*Hamlet:* The Construction of Insanity

The play *Hamlet* extensively concerns the structuring of the surrounding world. Due to this preoccupation with human construction, the play can critically be examined from the perspective of structuralism. With this, one must consider the numerous binary oppositions found within the work, all of which significantly support the overarching oppositions between sanity and insanity, order and chaos, and natural and unnatural.  In the true nature of binary oppositions, one cannot be had without the other and this inherent link forces Hamlet to acknowledge and accept the constant presence of these opposing elements, which ultimately drives him to his madness and causes the overall chaos of the play.  Also important is the structuralist notion of the signifier and the signified in language and in action, the arbitrariness of their connection, and how it is the breaking up of these links that also contributes to Hamlet’s insanity and the theme of pandemonium.

As explained in *How to Interpret Literature* by Robert Dale Parker, structuralism is primarily “understanding concepts through their relation to other concepts, rather than understanding them as intrinsic, in isolation from each other” (Parker 44). As a general rule, humans “interpret the world by juxtaposing different concepts against each other in what structuralists call binary oppositions” (44). The tale of Hamlet is filled with binary oppositions; one could even argue the narrative becomes entirely defined by these opposing concepts. Classic structuralism also sees “language as a system of signs, with each sign consisting of a sound-image… called a signifier, and a concept that the sound-image represents… a signified” (Parker 46). They signifiers can often represent concepts that are binary oppositions.

The play immediately opens with a binary opposition between reality and imagination, as well as between belief and disbelief. Marcellus and Bernardo are conversing with Horatio and claim to have seen the ghost of the former king, but Horatio initially disregards this as mere “fantasy” (1.1.21-30). Yet then, Horatio himself sees this ghost, saying “Before my God, I might not this believe without the sensible and true avouch of mine own eyes” (1.1.56-58). This leads us to a binary opposition between seeing and not seeing, as well as the constructed relation between sight and believing something to be true. One could even suggest that the concept of sight signifies the subscription to a belief. Beginning the play in this manner sets up the reader with the notion that not everything is as it initially appears. It also establishes the theme of quickly-changing beliefs.

Further on, the soliloquys of the main character also finds their home and definition within binary oppositions. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet declares, “O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew!” (1.2.129-130). He calls attention to the oppositions between that which is solid and permanent and that that which is soft and easily changeable. According to one scholar, “Hamlet is expressing something about a physical world that stands and one that evaporates” (Sinclair 1). I believe we can extend this interpretation to not only the physical world, but truthfully to everyone and everything in Hamlet’s life and he struggles to come to terms with the disintegration of some people, some character, and some beliefs. He goes on to address “things rank and gross in nature” (1.2.136). This sets up a theme of the binary between that which is natural and that which is unnatural. The unnatural rears its head and slowly and steadily begins to perverse the entire narrative. In this soliloquy, Hamlet also relates the binary oppositions to characters, and the reader can see how much this particular issue bothers him. Specifically, he characterizes his mother as “frailty” and “a beast,” due to her hasty marriage to Claudius (1.2.146-150). In direct opposition to this is the late King Hamlet, as his son paints him as “so excellent a king” and “so loving” (1.2.139-140). The beginning of Hamlet’s despair is seen in this binary opposition between his deceased father and living mother. He cannot comprehend her actions, which he views as complete betrayal. Painting his father as the ultimate good force leads him to fall to the polar opposite in his depiction of his mother, viewing her as the ultimate evil. In this, she becomes a sort of antagonist to Hamlet. Later on, Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy deals primarily with the opposition between life and death, asking, “To be, or not to be: that is the question” (3.1.57). He must choose one or the other, as he obviously cannot have both.

The binary oppositions of the characters themselves continues in the play. As one scholar remarks, “The discord caused by the maneuvering of the ‘mighty opposites,’ Hamlet and Claudius, is intense” (Davidson 172). Hamlet is conveyed as the good, albeit mad, protagonist, while Claudius is the conniving and evil antagonist. More than anything else, it a clash of each character’s morals. Much of the intensity and high stake of the tale simply would not exist without these opposing forces of characters. In this, the narrative relies on polarizing the characters in order to find suspense and excitement. Yet ultimately, the binary oppositions first lead to chaos and then to disaster. Although these oppositions rely on each other, as one cannot exist without the other, they are also in constant combat. Paradoxically, neither can survive without the other, yet neither can truly survive with the other. This is the most interesting point of binary oppositions. It is clearly seen with Hamlet and Claudius, as both perish in the end of the play. They could not survive peacefully, yet they also cannot have one survive in singularity. The same type of situation is seen concerning Polonius and Ophelia. In regard to their fates, “Both, ‘between the pass and fell incensed points of mighty opposites,’ are tragically constrained and destroyed” (Schell 12). They are binary opposites in life, yet neither survives without the other. Binary oppositions are permanently and irrevocably linked. In regard to the signifier and signified, Hamlet must also personally experience how easily a certain signifier can flip from signifying one element to instead signifying the exact opposite binary. The uncle figure who becomes a father figure should be one of paternal comfort, security, and support. Yet Claudius is a traitor and Hamlet’s main opposition. The queen used to be a motherly source of comfort, and should have been Hamlet’s shared griever in his father’s death. Yet she quickly becomes tied to the evil of Claudius and simply becomes another symbol of betrayal. Ophelia is seen as simply a girl, to a potential love interest, to a disgust to Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin as friends and confidantes and turn into deceitful enemies of Hamlet. Virtually no one remains loyal to Hamlet, and part of his insanity simply is derived from these blatant betrayals and flipping of everything and everyone Hamlet thought he could believe in.

