

An Examination of William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Critical analysis

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the theme of death in William Shakespeare's renowned play, Hamlet. It will delve into selected acts, scenes, and soliloquies to analyze the evolution of Hamlet's relation with death throughout text and reasons behind these changes. This paper seeks to establish protagonist as a redundant hero, drawing parallels between his character and the ineffectual aristocrats found in 19th century European, American, and Russian novels. The term "superfluous hero" refers to a vague, futile, and intellectually incompetent aristocrat who struggles to fit within societal norms of their time. Although the term was not coined during Hamlet's era, Hamlet has many similarities to unnecessary heroes throughout international literature. This paper will examine whether Hamlet can be classified as a superfluous hero by comparing his character to those found in other literary works, while also analyzing the social and literary contexts within the class milieu.

KEYWORDS: Relation, incompetent, unnecessary

Introduction

William Shakespeare was a highly accomplished creator of archetypal literary characters. His profound understanding of human psychology allowed him to craft memorable and universally relatable individuals in his plays, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries. Shakespeare made a significant and amazing contribution to the study of human character. His plays have continued to offer insightful perspectives into the complexity of human psyche even from his time to the current post-modern period. Among Shakespeare's tragedies, "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" has sparked extensive debate and critical analysis.

During the Elizabethan era, William Shakespeare introduced a timeless and universal character in the form of Hamlet, who has achieved immortality in world literature. Hamlet's relatability extends to various eras, countries, and even the contemporary world. Consequently, Hamlet remains one of the most extensively debated characters created by Shakespeare. He possesses a complex psychological makeup, becoming an enigmatic and dominant figure within the play, overshadowing other characters. In the nineteenth century, writers including Ivan Turgenev, Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolay Gogol, Alexander Herzen, Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Goncharov and Nikolay Gogol, first introduced the idea of the superfluous hero. The famed works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, where a Russian intellectual elite struggled with a cultural fight for self-understanding and looked for a solid basis, represent the height of this ideology.

The play Hamlet by William Shakespeare has had a profound and lasting impact on audiences over the centuries. A central theme explored in text is Hamlet's complex

relation with death, as this is consistently highlighted in whole narrative. The story revolves around titular character, who experiences the loss of his father and his kingdom. Complicating matters, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, swiftly remarries his uncle, who has now become the king of Denmark. This immoral situation leaves Hamlet feeling disillusioned and pushes him towards contemplating death as an escape from his deep depression. The revelation of his father's ghost further intensifies his turmoil, as Hamlet learns of his uncle Claudius' involvement in the murder of the former king. Consequently, Hamlet is compelled to seek revenge. Throughout the play, Hamlet faces deceit from various sources, but his quest for vengeance remains unfulfilled until the tragic conclusion where he and several other characters meet their demise. The play concludes with Fortinbras giving Hamlet a military funeral and salute as a final tribute.

Objective

In the contemporary post-modern era, it is necessary to reexamine Shakespearean classics through the lens of modern intellectual tools. This research paper aims to shed fresh insights on these works by employing literary techniques and concepts that have emerged in the 20th century.

Reasons to seek death

The evidence provided thus far leads to the conclusion that the prince, Hamlet, is experiencing depression. It is now important to explore the reasons behind Hamlet's inclination to see death as a form of escape. To find answers to these questions, an analysis of some selected passages is done, where Hamlet's psychic struggles are clear, will be undertaken. In the opening of Act 1, Scene 2, Hamlet delivers a soliloquy that serves as an example of his internal contemplation.

O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst [self-] slaughter! O God, God,
How [weary], stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed, thingsrank and gross in nature (1.2.
129-136)

In Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet experiences a profound sense of disappointment upon encountering the actors who are staying at the castle. Their presence serves as a subconscious reminder to Hamlet of his own perceived limitations and ineffectiveness. Following their conversation, Hamlet engages in another soliloquy, where he tries to convince himself that if the actors had a motive as powerful as his own (his father's

murder and his quest for revenge), they would have performed with greater passion and intensity (2.2.540-546). The underlying message is that the actors would have expressed their emotions freely. In contrast, Hamlet feels a deep sense of frustration with himself, as he has been unable to take the desired revenge. As one delves further into the text, it becomes apparent that the protagonist's anger is directed inward, as he blames himself for his failure to seek vengeance.

