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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

Hamlet

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Hamlet*

HAMLET is a play, specifically a tragedy, and more specifically a Shakespearean tragedy. A Shakespearean tragedy generally involves a tragic hero (Hamlet) who holds an elevated position in his society (Prince of Denmark, son of the late king and current queen, nephew to the current king).

Some key character trait (Hamlet is a thoughtful, contemplative, and scholarly man) motivates the hero to perform an action or to set in motion a series of actions. (Hamlet is called to avenge his father's murder, but finds vengeance difficult to achieve while he has questions about the true nature of his father's ghost, his uncle's guilt, and his mother's virtue. It is more in Hamlet's nature to ponder the various possibilities and their consequences than to actually take action. Ultimately, however, his inaction draws more and more people into the circle of corruption that will eventually have to be destroyed.)

This series of actions creates intense suffering both for the hero and for the society at large (Hamlet is plagued by intense guilt about his failure to achieve revenge. The method he chooses to assess his uncle's guilt hurts his mother and his girlfriend, ultimately resulting in his girlfriend's death. His own insecurity allow him to trust virtually no one, including his own mother, his girlfriend, and two childhood friends who have come to "help" him. This distrust erupts into violence once Hamlet reaches the point of being able to take action.) Finally, the hero is killed by someone who has been caught up in the overall intense suffering (Hamlet is killed by Laertes, whose father and sister Hamlet has essentially destroyed). Peace and order are restored.

Sometimes an outside agent (a villain or some other intruder) acts as a catalyst to the hero's beginning the action or series of actions. (Hamlet is already grieving his father's death and lamenting his mother's remarriage when the ghost appears, but the fatal distrust of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the involvement of Laertes and Ophelia are the result of the ghost's appearance and call to vengeance.)

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) wrote *Hamlet* (c. 1599—1601) when he was approaching what would be middle-age for an Elizabethan. In 1596, Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died suddenly after a brief illness at the age of eleven. Evidence of Shakespeare's profound grief can be found in several plays written after this event.

Prior to *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's fame and literary success were based on his comedies, most notably *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *Hamlet* began a long string of tragedies—those plays now called "The Great Tragedies"—and the only comedies Shakespeare wrote in this period are the fairly un-funny "problem plays": *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*.

Feminist Theory Applied to *Hamlet*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgement. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are believed to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



Activity One

Examining Gertrude's Options as A Woman in Hamlet's Society

1. As a class, look at Claudius' first introduction of Gertrude in Act I, scene ii: "our sometime sister, now our queen, / The imperial jointress to this warlike state."
2. Have students look up jointure and jointress in the dictionary. Discuss the significance of Gertrude's being identified as the "imperial jointress."
 - Might Gertrude's status have had an impact on her decision to marry Claudius?
 - Might Gertrude's status have had an impact on Claudius' desire to marry her?
3. Next, discuss what Claudius means when he says: "nor have we herein barr'd / Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along."
 - Why might the king's advisors at court have agreed to Claudius' marrying Gertrude?
 - Why might the king's advisors at court have agreed to Claudius' becoming king?
4. What does Shakespeare's handling of Gertrude in this episode suggest about the role of women in the society of the play?

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory Applied to *Hamlet*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining Oedipal influences in *Hamlet*

1. Review with students and have them research the original Oedipus myth and the psychological theory called the Oedipus Complex.
2. Individually, have students examine Hamlet's soliloquies and his conversations with his mother to either support or refute the thesis:
 - Hamlet's primary problem is Oedipal in that he is unable to accept his mother's sexual activity with a man who is neither his father nor himself, and this contributes significantly to the calamity and the universal carnage at the end of the play.
3. Individually, have students examine Hamlet's conversations with Polonius and Ophelia to either support or refute the thesis:
 - Hamlet's ambiguous references to Ophelia's sexuality and to Polonius as her "pimp" suggest that Hamlet, while thirty years old physically, is psychosexually underdeveloped.



Mythological/Archetypal Criticism Applied to *Hamlet*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining Archetypal Symbols in the Play

1. Divide the class into four groups (or a number of groups divisible by four) and assign each group one of the following archetypal images:
 - WATER
 - GARDENS
 - SERPENTS
 - YIN AND YANG
2. Each group examines the play for mention of its assigned symbol and discusses how interpreting that symbol as an archetype alters or clarifies the meaning of the play.
3. Each group reports back to the class. Discuss any significant differences or discrepancies between the reports of groups that analyzed the same symbol.