

Revenge Play or Classical Tragedy: *That is the Question!*



In the original myth *Amleth* (a 10th-century Norse myth), Prince Amleth was the descendent of Vikings during a time that revered warfare and vengeance. Shakespeare's version is thought to take place in medieval Denmark (13th-14th century) during a time that celebrated honor and chivalry. Shakespeare was writing during a time of post-Renaissance skepticism (when previous ideals and theories were questioned) and during the Protestant Reformation (when Catholicism was challenged); thus, much was up for debate. Revenge itself was viewed paradoxically: on one hand, blood revenge was considered an illegal sin; on the other hand, there were vestiges of a tradition in which blood revenge was seen as an honorable familial duty.

William Shakespeare is well-known for tinkering with other writers' formulas and storylines. Shakespearean scholars, literary aficionados, and other erudite people with much time on their hands debate fervently as to whether William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* deserves the title "Classical Tragedy," a genre originating with Ancient Greek playwrights, or "Revenge Play," a genre stemming from the Ancient Roman playwright Seneca, which was popularized during the Renaissance.

I have had professors avow that *Hamlet* is the quintessential classical tragedy, only to have other professors profess it is nothing of the sort. *Hamlet* more clearly adheres to the revenge play conventions, but some literary critics believe that this genre oversimplifies one of Shakespeare's most psychologically complex and philosophically rich plays. Some question whether the play revisits the Ancient Roman values of martial valor and familial honor (which would resonate well with the old-school Scandinavian "Viking values" and the chivalry of the Middle Ages). Some wonder if it brings to light more Christian sentiments such as acceptance, repentance, humility, and forgiveness. While the original myth *Amleth* applauds murdering a murderer for vengeance's sake, revenge plays explore the moral ambiguity of killing a person for killing a person, which begs the question: What is the overall moral message of *Hamlet*? Is justice obtained through vengeance, or is vengeance portrayed as a heinous sin...or something else?

Regarding the play's portrayal of religion, consider how different forms of Christianity are conveyed: Hamlet has a father in purgatory because he did not receive his "last rites" and died a sinner—a Catholic belief. Hamlet, however, is studying in Wittenberg—the birthplace of Martin Luther, the German priest who criticized the corruption within Catholicism and ignited the Protestant Reformation. Hamlet appears to take a more Protestant approach to his fate by the play's end, demonstrating complete faith in "divine providence," but does he surrender his agency and accountability in the process? The many layers of different cultural values, religious beliefs, and literary genres at work here make it difficult to draw clear-cut thematic conclusions: *ay, there's the rub...*

Each group will explore whether *Hamlet* should be considered a Revenge Play or Classical Tragedy OR whether the Classical Tragedy's "tragic hero" archetype applies to supporting main characters (e.g.: Laertes, Gertrude, and Ophelia). Each group will participate in a four-round poem battle that includes recitation, translation, analysis, and research.

Hamlet Found Poem Battle

a.k.a. the only time I demand that you plagiarize in my class

Step One: Discuss and Deliberate

Groups will be tasked with analyzing whether *Hamlet* is a Revenge Play or a Classical Tragedy OR whether one of the supporting main characters fits the bill of a Classical Tragedy's tragic hero archetype. If analyzing whether or not the supporting main characters are tragic heroes, groups will be assigned a supporting main character to focus on: Gertrude, Ophelia, or Laertes.

Step Two: Quotation Quest

Once you have your main arguments in mind, find concrete evidence from *Hamlet* proving precisely how the play either meets or does not meet the criteria for a Revenge Play, a Classical Tragedy, or a Tragic Hero. There are six conventions to consider, so each group member must find four lines of evidence for their own convention. If you have fewer than six group members, you are allowed to omit conventions; if you have more than six, you must double up.

Be particular in how you choose your quotations because you will be arranging these quotations into a "found poem." A "found poem" is when you steal lines from someone else's writing, and you arrange these lines to make a poem of your own. This will be the only time in this class that plagiarism is mandatory. ☺ The length of each quotation must be at least **4 lines**. Your four lines can come from anywhere in the text, and they do not have to appear in consecutive or even chronological order. You will each respectively **memorize** the four lines you have contributed to your group's poem.

