

STARY IZAAK NIE ŻYJE. TO TRAGEDIA. NIE, TO NIE TRAGEDIA

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Esej ten poświęcony jest tematowi tragedii, tragizmu i śmierci. Odwołuje się on przede wszystkim do analiz tych zagadnień dokonanych przez polskiego badacza literatury, Juliusza Kleinera. Kleiner wskazał podstawowe warunki umożliwiające mówienie o tragedii. Są nimi obecność śmierci, działanie Losu, zło i bohater, obdarzony odpowiednimi cechami. Analiza Kleinera jest świetna, ale nie obejmuje wszystkich wypadków; stąd przywołano A. Christie i biografię polskiego uczonego, Władysława Natansona. Specjalnie oparto się tekstach odległych od nas o kilkadziesiąt lat. Za tą decyzją stoi obserwacja współczesnej kultury, odrzucającej kategorię Losu.

Słowa kluczowe: tragizm, tragedia, śmierć, los, Juliusz Kleiner, Władysław Natanson.

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OLD ISAAC IS DEAD. IT'S A TRAGEDY. NO, IT'S NOT A TRAGEDY

This essay is dedicated to the theme of tragedy, and death. It refers primarily to the analysis of these issues made by Julius Kleiner – Polish literary scholar. Basic conditions allowing us to speak about the tragedy were pointed out by Kleiner. These include: the presence of death, the effect of Fate, evil and the hero endowed with the appropriate signs. Kleiner's analysis is great, but it does not include all accidents; hence creative works of A. Christie and biography of Polish scholar Władysław Natanson are invoked. I decided to analyse texts distant from us several decades on purpose. Especially the observation of contemporary culture, rejecting the category of Fate is my aim hidden by this decision.

Key words: tragedy, death, fate, Juliusz Kleiner, Władysław Natanson.

Prof. Jackowi Hołówce, Fates and People

Isaac. Poor old Isaac. I believe – oh, I do believe that he's dead.

«It was quite a tragedy, wasn't it?» said Tuppence. «Very sad».

«Oh well, he was an old one», said Henry. «Nobody expected him to live longer any way».

Agatha Christie, *Postern of Fate*

Tragedy of a wise man

In 2010, on a winter morning, Professor Jacek Hołówka said to his students: It's cold, dark, you're sleepy and unhappy but before an hour and a half expires, you'll know who Frege was. You will go out into Krakowskie Przedmieście and you will be the very few people who have an idea about Frege. And I would like to assure you that the misfortune of a man who knows and the misfortune of a person deprived of such knowledge are two different types of misfortune. The former one is in fact deprived of the great sin of ignorance.

Pathos and tragedy have been popular subjects in the history of philosophy and Western culture. It was started by Aristotle. Scheler and Nietzsche added many valuable thoughts. Numerous scientific works have been written, and the subject still seems intriguing and open, perhaps, the more intriguing, the more the character of the modern times has become «calculating», as George Simmel wrote.

Calculating means measuring, weighing and predicting while the human life depends, at least sometimes, on unpredictable forces impossible to be influenced; forces that require taking into account factors that fail to be subject of rationalization and regularity. (Again, Simmel and his *Philosophy of Money*)

Meanwhile, pathos and tragedy are closer to unpredictable things which a man cannot control. In our text, we refer to the idea of the Polish literary erudite Juliusz Kleiner, also to Aristotle, Agatha Christie and activity of one of the Polish scientists.

Kleiner has devoted his lecture on January 24, 1945 to pathos. He delivered it in Lublin, The Second World War was still in progress but Kleiner managed to keep calm which enabled him to recognize several shades of pathos.

In his lecture, he said that the well-known approach towards the issue of tragedy fails to satisfy him. However, failure in finding answers prompted him to present his own proposal. Nevertheless, he did not get involved in the issues that could be interesting for others, e.g. different senses of pathos, the fact that Goethe's tragedy of Gretchen would probably fail to interest the ancient Greek.

