

Alice H. Allen
Andersonian Tragedy
alicehallen@gmail.com

Success, wrote Maxwell Anderson, in an artistic field cannot be achieved without a “definition of the artist’s faith...” (Whatever Hope 18). Anderson had unconventional definitions of both faith and religion. His sacred texts were those of Socrates, Aristotle, Sherwood, and Connelly; his temple was the theatre building; and the followers of his religion were those audience members attending the theatre in support of the arts and participating in what Anderson called the “Exaltation of the spirit of man” (Broadway 28). Anderson determined, through study of previous theatrical successes of the Greeks and Shakespeare, that the purpose of theatre was to “find, and hold up to our regard, what is admirable in the human race” (27). To ensure success of his plays, Anderson studied playwrights who created plays which contain subjects that are everlasting because they present what is “admirable to the human race” (Broadway 27). His study concluded with a collection of rules which he believed created a successful, profitable tragedy. Anderson’s formulaic idea of writing coupled with his “faith” in the theatre defines his work in verse drama.

During the 1920s, Anderson concluded that religion had been replaced by science, a “religion” based upon facts and statistics instead of the unseen (Weinman 21). In Anderson’s view, the universe operates according to patterns which have no understandable beginning or end. The reason these patterns are indecipherable to man is because human kind is too narrow-minded and immature to understand something so complex (Weinman 20). Religion is simply man’s attempt to understand this pattern. Critics argue that tragedy is an observation of the moral order of things in the universe, and if Anderson could not believe in a Christian God or any form of a creator, then he could not believe there was a moral order to the universe (Weinman 22). Anderson, on the contrary, believed in a moral order to the universe and that this moral order was inherent in the evolution of man.

Within the soul of man, Anderson theorized, lies a capacity to become more like gods. Artist and poets have consistently turned away from the commonplace and toward that which they have found to be godly (Weinman 24). If man, especially the artistic man, is to aspire to be god-like, he must take the path in life which will strengthen the forces of good. Anderson believed that it was the responsibility of the artist to inspire such change in humanity. He said that the artist comes “nearest among men to what man may sometimes be,…” (Weinman 33). He continued to say that the artist will lead the race to its perfection because art “beckons man away from what he is and on to what he may become” (Weinman 33).

With such lofty expectations of a dramatist, Anderson created rules of writing tragedy to keep his message on course with this goal. Maxwell Anderson’s principle rule states that a tragedy’s most important scene contains the recognition. This scene must be central to the action and all dialogue and action must lead the audience up to and away from it. At this point in the play, the central character, or tragic hero, must discover something about himself that was previously unknown. Anderson calls this discovery a spiritual awakening; the discovery and the consequential actions of the tragic hero must dictate the ending of the play (Essence 511). This scene was so important to Anderson that he even went so far as to dictate where in a play this scene should occur. He found that the location of the recognition scene was structurally similar in all successful tragedies and tried to mirror this in his work.

Anderson wrote that “unless [the playwright] and [his] play have a dream- or a conviction...- and unless [the playwright] can defend that conviction against death and hell..., [the] play isn’t worth producing” (Keeping 76). The dream, or conviction, that Maxwell Anderson tried to convey through his work dealt directly with the moral plight of mankind. Anderson believed that man could be more god-like “through the acquisition of such god-like

traits as goodness, justice, and truth” (Weinman 24). These were among the themes of which Anderson explored in his quest to inspire men to be better than they were. If a playwright must say something of note in every production, he is required to determine his place in the universe and his interpretation of the universe in which he lives. Anderson’s dream reflected his personal definition of his place in the universe; therefore, he defended it for the entirety of his career.

Since Anderson’s idea of theatre revolved around the exaltation of the spirit of man, he defined the spirit of man through what society believed to be morally sound. Anderson summed up the evolution of man quite simply; he said:

If [theatre] affirms that the good and evil in man are the good and evil of evolution, that men have within themselves the beasts from which they emerge and the god toward which they climb. It affirms that evil is what takes men back toward the beast, that good is what urges him up toward god. (Broadway 34)

If man’s ultimate moral goal is to become more god-like, then men must continually choose the path in life which they believe will confirm the success of good. Excellence on the stage, therefore, is a moral excellence of character. The plight of the character involves a continuing fight, on the part of the tragic hero, to better himself; however, this plight is of no interest unless “his character is somehow tried in the fire, and unless he comes out of his trial a better man” (Off Broadway 26).

