HAVE WE LOST THE TRAGIC SENSE?

Tragedy can arise and flourish only where people are aware of individual life as an end in itself, and as a measure of other things. In tribal cultures where the individual is still so closely linked with his family that not only society but even he himself regards his existence as a communal value, which may be sacrificed at any time for communal ends, the development of personality is not a consciously appreciated life pattern. Similarly where men believe that Karma, or the tally of their deeds, may be held over for recompense or expiation in another earthly life, their current incarnation cannot be seen as a self-sufficient whole in which their entire potentialities are to be realised. Therefore genuine tragedy—drama exhibiting “the tragic rhythm of action”—is a specialised form of art.

—Susanne Langer
(Feeling and Form)

When T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, singing his love song, sets out on aimless wanderings through certain half-deserted streets of some unreal city, where “the streets follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent”, and finds himself obsessed with the diseased ‘evening spread out against the sky like a patient etherised upon a table’, he makes a tremendous impression on modern sensibility. The way Eliot hospitalizes the evening, several modern critics tend not only to put some works of literature through a sort of clinical check-up, but even bury them with a chuckle as it were. Of all the art forms tragedy is their most favourite prey. Is tragedy dead and gone? Is that most majestic and aristocratic of art forms out of tune with the climate of democracy which vindicates the dignity of man as man and not of man as a king? Has the modern world at once been dwarfed into a veritable island of Lilliput where our Gulliver of tragedy is ill at ease and would fain flee away? Have we altogether ceased to be tragic or lost our
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tragic sense? Particularly in modern literary criticism there seems to be no dearth of elegies on the death of tragedy. Although unlike great elegies they do not see beyond the immediate smoke-screen of death some fresh fields and pastures new or any Platonic polestar of immortality, we have not ceased to have a harvest of tragedy altogether. These critics refuse to step out of the magic circle of the Aristotelian tenets that could not circumscribe completely even the ancient Greek tragedians, and apply those norms to the totally changed context. Since, according to Aristotle, tragedy is an artistic imitation of a noble action that is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain magnitude, Joseph Wood Krutch throws up his arms in despair:

We can no longer tell tales of the fall of noble men because we no longer believe that noble men exist. The best that we can achieve is pathos, and the most that we can do is to feel sorry for ourselves. Man has put off his royal robes, and it is only in sceptred pomp that tragedy can come creeping by.

This view reveals not merely a false hierarchy of values but also stark aesthetic cynicism. Fortunately, although we are badly let down by kings and queens, surely not so by the modern tragedians. No less an artist than Arthur Miller, who can speak with some evidence of experience, writing in the New York Times (February 27, 1949) on "Tragedy and the Common Man", said:

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations...And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character
alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it...It is time, I think, that we, who are without kings, took up the bright thread of history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.

Intriguingly enough, the critic of the stature and understanding of Joseph Wood Krutch betrays nearly a closed mind on the issue of tragedy in our times, no matter how great be the evidence against his verdict. For instance, again, in the essay on "The Tragic Fallacy" he asserts:

The death of tragedy is, like the death of love, one of those emotional fatalities as the result of which the human as distinguished from the natural world grows more and more a desert...Once the Tragic Spirit was a living faith and out of it tragedies were written. Today these great expressions of a great faith have declined, not merely into poetry, but into a kind of poetry whose premises are so far from any we can really accept that we can only partially and dimly grasp its meaning...We read but do not write tragedies.

What inconsonance between the reading and the writing of tragedies the learned critic implies is not clear. He cannot, however, call upon us to turn a blind eye on the vast stretch of modern drama from Ibsen to Anouilh which is not unfertile in tragedies. In Aldous Huxley's essay "Tragedy and the Whole Truth" we find a gentle note of dissent on views like Joseph Wood Krutch's:

I have sometimes wondered whether tragedy as a form of art, may not be doomed. But the fact that we are still profoundly moved by the tragic masterpieces of the past—that we can be moved against our better judgement, even by the bad tragedies of the contemporary stage and film makes me think that the day of
chemically pure art is not over. Tragedy happens to be passing through a period of eclipse, because all the significant writers of our age are too busy exploring the newly discovered, or rediscovered, world of the Whole Truth to be able to pay any attention to it. Tragedy is too valuable to be allowed to die.

