

Eastern Illinois University

## The Keep

---

Plan B Papers

Student Theses & Publications

---

3-9-1960

### From Here to Eternity: A Tragedy

Samuel F. Eaton

Follow this and additional works at: [https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan\\_b](https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan_b)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Eaton, Samuel F., "From Here to Eternity: A Tragedy" (1960). *Plan B Papers*. 171.  
[https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan\\_b/171](https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan_b/171)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Plan B Papers by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact [tabruns@eiu.edu](mailto:tabruns@eiu.edu).

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: A TRAGEDY

BY

SAMUEL F. EATON

FOR

DR. BLAIR

ENGLISH

500

MARCH 9, 1960

Statement of purpose: My purpose in writing this paper is to present and substantiate the thesis that Prewitt, in From Here To Eternity, is a proper tragic hero and elevates the novel From Here To Eternity into the ranks of the more important novels of our century.

## OUTLINE

- I. For one to determine a proper tragic hero, one must have a set of criteria.
  - A. Aristotle's Poetics has been used as a basis for the criteria.
  - B. The criteria consist of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, his definition of hamartia, and his statement concerning peripety combined with recognition.
- II. Prewitt is represented as a proper tragic hero in From Here To Eternity.
  - A. Prewitt's character in relation to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is with reference to three other characters, his mother, Alma schmidt, and Maggio.
  - B. Hamartia consists of Prewitt's misjudgment.
  - C. The peripety combined with recognition is evidenced by Prewitt's realization that the catastrophe is the inevitable though unexpected outcome of his own actions.
- III. The conclusion is a summation of the criteria establishing Prewitt as a proper tragic hero who elevates From Here To Eternity into the ranks of the more important novels of our century.

The proper tragic hero of the novel From Here To Eternity is Prewitt. For one to determine a proper tragic hero, one must have a set of criteria. On the basis of a study of Aristotle's Poetics and various commentaries thereon, I have arrived inductively at the formulation of the standards applied throughout the present study.

Aristotle in The Poetics said:

There remains then the man who occupies the mean between saintliness and depravity. He is not extraordinary in virtue and righteousness, and yet does not fall into bad fortune because of evil and wickedness, but because of some error of the kind found in men of high reputation...<sup>1</sup>.

The error that Aristotle refers to is harmatia. Bywater, in a footnote to this passage, states that harmatia is "an error of judgment."

My task now is to present to the reader the tragic hero Prewitt, emphasizing that he was not a paragon of virtue, nor did he represent the epitome of evil. He did not fall into bad fortune because of evil, but rather his fall into bad fortune was as a result of harmatia, and Prewitt's final bad fortune, his death, was due to a combination of recognition and peripety.

Aristotle in The Poetics said:

Recognition, as the word indicates by its derivation, is a change from ignorance to knowledge...The best recognition is one combined with a peripety...Such a recognition and peripety will produce pity and fear, and tragedy is an imitation of actions producing these feelings, and good fortune and bad fortune come about as a result of such recognitions and peripeties.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle said of peripety specifically: Peripety is a change to the opposite of actions performed according to probability or necessity...<sup>3</sup>.

Butcher, in a footnote to this passage, interpreted Aristotle's definition of peripety as being:

The situation, as it were, turns upon the agent who is attempting to deal with it, -- swings around and catches him in the recoil.<sup>4</sup>

1. Allan H. Gilbert, Literary Criticism, p. 86.

2. Ibid., p. 84.

3. Ibid., p. 83.

4. Ibid., p. 83.

These, then, are the criteria that will be utilized to verify the veracity of my thesis, that Prewitt in From Here To Eternity was a proper tragic hero, and in that context he, Prewitt, elevates the novel From Here To Eternity into the ranks of the more important novels of our century.

My first contention is that Prewitt was not extraordinary in virtue, nor was he extraordinarily evil. To give validity to this statement, as with all, in reference to my criteria, I shall quote excerpts from the novel From Here To Eternity. The excerpts I am going to quote will deal with Prewitt from the standpoint of his feelings in regard to other people. I am going to consider the following people: his mother, Alma Schmidt, the prostitute he loved; and Maggio, his best friend.

The first explanatory excerpt deals with Prewitt and his mother:

As she was dying his mother made him promise her one thing. "Promise me one thing, Robert," she wheezed at him. "From your father you got pride and I knowed that you would need it. But one of you would have kilt the other if it hatnt been for me. And now, I wont be standin atween you no more."

"I'll promise anything you want, ma, whatever you say for me to promise, whatever it is you say," the boy, watching her die in front of him, looking at her above his haze of disbelief for signs of immortality, said woodenly.

"A deathbed promise is the most sacred one there is," she hawked at him from lungs that were almost, but not quite, filled up yet, "and I want you to make me this promise on my deathbed: Promise me you wont never hurt nobody unless its absolute a must, unless you jist have to do it."

