

An Overview of *Hamlet* Studies

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By

Manpreet Kaur Anand

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To my little sons
Charankamal Singh & Sidakpreet Singh

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FOREWORD

An Overview of *Hamlet* Studies by Dr. Manpreet Kaur Anand is an acute analysis of the stupendous critical response the unique journal received from the worldwide Shakespeare scholars for its record run of 25 years. Making it comprehensible to the common reader even as it classifies the exciting explorations of the intricacy involved in the never-ceasing sect of Shakespeare's most fascinating play, *Hamlet*. The book highlights the unparalleled contribution the journal made during its long run (1979–2003) to the ever-accumulating interpretations of the legendary play about the prince of Denmark who remains caught up in the dichotomy of “to be or not to be”.

I am sure that the book will refresh the memories of Shakespeare scholars spread across the civilised world of various cultures and numerous tongues.

—Dr. Bhim. S. Dahiya
President
Shakespeare Association (India).

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—Mrs. Manpreet Kaur Anand

INTRODUCTION

Journal writing connects information derived from a fresh perspective with the bulk of knowledge the writer already possesses and thereby fosters learning with an opportunity to clarify and reflect upon the perception. Narrowly focused, comprising different volumes and issues, a journal or a periodical is a publication which is produced on a continuing basis, i.e., weekly, monthly, quarterly and annually. To name a few: academic/scholarly journals (*Hamlet Studies*, *American Economic Review*, etc.), trade journals (*Advertising Age*, *Nursing Times*, etc.), current affairs/opinion magazines (*Current Affairs Bulletin*, *Scientific American*, etc.), popular magazines (*Readers Digest*, *Sports Illustrated*, etc.) and newspapers (*The Economic Times*, *The Statesman*, etc.). By contrast, a book is a bound non-periodical publication without volumes and issues, with only parts or, say, text on pages, between covers. It is a self-contained, finished, independent work of thought and effort—something a reader is willing to spend numerous hours with—and without the reader, a book is just a collection of words on paper.

Like the essay in literature, in literary criticism an article has been a significant medium for exploring various issues of aesthetics in the history of scholarly work and critical interpretation. Ever since the journals of literary criticism were initiated in the early nineteenth century, their role in advancing the cause of literary scholarship and critical interpretation has been steadily on the rise. The history of short critical literature reached its climax in the early years of the twentieth century when critical journals were launched to establish new critical approaches to literature. Two of the most outstanding efforts were made by T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, who respectively launched *The Criterion* (1922–1939) and *Scrutiny* (1932–1953).

One of the problems with critical journals has been that of sustenance. Right from the time of S.T. Coleridge, who launched *The Friend*, to our own time, most of these critical efforts could not be sustained for more than a few months or a few years. Even the longest span that critical journals like *The Criterion* and *Scrutiny* had did not exceed twenty years. In the twentieth century, critical activity intensified to such an extent that specialized critical journals came up in a big way. Titles like *Romantic Literature*, *Victorian Studies*, *New England Quarterly*

or *Renaissance Studies* became very common in the period following World War II. However, critical activity gained so much momentum that not only were periods, movements or regional studies made the subject of individual publications, but individual authors like Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, William Shakespeare or Joseph Conrad also became the focus and themes of journals. But the problem of sustenance still continued to plague these critical efforts.

Against the background of such a history in the field of critical journals, it was indeed a brave attempt on the part of Dr. R.W. Desai, Prof. of English at Delhi University at the time, to have thought of launching a critical journal, not on any period or movement study, nor on the study of an individual writer, but on the study of an individual text. No doubt, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been the most fascinating literary work in world literature, one that has attracted unparalleled critical response from scholars and critics the world over in the last five hundred years. When Eliot compared *Hamlet* to the *Mona Lisa*, it was this very aspect of its being the most intriguing and fascinating literary work in the canon of world literature that he had in mind. Dr. R.W. Desai felt that the complexity of and fascination with *Hamlet* could sustain a full-fledged journal, entertaining diverse points of view, while its advantage over other more general Shakespeare journals would be precisely its exclusivity. It was around 1977–1978 that starting such a journal became possible. The idea was mooted to the colleagues at the University of Delhi, Professors A.N. Kaul and G.K. Das—they concurred, and in 1979 the first issue of the journal was published by Vikas Publishing House under the editorship of the three professors, R.W. Desai, A.N. Kaul and G.K. Das. The advisory board consisted of eminent scholars like M.C. Bradbrook, Charles Forker, John Holloway, V.Y. Kantak, Maynard Mack, Moody E. Prior, Gamini Salgado, S. Scheonbaum and Eugene M. Waith. Two years later, when Vikas Publishing House decided to withdraw, the triple alliance collapsed due to various circumstances, and at the time of the publication of Vol. 3 (1981) Prof. Desai alone had to continue as the founder, editor and publisher of *Hamlet Studies*.

