



An Analysis on the *To Be or Not to Be Soliloquy in Hamlet* by William Shakespeare

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Abstract: This paper is a tentative analysis on the *To Be or Not to Be Soliloquy in Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, because it gives a new interpretation of the *To Be or Not to Be* soliloquy analyzed from a combination perspective of both discourse and psycholinguistic perspective to demonstrate how it helps to forward the plot to achieve the dramatic effectiveness and to make different characters more distinctive. With this object, the position and the significance of the soliloquy *To Be or Not to Be in Hamlet* is going to be concluded. The author hopes to interpret the *To Be or Not to Be Soliloquy* through a combination approach, which in turn achieves the dramatic effectiveness and two ghosts and two implications are revealed.

Keywords: soliloquy, Hamlet, discourse analysis, psycholinguistic perspective, dramatic effectiveness, William Shakespeare

Introduction

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, soliloquies portray a solitary character in midst of a private struggle, voicing emotions and thoughts about the human condition. The paper consists of five segments. Part one has an overview on the literary device soliloquy. Then the second part focuses on a general analysis on the fourth soliloquy in *Hamlet*. The third part illustrates the function of the soliloquy in *Hamlet*. At the same time, the position and the significance the *To Be or Not to Be Soliloquy* in *Hamlet* are analyzed in part four. Ultimately, the fifth part arrives as a conclusion. This paper combines the theories of discourse and psycholinguistic perspective to analyze literary works. Although this article is not the first review of *Hamlet*, the method proposed by the author is relatively new. Through the analysis from both discourse and psycholinguistic perspectives, this literary significance is manifested in a communicatively dynamic way, which in turn Two ghosts as the go-between in *Hamlet* is embodied to a larger extend, so that different characters are more distinctive.

Literature Review

In recent years, sociolinguistics has developed rapidly, especially in combination with other disciplines. In the second decade of the 21st century, Western Shakespeare studies continue to flourish. From the perspective of topic selection, Western Shakespeare studies are diversified and innovative, but in terms of research methods, they can be basically divided into two "Historicism" and "Modernism". The former emphasizes the historicity of Shakespeare's creation, while the latter studies Shakespeare in combination with the current situation^[1].

In the middle of the 19th century, with the continuous integration of Chinese and Western cultures, Shakespeare's name was introduced to China: during the 400 years, great changes have taken place in Chinese society, making the study of Chinese Shakespeare at various stages marked by the changes of the times. In the hundred years of Shakespeare study in China, from the initial exploration of Shakespeare study before the founding of the People's Republic of China to the initial prosperity of Shakespeare study before the reform and opening up, to the revival and prosperity of Shakespeare study after the reform and opening up, as well as the diversified expansion of Shakespeare study in the new century, It can be sorted out China's Shakespeare study through some development stages. namely: origination (1934 – 1999), rapid development (2000 – 2009), and steady development (2010 – now). The works of each period are characterized with distinct characteristics of the times and various angles of view^[2].

I. An overview on the literary device soliloquy

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A soliloquy is a literary and theatrical device often used in drama whereby a character relates his or her thoughts and feelings without addressing another individual. It is believed that the use of the soliloquy is important so as to let the audience understand and comprehend fully. Soliloquies were frequently interpreted in dramas but went out of fashion when drama shifted towards realism in the late 18th century.

A soliloquy is generally uttered in blank verse, which is a kind of long non-rhyming poem by the speaker. The basic requirement of a soliloquy is that the speaker should be alone on stage, away from the rest of the characters, while voicing his innermost thoughts. The playwright uses the dramatic device of soliloquy to create a kind of psychological depth within the character as he reveals his innermost thoughts and feelings.

1.1 Definition and origin of soliloquy

Soliloquy is a literary device according to which a character brings out the inner complex feelings by speaking to him /herself. The audience is supposed to hear it but not the other characters. Characters are individuals with their own complex thoughts and emotions and these thoughts and emotions can be shared with others.

The word soliloquy derived from Latin words "solus" which means alone and "loqui" which means to speak. It can be traced back to 1595-1605. Verb soliloquize is recorded from 1759. Soliloquy is a long speech uttered by a single character alone on the stage in which he/she expresses his/her thoughts and feelings. It enables the dramatist to convey directly to the audience the important information about a particular character; his/her state of mind and heart, his intimate thoughts and feelings, his motives and intentions^[3].

