A further note on Tragedy as it concerns *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* is something of a “crossroads” play, existing at an intersection of different traditions, ideologies and concerns – even more so as it continues to be performed and reinterpreted by directors. The play, like the character, is complex and multifaceted. Perhaps this is why it cannot defined in a few easy lines (perhaps it cannot really be “defined” at all) and why the notes you find on the internet about it - while not wrong - seem so often unsatisfying.

Thus it follows that the following note on *Hamlet*-as-a-tragedy (that is to be paired with the note on Classical and Christian influence) cannot be somehow final and complete. But I hope in two pages to do justice to some of the main formative influences (as I see it) on the tragedy of *Hamle*t as we read or see it today.

1. Influence of classical tragedy. Hamlet is a **great man, full of promise, who becomes undone and dies**. Because he is a **politically important man, his undoing is not just private and individual. It is tied to the ruin of the state, or body politic**. In watching this ruin, the audience may feel **pity and fear**: as these emotions flow out the people are purged (ie experience **catharsis**). Hamlet is flawed in that he **cannot properly balance** reason and emotion, and has become wayward, chaotic, even insane. He swings from overthinking (leading to paralysis) to rash rage; he does **not always seem to be the ideal self-possessed man**. As I like to say: when it comes to classical tragedy, those who lose their balance will fall.

2. Influence of medieval tragedy. Hamlet suffers a kind of **reversal of fortune at the hands of cruel chance (or fate)**. He was a wealthy, intelligent prince in love with the fair Ophelia, when suddenly his father died, his mother (as he saw it) fell and his awful uncle usurped the throne and his father’s rightful matrimonial place. Then he learned that his uncle killed his father, who is now suffering in Purgatory. He regrets that he is now fated to be the suffering person who will have to put this right. In his resulting period of rage, angst and wildness, Hamlet maims the love he and Ophelia had and becomes a murderer himself by accidentally killing her father. In the end, Hamlet dies. Did he deserve this trouble, this strife? No, but it came to him regardless. The Wheel turned – and brought him low.

3. Influence of Christian sense of fall and sin. Central to the Christian story is the idea of **the fall of man** through **sin, bringing evil into the world**. There was an **original sin**, which spread its **taint** through all people. That sin happened in a garden, where the first **woman was seduced by a “serpent” (the devil)** and **poisoned** by words of temptation, which she later spoke in Adam’s **ear**. Thus, evil spreads, corrupts souls, and will be punished by God in the afterlife – unless the faithful are saved by good works and Grace.

Part of Hamlet’s problem is that he is a classical revenger-son but now in a Christian context. In a Christian context, killing is still a sin even if it is killing a killer, the killer of one’s father. Such a **moral paradox** was unknown in the classical world of Ancient Greece and Rome, where such revenge would have been a clear and absolute duty.

4. Influence of Elizabethan worldview. We’ve said a lot about it so there is no need to repeat here. **God will restore the broken order of the world (as Providence), even if others beyond the breaker suffer and die in the process**. **The Chain of Being, the Divine Right of Kings and other manifestations of God’s order can be abused only at huge cost to man and nature, and only temporarily**.

Here’s an **equation** I found for Shakespearean tragedy:

**Order – Fall – Chaos and Ruin – Death – Order Restored.**

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Now all of the above was certainly an influential background to Shakespeare’s plays, and all of it as a mishmash was part of general Elizabethan ideology. But let’s be a little careful here. It’s quite possible that pressing concerns and anxieties of the moment could have a greater influence than general (and for some in Shakespeare’s time a little hazy or even cliché) philosophical background ideas on a play you happen to be writing…

5. Influence of topical fears and concerns during the reign of Elizabeth and James. As I learned from Neil MacGregor’s enlightening series of radio programs called *Shakespeare’s Restless World*, the English at the time had pressing anxiety around:

a) Overthrow by foreign powers (France, Spain)

b) Catholic plots to assassinate the rightful monarch

c) interfamily feuds in the ruling class (Elizabeth and “Bloody” Mary Queen of Scots were sisters)

d) the young (Protestants) not being able to trust the old (Catholics)

e) (foreign and Catholic) spies in their midst

f) Plague

g) Generally, England as they knew (and loved) it going to hell as a result of all this uncertainty, plotting and enmity.

**Did Shakespeare find in an old tragic story (remember that the bones of the Hamlet story had been around since the Middle Ages; he did not invent the basic plot here) a way to express deep, of-the-moment anxieties of the English?**

6. Influence of modern tragedy (on performances of *Hamlet*)

To add to the complexity, modern productions of *Hamlet* map modern concerns and interpretations onto this over 400-year-old play. For example, some productions play up the **psychological dynamics** in the characters, focusing on their individual stress, behaviors, thought patterns and dilemmas. Such a psycho-focus is very 20th century. Also, some productions put emphasis on Hamlet’s **existential angst** as a sort of everyman grappling with questions of existence and the reality of death in a confusing and often cruel world. Such an **individual** (as opposed to social and political) focus is also very 20th century. Some have a **Marxist** angle, or highlight **feminist** concerns and questions. And some embrace the rich riddle that is *Hamlet* with **postmodern** glee!

So, like the Ghost, the story refuses to fade away, and continues to trouble us into thinking…