



THE IMPORTANCE OF HEROISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.2.45](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.2.45)



Article info

Article Received:20/03/2024
Article Accepted: 28/04/2024
Published online:06/05/2024

Abstract

The drama of the sixties and its resolution of the notion of heroism have paved the way for a new liberation in creative integrity in the post-Vietnam age. After overcoming the distress caused by the disappearance of the revered white hero (the thoughtless possibility represented by Cummings), Shepard emphasizes the enigmatic nature of the stage, its ability to make the yet-to-be-conceived idea visible: "The remarkable aspect of theater is its capacity to reveal the unseen, and that's what captivates me about it." During this morning, as we see a profound sense of astonishment, we come to understand that the protagonist in American theater, a forgotten offspring of the frontier, decaying and devoid of historical and cultural significance, has been revived once again to confront the challenges of a fresh and intense emotional experience.

Keyword: Heroism, literature, drama, American literature, American drama, dialect.

Introduction

The inquiry into the concept of heroism in American literary discourse emerges as a significant topic during the mid-19th century. It is during this period that the need to address the inherent conflict between a classical or European legacy and a distinctly American idealism in contemporary terms becomes evident for the first time. The longing for independence in the presence of an enticing

frontier coincided with the apprehension of European influence, which proved difficult to avoid or justify. Harold Bloom refers to this sentiment, in relation to the teachings of Emerson, as the "apocalyptic wistful."-From a geographical, anthropological, and historical perspective, the frontier emerged as an undeniably indigenous and tangible entity. It posed a challenge to the American Adam, urging him to demonstrate his value without relying on the paternal approval of his esteemed

father. Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" introduced a novel approach to historiography. Turner's work departed from the prevailing European-centric perspective, which emphasized the Atlantic as the locus of American development. Instead, Turner argued that the western frontier played a pivotal role in shaping American heroism and fostering self-awareness (Adam, 2016).

Literature Review

However, within the realm of literature and the subsequent evolution of drama, the aforementioned differentiation proved to be considerably more challenging to ascertain. Despite occasional challenges, the classical European notion of heroism, along with its white Anglo-Saxon counterparts in America, continued to exert influence, albeit with some uncertainty. This concept was characterized by a combination of admiration and skepticism, as well as strength and resurgence. In its state of isolation, the emerging American spirit of heroism sought models of resilience and optimism. Surprisingly, it discovered these models within the context of those who had been victimized, rather than among those who had achieved victory. Specifically, it found inspiration in the plight of the Native American, as depicted in the works of Cooper, and later, in the experiences of African Americans, as portrayed by Norman Mailer. The ironic aspect lies in the fact that the exploration of the heroic mode in non-white cultures, which was often tentative and accompanied by feelings of guilt, took place against the backdrop of white American colonialism, which was characterized by prevailing racist attitudes. The dialectic of heroism between black and white individuals is situated within the ambiguous symbiotic relationship (Adams, 2008).

Throughout different periods in Western history, a range of heroic concepts have been explored, including the Hellenic, Miltonic,

Carlylean, and Darwinian perspectives. However, alongside these notions, a distinct form of heroism has emerged, known as the "heroism" of the Underground Man. This particular type of heroism is characterized by its fundamental and compromising nature, and has gained prominence since the mid-nineteenth century, particularly due to the subversive qualities and the "invisibility" associated with it. In the literary traditions of Dostoevsky's subterranean rebel and Thoreau's Orphic radical, there is a recurring theme of individuals who embrace civil disobedience and willingly choose confinement (referred to as the "Subterranean" realm) over a corrupt external society. During the Vietnam era, authors such as Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, Charles Marowitz, and Jack Gelber have made attempts, to varying degrees, to define the essence of such a hero or anti-hero. Their focus lies on the acute existential condition experienced by the Black American Hipster and their hardened counterpart, the White Negro. Edward Albee presents a compelling depiction of the latter category through the character of Jerry, the central figure in his play *The Zoo Story* (1959). Jerry raises profound inquiries about a fundamental sense of estrangement prevalent in society, as he ponders, "If we are capable of such profound misunderstandings, then what purpose does the concept of love serve in our collective consciousness?" (McConachie, 2005).

