Ianthe Haarhoff
A.L. Combrink

TRAGEDY AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD : CHRISTIAN LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY

A Christian approach to literature is easily confused with a theological approach. There are many dangers implicit in such an approach. Sallie McFague TeSelle says the following about theologians who presume to violate the bounds of both theology and literature by attempting literary criticism:

"There is no reason to suppose that those trained in theology, or philosophy for that matter, are likely to possess, what is essential to the practice of literary criticism, that 'sensitiveness of the intelligence' described by Matthew Arnold as equivalent to conscience in moral matters. A theological training seems to have a disabling effect and has subsequently to be struggled against when literary criticism is the concern." (TeSelle 1966:4).

Another misconception about Christian literary criticism is that it is concerned with "Christian literature", which, in the opinion of Ruth Etchells, is "neither Christian nor literature, because of its cliché-ridden style, vagueness and muddle of thought, unctuousness of tone or piety of sentiment, all of which deny the vitality, vigour and purity which is implicit in the Christian understanding of art" (Etchells 1969:15). The Christian critic is not concerned with a particular brand of literature. On the contrary, his calling is to make his influence felt in the same areas as the anti-Christian or so-called "neutral critics". The approach of the Christian critic to the literary work of art is uncompromised and unafraid: both academically respectable and radically Christian.

"Art is a symbolically significant expression of what lies in a man's heart, with what vision he views the world, how he adores whom. Art telltales in whose service a man stands because art itself is always a consecrated offering a disconcertingly undogmatic yet terribly moving attempt to bring honour and glory and power to something" (Seerveld, 1963: 28).

Art, and thus also literary art, is worship. If it worships the Sovereign Creator, it is legitimate art. Otherwise it is warped and distorted. In God's

earth, literature has a twofold calling. Its first task is to create beauty and order from the sinful ugliness and chaos of fallen creation. Naturally this does not imply that literature only treats beautiful subject matter, as if its aim were the concentration of the world's beauty into literary work. Rather, the beauty of the art form makes a sinful and tragic reality beautiful.

The basic function of literature is to evoke an aesthetic experience. The aesthetic expression of reality is not mere description. Sallie TeSelle (1966: 96) says life is ambiguous and muddled. Literature of great complexity and depth does not reflect the muddle: rather, it is "a highly ordered and structured complexity that illumines and dispels the chaos of experience".

However, literature is not purely an aesthetic expression to be enjoyed for its beauty ("l'art pour l'art"). Particularly in the present century art has become increasingly preoccupied with political, social, moral and religious issues, and this fact cannot be ignored by critics. N.A. Scott (1966: 120) says the following in this regard: "It is being increasingly recognized that, though the literary work is a special type of linguistic structure, what holds the highest interest for us is that this structure is instrumental toward a special seizure of reality. The very nature of literature, in other words, is felt to require the critic finally to move beyond the level of purely verbal and stylistic analysis to the level of metaphysical and theological valuation."

The second task of literature, then, is by means of the art form, to create truth. Good literature is an accurate and relevant comment on reality and its God-given function is to introduce clarity of vision into a world whose eyes are blurred by sin. Literature exposes and illuminates reality by bringing certain aspects into focus. In this connection, Sallie TeSelle (1966: 122) says that "the truth of a work of art is both its adequacy to the basic of human experience and its correction and deepening of our understanding of this structure of human experience, so that we rightly say not only that art is true to life, but that art is more true than life".

TRAGEDY AND THE COMPLETE CHRISTIAN VISION

Tragedy has often been dismissed summarily as unchristian, because for the Christian death is not regarded as being a tragedy. But such a dismissal does not do justice to the subtle and intricate nature of tragedy. In the first place, the tragic does not necessarily reside in the death of the tragic hero, but in something with far greater magnitude and significance. Secondly, even supposing that the great and terrible thing which constitutes tragedy

were to be regarded as being incompatible with the Christian vision, it contains significant parallels with Christianity. Henrietta Ten Harmsel (1976: 9) says that "in their amazing approximation of the complete Christian vision the universally admired tragedies – even when written by non-Christians – affirm not only their own soundness but also the marvellous authenticity of the Christian revelation which both comprehends and transcends all the tragic aspects of the human condition". Where both tragedy and Christianity claim to throw light on the tragic aspects of the human condition, it is necessary that they be compared and tested as to whether both are compatible with the truth. A brief discussion and comparison of the tragic vision (as it is found in all the great tragedies) and the complete Christian vision (which is found in the revealed Word of God) are necessary before reaching a conclusion on this point.

