

## ABSTRACT

The Consolation of Sorrow

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What have the tragedies of antiquity to do with consolation? It seems that the Greek plays, which are marked by war and grief, have little to offer in terms of comfort. Yet, the characters of ancient drama are well-acquainted with sorrow, inviting audiences to share in the experience of suffering and desire for consolation. In this thesis, I demonstrate how Greek tragedies provide a consolatory sorrow that relieves the afflicted and pulls them outside of themselves. I establish the various ways in which consolation allows for sorrow, turning to both the philosophic and religious traditions. Both perspectives recognize the need to mourn and leave room for expressions of sadness. Greek tragedies prompt this consolatory sorrow by providing a platform for people to confront suffering and mortality through the safety of art. In depicting the serious nature of pain and grief, the dramas provide an outlet for sorrow, recognizing the need to mourn and pushing audiences towards a consolation found in community and comforting others.

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THE CONSOLATION OF SORROW

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Consolation of Sorrow

#### *Introduction*

Why do we like sad stories? The notion that we derive pleasure from reading books that end in heartache and watching films where the main character dies in front of our eyes is paradoxical. Yet, we often enter the theater knowing that the movie's ending will incite tears. Films like *1917*, *The Notebook*, and *A Marriage Story* continue to draw people in and capture their attention despite the misfortune of their stories. Books like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, where the characters come face to face with mortality, grief, and shame, are read by many. Greek tragedy illuminates this strange appeal of sorrow and storytelling. It is an art full of violence, familial conflict, death, and lamentation. These ancient stories are marked by grief. Despite their sorrowful notes, the city-state thought the tragedies worth watching, and centuries later, people continue to perform, teach, and read the ancient plays. In real life, when terrible things occur, there is no trace of enjoyment. Fusing sorrow and pleasure should not succeed, but the unfolding of human life in all its miseries engages us when it is depicted in art. To some extent, it may even offer relief, consoling viewers.

Literary theorist Terry Eagleton in his book, *Tragedy*, recalls a time at Cambridge when a fellow student leaned over to him and observed, "The examiners seem to think that tragedy is a good thing."<sup>1</sup> This comment underlines the notion that sorrowful stories may be helpful and even therapeutic. The tragic poets speak to the human experience of

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<sup>1</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Tragedy* (Yale University Press, 2020), ix.

grief, recognizing the brutality of human suffering while also giving way for expressions of mourning. It is universal but does not have to be suffered alone. Yet, many questions arise from this idea concerning tragedy's lasting effects and the legitimate nature of its comfort.

In this thesis, I seek to address the consoling potential of Greek tragedy, arguing that by confronting audiences with figures who endure unimaginable pain, the tragic poets provide a platform for reflection and the consoling expression of sorrow. In the first chapter, I endeavor to examine the nature of consolation, distinguishing it from other forms of comfort. I engage the philosophic and religious traditions, arguing that both leave room for sorrow in their conceptions of consolation. In the second chapter, I examine Greek tragedy as an art form that provokes sorrow and consoles through the recognition of grief and the practice of mourning. Finally, I evaluate objections to tragedy's consoling abilities and consider arguments from philosopher Simon Critchley and literary theorist Terry Eagleton.

### *Consolation Distinguished from Comfort*

To understand the ways in which Greek tragedy consoles, it is necessary to examine the purpose of consolation itself. In times of distress, there arises a longing for comfort. Seeking relief, people find various forms of escape, from shallow pleasures to religious faith. Often, their efforts fail since common responses such as watching Netflix or drinking wine at a bar with strangers do not offer lasting solace but are only fleeting distractions. Instead, consolation alleviates pain by pulling the audience out of their

suffering and redirecting them towards a higher good. Turning to the Stoic, Jesuit, and Thomistic philosophies will provide insight into true consolation.

In the midst of death and adversity, what should console us? People often turn to the comforts of wine, sex, and entertainment to escape from their pain. At best, these provide momentary relief, leaving the afflicted to return to their misery when the pleasure fades away. Often, when affliction threatens, and people turn to these outlets, they fail to provide substantial relief. Given these vastly different sources of comfort, the term ‘consolation’ needs refinement. It seems that there are degrees of comfort, ranging from the lowest pleasure to the greatest comfort—consolation. At the most basic level, a warm meal and a bath offer relief from a day of hard work. Perhaps a word of comfort or a new pair of shoes can brighten someone’s day for a moment, but it does not cure the ache of loss. Turning to alcohol, sex, food, and media as an escape from pain does not have any permanent effect either. Sir Roger Scruton considers the extent of these comforts, admitting, “I can see what it would be to take refuge in wine completely and allow that to soothe one through one’s day and soothe one through one’s inadequacies.”<sup>2</sup> However, he acknowledges its limitations, recognizing that wine will offer no comfort beyond diversion. At the end of the day, the pain lingers, to be resumed when the temporary “high” wears off the next morning. These superficial pleasures only divert one from the issues at hand, distracting an individual until he inevitably returns to his anguish. There are, however, ways in which people attempt to obtain a lasting solace that assuages their misery. Reason tries to deter anguish, and philosophy and science provide an avenue by which people attempt to understand and overcome suffering.

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<sup>2</sup> Scruton, “Of Beauty and Consolation Episode 2 Roger Scruton,” 2000. <https://youtu.be/xoybTk6TEX4>, 35:40.

Consolation, then, must be a higher form of comfort than the superficial pleasures of food and drink. According to both philosophy and religion, the greatest solace is to be found when the individual turns away from himself to something beyond. It entails something beyond momentary relief; it is lasting and affects change. Scruton's analysis of consolation highlights this turning away from self. In the year 2000, on an episode of the Dutch series titled "Of Beauty and Consolation," he commented on the nature of solace. He explains, "All our unhappiness and alienation come from the attempt to be an individual above everything else, whereas consolation comes when one relaxes into a sense of something greater than oneself."<sup>3</sup> His conception of a higher good echoes the Platonic and gestures to a solace found in the peace and reconciliation of contemplation. In this, the philosophic rendering of consolation bears some similarity to the religious. St. Ignatius also emphasizes that the role of consolation should redirect the afflicted beyond themselves. Though his conception of solace aims at unity with the divine, both the philosophic and religious approaches to consolation agree that mere comfort is not enough.

In this chapter, I will provide background on the different approaches to consolation, addressing the power of reason and religion in comforting the afflicted and thus revealing the place for sorrow in consolation. Within the rational and religious approaches, I will trace the need for tears, sympathy, and community, arguing that sorrow can offer relief from pain. In this discussion of consolatory sorrow, I will lay the foundation for the ways in which tragedy provides solace, which will be discussed in the second chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Scruton, 6:00.



## *Consolation Defined*

Before turning to the place of sorrow in consolation, the term itself must be defined. As we have seen, consolation is something that is distinct from basic comforts. Ancient philosophy approaches it as a thing that is necessary when confronting loss. The Stoics desired to wipe out all fear of death, seeking consolation from suffering by facing the reality of death and mourning briefly when needed. In acknowledging reality and assuaging pain, they find a lasting consolation that contributes to an ordered life. While this vision of consolation excludes hope, the Christian tradition offers a similar but distinct view of consolation.

Christianity also anticipates death, noting the reality of man's mortality and the internal warfare the human suffers as a result of sin. Yet, the tradition turns to Christ as the ultimate consolation, making it distinct among other definitions of consolation. For believers, there is hope in Christ's resurrection and redirecting the soul towards God provides lasting solace.

In both philosophy and Christian tradition, consolation is something that addresses the psychological pain of loss. This focus on the mind reveals that the therapeutic aim of consolation is to transform an individual's interior life. In this thesis, I will use the term consolation in reference to the alleviation of psychological misery which redirects the individual to a higher good, namely contemplation of the divine. Though consolation has comforting abilities, it ultimately goes beyond comfort and provides a lasting solace that pushes the sufferer towards community and hope.

## *Stoic Philosophy and Sorrow*

Stoicism attempts to prohibit grief before it even occurs. Preparing for death, the Stoics would anticipate the inevitability of loss before it ever happened. They sought to eliminate any fear surrounding the subject, reasoning that death exists and people must expect it. This practice allowed them to temper their passions and focus on the cultivation of virtue. Ideally, there would be no further need for consolatory efforts. However, sadness emerged in times of hardship. In circumstance when this occurred, the Stoics attended to the passion immediately. If left unchecked, lamentation had the potential to overwhelm individuals and deter them from living virtuously.

Stoic philosophy offers a response to the inevitability of loss by attempting to comfort the afflicted through an appeal to reason. The Stoics emphasize the tempering of emotions through self-control. Hoping to prevent sorrow before it occurs, the Stoics acknowledge the inevitability of suffering and death and limit their expressions. By anticipating loss, they aim to restrict unruly passions.

*The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman's defense of liberal education, raises the question—to what extent can reason provide this comfort? Exploring the failings of philosophy, he turns to a passage in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. The story itself follows the Abissinian prince, Rasselas, on his journey to determine the nature of human happiness. His quest concerns whether or not humans can even obtain it. Newman specifically gives attention to a scene between Prince Rasselas and a philosopher. The philosopher seeks to conquer his passions, becoming a master of temperance, "immovable by pain or pleasure."<sup>4</sup> Still, when confronted with the death of his daughter, reason fails to comfort or interest him. Newman quotes Johnson,

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<sup>4</sup> Newman, John Henry, and Martin J. Svaglic. *The Idea of a University*. Notre Dame, Ind: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2003, 88

“‘Sir,’ said the prince, “mortality is an event by which a wise man can never be surprised; we know that death is always near, and it should therefore always be expected.’ ‘Young man,’ answered the philosopher, “you speak like one who has never felt the pangs of separation.’ ‘Have you, then, forgotten the precept,” said Rasselas, “which you so powerfully enforced?... consider that external things are naturally variable, but truth and reason are always the same.’ ‘What comfort,’ said the mourner, ‘can truth and reason afford me? Of what effect are they now, but to tell me that my daughter will not be restored?’”<sup>5</sup>

According to this account, reason does not offer consolation to the mourner. Rasselas reminds the philosopher of exemplars of reason, urging him not to succumb to the passion of sorrow, but his words fail. As Newman presses this point, he highlights the limitations of philosophy in asking, “What has its teaching ever meditated, when it was boldest in its remedies for human ill, beyond charming us to sleep by its lessons that we might feel nothing at all?”<sup>6</sup> His comments exhibit the failings of stoic and philosophic rationality to console. Although reason acknowledges suffering and death as inevitable, it does not relieve the sufferer from the pain of loss. It may attempt to alleviate suffering, but it cannot console fully. However, the Stoics seem to account for these instances when grief overtakes the individual. Sorrow, if it is not prevented by reason, must be felt, but never indulged.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 87.

