

Hamlet and His Problems: Critical Analysis

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Published in 1919, T. S. Eliot's Hamlet and His Problems is a classic instance of the misplaced application of a well formulated critical principle. In this essay. Eliot seeks to challenge the age-old established critical perspectives on a work of art. He is of the view that much of the critical writings have been devoted to analysing the character of Hamlet, rather than analysing the play, which should be the primary concern of the critics. **He says that critics have generally devoted their attention on Hamlet, the character, and ignored Hamlet, the play** Right from his first critical essay, The tradition and the Individual Talent, Eliot has maintained the position that the created work must be the primary focus of the critic for analysis. However, an overview of the history of critical endeavours over the years clearly point to an acute absence of this focus. Especially during the romantic age, the criticism was an excuse of self-revelation or self-indulgence. Even such men of genius as Coleridge and Goethe could not escape this kind of fallacy and have substituted "their own Hamlet for Shakespeare's". In their criticism, they have presented an image of Hamlet out of their own fancy, instead of remaining true and faithful to the Hamlet of Shakespeare's play. Eliot praises J.M. Robertson and Stoll, who, according to him, tried to shift the critical focus of Hamlet to a right direction by pointing out the genesis of Shakespeare's play from his predecessors: "*Hamlet* is a stratification, that it represents the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors." According to Eliot, the presence of anomalies and much of the crude elements of the play can be attributed to this fact.

In order to establish his contentions, Eliot goes on to examine the play from a historical perspective. He cites the example of Kyd's *Hamlet Play* and *Spanish Tragedy* and tries to establish the fact that just as Kyd's Shakespeare's play was also made in the tradition of Elizabethan revenge tragedies and was expected to serve the dramatic purpose of this genre. In this Eliot argues that the revenge-motives in the earlier plays are dramatically justified, but in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* there is a failure in establishing the motive of the character. Eliot thinks,

'...there is a motive which is more important than that of revenge, and which explicitly "blunts" the latter; the delay in revenge is unexplained on grounds of necessity or expediency; and the effect of the "madness" is not to lull but to arouse the king's suspicion.'

According to him, Shakespeare made certain changes with the play of Thomas Kyd, but those changes are far from being convincing. Eliot gives some other evidences to establish that Shakespeare adapted his story from Kyd's lost play. He defends Robertson's view that 'Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and

that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the "intractable" material of the old play.'

According to Eliot, the material of the play is intractable. Shakespeare failed to impose order and arrangement on this material, and as a consequence, "the play is most certainly an artistic failure." There is much in the play that is puzzling and which cannot be justified. First, it is the longest play of Shakespeare and there is much in it that is superfluous and inconsistent (Polonius-Laertes scenes and Polonius-Reynaldo scene for example). This superfluity is so obvious that it can be noticed even in a hasty-revision and yet it has been allowed to persist. Secondly, its versification is uneven and variable. Immature and defective lines alternate with quite mature ones. Both workmanship and thought are in a unstable condition As a work of art, it is much inferior to the other great tragedies of the dramatist.

The material of the play is intractable which itself accounts for some of the weaknesses of the play. However, the source of its real weakness lies much deeper. The central motif of the play is the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son. A mother's degradation causes unutterable torture and anguish in the son, and therefore "the guilt of mother is an almost intolerable motive for drama." But the failure of the drama arises from the fact that Shakespeare could not handle the effect of a mother's guilt, with the same success as he could handle the jealousy of Othello, or the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus. As in the sonnets, so in the play, there is some mysterious diffused feeling to which the dramatist has failed to give artistic expression. This mysterious, all-pervasive emotion cannot be localised in any particular scene or speech. It is all over the play but nowhere in particular. There is no particular object, event or action which adequately expresses this feeling. The artistic weakness of the play arises from the failure of the dramatist to objectify this unrealised emotion.

In other words, Shakespeare has failed to find a suitable, "**Objective Corelative**" for the emotions of Hamlet. Eliot defines "Objective Corelative" as, "**a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion: such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.**" The dramatist should present such actions, events, characters, situations as would arouse in the readers or the spectators the particular emotion aimed at by him. The emotions of poetry should be provided with motives, or that the responses of the poets should be responses to a defined situation For example, the action, gestures and words of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep arouse the same sense of anguish in the readers as they do in Macbeth himself, and hence his words on hearing of his wife's death seem quite inevitable and natural under the circumstances. This is also the case with the anguish of Othello. This is so because external action and situation are quite adequate for the internal emotion. But this is not so in Hamlet. There is no object, character, situation or incident which adequately expresses the inner

anguish of the Prince of Denmark. His suffering is terrible, but the full intensity of his horror at his mother's guilt is not conveyed by any character or action in the play. He suffers terribly, but his suffering is far in excess to the character and situation as presented in the play. A similar situation in real life would not arouse equally intense emotion in normally constituted people. Shakespeare wanted to convey something unexpressibly horrible but the character of Gertrude and the whole plot of the play is inadequate for the purpose. In other words, Shakespeare has failed to find a suitable, "Objective Corelative", for the emotion he wanted to convey. Herein lies the real source of the artistic failure of the play.

Hamlet is an artistic failure, but this failure arises only from the fact that in it Shakespeare tried to tackle a problem which proved too much even for him. He was trying to express an unexpressible horror and, therefore, as some critics have rightly stressed, his failure itself is a measure of his artistic greatness and not of his lack of genius. He failed because his chosen plot and his characters were inadequate for the purpose, just as a great artist would fail to draw a magnificent picture in the absence of adequate colours and canvas.