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Artistic Misconceptions in T.S. Eliot's "Hamlet and His Problems"

The merits of a work of art can be difficult to define, as by its nature art is an abstract and wholly subjective form of expression. This lends it a certain malleability; the emotions, backgrounds, and open-mindedness of the person experiencing the work can affect how they perceive the story and its characters. Because of this, claims cannot be made as to the exact feelings of a character unless they have been explicitly stated, and even then it is up to the viewer or reader to decide the moral and ethical implications. This is what T.S. Eliot forgot to consider while writing his essay "Hamlet and His Problems". By attempting to objectify Shakespeare's intentions with Hamlet, Eliot betrayed the abstract nature of art and its effects on different individuals.

The most atrocious case of misinformation in the essay comes in the use of the term "objective correlative", which Eliot describes as "...a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion...". His definition posits a blueprint for art, while in fact it is a much more complex method of expression than that. It is not possible for one to know the precise recipe for evoking specific emotional responses in people, as their own unique experiences and viewpoints alter how they react to different scenes. Eliot uses his supposed knowledge of human emotion to assert that Hamlet's response surpasses the events of the play ("Hamlet...is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it is in excess of

the facts as they appear.”). However, there are flaws in this statement just as there are in his classification of art, because everybody reacts differently to emotional realizations. While Eliot himself may have simply internalized the revelation of his uncle’s betrayal and taken a more practical approach to the matter, we see several times that the character of Hamlet is indecisive (as evidenced by his inconclusiveness in avenging his father), morose (following King Hamlet’s death), and occasionally immature (mostly displayed after his breakup with Ophelia). Just as Hamlet is surrounded by outlandish happenings, his reaction may be viewed as eccentric; however, this is of course one distinct reaction to the events of the play, and is not telling of Shakespeare’s lack of talent as a writer. This is not the only area of analysis that is contaminated by Eliot’s carping evaluations. Just as he is incorrect in stating that every emotion expressed in art must follow a formula, his idea that art must only be criticized by exclusively critical minds is inherently flawed as well.

Early in his essay, Eliot suggests that Hamlet has a tendency to attract a “...most dangerous type of critic...”; one whose own creative capabilities overthrow Shakespeare’s intentions and substitute his own Hamlet for their own. This is, intrinsically, a faulty notion. Due to the pliable nature of art, characters are interpreted however the reader sees them, often influenced by their own conscious and unconscious sentiments. As such, there is no one concrete representation of any fictional character. In saying that the inventive intellects of certain critics undermine Shakespeare’s meaning, he is once again betraying the medium’s innate conceptuality. He later makes reference to critics of Shakespeare’s time, saying that they were “...nearer in spirit...” to the play’s design and as such were “...nearer, in their old-fashioned way, to the secret of dramatic art in general.”. While one could certainly make an argument against

the timeliness of Shakespeare's work, they should at least acknowledge the aspects that make it so enduring as well. Hamlet is not so well-loved because of the lead's perhaps hyperbolic madness, or the fact that one's interpretation of the character may overrule the author's intention; rather, it is the relatable depictions of angst, desperation and endearing anxiety that still bring it academic consideration over 400 years after it was written (www.britannica.com). Eliot also attempts to discredit Shakespeare's originality in his essay, but Hamlet was in fact no more derivative than in his other well-regarded works.

Though Eliot compares several of Shakespeare's plays to Hamlet in a much more positive light, extensively noting the other works that it borrows from to its detriment, he does not mention the fact that many of Shakespeare's other plays also acquired their plots from previous sources. Eliot attributes many of Hamlet's major faults to the fact that it is too similar to the play on which it is primarily based: Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (www.britannica.com). However, he then goes on to harshly criticize the differences in Shakespeare's adaptation as well. He writes that the delay of Kyd's protagonist came simply from the fact that assassinating a monarch is a difficult task; he is constantly surrounded by guards, and to do so and be caught would be treasonous murder. He also notes that the insanity of the lead in Kyd's tragedy comes from a desire to evade the king's suspicions, while Hamlet's motives are too ill-defined. One would imagine that comparing the play to its source material in a negative light opens up his other works for similar scrutiny; however, Eliot does not so much as attempt this. He notes Shakespeare's inability to manage the "...guilt of a mother..." facet as he managed the doubtfulness of Othello, the infatuation of Antony, and the pride of Coriolanus, but does not once examine the sources on which those plays were based. He lambasts both the

similarities and the differences of Hamlet to The Spanish Tragedy, then touches on several other works with like influences without any mention of their weaknesses or strengths. It appears that this evasion of the closeness of Shakespeare's other plays to earlier works was done simply to bolster his own points while avoiding a much more incriminating issue. It is in these ways that Eliot misjudges Hamlet and Shakespeare's aims with the main character. ✓

Like any great work of art, William Shakespeare's Hamlet has opened itself up to many forms of criticism and analysis. One essay about the play, T.S. Eliot's "Hamlet and His Problems", attempts to ascribe its perceived flaws to an equivocal, overacting lead, a propensity by critics to project their own values onto the work, and poor adapting of the source material, Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy. However, outlining these factors as the primary flaws displays a tremendous misunderstanding of art in general, and people's responses to it. In essence, art is abstruse emotion, and nobody can claim to know what conjures these feelings with absolute certainty. This is why by attempting to impose a concrete meaning on Hamlet, T.S. Eliot is forgetting that art, by its very nature, is subjective and open to interpretation. ✓

Works Cited

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Fares, Lindsay. *free-essay.org*. n.p. 5 June 2012. Web. 4 November 2015. ✓

Mukherjee, Tarun Tapas. *freehelpstoenglishliterature.blogspot.ca*. n.p. 16 November 2008.

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Although you never cite
the play, you should include
it in your Works Cited as
it is a reference.

Explaining Your Writing Variables

Identify the five writing variables you have chosen for your writing task [REDACTED]

Central Idea: Convince the reader that Eliot's thoughts on Hamlet are incorrect
 Form: Persuasive essay
 Purpose: To convince the reader that Eliot is wrong
 Public Audience: People interested in analysis and the history of plays
 Context: Books on the subject, websites featuring essays

Explain how your chosen writing variables work together to make your text effective.

5 marks

110

A persuasive essay is the best way to make my case against T.S. Eliot's "Hamlet and His Problems" because it allows me to thoroughly explain my points. This essay would be of interest to current and aspiring essayists, as well as people interested in the history of Shakespeare plays, because it shows the ways one could ~~analyze~~ analyze another's essay while also touching the influences of some of Shakespeare's works. These people could locate the essay in a book of collected criticisms or a website of the same subject. This would make my essay widely available to students and writing enthusiasts. That is why an essay is the best way to make my argument.