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Illusion vs. Reality in The Tragedy of Hamlet

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BY

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By using certain dramatic devices, his knowledge of the sixteenth century belief in the hierarchical system and humanism, as well as in his characterization, especially of Hamlet, Shakespeare reveals that the problem of reality is central to the play, The Tragedy of Hamlet. Other possible theses become apparent in a discussion of illusion vs. reality, but in the last analysis all are reduced finally to the problem of reality.

An important structural key to the play is the critical distinction between "seem" (illusion) and "is" (reality). In order to better understand the development of this motif, two basic Shakespearean assumptions must be understood. The first is "that the world of appearance is largely the world of illusion, and this illusion is the projection of ourselves, our dominant interests. Thus there is blindness to what is outside our own conception; and so our guesses about each other can be disastrously wrong."¹ The second is "that reality, the shape of things, that which will not be altered, is not finally conformable to our best intentions, our deepest affections, or, surprisingly, our most strongly willed purposes. As with our guesses about each other so it is with our guesses at reality; they will be, in greater or less degree, inadequate."² As a consequence, if one is to experience living in "real life," one must accept the limits of humanity, for they constitute the only reality of which we can have certain knowledge.

¹ John Lawlor, The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), p. 42.

² Ibid.

Before analyzing the motifs of illusion and reality in Hamlet, it is important to understand the Elizabethan belief in the hierarchical order--the cosmological (universe), the political and social (state), and the psychological (individual)--each a reflection of the others. Theodore Spencer explains it as follows:

The governing of the state could be seen as an image of the order of the stars and the order of the stars were reflected in the order of the faculties of man. The Ptolomaic [sic] heavens revolved around the earth; and the sun was the largest and most resplendent of the planets, so the king was the center of the state. Similarly, as the earth was the center of the universe, so justice was the immovable center of political virtue. The cosmological and political orders were reflected in the order of nature . . . and though there might be different interpretations of details, the essentials of the scheme were unhesitatingly accepted. The scale rose from inanimate matter, through the vegetative soul of plants, the sensible soul of animals, the rational soul operating through the body of man, the pure intelligence of angels, up to the pure actuality of God. Man was an essential link in the chain--the necessary mixture of body and soul to complete the order. If man did not exist, it would have been necessary--in fact it had been necessary--to invent him. And man was more than this: he was the end for which the rest of the universe had been created.³

Spencer further illuminates the theory by explaining that man's chief purpose on earth was to study the book of nature and the scriptures "so that by knowing truth, he could know himself, and hence reach some knowledge of God who had made him. . . . For man alone had reason, and though false imaginations (illusions) might arouse his passions and turn him awry, and though his humors might be unbalanced, there was no real doubt that by use of his distinct reason he could resist all such

³ Theodore Spencer, "Hamlet and the Nature of Reality," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 32-33.

disturbances. Man was not a beast, to be a slave of his affections and his immediate experience."⁴

The paragraph above readily explains Hamlet's disgust with the corrupt Danish court as well as his own fear of being "passion's slave." But the system seemed orderly and optimistic, and most Elizabethans were satisfied with it. Yet doubts were beginning to erupt early in the century. Copernicus had questioned the cosmological order; Machiavelli had questioned the political order; and Montaigne had questioned the natural order. The Copernican theory was not absorbed by most Elizabethans, and it was not until Galileo perfected the telescope that the Copernican theory was considered to be "a true description of reality." Galileo himself was hesitant to support it because he was afraid it would make him "look ridiculous." The latter statement lends proof to how thoroughly "entrenched" was the Elizabethan belief in the Ptolemaic view. "For the whole inherited order depended on it."⁵

Machiavelli, on the other hand, gives a dismal picture of man in his book, The Prince. He regarded the state "a morally isolated thing, human history divorced from revelation, and human nature divorced from grace." Looking at man not as he should be but as he is, he thought man naturally depraved and that he had to be governed "by fear and by force." Understandably the Elizabethans viewed this theory with alarm.

