

Hamlet: A Statement of Defense

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Does the cheap paperback entitled *Hamlet* have any real value, except those two cents worth of paper? Should we read even now, four centuries later, a drama that takes place in a setting so distant to ours? They don't even have computers! Mr. * answered my question whether students should read Hamlet: "No, because it's words." He did not know he was actually quoting Hamlet (2.2.210). But then he changed his opinion: "Students should read Hamlet, calculus books, and music." "Why?" "Because it's there..." To find a reasonable justification seems impossible. Whenever we try to do so, we must use terms as "every educated person," or "western culture." Yet look at a simple image: Two boys are standing in front of you; the first one speaks nice English, has clean underwear, smells lovely, and so forth; the second one is jumping around, whirs at you, and only the lack of body hair distinguishes him from a monkey. In my opinion, you should read *Hamlet*, to be like the first one; to smell lovely. Not only you will improve the others' image of you, but you will also find out more about yourself, which will raise you from a plain vegetative existence. Especially the youth likes the play because Hamlet resembles her; they both have problems with parents, they squabble with friends, and they think the whole world has conspired against them. They lost everything and now they are alone. This trivial resemblance, however, goes much deeper, since Hamlet albeit living centuries ago is still engulfed by the same relationships and feelings; he is exactly the same human as you. Finally, since Hamlet goes through every possible state of mind, everybody can find his own in the drama, and students should

therefore find its reading pleasing.

The first and most common argument for reading *Hamlet* presumes that students should read classics. Shortly, if you want to understand the fancy word *albeit* I used in the last paragraph, you have to know the words *although*, *be*, and *it*. Only then can you understand a new word (that is new art), whichs refer to the old words (that is the classics). Hamlet himself often alludes to older classics: He for example paraphrases Jocasta in comparison to Gertrude: “What should a man do but be merry?” (3.2.132) In that second, the plot of *Oedipus the King* jumps into the reader’s head and the interpretation must take it into account. Instead of describing a particular feeling at great length, you just allude to a phrase from known literary work, and then you can easily create new feelings out of the old ones. But if a student uses such quotes from a book that he has never read, he speaks in cliches. Whenever an author mentions the name of Hecuba, you are expected to have read the *Iliad* and some references to it such as Hamlet’s “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to to Hecuba” (2.2.586). If you as an author use the phrase without knowing its meaning, your reader will consider you a gasbag. The National Council on Economic Education, for instance, used the phrase “To be or not to be. . .” (3.1.64) to denote a program in which 3rd-graders learn to understand the terms labor, wages, and human capital to improve their chances on the labor market. Fortunately, the schools do not employ the title to teach such children why not to commit suicide. . . On the contrary, with the same title schools try to develop mature students’ critical reading and comprehension of texts that do not serve their content in simple sentences, for which *Hamlet* seems appropriate. I think that after the reading my comprehension of English literature has improved and I am more apt to follow texts, which had been previously inaccessible to me. The students should therefore read classics in general to improve their interpretation and ken (with which all the polled agreed), but we still do not know why *Hamlet* is a classic.

A classic work does not contain pretentious prating, but rather suffuses the very anima of its reader with truth; a classic captures the world in a single tome. *Hamlet*, similarly

