The Gods Within: Chekhov, Lorca and Internalization of Tragic Fate

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"Tragedy," writes George Steiner in his *Death of Tragedy*, "is irreparable" (8). If the reader or spectator can envision any sort of solution for a disaster – whether it be through social or technical means – then it is not truly tragic. He points to playwrights like Ibsen and Chekhov by way of example. The situations in which their characters find themselves are indeed lamentable, but often it seems that all would be set right if only debts were repaid or love interests requited. What separates this sort of misfortune from actual tragedy is, according to Steiner, the lack of fate or divine intervention. No remedies were available to the tragic heroes of classical tragedy. The gods fated a particular destiny that was, without exception, inescapable. No matter what immediate solution became apparent, nothing could derail the course of fate. The most famous example of this is that of Oedipus, who fell right into the arms of his tragic destiny – murdering his father and marrying his mother - by trying to avoid it. By contrast, more modern "tragedies" have no divine force driving the plot. Without gods, there is no fate, and certainly nothing that is inescapable.

The majority of modern theater has a conspicuous lack of divine intervention. Should we dismiss it outright as "almost, but not quite"? The temptation to accept Steiner's contention is strong; many god-less plays, "revivals"
of the classical style, have missed the mark in some way. The Romantics of the 19th century sought to reach tragic ideal, in Steiner's view, but put too much of themselves into their art. Where classical art "strives for [the] ideal of impersonality, for the severance of the work from the contingency of the artist," Romanticism links play and playwright inextricably (Steiner 139). The result is too egocentric to make a truly tragic impact a large audience that may not be able to relate. Moreover, Romantic "tragedies," though fiercely dramatic, ended on some sort of redemptive note, reflecting "an age which did not believe in the finality of evil" (133). This is precisely Steiner's point – a play can be as violent or heart-wrenching as it gets, but if when all is said and done, if the loose ends are tied into a neat bow, it undermines the essence of tragedy.

The Naturalists faced a similar fate in Steiner's view, though they never meant to reach the same melodramatic intensity of the Romantics. They did not directly intend to resurrect the classical forms, but its heavy subject matter makes for an easy juxtaposition with Greek tragedy. Because Naturalist plays deal with realistic, everyday situations where no powerful outside force exists, Steiner insists that solutions can be found not just for the characters' problems, but for the problems of the society that these characters represent. Ibsen and Strindberg's sitting-room dramas, for instance, draw attention towards the issues of the middle-class, then "[summon] us to action in the conviction that truth of conduct can be defined and that it will liberate society" (291). Their heroes may not triumph, but they raise awareness of problems solvable problems. Steiner maintains that they are personally responsible for their follies. Had they chosen to, they could have
escaped their unfortunate ends. Where a solution exists, tragedy does not — "tragic" does not necessarily imply "tragedy."

What is tragic will only reach the status of tragedy if fate is involved. Fate cannot exist without gods. Thus, drama that lacks gods must also lack fate and, as such, cannot be tragedy. Steiner's syllogism is convincing in its simplicity, but its narrow scope may be its own downfall. Why must fate be dependent on the divine, on a power outside of ourselves? The human mind is easily convinced, and psychosomatic suggestion can lead to the most dire of self-fulfilling prophecies. I would like to propose that Steiner's scope is too limited; fate is something that can be created from within, and does not need to rely on the mandate of a supreme being. The psychological impact on the characters of modern drama, whether it stems from societal, political or cultural forces, is strong enough to act as fate-creator in a world where gods do not exist.

This paper will attempt to prove the continuation of fate into modern tragic theater, using the plays of Chekhov (a Naturalist) and Lorca (a post-Romantic) as representative examples. After setting up these authors in their proper cultural contexts, I will examine their works against well-established definitions of tragedy, both classical and modern. I will then closely analyze the internal workings of the tragic heroes of these plays, ultimately demonstrating how they have managed to create and fulfill their destinies, even in the absence of gods.
Tragedy's Reality – The Lives of Chekhov and Lorca

One would be hard-pressed to find suitable comparisons between such incongruent authors as Anton Chekhov and Federico García Lorca. Still, there are several points on which at least their tragic inspirations converge. The two writers seem to share an interesting muse – an embarrassing and ruinous secret. Chekhov's denial of his terminal illness and Lorca's inability to come to terms with his sexuality not only tint their respective works with incurable pessimism but create for both a most curious parallel to the heroes of classical tragedy. In effect, they exhibit real-life forms of the tragic flaw, a devastating and inescapable fact of existence that would ultimately bring about their premature demise. These flaws inspired dramatic pieces that are oddly similar in their psychological scope and the way in which they demonstrate a shift away from God-created fate. It is clear that each author, in his own distinct way, asked himself poignant questions about the nature of fate, stemming perhaps from an understanding of his own tragic fate that he could not avoid no matter how hard he tried to conceal it.

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a small port town in southern Russia. His short life, only fourty-four years, was a turbulent one and rarely a source of comfort to him. As a child, he endured not only the sting of poverty, but also the cruelty of an unloving family, large and full of corruption, mental instability and the ravages of addiction. "Tyranny and lies crippled our childhood so much," he once wrote to his brother, "that it makes me sick and afraid to remember" (Rayfield 17). Chekhov's father, a deeply religious and disciplinary man, beat his children regularly for even the slightest infractions. He insisted that
Chekhov and his brothers join the choir at the Greek monastery, forcing them into late-night and early-morning rehearsals, which he punctuated by thrashings (13). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Chekhov's associations with Greek Orthodoxy – and, consequently, religion on the whole – were so unpleasant. "When I recall my childhood I now find it rather gloomy," he lamented to a fellow writer in 1892, "I now have no religion" (14).

It was apparent to Chekhov from an unsettlingly young age that that there was a certain instability to his life, a lingering restlessness that would find its way into his written works. His first sexual experience, for instance, a night at the local brothel when he was thirteen years old, would set the stage for many future misadventures with women (51). Though he was a handsome young man who was never without interested parties, he remained incapable of sustaining a meaningful relationship. He expressed dissatisfaction with his unending string of girlfriends and fiancées, suggesting a need for the constant newness with which the brothels supplied him. Chekhov used his career as a doctor to further satiate his lust, routinely sleeping with the very prostitutes he examined for venereal diseases. As a writer for various literary magazines, he would use his experiences of medical examinations and autopsies as fodder for creative re-imaginings of this sordid world.

After the loss of one of his brothers to alcoholism, and then again when he was closer to his own death, he embarked on what he hoped would be an inspiring journey across Siberia and into Europe, unwilling to chain himself to one place for too long. Adding to his bevy of predicaments was a well-kept and fatal secret:
Chekhov had tuberculosis, officially contracted from one of his patients sometime in the 1880's, although he had been sickly and consumptive since childhood. As many of his own friends and family succumbed to the same disease, he dutifully concealed the severity of his condition. Likely experiencing his own fair share of denial, he continued his debauchery for as long as he could manage, regularly indulging in morphine or heroin to ease the pain of his speedy deterioration.

