

## Trajik Olaylar, Ölüm ve Yas: Tim Crouch'un *An Oak Tree* Oyunu<sup>a</sup>

Kadriye BOZKURT<sup>b, c</sup>, Meryem AYAN<sup>d</sup>

### Özet

Ölüm hayatın doğal akışını alt üst eden ve insanların yaşamlarını derinden etkileyen en zor ve en acı dolu gerçeklerden bir tanesi olarak karşımıza çıkar. Geçmişte olduğu gibi günümüz dünyası da beklenmedik olumsuz trajik olaylarla mücadele etmekte ve bu olaylar insanlar için en sevdiklerinin kaybına sebep olabilecek istenmedik sonuçlar doğurmaktadır. Ölümün insan hayatındaki evrenselliği ve insanlar tarafından istekli/isteksiz kabullenilişi merhum/e kişinin en yakınlarının hissettikleri acı ve kederin hafiflemesinde nispeten etkili olabilir. Toplu törenlerinin düzenlenmesi veya ölüm acısını paylaşmak için insanların bir araya gelmesi bireysel üzüntüyü sona erdirmek için yeterli olamamaktadır. Bu çalışmada seçili tiyatro oyunu *An Oak Tree* (2005) ile örneklendirildiği gibi ölüm insanların kalbine ve zihnine ağır ve elem dolu bir yük koyar. Çağdaş İngiliz tiyatrosunun en önde gelen oyun yazarlarından olan ve çok yönlülüğü ile bilinen Tim Crouch tarafından yazılan bu oyun trajik bir kaza sonrası ölümle gelen yıkıcı ve acı dolu yas sürecini gözler önüne serer. Çağdaş insanın gizli ve gözlerden uzak trajik durumunu ortaya koyan önemli bir oyun yazarı olarak Crouch, bu oyunda travma, suçluluk, utanç ve kaybetmenin acısı gibi ölüm ile ilişkili olan insana dair hisleri alışılmadık tiyatral yöntemler kullanarak ele alır. Bu çalışma ile trajik olaylar, ölüm ve yas tutma arasındaki zamansız ilişkiye değinilmesi amaçlanmıştır, ayrıca bu çalışma çağdaş insanın ölüm karşısındaki potansiyel tutumu ve tepkisini Crouch'un seçili oyunundaki karakterler vasıtasıyla ortaya koyacaktır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

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## Tragic Events, Death and Mourning: Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree*

### Abstract

Death is one of the most challenging and sorrowful life facts that strikes people's lives and disrupts routine natural continuity of life. As it has happened in the past, today's world struggles with unexpected unfavourable tragic events, and they bring undesirable outcomes for people even the loss of their dearest ones. The universality of death and its un/willingly accepted existence in people's lives maybe slightly help in relieving the pain and grief of those who are closest to the deceased. The communal rites or people's togetherness to heal the pain of death cannot be enough to terminate the individual agonies. In the way that it is exemplified in this study with this selected play *An Oak Tree* (2005), death places heavy and painful burden for people's heart and mind. Written by one of the most sophisticated and prominent playwrights of the contemporary British theatre, Tim Crouch, this play portrays the disruptive and tristful period of mourning that follows a death after a tragic accident. Being a notable playwright to expose the hidden and invisible tragic status of contemporary people, Crouch reveals humane feelings related to death like trauma, guilt, shame, the pain of loss in this play with unfamiliar strategies of theatre. With this study the timeless relation between tragic events, death and mourning is aimed to be encapsulated, and this study will also deliver the potential responses and reactions of contemporary people in the face of death via the characters of Crouch's selected play.

### Keywords

Tragic events  
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<sup>b</sup> Contact Author: kbozkurt78@hotmail.com

<sup>c</sup> Asst. Prof. Kadriye BOZKURT, Bolu Abant İzzet BAYSAL University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5219-5629>.

<sup>d</sup> Prof. Dr. Meryem AYAN, Manisa Celal BAYAR University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, ORCID:0000-0003-3138-1523.

## Introduction

From the very beginning of human life, people have experienced the unescapable presence of death in their lives. Humankind cannot escape from death and inevitably face this reality. Though the death is considered from different perspectives related to the earthly relations such as the loss, the deprivation or annihilation, or related to religious belief such as salvation in afterlife or an endless life, one face of death brings sadness and sorrow for people. Just like the former times, contemporary world is also unfortunately surrounded by distressful and sorrowful events and people cannot get rid of the tragic fate created by their own hands or by the outer forces. As Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests, "it is remarkable that ancient tragedies already thematized suffering concretely, and even simply: as pain, separation, aging, the loss of a child, the fear of death and so on. It did not occur for the first time" (p. 46). Tragic events are still at work and affect people's lives deeply. As depicted by British playwright Tim Crouch in his plays, contemporary people struggle with the similar tragic issues and suffer from many different reasons that bring them sorrow, pain and death. In the play, *An Oak Tree* (2005), Crouch presents the narrative on tragic condition and death that follow a painful and pathetic mourning process for characters.