In a letter addressed to his friend, Lucilius, who had recently lost a loved one, Seneca outlines what proper mourning should look like. At the death of a friend, he explains, “One’s eyes should be neither dry nor streaming. Tears, yes, there should be, but not lamentation.”<sup>7</sup> For Seneca, then, grief is a burden that must be taken on. However, it should be conquered as soon as possible. Instead of sitting in their grief, the Stoics pivot towards reflecting on the life of the deceased and resting in their memory. Yet even the stoics acknowledge that sorrow must occur.

### *Sorrow and Religion, a Movement Towards Consolation*

For the virtuous Christian, sorrow should have ended on the third day, when the tomb was found empty. Despite the corruption that surrounds us, all earthly suffering and pain should fail in comparison to the piercing glory of salvation. Christ revealed that evil could be vanquished, giving way to the greatest joy for the human—an opportunity for eternal life and union with the divine.

Still, grief invades the Christian life. We mourn for ourselves, our families, friends, and neighbors. Despite the triumph of the resurrection, sadness lingers within us as a condition of our being. It is a passion tied to loss, fear, pain, and chiefly—evil, as opposed to happiness and virtue. In place of this weight, we ought to have a spirit of gladness, delighting in the gift of life. In the face of trouble, Christians ought to “count it all as joy.”<sup>8</sup> It is a calling to live in recognition of the cross, and all that was

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<sup>7</sup> Seneca. *Seneca: Letters from a Stoic*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1969, 114.

<sup>8</sup> *Holy Bible, James 1.2.*

accomplished, in unending gratitude for the payment of our debt. Christ, then, is our ultimate consolation.

C.S. Lewis's novel, *Till We Have Faces*, illustrates the difficulty of happiness in the midst of hardship. In the myth retold, Psyche, a young princess of great beauty, incurs the wrath of the goddess Ungit. The people in the kingdom begin to worship Psyche, and in response, Ungit invokes a plague. Famine overcomes the people, and to appease Ungit, Psyche is sacrificed to the gods. This is a great relief to all but two. Psyche's tutor, "the Fox," and her sister, Orual, grieve. Before Psyche is offered to Ungit, Orual goes to comfort her sister. However, Psyche displays little fear for herself, instead offering Orual words of solace. A longing for beauty and home grips Psyche, and she reassures her sister that this is what her life has always been leading towards. Orual writes of this encounter, "As she spoke I felt amid all my love, a bitterness. Though the things she was saying gave her (that was plain enough) courage and comfort, I grudged her that courage and comfort."<sup>9</sup> In response, Psyche urges, "Do not let grief shut up your ears and harden your heart."<sup>10</sup>

Orual's sorrow overwhelms her, and she determines to bury Psyche and journey to the place of sacrifice. Her grief is all but fixed when beauty takes hold of her senses, and Orual is struck by the natural world—the glow of morning dew, the singing lark, the stillness of the valley. For an instant, she catches a glimpse of beauty, and a voice tugs at her, "Why should your heart not dance?"<sup>11</sup> It is a moment of hope. Despite the loss of her

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, (HarperCollins 2002), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 110.

sister, beauty endures, beckoning her to continue in love and gladness. Yet, Orual cannot hold onto this joy. Instead, she clings to the “inconsolable grief” that manifests itself within her, rebuking all thoughts of beauty in a world where she is separate from Psyche.<sup>12</sup>

At the close of the myth, Orual finally understands the extent of Psyche’s role as a comforter. She reflects on her life and suffering, “Psyche, in that old terrible time when I thought her cruel...she suffered more than I perhaps?” The Fox answers her, confirming, “She bore much for you then.”<sup>13</sup> In all the pain and grief Orual suffers, Psyche tries to invite her into true consolation, into the comfort of home and beauty. Orual resists just before the end of her story, exhibiting the strain involved in moving towards hope.

Turning from suffering to joy, then, does not come naturally, nor does it seem appropriate at all times. Loss remains, and it is rarely a comfort to those in pain to be reminded of the promised glory of Heaven. They know this, and still, they sorrow. So, if sadness is not to be avoided at all times, does it have a role in consolation? It would appear that passion itself would require consolation, an escape from the bitterness of tears and misery of loss. Sadness threatens our livelihood. Grief, pity, despair—each one shakes us, but we must sorrow. This need to sorrow raises the question—how do we mourn and suffer without becoming undone? There is harm both in resisting the need to sorrow and indulging the passion to the point of despair. Yet, there may be a place for it in the longing for consolation. Aquinas and Ignatius explore this problem and offer an

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 347.

avenue by which sorrow helps console. To understand this, we must first turn to the nature and purpose of sorrow.

### *Virtuous Sorrow*

According to Thomas Aquinas, sorrow falls into the category of the passions as a species of pain. The passions—love, hate, pleasure, and pain—reside in the sensitive part of the soul. Aquinas likens them to affections, discerning that they are found in the appetitive part of the soul, which is often considered the weaker of the parts. They are neither good nor bad in themselves, as Aristotle acknowledges, but they can become worthy of praise or blame. They have the potential to aid or hinder the virtuous depending on whether they are governed by reason and the will. Passions, then, must be moderated by and executed in accordance with reason. This is made clear in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, “A mean can also be found in our emotional experiences and in our emotions.”<sup>14</sup> Aristotle and Aquinas agree on the value of the passions, noting that they do not necessarily conflict with moral virtue. Aquinas makes this clear, “If we give the name of passions to all the movements of the sensitive appetite, then it belongs to the perfection of man’s good that his passions be moderated by reason.”<sup>15</sup> When a person expresses sadness for the right things, there is a comfort in releasing the passion. As long as they remain tempered by reason, far from an excess of emotion, they can be beneficial. Aristotle further explains,

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), ii.7.1108a.32.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. *Aquinas 101*, [aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org/st-ia.1.2.q24.a3](http://aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org/st-ia.1.2.q24.a3).

“Some people define the virtues as states of freedom from emotion and of quietude. However, they make the mistake of using these terms absolutely and without adding such qualifications as “in the right manner,” “at the right or wrong time,” and so forth. We must, therefore, assume as the basis of our discussion that virtue, being concerned with pleasure and pain in the way we have described, makes us act in the best way in matters involving pleasure and pain and that vice does the opposite.”<sup>16</sup>

From this, it remains clear that the passions have the capacity to contribute to human flourishing. They are not to be silenced, but rather, they should be ordered by reason according to virtue. Through this, individuals can use their passions to further their pursuit of virtue. Aquinas reaffirms Aristotle, noting the relationship between passion and virtue, “If the passions be taken for any movements of the sensitive appetite, they can be in a virtuous man, in so far as they are subordinate to reason.”<sup>17</sup>

Since evil is the cause of sorrow, affection is often considered in a negative light. Aquinas counters this notion. Like virtue itself, sorrow requires a mean between excess and deficiency. Aquinas notes, “Sorrow is compatible with moral virtue in the same way as the other passions are when moderated by reason.” According to this, sadness has the potential to contribute to the Christian life as a virtuous good. He continues, “Moderated sorrow for an object which ought to make us sorrowful, is a mark of virtue.” In contrast, he explains, “Immoderate sorrow is a disease of the mind.” If this is the case, of what does virtuous sadness consist?

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, ii.3.1105a.8-14.

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2 q59 a2.



Aquinas identifies the correct posture of the virtuous man who sorrows, “For the proper object of sorrow is ‘one's own evil.’ Hence sorrow may be concerned for an object foreign to it either through one's being sorry for an evil that is not one's own; and thus we have ‘pity’ which is sorrow for another's evil considered, however, as one's own.”<sup>18</sup> He first places sorrow alongside the notion of contrition. Sorrow for evil is good, as Aquinas explains, “Supposing the presence of something saddening or painful, it is a sign of goodness if a man is in sorrow or pain on account of this present evil.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Religion and Consolation*

Religious consolation presents an alternative solace. Paul tells us that God is the ultimate comforter; He is one who “consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction.”<sup>20</sup> It is not just healing for the individual, but rather, divine consolation cultivates a community in which those who have been comforted turn to their neighbors and offer the same support.

Further, Saint Ignatius Loyola describes the aim of consolation for the believer: to draw closer to God. In this conception of consolation, anything that moves the soul towards the divine, can console. He explains, “I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 1.2 q35 a8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1.2 q39 a1.

<sup>20</sup> *1 Corinthians* 1.4

<sup>21</sup> St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 68.

It is natural to mourn and weep in a world where pain exists. No one escapes death and suffering, this much is clear to all. In the face of death, tears and sorrow are expected. We ought to grieve, it is what is natural to loss. If there is an absence of grief, it is seen as cold and inhumane, as Meursault's indifference to his mother's passing is viewed in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*.

