



The role of the historical context in Shakespeare's Hamlet: Hamlet as a Renaissance prince or existentialist figure?

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare can be interpreted in different ways depending on the sociohistorical context of the audience, as Kott explains in *Shakespeare, our Contemporary* (1964). From this perspective, a possible reading of Hamlet, the main character, sees him as product of the play's context of production, affected by the two coexisting discourses of the period (i.e: the medieval and the modern discourse); and a different, more modern interpretation of the character considers him an existentialist figure, affected by the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. Furthermore, some authors, such as Bloom, go as far as to say that these readings are not *interpretations*, because "there's no 'real' Hamlet" and, instead, he's a reflection of the audience themselves (1998:401).

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark was created in a period of transition between the medieval and the modern period. The former was characterised by a larger ratio of relational identity over individual identity (Hernando, 2018) and associated with violence and action over reflection or knowledge, while the modern period presented a dissociation between reason and emotions which led to the coexistence of individual and relational identities, often with individuality more dominant (Hernando, 2018). Some critics argue that the conflict of the play arises due to reality reflecting the residual discourse, leaving Hamlet "a tragic victim to the discrepancy between his reasoning and his action" (Brecht qtd. in Kott 1964:63). Even though this may be a valid reading of the play as a whole, the text also presents numerous examples that illustrate a dichotomy between this interpretation and the existentialist view.

One of the clearest examples of the ambiguity —or coexistence, from Bloom's perspective— in the interpretation of Hamlet's character is the *to be or not to be* soliloquy. On the one hand, it shows the conflict between the emerging discourse and the residual one. Hamlet wants to take his own life, but he does not because he is afraid of the afterlife:



"... Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?" (Shakespeare, 1603/2003: 3.1.76-82)

Not only does Hamlet believe in an afterlife, but his soliloquy also "has religious meaning of an implanted sense of right and wrong." (Edwards in Shakespeare 2003:50), implying the presence of Christianity as an entity that contributes to Hamlet's relational identity. Nevertheless, the fact that he is afraid of death shows the predominance of his individual identity (Hernando, 2018:113) and, as he is not a religious person, it turns him into the epitome of a Renaissance figure. On the other hand, however, a completely different reading about this soliloquy can be made. From an existentialist point of view, it can be said that Hamlet wants to die by suicide because "he is looking for inner freedom, and does not want to commit himself", detaching his emotions from his actions, since "[h]e considers life to be a lost cause from the outset [and] would rather be excused from this big game..." (Kott, 1964:76). From this perspective, the reason Hamlet does not take his own life is that he does not believe "that any act of his could improve the condition of the world or the condition of its victims" (Edwards in Shakespeare 2003:48), showing the absurdity typical of existentialist ideologies.

In addition to the controversy of taking his own life or not, the same arguments can be used to justify Hamlet's procrastination on murdering Claudius. There appears to be a conflict between the medieval idea of "taking justice by one's hands" and the set of values imposed by Christianity (Edwards in Shakespeare 2003:50), which justifies his delay in action. What is more, when Hamlet is determined to kill his uncle but finds him praying —or so he thinks—he shows again, more explicitly, that he believes in heaven and hell and that plays a role in his reasoning, interfering with his actions:

"Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying,
And now I'll do't — and so a goes to heaven
... Up sword and know a more horrid hent...
Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell whereto it goes." (Shakespeare, 1603/2003:3.3.73-74,88,93-95)



In contrast, an existentialist perspective could claim that Hamlet's inaction is due to his not wanting to play a role he did not choose in life (Kott, 1964: 76) and humans' inability to change the world and predisposition to "unhappiness and inactivity" (Edwards in Shakespeare 2003:50). Lastly, it is worth mentioning that both of these readings, as a single unit, can explain Hamlet's character development, as seen in 5.1: he is able to act and come to terms with life because he is being true to himself and his vision of fate, right and wrong.

In conclusion, Hamlet, the main character in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by Shakespeare is a multiphasic hero who can be interpreted from a wide range of perspectives. Hamlet can be seen either as a Renaissance prince, a product of the historical context in which the play was produced; or an existentialist figure, an "anachronistic" character which perfectly illustrates perspectives not present in the context of production of the text. According to some critics, both those readings and others —such as the psychoanalytical reading, which cannot be discussed for space reasons— can coexist without one being "right" or more relevant than the other(s), because there is a different Hamlet for every context, time and place.

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The role of the historical context in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: Hamlet as a Renaissance prince, or an existentialist figure?

