

KHAZAR UNIVERSITY

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MA THESIS

THEME: “The analysis of the characters in “Hamlet” tragedy and their similarities with the characters in “Othello”

Master student: Parvin Karimova

Supervisor: Ph. D. Eldar Shahgaldiyev

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KHAZAR UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT

ABSTRACT

OF DISSERTATION FOR MASTER'S DEGREE

THEME

**The analysis of the characters in “Hamlet” tragedy and their similarities
with the characters in “Othello”**

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Abstract

Object of research – The analysis of the characters in “Hamlet” tragedy and their similarities with the characters in “Othello”. The analysis is based on “Hamlet” and “Othello” tragedies. Shakespeare was a poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world’s pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England’s national poet and the “Bard of Avon”. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

William Shakespeare, by universal consent the greatest author of England, if not of the world, occupies chronologically a central position in the Elizabethan drama. He was born in 1564 in the good-sized village of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, near the middle of England, where the level but beautiful country furnished full external stimulus for a poet's eye and heart. His father, John Shakespeare, who was a general dealer in agricultural products and other commodities, was one of the chief citizens of the village, and during his son's childhood was chosen an alderman and shortly after mayor, as we should call it. But by 1577 his prosperity declined, apparently through his own shiftlessness, and for many years he was harassed with legal difficulties. In the village 'grammar' school William Shakespeare had acquired the rudiments of book-knowledge, consisting largely of Latin, but his chief education was from Nature and experience. As his father's troubles thickened he was very likely removed from school, but at the age of eighteen, under circumstances not altogether creditable to himself, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior, who lived in the neighboring village of Shottery. The suggestion that the marriage proved positively unhappy is supported by no real evidence, but what little is known of Shakespeare's later life implies that it was not exceptionally congenial. Two girls and a boy were born from it.¹

In his early manhood, apparently between 1586 and 1588, Shakespeare left Stratford to seek his fortune in London. As to the circumstances, there is reasonable plausibility in the later tradition that he had joined in poaching raids on the deer-park of Sir Thomas Lucy, a neighboring country gentleman, and found it desirable to get beyond the bounds of that gentleman's authority. It is also likely enough that Shakespeare had been fascinated by the performances of traveling dramatic companies at Stratford and by the Earl of Leicester's costly entertainment of Queen Elizabeth in 1575 at the castle of Kenilworth, not many miles away. At any rate, in London he evidently soon secured mechanical employment in a theatrical company, presumably the one then known as Lord Leicester's company, with which, in that case, he was always thereafter connected. His energy and interest must soon have won him the opportunity to show his skill as actor and also reviser and collaborator in play-writing, then as independent author; and after the first few years of slow progress his rise was rapid. He became one of the leading members, later one of the chief shareholders, of the company, and evidently enjoyed a substantial reputation as a playwright and a good, though not a great, actor. This was both at Court (where, however, actors had no social standing) and in the London dramatic circle. Of his personal life only the most fragmentary record has been preserved, through occasional mentions in miscellaneous documents, but it is evident that his rich nature was partly appreciated and thoroughly loved by his associates. His

¹ Sarah Smith «Chasing Shakespeare” Dial-A-Book. 2003

business talent was marked and before the end of his dramatic career he seems to have been receiving as manager, shareholder, playwright and actor. He early began to devote attention to paying the debts of his father, who lived until 1601, and restoring the fortunes of his family in Stratford. The death of his only son, Hamnet, in 1596, must have been a severe blow to him, but he obtained from the Heralds' College the grant of a family coat of arms, which secured the position of the family as gentlefolk. Thither he retired about 1610 or 1612, and there he died prematurely in 1616, just as he was completing his fifty-second year.²

One of the greatest benefits of studying Shakespeare is that he makes us more aware of our assumption and so less confined by them. A much more subtle and deeply rooted assumption is that Shakespeare was a great poet who wrote plays.

Shakespeare has two sides: one is the historical side, where he is one of a group of dramatists working in Elizabethan London and writing plays for an audience living in that London at that time; the other is the poet who speaks to us today with so powerfully contemporary a voice. If we study only the historical Shakespeare, we take away all his relevance to our own time and shirk trying to look into the greatest mystery of literature, the mystery of how someone can communicate with times and spaces and cultures so far removed from his own. But if we think only of Shakespeare as our contemporary, we lose one of the greatest rewards of a liberal education, which is studying the assumption and values of societies quite different from ours, and seeing what they did with them.

We have to keep the historical Shakespeare always present in our minds, to prevent us from trying to kidnap him into our own cultural orbit, which is different from however quite as narrow as that of Shakespeare's first audiences.

If Shakespeare were alive now, no doubt he had been interviewed every week and his opinions canvassed on every subject from national foreign policy to the social effects of punk rock. However in his day nobody cared what Shakespeare's views were about anything, and he would not have been allowed to discuss public affairs publicly. He was not therefore, under a constant pressure to become opinionated. We have no notion what his political or religious views were; if any: his plays merely present aspects of social life that would have been intelligible to his audience and would have spoken to the assumptions they brought into the theatre with them. Even then he would deal only with those aspects that fitted the play he was writing. The fact that the plays were mostly in verse means, among other things, that there are two levels of meaning: a presented or surface meaning, and an underlying meaning given us by the metaphors and images used, or by certain subordinated or played – down events or speeches. They have been called the “overthought” and “underthought”. Sometimes the two levels give us different versions of what is happening.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, or more simply Hamlet, is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1599 and 1601. The play, set in the Kingdom of Denmark, recounts how Prince Hamlet exacts revenge on his uncle Cladius for murdering the old King Hamlet, Cladius's own brother and Prince Hamlet's father and then succeeding to the throne and marrying Gertrude, the King Hamlet's widow and mother

² M. L. Rosenthal. “Poetry in English”. Oxford University Press. New York. 1987

of Prince Hamlet. The play vividly charts the course of real and feigned madness – from overwhelming grief to seething rage – and explores themes of treachery, revenge, incest, and moral corruption.

In spite of much research, the exact year Hamlet was written remains in dispute. Three different early versions of the play have survived: These are known as the First Quarto (Q1), the Second Quarto (Q2) and the First Folio (F1). Each has lines, and even scenes, that are missing from the others. Shakespeare based Hamlet on the legend of Amleth, preserved by 13th century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* as subsequently retold by 16th century scholar Francois de Belleforest.

The play's structure and depth of characterization have inspired much critical scrutiny, of which one example is the centuries – old debate about Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle. Some see it as a plot device to prolong the action, and others see it as the result of pressure exerted by the complex philosophical and ethical issues that surrounded cold – blooded murder, calculated revenge and thwarted desire. More recently, psychoanalytic critics have examined Hamlet's unconscious desires, and feminist critics have re – evaluated and rehabilitated the often maligned characters of Ophelia and Gertrude.

Purpose of thesis – the purpose of thesis is to focus on dramatic aspects of “Hamlet” tragedy and to analyze characters and focus on the similarities with the characters in “Othello”.

Functions of thesis are as follows:

- To observe dramatic structure and its main features in “Hamlet” tragedy.
- To show the problems raised by Shakespeare in tragedy.
- To analyze characters in “Hamlet” tragedy.
- To examine socio-political life in tragedy
- To draw a comparative analysis between Hamlet and Othello.
- To uncover Hamlet's love and hatred feelings.
- To prove Gertrude's faithlessness towards her husband and son.
- To draw a description of the soliloquy given in the tragedy.

Chapter I

Dramatic structure of “Hamlet” tragedy and its main features.

The tragedy of “Hamlet,” the most renewed of English dramas, is based on a legend found in the “History of the Danes,” written by Saxo Grammaticus about 1200. It came to England through the French, and was already on the stage in a version now lost, before Shakespeare took it up. The earliest edition of our play was printed in a corrupt form in 1603, and was written at least as early as 1602. A more correct edition appeared in 1604, and further alterations appeared in the version printed in the first collected edition of Shakespeare’s plays in 1623. The author seems to have worked over and revised this tragedy more than any other of his dramas.

The main situation of the tragedy goes back to the prose tale. There we have a king murdered by his mother, who had previously seduced and has now married the queen; and the son of the king, aiming at revenge, finally achieving it, and using the device of pretended madness to protect himself in the meantime. The prototype of Polonius is killed while eavesdropping, but his character bears little resemblance to Shakespeare’s Lord Chamberlain; Ophelia and Horatio are merely hinted at; while Laertes, Fortinbras, and several of the minor characters, such as grave-diggers and Osric, are altogether absent. The original Hamlet goes to England without interruption from pirates, witnesses the death of his two companions, returns and kills not only the king, but all his courtiers, goes to England again and marries two wives, one of whom betrays him to his death.

Despite much research, the exact year Hamlet was written remains in dispute. Three different early versions of the play have survived: These are known as the First Quarto (Q1), the Second Quarto (Q2) and the First Folio (F1). Each has lines, and even scenes, that are missing from the others. Shakespeare based Hamlet on the legend of Amleth, preserved by 13th century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* as subsequently retold by 16th century scholar Francois de Belleforest.

Most scholars reject the idea that Hamlet is in any way connected with Shakespeare’s only son, Hamnet Shakespeare, who died in 1596 at age eleven. Conventional wisdom holds that Hamlet is too obviously connected to legend, and the name Hamlet was quite popular at the time. However, some scholars have argued that the coincidence of the names and Shakespeare’s grief for the loss of his son may lie at the heart of the tragedy. They note that the name of Hamnet Sadler, the Stratford neighbor after whom Hamnet was named, was often written as Hamnet Sadler and that, in the loose orthography of the time, the names were virtually interchangeable. Sadler’s first name is spelled “Hamlett” in Shakespeare’s will.

From the early 17th century, the play was famous for its ghost and vivid dramatization of melancholy and insanity, leading to a procession of mad courtiers and ladies in Jacobean and Caroline drama. Though it remained popular with mass audiences, late 17th century

Restoration critics saw Hamlet as primitive and disapproved of its lack of unity and decorum. This view changed drastically in the 18th century, when critics regarded Hamlet as a hero – a pure, brilliant young man thrust into unfortunate circumstances. By the mid-18th century, however, the advent of Gothic literature brought mystical and psychological readings, returning madness and the Ghost to the forefront. Not until the late 18th century did critics and performers begin to view Hamlet as confusing and inconsistent. Before then, he was either mad, or not; either a hero, or not; with no in-betweens. These developments represented a fundamental change in literary criticism, which came to focus more on character and less on plot. By the 19th century, Romantic critics valued Hamlet for its internal, individual conflict reflecting the strong contemporary emphasis on internal struggles and inner character in general. Then too, critics started to focus on Hamlet's delay as a character trait, rather than a plot device. His focus on character and internal struggle continued into the 20th century, when criticism ratched in several directions.

Hamlet departed from contemporary dramatic convention in several ways. For example, in Shakespeare's day, plays were usually expected to follow the advice of Aristotle in his *Poetics*: that a drama should focus on action, not character. In Hamlet, Shakespeare reserves this so that is through the soliloquies, not the action, that the audience learns Hamlet's motives and thoughts. The play is full of seeming discontinuities and irregularities of action. At one point, as in the Gravedigger scene, Hamlet seems resolved to kill Claudius: in the next scene, however, when Claudius appears, he suddenly tames. Scholars still debate whether these twits are mistakes or intentional additions to add to the play's theme of confusion and duality. Finally, in a period when most plays ran for two hours or so, the full text of Hamlet – Shakespeare's longest play takes over four hours to deliver. Hamlet contains a favorite Shakespearean device, a play within the play, a literary device or conceit in which one story is told during the action of another story.

Hamlet is one of the most quoted works in the English language, and is often included on lists of the world's greatest literature. As such, it reverberates through the writing of later centuries. Academic Laurie Osborne identifies the direct influence of Hamlet in numerous modern narratives, and divides them into four main categories: fictional accounts of the play's composition, simplifications of the story for young readers, stories expanding the role of one or more characters, and narratives featuring performances of the play.

Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, published about 1749, and describes a visit to *Hamlet* by Tom Jones and Mr. Partridge, with similarities to the "play within a play". In contrast, Goethe's Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, written between 1776 and 1796, not only has a production of Hamlet at its core but also creates parallels between the Ghost and Wilhelm Meister's dead father. In the early 1850s, in *Pierre*, Herman Melville focuses on a Hamlet-like character's long development as a writer. Ten years later, Dickens's *Great Expectations* contains many Hamlet-like plot elements: it is driven by revenge-motivated actions, contains ghost-like characters Abel Magwitch and Miss Havisham, and focuses on the hero's guilt. Academic Alexander Welsh notes that *Great Expectations* is an "autobiographical novel" and "anticipates psychoanalytic readings of Hamlet itself". About

the same time, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* was published, introducing Maggie Tulliver "who is explicitly compared with Hamlet" though "with a reputation for sanity".³

In the 1920s, James Joyce managed "a more upbeat version" of Hamlet – stripped of obsession and revenge – in *Ulysses*, though its main parallels are with Homer's *Odyssey*. In the 1990s, two women novelists were explicitly influenced by Hamlet. In Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, *To be or not to be* is reworked as a song and dance routine, and Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* has Oedipal themes and murder intertwined with a love affair between a Hamlet – obsessed writer, Bradley Pearson, and the daughter of his rival.

³ Henry W. Kent «Bibliographical Notes on One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature» Nag Press, 2008

Chapter II

The analysis of the characters in “Hamlet” tragedy and their similarities with the characters in “Othello”

Hamlet seems to be the first play of Shakespeare in which he is deliberately competing with a well-known earlier play on the same subject. The Shakespeare play has a First Quarto, which garbles the text and makes a frightful mess of such things as the “To be or not to be” speech, but still has many points of interest. In it, Polonius is called Corambis, the Queen explicitly says that she knew nothing of Hamlet senior’s murder. Hamlet leaps into Ophelia’s grave to struggle with Laertes, and Hamlet’s speech to the players refers to the ad-libbing of clowns. In short, it undoubtedly has some authority: how much is another question. It has been staged in its own right. It is clear that it is a lively and actable play, and may well have come closer than the texts you are reading to the Elizabethan audience actually got. I do not see how an uncut Hamlet could ever have been performed under Elizabethan conditions. There is a seventeenth-century Hamlet play in German, called *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (Brother-Murder Punished), probably derived from a version brought to Germany by English companies on tour there, and it is closer to Q1 than to the texts we know.

Shakespeare’s company seems to have been annoyed by Q1, and they took the unusual step of issuing an authorized Quarto, which, they said on the title page, was twice as long as Q1, and printed “according to the true and perfect copy.” This Q2 is the basis of most modern editions of the play. Then there is the Folio Hamlet, shorter than Q2 but still containing many passages not in it. Editors assume that every line likely to have been written by Shakespeare must be preserved, and that their job is to reconstruct a monolithic Hamlet, containing everything in both Q2 and F that is missing from the other. No doubt they are right as editors, though whether Shakespeare really wrote such a definitive Hamlet is by no means certain. Anyway, when we take Q2 as a basis and add to it all the F lines not in it, the result is Shakespeare’s longest play.⁴

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don’t know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there’s something important he’s not saying, maybe something even

⁴ Sylvan Barnet, Signet Classics. “Hamlet” Yale University Press. 2001

he is not aware of. The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of Shakespeare's most impressive achievements.

A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father's death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, evidence that any other character in a play would believe, Hamlet becomes obsessed with proving his uncle's guilt before trying to act. The standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt" is simply unacceptable to him. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die—the list is extensive.

But even though he is thoughtful to the point of obsession, Hamlet also behaves rashly and impulsively. When he does act, it is with surprising swiftness and little or no premeditation, as when he stabs Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who he is. He seems to step very easily into the role of a madman, behaving erratically and upsetting the other characters with his wild speech and pointed innuendos.

It is also important to note that Hamlet is extremely melancholy and discontented with the state of affairs in Denmark and in his own family—indeed, in the world at large. He is extremely disappointed with his mother for marrying his uncle so quickly, and he repudiates Ophelia, a woman he once claimed to love, in the harshest terms. His words often indicate his disgust with and distrust of women in general. At a number of points in the play, he contemplates his own death and even the option of suicide.

But, despite all of the things with which Hamlet professes dissatisfaction, it is remarkable that the prince and heir apparent of Denmark should think about these problems only in personal and philosophical terms. He spends relatively little time thinking about the threats to Denmark's national security from without or the threats to its stability from within (some of which he helps to create through his own carelessness).