The 'sick doctor' device is not uncommon to Naturalist theater like Chekhov's; playwrights such as Ibsen and Strindberg employed the character recurrently. Naturalism in the arts frequently dealt with the theme of illness as a greater social issue. Sickness in the plays of this genre was represented by a cloying stench that permeated the membrane of the bourgeoisie, causing its fall and rotting from within. The inclusion of a doctor who was just as unwell as those he was meant to cure reinforced this social criticism. The role of a doctor is to diagnose; he is a sort of omniscient character because he can pinpoint exactly what's wrong with the other characters, both physically and mentally. But if a man of medicine cannot even treat his own ailments, then what hope can there be for his patients? If we extend the metaphor, we can surmise that the noble class is similarly doomed. The fact that Chekhov was himself a terminally ill doctor could not have escaped his keen sense of ironic fate. His realization of the irony inherent in his regrettable situation must have perpetuated his pessimistic worldview and simultaneous insistence that the plays he wrote were, in fact, comedies.

It is no wonder that Chekhov, surrounded by death, abuse and disease throughout his life, cultivated an ironic tinge to his writing. His portrayal of
bourgeois existence was disquieting: although his intention was to mock, he instead incited profound sadness and pity. Chekhov even believed himself to be a humorist; he was known as a biting satirist long before he began writing his best-known works. The many pieces he had written for disreputable newspapers, some under assumed names, had established him as a cutthroat and often vulgar writer. Although he began to tackle quite serious psychological issues in his short fiction, he could nevertheless "be sure of hiding behind a neutral, ironical authorial persona" (127). Furthermore, the four plays that constitute his most established theatrical oeuvre – *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* – were all meant to be satirical, if not outright comedic.

Despite Chekhov's delusions to the contrary, the intended comedy within these major plays translates into tragic irony. *The Seagull*, for example, is "full of cruel parody" and encapsulates "all the material of comedy," but leaves a troubling void where happy resolution belongs – "age is unscathed, youth perishes, and the servants sabotage the household" (353). Konstantin Stanislavsky, co-founder of the Moscow Art Theater and producer of several of Chekhov's plays, noticed this disparity. Expecting jovial farces from the playwright, he was troubled to find instead *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, the latter of which Chekhov had labeled with the sub-heading 'comedy', just as he had done with *The Seagull*. "I only fear that instead of a farce again we shall have a great big tragedy," the director predicted of *The Cherry Orchard*, "Even now he thinks *Three Sisters* a very merry little piece" (580). Surprisingly, "though it focuses on the destruction of a family and their illusions," *The Cherry Orchard* was designed as a vaudeville (580).
It was Chekhov's answer to Stanislavsky's displeasure with the overwhelming sadness of *The Three Sisters*.

Like Chekhov, Federico García Lorca lived for only a very short time, from 1898 until the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Although he enjoyed celebrity and his writing won commercial success, he nevertheless struggled with a suicidal depression. Ian Gibson, a respected Lorca biographer, suggests that Lorca's unhappiness was an unfortunate side-effect of trying to camouflage his homosexuality. "The necessity of having to lead a double life in a society where homosexuality was considered abhorrent," Gibson explains, "played a large part in the poet's underlying sadness and, at times, despair" (xxi). But the problem extended past the need for a public façade. Lorca was raised in an extremely religious environment and maintained a strong connection to Catholicism into his adult life. His attempts to reconcile his homosexuality with his religion were agonizing, and certainly contributed to the development of his strange relationship with God.

Although Lorca's complete devotion to Jesus and his teachings never waned, he "had come to feel a passionate hatred for the Christian God" (65). He identified with Jesus' suffering, but could not abide obeisance to a God who did not accept all of His followers or who caused them so much pain. Lorca found an outlet for his religious apprehensions in his writing, particularly in his tragic theater, where he pitted his heroes against the cruel authority of nature or family - earthly substitutes for God. Yerma, the heroine of the play of the same name, serves as an apt example. A barren woman with a desperate desire to have children, she reflects
the author's own frustrations. As a homosexual man in an intolerant culture, Lorca was himself, effectively, sterile. No socially acceptable solution existed for either Yerma or Lorca, both devout Catholics whose faith began to shatter when God's absence became painfully clear.

Interestingly, both Chekhov and Lorca experienced the beginnings of political upheaval in their respective countries. The political climates of Russia and Spain, two rarely compared regions of the world, provide fascinating contextual backdrops for the lives and works of these men. Both authors lived in the mounting crescendo of citizen unrest. Because he died before the first Russian Revolution of 1905, Chekhov could not have known the complete reworking of society that would follow, but he must have been well aware of the tensions that had been building during his lifetime. Lorca was less fortunate, although he, too, did not experience life under the new regime. At the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War, he was shot by Falange militia at Franco's behest, most likely a punishment for his homosexuality and heretical leanings. Chekhov and Lorca lived their lives on the precipice of revolution; the overwhelming mood of instability could not have escaped either their thoughts or their writings. Steiner mentions that important periods of drama often "did coincide with periods of particular national energy" (109); as members of quickly unraveling societies, Chekhov and Lorca processed their countries' turmoil through their characters (many of whom I will discuss in a later section of this essay). Chekhov's displaced nobility reflected the growing obsolescence of the bourgeoisie, while Lorca's oppressed heroines mimed their
real-life counterparts, an entire nation of people soon to be controlled by a deeply religious government.

Chekhov and Lorca's religious concerns also contributed greatly to the overall moods of their works. Chekhov's childhood experiences with Russian Orthodoxy and ensuing physical deterioration may have done little for his piety, but where he replaced faith-based questioning with outright cynicism, Lorca felt the need to play out his doubts through his fiction, perhaps hoping to stumble upon a solution for his torment. The acute need to harmonize his heretical beliefs with his intense spiritual devotion guided Lorca through his artistic exploits. The paths that these two authors took towards tragedy may have differed, but the resulting works converged on a crucial point – we can no longer blame God for the fate that we create ourselves.

In order to better understand these works and how they fit into the tragic mold, we must define the goals of tragedy itself.

Classifying Tragedy – How Can Modern Notions of Tragedy Fit into Classical Forms?

Tragedy is not defined simply by the presence of gods or fate – these elements are present even in comedy, tragedy's opposite, and thus cannot be the foundation on which tragedy rests, despite what Steiner might have us believe. The need to separate dramatic forms into distinct categories and delineate their exact necessary components was evident even while classical theater was still being written. Two of the most prominent philosophers of tragedy, Aristotle and
Nietzsche, have carefully elaborated their respective understandings of what real
tragedy must include. I hope to demonstrate how modern theater continues to
adhere to their rubrics.

