

Tragedy and its Perpetual Controversy, With a Particular Reference to George Steiner's *Death of Tragedy* and Terry Eagleton's *Tragedy*

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Received 11 January 2023; accepted 14 February 2023

Published online 26 February 2023

Abstract

The present article aims to explore the concept of tragedy as delineated by Aristotle, its particularity, nature, objectives, practices, procedures, topics, representations of human beings and complex interrelations with the metaphysical and eschatological factors. A pivotal issue to be highlighted here is the reasons behind the gradual decline or demise of tragedy in our present technological age. This hypothesis implies the economic, cultural, political, ethical and social mutations in European societies throughout the twenty-five centuries ever since its birth in the fifth century BC. The article also provides a sufficient account of the Athenian tragedy as specified by Aristotle and his significant contribution to the tragic genre and its prescriptions and proscriptions. There are some references to the valuable judgments of the philosophers Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The main argument will concentrate on the striking views of the two twentieth century critics: the French-English George Steiner and his remarkable book, *Death of Tragedy* (1961), and *Tragedy* (2020) by the contemporary Irish critic, Terry Eagleton. The main emphasis of the article is on these two critics and their illuminating arguments. The conclusion is a recapitulation and highlighting of the points raised throughout the article.

Key words: Tragedy; Aristotle; Steiner; Eagleton; Nietzsche

Sultan, S. S., & Najjar, K. A. (2023). Tragedy and its Perpetual Controversy, With a Particular Reference to George Steiner's *Death of Tragedy* and Terry Eagleton's *Tragedy*. *Studies*

in Literature and Language, 26(1), 1-11. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12904>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12904>

1. INTRODUCTION

Tragedy: Merits and Demerits

Of all topics in literature, tragedy has ceaselessly engaged a very prominent position in the literary controversy. This is due to its potentiality to attract actual practitioners of writing tragedies in different parts of the universe in addition to prominent philosophers and critics who have theorized on its intricate world and cultural milieu. Moreover, tragedy is as old as poetry in that it dates back to five centuries B.C. Despite the elapse of two millennia and a half, tragedy still maintains some fascination and mystery that would entice further voices and recent figures who are not thoroughgoing specialists in the field of tragedy. Names like Aristotle, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud find that tragedy is a sort of rallying point bringing different people and classes together. Tragedy drives all these figures to use their intellectual reservoir to decipher tragedy's secret and perennial allurements. According to two scholars in our current age, the duality of pain and sublimation are present in the very definition of tragedy:

The simplest definition of the tragedy, as Raymond Williams suggests, lies in the tragic sense that permeates both dramatic performance and reaction of audience. As he puts it, "tragedy is a particular kind of event, and kind of response, which are typically tragic, and which the long tradition embodies" (1979, p.13).

Why do people take tragedy seriously despite the fact that what is actually performed on the stage remains short of embodying the actual sufferings and setbacks that people confront daily? Definitely, this is true. However, tragedy as a dramatic work dealing with sufferings and

defeats has a positive role to fulfill, even though people are not quite aware of it. This role is redemptive and spiritually sustaining. Author Katherine T. Bruek entitles her book, *The Redemption of Tragedy*, as a brilliant move towards recognizing the positive role of tragedy in human existence despite the ostensible scenes of catastrophe, "Relationship with a divine power enables the protagonists of classical tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* or Shakespeare's Hamlet to acquiesce nobly to an otherwise wretched existence" (1995, pp.2-3).

What is more significant in the above-mentioned argument is the fact that tragedy on the stage gradually began to lose its former momentum for the simple reason that daily life tragedies and catastrophes began to eclipse the former in terms of horror and atrocities. This is a point that George Steiner is going to elaborate at the end of his remarkable book, *Death of Tragedy*. At the moment, it is necessary and relevant to point out how actual life situations exceed the fear and horror we see and live in tragedy on the stage:

Daily news media lay "tragedies" on our doorsteps: schoolhouse shootings, imploding states, global warming, the slow death of democratic structures [...]. In everyday parlance, the term often seems emptied of meaning. If the word simply suggests something sad, banality is the consequence. (Helene, 2004, p.617)

Apart from the aforementioned argument about the dispute regarding the validity or invalidity of tragedy in modern life, there is another factor which helped in reducing the position of tragedy nowadays. It is the ever-increasing gap between the abstract philosophy of existentialism and what is actually practiced in the theatre. Any passing look at the arguments of Sartre, Foucault, Camus, Arendt and Malraux shows the ever-widening gap between their philosophical theorizing imbued with a tragic touch and what goes on in theatre. It is in the words of scholar Jennifer Wallace:

Never again in the twentieth century would a philosophical movement be so closely aligned with the stage. Instead, there emerged outside of and after existentialism, a counter-tradition in the Western philosophy that explicitly rejects ideas of tragedy's universal appeal or modern applicability (2007, p.83).

In other words, one can ascertain that tragedy remains elitist, i.e., it addresses the cultivated and highly educated people who could figure out the tragedy's message and its stipulations. In contrast, the comedy which has a long history and lineage has a special appeal to people and their needs. We learn that "all major cultures and most minor ones have developed a comic vision and expressed it in various forms known to the human imagination" (Sims, 2021, p.38)

In practice, do people prefer tragedy to comedy or the opposite? The answer would be that audiences usually prefer to choose comedy for the simple reason that through laughter, they find vent for their suppressed desires and

frustrations. Indeed many theatrical performances and films which hinge on the comic sense leave a lasting impact on their audiences. It is through the comic gesture or apparently funny situations that many serious messages are conveyed to audience or readers. Unlike tragedy, comedy makes use of different devices in order to reach the desired effect. It is in the words of Agnes Heller (2005), "Yet in comedy there is singing and dancing; one can also stage a parody of rituals, just as the marketplace [...] These and similar insertions instead conjure up the spirit of the carnival." (p.44).

