

# The Story of Hamlet

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## **Abstract:**

William Shakespeare emerged as a champion of dramatic art in his brilliant tragedies. *Hamlet* stands as a touchstone of his creative opus owing to its manifold themes and depiction of human conscience at work. The story of the tragic prince of Denmark is very enigmatic in nature. His is the saga of a creative and philosophic genius who had to undergo deeper pains to justify his existence in the not so sensitive world. That he wanted his story to be known to the posterity in its logical form and that he beseeched his confidante Horatio to live to narrate it so that he might not be misunderstood and misquoted, makes this drama more significant in the analysis of human nature trying to cope up with the ways of destiny. It was due to Hamlet's nobility of thought, his stoic ability of endurance amidst wounded circumstances that make his story the most touching portrayal of human nature in conflict with the societal forces.

**Key words:** Trauma, abnormal behavior, moral turpitude

*"It is the story... that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The Story is our escort; without it, we are blind.*

*Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us."*

--- Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*

It is pertinent to note that the brilliant critic and poet of Victorian Age, Matthew Arnold's cogent consideration of the dying speech of Hamlet in the great play of William Shakespeare of the same name as one of the Touchstone passages in his "The Study of Poetry" owing to the "higher seriousness" that it invites the general attention of the readers and viewers regarding the grand theme and rhetoric of individual experience in a chaotically "out of joint" world. The story that Hamlet intends his bosom friend Horatio to transfer to the posterity is the saga of a sentimental mind trying to adjust with the moral depravity of the materialistic world. The relevant extract from Arnold's text is as follows:

"...and take, as well, Hamlet's dying request to Horatio ---

'If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story..." (Enright & Chikera 268)

Before we initiate into delving deeper the importance of the story of Hamlet for the society at large in the present times as well as for the future generation, it would not be out of context to mention that Matthew Arnold, the great poet critic of Victorian Age, while valuing the significance of the immense future of poetry (*Kavya* including *Drishya* and *Shravya* in the broader sense of the word) in the making of a hopeful and good society, asserted that it is because of the possession of higher truth and higher

seriousness, that Aristotle observed as profound, the poetry stands superior to history. The famous Aristotle scholar, K G Srivastava views, "... if poetry is a criticism of life, then its highest mark should be the expression of the best and the noblest of thoughts gathered from various branches of learning, powerful enough to have moved the poet profoundly and to have been assimilated by his mind and soul, thus gaining an authentic ring in their expression. It is the deeply felt noble thoughts, rendered most impersonal by the imaginative structuring by the poet that constitutes 'Higher Seriousness' of Arnold's conception which is.... Substantially the same thing as Aristotle's notion of the "Universality of Poetry"(Srivastava 106). Arnold's consideration of the value of Shakespeare lies in the universal view of life and nature depicted so virtually and lucidly that it looks like a lively tale of common human being trapped in the tumultuous whirlwind of crises. The tragedy of destiny, that the character of Hamlet witnesses, unfurls multilayered experiences of human consciousness. Hamlet, a university student comes to know about the sudden death of his loving father. The psychological fret felt by him has ever been inscrutable to the scholarly circle. The hasty marriage of his mother Gertrude with his uncle Claudius soon after the death of his affectionate father was something tough to bear with. His rendezvous with the ghost of his father followed by his tormented confession about the ugliest and unnatural murder of his constructs the evolution of plot in, "Murder most foul, as in the best it is; But this most foul, strange, and unnatural" (Act I Scene V) and that Hamlet should avenge his father's murder if he was guided by his basic human instinct,

"O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!