Søren Kierkegaard reinforces the place of sorrow in the human life, identifying it as a duty. In *Works of Love*, he dissects the commandment, "Thou shalt love," and examines the responsibility we have to our neighbors and ourselves to love rightly. His rendering of "shalt" is something eternal and the command of love is contrary to despair. It is not a feeble comfort that consoles in the face of pain, but something weightier. In the face of unhappiness, the eternal demands love. Kierkegaard entertains the separation of death and the temptation of despair that may follow it. To this he says, "Eternity helps."<sup>22</sup> Continuing, he explains, "The love which underwent the change of eternity by becoming duty, is not exempt from unhappiness, but it is saved from despair, in fortune and misfortune, equally saved from despair."<sup>23</sup>

He invokes this "shalt" in considering sorrow, "'Though shalt sorrow,' is both true and beautiful. I have no right to harden my heart against the pain of life, for I *must* sorrow; but neither have I the right to despair, for I *must* sorrow; and yet neither have I the right to cease to sorrow, for I *must* sorrow."<sup>24</sup> In the discussion of love, he also turns to the duty of sorrow, illustrating the calling to sorrow.

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<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

Even God Incarnate sorrowed, as prophesied, “He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”<sup>25</sup> His earthly life was marked by hardship as He endured poverty, sorrow, and persecution at the hand of His people. It was a strife defined by its humanity. In all His difficulty, He maintained faith, loving those around him even in their betrayal. This familiarity with pain provides a consolation because God understands human suffering. It is a comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our anguish. The author of Hebrews explains the Savior’s nature, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are, yet* without sin.”<sup>26</sup> He experienced the world as a man, undergoing temptation, death, and sorrow. Christ walked the earth, experiencing God’s fallen creation. In two instances, he was moved to sorrow openly.

At the death of Lazarus, He wept. His spirit gives way to sympathy while witnessing the sadness of his companions. Notably, Christ’s sadness here is not a pleasurable one. He does not mourn for the sake of comfort or even because of Lazarus’s passing. Christ hears the weeping of his friends, and their sorrow moves Him. Compassion rests at the heart of His response, and His tears, as described in the Gospel of John, are moderate.

Another moment of sorrow for Christ occurred before his death. Betrayed and forsaken by those around him, Christ entered Gethsemane and expressed his anguish, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.”<sup>27</sup> At this, one of his final moments

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<sup>25</sup> *Isaiah* 53.3-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Hebrews* 5.15.

before his arrest and crucifixion, Christ cries out in sorrow. His pain is human, further attesting to the place of sadness in this life.

### *Consolatory Sorrow*

In his definition of consolation, St. Ignatius allows for sorrow. He writes, “Likewise, when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one’s sins, or for the Passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly connected with His service and praise.”<sup>28</sup> His aim in directing the soul towards the divine permits sorrow. In sadness, the soul can mourn for the proper things and in so doing glorify God. Aquinas also identifies this possibility as he writes, “Sorrow can be the cause of pleasure.”<sup>29</sup> He considers how loss can cause people to seek “the more eagerly for something pleasant.” In this, the comforts of sorrow can redirect us towards the higher solace of eternity.

Supporting this notion, Aquinas explains that sorrowing in the right way can cause the mourner to move towards what is good and pleasurable. Thus, in seeking consolation, sorrow has a role to play in helping people identify a need for something to relieve their pain. Continuing this thought, Aquinas notes that sorrow may also push people towards the highest consolation found in Christ. “Sorrows of the present life lead us to the comfort of the future life. Because by the mere fact that man mourns for his sins, or for the delay of glory, he merits the consolation of eternity.”<sup>30</sup> There is, then, an

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<sup>27</sup> *Matthew* 26.38.

<sup>28</sup> Ignatius *Spiritual Exercises*, 68.

<sup>29</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2 q35 a3.

opportunity for sorrow to prompt consolation. Through analyzing the role of tears and pity, we may better understand how sorrow contributes to consolation.

Aquinas contributes to the idea of consolatory sorrow in his discussion of tears. He examines the practice of grief and discusses the value of tears, offering a form of solace in the expression of sorrow. Acknowledging the human need to sorrow, Aquinas explains that emotional turmoil worsens if it is not expressed appropriately. Restricting sorrow leads to worse pain in the future. Arguing further, he explains, “Tears and groans naturally assuage sorrow.”<sup>31</sup> As he illustrates, there is a place for the natural expression and relief of sadness.

To conceal sorrow worsens the affliction, making it hurt more than if you were to express the pain through tears. He goes so far as to say that weeping can be pleasant to a man wrapped up in grief. “Tears and groans are actions befitting a man who is in sorrow or pain; and consequently they become pleasant to him.”<sup>32</sup> Releasing sadness through this physical reaction allows for pleasure and healing. Vital to understanding the goodness of sorrow and tears is the object of sadness. Aquinas established that the aim of sorrow must be virtue. It is good to mourn for good that has been lost. However, weeping over goodness itself is vicious and causes people to stray from the path of virtue.

Another type of sorrow that has the potential to console is pity. This sorrow is in reaction to the misfortune of others, as Aquinas explains, “Sorrow may be concerned for an object foreign to it either through one's being sorry for an evil that is not one's own;

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

and thus we have "pity" which is sorrow for another's evil, considered, however, as one's own."<sup>33</sup> Aquinas goes further when examining "misericordia," which translates as mercy. Describing this concept, Aquinas writes, "Mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succor him if we can. For mercy takes its name "misericordia" from denoting a man's compassionate heart for another's unhappiness."<sup>34</sup> His analysis of mercy illustrates another facet of sorrow and he identifies it as a virtue. Examining this notion, he continues, "In the case of those who are so closely united to us, as to be part of ourselves, such as our children or our parents, we do not pity their distress, but suffer as for our own sores."<sup>35</sup> This comment exhibits how there is potential not only for sorrow to be virtuous through its manifestation as mercy, but it can be practiced by taking on the burden of friends and family, feeling their pain as your own.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* touches on how sorrow can be consoling through contrasting the tears of the blessed with those of the damned. Beatrice, a perfected spirit residing in Paradise, contrasts this outpour of selfish emotion by shedding tears of pity. Several times, she is identified as one who weeps. First, Virgil recalls their interaction when she called on him to help Dante, "When she had finished speaking to me so, she turned her glistening eyes all bright with tears—which made me all the readier to go, and so I came to you as she desired."<sup>36</sup> Despite her throne of honor in Paradise, she remembers Dante, and fearing for his soul, she journeys to Limbo on his behalf. In fact,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 1.2 q35 a8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 2.2 q1 a1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Alighieri, Dante, *Inferno* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 2.116-117.

she goes so far as to request this of Virgil so that she “may be consoled.”<sup>37</sup> Her desire is motivated by love for Dante’s lost soul, but the desire for consolation underlines an interesting feature of her character. By allowing Beatrice to weep, the author seems to imply that there might be a place for tears in Paradise. The nature of her sorrow resembles the tears Paul speaks of in a letter to the Corinthians, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you.”<sup>38</sup> The image of her weeping is revisited when she first encounters Dante in Earthly Paradise, “I visited the portals of the dead, and to the one who led him up this hill I offered my entreaties, as I wept.”<sup>39</sup> Her role as sufferer resembles Christ’s. She mourns for Dante’s soul out of love, and her tears of pity console her.

However, Dante illustrates that tears can be vicious in *Inferno*. The souls of Hell weep to ease their pain, but the object of their sorrow is misguided. The outpour of tears is one of their only sources of relief from the torture they endure; it is a selfish, indulgent comfort. In the ninth ring, Dante encounters the soul, Friar Alberigo, who is submerged in ice. As he attempts to weep, his tears freeze over, inhibiting any comfort, and so he begs for help. The shade cries out, “Lift the hard veils from off my face, that I may vent the grief my heart has soaked me with, one moment till the tears freeze up again.”<sup>40</sup> He is given no such relief as Dante, attune to God’s judgement, rejects to provide this comfort.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 2.69.

<sup>38</sup> 2 *Corinthians*, 2.4.

<sup>39</sup> Alighieri, Dante, *Paradiso* (New York: Modern Library, 2005) 30.140-141.

<sup>40</sup> Alighieri, *Inferno*, 33.112-14

It is the fate of the traitors that they are robbed of their sorrow, unable to indulge in tears because of the frigid conditions.

In *Confessions*, Augustine admits tears similar to those of the damned in Dante's poem. He confesses, "I loved to suffer."<sup>41</sup> From boyhood, he indulged in sorrow, weeping over epic poetry, theatre, and the loss of a friend. He invited the pleasure of tears, allowing them to drown him as he wept. Upon the death of his mother, Monica, grief pierces Augustine. Yet, he conquers his emotions and instructs others to do the same. For a moment, his view of bereavement bears similarities to that of the Stoics. In reality, Augustine feels the loss of his mother, and it shatters him. Because of this, it requires great mental strength for him to maintain composure. He considers that tears should only be shed for those who are miserable. Instead of sorrow, he knows he should celebrate because of "the evidence of her virtuous life."<sup>42</sup> This perspective leaves no room for pity, no doubt because he must take solace in God alone, not the passions.

It is not until right before Monica's funeral that Augustine weeps. He cannot hold in his grief any longer, but because he suppressed sorrow for so long, the pain worsens. Augustine notes this added anguish, "With a new sorrow I sorrowed for my sorrow and was wasted by a twofold sadness."<sup>43</sup> This moment invites the idea that sorrow may yet have a place in consolation. Restricting sadness in times of suffering only causes more problems. Aquinas elaborates on this observation, "A hurtful thing hurts yet more if we keep it shut up, because the soul is more intent on it: whereas if it be allowed to escape,

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<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 176.



the soul's intention is dispersed as it were on outward things, so that the inward sorrow is lessened. This is why men, burdened with sorrow, make outward show of their sorrow, by tears or groans or even by words, their sorrow is assuaged.”<sup>44</sup> There is something natural about the consolation of expressing sorrow and weeping. Both Augustine and Aquinas touch on this aspect of sadness. Before he finishes his reflection on Monica’s death, Augustine challenges readers, “Let anyone who wishes, read and interpret as he pleases. If he finds fault that I wept for my mother for a fraction of an hour, the mother who died before my eyes who had wept for me that I might live before your eyes, let him not mock me but rather, if a person of much charity, let him weep himself before you for my sins.”<sup>45</sup>

It seems that joy should pull us back, consoling us with the promising hope of the resurrection. Yet, there must be room for sorrow. In every seeking of consolation, both rational and religious, there is a common thread of the need to sorrow. In tears. In sympathy. Expressing sorrow allows for consolation.

