‘To Be or Not to Be’: The Evolution of *Hamlet* and Grief

Dana Gloe

There's just something about *Hamlet* that will never fail to feel real. Centuries later, readers still see themselves in his uncertainty, in his grief, in his search for meaning. The “To be or not to be” soliloquy captures that better than anything else and stands as one of the only moments where Shakespeare lets us see Hamlet’s mind for what it is: in constant conflict with itself. Over time, scholars have shifted their views on this moment, with T.S. Eliot’s “Hamlet and His Problems” (1921) seeing it as excessive, Arthur Kirsch’s “Hamlet’s Grief” (1981) seeing it as deeply human, and Diane Dreher’s “‘To Tell My Story’: Grief and Self-Disclosure in Hamlet” (2015) seeing it as an actual form of therapy. Reading their interpretations together reveals not only how *Hamlet* has evolved in meaning over time, but also how our ideas about emotion and mental health have changed.

Personal Analysis of Hamlet

Hamlet is arguably one of Shakespeare’s most complex and well-known characters. He is the prince of Denmark, a man surrounded by wealth and power, yet he still feels powerless himself. He lives in the castle, alongside his mother, Queen Gertrude, and his uncle Claudius, the newly crowned King. He is still a social man with several friends, the closest being Horatio, a character who seems to stay by Hamlet's side until the end; and of course, there is his main love interest: Ophelia, the daughter of the Lord Chamberlain.

However, the clearest thing in Hamlet's life is that he is riddled with tragedy from the start; his father has died, and his mother quickly remarried Claudius, his father's brother. Even outside of the clear heavy-hitting issues, when you look closer at Hamlet he has more grief to feel. From sheer loss of his own reality to a troubling love life and slowly deteriorating trust with everyone around him, Hamlet has a lot on his plate.

Naturally, this means he has a lot to feel concerned about. He lives in a constant state of anger, grief, and confusion, with his father's death being a catalyst for his newest passion: revenge. When his father's ghost comes back to tell Hamlet that his death was not an accident but rather a murder, with Claudius behind it all, his father demands that Claudius be killed in his honor. This factor alone brings a lot of added pressure to Hamlet's life; not only does he need to work through the new reality of killing his own uncle, but he is also concerned with the reality that everyone around him is no longer safe or stable. His concerns are no longer just surface level, but something that makes Hamlet's experience with grief so complex.

He is now additionally concerned with deeper questions about life and death, morals and truth. He constantly worries about doing the right thing, while feeling as if he is surrounded by people who are constantly doing the wrong thing. Really, this is often how Hamlet fits into the larger story being told. Shakespeare's tragedies often have a tone that revolves around the fragility of the world, and for Hamlet, that takes form in the royal court's clear dismay. His grief and personal pressures are almost contagious, but not in the traditional sense; instead, it is decaying everything around him. His inner self, the confusion and often hatred he carries so closely to his heart, doesn't always stay private in the way he claims. It shapes the lives of the people around him, the people he loves and cares about, and shows how a plate too full will eventually ripple into the world around you.

The grief Hamlet feels is often an underlying, unsaid theme in the story; but there are a few moments when it stands at the forefront of the plot, most notably in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy. In this moment, readers get a clear view into his true inner thoughts; there is no guessing what he is thinking, it is just there. Shakespeare uses a lot of vivid imagery and metaphors to really show what Hamlet's suffering is, through lines like "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and "the undiscovered country" (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 57;76). The idea of slings and arrows helps illustrate that Hamlet feels like he is in the midst of a violent life. The comment about an undiscovered country is supposed to directly reflect death, as he truly fears what comes after death; yet at the same time, has no idea what life after death really looks like. This use of figurative language takes Hamlet's life and helps readers to understand his fear of life, death, and suffering all in one, while simultaneously showing how these struggles are clearly putting Hamlet in a far less-than-ideal emotional state.

As mentioned, Hamlet is a deeply philosophical thinker, sometimes to a fault. However, in this speech, his philosophical nature is a strong suit. He is taking this moment to look at death, specifically in regard to himself, quite carefully and reflectively instead of rashly. It raises the question of: what is really next and how am I supposed to feel about that? He states, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," (Act 3, Scene 1, line 83). Through this he is showing that reflective nature, not as a means of understanding the world but rather as something that may set the mind back, or as he states, "make cowards of us all." In this case, it might possibly be saving him from taking his own life, as if the list of unanswered questions he is presenting are the reason he can't.

The soliloquy stays heavily centered in some of those larger themes of the play, between action and inaction, he unpacks grief and morality. He even touches on corruption, pointing out the abuse of power in his own country and the unjust ways the undeserving are treated: "The insolence of office, and

the spurns / That patient merit of th'unworthy takes" (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 73-74). For readers, this shows that while his soliloquy has a primary focus on his circumstances, it changes to wrongdoings that go beyond his personal experience in this moment. This is only one of the places where the soliloquy also becomes a reference for readers throughout the whole play, only gaining more importance as the tragedy continues to play out and readers see the continued injustice of war and murder, even those committed by Hamlet.

As the soliloquy comes to an end, Hamlet concludes with a final realization that "with this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action" (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 85-87). Here it seems he is admitting that he is trapped in his own mind. His grief has become nothing more than a constant confinement, one which he cannot get out of, as he has officially lost the "name of action." Just a few lines after, Ophelia enters, and he greets her as if nothing ever happened: "Soft you now, the fair Ophelia!" (Act 3, Scene 1, line 88). While we watch him find some better understanding of his circumstances, this quick switch to formality with Ophelia turns into a full verbal fight. For readers, it shows something important about Hamlet's soliloquy: There is no large moment at the end to truly achieve peace or closure. This moment of reflection may have told readers something new and helped Hamlet think about what action really is, but it doesn't fix anything. Hamlet's world still feels broken, something is still rotten in Denmark, and his grief still sits at the forefront of everything he does.

Scholarly Reception of Hamlet

Early Reception

T.S. Eliot wrote the piece, "Hamlet and His Problems," in 1921, when mental health was often incorrectly studied and completely misunderstood. The National Mental Health Act in the United States was not even put into place until over twenty years later in 1946 (Wikipedia contributors). One of Eliot's main and most notorious claims in his essay revolved around the idea of the "objective correlative," which means that writing, plays, art, or really any fictional work is best when emotion is tied to clear external elements within a piece. Eliot thinks that Hamlet lacks this; the external factors in the story, even Hamlet's father's death, do not explain the way Hamlet feels in the soliloquy enough on their own. In simple terms, he believed that Hamlet is jumping to an extreme in the soliloquy. However, when we remember the time frame Eliot was writing in, his ideas are not overly abstract. That lack of focus on mental health was built in a time when institutionalization was more common than lower-stakes treatment, such as mental evaluation and less intense types of medication (Wikipedia contributors).

Mid-Century Reception

By the 1970s and 80s, literary studies really started to push theories like New Criticism out the door. The New Critics' hyper-focused close readings left the new age feeling that something was missing. Instead, scholars started holding tighter to theories like deconstruction, feminist reading, and psychoanalysis (Gallop). Reading began going beyond the text itself and what readers can physically see on the pages, but rather into the deeper meaning, the feelings, and minds behind the figures inside the pages.

Right in the middle of this diverse time, Arthur Kirsch's 1981 essay titled "Hamlet's Grief" was published. Kirsch looks at Hamlet's grief as if it were the driving force for the whole play. Kirsch sees Hamlet's grief not as an irrational outburst, but something relatable, stating that he is "speaking deeply of an experience which everyone who has lost someone close to him must recognize" (19). In multiple places throughout the essay, he notes the circumstances Hamlet is in betrayed by his family and haunted by his father, both literally and figuratively.

Freud's name even makes an appearance, with Kirsch connecting Freud's thoughts that grief is, at its core, a true struggle that takes more than time to overcome. Kirsch ties this to Hamlet by pointing out that while people naturally want to hold on to emotional connections with those they have lost, they must also face the painful reality of their absence, something that Hamlet never accepts (23). He ends the essay by leaning further into post-New-Criticism thinking: Hamlet's authentic connection to the human experience and the reality of grief as an all-consuming feeling.

Contemporary Reception

In the 2010s, mental health started to become one of the biggest discussions, even outside literature or science. A fierce focus on breaking mental health stigmas arose, and honesty in struggle became an encouraged and honored practice (Gattuso). In 2015, Diane Dreher's essay, "'To Tell My Story': Grief and Self-Disclosure in Hamlet," was published. In it Dreher points out that Hamlet is not just a tragedy of revenge, but a tragedy fueled by "self-disclosure," which she defines as a process through which grief is expressed, shared, and then finally healed. Dreher really focuses on Contemporary Grief Theory, using it to explain how "telling the story" of loss helps people integrate pain into their life story. She suggests that Hamlet's soliloquies are a form of therapy: a time when his deep more unspoken emotions finally find themselves in the form of understandable words. She argues that Shakespeare used Hamlet as a way for personal healing through the expression of his own feelings. Dreher ends the piece by pointing out the bridge between "personal self-disclosure" and "public self-disclosure," where the author, in this case Shakespeare, and the audience experience their grief together. Really Hamlet's grief being so fully laid out for readers is a form of

healing for every participant. When we compare these concluding thoughts to the social climate of the time, they match well. Shakespeare may have just been one of the original stigma breakers, and Dreher seems to support that notion.

Agreements and Disagreements Through the Ages

Even without an in-depth comparison of scholars' perceptions of grief and Hamlet, the synthesis alone makes it pretty clear that there are some distinct opinions. In 1921, T.S. Eliot saw Hamlet as nothing more than excessive. Hamlet's inability to restrain emotion was taken as a flaw in Shakespeare's writing. To Eliot, the soliloquy is simply ungrounded with no backing.

However, the more modern critics saw it as vulnerable; it is now a great expression of grief. Arthur Kirsch points directly to the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, arguing that it is not just self-remorse or rambling ideas, but rather a direct view into inner turmoil and the complexities of suicidal thoughts. If we compare the ideas between Eliot and Kirsch directly, it becomes clear that Eliot saw the soliloquy as illogical, and Kirsch, almost sixty years later, instead saw it as more than just logical, but rather the truth itself. Adding contemporary ideas from Dreher to Kirsch's already accepting view of grief, it is easy to note that they each follow the same basis: Hamlet's grief is real and raw. However, Dreher makes the point to include a quote from Park Honan, stating that the soliloquy was meant to "show off his extreme anguish and, importantly, do not transform it, but keep terrible pain and the mind that endures it in view" (qtd. in Dreher pp. 12). This, by far, is the most accepting take on "To be or not to be" within each scholars' essays, simply because Dreher does not try to pull it apart but rather accepts it for what it is: a vulnerable expression of Shakespeare's own grief. When you stack each piece next to the others, their readings show how every generation rewrites and interprets Hamlet's soliloquy based on their own relationship with feeling and mental health.

As a modern reader, it is nearly impossible to approach *Hamlet* without seeing it through a culture that openly discusses mental health and emotional struggle, even more so than Dreher might have seen it in 2015. This also shapes how I handle grief as a personal emotion and influences my interpretation of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy on the depth of Hamlet's pain. Eliot saw his emotion as excessive, while currently, there is a lot of recognition of the value and importance of articulating hurt. We can disagree with some of Hamlet's actions, while still finding ourselves sitting right there with him in grief. For many readers today, Hamlet's feelings are familiar simply because we see them named in real life more openly than ever; it is not a weakness but a human reaction to a large loss. That

understanding inevitably shapes the way I read and write about Hamlet's grief: not as a flaw in Shakespeare's writing, but as one of the most realistic things about it—right alongside Kirsch.

Conclusion

Hamlet's impact far surpasses the days of Shakespeare, with pop culture references to the play popping up left and right. The *Simpsons* episode "Do the Bard, Man," is a clear modern parody of *Hamlet*. In the episode, Bart Simpson takes on the role of Hamlet. Surprisingly, the episode follows a very close plot line to the original play itself. Claudius, Gertrude, and Ophelia even make their own appearance through the shape of different Simpson characters ("Tales from the Public Domain"). Naturally, the tone is comedic to fit the classic *Simpsons* narrative, but it still shows how deeply Hamlet's story has gone into more mainstream media. Even in the form of parody, grief is still there, and that need for revenge takes center stage. For those who are unfamiliar or struggle with *Hamlet*, it makes it both accessible and humorous. However, it speaks to a larger point that even when Hamlet is made in satire, the core of who he is as a character is still there. He is clearly lost and conflicted by his own life. It proves that no matter how many centuries have passed between Shakespeare and the present time, *Hamlet* continues to be adaptable for any audience.

That's also why the way people read it matters. What Eliot saw as far too much emotion, Kirsch simply saw a human reaction, and Dreher saw Shakespeare's own loss. Each one says something about the world they lived in and what they thought emotion should look like. My own reading is shaped by the same thing; the time I live in and the way we talk about grief now are important to my work as I navigate analysis. When I look at Hamlet's words and scholars' perceptions, I do see instability, but not in a way that makes him less real. That's what makes Hamlet timeless. His grief isn't clean or noble, nor is he, but in his soliloquy, it is familiar, human, and it matters.

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