

## ENGLISH: *HAMLET*

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

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Tragedy's preoccupation with human nobility and fallibility pertains to the struggle of humanity in extreme crisis. Man's conflict with one another establishes moral decadence in society, inflicting the individual with a tragic view of life. This immoral exterior thus provokes internal introspection, whereby man turns in against himself. If countervailing physical resolution cannot then be actualized, the extreme crisis accosts man with his inhumanity, reducing him to his bestial self. William Shakespeare's explores this extreme crisis of humanity through the revenge tragedy Hamlet. Act III portends crisis point through the metaphysical despair of Hamlet's soliloquy, the impotent consternation of moral treachery in the mousetrap and the impetuous murder of Polonius. Utilising conventions of Senecan tragedy and exploring competing concepts of Humanist Rationalism, Calvinism and feudal Catholicism, Hamlet provides a rich, complex tapestry for theatre and interpretation. Kenneth Branagh's production of Hamlet (1996) uses the 'mousetrap' scene to frame Hamlet's psychological torment and reveal the epic facade that is the courts. However the beauty of Shakespeare's craft is in the timelessness of the universe he creates, portending crises of humanity that both reflect and transcend context.

Moral treachery engenders the superstructure of revenge in Hamlet, whereby 'Man's inhumanity to man'<sup>1</sup> provides the basis for humanity's extreme crisis. Shakespeare's use of the revenge tragedy form echoes his Elizabethan context, as a murder sets up the initial crisis. Man's conflict with man; not in a noble sense, or for just causes as pursued by Fortinbras, but 'murder most foul' that 'hath the primal eldest curse upon't'. Biblical allusion to the story of Cain and Able here illustrates the severity of the crisis, as it is 'a brother's murder'. A Marxist reading would here infer, as was Shakespeare's belief, that the moral quality of the 'body-politic' determines the condition of society, as from the monarch stems the greater moral crisis for Denmark as a whole. To this end the crisis is exaggerated by the subservience of the courts; Hamlet's childhood friends ('of so young days brought up with him') Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, recruited 'to gather/So much so from occasion you may glean'. This spying and entrapment continues, symptomatic of an instable court descending into crisis. Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of the 'mousetrap' scene uses jump-cut editing between the players to create a sense of panic, evidence of the extreme crisis coming to light. The 'horrible' truth of the ghost's original words is revealed through the use of flashback, concurrent to growing crescendo of the 'demented cannon'<sup>2</sup>, as confirmation of Claudius' guilt sets the plays 'bloody' course. Thus in act 3, we witness the extreme crisis of man in conflict with his fellow man as the revenging eschatology of the play is, in more senses than one, played out.

The wider moral crisis of external conflict in the play is internalised in a tragic view of life for the individual as man turns on himself to face self-reproach and spiritual crisis. Gertrude and Claudius both reflect on the prospect of damnation as conscience drives them to extreme emotional crisis. Gertrude's confessional discussion with Hamlet in the closet scene echoes these anarchic sentiments,

*Thou turn'st my very eyes into my soul,  
And there I see such black and grained spots  
Symbolism here illustrates her self-scrutiny and how this induces her moral crisis over guilt.  
Furthermore, Claudius' desperate questions the hideous possibility of damnation through religious imagery  
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens  
to wash it white as snow?*

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<sup>1</sup> Milton's Paradise Lost

<sup>2</sup> A thematic aspect of Patrick Doyle's score for the Kenneth Branagh film – used specifically for Claudius in climactic moments

Hamlet's third soliloquy too reflects personal introspection, in his case the spiritual crisis of confronting the 'quintessence of dust'. His speech voices existential notions apposite to the contemporary context, whilst Shakespeare also harkens to 16th century cultural concerns. Hamlet becomes the vehicle for the expression of conflicting paradigms of feudal Catholicism and humanist rationalism, reflecting the contextual religious juncture.

*to take arms against a sea of troubles  
and by opposing end them*

Through metaphor Shakespeare here refers to Hamlet's explicit consideration of self-destruction, suicide denounced by values of Catholicism thus illustrative of the severity of his personal emotional crisis. Gregory Doran's Hamlet (2009) captures this existential despair in Hamlet's third soliloquy; tenebrous lighting and an illusory camera angle create an abyssal effect where Hamlet looks as though he is literally speaking into the void. This post-modernist interpretation reflects a post-Christian context where man confronts the horrors of an empty universe without god, demonstrating the universality of Hamlet's spiritual crisis. Humanity's extreme crisis is thus evident as man turns against himself, the implications clear for the state of crisis in Denmark, as on Hamlet depends 'the sanctity and health of this whole state' while he admits his real contemplation of self annihilation.