Tragedy is defined typically as an action of great dignity and magnitude having a beginning, middle and end. What action has greater dignity and magnitude than that contained in the complete revelation of God's dealings with man from the beginning in creation to the end in the final establishment of the New Heaven and Earth?

Tragedy produces a catharsis in the spectator who identifies with the hero and re-experiences purgation vicariously. But this is merely an imagined purgation. For the Christian there is a real identification with Christ and real purgation of sin through his redeeming work.

The typical tragic hero reflects many characteristics of Adam (as representative of all mankind). The tragic hero is high in character and position, but he has a tragic flaw, namely "hubris" or pride which causes his tragic and inevitable downfall. Adam's position and character are high indeed. He is made in God's image and appointed lord of creation. His fatal flaw is his sin of disobedience rising out of pride – the ambition to be like God, and he exacts the penalty of death. The result of the downfall for the tragic hero is guilt, fate, death, universal chaos and conflict with divine and superhuman forces. Similarly for Adam, the aftermath of the fall is characterized by guilt for sin, the fate of eternal damnation, chaos in all of creation and alienation from and conflict with God.

The tragic hero strives to be true to his own vision of honourable conduct and this gives him character, nobility, depth and tragic stature and earns him the interest and sympathy of the audience. Because of his fatal flaw, he fails to be true to this vision and the fact that he tries, brings him into conflict with the gods and often loses him the sympathy of the bystander (the chorus in Greek tragedy). Nevetheless in his death he is purged of his flaw and he achieves integrity. Thus the nobility of man is reasserted,

but the great question posed by tragedy is left unanswered. In Greek tragedy the question was "Why did the gods tempt this man to fall and then allow him to suffer?" The dominant question of Elizabethan tragedy was "Why is man unable to reach his potential without coming to a downfall?" Twentieth century tragedy poses the ultimate question "Why is man exposed to the utter horror of a meaningless existence and terrifying unknown though they were malignant and arbitrary. Even the Elizabethans had faith in man and his intrinsic nobility. But twentieth century tragedy shows no way out.

Here the tragic vision and complete Christian vision part company. Adam is not to achieve integrity after his fall by dying for his sin being elevated to the status of tragic hero. He is damned to suffer eternally because he is unable in himself to earn redemption. There is no way Adam can find a little glory in his fall. He is utterly depraved. But neither is the tragic question left unanswered as in the tragic vision. The complete Christian vision presents a second Adam, the transcendant hero, Christ. The Son of God re-enacts the role of the hero and He gives the perfect answer to the tragic question.

In her excellent study in *Tragedy and the Christian Faith*, Henrietta Ten Harmsel outlines the areas of similarity between the tragic hero and the transcendant hero, Christ.

"The high position and noble character of the Christ obviously outstrip those of a King Oedipus, a Prince Hamlet, or a Mayor Henchard. King of Kings, Lord of Lords, mighty God – these are the titles he bears. This comparison does not make a 'miniature Christ' of the tragic hero but rather a 'transcendant hero' of the Christ. It is in the fall – the descent – of the hero, however, that the comparison becomes most meaningful ... The ironic reversal of Lear's position from the dignity of the throneroom to the dirt of the hovel is onconsequential compared with Christ's exchanging the throne of heaven with the manger in the stable. Lear's pitiful situation in the hovel accompanied by a fool and a madman, only approximates that of the weeping Christ, pouring out sweat and tears on the rough ground of Gethsemane. Lear's recognizing himself as a 'poor forked animal' only approximates the 'descent' of the Christ, who was surrounded at his birth by sheep and oxen; who could be called a 'worm and no man'; and whose situation compared unfavourably with the foxes, who have holes, and birds, who have nests. Lear was disowned by his children, Oedipus was expelled by his own people, but the Christ was deserted by his closest friends and finally even by his own own Father – God. The raging despair of Lear on the heath, the inner turmoil of Hamlet's soliloquies, the blind agony of Oedipus – these give

only a small glimpse into Christ's unfathomable despair when he said, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (1976: 10).