1.2 Four types of Shakespearean soliloquy

Based on the complexity of the stage setting and the interrelationships among characters and between actor and audience, soliloquies in Shakespeare's plays may be divided into four basic types: Plain Soliloquy, Attended Soliloquy, Soliloquy with Props, and Soliloquy as Dialogue^[4].

Of the four, plain soliloquy regarded as the simplest one, and most often employed. Connecting a character uttering by oneself provided that there's no other character on stage. Then the character may come up the stage and tell the audience about himself. When the absence of other characters on stage does not necessarily hint, latter they are often added to the drama by the attended soliloquy. A typical case is the aside. Greater dramatic import and interest can be generated if the soliloquist is unaware of being watched. Attended soliloquy can heighten dramatic effect even where no real eavesdropping takes place.

Soliloquy with props involves the use of a prop or props. Whatever the number of onstage characters, as long as a prop is directly addressed, it becomes an add-on character. Like in the fourth soliloquy, the audience is likely to be reminded of the prop—the knife—that lies in wait, abiding its turn for a fatal mission.

Compared with the previous three types stated, the soliloquy as dialogue is the most sophisticated one both in form and theatrical in effect. The dialogical soliloquy often involves a special kind of prop—the epistle. On the one hand, the presence of a letter normally presupposes the absence of the writer of that letter, or the letter would be superfluous. On the other hand, because he is able to express himself through the letter, the writer is in a real sense "present" on stage.

1.3 The use of the soliloquy in Shakespeare's Hamlet

Shakespeare's writings in the tragedy of Hamlet reveal seven in depth soliloquies uttered by Hamlet. In these seven soliloquies, the segments of Hamlet's personality was demonstrated to some extent. The soliloquies used in Hamlet help readers better understand the exact mind of Hamlet. At the conclusion of the play, the readers feel as if they know Hamlet and his soliloquies contribute too much of that understanding. Hamlet is one of the most complex characters ever created. His intricacy can be seen in the amount of soliloquies he speaks throughout the play. His soliloquy 'to be or not to be that is the question' is one of the most remarkable soliloquies that serves to highlight the state of indecision in which he finds himself. Hamlet's soliloquies show a progress in his power to convert the personal into general, each one of Hamlet's soliloquies reveals his inmost thoughts and gives the reader or the audience an insight of his feeling at that time^[5]. Hamlet's quartet of soliloquies illustrates how he is initially indecisive, but eventually makes a decision to take revenge against his uncle.

II. A general analysis of the fourth soliloquy in Hamlet

This is the most famous soliloquy because it is the most philosophical of all. In this soliloquy, there is a mental debate. Hamlet finds himself on the horns of a dilemma; "To be or not to be: that is the question". He asks which of the two alternatives is nobler whither silently to suffer the cruelties of fate or to put up a fight against the misfortunes of life. What prevents a man from committing suicide is that he does not know what is the result for him after death. It is the fear of what may happen to us after death that makes us endure the ills and injustices of life. This soliloquy reveals the speculative temperament of Hamlet, irresolute and wavering mind and his incapacity for any premeditated action of a momentous nature. *Hamlet* can be better understood by examining Hamlet's soliloquies. All of *Hamlet's* soliloquies show Hamlet's self-hatred and even a willingness to die.

2.1 The disposing of each verse from a discourse perspective

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

The obvious interpretation of the verse is that Hamlet contemplates suicide; he questions whether it is best for him to live or die. However, the form of the words guarantees that Hamlet's question will be interpreted on a general level. In light of the general quality it is fair to assume that Hamlet poses the question simultaneously on a pragmatic level and on a metaphysical level. It is not a mere question of whether Hamlet should or should not kill himself; the justification for existence itself is here questioned.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

Here Hamlet expands on this notion, more specifically the question refers to existence in the face of suffering. Suffering here is used in such a way that it comes to indicate tolerant patience.