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* presents us with a Renaissance prince; a man of thought who questions and reflects on multiple subject matters: love and lust, politics and society, feelings and reason, death, life, and its meaning in the world; he even wonders about his own actions. Towards the end, he becomes acquiescent and inclines to action in order to avenge his father. In this essay, I will focus on Hamlet's internal character development.

Hamlet was written in the early 1600s, which was a time of change for England. This transition period created tension between the residual Middle Ages and the early modern Elizabethan era. The clash between both discourses can be seen in *Hamlet*, as it presents some medieval ideas such as revenge, but is also concerned with modern notions such as gender, personality, identity, or sexuality.

At the beginning of the play, the Ghost appears and commands Hamlet to avenge him; however, Hamlet is hesitant: "The time is out of joint: O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right. –" (1.5.189–90). Jan Kott (1964) discusses how young people in *Hamlet* are externally imposed a role and a task they must accomplish, which they tend to rebel against: "Hamlet, Laertes, Ophelia also have to play parts imposed on them, parts against which they revolt" (p. 72), since "(...) none of them has chosen his part; it is imposed on them from outside, having been conceived in the scenario" (p. 74). Hamlet is inherently divided between acting or thinking, what he should do as opposed to what he considers right. Harold Bloom (1998) states that "(...) Shakespeare created him to be as ambivalent and divided a consciousness as a coherent drama could sustain" (p. 387). He also calls Hamlet's delay upon this request 'dialectical', as it determines early on the fate of all the other characters in the play. This father-son disagreement takes place in a context of discourse contrast: while the Ghost is a "tough, warlike" (p. 387) medieval ruler, Hamlet is a modern, intelligent prince with a "Renaissance wit" (p. 387).

After the player's speech about Pyrrhus, Hamlet reproaches himself for not being able to act on his dead father's command: "A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, / And can say nothing – no, not for a king, /



Upon whose property and most dear life / A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?" (2.2.519–23). In this soliloquy, Hamlet is deeply self-critical and wonders why, though having valid reasons, he cannot bring himself to avenge his father. He contemplates whether he's a coward. This denotes that Hamlet is torn between the two discourses, two opposing forces: he is in the midst of a conflict. It is possible to associate his excessive contemplation and lack of action as a modern mentality trait. He questions and rejects his imposed task, and therefore, procrastinates. As Bloom (1998) states, "It does not take supreme intellect and capacious consciousness to cut down Claudius" (p. 388), and therefore "Hamlet (...) cannot strike us as a likely avenger, because his intellectual freedom, his capaciousness of spirit, seems so at odds with his Ghost-imposed mission" (p. 392). Hamlet also explains that his revenge is God-ordained: "Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must like a whore unpack my heart with words, / And fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A scullion!" (2.2.537–40). Here, he considers his cowardice and postponement feminine traits.

In modern times, gender was related to power, so having womanly traits meant he was powerless. Furthermore, the word *whore* is an interesting choice, as it shows he not only considers himself a woman, but a rather vulgar, worthless one: a doubly degrading characteristic. Strangely, Hamlet is reproducing a medieval discourse, that of a desired revenge, of acting impulsively. Once more, it is evident that Hamlet is torn between the two discourses and faces a dilemma. As Bloom discusses, "Hamlet, who questions everything else, scarcely bothers to question revenge, even though pragmatically he has so little zest for it" (p. 402), which can be explained by the fact that, to some extent, the two discourses converge in him. He adds: "But that is typical of Hamlet's consciousness, for the prince has a mind so powerful that the most contrary attitudes, values, and judgments can coexist within coherently (...)" (p. 402). It is evident that he is between the two eras: the end of one and the beginning of the other.

Throughout the play, Hamlet does not exclusively reflect on the logic against action quandary. Life and death are also the subjects of his contemplation. In this sense, he presents a rather existentialist or philosophical vision. Because of his father's mourning, life is bleak and meaningless to him; however, as he fears the afterlife, he would rather live a joyless life. In this dialectical soliloquy, he reflects: "And makes us rather bear those ills we have / than fly to others that we know not of? / Thus conscience does make



cowards of us all, / and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.81–84). As Kott (1964) states, "He considers life to be a lost cause from the outset. He would rather be excused from this big game, but remains loyal to its rules. (...) Sometimes he thinks himself an existentialist" (p. 76). Again, themes of cowardice and the impossibility to act appear, as he thinks thoughts pollute the feasibility of acting: "For Hamlet, revisioning the self replaces the project of revenge" (Bloom, 1998, p. 400). Again, Hamlet is seen amid an internal conflict of opposing forces. After long consideration, Hamlet finally decides to take revenge: "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (4.4.66). The development of his character starts to become visible, as Hamlet begins to accept reality. Still, his scholarly, refined, contemplating nature is evident: "And spur all my dull revenge! What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more" (4.4.33–35). Once again both modern and medieval discourses cohabit in his mind: he oscillates between two ways of existence; to think or to act.

