Hamlet Brutal Truth Essay, Research Paper

Disillusionment. Depression. Despair. These are the burning emotions

churning in young Hamlet’s soul as he attempts to come to terms with his

father’s death and his mother’s incestuous, illicit marriage. While

Hamlet tries to pick up the pieces of his shattered idealism, he

consciously embarks on a quest to seek the truth hidden in Elsinore;

this, in stark contrast to Claudius’ fervent attempts to obscure the

truth of murder. Deception versus truth; illusion versus reality. In the

play, Prince Hamlet is constantly having to differentiate amongst them.

However, there is always an exception to the rule, and in this case, the

exception lies in Act 2, Scene 2, where an “honest” conversation (sans

the gilded trappings of deceit) takes place between Hamlet and

Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. Via the use of prose and figurative

language, Shakespeare utilizes the passage to illustrate Hamlet’s view

of the cosmos and mankind.

Throughout the play, the themes of illusion and mendaciousness have

been carefully developed. The entire royal Danish court is ensnared in a

web of espionage, betrayal, and lies. Not a single man speaks his mind,

nor addresses his purpose clearly. As Polonius puts it so perfectly:

“And thus do we of wisdom and of reach^?

By indirections find directions out”

Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 71-3

The many falsehoods and deceptions uttered in Hamlet are expressed

through eloquent, formal, poetic language (iambic pentameter),

tantamount to an art form. If deceit is a painted, ornate subject then,

its foil of truth is simple and unvarnished. Accordingly, when the

pretenses of illusion are discarded in Act 2, Scene 2, the language is

written in direct prose.

Addressing Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet pleads with them to

deliver up honest speech about the intent of their arrival:

“[offer up] Anything but to th’ purpose.”

Act 2, Scene 2, Line 300

In a gesture of extreme significance, in a quote complementary to

Polonius’ aforementioned one, Hamlet demands:

“Be even and direct with me whether you

were sent for or no.”

Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 310-11

Being the bumbling fools they are, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern

disclose their intentions and purposes to Hamlet, revealing the King and

Queen’s instructions. Thus does truth prevail in this passage. For this

reason, the whole passage is devoid of the “artful” poetic devices that

are used in the better portion of the play.

The recurring motif of corruption also appears in the passage. Due to

the wicked internal proceedings in the state of Denmark (e.g. murder,

incest), Shakespeare implies that the whole state is “soiled”, which in

turn has a direct negative consequence in the grand universal scheme of

things. Imagery of warped and distasteful plants, in place of the

traditional “aesthetically correct” beautiful flowers in a garden,

serves to further reinforce the degeneration theme:

“‘Tis an unweeded garden that grows

to seed. Things rank and gross in nature

possess it merely.”

Act 1, Scene 2

Essentially, all of life, and all that was good and beautiful in life

(e.g. the garden) is sullied.

Hamlet, the disillusioned idealist, continues with the motif when he

disheartenedly declares:

“the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory^?”

-Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 321-2

[the air] “why, it appeareth nothing to me

but a fouled and pestilent congregation of vapors.”

-Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 325-6

The above lines represent Hamlet’s cosmic view on the planet. He finds

the world to be empty and lifeless, dirty and diseased, and his

particular place in it to be desolate and lonely. Indeed, he feels so

isolated and entrapped in his native land that he says:

[the world is a prison] “A goodly one, in which there are many confines,

wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ th’ worst.”

-Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 264-6

This view of the world exemplifies the micro/macro concept, where

Denmark is the “micro” manifestation of a prison for our hero. The taint

of “micro” Denmark leads to repercussions that in turn affect the whole

universal order, leading to the consequence of the world itself becoming

the “macro” manifestation of a prison in Hamlet’s eyes.

Further along in the same paragraph, Hamlet offers up his opinion on

man, extolling his virtues and excellent qualities (”what a piece of

work is man^?”). Yet, it is tremendously ironic, that the ideal type of

man Hamlet is describing is nowhere to be found in the play. Hamlet

himself is indecisive, unable to take action, Claudius is a slave to his

lusts and passions, Polonius is a simpering, servile old fool, and

Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are mindless ninnies. Quite simply, no

“true man” as Hamlet describes him exists in the play.

As a result of this dismal realization, and because of his inability to

adapt to the “unnatural state of things in Denmark”, Hamlet has lost the

love for life he once had. This loss of enthusiasm also stems from the

fact that he intrinsically knows there is more wickedness brewing under

the superficial illusionary surface of calm that Claudius is trying to

promote. As a culmination of all these factors, Hamlet loses all faith

in man:

“And yet, to me, what is this

quintessence of dust?”

Scene 2, Act 2, Lines 332-3

Drawing on Biblical allusions, Hamlet redefines the position of man as

simply “that which came from dust”. From this stance, it is inferred

that solely God is Truth. Man, coming from the lowly earth, cannot be

depended upon to deliver pure and true thoughts, as his source of origin

itself is impure and unclean. If one establishes this rationality for

mankind’s nature, then all the characters in the play can be accounted

for.