If comedy is known to be capable of bringing laughter and hilarious spirit from its beginning up to now, tragedy appeals to other equally important aspects in human thinking and psychological life. Tragedy aims at mitigating the psychological pressures and daily troubles by reminding the audience that all human catastrophes and setbacks we encounter in life appear slight when we compare our bitter situation with what is going on the stage. Two scholars in health questions find a great extent of therapeutic effects due to the exposure to tragic drama and its complex world:

Though direct effects of the experimental manipulation on health outcomes were not detected, our analyses of potential mediators revealed linkages between drama and health. Indirect benefits of drama exposure on well-being were found via cognitive processing and subsequent changes on self-regulation. (Khoo & Graham, 2016, p.187)

1.1 Aristotle and Greek Tragedy

No sooner is the term 'tragedy' mentioned than the name of the Greek philosopher and teacher Aristotle (384-322 BC) comes to the fore for the simple reason that he was the pioneer in describing its constituents, features, effects and benefits or disadvantages. His contribution to laying the foundations of tragedy is invaluable. He theorized much on the successful performance and its main components. His discussion of the tragedy centers on the practices of the great tragedians Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus of the fourth century B.C. to whose works he had overwhelming nostalgia.

Seen from a social and religious perspective, Athens in the fifth century was the arena of two opposing cultures and modes of living which were irreconcilable. "On the way out was the old society which looked back to the heroic past, myths and belief in gods, on the other, it was a secular society governed by law, logic and democratic practice". (Wallace, 2007, p.22)

It is this duality of the theological/ and secular dimensions that forms the crux of the matter here. In fact, Aristotle played an indispensable role in establishing the main postulates of Greek tragedy as seen on the pages of his pilot book, *The Poetics* (330? BC). Actually this book is the first one in the world that is devoted to the art of tragedy, its definition, stipulations of the tragic hero, his social class and the mixture of good and bad sides in

his character and how this medley eventually leads to his tragic downfall. Although the intent of the *Poetics* “was to discuss epic poetry, tragedy and comedy [...], most of the material contained in the *Poetics*, as we have it, deals with tragedy”. (Thorburn, 2005, p.68)

A close view of the tragic work and the people it depicts shows that there is always a kind of imbalance between the individual’s will and the surrounding environment that often runs counter to his aspirations and plans. Although the individual is not without blame, the final outcome shows that the frailty or hamartia, to use Aristotle’s term, cannot be solely the driving force for the final catastrophe that eventually befalls the hero. This has been summed up in the following assertion that man,” in his final act comes about because of the cosmic moral order and the role played by chance or destiny in human affairs”. (Critical Essays, p.1)

Aristotle’s familiar definition of tragedy accentuates the plot, the action of the characters on the stage and its effect on the spectators watching the performance with awe and seriousness.” It is a mimesis not of men (simply) but of an action, that is of life. (Baxter & Atherton, 1997, p.21)

These actions should be geared to revealing some elements in the behavior of characters, especially the protagonists and antagonists, which eventually end in the downfall of the former. Also evil is the dynamic force that makes the tragic action charged with power tempo and suspense till it reaches its tragic finale. According to Aristotle, “evil is caused by social conditions such as marriage and the position of power held by men or by exile and the status of a stranger. Evil also emerges as inherent in such human motives as the revenge of Medea” (Kontos, 2018, p.2).

How does tragedy manage to convey its message to the audience? In Aristotle’s view, tragedy is the most difficult of all arts in that it should keep a subtle balance between “unhappy ending and the satisfied audience” (Downey, 2001, p.118).

Such a task is not easy to attain, simply because the tragedy’s main elements (actors, themes, language, scenery) should be put at the service of the underlying vision behind the whole tragic performance. Indeed, the dramatic performance of the tragedy and its success depend on the response of the audience watching what is going on and the nature of the material presented. If one of the constituents of the success of the comedy is the tendency of the audience to interrupt the action, in tragedy the opposite is true. It was essential for the tragedy, if it were to succeed, that audience should not interrupt” (Edmunds & Wallace, 1997, p.160).

The reason lies in the subtle action of the tragedy which entails a great degree of attention and presence of mind on the part of the audience. If the Aristotelian tragedy inspires in the audience the double feelings of pity

and fear, the direct corollary of this is the great seriousness with which they take the tragic action of the performance. Aristotle’s objective behind all this is to make the audience reach a state of catharsis, i.e., purification and refining all the petty feelings they have. The painful sense that accompanies death scenes at the end of the performance often leads to “a sense of satisfaction at recognizing and knowing about moral and spiritual truths” (Wilson, 2006, p.711).

However, this is not the entire story. The actors did not take the tragic performance as simply perfunctory or mechanical. They were trained to feel deeply what they say or act so that this heartfelt performance can simply reach the audience’s minds and feelings alike. The great Greek actor of tragedies, Aesopus, describes what kind of acting that used to be performed at that time and how the actors had a great empathy or identification with what they used to perform, “I myself have often seen the eyes of the actor from behind his mask as he spoke [...] and then he would be lowering his voice to a pitiable tone. He seemed to be weeping and grieving as he spoke the lines (Rehm, 2013, p.49).

