

'THE SESSIONS OF SWEET SILENT THOUGHT'

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(SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 30)

In this article I hope to demonstrate that the literary touchstones of Shakespeare's plays are a powerful and fruitful source of inspiration and nourishment in therapeutic work. There seems to be an over-lap between the concerns of therapy and literature and these two methods of discourse are mutually beneficial. It seems significant that Apollo is the god of both poetry and healing. There is a case for saying that the reconstructions of the past that are heard in the therapy room are a narrative weaving or a kind of fiction. We are attempting to read, or interpret, something below the surface and become aware of the use of metaphor and symbol, and are thus working at the interface of what is known and not known.

Since the beginning of psychoanalysis, literature and myth have been at the heart of understanding the fundamental elements of human nature and relationships and Shakespeare has always been a writer of particular interest. For instance, Ernest Jones referred to him as a 'master psychologist' and it may not be an exaggeration to say that Freud finds Shakespeare always there before him.

In briefly looking at two plays, I hope to show how Shakespeare helps us gain an understanding of grief and jealousy which might feed and deepen our approach to clients who are wrestling with these emotions.

The devastating impact of death is displayed in 'Hamlet', a story of mourning and loss.

This is probably Shakespeare's most complex play which does not lend itself to one definitive interpretation. However, one of its major themes is grief and it is interesting to note that it was written in 1601, just after the death of the playwright's father. Therapists and psychoanalytic writers have always paid great attention to this play and as Jacques Lacan says: 'From one end of Hamlet to the other, all anyone talks about is mourning' Indeed, even before we see him, we know Hamlet to be a bereaved son who is struggling

to come to terms with his father's death.

In 'Hamlet' we see the impact of the loss of that father plus the further loss of his mother to a second relationship, a story commonplace in the counselling room:-

- An inability to face up to any flaws in the relationship with the father: what we are presented with is Old Hamlet, a dead soldier/hero who, as a man of action, has more in common with Young Fortinbras, the warrior princeling, than his own son. Young Hamlet, by contrast is a scholar, a thinker and a brooder. This puts in question whether they had a friction-free relationship since they are so entirely different.
- Placing the lost father on a pedestal: Hamlet has an idealised version of his father. Yet we are also aware that Old Hamlet is condemned to Purgatory and so is clearly not without sin, although we are not privy to what he might have done. In the closet scene with his mother, he makes it explicit that he sees his father as an idealised spirit and his new step-father, Claudius, as base and physical.
- Open hostility towards the step-father: When we first see Hamlet and Claudius together the depth and expression of his loss has become tiresome to his uncle/step-father. Even before Hamlet discovers that his father has been murdered by Claudius, their relationship is prickly and critical and his grief is dismissed by Claudius as

'unmanly' (Act1/Scene2). Hamlet's enraged resentment is much more personal than political.

- The loss of an appropriate model for what it means to be a man: Hamlet would be expecting to take over from a father losing power due to advancing age – a process of growing-up which usurps the father. The arrival of Claudius in his life means that this path to manhood has been de-railed. Claudius has literally killed his father and thus got in the way of Hamlet's own desire to 'kill' his father in a healthy way by becoming a man.
- Envy of other father/son relationships: Hamlet is hostile towards Polonius, his potential father-in law, who he perceives to be a fool who does not have the right to continue living whilst his own father is dead. He is also forced to face up to another way of responding to loss in the person of Laertes who, after the death of his father Polonius, and his sister Ophelia, instantly puts a plan of revenge into action.
- A sense of betrayal and abandonment by the mother: As an audience, we have no idea whether Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, was an unfaithful wife or indeed whether she knew of the murder of her first husband. It may be that she has re-married hastily



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merely in order to do the best for the state as well as her son, since Claudius makes it plain that Hamlet will be next in line to the throne. However, Hamlet's perception of his mother has shifted entirely as a result of this second marriage leaving him feeling un-mothered. He is forced to see her as an object of a man's desire which he is both uncomfortable with, and at the same time cannot prevent himself from imagining. Confrontation with her sexuality means that for him, she has forfeited her wholesome motherliness. In the closet scene, any gentleness that he might feel towards her is over-taken by increasing anger and a desire to make her feel guilty.

- Changed dynamics in other close relationships: This is particularly noticeable in the nunnery scene – significantly Elizabethan slang for a brothel- which shows his confused feelings towards Ophelia as he pushes her

away and grasps her towards him in turn. This scene is infused with Hamlet's distaste for sexuality, his mistrust of his mother and much mis-directed rage which he acts out on Ophelia, the innocent victim of the piece. Hamlet has lost his trust in love since those that he has loved are either dead or have become unavailable to him. The withdrawal of Hamlet's love is the beginning of Ophelia's unravelling which ultimately leads to her death by water – a common metaphor for female sexuality.

