

Theatre and Language in Hamlet

The soliloquies

The first Folio is prefaced with an address to the reader to “Read him again and again”. In terms of words and action, Hamlet is the most self-conscious play about its own theatricality. Words and actions throughout the play are inextricably linked, as is the notion of “playing” a part.

From the outset of the play we see evidence of the external show compared with the underlying reality. In Act One, Hamlet’s speech to Gertrude (Nay seems...etc) shows us the Prince talking about actions that a man “might play” and also about what is “inside” him which “passes show”. (NB “Action” in Elizabethan definition meant “acting”)

Throughout the play we see inner reality beneath the surface performances of not only Hamlet, but other characters, too. Hamlet has only “one-liners” at the beginning of the play until we hear his first soliloquy, which is an attempt to look at “that within, which passes show”.

The soliloquies create a bond between the character and the audience and were a dramatic convention inherited from Greek drama. By the time of Shakespeare they had moved away from commentaries on the plot and events of the play and had become illustrative of the inner thoughts of the character. In the soliloquy the character tells the truth as he perceives it, although “truth” is subjective and can have different meanings for different characters.

In Hamlet we have seven soliloquies, five major and two smaller ones, and Hamlet’s character is revealed through them as the play progresses.

Hazlitt – “This is that Hamlet the Dane...whom we remember...but all whose thoughts we know as well as we know our own..Reality is in the reader’s mind..It is we who are Hamlet”

How do the soliloquies work?

They are NOT “voice-overs”, nor are they private, secret musings, but rather genuine conversations (albeit one-sided) between the protagonist and the audience. Hamlet “takes the audience on” and there is real interaction between him and them.

Where are they in the text?

“O that this too too sullied flesh..” (after Mother’s plea)

“O all you hosts of heaven..” (after the ghost)

“O what a rogue and peasant slave am I..” (after Phryrus speech)

“To be, or not to be..” (beginning nunnery scene)

“Tis now the very witching time of night...”(after mousetrap)

“Now might I do it pat...” (Claudius at prayer)

“How all occasions do inform against me...” (on the way to England. Fort.’s army)

There are no others in the last part of the play after he returns from England because the nature of the relationship between Hamlet and the audience has changed and he is different, and more assured of his actions.

The soliloquies divide into three pairs and one "commentary" which refers to each sentiment in the pairs, as follows:

1 & 2 are constructed round the ideas of *memory of the past*

3 & 4 are *the present situation* and his conscience

5 & 6 are *his future intentions* to kill and extract the vengeance.

7 *draws threads from all the others*

The first pair

"*Solid flesh*" is his memory & ability to remember the past, describing "that within". It ends with a basic theatrical event, the entrance of many people and his "break my heart for I must hold my tongue" Tense is past, remembering his mother's actions and his own grief and despair at his father's death.

"*Hosts of heaven*" finds him alone after the ghost and again he is obsessed with memory, this time of his father. "Remember thee?...Remember thee?" He has to physically set down the past, writing it in his "tables".

The second pair

"*Rogue & peasant slave*" is present tense, powerful language. Look at the Phyrus speech, too and see how it has a broken line "Did nothing".... which illustrates the idea of hiatus (pause) and inaction, an important theme in the play as a whole. The actor's reaction & tears are compared by Hamlet to his own inaction.

Hamlet says "I am alone" (Note also the broken line in "For nothing,.....For Hecuba", which echoes the one in the player's speech) The sense here is of strong disgust with himself at his use of words, rather than action. Note also the ending, which reintroduces the idea of acting and action in "the play's the thing..."

"*To be or not to be...*" has a huge amount of infinitive verb forms which suggest frozen inaction, (to die, to sleep, to dream, to be, to suffer etc.) The speech is a reflection on conscience, a reflection on the contents of consciousness which prevents deeds and action. Because of "conscience", action is lost.

NB The play within the play is dumbshow – no words, just action (acting) which IS effective, unlike Hamlet. Its effect, as well as "catching the conscience of the King", spurs Hamlet to believe that he will TAKE action as a result

The third pair

"*Tis now the very witching time*" is very melodramatic language and moves into future tense "Let me be cruel"..I will speak daggers, but use none.." Words are going to be dominant and language suggests action.

"*Now might I do it.*" "Now I'll do it" again suggests future, but of course Hamlet talks himself out of it again as the language takes over from the action once more. Note the pause again in the broken pentameter "To Heaven"

The last soliloquy returns to the idea of what makes humans human, bestial oblivion v. consideration of past and future. Again the language contrasts action with words and intent. At the end of the speech he is still thinking of "thoughts" being "bloody or nothing worth".

Hamlet is not seen alone for the rest of the play and when he returns it is to a graveyard. In a play concerned with death this is a physical representation of human mortality which Hamlet has previously pondered. In the Elizabethan theatre the pit which would represent Ophelia's grave was called "Hell", and the canopy above the stage was painted with the stars and planets and called "Heaven". Several times in the play we have powerful references to the heavens and also to the grave. Hamlet describes himself as "Crawling between earth and heaven". Shakespeare's audience would have had a physical picture of this before them, which added great weight to the imagery of his text, as of course would the scuffle over Ophelia's corpse.

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At the end of the play Hamlet stops musing and the language becomes very direct and simple, "there is a divinity.." "the readiness is all". In the final scene Hamlet "acts" in all senses of the word, and "theatre" takes over. The final speeches are terse and contain references to the theatricality of the occasion. he refers to the "mutes" (extras on stage) and the "audience to this act". Fortinbras commands him to be "carried to the stage", perhaps a last comment on a play which is characterised so much as actors playing to actors in a kind of Chinese box puzzle of outward show and inner secrets.

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