The question that needs to be posed here after referring to these views could be : is the scene of death which we encounter in the tragedy normally acceptable and full of psychological and emotional effects so as to justify the tragic act? Undoubtedly, this is the most painstaking task the tragedian undertakes, i.e., to make his tragic scene carry different meanings for his audience. As has been rightly suggested, “The death of a character stimulated on the stage or described on the pages of a book can be artistically gratifying whereas, in normal cases, the actual death of a person is only painful” (Butcher & Gassner, 1951, p.1X).

1.2 The Views of Schopenhauer on Tragedy

The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), known for his pessimism, finds that tragedy is a good mouthpiece for clarifying his own judgments about man’s pathetic position in his anarchic world. Accordingly, he is of the opinion that tragedy is the only possible means of reflecting man’s misfortunes and setbacks. He finds the tragedy, as cited by Gaut and Lopez, as “the summit of poetic art. For in representing the unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind [...] the antagonism of the will with itself” and that chance and error are the rulers of the world” (2001, p.264).

Moreover, the individual adopts total resignation to one’s lot, no matter how gloomy and miserable it might be,” the spectator becomes aware that it is better to tear his heart away from life, to turn his willing from it, not to love the world and life”. (Gaut & Lopez, p. 421)

Does tragedy provide a kind of bulwark against the endless misfortunes the world inflicts on people in life? Schopenhauer thinks that tragedy, after all, is not a futile and profitless game if it is viewed correctly:

Learning what tragedy has to show us does not make things any worse: as he sees things, after all, it is not as if ignorance is a bliss. Ignorance consists rather of enslavement to the Will, a pointless, degrading, and painful cycle of willing and frustration. [...] He adds the tragedy is rather a step towards emancipation. (Bermudez & Gardner, 2018, p. 216).

In another context, Schopenhauer, in a rare move, places tragedy in a high stead as it is one of the few arts that provide spiritual and psychological shelter or buffer zone against the ceaseless agonies and inflictions as man conceives:

For Schopenhauer, the tragedy is the manner *par excellence*, in which human beings can truly confront the bleaker conditions of human existence in a way that places themselves in the position to develop their own ethical response to the economy of evil. (Shapshay, 2022, ch.18-19)

1.3 Nietzsche and the Birth of Tragedy

Nietzsche's famous book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) is a work that reflects the author's multiple interests, both scientific and artistic. The book was inspired by a temporary friendship with and admiration of the German musician, Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883) who was fully confident that music surpasses all arts. As Nietzsche wrote, in his letter to Wagner to accompany the presentation of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the object of the book was to show that Wagner's art was eventually in the right. Nietzsche found "tragedy especially interesting for as long as he thought it a form of the self-evidently most important and inherently significant cultural phenomenon there was---music—and he thought tragedy was essentially music to a large extent because Wagner said so" (Nietzsche, 1872, pp. XXIX).

How did Nietzsche view tragedy and its birth? Well, it is the consummation or the amalgamation between what is Dionysian and Apollonian that will give birth to a work that is neither thoroughly pessimistic nor hopeless as the former stands for mirth and transgression of all sorts of restrictions:

If Dionysos and Apollo are successfully brought into alliance in a given tragedy, the result will be a transformation of 'pessimism'—not into optimism, to be sure, but into a kind of affirmation; that is, the *Schin* (glitter, meaning added) that arises will not sap the audience's strength, paralyze its will or lead to demoralization, but rather will energize the members of the audience to, go on living. (pp.XXV)

Nietzsche's judgment of Greek tragedy remained high, but there were factors that left their harmful impact on that culture which he summarized in "the depredations of time make over knowledge of that culture at best fragmentary and indirect" (p.X).

One can guess these factors to be political, cultural and social whose imprints would be seen in the tragic works written after overwhelming success in the fifth century B.C. The dismantling blow that was directed to tragedy in its infancy (fifth century BC) was the growing influence of Socrates and the spirit of rationality he managed to disseminate. Indeed Socrates' name was inarguably

associated with rationality and tacit reservation against classical gods and their inviolable sovereignty. Tragedy, as everybody knows, capitalizes on the theological and the crucial role assigned to them in affecting the lives of human beings. Given Socrates' instructions, one can easily deduce that the tragedy's guiding principle has been drastically debilitated in one way or another,

Socratic rationalism upsets the delicate balance in which tragedy depends, by encouraging people not to strive for wisdom in the face of unnecessary unsatisfactoriness of human life, but to attempt to use knowledge to get control of their fate. (p.X11)

It is not only Socrates' presence and his invigorating role in opening the minds of people, especially the young, but also his death which is a tragedy of the radicalizing spirit he ignited in the minds of people and the far-reaching effects of all that on society as a whole. It is in the words of Emily Wilson:

Socrates' death in 399 BCE has figured large in our world ever since, shaping how we think about heroism and celebrity, religion and family life, state control and individual freedom, the distance of intellectual life from daily activity — many of the key coordinates of Western culture. (ch. 1)

2. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The methods used throughout the present paper are a combination of historical approach in tracing the evolution of tragedy and its gradual decline in the twentieth century and analysis of tragedy as a genre beset by adjacent and competitive arts whether visual or performative. The synthesis of these approaches helps in assessing this challenging and sometimes misleading genre that has survived for more than twenty five centuries.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The core of the present argument will be shown through a detailed study of two outstanding works entirely devoted to tragedy and its problematic. The first is *Death of Tragedy* by George Steiner (1929-2020) and *Tragedy* by contemporary Terry Eagleton (b.1943). The two have tackled tragedy from different perspectives: philosophical, ethical, historical, economic, cultural and artistic. Despite the recurrent calls of the death of tragedy as a genre as seen through Steiner's reputed book, *Death of Tragedy* (1961), many successful tragedies are still written and performed in America, Europe, Latin America and Asia. Surely, the tragic atmosphere that was prevalent in Greek drama before Christ was no longer feasible. However, tragedy in its original sense or tragicomedy as practiced in our present time, still survives and its admirers and theorists are many everywhere. Although comedy is now thriving in different parts of the world, especially in its cinematic version, tragedy still has its own apologists and theorists as will be shown in the following pages.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