It is not known how much influence, if any, Machiavelli had on Shakespeare, but it is known that Shakespeare had read the essays of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) as did Sir Francis Bacon, and both men

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

were influenced by them.⁶ Montaigne more explicably supports and further explains his emphatic denial that reason sets man apart from other animals. He contends that man cannot know himself, God, his soul, or nature; his senses are unreliable; he has no satisfactory standards for anything; and "the only way man can rise from his ignorant and ignominious position is by divine assistance. Man must bow to the authority and reverence of divine majesty." Montaigne concludes that "there is no difference between the psychology of men and the psychology of animals . . . since reason is insignificant, the whole hierarchy of nature crumbles."⁷

One can easily agree with Spencer's assertion that the idea of man in Shakespeare's plays was inexorably interwoven with the ideas of state and world to such a degree that it is difficult to realize that the interwoven pattern was "threatened by an implicit and explicit conflict."⁸ And when Hamlet informs Horatio: "When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us/There's a divinity that shapes our ends/Rough-hew them we will"(V.ii.9-11),⁹ he is indicating that he realizes he is in the hands of some kind of providence. "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow"(V.ii.221).

Turning to Hamlet itself, the play, examined as a whole, can be recognized on the surface as a blood-and-thunder revenge story. On

⁶ The World Book Encyclopedia, 1959 ed., s.v. "Montaigne, Michel Eyquem De."

⁷ Spencer, p. 38.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ G. B. Harrison, ed., Shakespeare: The Complete Works (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948)I.ii.129-34. (Subsequent quotations of Shakespeare will be cited in the text from this edition).

closer scrutiny, however, the problem of reality becomes evident, and all the mystery surrounding the problem is revealed. Such an expert Shakespearean critic as John Dover Wilson contends that the play is an enigma and that "we were never intended to reach the heart of the mystery."¹⁰ Probably the truth of this statement lies in the fact that it is not possible to know exactly what Shakespeare wants us to know. Critics disagree vehemently about whether the play is secular or theological. Since there are indications of both in the play, perhaps it is impossible to say that it is one or the other. This is another difficulty that adds to the mystery of the play and the problem of reality, especially as Hamlet views it. Dover Wilson reinforces this viewpoint when he advises that it is an illusion that the play has a heart, that the "mystery itself is an illusion, that Hamlet is an illusion." "The secret," says Wilson, "is Shakespeare's."¹¹

Wilson continues by explaining that Shakespeare created "technical devices" to create "this supreme illusion of a great and mysterious character, who is at once mad and the sanest of genuises, at once a procrastinator and a vigorous man of action, at once a miserable failure and the most adorable of heroes."¹² It is these illusions, in this play full of illusions, that are related to the problem of reality. And the dramatic devices employed by Shakespeare to reveal the illusive qualities of the play, interspersed with the hierarchical belief and humanism, will be the primary discussion in this paper.

¹⁰ Edmund Fuller, ed., Invitation to Shakespeare: Hamlet (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1967), p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Obviously, the theme of the play is exposed mainly through the character of Hamlet. The many devices the dramatist uses to reveal the problem may somewhat overlap, and as a consequence, a particular quotation may be used more than once as an illustration. Beginning with the interrogative mood, this questioning device is discussed by Louise Higgins and Walter Kerr as well as Maynard Mack. Higgins and Kerr explain that the play raises more questions than it answers and that many of the questions evolve from Hamlet himself.¹³ What does he do in a crude world? Should he become crude to survive, or should he try to 'humanize the bestial world'? And Hamlet himself asks, "What is a man?"(IV.iv.33). His idealistic version of man does not seem to fit the world he finds at Elsinore. If Elsinore is a brutal world, is man also brutal? Is Elsinore merely corrupted by Claudius? If Claudius is removed, can Hamlet humanize it?¹⁴ Such questions intensify the mystery of the drama--and the problem. A man who has lived in the brutal world only a few months cannot be expected to have any but the most rudimentary answers to the questions. Before the play is over, however, the Prince becomes a quiet man of action and makes his decision when he realizes the truth as to what he must do. As shall be seen, he faces reality.

