



# The Death of Tragedy

*George Steiner*

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## **The Death of Tragedy** George Steiner

"This book is important—and portentous—for if it is true that tragedy is dead, we face a vital cultural loss. . . . The book is bound to start controversy. . . . The very passion and insight with which he writes about the tragedies that have moved him prove that the vision still lives and that words can still enlighten and reveal."—R.B. Sewall, *New York Times Book Review*

"A remarkable achievement. . . . The knowledge is marshalled here with the skill and authority of a great general, and from it a large strategic argument emerges with clarity and force. . . . A brilliantly thoughtful and eloquent book which deserves to be read with the greatest attention and respect."—Philip Toynbee, *The Observer*

"As brilliant, thorough, and concerned a contemplation of the nature of dramatic art as has appeared in many years."—Richard Gilman, *Commonweal*

"A rich and illuminating study, full of intelligence and sensibility."—*Times Literary Supplement* (London)

"His merits are shining and full of the capacity to give both delight and illumination. . . . His style is throughout vigorous, sensitive, and altogether worthy of its subject."—Harold Hobson, *Christian Science Monitor*

"Immensely useful and [a book] to be reckoned with by everyone working in this field."—Raymond Williams, *The Guardian*

## **The Death of Tragedy Details**

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Author : George Steiner

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## Roos says

The love the Writer has for literature and plays is great tot read about.

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## Eric says

A bargain at \$2. Steiner's is my favorite critical prose style after Hugh Kenner's.

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## Lockomotive says

baru baca sikit dah tertarik sebab cerita tentang kematian...macam best jek...

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## Daniel says

The main argument of this book is that modern perspectives (Romanticism, Christianity, Marxism) are all incapable of genuine tragedy because they have too much hope. While that summary is (I believe) true, it completely ignores the excellent writing and the mind-boggling erudition that runs through this book. The book is a little hard to read if you are not intimately familiar with world literature ranging from the Greeks through modern English, French, German and Russian (not to mention Danish!) drama. It's a book to have the shelf if you're interested in comparative literature, and reading it will spur you to read (and reread) the great works of the Western Canon.

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## Adrik says

A classic and a must.

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## Michael says

This book is arrant nonsense of the most delicious kind. Steiner can hardly be offended by such a comment, since he admits in the book's closing pages that "literary criticism has about it neither rigour nor proof. Where it is honest, it is passionate, private experience seeking to persuade." This book certainly meets his own criterion for great literary criticism. Steiner believes that of all forms of literary art, tragedy is "the noblest yet wrought by the mind." His passion for the great tragedians of Greece and Renaissance Europe is intoxicating. Some might find his style flowery, but I find it direct and moving, in a way that is extremely rare in academic prose.

There are two main problems with the book.

Firstly, Steiner is contemptuous of the theatre. For him, tragedy is poetry. All the focus must be on the imaginary characters and their words. He describes stage business, plotting and spectacle as the "superfluous elements" of drama. When he praises a play like *Maria Stuart*, whose plotting and stage business are brilliant and suspenseful, he simply ignores these aspects and talks about the poetry. This flaw is forgivable in a literary critic, of course. Steiner does not present himself as a man of the theatre. But it does lead him to judge the Romantic playwrights and Wagner very harshly, and I think wrongheadedly.

The second problem is the narrow canon on which he relies to prove his arguments. Perhaps because of this contempt for the theatre, and his traditional literary training, Steiner never discusses any playwrights but the few dead white males who form the pinnacle of the traditional canon. There is nothing wrong with focussing on these playwrights in itself, but his narrow evidence base makes his big claims about the history of drama difficult to accept. He also has a strong bias towards poets. He treats Dryden as the only dramatist of note during the Restoration, for example, and never really deals even with Otway. He writes about the Romantic stage in England using only Byron as an example, without even mentioning the tragedies of Lewis, Maturin and Baillie, which were successful on the stage, and in Baillie's case, on the page as well. His account of twentieth-century drama simply ignores the great English-language playwrights altogether! His notion that somehow Yeats and Eliot were the essential playwrights of their time, and not for example Eugene O'Neil, is surely bonkers. His poor grasp of theatre history is a terrible flaw because it undermines his overall argument that tragedy is dying on the stage. He simply does not present enough evidence of what was on the stage to make this argument work.

But these flaws can't rob a star from the book, because it is really not a book about the theatre at all. If you ignore Steiner's misjudged remarks about the stage, you find here a book about poetry, which teaches us why poetry might matter, which presents a vision of spiritual life and presents an ideal for us to aspire to. At the end of the book, Steiner claims that the three powerful mythologies of Western culture are the Greek, the Christian and the Marxist. He neglected to add his own mythology, the mythology of Liberalism with really underpins his whole outlook. This mythology claims that in the empty modern world, people are free to create themselves. It was the mythology of his favourite modern playwrights, Schiller and Goethe, and as Schiller's incomparable *Maria Stuart* shows, it was perfectly compatible with tragedy. Steiner, despite giving this book a tragic title—*The Death of Tragedy*—is, rather ironically, a closet comedian.