Ophelia's demise is a turning point for Hamlet, which prompts him to reflect on mortality. He realizes that no matter how many nobility titles, money, or belongings, the only inevitable ending is death. Hamlet may conclude that avenging is useless, as there is a single end common to all beings. As proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, "The knowledge kills action, for action requires a state of being in which we are covered with the veil of illusion — that is what Hamlet has to teach us (...) the true knowledge, the glimpse into the cruel truth overcomes every driving motive to act (...)" (Nietzsche, 1872/2008, p.29). Despite his consideration, a subsequent encounter with Fortinbras motivates him to finally act. This is explained through the converging opposite mentalities, as he can rationally understand what makes sense. Nonetheless, he feels the need to act.

In the denouement, Hamlet kills Claudius; however, in that same incident Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet himself end up dying. Kott (1964) argues that in this event Hamlet "(...) badly misuses his new knowledge acquired at Wittenberg University. This knowledge gets in the way when it comes to resolving conflicts of the feudal world. His reason is impractical when faced with irrational reality. He falls a tragic victim to the discrepancy between his reasoning and his action. The powerlessness of reason" (p. 73).



His thorough reflections were not enough to solve his conflict: Hamlet inclines towards action.

Over the course of the five acts, Hamlet undergoes a process of deep, meticulous deliberation on a variety of themes. Although he does, indeed, develop a change of character towards a more instinct-driven personality and comes to terms with his fate, still he remains a man of thought, a witty, intelligent scholar. If anything, Hamlet is the personification of the historical time he was written in: that of change. He proves the convergence of both discourses is possible, despite being exact opposites. He is a man of conflicting qualities, a contradiction himself.

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Shakespeare's *Othello*:

An Orientalist Representation of the Ethnic Other

Throughout history, race has been a volatile concept. Nowadays, according to Loomba, race “becomes shorthand for various combinations of ethnic, geographic, cultural, class, and religious differences” (2002: 2). Yet, in Shakespeare’s day, the peoples were differentiated mainly by their cultural practices. In the search of new markets and colonies abroad, early modern Europeans began to establish contact with other peoples and, thus, they became aware of their power and wealth, which “often only intensified expressions of European and Christian superiority” (Loomba, 2002: 4). This question of superiority is made evident in the literature of the time, namely in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where the ethnic other is portrayed in consonance with the tenets of a Western perspective. Then, the way in which Othello, the protagonist, is depicted throughout the play can be analysed by adopting Said’s critical concept of Orientalism: “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1995: 88). Following the postcolonial theory, the present essay aims at exploring to what extent Othello conforms to an Orientalist representation of the ethnic other.

In *Othello*, a young white woman, Desdemona, challenges the social hierarchies of the Venetian society when she elopes with an older black general, Othello. This act can be seen as the trigger for the racism against Othello: in Elizabethan times, the contact with other peoples was acceptable in the case of overseas trade and colonisation, but not domestic affairs; the Orient “had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1995: 87). In the play, the exoticisation of the ethnic other is carried out by means of the ways in which the characters refer to Othello, the references to his past, and the characteristics attributed to the protagonist. From the beginning, the characters “call him [Othello] 'a devil', 'old black ram', and 'a Barbary horse', all images which attached to sub-Saharan” (Loomba, 2002: 92). All these terms represent racist ideas connected to age-old stereotypes of black people and animal imagery, hence the ethnic other is regarded as “savage” and “bestial.” Moreover, Othello is characterised by certain traits attached to Eastern stereotypes: “Both blacks and Muslims were regarded as given to unnatural sexual and domestic



practices, as highly emotional and even irrational, and prone to anger and jealousy” (Loomba, 2002: 91). To illustrate this, when Iago tells Brabantio —Desdemona’s father— that his daughter has married Othello, he asserts: “...an old black ram | Is tugging your white ewe...” (I, i, 86-87); which emphasises the held assumption that Othello is “a lascivious Moor” (I, i, 124), a lustful and sexually aggressive person. Afterwards, Brabantio seems to react indignantly to the news, attributing the marriage to “witchcraft:”

...She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.
For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not. (I, iii, 61-65)

Here, Brabantio’s words reinforce the stereotype of “unnatural sexual and domestic practices” connected to non-Western people since, in his view, their marriage goes “Against all rules of nature” (I, iii, 102). Thus, the only way in which Othello could have seduced Desdemona is by the use of drugs or magic spells. The references to Othello’s past constitute another device through which he is exoticised. As he attempts to account for Desdemona’s love before the Duke of Venice, he explains:

...From year to year – the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I have passed...
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field...
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch
heaven...
Upon this hint I spake:
She loved me for the dangers I had passed... (I, iii, 130-167)

Therefore, in Othello’s opinion, rather than his physical appearance or any other aspect of his character, it was his exoticism, his “haunting memories and landscapes” and “remarkable experiences,” that made Desdemona fall in love with him. Othello’s representation also appears to meet the stereotype that “lust and jealousy as well as black skin are the result of a hot climate” (Loomba, 2002: 94). Even though, at the beginning of the play, Othello is portrayed as a calm man who seems to truly love his wife, as the plot unfolds, Iago poisons his mind against Desdemona and this gradually



inspires feelings of anger and jealousy in Othello. Then, when Emilia asks Desdemona "Is he not jealous?" she claims "Who, he? I think the sun where he was born | Drew all such humors from him" (III, iv, 28-30), alluding to the idea that being jealous is in Othello's "nature" due to the place where he comes from. All the aforementioned instances of the play demonstrate that, through the imperialistic discourse, Othello is exoticised and alienated from an all-white city; not only because of his skin colour, but also (and most importantly) because of his cultural practices, or rather, the cultural practices that the Western perspective associate with him.

Furthermore, the genre of the play, a tragedy, also affects the representation of Othello: some of his personal qualities and acts seem to echo the Western tragic hero. Even Iago recognises Othello as a morally superior person, as "the noble Moor," when he states that "Another of his fathom they have none, | To lead their business. |...Though I do hate him... | I must show out a flag and sign of love..." (I, i, 150-154). Later, as Iago tries to poison Othello's mind, the protagonist asks for ocular proof of Desdemona's dishonesty: "For she had eyes and chose me. No, Iago, | I'll see before I doubt..." (III, iii, 190-191). Similarly, after Iago tells Othello that he has "seen" Cassio wiping his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief, the protagonist insists on the argument of justice and honour: Othello is determined to smother Desdemona since "The justice of it pleases" (IV, i, 201). This can be related to Hernando's idea that the Western society believes itself superior to any other society due to its reliance on "reason" rather than "emotion" (2012: 23). Lastly, it is Othello's pride (*hubris*) that leads him to commit suicide, which comprises another characteristic of the Western individuality since African people do not tend to commit suicide as they do not know introspection; rather they solve their problems together with their community, through the practice of self-criticism (Fanon in Storni Fricke, 2012: 2731).

All in all, there seems to be no actual trace of a non-Western identity throughout the play. The exotic way in which Othello is portrayed along with the protagonist's insistence on the question of honour and justice lead to the conclusion that Othello fully conforms to an Orientalist representation of the ethnic other. Furthermore, the fact that, in Shakespeare's times, black people and women were impersonated onstage by white male actors wearing make-up provides further evidence of the lack of an ethnic other in the play: despite being "no paucity of Africans in England," there were "indeed,



no authentic 'others'" in the performances (Callaghan, 2000: 76). After all, Othello's final speech seems to warn the audience against the dangers of the Orient:

...in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog
And smote him (*pulls out hidden dagger*) thus. (V, ii, 350-355)

This quote by the protagonist demonstrates that the phenomenon of Orientalism pervades everything said and believed about the Orient's politics, ideologies, science, among other aspects; to the extent that the ethnic other, just as Othello, ends up internalising the racist discourse. Then, it can be claimed that "the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action" (Said, 1995: 89).

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Reason and Emotion: Neoclassical Ideals Expressed in *Austen's Persuasion*

Even though Jane Austen (1775-1817) was a contemporary to romanticism, she was not a romantic writer. Her works are associated with neoclassicism, in which, as Burgess explains, 'reason and emotion no longer work together. Emotion is kept down, made into an inferior' (1974: 141). This essay shall shed light on the neoclassical ideals expressed in her last novel, *Persuasion* (1817), which are reflected both in its form and its characters' values, more explicitly when it comes to its heroine, Anne Elliot. While she does connect with her emotions and there are hints at her sexual desire for Captain Wentworth, it is her rationality which prevails throughout the novel and guides her decisions.