In making *Hamlet Studies* a kind of clearinghouse for research on *Hamlet*, Dr. Desai has provided the impetus for fresh, lively and original articles. To give just one example, consider “Taboo or Not Taboo?” (Vol. 10). In it, Eric Sams argues that the successive texts of *Hamlet*—the *Ur-Hamlet*, Quarto 1 (Q1), Quarto 2 (Q2) and Folio 1 (F)—are all Shakespeare's own “stitching and unstitching”, (Yeats “Adam's Curse”, 6) and not garbled versions of an original text now lost. Moreover, the editorial board of *Hamlet Studies* has tried to be catholic in its outlook: it

has tried to give its readers a wide spectrum of critical approaches and perspectives on the play. The comprehensive, analytical Index to volumes 11–25 of the journal that came out in 2005 lists the following categories of criticism: biographical, character, Christian, construct theory, contextual, Cultural Materialism, deconstruction, feminist, historical, New Historicist, interpretive, linguistic, Marxist, myth, New Criticism, phenomenological, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, reader response, source structuralism and textual.

A remarkable fact about the journal is that despite its being focused for a quarter of a century on a single work, publishing about three hundred articles in all, it maintained a very high quality of scholarship, receiving contributions from well-established critics of Shakespeare from different countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and India. Among the prominent Shakespeare scholars who contributed to *Hamlet Studies* over a span of twenty-five years, beside the editor himself, were Aluin B. Kerwan, R.N. Parkinson, Keith Fleming, R.S. White, Barbara Hardy, Murray Roston and Mythili Kaul. All the writers, scholars and contributors to *Hamlet Studies* were treated alike. Even the Indian contributions had to meet the same standards as any of the other contributions. The basis of acceptance was that the articles had to be original and provocative. Consider Hema Dahiya's "Delay as Différance in *Hamlet*: An Ethical View" and Manju Jaidka and Natasha W. Vishist's "Of Wigderus, Feng: Some Variations on the *Hamlet Studies*". In addition, the manuscripts were required to conform to the MLA stylesheet, either old or new style. Articles could not exceed 6,000 words. Notes, production reports and reviews were generally limited to 1,500 words.

The present research work proposes to investigate and assess the critical contribution *Hamlet Studies* has made to the play's scholarship. There are two aspects to the study: one is the critical credo that the editor of *Hamlet Studies* chose to follow and offered as guiding principles for its contributors. Even an open policy of accepting all shades of critical opinions with regard to the study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in itself constitutes a kind of comprehensive critical philosophy. Although apparently *Hamlet Studies* seems to have followed an open policy, keeping the journal accessible to all the possible approaches coming from individual scholars as well as from critical schools, it does seem to have encouraged new and fresh approaches to Shakespeare's plays in general. However, this is a matter of investigation, and a final statement on this aspect can follow if logically derived.

The second aspect to the proposed study is an examination and assessment of the critical contributions to *Hamlet Studies* in the different

areas of the literary text that it was able to attract during its long span of twenty-five years. The study plan is in the form of six chapters:

- (i) *Hamlet* Criticism up to 1978.
- (ii) The Journal's Critical Credo.
- (iii) The Textual Contribution.
- (iv) New Areas of Investigation and Interpretation.
- (v) Performance-based Contributions.
- (vi) Conclusion.

CHAPTER ONE

HAMLET CRITICISM UP TO 1978

Even after a couple of centuries, *Hamlet* is still—even now—translated into various languages, re-read and re-examined by students, teachers, authors and critics the world over. Its timelessness is enough reason to make Dr. R.W. Desai's creditable work on *Hamlet: International Journal of Research on the Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, which was founded in 1979 and successfully concluded in 2003, a suitable area of critical scrutiny. But before scrutinizing the journal, it is important to know how the critics responded to the play prior to the launching of this journal. From Neo-classicism to Neo-Aristotelianism, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been a subject of admiration and contempt. The emphasis oscillates from revenge motive to plot, structure, irony and its many other facets.

Neo-classicism attended to both form and content, instruction and delight; it conceived of their coming together at a purely formal level, with poetic imitation as the site of a correspondence between the two distinct functions. However, in Dryden's criticism, lifelikeness as the criterion of poetic imitation or verisimilitude is replaced by a notion of liveliness. Lisideius, in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, defines the criterion of the judgement of poetic merit by saying that a play should be a "just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humors, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind" (Dryden n.d.). Dryden's evaluative criticism of Shakespeare is contained in his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), prefaces to *All for Love* (1678) and *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), and prologues to some of his best-known poems. Although Greene, Meres, Harvey and Jonson have critically assessed Shakespearean works, Dryden's evaluation is acknowledged as the first assessment based on principles and arguments. Dryden's famous assessment of Shakespeare is as follows:

He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he

describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 148).