to the Shield of Achilles, covers everything: violence, relationships, sex, suicide, revenge, pretension, state affairs, inability of decision, freedom. Just look at the last two: Why does Hamlet procrastinate with his revenge? Because when he decides, he must hold up to his word, and therefore loses the freedom to decide, and without freedom there is no conscious existence. And how do all these issues differ from ours? Instead of the printing press we have printers, but the problems of the essence of our existence remain the same. The quality of being a classic (often connected to something ancient and obsolete) paradoxically lies in its application to today. Shakespeare tries to improve my life by a didactic example of universal moral values: You should not copulate with such a beast as Claudius—a completely immoral existence—and you should not commit suicide. We do not have to know what it feels like when your mother marries before “the salt of [her] tears / [has] left... her eyes” (1.2.160) (thereby showing she did not love your father) a man who has loved neither her nor you; a life can, however, look like that too. Or your friend is so whimsical that you do not recognize her; she might not be concerned with the color of her lipstick, but rather with existential questions. Although I recorded that the polled found *Hamlet* inspiring in solving relationship crises, the perception of your own struggle as an act of artistic beauty may likewise aggravate the situation. On the other hand, Hamlet’s religious struggle and his suicidal meditation seem to have influenced hardly anybody (except me). Readers usually take it just as a good story. Moreover, the drama discloses a sign even more actual in contemporary society: Pretense. Ophelia pretends to be praying and hides her sincere affection for Hamlet to serve the goals of her father, for which he chides her: “God has given you one face, and you make... another” (3.1.155). The prince similarly reprimands Gertrude for wearing black without a real grief for the death of her spouse (1.2.81). And so we have all those who think they are the professional masters of this world, yet their mask is no better than a “harlot’s cheek, beautied with plastering art” (3.1.59). Some people are just so shallow in their pretense that they dissolve like Osric when “all ’s golden words are spent” (5.2.144). Here too, the play accurately describes our world, which is in fact identical in its baseness

with that of medieval people. The persistence of the quotations' meaning advocates that the drama be read forth in the schools.

Many works contain themes reflecting our life, but a classic reading should have something extra: Form. A drama written in iambic pentameter with occasional rhyming and full of puns certainly fulfills this requirement. Though analytic papers discourage ambiguities, in creative work they can produce the contrast necessary for the plot. When Hamlet replies to Claudius' familiarity "I am too much i' the sun" (1.2.69), he means either that the atmosphere is too happy for his grief, or he does not want to be considered Claudius' son. To form these puns from the clay of words like a potter is artistry, and in order to become like the first boy from the introduction, you have to master it. There must certainly be some beauty in Hamlet's lines; why else would "To be or not to be" be used twice as much as "Let there be light" from the Bible? Not that the play must follow a literary standard; the literary standard follows from the play—that creates a truly classical drama. *Hamlet* thus serves not only as the good example of early Modern English, but also deepens the grasp of English by presenting unusual yet valid grammatical constructions. In my reading, I really felt the limitations of language in describing thoughts in literary sense, for Shakespeare had to use figurative language like that of the scene where Gertrude describes Ophelia's drowning in order to express the topics of faith, madness, and death in their tragic monumentality:

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up
.....
..... But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (4.7.200)

The language of this excerpt is so subtle, yet it still describes death. The form and the subject are here in contrast, which expedites the conflict. It is as if the form urged the actors: Leave this terrible madness and return to harmony. Therefore, not only the story, but also the dexterity with which the author evokes a different atmosphere constitutes a classic. *Hamlet*, however, is not the only piece of literature that can be used at schools; other tragedies of Shakespeare would work similarly, and any worthy book would fulfill all the requirements except for the early Modern English usage practice. As Mr. * remarked in the introduction, literature is there and to do something is better than nothing, and so we should read it. If a nihilist opposes required reading, no arguments will make him give up his pose anyway. But let me ask him how he got to his intellectual pinnacles. By reading. If nothing else, some noted that they had found *Hamlet's* story enjoyable for its straightforward description of good versus bad conflict and its action. I disagree, as it is not clear who the good character is (look at how many people Hamlet de facto killed: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, Claudius—and compare it to the villains, who each killed only one person) and to enjoy it only because it contains many murders seems superficial to me. A classic thus allows for many interpretations, which manifests its contrasts: In purity it conceals mystery, in tradition actuality, and in freedom a literary imperative. Since *Hamlet* follows both requirements of form and content, it serves well as compulsory reading.

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Work cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

National Council on Economic Education. “To Be or Not to Be?” URL: <http://www.econedlink.org/lessons/index.cfm?page=teacher&lesson=EM393>.

For the comparison of “To be or not to be” and “Let there be light” I used the number of web sites found by Google that contained the string.