Am I a coward?

Who calls me a villain, break my pate across,

Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i´th´throat

As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?

Hah, `swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be

But I am pigeon-liver´d, and lack gall

To make oppression bitter, or ere this

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,

That I, the son of a dear [father] murdered (2.2.551-552,
554-558, 562-563)

The essay delves into the interplay between Hamlet's despondency, matter of autonomy, and their resulting relationship to death. While the primary focus is on Hamlet and death, it is great to recognize the connection between despondency and one's perception of death as a refuge. It would be implausible to make such a claim without considering the presence of depression in the individual. As a result, a slight deviation from the main argument is necessary in initial of current section. His father undeniably serves as the catalyst for his son's depression, prompting an examination of how his death, coupled with the pervasive atmosphere of despair in Denmark, leads Hamlet to view death as a potential escape.

Inner turmoil of the central character

Let's explore a specific part of Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 4, Scene 4, which connects to the theme of death

Makes mouths at the invisible event,

Exposing what is mortal and unsure

To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,

Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great

Is not to stir without great argument,

But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd (4.4.46,50-57).

Terry Eagleton claims that Hamlet is a character stuck between the established social order, in which he holds a marginal place, and an upcoming period of bourgeois individualism that will ultimately supersede it. Hamlet's psyche undergoes substantial inner alterations as a result of this confrontation with the socioeconomic circumstances of a faltering feudalism. Similar to the superfluous heroes depicted in Mikhail Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time" and Turgenev's stories, Hamlet exhibits indecisiveness and a lack of purpose in his life. However, it is important to note that these superfluous heroes sometimes find meaning through their actions, which can involve adventure or violence. Examples include the heroic deeds of soldiers or duelists, the tragic death of Rudin on the Paris barricades in Alexander Turgenev's work, or the self-sacrifice of Sidney Carton through execution in Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities." Hamlet, too, presents same adventurous and gallivanting actions characteristic of these superfluous heroes in world literature.

We can further explore Hamlet's connection to death by analyzing his soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 1 and linking it to the previous argument.

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, to sleep –
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep –(3.1.55-63).

Like other pointless protagonists in literature from throughout the world, Hamlet defies convention and the established social order. But like these heroes, he also meets a horrible end. Despite his rebellion, Hamlet struggles to find specific point and love in own life due to his indecisiveness and tendency to procrastinate. The ghost of his deceased father, acting as a state apparatus, establishes Hamlet as the rightful heir to the throne of Denmark and charges him with the task of avenging his murder. Various ideological state apparatuses also reinforce Hamlet's belief in his exceptional status and assign him the role of reclaiming the kingship from his uncle, King Claudius. Consequently, Hamlet becomes shaped and limited by the ideology, social structures, values, and assumptions that surround him. With his feudal background, royal upbringing, and higher education, Hamlet sees himself as an extraordinary individual and

the embodiment of all values within Denmark. However, when confronted by the spirit of his father, who reveals Claudius's guilt, Hamlet doubts his own capabilities and feels inadequate for the revenge that is demanded of him.

