

# An Analysis of *Hamlet* from the Perspective of Aristotle's Tragedy Theories

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**Abstract:** With profound tragic significance, *Hamlet* is an enduringly popular tragedy by the famous British dramatist William Shakespeare. The complex characters, as well as the various artistic techniques for the creation of the tragic story in the play, especially its application of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's tragedy theories, have received extensive attention from academia. This paper intends to conduct a study on the application of Aristotle's tragedy theories in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. On the basis of the analysis of Aristotle's tragedy principles related to tragic plots and characters, "Error and Frailty", "Fear and Pity" and "Purification", the paper discusses the tragedy *Hamlet* and its application of Aristotle's guidance, in order to help readers untie the reasons of the design for some important parts of this tragedy.

**Key words:** *Hamlet*; Aristotle; tragedy theories

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## 1. Introduction

Exploring and reflecting on tragic works helps people understand the characteristics of human nature and the meaning of life as well as giving us inspiration and promoting a greater use of reasoning strategies, insight and critical thinking with carefully-crafted stories. But how can we appreciate tragedies more systematically and logically? The author believes that one of the effective methods is to study these works through analyzing their application of great literary theories as writing guides. The use of tragedy theories is not only for writers to craft compelling stories, but also to enlighten the audience and the readers through the insightful tragic stories. This study intends to analyze how Aristotle's theories of creating a tragedy is used by Shakespeare in his writing of *Hamlet*.

## 2. The "Fear and Pity" Excited by the Sufferings of Good Man Hamlet

As the protagonist of this tragedy, Hamlet well fits Aristotle's four principles of a tragic character. Firstly, he is a virtuous prince with many fine qualities. In this play, Ophelia compares Hamlet to the courtier's eye, scholar's tongue, soldier's sword, the expectancy of the country and the center of the whole world's attention (Shakespeare et al. 101). Such a good-natured and well-educated man is exactly in his prime. The tragedy, however, happens at just the same time.

Secondly, speech and action of Hamlet are also designed in an appropriate way when the events are constructed.

Thirdly, though as a prince, Hamlet is different from ordinary people in many aspects, the audience can still resonate with him, for everything he does seems logical and reasonable for a well-cultivated man like him in such a high status. Even during a long period in which Hamlet is driven crazy, his actions are still convincing, and the audience can always easily find clues and evidence of his plan.

Fourthly, the character of the prince is also consistent, without any unreasonable changes or illogical development. Though having experienced great ups and downs in his life, Hamlet's inborn characteristics have been the same all the way through.

In addition, Aristotle also emphasized that an ideal tragic hero should be intermediate between extremely virtuous and wicked, who suffers not due to depravity but because of some serious errors (Aristotle, "*Poetics*" 21). At the same time, he should be a highly renowned and illustrious personage in a prosperous family. Hamlet is just the very image of an ideal heroic figure in this light. He is typically a "good man".

First of all, he had the high status of being the prince of the Kingdom of Denmark.

Secondly, studying philosophy and other subjects of the sort in school, he is well-educated. Hamlet has the ability to think and reflect in a logical and critical way. When he sees the appearance of the old king Hamlet at night, he's wondering if it is even real instead of taking it as reasonable without thinking. Even though he feels depressed about his father's death, he tries to think logically and reasonably. When the ghost of the old king Hamlet tells him that Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, has poisoned him, and emphasized that he has to wander the earth until Hamlet seeks revenge for him, even though this brings great pressure to Hamlet, he still keeps questioning whether the ghost of his deceased father is real or not. Hamlet did not blindly get revenge, instead, he decides to figure out whether his uncle Claudius has truly killed his father. Therefore it is apparent that the protagonist Hamlet is a very intellectual man.

What he does next is to hire some famous playwrights and get them to help reenact what has happened on the night of his father's murder. He gets the actors to have a big play in front of everyone, including King Claudius himself. As King Claudius watches the reenactment of how the old king Hamlet is murdered with poison poured down his ear while he is sleeping, the young prince is observing his uncle's reaction to the play unfold all the while. After this, Hamlet is certain that his uncle Claudius, the new king, is the murderer. And at this moment Hamlet decides that he must seek revenge for his father.