Hamlet's major antagonist is a shrewd, lustful, conniving king who contrasts sharply with the other male characters in the play. Whereas most of the other important men in *Hamlet* are preoccupied with ideas of justice, revenge, and moral balance, Claudius is bent upon maintaining his own power. The old King Hamlet was apparently a stern warrior, but Claudius is a corrupt politician whose main weapon is his ability to manipulate others through his skillful use of language. Claudius's speech is compared to poison being poured in the ear—the method he used to murder Hamlet's father. Claudius's love for Gertrude may be sincere, but it also seems likely that he married her as a strategic move, to help him win the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the king. As the play progresses, Claudius's mounting fear of Hamlet's insanity leads him to ever greater self-preoccupation; when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius does not remark that Gertrude might have been in danger, but only that he would have been in danger had he been in the room. He tells Laertes the same thing as he attempts to soothe the young man's anger after his father's death. Claudius is ultimately too crafty for his own good. In Act V, scene ii, rather than allowing Laertes only two methods of killing Hamlet, the sharpened sword and the poison on the blade, Claudius insists on a third, the poisoned goblet. When Gertrude inadvertently drinks the poison and dies, Hamlet is at last able to bring himself to kill Claudius, and the king is felled by his own cowardly machination.

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret?

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as well as by her tendency to use men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.ii and V.ii), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace and charm are her *only* characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

Chapter III

Description of the soliloquy given in the tragedy and literary value.

Hamlet is the most famous play in the English language. William Shakespeare achieved artistic maturity in this work through his brilliant depiction of the hero's struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father's murder. Shakespeare's focus on this conflict was a revolutionary departure from contemporary revenge tragedies, which tended to graphically dramatize violent acts on stage, in that it emphasized the hero's dilemma rather than the depiction of bloody deeds. The dramatist's genius is also evident in his transformation of the play's literary sources.

And now let me present you the most popular soliloquy couplet from tragedy:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms and arrows against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. To die to--sleep--

Let me start from the first line:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

The opening line scans fairly normally, and the stresses help emphasize the comparison of being versus not being. The line is an example of a feminine ending, or a weak extra syllable at the end of the line. Hamlet puts forth his thesis statement at the beginning of his argument, which is generally a good idea. **Be** here is used in its definition of "exist." Note the colons signifying two *caesuras* (pauses) in the opening line. The *trochee* of **that is** works in two ways here, lending proper emphasis to the line and reinforcing the pause in the middle.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The initial *trochee* is a typical inversion of Shakespeare's; beginning the line with a stressed syllable varies the rhythm and gives a natural emphasis at the start. The third foot with "in" could also be scanned as a *pyrrhic*. Hamlet now elaborates on his proposition; the question actually concerns existence when faced with suffering. **Nobler** here seems most likely to denote "dignified," **in the mind** translates to "of opinion," and **suffer** is used in the

sense "to bear with patience or constancy."⁵ As a whole, a thoroughly less poetic rendering of the line translates to "whether people think that it's more dignified to put up with."

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

This is the third feminine ending in a row, and it's hard to overlook as anything but a conscious effort. Some editors have argued that the original word was "stings" rather than "slings," although **slings and arrows** make for a better rhetorical construction. Slings and arrows imply missile weapons that can not only strike from a distance but can miss their mark and strike someone unintended. That would fit with the capriciousness suggested by the phrase **outrageous fortune**. The metaphor also brings up the demoralizing aspect of enduring attacks without being able to respond effectively—whether from archers, snipers, artillery, or even guerrilla tactics. **Outrageous** in this speech denotes "violent or atrocious." In this usage, **fortune** denotes "the good or ill that befalls man."⁶

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

Here's a changeup: a *pyrrhic* followed by a *spondee* that adds a natural emphasis on **take arms** (denoting in this instance to "make war"). In what follows, we have straight *iambic* meter with yet another feminine ending. The initial quatrain of four weak endings could be an attempt by Shakespeare to use the verse to convey further Hamlet's uncertainty. **Sea of troubles** is a fairly simple metaphor in this usage that compares Hamlet's troubles (sufferings) to the vast and seemingly boundless sea. This line essentially translates to "or to fight against the endless suffering." The preceding reference to "outrageous fortune" dictates that Hamlet is primarily referring to the continuous assault of troubles that he perceives life as presenting him. However, the *double entendre* is whether to take up arms against the external troubles (i.e., Claudius) or against those troubles within himself (thus implying consideration of suicide). Either way, Hamlet seems to be asking if the struggle is even worth the effort.

And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;

The line would appear to scan as *iambic pentameter* with an extra unstressed syllable preceding the implied pause after "them?" (a pause, incidentally, that makes it hard to scan "...them? To die" as an *anapaest* foot, since the two unstressed syllables don't run together.) The use of **opposing** in context continues the metaphor of armed struggle begun by "take arms" in the previous line. There is potential ambiguity in the use of **die** here; obviously, it means "to lose one's life," but there are possible secondary meanings of "to pine for" and "vanish" as well. **Sleep** plays upon a double meaning of both "rest" and "being idle or oblivious."

⁵ Stanley W. Wells, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

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Conclusion

William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Shakespeare has two sides: one is the historical side, where he is one of a group of dramatists working in Elizabethan London and writing plays for an audience living in that London at that time; the other is the poet who speaks to us today with so powerfully contemporary a voice. If we study only the historical Shakespeare, we take away all his relevance to our own time and shirk trying to look into the greatest mystery of literature, the mystery of how someone can communicate with times and spaces and cultures so far removed from his own. However if we think only of Shakespeare as our contemporary, we lose one of the greatest rewards of a liberal education, which is studying the assumption and values of societies quite different from ours, and seeing what they did with them.

We have to keep the historical Shakespeare always present in our minds, to prevent us from trying to kidnap him into our own cultural orbit, which is different from however quite as narrow as that of Shakespeare's first audiences.

In the tragic play Hamlet, William Shakespeare explores the psychological afflictions of man whose mother marries his father murderer who also happens to be his uncle. The ghost of the Hamlet's father, who was the King of Hamlet, appears before Hamlet, tells him who the murderer is, and makes him swear revenge against his murderer.

During the nineteenth century, and through much of the early twentieth, Hamlet was regarded as Shakespeare's central and the most significant play, because it dramatized a central preoccupation of the age of Romanticism: the conflict of consciousness and action, the sense of consciousness as a withdrawal from action which could make for futility, and yet was all that could prevent action from becoming totally mindless. No other play has explored the paradoxes of action and thinking about action so deeply, but because it did explore them, literature ever since has been immeasurably deepened and made bolder. Perhaps, if we had not had Hamlet, we might not have had the Romantic movement at all, or the works of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard that follow it, and recast the Hamlet situation in ways that come progressively nearer to us. Nearer to us in cultural conditions, that is, not in imaginative impact: there, Shakespeare will always be first.

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Introduction

William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

William Shakespeare was the son of John Shakespeare, a successful glover alderman originally from Snitterfield, and Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent landowning farmer. He was born in Stratford – upon – Avon and baptized there on 26 April 1564. His actual birth date remains unknown. He was the third child of eight and the eldest surviving son. Most biographers agree that Shakespeare probably was educated at the King's New School in Stratford, a free school. At the age of 18, Shakespeare married the 26 – year – old Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna, twins Hamnet and Judith.⁷

Although no attendance records for the period survive, most biographers agree that Shakespeare probably was educated at the King's New School in Stratford, a free school chartered in 1553, about a quarter-mile from his home. Grammar schools varied in quality during the Elizabethan era, but the curriculum was dictated by law throughout England, and the school would have provided an intensive education in Latin grammar and the classics.

Between 1585 and 1592, Shakespeare began a successful career in London as an actor, writer. He produced most of his known works between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century. Then he wrote mainly tragedies, including Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth. These tragedies considered some of the finest works in the English language.

One of the greatest benefits of studying Shakespeare is that he makes us more aware of our assumption and so less confined by them. A much more subtle and deeply rooted assumption is that Shakespeare was a great poet who wrote plays.

Shakespeare has two sides: one is the historical side, where he is one of a group of dramatists working in Elizabethan London and writing plays for an audience living in that London at that time; the other is the poet who speaks to us today with so powerfully contemporary a voice. If we study only the historical Shakespeare, we take away all his relevance to our own time and shirk trying to look into the greatest mystery of literature, the mystery of how someone can communicate with times and spaces and cultures so far

⁷ Sarah Smith "Chasing Shakespeare" Dial-A-Book. 2003

removed from his own. However if we think only of Shakespeare as our contemporary, we lose one of the greatest rewards of a liberal education, which is studying the assumption and values of societies quite different from ours, and seeing what they did with them.

We have to keep the historical Shakespeare always present in our minds, to prevent us from trying to kidnap him into our own cultural orbit, which is different from however quite as narrow as that of Shakespeare's first audiences.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, or more simply Hamlet, is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1599 and 1601. The play, set in the Kingdom of Denmark, recounts how Prince Hamlet exacts revenge on his uncle Claudius for murdering the old King Hamlet, Claudius's own brother and Prince Hamlet's father and then succeeding to the throne and marrying Gertrude, the King Hamlet's widow and mother of Prince Hamlet. The play vividly charts the course of real and feigned madness – from overwhelming grief to seething rage – and explores themes of treachery, revenge, incest, and moral corruption.

Compared with language in a modern newspaper, magazine or popular novel, Shakespeare's language can strike contemporary readers as complex, elaborate and at times difficult to understand. Much of Hamlet's language is courtly: elaborate, witty discourse, as recommended by Baldassare Castiglione's 1528 etiquette guide, *The Courtier*. This work specially advises royal retainers to amuse their masters with inventive language. Osric and Polonius, especially, seem to respect this injunction. Claudius's speech is rich with rhetorical figures – as is Hamlet's and, at times, Ophelia's – while the language of Horatio, the guards, and the gravediggers is simpler. Claudius's high status is reinforced by using the royal first person plural – “we” or “us”, and anaphora mixed with metaphor to resonate with Greek political speeches.

Hamlet is the most skilled of all at rhetoric. He uses highly developed metaphors, stichomythia, and in nine memorable words deploys both anaphora and asyndeton: “to die: to sleep – / To sleep, perchance to dream. In contrast, when occasion demands, he is precise and straightforward, as when he explains his inward emotion to his mother: “But I have that within which passes show, / these but the trappings and the suits of woe”. At times, he relies heavily on puns to express his true thoughts while simultaneously concealing them. His “nunnery” remarks to Ophelia are an example of a cruel double meaning as nunnery was Elizabethan slang for brothel. His very first words in the play are a pun; when Claudius addresses him as “my cousin Hamlet, and my son”, Hamlet says as an aside: “A little more than kin, and less than kind.” An aside is a dramatic device in which a character speaks to the audience. By convention the audience realizes that the character's speech is unheard by the other characters on stage. It may be addressed to the audience expressly or represent an unspoken thought.

An unusual rhetorical device, hendiadys, appears in several places in the play. Examples are found in Ophelia's speech at the end of the nunnery scene: “The expectancy and rose of the fair state”; “And I, of ladies most deject and wretched”. Many scholars have found it odd that Shakespeare would, seemingly arbitrarily, use this rhetorical form throughout the play. One explanation may be that Hamlet was written later in Shakespeare's

life, when he was adept at matching rhetorical devices to characters and the plot. Some scholars argue that Shakespeare changed English drama forever in *Hamlet* because he “showed how character’s language can often be saying several things at once, and contradictory meanings at that, to reflect fragmented thoughts and distributed feelings. “They give the example of Hamlet’s advice to Ophelia, “get thee to a nunnery”, which is simultaneously a reference to a place of chastity and a slang term for a brothel, reflecting Hamlet’s confused feelings about female sexuality.

Written at a time of religious upheaval, and in the wake of the English Reformation, the play is alternately Catholic and Protestant. The Ghost describes himself as being in purgatory, and as dying without last rites. This and Ophelia’s burial ceremony, which is characteristically Catholic, make up most of the play’s Catholic connections. Some scholars have observed that revenge tragedies come from traditionally Catholic countries, such as Spain and Italy; and they present a contradiction, since according to Catholic doctrine the strongest duty is to God and family. Hamlet’s conundrum, then, is whether to avenge his father and kill Claudius, or to leave the vengeance to God, as his religion requires.

Hamlet is often perceived as a philosophical character, expounding ideas that are now described as relativist, existentialist, and skeptical. For example, he expresses a subjectivistic idea when he says to Rosencrantz: “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”. The idea that nothing is real except in the mind of the individual finds its roots in the Greek Sophists, who argued that since nothing can be perceived except through the senses – and since all individuals sense, and therefore perceive, things differently- there is no absolute truth, only relative truth. The clearest example of existentialism is found in the “to be, or not to be” speech, where Hamlet uses “being” to allude to both life and action, and “not being” to death and inaction. Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide in this scene, however, is less philosophical than religious as he believes that he will continue to exist after death. Scholars agree that Hamlet reflects the contemporary skepticism that prevailed in Renaissance humanism. Hamlet’s skepticism is juxtaposed in the play with Horatio’s more traditional Christian worldview. Despite the friends’ close bond, Hamlet counters Horatio’s faith with the seemingly agnostic comment, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

In the 20th century feminist critics opened up new approaches to Gertrude and Ophelia. New Historicist and cultural materialist critics examined the play in its historical context, attempting to piece together its original cultural environment. They focused on the gender system of early modern England, pointing to the common trinity of maid, wife, or widow, with whores alone outside of stereotype. In this analysis, the essence of *Hamlet* is the central character’s changed perception of his mother as a whore because of her failure to remain faithful to Old Hamlet. In consequence, Hamlet loses his faith in all women, treating Ophelia as if she too were a whore and dishonest with Hamlet. Ophelia, by some critics, can be honest and fair; however, it is virtually impossible to link these two traits, since ‘fairness’ is an outward trait, while ‘honesty’ is an inward trait.

Carolyn Heilbrun’s 1957 essay “*Hamlet’s Mother*” defends Gertrude, arguing that the text never hints that Gertrude knew of Claudius poisoning King Hamlet. This analysis has been championed by many feminist critics. Heilbrun argued that men have for centuries

completely misinterpreted Gertrude, accepting at face value Hamlet's view of her instead of following the actual text of the play. By this account, no clear evidence suggests that Gertrude is an adulteress: she is merely adapting to the circumstances of her husband's death for the good of the kingdom.

Ophelia has also been defended by feminist critics, most notably Elaine Showalter. Ophelia is surrounded by powerful men: her father, brother, and Hamlet. All three disappear: Laertes leaves, Hamlet abandons her, and Polonius dies. Conventional theories had argued that without these three powerful men making decisions for her, Ophelia is driven into madness. Feminist theorists argue that she goes mad with guilt because, when Hamlet kills her father, he has fulfilled her sexual desire to have Hamlet kill her father so they can be together. Showalter points out that Ophelia has become the symbol of the distraught and hysterical woman in modern culture. It is long partly because everyone, with the exception of the two women, talks too much. That is just the dramatic effect, of course: words are not really being wasted. "Brief let me be," says the Ghost, and goes on for another fifty lines. "I will be brief," says Polonius, after the Queen pulls him up and tells him to get on with it, but he is not. Even the Player Queen, Gertrude says, protests too much. Hamlet, of course, talks incessantly: he wonders why he "must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words," and goes on talking about that. He talks so much that he begins to sound like a guide or commentator on the play, and one of the standard ways of misreading Hamlet is to accept Hamlet's views as Shakespeare's. But Hamlet's views of Polonius, of his mother's sin in marrying Claudius, of the treachery of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, while they may often be reasonably close to what we are likely to accept, are surcharged with Hamlet's melancholy – that is, they are sick. He sees what is there, but there is an emotional excess in his perception that is reflected back to him. His self – reproaches are sick too, but it is not so hard to see that. We must never forget that while he is alienated from the other characters – except Horatio, he is still involved in the action, and not where we are in the audience. For example: his address to the players is often read as encapsulating Shakespeare's own view of how his plays should be acted. But Hamlet's views of classical restraint in acting, his preference for plays that are caviar to the general, and the like, are views which are primarily appropriate to a university-trained highbrow. It is obvious as he goes on that Hamlet could never conceive of the possibility of such a play as *King Lear*. He is not much of a poet, he tells Ophelia, but when he is instructing the actors how to speak "my lines," we hear the voice of the amateur, concerned primarily with making sure that nobody misses a syllable of his precious speech. We can not check up on his abilities here, because we never get the speech, at least to recognize it: presumably it came after the play broke up. In short, Hamlet is one more character in Shakespeare, who contains him as he contains Peter Quince.

Functions of thesis are as followings:

- To observe dramatic structure and its main features in "Hamlet" tragedy.
- To show the problems raised by Shakespeare in tragedy.
- To analyze characters in "Hamlet" tragedy.

- To examine socio-political life in tragedy.
- To draw a comparative analysis between Hamlet and Othello.
- To uncover Hamlet's love and hatred feelings.
- To prove Gertrude's faithlessness towards her husband and son.
- To draw a description of the soliloquy given in the tragedy.

Object of research – the analysis of characters in “Hamlet” tragedy and their similarities with the characters in “Othello”. The analysis is based on “Hamlet” and “Othello” tragedies. Shakespeare was a poet and playwright, widely regarded as greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the “Bard of Avon”. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Purpose of thesis – the purpose of thesis is to focus on dramatic aspects of “Hamlet” tragedy and to analyze characters and focus on the similarities in “Othello”.

