



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The greatness of man can be seen in the works of the classical tragedians, especially in the works of the Greek masters-- Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. In their representative plays, they have portrayed man's greatness in moments of victory and magnanimity but most vividly in times when man reached his nadir. It is in times like these when the depths of human nature were reached and explored and when the greatest of endurance tests were applied. It is also in times like these when men soared to greatest heights in human spirit. The characters of these great writers duelled with adversities and the momentous decisions made by Agamemnon, Oedipus and Pentheus affected not only their lives and their futures but also their beliefs, their reputations, and their descendants. A study of these tragic heroes in their moments of heroism and grandeur together with analyses of their decisions made at their most critical periods of their lives is the aim of this treatise.

To achieve this purpose, the origin of Greek tragedy with the magnificent thoughts and motivations that made such literature possible together with the environments and philosophies that existed during the period, needs to be scrutinized. Then only would the reader be able to visualize the broad spectrum of Greek thought as it was during the soaring heights of greatness and to appreciate the legacy that this short period of flowering in man's history bequeathed to humanity. As it is the aim of this treatise to enquire into the tragedians' philosophies and motives in creating their characters, the historical background, their religious beliefs, their views on the conflict between man and gods, between man and man, how man treated these conflicts are topics that would inevitably have to be explored also. In exploring these factors from the playwrights' point of view, we could analyse the actions of the main characters of the most important plays written by them. It is intended to portray and analyse the actions of Aeschylus' Agamemnon from his play of the same name, Sophocles' Oedipus from the play Oedipus Rex, and Euripides' Pentheus from the latter's Bacchae. The decision to choose these representative plays and these characters from among a host of extant tragedies written by these Greek masters was because they could portray the best human characteristics

which made them apart from ordinary human beings in moments of crises, and because they could exemplify the noblest spirit of man. In other words, these characters are human greatness personified.

To create such characters, with such nobility of spirit, was no mean feat and it was the era of such greatness of literature that critics have agreed to the fact that it has never been surpassed since and rarely equalled by poets and playwrights that succeeded these tragedians. It should be considered a miracle, when it is realized that such a small country with so small a population, divided into smaller city-states that are forever vying among themselves for supremacy, could produce such ever-lasting gems of literature. It is all the more amazing that such masterpieces were produced during a very short period of its existence. Compared to the modern world which had survived centuries without total destruction and which could not produce a single play or literary classic that could rival those of the Greek Masters, this period was uniquely productive in masterly thought and creativity. Edith Hamilton in her The Greek Way emphasized the birth of the miracle:

Something had awakened in the minds of the men there which was so to influence the world

that the slow passage of long time, of century upon century and the shattering changes they brought would be powerless to wear away that deep impress. Athens had entered upon her brief and magnificent flowering of genius which so molded the world of mind and spirit that our mind and spirit today are different.

...What was then produced of art and of thought has never been surpassed and very rarely equalled, and the stamp of it is upon all the art and all the thought of the Western world.¹

Among the art and thought of the Greeks of the 5th century B.C. that had an everlasting effect on the Western world was TRAGEDY which gave us the first taste of aesthetic pleasure in literary mode. It is the vehicle by which the Greek masters propelled their audience and later the whole civilized world into the realm of unique artistic appreciation. Tragedy, as such, would be the very instrument which deserves our investigation before its effects on the people are considered. The definition, origins and the characteristics of tragedy and the tragic spirit comes to attention thus as a prerequisite to our study of Greek tragedy and its influences.

¹ Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way, (New York: W.W.Norton, 1983), p.11.

Tragedy could be defined in many ways, and Herbert J. Muller's definition of "a dramatic composition of serious and sombre character with an unhappy ending," would serve as an introduction to the subject. As we proceed further and delve deeper into the intricacies of what constitutes tragedy of the finest water, several factors would have to be considered. However, it would be prudent to trace the origins and the development of tragedy in the 5th century B.C. of Greece, to obtain an overview which leads to the heart of the matter.

