

## Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)

- 1729 born to pastor & pastor's daughter in Saxony
- 1746 begins to study theology, then medicine at the Univ. of Leipzig
- 1747 translates for the Neuber stage (Frederike Caroline Neuber [1697-1760] founded the first standing German stage in Leipzig.)
- 1748 His Young Scholar is performed by the Neuber troupe. He quits his studies and moves to Berlin to work as a journalist for The Berlin Privileged Newspaper
- 1749 The Jews (a play about the limits of tolerance)
- 1751 editorial work for the *Berlin Privileged Newspaper*
- 1752 meets Friedrich Nicolai, Moses Mendelssohn, Voltaire, and others in Berlin, translates writings by Voltaire and Friedrich II
- 1753 Six volume collection of his Works appears
- 1755 Miss Sara Sampson performed in Frankfurt/Oder (called a middle-class tragedy)
- 1756-57 corresponds with Nicolai and Mendelssohn about tragedy
- 1758 fragment of a Faust drama
- 1760 works as secretary to the Prussian governor-general of Silesia at Breslau
- 1760 Letters, Concerning the Newest Literature (333 letters, with the 17th of 1759 considered the most famous for its attack of Gottsched )
- 1766 Laocoön, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry (argues against the notion of *ut pictura poesis*)
- 1767 goes to Hamburg to become “literary manager” (Dramaturg) of the short-lived German National Theater (Apr 1767-Nov 1768)
- 1767 Minna von Barnhelm or Soldiers' Fortune (a comedy in prose)
- 1767-69 Hamburg Dramaturgy (52 critiques and reviews written as part of his job of Dramaturg at the newly opened National Theater in Hamburg)
- 1770 after the failure of the Hamburg theater, Lessing becomes librarian at Wolfenbüttel, a job he holds until his death in 1781
- 1771 member of Hamburg Masonic Lodge, engaged to Eva König
- 1772 Emilia Galotti (a middle-class domestic tragedy, written in prose in 5 acts, started in 1757)

### Emilia Galotti

The Prince is madly in love with a beautiful woman of the middle class, Emilia Galotti. But she is about to marry someone else, Count Appiani, who is not at all on friendly terms with the Prince. The Prince tries to seduce Emilia, and follows her about, even into the church. The Prince also allows his chamberlain to stage a robbery of Count Appiani shortly before the planned wedding. According to the plan, the Prince is then supposed to “rescue” Emilia from her attackers, and bring her to “safety” to his Pleasure Castle. Emilia at first thinks she has been saved by the Prince, but soon learns she has been kidnapped and that her fiancée has been killed in the “robbery.” When Emilia learns about the scheme, she wants to kill herself in order to save her virtue. But her father, who is unable to free his daughter from the grips of the Prince, grabs the dagger from her hands and kills her so that she can remain virtuous.

- 1776 marries Eva König  
 1777 wife and son die  
 1779 Nathan the Wise, a dramatic poem about religious tolerance in 5 acts, written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter, i.e. a metric line of five feet consisting of a light followed by a stressed syllable, called “blank verse” because lines do not rhyme)

Nathan the Wise

The play begins in Jerusalem in the times of the crusades when the city was ruled by the Moslem Sultan Saladin. Nathan, a Jew whose family had been killed by the Christians, learns that his daughter Recha had just been saved from a fire by a captured Christian knight. Nathan wants to meet the knight and thank him. Meanwhile, Saladin discovers that he is out of money, and hears rumors that Nathan is both wise and wealthy. Nathan is called to visit the Sultan. Nathan truly wants to help, especially since the Sultan indirectly saved his daughter’s life by his having spared the life of the Christian knight who would eventually save her from the fire. (The Sultan had originally spared the knight because of his resemblance to the Sultan’s long-lost brother.) The Sultan asks Nathan about the best religion, and Nathan responds with the Ring Parable. Meanwhile, the Christian knight has fallen in love with Recha, and is uncertain what he should do since she is Jewish. But he soon discovers that Recha is not Jewish, but rather an adopted child and that her parents were in fact Christian. In the end, it turns out that all characters are in fact related: the Christian knight is Recha’s brother, and both are children of the Sultan’s lost-brother, whom Nathan had served eighteen years earlier.

- 1780 The Education of the Human Race  
 1781 Lessing dies in Braunschweig

**Lessing’s Thoughts about Tragedy** (Letter to Friedrich Nicolai 13. November 1756)

Lessing searches for the best formulation of what tragedy is capable of doing, and how it goes about doing it. He develops an argument over time:

- ▶ “Tragedy should improve us.” (i.e. make us better persons)
  - ▶ “Tragedy should arouse passions.”
  - ▶ “Tragedy is able to improve us by arousing passions.”