This questioning mood in Hamlet "seems to lie closer to the illogical logic of life" than Shakespeare's other tragedies, according to Maynard Mack.¹⁵ To illustrate the illogical logic one might

¹³ V. Louise Higgins and Walter Kerr, Five World Plays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1964), p. 453.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 454.

¹⁵ Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," in The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark, ed. Edward Hubler (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 236.

reiterate Macbeth's remark about illusion and reality, "Nothing is but what is not"(I.iii.141-2). Mack contends that the play is full of questions that are "anguished, reproachful, meditative, and fearful." Questions which seem simple and naive at first reach a "pervasive inscrutability in Hamlet's world as a whole."¹⁶

The play begins in a puzzling manner when a challenging question is asked by the guard who is approaching the promontory, not by the one on duty. Bernardo, about to enter the platform, asks, "Who's there?" And throughout the play are the famous questions which go far beyond it: "What a piece of work is man! . . . And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?"(II.ii.312-17). Such questions indicate that Hamlet was certainly a man of the Renaissance, thoroughly schooled in its new thoughts of humanism as well as the old hierarchical system. But they also indicate the deep quandary he has been in since arriving at Elsinore, the quandary of "outward seeming" and "inner truth" that many Elizabethans were aware of early in the seventeenth century. He extends his feelings about his particular situation to cover his feelings about the world as a whole and makes them universal.¹⁷

The questions asked during Hamlet's antic mood were also evidence of his continuous search for truth. To Ophelia he exclaims, "Get thee to a nunnery. Why would's't thou be a breeder of sinners? . . . What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?(III.i.121-29). Is the latter question referring to a disenchantment with the hierarchical

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 237.

¹⁷ Ibid.

order, and, to some extent, the first one too? He is thoroughly disgusted by the display of lust by his mother, and seems to put Ophelia in the same category. He further states, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't"(II.ii.207-8). And Mack, sympathizing, says, "His madness is 'riddling' to the reader, who must ask, "How much is real? How much is feigned?"¹⁸

Hamlet's concern with the nature of reality and the relation of reality to appearance raises other questions, especially concerning the Ghost in the first act. The Ghost, which Mack calls a "vehicle of realities," reveals that Claudius killed Hamlet's father, the former King, and that Gertrude is guilty of adultery and incest. Both revelations create a real dilemma for Hamlet. Is there a possibility that the apparition itself is an illusion--or a devil who has assumed his father's shape?¹⁹ He must know the truth before he carries out his mission.

The enigma of the King poses still another question. If the Ghost is only an illusion, is the King's appearance reality?²⁰ The quandary deepens. Consequently, he tests this situation by the "play within a play," which will be the next device to be explored. It may be revealed at this point, however, that Claudius failed the test. He is found as guilty as the player-king.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 239

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Another incident concerning the Ghost and reality appears later in Gertrude's bedchamber. Hamlet sees the Ghost again, but Gertrude does not. "In one sense at least," states Bradley, "the Ghost is the supreme reality, representative of hidden ultimate power, witnessing from beyond the grave against this hollow world."²¹ Yet the Queen thinks Hamlet, who sees through this "reality," is mad. "To whom you speak this?" she asks him. He is astonished and replies, "Do you see nothing there?" Her answer, "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see," discloses the "imperturbable self-confidence of the worldly world, its layers on layers of habitation, so that when reality is before its very eyes it cannot detect its presence."²²

The dual plane of reality in Hamlet is the next device that will illustrate the problem of reality. Charles R. Forker, in an essay reprinted from the Shakespeare Quarterly, discusses this duality and asks that the reader picture the Elizabethan audience responding to the "play world" and the "real world" at once. As examples to help the reader understand the duality more readily, the play Twelfth Night is especially enlightening as Fabian comments to Malvolio: "If this were played upon the stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction," or when Cleopatra inveighs against her would-be captors with " . . . I shall see/ Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/I' th' posture of a whore." So we have the opposition between appearance and reality,

²¹ Ibid., p. 241.

