Shakespeare Topic Paper

Insanity and Identity:

An Extended View on Shakespeare’s Conception of Character

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Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Poetry

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The spirit driving Shakespeare’s tragedies is a spirit that defines unfortunate fate and most of all: the paradox of life. As each setting is specified to a Shakespearean genre, his characters are set to face their own paradox, a once reasonable and acceptable proposition resulting in self-contradiction. The question of Prince Hamlet’s insanity has been a controversy between avid readers and play enthusiasts since the sixteenth century. Through Shakespeare’s unparalleled creation of characters and the depth of consciousness they possess, it’s no wonder as to why this question of identity remains a blur. However, it is not one specific identity Hamlet should be seen from, but a multiplicity of them. Just as there is no definite emotion described to the human heart, there is no fixed persona to Hamlet’s character. Through this revenge tragedy, Hamlet’s identities become scattered and the inner turmoil, the insanity he wished to feign, becomes him.

In order to understand Shakespeare’s characters, the tragedy genre in which they are placed must first be understood. The theory of dramatic tragedy was created long before Shakespeare and done so many times over before him. However, no other poet or author is more known for the shattered hopes and lovers lost than Shakespeare today. Now, there are only cheap imitations derived from his imagination, all characters a stereotype and all their lines a cliché.

The difference with Shakespeare’s tragedies is that they matter, the tragedies mean something.1 All of Shakespeare’s tragedies propose a flawed nature of not only the main character, but also a situation of events. For example, Hamlet’s flaw could be considered his procrastination to murder his uncle, but that can also have something to do with the situation in which his father’s murder was told to him by a ghost and that his mother is implicated in it as well.2 This reaches a level of the personal, dealing with a shift in family and in the personality of the prince, making it that much easier to drive sorrow into its readers by the conclusion. Tragedy is not just a preface for a murder to occur in a piece of literature, but an emotion and an experience to be felt by an audience, and that is exactly what Shakespeare succeeds to deliver through the characters he creates.

From the very beginning, Hamlet is painted as a hero with an ethical dilemma, quickly divulged into a new sense of self for the progression of the play following his father’s death. At first wallowing in an endless pit of misery, soon Hamlet encounters the first major event of the play: the event of his father, the dead king, up and roaming about. Though it looks like the past king of Denmark, perhaps idealized by a grieving country, the figure is still questioned in its identity since its discovery “What are thou that unsurp’st this time of night.”3 The ghost is never actually regarded as “he”, but rather referred to as “it” throughout the dialogue. This clever conception of character in the dialogue leaves the observers lost, not clearly pin-pointing the ghost as the King’s character, but as an interpretation of the imagination that provokes the manic mind of Hamlet and contributes to a sole focus on his inner turmoil.4

What once was sorrow in Hamlet’s mind is filled a-buzz with the distraction of revenge aimed at his uncle and a similar distaste for his mother, all stemming from the words of a figure that resembles his father. This not only sets the task of revenge to carry out the play, but the beginnings of a tragedy. The beginning of a disintegrating mind and that of the world around him.

To further advance this break up of Hamlet’s mind and his character identity, the famous fourth and most known soliloquy is placed perfectly in the text. All the characters up until this point have been pondering the stability of Hamlet’s mind, while he himself begins to ponder “To be or Not to be”5. The question of death, its uncertainty, and the continuance of life lived on in misery, as it pertains to living and continuing his own life. Although seemingly serene in its context, the insinuation of suicide marks a grave moment as Hamlet’s turmoil becomes overwhelming. His efforts to convince characters of his madness have gained notice, but his motives for personal revenge have yet to be fulfilled, and he cannot help but be frustrated, and in that frustration we see his true emotions spill.

The stage had been set for Hamlet by Polonius, in order to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he had truly lost sense of rationality, and that is exactly what Polonius receives. Though Hamlet’s intentions were to create madness to achieve murder, instead he has revealed what was always there: a duplicity of emotions and ever changing character that are very much real. And though insanity is certain for Polonius and other characters of the kingdom, the blur of Hamlet’s personality also becomes real for the readers. In denying his true love for Ophelia, Hamlet denies not only the aspects pertaining to his past, but the remains of truth he held for himself, the logic in living if it were.

