

Hamlet as a tragic hero



“What a piece of work a man is,” says the title character, Hamlet, of William Shakespeare’s famous tragedy Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (Shakespeare 2. 2. 327). Men are pieces of work, and some men like to make pieces of work, like Shakespeare and his numerous plays, and other men like to give their opinion on pieces of work. The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about poetics, but more specifically he wrote about tragedy. Aristotle’s book, Poetics, defines tragedy as “an imitation, not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear” (Aristotle 686).

Not only did Aristotle define tragedy, but he also defined the tragic figure in tragedy. A perfect example of the tragic figure is Hamlet, a melancholic grieving prince who has recently lost his father. After the death of his father, Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius, takes the throne and marries Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude. The play begins with the late King Hamlet appearing to young Hamlet as a ghost.

The ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for old Hamlet’s death and that Hamlet needs to kill Claudius to avenge old Hamlet, and release him from Purgatory. Hamlet then “vows to give his life to the duty of revenge; the rest of the story exhibits his vain efforts to fulfill this duty” (Bradley 21). Hamlet eventually succeeds in killing Claudius but ends up dying in the process. Thus, Hamlet shows the signs of a tragic figure.

In William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Hamlet displays the characteristics of a classic tragic hero. To begin, Aristotle’s classic tragic figure must have four defining characteristics. First, nobility comprises the first characteristic that a tragic hero must have. To have nobility, the character must be “manly,”

because “ it is not appropriate [for] a female character,” to be tragic (Aristotle 698). The tragic figure must also have a high ranking position in his society, be well liked, and he “ shall be good,” and have a high moral fiber that elicits sympathy from the audience (Aristotle 689).

All of this will lead to the public opinion that he is “ better than the ordinary man” (Aristotle 689). Regardless of the fact that he is noble, and viewed as of higher order, the tragic hero must have a tragic flaw. The flaw will usually be revealed early to the audience but is denied by the tragic hero. This flaw is a natural part of their personality that causes them to make an “ error in judgment” (Aristotle 687). The error is most clear when the act is done “ knowingly and consciously” by the character (Aristotle 688).

This flaw in personality causes the character to be responsible for his reversal of fortune. This reversal of fortune is called Peripety by Aristotle and is “ the change [...] from one state of things within the play to its opposite” (Aristotle 686). During the Peripety, the tragic hero will be seen “ falling from happiness into misery,” in order to “ move [the audience] to either pity or fear” (Aristotle 687). The hero will make a decision that will eventually cause his destruction that was the result of a combination of free will and fate.

As a result of the Peripety, the tragic hero will experience a realization of the truth and a downfall from his high position. During the realization the hero experiences “ a change from ignorance to knowledge,” and as a result of this change, will probably experience some form of mental suffering which will probably be “ destructive or painful [in] nature” (Aristotle 687). This realization, however, comes at a price which is their downfall, during which

they will experience long suffering or self torture. This will accompany death. Therefore, Aristotle's aforementioned characteristics are the defining components of the ideal tragic hero. First of all, in order to be a classic tragic hero, Hamlet must be noble.

As a part of the nobility of the classic tragic figure, Hamlet exemplifies the high ranking male requirement. At the beginning of the play, when Hamlet is first introduced, Queen Gertrude tells Hamlet to stop grieving for the dead King. She says Do not forever with thy veiled lids Seek for thy noble father in the dust. Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity. (1.

2. 72-75) If the Queen says that he had a noble father, then by nature he must be noble himself. Also, at the end of the play, Hamlet's school friend Horatio tells Hamlet " Good night, sweet prince" (5. 2. 397). The fact that he is a prince further proves that Hamlet is a high ranking male.

Hamlet's high ranking position and masculinity parallel the high rank and masculinity of the classic tragic figure. In addition to Hamlet's masculinity and high rank, Hamlet is well liked just as the classic tragic hero is well liked. Hamlet's popularity is evident when Horatio wishes to commit suicide when he realizes that Hamlet is going to die. Horatio picks up the poisoned cup that killed Gertrude and Claudius and says " Here's yet some liquor left," indicating that he likes Hamlet to the point that he would rather die than be alone in the world without him (5. 2. 375).

Hamlet's popularity is also evident when he sees Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and says " My excellent good friends! How dost thou" (2. 2.

242). If Hamlet was unpopular he would not have friends. Hamlet's popularity parallels the popularity that is required by the tragic hero. As well as popularity, Hamlet's high moral fiber parallels the high moral fiber of the tragic hero.