The specific passion excited by tragedy is **pity, not terror or astonishment**. (“A tragedy full of terror and not pity is like lightening without thunder.”) Lessing believes that tragedy had suffered because of a “false translation of Aristotle” regarding fear: “... not fear excited in us by misfortune threatening another person. It is the fear which arises for ourselves from the similarity of our position with that of the sufferer; it is the fear that the calamities impending over the sufferers might also befall ourselves; it is the fear that we ourselves might thus become objects of pity. In a word this fear is compassion referred back to ourselves.” “The fear and pity excited by tragedy is to purify our pity and fear -- only these and no other passions.”

Much of Lessing's understanding of the purpose of tragedy and his understanding of pity comes from his discussions with his close friends Moses Mendelssohn and Friedrich Nicolai. Mendelssohn signified for Lessing emancipated, enlightened Jewry in Germany, and provided the image of Nathan in Lessing's Nathan the Wise. Mendelssohn developed a theory of mixed feelings (pleasure and displeasure) in relation to tragic pity. Nicolai contributed much to the notion that tragedy should arouse passions and make the audience morally better.

The tears we shed during a tragedy are tears of compassion (literally, suffering along with someone). Yes, fear too is involved, but not terror. Lessing believes that Aristotle did not mean that tragedy should arouse in us the fear that someone's misfortune will happen to others as well, but that it could happen to us. Lessing speaks of fear as "the fear which arises for ourselves from the similarity of our position with that of the sufferer; it is the fear that the calamities impending over the sufferers might also befall ourselves; it is the fear that we ourselves might thus become objects of pity." He is not interested in portraying shocking or astonishing examples which leave only a temporary impression on the audience, as was common in seventeenth century tragedy, but wants a lasting effect which fundamentally changes our moral disposition. Our hearts should be moved in order to make us better human beings.

### **The Purpose of Tragedy**

For Lessing the purpose of tragedy lies in its ability to improve us morally:

► **"Tragedy should expand our capacity to feel pity."**

Tragedy should not merely teach us to have pity towards any misfortune, but it should make us aware that misfortune touches and captivates us at all times.

► **"The most compassionate person is the best person."**

Whatever makes us compassionate makes us better and more virtuous. Tragedy does this best. But comedy can also do this. Comedy helps us develop the ability to easily recognize and avoid the ridiculous, thereby becoming better, moral human beings. Both tragedy and comedy are pleasurable and useful.

### **Lessing's Hamburg Dramaturgy (1767-69)**

In the Hamburg Dramaturgy Lessing defines tragedy as the imitation of an action worthy of our pity, an action which involves a tragic hero of a "middle character," who thereby resembles us (who is neither criminal nor an angel), who is made of the same "stuff" we are made of, and who suffers undeservedly. This kind of tragedy moves us; we fear that the undeserved misfortune we witness could happen to us. The only unity of any importance is the unity of action.

## About the critical function of tragedy

- ▶ “It is in the hands of the public to improve and redress what it finds defective. Let them come, see and hear, and examine and judge!” The “theater is to be the school of the moral world.”
- ▶ “If pomp and etiquette make machines out of men, it is the task of the poet to make men out of these machines.”
- ▶ **“The names of princes and heroes can lend pomp and majesty to a play, but they contribute nothing to our emotion.** The misfortunes of those whose circumstances most resemble our own, must naturally penetrate most deeply into our hearts, and it we pity kings, we pity them as human beings, not as kings. Though their position often renders their misfortunes more important, it does not make them more interesting. Whole nations may be involved in them, but our sympathy requires an individual object and a state is far too much an abstract conception to touch our feelings.”
- ▶ “From the stage we are not to learn what such and such an individual man has done, but what every man of a certain character would do under given circumstances. the object of tragedy is more philosophical than the object of history...” “Tragedy is not history in dialogue. History is for tragedy nothing but a storehouse of names wherewith we are used to associate certain characters.”
- ▶ “the dramatic poet is not an historian, doesn’t relate to us what was once believed to have happened, but he really produces it again before our eyes -- not according to historical truth, but for a totally different and noble aim. Historical accuracy is not his aim, but only the means by which he hopes to attain his aim.”

## Lessing’s Thoughts about Comedy

Lessing analyses the “tearful” and “touching” comedies of the French stage: “The aim of farce is to produce only laughter; of the tearful comedy to produce only tears; whereas the aim of true comedy is to produce both.” He has no problem with mixing genres. He doesn’t see this as an adulteration, but rather as a way to approach an ideal model of comedy: “Only those comedies are true comedies which portray vices as well as virtues, propriety as well as absurdity, for in this very intermingling they most closely approach their model, which is human life.”

- ▶ “Comedy is to improve us through laughter, but not through derision, its general use lies in our power to discern the ridiculous...” “in comedy characters are most important, and situations are only means to set them in motions”