Nonetheless, Kleiner started with Aristotle, which is not very surprising. He revisited the philosopher enough to notice the sources of pathos not in the approach towards the reality experienced by a man but in the theatre and the drama writing.

Aristotle left no doubt that both tragedy and comedy «were conceived during improvisation», a tragedy originated from the dithyramb while a comedy from phallic songs. After reaching an excellent, fully developed version, the tragedy became something that Aristotle could describe as follows: «The tragedy is the imitative representation of a serious, finite action which has (an appropriate) volume, expressed in a decorative language, ... present in the dramatic form, ... which by evoking pity and fear leads to “purification” (catharsis) of those emotions» (Quotations from Aristotle come from his *Poetics*) [1].

Kleiner would probably agree to linking pathos and tragedy together, yet not so much to combining them with other elements. Contrary to Aristotle who talked about tragic guilt, error (*hamartia*), Kleiner pursues his goal directly and says that: «**Tragedy is a drama of death**». [DHK – emphasis mine]

Let us highlight that thought. Despite historical circumstances (the lecture is given in January, 1945), Kleiner's thought is suspended in some kind of eternal now that is beyond time and space, it does not relate directly to the experiences of the World War II.

The death in itself is at the center of his thought. The Polish erudite has no doubts concerning this. He says that regardless of any possible discussions about the type of characters, conflict, which can be recognized as tragic (let us mention the tragedies by Racine), regardless of the trials and tribulations that the heroes go through, the center of the tragedy is **death**. Death or such a combination of events which results in breaking or destruction of a human being is equal to his death or something far worse than death.

Kleiner believes that death or the dread it evokes are the factors which move human will and feelings. They also trigger the highest volume of energy in people. By the way, let us say that the contemporary trauma psychologists would agree with Kleiner; the state just before the death is the maximum accumulation of human forces which leads to either a transition into a different state of consciousness or to fight. From the energy point of view, for them trauma equals confinement of energy which failed to be released during the attack.

Kleiner also associates human attitude towards death with a struggle, with an active protest against it and, in the case of defeat, with maximum mental pain. However, just the referral to death or defeat is not the end of human activity. According to Kleiner, a certain level (let's be honest: a high level) of spiritual development demands an appropriate response to death. Lack or failure to find a proper attitude towards death will not allow finding release. The man searches for something that is beyond death, searches for something that will help him to overcome dread by the power of spirit.

This condition results in formation of the belief that the attitude towards death is a measure of the human value. It is reflected culturally, e.g. during the Middle Ages when the knightly culture conferred a great importance on death, maybe not in all kinds of death, but surely in death under appropriate conditions (for example, dying for a master or beloved person). For culture based on religion, death becomes a point of transition between worlds, a gateway to a better world.

Regardless of the rationalizations attached to death, a contact with death causes spiritual shock. According to Kleiner, tragedy exploits the emotional and ideological meaning of death but does it in a “safe” way. Medium of art separates the viewer from the direct fear for his life and life of his nearest and dearest.

On the one hand, development of death through tragedy (let us call it in this way) releases a man from fear (others die and die “not so seriously”). On the other hand, it offers a chance to condense, intensify the elements which constitute the experience of death (Aristotle spoke about greater value of the tight over the «diluted by the stream of time»).

Here, Kleiner enters the realm of considerations relating to those qualities of death which make it tragic. As you remember, according to Aristotle, not everyone is born to be a hero of a tragedy. It cannot be immaculate man who suddenly turns his happy life into existence full of disasters. It cannot be so because instead of pity or fear it will only evoke outrage.

Moreover, a hero of a tragedy cannot be a wicked person who passes from misery to happiness; because it also fails to meet conditions set for the tragedy as it conjures neither pleasure nor pity or fear.

Finally, it cannot be a wicked man who, under vicissitudes of the fate, runs from happiness into misfortune. Although it will provide the viewer with pleasure, it will fail to evoke pity and fear.

