

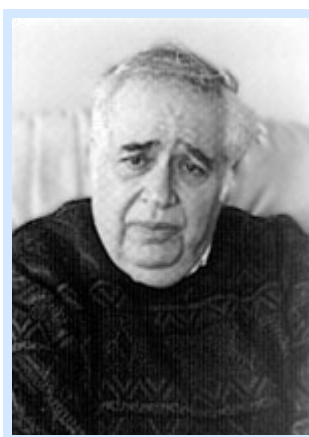
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## Harold Bloom Interprets "Hamlet"

Author Discusses Shakespeare Classic at Library

By YVONNE FRENCH

Shakespeare's "Hamlet," "after four centuries, is still the most experimental play ever written," literary critic and Yale University professor Harold Bloom argued before a capacity Library audience in March.



"We read to reflect and to be reflected. ... You can make of the play 'Hamlet' and the protagonist pretty much what you will, whether you are playgoer or reader, critic or director, actor or ideologue; push any stance or quest into it and the drama will illuminate what you have brought with you," Bloom said.

Prosser Gifford, director of the Library's Office of Scholarly Programs, introduced Bloom as "a force of nature, a storm of intellectual activity, whose commentaries are, in the words of Mike Abrams of Cornell, like reading classical authors by flashes of lightning."

Bloom is Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University and Berg Professor of English at New York University. The winner of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1985 and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Criticism in 1999, he is the author of more than 20 books.

The John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress and the Office of Scholarly Programs sponsored the lecture, which Bloom based largely on his new book, "Hamlet: Poem Unlimited" (Riverhead, 2003). Bloom said he wrote this book to fill a gap he left in "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human" (1998), in which he argued that "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare" is "a secular scripture from which we derive much of our language, our psychology and our mythology."

In "Hamlet: Poem Unlimited," Bloom suggested reading the play as if Hamlet the prince were a "mortal god in an immortal play."

Bloom dismissed the notion that Hamlet, goaded by his father's ghost, was motivated by revenge to kill his uncle Claudius, who had ascended the throne and married the queen, Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. He also said Freud's attempt "to fasten the Oedipus complex on Hamlet ... will not stick."

"Something in Hamlet dies before the play opens, and I set aside the prevalent judgment that the deepest cause of his melancholia is his mourning for the dead father and his outrage at his mother's sexuality," Bloom said. "The only vital relationship Hamlet has ever had was with Yorick, the King Hamlet's jester, who died, the Grave-digger tells us, when the prince was seven. ... Yorick the jester was Hamlet's true father and mother."

"The play's subject ... is neither mourning for the dead or revenge on the living. ... All that matters is Hamlet's consciousness of his own consciousness, infinite, unlimited, and at war with itself," Bloom said.



In a running battle of wits, Hamlet also contends with his creator, Shakespeare. "In the book I propose that a civil war goes on between Hamlet and his maker," said Bloom. "Shakespeare ... cannot control this most temperamentally capricious and preternaturally intelligent of all his creations."

The war with Shakespeare takes place in the play within the play, which, Bloom explained, begins in Act II and takes up 1,000 lines of the



play, Shakespeare's longest at 4,000 lines. He said this interlude was the playwright's attempt to wrest the drama back from the genius he created in the character of Hamlet.

Hamlet's character changes after the graveyard scene in Act V, according to Bloom. Here Hamlet's consciousness is "drastically purged of self," he said. "Hamlet discovers that his life has been a quest with no object except his own endlessly burgeoning subjectivity. This truth, intolerable to any of us, helps turn Hamlet into an angel of destruction," he said.

Bloom wrote: "Contending with unknown powers within his own self, the prince seems to struggle also with the spirit of evil in heavenly places. ...

"Hamlet ... is not going to heaven, hell, purgatory, or limbo, or to any other theological fantasy. He has been there, done that, in his exhaustive drama. ... For Hamlet himself, death is not tragic but an apotheosis."

Bloom concluded: "The enigma of Hamlet is that so many are moved to identify with him, and he does not want or need such identification. Yet he urges Horatio to stay alive to retell the play's story lest the prince bear a wounded name forever. Why does Hamlet still care? Why do any of us care whether our name will be remembered and how?"

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