The origins of tragedy are again under dispute. Aristotle informs us that tragedy grew out of the Dithyramb, sung in honor of the god Dionysus. Although many scholars have supported this view, there are a few who dispute the claim. It is, however, obvious that an authority such as Aristotle could never be disputed, as later scholars could never hope to have access of the documents that Aristotle made use of to assert his theory. Even Aristotle's works were lost until some were "rediscovered" later. Muller in his The Spirit of Tragedy supports this view:

Aristotle informs us that tragedy grew out of the Dithyramb, sung in honor of the god Dionysus. Murray and other English scholars

developed the thesis, by now widely accepted, that rites of Dionysus in turn grew out of the pre-historic ritual of the year-Daemon, who annually died and was reborn. Other scholars have demonstrated that this ritual pattern was common throughout the Near East, and that it is at least six thousand years old. Its object was to assure fertility the growth of new life in the spring. Although the pattern took many forms, involving many different deities, it was everywhere centred on a god, or a king acting for the god, who was annually killed and resurrected. It was this idea that carried through the centuries, and that is still woven into the fabric of our "most magical dreams." ²

The ancient beliefs and mythical origin of tragedy was generally accepted by most scholars. There have even been incidents of modern novelists adopting this theme of the ruler adapting the role of the ancient monarch who was forced to give up his life when his province is affected by drought, infertility and plant decay. Philip Loraine, a contemporary novelist, depicted this recurrent theme with a provincial French setting in his book Day of the Arrow.

Werner Jaeger in his Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, however, refutes the origin of the Dionysian

² Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.20-21.

rituals as the origin of Greek tragedy. He asserts that tragedy was myth reborn. His arguments depart from the traditional dithyrambic festivities that gradually grew into tragedy and traces the background of the era which made the tragedy incubate and finally emerge from the womb like a butterfly from the chrysalis. His ideas bear looking into:

Sixth-century Greece, shaken by the fall of the old aristocratic regime and of its ancestral religious faith, and disturbed by the rise of strange and hitherto unimagined spiritual forces yearned for a new moral standard, a new life-pattern. And nowhere was there a richer combination of delicate sensibility with youthful energy, still unused and almost crudely immature and a vast variety of spiritual and intellectual talent. That was the soil which brought the marvellous fruit of tragedy to ripeness. It was fed and borne up by roots in every region of the Greek spirit, but its taproot was plunged deeply into the rich subsoil of all the poetry and of all the higher life of Hellas-- the myth. Thus in an age which seemed to be moving ever further away from heroism, and (as Ionian literature shows) exercised its greatest powers on reflective thinking and heightened emotional perception, there sprang from these roots a new and more deeply felt spirit of heroism, which was closely and fundamentally akin to myth. It poured new life into mythical forms, and gave them back their speech, as Odysseus gave life and speech to the dead--by letting them drink of the blood of sacrifice. Without that sacrifice, the miracle of the myth's resurrection could not be understood.³

³ Warner Jaeger, Trans. Gilbert Highet, Paedeia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), pp.244-245

Jaeger's ideas on the incubation of the tragedy was definitely plausible and it resembles those of Edith Hamilton's quoted above. But where he departed from the accepted theories was when he deals with the origins. Here we have a very novel approach:

The attempts of the modern scholars to trace the ancestry of tragedy and determine the true nature usually pass by this question. In fact they have externalized the problem, by deriving the new creation, tragedy, from some earlier but similar literary type--by believing, for instance, that the Dionysiac dithyramb 'took serious form' when some inventive genius made it deal with subjects from the heroic sagas. According to this view, Attic tragedy is nothing but a heroic myth dramatized and played by a chorus of Athenian citizens. But though the medieval literature of all civilized nations is full of dramatizations of the lives of the saints, none of them developed into tragedy until they were influenced by the ancient models. And the dramatization of the Greek sagas would have been no more than an ephemeral innovation in choral lyric, with no interest for us and no possibility of further development, if the sagas had not been transposed to a higher plane of the heroic spirit from which they had been produced, and thereby acquired a new artistic power of creating character. ⁴

