

# EXPLORING THEMES OF JUSTICE IN SHAKESPEARE AND MODERN LEGAL DRAMAS

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## Abstract

*The present paper addresses the issue of justice as interpreted in the context of Shakespearean works and as it reflects through modern interpretation in contemporary legal drama. Shakespeare's plays like The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure, and Hamlet enlighten upon conflict between law and morality, element of agent in pursuit of justice, and the personal cost incurred to seek revenge. Besides, the paper analyses the way contemporary dramas about the law, such as To Kill a Mockingbird, The Good Wife, and 12 Angry Men, raise questions about racial prejudice, the difficulty of moral decision-making, and questions regarding the law itself. The research reveals the dynamic nature of justice by comparing Shakespearean justice with modern portrayals, where personal desires, societal norms, and moral considerations intersect, offering insights into how these themes continue to resonate across time periods.*

**Keywords:** Justice, Shakespeare, Legal Dramas, Morality, Moral dilemmas

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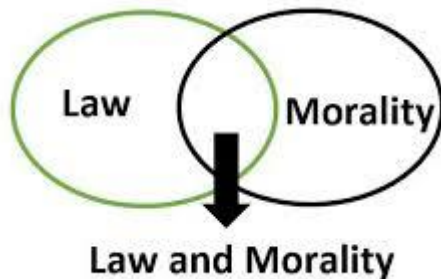
## 1. INTRODUCTION

Justice is one of the prominent themes which, for so long, has been very focal in literature and has taken changes in the description of it as a moral as well as legal ideal. This timeless theme comes in various forms through the various ages, indicating how values in society and the legal systems change with time. Often, in Shakespeare's works-comedy, history, and tragedy, justice is given a life through winding narratives that problematize the personal, moral, and political elements of action among humans. His plays often involve characters who must navigate a complex web of justice within a framework that includes personal vengeance, political corruption, and legal institutions, all of which intersect with the broader themes of power and morality. For instance, The Merchant of Venice by Shakespeare demonstrates how the letter and the moral content of the law are in complete conflict with one another, in the example where Shylock demands a pound of flesh from the character of Shylock and Portia intervened on the plea of mercy.

Modern legal dramas are contemporary legal system and justice-themes that include racial bias, institutional corruption, and the erosion of rights for the individual. Justice, as it stands here, is a dynamic factor influenced by historical and cultural contexts-thus being contested in maneuverings of the legal and power plays working within public opinion. From this point of view, there has to be little difference between the abstract principles discussed in Shakespearean works and the implementation of these principles in real life, where personal biases, societal norms, and institutional power may shape their interpretations.

### 1.1. The Tension Between Law and Morality

Thus, justice does not quite exist in absolute terms; rather, it has to be bargained for between law and morals. Characters in Shakespeare's plays often wrestle with the moral meaning of what they do, even if that what they do is legally permitted.



**Figure 1:** Law and Morality

For instance, in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke uses the law as a tool for his own discretion to mete out justice in the way he likes. Similarly, in modern legal dramas, whether the law is applied strictly or interpreted in accordance with personal ethics remains central to the debate. Shows like *The Good Wife* will always be plumbing the tension of doing what's legally right while doing what's morally just because of the very fact that a character has to go through their day-to-day ethical dilemmas in becoming a lawyer.

### 1.2. Character Agency in the Pursuit of Justice

Most essential element Shakespeare unfolds in his own works as well as in dramas of modern judiciary is character agency, where struggles and choices regarding personal issues to be resolved bring justice. A Shakespearean creation has to go through the predicament of seeking legal justice but at the expense of personal morals, such as Hamlet wanting revenge or even King Lear showing no justice administered within his immediate family. In contemporary legal drama, the character is often forced into such a similarly challenging predicament that the personal values, aspirations, and the moral framework for the character decides the action. It becomes one of the most vital themes for choosing; it explains that justice can be as individualistic as a matter of decision-making as well as it would be about outer legal systems or social norms.

## 2. JUSTICE IN SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

In the case of justice, there have been multiple themes by Shakespeare, such as the quest for revenge and retribution, and the intricate concept of mercy and forgiveness. Sometimes Shakespeare has written about flaws in the law and how it struggles with justice and sympathy, as in the cases of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, and *King Lear*. For example, while the *Merchant of Venice* utilizes the framework of legal contracts to show that justice has been served, it at the same time subverts the same actuality of law with mercy, humanity and grace. *Measure for Measure* presents questions on the balance of power and who is ethically accountable with the manipulation of power by the Duke.

Shakespeare also connects with the individual cost of seeking justice. For example, there is the issue of trying to get justice in the case with Hamlet's uncle Claudius, plus the dimness of moralism and also the tolling of revenge by getting justice. The tragic effect of family injustice and destruction becomes inevitable if not judged justly, according to King Lear's philosophy. That makes it bring about a concern about the warfare between the justice law institution and human nature on brutality or its softness.

## 2.1. Justice and Mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*

In *Hamlet*, the pursuit of justice by the protagonist against his uncle Claudius is very much inextricably linked with personal and moral uncertainty. Hamlet's pursuit of revenge becomes a dominating force that cuts him off from others, breaking down relationships and increasing inner turmoil. His hesitation and philosophic musings on justice—the moral rightness of revenge and whether it could be justified through his wrongs—make his quest far from clear-cut. Hamlet's intellectual wrestling over justice, in that he debates over fate, morality, and responsibility, prevents him from taking any action.



**Figure 2:** Justice and Mercy

Shakespeare's plays describe how the force of justice is the destructive power, where personal obsession and uncertainty conspire to make both protagonists' emotional and tragic consequences. In *King Lear*, failure to actually do fair judgment leads the downfall of the king and those around him. Lear's fantasies and misjudgments, such as those with his daughters, mean personal loss and betrayal. In general, justice operated under the influence of pride and bad judgment becomes destructive of bond between families and the power to control authority.

## 2.2. Power and Ethics in *Measure for Measure*

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare explores the complicated relationship between power and ethics by using the legal system as manipulated by the duke. The duke, disguised as a friar, observes his deputy, Angelo, who strictly enforces moral laws in Vienna. The secret intervention of the duke by manipulating the events around Isabella's plea for mercy challenges the boundary of ethical leadership. While he's busy restoring order in the city with justice, how he is operating raises so much moral dilemmas about his integrities given the places in which they place themselves. There could be many lines of actions seen in how Duke Vincent behaves about the powers at play by relating that one had to perform to achieve some goal for good eventually. This ends up forcing the audience to question the tension that exists between moral righteousness and ethical compromises leaders have to make in their bid when they feel justified using power to pursue their aim.

## 2.3. The Personal Costs of Seeking Justice in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

As illustrated both in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, pursuing justice comes with a very expensive personal cost—the end result of retribution being achieved at the price of the person. In the play *Hamlet*, his obsessive need to get revenge for the murder of his father drags him into an ethical quagmire; hesitancy, intellectual reflection, and existential doubts regarding justice become a paralyzing force. Hamlet's inner turmoil regarding whether revenge is morally right, with his apprehension at committing an immoral act, makes him postpone action over and over again, leading to the deaths of innocent people—Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and his mother. His failure to act in any decisive way, combined with his continually growing alienation from people around him, clearly

demonstrates how personal justice seeks means to destroy all relationships, mental stability, and ultimately life. In a similar way, King Lear stresses how the personal judgment proves destructive in pursuing justice. Thus, by dividing his kingdom on a whim rather than according to some true worthiness, Lear initiates a whole train of tragedies that ultimately rend asunder both his family and kingdom. Through this, personal loss, suffering, and betrayal result, brought about by the failure to understand his daughter's loyalty, who happens to be Cordelia, when his daughters have Goneril and Regan as the one betraying his loyalty. On Lear's downfall to madness, pride and foolish judgments drive pursuit to justice resulting in the demolition of family relations, the tearing of his throne down, and eventual death. Both the plays poignantly depict how the pursuit of justice, when it becomes clouded with personal emotions, flaws, and moral uncertainties, can cause irrevocable harm not only to the person seeking justice but also to others around them.

### 3. JUSTICE IN MODERN LEGAL DRAMAS

To Kill a Mockingbird, The Good Wife, and 12 Angry Men are examples of the more contemporary, direct expression of justice within the modern legal systems. In fact, many dramas center around the moral dilemmas of lawyers and judges, biases in the system, and individuals fighting for justice in a society that follows rules. The justice system in To Kill a Mockingbird is grossly inadequate and biased towards racial prejudices, determining the legal verdict. Atticus Finch is a beacon of morality against the corrupt, unjust system. The novel also revolves around themes of personal integrity and standing for what is right.



**Figure 3:** Law Drama

On the other hand, more often than not it is legal dramas like The Good Wife, which shows the complexity of legal procedures and the ethical compromise that lawyers would often face. The idea shows characters balancing the pursuit of justice with professional survival and personal ambition. Modern legal dramas also frequently analyze the role that public opinion and media play in forming ideas on justice, something that was certainly not so vital in Shakespearean times but certainly is in present society.

