

# *The Call from the Other Shore: Hamlet Based on Postmodern Interpretation*

Yang Yang

College of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, 2 Beinong Road,  
Changping District, Beijing, China  
yy1594487774@163.com

**Abstract:** As a subversion of traditional drama, the preoccupation of *Hamlet* has been discussed universally. However, the interpretations of this work change with times as well. In order to explore the deeper meaning of *Hamlet*, this essay will focus on postmodernist theory, and analyze *Hamlet* from the perspectives of interpretation and dissemination, to demonstrate the value of *Hamlet* and the potential to interpret it from the postmodern perspective. This practice would promote the popularization and re-creation of classic works by virtue of postmodernist theory, which is conducive to the development of literature.

**Keywords:** *Hamlet*, Postmodernism, Deconstruction

## 1. Introduction

The interpretation of *Hamlet* is diversified and never reaches unanimity.

Due to the language glamour of Shakespeare's plays, the linguistic characteristics have always attracted researchers to focus on the study of the language and stagecraft therein. Studies on Shakespeare have covered the research of language art, translation skills, creation idea and research review [1]. At the end of 1960s, with the emergence of postmodernism and deconstruction, Shakespeare's plays provided inspiration for many European writers to make postmodern adaptations and parodies based on Shakespeare's works. Meanwhile, the rise of mass media laid a foundation for the popularization of Shakespeare's works. In addition, amid the surge of postmodernism, some scholars in the western countries started off the research with postmodern theory, broadening the boundaries of research. In China, it is worth noticing that the study of Shakespeare's works has been well influenced by the research tendency of former Soviet Union. According to the analysis of the former Soviet scholar Smirnov, Morozov and their student Annixter, *Hamlet* is the quintessential figure of the humanist. This view has deeply influenced the interpretation of *Hamlet* by domestic scholars. However, with the development of postmodernism in the 20th century, the traditional interpretation of prince *Hamlet* and this classic have gradually been challenged. This paper, however, proposes that the theory and the practice of postmodernism shed new light on the understanding of both *Hamlet* and *Hamlet*.

As a literary current originated from modernism and influenced by Sartre's existentialism, postmodernism firstly appeared in the 1930s, while its vogue began after the end of World War II. Postmodernism originates from modernism, but it also rebels against modernism. Terry Eagleton believes that postmodernism is a challenge to the classical concepts of truth, rationality, identity and objective existence, as well as to the universal progress and liberation, single structure and grand

narrative, which expresses the alienation of people's mental state in the postmodern environment. Rationality promoted in the age of enlightenment is no longer applicable, and people have to break through convention, rationality and even modernity to find the meaning of meaning, that is, the meta-meaning. Shakespeare is a master of both drama and reality. In *Hamlet*, his most classic tragedy, we can glimpse Shakespeare's meditation on reality, ideal and revenge, which are all ahead of its time.

As Shakespeare's greatest tragic work, the literary merit and practical significance of *Hamlet* are undeniable. Although Shakespeare is a Renaissance playwright and *Hamlet* has long been regarded as one of the greatest works of the Renaissance, *Hamlet*, created by the writer who is extremely concerned with the realistic dynamics and full of forward-looking horizon, embodies some characteristics consistent with postmodernism as well. Showcasing as an immortal masterpiece, *Hamlet* is a subversion of traditional drama, and its preoccupation with existence and the meaning of life is also the concern of every generation. Thus, it is realistic and feasible to analyze *Hamlet* from the perspective of postmodernism, which can contribute both to the development of the postmodernist theory and the interpretation and dissemination of the classic *Hamlet*.

