
UNIT 2 INTERPRETATIONS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After a careful reading of this unit you will be able to understand

- what *Hamlet* is about
- what it seeks to talk to us about
- how it is a revenge play and
- how it can be variously interpreted.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Once the text of a literary work has been established to our satisfaction—or we have, at least, decided to accept a certain version, pending final judgement—on the basis of the principles of authenticating a text, the more complex part of the critical endeavour begins to seize our mind and thought.

A work of art is an organic whole. It is one work. It has one voice and that voice must speak for the whole work. It must speak collectively for every part that makes up the whole that the work of art before us is. It is not the same thing as suggesting that a work of art must or can have only one meaning. Great books have a tendency to speak to each reader in a different mood and meaning and impart a different significance. In fact, each reader finds himself responding to a different significance each time he reads a great work of art. But that one meaning must answer every question that that text must raise, and justify all that happens, for instance, in a play, in its every word, gesture and action. In other words, all interpretations proffered as meaning of a play must derive validity from the text of the play itself.

What we are *not* looking for is the most authentic meaning—how are we to arrive at its authenticity?—or the meaning that the author may have had in mind when he wrote—we have no access to the mind of William Shakespeare. One way of looking at this issue is to remember that once a work of art is written the author is merely a reader of this work; one more reader of this work. Maybe a principal, even the principal reader of this work, but merely a reader nonetheless. Once a text sees the light of the day—or the darkness of the print, if you like—it becomes an angle in the triangle with the author and a common reader or a professional scholar as the other two angles. The interaction between these three angles offers endless possibilities of intellectual pleasure and profit. But our ultimate focus is the work of art that is before us. The meaning that we are looking for is the one that satisfies a reader the most and explains in every way the complex entity that the work of art in question is.

There is thus a great deal of freedom for the professional student of literature to apply his mind and look at the text of the play in any way his personal predilection, sensitivity to life and letters and professional training lead him to. A work such as *Hamlet* with its endless diversity and richness, is likely to provoke myriad responses compared to, say, an average play by minor playwright. Yet, one must contend that certain interpretations of the play might appear to do greater justice to the readers' expectations from the playwright; or even respond to the expectation of the times in which the play is being read, the mood, the pressures and knowledge that is brought to bear upon the play by a reader.

After such a heavily qualified caveat, how does one look at *Hamlet*? What is *Hamlet* about; what does it seek to talk to us about; what does it mean—the meaning, the voice that will acquaint us most meaningfully and profitably with the heart and soul of the play?

2.2 HAMLET AS A REVENGE PLAY

Revenge is an important part of the plot structure of a large number of Renaissance tragedies. Thomas Kyd's (1558-15-94) *The Spanish Tragedy* (published perhaps in 1589) was perhaps the first Elizabethan play in which revenge is the primary motivating force both for the protagonist as well as the plot. The tragic denouement of the play shows the murderers as well as the avengers alike being killed. Kyd introduced many elements in his play which became standard conventions for the revenge plays that followed: the ghost, intrigue, betrayal, a hesitant, unsure hero, and his inaction chiefly based on moral scruple, madness, and melancholia, the black dress, the reading of a book and philosophical musings and a gradual deterioration of the hero's moral stature which alienates the audience's sympathy for the hero. Many more plays followed Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*: John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, Tourner's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* and John Fletcher's *Valentinian* are some of the plays that belong to the literary tradition that Kyd appears to have initiated. Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* were great crowd pullers. A major influence on the development of the Elizabethan revenge play was that of Seneca, the Roman dramatist and essayist who died in A.D. 65. He was translated in the sixteenth century and was much admired for his revenge tragedies that had many of the features that Kyd made popular through his play, *The Spanish Tragedy*. Other sources of influence include Italian *novelle* and the works of writers such as Machiavelli.

Even though revenge-focused literature during the Renaissance was very popular, the general attitude to revenge was one of disapproval, even revulsion. Christian ethics disapproved vengeance as personal principle --

Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

Thou God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself.

Be ye angry and sin not: let no the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil. *St Paul*

Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.