Hamlet's avid intellectualisation of the world, his 'vicious mole of nature', compounds humanity's crisis within the play, as to survive in the face of moral and spiritual conflict, someone must take action to prevent humanity's self-destruction. While his initial assertion is to 'sweep to revenge', as the play progresses his nature prevails,

*the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'*

Vivid metaphor here confirms his intellectual tragic flaw; thus adhering to conventions of Aristotelian tragedy and moreover, as the stoic hero, borrowing conventions from Seneca. The Schlegel-Coleridge theory argues with that Hamlet suffers from 'an overbalance in contemplative faculty'<sup>3</sup>, his 'reflective and speculative genius'<sup>4</sup> disabling him from resolving issues of the flesh – 'conscience does make cowards of us all'. Through alliteration Shakespeare warns against the dangers of the Renaissance Intellect, as during its hour of maximum danger, the prince cannot take righteous action to protect humanity. The 'mousetrap' presents dramatic irony in this light, as Shakespeare explores another post-modern notion of meta-theatrical self-consciousness; the self-consciousness in the play about itself as drama paralleling Hamlet's self-consciousness – his anguished mediation on epistemology and conscience<sup>5</sup>. This exacerbated frustration is evident in Branagh's production; his Hamlet coloured by passionate emotional turbulence. By filming the scene from Hamlet's viewpoint, Branagh creates the dichotomy between action and acting, working with the play's omniscient pun on the words 'to act'. Demonstrating textual coherence, Branagh dramatically emphasises the meta-theatre that is central to the audience's understanding of Hamlet's personal crisis, using it to shed light on the psychological and emotional contentions that are inexorably linked with humanity in extreme crisis. Thus Hamlet's 'almost blunted purpose' not only exacerbates his melancholia and personal emotional crisis, but allows moral corruption to further infect the already 'rotten state of Denmark.'

Shakespeare symbolizes the humanity's perilous position throughout the play, with language suggesting it is always teetering on the verge of lapsing into nothing more than bestial, 'sullied flesh'. Recurring motifs of disease and animalistic imagery involving images of 'ulcers', 'incestuous sheets' and 'eyes without feeling', highlight an ever-present duality between man and a rotting, bestial nature. Hamlet's self-conception as 'pigeon-livered' serves to purvey this synonymy between humanity and the bestial condition.

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, A C, *Shakespearean Tragedy – 1904 Chapter III: Coleridge*

<sup>4</sup> Bradley, A C, *Shakespearean Tragedy – 1904 Chapter III: Coleridge*

<sup>5</sup> *A Critical History of Hamlet*

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Claudius and his father as a 'Hyperion to a satyr' illustrates through animalistic symbolism, the reductive quality of immorality as humanity is again analogized to bestiality. Act III presents the dénouement for this contentious relationship between man's humanity and bestial self, as Hamlet's soliloquy questions, "Who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life" illustrating the base, bestial reality of human life as juxtaposed to metaphysical stoicism. As humanity's extreme crisis comes to the boil, 'Elsinore is letting of a bestial stench'<sup>6</sup>, culminated in Hamlet's impulsive murder of Polonius. 'How now, a rat. Dead for a ducat, dead' contrasts the philosophical rhetoric of the man Hamlet to the categorical, impassive bestial creature that has superseded him. Kenneth Branagh's production acutely examines this bestial duplicity, the grandiose veneer of the courthouse and theatre juxtaposed through the rationalist scrutiny of Horatio's binoculars, to the truly base nature of the players. Claudius' final despair over his "limèd soul" encapsulates poignantly the fall of man from his celestial ideal, the symbolic imagery representative of the ultimatum of humanity's extreme crisis.

The exceptional circumstances that position man for his fall, by convention of tragedy, are clearly signed in Claudius' foreboding moral paradox 'with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage'. Ironically it is on behalf of his treacherous crime that moral imbalance is initially due, begetting self-destruction and a chaotic spiral for humanity, exacerbated by irresolution. It is through considering man at his lowest point, in extreme crisis, that Shakespeare thus delivers insights on the human psyche and soul. In this we identify with Hamlet, 'the sponge'<sup>7</sup> and 'soul of the age, but for all time'<sup>8</sup> and I believe whose fathomless character is the critical vehicle for a true study of humanity's crisis in the play. The divergence between the humanist and the divine and the intellectual and the physical are but bolts in Shakespeare's greater framework. Tragedy's message resonates as his final gift, the cosmic irony that despite the resolution of humanity's extreme crisis, 'here shows much amiss.'

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<sup>6</sup> Bradley, A C, *Shakespearean Tragedy* - 1904

<sup>7</sup> Knott, John, *Hamlet of the Mid-Century* - 1960

<sup>8</sup> Johnson