²² Ibid.

²³ Charles R. Forker, "Shakespeare's Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in Hamlet," Shakespearean Quarterly, XIV (1963), rpt. in Essays in Shakespearean Criticism, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 443.

between fiction and truth; yet the appearance seems more real and the fiction more true. And because there is so much reference to "playing," "showing," and "seeming," and because of the "mouse-trap" that brings about the climax of the play, this duality functions continually throughout the drama.²⁴

The device of the "play within a play" adds another plane of duality, making the response a triple or even quadruple if the analogical level is included. Looked at in this way, "the gradations of actuality resemble a Platonic ladder, for the 'play within a play' is an image of an image of an image. Real actors pretend to be actors entertaining an actor-audience, who, in turn, entertain the real audience, who are metaphorically actors on the world's stage and hence 'walking shadows' of an ultimate cosmic reality, of which they are but dimly aware."²⁵ In reverse, the movement can be graphed as follows: Ultimate reality--actual world--play world--play-within-play-world.

Such theatrical devices give the audience more sympathy with the actions and feelings of the characters as well as "the objective reality of artiface through aesthetic distance."²⁶ The world of the play becomes more or less real than the actual world, and we must be aware of the relationship inside and outside the play.²⁷

Forker explains further that the idea of the theater contains one of the mysterious paradoxes of tragedy, "the impingement of appearance

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

and reality upon each other,"²⁸ and this is the very problem that obsesses Hamlet throughout the play and that eventually destroys both guilty and innocent alike. What is real seems false and what is false seems real.²⁹

Forker continues his observations of Shakespeare's theater by asserting that spiritual growth in Hamlet is his learning to "recognize" and "cope" with what only seems to be a reality but is false, or vice versa. To the audience, Hamlet, and Shakespeare the theater is "the symbol for making unseen realities seen, for exposing the secret places of the human heart and objectifying them in a way without which they would be unbearable to look upon. We see ourselves, as it were, through a looking-glass."³⁰ Hamlet sees this mirror image in relation to acting and other forms of art which reveal the illusions and falseness of life. "The purpose of playing . . . is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III.ii.21-25).³¹

Whether acting is real or illusory depends largely upon the position of the observer. Like Hamlet, "we can 'shift position' in our imaginations to look upon fiction from both sides of that hypothetical curtain which divides the stage from the pit."³² Caught in this paradox, Hamlet must

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 443-444.

³¹ Ibid., p. 444.

³² Ibid.

take action that is real from one point of view and unreal from another. He chooses his "role" on the one hand and has it forced upon him on the other. Since he is a "man of self-awareness," yet "divided against himself," he lives in a "divided world of good and evil, fact and fiction, actuality and feigning, of spectator and performer."³³

Forker concludes his essay by remarking that in the last act of the play all the paradoxes of appearance and reality "merge" and "are mysteriously resolved in death. . . . All appearances come to dust."³⁴

As stated earlier, an important dramatic device in the structure of the play are the words "seem" and "is." The word "seems" obviously presents the problem of appearance. In the first court scene the Queen asks Hamlet why the death of his father seems so "particular" with him, and he replies, "'Seems,' madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems!'" (I.ii.76). Because he has such high standards, he is torn apart when he realizes that the traditional order in which reason should be in control of passion is only an appearance, and that the reality of his mother's lust, for example, proves that human beings are only beasts, their specific function, reason, gone.³⁵

Another word of importance to illusion is "assume." One may assume what one is not. "'The de'il hath power t' assume a pleasing shape,'" for instance. On the other hand, it may be what one is.

³³ Ibid., p. 446.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 455.