Joseph Wood Krutch is only one of a huge crowd of mourners whose dominant mood is both despondent and nostalgic. To George Steiner any revival of tragic drama seems almost out of question: "The classic leads to a dead past. The metaphysics of Christianity and Marxism are anti-tragic. That in essence is the dilemma of modern tragedy." May be, Steiner has plays like Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* at the back of his mind, in which the playwright fails to succeed in re-conditioning an ancient classic in modern terms and elevate it to a sublime tragic height. It is nevertheless questionable whether Steiner has any adequate premise to generalize so sweepingly. For *Mourning Becomes Electra* is in the tradition of *Oresteia* and *Hamlet* with the revenge theme impinging on the tragic pattern. O'Neill here substitutes sex and psychology for fate and we have a typical modern tragedy. In depth and magnitude it remains almost unequalled. Nor are Christianity and Marxism anti-tragic per se. Shaw's *Saint Joan*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Mac Leish's *J. B.* or Anouilh's *Becket* are only a few illustrations of Christian tragedies. Here are the plays that evoke profound tragic experience without ever getting entangled between the horns of Aristotelian dilemma that prevents saints from being tragic heroes. Christianity is as profoundly human as divine, and even saints are essentially human. Modern playwrights, by humanizing the saint and often by shifting the burden of failure from the shoulders of the saint to the society, create profound tragic appeal without denuding art or Christianity. For, if the saint fails in this mundane world, he triumphs spiritually. The saint struggles for a mission, he suffers, and he is destroyed. His striving, suffering, and destruction constitute tragedy. But the tragic centre is shifted. The burden of failure ultimately devolves on the antagonists while
the saint shines with a halo of martyrdom. Shaw's Joan, when after nearly five centuries of her burning, finds that she is still unwelcome in this world, lifts up her heart in an anguished cry: "O God that made this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" In Joan's strangled cry and tragic vision we have almost an everlasting though profoundly moving assurance of the climate of tragedy.

Christianity is not passive. It can stand up against all wrongs. As for Marxism, far from being inimical to tragedy it has become the cause of many a tragedy in life and literature by tending to uproot humanity through monstrous doctrinaire perversities. Christianity or Marxism should not be in the least spurious if it must negate tragedy. These ideals are too imperfectly realized to eliminate the immense scope for tragic happenings and vision.

Henry Myers has still different diagnosis. He mentions the fact that we have produced no great contemporary tragedy as a proof that "the times are out of joint, that civilization is disintegrating, and that man in our age, in comparison with man in the great ages of Sophocles and Shakespeare, is enfeebled in spirit." Though he assumes that "we find in tragedy only an effective artistic illusion and not an accurate description of life, the life of man in modern times, we must not forget that "at the heart of the nature of things there are always the dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy. The adventure of Universe starts with the dream and reaps tragic Beauty."

