

Role of Ethics in the Life of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's Play 'Hamlet'

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's play Hamlet is considered a revenge tragedy. The central character in William Shakespeare's play Hamlet is 'Hamlet'. In the play the Ghost of his father is seen by the Hamlet. Hamlet is not frightened but he is astonished to see his father's ghost. Hamlet believes that all is not well. He doubts some foul play. The Ghost discloses the secret of his father's murder. Hamlet came to know how his father was murdered by his uncle Claudius. Claudius had murdered his father by pouring poison into his ears while he was sleeping. Claudius had declared that king had died by the bite of a serpent. The Ghost urged Hamlet that he must avenge his father's murder. Then revenge became a sacred duty after the Ghost's revelation. It disturbs his peace of mind. Hamlet comes to know the real facts of his father's death. He is a sensitive and an idealistic young man. It is often said

that Hamlet is not a man of action. He seems to have gone mad. The play depicts the mental suffering and torture which Hamlet endures. It is often said that there are some defects in a tragic Hero's character that leads to the final disaster in the Shakespearean tragedy. Hamlet resolves to avenge the murder of his father. He goes on waiting till it occurs to him that he should verify the truth of what the ghost has told him. So he arranges a play within the play. he does not proceed to take his revenge until he has made sure that his uncle Claudius is guilty. He gets an excellent opportunity to murder his uncle but he spare him on the ground that the king is praying to God and if he killed him, at this point, he would go to heaven. This postponement of a his revenge, constitutes a serious flaw in his character. Actually it is not a flaw in his character it is due to the ethics of Hamlet. Some critics say that it was a weakness in his character. But this is not true. Hamlet was a man of ethics. The ethics does not allow him to murder the enemy when he is saying his prayer. There was moral repulsion to the action. And Hamlet did the same. Hamlet wanted to verify the facts, this was also true. Hamlet was a man of ethics. He was the son of a great king of Denmark. He was not an ordinary person. Ethics played a significant role in the life of Hamlet although he had to suffer a tragic end.

Key words: Drama, Ethics, Tragedy, Revenge Tragedy.

Drama

Drama is a genre of literature which is designed to be represented on the stage by the performance of the actors through there actions and dialogues. The actors play different roles

on the stage. In a drama life is represented on the stage. A drama is written only for the stage. If it is not possible to represent it on the stage, it cannot be called a drama. There is a deep relationship between the drama and the stage. The drama is a copy of life. William Shakespeare in his poem 'All The World's A Stage' Compares the world to a stage. He has used the world as a metaphor of the drama. Men and women are the actors who perform their different roles on the stage. They enter this stage at the time of their birth. They play different types of roles during their stay on this earth. They leave this stage at the time of their death. William Shakespeare views confirm the fact that drama is a copy of life.

Ethics

Ethics are the moral principles or moral guidelines that are more significant while doing an action that one has to follow in order to uphold values, Values are the standards of behavior. Values provide the significance to an action in one's life. It is related to worth of an action. Ethics is the branch of knowledge that deals with the moral principles while doing an action. While doing an activity the moral principles guide a person. One must note that ethics are not our emotions. Ethics are not related to religion. Ethics are not laws. Ethics are the moral principles that guide a person to behave in a particular situation.

Tragedy:

Keeping in view, the effect of drama on the audience, there are two types of drama:

1. Tragedy
2. Comedy

Tragedy is a play having an unhappy ending. It ends with a feeling of deep sadness. There are scenes of great suffering, destruction, and distress and natural catastrophe in it. It deals with the death or downfall of the hero.

Where as Comedy is play having a happy ending.

Aristotle in his book 'Poetics' defined tragedy as "*an imitation of an action, serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, in a language beautiful in different parts with different kinds of embellishment, through action and not narration and through the scenes of pity and fear bringing about the catharsis of these emotions*".

Revenge Tragedy

The term Revenge Tragedy has been Coined by A.H. Thorndike. Revenge Tragedy is that tragedy in which the prominent theme is revenge as in William Shakespeare's Hamlet. Revenge tragedy is also known as 'Tragedy of blood'. Revenge Tragedy has in it murder, revenge, ghosts, mutilation and carnage. In Elizabethan period the dramatists usually staged them to satisfy the emotions of the audience. There is violence in these plays. Tragedies flourished during the period between 1585 AD and 1625 AD . Great dramatists such as Marlowe, Shakespeare, George Chapman, Sir Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher were the pioneers in this field. One finds deviation from the Aristotle's definition of tragedy's in some of the plays. Shakespeare's Othello is closely related to Aristotle's basic concept of tragic hero and plot. Revenge Tragedy points towards dishonest ways to retain power. There is devoid of pity in such circumstances.

