

5-20-2012

Tragedy and Transcendence: Tracing Tragedy from Early Modernity to Present

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TRAGEDY AND TRANSCENDENCE:
TRACING TRAGEDY FROM EARLY MODERNITY TO PRESENT

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Worcester, Massachusetts

May, 2012

For Charles Flowers

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Introduction: Tragedy and Transcendence

Tragedy, in comparison to epic, comedy, satire, and lyric – as representations of life – seems to occupy a more fundamental position. By this I do not mean to say that tragedy is objectively superior to these other genres, but instead that it more earnestly, in some respects, offers insight into human nature, life's necessities, and the cosmic forces at play in the world as they relate to and have a bearing on human existence. Pain, suffering, and destruction are at the heart of tragedy. Indeed, Richard Sewall contends that whereas the man of corrective comedy or satire might claim, "I think, therefore I am" the achieving, epic man, "I act, or conquer, therefore I am," the sentimental, lyrical man, "I feel therefore I am," tragic man – although he has the qualities of thought, achievement, and sensitivity – understands the essence of his nature through suffering: "I suffer, I will to suffer, I learn by suffering; therefore I am" (*Form*, 155). Northrop Frye offers this: "It is largely through the tragedies of Greek culture that the sense of the authentic natural basis of human character comes into literature. In romance the characters are still largely dream-characters; in satire they tend to be caricatures; in comedy their actions are twisted to fit the demands of a happy ending. In full tragedy the main characters are emancipated from dream" (*Criticism*, 206).

There are two foundational concerns worth mentioning at the outset with respect to tragedy's attitude and vision. The first of these concerns is that tragedy is largely existential – it seriously deals with man's place in the cosmos amidst sources of order, disorder, capriciousness, meaning, meaninglessness, etc. The second concern is this: the central character in tragedy is exceptional in some significant regard and rightly deserves the title "tragic hero" – he fights against the forces of disorder and evil that create conflict in the world and is willing to suffer, for he realizes that it might be horrible to suffer, but worse yet to simply remain indifferent or

merely pessimistic. As Frye asserts, one who suffers is not immediately tragic, it is the peculiar nature of his suffering – namely his willingness to confront “God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these” and the type of knowledge this suffering ultimately leads to that makes him tragic (*Criticism*, 207). Tragic man ultimately serves as the mediator between the human and the divine, whatever form it takes: God, gods, fate, the orgiastic, the numinous, the ambiguous, the ecstatic. Tragic man, “taking up arms against the ancient cosmic evil” (Sewall, *Form*, 160), transcends the human situation and in his mediation between the human and the divine, offers us some knowledge, insight, revelation into the human situation and the possibilities that exist for man to orient himself within the cosmos.

Although there are different examples – or epochs – of tragedy (Greek, Renaissance, Modern), my contention is that tragedy proper – that is, the essence of the tragic vision of life that first emerged in Greek drama – involves a tragic hero and some significant exploration and disclosure of “transcendence” (*i.e.*, the divine, the numinous, the ecstatic). The true antithesis of tragedy is not irony – for tragedy contains this – but cynicism and pessimism, and whenever “transcendent” mystery is denied us, a work fails to be tragic. Furthermore, the type of suffering experienced in tragedy must yield something significant – whether it is the picture of a transcendent, transformed character, a newfound respect for and depth of understanding for some value (*i.e.*, equanimity, humility), an insight into fundamental questions (*i.e.*, what it means to be human, what justice entails, what man’s freedoms and limits are), or a measure of justice that heretofore had been unrecognized or misconstrued. In short, tragedy manifests a new sensitivity to the order of things and a change in being that, as Hamlet puts it, “readies” one to confront life seriously. The tragic hero, as Sewall notes, acts out of “an acceptance of destiny that is not merely resignation” (*Form*, 160).

Accordingly, this thesis will examine six “tragedies” spanning the Renaissance and Modern epochs and attempt to trace the narrative of tragic consciousness as this consciousness expands to include new forms, symbols, and modes of expression. Additionally, this thesis will attempt to parse the kind of relationship tragedy has with transcendence and seek to understand – and ultimately judge – whether each of the texts examined herein is properly “tragic” as opposed to ironic, pessimistic, nihilistic, merely cynical, or merely existential.

Chapter 1: Tragedy's Concerns and Structure

Since the Greeks, human beings have contemplated “tragedy” – a term that now names a distinctive genre of literature. However, the ways in which humans address and account for the issues of evil, suffering, and misfortune have changed since the Greek’s early vision of tragedy, and tragic literature from the various epochs that have come after the Greeks bears this out. Indeed, tragedy – as a genre of literature – saw itself change during its instantiation in the times of the English Renaissance and once again in the 19th and 20th centuries. Each epoch of tragic literature possesses certain characteristic concerns, some of which are theological, others of which are philosophical. Seen as a unified whole, tragedy has always sought to explore the individual, his understanding of self, and his means of orientation in relation to the many forces of order and disorder that are found in the world. There are at least a few universal themes that tragedy deals with: evil; fate; purpose; individual understanding of self; human possibilities; human limitations. All of these concerns are present in some capacity in each epoch of tragic literature. Thus, although tragedy has undergone some notable transformations since its inception in ancient Greek times, there is a certain narrative of tragic consciousness – especially with respect to notions of divinity, mystery, individual identity, and individual will – that can be traced from the Greek tradition to the Renaissance and Modern traditions.

A central concern that tragedy has always engaged is humanity’s relation to and understanding of mystery. This notion of “mystery” is made intelligible by tragedy with respect to notions of the divine, fate, and human reaction to certain modes of human possibility. The presence of gods in the human cosmos is the most obvious and immediate form the “divine” took in Greek tragedies. Within the Greek vision of tragedy, the poet’s emphasis often situated an exploration and accounting of the issues of evil, suffering, misfortune, etc. in the context of a

world where the gods and man were part of, and interacted with, the same cosmos. For this reason, human possibilities and limits were shaped and explored in relation to the divine's – that is a god or gods – immediate interaction with humans in the cosmos. Paul Ricoeur notes in his work, *The Symbolism of Evil*, that in the early Greek vision of the divine there exists a “non-distinction between the divine and the diabolical,” and divine powers act both as “a source of good counsel and as a power to lead man astray” (214).

In Christian and some Renaissance tragedies, the divine often functions as a transcendent creator of the world with whom human beings can connect and consequently come to understand their natural, moral selves. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* addresses this notion of the divine perhaps most straightforwardly when Hamlet comes to assert that there is a divinity – the creator god – that shapes our ends. He states: “When our deep plots do pall...that should learn us / There's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will –” (V.ii.10-11). In short, tragedies of the early Renaissance period – perhaps most notably, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* – engage the notion that one's ability to live authentically – that is, to transform oneself and come to realize true human freedom and possibility – is conditioned by one's encounter with and recognition of the divine. One should note that while the qualities of this “creator god” remain mostly ineffable, the divine's existence certainly is not ambiguous: the horizon of mystery and awe that occasion an epiphany for the tragic hero is precisely the form the divine takes. The tragic motion of both *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, for example, require an epiphany and subsequent transformation of the tragic hero in order to express the true depths of the tragic experience of life: only when one has endured the lowest depths and misery of existence can one best come to experience an honest, meaningful “divine epiphany.” In *King Lear*, Lear's acknowledgement and acceptance of the divine – a kind of ecstatic realization of primordial love, awe, and wonder –

allows him to finally “see.” In *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s encounter with the divine allows him to finally “let be.”

In modern literature, tragedy’s relation to mystery and the realm of the ineffable changes markedly from the relationship Renaissance tragedy posits between human beings and the divine. Due in large part to the onset of a philosophical perspective that imagines nature’s impersonal will governing the cosmos, the vision of the human being and tragedy in the modern era is largely divorced from notions of the divine and the mysterious. Human will functions in an especially potent way in modern tragedy insofar as tragedies of this time – such as Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of A Salesman* – assert that human action can eliminate the tragic. Furthermore, pessimism and, indeed, nihilism – as operative philosophical perspectives in many modern tragedies – suggest that the realities of the world are at best transient and a matter of mere subjective experience and interpretation, and at worst, utterly meaningless (one finds this latter position in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*). When tragedy is understood as a reflection on pessimism and the impersonal and meaningless forces of the world, the very core of the tragic tradition is problematized, for tragedy traditionally presupposes and imagines the human being acting in a world where there is fundamental “mystery” and “hiddenness.” What one finds in the pessimistic vision of life is the claim that existence, purpose, order and so forth are merely arbitrary and provisional.

Although there is little doubt that it would be an exceedingly difficult task to provide an overall definition of tragedy and its vision of the world that encompasses every epoch of tragic literature, one does, I believe, find a “tree of family resemblances” when one looks at the various epochs of tragedy in conjunction. Admittedly, the modern sense of the tragic poses the greatest threat to a coherent tragic narrative for it very nearly represents a schism within tragic

consciousness given its philosophical disposition and modes of tragic expression – most significantly a vision of the cosmos that ostensibly does not involve a fundamental divine dimension. However, as Paul Ricoeur claims, the Greek conception of tragedy persuades us that “the tragic vision of the world is tied to a spectacle and not to a speculation” (*Symbolism*, 212). Stated differently: the essence of tragedy cannot simply be transcribed into an exact theory of the way the world is, but, instead, rests in spectacle – a theatrical *show* or *action*. Ricoeur locates the essence of tragedy as spectacle in “a tragic hero, a tragic action, a tragic denouement” (*Symbolism*, 212). In principle, “tragedy” can absorb different modes of expression (*i.e.*, different modes of spectacle or “show”) for it is elastic, to a degree, rather than strictly rigid. As such, each epoch of tragic literature can embody the tragic ethos even if it has concerns that are distinctive and unique from epochs past.

There are, however, a few constituent aspects to the way in which tragedy makes sense of the world and imagines man’s position in the world. There also are certain concerns that tragedy must address if its ethos is to remain consistent. First and foremost, tragedy is not simply reducible to moralism or fatalism. That is, tragedy is distinct from “morality tales” (*i.e.*, moralism) and irony (*i.e.*, fatalism). Tragedy also is distinct from pessimism – what one finds in the novels of Thomas Hardy, for example – and from the philosophy of existentialism – what one finds in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett. Pessimistic and existential literature seems to be more ironic than tragic. One should not be mistaken, however, that tragedy does engage with much of what existential literature and existential philosophy explore. Northrop Frye elucidates this point in his work, *Fools of Time*: “[T]ragedy, no less than irony, is existential: the conceptions that existential thinkers have tried to struggle with, care, dread, nausea, absurdity, authenticity, and the like, are all relevant to the theory of tragedy” (4). Frye

also explains that tragedy is existential in that “the experience of the tragic cannot be moralized or contained within any conceptual world-view” for “a tragic hero is a tragic hero whether he is a good or a bad man; a tragic action is a tragic action whether it seems to us admirable or villainous, inevitable or arbitrary” (*Fools*, 4). Existence itself is understood as tragic and, as Frye suggests, even if a religious or philosophical system were somehow to answer all questions and solve all problems, such a system could “never absorb the kind of experience tragedy represents” (*Fools*, 4) for any study of human existence approached from the perspective of pure thought lies outside *experience itself*. Frye crystallizes this point by claiming that the dying words of Hotspur in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I* come out of the heart of tragedy: “Thought’s the slave of life” (*Fools*, 4).

As for moralism and the form of the morality tale being distinct from tragedy, tragedy, as stated above, “cannot be moralized...within any world view” and, though it may have a moral component, this moral component is not all determining. One need not look far to realize that tragedy does deal with morality in a significant manner, namely with respect to exploring the possibilities that exist for realizing a greater measure of justice in human affairs. Indeed, what one finds in much of Greek tragedy and Renaissance tragedy is a tragic hero who courageously bears as Hamlet puts it, “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.57), and is able to realize some greater measure of justice through suffering and bearing the burdens of the world and its mystery. One final point on this matter of the moral dimension to tragedy must be stated. It is this: the very structure of tragedy – that is, the way in which tragedies unfold and ultimately conclude – follows a logic that explicitly is not moralistic. As Frye puts this, since tragedy deals with the heroic and the heroic represents something “above the normal limits of experience...something infinite imprisoned in the finite” that inevitably drives

toward death, “the impetus of tragedy is *sacrificial*” (*Fools*, 5). In other words, tragedy’s movement – as a journey that takes place in the intervening time between birth and death – tends toward a sacrifice in which death is, as Frye can be rendered as saying, “the debt we owe for having lived at all” (*Fools*, 4). Tragedy presents human action unfolding as if it begins from the end – death is inevitable, “mortality is [man’s] lot” (Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 214). Thus, tragedy does not structure life’s actions within the explicit framework of moral progress or moral exploration; it structures life’s actions within the framework of mortality, that is, of a journey toward death.

