In Defense of Tragedy

I'm pretty sure that I have written on this subject before but for the life of me my old brain can't quite remember when or where, and my searches of the internet and of my computer files have turned up nothing.

So I'll start again.

I seem to remember that I was first thinking about writing this essay—if, in fact, I haven't already written it—after the 1999 Columbine school shootings or the 2012 Sandy Hook school massacres, both of which were blared in newspaper headlines as "TRAGEDIES." 'That's not right," I thought at the time. "'Catastrophe' or perhaps 'So-horrible-we-can't-even-fathom-it' might be more appropriate," I felt. "Why water down the complex sense of 'tragedy' in the plays of ancient Greece or the plays of Shakespeare to make the term a simple synonym of 'horrible'?"

And now, at the end of January, 2025, as the mid-air collision between a passenger plane and a US military helicopter in Washington, DC, is similarly being labeled in newspaper headlines as a "TRAGEDY", I feel compelled to address this topic. (Again, assuming that I haven't already done so.)

I start with a long, pedantic, "Athenian Tragedy" entry in the encyclopedia I wrote for the *Golden Age of Greece* course I created for the Virtual High School in 2003:

> **Athenian Tragedy**
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> The tragic play was an invention of the Athenians. This theatrical form apparently had its origin in poetic choral odes sung at rural festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and rejuvenation. This choral origin of tragedy is revealed by the name itself, which means in Greek "goat song." (Scholars are unsure of whether the goat part refers to a possible animal sacrifice or prize, or to the association of goats with satyrs --the often randy, half-human, half-animal, companions of Dionysus.)

Sometime around 530 BC, a semi-mythical Attic poet named Thespis (from whom derives the modern term "thespian" for an actor) introduced the first actor into these choral odes. This actor, apparently, imitated a legendary or historical figure who gave a composed speech to the chorus. By the beginning of the Classical period, a second actor had been introduced, perhaps by Aeschylus, and real tragic drama began. By 460 BC, the playwright Sophocles had introduced a third actor and stage scenery.

In Athens, new tragedies first debuted as part of the annual City Dionysia festival, where, over the course of three days in March, three playwrights each presented three tragedies followed by a satyr play --a grotesque, comic parody of a tragic subject. The state paid the wages of the actors, but the cost of supplying the chorus, which was trained by the playwright, was borne by a wealthy citizen called a *choregus*. Favorite tragedies were also performed during other festivals, notably the Rustic Dionysia held in the small villages of Attica in December and the Lenaea wine festival held in Athens in January.

Tragedies normally have a standard form: a *prologos* (prologue) that sets forth the subject of the play (remember that staging was always minimal); a *parodos* (entrance) in which the chorus comes into the orchestra singing; a series of *episodes* interspersed with choral songs, or *stasima* (with the chorus often being divided into two parts that sang back and forth to each other in a strophe and antistrophe); and a final scene, the *exodus*.

Of the hundreds of tragedies that were written and performed in Athens from ca. 485 to 330 BC, we have only a handful: seven of Aeschylus, seven of Sophocles, and seventeen of Euripides. Each of these playwrights actually wrote several dozens of plays each, however. The plays that survive do not represent the "best" ones, or even those that won first prize in the City Dionyisia when they were first performed. The choice of this canon was in fact made by the librarians of Alexandria, Egypt, during the Hellenistic period; the esthetic basis for their choice was quite different from that of the Classical Athenians, or of ourselves! Although we do know the titles of many other plays that Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote, and in many cases know which of these plays won first prize, without the plays themselves we can not know exactly what the 5th century BC Athenians judged to be a good tragedy.

So what, then, is a tragedy?

In his work, *Poetics* (lines 149 b24-28), the philosopher Aristotle (born 384 BC, died 322 BC) defines tragedy as:

> an imitation (*memesis*) of an action (*praxis*) that is admirable, complete, and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; and effecting through pity (*eloes*) and fear (*phobos*) the purification (*katharsis*) of such emotions.

Note that Aristotle stresses the effect a tragic play had on its audience —the cathartic cleansing of emotions. Athenian tragedies, then, were quintessentially public events, ones in which the community gained coherence by jointly experiencing pity and fear. They were also part of a religious experience associated with the worship of Dionysus, a deity who must be pacified lest the powers of drunkenness and lust lead to chaos within the society.

> But tragedies also, of course, concern the actions of the characters --the decisions that the tragic figures make in the face of the divinely ordered cosmos. The tragic character has an essential tragic flaw (*hamartia*), part of his or her intrinsic make-up that leads, inexorably, to an over-stepping of divine boundaries. And just as inexorably, the tragic figure's rashness (*hubris*) leads to disaster (*ate*).
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> A tragedy has a central moment, the *peripeteia* (literally, the "walking around"), upon which the tragedy turns. A tragedy, then, involves a winding up of events into a knot of human and divine relationships that must be resolved. And as much as the tragic character may be compelled by preordained fate, the tragedy ultimately hangs on what that human character decides to do. Tragedies, then, are at the core of Classical Greek humanism.

Okay, apologies for that long, pedantic, excursus on a topic I assume most of my readers would already have known from a high-school or college humanities course. But I put it in here to make two points.

First of all, a tragedy must involve a *hamartia*, a tragic flaw in a character. Thus Oedipus thinks that he can avoid his prophesied fate, or Orestes thinks he can escape the curse of matricide in avenging his father's murder, or Hamlet procrastinates until "The rest is silence." (Yes, it has been pointed out that analyzing a tragedy in terms of *hamartia* often leads to an oversimplification of a complex story.) But where is the *hamartia* when an adolescent boy guns down his classmates? Such a *peripeteia* does involve a social tragic flaw of not providing adequate mental care to the psychologically damaged among us, or the obscene access Americans have to weapons. We can blame the boy, but, above all, we must blame ourselves. And where is the tragic flaw when a helicopter flies into an airplane? Perhaps we can blame the *hubris* of a pilot who thinks that they know their altitude, or of an air-traffic controller who thinks that their instructions are being followed. (But we certainly can't assign blame, as Trump has obscenely done, to governmental programs meant to address centuries of systemic racism, misogyny, and inequity.) But an accident, even an avoidable one, is not a tragedy.

Which brings me to my second point. As Aristotle pointed out, when we witness a tragedy, through the empathy we feel for the tragic character out of our pity and fear, we the audience are *cleansed*. But empathetic catharsis seems to vanished in our modern world. Who of us feels better about ourselves or the human condition when

witnessing a school shooting, or a plane crash (or the wars in Ukraine or Gaza, or the collapse of our climate that will bring an end to life as we know it)?

Okay, I get it. Language is a living thing. Words have mutable meanings that evolve over time. (I have pedantically complained about how the term "existentialist" has now come to mean simply "life-threatening", robbing the term of the dread that Sartre and others have pointed out we feel when trying to find meaning in a meaningless universe.)

So what if a "tragedy" now only means "a really, really, bad thing"? Is it really tragic that we no longer can cleanse ourselves living in this dirty world we've created ?