³⁵ Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. 93.

"If it assume my noble father's person, I'll speak to it." And then again, "It may be what we are not yet, but would become," as when Hamlet advises his mother, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not."³⁶ In other words, Hamlet advises his mother to create an illusion for her own sake. One might also add that Claudius assumes the illusion of having a peaceful kingdom, which is all that is possible for the whole court until order is restored to the throne. Only then can there be reality in Denmark.

"Shape" is another word Shakespeare uses to illustrate illusion. Mack explains that it is in a form we recognize because we are accustomed to seeing it a certain way. For example, Hamlet asks, "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?"³⁷ A shape may also be a disguise, a costume, or an actor's role. Claudius illustrates this when he tells Laertes, "Weigh what convenience both of time and means fit us to our shape."³⁸ He is deviously suggesting that Laertes watch for the best time and means to kill Hamlet.

In addition to words, clothes are images also used to create illusion in the play. "The apparel oft proclaims the man,"³⁹ Polonius tells Laertes as the latter is about to leave Elsinore for Paris. Mack admonishes, "Sometimes, sometimes. But not always!"⁴⁰ Polonius also sends Reynaldo to Paris to spy on Laertes to see what kind of life his son leads.

³⁶ Mack, p. 242.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 243.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

He gives Reynaldo permission "to put a false dress of accusation upon his son . . . what forgeries you please."⁴¹ It thus appears that the "outward seeming" is of the utmost importance to Polonius.

But what Hamlet sees between "the outer appearance and the inner emotion 'shakes him to the core.'⁴² His mother, only recently in her widow's weeds, marries his uncle within a month. "'Her mourning was all clothes,'" the reader is told. When she pleads with Hamlet to take his "nighted colors off," he replies, "'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother . . . These indeed seem/For they are actions that a man might play/But I have that within which passes show/These are but the trappings and the suits of woe'"(I.ii.76-85).⁴³

Imagery in painting creates still another illusion. Sometimes art conceals, as Claudius confesses. "'The harlot's cheek,'" he remarks in an aside, "'beautied with plastering art/Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it/Than is my deed to my painted word'"(III.i.51-54).⁴⁴ So Claudius suffers pangs of conscience, but does not see the light of reality. The pangs quickly cease, and he continues his diabolical plans against Hamlet.

Later, Hamlet speaks bitterly to Ophelia in a somewhat different light of the same subject. "'I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another'"

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 244.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

(III.i.144-46).⁴⁵ Ophelia's mournful answer is "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown. . . . O, woe is me/'T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"(III.i.153-164).

Other words in the play that create images of illusion (and problems of reality) are "show," "act," and "play." Mack believes that the "show" image is most central to the play.⁴⁶ It is used as a pun during the dumb-show, especially in Hamlet's sly remarks to Ophelia, "Be you not ashamed to show?"(III.ii.149-50). Spencer explains that Hamlet's ill-treatment of Ophelia in this and in other places in the drama is Shakespeare's way of showing the contrast between appearance and reality, what seems and what is. There is an ideal in the background that makes reality coarse and vile, that what is true of Gertrude and Claudius is true of all such human nature.⁴⁷

The mirror image also supports the "show" image and may be illustrated in terms of art which not only can create an illusion but can also "serve the truth." For example, the dumb show mirrors an "image of a murder done in Vienna." It soon mirrors Claudius's guilt and holds the mirror up to nature," according to Mack.⁴⁸ In (III.iv.20-21) Hamlet tells Gertrude, "You go not till I set you up a glass/Where you may see the inmost part of you!"⁴⁹ But most readers perceive that it took more than a "glass" for Gertrude to "see" herself. This reader believes

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 245.

⁴⁷ Spencer, Nature of Man, p. 208.

⁴⁸ Mack, p. 244.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

that she is the one character in the play who never see herself in reality.