One perceives the intensity in his depiction of different passions in his tragic heroes such as Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear. In his “Preface, Containing the Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy” to *Troilus and Cressida*, Dryden re-examines his evaluation of Shakespeare. One of Shakespeare’s failings to him is the manner in which he sometimes expresses the passions:

He often obscures his meaning by his words, and sometimes makes it unintelligible. I will not say of so great a poet, that he distinguished not the blown puffy style from true sublimity; but I may venture to maintain, that the fury of his fancy often transported him beyond the bounds of judgment, either in coining of new words and phrases, or racking words which were in use, into the violence of catachresis (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 150).

Dryden also makes a reference to the player’s speech in *Hamlet*, which he interprets as Shakespeare’s caricature of bombast. Keeping in view the principles of merit, Dryden ponders over the matter and manner of passion in drama and exemplifies Shakespeare’s passionate description with the following text:

’tis of Richard the Second when he was deposed, and led in triumph through the streets of London by Henry of Bullingbrook: the painting of it is so lively, and the words so moving, that I have scarce read anything comparable to it in any other language.... (Weitz 1972h, 151).

His evaluation serves as an invitation for further assessment of his response. He, thus, suggests that Shakespeare’s judgement is not always in keeping with the mind of a genius.

In the Preface to his edition of *The Works of Shakespeare* (1725), Alexander Pope details “an account of the fate of his works, and the disadvantages under which they have been transmitted to us” (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 152). Pope believed that if Shakespeare had edited his own work, the folios would have reflected more accurately Shakespeare’s true poetic genius and dramatic skill. He distinguishes between the faults and beauties of Shakespeare: “The poetry of Shakespeare was inspiration indeed; he is not so much an imitator as an instrument of Nature” (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 152). Shakespeare’s second excellence, to Pope, is the delineation of character: “Every single character in Shakespeare is as much an individual as those in life itself” (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 153). Consider Touchstone in *As You Like It* or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in

Hamlet; Iago in *Othello* or Claudius in *Hamlet*. It is Shakespeare's "'power over our passions', which was never possessed in a more eminent degree, or displayed in so different instances" (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 153) that sets him apart. "He moves us to both laughter and tears by his portrayal of the full range of emotion, and he moves us without labour or contrivance" (Weitz 1972h, 153). Pope points out Shakespeare's ability to develop arguments and motives in a convincing manner, when in his plays he comes across "coolness of reflection and reasoning" (Weitz 1972h, 154). Consider Portia's mercy appeal to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, restricting him from taking a pound of flesh from near the heart of Antonio, and the fulfilment of the revenge motive in Act Three of *Hamlet*. His limitations, says Pope, are as great as his virtues. "It is said that Shakespeare is often vulgar in his themes, extravagant in his incidents, bombastic in his language, and pompous in his verse. These are real defects" (Weitz 1972h, 154). Pope defends him with the argument that "it is Shakespeare's audience and his part-profession of a player that are to blame, not Shakespeare" (Weitz 1972h, 154). Thus, Pope acts as a counsel. He neither questions Shakespeare's so-called real defects nor denies that Shakespeare possesses them.

Dr. Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) has carved a niche in Shakespearean scholarship as well as in literary criticism. It is remarkable for its forthright honesty and frank recognition of Shakespeare's faults and for defending him against the charge of ignoring the classical unities. Dr. Johnson adopts a neo-classical approach which is in keeping with the spirit of the age. For him, "Shakespeare's plays are a just representation of general human nature in the sense that they hold up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (Weitz 1972h, 159). They abound in "'practical axioms' and 'domestic wisdom', to the extent that it may be said of *Shakespeare*, that from his works may be collected a system of civil and economical prudence" (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 161). Consider, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" (1.3.75) and "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain—" (1.5.108), which are concise statements of deep practical experiences and conclusions drawn therefrom. There are no heroes; his characters are species-distinct despite being of great variety. His plots and themes are life-like and his language is the familiar one of real-life situations. S.T. Coleridge agrees with Dr. Johnson that Shakespeare's greatness is due, at least in part, to his imitation of nature, but he gives a different—though undignified—account of what is true in Shakespearean drama.