"I promise you," he vowed to her, still waiting for the angels to appear. "Are you afraid?" he said.

"Give me your hand on it, boy. It is a deathbed promise, and you'll never break it."

"Yes maam," he said, giving her his hand, drawing it back quickly, afraid to touch the death he saw in her, unable to find anything beautiful or edifying or spiritually uplifting in this return to God. He watched a while longer for signs of immortality. No angels came, however, there was no earthquake, no cataclysm, and it was not until he had thought over often this first death that he had had a part in that he had discovered the single uplifting thing about it, that being the fact that in this last great period of fear her thought had been upon his future, rather than her own... 5.

5. James Jones, From Here To Eternity, pp. 21-22.

After the death of his mother, Prewitt went on the "bum," these being the depression years, and finally enlisted in the army. In the army he became a boxer, a bugler, and then returned to boxing again. In a ring accident he blinded a fighter named Dixie Wells. As a result of this accident, he decided to quit boxing. There was, however, more behind Prewitt's decision than just the fact of the accident.

Everything [boxing] would probably have gone on like that indefinitely, since he had convinced himself that bugling was nothing, had it not been for the deathbed promise to his mother and for Dixie Wells... 6.

And again Prewitt thinks:

It would probably, after Dixie Wells, have been the same whether or not he had been haunted by his promise to his mother. But the old, ingenious, Baptist-like promise was the clincher. Because the uninitiated boy had taken it, not like a Baptist, but literally. 7.

Since Prewitt's thoughts and especially his rationalizations as related to his feelings toward his mother lie beyond the scope of this study, I shall leave the implications of the foregoing passages to the mind of the reader.

The next person to be considered in regard to Prewitt and his feelings, is Alma Schmidt. The explanatory scene takes place during their first meeting. She, Alma, is (regrettably, according to many critics) a prostitute, and Prewitt and she are together at the New Congress.

"Am I one of your specials?" he asked her thickly. She stopped at the door and laughed back at him over her shoulder.

"Well," she said, coquettishly, "you're here, aren't you?"

"Sure I'm here. But that could be because of Angelo and Maylon, and the bottle, that they wanted me cut in on," he said, noticing how very feminine she was when she was coquettish. "Billy and Sandra brought them here, not me."

"Is it so important?" Lorene teased.

"Yes, its important," he said urgently. "Important because there are so many of us: thats just faces, to you. so many of you that aint even faces, only just bodies,

---

6. Ibid., p. 25.

7. Ibid., p. 27.

to us. Do you want to be just a unremembered body? When we come here and then go away we need to know at least that we've remembered. Maybe we seem all alike but none of us is ever alike. Men are killed by being always all alike, always unremembered. They die inside. Wives earn their money that way just as much as whores do, with this crappy imitation that aint no good but has to work because usually its all there is. But it dries up the well and leaves it nothing but a mudhole, makes it just rick block poured down a strawy rathole that stinks afterwards, unless you are remembered. Just to be remembered is..." 8.

Later on that same night, Prewitt thinks:

what a possibility, he thought; man, man, what a possibility. But then why not? In this place, on this Rock, who else is it possible for a soldier to fall in live with, except a whore? This Rock, where the white girls, even the middle-class white girls, were all little snobs and where there were no white girls below the middle class. This Rock, where even with the gook girls that were the lowest class it was a disgrace to be seen talking to a soldier. So then why not a whore? It was not only possible, it was perfectly logical. Maybe it was even sensible. 9.

And still later, Prewitt rationalizes his love or amorous feelings for Alma in this way:

Why, hell. She could marry him now, today, and still go on working for a year, she planned to do that anyway, what did he care? Respectability had done him a lot of goddam good in his time, hadnt it? Respectability and fifteen cents will get you a beer. Respectability and its matronly advocates who were trying to hide their own youth when they too had been alive, because being alive was always a little obscene, you always made people uncomfortable when you were alive. well, up yours, ladies, thats all. 10.

Prewitt's problem, here, involves his desire for respectability versus his love for Alma. Society feels it is not respectable to fall in love with a prostitute. However, sincere love, in itself, transeends what is considered respectable or not respectable. Even the Bible of the Puritan's does not stipulate the profession of the neighbor that one is obligated to love.

8. Jones, Op. Cit., p. 241.

9. Ibid., p. 245.

10. Ibid., p. 343.

Therefore, I ask the reader to make his own decision as to whether Prewitt was depraved or virtuous in his relationship with Alma. I also ask the reader to keep in mind the fact that if Prewitt was neither depraved nor virtuous, he then would fall in a category somewhere between depravity and virtue.

Prewitt's feelings in regard to his best friend, Angelo Maggio, I feel emphasize Prewitt's characteristic attitude toward virtue and evil. I feel it is clearly evident from the following excerpt that Prewitt is neither overly virtuous, nor overly evil; but that he does indeed occupy the mean between the two.