Jaeger's assumption that tragedy grew out of the hearts of the Greeks when the time was ripe for it to appear and it

⁴Jaeger, p.245

was myth revitalized is plausible and novel. It may be one of the origins of tragedy, an important one, nevertheless, but not the only one. Aristotle's definite assertion that tragedy grew out of the Dithyramb could not be discarded out of hand. Aristotle had many sources and proofs. In fact, more than modern scholars could ever hope to find. He was very near the period in which the tragedians wrote, and all of his proofs and writings were not revealed to the latter-day writers and critics. In actual fact, his works were rediscovered more than a millenium later during the Middle Ages and it cannot be said for sure how much was destroyed never to be found anymore.

It remains for us to examine the different virtues attributed to tragedy, as to why this particular piece of art changed the Western world in the concepts of heroism and human greatness. What are the ingredients of tragedy which made it what it is and why is it so influential on the audiences of the day and audiences of all times?

Tragedy and the tragic spirit has been defined and dissected by a host of learned scholars from the time of the Renaissance to the present day. Almost all of them have agreed on it as something unique and something incomparable.

But from that point onwards, each offers diverse views of its greatness and uniqueness. It is often asserted that Greek tragedy is fatalistic,-- that all the events are predestined, that the characters are helpless in the grip of fate, that they await the call of fate. Any sweeping remark or statement of this sort is fallacious; even for Aeschylus, fate is not even the most important element in tragedy. What is true is that a part, great or small, of the action in most plays is considered to proceed from causes beyond the control of the characters. But this is also true in real life, although we act as if we were free. Conversely, as fate sinks into the background, human characters emerge and control, or seem to control, the situation; in such a case, the struggle between two or more wills or the struggle of a will to overcome obstacles, provides the chief interest. For some scholars, this struggle of a human being or between human and god, is the source of tragic effect and what brings forth the heroism and nobility of the tragic hero. W.C. Greene in his Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought states his point of view:

...the finest and most profound tragic effect comes when the poet is not content merely to set forth external events, nor even the fact of guilt, but exhibits also the moral attitude of his protagonist toward events and toward his own action. He answers

the call of honor, come what may; he endures what fates the gods send. His act may have caused his down fall, but he remains noble; he learns by suffering; and there may be a final vindication of the sufferer, though of an unexpected kind. Such tragedy, though lapsing now and again into traditional lament and pessimism, is penetrated by the feeling of fifth century Greece that life is a game played for high stakes, in which man may nobly win, or at worst nobly lose. The greatest Greek drama, in other words, rests on the interplay between fate and character, between what man cannot change and what remains within his power.⁵

It is the aim of this treatise to show that the Greek masters, in their representative plays now chosen, have exhibited the moral attitude of their protagonist towards events and towards his own action, when he answers the call of honor, come what may. It is this very attitude of the heroes of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that made them worthy to be called heroes. They have all endured what fates the gods send. Their acts may have caused their downfall, but they remain as noble or become nobler for their very acts after or during the event of their downfall. They learn by suffering -- none more so than Sophocle's Oedipus and there was a final vindication of the sufferer which he never even hoped for and which was of an unexpected

⁵ W.C.Greene, Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 91-92.

nature. All the plays chosen namely, Agamemnon, Oedipus Rex, and The Bacchae rest on the interplay between what man cannot change and what remains within his power.

