In spite of the wide variety and richness of Renaissance drama, the four tragedies of Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* reveal a kind of maturity that is far from discernible in any of the English tragedies of the period. For the entire gamut of experience explored by these four tragedies not only authenticates Shakespeare's full realization of the tragic vision of life but also seems to confirm our sense of values that emerge from the nature of the tragic suffering. And it is especially in the ending of these plays that, we believe, the meaning and import of the tragic truth are best realized. It is, of course, true that the great diversity of tone and subject-matter hardly leaves any room for generalization. Yet the struggle continues unabated for deciphering common denominators that would make the study of tragedy seem more contemporary and intelligible. It would, therefore, be our endeavour, in the present chapter to see as to how and in what ways do the endings of the four major tragedies of Shakespeare illuminate our understanding of the tragic vision of life as embodied by the plays under discussion. We should, of course, like to consider the tragic vision as it manifests itself through the clash between the protagonist's private natural inclinations and his public response -- the kind of clash, in other words, that comes to light for the first time in Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, *Titus*
Andronicus. It is in this play that the issue is raised in its embryonic form for the first time. For Titus Andronicus presents the case of the passionately honest soul, unsuspicious of people and their motives being ultimately shocked out of complacency and hurled into a world of base violence, malice and corruption that succeeds in shattering his vision of the ideal world thus forcing upon him the onus of outrevenging revenge itself by undertaking enterprises of the most hateful kind. The clash between the individual's private inclinations and the external world of hostile circumstances which was destined to be a predominating preoccupation of the later tragedies is thus set forth quite early in this play. Although the circumstances under which the issue takes root are different for each of the later tragedies, the leitmotif, however, remains the same. But the issue as it figures in the later tragedies of Shakespeare attain a kind of maturity not to be found in Titus Andronicus. In the process, what we find in these plays is the playwright's growing awareness of the complex realities confronting the man in the society and the nature of his response to such realities. We should now like to turn to the four tragedies themselves and in line with the earlier chapters we intend to begin our discussion of the present chapter too with Hamlet.

I

In Hamlet, much like Titus the tragic vision can be understood only in relation to the position of the individual confronting the external world of hostile circumstances. But the issue here is much more complex than that of Titus. For in the early play, although the protagonist is placed in more or less the same situation as that of Hamlet, the nature of the
task Titus is called upon to undertake is made relatively easier by the fact that the abuses against which he is purportedly fighting are abundantly transparent. Moreover, Titus is his own general and has only to follow the dictates of his own conscience to proceed with the mission ahead rather than wait for the signal of an external force to act. But in the case of Hamlet there is an element of elusiveness about the nature of the evil he is brought into confrontation with insofar as the villainous designs of Claudius are not as socially transparent as those of the antagonists of Titus. Consequently, even when Hamlet discovers the truth and necessity of the mission of revenge as a mission of restoring public order, he is caught between the conflicting impulses of contemplation and action. On his own admission, therefore:

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;

And enterprises of great pitch and moment,

With this regard, their currents turn awry,

And lose the name of action.

(III.i.85-88)

What the conflict between the contradictory impulses reveals for us, then, is not merely the predicament of Hamlet the dramatic character but the problem of the individual in confrontation with a world crossed with doubts and uncertainties. And, therefore, as Arthur Sewell argues:

Unless what happens to the character is a mode of bringing together into more poignant relationship the character's way of meeting his world and
the comprehensive vision of the play, the character becomes no other than a ‘real person’, and we may be affected more but moved less. The emotion, like the incident which arouses it, should be a catalyst by means of which vision is released and enriched so that the particular case is apprehended in terms of the general case of man.¹

Referring further to the soliloquy

What is a man,

If his chief good and market of his time

Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,

Looking before and after, gave us not

That capability and god-like reason

To fust in us unus’d.

(IV.iv.33-39)

Sewell goes on to argue that:

Hamlet here is persuading himself that, whatever evil and whatever death may be the consequence of action, man’s reason is god-like and should not grow stale through lack of use .... the play is not the study of a man, but the study of moral nature of a man in his traffic with the outer world, to suggest that character and moral vision must be apprehended together, and

that when character is understood separately from moral vision it is not in fact understood at all.²

Character and tragic vision being thus inextricably linked, it is imperative that we understand the tension between the apparent opposites informing the play. And this recognition on our part makes the appreciation of the issue of contemplation and action vis-à-vis the mission of revenge essential to our understanding of the tragic vision of Hamlet.

From the very initial stages of the play till his return to Denmark from the voyage Hamlet is perennially torn between the claims of an individual life and those of the general social and moral order and finds himself placed in a situation that impels him to bring about a concordance between his private natural inclinations and the imposed public responsibilities. Having seen through the complexity of the task he curses his fate for being born to set right a time that “is out of joint”(I.v.189). It is by virtue of his birth that Hamlet finds his inner contemplative nature inextricably caught up with the inescapable public responsibilities.

As the Prince of Denmark he is condemned to be a part of the court world of Claudius the hypocrisy and the pomposity of which he despises. Laertes realizing the conditions thrust upon Hamlet by his position admonishes his sister:

His greatness weighed, his will is not his own

For he himself is subject to his birth.

He may not, as unvalued persons do,

²Ibid., p.59.
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The safety and health of this whole state.

(I.iii.17-21)

Again and again, then, Hamlet finds himself being propelled by an authority external to himself to realize the urgency to act decisively. It is for instance, both as a conscientious son as well as one concerned about the welfare of Denmark that he exclaims:

I will wipe away all trivial fond records, ...
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter.

(I.v.99-104)

As Charles J. Signet observes:

At this early stage, the hero’s ability to act depends on his acceptance of a ready-made set of values provided by this culture, and these values are often associated with paternal authority.³

But Hamlet at this stage is incapable of any significant action as he suffers from the impotency of resolving his inner turmoil into an ordered external expression in terms of concrete action. For the nature of the task he is called upon to execute so situates him that he finds himself being impelled into following a social ethic that is quite alien to his nature, viz., the ethic of revenge. It is the public nature of the action that perplexes Hamlet most. The sense of role-playing that he perceives in all acts of public import

incapacitates him from identifying any such act with the inclinations of his private self. He thus cuts himself away from a world of social involvement into a world of the inner self.

And in this state of isolation, Hamlet finds all around him, as Marjorie Garber points out:

... contrasting figures who emphasize his own isolation. He is not like Old Hamlet, as Laertes or Fortinbras, or the First Player, or the Gravedigger, nor is he like Claudius, or his 'schoolfellows', Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Two of the major soliloquies bear directly upon his sense of disjunction: the 'rogue and peasant slave' speech (II.ii.555-612) elaborately contrasts the First Player's response to fictive grief with Hamlet's failure to respond to reality; 'How all occasions do inform against me' (IV.iv.32-66) similarly contrasts Fortinbras's martial defense with Hamlet's inactivity. And dramatic events within the play seem to support his feeling of contrast with those he should resemble.4

However, the mission of revenge being the issue, the response to and through the implications of which the tragic vision is best realized, it will not be out of place here to consider at some length the kind of contrasting relationships in which Hamlet stands to the fellow avengers in the play.

Although the central focus of the revenge theme is rivetted on Hamlet, he is not the sole avenger in the play to be called upon to inflict vengeance on his father's murder. For the situation in which he finds himself placed is reflected in at least three other characters, viz., Laertes, Fortinbras and Pyrrhus, each of whom is committed to the task

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of avenging a father’s death. Laertes, in addition to avenging his father’s death has also to
avenge the death of his sister and Fortinbras has to shoulder the additional responsibility of
recovering the lands lost by his father. Hamlet sees through the situation of each of these
characters and finds, as it were, a paradigm of his own predicament.

Laertes, more than any one else strikes Hamlet as a case in apposition as borne out
by his sincere confession minutes before the crucial duel:

By the image of my cause, I see

The portraiture of his.

(V.ii.77-78)

Just as Hamlet has to carry out the burden of avenging his father’s murder and his
mother’s seduction by Claudius, Laertes, too, is faced with the task of avenging his
father’s death and his sister’s succumbing to death on account of Hamlet. But despite the
resemblance of their predicaments the attitudes they adopt to inflict vengeance upon their
enemies place them at diametrically opposite poles. Over and over again, do we come
across intents and strategies of the avengers that run contrary to each other’s plan of
action.

While Hamlet is torn between the call of duty and the concern for justice and calls
in question the very authenticity of the ghost’s tale even when it confirms the promptings
of his “prophetic soul” (I.v.40) and needs a “Murder of Gongazo” to “catch the
conscience of the king,” (II.ii.580) Laertes on mere suspicion of Claudius’s involvement in
his father’s death raises a successful rebellion against the King straightway and is ready to
“dare damnation” (IV.v.130) in order to have his revenge.
Whereas Hamlet’s perennial concern is to interpret his actions in the light of conscience:

Is’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm?

(V.ii.67-68)

Laertes has absolutely no qualms of conscience:

Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit?
I dare damnation: to this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I’ll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.

(IV.v.129-33)

Again, when Hamlet recoils from killing the King at his prayers as there is in such an act a “relish of salvation”(III.iii.92) Laertes hastens to declare his intentions ‘to cut his throat in the church’(IV.vii.27). He wouldn’t even mind subscribing to the villainous suggestion of Claudius to use unabated foil against his adversary who being:

Most generous and free from all contriving
Will not peruse the foils.

