

Hamlet: Shakespeare's Masterpiece in Our Times

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Abstract

Shakespeare's works are timeless . Even after 400 years of his death, his works appeal to the learned and the unlearned . The bard of Avon has got an enduring appeal. After reading his tragedy Hamlet we can conclude that Shakespeare is still relevant. Hamlet is a psychological study of human nature. In the contemporary times, people are facing many psychological problems, loneliness, indecision; torments of family problems, procrastination, etc., same type of issues were faced by Hamlet. We can relate to his plays so conveniently. His popularity continues unabated and seems to continue in the future too.

Key words: Hamlet, Shakespeare, psychological, soliloquies, universal appeal

Timeless Shakespearean Stories

“Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety” – this is how Shakespeare describes Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The same rule applies to him. “Shakespearean stories are timeless; his writing is brilliant for the most part.”¹ He was a literary genius whose work is universal in its appeal. He wrote across many genres from comedies to tragedies. Even after 400 years of his death, his works appeal to the learned and the unlearned, to the urban sophisticated people as well as the poor class. He grasps with equal penetration the intimate lives of the kings and the fools and the beggars. His popularity continues unabated and seems to continue in the future too.

Focus of This Paper

This paper is an attempt to justify few points of the acclaimed survival of Shakespeare. Since the 19th century readers have wondered how Shakespeare with his grammar school education and mercantile roots, alone could have written so knowledgeably and eloquently on subjects ranging from politics and law to medicine and falconry. I have selected Hamlet to prove that Shakespeare is still relevant and we can easily relate to his works in 21st century. “Shaw suggested that if Shakespeare had been asked to choose one of his plays for a World’s Classics series he would have chosen Hamlet.”³

Hamlet - Psychological Study of Human Nature

Hamlet is a psychological study of human nature. In the contemporary times, people are facing many psychological problems, loneliness, indecision; torments of family problems, procrastination, etc., same type of issues were faced by Hamlet. These feelings have universal appeal and are still relevant. We as a reader can relate to these feelings conveniently. “Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British audiences did not study nor understand human psychology as it is understood today. Yet the psychologically complex character of Hamlet made for a successful play because of its connections with ideas and events that were relevant to the people of Shakespeare’s time.”² The play romanticizes the idea of confrontation as personal

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integrity. He distrusts violence and pursues moral autonomy. Only at the end he embraces the sword as resolution. In a complex state of mind, Hamlet finds serenity in a conventional attitude about the duel, that its outcome manifests God's justice

Soliloquies

Shakespearean characters speak in soliloquies during the course of the play. Soliloquies are essential to the presentation of a story through the medium of a play because they provide the opportunity to tell the audience specific pieces of information which cannot be disclosed through normal conversation. Hamlet's soliloquies are emotional outburst of the mental torments that he was undergoing. There are seven soliloquies in Hamlet. . Each soliloquy advances the plot, reveals Hamlet's inner thoughts to the audience and helps to create an atmosphere in the play.

The soliloquies reveal Hamlet's reflective and thoughtful nature; he tells of his father's death and then his mother's quick remarriage. During the course of this speech Hamlet makes several allusions to historical figures and this demonstrates to the audience that he is an intelligent young man. One of these allusions is when he compares the love his late father had for his mother to Hyperion to Satyr; this is a reference to the sun god and his affections. This clearly shows the audience that his heart is breaking not only for the loss of affections towards his mother but the fact that she does not seem to care about this loss.

Through the soliloquy we have the revelation that his father was murdered by his own brother, this news deeply upsets Hamlet. When he says, "Now to my word ... I have sworn it" (I, v, 116-119), he is letting the audience know that he will avenge his father's death therefore creating anticipation as the audience wonders how he will achieve retribution.

Story Progresses through Soliloquy

The next time the audience sees Hamlet alone; more information has been gathered about his character. It is now known that Hamlet is mad, although he has revealed to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that he is only pretending. He further explains the plan to foil his uncle in this soliloquy, saying he will watch closely the way his uncle reacts to a play that is very similar in plot line to the actions Claudius has taken to become King. Hamlet reveals that he feels he has

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taken a cowardly approach to making sure that the ghost was telling the truth and that his uncle really is the murderer but he also discloses that he is worried the ghost may have been the devil. This soliloquy also creates atmosphere because of the way Hamlet talks about himself; It gives Hamlet a reason to be acting so mad because there is a lot to deal with in his life, his character becomes relatable to the audience because he is overwhelmed therefore allowing there to be some justification of his actions.

