



Random Comments on the Character of Hamlet

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Abstract

Hamlet is considered to be the summit of Shakespeare art and one of the Shakespeare's masterpieces. Although Shakespeare wrote the play and created and described this character of Hamlet more than 400 years ago, *Hamlet* is still appreciated by both Europeans and Chinese people. The image of Hamlet appears so vividly before us and the character of Hamlet is still so deeply endeared and admired by numerous Chinese readers that the study of *Hamlet* constantly becomes a hot topic of Chinese scholars in China. This paper tries to make some comments on the character of Hamlet by analyzing him from the perspective of his inner-mind changes with the story development, especially exploring the formation of his melancholy and its causes in more details, and then attempts to indicate its historical significance of the play so as to give the future readers more implications and draw some lessons from Hamlet as well.

Key words: Shakespeare; Hamlet; Character; Causes; Significance

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INTRODUCTION

"Hamlet" is one of Shakespeare's "Four Great Tragedies". The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues is one of Shakespeare's most impressive achievements. As we all

know, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is a worldwide famous playwright as well as a humanist. In his life, he wrote 38 plays which reflect the life of Britain from the 16th century to the turning of the 17th century. *Hamlet* is considered one of the Shakespeare's masterpieces written in 1601. The story comes from an old Danish legend, which narrates the process of how Hamlet, the young prince of Denmark avenges his father, the old king, and fights against the murderer, his uncle Claudius, who plotted to kill his brother and tied to usurp his throne and then marry Gertrude, his brother's wife and mother of Hamlet, by all deceitful means. In the following the paper will try to make some comments on the character of Hamlet by analyzing him from the perspective of Hamlet's inner-mind changes with the development of different scene periods.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER OF HAMLET AND ITS CAUSES

The play describes chiefly the character of Hamlet. From the very beginning, the conflict among the leading characters appear very sharp. The love, friendship and revenge are involved in the arrangement of the "play scene" — all these make the plot remarkably active and interesting and present a strong appeal to the readers.

1.1 Being Native as a Humanist Scholar

Before his father's departure, Hamlet is the pride of Denmark, for he studies in University of Wittenburg in Germany, being educated with humanism. He has lofty ideals and entertains high hopes for the world and mankind. Here is what he says:

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason!
 how infinite in faculty! in form and moving
 how express and admirable! in action how like an angel!
 in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world!
 the paragon of animals!

(See Act II, Scene II)

From what he said above, we can see that being a model youth with new ideas and a representative of the new age, he is delighted, straightforward and full of vitality in personality; he keeps forging ahead in thought; he is modest and unassuming towards his subordinates; he appreciates the ability and virtue of others while hating hypocrisy and evils bitterly; he is sensitive and easily excited. In a word, he is once a guy of the gayest and most lively men in the world at that time.

1.2 Being Melancholic as a Humanist Person

The “play scene” is the place where he learns to understand the world. During this time, a tremendous number of troubles come to cloud his mind, bring about his melancholy state of mind and hesitation in action.

1.2.1 His Father’s Death and Mother’s Remarriage

Owing to the sudden death of his father, he is obliged to come back to his motherland with a heavy heart. On seeing his mother’s new marriage with Claudius just one month after his father’s death, he can hardly believe his own eyes. In his opinion, the late king, his father, is the most perfect image of the world and the relationship between himself and his wife should be the most harmonious one. Thus, Hamlet’s ideal comes to be dashed to pieces by the remarriage of his mother. He associates the fact with the common weakness of the female -- that is “Frailty, the name is woman!” (see Act I, Scene II) The more he thinks over the matter, the sadder he becomes until he is so miserable and gloomy that he gives up all his manly games and pastimes and seems to have departed from his gaily natural self. From that time on his being melancholy has become the key-note of his characteristic.

1.2.2 His Disability in Realizing His Wishes

In talking with the ghost of his father, Hamlet is told that father has been treacherously murdered and the serpent is nothing but the new king, Claudius. So he swears revenge on Claudius. He has drawn a lesson from what happened to his father:

...That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I’m sure it may be so in Denmark...
(See Act I, Scene V)

By connecting his own revenge with the common evils prevailing in the society at large, he sees through the world. He says: “The time is out of joint.” (see Act I, Scene V) He regards Denmark as well as the world as a prison, “in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o’th’ worst.” (see Act II, Scene II) His strong will to defend his ideals and reform reality makes him bent on setting the society right. Meanwhile he feels his ability falling short of his wishes; so it causes his mental agony. He is grieved to find the injustice triumphantly over justice.

