

Hamlet – A Character Analysis

by Karen McCain

The story of the individual in the larger society is the story of every person born into this world. Even if someone is born into a large, supportive family they are still an individual. It doesn't matter if they are rich or poor, well connected or not, each person must find his way along his own path and make his own decisions in life. Unless a person lives as a hermit they have the larger society to deal with. Dealing with society causes us to ask ourselves a lot of questions. Some of these questions concern identity such as "How do I fit into my family and circle of friends?" Others might be about our desire for dominance in our circle of influence, "What do I know to be true and how loudly am I going to share it?" The role of the individual in a larger society as explored in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare is just as complicated in modern society because people in every era find that as they move from adolescence to adulthood, and even through adulthood, they each must fight to follow their own path and find his place in the world, define their role in the family, and still retain their individuality so that their voice is heard separate from the voice of the masses.

In an article entitled *The Individual and the Herd* the author states "We have seen that the individual member of society is affected by a tendency to self-assertion, and, at the same time, by the tendency to gregariousness, so that he wavers between complete egotism and complete submergence of the self." (Harland, 31)

The theme of the individual in a larger society is evident in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Hamlet is a great example of someone struggling with this balancing act. The title character finds himself in the

chaotic world and has been turned upside down after his father's death. He is charged by his father's ghost with taking revenge on his uncle who he is told murdered his father. He is not sure who he could trust or what people's true motives are as he watches events unfold. He is very alone and his family home, Elsinore Castle, and in the Royal Danish Court.

Shakespeare understood what it meant to struggle as an individual who was trying to follow his life's path in the larger Elizabethan Society. Born into a middle-class family he saw what it meant to have certain privileges such as a free education. He also saw how quickly one's standing in society changes when one's economic fortunes change. Shakespeare's father went from holding a variety of offices in town and the seat on the Town Council to falling on hard times financially which meant he lost his standing in their community. Shakespeare himself had a family at a young age and may have done odd jobs to provide for them while they lived with his parents. Shakespeare was from a small town and humble beginnings. He knew what it was to work for a living. He had connections in a variety of classes of people in the Elizabethan culture.

The plot of *Hamlet* is a complicated one. King Hamlet of Denmark dies before the opening of the play. His son, Prince Hamlet, has been away at school in England but is now home for his father's funeral. Soon after the funeral the King's brother, Claudius, married the Queen, Gertrude. This angers Hamlet greatly. Queen Gertrude asks Hamlet to stay home and not return to school. Out of love and respect for his

mother, he does so. Leading up to this time Hamlet has been affectionate towards Ophelia who is the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius's, daughter. Polonius and Ophelia's brother, Laertes, don't really believe Hamlet loves Ophelia and they're worried about his strange behavior so they warned her to stay away from him. The ghost of Hamlet's father haunts the castle and Hamlet's friends bring him to where the ghost is. The ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius and that he wants Hamlet to avenge him. Hamlet figures that feigning madness will make people leave him alone and allow him time to figure out what's going on. He's not sure he can trust the ghost and wants proof of what he claimed. Claudius, now the King, brings two of Hamlet's friends from school to cheer him up. They are actually there to spy on Hamlet for the new king. Claudius and Polonius decide also to spy on Hamlet themselves as he seemingly, by chance, meets up with Ophelia. While talking to Ophelia Hamlet's speech slips back and forth between being coherent and nonsensical. The two eavesdroppers don't quite know what to make of this. A traveling Troupe of players is brought to the castle. Hamlet writes a short play for them to perform. It mimics the story of how Hamlet's father was killed in his sleep when his brother poured poison into his ear. Hamlet watches Claudius's reaction to the play for signs of guilt. When Claudius leaves in the middle of the play Hamlet takes that as proof of a guilty conscience. Even with this proof of Claudius's guilt Hamlet still doesn't kill him as he was told to do.

Hamlet visits his mother in her chamber and berates her for marrying Claudius. Polonius was eavesdropping behind the tapestry. When Hamlet hears him he thinks it's Claudius and stabs him to death. Claudius sees Hamlet as a threat and

sends him back to England. Hamlet finds out that his trip back to England was really a plot to have him killed and he returns to Denmark. Meanwhile, Ophelia has lost her mind and then drowns herself. Laertes has returned home and is angry about his father, Polonius's, death. At Ophelia's grave, Laertes and Hamlet argue and arrange to have a duel. Claudius has won Laertes to his side and they conspire to kill Hamlet. Laertes poisoned the tip of his Rapier. Claudius prepares wine for Hamlet that is also poisoned. Hamlet and Laertes wound one another. In a scuffle, their swords are mixed up. When they wound one another again Hamlet cuts Laertes with the poisoned sword. Laertes tells Hamlet what he has done and that they are both going to die. While they have been fighting, Queen Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine meant for Hamlet and dies. When Hamlet knows he is about to die he finally kills Claudius.

In the world of Elizabethan England, there was political uncertainty, spying, betrayal, revenge, and desire for power and prestige. During this time of the Reformation, there were questions about fate, free will, and identity. What Shakespeare showed on the stage mirrored somewhat what was happening in Elizabeth's Court. And it gave commoners a peek at what they perhaps had heard was rumored to be going on in the lives of the ruling class. Running through Hamlet and the lives of each of the audience members was the theme recognizable to them- the individual in the larger society, who is trying to figure out how to navigate through life.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* during the Renaissance period. It was a time when the culture was moving away from the system of Feudal Lords to a rebirth of classical culture, art, music, and the political forms. It is a time of science and logical

thought, even in religion. The old religions influenced tradition and philosophy. In Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" speech (3.1.57) he starts out talking about suicide from the perspective of the Pagan philosophy where there is no afterlife. In line 61 he says:

...To die, to sleep—

No more—and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation
65 Devoutly to be wished!

In the Pagan mindset when one commits suicide there's nothing else. It is simply like going to sleep. Then he looks at it from the Christian side.

...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

70 That makes calamity of so long life.

When one thinks of suicide with the belief in an afterlife as in Christianity there is much more to consider and weigh. Hamlet had several soliloquies in which he puts ideas forward that he kind of debates with himself on different philosophical matters. He desperately wants to know the right course of action, or in other words, the right path for his life.

While living in London as a playwright Shakespeare made acquaintances and friends with some of his patrons who were members of the Elizabethan Court. One of his friends and a patron of the Company was the Earl of Southampton; therefore, Shakespeare was no stranger to the court and the drama therein. His contacts gave him insight into the Court's goings-on. The Essex Rebellion will be discussed later.

It was one example of intrigue that plagued the court of Queen Elizabeth I. Some scholars postulate that *Hamlet* was intended to pay tribute to Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex (Venema, 2012). Shakespeare would have been familiar with life as an individual in the middle class, the lower class, and in the Royal Court of Elizabethan society.

Shakespeare was the foremost playwright for Lord Chamberlain's Men. He was also an actor and a partner in the troupe. It was renamed The King's Men when King James I ascended the throne after Queen Elizabeth's death. Because he knew the people so well he knew what was popular among the masses. The revenge plays were very popular at this time. If he was trying to earn a living in the theater it makes sense that he would do something that was popular. *Hamlet* is a very old story going back hundreds of years. It makes sense that he would give the audiences a taste of the revenge plays they wanted; a story set in a distant land whose culture was rife with revenge seems to be a good recipe for success in the Elizabethan culture.

Shakespeare used the plot in *Hamlet* to communicate the theme to the audience. Hamlet is trying to find his place in the world. He is a student at the beginning of the story who has returned home for his father's funeral. Just like most young people he probably felt that by going away to school he would obtain the needed education to develop his own beliefs and views of the world and life. As he did so he would find his purpose in life and his place in the world. When a young person leaves home and breaks away from their established role in the family dynamic, they are free to explore who they are as an individual what they had to say concerning what they see in the world around them. They are no longer a child of

their parents, echoing their parents' voices but an individual with their own message to the world. Queen Gertrude asks Hamlet to stay home and not return to school (1.2.118):

GERTRUDE

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.

I pray thee, stay with us. Go not to Wittenberg.

HAMLET

120 I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

He does so out of respect and love for his mother. This action changes everything for Hamlet. It takes him out of school where he was gaining an education in an effort to develop his own voice and find his own place in the world. He was on his way to being his own man. Now that he has agreed to remain home he is thrust back into his role as Prince of Denmark, son to Queen Gertrude, and the member of the Royal Court, embroiled in corruption and intrigue. Hamlet struggles not to be swallowed up in such corruption and intrigue. He works to think for himself and act of his own accord.

Shakespeare also uses the younger characters to highlight the theme in *Hamlet*. Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes are all tied in some way to the larger body, the Royal Court of Denmark. However, they are each individual thinkers with their own ideas, desires, and agendas. They have desires to be elsewhere and to pursue their own lives. Laertes goes to France to study fencing. Hamlet was away at school and now seemingly feel stuck in Denmark when his mother asks him to stay home and he decides to oblige her. Ophelia is so mixed up in her emotions about Hamlet, love, and rejection that at first, she loses her mind and then leaves the Royal Court permanently through suicide. She found her own answer to the question "To be or not to be?" Each of these characters has their own plotline that intertwines with the whole. Another young character is young Fortinbras, Prince of

Norway. He is first mentioned in act 1, scene 1, with the following description appearing in line 94.

...Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimprovèd mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there

Sharked up a list of lawless resolute,
For food and diet, to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in 't, which is no other—

As it doth well appear unto our state—
But to recover of us, by strong hand
And terms compulsory, those foresaid lands

So by his father lost. And this, I take it,
Is the main motive of our preparations,
The source of this our watch, and the chief head

Of this posthaste and rummage in the land.

After King Fortinbras is killed young Fortinbras is rounding up men to attack Denmark and retake the lands that were lost by his father. He chooses his path in life and acts on his choices. He is the man of action that Hamlet is not.

In the 1590s England had won a recent victory over Spain, however, there was an air of paranoia that Spain it would retaliate. The English are not only worried about a military attack on their country but a subtle, ideological, one as well. They feared the Jesuit priests would infiltrate England. They "were said to use any means possible, from employing witchcraft to perverting the law, to return English Protestants to Roman Catholicism." The English were afraid this would allow Spain into England to "forever dictate the English way of life and destroy the English freedom of thought" (Camino, 137). In 1601 Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex attempted to lead a coup against Queen Elizabeth because he felt he had been wronged and wanted to save his reputation.

He was convicted of treason and executed (Essex Rebellion, Hopkins). With fear of invaders to their country and attacks against the crown in real life audiences surely embraced the fictional plot of *Hamlet* very easily. After London's first theater was built in 1576 many more were built in the next few years. When Shakespeare arrived in London "...the theater was a thriving enterprise. It was not, however, altogether a respectable one" (Holladay). Theatergoers continued to support the plays produced by the companies. This suggests that the audiences liked *Hamlet* and that it was a commercial success.

One group that did not like *Hamlet* and the theater, in general, was the church. They were against the cross-dressing that took place. Women were not allowed on stage, so boys and young men played the female roles. The church worked to have theaters shut down.

The theme of the individual in the larger society is seen in both *Henry V* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare allows his main characters in each story to exhibit traits in their personalities that showcases their individuality in their respective societies. Both King Henry and Kate are bound to their station in life by virtue of their birth. They each work to define their role in their own family, follow their own life's path, and establish their voice and place in the world.

In *Henry V* King Henry had to establish himself as the new monarch after his father's death he received tennis balls in what looked like a treasure chest from the Dauphin of France as a mocking gesture referring to his wild adolescence. As he worked to carve his niche in the world and in history he decided to go to war against France and lay claim to lands in France and

he feels should be his by law. King Henry worked to be true to his ancestry and his role in the family line while still asserting his sense of individuality upon his reign.

In *Taming of the Shrew* Kate struggled with her role as a daughter in a society that allowed women to be essentially sold by their fathers to the suitor offering the most wealth. She wanted her voice to be heard and not to be drowned out or silenced because as a wife she would become subservient to her husband who is now her master. She is intelligent, strong-willed, confident, and spirited. She doesn't wish to marry a man who is controlling and who will squelch her ability to assert her individuality. She behaved in a shrewish manner to scare away such men.

This same theme is found in Shakespeare's sonnets as well. In sonnet number 29 the speaker turns aside from his original desires of wealth and prestige among society. He realized that what he desired most is the love and companionship of his lover. He chose to focus on his individual feelings and desires rather than what society said he should be pursuing.

This theme is so enduring that we can see it in the television shows, movies, books, comic books, etc. of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Two examples are *The Brady Bunch* and *Boy Meets World*. *The Brady Bunch* (Leeds 1969) aired on television from 1969 to 1974. Mike Brady is a widowed architect who has three sons, Greg, Peter, and Bobby who range in age from 13 - 7. Carol is a divorced homemaker with three daughters, Marcia, Jan, and Cindy, ages 12-6. This blended family also includes Mike's housekeeper, Alice. Over five seasons and 117 episodes each of the children face struggles trying to understand life in a large family with their siblings and a new step

parent. These new worries of life in a blended family occur amongst the normal stresses of growing up such as school, puberty, friends, dating, etc. Even Mike, Carol, and Alice are focused on from time to time, showcasing their uncertainties of their roles in the family, their own talents and shortcomings as individuals and as parents/caregivers. The adults are able to help the children overcome the moments when they feel that being a part of this large blended family is something they don't want. There are times when the children clash with their new siblings and even their new stepparent. This all takes place in a very sterile TV sitcom world, but it does have some similarities to Shakespeare's Hamlet.

After Hamlet's father dies his mother, Queen Gertrude marries Claudius, the former King's brother. Watching your parents remarry can be difficult if you are 6 years old like Cindy, the youngest of the Brady children, or in graduate school, like Hamlet. Hamlet lived in close proximity to Polonius's family and grew up with them. They quarreled like siblings and engendered strong emotions in one another. Each is trying to find his / her place in the court of Denmark and in the world at large.

Boy Meets World aired on television 1993 – 2000 (Jacobs 1993). It also focuses on a family but in contrast, it focuses more specifically on the middle child of 3 in the family. We get to see the world through his eyes. His name is Cory Matthews. The Matthews family lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His dad is the manager of a grocery store and his mom is a homemaker. Cory has an older brother, Eric, and the younger sister, Morgan. At the beginning of this series, Corey is in the 6th grade with George Feeny as his teacher who happens to live next door. George's character is the wise old man of the story and mentors Corey specifically as well as the other characters

from time to time. Cory's best friend, Shawn, comes from a broken home and is a little rougher around the edges. Shawn has more of a bad boy persona than Corey does. Corey makes friends with a girl in his class named Topanga. She has the soul of a flower child from the 1960s. She provides a lot of opportunities for Corey to learn life lessons about girls in general and later how to be a husband once they get married. Like Cory, Hamlet is the focus of the story with the other characters and plotlines revolving around him and his interactions with them. Hamlet tried to understand his place in the world amongst the aid and advice of friends and family while balancing expectations from school and home with his own desires in life. Corey faces the same balancing act.

Both characters have strong feelings for a young woman in their life and struggle with understanding her and how to make a relationship work. Ups and downs with parents, siblings, mentors, friends can be confusing and very trying. *Hamlet* was much darker as a story and as the Prince of Denmark, he had a lot more on his shoulders. Corey and Hamlet, however, both had to learn who they could trust, tried to figure out the fair sex, what mark they were going to make in the world all while being true to themselves.

The theme of the individual in the larger society is just as relevant in modern times as it was in Elizabethan society. It doesn't matter what era a person lives in or what economic or social circumstances they are born into, they want to know how to fit into the family dynamic and the world at large. The class system of Elizabethan England made life a little different for people than life as we know it in 21st century America but each person still works to understand their place in a civilized society. It is natural for people to want to

feel stability in a large, unpredictable world. The need for autonomy is ever present in a world of billions of people. Every person has his own life to live.

Shakespeare left a legacy of rich stories and characters that almost have taken on a life of their own. He was a master at observing human behavior and portraying people as characters on stage in a way that is believable. The characters in his tragedies, comedies, and history plays are all so true to life that we see traits in them that we recognize in ourselves and those around us in our modern world, 500 years later. His stories have been popular for generations because on a basic level human behavior doesn't change. Through every age of the world, people have been striving for power, looking for love and acceptance, trying to

figure out how to make their mark in the world, and make their own voice unique.

Individuals in the Elizabethan era were trying to find their place in the world, understand and define the role in the family, and find their way to make their voices heard in a world of an untold number of voices. They saw the injustice, uncertainty, and betrayal happening in the world as well as love and rejection. These same elements of human behavior are still present today in the 21st century. Shakespeare wrote about very basic elements of human behavior. His work will continue to be popular for generations to come because future generations will continue to recognize traits present in his characters and elements in his stories in themselves and in their own lives.

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