Aristotle explains in his *Poetics* that tragedy has "ceased to evolve" (Halliwell
35). After generations of poets had made their slight alterations and improvements,
the genre "attained its natural fulfillment," leaving no room for further modification.
Agreeing with Aristotle would not only mean accepting Sophocles and Euripides as
the epitome of tragic ideal, but also granting them the dubious status of 'Last
Tragedians.' If tragedy's development ended with these men, how must we
categorize the tragic drama written since the 5th century BCE? Do these plays
overflow the confines of tragedy, or can we allow for malleable borders in order to
accommodate contextual changes? To answer these questions, we must define
these borders, an endeavor that cannot be tackled without a thorough
understanding of Aristotle's own requirements for tragedy.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is made up of six crucial components that
"make it what it is": plot structure, character, thought, style, lyric poetry and
spectacle (37). Of these, the most important by far is plot structure, the ultimate
goal of tragedy, "because tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of
actions and life." Characterization is of second importance, as it exists only insofar
as it moves along the plot. The rest of the elements decrease in consequence
following the aforementioned order. Thought refers to the characters' ability to
argue convincingly. Style and lyric poetry describe verbal expression as well as
vocal rhythm and melody of the characters' speech, respectively. Spectacle, the last
of the six elements, "is the least integral of all to the poet's art: for the potential of tragedy does not depend upon public performance of the actors" (39). We will confine our discussion primarily to those elements that do not deal with the structure language, as Aristotle's ruminations on the subject were limited to the linguistic parameters of Attic Greek. This leaves us with plot and characterization, luckily the most relevant themes of the Poetics.

Undoubtedly the most significant of Aristotle's prerequisites for a good tragedy are unity of action and arousal of pity and fear. Every component of his tragic plot structure leans on the overarching need for unity. In order to be a tragedy, a drama must follow a perfectly logical progression of events and be encapsulated between a clear beginning, middle and end. Each distinct event must have a precise purpose, "for anything whose presence or absence has no clear effect cannot be counted an integral part of the whole," and must evoke both fear and pity in the audience (40). Ideally, a tragedy should also involve recognition (a change from a state of ignorance into a state of knowledge) and reversal (a surprising and often ironic plot twist), both of which, if executed properly and in conjunction with each other, will actually produce pity and fear. Although Aristotle outlines several types of recognition, he asserts that the best kind will arise out of the emotional impact of the events themselves. A drama in which the unity of all these elements cannot be disturbed for fear of collapsing the whole is at the core of the tragic ideal.

A tragedy may follow either a simple or complex plotline, although the latter is highly preferable. A simple plot must, of course, be "continuous and unitary" as
described above, but its transformation – that is, a change in status "from affliction to prosperity, or the reverse" – need not arise from reversal or recognition (42). The action of the complex plot does involve these things. Again, this speaks to the importance of interwoven plot elements in tragedy; if a transformation occurs without any particular reason, then the overall unity of the drama is marred. A well-crafted tragedy should flow as naturally as possible from action to action, leaving no effect without a cause.

Character portrayal is nearly as important as plot in its contribution to a play's structural unity, as well as its ability to provoke, and then purge, fear and pity in its audience. Just as plot cannot be superfluous in any way, the characterization within an ideal tragedy must also be limited to necessity, "so that a necessary or probable reason exists for a particular character's speech or action" (48). This follows logically with Aristotle's previous points - a smooth plot progression relies on the actions of its characters – but he adds several parameters to which these individuals must adhere. He insists that the protagonist must be ethically good, appropriate for his prescribed role and consistent in his nature (47). This is not to say that the tragic hero must be even-tempered and pure, but "the poet, while portraying men who are irascible or lazy or who have other such faults, ought to give them, despite such traits, goodness of character" (48).

Naturally, the "fearful and pitiful events" that occur befall the characters, particularly the hero, and must follow their own set of rules. A wholly good man cannot fall from prosperity into affliction, as this would provoke pity and fear but not purge them; neither should the plot tell the fall of a truly evil man; his fate
would, in this case, be deserved, and "such a plot-structure... would not arouse pity or fear" (44). Neither should an evil man move from affliction into prosperity, as the consequences would not be "moving nor pitiful nor fearful" (44). Aristotle correctly notes that very few options remain if these rules are put into effect, and the resulting hero figure must exist on a middle ground between good and evil. His fall into affliction is tragic, unlike the previous examples, "because of a certain fallibility," – the hamartia, or tragic flaw - and not because of any inherent evil (44). If the goal is to provoke a certain audience reaction, the hero must be someone with whom the viewer can identify. A hero who comes to a tragic end because of something he could have helped or because he deserved it will not win pity from the viewer, whereas hamartia – a sad fact of a hero's life that in no way reflects poorly on his character – is acceptable.

In brief, a perfectly unified Aristotelian tragedy begins with a complication (the exposition and rising action that precedes a transformation), continues to the point of recognition, which, in turn, creates the transformation from prosperity into affliction, and proceeds after this point to the dénouement that comprises the falling action of the play (51). Each section flows fluidly into the next, and although a surprising turn of events is certainly integral, it must nevertheless be a logical turn, an event that occurs as a direct result of previous events. The plot itself must be complex, but single – a branching plotline would be too reminiscent of epic poetry. As for characterization, Aristotle requires a sympathetic hero, as well as total appropriateness of all other characters. In order to incite pity and fear, the hero must be generally good and possess hamartia. To the Greek audience, this brand of
bad luck would have made the protagonist pitiable, as it does not imply weakness of character but rather a fate that he cannot control.

What makes a tragedy a tragedy? Would a play that fit all of Aristotle's rules but one still be a tragic? This is not an issue that Aristotle addresses head-on, but given his precision in delineating every aspect of a proper tragedy, it seems that the philosopher himself would answer this question in the negative. Although he does allow room for variation, there is no mistaking which type of tragedy Aristotle deems superior. His assertion that tragedy has reached its structural pinnacle seems to stifle any possibility of straying from his formula. Returning now to the opening quandary, I would like to address this issue as it applies to modern tragedy, that of Chekhov and Lorca in particular.

I contend that the overarching theme of Aristotle's guidelines is in fact quite relevant to post-Classical theater, but that the particulars cannot fully extend into the modern realm. Complete unity of action, for instance, the key to Aristotle's principles, is present in both Chekhov's and Lorca's drama. The works of each author, which will discuss at greater length in a later section of this essay, embody a cohesive story line without diverging too drastically into subplots. Despite radically different writing styles, their respective end results nonetheless fit this portion of the Aristotelian mold. Lorca includes only what is essential to his theme in order to advance his plots, by virtue of his simplicity and ardent symbolism. For example, the macho and the hembra of Yerma's final act are archetypal representations of pagan sexuality and the workings of nature as a whole. Because he uses strongly recognizable symbols, Lorca has no need for over-explication or
beating around the bush – his meaning is abundantly clear. Chekhov, although he is comparatively verbose, fills each of his lines with deep significance. Even stage directions and setting are absolutely crucial. The time of day and season of each act of *The Three Sisters*, for example, reflect each act's mood; they signal not only the passage of time, but the process of aging and embitterment.

