

How Does Hamlet Synthesise the Aristotelian, Nietzschean, and Hegelian Ideas of Tragedy?

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Abstract

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark surpasses all other works of Shakespeare.

Almost every line in this play is a mine of precious wisdom, and the hero Hamlet outstrips all the imaginations of the readers, who feel deeply interested in him despite his inaction. By portraying a true reflection of the contradictory sides of the human mind through a passive character like Hamlet, Shakespeare successfully shows the difference between a great soul and a great character. The suffering of Hamlet from the tragic and melancholy recognition of our finite human condition draws all humanity to fight with him to establish the truth and to secure liberty.

An attempt to understand *The Tragedy of Hamlet* in the light of the theories of great philosophers like Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Hegel will surely reveal the unnoticed vastness and vividness of Shakespeare's most mature play. The more-than-life experience of Hamlet can provide new definitions for our undefined lives and redirecting us from a monotonous way of knowing life. The 'neither this and nor that-ness' of Hamlet, the 'to be or not to be' of a mortal being is to be approached from all possible angles of knowledge to resolve the eternal confusions regarding human existence.

How Does Hamlet Synthesise the Aristotelian Ideas of Tragedy?

The classic theories regarding the requirements for a perfect tragedy explained in Aristotle's insightful *Poetics* are not out of date as a criterion to measure the perfection of a tragedy even after centuries of their formulation. Even though a considerably few works from the ancient Greek culture to the modern era of absurd plays conform to the essential nature of tragedy as per the standards of Aristotle, orchestrating all available tragedies into the conditions of *Poetics* is still found to be relevant. It is well known that rarely any play, except Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, can be perfectly fit inside the boundaries of or can be extended to the precision that Aristotle's thought put forward. Still, there arises no question regarding the need of analysing the great playwright Shakespeare's tragedies in the light of Aristotle's theories, as

this process is the most reliable method which allows a probably unified code to identify tragedies.

Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark* essentially satisfies, as many plays do, most of the requisites of Aristotelian theory, though it fails to fulfill some requirements in some sense. The Aristotelian guide to the best tragedy defines tragedy as (1), "the imitation of an action, (2) that is serious, has magnitude, and is complete in itself; (3) in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind introduced separately in a different part of the work; (4) in a dramatic as distinct from a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, whereby to provide an outlet for such emotions" (Aristotle et al. 12). In this sense *Hamlet*, without any doubt, can be considered as an Aristotelian tragedy. It is an imitation of the life of a historical figure, rearranged and presented in a dramatic narrative form, and it deals with a serious theme of revenge of a young man for the murder of his father, and the play gives a complete picture of the incidents in the life of Hamlet to the audience.

Aristotle asserts the inclusion of 'ingredients' like the Spectacle, Melody, Diction, Character, Thought, and Plot in the tragedy. Among these parts of tragedy, he finds the Plot as the most important one, it "is the first essential- the very soul... of tragedy" (Aristotle et al. 14). The plot of the *Tragedy of Hamlet* may be considered following principles of tragedy of Aristotle "an imitation not of persons but of actions and life, of happiness and misery" (Aristotle et al. 13) of Hamlet and his kin and kith.

The Tragedy of Hamlet also concentrates on one sole action which is the delayed but accomplished revenge of Hamlet. But this one action itself is a collection or chain of various incidents, and the dislocation of one incident will disturb the entire play. The complete change that happened in the life of ignorant Hamlet after the revelation of the secret of his father's death justifies the Aristotelian idea of Discovery. The complete change that happens in the behaviour of the passive and melancholy Hamlet to a man of wit and action after the murder of Polonius satisfies the notion of Peripety. These features of Discovery and Peripety make this play to be the finest forms of tragedy having a complex plot.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy that does not convey pity and fear is not effective. "Aristotle sees tragedy as the mimesis of an action involving pity and fear. (Pity is a technical term that refers to the painful emotion we feel in the face of undeserved misfortune, and fear is a technical term that refers to the same emotion when it focuses on our own, personal vulnerability to such undeserved misfortune)" (Golden 143).

