Title: Hamlet and Self-analysis

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Rowland Molony considers the way Hamlet reflects on himself after coming into contact with people who live and work outside the Royal Court: the actors, young Fortinbras and his army, and the gravedigger

AS/ A-level literature is changing. The focus and emphasis on the way we teach and study it is shifting. Assessment objectives require teachers and students to look at texts in ways which may well differ from traditional approaches. Essays need to include not only a student's own interpretation but also alternative interpretations. Where once we might have written solely about a character's behaviour in the world of a novel or play, now we need to show how the author explores ideas through that character. Where once we traced theme, following it like a thread through a book, now we need to show it in the context of its time and its society.

In which Shakespeare play would you see a Norwegian--Danish war that results in lands being lost and won; the deaths of the two warring royal protagonists -- one killed in battle, the other poisoned while sleeping in his orchard; a new-generation Norwegian prince gathering the men and materials to seize back the lands lost by his father; and a Danish royal funeral swiftly followed by a royal re-marriage, so that a new king reigns but his wife has barely broken her sovereign role?

The answer to the question, strictly speaking, is in no play. You will have identified Hamlet, of course, by these events, all of which preface the play. And that is a point worth remembering. None of these hugely momentous events happens in the present rime of the play at all. They have all happened before the play begins. These are the rocky times swiftly sketched in by Marcellus, Horatio and Claudius in the opening minutes. The scale of these events is enormous: international wars, deaths of kings, regal funerals and coronations. This is the stuff that makes up the history of nations, they are momentous events in the lives and times of countries. All the greater, then, is the contrast when the dramatic focus spirals down from these international dramas...to the inside of Hamlet's head. In cinematographic terms, it is a colossal close-up that Shakespeare manages. But a close-up on what?

Hamlet's problem

Hamlet is unhappy, and we know why. He has of late lost all his mirth, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This is not surprising: we could count off a fistful of reasons why he is, why anyone in his situation would be, depressed and unhappy. The full list of Hamlet's burdens in this play is enough to afflict three of four tragic heroes across their whole lifetimes. Yet at this point, Hamlet can go little further than making observations about the earth, the air and the nature of man. The terms in which he frames his dissatisfaction decline from: 'this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire' to 'a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours'. Similarly, 'how like an angel...how like a god' reduces to 'this quintessence of dust'. Just as the magnifying focus in the beginning of the play zooms down from affairs on the global stage to Hamlet's unhappiness, here Hamlet himself, in putting his general outlook into words, is deliberately plunging from exalted images of beauty and nobility to nothingness: vapours and dust.

The extremes match each other in inventive imagery. The field of view here is vast. The concepts are grand, but it is poor stuff as far as self-analysis goes. There is no discovery about self here. Why not? Why does Shakespeare give his character soaring lines, universal concepts, but no personal revelation? At this point, Hamlet has already discovered that the true reason for the presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the Court is not simply friendship. So he may well wish to be circumspect. And the effects of being marooned in the Court, cut off from the outside world -- not resuming his studies, reminded daily of his mother's 'infidelity', his intelligence wasted and distracted -- may already be dulling his wits.

The practical cure?

It is only when Hamlet comes into contact with people from outside the Court, who honestly fulfil practical occupations that give purpose and meaning to their lives, that he defines his state of mind in clear and precise images. It takes a group of actors, an army of soldiers en route to war, and a gravedigger to really sharpen Hamlet's insight into himself and the context of his existence.