To begin with, with regard to its characterization, *Persuasion* does express neoclassical ideals, especially through Anne. As Eagleton explains, for Austen 'the foundation of all right conduct is true judgment' and 'morally upright conduct is inseparable from respect, compassion and sensitivity, and thus from manners, civility or propriety' (2005: 80). All these values appear in Anne's character: in her youth, she had been 'forced into prudence,' which means that she had followed rationality and social conventions when she decided not to marry Wentworth, and she only 'earned romance as she grew older' (1817: 21). Although she does connect more with her emotions over the years, the lack of resentment in Anne is proof that she remains a rational character: she admits that, if she yielded to persuasion in the past, it was 'to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk (...) I thought it was to duty' (1817: 163), and later on states that she would have suffered more had she decided to continue her engagement in the past, because she would have suffered in her conscience (1817: 164).

The importance of rationality and propriety in *Persuasion* is also evident when it comes to Louisa Musgrove's accident on the Cobb. Wentworth advises her against jumping down the steps, but he 'reasoned and talked in vain,' for she decides to jump anyway because 'the sensation was delightful' (1817: 73). This leaves her seriously injured, and it is once again Anne who reacts the most prudently: she gives directions to



the rest (1817: 74), and Wentworth later acknowledges her propriety and capability during such situation (1817: 77). Louisa's accident is important because it reflects how, in Austen's view, rationality is not only preferred, but it is also a quality to be praised; and it proves how, in the words of Eagleton, she condemns characters that 'selfishly indulge their own feelings' (1817: 78), like Louisa in this case.

What is more, in relation to Anne's romantic decisions, Illouz states that 'it is impossible to separate the moral from the emotional, because it is the moral dimension that organizes emotional life' (2012: 25) and that 'the choice of a love object (...) had to be grasped by reason and be an object of self-knowledge' (2012: 167). This explains why Austen, who wrote in accordance with neoclassical values, aligned the heroine's emotions with her rationality. When it comes to Mr. Elliot, it is not only Anne's heart that rejects him, but also her mind, as suggested on page 106: 'And it was not only that her feelings were still adverse to any man save one; her judgment, on a serious consideration of the possibilities of such a case, was also against Mr. Elliot.' Through this sentence, the author shows how Anne's feelings correspond to her thoughts, and she presents this balance through the form of the sentence itself as she resorts to the use of a semicolon to create a parallel structure. There is another example of a parallel structure on page 18, where Austen introduces Captain Wentworth and compares his qualities to Anne's, once again using a semicolon to create balance: 'He was, at that time, a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste and feeling.'

Furthermore, in relation to form, Austen also tends to make use of free indirect discourse. According to Stafford in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, this 'enables the narrator to slip almost imperceptibly into the consciousness of the heroine' and, in turn, allows readers to see through the character (2009: 149). There is an instance of free indirect discourse on page 40, through which Anne's reflections on her feelings for Captain Wentworth become accessible: 'Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less (...) Alas! with all her reasonings, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing;' and another instance on page 35, where she hears the Musgroves talking about Wentworth: 'To hear them talking so much of Captain Wentworth, repeating his name so often, puzzling over past years, and at last ascertaining that it *might*, that it probably *would*, turn out to be the



very same Captain Wentworth (...) was a new sort of trial to Anne's nerves.' As both these examples suggest, Austen relies on free indirect discourse as it enables her to portray Anne's most sincere thoughts, and she resorts to this technique especially at times when the heroine seems to struggle with her emotions.

Additionally, when it comes to her feelings towards Wentworth, there is evidence of Anne's constant agitation, nervousness and anxiety which may all be perceived as signs of sexual desire. In the words of Itokazu, she 'must endure all the feeling, including sexual and emotional' (2011: 9). There are numerous mentions of her 'flushed cheeks' (1817: 18), 'anxious feelings' (1817: 85) and efforts to catch glimpses of him (1817: 119). However, in spite of these revelations and the fact that, as previously mentioned, she does connect more with her emotions as she grows older, it is her rationality which always prevails. For instance, during one of his visits, Anne encourages Captain Benwick to read more prose and recommends works of the 'best moralists (...) to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances,' preaching patience and resignation to a man who is dealing with the recent death of his fiancée. Immediately, however, she finds irony in herself for being eloquent on 'a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination' (1817: 68). This proves that, even though the presence of emotionality in Anne's character is undeniable, she is a rational character above all else.

All in all, there is enough evidence to suggest that Austen was indeed a neoclassical writer despite her contemporaneity to romanticism. In *Persuasion*, the author reflects values and ideals which belong to the age of reason, particularly the dominance of reason over emotion and the importance of true judgment and propriety; and she does so through different techniques such as free indirect discourse and the use of semicolons to create balanced structures. While it is true that there are references to the heroine's feelings, it is always her reasoning and propriety that are prioritized and praised throughout the novel.

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