

Extended Essay

English B HL

Shakespeare's Hamlet and Emotional Expression Through
Narrative Techniques

Research Question: How Does William Shakespeare Express the
Feelings of the characters, Prince Hamlet, Claudius, Ophelia, and
Gertrude with the use of narrative techniques in the play Hamlet?

Category 3 – Literature

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INTRODUCTION

“The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” often shortened as Hamlet, is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare between 1599 and 1602. It is the longest play of Shakespeare and one of the greatest piece of English literature of all time. Hamlet is a piece of art which has a gripping plot but also, it is a journey of deep exploration of human emotion and character.

This essay will answer the question: How does Shakespeare express the feelings and characteristics of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Ophelia through literary devices in Hamlet? The aim is to explore how Shakespeare reveals psychological depth and emotional complexity in each character by using monologue, imagery, symbolism, and dialogue, within the Renaissance context of humanism and moral questioning.

About the author

William Shakespeare was born in 1564. The emotional and thematic context of Hamlet was influenced by William Shakespeare’s life. The play was written around 1600, after the death of Shakespeare’s only son, “Hamnet”, whose name relates with the main character’s name Hamlet. After his loss, Shakespeare’s experiences of grief, mortality, and the fragility of human existence can be seen in his plays. Hamlet’s character reflects Shakespeare’s own problems with uncertainty during a time of personal and political instability in Elizabethan era of England is defined by the tension between action and hesitation. Moreover, Shakespeare’s understanding of performance ideas can be seen in Hamlet where characters constantly question what is real and what is an act. His engagement with Renaissance humanism also can be explored in the play’s philosophical tone. Hamlet’s insight reflects the era’s individual reason, doubt, and moral questioning. In this way,

Shakespeare's experiences, and his external environment shaped Hamlet into a tragedy of universal reflection.

The historical context

Hamlet was written and first performed around 1600–1601, during the late Elizabethan period, and printed later in 1623. The Elizabethan context in which Hamlet was written is crucial to understanding the mindset of the characters and the treatment of themes. The moral instability in the play Hamlet may be due to the fact that it was written in the oppressive system of medieval Europe, Catholic. The fear of the unknown after death, emphasized in the "fear of something after death". This situation began to be questioned in the historical process. In this period, people began to question humanity and reason and were becoming more aware that religious authority was harming them. The Renaissance period can be given as the reason for the beginning of modern thoughts. Hamlet's internal conflicts reflect the period's search for individual questioning and moral reckoning. "*To be or not to be... that is the question...*" (*Hamlet 3.1.127*) reflects the period's search for individual questioning and moral reckoning. The aim of the Renaissance was to question human nature and the power of reason. This is the Renaissance's understanding of the individual. In these cases, the play Hamlet is a tragic and revenge play with a dark atmosphere questioning death, life, and life after death. The play intertwines themes of death, political betrayal, and complex emotional relationships, reflective of early modern societal tensions. While having a dramatic point of view, the play has also love and sensuality inside.

Synopsis of the play

Prince Hamlet's struggle to avenge his father's death. The story begins with the sight of the last King's ghost on the walls of Elsinore Castle. The ghost tells his son, Prince Hamlet, that he was poisoned by his brother Claudius, who is the new King and married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Hamlet was shocked and falls into inner conflicting between doubt and action. To test the truth of the ghost's words, he stages a play presenting the murder, and Claudius's guilty reaction confirms his suspicion. In a rough conversation with Gertrude, Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius, expecting that he was Claudius. As a result, Claudius sends Hamlet to England and secretly orders for his execution, but Hamlet escapes and returns to Denmark. Meanwhile, Ophelia, Polonius's daughter, becomes devastated by her father's death and Hamlet's behavior. Her experiences made her descend into madness and dies with drowning herself. Her brother Laertes conspires with Claudius to kill Hamlet in a rigged duel. During the fight, both Laertes and Hamlet are wounded by a poisoned blade, and Queen Gertrude dies after drinking poisoned wine. Before dying, Laertes tells Claudius's betrayal. Hamlet kills his uncle Claudius and then dies because of the poison. The play ends with Hamlet's death.

