

Shakespeare's Hamlet, A Crafty Villain than a Hero

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's heroes are without any doubt taken from practical life; but some of his heroes are more villainous than heroic. Prince Hamlet, the central character of the play 'Hamlet' is obviously a crafty villain than a hero. His character, activity and instinct reflect his inherent qualities even without his willingness. He represents himself before us not as a valiant hero but as a scheming and guileful negative character, a villain.

Keywords: villainous, crafty, instinct, inherent, valiant, scheming, guileful

1. Introduction:

The life blood of the tragedy "Hamlet" is, was and will definitely be Prince Hamlet, widely known, honoured, loved, criticized and praised both as a hero and as a nerveless boring villain by the judicious readers and scholars. From the very inception of the play, he is continuously represented as a villain in the guise of a hero. The play proceeds and Hamlet becomes more complex, enigmatic and obscure in action. When the play gets started with the security issue of the palace of King Claudius, a ghost resembling King Hamlet in military suit is seen on the palace wall by Barnardo, Marcellus and Horatio. This ghost eventually defines the killer of King Hamlet before Prince Hamlet-but the action of the hero then becomes unintelligible and boring to the readers and audiences. The advancement of action is never smooth, it is rather time killing; though sometimes exciting-particularly in mouse-trap and in fencing match. Hamlet at last takes revenge not like other heroes of Shakespeare but as a crafty villain.

1.1 Development of thought:

Hamlet's unheroic and antihero-role in guise of a hero begins after the second marriage of his mother with his uncle Claudius. He cannot take it easily and tries to find out the reason behind it as the killer of his father is already been assigned by the ghost. He loses control and gets puzzled and wants to commit suicide but cannot commit because it is not legal. Hamlet in a soliloquy reveals his mind in the following way-

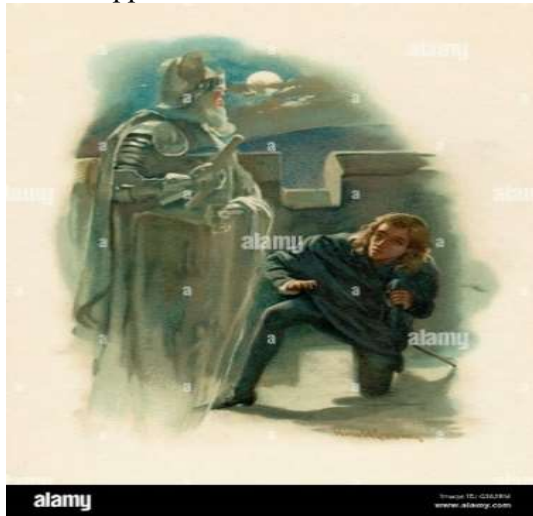


Prince Hamlet

*"O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God!
God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in
nature
Possess it merely."(Hamlet, Act-I, Scene-ii,
lines-131-139)*

Hamlet, like a peevish hero, loses his faith on his mother and suspects that his mother may have been involved in killing his father and then bluntly tells- *"Frailty, thy name is*

woman”(Hamlet, Act-1, Scene ii, line-148). After Hamlet’s first meeting with the ghost of King Hamlet, he instead of becoming invigorated, tries to establish the supremacy of Philosophy against supernaturalism and common sense and later muses over the revelation of the ghost. The Ghost can detect the unheroic nature of Hamlet and makes a fervent appeal-



**“If thou has nature in thee, bear it not,
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned
incest.”**(ACT-I, Scene-v, lines-86-88)

Hamlet becomes puzzled and addressing the ghost he expresses his utter helplessness and tells-

**“The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.”**(Act-I,

Hamlet, before the Ghost Scene-v, lines-204-05)

Hamlet’s harsh comment regarding King Claudius reflects his own character. He calls Claudius a villain but the original villain harbours in him. It seems that the following statement reflects his own character indirectly--

**“O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!
My tables. Meet it I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a
villain-
At least I am sure it may be so in
Denmark.”**(Act-I, Scene-v, lines-111-114)

1.2 Hamlet’s villainous attitude and activity:

When he gets a chance to stage a play in the palace with the help of the hired players according to his direction, he unmasks his shrewd plan before us. It seems that a villain is hatching a plan to entrap his prey. He is not a man of firm character, he rather represents his suspicious inner mind before us. We cannot but thank Hamlet because of his honest confession while making a plan to be sure that Claudius is the killer of his father. He identifies himself as-

