

The Quintessential Characteristics of Shakespearean Tragic Heroes

Pei Liang

Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, 300387, China
603478925@qq.com

Abstract: *In the vast expanse of literary studies, the works of Shakespeare have consistently held a pivotal position, particularly his tragedies with their profound exploration of human nature and intricate emotional entanglements that have ignited the interests of countless scholars and artists. This paper examines the quintessential characteristics of Shakespearean tragic heroes: noble birth, tragic character flaws (hamartia), ethical conflicts, and inevitable fate. It explores how Shakespeare's protagonists, despite being of high status, reflect the universal human experience of suffering and downfall. It also vividly embodies the richness and complexity of human essence. The analysis includes key examples from Shakespeare's works, highlighting the interplay between character flaws and tragic outcomes. Additionally, the paper delves into the influence of historical and cultural contexts on Shakespeare's choice of distinguished tragic protagonists, revealing the timeless and universal nature of these narratives in literature. Employing methodologies such as content analysis, literature review, and comparative analysis, this study conducts a comprehensive and profound investigation into Shakespearean tragic essence in its tragedies, providing new perspectives on the manifestation of Shakespearean tragedies.*

Keywords: *Shakespearean Tragedy, Renaissance Humanism, Tragic Heroes, Character Flaws*

1. Noble Birth

“Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of 'high degree'” [2]. The protagonists of Shakespearean tragedies are immediately presented as distinguished and noble mankind. While this phenomenon has been noted, it has not been deeply analyzed. Shakespeare, a great humanist, bathed in the intellectual liberation of the Renaissance, began to embrace the nascent bourgeois concept of equality, rejecting the medieval division of people into nobles and commoners. This idea is present in his tragedies, as reflected in the lines, “Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel” and “Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay. Might stop a hole to keep the wind away” [9]. Soviet critic Aleksandr Anikst highlighted that the humanist worldview in Shakespeare's works embodies a profound people-oriented nature [6], indicating did not hold contempt for the common people's prejudices and vulgar habits. Despite this, the protagonists of Shakespearean tragedies are predominantly emperors, princes, prominent statesmen, or at least members of the nobility, such as Hamlet (a prince), King Lear (a king), Othello (a military commander), and Macbeth (a noble with significant military achievements). Even in his later tragedies, the main characters, like Romeo and Juliet, belong to distinguished families. Given Shakespeare's lack of class prejudice and his portrayal of protagonists with exceptional talents and noble stature, one must consider how this aligns with his overall philosophy. The fact is that the pains of love, the torment of existence versus death, and the cruelty of murder affect both commoners and nobles alike, yet the outcomes and societal reactions differ significantly [8]. In terms of personal integrity and dignity, Shakespeare acknowledges equality among all people. However, the equality of dignity does not translate to equal consequences. A person of high status or wielding great power, could influence the welfare of an entire nation or empire. Their fall from grace could evoke a sense of human frailty and the fickleness of fate, producing a tragic impact far beyond what commoner stories could achieve. Their downfall could lead to national upheaval, divine wrath, and profound tragedy. Shakespeare portrayed his tragic characters as great figures, engaging the audience with their genuine emotions, not from a standpoint of class, but to highlight their intense passions and the resulting turmoil and shock [1]. The sublime beauty often evoked in Shakespearean tragedy is a testament to this [3].

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, this likely mirrored the general aesthetic expectations of the audience at the time [12]. While Renaissance humanism had deeply penetrated the hearts of people, revealing human grandeur and dignity, and marking a significant ideological transformation by dethroning the divine. Nonetheless, the Renaissance itself was rooted in the Middle Ages. The diminishing presence of deities did not erase the ingrained adoration and religious sentiments towards people entirely. Thus, integrating commoners as the protagonists of tragedies, a genre revered for its solemnity, was not readily embraced by audiences within that cultural context. Tragic heroes were expected to embody the formidable power of humanity, possessing heroic virtues that commoners could scarcely represent.