### *Conclusion, Tragic Consolation*

Tragedy invites us into the suffering of others. Sorrowing for someone else can pull us away from ourselves. This is noted in scripture when Paul tells of the divine comforter who in consoling His people pushes them to comfort their neighbor.<sup>46</sup> In sorrow, we may weep for ourselves and the good we have lost, but there is still a way in

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<sup>44</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2 q. 38 a2.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 176.

<sup>46</sup> 2 *Corinthians* 1.3.

which sorrow can pull us out of our misery through acknowledging pain, expressing it properly, and sympathizing with others. This is a function of tragedy as an art form. Tragedy's consolation does these things through the portraying suffering in a serious manner, exhibiting the plight of the tragic hero and inviting audiences to consider personal suffering as well as universal pain. These elements have the potential to draw audiences away from their pain, redirecting people to something greater than themselves. Understanding the place of sorrow and consolation within these philosophies allows for a greater understanding of the ways in which tragedy may console.

Thus, Greek tragedy's consolation incorporates sorrow, mixing the philosophic and religious conceptions of consolation. It addresses the reality of mortality, as rational Stoicism anticipates death, but it also presses the need for lament, examining images of profound suffering and mourning. In emphasizing the need to grieve, tragedy's sorrow offers relief and pulls us outside of ourselves.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Tragedy as the Art of Lamentation

#### *Introduction*

In everyday conversation, the term “tragedy” is often used in reference to generally unfortunate occurrences. “Tragedy,” however, means more than just a distressing incident. More specifically, tragedy is a dramatic art form concerned with the terrible events and circumstances suffered by the tragic hero. Emerging from a history of war, it is an art that examines what is sorrowful and broken in humanity. The plays focus on the imitation of action and life-like representations of people who, though they are often noble in character, suffer greatly. Importantly, tragedy poses questions about how we should respond to suffering while simultaneously exploring civic issues as the play develops. In many ways, it engages consolatory sorrow, but there is disagreement about whether or not it offers true consolation.

In this chapter, I will examine three ways in which tragedy leads to consolation through sorrow in the individual and community. First, I will provide an overview of tragedy, explaining how its structure and purpose aim at relieving pain and purging emotion. Through cultivating an awareness of suffering and prompting catharsis, the plays provide a platform for individuals to ease their pain. Second, I will focus on the tragic hero’s plight and sorrow, underlining the consolatory images found within the Greek plays. Finally, I will examine how the chorus bridges the gap between the audience and the tragic action, paving the way for future consolation

### *Tragedy as a Practice in Mourning*

To view a tragedy is to watch man suffer. It is a lesson in the practice of grief, tracing the downfall of the tragic hero and the death of those around them. The characters in tragedy serve as a mirror, reflecting the universal reality of human suffering, thus calling into question how people should live.

It began as a distinctly public art form sponsored by the government of Greek city-states and performed at Greek festivals.<sup>47</sup> Stemming from religious rituals, Athenians considered these festivals vital to community life. Tragedy was considered a tool that created better citizens and, as a result, a better polis. As thousands of people gathered to watch the plays, they were faced with moral dilemmas about political and familial life. The great playwrights composed stories that urged audiences to reexamine their lives and actions. The tragic art form inspired curiosity by asking questions about why the gods would allow a man to murder his mother or a mother to murder her children. As the public sat in reflection, considering the state and their place in society, they carried out their civic duty.

Despite its civic use and artistic achievement, there is much disagreement about how far the tragic poets can take their viewers, and by implication, us. The moment Plato banished the playwrights, condemning theatre and poetry, he underlined their opposition. From hundreds of lost plays to the deterioration of public performances, it remains difficult to understand the history of the tragic tradition. This fog surrounding its past creates doubt about what modern audiences can glean from the ancients, but

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<sup>47</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz et al., *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (New York: The Modern Library, 2017), "Introduction".

there may yet be a place for tragedy. Over time, it has transitioned from the stage to the text. Regardless of the shift, it continues to confront readers with moral questions, inviting them to consider the effects of war, familial conflict, and grief. The tragic art form does not instruct us on action or civic duty alone, as the authors may have originally intended, but it does have the potential to console through its aesthetic form and content.

First, as an art containing music and poetry, it consoles through beauty. Tragedies are composed of several elements, including action, spectacle, character, and melody. Aeschylus is often attributed as the playwright who suggested the use of dialogue between priests and dancers, which would eventually evolve into the chorus. On paper, as on stage, it has clear artistry through poetry. This tempers the darkness of tragedy, making it bearable for viewers.

From the artistic elements that make up the plays, tragedy has a certain safety that allows people to approach death through art. It provides an opportunity to explore suffering from a distance, prompting emotion and reflection without the repercussions of a first-hand experience. This barrier between audience member and tragic hero creates an environment in which people can explore grief and suffering without enduring real devastation. Literary theorist Jürgen Pieters expresses this, explaining, “That which repels us when we encounter it ‘in real life’ results in a different experience in the theatre, if only because we know that a staged corpse is really dead.”<sup>48</sup> At the end of the story, life resumes for the viewer as though nothing has changed. In some ways, this prepares the audience to anticipate death by reminding them of mortality, as the Stoics

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<sup>48</sup> Jürgen Pieters, *Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 51.

sought to achieve. The plays accomplished this by imitating death in a serious manner. Though art creates some restrictions in what it imitates, tragedy bears a resemblance to reality. Tragic characters are forced to confront their pain, often the loss of loved ones, creating raw images of suffering which make way for the audience to sorrow alongside them.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle dissects the elements that make up Greek tragedy and provides information regarding the drama's ability to prompt sorrow. His work consists of a series of fragmented essays, but the criticism it contains continues to influence much of theatre and storytelling. Here, Aristotle outlines the use of plot and character in tragedy, highlighting it as an imitation "of actions and life," that focuses on action.<sup>49</sup> According to his analysis, the fascination underlying tragedy comes about because of the reversal, recognition, and suffering elements that make up plot.<sup>50</sup> Reversal occurs when there is a change in fortune, shifting from a good situation to a miserable one. Recognition signals another change, this time in the character's awareness of their circumstances and involvement in the action. It is a shift from "ignorance to knowledge," when the tragic hero comes to a significant realization. Suffering follows these elements and consists of "an action of a destructive or painful kind, such as the deaths that take place in the open, agonies of pain, wounds, and so on."<sup>51</sup> From this, it is clear that tragedy contains brutal misfortune, but it also paves the way for consolatory sorrow.

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<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 6.1450a.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 6.1450a.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 11.1452b.

The combination of reversal, recognition, and suffering is what Aristotle believes will produce “catharsis,” which is an arousal and purgation of pity and fear.<sup>52</sup> This notion of catharsis offers insight into the consoling nature of Greek tragedy. Theories surrounding Aristotle’s mention of catharsis are still contested, but it holds value in considering tragedy’s consolation. Though Aristotle never fully expands on his theory, the reference to catharsis highlights a need to order the passions. Through viewing a tragedy and purging fear and pity, audiences could prepare for temperance in life. This is one reason Aristotle seems to emphasize catharsis. It allows people to engage with challenging emotions and encounter events that everyday life has not allowed. As an art form, this confrontation of evil and pain is made more bearable, leaving room for contemplation and productive emotion.

According to Aristotle, it was the intention of playwrights to induce pity and fear, purging people of emotion and helping them regulate their passions. He briefly notes this, mentioning that the term highlights this aim. In his explanation, he writes that the poets should focus on arousing “the effect of human sympathy.”<sup>53</sup> It is the playwrights, in pursuing this effect, that prompt the relief of catharsis and sympathy. Interpreting catharsis as purgation reveals how it offers comfort to the audience. It attempts to alleviate pain by allowing and subsequently expelling sorrow. If grief has built up within a person, then there is liberation in its release. How, then, does this come about? Aristotle explains, “We feel pity for a person who suffers undeserved bad fortune and fear for someone who is like us.”<sup>54</sup> This describes the tragic hero.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 1450.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 1456a.

### *Mourning and the Inconsolable*

Tragic heroes often find themselves in places of desolation. This is the state in which they enter into isolation and turmoil. It is also the state in which they most desperately need consolation. While seeking an escape from their own troubles, this state is where the reader may meet the tragic figures on common ground. As established in the last chapter, those in pain find consolation in others who share their anguish. There is a universality in suffering. In this, the characters of tragedy become real to us—they are people familiar with pain.

Heroes with whom we sympathize are like us; this is why Aristotle appropriately recognizes that the figures of tragedy must not be too saintly or too evil. Tragic characters resemble the common man but must have an element of greatness. As Aristotle notes, “Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are better than we are.”<sup>55</sup> It is not enough for the figures on stage to have honorable and virtuous qualities. They must not simply be good people; they must be like us. There is a balance to be met.

The action of tragedy is contained and transpiring over a brief period of time. Though they only span over a short period of time, sorrow asserts its place in the story. Scholars acknowledge its inclusion, noting the emphasis placed on grief. One such scholar, Louise Cowan, articulates this: “Tragic time is brief, swiftpaced, demanding immediate action, leaving little room for alternatives for those moving to destruction. Yet

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 1453a.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 1454b.



somewhere in it there is leisure for lamentation.”<sup>56</sup> Death and grief remain prevalent throughout the stories. It is an art brimming with sorrow, as Simon Critchley acknowledges, noting that the Greeks likely had more than thirteen nouns to describe grief, lamentation, and mourning. He reflects on this, “Our lack of vocabulary when it comes to the phenomenon of death speaks volumes about who *we* are and what is so impoverished about us.”<sup>57</sup> Cognizant of our situation as humans, Critchley highlights how we moderns have lost the vocabulary of mourning.