Tragedy’s concern with sacrifice and mortality means nothing unless it is linked with heroism. In fact, heroism – that is, the “heroic” as an exceptional mode of human possibility and being – is one of, if not *the*, defining aspect of tragedy. Frye puts it thus: “What makes tragedy tragic, and not simply ironic, is the presence in it of a countermovement of being that we call the heroic, a capacity for action or passion, for doing or suffering, which is above ordinary human experience” (*Fools*, 4-5). The heroic energy that the tragic hero embodies appears “invincible” and capable of bursting “the boundaries of normal experience”; tragedy illustrates the impact that the heroic has on human experience (*Fools*, 5). The heroic showcases human possibility – it shows us something important and valuable about human possibilities. It therefore is no surprise that many tragedies often end with what Frye calls “the survivors forming, or about to form, a secondary or social contract, a relation among more ordinary men which will achieve enough working justice or equity to minimize further tragedy” (*Fools*, 5-6). The heroic suggests something infinite imprisoned in the finite and this “something infinite” may be morally either good or bad, for “the worst of men may still be a hero if he is big enough to anger or frighten the gods...Man may be infinite if he is infinite only in his evil desires” (*Fools*, 6). Morality and a

greater sense of justice or equity may come out of a tragic hero's struggle, but this does not follow from necessity. What a tragic hero embodies is a strong countermovement of action against the prevailing troubles and mysteries of the world that illuminates in some substantive manner the depths of human limitations and opportunities. The tragic hero is caught up in the ambiguity of the human situation and at least struggles to make sense of – if not, in fact, makes sense of – some fundamental aspect of human nature. This, as will be explored in great length in chapter 4, is part of what decisively constitutes the tragic element of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

Any mature study of tragedy must take into account three additional constituent elements (besides the presence of a “tragic hero” as explained above) that works of proper tragedy contain: (1) an element of mystery that manifests itself most prominently as a form of blindness or “hiddenness” that prompts, conditions, or restrains human action; (2) a sense of being in time or within the larger movement of nature; (3) what Aristotle calls “a complete action” – an action that is serious, whole, and of a certain magnitude. These distinctively tragic concerns will be explained more thoroughly in chapters to come, but there are at least a few matters that must be stated preliminarily.

What one means by blindness and “hiddenness” in the tragic sense is that the drama of a tragic work unfolds in such a way that there is a depth of understanding that is lacking on the part of the tragic character – he is impotent in some significant manner and is continually at the mercy of fate. This sense of the “fatedness” of action relates intimately to the notion that tragedy unfolds with an acute sense of time. That is, time – as the process of experiencing the causal links that emerge out of tragic action – bears heavily on the tragic character and his human limitations. Furthermore, “being in time” in the tragic sense connotes a feeling of the one-

dimensional quality of life: everything happens once and for all and life inevitably moves toward death at every moment. Tragedy thus takes seriously the idea that mortality gives shape and form to life and that one is limited by one's mortality and the forces at work in the world that bring one's mortality to bear.

As for the idea that tragedy contains a complete action, what is meant here is simply that the tragic action and its subsequent consequences carry with it a sense of significance such that every action is necessary and drives the story toward its tragic conclusion. Aristotle claims: “[T]ragedy is a representation not of human beings but of action and life...plot is the origin and as it were the soul of tragedy, and the characters are secondary” (*Poetics*, 93). Given the primacy of action and plot, Aristotle claims that tragedy ultimately offers a catharsis through the “suffering with” one experiences when one watches tragic action unfold. One does not simply connect to the character – that is, the particular – one connects with the way in which the character experiences the necessities and limitations imposed by life – the universal. To use Frye's terminology, one identifies with the “heroic energy” that the tragic hero possesses as this energy counterpoises, for a time, the inevitability of mortality and cosmic necessities.

In order for the term “tragedy” to have any affective significance, a work must exhibit the four elements that have been stated above. Ostensibly, the more a work contains of these elements and the more earnest, well crafted, and resonant its appropriation of these elements within the work, the stronger its “tragedy” is. Tragedy, as Richard Sewall explains, “speaks not the language of systematic thought, but through symbolic action, symbol and figure, diction and image, sound and rhythm” (*Form*, 150) as it ponders and represents the mystery of the world and man's place in it. Tragedy uses certain symbols (as will be further explained in coming chapters) and characteristic elements (as explained above) to wrestle with man's encounter with cosmic

mystery (namely the mystery of evil), the paradox of man and his ambiguity, and man's relation to both himself and the cosmos. In its overall scope, tragedy shows us the paradoxes and tensions one finds both psychologically and externally in life – rather than simply telling us about them – and contains both a measure of pessimism and optimism, but ultimately moves beyond any simple understanding or conclusion about life's mystery and man's experience of mystery. Tragedy wrestles with and illuminates ambiguity, mystery, paradox, transcendence, fate, absurdity, and irony, but it does not come to some exact conclusion about such matters. As Hamlet might put it, tragedy makes one “readier” to witness “new revelations about human existence, the evil of evil, the goodness of good” and momentarily offers a glimpse into the eternal mystery of man's nature and the world from a “transcended, higher vision” (Sewall, *Form*, 161).

Chapter 2: The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus

If one states outright that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is better understood as a tragedy than a morality play, this statement demands clarification. In order for one to properly understand this assertion, one must admit that tragedy ultimately deals with a fundamental "hiddenness" and blindness that conditions action, discloses human limits, suggests that the possibilities for human freedom and responsibility are located in the tension between forces of order and disorder that appear in the world, and that its judgments are neither simply moralistic nor fatalistic. Marlowe's examination of Faustus' motivations and actions in the play exemplifies these aforementioned notions. In fact, Marlowe's play discloses the scope of the tragic consequences of Faustus' blindness to God's grace and misguided understanding of Hell, while simultaneously critiquing Faustus' decision to embrace the desire for power, control, and unbounded self-assertion over a willingness to accept his human limits. And so, because Marlowe equally makes clear the extent to which Faustus' actions and motivations are grounded in both God's absence from Faustus' world *and* his immediate decision to commit himself to selfish pursuits, Marlowe's vision of the play is not simply moralistic, but tragic.

Whereas some believe the play is aptly described as a "Christian tragedy" in the sense that W.H. Auden speaks of it – at the end of a Christian tragedy, we say, "What a pity it had to be this way when it might have been otherwise" – I think that it is better construed as embodying the ethos of Greek tragedy, which, as Auden remarks, makes us say, "What a pity it had to be this way" (Sewall, *Vision*, 57). The above distinction is important, for so called "Christian tragedy" – because it posits a God who has a specific connection with and concern for His creation – suggests that at any moment, provided one is genuinely repentant, one can escape one's tragic predicament. Although one might plausibly sympathize with the "it could have been

otherwise” interpretation of this play, I think the true essence of tragedy suggests that things could not be otherwise and that “tragedy” entails an active countermovement against the inevitable – against Fate, God, gods, misfortune – realizing that despite how things “will end,” the human situation (*i.e.*, human freedoms, limits, purpose, ambiguity, etc.) must be explored amidst the cosmic forces that weigh one down. *Doctor Faustus* – while it may not be the most traditional of tragedies – does contain this sense of the tragic.

Only with a precise understanding of God’s absence from Faustus’ world can we properly appreciate and gauge the complexity of the tragic dimension of Faustus’ actions and motivations. Marlowe makes this notion clear from the outset, when, in the first scene of the play, Faustus quotes from the First Letter of John: “The reward of sin is death” (5), neglecting to quote the following line of John’s letter, which reads, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John: 1:9). God’s detachment from Faustus’ perception of the world is evident – he only hears the law of the Bible, not the potential for salvation through God’s grace. Therefore, Faustus sees religion as a certain death, for he thinks once one has sinned one is damned: “If we say that we have no sin, we / Deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us / Why, then belike, we must sin, and so consequently die / Ay, we must die an everlasting death” (5). Faustus’ decision to dismiss religion and carry on with his desire for absolute knowledge is largely the consequence of his blindness and misunderstanding of God’s grace, an inevitably tragic reality. The elemental “hiddenness” of the importance of faith and the dire consequences of renouncing God are again apparent when Faustus exclaims; “this word ‘damnation’ terrifies not me,” (14) “hell’s a fable,” (23), and that the idea of pain in the afterlife is merely an “old wives’ tale” (23). The depth of Faustus’ alienation from God presents itself even more powerfully when he remarks:

“Contrition, prayer, repentance, what of these?” (18) and “My heart is hardened, I cannot repent / Scare can I name salvation, faith, or heaven” (25).

Although God’s absence conditions Faustus’ actions, his motivations are also born out of a gross, unbounded desire for self-assertion: “All things that move between the quiet poles / Shall be at my command: emperors and kings / Are but obeyed in their provinces / But his dominion that exceeds in this / Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man / A sound magician is a demi-god! / Here tire my brains to get a deity!” (6). Faustus’ willfulness envisions no bounds. He seeks to explore man’s place in the world and challenges what it means to be a man, namely a Renaissance man. He speaks of the ultimate vision of the Renaissance’s focus on the perfection of the human mind and centrality of human agency when he states he desires to be “resolve[d] of all ambiguities” (7) and be the “great emperor of the world” (15). Marlowe imagines Renaissance man’s position in the world and inner psychology as a tragic predicament. Richard Sewall argues that “Marlowe interpolated into the old medieval equation the new, mysterious, and terrifying ambiguous dynamic of the Renaissance” as it flew in the face of “fifteen centuries of Christian teaching and spiritual discipline...introduc[ing] the modern tragic theme of the divided soul – soon to become ‘the complicated modern soul’ of Dostoevski’s analysis – torn between the desire to exploit its new mastery and freedom and (on the other hand) the claims of the old teachings, which to defy meant guilt and a growing sense of alienation” (*Vision*, 59). Sewall claims that Faustus is tragic because he recognizes modern man’s dilemma as real.

Faustus realizes that the thrust of the Renaissance values of human mastery, perfection, knowledge, and greatness comes at a great cost and that its vision of human possibility jeopardizes one’s soul – almost forces one, as Faustus literally does, to sell one’s soul. Faustus comes to realize that man’s soul is not entirely his own, it belongs – in a sense – to God, and to

deny God means to fracture, if not completely destroy, one's soul. In a world where God seems absent, Faustus seeks to realize his human nature fully and is willing to risk everything – even his soul – to see what opportunities await man in this world. Marlowe sets Faustus free to explore forbidden realms that, as Sewall contends, shows the full range of “the outward Renaissance thrust” (*Vision*, 60). Marlowe turns the focus inward in Faustus and sees “the soul as the tragic battlefield” (*Vision*, 57), envisioning human striving and freedom in juxtaposition with the Christian injunctions against worldly pursuits and sensitivity to sin, guilt, and redemption.

Faustus' motivations are not simply the cause of an immoral disposition born out of evil intent, nor are they a direct response of a conscious will to turn away from that which he understands to be good and holy. The situation is far more ambiguous than this, far more tragically complex. This is made evident when Faustus exclaims: “Tis magic, magic, that hath ravished me!” (8). Marlowe's diction is important here, especially if one hopes to best understand the tragic complexity of Faustus' actions: by having Faustus exclaim that he is “ravished” by the thought of magic, Marlowe suggests the vulnerability and ignorance of Faustus' situation – God's absence causes him to operate with a certain blindness to consequence and an insufficient understanding of what becomes of the impious individual.

Faustus' willingness to explore the mystery of man's position in the world with conviction and strength makes him heroic. Time and time again he seems to vacillate between what would have to be blind obedience to God and his own desires. He seeks earnestly to know himself at all costs and heroically is unwilling to simply submit to a God whose presence he cannot feel. Faustus exclaims to Mephistophilis, a devil, “[I]earn thou of Faustus manly fortitude” and promptly asserts that he will “always remain obedient to [his own] will” (15).

Faustus thrusts himself into the predicament of his times, the Renaissance dilemma alluded to earlier. He encounters the Good Angel a few times throughout the play – an old man in the fifth act who speaks of love, humility, and repentance, and a few curious signs such as the sudden appearance of the words “Homo Fuge!” before he signs his pact with the devil – yet still commits himself to his will. Faustus, quite simply, is unwilling to take for granted man’s position in the world and is intent upon realizing his full human potential, for “O, what a world of profit and delight / Of power, of honor, and omnipotence / Is promised to the studious artisan” (6). Faustus speaks not only of self-interest, but also self-improvement, and even, at times, beneficence: “I’ll have them fill the public schools with silk / Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad / I’ll levy solders with the coin they bring / And chase the Prince of Parma from our land” (7). Faustus expresses the sentiments of Renaissance man in all his glory: egotistical and power driven, yet also intellectual – “I’ll have them read me strange philosophy / And tell the secrets of all foreign kings” (7) – and humanitarian.

Marlowe’s overall vision of the play clearly lays emphasis on the interiority of evil – that is, much of the tragic significance of Faustus’ situation springs from the psychological conflict caused by, on the one hand, his desire for self-actualization, and, on the other, the guilt he feels given the religious sentiments of his culture. The divine is not manifest; all moral strivings take place in a context where sacramental mediation seems to have broken down. Marlowe sees the tragic element in this state of affairs and does not view this situation “only as ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ would see it but as man of flesh and blood, the one who takes the risk, sees it and lives it out” (*Vision*, 60). Indeed, Marlowe, through Faustus, asks us to consider what man does when he realizes the possibilities for self-mastery and perfection amidst a world that is characterized by “guilt-ridden allegiance to traditional values” (Bevington and Rasmussen, *Faustus’ Tragedy*,

180). Marlowe wants to know how a man in Faustus' position deals with this cultural crisis – how does it make one feel? What are the inner sources of conflict that arise? What is the discovery and how does this discovery affect one? What does it tell one about oneself and one's position in the cosmos? At bottom, Marlowe's play is steeped with psychological frustration and drips with irony; it conveys the inner discord one feels when one exists in such a dilemma as Faustus does. The psychological battle that Faustus endures proves both his heroism – he refuses to simply submit to a God who seems hidden from the world and suffers the high price that comes with this choice of action – and the tragedy of Faustus' situation.