If thou hast 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)

However the ghost suggests Hamlet not to treat Gertrude in the manner of Claudius and asks him to let her suffer her own *Karma* and bear the consequences accordingly,

"Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive

Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven,

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,

To prick and sting her. (Act I Scene V)

Hamlet's inner voice in the form of his soliloquies reveals his reflections on the worldly abyss. Life, as is well known, seems a bed of roses for a person like Hamlet who is born with silver spoons in his hands. The Romantic poet John Keats also invites our attention about the common phenomenon that "In the very temple of Delight/ Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine"(Ode on Melancholy). The melancholia of which Hamlet suffers was due to his failure to find an ideal world. His quest for the Ideal in fact leads him to undertake his actions. A man of thought, he initially broods over suicide but the idea soon gets dispelled after he reflects upon its repercussions that were due to his insightful bent of mind that could realize the fact that nobody knows as to what happens after death. Probably his belief in the idea of rebirth makes him think so. His ethical mindset is changed with the common wisdom that the uglier present should be preferred to unknown future,

"To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn

No traveler returns, puzzles the will,

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?

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." (Act III Scene I)

As regards the suicidal tendency, Albert Camus observes in 'An Absurd Reasoning', "Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art, the man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger and jumps. ...he had 'undermined' him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. Society has but little connection with such beginnings. The worm is in man's heart" (The Myth of Sisyphus 03). A loving son of an adorable father, Hamlet develops within himself a deeper sense of distraction after having heard of the untimely death of his father under mysterious circumstances. Moreover, Hamlet's anxiety is developed with the suggestion of the new king of Denmark, Claudius to consider the demise of Hamlet senior with "wisest sorrow" and that they ought to mind their own interests. Gertrude's shameless suggestion to Hamlet that everyone who is born is sure to die one day and that he would not be so particular with the death of his father creates a deeper sense of frustration in his mind. Unable to cope with the emotional turbulence he realizes the troublesome nature of this temporary world that offers no trust but only disenchantment and mental trauma. He utters,

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!

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. (Act I, Scene II)

He generalized the image of a woman as a weakling who because of their fragility may be easily won over --"Frailty! Thy name is woman." His resentment against Gertrude reached so intense that he deemed her even inferior to a beast lacking in reason and morality. In fact Gertrude's moral turpitude seems to be one of the prime reasons behind Hamlet's abnormal behavior. His over reflective mind finds no option but lack of decision regarding the future course of action,

"To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them" (Act III, Scene I)

However, as regards his relationship with Gertrude is concerned, he follows the ethical code formulated by the society. It highly seems probable that Hamlet got psychologically offended not much with the death of his father, but with the marriage of his mother with his own uncle Claudius, and that too at a very short notice. It is a well known fact that mother is the most respectful figure worthy to be admired and trusted. Matricide is deemed as a sin. His utterance, "I will speak daggers to her but use none" (Act III Scene II) is suggestive of his intention not to hurt her physically. When he interacts with his mother, he rebukes her by way of showing a mirror up to her guilty conscience as follows,

“A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother,  
As kill a king and marry with his brother.” (Act III Scene IV)

This made Gertrude again reminded of her immoral act and she says in a pathetically emotional tone,  
“O Hamlet, speak no more!

Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grainèd spots  
As will not leave their tinct” (Act III Scene IV)

According to Bradley, “If these various peculiarities of the tragedy are considered, it will be agreed that, while Hamlet certainly cannot be called in the specific sense a ‘religious drama’, there is in it nevertheless both a freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided, though always imaginative, intimation of a supreme power concerned in human evil and good, that can be found in any other of Shakespeare’s tragedies. And this is probably one of the causes of the special popularity of this play, just as Macbeth, the tragedy which in these respects most nearly approaches it, has also the place next to it in general esteem”( Bradley 141). Further in the play, Hamlet, while taking cognizance of the pain he inflicted upon Laertes by mistakenly killing his father Polonius, notes that it was not his true Self that killed him; rather his Madness was responsible for the act. Like an advocate on record in the court of justice, he intends himself to be regarded as a sufferer and not a perpetrator,

“Was't Hamlet wrong;d Laertes? Never Hamlet:

If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,  
Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.

Who doest it then? His madness. If 't be so,  
Hamlet is of the faction wrong'd;

His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy” (Act V Scene II).