Furthermore, disregarding tradition represents a perilous path for any art form. Despite being a progressive humanist, Shakespeare was profoundly influenced by the traditional culture, deeply rooted in Aegean, ancient Greek, and Roman cultures [10]. His dramatic subjects predominantly drew from existing European legends and historical narratives. In addition, like his contemporaries, Shakespeare was educated in Latin and had read extensively the ancient literary works from Greece and Rome that survived in Latin. The epic tales, mythologies, and tragic heroism of ancient Greece and Rome significantly influenced his dramaturgy and selection of protagonists.

Subsequently, the influence of form on content and the historical development of English drama suggest a certain inevitability in Shakespeare's choice of distinguished tragic protagonists. "The beginnings of English drama are obscure... it was the Church that reintroduced drama to England." "Religious ceremonies of the Church inherently contained dramaturgic elements, which by the tenth century, had evolved into rudimentary forms of drama" [10]. "English drama originated from these religious ceremonies" [7], evolving from church-held religious rites into religious plays, which then transformed into secular drama. Initially centered on religious themes and narratives, these plays naturally extolled gods and angels, delivered in Latin (later transitioning to English). The solemnity and reverence of these religious ceremonies dictated that the content be dignified, setting a precedent for the grandeur in form that would define tragedy. Even as religious plays evolved into secular drama, moving beyond church walls and divine narratives, the sublime nature of the protagonists, inspired by their religious origins, remained a steadfast characteristic.

2. Hamartia

Hamartia is the Greek word for "sin" or "error", which derives from the verb *hamatanein*, meaning "to err" or "to miss the mark". In other words, hamartia refers to the hero's tragic flaw. It is another critical element of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Throughout Shakespeare's plays, regardless of the reasons, his tragic characters often possess fatal flaws. In the progression of the plot, whenever certain aspects of the protagonist's personality predominate, they exhibit an irresistible destructive force. The protagonist is led to destruction under their sway. Bradley once stated, "as we have seen, the idea of the tragic hero as a being destroyed simply and solely by external forces is quite alien to him; and not less so is the idea of the hero as contributing to his destruction only by acts in which we see no flaw" [2]. The essence of Shakespearean tragedy lies in the actions caused by the personality. "These actions beget others, and these others beget others again, until this series of inter-connected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe" [2]. Therefore, it is evident that the protagonists, as the chief agents of action, are themselves the architects of the tragedy.

This theme is consistently validated from *Titus Andronicus* to the four great tragedies. Titus is a self-righteous, credulous, and impetuous man. He may be deemed a classical hero on the battlefield, but once back in real life, he repeatedly commits grave errors, leading to personal tragedy. Upon his triumphant return from the Roman battlefield, he naively endorses Saturninus to ascend to the throne, subsequently betrothing Lavinia to Saturninus and killing Mutius. Though his intentions seem patriotic, he orchestrates his own, his family's, and his nation's tragedy. His character flaws blinded him to the truth, turning him into a victim of deception by political enemies and rivals, and alienating his family members. Only after his daughter suffered immense misfortune did he awaken from his profound delusion, fully realizing the unparalleled nature of his ordeal. This epiphany compelled him to choose a method of revenge that was unheard of and would remain unrivaled. Driven by rage and sorrow, he executed Tamora's sons, who had violated his daughter, transforming their remains into a ghastly meal, and forced Tamora to consume the flesh of her own children. After this series of heinous acts, he personally ended Tamora's life. This string of horrifying vengeful actions starkly reveals the hamartia in Titus's character [14].

Similarly, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, initially appears as an intelligent, witty, optimistic, and positive figure during his time at the University of Wittenberg, a center of German humanism. However, the abrupt demise of father, the swift remarriage of mother, and the swirling rumors throughout the court plunged the once carefree prince into profound melancholy and doubt. Although his madness was feigned to deceive his father's murderous uncle and his "fragile" mother, it was interspersed with rational moments, as seen when he decisively kills Polonius, who was hiding behind the curtain [13]. Yet, he ultimately could not escape his hesitancy and indecision, failing to seize the opportunity to end his uncle's wicked life while he was alone in prayer. Hamlet's aim was clear: to eliminate the usurper responsible for the regicide, right the overturned order, and salvage the disjointed era. He solemnly swore to the apparition of his father when it first revealed the truth of the sin. Hamlet's indecisive nature caused him to miss the perfect chance to exact bloodless vengeance. Despite the ghost's persistent prodding, although he did kill his incestuous and usurping uncle, Hamlet, described as "Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion and the mold of form, Th' observed of all observers," [9] tragically fell, echoing through eternity.