Actuality: Dramatic aspects of the tragedy and the problem raised by the author

Practical use: This work can be used as a basis for lectures on William Shakespeare's creative activity

Chapter I

Dramatic structure of “Hamlet” tragedy and its main features

Shakespeare's dramatic career falls naturally into four successive divisions of increasing maturity. To be sure, no definite record of the order of his plays has come down to us, and it can scarcely be said that we certainly know the exact date of a single one of them; but the evidence of the title-page dates of such of them as were hastily published during his lifetime, of allusions to them in other writings of the time, and other scattering facts of one sort or another, joined with the more important internal evidence of comparative maturity of mind and art which shows 'Macbeth' and 'The Winter's Tale,' for example, vastly superior to 'Love's Labour's Lost'--all this evidence together enables us to arrange the plays in a chronological order which is certainly approximately correct. The first of the four periods thus disclosed is that of experiment and preparation, from about 1588 to about 1593, when Shakespeare tried his hand at virtually every current kind of dramatic work. Its most important product is 'Richard III,' a melodramatic chronicle-history play, largely imitative of Marlowe and yet showing striking power. At the end of this period Shakespeare issued two rather long narrative poems on classical subjects, 'Venus and Adonis,' and 'The Rape of Lucrece,' dedicating them both to the young Earl of Southampton, who thus appears as his patron. Both display great fluency in the most luxuriant and sensuous Renaissance manner, and though they appeal little to the taste of the present day 'Venus and Adonis,' in particular, seems to have become at once the most popular poem of its own time. Shakespeare himself regarded them very seriously, publishing them with care, though he, like most Elizabethan dramatists, never thought it worth while to put his plays into print except to safeguard the property rights of his company in them. Probably at about the end of his first period, also, he began the composition of his sonnets, of which we have already spoken.⁸

The second period of Shakespeare's work, extending from about 1594 to about 1601, is occupied chiefly with chronicle-history plays and happy comedies. The chronicle-history plays begin (probably) with the subtitle and fascinating, though not yet absolutely masterful study of contrasting characters in 'Richard II'; continue through the two parts of 'Henry IV,' where the realistic comedy action of Falstaff and his group makes history familiarly vivid; and end with the epic glorification of a typical English hero-king in 'Henry V.' The comedies

⁸ Alastair Fowler "A History of English Literature" Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1989

include the charmingly fantastic 'Midsummer Night's Dream'; 'The Merchant of Venice,' where a story of tragic sternness is strikingly contrasted with the most poetical idealizing romance and yet is harmoniously blended into it; 'Much Ado About Nothing,' a magnificent example of high comedy of character and wit; 'As You Like It,' the supreme delightful achievement of Elizabethan and all English pastoral romance; and 'Twelfth Night,' where again charming romantic sentiment is made believable by combination with a story of comic realism. Even in the one, unique, tragedy of the period, 'Romeo and Juliet,' the main impression is not that of the predestined tragedy, but that of ideal youthful love, too gloriously radiant to be viewed with sorrow even in its fatal outcome.⁹

The third period, extending from about 1601 to about 1609, includes Shakespeare's great tragedies and certain cynical plays, which formal classification misnames comedies. In these plays as a group Shakespeare sets himself to grapple with the deepest and darkest problems of human character and life; but it is only very uncertain inference that he was himself passing at this time through a period of bitterness and disillusion.

'Julius Caesar' presents the material failure of an unpractical idealist (Brutus); 'Hamlet' the struggle of a perplexed and divided soul; 'Othello' the ruin of a noble life by an evil one through the terrible power of jealousy; 'King Lear' unnatural ingratitude working its hateful will and yet thwarted at the end by its own excess and by faithful love; and 'Macbeth' the destruction of a large nature by material ambition. Without doubt this is the greatest continuous group of plays ever wrought out by a human mind, and they are followed by 'Antony and Cleopatra,' which magnificently portrays the emptiness of a sensual passion against the background of a decaying civilization.¹⁰

Shakespeare did not solve the insoluble problems of life, but having presented them as powerfully, perhaps, as is possible for human intelligence, he turned in his last period, of only two or three years, to the expression of the serene philosophy of life in which he himself must have now taken refuge. The noble and beautiful romance-comedies, 'Cymbeline,' 'The Winter's Tale,' and 'The Tempest,' suggest that men do best to forget what is painful and center their attention on the pleasing and encouraging things in a world where there is at least an inexhaustible store of beauty and goodness and delight.

Shakespeare may now well have felt, as his retirement to Stratford suggests, that in his nearly forty plays he had fully expressed himself and had earned the right to a long and peaceful old age. The latter, as we have seen, was denied him; but seven years after his death two of his fellow-managers assured the preservation of the plays whose unique importance he himself did not suspect by collecting them in the first folio edition of his complete dramatic works.

The tragedy of "Hamlet," the most renewed of English dramas, is based on a legend found in the "History of the Danes," written by Saxo Grammaticus about 1200. It came to

⁹ W. H. Auden "Lectures on Shakespeare" 2001

¹⁰ Robert Sandler "Northrop Frye on Shakespeare" Yale University Press. New York 1986

England through the French, and was already on the stage in aversion now lost, before Shakespeare took it up. The earliest edition of our play was printed in a corrupt form in 1603, and was written at least as early as 1602. A more correct edition appeared in 1604, and further alterations appeared in the version printed in the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays in 1623. The author seems to have worked over and revised this tragedy more than any other of his dramas.¹¹

The main situation of the tragedy goes back to the prose tale. There we have a king murdered by his mother, who had previously seduced and has now married the queen; and the son of the king, aiming at revenge, finally achieving it, and using the device of pretended madness to protect himself in the meantime. The prototype of Polonius is killed while eavesdropping, but his character bears little resemblance to Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain; Ophelia and Horatio are merely hinted at; while Laertes, Fortinbras, and several of the minor characters, such as grave-diggers and Osric, are altogether absent. The original Hamlet goes to England without interruption from pirates, witnesses the death of his two companions, returns and kills not only the king, but all his courtiers, goes to England again and marries two wives, one of whom betrays him to his death.

Other elements of the tragedy that are probably not due to Shakespeare's invention have been gathered from a study of contemporary "tragedies of revenge." How many of such additions were made by Shakespeare, how many by the author of the lost play, cannot be decided. But for those things which have raised "Hamlet" to its preeminent position in the history of literature, - the magnificence of the poetry, the amazing truth and subtlety of the psychology, and the intensity of the tragic emotion, it is not hard to assign the credit.

The play's structure and depth of characterization have inspired much critical scrutiny, of which one example is the centuries - old debate about Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle. Some see it as a plot device to prolong the action, and others see it as the result of pressure exerted by the complex philosophical and ethical issues that surrounded cold - blooded murder, calculated revenge and thwarted desire. More recently, psychoanalytic critics have examined Hamlet's unconscious desires, and feminist critics have re - evaluated and rehabilitated the often maligned characters of Ophelia and Gertrude.

Hamlet departed from contemporary dramatic convention in several ways. For example, in Shakespeare's day, plays were usually expected to follow the advice of Aristotle in his *Poetics*: that a drama should focus on action, not character. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare reserves this so that it is through the soliloquies, not the action, that the audience learns Hamlet's motives and thoughts. The play is full of seeming discontinuities and irregularities of action. At one point, as in the Gravedigger scene, Hamlet seems resolved to kill Claudius: in the next scene, however, when Claudius appears, he suddenly tames. Scholars still debate whether these twits are mistakes or intentional additions to add to the play's theme of confusion and duality. Finally, in a period when most plays ran for two hours or so, the full text of *Hamlet* - Shakespeare's longest play takes over four hours to deliver. *Hamlet* contains a favorite Shakespearean device, a play within the play, a literary device or conceit in which one story is told during the action of another story.

¹¹ Beverley Ellison Warner "English history in Shakespeare's plays" Nabu Press, 2010

An attack on pseudo-problems raised by Shakespearean critics that are not relevant to the kind of thing Shakespeare was doing. It did not take me long to find that most of the minor problems were useful. First, there is no boundary in the play between the actual and the pseudo-problems; second, there is no other play in Shakespeare, which probably means no other play in the world that raises so many questions of the “problem” type. It is quite clear that problems, genuine or phony, are part of the texture of the play, and central to its meaning. I am not saying that we get to the “real meaning” of the play by figuring out answers to its problems: I am saying rather opposite. Insoluble problems and unanswerable questions meet us everywhere we turn, and make Hamlet the most stifling and claustrophobic of plays. Not for us, because we are outside it, but for the characters caught up in its action. It used to be said that one reason for all the complexity is the older Hamlet play, which saddled Shakespeare with an “intractable” plot and situation much cruder than he wanted to use. There can hardly be much in that: the earlier Hamlet looks so mysterious because we do not have it, but we do have a earlier version of King Lear, and it is clear from that that Shakespeare never allowed any source to become “intractable” and get in the way of his play.

Example of “problem”: why does Hamlet fly into such a rage when he hears Laertes expressing a very natural and poignant grief for his dead sister, even if it includes some equally natural cursing of Hamlet? No direct answer, probably, but we can understand something of his feeling. Apart from Hamlet’s sudden discovery that Ophelia is dead, as he assumes by suicide, a shock great enough to demoralize him in itself, he is seeing the reflection in Laertes of his own dilemma of words taking the place of action. “Show me what thou’lt do!” he screams at Laertes, although there is nothing appropriate for Laertes to do at this point except kill Hamlet. Then Hamlet says:

What is the reason that you use me thus?

I loved you ever. (V. i. 313-14)

This has a ring of sincerity, but if Hamlet is only assuming madness, as we have been led to think, has he really forgotten that he was wiped out Laertes’ family? Perhaps not, at least if when he says to Horatio:

For, by the image of my cause, I see

The portraiture of his. (V. ii. 77-78)

He is thinking of Laertes as someone else with a murdered father. In apologizing to Laertes, however, he pleads diminished responsibility, and says that his madness and not Hamlet himself was to blame. But the worst thing Hamlet has done to Laertes is to murder Polonius, and he does that in a scene where he is swearing to his mother with the greatest vehemence that he is not mad. And if Hamlet can make madness a not-guilty plea for murder, why can not Ophelia be exonerated from suicide for the same reason? Yet the gravediggers agree that she was a voluntary suicide: the priest grumbles that her death was “doubtful”, and has certainly no intention of giving her the benefit of any doubt; and Hamlet himself tells us that the funeral rites are those of a suicide. And so it goes: every part of the play is like this.

Take the use of the supernatural. The opening scene gets the point established that the Ghost is objective and not just a hallucination of Hamlet's. For a speculative temperament like Hamlet's there might be a certain exhilaration in the revealing of another world, in seeing for oneself that there are more things in heaven and earth are dreamed of in Horatio's cautions and skeptical philosophy. But everything that seems to expand the horizon in the play actually limits it still further. The fact that the Ghost has to leave by dawn suggests that he could be an evil spirit, and there is enough sense of evil to make the group who first see him huddle together and try to warm themselves up, so to speak, thinking of the "so hallowed and so gracious" time of Christmas Eve, when there are no evil spirits.

In the next scene Hamlet, in his black clothes, standing apart from the brilliant court scene, is urged by his mother not to seek his father in the dust, and by his new stepfather to throw his "unrevealing woe" to earth. Melancholy, the cold and dry humour, is being associated with earth, the cold and dry element. With Hamlet's first soliloquy a vision beings to form of a corrupt Danish court resting on a seething and heaving quicksand. This vision is embodied for us on the stage at the end of the first act, when the Ghost disappears below it and follows Hamlet and his friends *hic et ubique*, as Hamlet says, saying "swear" at intervals, the perfect image for an unresting spirit whose unresolved murder is threatening the whole Danish world with destruction from below. Quite a contrast with the language of the opening scene, which begins with the words "Long live the king!", meaning Claudius, and where the first line addressed to the Ghost by Horatio contains the word "usurp". Usurpation, kingship and the source of evil are reversing their locations.

Hamlet's real difficulty with the Ghost is: if purgatory is a place of purification, why does a ghost come from it shrieking for vengeance? And why does purgatory, as the Ghost describes it, sound so much as though it were hell? The Ghost's credentials are very doubtful, by all Elizabethan tests for such things, and although Hamlet is in a state close to hysteria when he calls the Ghost "old mole," "this fellow in the cellarage," and the like, it is still unlikely that he would use such phrases if he had firmly identified the Ghost with his father at that point. On the other hand, he has always despised and distrusted Claudius, and is inclined to think the story authentic whether the teller of it is or not. There are two elements, in any case, in the message the Ghost brings him that increase to an unbearable pitch what I have called the sense of claustrophobia.

The first element is the role of religion in the play. The Ghost suffers so much in purgatory because he was killed before he had time to be confessed and shriven. So Hamlet decides that he will not kill Claudius while he is at prayer because he wants him to go to hell and not to purgatory. Never mind how genuine this feeling is just now: the implication is that when we enter the next world we run on a mindless railway switch that will automatically send Claudius to hell if he dies drunk, and to purgatory if he dies praying. We could write this off as an excuse, of course, if it stood alone; but the notion is deeply rooted in Hamlet's mind, whether implanted by the Ghost or already there. He makes a point of the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to be killed with "not shriving-time allowed," and when discovers that the man behind the arras is Polonius and not Claudius he says "take thy fortune." Apparently everything depends on whether the priest gets there in time or not. So it is very reassuring to find that the only accredited priest in the play is that horrible creature

who presides over Ophelia's funeral, and who gets a concentration of malice and spite into an eight-line speech that would do credit to the Devil himself, who doubtless inspired it.

The supernatural dimension of the play, then, does not expand our vision: on the contrary, it seals it in by surrounding us with an "afterlife" that has no infinite presence in it, only the clicking and whirring of a sacramental machine. Hamlet's weariness with his life and his longing for death, if necessary by suicide, are expressed many times in the play. Suicide is an obvious way out for someone who feels that the world is a prison, even if "a goodly one. But the machine cuts that escape off too: if you kill yourself you will not get the release of death; you will simply lose what chance there is of ever being released.

The second element in the Ghost's message that squeezes Hamlet's life into narrowing limits is the interruption of the habits, such as they are, of Hamlet's life. At first, though he has no use for Claudius, he has no great hatred for him either, and the real cause of his melancholy is not the loss of his father but the re-marriage of his mother. The Ghost tells him that he must focus on Claudius and stop brooding about Gertrude. "Taint not thy mind," he says, apparently not realizing how much it is tainted already, and "leave her to heaven," again not a reassuring recommendation coming from him. But Hamlet's feelings are still fixated on his mother, and he has to keep working up his hatred of Claudius.

It is a little unusual for someone who has an appointment to see his mother to stop on the way and remind himself in a soliloquy that he must be careful not to murder her, especially when he is about to pass up a chance to kill Claudius and get rid of his ghostly incubus. One reason why it is Gertrude rather than Claudius who drives Hamlet up the wall is her total unconsciousness of having done anything wrong. She is a soft, easygoing, sentimental woman who "would hang on" her late husband and be treated with the greatest solicitude in response, and Hamlet does not see that the instinct to hang on his father was the same one that prompted her to attach herself after his death to the nearest strong-looking man who presented himself. Because of her compliant nature, Hamlet finds her delightfully easy to bully, and she keeps crumpling under his ranting until the exasperated Ghost comes in to derail him again. We notice that the Ghost is still solicitous about her, in spite of his purgatorial preoccupations.

Hamlet keeps calling the marriage incestuous, as technically perhaps it was: marriage with deceased husband's brother was the other half of the great Victorian anxiety symbol of marriage with deceased wife's sister. The Hamlet situation was the one that brought the Reformation to England, when Henry VIII asked the Pope to dissolve his marriage to Catherine of Aragon on the ground that she had been previously married to his deceased older brother. But no one else, even the Ghost, seems much concerned about that side of it, although the Ghost does call Claudius an incestuous and adulterate beast, along with many other epithets that he had after all some provocation for using. But the incest theme is really another stick to beat Claudius with: the real centre of Hamlet's distress is the "wicked speed" of the marriage; it seems almost to suggest some prearrangement.¹²

¹² M. H. Abrams "The Northon Anthology of English Literature" Sixth Edition. Volume 1. Cornell University Press. New York 1993

Freudian critics have been quick to notice that Hamlet is in the classic Oedipus situation in regard to his parents, and have suggested that Hamlet is paralyzed in trying to move against Claudius because Claudius has fulfilled Hamlet's own Oedipal desires by killing his father and marrying his mother. It would not be reasonable to ignore the oedipal element in the set-up, but, as always in Shakespeare, there are many other factors involved. Hamlet is a student whose few pleasures have to do with the life of the mind. It is pathetic, almost humorous, that after he hears the Ghost his conditioned impulse is to reach for what we would call his notebook and make memorandum about the hypocrisy of villains. I am not saying that Hamlet has a studious temperament averse to action, though he does have the student's disease of melancholy, which means that his actions are apt to be out of synchronization, being either delayed, like his revenge on Claudius, or hasty and rash, like his killing of Polonius. This fact has a good deal to do, naturally, with his horror at seeing his amiable mother moving so much faster to remarry than one would expect.