Ethics in Hamlet's character

It is often assumed that Hamlet is a weak character because of his delay in taking revenge. It is not true. In fact he was pure at heart. He had a strong moral character. He was a man of ethics. Hamlet was a graceful youth. He was sweet and sensitive. Hamlet is a moral being. He is full of sympathy. He is not delicate, frail and weak. He has a royal birth. He is not an ordinary person.

Ghost Reveals the truth:

Ghost: Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Act-I- Scene-V

The Ghost tells Hamlet to take revenge upon the man who murdered him. Ghost tells Hamlet that his father died an unnatural death. He was a victim of hateful act.

Ghost: Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-

O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power

So to seduce!-won to his shameful lust

The will of most seeming-virtuous queen.

Act-I Scene-V

Ghost tells Hamlet that his uncle Claudius has now married the woman who was my wife. Your uncle Claudius is an adulterous monster. He won her over with the magical power of conversation and expensive gifts. My wife proved unfaithful to me. Your uncle was inferior to me. My wife loved me truly. But she proved unfaithful. She was caught in the magical web of your uncle. He also tells Hamlet that one afternoon his uncle Claudius poured poisonous liquid into his ears.

Ghost's advice to Hamlet:

Ghost: If thou has nature in thee, bear it not,

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest.

But howsoever thou purest this act,

Traint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive

And gins to pale his uneffectual fire.

Act -I Scene-V

Ghost advised Hamlet that it is a grave injustice. You must not remain passive. Your uncle and my unfaithful wife are now enjoying and fulfilling their lustful desires. You may adopt

any method in order to take revenge upon the murderer. You must not allow the sinful activities of your mother and your uncle that contaminate the Royal Bed of this Country. You must not corrupt your mind with evil thoughts. You must not harm your mother in any way. Leave it to God to punish her.

Verification of the Story Narrated by the Ghost:

Hamlet wanted to verify that the story narrated to him by the Ghost. For this purpose he made a plan of staging the play called. 'The Murder of Gonzago'. He invites the king, the queen and the courtiers to see it. Hamlet thinks that the Ghost he has seen might be devil in disguise. He might have tempted him to commit an evil deed. He might have told him a false story of his father's death.

Hamlet: The spirit that I have seen

May be the devil; and the devil hath power

To assume a pleasing shape; yea and perhaps

Out of my weakness and my melancholy,

As he is very potent with such spirits

Abuses me to damn me.

Act II, Scene -II

Hamlet took the help of Horatio. Hamlet had already taken him into confidence in the matter of the secret of his father's death. Hamlet asks him to remain conscious and watch king's face during the performance of the play and tell him about what he judged. Both Hamlet and Horatio are convinced by the King's behavior during the performance of the play and came to know about the truth of Ghost's story.

Hamlet has a Divine soul

When Hamlet came to know about the story of his father's murder, Ghost reminds him of his moral duty. But Hamlet has a divine soul. He does not want to act in a haste way. He has promised Ghost that he would have revenge on the murder but must confirm the story at first before indulging into action to take revenge. The task assigned by the Ghost of his father brought melancholy in his life. Normally he was a cheerful person. The new responsibility assigned by the Ghost brought complete transformation in his life. His melancholy deepens so much that it brought a complete change in the life of Hamlet. Hamlet was totally involved in the web of guilt. Hamlet condemns the stupidities and vices of humanity in his talk. Hamlet's pretence of madness connected with resolve to verify the facts.

After the Ghost's revelation Hamlet feels that it is his sacred duty to take revenge. Hamlet was suspicious about his father's death. When the Ghost of his father reveals about the murder of his father, Hamlet resolves to verify the fact.

Hamlet: My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;

I doubt some foul ply.....

Act-I Scene-II

In order to verify the facts of the murder of his father Hamlet pretends to be mad. His madness is not real. He seems to be abnormal. The change in his behavior is due to the shock of the murder of his father and his mother's remarriage with his ncle Claudius soon after the death of his father. Hamlet's talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern clearly show that his eccentric manner is deliberately designed.

Hamlet: I am but mad north-north west. When the wind is

Southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.

Act-II Scene-II

Hamlet's philosophical conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern show his eccentric nature but he is not mad. He tells them that he has lost his nature of enjoying the world. He does not find any pleasure in any man's company.

Hamlet: When did ye laugh When I said man delights

not me

Act-II Scene-II

Hamlet tells them that he is not absolutely mad as his mother and uncle Claudius think. His madness is connected with the fact that he wants to verify the facts about his father's murder. After all he is a moral being. He does not want to act upon the advice of the Ghost without verifying the fact. All these facts show that Hamlet is a man of ethics.