What is important to note about this modern drama, however, is that its unity of action is not harmonious in the way Aristotle would have wanted it to be. Instead of fluid plot progression, these plays involve a certain amount of jarring, almost forced development. Ancient tragedies certainly feel more "complete" than any of Chekhov or Lorca's plays. Typically, classical tragedy leaves no possible continuation to its narrative. The heroes meet their predestined fate head-on, the gods make their appearance and, more often than not, the majority of the characters meet their demise. The drama resolves itself logically and fluidly, with no unanswered questions or room for further speculation. This is not entirely the case with either Chekhov or Lorca, whose drama, although unified, fails to satisfy on the same basic level. Yerma's decision to murder her husband is not harmonious with the rest of the plot, even though it is logical. It is a disturbing final moment that savagely severs all loose ends, leaving the viewer not with a sense of justice or satisfaction from a lesson learned, but an unexpected jolt of fear. Neither does Adela's suicide in *Bernarda Alba* provide a tidy finish; the only thing that her death accomplishes is to reinforce Bernarda's supremacy. In *The Cherry Orchard*, the family lets misfortune overtake them, leaving both the orchard and their oldest servant to die in their absence. The *Three Sisters* also ends on an uneasy note. The
trio of heroines is literally forced out of its home by a dreadful sister-in-law, and all hope of a happy future is squelched under her power. What troubles us so much in these plays is the frustration at not seeing a resolution – even a terrible one - to the most obvious problems: the three sisters will never get to Moscow, Yerma will never have children, nobody will be able to marry Pepe el Romano and it seems as though nothing ever really happens.\(^1\) Nevertheless, these plays are undeniably complete, despite their lack of harmony (in comparison to classical theater).

Indeed, where could the action possibly progress from such stifling endings? Where Greek tragedy's unified wholeness most often arose from the a tragedy of action, in which the hero fights his destiny tooth and nail before succumbing to it, these modern tragedies are complete insofar as they are tragedies of inaction. The latter is far more disquieting, in a sense; although both present insurmountable conclusions, tragedy of inaction resonates with weakness rather than strength.

I do not mean to imply, of course, that ancient tragedy was not unsettling in its own right, but it carries with it an implied sense of integrity that modern tragedy lacks. It is perhaps an issue of characterization that makes its brand of unity so different from the modern. "Tragedy is a mimesis of men better than ourselves," Aristotle explains, but he had a Greek audience in mind (48). He understands that, if the viewer is to react with both fear and pity at the tragedy unfolding before him, he must be able to identify with the hero. The Hellenic spectator would not have been moved by a hero with weakness of character. He can empathize only with

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\(^1\) This is not the case with all of Lorca's tragic theater, however. *Bodas de Sangre*, for instance, is much more traditionally Greek in its execution, in that it is very clearly a tragedy of action and resolves itself in vengeance and extreme dramatic grandeur.
somebody deserving of admiration: the type of hero that Aristotle describes, a
noble and virtuous character who succumbs to completely inescapable hamartia.
He would simply not be able to relate to the kind of passive, indecisive
personalities that have riddled modern theater, at least since Hamlet.

Conversely, modern spectators have an entirely different threshold for
empathy. For many of them, tragedy is not a mimesis of men better than they are,
but men who are just like them. The 20th century hero is hardly a hero at all – he
may have any number of shortcomings that result from his own personality flaws,
rather than an insurmountable divine force. This is because his audience requires a
much higher dose of realism than did the Greeks. In an age of intense class struggle
and fragmenting spiritual beliefs, a different archetype must emerge. The modern
spectator may find the fall of an idealized protagonist to be lamentable, but it will
not resonate with him beyond a superficial level. Instead of the adoration that the
Greek spectator might have felt towards this perfect version of himself, his modern
counterpart experiences a sharp realization of insignificance by comparison,
realizing the depth of his own flaws instead of feeling pride for the character meant
to represent him. The hero’s fall must be significant in a different context, one that
makes sense to the intended audiences of Chekhov and Lorca. Teetering on the
brink of revolution or war, the Russian or Spanish audience member would have
felt a greater connection with displaced social classes or other powerless victims of
government overhaul. The Greeks wanted to see a representation of what a Greek
should be, even if they did not find that representation similar to themselves as
individuals. This desire was a side-effect of living in a society built on aristocratic
ideals and democratic practices, the best parts of which found their artistic expression in one powerful symbol: the tragic hero. In the same manner, the modern viewer’s need to connect with less upstanding individuals is, in part, a response to an unstable socio-political climate.

According to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, this evolution of the tragic hero (and, of course, of tragedy itself) began long before the time of either Chekhov or Lorca. Nietzsche notices the beginning of a shift in tragedy within Euripides’ writings. Like Aristotle, Nietzsche believes that tragedy’s development had all but ceased with Euripides. However, where Aristotle claims that Euripides, "whatever other faults of organization he may have, at least makes the most tragic impression of all poets," Nietzsche blames him for the death of tragedy (Halliwell 45). He takes great issue with Euripides’ injection of “civic mediocrity” into a heretofore aristocratic genre (Nietzsche 77). “The mirror in which formerly only grand and bold traits were represented now showed the painful fidelity that conscientiously reproduces even the botched outlines of nature,” he laments, clearly not interested in the possibility of the uneducated masses finding common ground with the heroes of tragedy (78). As I’ve discussed, the differences that have appeared in tragedy are necessary for its continued relevance. Why, then, does Nietzsche view the phenomenon as an abomination to the tragic form?

Nietzsche’s entire understanding of tragedy is built on the interplay of two forces: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian represents an idealized dream-state and all that is masculine, civilized and composed, although still open
to desire, fear and the irrational. The Dionysian, its feminine counterpart, is nature, the chaotic and decadent power that Apollo tames. It is the sound that accompanies the Apollonian image. The collision of these two forces gives birth to tragedy. They signify two "art-states of nature," the Apollonian "image world of dreams" and the Dionysian "intoxicated reality," which takes the dream-state into excessive ecstasy that "destroy[s] the individual and redeem[s] him by a mystic feeling of oneness" (Nietzsche 38). As power constantly shifts from one to the other - Apollo harnessing Dionysus' wild energy, Dionysus, in turn, tumbling the walls of order with orgiastic revelry – a sort of ever-undulating structure emerges. "The Dionysian and the Apollinian [sic], in new births ever following and mutually augmenting one another, controlled the Hellenic genius," Nietzsche explains (47). In other words, tragedy is the carnage that results from their melee. Without the clash of one against the other, it simply would not exist. This is the very foundation of Nietzsche's problem with Euripides; as he envisions it, Euripides has stripped Dionysus from tragic theater, leaving in its place a complete mockery of its former self.