However, it is precisely this ironic element that serves to indicate and delineate the inherent characteristics of the dialectical trajectory that the concept of heroism has undergone within the realm of Western mythopoesis. The synthesis of heroism in contemporary idealism within literature and drama has been achieved through the profound clash between opposing forces, such as the conscious and the unconscious, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the colonizer and the colonized, and the white man and the black man. In the context of both heroic and tragic conflicts, the protagonist and antagonist embody not only a seemingly irreconcilable

clash between powerful opposites, but also serve to dialectically justify the inherent inevitability of this clash through the paradigms or lack thereof, the values or lack of values, the heroes or the tragically affected individuals that paradoxically emerge from such violent circumstances (Flynn, 1977).

Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* can be regarded as an exemplification of a dialectical relationship between the indigenous Red Indian population and the white settlers. In order to gain insight into the development of the notion of heroism in contemporary American drama, it is necessary to delve into the historical context of this dialectical ethos within the Western intellectual tradition. This ethos was initially introduced by influential figures such as Socrates and Plato, Hegel and Coleridge, and subsequently ingrained into the collective consciousness of New England by Emerson and his adherents. The dichotomy between black and white, as it pertains to this specific theme, assumes a crucial importance when examined within the framework of an ongoing dialectical tradition that extends into contemporary times (Green, 1972).

Emerson's discontentment with the Unitarian faith and his persistent quest for a more genuinely humane alternative, as evidenced through his exploration of works by Plutarch, Milton, Goethe, and other authors, can be paralleled with his dissatisfaction towards the Western, classical, and Anglo-Saxon heroic paradigm. This dissatisfaction prompts him to seek an authentic form of heroism within unfamiliar and often culturally distant contexts. Indeed, the interrelation between the anxieties surrounding religious and heroic ideals is significant in delineating the dialectical essence of Emersonian philosophy, a characteristic that has permeated subsequent American intellectual discourse. The disappearance of the white hero in American literature and drama, as well as the emergence of a modern understanding of heroism, are topics that can be

observed in the works of Emerson and Thoreau within the framework of the Transcendental movement. These concerns can also be traced back to non-white civilizations and literatures. The anticipation being discussed here is primarily rooted in idealism and driven by a sense of necessity. As a result, it is closely connected to, rather than dictating, potential future manifestations of the heroic mode (Bloom, 1993).

In his essay titled "Heroism" (1841), Emerson's motivation, as noted by Carl Nelson, becomes evident. Emerson is driven by his observation of the hollowness inherent in the prevailing Western notion of heroism. To substantiate the need for a heroism that surpasses and encompasses the one frequently championed in the materialistic mindset of Western society, particularly in the context of American colonialism, Emerson turns to the philosophy espoused in the *Bhagavad Gita*. This ancient text defines heroism as a state of the soul characterized by a military attitude.

Emerson's disillusionment with the depleted lineage of classical heroism redirected his focus towards fundamental origins that, in his view, possessed the potential to dialectically influence the emergence of heroism in contemporary society, just as they had done in previous eras.

Discussions

Since Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed that the emergence of the analytical Socratic disposition was accountable for the demise of tragedy by repressing the Dionysian essence, examinations of the quintessential tragic structure have consistently been accompanied by expressions of sorrow regarding its decline. There exists a prevailing agreement among proponents who argue that the composition of tragedies, as traditionally understood, is no longer feasible due to the perceived incompatibility between the rational disposition and the creation of tragic works. It is posited that

the scientific perspective on existence is incongruous with the tragic perspective on existence. In his work titled "Tragic Sense of Life" published in 1913, Unamuno posits that with the advent of the scientific spirit within a society, certain disparities between the tangible material structure of the world and the desired conceptual framework are elucidated, while others are acknowledged as verities. Consequently, a society relinquishes its perception of enigma and consequently, its 'tragic perception of existence'. According to Unamuno, the composition of tragic works represents the expression of humanity's intellectual frustrations and serves as a means of alleviating them. The process of intellectualising life gives rise to an unfavourable atmosphere due to its simultaneous manifestation of excessive scepticism and unwarranted self-assurance. In other words, it exhibits audacity in both questioning and investigating (Terry, 1997).