In tragedy, death is twofold. First, it is an art concerned with dying, reminding us of mortality at every moment. The tragic characters are figures who resemble us, sharing in our mortality and fragmentation. As such, they prompt us to consider what it is to die. Tragedy, more than a practice in dying, is one of mourning. As the tragic heroes step out on stage, they are already acquainted with death. These are people of war, Antigone’s father, mother, and brothers have died, Orestes grapples with the death of his father, and Ajax arrives fresh from the Trojan War. They mourn, and as the plot unfolds, the audience is guided to sorrow alongside the tragic figures.

Still, it can only go so far in its exploration. We are restricted by the art itself. The actors can only take their portrayal to a certain extent; the curtains inevitably fall. Yet, the experience is meant to incite emotion, provoking sadness. The actors on stage and the characters on the page endure hardship beyond what most audiences will ever know. Their experience with suffering prods at our emotions, pushing us to consider death despite our inability to know it fully.

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<sup>56</sup> Louise Cowan, *The Tragic Abyss*, ed. Glenn C. Arbery (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2020), 10.

There is a further commonality of grief that tragedy acutely recognizes. The suffering of the characters is intimate. Agamemnon dies at the hands of his wife, Antigone's uncle forbids the burial of Polyneices, and Oedipus unwittingly kills his father. These are familial pains that uproot the lives of the characters. Like us, they wonder how they are supposed to handle their suffering and whether they can transcend it. In their grief, their pain resembles ours. Though Antigone is royalty, her loss is familiar. She has suffered the death of her brother, as so many people before her time and long after. The tragic characters have complicated stories, full of political turmoil and twisted relationships. The brutality of their war and strife may cause some barriers between the audience and the figures since their fates are worse than most people will ever endure. Even so, there is something familiar in the death and mourning of loved ones that remains.

### *Sophocles and Figures of Mourning*

Despite their magnitude, the tragic heroes fall, making fatal mistakes that lead to their death, and the death of those around them. Their grief is potent and to understand the consoling abilities of tragedy; we must turn to sorrow within the plays. As many critics note, the tragic hero is not the savior but the source of conflict within the story.<sup>58</sup> It may serve as a further comfort to viewers that the hero knows the pain of failure. In examining the comfort derived in watching the tragic hero, it is beneficial to consider how consolation functions within the texts. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, and *Electra* speak to the prominence of sorrow within tragic drama.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 43.

Pain, grief, and wisdom intertwine as the action of Oedipus unfolds. Oedipus is a man of grief. *Oedipus the King* opens with a priest begging Oedipus to save the people from a plague that has devastated the kingdom. Before the minister presents his plea and acknowledges the king as the people's mighty savior, the king has already agreed to do everything in his power to assist the people. It is this opening that establishes the sympathy and piety of his character. He is hailed as the "greatest in all men's eyes," and the fate of Thebes is placed on his shoulders.<sup>59</sup> Oedipus listens to the priest's pleas and absorbs every word. He is left to lament,

"My spirit groans for city and myself and you at once.

You have not roused me like a man from sleep;

know that I have given many tears to this,

gone many ways wandering in thought."<sup>60</sup>

Oedipus is a respected and honorable king, one who cares for his people and suffers alongside them. This is the first mark of the tragic hero—honor and virtue. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus has already established his worthiness by saving the city from the Sphinx, solving her riddle and freeing the people. Through this, he has earned his title.

As the truth about Thebes is brought to light, Oedipus bereaves not only his fate but the repercussions of his actions. He understands the weight of what has happened and exhibits a need to grieve. He begs Creon to allow him to mourn with his family, "I wish

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<sup>59</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 40.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 63-67.

that you might allow me to touch them and sorrow with them.”<sup>61</sup> It is a moment in which he seeks the comfort of his tears and the community.

Mourning and death take center stage in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, and, following her father’s exile, war breaks out. This violence results in the death of her brothers—Eteocles and Polyneices. Due to Polyneices’ disloyalty, Antigone’s uncle, Creon, forbids his burial. Antigone refuses to accept this and determines to bury her brother. Søren Kierkegaard’s aesthete discusses Antigone’s sorrow as it originates from her family tree; it is an “echo of her father’s” sadness.<sup>62</sup> She takes on his burden of grief and appropriately mourns her brother by properly attending to his death.

Still, some people may propose that sadness threatens despair. Evoking sadness through these texts could lead to an overindulgence of sorrow and inhibit people’s civic lives. To understand this question and the need for consolatory sorrow, it is worth considering how comfort is depicted within *Electra*.

Sophocles’ rendering of *Electra* examines how sorrow has the potential to deceive. As the play begins, Electra is already bound to her grief. She cries out, announcing her pain and a need for help, “I proclaim my sorrow to all...Send my brother to me. For alone I am no longer strong enough to support the heavy burden of my grief.”<sup>63</sup> Refusing consolation, she embraces her anguish and mourns her father years after his murder whilst living alongside his killers. Hers is a relentless grief. She asserts

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 1466-1468.

<sup>62</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/or: Fragment of Life* (Penguin, 1992), 156.

<sup>63</sup> Sophocles, *Electra*, 108,118-120.

the value of sorrow, and this seems to be her only source of refuge. Grief demands itself to be known, and Electra recognizes both this and the duty she has to mourn. She asks the chorus to consider her position, “How could any woman of noble birth observe her father’s pain and not do what I’ve done?”<sup>64</sup> Time offers her no solace, but it allows her sorrow to mix with anger, fueling her desire for vengeance. Eventually, Electra gains the help of her brother, and together, they kill their mother, Clytemnestra. Though she believes this will console her, it does not ease her pain.

In presenting this character, Sophocles seems to suggest that there is a place for sorrow, a time to mourn and find comfort in bereavement. Yet, Electra’s obsession and anger corrupt any hope of consolation. The women of the chorus offer solace, but she rejects them. In their role as consolers, they urge Electra to temper her passion,

“Remember, Electra, your father was a mortal.

Orestes was a mortal. So do not grieve too much.

Every one of us must pay this debt.”<sup>65</sup>

Her choice to indulge in sadness and reject comfort highlights the nature of true consolation. If an individual is to be consoled, they must seek consolation—it cannot be forced.

For the audience, Electra’s story invites questions about the nature of grief and how best to mourn. There is sympathy for Electra’s anguish and a recognition that mourning is deeply personal and sometimes escapes understanding. Despite this, there is a consolation in seeing the inconsolable. Being sad for them and knowing that others

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 257-58.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 1171-3

suffer similarly offers comfort. People are not alone even in their desolation. Until, of course, they separate themselves from others, cutting off opportunities to move towards consolation. This is an underlying motif in the story.

Viewing Electra's grief offers distraction, if nothing else. It reminds people of the depths of pain but has potential to comfort beyond distraction, offering solidarity with those who bear similar burdens. For people whose communities have offered unsatisfactory comforts or fail to grasp the weight of their grief, there is solidarity to be found in the Greek tragedies.

Many scholars consider the rejection of consolation a testament to the inconsolable nature of tragedy. However, there still remains hope for the audience. In viewing Electra reject comfort, the reader also observes the results of her refusal. She does not have a "happy ending." Her state is not an admirable one. Rather, it pushes people to consider how the embrace of community might offer a better alternative. It further establishes that, while sorrow may provide relief, its excess will reap no benefits.

### *Sympathy and Empathy*

Is the hero's plight consoling for us? Plato considers the influence of stories, inviting questions about what good they may offer audiences. Though he opposes the excessive indulgence of emotion, even Plato takes a moment to acknowledge the solace of tragedy, "The best of us, as I conceive, when we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawing out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast—the best of us, you know, delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who

stirs our feelings most.”<sup>66</sup> Plato’s comment highlights how people are prone to feel sympathy for the tragic figures and open to enjoy the experience of sorrow.

Through the sympathetic response that viewers have towards the misfortune on stage, they are humbled. As the hero falls, spectators are left with a sense of gratitude for their own well-being. After watching the characters endure horrors one after another, it is only natural to let out a sigh of relief, “Thank God that wasn’t me.” Oedipus discovers the source of the plague and gouges out his eyes. It is a lingering feeling that follows them home, pushes them to cherish what they have, or treat the world around them with the weight of finitude in their hearts. Herein lies one way in which tragedy may console. It offers the relief that life could always be far worse.

Schopenhauer expresses this sentiment in his essay, “On the Suffering of the World.” Discussing where humans find consolation, he comments, “The best consolation in misfortune or affliction of any kind will be the thought of other people who are in a still worse plight than yourself; and this is a form of consolation open to everyone.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the weighty pessimism of his philosophy, Schopenhauer’s comment illustrates that there is comfort in viewing your situation from another perspective. However, this may suggest that it is good that others suffer terribly if only because it lessens the pain of our own misfortune. Guilt may follow this line of thinking. It suggests that there is comfort in the pain of other human beings, a twisted consideration. Tragedy does not undercut the place of suffering but acknowledges pain and pushes audiences towards humility and communal sorrow.

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<sup>66</sup> Plato, *The Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 10.605.

<sup>67</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur, “On the Suffering of the World,” Essay.

Empathy is another crucial dimension of understanding the tragic hero and sorrowing with him or her. Tragedy allows us to see things through the lens of those who suffer. Despite the unique experience of pain, there is room for audiences to encounter the world and understand it through the suffering hero. Through this, there is an opportunity for people to develop a better response to those in life who suffer unimaginable pain. Tragic plays allow them to encounter misery in a way that helps them understand the pain of those around them. However, as philosopher Terry Eagleton notes, “Tragic art requires us to feel the misfortune of others, but it also demands a respect for the opaqueness of their sorrow.”<sup>68</sup> This comment suggests a movement towards empathy that simultaneously takes a posture of humility. In an attempt to understand the reality of pain, audiences must also assume a posture of humility, recognizing the deeply personal character of sorrow.