As regards his relationship with Ophelia, it had a bit of tragedy involved in it. It seems that it was an interaction between the philosophically ideal person and a realistically practical woman who failed to communicate properly to meet their nuptial destinations. His misogynistic remark to Ophelia smells a note of dissent towards the feminine world. Though here Hamlet looks quite rude and blunt, yet it seems that having been so much affronted by the infirmity of a mother figure Gertrude, he had lost faith in the feminine world. To Hamlet, Ophelia is an image of purity, chastity and virtue that he didn't want to be ravished by social flaws. He says, “Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves – believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father?” (Act III Scene I) This has further to be noted that after the death of Ophelia when Hamlet says,

“I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum (Act V Scene I)” it becomes highly apparent that since he was known to the doom he would follow in avenging his father's murder, he couldn't afford to develop amorous advances when situations were terribly against him. Lady Ophelia remained a virtuous figure in his mind because she died pure and intact without any slight trace of infidelity. Later on, when Hamlet says that, “There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it

be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all,” (Act V Scene II) here in this statement Hamlet asserts that everything goes on as per the dictates of the divine, as per the irretrievable Fate and finds assurance amidst chaotic circumstances thus leading to Hamlet’s complete surrender to the will of God. It seems in all probability that Hamlet, after having been fully fed up with the wounded system, wanted to take shelter in the divinity by way of heroically dying the death of a warrior, and not like a coward. The final fencing match became a means to validate his actions as a tragic hero able enough to bring about the catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear. James Joyce observes, “Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.....”

The tragic emotion, in fact, is a face looking two ways, towards terror and towards pity, both of which are phases of it. You see I use the word arrest. I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore, improper arts. The aesthetic emotion is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing (Joyce 204-205).

In fine, *Hamlet* can be considered as a tragedy of psychological intellectualism. The central protagonist’s tendency to overanalysing his proposed actions becomes a bane for his personality. In fact it became his tragic flaw as well. The last scene of the play deliberates upon the thematic nature of death in the context of a morally depraved and rotten social setting. A young boy’s inability to adjust his neurotic orders with the trend of the materialistic world amounted to the catastrophe of his existence. The final scene in the text unfurls the fruits of the *Karmic* theory. Gertrude and Claudius met their tragic fate as a matter of fact falling prey to their self made trap. It becomes quite clear that Laertes had well understood the impish plot concocted by Claudius and before Laertes died he had a very fine opinion about Hamlet,

“Exchange forgiveness with me, Noble Hamlet;  
Mine and mine father’s death come not upon thee,  
Nor thine on me! (Act V, Scene II)

This leads to the display of Hamlet’s grand nobility in the eyes of Laertes that made even Fortinbras opine highly of him,

“Let four captains  
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage;  
For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have prov’d most royally; and for his passage  
The soldiers’ music and the rites of war  
Speak loudly for him. (Act V Scene II)

According to Schopenhauer, “ in tragedies the noblest men after long conflict and suffering at last renounce the ends they have so keenly followed, and all the pleasure of life forever, or else freely and joyfully surrender life itself” (The World as Will and Idea Vol 1, 327). The thought of Pt Vidyanivas Mishra is worthy of note herein, “Of Dharma there is no death, for it is purified continually by truth; what actually is (rita) and imperishable resides in truth (Satya). The awareness that death is in this body and immortality is too is in it, constitutes truth’s consciousness.

Amrutam chaiva mrutyushcha dvayam dehe pratishthitam/  
Mrityurapayate mohatsyenyapayate mrutam// (S. P. 278/29-30)

So there is contradiction between them only in the sense of being better or still better. That which seems to be contradictory in essence are degrees of comparison. In choosing eventually the better over the lesser, one has to forego all attachment. One has to view equally all aspects that affect all, If one does this, then one realizes that really there is no choice, except choiceless Dharma” ( Mishra, Mahabharata, 197).

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