

Hamlet
by William Hazlitt

It is the one of Shakespeare's plays that we think of the oftenest, because it sounds most in striking reflections on human life, and because the distresses of Hamlet are transferred, by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity. Whatever happens to him, we apply to ourselves, because he applies it to himself as a means of general reasoning. He is a great moralizer; and what makes him worth attending to is that he moralizes on his own feelings and experience. He is not a commonplace pedant. If Lear is distinguished by the greatest depth of passion, Hamlet is the most remarkable for the ingenuity, originality, and unstudied development of character. Shakespeare had more magnanimity than any other poet, and he has shown more of it in this play than in any other. There is no attempt to force an interest: everything is left for time and circumstances to unfold. The attention is excited without effort; the incidents succeed each other as matters of course; the characters think, and speak, and act just as they might do if left entirely to themselves. There is no set purpose, no straining at a point. The observations are suggested by the passing scene—the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind. The whole play is an exact transcript of what might be supposed to have taken place at the court of Denmark at the remote period of time fixed upon, before the modern refinements in morals and manners were heard of. It would have been interesting enough to have been admitted as a bystander in such a scene, at such a time, to have heard and witnessed something of what was going on. But here we are more than spectators. We have not only “the outward pageants and the signs of grief,” but “we have that within which passes show.” We read the thoughts of the heart, we catch the passions living as they rise. Other dramatic writers give us very fine versions and paraphrases of nature; but Shakespeare, together with his own comments, gives us the original text, that we may judge for ourselves. This is a very great advantage.

2

The character of Hamlet stands quite by itself. It is not a character marked by strength of will or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment. Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be; but he is a young and princely novice, full of high enthusiasm and quick sensibility—the sport of circumstances, questioning with fortune, and refining on his own feelings, and forced from the natural bias of his disposition by the strangeness of his situation. He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect—as in the scene where he kills Polonius; and, again, where he alters the letters which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death. At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and skeptical; dallies with his purposes till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretense to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the king when he is at his prayers; and, by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity. . . .

The moral perfection of this character has been called in question, we think, by those who did not understand it. It is more interesting than according to rules; amiable tho not faultless. The ethical delineations of “that noble and liberal casuist”—as Shakespeare has been well called—do not exhibit the drab-colored Quakerism of morality. His plays are

not copied either from “The Whole Duty of Man” or from “The Academy of Compliments!” We confess we are a little shocked at the want of refinement in those who are shocked at the want of refinement in Hamlet. The neglect of punctilious exactness in his behavior either partakes of the “license of the time,” or else belongs to the very excess of intellectual refinement in the character, which makes the common rules of life, as well as his own purposes, sit loose upon him. He may be said to be amenable only to the tribunal of his own thoughts, and is too much taken up with the airy world of contemplation, to lay as much stress as he ought on the practical consequences of things. His habitual principles of action are unhinged and out of joint with the time. His conduct to Ophelia is quite natural in his circumstances. It is that of assumed severity only. It is the effect of disappointed hope, of bitter regrets, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the distractions of the scene around him! Amidst the natural and preternatural horrors of his situation, he might be excused in delicacy from carrying on a regular courtship. When “his father’s spirit was in arms,” it was not a time for the son to court. He could neither marry Ophelia, nor wound her mind by explaining the cause of his alienation, which he durst hardly trust himself to think of. It would have taken him years to have come to a direct explanation on the point. In the harassed state of his mind, he could not have done much otherwise than he did. His conduct does not contradict what he says when he sees her funeral:

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

21 Which statement provides an objective summary of the selection?

- A Hazlitt admires the play because of the fantastical nature of the events that occur.
- B Hazlitt admires Shakespeare for the development of a precise, historical setting for his plays.
- C Hazlitt admires Shakespeare for addressing the politics of his time in innovative ways.
- D Hazlitt admires the play because of Shakespeare’s ability to create realistically flawed characters.

22 In the first sentence, what does the author mean by the phrase “sounds most”?

- A He means that many people are familiar with the play.
- B He means that the play has the same tone as Shakespeare’s other plays.
- C He ties the phrase to the word striking to indicate that the play has a strong effect on the reader.
- D He ties the phrase to the word reflections to show that memories are the keys to understanding our past.

23 Which quote from the first paragraph supports the author’s purpose for writing this selection?

- A “Lear is distinguished by the greatest depth of passion.”
- B “Hamlet is the most remarkable for the ingenuity, originality, and unstudied development of character.”
- C “There is no set purpose, no straining at a point.”

D "Other dramatic writers give us very fine versions and paraphrases of nature."

24 What is the role of the figurative language in the first paragraph?

A The author's use of the onomatopoeia "the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind" imitates the mood of the scene.

B The author's use of the simile "the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind" suggests the play's realistic setting.

C The metaphorical use of the observations of the characters indicates that "the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind."

D The oxymoron, "the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind," intentionally gives order to the disorder of the play.

25 How does the phrase "the characters think, and speak, and act" in the first paragraph help to refine the author's idea?

A The phrase contradicts Shakespeare's intentional attempt to portray the chaos surrounding the succession of the king.

B The phrase demonstrates the sequential order that the characters follow in their actions.

C The phrase perpetuates an imaginary idyll that contrasts with the chaotic disorganization of the play.

D The phrase demonstrates a parallel structure that illustrates the systematic, ordered nature of the play.

26 How does paragraph 2 of the selection contribute to the author's purpose?

A It conveys specific details about Shakespeare as a child.

B It demonstrates why Hamlet is classified as a villain.

C It gives more details about the events of the play.

D It explains why Hamlet behaves the way he does in the play.

27 In the last paragraph, what does "neglect of punctilious exactness" mean?

A showing a lack of attention to detail

B demonstrating the ability to be on time

C showing an inability to work with others

D demonstrating the ability to behave well

28 How does the author explain Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia?

A He claims that Hamlet wanted to be cruel to her, but was influenced by his family.

B He says that Hamlet was unable to carry on a relationship with her because of her father's disapproval.

C He states Hamlet was unable to explain to her what was wrong with him.

D He says that Hamlet's behavior toward her did not reflect his true feelings.

29 What effect on the reader does the author wish to achieve by his frequent use of the pronoun "we"?

A a feeling of being persuaded to adopt the author's point of view

B an assumption that the text is being directed to both the reader and the

author

C a feeling that the author is arrogant in the expression of his opinion

D an assumption that the author is speaking from an uncommon point of view