- Alienation from friends: although Hamlet has one trusted friend, Horatio, with whom he is always honest, his other friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, fail to connect with this new mirthless Hamlet and are treated with suspicion by him even before he realises that they are spying on him.

- Imagining the presence of the dead person: although the ghost of Hamlet's father is seen and heard by other characters, in the closet scene his mother cannot see what Hamlet sees and describes it as 'the very coinage of your brain' (Act3/Scene 4). In this highly emotional state we, as an audience, may think Hamlet to be mad, but it is not uncommon for a bereaved person to imagine that they see glimpses of a loved one or catch the sound of their voice.

- Having to face up to mortality: Hamlet spends much of the play meditating on death and the nature of reality from 'To be or not to be' (Act 3/Scene 1) via his confrontation with Yorick's skull (Act 5/Scene 1) to the point at which he finally reaches an accommodation with his own mortality just before the final sword fight - 'Let be' - (Act 5/Scene 2)

Shakespeare also shows an emotion out of control in 'A Winter's Tale': a demonstration of the destructive power of morbid jealousy.

In 'A Winter's Tale' we see King Leontes in a fixed belief about his wife's unfaithfulness, such that all counter-evidence is read as proof. Most of us will have been aware of a certain amount of jealousy within us and, indeed, it is needed as part of a properly involved relationship. This play portrays what happens when jealousy shades into mental illness. In 'What's Really Going on Here?' Susie Orbach describes the condition in these terms: 'We feel that the attention our partner is giving a third party is attention that is being withheld from us.' Leontes displays the symptoms of morbid jealousy in all its terrifying intensity:

- The suspicion of a familiar person having transgressed with a partner and their subsequent rejection: Leontes suspects his boyhood friend Polixenes, with whom he has had a close but competitive relationship. His pregnant

wife Hermione has an easy friendliness towards him which confirms what Leontes has already started to believe, so that he can then conclude 'Polixenes has made thee swell thus' (Act 2/Scene 1). This leads to the banishment of his oldest friend.

- The retrospective doubt about the paternity of children that can then put them at risk: Leontes rejects his existing son Maximillius and withdraws his love for him. The boy is removed from his mother - 'Bear the boy hence, he shall not come about her' (Act 2/Scene 1) - and then sickens and dies. Leontes also demands, in an outburst of toxic rage, that the newborn be thrown on the fire and, indeed, it is left in the wilderness to die. He states that 'I'll not raise another's issue' (Act 2/Scene 3).

- The revision or reinterpretation of memories and events: A tiny seed grows in Leontes' mind which infects his perception of his entire marriage. Because Hermione hesitated briefly before accepting his offer of marriage, he imagines that this must have been because she had another suitor in mind.

- The violence displayed towards the partner: Being a king, Leontes is in a position of absolute power and his behaviour demonstrates that he perceives his wife to be his possession. He becomes violent towards Hermione,

imprisons her and torments her by separating her from her two children.

- The assumption of guilt until innocence is proven: This is clearly, impossible to achieve. In contemporary terms we have DNA and lie-detector tests which are used by a suspect to, hopefully, reassure their partner. For Leontes, the equivalent is consultation of the Oracle, which he then refuses to believe. As a result Apollo becomes enraged and as a punishment brings about the death of Maximillius.
- The sufferer is deluded and their reason overthrown: Leontes is enclosed and entrapped by his condition as much as those who are his victims, though he is unaware of it. He is, therefore, deaf to his previously trusted courtiers who try to sway his 'diseas'd opinion' (Act1/ Scene2), but his mind is full of imaginary scenes and vivid dreams which convince him that his view is justified.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's plays seem particularly important in terms of the enrichment of therapeutic work. A play, having no authorial voice, gives us only what the characters say about themselves or others to go on, in demonstrating who they are – just as clients in therapy. These particular plays, as they also contain great poetry resonate at a deeper level. In listening to their verse we are both trying to hold a thought together and responding at a more visceral level, since the heart beats iambically. By reading Shakespeare's plays or seeing them performed, and getting in touch with their transformative power, we can connect with some profound truths. Entering the world of another, whether on stage or in the counselling room, requires empathy and compassion and a willingness to engage with things beyond the definitive. Sometimes it is literature as much as counselling theory which helps us to see the interior of human existence.

References

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