

## **Tragedy and the Tragic Form:**

### **An Argument For the Pessimistic View of Life?**

No one really understands the genre of tragedy; the art form began with the Greeks, probably in the 6th century B.C.E., and consists of only 33 plays that took place between 430 and 355 B.C.E., or a brief 75 years. Yet no other expression of humanity's fears, pains, or justifications for life itself manifests itself as strongly



The Greek dramatist, Sophocles, attempted to explain life by the use of mythologies to express instinctive feelings about human nature. Tragedy is not a static art form. What about the "tragic" life, for example? How do we view an artist such as Van Gogh, whose art vividly documented his madness and changing attitude to his world? Or the life of Christ, if we look at the New Testament as literature? Or Freud's "death instinct," in which all life hungers to return to its origins? Many people believe that true tragedy is no

longer possible, that we have lost the ability to tap into our hidden, instinctual feelings because reason plays such an important part in our lives. Novels, for instance, may best express the spirit of tragedy today, especially books that appeal to our collective, national consciences. A work such as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in which a slave leads a futile, bloody revolt, repeatedly asks "why must we suffer? how did this happen to us?" Styron's novel, itself controversial, has a remarkable comparison to a work such as Euripides' *The Bacchus*, demonstrating that so **long as people fight against the unconquerable, tragedy can be relevant, even in our own world.**

What tragedy means has never been an easy question; but in its many formal aspects, tragedy remains an important cultural concept in Western literature, visual art, and philosophy.

Today we attempt to impose order and meaning on the meaningless by redefining the tragic in new social, artistic, and philosophic ways; the tragic spirit is part of us all--a universal statement of what it means to be human.

The term itself demonstrates the elusiveness of the concept. In literature, we think that all tragedies must end in death or that heroes demonstrate fatal "flaws." We describe well-documented lives as being tragic by the degree to which they differ from our own experiences--biography becomes a voyeuristic necessity not unlike Aristotle's concept of catharsis.

**Tragedy seeks understanding and purpose in otherwise purposeless existences--to understand that need is to touch the universality of life.**