Dr. Johnson refutes critics like Dennis, Rymer and Voltaire. He reflects the stricter neo-classical demand regarding the portrayal of

character. Dennis and Rymer did not approve of Menenius, a senator of Rome, having been depicted by Shakespeare as a buffoon, and Voltaire did not approve of the Danish usurper (Claudius) being represented as a drunkard. “He [Shakespeare] was inclined to show an usurper and a murderer [as] not only odious but despicable, he therefore added drunkenness to his other qualities, knowing that kings love wine like other men, and that wine exerts its natural power upon kings” (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 161). At the same time, Shakespeare’s faults are also highlighted:

He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose; ... he makes no just distribution of good or evil.... The plots are often so loosely formed... and so carelessly pursued... His declamations are commonly cold and weak... He has too many quibbles: “A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it” (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 163).

It was Philip Sidney who preached the unities of time, place and action but lamented the absence of these unities in contemporary drama. In *Hamlet*, the scene changes from heath to the court of Elsinore; sometimes we are with the pirates in the ship, and at another moment we are in the theatre with the players and see the Mousetrap. But Johnson, in the *Preface*, regarded them as optimal devices, available to the playwright to achieve special effects of dramatic concentration. D. Nichol Smith summarizes the *Preface* in a nutshell:

Johnson set himself to review the common topics of Shakespeare criticism, and to give his judgement on the points at issue. There is little new matter in his Preface, except where he deals with his work as an editor. Its importance lies mainly in its being a conclusive summing up by a strong, wise, and impartial mind of a prolonged discussion (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 165).

This assessment of Johnson is plausible. We restrict ourselves to Johnson as an evaluative critic of Shakespeare. Shakespeare does have his fascination and shortcomings, and critics concur with Johnson that Shakespeare is above all a modern writer and a great writer due to the largeness of his canvas and the intricate depictions of his multitude of human characters.

The French Revolution and Industrial Revolution influenced the fictional and non-fictional writings of the Romantic period, inspiring writers to address themes of democracy and human rights and to consider an apocalyptic change as the function of revolution. The democratic aspirations made Wordsworth and Coleridge carry on the crusade against

artificial poetic diction. Wordsworth discarded the constraints of eighteenth-century poetry. His prime purpose was to save the language of coterie, and to bring it close to the universal language of humankind. The Romantic view emphasizes the character of the hero and its explanation. Coleridge's assessment of *Hamlet* espouses that the language is the easy, familiar one of common life, especially in its first scene. It is a great play in terms of characterization, language, plot and profundity. In each of these principles, Shakespeare exhibits an exquisite judgement equal to his genius as a dramatist. Coleridge says,

[Shakespeare] never wrote any thing without design.... [In *Hamlet*] he intended to portray a person, in whose view the external world, and all its incidents and objects, were comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 179).

The characters as ideal realities, i.e., genera intensely individualized, gather significance. Profundity, too, rests on the criterion of truth. Hamlet's imaginative power forces him to think twice, attaching significance to shadows and "throwing a mist over all common-place actualities" (Coleridge 1897). In the course of time, he develops an unhealthy relation with the living world. He is indeterminate—torn between "to be or not to be". He looks upon external things as hieroglyphics. Consider his soliloquy: "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.128). S.T. Coleridge demonstrates that he delays action till action is of no use; such a situation arises when there is "overbalance in the contemplative faculty" (1897).

Even the appeal to language revolves mostly around the criterion of truth. "Shakespeare's dramas are great because of the language; and the language, whether it is wit, fancy, puns, or ordinary prose, is the language of nature. It is true to life" (Weitz 1972h, 185). The presence of the word "again" in the line, "What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?" (1.1.24) has its validating effect. "It is a great use of language because it imitates the language of real life in similar situations" (Weitz 1972h, 185). Puns show "Shakespeare's judgement because they also imitate situations in real life where punning is the natural expression of a particular emotion" (Weitz 1972h, 185).

Hamlet's first soliloquy crystallizes his character, and his second and fourth soliloquies express his sense of inadequacy and Shakespeare's consistency in character delineation. Morris Weitz says that Coleridge's "criticism of *Hamlet* includes description, exegesis, explanation and

evaluation”—constantly interweaved (1972h, 178). Coleridge sums up his assessment of Shakespeare’s creation of *Hamlet* as follows:

All that is amiable and excellent in nature is combined in Hamlet, with the exception of one quality. He is a man living in meditation, called upon to act by every motive—human and divine, but the great object of his life is defeated by continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve (qtd. in Weitz 1972h, 184).

Coleridge asserts that Shakespeare’s judgement and genius are one; that his plays in form and content are supplementary in nature. Consequently, his greatness as a dramatist is complete. Coleridge feels that there is nothing at fault in his plays, and he does not consider the use of such epithets as irregular as those expressed by Voltaire, Pope and other critics.