## On Tragic, Death and Loss

Death creates tragic characters who agonize over the loss of their precious ones, and various emotions accompany this suffer like missing, regretting, guilt, desperation, rebellion or disbelief. Even if it is perceived as nothingness or salvation, death still leaves behind sadness and pain. This pain and sorrow of death are explained by Terry Eagleton in his following words, "at the core of human existence lies the monstrous trauma of death and the threat of eternal perdition. (...) What we call reality is just the set of shabby illusions which shield us from death" (2003: p. 215). Since death appears as the opposite of life, aliveness and exuberance, people suffer from it and feel anguished. The more they internalize death, the deeper they can feel its pain. As Aristotle declares and then Lehmann reminds us again, "nothing tragic can exist without 'heavy grief'" (2016: p. 45). Unfortunately, death is a part of human life, and the human sufferings and their losses always become the subject of human affairs. The great impacts of death in people's lives have been exemplified in literature especially in tragic writings. Thinking on the death and grief in literature, Professor Adrian Poole gives references from tragedy by underlining that "the origins of tragedy may be bound up with mourning rites for a dead hero or king" (2005: p. 41). In ancient Greek, the lamentations of women for the death of their brave warriors and then the collective burial and mourning rites for them took part in Homer's epic *Illiad* that was a significant source for many tragedies written in ancient Greece. As one of the oldest genres, tragedy depicted great sufferings, destructions, distress and tragic deaths of the noble heroes/heroines. In modern world, serious accidents, crimes, or natural catastrophes, sudden attacks or unfortunate lives of common people are included in the scope of modern tragedy by some parties in literary circles and Arthur Miller is one of those who suggests that the misfortunes of the ordinary modern men can be the subject of tragedy, so he puts into words his ideas in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1996). Similarly, Lehmann emphasises that "it has found different forms of expression at different times. However, modulated, tragic experience returns again and again" (2016: p. 411).

From its prototypes of tragedy in Ancient Greek to today's tragic writing, countless tragic stories have been issued and innumerable tragic heroes have been ruined because of several internal and external factors. Tragedy ends up with loss and grief, mostly it depicts the death of tragic hero and the final sorrow and grief of people. These tragic narratives on destruction and death sometimes appeared as an elegy to praise and commemorate the dead, sometimes they were written to convey the regrets for wrongdoings and apologies for the dead, sometimes they were written for the wishes for peace after death if the dead one did not have a restful world life, or they could be written for the nature of the death that separates the beloved ones; the families, the lovers or communities. Whatever the purposes of them were, the narratives on death mostly covered the collective and individual mourning process. For instance, Ajax and Oedipus had very controversial lives and after their deaths they were wished to rest in peace in their rites as collective activity (Poole, 2005: p. 41) or the star-crossed lovers of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* made everyone cry and feel regretful with their death. In such tragedies, public commemoration can be observed as the communal lamentation of people. Poole makes a distinction between the past narratives and modern ones concentrating on their treatment of the death and mourning. Poole puts forward modern tragedy's concern to "private, even secret, mourning" (p. 41) as the distinctive points. This approach can be associated with the notions of subjectivity and individuality that modernism has brought into people's lives. If the matter is the suffering and trauma of an individual, then it can be experienced in a "private, neglected, unnoticed" way (p. 42), unlike the collective public mourning in the past.