## 2. The Multi-layered Drama Theme

Considering the attribute of postmodernism which is opposed to grand narrative [2], it is beneficial to analyse *Hamlet* for multiple interpretations of the theme with the postmodern theory. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, grand narrative follows the Enlightenment's assumption of human progress and self-perfection, while post-modernism advocates the deconstruction of grand narrative and its replacement with specific, constantly changing petit narrative. Firstly, unlike the characters in the traditional revenge plays who take revenge as the highest criterion, *Hamlet* questions the identity of the ghost and the meaning of revenge. In the Renaissance England, revenge play was the most influential type of tragedy. With the efforts of playwrights at that time, ghosts started to show up as dramatic characters on the stage, and widely emerged in revenge plays. *Hamlet* also belongs to this type of revenge play. However, the prince does not fully agree with the identity of the ghost and the practice of revenge. Even the prince himself, who should not hesitate to engage in revenge, is constantly looking for reasons and motivations to support this action. The play goes beyond the tit-for-tat bloody plots of traditional revenge plays to explore the meaning of death. For instance, in the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, *Hamlet* explores the motivation behind people's fear of death, attributing it to "The dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns, puzzles the will" [3]. *Hamlet*'s contemplation on the afterlife prevents him from committing suicide. As Watson puts it, revenge is presented as "a kind of medicine that fights poison with poison -- death cures death with death" [4]. In *Hamlet*, the impulse of revenge acts as a method to withstand and solve the mortal confusions and anxieties, in which case, the highest standard of traditional revenge plays has been deconstructed, and the meaning of meaning has been explored. From this point of view, the grand goal of revenge has been splitted and deconstructed by a series of contemplation and questioning in the play.

In addition to revenge, humanism is another keyword associated with *Hamlet*. Aristotle points out in chapter 6 of *Poetics*, "Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions" [5]. For a long time, it has been believed that the melancholy character is the major premise and main reason for *Hamlet*'s action of delaying revenge, but this concept of analyzing *Hamlet*'s behavior from the humanist premise is also a preconceived grand narrative. The word "humanism" can be traced back to the Latin word *humanitas* used by Cicero, the Ancient Roman writer, and refers to the exertion of human nature in the pursuit of learning. By the Renaissance, the words *studia humanitatis* and *humanist umanista* appeared. The former means humanities and the latter, humanist. It was not until the 19th century that the term "humanism" was formally coined. However, the conception of humanism from Renaissance to 19th

century generally centered on education and learning, which is not entirely consistent with the contemporary connotation of humanism. Thus based on the concepts humanism in Renaissance, it is inappropriate to refer Hamlet as a typical humanist. He can only be regarded as a progressive intellectual influenced by humanistic ideal. Currently, the core of humanism is to advocate the value and dignity of human beings. In this sense, Hamlet has the thought of proto-humanism, but he is also framed by the contemporary religious tradition and social hierarchy.

In 1986, Gao Wan Loong also raised doubts about Hamlet's identity as a humanist and pointed out that this idea which defines Hamlet as a humanist thinker could only illustrate, divide and even distort the artistic image in the original work [6]. To begin with, Hamlet originally studies in the School in Wittenberg, Germany. The University of Wittenberg is a product of Martin Luther's Protestantism, which is rich in humanism and does not believe in the Catholic punishment of purgatory. However, Hamlet's fear of purgatory, the highest punishment of religion after suicide, confirms that he is not a typical comprehensive humanist and cannot totally get rid of the religious bondage. Further, after the murders of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, Hamlet makes the following plea:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment;  
They are not near my conscience; their defeat  
Does by their own insinuation grow:  
This dangerous when the baser nature comes  
Between the pass and fell incensed points  
Of mighty opposites. [3]

Although Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are minor characters, the contemptuous attitude of Hamlet is against the kindness and equality of humanism. In fact, the assertion that Hamlet is a humanist originated from the scholars of the former Soviet Union, and this traditional concept has deeply influenced the study of Shakespeare in China. This presupposition limits the interpretation of the text's connotation to some extent. In this light, the anti-grand narrative characteristic of postmodernism makes Hamlet's thematic interpretation more diverse and critical.

### 3. The Contradictoriness

It is conducive to further understand the contradictoriness in Hamlet by virtue of postmodernism. Deconstructive postmodernism and constructive modernism merge with each other in the play. Politically, Hamlet exclaims against oppression of people. He wants to destroy the corrupt and absurd world by eliminating the tyranny of autocracy, which coincides with the anti-hegemonism in postmodernism, and to establish a kingdom governed by a virtuous and wise king. However, he is overwhelmed by melancholy. After the chaos, Denmark's order is finally restored. Culturally, Hamlet consists of two spirits: the carnival spirit and the reflective spirit. The spirit of revelry is destructive, while the spirit of reflection shows the constructive meaning of postmodernism. On the one hand, the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude is incestuous, and it destructs ethics and challenges religion doctrines. Resisting the marriage between his 'uncle-father and aunt-mother' [3] and pretending to be mad, the prince expresses his interior feelings in insane words, which registers his carnival spirit and can be interpreted as the rebellion against the depressive, corrupt and absurd social environment. Yet this destruction brings some bizarre unity and stability. Claudius's regicide and the incestuous marriage causes trouble. While Hamlet in feigned madness aspires to restore the social order in the end. On the other hand, Hamlet's denial of the tradition of indulging in wine and pleasure, "This heavy-headed revel east and west makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations" [3], reflects his rational and reflective spirits. He wants to create order out of disorder. In brief, both spirits serve to restore the dislocated society to order. Carnival spirit can contribute to the reconstruction and remodeling of the society by purifying and deconstructing the meaning of justice, ethic and religion.