When I am saying is that the cold, bleak, primitive call to revenge does not give Hamlet's life a positive purpose: it merely impoverishes still further what life he has. Among the conflict of emotions in his mind when he watches Claudius praying and wonders if he should kill him now, one is undoubtedly a strong distaste for a treacherous and rather cowardly act, which is what sticking a rapier into a man's turned back really amounts to, whatever the urgency of the revenge ethic. It is, as he says, "hire and salary, not revenge." O.K., Claudius started it, but if you adopt the methods of your enemies you become like your enemies, and Hamlet has no wish to become like Claudius at his worst. Revenge, said Francis Bacon in his essay on the subject, is a kind of wild justice, and something in Hamlet is too civilized for stealthy murder, though he clearly would stand up to any kind of open conflict.

In all revenge tragedies we need three characters: a character to be killed, a character to kill him, and as avenger to kill the killer. The revenge is usually regarded by an audience as a positive act of retribution that brings the moral norms of society into balance again, and it usually sympathizes with the avenger accordingly. Because in the Bible God is represented as saying "Vengeance is mine," the avenger is often regarded, in the tragedies of the period, as an agent of divine vengeance, whatever his own moral status. It is in tragedy particularly that we see how persistently man creates his gods in his own image, and finds nothing incongruous when a ferocious and panic-stricken human revenge is called the carrying out of God's own will. Shakespeare has two revenge tragedies apart from Hamlet: Julius Caesar and Macbeth. Julius Caesar and Duncan are murdered; Brutus and Macbeth are the murderers; the avengers are Mark Antony, with Octavius Caesar, and Malcolm and Macduff.

In Hamlet, however, there are three concentric rings of revenge tragedies. In the centre is Polonius murdered by Hamlet and avenged by Laertes. Around it is the main action of the play, Hamlet senior murdered by Claudius and avenged by Hamlet junior. Around that again is the background story of Fortinbras senior, killed by Hamlet senior in a duel on the day that Hamlet junior was born and the first gravedigger entered into his occupation. Fortinbras junior, at the beginning of the play, is planning a revenge on Denmark: Claudius manages to avoid this threat, but Fortinbras comes in at the end of the play, achieving precisely what a successful revenge would have achieved, the crown of Denmark. The final result of all the to-do the Ghost of Hamlet senior starts is that the successor of Claudius on the throne of Denmark is the son of the man he had killed long before the play began.

Naturally, the simultaneous existence of these three revenge themes produces a fantastically complex play, especially when Hamlet has both the murderer's role in the Polonius tragedy and the avenger role in the main story. Their total effect is to neutralize the sense of the restoring of moral balance that revenge is supposed to give us as a rule. Revenge does not complete anything, it merely counters something, and a second vengeance pattern will grow up in opposition to it. Of Fortinbras, on whom the hopes and expectations of the few survivors of the play are fixed, we know nothing except that he will fight for anything. In tragedy the typical effect on the audience is traditionally assumed to be catharsis, a word that has something to do with purification, whatever else it means. Hamlet seems to me a tragedy without a catharsis, a tragedy in which everything noble and heroic is smothered under ferocious revenge codes, treachery, spying and the consequences of weak actions by broken wills.¹³

Let us look first at the inner circle of Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia. At the beginning we have a contrast between Hamlet, forbidden to leave Denmark and become a student again Wittenberg, and Laertes, who has finally persuaded his father to let him go to France. So we have a scene of leave-taking, with Polonius sounding off with a number of maxims, and ending with the noble and resonant "This above all," etc. after which he gets a servant to follow Laertes to Paris to snoop and spy and encourage tale bearing from his friends. That is one of the first examples of how any opening in the thick fog surrounding the court of Denmark gets sealed up again. In the same scene Polonius tells Ophelia not to encourage Hamlet's advances, because he is too high in rank to want to marry her. Ophelia says that Hamlet's wooing has been "honorable," and we gather later on that Claudius and Gertrude would have appeared of the match and that Gertrude at least expected it. Polonius may be simply an obstinate ass, but it is more likely that he is rationalizing something, and that we have to add him to Shakespearean fathers with grown-up daughters who will not let go, except on their own terms. Laertes weighs in with a remarkably priggish speech about maidenly virtue, and Ophelia tells him, very politely and demurely, that he just might try to mind his own business and look after his own morals. "Oh, fear me not," snaps Laertes: sisters are not supposed to answer back. The point of this is, apparently, to establish Laertes as already suspicious of Hamlet.

After Hamlet learns the truth about how Claudius became king, he conceals his feelings under the disguise of madness, and Claudius feels that there is something dangerous there to be investigated something more than just the shock of his father's death and mother's remarriage. Polonius is all ready with a theory. In speaking of the love conventions that come into Romeo and Juliet, those who died for love were saints and martyrs in the God of Love's calendar. It was also in the convention that great lovers frequently went mad when frustrated in love: one of the best-known poems of the age was Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, about the great knight Roland, or Orlando, of Charlemagne's court, driven mad by the infidelity of his mistress, Angelica. Polonius, a wide if not always critical reader, has decided that that the frustration of Hamlet's courtship of Ophelia, the result of his own piercing insight into the situation, has driven Hamlet mad. Must be true: he read about it in a book somewhere. He has one piece of evidence: Hamlet, Ophelia reports, had burst into her room, stared hard at her face, and then left. We can see that he was wondering if he could possibly make Ophelia

¹³ Robert Sandler "Northrop Frye on Shakespeare" Yale University Press New York 1986

a friend and confidante in his situation, as Horatio is, and saw nothing but immaturity and weakness in her face. However, Polonius proposes setting a booby trap for Hamlet, using Ophelia as a decoy, and Ophelia has no power to resist this scheme. So there is a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia, with Claudius and Polonius eavesdropping, as Hamlet realizes near the end of the interview. That is the end of any luck Ophelia might have in future. "Am I not right, old Jephthah?" Hamlet says to Polonius, "I have a daughter whom I love passing well." Sure, but what Jephthah did to his daughter was sacrifice her. The women in this play are heroines in a tragedy, but not tragic heroines, like Juliet or Cleopatra: they are pathetic rather, crushed under the wheels of all the male egos.

To look briefly now at the struggle with Claudius: if we could manage to forget what Claudius did to become king, we could see what everybody except Hamlet and Horatio sees, a strong and attractive monarch. He shows the greatest coolness and shrewdness in dealing with the Fortinbras threat, preparing to meet it if it comes, but deflecting it nonetheless. Apparently there is no question of any de jure line of succession in so turbulent a time, and the new king is elected by the nobles. Hamlet says late in the play that Claudius "Popped in between the election and my hopes," but there might have been a quite sensible decision that Hamlet was too young and untried: in any case, Claudius not only treats him like a son, but publicly supports him as his own successor. And while in such a time Claudius may have strengthened his position by marrying Gertrude, there seems no reason to doubt the sincerity of his affection for her.

In fact, once the play starts, he does no harm to anyone except Hamlet, and even against him he proceeds very unwillingly. The delay in Hamlet meets a corresponding delay, with equally unconvincing excuses, in Claudius. An uncompleted villain, like Richard III, would have wiped Hamlet out of his life at the first hint of danger, and slept all the better for it. Claudius seems a sensuous, even coarse, physical type, with an abounding vitality that makes for a lot of noisy partying. When Hamlet is freezing on the ramparts of Elsinore he hears such a party going on, and makes a disapproving speech about how heavily drinking king is bad for Denmark's reputation. Two points to note there: first, Hamlet does not yet know why Claudius has to drink so much; second, the party, judging from that Claudius has said, is at least partly in honor of Hamlet and the fact that he is staying in Denmark. Even the final scene, in which Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes all die, is essentially a party in honor of Hamlet. We are told by Claudius that Hamlet is a great favorite with the "general gender" offstage, who evidently do not trust Claudius completely – at any rate, Laertes is hailed as a possible new king on his return from France. But Shakespeare's portrayal of crowds is not very flattering in any of the plays in which crowds are featured.

So Claudius keeps his distance from Hamlet, not wanting to harm him as yet, only watching. And as he does so the "mousetrap" play suddenly closes on him. There are dozens of confrontations with pictures and mirrors that, in the dumb show, holds up to Claudius the image of his crime. It takes all the nerve of a very strong man not to break right there: when he speaks, he says: "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in it?" it is the question of a suspicious tyrant, not of the affable and gracious king that Claudius still is to everyone except Hamlet and Horatio. When the image is repeated, that does it. But it is not every murdering villain who would take to prayer in such circumstances. The prayer would not be very effective unless he did what he still could to undo his crime, such as surrendering the

crown. But the cold little voice in possession of Claudius says very clearly, “Do not be silly,” and there is nothing to do but get up and start planning the death of Hamlet. After all, the mousetrap play depicts a nephew killing his uncle, not a usurper killing his brother.

I would like to point out how healthy a man Claudius was, except for his crime, and how sick a man Hamlet was, even with his cause. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, are old friends whom Hamlet is at first delighted to see: he soon realizes that they have been “sent for,” which they immediately admit, and the discovery does not bother him too much. They are serving the king, whom they assume is the rightful king – Hamlet has not taken them into his confidence to that extent – and it never occurs to them that they are not acting in Hamlet’s own best interests. “My lord, you once did love me,” Guildenstern says with simple dignity. For Hamlet to describe them so contemptuously to Horatio as the shabbiest kind of spies, whose death is simply a good riddance, is one of those bewildering shifts of perspective that make what broadcasters call “easy listening” impossible.

I have spoken of the number of mirrors and confronting images that we meet everywhere in the play. Hamlet, for example, finds himself watching the recruits of Fortinbras, who, deflected from Denmark, are going off to attack Poland, free at least to get out of Denmark and engage in some positive action. Then we hear that the territory to be fought over is hardly big enough to hold the contending armies. One does not escape claustrophobia even by avoiding Denmark. Hamlet eventually leaves Denmark and is sent to England, but in his journey there he is “be-netted round with villainies,” and is as unable to sleep as fettered mutineers. Polonius spies on him; Claudius spies on him; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spy on him, and he has the additional difficulty of pretending to be mad when with them and sane when with Horatio. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he has of late “foregone all my exercises,” but tells Horatio that since Laertes went into France he has been in continual fencing practice.

Gertrude is forced by Hamlet to “look upon this picture, and on this,” to compare Hamlet senior with Claudius, in the process of having also to contemplate the very unflattering portrait of herself that Hamlet is drawing. Claudius says of the mad Ophelia that without our reason we are mere “pictures,” or else beasts, and as Ophelia is not a beast she must be a picture, a terrible but quite recognizable picture of what she could have been. The function of a play, says Hamlet, is to hold the mirror up to nature. He should know; he asks a player for a speech about Pyrrhus, the ferocious Greek warrior about to kill Priam, and hears how:

As a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,

And like a neutral to his will and matter,

Did nothing.

(II.ii. 510-12)

I said that in the first act we get a vision of the court of Denmark as rocking and heaving on the quicksand of the murder of Hamlet’s father, and that this vision is to some degree physically presented to us when the Ghost disappears below the stage and speaks from there. At the beginning of the fifth act the lower world suddenly yawns open on the stage, as the gravediggers are preparing a grave for Ophelia.

This episode is particularly one that the more conservative humanist critics I spoke of earlier regarded as barbaric. It is a type of grotesque scene that Shakespeare occasionally throws into a tragedy: the porter answering the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* and the clown coming in with the basket of figs and the serpent in *Antony and Cleopatra* are other examples. The word “grotesque” is connected with the word “grotto,” a cave or opening in the ground, and it usually has some connection with the ironic aspect of death, death as the decaying of the body into other elements. These grotesque death scenes became particularly popular in the Middle Ages, when a form appeared in literature known as the dense macabre was based on the fact that in a hopelessly unjust society death is the only impartial figure, and the only genuine democrat: in fact, all we can see of the God who is supposed to be no respecter of persons. The reasons why such scenes as this were disapproved of by highbrows are all connected with the incessant self-idealizing of ascendant classes, whether aristocratic or bourgeois. We feel sympathy with Laertes when he speaks of Ophelia’s “fair and unpolluted flesh,” and when we hear the gravedigger telling us that “your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body,” we dislike the implication that Ophelia’s fair and unpolluted flesh would not stay that way very long.

In this scene we are at the opposite end from the mood of sinister chill in which the play opened. In that opening scene we heard Horatio explain how:

A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless and sheeted dead
Did squeek and gibber in the Roman streets.

(I.i. 114-16)

Here the atmosphere is not simply ghostly, but heroic as well: the great Caesar cannot just die; prodigies occur when he does. In the present scene we get a very different tone:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn’d to clay
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

(V.i. 233-34)

And there are no ghosts in this scene: characters are either alive, like Hamlet and Horatio and the gravediggers, or dead, like Yorick and Ophelia. The terrible ambiguity of life in death, which the Ghost has brought into the action, and which has transformed the action of the play into this nightmarish sealed labyrinth, is resolving into its primary elements.

Then we come to the funeral of Ophelia, which Hamlet recognizes to be the funeral of a suicide as soon as he sees it. There follows the struggle between Hamlet and Laertes I spoke of, where probably both men are in Ophelia’s still open grave. Both profess a deep love for her: Laertes clearly means what he says, and Hamlet, though ranting, probably does too. All this affection comes a little late in the day for poor Ophelia, who has hardly had a decent word thrown at her since the beginning of the play. She is bullied by her father, and humiliated by being made a decoy for Hamlet; she has been treated, during the play scene, to a conversation with Hamlet that would have been more appropriate in a whorehouse; and

even Gertrude, who seems genuinely attached to her, panics when she comes in for the mad scene, and refuses to speak with her. But something connected with her death brings about a sudden sobering of the action, especially in Hamlet, who all through the gravedigger scene has been in a mood in which his melancholy is never quite under control, and his farranging associations “consider too curiously,” as Horatio observes. It is as though Ophelia’s suicide; to the extent that Hamlet assumes her death to be that, has broken the longing for death in Hamlet’s mind that has been burdening it from the beginning.

As the play slowly makes its transition to the final dueling scene, Hamlet modulates to a mood of complete acceptance and resignation. He realizes he has not long to live, but commends himself to providence – the first indication we have had that such a thing is in his world – and says simply “the readiness is all.” Horatio tries to tell him that he is still a free agent, and could decline the contest with Laertes if he liked, but Hamlet has already asked Osric “How if I answer no?” and Osric has said “I mean, my lord, the opposition of your person in trial.” Sometimes a no-answer is more informative than any pretence of an answer. Hamlet’s enemies will not wait very long now.

The sudden quieting of mood affects Laertes as well as Hamlet. Just as Hamlet, in spite of the powerful push to revenge given by the Ghost, could not bring himself to assassinate Claudius without warning, so Laertes, with both father and sister to avenge, feels ashamed of his poisoning scheme. Laertes and Hamlet die mutually forgiven, and with “heaven” absolving them of mortal sins. This does not mean that the machine-god of the earlier action has suddenly turned sentimental, in spite of Horatio’s speech about flights of angels – angels who can hardly have read the first four acts. It means rather that the two elements of tragedy, the heroic and the ironic, have reached their final stage.

On the heroic side, the last scene reminds us what a tremendous power of mental vitality is now flowing into its delta. Against the sheer fact of Hamlet’s personality, all the reminiscences of his indecision and brutality and arrogance seem merely carping: the death of so great a man is still portentous, even if he does not have Julius Caesar’s comets. On the ironic side, the immense futility of the whole action takes such possession of us that we feel, not that the action has been ridiculous, but that we can look at it impartially because it has no justifications of its own. Horatio, obeying Hamlet’s charge to tell the story again – a charge far more weighty than any ghostly command to revenge – promises:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads. (V.ii. 394-99)

This is a summary of what I called earlier a tragedy without a catharsis. The ironic side of the play relates to what has been done, which is precisely nothing, unless we call

violent death something. The heroic side of it relates to what has been manifested. Hamlet has manifested such a torrent of abilities and qualities that Fortinbras assumes that he would have been a great king and warrior too: two roles in which we have never seen him. Hamlet's earnest injunction to Horatio to tell his story expresses something that we frequently meet in the resolution of tragedies. Othello's last speech contains a similar injunction. The effect of this imaginary retelling is in part to present what the tragic hero has done in relation to what he has been: it asks for a totally conscious judgment, not just a subtracting of deeds from good ones.

The contrast between judging from actions and judging from character comes into the central struggle between Hamlet and Claudius. A man's quality may be inferred from the record of what he has done, or it may be inferred from what he is trying to make of himself at any given moment. The former is, so to speak, the case for the prosecution: you have done such and such, so that is forever what you are. Most of us are aware that our potential of interests and abilities steadily narrows as we get older, and that what we can still do becomes increasingly predictable. But we tend to resign ourselves to that, unless, like Claudius, we're blocked by some major crime and we have enough intelligence and sensitivity to know that it is a major crime. Claudius is someone of great potential fatally blocked by something he has done and can never undo.

