

tragedy and awareness*

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Tragedy is suffering on a godlike scale. It touches hands with joy and exultation and wonder. When we agonize, as when we exult, we have achieved our greatest capacity to feel; we have disclosed the deepest reaches of our hearts; in short, we have discovered ourselves. The significance of our lives—does it not depend at last upon our ability to suffer? If a swallow could feel pain as Hamlet does, would a man have more value than a bird? In short, suffering is the yardstick by which we measure our souls; tragedy and awareness go hand in hand.

“Man is the only animal that weeps,” writes Hazlitt, “for he is the only animal that is struck by the difference between what things are and what they ought to be.” A tragedian sees something irremediably wrong in the world and attempts to explain it. Why, if God is just, do the innocent suffer? Why does evil triumph? Why is man’s existence negated by death? The bitter and the despairing, the Eustacia Vyes and Ethan Fromes do not give us our answers. So, too, the death of a child breaks the heart but does not explain the “wrongness” of life. For our insights we turn to the tragic sufferer. A new and intolerable truth and a soul great enough to face it—these are what make a tragedy. Surely, then, no man can be tragic and not know why he suffers. Beethoven knew. He who wrote the Eroica might be deaf, but he was no dumb, driven victim of his fate. Hecuba knew why Troy must fall. “Yet had God not . . . cast to earth our greatness,” she says, “. . . men would have found no theme in song for us nor made great poems from our sorrows.” Whenever a soul in suffering can reflect upon the meaning of that suffering, a new, a tragic awareness results.

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Whatever the tragedy, it raises one inescapable question! Why does man suffer? Man himself provides the answer when he endures adversity with courage and grace. Noble suffering assures us of our worth; it declares that there is glory in man who can so dignify his sorrow. The American Indian, knowing himself defeated yet fighting on. Brutus, brought to ruin by his murder of Caesar, yet always "the noblest Roman of them all." We marvel at their power to feel and are challenged, in turn, to feel as deeply. Though powerless to escape suffering, we can always suffer nobly. We can overcome our destiny of pain, transform defeat into triumph. We can emerge from any plight "the masters of our fates, the captains of our souls." There is that in Socrates drinking the hemlock, in Christ nailed to the cross, which stirs us to exultation. Through them we discover the destiny of man. Through them we become aware of ourselves.

"Nothing that is vast enters into the life of mortals without a curse," wrote Sophocles. Adam and Eve lose their Eden when they eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Prometheus must suffer for aspiring to the wisdom of Zeus. Always, man measures himself by his response to suffering. We pity those rendered numb or bitter or inexpressive by their grief, but we bow before a soul in agony. We reverence Michelangelo's *Pietà* with its deep and terrible sorrow. We consider a Rembrandt of more value than a Hals. In our hearts we know only sorrow could produce music like Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony* or dramas that sound the soul as Shakespeare's do. Deep down we know the best in us—courage and nobility and pride—come to the fore when we suffer. Finally, we must admit that man was meant to suffer. It is a hard, an intolerable truth, but it is a truth that makes us wise.

Thus, tragedy and awareness go hand in hand. To be aware is to know ourselves fully, our capabilities and our limitations. Man may be godlike, but he is not a god. He cannot escape his destiny, which is to suffer. He orders his life by issuing laws, yet is driven hither and yon by the whims and caprices of Fate. He struggles and fails and dies. But man need never feel himself a victim, for there is that in each of us which can make of defeat a victory. In tragic suffering we catch a glimpse of ourselves that reconciles us to our lot. We can be proud to be what we are—human beings sharing a destiny that is both terrible and glorious.