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## The Idea of Fate and Free Will in Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Comparison between Classical and Renaissance Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

*This research explores the a very historic, ever debated, highly intricate and dynamic question, that how fate and free will go hand in hand with each other, but ultimately, who remains dominant, in Shakespearian tragedies. This articles covers, Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear the unparalleled tragedies written by William Shakespeare. Here in the study we will analyze how artfully characters drawn out of Shakespeare pen deal with conflict and crisis which are outcome of their predetermined destiny, fate and their inner voice and choice. The study suggests that Shakespeare's characters and specifically his tragic heroes represent the clash and in opposition of external forces, and internal decision-making, which ultimately shape their own destinies through their choices. In all the earlier mentioned plays prophecy, omens, predictions and cosmic disorder seems as dominant and guiding force and power which has taken human lives, in control and shapes the human life and result of their efforts, struggle and skirmish, which soothes unseen and heavenly powers. But as the story unfolds, the protagonist's tragic and devastating fate and end appear to be largely the result of his own decisions, desires, and moral weaknesses. Through this confrontation, it becomes clear that Shakespeare's profound insight into human suffering and misery cannot be understood solely in terms of fate, but must also be seen in the context of human will and decision-making. His tragedies do not simply present a scene of resignation to fate, but they reveal a complex conflict between inevitable forces and personal decisions that shape the life of the individual.*

**Keywords:** Fate, Free Will, Shakespeare's Tragedies, Classical, Renaissance Perspectives.

### Introduction

The debate of dominating the human life by, fate and free will, has captured scholar's attention for centuries, whether it is philosophy, theology, or literature. As its core or basic question whether human being is the architect of his own fate or not. Either he is governed by unseen powers or by he can make his own choices. Whether fate is in his grip, or he is ruled by the fate. Shakespeare's tragic plays provide a chiefly deep rooted ground for this inquiry, as they show that human struggle at the edge of predetermined end and personal choice. His tragic works reflect not only the inheritance of classical ideas, which often show and present the fate as an unavoidable element, but also the spirit of the Renaissance, a period that foregrounded individuality, freedom and shows human access as limits.

Shakespeare's brilliance is that he presents his characters in such a way that their downfall cannot be explained by any single cause, but is the result of an interplay of foreshadowing,

circumstances, and personal decisions. The hero's decline and crisis always raises the question in the viewer's mind as to whether the decisions made by the hero led to his downfall or whether this decline was already determined by some other force.

The witches' prophecies in *Macbeth* reveal inevitable consequences and their fulfillment, but *Macbeth*'s conscious quest and lust for power turn this possibility into a tragedy. *Hamlet* confronts the ghost's demands for revenge, but his own hesitation and deliberation complicate the concept of fate. *King Lear* and *Othello* similarly show how flaws born of pride, trust, or bad judgment can lead to tragic outcomes, even when greater forces have already shaped their course.

By bringing this delicate balance to the stage, Shakespeare avoids a simple interpretation of fate or free will and presents tragedy in a realm where these two forces both collide and coexist. This portrayal of the characters not only demonstrates Shakespeare's dramatic greatness but also highlights the cultural problems and limitations of his time. Shakespeare thus establishes fate and free will as fundamental elements of tragic imagination, and this theme continues to resonate in the scholarly and dramatic tradition from generation to generation.

### **Literature Review**

Shakespearean tragedies have ever been remained an active part of discussion, in respect of the dominance between fate and free will. His characters have always become the victim of predetermined end, despite taken all the possible steps which can become a source of their safety, and fulfillment of desired end. Critics always take it, as a continuation and adaptation of Greek dramatic tradition and belief in the dominance of unforeseen forces. A. C. Bradley finds a closeness relevance between the both, Greek traditional heroes and Shakespeare's protagonists. Despite this Bradley also noted, Shakespeare never leaves his characters on the will of fate and circumstances. Yet their downfall is not only because of external pressures but also because of the choices and selection they make, that reveals their inner flaws. In this light, *Macbeth* is no helpless pawn of prophecy but a man who embraces ambition with full knowledge, wielding desire like a sword that eventually cuts him down.

