Hamlet among Us: A Portrait of the Postmodern Alienated Man

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Abstract: Some of the most successful works of literature stand the test of time because the text tells more than what was assigned to it during the time in which it was written to produce never-ending meanings at different epochs. Probably, more has been written on Hamlet than any other literary work in history. Hamlet the character, as opposed to Hamlet the plot, has been the main theme of Hamlet criticism for almost two centuries. The play acquired its key position as inaugural work of modernity, a status it has never reached before. It is worth noting that just like the stranger, (the ghost), which dictates on Hamlet some, “commandments”, Hamlet comes to feel, himself, a stranger too. His alienation is portrayed as “a sea of troubles”. Thus, begins his contemplation of suicide when he realizes the magnitude of his own troubles. Hamlet’s feelings that he is, “out of joint”; that he is a stranger to himself and to the world around him, threw him in a series of metaphysical questions translating his deep affliction and estrangement. Ultimately, Hamlet turns into the prototype of the contemporary man struggling in a “rotten” world. He struggles to overcome his “nausea” by trying futilely to make ends meet.

Keywords: Alienation, estrangement, unconscious, neurosis, foreigner, exile, existentialism, psychoanalysis, anxiety.

I. Introduction

For centuries, Hamlet has remained a mystery, never fully explained and forever inducing innumerable questions to minds; something that has pushed critics to tackle the play from different perspectives. According to some views, Hamlet’s puzzle lies in his personality. Literary critics stressed the “indecipherability” of the play. In this regard, the play remains, forever, open for a multitude of views and approaches; something that explains its everlasting fame. What I wish to develop, at greater length, in this part is Hamlet’s relevance to the Twentieth century. It is fit, then, to recognize within Shakespeare’s hero, Hamlet, a personality profile that matches the contemporary model man by examining the way in which the reading and rereading of Hamlet contributes to the establishment of the psychoanalytic and existential enterprise waved by some eminent psychoanalyst and existentialist pioneers like: Freud, Lacan, Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche. The play often reverberates profoundly for modern man and this is, in part, due to 20th century representations of Hamlet as a contemporary man, with all the cultural and psychological associations suggested by such a designation. By using Hamlet the hero as a motif for the modern man, Shakespeare was able, behind the portrait of his protagonist character to shape the modern philosophy of life and the culture that, previously, mirrored social conflicts and dilemmas. This article aims at providing a psychoanalytic reading of Hamlet by extrapolating the existentialist dimension of the play. Hamlet’s alienation and inner conflicts have been described by modern psychologists as “neurosis”. Thus, psychoanalysis does not discover the “unconscious” in Shakespeare. It is rather Shakespeare who precedes psychoanalysis epistemologically and historically. Hamlet’s metaphysical questions are nothing but an articulation of the contemporary phase of the dilemma of the postmodern Man who is essentially turbulent, desperate, and disillusioned.

Shakespeare’s most famous play, Hamlet, has haunted audiences and readers for centuries. The play has, through the years, produced different meanings at different times and in different places. Some of the meanings have changed quite radically by historical events. In the nineteenth century, Hamlet has become the very model of introspection. “The character of Hamlet, as I take it, represents the profound philosopher,”¹ wrote Shelly. For the French, Hamlet was the emblem of the existential man. Victor Hugo exclaimed that: “Hamlet expresses a

permanent condition of man. He represents the discomfort of the soul in a life unsuited to it". In the Twentieth century, Hamlet is thought to make the modern culture. Marjorie Garber states that:

Out of all Shakespeare’s works, Hamlet strikes the deepest chord within me. I’m not usually attracted to tragedies. I tend to steer clear of anything that reminds me of my own fragile existence. But Hamlet speaks to me in a way that (Shakespeare’s other) tragedies don’t […] Not only do I sympathize with his despair, I find in him a reflection of my own most painful moments.

