

# 'hamlet' and 'the woman in black' both present the theme of revenge

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'Hamlet' and 'The Woman in Black' both present the theme of revenge but in different ways. In Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet is set on a warpath of insanity and murder by his spectral father. Susan Hill highlights a ghostly mother's revenge against the social injustice of having an illegitimate son taken from her. Revenge is often carried out in the two texts in the two texts at an opportune moment in which the victim has let their guard down. Insanity is also highlighted throughout the texts as the question of morality is often raised.

Whereas Hamlet is commissioned to execute a man guilty of regicide.

Overall revenge takes precedence as the main theme of the two texts during the penultimate and final sections. Hamlet's revenge is more defensible than The Woman in Black's as Hamlet is charged with killing a guilty man whereas The Woman in Black murders innocents.

'Hamlet' is more interested in bringing to light the validity and usefulness of revenge than in satisfying the audience's constant yearn for revenge and bloodshed like in the 'Woman in Black'.

Hamlet seems eager enough for vengeance when the spirit of his father explains that he is in purgatory and cannot leave until he is avenged.

Purgatory is often associated with fire that would

purge you of your sins and open a path to heaven in the Christian faith which rules over Shakespearean England. It could be argued that the play portrays the Lutheran sect. of Christianity which was the most prominent in 17th century Denmark, Lutheran beliefs entailed that prayer could not help those

in purgatory which would explain why Hamlet is so eager to get revenge as that is the only way in which old hamlet may be saved. The ghost of old Hamlet states that he is 'Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night And for the day confined to fast in fires' showing his purgatory to be painful This spurs Hamlet as he says 'Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift As meditation or the thoughts of love, May sweep to my revenge' showing Hamlet is ready to take on the task of freeing his father from his ethereal shackles that would stop him from entering heaven. Hamlet seems to show reluctance when he finds out his victim will be his own uncle and new king Claudius. The prince expresses his concern and confusion by saying 'the spirit that I have seen May be the devil: and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape'. This not only shows Hamlet's reluctance to carry out the task but also his disbelief in his father's return from beyond the grave, he also believes that his own grief has laid the foundation for the devil to attack his mind due to his weakened state and uses the guise of his father to compel him to be lead astray from his religious oath. The Danish prince is locked in a battle with his own mind trying to figure out how to go about the situation. After deciding to seek vengeance on Claudius Hamlet tries to figure out the best time to do so, Hamlet is presented with an opportunity whilst Claudius is praying to strike him down but quickly decides against it as he thinks Claudius will go to heaven because he was killed during a faithful act. This leads Hamlet to plan how to kill Claudius as his religious beliefs make him seek both a painful end and afterlife for his victim. It is because of this that the quote 'revenge is a dish best served cold' related to the young prince, as he waits for the perfect opportunity to strike down Claudius and

does not let his murderous tendencies control him. Hamlet utilises the religious society in which he resides in to lead Claudius to not only a painful death but also a never ending afterlife. Young Hamlet attempts to use revenge in a different way to Jennet in the woman in black as it seems to have a purpose in gaining some sort of closure as a pose to the random killings of The Woman in Black.

Jennet in ' The Woman in Black' most certainly strays from Hamlet's method of ' revenge is a dish best served cold' as she tries to achieve it in any possible way she can get it. As a bereaved parent, Jennet returns from beyond the grave as a malevolent spirit to take revenge on the society she lived in. Jennet is angry at society as because of the taking of her child from her. The child that was birthed by Jennet ' Nathaniel' was born out of wedlock which in 19th century England meaning that the child could not belong with her and was instead fostered to her sister. Jennet is invited to live in Eel marsh house where Alice, her sister lives. Jennet is allowed to keep an eye on Nathaniel so she does not feel alienated from her son. Jennet's mental state then completely shatters when Young Nathaniel is travelling back to eel marsh house where both Jennet and his adoptive mother Alice Drablow take residence. Travelling by horse and carriage a thick mist sets in and obscures the path leading the carriage onto the marsh where it was essentially swallowed, taking with it Nathaniel. Jennet is described after this event as ' Mad with grief and mad with anger and a desire for revenge. She blamed her sister who had let them go out that day, though it was no one's fault, the mist comes without warning'. Jennet was thrown into a state of

