

Hamlet as a model of a person

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Harold Bloom asserts that “ Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought be possible...” (15). If this is true, then the Prince of Denmark himself in Shakespeare’s Hamlet is the epitome of humanity in his perceptions of mankind and mankind’s unavoidable perversion of nature, and in his representation of the vast uncertainties within the human mind.

Hamlet ponders – or, in Bloom’s view, invents – the concept and definition of man; his fundamental impression of the natural being of man is “ noble in reason ... in action how/like an angel, in apprehension how like a god...” (II, ii, 327-330) Yet in the same soliloquy, Hamlet exhibits ungrateful discontent with his “ express and admirable” (II, ii, 329) fellow men, a contradiction which bears neither noble reason nor godlike apprehension. Shakespeare projects one definition of man through Hamlet’s words and another through the man himself. These two ideas, which exist at opposite poles from each other, must be assumed to include all positions in between, for the person who is fully angelic or invariably dissatisfied is rare, if he exists at all. By implying this vague spectrum the gauge of a being’s mind, Shakespeare defines man as indefinable. The first of these human conditions, that which describes man as angelic, has been carried from Shakespearian times to modern philosophy through the work and legacy of John Locke; Hamlet’s slightly contradictory yet firm vision of man as basically good trigger an immediate connection to Locke in current Western thought. Trust in the “ noble reason” and “ infinite faculties” of man are also the basis of the democratic American government, established by men influenced by Locke, whose main philosophical platform closely parallels Hamlet’s reflections.

Hamlet's mental and familial situations are perversions of the natural human condition he describes: contrary to "noble reason," Hamlet displays insanity; he is more goal obsessed than "infinite in faculties"; his lust for bloody revenge and his Uncle's incestuous, murderous tendencies oppose Hamlet's idealized notion of man as "in action how like an angel" (II, ii, 329). In a far greater quantity than he praises humankind, Shakespeare examines the extent to which the natural, good state of human beings is tragically corruptible. Hamlet chides his mother's "incestuous" acts: "O, such a deed/As from the body of contraction plucks/The very soul, and sweet religion makes/a rhapsody of words!" (III, iv, 54-57). Hamlet is pressing what he perceives as the moral argument upon his mother, the Queen. He sees her as a perversion of natural being yet later, when she declares the aside "Alas, he is mad" (III, iv, 121) of Hamlet, Shakespeare plunges into uncertainty: does the Queen truly deserve this blame, or has the audience blindly assumed a treacherous mispreaching by the insane Hamlet to be true? In the same scene, Hamlet murders Polonius; the spectacle becomes a bastion of incest, insanity, and death, all combining to display a blatant perversion of Hamlet's supposedly "noble" purpose of revenge.

Shakespeare reveals not only that moral and psychological flaws are as prevalent in royalty as they are elsewhere, but also – on a more universal scale – the fragility of meticulously conceived moral structures under the blows of evil snares. Hamlet commits the ultimate sin of taking life for what he convinces himself is a necessary purpose, thus serving as a warning against self-delusion which inevitably perverts the holiest, most natural intentions.

Upon creating components of man – nature and perversion, definition and uncertainty – Shakespeare uses Hamlet as a model portraying that the true essence of humanity lies in man’s struggle to reach peace within and between these components. Hamlet has a history of love and courtship with Ophelia, yet when he sees her he demands: “ Go thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be/a breeder of sinners?” (III, 131-132). Later, after her death, he once again proclaims his love. This ebbing and flowing of one set of values to make way for another gives Hamlet indecision and internal conflict – it challenges him to pick one truth from an assortment offered by his surroundings. This theoretical freedom represents man’s liberty to wade between challenging and embracing all ideas, actions, and processes; this philosophy has become a cherished rationale for modern poets and philosophers. Walt Whitman said, “ Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.” The multitudes that Whitman contains are the same as those within Hamlet and the same as those struggling within anyone who Shakespeare has taught, according to Bloom, “ to think too well” (10).

Though today the origins of the physical human are hotly debated, the psychology with which men view themselves and each other can be traced back further than America’s founding fathers, even further than John Locke, to William Shakespeare. Through Hamlet, Shakespeare was the first to add the components of natural goods with perverse evils to create the ultimate literary depiction of the struggles which are the essence and core of humanity.