On many occasions Marlowe ironizes Faustus' actions and words so that one sees the precarious situation Faustus finds himself in: he is able to enjoy a measure of freedom and liberation, yet also begins to experience a significant diminution in his passion for self-advancement, glory, and intellectual satiation. Marlowe illustrates Faustus' steady decline into boredom and petty trickery, and makes it clear that although many years have passed, Faustus has yet to accomplish anything truly remarkable, marking his rapid decline into a self-indulgent, conflicted, and alienated individual. In the latter half of the play, we see a stark contrast between the potential heroism suggested in Faustus' opening soliloquy and the petty trickster he becomes.

I'll have them wall all Germany with brass,
And make swift Rhine circle fair Wittenberg;
I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,
Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad;
I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,
And chase the Prince of Parma from our land. (7)

Additionally, because Faustus simply travels throughout Europe glorifying his own trivial desires, accomplishing nothing worthy of mention and certainly nothing for the greater good of Germany, his initial philanthropic suggestions seem contrived and meaningless. Marlowe

communicates that the depths of Faustus' fractured, disintegrating self are the tragic consequence of his fateful decision to defy augury and commit himself to realizing his individual potential.

In the process of his journey and amidst the psychological despair, frustration, and torment he experiences, Faustus comes to a fundamental realization. He asks: "What art thou, Faustus, but a man condemned to die / Despair doth drive distrust into my thoughts / Confound these passions with a quiet sleep" (61). His agony is significant and so too is his revelation: he realizes that he is no more immortal than anyone else and that his passions, in truth, are crippling and life-denying. In fact, his unwillingness to embrace a humble disposition and accept the limits and restrictions placed on human action by religious teaching and dogma denies him the fundamental wisdom that he is not omnipotent and that life is fundamentally characterized by forces of order and disorder, no matter how fervently one desires to establish absolute control over the world and one's place in it. In Sewall's words, what Faustus learns is "the truth of his own nature – a truth which it was his peculiar Renaissance compulsion to forget or deny: that he is creature as well as creator; a man and not a god; a dependent, responsible part of a greater whole. He learns that his soul is not a mere trifle of his own, to use as a commodity, and that 'contrition, prayer, repentance,' hell and damnation, are not (as the Evil Angel told him) '...illusions, fruits of lunacy / That make men foolish that do trust them most'" (*Vision*, 64). Faustus has forgotten the humbling terror that God reigns supreme and that His word is infallible.

Faustus' dilemma involves the emerging conflicts and tensions brought about by modern times. Sewall explains that the fascinations and compulsions that give rise to Faustus' actions are born out of modern man's unique situation: "On the one hand is human limitation and finiteness, the necessary postulate and the first step in the Christian experience. On the other, with the old

catechism wearing thin, it is the compulsion of modern man to deny his limitations, press ever further into the mysteries of a universe which appears steadily to yield more and more of its secrets to his inquiring mind” (*Vision*, 65). At the core of Faustus’ experience and discovery lies a paradox: if he is simply content with his limitations he would seem to deny his God-given powers for self-exploration and intellectual exploration, yet to challenge the mystery of man’s place in the cosmos and his possibilities for self-actualization and mastery portends evil and entails suffering the horrors of eternity. In the end, God “levels” Faustus as he comes to realize the divine force that governs the cosmos.

Faustus’ actions are rightly considered heroic because of their magnitude: he takes a bold risk – he sells his soul – and endures the suffering and despair that are unique to the Renaissance hero’s dilemma. He fights against the old religious tradition and is unsatisfied with paltry signs of God’s presence (*i.e.*, in the beginning of the play the words “Homo fuge!” appear on the contract he signs with the devil and in the penultimate scene of the play “Christ’s blood streams in the firmament” (80), immeasurably distant, vaulted in the heavens, entirely out of reach and entirely ungraspable). Faustus questions supposed revelatory signs and discards them if they are unnecessarily opaque, ambiguous, or simply unrealistic – a powerful expression of the psychological battle the emerging modern man is thrust into.

One thing that has troubled some scholars is, as Bevington and Rasmussen say, “the play’s seeming lack of a proper middle...Faustus appears to have little to do after he has signed his fateful bargain” (*Faustus’ Tragedy*, 181). Some critics cannot make sense of the comedy and irony that comprise portions of the middle of the play and thus claim that the play is structurally unsound. I think there is an answer to this concern. Bevington and Rasmussen explain Nigel

Alexander's take on the structure of the play, and considering its persuasiveness, I'll quote it in full:

The middle of the play is needed to make clear to the audience the nature of Faustus's danger and folly. It does so by generating what Alexander calls the "logic of suspense," making use of rapid transitions to sharpen the audience's awareness of Faustus's approaching destiny. The Seven Deadly sins entertain Faustus with a "representation of the bonds which will fetter him until his destruction at the end of the play." The low comedy scenes are much more than parody; they are tied together by a symbolic imagery of evil that suspensefully reminds us of following passion wherever it leads." They give objective form to the dilemma in which Faustus is caught, between his knowledge that grace is truly offered to the penitent and his own conviction that he cannot repent. (*Faustus' Tragedy*, 182)

While one might be prudent to admit that the structure of the play – most significantly the middle of the play – does not hold up as well as say a *Hamlet* or *King Lear* does when subjected to the most scrutinizing and meticulous Aristotelian analysis, there certainly is a coherent tragic element to the play's structure, and I think this is apparent in exactly the way Alexander claims.

As for the ending of the play, it clearly goes beyond the traditional morality play conclusion that is suggested in the chorus's final words. Indeed, we see in Faustus' situation the dilemma of modern man and his emerging desire to make sense of the world and experience its mystery on his own terms through his own mastery and self-actualization. Faustus takes us deep into his inner psychology in such a bold and honest fashion that he seems exceptional. In his thought and action – philosophizing, conjuring, defying God, and possessing an incredible confidence in the face of devils – he seems not so much the figure of Everyman represented in the morality plays, but more of a Prometheus or an Adam. The play's significance and meaning go far beyond the final summary offered by the chorus and leave one contemplating the nature of knowledge-seeking and the fundamental concerns of man's quest for knowledge and mastery of the world.

If Christian tragedy leaves us saying, “What a pity it had to be this way when it might have been otherwise,” then I do not know that *Doctor Faustus* is strictly a Christian tragedy. The reason for this is simple: Marlowe presents Faustus’ world as far more unsecure, unpredictable, ambiguous, and mysterious than the Christian individual imagines it to be. Considering that Marlowe does not repeat the old traditions of past times and instead shows the terror, fascination, and mystery of man’s emerging modern sense of his position in the world, his contention is that man’s desire for knowledge and mastery are not the product of mere folly, and this is why we sympathize with Faustus and see something great and daring in his actions and convictions. Faustus is not pathetic or foolish; he is daring and exceptional and represents the dilemma of early modernity. By the end of the play he transcends the man he was at the beginning and exhibits the many layers of early modern man: he does not completely debase himself, does not simply accept his fate, and he is appalled by eternity. For Faustus, it could not “have been otherwise” for if it were and he were to debase himself, the world would cease to be as mysterious and fascinating as it is, and human individuality and human accomplishment would seem far more constrained than they need to be. Sewall puts it perfectly: “[T]he final scene gives a sense, not so much of the justice and goodness of the universe as of the transcendent human individual, caught in the consequences of a dilemma which, granted the conditions of his time, it was impossible for any imaginative man wholly to avoid” (*Vision*, 67). The complexity of the human imagination, human aspirations, and human nature existing in opposition to fate are all present in the character of Faustus.

Chapter 3: The Tragedy of Hamlet

What one finds in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is something of an expansion of Marlowe's concerns in *Doctor Faustus* with respect to notions of man's individuality and liberation in the face of the modern dilemma. Both plays seek to make sense of human freedom and opportunity as the forces of evil, suffering, and misfortune complicate man's position in the cosmos.

Shakespeare expands on the conception of the modern willful man and his ambitious desire to control and master the world and showcases the crippling and life-denying consequences of this disposition in his depiction of Elsinore. The tragic hero of this play, Hamlet, ultimately must fight against the willful actions and intentions of his fellow man and come to find a first principle upon which to act in the chaotic, manipulative world of Elsinore. Shakespeare's focus in *Hamlet* largely deals with illuminating the utterly conflicted and misguided attitudes of a society that seeks to busily pursue immediate, temporal purposes. It is not until the final act of the play that Shakespeare provides us with a model of how one best lives one's life and is authentically oneself in Hamlet's rejection of immediate, temporal ends, and his focus on the ultimate end: mortality. In so doing, Shakespeare asserts that when one busily tries to manipulate others and simply focuses on temporal purposes and ends, one becomes alienated from one's natural, authentic self, and thus is unable to realize one's full human potential and the mystery of man's place in the world. Shakespeare very explicitly showcases the chaos and destruction that are the consequences of man's attempt to eliminate both the mystery of the world and the divine forces that govern the world.

The tragic situation that Hamlet faces – the murder of his father by his uncle – unfolds in a world of utter ignobility and deception. Shakespeare's tragic concerns are many in this play, but one can access a significant portion of the play's overall tragic resonance once one

understands two of Shakespeare's immediate concerns: first, the predicament of modern man and his willfulness; second, the existential element of the play that is perhaps best conveyed by Hamlet's utterance: "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (III.i.55). The play determinedly explores a few fundamental concerns: man's place in the world; how one best lives authentically and meaningfully; what it means "to be"; how one comes to truly be at peace with the world given all its – one the one hand – beauty, magnificence, and wonder – and on the other – death, destruction, chaos, and evil. Hamlet's tragic journey through mystery, psychological torment, and profound anxiety to eventual self-realization and greatness show a true picture of transcendent man – the truest expression of "tragic man."

As is the case with all great tragedy, Hamlet's thoughts and actions are largely conditioned by the world in which he finds himself – his tragic journey consists of him confronting the forces of disorder he finds in his world and heroically taking on the mystery and suffering that this world imposes on him. Shakespeare shows the incredible mystery at the heart of Hamlet's world, in part, by writing the play in the interrogative mode. The play permeates with the phenomena of determining how one makes sense of the world. Uncertainty shrouds Hamlet's world and a tremendous anxiety about how one understands appearance pervades most of the play's action. One has a sense of this mystery from the outset – the first words of the play are: "Who's there?" (I.i.1). Questions abound: "What a piece of work is man!...And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?" (II.ii.301-308); "Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" (III.i.20); "To be, or not to be?" (III.i.55); "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" (III.i.126-127). As Maynard Mack notes of the many questions the play poses, "In them the interrogations seem to point not only beyond the context but beyond the

play, out of Hamlet's predicaments into everyone's" (*World of Hamlet*, 194). In Hamlet's questions about the world and himself, one sees fundamental questions about human nature.

One of the principal difficulties Hamlet endures is making sense of reality and appearance and distinguishing the one from the other. Shakespeare imbues the play with the tension that results from this difficulty, showing the ambiguity and uncertainty that arise from man's willfulness. For example, Claudius' speech regarding his late brother's death, though it sounds regal and respectful, is ironically rife with dishonesty and disrespect: he urges his people "with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves" (I.ii.6-7); he refers to the queen as a "sometimes sister, now [a] queen" (I.ii.8); and he claims that "with mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage" (I.ii.12) he has taken the former queen as his bride. Claudius' words highlight how inappropriate his attitude is, for they contradict and undercut what they attempt to communicate. Although Claudius' subjects are not privy to the fact that he has murdered his brother and thus are not especially suspicious of him, Shakespeare ironizes Claudius' words so that we understand that he is not who he presents himself to be – he is not a noble, honest, moral individual.

Shakespeare's treatment of Claudius' supposedly wise words to a grieving Hamlet in the second scene of the play is ironic, thus indicating an indictment of Claudius. Claudius claims that Hamlet's grief for his father's death is "[a] course of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief / It shows a will most incorrect to heaven" (I.ii.93-95) and concludes that because human beings inevitably die, one must accept the death of one's father and not "take it to heart" (I.ii.101), for grief is "a fault to heaven / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature" (I.ii.101-102). Claudius' words are certainly pregnant with irony: grieving for a loved one is not a mark of impious stubbornness, nor is it disrespectful to heaven, nature, or those whom are deceased; killing one's

brother out of a self-interested desire for power and fame is. Shakespeare intends for us to see that Claudius' words more appropriately are understood as an indictment of his own actions, not Hamlet's. We see, then, that Claudius' self-interested purposes are utterly perverse and unnatural and that he does not honestly understand himself or his place in the world: he knows nothing of what it means to maturely navigate life; he has a completely misguided and immature sense of the gravity of death; he has not a clue to how one meaningfully and maturely lives in accordance with death.