As a matter of fact, after half a millennium, the play still fascinates us because it does not only portray what it means to be human, but also because of its mystery and perplexity that leaves one bewildered by the course of events. Shakespeare’s tragedy has exceptionally captivated the interest of the world ever since its first staging. The play has been the subject of interpretation and analysis by some of the history’s greatest thinkers. Some of the prominent elucidation of this play was made by Hugo, Nietzsche, Freud, Eliot, Ecco, etc., just to name a few. Although they have differed in methods and approaches, they have maintained that Hamlet is a “mystery”, a “riddle”, a “puzzle”, an “enigma!” Bloom goes so far as to claim that Hamlet is so modern that he is ‘post-Shakespearean’ and that Western consciousness is still evolving towards him because none else has yet managed to be post-Shakespearean. As a matter of fact, Hamlet has turned into an emerging modern individual, a psychological forerunner. Claudio’s comment on Hamlet’s transformation has proved correct “nor th’exterior like the inward man/resembles that it was” (II.6.6-7). The play has enshrined a very modern and serious sense of early adult angst; a case of pre-modern analysis paralysis. The interest in Hamlet as a “psychological portrait akin to the modern man is consolidated in late 19th and early 20th century work on the play by GWF Hegel, Sigmund Freud, and A.C. Bradley using terms like, “consciousness”, “unconscious”, “psychoanalysis”, and “pathology”.

By using Hamlet the hero as a motif for the modern man, Shakespeare was able, behind the portrait of his protagonist character to shape the modern philosophy of life and the culture that, previously, mirrored social conflicts and dilemmas. As a mirror of nature, the play is also a mirror of ourselves. All that is in Hamlet is also within us for he mirrors the situation of mankind in general. It is precisely this very interaction between our own situation and that of Hamlet which grants the play the mark of modern value. Indeed, by exploring the close interrelationship between Shakespeare and 20th century contemporary culture, we can fairly see that Shakespeare’s plays have always meant something to the time during which they are read, produced or interpreted. Garber’s Shakespeare after All contributes to a fresh understanding of Shakespeare as a modern man of the modern world challenging many long-established views and laying foundation for a reassessment of Shakespeare’s role as a playwright in today’s world. It is significant to notice that at various points at which the eye stops in the play, the character of Hamlet leaves one with the startling sense that Shakespeare has portrayed a type of humanity which belongs, first and foremost, not to his age but most probably to our own. Indeed, the notion that a person can be paralyzed by thought is a notion that has a long history in Western thought. This theme was developed by Shakespeare in 1601. The character of Hamlet stands for a person endowed with a philosophical inclination, a man of thought, as opposed to a man of deeds. Shakespeare’s Hamlet is portrayed as an introspective and troubled character. He has been called, “the first modern man”. The German philosopher Nietzsche wrote:

The Dionysian man resembles Hamlet; both have once looked truly into the essence of things; they have gained knowledge and knowledge inhibits action, for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel to be ridiculous or humiliating, that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; […] Not reflection, nor true knowledge weighs any motive for action.

The meditative element in Hamlet turned out, unfortunately, to outweigh the practical so that he lost the power of determination and action. In the court of Elsinore, Hamlet seems to be at odds with the real world outside. He finds it hard to match his ideals with those of ordinary people. This feeling of alienation is, further, enhanced by his mother’s swift marriage to the usurper of the throne, and by a strange paradox in his uncle Claudius. At the outset of the play, he is sunk in deep sadness. When his sorrow is noticed, he tells t

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3 Mary Janell Metzger, Shakespeare without Fear (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), P. 14.
4 Bloom, The Invention of the Human, P. 386.
8 Ibid, P. 62.
9 Ibid, P. IX.
within which passeth/ These but the trappings and the suits of woe” (I.2.85-86). Once emotionally tormented and restless inside his high expectations about people who are meant to be the closest to him, and who had turned into foes, he resorts to speculation of death. He asks the inevitable question that is linked to existentialist man. The underlying cause of Hamlet’s inner conflict throughout the play is his inability to look into the inner truth of things. Being as frail, as he thinks all women are, he shrinks into himself and lives an inner turmoil. For much of the play, he appears either too overwhelmed with grief or too consumed with hesitation to revenge the death of his father. Of Hamlet’s emotional breakdown, Charles Nodier wrote:

It is the heart of man in all its sadness […] One of those feelings proper to modern societies, which have lately been expressed forcefully by Goethe, Schiller, and especially Chateaubriand but which Shakespeare was discovering, so to speak, and in the portrayal of which, no one has surpassed him.11

Hamlet considers the first steps towards unthinkable ends: the murder of his uncle Claudius, the king. He recognizes that any reaction he takes must result in his own death and that he must determine to what degree that consideration should influence his action. Therefore, Hamlet scrutinizes his feelings about his own death, whether by suicide or otherwise. Thus, begins his contemplation of suicide when he realizes the magnitude of his own troubles. Just as his anger and outrage deepen, Hamlet’s sorrow at his father’s death focuses on his analogical analysis on the issue of suicide:

[…] To die: to sleep;
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: ‘tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished-to die: to sleep (V.1.5-9).

