

REBUILDING IDENTITY: HAMLET

Ravindra Ranasinha PhD

Research Centre for Dramatherapy, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Mobile No. +9471 983 9507

Email: ravindraranasinha@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims in delineating some aspects of Hamlet's psychological behaviour. The discussion will limit to view Hamlet's behaviour as a withdrawn, distorted, and traumatized person, and how he emerges from his distortion. In this study, rebuilding identity emerges as a strong theme, to depict Hamlet as a catalyst.

Trauma

Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, begins to experience trauma after meeting the Ghost of his father. The Ghost's revelations make him, both certain and uncertain that his father was killed by his uncle as well as of his mother's collusion with him or, at least, of her betrayal of the memory of her recently deceased husband. Hamlet loves his father, and therefore, this revelation creates a negative impact on him, as manifested through his melancholy. Upon being traumatized by the Ghost's revelations, his strategy is to feign madness (Simon, 2001). It appears as a mask to ensure his existence, in a world where he cannot comprehend its disorder.

As seen in the play, his chaos or disorder is directly connected with his relationship to his parents. This is also projected on his love relationship with Ophelia. This lived experience turns him to be a withdrawn contemplative "beautiful soul" (Lacan, 1977: 663-67, 675-76). "The beautiful soul denounces the perceived disorder of the world around him without recognizing that this disorder is a reflection of his own inner state" (Lacan, 1977: 171-73, 281, 415). Hamlet fails to comprehend the disorder within him.

For Hamlet, his father was: "*So excellent a king, that was to this / Hyperion [...]*" (1.2.139- 40). His major deficiency posits in his inability to develop an identification with a parental figure. He has lost his father, and has no one to identify with. Identification is when individuals mimic the actions of a parental figure. Such a process is pivotal because it will develop the infant's personality (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973:170). The father, whom an infant will identify with, will influence the personality of his child from infancy to adulthood (Diamond, 252). When a man protects or watches over his wife and child, he will create enough time to establish a mother and child relationship. This relationship forms the infant's ego. The father turns to be the archetype of the protector. Child's development, identification, and autonomy is bound with a father image. This father image will be internalized, regardless of age (Diamond, 1998: 252, 255-256), and supports in avoiding a sense of impotence. When conversing with Horatio about the late sovereign, the prince utters "*A was a man [...] / I Shall not look upon his like again.*" (1.2.187-188).

In act 1.2, Hamlet is discontented with his mother, including her in his metaphor of degeneracy, “*things rank and gross in nature*” (1.2.136). Professor Bradley states that Hamlet’s fundamental problem is his mother’s immorality. It is tormenting him more than anything else. Gertrude’s depravity is the cause of her son’s depression (Bradley, 2004: 118). This atmosphere makes Hamlet psychologically weak. His longing for death becomes an irresistible impulse (Carroll, 2010), under these circumstances.

Guilt and Unworthiness

“Freud observes that the loss of an object deprives the individual of the love necessary for growth and nurture” (Camden, 1989: 169). For Hamlet, he has suffered two losses: (1) the loss of his father and (2) the loss of his mother’s attention, since she now lavishes her attention and affection on Claudius. As a direct result of this, Hamlet loses his capacity to love Ophelia. This accounts for his coldness and cruel treatment of her. “Freud viewed depression as arising from hostile feelings initially directed towards parents. These hostile feelings then turn inward, producing feelings of guilt and unworthiness” (ibid). This supports our view about the projecting or mirroring of relationships from Hamlet’s relationship with his mother to the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet’s failure to execute Claudius’s murder builds his guilt, anxiety and negativity (1.2- 4.4). His helplessness appears as a crucial symptom (2.2.551-552, 554-558, 562-563). The prince consistently derogates himself (for example, soliloquy 2.2 and 4.4), and his death-wish is quite evident in the play (for example act 3.1). All of these symptoms appear to have started when the late sovereign died. For example, Claudius imparts, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” (1.2.66). Furthermore, Gertrude adds that “all that lives must die” (1.2.72) and “Why seems it so particular with thee?” (1.2.75). His helplessness was due to apathy, which results from melancholia (Bradley, 2004: 122).