-- and the law of the land made personal revenge anti-social and punishable. The moral preachers and church fathers characterise it as immoral and constantly spoke against it from the pulpit. Much debate was carried out in public to condemn revenge as morally and legally totally indefensible. Revenge fostered anti-social behaviour, made men self-centred as they set themselves up as judges of their own cause, leading to an exaggerated rather than a fair view of the injuries suffered, and discourages forgiveness and a charitable temper. Yet it is clear that there was understanding shown—if full approval was not accorded—for certain kinds of acts of revenge. The Elizabethans believed, despite legal and religious disapproval, that personal honour had to be defended. Murder had to be avenged. A son had a sacred duty to avenge the murder of his father. The sixteenth century civil law could deny the heir of a murdered father his inheritance unless he avenged the unnatural death of the victim. For the Elizabethans, there existed a well known work which defined the properties for honourable revenge: *The Courtiers Academie* by Count Remei which became available in an English translation around 1598. Francis Bacon wrote in 1625:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature run to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of the wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior. . . .

The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs for which there is no law to remedy, but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; or else a man's enemy is still beforehand, and it is two for one. Some when they take revenge, are desirous the party should know whence it cometh. This is the most generous. For the delight seemeth to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent. . . .

This is certain, that a man that studies the revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges for the most part are fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

The public sentiment thus acknowledged the official and religious disapproval of the acts of revenge but showed understanding for the avenger's passion.

It is against this background that we should attempt to appreciate Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Revenge as an aspect of the plot structure of the plays appears in many plays of Shakespeare. It appears in varying degrees of importance in *Richard II* as well as in *Tempest*. As a minor motif it appears several other plays such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*,

Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar and Richard III. Hamlet it is which embodies Shakespeare's most significant handling of the revenge theme.

Interpretation:

Hamlet has not one but four revenge plots. Hamlet commits himself to avenge his father's death at the hands of Claudius, his uncle, who also marries his mother and usurps the throne of Denmark. Another son, Laertes, vows to take revenge for the killing of his father by Hamlet. Fortinbras invades the kingdom of Denmark to avenge his father's death at the hands of old King Hamlet. And there is yet another son who vows "revenge" in *Hamlet*: Pyrrhus slaughters Priam, whose son had killed Pyrrhus's father.

A typical structure of a revenge play can be viewed in five parts. The first part of the structure of a revenge play was an "exposition" usually by a ghost but in some plays exposition is carried out by other characters, even victims in the moments of their death. The exposition is followed by "anticipation" in which an elaborate plan for carrying out the revenge is prepared. A central and most dramatic part of the structure of the revenge play used to be the "confrontation" in which the avenger and the intended victim come face to face, so to say, though some time the confrontation takes a different form as it does in *Hamlet* in the prayer scene. "Delay" is a major structural device which allows the revenger to deliberately keep postponing taking action on account of moral scruples, a feeling of inadequacy to the intended task that lies ahead of him, or for other reasons. The "fulfilment" or "completion" of revenge takes the form normally in which both the victim and the avenger are destroyed along many other innocent bystanders.

Hamlet opens with the officers guarding the royal palace who are terrified by the appearance of the ghost who would not speak to them. Nor will the ghost confide the reason for his appearance in Horatio who joins the guards on the third night. But he speaks to Hamlet:

List, list, O list!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love-- . . .
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. . . .

Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange and unnatural. . . .
O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!
If thou hast nature in thee bear it not,
Let not the rpyal bed of Denmark bell.
Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me.

[Act 1, sc.v, ll. 24, 26, 27-8, 80-83 and 91].

Hamlet is horrified to learn that the murderer is Claudius who had seduced his wife and poured poison in his ears as he slept. Hamlet promises to carry out his obligation as a son and avenge his father's death. But many weeks pass and no action is taken. Hamlet suspects that the ghost may have been an evil spirit. But chiefly he does not relish the role of an avenger. He needs to make sure that the ghost did give him facts. To ascertain the truth he feigns madness which confounds his enemies but brings him no closer to the certainty of truth.