He felt guilty about Angelo too, that was one reason he had wanted to see him. He felt that what had happened Payday was somehow his fault. Angelo had been playing the queers for quite a while now, he had been coming down to Hal's place often, and nothing like this had happened before. Only when Kid Prewitt appeared on the scene, like a catalyst poured into a tranquil beaker, did the mixture begin to boil and then explode. Angelo had not been tainted by the queers; it was only when Kid Galahad Prewitt had stepped in looking for the Holy Grail with his moralistic fears and questionings that Angelo had suddenly felt guilty enough, or tainted enough, to do something drastic. There were times when Prewitt felt a special quality in himself, a strange unpleasant quality that seemed to force everyone he touched into making drastic decisions about their own lives, no wonder people did not like to be around him. The idea frightened him deeply, at such times, because he could not understand what it was and because he did not want to do it. Certainly, he did not try to do it. People went along, living their lives as best they could, not gaining much maybe, but not losing greatly either, and all the time, deeply hidden, the one great personal conflict of fear lay dormant and unhidden. Enter Kid Galahad Prewitt. The action precipitates. The conflict of fear rises flapping from the depths like a giant manta ray, looming big and bigger, looming huge, up out of the deep green depths that you can look down into through a water glass and see the anchor cable dwindling in a long arc down into invisibility, up from far below that even, flapping the two wing fins of choice and the ego caught square in the middle. And they had to choose, had to face it, and whichever way they chose they still got hurt. And all the time he did not want to do it, did not know he did it, until afterwards. It always frightened him, thinking this way, it was one

---

of the things he could most of the time keep down, out of his mind, but sometimes it was too hard to keep the mind going in smooth even waves and he had to let it in and the mind started jumping around yawingly as if there were no bottom under the feet and it always frightened him. Maybe there were things in themselves men should not look at, just as there were things in the very deep bottom of the sea that it was better that men did not know about. He felt that was true, sometimes. Life frightened him, sometimes. But there was nothing to do, anyway. Because this special quality was a thing he could not control in himself, that he could not stop. But then when he was going good he knew it was better to face it, that it was always better to face things no matter what it cost anybody. He knew that. He believed it. Only in the bad spells did life frighten him with its unbelievable cruelty, its inconceivable injustice, its incredible pointlessness. He was going through one of the bad spells now, with Angelo in the stockade waiting trial. He felt he should have been able to stop the little guy from going off the deep end that night, even though it was himself, he felt, who caused it. He should have foreseen it. He should have not left him alone to step to the water to jettison the trunks. He should have pitched into the fight, in spite of what the little guy had yelled. The two of them could have whipped the MPs, clubs and all and gotten away, back to the company and safety. He saw a thousand things he should have done, but had not done. He held himself responsible for what happened to Angelo. That was why he wanted to see Angelo so badly, maybe he could explain it to him. But he did not get to see Angelo. 11.

My second contention is that Prewitt's fall into bad fortune was due to hamartia. To verify this statement, I refer to the passage in which Jones states explicitly that it was Prewitt's own mistaken decision that catapulted him into increasing evil fortune.

When he arrived in Schofield Barracks he was still very bitter about the bugle. It was this that made him go back to fighting, here in the Pineapple Army where fighting was even more prolific than it was at Myer. That was his error, but it did not seem so then... 12.

Finally, Jones makes clear that the catastrophe, Prewitt's death, was accomplished by means of peripety followed by the hero's recognition.

"Advance, friend, and be recognized," said the bigger one squeakily. Then he cleared his throat.

11. Jones, Op. Cit., pps. 394-395.

12. Ibid., p. 25.

And he, Prewitt that is, the unrecognized friend, came toward them slowly. Thinking how now, for a split minute out of the time run, by a happenstance of smartness on their part and dumbness on his, they held it all in their hands. A thing that had started almost a year ago, with Chief Bugler Houston, and led up through Dynamite Holmes and the boxing into the treatment and Ike Galovich and from there to the stockade and Jack Malloy and the late Fatso Judson, and a lot of other things both before and after, to finally here, where for this split minute that was the current point of time in the line of time which was not a line but an infinite series of points, four strangers held it all in their hands without even knowing it. <sup>13.</sup>

In summary, the fact that Prewitt does indeed reach Aristotle's mean between saintliness and depravity; the fact that due to hamartia, Prewitt fell from good to bad fortune; and finally the fact that Prewitt's death was brought about by peripety, accompanied by recognition compel us to the conclusion that he is to be considered a proper tragic hero; and, therefore, the novel From Here To Eternity is one of the more important novels of our century.

---

13. Ibid., pp. 746-747.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Aristotle. "The Poetics." Gilbert, Allan H. Literary Criticism. Chicago: American Book Company. 1940.
2. Jones, James. From Here To Eternity. New York: New American Library. 1953.