To Be Or Not To Be

Hamlet is seen again in act 3, speaking directly to the audience during his famous *to be or not to be* speech. This soliloquy reveals a new side of Hamlet. This soliloquy shows Hamlet's softer emotional side when he speaks of suffering and lists multiple opposing things, showing once again the inner turmoil that Hamlet is facing. The big question that Hamlet is trying to answer for himself during the course of this soliloquy is whether or not it is noble to take up arms and die defending what you believe is right. By discussing mortality Hamlet again allows the audience to relate to him because he reveals he is afraid of dying. The soliloquy ends on a strong note giving the audience pause to consider his actions he says, "be all my sins remembered" (III, i, 98). This quote tells the audience that Hamlet has decided that seeking revenge is in fact a noble deed and justifiable. This creates atmosphere for the audience and prepares them for the actions that Hamlet will take in the near future.

Sixth Soliloquy

In his sixth soliloquy Hamlet decides that he must not kill Claudius at prayer, for the king might then go to heaven. Claudius took his brother in the midst of life with his final "audit" (3.3.82) in question. Hamlet chooses inaction over action; killing Polonius turns the plot toward its tragic end.

The Final Soliloquy

The final soliloquy that Hamlet presents to the audience is one of the last times Hamlet appears on stage. It is at the end of scene 4 act 4 and takes place after Hamlet has encountered Fortinbras' army and talked with Fortinbras himself. Hamlet reveals to the audience that he feels that if a man has no purpose he is no better than a beast so he must use his encounter with

Fortinbras to spur his revenge. He believes that God has created humans in his image to achieve great things and he also tells the audience that he doesn't just want to sit there anymore while his father is not avenged and his mother is stained by the actions she has taken to be with his uncle. He is inspired by Fortinbras and his army of twenty thousand men who walk towards certain death and yet they do it with noble hearts and courage because their honor is at stake. At the end of his soliloquy Hamlet vows, "O, from this time forth/ My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!" (IV, iv, 68-69) These lines show that Hamlet has gained new resolve and will try to kill his uncle no matter what to avenge his father's death and Hamlet is convinced that all of his actions are justifiable. This closing line gives the audience a chance to connect with Hamlet because it is easy for one to understand feelings of being wronged and wanting to get revenge.

Before Hamlet's death, he kills his uncle and avenges his father and this allows the audience to breathe a sigh of relief towards Hamlet because he has achieved the purpose which he often alludes to during his soliloquies. Each of the seven soliloquies allows the audience a deeper perspective into who Hamlet is as a character as he reveals his thoughts, advances the plot and adds atmosphere. When Hamlet speaks in these soliloquies he is always his true self; never pretending to be mad or taking on a superficial way of talking as he did at times in dialogue with others. These soliloquies, therefore, adds much to the overall content of the play Hamlet and allows Shakespeare's audience a much better understanding of the plot.

Characters

Hamlet

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out.

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.

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,

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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.

Hamlet is extremely melancholy and 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.

Claudius

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.

Many politicians reflect the same traits what Claudius has. They are preoccupied and self-centered and just trying to achieve some petty goals.

Gertrude

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. After reading the play Gertrude emerges clearly in Hamlet as a woman who uses men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which 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. In contemporary society we do come across such characters who adopt unethical means to achieve their objectives in life.

Language

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The bard of Avon has got an enduring appeal. His language is rich, the characters are complex and many of his basic themes – love, treachery, honor, bravery and political intrigue – still resonate today. Humans still experience love, loss, betrayal, war, humor and tragedy, which give Shakespeare a foothold in modern times.

When we recollect Hamlet, words stand out considerably as much as vivid visual images. One of the intriguing things about this tragedy is the fact that we remember words from Hamlet more than any other play by Shakespeare or anyone else. Everyone can recollect quote, or recognize quotations from this play.

To be, or not to be, that is the question....
There is divinity that shapes our end....
What a piece of work is man....
The time is out of joint....
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns ...

The writings of this bard from Stratford are legendary. Thoughts and images came so easily from his pen. English had never sounded so good and has rarely sounded that way since. In his 55th sonnet, Shakespeare suggested that his writings could last when other things wouldn't. His "powerful rhyme" would be eternal. But he also realizes, in this poem, that everything changes. Things like "marble," "the gilded monuments of princes" and "statues" will all go away, ruined by history's indifferent hand. Everything decays, and only the "living record" of writing would have the chance to cheat time.

Universal Appeal

Shakespeare's longevity lies in his universal appeal. He was a man of his times; writing for his contemporaries. The play clearly tells that when we choose arms against troubles results are always tragic in nature.

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