At the heart of this matter of appearance (*i.e.*, the appearance of concern, nobility, wisdom, etc.) and reality (*i.e.*, human nature and the actual state of things) is a concern about human willfulness and the ways in which people attempt to navigate life: does one simply manipulate others and one's appearances? Does one act out of compassion? Does one attempt to control everything? Does one accept one's limitations and live humbly? Shakespeare shows us that Hamlet contemplates these exact concerns. The first half of the play illustrates the extent to which even Hamlet is corrupted by the self-interested desire to satisfy immediate purposes and ends. Hamlet's tragic blindness manifests itself as a misunderstanding of how one best lives as a limited human being and best orients oneself such that one is allowed a true measure of freedom, possibility, meaning, and composure in life. Shakespeare suggests quite evocatively how destructive and mad Hamlet becomes by having him adopt Pyrrhus as a model of revenge. Hamlet, while asking a player to act out a scene, remarks that he "chiefly lov'd Aeneas' [tale] to Dido / And thereabout of it especially when he speaks of Priam's slaughter" (II.ii.446-447). Hamlet becomes so obsessed with exacting revenge on his father's killer that he begins to revel in the idea of slaughter. Indeed, he delights in quoting a part of the tale of the fall of Troy himself:

With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Bak'd and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and a damned light
To their lord's murder. Roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks. (II.ii.458-464)

Hamlet's commitment to revenge by feigning madness appears to actually cause him to become mad: he delights in the image of Pyrrhus as an archetypal avenger. Hamlet's enjoyment of this speech suggests the depths of his distress and depression and resonantly implies that he has turned his focus on wrathful anger. Hamlet's commitment to immediate, self-interested purposes breeds a destructive anger in him, and we see how unnatural his vision of revenge has become in his failure to see the immensely hellish, beast-like figure Pyrrhus is described as: Pyrrhus is full of "wrath and fire;" is drenched in "coagulate gore;" and is grotesquely "hellish."

Shakespeare most effectively suggests the utter perversity and madness that are spawned from Hamlet's steadfast commitment to exacting revenge for his father's murder in his unwillingness to kill Claudius as he prays. Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius as he prays – even though he believes he has the confirmation he needs of Claudius' culpability – for he reasons that since Claudius murdered his father before he was able to confess his sins and receive his last rites, Claudius does not deserve salvation: "'A took my father grossly, full of bead / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May...And am I then revenged / to take him in the purging of his soul / When he is fit and season'd for his passage? / No!" (III.iii.80-86). Hamlet's desire for revenge becomes a matter of egomaniacal self-interest: he takes it upon himself to pass divine judgment and impose himself in cosmic matters. Shakespeare makes clear that Hamlet has not only lost touch with reality, but also that he knows nothing of himself or his place in the world – he refuses to simply exact his revenge and allow God to settle matters of salvation. Hamlet

comes to represent the hellish figure of Pyrrhus – he devolves into immorality and supreme wrathfulness.

Part of Hamlet's heroism is embodied in his ability to take us into his inner psychology and give voice to the many tensions and conflicts that arise in man's limited situation on earth. As Mack notes, the "breach between the outer and the inner stirs no special emotion in Polonius, because he is always either behind an arras or prying into one, but it shakes Hamlet to the core" (*World of Hamlet*, 200). Hamlet eventually sees beyond the mere appearance of his world and gives voice to the dire emotional conflict man suffers, and he is willing to take these concerns seriously rather than scheme and remain emotionally distant like Claudius, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. The Hamlet we find in the first act of the play seems hyperaware that foundational appearances are doubtful: "These indeed seem / For they are actions that a man might play / But I have that within which passes show / These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (I.ii.83-86). What Hamlet realizes is that there are very few possibilities for justice, compassion, and honest nobility in the world of Elsinore. Indeed, he claims of the current state of his world: "Fie on't, ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely / That it should come [to this]!" (I.ii.35-37). The image of the rotten world Hamlet's words evoke comes to powerfully symbolize the evil, decay, and suffering he finds in the world and throws us headfirst into his tragic dilemma: in a world of such self-interested purposes, political machinations, and emotional callousness, what is the compassionate, honest individual to do? Must he follow the example of those around him, or can he orient himself in such a manner that life can become bearable, meaningful, and liberating?

Shakespeare shows the true horror of Hamlet's suffering by making evident the life-denying, crippling, and self-alienating effect of Hamlet's initial self-interest and scheming antic disposition. Indeed, Hamlet's thoughts of suicide and self-laceration show the true despair of his predicament. He questions whether life is worth living: "To be, or not to be, that is the question / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing, end them" (III.i.55-59). Hamlet envisions life as impossible and full of suffering, concluding that life ultimately is a "calamity" (III.i.68). In fact, he imagines life is so meaningless and full of strife that he claims one lives simply out of fear of what awaits one after death, stating that the fear and uncertainty of the afterlife "makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of" (III.i.80-81). That Hamlet expresses his utter fragility and deplorability – he does not love himself, does not love life, and does not have a mature understanding of mortality – and yet does not succumb to these terrors and simply act out of gross self-interest or nihilism, proves his heroism.

Mack has it right when he notes that "mortality" as a theme in Hamlet – and this is true in the broader sense of tragic consciousness – means more than death, it means "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" (*World of Hamlet*, 204). Hamlet's world is a world of heartache, depression, manipulation, and constant flux – this is his tragic lot. Shakespeare shows that even language is inconsistent and potentially meaningless – because mutable – in the world of Elsinore. Indeed, Shakespeare has Hamlet remark, "Words, words, words" (II.ii.192), intending us to see that language itself amounts to nothing more than an object for manipulative purposes. We see this often: Claudius' words are almost always ironic because they attempt to conceal his true feelings and actions; Gertrude offers – like Claudius does – words of "wisdom," explaining to Hamlet how unhealthy his grief seems, though she realizes her

remarriage was hasty and immoral, and her grief for her husband's death inadequate; Hamlet puts on an antic disposition and speaks as though he has gone mad; Polonius' words are never direct, as they seek "[b]y indirections [to] find directions" (II.i.63). Shakespeare powerfully illustrates the impossibility of honesty, morality, meaningful love, and nobility when language is stripped of direct and genuine meaning. The chaos, corruption, and constant uncertainty that are born of this could not be made clearer, and we understand the disorientation and madness that Hamlet feels. We even participate in this chaos in the second scene of the second act of the play: because this scene is immensely long and involves many exchanges between various characters, we get a glimpse of the sea of self-interest and sheer willfulness that Hamlet is forced to swim in – the reader does not receive a moment to take a breath, just as Hamlet does not receive a moment to have a clear, natural thought.

In the broader context of the play, Shakespeare's critique of self-interested ends and the effects of busily pursuing temporal purposes is but part of the overall issue the play engages: the question of human nature and how one best understands oneself and lives one's life meaningfully. The first four acts of the play provide Shakespeare's critique of self-interested modernity and the tragic dilemma Hamlet faces as a modern man. Hamlet's transformation in the fifth act of the play provides us with Shakespeare's answer to the question: how shall we live? Hamlet's encounter with his mortality serves as the pivotal point in the play that allows for his heroic transformation into a man who transcends the self-interested, corrupt world of Elsinore. Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of the revelation that comes from Hamlet's encounter with mortality in his use of monosyllables: "My head should be strook off" (V.ii.24). Shakespeare's use of monosyllables in this instance shows what one could fairly consider to be Hamlet's first clear, natural thought – something denied to him while participating in the

manipulative, corrupt world of Elsinore. Realizing that there is “a divinity that shapes our ends” (V.ii.10) allows him to reject his desire to satisfy immediate, temporal ends and focus, instead, on his eternal, ultimate end: death.

In Hamlet’s transformation, we see Shakespeare’s suggestion that the possibilities for self-understanding, self-acceptance, and nobility arise when one is able to integrate one’s passions and intellect, when one restrains one’s will, and when one learns to live with an acknowledgement of one’s mortality so that life is not taken for granted. In Hamlet, Shakespeare provides an image of perfect integration, and, consequently, a model of what it means to be authentically human. We see how Hamlet comes to comfortably be at peace with himself and his place in the world:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special
providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be [now],
'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if
it be not now, yet it [will] come – the readiness is all.
Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to
leave betimes, let be. (V.ii.219-224)

Hamlet now understands that some divine being controls all things and man will inevitably die; and so, he states that “a readiness” for death is all that is ultimately important in life. Even more, he is so at peace with himself that he proclaims: “let be” – he is prepared for his fate and willing to meet it like a great man. His willingness to humbly accept life and focus on ensuring his own integrity allows him to feel safe within himself. Indeed, he now loves and understands himself so completely that he is able to triumphantly exclaim: “This is I / Hamlet the Dane” (V.i.257-258), a far cry from the “rogue and peasant slave” (II.ii.550) he once imagined himself to be. The Hamlet we encounter in the fifth act of the play is supremely ready to be himself and reach his full human potential in both word and deed, realizing that he should not focus his attention on

best determining how to exact revenge on his father's murderer, but, instead, to living as authentically and meaningfully as possible in the face of mortality.

Of particular note is the way in which Hamlet comes to have his epiphany. Indeed, after being sent to what he eventually learns was his intended death by Claudius' orders, pirates attack the ship Hamlet takes to England. As Hamlet's ship grapples with the pirates' ship, Hamlet boards the pirate ship in the scuffle and is dealt with mercifully by the pirates and eventually returned safely to Denmark. The utterly unexpected arrival of the pirates – which traditionally are part of the world of romance, adventure, and myth – marks an important point in the play: for the first time, we see fate benevolently outstretching its hand to Hamlet. The action of the play thus far has consisted of seedy activity, political machinations, and constant manipulation; in other words, manipulative actions that presume there are no accidents or matters of chance. The world of Elsinore is a world that is blind to chance and providence. Hamlet's providential moment with chance – that is, the unexpected arrival of pirates (and mind you, merciful pirates) and escape from death – allows him to live in tune with the larger cosmic order. Hamlet claims in the beginning of the play, “The time is out of joint – O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!” (I.v.188-189), but learns by the end of the play that it is not *he* who sets “time right,” but *time* that sets him right – chance and providence extend their hand to him and this encounter with transcendence allows him to come to a more expansive and capacious perspective on life, human nature, and human action.

In short, Hamlet's confrontation with mortality allows him a fundamental first principle: human action and judgment are limited, the human mind cannot comprehend everything, and man – no matter his scheming, no matter his conquests – is finite; therefore, one ought to live with a humble acceptance of one's limits and live always with the knowledge that life is fleeting,

and that a readiness for improving one's integrity in the face of mortality is all that matters. This elemental knowledge allows Hamlet to break the exact type of desire for revenge Laertes expresses:

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd
Most thoroughly for my father. (IV.v.132-137)

The egocentricity and unbounded self-assertion that Laertes speaks of stands in stark contrast to Hamlet's attentive posture of humility and composure. Hamlet willingly faces his fate and accepts the condition of being man and therefore experiences a heroic death. Hamlet's singular courageousness in exploring the depths of himself – and more broadly, human nature – bring a measure of greater justice and consciousness to the world of Elsinore and its corruption, foolishness, manipulation, and willfulness. For this reason, as he instructs Horatio, his story must be told, not simply for the sake of his ego, but for the sake of Elsinore and humanity if they are to flourish.

Chapter 4: The Tragedy of King Lear

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the modern dilemma of man's individuality and willfulness is again a focus. Additionally, Shakespeare's focus is on love and the ways in which love helps one transcend the sordid, treacherous world of the play. Filled with betrayal, disobedience to figures of authority, corruption, and willfulness, the world of *King Lear* is perhaps even more rotten than the world of *Hamlet*. In fact, in this play, a sense of the apocalyptic pervades nearly every scene.

Although *King Lear* is too complex a play to admit of holistic analysis by way of a single set of themes, it certainly does concern itself deeply with exploring love and loyalty, and I think that the play's engagement with this set of themes allows one access to a significant amount of its tragic complexity. The play's exploration of these themes exists within the backdrop of an existential dilemma, as well: Lear's fundamental misunderstanding of his role as king. From the outset, Shakespeare makes clear Lear's misconception of love, loyalty, and his connection to his role as king. The primary tragic actions – Lear's division of the kingdom and his renunciation of his loving daughter, Cordelia – take place in the very beginning of the play. Thus, Lear's tragic journey charts the depths of his misery to his eventual realization that Cordelia's honest love is his final saving grace in the cold world of betrayal and deceit he exists in.

Lear's tragic blindness shows itself immediately in the first scene of the play when he constructs a contest in which he attempts to determine which of his daughters loves him the most. His eldest daughter, Goneril, hyperbolically declares her love for her father: "Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty / Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare / No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor" (I.i.56-58). His daughter Regan does the same and, in fact, even further exaggerates her love for him – she says that her love for him is beyond that which

Goneril expressed toward him and that “all other joys” (I.i.73) besides her love for him are her “enemies.” Lear is very impressed by both Goneril’s and Regan’s “admission of love” and immediately renounces his youngest daughter, Cordelia, when her response seems less grandiose than her sisters: “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty / according to my bond, no more, no less” (I.i.92-93). Lear’s opening exchange with his daughters is more of a ritual – in which he, as king, expects to be flattered – rather than an honest, meaningful conversation with his daughters. He appears a man uncertain of his worth and in desperate need of reassuring himself that he is valuable no matter how shallow or superficial such reassurance is. Indeed, he is smitten by both Goneril and Regan precisely because they flatter him excessively and outraged by Cordelia because she speaks simply and honestly. Cordelia grasps the magnitude of honest love and explains that she “cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth” (I.i.92). She clearly imagines that it would be indecent and irreverent to insincerely and hyperbolically state her love and thus tells Lear: “I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” (I.i.92-93). Blind to honest love and devotion, Lear renounces Cordelia and speaks of her as a mere commodity, telling Lord Burgundy, “When she was dear to us, we did hold her so / But now her price is fallen” (I.i.96-97).

