

# Revengers Tragedy

## Introduction

REVENGERS TRAGEDY is based on the classic play by Thomas Middleton.



It was first published, anonymously, in 1607, having been performed by Shakespeare's company, the King's Men. Middleton was one of Shakespeare's young collaborators: he also worked on *MACBETH* and *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*. In the 1650s, authorship of the play was ascribed to another playwright and poet, Cyril Tourneur. Modern critics view this as a mistake, and attribute the play to Middleton, who also wrote *THE CHANGELING*, *WOMEN BEWARE WOMEN* and *A GAME AT CHESS*.

*THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY* was long viewed as the product of a demented or diseased mind. In the nineteenth century, William Archer wrote in *The Old Drama & The New*: "I will only ask whether such monstrous melodrama as *THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY*, with its hideous sexuality and its raging lust for blood, can be said to belong to civilised literature at all? I say it is a product either of sheer barbarism, or of some pitiable psychopathic perversion."

After two world wars and a half-century of unimaginable horrors, the play was critically rediscovered – as a black comedy. As the first English black comedy, in fact. It was its mixture of comedy with the Dance of Death that attracted director Alex Cox.

The play is a darkly funny meditation on love, family and revenge, set in a court obsessed with transient beauty, money, inherited privilege, and power. Cox says, "The characters have ironic, Latin-sounding names like 'Spurio' and 'Sordido' but the story is clearly set in, and is about, that English class of titled gangsters, the 'Aristocracy': with its intrigues, indiscretions, betrayals, lost fortunes, and sudden deaths".

# Revenagers Tragedy

## Tragedy

The first thing we need to consider, when talking about Revenagers Tragedy is the two parts of the title – revenge and tragedy.

One of the first definitions of tragedy in drama was given by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. He said that tragedy aroused fear and emotion in the audience of a play, purging their souls (catharsis). It would raise pathos (greek for suffering) which has come to mean the quality in something that arouses sympathy.



**Tragedy** is derived from the Greek words *tragos* (goat) and *ode* (song) linking to the idea of a sacrifice. One thing is certain about a tragedy – that the hero of the play will die by the end. Think of Shakespeare's tragedies – Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet – if your name is in the title then there's only one thing that you can predict about what will happen!

The tragic hero will have a tragic flaw. The hero of a tragedy will fall from grace but at the end have a realisation of "the right path".

Tragedies depict the life voyages of people who steered themselves on collision courses with society, life's rules or simply fate. The tragic protagonist is one who refuses to agree to fate or life's rules, either out of character weakness or strength. Most often, the protagonist's main fault is *hubris*, a Greek (and modern English) word meaning arrogance. It could be the arrogance of not accepting the hand that life deals, the arrogance of assuming the right to kill or the arrogance of assuming the right to seek vengeance. Whatever the root, the protagonist's ultimate collision with fate, reality or society is inevitable and irrevocable.

In Greek tragedy the tragic situation, in which the characters find themselves, is always a situation in which a man seems to be deprived of all outward help and is forced to rely entirely on himself. It is a situation of extraordinary tension, of utmost conflict. Characteristic of the tragic catastrophe is the fact that not only the protagonist comes to be destroyed, but very often innocent people are also involved in the tragic happenings and lose their lives. The catastrophe, sealing the tragic situation, comes as an avalanche that rolls over both the bad and the good, the guilty and the innocent. This indicates that the individual is responsible not only for his own fortunes, but also for the fortunes of society. Everybody's fate is connected in some way with the other's and if at one point the harmony is disturbed, disaster is lurking everywhere. This is particularly relevant when the tragic hero is a king or ruler – then his fate is inextricably linked to that of his allies and people.

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The underlying question of all these dramas concerns the laws and standards by which man lives. It is the paradox of tragedy that it will never yield any definite answers. Greek tragedy, then, is an expression of man realising that his human standards have become questionable.

Greek tragic drama – with a few exceptions – always results in a catastrophe, yet the way in which the hero fails, often evokes our admiration for him.

Tragedy is the disaster which comes to those who embody, in a peculiarly intense form, those flaws and short-comings which are universal in a lesser form. Tragedy is a disaster that happens to other people; and the greater the person, so it seems, the more acute is their tragedy. Put at its crudest – the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

There should be a sense that at the end of a tragedy we and the hero have been purged and that we and they are more knowledgeable than before.

## tasks

Read again these introductory notes in tragedy. In what ways does REVENGE TRAGEDY fit in with these classic definitions? In what ways is it different?

