

## Hamlet: Literary Criticism and Response

**\*\*Note:** This assignment will be much like your in class analytical essay that is a summative assessment for this unit. Today, choose two of the following critiques and determine whether you agree or disagree with the critique. (I often think it's easier to disagree initially). Choose an approach (either feminist, queer, or psychoanalytical) to form your response from. Develop your thesis statement, then create an outline that includes your claims and evidence from the text (both Hamlet and the analysis given) to support these claims. I want this for two of the following criticisms.

Instructions: Read the literary criticisms of Hamlet below. Choose one criticism, and, on another sheet, write a response either in support of or opposing the critic's argument. Remember to cite the text (both the criticism and the play) for support.

### Criticism #1: REBECCA SMITH

Smith, Rebecca. *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. University of Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Gertrude, in Shakespeare's Hamlet, has traditionally been played as a sensual, deceitful woman. Indeed, in a play in which the characters' words, speeches, acts, and motives have been examined and explained in myriad ways, the depiction of Gertrude has been remarkably consistent, as a woman in whom "compulsive ardure . . . actively doth burn, / And reason [panders] will" (III.iv. 86-88) Gertrude prompts violent physical and emotional reactions from the men in the play, and most stage and film directors . . . have simply taken the men's words and created a Gertrude based on their reactions. But the traditional depiction of Gertrude is a false one, because what her words and actions actually create is a soft, obedient, dependent, unimaginative woman who is caught miserably at the center of a desperate struggle between two "mighty opposites," her "heart cleft in twain" (III.iv.156) by divided loyalties to husband and son. She loves both Claudius and Hamlet, and their conflict leaves her bewildered and unhappy.

### Criticism #2: REBECCA WEST

West, Rebecca. *The Court and the Castle*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957.

There is no more bizarre aspect of the misreading of Hamlet's character than the assumption that his relations with Ophelia were innocent and that Ophelia was a correct and timid virgin of exquisite sensibilities...She was not a chaste young woman. That is shown by her tolerance of Hamlet's obscene conversations, which cannot be explained as consistent with the custom of the time. ...The truth is that Ophelia was a disreputable young woman: not scandalously so, but still disreputable. She was foredoomed to it by her father. ...Polonius is interesting because he was a cunning old intriguer who, like an iceberg, only showed one-eighth of himself above the surface. ...[In addition,] no line in the play suggests that [Ophelia] felt either passion or affection for Hamlet. She never mentions him in the mad scene, and Horatio says of her, "She speaks much of her father."

It was the whole court that had destroyed her. She was a victim of society, which abandons principle for statecraft, for politics, for intrigue, because of its too urgent sense that it must survive at all costs, and in its panic loses cognizance of all the essentials by which it lives.

### Criticism #3: SARA SHELDON

Sheldon, Sara. *Three Tragedies*. Scholastic, Inc., 1956.

With his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage, he has caught his first glimpse of corruption, and his imagination preys upon it. He sees, in sharp focus, whatever is tainted or impure. Hamlet comes upon Ophelia, kneeling at her prayers, the very image of innocent devotion. Yet he sees no fresh-faced virgin, but a painted

whore. "I have heard of your paintings, well enough," he tells her abusively. "God hath given you one face, and you make yourself another. You jig, you amble, you lisp. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad."

As Hamlet prowls about Elsinore, his mind runs to images of degeneration and decay. For him the clear air has turned to "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors"; "something is rotten in the state of Denmark." At first we suspect the source of the foul odor is Claudius, the satyr, the bat, the King of reechy kisses. But the problem goes deeper than that. What is troubling Hamlet is the smell of human mortality. This "too, too sullied flesh" has properties to turn a delicate stomach, particularly when it is decomposing in the earth. In the graveyard scene, holding the skull of Yorick, his father's court jester, Hamlet asks his friend, Horatio, "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th'earth? And smelt so?" A Shakespearean scholar, G. Wilson Knight, has said of Hamlet: "He has seen through humanity. He has seen the truth, not alone of Denmark, but of the Universe, and the truth is evil." It is a measure of our own disorders how much at home we are in this dark, disrupted world of Hamlet's.

#### Criticism #4: ALAN GARDINER

The first scene...suggests that this society is a deeply disturbed one. Even before the silent movement of the Ghost across the stage 'harrows' Horatio 'with fear and wonder' there is a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension in the tense, nervous exchanges between the guards; the unsettled atmosphere is such that Francisco feels 'sick at heart'. Horatio believes the coming of the Ghost 'bodes some strange eruption to our state' and Marcellus's account of the country's urgent preparations for war increases the sense of a troubled kingdom. Another important function of this scene is to suggest the nature of the old order which existed in Denmark when Hamlet's father was alive, an order which has been superseded by a very different set of values now that Claudius is on the throne. 'Valiant Hamlet' emerges as a man of honour who settled disputes such as that with Fortinbras (the elder) of Norway by personal combat. The appearance of the King's Ghost, 'majestical' and of 'fair and warlike form', similarly suggests a heroic figure. In contrast to the cold, menacing darkness of the play's opening, the scene which follows presents the light, warmth and formal splendour of Claudius's court. However, although at this stage we know nothing of the murder he has committed to win the throne, Claudius's very first speech hints at the corruption beneath his dignified exterior.

#### Criticism #5: HAROLD BLOOM

Bloom, Harold. Hamlet: Poem Unlimited. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

How did Hamlet develop into so extraordinarily ambivalent a consciousness? I think we may discount any notion that the double shock of his father's sudden death and his mother's remarriage has brought about a radical change in him. Hamlet always has had nothing in common with his father, his mother, and his uncle. He is a kind of changeling, nurtured by Yorick, yet fathered by himself, an actor-playwright from the start, though it would not be helpful to identify him with his author. ...[At] the very close, Hamlet fears a wounded name. I suggest that his anxiety pertains not to being a belated avenger, but to his obsessions as a dramatist.