--Altenbernd & Lewis (1996) choose to highlight the structural sides of tragedy and the role assigned to these in crystalizing the catastrophe that will be inevitable in any serious tragic work. As they put it, these elements:

are unified, made probable and inevitable, harmonizing a strong character, capable of searching and revealing emotions we can identify as universal, with a tragic world which declares through tone, spectacle, language, and action that is antagonistic, violent and destructive. (p.73)

--Ronan McDonald (2002) finds that tragedy in the twentieth century faced fierce competition from neighboring artistic genres so that the traditional position of tragedy as we know it has become shaken or at most weak. His argument runs in this vein:

In an age where traditional consolations—Fortune, aristocratic heroism, a more tightly communal society, a divinely ordered universe—have trophied, the poetic eloquence and clearly ordered dramatic unities will predictably be undercut by comic deflation. (p.41)

-- Hall & Harrop (2010) argue that it is axiomatic to state that tragedy is one of the most popular topics that has attracted a huge number of philosophers, scholars, researchers, students, experts, directors, actors and professionals. Tragedy attracted “ thousands of scholars and students not only of Classics and of Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, and on interdisciplinary programs, but also in Media studies, Film Studies, Comparative Literature, Modern Languages, and Social Intellectual History”. (p.1)

--Sean Carney (2013) finds that tragedy and its gloomy world is the only convenient means for reflecting the continuous sufferings and defeats of man throughout all ages. He capitalizes on Edward Bond’s article (Modern Drama) where he finds that:

Strictly speaking, the Greeks were right, it is better (or at any rate simpler) not to be born. But they were wrong in saying that once born *it is better to die* – because imagination seeks life. It seeks it even if it has to kill to get, either because of ideological persuasion (I die for freedom) or ideological fear (I make a sacrificial offering of a life in place of mine. (p.162)

--Kavin Taylor (2013) seeks to answer the ticklish question regarding the hazy future of tragedy. Do we expect to come across tragic dramas in the foreseeable future? Or will it vanish in the plethora of artistic works that proliferate daily? He starts his argument as follows:

Can new tragedies still be written, or are we left to merely perform the tragedies of the past [...].The revelatory of tragic drama, after all, remains. The human drama continues, and we are all called to our roles on the world stage; to hold otherwise would obviate the reality of tragic experience and the relevancy of tragic art. (p.45)

--Julian Young (2013) reminds readers about the common lines of thought between theatregoers and the contemporary ones. Despite the great distance in time

and space, his argument stresses the fact that nothing has changed since human beings’ fears and aspiration remain as they were in the past:

Since, then, our modern times, Socratic culture based on illusion, since pain and mortality are, in reality, as in eliminable from our lives as they were from those of the Greeks, we in fact stand, as they did, a need of the ‘metaphysical comfort’ brought to us by tragedy. And so we need ‘the rebirth of tragedy’ (p.184).

--In Enders et al (2020), we come across one of the primary functions of tragedy as being:

to awaken in us those conflicting impulses (suppression and sublimation), especially those that make us sad and at the same time bring a kind of satisfaction which can only found in the realm of tragedy: This is the explanation of that sense of release, of repose in the midst of stress, of balance and composure, given by Tragedy for there is no other way in which such impulses, once awakened, can be set at rest without suppression. (p.9)

4.1 Francis George Steiner’s Death of Tragedy

Steiner is a French-English critic and academic who wrote a number of books, the most famous of which was *After Babel* (1975). He taught in different universities in Britain and America. As a critic, it is very difficult to subsume his works under a particular label such as structuralism, deconstruction, New Historicism, semiotics or Marxism. Indeed he is known for disapproving of critical fads or bizarre categories. A good example of this is his scathing comment on Jacques Derrida’s statement that ‘every text is a pretext’. He declares that, “ This is one of the most formidably erroneous, destructive, brilliantly trivial wordplays ever launched” (Sharp, 1995, p. 4). If we recall the sweeping fame of France’s great figure, it shows that Steiner has the self-confidence to detect the failings of such great figures.

Steiner belongs to the generation of literary critics whose critical orientation is not confined to a particular approach or ideology. His critical approach is open to all types of critical writings which remind us of critics like Frank Kermode, George Watson or Lionel Trilling. In his treatment of the topic of tragedy, he provides a huge amount of information about its nature, history, and the factors that helped in decreasing people’s interest in it as an artistic genre. There is no prejudice or favoring in presenting the material about the tragedy. His identification of the tragic work rests in the characteristic way in which tragedy presents man and his pathetic lot. He is quoted to be seeing tragedy as follows, “ What I identify as a tragedy is... a view of reality in which man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world” (Chatterley, 2011, p.146). Steiner’s approach in dealing with the evolution or presumable demise of the tragedy as a literary genre can be subsumed under two categories: the first is related to the stages of intellectual evolution of the audience’s minds and their expectations about the tragic work and its priorities. The second is related to the political, economic and social developments in European societies like Britain

or France and their subsequent effects on the audience's sensibility and response to dramatic works, particularly tragedy.

Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* (1981) starts the second edition of his book by giving the shocking information about the brief life of Greek tragedy and how it dwindled after a long time of thriving and overwhelming success in the fifth century B.C. "Attic Greek drama embodies specific congruence of philosophic and poetic energies, that it only flourished during a brief period, some seventy-five years or less" (p.x). The way Steiner identifies the tragedy per se hinges on a certain premise which he keeps reiterating in more than one instance, summarized in the statement or "view of reality in which man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world" (xi). The last line above shows the intellectual background of tragedy in highlighting the shaky position of man in its dramatic representation. As such, it is not surprising to reconsider some of his judgments about the death of tragedy as a title like this would mean a total eradication of the term 'tragedy' from the literary scene. In the second edition, Steiner regrets that he did not include the tragicomedy of the theatre of the absurd in the twentieth century as shown in the works of "Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Adamov in addition to the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht or Henry Motherlant" (p.xvi).

Steiner's concept of tragedy stresses the Aristotelian views concerning the tragedy and its uncommon worlds. Steiner's emphasis is laid on the metaphysical and eschatological sides when he defines the tragedy, "The tragic theatre is an experience of the pre-rational phase in history; it is founded on the assumption that evil is in nature and in the psychological occult, uncontrollable forces able to madden or destroy the world" (p.34).

The helplessness of man as regards the ineradicable forces at work in the universe that are ultimately imposed on human life is a key point in Steiner's perspective of the tragedy and its driving forces. In one of his arguments, he suggests that tragedy would have us know that there is in the very fact of human existence a provocation or paradox: "it tells us that the purposes of men sometimes run against the grain of inexplicable and destructive forces that lie "outside" yet very close". (p.128)

A third instance of this leitmotif in Steiner's argument can be seen when he presents the tragic theatre of Henrik Ibsen. He argues that in Ibsen's tragedy, "man moves naked in a world bereft of explanatory or conciliatory myths" (p.293). The recurrence of this central idea in different places is a reminder that this the main postulate on which tragedy hinges as he believes. When Steiner begins with the cradle of tragedy in the Athenian world, he asserts the inextricable relation tying tragedy to the theological and mythological worlds prevalent at that time. Indeed, part of the seriousness and greatness of tragedy rests in this particular point, i.e., the individual hero has to

succumb to his preordained fate, even if this leads him to perdition. He reiterates the helplessness of human beings as reflected in the tragedy with their sorrowful destinies. He quotes the words of the Greek poet Eteocles that express the human ordeal, "We are already past the care of gods/For them our death is the admirable offering./Why then delay, fawning upon our doom?". (p.7)

Steiner's comment on the risks lurking in man's way in Greek tragedy, as shown above, is obviously the gist of the matter as they inform all the details of human lives and concerns. Metaphysics plays a vital role here in threatening and intimidating humans as shown in the Greek tragedy:

The Greek tragic poets assert that the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason, or justice. Worse than that, there are around us daemonic energies which prey upon the soul and return it to madness. Or to put in the terms of the tragic design drawn by Thucydides: our fleet shall always sail to Sicily although everyone is more or less aware that they go to their ruin. (p.7)

The overriding emphasis laid on the subversive role of metaphysics in human lives and affairs might be seen as a sort of discipline and education for the plebeians and simple-minded people. For such types of people, this mysterious fear is a kind of cure or centripetal force, edifying people by means of implicit or explicit threat and continuously remind people of the impending inflictions. No matter how we view it, one thing is clear for sure. Lives of the Greek people were continuously overshadowed by the ceaseless pressures of gods and daemons. That is why the annual performances were held to celebrate and be cautious about what should be worshipped and blindly obeyed. Given this uncommon life in ancient Greece, Steiner brings forth his definition of the tragedy after taking into account all the human and supernatural factors. Tragedy is defined here as "a narrative relating the life of some ancient or eminent personage who suffers a decline of fortune toward a disastrous end" (p.11).

What is the lesson to be gleaned or learnt from watching a tragedy? In our modern times, one agrees with Steiner in his judgment that tragedy, after all, is irreparable:

It cannot lead to just and material emancipation for past suffering. Job opts back double the number of she-asses; so he should, for God has enacted upon him a parable of justice. Oedipus does not get back his eyes or his scepter over Thebes. (p.8)

Were there practical reasons behind the receding interest in tragedy as specified by Aristotle? Definitely. There were historical factors represented by the rivalry and wars between the two great ancient cities in the world, Athens and Sparta. Politically speaking, "Athens a democracy, Sparta's outlook was aristocratic and totalitarian" (Sarton, 1993, p.235). This Peloponnesian

war devastated the Greek world between 431-421 B.C. One can easily infer that post-war life will undergo a great change in culture, philosophy and arts.

The Elizabethan writers of tragedy such as Marlowe, Kyd or Shakespeare practiced plagiarism without any reasonable justification. Steiner shows that “the Elizabethans had plundered freely whatever their eyes roamed. But what they took, they took as conquerors, not as borrowers” (p.42).

In a situation like this, one expects they preferred the romantic and the clamour of tragic comedy or the chronicle play (p.20).

In Britain of the seventeenth century, tragedy faced new challenges as people in this age shifted their interest from drama to prose fiction. “The problem of commercial control and stagecraft lead to the deterioration of drama and great rise of the novel whose popularity in Britain in the seventeenth century was at the expense of drama” (p.115).

Moreover, aristocracy gave way to the emergence of the middle class or bourgeoisie whose interests and preferences were entirely different. During the Renaissance, tragedy’s emphasis on the metaphysical and irrational forces leading to the hero’s perdition got less and less. Instead a new drive began to emerge, i.e., the antagonistic relationship between the tragic hero and hostile community. The customary stipulation of the high rank of the protagonist is still maintained but the origin of the conflict moves to other spheres. The tragic hero now “suffered from the gap between the individual and community, but this time in Elizabethan tragedy, his identity was not confined to his social status. His interiority was thought to provide the modern subject some leverage against his world” (Minnema, p.2013, p.214).