The structure and character of the protagonist is of utmost importance in a “religion” where the exaltation of the spirit of man is practiced. A protagonist must embody the “forces of the good and must win, or if he has been [a representation of] evil, must yield to the forces of [good]” and recognize his defeat (Off Broadway 25). Despite being an exceptional person, a protagonist cannot be perfect. If the protagonist were perfect, he would have no need for change since he would have completed the path of evolution and achieved god-like status. This in no way means that the protagonist may be “common.” If a man can be “picked from the street to

occupy the center of your stage” he must contain some quality that the audience can admire; he must be a representation of how admirable qualities can be wasted or perverted; or he must be “symbolic of a whole class of men who are blocked by circumstances from achieving excellence in their lives” (26). The audience expects nothing from the hero except that he fights with everything available to him against what evil confronts him (30).

Anderson wished to leave the theatre, not only with his messages of the human condition, but also with a specific way of using language. Anderson writes, in his essay “The Uses of Poetry,” that poetry is a “way of using language that impels the user powerfully toward emotional utterance...away from the small change...and toward whatever vision he may be able to formulate of human destiny” (88). Anderson found that poets were the most prophetic artist of any generation. Tragic poets, he believed, offer the greatest hope to mankind, the hope that man is greater than he appears to be and that “the spirit of man may rise superior to physical defeat and death” (Poetry 90). This is the message that Anderson finds in all tragedy, the definition of it. Anderson found no greater vehicle for his message of the human condition than the use of language most potent to the listener: poetry.

Anderson’s verse plays were well received by the theatre reviewers of New York, but many theatre critics did not understand Anderson’s use of verse on the stage. Weinman quotes David Sievers who claims that “in Anderson’s failure to analyze motives of behavior of his characters he was forced to rely on rhetoric...” (Weinman 6). Though literary and theatre critics have correctly analyzed Anderson’s verse when compared to “textbook” poetry, and have met a general conclusion that what is lacking in Anderson’s work is a defined character, they never questioned if Anderson achieved his purpose through theatre. Anderson’s purpose through theatre was not to develop a character but to deliver an idea. For Anderson, if success cannot be

achieved in a play without a “dream,” then we must determine how his dream was realized through his drama.

Anderson criticizes modern dramatists for being journalistic in their writings instead of being leaders of men toward something greater than themselves. Despite this condemnation of journalistic theatre, Anderson turned to current events to frame his verse tragedy, *Winterset*. Through this play gave him the most positive critical and professional acclaim, the “tragic hero,” Mio, still lacks qualities Anderson finds essential to a successful verse tragedy.

Anderson states in his essay “The Essence of Tragedy,” that a tragic hero must choose the path which he believes will contribute to the continued success of good triumphing over evil. The path Mio follows is mixed with forces that Anderson considers good and evil. While Mio searches for a right to an injustice (good), his motivation is found in revenge and hate (bad) instead of attempting to attain for good for good’s sake. A true Anderson tragic hero must act only for the glory of good; if Mio hadn’t changed his path and had completed his task of clearing his father’s name, he would have succeeded in revenge, a “bad” characteristic for mankind.

If theatre is to be the “exaltation of the spirit of man” the character responsible for leading men to something greater than themselves must be formatted to the most effective status. *Winterset*’s writing actually twists the idea of good and bad. Anderson proposes that a reader or audience member should cheer on the forces of good. Since good and evil were twisted within the plot, it is difficult for a reader to define which they should be cheering for. *Winterset*’s subject matter being a current event also lends itself to being a poor representation of the ideal verse tragedy. Current events lend themselves to journalistic qualities despite how they are interpreted or manipulated within the script. The message, another key to the ideal Andersonian verse tragedy, seemed contrived within the eulogy. It was as if Anderson tried to take a format

from the Greeks and tried to change the subject to that of a 1927 murder trial. While critics appreciated the work, the lacking motives for a tragic hero, the subject matter, and the contrived feeling of the message make it a sad story but not a tragedy, according to Anderson's theories.