### *Community and the Chorus*

Tragedies unveil a deep tradition of mourning. They call us to consider who we are as individuals but also as members of the community. Though the tragic character suffers a highly personal misfortune, it affects the entire city. The chorus follows along as the characters endure pain, and the pain often spreads, as exhibited by the plague in *Oedipus the King*. One of the roles of the chorus is to offer comfort, even when it is rejected, and in this, they reflect the experience of the community in times of hardship. When one member of the community suffers, it often impacts the whole. The chorus exhibits this, bridging the gap between the audience and the onstage action, allowing the

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<sup>68</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 217.



viewers to partake in the suffering before them. Traditionally, they reflect the *polis*, observing the actions of their leaders and fellow citizens, always present. Members of the chorus serve as commentators and mediators, offering advice to the characters while also providing context for the audience. There is a further civic purpose served through including the chorus—it is an interaction between the rulers and citizens. They do not advance the action but offer their thoughts on it. The chorus contained elements of song and dance that are no longer incorporated in modern plays.

Though the chorus serves several functions, they often fill the role of comforter. As seen in *Electra*, their attempts at consolation fail. This is in part because of Electra's disinterest in consolation. Yet, the chorus prepares audiences for the next step of consolation—turning to ease the pain of their neighbor. It is their place to pass on comfort, exhibiting what should happen when war, famine, and death arise.

While not everyone is consoled by the community, as some people prefer the comfort of quiet and solitude, it is important to note their role in consoling. There is still value in the community having an awareness of those who are suffering and respecting their need to grieve. There is an awareness of sorrow's comfort as the chorus in Euripides's *Trojan Women* affirms, "When things are bad, it's very sweet to weep, to wail in mourning and to sing your pain."<sup>69</sup> This not only reaffirms the chorus's role as comforter but revisits the relieving effects of sorrow. In mourning, tears and grief are natural expressions that must be released. This is something that the playwrights place in the mouth of the chorus, illuminating the need to mourn and using the community to guide the tragic figures towards the consolation of sorrow.

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<sup>69</sup> Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 608-9.

By bridging the gap between audience and tragic hero, the chorus establishes how viewers are invited into the suffering onstage. There is community in this gathering to observe suffering with reverence and empathy. *Hippolytus* identifies this communal aspect. As Theseus, King of Athens, watches his son, Hippolytus, draw one final breath, the Chorus chants:

“All citizens feel this new grief together.

It wasn’t foreseen.

There will be a torrent of tears.

Great men’s stories, when they’re told,  
spread greater sorrow.”<sup>70</sup>

### *Endings*

At the close of the stories, as the plot reaches its clamoring conclusion, what are we left with? Oedipus leaves in exile, Antigone dies, and Electra avenges her father through matricide. Each ending lacks a sense of resolution. J. Peter Euben’s reflection on *The Oresteia* speaks to the whole of tragedy when he says, “The Oresteia does not end suffering but collectivizes it through the medium of dramatic performance.”<sup>71</sup> There is no perfect resolution to tragedy. Though Orestes escapes punishment, the play does not offer a solution to pain and suffering. Instead, audiences are invited into suffering through stories that seek to understand human life.

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<sup>70</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 1461-65.

<sup>71</sup> J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 12.

This creates tension surrounding the question of whether or not the stories of Greek tragedy hold much influence at all, especially in producing consolation. Many believe that the effect of tragedy is momentary; it is a spectacle that may engage the audience through the action, causing a fleeting instant of reflection or thought but fails to have a lasting impact.

Yet, tragedy is not altogether without hope. Oedipus pursues truth to no end. He threatens everyone who stands between him and seeks to uncover the source of the plague. This is what tragedies seek—to ask questions and pursue truth until reality is known. It is important to remember that these are stories that imitate what is real and serious in this world. There is a note of resiliency in tragic art, and this is vital to consolation. Though some claim this truth refers to the recognition of life as a place of evil and suffering, others have more hope for tragedy's message. In observing tragedy, Terry Eagleton holds out for some higher truth, "A good deal of tragic drama mixes a strain of hope, however diffident and provisional, with its lamentation."<sup>72</sup>

There remains a mixture of consolatory ideas that compose tragic consolation. The dramas engage an element of the stoic, philosophic view of anguish through the constant reiteration of death and suffering in human life. It is a reminder of inevitability and fate; our loved ones die and so do we. Yet, it allows for mourning, depicting a tradition of men and women who sorrow. Iris Murdoch considers suffering and purgation in the human life and her commentary is valuable in evaluating the abilities of tragedy to console. She observes, "Few ideas invented by humanity have more power to console than the idea of purgatory. To buy back evil by suffering in the embrace of good: what

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<sup>72</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 17

could be more satisfying, or as a romantic might say, more thrilling?”<sup>73</sup> In some ways, this is what tragedy seeks to accomplish. Catharsis and the portrayal of anguish allow for expressions of grief, releasing the spectator from their suffering by helping them face it.

Above all, it has the potential to cultivate a spirit of endurance, preparing people for hardship, offering the comfort of solidarity to those who are inconsolable, and challenging audiences who are not suffering to recognize evil and console those in anguish. Brian Doerries, a Greek translator and director of theater, suggests that tragedy should aim “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”<sup>74</sup> This time-honored aphorism has a bearing on the purpose of tragic art.

The sorrow prompted by tragedy also reminds us of life’s value. It underlines noble actions and community even when the things we love are stripped away. One critic, Joseph Krutch, speaks to this: “Tragedy is essentially an expression, not of despair, but of the triumph over despair and of confidence in the value of human life.”<sup>75</sup> In the midst of suffering, it establishes the endurance of man. Oedipus may gouge out his eyes and go into exile, but he remains bound to truth and acknowledges his fault. There is a spirit of perseverance in the hero’s tragic grief. Krutch continues, “Hence it is that every real tragedy, however tremendous it may be, is an affirmation of faith in life, a declaration that even if God is not in his Heaven, then at least Man is in his world.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 80.

<sup>74</sup> Bryan Doerries, *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2016), 8.

<sup>75</sup> Krutch, Joseph, “The Tragic Fallacy,” Essay.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Conclusion*

Tragedy's final word is not about the triumph of death. While it lacks the resolution promised by religious consolation, it still holds tightly to confidence in human endurance. In leaving questions open, tragedy allows its audience to consider the action, the moral dilemma, and ultimately, what they must do in the face of death.

Tragedy's consolation prepares us for hardship, inviting us to practice mourning and develop an empathetic response to those in pain. It has a Stoic undertone, emphasizing the reality of death and suffering while also allowing the relief of sorrow. For those who already endure great affliction, it creates a community of inconsolable mourners. Tragedy then becomes a platform for people to engage with the ideas of suffering from the comfort of their homes or the seats of the audience. In this safety, it differs from the reality of anguish.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Tragic Consolation for Our Times

#### *Introduction*

Tragedy acknowledges the reality of anguish and the place of mourning, inviting people to consider suffering in their lives and the lives of those around them. Misfortune occurs in this world, and as Kierkegaard notes, we “must sorrow.”<sup>77</sup> By confronting the reality of suffering and the need to sorrow, the tragic art form provides consolation. The ancient playwrights created an art form that engages human loss by facing it and exploring expressions of mourning. Since the emergence of tragedy, others, from Shakespeare to modern authors and creators, like Bryan Doerries, have taken up the same task, provoking thought about the nature of human pain and grief.

Having investigated the nature of consolation and its presence in Greek tragedy, the existence of this art form’s consolatory abilities remains contested. In this chapter, I will address objections from various scholars and consider recent criticism from philosopher Simon Critchley and literary theorist Terry Eagleton. First, I will explain their opposing views, focusing on the role of philosophy in tragedy, the extent to which tragic drama consoles, and its potential to deceive. Then, I will then offer a response to their arguments. Finally, I will explain how threads of tragedy continue to exist in today’s media. Scholarly observers investigate the appeal of tragic art, seeking to understand its place in human life, while others keep the tragic tradition alive, provoking conversation and healing through projects like Bryan Doerries’ “Theater of War.”

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<sup>77</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 36.

### *Critchley Against Tragic Consolation*

Philosopher Simon Critchley, a professor at the New School for Social Research, offers an analysis of Greek tragedy, presenting it as a rival to philosophy. He explores in depth the tragic art form, turning to the ancient playwrights, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, while also engaging with criticism from thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

At the heart of the book is moral ambiguity. Critchley adamantly argues that the world of tragic drama presents warring moral positions, all of which seem to have justice on their side. Tragedy, in his mind, speaks to our lack of self-knowledge and our uncertainty in times of distress. Fundamentally, the dramatic art form pursues the question of how we should act when our lives are marked by suffering. Addressing this query, he hits on several concepts that contribute to the discussion of tragic consolation. Specifically, he considers the potential for tragedy to prompt excessive lamentation. Through this, Critchley raises questions about the role of catharsis and the extent to which it might benefit audiences. As he concludes, Critchley reflects on a conversation with an actress who describes tragedy as “a certain experience of aliveness.”<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, despite his insights, I am not persuaded that he fully grasps the potential for tragedy to console audiences.

According to Critchley, the conflict of tragedy emerges from war and causes a grief that perpetuates violence. He explains, “Tragedy might be defined as a grief-stricken rage that flows from war.”<sup>79</sup> Giving attention to the rage and shame that arise in

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<sup>78</sup> Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, 279

tragedies, he notes that we are all involved in the miserable disasters that occur in life, and from this, emotional distress emerges. Observing this, he focuses on the place of sorrow. Critchley identifies grief as “the very emotion which is so central to the experience of tragedy.”<sup>80</sup> Pursuing his claim that tragedy and philosophy are in opposition, Critchley turns to Socrates’ dismissal of emotion. He explains how Socrates’ ideal citizen should strive to restrict emotion, which is at odds with the performances of tragic plays. Critchley’s discussion identifies a conflict that establishes the place of tragedy as an art form that evokes emotion and focuses on the imitation and expression of grief.

Following this, Critchley raises an objection to the role of catharsis. Considering tragedy’s effects, Critchley argues, “we will never know” whether any purification or change occurs within the audience member.<sup>81</sup> His concern resides with the uncertainty about the term itself. Seeing as no man alive today lived during the age of Greek antiquity, there is no evidence to understand Aristotle’s use of the term, and Critchley believes it is not our place to make claims about the ancients. He notes that if Aristotle’s notion has a part in the theatrical experience, it is a minimal role at best.

