

## **Positive Personal Identity: Integrating theories on 'Hamlet's procrastination' in Shakespeare's 'The Tragedy of *Hamlet*'**

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### **A. Briefing**

Science can be understood. Literature can only be felt. Science is an activity of intellect. Literature that of emotions. Art affects us for a lifetime. All great art has something personal and unique about it and it never is merely document on its time. The psychic material tends to create its own form." (T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and poets) once the dramatist gives birth to a character, it is beyond his control. A statement like 'Hamlet's procrastination' in Shakespeare's revenge-play *The Tragedy of Hamlet* (1600) is neither true nor false. This paper showcases the same through the selected most recent psychological and managerial observations and concludes through the critical lens of T.S. Eliot.

### **B. Many critical theories on *Hamlet***

The study of the question of why Shakespeare's Hamlet delays killing Claudius in revenge for his father's murder is examined in light of the major critical theories. Hamlet, the protagonist hero of Shakespeare exhibits the "To be or not to be" dilemma. His father, king Hamlet, was killed by his own brother, Claudius who had married king Hamlet's wife, Gertrude, and won the kingship. His father's ghost appeared asking him to kill Claudius.

Prince Hamlet can't make his mind whether to take his father's revenge or not. He was in a dilemma leading to procrastination, his tragic flaw. James K. Lowers in his *Tragic Heroes* argues that "Shakespeare's tragedy is a work of surpassing interest and genius, and the tragic hero is universally attractive and fascinating". At the end of the eighteenth century, Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* proposed that Shakespeare means, in *Hamlet*, to "represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it". At the beginning of the twentieth century, A. C. Bradley proposed another reason for the delay in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* Bradley argued that Hamlet's delay is the result of a melancholic state of mind, brought on by the death of his father and the hasty remarriage of his mother. Another reason offered for Hamlet's delay was the psychoanalytical one, first suggested by Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis.

According to this theory, Hamlet is rendered incapable of acting against Claudius because of a repressed Oedipus complex, he restrains his actions because he has a subconscious desire to replace his father and lie with his mother. "According to most critics," claims John W. Draper, 'the crucial question in the tragedy is the

reason for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder." Ernest Jones believes that the "central mystery" of the play, "namely the meaning of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for his father's murder--has well been called the Sphinx of modern Literature"

Hamlet himself has caused more of perplexity and discussion than any other character in the 'whole range of art. The charm of his mind and person amounts to an almost universal fascination; and he has been well described as "a concentration of all the interests that belong to humanity." I have learned by experience that one seems to understand him better after a little study than after a great deal. (Hudson 1870)

In an issue of the Journal of Research in Personality from 2000, Tice and Ferrari concluded that procrastination is really a self-defeating behaviour — with procrastinators trying to undermine their own best efforts. "The chronic procrastinator, the person who does this as a lifestyle, would rather have other people think that they lack effort than lacking ability," says Ferrari. "It's a maladaptive lifestyle."

### **C. Outline**

Prince Hamlet is disheartened at his father's funeral and shocked to see his mother Gertrude re-wedded to his uncle Claudius. To Hamlet, her remarriage is "foul incest." His father's ghost narrates how Claudius poured poison in King Hamlet's ear. He asks Hamlet to avenge his death, but to spare Gertrude. Hamlet feigns lunacy to spot the interactions in the castle. In order to check the Ghost's authenticity, Hamlet re-forms the assassination the Ghost pronounced and as Hamlet had anticipated, Claudius' reaction exposes the King to be conscience-stricken. In his non-stop hesitancy to dispatch Claudius, Hamlet really causes six additional deaths. The first death is of Polonius, whom

Hamlet stabs through a wall hanging. Claudius exiles Hamlet for Polonius' death. He employs Hamlet's school associates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy on his nephew and instructs them to deliver Hamlet into the English king's hands for execution. Hamlet learns the plot and positions for the hanging of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. Ophelia, hysterical over her father's death and Hamlet's behaviour, drowns. Her brother, Laertes decides to avenge his father's and Ophelia's bereavements, plotting with Claudius to kill Hamlet. When Laertes drops his lethal poisoned sword, Hamlet retrieves the sword and cuts Laertes. Laertes says Hamlet that since Hamlet has already been wounded using the same sword, he too will presently die. Horatio announces "The Queen falls." Gertrude, considering her son is winning the fencing match, has taken a toast to her son from the poisoned cup Claudius had intended for Hamlet. The Queen dies. As Laertes confesses Gertrude's death lies on Claudius' head, Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and then pours the last of the poisoned wine down the King's throat. Before he dies, Hamlet declares that the throne should pass to Prince Fortinbras of Norway, and he appeals his true friend Horatio to describe the events that have led to the bloodbath at Elsinore. The play ends as Prince Fortinbras, in his first act as King of Denmark, orders a funeral with full military honours for slain Prince Hamlet.

