Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: An Outline

The passion of revenge, motivated by the subsidiary passions of anger, jealousy, pride, ambition or envy, was as universal among the savage races of pagan eras as it has been among the most sophisticated societies throughout the history of mankind. With the absence of any social order, revenge in early times was not held to be a crime, but rather the mightiest and only way to right a wrong. Its form was as a simple and direct act of violence by one individual upon another to return a personal injury. Then progress brought the civilizing developments of customs, laws and religions, and revenge became something of greater complexity - an issue dealing with ethics and morality, posing questions of responsibility and guilt.

1. The Seneca Influence

Seneca (3 B.C. -65 A.D) Was a Roman philosopher, dramatist and statesman. His tragedies, based on Greek models, provided one of the foremost influences on the Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Written in an atmosphere of gloom, Seneca’s plays (concerning the great crimes of antiquity - Medea, Phaedra, Agamemnon, Oedipus etc.) Strongly emphasized blood revenge for murder or flagrant injury, or less serious revenge out of jealousy. His rhetoric and bombast, and his stoicism, were important contributions to the Elizabethan form.

Some of the characteristics of Senecan tragedy inherited by Renaissance dramatists were:

a) the revenge was personal, often taking on a sense of religious but
b) the revenge could be prompted by a ghost.
c) the revenger could be satisfied to take vengeance not on the injurer himself, but on his kindred, affording greater torment.
d) the revenger was warned to conceal and dissemble revenge, lest his chance for vengeance be lost.
e) terrible punishment awaited an unnatural revenge.
f) innocent or deceived accomplices were sometimes used to help the revenge, but never to consummate it.
g) momentary hesitations could briefly halt the revenger.
h) Seneca’s criminals were fully responsible: the will was all powerful and man had liberty of choice between good and evil.
i) amendment was possible if the guilty person repented.
j) death was a last refuge and expiation. Seneca sympathized with suicide when it saved honour or gave an escape from a life too full of pain, but felt it was more courageous to combat misfortune than to succumb without a struggle.
2. The Elizabethans

In the God-fearing Elizabethan Age (1558-1603), with the word of God so expressly forbidding private revenge, it was only natural to believe damnation awaited those who disobeyed. Elizabethan law felt itself capable of meting out justice to murderers, and therefore punished an avenger who took justice into his own hands just as heavily as the original murderer. However, there is much evidence of an Elizabethan sympathy towards blood revenge (for murder) and a very real tradition existed in favor of revenge under certain circumstances, especially in the heir’s legal duty to revenge his father. The right to punish their own wrongs was therefore dear to many Elizabethans who did not approve the restrictions put by the law upon their revenges. Private revenge among the nobles and gentlemen took almost exclusively the form of a duel; poisons were frequently used among the common people and the Elizabethan courtiers.

3. Machiavelli and the Italian Influences

The Elizabethans feared the Italianizing of England and viewed with misgiving the fashionable vices picked up by English travelers. They summed up the Italians in the person of Machiavelli, whose name became an English synonym for villain.

An author and statesman, Machiavelli was one of the outstanding figures of the Italian Renaissance. His best-known work, The Prince, describes concisely the means by which a ruler may gain and maintain his power. His ideal prince is an amoral and calculating tyrant, capable of using tyranny to build up a despotic Italian State.

Machiavelli’s name expressed nothing but treachery, murder, and atheism to every Elizabethan. Italian deceit and hypocrisy were also feared as was the influence of the Italian secret revenge, which, they thought, was utterly foreign to the English temperament and could only be a Continental vice.

The Elizabethan’s reading of the Italian “novelle”, their French translation and his own English adaptations, could only confirm these opinions. Various collections of Italian revenge stories not only provided the Elizabethan dramatist with a perfect mine of material for the English stage, but also led audiences to accept what they saw as dramatized truths. It supported their prejudices about the villainy and treacherous revengefulness not only of Italians, but of the French, Spanish and indeed of all foreigners.

4. The Spanish Tragedy

Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy (1586-89) was the outgrowth of the Italian and the French “novelle”, and the Elizabethan’s hostile view of Machiavelli and the Italian character. The play first popularized revenge as a tragic motive on the Elizabethan popular stage by using blood vengeance as the core of its dramatic action. In Lorenzo, it introduced the first Machiavellian villain in Elizabethan tragedy, and in Hieronomo, a new kind of tragic hero, a revenger hesitant on the brink of madness. Structure and style were Senecan, as were such things as the revengeful Ghost who opened the play, the chorus and the epic reports.
5. Four Phases of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy

A) The Kydian Revenge Tragedy (1585-1607)

This type was fundamentally moral and philosophical in its treatment. The sacred duty of blood revenge lent a semi-religious tone to the plays. Revengers of blood undertook a difficult task hampered by every conceivable obstacle. Stretched on the rack of human emotions, they peered into the causes of their action and the great questions of life and death.

