

Elizabethan and Modern Drama: Ethical Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Ethics is central to any moral philosophy of human behavior that deals with questions about what is morally right or wrong, fair or unfair. It is a reflection of the foundational role of human habits and dispositions in moral philosophy. The development of ethics has been shaped by key philosophical traditions, from Greek antiquity to the modern era, evolving to address complex moral issues in a variety of contexts. The historical journey of the ethical philosophy illustrated the deep connection between languages, philosophy and human understanding of morality. Both Elizabethan and Modern drama grapple with fundamental ethical questions, reflecting the values and anxieties of their respective eras. While Elizabethan drama often explored morality through the lens of divine order and social hierarchy, modern drama tends to focus on individual experience, psychological realism, and social critique. This study will examine some key ethical themes in both periods, highlighting similarities and differences in their approaches.

Keywords: Ethics, Morality, individual, Realism, Psychology, Audiences

1. INTRODUCTION

From the grandeur of Elizabethan tragedy to the fragmented realities of Modern theater, playwrights have consistently engaged with ethical questions concerning right and wrong, justice and corruption, duty and desire. Though separated by centuries, both Elizabethan and Modern drama grapple with moral dilemmas that challenge characters and audiences alike. Yet, the way these dramas approach ethics reveals the shifting concerns and cultural contexts of their times. During the Elizabethan era, playwrights like William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe used their works of drama to explore fundamental ethical questions. Characters like Macbeth, driven by his selfish ambition and Hamlet consumed by the moral dilemma of revenge or Doctor Faustus with his cursed desire and dissatisfaction, embodied the ethical conflicts of a society deeply rooted in Christian doctrine yet navigating the complexities of emerging humanism. The Elizabethan theater served as a moral laboratory, where audiences could witness the tragic downfall of those who violated the established ethical norms, reinforcing the social order. In Modern Drama, the ethical focus has shifted dramatically, playwrights such as Arthur Miller and August Wilson moved away from divine judgment to focus on social ethics and the individual's moral responsibility within a complex, often flawed society, this includes themes of hypocrisy, systemic injustice and the pressure of conformity. Modern drama doesn't offer an easy moral lessons but instead invites the audiences to actively question social values and personal choices. The ethical dilemmas presented are often ambiguous, reflecting a world where "right" and "wrong" are not always clear, and where the moral high ground is difficult to find. This paper will explore how ethics function in both Elizabethan and Modern drama, examining the different frameworks through which playwright interrogate moral dilemmas, narrative structure and characters development across these two periods.

2. Etymology of the word "Ethics"

The word "ethics" originated from the Greek term (ethos), which means "character" or "custom". The concept of ethos was central to Greek philosophy, particularly in the works of Aristotle, who developed the field of ethics as a systematic branch study. He used the term as a reference to the personal habits or dispositions and their role in determining moral behavior. The Greek word ethos itself was derived from the root "eth-", referring to the habitual or customary nature of behavior. The term "ethics" entered the English language in the late middle ages, through Latin and France intermediaries. In Latin, the equivalent word was "ethica", a term used in philosophical discussions, particularly in the context of moral philosophy and was adapted from the Greek "ethike" which was

an adjective derived from "ethos". In its initial usage in English language during the 14th century, the term ethics referred to the study of moral principles, rooted in classical philosophy. Over time, the term's meaning expanded to include the systematic study of moral questions, including the nature of virtue, the good life, and justice. The term "ethics" now represents not only the theoretical study of moral philosophy but also the practical consideration of moral issues in diverse contexts, involving both normative questions about what one ought to do, and applied ethics, where moral principles are used to address real-world dilemmas.

