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Theatre History CTA 153

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Six Faces of Death by Murder

Death appears as a primary focus of this semester's plays. As such, I will be presenting a season of plays entitled Six Faces of Death by Murder. I have selected six plays that portray different underlying reasons for violent death. As an administrative assistant to the Warden of a maximum security state penitentiary, I often study case histories of inmates that are housed for a sentence of murder. Although the reason a person murders is very individualized, I believe there are some commonalities. I noted that these six plays fall into three major categories, each with two thematic elements.

The first two plays are examples of envy and its derivatives. Envy is an emotion that begins as a seed and grows like a weed. Without being watered or tended to, it continues to grow and can choke out all beauty. It is like a poison and in this context, eventually leads to death, either by killing externally or internally, by death of self. The second two plays show death stemming from anger, while the third set is related to death in cultural war.

The first play of the season being presented is *Hamlet*. Written in 1600-1601 by William Shakespeare, it is a play that deals with envy leading to the murder of Hamlet's father (Gainor, Garner and Puchner 719; vol. 1). This death actually takes place before the play begins, but is the basis for the play itself. It is revealed to Hamlet by a ghost that his uncle, King Claudius, is the one who killed his father in order to gain access to the throne. *Hamlet* contains all the elements necessary for an Elizabethan revenge play (Gainor, Garner and Puchner 721; vol. 1). As a perfect

example of murder to exact a prize, King Claudius is a victim of internal greed. He covets the kingdom and eventually resorts to murder to get the kingdom from Hamlet's father. However, there seems to be a missing characteristic of greed in the man Hamlet. He knows he should avenge his father's death, and is aware that with his uncle's death, he would gain the throne. This does not occur. Instead the play ends with the deaths of all in the family. Gainor, Garner and Puchner state, "One could argue that the swift execution of justice on Claudius by Hamlet in the first act would have saved the lives of all of them" (722; vol. 1). This play shows the consequence of Claudius' envy that resulted in the death of Hamlet's father.

The second play, *Death of a Salesman*, written by Arthur Miller in 1949, tells of Willy Loman, a salesman who is not a successful salesman by his standards. However, we learn that his success is a moving target, driven by his envy of others' success. It appears as though he cannot live up to his own expectations, nor can his sons. He looks to others to determine the meaning of success, rather than looking inside himself. The emotion of envy grows to a fevered pitch. He can no longer live with his failure or his son's failures. Suicide, as murder of self, ensues. Gainor, Garner and Puchner state, "This salesman is worth, in the end, only the dollar amount of the insurance policy on his life" (757; vol. 2). The second play deals with the tragic consequences of envy resulting in Willy Loman's suicide or death of himself.

Play number three, *Dulcitius*, is written by Hrotsvit around 965 to 975. She is the first known Christian dramatist (Gainor, Garner and Puchner 427; vol. 1). Hrotsvit had a way of placing wicked men in situations where their evil deeds were thwarted by Divine Guidance. Count Sissinus, who represents cruelty, was deluded into thinking the girls Agape, Chionia, and Hirena would bow down and give in to his desires (Gainor, Garner, and Puchner 430; vol. 1). Dulcitius is a governor who is used to having his own way. He is also overcome with lust for

Agape, Chionia, and Hirena. His advances are rebuffed, and Dulcitius, in anger, orders their deaths. Dulcitius, as well as Count Sissinus, experienced anger from publicly losing face in front of their close associates. *Dulcitius* has many facets, but the one that is of interest in this series is the anger that envelops Dulcitius when he cannot have any of the three virgins. Hrotsvit suggests that even in death, these three women are victorious as, “They withstand torture and death, thereby overpowering their male aggressors, whom they show to be impotent in the face of Christian faith” (431; vol. 1). These deaths were as a direct result of anger.

Trifles, as play number four, was written by the American Susan Glaspell in the year 1916. The murder takes place before we are brought into the first scene. Gainor, Garner and Puchner state, “Part of the ongoing appeal of *Trifles* surely stems from its reliance on the convention of the murder mystery” (475; vol. 2). Inclusion of this play first necessitated a determination of a verdict which was not offered in the original play. Reaching a verdict allows us to see the anger that swept over Mrs. Minnie Wright. In my opinion, years of shame that she felt and years of being abused, led to Mr. John Wright’s death. It appears as though it was precipitated by Mr. Wright killing her canary. This canary represented her youth, her freedom, and the right to express that freedom in song. As Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale uncovered the evidence of the canary, they were sure Mrs. Wright had killed her husband because she finally snapped under the weight of abuse. Her beautiful voice had been stilled by Mr. Wright, just as her canary’s beautiful voice. Mr. Wright was killed by strangling, just as her canary was. His death was a direct result of anger.

War is the common theme for the last two plays. This category begins with *Oedipus the King*, written by Sophocles around 428 B.C.E. King Oedipus has been told by an oracle that the plague in Delphi is a direct result of the former king’s murderer still being present in Thebes

(Gainor, Garner and Puchner 141; vol. 1). Oedipus must find the murderer to rid Delphi of the curse causing the plague and to secure his position as king. Killing for the sake of saving the kingdom is for a noble cause and is the basis for a premeditated war. The inclusion of this play takes liberty with the theme of death as the murder affecting the well-being of Delphi takes place prior to the beginning of the play. However, it gives new light to the reason for murder being “for one’s country”. Although a tragedy, murder to revenge a family member is an honor. The impending death is a premeditated act of war.

The last play in the series is *Song of Death* (1950) by Tawfiq Al-Hakim. *Song of Death* takes place in Upper Egypt. Asikir’s husband was murdered seventeen years ago. Egyptian custom says that his murder must be avenged by a son, using the same weapon that killed his father. Asikir’s son, Ilwan was sent away as a child. As the play opens, Asikir believes that Ilwan is coming back to the village to exact retribution for his father’s murder. (Gainor, Garner and Puchner 829; vol. 2). Ilwan has been at a theology school and comes back only to challenge the tradition of killing the one that killed his father. She is adamant that he must kill to exact revenge and as the play unfolds, “Her single-minded focus on killing drives all tenderness from her motherly love, leaving her with nothing but hatred on her mind and in her heart” (Gainor, Garner and Puchner 829; vol. 2).

I will be producing this last play, but will change the demographics to a small gang-infested suburb in New York. The characters can remain the same, but it will be Ilwan telling his mother that she must allow him to avenge his brother’s death. In the same tradition, a death must occur to wipe out the murder of a family member. Utilizing some of the tradition of song being included in *Song of Death*, song will be included in this version, taking on some of the musical

score from *West Side Story*. Although a tragedy, murder to revenge a family member is an honor. The impending death in this play is a premeditated act of war.

In conclusion, this season's plays focus on stories of reprehensible, understandable and honorable death by murder. Choosing to produce the plays in a non-chronological order is a conscious choice. Producing them chronologically would remove the focus of the mystery of death itself, instead placing the focus on what comes next. These six plays represent a phenomenon that transcends all time. Murder is still being portrayed in plays, movies, TV, and novels. A good murder mystery is always good entertainment, whether it is factored into comedies, such as *Murder She Wrote* or *Monk*, or in more serious settings such as *Ellery Queen's Mystery Theater* or *NCIS*. Murder is still being committed in the name of revenge, anger, as a response to abuse, and as a result of losing all hope. And murder is still a popular plot for a production of any media. As such, I present the season on *Six Faces of Death by Murder*.

Works Cited

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