The tragic vision impels the man of action to fight against his destiny, kick against the pricks, and state his case before God or his fellows. It impels the artist, in his fictions, toward what Jaspers calls ‘boundary-situations,’ man at the limits of his sovereignty…

--Richard Sewall

As we make small and large decisions, we face questions of identity, of limitation, and of sovereignty. Who am I? What confronts me? What control do I have over my life? Tragic literature explores these questions with great profundity. It deals thoroughly with the themes of power and empowerment. Tragic heroes and those who write in the tragic vein are in a position where they must confront themselves, where they must come to terms with the possibilities of who they are and who they can become. Like all of us, they are asked to declare themselves for at least one moment in their lives.

GOALS

As an English major progressing through our curriculum, we call upon you to improve continually in your ability to demonstrate the following:

1. the ability to discuss literature, including engaging in an exchange of ideas, and offering and supporting insights.

2. the capacity to sustain controlled, critical arguments that analyze and synthesize texts.

3. an understanding of the craft of writing, including concision, diction, grammar, and syntax.

4. the ability to produce creative writing that shows an awareness of language, freedom from cliché, and an understanding of genre, style, and topic.

5. the ability to identify and use a range of sources suitable to the scholarly conversation on a particular topic, to evaluate and integrate source material, and to document accurately.

6. an understanding of the literary tradition, the historical and cultural contexts of literature, and critical methods of reading.

7. the ability to give well-planned, engaging presentations.
As a participant in this particular course, you should seek to

a. understand the critical history of the tragic form
b. apply understandings of the form’s critical history to specific literary works
c. question the validity of these critical stances and applications

TEXTS

The following texts will be studied in this course:

Medea, Euripides
King Lear, William Shakespeare
Moby-Dick, Herman Melville
Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller
Fences, August Wilson
The Wine of Astonishment, Earl Lovelace

Other texts include work by Aristotle, Jaspers, Nietzsche, Sewall and various literary critics. These works will also be online or distributed in class or put on reserve.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADES

1. Your first responsibility is participation. While I do not take attendance, please know that 15% of your final grade is based on participation. If you’re not here, you can’t participate. By “participation,” I mean active involvement in the discussion. While I am sympathetic to those who, in Bartelby’s phrase “prefer not to,” I also note that Bartelby suffered, without complaint, the consequence of his decision. You should strive to contribute regularly to discussion with intelligent questions and insights that are based on a complete, thoughtful reading of all assignments.

2. In the weekly schedule, you will find a variety of writing assignments that account for 70% of your final grade.

3. In pairs or small groups, you will give one presentation that will account for 7% of your final grade.

4. The final, take-home essay exam will account for 8% of your final grade.
POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

(Much of the following was devised by Professor Kalata Vaccaro, and I use it with her permission.)

Attendance. Excessive absences will directly affect your grade. You may miss three classes. After these three, you will lose 1/3 of a letter grade for each additional class you miss (e.g., an A- course grade will change to a B+; a B+ course grade will change to a B). Absences will be excused only in emergency situations, with appropriate documentation. Please be aware that “self-reported sick in room” notices from the Student Health Center will not change an absence from unexcused to excused. Note, too, that two late arrivals—or early departures—of 15 or more minutes constitute an absence. I reserve the right to mark text-messagers and sleepers absent.

Deadlines. Late papers are penalized 10% per day late, including the first day and weekends. Computer, jump drive, or printer problems do not justify late or shoddy work. Please refrain from blaming your computer or the computer labs for late papers.

Honesty. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating or lying will not be tolerated. Any evidence that you have used others’ ideas without accrediting a source will result in failure of the assignment, consultation with the Dean, and, possibly, failure of the course and permanent dismissal from the College. Please familiarize yourself with the Academic Integrity Policy & Procedures described in your Student Handbook.

Respect. I would like for us to cultivate a culture of respect in our classroom. Please maintain a respectful attitude toward the course, your fellow students, and me; in turn, I will do the same for you. Know that disrespectful behavior can negatively affect your participation grade. Also, please adopt a professional tone (and include opening and closing salutations) in e-mail correspondence. For example, a professional, respectful e-mail might read: “Dr. Swerdlow, Can you help me with an assignment? Sincerely, John Doe.” If your e-mail message is poorly written or otherwise unprofessional, I will ask you to revise it before responding to your question.