But can one say that Christ's tragic fall was caused by his "hubris"? Certainly it was not pride or a desire to "be like God" (for He is God) which prompted his downfall. If one looks more closely at the exact meaning of the Greek word *hubris* the relevance is more apparent. The *pride* suggest by the word is not vanity or superciliousness but rather that characteristic of the tragic hero which causes him to *choose himself* (as Kierkegaard would say) to bear the burden of his humanity and the inescapable doom which awaits him merely because he is human.

Thus Christ in fact becomes human and bears for all humanity the wrath of God on man because of his sinful nature. He takes on Himself the responsibility of being human, pays the penalty finally and thus frees man of the necessity of bearing the burden himself.

Christ is the perfect hero of the real tragedy of humanity and in his death he asks the ultimate tragic question: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But not only does He pose the question to transcend all questions, in his resurrection He provides the ultimate answer. There is no achievement of integrity in man's dying for his own failure to live up to his integrity in man's dying for his own failure to live up to his individual moral creed, but there is the free offer of fulness of life as prophet, priest and king for whoever accepts Christ's death for sin and perfect fulfilment of God's law. Questions about blind malignant fate and meaningless doom are no longer relevant because Christ promises eternal life to all who believe in Him and the question of tragedy, "Why should the good suffer?" is finally answered by Christ's necessary sacrifice.

ARTHUR MILLER : THE CRUCIBLE

This play by Arthur Miller is commonly regarded as a great example of modern tragedy. It is a play based on the McCarthy trials in the United States in the early fifties of this century. Miller uses the historical parallel of the witch hunts in Salem, Massachusetts as a dramatic setting for his play. These witch hunts occurred in 1694 among the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers and involved a great deal of hysterical and malicious persecution based on superstition and hearsay.

Arthur Miller brings new life to the story, focusing particularly on the profound effect of the witch hunt, not only on the community but also on the lives of certain individuals. He stresses the idea of individual integrity most strongly – the aim of mankind to be true to his "vision of decent conduct". He presents his theme by dramatizing the success or failure of his characters to achieve this lofty aim.

John Proctor, the main character, is ultimately successful and so are Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey. The central conflict of *The Crucible* is Proctor's struggle to be true to his vision. His integrity, which costs him his life, is contrasted with the lack of it in Danforth and Parris. He is guilty of an immoral act and denounces himself. Nevertheless he has insight which the other characters lack, and while all Salem joins in the hysteria, he sees the hypocrisy of the government and church which lead the hunt. Proctor knows that he isn't good (Rebecca can oppose the court out of her essential goodness – she suffers and dies a saintly death). If he should resist, as Rebecca does, it will only be out of spite. When he is required, however, to sign a lie to save his life, which he passionately wants, he sees that he can still attain integrity in spite of anything that has gone before. He refuses to sign his *name* to a lie, and this final act of faithfulness to his conscience saves him. He says it too: "You have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor" (p. 125)*, and it is confirmed by his wife: "He have his goodness now".

By denouncing the lie, he doesn't save his soul, as Rebecca does (by remaining true to her unshakable vision), but he saves his name, and that, according to Miller, constitutes his triumph and crowns him with integrity. He is no longer a "sinner ... against .... his own vision of decent conduct" (p. 27) but its champion.

The Crucible is an appeal for the identity and integrity of the individual. While such an ideal is by no means incompatible with Christianity, it must be seen in the right perspective, viz. as having as ultimate goal, the glory of God and not the glory of man for himself. The integrity of the creature must reflect the integrity of the Creator. It is only by losing one's selfish

*Page numbers in brackets refer to Miller, A. 1968. The Crucible. Penguin.

identity that one attains meaningful identity in Christ ("Whoever would save his life would lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it"). This requires a certain forfeiting of oneself and Proctor (and Rebecca and Giles) never make that sacrifice. Miller places individual integrity in the foreground and never gives any indication that he recognizes God's claim of sovereignty, even in this. Ruth Etchells says much which is of relevance to the theme of identity in *The Crucible.*