(IV.vii.134-36)

Although the contrast between these two avengers has been much commented upon on an important feature of the contrast that has not received the critical attention it
deserves as acclaimed by Harold Jenkins is the duality of Hamlet's role as both agent and victim:

The hero charged with a deed of vengeance now also incurs vengeance. The situation of revenge is revealed as one in which the same man may act both parts; and the paradox of man's dual nature, compound of nobility and baseness, god and beast, repeatedly placed before us in the words of the play and represents in its action in the contrasting brother kings, is also exemplified in the hero's dual role.5

In other words, Hamlet in himself combines the dual heritage from the brother kings nobility on the one side and baseness on the other.

But the resemblance of their guilts notwithstanding, it would be a travesty of justice to place Hamlet and Claudius on the same plane as murderers. For while Hamlet kills Polonius by pure accident ["I took thee to be thy better"(III.iv.33)], Claudius commits a "Murder most foul ... strange and unnatural"(I.v.27-28). There is thus a world of difference with regard to the degree of their crimes although that does not exculpate Hamlet from the sin of murder he has tainted himself with.

What, however, is striking about the Hamlet-Laertes juxtaposition is the intensification of the effect of the contrast between the vigour and haste of Laertes and the circumspection and constancy of purpose which so characterize Hamlet. As Bernard McElroy quite succinctly observes:

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Though Laertes's uncritical determination does succeed in getting him his revenge, it also makes him the ignominious instrument of a usurper-regicide, debases such nobility as he has, and brings about his just death—all because he specifically lacks the circumspection and skepticism about appearance and the passion for truth that characterize Hamlet.⁶

This, then, is the essential point Shakespeare has in mind in the contrast between the two avengers.

Fortinbras is another character presented as a foil to Hamlet. He too like Laertes is contrasted with Hamlet and quite significantly becomes in the end what Hamlet rightfully should have been, viz., the King of Denmark. Although he too has a father's death to avenge and has to recover lands lost by his father our impression of him at the beginning is not one of a “paragon of animals”(II.ii.300) but of a wayward and reckless youth shirking up:

... a list of lawless resolutes

For food and diet, to some enterprise

That hath a stomach in't

(I.i.98-100)

Later on we are told he is ready to lead twenty thousand men to their deaths “for a fantasy and trick of fame”(IV.iv.61). Yet Hamlet calls him “a tender and delicate prince” (IV.iv.48) and wistfully endorses his way of doing things:

   Rightly to be great

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Is not to stir without great argument
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake

(IV.iv 48-56)

Hamlet’s laudatory appraisal of Fortinbras’s conduct can only be explained as the natural outcome of a mind thwarted by its own inactivity brought into the presence of one characterized by boisterous activity. So when Hamlet lends his “dying voice”(V.ii.338) in favour of Fortinbras it is because his concern for the welfare of Denmark leads him to think that it is only a man like Fortinbras, so full of resolve and energy, and so unlike himself, who would be able to accomplish the task he himself could not.

In the same way, one can discern obvious parallels of the Hamlet situation in the Dido play with Pyrrhus faced with the task of avenging the father and the “mobled Queen’s”(II.ii.477) ‘burst of clamour’(II.ii.490) reminding of Gertrude who

... follow’d my poor father’s body,

Like Niobe: all tears,

(I.ii.148-49)

The hellish Pyrrhus whose arms are as “black as his purpose” (II.ii 428) and one who is capable of making “malicious sport / in mincing with his sword her husband’s limbs” (II.ii.488-89) of an aged Priam not apparently guilty of murder for killing Pyrrhus’s father in the battlefield is contrasted with the more sober Prince who finds it a bitter business to kill the man who has most unlawfully murdered his father and seduced his mother. Hamlet longs for Pyrrhus’s ruthlessness whose savage deeds remind him that he is
... pigeon-liver’d and lack gall

to make oppression bitter

(II.ii.572-73)

In addition to all these fellow-avengers there is yet one more foil in the person of Horatio who not only serves the purpose of the Chorus in the play but also happens to be the only confidant of Hamlet and almost “prefigures Hamlet’s transformation from skeptic to believer, not specifically about the Ghost, but in terms of general philosophical disposition.” 7 Hamlet is all praise for Horatio as he finds in Horatio’s qualities a reflection of his own weakness:

... for thou hast been

As one, in suff’ring all, that suffers nothing;

A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards

Hast ta’en with equal thanks

(III.ii.61-64)

Horatio represents the standard by which Hamlet measures his aberrant self and anticipates in this regard the parallel role of Banquo in Macbeth and Edgar in King Lear. He is the only character in the play who remains successful till the end in keeping the passions well under control. It is precisely this triumph on the part of Horatio that prompts a passionate Hamlet to exclaim:

Give me that man

that is not passion’s slave, and I shall wear him

In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,

As I do thee.

(III.i.67-70)

Horatio in other words is the well balanced stoic whereas Hamlet himself self-confessedly is subject to fits of passion lacking a proper equanimity of mind. Horatio is also the solitary figure in the play who remains totally unaffected by the revenge motif.

The obvious contrasts that mark Hamlet’s response to situations in which others around him are identically placed distance him from the centre of creative activity into a secluded inner life thus aggravating the emotional turmoils experienced. For, the sense of isolation that culpably propels Hamlet to a life of total inactivity tears his world asunder and he subjects himself to self-reproaches of the most caustic kind:

O! What a rogue and peasant slave am I

Yet I,

A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,

Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,

And can say nothing; ....

Am I a coward?

Who calls me villain?

(II.ii.523-46)

By leading a life divorced from social involvement he denies himself the opportunities of an integrated being in whom the claims of the individual life corresponds with the social
And the painful detachment from a society necessitated by the very nature of its political degeneration and by the violation of its most sacred bonds incinerates Hamlet's sense of reality so completely that the only alternative that he can think of is to shuffle off "the moral coil" (III.i.67).

But things take a sudden dramatic and decisive turn in the last scene of the play as Hamlet the morbid Prince of the earlier scenes reintegrates his personality and shows an understanding more mature and clear-sighted as compared to his confused behaviour of the early scenes. After his return from the voyage he is quite significantly a visibly changed man. He is no longer the tormented soul of the earlier scenes seeking release from life and its concomitant evils cursing his fate for being born to set things right when "the time is out of joint" (I.v.189). Nor is he preoccupied with the "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" (I.ii.133) ways of the world or musing any more on "the dread of something after death" (III.i.78). He is now totally convinced of the need to repose his faith in a divine order that gives shapes and purposes to our lives. As he narrates his experiences of the voyage to Horatio relating to his miraculous escape from death by means of a forged commission substituting the one which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were bearing he expresses his confidence in the shaping influence of a divine order:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will

(V.ii.9-10)

Such is his faith in that power that even in the sealing of the forged commission he finds "heaven ordinant" (V.ii.48). Again, when he is asked by Horatio to act with haste before
the arrival of news from England about the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern his remark is tremendously reassuring: "the interim is mine." (V.ii.73). Yet tinged with this reassurance is the premonition of his impending death. What, however, is significant is how the calm acceptance of it differs from the earlier contemplation of "self-slaughter" (I.ii.32). When asked by Horatio whether the duel with Laertes could be postponed to a further date his reply is:

> We defy augury: there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it will be not now, yet it will come -- the readiness is all

(V.ii.202-05)

Armed thus with such profound confidence in the execution of divine justice he seeks to vindicate the need to annihilate the King in order to restore health and normalcy in the state of Denmark after the recrudescence of natural order:

> ... is't not perfect conscience  
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil ?

(V.ii.68-70)

He thus begins to see himself in conformity with the fundamental Elizabethan assumption, as an essential part of that universal code that "makes the structure of the world of living beings and of society a simple unity created by the hand of God."8 He understands how

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important it is for him in the scheme of this order to know both himself and the role
assigned to him. He is now resolved to restore the much severed bond with the society by
committing himself to the task of cleansing it of the ulcer, that is Claudius. Hamlet
realizes like Ulysses in Troilus and Cressida that

... no man is the lord of anything

Though in and of him there be much consisting,

Till he communicates his parts to others;

(III iii.115-17)

After such clear knowledge of the mission of his life Hamlet grabs at once the opportunity,
when it comes to commit the last and desultory but momentous act of his life by killing the
King the moment the Queen falls dead and he gathers from Laertes that he too has been
mortally wounded.

It is difficult to subscribe to the views shared by critics that Hamlet fails to act in
the true sense as the rash and impulsive way in which he kills Claudius is absolutely
unpremeditated. On the contrary, the moment he strikes the King is the moment he has all
along been anticipating. It is the moment when the nature of the evil Claudius has
indulged in is exposed in its naked realism. This then is the kind of exposure -- the "horrid
hent" -- Hamlet had in mind when he spared the King at his prayers:

Up sword, and know thou a more horrid hent

... or about some act

That has no relish of salvation in't.

(III.iii.88-92)
Moreover, it is important for us to realize that Hamlet must not only execute justice but also seen as doing so. That is why he asks Horatio to report his cause aright.

It is, of course, true that the opportunity to act decisively comes to Hamlet as a Providential offer, but the opportunity provided he does not fail to make the best possible use of it. What is significant is that he has already expressed his willingness to accept the authority of a divinity “that shapes our ends.” Only “the readiness is all” -- a readiness to accept, in effect, the authority of a superior power governing the affairs of the “little world of man” and placing every action of the individual in the grand design. Referring to the last act of *Hamlet* Philip Edwards cogently argues:

The man who has examined his conscience and his faith that the general course is course that God wills, the man who comes to find in humility his sense of identification with Heaven, may know that it will not be through his contrivances and plans that God will work but through the ordinary accidents of life and the ordinary sudden impulses of man.⁹

Seen in this light the crucial killing of Claudius falls in its place with the impression that no action would have corresponded more with Hamlet’s avowed intention of killing a thoroughly exposed villain with the corroborative Providential intervention as anticipated.

As both the principal avengers Hamlet and Laertes lie mortally wounded they are seen to engage in act of expiation as they exchange mutual forgiveness in the denouement of *Hamlet*. Laertes, whose treacherous and sinister designs have brought him to this pass

is now a virtually penitent soul convinced of the justice the mortal punishment has brought upon him:

I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery

(V.ii.312)

Keen on a reconciliation with his fellow revenger, he accepts the reality of the explanation afforded by Hamlet in defence of his position:

If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away
And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness.

(V.ii 230-33)

Laertes is convinced that Hamlet is as much a victim of the cruelty perpetrated by Claudius as he himself is. For if it be his "madness" that is responsible for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, his madness but mirrors a malady that tells upon the moral and social health of Denmark in no uncertain terms. Hamlet is thus exculpated from the charge of bringing disaster upon the family of Polonius. Nor is Laertes responsible for the death of Hamlet. The culpability for the calamities striking them through each other's actions lies with the impostor King Claudius: "The King -- the King's to blame" (V.ii.302).

Claudius epitomizes a kind of moral affliction whose intentions stab at the very centre of the Danish state reducing all moralities to nought. When Hamlet finally achieves his vengeance by killing Claudius he does not merely pronounce a personal
judgment upon the murderer of his father but brings about as a recent critic J. Philip Brockbank quite perceptively points out:

... the destruction of the whole moral and political world which he represents and over which he presides -- the Denmark of Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and even Ophelia -- and of things their words and our response to them endorse.  

But the destruction of the old corrupt and debased world order of Claudius also demands the sacrifice of the hero in order to assert the ultimate unity of the moral order which transcends the closing carnage of tragedy.

Hamlet is perhaps the only tragedy where a dying hero successfully completing the mission of his life asserts absolute authority and votes the next successor to the seat of power. And when eventually death comes to him, he accepts it as “felicity” (V i.329) and a much sought after release and prevents Horatio from partaking of the blessed experience until he has performed the choric function of narrating the story of Hamlet’s life and career.

The kind of tragic vision that seems to emerge from the ending of Hamlet, then, is concerned with a world beset with all sort of indefinable problems and the heroic struggle of the protagonist to find an answer to the inscrutable mysteries. And as McElroy suggests:

... the discrepancy between appearance and reality is intolerable to a mind that places prime value upon truth, and that the inscrutability of the

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universe presents the unsolvable dilemma to a man who demands absolute values based upon absolute truth. Hamlet is such a man and has such a mind, yet the world he must deal with is filled with deceptiveness and unanswerable questions.¹¹

The experiences that Hamlet gathers in the graveyard scene bring upon him the realization that all human endeavours are turned to nought by death and that life itself must eventually mingle with the dust from which it springs. The flesh will rot into dust regardless of the earthly might and status of its owner. Similarly, all attempts at beautifying herself will bring a woman to the same end:

... let her paint an inch thick,

to this favour she must come.

(V.i.174-75)

Yet notwithstanding the memento mori effect of the scene, Hamlet seems to be all geared up for a life of positive action dedicated to the restoration of the natural bonds that have been so badly severed by the Claudius regime. It is however in the final scene of the play that the effect of the graveyard scene on Hamlet is best realized. Consequently, the tragic vision too becomes more transparent in the ending of the play as the hero through whom this vision is expressed shows an increasing readiness to endure the designs of a world beset with metaphysical dilemmas and to resist at the same time the sinister human interferences that seek to wipe away the kinds of values he holds as sacred in the face of his awareness of the sense of inevitability and doom that await us all. It is true that in

¹¹Bernard McElroy, op cit., p. 88.
keeping with the conventions of tragedy, the tragic vision in Hamlet too involves a loss of meaning, as seen, for instance, in Hamlet's questioning of the Renaissance humanism vis-à-vis the value of man and life. But the ending of the play also reveals that the meaninglessness seen is only conventional and skin-deep and that it is ultimately the discovery of meaning at a much profounder level. And the meaning comes to fore in the endeavour of the survivors as Marjorie Garber perceives:

... to reconstitute the human bonds that have been severed, to remake a community and society by placing the hero and his downfall in the instructive context of history.12

And it is precisely this attempt to reorganize a fallen society by underlining the significance of the human and social bonds "by placing the hero and his downfall in the instructive context of history" that defines Horatio's concatenation at the end of the play:

And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

(V.ii.361-67)

In spite of the apparent loss of meaning experienced in the fall of the hero and all his sense of values, the play finally ends with a vision of order and redemption. And this is the kind of vision that seems to unite all the major tragedies of Shakespeare into a coherent pattern as we shall see in the discussions to follow.

II

The tragic vision that evolves from the ending of *King Lear* involves the case of the individual in confrontation with a universe not only appallingly hostile but imbued with such depth and mystery of human suffering that it seems, at first, to defeat all our attempts at defining the meaning and purpose of life. But the ending of the play finally lays to rest all our misapprehensions about the tragic truth and unfolds, as it were, a deeper level of meaning hidden below the surface meaninglessness. But, once again, it is through the conflict between public compulsions and private response that the tragic vision is brought to light, although in a manner widely different from that of *Hamlet*. For the tragedy here originates from a situation lamentably misconstrued by the hero himself. In other words, *King Lear*, the protagonist of the play who is charged with the responsibility of exercising the kind of power attached to his position to its effective best understands power itself as sovereign good failing thereby to recognize as to how his way of understanding power is fraught with danger both to the society and himself. In fact, the exercise of power is in the interest of society. But power misleads Lear into ignoring his links with the society. For in remaining boastfully preoccupied with
he tries to utilize a responsible public office for the expression of an absolutely irresponsible piece of private caprice. The result is limitless chaos as we are brought face to face with a tragedy of enormous magnitude. Referring to the first scene of the play, for instance, J.M. Gregson remarks:

The first scene of the play is a distillation of Shakespeare's favourite theme: how power and the irresponsible exercise of it cloud judgment and moral sensitivity.13

In fact the clouding of judgment and moral sensitivity by "power and the irresponsible exercise of it" remain the theme not only of the first scene alone, but the central concern of the play itself. For if King Lear himself indulges in an irresponsible exercise of power abetted by false pride and a puerile sense of judgment in the first scene, the later representatives of the power system like Goneril, Regan and all the rest of them who are to be found in the corridors of power, do much worse to bring about a calamitous end to the play. But it is certainly Lear with whom lies the culpability of initiating a series of events with disastrous consequences, with his erroneous perceptions not only of filial

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bonds but also of the ways in which the true power rests on sympathetic understanding of people. Lear, in deciding to divide his kingdom among his daughters intends to set himself free of the responsibilities that are wedded to power as he speaks of his...

... fast intent

To shake all cares and business from our age.

Conferring them on younger strengths while we

Unburden'd crawl toward death.

(I.i.37-40)

Yet he is not prepared to relinquish the benefits and titles that go with power:

Ourselves, by monthly course,

With reservation of a hundred knights,

By you to be sustain'd, shall our abode

Make with you in due turn. Only we shall retain

The name and all the addition to a King;

The sway, revenue, execution of the rest,

Beloved sons, be yours: which to confirm

This coronet put between you

(I.i.131-38)

What emerges as crucial to Lear's failure as the head of a state is his inability to appreciate the fact that power as the sign of authority rests with the crown so long as it is on the appropriate head. The moment the crown is dishonoured by the fallacious judgment of a
private and unilateral nature, tragedy strikes both the individual responsible for the lapse and the state under him. Robert Heilman, in this regard makes the observation:

Lear then invites tragedy by three errors of understanding -- error with regard to the nature of kingship, the nature of love and the nature of language (the value of certain statements about love). These errors are not the negligible slips of a mere observer who has the time to check and prove and correct; they are the terrible mistakes of a man of action, of a man whose action is a public action.14

These “terrible mistakes” committed by Lear, “a man whose action is a public action,” then, are fraught with far-reaching consequences. Lear is, of course, in the course of his eventful career following the great betrayal by his daughters made to understand and realize the human condition in a way he had never done before. He is also made to realize that power as such is only an aspect of authority and that it cannot function as an autonomous identity without a social sense. And this new understanding demands of him an actual participation in the life and situation of the unhoused man in order to make him see the realities he did not take cognizance of when he was in a position, perhaps, to mend things, in conformity, of course with his authority. It is thus only when he experiences the misfortunes of the unaccommodated man in the storm that he exclaims:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,

That bide the pelling of this pitiless storm,

How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,

Your loop’d and window’d raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta’en
Too little care of this.

(III.iv.29-33)

Similarly, on hearing of Edgar’s concocted tale of woe in his disguise as a mad man, his reply is:

Is man no more worse than this. Consider
him well. Thou owes the worm no
silk, the beast no hide, the sheep
no wool, the cat no perfume.
... unaccommodated man is
no more but such a poor, bare
forked animal as thou art.

(III.iv.98-105)

There is thus a gradual and cumulative development of Lear’s potentiality for understanding the social realities beginning with his realization

The art of our necessities is strange

And can make vile things precious.

(III.ii.70-71)

What, in other words, is significant about these speeches is Lear’s attempt at generalizing his experiences gathered in moments of extreme adversity. All the same, the experiences of Lear also point towards the budding traces of spiritual regeneration within him. But
juxtaposed with his growing awareness of the issues that purport to explain the human predicament is a corresponding progress towards chaos and systematic degeneration until at last in the words of Jan Kott:

all bonds, all laws, whether divine, natural or human, are broken. Social order from the kingdom to the family will crumble into dust. There are no longer kings and subjects, father and children, husbands and wives. There are only huge Renaissance monsters devouring one another like beasts of prey.¹⁵

But nowhere in the play do we find the movement towards the renewal of hope and the corresponding march to rapid destruction so strongly pronounced as in the ending of the play revealing in the process the very unpredictability and mysteriousness of life and its promises. There is the promise, for instance, of the moment of reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia being turned into a lasting relationship as the conversation between the two of them following Lear’s recovery from madness under the tender care of Cordelia, a little before the final act reveals:

_Cordelia._ O! look upon me, Sir

And hold your hands in benediction o’er me:

No, Sir, you must not kneel.

_Lear._ Pray, do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man,

Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;

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And to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind / ...

For, as I am a man, I think this lady

To be my child Cordelia.

*Cordelia.*  And so I am, I am.

*Lear.*  Be your tears wet? Yes faith I pray weep not.

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

I know you do not love me; for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not.

*Cordelia.*  No cause, no cause.

(IV.vii.57-75)

There is no reason as to why this touching and passionate exchange of filial affections should not lead to a permanent state of bliss and consolation. Yet the march of events belies all expectations as the next time we see the two of them together is not in their “own kingdom” anymore but only as prisoners of the British forces. But even in the midst of all adversities, Lear is busy building castles in the air, hoping, once again, for grace where it does not exist:

Come, let’s away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage,

When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,

And ask of thee forgiveness; so we’ll live,
And pray and sing, and tell old tales and laugh ...

(V.iii.8-12)

Again,

He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven

And fire us hence like foxes.

(V.iii.22-23)

As Philip Edwards puts it,

Every thing spoken here in this major moment in Shakespearean tragedy is of the greatest importance. It is the ultimate expression of the vision which so many have glimpsed, of a human relationship bathed in a light that never was on sea or land, the consecration and the poet’s dream .... it comes to existence in adversity, in the active disfavour and hostility of society, and it rises supremely above both the adversity and those who are responsible for it. This relationship within the walls of a prison, founded on the need of each person for the other, is an avenue to a transcendent knowledge. The ‘mystery’ of things means their secret significance. Cordelia and Lear (to Lear’s mind) will be in the service of heaven, aliens and strangers among mankind, knowing the vanity and absurdity of what men and women spend their lives trying to achieve. This offering of themselves to each other in the spiritual liberation of a place of deprivation and confinement is a ‘sacrifice’ pleasing to the gods.\(^{16}\)

Edwards also goes on to state that just as Hamlet on shipboard felt conscious of the revelation of divine guidance, so too, Lear’s revelation is only personal to him and is not confirmed by the play as such. The frailty of Lear’s vision, according to Edwards lies in ‘He that parts us shall bring a brand of heaven.’\(^\text{17}\) As against Lear’s illusions what the play’s vision actually reveals is the way in which the trials and reverses of circumstances make a malicious mockery of all human efforts at shaping their ends in conformity with their cherished desires. This, indeed, is a fact confirmed again and again by the ending not only of *King Lear* but of all the tragedies of Shakespeare we have been discussing. But to come back to the frailty of Lear’s vision as envisaged in the passage under discussion, it is not the “brand from heaven” (V.iii.22) that separates Lear and Cordelia, but a mundane and vicious order from Edmund. But the worst is yet to come. As if Lear’s journey through the terrible ordeals has not been an expiation enough for his past misdeed -- in case we were to consider his sufferings as the inevitable consequence of an act committed most unwittingly -- comes now the most heartbreaking sight with Lear carrying Cordelia dead in his arms and bewailing his miserable plight:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you
are men of stones!

Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so
That heaven’s vaults should crack. She’s
gone for ever.

I know when one is dead and when one lives;

\(^\text{17}\)ibid.
She’s dead as earth.

(V.iii.257-59)

But the kind of nervous excitement caused by the interplay of hope and despondency certainty and uncertainty, life and death, the “constant intensifying of disaster at the moment when disaster seems to be over,” 18 that mark the entire action of the play does not cease to tease the weary soul of Lear with fresh torments even at this stage of the play demonstrating in the process the terrible truth of Edgar’s:

The worst is not

So long as we can say, ‘This is the worst’.

(IV.i.27-28)

For even when the last of his earthly hopes is snatched away from him, Lear seems to be torn between the extremes of joy and grief as pondering over the inert body of Cordelia, he resorts to the frenzied outburst:

This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,

It is a chance that redeem all sorrows

That ever I have felt.

(V.iii.265-67)

Finally, when there seems to be no scope for any hope whatsoever for Cordelia’s resurrection, when for all sense and reason “she’s dead as earth,” Lear cries out for the last time in words that threaten to crack “the strings of life”:

Why should a dog, a cat, a horse have life,

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18John Holloway, The Story of the Night, p. 90.
And thou no breath at all? Thou wilt come no more,

Never, never, never, never, never!

Pray you undo this button! thank you, Sir.

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,

Look there, look there.

(V.iii.306-11)

Throughout the final moments in the play -- that is, from the moment when Lear and Cordelia are taken away as prisoners to the moment of Lear's death -- Lear is presented as a virtual puppet in the hands of hostile circumstances, shuddering between tantalizing illusions and the stark reality of the situation in which he finds himself placed. But his words at the moment of his death confirm the final collapse of his world. And with his death all his illusions are brutally shattered. Lear's final lines have, of course, given rise to a whole range of interpretations from Bradley's insistence that the lines express the fact that though Lear "is killed by an agony of pain, the agony in which he actually dies is one not of pain but of ecstasy,\(^\text{19}\) to Empson's suggestion that Lear in the last scene recreates the madness of the storm scenes and both the phases of madness happen to be "the effects of immediate shock\(^\text{20}\), and beyond. But, the actual reality of the situation, we believe, is convincingly brought by a reading like J.K.Walton's to the effect that:

\(^{19}\)A.C.Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p.46.

There is, in fact, nothing in his speech from the five times repeated ‘Never’ to his last words ‘look there!’, which indicates a transition from grief to joy. ...Cordelia’s lips might, by a change in colour, give a sign of death but hardly one of life; and it is appropriate that Lear’s attention should be finally concentrated on her organ of speech. As at the beginning of the play she says nothing, but this time Lear dies with the effort of realizing to the full the implications of her silence. That, and not merely despair, brings about his death.21

Similarly, Philip Edwards also convinces us with his observation that:

Lear knows she will come no more -- ‘never, never, never, never, never’. He dies knowing that, calling the others to witness in the final bitterness of his cry, ‘Look there!’ As in all the love-tragedies, there has been the achievement of a relationship which like a sudden flame momentarily illuminates undreamt of regions of experience as it is extinguished.22

Illusion, we understand, is an essential condition of the tragic experience itself. But the ending of the tragedies of Shakespeare also shows the destruction of all illusions. Consequently, the ending of Lear also demonstrates the full-blooded realization of the hero of the finality of death and the collapse of all hope. But the way in which this tragic truth is demonstrated in King Lear has divided the critical response to the ending of the play into two diametrically opposite camps. The first of these responses centres round the

22 op.cit., 157.
Bradleyan notion of suffering and redemption and continues to dominate the criticism of the play till the beginning of the 1960s. Many of these works, in fact, tend to render a Christian interpretation of the ending identifying in it the culmination of sin, sacrifice and redemption. But equally emphatic have been the voices that underline the horror and brutality of the closing scenes, remarkable among them being W.R. Elton's *King Lear and the Gods* wherein he states that the last act of the play:

... shatters more violently than an earlier apostasy might have done, the foundations of faith itself.23

It is, of course, true that the question that Lear asks at the moment of his death as to “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?” (V.iii.306-07) not only underlines the unendurable reality of the human condition but brings us into the presence, as it were, of a world bereft of any meaning and assurance. However, a closer look at the ending of the play enables us to discover meaning at a much deeper level thus proving the superficiality of the meaninglessness encountered. For the experience of meaninglessness becomes a tragic necessity, as in the case of *Hamlet*, for the understanding of the tragic vision of this play as well.

We saw at the beginning as to how in his blind arrogance Lear understands power as sovereign good unmindful of the kind of loyalty to the traditional bonds between parent and children as well as between king and subjects required of royal and patriarchal authority. In the process, he moves into a kind of self-isolation without actually desiring it. For what follows from his initial action “goes against his intention, counters his hopes,

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and diminishes him in revealing the limits of his power."

Lear is of course made to realize through the travails of the self the disastrous consequences of the rampant individualism he had resorted to in making a most unwilling and capricious judgment upon his daughters, heedless of the warnings of his true and loyal subjects. He also takes cognizance of the fact that the devastating decision to divide the kingdom in his irrationally arrogant terms involved not only an error of judgment but a moral error as well inasmuch as it was a perversion of the natural bond between parent and children.

The fact of Lear’s spiritual regeneration and the simultaneous awareness of the rampant social degradation during the storm scenes on the heath have already been touched upon in our discussion of the play in the earlier chapters. What needs to be stated further about the scenes with regard to Lear’s vision is the fact that much like Hamlet, who sees at the height of his despair, a providential justice at work; so too, Lear, in the face of his excruciating sufferings on the heath looks upon the storm itself at times as an agent of divine justice:

Let the great gods
That keep this dreadful pudder o’er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble thou wretch
That has within thee undivulged crimes
Unwhipped of justice.

(III.ii.49-53)

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in the same way as he considers as already stated, his imprisonment along with Cordelia a providential offer. A similar faith in providential justice is also affirmed by Edgar towards the end of the play:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:
The dark and vicious place where he got
Cost him his eyes.

(V.iii.170-73)

But the ending of the play, in tune with the spirit of Renaissance humanism, challenges through the collapse of Lear's world around him as well as through the very nature of his questions the notion of earthly life as enacting the judgment of God.

What the collapse of meaning reveals, then, is the fact that in the world of King Lear, too, like the world of Hamlet, an offence once committed -- no matter whatever the degree of the offence -- knows no compensation, but is fraught on the contrary with devastating consequences. Lear's painful realization of his folly and the decision, consequent upon the realization, to endure the unendurable may transcend in our view, all his past follies. But the world of the play will not accommodate such compensatory gesture. Act and consequence here are inseparable. And as John Lawlor argues:

There is, as always, manifest disproportion between the 'offence' and the disproportion that follows from it. It is a disproportion which banishes any facile notion of the tragic victims as 'deserving' what befalls them. In this light, questions of retributive justice, alike of deserving and of proportion,
pertain rather to the region of fiction, a merely poetic justice. In reality, we may feel, here too

... high Heaven rejects the lore

Of nicely-calculated less or more.

Act and consequence are clear: and what is above all clear has nothing directly to do with repentance and forgiveness, and will take place even when evil itself relents.

What the vision at the close of the play finally asserts, then, involves a profound truth about the human condition. As life on earth continues to tease us with its unfathomable mysteries all knowledge about the nature of the human realities comes to be infested by doubt and uncertainty. Each assertion, therefore, is confronted by a counter-assertion. As such, nothing is confirmed, nothing denied either. Yet in the midst of all these uncertainties, the only thing of any lasting value is the loyalty to the natural bonds. Thus, “the power of the natural bond is the only final reality; and as such it illuminates and sustains all else.” Lear invites his tragedy by ignoring this bond. But at the end of the play all his energy is concentrated on this aspect of relationship in a way that it obliterates all other considerations. He is thus brought to the profound realization of understanding love as a sustaining principle amidst the contingent conditions of life. And at the moment of his death, it is this realization of the supreme importance of love that is transferred to Lear’s survivors. But the concept of love as understood by Lear and represented by Cordelia also involves a sense of duty and sacrifice. As a matter of fact, the survivors of the

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25op.cit., p. 170.
tragedy who inherit the concept wholesale from the example of Lear and Cordelia try to express their understanding of it in identical terms with the father and the daughter. Thus Kent for whom love means service before self, refusing to “rule in this realm” (V.iii.320) states:

I have a journey, Sir, shortly to go.
My master calls me; I must not say no.

(V.iii.321-22)

Albany, too, expresses a similar sense of sacrifice when he addresses his two other fellow survivors thus:

... Friends

Of my soul, you twain
Rule in this realm and the gor’d state sustain.

(V.iii.319-20)

Finally, it is Edgar who accepts the responsibility of sustaining the “gor’d state” as a manifest attempt on his part at restoring the human bonds through the instructive context of his predecessors:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long.

(V.iii.323-26)
But while at the end of King Lear, we poignantly realize the human cost of the loss of "bonding", it is, we must admit, not so certain as it is in the case of the other tragedies. The original bond of nature is here only spiritedly affirmed. All the three survivors, Edgar, Albany and Kent seem to speak in a weary and disillusioned voice. The pattern, therefore, is here as a trace, no more than that.

III

As we turn from these plays to Othello what we perceive is another version of the conflict involving the public and the private aspects of human inclinations. For if Hamlet finds himself placed peculiarly in a situation that demands the fulfilment of public responsibilities contrary to his private impulses and Lear while occupying an important public office suffers in matters entirely private, Othello depicts the tragedy of the essentially public man made to respond to passions and perplexities pertaining absolutely to the world of private relationships alone. But whereas in the case of Hamlet and King Lear the protagonists seem to recognize the kind of incongruities and ambivalence within their selves that make life miserable for them quite early in the plays, Othello seems to take no cognizance whatsoever until the last scene of the play of any weakness or failure within himself that might be responsible for the predicament in which he finds himself placed.

In Othello, therefore, we have a hero extremely conscious of his glorious public self and priggishly convinced that his private life too would be as exciting and eventful as the romantic experiences and adventures of his public life. He can thus understand and interpret all acts of his private life only in terms of the public image he has conjured up of
himself. In fact, such is the kind of his obsession with his private ventures that his love for Desdemona -- the most private and intimate of all his emotional bonds -- too gains significance only in a context provided by his military exploits -- a fact well borne out by the account, for instance, of their courtship that he gives before the Senate:

She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd
And I lov'd her that she did pity them.

(I.iii.167-68)

Yet the instinct for self-glorification notwithstanding, Othello shows a remarkable capacity to love. Desdemona is for him -- united as they stand in marriage now -- his "soul's joy"(II.i.182) and he would fain like her to remain so till death would them part:

O my soul's joy!

If after every tempest come such calms,

May the winds blow till they have waken'd
death, ...

(III.i.181-84)

With the kind of war-like sincerity and sense of dedication firmly ingrained in him, he thus sees all acts of life in terms solid and absolute. Naturally, therefore, his commitment to the cause of love and by extension to Desdemona too is built on similar grounds leaving thereby no scope for any compromise, whatsoever, to meddle with his affairs. In the same way, he expects Desdemona too to reciprocate his feelings with the same degree of intensity and care. Yet the kind of passionate intensity that marks his attitude towards life betrays a most lamentable ignorance on his part of the earthly realities that play so
important a role in the world of private human relationships. As a matter of fact, the all transcending power of love that he seems to believe in is ultimately seen to be incapable of piercing through the opaque mysteries of a world infested with people full of insidious intents as the diabolic Iago himself admits:

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;
And will as tenderly be led by the nose
As asses are

(Ii.ii.393-95)

Iago’s speech here, obviously, assumes great significance not only for the revelation it makes of the innocent nobility of Othello, the warrior aristocrat, but, also for exposing the kind of corruptions that inform the thoroughly commercial and materialistic world of Venice.

The essential soldier that he is, Othello, much in the manner of Titus Andronicus, with the same kind of Titus’s unsuspicious nature turns out to be a miserably poor judge of characters and their motives. In fact, both Othello and Titus in their resolve to occupy themselves for the major part of their lives with warlike enterprises that “make ambition virtue” (Othello III.iii.54) succeed in distancing themselves from the more pressing concerns of private import that are inextricably caught up with the social realities in the context of which life in the ultimate analysis has to be seen and measured. In the process, they invite upon their subjective worlds such casualties as no medicine on earth has the power to repair. But whereas Titus sees through the game of those directly involved in
bringing about his misery quite early, though not before suffering torments of the hellish kind that shatter the very foundation of his vision of reality, the actual villain who tears the world asunder for Othello eludes his grasp till everything meaningful in life for him is virtually lost. For, by the time the true colours of the impostor are revealed not only does Othello bid farewell to the “tranquil mind”, the “content” (III.iii.352), the “plumed troops” (III.iii.353) and the “pride, pomp, and circumstances of war” (III.iii.358), but most important of all, he bids farewell to Desdemona as well, and literally so. However, in presenting both these characters Shakespeare shows us his awareness of the vulnerability as well as nobility of the type that cares for personal glory and does not intrigue for power.

