Chapter 21
The Tragic Vision: Affirmation through Loss

Definition of Tragedy (Roberts 923)
- “drama in which a major character undergoes a loss but also achieves illumination or a new perspective”
- “most elevated literary form b/c it concentrates affirmatively on the religious and cosmic implications of its major character’s misfortunes”

Origins (923-24)
- Dithyrambs at Dionysian festivals in Ancient Greece (Lenaea & City Dionysia)
- Subject matter = well-known stories, or myths, or legends from pre-historic period
- Individual adventures, achievements, explorations, and battles (e.g. Trojan War)
- Illustrations of divine-human relationships
- Models of heroic behavior
- Great and noble characters, but dominated by hubris

Evolutions (925-26)
- Important to stress: tragedy began as choral recitation
- Because performances offered philosophic, religious, moral, and civic benefits, simply attending performance of tragedy regarded as fulfillment of religious obligation
- Hypocrites or actors introduced, eventually dominate
- Acknowledged founder of acting/first hypocrites was Thespis (around 536-33 B.C.)
- Ancient competitions for honor of having one’s plays performed (4-part submission: 3 tragedies & 1 satyr; 3 best submissions given a chorus; voted best playwright for that year)
- Thirty-three (33) plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, & Euripides survive; repeated performances, classics status, survived (papyrus, vellum, or parchment)

Aristotle’s Criticism & Aesthetics (928-32)
- Aristotle’s Poetics = Western world’s 1st critic & aestheteician; work survives from antiquity (4th c. B.C.); no one before/after Aristotle has had more firsthand knowledge; studied entire body of Greek tragedy from origins to his own time; we only have 33 plays
- Critics took from Poetics the “rules” of tragic composition & fragments of his commentary on comedy
- “once tragedy reached its ‘natural’ or ideal form it stopped evolving”
- Ideal definition = “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not or narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (VI.2, p.23)
• **Catharsis** = Aristotle’s key goal for tragedy; “a sympathetic release of feelings that produces emotional relief and encourages psychological health. In other words, tragedy heals”

• Plato (his teacher) denied that literature can address the need to moderate & regulate emotion

• Aristotle believed literature can moderate & regulate emotion via catharsis; by arousing pity & fear, tragedy trains emotions and habituates us to measure, shape, channel, & control our passions; we achieve balanced state of emotions, harmlessly, because the artistic context gives us immunity from personal damage; habitual compassion for plights of others that makes us part of our civic & national communities & ultimately develops our greater humanity

• Argued other literary genres, esp. comedy, epic, & music encourage moral virtue & are defensible & necessary

• Tragic plot structured to arouse & shape emotion:
  o Arouse emotion
    ▪ Single major action represented/mimesis; other incidents just reported
    ▪ Tragic hero must be imperfect so punishment seems deserved yet pitiable; neither saint, nor perfect b/c we are imperfect; *hamartia*
    ▪ Reversal (peripeteia), recognition (anagnorisis), suffering (pathos)
    ▪ Pervasive irony (situational & cosmic) (933)
    ▪ Irony related to *tragic dilemma* (situation that forces tragic protagonist to make a difficult choice (933); aka lose-lose situation
    ▪ Dramatic irony demonstrates limitations of human vision & knowledge (934)
  o Shape emotion
    ▪ Serious—elevated, noble tone & level of life
    ▪ Complete—logical & finished whole
    ▪ Magnitude—balance of length & subject matter; nothing essential omitted, nothing superfluous included

• Include verse, song, & music where appropriate

Shakespeare (lived 1564—1616)

• Theatrical entrepreneur as well as writer (978)
• Major writer of comedies & tragedies by 1595
• Lord Chamberlain’s Men; shareholder in Globe
• Wrote 37 plays; 11 tragedies
• Elizabethan tragedy derived from Senecan tragedy (Roman); *revenge tragedy*; Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (981)
  o Ghost
  o Revenger
  o Violence
  o Insanity
• Death

• Globe theater small but versatile venue; influenced nature of his plays
  • Ring-type, open to the sky, number of acting areas, 3 locations for audience (ground/seating levels/stage), established conventions (asides & soliloquys literally to the audience members b/c so close)
    • Burned in 1613
    • Replacement torn down by Puritans under Oliver Cromwell in 1644
    • Reconstruction near to original location in London

• Actors followed established conventions in gesture & costume
  • Actors legally bound to company
  • No women
  • No masks
  • Elaborate costumes to demonstrate nature & status of characters