Hamlet prefers duty to Love for Ophelia

Hamlet is in love with Ophelia. But Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia is insulting. Hamlet loved Ophelia deeply before his mother's remarriage. The circumstances of his mother's remarriage and the revelation of the ghost about the murder of his father compelled him to give up his thoughts of love for Ophelia. There is the possible reason for his rudeness towards Ophelia. There takes place a shift in the attitude of Hamlet towards Ophelia, The reason behind is that Hamlet is more inclined to his moral duty assigned by the ghost to take revenge. In Act-V Scene I, Hamlet's love for Ophelia can be judged from his words.

Hamlet: I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers

could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.

Act-V Scene -I

Hamlet's rhetorical speech in the graveyard is the proof of his love that he had in his heart. It is the perfect expression of Hamlet's former feeling of love for his beloved Ophelia. But the circumstances compelled Hamlet to remain away from Ophelia, because his love for Ophelia may not divert his intention in taking revenge. Hamlet's mental suffering kept him away from

Ophelia that brought about a transformation in his character. He gives more importance to values. He accepts the reality in the grave yard. His life is full of dilemma. But he is more inclined to his duty assigned by the Ghost of his father.

Hamlet's Moral aversion to the Act of Murder of his Uncle

Hamlet's moral aversion to the act of murder of his uncle shows that he is a man of ethics. Although Hamlet is bound to his duty to take revenge, Hamlet finds a good opportunity to kill his uncle Claudius when the later was at prayer. He finds himself in a conflict. He thinks that if he killed the king when he is at prayer, he will go to heaven. He does not want to kill the king in the holy act of prayer. It will not be a revenge instead I shall help him in sending him to heaven After all Hamlet's ethics does not allow him to do such a sinful action. He wants to wait for a better opportunity to take the revenge. He wants to kill him when the king is indulged into drunken state or when he is indulged in sinful pleasures. Hamlet wants to wait for that moment. The nature of Hamlet at this point shows that he acts on the moral principle. His ethics do not allow him to do so.

Hamlet's repentance over the murder of Polonius shows his ethics.

When Hamlet's kills Polonius he does not know who is hiding behind the curtain, perhaps he thought the king Claudius was behind the curtain and he is listening secretly to his conversation with his mother. On finding that he has killed Polonius, an innocent person, he repents a little later. Hamlet tells his mother that he has killed wrongly an innocent person.

Hamlet: I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so.....

Act-III, Scene-iv

This argument of his repentance over the death of Polonius, proves that Hamlet is a man of ethics. He also says that:

Hamlet: I must be cruel only to be kind. Act-I Scene-II

In fact Hamlet is not a cruel man. He is kind at heart. He feels that his intention was not bad. He argues that he will provide satisfactory explanation to the authorities. He feels sorry to have killed an innocent person, Polonius while he was going to punish the king Claudius. He has acted according to the will of Heavenly power. He is just the agent of Heavenly power for punishing the evil doers. This act and his arguments prove that he is a man of moral principles.

Hamlet's Ethics led him to a tragic end

The tragic end of Hamlet lies in the ethical nature of Hamlet. Hamlet endures mental sufferings due to the shameful activities of his mother and the king Claudius. His mother gets remarried with his uncle Claudius who is guilty of the murder of his father. His uncle was much inferior to his father. Hamlet is also mentally upset due to the behavior of the king Claudius. The mental condition of the Hamlet can be noticed in his soliloquies. Her mother's

remarks that why Hamlet has taken his father's death to heart, disturbs him. Hamlet condemns his mother's frailty.

Frailty, thy name is woman! Act-I Scene-II

Hamlet thinks that his mother had done a bloody deed. She was involved in the murder of his father and remarried his uncle Claudius who is treacherous.

Hamlet: A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good mother,

As kill a king and marry with his brother. Act-III Scene-IV

Hamlet's tragic end is the tragedy due to his ethical idealism and the ethical principles which he follows. Hamlet's delay in avenging the murder of his father is due to his ethical nature. Had he killed his uncle Claudius when he was at prayer, he would not have faced such a tragic end. And he would have taken the revenge of his father's murder. Hamlet is the victim of his ethical nature. And this brought a tragic end.

Conclusion:

William Shakespeare's play Hamlet is considered to be a revenge tragedy. After the revelation of the Ghost it becomes clear that Hamlet's father was killed by his uncle Claudius. The Ghost ordered Hamlet to take revenge upon the man who murdered his father. But Hamlet is not a staunch revenger. Hamlet is a man of ethics. Had Hamlet not been a man of principles he would have taken revenge easily. He wants to verify the story narrated by the Ghost. Hamlet has a divine soul. He sacrifices all the enjoyments and pleasures of his life. He even sacrifices his love for Ophelia. Hamlet's moral aversion to the act of murder of uncle clearly shows that he is a man of ethics. He spares his uncle on the ground that if he killed his uncle when he is at pray, he will go to heaven. Hamlet's repentance over the murder of Polonius shows his ethics. Hamlet's ethics led him to a tragic end. Ethics played a significant role in the life of Hamlet.

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