For certain critics, scepticism is regarded as an indication of self-assurance, while for others it is perceived as a manifestation of hopelessness. Joseph Wood Krutch, in his influential work *The Modern Temper* (1929), presents the perspective that aligns with the latter viewpoint. This scholarly study delves into the contemporary American Zeitgeist, dedicating a chapter specifically to the exploration of tragedy. Krutch's relevance to the discourse stems from his anti-rationalist perspective on the issue of contemporary dramatic tragedy, as well as his broader views on literature. This viewpoint is widely embraced by numerous individuals of his time, including critics and playwrights. Krutch offers a moral interpretation of Nietzsche's argument on amorality and aesthetics. In his work "The Birth of Tragedy," Nietzsche posited that the rational, analytical, and scientific method, along with its consequent optimistic disposition, was detrimental to society, referring to it as "the harmful contagion of our culture" (109). Drawing from the perspectives of various contemporary critics and playwrights, Krutch

contends that relativism, scepticism, and ultimately amorality are inherent aspects of rationalism. The ideas he presents embody a significant stream of criticism that continues to persist in a modified manner to this day. The belief system in question exhibits a strong inclination towards anti-rationalism and even anti-intellectualism, coupled with a pervasive sense of nostalgia, both in terms of aesthetics and morals. These characteristics are evident in numerous American endeavours during the specified period, as well as in the subsequent decades, aimed at revitalising the tragic genre. Hence, the argument presented by Krutch in his work titled *The Modern Temper* deserves careful examination. While it cannot be definitively stated that all four playwrights being examined in this discussion, except for Anderson, completely align with Krutch's occasionally confrontational scepticism towards science and intellectual pursuits, there are certain aspects of his anti-rationalistic perspective that can be identified in their works (Bloom, 1993).

According to Krutch, contemporary scientific advancements have revealed the insignificance of human beings and rendered their morality obsolete. Science has played a pivotal role in the extensive demystification observed across various domains of human pursuit. The emergence of what Krutch refers to as 'the modern temper' can be attributed to the regrettable encroachment of 'truth' into the realm of imagination. According to the individual's perspective, the prevalence of a rational mindset in contemporary society has rendered it increasingly challenging for individuals to maintain faith in the existence of a higher power or in their own inherent worth. According to the author's perspective, science's objective scrutiny has rendered previously unquestionable moral standards as subjective constructs devised by humans (McConachie, 2005).

The author's conclusion is that due to the contemporary predicament and the profound crisis of faith, tragedies, in the specific sense of the term that holds distinctive significance, are no longer being produced (Berkowitz, 2014). The central focus of his discourse centres on the notion that tragedy can be viewed as an optimistic manifestation of a self-assured era, wherein it revels in the commemoration of its own grandeur. The utilisation of an unhappy ending in tragedy serves as a mechanism to achieve a specific objective, namely the reinstatement of societal structure and the gratification derived from witnessing the heroic manifestation of determination. The author posits that, according to his assertion, tragedy during significant historical periods serves not as a manifestation of hopelessness, but rather as a mechanism through which individuals and societies were able to extricate themselves from such despair (Manheim, 2004). In the event that Hamlet's life is willingly relinquished, he perceives it as being in service of a virtuous objective. The demise of the individual hero does not, by any means, exclude the perpetuation of the established system. The author further asserts that in the context of tragedy, individuals willingly embrace the external failures depicted in order to gain insight into the internal triumphs that are unveiled. To clarify, it can be understood that external failures should be regarded as indicators of internal triumphs.

