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Tragic Hero in *Hamlet*

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

{ رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً
وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ (٢٠١) }

صدق الله العظيم

سورة البقرة (آية ٢٠١)

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

**"{Our Lord! Give us in this world
that which is good and in the
Hereafter that which is good, and
save us from the torment of the
Fire!(201)}"**

The words of Allah are true

Sorah Al-Baqarah (Verse 201)

Dedication

This Research is dedicated to the most precious people in our lives (our parents, families and faithful friends). To our instructors who taught us during the four years of our study.

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Abstract

The Purpose of this research is to illustrate and explain how Hamlet is considered to be a tragic hero. In the Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*, the tragedy of a young prince's attempt to extract revenge upon the man who murdered his father is the central idea. First of all, researchers provides the reader with a general introduction about the play '*Hamlet*'. Then, the research is divided into three chapters, the first of which is to deal with William Shakespeare's Life and Works. The second chapter, though, is allotted to elucidate summary of the play '*Hamlet*'. Furthermore, in chapter three, researchers elucidate the theme of the tragic hero in the play '*Hamlet*' in details. In conclusion, researchers illustrate how Prince Hamlet's inability to make crucial decisions ultimately leads to his tragic death, and that is what makes him a tragic hero. In addition to, researchers state that Hamlet is a tragic hero because he is a person of high rank who violated a law, and he poses a threat to society and causes suffering to others through violating the law, which are all characteristics of a tragic hero.

Introduction

Hamlet, the first in Shakespeare's series of great tragedies, was initially classified as a problem play when the term became fashionable in the nineteenth century. *Hamlet* focuses on the complications arising from love, death, and betrayal, without offering the audience a decisive and positive resolution to these complications. This is due in part to the simple fact that for Hamlet, there can be no definitive answers to life's most daunting questions. Indeed, Hamlet's world is one of perpetual ambiguity. The emphasis on ambiguity in the play, and the absence of overt instruction on how to overcome such ambiguity is Shakespeare's testament to real life. Each one of us has experienced Hamlet's struggle to find the truth in a mire of delusion and uncertainty, often to no avail. *Hamlet* also can be sub-categorized as a revenge play, the genre popular in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Elements common to all revenge tragedy include: a hero who must avenge an evil deed, often encouraged by the apparition of a close friend or relative; scenes of death and mutilation; insanity or feigned insanity; sub-plays; and the violent death of the hero.

Chapter One

William Shakespeare's Life and Works

William Shakespeare (26 April 1564 - 23 April 1616) was an English playwright, poet and actor. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon" (or simply "the Bard"). Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 in Stratford, a small town with many green meadows and a river named Avon. On the edge of Stratford was the Forest of Arden, close to his mother's maiden place. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden was born in the village of Wilmcote on the fringes of the forest of Arden and belonged to a well-to-do yeoman family. She married John Shakespeare in 1557, who was a tanner and glove-maker. John Shakespeare intended to better his conditions and extended his business. He gradually rose to an influential position becoming the town Chamberlain (who kept the town's accounts) in 1561 and later the High Bailiff (legal officer) in 1568.

Shakespeare was the third child born to his parents; the two sisters before him had died in infancy. Soon after his birth, plague broke out in London. It was a miracle indeed for both John and Mary that Shakespeare survived the plague. Neither of Shakespeare's parents received any school education, thus they made sure that Shakespeare attend school. They sent him to the Grammar School of Stratford where he learnt Latin grammar and read Ovid and Virgil among other classics. The early years spent in Stratford impacted young Shakespeare who developed a deep connect with nature. The picturesque landscape enhanced his poetic sensibility. Also, Shakespeare was one with the life of the ordinary people. The folk-songs of the peasantry and their ways of celebration have been captured in his works (Potter, 2018 : 391-393).

Shakespeare was a product of the countryside and ever felt drawn towards it. Most of his plays oscillate between the world of the city and court on one side and the forests and country on the other. Where the country is absent, he moves into the alleys that the common people occupied. Significantly, Shakespeare was witness to deprivation and the misery of people in the country. The place was crowded with beggars and tramps moving within it and presenting a depressing spectacle. Farmers were racked by their landlords and there was rampant social injustice. In the initial years, Shakespeare's own financial condition worsened as his father incurred penalties for being in deep debt. This may have triggered in the young man the urge to become a self-made gentleman or in fact what was termed bourgeois *gentilhommes*. The horrific life of the poor that he had seen first in Stratford and later in the dim and dingy lanes of London could also be the reason why Shakespeare had the motivation to buy land and a house. This ensured security. In this, he may have been enabled by the profits from theatre.