Hamlet expresses his frustration and burden by exclaiming, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite. That ever I was born to set it right!" (Shakespeare, William, 2005, Act 1, Scene V, 188-189). He feels the weight of his responsibilities as a prince of Denmark and the obligation to rectify the state of affairs. Initially, he is driven to seek revenge swiftly, with the speed of thought or love. However, adhering to his father's command and restoring justice would require him to act in a manner that contradicts his own principles, rendering him hypocritical like those around him. Consequently, Hamlet struggles to find a suitable course of action and existence. His initial enthusiasm quickly fades, and he falls into a pattern of indecisiveness and procrastination. This makes it extremely challenging for him to revenge the killing of his father. This idea is echoed when Hamlet advises his mother, urging her to feign virtue if she does not possess it naturally. He believes that habitual actions can have a transformative effect and that outward appearances can influence one's inner nature. Furthermore, Hamlet is deeply disillusioned when his mother Queen Gertrude, hastily marries his uncle King Claudius just two months after death of his father. This event further sours his perception of women, leading him to utter the famous words, "Frailty thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare, William, 2005, Act 1, Scene II, 148).

Critical comments:

According to Professor Bradley, Hamlet's primary issue stems from his mother's immoral behavior, which torments him more. He argues that root cause of her concern is only his son's depression. Professor Carroll shares a similar belief, emphasizing the negative impact of Gertrude's hasty and degrading remarriage on the emotional bond between mother and child. While their insights shed light on Hamlet's predicament, there is another perspective to consider, which may provide an explanation for his persistent state of depression. In Act 1, Scene 2, Hamlet expresses his discontent with his mother, as a metaphor of degeneracy as "things rank and gross in nature." The prince goes on to say...

So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a saty, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she should hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet, within a month –
Let me not think on't! (1.2.139-146).

William Shakespeare created a character in the form of Hamlet that has achieved enduring fame and has become a universally recognized figure in world literature. As a result, Hamlet has become a subject of extensive discussion among scholars and critics. The Romantics, for example, challenged Aristotle's emphasis on the superiority of action over character by regarding Hamlet as an exception to this notion. According to Frederick Hegel, Hamlet represented the pursuit of self-awareness and self-determination. A.C. Bradley further expanded on Hegel's ideas and formulated his own important point of Shakespearean tragedy, which suggests that work is fundamentally a reflection of protagonist.

Jacques Lacan, in his essay "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet," reevaluated Hamlet's character and its significance in present consciousness. Departing from the notion of Hamlet's tragedy being solely rooted in repressed desire, Lacan viewed it as a tragedy of mourning for what has been relinquished. Similarly, Jacques Derrida, employing his deconstructive hermeneutics, explored the themes of desire and justice in Shakespeare's plays, particularly "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet." He associated the Ghost of Hamlet with the Marxist concept of the "spectre" haunting Europe. According to Derrida, Hamlet represented an emancipatory and messianic affirmation, pointing towards a notion of justice away from logic. Building upon these interpretations, Sedinger and Marthinus Christoffel Van Niekerk conducted further analyses of Hamlet from a Derridean deconstructive perspective, while Noorbakhsh Hooti explored Hamlet in a deconstructive study.

Vanessa Pupavac examined Hamlet's crisis of meaning and mental well-being in the context of the war on terror. N. Maleki focused on polar concepts in Hamlet to gain a deeper understanding of the play's world and its opposing forces. Charlotte Keys explored Hamlet as an existentialist hero in her doctoral thesis titled "Shakespeare's Existentialism." Various dialectical literary critics, such as Karl Marx, Raymond Williams, Friedrich Engels, Anatoly Lunacharsky, A. A. Smirnov, Mikhail Lifshitz, Christopher Caudwell, L.C Knight, Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukacs, have provided new perspectives on Hamlet through dialectical analysis. Georg Lukacs, for example, highlighted Shakespeare's ability to depict historical and social circumstances through his characters' qualities and behaviors, showcasing the dramatic historicism of his works.

Conclusion

This paper aims to establish Hamlet as a superfluous hero, drawing parallels between him and other notable heroes in whole writings. The central argument moves around Hamlet's struggle to find main point, importance, and fulfillment in his life and relationships, particularly his failed connection with Ophelia. Thus, the paper emphasizes the striking resemblance between Hamlet and superfluous heroes found in other literary works. It explores Hamlet's evolving relationship with death, progressing from a desire to escape into oblivion to a realization of the possibility of an honorable conclusion to his life.

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