

FOLLOWING are the notes of a lecture to be given from 4YA on Tuesday, April 30, at 7.30 p.m., by Mr. Lloyd Ross, M.A., LL.B., under the auspices of the Workers' Educational Association, University of Otago.

A man commits suicide. Is that a tragedy? A man is killed in battle, a woman dies, a sparrow falls? Of course, to those who suffer these things would be tragic, but would they make a play? We want more—we want the background of events leading up to the tragic events; we want to know more about the characters themselves; we probably want to feel that the particular tragedy has some relation to the problems of life for us all. Tragedy reveals how men are led into suffering by their natures, or by the laws of the universe, by the circumstances in which we live. A tragedy in drama should include a conflict, the protagonists in themselves should be great, the tragedy itself should be inevitable, given the characters as they are and the circumstances in which they are placed. We will take one by one the ingredients of a tragedy and see how they have altered.

**The Characters.**

IN a Greek play the characters were the great of the earth, gods and demigods. Oedipus was such a man. Elizabethan plays were about kings and lords—Othello is noble, commanding, a born leader; Macbeth at first is a courageous and inspiring general, vic-

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## What is a Tragedy?

torious in battle. To-day the people who suffer can be the ordinary people of the streets. See, for instance, "Justice," by Galsworthy. We want to see people like ourselves. A recent critic has written "Ruin of the simplest people can have tragic impressiveness if it means the waste of fine or admirable characters, no matter how humble the sphere in which they are employed. . . . But the ruin of a weak man with no high qualities to set off his weaknesses we are not accustomed to call tragic." "Justice" would hardly fit their definition, because Valder, the victim, is weak, petty, and without any heroic qualities. It may be, however, that Galsworthy in this play is the forerunner of the very modern tragic writers who try to represent the clash of social forces, and not of individuals. In some of these plays the characters are designated by such terms as "He," "She," "Mr. Zero," "The Mass," "The People."

**The Conflict.**

THE Greeks put on the stage great figures, going to waste, partly because of their own pride, partly because of Fate or circumstances. The misfortunes of absolutely righteous characters were too shocking for the tragic stage. Othello is capable of headlong violence almost amounting to madness when provoked. Macbeth is unscrupulously ambitious. Tragedy had to be impressive and awe-inspiring; therefore the figures had to be great. The world was just, therefore the flawless could not suffer. Here, too, there is a change to-day. We represent not merely the conflict of man and fate, but the conflict of man in a society which is not perfect, the sufferings of people through no fault of their own. In Galsworthy's "Escape" a man is imprisoned because he is chivalrous. He escapes, and the play deals with his wanderings, but he gives himself up to save a priest from telling a lie. However, although there have been these changes to an interpretation of life more akin to our everyday experience, we have preserved the ideal that tragedy must awaken passion mixed with the thought that we, too, are likely to meet tragedy. Until recently, emphasis would be placed on our fallibility as human beings. To-day the tragic writer merely insists we may be caught by external events, no matter how pure or right we may be. The tragedy may be not so much the disaster of an individual as the failure of an ideal, as in "Saint Joan."

**The Subjects.**

IN "Agamemnon," by the Greek Aeschylus, a King of Greece is killed by his wife because he had sacrificed his daughter for the success of an expedition. That is a typical Greek subject—the doings, terrible doings, of the great. In a Shakespearean tragedy the poor never suffer. To-day all subjects, past and present, are fit for a tragedy. "Twenty Below," by Nicholls and Tully, deals with the actions of some American hoboes who have sought refuge from the cold in a prison. "The Hairy Ape," by O'Neill, deals with an ignorant, dirty, foul-

mouthed stoker in an American liner. On the other hand, the plays of O. K. Munro try to put on the stage the problems of international politics, of warring nations, of revolution and counter-revolution.

**The Action.**

ALTHOUGH the Greeks dealt with tremendous subjects, the incidents were relegated to a messenger's speech. They were too horrible to show. The Elizabethans delighted in scenes of murder and torture. We want action on the stage, but some things are too terrible even for us. This may explain why "King Lear" is seldom played.

The problem of a tragedy is to express the universal in the particular. We want to feel that more is involved than is apparent on the surface. The nature of life itself is the real theme. "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport," or "The gods are just, and of our present vices make instruments to torture us." Which is true? Different dramatists have different answers, but a great tragedy contains a view of what life is. The feeling of universality is gained by

**Discussion.**

READ a Greek, an Elizabethan, and a modern tragedy, and trace out the changes in the ingredients of a tragedy. Aristotle defined a tragedy—"Tragedy is a representation of an action, which is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain limited length; it is expressed in speech made beautiful in different ways in different parts of the play; it is acted, not merely recited, and by exciting pity and fear it gives a healthy outlet to such emotions." How far does this definition apply to modern plays? (2) A man crosses the road and is killed. Sketch out how this incident might be treated by a Greek, an Elizabethan, and a modern to make a tragedy; (3) Interpret by the changes in the ages from Greece to 1929. Books: "Tragedy," C. P. Lucas; "Introduction to Dramatic Theory," A. Nicoll; "Dramatic Values," C. E. Montague; "Euripides and His Age," Gilbert Murray; "Modern Drama," Otago W.E.A. correspondence course.

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