Hamlet's high moral fiber is clear when he calls his incestuous mother "Wretched queen," indicating he does not approve of the fact that she married her former husbands' brother (5. 2. 365). His high moral fiber is also apparent when he utters the words "To be or not to be," because he is contemplating suicide (3. 1.

64). He then rejects the idea of suicide because he does not believe it to be acceptable by the church. Hamlet's high moral fiber parallels the high moral fiber of the classic tragic hero. Therefore, Hamlet's all around nobility corresponds to the nobility required by the classic tragic hero.

As well as being noble, Hamlet's tragic flaw parallels the flaw that is required by the classic tragic hero. As part of the tragic flaw, the hero's flaw must be a part of his personality. Hamlet's flaw is that he is too analytical, which is clearly part of his personality. His flaw of being over analytical is apparent when he sets up a play during which he will "have [the] players / Play something like the murder of [his] father" (2.

2. 623-624). He hopes that by "the very cunning of the scene" Claudius' reaction will prove whether or not he was the murderer of old Hamlet (2. 2. 619). If Hamlet had just trusted the ghost when it said that Claudius had killed old Hamlet, then Hamlet would have saved a lot of time and energy.

He could have just killed the King, been done with the entire business, and probably would not have died in the process as he did. Hamlet's personality flaw of being over analytical is also apparent when he misses a chance to kill the King. Hamlet sees Claudius praying, and he says "And so am I revenged. That would be scanned: A villain kills my father, and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send To heaven."

(3. 3. 80-84) Hamlet, however, does not send Claudius to heaven; he over analyzes the situation, and decides to kill Claudius at a later time. He thinks that because Claudius appears to be praying killing him would send him to Heaven, which is not wanted. It is later revealed; however, that Claudius' "thoughts never to heaven go," or in other words, he was not actually praying (3.

3. 103). Hamlet's personality flaw of being over analytical parallels the personality flaw that must be in the tragic hero. As another part of the tragic flaw, the hero must make an error that is not realized by the hero.

Hamlet makes an error when he "accidentally kills Polonius and is consequently dispatched to his death in England" (Winders 8). Hamlet wanted to get revenge for his father on Claudius by killing Claudius, and Hamlet, while arguing with his mother, decides to stab and kill a man behind a curtain whom he believes to be Claudius, but is actually Polonius. This causes Polonius' son Laertes to want revenge on Hamlet. Hamlet tries to get forgiveness from Laertes, and says "Give me your pardon, sir."

I have done you wrong,” but Laertes insists that they duel (5. 2. 240). Hamlet also makes an error when he pretends to act mad. His fake madness drives Ophelia, his love, mad.

Then, while near water, she falls “ in the weeping brook,” and the water “ Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death” (4. 7. 200, 4. 7. 207-208). When Hamlet goes through all of the complex plans, and such in order to prove that Claudius is guilty, he makes the mistake of being partially responsible for the death of the woman he loves.

Hamlet’s error parallels the error made by the classic tragic hero. Thus, Hamlet’s tragic flaw parallels the tragic flaw of the classic tragic hero. In addition to his nobility, and tragic flaw, Hamlet’s reversal of fortune parallels the reversal of the classic tragic hero. As a part of Hamlet’s reversal of fortune, the opposite of what Hamlet wanted to happen happens, as a result of a decision Hamlet makes.

One of the decisions Hamlet makes that turn out to be the opposite of what he had hoped for is his killing of Polonius. When Hamlet stabs through the curtain, and Polonius cries “ O, I am slain,” Hamlet realizes that he has killed Polonius (3. . 30). He had meant to “ Kill a King,” and avenge his father’s murder (3.

4. 35). Thus, Hamlet’s decision to kill Polonius is the opposite of what he had hoped for, and that parallels the decision of the classic tragic figure. Another decision that Hamlet makes that is the opposite of what he had hoped for is when he first hears of the ghost. When he first decides to go see the ghost,

he realizes that “ All is not well,” which is the opposite of what he had been hoping for, because he had wanted to move on from his father’s death (1. 2. 277). He had even contemplated “ self-slaughter” in order to escape the pain that it caused him, and when he goes to see the ghost, he realizes that something will be causing him more pain (1. 2. 136). The decision to visit the ghost turns out to be the opposite of what Hamlet had hoped for, which parallels the decision of the classic tragic figure.

In addition to making decisions that turn out to be the opposite of what he hopes for, Hamlet’s reversal is a combination of free will and fate. Fate placed Polonius behind that curtain. Hamlet clearly did not want to kill Polonius, he says Ay, Lady, it was my word. Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. I took thee for thy better.

Take thy fortune. Thou find’st to be too busy is some danger. (3. 4. 37-40)

This indicates that he feels some remorse for having killed Polonius, and that he had wanted to kill Claudius. As fate would have it, however, it was not Claudius behind the curtain.