1.2.3 His Failure in Love and His Schoolmates’ Betrayal

Later, Claudius begins to suspect his gloominess. He summons Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, Hamlet’s

schoolmates, and orders them to spy on Hamlet. And then Claudius takes Ophelia as a tool to fish for information from the prince. Seeing all these, Hamlet’s ideal of humanism is once again shattered, for he has never expected that his old friends and sweetheart should become actually the accomplices of the wicked king.

1.2.4 His Opponent Being Powerful

Having located the truth of his father’s death, the young prince doesn’t take action but sinks into meditation, just because of his opponent being big and powerful enough and his task so formidable. So he is torn by the conflicting ideas -- to live or die, to endure or resist. These ideas to trouble his mind and conscience so much that he wonders if it is worth while to live on. Thus, with so many worries, he becomes much more melancholy than ever. Here is what Ophelia says of him:

O, what a noble mind is here o’er thrown!
... -- quiet, quite down!
(See Act III, Scene I)

Confronted with the foregoing facts, Hamlet is unable to drop his melancholy but is deeply involved in it. Yet reality requires neither lament nor grief. It requires action, which is incompatible with his mood. Under such circumstances, his ideological struggle is growing in intensity, deeply sinking into melancholy.

1.3 Being Hesitated in Action and Contradicted in Mentality

Hamlet always takes a skeptical attitude towards everything. He is troubled by mental conflicts and is in a state of contradiction before acting. For example, a) In Scene II of Act III, Hamlet, on the way to his mother’s apartment, comes upon Claudius, who is falling on his knees in an attempt at prayer. Nothing could have been easier than to carry out his revenge there and then, but weakness and indecision prevails over his resolve. So he fails to kill him and let the opportunity of revenge slip away. As we know, Hamlet has then confirmed that it is Claudius who has murdered his father. So generally speaking, his great indignation and constrained feeling would press him hard to kill Claudius at once; it is inevitable and reasonable for him to take action as concerns his hatred for the evil king. But he fails to do so because of his hesitation. b) From the following words he utters, we can observe his contradictory mentality, the result of his melancholy.

What a piece of work is man! How noble in
Reason! how infinite in faculty ! ... And yet, to me,
What is this quintessence of dust? man delights
Not me; no, nor women neither.
(See Act II, Scene II)

In this monologue, Hamlet affirms mankind and life on one hand and he negates them on the other hand. The monologue is well concentrating and obviously expressing humanists’ contradiction in thinking while it also shows

that Hamlet is quite aware of some factors that are good enough to prevent him from accomplishing his task and revenging his father. He realizes that the people at large are not the same as those he has expected. From Claudius to Oskier, he has come across very few good and honest people in the world and he takes it for granted that the destruction of human nature is due to the root of social evils.

Therefore, Hamlet is a person with strong characteristics. Weakness is not a part of his disposition but his mentality. His hesitation is not caused by his weakness but by the complicity of his contemplated task—to eliminate evils in the world. His hesitation does not mean to give up the struggle. What he hesitates or suspects is how to complete his task better. And the development of the play plot lies in the fact that Hamlet is trying to free himself from his inner conflicts: though he hates his wicked uncle, he naturally shrinks from killing any of the other human beings, which is decided by his humanist sentiments. In other words, it is because of his attempt to find out some fair or just measures that he gives up the chance to kill the guilty king.

1.4 Being Alterable and Tricky Enough in Nature

Although Hamlet is enveloped in melancholy and obviously caught by the spiritual shackles in Act I and Act II, it does not mean that his characteristic is unalterable. From Act III on, he starts to overcome his melancholy state of mind step by step. Hamlet becomes a changeable man with tricks. First, in order to hide his feelings better, Hamlet feigns madness to escape suspicion by pretending to be disappointed in a love affair. Secondly, Hamlet sees through Claudius' s purpose of sending Ophelia to take him. Therefore, while chatting with her, Hamlet simulates rudeness, consistent with his feigned insanity. Thirdly, to test whether the old couple are guilty or not and verify the truth of what the ghost has said, Hamlet arranges a “play scene”, the scene of revealing who is the real murderer of his father. Through revising the play, the prince becomes deeply convinced of the king's guilty conscience when Claudius seems to be profoundly affected by the performance by leaving the hall before the play is ended. By doing so, Hamlet achieves his aim that the conspiracy of Claudius is fully brought to light.