Prince Hamlet

Hamlet is a complex character in the play. With the use of soliloquies and speeches that Hamlet tells his thoughts, Shakespeare expresses his inner feelings. The themes such as death and revenge are the central topics that gives way to the characters' actions in Shakespeare's Hamlet. When Hamlet is instructed to take the revenge of his father by his father's ghost, he did not choose to carry out this necessity. In opposite, he was stuck in philosophical reflections about the nature of death and the boundaries of justice. One of the most well-known lines, "*To be or not to be, that is the question*" (*Hamlet 3.1.127*) illustrates Hamlet's thoughts and confliction about life and death. In this sentence Hamlet thinks about whether it is better to live and suffer or to die and face the unknown of the death and these thoughts frightenes him. Although he trusted to his father's ghost, he remains inactive because of his fear. Shakespeare uses the image of death as "sleep" to show Hamlet's anxiety and fear about what the life after death. Renaissance way of thinking such as doubting and self examination can be seen with the images, showing Hamlet's fear of the unknown. Hamlet's word choices also changes depending on how he feels. Sometimes he speaks in poetic, thoughtful ways; other times, he is sarcastic and angry, especially when talking to his mother, Gertrude.

HAMLET:— Have you eyes?

Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed

And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?

You cannot call it love, for at your age

...

Would step from this to this? Sense sure you have,

Else could you not have motion. But sure that sense

Is apoplexed, for madness would not err,

...

Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,

Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,

Hamlet 3. 4. 175

This part will analyse Hamlet Act 3 Scene 4 page 175. Prince Hamlet and Queen Gertrude are in a psychological confrontation. This was exposed in the dialogue as an emotional situation. Hamlet is obsessed with purity so that he objects his mother's relationship with his uncle Claudius. He thinks that this connection is completely unnatural and morally wrong. Hamlet's expressions are harsh and criticizing to Gertrude because his love and respect for his father increases the level of anger to her mother inside him.

The line "*Have you eyes?*" plays a metaphoric role in this scene. Gertrude's morally immoral behavior creates an obstacle to Hamlet's desire to cover the truth. "*...but sure that sense is apoplexed,*" underline Hamlet's internal struggle between rational thought and emotion; in other words, this exchange is the depiction of Hamlet's sorrow and frustration. His speech is a realization that human understanding may be tainted by desire and weakness.

The repetition of the word "without" in the line "*Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,*" expresses Hamlet's emotional instability and anger towards his mother. Gertrude's senses no longer have its function; hence the word "without" is an

expression moral blindness and emptiness. In addition, Hamlet's inner conflict between emotion and belief is reflected by the reversal between "eyes" and "feeling" creates a "cross-structured rhythm" (chiasmus pattern). Shakespeare shows Hamlet's frustration with moral corruption and expresses his despair over the loss of truth and honesty in the world around him through this word order and rhythmic balance.

GERTRUDE:—What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?

Help, help, ho!

POLONIUS [from behind the arras]—What, ho? Help, help, help!

HAMLET: How now, a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!

HAMLET stabs his sword through the tapestry and kills POLONIUS

POLONIUS [from behind the arras] Oh, I am slain.

GERTRUDE:—O me, what hast thou done?

HAMLET:—Nay, I know not. Is it the king?

GERTRUDE:—Oh, what a rash and bloody deed is this!

Hamlet 3.4. 171

This part will analyse Hamlet Act 3 Scene 4 page 171. In this dialogue between Queen Gertrude and Prince Hamlet, Shakespeare increases the dramatic tension by using dramatic irony to show both moral blindness and psychological chaos. Gertrude cries for help because she is believing that her son is planning to kill her, Hamlet accidentally shoots the gun through the person behind the curtain, thinking it is Claudius. However, the audience already know that it is Polonius hiding there. Shakespeare uses ironic contrast between the audience and Hamlet which deepens

the tragic irony of the scene. This moment is used to show the breakdown of perception and judgment in a world ruled by deceit. As a barrier between appearance and reality, the *curtain* symbol mirrors Hamlet's inability to tell truth. Through these narrative techniques, Shakespeare emphasizes the conflict between reason and emotion which was a popular topic in the Renaissance era. Because of the moral blindness of Hamlet, his thoughts are defeated by his passion. Therefore, the scene becomes a turning point of the play, transforming Hamlet into an agent of tragedy.

Claudius

As being both powerful and guilty, Claudius is the new king and Hamlet's uncle. He acts confident in public but in his private life he admits his sins.

CLAUDIUS:—*Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven.*

It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,

A brother's murder. Pray can I not.

...