There can be no end to dialectics on a highly controversial problem such as the collapse of a major dramatic form like tragedy. It can die only with the death of drama. Our winter of discontent cannot obscure the flowering of tragedy even in the seeming autumn of tragic creativity. Nor has humanity gone bankrupt. The critics who attribute to the enfeeblement of human spirit the cause of the fall of modern tragedy—and there is quite a host of them—have only to look—
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Around and think not merely of the conquest of Everest or of space but also recall Mahatma Gandhi's fight for freedom, peace, and truth in the face of the brutal forces of tyranny, violence, and oppression; or the way Winston Churchill heroically led his country and the allies to victory through the stress and storm of the second world war. Again think of Albert Schweitzer's life and work in dark Africa, or Helen Keller's search for light beyond unfathomable darkness, or Martin Luther King's sacrifice for the fundamental human rights, and you will be struck with spiritual strength and human nobility. As for the fall of noble men, consider the intensity and universality of shock created by the assassination of men like Mahatma Gandhi or President Kennedy. In an instant, the world was turned into a mourning cathedral, electrically as it were. What a fall was there! It had indeed a far greater impact on mankind than the fall of a Caesar or a Pompey. The heroes of humanity have displayed immensely greater courage than the heroes of the battle-field; and the cottage has proved to be as much congenial to the greatness of human worth as the court. As for sheer courage and heroism even the stout hearts faint to see the courage of the astronauts who nonchalantly make space the scene of their rendezvous, and we marvel at the brave new world in which life is lived in all its abundance and adventure. The forces of greed, cruelty, and oppression have however not yet perished. The horrors of the Nazi gas chambers and the massacre of communal riots that preceded and followed the freedom at midnight in this subcontinent still haunt our memory. The predicament of man remains yet essentially tragic. Perhaps that way lies human destiny. In other words, it would be an error to describe tragedy as an anachronism in the modern world, though it might not be quite free from some passing crisis. As John Masefield puts it in his preface to The Tragedy of Nan, 'Tragedy at its best is the vision of life'; and life's heart yet beats and it will keep on beating till the crack of doom. But if we have Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller and not Euripides and Aeschylus, J. M. Synge and Sean O'Casey and not Sophocles and
Shakespeare, there is no reason why we should lament across such a vast span of time that divides the moderns from the ancients. Like time, life is in a constant flux and so is art which grows from the soil of life. Mutability is inescapable. As in life, so in literature nothing remains static. We had hence better not let our approaches to literature be blurred by empirical semantics or the values of the other times. When the ancient Greek dramatists themselves could not consistently and strictly adhere to Aristotle's prescription, how on earth are the modern dramatists expected to stick to it? If the modern playwright at all fails to measure up to a certain tragic stature and is offset by his ancient predecessors, it is surely not on account of the failure of spirit or the prevalence of Christianity or Marxism. Christian Shakespeare or Milton is not devoid of tragic vision; nor is the so called Markist Sartre or Camus so, for that matter. Boris Pasternak, on the other hand, is a classic though disturbing example of Marxism fostering a tormenting tragic vision. The tragic view of life is universal and eternal, and it will endure as long as man does not fail to affirm life courageously in the face of death and destruction; so long as man, like Hemingway's Old Man, chooses to be destroyed but not defeated. Probably the vision and meaning of tragedy find in our times more lucid expression in the flexible form of the novel than in the stringent form of drama involving quite a rigorous and economic process of what T. S. Eliot describes as "the extinction of personality." The mimic world of theatre surely does not give that latitude to the artist as the free world of fiction. Could it be that, because of the perfect freehand that the novelist has as against the self-effacing objectivity of the dramatist that tragedy, which sometimes fights shy of the modern theatre, goes about unbribled in the pocket-theatre? Tragedy is not merely a vision of life, it is essentially the heroic assertion of life, the heroic way of life expressed in terms of art. As long as these basic values do not perish, there might be perhaps some erosion but not extinction of such a vital art form. It might have to face crisis but not catastrophe.
Since it is in the United States particularly that such an acute concern for the fall of tragedy is felt, it would not be inappropriate to turn to an American dramatist. At once Eugene O'Neill comes to our mind, for as John Gassner suggests, 'the height and breadth of the American theater is measured' by his stature. He is surely the most representative American playwright, whom his fans love to describe as America's Shakespeare, as those of J. M. Synge describe him as Ireland's Shakespeare. Shakespeare like his Caesar bestrides the narrow world of drama like a Colossus and if most other dramatists look underlings, the fault is surely not in their art but in Shakespeare who dwarfs them all. We would do well not to attempt to juxtapose all playwrights with Shakespeare. O'Neill is a modern tragedian who "is almost alone among modern writers in possessing what appears to be an instinctive perception of what a modern tragedy would have to be." The playwright described himself as 'a bit of a poet, who has laboured to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it,' and claims to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values. His plays have a definite tragic vision expressing the artist's sense of life's little ironies and the ache of modernity. According to Gassner he is "a modern dramatist in search of aesthetic and spiritual center." If some of his plays leave the readers dissatisfied and depressed, it is to an extent because of the fact that Eugene O'Neill, who like Shakespeare, opened his account in the theatre, keeps his eye on the stage in the theatre and not so much on the printed page in the book, on the spectator in the auditorium and not quite on the reader by the fireside. Else how do we account for his love of theatricality that often mars some of the finest moments in his plays and renders them melodramatic? But Francis Fergusson, who complains against O'Neill's 'eternal immaturity' and adds that 'he has a sense of human need but not of human destiny' does not deny him tragic vision:

O'Neill's plays are crosses. Follow the road he travels and you will often hear the sound of flagellation. Look and you will often see that the whip is brought
down by a tormented soul on his own back. But flowers grow on this desert track, and the mountains and the sunset lie Beyond Horizon.

The question is whether Eugene O'Neill's plays in the final analysis at all succeed as tragedies. Instead of talking in vague and general terms, we might pick up one of his plays for an X-ray examination not so much in order to measure the playwright's stature as a tragedian as to study the case-history of a modern tragedy and observe its symptoms and condition. *Beyond the Horizon*, his first Pulitzer Prize play with which he made his debut on Broadway, is quite an intriguing play from this point of view. The playwright has explained the origin of the play as it occurred to him on a British tramp steamer from Buenos Aires to New York. There is none the less an apocryphal anecdote in vogue: O'Neill was sitting one day on the beach of Provincetown, looking out across the sea. A little boy sat beside him putting questions:

> 'What is beyond the ocean?'
> 'Europe'.
> 'What is beyond Europe?'
> 'The horizon'.
> 'What is beyond the horizon?'