**“I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a- dreams, unpregnant of my
cause,
And can say nothing- no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn’d defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain,”** (Hamlet, Act-II,
Scene-ii, lines-580-586)

Like a coward, Hamlet is irresolute in his plan and action. He is mentally disturbed and unstable. He expresses his doubt in a settled issue and tells-

**“The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’assume a pleasing shape, yea, and
perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I’ll have grounds
More relative than this. The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the
King.”**(Act-II, Scene-ii, lines-614-621)

Truth is inevitable and it comes out like a volcano. The villainous nature and its consequence unwillingly but subconsciously get the sun shine through the speech of Hamlet-

**“Thus conscience does make cowards of us
all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,”**
(Hamlet, Act-III, Scene-I, lines-90-92)

1.3 Hamlet, the murderer of his beloved:

In Act-iii, Scene-I, Hamlet meets his beloved Ophelia, his beloved, and behaves as a villain with her. His incoherent bubbling with frenzy

gesture makes her seriously wounded and puzzled. She is so shocked and disheartened that she thinks the Prince has become mad. Ophelia with sour heart bewails-“**O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!**”(Hamlet, Act-iii, Scene-I, line-162)

Ophelia later thinks of committing suicide because life without Hamlet is impossible to her. Then she commits suicide by drowning and Hamlet is the sole cause of her death. Here Hamlet is the murderer of Ophelia, the innocent heroine in ‘Hamlet’.

1.4 Hamlet, a namely hero, without heroism:

Hamlet’s way of taking revenge is in no way heroic. He, all through the play, does not act like a tradition hero. When suspected Claudius’ guilt is proved through staging the play ‘Mousetrap’, Hamlet even then does not become drastic in his action. Though it was not an easy task for Hamlet to kill Claudius in the court, he is on solid ground to take revenge against the killer of his father. But he fails for not having heroic zeal and courage. The persistent importune of the Ghost even fails to make Hamlet retain to his name and fame. When Hamlet is in the bed chamber of Queen Gertrude, the ghost again insists on taking revenge against the assigned killer of his father.



The incompetent hero can evaluate his aptitude and responses to the ghost as a villain and tells –

“**Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That, laps’d in time and passion-,**”(Hamlet, Act-III, Scene-iv, lines-120-121)

1.5 Pretention; a trifle trick:

Hamlet’s feigned madness disheartens us because it is not an action-device-attitude to accomplish the goal. The feigned madness of Ulysses could not save him from going to the Trojan War. So, Hamlet’s contrived madness, though it helped him attain success, does not match with a hero. He is also aware of the fact that such type practice does not suit a hero. So, he imparts his mother about his pretention and asks her not to share the bed of Claudius, the killer of the late king Hamlet. His adoption of hide and sick secures him the title of a villain rather than the honour of a hero. He exposes himself to the Queen in the following way-“**That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft,**”(Hamlet- Act-iii, Scene-iv, lines-206-207)

Hamlet, the feigned mad prince, kills Polonius in the bed chamber of Queen Gertrude that bears little effect. He is sent to England by the present king for his ultimate doom. Hamlet overcomes the danger, not for his feigned madness-but by the sheer chance of Fate.

According to Shakespeare, a bad intention in the heart must be kept concealed behind an innocent expression on the face of the bad man to mislead the world. It was the concept of Macbeth, another famous villainous hero of Shakespeare. Here, Macbeth tried his best to keep his crime unknown to all except his wife –but he could not because evil thing is followed by evil consequence. Macbeth was killed mercilessly because he was a villain in the shape of a hero. But Hamlet was not like Macbeth. He was in no way a sophisticated hero; rather a crafty villain as he even fails to conceal his revenge-motive through his behaviour. Shakespeare in ‘Macbeth’ tells through Macbeth-

“**False face must hide what the false heart doth know.**”

(Macbeth, Act-I, Scene-vii, Line-82)

1.6 Hamlet, a cool headed-damn murderer:

Hamlet kills Laertes, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Queen Gertrude as by products. They are not his enemies or they have not done any wrong to him; but they become the prey to Hamlet

because of his unheroic and villainous nature. He wants to kill King Claudius but his imperfect murderous intention makes the above persons helpless victims to him. Claudius is the killer of King Hamlet and Prince Hamlet wants to kill Claudius; but on the way of his revenge, the acquitted letter bearers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the victims. Claudius writes a letter to the King of England to kill Hamlet; but whenever Hamlet discovers the letter of Claudius, bearing the order of his death, he changes the names of the persons and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern face the death sentence. This is, of course, not a heroic deed, rather a cowardly practice from a villain. Actually, he has smeared the title of the Prince and degraded his position to a villain.

