**George Detmold**

*Detmold addresses the question of why Hamlet delays taking revenge on Claudius by assessing his status as a tragic hero. According to the critic, a tragic hero has three prominent characteristics: (1) a will-power that surpasses that of average people, (2) an exceptionally intense power of feeling, and (3) and unusually high level of intelligence. From this definition of a tragic hero, Detmold especially focuses on Hamlet's unorthodox demonstration of will-power in the play, arguing that the protagonist's preoccupation with moral integrity is what ultimately delays him from killing Claudius. Further, the critic asserts that Hamlet is distinct from other tragedies in that its action commences in the soliloquy of Act I, scene ii where most other tragedies end: "with the discovery by the tragic hero that his supreme good is forever lost to him." Perhaps the most significant reason why Hamlet hesitates, the critic concludes, is that although he is tempted by love, kingship, and even revenge, he is long past the point where he desires to do anything about them. None of these objectives gives him a new incentive for living*.

Hamlet is surely the most perplexing character in English drama. Who has not sympathized with the Court of Denmark in their bewilderment at his mercurial conduct? Theatre-goers, to be sure, are seldom baffled by him; perhaps the spectacle and melodrama of his undoing are powerful enough to stifle any mere doubts about his motives. But the more dispassionate audience of scholars and critics—if one may judge from the quantity of their published remarks—are often baffled. Seeking an intellectual satisfaction which will correspond to the pleasant purging of pity and terror in the spectator, they are only perplexed by Hamlet's behavior. They fail to understand his motives. How can a man so dilatory, who misses every opportunity to achieve what apparently he desires, who requires nearly three months to accomplish a simple and well-justified killing—how can such a man be classed a tragic hero? Is he not merely weak and contemptible? How can he be ranked with such forceful men as Lear, Macbeth, Othello, or even Romeo? And yet he is a great tragic hero, as the playgoers will testify. The spectacle of his doings and undoing is profoundly stirring; it rouses the most intense emotions of awe and admiration; it never moves us to scorn or contempt.

In order to understand Hamlet, we must be able to answer the old question about him: "Why does he delay?" Granting—as he does—that he has sufficient "cause, and will, and strength, and means" [IV. iv. 45] to avenge his father, why should he require approximately three months to do so, and then succeed almost purely by accident or afterthought? There is only one possible reason why a strong, vigorous, intelligent man does not kill another when he feels no revulsion against the deed, when his duty requires that he do it, when he is not afraid, when the man to be killed is not invulnerable, and when the consequences of the act are either inconsiderable or are not considered at all. Hamlet delays to kill his uncle only because he has little interest in doing so. His thoughts are elsewhere. Most of the time he forgets about it, as we forget about a letter that should be answered—and only occasionally does he remember it and ponder his reluctance to perform this simple duty. Rightly or wrongly, he is preoccupied with other things.

Yet revenge, especially when it entails murder, is a tremendously important affair; how can any man overlook it? What kind of man can consider what kind of thing more important? Is Hamlet in any way unique, beyond or above or apart from our experience of human nature? Let us examine him as a man and—more important—as a tragic hero.

We must realize that there is nothing curious or abnormal about him. He is recognizably human; he is not diseased or insane. If this were not so he would rouse no admiration in an audience, for it will never accord to a sick or crazy man the allegiance it usually gives to the tragic hero. The normal attitude toward abnormality is one of aversion. We worship strength and health and power, and will identify ourselves with the hero who displays these qualities. We may even identify ourselves with a Lear during his temporary insanity, but only because we have known him sane and can appreciate the magnitude of his disaster. For the Fool who is his companion we can feel only a detached and tender compassion. Hamlet rouses stronger emotions than these, and only because we can recognize ourselves in him, because he is in the finest sense a universal man: Homo sapiens, man thinking—and man feeling, man acting. The proper habitat of the freak is the side-show or museum, not the stage.

But within this humanity and universality we may distinguish three characteristics which are usually found in the tragic hero. The first of these is a willpower surpassing in its intensity anything displayed by average men; the hero admits of no obstacle and accepts no compromise; he drives forward with all his strength to his desired goal. The second is a power of feeling likewise more intense than that possessed by average men; he rises to heights of happiness forever unattainable to the majority of us, and correspondingly sinks to depths of misery. The third is an unusually high intelligence, displayed in his actions and in his power of language. Aristotle sums up these characteristics in the term *hamartia*: the tragic flaw, the failure of judgment, the refusal to compromise. Passionately pursuing the thing he desires, the hero is incapable of compromise, of the calm exercise of judgment.

