

The Spanish Tragedy begins with the ghost of Don Andrea, a Spanish nobleman killed in a recent battle with Portugal. Accompanied by the spirit of Revenge, he tells the story of his death; he was killed in hand-to-hand combat with the Portuguese prince Balthazar, after falling in love with the beautiful Bel-Imperia and having a secret affair with her. When he faces the judges who are supposed to assign him to his place in the underworld, they are unable to reach a decision and instead send him to the palace of Pluto and Proserpine, King and Queen of the Underworld. Proserpine decides that Revenge should accompany him back to the world of the living, and, after passing through the gates of horn, this is where he finds himself. The spirit of Revenge promises that by the play's end, Don Andrea will see his revenge.

Andrea returns to the scene of the battle where he died, to find that the Spanish have won. Balthazar was taken prisoner shortly after Andrea's death, by the Andrea's good friend Horatio, son of Hieronimo, the Knight Marshal of Spain. But a dispute ensues between Horatio and Lorenzo, the son of the Duke of Castile and brother of Bel-Imperia, as to who actually captured the prince. The King of Spain decides to compromise between the two, letting Horatio have the ransom money to be paid for Balthazar and Lorenzo keep the captured prince at his home. Back in Portugal, the Viceroy (ruler) is mad with grief, for he believes his son to be dead, and is tricked by Villuppo into arresting an innocent noble, Alexandro, for Balthazar's murder. Diplomatic negotiations then begin between the Portuguese ambassador and the Spanish King, to ensure Balthazar's return and a lasting peace between Spain and Portugal.

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Upon being taken back to Spain, Balthazar soon falls in love with Bel-Imperia himself. But, as her servant Pedringano reveals to him, Bel-Imperia is in love with Horatio, who returns her affections. The slight against him, which is somewhat intentional on Bel-Imperia's part, enrages Balthazar. Horatio also incurs the hatred of Lorenzo, because of the fight over Balthazar's capture and the fact that the lower-born Horatio (the son of a civil servant) now consorts with Lorenzo's sister. So the two nobles decide to kill Horatio, which they successfully do with the aid of Pedringano and Balthazar's servant Serberine, during an evening rendez-vous between the two lovers. Bel-Imperia is then taken away before Hieronimo stumbles on to the scene to discover his dead son. He is soon joined in uncontrollable grief by his wife, Isabella.

In Portugal, Alexandro escapes death when the Portuguese ambassador returns from Spain with news that Balthazar still lives; Villuppo is then sentenced to death. In Spain, Hieronimo is almost driven insane by his inability to find justice for his son. Hieronimo receives a bloody letter in Bel-Imperia's hand, identifying the murderers as Lorenzo and Balthazar, but he is uncertain whether or not to believe it. While Hieronimo is racked with grief, Lorenzo grows worried by Hieronimo's erratic behavior and acts in a Machiavellian manner to eliminate all evidence surrounding his crime. He tells Pedringano to kill Serberine for gold but arranges it so that Pedringano is immediately arrested after the crime. He then leads Pedringano to believe that a pardon for his crime is hidden in a box brought to the execution by a messenger boy, a belief that prevents Pedringano from exposing Lorenzo before he is hanged. Negotiations continue between Spain and Portugal, now centering on a diplomatic marriage between Balthazar and Bel-Imperia to unite the royal lines of the two countries. Ironically, a letter is found on Pedringano's body that confirms Hieronimo's suspicion over Lorenzo and Balthazar, but Lorenzo is able to deny Hieronimo access to the king, thus making royal justice unavailable to the distressed father. Hieronimo then vows to revenge himself privately on the two killers, using deception and a false show of friendship to keep Lorenzo off his guard.

The marriage between Bel-Imperia and Balthazar is set, and the Viceroy travels to Spain to attend the ceremony. Hieronimo is given responsibility over the entertainment for the marriage ceremony, and he uses it to exact his revenge. He devises a play, a tragedy, to be performed at the ceremonies, and convinces Lorenzo and Balthazar to act in it. Bel-Imperia, by now a confederate in Hieronimo's plot for revenge, also acts in the play. Just before the play is acted, Isabella, insane with grief, kills herself.

