

Unit V - Criticism

Hamlet and His Problems

by T. S. Eliot

T. S. Eliot commences his critical essay, *Hamlet and his problems* by stating, “few critics have even admitted that Hamlet the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary. And Hamlet the character has had an especial temptation for that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead.” Eliot asserts that the critics like Coleridge and Goethe often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. He adds that they seem to have forgotten their main role as the critic, i.e. to study the play. Hence, their approach sounds misleading. In fact, they have produced their own version of Hamlet.

At the same time, Eliot is very much appreciative of Robertson and Prof. Stoll who have made a right attempt to turn their critical observation in the right direction which has forced him to say, “Shakespeare’s Hamlet, so far as it is Shakespeare’s, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the “intractable” material of the old play.” It is clear, at this juncture, that Eliot is finding fault with Shakespeare and is also supportive of the critics like Robertson.

Eliot strongly asserts that the noted critics had much more to focus their attention on the Hamlet the character than on the play Hamlet. He calls this the actual cause of problems. People consider *Hamlet* to be the Mona Lisa of Literature mainly because it is interesting. Despite the play being a masterpiece, it is most certainly an artistic failure. Eliot observes, “In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes”.

Eliot is of the opinion that Shakespeare did not succeed in his attempt of producing the effect of mother’s guilt as he could adeptly do with the jealousy of Othello. As regards Hamlet’s madness, Shakespeare got a hint for it from Thomas Kyd’s revenge play, *The Spanish Tragedy* as everyone knows that Shakespeare worked on Kyd’s play. It could be observed, “Hamlet’s madness is less than madness and more than feigned”.

Further, Eliot says that Shakespeare has failed to find a suitable ‘Objective Correlative for the emotions of Hamlet. Eliot himself defines Objective Correlative as “ a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” There is no object, character, or situation incident which could adequately express the inner anguish of the Prince of Denmark. His suffering is terrible, but the full intensity of his horror at his mother’s guilt is not conveyed by any character or action in the play.

Eliot says Shakespeare is successful in evoking the same emotional quotient i.e. the ‘Objective Correlative’ in his other tragedy, *Macbeth*. He tells the readers “the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife’s death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic “inevitability” lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet”

Hamlet is an artistic failure, but this failure arises only from the fact that Shakespeare tried to confront a problem which proved too much for him. He was trying to express an inexpressible horror, therefore his failure itself is a measure of his artistic greatness. He failed because his chosen plot and his characters were inadequate for the purpose, just as a great artist would fail to draw a magnificent picture in the absence of adequate colours and canvas. In fact, Shakespeare wanted to give expression to some magnificent experience but his skill had a fall even before he made an attempt.

The essay , *Hamlet and His Problems* is the finest example of ‘destructive criticism’. It shows Eliot’s originality and boldness as a critic. During a time when the play *Hamlet* had been admired by all, Eliot alone had the guts to comment that it is an ‘artistic failure’. It must be remembered that Eliot’s essay is more a tribute than a condemnation of the play.

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