Although the decline of tragedy is most visible in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain because of the growth of the novel and its great popularity, French tragedy enjoyed a good position in the seventeenth century, thanks to the achievements of the famous tragedians of the age, Pierre Corneille and Arthur Racine. Corneille wrote *The Death of Pompey* (1644) and *Theodore* (1646). It was Racine who won the admiration of Steiner through his fine tragedies *Andromaque* (1667) and *Phaedra* (1677). The second play, *Phaedra*, is not new as Seneca wrote it in 54 BC. It talks about incest and forbidden love when *Phaedra* fell in love with her step son, Hippolytus. Curiously enough, sometimes when such an act is performed in actual life and literature, people turn a blind eye to it, ignoring its flagrant violation of moral norms. The end of the tragedy is typically Aristotelian in the deaths of both wife and step son. “*Phaedra* is the keystone in French tragic drama. The best that precedes it seems in the manner of preparation; nothing which comes after surpasses it. It is *Phaedra* which makes one flinch

from Coleridge’s judgment that Shakespeare’s superiority to Racine is a flat truism.” (p.84).

In brief, Steiner’s work is a comprehensive survey of a wide and ramified topic. That he had full mastery of two languages (English and French) enabled him to give an impressive and comprehensive account of the tragedy, its founders, theorists and practitioners in different parts of Europe. As a coda to this outstanding book, the present researchers notice that its concluding chapter comprises only four pages whereby the author talks about the terrific experiences he heard about during World War II. In these pages, the reader feels that whatever has been mentioned about tragedies in the theatre is no match to the bestiality and atrocities that human beings ruthlessly commit in their daily lives whenever the situation allows. The ‘death’ mentioned in the title of the book could also mean that whatever is portrayed in tragedy on the stage is slight, compared to factual or potential human cruelty and savagery. The description of the Russian officers captured and imprisoned in a monastery is harrowing and heart-wrenching and a reminder that what human beings do in actual life exceeds those artistic constructs. The death practiced in actual life does not lead to catharsis or reducing pain. Rather, it is the opposite: human death can be gratuitous, bestial and irrational.

4.2 Terry Eagleton’s *Tragedy* (2020)

Terry Eagleton is an Irish critic who was born in 1943. He is a distinguished professor of English literature at Lancaster University. He is a Marxist critic who considers the Marxist scholar Raymond Williams as his mentor and teacher. He wrote a huge number of books such as *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983); *Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) *After Theory* (2003); *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2008) and many other books and articles.

The title of Eagleton’s *Tragedy* sounds neutral in that it highlights neither birth nor death of the genre. It is essentially concerned with the oldest art and the only work that won great fame and appreciation as it was held to be part of the Greek annual festivals and worshipping of gods, particularly Dionysus. God Dionysus represents a complex web of contradictory elements and perhaps his name is associated with tragedy. As Eagleton argues elsewhere, he was “Protean, playful, diffuse, erotic, deviant, hedonistic, transgressed, sexually ambiguous, marginal, and anti-linear [...] Yet he is also an unbearable horror, and much for the same reasons” (Eagleton, 2003, pp.2-3).

It is in celebration and glorification of Dionysus that dramatic festivals were held every year in spring and the same dramatic texts were usually performed. Watching such performances was considered a primary and mandatory duty. Again the problem of categorizing tragedy surfaces in the English discourse as it poses a

serious problem when one looks for an adequate definition of the term. The difficulty stems from the fact that tragedy is “that like ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ the term floats ambiguously between the descriptive and normative” (Eagleton, 2003, p.8).

Although tragedy has been fully investigated from different viewpoints and perspectives such as ethics, philosophy, psychology, theology and history, Eagleton's handling of this topic is striking as it combines ideology with Catholicism, a curious synthesis of two polar opposites. From the very start, Eagleton's apologetic tone can be easily discerned:

Tragedy is said to be universal, which is true enough, if one has everyday use of the word in mind. Grieving over the death of a child, a mining disaster or the gradual disintegration of a human mind is not confined to any particular culture [...]. Yet tragedy in the artistic sense is a highly specific affair. The form originates as a timeless reflection on the human condition, but as a form in which Western particular civilization grapples for a fleeting historical moment. (p.2)

Moreover, Eagleton finds that tragedy, “is the aristocrat of art forms and my own work, both in *Sweet Violence : The Idea of the Tragic* and this book in the manner of my late friend and teacher, Raymond Williams, to democratize it” (p.viii). Scholar Paul Gordon finds that “the identification of tragedy and artistic nobility is thus an effect, not a cause, of the more important aesthetic notion of Dionysian excess that was first applied to those aristocratic individuals like Oedipus, Antigone and Macbeth” (2001, p.112).

There is a consensus among historians and critics that Eagleton's fundamental approach is political. As a Marxist writing on a topic fully immersed in theology and mythology, raises questions about this discrepancy. The reconciliation between Marxism and Christianity in Eagleton's argument stems from his own personal experience and his life's harsh vicissitudes. The poverty and deprivation of his early childhood is reflected in his autobiography titled *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir* (2003). The death of his two brothers as infants and the asthma that haunted him for many years made his life intolerable. But the intervention of the Roman Catholic Church in his native city Salford and its generous help that culminated in granting him the opportunity to join Cambridge University made Eagleton adopt this compromise between political ideology and religious faith. “I value my Catholic background. It taught me not to be afraid of rigorous thought, for one thing [...]god cannot be understood through the so-called direct reason and science; it can be explained through intuition which is subjective” (Abhinav, 2012. ch.3).