Lear’s discussion with his daughters conveys not only his ignorance of love, but also his ignorance of his role as king. That is, his political sense is incredibly askew and inept: he claims he will appropriate his territory simply on the basis of determining which daughter loves him the most, evaluating an individual’s worth simply on the basis of how willing one is to flatter him. There are two matters at stake here. One is Lear’s blindness to love – as evinced by the very economic language he uses with his daughters, rather than actual meaningful, human, emotional language – and the second is Lear’s utter misunderstanding of the gravity of his position as king,

as evinced by his division of the kingdom. In fact, Lear does not simply misunderstand his role as king, he misunderstands his role both as a human being *and* as a king, and, consequently, his role as a *human king*. This matter seems clear when he states: “Know that we have divided / In three our kingdom; and ’tis our fast intent / To shake all cares and business from our age / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we / Unburthen’d crawl toward death” (I.i.37-401). He speaks of a life without hardships and imagines that he can simply pass whatever problems he has on to “younger strengths.” This utterance conveys a considerable amount of Lear’s overall tragic blindness, for it shows that he seems a bit too comfortable in his position as king and that he knows nothing of the hardships of life – he imagines that his transference of power will run smoothly and according to his will.

The theme of Lear’s misunderstanding of human nature and the deep love that is experienced by the reflective, respectful individual plays itself out in many ways in the play. Indeed, Lear not only misunderstands Cordelia’s love for him, but also the respect and love Kent, his loyal servant, shows him. Like Cordelia, Kent is banished from Lear’s kingdom. With Cordelia and Kent gone, Goneril and Regan seek to strip Lear of his kingly power and begin to take away his knights until he is left without a single one. As Goneril and Regan start to barter with him and take more and more of his knights away, he exclaims in anger, “I gave you all” (II.iv.249), indicating how much he has lost. As his daughters take everything they can from him, Lear suddenly begins to see how lonely he is and how unloving his daughters truly are. He tells Regan: “Thou better know’st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude / Thy half o’ th’ kingdom hast thou not forgot / Wherein I thee endow’d” (II.iv.177-181). Regan and Goneril precisely do not understand the natural “bond” that binds them to their father and for this reason are more than willing to exploit him. Lear is no more than a

foolish old man in their eyes who can be exploited in whatever manner they wish. With not a single knight or servant left, both Goneril and Regan lock Lear out of the castle as a storm starts to develop outside the castle walls.

Outside on the heath, Lear stands alone with the Fool. As the storm begins to rage, Lear immediately bursts out in anger, cursing his daughters and even himself. He claims that a “man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (II.iv.267) and admits that he is “a poor old man / As full of grief as age, wretched in both” (II.iv.272-273). Furthermore, he admits that he is a “poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man” (III.ii.20). He no longer sees himself as a regal king who is better than everyone else and even comes to realize that he is not all powerful or all knowing. As a strong physical representation of the intense strife and inner turmoil Lear suffers, Lear’s time on the heath represents the deepest depths of his anxiety, confusion, and anger. Lear’s words during the storm are almost incoherent and express measureless frustration, despondency, and ire, yet are interspersed with words that serve as his first unselfish thoughts. His first insight into the human condition – that is, on the one hand the frailty of man, and on the other, the bond of love, compassion, and respect that unites all of humanity – comes from his ability to recognize how pathetic he has become. After acknowledging this, Lear expresses compassion and love for the first time when he asks the Fool, “How dost, my boy? Art Cold?” (III.ii.68) and then says: “Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That’s sorry yet for thee” (III.ii.72-73).

Lear’s apparent empathy and compassion in his exchange with the Fool is followed by another moment of empathy and compassion when he encounters Edgar, who is disguised as a beggar so that he may visit the king. Lear laments over the hardships that the poor must endure:

Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,
That bid the pelting of the pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your [loop’d] and window’d raggedness, defend you

From seasons such as these? O I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just (III.iv.28-26)

In these words we see not only a clear expression of concern and empathy, but also an admission of guilt – Lear admits that he wrongfully “took too little care” insofar as matters of beneficence and caring for those who are less fortunate are concerned. Additionally, Lear’s words express a strong desire to change and rehabilitate himself so that he may become a more virtuous, loving, and honest man. In short, Lear’s time on the heath and subsequent encounters with the Fool and Kent provide us with a clear picture of Lear’s newfound inward focus: he comes to realize that he has a soul. Lear’s recognition of his soul incites a desire for change and shows the first stirrings of his soon to be realized heroism. In fact, in the scenes on the heath, Shakespeare suggests that Lear has been stripped of pomp and is starting to take on a more expansive and sophisticated understanding of humanity and the bond between human beings. As such, Lear’s throwing off of his clothes represents his rebirth – Lear utterly strips himself of any feelings of superiority and is willing to simply exist as a mere *human being*.

Critical to Lear’s inward focus is an honest recognition of his past misdeeds and the superficiality of Goneril’s and Regan’s treatment of him. Lear comes to realize his daughters’ cruelty and superficiality for the evils they are. Even more, he comes to recognize just how misleading and superficial his subjects have been to him: “[T]hey told me I was every thing / ’Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof” (IV.iv.104-105). Critical to his newly formed humble and honest disposition is Lear’s renunciation of the sordid, life-denying, rotten world in which he exists. While talking with Gloucester, he refers to the world and its corruption, deceit, and unnaturalness as a “hell,” a “darkness,” and a “sulphurous pit” of “burning [and] scalding stench

[and] consumption” (IV.iv.127-128). Lear’s reflective understanding of the Hell in which he has been living is crucial to his developing sense of proper justice, health, and love – he realizes that the world he exists in is precisely the kind of festering cesspool that cripples one’s soul and turns man into a “poor, bare...animal” (III.iv.107). Lear sees clearly now that he must transcend this world if he is to truly experience the full depths of human satiation and enjoyment in loving kinship with others. As Gloucester suggests to Lear, the world of political machinations, treachery, and contempt for others in which Lear finds himself is a perversion of the natural order of the world and inevitably will destroy humanity if man does not choose the path of love and virtue: “O ruin’d piece of nature! This great world / Shall so wear to nought” (IV.vi.134-135).

In addition to the evil characters – namely, Goneril and Regan – that appear in this play, Shakespeare uses the parallel narrative of Gloucester’s dealings with his sons Edgar and Edmund to shed light on Lear’s tragic narrative arc. Edmund is the counterpart to Goneril and Regan in Gloucester’s narrative and Edgar is Cordelia’s counterpart. In this narrative, Edmund plots to take advantage of his father in the hopes that he might gain his inheritance. His motivation in this matter is incredibly shallow and evil: being a child conceived out of wedlock, he expresses dissatisfaction with society’s attitude toward bastards and commits himself to tricking his father into thinking that his son Edgar is plotting to kill him so that he (Edmund) will be given his father’s inheritance instead of Edgar. Edmund is the type of individual that appears time and time again in the world of the play – a petty, angry, self-interested person who cares only for himself and is willing to go to incredible extremes to obtain what he wants. Under the impression that Edgar plans to deceive and manipulate him, Gloucester refers to him as an “[a]bhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish villain! Worse than brutish...Abominable villain!” (I.ii.76-77).

Given the rampant treachery and abundant disrespect of so many of the characters in the play, the larger significance of these words is clear: they aptly characterize the world in which these characters exist.

Both Lear and Gloucester feel the full force of their fallen, rotten world and in their respective dilemmas lays Shakespeare's overall comment on the tragic quality of the predicament each faces. Gloucester, from the beginning of the play to the end, succumbs to the horrors of the world and fails to see any measure of happiness or love. His view of the world is incredibly pessimistic – “[m]achinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves” (I.ii.12-14) – and he fails to heroically take up arms against the world and make it a better place, deciding instead to blame cosmic forces for the evil that exists in the world: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods / They kill us for their sport” (IV.i.36-37). Gloucester embodies the very opposite of a tragic hero because he renounces life and refuses to attempt to counteract the problems of the world. Instead, he would rather blame the gods and suffer meaninglessly. In fact, after his eyes are gouged out by Regan's husband, Cornwall, he tells his son Edgar: “I have no way, and therefore want no eyes / I stumbled when I saw, full oft ’tis seen / Our means secure us, and our mere defects / Prove our commodities” (IV.i.18-21). For him, the world is a place of darkness and meaninglessness that is better avoided than confronted head on.

Lear, on the other hand, is not content with suffering meaninglessly and instead comes to appreciate – with the help of his loving daughter, Cordelia – the power of love and the gift of life. Whereas a despondent and pessimistic Gloucester cannot see the truth to Edgar's utterance that “[t]hy life's a miracle” (IV.vi.55), Lear does come to see the miraculous quality of life. After being defeated in war and taken as prisoners, Lear and Cordelia start to share moments of honest,

pure love. What we see in Lear by the end of the play is a far cry from the misguided, superficial, unreflective old man we find in the beginning of the play. Indeed, expressing his love to Cordelia in the final scene of the play, Lear's words shine with love and a reflective understanding of the human condition. He states:

No, no, no! Come let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds I' the' cage;
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too –
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out –
And take upon's the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by th' moon. (V.iii.8-19)

These words evince a true nobility and loving tenderness that compare, perhaps, only to Cordelia's speech in the play. What they convey is a love so true and divine that they transcend the world of the play and speak to the universal love that all of humankind is meant to naturally share in. All of the talk of human "bonds" and "nature" in the play rests on the key insights articulated in the above passage: life is a miracle and is meant to be lived lovingly and only has meaning and shape if the bond between human beings is nurtured and respected. Lear's words stand over against the sordidness and "raw ferocity, physical as well as moral" (Mack, *Our Time*, 225) that characterize his world and express the truest depths of meaningful human possibility: a commitment to love and a conscious overcoming of the egotistical willfulness that human beings so easily fall into.

What makes Lear a great, heroic individual is his ability to bear the burden of being human – in all of its terrifying complexity – and come to introspectively develop a sense of meaningful human action. Lear comes to represent the transformation of man to a higher plane of

moral and emotional possibility as he breaks from the lust of existence – that is, the desire to willfully assert oneself at all times and simply live to satisfy base, petty desires such as greed – and recognizes something deeper and profoundly meaningful in human affairs. In short, he recognizes “the mystery of things” (V.iii.16) – the wonder and awe of a world divested of petty egotism and marked by an overflowing love for others. Much like Hamlet, Lear’s transformation into a pure and self-transcending individual serves as a model for the world. His sacrifice (*i.e.*, his death) brings with it an illumination of paths of human action that heretofore remained either hidden or disregarded. Therefore, the play fittingly concludes with Edgar remarking that the worst times have come to past, implying that progress can and will be made in the future. Even more, although the play closes with very few moral characters left alive, the sentiment that Edgar expresses to his father – “Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither / Ripeness is all” (V.ii.10-11) – still powerfully reverberates: life, with all its mystery, misfortune, awe, and wonder, must be lived fully and to the end, for one always has the choice to choose the higher path in life and attain “ripeness” before death.

In all, the tragic elements of *King Lear* are continuous with the sense of tragedy evinced in both *Faustus* and *Hamlet*. All three of these plays offer a close examination of human will and situate their exploration of this theme within the broader context of the various forces of order and disorder man encounters in the world. Central to all of these plays is the presence of a strong, heroic character that expands human consciousness in some significant regard and glimpses the mystery of the world. In the characters of Faustus, Hamlet, and Lear we see models of transcendent man – that is, of men who transcend the necessities of their immediate environment and make manifest truths about the basic order of the cosmos and one’s human capacities in the cosmos. Furthermore, each of these plays examines the notion of man’s destiny, and through the

characters of Faustus, Hamlet, and Lear, man's intellectual and spiritual destiny come into focus. In short, each of these men comes to display qualities that expand the possibilities for human action in the world. These men come to know something about the human condition and show us the nuances and complexity of living as human beings. As Northrop Frye puts it, "[t]o know is a higher destiny than to experience, and by virtue of his consciousness man may rank himself with the gods, in fact may even outgrow them" (*Fools*, 11)

Chapter 5: The Modern Sense of Tragedy

Many modern plays and novels understand “tragedy” in a way that is distinct from the sense of tragedy that prevails in the early modern period. There are at least a few reasons for this – some imaginative, some philosophical. The primary distinction between early modern tragedy and modern tragedy deals with the notion of transcendence and mystery. In the simplest terms, modern tragedy is divorced from the ideas of mystery and transcendence and finds its expression primarily through pessimism. Additionally, modern tragedy tends to focus more on psychological tensions than matters of cosmic concern. Modern tragedies such as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* tend to be more intimate and personal than many early modern tragedies. Part of the reason for this rests on the fact that when mystery and transcendence are taken out of the equation, the scope of tragedy is lessened. For example, notable modern tragedies like *Death of a Salesman*, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, and Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* all focus on familial tensions and find their tragic expression within the context of familial discord. While early modern works like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* concern familial discord, they have a scope that is far more expansive than mere familial discord – they attempt to illuminate fundamental insights into the intellectual and spiritual human imagination. While some modern tragedies have a focus that is grounded in large, universal concerns, the fact still remains that many notable modern tragedies offer a pessimistic view of the world that is inherently limiting. Even more, some modern tragedies – *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – espouse a pessimism that is so strong that it borders on nihilism.

On top of rejecting cosmic mystery and transcendence, modern tragedy has a tendency to be very existential, further problematizing the early modern conception of tragedy found in

Faustus, Hamlet, and King Lear. The existential attitude of man subjectively creating his own meaning and purpose out of a world that lacks any overarching, systematic meaning and purpose divests the cosmos of certain realities that early modern tragedy understands as necessities. Stripped of mystery, the modern tragic world is both a psychological burden and a world in which there are no clear directional indices. The modern tragic character – like the existential individual – faces a world of despair, anxiety, and alienation, and suffers in such a way that the primary source of tragic tension manifests itself – as Arthur Miller says – “from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world” (*Common Man*, 145). Distinct from early modern tragedy, modern tragedy hinges on a type of suffering that is highly personal and individualized. In the broadest sense, works such as *Death of a Salesman* and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* deal with suffering that is limited to the immediate problems experienced by certain individuals, while works like *Faustus, Hamlet, and King Lear* focus on a type of larger-than-life purgatorial suffering. *Faustus, Hamlet, and Lear* suffer not only insofar as their particular woes are concerned, but to the extent that *man* suffers by virtue of existing in a world that is steeped in such incredible mystery. Take, for example, *Faustus’s* world: the reason *Faustus* sells his soul is that he wishes to attain certain powers so that he can explore the mystery of his world – he wishes to know the world more fully and desires to forge his individuality amidst the mystery he finds in the world.