Herbert J. Muller states that the tragic spirit is more or less pessimistic. He points out, however, that it does not necessarily reject belief in Providence or a moral order for pious critics can manage to extract from most tragedies the lesson that God is just. But he asserts that there would be no tragedy if this simple lesson were perfectly clear:

...the tragic poets recognize some kind of order in the universe and of logic in man's fate, but they suggest that this order is not simply beneficent. While they show how men can bring about their own downfall, they often show too that their suffering is not wholly deserved, that it is disproportionate to the wrongdoing, that it can result from good as well as bad intentions, that the innocent may suffer too--in short, that man's fate is truly tragic.

...the tragic spirit is essentially humanistic. Although again it need not deny the interests and the claims of God, it is centered on the interests and claims of man. It would not arise if men were convinced that their whole duty was to love and serve God. It is in this respect, paradoxically, a proud spirit. Thus the hero of Greek tragedy is usually a proud man who suffers because of his pride; but he is a hero, and what makes him a hero is just this pride. Aristotle said, pride is "the crown of the virtues", for it makes men aspire to great things, seek

the highest good they render the gods--honor. The humble man, he added, seems to have something bad about him from the fact that he does not think himself worthy of good things.⁶

Muller's lucid interpretation of the tragic spirit seems one of the most comprehensive and satisfactory of the genre because the essential virtue (or curse) of the hero is highlighted. A person of ordinary spirit and heroism could never become the hero of Greek tragedy. Pride, which is the very essence and integral part of the virtue in a tragic hero is also his curse for it could frequently be interpreted as "hubris" and is the major cause for the gods' jealousy and anger which usually occasions his downfall, or the beginning of his downfall. If a timid and humble person foresees this and avoids doing the things he is obviously meant to, then he will escape punishment and the wrath of the gods, but he will also be colourless and unheroic. As Aristotle very aptly remarked, that person would "seem to have something bad about him", for not aspiring to the better things in life. He has definitely no place in the ranks of the heroes and hence it follows, no place in the roles of protagonists in Greek tragedies.

⁶Muller, pp. 14-15.

Greek tragedies have personified heroism and nobility to the very highest stage and all the heroes possess pride or was marked by the gods to have pride to earn their enmity and punishment. In this connection, a few instances would illustrate this point. Aeschylus' hero Agamemnon was accused of this pride when he trod on purple, the prerogative of the gods. Sophocles' hero Oedipus was accused of this crime also when he treated Teresias and Creon (Oedipus' own brother-in-law) badly through anger and suspicion. Euripides' hero Pentheus was a young and haughty monarch and was accused of pride when he refused the entreaties of his grandfather and Teresias (who was no more a soothsayer in this play but a good friend and confidante to his grandfather and was still a very influential person to the royal family), and the chorus on behalf of the new religion. But had they all behaved differently, the heroes would have been ordinary and meek types of human beings who would not be criticized for their actions but would not also be admired for these same types of behaviour which ranked them with the superhumans. Their acts would also never be passed on to posterity.

Muller has further defined the tragic spirit as an affirmation of positive values as the great tragedies in the

past do not end in sheer terror, horror or despair. He asserts that there is a basic rhythm of the tragic action:

... the basic rhythm of the tragic action is Purpose, Passion, Perception. The hero's purpose is defeated, his passion is harrowing, but through his final perception he comes to terms with his fate--or if he doesn't, the spectator does. There may be such clear compensations for his tragic fate as purification through suffering, the defeat of evil, the restoration of social order. Always there is some human good to place in the social scale against the evil, even though the balance is seldom, as even or stable as many critics like to make it.⁷

The tragic spirit that Muller defines is very clearly perceived in the plays of the Greek masters especially those of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The purpose of the hero is always defeated which can be seen in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, where the hero wished to save his country from ruin and could only effect it through a thorough investigation of an homicide and banishment of the perpetrator(s). His action was met with obstacles at the end of the scrutiny, when everyone near and dear to him entreated him to abandon the quest. His purpose was defeated because the investigation ended with him being

⁷Muller, p. 15.

branded as the perpetrator of the crimes, the arch-villain who was the cause of all the ills that befell his beloved country was ironically himself. The purpose that he would himself emerge as the hero to his state was defeated in the end. His passion was thereby harrowing. A spent and broken man, blind and solitary, he thought of the plight of others before he came to terms with his fate as a wandering exhibit of human degradation.