His judgment of man's position in this world is ambivalent: neither a puppet in the hands of fate nor completely independent. As he puts it:

Human beings are neither the mere plaything of external forces, nor (as in a familiar middle-class mythology) free-standing and

supremely self-responsible. They are free enough to refute the scientific materialists, but subject to cosmic law in a way which equally confounds the liberal individualists (p.12).

Eagleton's explication of the reasons behind the rise of tragedy at certain times in European society when there was a kind of collision between two clashing ways of practicing life. Here he quotes Albert Camus' remark that “tragedy is born in the West each time the pendulum of civilization is half way between a sacred society and a society built around humanity. (p.57)

Eagleton holds that tragic drama runs counter to what is there in modern age. Of course, this is the final conclusion Steiner has reached. In Eagleton's view, the majestic characteristics of tragedy as specified by Aristotle stand in polar opposition to modern life and secular world. In this sense, tragedy is seen here as:

elitist rather than egalitarian, blue-blooded rather than heavy-handed, spiritual rather than scientific, absolute rather than scientific, repairable, universal rather than parochial, a question of destiny rather than self-determination.it deals with the death of princes rather than the suicide of a salesman. (p.6)

Elsewhere, Eagleton finds that the scale of tragedy on the stage tilts when compared to real tragedies in life which human beings daily face and have to put up wit, “only in art can the value released by destruction be released; that real suffering is passive, ugly and undignified, whereas affliction in art has heroic splendor or resistance” (Eagleton, 2003, p.5).

When Eagleton discusses the lesson or moral the audience gets from watching a tragedy, one easily notices that his argument runs in parallel lines with Aristotle's, especially the cathartic impact the tragedy leaves on the audience's thinking and feeling. Moreover, there are some unmistakable echoes of Steiner's argument in this regard:

The suffering it portrays is ennobling as well as appalling, so that we leave the theatre edified by scenes of carnage. Only when confronted by calamity is the human spirit able to reveal its true nobility. Tragedy is the peculiar form which presents us neither simply with human affliction nor simply with what transcends it, but with each in terms of the other. (p.8)

The ambivalence that characterizes Eagleton's approach in covering all the details of the tragedy is also present in assessing its final outcome, whether pessimistic or optimistic. As is his wont, he chooses a midway or reconciliation in dealing with it:

Since we are able to pluck value from failure and desolation, there is hope, but not some bright-eyed optimism. Both the pessimists and progressivists are accordingly outflanked. Human ability is affirmed in the teeth of the mechanical materialists, but the utopian dreamers are reminded of human fortitude. One must cling to the value tragedy reveals while also acknowledging its fragility. (p.13)

His conclusion is apt and note-worthy, “Tragedy values wisdom over knowledge, mystery above lucidity, the eternal over the historical”. (p.13)

What distinguishes Eagleton's perception of the tragedy and its human and nonhuman worlds? In an indirect attempt to respond to Steiner's postulate represented by *The Death of Tragedy*, Eagleton chooses a midway, leaving the question deliberately unresolved and subject to many speculations:

The question, then, is whether the tragedy dies or simply mutates. With the emergence of middle-class society, the focus begins to shift from a collective action to the individual hero. For Friedrich Schelling [...] tragic action is internalized, in a way at odds with the ancient Greek theatre (p.26).

The materialistic spirit that emerged in the late seventeenth century and eighteenth century reached its peak in the twentieth century, when tragedy appeared almost out of place. Rebecca Bushnell elaborates this point further,

But one of the unfortunate outcomes of the 1980s and 1990s materialism [...] has been suspicious of terms like 'tragedy' often thought to be complicit with discredited ideas of transcendent literary significance. (2008, p. 129).

If Steiner has stressed the decisive role of fate or destiny in changing or even undermining the lives of tragic heroes in his book, Eagleton can only agree wholeheartedly as this factor is of crucial significance for the development of the tragic play. If this element is missing, tragedy will lose its core and essential material:

with the disappearance of the idea of destiny, routed by a modern sense of the ransom and contingent, the art of Aeschylus or Sophocles is no longer possible. It is a prejudice Hegel shares with his philosophical adversary Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom modern tragedy ceased to be an art of the public sphere and instead has been individualized and driven inward. (p.28)

It has become evident by now that Eagleton's argument combines the views of Marxists like Marx and Hegel and Western thinkers and philosophers such as Nietzsche or Schopenhauer and often shares their conclusions and judgments. Indeed, he comments on Schopenhauer's phrase that tragedy is the fable of great misfortune. He elaborates on this matter as follows:

it does not matter whether it occurs on or off stage, whether it visited upon you by Zeus or happens through sheer accident, whether the protagonist is a princess or chauffeur, whether you engineer your downfall or cut down by others, whether the event results in reconciliation or a dead end, or whether it bears witness to a transcendent human spirit. (p.34)

One of the remarkable points Eagleton raises in his exploration of the tragic drama is its characteristic language. The linguistic medium receives great emphasis in the tragedy as it is the means of elevating the work to high levels of splendor and majesty. Eagleton quotes Horace's argument regarding the vital role played by the language here:

Horace advises poets not to allow the gods to speak in plebian accent, and neither no doubt should tragic heroes, but when it comes to modern-day heroes we have set aside that piece of

subtlety. From the enlightenment onwards, we are confronted with the wind-shaking proposition (one long anticipated by Christianity) that men and women are to be valued simply on account of their membership of the human species, not because of their rank, character, or ethnic provenance. (p.29)