3. Elizabethan Drama: morality, order, and divine right

Elizabethan drama, exemplified by the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson, often depicts a world governed by a divinely ordained hierarchy. Ethical transgressions were not only violations of social norms but also affronts to god and the natural order. Characters like Macbeth or king Lear, who disrupt this order, ultimately face tragic consequences and, reinforcing the importance of obedience and adherence to traditional values. In relation to moral values, what is right and what is wrong and how should man live with his society are the most social and ethical questions that had been studied by the Elizabethan dramatists. Shakespeare in his great drama "Macbeth" referred to these questions through the audiences when they evaluate the behavior of the two main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

3-1. Macbeth:

The play presents powerful of moral values when we select quotations from the play to discuss moral dilemma regarding our own life when we decide what is wrong or right. The study of the two main characters provides a support to understand moral motivation, for instance, the study and exploration of Macbeth's reason to choose right and wrong helps us to analyze his moral background about making decisions. The difference or the inversion between moral decisions given by the characters of the play helps us to compare between the characters, who choose the right and those who choose the wrong. David Pugh in his work "*Schiller's Early Dramas*" stated that "historically the play Macbeth was written in 1606 and performed at Hampton Court for king James I and his brother-in-law king Christian of Denmark. It seemed that the aspects of the play were intended to please king James who was the patron of Shakespeare's theater group at that time". The play was chosen by the ethic researchers as an object of their study because of the tragic life and death of the main characters according to their blind ambition, Macbeth, for instance, was a changeable character throughout the events of the drama. The audiences firstly recognize a moral and optimistic knight who sacrifice his life to his kingdom as well as personal loyalty to his lady, but with the progress of the drama the personality of the man was changed completely to be selfish and aggressive. The morality of Macbeth was destroyed by the evil intentions inside him characterized by his quest for power and authority which erased his conscience. The attitudes of Macbeth and his lady in pursuing their ambitions to gain their goals give an investigation about what these characters personal understanding towards the right and wrong. The three witches' prophesy when they confronted him after his victory in the battle, calling him as "Thane of Glamis" and "Cawdor" exploded his ambition and lust for authority. He believed that he has the right to be the king and he decided to work without hesitation with his lady to gain his right, giving himself the right to commit what is immoral by killing an innocent man. However, he knows that he will feel guilt forever as a consequence of this crime because of the inner conflict between his noble and dark characters inside him. Shakespeare explains his viewpoint about the collapse of human morality when they follow evil principles characterized by the three witches words "Fair is foul, and foul is fair".

3-2. Christopher Marlowe's "*Doctor Faustus*":

Christopher Marlowe's "*Doctor Faustus*" is a perfect example about the new vision of the Elizabethan ethical plays, in which the dramatist presents a contradistinction to the preceding medieval morality plays. While the preceding plays focus on the Church principles and give the audiences lessons about the moral behaviors that lead to heaven, Marlowe's play concentrates on his viewpoint about man and his plight. He tends to deal with the real problems between man and society including problems of immorality and how to confront moral complexities and chooses to explore more about humanism themes presenting the religious attitudes with new vision about individualism of humanity. John D Cox in his work "*The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama*" argues that "affirmations were comparatively secular instead of shifting away from the religious focus from church as the institution of the power over the religious sacraments to the religious individual and the ruling

class" (p. 94). The play made a great impact in public and "functioned as a link between religious and secularized theatre" (Cox, p. 127). Therefore, historically Christopher Marlowe regarded as "the first playwright to explore the newly secularized society through stage devils" (Cox, p. 110). With his presentation of stage devils and characterizing them with human behavior, language and obsession with sexuality, Marlowe refers toward hell and its punishment to warn the spectators about the horrible consequences of immorality. In her work "*Staging Vice*", Charlotte Steenbrugge explains Marlowe and other dramatists' quality of attracting attention of the audiences by using stage devils to spread their viewpoints saying that "playwrights could make the stage devils as the central of the audience's attention by the physicality of them to express various thoughts, in which, body and soul were considered to be complete opposites" (p. 94). Doctor Faustus did not endure the reality of human knowledge limitation and obsessed with the supernatural power of the necromancy by making deal with the devil to gain this kind of power in exchange for his soul to reach his selfish goal regarding that "All things that moves between the quiet poles shall be at my command" (*Doctor Faustus*). Faustus' fatal mistake was in his unlawful desire for forbidden knowledge and by following illegal ways to get them. He was not satisfied with his own share of knowledge, forgetting the reality that human mind is restricted by what is made available of knowledge. Sigmund Freud's book "*Moses and Monotheism*" is a perfect study about the consequences of human dissatisfaction, he said that "this satisfaction of the instinct is felt as pleasure by the ego, just as not satisfying this instinct would undoubtedly become a source of discomfort." (p. 148). The personality of Doctor Faustus with its decline of the moral values was used by Christopher Marlowe to express his own intentions as a representation of the Elizabethans' desire for forbidden knowledge.

