

Revenge – and Revenge Tragedy – ‘Oh, vengeance!’

Today, many people consider revenge immoral because it takes the law into its own hands. It is seen as a profoundly unsocial act. But it seems to be a very human impulse: to exact retribution from someone who has done wrong to you or your family. Revenge follows the Old Testament maxim ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’. Revenge is still central to some criminal codes of honour (e.g. the vendetta among the Sicilian mafia).

In Shakespeare’s time, revenge was a crime in law, and was also an irreligious act. For the Church of the late sixteenth century, revenge was considered a sin. The revenger’s soul was damned, condemned to suffer everlasting torment in hell. That thought preoccupies Hamlet for much of the play.

Francis Bacon, a contemporary of Shakespeare, called revenge ‘a kind of wild justice’. He wrote in 1625 in an essay on revenge:

The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy, but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; else a man’s enemy is still beforehand, and it is two for one. Some, when they take revenge, are desirous the party should know whence it cometh. This is the more generous. For the delight seemeth to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent . . . This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges are for the most part fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate.

Either write a reply to Bacon. Begin ‘In Hamlet’s case . . .’, and argue the points Bacon makes in his essay. Alternatively, write a reply that argues with Bacon’s position from your own point of view.

Or write a brief outline of a modern revenge story or play. Then write the opening chapter of the story, or the first scene of the play.

Or write a paragraph responding to each of the following statements:

- Revenge is always wrong.
- *Hamlet* is not so much a revenge play as a play about revenge.
- The play suggests that revenge does not pay.
- *Hamlet* is more a tragedy than a revenge play: its focus is on the fall of a hero rather than on the execution of a pledge to revenge.

- The revenge plot of *Hamlet* is one of the least important elements in the play.

Revenge Tragedy was hugely popular when Shakespeare began his play-writing career. The central feature of each revenge play was a hero (or villain) who sought to avenge a wrong. Elizabethan playwrights served up a rich diet of madness, melancholy and revenge. In the ten years before *Hamlet* was performed, enthusiastic crowds flocked to see Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, and Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*.

Shakespeare also knew a twelfth-century revenge story about Amleth, prince of Denmark. In the tale a brother murders the king and marries his wife. The son, Amleth, pretends to be mad to pursue revenge. He slays one of his uncle’s spies, forges a letter to have the king’s two accomplices executed in England, and finally kills his uncle and becomes king.

Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy contained typical ingredients: a melancholy hero/avenger; a hesitating avenger (without hesitation the play would be over too quickly); a villain who was to be killed in revenge; complex plotting; murders (usually from sexual motives) and other physical horrors; a play-within-a-play; sexual obsession and lust, related to the passion for revenge; a ghost who calls for revenge; real or feigned madness; the death of the revenger. The plays were usually set in Italy or Spain, but the Elizabethans seemed able to relate the wider themes of each play to their own world.

The typical structure of a Revenge Tragedy had five parts:

- *exposition* usually by a ghost (providing motivation for revenge)
- *anticipation* in which detailed planning of the revenge takes place
- *confrontation* between avenger and intended victim
- *delay* as the revenger hesitates to perform the killing
- *completion* of the revenge (often with the death of the revenger).

Hamlet has four revenge plots. Hamlet vows to revenge his father’s death at the hands of Claudius.

father’s death Another son seeking revenge is Pyrrhus: he slaughters Priam, whose son had killed Pyrrhus’s father.

Hamlet has many elements of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy. Merely telling the story makes it sound very sensational: eight deaths, a mad woman, a fight in a grave, and so on. But *Hamlet* has outlived most other revenge plays and is still immensely popular. Why?

spoilers