Mystery is central for *Faustus, Hamlet, and Lear* as they all experience their human nature through encountering the world’s mystery in the course of their tragic journeys. Modern tragedy, on the other hand, seems to start often enough with psychological and existential woundedness. In his essay, *Tragedy and the Common Man*, Arthur Miller states of tragic man:

“Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly” (144). On Miller’s account, tragedy is determined by one’s willingness to overcome one’s feelings of indignation and act against the prevailing troubles one finds in the world so that one can better forge oneself: “The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing – and need be nothing – but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status” (*Common Man*, 144). As one sees from this quotation, modern tragedy – if Miller is representing it (or at least a strand of it) correctly – stems from the individual desire for self-actualization and self-realization. What Miller leaves out of the equation – and many modern tragedies do as well – is the heroic attitude of the tragic character in the sense that Northrop Frye talks of it. Indeed, Miller’s notion of the tragic character’s “unwillingness to remain passive...” hardly encapsulates Frye’s notion of heroism: “the heroic is above the normal limits of experience, it also suggests something infinite imprisoned in the finite” (*Fools of Time*, 5). What Frye is speaking of is a strong countermovement of being that acts against cosmic necessities and the tensions and conflicts one encounters in life. On Frye’s account, the presence of “the heroic” is what fundamentally distinguishes tragedy from irony and is the primary means by which tragedy explores human nature and man’s place in the cosmos: “Tragedy, then, shows us the impact of heroic energy on the human situation” (*Fools of Time*, 5).

What one finds in both *Death of a Salesman* and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* is a protagonist that is not heroic in the sense Frye means it. There is nothing exceptional or larger than life about a Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*) or James Tyrone Sr. (*Long Day’s Journey*

Into Night). Both of these protagonists seem largely pathetic characters (in a thoroughly negative sense – they do not inspire pity) who bring about their own suffering and the suffering of their loved ones. Furthermore, in the course of their respective narratives, each character does not mature in any significant respect. Maturation – manifested through a clear and expansive consciousness of human nature – is never realized by either Willy Loman or James Tyrone Sr. Indeed, each seems like a version of the Lear that appears in the first two acts of *King Lear* – willful, ignorant, unable to truly love, and foolish – and never breaks away from this. As such, neither Willy nor Tyrone Sr. are heroic in the full sense of the term.

If one examines Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, one sees quite clearly that the modern sense of tragedy is distinct from – and perhaps even somewhat opposed to – the early modern sense of tragedy. One thing of particular note in O'Neill's play is that there is very little action – the major action of the play rests on the return of Mary's drug addiction and Edmund's diagnosis of tuberculosis. In plays like *Faustus*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, the central tragic action of the play was larger than life and far-reaching in scope: selling one's soul to the devil; finding out that one's father has been murdered and that the murderer is now the king; realizing that one's supposedly loyal and loving family and subjects are vicious, bloodthirsty individuals who seek power above all else. As is represented by the smaller scale of action in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, modern tragedy is more about the psychological burdens and existential tensions one encounters in the world. Take for example the central conflict that James Tyrone Sr. faces: he cannot escape his childhood dream of being a successful, famous actor and thus attempts to live vicariously through his son, Jamie. James Tyrone Sr. is a man who is caught up in the past and cannot move on with his life. Indeed, he cannot find his place in the world and therefore experiences a considerable amount of anxiety, dissatisfaction, and anger. Part of the

tragedy of this play deals with the familial scarring and fracturing that are the consequence of the various characters' inability to let go of the past and live contentedly in the present. The crux of the play's tragedy rests in the intensity and honesty with which the characters acknowledge the devastation of their lives and the horrible truths of existence.

While this play possesses tragic elements, I believe that it ultimately is tragic only in a broad sense, not the pure, Greek sense. The reason for this is that the play seems thoroughly divorced from any notions of transcendence and mystery and therefore never generates the heroic energy found in many of the best Greek and Renaissance tragedies. Indeed, this play is preoccupied with expressing the suffering one encounters in life, but ultimately possesses such a strong undercurrent of pessimism and nihilism that its tragic scope is inevitably diminished. The nihilistic fatalism that is at the heart of the play first overtly presents itself in Mary's assertions concerning her husband's (James Tyrone Sr.) foibles: "But I suppose life has made him like that, and he can't help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever" (63). Mary's words express what seems to be at the heart of the play's vision of the world: the impersonal will of nature grabs hold of one, inflicts horrible suffering on one, and never lets go of one as one inevitably becomes further and further alienated from one's true vision of self. Mary's words, here, echo the sentiment of the philosopher Alfred Whitehead's remark that "[t]he essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness...it resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things...this inevitableness of destiny can only be illustrated in terms of human life by incidents which in fact involve unhappiness, for it is only by them that the futility of escape can be made evident in the drama" (as quoted in Hardin). What the play focuses on is precisely this notion of

“the remorseless working of things” – human beings are utterly powerless in the face of nature’s impersonal will, and as Mary says, “The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too...we all try to lie out of that but life won’t let us” (90).

The most powerful nihilistic sentiments of the play crystallize in Edmund’s remarks concerning his feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and inability to orient himself: “It was a great mistake, my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!” (157). From both Mary’s and Edmund’s remarks, one sees that the world of the play is a world in which transcendence is not a possibility: one can never escape one’s past and human existence itself is a complete and utter curse (*i.e.*, Edmund wishing he was a sea gull or a fish). The overall nihilistic and fatalistic sentiments expressed in the play recall Gloucester’s claim in *King Lear* that, “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods / They kill us for their sport” (IV.i.36-37). Ultimately these sentiments are not tragic – they are pessimistic, fatalistic, and nihilistic – for they suggest that man is helpless, perpetually lost, and incapable of transforming his misfortunes into something meaningful – that is, turning misfortune and chance into destiny. In fact, the play seems to conclude that man not only is incapable of forging destiny out of the suffering and misfortune he encounters in life, but that man possesses no inherent dignity such that he could be capable of fighting against the forces of evil and conflict he finds in the world. When Edmund states that “[man] is such stuff as manure is made on...is more my idea” (134), mocking his father when he quotes a line from Shakespeare, one sees quite clearly the thoroughgoing pessimism and nihilism of the play – man is *nothing*, he is manure, he is waste. As essentially *nothing*, man cannot transform himself and cannot transcend his suffering.

Even more, the play suggests not only that man cannot overcome his suffering in some meaningful, transcendent way, but that “transcendence” itself is an illusion. As Edmund speaks to his father recalling his time spent sailing the sea on a boat, it becomes quite clear that O’Neill means to suggest through Edmund’s words the dark truths of human existence and the way in which transcendence is ultimately an illusion:

Then the moment of ecstatic freedom came. The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond man’s lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams! And several other times in my life, when I was swimming far out, or lying on a beach, I have had the same experience. Became the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide. Like a saint’s vision of beatitude. For a second, you see – and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble On toward nowhere, for no good reason! (156)

While Edmund does experience a transcendent moment – an ecstatic feeling of unity and peace – that moment is just that – a *mere moment* that eventually ends as life’s hardships and meaninglessness begin to encroach on one’s existence, leaving one “stumbling” and headed “no where...for no good reason.” The tragic content of this play ultimately rests on precisely what Edmund speaks of here: the intense and honest recognition that life is devastating and void of any overarching, orienting principle. For this reason, the play never embodies the heroic energy of tragedies past that transforms suffering into something meaningful and allows man to reclaim his dignity. As is the case with this play – and I believe also *Death of a Salesman* and *Endgame* – the type of suffering that occurs never facilitates a countermovement of being. These plays focus more on the “remorseless working of things” (to recall Whitehead) and the existential tensions that are born out of this: the fear, dread, anger, and anxiety of living as a limited human being in a world where there no longer are transcendent possibilities.

Collectively, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Endgame* explore existence in the wake of Nietzsche’s notion of the “death of God” – we are bound to the earth for

there is no metaphysical dimension to the cosmos and thus no transcendent categories to which we can appeal or rationally feel bound to. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in particular explores the fatalism and nihilism that develop as a consequence of modern science explaining the natural world in such a way that one can make sense of human experience without the need to appeal to a God or a metaphysical realm. O'Neill imbues the play with a sense of the profound disorientation, loneliness, and psychological anxiety of living in the wake of the death of God: James Tyrone Sr. states that "[w]hen you deny God, you deny sanity" (137), Edmund claims that whenever he stops to think about life he cannot help but laugh at how "damned crazy" (154) it is, Jamie refers to the "infinite sorrow of life" (163), and Mary's final words in the play imply that she will never be happy again, lamenting that she fell in love with her husband but inevitably was only "happy for a time" (179). Ultimately, each of these characters is impotent in the face of life's conflicts and necessities, trying to nostalgically cover up the present by recalling a past that was full of possibility and meaning. However, as the play progresses and the characters find themselves heading from daylight into night, they soon experience the "remorseless working of things" as they gruelingly tear into each other and are forced to face the devastating truth of their existence: life has always been a burden and there never was a time when things were truly peaceful and good. In the end, their nostalgia is nothing more than an illusion that thinly veils the horrid truth of their toilsome and heartbreaking experience of life.

In the broad scope of the play, one sees that O'Neill gives attention to the types of concerns that modern tragedy distinctly deals with: the chaos of life, life divested of metaphysical significance, fatalism, nihilism, and the world of nature's impersonal will governing the cosmos. As I see it, nihilistic fatalism and a lack of "heroism" are two factors that significantly distinguish the modern sense of tragedy from past tragedy (*i.e.*, Greek and

Renaissance tragedy). The next two chapters provide what I find to be the other two responses modern tragedies have offered to make sense of the human situation outside the fatalism and nihilism one finds in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* – pessimism and absurdism.

Chapter 6: Modern Tragedy and Pessimism – *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* might be best described as a tragedy of identity. Miller's overall intentions with the play clearly manifest themselves as a critique of business society. The primary means by which Miller offers his overall critique of society is through examining the corrosive effects business culture has on one's identity. Miller's illustration of the masculinization and commodification of culture makes clear society's belief that one's identity is primarily constituted by one's physical appearance and how well one is liked. The play's examination of this notion brings to light the direness of such a belief: almost every character in the play – but especially Willy, Biff, and Happy – experiences discontent, feeling as though each is wasting his life. Furthermore, Miller makes clear the cost of this identity crisis: Willy falls into delusion; Linda, Willy's wife, must endure Willy's disrespect; Biff experiences profound conflict with Willy; and Happy – though involved in the business world and somewhat successful – cannot bear such an existence and believes he can only be content if he rises to the top of the corporate ladder. These characters' actions – with the exception of Linda – cause the slow disintegration of the family, which they all painfully bear witness to. The overall thrust of the tragedy of this play emerges out of the characters' inability to be at peace with themselves and one another, and their inability to realize that in order to experience meaning in life, one must understand one's identity by committing oneself to honesty, compassion, love, and family.

Miller's use of masculine and sometimes violent diction in association with business parlance and Willy's general speech illustrate the masculine ideal at work in society. When Biff asks Willy how business is, Willy responds: "Knocked 'em cold in Providence, slaughtered 'em in Boston" (33) and tells Linda, "Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week, I'll go to Hartford, I'm very well liked in Hartford" (36). Willy imagines he is doing the work of a "man" and speaks rather

violently when relating how he performs with his clients, considering successful business exchanges as a form of victory. Willy also seems to think that this type of manly identity – constituted by these “victories” – informs peoples’ impressions of him: he is well liked *because* of his glorious business triumphs and the masculine appearance they create. Willy tells his neighbor, Charley, that “[a] man who can’t handle tools is not a man” (44), remarking that Charley is “disgusting” (44) because he is not good with tools. Thus, Willy’s hyper-masculine understanding of self not only is an assertion of the superiority of man as a craftsman and warrior of sorts, but also is a form of utter disrespect. When Willy imagines he is speaking with his deceased brother, Ben, he claims: “Business is bad, it’s murderous, but not for me, of course” (51), suggesting his personal worth as a man is at least somewhat constituted by his ability to remain “alive” in the business world. Undoubtedly, a significant part of Willy’s conception of self is related to the idea of the triumphant, glorious male figure.