ATHLETICS & EXTRACURRICULARS: If you are involved in College athletics or other extracurricular activities and will miss class meetings because of games, performances, etc., please notify me in advance of any class sessions you will miss. All work is to be submitted prior to the excused absence.

CELL PHONES should be out of sight and turned off at all times, or I will become very cranky. Do not use your cell phone to read or view the assigned texts. Find another way. If you are using in your cell phone in class without my permission, I will ask you to leave. You will be marked absent for that day.

PAPER DRAFTS: I encourage you to visit me during office hours so that we can discuss your writing. You may also e-mail me a draft of an assignment, as long as you give me sufficient time to review it (“sufficient time” = one week before paper is due).
SCHEDULE

In this schedule, you will find several assignments. I will be providing you with grading criteria for each assignment.

August 27: Introduction

August 29: Read Medea. Prepare at least four good questions about the play that the class might consider.

August 31: Discussion of Medea

September 3: Study Aristotle’s Poetics, Sections VI through XIX (http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ari/poe/poe07.htm); Make good notes on the text that is attached. Look for connections between the text and Medea.

September 5: Study Richard Sewall’s “Tragic Form” https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pMAmCi4MUh255_mRfwk5BE-17aZ7-dUTNPQ1164KRRg/edit?hl=en_US Make good notes on the text that is attached. Look for connections between the text and Medea.

September 7: Study Karl Jaspers’ “The Basic Characteristics of the Tragic” (Handout)

Assignment Due on September 12

As the main feature of a letter addressed “Dear Fellow Student,” Explain what you feel is ONE of the most important and interesting arguments made by Aristotle, Sewall, OR Jaspers in what we have read. In your letter, summarize and evaluate that argument. You might consider why this particular article attracted you, confused you, concerned you, beguiled you, impressed you, etc. Your letter need not be in traditional paragraph form; however, your choice of form should allow you to develop ideas with some degree of sophistication. In addition to submitting your paper to me electronically, please bring in a hard copy of your essay that will be given to one of your classmates. Your grade will be based on the accuracy and clarity of your summary, as well as the level of intelligence with which you evaluate the text. The letter should be between 3 and 4 pages long. 15% of final grade.

September 10: Discussion of King Lear, Act 1

September 12: Discussion of King Lear, Act II. Come to class with a written agenda of what you would like to discuss.
September 14:  *King Lear*, Act III

**Assignment Due on September 17:**

Based on what you know so far about the nature of tragedy, identify a real person from contemporary American society who you think is in some way tragic. This person could be living or dead, famous or unknown. Once you identify this person, write a one-page description of him or her that gives a sense of his or her tragic dimensions. While you should concentrate on this person’s character traits more than on his or her story, some mention of story may be inevitable. Your grade will be based not only on the quality of the connection you draw between your person and his or her tragic dimensions, but also on the correctness and clarity of your expression. Submit your description to me by email. 8% of final grade.

September 17:  *King Lear*, Act IV.

**Assignment Due on October 1st**

Please submit a response to the letter you received earlier in the semester. Your response should include the following: 1) a correction of any misconceptions you noted in the letter you received, 2) an expression of arguments or interpretations that counter and support those in the letter you received, and 3) a brief application of the theorist’s arguments to *Medea* and *King Lear*. You are encouraged to bring material from class discussion into your letter. Again, submit your letter to me electronically. Also, provide a copy of your letter to the student to whom you are responding. I will grade the letter based on its thoroughness, its clarity, and its reasoning. The letter should be between 4 and 5 pages long. 15% of final grade.

September 19:  *King Lear*, Act V

**Assignment Due on September 24**

Using the person you identified in your September 11th assignment as the central character, outline a plot that is tragic in dimensions. In addition to submitting your outline, write one scene that reveals an important aspect of your character. Your scene should be approximately 500 words in length, and you may write in either dramatic or narrative form. Your scene will be shared with the rest of the class anonymously. Your work must be submitted to me electronically, no later than 11 pm on the 14th. 7% of final grade.

