

# Shakespearean Tragedy Revisited: Death in Othello and Hamlet

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## Abstract

*This paper looks closely at death as a thematic concern in Shakespearean tragedy, with a focus on Othello and Hamlet. In both plays, death as a tragic ending brings the stories of heroes who are led up constantly to fall and yield to the force of circumstances that have been created and plotted. The calamities in Shakespeare's tragedies are not accidental. They proceed mainly from actions which beget others until this series of interconnected acts leads to a catastrophe. These acts are predominantly of great importance to the tragic ending. As the tragedy advances towards its 'denouement', one would notice that the catastrophe follows inextricably from certain actions whose main source is a flaw in the hero's character. Such is the case with both Othello and Hamlet. This paper attempts to offer a critical reading and a discussion of Shakespeare's tragedy.*

**Keywords:** *tragedy, Hamlet, Othello, drama, death.*

Death is the most mysterious and the most traumatic crises of life. It is, then, at the very core of all Shakespeare's tragedies. Such tragedies bring a considerable number of features, and it is per-eminently the story of a hero led up constantly to a fall that is mostly striking. It includes death, and whatever may be true of tragedy, says Dr. Bradley, "no play at the end of which the hero remains alive is,

in the full Shakespearean sense, a tragedy”<sup>1</sup>. The story depicts the broadcast side of the troubled part in the hero’s life that recedes and leads up to his death. An instantaneous death that would occur by “accident” in the “midst of prosperity”, says A.C Bradley, would not suffice. It is, actually, a tale of “suffering and calamity” conducting to a disastrous ending; a tale of a man worn to death on a gradual process. The suffering that affects the hero, and generally extends beyond him, is a preliminary ingredient in tragedy and a chief source to raise the tragic feeling in the audience.

A total disaster or misfortune looms around a man who “stood in high degree” merry, jovial and apparently secure. This tragic fact of the medieval mind appealed strongly to the audience’s sympathy and ignited the feelings of fear and awe; “the plaything of an inscrutable power, called by the name of William Shakespeare’s notion of the tragic fact goes beyond the medievalist but it includes it. Tragedy, to him, concerns people of «high degree», kings, princes and leaders of states. The tragic fall he represents is sudden, from earthly greatness to the dust, and “it produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man and the omnipotence – perhaps the caprice – of, Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival.”<sup>2</sup>

The calamities in Shakespeare’s tragedies are not accidental. They proceed mainly from actions which beget others until this series of interconnected deeds leads to a catastrophe. These deeds are predominantly of great importance to the tragic ending. As the tragedy advances towards its “close”, one could notice that the catastrophe follows inextricably from certain actions whose main source is a flaw in the hero’s character. This tragic trait is fatal. He errs and his error together with other causes brings about his destruction. This defect, or let us call it imperfection, contributes decisively to the conflict and catastrophe that culminate in death.

Shakespeare has found the perfect use for the expansiveness of his imagination in devoting it to the dramatic presentation of the way evil works within an individual. The point may be made as professor Kitto does in comparing “Greek tragedy presents sudden and complete disaster, or one disaster linked to another in linear fashion, while Shakespearean tragedy presents the complexive, menacing spread of ruin; and that at least one explanation of this is that the Greek poets thought of the tragic error as the breaking of a divine law (...), while

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<sup>1</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1905), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 10.

Shakespeare saw it as an evil quality which, once it has broken loose, will feed on itself and on anything else that it can find until it reaches its natural end.”<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably, as to any reflective mind, the very fact of the tragic downfall leads one to think of all those “matters within the soul that bear upon the deed and the outcome”.<sup>4</sup> In *Othello* and *Hamlet* Shakespeare presents stories in which the hero moved in various ways towards crime and folly to end up with tragedies of “blood and butchery”.