Figure 1: King Lear

In *King Lear*, which is shown in Figure 1, impulsiveness and vanity seem to bewitch Lear as he capriciously decides to divide all his power and land between his two insincere daughters, Goneril and Regan. This rash decision plunges him into a state of disgrace, reducing him to a deranged beggar after being tormented by the daughters to whom he relinquished his authority. The genuine love he holds for his youngest daughter, Cordelia, and her tragic fate ultimately trigger his mental breakdown. It is his vanity and obstinacy that weave this tragic tapestry [6]. The Russian critic Dobrolyubov remarked on tragic protagonists: "Their self-adoration finally transgresses all bounds of reason: attributing all glory and respect received from their position to themselves, they resolve to abandon their power, believing that awe will continue post-abdication. This foolish conviction led them to transfer their kingdoms to their daughters" [11].

In *Othello*, the typically magnanimous and upright Moorish general, who serves as a high-ranking officer in Venice, is tragically transformed under the malicious manipulation of the deceitful ensign, Iago. Othello, once known for his broad-mindedness and bravery, succumbs to overwhelming jealousy and alters drastically, becoming narrow-minded and paranoid. Driven by misinterpretation and jealousy, he ends up murdering his innocent and devoted wife, Desdemona, a woman as pure as an angel. Upon realizing the truth, he is consumed by remorse and ultimately takes his own life with his sword. Jealous suspicion, like a venomous serpent, devours the rare black hero.

In *Macbeth*, the eponymous character succumbs to an insatiable lust for power and ambition, committing a litany of crimes that culminate in his tragic downfall [5]. Initially, Macbeth is not a man blinded by the desire for power; he is a noble and valiant general who earns undying laurels by quelling a rebellion. At this juncture, Macbeth stands as a victor, possessing the requisite talent and strength to achieve all that is rightfully his. However, the temptation of power proves irresistible, and the witches' prophecies transform his noble ambition into a darker, more destructive force. A burning desire to augment his distinguished persona with a crown ensnares him; this crown becomes an overwhelming temptation. As his ambition swells, Macbeth abandons the path of righteousness, descending into a morass of iniquity. This uncontrollable desire for power becomes Macbeth's hamartia, steering him toward his ultimate ruin.

Shakespearean tragic heroes, though exceptional, share commonalities with ordinary individuals in possessing character flaws, culminating in their downfall. Thus, character determines fate. Shakespeare

perceives drama as the mirror of the age, reflecting society and the human soul. We cannot ignore the natural and historical context of characters to understand the genesis of tragedy. However, as the analysis reveals, character flaws and the abnormal extension of a particular trait play catalytic roles in tragedy's inception and progression. In his tragedies, Shakespeare consciously portrays one-sided characters [4]. Beyond reflecting contemporary social realities, these tragedies also represent a deliberate exploration of multifaceted human nature.

3. Ethical Conflicts

Shakespearean tragedy characters are not merely paragons of virtue or embodiments of evil—they are neither angels nor devils but individuals with complex personalities and moral conflicts.

Bradley posits that tragedy illustrates the spiritual “self-torture and self-waste” [2], highlighting that both sides in a conflict possess spiritual value. He asserts that tragic conflict is not solely the clash of good and evil but primarily between goods opposing goods, where goodness represents anything of spiritual value, and evilness also assumes a broader significance. Bradley's theory primarily centers on the analysis of Shakespeare's works. He discerns that Shakespeare's tragic corpus underwent a developmental and maturing process, distinguishing between his earlier and later works [2]. The former predominantly portrays external conflicts, where protagonists represent different factions, communities, and sets of values or emotional states, culminating in the protagonists' destruction. For instance, the love between Romeo and Juliet embodies the conflict between their families' hatreds, reflecting the feuds characteristic of European feudalism, hard to resolve without bloodshed due to the honor and face valued by nobility.