After this part, Hamlet has already built a positive image in audience's mind, for they can see rationality, wisdom, courage and many other merits in him. When he curses out that he himself is born to set chaos right, the audience tend to feel pity for his misery. And later when the audience find out that his errors and frailty are very common, they will fear that they themselves may make the same mistakes in the same situation.

Conflicts between people in close relationships, are proposed by Aristotle as appealing to the audience because they seem to be terrible or pitiful. Therefore, we are going to discuss the suffering arising between Hamlet and his beloved ones or relatives, like his mother and uncle.

2.1 "King, father, royal Dane: O, answer me!"

At the very beginning of the play, Hamlet is depressed as he has to go home to his father's funeral. When Hamlet gets home, he suspects murder, which means something is not right because he sees that his mother Queen Gertrude has already remarried his uncle. In addition, he finds out that his father's throne has been taken over by his uncle Claudius. This seems unfair to Hamlet because he was supposed to be the heir to the throne. Furthermore, When Hamlet sees the appearance of the old king Hamlet at night, he is wondering why he sees this ghost and if it is even real (Shakespeare et al. 38).

In fact, from the moment Hamlet returns home, his suffering has already begun. When the new king Claudius asks him how the clouds should still hang on him, Hamlet replies sorrowfully that he himself is too much in the sun (Shakespeare et al. 17), which implies "our feelings and spirits are not interlinked with each other, so please don't bother me anymore". And from this, the audience can also find that Hamlet is very depressed about his father's death and his mother's remarriage. When his mother Queen Gertrude asks him not to seek his father in the dust, saying that death is a

common thing, Hamlet shows the same reaction as what he gives to Claudius because his mother has already let him down.

However, when Gertrude complains that death should not seem particular to Hamlet, it indeed irritates him. Some precious qualities of Hamlet show up at the same time, including his natural disposition and commendable honesty, since he denies directly that he does not "seem" to be gloomy, instead, he emphasizes that he is indeed melancholy. Later, in the soliloquies of Hamlet, clues could be found implying that he is very disappointed by the events, especially the incest that has happened in the country, and he is extremely angry with his mother's frailty.

Thus, the old king Hamlet's talk with his son in the castle only signifies the beginning of Hamlet's suffering. When Hamlet unhesitatingly follows the ghost for his answer, he is in pursuit of a prophetic vision that his uncle may have murdered the old king.

## 2.2 "O my prophetic soul! my uncle!"

When Hamlet was told the truth about the old king Hamlet's death by the ghost, which was just as what have been guessed (Shakespeare et al. 44), a mix of emotions including upset, anger, sadness, confusion and disgust comes to his mind at once. The betrayal of his uncle is another suffering that Hamlet is undergoing. The narrator in the play describes the new relationship between Hamlet and his uncle in the play as an incredibly complex one, in which Hamlet and Claudius are both near of kin and far as strangers (Shakespeare et al. 17). Here gradually comes the conflict, which is between Hamlet and his intimate relative, uncle Claudius. So pity the audience will feel for the unjust things that happened to Hamlet, and so fearful they are, for what is happening seems to be very possible in that situation.

## 2.3 "Would it were not so—you are my mother."

Conflicts also arise between Hamlet and his mother Queen Gertrude, whose remarriage to Claudius is one of the sources of Hamlet's sufferings. The audience may have no idea about whether Queen Gertrude is even in love with Claudius, but numerous clues can be found that she loves her son Hamlet. She is very proud of him but she is also caught in a web, trying to protect herself in the midst of this commotion. Her frailty hurts Hamlet very much, and that is why Hamlet suddenly becomes angry with Gertrude, yelling at her that he wishes that she was not his mother, for the ridiculous fact that now she is also his uncle's wife (Shakespeare et al. 135).

The reason why it is Queen Gertrude who is discussed here instead of Hamlet's beloved Ophelia is because most of the conflicts arising between Hamlet and Ophelia come from Hamlet's frustration and anger at his mother, and what Queen Gertrude has done leaves a negative image of women in the mind of Hamlet. Apart from that, some of the plots concerning Hamlet and Ophelia in this play are very ambiguous, merely arousing the audience's pity without fear, for there are very limited conflicts that are actually caused by them. However, by contrast, Queen Gertrude contributes a lot to the development of the tragedy, and her actions and speeches with Hamlet not only excite the audience's pity for the incest and all other chaos, but also arouse their fear that in the same situation they may face the same difficult choices.

