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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S 'HAMLET': A SAGA OF TRAGEDY

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Abstract

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, widely known as *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, is popular for its tragic elements as well as its themes of revenge and internal conflict of the protagonist that has created a story worthy of applause. In this paper, a thorough analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a tragedy is presented.

The motivation for the study was to analyse the different elements present in the play that establishes it as a unique tragedy through the amalgamation of diverse elements of the ancient and the modern. Thus, the true nature of it as a tragedy can be manifold which is considered the research problem in this paper.

An empirical study design is adopted for the article, using Formalism as the primary critical theory to analyse each part of the text and unearth the elements of tragedy- both in the ancient Greek and modern Shakespearean sense.

The results of the paper indicate that *Hamlet* is a unique synthesis of the ancient notions of tragedy and a modern tragic hero with internal conflicts and self-doubt as well as a revenge tragedy by virtue of its primary theme. It is concluded that *Hamlet* is rooted in ancient Greek principles in terms of plot and dramatic devices yet the theme makes it a revenge tragedy and its modified character sketch establishes it as a tragedy of thought.

Introduction

Consideration of a play distinctly as a tragedy is traced back to the ancient Aristotelian times, where the distinction between an epic and tragedy first contributed to developing a definition of tragedy, used by scholars even today. The definition of tragedy found in his is *Poetics*, which considers the primary characteristic as "an imitation of an action that is spiderman", followed by the basic tenets that tragedy shares with an epic, namely, the grandeur of language, completeness and magnitude. However, unlike an epic, it is acted rather than narrated. The final clause by Aristotle is the rise of pity and fear among the audience, leading to the catharsis of such feelings (Kelly, 2). Thus, in this paper, Shakespeare's famous play, *Hamlet*, is analysed as a tragedy, to indicate what the core characteristics of the ancient Aristotelian definitions of tragedy imply to the play.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, widely known as *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, was written between 1599-1601 and performed first in 1602. It is also considered the longest play by Shakjepeasre, consisting of around 30,000 words, which gained popularity during the early 17th century by its revengeful plot, appearances of ghosts, insanity and melancholy. The play's title in itself holds the word *tragedy*, however, in Shakespeare's writing, certain characteristics of the ancient dramatic unities mentioned by Aristotle are not observed completely. Furthermore, the essence of tragedy is transformed by the playwright to portray the inner

turmoils of the protagonist more intricately than describing the outer grandeur of a Prince. In essence, this play is often categorised as a revenge tragedy, constituting a modified amalgamation between the ancient tragedy and the modernised revenge tragedy, presented by an author, equipped with tremendous creativity.

The definition of tragedy has changed with time, despite the core characteristics of the Aristotelian definition being the same or similar. The play can be considered as a Tragedy of Thought-a representation of inaction-making it a Tragedy of Action (Verity, 35). Thus, the play provides a wide spectrum of analysis where the true nature of it as a tragedy can be manifold which is considered the research problem in this paper.

To address the problem of the research , the researcher considers three elements in hypothesis such as *Hamlet* is a synthesis of the Aristotelian and Shakespearean sentiment of a tragic play; also a revenge tragedy which reflects the tragedy of thought and action.

The tragedy in *Hamlet*, is the tragedy of the protagonist himself, as we use the term 'tragedy' in the modern literary sense of melancholy, despair and misfortune. The play is essentially the portrayal of a prince (a protagonist of high birth and great magnitude) dealing with internal conflicts, the pretence of madness and plotting for revenge after being informed of the truth of his father's murder by his uncle by the ghost of his father himself. Such a summary fails to illustrate the expertise showcased by the playwright in describing the internal deterioration of a Prince, confused and maddened by the burden of revenge.

The long-elaborated plot for revenge which ends in the death of Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude, compels the audience to internalise feelings of pity and fear, for a protagonist whose long-awaited vengeance is ended in misery. This brings about the question of life and death and how both are uncertain and trivial in the face of fate. *Hamlet* is described as one of a kind- "a tragedy of thought inspired by the continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of spectators." (Rolfe, 16). The initiation of internal conflict within Hamlet is a reflection of a tragic fate that destroyed the innocence of a young prince and replaced it with a dreadful responsibility to seek revenge within his own royal family.

The well-constructed principles of a tragic play are present in the play yet the representation of horror and evil in the play indicates the characteristics of a revenge tragedy, made famous in the 17th century, to startle the audience with the deepest, darkest desires of human beings enacted on the stage. Hamlet rejects Claudius as a king, however, Shakespeare ensures that his opinion is not substantiated by others in the play, portraying a strong stubbornness to accept his uncle, fuelling his act of revenge (Dunne,106). The characteristics of a revenge tragedy, being present in the play, since the first appearance of the late King's ghost, are amplified by Hamlet's plot to unearth the truth by producing a play to provoke his uncle. Therefore, the tragedy of Hamlet in the play is a tragedy of revenge as the plot for vengeance is accomplished by the death of the innocent and the sinners. On the other hand, it does not carry the structure of an ancient Greek play, by observing the unity of time, place or action either. However, it is reflective of a tragic story of high magnitude or seriousness, devising the fall of a great man from happiness to despair.