September 21:  Discussion of  *King Lear*

September 24:  TBD

September 26:  Creative Writing Workshop
September 28: Creative Writing Workshop

October 1: Creative Writing Workshop

October 3: Read the first 50 chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Please come to class with a list of five questions pertinent to both the novel and to our study of the tragic vision.

October 5: No Class

October 8: *Moby-Dick*

October 10: *Moby-Dick*

October 12: *Moby-Dick*

October 15: Read through chapter 99 of *Moby-Dick*. Come to class with an agenda for discussion.

October 17: *Moby-Dick*

October 19: *Moby-Dick*

October 22: Finish *Moby-Dick*

October 24: *Moby-Dick*

October 26: *Moby-Dick*

Paper assigned (10-12 pages), due April 11th. 25% of final grade

FALL BREAK

October 31: Complete *Death of a Salesman*

November 2: *Death of a Salesman*

November 5: *Death of a Salesman*

November 7: *Death of a Salesman*

Presentations

November 9: *Death of a Salesman*

Presentations

November 12: Complete *Fences*

November 14: *Fences*
November 16:  *Fences*

  Presentations

November 19:  *Fences*

  Presentations

THANKSGIVING BREAK

November 26:  *The Wine of Astonishment*

November 28:  *The Wine of Astonishment*

November 30:  *The Wine of Astonishment*

December 3:  *The Wine of Astonishment*

  Presentations

December 5:  *The Wine of Astonishment*

  Presentations

December 7:  Take-home Final Distributed
Part VI

Of the poetry which imitates in hexameter verse, and of Comedy, we will speak hereafter. Let us now discuss Tragedy, resuming its formal definition, as resulting from what has been already said.

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. By 'language embellished,' I mean language into which rhythm, 'harmony' and song enter. By 'the several kinds in separate parts,' I mean, that some parts are rendered through the medium of verse alone, others again with the aid of song.

Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it necessarily follows in the first place, that Spectacular equipment will be a part of Tragedy. Next, Song and Diction, for these are the media of imitation. By 'Diction' I mean the mere metrical arrangement of the words: as for 'Song,' it is a term whose sense every one understands.

Again, Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these- thought and character- are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. Hence, the Plot is the imitation of the action for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents. By Character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents. Thought is required wherever a statement is proved, or, it may be, a general truth enunciated. Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality- namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. Two of the parts constitute the medium of imitation, one the manner, and three the objects of imitation. And these complete the first. These elements have been employed, we may say, by the poets to a man; in fact, every play contains Spectacular elements as well as Character, Plot, Diction, Song, and Thought.

But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in general this is often true. It is the same in painting; and here lies the difference between Zeuxis and Polygnotus. Polygnotus delineates character well; the style of Zeuxis is devoid of ethical quality. Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents. Besides which, the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy- Peripeteia or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition scenes- are
parts of the plot. A further proof is, that novices in the art attain to finish of diction and precision of portraiture before they can construct the plot. It is the same with almost all the early poets.

The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colors, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action.

Third in order is Thought- that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances. In the case of oratory, this is the function of the political art and of the art of rhetoric: and so indeed the older poets make their characters speak the language of civic life; the poets of our time, the language of the rhetoricians. Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character. Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.

Fourth among the elements enumerated comes Diction; by which I mean, as has been already said, the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence is the same both in verse and prose.

Of the remaining elements Song holds the chief place among the embellishments.

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.

Part VII

These principles being established, let us now discuss the proper structure of the Plot, since this is the first and most important thing in Tragedy.

Now, according to our definition Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long. As, therefore, in the case of animate
bodies and organisms a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be
easily embraced in one view; so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which
can be easily embraced by the memory. The limit of length in relation to dramatic
competition and sensuous presentment is no part of artistic theory. For had it been the rule
for a hundred tragedies to compete together, the performance would have been regulated
by the water-clock- as indeed we are told was formerly done. But the limit as fixed by the
nature of the drama itself is this: the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be
by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous. And to define the matter
roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the
sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change
from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.