Most of the characters in the play support the show image at one time or another.⁵⁰ Polonius's advice to Laertes is to put on an external show only. And Laertes accepts the advice easily. When he fought Hamlet in the duel, he was willing to forego honor and win with any means at hand. Even at Ophelia's grave he seemed more concerned about the correct ceremonial burial than that she was dead. In his anger at Hamlet's presence, he forgot his tears and swung his fists. He flung angry words at the "churlish" priest. Just the appearance of being honorable was all that he cared about.⁵¹ The reality that he was not did not occur to him. The illusion, then, always seemed to suffice for Laertes.

Throughout the play the show image is exemplified by Hamlet himself. His mourning clothes, melancholy, and antic disposition went deeper than the surface image. They all changed at the end of the play to show a self-assured, mature man who had faced reality.⁵²

Mack contends that the word "act" is the play's "radical metaphor."⁵³ The question is, "What is an act?" The clown at the graveyard replies, "If I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches; it is to act, to do, to perform."⁵⁴ In a sly way the clown is

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 245.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

saying that the act of giving Ophelia a proper burial is only an illusion. No order from the King can send her to heaven. Here again the royal court refuses to face reality.

Even words themselves are acts to a certain extent. Hamlet declares, "I will speak daggers to her, but use none/My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites/How in my words somever she be shent/To give them seals never, my soul, consent!"(III.iii.404-07).⁵⁵ Hamlet remembers his father's warning that he must not harm his mother; yet he is going to be firm and harsh with her to force her to look at things as they really are. But Gertrude lacks the courage to face reality; Hamlet will try to force her to do so.

The play also asks "how an act--a deed, relates to an act--a pretence. When Polonius was preparing Ophelia for his interview with Hamlet (III.i), he confessed, "We are oft to blame in this/'Tis too much proved, that with devotion's visage/And pious action we do sugar o'er/The devil himself."⁵⁶ Polonius is indicating that he has some guilty feelings about the scheme to spy on Hamlet. And Claudius, who is present, winces and replies, "O, 'tis too true/How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!"(III.i.49-50). But they continue to live under the illusion that the kingdom will be safe if only Hamlet will adjust to things as they are, not as they should be.

The reader is also informed that sometimes an action is not really pretense; yet it also is not what it appears to be. Hamlet does not kill

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 246.

the King after the show in (III.ii) when the opportunity avails itself. He finds the King in the "act" of prayer that has some "relish of salvation in 't." Mack continues this idea when he states "that it may be a pretense that is actually a mirroring of reality, like the 'play within a play,' or the whole tragedy of Hamlet."⁵⁷

The third word-image often used in the drama is "play." "The court plays, Hamlet plays, the players play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to 'play' on Hamlet, although they cannot play on his recorders-- here we have an extension of the word in a musical sense."⁵⁸ Most of the "playing" creates illusion, however, in an effort to avoid reality.

The duel in the final act is also a play in which everyone but Claudius and Laertes play "in ignorance." The lord in attendance informs Hamlet (V.ii) that the "Queen desires you to show some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play." And Hamlet, a few lines later (V.ii.253), replies to Laertes' acceptance of his apology for having fought with him at the cemetery, "I embrace it freely/And will this brother's wager frankly play."⁵⁹ All these speeches illustrating the word "play," perhaps with the exception of Hamlet's, function to create the illusion that everything is going smoothly at court.

But the clearest evidence of the motif of "play" occurs when a group of players comes to the palace. "We have suddenly a situation that tends to dissolve the normal barriers between the fictive and the real,"

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 247.

Mack explains. The play itself is one of "false appearances."⁶⁰ A player-king is in the play while another player-king, Claudius, is part of the audience. Hamlet watches both player-kings while he plays a role himself, his role of antic-madness. Other members in the audience, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, and Polonius are players too. Mack then asks the questions for all who read or view the play, "Where . . . does the playing end? Which are the guilty creatures sitting at a play? When is an act not an act?"⁶¹ The problem of appearance and reality pervade the play as a whole . . . and possibly their best symbol is the "play within a play."