It will be seen that Hamlet possesses these three characteristics. His power of feeling surpasses that of all other characters in the play, expresses itself in the impassioned poetic diction peculiar to great tragedy. His intelligence is subtle and all-embracing, displaying itself not only in his behavior but also in word-plays beyond the comprehension of the others in the drama, and in metaphors beyond their attainment. But what can be said of his will-power, the one pre-eminently heroic characteristic? He is apparently a model of hesitation, indecision, procrastination; we seem to be witnessing an examination of the failure of his will. And yet demonstrably it has not failed, and does at odd moments stir itself violently. In no other way can we account for the timidity of his enemies, the respect of his friends, and his own frankacknowledgement that he has "cause, and will, and strength, and means" to avenge his father. And though he is a long time in killing Claudius, he does kill him at last, and he is capable of other actions which argue the rash and impulsive nature of a man with strong will. He will "make a ghost" [I. iv. 85] of any man who tries to prevent him from following his father's spirit. He murders Polonius. He engineers the murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He boards the pirate ship single-handed. He takes so long to kill Claudius only because he has little interest in revenge—not because he lacks will, but because it is inactive. Will-power does not spread itself in a circle around the possessor, but lies in a straight line toward the thing he desires.

Hamlet, then, has the heroic traits of Lear, Othello, Tamburlaine, Macbeth, and Oedipus: high intelligence, deep sensitivity, and strong will. There is another characteristic of the tragic hero without which the former ones would never be perceived: his delusion that there is some one thing in the world supremely good or desirable, the possession of which will make him supremely happy. And to the acquisition of the thing he desires he devotes all his will, all his intelligence, all his power of feeling. Thus Romeo dedicates himself to the pursuit of love, Macbeth to power, Lear to filial gratitude—and Hamlet to moral beauty.

It is clear that, at some point before the opening of the play, Hamlet has been completely disillusioned. He has failed to discover moral beauty in the world; indeed, by the intensity of his search he has roused instead his supreme evil: moral ugliness. The majority of us, the non-heroes, might disapprove of the sudden remarriage of a mother after the death of her husband—but we would probably not be nauseated. Hamlet, supremely sensitive to the godliness and beastliness in men, was overwhelmed by what he could interpret as nothing but lust. To be sure, the marriage of his mother and uncle was technically incestuous. But his objection to it lies much deeper than surface technicalities. He has worshipped his father, adored his mother (his love for her is everywhere apparent beneath his bitterness). Gertrude has mourned at the funeral "like Niobe, all tears" [I. ii. 149]. And then within a month she has married his uncle—a vulgar, contemptible, scheming drunkard—exposing without shame her essentially shallow, thoughtless, amoral, animal nature.

The blow has been too much for Hamlet, sensitive as he is to moral beauty.

     O, most wicked speed, to post  
     With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!  
     It is not, nor it cannot come to good.  
     [I. ii. 156-58]

That is, it cannot come to his conception of the good, whatever may be said for Gertrude's. He is unable to offer her understanding or sympathy, since to do so would mean compromising with his ideal of her. He fails to realize that no amount of scolding will ever improve her. Instead of accepting her conduct as inevitable or even endurable, he fights it, exaggerates it into a disgusting and an intolerable sin against everything he holds dear. And because the sin may not be undone, and since it has destroyed his pleasure and purpose in living, he wishes to die. The only thing that restrains him from suicide is the moral injunction against it:

     O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
     Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
     Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
     His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.  
     [I. ii. 129-32]

The longing for death, once the supreme good has been destroyed, is entirely normal and usual in the tragic hero. Romeo, hearing that Juliet is dead, goes immediately to her tomb in order to kill himself:

    O, here  
    Will I set up my everlasting rest  
    And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars  
    From this world-wearied flesh …  
    Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on  
    The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark.  
    [*Romeo and Juliet*, V. iii. 110-14]

Othello, when he realizes that in seeking to preserve his honor he has ruined it, prepares to die in much the same state of mind:

    Here is my journey's end, here is my butt  
    And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.  
    [*Othello*, V. ii. 267-68]

Macbeth, discovering at last that his frantic efforts to maintain and increase his power have only destroyed it, finds life a tale told by an idiot—and he too longs for death:

    I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun,  
    And wish the estate of the world were now undone.