As dreadful as they may seem, the events of the last scene come as the inevitable end of Othello’s ‘journey’: his ultimate attempts to remedy the ultimately irremediable.”<sup>5</sup> John Bayley argues that the misevaluation and the incomprehension of the character’s situation has brought the whole tragic twist in “Othello”; or as he puts it: “No one in «Othello» comes to understand himself or anyone else. None of them realize their situation”<sup>6</sup>.

It is, indeed, the end of the play that is so painful and so terrifying precisely because of the main characters who come to ‘realize their “situation” where there is now nothing more they can do to remedy it. Incomprehension is certainly an important factor in the development of the awareness to which both Othello and Desdemona are brought.

(Othello enters with a light, Desdemona in her bed)

Othello : *It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul:  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!  
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster:  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men  
Put out the light, and then put out the light:  
If I quench thou flaming minister,  
I can again thy former light restore,  
Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,  
Thou cunning's pattern of excelling nature  
I know not where that Promethean heat is  
That can thy light reline. When I have plucked thy Rose,  
I cannot give it vital growth again,  
It needs must wither. I ll smell it on the tree.*

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<sup>3</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and meaning in drama* (London: Methuen, 1956), 337.

<sup>4</sup> John Arthos, Action in *Othello*, in *The Art of Shakespeare* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1964), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Adamson, *Othello as Tragedy: Some problems of Judgement and feeling* (London / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 264.

<sup>6</sup> John Bayley, *The Characters of Love* (Basic Books, 1961), 146.

(He kisses her)<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that for Othello, Desdemona is now an object. He seems to be able to call her ‘thou’ only because she is unconscious and unable to either hear or reply. Her sleeping body seems to him not merely the image of her death, but inanimate already. Her death is to him so imminent that he speaks almost as if she is dead even now, a motionless statue or monument. Desdemona, so to speak, is motivated intuitively bearing that her death is imminent when she says:

*Good faith, how foolish are our minds!  
If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me  
In one of those same sheets*

Death for Desdemona seems, then, not a wish to escape, but the silently dreaded yet unavoidable culmination of her misery.<sup>8</sup> She immediately recognizes that she has lost Othello’s love, a recognition of her marriage is irremediably lost as if all present and future life would follow a painful way, with no strength to resist or even cry out for help. Othello literally kills her first with blame to her unfaithfulness for having discarded him; but he strangles her afterwards and her dying words unequivocally re-affirm the bounteousness and the strong purity of her love for him:

*Desd: a guiltless death I die  
Emilia: O, who hath done this deed ?  
Desd: nobody – I myself – farewell.  
Commend me to my kind lord-O,  
Farewell!*<sup>9</sup>

(She dies)

Othello could never come to forgive himself if he came to know what he has done. He is apparently guilty and yet Desdemona takes his mistakes and guilt on herself in asserting that the deed was done by “nobody”. She implicitly “claims that her death is not a murder but a kind of (innocent) suicide, committed out of guiltlessness”.<sup>10</sup> Still, she is Othello’s victim. Her death is catastrophic, a “monstrous act” but we interpret it as a tragic (not merely an unfortunate) event because we have come to see how her fate is too largely shaped by her disposition;

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<sup>7</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Othello the Moor of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 11.

<sup>8</sup> Adamson, *Othello as tragedy*, 255.

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello the Moor of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 11.

<sup>10</sup> Adamson, *Othello as tragedy*, 262.

“Othello kills her because he loves her in the ways he does... She is murderable because she has staked her life upon his faith and love”.<sup>11</sup>

The whole tragedy finds its catastrophe not on the battle-field, nor in the presence of a court but in a bedroom at night where two people, united by the closest of ties, speak at cross purposes and misunderstand each other disastrously, with no thought of turning to the independent witness, Emilia, who could reveal the truth and save both of them. Iago is actually at the center of the whole tragedy. He injects the poison of jealousy and on the process incites Othello to murder Desdemona and, therefore, destroy his happiness. We can feel, as Bradley asserts, the part of himself that Shakespeare puts into Iago.