The little boy persisted in his obstinate questioning with something strangely tender in his sense of awe and wonder and curiosity. What answer he got is not known. But he did drop pebbles in the calm lake of the artist's consciousness, and the ripples spread far beyond the horizon, creating his first full-length play. The one-act play was his first love, and he had already made a mark with *Bound East for Cardiff*, *Ile, The Long Voyage Home*, *The Moon of the Caribbees* to name only a few of his plays which should have easily earned for him an epithet of 'the sea dramatist'. He is akin to Conrad and Masefield in his love of the sea. And it seems that even while he embarks on writing a full-length play both the sea
and the technique of the one-act play continue to cast a spell on him. For Beyond the Horizon has three acts loosely put together, and it looks a trilogy rolled into one. Its structure is ramshackle, almost like a Strindberg play, and as in a chronicle play time flies behind the curtain, leaving vacant tracks between the acts. The play does not have any unity of time as the action is spread over eight years. But it has the unity of motif; and above all a remarkable unity of place which should flatter even an Aristotle.

O'Neill combines naturalism and symbolism. If his stage-directions have photographic vividness, they do not fail to convey a deeper meaning. As he observes 'In Beyond the Horizon there are three acts of two scenes each, one scene out of doors showing the horizon, suggesting man's desire and dreams, the other indoors, the horizon gone, suggesting what has come between him and his dream. That way I get the rhythm of longing and loss.' The symbolism of the play is pervasive. The cycle of seasons—spring, summer, fall—goes on whirling, keeping pace with the march of the happy and the unhappy events in the play with a characteristic pathetic fallacy. The horizon, the eternal frontier that stands between man's distant dreams and his immediate reality, symbolises the undying quest of human heart for the unknown. The sea is the sea of life—so vast, so unfathomable, so mysterious,—and it underlines the hero's sense of loneliness and inner unrest. But the sea and the horizon are not mere symbols, they are also actors. If the horizon lures the hero from the beginning to the end, it is the sea that takes away Andrew leaving Ruth and Robert to suffer on the farm. If Robert had responded to the call of the sea, his destiny might have taken a different turn. Sunrise and sunset, day and night, light and twilight, the cottage quite orderly and again at sixes and sevens, the farm well kept and desolate, the hedge, the ditch, the sea, the horizon and the seasons, all assume extraordinary symbolical meaning. If these, abounding symbols give a touch of poetry to the play, their load impinges rather heavily on its texture. There is a discernible Celtic touch about O'Neill's imagery also. It is quite typical of
O’Neill to use his milieu to map the inward landscape. ‘The essential locale for O’Neill dramas hovers round the tireless yearnings of the human heart.’ It cannot nevertheless be asserted that the action of Beyond the Horizon is entirely inward and that even that the characters determine the plot. With the probable exception of the protagonists almost all the characters are conventional stage-types, just two dimensional paper-figures and nothing more. To the dramatist they hardly much matter. Else, how should he have resisted the temptation of presenting a touching scene of family re-union, when Andrew returns home after three long years, between him and his mother Kate ‘whose face has a helpless, doleful expression of being constantly on the verge of comfortless tears’ because of the ordeal during his absence? Equally unconvincing though charming is the juvenile character Mary, aged two, that chip off the old block, who must find it impossible to act across the footlights. The only exception is Uncle Dick who at once springs to life, and for a while threatens to overshadow all the rest. He is brimming with funny anecdotes of sea-life and gives this otherwise tense drama some comic relief. He so much throbs with life that when, after three years, he returns to the Mayo farm, even the dramatist seems to become a wee-bit nervous in his presence, and cleverly evades him lest he should throw the protagonists out of the tragic focus by his comedy and horseplay. But thereby the playwright has forefeited one more opportunity of blending pathos and humour. In a sense Uncle Dick is an unconscious agent of fate. He cannot be described as a deus ex machina, yet his contribution to the action is immense. For it is he who first offers to take Robert to the far-off lands of his dreams, but through sheer irony whisks away Andrew twice across the sea. All the same he remains quite a minor character although unforgettable. The playwright tends to take at times partisan stand in favour of the hero. If speculation be allowed one can easily imagine a near heartbreak from which Andrew must have suffered after being jilted by Ruth. His silent suffering and sacrifice should lift him up above the rest of the characters. But speculative criticism has its own dangers. Once we step
out of a work of art, all the characters too will follow our footsteps and walk out of that green world of imagination. The result will be disastrous, a complete chaos. The organic unity of the work of art will be disintegrated at once. We had better therefore not violate the frontiers of art, unless we have a rage for chaos. O'Neill like Rabindranath Tagore, always tends to focus all his interest on the protagonists and develops only one or two characters at the cost of the rest, who get a raw deal at the hands of their creator. In fact, at times he gets so abnormally interested in the central character that quite unconsciously he identifies himself with him and loses objectivity without which the illusion of reality in the mimic world of drama is apt to suffer. Subjectivity is inimical to dramatic art, which is fiercely objective. It is in Robert, the hero, that he has projected a bit of himself, his love of the sea, his wanderlust, his day-dreaming, his search for the self and even his consumption. But it is no exception. He can masquerade easily in his plays, may be not so prominently as he does as Edmund in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* which is outstandingly autobiographical.