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Shakespeare employs this metaphor as a means of illustrating the nature of the difficulties confronting Hamlet, in the form of his father's request which he cannot reconcile to his intellectualization of revenge and his mother lecherous relationship with Claudius. The metaphor as the weapons employed by fortune are ranged weapons, the distance from which they attack could indicate the unseen quality of Hamlet's fortune's foe, or possibly indicate the convoluted quality of the means by which fortune affects him.

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them.

Here Hamlet proposes an alternative to suffering these slings and arrows of fortune. Suggesting that perhaps if he stood in opposition to such attacks he could terminate them. The metaphor sea of troubles is fairly simple in that it simply compares Hamlet's suffering to the vast and boundless sea. Hamlet questions whether to take arms against the external troubles confronting him (Claudius, his mother's incest and frailty), or against his internal troubles, which again implies the contemplation of suicide. The use of opposing in context continues the metaphor of armed struggle begun by "take arms" in the previous line.

To die: to sleep;

Shakespeare uses an extended metaphor in which sleep comes to represent death. Sleep is like death because sleep is also the connotation of inaction, rest, and being idle or oblivious.

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

This line qualifies Hamlet's intended use of sleep in the previous line.

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to,

Here Hamlet reveals a trend to perceive carnality as inherently corrupted; he has a strong association between the physicality of man and his inevitable corruption. The use of heir here reveals Hamlet's notion that these flaws are hereditary; this could help the reader better understand Hamlet's abhorrence for his mother's actions.

'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd.

Refers to previous lines, Hamlet displays a desire to end his 'thousand natural shocks' and in doing so once again communicates to the audience a trend towards suicidal contemplation. The term consummation in this context means end or death, its use here in poetry plays of its natural meaning of completion suggesting that Hamlet is not complete until death.

To die, to sleep;

To sleep: perchance to dream: aye, there's the rub;

Inferentially, it suggests that there may be a possibility of something beyond death, this something is here represented by the notion of a dream. The intangible quality of a dream parallels the unknown quality of realm beyond death. Hamlet suggests that this unknown quality, the chance that there is something further is something which prevents men from devoutly wishing this 'consummation'.

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

The comparison of sleep and death, Hamlet infers that if death is sleep intensified, then the possible dreams in death are likely to be intensified as well. Hamlet's pace is also increased as unlike previous lines punctuation is not used to indicate pauses.

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

The mortal coil here symbolizes life, by referring to life as a coil Shakespeare creates a vivid image in the reader's mind. Use of the term coil likens mortality to a snake traditionally associated with death or evil, this metaphor is effective on another level too.

Must give us pause: there's the respect .

That makes calamity of so long life;

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time.

The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,

*The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns,
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,*

This is a list of the corruptions that a man must tolerate in this life, Hamlet presents these as prefix to the revelation of the thing that keeps man from ending his life, and subsequently ceasing his need to tolerate such villainous elements.

*When he himself might his quietus make.
With a bare bodkin?*

Refers again to suicide this time not in a personally contemplative sense but in a general sense. Bodkin was the Elizabethan term for sharp instrument. In this context, however it suggests a dagger as such the phrase comes to mean 'bare blade'. Hamlet asks who wants to suffer life when you could end your troubles with a dagger? After the initial question. Who would fardels bear, Hamlet continues by asking who would bear fardels which was an Elizabethan term for a heavy pack.

*To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
Elaborates* on Hamlet's negative outlook on life in general.

*But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?*

This is the reason Hamlet gives for men sustained tolerance of the corrupt elements of life. Man is afraid of what comes after death. Death is an undiscovered country that no traveler (deceased person) has ever returned from. Death is an unknown quantity that puzzles the human will and causes man to tolerate the known evil.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;

Hamlet suggests contemplation along these lines makes cowards of men. This line is applicable in a general sense throughout the play as the reader repeatedly sees Hamlet's resolve to act crumble as he considers it in more depth. Conscience here is used in a manner which suggests its meaning "consciousness, inmost thought or private judgment" rather than implying a moral dilemma. The premise is that thoughts can deter action.

*And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,*

Resolution to act is compromised by excessive thinking. The words to describe the thoughts reflect Hamlet's dissatisfaction with his ability to act on his beliefs; he believes his noble 'hue of resolution' is destroyed by his excessive contemplation. These lines set up a contrast between resolution and thought through the use of a parallelism.