In *Elizabeth the Queen*, Anderson dubbed Elizabeth the tragic hero of the play. As a tragic hero, however, Elizabeth's recognition scene did not cause her to change for the better but created a more bitter and hateful woman. Elizabeth, as an Anderson character, left structural holes which *Mary of Scotland's* Mary corrected. With the creation of Mary, Anderson has found a character that begins to experience a more appropriate recognition scene through the discovery of Elizabeth's unfaithfulness to her. This recognition causes Mary to rise above the circumstances and experience a type of "ennoblement of character through her inward vision of what is right" (Halline 74). When she is imprisoned by Elizabeth, Mary expresses a belief in man and God, to show the truth behind the injustice that Elizabeth committed against Mary.

Consistent within the character of Mary is her ability to fight against the evil confronting her with everything she has. What is inconsistent in her character is the fact that her only weapons are her kindness and love. While for other Anderson characters love and kindness are acceptable forces against evil, it seems incorrect to give a Queen of a nation love and kindness as her only power. Mary fails to express the demeanor or ability to command respect from those around her. The portrayal of Mary causes the audience to view many of her actions as naive for one who has been asked to rule a country.

As for a message, Mary states that she believes that "all men love better good than evil, cling rather to truth than falseness, answer fair dealing with fair return" (Mary 48). While this is consistent with Anderson's personal beliefs of mankind, the message is hidden deep within the trials of the protagonist, more specifically it is hidden behind the story of Elizabeth vs. Mary.

For Anderson's tragedy to be consistent with his theories, the use of poetry should allow the message to be evident to the audience. The message should be the purpose of the drama, not the subtext.

In 1939, Anderson wrote *Key Largo*, a blatant representation of his belief and hope for the race of man. When *Key Largo* was first produced it did not have success with critics or audiences. This may be attributed to the period in which it was written, 1939, while the feelings of despair from the Great Depression were still fresh on America's mind. In a time when America had lost faith in itself and was practicing an isolationistic mind, Anderson found that it was the correct time to write what may be the most apparent definition of his faith in man. King McCloud's journey in *Key Largo* is representational of the journey that Anderson hopes the race of man will continue. Edward Foster and Richard Weinman believe that Anderson wrote this piece in response to Hitler's growing popularity in Germany. Their idea is supported through the theory which states that rulers like Hitler are rulers of force that cannot be stopped except through a faith in men themselves. A Hitler is only possible in a nation whose people have lost faith in the country and themselves. Foster and Weinman believe that one of Anderson's purposes for writing *Key Largo* was to "arouse America from her indifference toward 'the rule of force'" (Weinman 219). Despite a belief in this theory, it cannot be denied that *Key Largo* is an expression of Anderson's religious beliefs and dream for the human race that states a message which directly coincides with Anderson's ideal tragedy.

For Anderson, King McCloud may seem to be the perfect tragic hero. He is a common man who represents the "group" of mankind, and his journey represents the evolution that Anderson believes mankind has taken in the past but also represents the potential of mankind for future moral evolution. King's death is noble, but does it mark the end of the life of a man who

had reached a higher moral plane in the evolution of man? While King's character delivers many speeches about how he must die for that in which he believes, the audience must question if King dies because he finds it to be the greatest right or if he simply dies because he knows he cannot continue to live with himself. While the message of this piece is a clear representation of what the playwright believes men should strive for, the inability of the reader to determine King as a tragic hero, traitor, or villain weakens *Key Largo* as the ideal tragedy.

I have found *The Wingless Victory* to be the best representation of Anderson's ideal tragedy. The play follows the story of Nathaniel McQueston and his new, dark-skinned Malayan princess wife, Oparre. When the two return to Nathaniel's hometown, his family and the New England village only accept Oparre because Nathaniel is such a wealthy man. In time, she realizes that she will never be accepted and that her "differences" stand in the way of Nathaniel's success and life.

