

Hamlet - william shakespeare essay

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Consider how the personality of the flawed and unique individual unfolds during the play.

What devices does Shakespeare use to win our sympathy for the main character?

Does Shakespeare suggest that the individual can make a difference?

Abstract

In the first section of this paper I deal with the way Hamlet's character emerges throughout the play, and the way his character exemplifies changes known collectively as the Renaissance are examined. The second section deals very closely with Act Three, scene one and how Shakespeare creates sympathy - and even empathy for Hamlet. The political corruption of the Danish court is examined in detail with references to specific film productions, and there is some wider reference to Hamlet's situation in the rest of the play. Finally, the paper discusses the question of whether one man can make a difference and examines Hamlet's transformation after his capture and return by the pirates.

Main Body

Hamlet's personality emerges gradually during the course of the play. In the first scene we see him dressed in black, a striking contrast to the festivities surrounding the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, and Claudius's coronation. He has, it seems, every reason to be depressed, and his situation only gets worse when he hears the voice of the ghost, accusing Claudius of murdering him by pouring poison in his ear, and urging Hamlet to take quick revenge. Hamlet has often been criticized by readers and audiences for his

delay in killing Claudius, but this criticism is naive and does not take into account that this play was written in the Renaissance, and Hamlet is a Renaissance man. What does this mean? Europe was in a state of transition (Gibson, 2002, p. 63): European voyages of discovery, the rise of Protestantism, the development of early capitalism, scientific discoveries and the rediscovery of the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome were, according to Gibson (2002), “ shaking the firm convictions of the medieval world.” (p 63) Hamlet is part of the spirit of this new age: according to Gibson (2002) Hamlet shows

... signs of modernity: complexity, scepticism and doubt. Hamlet, like early modern England, displays misgivings about the ethics of revenge, the nature of ghosts, the justification of divine and secular authority, and the stability of social order. (p. 64)

His delay shows his moral scruples: he knows that murder is wrong and he will not rush to kill anyone on the word of an apparition.

Therefore, hamlet constantly questions things: his own mortality, the justice of revenge, the purpose of life. How can he trust the words of a ghost? Claudius's guilt is not confirmed until Act Three, scene two, and Hamlet refuses to kill him while he is praying. He then gets sent to England, and returns with a new sense of purpose and kills Claudius at the first opportunity. Claudius is a king and many productions emphasize how well-guarded he is by surrounding him with body guards, thus emphasizing the practical problems of carrying out Hamlet's revenge. Interestingly, we might

describe Claudius as a Renaissance politician, since his words and actions reflect the new political ideas expressed by Machiavelli (Gibson, 2002, p. 66)

Shakespeare uses many devices to win our sympathy and some of them are exemplified in Act One, scene three. Hamlet's soliloquies (for many the highlights of the play) allow the audience to form an intimate relationship with Hamlet because he confides in us his innermost fears and anxieties. Act Three, scene one contains arguably the most well-known soliloquy of the play, and it could be argued it shows Hamlet at his most vulnerable. The context of this scene also helps to win our sympathy because it exemplifies Shakespeare's presentation of Elsinore: Hamlet is under constant surveillance and even his former lover, Ophelia, goes along with Polonius' plan for their conversation to be overheard by Polonius and Claudius. Hamlet is surrounded by spies and manipulators. Even his old school mates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, have been summoned to court to spy on him. This idea was captured forcefully in Michael Almeyreda's modern film version of Hamlet (2000) where Hamlet was under constant surveillance by CCTV cameras and hidden microphones. On stage a noise (a cough, a sneeze, a throat-clearing) is usually made from behind the arras where the king and Polonius are hiding, and this prompts Hamlet's question to Ophelia: "Where's your father?" (Act Three, scene one, 130) and Ophelia's response, "At home, my lord," (132) makes Hamlet realize that his former lover is lying to him. Earlier in the play Ophelia had obeyed her father's orders not to have any communication with Hamlet, and, because Hamlet is never given any reason for this contrary behavior, we are likely to sympathize even more with him. In Branagh's Hamlet (1996) a pre-action scene showed that hamlet

and Ophelia had consummated their relationship - which makes her betrayal here even more poignant: he cannot even trust his former lover who lies to him about the whereabouts of her father. This scene also contains a revelation that wins our sympathy entirely. At this stage of the play Hamlet is not wholly convinced that Claudius murdered his father: he is only certain of this fact in Act Three, scene 2. But in Act Three, scene one Claudius admits in an aside to the audience that he did murder Hamlet's father. His aside comes after Polonius has issued his instructions to Ophelia on how she should appear to be in her conversation with Hamlet: he is encouraging her to lie and be deceitful, and Claudius responds by saying:

O 'tis too true.

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

Than is my deed to my most painted word.

O heavy burthen! (Act Three, scene one, 49 - 54)

The audience watch the scene which unfolds with this knowledge. Long (1976) sums up this view of Elsinore:

The bases of Elsinorean social practice are manipulative, expeditious and politic, a matter of espionage and the use of man by man against man.... The King is the centre of this world, the major manipulator, who works like the controller of a huge chessboard. (p. 127)

This sense that Hamlet is being manipulated further wins our sympathy.

The “ To be or not to be” soliloquy has caused much critical debate. (Gibson, 2002, p. 26): critics are divided as to whether this is a very personal debate about whether to commit suicide or a general observation on one of the central problems of human existence: there is no reason why it cannot function as both. What this soliloquy does is that it demonstrates the deep emotional turmoil that Hamlet is undergoing, and it displays (as all the soliloquies do) an intelligence and power of thoughtful reflection that wins our sympathy because, given what Elsinore is like, Hamlet is the most intelligent and sensitive character on stage. If he is really contemplating suicide, it will win our sympathy for his plight; if it is a reflection on the human condition, it will win our sympathy for expressing a universal problem. Kermode (2000) argues that Shakespeare is using the soliloquy a new way:

This soliloquy has been discussed interminably, but one thing is surely obvious: Hamlet is referring his own to a more general view of the human condition, and this is, I think, a new use for the soliloquy - ordinarily used for the conveyance of information to the audience - as a way of considering the human situation more largely. (p. 115)

If Kermode is right, then it wins our sympathy for Hamlet, and our empathy - since as human beings we share that human condition.

In one sense, Hamlet has had our sympathy from the start of the play, before the appearance of the ghost: he is grieving for his father and trying to cope with his mother’s very quick re-marriage to an uncle whom he despises.

In Act Three, scene one I do not think Shakespeare shows that an individual can make a difference: the political forces are too strong to allow Hamlet any freedom of action and, in any case, it is not until the next scene that Hamlet has his suspicions about Claudius confirmed. However, once Hamlet has escaped from Elsinore and spent time with the pirates, he returns to Denmark a changed man - a man who can and does make a difference, a man who has accepted the possibility of his own death and, before he dies, exposes the corruption at the heart of the Danish state and takes revenge on his uncle. It is as though by exposure to the pirates' way of life and the casual ease with which he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in England have changed and energized him.

References

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