1.5 Being Resolute and Decisive in Action

With the development of the story, Hamlet's hesitation gradually gives place to resolution and his melancholy to uprightness. The following occasions can well illustrate these characteristics. a) In Scene IV of Act III, during the course of his conversation with his mother, Hamlet suddenly notices that he is being overheard from behind the arras in the Queen's closet. Thinking it to be no other than Claudius, he stabs and kills the eavesdropper right away who turns out to be Polonius. b) On the way home to England, Hamlet discovers a letter in which Claudius

commissions his Britain vassals to put him to death as soon as he sets foot on the soil of England. Upon detecting such an evil plot, Hamlet makes a prompt decision and alters the content of the letter by replacing his name with those of his two accompanying officers. On the next day, he jumps on board of the pirate ship single-handed, and returns to Denmark finally. c) In the “sword play” plotted by Claudius, Hamlet instantly kills Claudius with the poisoned rapier as soon as he learns from Laertes that it is Claudius who has plotted for his assassination. d) Before dying, Hamlet asks his close friend Horatio to make known to the people the true story of his father's murder and of his justified revenge, together with his last words of letting Fortinbras succeed in coming to the throne. All these occasions show that Hamlet is being both brave and resourceful. Especially after dropping melancholy, he acts resolutely and decisively.

1.6 Being Upright With High Aspirations

As a prince, Hamlet is upright and honorable, a man who has high aspirations and lofty ideals. By the end of the 16th century when Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) is approaching to the last few years on her throne, social contradictions in England are intensified. The struggle inside the court is growing sharper and sharper on the question of the succession to the throne. By the time of James I (1603-1625), the despotic monarch, political revolts with the bourgeoisie and the laboring people as the motivating force shook the feudal society to its very foundations. As a humanist, Hamlet is confronted with the new struggle when the feudal society is declining while the capitalist society rising. Hamlet is living in an age when “the time is out of joint”. He is dissatisfied with the practice of the imperial government. This is what Hamlet regards the world as at that time:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! O, fie! 'tis on unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

(See Act I, Scene II)

After meeting with the ghost of his father, Hamlet's resolve to revenge on Claudius is closely linked with his objective to change reality. Such an ideal of remaking the society is in keeping with the aspirations of the masses objectively. So he is welcomed by the laboring people, with whom he is in constant touch. This is what Claudius himself has to admit the man he hates and fears: “... The great love the general gender bear him” (see Act IV, Scene VII). In Scene II of Act II, while meeting with the actors, Hamlet is very glad by calling them friends, and also asks Polonius to receive them warmly. The actors are then often looked down upon and humiliated while Hamlet, however, shows sympathy for them as well as concern for them. So Hamlet obtains much support from the masses owing to his justice. Just for this reason, Claudius,

the vicious king, can not kill him brazenly. Meanwhile, Hamlet also hates the evils brought about by capitalism; he is determined to eradicate them. At this juncture, he comes to know people better and perceives things in a better light. Yet he can not realize the reason why his ideal fails to come true then, and there seems to be no way out. He simply can't see the power of the people though they love him body and soul. When the local people rise against the rule of that of tyrant, he only stresses his own effort instead of that of people. So he curses the grave-diggers, who condemn the injustice of the social system. Hence, we get to know that Hamlet shows sympathy for the working people on one hand and neglects their role on the other hand. That is the main course of his conflicting mentality and tragedy. That is the reason why he often busies himself about without accomplishing anything. However, the contradiction between Hamlet and Claudius reflects a combat of humanist force against that of social darkness. Confronted with so many difficulties, Hamlet tries every possible way to seek for the road to reconstruction. All these facts testify that Hamlet is by no means weak-minded. He is conscious that "the time is out of joint" and has the ambition to set it right.

1.7 Being Forgivable and Emotional in Mind

Aside from the characteristics mentioned above, Hamlet is also a forgivable and tenderhearted man full of emotions as disclosed in his attitude towards his mother and his affection for Ophelia. We learn from Hamlet that his father loved his mother passionately, and there is every reason to believe that Hamlet's father and mother lived happily together. But after the old king died, she very soon forgot her husband and gave her hand to Claudius. On hearing this, Hamlet is totally puzzled. The sorrow for his father knows no bounds. What a sharp contrast there is between his noble father and his exceedingly debased uncle Claudius! The graceful image of his father is simply beyond comparison in human society. Before departure for England, Hamlet scolds Gertrude, his heartless mother, relentlessly for her sins. In a sharp tone, Hamlet expresses his indignation at her unfaithfulness towards her husband's memory. Hamlet stresses the frailty and infidelity of his mother, though he has never ceased to love and respect her. Hamlet is really practicing what he says: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (see Act III, Scene III). Hamlet forgives her mother for her faults that he attributes to Claudius himself. Hamlet's forgiveness and tenderness towards his mother may just prove to be a touch of his humanist weakness.