Miller further shows society’s preference for masculinity by illustrating Happy’s and Willy’s mistreatment of and disrespect for women and relating this to the idea of the masculine self. In effect, Miller suggests that all things are treated as consumptive items and commodities. When Biff and Happy talk about the women they have had relations with in the past, Happy remarks of one girl, “Boy, there was a pig! You taught me everything I know about women. Don’t forget that” (21). The commodification of women is apparent on a number of levels: first, Happy refers to the woman as a “pig”; second, Happy tells Biff that he taught him everything he knows about women, suggesting that there is a legacy effect to this view on women – Biff experienced it first, then taught Happy; and third, Happy suggests that Biff should be proud (*i.e.*, “remember”) that he imparted this skill to him, as if it were an accomplishment to be applauded. Furthermore, Happy tells Biff that he sleeps with executives’ girlfriends just to prove to himself

that he can, claiming, “I get that anytime I want...The only trouble is, it gets like bowling or something. I just keep knockin’ them over and it doesn’t mean anything” (25). Women are like sport for Happy – something to possess whenever he wants to have a little fun. He continues: “I don’t know what gets into me, maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her, and furthermore I can’t get rid of her” (25). Quite clearly, this commodification of women is associated with masculinity: Happy cannot and does not feel the need to account for why he sleeps with so many women – he obviously operates out of a sense of entitlement – and he sees such acts as a means of competition whereby he must utterly possess a woman. Additionally, Miller’s diction is evocative of notions of masculinity: Happy says he “ruins” her – that is, she falls for him completely and he possesses her fully. Similarly to Happy’s mistreatment of women, Willy disrespects his wife by interrupting her while she speaks, assuming that his business concerns are more important than anything she has to say, and by having an affair with a secretary.

Miller not only laments the disrespectfulness that results from understanding identity as reinforced by appearance and masculinity in relation to women and commodity culture, but suggests that it also infringes upon the sanctity of the home and familial bonds. Willy recalls telling Biff and Happy when they were younger: “I thank God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (33). Willy’s understanding of identity is thoroughly masculine – he thanks God that his boys are built like “Adonises” – and is grounded in appearance: he reasons that if one appears manly and professional, then one will be liked and therefore will be able to climb the corporate ladder and will inevitably be successful. Willy’s focus in life becomes primarily business oriented, not

family oriented. Therefore, he often speaks to Linda in business parlance, calling her “kid” and ignoring her concerns and thoughts because they do not have to do with the business world. Willy cares more about telling Linda that he is “the New England man” (14) and that he is “vital in New England” (14) rather than that he loves her and cares for her. Instead of showing her affection, he talks to her about the commissions he makes and other business accomplishments. Miller makes clear that Willy cares more about meeting his psychological need to be well liked than the emotional needs of his wife and sons. Willy would rather preach to Biff and Happy, trying to sell them – very much in the manner of a salesman – the dream of success in the business world, built on appearance and being liked by others, than establish a significant, emotional relationship with them. Even more, when Willy is fired by Harold, his boss, he appeals to him, telling him that he helped name him, suggesting that he is like family to the business: rather than emphasize familial bonds while at home, he does so in a business environment, effectively making his business life a substitute for his family. Miller suggests Willy’s construction of identity not only causes the slow disintegration of his family, but also comes at a profoundly personal cost whether Willy acknowledges it or not; Happy, desiring the things his father desires, claims: “[I]t’s what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I’m lonely” (23). Not only do people like Willy cause the deterioration of their family, but deep down they also suffer from profound loneliness.

The perversity of Willy’s understanding of self is further exhibited in the fact that he believes his conception of the well-liked businessman is of mythical and heroic proportions. In effect, Miller, along with exposing the detrimental effects his desire has on his family, exposes Willy’s refusal to accept reality and desire to indulge in fantasy. When talking with his boss, Willy equates a mythical and heroic quality to the story he relates of Dave Singleman: “[H]e died

the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston – when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral... There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality" (81). Willy fails to account for the tragic aspect of this story: Dave Singleman was still working at the age of eighty-four and died away from home on the road and in pursuit of money, not while he was with his loved ones. At the moment of his death, Dave Singleman was far away from the meaningful realm of the home. That Willy concludes his story by claiming there no longer is nobility in the world of business makes explicitly clear that his passions and desires are utterly misdirected – even if we accept his claims that there was a noble, heroic quality to the business world that Dave Singleman was part of, this quality surely does not persist in the business world that Willy currently is part of. Willy's romanticized conception of the heroic, mythical quality of the life and experiences of a businessman is even more apparent when he tells Biff and Happy that once he brings them up and they become proper businessmen everything will be "open sesame" (31) because he "has friends" (31) and that the world "is an oyster" (41) and that "the greatest things can happen!" (48) when one is well liked. The depths of his illusion are profound and undoubtedly grounded in a sense of grand, fantasized possibilities otherwise inaccessible to those who are not well liked.

Miller illustrates the severity of Willy's illusions and detachment from reality by suggesting that he has not fully matured as a nurturing father and perceptive individual. Indeed, after Willy's neighbor, Charley, offers him a job and he refuses, Charley asks, "When the hell are you going to grow up?" (97). Charley's question no doubt must be attended to because it is quite clear that Willy has not "grown up" – that is, he has not matured: he does not focus on

establishing intimate, significant relationships with his family members; he misguidedly indoctrinates his children with the idea of the importance of projecting a business appearance at all times; and he engages in an extramarital affair. Furthermore, Willy consistently believes that there is a definite, identifiable key to success and in this manner seems like a child attempting to put together a puzzle. In fact, Willy continually appeals to his deceased brother, Ben, for assistance, asking him what the key to success is. Ben replies: “William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And by God, I was rich!” (52). Willy responds: “That’s just the spirit I want to imbue them with. To walk into the jungle! I was right! I was right! I was right!” (52). Like a child, Willy is overjoyed, thinking rather undiscerningly that Ben has imparted a profound piece of advice to him when, in actuality, Ben has not said anything of actual substance. Yet, Willy imagines Ben’s words are of the utmost importance. Willy clearly fails to realize that Ben’s wealth is simply the result of luck, not the product of deserving, hard work – there is no “key” to Ben’s success.

Ultimately, Miller makes clear the depths of Willy’s illusions and consequent displacement from reality by illustrating his belief that suicide is the greatest testament to realizing his dream of being a successful businessman precisely because it is the ultimate exchange. In effect, Miller exposes the depths of Willy’s misguided conception of what it means to care for one’s family and nurture one’s family properly. At the end of the play, before Willy commits suicide, he experiences an urge to plant a garden. While planting the garden he talks with Ben, saying, “She’s suffered, Ben, the woman has suffered. You understand me? A man can’t go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something...Remember, it’s a guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition” (126-127). Willy feels as though he must be able to grasp the fruits of his labor and the planting of the garden serves as a metaphor for this and his

act of suicide: the insurance money his family will receive after his death is a tangible product of his labor and will help provide for his family. Miller clearly indicates that Willy cannot grasp reality as he holds onto his dream of success grounded in the notion of exchanging commodities: this time, the sale is Willy's life. Reflecting on his plan to commit suicide, Willy remarks that Biff will "see what I am...he's in for a shock that boy" (126) and that he will "worship me for it" (135) – Willy believes his death is a testament to his dream of success and therefore is worthy of veneration. Willy remains unaware of any true self-understanding but perhaps understands that the product he truly sells is himself and that his final sale must be his own life.

As a whole, Miller's play is concerned with expressing the deep misery and alienation that are experienced as a result of business culture as life is understood in terms of quantity and exchange rather than quality and beneficence. The real tragic experience of the play lies in Biff's remark that Willy "had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong. He never knew who he was" (138). Indeed, Willy's tragic predicament most significantly rests in an illusion, namely, that life is good only when one is well liked and successful in one's business endeavors. Willy's illusion keeps him from experiencing the truest depths of himself and from what it means to be human: he never experiences true, transcendent love; he never forms strong, significant bonds with others; and he inevitably ends up seeing himself as a mere commodity (*i.e.*, his suicide and talk of suicide as an economic exchange). What Miller gives voice to throughout the play is the sense in which "business people" are victims of a larger cultural mindset that is out of the individual's hands. That is, business culture is – for all intents and purposes – *the* predominant culture in the world of the play and thus one is expected to adhere to it at the risk of being alienated from others socially and materially. Miller has Charley say of Willy: "He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that's an

earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished.

Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory" (138).

Miller certainly illuminates the materialistic mindset of society and potently shows how devastating this mindset is if one hopes to truly flourish (*i.e.*, emotionally and spiritually), but ultimately creates in Willy a character who is distinct from Faustus, Hamlet, and Lear. Indeed, the striking feature about Miller's Willy Loman is that he does not possess "heroic energy" in the sense Frye understands heroism and the consequence of this is significant: Willy is *not* a tragic character. Indeed, he never is able to transcend the necessities and limitations of his world and hardly seems similar to the larger-than-life figures of Faustus, Hamlet, and Lear. One does not pity Willy and feel a sense of terror as the action of the play unfolds for Willy remains a rather stagnant, pathetic individual. When he says, "Work a lifetime to pay off a house, you own it, and there's nobody to live in it" (15), one sees that a large reason why this is the case is precisely because Willy is a shallow, deluded individual – he never understands the sanctity of the home and never acts in a truly loving and compassionate way. Everything for him is a matter of economic calculation and mere appearance, and as a result, the play never offers the catharsis (in the sense Aristotle uses this term) that proper tragedy offers – there is no sense of purgation and cleansing, for Willy becomes progressively more pathetic, foolish, and delusional as the play progresses.

The fact of the matter is simply that the play is overly pessimistic about the world these characters exist in and the relations they have with one another. While Linda seems like an authentic character and Happy and Biff share a few poignant moments together, pessimism pervades the play and never lets go of the action in the play. Time and time again these characters collide with one another and inevitably never mature or experience the world in a

deep and meaningful manner. Each of the principal characters (besides Linda) is a willful individual who never takes the time to step back and gain a reflective understanding of the world he lives in and for this reason, is never able to transcend it. While Biff is the character who speaks most resonantly on matters of higher consciousness and the true joys of life – he speaks of working on a ranch, existing in nature and outside of the toilsome, economic world of the city – he ultimately admits to Linda, “I just can’t take hold, Mom, I can’t take hold of some kind of a life” (54). Biff, like all the others, cannot escape or transcend the world and he feels lost and out of control of his own destiny. Indeed, this play seems to suggest in its overall scope that there is a fatedness to life that cannot be turned into destiny: one is buffeted around by the remorseless workings of the world – usually occasioned by willfulness, greed, and the belief that everything in the natural world is a consumptive item that can be sold and exchanged – and remains fated to endure the troubles of the world in the face of the fact that there seem to exist very little, if any, transformative possibilities in life. Thus, fate cannot be turned into destiny – nothing higher or more meaningful emerges out of one’s encounter with fate.

As the play illustrates, Willy is, above all, a willful character. He is essentially the same kind of figure that Lear is in the beginning of *King Lear* – unaware of himself and focused on the superficial aspects of life. When speaking with his son, Happy, about his brother who became rich after mining diamonds in the African jungle, Willy’s sheer willfulness is apparent: “What’s the mystery? The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he’s rich! The world is an oyster, but you don’t crack it open on a mattress” (41). For Willy, existence is constituted by nothing more than the desire to succeed economically and thus, by his calculation, one is successful in life only to the extent that one achieves a measure of material and social success. He therefore thoroughly fails to see

spiritual and transcendent possibilities in life and thus never attempts to pursue such avenues. Instead he obsesses over achieving material success, hoping to attain riches like his brother, Ben.

Although the play does not seem to offer any real insight into the transcendent possibilities of existence and simply shows the chaotic, toilsome experience of existing in the modern world, there is tragic tension in the play. This tragic tension rests on the identity crisis Willy experiences. Indeed, Linda, while speaking with Biff, gives voice to the tragic tension of Willy's situation: "He's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (56). After all, Willy suffers direly to make ends meet for his family and he is willing to fight day in and day out – even if his motivation is largely selfish – to ensure the material wellbeing of his family. Additionally, he is caught up in a culture in which there more or less is an imperative to attain material and social success if one is to survive comfortably. However, this being said, it is ultimately my contention that while Willy is a character who suffers tragically in the broad sense, he is not tragic (nor is the play as a whole) in the truest sense: his suffering is largely the consequence of his own pathetic blindness; he never transforms himself or offers a glimpse into the purgatorial possibilities of his suffering; his willfulness and selfishness keep the audience at arm's length from him and thus keep one from experiencing true catharsis through the play; and rather than offer some insight into the mysteries of the world, he contaminates his world and exists in a perpetual state of self-reinforced delusion. It comes as no shock, then, that Linda's final words are marked by disappointment and loneliness: "Willy, dear... Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home" (139).

Chapter 7: Modern Tragedy and The Absurd – *Endgame*

In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, man's existential dilemma is represented in such a way that one cannot help but conclude that the authentic tragic experience is no longer available in modern times. Indeed, Beckett's play illustrates in elaborate and intellectual ways the psychological and philosophical ramifications of living in a world that lacks any overarching, objective meaning. Specifically, this play posits a world in which there is no beginning and no end to life – life is cyclical and nothing more than a concatenation of moments that have no ultimate bearing on each other such that one can clearly distinguish “a meaningful beginning” from “a meaningful end.” The world of Beckett's *Endgame* is a world in which meaningful distinctions collapse and one is left with nothing more than a series of repetitive and cyclical actions and experiences. In fact, the title of the play refers to the series of moves that represent the end of a game of chess – an experienced chess player simply enacts this series of moves and in so doing hastens the end of the game. In this play, the notion of “endgame” refers to what one might call the “endgame of life” – the series of repetitive actions and cyclical moves one makes in the time before one's death.