Some critics refuse to choose between fate and freedom, seeing Shakespeare's genius in his ability to bind both into a single vision of tragedy. Northrop Frye (1957) argues that destiny in Shakespeare is never entirely external nor entirely internal, it is both hammer and hand. The witches in *Macbeth* may foretell his kingship, but the bloodshed that follows is born of his own decisions. Kiernan Ryan (2002) drives the point further: the power of Shakespeare's tragedies lies in their refusal to silence this contradiction. Instead, they expose the raw uncertainty of human existence, men forever caught in the tension between what is decreed and what is chosen. The world Shakespeare lived in only deepens the debate. E.M.W. Tillyard, (1944), in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, underscores how deeply providence ran through the veins of early modern England, where even tragedy could be seen as part of divine design. Yet later secular scholars, particularly in the twentieth century, stripped away divine scaffolding to uncover the raw psychology and existential grit of Shakespeare's heroes. Harold Bloom (1998) declares *Hamlet* and *Lear* as the first of modern men, giants who confront their own freedom and bear its crushing weight, even under the looming shadow of doom.

Taken together, the vast body of criticism is not a single banner but a battlefield of competing standards. Some critics sharpen their swords on the steel of classical fatalism, others wield

the Renaissance blade of humanism, while still others march under a banner that fuses the two. What becomes clear is that Shakespeare's tragedies cannot be pinned to a single explanation.

### **Analysis:**

At the core of Shakespeare's tragedies stands a raw and unrelenting conflict: the collision between forces that seem immovable and the choices men and women make in defiance of them. His plays do not merely bow before destiny; they expose the fragile yet fierce intersection where fate brushes against human will. Prophecies, omens, and signs of cosmic disorder may shadow the stage, but they are never chains that bind. Instead, Shakespeare casts them as riddles, open, suggestive, demanding interpretation. The power of his tragic vision lies not in characters surrendering to inevitability, but in their bold and often destructive attempt to wrestle with it. Their downfall is carved as much by the weight of their own decisions as by the pressures that surround them, making clear the harsh paradox of responsibility in a world where certainty is always out of reach.

In *Macbeth*, this conflict is brought out with great urgency and clarity. The witches greet him with words that seem to promise a fixed future, but their language is deliberately ambiguous and ambiguous. They do not present fate as a reality written in stone, but rather a glimpse of the possibilities that Macbeth himself decides to pursue. It is his own desire for power, his willingness to be seduced by others, and his readiness to embrace violence that transform these mysterious prophecies into bloody reality. Shakespeare does not portray Macbeth as a helpless man drifting with the tide of fate, but rather as someone who takes signs as permission and turns vague glimpses of the future into a path of cruel certainty. Thus, the drama shows that the consequences of the misuse of human freedom can prove to be more devastating than fate itself, and thus tragedy becomes the result not of inescapable fate but of wrong decisions.

This same conflict, between inevitable fate and human agency, also shapes *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, although expressed differently in the two plays. The king's disastrous decision in *King Lear* to divide his kingdom on the basis of empty praise illustrates how pride and bad judgment can lead to ruin. *The Tempest* gives the impression of cosmic chaos, but Shakespeare traces Lear's downfall to his blindness to truth and true love. In *Hamlet*, this conflict takes on another form. The ghost holds before him a fixed duty of revenge, but Hamlet's delay arises not from fate but from the conflict of his own doubts, conscience, and reflection. At the same time, the drama reminds us through accidents and coincidences that life is never entirely under human control. Combining these tragedies reveals Shakespeare's conception of human existence, in which both freedom and constraint are deeply intertwined. Fate may set the stage, but the burden of tragedy falls on decisions that expose human weaknesses and contradictions.

His tragic creations still capture viewers today because they reflect an eternal truth. Although much of life feels beyond our control, the decisions we make determine who we are and how we fall. This is why his tragedies survive to this day, because they highlight the fact that to be human is actually to be suspended between inevitable fate and freedom.