William Hazlitt familiarizes us with Hamlet, first as a native of Denmark, and sequentially as a character of the play, the presenter of a famous soliloquy on life, a philosopher considering this earth as a “sterile promontory” (2.2.299), and simultaneously as a schoolmate, a friend, a lover, an avenger and, above all, as an ordinary man, torn down by the fluctuations of life. He is a man to whom sadness, dullness and drabness wears away, and someone whose dreams have been shattered, for whom the word “joy” is a strange word. This is so because a man who is not united within himself cannot live in happiness and harmony. *Hamlet* is the story of a man who continuously struggles only to find that there is nothing remarkable in life.

Hazlitt’s assessment of Hamlet seems to fit the Movement poet Philip Larkin’s comment that “At an age when self-importance would have been normal, the events cut us ruthlessly down to size” (1983, 18). Hamlet feels that the days are unproductive and the nights are restless. This happens even in an ordinary man’s life. Thus, the play is a reflection of human life: “the distresses of Hamlet are transferred by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity” (Woodring 1961, 339–40). His thoughts are the thoughts of humanity at large. The beauty of Shakespeare’s art diverts the reader’s attention effortlessly towards the manner in which incidents are woven in succession. Commenting upon Hamlet’s traits, Hazlitt observes that passion is not indeed a passion but a pendulum which oscillates every moment. Hamlet is no Satan, the protagonist in *Paradise Lost*, known for strong willpower and obdurate pride. Marked by refinement of thought and sentiment, Hamlet is presented as ever-enthusiastic. His actions are accompanied by an over-speculation and excessive worry. Hamlet’s confused mind is the root cause of his procrastination:

HAMLET. 'Tis heavy with him. And am I then reveng'd,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No.
Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk, asleep, or in his rage,
(3.3.84–89)

Revenge is incomprehensible, as he is caught up in suspicions. Under similar circumstances, a man's conduct would be similar to that of Hamlet's towards Ophelia, and this is quite natural. As he tries to speculate and investigate his father's death, "he could neither marry Ophelia, nor hurt her mind by explaining the cause of his alienation" (Woodring 1961, 341). Still, he says:

HAMLET. I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum. (5.1.264–66)

Through his versification, Shakespeare throws light on every character. He shows that the queen is as much a criminal as Ophelia. Ophelia is tender and pathetic, while Laertes is hot and choleric. Foolish and sensible at the same time is none other than Polonius. His masterly design proves that he is only a master of the mixed motives of human character.

Charles Lamb, in the essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare", considers his plays with reference to their fitness for stage representation. He has regarded Shakespeare's greatest plays as books to be read rather than as plays to be acted. Charles Lamb claims that any actor who sways the audience with his dramatic demonstrations and desirable expressions is indeed a real actor. It is, then, possible for an actor to perform the roles of a character such as Hamlet—a paralysed Hamlet or the romantic beau. The intellectual insight into the character of Hamlet by the spectators is inestimable. It is his performance, especially his communication skills, that prompts a spectator to get into the "internal workings and movements of a great mind, of an Othello or a Hamlet" (Lamb 1910). Hamlet as a character is highly dramatic. Throughout the play, he wavers over the utterances of the Ghost and the behaviour of Claudius and Gertrude. He raises the question, "how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted" (Lamb 1910). Shakespeare has collected images of virtue, attributes from the nature of a common man, and has woven them into his plays, thereby bringing a touch of naturalness in his plays. His observation of life is admirable. Another peculiarity of Shakespearean tragedies that Charles

Lamb points out: “We think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity which prompts them to overleap those moral fences” (1910).

Victorian age was too vast to be reduced to a formula. The writers in prose and verse had different shades of thoughts and affiliations. But most people sought stability and peace even amidst disquieting circumstances. Whether they knew the Victorian Compromise or not, they had recourse to a compromise in life and thoughts; and they had grown mechanical in head and heart. Newman, Keble and Pusey, the three eminent spiritual leaders started the Oxford movement (1833) and made a serious attempt to recover the lost tradition (reviving Roman Catholic doctrines and rituals). They were orthodox and had implicit faith in dogmas. For a time, they were the bulwark against scientific and historical criticism. The literature of the Victorians was purposeful, propagandistic, didactic and aesthetic, with too palpable a design upon the reader.

