

## "An Overview of Revenge Tragedies"

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### Abstract

Revenge is a strong feeling found in the life of human beings. Tragedies come into picture throughout the world in the various civilizations. As mentioned in the western drama tragedy first appeared in the literature of ancient Greece and after that in Roman drama. This literary genre moved into the sixteenth century with the Renaissance and later that was referred as the golden age of drama. In this period, we can witness the development of this literary genre is categorized into various kinds. The article has studied the subject from a historical approach to study tragedy, tragedy writers and its various kinds in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. The paper has also presented the prominent features and characteristics of tragedies. The study of Spanish tragedy and its influences on revenge tragedies written by Shakespeare and other tragedy writers is also discussed in the paper. The article also included some of the most prominent dramatists and tragedy writers of these periods such as Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare, John Marston, George Chapman, Tourneur and John Webster.

**Keywords:** Tragedy, Revenge Plays, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Spanish Tragedy etc.

### Introduction

The literature is always changed according to the choice audience and period. There are several genres of literature in which drama is very popular form in literature. In these types of literature Tragedy plays an important role. As Aristotle, 'Tragedy is the highest creation of literature.' Because in tragedy writer has to show the man worst than he is or best than he is. Hence in this current work first important thing is to know what is mean by tragedy and the background of the tragedy.

### Background and Definition of Tragedy

A revenge play is also known as a revenge tragedy. This kind of tragedy "is brought about by the pursuit and accomplishment of revenge. It is blood asking for blood. The revenge tragedy was very popular during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and it owed its popularity largely to the influence of Seneca the ancient Roman dramatist" (www.Scribd.com)

On the Contrary Abrams (1999) while defining tragedy states that "Senecan tragedy was written to be recited rather than acted; but to the English playwrights, who thought that these tragedies had been intended for the stage, they provided the model for an organized five-act play with a complex plot and elaborately formal style of dialogue" (p.323) He further adds that: Senecan drama in the Elizabethan Age had two main lines of development. One of these consisted of academic tragedies written in close imitation of the Senecan model, including the use of a chorus, and usually constructed according to the rules of the Three Unities, which had been elaborated by Italian critics of the sixteenth century; the earlier English example was Thomas Sackville and Thomas Nortons Gorboduc (1562)

Abrams (1999) further in continuation explains that the other and much more important development was written for the popular stage, and is referred as the revenge tragedy, or (in its most sensational form) the tragedy of blood. This type of play is adopted from Seneca's favorite materials of murder, revenge, ghosts, mutilation and carnage, but while Seneca had put such matters in lower to long reports of offstage actions by messengers, the Elizabethan writers usually represented them onstage for the satisfaction of the appetite of the prevailing audience for violence and horror' (p.323). It may be that Thomas Kyd's Spanish Tragedy (1586) was the first revenge play in its kind and as Abrams remarks, "established this popular form, its subject is a murder and the quest for vengeance, and it includes a ghost, insanity, suicide, a play-within-a-play, sensational incidents, and a gruesomely bloody ending" (p.323) Kyd's revenge tragedy, was followed by a spurt of revenge plays, and "it was during James's reign that many of the most famous tragedies and comedies in English were written and first performed" (Widdowson, 2004, p.9). Abrams (1999) enlists these



popular dramatists, including Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1592) and Shakespeare's later *Andronicus* (1608) are in this mode. The most famous revenge tragedy is probably the White Devil (1612) by John Webster. Webster's *Andronicus* and *Titus Andronicus* were some of the first revenge tragedies. Other revenge tragedies are *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1608) and *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611) is also worth mentioning.

### Major Characteristics of Tragedies

The main components and characteristics of revenge tragedies are as follows:

- There are few murders which are justified.
- The appearance of murdered persons almost appears in few close relative or friend of his.
- This appeared ghost enjoin him to take the revenge of the murdered.
- In the revenge tragedy the revenge is imagined as a sacred duty.
- In the revenge tragedy, it is not as a kind of wild justice.
- In tragedy, the avenger is moved by a sense of sacred duty.
- In tragedy, a sense of sacred duty is not out of any passion.
- It shows greed or hatred for some personal injury in tragedy.
- We can see, there is a piling up of crude, physical horror upon horror's head.
- In revenge tragedy, there is much that is sensational and melodramatic.
- These terrors are intensified in revenge tragedy by the repeated appearance of the ghost.
- In revenge tragedy, there are a number of deaths and the stage is left littered with dead bodies, at the end.
- In revenge tragedy, there is plentiful use of the imagery of violence and terror.
- In revenge tragedy, the prominent role is assigned to some rascally servant known as the malcontent, a Machiavellian-villain much given to reflection and satiric comments.
- In revenge tragedy, Sympathy is aroused for the avenger."

