

# Henry Alonzo Myers

*April 9, 1906 — May 2, 1955*

Henry Alonzo Myers, Professor of English, died in Tompkins County Memorial Hospital on May 2, 1955, after an illness of some months. He is survived by his wife, Elsie Phillips Myers, M.A., Cornell, 1933, and two children, James Phillips and Helen Priscilla Myers.

Born in Newburgh, New York, he received his early education in schools in and near Lewiston. After graduation from Niagara University in 1929, he entered Cornell University to pursue graduate studies in philosophy and in English and American literature. Cornell awarded him the Ph.D. degree in 1933.

After an additional year as a teaching assistant in English at Cornell, he was awarded a research fellowship by the American Council of Learned Societies for a year of study at Harvard University. He returned to Cornell in 1935 as Instructor in English and two years later became Assistant Professor of English; in 1940 he became Associate Professor and in 1947 Professor. In 1952-53 he served as Acting Chairman of the English Department.

For many years his special interest was in dramatic literature, and it is in this connection that many Cornellians best remember him and his work. His effort to formulate a modern theory of tragedy resulted in many memorable lectures, a number of published articles, and in plans for a book on the subject. In 1945-46 he held a Visiting Professorship in Dramatic Literature at Stanford University.

His second major interest lay in American Studies. For nearly twenty years he taught courses in American literature, and more recently he helped to develop—and served as the first chairman of—an interdepartmental program in American Studies at Cornell. In 1951-52 as Fulbright Lecturer in American Literature and Civilization he offered the first course on American literature at the University of London, which initiated at King's College of the University a program in which American literature became a subject for the B.A. Honours Degree in English. He also lectured at Salzburg in the Seminar in American Studies and in various universities in the British Isles. The breadth of his philosophical and literary interests led to his appointment for 1953-54 as the first Visiting Professor of Humanities at Stanford University, where his task was to inaugurate a new type of program for a Doctorate in the Humanities.

A teacher and lecturer in whom students found unusual stimulation and appeal, Professor Myers had few equals in his College during his time. Possessed of rare intellectual capacity, a truly searching curiosity, and an intense

interest in his fellow men, he exerted a telling influence on successive generations of graduate and undergraduate students alike. His sense of humor, though quiet, was warm and generous; and he was both cherished and respected by persons of widely divergent backgrounds.

In his books and many articles he has left enduring testimony to his breadth and his strength. His books include *A Short History of English Literature* (written with Elsie Myers; 1938, revised edition, 1952); *The Spinoza-Hegel Paradox: A Study of the Choice between Traditional Idealism and Systematic Pluralism* (1944); and *Are Men Equal? An Inquiry into the Meaning of American Democracy* (1945), republished by the Cornell University Press a few months after his death.

Of his last book it may be said that no one can read it without being moved by the passionate and compassionate spirit evident in it from beginning to end.

It was written by a man who, though he saw the infinite worth of every human being, felt his own finiteness and was aware of his own and all men's frailty. It was of himself as well as of others that he wrote: "Only through loneliness and comradeship can one learn to accept others as his equals in ultimate value. Only after sharing sorrow and joy with others can one arrive at a tragic understanding that all men are subject to a common fate." For twenty years Henry Myers strove to formulate a theory of tragedy, as a key to the problems of life. Time failed him for the final formulation, but in the striving he achieved a rare insight into human beings and a warm sympathy for human suffering.

*H. D. Albright, M. R. Konvitz, F. E. Mineka*