A.C. Bradley appeared on the literary scene at the end of the Victorian period and the beginning of the modernist one. Again, the emphasis is on an intensive analysis of character. It was A.C. Bradley who first established a simple but convincing theory in his book *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). Hamlet’s inability to kill his uncle is due to the melancholic disposition caused by the death of his father by his own brother and the betrayal of his mother. Hamlet’s initial disgust for life can be anyone’s reaction under similar circumstances.

HAMLET. O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d
 His canon ’gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!
 How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
 Seem to me all the uses of this world!
 (1.2.129–34)

HAMLET. ...this goodly frame the earth seems to
 me a sterile promontory, this most excellent
 canopy, the air, [...] it appeareth nothing
 to me but a foul and pestilent congregation
 of vapours. (2.2.298–303)

This state of emotion is inevitably adverse to any kind of decision making. Dejection, then, is a state of Hamlet’s mind. Bradley stratifies plot and character and justifies the delineation of Hamlet’s character as quintessential for the adequate understanding of the play. Hamlet’s excessive intellectuality causes irresolution—the hypothesis of the play. His irresolution just

lingers on. “The direct cause was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances—a state of profound melancholy” (qtd. in Weitz 1972a, 5) serving as a strand for the plot. Melancholy doesn’t change into action promoting anger. Similarly, “to be, or not to be” (3.1.56) expresses Hamlet’s weariness of life. “For Bradley criticism functions as explanation, where the explanation purports to be true and testable” (Weitz 1972a, 8). He gradually “formulates a hypothesis that makes Hamlet clearer to readers than it would otherwise be” (Weitz 1972a, 8).

Shakespeare threw his heart and soul into the making of *Hamlet*. Hamlet is different from Othello and King Lear in the language which he uses for Ophelia: “disgusting”, says A.C. Bradley, “you will find addressed to a woman by no other hero of Shakespeare’s, not even in that dreadful scene where Othello accuses Desdemona” (Weitz 1972a, 9). Another notable point is: “Hamlet is extremely fond of quibbles and conceits, which Bradley interprets as tokens of nimbleness and flexibility of mind and an imaginative humour that are characteristic of Hamlet” (Weitz 1972a, 9). Bradley illuminates Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius and, finally, the Ghost, whose quality is his great majesty. He is no apparition, but “the representative of that hidden ultimate power, the messenger of divine justice set upon the expiation of offences” (qtd. in Weitz 1972a, 10). The description pinpoints the dominant theme in his criticism of the play: *Hamlet* as a tragedy. Critics like A.C. Bradley and J. Dover Wilson consider that Hamlet is caught up in his own world—the world of tensions and pitfalls, leading to enormous suffering. It is this suffering that makes the tragedy more complex and interesting. Dread signifies hatred, and hatred leads to regression, thereby making Hamlet’s mind a poisoned mind. That *Hamlet* is more tragic than *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* explains an attempt made by Bradley to relate their common properties to the fundamental nature of tragedy itself. “Tragedy is the mystery of the irretrievable, ultimate self-waste of spirit in the struggle between good and evil; Hamlet exemplifies (he is the only one in the play to do so) this mystery” (Weitz 1972a, 14). Many critics dispute his definition of tragedy on the grounds that these views are false and offer counter-doctrines of their own that they claim to be true.

The modernist age rose out of the slumber of self-complacency and subjected everything to a close scrutiny. The growing cult of materialism brought a twist to whatever was considered sacred and valuable in life. The works of writers marked a note of revolt against this advancing tide of the modern times. In literary criticism, the modernist period is represented by the New Critics: I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, etc. They focused more on poetic devices than on the

stagecraft, plot and character as the basic components of any work of literature. Whether it is a lyric, a narrative or a drama, it is conceived to be words, images and symbols rather than the character, thought and plot. For Caroline Spurgeon, *Hamlet* is tragic because it exemplifies, through its imagery of rottenness, the natural condition of man—his physical corruptibility, which itself is tragic.

The New Critics consider T.S. Eliot their guiding spirit. Their critical vision was not concerned with the historical or sociological aspects of the age; they considered a poem as an object in itself. T.S. Eliot, in “Hamlet and His Problems” (1919), insists on the evaluation of the play, rather than its interpretation. Eliot calls it the *Mona Lisa* of literature as well as an “artistic failure”:

He offers three reasons for his negative judgement. First, the play is not consistent in its versification. Second, it contains “unexplained scenes—the Polonius-Laertes and the Polonius-Reynaldo scenes—for which there is little excuse”. Third, and the most important, much of the action of the play is in excess of its essential emotion... In the play that Shakespeare wrote, the essential emotion “is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother”. But Hamlet “is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it is in excess of the facts as they appear” (Weitz 1972g, 37–38).