Why will we call Hamlet a hero? No, he is a villain in guise of a philosophical character. Someone has killed his father and the killer is assigned but what is the cause of his procrastination. Answer is that, his character or heroism does not suit it. He is not like Macbeth, Othello, Julius Caesar, Romeo, Orlando, Achilles or Ulysses. It is Hamlet who can deliver the following statement even after getting the killer of his father in his safe grief-
“A villain kills my father, and for that I, his sole son, do this same villain send To heaven.”(Hamlet, Act-III, Scene-iii, lines-79-81)

1.7 Hamlet’s fruitless, incoherent action:

He is so peculiar in his action that very few of us will call him a hero. He tries to make the audiences and readers foolish -concealing his cowardice. It becomes a question to us, when will he take the revenge? The audiences and readers lose their patience when Hamlet unmasks his plan of killing Claudius. In Act-iii, Scene-iii- Hamlet in a soliloquy tells-
“When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage, Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed, At game a-swearing, or about some act That has no relish of salvation in’t.”
(Hamlet, Act-III, Scene-iii, lines-92-95)
Hamlet’s desertion and Polonius’s death hasten the decision of Ophelia’s suicide. It is certain that, for both life loss, Hamlet is the

sole cause and he is the murderer. But, when Ophelia’s death body is brought for burial, Hamlet gives a villainous show to prove his love for Ophelia. Jumping into the grave of Ophelia, he shouts-

“I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers Could not with all their quantity of love Make up my sum.”(Hamlet, Act 5–Scene- I, lines- 276-278)

1.8 Hamlet, not appropriate for his character:

When Hamlet jumped into the grave of Ophelia to prove his love for her, he could be killed if he were not the Prince of his that country. George Bernard Shaw, the father of modern drama, has rightly presented the above lines in a satirical way only to indicate that such type of dialogue suits a villain like Hamlet and in “Man and Superman” Mendoza, a robber leader, utters like Hamlet-
“I loved Louisa: 40,000 brothers Could not with all their quantity of love Make up my sum.”(G B Shaw, Man and Superman, Act-III)

T S Eliot’s satirical and neurotic character J Alfred Prufrock even does not like to perform like Hamlet because he (H) is not such a commendable character who can be followed. Prufrock tells-

“No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor meant to be;”
(T S Eliot, The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, line-iii)

1.9 Hamlet, not confident of his valour and name:

Hamlet, son of the late King Hamlet, a well-known prince, next heir to the crown- has no confidence on his position, valour and heroic deeds. He can evaluate his merit and eminence. So, before his death, Hamlet makes a fervent appeal to Horatio to continue his (Hor) life to tell the unknown story of Hamlet to inquisitors. Hamlet tells Horatio-

“Horatio, I am dead, Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright To the unsatisfied.”(Hamlet, Act-v, Scene-ii, Line-361-363)

Even after this friendly request to Horatio, Hamlet does not become sure of Horatio's role and in the same act and scene, he again implores Horatio to continue his life only to tell the unknown story of his life to the people around him. He beseeches-

***O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave
behind me,
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in
pain
To tell my story.*** (Hamlet, Act-v, Scene-ii,
lines- 369--374)

The above statements make it clear to us that Hamlet was never heroic and justified to his name and position. He is lesser in honour to Prince Fortinbras.

2. Hamlet's character- an impartial evaluation:

Hamlet is more a name than a hero. He would never get eminence without being the central character of William Shakespeare's outstanding and popular play 'Hamlet'. His weaknesses, shortcomings, procrastination, losing opportunity, vague madness, shrewd but immature bubbling, irresponsible love attitude, unheroic dealings with the pirates, easy but avoidable surrender to death, handing over power to his father's enemy's son, selecting a lesser man as his representative (Horatio) to impart the world- the history and the cause of his death, a jackal witted personality and outward smartness, confirm and secure his status as a villain.