"There is, in accepting Christ, a necessary loss of identity in one sense, in that there has to be a willingness to abdicate from self-control, a shift of focus so that things are not measured by their advantage to *self* (p. 103). Proctor is not required to give up his soul to the devil, and Miller protests rightly that the Salem court commits a gross attack on his self-respect in trying to make him do so. But he also may not keep his soul to himself. He must surrender it to the One who has first claim, but he does not. Etchells continues thus: This does not mean that one ceases to be an individual ... On the contrary, becoming a Christian means becoming more uniquely the self one was intended to be than ever one could before; means escaping from the narrow limitations of one's psychological horizons to the freedom of being God's child" (p. 103). John Proctor clearly misses this calling, because he sees identity as an end in itself. This does not negate the validity of Miller's exposure of the lack of integrity of the other characters; they missed the point too. In fact, Arthur Miller missed the point. N.A. Scott sees the "pathetic" element in the tragic situation as this focusing on a valid value which, however, does not encompass the entire reality. He says that "the protagonist's self-affirmation generally involves his championing some particular value which, however valid it may be in itself, remains only a partial and limited good. Thus the ardor of his commitment to what is only a limited and determinate good renders him insufficiently responsive to his total situation and has the effect of throwing his life out of gear with certain facets of reality *which also have a valid claim upon him* (p. 126). The facet of reality which Proctor ignores in the very fundamental one of God's claim to his identity and because he disregards it, his vision and action are distorted.

COHERENCE AND DIMENSION IN "THE CRUCIBLE"

There are various literary norms by which the aesthetic value of a work can be judged, and this aesthetic judgement is a *pre requisite* for the activity of the literary critic, as it precedes the value judgements implicit in the

Christian vision. Coherence and dimension are the norms used in this instance: coherence being the satisfactory amalgamation of those aspects (intention, intensity and correspondence) which allow the literary work to become what it says. The real meaning of this play is fully realized in the actions and profound experiences of the characters, *without any recourse to moralizing.* Miller combines historical accuracy with a sound understanding of the human nature, and this gives his drama authenticity – "correspondences", to use Steenberg's term (1977: 32).

Once a literary work has achieved "amalgamation" (Warren and Wellek 1963: 243), i.e. satisfied the coherence criterion, its value can be assessed according to the extent to which it achieves dimension – diversity of characters and actions and virtuosity in language. *The Crucible* has a more limited scope and more modest intention than the greatest dramas and subsequently it lacks the complexity of *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* and the universality of *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear.* Nevertheless, it is a profound work, undoubtedly a classic in the drama of the present century.

"THE CRUCIBLE" AS A TRAGEDY

R.B. Sewel (1959: 5) says a reader can call a work a tragedy when he has "felt the anguish of the marrow – the fever of the bone" and "the tragic vision impels the man of action to fight against his destiny, kick against the pricks, and state his case before God and his fellows".

Who can read *The Crucible* without confessing that he has "felt the anguish of the marrow" or who can deny that John Proctor fights against his destiny and states his case before God and man, or that (in the terms of Karl Jaspers) he suffers beyond his ability to act? In his death Miller undoubtedly intends him to bring to "realization the highest possibilities of man" (Jaspers 1953: 27).

What is the tragedy in *The Crucible?* Miller sees the tragedy in this, that a blind, corrupt justice forces individuals with insight and character to choose between their integrity and their life. They "suffer a terribly ultimate kind of cheat" (Scott 1966: 131). Although they are innocent and they have knowledge, they are powerless against the deluded conviction of the authority which has power over them. This results tragically in the death of the good and the survival of the tyrant. The essence of tragedy lies in the waste of human potential – the unnecessary death of the most valuable members of the community particularly the death of John Proctor.

He exacts the death penalty because of his hubris, that tragic quality by which he "strives consciously to introduce absolute perfection into this merely relative world which, by definition, cannot stand perfection" (EB Cherbonnier, Ten Harmsel 1976: 11). Proctor strives to be true to his vision of conduct and it destroys him because it is incompatible with his own fallible nature (hence the sin of adultery of which he is guilty) and the decayed community in which he lives. Because of his hubris, his noble vision which is incompatible with reality, he incurs guilt (because he cannot live up to it himself) as well as conflict with an insightless authority (which corresponds to the malignant and arbitrary fate of the classical tragedy). He dies, but like Oedipus and Hamlet and Lear, he attains salvation and integrity in death. He is redeemed, but the tragic question remains unanswered – why could John Proctor not have lived on and fulfilled his potential as a human being with character and insight? Why did he suffer, although he was innocent of witchcraft, and why the waste?

