

The tragedy of vengeance in shakespeare's masterpiece

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The most common distinction between a tragedy and a comedy is the arc of plot development. Generally speaking, a comedy moves from a world of disorder into a world in which everything is put back together again. A tragedy, on the other hand, typically begins with everything as it should be before unraveling into chaos (Cahn 1). Consider that at the beginning of straight tragedies such as King Lear or Macbeth the world is in a state of order, but quickly deteriorates into death and madness.

A subgenre of the tragedy is the revenge tragedy which differs somewhat in that the universe by definition has already been upset right from the beginning. Revenge, of course, requires that the protagonist of this tragedy engage in a series of actions designed to rebalance the order in the universe (Frye 68). The normal course of events in a revenge tragedy follow the line of plot development in which the revenger must carry out the actions that bring order back to a world of disorder.

William Shakespeare's Hamlet comfortably fits into the genre of the revenge tragedy as it opens with the melancholy Dane in the depths of human misery, at the center of a topsy-turvy world where his uncle is now his father (Gardner 218). And yet, at the heart of Hamlet's story of revenge, there is a noticeable difference that presents itself as perhaps the central theme of the play. Most protagonists of the revenge drama face obstacles to carrying out their vengeance from the outside (Frye 68). This, in turn, affords for the purely literary concerns of drawing out the story to a necessary length.

Some might argue that Hamlet goes to unnecessary lengths and does so not as a result of external obstacles to Hamlet's sealing his uncle's doom, but

rather as a result of interior obstacles. Perhaps the primary criticism of most readers is: why does Hamlet take so long to make up his mind? He is presented several times with opportunities to run his sword through Claudius, yet instead of doing so it seems he would rather talk to himself about why he should or shouldn't do it.

The revenge play in its purest form makes it plain that the act of revenge is just. Ghostly appearances, apparitions and other supernatural devices are introduced to hammer home the point that an act justifying revenge has been committed (Baker 148). One of the great ironies at work in Hamlet is that even though these elements are introduced in the form of the ghost of Hamlet's father assuring him of the truth of his death, Hamlet still questions himself.

From the initial encounter with the ghostly figure of his father, Hamlet is moved to question appearances and the perception of pure truth. His doubting of the reality that the ghost is in fact his murdered father's ghost quite often leads to questions of Hamlet's motivations. Is he merely a coward? Is he insane? His questioning and contemplating every aspect of life moves to the point of compulsion. Hamlet becomes an obsessive questioner of reality and as such remains static for most for most of the play.

Hamlet belongs to the sub-genre of revenge tragedy, but it is his unwillingness to commit to tracking down the object of his revenge that separates this play from the pack. Throughout the story, Hamlet will be moved to obsessively reflect upon the much larger significance of revenge,

suicide, love and even the very purpose of existence. As irritating as Hamlet's long-winded meditations may be, they are the heart of the play and what allow it to stand out from other revenge tragedies. Moreover, those penetrating insights into life ultimately reveal the answer to why Hamlet waits so long to decide to kill his father's murderer.

The delay between Hamlet's discovery of his father's ghost and Claudius' culpability and Hamlet finally carrying out his revenge results in one of the biggest bloodbaths in literary history. Between the time of the elder Hamlet's death and his son's death, the cast of corpses reads like a who's who of the play: the entire family of Polonius, Ophelia and Laertes, both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius.

Ironically, for a man who spends so much time contemplating murder, Hamlet winds up with blood on his hands for the deaths of many of these characters.

In fact, some critics have even suggested that Hamlet be considered a sociopath because of his role-either direct or indirect-in the deaths of so many people (Wilson 166). Regardless of whether Hamlet is directly responsible for the murder of Polonius or indirectly in the form of a puppet master pulling strings, as in the case of sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off to their deaths, there is little question that a whole host of people meet their end at his beck. And then, of course, there is the argument that the deaths of Ophelia and Laertes are Hamlet's responsibility because had he only immediately set upon revenge their lives would have been spared. The argument goes that all of these characters and friends of

Hamlet's met their doom as a result of his procrastination. Had Hamlet killed Claudius when he was praying, or any time prior to that, Claudius would not have killed Polonius, and is it that murder that truly sets about the course of tragedy in which the play ends.

Hamlet's delay in exacting revenge upon Claudius ultimately results in the death of Gertrude as well. Polonius' eavesdropping results in his death and Polonius' death set in motion the events that leads to Ophelia's suicide, which in turn causes Laertes to join in with Claudius in his murderous designs on Hamlet which, of course, ironically spins about to kill just about everyone left. Hamlet's mother's death could have been avoided had Hamlet only not spent so much time talking but acting out the revenge asked upon him by his dead father.

Ultimately, of course, the final result of Hamlet's procrastination is his own demise. Hamlet's refusal to instantly go about revenge causes Laertes to want to take revenge for his father's unnecessary and vicious murder. To view the story of Hamlet in this way, Laertes becomes something of a hero. He can be looked upon as the thing that Hamlet is not; the thing that Hamlet should be. Upon discovering that his own father has been murdered, Laertes does not simply sit around and talk to himself ad infinitum about revenge and suicide and the deeper mysteries of life, but he quickly takes action.

He plots with King Claudius to kill Hamlet in a fencing match by poisoning the tip of his sword. Laertes views the world in black and white, with no confusing shades of grey to color his decision-making process. To some

people there is a word that aptly describes the difference between someone who sees things only in black and white; for whom the answer to any question comes down to yes or no. Hamlet himself uses that word in one of the most famous quotes in a play that is overflowing with famous quotes.

Unlike his friend Laertes, Hamlet is incapable of viewing the world through a lens that lets in only black and white. He is never less than fully cognizant of the fact that he must seek revenge, but he remains troubled by the actual act of murdering Claudius. In fact, Hamlet is so confused and torn over doing what he knows is right while at the same time questioning whether he has the right to commit that act that he contemplates self-murder as an answer to his dilemma (Mack 257). Hamlet, all too aware that ghostly apparitions can just as easily be the result of melancholy in the heart must be presented with evidence that corroborates the story of his dead father.

To those readers who instantly term Hamlet a coward, Shakespeare provides an answer, though an answer that usually remains mistakenly interpreted. It is beyond reason to suspect that Laertes would ever speak the line that Hamlet speaks in considering himself less than manly. As Hamlet is debating whether to seek revenge on Claudius or commit suicide, he whispers the words, " Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (Shakespeare 688). No one who sees the world in black and white would speak those words; in fact, most would quickly fasten onto the word coward and overlook the true meaning of that phrase. For that phrase contains the answer to the question not only of whether Hamlet is a coward, but also why he waits so long to enact his revenge.

The typical “revenger” in a revenge play has little trouble carrying out his mission because there is little doubt that his is a just mission. For most of the play, all Hamlet has to go on is the word of a ghost. And even when he finds out from Claudius’ own lips, he holds back. Why? Because Hamlet possesses something that Claudius does not, and that even Laertes possesses in short supply. Hamlet has a conscience (Joseph 135). When he sees Claudius praying, Hamlet puts off the murder because he cannot in good conscience stab a man in the back while he is kneeling in prayer. Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, but it is unique to the genre. The obstacles in place of Hamlet carrying out his revenge are of his own making. And, the reason that he places those obstacles there is because Hamlet, unlike most revenge play protagonists, has a conscience.

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