He finally perceived that this was what he was ordained to do to bring on a final service to the people he loved and owed so much. Oedipus was the personification of the ideals of the tragic spirit and tragic action that Muller so believed in.

By progressing further along the set of guidelines asserted by Muller, we can notice that the spectators have already guessed the outcome of the investigations long before Oedipus did, which is also ahead of Jocasta and the other characters. The spectators know that the killer, the incest and the king are one and the same person and that he will have to suffer some kind of punishment commensurate with his crimes. Oedipus, however, was noble enough to take all the blame on himself alone and bear the burden in

solitary penitence. There was clear compensation for his tragic fate at the very end of his long and eventful career, when he was rewarded by the gods, and when even his final resting place became hallowed ground. But even without this purification, the story has a moral. Evil in the sense of parricide and incest was punished objectively. Never for a moment did the fates hesitate to find out the nobility, the heroism, and the character of the perpetrator of these horrendous crimes. Neither did the punishment lessen, in view of the past service done. It was justice at the highest level, awesome, harsh and relentless. It was pitiless, no doubt, but nevertheless the audience could appreciate its unremitting sentence for wrongs done. This is the human good to place in the social scale against evil and it was fully realised by the audience of the time. They would realize that nothing could erase crimes of this order and magnitude and man must pay in the end for committing it whether intentional or not, These are the consequences of wrongdoing. Whether there was criminal intent present or not is beside the point and the world which the audience now represents became richer through the sufferings of a great and noble man.

The influence of tragedy on the audience of today can be measured by the reverence placed on plays and the

tragedians who wrote them. Every time anywhere on earth there is a place where the revival of the Greek masters' plays are performed, published or re-interpreted in the languages of the countries of the world. It would be inversely proportional to the population of the country that originated these tragedies. It would be quite normal thus for the citizens of 5th century B.C. Greece to look to these tragedies and the tragedians who wrote them with awe and respect. But what modern audiences could not fathom is the amount of awe and respect that these audiences heaped on the writers. They were regarded as the leaders of their country not only in aesthetic and literary fields but also in all aspects of their lives. This is the reason why Plato looked to the poets as "dangerous". The cause of their being regarded as such is not too difficult to ascertain.

The undisputed supremacy of Attic tragedy, which lasted for a hundred years, coincided chronologically and spiritually with the rise, greatness, and decline of the secular power of Athens. Within that period tragedy attained that domination over the Athenian people which we see reflected in the allusions of the comic poets. Its power over the Athenian people was an essential factor in creating its far-reaching influence throughout the Greek

world, for the Athenian empire made the Attic dialect understood almost throughout Greece. Tantamount to this influence over the Grecian world was the supposed, imaginary and actual influence of the poets over the populace. For the men of that age never felt that the nature and influence of tragedy were purely and simply aesthetic. Its power over them was so vast that they held it responsible for the spirit of the whole state; and although we may believe that even the greatest poets were but the representatives, not the creators, of national spirit, our belief cannot alter the fact that the Athenians held them to be their spiritual leaders, with a responsibility far greater and graver than the constitutional authority of successive political leaders. Jaeger defends Plato's stand:

Only by keeping that in mind can we understand the attacks made on the freedom of poetry in Plato's Republic-- attacks which seem so inexplicable and repulsive to a liberal mind. Yet the idea that the tragic poet was responsible for the spirit of the state cannot have been the original conception of his function; for the age of Pisistratus thought of poetry purely as a thing to be enjoyed. It was created by the tragedies of Aeschylus.⁸

⁸ Jaeger, p. 247.