    Ring the alarum bell. Blow wind, come wrack,  
    At least we'll die with harness on our back.  
    [*Macbeth*, V. v. 48-51]

Lear, instead of dying, is driven mad. His counterpart, Gloucester, who also has lived for the love of his children, tries to throw himself from the cliff at Dover. Oedipus [in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*], too, when he discovers that he has ruined the city he tried to save, finds life worthless—blinds himself, and begs to be cast out of Thebes. As a general rule, whenever the tragic hero discovers that in his efforts to attain his supreme good he has only aroused his supreme evil, he kills himself, or goes mad, or otherwise sinks into a state that is death compared to his former state. Once he has lost all hope of gaining what he desires, he quite naturally finds no reason for continuing to live. Life in itself is always meaningless to him; he lives only for the good that he can find in it.

The curious thing about *Hamlet* is that it begins at the point where most other tragedies end: with the discovery by the tragic hero that his supreme good is forever lost to him. The play is surely unique among great tragedies. Elizabethan drama usually presents a double reversal of for-tune—the rise and fall in the hero's prosperity and happiness—or sometimes, as in *King Lear*, the fall and rise. Greek tragedy, limited to a single curtainless stage and thus to a late point of attack in the plot, could show only a single reversal—usually the fall in fortune from prosperity to misery, as is observed by Aristotle. But certainly nowhere else is there a tragedy like *Hamlet*, with no reversal at all, which begins after the rise and fall of the hero have taken place, in which the action does not coincide with his pursuit of the good, and which presents him throughout in despair and in bad fortune. We never see Hamlet striving for or possessing his good. Rather, he knows only the evil which is its counterpart; and in this unhappy condition he find nothing further desirable except death.

We are now in a position to understand why Hamlet takes so long to effect his revenge. Everyone in the play, including himself, recognizes that he is potentially dangerous, that he has the necessary courage and will to accomplish anything he desires. But the demand upon these qualities has come at a time when he has forever lost interest in exercising them. Upholding the divinity of man, he is betrayed by the one he thought most divine, exposed to her rank shameless adultery, bitterly disillusioned in all mankind, and desperate of any further good in existence. The revelation by the Ghost that murder has cleared a way for the new husband shocks Hamlet to the base of his nature, but it gives him no new incentive for living; it merely adds to his misfortune and confirms him in his despair. The further information that his mother has committed adultery provides a final shock. All evidence establishes him immovably in his disillusion. The Ghost's appeal to him for revenge is, remotely, an appeal to his good: if he may not reestablish the moral beauty of the world he may at least punish those who have violated it. But it is a distant appeal. The damage already done is irreparable. After giving passionate promises to "remember" his father, he regrets them:

    The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,  
    That ever I was born to set it right.  
    [I. v. 188-89]

Within ten minutes after his first meeting with the Ghost he has succumbed again to his anguish, which is now so intense after the discovery of his mother's adultery and the murder of his father that his mind threatens to crack under the strain. His conversation with his friends is so strange that Horatio comments upon it:

    These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.  
    [I. v. 133]

A few minutes later Hamlet announces his intention to feign madness, to assume an "antic disposition"—presumably as a means of relieving his surcharged feelings and possibly forestalling true madness, but certainly not as a means of deceiving Claudius and thus accomplishing his revenge. At the moment there is no point in deceiving Claudius, who knows of no witnesses to the murder and who is more vulnerable to attack now than he will be at any point later in the play.

Two months later the antic disposition has succeeded only in arousing the King's suspicions. Hamlet has not effected his revenge; there is no sign that he has even thought about it. All we know is that he is badly upset—as Ophelia reports to her father:

    My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
    Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,

    No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,  
    Ungartered and down-gyved to his ancle,  
    Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,  
    And with a look so piteous in purport  
    As if he had been loosed out of hell  
    To speak of horrors, he comes before me,  
    [II. i. 74-81]

It is doubtful that he wishes to deceive the court into thinking that he is mad with unrequited love—only the fool Polonius is so deceived. Most probably he goes to Ophelia because he loves her as he loves his mother, and fears to discover in her the same corruption that has poisoned his mind towards Gertrude. He suspects that her love for him is insincere; his suspicions are later reinforced when he catches her acting as the decoy of Claudius and Polonius. But the one significant thing here is that his mind is still upon his old sorrow and not upon his father.