For Hamlet, death becomes a reliable end to mortal suffering; something that can bring comfort. Via this soliloquy, Hamlet becomes concerned with ultimate choices of life and death. The latter gives rise to inner conflicts that unfold throughout the play. According to their responses, the protagonist moves from one state of being to another. We become intensely aware of Hamlet’s inner life through his soliloquies, which externalize and dramatize his inner conflicts so powerfully. All of these inner tensions and pervasive feelings of powerlessness and rage are best expressed in the course of his meditations which his soliloquy best mirror. Discussing Hamlet, Jean Michael Rabaté remarks that Freud, “quotes Shakespeare so often that one can say that there is a Shakespearean myth at work in psychoanalysis”.12 He adds that, “Shakespeare has been both subject to psychoanalysis and a constitutive presence in psychoanalysis”.13 From the very beginning, Shakespeare helped shape the contours of psychoanalysis. Armstrong shows how A.C. Bradley’s account of the play treats the character of Hamlet as a repository of secrets to be unveiled and presents the psyche as an “interior space of exploration”.14 For Armstrong, Shakespeare provides much of the groundwork for psychoanalytic approaches. He surveys the influential Freudian interpretations of Hamlet by Ernest Jones, Otto Rank, and Harold Bloom. They all produce a thoroughly late-modern Shakespeare, but the psychological interiority these readings disclose, derive as cultural historians have recently highlighted from the “European epistemological crisis out of which Shakespearean dramaturgy emerges”.15 Thus, psychoanalysis does not discover the ‘unconscious’ in Shakespeare. It is rather Shakespeare who precedes psychoanalysis epistemologically and historically since the “modes of narrative, rhetoric, imagery, and characterization” in Shakespeare’s drama shape “psychoanalytic notions about the unconscious and the self”.16 In many aspects, the influence of ego psychology had much in common with that of Carl Jung who aims to trace in Shakespeare’s works the process of “individuation” or “self-realization”, the integration by unconsciousness of those instinctual, libidinal, and unconscious forces most opposed to it”.17 Jungian reading of Shakespeare can be clearly identified as a grandiose universalism according to which dramatic characters are seen not merely as reflections of the author’s psyche, but as manifestations of primate archetypes existing in a “collective unconscious” shared by the entire human race. For this very reason, Hamlet’s situation, in Schopenhauer’s eyes, is:

One of the best exemplars of how the body as a manifestation of will mirrors itself in words and reaction. In the course of his misfortune, Hamlet meditates not only on his own life but on the lot of mankind itself […] It is this aspect of Hamlet as a knower of the nature of the world

13 Ibid., P. 5.
15 Ibid., P. 39.
16 Ibid., PP. 41-2.
17 Novak, Hamlet, P.185.
rather than only as its victim, which seems to appeal to Durrell in his own investigation of self.\textsuperscript{18}

Hamlet’s soliloquies are also expressions of superego conflict: to die or to live; to honor or to revenge; duty to oneself or to one’s father. Hamlet’s contemplation of death and his obsessions with the spiritual questions acquire the play a sense of modern psychological play as conceived by Freud:

If Freudian theory is an epitome of modernism as some historians believe, \textit{Hamlet} is ‘a very modern play’. Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy differs from others not only in the more meditative cast of its hero’s mind, but in its psychology. Hamlet’s grief is to a certain extent pathological. It has passed beyond what Freud conceives as normal mourning to leave him stricken with melancholy, then as now regarded as an illness of the mind.\textsuperscript{19}

Sigmund Freud accepted the Romantic assumption as a starting point that the major interest in the character of Hamlet is the reason for his seeming delay. Finding this reason became the principle focus of Freudian criticism of Hamlet. It was as if Freud felt that a cause had to be isolated for this behavior. Freud referred to the matter as the “problem of Hamlet” as if it were the only major critical question that mattered. The problem, namely, is why Hamlet hesitates to kill the king. It was, precisely, because of the permanent attempts to answer the problem of Hamlet’s procrastination that the psychoanalytic school of Shakespearean criticism originated.\textsuperscript{20} Hamlet’s inner conflict has been described by modern psychologists as “neurosis”. The age of subjectivity has been succeeded by the depressive individual desperate to come to terms with life. Ernest Jones, the first English language practitioner of psychoanalysis, declared straightforwardly that: “Shakespeare was the first modern” because he understood so well the issues of psychology: the inner conflict modern psychologists know as “neurosis”. Jones adds that only through neurosis, can we better grasp man’s reactions and behavior. Here, as in so many other respects, Shakespeare was the first modern as:

Jones suggests that Shakespeare inaugurates the notion of tragedy as ‘inner conflict’ rather than external allegory: In this, he shows that the tragedy of man is within himself […]. This inner conflict modern psychologists know as ‘neurosis’; and it is only by study of neurosis that one can learn the fundamental motives and instincts that move men. Here as in so many other respects, Shakespeare was the first modern.\textsuperscript{21}

Hamlet’s exuberant speech, mainly in the soliloquy, is listed among Shakespeare’s great memorable speeches. In it, Hamlet fell victim to the hollowness of modern life inspired by nothing and producing, only, a dull existence. In his tragedy, Hamlet speaks his mind loud. He asks questions almost too large for him. And in his very unanswerable interrogations, loom signs of absence, emptiness, and loss. The world of Hamlet is impregnated with “deep anxiety and the philosophical basis of the play more closely resembles modern existentialism”.\textsuperscript{22} Hamlet carries with him a sense of alienation, anxiety, loneliness, and pessimism perceiving himself to be in a hostile world. The play probes his turbulent inner world as a modern man whose problem is whether to become materialistic or spiritualistic. His life is teeming with troubles and pains, which are all the more keenly felt by sensitive people. The question about life and death haunts Hamlet throughout his life. He is vexed by the thought of death. Hamlet cannot find any satisfactory answer to his questions, doubts and inner voices. He gets mentally shattered, morally degenerated, and physically exhausted. Existentialism represents the individual as an anxious person, confronted with the absurdity and meaningless world, trying to discover themselves so that they can live in this world as themselves.

As thus, existentialism is a philosophical movement that views human existence as having a set of underlying themes and characteristics, such as dread, freedom, awareness of death, and consciousness of existing. As a result, existentialists see the world as absurd. They realize that there is nothing certain, except for the nothingness of everything. Existentialists also find absurdity looking for the meaning of life. In \textit{Hamlet}, When Polonius asks Hamlet: “What do you read, my Lord?” (II.2.219), Hamlet’s response could not be more meaningful: “Words, words, words” (II.2.210). The disinterest and boredom with which Hamlet responds reflect his inner turmoil, a turmoil that he cannot appease with action, as he knows he should, but can only appease with words. On the surface, he appears to be responding to Polonius insolently, but the reality is that Hamlet is feeling the meaninglessness of life, as meaningless as the words are to him on the page. His reply implies the extent of his despair. Thus, Hamlet becomes disgusted with humanity and its purpose in the world. Quite

\textsuperscript{18} Cited in Ray Morrison, \textit{A Smile in His Mind’s Eye: A Study of the Early Works of Lawrence Durrell} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), P.267.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., P. 52.


\textsuperscript{21} Armstrong, \textit{Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis}, P. 39.

fittingly, the “words, words, words”, Shakespeare uses in Hamlet reflect his internal dilemma, contributing greatly to the complexity of Hamlet’s character.

Hamlet is an especially attractive figure to modern man. More specifically, modern man sees himself in Hamlet because Hamlet reiterates a social archetype of the lost contemporary man and the absurd life. Basically, Hamlet expresses all anxiety and alienation that is often assumed to be the inevitable consequence of all modern men. In his uncertainty, Hamlet can be seen as the prototypical modern man who often takes refuge from harsh material facts in the intricacies and interminacy of life. “Hamlet”, says Metzger, “encompasses all of Shakespeare’s ideas, thoughts, view toward every aspect of life, making the experience of Hamlet more important than any of his other works. And here, the words of Martin Esslin come to mind and the theatre of the absurd in all of its intellectual complexities and intricacies helps us to see our role in life. Esslin writes:

The human condition being what it is, with men small, helpless, its hopelessness, death, and absurdity [...]. The bitter truth that most human endeavor is irrational and senseless, that communication between human beings is well, nigh impossible and that the world will forever remain an impenetrable mystery.

References


23 Mary Janell Metzger, Shakespeare without Fear (Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann, 2004), P. 50.