Figure 2: *Hamlet*

While in the later period of Shakespearean tragedy, there is a discernible shift in focus toward the protagonists' internal conflicts, signifying the maturation of Shakespeare's tragic form. Works such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, exemplify this. Although they all feature external conflicts to some extent, these are not the main thrust of the tragedies. In *Hamlet*, which is shown in Figure 2, for instance, “Hamlet and the King are mortal foes, yet that which engrosses our interest and dwells in our memory at least as much as the conflict between them, is the conflict within one of them” [2]. In other words, what truly makes an impression and moves the audience is not the discord between Hamlet and the king, but the internal conflict within Hamlet himself. He had every reason, determination, strength, and means to avenge his father, yet he delays, leading to procrastination in action. Torn between the intense need for vengeance, prompted by his father's specter, and his own introspective nature, which prompts deep reflection on life's value, Hamlet wavers agonizingly. His journey of revenge thus morphs into an excruciating odyssey of self-examination. Accordingly, Hamlet's evolving psyche and its intricacies mirror the advancements and limitations inherent in humanistic ideals. Ultimately, Hamlet's tragedy is not solely his own but symbolizes the broader, inevitable tragedy of humanists and their era, encapsulating a profound meditation on human nature and morality.

In a word, the profound character depictions of Shakespeare reveal the universality and temporality

of their ethical conflicts, representing the broader societal, political, and cultural clashes of their time. Amidst eras marked by religious conflict and social turbulence, imbued with pervasive pessimism and a deep awareness of mortality, Shakespeare delves into humanity's shadowy facets. His tragedies scrutinize and expose these facets, providing profound insights into the ubiquitous moral and spiritual quandaries of human. Thus, the ethical conflicts in Shakespearean tragedies not only delineate the characters' distinctiveness and destinies but also delve deep into the essence of human complexity and ethical multiplicity [15]. Faced with essential existential concerns—survival, power, love, and enmity—Shakespeare's characters wrestle with moral decisions and internal struggles, enhancing their depth and illustrating the immense emotive power of their stories.

4. Inevitable Fate

Bradley believes that many facts in Shakespearean tragedies suggest the existence of an overriding and supreme force, namely "fate," which operates independently [2]. In the tragic world, individuals' actions seldom align with their intentions, leading to unintended consequences. Despite their efforts to control their fate, they unknowingly fulfill a larger design, becoming trapped by their own actions regardless of their original motives. Brutus, despite his best intentions, orchestrates sorrow for his nation and seals his own demise. Conversely, Iago, with the most malevolent of intentions, becomes ensnared in the very trap he sets for others. Hamlet, reluctant to undertake the task of vengeance, finds himself embroiled in violence he had not envisaged, ultimately being driven toward the very revenge he lacked the resolve to pursue. The killings executed by his foe, along with the foe's own regret, culminate in results contrary to their intentions. King Lear acts on an impulsive decision that is part generous and part egotistical, unwittingly unleashing profound evil. Othello torments himself over a baseless illusion and, in his attempt to administer what he believes is grave justice, ends up slaughtering innocence and suffocating his lover. Coriolanus perceives his heart as unyielding, yet it softens rapidly under pressure. Lady Macbeth, who once believed she had the ruthlessness to kill her own child, is eventually driven to despair by the repercussions of violence against another. Her spouse, aspiring to secure a throne at any cost, discovers that his regal ascent invites the very nightmares he aimed to avoid. Juliet awakens from her trance a minute beyond the pivotal moment. Desdemona's handkerchief goes missing precisely when its presence is most crucial. A seemingly minor delay becomes the fatal factor in Cordelia's untimely death. In this realm of tragedy, human intentions, when put into action, often morph into their direct antitheses. An individual's deeds, seemingly minor adjustments in the physical world, can unleash catastrophic consequences that reverberate through an entire realm. Ultimately, individuals often meet their downfall, achieving the very outcome they least anticipated: their own ruin.