A group of actors comes to castle and Hamlet decides to have them act out a tragedy which contains an incident much like the murder of Old King Hamlet: Hamlet hopes to determine Claudius's guilt by the latter's reaction to the play. If he reacts guiltily, the ghost was not an evil spirit. Claudius suspects the truth is out and plans to send Hamlet to England. When the players present the enactment of the murder of the Old King Hamlet, Claudius leaves the royal court in terror of retribution at the hands of

Hamlet. He orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take *Hamlet* to England and plans to have him killed.

Alone. Claudius tries to pray:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven,
It had the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder! Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. . . .

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash [this cursed hand] white as snow? . . .

O bosom black as death!

O limed soul, that struggling to be free,
Art more engag'd; . . .

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without never to heaven go.

[Act III, sc. iii, ll. 36-43; 45-46; 67-69; 97-98.]

Hamlet find Claudius "a-praying"---

And now I'll do't. . . .
. . . and am I then revenged
To take him in the purging of his soul
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?

[Act III, sc. iii, ll. 74; 84-85]

--and decides not to avenge his father's murder.

On the one hand Hamlet vacillates between his belief that the ghost was actually his father's spirit and had just cause to approach his son, and his apprehension that it was an evil spirit and would cause trouble. Hamlet's ambivalent thinking reflects the confused thinking of his times. Unlike the other pagan heroes of the Icelandic sagas Hamlet is burdened with the value-system of his faith--the Protestants had no faith in ghosts which came to haunt the earth on account of their unfulfilled desires.

What makes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a different and superior work is not its faithful adherence to the conventions of revenge plays which dominated Elizabethan stage and drew admiring crowds for many decades in the Elizabethan age. Even though *Hamlet* is a revenge play, the focus of the play is on higher principles of life and living. Hamlet is shocked as much by his father's murder as by his mother's unfeeling haste with which she marries another man. He finds Ophelia collaborating with her father against him totally repugnant. Polonius's lack of loyalty to the old King Hamlet, his friends' attempt to allow themselves to be used by the King for his own nefarious purposes are acts which violate the social laws, moral order and religious sanctity. Shakespeare endows Hamlet with finer characteristics which raises him above level of the stock protagonist of the revenge play. Hamlet's sensitivity to the values of personal relationships is another characteristics that enriches his character. The crudity of violence gives place to intellectual reflection that dominates a major part of the play.

The psychological emphasis placed upon plays characters makes it a finer work of art than any other revenge play produced during the Elizabethan dramatic tradition. Hamlet procrastinates; but he thinks. He finds himself unable to stoop to revenge; but he knows and ruminates upon a myriad issues that are issues of pivotal significance to man's life. Above all the great poetic richness of the play raises it to a higher plane of enriched creativity and distances it away from the average revenge play and their insistent focus on blood, violence and amoral and villainous unthinking protagonists.

But there are other view-points. There are readers of the play who consider any attempt to read *Hamlet* as a tale of vengeance a great disservice to the memory of the great poet and a denigration of the play. In their recent book, *Hamlet*, Thompson and Taylor maintain that the treatment of the play by scholars such as John Dover Wilson, Eleanor Prosser and Fredson Bowers, among others, who focus on the revenge theme their respective studies of the play. Such studies with their focus on the revenge theme, Thompson and Taylor remark:

... while illuminating many aspects of the play, set it in a relatively remote historical and literary context by putting stress on such things as the ethics of revenge and the Elizabethan belief in ghosts. Thus *Hamlet* may have begun to seem in the mid-twentieth century primitive and quaint, an appropriate subject for academic and antiquarian investigation but not very relevant to the modern world. . . . [p. 5]

But the study of the revenge theme in a Shakespearean play has some justification: The Elizabethan revenge play has a long generic tradition. Moreover, revenge had and continues to have, one might say a social and psychological reality. Our own sense of legal subtleties, Francis Bacon notwithstanding, recognises consolatory justice as a necessary part of a civilised society.