The title of a tragic hero is allowed to Hamlet as he embodies all the characteristics that are essential and rather required according to the ancient Greek tradition. Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is a person of high rank, operating against his positional law and regulations yet being met with a tragic end ordained by the inescapable fate. He experiences revelation and reversal of fate- experiencing the worst of events due to his indecisiveness. In 1998, penguin edition of Shakespear's ***Hamlet,*** it is stated that a tragic hero stands responsible for settling in motion the events that ultimately lead to his destruction, as seen in King Lear and Macbeth (36). Hamlet stands responsible for initiating the revenge plot, being influenced by the ghost of his murdered father that ultimately leads to his destruction and death as well.

On the other hand, the intersection of ancient and modern sentiment is prominent in the character of Hamlet as a tragic hero. Hamlet is described as the most modern of Shakespearean heroes, immersed in doubt and self-questioning, similar to the 20th-century sentiments while the most primitive notion of blood revenge constitutes the central plot of the play (Cantor, 9). Compared to the ancient tragic heroes such as Achilles of *Iliad*, Hamlet seems to be more introspective, doubtful and inquisitive when plotting for revenge as opposed to a courageous and bold representation of a tragic hero. Hence, Hamlet as a tragic hero set a new trend for the genre of tragedy, which can also be indicated as the first traces of a modern hero, aware of his internal turbulences.

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A creative synthesis is seen in Hamlet as a tragic hero whose tragic fall represents the futility of life and death in a world where the selfish agendas of individuals dictate their actions. His pretence of madness may also be questioned as his mental deterioration can be a sign of genuine madness as his lust for blood revenge grows as the play progresses. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge Hamlet as a tragic hero bearing traces of modernism.

The study is designed as an empirical study based on secondary data collected from various books. The paper adopts a deductive and qualitative approach for data collection and analysis, leading to a comprehensive assessment of the topic. The deductive approach to the topic has benefited to construct evidence-based research for hypothesis formation and analytical discussions. On the other hand, the secondary data collected from various books were sampled using purposive sampling to ensure relevant information selection, analysis and presentation. The overall methodological structure has contributed largely to the establishment of a study capable of addressing the intricate literary questions of tragedy in the paper.

The primary critical theory utilised in this paper is the formalist or formalism theory. Formalism helps in analysing the inherent characteristics of a text for proper analysis and interpretation as opposed to establishing relationships with external factors for a meaning generation. The formalist approach in this paper has contributed to an objective analysis of the content of the text itself based on which conclusions were drawn. Formalism resides in the development of critical ideas that are essentially based on the aesthetic and form of the text, which can be traced back to the tenets of cultural theory (Verena and Tredennick, 8). Using formalism as the critical theory of this paper facilitated a comprehensive analysis of each act and scene, demonstrating the key tragic elements present in the play to allow the title of a tragedy. On the other hand, focusing on the content of a literary work for establishing critical perspectives based on Formalism considers the position of a text as primary. Thus, considering the text as the primary source for critical evaluation, irrespective of other external factors, ensured that the play is a singular piece of work. Despite the limitation of formalism that essentially rejects the influence of any external element other than the text itself, it has aided the study to address the research problem adequately.

Hamlet is widely categorised as a tragedy and it rightly shows all the key characteristics that are required to consider it as such. Shakespeare exhibits his expertise by demonstrating a tragic hero, who is of high rank, faced with tremendous doubt and dilemma, stemming from the obligations to complete the blood revenge as instructed by the ghost of his father yet feeling confused regarding the manner of punishment that would benefit Claudius. For example, in Act III, Scene 3, Hamlet, despite having the chance to kill King Claudius as he is kneeling to pray, the internal monologue of Hamlet describes his indecisiveness, "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying; And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven; And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd: A villain kills my father; and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven." (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Sc 3).