TRAGEDY AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The perspective of Christianity in tragedy both accepts its reality and supplies the dynamic answers to the desperate and overwhelming question.

John Proctor recognizes the evil inherent in him and this is consistent with Christianity. But he sees his evil as a violation of his personal code and not as a failure to serve the God who created him. The redemption he seeks stems from the same source as the code he has broken and he saves himself by his own act of goodness. He becomes his own Christ, effecting his own purgation through his death. Instead of fulfilling his calling to glorify God, he in fact denies God ("I say – God is dead!", p. 105) and becomes his own judge ("There be no higher judge under heaven than Proctor is!", p. 119) and his own redeemer. He comes close to Albert Camus' description of the metaphysical rebel, who "attacks a shattered world in order to demand unity from it. He opposes the principle of justice which he finds in himself to the principle of injustice which he sees being applied in the world ..... Metaphysical rebellion is a .... protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil . . . (the) rebel refuses to recognize the power that compels him to live in this condition. The metaphysical rebel is therefore not definitely an atheist, as one might think him, but he is inevitably a blasphemer. Quite simply, he blasphemes primarily in the name of order, denouncing God as the father of

death and the supreme outrage" (Camus, in Scott 1966: 123).

Legitimately, Miller encourages man to lament the corruption which causes waste of human potential and prevents the integrity of a society, and to bring about reform. But seen next to God's indictment to lament the fall because sinful man displeases God and to repent and turn from sin in order to glorify Him again, Miller's tragedy is reduced to a dimension not to be compared with the true and real tragedy of life as expounded in the Living Word of God.

Miller's tragedy lies in the waste of human potential to the detriment of the human race. Fundamentally then, it deviates from the Christian reality, because it is man-centred, not God-centred. John Proctor's death is waste, certainly, and a natural result of the Fall. But Christ died to save sinners from the tragic consequences of the Fall and rose again to give them life: not comfort in this life, but eternal life.

If Miller gives any answer to the question of tragic waste, it is that the individuals concerned have attained integrity. This answer is not very satisfactory compared with the radical Christian answer: On the one hand earthly death, suffering and waste are nothing next to the ultimate tragedy of eternal death and hell and futility without God. On the other, the gaining of one's "name" or "goodness" is empty beside the ultimate triumph of eternal life and perfect identity with Christ.

EVALUATION

It was suggested that literature has a two-fold calling – to create beauty and truth, and its ultimate purpose is worship of the living God. Judged by these standards, *The Crucible* is successful in many respects. It is an aesthetic expression of "the blight man was born for". Anguish and disaster are transformed in a marvellous beauty.

Its radical vision of fallen man in a broken world is accurate and relevant and compelling. But its truth is only an approximation of the reality of sin and its consequences, because it can only ask the question and hint at an answer which is still bound to the sin which gave it birth. It still falls short of God's truth. Its beauty can only sharpen the tragic reality by dispelling the chaos around it and forcing a merciless spotlight on the stark question. It doesn't look to God, the author of light and beauty. Justly, it perceives that something is wrong with man and something is wrong with society and that is why they are unable to achieve meaning. But it fails to see that the something wrong is that man and society are not worshipping

God. Their quest for meaning must in the first place be directed to Him before any other aspect of life may be imbued with meaning.

A Christian reader, then, will appreciate the depths of suffering and conflict in the tragedy of The Crucible, but for him it has no compelling relevance because it stands beside the Christian reality which transcends it. He may be aroused to pity and sorrow by man's lack of insight and the waste of human potential, but never touched in his innermost being because his own life is proof of God's answer of righteousness through faith and new meaning in Christ.

A more compelling consideration for the Christian critic is the effect of *The Crucible* on the attitudes and behaviour of non-Christians who read it. As they are naturally inclined to glorify themselves, denying God his Sovereign right to their allegiance, reading *The Crucible* can only reinforce their self-centred ideas and life-style. In addition, although it justly criticises the church, the negative attitutde it conveys unjustly prejudices the heart of the unbeliever against that church which indeed fulfils its God-given calling.

Finally, while tribute must be paid to its artistic merit and fine literary qualities and to the compelling vision it focuses onto man and society, the play is not great art in the ultimate sense — worship of the Creator who made man and put eternity in his heart so that he in turn could create beauty and truth in humble acknowledgement of the first Great Artist.

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