### **3. The "Error and Frailty" of the Characters**

Proposed by Aristotle, one of the main features of the plotting of a heroic figure is that his misfortune should be caused by his errors, but not by his moral defects (Aristotle, "*Poetics*" 21).

#### 3.1 The error of Hamlet

Hamlet decides to seek revenge for his father, but by accident he kills Ophelia's father Polonius in a rage. As a result, Ophelia becomes enraged and goes mad, finally dying by a river. Namely, both Polonius' and Ophelia's deaths are caused by Hamlet, directly or indirectly. Hamlet kills Polonius not because he intends to hurt him by design but due to his rashness and incorrect judgment, which conforms to Aristotle's principle about the causes of miseries.

Some scholars also claim that Hamlet's flaws and errors lie in his hesitation and irresolution, for he loses the first

opportunity to kill Claudius. However, the reason why Hamlet retreats and then plans to revenge Claudius when he is doing evil deeds is because Hamlet reasons that if his uncle was killed while praying, this evildoer would be sent to heaven, which is not what the prince expects. The whole process of his reasoning proves that Hamlet's withdrawal has been carefully thought over.

### 3.2 The frailty of Ophelia

Though Ophelia weighs not as much as Hamlet, the protagonist, she also fits Aristotle's standard of a tragic figure well. She is virtuous but not extremely just. She gets into trouble not because she is wicked, but due to her serious errors and frailty. After old king Hamlet's death, Hamlet's mother Queen Gertrude, who once seemed to be so faithful to his father, soon remarries his uncle Claudius. Hamlet gradually regards women as frail in love after all this happened. When Ophelia's brother and father cast a slur on Hamlet's dignity, the girl is just misled by these false statements which are far from the truth, obeying her father and returning Hamlet's letters and gifts. In fact, when Ophelia repels Hamlet's letters and access to her, she herself feels afflicted too, but apparently, she values her father's command much more than justified human emotions. Her sudden change of turning against Hamlet aggravates his emotions of uncertainty, insecurity, anger and frustration about love and relationships. Therefore, in such a rocky relationship, it is not unexpected that their love gradually becomes weakened and finally withered.

### **4. The Tragic Effect of "Purification" Achieved after the Emotions of "Fear and Pity"**

Tragedy glorifies good faiths through mournful stories, so as to enhance people's pursuit of good qualities and purify their emotions of sadness. Undeniably, sorrowfulness constitutes much of a tragedy. However, the aim of tragedy is to praise good and criticize evil and finally achieve the tragic effect through exciting audience's emotions of "Fear and Pity", of which the whole process was called by Aristotle as "Katharsis" in Greek, now known as the process of "Purification".

The deaths of Claudius and Laertes, who are the antagonists representing evil forces in this play, symbolize the summit of the process of "Purification" through "Fear and Pity". When the heroic character reaches a chink of light through the exhausting and painful struggle, the audience's spirits will be lifted and their emotions purified at the same time.

Although the era of Hamlet has passed away for a long period, whenever we see the hero struggling for revenge, we can still have a resonance with him, and the emotions of "pity and fear" aroused by the whole grueling process will be finally sublimated and purified.

### **5. Conclusions**

The study of application of Aristotle's tragedy theories reveals that the design of the plots and characters in *Hamlet* by Shakespeare has much to do with the influence of Aristotle's tragedy theories. In this paper, it is analyzed that the design of the weaknesses of Hamlet and the frailty of Ophelia follows Aristotle's relevant suggestions for the creation of tragic characters and also meets the criterion of "Error and Frailty" by him. Meanwhile, the sufferings of tragic characters successfully excite the audience's emotions of "Fear and Pity", which is particularly emphasized by Aristotle. Furthermore, the tragic effect of "Purification" achieved through the emotions of "Fear and Pity" is also presented in the play, which is an essential element of a tragedy from the viewpoint of Aristotle. To summarize, the tragedy *Hamlet* follows many suggestions given by Aristotle. It is because of the perfect combination of the wit of these two great minds that the gripping construction of Hamlet's tragic story wins great favor among people at all times and in all countries.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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