4. Ethics in Modern Drama :

When we come to discuss the modern English drama we refer to plays written during the two last centuries, 19th and 20th till nowadays drama. The style of playwriting in this period is far different from others by discussing real situations of real characters, using their everyday language and incidents. The decline of the ethical and social values in this period accompanied by the erosion of the moral boundaries has caused new kinds of social problems. Modern drama deals with "problems" of the ordinary individual who lives under the pressure of his everyday life difficulties. Therefore, critics of modern drama give it the name "anti-hero drama" when they found that there is no distinguished hero, unlike Shakespeare's and other early dramatists' heroes. The problem drama has been developed by many modern dramatists who have written many plays in which they discuss the contemporary social and political and even psychological problems. Problems of poverty, inequality, justice, corruption and many other problems which reflect the ethics of the modern society have been discussed by so daring dramatists like Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. In modern literature, especially drama, every piece of art should be aligned with the social and ethical norms. Emmanuel Ebo in his work "*Social Criticism in Nigerian Drama*" comments that: the playwright is making an objective evaluation, exposition or the critical assessment of the sociopolitical conditions in society" (180). Therefore, dramatist works as an observer and his art should be a powerful weapon by depicting the various facts of the society, including its truths and contradictions, what is right and what is wrong. Ifeyinwa Uzundu a Nigerian playwright in English, in here work "*Which Way is Right*", discusses such moral and social dilemmas and the consequences of the individual social actions.

4-1. Which Way is Right:

Uzundu in this play reinforces the idea that moral decay, whether through financial desperation, professional ambition or spiritual manipulation, should be confronted and defeated by the moral society. The play is compelling exploration of ethics, courage and societal structure by discussing not only in literary and theatrical contexts, but in moral philosophy and social reform arenas as well. The characters of any drama are the key elements of the moral and ethical issues analysis when critics focus on their ethical development, involving in evaluating the ethical principles representation . Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright in English argues that "writers should have the courage to determine what can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity" (p. 75). In Uzundu's play, the audiences are challenged to assess their choices and societal complicity in corrupt system when they watch characters like Ogechi serve as role models, proving that integrity and diligence still yield rewards. She is a morally upright NYSC "National Youth Service Corps" member, patient, brave and incorruptible by refusing inducements to secure employment. However, another face of the modern society infected by the impatience, greed, and lack of contentment which affected young men like Okechukwu and Ikenna who found it difficult to secure a job, engaging themselves in criminal activities ending up in jail for the offence of attempting murder and kidnapping. The unexpected apprehension of these young men, who were used

as thugs by "Nkemka" in his political campaign, thinking that they will be protected with this position, reflect the power of the retributive justice in the modern society. The play offers a profound meditation to the modern individual to be engaged with the complexities of the ethical dilemmas that confront modern society, "Which Way is Right" explains the gender oppression that threaten the lives of the female protagonists in this play as a representation of the female condition in the modern society in which, women are subject of sexual exploitation by men. Oluwatoyin Olokodana James said that "the strength of the womanist rests solely in her ability to remain strong and undefeated in the face of oppression." The play is a captivating drama works as a reminder about keeping moral values in a cruel changeable unfair world, inviting people to be responsible about the consequences of their action and the nature of the path they choose in their journey of life.

5. Comparative Analysis:

Drama has long served as reflection of society, provide unique lens through which to explore evolving moral frameworks. From the grandeur of the Elizabethan stage to the nuance of contemporary drama, ethical values have both shaped and been shaped by the plays of their time. Ethical considerations in drama cannot be separated from the era in which they are written, Elizabethan plays were shaped by the Renaissance, a period of intellectual rebirth, religious tension and emerging humanism. Morality was heavily influenced by Christianity, social hierarchy and patriarchy. Play often reaffirmed the divine right of kings, rigid gender roles and the nature order. In contrast, modern drama is a product of secularism, democracy and increasing awareness of civil rights. Modern playwrights question authority and social norms, addressing issues like systematic oppression, existential dread, feminism and other personal and conflicted issues.