Hamlet has an even greater potential, and has not blocked himself in the same way. He is aware of the infinite possibilities inherent, at least in theory, in being human and conscious, but, of course, knows also that even someone as versatile as he still has only a limited repertoire. It takes a very unusual mind to feel that simply to be a finite human being is to be in some sense a prisoner. We all build secondary prisons out of our actions; but these are projections of the deeper prison of what we are, the limits of our powers imposed at and by birth. Hamlet, so far as it is a study of its chief character, is perhaps the most impressive example in literature of a titanic spirit thrashing around in the prison of what it is. A naive consciousness would say that, although bounded in a nutshell, it was also king of infinite space, but Hamlet's consciousness is not naive, and it dreams.

The stock remedy for the claustrophobia of consciousness is action, even though human action is so often destructive or murderous. But consciousness is also a kind of death principle, a withdrawing from action that kills action itself, before action can get around to killing something else. Hamlet himself often comments on his own inaction in these terms, often with a kind of half-realized sense that the Ghost cannot stimulate any form of vitality, however destructive, in the living world, but can only draw everything it touches down with itself into the shades below.

The "to be or not to be" soliloquy, hackneyed as it is, is still the kernel of the play. It is organized largely on a stream of infinitives, that mysterious part of speech that is neither a verb nor a noun, neither action nor thing, and it is a vision that sees consciousness as a kind of vacuum, a nothingness, at the centre of being. Sooner or later we have to commit ourselves to nothingness, and why should so much merit be attached to dying involuntarily? The Ghost insists that Hamlet must not die before he has killed Claudius, and the one thing that prevents Hamlet from voluntary death is the fear that he might become just another such ghost. Until

the death of Ophelia releases him, he sees no form of detachment that would achieve the kind of death he wants: freedom from the world.

Hamlet was regarded as Shakespeare's central and the most significant play, because it dramatized a central preoccupation of the age of Romanticism: the conflict of consciousness and action, the sense of consciousness as a withdrawal from action which could make for futility, and yet was all that could prevent action from becoming totally mindless. No other play has explored the paradoxes of action and thinking about action so deeply.

Chapter II

The analysis of the characters in "Hamlet" tragedy and their similarities with the characters in "Othello"

Shakespeare's greatness rests on supreme achievement—the result of the highest genius matured by experience and by careful experiment and labor—in all phases of the work of a poetic dramatist. The surpassing charm of his rendering of the romantic beauty and joy of life and the profundity of his presentation of its tragic side we have already suggested. Equally sure and comprehensive is his portrayal of characters. With the certainty of absolute mastery he causes men and women to live for us, a vast representative group, in all the actual variety of age and station, perfectly realized in all the subtle diversities and inconsistencies of protean human nature. Not less notable than his strong men are his delightful young heroines, romantic Elizabethan heroines, to be sure, with an unconventionality, many of them, which does not belong to such women in the more restricted world of reality, but pure embodiments of the finest womanly delicacy, keenness, and vivacity. Shakespeare, it is true, was a practical dramatist. His background characters are often present in the plays not in order to be entirely real but in order to furnish amusement; and even in the case of the chief ones, just as in the treatment of incidents, he is always perfectly ready to sacrifice literal truth to dramatic effect. But these things are only the corollaries of all successful playwritings and of all art.

To Shakespeare's mastery of poetic expression similarly strong superlatives must be applied. For his form he perfected Marlowe's blank verse, developing it to the farthest possible limits of fluency, variety, and melody; though he retained the rhyming couplet for occasional use (partly for the sake of variety) and frequently made use also of prose, both for the same reason and in realistic or commonplace scenes. As regards the spirit of poetry, it scarcely need be said that nowhere else in literature is there a like storehouse of the most delightful and the greatest ideas phrased with the utmost power of condensed expression and figurative beauty. In dramatic structure his greatness is on the whole less conspicuous. Writing for success on the Elizabethan stage, he seldom attempted to reduce its romantic licenses to the perfection of an absolute standard. 'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Hamlet,' and indeed

most of his plays, contain unnecessary scenes, interesting to the Elizabethans, which Sophocles as well as Racine would have pruned away. Yet when Shakespeare chooses, as in 'Othello,' to develop a play with the sternest and most rapid directness, he proves essentially the equal even of the most rigid technician.¹⁴

“Hamlet” is without question the most famous play in the English language. Probably written in 1601 or 1602, the tragedy is a milestone in Shakespeare’s dramatic development; the playwright achieved artistic maturity in this work through his brilliant depiction of the hero’s struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father’s murder.

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don’t know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there’s something important he’s not saying, maybe something even he is not aware of. The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of Shakespeare’s most impressive achievements.

A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father’s death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, evidence that any other character in a play would believe, Hamlet becomes obsessed with proving his uncle’s guilt before trying to act. The standard of “beyond a reasonable doubt” is simply unacceptable to him. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die—the list is extensive.

But even though he is thoughtful to the point of obsession, Hamlet also behaves rashly and impulsively. When he does act, it is with surprising swiftness and little or no premeditation, as when he stabs Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who he is. He seems to step very easily into the role of a madman, behaving erratically and upsetting the other characters with his wild speech and pointed innuendos.

It is also important to note that Hamlet is extremely melancholy and discontented with the state of affairs in Denmark and in his own family—indeed, in the world at large. He is extremely disappointed with his mother for marrying his uncle so quickly, and he repudiates Ophelia, a woman he once claimed to love, in the harshest terms. His words often indicate his disgust with and distrust of women in general. At a number of points in the play, he contemplates his own death and even the option of suicide.

But, despite all of the things with which Hamlet professes dissatisfaction, it is remarkable that the prince and heir apparent of Denmark should think about these problems only in personal and philosophical terms. He spends relatively little time thinking about the

¹⁴ Robert Sandler “Northrop Frye on Shakespeare” Yale University Press New York 1986

threats to Denmark's national security from without or the threats to its stability from within (some of which he helps to create through his own carelessness).

I believe the character of Hamlet may be traced to Shakespeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy. Indeed, that this character must have some connection with the common fundamental laws of our nature may be assumed from the fact, that Hamlet has been the darling of every country in which the literature of England has been fostered. In order to understand him, it is essential that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds. Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense: but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect;—for if there be an overbalance, in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action. Now one of Shakespeare's modes of creating characters is, to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakespeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attentions to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds,—equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the medium of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action, consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakespeare places in circumstances, under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment:—Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. Thus it is that this tragedy presents a direct contrast to that of Macbeth; the one proceeds with the utmost slowness, the other with a crowded and breathless rapidity.

The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without,— giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all common-place actualities. It is the nature of thought to be indefinite;—definiteness belongs to external imagery alone. Hence it is that the sense of sublimit arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the beholder's reflection upon it;—not from the sensuous impression, but from the imaginative reflex. Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something akin to disappointment: it is only subsequently that the image comes back full into the mind, and brings with it a train of grand or beautiful associations. Hamlet feels this; his senses are in a state of trance, and he looks upon external things as hieroglyphics. His soliloquy—

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt, &c.

springs from that craving after the indefinite—for that which is not—which most easily besets men of genius; and the self-delusion common to this temper of mind is finely exemplified in the character which Hamlet gives of himself:—

*—It cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall
To make oppression bitter.*

He mistakes the seeing his chains for the breaking them, delays action till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident.

There is a great significance in the names of Shakespeare's plays. In the Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, and Winter's Tale, the total effect is produced by a coordination of the characters as in a wreath of flowers. But in Coriolanus, Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, &c. the effect arises from the subordination of all to one, either as the prominent person, or the principal object. Cymbeline is the only exception; and even that has its advantages in preparing the audience for the chaos of time, place, and costume, by throwing the date back into a fabulous king's reign.

But as of more importance, so more striking, is the judgment displayed by our truly dramatic poet, as well as poet of the drama, in the management of his first scenes. With the single exception of Cymbeline, they either place before us at one glance both the past and the future in some effect, which implies the continuance and full agency of its cause, as in the feuds and party-spirit of the servants of the two houses in the first scene of Romeo and Juliet; or in the degrading passion for shrews and public spectacles, and the overwhelming attachment for the newest successful war-chief in the Roman people, already become a populace, contrasted with the jealousy of the nobles in Julius Caesar;—or they at once commence the action so as to excite a curiosity for the explanation in the following scenes, as in the storm of wind and waves, and the boatswain in the Tempest, instead of anticipating our curiosity, as in most other first scenes, and in too many other first acts;—or they act, by contrast of diction suited to the characters, at once to heighten the effect, and yet to give a naturalness to the language and rhythm of the principal personages, either as that of Prospero and Miranda by the appropriate lowness of the style,—or as in King John, by the equally appropriate stateliness of official harangues or narratives, so that the after blank verse seems to belong to the rank and quality of the speakers, and not to the poet;—or they strike at once the keynote, and give the predominant spirit of the play, as in the Twelfth Night and in Macbeth;—or finally, the first scene comprises all these advantages at once, as in Hamlet.

Compare the easy language of common life, in which this drama commences, with the direful music and wild wayward rhythm and abrupt lyrics of the opening of Macbeth. The tone is quite familiar;—there is no poetic description of night, no elaborate information conveyed by one speaker to another of what both had immediately before their senses—(such as the first distich in Addison's Cato, which is a translation into poetry of 'Past four o'clock and a dark morning!');—and yet nothing bordering on the comic on the one hand, nor any striving of the intellect on the other. It is precisely the language of sensation among men who feared no charge of effeminacy for feeling what they had no want of resolution to bear. Yet the armour, the dead silence, the watchfulness that first interrupts it, the welcome relief of the guard, the cold, the broken expressions of compelled attention to bodily feelings still under control—all excellently accord with, and prepare for, the after gradual rise into tragedy;—but, above all, into a tragedy, the interest of which is as eminently *ad et aped intra*, as that of Macbeth is directly *ad extra*.

In all the best attested stories of ghosts and visions, as in that of Brutus, of Archbishop Cranmer, that of Benvenuto Cellini recorded by himself, and the vision of Galileo communicated by him to his favourite pupil Torricelli, the ghost-seers were in a state of cold or chilling damp from without, and of anxiety inwardly. It has been with all of them

as with Francisco on his guard,— alone, in the depth and silence of the night;—"twas bitter cold, and they were sick at heart, and not a mouse stirring.' The attention to minute sounds,— naturally associated with the recollection of minute objects, and the more familiar and trifling, the more impressive from the unusualness of their producing any impression at all — gives a philosophic pertinency to this last image; but it has likewise its dramatic use and purpose. For its commonness in ordinary conversation tends to produce the sense of reality, and at once hides the poet, and yet approximates the reader or spectator to that state in which the highest poetry will appear, and in its component parts, though not in the whole composition, really is, the language of nature. If I should not speak it, I feel that I should be thinking it;—the voice only is the poet's,— the words are my own. That Shakespeare meant to put an effect in the actor's power in the very first words— "Who's there?" — is evident from the impatience expressed by the startled Francisco in the words that follow —"Nay, answer me: stand and unfold yourself." A brave man is never so peremptory, as when he fears that he is afraid. Observe the gradual transition from the silence and the still recent habit of listening in Francisco's—"I think I hear them"—to the more cheerful call out, which a good actor would observe, in the—"Stand ho! Who is there?" Bernardo's inquiry after Horatio, and the repetition of his name and in his own presence indicate a respect or an eagerness that implies him as one of the persons who are in the foreground; and the scepticism attributed to him,—

*Horatio says, 'tis but our fantasy;
And will not let belief take hold of him—*

prepares us for Hamlet's after eulogy on him as one whose blood and judgment were happily commingled. The actor should also be careful to distinguish the expectation and gladness of Bernardo's 'Welcome, Horatio!' from the mere courtesy of his 'Welcome, good Marcellus!' Now observe the admirable indefiniteness of the first opening out of the occasion of all this anxiety. The preparation informative of the audience is just as much as was precisely necessary, and no more;—it begins with the uncertainty appertaining to a question:—

Mar. What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?—

Even the word 'again' has its credibilizing effect. Then Horatio, the representative of the ignorance of the audience, not himself, but by Marcellus to Bernardo, anticipates the common solution—"tis but our fantasy!" upon which Marcellus rises into

This dreaded sight, twice seen of us—

which immediately afterwards becomes 'this apparition,' and that, too, an intelligent spirit, that is, to be spoken to! Then comes the confirmation of Horatio's disbelief;—

Tush! tush! 'twill not appear!—

and the silence, with which the scene opened, is again restored in the shivering feeling of Horatio sitting down, at such a time, and with the two eye-witnesses, to hear a story of a ghost, and that, too, of a ghost which had appeared twice before at the very same hour. In the deep feeling which Bernardo has of the solemn nature of what he is about to relate, he makes an effort to master his own imaginative terrors by an elevation of style,—itself a continuation of the effort,—and by turning off from the apparition, as from something which would force him too deeply into himself, to the outward objects, the realities of nature, which had accompanied it:—

*Ber. Last night of all,
When yon same star, that's westward from the pole
Had made his course to illume that part of heaven
Where now it bums, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one—*

This passage seems to contradict the critical law that what is told, makes a faint impression compared with what is beholden; for it does indeed convey to the mind more than the eye can see; whilst the interruption of the narrative at the very moment when we are most intensely listening for the sequel, and have our thoughts diverted from the dreaded sight in expectation of the .desired, yet almost dreaded, tale—this gives all the suddenness and surprise of the original appearance;—

Mar. Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!—

Note the judgment displayed in having the two persons present, who, as having seen the Ghost before, are naturally eager in confirming their former opinions,—whilst the sceptic is silent, and after having been twice addressed by his friends, answers with two hasty syllables—'Most like,'—and a confession of horror:

—It harrows me with fear and wonder.

O heaven! words are wasted on those who feel, and to those who do not feel the exquisite judgment of Shakespeare in this scene, what can be said?—Hume himself could not but have had faith in this Ghost dramatically, let his anti-ghostism have been as strong as Sampson against other ghosts less powerfully raised.

Act i. sc. i.

*Mar. Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,
Why this same strict and most observant watch, &c.*

How delightfully natural is the transition to the retrospective narrative! And observe, upon the Ghost's reappearance, how much Horatio's courage is increased by having translated the late individual spectator into general thought and past experience,—and the sympathy of Marcellus and Bernardo with his patriotic surmises in daring to strike at the Ghost; whilst in a moment, upon its vanishing the former solemn awe-stricken feeling returns upon them:—

*We do it wrong, being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence.—*

Ib. Horatio's speech:—

*I have heard,
The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day, &c.*

No Addison could be more careful to be poetical in diction than Shakespeare in providing the grounds and sources of its propriety. But how to elevate a thing almost mean by its familiarity, young poets may learn in this treatment of the cock-crow.

Ib. Horatio's speech:—

*And, by my advice,
Let us impart what we have seen to-night
Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.*

Note the unobtrusive and yet fully adequate mode of introducing the main character, 'young Hamlet,' upon whom is transferred all the interest excited for the acts and concerns of the king his father.

Ib. sc. 2. The audience are now relieved by a change of scene to the royal court, in order that Hamlet may not have to take up the leavings of exhaustion. In the king's speech, observe the set and pedantically antithetic form of the sentences when touching that which galled the heels of conscience,—the strain of undignified rhetoric,—and yet in what follows concerning the public weal, a certain appropriate majesty. Indeed was he not a royal brother?—

Ib. King's speech:—

And now, Laertes, what's the news with you? &c.

Thus with great art Shakespeare introduces a most important, but still subordinate character first, Laertes, who is yet thus graciously treated in consequence of the assistance given to the election of the late king's brother instead of his son by Polonius.

Ib.

*Ham. A little more than kin, and less than kind.
King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Ham. Not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun.*

Hamlet opens his mouth with a playing on words, the complete absence of which throughout characterizes Macbeth. This playing on words may be attributed to many causes or motives, as either to an exuberant activity of mind, as in the higher comedy of Shakespeare generally; —or to an imitation of it as a mere fashion, as if it were said—'Is not this better than groaning?'—or to a contemptuous exultation in minds vulgarized and overset by their success, as in the poetic instance of Milton's Devils in the battle;—or it is the language of resentment, as is familiar to every one who has witnessed the quarrels of the lower orders, where there is invariably a profusion of punning invective, whence, perhaps, nicknames have in a considerable degree sprung up;—or it is the language of suppressed passion, and especially of a hardly smothered personal, dislike. The first and last of these combine in Hamlet's case; and I have little doubt that Farmer is right in supposing the equivocation carried on in the expression 'too much I' the sun,' or son.

Ib.

Ham. Ay, madam, it is common.

Here observe Hamlet's delicacy to his mother, and how the suppression prepares him for the overflow in the next speech, in which his character is more developed by bringing forward his aversion to externals, and which betrays his habit of brooding over the world within him, coupled with a prodigality of beautiful words, which are the half embodyings of thought, and are more than thought, and have an outness, a reality sui generis, and yet retain their correspondence and shadowy affinity to the images and movements within. Note also Hamlet's silence to the long speech of the king which follows, and his respectful, but general, answer to his mother.

