

# Shakespeare's personal life and the writing of hamlet essay



It is a well-established fact that an author's material for fiction is largely derived from his/her own personal experiences. And the greatest of English literary artists in the form of William Shakespeare is not an exception to this rule. The underlying thematic current in the play is tragedy. And based on what scholars have documented about the personal life of Shakespeare as well as the historical and socio-political circumstances of his era, a synthesis could be developed linking the personal and the artistic lives. Also, understanding the private life of the writer elucidates to us the roots of his creative genius. The rest of this essay is an exercise toward this end.

First of all, in order to understand the connection between the personal and the professional, it is important to locate the exact time period in which the play was written. Given that Shakespeare lived during the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, there are no authoritative accounts of when the play was written. So one can only arrive at a tentative date; and scholarly consensus designates the period between 1599 and 1602.

(Fedderson, 2000, p. 145) By this time, Shakespeare was already an established playwright and his works had acquired him critical appreciation as well as popular recognition. He was in his late thirties by this time and been married to Anne Hathaway for close to twenty years. Hence, it is fair to say that Shakespeare had seen enough of life's challenges and travails to have gained insights into human relationships. (Ross, 1999, p. 6)

And the vividness with which the author puts forth emotions related to betrayal, treachery and grave indignation in the play is a reflection of his own maturity as a person. As Prof. Park Honanspent's recent biography on the great artist reveals,

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“ In addition to fresh information about the women in Shakespeare's life, what has come to light is playwright's connections with more sinister matters and how his personal experiences of treachery were mirrored on stage. Using new computerised linguistic research, researchers claim that Shakespeare's acquaintance with murder in his private life was not only reflected in the plots of his plays, but actually performed by Shakespeare on stage.” (The Birmingham Post, Oct, 1998, p. 3)

This is a relevant observation, for the central plot of Hamlet is one of revenge and murder. In it, Prince Hamlet contrives to kill his uncle Claudius, for his father was killed and the throne usurped by the latter. Shakespeare is no stranger to murder in real life. Shakespeare was also acquainted first-hand with fatal rivalries between closely related individuals. For example, Professor Honanspent's research has shown that

“ a previous occupant of Shakespeare's Stratford house, New Place, poisoned and murdered his own daughter. Similarly, the man who later sold the house to Shakespeare was poisoned and killed by his son. Against this background, Shakespeare, when writing Hamlet only a year or two after he bought the house, chose to use poison to kill King Hamlet. And we now know that Shakespeare performed some of these characters himself including the Ghost of King Hamlet, and Duncan, a victim of Macbeth's dagger.” (The Birmingham Post, Oct, 1998, p. 3)

Similarly, one could make connections between women in Shakespeare's life and the characters seen on stage. For example, his wife, Anne Hathaway, had a much problematic and conflicted relationship with him. Their marital

harmony was marred by Shakespeare's prolonged absence after the birth of his three children. Towards the end of the 16th century, Shakespeare's life was undergoing important changes. Firstly, his relationship with his wife Anne Hathaway was getting rough. Secondly, the Globe Theatre, with which he was long associated, had moved to a place south of River Thames. During this time, he was also said to have stumbled into a writer's block, whereby the creative powers of a writer are temporarily deprived, probably due to overwork or lack of inspiration (Fedderson, 2000, p. 145). This was illustrated in the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, in which the great writer's character was played by Joseph Fiennes and his lover's role played by Gwyneth Paltrow, who is the daughter of a wealthy trader. Although the movie deviates from real facts of Shakespeare's life (as there is no authoritative source for the same), it does succeed in capturing the romantic side of Shakespeare and his infidelity to his faithful wife Anne. One could draw parallels between Shakespeare's own personal failures as a husband and Hamlet's mother's incestuous relationship with Claudius. (Nehring, 2004, p. 132) Some scholars have given a Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's fears about the prospect of killing Claudius, for it might graduate him to the position assumed by the latter, namely one of his mother's lover. There is no evidence from Shakespeare's personal life to denote his own Oedipal anxieties. Hence the emphasis on this parallel occurrence - one in real life and the other on stage - should be subject to doubt and debate.

Hamlet the Prince's longing for revenge and retribution toward Claudius is not an unusual tendency at the time of the play's setting. During the late 16th century England, political intrigue and betrayal were quite common

(Tiffany, 2005, p. 112). It was not usual for power-hungry subordinates or peers to resort to unethical or inhumane tactics to achieve their end. For a modern audience, the killing of a King and the acquisition of his power and property (which in those days included wives) might come across as grossly unjust. But Shakespeare was only mimicking the political culture prevalent at the time in plays such as Hamlet. In particular, the notion of 'revenge' as a way of getting justice for a grave violation of noble contract was an accepted aspect of politics. Shakespeare, being an astute student of the tradition of drama and the works of earlier playwrights, was only presenting an alternative expression of the theme of revenge. And as per this tradition, not only is revenge meant to be nominal and to the point, but it is meant to be ghastly and dramatic. As Grace Tiffany points out in her journal article,

"The Ghost tells Hamlet he will be "bound" to "revenge" after he hears the tale of the murder, and before telling that tale he repeats that Hamlet must "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1. 5. 6-7, 25)...for Elizabethans, by the conventions of revenge tragedy stemming from Aeschylus and running through Thomas Kyd, "revenge" implies not a salutary humiliation which may prompt the criminal's repentance, but spectacular bloodshed and death. Second, the Ghost seems angry and it chokes his utterance." (Tiffany, 2005, p. 112)

Hence, in conclusion, one could draw a lot of parallels between Shakespeare's personal life experiences and the narrative in Hamlet. Three key similarities are particularly salient. Firstly, the author's troubled relationship with his wife of many years, Anne Hathaway, and his propensity for infidelity might have served as inputs to Claudius' incestuous relationship  
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with his brother's widow. Secondly, the author's subtle indication of an Oedipal anxiety on part of the protagonist is the result of Shakespeare's sophisticated understanding of interpersonal relations. But no factual evidence exists to suggest that the Oedipal anxiety was experienced by the author himself. Thirdly, the emphasis on revenge as a proper course of attaining justice was showcased in the play. This is an accepted element of Elizabethan society and its incorporation in the play only reflects the socio-political condition of the author's time. There are also other minor reflections of the personal and the theatrical. But as a note of caution, given that these inferences were derived based on deductive logic and circumstantial evidence, one should take them with allowance for doubt. Probably, with advancement in anthropological research in the future, more concrete understanding of the great writer's life would emerge.

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