Prior to the advent of the three great masters of tragedy, poetry as it existed in Greece, was valued for its utility-- something to be enjoyed, not as the spirit of the whole state. Aeschylus could be regarded as a pioneer to bring the latter concept into Greek poetry by his version of the tragedy that swept the Greek world off its feet. The seed of tragedy, which flowered under these tragedians reached its height with Sophocles-- the greatest of them all. The seed of tragedy was received by the fertile soil of Greece especially Attica, which was ripe to receive the gift. The Greeks of the fifth and sixth centuries had long been brooding on the great religious problem why does God send suffering into the life of man? The force of this question was now intensified in the presentation of human suffering to the eyes and ears of the spectators at the tragic festivals by the emotional ardours which the chorus expressed through dance and song, and which through the entrance of several speakers developed into the presentation of a complete episode of human fate. As the spectators shared in the agony of the tragic characters and chorus beneath the thunderstrokes of fate (which Solon compared to a tempest), they felt their highest spiritual energies called out to resist the storm, and were driven by pity and terror, the immediate psychological effects of their

experience, to fall back on their last defence-- their faith in the ultimate meaning of life itself. The specifically religious effect on the audience of sharing in the terror of human destiny, which tragedies succeeded in producing as an integral part of the action, is the essentially tragic element in the dramas. Jaeger asserts that this is the element which makes it tragic and which transforms the ordinary utilitarian poetry into something which replaces the spirit of the state:

To appreciate them, we must abandon all modern conceptions of the essence of drama or the essence of tragedy, and direct our attention to that element alone.⁹

The Greek poets of the day had taken the traditional legends and presented the heroes in them in accordance with their own conception of them. They did not make needless changes in the events as described by tradition, but in rounding out a legendary name into a complete character, they could not help transfusing into myth the modern ideas which were to be its spiritual lifeblood. Not only is this true of the characters and their speeches, it also applies to the tragedies as wholes. Until the appearance of tragedy

⁹Jaeger, p. 261.

no type of poetry had ventured to use myth as the vehicle for an idea, and to choose or neglect myths in accordance with their fitness for that purpose. For it must not be thought that every part of the saga-tradition could be dramatized and automatically become a tragedy. Aristotle had pointed out the fact that few of the subjects of the whole realm of saga was naturally fitted to be dramatized. Tragedy then was the first type of poetry to apply the mythical tradition a regular structural principle-- the conception of the inevitable rise and fall of human destiny, with the sudden reversals and its final catastrophe.

If Jaeger insists on the sharing in the terror of human destiny as the element which constitutes tragedy, then Edith Hamilton's views on the subject need to be presented to complete the theory. Her theory as to the tragic sense is somewhat similar to Jaeger's but her elucidation on the sense of pity and fear is unique. Hamilton asserts that tragedy was created at a time when men were thinking more and more deeply about human life and wondering why there was so much evil and that injustice was the nature of things. Tragedy belongs to the poets as they were the ones who brought the age-old myths to life. Her theory of the poets being able to transmute pain and could make the people exalt in it by writing about pain is novel:

None but a poet can write a tragedy. For tragedy is nothing less than pain transmuted into exaltation by the alchemy of poetry. ... It would seem that tragedy is a strange matter. There is indeed nothing stranger. A tragedy shows us pain and gives us pleasure thereby. The greater the suffering depicted, the more terrible the events, the more intense our pleasure. The most monstrous and appalling deeds life can show are those the tragedian chooses, and by the spectacle he thus offers us, we are moved to a very passion of enjoyment.¹⁰

It is Hamilton's view that pain can be transformed into exaltation by the poets. This exaltation is pleasure and the more the pain the more the pleasure. This is a utilitarian point of view of art and a noted scholar like Hamilton recognizes this aspect of Greek literature while accepting the circumstances in which tragedy took root. There is, however, one other point in which Hamilton goes further than the other scholars, and that is in the theory of tragic pleasure. For if it is only the terrible bloody events that depicts the suffering as shown in the Roman arenas of the next civilization, it surely cannot be classified as tragedy although people might still find pleasure in such spectacles as it arouses our severe instincts even in the most civilized amongst us. Pain, disaster, and sorrow are always