Despite the overwhelming support that the play extends to those who wish to read *Hamlet* as written in the Elizabethan tradition of revenge theatre, the play can be read in many more ways. There is a sense in which *Hamlet* is less of a revenge play than a play about revenge. Shakespeare subjects the human compulsion to seek revenge under a philosophical enquiry to show all facets of this human compulsion and its impact on man. As we have already seen, Francis Bacon maintains:

This is certain, that a man that studies the revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges for the most part are fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

The desire for revenge and its influence on an avenger find an elaborate analytic expression in the narrative of the play.

But *Hamlet* can be studied many more vastly different ways.

2.3 THEATRE AS A THEME IN *HAMLET*

In no other play does Shakespeare subject to intense and detailed scrutiny the art of theatre itself. Shakespeare's belief in the importance of theatre led him to focus on theatre as one of the social institutions. He universalises the concept of character as

role and stage as universe by showing all of life in Elsinore as play-acting. So much so that the submerged theatre within the play, as if, takes over and, we have in *Hamlet*, reality looking like theatrical activity. Life in Elsinore becomes full of theatrical activity. Plays are staged, role-playing is resorted to, false, metaphorical, as well as real, masks are put on—as Claudius does—to deceive others. The power of art to change the world is put under a question mark. Shakespeare apparently makes enormous claims behalf of the craft that he practices. But in the end his scepticism regarding theatre as an infallible weapon to perceive and discover the truth prevails. Characters are actors in the hands of forces which pull their strings and that is how the meaning of life is achieved.

Shakespeare is expansive with fulsome praise when he dwells upon actors: a magnanimous tongue it is that he puts into the mouth of Polonius when Shakespeare seeks to compliment them:

The best actors in the world, either of tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited. . . .

. . . what a treasure hadst thou!

He gives them most generous praise when he wants pay them a tribute:

They are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.

A reference in *Hamlet* to a group of boy-players who had been enjoying a great deal of success in London provokes an outburst (not of anxiety about a threatened livelihood) but of professional jealousy:

Rosencrantz. . . but there is, sir, an acery of children, little eyases, // that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't: these are now the fashion, and so // berattle the common stages (so they call them) that many // wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills, and dare scarce come thither. [III. ii. 342-47]

Hamlet. . . What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? . . . Will they pursue the quality no // longer than they can sing? [III. ii. 348-50]

Bad acting is strongly castigated:

O there be playes that I have seen play—and heard others praise, and that highly—not to speak of profanely, that neither having th'accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor, an, have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had men. And not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. [III. ii. 28-34]

Among any audience there are “the judicious” as well as “the unskilful” and “barren” theatre-goers: Hamlet would want actors to never play to the gallery but only to judicious, discriminating audience.

After Hamlet hears one of the actors deliver a speech, he reflects:

Is it not monstrous that this player here
But in fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his vices wanned

Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,

Interpretations

A broken voice . . .

. . . and all for nothing! . . .
. . . what he would do,

Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears; . . .

[II. ii. 554-559; 560; 563-569]

The play within the play is the central action of the play and is the key to the very mystery of the plot. "The play is the thing," says Hamlet, "wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." And he succeeds. Simulation, dissimulation, acting, role-playing are the weapons that he resorts to throughout the play to achieve his objectives.

Hamlet is full of references to the language of theatre. Words like "play," "perform," "applaud," "prologue," "part," etc. The players are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time," and the purpose of the theatrical art is

at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as t'were, the // mirror upto nature,
to show virtue her own feature, // scorn her own image, and the very age and
body of the // time his form and pressure. . . . [III. ii. 21-24.]

The play contains numerous private jokes, as if, shared between the actors of the play, such as the comment in act III by the actor playing Polonius: "I did enact Julius Caesar"; or in act II, ". . . thy face is valanced since I saw thee last . . . Pray God your voice . . . be not cracked."