In London, Shakespeare came in touch with James Burbage who owned the first playhouse erected in London in 1576 called the Theatre. It was James Burbage's son Richard Burbage who would later become Shakespeare's most famous fellow actor. Shakespeare began to work at the Theatre as in-charge of horses for those who rode to watch the plays. He continued to do menial work such as becoming a 'servitor' to the actors, then a prompter's attendant whose job was to facilitate the actors, approached the stage. These petty jobs at the theatre company made Shakespeare aware of the fine details of play-acting and managing a show. Because of his skills, he soon rose above his station. This period in London was marked by the development of the Protestant spirit (Schoenbaum, 1991 : 44-47).

England under the stewardship of the queen had become a great Protestant power. The validation of Queenly power was provided by the writers preceding Shakespeare, such as Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser; the latter celebrated the Queen's authority and reinforced her right to power through their poems. Shakespeare, too, dedicated his works to patrons who were in service of the queen. However, this did not prevent him from unraveling the murky nature of power and courtly politics. His characters sought escape from the court and the city and ventured to reflect critically on that which went in the name of honor, heroism and valor. Shakespeare's comedies written in the period 1592 onwards testify to this attitude.

Shakespeare came to London as much to be a poet as to become an actor and playwright. He was a poet seeking a patron. His early poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. *Venus and Adonis* begins with a Latin phrase appealing for patronage where Shakespeare asserts that he would pursue "pure poetry" as against the common literature of the times. Both these poems were written during the years of the plague when the theatres were shut by government order. When he couldn't stage plays, Shakespeare turned to poetry and spent his time writing and editing his poems. This may be the reason why his plays are poetic in nature. *Venus and Adonis* is an Ovidian erotic poem that ran into nine editions during the poet's lifetime. It became Shakespeare's signature work. The poem relates the tale of an innocent boy who is seduced by an older woman/goddess. The work became a favorite among the young readers of Elizabethan England. Before these poems, Shakespeare had written plays such as *Henry VI* trilogy as also *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Comedy of Errors* (Burrow, 1998 : 15-18).

The plays *Henry VI Part 1*, *Part 2* and *Part 3* were written between 1589 and 1591. *The Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* were written during the next two years 1592-1593. *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew* came out in the following year 1593-1594. Once Shakespeare acquired a share in *The Lord Chamberlain's Men* and later *The Globe*, he devoted himself more or less entirely to writing plays. Nonetheless, he kept writing sonnets during the 1590s and kept the poet in him alive. It is believed that he continued to write sonnets till 1609. In his early years in London, Shakespeare was deeply impressed by Christopher Marlowe who was his senior. Marlowe was responsible for bringing on public stage the use of unrhymed iambic pentameter which Shakespeare would also make use of. Marlow gave substance to English tragedy and is rightly considered its creator. He had as model the plays of Seneca (Roman dramatist of the ancient period). Marlowe's diction and style were refined, too. He was a scholar from Cambridge and rose to fame quicker than Shakespeare.

The evidence of Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare can be found most distinctly in the latter's play *Titus Andronicus*, the earliest tragedy he wrote. The play has many horror-filled details, and projects savage deeds where the father Titus kills one of his sons abruptly. There is blood and gore as well as many slaughter scenes in the play that have been borrowed from Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. They also carry shades of Ovid and Seneca. Shakespeare was well read in the classics as he was indeed in the literature of his age. Marlowe's writing style was highly rhetorical and so was Shakespeare's in his early plays. The years 1595-1596 saw the production of Shakespeare's history plays such as *King John* and *Richard II* on the one hand, and romances such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour's Lost* on the other (Guttman, 1947 : 231-233).

Following this, in 1597 Shakespeare staged *The Merchant of Venice*; *Henry IV Part I*; and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. The variety and the range of his subjects bring to us the fact that Shakespeare enjoyed versatility as an important trait. He could easily juggle between writing history plays and comedies as also romances. Shakespeare read voraciously. He had extensive knowledge of English history as also the history of the Greeks and the Romans. For his English historical plays, he used Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577) and for his plays based on Roman Empire he took help from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* written in second century AD. Shakespeare wrote a number of Romances and comedies in the closing years of the century. *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It* belong to this phase of his writing.

