

Hamlet and the Stages of Grief

The psychoanalytic perspective in literary analysis is one of the most popular methods to analyze text because it relates to common human experiences. Lois Tyson states, “Psychoanalytic concepts such as sibling rivalry, inferiority complexes, and defense mechanisms are in such common use that most of us feel we know what they mean without ever having heard them defined” (11). Because of its relatable nature, one can look at texts like *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare and reflect on character intentions in a way that can make the reader empathize and connect with a character’s conflict. It also helps the reader understand the subconscious (or the id) physiological processes a character experiences in regard to death, sexuality, dreams, all according to Sigmund Freud’s research in the late 1800s. The character Hamlet is forced to deal with the concept of death very abruptly when his father is killed, causing him trauma. This lens also lets the reader see that Hamlet is (consciously and subconsciously) exploring his death drive and performing death work. Hamlet is “working” out his grief through various crises, some in and out of the public eye. Being the Dane of Denmark, he is a public figure with responsibilities to his country. Most of his reactions and actions are known by his peers and the public making the pressure on him to accept his father’s death very high. Because of Hamlet’s pressures to his title, he is not allowed to grieve his father’s death privately or properly, causing him to unhealthily confront death in his various stages of grief.

Everyone’s grief in life is experienced individually. There is no single way to deal with a lost loved one, but we are all human. Because of this, some of our experiences are similar and

are able to be studied. A common way of understanding how we go through this trauma is the five stages of grief. “The five stages, denial [or isolation], anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling” (Ross and Kessler). Throughout Hamlet’s journey, we can see him go through all of these stages at least once in various intensities. I will be using these stages as a framework to talk about the psychoanalytical trauma Hamlet is processing regarding his father’s death.

One of the first stages usually experienced after a loss is denial or isolation. We can immediately see this with Hamlet in act one, scene two when Gertrude and Claudius are trying to persuade him to let go of his father’s death. Hamlet is dressed in black, stated by Gertrude, “Good Hamlet cast thy nighted color off” and is visually separated from the rest of the characters or even tucked away, brooding in his own room seen in the Franco Zeffirelli film (Shakespeare 1.2. 68). This is symbolic imagery of Hamlet’s isolation and denial because it seems he is the only one still upset. Claudius’ speech to Hamlet encourages him to move on because it is only natural to do so. He states, “But you must know that your father lost a father, / That father lost his” (1.2.90,91). Granted, this speech could be considered helpful to Hamlet with the loss of his father, but Claudius’ intentions are more in his own self-interest rather than to actually comfort Hamlet. I believe this is the point where Hamlet is subconsciously dealing with his father’s “abandonment” of him. Tyson states, “When children lose a parent, when adults lose a spouse, the overwhelming feeling is often a feeling of abandonment” (23). Hamlet’s isolation and denial over his father’s death is his way of dealing with this feeling of abandonment. His pressures to

accept it only amplifies the pain in his grieving process, forcing Hamlet to engage certain aspects of the acceptance stage of the grieving process too early, making his trauma worsen.

Hamlet has many emotionally intense moments but by far the angriest he can be seen is in act 3, scene 4 when he is confronting his mother. Anger is a common stage in grief because it is easy to cover pain with anger. Hamlet feels resentment towards his mother for marrying Claudius so quickly and taking away his right to the throne. In this scene we see him try and sit his mother down and explain her wrongdoing. He scolds her:

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue a hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicer's oath (3.4. 38,43).

His father being the source of his grief, Hamlet is absolutely furious with his mother for defiling her marriage and her love for King Hamlet. But Gertrude did not kill King Hamlet. She did not cause these issues for him. Sure Hamlet can be angry at her for choosing Claudius, but it isn't the direct cause of grief for Hamlet. His anger over his father's death is being misplaced on Gertrude. This is called displacement. Tyson defines displacement as: "the psychoanalytic name for transferring our anger with one person onto another person (usually one who won't fight back or can't hurt us as badly as the person whom we are really angry)" (11). Gertrude fits the criteria perfectly because she isn't the cause of his suffering, she only adds to it. Hamlet is actually angry at Claudius because he now knows from his reaction to the players in act three, scene two that

Claudius is guilty. He isn't emotionally ready to confront him yet, so he takes it out on his mother. Also, killing Polonius in this scene could be considered death work because this action could be seen as the beginning of the end for Hamlet in the events leading up to his own death (and also the act is literal murder).

