



# Tragedy: Contradiction and Repression

*Richard Kuhns*

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## **Tragedy: Contradiction and Repression** Richard Kuhns

Drawing on philosophical and psychoanalytic methods of interpretation, Richard Kuhns explores modern transformations of an ancient poetic genre, tragedy. Recognition of the philosophical problems addressed in tragedy, and of their presence up through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophical texts, novels, and poetry, establishes a continuity between classical and modern enactments. Psychoanalytic theory in both its original formulations and post-Freud developments provides a means to enlarge upon and inform philosophical analyses that have dominated modern discussions.

From Aeschylus' classic drama *The Persians* to the hidden tragic themes in *The Merchant of Venice*, from the aesthetic writings of Kant to Kleist's narrative *Michael Kohlhaas*, Kuhns traces the writing and rewriting of the themes of ancient tragedy through modern texts. A culture's concept of fate, Kuhns argues, evolves along with its concepts and forms of tragedy. Examining the deep philosophical concerns of tragedy, he shows how the genre has changed from loss and mourning to contradiction and repression. He sees the fact that tragedy went underground during the optimism of the Enlightenment as a repression that continues into the American consciousness. Turning to Melville's *The Confidence Man* as an example of Old World despair giving way to New World nihilism, Kuhns indicates how psychoanalytic understanding of tragedy provides a method of interpretation that illuminates the continuous tradition from the ancient to the modern world. The study concludes with reflections on the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Each poet's celebration of the body, and the contribution of the senses to reason, perception, and poetic intuition, is seen as an embodiment of the modern tragic sensibility.

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