**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Hamlet**

The greatness of Shakespeare’s technique lies in the way he constructs this momentum through intense action, rich language, and layer upon layer of metaphor and symbols.

Like many of Shakespeare’s tragic characters, Hamlet has an intensity that is revealed in his complex range of emotions.

The climax occurs not only in the outward events on stage, but also, and perhaps more importantly, within the character of Hamlet himself.

In Shakespeare’s play, indecision is a major theme. Hamlet is haunted—literally—by his father’s murder and a desperate need to avenge the crime. But something holds him back from acting on this desire for revenge.

“Who’s there?” Bernardo’s anxious shout, which begins SP’s most problematic play, raises the fundamental question of Hamlet’s identity.3

Various male authority figures advance simple answers.

For the Ghost, Hamlet is a dutiful son who should sweep to his revenge and forget about his mother.

For Claudius, Hamlet is a possible rebel who should be either made tractable or banished and killed.

For Polonius, Hamlet is the heir gone mad through frustrated love of Ophelia, whom Polonius has denied him partly for reasons of state.

But for Hamlet, the roles of dutiful son, ambitious rebel, or mad lovesick heir are just that: roles, to be played for others but not felt for himself. The “Who” remains unsettled within and without, “the heart of my mystery” (3:2, 351).

Over the years the opinion of Hamlet has changed. After centuries of unqualified admiration some critics now come close to suggesting that Hamlet is the villain, not the hero.

**Hamlet as Anti-Hero**

Hamlet himself, of course, offers some extremely unfavourable comments on his own character, particularly in the Nunnery scene, where he tells the hapless Ophelia that “I could accuse myself of such things where better my mother had not borne me: I am proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in” (3:1, 124-7).

Hamlet, in other words, would heartily agree with some f the worst things critics could find to say about him, and actors attribute to him.

Many of those who stress Hamlet’s gross faults and vices, his callous cruelty, his cynicism, his coarseness, for example, tend to see Claudius as a well disposed, kindly uncle who does all he can to dispel his nephew’s melancholy mood, only to find his best efforts repelled by an embarrassing hostility.

Even those who regard Hamlet as an essentially sympathetic character will admit that his virtues are offset by some disturbing features in his character, outlook and behaviour.

Everybody has noticed the bitterness, cynicism and hatred which mark his dealings with others.

His cruelty to both Gertrude and Ophelia amounts to extreme mental and emotional torture.

He relishes the torment he inflicts on Claudius through the insert-play, and when he finds his uncle at prayer, takes an unholy delight in the prospect of preserving him for a more horrible fate.

He sends his school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths without giving them an opportunity to make their peace with God (“not shriving-time allowed”), and refuses to take moral responsibility for doing this (“they are not near my conscience”).

His scourging of moral corruption in his interviews with his mother and Ophelia is marked by withering sarcasm, self-righteousness (“forgive me this my virtue”), and obscenity of language and idea.

His interview with his mother (3) is remarkable for its compulsive, obsessive insistence on lust and the corruption of human relationships.

The imagery he uses to characterise Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius is repulsive and excessive, with its bestial overtones; the tone of many remarks here is hysterical and violent.

Again, his treatment of Polonius shows the less attractive side of his personality. It is true that Polonius is cynical, narrow-minded and corrupt, but when Hamlet kills him in mistake for Claudius, he reacts to his violent deed in a way that does him little credit.

He callously dismisses the death as an irrelevance (“Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!”), and treats his dead victim, as he does the living Claudius (“a padlock, a bat, a gob”) as no better than an animal (“I’ll lug the guts into the neighbour room”).

**The Noble Hamlet**

Hamlet displays another side of his character to those he loves and respects.

The more attractive Hamlet earns Horatio’s heartfelt epitaph: “Now cracks a noble heart: good night sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (5:2, 349-50).

This is the Hamlet who forgives Laertes with his dying breath, prevents Horatio’s suicide, shows practical concern for his friends, whom he treats with admirable frankness and courtesy, and inspires the absolute devotion and loyalty of Horatio, the character who knows him best.

We must also recognise his moving devotion to the memory of his father, his fundamental idealism, warped though it may be by the pressure of circumstances, and his refined sensibility, good sense and taste, displayed in his reflections on drama and on acting.

**Idealism turned to Cynicism**

Hamlet’s tragic experience can be understood only by taking the two sides of his nature fully into account.

His tragedy is that of a noble, idealistic young man, the ornament of his society, as Ophelia recognises (“Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state”), whose greatness of mind and soul is overwhelmed by a succession of catastrophic events and perverted cynicism, grossness and cruelty.

Much of the bitterness and cynicism displayed by Hamlet can be understood in terms of the formula that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother.

