

Shakespeare's presentation of crime and punishment in 'hamlet'



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Explore Shakespeare's presentation of crime and punishment in 'Hamlet,' with comparison to 'The Revenger's Tragedy' by Thomas Middleton. The discovery of Claudius' crime, the murder of the Old King Hamlet, by Hamlet places him in the role of judge and executioner, as Shakespeare, and similarly Middleton, place their characters in a situation where they can not obtain justice for the crimes made against their loved ones, the killing of Hamlet's father and Vindice's girlfriend Gloriana, legally as the governments they live under are shown to be corrupt.

This allows both Shakespeare and Middleton, to explore the issue of dealing with crime and question to what extent can revenge bring justice and at what price. Hamlet reflects on the corruption of the court in his first soliloquy, as he describes the court as 'an unweeded garden.' This image communicates across a sense of Hamlet's disgust and despair, as the garden imagery suggests the Garden of Eden after Man's fall, corrupted by man's sin and disobedience to God, which is enforced through Hamlet's images of decay ('rank and gross').

This biblical undertone is emphasised by the Ghost's description of Claudius as a 'serpent,' and Claudius' ironic reference to the 'first corpse,' as according to the story of Genesis the first murder in the history of mankind was the slaying of Abel by his brother Cain. To a Shakespearean audience watching the play this overwhelming biblical backdrop to the play would arguably have built up the expectation that justice would be delivered, against Claudius, in the form of divine intervention.

However, it is not God who takes on the role of punishing Claudius in the play, but Hamlet. This has led critics to question to what extent the figure of the Ghost can be seen as a divine messenger of justice advocating revenge, and question whether Hamlet's mission was doomed from the start. This conflict of the moral issue in taking revenge and risking damnation is exemplified in Hamlet's description of the Ghost as a 'host of heaven!' juxtaposed with the line 'shall I couple hell?', for the imagery he draws on combines the idea of heaven and God, with the concept of hell and its associations with damnation and the devil. For an Elizabethan audience the Ghost would have been treated with immediate suspicion as it was believed Ghosts were largely agents of the devil.

The idea that Shakespeare wanted the audience to view the Ghost in this manner is suggested by his placing of the Ghost beneath the stage during part of the first act, as symbolically in the Elizabethan theatre below stage was typically associated with hell. Kierkegaard argues that through bringing in this question of Hamlet's mission of punishment being divine Shakespeare, can be said, to be attempting to question the audience whether faith is capable of 'transforming murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God,' as you are essentially still committing a crime through revenge but also delivering justice. Shakespeare's answer to this question can be said to be reflected in Hamlet's response to Claudius' crime.

For, a sense of expectation is built up with Hamlet's excited claim that he'll be 'swift' and will 'sweep' to his revenge, as the associations of these words with movement conveys a sense of immediacy to the audience that punishment will be delivered quickly, which is enhanced by the shortness of <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-presentation-of-crime-and-punishment-in-hamlet/>

these mono-syllabic words. However, Hamlet does not immediately act on this claim and instead delays his punishment of Claudius.

Thus, he is very unlike the archetypal revengers of Seneca's tragedies, or Vindice in 'The Revenger's Tragedy, who are violently self-assured characters, and unquestioningly believe that taking revenge is the appropriate method for delivering punishment. This is reflected in Vindice's confident and violent proclaim to the audience 'when the bad bleed the tragedy is good,' as his exaggerated use of alliteration ('bad bleed') links these two words together and suggests an intimate link between murder and 'good[ness].'

In 'The Revenger's...' the quickness with which murder and revenge takes play, is part of what makes the play very comic as the immediacy of violence is quite shocking and sudden. This is arguably part of the reason why Shakespeare makes Hamlet delay, for this allows the audience to explore the moral issue of taking revenge realistically and more seriously, as Shakespeare presents us with a arguably more humane, psychologically deep response to the act of murder, when compared with a largely 'two-dimensional' character like Vindice who only wants revenge.

In Elizabethan England the taking of revenge was illegal, and it was also condemned by the New Testament as it was believed that God should ultimately be the one to deliver punishment and justice. Underlying these issues is also the fact that by revenging his father's death, Hamlet would be committing also be committing an act of regicide, which was not just

considered treasonous but also damning as it was believed, since medieval times, that the King was God's representative on earth.

Thus, to kill Claudius Hamlet would not only be betraying his honour and his duty as the King's subject but also be, on a deeper moral level, betraying God. In this context it is arguably understandable why Hamlet dwells so long and spends so much time stuck in mentally contemplating action in his soliloquies, rather than acting in the present, physical 'now' that Vindice constantly adheres to. Shakespeare uses Laertes as a foil for Hamlet, for like Hamlet he seeks to revenge for his murdered father.

However, while Hamlet contemplates how 'conscience,' our innate sense of right and wrong, 'does make cowards of us all,' Laertes alternatively proclaims 'Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit' and confidently claims 'I'll be revenged/ Most thoroughly for my father.' His success in raising an army of supporters against Claudius shows how much more easily Hamlet, whom the people loved ('loved of the distracted multitude'), could have done the same thing, which emphasises how purely internal were the obstacles Hamlet had to overcome.

However, while Laertes does ultimately succeed in getting his revenge, it has to be taken into account at what cost, for not only does Laertes kill Hamlet but he is in turn killed. Thus, murder and crime is shown, in a circular fashion, to only lead to further death. This is similarly the case for Hamlet, for at the one point when he takes action, and disregards the moral consequences, he accidentally kills Claudius, an innocent man and thus, in a

deeply ironic move, ends up committing the crime he intended to punish Claudius for: the murder of a father.

Middleton can similarly be said to show the corrupting influence of revenge in the central scene of the play, the killing of the Duke. For, Vindice uses the skull of his once beloved, Gloriana, as the vehicle of his revenge. He dresses the skull's lips with poison, and in a highly ironic move, makes her skull kiss the Duke. Thus, like Hamlet, Vindice becomes indistinguishable from the moral corruption around him, as he symbolically rapes Gloriana of her protected chastity, her 'purer-part,' by forcing her to commit the act that she denied the Duke when she was alive, and which had cost her, her life.

Parton claims, about 'The Revenger's...,' that 'whatever verbal homage characters pay to religion it has no effect on their actions.' However, while this view can be applied in both plays, particularly with characters like Claudius who pray to God yet continue to act sinfully, the fact that Vindice and Hamlet die at the ends of their plays, does show arguably how, as Vindice claims, 'heaven is just.'

Thus, the concept of cruel, yet divine justice can be said ultimately to play a key role in both plays as sinful, criminal acts, no matter the original intention, are shown to be punished by God with punishment and death.

Shakespeare can be said to reflect and challenge through 'Hamlet,' the ease with which punishment is delivered in typical revenge tragedies, as the play reflects on the moral conflict involved in murder, as Shakespeare ultimately shows how crime and revenge are corrupting acts and only bring more pain,

and a decline of moral values, which can only lead to suffering and death in the play.