¹⁰ Hamilton, p. 166.

spoken of as depressing, as dragging down-- the dark abyss of pain, a crushing sorrow, an overwhelming disaster. But speak of tragedy and extraordinarily the metaphor changes. Lift us to tragic heights, we say, and never anything else. The depth of pathos but never of tragedy. Always the height of tragedy. There is something in tragedy which marks it off from other disaster so sharply that in our common speech we bear witness to the difference. Edith Hamilton sums up her definition of tragic pleasure:

Pity, awe, reconciliation, exaltation-- these are the elements that make up tragic pleasure. No play is a tragedy that does not call them forth...

... tragedy is something above and beyond the dissonance of pain. But what it is that causes a play to call forth those feelings, what is the essential element in tragedy, Hegel alone seeks to define. In a notable passage he says that the only tragic subject is a spiritual struggle in which each side has a claim upon our sympathy.¹¹

Indiscriminate suffering does not give the audience tragic pleasure, however, and neither does the suffering of the innocent. On the other hand, the death of Cordelia in Shakespeare's King Lear is tragic which makes it rather difficult to lay down guide-lines or hard and fast rules to

¹¹ Hamilton, p. 168.

follow. It is true that different categories of innocent suffering can be tragedies as witness Prometheus the innocent sufferer in Aeschylus' Prometheus as contrasted with Cordelia in Shakespeare's King Lear, who has nothing in common with each other. Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles' play Antigone, who suffered for the burial of her brother's body is the opposite of Macbeth, the ambition-mad murderer of his king and guest in Shakespeare's Macbeth. These two plays call forth the same response, yet seemingly so totally unlike. According to Hamilton, tragic pleasure of the greatest intensity is caused by them both. Undeserved suffering, however, is not by itself tragic. Death is also not tragic in itself, not the death of the beautiful and the young, the lovely and the beloved. Death felt and suffered as Macbeth feels and suffers is tragic. Death felt as Lear feels Cordelia's death is tragic. Ophelia's death is not tragedy, says Hamilton. She being what she is, it could be so only if Hamlet's and Laerte's grief were tragic grief, she adds. The conflicting claims of the law of God and the law of man are not what make the tragedy of Antigone. It is Antigone herself so great, so tortured. Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle is not tragic. The tragedy is his power to feel. The suffering of a soul that can suffer greatly-- that and only that, is tragedy, says Hamilton.

This definition of tragedy and the tragic pleasure is comprehensive and the examples shown by Hamilton is lucid. We can be sure from this that the events are not that which makes a tragedy but only play supporting roles in which the tragedy is the suffering of a great soul. This is the main thesis that I would like to bring on. Man is the centre, the main character, the only character that makes tragedy and a truly great soul only could perfect a course of action that culminates in tragedy and in so doing brings forth the nobility, the heroism, the greatness of man and all the inherent, finer qualities of man. Tragedies, as such, are the greatest legacies of the Greeks to the Western world of literature and subsequently to the literary world of today. The world would not be what it is now, nor would we be what we are now without that legacy, as we are the inheritors to the magnificent ideas and literature bequeathed to us by them. Edith Hamilton's eloquence in summing up this phenomena is by itself a masterpiece:

If the Greeks had left no tragedies behind for us, the highest reach of their power would be unknown. The three poets who were able to sound the depths of human agony were able to recognize and reveal it as tragedy. The mystery of evil, they said, curtains that of which "every man whose soul is not a clod hath visions." Pain could exalt and in tragedy for a moment men could have sight of a meaning beyond their grasp. "Yet had God

not turned us in his hand and cast to earth our greatness", Euripides makes the old Trojan queen say in her extremity, "we would have passed away giving nothing to men. They would have found no theme for song in us nor made great poems from our sorrows."