If Aristotle has emphasized the sustaining role of the tragedy through its catharsis and sublimation of the weaknesses of the audience, Eagleton, likewise, highlights the role of tragedy in reducing or eliminating the harmful effects of class differences as the action of the tragedy forces all people to share the same feelings of pain and self-recognition. As he puts it:

The ethical is simply how religious faith is lived out in everyday practice. For those who find bathos in this view, however, ethics is a domain for the spiritual plebian of this world, while the aristocrats of the inner life move in a sphere beyond good and evil. (p.37)

What distinguishes Eagleton's approach in his perception of the tragedy and its human and non-human worlds is his striking ability to analyze its characters from different angles and viewpoints. Oedipus represents a very good example for the multiplicity of roles he unknowingly has played:

He is both son and husband, father and brother, criminal and lawgiver, king and beggar-man, native and stranger, poison and cure,, man and monster, guilty and innocent, blind and perspicacious, holy and cursed swift of mind and slow of foot, solver of riddles and indecipherable enigma. (p.41)

In brief, Eagleton's presentation here is just an example of what sort of critic he is. He was fairly described as: "His merits as a critic of literature were confirmed not only by the opinion of people I respected, but also by his capacity to rise above belles lettres and address the relevance of fictional writing to matters of general importance to culture and society". (Doughty, 2011, p.5)

What matters in this brief survey of Eagleton's views concerning tragedy, in particular the great differences between the tragedy on the stage and life's actual tragedies and misfortunes, is the curious combination between tragedy and hope. For all the surrounding darkness and terrifying situations on the theatre, tragedy remains, according to Eagleton, a symbol of hope despite the prevailing depressing imagery and suffocating milieu. In his article aptly titled "Why hope in tragedy", he argues as follows:

Hope is not the same as optimism because it does not confidently anticipate a good outcome. Indeed, it trusts in a more general way in human resourcefulness and resilience, and it cannot do so precisely because it has had an experience of breakdown and defeat, yet is still around to register it. (Eagleton, 2008, p.5)

What is striking here is the fact that Eagleton's view that tragedy implies optimism is already present in Arthur Miller's famous article titled 'Tragedy and the Common Man.' He published this article in 1949 which contained

seminal arguments about tragedy's association with optimism though ostensibly it is gloomy and sorrowful:

It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism [...]. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal. (Miller, 1949, n.p.)

Eagleton's survey of the tragedy and its intricate world highlights its constituents. The main point raised here is the central view that tragedy has, after all, a glimpse of hope which the audience cherishes in the midst of all sorrowfulness and gloom.

5. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study has attempted to show that tragedy is a very controversial matter ever since its birth in the fifth century B.C. Part of the ceaseless debate lies in the preconditions that the tragedian should abide by, if he were to write a successful tragic work. Tragedy has been rightly classified as an aristocratic work, in that its main character or hero should be from a high rank. If the classical tragedy necessitates such prominent figures, the aftermath of that is certainly resounding and wide-ranging. The history of tragedy represents a downward line in sharp contrast to the cultural life and social awareness. The more the latter (cultural life) develops, the less the impact of the former gets. This formula will be recurrent in any study of the epochs of tragedy throughout its long history. Tragedy ensued in the fifth century B.C. In this case, one expects the beginning of this tragic work to be modest and immature, but its status is totally different from such reasonable speculations. It reached the zenith almost in meteoric speed. Therefore it is possible to state that tragedy followed a reverse method in its evolution. The striking growth of tragedy gradually begins to give way to other competing dramatic genres like the comedy or tragicomedy in our present times.

Tragedy, then, capitalizes on the notion of fate, the mysterious and unpredictable force that could disrupt the lives of people at any moment. Interestingly, the American-English novelist and critic, Henry James, wrote a novella titled 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903) that revolves around the man-fate relationship and its profound repercussions. The protagonist, John Marcher, is haunted by a morbid idea that a terrible fate is lurking in his way and might destroy him at any moment. His full engrossment with this nightmarish fear costs him the loss of his kindly wife, May Bartram. This novella was written at the beginning of the twentieth century when such obsessive worries appeared out of place and meaningless. Tragedy is based on this irrational misgiving or fear.

Another tributary to this trend is the contribution of the French philosopher-scientist August Comte (1798-1857) who suggests the law of the three successive stages

which humankind passed through," the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific. The first is the necessary starting-point for the human mind; the last, its normal state; the second is but a transitory stage that makes possible the passage from the first to the last. (Bourdeau, n.d., p.4). All the above suggests that the idea of fate – tragedy relationship is no longer viable, due to these historical and cultural variables which resonate in art in all its forms.

Modern tragedy, as seen through the works of Eugene O'Neil and Arthur Miller, erected its dramatic world on modern and contemporary life, whether in themes, characterization or setting so that members of the audience feel that what is being performed is not different from their daily life. The modern tragedy is more plausible and convincing and less pretentious.

The answer to Steiner's prediction about the possible or conclusive death of tragedy is that it survives even though it was stripped from its resonating and intimidating effects. What can be offered in place of the ancient tragedy is the modern one with its ordinary people and modest abilities and ambitions. The loss that ordinary audience feels in watching a modern tragedy is related to the high rank of the protagonist and the magnitude of his character in addition to superb diction—all this is lost forever. However, there were successful attempts at reviving the tragedy in all its magnitude and fascination as seen through T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) even though the main character is not from the nobility or aristocrats. Despite its declining and lackluster position in the artistic field, tragedy is still capable of stirring up genuine feelings of sympathetic and empathetic spectators in our material and secular world. Its death is obviously deferred in our hectic times as critic Eagleton reminds us.

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