*And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.—Soft you now!*

Here Hamlet speaks in general terms of the great enterprises that have been compromised by thought. The use of the term awry creates an implied reference to the suggestion that the time is out of joint, and the fact that something is rotten in the kingdom of Denmark.

2.2 The dilemma of life and death from a psycholinguistic perspective

All of Hamlet's soliloquies show Hamlet's self-hatred and even a willingness to die. However, in Hamlet's soliloquy, 'To be or not to be', Hamlet takes this a step further and operates on the assumption that everyone would rather be dead than living, and is alive only because he has a fear of killing himself. Hamlet is no longer questioning whether or not he wants to die, but only whether or he is able to kill himself, because killing himself conflicts with his religion[6].

Hamlet's despair over his father's death and his mother's quick marriage caused him to wish for death even before he learned that his uncle murdered his father.

Hamlet is desperate and sees suicide as his only option to avoid being a coward or a murderer, but killing himself also poses a struggle between his religion and honor. Hamlet questions "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them". Hamlet believes that everyone wishes to kill himself, because who would bear the whips and scorns of time...when he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin?". Hamlet views living as a burden, referring to the "mortal coil" to represent living as a difficult task.

Hamlet reasons that people do not kill themselves solely because they are scared of "the dread of something after death," and that if people had more courage and certainty, they would commit suicide .

Hamlet seems to think that there is no chance of peace for him in life—that his only option is to continue to be tortured on Earth, or to kill himself. It seems that killing Claudius would torment Hamlet, out of guilt for his murder, as not killing him does, out of guilt for his inability to avenge his father's death. After examining Hamlet's soliloquies, it is apparent Hamlet sees no possible way out of his dilemma without damaging his honor, duty, religion, or sense of morality^[7].

III. The functions of the soliloquy in Hamlet

It's believed that Shakespeare is known for his deep understanding of human nature with diverse feelings, emotions and passions both positive and negative involved in it.

The fourth soliloquy is given to him to reveal his complex psychological state. It's the tragedy of moral frustration. The tension between Hamlet's need for revenge and the question of morality, guilt, justice as well as his uncle and mother's position is vividly dramatized.

In these 'Seven Soliloquies', Hamlet shares his inner feelings, thoughts and plans for the future, and therefore, helps the development of the plot. These soliloquies are the pivotal pillars of the drama, and still considered as one of the most brilliant literary works. Without reading these seven soliloquies, one cannot enjoy the true experience of this amazing drama.

3.1 Achieving the dramatic effectiveness

Zuo Xin states that: "All narrative fiction has a discourse or textual level and a story world^[8]". The choice of language is greatly varied and can be very emotional. It creates a great atmosphere and a superb play.

In literary discourse, only the addresser at the discourse level above the story world, i.e., the author, is the ultimate source of coherence of literary significance. This literary significance is manifested in a communicatively dynamic way through the transformation of "discourse theme" through some "mediating stages" into literary "discourse rheme," ensuring coherence in the story world.

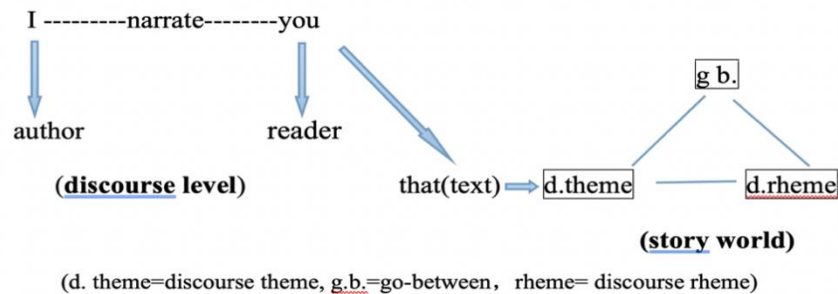
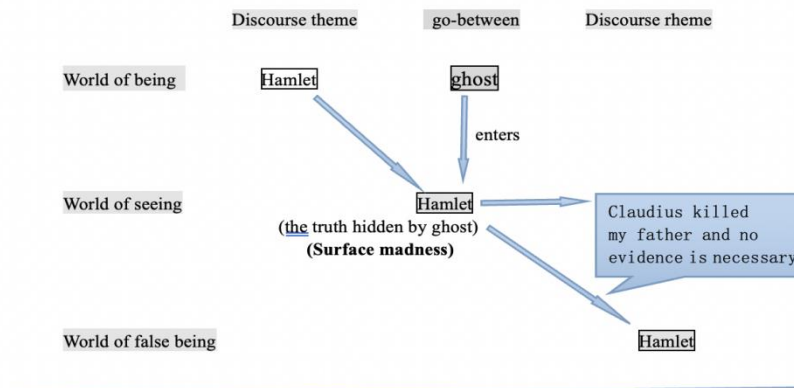