Despite the critic's claim that *The Wingless Victory* is an "old-fashioned melodrama," masked by an attempt at blank verse, it follows the Andersonian rules for creating tragedy on stage (*The Wingless*). Oparre, as a tragic hero, has a recognition scene that occurs at the end of act two when Nathaniel tells Oparre how he has begun to despise their relationship, her words express a misled woman who trusted her heart and false gods, while in actuality, we learn in act three that she agreed to leave and purposefully hurt Nathaniel because she knew that she was holding him back. Coupling this knowledge with her fear for herself and her children as only being seen as slaves and whores in a "white world" lead to her suicide. In her love for him, she sacrificed herself and her happiness for his.

Oparre is a well-designed tragic hero according to Anderson's formulaic writing style. She is a woman who is confronted by the "evil" of the stereotypes which the white village

possesses toward her race. While she is aware of her outsider status, she fights with everything she possesses, her demeanor, against the evil. She behaves in the most cordial manners of the period, dreams of social engagements with other ladies, and trades her Malayan royalty garb for traditional American clothing. She represents the group of individuals who are unjustly persecuted not for actions, but for preconceived notions of their race or gender. Depending on the production, Oparre can be portrayed as a representation of a race, women, individuals accused of witchcraft in Salem, the McCarthy era, or her symbolic-image can be left to the imagination of the audience so that each member of the audience personalizes her experience to represent something they can associate with.

The virtues toward a higher moral evolution that Anderson teaches through this story are that of justice and truth. The justice that Anderson calls for in this play is the justice of the underrepresented minorities. The individuals who experience a life full of injustice because of their outsider status are the heroes of this piece because of their ability and willingness to fight this injustice. Their ability to fight places them higher on the moral evolution of man than their transgressors. The truth that he teaches is closely related. It is a truth not only based upon the removal of preconceptions and stereotypes from our society but a truth with the self. Man must be willing to be truthful with himself, understand, accept, and own his feelings and beliefs, before he can travel to the next level in the moral evolutionary path. The messages of this piece clearly teach two virtues which will aid man in ascending to a higher moral level and in becoming gods.

Some critics claim that Anderson's characters had no life to them; that each play showed an apparent manipulation by the artist's hand. While directors and many playwrights say that a character's actions should motivate the story, Anderson disagreed. Anderson found that the

characters of his plays were only pawns in an attempt to teach a lesson to mankind. This belief, I conclude stems from his beginnings as a poet. Theatre, unlike poetry, has always been considered a participatory art. The audience must be willing to suspend its beliefs and utilize its imagination and personal experiences to connect with and complete the world of the play. Anderson tried desperately to reach audiences with a particular message. Since theatre is a participatory art form, his formulaic writing often got in the way of a clear message.

Despite what flaws theatre historians and critics find in Anderson's writing, it appalls me that not one critic, save for Mr. Weinman, has ever considered what Maxwell Anderson was trying to achieve. If Anderson had been trying to create mainstream theatre, all critics would be validated in their analysis of Anderson's work; however, Anderson was not trying to replicate that which was already popular in theatre. Anderson was trying to revive a type of theatre where language was more expressive and potent than the colloquialisms that flooded the theatre of his time. Anderson hoped to bring back the "ever-lasting" tragedy; the one form of drama which gives hope to the human race, a hope that we can be more than we appear. Anderson wanted humankind to realize that we have, inherent in all of us, a spark of godliness that can be awakened and realized if we only choose the moral path in life.

Anderson's career did not begin in the theatre, but we cannot deny his attempts to inspire humanity through the stage. While Anderson may not have been able to touch as many lives as he intended through his work, he no doubt understood the evolutionary art of theatre. Throughout theatre history, theories have been formed by building and manipulating previous theories. Even if Anderson missed the mark with his verse drama in the eyes of the theatre community, he no doubt left us questioning the future of man and the endless possibilities within ourselves.