In Aristotle's opinion, pity and fear are aroused only when the tragic hero is worthy of respect in a moral sense and who makes a significant error in his life which leads him from happiness to misery. *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, in that sense, arouses pity and fear in the audience. There is no place for doubt about the morality of the character of Hamlet. It is his sense of morality that keeps him idle and unable to decide an act of revenge against the murderer of his

father. This ‘tragic flaw’ (*Hamartia* or the false step by the protagonist and his own fall) of Hamlet is the reason for his undefined madness and his ultimate demise.

This error through which Shakespeare’s hero falls is not completely intellectual or moral. Both Hamlet’s indefinite moral sense and intellectual fluctuation are equally responsible for his failure. Hamlet, who asks the ghost of his deceased father to,

“Haste me to know’t, that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge” (Wilson 27)

loses his integrity completely due to his mental incapability in doing such ‘bloody’ deeds.

This error of judgement and action of Hamlet while enjoying great reputation and prosperity will have great effects upon the audience. Therefore the tragic circumstances of Hamlet's life and death arouse pity and fear in them. The slain of his father, his mother’s marriage with his uncle, his accidental murder of Polonius, the suicide of the woman he loved, and his death in the hands of his enemies are all ample reasons to pity Hamlet. Besides, it also causes fear in them as the moral sense and fatalism of a man ends up in his complete failure both as an individual and as a social being. It is the ruthless face of the reality that haunts the audience that it is not the urgent actions of Hamlet that lead to his unmerited misfortune and the tragic ending of the play, but his cautious nature which everyone considers as a virtue.

Catharsis, which Aristotle explained as an important feature of ideal tragedies, also has a place in the discussions about *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. Catharsis can be defined as a ‘relief from strong or repressed emotions.’ The catharsis in Hamlet occurs at the end of the play, because of the swordfight between Hamlet and Laertes. Subsequently, Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes are killed, and Hamlet also dies at the end. After all these tragic incidents, the audience can finally breathe a sigh of relief when the warring prince of Norway, Fortinbras, hearing the story of Hamlet from Horatio, decides to treat the body of Hamlet as a hero. This is the way Hamlet ends providing some relief for those who watched the play.

The Characters, Thought, and Diction are also especially important in Aristotelian tragedies. *The Tragedy of Hamlet* depicts the essential qualities of the characters through its excellent plot, and it also makes the moral purpose of each character clear to the audience. No character seems to be unnecessary or out of place in this play.

By Thought Aristotle meant what can be said and should be said at each moment of the plot.

Diction gives importance to how things are to be said. Shakespeare has used thought and diction perfectly in *Hamlet* that each character speaks most appropriately as per his/her position and situation. For example, Hamlet’s replies to the questions of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern who spy on him for the King are exactly what to be told to them. Claudius,

the King, speaks with all the shrewdness of a politician and the Queen with overwhelming obligations towards her husband and love for her son. The conversation of the grave-diggers throws light to the manners of common people and the soliloquies of Hamlet verify his overpowering mental distress. All these prove that the language and dialogues used by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* seem to be the best suited to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy.

The Tragedy of Hamlet does not follow all the aspects discussed in *Poetics* by Aristotle. The Spectacle or the chorus, whom Aristotle considered as relevant as the characters, is not present in this tragedy. Besides, there is doubt about the unity of the Plot in *Hamlet* as it sets the scenes in different places and times. There is a collection of different plots like Hamlet's revenge, Hamlet's love for Ophelia, Ophelia's madness and death, Polonius's family issues, Fortinbras's military expedition, etc. in *The Tragedy of Hamlet* which sometimes blur the main plot. So, the *Tragedy of Hamlet* is not a perfect Aristotelian tragedy, even though it satisfies most of the requirements for a tragic work introduced by the ancient philosopher.

How Does *Hamlet* Synthesise the Nietzschean Ideas of Tragedy?

Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy as the synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysian unveils the two possibilities of paradoxical understanding of human life. Nietzsche believes in the duality of Apollo and Dionysus, the Greek gods of civilization and chaos, and their co-existence which only brings artistic perfection. The life-affirming force of Apollo controls the destructive and life-threatening force of Dionysus. The Dionysus, instead, prevents men from being extremely influenced by the Apollonian optimism regarding 'ordered life'. In truth, both these overlapping edges of worldview continue to correct each other. Nietzsche agrees to the fact that it is only the meeting with Apollo that created radical transformations in the Dionysian impulses making it artistic, productive, and redemptive. But these realizations could not help Nietzsche finding Dionysian as fundamental to the creation of art. To him, the attainment of the state of primordial unity is perfectly possible only through the submission to Dionysian madness, which is beyond social barriers and narrow thinking.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark can easily be looked at through the lens of Nietzschean Apollonian and Dionysian duality as well as their expected unity. Nietzsche himself has pointed out the Dionysian similarity in Hamlet, saying,

“The Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous and humiliating that they asked to set right a world that is out of joint.” (Nietzsche)

The angst of Hamlet due to the sudden death of his father and the hasty marriage of his mother leaves him on the verge of madness. His mind is 'intoxicated' with the thought of revenge for his father's death but lacks the power of action giving him the diction and

appearance of a mad man. Hamlet's utter inability to keep to the issue in hand, as Nietzsche says, is not an outward representation of helpless cowardice, but his realization of the world that is out of order, which is beyond his ability and control. It is his more-than-life understanding of the situations that keep him idle. And his Dionysian madness is an outcome of the conflict in his inner self between the Apollonian urge for re-establishing truth and order and the Dionysian realization of life. His Dionysian struggle is against the Apollonian powers of fate and death. It is Dionysus's drunkenness that makes Hamlet forgetting his self. He forgets to be himself and his only question becomes "to be or not to be" (Wilson 60). This state of wild passions leaves him to meditate on and on, rather than avenging the murder of his father with 'swift wings.'

Nietzsche assumes that, when dreaming, one is always aware that one is dreaming; those who are entirely caught up in their dreams are not experiencing Apollonian beauty, but a rather Dionysian ecstasy. Apollo presents a state of dream in which one has life-like experiences, but he does not lose the awareness that these experiences are mere appearances, and that the reality lies beneath. According to Nietzsche, Dionysus represents the inability to discern the boundaries between dream and reality or appearance and reality. Thus, the influence of Dionysus results in the breaking down of the barriers between man and man and between man and nature itself. In this state of diving ecstasy, man enters the primordial unity and becomes a member of a higher community. Hamlet is truly in such a state of understanding life and nature. It is because of his ability to stretch his hands out from the accepted realities of day-to-day life, that he faces the apparition with the courage of a man from the outer world. He could not find the ghost of his father as a mere reflection of his own self, but as the reality that touched his heart. It is the Dionysian intuition that directs him, not the Apollonian reason. Hence, he says to Horatio:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." (Wilson 32)

This reach beyond-life represents the Dionysian breakdown of the walls of restraints that Apollo imposed upon human life. And this lack of restraints makes Hamlet unable to remain separate from the emotions and illusions that strike him. It is at this juncture Hamlet finds himself completely lost in the Dionysian understanding of truth, where he is in danger of losing himself and becoming unable to continue with his everyday reality. The mere sight of his mother reminds him of the tragic death of his father and the ephemerality of female love, squeezing all his desires to live and to love Ophelia out from his very veins.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche says that "Knowledge kills action; action requires the veil of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet... true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man" (Nietzsche). Macbeth with obscure knowledge about the burden of power and crimes, King Lear with a faint outline regarding the love of his daughters and without clarity about the distinction between