One can observe many contrasts in the play as another dramatic device used by Shakespeare. The contrasts between what other characters cheerfully accept as truth and what Hamlet must probe for can be noticed in many instances during the progress of the play. One example is expressed early in the drama when the King demands to know the reason for Hamlet's melancholy. Hamlet's reply, "I am too much in the sun" (I.ii), thus establishes his judgment and opposition to the easy acceptance of things as they are.⁶² The contrast is shown again when the Queen attempts to reconcile her son to the inevitability of death in the natural scheme of things. When she asks, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" he exposes the contrast between the seeming evidences of mourning and real woe. Unequivocally, it is a condemnation of the Queen's

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Wilfred L. Guerin et al., A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 77.

easy acceptance of his father's death and a vindication of his own resistance to viewing that death merely as an occasion for ceremonial mourning duties.⁶³ Consequently, we see that every statement by Hamlet tends to have a double meaning--one meaning as it appears to the other characters and the real meaning for Hamlet and the reader.

Another contrast is shown in Hamlet himself in his concern and frustration with the "paradox of man."⁶⁴ A "pervasive blight in nature," especially in human nature, appears everywhere. Outwardly, he appears as the "crown of creation" but is susceptible to "some viscid mole of nature," and no matter how virtuous he may be otherwise, "the dram of evil" or "the stamp of one defect adulterates nobility"(I.iv). He finds that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain"(I.v).⁶⁵

The contrasts continue. "As the deity can be understood as looking before and after"(IV.iv), the player-king points out to his queen that "there is a hiatus between what man intends and what he does when he says, "'Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own'"(III.ii).⁶⁶ Claudius had no such perception of the reality of his thoughts and deeds. He adhered to his illusions, inexorably.

The blind eye-sockets of Yorick's skull "once 'saw' their quota of experience," but most people in Denmark are content with "the surface appearances of life and refuse even to consider the ends to which

⁶³ Ibid., p. 78.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

mortality brings all men."⁶⁷ This image of sight indicates the plight of man who "'seemed to find his way without his eyes'"(II.i) and who found himself at last "'placed to the view of the yet unknowing world'" (V.ii).⁶⁸ And once again those who are content with appearances contrast with the hero who probes for reality. They are blind; he is alert and perceptive.

Perhaps Ophelia, in her madness, offers the key line of the play as far as contrasts are concerned. She prayerfully states, "'Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be'"(IV.v). And earlier in the play Hamlet says that if the King reacts as expected to the "play within a play," "'I know my course'"(II.ii). But the reader knows he is never sure of his course, nor does he know himself. "In the prison of the world, he can only pursue his destiny, which, he finally realizes before the duel, inevitably leads to the grave.'" Idealism, the way things ought to be, is a poor match for the reality "'of the prison walls of Denmark or the grave.'"⁶⁹

W. H. Clemen discloses the last kind of dramatic device to be discussed. He observes that the imagery in Hamlet exposes all sides of Hamlet himself. The imagery in his essay also reveals more contrasts in the drama and shows its relationship to illusion vs. reality. Clemen's first observation shows us that "when Hamlet thinks and speaks, he is at the same time a visionary, a seer, for whom the living things

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

of the world about him embody and symbolize thought."⁷⁰ His first monologue is a good example: "A little month, or ere those shoes were old/With which she follow'd my poor father's body/Like Niobe, all tears"(I.ii.147-49). "These are no poetic similes," Clemen explains, "only keen observations of reality."⁷¹

In explaining Hamlet's method of expressing images, Clemen says he does not translate the general thought into an image, paraphrasing it, but uses the opposite method, referring the generalization "to the events and objects of the reality underlying the thought."⁷² This sense of reality finds expression in all the images Hamlet employs, and peculiar to them all is that closeness to reality "which is often carried to the point of unsparing poignancy." He keeps his images within the scope of reality, within the everyday world.⁷³