The artist’s delight in the development of a plot, a design, which, as it works itself out, masters and possesses him until the very end where the poison gets hold of the hero to commit such a hideous act. It is not until act III, scene III, that Iago actually “Sets down the pegs” to turn the lovers’ harmonious music into a horrible cacophony. But during that crisis, he distilled such a toxic “poison”, that no medicine will ever cure from the handkerchief as a medium to ignite the tragic twist. It was he who brought Othello to commit murder and suicide, though Jane Adamson thinks otherwise, namely that it was Othello’s need for moral and emotional finality that is at the core of the whole calamity.<sup>12</sup>

The disaster brought at the end of the play contains both a murder and a suicide. Jane Adamson thinks that Othello’s suicide somehow morally balances out the murder of Desdemona and goes on further to say that the two are somehow better off dead than alive in a world that contained a Iago whose work in the formulation of the catastrophe has brought about the full tragedy. The murder is quite apparent: Desdemona is unfaithful; she has to be murdered, still what is most enigmatic is the suicide. Throughout acts 1v and 2v Othello has been struggling “to kill in himself the very capacity to feel.”<sup>13</sup>

His act of stabbing himself is the inevitable completion of the psychic self-murder he had attempted in murdering Desdemona. Killing her could not still stifle “the insufferable motions of his own heart”. Except by literally stabbing his heart, there is literally no way but this to endure the pressure of his feelings which has driven him to murder and brought him to the point of suicide.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Adamson, *Othello as tragedy*, 299.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 296.

Othello's act of suicide can be comprehended in several ways indeed, the play has pressed us to enter into Othello's inner experience and his self-murder is no more than a last desperate "effort not to have to face such a total guilt that his mind would shatter in the recognition of it."<sup>14</sup> It is as if at last, in this single act, he at once "acknowledges, accepts and cancels" that love Desdemona gave him. Her love for him gives him power to hurt her, so his love for her has all along empowered her to make him feel his capacity to be hurt: and that necessary condition of loving is simultaneously confirmed and annulled by his suicide.

At last he can speak to her in a voice that is utterly simple, direct and naked in its love:

*I Kissed thee, ere I Killed thee: no way but this ,  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.*

She has been seeking to "whistle off" Desdemona to turn his "heart-string" into unloving stone. From the first moment "that some need, some lack of faith in himself turned to lack of faith in Desdemona's faith to him... Othello has sought remedy' to kill his suffering".<sup>15</sup>

It is with an apparently straight forward "situation for revenge" that Hamlet opens with. It, therefore, lies the groundwork for the tragic twist in the play. An atmosphere of gloominess and coldness surrounds the appearance of the ghost of the hero's father, and sets out, on the process, the tone of the whole tragedy: Claudius has usurped his brother, took his widow, Gertrude, for wife, and violently appropriates a kingship he has no right to. Hamlet receives a duty from the spirit of his father, to revenge "the buried king of Denmark". According to the ethics of the Elizabethan era, it becomes his imperative task to revenge the father's murder, and the impetuous murder of Polonius is the first link in the chain of calamities. The infinitely sad fate of Ophelia, the deaths of Leartes, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; all these are a fatal blow that has contributed to the development of the whole tragedy. It is actually, as Bradley points out, Hamlet's failure that is the cause of the disasters that follow; he sacrifices the whole characters for the sake of the duty of revenge.

Polonius is the first to meet his end. It has become quite imperative that the prince should be brought to disclose his secret; for his choice of the "Murder of Gonzago" and perhaps his behavior during the performance have "shown a spirit of exaggerated, hostility" against the king who has excited general alarm. The

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 296.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

turning point of the play has scarcely begun before the queen. Frightened by her son's vehemence, she cries out for help "Thou wilt not murder me", Polonius stirs behind the arras to echo her call, and Hamlet immediately, "Hoping the concealed person is the king, runs the old man through the body".<sup>16</sup>