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## H says

a REALLY great smart read for pretentious gays like myself who are sad because there aren't as much plays about grandiose evil women fucking up their own destinies and going down in flames anymore and I'm glad my man George here is backing me up on the academical front of things....

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## Bryn Hammond says

(2016 read)

It's encyclopedic on tragedy, and perhaps the main profit to be had from it is to read about lesser-known playwrights (along with those major names you've never got around to), with Steiner's superb abilities at description. It's also the best kind of writer's manual. For instance, if you want to write death scenes, here

we have good deaths, bad deaths, meaningful and meaningless deaths, with Steiner's understanding and again, ability to explicate the artistic effects achieved. I still find it intensely stimulating. He is so saturated in plays that his writing effortlessly turns a phrase worthy of inclusion in them, or issues out in near-verse.

When I twenty-odd he shook my confidence and I believed him when he told me tragedy is defunct to us, what with optimistic religion and optimistic politics; but even without being post both of these, there were always dissenters, not everybody goes along with the main thrust of the culture. I don't know how he explains to himself the creation of *Lear* (on which he is fulsome) when Christianity was prevalent. He mentions but doesn't explore tragedy in the novel; I'd say tragedy has been alive and well in the novel. Lastly, why on earth do we value tragedies if they are alien to us, impossible for us? If we live in an anti-tragic age shouldn't we toss our Shakespeare and Euripides away?

This time, I also pinned him as a Classicist by temperament, so that he is hard on Romantics and harsh on late Romantics; I don't think he has the make-up to be fair to them. He was at his most compelling when explaining to me the last Classicists, Racine and Corneille. But his Classicist-Romantic dichotomy began to seem to exaggerated, too. It's as if you're in one camp or the other, but I admired the hell out of his Classicists and I'm an arch-Romantic.

I never did a better thing for myself than meet this book, which has been every bit as exhilarating the second time. Even when I don't believe him.

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I'll have to read this again before I can review, but he became my God of critics. Even though you might despair when you believe/know that tragedy is the highest art and he proves tragedy impossible in the present age... Meant more to my existential growth than Nietzsche with *The Birth of Tragedy*.

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### **Chin Jian Xiong says**

I love the power of Georgie's rhetoric, but really - his aesthetic judgments are always built upon an ivory tower of high Classicism. When dealing with the advent of Modern plays, he calls Ibsen the king of creating 'new mythologies' and he pinpoints Chekhov as creating 'music in prose'. His inclusion or exclusion of a playwright from the realm of great tragedy is always based around something that either boils down to 'not classical enough' or 'not ceremonial enough' or 'there is hope, and thus it removes the work from the realm of true no-hope fear-of-god type tragedy'.

Its quite okay as a book to get a certain perspective on artistic tradition - but Georgie feels too much like one of those guys who'd chastise us for being too far displaced from the realm of old tomes while he lingers within his library slobbering over the lives of men removed from our time.

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### **Philippe Malzieu says**

I took advantage of my fixed immobilization forced to reread some books of Steiner. I began with real presences. *Death of the tragedy* is more ambitious. It is somewhere an history of the literature of the Greek

until us. And particularly, he wonders about the disappearance of the tragedy as literary genre. It is for him because of the Christianity, the Marxism and the psychoanalysis. Edip who is the archetype of the tragic hero, toy of the fate, becomes at Freud the hero of a rational quest in search of cure.

Steiner puts texts in perspective. With his great erudition, he allows us to discover this end of the tragedy. The END? Not sure. Is the postmodernity propose to us a kind of new tragedy. There is new mythology. For example, when I see the TV series, not only game of thrones. I think in of television series Scandinavians (Swedish and Danish particularly), Israeli, English and some rare French, They are our new tragedies.

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## John Jr. says

George Steiner here surveys tragic drama and what could be called the tragic spirit from Greek tragic drama of the fifth century B.C. to the 20th century. That's his subject. Broadly speaking, his purposes are three: to show in what view of life the tragic spirit has been grounded; to illuminate that view through detailed appreciations of dramatists as varied as Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen (rather briefly), and a number of others; and then to argue that, with the fading of that view of life under the progress of modern rationalism, the tragic spirit, and hence true tragedy itself, has become impossible. That we have, in Steiner's view, no full-fledged tragedies anymore is not a matter of individual writers, then: it's not because no one happens to have come along in the Western world lately who can produce a good tragedy. It's a matter of the changing ethos of succeeding ages. To borrow a simplification from Steiner's foreword, the tragic spirit possesses "the image of man as unwanted in life, as one whom the 'gods kill for their sport as wanton boys do flies.'" Where it does not prevail, tragedy cannot thrive.

A good illustration not discussed by Steiner, which is (as I write) apropos in New York because of a current production, is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Miller's salesman clings to deluded views of his sons and, to put it crudely, is sorely disappointed in himself. But it's not the universe that has brought him low; he is, to speak crudely again, simply not a very good salesman or a very good father. We can conceive of reasons for his failures; they are all in some sense susceptible to amelioration--we can imagine how, with some social, political, or psychological adjustments, he might've done better. That's the spirit of rationalism that Steiner discusses in this book, and it's fatal to tragedy as the form was understood for centuries. Miller himself believed he had written a tragedy, but the case he made for that view (available in the edition reviewed here) is, in the light of this study by Steiner, unconvincing.

The majority of the text was written in the 1950s and first published in 1961. Beyond prepending a foreword written in 1979 for another edition, Steiner has made no attempt to revise or extend his study. It's possible that some more recent dramatists such as Howard Barker would alter the story, and that the flickers of fatalism one can nowadays detect here and there represent some sort of cyclical return to the spirit of the Greeks. (The rise of superhero tales, which so far have been mostly subliterate, may likewise represent a cyclical return to the mythic mode; Northrop Frye suggested a similar idea in the first essay of his *Anatomy of Criticism*.) Contemporary theorists, such as George Hunka, are far better equipped than I am to attempt an answer. And other views of many modern dramatists are certainly possible, such as those in *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama*. But none of that affects the power or the beauty of this book.

An unnecessary postscript: *The Death of Tragedy* originated in Steiner's doctoral dissertation at Balliol College, Oxford, where it was not at first accepted. A *Paris Review* interviewer, indirectly quoting Steiner, reported that it was rejected "because it was too close to a field that Oxford did not teach in those days: comparative literature." He was later appointed to a chair in that very field at Oxford, the first at either of the Oxbridge universities. Those two facts together will provide some idea of the range of Steiner's knowledge

and abilities.

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## **TJ DeSalvo says**

Very rarely am I this pleasantly surprised when my expectations are disappointed. Here's what happened: I checked out *The Death of Tragedy* because I wanted a book that would give me a solid overview of Greek tragedy. Something like, say, *Greek Tragedy* by H.D.F. Kitto. I got that for the first ten pages. The rest of the book was a sweeping, panoramic exploration through basically the entirety of Western literary history, tracing the resurgences (and, more tellingly, the failures of resurgence) of the Tragic vision.

The title is misleading: Steiner is not claiming tragedy is "dead," but instead that it is a form that emerges but seldomly in literary history. Elizabethan England and the France of Corneille and Racine are his two paragons of the reemergence of Tragedy outside of Greece. More common are the failures, the near misses, and the transformations of the Tragic vision into something that isn't really Tragedy- most amusing are his chapters on the English Romantics (apparently adapted from his dissertation), Goethe and Schiller. We haven't lived in an age conducive to tragedy for some time, but that doesn't suggest tragedy is dead - it has reemerged in the past, and nothing is stopping it from happening again.

My complaints are few. I feel Steiner's definition of Tragedy to be a bit too limiting. "Tragedies end badly," he states in the book's opening pages - except not all of them do. Many tragedies don't end so catastrophically, though their characters may have had to travel through hell to get there. The *Oresteia* is the obvious example, but one can also throw out *Alcestis*, *Philoctetes*, and *Ajax* in that group - there is also evidence that Aeschylus' *Prometheus* trilogy, though we have only the first part, also ends positively. Steiner seems to have corrected himself in his later work - in books like *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* he calls the kind of plays he's talking about here "Absolute Tragedy" to differentiate them from all others. I would've maybe also liked him to devote a bit more time to Roman Tragedy (or Seneca, seeing as that's all that survives). But these are minor complaints, and ones that don't take away anything from how I feel about the final product.

If you're interested in literary history or Tragedy in general, this is a must-read. Steiner has a reputation for being difficult, but his difficulty is of a categorically different order than, say, Derrida or Foucault. He's not an obscurantist - if he's difficult, it's only because he seems to have the entire Western literary/philosophical canon committed to memory, and he expects you to keep up.

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## **Elizabeth Adams says**

Brilliant analysis of how the dramatic literary conception of tragedy has changed and evolved along with human society, from the Hebrews to the Greeks, to the Elizabethans and neoclassicists, romantics and modernists. Not only did this book teach me a great deal about plays and traditions in which I'm well-read, it's encouraged me to read plays I have not, from Racine and Corneille to Schiller, Goethe, Pushkin, and their less-known contemporaries. Steiner's prose is accessible and his style very readable, though (inevitably) I found myself more interested in the sections that pertained to plays with which I was already familiar. He quotes passages at length and includes his own translations into English; in some cases I felt he was sacrificing content for poetic meter but he may have a bias in that direction, feeling that the "untranslatability" of certain plays is due to the fact that their music is lost in other languages. For anyone who has read even a few Greek plays, Shakespearean tragedies, and some Ibsen or Chekhov, this book will make fascinating connections and enlarge your sense of the place and concept of tragedy within western human history.



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**Reuel says**

literary criticism

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**Aaron says**

Very interesting, even though it has nothing to do with my research. A piece of literary criticism that approaches literature itself.

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