



# Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Synthesis of Senecan, Kydian, and Aristotelian Tragedy

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Received: 19 Nov 2024; Received in revised form: 21 Dec 2024; Accepted: 27 Dec 2024; Available online: 31 Dec 2024

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**Abstract**— This paper aims to explore William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as one of the most intense, profound, and complicated tragedies in the literary canon. The objective is to analyze revenge as the central theme in the drama through the lens of Aristotelian tragedy; to trace its origin and connections to the Senecan, and Kydian model of tragedy, with due regard to the socio-political conventions of the Elizabethan period. The Renaissance drama in English literature was marked with literary innovations, more nuanced characters and complex plots, a lot of which is credited to Shakespearean brilliance. This paper critically delves into examining *Hamlet* as a tragic hero, deciphering his tragic flaw, and philosophical dilemmas in his pursuit of vengeance, along with highlighting the ambit of drama that transcended the historical context, as a timeless exploration of the human nature.



**Keywords**— *Revenge Tragedy, Tragic Hero, Shakespeare*

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy. Revenge in *Hamlet* is both the central theme, and the most prominent catalyst in the course of action or the development of the major plot in the drama. King Claudius tells Laertes in "Revenge should have no bounds" (*Hamlet* 4.7.126); and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* becomes a testimonial of this statement. To understand and analyze *Hamlet* as a **Revenge Tragedy**, it becomes fundamental to elucidate the tradition of Revenge Tragedy in the socio-political ambit of Elizabethan times, including the classical influences that shaped the conscience of Renaissance dramatists.

Classical literature was revived by the Italian Humanists, and the great classics became the model for Renaissance writers to manifest their literary genius. **Seneca** was a great Roman stoic philosopher and dramatist, whose works chiefly influenced the French neoclassical and the Elizabethan tragedy. Even though Seneca's plays were majorly, the re-workings of the classical Greek tragedies; the Renaissance writers of the age considered him as the original as only the classical Latin literature was available by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century whereas Greek Literature

including Aristotle's *Poetics* came to be known in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Seneca's influence on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is apparent as the outer framework draws a seismic parallel to a typical Senecan Revenge Tragedy. Some thematic and stylistic similarities are as follows:

- A tragedy in five acts
- The themes of revenge, corpse-strewn climax, betrayal, incest, melodrama
- Artistically, Seneca's dramas were eloquent, built on strong rhetoric, and had a facility for epigrams, the elemental reason behind this was that dramas in Seneca's age was meant to be recited focusing majorly on the speech rather than action. *Hamlet*'s soliloquies which we find in almost every act of the drama are testimonial of this.
- The presence of the Supernatural; even though Aristotle discards supernatural in *Poetics*, it is a main element of the Senecan, and Shakespearean Tragedies. In Senecan Tragedies, the theme of revenge is usually introduced by the ghost of the

dead person, and in this case the ghost of Hamlet's father.

It is widely believed that the inspiration for *Hamlet* came to Shakespeare from the myth of 'Amleth', retold by Bellefrost and adapted by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* [1592]. *Hamlet* shares some structural parallels with *The Spanish Tragedy* including 'a play-within-play' to trap the murderer; feigned madness, and a ghost's intent on vengeance. Even though Shakespeare was heavily inspired and influenced by the outer-frame construction of both Seneca and Thomas Kyd, but it was his own genius which helped him achieve literary hegemony unparalleled even to this day. Some of the quintessential characteristics of a typical Shakespearean Tragedy are:

Shakespearean tragedy is concerned primarily with one person, i.e. the tragic hero. The other characters, though sufficiently interesting in themselves, serve only to provide the links in the story to his fate. It is one of the main reasons that his tragedies are named after the principal figures.

Shakespeare's tragic hero is not an ordinary mortal. He is a character of public importance, in this tragedy, Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. As Aristotle states in *Poetics* that only a fall of hero above ordinary level would create impact on the audience. Shakespeare's tragic hero is a man of many noble qualities with one tragic flaw 'hamartia' which causes his ultimate ruin. As Aristotle mentions that an ideal tragic hero is the one who stands midway between the two extremes- neither by no means blame-less nor supremely good, but a man like us, who unwittingly gets involved in misfortune due to some great flaw or a fatal error in his character. Hamlet is a man of noble qualities, he is well-read, has an eye of a scholar, can potentially be a good soldier, is rational, but it is his, this very knowledge, his rationality which leads to overthinking and therefore, the 'indecisiveness'. His 'indecisiveness' becomes his great tragic flaw, his most fatal error. He remarks:

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with a pale cast of thought..." [Hamlet 3.1. 83-84]

"...Now, whether it be

Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple

Of thinking too precisely on the event,

A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom

And ever three parts coward..." [Hamlet 4.4.43-44]

However, if we look at Hamlet's character more emphatically, one can understand the underlying grief that had caged him. He was not done mourning his father's death that the twin revelation that his uncle has killed his father and 'whored his mother' gave him a spiritual shock. Hamlet, already affected by his mother's abrupt marriage to Claudius, feels betrayed and undergoes a tumult of emotions. Everything catches him off-guard when he is least prepared. He blames his mother and calls her 'the most pernicious woman'. There are times that Hamlet feels burdened by the 'duty' to avenge his father's death, thereby becoming what T.S. Eliot remarks, a buffoonery of emotion which can find no outlet in action. Nietzsche identifies Hamlet as a "Dionysian man" in his *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872], and claims that his inaction is due to the true knowledge, the glimpse of the cruel truth [of existence]. Hamlet proclaims:

"Hamlet is the faction that is wronged

His madness is his poor Hamlet's enemy" (Hamlet 5.2.238-239).

