

How hamlet is in his search for identity

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Why has Hamlet captivated actors, critics and audiences for centuries? What makes Hamlet himself so mysterious? Unlike most characters, who are defined by what can be seen on stage, Hamlet appears to be “constructed around an unseen or secret core.” Shakespeare characterizes Hamlet extensively, but it still seems that something is missing – passages contradict each other, accounts of scenes change, and at times it appears that not even Hamlet himself could explain himself. In this paper I argue that a traditional character analysis cannot define Hamlet; rather, what identifies him best is the lack of a clear-cut identity. Hamlet’s changing mood, state of mind, and behaviour are not simply devices to confuse his enemies, but rather the manifestation of his endless search for his true self. Hamlet fascinates us because we see ourselves and our searches in him.

In general, Hamlet is observed – and thereby characterized – by nearly everyone who speaks. Every person in the court is observing him and trying to figure out who he is. However, these accounts present very different images of him. At times, the differences between two perceptions of the same man could not be greater. Would we take all these versions of one character into consideration, it would be hard to believe all of them being one man. In this sense, Brian O. States’ notion of character may help understand Hamlet. States (among others) believes that a character is composed of several little units, or “traits”, which form the character of a figure. In this theory, a character does not change or gain traits. What happens when a figure reacts in a way that is untypical for his or her character is that an extreme situation generates an extreme response. However, according to States, all of these extreme responses are already “

pre-planted” in the character traits. The tension in Hamlet is created through this discrepancy between Hamlet’s “dispositional attributes” of character and the variations of “responsive traits”, which include cruelty, irony and self-isolation (39).

The theory of traits would be especially suited for an analysis of Hamlet’s character before the play (somewhat of a reconstruction of his former self), since it claims that his traits must have remained the same below the surface of his external actions. Indeed, Shakespeare allows us to see a few “refracted glimpses of a more normal man”, as Granville Barker phrases it. However, I think, the theory of traits is not enough to account for the changes Hamlet goes through after he meets the Ghost. The prince assumes madness and more than once deliberately oppresses his one character to exchange it for another. In fact, during the play, Hamlet seems to be constructed of personalities rather than of traits of one personality. For this reason, I like the concept of character presented by Habib better. He claims that the moment of great shock (meeting the Ghost) destroys Hamlet’s outer shell of personality (a definitely shaped expression of his character) and brings out what is inside, an indefinite, shapeless self. Because Hamlet lacks his definite shell, he is now open to be reshaped and re-identified (117-120).

I do not agree with everything in Habib’s theory. To me it seems more plausible to say that all people are constantly being reshaped and re-identified. It does not need a shock to induce that reshaping. However, in Hamlet’s case, the shock induces something else and that makes him completely lose control over his self. Habib calls this “the spinning

characterization". It refers to the main protagonist's painful questioning of his own nature and the universe that surrounds him. This questioning leads to chaotic actions and causes the figure to spin from one personality to another with an "intense and disturbed rapidity" (111ff). This notion of a disturbed character accounts for the fact that so many different observers, including Hamlet himself, fail to find out the truth about the prince.

The events in Hamlet's life disturb him and lead him to question his own existence. After being melancholy for a long time, which gradually distanced him from reality and the people in it, he is especially susceptible to this spinning motion. He goes through a variety of personalities and roles: he is cruel, sarcastic, silly, funny, evasive, melancholy, and drastic. He is a philosopher, an enthusiastic theatre lover, the avenger of his father's murder and the actor who feigns madness. He likes changing personalities, as it helps him to escape the unpleasant events in his life while remaining in the middle of them. The line between taking on a new personality and being overpowered by one is thin, and undoubtedly Hamlet himself cannot account for all his actions or dispositions. He knows about the changes he undergoes, but he cannot always control them. As he explains to a baffled Ophelia:

'I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us.' (III, i, 123-129)

Of course, even in this speech it is not clear how much of this he actually means and how much he adds for dramaturgic reasons. Still, he clearly states that he knows about his unstable character and the spinning from character to character.

In the spinning between roles and personalities, one role emerges as the basis of all others. It is the role of the player who assumes one personality after another. Hamlet expresses his admiration for actors and the stage on several occasions – most notably in the scene II, ii, 527-582, where he feels inferior to the actor who portrayed a figure on stage and seemed to experience more emotions than himself. To Hamlet, the answers to his constant self-questioning lie in acting. Since he fails to make up his mind, he decides to at least act as if he already did. This musings about the actor's true emotions are a true turning point, since before the players, Hamlet was only musing over what he should or should not do. Then, before and during the play-within-the-play, Hamlet is still partly in the role of the philosopher, but he also has the actual plan to find out whether or not the King is guilty. Additionally, the prince seems to come alive and explore his silly and sardonic sides more. Finally, after the play-within-the-play, the audience is presented with a changed and still rapidly changing Hamlet. He becomes more active and energetic.

Harley Granville Barker describes Hamlet's abstraction from himself in an interesting image. He says that Hamlet's mind is composed of mirrors and Hamlet has to constantly observe himself. Such a constant observation leads to him constantly feeling self-conscious. If a person sees his or her

every move monitored, the behaviour inevitably changes. The person assumes certain attitudes and thereby deforms the truth about him- or herself. By pondering his self-image in every move he makes, Hamlet moves further and further away from ever finding his true identity. The distance between contemplating and existing becomes wider and wider until it finally becomes insurmountable.

In the end, the search for identity remains fruitless. Not only is Hamlet a mystery to others, but also a mystery to himself. He spins from one personality to another, acts out parts or tries to find the truth in philosophical musings. He himself does not know who he is and therefore gives all his energy to a presumably suitable part ('the reckless revenger'), but does not even mention his father after killing Claudius. This may signify that he lost his perspective and even forgot what part he was playing. In the end, all that seemed to matter was that he discharged all that energy that has been building up inside of him during his transition from one role to another.

Now the question remains of whether people really value this complex character because they see themselves in him. Michael Goldman states that "An actor is a man who wants to play Hamlet". However, he also says - and I agree wholeheartedly - that "every private man [or woman] is an actor too." We all experience moments in our life when we want "either to express or conceal [...] or true self" (Goldman 239). The questioning of one's own identity has undoubtedly crossed the minds of many, if not most, men and women and that is a crucial part of what makes us want to watch and recognize ourselves in that 'observed of all observers'. The melancholy

Danish Prince is the personification of the ever-changing, diverse, self-contradicting character of human nature that screams, “ define me!” and in the same movement eludes any possible definition.

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