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NED STARK: "ONE MAN IN TEN THOUSAND"

"And the gods, who set mortals on that brutal voyage toward understanding, have decreed that we must suffer into learning.… Harsh is the grace of gods ruling from their terrible thrones."—Aeschylus' *Agamemnon,* lines 176-180

"It's Always the Innocents who Suffer."—Varys, "The Pointy End"

Winter is coming, but life in Westeros was already tragic. Where else could taking a new job cause you to lose your head… literally? Fans of *Game of Thrones* might be tempted to call the series tragic because of its dark themes of desolation and desperation… or simply because it continues to kill off all of the best characters! But, it's neither an untimely death, nor utter despair that makes a story truly tragic. To understand what tragedy really is, in the classical sense, we have to go back to its inventors, the ancient Greeks.

Game of Thrones draws its inspiration from a wide array of myths, legends, and folklore. And, it was just the same for the first Greek tragedians, who used Greek mythology as material for their own stories. Like *Game of Thrones*, the action in those ancient tragedies centered on the stories of four ruling dynasties: House Atreus in Mycenae, House Cadmus in Thebes, House Erichthonius in Athens, and House Minos in Crete. And, like the main houses in *Game of Thrones*, these tragic dynasties suffered terrible fates of their own making. Yet, the most tragic of all was House Cadmus, which became famous for the magnitude of its unmerited suffering and the determination its members showed in overcoming such undeserved hardship. This is probably why most people now associate tragedy with any tale that depicts terrible suffering. However, the most tragic stories almost always include the self-inflicted suffering of innocents. The saga of Ned Stark is a prime example of this sort of tragedy.

"The Man Who Passes the Sentence Should Swing the Sword."—Eddard, "Winter is Coming"

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the first philosopher to examine tragedy, thought the main ingredient in any tragic tale is the demise of a mostly good person with a fatal character flaw. Such a tragic flaw–which the Greeks called *hamartia*–might even consist in having too much of a good trait. Aristotle thought human beings were at their best when they aimed for everything in moderation. It's obvious that Ned's overblown sense of honor is what Aristotle would call excessive, and it's what continues to land him in hot water. Another major component in tragedy for Aristotle is an error (or errors) caused by the character flaw that ends up reversing someone's fortune. He called such reversals *peripeteia*, which means "to fall down around," like when we say "things have come crashing down" around someone. Finally, Aristotle believed a tragic hero or heroine must wind up in the sort of misery that could elicit fear and pity in an audience, so they could feel sympathy for the character's plight and identify with it. In this way, tragedy can fulfill its main social function, *catharsis*, which is the purging of negative emotions in its audience. For Aristotle, the story of Oedipus by Sophocles was the shining example of tragedy, precisely because it: 1) moved its audience to tears by 2) showing a decent man trying his best to do the right thing, but 3) mucking it up in a perfect storm of circumstance, character flaws, and dumb luck.

Fortunately, *Game of Thrones* delivers in droves on Aristotle's three criteria, especially in how Ned's story plays out. From the first episode, Ned is depicted as an honorable man who performs his duty with dignity. "The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword," he tells Bran. And this is meant to give us insight into the quality of his character; Ned is nothing if not decent. He's the sort of man who follows the old ways. Yet, as the first episode unfolds, we get glimpses into Ned's *hamartia* after he learns King Robert is coming to name him Hand:

NED: He's coming this far North, there's only one thing he's after.
CATELYN: You can always say no, Ned.

But, Ned can't say no, his tragic obsession with honor and duty won't allow it. As if he needed prodding, Luwin reminds Ned of this after Catelyn points out the mortal danger involved, "The king rode for a month to ask Lord Stark's help… You swore the king an oath, my lord." Sure enough, by the end of the first episode Ned has agreed and rides south with the king.

That was Ned's reversal of fortune. Since his decision stemmed strictly from duty and honor, his role as Hand will remain dominated by those values. He's been set on a path that ensures his tragic flaw will continue to come into play. In the next episode he kills Sansa's dire wolf by order of the king, even though he could have refused, or simply let the animal escape. It would be reasonable to expect his longtime friend to forgive such a transgression. But, Ned's reluctance to defy the king stems directly from his commitments to honor and duty.