Performance Therapy

In order to ascertain whether Claudius is guilty of regicide or not, he turns towards performing a play, to create an ‘as if’ situation. This entrance into a dramatic reality is to check Claudius’ conscience. When the theatre is over, Claudius collapses; this

makes Hamlet gleeful: “*Why, let the strooken deer go weep*” (3.2.256). After the dramatic performance, Hamlet is briefly satisfied because, contrary to other times earlier in the play, he succeeds in tormenting Claudius.

After discovering that Claudius is probably guilty, Hamlet does not show any indications of wanting to kill his uncle. Instead, the prince was only gleeful because he managed to negatively affect Claudius. Hamlet was simply happy that he managed to do something in oppose to soliloquy 2.2, where he hated himself because of his stagnancy. It is, therefore, reasonable to opine that in entering a dramatic reality Hamlet was able to shed light on the murder of his father. Even though the theatre scene helped him to identify the murderer, such performance does not fortify his courage to take revenge, nor act against the general degeneracy. Instead, he still experiences his mental impotence.

Transference

In soliloquy 3.1, Hamlet regards death as a refuge: *To be, or not to be, that is the question*. One of the most interesting dynamics within “To be or not to be” takes place at the end of Hamlet’s soliloquy. It is an ominous foreshadowing that Hamlet sees Ophelia and begins to speak to her immediately. It is ironic that after his contemplation of suicide, the first person he sees is Ophelia who coincidentally, takes her own life later in the play. It is as though Hamlet’s own feelings of despair, frustration, and self-loathing are mystically transferred to Ophelia. This transference of negative energy results in her own death rather than the death of Hamlet.

Pipher (1994) argues: When Ophelia falls in love with Hamlet, she lives only for his approval. She has no inner direction; rather she struggles to meet the demands of Hamlet and her father. Her value is determined utterly by their approval. Ophelia is torn apart by the efforts to please. When Hamlet spurns her because she is an obedient daughter, she goes mad with grief. Dressed in elegant clothes that weigh her down, she drowns in a stream filled with flowers” (20). It is a dark and psychological means of self-assertion that Ophelia displays through taking her own life.

Hamlet’s psychological problems, his uncompleted task, his depression and autonomy issues, make him want to: “*resolve [himself] into a dew!*” (1.2.130); dissolve his consciousness; flee from his emotional pain; avoid reality and do nothing even

when he realizes that Claudius committed regicide. Hence, death is a refuge from the emotional torments Hamlet has within him, because it is the only place where all his calamities cannot be found in.

Transformation

Nevertheless, when meeting Prince Fortinbras, Hamlet undergoes a transformation. He becomes preoccupied with the notion of honour. The explanation partially lies in Hamlet's incomplete paternal identification, which will alter when encountering the Norwegian prince (ref. soliloquy 4.4). Hamlet still wishes for death, but not to seek refuge from 'pain'. Influenced by Fortinbras' courage as well as his sense of duty, Hamlet feels mortified. He has neither sought revenge nor acted against the general turpitude in Denmark. Hamlet is now ready to resolve all the predicaments. His honour is at stake and he must defend it, cost what it may, and even his own life: "*while to my shame I see / The imminent death of twenty thousand men, / That for a fantasy [...] / Go to their graves [...] / How stand I then, / That have a father kill'd* (4.4.59-62, 56-57).

According to Mabillard's (2008) observation, Fortinbras is the one who initiates Hamlet's new attitude. The Norwegian prince is a royalty and a warrior who is, according to Hamlet, embarking on a quest for honour. It is known from the play that Hamlet senior was a very courageous warrior who conquered Fortinbras senior's land. There is a connection between Fortinbras and the deceased king. When witnessing Fortinbras in armour, commanding an army, Hamlet is possibly reminded of his father in his uniform when he commanded an army: "*Such was the armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combated.*" (1.1.60-61). It is possible that Hamlet perceives his father's qualities in Fortinbras in this particular scene, and sees the Norwegian prince as an embodiment of the late sovereign. When he encounters Fortinbras, he realises that he must act to maintain his honour. This is why Fortinbras becomes pivotal; the prince subconsciously identifies with him to establish autonomy, hence, seeking revenge and maintaining honour. As previously concluded, identification develops the individual's personality (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 170). Young Hamlet is, in other words, identifying with a substitutional father-figure – Fortinbras – who symbolizes Hamlet senior.