Step Three: Produce a Poem to Recite (Round One of Battle)

Once your group has picked out all of your evidence, you will type up your quotations into one cohesive poem on a slideshow in Google Classroom with all of the lines properly cited.

Step Four: Translation Task (Round Two of Battle)

Each group member will translate their four Shakespearean lines into a particular form of vernacular, using a unique slang and inflection (e.g.: the language of Gen Z brainrot, pirates, Star Wars, elderly people, surfer bros, etc.). This means you cannot directly copy the *No Fear* translation. ☺ This translation will be shared aloud (but not memorized). Translations will be added to your slideshow.

Step Five: Analytical Argument (Round Three of Battle)

Consider why you selected the quotation(s) you chose and how this evidence shows whether the convention of classical tragedy is met. Analysis will be shared aloud (not memorized) and added to the slideshow.

Step Five: Research-Based Resolution (Round Four of Battle)

As a team, find one scholarly outside source that supports the overall reasoning behind your group's arguments regarding the revenge play/classical tragedy/tragic hero conventions. Present a one-sentence claim, a quotation from a scholarly source, and two to three sentences explaining how that quotation either supports or counters your own group's reasoning. Be sure to properly introduce and cite your source, including the necessary bibliographic information on your Sources Cited slide, citing both *Hamlet* and your outside source.

Step Six: Poem Performance

You will be graded individually on your recitation, translation, analysis, and presentation skills; you will be graded as a group on your research-based resolution and bibliography (**30 points total**). There will also be extra credit for the winners of each round.

Conventions of a Revenge Play Checklist

Roman philosopher and playwright Seneca (1 B.C.-A.D. 65) wrote what were considered the first revenge plays which later inspired tragic drama during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Elizabethan Era. Revenge plays follow these conventions:

1. Secret Murder

A benevolent person of elevated status is murdered clandestinely by a malevolent antagonist. Is King Hamlet completely “benevolent”? What do we make of the fact that he is in purgatory: Is this an innocent king who was cheated out of receiving his “last rites,” or is this a king who has killed many people in battle (King Fortinbras in particular), making him a murderer too? Should we view him as a celebrated war hero (like Hamlet does) whose death deserves to be avenged, or is he a flawed “sinner” like all the other “arrant knaves” in Denmark?

2. Ghostly Visitation

A younger kinsman of the benevolent murder victim is visited by the ghost of said victim. The younger kinsman is typically a son. What do we make of the fact that a ghost in purgatory visits his son and requests that his son, and only his son, avenge his death? Is this a fair and noble plea for justice? Or is it a hypocritical and immoral command that becomes a curse, leading King Hamlet’s only son down his own road to perdition? Or is it an existential conundrum of sorts—since the ghost’s intentions can never truly be known or fully trusted?

3. Disguise and Deception

During a period of disguised identities, intriguing plot twists, and conniving stratagems, the malevolent murderer and the avenger plot against one another as the body count increases. Does the fine line between malevolent murderer and avenger begin to become blurred? Why or why not? And what are Shakespeare’s intentions behind the overwhelmingly pervasive disguise and deception throughout the play—what do we make of these “conniving stratagems”?

4. Madness

During this time of deception and disarray, the avenger or one of the supporting characters declines into madness (either authentic or feigned). Is the madness in the play authentic or feigned (or both)? And what are Shakespeare’s reasons behind incorporating these forms of madness in the manner that he does with the characters that “go mad”?

5. Egregious Violence

There is an outpouring of violence near the end of the play that takes place during a feigned form of courtly entertainment. What do we make of this egregious violence: Do these characters all get what they deserve—are they truly “hoist with their own petard”—or is the violence senseless and unnecessary, proving the absurdity of vengeance?