So is there anyone at all who could take part in Aristotle's tragedy? Yes, the answer is yes. The hero of Aristotelian tragedy must be, firstly, a fairly innocent person who can become guilty of something only through misguidance (it causes pity) and, secondly, a man like us, the audience (which, in turn, makes the fear possible.)

This is how Aristotle recognizes it. Kleiner emphasizes that not every death can cause shock among recipients. In order for it to happen, one needs three elements, namely, intensifying death itself and making it extraordinary, an adequate and suitable hero, series of events leading to death.

Thus, death as a consequence of a long life is not a tragedy. It is indeed sad and unfortunate but normal, common and has no potential to evoke tragedy. According to Kleiner, we do not mentally rebel against the death of an elder because we treat it as a natural course of events. Only under some exceptional circumstances someone may protest against it.

Whereby, our revolt occurs at the disruption of what we consider to be the natural course of life, for instance at the time of a premature death. And this revolt may be increased by violent circumstances in which the loss of life happened.

Kleiner says the following, "Only premature death, only violent intrusion constitutes tragedy" [4].

Therefore, if someone, a strong believer in life after death, prepares to travel to the other world, we cannot talk about tragedy. We cannot talk about it when someone experienced everything that he could and should in his life and now departs. Moreover, even if he failed to live his life, according to Kleiner failed to "taste it", but died from the lack of strength to continue to live, it also fails to be a tragedy.

So, we already know the first condition of tragedy. It is premature death. It is a necessary condition, yet not sufficient because the very prematurity of death will not shock the viewer. To do so, the right person is required.

Kleiner has high expectations of a tragedy hero. It has to be someone who is generally regarded as an exceptional person and whose departure will be treated as a significant loss for the world, depletion. *Ergo*, i. e. the one who dies tragically must be a man of great value.

Kleiner draws attention to the sociological and historical dimension of human greatness. For a long time, it was someone representing the world of gods or heroes (such as Heracles). Then, the splendor was passed onto kings and members of the royal family close to gods and heroes. (Kleiner's comment, perhaps still valid, says that a tragedy reflects the class hierarchy more than the epos). Christianity added the motif of those chosen by God and the saints. The sixteenth and the seventeenth century, as represented by the English and Spanish theater, allow people who come from social elites (see Othello, Romeo, Dom Guttierre) become the heroes of the tragedy (the exception is the peasant hero of Calderon's tragedy *El Alcalde de Zalamea* (*The Mayor of Zalamea*). It was the nineteenth century and the middle class who democratized the image of a tragedy. However, it was in the following century, the twentieth one, "the common man" would show his tragic face".

The third element that allows us to speak about tragedy is the right combination of events leading to tragic death. The theme of a tragedy is not the moment of death in itself. Death cannot surprise a viewer; it is not acceptable when none of the tragedy events signals the possibility of hero's destruction. On the contrary, the sequence of events must lead to a tragic, fatal finale; a viewer should be convinced about inevitable death of the hero. It is not enough that the hero dies. A tragedy is real when the hero must die.

Only the combination of those three components makes death become a tragic motive, because according to Kleiner's definition, "pathos is the need in premature destruction of a great value" [4].

However, Kleiner continues his analysis of the concept of «tragedy» because only specification of the justification of death makes (or does not) the tragedy reach its peak. Let us name a few forms that can be taken by the pathos according to Kleiner. Those are, "pathos of the devastating fate, tragic guilt, tragedy of excessive power of evil, tragic conflict of values incapable of coexistence, tragic revolutionism, tragedy of a victim" [4].

Most often, combination of the events leading to death takes the form of a lost fight, but the fight is not essential anymore. Christ, who does not fight, also belongs to the pantheon of tragic characters. Also, the human intrigues leading a hero to destruction can replace the struggle. Finally, they might be the factors beyond people's control. Here, Kleiner refers to *Oedipus the King* saying that none of the mortals did anything that would lead Oedipus to kill his father and start incestuous relationship with his mother. This dimension, brought to the viewer by Oedipus' story, becomes particularly important because "... the feeling and understanding of the need in falling intensifies, the power of inevitability grows, horizons extend and

expand, the breath of the mysterious, metaphysical reality penetrates, the mystery of being, the most profound aspect, is revealed ...» [4].