Part VIII

Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely
various are the incidents in one man’s life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too,
there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. Hence the
error, as it appears, of all poets who have composed a Heracleid, a Theseid, or other poems
of the kind. They imagine that as Heracles was one man, the story of Heracles must also be a
unity. But Homer, as in all else he is of surpassing merit, here too- whether from art or
natural genius- seems to have happily discerned the truth. In composing the Odyssey he did
not include all the adventures of Odysseus- such as his wound on Parnassus, or his feigned
madness at the mustering of the host- incidents between which there was no necessary or
probable connection: but he made the Odyssey, and likewise the Iliad, to center round an
action that in our sense of the word is one. As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the
imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action,
must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if
any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a
thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the
whole.

Part IX

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to
relate what has happened, but what may happen- what is possible according to the law of
probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in
prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of
history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has
happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a
higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.
By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according
to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the
names she attaches to the personages. The particular is- for example- what Alcibiades did or
suffered. In Comedy this is already apparent: for here the poet first constructs the plot on
the lines of probability, and then inserts characteristic names- unlike the lampooners who
write about particular individuals. But tragedians still keep to real names, the reason being
that what is possible is credible: what has not happened we do not at once feel sure to be
possible; but what has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not have
happened. Still there are even some tragedies in which there are only one or two well-
known names, the rest being fictitious. In others, none are well known- as in Agathon's
Antheus, where incidents and names alike are fictitious, and yet they give none the less pleasure. We must not, therefore, at all costs keep to the received legends, which are the usual subjects of Tragedy. Indeed, it would be absurd to attempt it; for even subjects that are known are known only to a few, and yet give pleasure to all. It clearly follows that the poet or 'maker' should be the maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions. And even if he chances to take a historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker. Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets, to please the players; for, as they write show pieces for competition, they stretch the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity.

But again, Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design. We may instance the statue of Mitys at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while he was a spectator at a festival, and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to mere chance. Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best.

**Part X**

Plots are either Simple or Complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition

A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of propter hoc or post hoc.

**Part XI**

Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in the Oedipus, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect. Again in the Lynceus, Lynceus is being led away to his death, and Danaus goes with him, meaning to slay him; but the outcome of the preceding incidents is that Danaus is killed and Lynceus saved.

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the Oedipus. There are indeed other forms. Even inanimate things of the most trivial kind may in a sense be objects of recognition. Again, we may recognize or discover whether a person has done a thing or not. But the recognition which is most intimately connected with the plot and
action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons. This recognition, combined with
Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those
which, by our definition, Tragedy represents. Moreover, it is upon such situations that the
issues of good or bad fortune will depend. Recognition, then, being between persons, it may
happen that one person only is recognized by the other-when the latter is already known-
or it may be necessary that the recognition should be on both sides. Thus Iphigenia is
revealed to Orestes by the sending of the letter; but another act of recognition is required to
make Orestes known to Iphigenia.

Two parts, then, of the Plot- Reversal of the Situation and Recognition- turn upon surprises.
A third part is the Scene of Suffering. The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful
action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like.

Part XII

The parts of Tragedy which must be treated as elements of the whole have been already
mentioned. We now come to the quantitative parts- the separate parts into which Tragedy
is divided- namely, Prologue, Episode, Exode, Choric song; this last being divided into
Parode and Stasimon. These are common to all plays: peculiar to some are the songs of
actors from the stage and the Commoi.

The Prologue is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the Parode of the Chorus. The
Episode is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs. The Exode
is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it. Of the Choric part the
Parode is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus: the Stasimon is a Choric ode without
anapaests or trochaic tetrameters: the Commos is a joint lamentation of Chorus and actors.
The parts of Tragedy which must be treated as elements of the whole have been already
mentioned. The quantitative parts- the separate parts into which it is divided- are here
enumerated.

Part XIII

As the sequel to what has already been said, we must proceed to consider what the poet
should aim at, and what he should avoid, in constructing his plots; and by what means the
specific effect of Tragedy will be produced.

A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the
complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear; this being the
distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of
fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to
adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad
man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of
Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls
forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of
this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor
fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like
ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then,
the character between these two extremes- that of a man who is not eminently good and
just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or
frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous- a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.

A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse. The practice of the stage bears out our view. At first the poets recounted any legend that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses- on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction. Hence they are in error who censure Euripides just because he follows this principle in his plays, many of which end unhappily. It is, as we have said, the right ending. The best proof is that on the stage and in dramatic competition, such plays, if well worked out, are the most tragic in effect; and Euripides, faulty though he may be in the general management of his subject, yet is felt to be the most tragic of the poets.

In the second rank comes the kind of tragedy which some place first. Like the Odyssey, it has a double thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad. It is accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to Comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies- like Orestes and Aegisthus- quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain.

Part XIV

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents.

Let us then determine what are the circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful.

Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention- except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another- if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done- these are the situations to be looked for by the poet. He may not indeed destroy the framework of the received legends- the fact, for instance, that Clytemnestra was slain by
Orestes and Eriphyle by Alcmaeon- but he ought to show of his own, and skilfully handle the traditional material. Let us explain more clearly what is meant by skilful handling.

The action may be done consciously and with knowledge of the persons, in the manner of the older poets. It is thus too that Euripides makes Medea slay her children. Or, again, the deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be discovered afterwards. The Oedipus of Sophocles is an example. Here, indeed, the incident is outside the drama proper; but cases occur where it falls within the action of the play: one may cite the Alcmaeon of Astydamas, or Telegonus in the Wounded Odysseus. Again, there is a third case- [to be about to act with knowledge of the persons and then not to act. The fourth case] is when some one is about to do an irreparable deed through ignorance, and makes the discovery before it is done. These are the only possible ways. For the deed must either be done or not done- and that wittingly or unwittingly. But of all these ways, to be about to act knowing the persons, and then not to act, is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic, for no disaster follows It is, therefore, never, or very rarely, found in poetry.

One instance, however, is in the Antigone, where Haemon threatens to kill Creon. The next and better way is that the deed should be perpetrated. Still better, that it should be perpetrated in ignorance, and the discovery made afterwards. There is then nothing to shock us, while the discovery produces a startling effect. The last case is the best, as when in the Cresphontes Merope is about to slay her son, but, recognizing who he is, spares his life. So in the Iphigenia, the sister recognizes the brother just in time. Again in the Helle, the son recognizes the mother when on the point of giving her up. This, then, is why a few families only, as has been already observed, furnish the subjects of tragedy. It was not art, but happy chance, that led the poets in search of subjects to impress the tragic quality upon their plots. They are compelled, therefore, to have recourse to those houses whose history contains moving incidents like these.

Enough has now been said concerning the structure of the incidents, and the right kind of plot.

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THE TRAGIC FORM
Richard B. Sewall

The vision of tragedy as it is revealed through the fully developed form should now be clear. Job and Oedipus do not exhaust the possibilities, of course; Kitto's book (among others) shows how many distinctions should be made by the specialist on Greek tragedy alone. But in the search for essences these two works are central. Values have been incremental, but each new tragic protagonist (for instance) is in some degree a lesser Job or Oedipus, and each new work owes an indispensable element to the Counselors and to the Greek idea of the chorus. I wish, in this brief interchapter, to restate in summary form the constants of tragedy we have so far established. But first a word about some of the relevance of these differences to the subsequent tradition.

The Book of Job, especially the Poet's treatment of the suffering and searching Job, is behind Shakespeare and Milton, Melville, Dostoevski, and Kafka. Its mark is on all tragedy of alienation, from Marlowe's Faustus to Camus' Stranger, in which there is a sense of separation from a once known, normative, and loved deity or cosmic order or principle of conduct. In emphasizing dilemma, choice, wretchedness of soul, and guilt, it spiritualized the Promethean theme of Aeschylus and made it more acceptable to the Christianized imagination. In working into one dramatic context so great a range of mood---from pessimism and despair to bitterness, defiance,
and exalted insight—it is father to all tragedy where the stress is on the inner dynamics of man's response to destiny.