While the reflective spirit represents the deep meditation on reforming the universe. These two seemingly ambivalent spirit, actually, share a common purpose for order restoration. With the increasing maturity of his writing skills and experience, Shakespeare makes a critical interpretation of the Elizabethan society, in which the progress from feudalism to capitalism was not yet completed, and the society was relatively turbulent. Therefore, it's helpful to analyse this contradiction with postmodern theory.

#### **4. The Interpretation, Creation and dissemination of Hamlet in the Age of Postmodernism**

The classic Hamlet has been endowed with new interpretations and adaptations, and gained its popularization with the development of postmodernism. Since the Renaissance, Shakespeare's plays have mostly been regarded as representative of high culture, and its stories were transmitted to the elite in the form of words, which kept most people out of the door of elite culture. However, Hamlet itself is a classic work with great potential for post-modern interpretation and rewriting. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to analyze Hamlet from the perspective of postmodernism.

The postmodernity in Hamlet can be shown by the melted boundary between high culture and low culture. In terms of writing language, the noble and tragic fate of Hamlet intertwines with his vulgar language. This seeming incompatibility between Hamlet's identity and his choice of language can add the comic tendency to this tragedy and then eliminate the gap between high culture and low culture. For example, in Act III, Hamlet talks nonsense to his beloved Ophelia, "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" [3]. The sexually suggestive dialogue conflicts with the dignity of a prince. In fact, it has long been thought that tragedy is nobler than comedy since the former represents dramatic catharsis, emotional sublimation and purification, while the latter has been regarded as the means of pleasing the audience. Hamlet is a creation in a bid to break the stereotype surrounding tragedy and comedy. This tragicomic style shows a detached and absurd characteristic. The mixture of tragedy and comedy enriches the connotation of the text. The tragic elements invite people to have deeper thoughts and greater enlightenment, and the comic elements can relieve the oppressive and tense atmosphere while people feel sad. This writing style would narrow the distance between author and the audience and thus contributes to the greater popularity of Hamlet.

As far as text rewriting is concerned, Shakespeare's works have deeply influenced subsequent writers. Since the 20th century, many postmodern writers have parodied, alluded to and criticized Shakespeare's works. For instance, Nabokov expressed the anxiety about life, existence, uncertainty in reality through his criticism of Hamlet in *Signs of subservience*, and Donald Barterme expressed his views on absurd life through a Hamlet-like lyric soliloquy through the mouth of Peterson in his short story *Golden Rain*. As the basis of many post-modern literary schools, Sartre's existentialism mainly focuses on the contradiction between existence and the absurd world. Although Hamlet was written before the emergence of existentialism, the question of existence runs through the development of literature. Therefore, the interpretation of Hamlet from the perspective of postmodernism has universal significance. In addition, in the post-modern context, post-modernist writers adapt and re-create Hamlet using irony, parody, word games, burlesque and thematic motif, absurd environments, events and characters to depict the survival dilemmas encountered by people in different times. These postmodern recreations are not only conducive to the contemporary interpretation of Shakespeare's plays, but can help the postmodern development of classical literature overall.

#### **5. Conclusions**

As a work worth discussing, Hamlet's charm is also ahead of its time. The former Soviet Union scholars' interpretation of Hamlet once restricted the multi-dimensional exploration of Hamlet the

character in particular and Shakespeare's works in general, and it ran counter to the diversified interpretation and mass dissemination of literature. The method of postmodernism can help people break through the limitation of time, interpret the classics from a new angle, and re-create the classics based on the characteristics of different times, so as to promote the development of literature.

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