In regard to Hamlet himself, his character is full of binary oppositions, which when added to the oppositions of the world around him, truly drives him to madness. As explained by one scholar, the play:

Shows us a man whose activity is limited not only by the waiting atmosphere of Denmark's prison but by the pervasive fertility of his thoughts, by his fear of bad dreams. To some extent, Hamlet is a "head play," in that much of the action (or, rather, the questioning about whether to act and when) takes place in the imagination and is expressed primarily in language. Because of this, Hamlet's physical role has a commanding stasis, and this is only slightly offset during most of the play by the petty, rather limited actions of the others in the court. Then, when language can no longer contain the action, it erupts onto the stage: Claudius leaves the play, calling for lights; Hamlet murders Polonius on impulse; Laertes returns in rebellion, fights with Hamlet in Ophelia's grave, and participates in the final ritualized solemnity of the duel (Hodgdon 309).

Hamlet’s character is identified by his conflict between action and inaction, as well as physical action and imaginative thought. His action is also seen as a binary to the actions of the other characters. The play itself relies on periods of inaction and mere language, leading up to a climax of explosive action. Hamlet “is prompted to his revenge by heaven and hell; he did love Ophelia once, and yet he loved her not; he is at once indifferent honest and yet proud, revengeful, ambitious. No one else in Shakespeare seeks so much for identity in opposites, sees himself so much as the subject of contradiction” (Gottchalk 159). The binary oppositions of the world around him force him to recognize the binary oppositions within himself. In an interesting paradox, the very oppositions that define him also prevent a single definition. Much of his inaction in the play is due to his inability to synthesize these binary opposites within himself. Instead, they frighten him and leave him unable to act one way or the other. He feels at chaos with himself.

By observing Hamlet’s strong reaction to the disordered system of the kingdom after his father’s death and uncle’s ascension to the throne, one can infer that prior to these circumstances, the young prince’s life was largely black and white and typically binary. One can assume that Hamlet had experienced many of these binaries in their singularity previously, therefore not recognizing the true complexity of these topics and of life itself. Yet in this circumstance, Hamlet is forced to deal with the oppositions heading at the same time. This forced concurrency would be uncomfortable for anyone, but for Hamlet specifically, his situation becomes unbearable. Although they rely on each other, some binary oppositions are not meant to be experienced simultaneously, as it makes it truly perverted. Hamlet’s father has just passed away and his mother has quickly remarried. Claudius himself speaks to the strangeness of such a situation in regards to social actions when he says, “with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage” (1.2.12). It’s simply unnatural. Hamlet does not have an issue with the binary oppositions themselves. It is rather the fact that he is forced to recognize their links and experience them all simultaneously that drives him to madness. Simply put, “The time is out of joint,” (1.5.188). This is not only limited to the actual, physical, natural world, but also applies simply to Hamlet’s personal world. There are many oppositions for which he has only experienced one side of the binary. Experiencing the other half concurrently pushes Hamlet far outside his comfort zone and makes him realize the necessity of one binary in order for its pair to exist. Yet as mentioned previously, while binary oppositions cannot exist without their pair, they also cannot survive together at the same time. This is ultimately why the play ends in complete disaster. The presence of all of these binary oppositions in character and concept is too unnatural to be sustained for a long period of time. Eventually, it will all simply explode, as we see with the final scene of *Hamlet*. Yet going even further, “Perhaps most to the point is the exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II that ends, ‘for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’” (I. ii. 255-57) (Schell 13). Hamlet’s madness derives not only from the inherent link of the binary oppositions, but also from the realization that all such oppositions, as well as the signifier and signified, are simply manmade social constructions. Hamlet is realizing that there truly is not reality outside of human construction, which is a terrifying initial thought. With this line of thinking, Hamlet’s madness itself is simply a construction; however, that does not make it any less of a reality.

The binary oppositions within this play set up all action and events. They also importantly portray the characters. The oppositions between what is natural and unnatural, order and chaos, and sanity and insanity color the narrative. Hamlet himself is driven to insanity through these binary oppositions in his surrounding world, as they turn everything into utter chaos. His madness also stems from the recognition of these binary oppositions within himself, as well as the ease with which these opposites can be switched, especially in consideration of signifier and signified. This leads to a complete distrust of others, the world, and ultimately of himself. Binary oppositions cannot exist in singularity or cohesively. An attempt of this would simply be unnatural, as we see in this tale, and ultimately results in ruin.

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