It is a fact that the cultural, ideological and religious atmosphere of the contemporary time is far from the time of grand tragedies especially in terms of the position of human beings in the world and in front of the Divine powers. Relatively, the strength and perseverance of earlier tragic heroes against death, the characterisation, the flow of action and the techniques of staging are organised around the human centred tragic narratives. Modern and postmodern tragic writings reshape their own tragic discourse by revealing the status of humankind who put themselves in the centre; so, their interactions, their cultures, their sorrows, their fragmented lives and dismantled identities and anything concerning human beings are involved in tragic writings. Tim Crouch's chosen play, *An Oak Tree* for this study reveals these tragic experiences of contemporary people and it conveys the darker, traumatic and self-questioning atmosphere of mourning after a death. David Lane emphasises this important point by asserting that "all Crouch's plays concern the art of representation and its deconstruction, and all of them have recognizable human stories at their heart" (2010: p. 28). The other play *An Oak Tree* unfolds the story of a father who loses his daughter in a car accident. Thematically, this play reveals depression, exposure, guilt, shame and the pain of loss and death. Each performance of this play features a new unprepared actor in the role of a father directed by Crouch who acts also as a hypnotist on stage. Also, in his other plays written for adult audiences *My Arm* (2003), *ENGLAND* (2007) and *The Author* (2009), Crouch uses his talent of writing and acting to expose the hidden and invisible tragic feelings of people. In these plays, Crouch explores many themes from cultural identity, child abuse, self-alienation, discrimination, violence, existentialism, death to traumas. Just like it appears in the plays of Crouch, people's lives can easily turn into a tragic stage that is surrounded by sudden attacks, violent crimes, deathful pandemics, or depressive minds. Considering

Crouch's plays, David Lane asserts that "all Crouch's plays concern the art of representation and its deconstruction, and all of them have recognizable human stories at their heart" (p. 28).

### Mourning in *An Oak Tree*

*An Oak Tree* was premiered at the Traverse Theatre in 2005, and it was co-directed by Crouch, Karl James, and Andy Smith. With this play, Crouch puts the sadness of loss and the grief of death on stage by carrying the experiential theatre to its zenith. Crouch intersects his story on mourning and his interest of conceptual art and hypnotism in this play. Written in the form of two hands, *An Oak Tree* unfolds the grief of a father for the death of his daughter and the unexpected encounter of two main characters, the Father and the Hypnotist, in a hypnotism show in a pub. Crouch takes inspiration for this play from Michael Craig-Martin's work of art 'An Oak Tree 1973' and Émile Coué's book *Self Mastery through Conscious Autosuggestion* (1922) on hypnotism (Radosavljevic, 2013: p. 219). Then, these two main issues are combined with the theme of death like a trivet of the play. Attracting attention with its story and performance, the play won a Herald Angel award and OBIE award. Crouch presents familiar issues, death, to his audiences yet he displays an unusual play with unique experiences for each actor and each audience. Similar to unexpected coming of death to people's lives, the playwright Crouch wishes instant reflexes and reactions from his actors about the given situations, for that reason the actors are not allowed to see the text before the performance. Apparently, this play pulls the actor and the audience in performance simultaneously in order to provide necessary experience about death. As Stephanie Withers says, "the audience and actor together uncover the tragic after-effects of losing a child. A lost character played by a lost actor, both trying to find their way; the form complements the themes elegantly" (2015: par 1). The script limits the second actor only in terms of words, at that moment, the actor is free from representational limitations.

Crouch presents a kind of text labyrinth for his second actor; he is free to act within the text, but he cannot exceed the border of it. On the one hand, Crouch draws a frame for his play, on the other hand he leaves spaces for the actor and the audience to act and move freely. It is obvious that the second actor is not built in the conventional sense, so his performance on stage does not fit into the traditional acting methods. Crouch has certain expectations from his actors: "I didn't want an actor who would do acting –I think I got quite bored or tired or depressed about acting" (Radosavljevic, 2013: p. 220). In this play, any physical resemblance with the character is not required; any age, any sex, any height are fine for this character, though he is depicted with certain physical characteristics in the script. No early preparation, no memorization, no mimicry, no costume, or no design. The status of the second actor is also important to show the people's position in front of death; the second actor does not know the story beforehand, and she/he is given a script on stage, or he is given her/his word to say. That means she/he faces the theme of death in an instant without any preparation for it physically and mentally even if it occurs in fictional world. Father depicts the very moment it comes in the third scene. "Death. Death walked through into the lounge. He put his helmet on the piano stool, spoke to us silver. He then pronounced two concrete blocks in black and left them to hang inside my ribcage, pushing against my lungs" (Crouch, 2011: p. 81). In real life, there is no true time for the encounter with death since people never be prepared to it. The suddenness and unexpectedness of the death can be found even in the second actor's unrehearsed action to perform this play. The audience can see the second actor's endeavours

to perform the character while she/he is struggling for reading the script on stage and to act as it is instructed by Crouch through the wireless receiver. These words of Crouch liken the summary of his attempts and aim in this performance: "The second actor plays a character who is lost in their life. And that character is played by an actor who is 'lost' on the stage. The form supports the story: the story supports the form" (qtd. in Wright, 2015: par 3).