Krutch asserts with notable assurance that in the twentieth century, there exists a lack of noble causes that merit dramatic portrayal. He argues that the modern era is deficient in its inability to embrace the optimistic perspective that tragedy inherently requires. In contemporary dramatic works, we are presented with a perspective that primarily showcases temporary external setbacks, which are often subject to criticism by scholars like Krutch, rather than portraying any significant internal triumphs. To clarify, contemporary drama, beginning with Ibsen, focuses on

addressing remediable societal issues rather than emphasising heroic deeds, and it adopts an ameliorative perspective. The tone of the text lacks inspiration as it primarily centres around ordinary and trivial matters, rather than extraordinary and significant ones. The acknowledgment and endorsement of the potential for improvement and social progress can potentially result in the dismissal of the significance of a tragic perspective or the necessity for tragic representation. In Krutch's instance, though, the recognition of this characteristic of contemporary society and contemporary drama leads to the devaluation of rationality, intellectuality, and scientific pursuits, along with an implicit rejection of all things modern (Ohno, 2008).

The Sophoclean and Shakespearean theatres serve as paradigms of the ideal theatre. In the realm of theatrical excellence, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which Fergusson regards as a flawless embodiment of Aristotle's concept of a "complete imitation of action," stands out prominently, surpassing the entirety of the discourse. Fergusson asserts that Dante's notable literary masterpiece exhibits a highly advanced concept of the theatre of human existence, as it comprehensively delves into various facets of both personal and societal realms. The contemporary theatre is deficient in the profound entirety of experience that is characteristic of its epic counterpart. According to Fergusson, the abundance of diverse theatrical expressions, often perceived as a valuable asset, is accompanied by a regrettable lack of coherence and purpose in contemporary drama. This deficiency leads to the absence of a cohesive artistic understanding of reality. The vision of the modern playwright, which is manifested within the confines of the narrow dramatic convention of social realism, is detached from the essence of current reality. According to Fergusson, it is argued that within the contemporary era, it is exceedingly challenging to envision a theatrical convention or concept that could effectively communicate

with a distinct cultural community, surpassing the mere portrayal of a fragmented and relativistic perspective of the world (Krasner, 2016).

Similar to Krutch, who consistently evaluates the modern era in comparison to the ancient, the user expresses a sense of despair regarding the state of contemporary society. They perceive the condition of the theatre as merely one manifestation of this overall deterioration. The arguments presented by Krutch and Fergusson are driven by a perception that is also echoed by Maxwell Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and occasionally Arthur Miller. This perception revolves around the notion of a diminishing spiritual and moral aspect. When Krutch discusses faithlessness, he is essentially referring to a perceived deficiency in moral steadfastness and a profound sense of despair. According to Krutch, the decline of the mythic and tragic perspective can be attributed to a weakening of the human spirit. This decline also signifies a gradual erosion of humanity's belief in its capacity to impose a desired interpretation on the complexities of life (Rose, 2002).

In his critique of the modern era, Krutch draws a parallel between the destiny of humanity in the twentieth century and that of a child who undergoes a permanent departure from innocence. According to the author, modern man has relinquished the universe that was tailored to his desires, the universe designed specifically for human beings, in favour of the natural universe in which he is merely a constituent. Consequently, humanity has undergone a gradual transition from an anthropocentric perception of security and an unquestioning belief in the inherent purpose of life to a state of scepticism and insecurity. The philosophical framework of rationalism has not only challenged the viability of traditional absolute morality, but it has also been unable to instil a sense of purpose and assurance in human existence (Berkowitz, 2014).