- ❖ *Do we feel any sympathy, pathos, towards any of the characters that we meet in the story? At the end did you feel that a better world had been introduced, that Vindice had come to an understanding of himself as a tragic hero should?*
- ❖ *Did you at any time find what was going on to be comic rather than tragic? Do you think a tragedy should contain comic elements?*
- ❖ *What were the heroic qualities of Vindice (as the revenger/hero)?*



One final word about tragedy; the word "tragedy" implies something intensely sad and terrible, but tragedies do not usually end upon a blackly pessimistic note. If they did, the effect upon the audience would be one of almost intolerable depression. The evil forces in a tragedy most frequently destroy the tragic hero, but the tragedy rarely ends with evil triumphant.

This then is the classical model on which most Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies were based. However, we now need to look at the other word in the title, REVENGE.

# Revenge Tragedy

## Revenge

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) is often seen as the prototype of Revenge Tragedy, which flourished during the ensuing two decades, and includes Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*, and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*.

Dramatic elements common to Revenge Tragedy include the vengeance spurred on by the death of a loved one, ghosts of murdered victims, real or feigned madness, graveyard scenes, a play-within-a-play, skulls or severed body parts, and scenes of violence and carnage.

In his book *The Tragedy of State* J.W.Lever characterises Jacobean Revenge Tragedy thus: "...a wide range of characters, a court setting; a dynamic of complicated intrigue and delayed revenge, with a final spectacular catastrophe. All this the Jacobeans made their own, adding an infusion of satire, intellectual speculation and moral aphorisms. The result was a dramatic treatment of the special shape in which evil revealed itself in their age: the phenomenon of state power and the debasement of human values."

Jacobean dramatists were keenly aware that their audiences expected something more spectacular: Vindici, who often comments on the very nature of Revenge drama, declares, "When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good" – this is also typical of the self-conscious theatrical reference that modern critics have identified as undermining the play's presentation of some sort of coherent spiritual/moral position from which events can be judged. If Providence does make appearances – it is really a backdrop to Vindice's actions at best or a theatrical effect at worst. Middleton incorporates many of these dramatic elements effectively, particularly the question of the revenger's sanity.

Revenge Tragedy always verges on the absurd, and this play frequently crosses the line (e.g., the manner in which the duke is poisoned).

- ❖ *Tragedy, at the end, is supposed to leave us thinking that a stable order has been restored. At the end of *Revenge Tragedy* did you feel that this was the case?*
- ❖ *In what ways could Vindice be called a tragic hero?*
- ❖ *"Let the man who seeks revenge remember to dig two graves". The film starts with this epitaph. In what ways does it apply to the revengers in *Revenge Tragedy*?*
- ❖ *One can understand why Vindice wants to seek revenge on the Duke (he killed Vindice's wife and family). Why do you think he also seeks revenge on the Duke's sons?*

# Revenge Tragedy

## Pandora's Box and the Jacobean World View

In Greek mythology, Pandora's box contained all the evil qualities that have afflicted mankind. Pandora let them loose upon the world. Is this the Jacobean world, one in which only the evils of Pandora appear, with no hope, no sense of goodness being about to appear? Look at the last words of the play. Do they really offer any hope that Antonio will be any different to the Duke? What evidence is there from what has just passed that 'blood' does have the effect of washing away treason? Is not one evil replaced by another?

After every tragic action must come, at the end of the play, a reaffirmation of morality and a hope that tomorrow the world will be better.

Jacobean tragedies differ from Elizabethan tragedies in that the world view that they offer contains no hope (in the story of Pandora's Box, hope remains contained within the box).

Things to consider – it was a time of great uncertainty – a time when people, though having chafed against the constraints of late Elizabethan rule – were starting to look back nostalgically on her reign. In 1607 – the audience would have been acutely aware that Catholic plotting had almost done for the King and his parliament in 1605 – The Gun Powder Plot – so the idea of courtly intrigue and social upheaval were close to home. For the Italy of The Revenger's Tragedy – a contemporary audience might easily be assumed to have read a study of their own court and courtiers' dissolute ways. To this would have been added fear of Popish plots and a return to Catholic rule and the persecutions associated with Mary I's reign.

It was a time when people sensed that society was in turmoil – "A generall corruption hath overgrown the vertues of this latter times, and this world hath become a brothell house of sinne.." writes Barnabe Rich in 1614.

Lawrence Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy* paints a clear picture of the kind of dissolute and extravagant behaviour that was common among those pursuing excitement and office at court. The repeated appearance of idiotic and wasteful aristos such as Sir Andrew Aguecheek in the drama showed how a real social phenomenon became a dramatic type very quickly. Part of this luxury was manifest at court in those ever more elaborate masques – often preceded by an anti-masque. In these figures of riot or abandon (Comus, Bacchus, etc) are seen to enjoy a temporary triumph only to be driven out by the figures of the masque proper – sometimes played by courtiers themselves. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* therefore, and other revenge tragedies, the use of a masque with which to engineer a general massacre is significant – as though the anti-masque figures triumphed and then invaded the auditorium and took no hostages.