Why is death of the ordinary man a wretched, chilling thing which we turn from, while the death of the hero, always tragic, warms us with a sense of quickened life? Answer this question and the enigma of tragic pleasure is solved. "Never let me hear that brave blood had been shed in vain", said Sir Walter Scott, "it sends an imperious challenge down through all the generations." So the end of a tragedy challenges us. The great soul in pain and in death transforms pain and death. Through it we catch a glimpse of the Stoic Emperor's Dear City of God, of a deeper and more ultimate reality than in which our lives are lived.¹²

Tragedy has been traced from its origins, its taproots, its soil and to the ingredients that have nurtured its growth. Various views and definitions have been explored and the best of the lot in the circumstances have been brought forth. The Greek masters that wrote these masterpieces are the best and their works that have been found intact have been appreciated by successive audiences from the fifth century B.C. right through the Renaissance up till the present day. Since it is necessary to study concrete examples of the best of the extant plays of these

¹² Hamilton, p. 172.

masters that would show man at the greatest and noblest instances of their lives, a play each of these greatest and acknowledged as unequalled by the world of literature, is selected to be scrutinized in detail.

The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the three Greek masters quoted above, are considered the elite of the genre and to study the plays of these tragedians alone would suffice to obtain necessary insight into tragedy, its power and influence. As it would be impossible to evaluate all the works of these masters due to limitations imposed on studies of this nature, a representative play of each master is selected amongst the extant tragedies which would highlight the views of the tragedians with regard to the greatness, nobility and heroism of man. From the works of Aeschylus the play Agamemnon was chosen. This tragedy is the first from the trilogy Oresteia, in which Aeschylus chose to portray the magnificence of his hero Agamemnon in times of conflict between god and god, man and god and men and men. The story starts with the victory of the Greeks over the Trojans but it flashes back to the past ten years ago when the armada of the Greeks assembled at Aulis. It showed the crises which the hero faced and the decisions he made and the

considerations and deliberations he used to decide. Agamemnon is considered his masterpiece.

From the works of Sophocles, who was adjudged the finest playwright of Greece and of all time, the play Oedipus Rex was chosen. This tragedy is also agreed upon by most critics to be the best--barring none. Aristotle cites this particular play in his praise of poetry in defence to Plato's condemnation of poetry and poets in general. Apart from the very moving, humanistic portrayal of suffering of a noble, heroic and gifted man, the plot itself, with its reversals and irony which are fine-tuned by a past master of the intricate plots to the minutest detail, is a delight in itself. Here Sophocles' masterpiece shows man at the lowest point of his life, shorn of all worldly riches, respect and dignity, the hero manages to show the audience and the world at large his heroism and nobility and the selflessness of his final actions remove any remaining doubt of his magnificence, if ever there was one at any time.

From the works of Euripides, the play The Bacchae was chosen. This tragedy is specially noted for its lyrics by critics but praise for its hero's resolution of the conflict between the new deity and himself, on behalf of his people, forms the basis of its greatness. It is also the choice from among the extant works of Euripides, the rebel, who

sides usually with the underdogs. It is a story of a man's futile struggle against a god--with its inevitable result. But what brings this play forth from the usual assortment of sordid confrontations was, the attitude and the suffering of a great man who stuck to his principles, come what may. It is yet another story of a man laying down his life for his country.

These three plays are presented together with relevant observations and criticisms of authorities. Stress is placed on the decisions made and the reasons behind the making of these decisions as it is believed that these are what makes the heroes tragic heroes. It is divided into three chapters, one for each tragedian and his hero. The final chapter concludes the findings. It sums up my contention that the Greek masters could portray man's nobility, heroism and greatness. Their works are still unsurpassed and are very rarely equalled, in magnificence. To taste the fruit of this rare legacy of the Greeks, we first turn to the pioneer of Greek tragedy-- Aeschylus.