While it is true that Titus’s predicament does confront us with sweeping questions on the nature of human frailties and motives, Titus Andronicus, being an early play the questions so raised are not treated with the same degree of serious regard as those of the mature tragedies of Shakespeare. Despite the points of resemblances between Titus and Othello, therefore, the latter like any of the great tragic heroes of Shakespeare is a character much more elaborately drawn than that of Titus. If the process of identifying the nature of evil wreaking havoc upon his personal life is thus delayed for Othello as compared to Titus, it is because the issues raised in this play are more complicated and demand a much more vigorous, searching and complex inquiry than those of Titus. Much like these heroes, therefore, Othello, too, sets about his professed designs in the world of private relationships with a certain vision of reality and like them too finds the basis of that reality shattered thereby dealing a telling blow to the honest endeavours of the heart. But
whereas in the case of the other heroes the collapse of the subjective world is caused by the actual occurrence of events contrary to the cherished designs of the hero, in Othello the private world of the hero breaks down owing more than anything else to his total misunderstanding of the realities around him. He is ignorant of these realities as he was born and bred in a different environment. It is this that makes him vulnerable to intrigue.

Coming as he does from a world of public action divorced from the ground realities, he enters a sphere of complex human relationships wherein his “inner timbers begin to part at once, the stuff of which he is made begins at once to deteriorate and show himself unfit.”26 Having led a life marked by “most disastrous chances” and “moving accidents by flood and field” (I.iii.134-35) prior to attaining the magnificent heights of military glory, Othello finally hopes to gain through his marriage a life of calm and stable repose. Thus he begins to look upon love not only as a kind of soothing balm capable of drowning all sorrows and miseries into oblivion but also as a potent enough experience that can transcend all prejudices of race, colour, age and custom. In “love” he also seeks a metaphysical answer to a nagging sense of inner vacuum. And he knows it only too well that when he loves not, “chaos is come again” (III.iii.93). But soon his new found trust in life fizzes out as the circumstances confronting him lead him to experience a sense of betrayal without being actually betrayed. As such, he is deluded into regarding his sense of optimism as both impossible and futile.

With Brabantio’s warning

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:

She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.

(I.iii.92-93)

already ringing loud and clear at the back of his mind despite the exterior sang froid, it is Iago now who with the avowed intention of “making him egregiously an ass” (II.i.303) is all set to unsettle the scheme of Othello’s newly constructed world. And it needs no great effort for Iago to reach the desired end as an insinuating remark from him concerning a possible undesirable intimacy between Desdemona and Cassio:

Ha! I like not that.

(III.i.35)

meets with immediate success. Such, in fact, is its impact on Othello that not only does he find it pregnant with horrible suggestions but within moments of this utterance he is brought to a pass where we find him exclaiming:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul

But I do love thee, and when I love thee not

Chaos is come again.

(III.iii.91-93)

Meanwhile, Iago continues to feed his jealousy with suggestions like “Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio” (III.iii.201). Nor does he fail to exploit Othello’s social inexperience to the full:

In Venice they do not let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown.
In fact, the very foundation of his faith in love and marriage is so terribly shaken that he feels the need now to bank on his Ancient’s wife to keep an eye on the movements of his wife -- his “soul’s joy.” So strong is his indignation against Desdemona that not only does he find her attitude towards colour and age of doubtful integrity but finds the marriage with her itself a great curse as he begins to experience a terrible sense of insecurity in an alien world:

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declin’d
Into the vale of tears -- yet that’s not much --
She’s gone; I am abus’d; and my relief
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
But not their appetites!

What is clearly discernible here is that the self-assertive quality of his demeanour, the authoritative mode of his speech, the consciousness of his power as a general, his influence on the affairs of the state -- in fact, all the distinguishing marks of his personality pale into insignificance now. Instead, “An insecure sense of self is apparent on Othello’s focus on his own presumed frailty, and in his immediate assumption that he has lost
As a result, the more he feels the world slipping away from his grip, the more urgently he feels the need to rely upon his slimy Ancient who turns the situation to his advantage with such malicious dexterity that never for a moment does Othello pause to ponder over the hideous intentions of the person on whose honesty he has reposed absolute confidence. So unwittingly, in fact, does Othello, the dedicated public man betray his blindness to the realities of the private world that lago with his kind of vengeful designs finds it all too easy a task to manipulate the course of events to a perilous conclusion thereby turning the subjective world of the hero completely upside down. And by the time we come to the terminal scene of the play the damage is well beyond repair.

Yet the ending of the play strikes us as highly significant in that it unfolds before us with widening clarity the tragic vision of the play itself, helping us thereby to come to terms with the thematic tensions of the play. Despite the very disturbing sense of waste that marks the ending of the play, the kind of reversal and recognition we witness finally, prior to the death of the hero immediately following the murder of Desdemona, prompts us with fresh insights into the nature of the tragic experience itself.

Understandably, then, Othello is the tragedy of the public man whose commitment to matters removed from the world of private conduct not only gets him enmeshed in a web of deceit and intrigue once he comes into contact with that world but also makes him shaky about the intrinsic worth of his own convictions. And as the play marches forward Othello is so completely mesmerized by the deceitful wiles of lago that all his sense of judgment and propriety takes leave of him as Desdemona appears to him as nothing less

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than an “impudent strumpet” (IV.ii.82) and a “public commoner” (IV.ii.74). And the thought thus of being reduced to a veritable cuckold gnaws his mind so that his subjective world disintegrates completely. For she had occupied for him that place where, as he says:

... I have garner’d up my heart,

Where I must live or bear no life,

The fountain from which my current runs,

Or else dries up.

(IV.i.58-60)

and the fact that he has been “discarded thence” (IV.ii.61) is what he cannot reconcile to. Similarly, he cannot bear the ignominy of having “this fair paper, this goodly book” (IV.ii.72) been “made to write whore upon” (IV.ii.73). Under the circumstances, the only meaningful course of action that he can think of to restore a semblance of order and congruence to his world is to eliminate Desdemona after his old world has already been transformed by his love. Othello’s pain is due not only to loss of self-esteem, but to loss of a love to which he is committed totally.

The ending of Othello thus drives home the sad truth that a private passion pursued with absolute dedication without an awareness of the social realities in the midst of which such passion has to flourish is fraught with dreadful consequences. The kind of public life that Othello has led has always kept him at a distance from the complex social realities. But it has taught him at the same time the necessity to devote the self absolutely to the mission ahead. And it is this principle of total devotion that he brings to bear upon
his intensely private passion of love as well. In so doing he learns to look upon his Desdemona as inseparable from his being, so much so that he calls her his soul. When, therefore, his ignorance of the corrupt designs of the social malefactors plus his lack of self-awareness leads him to regard Desdemona as tainted his sense of moral and emotional conviction is put under severe stress. There follows naturally the terrible pain of sustaining a life crossed with dubious implications and uncertain consequences. So, in the last scene of the play Othello seeking to release himself from the tempestuous feelings of the mind strangles Desdemona, the very object of his despair, to death. But the object of his despair is also the ground of his emotional sustenance and the centre of his moral being. Far from setting his mind at rest the murder of Desdemona, then drives him to a state of maddening isolation. And when finally he discovers that rather than making a sacrifice he has in fact committed a murder by killing Desdemona, the kind of emotional turmoil he experiences is of a nature that he cannot afford to absorb any more. Consequently, he commits suicide. And his suicide, as Jane Adamson rightly feels:

... implies his final acknowledgment of what he has sometimes fleetingly recognized as the absolute ground of his emotional and moral life, but which another current of his being has always striven to master and deny: his absolute need of Desdemona's unalterable love — the need always impossible of fulfilment in the flux of human life, to rest forever secure in her total love of him and her entire acceptance of his love.  

The ending of Othello thus shows with unblinking clarity that the disastrous form that Othello's jealousy assumes is possible only because his love for Desdemona has been absolute and that his jealousy is but a malignant offshoot of his pure and unfailing love. And even when his jealousy assumes a violent form he is tormented by the feeling that he is so dependent upon her love for his emotional sustenance. And it is precisely the extremity of love rather than its offshoot that enables him to exclaim:

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,

And love thee after. One more, and that's the last.

So sweet was ne'er so fatal.

(V.ii.18-20)

For he is in a position now to acknowledge the fact that amidst the concomitant evils and contingencies of social life the kind of love he subscribes to is not only fraught with grave dangers but is simply beyond the realm of possibility. It is, therefore, quite within the parameters of the human condition itself that the love between Othello and Desdemona should come to so tragic an end. Lodovico seems to appreciate the reality of the situation when at the end he attributes all the deaths witnessed to the evil machinations of Iago:

O Spartan dog!

More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!

Look on the tragic loading of this bed.

This is thy work.

(V.ii.364-67)
In referring to the "tragic loading of this bed" as the handiwork of Iago, Lodovico is not only focussing on Iago's villainy but is also exculpating Othello from his share in bringing about the tragic calamity. Moments before his death Othello himself refers to the diabolism of Iago as being responsible for bringing about his destruction:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar's my soul and body.

(V.iii.304-05)

Again, purporting to give a fair account of the circumstances leading to the tragedy, he enjoins the Venetians present to speak of him as

... one not easily jealous but being wrought

Perplexed in the extreme.

(V.iii.348-49)

This leads Peter Hyland to remark that

Othello's end is not brought upon him by his jealousy (although that is an undeniable factor in the sequence of events) but by his anomalous position as a successful general and an alien in the fundamentally racist Venetian society.²⁹

In Hyland's view, it is not any hostile destiny that is responsible for Othello's fall but malevolent human action.³⁰ It is of course true that a diabolic agency leads Othello into committing a heinous crime. But as Othello himself recognizes that in committing the


³⁰ ibid.
crime itself he has reduced himself to the level of a transgressor both against the Venetian
state and God:

And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him -- thus.

