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She Proves by Algebra that Hamlet is his Own Father

James Joyce wrote *Ulysses* with the intention of making it his magnum opus, confusing English students and teachers for years to come. He is quoted as saying: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality." The *Odyssey* serves as a direct and indisputable inspiration for *Ulysses*. But it should not come as a surprise to any English Literature students that Joyce, who was exceptionally well educated also includes many homages to another great work in the history of literature: *Hamlet*.

According to "The Hamlet of Stephen Dedalus," Shakespeare is referenced close to 300 times in the work (Peery, 1). Of those 300, at least a third are either directly or indirectly referencing *Hamlet*. While some scholars argue that the inclusion of *Hamlet* is coincidental (D.S. Savage wrote: "It is difficult to believe that Joyce's employment of [*Hamlet*] was deliberate (19)) the purpose of this paper is to show the incredibly significant role that *Hamlet* and Shakespeare has on *Ulysses* narratively and thematically.

In *Ulysses*' first chapter, we are introduced to Stephen Dedalus. Even before knowing much about him, allusions to *Hamlet* are made through his appearance. Stephen, much like Hamlet, is a scholar, returned from his studies to help mourn the death of a parent. In Hamlet's case, he returns home following the death of his father. For Stephen, it is his mother. Since both are in mourning, they are both dressed in black. This, in and of itself, isn't enough to bring

Hamlet into the mind of the reader, lots of people wear black. Visual allusions to Stephen with Hamlet occur later in the text, when Stephen refers to his hat as a “Hamlet hat” (a floppy black beret). However, both Hamlet and Stephen are noted for their determination to dress in mourning despite the fact that enough time has passed for them to have stopped mourning and return to normal clothing. Buck Mulligan, who has a penchant for teasing Stephen, points out that it’s silly for Stephen to remain stubbornly in mourning with the quote: “Etiquette is etiquette. He kills his mother but he can’t wear grey trousers” (Joyce, 6). Worth noting that Buck Mulligan mocks Stephen for a lot of things, but another things that Stephen is mocked for is his “*Hamlet* theory”. Mulligan introduces the reader to this theory and therefore theme by saying to their roommate (tower-mate?) Haines: “He proves by algebra that Hamlet’s grandson is Shakespeare’s grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father” (Joyce, 18). This is the first mention of Stephen’s theory, which will later be explained in depth in both the novel and in this paper. But the introduction to this theory brings *Hamlet* into the reader’s periphery.

Leopold Bloom, though not as educated or as studious as Stephen, is no stranger to Shakespeare’s work. While Stephen’s relationship with Shakespeare is that of a scholar, Bloom often quotes Shakespeare in small moments throughout his stream-of-consciousness narration. Bloom’s familiarity with Shakespeare is casual, which is probably pretty standard for an average man like Bloom. For example, when Bloom is observing his wife in bed he notices “blackened court cards laid along her thigh by sevens. Dark lady and fair man.” The “dark lady and fair man” are the subjects of Shakespeare’s sonnets, of which Bloom seems to be casually familiar. Later on, while talking about suicide with other men en route to a funeral, Bloom thinks about his father, who was himself a victim suicide: “Yet sometimes they repent too late. Found in the

riverbed clutching rushes” (96). The description of the riverbed doesn’t apply to Bloom’s father, who died by poisoning, but rather alludes to the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, who committed suicide by drowning. Later on, in that same chapter in the cemetery, Bloom thinks: “Keep out the damp. Gravediggers in Hamlet. Shows the profound knowledge of the human heart.” Once again, this reflects Bloom’s casual knowledge and appreciation of *Hamlet*, as the gravediggers in *Hamlet* serve as one of the only sources of comic relief, and their scene takes place at a cemetery where they are making a lighthearted joke out of Ophelia’s death and of death in general. Bloom seems aware of this connection, as he immediately chastises himself, thinking “Daren’t joke about the dead for two years at least” (96).

Thematically, *Ulysses* and *Hamlet* are comparable. As described in little detail above, both Hamlet and Stephen are mourning a parent (Hamlet a father, Stephen a mother). However, one of the major themes of Joyce’s work is the unification of Leopold Bloom and Stephen as father and son. The most direct and obvious allusion to this theme through the work is that of Odysseus reuniting with his son Telemachus (Bloom and Stephen, respectively). It revealed through the text that Stephen has all but disowned his real father, Simon Dedalus, who despite being the primary caretaker of his daughters spends the majority of his money on alcohol and gambling. Stephen, who is detached from his family in order to save himself from becoming like them and so that he can pursue his artistic endeavors, is literally motherless and figuratively fatherless. Hamlet has practically disowned his mother for marrying his uncle, which makes Hamlet literally fatherless and figuratively motherless, in perfect contrast to Stephen. Thus, Stephen perfectly poised to find a father figure in Bloom.