The plot of the tragedy mirrors the plot of the play as a whole (a sultan is driven to murder a noble friend through jealousy over a woman). Hieronimo casts himself in the role of the hired murderer. During the action of the play, Hieronimo's character stabs Lorenzo's character and Bel-Imperia's character stabs Balthazar's character, before killing herself. But after the play is over, Hieronimo reveals to the horrified wedding guests (while standing over the corpse of his own son) that all the stabbings in the play were done with real knives, and that Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Bel-Imperia are now all dead. He then tries to kill himself, but the King and Viceroy and Duke of Castile stop him. In order to keep himself from talking, he bites out his own tongue. Tricking the Duke into giving him a knife, he then stabs the Duke and himself and then dies.

Revenge and Andrea then have the final words of the play. Andrea assigns each of the play's "good" characters (Hieronimo, Bel-Imperia, Horatio, and Isabella) to happy eternities. The rest of the characters are assigned to the various tortures and punishments of Hell.

Hieronimo

The protagonist of the story. Hieronimo starts out as a loyal servant to the King. He is the King's Knight-Marshal and is in charge of organizing entertainments at royal events. At the beginning of the play, he is a minor character, especially in relation to Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Bel-Imperia. It is not until he discovers his son Horatio's murdered body in the second Act that he becomes the protagonist of the play. His character undergoes a radical shift over the course of the play, from grieving father to Machiavellian plotter. After his son's murder, he is constantly pushed the limits of sanity, as evidenced by his erratic speech and behavior.

Read an in-depth analysis of Hieronimo.

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Bel-Imperia

The main female character of the story. Bel-Imperia's role is prominent in the plot, especially toward the end. The daughter of the Duke of Castile, she is headstrong, as evidenced by her decisions to love Andrea and Horatio, both against her father's wishes. She is intelligent, beautiful, and, in moments of love, tender. She also is bent on revenge, both for her slain lover Andrea and for Horatio. Her transformation into a Machiavellian villain is not as dramatic as Hieronimo's, but only because she shows signs of Machiavellian behavior beforehand—her decision to love Horatio, in part, may have been calculated revenge, undertaken in order to spite Balthazar, Andrea's killer.

Read an in-depth analysis of Bel-Imperia.

Lorenzo

One of Horatio's murderers. Lorenzo's character remains fairly constant throughout the play. He is a proud verbal manipulator and a Machiavellian plotter. A great deceiver and manipulator of others, Horatio unsurprisingly has an enthusiasm for the theater. Lorenzo has a foil in Horatio; they are both brave young men, but Horatio's directness, impulsiveness, and honesty, contrast and highlight Lorenzo's guardedness, secretiveness, and deception.

Read an in-depth analysis of Lorenzo.

Balthazar

The prince of Portugal and son of the Portuguese Viceroy. Balthazar is characterized by his extreme pride and his hot-headedness. This pride makes him kill Horatio along with Lorenzo, and it turns him into a villain. He kills Andrea fairly, though with help, so it is unclear whether he is as "valiant" as the King and others continuously describe him. But his love for Bel-Imperia is genuine, and it is this love that primarily motivates his killing of Horatio.

Horatio

The proud, promising son of Hieronimo. Horatio's sense of duty and loyalty is shown in his actions towards Andrea, and he gives Andrea the funeral rites that let the ghost cross the river Acheron in the underworld. He also captures Andrea's killer, Balthazar, in battle, thus recovering Andrea's body. His sense of pride is shown in his confrontation with Lorenzo; though Lorenzo greatly outranks him in stature, he does not defer, but instead continues to argue his case in front of the King.

Ghost of Andrea

Andrea's ghost is the first character we see in the play, and the first voice to cry out for revenge. His quest for revenge can be seen both as a quest for justice, since it is sanctioned by Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld, and as a quest for closure. Andrea is denied closure when he travels to the underworld, because the three judges there cannot decide where to place him; ironically, at the end of the play he becomes a judge himself, determining the places of the various characters in hell.

Revenge

Andrea's companion throughout the play. Revenge is a spirit that symbolizes the forces of revenge that dominate the play's action. He talks of the living characters as if they were performing a tragedy for his entertainment.