depression until she chose to hang herself symbolically in the nursery of the house. Jennet rises from beyond the grave as a malevolent spectre known as 'The woman in Black' and haunts the people of Crythin Gifford and drives children to kill themselves as a form of revenge to how society treated her. To Jennet's spirit revenge is most certainly a dish best served cold as she waits from the date of her son's death to eventually kill herself and take vengeance on society. The vengeance taken on society is for all intents and purposes random and plentiful, juxtaposing the clear methodical killing of Claudius which only happens during the climax of 'Hamlet'. The difference in frequency shows that only one of the texts abides truly by the above made statement.

Speculation mounts about Hamlet throughout the middle and latter stages of the play as he is said to become insane, but Shakespeare makes Hamlet's apparent insanity quite enigmatic, there is evidence to suggest that he is using the image of his insanity to aid in his mission to murder Claudius and attain his vengeance. The first act of violence that Hamlet commits is the murder of Polonius who was eavesdropping on Hamlet and Gertrude's conversation about the murder of old Hamlet. Hamlet intensifying his conversation with his mother forces Polonius to shout out for help. Out of impulse Hamlet draws his rapier and runs him through. Hamlet then proclaims 'A rat, a rat' implying that Polonius was spying on Hamlet for Claudius. Later in the play Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet is 'Mad as the sea and wind when both contend which is the mightier' because of his actions. To Gertrude and many observers, the actions Hamlet took were that

of a mentally unstable person but in reality Hamlet does it to further his cause and get closer to the vengeance that he seeks. Shortly after Hamlet murders Polonius the apparition of his dead father appears and tells him his task is not yet complete. This further fuels doubts of Hamlet's sanity in Gertrude's mind as she cannot see the apparition and asks him 'Whereon do you look?' due to the suddenly changing focus and direction of his eyes. Hamlet uses his insanity as a useful tool to achieve his revenge and effectively uses it to remove all hardships and barriers that keep him from completing his task. He also fuels suspicions within Horatio, his dear friend. Hamlet towards the latter end of the novel picks up the skull of the old court jester Yorick saying 'alas poor Yorick, I knew him Horatio'. From a neutral perspective subjecting Horatio to his madness provides no benefit to Hamlet. This exchange could prove Hamlet has fallen for his own gambit and actually lost his sanity. The young Danish prince could be interpreted to have put on the act of being insane but eventually begins to take up the persona of a lunatic. Overall it can be said the Hamlet at one point or another portrays a sense of madness or lunacy.

Jennet takes her revenge on the children of Crythin Gifford in a cyclical fashion as the vengeance she takes doesn't seem to quell her hunger for anguish. Jennet kills children randomly and in 'violent or dreadful circumstance'. The weird nature of the deaths creates a suspicious stigma around the entire village as people report sightings of the 'woman in black' who is blamed for the deaths. The arrival of Arthur Kipps in the village only brings more distress and turmoil as he is sent to sort out paperwork in the

enigmatic Eel Marsh house. Arthur proclaims ' I did not believe in ghosts· and whatever stories I had heard of them I had, like most rational, sensible young men, dismissed as nothing more than stories indeed'. Being a modern relatively young Londoner Arthur doesn't believe in the superstition of the rural and seemingly less educated village, contextually the novella insinuates Crythin Gifford is in the northeast of England in Scarborough where Susan Hill was born. Which had a naturally superstitious culture relative to the time period. The villagers immediately try to discourage Arthur from his business, he faces opposition from Mr. Jerome who dealt with all the contracts and standings of Alice Drablow before her death, Mr. Jerome first meets Arthur at Alice Drablow's funeral where Arthur first encounters the woman in black. When meeting Arthur Jerome has a ' somewhat shuttered expression that revealed nothing whatsoever of his own personality'. We later learn he is emotionless because of the death of his child who he attributes to the woman in black. Fearing for the worst like most of the villagers he wants no involvement in Arthur's business and proceeds to try and discourage him. Jerome represents the attitudes of the town, which even involves him being fearful when asked a question related to the woman in black and avoiding them all together. Arthurs intrigue into the situation leads him to the repeated answer of ' I'm afraid I can't offer you help, Mr. Kipps' from Jerome. Kipps uses Jerome's vague plateau of conversation as a catalyst to Eel Marsh house as he makes his way there shortly after the conversation in the office. After Arthur concludes his visit to Eel Marsh house he is quickly reminded of the cyclical nature of revenge at a fair in London. After reuniting with Stella who is Arthur's fianc?, he returns