After his father's death, Hamlet has grave doubts about the practical significance of love and female sanctity. However Hamlet has fallen in deep love with Ophelia through frequent contacts with her. In order to revenge for his father, Hamlet has to sacrifice his love for her by pretending to have gone mad. Later Ophelia unconsciously becomes the tool of her father's intrigues.

Superficially Hamlet treats her coldly, yet he can hardly hold back his deep love for her. He shows sympathy and compassion for her when finding that she has gone mad. His sincere feelings are clearly observable in Scene I of Act V. At the moment when he escapes from the ship and returns to Denmark, Hamlet encounters a funeral party attended by the high-ranking officials in the court as well as the king and queen. Learning for whom it is held, Hamlet is terribly shocked by the tragic news and overtaken with sorrow. So he says:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis; whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers! This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

(See Act V, Scene I).

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

(See Act V, Scene I)

Hamlet declares in these lines his sorrow and cries that he has loved Ophelia for more than a brother could. He is willing to do everything for Ophelia, even at the cost of his life. All this proves that Hamlet is full of emotions besides his melancholy and is sincere and softhearted towards Ophelia. In Hamlet's eyes, there should be a pure love in human society. But owing to his noble identity as a prince, Hamlet's marriage can hardly be decided by himself.

In short, from what discuss above, we can see that Hamlet is a humanist of the age of renaissance. His characteristics are typical of other humanists of that time. He is free from medieval prejudices and superstitions. He is a man who faces the ugly reality as it is, dreams of healthy human relations and yet is unable to steer a right course to realize his dream. Thus the loftier the dream, the gloomier the surrounding reality, and the acuter his mental conflicts. The famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be -- that is the question" (see Act III, Scene I), indicates that Hamlet knows what to do but does not know how to do it well; it shows his probe over life, his vexation, hesitation, strong criticism and exposure of the society; it also subtly delineates the inner world of Hamlet. Nevertheless, Hamlet shows his sympathy for the poor people and is always on their side, and he stresses the dignity and equality of human society. He is an outstanding representative of the progressive class, a man bold enough to fight against the evils of the feudal system and wins the moral victory at the sacrifice of his life.

2. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HAMLET

From the analysis above, we can come to the conclusion that Hamlet is a person with multiple personalities. However, the causes for it lie not only in his subjective

incapability, but also in the historical limitations of his consciousness of the men of that age. The play reflects the surroundings and social life at that time. The society Hamlet lives in lacks the necessary conditions of success. The contradiction between his lofty ideal and crude reality is one of the reasons of his profound grief and disappointment as well as his melancholy. His tragedy is one of the humanist outlook as well as of the times. Moreover, living in those days when the feudal forces are predominant, Hamlet, as a humanist, regards the great task as his own. Though he cherishes a profound reverence for man, and a firm belief in man's power and destiny, he can neither rely on the working people to reconstruct the society, nor is he able to see the power of the masses except his own effort, which leads up to the tragedy. That is also the reason why he is unable to complete his mission to set the society right. Nevertheless, the play has its historical significance: Hamlet's spirit arouses the fighting will of the people. That is the reason why, up to now, people in the world are deeply touched by this famous tragedy. *Hamlet* reflects the contradictions at the turning from the old society to the new one; it exposes the sharp conflict between the nobility and the bourgeois; it also reveals the acute struggle between the courtiers for seeking power and the scene of the crisis-ridden imperial court; it shows clearly that the bourgeois humanists then had every reason, strong determination and possible means to reorganize the society, yet they could not succeed. Just for these reasons, *Hamlet* radiates with the light of humanist ideology; there is great momentum in it with much philosophy. It is just like what people say: *Hamlet* is permeated with the spirit of Shakespeare's own time and is the profoundest expression of Shakespeare's humanism and his criticism of contemporary life.

CONCLUSION

Under Shakespeare's pen, Hamlet is an ideal thinker with the most progressive ideals of humanism, full of dreams and aspirations and well aware of the evils of the time. He is an avenger with melancholy, depression and delay and later becomes an active avenger or reformer. Today, by analyzing the character of Hamlet, it not only helps us to understand the soundings Hamlet lies in but also helps us to know the society at that time. Besides, the play *Hamlet* has provided us with many significant meanings and draws us some implications. To sum up, from Shakespeare's tragedy of Hamlet, we are quite aware that when numerous opportunities come, we will learn from the lesson of Hamlet that never lest them go easily and catch them without any hesitation. When encountering difficulties, try every means to overcome them without avoiding or escaping them. And no matter what happens, try to be a person with progressive ideals; be brave and decisive enough in action; be forgivable to the one you love best; be sympathy for the poor; be upright and honest with aspirations. In a word, whatever conclusion one reaches about this play, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is always one of immortal masterpieces in the world.

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