(V.iii.355-58)

It is in this recognition of the self as a traducer as well as in the execution of justice upon
himself that the noble Othello asserts himself once again.

The tragic ending of Othello and the other plays are involved not only with an
assessment of the role of the tragic heroes but also with the very heart of the tragic vision.
Consequently, the collapse of Othello's world around him is not only an illustration of
man's folly but a terrible revelation of the unknown and the unknowable nature of life and
the world which no human experience can really encompass. The reality that declares
itself at the close of the play then argues that there is no harmony between the public
world and the private world in the play. The world of war and heroism is contrasted with
the world of personal love and loyalty. But in the life of Othello these two worlds are not
reconciled so that while valour and heroism are not debunked, they seem a poor
recompense for the loss of Desdemona and the defeat of love. All the same the
meaninglessness in the subjective world of the hero only serves to provide meaning and
purpose to the lives of those who survive him at the end of the play. For like the other
tragedies being discussed here, the play ends with a redemptive vision in that the life and
career of the hero come to be seen as an exemplum for the others to derive lessons in
human conduct.

In the world of Othello, we are aware as Arthur Sewell points out:

... of a human community closely contained within its own
meanness, hypocrisies and greed... It is a world in which soldiers
compete for office and prestige. It is a world in, as Emilia well
knows, men will do each other's officer in women's beds. It is a
world in which lust flaunts its finery and is not abashed. It is a
world, indeed, from which spirit has been drained, and all is
measured by use and entertainment and position. It is a kingdom
of means, not ends.\(^3\)\(^1\)

Therefore when Lodovico declares in his speech of summation at the close of the play:

Myself will straight abroad; and to the state

This heavy act with heavy heart relate.

(V.ii.369-70)

he is obviously making an effort to reintegrate a society in terms of the instructions taken
from the hero and his downfall. The final emphasis, therefore, is on the remaking of the
human bonds so necessary for the health of all societies of all times. It is with this vision
of restoration of all the natural human ties that the play ends.

\(^3\)\(^1\)Arthur Sewell, Character and Society in Shakespeare (Oxford: At the Clarendon
It is to this world that Othello comes seeking, as already stated, in love an answer to a sense of inner vacuum experienced by him. And the result as we have seen, is chaos of enormous magnitude. But at the end of the play, it is this same world of base materialism and rampant corruption that the survivors strive to reconstitute. For not only are the inadequacies of the state profoundly realized, but there seems to be a serious and honest effort at reasserting “the world of government” as well as at initiating “the act of reintegration with the society.”

IV

Macbeth presents yet another version of the clash between public compulsions and private response that is so crucial to the understanding of the tragic vision of the tragedies under discussion. But the clash as such does not arise so much out of a situation in which the hero is placed -- as in the other tragedies -- in confrontation with an external world of evil as out of a conflict between the ambivalent impulses in the inner world of the hero himself. For conspicuously absent in this play is the conventional villain with his sinister designs struggling forth to bring about the fall of the tragic hero. It is true that the witches as well as Lady Macbeth contribute significantly to the ruin of the hero, but they lack the stature as villains of a Claudius, an Edmund or an Iago. Moreover, the witches are supernatural creatures who even when they come to possess the soul of the hero only exploit an innate weakness for power that is already dormant in him curiously juxtaposed with his nobility. Similarly, Lady Macbeth’s demoniac energy is something that influences

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Macbeth during the early part of the play only. But once the regicide is committed, she pales into insignificance and does not in any way influence him to commit the subsequent murders following the regicide. A distinctive feature of this play, then, is the presentation of a criminal as the tragic hero. As such, the tragic feeling is evoked in us not so much by the death of the criminal hero as by the predicament itself in which he finds himself placed. The peculiar nature of the hero's itinerary from the murder of Duncan to the dastardly killing of Lady Macduff and her children postulates a sense of ambivalence in the protagonist's response to the call for action -- an ambivalence which corresponds to as R.N. Watson would have us believe:

... the battle -- which Nietzsche identified as the essence of tragedy -- between Apollo (the god of civilization, rationality, daylight) and Dionysius (the god of frenzy, passion, midnight).33

No Renaissance tragedy perhaps bears out the truth of the observation with the same degree of cognitive force as does Macbeth. For the tragedy of Macbeth springs essentially from the conflicting impulses within him of retaining his public image intact by leading a life in accordance with the dictates of conscience and of committing a regicide by a deliberate smothering of conscience. As the play begins, therefore, he is both the brave and conscientious general, profoundly aware of his responsibility with regard to the protection of the royal life at his disposal:

He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host

Who should against his murtherer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself.

(I.vii.12-16)

and a slave at the same time of a murderous ambition that provokes him to destroy that life by a deliberate smothering of conscience:

I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself

And falls on th' other --

(I.vii.25-27)

As the action progresses, more than any other tragic hero of Shakespeare, Macbeth comes to exemplify, as already stated in an earlier chapter, the Renaissance view of man as a privileged creature occupying a unique place in the Chain of Being as a link between the angels and the beasts and invested with a freedom of choice to become an angel or a monster. Although the capacity to exalt himself to the status of an angel or to sink to the level of a beast, remains a common feature, in some measure or the other, of all the tragic heroes of Shakespeare, nowhere in the entire canon of Shakespeare's tragedies is the capacity of the hero to imbibe monstrous qualities so markedly pronounced as in Macbeth. For the sequence of events in the play presents the hero, when it comes to the question of exercising his choice, as siding unfortunately with the monster in him. Yet Shakespeare, with his kind of ingenuity saves his hero from degenerating into a complete
monster by investing him with a capacity to express genuine human despair and frustration at the height of his monstrous glory. And even before murdering the king the murderous decision itself is subjected to a kind of haunting despair that leads him to think of recoiling from the deed contemplated. Thus he exclaims:

We will proceed no further in this business:

(I.vii.31)

The realization now dawns on him:

... that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return

To plague th’ inventor: this even-handed justice

Commend th’ ingredience of our poison’d chalice

To our own lips.

(I.vii.8-12)

Yet notwithstanding the recalcitrance to commit the fatal deed of the regicide, there remains the infernal dictates of the Weird Sisters and the equally fiendish suggestions of his wife to lead him to temptation and consequently to a life of evil. In other words, what makes Macbeth turn away from the pledge of not proceeding “further in this business” (I.vii.31) is the gruesomely assertive temptation to power hovering in the macrocosm in the form of an external force potently influencing the interplay of tensions in the microcosm -- the subjective world, that is, of the protagonist. And it is precisely this temptation to power that eventually propels him to tilt the scales in favour of Duncan’s
murder. But having "done the deed," Macbeth embarks upon the most tortuous path of life as he begins to be tormented by a terrible sense of guilt. He thus exclaims to his wife:

Methought, I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murther Sleep," -- the innocent

Sleep, / Sleep that knits up the ravell'd

Sleeve of care / the death of each day's life,

Sore labour's bath,

Balm of hurt minds,

(II.ii.34-38)

This sleeplessness, then, is what he literally achieves from the regicide and which remains there to torment him "to the last syllable of recorded time" (V.v.21). For despite the succession to power for the sake of which he had "put rancours in the vessel of my peace," (III.i.66) and had his "eternal jewel / Given to the Common Enemy of man" (IV.i.67-68), the events of the close project quite transparently that "power" as it comes to Macbeth in the way it does, crossed with uncertain implications is the least he had expected to embrace when he had referred to "the Greatest is behind" (I.iii.118).

Obviously, then, Macbeth's association of greatness with power was more of an idealized version of the notion that to occupy the highest seat of power meant the glorification of the self to the fullest possible extent in terms of rank and status. It is this primary concern for status rather than the might of authority that that gets Macbeth entrapped in the foul grip of power. For neither does he entertain hopes like Faustus, with the help of his newly acquired power to have at his command "All things that move between the quiet poles".
nor does he think in terms of political aggrandizement like Tamburlaine. Brian Morris, for instance, contends in this connection that Macbeth fails to understand the true nature of the power he achieves simply because this was not the kind of power he had envisaged:

Macbeth's failure to understand the 'Realpolitik' of his position, his casual and ineffective acts of violence, his lack of planning, all stem from his inability to comprehend the nature of the power which inevitably fell upon him as a result of the act of regicide. He does not understand it because he did not particularly seek it ....