Nietzsche calls this mockery "New Attic Comedy" (76). Instead of Dionysus, there is a new entity battling the Apollonian: Socrates. As an ever-questioning, ever-skeptical philosopher and spectator of Euripides' dramas, Socrates tempers the Apollonian archetype in a completely different manner from Dionysus. Instead of striking a balance with Apollo, he elbows him in the ribs like a co-conspirator in an elaborate game. Indeed, the opening that Socrates leaves for the audience of plebeians to come "onto the stage and ... pass judgment on the drama" implies a
certain tongue-in-cheek understanding that Nietzsche deems wholly un-tragic (79). Euripides, he insists, gives voice to Socrates' obsession with individuality and human reason, pushing away Dionysus' artistic and mystical impulses. "The New Comedy, with its perpetual triumphs of cunning and craftiness," is an open playing field for Socratic inquiry (78).

Nietzsche contends that the mystery and uncertainty that shrouded Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama was what made it so powerfully moving as tragedy. Euripides turns their formula on its head, demanding that every unexplained detail be illuminated and brought to the spectator's immediate attention. "Understanding was for him the real root of all enjoyment and creation," says Nietzsche, but the result of understanding, the semi-ironic, overly self-reflective philosophical drama that emerged from Euripides' need, killed tragedy outright, turning it into something "naturalistic and inartistic" (83). This new form fails to hold its spectators in suspense. Here Nietzsche points to the Euripidean prologue as evidence; if the playwright lays out the entire plot before it even occurs, the viewer cannot experience revelation along with the hero. Instead, he observes the action critically, knowing full well what lies in store and able to draw his own intellectual conclusions. For Nietzsche, dramatic irony of this kind has no place in tragic theater.

Nietzsche is incapable of envisioning tragedy's translation into a democratic form. Whatever bends the rules that he has laid out exceeds the realm of possibility within tragedy. Apollo and Dionysus wither away when the common man climbs up on the stage, he believes. In truth, it appears that one of his biggest concerns is
the lowering of such a high art to the level of the common man. Euripides has taken an art form that catered to the highest in power and intelligence and explained all of its mystery in terms that everybody could understand. Thus the esoteric became commonplace, pandering to "a power whose strength lies solely in numbers," as Nietzsche so eloquently puts it (79).

It appears that Nietzsche takes the greatest issue with the changing dynamic between character and spectator. There is a necessary separation between the two that Euripides and Socrates do not honor. As a result, the spectator can roam about the play as he pleases, diluting it with his presence. To Nietzsche's mind, the "ideal spectator" is the tragic chorus, "insofar as it is the only beholder, the beholder of the visionary world of the scene" (62). This stylized audience is an ideal complement to the hero, pushing him into self-contemplation in a perfect balance of Apollonian images (represented by the hero) and Dionysian music (represented by the chorus) (Nietzsche 62-5). Nietzsche maintains that the lack of this experience is precisely what pushes Dionysus away, but can we be certain that Dionysus is really absent from theater? As the representation of intoxication and excess, an id to Apollo's super ego, Dionysus or Dionysian elements certainly figure prominently in post-Euripidean drama. Even Euripides himself, the progenitor of this disgrace to the tragic form, includes quite a bit of it; we need only look to the most obvious example, *The Bacchae*, to see how important a role Dionysus plays. (Of course, Nietzsche backpedals a bit when referencing this play, insisting that it was a sort of death-bed confession for Euripides, an admission of Dionysus' inextricability from tragedy.) Returning to the modern theater of Chekhov and
Lorca, we can see that here, too, the Dionysian influence may not have disappeared. He has not been *replaced* by Socratic reasoning but masked by it, creating a more naturalistic – but hardly inartistic – kind of tragedy that is far likelier to provoke empathy in a modern audience.

It is quite interesting that Nietzsche notes an air of naturalism in Euripides’ plays. Chekhov, as we know, was at the forefront of European naturalism, and it is curious to think that the genre may have found its roots in Hellenic Greece. Nietzsche would undoubtedly argue that Chekhov wrote ironies, not tragedies, and that his plays lacked the proper art and passion characterized by Dionysus. Still, if we take a closer look, we see that Dionysian forces are not absent but simply overshadowed by the tedium and decorum of everyday life. Because Chekhov writes tragedy of *in*action, his plots are often ripe with the tension of characters who will not or cannot act on their desires. It is when this tension bubbles to the surface that we can see Dionysus emerge. *The Three Sisters*, a quiet provincial drama, builds in tension until it literally bursts into flames in the third act. The sisters’ long-repressed discomfort with their lives and their slow but steady displacement by a cruel sister-in-law finally reaches its pinnacle, allowing a Dionysian force to take over. Here, the youngest and most idealistic of the sisters breaks into absolute hysterics, flanked by the flames of the neighboring house fire and accompanied by the unrelenting sound of sirens. She is overcome by an intense and painful passion that, although very uncharacteristic for her, still follows the plot logically and never strays from the realm of the possible. The fact that the scene remains fairly realistic and naturalistic makes it all the more powerful to an
audience full of people who are perfectly capable of imagining such a scene unfolding in their own town, if not their own homes. Irina’s fervor resonates with all those whose predicaments resemble her own. Similarly, *The Seagull*’s play within a play acts as a venue for the abstract and symbolic to surface without tarnishing the believability of the play as a whole. The ominous string-breaking motif and magic show of *The Cherry Orchard* are nods to a Dionysian presence, as well. They form an eerie framing device, a foreshadower of catastrophe that is rendered all the more poignant by virtue of its realism. Chekhov would not have achieved the same results with the kind of over-the-top, rapturous surrealism behind which Nietzsche rallies.

Lorca’s tragedies follow classical themes much more closely than Chekhov’s, but we can make very similar observations about Dionysus’ role within them. Lorca’s plots are relatively simple and do not seem to occupy a particular point in time, but they are not unrealistic. The pagan procession in the final act of *Yerma* lets Dionysus enter the proceedings without disturbing the believability of the action. Lorca takes great liberties with this scene, however, and the ritual-like dancing and singing that it involves is particularly reminiscent of the cultish, Dionysian carousing that we associate with ancient drama. The scene climaxes with Yerma’s fit of rage, in which she murders her husband – certainly not a moment of clarity or self-awareness for our heroine, although it is rife with irony. As a post-Romantic who puts himself and his cultural identity into his heroes, Lorca’s literary devices are especially well suited for bringing the spectator into identifying with the play. His use of mythic archetypes, such as the *macho* and
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*hembra* that I have mentioned previously, resonates with the spectators of his specific time and place by playing to their collective tradition as well as to their individual selves. But in the cases of both Chekhov and Lorca, Dionysian ardor remains; it must simply be framed by logic in order to fit its proper context.

The difference between old and new styles of tragedy lies in the goal of the drama. Instead of inciting the intense feeling of oneness with man and nature in the manner of Nietzsche’s ideal tragedy, it now forces the viewer into self-analysis through the characters. Although Nietzsche insists that art holds "the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness", the shift towards a more individualized view of both characters and audience members reflects the needs of an ever-changing public (74). Just as the tragic hero must be updated for the modern stage, so must the tragic form.