The real dramatic interest in the play is focused on the two brothers, Robert and Andrew, and the girl Ruth. The theme of *Beyond the Horizon* like that of Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* is as old as the hills; the love of two men for one woman involving suffering and sacrifice, longing and loss. The play opens at the most crucial moment in Robert's life when at last he is about to embark on a long voyage beyond the horizon where perhaps his dreams lie. But on the eve of his departure, Robert and Ruth get suddenly caught up in a fit of midsummer madness and they let themselves sentimentally go. For a while we have an idyllic scene of an enchanting pastoral romance. In her embrace he finds, the mystery and wonder, the wonder that their love should bring home to them:

I think love must have been the secret—the secret that called to me from over the world's rim—the secret beyond every horizon...(He clasps Ruth to him fiercely.) Oh, Ruth, you are right! Our love is sweeter.
Robert is lost in the ecstasy of romance which for a while eclipses all other dreams of the mysteries beyond the horizon. The dream of love proves to be a supreme dream. He goes home and declares quite naively: Ruth told me this evening that—she loved me. (Act I, sc. i).

He cancels his trip, and it is Andrew, the son of the soil who sails away instead, leaving Robert, the dreamer of dreams with Ruth. The sudden awakening of adolescent love throws Robert on the cross-roads. Like a Shakespearean tragic hero he is confronted with an impossible dilemma, and like him again he makes a wrong choice. The reality of love for Ruth eclipses his dreams which he spreads under her feet. But she does not tread softly although she treads on his dreams. Both of them fall a prey to adolescent weakness and folly. What follows is a moving tale of the three misfits whose dreams for ever lie beyond their horizon partly because of the illusions and self-deception: Robert chooses farming instead of dreaming; Andrew chooses the sea instead of the farm, and Ruth, the practical peasant girl, who in fact loved Andrew, turns her back on him and prefers the dreamer, although unlike Tennyson's Annie Lee she never promised to be a 'little wife' to them both. They are all young and foolish, and then are full of tears. They are escapists. Their self-deception brings about certain degeneration. Andrew, who spends eight years running away from himself, ceases to be a farmer and becomes a gambler. Ruth soon grows cold and heartless and cruel and we see the sweetheart degenerating into a veritable shrew the moment the emotional excitement is over. 'There's a time comes—when you don't mind any more—any thing', she says to Andrew (Act. III sc. i). Although Robert appears to have been more sinned against than sinning, it is in fact Ruth who suffers more poignantly. Andrew goes abroad, Robert continually tries to sojourn into his dream-land. But, for Ruth there is
hardly any escape from the stern realities. She has to face the ordeal squarely and alone. There is no help. Robert, who compromises his dreams with domesticity is not altogether the idealist he looks. He is self-centered and he robs Andrew's happiness in order to be happy! Andrew's love for Ruth grows along with time whereas the romance of Ruth and Robert is like a flash of lightning. so sudden, so short. It is not at all deep-rooted. Robert assures Andrew:

It's horrible... If I could have foreseen what'd happen, I swear to you I'd have never said a word to Ruth. I swear, I wouldn't have, Andy.

(Act I sc. ii)

Love such as this was foredoomed to failure. It collapses on the hard plane of domestic realities, and we see Robert, the ineffectual idealist struggling unavailingly against his circumstances, against his fate and above all against himself. Life to him is now a dim, vast valley of tears where falls the shadow of death. Ruth and Andrew serve as foils to Robert and through them we see juxtaposed conflicting values: distant dreams and immediate reality, romance and domesticity, idealism and materialism, poetry and practicality. Here is a tragedy of opposite attitudes and attrition, even of disillusionment and frustration.