### **Fate and Free Will in *Macbeth***

In the opening lines of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare places his audience in a world charged with the tension between fate and choice. The play opens with the witches chanting:

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” (Act 1, Scene 1)

This line signals that the boundaries between destiny and decision will be blurred. Fate will not appear as a straightforward prophecy but as a riddle, and it is up to Macbeth to interpret and act upon it.

### **The Prophecy and the Spark of Ambition**

When the first time the witches’ prophecy, comes to Macbeth’s knowledge, “All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3), he is stunned. The witches never tell him to kill Duncan, nor do they map out how he will become king. Yet Macbeth immediately begins to imagine what could be:

“If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, Without my stir.” (1.3)

This is a crucial moment. On the surface, Macbeth acknowledges the possibility of fate, almost comforting himself that destiny could unfold without any action on his part. Yet the very fact that he considers this reveals the inner conflict: the seed of ambition is planted. Shakespeare shows how fate often works, not as an unavoidable script, but as a suggestion that tests human will.

### **Choice, Temptation, and Responsibility**

When Lady Macbeth hears of the prophecy, she interprets it differently. To her, the witches’ words are not fate to wait for but an opportunity to seize. She urges Macbeth to act, asking him to “feel like the innocent flower, but accompanied by the serpent”.

This moment is where free will enters decisively. The prophecy did not instruct murder, yet the Macbeths choose it as the path to fulfill what seems destined. Shakespeare makes it painfully clear that fate does not absolve them of responsibility. The prophecy may have opened a door, but Macbeth steps through it by choice.

### **The Illusion of Control**

After killing Duncan, Macbeth convinces himself that by acting, he has controlled fate. Yet Shakespeare shows that this is an illusion. Macbeth becomes obsessed with prophecy of the witches’ which says, “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth” (4.1). He interprets this as invincibility, a false comfort that fuels his reckless tyranny.

Yet, as with many riddles of fate, the language proves elusive. When Macduff discloses that he was “from his mother’s womb untimely ripped” (5.8), the seemingly unshakable prophecy unravels. What Macbeth had embraced as a fixed destiny is revealed instead as a play of words, a deception born of ambiguous interpretation. In this moment, the tragedy underscores the peril not only of prophecy itself but also of the human inclination to misconstrue destiny, mistaking obscurity for certainty.

### **Commentary: The Tragedy of Entangled Forces**

What makes *Macbeth* so compelling is the way Shakespeare refuses to let fate or free will stand alone. The witches create the conditions of temptation, but they do not force Macbeth’s hand. Macbeth chooses murder, yet he does so under the influence of an ambiguous prophecy that seems to promise greatness. His tragedy arises from the interplay between external suggestion and internal ambition.

In human terms, *Macbeth* reflects how life often feels: we may sense that certain opportunities, coincidences, or “twists of fate” come our way, but it is our response, our choices, that shape the outcome. Fate may set the stage, but free will writes the script.

Macbeth's downfall is tragic not because he is bound to destiny, but because he mistakes prophecy for permission and confuses possibility with necessity.

### **Hamlet's Experience and the Burden of Choice**

At the heart of *Hamlet* lies one of the most human struggles: the weight of having to choose when every choice feels uncertain. Unlike *Macbeth*, where fate seems to push a character forward, Hamlet is paralyzed by the sheer gravity of decision. His tragedy lies not in the absence of choice, but in being crushed beneath it.

### **The Arrival of Ghost and Unavoidable the Call of Fate**

The Journey of Hamlet begins with the appearance of that ghost, who reveals the murder of King Hamlet and demands revenge:

"If thou didst ever thy dear father love—Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." (1.5)

This command feels like fate speaking directly to Hamlet. The ghost places him in a role not of his choosing, a son burdened with restoring honor and justice. Yet Shakespeare complicates this sense of destiny. Is the ghost a true spirit or a devil deceiving him? Hamlet himself worries:

"The spirit that I have seen- May be the devil." (2.2)

Here, Hamlet hesitates. Unlike Macbeth, who acts quickly under prophecy, Hamlet cannot blindly trust fate. He knows that to follow the ghost's command is to step into uncertainty, and he feels the crushing responsibility of making the right choice.