Based on Fergusson's analysis, it appears that he attributes the lack of a relevant theatre to the failure of establishing a coherent organising principle for diverse cultural phenomena, in addition to the presence of pluralism and fragmentation. Maxwell Anderson aligns with the perspectives of Krutch and Fergusson, asserting that contemporary society is marked by a pervasive erosion of moral principles and a profound crisis of belief, which inevitably manifests in the condition of the theatrical realm. In a letter penned in 1945, the author expresses the belief that a well-crafted play can only emerge from a steadfast conviction, whether it be in favour of or against a particular stance. The author further asserts that when these convictions become uncertain or unstable, the theatre itself becomes unstable, thereby implying a strong interdependence between the ideological convictions of playwrights and the overall stability of the theatrical domain (Adam, 2016). However, the individual acknowledges the challenges of sustaining optimism in the aftermath of war, as the present era is characterised by an unprecedented erosion of values and principles. Both men and women find themselves in the regrettable circumstance of having to adhere to unverifiable, implausible, and generally irrational assertions that their active, rational minds consistently challenge and undermine. Once logic emerges victorious, and an individual or society becomes completely cynical, they are then prepared for their inevitable inclusion in the eternal junk-pile. Literary works in the form of novels and poems do not necessarily cease to exist during such a period. Novels have the potential to be constructed solely from the dissemination of rumours and hearsay, while poems possess the capacity to be crafted exclusively from profound feelings of hopelessness and desolation. However, it is imperative to note that a play is inherently reliant on some form of affirmation (Adams, 2008).

The inclination towards tragedy during the twentieth century often signifies an anti-modernist perspective. This is not primarily due to a nostalgic alignment with the Past, but rather reflects a simultaneous endorsement of traditional values, particularly steadfast ethical and moral principles, a conviction in the existence of unchanging human nature, and a certain level of fatalism. The aforementioned scholars, including Krutch, Fergusson, Miller, and Anderson, often overlook the significance of this particular element. However, it is an integral component of the tragic paradigm, alongside the unwavering belief in a static human essence (Terry, 1997). The deterministic and fatalistic perspective has rendered tragedy unfeasible for numerous playwrights and critics. Throughout his illustrious career, Miller has grappled with the profound quandary of fatalism within the realm of tragedy. On the one hand, the individual's emphasis on social matters, their preliminary analysis influenced by quasi-Marxist ideologies, and their inclination towards amelioration clearly contradict any deterministic elements that tragedy may necessitate. However, the socio-economic structures portrayed in his plays are frequently depicted as forming a destiny that is just as unchangeable and predetermined as those found in conventional tragic narratives (McConachie, 2005).

In contrast, O'Neill is drawn to the fatalistic nature inherent in tragedy. The individual's commitment to the genre of tragic drama stems from an acknowledgment, heavily influenced by the writings of Nietzsche, specifically his work "Thus Spake Zarathustra," of a contemporary predicament. This recognition is further intensified by a personal struggle with one's own beliefs. The author expresses concern not only about the overall decline of spirituality, but also about the particular emphasis on materialistic values in American society. This concern is evident in the author's critique of widespread materialism during the 1920s, which is prominently

portrayed in plays like *Marco Millions*, *The Fountain*, and *Lazarus Laughed*, among others (Bloom, 1993).

According to O'Neill, the refusal to acknowledge the potential for tragic expression would be a severe indictment of our spiritual impoverishment. O'Neill is faced with the task of addressing the spiritual void that he perceives both individuals and society to be caught in. The theatre serves as the primary platform through which he discovers a profound manifestation of spirituality that is notably absent within contemporary society (Berkowitz, 2014).

The individual endeavours to replicate Strindberg's heightened theatrical presentation, which O'Neill refers to as 'super-naturalism'. In the 1924 Playbill for *The Spook Sonata*, O'Neill expresses his admiration for Strindberg, regarding him as one of the most contemporary and influential figures in the theatre. O'Neill credits Strindberg as the foremost interpreter of the profound spiritual conflicts that form the essence of modern drama and reflect the core essence of our present-day existence (Manheim, 2004). The objective of the author is to surpass the superficial aspects of existence and delve into the depths of human experience, akin to Strindberg's pursuit of exploring the underlying drama of life. The author explores a form of theatre that deviates from realism and embraces the realm of imagination. This theatrical approach aims to evoke the ritualistic essence of ancient Greek theatre, particularly the Dionysian tradition. In his work titled 'Memoranda on Masks,' the author emphasises the need for a revitalised theatre that reclaims its primary purpose as a sacred space. This space serves as a temple where the poetical interpretation and symbolic celebration of life are conveyed to individuals who have become spiritually deprived due to the oppressive nature of their daily existence, where they are compelled to wear metaphorical masks amidst a society that is itself a collection of masks (Ohno, 2008).