Ib. Hamlet's first soliloquy:—

*O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! &c.*

This tedium vitae are a common oppression on minds cast in the Hamlet mould, and is caused by disproportionate mental exertion, which necessitates exhaustion of bodily feeling. Where there is a just coincidence of external and internal action, pleasure is always the result; but where the former is deficient, and the mind's appetency of the ideal is unchecked, realities will seem cold and unmoving. In such cases, passion combines itself with the indefinite alone. In this mood of his mind the relation of the appearance of his father's spirit in arms is made all at once to Hamlet:—it is—Horatio's speech, in particular—a perfect model of the 'true style of dramatic narrative;— the purest poetry, and yet in the most natural language, equally remote from the ink-horn and the plough.

Ib. sc. 3. This scene must be regarded as one of Shakespeare's lyric movements in the play, and the skill with which it is interwoven with the dramatic parts is peculiarly an excellence of our poet. You experience the sensation of a pause without the sense of a stop. You will observe in Ophelia's short and general answer to the long speech of Laertes the natural carelessness of innocence, which cannot think such a code of cautions and prudence necessary to its own preservation.

Ib. Speech of Polonius:—(in Stockdale's edition.)

*Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,)
Wrangling it thus, you'll tender me a fool.*

I suspect this 'wrangling' is here used much in the same sense as 'wringing' or 'wrenching'; and that the parenthesis should be extended to 'thus.'

Ib. Speech of Polonius:—

*—How prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows:—these blazes, daughter, &c.*

A spondee has, I doubt not, dropped out of the text. Either insert 'Go to' after 'vows';—

*Lends the tongue vows: Go to, these blazes, daughter—
or read
Lends the tongue vows:—These blazes, daughter, mark you—*

Shakespeare never introduces a catalectic line without intending an equivalent to the foot omitted in the pauses, or the dwelling emphasis, or the diffused retardation. I do not,

however, deny that a good actor might by employing the last mentioned means, namely, the retardation, or solemn knowing drawl, and supply the missing spondee with good effect. But I do not believe that in this or any other of the foregoing speeches of Polonius, Shakespeare meant to bring out the senility or weakness of that personage's mind. In the great ever-recurring dangers and duties of life, where to distinguish the fit objects for the application of the maxims collected by the experience of a long life, requires no fineness of tact, as in the admonitions to his son and daughter, Polonius is uniformly made respectable. But if an actor were even capable of catching these shades in the character, the pit and the gallery would be malcontent at their exhibition. It is to Hamlet that Polonius is, and is meant to be, contemptible, because in inwardness and uncontrollable activity of movement, Hamlet's mind is the logical contrary to that of Polonius, and besides, as I have observed before. Hamlet dislikes the man as false to his true allegiance in the matter of the succession to the crown.

Ib. sc. 4. The unimportant conversation with which this scene opens is a proof of Shakespeare's minute knowledge of human nature. It is a well established fact, that on the brink of any serious enterprise, or event of moment, men almost invariably endeavour to elude the pressure of their own thoughts by turning aside to trivial objects and familiar circumstances: thus this dialogue on the platform begins with remarks on the coldness of the air, and inquiries, obliquely connected, indeed, with the expected hour of the visitation, but thrown out in a seeming vacuity of topics, as to the striking of the dock and so forth. The same desire to escape from the impending thought is carried on in Hamlet's account of, and moralizing on, the Danish custom of wassailing: he runs off from the particular to the universal, and, in his repugnance to personal and individual concerns, escapes, as it were, from himself in generalizations, and smothers the impatience and uneasy feelings of the moment in abstract reasoning. Besides this, another purpose is answered;—for by thus entangling the attention of the audience in the nice distinctions and parenthetical sentences of this speech of Hamlet's, Shakespeare takes them completely by surprise on the appearance of the Ghost, which comes upon them in all the suddenness of its visionary character. Indeed, no modern writer would have dared, like Shakespeare, to have preceded this last visitation by two distinct appearances,—or could have contrived that the third should rise upon the former two in impressiveness and solemnity of interest.

However in addition to all the other excellences of Hamlet's speech concerning the wassel-music—so finely revealing the predominant idealism, the ratiocinative meditateness, of his character—it has the advantage of giving nature and probability to the impassioned continuity of the speech instantly directed to the Ghost. The momentum had been given to his mental activity; the full current of the thoughts and words had set in, and the very forgetfulness, in the fervour of his argumentation, of the purpose for which he was there, aided in preventing the appearance from benumbing the mind. Consequently, it acted as a new impulse,—a sudden stroke which increased the velocity of the body already in motion, whilst it altered the direction. The co-presence of Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo is most judiciously contrived; for it renders the courage of Hamlet and his impetuous eloquence perfectly intelligible. The knowledge,—the unthought of consciousness, —the sensation,—of human auditors,—of flesh and blood sympathises—acts as a support and a stimulation *a tergo*, while the front of the mind, the whole consciousness of the speaker, is filled, yea, absorbed, by the apparition. Add too, that the apparition itself has by its previous appearances been brought nearer to a thing of this world. This accrescence of objectivity in a Ghost that yet retains all its ghostly attributes and fearful subjectivity is truly wonderful.

Ib. sc. 5. Hamlet's speech:—

*O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell?—*

I remember-nothing equal to this burst unless it be the first speech of Prometheus in the Greek drama, after the exit of Vulcan and the two Afrites. But Shakespeare alone could have produced the vow of Hamlet to make his memory a blank of all maxims and generalized truths, that 'observation had copied there,'—followed immediately by the speaker noting down the generalized fact,

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!

Ib.

Mar. Hillo, ho, ho, my lord!

Ham. Hillo, ho, ho, boy I come bird, come, &c.

This part of the scene after Hamlet's interview with the Ghost has been charged with an improbable eccentricity. But the truth is, that after the mind has been stretched beyond its usual pitch and tone, it must either sink into exhaustion and inanity, or seek relief by change. It is thus well known, that persons conversant in deeds of cruelty contrive to escape from conscience by connecting something of the ludicrous with them, and by inventing grotesque terms and a certain technical phraseology to disguise the horror of their practices. Indeed, paradoxical as it may appear, the terrible by a law of the human mind always touches on the verge of the ludicrous. Both arise from the perception of something out of the common order of things—something, in fact, out of its place; and if from this we can abstract danger, the uncommonness will alone remain, and the sense of the ridiculous be excited. The dose alliance of these opposites—they are not contraries— appears from the circumstance, that laughter is equally the expression of extreme anguish and horror as of joy: as there are tears of sorrow and tears of joy, so is there a laugh of terror and a laugh of merriment. These complex causes will naturally have produced in Hamlet the disposition to escape from his own feelings of the overwhelming and supernatural by a wild transition to the ludicrous, —a sort of cunning bravado, bordering on the flights of delirium. For you may, perhaps, observe that Hamlet's wildness is but half false; he plays that subtle trick of pretending to act only when he is very near really being what he acts."

The subterraneous speeches of the Ghost are hardly defensible:—but I would call your attention to the characteristic difference between this Ghost, as a superstition connected with the most mysterious truths of revealed religion,—and Shakespeare's consequent reverence in his treatment of it,—and the foul earthly witcheries and wild language in Macbeth.

Act ii. sc. i. Polonius and Reynaldo.

In all things dependent on, or rather made up of, fine address, the manner is no more or otherwise rememberable than the light motions, steps, and gestures of youth and health. But this is almost everything:—no wonder, therefore if that which can be put down by rule in the memory should appear to us as mere poring, maudlin, cunning,— slyness blinking through the watery eye of superannuation. So in this admirable scene, Polonius, who is throughout the skeleton of his own former skill and statecraft, hunts the trail of policy at a dead scent, supplied by the weak fever-smell in his own nostrils.

Ib. sc. 2. Speech of Polonius:—

My liege, and madam, to expostulate, &c.

Warburton's note.

Then as to the jingles, and play on words, let us but look into the sermons Of Dr. Donne (the wittiest man of that age) and we shall find them full of this vein.

I have, and that most carefully, read Dr. Donne's sermons, and find none of these jingles. The great art of an orator—to make whatever he talks of appear of importance—this, indeed, Donne has effected with consummate skill.

Ib.

*Ham. Excellent well;
You are a fishmonger.*

That is, you are sent to fish out this secret. This is Hamlet's own meaning.

Ib.

*Ham. For if the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog,
Being a god, kissing carrion—*

These purposely obscure lines, I rather think, refer to some thought in Hamlet's mind, contrasting the lovely daughter with such a tedious old fool, her father, as he. Hamlet, represents Polonius to himself:—'Why, fool as he is, he is some degrees in rank above a dead dog's carcase; and if the sun, being a god that kisses carrion, can raise life out of a dead dog,—why may not good fortune, that favours fools, have raised a lovely girl out of this dead-alive old fool?' Warburton is often led astray, in his interpretations, by his attention to general positions without the due Shakespearian reference to what is probably passing in the mind of his speaker, characteristic, and expository of his particular character and present mood. The subsequent passage,—

O Jephtha, judge of Israel I what a treasure hadst thou!

is confirmatory of my view of these lines.

Ib.

Ham. You cannot. Sir, take from me any thing that I will more willingly part withal; except my life, except my life, except my life.

This repetition strikes me as most admirable.

Ib.

Ham. Then are our beggars, bodies; and our monarchs, and out-stretched heroes, the beggars' shadows.

I do not understand this; and Shakespeare seems to have intended the meaning not to be more than snatched at:—'By my fay, I cannot reason!'

Ib.

The rugged Pyrrhus—be whose sable arms, &c.

This admirable substitution of the epic for the dramatic, giving such a reality to the impassioned dramatic diction of Shakespeare's own dialogue, and authorized too, by the actual style of the tragedies before his time (Porrex and Ferrex, Titus Andronicus, &c.)—is well worthy of notice. The fancy, that a burlesque was intended, sinks below criticism: the lines, as epic narrative, are superb.

In the thoughts, and even in the separate parts of the diction, this description is highly poetical: in truth, taken by itself, that is its fault that it is too poetical!—the language of lyric vehemence and epic pomp, and not of the drama. But if Shakespeare had made the diction truly dramatic, where would have been the contrast between Hamlet and the play in Hamlet?

Ib.

— *had seen the mobled queen, &c.*

A mob-cap is still a word in common use for a morning cap, which conceals the whole head of hair, and passes under the chin. It is nearly the same as the nightcap, that is, it is an imitation of it, so as to answer the purpose ('I am not drest for company'), and yet reconciling it with neatness and perfect purity.

Ib. Hamlet's soliloquy:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am! I &c.

This is Shakespeare's own attestation to the truth of the idea of Hamlet which I have before put forth.

Ib.

*The spirit that I have seen,
May be a devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and, perhaps
Out of my weakness, and my melancholy,
(As he is very potent with such spirits)
Abuses me to damn me.*

Act iii. sc. i. Hamlet's soliloquy:

To be, or not to be, that is the question, &c.

This speech is of absolutely universal interest,—and yet to which of all Shakspeare's characters could it have been appropriately given but Hamlet? For Jaques it would have been too deep, and for Iago too habitual a communion with the heart; which in every man belongs, or ought to belong, to all mankind.

Ib.

*The undiscover'd country, from whose bourne
No traveller returns.—*

The obald's note in defence of the supposed contradiction of this in the apparition of the Ghost.

O miserable defender! If it be necessary to remove the apparent contradiction,—if it be not rather a great beauty,—surely, it were easy to say, that no traveller returns to this world, as to his home, or abiding-place.

Ham. Ha, ha! are you honest?

Oph. My lord?

Ham. Are you fair?

Here it is evident that the penetrating Hamlet perceives, from the strange and forced manner of Ophelia, that the sweet girl was not acting a part of her own, but was a decoy; and his after speeches are not so much directed to her as to the listeners and spies. Such a discovery in a mood so anxious and 'irritable accounts for a certain harshness in him;—and yet a wild up-working of love, sporting with opposites in a wilful self-tormenting strain of irony, is perceptible throughout. 'I did love you once:'

—'I lov'd you not:'—and particularly in his enumeration of the faults of the sex from which Ophelia is so free, that the mere freedom there from constitutes her character. Note Shakespeare's charm of composing the female character by the absence of characters, that is, marks and out-juttings.

Ib. Hamlet's speech:—

I say, we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live: the rest shall keep as they are.

Observe this dallying with the inward purpose, characteristic of one who had not brought his mind to the steady acting point. He would fain sting the uncle's mind;—but to stab his body!—The soliloquy of Ophelia, which follows, is the perfection of love—so exquisitely unselfish!

Ib. sc. 2. This dialogue of Hamlet with the players is one of the happiest instances of Shakespeare's power of diversifying the scene while he is carrying on the plot.

Ib.

Ham. My lord, you play'd once i' the university, you say? (To Polonius.)

To have kept Hamlet's love for Ophelia before the audience in any direct form, would have made a breach in the unity of the interest;—but yet to the thoughtful reader it is suggested by his spite to poor Polonius, whom he cannot let rest.

Ib. The style of the interlude here is distinguished from the real dialogue by rhyme, as in the first interview with the players by epic verse.

Ros. My lord, you once did love me.

Ham. So I do still, by these pickers and stealers.

I never heard an actor give this word 'so' its proper emphasis. Shakespeare's meaning is—'lov'd you? Hum! —so I do still, &c.' There has been no change in my opinion:—I think as ill of you as I did. Else Hamlet tells an ignoble falsehood, and a useless one, as the last speech to Guildenstern—'Why, look you now,' &c.— proves.

Ib. Hamlet's soliloquy:—

*Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.*

The utmost at which Hamlet arrives, is a disposition, a mood, to do something:—but what to do, is still left undecided, while every word he utters tends to betray his disguise. Yet observe how perfectly equal to any call of the moment is Hamlet, let it only not be for the future.

Ib. sc. 4. Speech of Polonius. Polonius's volunteer obtrusion of himself into this business, while it is appropriate to his character, still itching after former importance, removes all likelihood that Hamlet should suspect his presence, and prevents us from making his death injure Hamlet in our opinion.

Ib. The king's speech:—

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven, &c.

This speech well marks the difference between crime and guilt of habit. The conscience here is still admitted to audience. Nay, even as an audible soliloquy, it is far less improbable than is supposed by such as have watched men only in the beaten road of their feelings. But the final—'all may be well!' is remarkable;—the degree of merit attributed by the self-flattering soul to its own struggle, though baffled, and to the indefinite half-promise, half-command, to persevere in religious duties. The solution is in the divine medium of the Christian doctrine of expiation:—not what you have done. but what you are, must determine.

Ib. Hamlet's speech:—

*Now might I do it, pat, now he is praying:
And now I'll do it:—And so he goes to heaven:
And so am I revenged? That would be scann'd, &c.*

I confess that Shakespeare has left the character of the Queen in an unpleasant perplexity. Was she, or was she not, conscious of the fratricide?

Act iv. sc. 2.

*Ros. Take you me for a sponge, my lord?
Ham. Ay, Sir; that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities, &c.*

Hamlet's madness is made to consist in the free utterance of all the thoughts that had passed through his mind before;—in fact, in telling home-truths.

Act iv. sc. 5. Ophelia's singing. O, note the conjunction here of these two thoughts that had never subsisted in disjunction, the love for Hamlet, and her filial love, with. the guileless

floating on the surface of her pure imagination of the cautions so lately expressed, and the fears not too delicately avowed, by her father and brother, concerning the dangers to which her honour lay exposed. Thought, affliction, passion, murder itself—she turns to favour and prettiness. This play of association is instanced in the close:—

My brother shall know of it, and so I thank you for your good counsel.

Ib. Gentleman's speech:—

*And as the world were now bnt to begin
Antiquity forgot, custom not known,
The ratifiers and props of every word—
They cry, &c.*

Fearful and self-suspicious as I always feel, when I seem to see an error of Judgment in Shakespeare, yet I cannot reconcile the cool, and, as Warburton calls it, 'rational and consequential,' reflection in these lines with the anonymousness, or the alarm, of this Gentleman or Messenger, as he is called in other editions.

Ib. King's speech:—

*There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
That treason can but peep to what it would,
Acts little of his will.*

Proof, as indeed all else is, that Shakespeare never intended us to see the King with Hamlet's eyes; though, I suspect, the managers have long done so.

Ib. Speech of Laertes:—

*To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Laertes is a good character, but, &c.*

*I will do it;
And for that purpose I'll anoint my sword, &c.*

uttered by Laertes after the King's description of Hamlet;—

*He being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all contriving,
Will not peruse the foils.*

Yet I acknowledge that Shakespeare evidently wishes, as much as possible, to spare the character of Laertes,—to break the extreme turpitude of his consent to become an agent and accomplice of the King's treachery;—and to this end he reintroduces Ophelia at the close of this scene to afford a probable stimulus of passion in her brother.