The main object of the Ghost’s visitation is to incite Hamlet to act against Claudius and this is what he seems determined to do in the immediate aftermath of the apparition.

Hamlet, however, is as much concerned with his mother’s betrayal of her husband’s trust and her incestuous relationship with Claudius, as he is with his uncle’s crime.

The incomprehensible, shocking fact that within a few month’s of his fathers death she could “post/ With such dexterity to incestuous sheets”, and marry so unworthy a creature as Claudius, taints his mind against womankind, and causes him to lose whatever belief he may have had in the possibility of virtuous, stable love.

This helps to explain his revulsion from the idea of love and marriage in his interview with Ophelia (3,1). When a matron like Gertrude can betray her virtue, what hope is there for fidelity in marriage from anybody?

Many of those who disapprove in general of Hamlet have argued that he is responding with hysterical exaggeration to the failings of others, particularly of his mother.

Some find that his severe anti-feminism (“Frailty, thy name is woman”), and his observations on the emptiness of life and the felicity of death have been found to be disturbing and negative.

However, Hamlet’s emotions, particularly his world-weariness, his occasional hysteria, his outbursts of hatred, and his view of womanhood as tainted, must be understood in the light of what the play shows us of his circumstances.

He has suffered the sudden death of his adored father, followed by the indecently hasty and incestuous marriage of his mother to the hated uncle, soon revealed by his father’s ghost as his murderer and as Gertrude’s adulterous partner.

There is the further overwhelming burden of the Ghost’s command that Hamlet should take speedy vengeance on his uncle, who is depicted by the Ghost as a despicable blackguard.

**The Tardy Avenger**

The issue of Hamlet’s tardiness in carrying out the Ghost’s command is built into the very fabric of the play.

He himself frequently mentions the delay, agonises over it, and seems baffled and angry when he contemplates it.

There are many explanations offered which all have some reasonable basis in the text. The first kind of explanation implies some kind of psychological defect in Hamlet.

He may be squeamish about shedding a blood, able to revel in the contemplation of the act but not to perform it. He may be labouring under the burden of an intense melancholy, which incapacitates him from positive, planned activity.

Another kind of explanation would require us to accept that Hamlet is morally flawed, that he rebels against the imposition of a task, whose performance he knows to be his duty, because he lacks the courage to pursue it.

A related explanation is that Hamlet, like most of us, tends to be initially enthusiastic but to defer unpleasant duties as long as possible: that he is, in other words, the victim of an exaggerated procrastination complex.

Finally, it has been argues that before Hamlet can satisfy his conscience that he should pursue the act of vengeance, he must establish the “honesty” and good faith of the Ghost, who man, after all, be a devil in disguise come to damn his soul.

He tries to test the Ghost’s word by exposing Claudius to the insert- play, but never comes up with the kind of absolute, irrefutable proof that might satisfy a court of law, or even the Court of Denmark.

Whatever the explanation, Hamlet never takes on the full duty of a revenge hero.

Hamlet shoes on various occasions that he is capable of taking the life of somebody else: he rashly kills Polonius in mistake for Claudius, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, and slays Claudius at the end.

But these are acts of impulse forced upon him on the spur of the moment; it is another matter to plan murderous vengeance, and then carry it out with full deliberation.

There is the consideration that Hamlet may not be able to convince himself, as Laertes can in his own case, that the revenge code is capable of providing a satisfactory form of retribution for the deed Claudius has done.

Hamlet realises that slaying Claudius in cold blood cannot bring Old Hamlet back or restore Gertrude’s lost innocence.

What Hamlet actually does is to play a waiting game, remaining alert to what his enemies are planning, and matching their moves with his own, sensing towards the end that Claudius will, in good time, ensnare himself.

SP allows Hamlet to fulfil the task of vengeance without undertaking any morally revolting scheme of slaughter; had he made him follow a brutal, undiscriminating course of the blood avenger, he would inevitably have alienated our sympathies.

As it is, Hamlet stands morally apart from his enemies, whose plans involve levels of treachery and deceit to which he cannot stoop.

**Hero of a Revenge Tragedy**

It is not necessary to consider hamlet’s delay exclusively in terms of his character. It is also useful to think of him as the hero of a revenge tragedy.

In revenge tragedies, the revenger’s role was essentially a waiting one, whatever his character.

His delay was part of a pattern which became clear only at the close.

It was one of the major conventions of the revenge tragedy that the revenger was able to take advantage of an opportunity provided for him by the villain, who became the agent of his own destruction.

This, of course, is what happens in *Hamlet*. Claudius has arranged the duel to destroy Hamlet, but is himself destroyed along with Laertes and his queen. Hamlet, without planning it, becomes the agent of his uncle’s doom.