Perhaps the formulaic writing that Anderson so religiously held failed in an art form which strives to be free of restraint. What cannot be denied is that Anderson accomplished what he set out to do. He created successful theatre written in verse. He created a tragic hero, Oparre, who could be common without being pitiful. And he recreated a form of drama where the message was the driving force behind all other parts of the play.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Maxwell. Essence of Tragedy: and Other Footnotes and Papers. Washington: Anderson House, 1939.
- Anderson, Maxwell. "Mary of Scotland." New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1933.
- Anderson, Maxwell. "The Essence of Tragedy." European Theories of Drama: Supplemental Text on American Drama; Anthology of Dramatic Theory and Criticism from Aristotle to the Present. Ed. Barrett H. Clark. New York: Crown, 1964.
- Anderson, Maxwell. "The Uses of Poetry." Essence of Tragedy: and Other Footnotes and Papers. Washington: Anderson House, 1939.
- Anderson, Maxwell. "The Wingless Victory." Eleven Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson: 1929-1939. Ed. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940. 1936.
- Anderson, Maxwell. "Whatever Hope We Have." Essence of Tragedy: and Other Footnotes and Papers. Washington: Anderson House, 1939.
- Anderson, Maxwell. Off Broadway: Essays About the Theatre. New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1947.
- Avery, Laurence G., ed. Dramatist in America: Letters of Maxwell Anderson, 1912-1958. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1977.
- Halline, Allan G. "MAXWELL ANDERSON'S DRAMATIC THEORY." American Literature 16.2 (May 1944): 63. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Prescott Memorial Library, Ruston, LA. 23 Jan. 2009 <<http://ezproxy.prescott.latech.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=10251355&site=ehost-live&scope=site>>.

Weinman, Richard Jay. The 'Core of Belief' of Maxwell Anderson and the Structure of His Tragedies. Diss. Indiana University, 1965. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1966. 65-10,908.

Bibliography

“The Wingless Victory.” The Oxford Companion to American Theatre. Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004. Answers.com 17 Jan. 2009. <<http://www.answers.com/topic/the-wingless-victory>>.

Anderson, Maxwell. Essence of Tragedy: and Other Footnotes and Papers. Washington: Anderson House, 1939.

Anderson, Maxwell. “Elizabeth the Queen.” Eleven Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson: 1929-1939. Ed. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940. 1930.

Anderson, Maxwell. “High Tor.” Eleven Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson: 1929-1939. Ed. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940. 1937.

Anderson, Maxwell. “Key Largo.” Eleven Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson: 1929-1939. Ed. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940. 1939.

Anderson, Maxwell. “Mary of Scotland.” New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1933.

Anderson, Maxwell. “The Essence of Tragedy.” European Theories of Drama: Supplemental Text on American Drama; Anthology of Dramatic Theory and Criticism from Aristotle to the Present. Ed. Barrett H. Clark. New York: Crown, 1964.

Anderson, Maxwell. “The Wingless Victory.” Eleven Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson: 1929-1939. Ed. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940. 1936.

Anderson, Maxwell. “Winterset.” Eleven Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson: 1929-1939. Ed. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940. 1935.

Anderson, Maxwell. Off Broadway: Essays About the Theatre. New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1947.

Avery, Laurence G., ed. Dramatist in America: Letters of Maxwell Anderson, 1912-1958. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1977.

Halline, Allan G. "MAXWELL ANDERSON'S DRAMATIC THEORY." American Literature 16.2 (May 1944): 63. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Prescott Memorial Library, Ruston, LA. 23 Jan. 2009 <<http://ezproxy.prescott.latech.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=10251355&site=ehost-live&scope=site>>.

Klein, Alvin. "Keeping Alive the Work of Maxwell Anderson." New York Times (03 May 1998): 9. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Prescott Memorial Library, Ruston, LA. 24 Jan. 2009 <<http://ezproxy.prescott.latech.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=29839152&site=ehost-live&scope=site>>.

Weinman, Richard Jay. The 'Core of Belief' of Maxwell Anderson and the Structure of His Tragedies. Diss. Indiana University, 1965. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1966. 65-10,908.