Ib. sc. 6. Hamlet's capture by the pirates. This is almost the only play of Shakespeare, in which mere accidents, independent of all will, form an essential part of the plot;—but here how judiciously in keeping with the character of the over-meditative Hamlet, ever at last determined by accident or by a fit of passion!

Ib. sc. 7. Note how the King first awakens Laertes's vanity by praising the reporter, and then gratifies it by the report itself, and finally points it by—

*Sir, this report of his
Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy!—*

Ib. King's speech:

*For goodness, growing to a pleurisy,
Dies in his own too much.*

The obald's note from Warburton, who conjectures 'plethory.'

I rather think that Shakespeare meant 'pleurisy,' but involved in it the thought of plethora, as supposing pleurisy to arise from too much blood; otherwise I cannot explain the following line—

*And then this should is like a spendthrift sigh,
That hurts by easing.*

In a stitch in the side every one must have heaved a sigh that 'hurt by easing.'

Since writing the above I feel confirmed that 'pleurisy' is the right word; for I find that in the old medical dictionaries the pleurisy is often called the 'plethory.'

Ib.

*Queen. Your sister's drown'd, Laertes.
Laer. Drown'd! O, where?*

That Laertes might be excused in some degree for not cooling, the Act concludes with the affecting death of Ophelia,—who in the beginning lay like a little projection of land into a lake or stream, covered with spray-flowers, quietly reflected in the quiet waters, but at length is under-mined or loosened, and becomes a fairy isle, and after a brief vagrancy sinks almost without an eddy!

Act v. sc. i. O, the rich contrast between the Clowns and Hamlet, as two extremes! You see in the former the mockery of logic, and a traditional wit valued, like truth, for its antiquity, and treasured up, like a tune, for use.

Ib. sc. i and 2. Shakespeare seems to mean all Hamlet's character to be brought together before his final disappearance from the scene;—his meditative excess in the grave-digging, his yielding to passion with Laertes, his love for Ophelia blazing out, his tendency to generalize on all occasions in the dialogue with Horatio, his fine gentlemanly manners with Osric, and his and Shakespeare's own fondness for presentiment:

*But thou would'st not think, how ill all's here about my heart;
but it is no matter.*

Hamlet's major antagonist is a shrewd, lustful, conniving king who contrasts sharply with the other male characters in the play. Whereas most of the other important men in *Hamlet* are preoccupied with ideas of justice, revenge, and moral balance, Claudius is bent

upon maintaining his own power. The old King Hamlet was apparently a stern warrior, but Claudius is a corrupt politician whose main weapon is his ability to manipulate others through his skillful use of language. Claudius's speech is compared to poison being poured in the ear—the method he used to murder Hamlet's father. Claudius's love for Gertrude may be sincere, but it also seems likely that he married her as a strategic move, to help him win the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the king. As the play progresses, Claudius's mounting fear of Hamlet's insanity leads him to ever greater self-preoccupation; when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius does not remark that Gertrude might have been in danger, but only that he would have been in danger had he been in the room. He tells Laertes the same thing as he attempts to soothe the young man's anger after his father's death. Claudius is ultimately too crafty for his own good. In Act V, scene ii, rather than allowing Laertes only two methods of killing Hamlet, the sharpened sword and the poison on the blade, Claudius insists on a third, the poisoned goblet. When Gertrude inadvertently drinks the poison and dies, Hamlet is at last able to bring himself to kill Claudius, and the king is felled by his own cowardly machination.

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret?

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as well as by her tendency to use men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.ii and V.ii), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace and charm are her *only* characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

In the tragic play *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare explores the psychological afflictions of man whose mother marries his father murderer who also happens to be his uncle. The ghost of the Hamlet's father, who was the King of Hamlet, appears before Hamlet, tells him who the murderer is, and makes him swear revenge against his murderer.

Thus I was, sleeping, by a brother's hand

Of life, of crown, of Queen, at once dispatched;

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhous'led, disappointed, unaneled,
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head. . .
If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not.
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest. (Hamlet 81-86, 87-90 Act I, scene V) Prince Hamlet irrational, and delusional, already, thus swears revenge against his father's murderer, who now wears the crown of the King of Denmark.

So, Uncle, there you are. Now to my word:

It is "adieu, adieu! Remember me."

I have sworn't. (117-120 Act I, scene V)

However, Hamlet does not immediately seek revenge. He says he delays his revenge to seek the opportune moment to strike. However, Hamlet's procrastination drives him virtually insane. For Centuries Scholars have pondered the reason for Hamlet's delay in punishing his father. The Romantic writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*(1817), believes that: "Shakespeare's mode of conceiving characters out of his own intellectual and moral faculties, by conceiving any on the intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess and then placing himself, thus mutilated and diseased, under given circumstances..." (Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817). Thus, Hamlet's propensity to reflect arrests his ability to act, he simply thinks too much and the action in the play proves this to be true.

Hamlet spends most of his time thinking. A good deal of his narrative, sounds more like speeches as if he is speaking to himself, or his own mind. A good deal of Hamlet's speeches are soliloquy's, however, even when he is speaking to someone, it sounds as if he is contemplating matters in his own mind.

. . .I have of late--but wherefore I

Know not--lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises;

and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition

that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile

promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you . . . what a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of . . . (311-315, 319-322 Act II. Scene II) By now, the reader or viewer of the play is screaming kill him already, stop thinking about, just do it, but Hamlet does not. He continues to analyze every detail to the point of a psychotic breakdown. He seems to be analyzing whether he should obey the ghost

of his father, his thoughts, and his imagination, which seem so clear and evident to him, or the real world. Coleridge agrees with this assessment. He says: In Hamlet I conceive him to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between the real and the imaginary world. In Hamlet this balance does not exist-his thoughts, images, and fancy[being] far more vivid than is perceptions, and his very perceptions instantly passing thro' the medium his contemplations, and acquiring as they pass a form and colour not naturally their own. (Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, 1817) However, as a Romantic writer, and one of the founders of the Romantic Movement, it is not unusual for Coleridge to view Hamlet in this way. The Romantics believed in "The authoritative weight of classical precedents in literature, like the authority of church and state in society, was rejected in favour of poetic forms that seemed to reflect a more fundamental aspects of the human spirit."¹⁵ For writers Anderson, Buckler, and Veeder, "man was imaginative, more than rational--that is, capable of creation, invention, and inspiration". Hamlet, therefore, is the classical Romantic figure. He uses his mind to try to solve the problems of man. It could be argued that Hamlet is trying to rationalize his situation, but he is more than just rational, he imaginative, and allows the images he conjures in his mind to influence his thinking. Rather than turn to God, Hamlet turns to his inner self, and the supernatural to try to solve his dilemma. "Hence great, enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to the real action, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities".¹⁶

Hamlet's inability to act and his vivid imagination drive more insane as the play moves on. He becomes less and less rational, and moves further away from reality. He woos Ophelia, leads her to believe he will take her as his wife, but then tells her he feels he is not worthy and she should: Get thou to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a Breeder of sinners? 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 offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. (151-137 Act II Scene I)

Hamlet, of course, has done no wrong; other than woo Ophelia, but this is not for what he is judging himself. Hamlet is judging himself for his inability to act. He is agreeing with Coleridge's thesis that his imagination and mind prevent him from acting. His thoughts consume to much of his time for him to act upon his ambitions, or "to give them shape." He is a prisoner of his own mind, a man stuck in the imaginary world, an irrational thinker, in a rational society. The most famous speech in Hamlet proves Coleridge's theory beyond doubt. It is the ultimate speech of indecision and mental contemplation:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms and arrows against a sea of troubles,

¹⁵ Anderson, Buckler and Veeder. "The Literature of England" Volume 2, P 615, 617

¹⁶ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays" 1917

And by opposing end them. To die to--sleep--

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is air to. 'Tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wished. To die--to sleep.

To sleep--perchance to dream, ay there's the rub! (66-73 Act II Scene I)

Hamlet and Othello bare many similarities in their characterizations. “Othello, a great success in Shakespeare's time, was one of the first plays to be acted after the reopening of the theatres in 1660, and since that time has remained one of the most popular plays on the English stage”. Othello suffers from similar psychological problems. In Shakespeare's poetic tragedy Othello, passionate desire unravels into all-consuming madness. The celebrated Moorish general Othello cherishes the high-born Venetian lady Desdemona with a love so great that it should transcend cultural and social differences, but instead it leaves them defenceless before the deadly intrigues of the vengeful Iago.

Othello is about Iago, who has been passed over for promotion, plots to get even with his superior the Moor Othello, and the more favoured Cassio. He does so by sowing the seeds of jealousy in Othello, convincing him that his wife, Desdemona, had been cuckolding him with Cassio.

Iago Nay, but he prated,

And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms

Against your honour,

That, with the little godliness I have,

I did full hard forbear him. But, I pray you, sir,

Are you fast married: Be assured of this,

That the magnifico is much beloved,

And hath, in his effect, a voice potential

As double as the duke's: he will divorce you. (Act I Sc. II, lines 6-15)

It is not the exact same story we get with Hamlet, but it again deals with the psyche of man. Hamlet's mind drives him to the point where he is unable to act. Othello is driven by to insanity by his jealousy just as Hamlet is driven to insanity by his inability to act.

Othello a former black slave (a Moor) is embraced by the system that would have otherwise enslaved him, but for his strategic and military prowess. He becomes celebrated and, at the height of his influence, takes a white wife, the daughter of a secure member of the establishment he now belongs to. He does not cultivate his past but looks forward and hopes

to be accepted on his merits. Nevertheless, he remains isolated, insecure and suspicious, partly because he has no power base. He is a creation of other people and deep down he has an inferiority complex despite his bluster and pride. He truly cannot believe that his wife, that paragon of virtue and purity, could have settled for him. His insecurities, are played on by Iago and eventually trigger off an engulfing suspicion and jealousy of his wife's supposed infidelity, which culminates in him murdering her. Othello says, My wife! My wife! What wife? I have no wife.

O, insupportable! O heavy hour.

Methinks it should now be a big eclipse

Of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe

Should yawn at alteration. (Act V. Sc. II lines 97-101)

When he discovers that he has been tricked by his friend, he is overcome by remorse and kills himself. Othello asks before dying that they remember him.

Of one who loved not wisely, but too well

Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued

Albeit unused to the melting mood. . .

I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,

And smote him—thus. {He stabs himself. (Act V. Sc II, lines 345-356)

The play concentrates on more than just the character of Othello, Iago is totally fascinating--a Machiavellian mind manipulating everyone around him--and he's riveting to watch. But for me, at the centre of the play is the all-consuming love between Othello and Desdemona, which flies in the face of the conventions of the time. I wanted to reinvest the tragedy with passion and romance, because without romance there is no real tragedy. I saw the play as an erotic thriller, and that is what I wanted to translate onto the big screen. Passion is the driving force of the story. Every character is motored by desire. There's an extraordinary fusion of people boiling with different passions.

Just like Hamlet, Othello is based upon the passions that drive the main character over the brink of insanity. Othello's love for Desdemona was so deep he could not bear the thought of another being with her. He felt insecure in his own position and this added to his insanity. Unlike Hamlet, who constantly has ghosts whispering in his ear, Othello must deal with the lies and accusations of Iago. Iago tells these lies with the intention of driving Othello insane. The characters bare similar personality traits. Hamlet is jealous of his mother's relationship with his uncle the King, and Othello is jealous of Desdemona. Hamlet seeks

revenge, but his insanity prevents him from acting. Othello seeks revenge, but his insanity does not allow him to see who that vengeance should be directed towards, and he in his insanity he is driven to murder his own wife, and then kill himself. In both plays Shakespeare is dealing with man's psychological imperfections when faced with jealousy and obsession. Hamlet like Othello, but not directly, end his life tragically. He knows he will not win the final battle, and that his life will end. He also, indirectly, is responsible for the death of the woman he loves. It is Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia that drives her to suicide.

Shakespeare was not for an age but for all time, was in every respect a thorough Elizabethan also, and does not escape the superficial Elizabethan faults. Chief of these, perhaps, is his fondness for 'conceits,' with which he makes his plays, especially some of the earlier ones, sparkle, brilliantly, but often inappropriately. In his prose style, again, except in the talk of commonplace persons, he never outgrew, or wished to outgrow, a large measure of Elizabethan self-conscious elegance. Scarcely a fault is his other Elizabethan habit of seldom, perhaps never, inventing the whole of his stories, but drawing the outlines of them from previous works - English chronicles, poems, or plays, Italian 'novels,' or the biographies of Plutarch. But in the majority of cases these sources provided him only with bare or even crude sketches, and perhaps nothing furnishes clearer proof of his genius than the way in which he has seen the human significance in stories baldly and wretchedly told, where the figures are merely wooden types, and by the power of imagination has transformed them into the greatest literary masterpieces, profound revelations of the underlying forces of life. Shakespeare, like every other great man, has been the object of much unintelligent, and misdirected adulation, but his greatness, so far from suffering diminution, grows more apparent with the passage of time and the increase of study.

Chapter III

Description of the soliloquy given in the tragedy and literary value

Hamlet is the most famous play in the English language. William Shakespeare achieved artistic maturity in this work through his brilliant depiction of the hero's struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father's murder. Shakespeare's focus on this conflict was a revolutionary departure from contemporary revenge tragedies, which tended to graphically dramatize violent acts on stage, in that it emphasized the hero's dilemma rather than the depiction of bloody deeds. The dramatist's genius is also evident in his transformation of the play's literary sources.

And now let me present you the most popular soliloquy couplet from tragedy:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. To die--sleep--
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is air to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die--to sleep.

To sleep--perchance to dream, ay there's the rub! (66-73 Act II Scene I)

Let's start from the first line:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

The opening line scans fairly normally, and the stresses help emphasize the comparison of being versus not being. The line is an example of a feminine ending, or a weak extra syllable at the end of the line. Hamlet puts forth his thesis statement at the beginning of his argument, which is generally a good idea. **Be** here is used in its definition of "exist." Note the colons signifying two *caesuras* (pauses) in the opening line. The *trochee* of **that is** works in two ways here, lending proper emphasis to the line and reinforcing the pause in the middle.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The initial *trochee* is a typical inversion of Shakespeare's; beginning the line with a stressed syllable varies the rhythm and gives a natural emphasis at the start. The third foot with "in" could also be scanned as a *pyrrhic*. Hamlet now elaborates on his proposition; the question actually concerns existence when faced with suffering. **Nobler** here seems most likely to denote "dignified," **in the mind** translates to "of opinion," and **suffer** is used in the sense "to bear with patience or constancy."¹⁷ As a whole, a thoroughly less poetic rendering of the line translates to "whether people think that it's more dignified to put up with."

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

This is the third feminine ending in a row, and it's hard to overlook as anything but a conscious effort. Some editors have argued that the original word was "stings" rather than "slings," although **slings and arrows** make for a better rhetorical construction. Slings and arrows imply missile weapons that can not only strike from a distance but can miss their mark and strike someone unintended. That would fit with the capriciousness suggested by the phrase **outrageous fortune**. The metaphor also brings up the demoralizing aspect of enduring attacks without being able to respond effectively—whether from archers, snipers, artillery, or even guerrilla tactics. **Outrageous** in this speech denotes "violent or atrocious." In this usage, **fortune** denotes "the good or ill that befalls man."

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

Here is a changeup: a *pyrrhic* followed by a *spondee* that adds a natural emphasis on **take arms** (denoting in this instance to "make war"). In what follows, we have straight *iambic* meter with yet another feminine ending. The initial quatrain of four weak endings could be an attempt by Shakespeare to use the verse to convey further Hamlet's uncertainty. **Sea of troubles** is a fairly simple metaphor in this usage that compares Hamlet's troubles (sufferings) to the vast and seemingly boundless sea. This line essentially translates to "or to fight against the endless suffering." The preceding reference to "outrageous fortune" dictates that Hamlet is primarily referring to the continuous assault of troubles that he perceives life as presenting him. However, the *double entendre* is whether to take up arms against the external troubles (i.e., Claudius) or against those troubles within himself (thus implying consideration of suicide). Either way, Hamlet seems to be asking if the struggle is even worth the effort.

And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;

¹⁷ Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

The line would appear to scan as *iambic pentameter* with an extra unstressed syllable preceding the implied pause after "them?" (a pause, incidentally, that makes it hard to scan "...them? To die" as an *anapest* foot, since the two unstressed syllables don't run together.) The use of **opposing** in context continues the metaphor of armed struggle begun by "take arms" in the previous line. There is potential ambiguity in the use of **die** here; obviously, it means "to lose one's life," but there are possible secondary meanings of "to pine for" and "vanish" as well. **Sleep** plays upon a double meaning of both "rest" and "being idle or oblivious."

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

You could scan the first foot as either an *iamb* or a *spondee*; I've chosen a spondee because it seems like "No more" is a singular concept that warrants equal weight on the two syllables. There's a natural pause that comes before "and by a sleep...." The line is basically a qualifier of Hamlet's usage of "sleep" in the line before.