#### 3.1. Racial Injustice and Moral Integrity in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

In Harper Lee's novel To Kill a Mockingbird, the novel explores deep racial injustices built into the system of the South in America of the 1930s, and this case is done via the trial of the wrongly accused rape of a black man, Tom Robinson, on a white female. The justice system in the novel appears to be naturally biased, where racial prejudice dominates every aspect of the trial from the prosecutor to the jury biases. The extent to which racial discrimination distorts the concept of justice is further illustrated by Robinson's conviction despite strong evidence that shows his innocence. This novel vividly brings out how structures in society, including the judicial system, were set against blacks, especially when viewed through the lens of the deep-seated racism at that time.



**Figure 4:** Racism in to kill a Mocking Word

Atticus Finch, the father of the protagonist and a lawyer, symbolizes moral integrity in a society where justice is denied to the marginalized. He opposes racial biases and tries to remind the jurors of their responsibility to uphold justice. Atticus' speech to the jury urges them to look beyond their prejudices and deliver a verdict based on facts. Vilification was what Atticus was thrown at, but still, he persisted in his search for justice, offering his children significant experiences on standing for what is right. The novel by Lee demonstrates the power of personal conscience in the struggle against racial injustice.

### **3.2. Ethical Dilemmas and Professional Survival in *The Good Wife***

This would be in *The Good Wife* where the core legal battles faced by lawyer Alicia Florrick, would be about her ethical dilemmas while balancing the complexities of the legal system against her professional ambitions and personal life. Returning to the workforce in a scandalously different world by the side of her husband, Alicia is subjected to cases testing her idea of right and wrong and brings her face to cases that make really tough decisions regarding personal ethics or professional survival. It is an exhibition of all the compromises attorneys must make—especially in this high-stakes environment—when the pursuit of justice is necessarily intertwined with considerations about career advancement, client pressures, and monetary imperatives. Alicia was often faced with a situation where victory would mean that she had to make an ethical compromise and defend clientele that she morally opposed, making it difficult for her to come to a decision of balancing integrity and the realities of law practice. On the shoulders of Alicia, *The Good Wife* explains how lawyers of modern society go through such things and what kind of emotional and moral pay a person receives in return for working within a ruthless legal atmosphere, yet still fighting for justice.

## **4. THE ROLE OF CHARACTER AGENCY IN THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE**

Among other similarities between the works of Shakespeare and modern legal dramas is character agency in pursuing justice. This is an essential aspect that cuts across the whole Shakespearean experience, with most characters struggling with personal desires as opposed to greater societal and legal frameworks controlling them. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh is the representation of the strict, personal understanding of justice, whereas Portia's plea for mercy sets out to defy this notion and reveals the nature of justice in a more nuanced manner than its letter.

Characters in modern legal dramas similarly undergo moral and ethical decisions that characterize their pursuit of justice. Lawyers and protagonists will either pursue the truth, manipulate the law, or adhere to personal values. Character agency, therefore, has a very human element that gives justice the perspective of personal responsibility, effects of personal bias, and results of decisions in the context of the law.



#### 4.1. Personal Desires vs. Societal Norms in Shakespeare's Justice

One of the central tensions in Shakespeare's works is that between personal desire and societal expectations. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in relation to justice. Characters are constantly at odds with their own personal motives, which frequently work against the requirements and limitations imposed by the larger societal and legal structures in which they exist. This can be very evident in several of his works; here, personal scores, ambitions, and vengeance for revenge work out a plan for the significant characters, and eventually leads to tragedy. The exploration by Shakespeare of justice was more than its legal definitions because he also encompasses lines of morality and ethical points, which set grounds for the very reasons through which characters live; it reveals the complex interaction between personal agency and social responsibility within it.



**Figure 5:** Shakespeare's Justice: Individual Aspirations vs. Social Conventions

This can be highly visible in most of his work; here, personal scores, ambitions, and revenge for revenge chart a plan to the significant characters and eventually result in tragedy. It's more than what Shakespeare explored concerning justice, with him including lines of morality and ethical points in its definition; that set the grounds for very reasons through which characters live it; it's complex interaction of personal agency with social responsibility in itself.