This is to state that Shakespeare has not found an objective correlative for this emotion:

Thus, *Hamlet* fails in part because much in it is not linked, as it should be, to its essential emotion and the objectification of this emotion in Hamlet’s relations with his mother (Weitz 1972g, 38).

On the other hand, Wilson contends that Hamlet’s emotion is not in excess of the facts of the play, because his emotion is towards a mother who is not merely guilty but also incestuous:

It is that, far more than the indecent haste of the wedding, which makes “all the uses of this world” seem “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,” sullies his very flesh, causes him to long for death and prompts the bitter cry “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (qtd. in Weitz 1972g, 40).

In the “Impersonal Theory” of poetry, Eliot considers that the mind of a poet (wherein the third emotion is produced by mixing two emotions) acts as a catalyst. Though remaining neutral and unchanged, it is responsible for the transformation that takes place. It operates, either partly or exclusively, upon the experiences of the poet himself. But the experiences or passions are only the material of poetry; the poetic mind transmutes

them into new artistic wholes, thus subordinating personal emotion to the emotion of art. We have to realize clearly the distinction between the man who suffers and the mind that creates. In *Hamlet*, regarding the two emotions—the father’s death and the mother’s remarriage—had this been handled scientifically by Shakespeare, the result would have been revenge. The situation has a striking similarity with *Sons and Lovers*, where, towards the end of the novel, Paul Morel moves towards “the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly” (Baron and Baron 1992, 464) instead of committing suicide. Hamlet’s state is identical to what Mathew Arnold has said:

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,
And we are here as on a darkling plane.
(2002, 34–35)

The landmark study of imagery in Shakespeare is attributed to Caroline Spurgeon for her pioneering work, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935). Everyone writing after Caroline Spurgeon acknowledges his debt to her work. Through paradigms, she construes the term “imagery”. It is poetic imagery, she says, that “gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion in a way no precise description, however clear and accurate, can possibly do” (qtd. in Weitz 1972d, 135).

Her emphasis on imagery in Shakespearean drama has led to a great concentration upon the language and poetry in the dramas, even at times to a new poetics of the dramas according to which the poetry and not the plot or the characterization is central (qtd. in Weitz 1972d, 136).

The play is embedded with myriad images of sickness, disease or blemishes of the body, but the dominant image is that of an ulcer or tumour that expresses the sick environment of Denmark, i.e., the physical, mental and political corruption that is evident from the phrases such as “blister” (3.4.44), “sick soul” (4.5.17), “thought-sick” (3.4.51), “mildew’d ear” (3.4.64) and “mote” (1.1.115). Celestial bodies like the sun, moon and stars, and supernatural elements like ghosts and witches, are a clear manifestation of the intensification and effectiveness of the imagery. Their effect raises or lowers our intensity of feeling.

To Shakespeare’s pictorial imagination... the problem in *Hamlet* is not predominantly that of will and reason, of a mind too philosophic or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly; he sees it pictorially *not as the problem of an individual at all*, but as something greater and even mysterious, as a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the infection

which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless, in its course and development, impartially and relentlessly, annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike. That is the tragedy of *Hamlet*, as it is perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life (qtd. in Weitz 1972d, 136).

Several of the critics remonstrate with Spurgeon. Wilson points out that her reading of *Hamlet* in solely imagistic terms sets aside Hamlet's moral responsibility; and Francis Fergusson claims that her view of *Hamlet*

leaves out the substantial elements (the beings of the individual characters, the stable elements in the traditional cosmos) which underlie the associated or contrasted *qualities* of their lives, the "atmosphere" or feeling tone of the play (qtd. in Weitz 1972d, 136).

In the corpus of *Hamlet* criticism, the scholarly work done by J. Dover Wilson in his trilogy, *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet* (1934), "The New Shakespeare" edition of *Hamlet* (1934), and *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935), is magnificent indeed. Wilson's chief concern as a critic is: "to ascertain just what happens in the play, a task which, he claims, had never been pursued adequately before him and yet is a *sine qua non* for any large-scale interpretive criticism" (Weitz 1972e, 107). The prime purpose is not to delve deep into aesthetics or poetics of drama; it is rather to deliberate over the questions pertaining to exegesis and the text of the play. As a textual critic, he considers two main texts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the Second Quarto of 1604–1605 and the First Folio of 1623, but the concrete challenge is to detect the kind of manuscript that lay behind these two texts. The First Folio is a

transcript of a transcript:... though itself in all probability taken direct from Shakespeare's manuscript, had been edited in a more or less high-handed fashion by the book holder of the theatre;... The *Hamlet* of 1605 was printed, if badly printed, from Shakespeare's autograph, which the company sold to the publisher... (qtd. in Weitz 1972e, 110).