### Discussion

#### Thomas Kyd's Spanish Tragedy

The credit for making the revenge tragedy famous in England undoubtedly goes to Thomas Kyd. He was one of the university wits and belongs to the Elizabethan period. He had interest in the Greek dramatist Seneca's tragedies to the great extent as they were his favorite reading. While reading his plays, one can witness the re-appearance of the main characteristics of the Senecan tragedy in his masterpiece, *The Spanish Tragedy*. The great fame of this play is accounted for by the fact that the people were in need of romantic melodrama and Kyd offered them what they wished for. *Spanish Tragedy* is the first which was really effective tragedy in the Senecan style. The atmosphere is one of fear and gloom and the fear is aroused by the piling up of crime, which is most often monstrous crime. There is also a large number of murder. A young prince is killed treachery when he is to marry his beloved. His father pretended madness and plans revenge. He succeeds too much extent and finally everyone including himself is killed. The stage is scattered with dead bodies. The ghost in the Senecan style appears at intervals in the whole tragedy asks for revenge. Besides we see long, declamatory speeches in the Senecan manner. In spite of this classical influence, the tragedy does not actually imitate the norms and classical rules of dramatic writing. Unity of time and place is not followed in the play unity of action and unity of motif is seen, as it all centers round revenge. One find less action on the stage, whereas there is no such action in the Senecan tragedy



### **Famous Tragedy Hamlet**

Like his contemporaries William Shakespeare, Hamlet is essentially a revenge tragedy. The dramatist is responsible to have this play titled as a Tragedy. Hamlet's uncle murdered the ghost of the murdered king appears in the dream to Hamlet and instigates him to take revenge on his misdeeds to him. The revenge is considered by Hamlet as a sacred duty" (Simon, 1984, p. 10). Hamlet takes his mind firm to perform this duty, but he hesitates and delays doing so. As a result, the murders finally happen and all the dead bodies are shown on the stage. Revenge motif forms the base of the play. Crude, melodramatic and sensational is a dominant in the play. However the different scenes of the prince offer us a sign into his exploited soul. We also experience that Hamlet being a noble soul and his masterly inaction derives from his inherent nobility. Thus a crude melodrama transforms into a high tragedy, a play in which tragedy is a matter of character rather than a merely an exciting horrors.

### **Marston's Antonio's Revenge and Antonio and Mellida**

John Marston is the another prominent writer of Revenge Tragedy. Antonio's Revenge and Antonio and Mellida are his popular tragedies being the best. These two tragedies are the direct descendants of the Spanish Tragedy. He has followed the Senecan Tradition while writing these tragedies. His tragedies are characterized by coarseness, brutality and violence. They also unveil the cynicism and pessimism of the dramatist himself. Originality is found missing and they are imitative frankly. One can find coarseness to great extent in the playwright himself than in other writers.

### **George Chapman the Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois**

George Chapman is also recognized as an eminent writer of revenge tragedy. The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois written by Chapman is a good and powerful play. He had written the tragedy of Bussy D'Ambois in the year 1604. This play revolves around a brilliant swordsman at the court of Henry the Third of France, who was trapped by Count Monsturry for an evil plan with the connivance of the king's brother, the Duke of Guise. Chapman followed it up about after six years with The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois in which he left history completely and even invented a brother of Bussy's, whom he gave name as Clermont, to avenge him. On this figure Chapman focused all his powers. Clermont expressly called in the play 'This Senecal man', which is the ideal Stoic. A grave moral teacher, studying perfection in himself and others- this was the man on whom Chapman allotted the duty of taking swift, decisive, and harsh action. Even without the clue that the author offers, we can notice a certain kinship with Shakespeare's Brutus, and the relationship to Hamlet is closer still. The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois, is the only play by Chapman which has given clearly depicted debt to Shakespeare. At the beginning of the next century, there were two dramatists who gave a new life and vitality into revenge tragedy. Cyril Tourneur and John Webster are these two dramatists.

### **The Revenger's Tragedy and the Atheist's Tragedy**

The Revenger's Tragedy and The Atheist's Tragedy are considered as the masterpiece of Tourneur. These two tragedies are set in Italy, in a coarse and cruel world of crime and vice, without an escape and which knows no pity. Revenge and punishment being the theme the action moves with swiftness, clarity and intensity. The Spanish tragedy's tradition is followed in the play, and in their flashes of dramatic power, the greatest of the later revenge plays. Simpson writes that "the savagery of the play is its most marked characteristic, a long-deferred vengeance carried through to the accompaniment of murder, rape and incest. As always in the world of decadence, there is a striving after originality. And in one point the author has succeeded better than one could hope: he has drawn with an unflinching hand the temptation and the triumph of one pure woman" (qtd. in Carson, 1996, p. 45).