Oedipus stresses not so much man's guilt or forsakeness as his ineluctable lot, the stark realities which are and always will be. The Greek tradition is less nostalgic and less visionary—the difference being in emphasis, not in kind. There is little pining for a lost Golden Age, or yearning for utopia, redemption, or heavenly restitution. But if it stresses man's fate, it does not deny him freedom. Dramatic action, of course, posits freedom; without it no tragedy could be written. In Aeschylus' Prometheus Kratos (or Power) says, "None is free but Zeus," but the whole play proves him wrong. Even the Chorus of helpless Sea Nymphs, in siding with Prometheus in the end, defy the bidding of the gods. Aeschylus' Orestes was told by Apollo to murder his mother, but he was not compelled to. The spirit with which he acquiesced in his destiny (a theme which Greek tragedy stresses as Job does not) is of a free man who, though fated, could have withdrawn and not acted at all. Even Euripides, who of all the Greek Tragedians had the direst view of the gods' compulsiveness in man's affairs, shows his Medea and Hippolytus as proud and decisive human beings. And, as Cedric Whitman says about the fate of Oedipus, the prophecy merely predicted Oedipus' future, it did not determine it. Had Oedipus wish to escape his prophesied future, he might have killed himself on first hearing of it or never killed a man or never married. The fact that he acted at all, with such a curse hanging over him, explains why, perhaps, he is not entirely a stranger to guilt. But the fact remains that Oedipus presides over that mode of tragedy less concerned with judgement (eschatology) than with being (ontology), less with ultimate things than with things here and now; less with man and the gods as they should be than with man and the gods as they are.

In the Christian era, except for an occasional academic exercise or tour de force, there has been no tragedy identifiable as pure Hebraic or pure Greek. When the writers of the Renaissance found models and guides in Greek tragedy, in Aristotle, and in Seneca, they came to them with imaginations inevitably Christianized. What resulted from the amalgam of Hebraic, Greek, and Christian was still a third mode of tragedy—"Christian tragedy"—which added to the traditional modes its own peculiar tensions and stresses. What remained constant and compelling was the ancient tragic treatment of evil; of suffering; and the suggestion of certain values that may mitigate if not redeem.

Evil. The Greek tragedies, the imitations of them by Seneca, and the freer, more humanistic reading of the Old Testament, especially Job, brought to the men of the Renaissance not only the aesthetic delight and challenge of beautifully ordered structures and of richly poetic language but a sense of common cause in the face of insoluble mystery that centuries of Christian piety could not still. The Greek plays and Job, the products of long traditions and sophisticated cultures, spoke to latent anxieties and doubts which the Renaissance, itself a sophisticated culture and the product of a long tradition, was, in the general "freeing of the imagination" of that period, beginning to seek means of expressing more fully. The Greek plays and Job presented a view of the universe, of man's destiny and his relation with his fellows and himself, in which evil, though not total, is real, ever threatening, and ineluctable. They explored the area of chaos in the human heart and its possibility in the heavens. They faced the facts of cruelty, failure, frustration, and loss, and anatomized suffering with shocking thoroughness but with tonic honesty. The Greeks affirmed absolutes like justice and order, but revealed a universe which promised neither and often dealt out the reverse. The poet of Job showed a universe suddenly gone and brought it back to an uneasy balance only by appeal to a religious revelation—and not before giving a full view of his great protagonist, alone and embittered, forced unjustly into a "boundary-situation" not of his own making, where his only real help was himself. In the thirty-two surviving Greek tragedies, in the length of Job's complaints, and in the lesser examples of Hebraic literature of the
same cast, this basic theme of the "dark problem" appears in many guises and in varying degrees of emphasis. The focus shifts, but the vision is constant. The range and power of its manifestation in the Hebraic poem and the Greek plays established it as the informing element of tragedy. A way had been found of giving the fullest account of all the forces, within and without, that make for man's destruction, all that afflicts, mystifies, and bears him down, all that he knows as Evil. Aristotle is singularly silent about it, but it is the essence and core of tragedy.