The Second Quarto (1604–05) is the most authenticated text, though it is erroneous. It is the product of an "inexperienced printer and a slovenly proof-reader" (Weitz 1972e, 111). Wilson advocates a peremptory change: "too too sullied flesh" for "too too sallied flesh" and considers "a" a misprint for "u:" (Weitz 1972e, 111). Such misreadings are very common in Shakespeare, and especially common in the Second Quarto of *Hamlet* (Q2). Q2's collection comprises "Gertrad" for "Gertrude", "Course" for "Coarse" and "raine" for "ruin" (qtd. in Weitz 1972e, 111), to list a few errors. The exegetical problems are also dealt with; for example, the Ghost

says to Hamlet, “If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not” (1.5.81), and Wilson comments:

What could be more palpable or straightforward? Yet the discovery that the simple-looking word “nature” may mean “natural feeling”, and consequently “filial affection”, illuminates not only this line but four other passages in the play... (qtd. in Weitz 1972e, 113).

As a critic, Wilson’s chief concern is the interpretation of dialogue and narration of plot. His tremendous work speaks volumes of the hard work that yielded the trilogy, including scrutinizing of manuscripts and locating and examining misreadings.

G. Wilson Knight asserted the exposition and justification of a particular poetics of Shakespearean drama: “Each Shakespearean drama has an ultimate nature consisting of the spiritual, symbolic, or thematic element—the spatial—in which the characters and plot—the temporal—are fused” (Weitz 1972c, 29). Interpretation, then, is a mode of understanding to grasp the spatial-temporal reality—he tries to arrive at “the true focus of the play... by trying to understand its subject in the light of its own nature, employing external reference, if at all, only as a preliminary to understanding” (qtd. in Weitz 1972c, 29). Thus, thematic concerns become more pertinent than character and plot. The seeds of Hamlet’s disgust sprout from his father’s death and mother’s overhasty remarriage—making his domain an unweeded garden. Knight considers his misery related to his environment as an amalgam of different themes of grief in tandem. His soul is floundering in a morass of despair. In a confused state of mind, not suicide but the thought of taking revenge germinates, and it so changes Hamlet that he denies the reality of his past romance: “I loved you not” (3.1.119); he becomes cynical when he says, “To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand” (2.2.178–79).

Knight reduces the reality of the play to certain spatial themes: good versus evil; health versus disease; life versus death. But the play clearly offers a richer prospect than these polarities—an infinite vastness and an infinitesimal comprehensibility of our human experience. Death is another aspect highlighted in the play—the plot is set in motion by the murder of Hamlet’s father, the play opens with the apparition of King Hamlet, and Polonius and Ophelia die during the action (Act Four). Against the background of healthy and robust life, Hamlet seems pale with the consciousness of death. Had he been the King of Denmark, he would have been more dangerous than Claudius. His liberty to command, showing awe and majesty, becomes a threat for all. Knight’s survey

functions as a recommendation to attend to the themes of Shakespearean drama. *Hamlet* criticism is a combination of poetics, hermeneutics and the play's perusal.

With the dawn of the twentieth century, the New Critics found a significant space in the critical world of literary theory. The formalistic approach had a substantial influence upon readers, teachers and students during the second half of the century. The New Critics, like Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom, placed emphasis upon what a literary work says and how it says it. By shifting the focus to correct textual analysis, they recommended a negation of the study of the life of the author, the history of his times, and the social and economic implications of the literary work. Literature came to be viewed as an organic tradition with strict attention to form—a periodic reader—which they considered predominant. Wimsatt and Beardsley, in *The Verbal Icon* (1954), say, “the work must give us from within itself any intention that might be garnered, and we must not go to the author for his or her intention: at the very least the author is not a reliable witness” (Guerin et al. 1999b, 87). The formalistic approach to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* includes discussion about dialogues and soliloquies, similes and metaphors, and paradoxical statements, and it simultaneously disregards *Hamlet* as a projection of Shakespeare. Therefore, when Hamlet says:

HAMLET. What a piece of work is a man,
how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,
in form and moving how express and
admirable, in action how like an angel, in
apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the
world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me,
what is this quintessence of dust?
Man delights not me—nor women neither,
though by your smiling you seem to say so.
(2.2.303–10)

He pours out his preoccupation with the paradox of man—which permeates the whole play. His vision of an ideal world and the real world in which he lives, in turn, depicts his overriding concern about the strange puzzle of corruption and the corrupted man as such. How it happens, who does it or who is responsible for it is not to be probed. We retrace our steps to Scene Two of Act One to see the interplay of meaningful paradoxical statements: