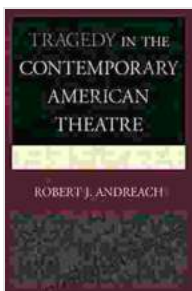


Tragedy in the Contemporary American Theatre: A Deeper Dive into Its Evolution and Impact

Tragedy has always been a staple of the American theatre, from the early days of Eugene O'Neill to the modern plays of Tony Kushner and August Wilson. But what is tragedy, and how has it evolved in the contemporary American theatre? In this article, we will explore the different definitions of tragedy, trace its history in the American theatre, and examine its impact on audiences and society.

What is tragedy?

Tragedy is a genre of drama that typically involves the downfall of a protagonist who is brought to ruin by their own flaws or by the actions of others. The protagonist is often a noble or heroic figure, and their downfall is often accompanied by great suffering and loss. Tragedies often explore the themes of fate, free will, and the human condition.



Tragedy in the Contemporary American Theatre

by Robert J. Andreach

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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Aristotle's definition of tragedy

The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote extensively about tragedy in his *Poetics*. In his definition, tragedy is a "representation of a 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 of narrative; through pity and fear effecting its catharsis of such emotions." (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6)

Aristotle's definition of tragedy emphasizes several key elements:

- Tragedy is a serious and important subject.
- Tragedy is a complete and well-structured work of art.
- Tragedy uses language and other artistic devices to create a powerful emotional impact on the audience.
- Tragedy is a form of action, not of narrative.
- Tragedy arouses pity and fear in the audience, and through these emotions, it purges (catharsis) these emotions from the audience.

Modern definitions of tragedy

Since Aristotle's time, many other writers have attempted to define tragedy. Some modern definitions of tragedy focus on the protagonist's downfall, while others emphasize the play's emotional impact on the audience.

For example, the American playwright Arthur Miller wrote, "Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly." (Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man")

And the German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote, "Tragedy is a way of looking at the world in which the actions of men are seen as the outcome of

their social and economic circumstances." (Brecht, "The Messingkauf Dialogues")

These modern definitions of tragedy show that there is no single, definitive definition of the genre. However, all of these definitions share a common understanding that tragedy is a serious and important form of drama that explores the darkest aspects of the human condition.

The history of tragedy in the American theatre

Tragedy has been a part of the American theatre since its very beginnings. The first American play to be performed professionally was Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*, which was performed in Philadelphia in 1767. This play was a tragedy in the classical style, and it set the tone for much of the early American theatre.

In the 19th century, American playwrights began to explore more realistic and contemporary themes in their tragedies. One of the most important playwrights of this period was Eugene O'Neill, who wrote such tragedies as *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941). O'Neill's plays often explored the dark side of the American dream, and they helped to establish tragedy as a major genre in the American theatre.

In the 20th century, American playwrights continued to experiment with the form of tragedy. Some playwrights, such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, wrote tragedies that were more realistic and naturalistic. Other playwrights, such as Edward Albee and Sam Shepard, wrote tragedies that were more absurdist and experimental.

Today, tragedy is still a vital part of the American theatre. Playwrights continue to explore new and innovative ways to tell tragic stories. Some of the most important contemporary American tragedians include Tony Kushner, August Wilson, and Lynn Nottage. Their plays have helped to keep tragedy relevant to a modern audience, and they continue to ask important questions about the human condition.

The impact of tragedy on audiences and society

Tragedy has a profound impact on audiences and society. Tragedies can help us to understand the human condition, to confront our own mortality, and to find meaning in the face of suffering.

Aristotle believed that tragedy could have a cathartic effect on audiences. He wrote, "Pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that the man who is exposed to suffering of this kind at once feels pity and fear in respect of another, and for himself fear because of the resemblance between the two." (Aristotle, Poetics, 14)

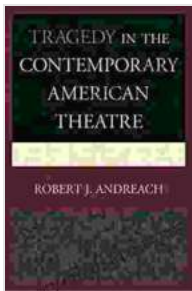
In other words, Aristotle believed that tragedy can help us to empathize with others and to understand our own vulnerability. By experiencing pity and fear for the protagonist, we can learn from their mistakes and avoid making the same mistakes ourselves.

Tragedies can also help us to confront our own mortality. By facing the death of the protagonist, we can come to terms with our own mortality and find meaning in our own lives.

Finally, tragedies can help us to find meaning in the face of suffering. By showing us the resilience of the human spirit, tragedies can help us to see

the beauty and meaning in life, even in the face of adversity.

Tragedy is a serious and important genre of drama that has a profound impact on audiences and society. Tragedies can help us to understand the human condition, to confront our own mortality, and to find meaning in the face of suffering. They are a reminder that even in the darkest of times, there is hope and beauty to be found.



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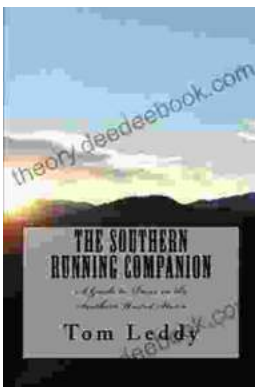
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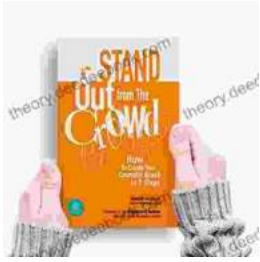
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