### **D. Studies of Procrastination**

**Procrastination** is a knotty crash of self-control and thus very harmful. The renowned *psychologists* define it as the deliberate postponement of several vital tasks that we intend to do, in the face of knowing the outcome of such delays. An inability to manage emotions seems to be the very foundation of such delays. "What I've found is that while everybody may procrastinate, not everyone is a procrastinator," (APS Fellow, Joseph Ferrari, Professor of psychology, DePaul

University) "It really has nothing to do with time-management," he opines. "As I tell people, to tell the chronic procrastinator to *just do it* would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, *cheer up.*" Procrastination-campaigners often declare that it doesn't matter when a task gets done, so long as it's eventually finished. Some even conclude of functioning best under anxiety. 'People can delay to their advantage by restructuring their to-do lists so that they're always accomplishing *something* of value.' (Stanford philosopher, John Perry, *The Art of Procrastination*) Procrastination is the absence of doing or halting the process of doing.

Some observations when applied to Hamlet's procrastination:-

### **1. The unaware feels subjective**

When Hamlet goes through a painful phase, the experience of 'delayed emotional responses' only acknowledge the change sprouting into his personality and willingness to challenge the acrimonious happenings around him. Emotions ogle when a person is ready to accept what is, and not a moment sooner. Loss, disappointment, even failure and defeat can be powerful transformative forces. Emotions can pop up in a moment. When experiencing a delayed emotional response from Hamlet, it can be shocking and unexpected to the audience. Once Hamlet moves from emotional overwhelm, he releases a rancorous action as a breakthrough, and then to compassion and self-love that can be seen in his final appeal to his true friend Horatio to describe the events that have led to the bloodbath at Elsinore:

" ... Horatio, I am dead;

Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright

To the unsatisfied. (Act V, Scene 2)

### **2. A Gap between Intention and Action**

There are several types of procrastinator based on a number of general impressions. Chronic procrastinators have continuous problems

in concluding tasks, while the delay of situational procrastinators based on the task itself. An untainted blow of procrastination follows, when an unpleasant task of revenge-murder encounters Hamlet, in spite of being free from any kind of impulsivity. The simple perception of procrastination as a failure is quite appealing in the case of Hamlet who knows what to do but not able to bring itself to do it. It's that gap between his intention and action. Does it befall due to his incompetence to regulate emotions? Many theorists espouse a formula for procrastination to determine the fluctuating utility of certain activities: pleasurable and tough tasks. (Prof Piers Steel, *Psychological Bulletin*, University of Calgary, 2007) Beyond that, studies have found that procrastinators carry accompanying feelings of guilt, shame, or anxiety with their decision to delay. (Ferrari and Pychyl, *Psychologists*) Though Hamlet, the procrastinator recognizes the temporal harm in what he's doing, but can't overcome. The dominant role played by mood in Hamlet's procrastination who has delayed action until about the final moment can be reinforced. (Tice, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2001)

### **3. Frustrating the Future Self**

As per this study, Hamlet would have reassess his approach after the first death of Polonius and quicken his action. Otherwise, he is a chronic procrastinator and the feedback loop is persistently out of service. It seems that the damage suffered as a result of delay doesn't teach him to start earlier the next time around. The whole of critical studies on him observe that his 'future self' turns out to be the monster of load for procrastination. But the death of Polonius details us the other way. Polonius deserved to die for his offences, Hamlet considers:

Hamlet. [draws] How now? Rat? Dead for ducat, dead! [Makes a pass through the arras and kills Polonius.

...[Lifts up the arras and sees Polonius.]  
Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool,  
farewell! I took thee for thy better.  
(Act III, Scene IV)

#### **4. The Neuropsychology of Procrastination**

Recently the behavioural research into procrastination has ventured beyond cognition, emotion, and personality, into the realm of neuropsychology. These behaviours — problem-solving, planning, self-control, and the like — fall under the domain of *executive functioning*. (Laura Rabin, Brooklyn College) Hamlet's procrastination might be a manifestation of mild 'executive dysfunction' who is otherwise neuropsychologically healthy and Hamlet's arrangement to enact the assassination of father- Ghost pronounced stands as a testimony. He says to Horatio:

There is a play to-night before the king. One scene of it comes near the circumstance, which I have told thee, of my father's death. ...Give him heedful note; ... And after we will both our judgments join in censure of his seeming. (Act III Scene 2)

#### **E. Theories of Procrastination**

##### **1. Anxiety: Fear of Failure, Perfectionism etc.**

There is a host of anxiety-related reasons that have been thought to cause procrastination. Essentially, Hamlet is believed to procrastinate on the task of revenging, because the task itself is stressful. Consequently, he procrastinates more.