In essence, Nietzsche’s dissatisfaction with the individuation and "dumbing down" of tragedy does not actually prove a lack of a Dionysian presence, which, by his definition, lies at the heart of all tragic theater. Dionysus remains on the tragic stage, but he is no longer the mass hypnotist that he used to be. Modern audiences will not suspend their disbelief long enough to feel a real connection with the tragedy they are watching. He peeks through the cracks in the veneer of Chekhov’s naturalism. He shows himself prominently in Lorca, but only in culturally appropriate and believable settings. In this way, the mystery and chaos that balances out logic and reason continues to fulfill its duty to tragedy, but within a proper context for the time in which the play was written.
Shifting to New Secular Gods – The Internalization of Tragic Fate

Modern theater can overcome the hurdles of Aristotle's and Nietzsche's rules with some ease, but there still remains the issue of Steiner. There is room for interpretation where the two previously-discussed authors are concerned, but Steiner's argument is not only steadfast and direct in its logic, but also far more appropriate to the discussion of modern theater, as it is the most recently written of the three and has the benefit of a retrospective clarity. If this beast cannot be slain, then modern tragedy is doomed to be nothing more than "near-tragedy," as Steiner himself puts it.

In his introduction to a recent translation of Lorca's plays, Christopher Maurer explains that, for Lorca, “tragedy entails certain formal elements, ... but above all it involves creating an illusion of fate or destiny, of ‘necessariness’ (Dewell xix, emphasis mine). This particular distinction – that is, illusion of fate versus actual fate – is precisely what George Steiner clings to. Whether the illusion appears in Lorca, Chekhov or any other post-Hellenic playwright, it will never cross the boundary into real tragic fate, without which a drama cannot be a tragedy. “In tragedy, there are no temporal remedies,” Steiner stresses; “Tragedy speaks not of secular dilemmas which may be resolved by rational innovation, but of the unaltering bias toward inhumanity and destruction in the drift of the world” (291). This sentiment is not unlike Nietzsche’s displeasure with Dionysus’ exit from the tragic stage. Socratic realism displaced Dionysian chaos in Euripides’ theater, leaving its descendants with a similar void. For Steiner, logic and tragedy cannot coexist; logic “cures” tragedy by offering solutions to tragic problems. “Tragedy can
occur only where reality has not been harnessed by reason and social consciousness” for this very reason, because it “is an expression of the pre-rational phase in history … founded on the assumption that there are in nature and in the psyche occult, uncontrollable forces able to madden or destroy the mind” (342). Though his phrasing seems deliberately inclusive, Steiner is actually quite limited in his intentions. He means specifically that modern tragedy is godless, and “tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God’s presence” (353). God cannot be reasoned away, but if he is never there to begin with, reason has ample opportunity to wreak its tragedy-destroying havoc.

Here we must return to the initial question. Does the lack of gods and consequent increase in logic necessarily imply escapable fate? This is not a universally applicable phenomenon. Tragedy can and does exist in the absence of divine law and intervention. Certainly reason was not absent even when the gods were front and center – Oedipus, we recall, had been very logical indeed in his attempts to evade his own oracle-prophesied fate. That his logic led him right into the lap of a tragic ending, Steiner would argue, was because the gods were there to squelch it. Yet modern, secular drama may offer just as little escape for its protagonists. Just because a solution might exist in theory does not imply that it could exist practically. If this were the case, then we would not be horrified but merely frustrated by our modern tragic heroes; it would mean that, for whatever reason, they opt to leave their problems unsolved. What pity could we have for the three sisters if their failure to reach Moscow came from laziness? How could we sympathize with Adela if she had had the option of eloping with Pepe el Romano?
A more menacing force must be at work here. Something must be taking the place of deities in the allocation of personal destinies, something that both resonates with the spectator and keeps the play’s hero trapped in his fate.

Pedro Chumillas, who introduces a collection of Lorca’s plays, agrees with this concept. He suggests that “el amor, en el teatro de Lorca, es un personaje omnipresente y terrible, un dios clásico enemigo de los mortales, a los que enardece y a la vez destruye” (23). This is hardly unreasonable; love is such a prevalent motif in Lorca’s works that it can very well form the barrier that keeps his heroes away from logic. Yerma’s intense love for Victor and for the child she cannot have ignites her, as Chumillas says, into such an irrational frenzy that she kills her husband. Adela, for her part, is so consumed by love for Pepe el Romano that she takes her own life moments after Bernarda lies to her about his death. Love brings about a tragic ending for both of these heroines and keeps them trapped inside an inescapable fate. It does not, however, function in the same manner in Chekhov’s plays, where Lorca’s brand of pure, simple love does not exist. Perhaps we should cast the net further to find a god-like power that applies to both authors.

Maurer introduces the concept of society as fate-creator, but stops just short of pushing the idea to the next level. In all of Lorca’s tragic theater, he says, “desire is frustrated violently and fatally by social forces” (xxii). This does not seem to be entirely factual, however, as Lorca never fails to include a character or two who live their lives against the proverbial grain. Maurer does realize that “Lorca’s

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2 Love, in Lorca’s theater, is an omnipresent and terrible character, a classical enemy god who sets mortals aflame and, at the same time, destroys them.
characters are unhappy and tragic, not because society keeps them from attaining their object or reaching their destination, but because they cannot fully understand what it is they want” – but this is only half of the story (xxiii). Social forces do indeed help to seal the characters into their fate, but society can do nothing to a person who resists its authority. It is the internal psychology of an individual that renders him completely incapable of remedying his tragic situation. Social mores simply plant the seed that has the potential to grow into self-created boundaries in a person’s mind.

The theme of fallen nobility that pervades both Chekhov and Lorca’s works is an excellent example of the power that society's standards hold over the human psyche. Nobody better represents the battle for appearances better than the penniless aristocracy of Chekhov’s plays. His characters may be educated, intelligent and well-bred, but they are no longer aristocrats. They have been robbed of their inheritance (the family house in The Three Sisters) or their livelihood (the cherry orchard), but in either case they are left without the slightest vestige of their halcyon days of wealth. Still, they cling to the past relentlessly, unable to come to grips with their new place in society. When Lopakhin suggests cutting down the cherry orchard, Ranevskaya only scoffs in response. "My dear, forgive me, but you don't know what you're talking about," she condescends. "If there's anything at all in this whole district that's still exciting, even incredible, that one thing is our cherry orchard" (Bristow 173). Although Lopakhin correctly points out that the orchard lost its usefulness long before, Ranevskaya is blind to his reason.
What keeps Ranevskaya and other Chekhovian characters from reconciling with their fate and, as Steiner suggests, remedying the problems in their lives is the obsessive need to preserve their former societal clout. The pressure of a shifting society has displaced them and rendered them – like the cherry orchard – useless. Keeping up appearances is so consuming for them that it clouds their minds. Their denial and deluded sense of worth are powerful tools for self-entrapment that preclude any possibility of improving their situation. Admitting uselessness even to themselves would be ruinous, and they are entirely incapable of it – the mere suggestion rolls off their backs.