This does not however sum up the motif of the play which is reminiscent of Tagore's The Post Office. Robert, who nearly carries the play on his shoulders, is like Tagore's Amal to whom life is a dream. Both of them, Robert and Amal, are physically infirm but they are endowed with an undying quest for the unknown. Incapable of action, they easily lapse into day-dreaming, and if they turn to the practical world it is only to be hurled back on dreams with a greater intensity. Robert is a Shelleyan hero who looks before and after and pines for what is not. So do hanker to a certain extent, even Ruth and Andrew. Robert has the imagination of a poet and his imagination feeds on dreams and poetry. It often takes him across the blue sea of fancy, but he still falls on the thorns of life.
and bleeds. Who can run away from life's realities unless he can manage to run away from life itself? Robert walks alone, and his sense of emotional isolation is progressively accentuated. His only companion in these hours of trial is little Mary. If Robert is at home with her alone, it is also because he remains at heart a child. He is a veritable Peter Pan. 'I am never going to grow up if I can' he says to Andrew. (Act. I, sc. i). But alas Mary his 'last hope of happiness' and the only friend dies and creates such a tormenting vacuum in his life that Robert, like Driffield in Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*, poignantly wishes, 'I could curse God from the bottom of my soul—if there was a God' (Act. III, sc. i). When Ruth says, 'Mary is better off being dead', pat comes Robert's agonized cry 'We'd all be better off for that matter.' (Act. III, sc. i). It is surely not the courageous acceptance of death, but defeatist cynicism. This bitter Hardian cynicism springs from the heart-breaking moments when the pain of longing and loss shroud life's meaning. Robert lives in such an atmosphere of hatred that even a kiss from Ruth—'one kiss, the first in years'—can for a moment brighten up his dark, dreary world. For nothing could be more tormenting than love turned into hatred like Ruth's for Robert, who could not live without love. Yet there is something ennobling about the catastrophe. Robert lives on his own terms and even during the most trying hours of need does not stretch his hand for help from any one. His hard labour is wasted, the servants desert him, the farm goes to pieces, debts pile up, the dearest ones die, love cools off, a fatal disease catches him with the threat of imminent death. But nothing quite hardens his heart. Like a flower that is bruised or broken, he gives greater fragrance. Under the stress of calamity the crust of his ego breaks, and he rises far above himself and dies courageously with an act of supreme self-sacrifice and exaltation.

Robert: Don't you see I'm happy at last—because
I'm making a start to the far off places—free—free !...
I've won to my trip—the right of release—beyond
the horizon. Oh, you must be glad...(He collapses.)
Andy!... Remember Ruth.

(Act. III. sc. ii)

Robert finally is so redeemed that he, who suffers from an intense sense of self-pity all along, does not now crave for the sympathy of the others either:

Robert (in a voice which is suddenly ringing with the happiness of hope): You mustn’t feel sorry for me. It’s ridiculous! Don’t you see I’m happy at last—because I’m making a start to the far-off places—free-free!...freed from the farm—free to wonder on and on—eternally! Even the hills are powerless to shut me in.

(Act. III, sc.ii)

A moment like this takes us closer to George Santayana’s view when he writes,

Tragedy, the knowledge of death, raises us to that height...and for a moment it brings our mortal wills into harmony with our destiny, with the wages of existence, and with the silence beyond...Such is the countenance of man when turned towards death and eternity and looking beyond all his endeavours at the Gorgon face of the truth.

If we focus our attention to Robert’s struggle and vision during the final moments of his life and think of his sense of sacrifice, his concern for the happiness of others rather than his own, and above all the way he comes to terms with the ultimate reality that shatters all his illusions, his stature as a protagonist grows. At least in the dying Robert we have a few glimpses of the mellowed beauty of the human soul like the last flicker of a dying lamp. None the less, could we say that the Robert who dies is not a Robert defiant but a Robert redeemed and that his education is complete? Death that comes to him as a friend means to him a sort of retreat from life. His regeneration appears contrived rather than attained, and it
they create impression that they are too big for the narrow world in which they live and that the world would be the poorer by their exit? If we accept A. E. Morgan’s definition of tragedy that ‘great tragedy is the unsuccessful struggle of a great soul’, frankly speaking majority of O’Neill heroes do not quite come up to the mark. So far as their suffering is concerned it is often intense, even unbearable. We are surely moved to pity, even sympathy, and think of their predicament in the context of the wider human situation. But we are not quite aware of their inner greatness. O’Neill’s plays like Beyond the Horizon tend to be studies in frustration ‘where weak and foolish people waste their life.’ But frustration and futility cannot make any great tragedy which involves the courageous affirmation of life in the face of death. That noble accent of life that we hear in all great tragedies is heard only faintly if at all in O’Neill.