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

Scansion here reveals a possible *anapest* at the end of the line (if one doesn't treat the next-to-last word as "natural"). This line serves as poetic elaboration of the "sea of troubles" to which Hamlet refers earlier. **Heart-ache** is easily enough understood as anguish or sorrow, while **thousand** signifies "numerous" in this context, and **natural shocks** translates loosely to "normal conflicts."

That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation

That flesh is heir to is a poetic way of saying "that afflict us" (literally "that our bodies inherit"). In this context, **consummation** (Middle English: *consummaten* from the Latin *consummare*, "to consume") means "end" or "death," a poetic usage playing off its traditional meaning of "completion."

Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;

Let it be noted that this repetition of "to die, to sleep" is an intentional rhetorical device. The significance of using the same phrase in a focal position at the end of two lines makes it nearly impossible to speak this speech without emphasizing the death/sleep comparison at work. Here, **devoutly** denotes a meaning of "earnestness" rather than its more traditional religious association; this speech, unlike Hamlet's first soliloquy, is secular rationalism (especially in contrast with "Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!").

To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;

The *spondee* in the fourth foot helps to punch the change that "perchance to dream" brings into the speech. Metrically, you can hear Hamlet working through the logic based on the stresses. **Rub** means "obstacle or impediment," and **perchance** means "perhaps" in context.¹⁸ The point of this line is that Hamlet seeks oblivion, which he has likened to a deep slumber. However, the flaw in this thinking, as Hamlet reasons out, is that dreams come to us

¹⁸ Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

during sleep. One can imagine that Hamlet's dreams are reasonably unpleasant, which leads him to extrapolate in the next line....

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

Notice how the straight *iambic* rhythm of this line and the one that follows quickens the pace of Hamlet's speech. This is reinforced by a lack of pauses (think about how colons, semicolons, and commas act as linguistic speed bumps in some of the previous lines). Now the rhetorical comparison of sleep and death is driven home, and Hamlet infers that if death is sleep intensified, then the possible dreams in death are likely to be intensified as well.

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Again, the uninterrupted iambic pentameter is skipping toward the predicate of Hamlet's discovery (which occurs in the next line). The language here, of course, is Shakespeare's poetic way of saying "when we've died" (**shuffled** = "gotten rid of" and **coil** = "turmoil, confusion").

Must give us pause: there's the respect

Scansion here reveals a trait that Shakespeare sometimes uses in a mid-line *caesura*: he occasionally eliminates a syllable or an entire foot following the pause. In this case, the line is only eight total syllables. Some scholars point out that at least some of these syllabic irregularities might also be due to corruptions of the text over 400 years. **Must give us pause** is the predicate of "dreams" from two lines prior. This line is also an example where the language can help the performer; just try to gloss over the word "pause" in this line. It's impossible. The verse, the punctuation, the context, and the word itself all serve to force the speaker to take some form of pause before moving on. **Give us pause** in context denotes "stop and consider." The usage of **respect** here denotes "a reason or motive."

That makes calamity of so long life;

My scansion pattern in this line is based on the sense of the speech. "Makes" is the predicate of this clause and needs a certain amount of stress. Although it might ordinarily seem strange in another context, the ending with three stressed syllables on "so long life" works because the back-to-back stresses draw out the words in an onomatopoetic manner (think about how your own speech might drag if you were describing something that tired you out just thinking about it). The word **calamity** is used in the sense of "misery."

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,

This plain iambic line begins a five-line poetic laundry list of examples of all those things that make life such a burden. Keep in mind that this is an extended, slightly rhetorical question Hamlet poses. The subject—those who would bear—begins in this line. **The whips and scorns of time** refers more to Hamlet's (or a person's) lifetime than to time as a figurative reference of eternity.¹⁹

The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,

¹⁹ Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

Fans of subjective scansion should love this line. Is the opening foot a pyrrhic, an anapest, or an iamb formed by pronouncing the beginning almost like "the oppressor"? **Contumely** (contemptuous treatment or taunts, from the Middle English *contumelie* from the Latin *contumelia*, meaning "abuse, insult") scans in this context as three syllables rather than four. This scansion gives the line an iambic feel (albeit with the flavour of a feminine ending), and the most logical way of viewing the meter seems to be: anapest/iamb/iamb/iamb/pyrrhic. At least that makes the line predominantly iambic pentameter.

The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,

This line is more interesting for its rhetorical devices than its metrical pattern. Like the line prior, there is a mid-line caesura that creates an internal parallel structure. Note the play of consonance in juxtaposing **despised love** and **law's delay**, as well as the light "s" sounds that punctuate several points within the line.

The insolence of office and the spurns

The fourth foot could scan as an iamb rather than a pyrrhic, but that's quibbling. This line produces heavy consonance with the words **insolence** (rudeness, impudence; from the Latin *insolens*, meaning "immoderate" or "overbearing") **office** (public officials), and **spurns** (insults). Incidentally, this in a nutshell is why Shakespeare still works for us four centuries later: the gripe of the public against those who hold public office is both universal and eternal.²⁰

That patient merit of the unworthy takes,

There are quite a few things going on here. First, scansion reveals as many as four unstressed syllables in a row, which is unusual. The line itself is 11 syllables; as scanned above, the line can be described as iamb/iamb/pyrrhic/anapaest/iamb. Scanning "of" as stressed (however slightly) turns that interpretation into iamb/iamb/iamb/anapaest/iamb instead. Grammatically, this line is an object-subject-verb inversion with the direct object ("spurns") on the previous line, which makes it all a bit dicier to parse. **Patient** in this context is defined as "bearing evils with calmness and fortitude," while **merit** denotes "worthiness" and **takes** is used as "receives." Literally, the clause would translate to something like "the insults that worthy fortitude receives from the unworthy."

When he himself might his quietus make

Now that Hamlet is done listing all those "whips and scorns of time," he's getting to the heart of his proposition. Who would suffer all this when there's another choice? Here's a bit of trivia: Shakespeare uses **quietus** only twice in all his works (the other occurrence is in Sonnet 126) It comes originally from Medieval Latin, meaning "at rest." In Middle English, it took on the denotation "discharge of obligation" and here denotes "release, or settlement of account." It is Shakespeare's poetic license in this speech that produces the contemporary meaning of "a release from life." That being said, it is the older interpretation of "quietus" that leads some scholars to argue that the whole point of this soliloquy is Hamlet talking about "settling his debt" with Claudius. It's the sort of thing that leads to academic "flame wars," so there's something to be said for the entertainment value.

²⁰ Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,

Bare bodkin is the salient point (no pun intended) of this line, so it gets the stresses. This creates a pyrrhic/spondee/iamb/iamb/iamb rhythm. **Bodkin** at the time meant a sharp instrument, much like an awl, used for punching holes in leather. In this context, it suggests a dagger or stiletto (think of the phrase as resembling "bare blade").²¹ The word derives from the Middle English "boidekin." Hamlet is basically asking who wants to suffer life when you could end your troubles with a dagger. After the initial question, Hamlet continues by asking who would bear **fardels** (pack, burden; from Middle English via Middle French, likely originally from the Arabic *fardah*).²²

To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

There is little noteworthy revealed in the scansion; the stresses fall on the words you would expect to hear stressed. Samuel Johnson preferred "*groan* and sweat" in his 1765 edition of the works, annotating, "All the old copies have, 'to *grunt* and sweat'. It is undoubtedly the true reading, but can scarcely be borne by modern ears." **Weary** here means "tiresome."

But that the dread of something after death,

This plain blank verse clause refers back to the fardel-bearing "who" of two lines prior. **Dread** (Middle English = *dreden*, from the Old English *adrædan* meaning "to advise against") is used in its primary meaning of "fear," although its archaic meaning of "awe or reverence" could be in play as well. Primarily, however, the point is that fear of the unknown is possibly the only thing keeping man from killing himself to end his troubles.

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn

With regard to meter, the only real question here is whether to stress **from**, **whose**, both, or neither. **The undiscover'd country** is a poetic reference to death; **bourn** denotes "limit, confine, or boundary." **Bourn** derives either from the Old English *burna* meaning "stream or brook" (via Old High German *brunno*, meaning "spring of water") or, alternately, from the French *bourne* (via Old French *bodne*, meaning "boundary or marker"), depending upon which etymologist you want to believe. With England having been prominently invaded by both Germanic and French speakers, either influence (or both) could be at work.²³

No traveller returns, puzzles the will

The rhythm here gets a little disjointed, scanning as spondee/pyrrhic/iamb/trochee/iamb. **Puzzles** denotes "perplexes or embarrasses," and **will** (from Middle English via Old English *willa*, meaning "desire") denotes "intellect or mind." What is most curious to both the casual reader and scholar alike is the statement Hamlet makes that no one returns from death—after he has been visited by his father's ghost. Perhaps Hamlet means no *living* being returns, or perhaps this thought betrays Hamlet's doubts that the spirit was truly his father. Or—if one interprets Hamlet as making this speech for the benefit of Claudius and Polonius—perhaps Hamlet wants to mislead any eavesdroppers precisely *because* of the ghost's appearance. There are a number of theories about this, including the hypothesis that the entire monologue

²¹ Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

²² Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

²³ Stanley W. Wels, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

or scene has been misplaced in the text. Invent your own explanation—it's fun, and it may earn you a research grant.²⁴

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Ill derives from an Old Norse word meaning "bad". The entire point of this purely iambic line is to set up a comparison between the devil we know...

Than fly to others that we know not of?

...and the devil we don't. What Hamlet says in effect is that fear of the unknown binds us all (in this case, fear of that unknown beyond death's door). As bad as earthly suffering is, there could be far worse in store for us in death. This is especially true for those who would commit suicide, which was viewed as an abomination by the Church (who saw it as one of the gravest affronts to God) and a guaranteed path to Hell—both by virtue of the sin itself and the Church's refusal to give the offender proper burial rites. Though the speech doesn't directly invoke God, this has to be an undercurrent, no matter how rationally and philosophically Hamlet couches it.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;

Thus in this line scans as a stress (making the first foot a spondee rather than an iamb) primarily because of the end-stop of the line above. It also gives emphasis to the slight turn of the speech into its conclusion. **Conscience** (Middle English via Old French, from Latin *conscientia*, "to be conscious") here is used primarily in its older sense of "consciousness, inmost thought or private judgment" rather than implying a moral dilemma. The premise is that thoughts can deter action, not unlike the conclusion of Macbeth's dagger soliloquy.²⁵

And thus the native hue of resolution

This line sets up the contrast between resolution and thought using a parallelism (*native hue* vs. *pale cast*). **Native** is used in its sense of "natural"; **native hue** implies a bold, healthy color symbolizing determination.

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

The antithesis of healthy determination, in this comparison, is the affliction of thought. **Sicklied o'er** denotes "tainted," and **cast** denotes "tinge or coloration." Hamlet, in these two lines, hits upon the dramatic problem (and arguably his own tragic flaw) of the play.

And enterprises of great pith and moment

Enterprises (from the Old French *entreprendre*, "to undertake") denotes undertakings. **Pith** derives from the Old English *pitha* (via Old German *pith*), which originally denoted the core of a fruit—as in a peach's pit—and evolved into a figurative meaning of spinal cord or bone marrow; here *pith* demonstrates its evolved denotation of

²⁴ Stanley W. Wells, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

²⁵ Stanley W. Wells, James Shaw "A Dictionary of Shakespeare" Oxford University Press, the USA, 1999

"strength or vigor." **Moment**, while it might seem to indicate timeliness, actually denotes "consequence, importance" in this context.

With this regard their currents turn awry,

This is a line in which the unvaried iambic pentameter combined with the consonance of the prevalent "r" sounds propel the speaker toward the conclusion of Hamlet's speech. **Regard** denotes "consideration" in its usage, while **currents** is a metaphor based on its meaning "the flowing [steady] motion of water." With **turn** (change direction) and **awry** (obliquely, askew), the line loosely translates to "are disrupted by thinking about them."

And lose the name of action.

The line continues after "action" with Ophelia's appearance, scanning as a full line of iambic pentameter. Compare this conclusion with the end of the dagger soliloquy of *Macbeth* ("Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives"). Here, Hamlet is making a similar statement that giving too much thought to the consequences of important actions can paralyze us.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

One of the greatest benefits of studying Shakespeare is that he makes us more aware of our assumption and so less confined by them. A much more subtle and deeply rooted assumption is that Shakespeare was a great poet who wrote plays.

Shakespeare's focus on this conflict was a revolutionary departure from contemporary revenge tragedies, which tended to graphically dramatize violent acts on stage, in that it emphasized the hero's dilemma rather than the depiction of bloody deeds. The dramatist's genius is also evident in his transformation of the play's literary sources—especially the contemporaneous *Ur-Hamlet*—into an exceptional tragedy.

Hamlet is one of the most quoted works in the English language, and is often included on lists of the world's greatest literature. As such, it reverberates through the writing of later centuries. Academic Laurie Osborne identifies the direct influence of *Hamlet* in numerous modern narratives, and divides them into four main categories: fictional accounts of the play's composition, simplifications of the story for young readers, stories expanding the role of one or more characters, and narratives featuring performances of the play. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play and among the most powerful and influential tragedies in the

English language. It has a story capable of "seemingly endless retelling and adaptation by others."-During Shakespeare's lifetime, the play was one of his most popular works, and it still ranks high among his most-performed, topping, for example, the Royal Shakespeare Company's list since 1879. It has inspired writers from Goethe and Dickens to Joyce and Murdoch, and has been described as "the world's most filmed story after *Cinderella*."

Hamlet departed from contemporary dramatic convention in several ways. For example, in Shakespeare's day, plays were usually expected to follow the advice of Aristotle in his *Poetics*: that a drama should focus on action, not character. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare reverses this so that it is through the soliloquies, not the action, that the audience learns Hamlet's motives and thoughts. The play is full of seeming discontinuities and irregularities of action, except in the "bad" quarto. At one point, as in the Gravedigger scene, Hamlet seems resolved to kill Claudius: in the next scene, however, when Claudius appears, he is suddenly tame. Scholars still debate whether these twists are mistakes or intentional additions to add to the play's theme of confusion and duality.-Finally, in a period when most plays ran for two hours or so, the full text of *Hamlet*—Shakespeare's longest play, with 4,042 lines, totaling 29,551 words—takes over four hours to deliver. Even today the play is rarely performed in its entirety, and has only once been dramatized on film completely, with Kenneth Branagh's 1996 version. *Hamlet* also contains a favorite Shakespearean device, a play within the play, a literary device or conceit in which one story is told during the action of another story.

The play's structure and depth of characterization have inspired much critical scrutiny, of which one example is the centuries-old debate about Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle. Some see it as a plot device to prolong the action, and others see it as the result of pressure exerted by the complex philosophical and ethical issues that surround cold-blooded murder, calculated revenge and thwarted desire. More recently, psychoanalytic critics have examined Hamlet's unconscious desires, and feminist critics have re-evaluated and rehabilitated the often maligned characters of Ophelia and Gertrude.

In the play *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare explores the psychological afflictions of man whose mother marries his father murderer who also happens to be his uncle. The ghost of the Hamlet's father, who was the King of Hamlet, appears before Hamlet, tells him who the murderer is, and makes him swear revenge against his murderer.

From the early 17th century, the play was famous for its ghost and vivid dramatization of melancholy and insanity, leading to a procession of mad courtiers and ladies in Jacobean and Carolina drama. Though it remained popular with mass audiences, late 17th century Restoration critics saw *Hamlet* as primitive and disapproved of its lack of unity and decorum. This view changed drastically in the 18th century, when critics regarded *Hamlet* as a hero – a pure, brilliant young man thrust into unfortunate circumstances. By the mid-18th century, however, the advent of Gothic literature brought psychological and mystical readings, returning madness and the Ghost to the forefront. Not until the late 18th century did critics and performers begin to view *Hamlet* as confusing and inconsistent. Before then, he was either mad, or not; either a hero, or not; with no in-betweens. These developments represented a fundamental change in literary criticism, which came to focus more on character and less on plot. By the 19th century, Romantic critics valued *Hamlet* for its internal, individual conflict reflecting the strong contemporary emphasis on internal struggles

and inner character in general. Then too, critics started to focus on Hamlet's delay as a character trait, rather than a plot device. His focus on character and internal struggle continued into the 20th century, when criticism ranned in several directions.

During the nineteenth century, and through much of the early twentieth, Hamlet was regarded as Shakespeare's central and the most significant play, because it dramatized a central preoccupation of the age of Romanticism: the conflict of consciousness and action, the sense of consciousness as a withdrawal from action which could make for futility, and yet was all that could prevent action from becoming totally mindless. No other play has explored the paradoxes of action and thinking about action so deeply, but because it did explore them, literature ever since has been immeasurably deepened and made bolder. Perhaps, if we had not had Hamlet, we might not have had the Romantic Movement at all, or the works of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard that follow it, and recast the Hamlet situation in ways that come progressively nearer to us. Nearer to us in cultural conditions, that is, not in imaginative impact: there, Shakespeare will always be first.

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