#### 4.2. Moral and Ethical Choices in Modern Legal Dramas

Contemporary legal dramas lay bare a complex and heavy weight of moral and ethical dilemmas that face characters operating in a system marked with poor justice delivery mechanisms, biasness, and many competing interests. In the process, lawyers, judges, and the protagonists have had to make decisions based on the demands of professional obligations conflicting with personal values. Topmost in the list of central themes is the contention between doing what is right before the law and determining what is right on a moral sense. Characters have to contend weighing whether the search for the truth to severe injury might again injure their client or professional status, or whether it is permissible to twist the law in the process of attaining personal or professional benefit. For instance, within *The Good Wife*, Alicia Florrick's moral compass is constantly under test as she weighs her duties as a lawyer against her personal life, especially as her clients' cases involve morally ambiguous circumstances. The complexity of these ethical dilemmas arises in the pursuit of a career in law, where winning cases frequently supersedes the true intent of justice and pits personal ethics against professional survival.

In most legal dramas, the influence of personal biases on the pursuit of justice is explored because lawyers and law professionals are human beings with their experiences, prejudices, and moral beliefs. All these conflicts

propel the story forward as characters in a play try to reconcile their roles with the kind of personal code of ethics while leading to their moral compromise. Public opinion and the media affect the definition of what justice is, as is depicted in television shows like Law & Order, where characters have to try to comply with and find a balance between the demands of legal needs and the limitations imposed by public opinion. These thoughts remind one of the complexity of the justice process.

#### **4.3. Explain Character Agency and Its Impact on Justice**

Character agency is very significant in the definition of both the pursuit and execution of justice. Whether it's Shakespeare or modern legal drama, there is an importance in the part that Shakespeare did throughout his works by presenting characters with dilemmas in which they exerted free will against societal and legal systems striving to order morality. These characters' choices—the reasons behind them, are they personal interests, moral rectitudes, or a deep sense of immersion in honor—have more general implications throughout the plays than just defining justice. Consider, as an example, *The Merchant of Venice*: Shylock, who, because he must by law accept it, will only take one pound of flesh from Antonio: he is a personification of an inflexible notion of justice. However, Portia, dressed as the lawyer, stands apart from this attitude—mercy and strict legalism. The play, through the instrumentality of Portia, argues that justice is not only one-sided; mercy, pity, and a capability to transcend hard legalism are the components of justice. This interaction between Shylock's and Portia's views of justice underlines how the actions of individuals, shaped by personal values, can determine the outcomes of justice in a society governed by law.

It features, in current legal dramas, as a powerful theme of character agency into justice. Their choices, first of all those by the lawyers and law enforcers mean to be impactful in justice-related contexts. On one hand, *The Good Wife* moral dilemmas put Alicia Florrick's personal morality in friction with institutional bounds, and even those in similar dramatic contexts mean something important and distinctive. Collective agency plays a crucial role in the attainment of justice for *12 Angry Men*. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, personal integrity and responsibility in Atticus Finch's defense of Tom Robinson illustrate how personal integrity and responsibility in an individual can change the pursuit of justice. Both these Shakespearean works and plays on justice in modern law show that individual acts determine justice. Both highlight that justice is not static but rather fluctuates with human capabilities in terms of agency, moral judgment, and ethical decision-making.

#### **4.4. Character Agency and Its Impact on Justice**

Character agency contributes to proving and determining justice by speaking of the level of power defined by choices individuals make in legal and social systems. Just like Shakespeare's plays lay down, so does the contemporary drama of the legal world because characters are provoked by moral dilemmas and ethics that challenge them to act according to personal values, biases, and desires. Shakespeare unifies characters ranging from strict interpretation to literal observance, as is in the case of Shylock, and then to a knight such as Portia, in hope of justice and mercy, within *The Merchant of Venice*. Today series, too, *The Good Wife* and *12 Angry Men*, use personal choice that happens when determined by the lawyer, a member of the jury, or the main character that decides what finally happens as the fate of justice. These characters will have to navigate personal morals, professional duties, and social norms to reveal how individual decision-making affects the practice and meaning of justice. This, therefore, shows that human beings are very crucial in determining choices in any of the given contexts. Their choices show that justice is dynamic and subjective—an abstract principle formed by human beings.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear from Shakespearean works and modern legal drama that the interplay between complex legal systems, morality, and personal agency is quite intertwined. Using characters who experience moral dilemmas and Shakespeare's characterization of justice will allow a view of the inherent conflict between personal desires, societal norms, and flaws inherently within the legal system. Just like this, the modern-day drama about law reflects issues related to present days in association with prejudice, power, and ethical problems people face related to justice. The same thing is followed in both of these contexts that justice is something that cannot easily be pursued rather is a troublesome issue in regard to individual will, social issues, and the conflict that is between the law and morality.

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