The denouement, although a little theatrical because of the stagey behaviour of the protagonists and particularly of the dying hero, telescopes nobly the opening scene. If at the start it was Andrew who sailed away leaving Ruth with Robert, it is now Robert who, at the end, goes beyond the horizon of life, returning Ruth to Andrew. The self-centred sentimentalist acts selflessly, and we have what Masefield calls ‘the vision of agony, of spiritual concept pushed beyond the limits of a dying personality’. The play that ends thus with the death of the hero seems to be such stuff as tragedy is made of. It has tragic tensions, pervasive irony, and above all unavailing struggle. Lionel Trilling describes it as ‘a near tragedy’. But between the opening and the ending of the play, the entire dramatic spectacle seems to be a futile stretch of waste, and the way attempts are made by the protagonists in league with the playwright to amend the errors of life-time only toward the end, smacks of arbitrary and cheap poetic justice. As a tragedy it is as unsuccessful as the tragic protagonist Robert. The situations in the play are largely contrived so as to be more significant than the characters, and are calculated to create sensation, particularly at the beginning and at the end of the play. It thus hovers on
the verge of melodrama. The play conveys an enormous sense of waste and the characters themselves are largely responsible for their destiny. Yet it is not a tragedy in Shakespearean sense. There is no universal conflict between the forces of good and of evil here. In fact the absence of evil in its strict theological sense generally marks modern tragedy. In O'Neill's plays it is difficult to come across the confirmed villains, for like Shakespeare, he does not hate, Fate and chance, too, have quite some decisive part to play. When Uncle Dick exclaims, "God A'mighty Kate, I can't give order to the tide that it has got to be high just when it suits me to have" (Act. I, sc. ii) he touches the heart of matter; for, that way he acknowledges the forces greater than men at work. The situations take abrupt turns with Sophoclean irony, characters speak out unconscious prophecies, the authority of the invisible is intensely felt and yet Beyond the Horizon is not like a Greek tragedy. We experience a sense of admiration, whereas terror is hardly, if ever, felt. Our sympathies are wavering and being tossed about, our emotional experience is vague and uncertain, and response confused.

Is Beyond the Horizon then a melodrama, or 'a near tragedy' or a tragedy in the making, or a genuine tragedy? When we take into account the sensational opening and ending of the play which are theatrical rather than dramatic revealing almost an uncritical acceptance of emotions that easily degenerate into passions and sentiments, and again those less probable situations determining the characters rather than the characters shaping the situations, Beyond the Horizon looks like a melodrama. Is it not an example of modern tragedy which has to be viewed in its psychological context and not moral context? If we obstinately insist on those absolute, set standards of tragedy, what will be our reaction to the plays like O'Neill's The Icemen Cometh which are without protagonists altogether? For, Harry Hope's saloon is a microcosm of the modern world; and unlike Chaucer's jovial pilgrims, who meet at the Tabbard Inn, these near-neurotics suffer from the strange affliction of the modern world, and present a woeful picture.
Have we lost the tragic sense? Of our times. Do we really admire Abbie and Eben, the Tyrones, John Loving, and the rest as we do Antigone and Lear and Hamlet? The question is, how far is it proper to go on looking back? 'Like every great tragic writer, O'Neill must accept the premises of his audience. It so happens that those premises are not the premises of ancient Greece or Elizabethan England, but the premises of modern psychology.' He tried to adjust his vision of the modern world in the intellectual framework by Freud and other psychologists. O'Neill's vision, like Hardy's vision of the modern world, is surely tragic, but unlike Hardy's it has more of psychological meaning than moral or cosmic meaning. Both of them, Hardy and O'Neill, are sensitive to suffering and can create moving spectacles of human suffering. But then they both eventually despair and convey an impression of pessimism and despair. If the idea of the Immanent will overshadows Hardy's tragic view, the psychological preoccupations blur Eugene O'Neill's vision of tragedy notwithstanding his immense compassion for humanity. More often than not he fails to measure up to a great tragic stature. He none the less lays bare the unfathomable depths of human life and shows the beauty of human soul in the midst of disaster and death. With his tragic heroes we experience a greater kinship as they are on our plane, 'flesh out of our flesh'. Even such a feeble character as Robert does not fail to raise a question whether it is not better to dream and despair than not to dream at all. He dies as a great lover, and incidentally vindicates the robust optimism of the Shavian dictum that 'it is enough that there is a beyond'; and we quite clearly hear in Beyond the Horizon the echoes of 'the still sad music of humanity.' Like the poetry of earth, the still, sad, music of humanity is never dead. It is eternal music, and will last as long as humanity lasts. And so long as humanity lasts, its vision, must inevitably be enveloped into the continual mists of tears. Suffering seems to be the badge of our human tribe, and it is perhaps our destiny too. Art cannot turn its back on life which, as King Lear discovered, is not ague-proof. If time, mutability, and death are inseparable, it must be man's lot, at least, the lot of even the
noblest of men, to rise up courageously against the sea of troubles even if it cannot be ended by opposition. The scale of values changes, but there is no erosion of the essential human spirit. If modern tragedy sometimes appears inadequate and tame, it is surely not on account of the decay or death of the art form. The fault is not in the stars of tragedy; it perhaps lies in us who cling to the straws of the old artistic norms which must get tossed about in the constant flux, or even in the inability of the artist to rise up triumphantly to those giddy majestic heights that overlook and disdain all pettiness, and perplexity, and suffering. The modern tragedian, however, unlike his ancient predecessors, does not need to go in quest of tragedy to the forlorn and almost inaccessible labyrinths of suffering which alone monopolised noble actions. Life's tragedies are here, around, and everywhere, and the noble suffering humanity is an everlasting reality. The heroic spirit of man that never knows defeat will strive ceaselessly against all odds, often unavailingly but never despairingly, helplessly but not hopelessly. There lies a hope for tragedy. When all our criticism lamenting its imaginary death will have been lost in oblivion, tragedy will be still there keeping step with time on its majestic march. It is not dead, not even diseased. The changes that we discern are the symptoms of its development and new dimensions. The sooner it is released from the clinical confines of modern criticism the better. Is not the love song of Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock a little tragic without any fuss of being so? Modern tragedy is even far more unassuming and yet infinitely more profound and moving.