### **The Paralysis of Decision**

Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, "*To be, or not to be*" (3.1), is not simply about suicide; it is about the unbearable burden of decision. He reflects on whether it is nobler to endure suffering or to act against it, knowing that either path carries risk:

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

Our protagonist knows he must choose, but thought itself becomes his obstacle. He represents the Renaissance human being, aware of agency, aware of responsibility, yet so conscious of consequence that freedom feels like a trap. His tragedy lies in the paralysis of overthinking, where free will becomes its own prison.

### **Providence and the Surrender to Fate**

By the final act, Hamlet's struggle shifts. After his return from England, he adopts a more fatalistic outlook:

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will." (5.2)

The line is highly crucial. Hamlet accepts that human beings may act, may "rough-hew" their lives, but ultimately, a higher force shapes the outcome. This shift shows Hamlet finding relief in surrendering part of his burden to fate. By Act V, he no longer seeks certainty; he accepts that death will come when it must, "The readiness is all."

### **Commentary: The Tragedy of Human Responsibility**

What makes Hamlet's story so deeply human is not simply his delay but his awareness of responsibility. The ghost gives him a role shaped by fate, but Hamlet insists on testing it, questioning it, and struggling to act rightly. This insistence reveals both his strength and his weakness. His free will is genuine, but it weighs on him so heavily that it paralyzes him.

In modern terms, Hamlet's tragedy resonates with anyone who has stood before a life-changing choice and felt overwhelmed by doubt. Shakespeare suggests that freedom is not always liberating, it can be terrifying. Hamlet's journey reminds us that to be human is to live in the tension between fate and free will, between the roles we are given and the choices we must make.

### **Othello: Passion, Manipulation, and Responsibility**

If *Macbeth* dramatizes ambition under prophecy and *Hamlet* wrestles with the weight of decision, *Othello* shows how passion, when manipulated, can masquerade as fate. What makes this play heartbreaking is that Othello appears trapped by forces beyond his control, yet his downfall still rests on choices born of jealousy and insecurity.

#### **The Spark of Manipulation**

From the start, Iago works like a twisted playwright, scripting Othello's downfall. His words act as the poison of suggestion:

"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on." (3.3)

Ironically, while pretending to warn Othello, Iago plants the very suspicion that will consume him. This is manipulation at its most dangerous, it feels like an external fate, something imposed on Othello's life. But Shakespeare also makes clear that Iago cannot succeed without finding fertile ground in Othello's own passions.

#### **Passion and the Loss of Reason**

Othello is not naturally jealous, but once the seed of doubt is planted, passion quickly overwhelms reason. His language shifts from calm dignity to violent imagery:

"Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!

Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne

To tyrannous hate!" (3.3)

Here we see the turning point. Othello surrenders love to passion, reason to emotion. His transformation shows how human vulnerability allows manipulation to take root. Shakespeare portrays passion as a double-edged sword, it gives Othello his greatness as a lover and leader, but it also makes him dangerously easy to unbalance.

#### **Responsibility and Tragic Choice**

Yet Shakespeare does not absolve Othello. Even under Iago's manipulation, Othello makes choices. He chooses to believe suspicion over trust. He chooses violence over dialogue. When he murders Desdemona, he tries to frame it as justice:

"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men." (5.2)

The justification reveals how Othello attempts to mask choice as necessity, as if fate demanded it. But the audience knows otherwise. The tragedy cuts deep because we recognize that, manipulated though he was, Othello's actions are his own.

#### **The Collapse of Illusion**

When the truth is revealed, Othello sees the terrible interplay of forces, his own passion, Iago's deception, and his responsibility for action:

"Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely but too well;

Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme.” (5.2)

This painful confession is vividly showcase human misery and limitation. Othello is not a puppet of fate, nor purely a victim of Iago. He is a man who loved intensely, who was deceived, and who made devastating choices. Shakespeare leaves us with a tragedy born not of destiny alone, but of the way passion, manipulation, and responsibility can work hand in hand to destroy a life.

