

## Hamlet: A black humour

Nitin Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, PGDAV College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

This paper deals with the study of black humour in William Shakespeare's Hamlet. Although Hamlet is categorized as a tragedy, Shakespeare does incorporate some humorous elements. In this paper I try to study all the elements in the play such as characters, language, dialogues etc. In this paper I should like to pursue this element systematically, exploring some comic aspects of the protagonist, examining the various comic figures, and also commenting on the complex relationship between the play's comic and serious elements, the unique mixture of "merriment and solemnity".

**Keywords:** black humour, william shakespeare's hamlet

### Introduction

**Dr. Laurentius M.D.:** *"How are you doing today, Hamlet?"*

### Hamlet

*"...I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a most sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted golden fire: why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors....Man delights me not; nor woman neither, [sigh]"*

**Dr. Laurentius:** *"Tsk tsk. My boy, it's obvious. You've got a bad case of melancholy."*

One of the key elements of Hamlet apart from the revenge and amidst all the bloodshed there is a sense of dark humour that takes place by the key character Hamlet. This dark humour is used most effectively. An example in Hamlet would be in Act 4 scene 2 where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go searching for Hamlet just as he has hidden away the dead body of Polonius. In this scene it starts with Hamlet saying "safely stowed!" This indicated towards the dark humour and here Hamlet talks about the dead body as if it were a piece of meat that he put away to be safely stored away. He goes on to say "Who calls on Hamlet?" This can be seen to be deliberately bringing out the farcical element. Humour is as much a part of the human condition as sadness; in times of grief, humour can be a saving grace. Hamlet's use of dark humour makes him more believable; he isn't just some royal brat who is upset that he has been further removed from the crown, but he actually cares about his family, specifically his father, and the wrong done to him. Therefore, for the audience, Hamlet's believability relies on his use of dark humour. The audience comes to share with Hamlet the knowledge that he is right, that he is justified. Considering that the audience also shares Hamlet's knowledge of the murder, his use of humour reminds the audience that his madness is just an act and that he in fact still has his wits.

The quality of humour is important in comedy, it is more important in tragedy, whether it is in the tragedy of life or in

the tragedy of the theatre. In terms of the element of humour in the play of Hamlet for instance, the darkness of tragedy is made blacker by the jewels of humour with which it is portrayed. This can be best shown in Act 1 Scene 2 where hamlet says "A little more than kin, and less than kind." This is said in the form of a pun as here hamlet in his typical humour characteristic does a play on words as he indicates that the king designates himself as not only Hamlets father but he is also his uncle and he is acting in a way that could be seen as unnatural. The reason this would be seen as unnatural is that the king is Hamlets uncle yet he is taking the role of his father and trying to bond with Hamlet in a father figure level which can be seen as an unnatural thing to do. After Hamlet says this the King replies "how is it that the clouds still hang on you?" "Not so, my lord; I am too much in the son," says Hamlet, toying with grief. Again we see Hamlets humorous side especially whilst he is depressed as the king uses the metaphor of clouds to hint that Hamlet is still upset and depressed and typical to Hamlets characteristic his reply is a sarcastic pun on the words of sun and son.

As identified by a modernized Dr. Laurentius, Hamlet is a case study in humoral imbalance. Shakespeare and his contemporaries thought about the physiological processes of the body and their relation to the mind and soul within the framework of the four humours. Hamlet's "antic disposition" and emotionally consuming deliberations are less perplexing when he is seen as an example of a melancholic individual. One could question whether his humoral disproportions were excessive to the point of provoking true insanity, but this is not the object of this paper. After briefly outlining the Elizabethan humoral physiology-psychology, I will apply the treatise of the sixteenth century Laurentius to the character of Hamlet.

The contemporary definition for black humour is given thus, 'In literature and drama, combining the morbid and grotesque with humour and farce to give a disturbing effect and convey the absurdity and cruelty of life.' In simple terms this would mean to make light of a serious or tragic situation by joking about it to illustrate how foolish life can sometimes be.

Hamlet's black humor is a direct result of too much anger: it leads to the alienation, and finally the death of the people who

know him, and eventually causes his own death. First, Hamlet's reaction his mother's marriage right after Old Hamlet's funeral shows that his anger alienates him from his mother. Second, his reaction to Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is his indirect anger to the world, because Hamlet feels that everyone is betraying and using him. Lastly, the anger towards Gertrude is expressed in conversations with Ophelia which eventually leads to her death. Hamlet tells Horatio that the food served in the funeral will be the same served in his mother's wedding.