Meanwhile, Bloom also stands in perfect contrast to Stephen. Stephen is a fatherless son

and Bloom is a sonless father. Bloom, who lost an infant son named Rudy close to a decade ago is still very much affected by the premature death. When Simon Dedalus remarks his distaste for Stephen's friends, Bloom is touched by Simon's paternal outburst and his thoughts immediately turn to Rudy:

“If little Rudy had lived. See him grow up. Hear his voice in the house.

Walking beside Molly in an Eton suit. My son. Me in his eyes. Strange feeling it would be. From me. Just a chance.” (87).

This is the first moment we have that alludes to Bloom and Stephen's future connection as father and son, as Bloom is spurred to mourning Rudy after the encounter with Stephen and Simon. It also establishes Bloom firmly in his role as a father without a son, which had been previously introduced but not explored to this extent. The characterization of Bloom as a father without a son brings with it the comparison of Bloom himself to Shakespeare. Shakespeare, much like Bloom, lost a son prematurely. The ensuing grief led to Shakespeare penning some of his greatest work, including *Hamlet*, largely thought to have been inspired by his son whose named happened to be Hamnet.

Stephen himself is among those who believe *Hamlet* to be the byproduct of filial mourning. He says as much when defending the previously mentioned *Hamlet* theory, which Stephen eventually presents to his academic peers in the National Library. In his theory, Stephen explains to the skeptical librarians that Shakespeare's personal life was the major (if not the only) inspiration for *Hamlet*. In summary, Stephen argues that Shakespeare represents the ghost of Hamlet's father, that Hamnet Shakespeare represents Hamlet, and that Ann Hathaway is the disloyal queen Gertrude:

“Is it possible that that player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son’s name (had Hamnet Shakespeare lived he would have been prince Hamlet’s twin), is it possible, I want to know, or probable that he did not draw or foresee the logical conclusion of those premises: you are the dispossessed son: I am the murdered father: your mother is the guilty queen, Ann Shakespeare, born Hathaway?” (186).

The scholars are skeptical of the *Hamlet* theory for a couple of reasons. Some dispute Stephen’s theory because they believe the biographical details of an artist’s life are irrelevant to the art itself. It’s important to note at this point that Stephen is very clearly based on a young James Joyce, which means that when Stephen opens up the floor to invite academics to examine the personal life of an author, he is actually inviting the reader to do the same thing for himself, as he is the author of *Ulysses*. Simultaneously, he is chastising the reader for doing so vis-a-vis the skeptical academics, who think that art should stand by itself, apart from the author’s personal life. One of the academics chastises Stephen for “peeping and prying into greenroom gossip of the day, the poet’s drinking, the poet’s debts” (186). At the mention of debts, Stephen immediately thinks of his own debts. This thought process, as well as the fact that Stephen resents the fact that the scholars haven’t invited him to participate in their poetry collection nor have they invited him into their social group, suggests that Stephen thinks of himself as a young yet-to-be discovered contemporary of Shakespeare despite the fact that he hasn’t technically ever written anything.

It’s especially interesting that Stephen considers himself a stand-in for Shakespeare.

There are similarities; like Shakespeare, Stephen has left behind his home and family to pursue a career in a bohemian city (Stephen in Paris, Shakespeare in London). However, as he is embracing Shakespeare as a creator he is condemning his biological father, and biological fatherhood in general, for their roles as creators, saying “a father is a necessary evil... Fatherhood, in the state of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to begotten... Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he his son?” (204). This dismissal of a father’s role in his son’s life is very clearly based on his own experience as the son of Simon Dedalus. Stephen considers Simon nothing more than a biological factor in his own creation. But because of Stephen’s insistence that an analysis of Shakespeare’s personal life is necessary, his understanding of Shakespeare’s life is an almost exact replica of Bloom. Like Shakespeare, Bloom has lost a son; like Shakespeare, Bloom is resentful of his unfaithful wife; like Shakespeare, Bloom has a daughter but no heir to carry on his name. The similarities between Bloom and Shakespeare are brought even further to light, albeit unintentionally, by Stephen when he adamantly argues that Shakespeare was Jewish. Bloom, as the reader has learned by now, is Jewish. Which means that Stephen is unwittingly uniting Bloom with Shakespeare. This unification of Bloom with Shakespeare is especially interesting because Stephen sees Shakespeare in a role as an artist and creator, something he desperately wants to be. Since it has been established that Bloom is a more fitting Shakespeare than Stephen is when personal life is factored in, Stephen is really saying that Bloom is more of a creator than Simon is. In other words, Stephen is dismissing his own father and aligning himself closer to Bloom. To the reader this should make a lot of sense. The average reader of *Ulysses* has already accepted that its characters are based on *The Odyssey*: Bloom is Odysseus, Stephen is Telemachus, and Molly is Penelope. However these three roles: father, son,

and wife, are also significant in *Hamlet*. Bloom is the ghost of Hamlet's father, Stephen is Hamlet, and Molly is Gertrude.