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* were in the Kydian tradition. The former is very similar in construction to *The Spanish Tragedy*, although there are important variations: blood revenge is given more adequate motivation; the villain’s actions before the start of the protagonist’s revenge have increased importance and complexity: there is a more logical and ironic use of the revenger’s madness: there is a change in the manner of bringing about the catastrophe; and an important villainous character has been included and is only loosely connected with the main plot.

*Hamlet* became the apotheosis of the revenge tragedy. It differed from the other revenge tragedies by Elizabethan dramatists primarily in the measure that Shakespeare was above his fellows in genius. Giving the revenge theme a higher purpose, Shakespeare made the issue turn on the character of the revenger and thus gave ample scope for the philosophical consideration of life, death, and human endeavour. Christopher Marlowe, the “Muses’ darling”, developed a second type of revenge tragedy during this period. The medieval conception of tragedy was a distinctly moral one; in Marlowe’s plays, the interest centres on the personality of the hero, the struggle of a human soul against forces too great. This was a new emphasis on human passion which would influence Shakespeare and be carried by him to greater heights. Marlowe’s protagonists, Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus, the Jew of Malta, are Machiavellian, overriding the moral codes of their times to find the complete realization of their particular ideals. While revenge in Marlowe’s plays takes an active part in resolving the catastrophe, the protagonist is not a revenger of blood.

B) The Horror Tragedies:

The early period of Kydian revenge tragedy came to an end with Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606). From 1607 to 1620, the villain holds the stage. Revenge has no advocates in this period. Elizabeth I had died in 1603 and James of Scotland succeeded, calling himself James I. There was a new tendency towards sensationalism and artificiality. Violence was portrayed for its own sake and lacked any intellectual or emotional penetration. The chief interest lay in the intrigues of the villains against the sympathetic person or against each other. And revenge was often for less serious grounds than murder. The sole contribution of these horror plays was an occasional moral that God in the catastrophe had punished vice. Representatives of this period were such plays as *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster and Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*.
C) Morality

From 1620 to 1630, a whole series of plays attacks the problem of the morality of revenge. In works such as Ford's *The Broken Heart*, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, and Middleton's and Rowley's *The Changeling*, the moral insistence is more didactic than the philosophical questioning of plays in the first period of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Where there was no practical solution at that time to the philosophizing and ethical examination of character, dramatists in the third phase attempt to solve the problem on a lower plane. James I had insisted on the doctrine of Divine Right*, and revenge was forbidden by both God and His representative, the State. So the plays of this period express an absolute disapproval of revenge under any circumstances.

D) Period of Imitation:

The final phase in the development of Elizabethan revenge tragedy (1630-1642) was a period of imitation. For their inspiration dramatists tuned back to the great revenge tragedies of the first and second period, and revenge again took a prominent place in the motivation of the tragic plot. In other words, a renaissance of blood-revenge. In this vein, the one noteworthy playwright of the period was James Shirley (*The Maid's Revenge*, *The Traitor*, etc.). Aside from his work, the decade produced little of significance and was one of decadence and disintegration. In 1642 Civil War erupted in England and the Puritans' victory resulted that year in the closing of the theatres, not to be reopened until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660.

Divine Right

**Divine Right of Kings** - the doctrine that kings derive their right to rule directly from God and are not accountable to their subjects; rebellion is the worst of political crimes; "the doctrine of the divine right of kings was enunciated by the Stuarts in Britain in the 16th century"

The Divine Right of Kings is a political and religious doctrine of royal absolutism. It asserts that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority, deriving his right to rule directly from the will of God. The king is thus not subject to the will of his people, the aristocracy, or any other estate of the realm, including the church. The doctrine implies that any attempt to depose the king or to restrict his powers runs contrary to the will of God and may constitute treason.

The remoter origins of the theory are rooted in the medieval idea that God had bestowed earthly power to the king, just as God had given spiritual power and authority to the church, centering on the pope. The immediate author of the theory was Jean Bodin, who based it on the interpretation of Roman law. With the rise of nation-states and the Protestant Reformation, the theory of Divine Right justified the king's absolute authority in both political and spiritual matters. The theory came to the fore in England under the reign of King James I (1603–25). King Louis XIV of France (1643–1715), though Catholic, strongly promoted the theory as well.

The theory of Divine Right was abandoned in England during the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89. The American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century further weakened the theory's appeal, and by the early twentieth century, it had been virtually abandoned.