6. Deadly Calamity

The play concludes with a final catastrophic event in which the main characters are ultimately destroyed, including the avenger. What do we make of all the death and destruction? Has justice been served in any way, shape, or form? Why or why not? Does the play’s resolution legitimate or challenge any old-school Ancient Roman/Viking/Medieval values of preserving honor/familial reputation and obtaining justice? Does it legitimate or challenge any Renaissance ideals, Elizabethan-Era religious beliefs and/or political structures, or existential philosophies? Explain.

Conventions of a Classical Tragedy Checklist

As inspired by Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), a classical tragedy is a text that contains the following six conventions:

1. Elevated Status

The protagonist is a person of elevated status (nobility or royalty) and worthy of their status and the audience's sympathy. Hamlet is indubitably high up on the Great Chain of Being, but is he worthy of his position and our sympathy? Are we rooting for him? Why or why not?

2. Tragic Flaw

The protagonist is a tragic hero—neither a perfect person nor an evil person, but a basically decent human with a tragic flaw or “hamartia” (some sort of inner weakness) that contributes to their downfall. Does Hamlet possess a flaw, and does this flaw contribute to his downfall? If not, explain why he is flawless or more of a villain than a hero.

3. Fate

The tragic hero is not only flawed but destined for tragedy through tragic reversals of fortune (“peripetia”). Is Hamlet's tragic plight due to any **twists of fate** (unlucky circumstances beyond his control or due to supernatural forces), or is his downfall solely the direct result of his own free will and choices?

4. Perseverance

A tragic hero fights to bitter end, despite his awareness of his own impending downfall. Does Hamlet persevere to the end, or does he give up or relinquish his responsibility completely?

5. Enlightenment

A tragic hero suffers tremendously but becomes enlightened by their experiences through “anagnorisis” (i.e. the recognition of the truth about oneself and/or the world around them). Does Hamlet gain any insight into the truth of his situation or does he never fully “see the light”?

6. Catharsis

During the resolution, the audience sympathizes with the tragic hero's experiences to the point that a catharsis is achieved (In layman's terms, the ending is sad, and the audience weeps like a wee babe). Do we feel pity for Hamlet, or does he lose our sympathy by the play's end? Explain.

Conventions of a Tragic Hero Checklist

1. Elevated Status

The tragic hero is a person of elevated status (nobility or royalty) and worthy of their status and our sympathy. Many of the play's characters are high up on the Great Chain of Being, but is your character also worthy of their status and our sympathy? Are we rooting for them? Do we respect them? Why or why not?

2. Tragic Flaw

The tragic hero is neither a perfect person nor an evil person, but a basically good person with a tragic flaw or "hamartia" (some sort of inner weakness) that contributes to their downfall. Does your character possess a flaw, and does this flaw contribute to this person's downfall? If not, explain why your character is either flawless or more villain than hero.

3. Fate

The tragic hero is not only flawed but destined for tragedy through tragic reversals of fortune ("peripetia"). Is any aspect of your character's downfall due to fate (unlucky circumstances beyond one's control or due to supernatural forces) or is the downfall solely the direct result of your character's individual choices and actions?

4. Perseverance

A tragic hero fights to bitter end, despite his or her awareness of an impending downfall. Does your character persevere or give up the fight prematurely?

5. Enlightenment

A tragic hero suffers tremendously but becomes enlightened by their experiences through "anagnorisis" (i.e. the recognition of the truth about oneself and/or the world around them). Does your character obtain enlightenment, "seeing the light" about their situation, or do they never recognize any deeper truths or gain any insights?

6. Catharsis

During the resolution, the audience sympathizes with the tragic hero's downfall to the point that a catharsis is achieved (In layman's terms, the ending a tearjerker and the audience weeps like a wee babe). Do you feel pity and sadness for your character, or do you lose your sympathy for your character by the end of the play? Explain.

Found Poem Title: _____

Directions: Only fill in *your* four lines; your group will eventually type up the lines into one cohesive poem.

1st Convention Quotation(s):

2nd Convention Quotation(s):

3rd Convention Quotation(s):

4th Convention Quotation(s):

5th Convention Quotation(s):

6th Convention Quotation(s):