Figure 1: Two layered structure in literary discourse

3.2 Two ghosts as the go-between in Hamlet

In *Hamlet*, the ghost creates an infinite image effect of two facing mirrors due to the double world of doubt as represented below. In *Hamlet* it is the "Ghost" who first introduces Hamlet to the world of SEEMING, and then Hamlet himself introduces Claudius to this world of doubt^[9].



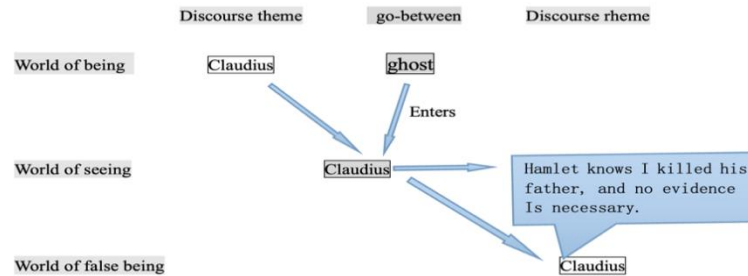


Figure 2: Being-seeing structure

3.3 Two implications revealed

First implication: the facing mirrors and the infinite number of reflections. For Claudius to know that Hamlet knows of his crime, he has to draw evidence from Hamlet. Hamlet, on the other hand, has no clear evidence of Claudius's crime and he cannot say anything clearly about it. It is well known that ghost could not be seen by human beings. But Claudius does not need to confess as long as Hamlet does not hold clear evidence of his crime.

While Hamlet sees Claudius making confession, importantly, he shows no interest in the content of the confession. At this stage, Hamlet is already convinced second implication: audience is cheated all.

The second implication is that the audience's readiness is all. Ultimately the audience is deceived into believing that Hamlet avenges his father's murder. All of the elements in this play can be said to be arranged to ready the audience to accept Hamlet's vengeance upon Claudius. Claudius confesses his murder of King Hamlet, but Hamlet does not hear it. In the prayer scene, the audience is now given sufficient grounds to believe who killed King Hamlet and who is to be avenged. Through these sorts of "shared knowledge," the audience believes that Hamlet has achieved his vengeance in the feud scene when he kills Claudius. In reality, however, Hamlet dies without any clear evidence that Claudius murdered King Hamlet, and Claudius dies without knowing that Hamlet knows that he murdered the king. Also in Hamlet, the author's discourse theme presented in the form of INNOCENCE earlier in the play becomes mediated through the three stages of SEEMING into a rhematic comment on the theme; that is, INNOCENCE ultimately faces RUIN.

3.4 Making different characters more distinctive

In Hamlet, eleven soliloquies together uttered by the protagonist Hamlet, King Claudius and Ophelia. All the soliloquies attempt to reveal the complexity of the character of Hamlet and the importance of the role that his presence of lunacy plays in the plot. And the different sides of his personality are revealed by the employment of the soliloquy. For instance, Hamlet's feelings about the King, Claudius, developed from dislike to suspicion and finally into hatred.

Ophelia makes her "O, what a noble mind is here o'er thrown" soliloquy.

The first thing Claudius reveals in his soliloquy is the most significant: he admits that he has murdered his brother, which up until this point in the play has been an ambiguous accusation.