Bradley interprets this force as a "moral order," arguing that it does not exhibit indifference to good and evil but demonstrates a proclivity for good and an aversion to evil [2]. This is evidenced by the fact that the main sources of suffering and death in Shakespeare's tragedies are not rooted in goodness; rather, they invariably stem from evil [7]. Bradley categorizes "fate" into two types: one represents a mythic representation of the entire system or order where individual characters are merely insignificant and feeble parts. This system or order, vastly more decisive than the characters themselves in determining their innate temperaments, circumstances, and consequent actions, is so all-encompassing and complex that they can hardly comprehend or control it. It has a definite or fixed nature where any change necessitates other changes, indifferent to human desires and regrets. The other type is a sheer necessity, completely indifferent to human well-being and the distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong. Bradley contends that tragedies depicting humans merely as playthings of chance or of a fate indifferent or hostile to them are not genuinely profound tragedies.

Bradley's analysis and research into the essence of Shakespearean tragedy are primarily grounded in Hegelian philosophical principles. His findings regarding the protagonists and their conflicting actions align fundamentally with the main perspectives of Aristotle and Hegel's theories of tragedy, even advancing them in some respects. However, in discussing the driving forces and essence of tragedy, his inherently idealistic and metaphysical stance leads him to interpret the dominant force in tragedies as a supreme entity—a moral system or order. In his analysis of Shakespearean tragic characters, particularly the protagonists, he overly concurs with Aristotle's notion of "great men" and their nobility, thereby neglecting the significant historical role of the common people. This flaw is not entirely attributable to Bradley himself. His exploration into the essence of Shakespearean tragedy, primarily from an aesthetic standpoint, fails to recognize that every tragedy in any era reflects the realities of human social life, with intrinsic connections between the traits of the society and era and the essence of the tragedy. In analyzing specific tragic works, he overlooks factors like the overall

characteristics of tragedy, life circumstances, social conditions, and epochal features, inevitably leading to biased and erroneous conclusions.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, having delineated the quintessential characteristics of Shakespearean tragic heroes—noble birth, tragic character flaws, ethical conflicts, and an inevitable fate—Chapter One sets the foundation for a profound understanding of this timeless archetype. These elements not only define the framework of Shakespearean tragedy but also resonate through the ages, revealing the universal nature of these narratives in human experience and literature.

Acknowledgement

Tianjin Research Innovation Project for Postgraduate Students (2022SKY273).

References

- [1] Bloom, H. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* [M]. Riverhead Books, 1998, p141.
- [2] Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy* [M]. Oxford University Press, 2005, p2-179.
- [3] Cowell, B. *The British Country House Revival* [M]. Boydell & Brewer, 2024, p34-59.
- [4] Greenblatt, S. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* [M]. W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, p78.
- [5] Haque M. Ziaul. *The Drama of Speech Acts: Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy* [J]. *Women's Studies*, 2024, p61-72.
- [6] Kastan, D. S. *Shakespeare after Theory* [M]. Routledge, 1999, p120-137.
- [7] Knight, G. Wilson. *The Wheel of Fire* [M]. Routledge, 2001, p411.
- [8] Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* [M]. Doubleday & Co, 1964, p249.
- [9] Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet* [M]. Downtown Press, 2003, p134.
- [10] Evans, Ivor. *A Short History of English Literature: With Supplementary Materials by Bernard Bergonzi* [M]. People's Literature Publishing House, 1984, p146-147.
- [11] Dobrolyubov, N. A. *Selected Works of Dobrolyubov: Volume 1* [M]. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1983, p321-495.
- [12] Jin Yuanpu, Zhou Ning. *Reception Aesthetics and Reception Theory* [M]. Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1987, p98.
- [13] Li Weimin. *The Reception and Transformation of Shakespeare's Plays in China* [M]. Sichuan International Studies University Press, 2020, p23.
- [14] Meng Xianqiang. *A Brief History of Shakespeare Studies in China* [M]. Northeast Normal University Press, 1994, p34-45.
- [15] Yang Zhouhan. *Compilation of Shakespeare Reviews (Volume II)* [M]. China Social Sciences Press, 1981, p163-169.