But, if we be meticulous and experienced readers of Shakespeare's plays, our judgment and character study will be obviously different. We are habituated to getting rational behavior and action from a hero. He will be judicious, kind, a man of honour, -strong personality, patience, forgiveness, virtue, motivation and reliance. He should not be a man of rash judgment like King Lear or

Macbeth, rather he will be like Prince Hamlet of 'Hamlet'. So, in this regard, Hamlet is what he should be. He is just as Shakespeare wanted him to be or he is just as we could be if we were in his place. He is none but a man who plays his role as a man of a common society or as a prince whose father is murdered and he is just struggling to survive let alone having the power of taking revenge against his own uncle and his mother's present husband who correctly looks after him as his son and declares him the next heir of the throne. It is worth mentioning that Claudius' weakness might establish Prince Hamlet as a hero and the next king of the state because Claudius was in no respect a heroic person and he did not have country support.

A C Bradley in his 'Shakespearean Tragedy' states – "*In Hamlet 'If Hamlet may be trusted, he was a man of mean appearance – a mildewed ear, a toad, a bat; and he was also bloated by excess in drinking. People made mouths at him in contempt while his brother lived, and though, when he came to the throne, they spent large sums in buying his portrait, he evidently put little reliance on their loyalty'*" (Page-143, para-11) Then, a question comes to our mind, why do we love or like Prince Hamlet? The answer is simple- he is a character-sketches by Shakespeare.

3. Research Methodology:

This article follows a qualitative research approach using textual analysis as well as primary method to examine Shakespeare's famous tragedy 'Hamlet'. The study is based on a close and meticulous reading of the play, focusing on Hamlet's actions, dialogues, and strategies that reveals his craftiness and villainous tenderness and attitude rather than traditional heroic qualities.

The methodology adopted here are:

3.1 Textual Analysis:

Selected key scenes and Hamlet's soliloquies (e.g.-Act I, Scene- i, ii, v, Act ii, Scene-ii, Act III, Scene-i, iii, iv, Act-Scene-i) where Hamlet's scheming, plot making, manipulation, and deceptive nature are

evident. Examined and analyzed Hamlet's use of language, especially irony, puns, and double meanings, to reveal his psychological tactics.

3.2 Thematic Approach:

Identified themes like-revenge motive, deception, moral corruption, and confusing line between villainy and heroism. Analyzed how Hamlet's procrastination in avenging his father's murder results not from hesitation but from proper planning and manipulation of other characters (e.g.-Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia and Claudius).

3.3 Comparative Character Study:

Compared Hamlet's character with Shakespeare's traditional heroes (like Othello and Macbeth and even with Kyd's Hieronimo) to highlight the differences that make him a crafty villain than a hero. Referenced critical opinions from scholars who consider Hamlet as amorally obscure and even Machiavellian in nature.

3.4 Secondary Sources:

Reviewed several relevant literary criticism, journal articles, and books dealing with Hamlet's character traits, including his arguments and villainous strategies and application. This methodology helps to understand a comprehensive sketch of Hamlet's character through literary, thematic, and critical lenses, supporting the article's argument that Hamlet is a crafty villain than a hero.

4. Conclusion: we, from every corner of the world, esteem Hamlet as a hero of William Shakespeare. He is the protagonist of this play. But, it is also known to us that all the protagonists are not heroes or heroines. Hamlet, the central character of this play has many notable qualities and most of these are not heroic in nature rather they are philosophical and non-action related. Though it seems that he is trying all his best to take revenge against the killer of his father, his action, attitude, step, procrastination,

fake lover attitude, selection of friends, jumping into the grave of Ophelia, killing the wrong persons, misbehaviour with his mother, suspicion, killing Laertes and Polonius, surrendering country to his father's enemy's son Fortinbras, etc. Hamlet's ways of dealing with his enemy- Claudius is very disgusting because the readers and audiences cannot take his action as a normal one. It is often said that Shakespeare's heroes behave naturally; but here Hamlet does not behave naturally because he fails to represent himself as a common hero of the world. Does it mean that he is an uncommon hero? The answer is so puzzling and one-sided. He is a man of complex nature and suffers always from indecision though he is wise and philosophical in his nature and action. His instinct and inherent qualities best suit for villainous activity and he unconsciously behaves as a villain. He is so talented that his villainous qualities are not so flashing as some of his heroic qualities. A close and meticulous study will surely unmask his latent crafty shrewd Machiavellian attitude and nature. So, it can be said that, he is a crafty villain than a hero.

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