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy

Hamlet 3. 3. 165

This part will analyse Hamlet Act 3 Scene 3 page 165. This monologue shows Claudius's guilt and inner conflict. His confession reveals the moral corruption he has been hiding behind the royal authority he displayed to people around him. Through imagery, religious language, and metaphor in this monologue, Shakespeare presents Claudius's psychological struggle. The

imagery of smell in “*it smells to heaven*” makes his feeling of sin turning into guilt. Shakespeare uses intertextuality technique by comparing Claudius’s crime with the murder of Cain by Abel. This use of language connects Claudius’s actions with the biblical example of sin, showing humanity’s guilt. His rhetorical question “*Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow?*” is a symbolic imagery of purification. The colors and tissues of “*blood*” and “*snow*” are contrasting with each other. This highlight Claudius’s strong desire for his forgiveness and purity.

Shakespeare’s use of the religious words such as “*mercy*,” “*heaven*,” “*curse*,” “*prayer*” reflects Claudius’ struggle of greed and belief. Claudius’ strongest passion in his situation is not to lose his crown and protect his soul at the same time. The hidden hypocrisy in his mindset is reflected by his word choices. Claudius masks his poisoned side with his behaviors.

Shakespeare reflects Claudius’ inner side as full of guilt and fear which causes him not be able to act. Hamlet’s word choices also covers doubt and moral questioning. Claudius also has questions about morality however he has also got guilt in his heart. This is how Shakespeare uses monologues and diction to dramatize the confliction between appearance and feelings. This directly connects with the research question and expresses a theme that occur in Hamlet’s world.

Ophelia

Ophelia is Laertes' sister, Polonius' daughter, and Hamlet's lover. She is one of the two female characters in the play, and her role in the play is mostly figured out by the other people around her. Throughout the play, Ophelia suffers an increasing emotional breakdown. This breakdown is most clearly through the change of her language and word choices. At the beginning of the play, Ophelia's language is controlled and calm. However, she loses her sanity, her speech becomes meaningless, and she begins to sing songs; after the death of her father Polonius and Hamlet's apathetic attitude towards her. The content of these songs expresses her pain for her father's death and her anger towards Hamlet. Shakespeare dramatizes Ophelia's mood changing through her songs and repeated structures. Ophelia's death can be seen as both a personal tragedy and a result of the damage caused by two male characters create in the name of revenge. Through her story and background, Shakespeare describes individual psychology and the complex ideas of justice and morality.

OPHELIA:—There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it "herb of grace" o' Sundays. Oh, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.

Hamlet 4. 5. 217

This part will analyse Hamlet Act 4 Scene 5 page 217. In this scene, Shakespeare reveals Ophelia's inner world using symbolic language. Following her father's death and Hamlet's behaviors, Ophelia's mind collapses under the weight of grief and depression. However,

Shakespeare does not show her madness as a normal incoherence, with the poetic language of emotion, he clearly reflected her feelings. The flowers she mentioned; "*fennel, columbines, rue, daisies, and violets*" are not random flower types. They all are representing other symbols that express what she can no longer explain directly with her words. Fennel and columbines represent deceit, rue symbolizes regret, daisies suggest the lost of innocence, and violets, which have "*withered all when her father died,*" show the death of faith and loyalty. Through these flower symbols, Ophelia transforms her emotional pain into metaphor, allowing her inner feelings to speak through the imagery of nature. Her language is "noun and object heavy," standing for her ability to act or reason. The repetitive usage of "*There's...*" shows her obsessive thought patterns, while the simplicity of her words associates a disappointment. Shakespeare uses symbolism, rhythm, and poetic language choices to dramatize Ophelia's situation. This literary devices and language choices shows that her madness becomes her only form of self expression.

With Shakespeare's use of language to describe Ophelia, proves her passive reactions and loss of agency. She stays silent rather than talking, observes rather than participating. This language style symbolizes the suspensions of her mind after her experiences. A tension in Ophelia's memory, shading the line between madness and spirituality is suggested by the line "*Herb of grace o' Sundays.*" Through these choices, Shakespeare does not only show madness as chaos he also turns it into a form of a kind of tragic poetry as an expression of grief and the search for forgiveness in the play. This scene connects to the research question by showing how Shakespeare uses literary devices to bring hidden emotions of a character to the surface. Ophelia's broken speech becomes a poetic image of grief and female silence, showing Shakespeare's language in turning mental suffering into powerful expression.