Yet another scholar criticizes Stephen's theory on *Hamlet* because Shakespeare himself is Prince Hamlet and thus cannot be King Hamlet. Prince Hamlet is too personal a character, so it has to be Shakespeare to have based him off of someone else. Stephen disagrees with that point, saying that an artist of Shakespeare's talent would have been able to create a character like Hamlet that is a part of himself but that does not necessarily mean that the character is based on himself. He goes on to explain that King Hamlet must have been Shakespeare himself, since King Hamlet was aware of his own death:

“But those who are done to death in sleep cannot know the manner of their quell unless their Creator endow their souls with that knowledge in the life to come. The poisoning and the beast with two backs that urged it King Hamlet's ghost could not know of were he not endowed with knowledge by his creator?” (194).

Because King Hamlet is endowed with knowledge that only Shakespeare knows, King Hamlet must be Shakespeare. Once again, the reader should consider the point to Stephen's example. If, as he implies in the narrative, an author has included a symbol of himself in the text (as Shakespeare has supposedly done with *Hamlet*, as Joyce has done with Stephen) then that character is endowed with knowledge that only their creator knows. This is especially interesting because Bloom seems aware of the connection he has with Stephen while Stephen, who is supposedly made in the image of his creator, Joyce, still doesn't seem to realize that Bloom will play a significant role in the narrative of his story. Bloom is also aware of his wife's infidelity,

just as Hamlet's ghost is aware of his wife's infidelities. This suggests that Bloom, and not Stephen, is endowed with knowledge from his creator. Once again, this places Stephen firmly in the role as Hamlet, and Bloom in the role of the ghostly father, who is also Shakespeare, who is also Joyce.

While father and son grapple, it is important to explain the role of the third *Hamlet* character represented in *Ulysses*, namely that of Molly who is meant to represent Gertrude. If anything, Molly's alter-ego as Gertrude seems more in-step with *Hamlet* than it does with *The Odyssey*. For example, Penelope remains faithful to Odysseus, but Gertrude does not remain faithful to her husband, King Hamlet. Molly has an affair with Boylan, who is probably *Ulysses*' most prominent antagonist. Ann Hathaway is made out to be unfaithful (despite the fact that her lack of loyalty is mostly assumed, we know very little about her) and that betrayal is what drove William Shakespeare to pursue a life in London. Molly, despite the reader knowing very little about her personal life (although her infidelity is later confirmed) is all but assumed to be unfaithful based on a letter. The courtship of Shakespeare and Ann is also assumed by Stephen to be a passionate love affair that turned into a mistake. Once again, we know very little about Shakespeare's personal life as no documentation of it has been left behind. At this point in the narrative the same can be said for Bloom and Molly, we know little of the courtship, nothing of her infidelity, and yet is assumed that Molly is the major factor in the rift in their marriage.

Joyce does something very clever with Stephen by introducing his theory that the author should play a role in the literary analysis of the text. In doing so, Joyce has inserted himself as a factor in the analysis of *Ulysses*. This is a very Joyce-like thing to do, it adds a multidimensional theory about the author's role within a work of art while the art is still occurring (i.e. the reader is

still reading it). Namely, allowing the reader to decide their own truth using only the tools that the author has given them, which is a recurring theme within both *Hamlet* and *Ulysses*.

Similarities between *Hamlet* and *Ulysses* are fairly confined, however, to character analysis. *The Odyssey* is very ostentatiously the major plot inspiration for *Ulysses*. However, *Hamlet's* role in the character creation and analysis of Ulysses cannot be ignored. The coincidences and many references to it are too deliberate to be coincidental. Whether Joyce wrote Shakespeare's magnum opus into his own cannot be determined definitively, the fact remains that it is still incredibly significant to the work as a whole. While Hamlet is reunited with his father in death, Stephen reunites with Bloom under slightly less bloody (albeit, still pretty bloody) circumstances. The two men are unified by their love of language. Thus the two men, father and son, King and Prince, creator and creation, are unified in the end. Just as they always will be in *The Odyssey*, *Hamlet*, and *Ulysses*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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