The vulgarity and absurdity of the drama arouses shock and horror among the critics, being described as a hazardous piece of English drama with absurd English sentiments. A critical comment from Voltaire's "*Theatre Complet",* 1768, stated, "One would imagine the piece to be the work of a drunken savage. But amidst all these vulgar irregularities, which to this day found in *Hamlet*, by a bizarrerie still greater, some sublime passages worthy of the greatest genius. It seems as though nature had mingled in the brain of Shakespeare the greatest conceivable strength and grandeur with whatsoever witless vulgarity can devise that is lowest and most detestable" (edt Sprague, 13). The vulgarity witnessed in this play goes against the traditional Greek tragedies where the plot of revenge was presented against the backdrop of great conflicts, high in morale. The question of morality is raised in *Hamlet* as the protagonist devises plans that are shrewd and downright absurd. Similar to the later developed and popularised revenge tragedy, inspired by the Roman tragedies of Seneca and authored first by Thomas Kyd for the English stage to be performed c. 1587, the characters of *Hamlet* are driven by an intense inclination towards blood revenge. To right what has been wrong and to ensure justice is served to the killer of the late King, Hamlet was prepared to sacrifice his own sanity. The portrayal of Hamlet as a tragic hero is essentially due to his failure, where he "fails absolutely, fulfilling, indeed, the task laid on him, but fulfilling it at an appalling and needless cost. And this failure is tragic in the highest degree because he is one of whom the highest was hoped" (Verity, 42). Hamlet, maddened by the burden of revenge and the burning rage against his uncle, fails to comprehend the magnitude of his actions on others which leads to the death of his mother and Ophelia.

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The tragedy of self is witnessed in the play as the protagonist is submerged in bitterness and self-depreciation, filling his mind with doubt and suspicion. The lack of trust and the drive to seek absolute revenge altered the persona which was introduced at the beginning of the play, which had some semblance of sanity and innocence in him. The constant internal conflict led to inaction for which *Hamlet* is also considered a Tragedy of Thought and Action. His internal monologues portray a deep, intellectual perspective that is clouded by confusion when faced with the responsibility of avenging his father's death. The events that led to the last Act of the play, when analysed as individual pieces, show a disjointed stream of thought, being appalled by the presence of evil in the world to internalising that evil as a means of revenge.

English audiences of the contemporary time enjoyed the enactment on stage, partly due to Shakespeare's popularity and partly due to the changing sentiment. Blood revenge, made illegal in the country, was still acknowledged as an honourable act by the English population. It can be assumed that the tragic elements of the drama were amplified to cater to the audience. As a tragic drama, carrying the characteristics of both modern and ancient dramatic and literary elements, a balanced synthesis can be seen where the character sketch is essentially modern yet the plot is rooted in ancient tragic sentiments. Conflicts of events and feelings portrayed in this drama direct the attention of the audience to the intent of revenge and its execution, at the centre of which the conflict between Claudius and Hamlet rests on shrewd planning instead of a face-to-face duel until the very end of the play.

Hamlet, devoting the majority of his time to plot the revenge by writing and presenting a thought-provoking play for the King and Queen, establishes his inability to act on time. Contrarily, his intent to verify the truth behind his father's messages secretly portrays his ability to evaluate an event properly. The contradictions seen in the character of Hamlet heighten the audience's perception of him. Thus, his fall to despair despite the fulfilment of his revenge plan acts as a cathartic moment for the audience. Goethe, regarding the play had connected in his 1795, *Wilhelm Meister*, "I sought for every indication of what the character of Hamlet was before the death of his father: I took note of all that this interesting youth had been, independently, of that sad event, independently of the subsequent terrible consequences, and I imagined what he might have been without them." (edt Sprague, 13). It can be stated that the portrayal of Hamlet, follows the primary patterns of a tragic hero, while also rousing interest among the audience to gain a glimpse of what he could have been without his tragic fall. His spirit was burdened by the death of his father and his inability to accept his uncle as the new king. Here his intuition is rather correct in assuming that something unusual had taken place. As he was proven right, his plot for blood revenge gains substantial ground yet as a true tragic hero, Shakespeare dooms him to inescapable suffering and death.

Conclusion

The paper analyses various elements of the text, indicating that ***Hamlet*** is a tragedy in multiple senses. The hypotheses presented in the paper are proven to be right as it shows a clear synthesis between the Aristotelian Greek tragedy and the modified and modernised tragedy of Shakespeare. Structurally, the unity of time, space and action are not observed in the play yet, it fulfils the need of a tragic hero, of a high rank, faced with events that ultimately lead to his great fall from happiness to despair. The character of Hamlet also rouses pity and fear as well as initial interest and admiration among the audience which leads to catharsis. On the other hand, it also bears prominent traces of a revenge tragedy, showing elements of horror, blood revenge and absurd vulgarity. The revenge plot, constituting the driving force of the plot and multiple tragic deaths at the end, gives it the status of revenge tragedy as well. Finally, it can be considered a tragedy of thought. The character of Hamlet is a character whose internal monologues show his indecisiveness, bitterness, doubt, self-deprecation and self-questioning. His constant conflicts and confusion, his mental capacity burdened with the burden of blood revenge and his inability to act instantly upon his resolutions make hold traces of an introspective modern hero. His thoughts essentially constitute a greater part of the play, indicating that Shakespeare had incorporated modern elements into an otherwise ancient tragic plot. Thus, it can be concluded that *Hamlet* is rooted in ancient Greek principles in terms of plot and dramatic devices yet the theme makes it a revenge tragedy and its modified character sketch establishes it as a tragedy of thought.

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