Free will, however, was what Hamlet exercised when he decides to kill Polonius. Thus, Hamlet’s reversal is a combination of fate and free will. Another way that Hamlet’s reversal is a combination of fate and free will is when Hamlet finds the orders of his death. When news of Hamlet’s killing of Polonius gets out, King Claudius decides that “ everything is bent / For England,” and sends Hamlet there (4. 3. 50-51).

Little does Hamlet know, but on its way to England as well, is a letter with “an exact command” to kill him (5. 2. 22). Then, Hamlet, “by a combination of his influence and an extraordinary stroke of good fortune,” is able to intercept the orders, and therefore prevent his assassination (Winders 9). Hamlet then exercises his free will, and turns the orders around onto Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hence, Hamlet’s reversal is a combination of fate and free will, just as is the reversal of the tragic figure.

Therefore, Hamlet’s reversal of fortune parallels the reversal of fortune of Aristotle’s classic tragic figure. Finally, Hamlet’s realization and downfall parallel the realization and downfall of the classic tragic hero. First of all, in order for Hamlet’s realization to parallel the realization of the classic tragic hero, he must experience a change from ignorance to knowledge. An example of that change is when Hamlet tells Horatio that “ill all’s here / about my heart” (5. 2. 226-227).

Here Hamlet has a bad feeling; he realizes that something will not go well for him when he fights Laertes. Another example of Hamlet’s realization is at the end of Laertes’ and Hamlet’s duel. Both Hamlet and Laertes are struck with a poisoned blade. Laertes then tells Hamlet that “the point [is] envenomed too” (5. 2.

352). Hamlet then realizes that he has less than half an hour to live. Thus, Hamlet’s change from ignorance to knowledge parallels the change from ignorance to knowledge in the tragic figure. As another part of Hamlet’s realization, he must experience some kind of mental suffering. Hamlet suffers immense pain and loss, when he learns of Ophelia’s death, jumps into

her grave and proclaims "What is he whose grief bears such an emphasis,
whose phrase of sorrow conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand
like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I, Hamlet the Dane." (5.

1. 267-271) He suffers so much emotionally that he proclaims " forty
thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my
sum" (5. 1. 285-287). Hamlet also suffers mentally, when his mother dies.

He had already considered killing himself when his father died, and were it
not for God's " canon 'gainst" it he probably would have (1. . 136). Now that
his mother has died as well, Hamlet must be suffering from extreme
emotional pain. Therefore, Hamlet's emotional suffering during the
realization parallels the emotional suffering of the classic tragic hero.

Furthermore, Hamlet's downfall parallels the downfall of the classic tragic
hero. First of all, for Hamlet's downfall, he must experience some form of
suffering, or self torture. Hamlet experiences suffering because he constantly
tortures his own mind with the thought of suicide. Even in the beginning,
during a suicidal soliloquy, he states that he believes life to be " stale, flat,
and unprofitable" (1. . 137).

He also causes himself to suffer mentally when he has " a kind of /
gaingiving," or uneasy feeling that the fight with Laertes will not end well (5.
2. 229-230). Hamlet does, however, still force himself to fight him regardless
of his feelings. As the final part of Hamlet's downfall, he must die.

Evidence of Hamlet's death occurs when right after Hamlet is hit with a
poisoned blade he says " O, I die, Horatio" (5. 2. 389). Further evidence is

when the conquering Norwegian Prince Fortinbras walks into the palace sees Hamlet's body lying on the floor and says O proud Death, What feast is toward in thine eternal cell That thou so many princes at a shot So bloodily hast struck? (5. 2.

403-406) Here, Fortinbras is asking why Death had to kill a prince, and since Hamlet is the only prince other than himself in the area, Hamlet must be dead. Thus, Hamlet's death as part of the downfall corresponds to the death as part of the downfall of the classic tragic hero. Hence, Hamlet's realization and downfall parallel the realization and downfall of the classic tragic hero. Therefore, in William Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet displays the characteristics of a tragic hero. The real tragedy of Hamlet, however, is the fact that Hamlet dies an almost Christ like figure who takes up the cross, in a sense, to fight against " a source of evil" not only for personal revenge, but also against an evil corruption that is infecting all of Denmark (Bertram 94). He is almost successful because Claudius' death comes not from Hamlet's planning, but from his own personal treachery.

Hamlet truly is a tragedy because Hamlet dies only after he has lost everything dear to him: his family, his friends, and his love. Works Cited Aristotle. Poetics. The Works of Aristotle Volume II. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952. Bertram, Joseph.

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