In his essay, "Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy," John Gassner observes: "Aristotle himself did not presume to legislate on tragedy for all time, but spoke mostly of tragic art as he knew." All arts are indeed evolutionary, and tragedy, too, must keep step with times. He adds:

- We should not overlook the modern playwright's search for new dramatic forms, especially in the turbulent expressionist mode...playwrights who gravitated toward expressionism tended to concern themselves
with, such contemporary themes as the Oedipus Complex, the alienation of the individual in a cheapened world, and the crisis of war and revolution...; the boundaries of tragic art were extended...If this argument does not at all prove that modern playwrights have written better tragedies than Sophocles and Shakespeare did (and the reverse is obviously the case), it does suggest that modernity may be relieved of the charge that it has extinguished the art or tragedy.

Surely, tragedy needs no obituaries. In fact the possibilities and perils know no end. If we seem to live in a world which is a veritable chamber of horrors—the horrors of war, violence, the abuse of science and technology, diseases, and above all of human brutality—we also witness the unfailing flowering of values and human spirit. Aristotle has been, unfortunately, our magnificent obsession; and our search for the tragic, too, is cramped by Aristotelian tenets. The tragic is there in abundance not merely in the expressionistic or the absurdist theatre, where it is perhaps least likely to be expected, but also in fiction and poetry. In fact modern art like modern consciousness and sensibility, is averse to all labelling. Sartre, Kafka, Camus, Beckett, all have unmistakable tragic vision manifesting itself, at times, in forms not literally or apparently tragic. It is hard to pigeonhole their works in traditional forms. Laughter and tears, the ridiculous and the sublime, the comic and the tragic intermingle in a complex way, and we are moved with pity and fear stemming from the experience which is unmistakably tragic. With the growth of human consciousness, there is a greater expansion of vision, of the tragic vision; and it must manifest itself in a wide variety of art forms like music, dance, sculpture, painting, and of course poetry and drama.

Karl Jaspers defines the condition of the tragic, which is not limited to any age or any race, much less to any high station of life. He traces the tragic rhythm in the very predicament of man and his spiritual reaction to life's little ironies.

A yearning for deliverence has always gone hand in hand with the knowledge of the tragic. When man
encounters the hard fact of tragedy, he faces an inexorable limit. At this limit he finds no guarantee of general salvation. Rather it is in acting out his own personality, in realising his selfhood even unto death, that he finds redemption and deliverance.

Modern life is no less fraught with perils than life in the ancient times. A Roberts or a Lavinia might not have the stature of an Oedipus or an Antigone. Nor is their destiny linked with the larger destiny of the society. Their tragedy is in a sense private. But if on one hand because of the texture of their life, their spirit, and their struggle they seem to transcend the common rut of humanity, on the other their place in the society, their suffering, and above all their humanity so link them with us that their tragedy tends to be in essence the tragedy of everyman—the modern tragedy.

Modern life has infinitely greater terrors and perils than ancient life. Apart from the never ceasing threat of nuclear deluge and holocausts, wars, terrorism and wholesale violence, the metaphysical anguish of alienation, schizophrenic internal monologues of the modern man, his sense of finite physical and mental strength against infinite forces, his consciousness of his most vulnerable predicament in an ever expanding cosmic theatre leaves him dejected if not always defeated. But there is also in him innate defiance, an assertion, even affirmation with which he rises even above himself and his destiny. In this struggle, although often unavailing, is the hope of tragedy.