"You Think My Life is Some Precious Thing to Me?"—Eddard, "Baelor"

In "The Wolf and the Lion," we finally see Ned defy the king when he steps down as Hand after hearing King Robert's plan to assassinate Daenerys and her unborn child. In venting his anger, Robert recognizes why Ned is now refusing to obey:

ROBERT: You're the King's Hand, Lord Stark. You'll do as I command or I'll find me a Hand who will.
NED: And good luck to him. I thought you were a better man.
ROBERT: Out! Out, damn you! I'm done with you. Go! Run back to Winterfell! …You think you're too good for this? Too proud and honorable? This is a war!

Once again, Ned's decisions, even the ostensibly defiant ones, are dominated by his sense of honor. Although it appears it might work out for Ned, he gets pulled back into the king's service while dutifully searching for the secret Jon Arryn died chasing. From there, Ned's fortune really begins to spiral downward, as his honor obliges him to make a series of errors: like confronting Cersei, refusing Renley's help, and ignoring Littlefinger's advice to take advantage of the power Robert bequeathed to him as Lord Protector of the Realm.

It turns out Ned's not just decent… he's virtuous and damn likeable! Most fantasy stories would kill to have a hero like him as the protagonist; but *Game of Thrones* simply kills him off. In

"Baelor," Varys visits Ned in the dungeons one last time in an effort to convince him to forsake his honor in favor of survival:

VARYS: Cersei knows you as a man of honor. If you give her the peace she needs and promise to carry her secret to your grave, I believe she will allow you to take the Black and live out your days on the Wall with your brother and your bastard son.
NED: You think my life is some precious thing to me? That I would trade my honor for a few more years of… Of what? ...I learned how to die a long time ago.

By now, *Game of Thrones* is known for its refusal to deliver the hackneyed, hero-wins-in-the-end trope of more conventional fantasy tales. The classical tragedians would, no doubt, smile at such a move, since they did the same thing by challenging the heroic epics of Homer (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) that came before them. This is where that third Aristotelean element, *catharsis*, comes into focus.

Those two episodes which depict Ned's imprisonment and execution set viewership records for the first season, but the online reaction was pretty hostile after his beheading. Many had a hard time accepting how a noble figure could meet such an ignoble end. Then something interesting developed. Fans began to commiserate online about those feelings and a sense of community grew from their interactions, as fans purged their own emotions to like-minded folks. This same sort of *catharsis* took place whenever the ancient Greeks attended classical tragedies. We can only imagine how much more intense this would have been sitting side by side on the walls of those ancient amphitheaters, watching the suffering on stage and witnessing the outpouring of emotions among our fellow watchers on the walls. The ancient Greeks realized that weeping alongside others, even strangers, created a bond almost as strong as kinship. And this was the social function of tragedies, to bring together the citizens of a city-state and bind them to one another through the common feelings of fear and pity.

"As We Sin, So Do We Suffer."—Pycelle, "Baelor"

More recently Martha Nussbaum has revived the moral and social relevance of classical tragedy in contemporary life. For her, the most important concept in Greek tragedy is the idea that people are, simultaneously, victims and agents in their own stories. Like Oedipus and Ned, they find themselves constrained by circumstances and chance, but they also tend to put themselves in those situations because of their character habits. Classical tragedy reminds us of that through the exercise of what Nussbaum calls fearful compassion. She identifies three components of such compassion. First, we recognize another's suffering is substantial. Second, we realize the suffering person didn't deserve so much misery. Third, we understand how such tragedy could easily happen to us. Nussbaum concludes that when it comes to passing moral judgment on the actions of others, we should remember they may have landed in those circumstances because of some catastrophe, but the actor still has some responsibility for their actions.