home to London and marries her. The couple have a baby and Arthur seems to have put the events of Crythin Gifford behind him. One day at a fair Arthur's young son Joseph insists on a pony ride, there is only room for two so Stella must accompany him. The theme of revenge being served cold is definitely shown as The Woman in Black makes her final appearance and steps in front of the pony and trap carrying Joseph and Stella. Joseph dies on the scene and Stella dies 10 months later from injury. The Woman in Black achieves her vengeance to spite Arthur for meddling in her affairs showing that the woman in black may sometimes be more methodical in her acts.

Once Hamlet achieves his revenge his life is slowly ended by a poison that was coated on Laertes' blade. Hamlet is left unable to bask in his success which raises the question, was it worth it to wait for his revenge? Hamlet makes immense with Laertes who's father he had slain earlier in the play, Laertes ousts Claudius who poisoned the blade that he is duelling with. Hamlet ultimately holds Claudius to account and ends his life with the blade while forcing the poisoned wine upon him. Hamlet takes his vengeance when Claudius is a proved sinner in the eyes of all. Hamlet's revenge is just and fulfils its purpose entirely, Hamlet keeps true to the promise he made his father but is unable to bask in the success of his mission. Although Hamlet's life is taken in the final process of the play the young prince's revenge was certainly worth it. Laertes portrays the theme of treachery and deceit and serves as a final reminder of what happens to liars, he states ' I am justly killed with mine own treachery' to show that although Hamlet dealt him his final blow, Laertes was the orchestrator of his own death. Betrayal and deceit



are huge themes in the play as they serve as a moral signifier as to who lives and who dies, the betrayal of the royal family is shown to always have its consequences as Hamlet and Claudius are punished for their regicide and Laertes falls because of his treachery towards prince Hamlet. Ultimately Hamlet is brought to justice for his many crimes on his quest to avenge his father, Gertrude is also brought to justice for her infidelity in marrying Claudius who was by law her family. Religious motifs are key in Hamlet as punishment by gods wrath was a huge fear in Shakespearian England. It would only be just in Shakespearian theatre that all the characters would have to atone for their sins because of the religious nature of the play.

The woman in black juxtaposes Hamlet because she is in no way held to account. We assume at the end of the play after Stella's death that Jennet will continue on her murderous rampage. This relates to the question in the beginning of the play, does Jennet really wait to strike or does she kill randomly. The nature of the killings of Joseph and Stella shows there is method to the woman in black's madness as she kills because Arthur had meddled in her affairs, The reality of who Jennet kills also makes the situation worse as Arthur is left to suffer the loss of his new family. However as said earlier in the novella by Samuel Daily ' Every time she is seen, a child dies'. The volatile nature of Jennet's killings are shown to be very random and take place at no specific time or date. Jennet kills for the sole purpose of vengeance on a symbolic society who shamed and potentially wronged her. The way in which The Woman in Black takes her vengeance is symbolic of how her own child was killed. Joseph and Stella are killed whilst on a ' pony

and trap', circumstances similar to how Jennet's own son Nathaniel was killed. It can only be assumed that Jennet wishes for Arthur to feel the same dread she felt as a way of compensation for his mishaps in Eel Marsh. Arthur then slumps into a state of depression to which point he only references the woman in black whilst telling the story to his own grandchildren. Overall the antagonist is shown to possess the power to either plan or randomly select her victims who will eventually meet a cruel end. The comparison between Hamlet and The woman in black can be drawn from the use of the dead to bring about vengeance. Both texts use spectral beings or ghosts to either enact or set the task of revenge, however in Hamlet the spectral figure that comes in the form of old king Hamlet is in actual fact not as malevolent as Jennet in the Woman in Black as he only seeks revenge on those that have wronged him. Old Hamlet is stuck in purgatory until he is revenged meaning that his vengeance has more of a cause than the numerous killings of the woman in black.