All the characters in the play have an obsessive compulsion to act a role. Frequently, characters seek to "By indirections find directions out," [II. i. 66] and role-playing is the method used. In the play, no opportunity is missed to exploit the potential of a theatrical situation: eight deaths, high-pitched rhetorical speeches, the play-within-play, the fencing match, the grave-yard scene, the duel between Laertes and Hamlet and numerous rhetorical speeches including Hamlet's own soliloquies: The humanity's histrionic predilection has never before or since and nowhere else been put on show in such exciting terms.

2.4 HAMLET AS A TRAGEDY

As we have remarked earlier, Hamlet rises above the average revenge play and answers to subtler demands of a great tragedy. In the end *Hamlet* turns out to be a great tragedy rather a mere revenge play.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as:

The imitation of action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a

narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

Later he defines the tragic hero:

There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement, . . . The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the hero's fortune must be not from misery to happiness but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part.

Hamlet responds to the definition of an Aristotelian tragedy in more ways than one though there are elements which are typically Shakespearean. In a Shakespearean tragedy the accent is on human responsibility rather on supernatural intervention, chance, fate or any other extra-human factor. The fate, destiny, the "written," too, plays a role but in the ultimate analysis it is the protagonist's own actions that bring about his tragic fall. In *Hamlet* the extra-human agency takes the form of the Ghost but the tragic disaster occurs on account of Hamlet's acts of commission or omission. Hamlet's tragic flaw that brings about the tragic end to the total human endeavour is his failure to act; or act fast enough; or act as a result of premeditation and reflection rather impulsive aggression. As Coleridge remarked:

Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical. He does not want courage, skill, will or opportunity, but every incident sets him thinking, and it is curious and at the same time strictly natural that Hamlet, who all the play seems reason itself, should be impelled at last by mere accident to effect his object. I have a smack of Hamlet, if I may say so. . . . [from *Table Talk*, 1827]

A thinking Hamlet with his compulsive reflective habit remained a standard view of Hamlet for a long time in the history of *Hamlet* criticism. That his failure to act is not the result of any other factor is easy to establish. That he is not a coward the play gives us many opportunities to establish. He is a thinking man, given to retrospection and self-analysis. That he hesitates and is often irresolute is provable, too. But what he is not is a coward, incapable of decisive action. His tragic flaw, as Coleridge saw it, is that he thinks too much.

2.5 HAMLET AS A RELIGIOUS PLAY

The Christian element so predominates the play that *Hamlet* comes across as concerning itself with the theological questions of sin, damnation and salvation. Elizabethans had an obsessive concern with after-life and believed in heaven, hell and purgatory. Hamlet is obsessed with the thoughts of after-life--

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. . . . [I. ii. 129-32]

--and longs for the peace that the end of life alone can bring, regretting that suicide is forbidden. In his famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," he reflects upon the uncertainty of what follows death:

To die, to sleep;
 To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there is the rub.
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled of this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause. . . .

The undiscovered country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills that we have
 Than fly to others we know not of?

The ghost describes his experience of the purgatory where he had to go as he died without an opportunity to confess his sins. Ophelia is denied a Christian burial as she was considered to have committed suicide. The question whether the ghost is "a spirit of health, or goblin damned" resounds through the whole play. Hamlet's refusal to take advantage of the opportunity to avenge his father's death when he comes upon Claudius in prayer, is the result of his belief in sin and salvation.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

There other themes and other foci with reference to which, too, *Hamlet* can be studied for a meaningfully enriched understanding of the text. *Hamlet* has been treated as a study in melancholia and madness, as a study in ambition and political manipulation, as a philosophical enquiry into a number of issues that feature in the writings of Montaigne, or even as a study in the art of characterisation.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that the primary focus of the play's thematic burden lies on interpreting *Hamlet* as a revenge play?
2. Comment on the nature and significance of the ethics of revenge in *Hamlet*. How do various characters in the play respond to the issue of revenge?
3. How does the preponderance of the metaphors of theatre, acting, stage etc. in *Hamlet* condition our response to the play?
4. Does your own reading of the play suggest to you that one could profitably read and enjoy the play without paying attention to the issue of "theme" and "meaning"?