

Ancient Greece

Lifelong Learning Course

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"The Idea of Tragedy"



Below is a compilation of thoughts from "The Idea of Tragedy" chapter in Edith Hamilton's *The Greek Way*. Tragedy is an achievement peculiarly Greek; it . . .

-- illuminates life's dark confusions by gleams fitful . . . and wavering, contrasted with the fixed light of religious faith.

-- distinguishes from all other art by a religious-like calm and serenity at the core of pain and horror.

-- is where the power of poetry confronts the inexplicable.

-- belongs to the poets. The Greeks turned the spotlight on man, the human condition. When a poet became aware more than that there are wrongs in the world but that there is something irredeemably wrong with the condition of being human itself, then tragedy was born. Only a poet can tread the sunlit heights and from life's dissonance strike one clear chord.

-- has nothing to do with cruelty or the lust for blood.

-- is pain charged with exaltation. We descend to the depths of pathos, but we climb to the heights of tragedy. "That singular swing toward elevation" (Schopenhauer) is the movement of tragedy. The surface of daily life is comedy's area.

-- cannot exist were human life is not valued as full of dignity and significance. When humanity is seen as devoid of dignity and significance, trivial, mean, sunk in hopelessness, then the spirit of tragedy departs. [see below Auden's "Shield of Achilles"] Because the society we have created in America mocks dignity and celebrates the trivial, the tragic note runs false, and we have learned to parody it.

-- knows the suffering of a soul that can suffer greatly and the greatness of suffering. That is tragedy. Why is the death of an ordinary man a wretched, chilling thing, a thing from which we turn in sadness or horror, while the death of a hero, always tragic, warms us with a sense of quickened life? The Greeks went to the myths for their subjects, for real life is too muddy for the clear note of tragedy. This is why modern, character-driven unmasked productions of ancient Greek drama do not work. Those are about individual character, and individual character is of daily life. In a mask, the staged death is the death of us all.

selection from "The Shield of Achilles", W. H. Auden

Auden uses the *Iliad* story of the sea nymph Thetis watching Hephaestus make a shield for her son, Achilles, to contrast what Auden saw as an ancient mythic world of connectedness with a world where the collapse of community held together by "ritual pieties" has led to bestiality.

She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal
Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the same
Lay in the hands of others; they were small
And could not hope for help and no help came:
What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder
For athletes at their games,
Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,
But there on the shining shield
His hands had set no dancing-floor
But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.