Nussbaum also believes our moral lives are filled with moments of "tragic conflict"—cases where luck constrains a person in such a way that they must choose between two competing and

equally valid moral claims. This is where *Game of Thrones* is at its most tragic. Nearly every lead character lands in tragic conflict which leads to their demise. The paradigmatic example of tragic conflict for Nussbaum is the decision laid before Agamemnon of House Atreus. Agamemnon was the commander of the Greek fleet that was ready to set sail for Troy. Unfortunately, the weather made things too treacherous for his army to leave the Greek shores safely. He was given a choice: sacrifice your daughter to placate the angry gods, or risk your army's destruction. This mirrors the choice which Melisandre places in front of Stannis when his army is frozen in its tracks on the way to Winterfell. Like Stannis, Agamemnon chose to kill his daughter—even though killing one's own family was deemed a heinous act by the ancient Greeks. But, Agamemnon doesn't make the decision lightly. He recognizes that both choices are not "without their evils," and he struggles to prioritize those evils in his mind and reconcile them to his choice of action.

We often find ourselves in similar scenarios involving a practical conflict between two competing values. Because our lives are full of all manner of commitments—to our families, our careers, our own hopes and dreams, etc.—we frequently find ourselves in a place where we're damned if we do and damned if don't. But, this brute fact about our moral lives isn't something from which we should try to hide; it's something we should embrace. Doing so helps us realize we too are victims, as well as agents, in our own moral stories. It's not that we should wish for suffering, but we should accept that, like these tragic heroes, we must suffer into learning and moral maturity.

"Then Lord Stark is One Man in 10,000."—Aemon, "Baelor"

When word reaches Castle Black that Ned has been captured, his "son" Jon Snow finds himself in his own tragic conflict. The wise Maester Aemon advises him about his situation:

AEMON: Tell me, did you ever wonder why the men of the Night's Watch take no wives and father no children?
JON: No.
AEMON: So they will not love. Love is the death of duty. If the day should ever come when your lord father was forced to choose between honor on the one hand and those he loves on the other, what would he do?
JON: He... He would do whatever was right. No matter what.
AEMON: Then Lord Stark is one man in 10,000. Most of us are not so strong.

Jon has faith in Ned to do what's right when it comes to practical conflicts in value, but as we've just seen, the problem with such scenarios is that there's no truly right choice, because neither option is "without its evils." This raises another point about tragedy highlighted by Nussbaum. Most people believe that the wisest way to deal with tragic conflict is to prioritize the competing values and act according to that hierarchy. This is just what Stannis and Agamemnon did when they chose to sacrifice their daughters. Most moral philosophers would see prioritization as the best strategy because they assume any adequate moral theory should not allow for the possibility of genuine practical conflict. But, there are some real problems to thinking in this way. First, we must admit that even if it were possible to arrange moral precepts hierarchically, sometimes

situations arise where the same value gives rise to conflicting obligations. For instance, wanting to be a good father, by itself, might cause a practical conflict wherever competing commitments to multiple children pop up. Moreover, if reason really could provide a clear resolution through prioritization, then in such scenarios there should be no "moral residue" (that unpleasant feeling which comes from second guessing our choices). Yet, we do often feel guilt and remorse for choosing the lesser of two evils and we look at figures like Stannis and Agamemnon with some contempt because of the decisions they've made.

A good tragedy doesn't attempt naïve solutions to the problems of practical conflict—the way most moral philosophies try to do—through prioritization. Instead, it shows us the fullness and complexity of the problem itself. It teaches us that the best a tragic hero can do is to acknowledge his or her own suffering and recognize it as an expression of a commitment to moral goodness. So, the key is to learn from suffering without succumbing to the misguided optimism of philosophical safety. The best that we, the watchers on our own walls, can do for the tragic heroes we encounter in life is to honor the significance of those troubles by seeing them as real possibilities for ourselves. Aemon recognizes that Jon must face his own conflict in order to grow morally:

AEMON: We're all human. Oh, we all do our duty when there's no cost to it. Honor comes easy then. Yet sooner or later in every man's life there comes a day when it's not easy. A day when he must choose.

The aim of tragedy isn't some romantic notion of happiness, but rather the greater range of emotion and nuance in action that comes with moral maturity. Ned was unable to open himself up to such possibilities, to the extreme of not even telling Jon who is real parents were, and it led to his eventual demise. As a member of the Night's Watch, Jon followed Ned in choosing honor and duty, and it got him killed. Perhaps there's still an opportunity for Jon, as King in the North, to grow beyond Ned's single-minded prioritizations and learn that, in the *Game of Thrones*, like life, there is no escape from moral suffering, every choice involves a tragic loss.

Further Reading

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