In Hamlet's encounter with the actors we may detect Shakespeare's profound sympathy with those who perform plays. His advice to them betrays Hamlet's/Shakespeare's passion for true and accurate rendition of the lines: 'Oh, there be players that I have seen play...they imitated nature so abominably.' Why, first of all, does the actor's grief for Hecuba touch Hamlet so deeply? Granville Barker points out that Hamlet must see in his mind's eye how unlike Hecuba his own mother is in her mourning. The speech propels him into a paroxysm of self-criticism. The man was acting, yet he had tears in his eyes and his whole face betrayed a felt passion. The actor was being utterly true to his art, he was carrying out his role supremely well. The example must show Hamlet to himself. It is a step in self-knowledge, and Hamlet articulates it neatly minutes later when he remarks that the purpose of play-acting is to hold a mirror up to nature. The players held up a mirror to him, and in his new-found reflection he tries out some anger to see how it fits. He rants:

Bloody, bawdy villain!

Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!

But it's empty noise. Hamlet is intelligent enough to see immediately that this is mere play-acted anger. Words only. Words without intent in them. Whipping himself into feigned anger won't answer his condition.

Hamlet was written in 1600, a time when theatre enjoyed a precarious popularity and required the patronage of men of influence to ensure its continuance. Forty-two years later, Puritan hostility resulted in the official closing of the theatres by Parliament. Hamlet's speech to the actors, with its fervent emphasis on the integrity of acting

to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image,

and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure

amounts to a stern defence of the function of the theatre. A timely reminder that what is happening here is more than mere entertainment; it is nothing less than a true representation of the age -- provided, that is, the actors hold to the discipline of their art.

Self-knowledge

Hamlet is hypersensitised. Everything that has happened to him has made him intensely self-aware, ready to be self-critical. In such a state of mind, all occasions will indeed inform against him, and 'examples gross as earth' will exhort him. Crossing Denmark en route to England, Hamlet encounters 20,000 Norwegian troops marching to their deaths in the fight over a patch of worthless land. Earlier, watching the actors, he witnessed feigned passion and wondered about his own lack of it; here on the Danish plain he sees imminent mass-death for no great or grand reason. A delicate prince leading his men defies the uncertain outcome: it 'is fortune, death and danger...even for an eggshell'.

As has been pointed out, Shakespeare gives Hamlet the capacity to swoop from macrocosmic imagery to the minuscule. Here again, the large concepts associated with war are juxtaposed with a worthless image, the eggshell. Being great, Hamlet sees, is not to act unless there be great and fitting reasons to do so, yet at the same time to retain the capacity 'to find quarrel in a straw when honour's at the stake'. This is painfully true of himself. The reflection goes to the heart of his dilemma.

The encounter with the gravedigger is revealing on a number of levels. It is arguable that because Shakespeare creates a labouring man who is so funny and irreverent, who has such verbal dexterity and is so unawed by rank either in life or in death, that he in fact sharpens Hamlet's wits to such an extent that the Prince's musings on bones and skulls borrow their illumination from the clown. What is it Hamlet sees among these graveyard relics, the last fragments that human lives leave behind? He sees that death levels everybody. However it was that power and stature are achieved and wielded in life, at the end of it all we each of us revert to a bone skull, a pinch of loam, and a whiff of decay:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,

Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

What does this show us in Hamlet? What do these musings on the scale and perspective of human endeavour tell us about him? His ponderings here are visionary, they encapsulate human life, they reduce it in the scale of death and eternity and consequently they are the products of a mind that can be detached and enlightened, that can see how transitory are things like social rank and beauty. This is wisdom. It is visionary and it is what goes to make Hamlet the multiple-faceted character he is. Moments later he leaps into Ophelia's grave to fight with Laertes arid dispute with him which of the two of them loved her more. This is not wisdom. Hamlet is capable both of soaring vision that contains and reduces human existence, and of a childish petulance.

At every point that we encounter him in this play, Hamlet is intensely self-aware, ready to be self-critical, prepared to learn lessons, prepared to admit truth to himself. He refuses to hide from the truth in self-deception. 'To thine own self be true', says Polonius to Laertes. Hamlet exemplifies this. Every major encounter with others teaches him more about himself. And learning the truth about ourselves, the quest for self-knowledge, understanding our own nature, is a philosophical precept thousands of years old. That is why Hamlet goes to the heart of the human condition.

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