

ENGLISH: *HAMLET*

“A text’s greatness comes from a profound delight in the individual reader no matter what their artistic taste.” What is it in Hamlet that has made a profound impact on you? Discuss making specific reference to the text.

“If we wish to know the force of human genius, we should read Shakespeare.” – William Hazlitt

It is Shakespeare’s genius that has made the iconic play Hamlet (1601) profoundly impact on my understanding of the Jacobean context and values. Powerful characterisations and the rich language of 16th and 17th Century England testify to Hamlet’s ‘greatness’. The play’s Jacobean reading and my own Post-Modernist interpretation have helped me appreciate that Hamlet impacts on responders irrespective of their artistic taste.

Hamlet is a work of ‘greatness’. I believe this because the play enables me to (re)interpret it through the Jacobean reading which explores the dominant political paradigm of 16th Century England. The Divine Right of Kings underpins the central idea of the Jacobean political and social class system as shown through the character of King Claudius, the “bloody, bawdy villain”, who has committed regicide and fratricide by pouring “poison in the King’s ear”. The Great Chain of Being encapsulates the significance of status in Jacobean England, a notion highlighted throughout the play (“My lord/My noble King”) where God is ranked first, followed by the angels, the nobility, the bourgeois and so on.

The importance of the Great Chain of Being is captured by Shakespeare through iterative imagery of corruption where “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” to emphasise Claudius’ “unnatural acts” and the threat he poses to the Jacobean natural order. Christian beliefs are the foundation for this order, made explicit when Claudius prays and realises the immorality of his actions, “Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow?”. Through Claudius’ emotional conflict and the political aspects of the context, I have come to appreciate the values of 16th Century England as they are both intriguing and invaluable to our understanding of the time period. Therefore, Hamlet impacts profoundly on its readers through the Jacobean political context.

The Jacobean reading of Hamlet that has impacted profoundly on me includes the Petrarchan idealism. This ideal is embodied in Shakespeare’s characterisation of the tragic and “frail” Ophelia. Laertes, her brother, expects that she “fear” an intimate relationship with Hamlet to maintain her virtue and “purity”. Ophelia explains to her father, Polonius, that Hamlet “hath shown [her] kind affections” but he claims she is “like a green girl” who foolishly believes Hamlet’s “tenders”. Ophelia experiences an internal conflict particularly when Hamlet claims “I loved you not” and rudely spurns her, “Get thee to a nunnery!”

Arguably, through this characterisation of Ophelia, Shakespeare is critical of Jacobean representations of women. Distraught over her father’s death and loss of Hamlet’s love, Ophelia drowns herself, becoming a symbol of patriarchal oppression. She has no chance of developing an independent conscience of her own as she is a victim of male egocentricity and misogyny (“I do not know what I should think”). In contrast, the Jacobean interpret Ophelia as a weak vessel whose mind becomes unhinged, incapable of bearing such internal conflict and inevitably, she falls to her death. This is the dominant view of women in 16th England and Ophelia, like most women in Jacobean society, is acceptably mistreated. Thus, regardless of artistic taste, one can appreciate the greatness of the play through the Petrarchan ideals of 16th Century England.

I value Hamlet as a play of ‘greatness’ as it allows me to reinterpret it using a Post-Modernist reading. The play takes the form of a ‘revenge tragedy’. This genre has been appropriated and transformed by Shakespeare from the Ancient Greeks and soon after by Seneca and Thomas Kyd

who were influential to most Elizabethan tragedy writers. The genre is used as the vehicle by which Shakespeare leads his protagonist, Hamlet, through a conflicted journey where he must overcome his vacillating emotions with anagnorisis (insight).

Action versus inaction is evident through Hamlet's intellectual and introspective mind. Hamlet plans to carry out revenge yet he is "like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of [his] cause". Shakespeare utilises Hamlet's procrastination to create suspense and increase the complexity of his characters. Hamlet often feels he has no course of action testified by, "but break my heart for I must hold my tongue", and when he decides to act, he is impulsive and irrational, killing Polonius and spurning Ophelia.

He displays inaction in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy where he weighs his options: to tolerate his pain ("suffer the slings and arrows"), to revenge his father's death ("take arms against...troubles") or commit suicide ("to sleep"). Hamlet's disorientation evokes feelings of sympathy in individuals such as myself as "melancholia" and "self-slaughter" are modern ideas. Therefore, Hamlet's powerful characterisation captures the essence of how Hamlet has profoundly impacted on my understanding.

Hamlet creates a profound delight in the individual reader because it can be read in varying ways including a Post-Modernist lens that explores the self and identity. We often ask ourselves: who are we, why do we exist, what is our purpose? Some of us find answers while others like Hamlet struggle to find a sense of self. Shakespeare utilises Hamlet's procrastination to explore Post-Modernist ideas of individuality and the complexity of the human mind. Hamlet displays a lack of self-worth reflected in the lexical chain, "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!" where deep-seated notions on the emptiness of existence are stressed. Hamlet admonishes life and views the world as decaying and "stale" to justify his need for suicide which can liberate himself from a world of corruption as evident in the line, "'tis an unweeded garden, that grows to seed."

Hamlet reflects upon himself during these internal conflicts ("What an ass am I!") but soon feels a sense of identity when Ophelia dies and he confidently declares, "This is I, Hamlet the Dane!" In the denouement, he wishes for his identity to be acknowledged and remembered, epitomised in the line, "To tell my story". Thus, Shakespeare's ideas of the self and identity impact powerfully on readers regardless of artistic taste.

Through my exploration of the Jacobean reading and my Post-Modernist interpretation of Hamlet, I have come to appreciate the greatness of the play. Shakespeare explores the context of his day, including the social and political structure, religious beliefs and Petrarchan values, whilst engaging contemporary audiences through Post-Modernist notions. Therefore, Shakespeare's context and values have made me more aware that a text's greatness can be appreciated regardless of artistic preference as a play can impact profoundly on readers and audiences.