Thus, the feelings of 'pity' and 'fear' are generated through these discourses and a brief sense of relief is restored when Hamlet achieves his aim at the end. Another peculiar feature of the Shakespearean Tragedy is that besides the outward conflict between individuals, there is also an inner conflict tormenting the Tragic Hero's soul. The outward conflict in the drama appears in the form of Hamlet's revenge from Claudius, Laertes' revenge from Hamlet, the tension between Norway and Denmark, the inner conflict remains in the conduit of the existential-crisis that Hamlet undergoes, which he explicitly elucidates in his "to be or not to be" (Hamlet 3.1.56) soliloquy, and his statement like: "What a piece of work is man...and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (Hamlet 2.2.303-304)

Shakespeare often introduces abnormal conditions of mind like madness, hallucinations, etc. It has become an elemental question that has derailed many critics, whether Hamlet was feigning his madness, or was he, as an inescapable truth, really mad? If Hamlet was really mad, the question of his delay does not arise, his cruel behavior towards Gertrude and Ophelia, and the reckless murder of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern on his hands can easily be explained as the ravings of a madman but the discourse of Hamlet's actions is far from it. Hamlet makes it clear that he is "mad only in craft" as Polonius remarks "there is a method in his madness" (Hamlet 2.2.205). However, Hamlet's feigned Madness and his contemplation of suicide become an accomplished reality in Ophelia's life, who derails her sanity when told about the death of her

father at the hands of her lover. The one major shortcoming in the play is the negative and passive treatment of women, as A.C Bradley comments on Ophelia's tragic fate, "A large number of readers feel a kind of irritation against Ophelia, they seem unable to forgive her for not being a heroine" (Bradley 1904, p. 201).

The complexity in *Hamlet* doesn't lie solely in the characterization but also, in the development of the plot. A brief examination of the three Aristotelian unities will help us to understand it. "Plot", as per Aristotle, is the most important element of a tragedy, acting as an artistic equivalent of 'action' in real life. It is to be noted that Aristotle posits only the unity of action, i.e. a play should have one single action, hence the focus should be concentrated on one central happening. However, the Italian humanist Castelvetro derived the other unities of time, and place from the unity of action. Unity of time dictated that action cannot exceed one day whereas the unity of space dictated that the action can occur only in one place. It is highly possible that Shakespeare was aware of these unities due to Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poetry* published in 1595. However, in Shakespeare, we see a free and open form of drama, continually changing, and not subjected to prescribed rules.

In *Hamlet*, The Unity of Time is completely disregarded. The timespan of a day already exceeds in the Act-I of the drama. As the plot goes on, there are several time leaps, including the sudden return of Hamlet from England, Laertes' return to France, and his journey back home in Act-IV, etc. The Unity of Space, in a broader sense, might be considered respected, if we consider the Castle of Elsinore a single unit, together with its platforms, halls, and graveyard. Nevertheless, that cannot be asserted, since the Unity of Space demands that a play be performed in one setting. The Unity of Action, even though concentrated on one central episode, doesn't prohibit the use of secondary or sub-plots, if they are related to the main plot in the cause-and-effect relationship. *Hamlet*, in this sense, has a main plot, which is combined with the subplots.

**Main Plot:** Hamlet's desire to unravel the truth about his father's murderer and to avenge him

**Sub-Plots:** [Functional] Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's story; a play-within-a-play with troupe of actors; Polonius' espial on Hamlet; Ophelia's story

[Non-functional]: War with Norway, Polonius' espial on Laertes, Hamlet's banishment to England

With due regards to the action in *Hamlet*, it is fair to conclude that the defined functional sub-plots made the happenings and the target of the main plot, cohesive and

easier. The plot is well-constructed; the action of the play falls into three movements as it characterizes a beginning, middle, and an end. The first movement exposes the crime and the culprit, the second movement shows the development in Hamlet's character and the enacting of the play to confirm Claudius' guilt, the climax occurs in Act III, when Hamlet accidentally stabs Polonius and brings himself into unavoidable conflict with the King, which leads to his banishment. However, the fall/reversal is seen when Hamlet outwits Claudius and arrives back in Denmark. The final movement or the catastrophe brings an end to the action, with the death of all the major characters.

T.S. Eliot in his essay, *Hamlet and his Problems* [1920], describes *Hamlet* as an artistic failure and argues that *Hamlet*, the play is the primary problem and Hamlet, the character, the secondary. Eliot states that there is a lack of sufficient elaboration in the drama and Shakespeare has failed in "Objective Correlation" i.e. translation of experience into words and in "Artistic Inevitability" i.e. the character and the spectators are in the same mood. He concludes that, "The character, Hamlet is a buffoonery of emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it's the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art."

However, what Eliot doesn't consider is that *Hamlet* is a "looking-glass" in which everyone sees his own face, as stated by L.C. Knight. *Hamlet*, thus, confronts us afresh with the paradoxes and dismays of life, and it is in its mystique and obscure nature that *Hamlet*, the tragedy and the character gets celebrated in literature, and is treated with warmth and reverence.

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