Bargaining and depression are both in the list of the stages of grief that arguably affect Hamlet the most in this play. The topic of suicide is prominent in *Hamlet* and he contemplates multiple times that it might be a better option than rather than deal with his current issues. The "To be or not be" soliloquy is the perfect example of Hamlet contemplating death because he is debating whether it's finding out what happens after one dies (3.1.55). He wonders if death is like dreaming and "what dreams may come" if it's anything like sleep (3.1. 65). But he concludes people live their lives because of the "undiscovered country" after death is too frightening to think about for humans (3.1.77). Hamlet is bargaining if this could be a valid solution for him and through this, the reader can see Hamlet exploring his death drive. This is the theory from Freud that "death is a biological drive" (Tyson 22). This subconscious drive that tells us to be self-destructive as a species through war and explains why sometimes individual self-hate occurs. This speech also confronts the fear of death and, consequently, the fear of living. Tyson describes this thought process: "The ultimate loss, of which I am utterly terrified, is death. Therefore, I can't risk living my life" (23). If Hamlet distances himself (through the fear of intimacy) from life, he wouldn't be afraid of that "undiscovered country". Thankfully, Hamlet doesn't get to the point where he commits suicide. Unlike Ophelia, who was able to create such distance between her and her own life. She was also dealing with the loss of a father when she drowned herself, so the two approaches of dealing with depression are very clear in *Hamlet*.

Hamlet chose “to be” and Ophelia chose “not to be”. Contemplating death is a lot different than actually killing one’s self. Suicide shouldn’t be an option for anyone even when dealing with the hardest of grief because there is always a path to recovery.

Hamlet eventually reaches a point of acceptance in act five. He is confident and ready to kill Claudius more than ever. He metaphorically looks death in the eye through the skull of Yorick and grapples with death more playfully with the gravediggers rather than in a depressed state. Later he proudly proclaims “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane ” (5.1.245,246). Hamlet is more confident and ready to complete the task given to him by the ghost at the beginning of his journey. When he learns of Ophelia’s death, he is more inclined to fight then to go back in isolation. I believe this confidence comes from his acceptance of his father’s death. Being able to understand that his father is gone, Hamlet is ready to confront Claudius confidently and even embrace his own (not self-inflicted) death nobly. He isn’t able to understand death fully, but he certainly accepts that it is an aspect of life.

Throughout Hamlet’s stages of grief, we learn a lot about this common human experience. Hamlet is forced to deal with the concept of death very quickly because of his status as a Dane. This makes his stages of grief more intense in some scenes, adding to the trauma he already had from losing his father. And by facing his own morality, Hamlet was able to accept his father’s death. All of these concepts can be understood through the psychoanalytic literary lens very well because death is a difficult concept for humans. Thinking about what happens after we die is just too much for the brain to handle, so having a perspective where we account for that is incredibly helpful in understanding it in literature. The psychoanalytic lens also offers insight into our subconscious desires and can give us insight into why we (or a character) might

be in denial or acting in a particular way. All humans have similar thought patterns, so it's very effective in understanding one another. But, because of a lot of the theories put forward by Freud in this psychoanalytic lens, we are left with a very male-oriented perspective. Most of Freud's ideas about phallic power doesn't leave a lot of room for female analysis. Sure the concepts could apply to any gender, but the focus on male power just leaves a lot of characters that are women with "penis envy" even if the topic is more about female agency. In regards to death, I think this lens can only look at certain literature because it's only based on human reality. For instance, this lens can't really deconstruct the ghost in *Hamlet* because it's seen as a real supernatural being that falls outside the psychoanalytic perspective. This lens falls short with tales with forces beyond humans and can't explain the character intentions of beings who are not human.

Work Cited

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