Along with these, Shakespeare wrote history plays *Henry IV Part II* and *Henry V* in the same year. *Julius Caesar*, too, was staged at the same time. In it, Shakespeare revived interest in the classics. In 1601, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, arguably his most complex work. This was accompanied by *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. With *Twelfth Night* produced in 1601-1602, the period of Shakespeare's comedy would come to a close. He wrote many dark plays thereafter, such as *Othello* (1604) and *Macbeth* (1605). The plays *Troilus and Cressida*; *All's Well that Ends Well*; and *Measure for Measure* were written between 1601 and 1604. Shakespeare's *King Lear* was staged somewhere around 1605-1606. During this period, he wrote a play on the unstable Roman Empire projected in *Antony and Cleopatra*. His interest in the subject continued in the following year with the publication of *Coriolanus*; *Timon of Athens*; and *Pericles* in 1607-1608. In 1609, Shakespeare more or less completed writing sonnets and produced *Cymbeline* (Kanzer,1951:14-16).

In 1610 he wrote some of his last plays - *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* before finally returning to his hometown Stratford. In 1612-13, Shakespeare wrote *Henry VIII* and *The Noble Kinsmen* (co-written with his friend John Fletcher) but he had more or less retired from active work by this time. His extant works, including collaborations, consist of some 39 plays, 154 sonnets, three long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. His works continue to be studied and reinterpreted. Shakespeare produced most of his known works between 1589 and 1613.

His early plays were primarily comedies and histories and are regarded as some of the best works produced in these genres. He then wrote mainly tragedies until 1608, among them *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, all considered to be among the finest works in the English language. In the last phase of his life, he wrote tragicomedies and collaborated with other playwrights. Many of Shakespeare's plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy in his lifetime. However, in 1623, two fellow actors and friends of Shakespeare's, John Heminges and Henry Condell, published a more definitive text known as the First Folio, a posthumous collected edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works that included all but two of his plays. Its Preface was a prescient poem by Ben Jonson that hailed Shakespeare with the now famous epithet: "not of an age, but for all time" (Wells and Taylor, 2005 : 155-157).

CHAPTER TWO

Summary of *Hamlet*

On a dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the king's widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father's spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father's death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince's erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages. A group of traveling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle's guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react (Mills, 2021 : 84-86).

When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father's death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius's son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father's and sister's deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes' desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes' blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match (Thatcher, 1993 : 246-248).

Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia's funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius's orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king's proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison.

Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword's blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen's death, he dies from the blade's poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet's last request, tells him Hamlet's tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier (Perry, 2012 : 133-135).

CHAPTER THREE

Tragic Hero in *Hamlet*

A tragic hero is one of the most significant elements of a Shakespearean tragedy. This type of tragedy is essentially a one-man show. It is a story about one, or sometimes two, characters. The hero may be either male or female and he or she must suffer because of some flaw of character, because of inevitable fate, or both. The hero must be *the most* tragic personality in the play. According to Andrew Cecil Bradley, a noted 20th century Shakespeare scholar, a Shakespearean tragedy “*is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death.*” Usually the hero has to face death in the end.

An important feature of the tragic hero is that he or she is a towering personality in his/her state/kingdom/country. This person hails from the elite stratum of society and holds a high position, often one of royalty. Tragic heroes are kings, princes, or military generals, who are very important to their subjects. Take Hamlet, prince of Denmark; he is intellectual, highly educated, sociable, charming, and of a philosophic bent. The hero is such an important person that his/her death gives rise to full-scale turmoil, disturbance, and chaos throughout the land. When Hamlet takes revenge for the death of his father, he is not only killing his uncle but inviting his own death at the hands of Laertes. And as a direct result of his death, the army of Fortinbras enters Denmark to take control. Due to all of the tragedies and deaths that occur in *Hamlet*, the play is known as a tragedy, and Hamlet is a tragic hero because he displays the traits of a tragic hero: he is a person of high rank who violates a law and he poses a threat to society and causes suffering to others through violating the law (Joseph, 1962 : 119-121).

Hamlet is one of the most famous tragedies ever written, and in many respects, it exhibits the features traditionally associated with the tragic genre. In addition to the play ending with the death of Hamlet and a host of others, Hamlet himself is a classic tragic protagonist. As the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet is a figure whose actions matter to an entire kingdom, which means the play's events reverberate through the entire world of the play. Like other tragic heroes, he displays many admirable traits. Hamlet may have a reputation for moping around Elsinore Castle with a melancholy disposition, but this is because he grieves his beloved father's untimely death. Despite his sadness, Hamlet is an intelligent young man of great potential, as many other characters recognize.