The fall of Polonius has actually raised a general alarm in the court; besides its contribution to the forwarding of the whole action, it has led to the insanity of Ophelia and the secret return of Learthes from France. Now that Hamlet, once only a strange, brooding misfit in Claudius's world, has shown that he can kill an eavesdropper, he has become an authentic danger to the king. But Claudius's nature is well fitted to deal with such a practical crisis:

*But never the offence. To bear all smooth and even,  
This sudden sending away must seem  
Deliberate pause. Diseases desperate grown  
By desperate appliance are reliev'd,  
Or not at all.*

Hamlet is, therefore, to be sent to England with secret letters arranging for his immediate execution. During the voyage, he secretly possesses himself of the royal commission and substitutes for it another one which the king of England is ordered to put an end to, not to the prince but to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. When Hamlet returns to Denmark, he stands in a most perilous position. On one side, there is the king, who grants safety to him; on the other one, Learthes, whose father and sister he has sent astray. Hamlet should have obeyed the ghost and acted at once; yet his willingness to fulfill his revengeful purpose on rational grounds incites him to trick his two companions into death and put an end to seven lives. So being aware of the death causes Hamlet to blind himself to the serene reason of life. He is now making people pay for his own suffering. His mother's incest has nauseated him: therefore he will be utterly cruel; "First he slays Polonius, and seems to hope he may have caught the king at an evil moment."<sup>17</sup>

All Shakespeare's major tragic works have what may be called a secondary tragic victim, a character caught up by the main tragic current and destroyed, as it were, in passing, such a figure must not be given a full tragic effect to compete with that of the protagonist, but "the deep pathos" of Ophelia's end needs only a touch of universality to make it as tragic as Hamlet's. Her love and innocence

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<sup>16</sup> Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson Knight, "Rose of May: an Essay on life themes in Hamlet", in *The Imperial Theme: Further interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies including the Roman plays*, vol 1 (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2002), 109.

equally lead to her final madness and suicide, and she thus becomes the second outstanding falling figure after Polonius. She is plainly quite young and inexperienced. She has lost her mother, and has only a father and a brother, “affectionate but worldly to take care of her”.<sup>18</sup> Her affection for her brother is shown by two or three delicate strokes. Her love for her father is deep, though mingled with fear. For some, Ophelia has no deep love for Hamlet, but certainly she has given to him all the love of “which her nature is as yet capable” of the three persons who were the world to her, her father has been killed, Hamlet has been sent out of the country for being insane, and her brother is abroad. She has no support to gain from the queen’s character, nor from the king’s. She is left helpless and absolutely alone.

The case study of Ophelia, as E. Schowalter suggests, is one that seems particularly useful as an account of hysteria or mental breakdown. She suggests an ideal of innocence and beauty suffering unjustly but irrevocably. Her broken songs express two elements of pain: her father’s death and Hamlet’s rejection of her love. She sings of “flowers” much:

*Larded with sweet flowers,  
With true love showers  
Which be swept to the grave did go  
With true love showers*<sup>19</sup>

She drowns herself. Her watery death is vividly described: Her clothes spread wide; and mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:

*Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
as one incapable of her own distress,  
or like a creature native and indued  
into that element: but long it could not be  
till that her garments, heavy with their drink  
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
to muddy death.*<sup>20</sup>

Ophelia’s death is here endowed with strong, unearthly beauty. Love here is a theme of flowery sweetness, “A fine blossom of the soul too cruelly crushed by tragedy.”<sup>21</sup> Death by water is, to Shakespeare, a constantly recurring suggestion with strong relevance to love: love eternally lost or apparently lost, in the floods of

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<sup>18</sup> Bradley, *Shakespearian tragedy*, 161.

<sup>19</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, Act 4, Scene v11.