Conclusion

Miller, Williams, O'Neill, and Anderson not only fail to present a comprehensive theoretical framework for tragedy, but they also often do not adhere to a readily categorizable dramatic approach. Frequently, scholars tend to overlook the formal elements and philosophical underpinnings of traditional tragedy, opting instead to concentrate on its heightened depiction of characters, which they perceive as emblematic of the genre. Tragedy is commonly associated with the portrayal of heroic actions and is consistently characterised by the protagonist's unwavering commitment to a noble cause, which ultimately leads to their subsequent affliction. Consequently, they redefine tragedy as predominantly a theatrical homage to individualism and the inherent capacity of humanity.

The individual's perspective on character development and their inclination towards tragic elements is rooted in a fundamental scepticism towards rationalistic principles. Nevertheless, it appears that they have shifted away from associating rationalism with anti-tragic optimism in the Nietzschean sense, and instead now associate rationalism with anti-tragic pessimism. In his work 'The Future of Tragedy', Camus highlights the role of disillusionment with rationalism in fostering a pervasive pessimism. This disillusionment, or rather scepticism towards rationalism as a universal solution to humanity's problems, contributes to the perception of humanity's diminished significance in both real life and theatrical representations. Additionally, it gives rise to a novel form of fatalism. Anderson consistently attributes the various afflictions of the world to science, scientific advancement, and rationalism. In a similar vein, O'Neill posits that the prevailing spiritual destitution and detrimental materialism in contemporary society can be attributed to the triumph of rationalism. While Williams does not explicitly criticise rationalism, his morally and spiritually

elevated protagonists embody an opposition to rationalistic tendencies in a poetic manner. The concept of sensibility and poetic sentiment stands in contrast to a materialistic, non-heroic, and fundamentally rational society (Klapp, 2017).

Individuals who aspire to achieve greatness or exert substantial influence often find themselves limited in their capacity to do so. Their highest attainable goal may be to safeguard their moral principles and uphold their sense of self-worth. The primary concern in Miller's earlier works, including *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Crucible*, revolves around the preservation of integrity. In the pursuit of truth, Chris Keller appears to be driven by individualistic self-righteousness rather than social idealism. Consequently, the preservation of individuality emerges as a recurring thematic element within these plays. The playwrights' conceptualizations of individualism exhibit certain resemblances to the romantic liberal concepts elucidated by Lukacs in 'The Sociology of Modern Drama'. Lukacs discusses the prevalence of these ideas in German drama during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tracing their origins back to the Romantic movement.

If one were to identify a prevailing belief system within these plays, it would be the prioritisation of personal integrity over communal norms. In Williams' plays, the protagonists consistently reject the societal norms of conformity, as exemplified by characters like Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the mob in *Orpheus Descending*. Similarly, they resist the ideals of middle-class respectability, which are embodied by a range of characters such as Amanda Wingfield, the Goopers, and Stella Kowalski. Instead, the protagonists, like all individuals who are marginalised, perpetually exist as outsiders. The heroic individual assumes the role of the ultimate moral judge and serves as the representative of the playwrights' ideals

centred around individualism. In contrast to Greek or Elizabethan tragedies, these plays do not manifest an explicit moral framework within which the protagonist must adhere to in order to avoid perishing. The societal norms are consistently demonstrated to be morally questionable and/or insufficient for personal self-expression. Consequently, the main characters establish their own set of standards that are deemed acceptable, and it is through these standards that they are evaluated and evaluate themselves.

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