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Advanced Composition

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The Dark Side of Happily Ever After

I recently had an argument with my mother, which rarely happens. We didn't argue about my spending habits, or my post-graduation plans, or my grades, or any other typical area where a college kid might butt heads with her parents. Instead, we argued about books.

After finishing Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* over spring break, I couldn't help talking about it with the rest of my family. As we drank coffee together one afternoon, my mom asked me what made that play so special. I explained the plot to her. She looked at me for a few seconds after I finished summarizing, and asked, "So, it isn't a comedy?"

I found myself at a loss. "Well, it has some funny moments, but no. Ultimately it is a tragedy."

"Oh. Well, I don't want to read it, then."

And with that comment, our argument began. How could she nonchalantly write off great works of literature just because they include some sad parts?

Obviously it wasn't a serious argument—I doubt my mother even remembers it now. But the premise of it continues to stick with me. We as humans gravitate towards lighter works. We want to laugh and feel good and believe that life will stay rosy. We choose the rom-com over the drama. I, however, think the other side of the spectrum has its merits. Maybe the books we deem too dark at first actually teach us the most.

Whether we admit it or not, people like a good tragedy every now and then. Think of how many Greek tragedies exist. Aristotle, at the height of Greek civilization, studied the allure of tragedy in his *Poetics*. In it, he creates the term "catharsis," which the *Oxford*

English Dictionary defines as “the purification of the emotions by vicarious experience.”

Author Joe Sachs, discussing *Poetics* in the 21st century, writes that “the mark of tragedy is that it brings you out the other side... In a tragedy, a happy ending doesn't make us happy...

The closest thing I know to the feeling at the end of a tragedy is the one that comes with the sudden, unexpected appearance of something beautiful.” In other words, tragedies have inherent beauty. The emotions they evoke—the catharsis—is good for the soul. Watching or reading a sad ending gives us hope that we'll achieve a happy ending in our own lives.

Now, I should clarify that I'm not Goth. I adore comedies in any form. I binge-watch television shows like *The Office* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, and have spent quite a few evenings curled up with Oreos and movies like *Mean Girls*. Generally, though, I choose dramas, whether in book, play, movie, or even musical forms. I don't know what it says about my psyche, but I'd rather go see *Les Misérables* over *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Writing in defense of any particular genre presents difficulties for the simple reason that people have varying tastes. For example, I happen to enjoy classics and mysteries, while a good friend of mine likes Christian fiction and young adult novels. We will never completely agree. But I believe that all readers, whatever their preferences, should keep an open mind when reading anything.

Open-mindedness matters because it allows us to enjoy all types of literary works. As author Vladimir Nabokov explains in his lecture, “Good Readers and Good Writers”:

We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy—passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece. To be quite objective in these matters is of course impossible... We all have different temperaments, and I can tell you right now that the best temperament for a reader to have, or to develop, is a combination of the artistic and the scientific one. (517-518)

Nabokov means that readers should develop a mixture of objectivity and subjectivity that create a sense of balance. We automatically read subjectively, relying on our emotions to gauge our interest in a book. But we also ought to retain a sense of objectivity, an ability to appreciate the technicalities and deeper meanings, even we don't feel a strong emotional connection at first. If a story has praiseworthy technical elements, like sentence structure and word choice, readers can more easily have an emotional response. In short, reading takes effort. We must work to overcome our prejudices and give each book a chance to thrill us—even sad books. In fact, I would argue that those can be the most enthralling books of all.

The books that resonate with me the most are the ones that evoke emotion. I've found that tragedies seem most adept at drawing me into the action. I want a story to suck me in, to make me feel like I'm having adventures with the characters and getting to know them as if they were real people. To me, characters feel the most realistic and sympathetic when facing suffering of some sort. As I read of people overcoming adversity, I connect with the characters and root for them. I cheer them on, and feel their worry and desperation and hope. They become real to me, and I remember them after I close the book. When the characters are perfect and carefree, living wonderful but unrealistic lives, I can't relate to them as much. In fact, I don't even like them. The emotional journeys that tragedies provide leave me feeling far more fulfilled than happier plots do.

Unlike me, many readers claim that darkness in a story just brings them down too much. And no one should discount another's opinions. But just because a book is sad in parts doesn't mean it can't be uplifting in others. Arthur Miller, the playwright who caused my original argument with my mother, published a beautiful essay on the nature of tragedy. In "Tragedy and the Common Man," he writes:

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the

idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal.

To Miller, tragedy provides the best means for uplifting a reader. Sad stories teach us about ourselves, about human nature as a whole, and can inspire us to see how humanity ought to look. Comedies are good—we need to laugh, and have a lightening of our moods. But tragedies can benefit just as much, although in different ways.

I love the movie *La La Land*, partially because of how it ends. I've heard people reject the movie entirely because it has a disappointing ending, but I think its sadness makes it beautiful. I won't spoil it, but it brings the plot to a close in a far more meaningful way than a happier ending would have. It sticks with the audience, lingering in their minds and sparking conversations and causing them to think about their own relationships. Viewers would likely forget another movie with a stereotypical ending, but instead, *La La Land* received 221 awards, including best actress, best director, best original score, and best cinematography ("Awards"). I find it revealing that such a highly-rated film doesn't conclude happily: it proves that people still watch and appreciate tragedies. Although happy endings are the general preference, sad endings still have enough support to win hundreds of awards.

J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote an essay addressing the significance of happy endings. "On Fairy-Stories" discusses the fairy tale genre in particular, but also beautifully examines the importance of what Tolkien calls the "turn" in any type story: "a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art" (75-76). A turn—in essence, a moment of closure or unexpected

brightness—gives purpose to suffering, making the resolution sweeter. For example, in *Death of a Salesman*, the tragic ending teaches the characters (and thus, the audience) how to conduct a life worth living. If it did not include tragedy, it would not have such an impact. Readers walk away with a new sense of purpose, a new understanding of not only the importance of dreams, but of why we distinguish them from reality. This idea applies to all genres. If something bad happens in a book, something even better usually comes from it. Sad stories produce hope. It partially explains why I connect with tragedies so much—if there is no element of tragedy, I can't experience the joy of the turn.

Of course, I don't mean that purely happy plays, books, and television shows have no value; if they didn't, they wouldn't continue in popularity. But as Arthur Miller points out:

It is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief-optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.

Although we flock to comedies, the most well-known works in western literature are tragedies. The general population has, at some point, read and studied plays like *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet*, which have heartbreaking endings. To me, this fact demonstrates how strongly a well-written tragedy can affect the human spirit. We continue to read these famous works, relate to the underlying themes, and realize that we aren't alone.

Tragedies matter. Sad plots matter. While we don't need to immerse ourselves completely in darkness, we don't need to write off an unhappy ending. Instead, we should consider its beauty. We can learn so much about ourselves and about our fellow humans through a sad book or movie. If we don't balance joy with sadness, how can we truly understand the world around us?

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