Module B: To what extent is “Hamlet” a play of its time and of all times?

We, as a 21st century audience, never tire from the multifaceted and mysterious qualities of Hamlet’s nature, which mirror much of our own emerging perceptions of self, as we are drawn to ponder “What a piece of work is a man?”. Composed in the early 17th century, Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ continues to engage audiences through its dramatic treatment of inner conflict, the nature of life and death and ignorance versus understanding, albeit often through the lens of renaissance humanist ideals. However, within this Elizabethan context, Hamlet is an “Everyman” protagonist who holds a mirror up to enduring qualities and conundrums that so often lie at the core of the human experience. Shakespeare’s intentional “miscasting” of Hamlet, takes the play from a predictable exploration of an individual’s tragedy, to a meta-theatrical representation of the human condition. Illuminating the applicative nature of Hamlet’s repressed control over his environment, this text’s cross-contextual depth ensures ‘Hamlet’s’ enduring resonance with a contemporary audience.

Within the human experience, inner conflict often provokes pain, sorrow and an inability to express the incommunicable. However, it can also lead to eloquent representations of the human struggle, to accept the realities of life and the finality of death. In a world where divine order has been overturned, much of what Hamlet needs to communicate is politically and personally incommunicable. English literary scholar A.C Bradley parallels that “Hamlet is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible” alluding to the extent to which the mercurial Prince’s existence as an idealist, suppresses his ability to speak of his father’s death and mother’s perceived betrayal. Within Hamlet’s first soliloquy, the pain that foreshadows his moral template, is given emphasis through his emotive language, within “But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue” (Act I, scene II). This juxtaposes effectively Hamlet’s suppression of his anguish with his desire to elaborate upon his inner conflicting emotions. Tormented by images of Gertrude’s tender affections toward Claudius, Hamlet laments further through narrative thuggery, for he says that he “can say nothing”, highlighting the emotional outpour of his pain, sorrow and grief. When commenting on his mother’s overly hasty marriage, an expression of this pain and sorrow is given depth within the lexical chain “within a month”, “ere that shoes were old” and “a beast would have mourned longer”. Providing insight into Hamlet's reasoning for his emotional despair, we as an audience are forced to sympathise with how the suppression of our pain and sorrow often provokes an inability to physically express what is felt needed to be spoken. However, this is not to say that from struggle comes downfall. Hamlet makes a point of asserting his truth, his anxiety to be what he appears, to embody the perfect equation of appearance and reality. As a result, Hamlet does find clarity within a “rotten state”, as his ability to metaphorically “turn [his] eyes into [his] very soul” and “see [the] black grained spots” symbolic of his inherent frailties, brings him to reflect upon his trail of carnage, borne of his inner conflicting nature. The sense of empathy evoked by Hamlet’s despair invites audiences of all contexts to confront the complexities of human grief and loss, in accordance with man’s innate nature.

As Hamlet ponders the nature of being and nothingness, Shakespeare's deliberately ambiguous representations of life, death and human relationships are universal conundrums of existence, that continue to resonate with a contemporary audience. Hamlet’s grief and disgust in his mother’s dysfunctional “o’erhasty marriage”, initiate and pervade much of his uncertainty and existential questioning. The use of synecdoche given within Hamlet’s first soliloquy of “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt”, is expressive of his desire to escape from the corporeality of his mistrust, into a process suggestive of spiritual release. It is here emphasised that Hamlet’s ability to confide in those who surround him
become non-existent, as he endeavours to accept the continuous punishing, hostility of life, that in Hamlet’s eyes “is not, nor cannot come to good”. Immediately juxtaposed to the notion of spiritual release, and standing in contrast to “flesh”, is his reference to the “everlasting”. Paradoxically, in his aversion from the flesh, Hamlet’s body must seem to him to possess a state of solidity, closer to something everlasting than to the ephemeral nature of the dew he yearns to become. It is Hamlet’s ambiguous interpretations of life that both catalyse the deterioration of his relationships, and enhance his own philosophical understandings of his existence; a contradictory conundrum universally relevant to the human experience of all contexts.

Further exploring the perplex nature of Hamlet’s character, Gregory Doran’s production of “Hamlet” (2009) confronts us with the uncomfortable truths of human mortality, expressed through the spiritual despair of his emotionally charged Hamlet. Doran captures the third soliloquy with protracted, low-key lighting, depicting Hamlet to be speaking into the void of the afterlife, reflective of the ambiguous nature of both Hamlet’s character and of death itself. Similarly, focused on Hamlet’s obsession with surveillance, Michael Almereyda’s 2000 modern rendition of “Hamlet”, further assists in the depiction of Hamlet’s enigmatic madness and paranoia, which stems much from his unstable connections with those he loves. Almereyda’s rigorous trimming effectively emphasises the diverse and harsh qualities of Hamlet’s nature, keeping intact Shakespeare intentional portrayal of Hamlet’s ambiguous character. As shown within Almereyda’s production, the ability to place Hamlet within a modern day context, makes evident the play’s ability to both resonate with its time and with all times, as the enduring qualities of Hamlet's nature, will never falter from existence.

Shakespeare intentionally reveals that the human desire to experience acceptance and love are often impacted by ignorance of the complexity of self, others and the world. Hamlet’s bewildered debate around death foreshadows his perceived lunacy, that often proves him oblivious to his happiness. Shakespeare’s exploration of Hamlet’s metaphorical interpretation of death being “The undiscover’d country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” provides insight into Hamlet's perception of life’s finality, nothingness and mystery. Hamlet further emotively laments that we must “rather bear those ills we have” as the “rest is silence”, highlighting his mature acceptance of humanity’s shared fate. In resolving this conundrum of existence, the abolishment of Hamlet's uncertainty allows for his growing appreciation of the complexity of himself, others and the world. It is Hamlet’s ability to self reflect upon his actions that see his statement to Ophelia, “you should not have believed me… I loved you not” juxtapose heavily with his later statement “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could have not with all their quantity of love, make up my sum”. Portraying a much calmer and tolerable figure, this contrast between Hamlet’s destruction and development showcases a sense of growth and maturity within his character. No longer perceiving life as a “sea of troubles”, Hamlet has grown to understand and appreciate life’s complexity as he no longer question whether “To be or not to be”. The sense of growth that pervades much of the concluding scenes, is universal to the human condition, as we must all mature and grow in order to move beyond the atrocities that life so frequently demonstrates.

Hamlet continues to stymie critics with his complexity and apparent contradiction of his enigmatic character. The logical and irrational qualities that consume much of Hamlet’s existence will forever resonate with successive generations, owing to the timeless, philosophical enigmas that continue to ignite internal and external debate among individuals irrespective of contexts. Therefore Shakespeare's “Hamlet” will forever be a play of its time and of all times as the qualities of man will never falter from time.