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PREVIEW

A STUDY OF HAMLET THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

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REPORT

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A STUDY OF HAMLET THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

The unusually prolonged delay of Hamlet in killing Claudius, a clearly sacred duty to Hamlet's deceased father, has been an enigma to literary enthusiasts. Critics are baffled by this fascinating Shakespearean personality. Here is a character whose assertive behavior cannot be doubted when one observes his cruelty to Ophelia or his instinctive decision to kill Polonius. However, this apparently decisive Hamlet is subjected to persistent reflection, making him incapable of killing Claudius and making him a truly remorseful person upon the discovery of Ophelia's death. What prompts this inward struggle that eventually paralyzes Hamlet's actions? Critics analyze this baffling behavior from various psychological approaches. Ernest Jones makes an extensive study to justify Hamlet's difficulty through psychoanalysis, which claims that an individual, like Hamlet himself, is incapable of identifying a repugnant factor within a task itself, thus "repressing" such repulsive and possibly sex-oriented mental processes. He provides an interesting psychological interpretation. But there is another psychological approach, transactional analysis, derived from psychoanalysis and developed by Eric Berne. Such a theory lends itself to the study of Hamlet's

inexplicable behavior. Transactional analysis contends that what a person says or implies may be quite different from what he actually feels because the true emotions are disguised. In this way, he not only "tricks" part of his own personality but other people as well. Using transactional analysis, one discovers another possible interpretation of Hamlet's psychological development, that of game playing in which he constantly changes his roles.

First, it is necessary to discuss transactional analysis a bit further. Berne argues that certain roles are immediately taken once people confront each other. These roles--Parent, Adult, and Child--are played in all human interactions. "Parent, Adult, and Child are not concepts like Superego, Ego, and Id . . . but phenomenological realities."¹ These three states belong exclusively to the Ego that assesses reality: thinking (the Parent), feeling (the Child), and behaving (the Adult).² What is preferred here is that since the "unconscious" Id is a hypothetical idea, at least the Child is observable and can easily be

¹Eric Berne, Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 24, as quoted in Thomas A. Harris, I'm OK--You're OK--A Practical Guide to Transactional Analysis (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 18.

²Eric Berne, A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 278.

"consciously" experienced.³ Throughout this paper, the terms Parent, Adult and Child will refer to specific behavioral roles. The Parent of an individual comprises those recordings of imposed, unquestioned, external events perceived by a person between birth and age five (a taught concept of life).⁴ Much of Parent data rests in the "how-to" category such as how to hit a nail, how to make a bed, how to brush teeth, etc. The Parent serves as that part of the ego which remains with the individual as a model for his own children, insuring the survival of the human race. This role enables the individual to make trivial decisions from mere habit since that is how things "ought" to be done. Parent data involves anything about which the little child felt dependent whenever he was incapable of questioning or exploring; this effect could have been produced by siblings. The images of what "ought" to be done are left with the individual long after the parents are gone. "For a little child, it may be safer to believe his own eyes and ears," especially if his own security is at stake.⁵ A. C. Bradley

³ Berne, A Layman's Guide, p. 303.

⁴ Harris, p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

says, "'Conscience' does not mean moral sense or scrupulosity, but this reflection on the consequences of action."⁶ It is natural, therefore, to have the Child and Parent dominate the child's personality for the first ten months because of an inability to manipulate the surroundings or to determine verbal responses. Throughout the play one sees Hamlet struggling with his Parent.

The second aspect of Berne's structural analysis of the personality is the Adult. The Adult is needed to make appropriate assessments of experiential data in order to deal effectively with the outside world. The rules

are rigidly internalized as a voluminous set of data essential to the individual's survival in the setting of a group, beginning with the family and extending throughout life in a succession of groups necessary to life.⁷

The Adult in early childhood can be very fragile and sensitive because of severe demands by the Parent and constant fear of the Child. It determines quickly, however, which form of behavior is more acceptable to society, discovering, for instance, that crying at a wedding is more appropriate than screaming at a husband. It enables the individual to distinguish life as it was taught and

⁶A. C. Bradley, Shakespearian Tragedy (London: MacMillan, 1952), p. 98.

⁷Harris, pp. 20-21.