Critchley’s dismissal of catharsis has some grounding. Even so, art draws people to reflect on their lives. Tolstoy believed art should “infect” its audiences with the sentiments felt by the artist and character. He makes a point to dispel misconceptions about art, “Above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 55.



them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.”<sup>82</sup> Though there is a chasm between ancient theater and modern times, the tragedies that remain with us today have the potential for consolation. The films, books, music, and general stories that individuals consume have within them the possibility to shape lives. If people read tragedies or have the opportunity to view modern performances, their experience does not necessarily end with the story. Critchley underestimates the value of emotion in theater.

Tragedies are stories of war and mortality, and for Critchley, this is essential. The violent actions that prompt much of the conflict are initiated by grief, and that sorrow ignites action. He notes that the stories, full of chaos and ambiguity, present a stark contrast to the rational, ordered authority of philosophy. The world of tragedy is one devoid of reason, where fate, emotion, and violence take center stage. It creates a disordered state of being, which poses a threat to philosophy. Comparing the ancient plays to philosophy, Critchley notes that when confronted by chaos, reason seeks order by appealing to a higher authority. Tragedy has no such response. Instead, Critchley insists, “For tragedy, that crisis is life and has to be lived as such.”<sup>83</sup> He suggests that there is no escape for those who live in this tragic reality. They must acknowledge the fragmentation of their world, not embracing chaos but accepting it. In observing this, Critchley argues that there is a reality of darkness that exists in the human experience. This acknowledgment of suffering as a part of life is the essential truth behind his conception of tragic art.

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<sup>82</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1996), 51-52.

<sup>83</sup> Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, 50.

Critchley considers the terror of the plays, noting the value they continue to have for modern audiences. In a 2019 interview for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, he explains, “They hold up a mirror to us where we see all the desolation and delusion of our lives, but also the terrifying beauty and intensity of existence.”<sup>84</sup> It awakens audiences to the reality that existence is both magnificent and terrible. However, his thoughts offer little in terms of consolation. According to his view, tragedy acknowledges, in part, the perseverance of the human spirit, but it does so by reminding us of the hell that comes with being alive.

In concluding his analysis, Critchley reflects on a conversation with actress Isabelle Huppert who performed in an interpretation of *Phaedra*. He recalls her observation about theater, quoting, “Of course, what theater is about is aliveness, a certain experience of aliveness. That’s all that matters. The rest is just ideas. Good ideas, maybe. But just ideas.”<sup>85</sup> In recounting this interaction, he emphasizes that the place of tragedy is to remind people of their existence, inviting them to acknowledge the brutality of life. Critchley urges readers to confront the devastating truth that they are creatures living in a world of great horror, where men and women exist as problems, and the inevitability of their suffering must be faced. This is a vital part of being alive.

Simon Critchley identifies the truth of tragedy to be an acknowledgment of brutality. In his conception, the tragic art form centers around the inevitability of loss, the insurmountable pain of human existence, that no comfort can alleviate. His view offers little to no hope beyond recognizing ‘aliveness’ in response to pain. Terry Eagleton,

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<sup>84</sup> Evans, Los Angeles Review of Books, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-violence-tragedy-existence/>.

<sup>85</sup> Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, 279.

however, holds out for its consoling abilities. As he notes, “The *Oresteia* ends on a positive note.”<sup>86</sup>

### *Eagleton and the Inconsolable*

Philosopher Terry Eagleton holds a more sympathetic view in his book *Tragedy* where he advocates for tragedy’s ability to teach moral lessons. Unlike Critchley, he considers ancient tragedy to have an edifying quality. Eagleton explains, “The suffering it portrays is ennobling as well as appalling, so that we leave the theater edified by scenes of carnage.”<sup>87</sup> He gives considerable attention to the political nature of tragedy while also focusing on tragedy’s apt analysis of the human experience. His book attends to the dispute over the death of tragedy, analyzes The Oedipus Cycle, and concludes by addressing the place of grief in the plays. Focusing on Eagleton’s view of sorrow and mourning, he examines the extent to which tragedy provides consolation.

Investigating the pleasure and pain depicted in tragedy, Eagleton then makes a point to establish tragedy’s emphasis on the inconsolable mourner. He considers tragedy’s role as an art that speaks to a terrible and inconsolable reality of grief. Eagleton engages this idea further, writing,

“The most harrowing forms of tragic art deal in distress for which no solace is possible, injuries which the passage of time will not erase, relationships which are irretrievably broken, states of desolation which refuse all comfort. It is perverse to

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<sup>86</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 17.

<sup>87</sup> Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, 8.

withhold the title of tragedy from such art simply because it refuses reconciliation.”<sup>88</sup>

His writing raises a vital question about whether or not all people are consoled by this type of art. Eagleton makes a crucial point, commenting, “The spectacle of those who are in mortal danger or atrocious pain can renew our sense of the value of the humanity which is under siege.”<sup>89</sup> It awakens us to human fragility and worth, but, he admits, “we do not appreciate their worth only by watching them die.”<sup>90</sup> Eagleton’s comment notes that there are other ways to develop gratitude for human life. Given this, why would we need tragedy to remind us of life’s value when other things like beauty, nature, and new life offer consolation?

Admittedly, not every person who enters the theater or opens the pages of a Greek tragedy will be consoled. People who have endured terrible loss do not always favor stories about suffering. Those whose friends and family suffer from cancer, avoid art that depicts such experiences. Others, who have undergone the loss of a friend by suicide are not consoled in any way by representations of suicide in film or onstage. It holds no comfort for these people to view the events of their lives unfold on screen. Knowing that others have lost family in this way may still bring them a form of community, but it does not ease their pain.

Who, then, should read and watch tragedy? This distaste for violence and tragedy is understandable, given the severe wounds caused by loss. There, is then, no guarantee

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 217

<sup>89</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 32.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

that the viewer will be consoled. People approach the tragic art form from a myriad of backgrounds and circumstances. If a person who experienced traumatic suffering has already reconciled their pain, they may find no benefit in reopening the past.

Still, the audience of tragedy may be consoled by the spectacle of pain. There is, as previously discussed, an element of familiarity and raw humanity in the plays. Pain and sorrow, being universal, have some weight for the viewer. Of course, interpretations differ; everyone approaches stories from different places of life. It likely depends on the individual viewer and their willingness to engage with the drama. As *Electra* exhibited, the individual must want to be consoled. If they approach the story without any desire for comfort, then their position will remain fixed. However, if spectators are willing, they may be consoled.

### *Tragic Truth and Deception*

Another point of opposition that arises in response to tragic consolation questions to what extent tragedy consoles and whether it has the potential to deceive. Iris Murdoch acknowledges that “we instinctively use art for consolation at an immediate personal level”<sup>91</sup> but quickly turns to consider the dangers of the tragic medium, warning that “art must not console us too much.”<sup>92</sup> Her definition of consolation, as it is seen in art, consists of a form of fantasy that has the potential to deceive.<sup>93</sup> Given that art is a form of imitation, tragedy has the ability to create a false consolation that distracts from truth.

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<sup>91</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage, 2003), 96.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 120

Murdoch's insight warns viewers against leaving tragedy with too heightened a sense of reassurance. Tragedy could pave the path for viewers to indulge their passions, creating false narratives about their lives and provoking self-deception. It is a way of comforting oneself with ideas that are appealing but have no truth, resulting in self-deception. Yet others argue for its benefits. In his chapter, "Fruitful Falsehoods," Eagleton holds out hope for its abilities to edify us, commenting, "It is not simply illusion, since it is also a transformative, life-enhancing power, the kind of fertile misconception by which we can grow and prosper."<sup>94</sup>

Though it has the potential to imbed falsely consoling thoughts, tragedy aims at reality. It is famously considered an art that approaches its subject with seriousness, taking into account the realities of life and death. Murdoch admits to this in her analysis, explaining,

"Tragedy must break the charmed completion, which is the essence of lesser art, revealing the true nature of sin, the futility of fantasy and the reality of death. Since it is art, it must have borders, it must be some kind of magic, but it must also inhibit magic in its more familiar and consoling uses."<sup>95</sup>

In tragedy, there is no sugar-coating. Evil confronts the characters and the audience. The manner in which it is presented and experienced aims at the reality of suffering.

In an interview for *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Roger Scruton contributes to this conversation. He explains the distinction between art which creates deceptive fantasies and art which engages the real world, directing people towards virtue and truth. Scruton

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<sup>94</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 122.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 104-105.

does this by considering literary critic F.R. Leavis' comparison of Tennyson and Hardy.

Scruton explains,

“He succeeds in showing just how concrete the vision of the world is in Hardy, and how he is interrogating objects and using them to interrogate himself. Each detail is raising an evaluative question, not only about the thing itself, but also about the quality of the emotion directed towards it. Whereas in Tennyson, there is an easy flow of emotion, which washes over things so that you hardly see them. There is no self-interrogation, and no interrogation of the object. The level of awareness is diminished.”<sup>96</sup>

Scruton's observation illustrates how the potential of deception depends on the type of art. Considering the realistic world Hardy creates, Scruton acknowledges that we can digest art, using it to reflect on our lives.

### *Tragedy Continues*

Traces of Greek tragedy are still found in various art forms, most prominently in the continuation of tragic drama through Shakespeare, but also in contemporary film. Questions about suffering continue to captivate audiences, confronting them with great evil and allowing for sorrow. These pieces illustrate the continued interest in art's depiction of suffering and its consoling abilities.

Shakespeare invoked the glorious tragic essence, composing stories that prompt reflection on power, agency, and morality. While Greek tragedy restricts the violent action from taking place onstage, Shakespeare's plays do not offer this safety. Though

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<sup>96</sup> The Philosophers' Magazine, *The Philosophers' Magazine*, n.d.

readers of Greek tragedy have the opportunity to imagine the violence at a distance or shut the narrative entirely, audiences are not granted this escape. Spectators are forced to confront Macbeth, Othello, and Juliet's pain. They may divert their eyes, turning their faces out of discomfort, but Macbeth's cries remain at the sight of Banquo's ghost. His agony echoes, making itself known.