words and deeds, and Othello being uncertain of Desdemona's love do not refrain from actions because there were these veils of illusions before them. What makes Hamlet different from his 'sibling tragic heroes' is his realization of his duties and his insight into the worthlessness of actions in such a disordered state of life. When the Dionysian intoxication of Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear breaks the order of life, Hamlet's madness is a little break from thoughtless actions giving him enough time to ponder over the necessity of actions. His meditations are not on killing himself, but on killing all probable false steps on his part. He "is meditating, not on suicide, but on revenge and the consequences of revenge." (Stoll 35). As the chorus in Sophocles' *Electra* says, "Yea, a man will pause on the verge of a great war" (Stoll 19). It is this pause, even though he ultimately perishes, that saves him from falter and failure. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, 'Hamlet's delay, and ultimately his downfall, is caused by too much thinking' and not because of his hastened actions.

In the play *Hamlet*, the madness of Ophelia also has a Dionysian face as she is also a person afflicted by the harsh realities of life. But her madness becomes self-destructive, and it ends at death by herself. The idea of self-destruction is also present in Hamlet, but the difference is that, as Polonius says:

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in it." (Wilson 45)

And this 'method' of Hamlet, I, think, is the Apollonian presence of Horatio on Hamlet's side. Hamlet becomes so engrossed with 'beyond humane thoughts only in the absence of Horatio. The Apollonian order in Horatio balances the Dionysian disorder in Hamlet. This is where the Apollonian and Dionysian blends together in Hamlet, helping these characters from falling completely into the abyss of order or disorder.

In the character of Claudius also the Dionysian elements appear but without backed by the Apollonian assistance. Even then his Dionysian madness of lust and greed is not visible as Hamlet's, because he from the beginning itself had attained or fulfilled his limited aims of ascending the throne and marrying his deceased brother's wife. He also had succeeded in keeping the mystery in the death of Hamlet's father and thus avoiding suspicions, unlike Macbeth. His madness blooms again only when he suspects Hamlet is aware of his secret. Hence, he conspires to kill Hamlet in England and then inspires Laertes to do the crime. It is this madness that prevents him from repenting his crime and from praying.

It is the togetherness of Apollonian and Dionysian elements in Hamlet that makes him a true tragic hero. Hamlet is ahead of his time. His inner conflict between morality and duty, his external conflict with disordered, and unmoral social conditions proves the refined qualities he possesses. Hamlet, who ponders over and over on a single matter before entering the sphere of action, might have misunderstood by his fellow beings thinking he is a quest for power. The truth he bears seems to be unrecognizable due to the inappropriateness of time in which he was born by mistake.

How Does Hamlet Synthesise the Hegelian Ideas of Tragedy?

Hegel in his descriptions of tragedy asserts the duality of substantive positions in human life. According to Hegel, the tragedy arises out of the substantial and just position of the hero, because, by doing this, naturally he places himself in opposition to a contrary and likewise just position. This choice of the hero becomes both just and unjust due to the presence of a complete reverse, but equally just option that has been completely neglected by the hero. Thus, the selection of the just position allows the hero to be known in the name of greatness and at the same time, he is destined to be guilty of his partial and one-sided action. Hegel sees value on each side of these equally justified conflicting positions. So for Hegel, tragedy stands for a conflict between two substantive justifiable positions that could be resolved only with the fall of the hero.

This theory of duality of the substantial and just position can be easily applied to the study of Hamlet. The conflict that Hamlet suffers is this conflict of choices. The substantive and just positions Hamlet faces are his role and duties as a son and as a subject of the state or God. Hamlet is placed amid the Christian world view of 'vengeance is God's' and the pagan world view that the death of a family member should be revenged. He has to choose between action and patience, and Hamlet's action becomes patience. His reluctance to kill Claudius, neglecting the best chance he got, is a result of fear of being victim to eternal punishment both by killing a praying man and also by sending his father's murderer to heaven. He swiftly draws his sharpest sword to stab his uncle, but only to falter and to flatten its edges with soft words:

“And now I'll do't, [he draws his sword] and so a' goes to heaven,
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....
Why, this is bait and salary, not revenge.” (Wilson 81)

