“On the Nature of Tragedy” — *Arthur Miller*

In our day, when there seems so little time or inclination to theorize at all, certain elemental misconceptions have taken hold of both critics and readers to a point where the word “tragedy” has often been reduced to an epithet. A more exact appreciation of what tragedy entails can lead us all to a finer understanding of plays in general.

The most common confusion is that which fails to discriminate between the tragic and the pathetic. Any story, to have validity on the stage, must entail conflict. Obviously, the conflict must be between people. But such a conflict is of the lowest, most elementary order; this conflict purely between people is all that is needed for melodrama and naturally reaches its apogee in physical violence. In fact, this kind of conflict defines melodrama.

The next rung up the ladder is the story which is not only a conflict between people, but at the same time within the minds of the combatants. When I show you why a man does what he does, I may do so melodramatically; but when I show why he almost did not do it, I am making drama.

Why is this higher? Because it more closely reflects the actual process of human action. It is quite possible to write a good melodrama without creating a single living character; in fact, melodrama becomes diffused wherever the vagaries and contradictions of real characterizations come to play. But without a living character it is not possible to create drama or tragedy. For as soon as one investigates not only why a man is acting, but what is trying to prevent him from acting – assuming one does so honestly – it becomes extremely difficult to contain the action in the forced and arbitrary form of melodrama.

Now, standing upon this element of drama we can try to reach toward tragedy. Tragedy, first of all, creates a certain order of feeling in the audience. The pathetic creates another order of feeling. Again, as with drama and melodrama, one is higher than the other. But while drama may be differentiated psychologically from melodrama – the higher entailing a conflict within each character – to separate tragedy from the mere pathetic is much more difficult. It is difficult because here society enters in.

Let me put it this way. When Mr. B., while walking down the street, is struck on the head by a falling piano, the newspapers call this a tragedy. In fact, of course, this is only the pathetic end of Mr. B. Not only because of the accidental nature of the death; that is elementary. It is pathetic because it merely arouses our feelings of sympathy, sadness, and possibly of identification. What the death of Mr. B. does not arouse is the tragic feeling.

To my mind the essential difference, and the precise difference, between tragedy and pathos is that tragedy brings us not only sadness, sympathy, identification and even fear; it also, unlike pathos, brings us knowledge or enlightenment.

But what sort of knowledge? In the largest sense, it is knowledge pertaining to the right way of living in the world. The manner of Mr. B’s death was not such as to illustrate any principle of living. In short there was no illumination of the ethical in it. The reason we confuse the tragic with the pathetic, as well as why we create so few tragedies, is twofold: in the first place many of our writers have given up trying to search out the right way of living, and secondly, there is not among us any commonly accepted faith in a way of life that will give us not only material gain but satisfaction.
Our modern literature has filled itself with an attitude which implies that, despite suffering, nothing important can really be learned by man that might raise him to a happier condition. The probing of the soul has taken that path of behaviorism. By this method it is sufficient for an artist simply to spell out the anatomy of disasters. The human being is regarded as essentially a dumb animal moving through a preconstructed maze toward his inevitable sleep.

Such a concept of man can never reach beyond pathos, for enlightenment is impossible within it, life being regarded as an immutably disastrous fact. Tragedy, called a more exalted kind of consciousness, is so called because it makes us aware of what the character might have been. But to say or strongly imply what a man might have been requires of the author a soundly based, completely believed vision of man's great possibilities. As Aristotle said, the poet is greater than the historian because he presents not only things as they were but foreshadows what they might have been. We forsake literature when we are content to chronicle disaster.

Tragedy, therefore, is inseparable from a certain modest hope regarding the human animal. And it is the glimpse of this brighter possibility that raises sadness out of the pathetic toward the tragic.

But, again, to take up a sad story and discover the hope that may lie buried in it requires a most complete grasp of the characters involved. For nothing is so destructive of reality in literature as thinly motivated optimism. It is my view – or my prejudice – that when a man is seen whole and round and so characterized, when he is allowed his life on the stage over and beyond the mould and purpose of the story, hope will show its face in his, just as it does, even so dimly, in life.

You are witnessing a tragedy when the characters before you are wholly and intensely realized, to the degree that your belief in their reality is all but complete. The story in which they are involved is such as to force their complete personalities to be brought to bear upon the problem, to the degree that you are able to understand not only why they are ending in sadness, but how they might have avoided their end. The demeanor, so to speak of the story is most serious – so serious that you have been brought the state of outright fear for the people involved, as though for yourself:

Tragedy arises when you are in the presence of a man who has missed accomplishing his joy. But the joy must be there, the promise of the right way of life must be there. Otherwise pathos reigns, and an endless, meaningless, and essentially untrue picture of man is created – man helpless under the falling piano, man wholly lost in a universe which by its very nature is too hostile to be mastered.

In a word, tragedy is the most accurately balanced portrayal of the human being in his struggle for happiness. That is why we revere our tragedies in the highest, because they most truly portray us. And this is why tragedy must not be diminished through confusion with other modes, for it is the most perfect means we have of showing us who and what we are, and what we must be – or strive to become.

(This note was written by Arthur Miller upon the occasion of the first anniversary of the Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman.* )