



Hamlet as an Artistic Failure

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Abstract

It is an established fact that *Hamlet* is one of the most controversial tragedies written by Shakespeare that has been interpreted by different critics and scholars as per their tastes and temperament. T.S. Eliot has called it as an artistic failure because of the fact that there is delay on the part of Hamlet in executing the revenge. There are many critics who interpret Hamlet in terms of revenge motif where the prince makes an unnecessary delay.

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Paper

Hamlet is Shakespeare's most powerful and controversial dramatic expression of the theme of revenge that in spite of more than 5000 years of intolerable debate and vetting by critics and scholars, no one has been able to arrive at a single and comprehensive view of the theme of the play. While, some critics read *Hamlet* in terms of delay on the part of the prince in executing the injunction of the ghost, there are scholars who understand this play in terms of revenge motif.

However, the fact remains that in spite of these conflicting views, there is a general consensus among all regarding the thematic coherence and aesthetic compactness, except T.S. Eliot who has called the

play as the Mona Lisa of English literature where the dramatic emotions are not in tune with the situational exigency. In a way, the total reaction and response expressed by Hamlet in the form of a number of soliloquies in excess of facts given in the text of the play due to which the play *Hamlet* has been called by T.S. Eliot as an artistic failure. But, the fact remains that as Catherine Belsey says, "Hamlet remains one of the most powerful tragedies of Elizabethan Age"¹ So, like Julius Caesar, Hamlet comes to a world which is 'gross and rank,' completely contaminated and defiled where evil is rampant and the time is disjoint as says Hamlet himself:

"The time is out of joint,
o cursed spite



That I was ever born to set it right”

The expressed chaotic state of Denmark, along with the intensity of defilement, seems to be disproportionate to the quantum of details obtaining in the play. Shakespeare in his book, *Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark*, says “this is a corrupt world where Hamlet finds himself to be utterly disappointed.”² According to T.S. Eliot, Claudius is not a villain of that level as he is being painted and portrayed by Hamlet himself. Also, the character of Gertrude is not as powerfully rounded as to cause the feelings of disgust and horror to the extent that he can condemn the womanhood as a whole

“Frailty thy name is woman”

Even the historical events exploited and employed by Shakespeare including Goethe’s *Faust* were not properly balanced and assimilated within the text of the play.

Hamlet is a sensitive young man given more to thinking and reflection than actions due to which the whole play, considering the soliloquies as a whole, appears to be a contemptuous discourse in to the philosophical and

intellectual dimensions of life. That is why, the tragedy of Hamlet is not because of the lack of valour or means to avenge the murder of his father, rather it is because of the excessive thinking and contemplation on the part of the hero that the energy of resolution is sickled over with pale cast of thoughts.

So, the delay or procrastination in carrying out the injunction of the ghost lies at the centre of tragedy. Albeit, in the beginning of the play, the prince hamlet was unprepared to receive the quantum’s of shocks, he is delivered one by one, first, in the form of the death of his father, second in the form of the hurried re-marriage of his mother, thirdly, in the form of loss of his empire and kingship at the hands of his father. As if these were not enough, he is informed by the ghost of his father who reveals the reality about the death.

Moreover, Hamlet is assigned the duty to take revenge against the murderer who is now the king, and also the most powerful person of Denmark. So, in this way, Hamlet is not only confronted with all pervasive and powerful evils, but has also been directed to act so as to root out



this evil. Hamlet organizes a play within play called *The Murder of Gonzaga* to authenticate the veracity of the ghost's revelation which not only confirms the murderer, but also makes the enemy aware and alert of his next move.

So, the prince puts on an anti-disposition, and even goes to speak daggers to his mother in the 'closet scene', where the ghost re-appears to what the blunted purpose of Hamlet. Here, the prince succeeds in winning over his mother but, by impulsively and rashly killing Polonius, exposes himself to danger from his uncle, king Claudius.

After the death of his father, Ophelia also becomes mad, and the king dispatches hamlet to England in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a sealed letter to the king of Denmark for the execution of Hamlet. However, the ship is attacked by the pirates and in the mean time, Hamlet escapes after changing the contents of the sealed letter, and comes back to Elsinore. Laertes also comes back and prays for justice before the king which is allowed in form of a dual between hamlet and Laertes. Ophelia drowns herself in a

pool of water, and it is for the first time that Hamlet makes a public confession of his love for her. The earlier melancholia and self-berating of Hamlet gives way to the firm belief in divine power and justice, as he asserts:

"There is a divinity that shapes our ends

Rough-hew them, how we will be"

According to Irving Ribner, "there is a pattern of growth in Hamlet in which the feeling of anger and frustration after passing through self-accusation, change in to a firm faith in the working of god."

So, now when Hamlet has surrounded himself completely in the hands of god for the final justice, the opportunity for revenge comes to him in the form of a dual match with Laertes. The king has planned the match in such a manner the tip of the rapier to be used by Laertes will be poisoned so that its mere touch with the body will cause hamlet's death. To be doubtly sure of death, the drink to be served during the round of bout, has also been mixed with poison.

In this way, with the attainment of maturity, the revenge feelings are fulfilled with the death of Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet himself.



Even this avoidable destruction of the innocent could have been averted. Here, Shakespeare uses some artistic skills in *Hamlet*, says T.S. Eliot, but we must not, as we cannot overlook and even ignore the critical appraisal heaped on Shakespeare and his dramatists by a number of scholars and critics who have hailed *Hamlet* as a superb evidence of Shakespearean dramaturgy.

However, what Eliot says cannot be completely swept under the carpet, but at the same time, we cannot read an Elizabethan drama with modern spectacle. That would

be like condemning Stevenson for not discovering a modern satellite, so *Hamlet* was and is, and will remain the most powerful dramatic expression of the theme of revenge cast within an equally powerful artistic frame-work.

References

1. Catherine Belsey. *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985) p.37
2. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*. (London: Penguin, 2005) p.87