The heavy grief atmosphere in *An Oak Tree* is presented through the sorrows of three different characters, hypnotist, Father Andy and Mother Dawn. They are experiencing their sufferings differently and searching for some ways to cope with the loss of their beloved ones. Even the playwright Crouch himself confesses the burden of death saying, "If I lost one of my children, I would not be able to represent the world in the same way ever again" (Question and Answer, 2016: min 3.17). In *An Oak Tree*, it is possible to witness the dimensions of the sufferings from death and how collective or personal it is. Unlike the collective public mourning in the past, the sufferings and traumas of an individual are experienced in a "private, neglected, unnoticed" way (Poole 2005: p. 42) like a secret private mourning ceremony. Different reactions and responses to death from different characters and their struggle to overcome tragic and depressive effects of death show the individual effort/effortlessness during mourning process. For instance, Hypnotist is the culprit of a tragic accident that brings death to the girl and turns her family's life upside down. His guilty conscience and his sadness restrain him from performing his hypnosis shows. He turns into a mourner for the girl and then he encounters with her father. His mourning does not comprise the existence of a close bond with the dead one, the sorrow of the Hypnotist is mostly because of the outcome of his regret and guilt for the accident he has caused.

The mood of the Father after the death of his daughter gives the audience goosebumps since his deep suffering and mourning are accompanied by the rejection of the truth of his daughter's death. The closeness of the relationship determines the degree of the felling of grief. Even though there is no certain rule about grieving, how long it takes or to what extent it should be, the Father's condition reveals the abnormality about his mourning process. In his book *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Sigmund Freud talks about healthy mourning and pathological mourning, melancholia. In pathological mourning, the excessiveness in depression and sorrow prevents the natural operation of the mourning process (qtd. in Aslan, 2007, pp. 162-163). The abnormality in the Father's responses to death links his attitude with pathological mourning. The Father cannot accept the absence, and he makes up an escape mechanism to forget his unwilling deprivation. He believes that his daughter has been transformed into an oak tree nearby the road the accident happened. Father refuses to go the mortuary and he goes for a walk on the day of the funeral by saying, "I had no one to bury" (Crouch, 2011: p. 89). It seems that he loses his ability of judgement. As Catarina Love mentions, his condition shows "the confused mind of a grieving parent" (2017: p. 42). Standing between fact and fiction, Father tries to avoid feeling of the loss of her existence in the world.

Contrary to her husband, the mother Dawn lives the mourning in her heart by accepting all the realities about this tragic condition. She is very rational with her acts to get over this big sorrow, she tries to face the truth to be able to continue her life. She does her best to communicate with her husband to give up his imagination about his daughter, but it is in

vain. The illusion and imagination caused by pain blur the borders of real and fiction and open an abstract phenomenal world painted by different colours. The Father describes how they feel that very night of accident: "Our pulses raced in purple. We phoned the piano teacher in brown. (...) Dawn's knees gave way in white" (Crouch, 2011: pp. 80-81). Death leads this man's mind to free from the physical limits of time and he begins to generate his own dreamy and illusionistic perception towards incidents. His mental breakdown blocks rational thinking and logical interpretation. He lives in his illusionary world: "I looked at the tree. A tree by the road. I touched it. And from the hollows and the spaces, I scooped up the properties of Claire and changed the physical substance of the tree into my daughter" (Ibid). He embraces the tree on the roadside where the girl has died by supposing that miraculously his daughter has transformed into this tree. He says, "I came to the roadside. I needed a hug from my girl" (Ibid). He keeps believing in his illusion as it can be seen in his dialogue with hypnotist:

**FATHER:** No, it's not like that. I'm here because –I wanted to –I needed you to know.  
It's good news.  
Claire's fine.  
**HYPNOTIST:** What do you mean?  
**FATHER:** She's fine. I mean she's okay.  
She's not okay.  
I mean I found her.  
I haven't found her.  
I mean I know where she is  
I don't know where she is.  
Only  
You have to help me.  
I've done something.  
Something impossible.  
And I don't know what to do.  
Something miraculous. (*An Oak Tree*, Scene 4)

Maybe the fear of the ending makes Father so depressed and rebellious to the fact. He does not want to accept the end of his daughter's physical existence. Raymond Williams argues that "however men die, (...) the experience is not only the physical dissolution and ending; it is also a change in the lives and relationships of others, for we know death as much in the experience of others as in our own experience and endings" (1966: pp. 80-81). The annihilator and devastating effects of death drag him in a hollow and depressive mode that contradicts the truth and logic. As Crouch reveals, "he [Father] finds her in absence, he finds her in conceptual absence, and he finds a more holy in a way than when she was alive as a girl" (Question and Answer, 2016: min 15.16). Father provides a new unbounded territory for his daughter to maintain her life in his imaginary world.