##### **2. Self- Handicapping**

Self-handicapping is when one places obstacles to protect self-esteem by giving people an "out," and that hinders one's effective performance. Hamlet's self-handicapping is his voluntary -delay in taking a revengeful course of action despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay. Although his dilemma 'to be or not to be'

has mounted to six more deaths making the drama a revenge tragedy, this element actually has appraised Hamlet as the only *Hero-protagonist* in Elizabethan theatre era.

#### **3. Rebelliousness**

This personality trait allows delay asserting autonomy through delayed actions. With this personality trait, Hamlet seems to be avoiding externally imposed schedules. Actually, by delaying work and starting it on his own schedule, his autonomy is reasserted. Thus, Hamlet is rebellious.

#### **4. The specious present: Hamlet stabs Claudius**

'The specious present' introduced by psychologist E.R. Clay, and the best-known characterization of it was due to William James (1890). His definition of the specious present suits to Hamlet's action in the climax revenge scene where all conceived times in 'the specious present' for a short duration strengthen Hamlet immediately and incessantly functional in taking his revenge on his father's murderer. Hamlet is constantly aware of a certain short duration, 'the specious present' vacillating from a few seconds to probably not more than a minute, and this duration is the original intuition of time for which Hamlet has been wait on.

#### **5. Temporal Motivation Theory (TMT)**

Temporal Motivation Theory (Piers Steel and Cornelius J. Konig) is particularly useful for understanding human behaviours like procrastination and goal setting. TMT is the base for the most other motivational theories, signifying the motives why individuals form any pronouncement in the following equation:  
Motivation = Expectancy\*Value

Impulsiveness \* Delay

Motivation indicates the preference for a course of action. Naturally, the higher the revenge, the greater the preference by Hamlet that has forced him to feign

madness to observe the happenings in the royal court.

The numerator has two variables: *Expectancy* refers 'to chance of an outcome occurring' while *Value* refers 'to how rewarding that outcome is'. Undoubtedly, with the philosophic inputs he has acquired, Hamlet poises to choose a set of strategies offering him a **worthy chance** of having an **agreeable outcome**.

The denominator has two variables: *Impulsiveness* refers to sensitivity to delay. Though six additional deaths are seen in the play, the delay in Hamlet's action can't be shown as the sole reason for those happenings. Hamlet imbibed with true philosophical inputs can't be impulsive such that the delay gratification is minute. *Delay* indicates how long, on average, the wait to receive the expected reward. The longer the delay, the less motivated about taking action. The procrastination of Hamlet is never gone to the extent of inaction. Moreover, the looming of the deadline for taking revenge, being in deathbed, the perceived yield of that activity increases exponentially, resulting into two deadly revengeful actions by Hamlet. One is stabbing Claudius and the second is pouring the last of the poisoned wine down the Claudius' throat.

#### **F. Conclusion**

In Shakespeare, one finds 'complexity of structure and period structure' Shakespeare has more maturity of mind and developed common style of nation. Shakespeare dramas with language of natural speech and conversation have classic poetic structures with 'universality,

gravity, and comprehensiveness of the conversation.' He never wrote beautiful lines for their own sake but he serves it contextual. He never allows us to listening to some verse lines. Dramatic excellence without poetic merit cannot produce a great drama. In Shakespeare 'the most dramatic scenes are the most poetic.' For T. S. Eliot who stands as a guide or torchbearer occupying a very prominent place in modern criticism world, art becomes a medium of representation of actual or imagined life. He says that in great imaginative work 'the connections are felt to bound by logical necessity as any connections to be found anywhere.' (Eliot, Knowledge and Experience) He also states that it is a 'feeling which Hamlet cannot understand and he cannot objectify it.' What attracts us is the Shakespeare element in each one of us. We laugh at ourselves as we are well caricatured. It is at our personality we look upon; we feel sad at our own personality and not at Shakespeare's. Shakespeare is something more than Hamlet. The writer discovers what is prevailed in his surrounding world to project it into "significant, consistent and developing personality." Such unity found in Shakespeare's work makes it classic. "There may be much more ... than the author was aware of." (T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and poets) This paper showcases that Hamlet is a dramatic composite unveiling lots of intricate human dimensions, delaying the killing of Claudius at different times, for diverse reasons, contributing towards his *positive personal identity*.

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