

# Timelessness in the Shakespearean Tragedy "Hamlet"

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**The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, often shortened to Hamlet, is the story of a young man avenging his father's death. Shakespeare made this play with such exceptional way that it is so often described as one of the most famous play ever written. Hamlet has inspired more critical speculations and interpretations from critics and scholars than any other play by any dramatist in English literature. The play has become a cultural icon.**

Young Hamlet told by his late father's ghost that he has been murdered by his brother and so, according to convention, Hamlet has the obligation to seek and achieve revenge. The play holds the skeleton of the Elizabethan age fashionable genre of revenge story. Hamlet contributed immensely to the English revenge tradition in drama but it was unique in its own way. It had a fusion of death, suicide and murder and many other timeless things. The thematic representations of love, power, life and death continue to hold significance till now. Films and novels around the world are often based entirely around the quest for revenge. In Hamlet, the hero is the representation of human society and mankind, blinded by a lust for revenge which directs him down the path of evil. Inevitably, this path leads to numerous destructions.

Hamlet opens with the officers guarding the royal palace. They are terrified by the appearance of the ghost who wouldn't speak to them. But he speaks to Hamlet:

"List, list, o list!

If thou didst ever thy dear father love... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder... Murder most foul, as in the best it is, But this most foul, strange and unnatural....

O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible! If thou hast nature in thee bear it not, let not the royal bed of Denmark bell. Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me."

[Act 1, sc. v, 11.24, 26, 27-8, 80-83 and 91]

Themes of Hamlet are universal which is why even almost four hundred years later, readers are still able to connect with the work. Hamlet involves many issues which are still relevant in today's world and the play's interpretations of the human mind is timeless. Hamlet focuses on the complications arising from love, death and betrayal without offering the audience a decisive and positive resolution to these complications. For Hamlet there can be no definitive answers to life's most challenging and daunting questions. There is an emphasis on ambiguity about life in the play.

Hamlet is a political drama. Hamlet's uncle murdered his father, the king. He threw Hamlet out of his right of succession and became the king. Hamlet's mother married the new king. Hamlet is in a state of agitation as he feels his mother has let him down by her hasty marriage to his murderer uncle. The new king determined to safeguard his position, plots in several ways to kill Hamlet as he might present a threat.

Hamlet's timelessness can be seen through the themes of political, social and ethical corruption. We still face these moral dilemmas and seemingly forever. The novelty of Shakespeare's work lies within the complexity and struggles of the character Hamlet which continue to reach the global audience. Hamlet's aesthetic, psychological, political, philosophical and literary depth and richness has made the play a masterpiece. Hamlet is perceived as a philosophical character. Hamlet expresses a relativist idea when he says to Rosencrantz: "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." [2.2.268-270]

Religion has an impact on the action of the characters of the play. Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy explains his religious thinking on the subject of life and suicide. Hamlet believes that "there is a destiny that shapes our ends". The Christian element plays a critical role in the play. Hamlet comes across the questions of sin, damnation and salvation.

"O, that this too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter... [I.ii.129-32]

In the famous soliloquy "to be, or not to be", Hamlet reflects upon the uncertainty of what follows death: "To die, to sleep;

To sleep: perchance to dreamy, there is the rub. For in that sleep of death what dreams May come When we have shuffled of this mortal coil, Must give us pause....

The undiscovered country from whose bourn No traveler returns, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills that we have than fly to others we know not of?"

Even though Hamlet is a revenge play, the focus of the play is on higher principles of life and living. Thompson and Taylor remark: "..... While illuminating many aspects of the play, set it in a relatively remote historical and literary context by putting stress on such things as the ethics of revenge and the Elizabethan belief in ghosts. Thus Hamlet may have begun to seem in the mid-twentieth century primitive and quaint, an appropriate subject for academic and antiquarian investigation but not very relevant to modern world....." [p.5]

Francis Bacon maintains: " This is certain, that a man that studies the revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges for the most part are fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate."

Hamlet turns out to be a great tragedy rather a mere revenge play. Coleridge remarked: "Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical. He does not want courage, skill, will or opportunity, but every incident sets him thinking, and it is curious and at the same time strictly natural that Hamlet, who all the play seems reason itself, should be impelled at last by mere accident to effect his object. I have a smack of Hamlet, if I may say so....." [From Table Talk, 1827]

Carolyn Heilbrun published an essay on Hamlet in 1957 entitled "Hamlet's Mother". Here she defended Gertrude, arguing that the text never hints that Gertrude knew of Claudius poisoning and murdering king Hamlet. This view has been advocated by many feminists.

Heilbrun argued that many people over the centuries misinterpreted Gertrude. In this view, Gertrude would be considered totally innocent. There is no clear evidence that suggests that Gertrude was an adulteress. She was merely adapting to the circumstances of her husband's death for the good of the kingdom. When she reacts to Hamlet's aggression-

Such an act

That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the fair forehead of innocent love and sets the blister there, make marriage vows as false as dicers' oath - O such a deed....[iii.iv.40-45]

One can apply the literary critical approaches to the play to arrive at conclusions. The Marxists, the Structuralists, the Deconstruction devotees, admirers of Freud and Lacan and many more in between, have given innumerable ways of looking at Hamlet. Now-a-days, Hamlet has been appropriated by diverse and varied readers from diverse and varied cultures. Hamlet has been treated as a study in melancholia and madness, as a study in ambition and political manipulation, as a philosophical enquiry or even as a study in the art of characterization.

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