

ENGLISH ADVANCED: MODULE B

To what extent is *Hamlet* a typical tragedy?

William Shakespeare's, *Hamlet*, very closely follows the dramatic conventions of revenge in Elizabethan theatre. All revenge tragedies originally came from the Greeks, who wrote and performed the first plays. After the Greeks came Seneca who was very influential to all Elizabethan tragedy writers. Seneca, who was Roman, basically set all of the ideas and the norms for all revenge play writers in the Renaissance era including William Shakespeare. The two most famous English revenge tragedies written in the Elizabethan era were *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, written by Thomas Kyd. These two plays used mostly all of the Elizabethan conventions for revenge tragedies in their plays. *Hamlet* especially incorporated all revenge conventions in one way or another, which truly made *Hamlet* a typical revenge tragedy.

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* became the exemplar of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, to which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* owes a great deal. Kyd's play is characterized by the idea that the ghost returns from the spiritual world to confront the living. In *Hamlet*, King Hamlet makes a ghostly visitation. He lets Hamlet know of his state and tells Hamlet to avenge his murder which was committed by Claudius. Although Shakespeare does use this exemplar in his *Hamlet*, he uses the Aristotelian elements in an unconventional way. Hamlet doesn't fit Aristotle's idea of a hero being bold and unhesitant whilst Fortinbras and Laertes do. When meeting the ghost in Act 1 Scene 4, Hamlet questions its existence rather than taking charge and acting to seek vengeance. As Mary Slater says, "Hamlet's nature is prone to questioning." He questions the ghost's existence through dichotomies. He wonders if he is "*a spirit of health or a goblin damned*", whether it brings with it a pure air from heaven or contagion from hell, has intentions that are "*wicked or charitable*." The ghost, as some critics say, is the reason why Hamlet delays in seeking vengeance. He cannot define its existence. Whilst Hamlet's hesitant nature goes against Aristotelian elements of a typical revenge tragedy, the presence of a ghost from a spiritual world is an idea illuminated from Kyd's exemplar of a typical revenge tragedy.

One element that is common to the Seneca model of a revenge tragedy and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the idea that the avenger descends into either real or feigned madness. In order to gain sufficient evidence for his father's murderous death, Hamlet decides to put on an 'antic disposition'. Hamlet uses puns to show his inner thoughts and at the same time pretend to be mad as is evident in his treatment of Ophelia in Act 3 Scene 1. His questions "are you honest?" and "Are you fair?" are riddling and play on the idea of Ophelia's purity and chastity. When he tells Ophelia to "Get thee to a nunnery" his euphemism of 'nunnery' is a pun on the meaning of a brothel. We as the viewer are left wondering whether Hamlet appears to be mad or is really mad. Maynard Mack summons the questions of "How much is feigned? How much is real?" however Oscar Wilde finds it bizarre that such a question has even been summoned when through the course of the play Hamlet signals that he is "essentially not in madness But mad in craft". Although he pretends to be insane initially, arguably he slips into actual insanity losing his morality when killing Polonius in the closet scene. It is Hamlet's insanity and flaws of being hesitant that leads to the tragedy of the play. Even though Hamlet is a flawed character in that he delays, according to the Kydian revenge tragedy exemplar, he is an avenger who hesitates justifiably.

Typically, a revenge tragedy questioned morals and ethics. Morality and ethics are questioned in Act 3 Scene 3 where Hamlet contemplates in killing Claudius in his prayers.

Some critics believe that Hamlet procrastinates yet again in another self-deception of word-play in this scene however; S.T Coleridge believes that Hamlet's nature to think before he acts can be understood by anyone. Coleridge says "I have the smack of Hamlet myself" and A.C. Bradley thinks that Hamlet is a man who has "exquisite moral sensibility". Mindful of Elizabethan religious assumptions, Hamlet's choice in ultimately not killing Claudius at this stage is a rational one. In this

scene, Hamlet contemplates about Claudius' after-life and says, "A villain kills my father, and for that/I his son do this same villain send/To heaven. Why this is hire and salary, not revenge". By ending his life in mid confession, Hamlet would allow the King to go straight to heaven by virtue of his cleaned soul. He would prefer to send the King to hell to fulfill his filial duty towards his father. Marlowe's tragic vision is that the audience has mixed feelings about the hero's demise. Shakespeare's characterisation of Hamlet has left many questions unanswered and so there are mixed feelings about his madness and delay. Shakespeare's characterisation of Hamlet links to the personality of the individual in Marlowe's exemplar of a tragic hero. Thus, *Hamlet* is a typical revenge tragedy with a typical tragic hero.

Conventionally, a revenge tragedy ends in a court ritual or performance which acts as a cover for an act of vengeance which leaves the main characters all dead. In Act 5 Scene 2 Hamlet has gained confidence in divine providence and it is tested. There is an obvious "poetic justice" in Laertes being killed as a result of poisoning the sword he was meant to kill Hamlet with. Claudius' treacherous actions of poisoning the cup he prepared for Hamlet backfires as Claudius is made to drink it. However, to what extent Gertrude deserves to die remains disputable. Her death seems to be a total accident, and can be seen to undermine any neat pattern of justice being done. Audiences may consider how sinful her behaviour has been reckoned to be. Although there is no evidence of her adultery while her husband was alive, she has transgressed the biblical injunction not to marry her husband's brother (Leviticus 18.16). Thomas Kyd's revenge tragedy exemplified that as events took their course through the play, the stage was littered with dead bodies. Throughout *Hamlet*, we see eight lives being lost leading to the tragedy of the state of Denmark.

Hamlet is definitely a typical revenge tragedy of the Elizabethan era. It followed many convention required to classify it as a revenge play. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* follows the conventions of Kyd, Aristotle, Seneca and Marlowe's exemplar of a typical revenge tragedy. *Hamlet* conquered all areas that were required for the consummation of a revenge tragedy.