But it is important for us to realize that Macbeth as designed by Shakespeare is not essentially a study of power. The study of power is at best only an aspect that in Morris's own terms "moves from the edges and not from the centre." To read the play, therefore, in terms of "Macbeth's failure to understand the 'Realpolitik' of his position" would not only mean impairing the playwright's design, but such a reading would also steal away much from the imaginative vitality of the play. Morris himself seems to recognize this when he states towards the later part of his essay:

Seen only in terms of its ideals and aspirations, Macbeth might seem a shallow, even a shabby, play. Its hero is ambitious for nothing more than social and professional status, he lacks any sense of the glory of kingship, he fails to comprehend the uses of power, and his kingdom is of no interest to him. To see the play so, and only so, would be chart its physical and

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35Ibid.
social structure and to ignore its ethical, imaginative dimension ... Macbeth is not the tragedy of ambition, it is the tragedy of guilt.\textsuperscript{36}

It is, however, in the ending of the play that the situation arising out of the regicide is best realized. For it is here that Macbeth takes cognizance of the fact, as John Holloway would have us believe, that

What looked as if it would endow life with the greatest meaningfulness has deprived it, in the end, of all meaning. What seemed like the beginning of everything was in fact the end of that, and beginning of nothing.\textsuperscript{37}

The metaphysics of order here, is discovered to be a fundamental human community. Macbeth by committing the regicide strikes against that order and isolates himself from that community. But having isolated himself from that community he also tries to destroy that community. In other words, as we come to the ending of the play, Macbeth, divorced, as it were, of even the basic human emotions resorts to a career thoroughly punctuated by a lust for blood as the only meaningful activity in a life thrown totally out of gear despite the power attached to it. Yet, even at this stage the onward rush of events fails to extirpate the kind of characteristic refined sensibilities evident earlier in the play in his concern for the “golden opinion” (1.vii.33) of people about him. Naturally, therefore, when he finds himself being woefully deserted by the sort of human attributes that he would have fain liked to accompany him at his age as a veritable consequence of his misconstrued attempts to fulfil the ambitious designs of his chequered career, he laments:

\textsuperscript{36} ibid., p. 47.

\textsuperscript{37}John Holloway, \textit{The Story of the Night}, p.71.
I have liv’d long enough: my way of life
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf:
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have: but in their stead
Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

(V.iii.22-28)

Situated thus in his predicament bereft of the most fundamental human needs of friendship, love and social bliss, not to speak of the royal accoutrements, Macbeth sees life only as a vapid pageant propelling mankind towards "dusty death." Referring to a conversation between the murderers employed by Macbeth to eliminate Banquo and his son, Jonathan Dollimore terms them as "lethal" hirelings who are ready to undertake any desperate venture and are absolutely "reckless" in that they have nothing either to gain or lose from their enterprise. Dollimore, of course, leans for corroborative authenticity on Burton’s insistence on the belief that poverty alone can with its destructive tendencies turn rogues and villains of men and make them ‘thieves, rebels, murderers, traitors, assassinates’ (Robert Burton, Anatomy of Melancholy I, 354). But what Dollimore feels as being true of the two murderers, is, we believe, also true, in a very special and significant way of Macbeth himself as the terminal events of the play reveal. In his resolve to retain power, Macbeth has virtually succeeded in losing everything worth possessing as

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38Jonathan Dollimore, Radical Tragedy (The Hanover Press Ltd., 1984) pp. 243-44.
suggested tellingly by the speech "I have liv'd long enough." His plight, therefore, is not much different from the hirelings who are prepared to set their lives "on any chance, to mend it or to be rid on't." He has so thoroughly mishandled the power he fails to comprehend that every natural human need commensurate with his age and position simply eludes him thereby leaving him a distressed soul contemplating desperate remedies. He is thus hurled into a world of such abject poverty where but to live is to be a villain, murderer, traitor or an assassin. As Bernard McElroy very succinctly observes:

To have a passionately held, demonstrably valid vision of the world, and yet to be cut off from it by one's own actions, to be hated and cursed by all humanity, to have to struggle against one's most deeply felt emotions, and to be aware of all this with perfect, unblinking clarity, is surely the most harrowing vision of human isolation that has ever been realized in drama.  

McElroy further avers that Macbeth's tragedy stems from the fact even when he realizes the necessity to have his actions in consonance with a broader scheme of reality, including the rest of humanity and the metaphysical order, he is incapable of meeting the desired ends. In fact, so complete is the disintegration that even the death of his wife fails to rouse him into a natural human response. As a natural consequence, therefore, of his self-awareness and the realization of inability to correlate his life and action to the issues he valued, Macbeth sets out to create a kind of political mayhem that re-enacts in a visible form the inner warfare within his tormented soul. The result is the overthrow not only of

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40 ibid.
political harmony and social equilibrium but a total destruction of the self as well. M. M. Mahood sees the point when he states that

The fertility of the land and the health of the body natural or body politic are dependent alike on the recurrent rhythm of times and seasons. Macbeth suffers in his single state of man all the disorder he has brought upon the greater organism of the state.\(^{41}\)

Yet notwithstanding the anguish and torment of the sufferer, for the sake of "even-handed justice"(I.vii.10) the evil that Macbeth has inadvertently epitomized must be wiped out at any cost -- no matter how big or great a sacrifice has to be made for the realization of that mission. Macbeth in trying to grab power by committing a regicide but gives vent, however awkwardly, to a convincing potentiality of the human predicament in which the individual despite his innate nobility is liable to be waylaid into a life of corruption and evil. All the same, the kind of corruption he resorts to is of no mean consequence. For, he commits a terrible breach of trust in so far as his relationship with the head of the state is concerned. Moreover, "Scotland is a family, Duncan its head. A natural law binds all degrees in proper place and allegiance."\(^{42}\) By killing Duncan, no matter what the circumstances are, Macbeth becomes instrumental in disturbing the "natural order" that binds the society together and lands upon a career of evil and crime. The awareness of his evil deeds, of course, afflicts him both with a feeling of tormented uncertainty with regard to the consequences and a sense of loss of his integrated self. To do away with the crisis


\(^{42}\) G.W. Knight, The Imperial Theme (Methuen, rpt. 1968) p. 26.
he begins to look for desperate remedies. But the kind of remedies he takes recourse to lead him to further evil with the unwholesome result that despite the indelible traces of characteristic refinements and the awareness of his moral degradation, the central thrust of his personality is yet towards activities essentially amoral. And by the end of the play whatever our sympathies with Macbeth, his extinction becomes absolutely imperative. When, therefore, we hear towards the end of the play, Macduff’s excited outburst:

Behold, where stands

Th’ usurper’s cursed head: the time is free.

(V.ix.20-21)

what we are conscious of is the restoration of order and harmony in the society with its malignancy rooted out.

Once again, then, the emphasis at the end of Macbeth too, like the other tragedies discussed here is on the reconstitution of the sacred human bonds. The hero, too, is accordingly placed once again in the instructive context of history. For, it is through the example of the kind of meaninglessness that comes to envelop the life of the hero that his survivors try to find meaning. What the survivors learn, in other words, is that Life becomes “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing” (V.v.26-28) when the individual completely abandons natural social norms and tries to steer his course by private impulse and aspiration alone. And, therefore, as Michael Long suggests:
the play's very medium thus embodies a vision of primal solitude in constant competition with bonding, the one dark, brooding and violent, the other, clear, bright and gentle.\textsuperscript{43}

Finally, when Malcolm declares at the end:

\begin{quote}
We shall not spend a large expense of time,  
Before we reckon with your several loves,  
And make us even with you. My Thanes and Kinsmen,  
Henceforth be Earls; the first that ever Scotland  
In such an honour nam'd. / ......
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
this, and what needful else  
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace,  
We will perform in measure, time, and place.  
\textsuperscript{(V.ix.26-39)}
\end{quote}

the emphasis naturally is on the "bonding" as Long suggests. Malcolm thus articulates the final vision of the play by identifying the meaning of life in the restoration of order and trust in the society by honouring the bonds of kinship so thoroughly severed by the Macbeth regime. And implicit in Macbeth's "make us even with you" is an awareness not only of the importance of a shared community life but also of the dangers associated with the kind of rampant individualism epitomized by Macbeth.

It follows, then, from our reading of the four Shakespearean tragedies in this chapter that even while the plays appear to delineate four different worlds, each unique in its own way, the prospect of a coherent vision of life underlying these tragedies does not quite strike us as an impossibility. As the plays deal with different types of people and action it is inevitable that the nature of the tragic substance should vary from one play to the other. For if the central focus of the *Hamlet* world, for instance, involves the unmasking of evil by holding "as 'twere, a mirror up to nature", the centre of interest in *Othello*, on the other hand, lies in the contrast between the world of war and heroism and the world of personal love and loyalty. In *Macbeth*, again, the tragedy seems to arise from the protagonist's efforts to steer his course by private impulse and individual aspiration alone in total disregard to the natural social norms. Yet the differences in delineation of the tragic worlds notwithstanding, our reading of the plays goes on to establish that a single vision underlies all these tragedies which manifests itself through the multifarious conflict between public compulsions and private response. And it is especially in the ending of the plays that the tragic vision is best realized as it is here that the real nature and meaning of the conflict come to be unfolded, investing the plays in the process with a particular perspective on life through a distinctive type of dramatic experience. Our discussion also goes on to show that the kind of individual experience of the hero that seems to bring us at the end of the tragedies face to face with a world emptied of all meaning and assurance in the long run only serves to afford meaning and purpose to the lives of the survivors of the closing carnage of the tragedies. The meaninglessness experienced thus becomes the discovery of meaning at a deeper level for
the life and career of the hero now come to be placed in the instructive context of history. Consequently, out of the terminal chaos and confusion of these tragedies there emerges a kind of redemptive vision that expresses itself through the efforts of the survivors to remake a society by reconstituting the human bonds, the severance of which led to the downfall of the tragic hero, although no metaphysical assurance of any sort seems to confirm the validity of such efforts.