### **John Webster's the Duchess of Malfi**

The Duchess of Malfi written by Webster has many features of a revenge tragedy. Free exploitation of crude, physical horrors, such as the dance of the mad men, the depiction of a dead man's hand to the Duchess, the showing to her of the wax figures of her husband and children to pretend as they were dead, the appearance of the tomb-maker and the executioner with all the apparatus of death are found in the play. There are many murders which include murders by strangling and poisoning. The playwright has used the imagery of violence, decay and corruption abundantly with intention "to intensify the atmosphere of horror"



(www.Bosola.com) A.M. Webster's *The Spanish Tragedy* is also found in the play. The character of Bosola, a rascal and a villain, is the most notable. The Duchess of Malfi (after studying minutely) is an experience with the plot of the play. The play is different from the traditional revenge play. First the revenge motif is lacks strongly with the Duchess. Her revenge is taken on the Duke. She tries to show her rank and status by her own way as the two brothers perceive. She has to bring disgrace to her family. She is not guilty of any serious crime and the horrible exploitation which she is subjected to is a result of her excess of her guilt. That fact of the weak the Duchess's motif is clearly pointed out by the Duke. It is only after two years Ferdinand and the Cardinal decide to punish the Duchess. He decides to end her marriage as soon as her first baby is born and she has two other children before Ferd. and he will have his revenge. If there is a revenge motif, it appears in the play when Bosola avenges himself on the cardinal and Ferdinand for ingratitude showed to him and also because he has been abused by the Duke of the Duchess and decides to avenge it (www.Scribd.com) 17. The issue of revenge in this drama is not a pious duty enjoyed by the supernatural as it was in the Senecan tragedy, but it can be "A satisfaction of personal passions". Ferdinand's motif perhaps be greed for the property of the Duchess or sexual jealousy because of his incestuous passion for her, or perhaps it merely result from the morbid pleasure which the brothers take in inflicting pain. In the case of Bosola, the motif is surely the ingratitude of the two brothers. It is a contentment of personal grudge. For sure, Webster has freely used crude physical terrors, but these terrors are made an internal part of the tragedy. The sensation and the melodrama are seen acting on the soul of the Duchess, and thus her inner suffering, in grandeur, majesty and nobility of her soul, are fully unveiled. In this way the melodrama is raised to the level of pure tragedy. Thus the horrible is subordinated to the total artistic effect the artist desires to create. The terror in the play does not remain something external as is the case with other writers of the revenge play (www.Scribd.com).

Another contribution of Webster to the revenge tragedy is intensity of moral vision. Revenge is made to look ugly and repulsive. Finally in the drama our sympathies are not either with the avenger or avengers like in the conventional revenge tragedy, but instead with the victims of revenge. We have sympathy with the Duchess, we are aware of her nobility, dignity and innocence, and our sense of justice is contented when the avengers ends. The death of the Cardinal and Ferdinand gratifies our moral sense, and revenge is felt to be something extremely unpleasant and unethical. Webster further changes the revenge play with addition of poetry to it. He was gifted with a poet's imaginative creativity and the poetry of his play has been praised by one critic after another. Schelling says that "the power of Webster, at his best is the revealing power of love, the poetry of sadness, the poetry of pathos, the poetry of ruin, and these poetic touches take off the edge of the various gruesome murders" (qtd in Philips, 1998.p.67). In Act IV of the play, Webster's poetry appears more effective due to its wistful, tender charm, wrung out of the very heart of tragedy. Webster's splendid creative vision and his poetic insight reduce the gloom and tedium of the play.

### Conclusion

Tragedies and revenge tragedies arise from the life of human beings throughout the world. The first revenge tragedies like *The Spanish Tragedy* during the Elizabethan period are historically significant. The reason can be explained that, such a play for example, foreshadows Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in detail and in spirit. In this drama we also gain for the first time, the unsure type of hero. It is tragic feeling of being sad is the gloom of a Shakespearean tragedy. However, Kyd didn't had that vision and poetry which Shakespeare alone could supply. *The Spanish Tragedy* is also significant as it gave rise to the prevailing fashion of the revenge tragedy, a kind of tragedy which gained lot of popularity during the Elizabethan era. The revenge motif was exploited again and again by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, and all its possibilities were soon ended. The search for newness resulted in ever increasing gullibility and absurdities, and the revenge play ended naturally. With moving the tragedy from the Elizabethan period towards the Jacobean period and the next century, the revenge tragedy stoop lower into crude melodrama and there was much horror upon horror's head. Murder and bloodshed were introduced too great extent to provide thrills and sensations to the degenerate tastes of the audiences. Dramatists still went in to exploit the revenge motif, but it soon stopped to get the central place, and was pushed to the background.

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