He does not recall his father until the First Player, in reciting the woes of Troy, speaks of the "mobled queen" who

    … saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport  
    In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs.  
    [II. ii. 513-14]

Shortly afterwards Hamlet asks him to "play the Murder of Gonzago" and to "study a speech of some dozen lines, which I would set down and insert in 't" [II. ii. 541-42]. This, as we learn in the following soliloquy, is to be a trap for the conscience of Claudius. And why is a trap necessary? Because perhaps the Ghost was not a true ghost, but a devil trying to lure him to damnation. Most likely Hamlet is here rationalizing, trying to find an excuse for his dilatoriness, for forgetting the injunction of his father—yet the excuse is a poor one, for never before has he questioned the authenticity of the Ghost. Furthermore, he does not wait for the trap to be sprung; throughout the performance of "The Mousetrap" he seems convinced of the guilt of Claudius, he taunts him with it. But for a while he has stilled his own conscience and found a refuge from the flood of self-incrimination.

Before "The Murder of Gonzago" is enacted we see Hamlet alone once more. What is on his mind? His uncle? His father? Revenge? Not at all. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" [III. i. 55ff.]. He is back where he started, and where he has been all along, with

    The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks  
    That flesh is heir to.  
    [III. i. 61-2]

He is still preoccupied with death.

"The Mousetrap" convicts Claudius beyond any doubt; he bolts from the room, unable to endure for a second time the poisoning of a sleeping king. And yet Hamlet, fifteen minutes later, with an admirable opportunity to kill his uncle, fails to do so—for reasons that are evidently obscure even to himself. He wishes, he says, not only to kill the man, but to damn his soul as well, and thus will wait to kill him unconfessed. At this, apparently, the Ghost itself loses patience, for it returns once more to Hamlet in the next scene and exhorts him:

    Do not forget: this visitation  
    Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.  
    [III. iv. 110-11]

The exhortation is wasted. On the same night, Hamlet allows the King to send him to England. Possibly he has no recourse but obedience; probably he knows what is in store for him; quite likely he does not care, may even welcome a legitimate form of dying; certainly he cannot, in England, arrange to kill his uncle. The next day, on his way to exile and death, he meets the army of Fortinbras, whose courage and purposefulness stimulate him to reflect upon his own conduct:

    How all occasions do inform against me,  
    And spur my dull revenge!  
    [IV. iv. 32-3]

He considers how low he has sunk in his despair:

    What is a man,  
    If his chief good and market of his time  
    Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.  
    [IV. iv. 33-4]

When he returns he is unchanged, still preoccupied with death. He haunts the graveyard with Horatio, reflects upon the democratizing influence of corruption. Overcome with disgust at the "rant" at Ophelia's funeral (he has seen too much insincerity at funerals), he wrestles with Laertes. He acquaints Horatio with the crimes of Claudius and resolves to revenge himself—and then accepts the invitation to the fencing match, aware that it is probably a trap, but resigned to whatever fate is in store for him.And with the discovery of his uncle's final perfidy, he stabs him with the envenomed foil and forces the poisoned wine down his throat. But there is still no thought of his father or of the accomplishment of an old purpose. He is stirred to action principally by anger at his mother's death:

    Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,  
    Drink off this potion: is thy union here? Follow my mother.  
    [V. ii. 325-27]

The murder of Claudius is simply accomplished. We see how easily it could have been managed at any time in the past by a man like Hamlet, with whatever tools might have come to his hand. Even though the King is fully awake to his peril he is powerless to avert it. The only thing necessary is that Hamlet should at some time choose to kill him.

That Hamlet finally does so choose is the result of accident and afterthought. The envenomed foil, the poisoned wine, Laertes and Gertrude and himself betrayed to their deaths—these things finally arouse him and he strikes out at the King. But he has no sense of achievement at the end, no final triumph over unimaginable obstacles. His uncle, alive or dead, is a side-issue. His dying thoughts are of the blessedness of death and of the sanctity of his reputation—he would clear it of any suggestion of moral evil but realizes that he has no time left to do so himself. Accordingly he charges Horatio to stay alive a little while longer:

    Absent thee from felicity a while,  
    And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
    To tell my story.  
    [V. ii. 347-49]

Then, after willing the kingdom to Fortinbras, he sinks into the oblivion which he has courted so long, and which now comes to him honorably and gives him rest.

**Source:** George Detmold, "Hamlet's 'All but Blunted Purpose,'" in *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, January 1949, pp. 23-36.

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