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With this decline in wealth and prestige, so the boundaries that separated the titled from the gentry began to erode with a commensurate decline in suitable distinction and respect. And the decline in social hierarchies hinted at bigger problems in God's creation – an instability in nature and the universe that hinted at a kind overarching decay. The sightings of comets, a realisation that the orbits of planets were irregular and that the earth was not the centre of all things – flowed from recent scientific investigation and fed into belief that everything was subject to 'mutabilitie'.

In the country land was being enclosed at an ever increased rate and people were being displaced. The visions in King Lear of an impoverished underclass ignored by the rich and kept out only by stout gates, the beadle's lash and the stocks certainly reflected popular anxieties. The fear that the poor were themselves organised into some sort of coherent anti-structure mirroring those that defined the proper hierarchy has been explored by Salgado in 'The Elizabethan Underworld'.

Then there were plagues and contagions – it was a time of superstition. James 1 took a considerable interest in things magical and particularly witchcraft fascinated him – he wrote a book on the subject. He was capable of debunking the more crazy assertions levelled against women accused of witchcraft – but he was convinced that witches had been behind a plot to kill him at sea while he was still living in Scotland.

As Christopher Hill points out in *The World Turned Upside Down* – out of all this emerged the energy and conviction needed to fuel the English Revolution just 34 years or so later.



## task

- ✦ Take a newspaper and, in reading the stories contained in it, think about how you would describe the world in which you live today. In what ways does *Revengers Tragedy* speak to this age as it did to that of the early 17th century?

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## Modern-day Settings

We need to ask the question as to why a director (in this case Alex Cox) should choose to set a play written in the seventeenth century in the near future. The key point to think about is what is the relevance of the play and its themes to today.

### task

Look at the opening of the film. You can see this section of the film again by going to the official Revenagers Tragedy website [www.RevenagersTragedy.com](http://www.RevenagersTragedy.com)

- ✦ *How is the world in which the film is set presented?*
- ✦ *Describe in detail what you are shown in the opening scene. What sort of world are you shown? How is Vindice first presented to us?*
- ✦ *Now you should think about the ways in which Alex Cox has recreated a world from the past and made it relevant to us.*

### task

- ✦ *In looking at the various settings and themes of the play, how has the director used modern day concerns and settings to link in with the fundamental ideas of the play? Which settings give us ideas about the characters and their desires?*
- ✦ *If you look back to the sheet on the Jacobean world view (pages 5-6) , you will see that the Jacobeans considered the Elizabethan period one of stability and greatness. In what ways might Liverpool be a clever choice of location for the film? Think back to Liverpool's past and what it is now, as well as the way in which it is presented in the film.*
- ✦ *Although the setting of the original play was in Italy, Middleton was making comments about life in England at the time. Is Alex Cox, in setting the play in the near future, doing the same thing?*

### task

- ✦ *Think about the ways in which Cox has modernised the play. What comment is he passing on present day Britain? You might like to think about his presentation of the Duke, for example, or the fact that Vindice's brother is a security guard. What is Cox saying about morality now?*



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## The Duke & Antonio – Good & Evil?

If you look back at the description of tragedy given on pages 2-3, you will see that one of the key aspects of the tragic experience is that at the end of the play, a better, more understanding world should exist.

If we look at Revenagers Tragedy, we have to decide whether Antonio replacing the Duke might be seen as a better world replacing a corrupt one.



### task

- ❖ *Think carefully about the ways in which the Duke is presented to us during the film. How would you describe him? Where does his power lie? He is the ruler of the province, but how does he maintain his control? Think about the trial scene. Think about the scenes where we see the people of the province violently demonstrating against him.*
- ❖ *Which actions within the film back up your description?*
- ❖ *Now think about Antonio. How is he presented? His wife is raped by the Duchess' younger son and then kills herself. So he too could be seen as a revenger! In what ways are we shown him to be a representative of a better world? True, he may be different to the Duke, but is what he represents an improvement?*
- ❖ *How does he get the population on his side once his wife has died? Why, at the end, should he treat Vindice the way that he does? After all, it is Vindice's actions which have brought him to power.*



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## What's in a name?

It was quite common in Jacobean drama to give characters names which reflected their characters. Look at the names of the characters of *Revengers Tragedy* and their meanings:

VINDICI:	revenger
GRATIANA:	grace
CASTIZA:	chastity
LUSSURIOSO:	luxurious i.e. lecherous
AMBITIOSO:	ambitious
SPURIO:	spurious, bastard
SUPERVACUO:	superfluous, vain
SORDIDO:	sordid, wretched



## task

- ✦ Thinking back to the film, can you think of one incident from the story which reflects the meaning of each of the characters' names?