Claudius' soliloquy about his remorse over his murder of Hamlet's father is important to the play because it's the one place where we learn how Claudius feels about what he has done. The rest of the play is all about how Hamlet feels about what Claudius has done, and I think it rounds out the play to get it from a different perspective.

Ophelia is a beautiful and simple-minded woman, easily molded by the more powerful opinions and desires of others. That weakness of mind and will, which permitted her obedience to her father and thus destroyed her hope for Hamlet's love, finally resulted in her insanity and death^[10]. When her father had challenged the honor of Hamlet's intentions, Ophelia could only reply "I do not know, my lord, what I should think". Used to relying upon her father's direction and brought up to be obedient, she can only accept her father's belief, seconded by that of her brother, that Hamlet's "holy vows" of love were simply designed for her seduction. She was to obey her father's orders not to permit Hamlet to see her again. By not thinking for herself and only doing as her father wished, she ruined her chances of love with Hamlet.

IV. The position and the significance of the soliloquy 'To Be or Not To Be'

This soliloquy is considered to be one of the most important and fundamental lines in English literature. Shakespeare's 'to be or not to be, that is the question' is still considered as a pioneer and stands apart in English literature.

The soliloquy of Shakespeare in Elizabethan period is more obvious in strong relief to set a dominant idea. This famous soliloquy in its new position thus becomes one of the most striking of those moments of lassitude and inactivity which in *Hamlet* invariably follow the moments to resolve. It takes its essential place in the structure of a drama which represents a tragic catastrophe as springing, not from mere external accident, but from lack of harmony character and circumstance.

Thus, the seven soliloquies of Hamlet are relevant because they allow the reader to follow the progression of Hamlet's spiritual crisis and they also help to bring out his complex mental state.

4.1 Shakespeare uses the soliloquy to reveal fascinating insights into his characters in Hamlet

Hamlet's first soliloquy shows that he is angry with his mother and upset over his father's death. It also expresses Hamlet's deepest thoughts. He can not stand the world that he lives in. He wants to relieve himself of all his responsibilities and return to a time of tranquility. He has been raised as noble man and he can't find the heart to abandon responsibilities. Through suicide, he feels that he can escape all of his problems. The beliefs of his father reject this idea. His problems seem to increase: his father's death, his widowed mother marrying his uncle and his confusing relationship with Ophelia. The first soliloquy introduces Hamlet's first thoughts of suicide. It also enables readers to know how much he disapproves of his mother-uncles' relationship^[11].

4.2 Shakespeare's influence on other artists

Shakespeare influenced every generation of writers since his death and he continues to have an enormous impact on contemporary plays, movies, and poems. The Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) was so influenced by Shakespeare that he kept a bust of the Bard beside him while he wrote, hoping that Shakespeare would spark his creativity. Keats's poems duplicate Shakespeare's style and are full of Shakespearean imagery. Many authors have used phrases from Shakespeare's works as titles for their own novels. Here is a list of just a few:

- The Undiscovered Country - Auther Schnitzer (Hamlet, 3.1)
- Forbidden Planet (1956) - The Tempest
- Throne of Blood (1957) - Macbeth
- 10 Things I Hate About You (1999) - The Taming of the Shrew

V. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the soliloquies, we can trace the spiritual dilemma that Hamlet went through. Shakespeare uttered the soliloquies in order to reduce his complexity in that he is a very complex character. Thus, the soliloquies of Hamlet are relevant because they allow the reader to follow the progression of Hamlet's spiritual dilemma and they also help to bring out his complex mental state.

Discussion of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy are almost as varied and divergent as interpretations of the play itself. Different understandings of the play and different formulations of Hamlet's character naturally affect interpretations of the soliloquy, but interpretations which fail to consider the dramatic context of the speech are surely faulty in critical procedure.

From the above analyses, Shakespeare portrays his characters at all levels and in all dimensions, which presents to readers diversity, complexity and profundity of human beings. Therefore, readers are blessed with the whole picture of human life and a rainbow of human experiences.

The author puts forward some new expectations on Shakespeare studies: future Shakespeare studies can adopt new angles of view, focus on some less-hyped works, strengthen in quantitative research, increase contact with modern world and promote Shakespeare studies by cultivating core author group in various ways.

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