With this decision, Hamlet is doing good to his moral self and also justice to his Christian self. But leaving a villain like Claudius without posing even a straw of threat against him, Hamlet is cutting the way for Satan. So, here, as Hegel explains in his theories of tragedy, the tragic hero Hamlet acts both for and against good, he becomes both innocent and flawed. The hero is responsible for his choice and negation, for his greatness and guilt, and ultimately for his fall. This is why Hegel offers the paradoxical formulation, that: “It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable.” (Hegel 1215)

Besides the collision of these equally justifiable conflicting positions, Hegel also discusses the possibility of a tragic collision within an individual's consciousness. It is this internal collision that happens in Hamlet. As the inner collision is less dramatic, Shakespeare had to put its effect into the audience through the soliloquies of Hamlet, which have absorbed the essence of Hamlet's warring self. The soliloquies prove the double self of Hamlet i.e. one

that owes repentance, and the other revenge. The intellectual and emotional consequences of this internal struggle upon Hamlet's life are marked by his Dionysian madness, which only will enhance the dramatic possibilities of a contradictory self.

Hegel tries to explain the traditional, Aristotelian motif of fear and pity from a different angle of understanding. Hegel objects to the Aristotelian concept of the fear of the audience aroused as a product of the eternal fate of the tragic hero. For Hegel, it is the violation of the ethical substance that turns against the hero creating fear in the minds of the audience. So, as per Hegel's concept, it is not the tragic death of Hamlet that frightens the audience but his initial mental conflict between action and patience and the later success of action over patience at a wrong time shedding so much blood. It is not the blood, but the cause for blood-shed that scares the audience. Hegel also re-reads Aristotle's notion of pity and presents it from a different perspective. Unlike Aristotle's pity that "is reserved for undeserved misfortune" (Aristotle et al. 21-22), Hegel interprets suffering as a consequence of the hero's virtue which is in a sense justified, despite his fall. So, the application of Hegel's theory into Hamlet will read pity as one aroused due to Hamlet's justifiable position, though it caused his death.

Hegel finds the inherent double-faced destructiveness in the actions of each tragic hero - destructive of the other as well as self-destructive. In Hamlet's case, even his inaction or patience causes harm to him and others. His idleness pricks the conscience of Hamlet, his gloominess tortures his mother and his wilful neglect confuses the distraught Ophelia. But when he resorts to action, he 'speaks daggers' to his mother, stabs Polonius and thus ruins Ophelia's mind and body, kills Laertes and Claudius, and at last embraces his tragic death.

Hegel considers tragic fate as a result of reason. The reason will not allow a person to cling to a particular position permanently. Hence, human beings tend to fly from their primarily chosen substantive mental position to the opposite one, both to enjoy the change and also to make some effects in the society with this shift. In Hamlet's case, this change is abrupt and explosive. Before this radical change Hamlet was passive and after this sudden burst of action he walks into perpetual passivity.

In Hegel's view, far from being simply weak, Hamlet displays the inner beauty of a profoundly noble soul. All the actions and inactions of this character in the play represent the same beauty and magnificence which the other characters fail to achieve. Even though Hamlet calls himself three-quarters cowardice and one-quarter wisdom, there is no other character as powerful as Hamlet's in *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. In the play, only Hamlet spends so much time for introspection moving from thought to action. The confusion Hamlet bears throughout the play reveals his Faustian features which are new in his time.

Hamlet, the modern Faustian man, is centuries ahead of his time. His loftiest sentiments and philosophy do not fit into the era of barbarous customs and daring deeds, in which his birth and life make no sense. Hamlet's Dionysian madness conveys meaning beyond his place and

time. Hamlet's mission seems accomplished for those who can touch his spirit which fights for truth alone and he is the true hero for those who find optimisation of truth and progress in him. So, The tragic essence of Hamlet can be looked at based on the theories formulated by great thinkers. As Shakespeare has incorporated much of the possible multiple meanings of human thought and action in one man, Hamlet is a genius representation of humane confusion, but Hamlet is a synthesis of qualities for only those who can idealize both action and inaction.

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