<sup>21</sup> Knight, “Rose of May”, 116.



time, or love victoriously blending with the water that would “engulf it to make another beauty «rich and strange» more lovely in death than life”.<sup>22</sup>

So Ophelia’s death has an immoral loveliness that itself slays death. Cruelly, the priest speaks over her body:

*.... For charitable prayers,  
Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her:  
Yet here she is allowed’d her virgin cranks,  
Her maiden streamlets and the bringing home  
Of bell and burial. (v.1)*

Again,

*We should profane the service of the dead  
To sing a requiem, and such rest to her  
As to peace parted souls (v.1)*

This play is a play throughout death: and death, the essential and absolute death, is hell, not heaven. Ophelia’s death is consequently symbolic, and what is worth nothing is that most terrible, most touching of all, that strangely preformed acts of her suicide. She presents an accurate picture of deep depression, generated by the loss of her father and the loss of Hamlet’s love, and a hopelessness towards life itself. She drowns herself and drawing, as Gaston Bachelard says, is associated with the female fluidity. He traces the symbolic connections, between woman, water and death. Drowning, he suggests, becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears.<sup>23</sup>

From the killing of Polonius, the catastrophe of the play stems. This false complexion of Hamlet’s revenge initiates the second cycle of revenge for a murdered father, that of Leartes for Polonius. That revenge is successful and ends in Hamlet’s death. By unwittingly killing Polonius, Hamlet generates his own death. Claudius is now absolutely determined to destroy the man who knows his secret. The news of Hamlet’s return astounds the king and he hastens to employ Leartes in a scheme to destroy him eventually. Laertes is actually more than a foil to Hamlet; he is his main antagonist, “diametrically opposed to him” in every way of thought and action, and he is shaming to kill him by a dreadful trick. But Shakespeare refuses to belittle him or let us despise him, and refuses also to sentimentalize his opponent or whitewash his failing. It is because he is writing a tragedy, not a sentimental drama.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>23</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L’eau et les rêves* (Paris: Corti, 1942), 109.

Now the plot against Hamlet's life has already been forwarded and is about to go off. The young Osric enters announcing that Hamlet and Laertes would meet in a duel. Hamlet accepts the fake challenge of the fencing match in the awareness that something may be afoot, and he faces it without any exhilaration: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart." When he says "if it be now, 'tis not to come... The readiness is all."

It is assumed that he has some kind of prevision of what actually happens, the coming together of his revenge and his own death. Laertes wounds him fatally before he is able to make his second attempt to kill the king. The first time, he killed the wrong man; the second time, he kills the king indeed but not until he is close to his own death. Hamlet ends, however, on a note of a pure tragedy; a sense of tragic expiation concludes the whole vision; "Hamlet and Leartes, death-consciousness... oppose each other."<sup>24</sup>

The fight is arranged by Claudius who "pits his present grace" (Leartes) against his past crime (Hamlet). This last phase of "Hamlet" is swift, the marvelous "visual stage excitement" is of Elizabethan inspiration, as melodramatic as anything in contemporary or earlier revenge tragedy. This quick ending, with very sudden decisive action, killings, must inevitably seem strange. In fact Shakespeare is fully satisfying his audience's natural expectation of some appropriate punishment for the king and Laertes, if not for the queen, has created superb contrast, being at the same time dramatic and full of irony, which is typical for the whole play. Thus, Hamlet at last, at the very end, kills the king with a certain fine excess of double killing by sword and poison, yet this killing is not the final success of an ordinary revenge tragedy; Hamlet's case marks the final failure of his long attempt to be the rational revenger. Perhaps he realizes and regrets it; this is what Shakespeare makes him refer to when on his dying words to Horatio: "O God! Horatio, what a wounded name things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me".

Consequently, as discussed previously, in the Shakespearean tragedy it is the internal imperfection of the hero that brings his collapse. This downfall becomes his own deed, and he is no longer, as in classical tragedy, the helpless victim of fate. The tragic flaw is brought by jealousy which flared up suspicion and then ended in disaster. The conflicting character within Hamlet himself is indicative of anger, depression and varying degrees of instability. The tragedy involves revenge,

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<sup>24</sup> Knight, *Further interpretations of Hamlet*, 124.

murder and betrayal. Revenge ignites the many deaths we encounter and becomes an important element in the story.

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