For the first time in the play, the young melancholic prince starts displaying his decisiveness, in act 5.1.

When he returns to Denmark from England, his former love, Ophelia, is dead. He notices that the deceased is not getting a proper Christian burial, and immediately comprehends that the victim must have committed suicide. After Hamlet understands that Ophelia is the deceased victim, he emerges from his place of concealment, in the cemetery. He confronts Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes with these words "*This is I, / Hamlet the Dane*" (5.1.243-244). Observe the word 'Dane'; it signifies 'the King' (Wofford, 1994: 139). Subsequently, Hamlet exclaims "*For though I am not splenitive [and] rash, / Yet have I in me something dangerous,*

/ Which let thy wisdom fear." (5.1.247-249). Thus, Hamlet appears to be more rational than previously because he, as the quotes in this paragraph indicate, appears to be rationalizing. He knows who he is and what he can do.

Re-Emergence of Suppressed Trauma

In addition to the above facts, it is possible to detect a pattern between Hamlet senior's death and Ophelia's death. Let us return to the mourning Hamlet from act 1.2. When meeting Horatio after he returns to Denmark from Wittenberg, Hamlet laments the fact that his father died

without receiving his final Eucharist. This signifies that the late sovereign's Christian burial is incomplete. In soliloquy 1.2, Hamlet expresses his love for his father; he expresses how virtuous Hamlet senior was. He compares him to Hyperion, for example (1.2.139-140). Needless to say, when the late sovereign died, Hamlet must have wept at his grave, displaying feelings and emotions similar to Laertes' at Ophelia's grave. There is a connection. When witnessing the burial of Ophelia, and when seeing Laertes mourning and crying at his sister's grave, Hamlet mentally relives his father's burial.

Additionally, according to Mabillard (2000), Ophelia is the most innocent and naïve person in Denmark because "[she] is the epitome of goodness [...] [Ophelia] is childlike and naïve". Developing her interesting observation, I believe that another point can be made concerning Ophelia and the late king. Why is she so important to Hamlet? Fundamentally, the answer is because she loved him. Hamlet was loved by someone who was loving and innocent. The only other person who loved Hamlet and was loving, innocent, and deceived (according to Hamlet) was his father. Hamlet perceives his father's love and nature in Ophelia's lifeless body; possibly, he is

re-experiencing the pain that came from losing his father.

When young Hamlet witnesses Ophelia's funeral, he relives the pain which he undoubtedly experienced during his father's burial. This is important because a significant event can now occur: the re-emergence of Hamlet's suppressed trauma and psychological issues. Ophelia's death represents his trauma. When the trauma is reactivated, the depressed victim experiences 'catharsis', because the trauma re-emerges; all the negative feelings and despair which are associated with the trauma will be revealed. The depressed victim can finally cognize the way he has scripted the issue. This is a process of emerging from the irrational thoughts and delusion, and gain insight to work through the issue and move on (Boeree, 2006,16).

Incomplete Catharsis

It is impossible to claim that Hamlet's catharsis is fully completed, nevertheless, the change of his thought pattern makes it plausible to assume that Hamlet has undergone a catharsis adequate enough to enable him to regain his intellect. It may decrease his issues with identification and autonomy. He will be able to rationalize, because his rationality will be more coherent than previously. Verification is, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.243-244); This is I, / Hamlet King of Denmark.

Though he realizes who he is, he still persists with his idea of death, since it brings recognition for him, as a Dane. He willingly walks to his death to expose Claudius' treachery and maintain his honour (5.2.302). Hamlet seeks revenge without becoming as dishonourable as Claudius. He wants to maintain his honour by avenging his father (5.2.64). Therefore, Hamlet accepts the combat, death for honour (4.4). When Fortinbras gives Hamlet a military funeral and salute, he verifies that Hamlet is perceived as an honourable man: "For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal" (5.2.379-380). Thus, Hamlet faces an altruistic death.

Conclusion

Finally, one can view Hamlet's emotional turmoil that was disentangled gradually, allowing him to reclaim his lost honour. The psychological calamity was temporary, as he found substitutional father-figure who supports him to build his identity. Catharsis through the loss of his lover helped him

to relive the trauma, and to reduce or alleviate same. Shakespeare's Hamlet emerges as a potential example, to understand that emergence from psychological distortions can occur when a support system is readily available.

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