*Bernarda Alba* may be the only one of Lorca’s plays that uses this theme, but it provides a more than adequate example of the harmful influence of aristocratic delusions. To begin with, the family in question is no longer wealthy. As matriarch of the house, Bernarda maintains a false sense of worth. She “tirana todos los que la rodean”3 by refusing to let them out of her sight (Chumillas 152). Her iron rule masks a desperation to maintain a moral and respectable order within the realm of her jurisdiction (quite small, coincidentally, but this partially explains her obsession with keeping her family from leaving her home). She rules over her home as though it were a highly fortified kingdom, forbidding entrance or exit through its borders. It is the only tangible vestige of her former glory, and she must salvage it for fear of losing status entirely.

A seemingly tangential dialogue between Bernarda and Poncia, her maid, reveals the thick border that Bernarda has drawn around her micro-society:

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3 tyrannizes all those around her
Poncia: Hablaban de Paca la Roseta. Anoche ataron a su marido a un pesebre y a ella se la llevaron a la grupa del caballo hasta lo alto del olivar.
Bernarda: ¿Y ella?
Poncia: Ella tan conforme. Dicen que iba con los pechos fuera y Maximiliano la llevaba cogida como si tocara la guitarra. ¡Un horror!
Bernarda: ¿Y qué pasó?
Poncia: Lo que tenía que pasar. Volvieron casi de día. Paca la Roseta traía el pelo suelto y una corona de flores en la cabeza.
Bernarda: Es la única mujer mala que tenemos en el pueblo.
Poncia: Porque no es de aquí. Es de muy lejos. Y los que fueron con ella son también hijos de forasteros. Los hombres de aquí no son capaces de eso (162).4

It is plain to see from this passage that there is a clear boundary between those bound to society's standards and those who are not. Paca la Roseta is "de muy lejos," far from the clutches of either Bernarda or the rules to which Bernarda so stringently adheres. What is more, we can see the effect that a lack of restraint has on people; although Bernarda and Poncia discuss Paca with disdain, it is nonetheless obvious that she is infinitely happier with her lot in life than the closely watched daughters of Bernarda Alba. She is unrestricted even by clothing, sexually free and completely shameless. Poncia calls Paca's people "forasteros," indicating

4 Poncia: They were talking about Paca la Roseta. Last night they tied her husband up in a stall and carried her to the top of the olive grove on the back of a horse.
Bernarda: And her?
Poncia: She went along with it. They say that she rode with her breasts out and Maximiliano grasped her like he was playing a guitar. Horrible!
Bernarda: And what happened?
Poncia: What had to happen. They returned almost by morning. Paca la Roseta's hair was undone and had a crown of flowers on her head.
Bernarda: She is the only bad woman we have in this town.
Poncia: Because she isn't from here. She's from very far away. And those who came with her are also sons of outsiders. The men from here aren't capable of these things.
an almost barbaric world of outsiders who cannot be controlled by Bernarda's
civilizing force. Bernarda's house is a stagnant fortress of propriety. Inside, the girls
are barely allowed to move around. Bernarda's senile mother, the only resident of
the house who refuses to conform, is kept locked away in her room so as to stifle
her rebellion. As Chumillas states, "el triunfo de Bernarda consiste en negar la
realidad" (209).\(^5\) So consuming is her need for wealth and respectability that she is
willing to go to preposterous lengths to achieve it.

But it is not Bernarda who meets a tragic end. If anybody can be considered
a tragic hero in this play, it is Adela, Bernarda's youngest and most rebellious
daughter. It appears from the outset that Adela is the only sister who is capable of
overcoming Bernarda's tyranny, but we soon realize that even she is not immune.
After revealing her love for Pepe el Romano, the man promised to her oldest (and
richest) sister, Adela announces to her mother that "en [ella] no manda nadie más
que Pepe" (207).\(^6\) Nevertheless, it is Bernarda's command that pushes her over the
edge. As the matriarch leaves for the barn to find Pepe, Adela hears a gunshot and
flees the scene in anguish. The family finds her dead in her room moments later;
she could not bear to live without her lover.

The horrible irony of the situation is that Bernarda never actually shot Pepe
– he ran away unscathed. Still, Bernarda's power is so strong that Adela never
hesitates in her decision. In a sense, her suicide fulfills Bernarda's wishes. "¡Mi hija
ha muerto virgen!"\(^5\) she cries, declaring once and for all that her daughter's identity

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\(^3\) Bernarda's triumph consists of the negation of reality.
\(^4\) Nobody commands[her] except Pepe.
\(^5\) My daughter has died a virgin!
was not her own (209). For Adela, Bernarda takes on the role of God. She may believe that she can subvert her mother's will, but in the end she must submit to her whims. Thus, Bernarda's delusions of worth permeate the entire household, trapping her daughters both physically and mentally. Even when escape seems possible, death precludes it – Adela could not have run off with Pepe because her mother's hold over her rendered her completely helpless.

Surprisingly, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* shares many structural elements with *Bernarda*. As with the Alba sisters, the father has recently died, the family is left without the riches it used to have and the house has become a similar fortress-like symbol of inertia. A mother-figure is not present until Andrey, the sisters' older brother, marries Natasha, who soon takes on the role of tyrannical matriarch. She, too, has fabricated a life of status and nobility for herself, although, as Masha points out early on, she is very much of a lower class. As Natasha rises to power, we begin to see two distinct types of self-denial: Natasha creates her own aristocratic status by leeching off those around her, while the sisters cling to their formerly wealthy selves, refusing to adapt to their new roles – so much so that Natasha is able literally to pull the rug from beneath their feet. Where Bernarda trapped her family inside the house, Natasha pushes them out, displacing all but her husband from their own childhood home. Her total absorption with taking over the family looms over her weak and unhappy sisters-in-law, who no longer have any legal rights to the house. Natasha's word is unbreakable, and thus she too takes on a godly role.
The sisters themselves avoid reality by shifting their focus into the future, one that they hope will be bright and promising. If they can only go to Moscow, they would be revived. Irina, like Adela, is both the youngest and most motivated daughter, harboring the highest hopes of fleeing her wretched situation. As such, she presents the most exaggerated example of how the sisters cannot avoid their tragic fate, however they may try. Irina embodies the desire to escape. Her pitiful and oft-repeated cries of "В Москву! В Москву!"\(^7\) reveal an earnest and naive belief that the family can begin anew. She understands that she must work now to support herself and save money, but her efforts are spoiled by her own dissatisfaction. After a hard day at work, she complains to her sisters: "Надо поискать другую должность, а эта не по мне. Чего я так хотела, о чем мечтала, того–то в ней именно и нет. Труд без поэзии, без мыслей…" (Berdnikov 136).\(^8\) It is impossible for her to look past her educated upbringing, where the thought of work without intellectual stimulation is madenning. Still, she pushes onward, all for the sake of Moscow. Later, she agrees to marry the Baron Tuzenbakh for the same reason, although she does not love him. In the end, Tuzenbakh is shot in a duel and Irina is lost once more. Steiner may insist that remedies are available, that all could be resolved happily if only the characters could overcome the tragedy of inaction and move away. But Irina does everything in her power to repair her life – fate is what draws her back in.