Isabella

Hieronimo's suffering wife, her inaction is a foil to his and Bel-Imperia's action. Her inaction, along with her visions of a dead Horatio, torment her increasingly throughout the play, providing an extreme version of Hieronimo's more subdued madness. Her death by her own hand foreshadows Hieronimo's suicide.

The King

The King of Spain is an ambivalent character. At times he appears noble and is definitely a friend to Hieronimo, resisting Lorenzo's attempts to have the Knight-Marshal dismissed. But he is also complacent (a typical English stereotype about the Spanish), as demonstrated by his callous conversation after the Spanish victory in Act I, his subsequent dialogue with the ambassador, and his failure to know that Horatio has been murdered on his estate.

The Viceroy

The King's counterpart in Portugal. The Viceroy is shown as both a loving father but also a weak king. He is defeated in battle, wallows in self-pity when he believes his son Balthazar to be dead, is easily led astray by Villuppo into condemning Alexandro to death, and then renounces his kingship in favor of his son. All of these are signs of bad leadership, especially to an Elizabethan audience.

Pedringano

Bel-Imperia's servant. Pedringano is easily bribed, and he betrays Bel-Imperia and is one of the gang of four murderers who kill Horatio. In fact, Pedringano seems to have no moral considerations, only following the person whom he thinks can help him most. Ironically, this leads him to trust Lorenzo, who ends up betraying him.

Serberine

Balthazar's manservant who, along with Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Pedringano, kills Horatio. Lorenzo suspects Serberine of informing Hieronimo of the crime, and has him killed by Pedringano.

Bazulto

An old man. Bazulto visits Hieronimo because his own son has been murdered, and he wants the Knight-Marshal's help in finding justice. The appearance of the old man makes Hieronimo feel ashamed at his own inability to avenge Horatio's death.

The Ambassador

The Portuguese Ambassador is the agent of communication between the King and Viceroy. His presence appears purely functional, exchanging information between the Portuguese and Spanish court.

Alexandro

A Portuguese nobleman who fought at the battle in Act I. Alexandro is betrayed by Villuppo, who falsely informs the King that Alexandro has shot Balthazar, the King's son. Alexandro's character appears exceptionally just; even when Villuppo is discovered, he begs the Viceroy (unsuccessfully) for mercy on Villuppo's behalf.

Villuppo

A nobleman who, for no reason clear to the audience, betrays Alexandro. Villuppo's role is so short and so tied in with his lie about Alexandro that he almost serves as a personification of deceit, contrasting against Alexandro's personification of honor.

General of the Spanish Army

The General simply describes the battle between Spain and Portugal in Act I. His account of Andrea's death (or lack of account of it) and description of the Spanish casualties as minimal provides an ironic contrast to Andrea's lamenting of his death in battle.

Christophil

A servant who attends on Bel-Imperia while she is kept prisoner by Lorenzo.

The Hangman

The hangman is witty and jovial, and he exchanges verbal retorts with Pedringano before hanging him. Later, the hangman discovers the letter on Pedringano's body that confirms Hieronimo's suspicions of Lorenzo and Balthazar's guilt.

The Page

The page is a messenger boy who brings Lorenzo's empty box to the execution, which is believed to hold a pardon for Pedringano. After the page looks inside, he does not tell anyone that it is empty, out of fear for his own life. This has a distinct impact on the play, since Pedringano's belief that he will be pardoned stops him from exposing Lorenzo as one of Horatio's murderers before it is too late.

Revenge and Justice

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, sayeth the lord" (Romans.xii.19). This Bible verse is quoted by Hieronimo in Act III, scene xiii, and it can be said to epitomize the official Elizabethan attitude toward revenge: that it is something that should be left to God. But this position is silent on the relationship between revenge and justice, which are identified with each other throughout the play—Hieronimo makes the connection explicitly several times, and revenge is officially sanctioned by Proserpine (Persephone), the Queen of the Underworld, in the play's opening scene. Revenge should be performed by God (or the State, which derived its power from God), but it still needs to be performed. This is the presupposition that underlies Hieronimo's doubts whether the Heavens (and God) are in fact just, which are doubts he expresses after the murder of his son and the apparent escape of his murderers. This link between revenge and justice also explains why, in III.xii, and IV.i, Hieronimo decides to revenge Horatio's death himself and why he interprets Bel-Imperia's offer of help as a sign that Heaven favors his decision. Hieronimo may here consider himself the agent of the divine vengeance that a just God must bring against his son's murderers, the man chosen by God to revenge Horatio's death. His act would thus be a service to God and not an usurpation of God's role.