The first trait of a tragic hero that Hamlet displays is that he is a person of high rank who violates a law. Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, and he was in line for the throne when his father died; however, his mother remarried taking away Hamlet's chance of being king. Being the Prince of Denmark has brought Hamlet's life to the public's eye, so many people in Denmark like and respect Hamlet. Laertes even explains to Ophelia how high in rank Hamlet is that he cannot even marry whoever he would like: "His greatness weighed, his will is not his own, for he himself is subject to his birth.

He may not, as unvalued persons do, carve for himself; for on his choice depends the safety and health of this whole state. Therefore must his choice be circumscribed unto the voice and yielding of that body whereof he is the head". Before Laertes' explanation, Hamlet found out that Claudius killed his father, and he swears to avenge his father's death by killing Claudius. Hamlet begins to go crazy while trying to find the right way and time to kill Claudius (Brooks, 1986 : 66-68).

In the middle of all of this revenge plotting, Hamlet is sent to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet has them sentenced to death, which is another example of when Hamlet breaks the law. While trying to kill Claudius, Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius, which violates a law, so Hamlet can be seen as a tragic hero. Hamlet also kills Laertes and Claudius, so he breaks the law several times over the course of the play, which shows the characteristic of a tragic hero that a person of high rank violates a law.

Another trait of a tragic hero that Hamlet shows is that he poses a threat to society and causes suffering to others through violating a law. As previously stated, Hamlet kills multiple people which is the law that he breaks to be considered a tragic hero. Hamlet causes many people to suffer due to these crimes, such as Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, Horatio, Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet causes Ophelia to go mad because of her father's death, in which case Hamlet was the killer. This madness led Ophelia to commit suicide, which caused Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet to suffer. As a result of his father and sister's demise, Laertes fights Hamlet, but in the process he is killed, which causes pain for Laertes.

Hamlet also causes Claudius to suffer because he teases Claudius with the guilt of what he has done through the production that the theatre group performed. Hamlet also kills Claudius, which breaks the law and causes Claudius to suffer. Horatio suffers by Hamlet's actions because he has to deal with Hamlet's madness and problems, which drags him into the huge mess that comes with the royal family at Elsinore. Polonius' death and suffering are caused by Hamlet's actions, making him responsible for the crime (Levine, 1962 : 539-541).

Hamlet also makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suffer because he is the reason that they were killed; he changes a death sentence to say their names instead of his own. Hamlet suspects that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been playing him for a while. So after Hamlet finds a letter sentencing him to death, he changes the letter to say that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be sentenced to death instead. Therefore, through all of this suffering caused by Hamlet, Hamlet definitely poses a threat to society and can be seen as a tragic hero due to his actions and crimes.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare uses the tragedies and deaths to make the play a tragedy; Hamlet is a tragic hero because he is a person of high rank who violated a law, and he poses a threat to society and causes suffering to others through violating the law, which are all characteristics of a tragic hero. Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, violates the law by killing different people such as Polonius, Laertes, Claudius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, making him a tragic hero. Hamlet's madness leads him down this path of destruction in which he harms and kills many people. Another way that Hamlet qualifies to be a tragic hero is that he causes suffering and harm to almost everyone in the play, such as Ophelia, Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Horatio, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet leads to or contributes to the death of most of these characters; if Hamlet had not acted as he did, some of these characters might still be around, but through Hamlet's actions he caused many people to die or suffer, which shows that he poses a threat to society. In conclusion, Hamlet displays the traits of someone in a high rank that violates a law and of someone who poses a threat to society and causes pain for others, which make him a tragic hero, as shown throughout the play (Froula, 2001 : 77-79).

Conclusion

In all literary tragedies, the tragic hero suffers and usually dies at the end. A tragic hero is a character that makes an error in judgment that leads to their downfall. Prince Hamlet is an example of a Shakespearean tragic hero. A tragic hero must possess many good traits, but also possess a flaw that ultimately leads to his downfall. In the Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*, the tragedy of a young prince's attempt to extract revenge upon the man who murdered his father is the central idea. Throughout the play, the audience is shown Prince Hamlet's internal conflict over who killed his father. The internal conflict Prince Hamlet brings upon himself is his hesitancy to trust his own judgment and act upon it. Prince Hamlet's instances of self-doubt and indecisiveness correspond to the idea that tragic heroes lack important decision-making skills in times of distress. Prince Hamlet's inability to make crucial decisions ultimately leads to his tragic death, and that is what makes him a tragic hero.

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