### **King Lear: Cosmic Disorder and Human Blindness**

*King Lear* is perhaps Shakespeare’s most devastating meditation on the fragility of human life. Unlike *Macbeth*, where prophecy tempts ambition, or *Othello*, where passion fuels jealousy, Lear’s tragedy emerges from a collision between **cosmic disorder**, a sense that the universe itself is broken, and **human blindness**, the inability to see truth until it is too late.

#### **Blindness at the Beginning**

Lear’s downfall begins not with fate but with his own blindness. In the famous “love test” scene, he demands his daughters declare their affection publicly:

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
That we our largest bounty may extend  
Where nature doth with merit challenge.” (1.1)

King Lear cannot see through Goneril and Regan’s flattery, nor can he recognize Cordelia’s quiet honesty. His blindness is not physical but emotional: he confuses words with truth, appearance with reality. In this blindness, he disrupts the natural order of kingship and family, setting the stage for cosmic disorder.

#### **The Cries against the Universe**

As the kingdom unravels, the sense of cosmic imbalance grows. Lear himself is at rage against the severe storm on the heath:

“I am a man  
More sinned against than sinning.” (3.2)

Here the storm is more than weather, it mirrors the chaos Lear has unleashed by dividing the kingdom. Shakespeare blurs the line between external and internal disorder: the natural world reflects the human world’s collapse. The storm feels like the universe crying out against injustice, yet it also exposes Lear’s blindness to his own role in causing it.

#### **Gloucester’s Literal Blindness**

Shakespeare reinforces the theme of blindness through Gloucester’s subplot. After being deceived by Edmund, Gloucester condemns Edgar and later suffers brutal physical blinding:

“I stumbled when I saw.” (4.1)

This paradox captures the play’s essence: vision without insight is useless, and only in literal blindness does Gloucester begin to perceive truth. His suffering parallels Lear’s, showing that human blindness contributes as much to tragedy as any sense of cosmic fate.

#### **Cosmic Disorder and Human Fragility**

The most haunting aspect of *King Lear* is its refusal to offer simple moral order. Characters cry out against the heavens, lamentation of Gloucester,

“As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods;  
They kill us for their sport.” (4.1)

The lines above mentioned express the terrifying sense that the universe is indifferent, that suffering is not always deserved. Shakespeare sets the vast sense of cosmic disorder against

the very real flaws of human nature, Lear's impulsive judgment, Gloucester's naïve trust, and Edmund's relentless ambition. The tragedy, then, does not come from one source alone but from the collision of a chaotic universe with the weaknesses of those caught inside it.

### Conclusion

When we look closely at Shakespeare's tragedies, one theme becomes undeniable: fate and free will cannot be separated into neat categories. They are always entangled, reflecting the same uncertainty and complexity that mark real human life. From the classical tradition, Shakespeare inherited the idea that destiny sets boundaries for human existence, that unseen powers such as the gods, prophecy, or the chaos of the universe hold sway over life.

As a writer of the Renaissance, an age that valued human choice and individuality, Shakespeare gave voice to the idea that the decisions we make, whether wise or flawed, ultimately shape who we become. In *Macbeth*, the witches' prophecy sets the stage, but it is Macbeth's own ambition and deliberate actions that turn possibility into destruction. In all the above mentioned plays we see the oscillation and the state of confusion between to be and not to be, throughout the plays. Instead, he places us in the uneasy space between them, between the ancient belief in destiny and the Renaissance conviction that human beings carve their own path. Circumstances, chance, and powers greater than ourselves inevitably affect our lives, yet within those boundaries our choices still matter. Tragedy, for Shakespeare, emerges not from fate alone or free will alone, but from the shadowed space where the two converge.

This is why his tragedies endure. They do not declare us as masters of our own lives nor as helpless victims of destiny. They reflect our own condition, where choice and inevitability always overlap. In showing this, Shakespeare bridged the classical and the modern, and more importantly, captured a truth that continues to speak across centuries: to live as human is to choose, to err, and to forever wrestle with the haunting question of how much of our story is truly our own.

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