The detection about Crouch's play's 'germination in front of the audience' is significant to highlight both the textual and the performative sides of them, also the interaction between the living elements of theatre. The performance is unfolded altogether regarding the script of the playwright, instruction of the director, responses of the second actor, the reception of the audience and all other theatrical elements from music to the lighting. Both the audience

and the second actor in the play feel uncertain and lost between real and imagination, presence and absence, abstract and concrete. In this collaborative performance, the story is unfolded by the multi-layered representations. Firstly, Crouch and the second actor, Father, appear on stage in their real identities. In this second layer, a fictional future is created “in a pub a year from now” (2011, p. 60). In this pub, the hypnotist and Father encounter in the hypnosis show. Other fictional layer is created about the death of the girl and grief of the family with retrospection to the past. Crouch does not present these different layers in a linear narrative. These layers are so interwoven that both the actor and the audience hardly catch the incidents and be certain about whether they are real or fictional; whether they are a part of hypnosis show or a part of Father’s story. The Hypnotist takes over the roles of the mother and he endeavours the Father to turn back the real world:

**FATHER:** I’ve changed it into Claire.

**HYPNOTIST:** I say “Our girl is dead, love. She’s dead. I say “That is a tree, I am your wife, this is your daughter, that is a road. This is what matters. This. This is what we have to deal with. This. (*An Oak Tree*, Scene 7)

The deepest levels of the Father’s mind are engaged in with hypnotic technics and the final scene is presented as a trance scene in which these two characters hypnotise each other to wake up for real life with free future. It is like a passage from one hypnotic world created by the pain of death to another hypnotic world created by posthypnotic amnesia:

**HYPNOTIST:** When I say sleep, she lifts her hand up.

When I say sleep, you say goodbye.

**FATHER:** When I say sleep, everything stops

**HYPNOTIST:** When I say sleep, you’re free again.

**FATHER:** When I say sleep, you’re free. (*An Oak Tree*, Scene 8)

This hypnosis aims to provide a transformation from mourning to freedom for these two grieving characters. Shocked and weakened by the grief and sorrow of death, the characters of this play represent contemporary people who feel vulnerable, helpless, and agonized in the face of death. On its tragic figures who experience the depressive effects of death, this play shows irreparableness of the loss of beloved ones and toughness of overcoming the grief and guilt. Crouch with this play mesmerizes its participants and audiences in terms of its theme and theatricality. To explore the unpleasant side of death altogether on stage, any possibilities of theatre are used. Crouch drives apart his performance from the world with concrete, visible and touchable substances. The shared experience in the course of performance shows that this play is not acted on stage; it is lived on stage together.

## Conclusion

The tragic events experienced by people cause some unpromised final farewells that are hard to believe and put up with. The unwilling separation after death leaves mourning people behind the dead/s. Mourning and grief are about people’s feelings, responses, and attitudes after the loss of dear ones, and they are the declarations of missing, love, respect and regard for the beloved dead one/s. Throughout the history people have experienced tragic events

and they know that the prevailing power of death is unescapable. They lamented over death, or they constructed massive structures as burials, or they organised communal mourning rites or as in the contemporary period more private rituals are carried out. As it is exemplified in the chosen play in this study, *An Oak Tree*; accidents, disasters, murders, treasons, or catastrophes have been still going on, yet contemporary people respond and react them more personally and privately. Crouch makes use of the idea of conceptual art and the power of hypnosis to enlarge his theatrical practices and to widen the vision and experience of performers and the audience, in this way the effects of death on contemporary people can be portrayed with different levels. The nature of death, and the sorrows and helplessness of human beings in front of death are put on the stage with experimental techniques like the inclusion of the unprepared second actor or the use of dematerialized theatricality. The characters in the play show that each of them lives the pain of death in different levels since they feel dissimilar devotion and commitment to the deceased and they are not equally strong to fight in this mourning process. In the cycle of life death comes all people's lives after many tragic events and it pulls them into grief and mourning for the depravity of the beloved one. Crouch constitutes this play as a reminder for the audience about the traditional communal rites for mourning since all the audience witness, share and experience the processes about death and mourning, and he also reveals the deepest private feelings of people they experience after death.

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