What is more important, according to Clemen, is that the images reveal that Hamlet is no abstract thinker and dreamer but a "gifted man with greater powers of observation than other people have."⁷⁴ Clemen also asserts that Hamlet is capable of "scanning reality" with a keen eye and can penetrate "the veil of semblance even to the core of things." His use of imagery reflects his ability to get to the real nature of

⁷⁰ W. H. Clemen, "The Imagery of Hamlet," Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Leonard Dean (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 227-28.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

men, and he "relentlessly breaks down the barriers raised by hypocrisy."⁷⁵ This special insight creates and magnifies the problem of reality, the way things are, from the way things appear to be--especially to other Danes.

Clemen further declares that many of Hamlet's images seem "designed to unmask men--they strip them of their fine appearances and show up their true nature."⁷⁶ In Hamlet's use of the simile of the fortune pipe, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that he has seen through their intentions. He un.masks Rosencrantz by calling him a "sponge that soaks up the King's countenance." Another time, his imagery "splits his mother's heart in twain" because he tells her the truth from which she shrinks and from which she conceals herself.⁷⁷ It is through imagery that he succeeds in getting her to recognize the truth. He also brings out the real nature of Claudius through images. "A mildewed ear/Blasting a wholesome brother"(III.iv.64).⁷⁸

At the graveyard scene in Act V, we now know with certainty that all appearances (illusions) have been uncovered. Mack believes that it is in this act that Hamlet discovers reality.⁷⁹ He reflects on death as the great leveler, the reality of "human limitation." And the mystery of reality is here, too. The gravedigger complains that Ophelia is given a Christian burial "when she willfully seeks her own salvation."

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 230.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 231.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Mack, p. 247.

Hamlet bemoans the fact that there is nothing left of the kind servant who gave him rides on his back except a smelly skull. Poor Yorick! And Alexander's noble dust "plugs a bunghole." "'Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay/Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.'" But most important in the reality of this graveyard scene was that "every skull had a tongue in it and could sing once."⁸⁰

The beginning of the play reveals the obvious and horrible split between Hamlet's view of the world as it should be and the world as it really is. Throughout the last act of the play, however, he displays his maturity explicitly. His reconciliation at the end, his "readiness," indicate that he is prepared to accept the limitations of humanity. He no longer considers his relationship to his mother, the lustful Queen, or to Claudius, the vicious King. The illusions are past. No longer "passion's slave," he discerns a universal relationship to the "order of things," which is reality.⁸¹

Hamlet's final view of that order finds him "exhausted, resigned and . . . exalted," and it is far different from the one derived from his theoretical education. ". . . and that should learn us/There's a divinity that shapes our ends/Rough-hew them how we will." ". . . If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: The readiness is all."⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Spencer, Nature of Man, p. 108.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 108-109.

In attempting to reach some overall conclusions about the effects of illusion vs. reality in Hamlet, this writer found some pronouncements by John Lawlor and H. B. Charlton apropos. Lawlor believes that it is "the nature of tragic experience that reveals reality, and thus we know truth, the foundation for all of our choices, speculation, studies, and knowledge. Illusion, the will to have things as they are not, is inseparable from our blindness to things as they are."⁸³ It is the "final truth" that is most real.

Charlton proclaims that "the source of Shakespeare's powers are his intuitive sense of personality and his intuitive vision of the ways of mortal destiny, the cosmic arbiters and universal laws of human life."⁸⁴ Charlton continues by expressing the idea that the "nobility of man triumphs over tragedy through tragedy." For Shakespeare, "tragedy becomes the stern but exalting picture of mankind's heroic struggle towards a goodness which enlarges and enriches itself as human experience grows longer and wider through the ages."⁸⁵

⁸³ Lawlor, p. 42.

⁸⁴ H. B. Charlton, "Humanism and Mystery," in Shakespeare: The Tragedies, ed. Alfred Harbage (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 13.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

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