When Polonius meets Hamlet, he indirectly insults Polonius. First he asks if Polonius is a fish monger when Polonius is a Lord Chamberlain. For example; "You are a fishmonger." (Act 11, Scene 11, Line 174) Secondly, he indirectly tells Polonius he's not intelligent, because he's old. ".....yet I hold it honestly to have it thus set down, for your yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward." (Act 111, Scene 11, Line 200) It leads him to accidentally kill Polonius when he meant to kill Claudius. "Oh I am slain." (Act 111, Scene 1V, Line 27) When Hamlet catches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spying on him on behalf of Claudius, he tells them that they're easily controlled and used by the king. "When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again." (Act 1V, Scene 11, Line 18) Later on, he secretly sends a note to the King of England that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be killed. He makes it look like Claudius has wrote it. "I had my father's signet in my purse, which was the model of the Danish seal, Folded the writh up in the form of th' other, subscribed it, gave't th impression, placed it safely, The changeling never known." (Act V, Scene 11, Line 49)

Hamlet is suffering from severe humoral imbalance. Evidence from Shakespeare's text directly and convincingly correlates to the portrait of Laurentius' melancholic. Hamlet is "out of heart"; all the other characters in the play notice how "neither th' exterior nor the inward man Resembles what it was"(2.2.7) and they are puzzled by his words and actions. When he visits Ophelia he is "fearfull and trembling", "Pale as his shirt, and his knees knocking each other "(2.1.81). It seems to Ophelia, that he is "afraid of everything", she describes he had "a look so piteous in purport, As if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors"(2.1.82). Hamlet's conflict is within himself; berating his indecision he calls himself an "ass", a "coward", indeed, he is "a terror within himself...he would runne away and cannot goe." Hamlet is "troubled with ...an inseparable sadness which turneth into dispayre" to the point of considering suicide:

*O that this too too sullied flesh would melt Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter* (1.2.129).

Hamlet is "disquieted in both body and spirit" telling his mother "I have that within which passes show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe. (2.1.86) Hamlet is not sleeping well, he is "subject of watchfulness, which doth consume him, describing to Horatio "Sir in my heart there was a kind of fighting That would not let me sleep"(5.2.4). He complains of "dreadful dreams" to Rosencrantz, complaining magnificently: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."(2.2.258). Hamlet is "suspicious", grilling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it free visitation?" (3.1.280) Hamlet is

*"one whom nothing can please, but only discontentment", damning all the world, he exclaims:*

*...O God, God, How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world? Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature*

*Possess it merely* (1.2.132)

Horatio observes how this distress "forgeth unto itselfe a thousand false and vain imaginations", noting "He waxes desperate with imagination"(1.4.87) and that Hamlet speaks in "wild and whirling words"(1.5.131).

Using Laurentius' description as a checklist provides ample evidence for a melancholic diagnosis. Hamlet's behaviour was indicative of his melancholic imbalance; his depression, anguish and reticence in avenging his father are distinct symptoms of his humoral disorder. At the risk of sounding trite or even facetious, I wonder how different the play would have been if someone had simply relieved the poor boy of his bad blood.

The two clowns make light of a serious situation as they jest about death. For instance, the one clown explains that a man is only drowned if he goes willingly to the water and puts himself in it; if, however, the water comes to him, he is not "drowned." Then, they argue the value of the gallows. Then, after Horatio and Hamlet enter, the clown engages in jokes and puns with Hamlet.

*HAMLET How long wills a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?'*

*CLOWN Faith, if 'a be not rotten before 'a die....'a will last you some eight year or nine year. A tanner will last you nine year.*

*HAMLET Why he more than another?*

*CLOWN Why, sir, his hide is so tanned with his trade tha 'a will keep out water a great while....*

In this scene, also, the gravedigger relates two riddles: one is about grave digging being the oldest trade in the world, and the other is that gravediggers build more securely than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter:

*The houses he makes lasts till doomsday. Go, get thee in, and fetch me a stoup of liquor.*

In conclusion I think that Shakespeare uses the tool of comedy in Hamlet very well. The evidence of just how effective Shakespeare is with using comedy as a tool in Hamlet is best shown in the gravedigger scene. In this scene Ophelia is being buried after she killed herself in the church which back when the play was first written which was in a time where Catholicism was powerful and so a person who killed themselves and was being buried in church would have cause a few people to get upset the serious mood is quickly lightened through the humour of verbal joust which takes place between Hamlet and the gravedigger.

## References

1. Clendening, Logan. *Source Book of Medical History*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1942.
2. Edgar, Irving I. *Shakespeare, Medicine and Psychiatry*. New York: Philosophical Library, Inc, 1970.
3. Hoeniger, David F. *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc, 1992.
4. Watts, Cedric. *Hamlet*. Boston Twayne Publishers, 188.
5. Weitz, Morris. *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Cleveland The World