\(^7\) To Moscow! To Moscow!
\(^8\) I will have to look for a different job, as this one doesn't suit me. Everything that I wanted, everything that I dreamed about – that's exactly what it doesn't have. Work without poetry, without thought…
It is painfully evident that the Sergeevna sisters will never make it to Moscow. Irina's attempts at sacrifice mimic similar sacrifices on the parts of Masha and Olga. Irina is a mash-up of everything that went wrong in the lives of her older sisters. Olga is a teacher, a spinster at twenty-eight. She feels old from work, and although she is grateful that she can provide for the family, she still believes that "если бы [она] вышла замуж и целый день сидела дома, то это было бы лучше" (119). Her opposite is Masha, who has not worked a day in her life, but dutifully married the school director - a man whose affections she does not reciprocate. The melancholy that she feels in a loveless marriage drives her into the arms of another, but any attempt at a viable relationship with him is futile. Irina seems to repeat her sisters' mistakes in double-time, trying Olga's route first before slipping into Masha's. Predictably, the effects are disastrous. The failures of the first two predict the failure of the third. Moscow – and the escape from dissatisfaction that it symbolizes – is unattainable. It is the sisters' own internalized sense of the socially and morally acceptable that drives the nail into their coffins; they are too firmly entrenched within their values to change, and so their fate is sealed.

But delusion comes in many forms, not just in the recalcitrance to admit an undesirable social status. Yerma shows us how social expectations can affect a hero in an entirely different way. Yerma (whose name, quite carefully chosen, means "barren" in Spanish) is a young wife living in the campo of southern Spain, married for several years but still childless. Her most profound desire is to have a baby, but she has not been able to. Again, Steiner could easily point out the obvious

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9 If [she] had married and sat home all day, that would have been better.
solutions – solutions that are even offered to her – but none of them turns out to be actually feasible.

Yerma admits to the old woman who crosses paths with her in the first act that she does not have sexual feelings for her husband, Juan. In response, the woman pinpoints this as the most likely reason that she has not been able to conceive:

Vieja: ...Los hombres tienen que gustar, muchacha. Han de deshacernos las trenzas y darnos de beber agua en su misma boca. Así corre el mundo.
Yerma: El tuyo; que el mío, no. Yo pienso muchas cosas, muchas, y estoy segura que las cosas que pienso ha de realizar mi hijo. Yo me entregué a mi marido por él, y me sigo entregando para ver si llega, pero nunca por divertirme.
Vieja: ¡Y resulta que estás vacía! (Yebra 64)10

For Yerma, a humble, proper woman who maintains a child-like trust in God, sexual pleasure would only mar the purity of conception. Still, the possibility of fulfilling love does exist for her, and thus, we must assume, the hope of bearing a child. Her childhood love, Víctor, still works in her town and continues to pursue a very flirtatious relationship with her. If she were to accept him, she would be able to have children, but in her mind the situation is far more complicated. Yerma's sense of obligation to both her society and her family is incredibly strong. It would

10 Old Woman: ...Men should be enjoyed, my girl. They have to undo our braids and give us water to drink from their own mouths. This is how the world works.
Yerma: Yours, not mine. I dream about many things, very many, and I am certain that the things I dream about will all be realized when I have my son. I submitted myself to my husband for his sake, and I continue to submit myself to my husband to see whether he will arrive, but never to enjoy myself.
Old Woman: And the result is that you are empty!
be unthinkable to dishonor both her husband and her father – who arranged the union – in one disastrous move. She adheres to standards and expectations so firmly that she is locked into complacency.

Neither is the prospect of adoption or caring for others' children an appropriate compromise for Yerma. "No quiero cuidar hijos de otros," she says to Juan, "Me figuro que se me van a helar los brazos de tenerlos" (84).\textsuperscript{11} Not only does she feel that having a child of her own is her duty as a good Catholic woman, but the pain of caring for others without having her own would be too much for her to bear. Knowing this about her values, that family or society has damaged her psychologically and made her so stubborn, makes it easier for us to understand how she has managed to create her own fate from the inside. Her end is not unlike Adela's, an act of passion that overtakes all reason. In the final moments of the play, she publicly murders her husband, cementing herself into the destiny that she herself created:

Yerma: … Marchita, marchita, pero segura. Ahora sí que lo sé de cierto. Y sola. (Se levanta. Empieza a llegar gente.) Voy a descansar sin despertarme sobresaltada, para ver si la sangre me anuncia otra sangre nueva. Con el cuerpo seco para siempre. ¿Qué queréis saber? ¡No os acerquéis, porque he matado a mi hijo, yo misma he matado a mi hijo! (119)\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} I do not want to take care of other people's children. I imagine that my arms will freeze just from holding them.

\textsuperscript{12} Yerma: … Barren, barren but certain. Now I know it for certain. And I am alone. (She stands. People begin to arrive.) I will sleep without waking up surprised, seeing whether my blood has announced other, new blood. With my body dry forever. What do you want to know? Don't come near me, because I have killed my son, I have killed my own son!
A baby could only come from her husband, but without love, she could never conceive with him. In a final surrender to her fate, she kills any hope for a son. She has externalized what she had always known to be true inside of her.

Steiner holds firmly that "the ancient is not a glove into which the modern can slip at will" (325). There is no question that the two are two very distinct types of theater that are neither interchangeable nor meant to be so. But to insist that "no mythology created in the age of rational empiricism matches the antique in tragic power" is simply unfair (ibid). The rational approach to tragedy reflects a post-Freudian era of religious and psychological questioning that simply turns tragedy back in on itself. Chekhov and Lorca were themselves the products of this age; their own dissatisfaction with religion and spirituality stood as a testament to the waning optimism of their cultures. The magnanimity and sincerity of Greek theater is entirely inappropriate to a society where political duplicity and shattered faith were the norm. This new audience requires irony and realism in order to feel a connection to tragedy, and this necessitates the absence of obvious gods.

Whether it is love, society or any other catalyst for psychological paralysis, the result is the same: the tragic heroes of modern drama have locked themselves into their own mental turmoil, internalizing the fate that, in ancient times, came from outside of themselves. Not only is the presence of gods irrelevant to the transformed tragic theater of the 20th century, but it is very difficult to fit into a world where, although faith plays a large role in many lives, gods do not actually interact with mortals. Manmade destiny does not necessarily imply that it can be
controlled; it may be the hero's own doing, but he is just as powerless to escape it as if the gods themselves had damned him. In yet another example of tragedy's adaptation into a modern frame of reference, psychological turmoil replaces the need for the divine. We have swallowed the gods and allowed them to rule us from within.
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