So, FATE comes into a human life, the life of a hero of a tragedy and its viewer. Fate may take the form of the moral order to which a man must succumb, it may become a system of social relations which are crushing an individual, it may be a consequence of the inheritance (popular among naturalists) and finally it may be a link to superhuman things, and then we speak about destiny.

In the collision of a Man and Fate, forces are not distributed evenly: an individual cannot win Fate. By saying it, Kleiner restores a human, cultural reflection of the category of Fate. If we eliminate Fate, both from life and from art, if we believe that a man and only man is fully responsible for the vicissitude of their lives, then according to Kleiner, not only we will falsify the truth of life but also deprive ourselves of the opportunity to live through a tragedy at its peak.

Thereby, Kleiner complements his earlier definition. A tragedy is not only “the necessity of a premature destruction of a great value”, but “a necessity that was imposed by fate”.

According to Kleiner, only the tragedy of fate is a real tragedy because “pathos reaches the very metaphysical breath”. Kleiner demands a dignified dimension of fate, after all, it is not just a fulfillment of some kind of prophecy. The true awe is inspired by Fate that unravels all appropriate (and terrible) significance of the past which cannot be undone by anyone and anything, such as the fact that Hamlet's father was murdered by his uncle and his mother married a murderer. Such manifestation of Fate which becomes Moira destroys the character.

At such a moment, it comes to intensification of something that we can call evil. Kleiner emphasizes in particular the fact that tragic fate manifested as a «tragedy of the excessive power of evil» is particularly shocking and moving for a viewer. That is because displaying evil forces which determine the shape of the individual's life has a greater effect than showing the most insidious intrigues of an evil, yet single, man.

In this struggle, we may see not a battle between the good and the evil but two clashed values that are valuable just as they are, yet impossible to reconcile. Antiquity brought us such a conflict personified by Antigone and Creon, while the Polish literature has its own relationship between Earl Henry and Pankracy, the heroes of *Non-divine comedy* by Zygmunt Krasinski. Earl Henry represents aristocracy and its virtues (loyalty to honor, courage, bravery, responsibility, respect for tradition). Pankracy is a revolutionary: honest, conquering, visionary, dreaming of a new, better and righteous world. Their arguments are so equal that they both die. The values they believed in proved to be incapable of coexistence, and it is another variation of the tragedy that can be encountered by people.

In the case of Earl Henry and Pankracy, their conflict is also an example of a tragedy of revolutionism, that is the struggle between the old order and those who want to introduce new, previously unrecognized or unfollowed ideals to the world.

In *Non-divine comedy*, the ultimate winner is Christ who brought into the European and, perhaps, global culture and spirituality the idea of sacrifice, self-sacrifice for others. However, according to believers, Christ was not defeated. But for those who do not perceive Christ's activities through the lens of eternity, his life and death are tragic examples of sacrifice for humanity which, despite this, failed to become better *en bloc*. God-man who dies for all people – this image has an enormous strength.

To this factor, along with the intensification of feelings, actions and thoughts, Kleiner draws particular attention. According to him, one can talk about intensity of human strength; one can talk with reference to heroes of a tragedy, as well as the audience. Here, we quote a long passage from Kleiner, “The whole human power and the depth of human essence are manifested in the face of extreme threats and at the moments when one is looking in the eyes of death. This is the highest test of strength. In that case, no piece of art can better reveal the human self and allow its values to shine than a tragedy” [4].

Kleiner looked at the issues connected with pathos and tragedy from the point of view of a literature researcher. Prematurity of death, intensified effect, specific type of character and conflict. Somehow, Aristotle comes to mind but...