There is, unquestionably, doubt in the audience's mind as to whether Hieronimo is right, and a similar ambiguity is felt toward other cases of revenge in the play as well—Andrea's and Bel-Imperia's, for example. Exactly what deaths should be revenged and who should do the revenging were topical questions for Elizabethans, who were living in a time when the Elizabethan state was bringing a centuries-old tradition of private revenge in England under control. It was also a state whose preachers advised leaving revenge to God, while at the same time describing the horrible revenge God would take on sinners. But the problems posed to us by revenge—and the intense desire for it when we or a loved one is injured by another, especially when the law fails to provide us with redress—is something that can be felt by modern audiences as well.

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Love and Memory

Not only is revenge a form of justice in the play, it is, ironically enough, an expression of love. Bel-Imperia's love for Andrea leads her to desire revenge against Balthazar; Balthazar revenges himself against Horatio because he loves Bel-Imperia. Bel-Imperia and Hieronimo make the most explicit connection between the two, interpreting the failure to revenge one's loved one as a lack of love. The presupposition that underlies all these actions and words is that love for a murder victim finds

its fullest expression in vengeance. In effect, vengeance is an assertion that the loved one is not forgotten. Thus, Andrea's desire for vengeance is understandable as a desire not to be forgotten by those still living, and love and revenge are intertwined in the symbol of the bloody handkerchief, which starts out as a simple memento but ends by becoming, for Hieronimo, a symbol of both the memory of his son and the need to revenge his son's death.

Fortune

The wheel of fortune was a potent image in Elizabethan iconography. It signified, in the Elizabethan consciousness, the vagaries and constant revolutions of Fortune, from low to high and everywhere in between. Lorenzo makes an allusion to it when he notes that the social-climbing Horatio is, hanged from the trees, "higher" than he ever was in life, and the Viceroy makes explicit reference to it in mourning the loss of his son in Act I (though his mourning is ironic, because it is premature). From Andrea onward, the characters we meet all experience drastic reversals of fortune—the loss of a son, the loss of life, the loss of a lover. This vicarious experience of the precariousness of human happiness—the way, in an instant, it can be changed to misery—is one of the unique pleasures that tragedy affords us: we are allowed to experience this loss without actually experiencing the tragic loss ourselves.

Appearance vs. Reality

Kyd uses dramatic irony throughout the play to drive a wedge between the world as his main characters see it and the world as it actually is. Balthazar and Bel-Imperia see their evening rendezvous in the orchard as a safe space in which to express their love, because Bel-Imperia thinks that Pedringano is a trustworthy servant. In fact, Pedringano is deceitful, and, because of his treachery, the orchard turns into a place of death.

Furthermore, Lorenzo enthusiastically agrees to play his part in Hieronimo's tragedy, not knowing that Hieronimo intends not only his character to die, but for him to die as well. But, perhaps the most concrete and dramatic example of this wedge is Pedringano's belief that a pardon is contained inside the box Lorenzo has sent him. The box then comes to symbolize, in the view of many critics, a more fundamental and general limitation on human knowledge. In other words, the characters' inability to get past appearances is typical of all human beings' inability to penetrate appearances.

These words are spoken by Andrea, to the audience, at Act I, scene i., lines 1–17, while only he and Revenge are on-stage. These lines serve as an exposition, telling the backstory necessary to understand the play. They lead into Andrea's description of his long journey to the underworld below, and his inability to find justice there. The section thus introduces the main characters, as well as the main themes of the play—justice, revenge, and Fortune. They also show the quick movement

from one opposite to another-summer to winter, youth and death-that will characterize the rest of the play. The rhetoric of these lines quickly establishes a grave, serious and ornate style, indicating the author's serious tone and his intention to deal with potentially tragic subject matter.