Gertrude

Gertrude, the Queen of Denmark, is Hamlet's mother and Claudius's wife. As one of two female characters in the play, she embodies Shakespeare's complex view of women in a male-dominated society. Her marriage to Claudius, right after her first husband's death who is Hamlet's father, becomes a main point of Hamlet's anger and disgust. However, Shakespeare does not present Gertrude as weak or immoral. Instead, through her broken tone and defensive way of speaking, he expresses Gertrude's inner struggle between desire, survival, and guilt. Her actions can be seen as a reflection of the Elizabethan period where women are dependent to the men for safety. Although Hamlet sees Gertrude's marriage as lustful and unnatural; this marriage can also act as an action of vulnerability in a court ruled by male authority. Shakespeare does not construct Gertrude as a villain, but he shows her as a tragic character whose silence and obedience reflect the suppression of women voice in Renaissance society through her unclear morality and emotionally charged language.

Shakespeare reflects Gertrude's inner world not directly through a monologue. He described the character through her interactions with other characters in the story especially the language Hamlet uses towards her. Hamlet uses harsh and sometimes insulting language towards his mother, which affects Gertrude's feelings and expressions. Gertrude's language is truly short, full of self-defenses and ambiguity. Gertrude's silence and her failure to clearly express her feelings increase the tragic and dramatic aspect of her character. Shakespeare shows the character's inner conflict to the reader with the language choices he uses here.

*GERTRUDE:—Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries, “A rat, a rat!”
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.*

...

*GERTRUDE:—To draw apart the body he hath killed,
O'er whom his very madness, like some ore
Among a mineral of metals base,
Shows itself pure. He weeps for what is done.*

Hamlet 4. 1. 189-191

This part will analyse Hamlet Act 4 Scene 1 pages 189-191. In this scene, Gertrude presented as a conflicted and awakening figure. Shakespeare expressed the tension between her love to her son, her fear and her guilt through the language and word choices. Her choice of imagery reflects Hamlet's emotional chaos and her own inner conflict when she describes Hamlet's behavior after killing Polonius “*Mad as the sea and wind when both contend.*” The storm metaphor is Hamlet's madness into something wild; and it is not the fear but empathy of Gertrude's to her son.

Gertrude uses words like “*madness*,” “*pure*” and “*weeps*” which contain an emotional background. Her words are not political as a powerful queen, instead they highlight her mother love to her son. Gertrude describes her son's mental breakdown as “*O’er whom his very madness, like some ore among a mineral of metals base*” This reveals as a metaphor for purity, which shows the unique and special nature of Hamlet's situation. She points that in a world full of madness, his spirit remains pure. In this way, Gertrude once again expresses her love for her son and reflects her maternal feelings.

Shakespeare uses lyrical rhythm with the sentence “*He weeps for what is done.*” In this sentence Shakespeare underlines Gertrude’s religious tone with his emotive sentences. This scene is a reflection of Gertrude’s motherly side and queen side. Shakespeare represents Gertrude as a passive character in the play because she understands the corruption around her and stays inactive. This situation explained by the use of metaphors and tonal shifts. This is how Shakespeare uses literary devices to illuminate Gertrude’s inner struggle.

Conclusion

Shakespeare uses some specific literary devices to express the inner world of the characters; Prince Hamlet, King Claudius, Queen Gertrude and Ophelia in the play The Tragedy of Hamlet. The use of imagery reflects the conflict between characters and their dialogues. To show the moral situations and how they are questioned, a symbolic word choice occurs. Prince Hamlet’s act of revenge, Claudius’ strong desire to his crown and his conflicted personality, Ophelia’s emotional speech and symbolic flower names, Gertrude’s motherly and harsh sides are explored in the play.

Shakespeare's style is to show the situations by not exactly telling and explaining it. In the Tragedy of Hamlet, he also lets his words create the characters' background. His word choices create the characters just like how he created Hamlet with questions, Claudius with prayers, Ophelia with songs and flowers and Gertrude with images. As a result, a tragedy came out where desire, guilt and the grief are explored.

Overall, these techniques and the play's exploration of moral corruption, grief, and identity explain why Hamlet is still read and studied by modern audiences. Shakespeare presents psychology and poetry as a union so that readers must be careful to literary techniques he uses. Although death, revenge, and the uncertainty of truth are abstract topics, they are lived experiences shaped by how characters speak with each other and within themselves. Shakespeare created a world of language that plays as a mirror of the soul of the human. The complex situation of the human mind that exists in today's world is shown by the monologues, imagery, and symbolism that reveal the characters' emotions.

Bibliography

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