The next event to which Hamlet’s character begins to blur the conception of his identity takes place in Gertrude’s chamber. Through this scene and through the words of Hamlet’s mother, an insight into his deteriorating psyche is revealed.

Alas, how is’t with you,

That you do bend your eye on vacancy

And with the incorporal air do hold discourse?

Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep:

And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,

Your bedded hair, like life in exrements,

Starts up, and stands on end. O gentle son,

Upon the head and flame of thy distemper

Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?6

What is alarming about this passage is no longer just the appearance of the ghost, but the fact Hamlet is now the only one to see it. At the start of the play, the castle guards were able to witness the ghost’s appearance, in fact they were the first to see it. But now, in Gertrude’s bedroom, Hamlet is the only capable of seeing the King’s figure.

So the question is, what has changed? While it is said that the guards witnessed the ghost, Hamlet has only ever been the one to hear and actually speak with it. It could be that in Gertrude’s bedroom, the ghost only wishes to reveal itself to Hamlet, but the more likely case are it as a figure of Hamlet’s imagination. The King’s ghost being a familiar figure to ease his sorrow and give purpose to revenger’s passion, but even in that conclusion it is a method of madness. A method in which Shakespeare turns the tables and gives insight into the true tragedy, the disintegration of mind and the crumbling of a specific identity in Hamlet.

As the play’s action heats up and the time remaining dwindles, the reminder of Hamlet’s motives come into perspective. The main component of tragedy to the play, as well as Hamlet’s the main component consuming Hamlet’s mind is the motive of revenge, and though for his dead father, a madness in the act itself.

Does it not, think’st thee, stand me now upon-

He that hath kill’d my king and whored my mother,

Popp’d in between the election and my hopes,

Thrown out his angle for my proper life,

And with such cozenage – is’t not perfect conscience,

To quit him with this arm? And is’t not to be damn’d,

To let this canker of our nature come

In further evil?7

This passage reminds the readers that Claudius not only killed Hamlet’s father and married his mother, but also that he stole the throne from Hamlet, “Popp’d in between the election and my hopes”8. Up until this line, there was hardly a mention of Hamlet’s desire to reign following his father, but now it appears as another motive in his murder of Claudius. A motive perhaps there from the beginning, day by day eating away at Hamlet as another thing that had been taken away from him: the life of his father, the love of his mother, and now the progression of his future. If all that is not enough substance for Hamlet to feel driven to seek his revenge, the mind’s creation of a dead and rambling father figure surely is.

So who is Hamlet? A grieving son hoping to avenge his father, a stifled opportunist vying for his rightful thrown, and a mad man driven by circumstances beyond his control, or is he all of the above? Hamlet is not limited to one definition of personality, but too many, insane, clever, and himself. Through the lines of the play and the high stressors proposed to Hamlet, an array of character arises, of which includes the insanity he gives into. However, his antic-disposition is not the only depth to his character, and through the true intentions of his madness, real and feigned, those depths are able to be expressed. Therefore, Hamlet is seen for what he is – human. Hamlet’s inner consciousness speaks to the human he is, and to the human audience his observers are. Shakespeare successfully matches Hamlet’s madness to the madness of his audience, and in turn forever roots his play in literature and in culture. Like Hamlet there is no strict sense of identity, no stable situation, but rather a blur in identity and ever-changing events of life that speak for all. As madness is at the heart of Hamlet, it is at the heart of modern life today.

Notes

1. Everett, Barbara. *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, 13. Print.

2. Leggatt, Alexander. *Shakespeare's Tragedies: Violation and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.

3. All textual citations, here and later, are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, text ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), unless otherwise specified.

4. Dillon, Janette. *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007, 67.

5. Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.” Evans, G. Blakemore and J. J. M. Tobin. *The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd Edition.* 1997. Print. Refer to Act Three, Scene One, Line 1749.

6. Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.” Evans, G. Blakemore and J. J. M. Tobin. *The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd Edition.* 1997. Refer to… “Alas, how is’t with you, That you do bend your eye on vacancy...” (III. IV. Line 117-135).

7. Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.” Evans, G. Blakemore and J. J. M. Tobin. *The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd Edition.* 1997. Refer to…“Does it not, think’st thee, stand me now upon…” (V. II. Line 63-70).

8. Shakespeare, William. Refer to previous passage, specific line ….