

## Pandemic Dramaturgy: Tragedy and Accountability

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As theater folks know, everyone from Aristotle to Joseph Stalin has offered their take on tragedy. The term evades technical definition in our everyday language, serving to mark deeply regrettable, irreparable losses or functioning as a signifier for a kind of generalized sadness. For example, the “risk” section of consulting firm McKinsey’s website begins “the coronavirus outbreak is first and foremost a human tragedy, affecting hundreds of thousands of people,” before launching an analysis of the pandemic’s implications for the global economy. Here “tragedy” functions as a signifier of human sympathy, expressing appropriate solemnity, rather than as a descriptor that raises questions about agency and harm, like those found in tragic drama.

I’ve been teaching and writing about tragedy for the better part of a decade and have become increasingly interested in tracking how the “tragic” shows up in casual conversations and journalistic accounts of contemporary events. These extant examples in everyday language show how tragedy can be used as a catch-all term to absolve our willful negligence and its part in modern human suffering, from mass school shootings to our current international health crisis.

Language shapes our reality, and whether or not journalists are thinking of Euripides or Racine when they select the word “tragic,” the word is burdened by centuries of association with questions about accountability and suffering. We should be concerned that calling our current crisis a tragedy will encourage future commentators—as it encourages us now—to think of the present devastation as inevitable and accidental, something that happened to us, rather than something that was made, obscured, and perpetuated by our leaders and the policies based in neoliberal capitalism.

Calling the COVID-19 pandemic a “tragedy” could enable certain parties to deflect or deny political responsibility. For example, to use an argument persuasively made by critic Anne McClintock, for one to declare that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were “tragedies” requires a shrewd and nefarious kind of obfuscation, creating distance between deliberate acts of state violence and the historical complexity and political agency that were ultimately their cause.<sup>1</sup> This distancing enables responsible parties to deflect ethical culpability. McClintock’s example illustrates how governments can frame their violent actions as if they were “tragic destiny” to slink out of accountability and responsibility.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., it’s increasingly clear that the Trump administration’s unwillingness to take the necessary precautions to contain the virus caused a massive proportion of the suffering and precarity we now see all across the country. Furthermore, the initial relief package that ultimately prioritizes large corporations and the wealthy, as well as the failure of municipalities to put a moratorium on rent and evictions, will be direct causes for the continued barrage of mental and physical harm that will affect so many of our neighbors.

Calling SARS-CoV-2 a tragedy also suggests that there was something inevitable in its outbreak. But the [situation reports released by the World Health Organization](#) in February showed the virus to be zoonotic, meaning that it can cross the species barrier to humans through one or more intermediate animal hosts. While the spread of pathogens from animal to human isn't exactly uncommon, a study released in early April in the [Proceedings of the Royal Society B](#) found that human destruction of wildlife habitats and exploitation of animals through trade is linked to zoonotic disease transmission. From this perspective, it's fair to say that a novel coronavirus is a consequence of the way that we eat, travel, and trade.

My thoughts often return to the [Chicago Sun Times story](#) on farmers destroying their own crops because "it's tragically obvious that the major agricultural markets have dried up." It's strange to call market activity tragic as if there were no traceable causes or no actions that could be taken to prevent the destruction of our food supply in the face of such widespread precarity. I suppose this situation is only tragic if one considers the forces of the invisible hand, the laws of supply and demand, as inevitabilities—the gods or fate of tragic drama. But certainly, as bailouts and relief packages demonstrate, our leaders have more influence over our economic systems than Oedipus had over his destiny.

An equally chilling use of tragedy comes in a [story published](#) on April 11 by CNN that describes the "tragic last words of a dying man" about to be placed on a ventilator: "Who's going to pay for it." Next to Hamlet's "the rest is silence" or Antigone's scorching "see what I suffer, and at whose hands," these words seem as if they could be plucked from a farce; yet, the situation from which they arise—a man facing death from a virus that might have been better contained in an utterly broken healthcare system riddled with supply shortages and exorbitant charges for care—comes closer to actual tragedy than the other examples I've covered. But the report continues, insisting that despite this man's "tragic circumstances, the question was a valid concern." Calling the situation tragic but affirming the patient's question validates the whole process—he's right to be worried about who will pay for his care. This shallow use of tragedy—again, just as a signifier for "very sad"—puts the story's framing subtly at odds with its content, which does actually discuss healthcare inequality, which is, of course, not an inevitability.

One positive effect of calling an event a "tragedy" is that it dignifies human suffering; tragedies are often said to imbue violence with cosmic meaning or redemptive possibility. Traditionally, tragic protagonists are men and women at the peak of their vigor who go through unthinkable pain and sacrifice, usually for the benefit of their community. Modern tragic dramas often elevate the suffering of everyday people to the level of the gods and kings of Greek tragedy, making their lives intelligible and their losses grievable. Many commentators have noted that COVID-19 has elevated laborers, such as warehouse workers, grocery store clerks, and delivery drivers, as essential to the functioning of our society. But they are celebrated because they ensure that we can maintain our lifestyles without risking our own health and safety to the detriment of their own—this action makes them heroic.

This population was already our most vulnerable, thanks to a broken healthcare system, systemic racism, homelessness, and the other exploitations enabled by neoliberal capitalism. Perhaps we should be a little wary of the idea that suffering is always redemptive and meaningful, especially when that suffering is so clearly unnecessary or preventable.

Labeling COVID-19 a tragedy is not necessarily wholly inaccurate, and certainly responding to excessive suffering with compassion—as tragedy requires—is humane and admirable. Dignifying, or even just making visible, the unnecessary suffering of our world's most vulnerable is vital to the larger project of eliminating that inequity. However, rather than only using “tragedy” as a shallow signifier, we also need to name the direct cause of so much of this excessive harm: the failure of our leadership to contain the spread of the virus when they had a chance, and their refusal to consider relief measures that will mitigate the damage caused by widespread furloughs, unemployment, or hazardous employment, such as student loan forgiveness, rent moratoria, or, perhaps most vitally, Medicare for All.

If we genuinely see COVID-19 as a tragedy—an event causing irreparable loss—then we all need to commit to doing the work of detangling cause and consequence to reveal the destructive paradigms that continue to influence our individual and collective actions, instead of using the word as an absolution of a collective societal sin. A truly free society, centered on cooperation and care, will leave us better equipped to act ethically in the face of whatever inevitability will arise next.

<sup>1</sup> Anne McClintock, “Imperial Ghosting and National Tragedy: Revenants from Hiroshima and Indian Country in the War on Terror,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 820.