Old Isaac Bodlicott from *Postern of Fate* by Agatha Christie was about ninety years old when he died. We know he was 90 years old because he said so. However, nobody believed it, yet no one doubted his hoariness. Regardless of his age, he kept saving residents of a village near Hollowquay when things broke down in their houses.

Through long years, he acquired the experience in dealing with bath tubs, gas stoves, electric appliances, locks, doors, windows. He was efficient and inexpensive. Oh, but he had his flaws. He liked to repeat the stories from his life and kept looking for new listeners to share bygone events. For him, heroes of those stories were still alive. An older sister who was a crook and got betrayed by the butcher's dog. Mrs.

Atkins who kept a revolver in a white wedding shoe. She used it to shoot people who scared her beloved birds...

One day, however, Prudence, better known as Tuppence, and sometimes as Mrs Thomas Beresford, found him dead in a garden. At the end, he was given a very decent funeral; his family appreciated a large bouquet of flowers from grateful employers and delegated other members of the family to work in the garden. The relatives did not weep long although during the hearing it was decided that Isaac had been murdered by unknown assailants. They did not cry because... Isaac was old and the family has already suffered from other deaths. However, wise Tuppence said it was a tragedy.

In 1937, in the prewar Poland, a Polish physicist, Professor Władysław Natanson, died having reached the same age as Isaac. He also lived a long, fulfilling life being similarly successful, though by pursuing a different kind of things (he was interested in electrons and protons instead of tubes and wires), and his death was also said to be a tragedy, as the author of his memoirs, Fr. Bishop Michael Godlewski, called it (and added the word «wise man»).

Natanson's death took longer than the sudden death of Isaac. In 1933, he was still working 12 hours a day, defending the university's autonomy, still had plenty of research plans, but... «clouds started to gather on the horizon», he started to get tired too easily, his arms and eyes had weakened. Yet, he kept working, though instead of physics, he got involved in... Alexandria and the Arabs. He wrote, published, rushed as he felt that he was getting weaker and weaker. Then the attacks came that resulted in a temporary paralysis. Along with the physical pain, a spiritual pain was accompanied by awareness that he understood so little from the order of the surrounding world and culture. On the physical part, every single change of weather, every sudden alteration of temperature was a disaster preventing him from normal functioning for a long time. At the same time, he was haunted by gloomy thoughts about the poor value of humanity. He read Condorcet's work presenting the lives of many scientists sentenced to death or imprisonment by irrational and cruel crowd; he linked it to the events of his times, to the persecution of researchers conducted by Bolshevism and Nazism.

Year 1936 brought further deterioration of his health condition. He lost the capacity to do intellectual work, he was unable to read, speak and lie down on the couch. "So, he sat, and sat in a chair with his head bowed, absorbed by sad thoughts ..." He wrote that his life became a stagnation and half-existence. He failed to be comforted by existing knowledge and his achievements. "He kept weakening, departing, burning out just like an oil lamp when it runs out of oil..." His tragedy, as Godlewski wrote, came to an end on February 26, 1937.

Both deaths as examples of fate qualified to become a tragedy would fail to satisfy Aristotle or Kleiner. Particularly Kleiner; and in neither case we are dealing with a premature death. Moreover, both of them, Isaac and Natanson, lived long fulfilling lives.

But I agree with Tuppence and Godlewski that we can talk about tragedy in each of those cases. Maybe it is because all the approximations of the tragic events and circumstances are just approximations, while the true essence of a tragedy and pathos is the revealing of Fate – unpredictable, unknown, incomprehensible and powerful one.

Fate came to Isaac taking the shape of murderers, to Natanson – under the form of disease. Nevertheless, it came and **this meeting revealed not only the power of Fate but the greatness of a Man**. Let us give the floor to Kleiner, "Fate dignifies [DHK – a man] when it breaks him/her – the kind of Shiller's fate that raises a man through his/her devastation (*welches den Menschen erhebt, wenn es den Menschen zermalmt*)» [4].

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