



## HAMLET'S SOLILOQUY "TO BE OR NOT TO BE"

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### ABSTRACT

*Hamlet is often considered to be one of the greatest plays of all time. Of all the plays of Shakespeare, Hamlet is the most touching, heart rendering and soul stirring. It is also one of the most discussed and analysed pieces of literature. This paper focuses on soliloquies of Hamlet and it brings the difficult passage of Shakespeare into life. If the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is "poem unlimited" beyond genre and rules then its protagonist is character unlimited beyond even such precursor as the classical Brutus. Hamlet's greatest soliloquy is probably the best-known lines in English literature and the oft-quoted lines of Shakespeare. "To be, or not to be" is the most famous soliloquy in the world literature. Shakespeare gives seven extraordinary soliloquies in the play Hamlet which are highly philosophical, speak the universality and it can be called his death-speech -in-advance. Nevertheless, the soliloquy is the centre of Hamlet. The Soliloquy is an actor's secret thoughts uttered aloud on the stage to acquaint the audience with what is passing in his mind. It is not, however, supposed to be heard by anyone, and is spoken when no other actor is present. The soliloquy, however, has an honoured place in literature and a dramatic device and some of the noblest passages of Shakespeare are cast in the form. Hamlets "to be or not to be", Othello's "put out the light, and then put out the light", Macbeth's "if it were done, when tis done" and Henry V's "What infinite heart's ease must kings neglect", are famous soliloquies with highest poetical quality and also possessing profound psychological interest.*

**KEY WORDS:** Dramatic device, Hamlet, Literature, Philosophical, Soliloquy, Universality.

## INTRODUCTION

Hamlet is often considered to be one of the greatest plays of all time. Of all the plays of Shakespeare, Hamlet is the most touching, heart rendering and soul stirring. It is also one of the most discussed and analysed pieces of literature. This paper focuses on soliloquies of Hamlet and it brings the difficult passage of Shakespeare into life. According to the great critic of Shakespeare Herold Bloom "Our complete Hamlet, of 3880 lines, has virtue of reminding us that the play is not only "the Mona Lisa of literature" but also is Shakespeare's white elephant, and anomaly in his canon". If the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is "poem unlimited" beyond genre and rules then its protagonist is character unlimited beyond even such precursor as the classical Brutus. Hamlet's greatest soliloquy is probably the best-known lines in English literature and the oft-quoted lines of Shakespeare. "To be, or not to be" is the most famous soliloquy in the world literature. Shakespeare gives seven extraordinary soliloquies in the play Hamlet which are highly philosophical, speak the universality and it can be called his death-speech -in-advance. Nevertheless, the soliloquy is the centre of Hamlet. Shakespeare understood that the highest art was hard work. The Soliloquy is an actor's secret thoughts uttered aloud on the stage to acquaint the audience with what is passing in his mind. It is not, however, supposed to be heard by anyone, and is spoken when no other actor is present. The soliloquy, however, has an honoured place in literature and a dramatic device and some of the noblest passages of Shakespeare are cast in the form. Hamlet's "to be or not to be", Othello's "put out the light, and then put out the light", Macbeth's "if it were done, when tis done" and Henry V's "What infinite heart's ease must kings neglect", are famous soliloquies with highest poetical quality and also possessing profound psychological interest.

## SOLILOQUY "TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION"

Soliloquy is not the knowledge of philosopher or mystic or even the knowledge of Homer and Dante; it is unique to Shakespeare, Montaigne and Cervantes his greatest contemporary are closer to it than anyone else before or since. Shakespeare has remained a genius, whose resisting and challenging views have surpassed time and place in the expression of soliloquy. Arguably Shakespeare's finest and most important play, *Hamlet* is also one of the most misunderstood masterpieces of world literature. "To be or not to be", may be the question, but the answer has eluded many." Hamlet asks himself whether is better to be alive or

dead. Hamlet's assertions always verge upon being questions. Harry Levin brooding on this, aptly described Hamlet as a play obsessed with the word "question" and with questioning. The question of Hamlet always must be Hamlet himself. But now the question whether life is worthwhile has much more knowledge and experience to take account of or brood over, and it assumes an entirely new significance. Here is the most famous soliloquy in English language:

To be, or not to be, that is the question--  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them.

Hamlet is asking whether one should go on living or whether one should take one's life. He is back in the depression of the first soliloquy, longing for the oblivion of death. The question for him was whether to continue to exist or not – whether it was nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of an unbearable situation, or to declare war on the sea of troubles that afflict one, and by opposing them, end them. The question is which of two courses is the nobler. The first alternative is "to be", to go on living, and that is the matter of endurance, of contriving to accept the continuous punishing hostility of life. The second alternative is "not to be", to take one's life, and this is described as ending a sea of troubles by taking arms against it. There is only the one opposition to be made against the sea of troubles and that is the constructive act of suicide. Suicide is the one way in which fighting against the ungovernable tide—the mythical symbol of hopeless endeavour can succeed:

To die, to sleep----  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd.

And with that sleep we end the heartaches and the thousand natural miseries that human beings have to endure. It is an end that we would all ardently hope for. This is a "consummation" a completion or perfection—"devoutly to be wish'd," or piously prayed for:

To die, to sleep---

*To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:*

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off *this mortal coil*,

Must give us pause—there's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life,

Hamlet tries to take comfort in the idea that death is really "no more" than a kind of sleep, What disturbs Hamlet, however, is that if death is a kind of sleep, then it might entail its own dreams, which would become a new life—these dreams are frightening unknown. Hamlet's hesitation is akin to that of the condemned hero Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, written a few years after Hamlet. "Ay, but to die, and go we know not where!" (Act3, scene 1). Hamlet's fear is less clearly visualized, but is of the same type. People prefer it to death because there is always a chance that the life after death will be worse, to die, to sleep, to sleep, perhaps to dream. Yes, that was the problem, because in that sleep of death the dreams we might have when we have shed this mortal body must make us pause. That is the consideration that creates the calamity of such a long life:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,

Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,

The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns

That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,

When he himself might *his quietus make*

*With a bare bodkin?* Who would fardels bear,

To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,

Because, who would tolerate the whips and scorns of time; the tyrant's offences against us; the contempt of proud men; the pain of rejected love; the insolence of officious authority; and the advantage that the worst people take of the best, when one could just release oneself with a

naked blade? Who would carry this load, sweating and grunting under the burden of a weary life if it were not for “the dread of something after death” Hamlet already spoken of suicide as means of escape and he dwells on it in a later part of this very speech, giving however, a different reason for refraining. He is speculating on the possibility of “something after death”—whether there is a future life? The whole drift of the speech shows his belief in a future. Curiously opposite is Macbeth’s soliloquy “if it were done” etc in which the dominating thought is that if he could make sure of escaping punishment for his crime in the world he would risk the next world; yet Hamlet and Macbeth are alike in some respect. Practically the whole of Hamlet’s speech has become proverbial as an outpouring of utter world –weariness:

*The undiscovere'd country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?*

Hamlet embodies such a heroic vitalism, he is also the representative of death an undiscovered country bounded by time. “The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns?” Why does the prince so beautifully call death the undiscovered country whose bourn no traveler returns? Sea of troubles he transmuted by John Milton into the great phrase a universe of death at the heroic statement must explore on rout to the new world of Eden. Wilson knight admirably characterized Hamlet as death’s ambassador to us; no other literary character speaks with authority of the undiscovered country. The after –life he suggests , is one of those far-off countries of which only doubtful and untrustworthy reports exist; it is not one of those explored countries from which reputable travellers have actually returned to us their eyewitness accounts. The undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns -Comfortably back in the high diction appropriate to a noble soliloquiser. He may be likening the unimaginable "something after death" to the New World, from which, in this Age of Exploration, some travelers were returning and some were not. "Bourn" literally means "limit" or "boundary"; to cross the border into the country of death, he says, is an irreversible act. But Hamlet forgets that he has had a personal conversation with one traveler who *has* returned—his father, whose ghost has disclosed the details of his own murder:

*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.*

‘Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all’. ‘Conscience here means conscience, the inner knowledge of right or wrong. Many commentators claim it means ‘introspection’, but Hamlet is talking about one’s implanted sense of good and evil. He calls himself a coward having a conscience, and feeling “dread of something after death”. He is afraid of risking hell, by committing suicide. He is afraid of doing wrong thing, and is inactive, partly because of his conscience. Thus conscience does make cowards of us all-Hamlet's phrase is certainly the most famous judgment on fear of the unknown. But he was not the first of Shakespeare's characters to utter such words: King Richard III, on the verge of his downfall, had said that "Conscience is but a word that cowards use" (Richard III, Act 5, scene 3). The difference is that Machiavellian Richard professes not to believe in a conscience, though his bad dreams ought to have convinced him otherwise. Hamlet believes in conscience; he just questions whether it is always appropriate. It is extraordinary that, at this moment in the play, the soliloquy should seem so indifferent to the immediate problem of killing the king. Implicitly the issue is there all the time, but never explicitly. The reason for that is that the killing of the king has become part of much wider debate.

All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity. If we accept that Hamlet’s alternative in these opening lines is the course of enduring or the course of evading life’s onslaught. The life has to be suffered or evaded is described as a continuous, permanent condition of misfortune, and must therefore include the state of the world even after the vengeance has been taken and Claudius killed-supposing that to happen. The whips and scorns of time, the oppressor’s wrong-there is no indication that these can ever disappear from the world, except by disappearing from the world oneself. By his stark alternative in these opening lines Hamlet implicitly rejects the possibility that any act of his could improve the condition of the world or condition of its victims. Revenge is of no avail. Whether Hamlet kills the king or not,

Denmark will continue to be a prison, a place of suffering ruled by fortune. The only nobleness which is available if one goes on living is not the cleansing of the world by some great holy deed, but endurance, suffering in the mind.

But, as the soliloquy proceeds, the one positive act available to man, suicide, has to be ruled out. The sleep of death becomes a nightmare, because of the dread of damnation. What began as a question which was more noble ends as a contest in cowardliness. What is one the more afraid of, the possibility of damnation or the certainty of suffering on earth?. And so we do nothing, frightened to take the one route out of our misery. What it normally means, when Claudius uses it just before this and when Hamlet uses it in the previous scene; that is to say, it has religious meaning of an implanted sense of right or wrong. It is with this reflection that Hamlet moves away from suicide; it is with this 'regard'- this examination of the consequences of things and how worrying about how they look in the eye of eternity-that other "enterprises of great pitch and movement" lose the name of action.

Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark is a conflicted soul doom to take upon himself the deadly task of avenging his father's murderer. Hamlet must be thinking about killing Claudius. Hamlet can seem an actual person who somehow has been caught inside play, so that he has to perform even though he does not want to. So, although only by inference and indirectly, Hamlet twice refers to his revenge in this soliloquy. On the first occasion we gather that he no longer has any faith that killing the king would be a cleansing act setting the world to rights; on the second, we gather that his resolution to exact revenge has been "sicklied'o'er" by respect of conscience. His conscience cannot convince him that the act is good; and, whether good or bad, it cannot change the world. We are condemned to unhappiness and to inactivity. Although this speech represents a trough of despair into which we do not see Hamlet fall again, the whole of the rest of the play is coloured by the extreme pessimism of this soliloquy. Pragmatically Hamlet is an ambassador of death unlike Falstaff is life's ambassador to choice. Hamlet has no love for life, no love for himself, no love indeed in anyone else Ophelia, Horatio. Hamlet's universalism seems our largest clue to the enigma of his personality. The largest enigma of Hamlet is the aura of transcendence he emanates, even at his most violent, capricious and insane moments. Some critics have rebelled against Hamlet, insisting that he is, at best, a hero-villain but they blow the

sand against the wind, and the wind blows it back again. If Hamlet is a hero-villain, he remains the western hero of consciousness. We cannot demystify Hamlet.

The internalization of the self is one of Shakespeare's greatest invention, particularly because it can be done by anyone else. No other single character in the plays, not even Falstaff or Cleopatra, matches Hamlet's infinite reverberations. Elsinore rancid court is too small a mousetrap to catch Hamlet, even though he voluntarily returns to it to be killed and to kill. Hamlet is the most intelligent character in all of literature perhaps master ironist as Kierkegaard called him. Like the play the prince stands apart from the rest of Shakespeare, partly because custom has not staled his infinite variety. Hamlet is beyond us, beyond everyone else in Shakespeare or in literature. Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else. Hamlet incarnates change. The final form of change is death, which may be why we tend to think of Hamlet as having a highly individual relationship with death. Hamlet's tragedy is at last the tragedy of personality, achieving the triumph of "The rest is silence". What is not at rest, or what abides before the silence, is the idiosyncratic value of Hamlet's personality, for which another term is "the canonical sublime". Nietzsche's most Shakespearean realization is pure Hamlet "we can find words only for what already is dead in our hearts, so that necessarily there is a kind of contempt in every act of speaking. The rest is silence; speech is agitation, betrayal, restlessness, treatment of self and others. The paper is a humble step in this direction and Shakespeare plays always promote great prospects for all those who approach them with critical and analytical perspective.

## CONCLUSION

The universality and uniqueness of Shakespeare have surpassed time and place. Hamlet's eminence never has been disputed, which raises again the hard query "To be, or not to be" is the famous opening phrase of a soliloquy in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. In the soliloquy, Hamlet questions the meaning of life, and whether or not it is worthwhile to stay alive when life contains so many hardships. He comes to the conclusion that the main reason people stay alive is due to a fear of death and uncertainty at what lies beyond life. Shakespeare's Hamlet contains seven soliloquies which are highly philosophical and speak the universality, moral order, break the process of the discursive. Claudius' uncaring murders and plots are balanced by



Hamlet's internal struggle with his own conscience and morals as he attempts to right the wrongs committed against him. Laertes, who does not have a counterpart as Claudius does Hamlet, eventually admits to his wrongs and realizes they are that, helping clear Hamlet's name in his dying moments. Hamlet's indecisiveness and procrastination throughout the play were caused because of his morals; even though Claudius murdered his father, Hamlet could not kill him at prayer. This shows the opposite sides of the moral issue, and helps ensure that at the end, there is no imbalance, and the sequence leads up to a balanced end in which no single side has triumphed. Arguably Shakespeare's finest and most important play, *Hamlet* is also one of the most misunderstood masterpieces of world literature. "To be or not to be", may be the question, but the answer has eluded many. It is expected that the outcome of the study will serve as a useful source of information for students of literature and research scholars who want to have a serious study on soliloquies of Shakespeare.

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