

## The Tragedy of Hamlet

In my view, *Hamlet-as-a-tragedy* is illuminated by considering two strong influences on Renaissance era literature: the Classical (from ancient Greece and Rome) and the Christian.

### The Classical influence

First of all, Aristotle (the ancient Greek philosopher) defined tragedy in the *Poetics* as a sorrowful but cathartic story of a great, heroic man who **falls because of some flaw** in his nature. It is the gods who cut him down to size and make him suffer as he meets his nemesis. Through his suffering and/or death, wisdom is learned and the audience feels cleansed (of pity and fear).

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that a good, virtuous man, strong in character, is someone who is **balanced**. In other words, someone who in his traits has achieved a "golden Mean" or middle between extremes. For example, between the extremes of rashness and cowardice the golden mean would be courage, or between the extremes of overthinking and impulsiveness the golden mean might be considered but decisive action. However, a man who cannot find these kinds of balance will not find true happiness and fulfillment of a noble life.

In connection, Greek and Roman doctors (examples would be Hippocrates or Galen) were proponents of **humorism**: the idea that illnesses were caused by imbalances of the four humours. For example, someone who had an overabundance of black bile was literally melancholic (*melan* 'black' + *khole* 'bile') – a depressive.

Indeed, there was a strong sense of a **proper order** of things pervading everything, whether anatomical or astronomical, internal or external, that when disrupted by *disorders* and *flaws* could produce *catastrophe* (which by the way was an ancient Greek term meaning literally "reversal of the expected", used to describe the fatal final act of a tragedy).

Also there was fate, implacable destiny. But Stoics and their ilk revered the man who was not moved by fate, who could stay reasonable, self-controlled and possessed of equanimity even as the harshest winds of chance blew everything he had to pieces around him.

Putting the above notions together, some have argued that Hamlet is a **tragic hero** because he held great promise (*the rose and expectancy of the state*) but fell because of his flaws. His flaws in this sense are a matter of some debate, but common suggestions are **overthinking** (causing delay) or, perhaps even more persuasively, **imbalance of reason and emotion**: a tendency toward "thinking too curiously" ill-mixed with obsession, depression, impulsiveness, misplaced bitterness and rage. Some have blamed his excess of **melancholy** after his father's death. And it could be he was **fated** to set right an evil wrong and live in an evil time – a bitter fortune perhaps worsened by his inability to stay fully self-possessed in the face of it.

### The Christian influence

But although the Renaissance had brought Classical ideals and aesthetics and an attendant humanism back into vogue in Europe, England in Shakespeare's day was profoundly Christian. And Christian notions have an equally strong bearing on Hamlet.

First of all, there is the notion of the **Fall and Original Sin**. The idea was that man had created God in his image, and created man sinless. But man (Adam) and woman (Eve), who were living in the paradisaical **Garden of Eden** in a **state of grace**, were tempted (Eve by the **serpent**, Adam by Eve) to fall into sin. That original sin was like an infection that tainted all subsequent men (sons of Adam) and women (daughters of Eve).

Then there is the notion that God's will works in the world (sometimes through intermediaries), so that His justice will ultimately find the guilty. Cain, who murder his brother Abel, bore the mark of God's especial curse for committing the first murder (an act expressly against God's commandment). Indeed, Heaven will direct events to their appropriate moral ends. Ultimately, we are in God's hands.

And then there was the particularly Elizabethan take on the Christian universe that we see in **The Great Chain of Being, The World Order and The Divine Right of Kings**. In this conception, a rebellious act – some immoral, chaotic deed – especially against a King, was seen as a sin against God's order. It was a religious crime whose dislocating reverberations through the chain meant corruption and catastrophe. It would ultimately be set right, but only after much pain. Many would have to atone for the (original) sin of one.

So, in *Hamlet* we see a Fall first of Claudius, who, Cain-like, killed his brother, and Gertrude, who, Eve-like, is seduced by evil (at least in the view of Hamlet and the Ghost). But Claudius didn't just kill a brother, he killed the rightful king. This is a sin against the divine order, a sort of **original corruption** that will rot Denmark, destroying the apparent state of grace that reigned under Old Hamlet, and blight Hamlet, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern along the way. Only a major bloodletting will make things clean from this contagion. Order will be restored, but only after much pain.

If God's means of restoring order is Hamlet, Hamlet is unfortunately an **imperfect mortal instrument of divine retribution**. In fact, Hamlet stumbles into becoming a murderer himself (of Polonius). In fact, in many ways Hamlet seems tainted by the corruption and disorder even as he tries to be revenged on its source. His imbalance - indeed near-insanity - seems to show this. Thus what could have been a great young man became an increasingly flawed, tragic player in catastrophic, corrupted chaos (*something is rotten in the state of Denmark*) Claudius started and Fortinbras finally ended. Maybe Hamlet was in God's hands the whole time, but, as Job knew, God can be harsh and implacable.