

ARTS & LETTERS

ferent, he insists. While TV and other products of technology impose themselves with "force and indifference," reading requires active human involvement.

That quality, in Poirier's view, elevates literature above even the other arts—painting, music, dance. He writes: "More than any other form of art or expression it demonstrates what can be made, what can be done with something [language] shared by everyone, used by everyone in the daily conduct of life, and something which, moreover, carries most subtly and yet measurably within itself, its vocabulary and syntax, the governing assumptions of a society's social, political, and economic arrangements."

Tragedy for Our Times

"What Is Happening to Tragedy Today?"
by James Mark, in *Journal of European
Studies* (June 1984), Alpha Academic,
Halfpenny Furze, Mill Lane, Chalfont St.
Giles, Bucks HP8 4NR, England.

Tragedies on the grand scale of the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare are no longer written. Of late, literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic have argued that tragedy itself is dead. Mark, a British writer, insists that tragedy lives on.

During the fifth century B.C., Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides portrayed awesome human suffering. They challenged their audiences to affirm their faith in "an ultimate order that transcends our understanding," writes Mark. Shakespeare's tragedies likewise suggested an orderly but implacable universe, in which flawed heroes who violate sacred trusts of love or duty die terrible deaths.

In an "atomized, fluid" society, it is not possible for playwrights to people the stage with the noble figures—kings, queens, warriors—of more traditional tragedies. The hero of a serious contemporary play is more likely to be a kind of Everyman, and an unsympathetic one to boot. And the modern tragic universe is almost always meaningless, rife with absurdity and cosmic injustice.

The avatar of modern drama may well be *Waiting for Godot* (1952), by Samuel Beckett, in which two pathetic characters, Vladimir and Estragon, cling together unhappily in a kind of limbo waiting reluctantly for a character (Godot) whose identity is a mystery. Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1945) portrays three characters in hell, whose sentence it is to endure one another's company. Mother Courage, the heroine of Bertolt Brecht's 1941 play of the same name, is forced to prostitute her daughter as the price of holding her family together during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48).

How can these works of despair be considered tragedies? The playwright's own attempt to impose order on the chaos of modern life and the sympathy that audiences feel for the plays' characters are both affirmations of the human struggle. This is a greatly diminished view of tragedy, Mark concedes. But as long as man must grapple with uncertainty and the question of his ultimate fate, tragedy will survive.