**Suffering.** But the tragic poets of antiquity had made another great discovery. They had found a way of presenting and rendering credible in a single, unified work of art, and hence at one and the same time, not only all that harasses man and bears him down but much that ennobles and exalts him. They found in dramatic action the clue to the rendering of paradox---the paradox of man, the "riddle of the world." Only man in action, man "on the way," begins to reveal the possibilities of his nature for good and bad and for both at once. And only in the most pressing kinds of action, action that involves the ultimate risk and pushes him to the very limits, are the fullest possibilities revealed. It is action entered into by choice and thus one which affirms man's freedom. And it leads to suffering---but choice of a certain kind and suffering of a certain kind. The choice is not that of a clear good or clear evil; it involves both, in unclear mixture, and presents a dilemma. The suffering is not so much that of physical ordeal (although this can be part of it) but of mental or spiritual anguish as the protagonist acts in the knowledge that what he feels he must do is in some sense wrong---as he sees himself at once both good and bad, justified yet unjustified. This kind of suffering presupposes man's ability to understand the full context and implications of his action, and thus it is suffering beyond the reach of the immature or brutish, the confirmed optimist or pessimist, or the merely indifferent. To the Greek tragedians, as to the Poet of Job, only the strongest natures could endure this kind of suffering---persisting in their purpose in spite of doubts, fears, advice of friends, and sense of guilt---and hence to the Greeks it became the mark of the hero. Only the hero suffers in this peculiar, ultimate way. The others remain passive, make their escape, or belatedly or impulsively rally to the hero's side, like the Sea Nymphs in Prometheus. Even murderesses like Clytemnestra and Euripides' Medea, whose monstrous crimes make them anything but heroic in the romantic and moral sense, are dignified by their capacity for this kind of suffering.

**Values.** Suffering of this kind does more than prove man's capacity to endure and to perceive the ambiguity in his own nature and in the world about him. The Greeks and the Poet of Job saw the suffering endured by these men of heroic mold to be positive and creative and to lead to a reordering of old values and the establishing of new. This is not to say that they recommended it, as in St. Paul's exhortation to "glory in tribulation"; Job never glories in his tribulations, and no Greek hero embraces his destiny gladly. He is characteristically stubborn and resentful. Nor did the tragic writers see these new values as ultimately redemptive. But suffering under their treatment lost its incoherence and meaninglessness. It became something more of a sign of the chaos or malignity at the center of being. They showed that, for all its inevitable, dark, and destructive side, it could lead under certain circumstances not only to growth in the standard virtues of courage, loyalty, and love as they operate on the traditional level, but also to the discovery of a higher level of being undreamt of by the standard (or choric) mentality. Thus Job's challenge to Jehovah, for which the Counselors rebuke him, opened up realms of knowledge---even truth, beauty, and goodness---of which the Counselors were ignorant. And Oedipus' pride, which makes the Chorus fearful, led to discoveries, human and divine, which make their moralizings seem petty indeed. Tragedy, as the Greek plays defined it and The Book of Job did not, stresses irretrievable loss, often signified by death. But suffering has been given a structure and set in a viable relationship: a structure which shows progression toward value, rather than denial of it, and a relationship between the inner life of the sufferer and the world of values about him. Thus the suffering of Job and Oedipus, of Orestes and Antigone and Medea, makes a difference. If nothing else, those about them see more clearly the evil of evil and the goodness of
good. The issues are sharpened as never before. Some of the tragedies end more luminously than others. There is nothing like the note of reconciliation at the end of Medea, for instance, that there is in the final scenes of the Oresteia and Oedipus. But Medea, by the end of the play, has (like Clytemnestra) displayed qualities of "a great nature gone wrong," and the play as a whole asserts values that transcend her enormities. The emphasis is on "greatness," and because of her action the dark ways are both more and less benighted than they were before. Though nothing fully compensates (the plays say) there is some compensation. There has been suffering and disaster, and there is more to come. But the shock has to some degree un-shocked us. We are more "ready."

Such is the approach to the question of existence, and such the appraisal of the stuff of experience, that constitute the form of tragedy as the artists of antiquity achieved it. They did not make permanent laws of tragedy, nor did Aristotle, whose distinction lay in seeing that a form was there and in cutting beneath theatricality to give it statement. The Poetics was a powerful influence in directing the writers of the Renaissance to the plays. They found them to have well-ordered structures, which, when the time was ripe, they turned to for suggestive models. And, informing these structures, giving them their shape and body, was that characteristic vision of evil, suffering, and value which we have learned to call tragic.