Outside of theater, the essence of tragic art continues to appear in film and television. Popular shows like *Breaking Bad* explore elements of tragedy, evoking fear and sorrow from audiences. Watching Walter White, a man marked by hubris, make a fortune by cooking methamphetamine captivates audiences. It is a series steeped in darkness wherein Walter, much like Macbeth, pursues power and finds himself torn by his actions to obtain it. Once he enters into a life of crime and violence, Walter feels he cannot return from his actions. Similar to Macbeth, he sees no way out and decides all he has left is to move forward, continuing his pursuit of power. In the story, there is familial conflict and a continuous reminder of mortality as the characters encounter and create danger. At the conclusion of the show, viewers are left with the brutal repercussions of Walter's actions, as he finally attempts to set things right but fails.

In other works, threads of tragedy are found. One of the foremost disaster films in popular cinema is *Titanic* which follows the relationship between a wealthy passenger, Rose, and a penniless artist named Jack. As their friendship develops and shifts into romance, they are confronted with terrible suffering. This film addresses the notion of loss through Rose and Jack's relationship while also attending to the human pride of creating an "unsinkable" ship. The Titanic inevitably crashes, and the audience is left with the reality of mortality and human insufficiency.



Though Attic tragedy belongs to a precise moment in time, elements of Greek dramas continue to appear in contemporary art. Tragedies are still written, and the impact of antiquity can be seen in modern film and media. It is valuable not only to return to the writings of antiquity and the theater but to recognize how the tragic elements in modernity can help or hinder people's pursuit of consolation.

### *Tragic Consolation Today*

The impact of Greek tragedy remains and continues to provoke the interest of scholars. The stories were passed down, and there arose a desire to continue the tragic form, examining the pleasure that comes from watching terror unfold in front of our eyes. Other artists began creating tragic art, asking moral questions and evoking fear and pity. Shakespeare chose to pursue the tragic art form, creating plays that differ from the ancient Greeks but still prompted sorrow and reflection. Contemporary storytellers continue this tradition, and though it differs from the plays of antiquity, the interest in suffering, sorrow, and consolation remains.

In contemporary society, people still tell stories with irresolute endings and sorrowful characters. Despite the lack of resolution and the prominence of grief, they continue to seek out this genre of art. It is a strange phenomenon that individuals would turn to tragedy time and time again. This has captured the curiosity of many, leaving them with the question—what good is tragic art? Two recent studies regarding the comforting potential of sad stories and an ongoing project, “The Theater of War,”<sup>97</sup> illustrate how people gravitate towards tragic stories and find healing in them.

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<sup>97</sup> Doerries, *The Theater of War*.

Researcher Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, a former professor at the School of Communication at Ohio State University, takes on the question of tragedy's appeal and effects in her research project, *Tragedy Viewers Count Their Blessings: Feeling Low on Fiction Leads to Feeling High on Life*.<sup>98</sup> Intrigued by the desire to view sad, often tragic films, Knobloch-Westerwick conducted an experiment to investigate why this might be the case. She titled the problem the "tragedy paradox," illuminating the dichotomy of pleasure and tragedy. Before she began, Knobloch-Westerwick developed the following hypothesis: "The more sadness is induced by tragedy exposure, the greater is the tragedy enjoyment."<sup>99</sup> Consequently, she thought viewers of tragedy would turn to inward reflection, placing the art form in conversation with their own lives

Her research began by gathering over three hundred students to watch a screening of Joe Wright's 2007 adaptation of *Atonement*. The film, which follows two lovers who endure loss due to false accusation, war, and ultimately death, was intended to prompt sorrow. To determine the impact that tragic cinema might have on viewers, the researchers asked the students questions to gauge their happiness in life. In addition to this, the audience members rated their levels of emotion throughout the film. At the end of the study, each student reflected on the experience, describing how the film caused them to reflect on their lives. One student remarked, "The movie will make you appreciate what you have and how quickly it can be taken away."<sup>100</sup> Another audience member describes their experience, "The movie makes me think about what has been

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<sup>98</sup> Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick et al., "Tragedy Viewers Count Their Blessings," *Communication Research* 40, no. 6 (August 2012): pp. 747-766, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650212437758>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 749.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid, 754.

going through my mind a lot lately, and that is what the purpose of life is. What I want to accomplish with my time.”<sup>101</sup> Given these responses, she concludes that tragic films have a lasting positive impact. She writes, “Tragedies help us in these efforts of “counting one’s blessings” and achieving enduring happiness through meaningful relationships.”<sup>102</sup>

Knobloch-Westerwick’s research exhibits the continued interest in the problem of tragedy’s appeal as well as its continued impact on audiences. It is important to note that her research should be considered in light of its caveats. Given that the project was limited, occurring only once and observing only college students, it does not account for a general consensus on this issue. However, this research project illustrates that people have a vested interest in the benefits and appeal of tragic stories.

This fascination with tragic art sometimes stems from an interest in watching terror unfold, being unable to tear one’s eyes away from the train crash. However, it might be for some of the same reasons that the Greeks chose to create the tragic art form. People are plagued by hardship, mourning their loved ones and engaging in war. Pain, in this life, is ever-present. For some, the magnitude of war is not part of their reality. Yet, there is a place for mourning in times of trouble. Given the place of sorrow and consolation in Greek tragedy, does ancient verse still have a place in the modern world?

Bryan Doerries, a modern writer, director, and translator, responds to questions regarding the place of Greek tragedies today. Advocating for the effects of ancient drama, he claims that the plays provide healing for modern audiences. Performing tragedies that depict pain as a real and universal experience creates a platform for open conversation.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 763.

In his book, *The Theater of War*, Doerries recounts the solace he found in tragic art following the death of his girlfriend. Reflecting upon his experience, he writes, “Whenever I returned to the ancient Greek tragedies I had studied in college, the conflicted, suffering characters in the play spoke to me with an immediacy that I never could have anticipated.”<sup>103</sup> In the pages of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Doerries found a community of mourning. He emphasizes the shared humanity that emerges from the works of antiquity. Reading about the deep misfortune of the tragic heroes resonated with Doerries and introduced him to suffering figures who understood his pain. The deeply intimate and jarring nature of tragedy provided Doerries with unforeseen relief through the realization that he was not alone. This consolation prompted him to share the stories of antiquity with others and he began seeking out communities that had endured unimaginable pain.

The Theater of War Productions travels to different communities, performing Greek tragedies in front of a range of audiences including, veterans, university students, convicts, and police officers. In pursuing modern reproductions of tragedy, Doerries found that audiences responded strongly to the stories. They encountered characters who understood their experiences. This widespread response attests to the universality of Greek tragedy. Distinct from ancient theater is Doerries emphasis on having guided conversations after the plays. Providing audiences with a platform to voice their reactions is pivotal in engaging the community. It not only reinforces the commonality of what the tragedies present but allows audiences to bring their own stories forward exhibiting how the plays moved them.

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<sup>103</sup> Doerries, *The Theater of War*, 6.

These stories, as Doerries' project illustrates, continue to confront and console audiences. It is his adamant message that "we've lost a sense for what theater does or what it can do"<sup>104</sup> and should return to the tragic art form. Enacting these plays gives voice to the individual and universal pain in humanity. Doerries writes,

"Through tragedy, the great Athenian poets were not articulating a pessimistic or fatalistic view of human existence; nor were they bent on filling audiences with despair. Instead, they were giving voice to timeless human experiences—of suffering and grief—that, when viewed by a large audience that had shared those experiences, fostered compassion, understanding, and a deeply felt interconnection."<sup>105</sup>

We may never know how tragedy affected the Greeks, whether catharsis merely purged them of the passions, and made them better citizens or enacted something deeper. Yet, the sadness in fiction remains ever-present, illuminating the need to sorrow and in so doing, moving towards consolation.

### *Conclusion*

Tragic stories continue to resonate with audiences, reflecting universal experiences of suffering. As the longing for comfort continues to make itself known, people seek solace in fickle pleasures but may benefit by turning to the relief found in Greek tragedy. In the plays, where individuals are faced with intimate pain, people may

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<sup>104</sup> Bryan Doerries, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2nF6m4q90Q&t=1332s>, 1:07:10.

<sup>105</sup> Doerries, *The Theater of War*, 55.

find consolation, though it is up to the audience to decide whether or not they are up to the challenge.

Though tragedy is steeped in misery and sorrow, it leaves room for something beyond anguish. Eagleton speaks to this, reinforcing the value of the tragic dramas.

“Tragic art does more than portray the intolerable: it also invites us to reflect on it, honour it, memorialise it, investigate its causes, mourn its victims, absorb the experience into our everyday life, draw on its terrors to confront our own weakness and mortality.”<sup>106</sup>

Hope for tragedy’s teachings remains. Not only this, but Eagleton maintains that we may yet “find some tentative moment of affirmation at its heart.”<sup>107</sup>

Tragedy is by no means the only refuge for those who desire comfort. There is joy to be found elsewhere, in the beauty of friendship, in nature, ultimately in the grace of God. Even so, there is a need for us to mourn in response to anguish, death, and the fractured nature of the world. If we must sorrow, then we should strive to do so virtuously, seeking to relieve pain through proper expressions of sadness and by reorienting ourselves to what is meaningful. Greek tragedy invites us into conversation about loss and grief, pushing us to reflect on how humans approach hardship. It not only allows for the natural expression of sorrow, but the tragic stories illustrate the resilient nature of the human spirit. Though they are full of terror, violence, and grief, the tragedies of antiquity prompt conversations about the effects of terrible events and allow

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<sup>106</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 11.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

people to reflect on how others mourn. For those seeking to understand pain and to express grief, the tragic art form continues to help by way of consolatory sorrow.

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