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Writing Samples

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Hamlet: The Youthful Interpretation

In shaping characters in literature, diverse pieces of evidence often come into play. Both direct and indirect evidence play an integral role in discovering the true character of literary figures. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, such is the case with the young prince. Hamlet's own behavior and interaction gives us insight into his motivations and overall nature. Moreover, the activities of other major characters also offer a wealth of information in defining Hamlet. Indeed, one common interpretation of Hamlet often points to him trying to the morally right thing in an array of deceitful and conniving family members and friends. However, it is also important and relevant to interpret the play from the perspective of Hamlet being consistently presented as a misguided and inexperienced youth. Shakespeare epitomized Hamlet's youthful, emotional and experienced nature through dialogue with other characters, feelings of alienation often attributed to youths, irrational decision making and finally the overall structure of the plot. Contextual evidence from the play consistently attributes Hamlet's behavior to be a product of his youthfulness, emotional tendencies and lack of experience. A common attribute of young individuals is stubbornness and emotional behavior. In the earlier portion of the play, Claudius laments to Hamlet, "How is it that clouds still hang on you" (Shakespeare, 267). Claudius also directly cited Hamlet's childish behavior by criticizing his feelings: "of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief on losing father" (Shakespeare, 297). Shakespeare skillfully integrated this dialogue to portray Hamlet as a stubborn youth who chose not to realize and

reconcile the realities of life, like death. While death of a father is a natural phenomenon, Hamlet remained persistently melancholy and blameful toward others around him. Moreover, his emotional tendencies were also illuminated. In attempting to dissect Hamlet's erratic behavior, Polonius characterized it as "the very ecstasy of love" (Shakespeare, 1061). Again, this notion of overwhelming emotional influences, typical of young people, is attributed to Hamlet's behavior. Polonius also went further to argue that "it is common for the younger sort to lack discretion" (Shakespeare, 1078). Therefore, it is clear that the adults in the play do not perceive Hamlet as a grown man; instead, Hamlet is depicted as being an enraged youth whose behavior can be excused simply because of his age.

Hamlet's interactions with other characters also reflect the same alienation that many youths face. Often times, young individuals are clichéd as not respecting the authority of older individuals while taking out their frustrations on the world around them. Hamlet, indeed, is loaded with snappy behavior and general disrespect. For instance, as most children do not like living in their parent's home as it represents a limit to autonomy, Hamlet lamented to his friends that "Denmark's a prison" (Shakespeare, 1344). Hamlet's alienation from others is also evident from his own personal emphasis on his pride and intolerance of others. Hamlet remarked that "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in" (Shakespeare, 1817). These feelings stem from the fact that Hamlet does not have good relationships with most of the characters. For instance, Hamlet dislikes Claudius for marrying his mother, Gertrude for re-marrying so quickly, Polonius for being against him and Ophelia for being a spy. In defining Hamlet by his negative relationships with others, it is feasible to see why Hamlet would have feelings of alienation. In one way or another, almost every character has

betrayed him in some way. Just as many youths feel like their parents and superiors are the enemy, Hamlet is no exception. As the whole play is written in the context of Hamlet fighting the forces of oppression from his own household, he thus feels alienated and lashes out angrily.

Another major indicator of Hamlet's youthful nature is the fact that he is irrational and impulsive. In comparison to young rulers in Greek literature who don't fully understand the consequences of their actions, Hamlet's carries similar traits. For instance, in lamenting about how quickly his mother remarried, Hamlet gave the revengeful omen that "foul deeds will rise" (Shakespeare, 479). This is critically important within the context of Hamlet's patterns of thinking because it illuminates his problem solving methods. Rather than taking his situation in terms of rational and civil means, Hamlet delivered a chilling omen that reflected his spiteful and revengeful nature. Indeed, Hamlet did deliver on this omen. Preceding his conversation with Ophelia, Hamlet attempted to justify utilizing murder as a means of accomplishing his goals (Shakespeare, 2360). As Hamlet stabbed Polonius not knowing his identity, his impulsive and irrational behavior was the main driving force. Such violent rage only minutes before he was contemplating using violent means shows how impulsive and irrational his decision making process was. Again, such characteristics of acting impulsively, albeit not in a murderous rage, are very consistent with young adults in their teenage years.

Hamlet's general attitude towards authority also reflects his lack of maturity within the play. In Hamlet's conversation with his mother, he was quick to criticize her life choices. He severely criticized his mother for remarrying his uncle on the grounds of incest and more importantly, because it was only two months after his father's death (Shakespeare, 355-375). Moreover, after killing Polonius, Hamlet lashed back to his mother again by remarking that his

deed was “a bloody deed-almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king, and marry with his brother” (Shakespeare, 2417). Even in discourse with Polonius, Hamlet insulted him by calling him a fishmonger on several occasions. His general tone throughout the play with most of the other characters is with this same vicious and hateful tone. Along with not having a positive relationship with Claudius, but also his own mother, it is clear that Hamlet has a problem with authority. Such characteristics are also common with youths who still live under the rule of their parents.

Finally, the overall plot is based on the characters making and implementing carefully orchestrated plans in contrast to Hamlet’s own impulsive behavior. The general order and meticulous planning is present with the other characters. For instance, Polonius and Laertes privately instruct Ophelia to not believe Hamlet and work against him, which Ophelia obeys (Shakespeare, 624). Moreover, two of Hamlet’s friends are also sent by Claudius to find out why he is behaving so erratically. Next, the plan to send Hamlet away to his death, the spying by Polonius and plan for Laertes to poison him during a fight also shows planning. Indeed, the other characters work together in synergy to undermine Hamlet in any way possible. This organizational consistency is contrasted by Hamlet’s own behavior. For instance, the responses and tasks implemented by Hamlet represent impulsive behavior. Thus, in the context of the whole play, Hamlet is the only character who is outside this realm of planning, sneaking around and using strategic notions to achieve goals. This strongly suggests that Hamlet’s behavior was motivated and highly influenced by his relative youth and inability to carry out complex tasks based on rational problem solving. Therefore, Hamlet’s inexperienced and youthful behavior was once again epitomized.

Hamlet's behavior throughout the play can thus be interpreted from the perspective of an irrational and inexperienced youth who was struggling to claim revenge impulsively while being undermined by the teamwork and synergy of other characters. Often times, the adults, like Claudius, Polonius and Gertrude cited Hamlet's own youthful and emotional nature. The themes of love, revenge and inexperience are consistently present as the other characters try to explain Hamlet's erratic behavior. Moreover, Hamlet epitomizes the youthful and inexperienced prince via his feelings of alienation from the others. While if an adult, Hamlet's behavior and general distrust towards others could be perceived as paranoia, the context of a youth points directly to his feelings of alienation instead, a much more feasible interpretation of his behavior. Hamlet's own impulsive and irrational actions, like killing Polonius on a blind wimb, illuminated his "act first, think later" attitude towards problem solving. Finally, Hamlet's apprehension towards the authority of his parents and the fact that everyone's plans are carefully orchestrated besides his own reflect the contrasting level of organization and teamwork in comparing Hamlet to everyone else.

Works Cited

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