This play so radically redefines the energy of life – that is, life being experienced cyclically and repetitively rather than directionally – that “tragedy” comes to mean very little. In a world where there are no clear beginnings, no clear endings, and no fixed meaning or purpose, one cannot transcend the world in which one finds oneself, for there is no higher plane of meaning and existence. Life is, at bottom, a series of moments that lead to death – nothing more, nothing less. As such, this play is not a proper tragedy, it is a farce – tragedy and comedy both collapse into farcical, black comedy in the play. Rather than structure the play as a search for first principles of existence that allow the characters insight into their world and the necessities

of time and lived experience, Beckett structures his narrative in such a way that there is almost no action whatsoever. The only real tension in the play is whether or not Clov will leave Hamm and the small room in which they find themselves day in and day out. Like *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the action of the play exists on an incredibly small scale. Given the minimal action that occurs and the lack of any authentic search for meaning and purpose, this play represents the limits of tragedy in the modern age: if life is really nothing more than a series of moments and there is no actual directionality to life, then there is no absolute purpose to one's actions, beliefs, and experience of life. Thus, tragedy as sacrifice cannot exist – one cannot sacrifice because existence is nothing more than simply enduring the monotony and meaninglessness of life. In other words, there is no way of existing in the world that is qualitatively better and more meaningful than other ways – all meaningful distinctions collapse, all paths are the same.

Central to the play's vision of the world and existence is the notion of circularity and emptiness. One of the primary means by which Beckett imbues a sense of emptiness and "circularity" in the actual material world of the play is through the setting, a small kitchen that is largely bare and filled with grey light. The bareness of the setting creates a palpable emptiness and the fact that the light in the room is grey – that is, neither totally light nor totally dark and instead a medium shade – suggests that the physical setting itself exists in a kind of intermediate state, shrouded in ambiguity. Furthermore, when Hamm explains that beyond the confines of the small room in which he exists is "the...other hell" (33), one sees quite clearly the sense in which the world of the play is pervaded by a sense of circularity – there is no escape to the hell of this world as hell is everywhere. The physical world has inscribed in it a sense of the repetitiousness and meaninglessness that the protagonists, Hamm and Clov, experience psychologically.

Another striking feature of Beckett's play that is central to the overall vision of existence it posits is the ubiquity of "sameness" that one finds layered into almost every aspect of the narrative, setting, and dialogue. When Hamm asks Clov for the time and Clov responds "[t]he same as usual" (10), this moment serves as a powerful crystallization of the play's attitude toward existence: existence is essentially undifferentiated and meaningless such that everything in the world is approximately the same. This is radical, especially if one recalls Frye's notion of tragedy unfolding with an acute sense of time in which time weighs heavily on the action of the play and its characters. In Beckett's play, time is of little importance; in fact, time collapses just like everything else and there is no past or future – all that exists is the monotonous present in all of its banality and meaninglessness. The dialogue of the play – all of which is very repetitious, short, inane, and often meandering – puts the matter of life's meaninglessness and monotony quite frankly: Clov remarks, "[a]ll life long the same questions, the same answers" (12); Hamm and Clov both state that there is "no one else" (13) left in the world besides the four occupants of the kitchen (Hamm, Clov, Hamm's father Nagg, and Hamm's mother Nell) and that there is "nowhere else" (13) left to go in the world; Hamm remarks, "This is not much fun...But that's the way at the end of the day, isn't it, Clov?" (20); Clov states that Hamm asks him the same questions "millions of times" (46). For both Hamm and Clov, life amounts to nothing more than the same questions, the same nonsense, the same drivel, the same lack of joy day in and day out.

The apparently post-apocalyptic world of the play is not only philosophically (*i.e.*, intellectually) meaningless and monotonous, but also physically meaningless: it is a complete wasteland of decay. In fact, when Hamm asks what Clov sees outside, Clov states, "zero" (11) – a sentiment that really captures the essence of the play's attitude toward life: life is *nothing* – it lacks any objective purpose, and all the joys of life eventually become banal and monotonous

when one realizes how utterly ephemeral they are. Life can be summed up in Hamm's remark that, "We breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (18). Over time, our intellectual capacities decay and so do our bodies – we end up in trash bins like Nagg and Nell find themselves in. We live for a short time, suffer affliction and disease, and then end up as mere material waste that must be disposed of. As Hamm explains to Clov, human beings are no more than a speck of dust in an infinite void: "One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever, like me... Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe" (44). The world of the play is a world in which there are no authentic possibilities or human potentialities to live meaningfully and experience the world in significant depth. It is, in short, a world where transcendence is not a possibility.

Ethics and the future existence of humanity are even meaningless and banal matters in this play. When Hamm asks Clov why he will not just end his (Hamm's) suffering and kill him, Clov states: "I don't know the combination to the cupboard" (15). Clov understands mortality in a utilitarian and essentially depthless manner: if he knew the combination to the cupboard he would presumably retrieve the gun and then kill Hamm (and then perhaps himself), but since he does not know the combination, he will not. Existing in the world, here, hinges on a shallow, utilitarian principle: if I have the means to end my life then I probably will, if not, then I will just have to suffer some more. Clov and Hamm have a similar attitude toward existence with respect to the future of humanity. When Clov thinks he spots a flea, he is sure to use copious amounts of insecticides so as to ensure the flea dies after Hamm exclaims: "But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!" (41). It is of the utmost importance to Hamm and Clov that they ensure humanity does not regenerate itself – existence ultimately

means nothing, so there is no reason why future generations should have to bear the burden of the repetitious inanity of life. The attitude that this play takes toward the whole of nature is incredibly pessimistic and even nihilistic. It can be summarized in the story Nagg tells about an exchange between an Englishman who needs a pair of trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities and the troubles he encounters with the tailor who works on them:

[*Customer's voice.*]

“God damn you to hell, Sir, no, it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, six days God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!”

[*Tailor's voice, scandalized.*]

“But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look --

[*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*]

--at the world --

[*pause*]

and look --

[*loving gesture, proudly*]

--at my TROUSERS!” (30)

The created world itself is essentially meaningless, or at the very least, possesses no obvious, fixed, objective meaning. The world is at best essentially the same as a pair of trousers, or at worst – as the tailor suggests – less significant than a pair of trousers. As Clov peers out of the window using a telescope, he reports to Hamm, “Zero... Grey. Grey! GRREY! Light black pole to pole” (39). The world physically exists in a perpetual state of grayness and philosophically is a vacuum – a dark void of ambiguity, chaos, and meaninglessness. Even more, Beckett clearly intends for his audience to notice the sheer nothingness of the universe – the telescope, which normally is an instrument that allows one to see beyond human limits (because it allows one to see beyond the sight of the naked eye), ultimately serves to make clear that there is no “beyond,” infinite nothingness is all one finds when one peers into the telescope.

Ultimately, the crux of the play's vision of the modern world rests on Nell's claim that “[n]othing is funnier than unhappiness” (26) and Hamm's claim that “the end is the beginning

and yet you go on” (77). Nell’s remark expresses the notion of life being absurd, and Hamm’s remark engages the notion that life is circular and without definite shape or direction. To say that “nothing is funnier than unhappiness” is to say that life essentially is not – in fact, cannot – be tragic. Indeed, it is to say that life is, as Nell laments, a farce – “[w]hy this farce, day after day?” (21). The absurd is the divorce that exists between the rational search for meaning and purpose in life and the intellect’s realization that such meaning and purpose are not forthcoming. It is, in the simplest sense, the confrontation between a rationality that seeks purpose and meaning and the realization that existence lacks any fundamental purpose when apprehended by the intellect. The realization that the world is hostile, capricious, and indifferent to man’s existence gives rise to the absurd – the absurd exists as the tension between hope (*i.e.*, the desire to find purpose, the rational search for meaning, the incessant need to find cohesion and unity in life) and life’s necessities (*i.e.*, the caprice and indifference of the world). Beckett ultimately wants to suggest in this play that life should not be taken too seriously, or, perhaps, even seriously at all – the impersonal will of nature and the biological and cosmic necessities that keep the world running day in and day out have no regard for human life. Thus, one ought not see existence as tragic (for something meaningless cannot be tragic); one ought to laugh at all the misery and pain experienced in life, for even though existence may be pathetic and rife with chaos, it is oddly comic at times. This is the essence of the play’s status as an absurd tragicomedy – it finds low humor even in the darkest of places and manages to laugh at life, warts, scars, diseases and all.

The play conveys the full force of existing in a world of repetitious meaninglessness through persistent images of impotence. Every single one of the four characters in the play is significantly impotent in some manner: Hamm is blind and cannot stand (he is confined to a wheelchair); Clov can only stand (rather poorly, in fact); Nagg and Nell have no legs and live in

dusts bins. Additionally, each character exhibits a kind of mental impotence such that each is not a fully mature and intellectual individual: Hamm is excessively domineering and often disrespectful to Clov; Clov is excessively submissive and often staggers around aimlessly; Nagg is childlike and often annoying; Nell is very resigned to the point of one-dimensionality. In a similar respect, each character is emotionally impotent as they collectively lament their situation, nag at each other, and lack any true signs of compassion toward one another. In fact, the only affection displayed in the play exists between Hamm and his handkerchief, which he lovingly refers to as his “Old Stauncher.” The sense of impotence that pervades the play serves, in the end, to display the very crippling nature of existing in the wake of the absence of the divine: when there is no higher plane of existence or meaning in the world, one ultimately has only the inanities and ever fleeting joys of daily life to make one content. As the play establishes, even if the world is boring, farcical, and meaningless, it is not tragic, for tragedy requires a backdrop of transcendent purpose and meaning – the tragic hero ultimately fights against the prevailing troubles of his world so that some larger insight and glimpse into the meaning of the human situation and man’s place in the cosmos can be made manifest. When existence is no more than a series of repetitive moments and there is no true beginning or finality in life, there is no tragedy. In fact, there is nothing but constant flux which one can either laugh at or be horrified by, but in the end, either response is approximately the same insofar as each inevitably is meaningless.

Conclusion: The Future of Tragedy

Tragedy focuses on ultimate questions about the nature of human existence, human purpose, and the value of enduring the hardships of life. It seeks to explore at least a few significant questions: does life have purpose or meaning? Can life be meaningful in the face of all the suffering and pain one encounters in the world? What constitutes man's basic integrity and dignity? What is man's place in the cosmos? Tragedy offers insight into these questions by presenting the purgatorial suffering of a tragic hero who gains wisdom through his suffering. Indeed, in the course of the tragic hero's journey, he comes to transcend the necessities of his existence and attains some meaningful understanding of human nature and his place in the world. As George Steiner explains of tragic man's suffering: "In the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken, a blind beggar hounded out of the city, he assumes a new grandeur. Man is ennobled by the vengeful spite or injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent, but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame" (*Death of Tragedy*, 9-10). Tragedy ultimately is inextricably linked with "transcendence" which manifests itself as a clear and expansive consciousness that apprehends the world and man's dignity in greater depth than they are usually apprehended. At the very heart of tragedy is the heroic energy of the tragic hero and his transcendence.

While there certainly is a narrative of tragic consciousness that can be traced from Greek tragedy to Modern tragedy (as I have explained in the course of this thesis), it seems as though modern tragedies lack transcendence. This is due to the fact that modernity confronts a world that is bereft of any real mystery: by the modern age, Copernicus has shown that the earth is not the center of the universe; Darwin has shown the lowly origins of man; Freud has said that man is a prisoner to his instincts; and Nietzsche has announced the "death of God." In the modern era,

the metaphysical grounds on which Greek and Renaissance tragedies operate collapse and man is left in a world of nature's impersonal will and the "remorseless working of things." With God out of the picture and man bound to the earth, pessimism and existential angst come to characterize the few modern tragedies that are produced. As such, modern tragedy bears a marked difference from tragedies past as it struggles with "the death of God," pessimism, nihilism, and absurdism. Despite their attempts, modern tragedies like *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Death of a Salesman* seem to lack the strong heroic presence that is found in earlier tragedies like *Faustus*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*.

Perhaps the problems of modernity make it impossible for the authentic tragic experience to present itself. In fact, George Steiner claims that it might be the case that tragedy has effectively died, for "tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie" (*Death of Tragedy*, 353). It seems likely that tragedy has an uncertain future in modern times. Indeed, the post-modern period (which roughly begins around 1970) tends to deal often enough with the chaos and absurdity of life. Postmodern writers like David Foster Wallace, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon specifically mock the kind of epiphanic moments one finds in the transcendent revelations portrayed in tragedy. Much of postmodern writing deals with absurdity, irony, and ambiguity, positing that the world does not possess any underlying ordering structure behind the chaos of life. It should not come as a shock, then, that few, if any, postmodern tragedies are written.

While the future of tragedy looks bleak, there are two notions upon which one must reflect if one hopes to offer a fair appraisal of the tragic possibilities in the modern world. The first notion comes from Paul Ricoeur in his work *The Symbolism of Evil*: perhaps as long as the

problem of evil persists – whether God is part of the equation or not – so too will tragedy, for man will never rest easy in the face of pain and suffering. The second notion is this: as Ricoeur explains, tragedy *shows* rather than tells – it exists experientially, not intellectually or theoretically, and therefore can never die simply as a result of philosophical or theological thought. Perhaps, it will only be when man no longer seeks to transform himself in the face of suffering and *feels* only numbness and indifference that tragedy will fully die.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Jim Kee, for his contributions to this thesis. I am immensely indebted to him both for the work he has done with me on this project and his course, "Tragic View." His guidance throughout this thesis helped elevate both my thinking and my writing and made this project a true delight.

I would also like to thank Professor Bill Morse for his support over the years. In particular, his Shakespeare seminar opened up *Hamlet* and *King Lear* in elaborate and thought-provoking ways. I owe a debt of gratitude to him for my conceptual understanding of these two texts.

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