5-1 Justice and Retribution

In Elizabethan drama, most notably in the works of Shakespeare, justice is tied to divine or monarchical authority. Plays such as Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear explore revenge, ambition and justice through the lens of fate and moral order. Ethical dilemmas are often resolved through punishment or death, suggesting a cosmic balancing act, for instance, Macbeth's descent into tyranny is met with inevitable downfall, restoring moral order. Modern drama, however, complicates the notion of justice, modern playwrights portray the justice system as a tool of hysteria and vengeance rather than truth. For them, justice is personal and tragic and not institutional, the ambiguity surrounding what is "right" challenges individual to grapple with the idea that justice may not always prevail.

5-2 Gender and Power Dynamics

Elizabethan plays reflect deeply patriarchal ethics, female characters, though occasionally strong-willed are generally constrained by male authority. The ethical framework assumes women's virtue lies in obedience, chastity and loyalty. Modern drama shaped by feminist and queer theories, interrogates these norms. Modern playwrights challenge the ethical assumptions of Elizabethan patriarchy, promoting inclusivity and equity. Women in modern plays are portrayed as agents navigating ethical compromises in male-dominated societies. Themes of modern drama are ethically critical, including gender fluidity, sexual identity and reproductive rights.

5-3 Violence and morality

Violence in Elizabethan drama is often stylized and symbolic-duels, poisonings, and supernatural revenge are dramatized to reflect ethical order. Violence is not only physical but also moral, illustrating the consequences hubris or betrayal. Audiences expect poetic justice like death of villains or heroes suffering nobly. In contrast, modern drama confront the audience with stark, often senseless violence, portrayed as random, disturbing and morally ambiguous. Modern plays ask weather humanity has learned from history or regressed. The ethical discomfort they induce serves as a critique of desensitization in modern society.

5-4 Ethical Agency and the Individual

Elizabethan drama often place individual in the shadow of fate, divine will, or societal duty by paralyzing the ethical weight of vengeance versus morality. Characters of Elizabethan plays struggle with conscience, but the ultimate decisions often reinforce a moral universe governed by higher powers. Modern drama, however, emphasizes ethical agency, making morally flawed choices rooted in systematic racism, blind belief in

nationality rather than divine will. The ethical landscape of modern drama embraces contradictions, portraying individual as product of both choice and circumstances.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout history, drama has served not as a form of entertainment but also as a mirror to society's moral, philosophical and ethical beliefs. A comparative study of Elizabethan and Modern Drama reveals distinct differences in structure, theme and purpose, yet both for reflect their respective societies' moral concerns and human complexities. While Elizabethan drama emphasized grandeur, fate and moral dilemmas of nobility, Modern drama often centers on the psychological and ethical struggles of ordinary individual. Elizabethan Drama, exemplified by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Dealt with themes of justice, betrayal, honor and a hierarchical worldview. Tragedy was often seen as the result of moral transgression or divine retribution, characters like Macbeth or Faustus embody ethical struggle that remain timeless but they operate within a universe where morality is absolute and fate is inescapable. In contrast, Modern Drama, influenced by realism and psychological insight, tends to reject absolute truths. Modern playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Ifeyinwa Uzundu highlight social injustice, identity and moral ambiguity of human behavior. Ethical dilemmas are no longer confined to kings and nobles but extend to everyday people grappling with systemic inequalities and personal failure. Elizabethan drama taught audiences to reflect on personal honor, divine justice, and loyalty while Modern drama challenges people to question societal norms to explore the gray areas of morality and accept the complexity of human motivation. In conclusion, both Elizabethan and Modern drama serve critical ethical functions, one upholds a vision of moral order, while the other invites moral inquiry. By studying both, we gain a richer understanding of how art reflects the moral imagination of society, drama remains a powerful ethical tool that continues to challenge and inspire humanity across centuries.

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