

## RENAISSANCE HUMANISM THROUGH WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

O HUMANISMO DO RENASCIMENTO ATRAVÉS DA HAMLET DE WILLIAM  
SHAKESPEARE

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### ABSTRACT:

The article focuses on a philosophical issue of the Renaissance humanism in William Shakespeare's Hamlet. The humanist tradition originated in Greece with the famous statement "Of all things man is the measure" (Protagoras of Abdera, 485-415 BCE), but it was not until the Renaissance that it reached its peak and became a doctrine. The article focuses on the humanism of the Renaissance, with its glorification of the image of the "giant man," which is mainly expressed in the work of William Shakespeare. By pointing out the nature of Renaissance humanism, the article emphasizes Hamlet's play as a typical work of Renaissance humanism.

KEYWORDS: *Hamlet*, Renaissance Era, Humanism, William Shakespeare.

### RESUMO:

O artigo enfoca uma questão filosófica do humanismo renascentista no Hamlet de William Shakespeare. A tradição humanista se originou na Grécia com a famosa declaração "De todas as coisas o homem é a medida" (Protágoras de Abdera, 485-415 aC), mas não foi até o Renascimento que atingiu seu auge e se tornou uma doutrina. O artigo enfoca o humanismo do Renascimento, com sua glorificação da imagem do "homem gigante", que se expressa principalmente na obra de William Shakespeare. Ao apontar a natureza do humanismo renascentista, o artigo enfatiza a peça de Hamlet como uma obra típica do humanismo renascentista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Hamlet*, Renascimento, Humanismo, William Shakespeare.

## Introduction

The Renaissance era (XIV-XVII centuries) was marked by achievements in promoting and praising people. If humanism is understood as a doctrine about people, affirming the position of people, respecting them, and paving the way for the comprehensive development of each person's forte, intelligence and ability, then the Renaissance was the age of "giant people." That "giant" lies in the wisdom and thought of individuals as well as the time. Renaissance humanism became the basic ideological movement, creating the value of Renaissance literature and art. In that context, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was a Renaissance humanist, who shined in absorbing the spirit of the times and imbued the human spirit in his literary works (HADFIELD, 2003, RASPA, 2016). In other words, Renaissance humanism converges most clearly in Shakespeare's work, especially Hamlet (HAMILTON, 2019, SHAKESPEARE, 2003, SHAKESPEARE, 2019), and his character Hamlet as famous that Bloom argued "After Jesus, Hamlet is the most cited figure in Western consciousness" (BLOOM, 1998, p.xix). Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), the great Russian poet, once said, "If he is a great poet, it's in 'Hamlet'; if he is the *true* Shakespeare, the immeasurable genius penetrating the human heart, and the laws of destiny, the authentic and inimitable Shakespeare, it's all in Hamlet" (ALLEN, 2002). By analyzing Hamlet, the article highlights the important contents of humanism of this period.

### 1. The essence of Renaissance humanism

#### 1.1 'Rebirth' of Greco-Roman values

The Renaissance cultural movement appeared as a new wind that changed all aspects of Western European social life at the time. It started blowing up in Italy (Italian Proto-Renaissance) around 1250 and spread to countries in western and central Europe. Many researchers believe this cultural movement aims to restore the ancient Greek and Roman cultures that were forgotten and buried during the Middle Ages (BURKE, 1997, BURKE,CLOSSEY;FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO, 2017), and some others state that it was an extension of the Middle Ages (MONFASANI, 2016). However, the real goal of the Renaissance cultural movement was not only to restore those ancient cultures but also to enrich them. Through the remnants of Greek and Roman civilization that new excavations have discovered, they have recognized that the Middle Ages with the ruling powers, including the feudal State and the Church, suppressed culture. More serious when it has brutally trampled on the right to life, the right to freedom of people. They thought that the ancient Greeks were able to create a flourishing civilization because of

the absence of feudalism and the spiritual domination of the Church of God. These two main forces brought humanity into dark Middle Ages.

Despite dazzling forms of Greek and Roman culture, dispelling “the ghosts of the Middle Ages”(MARX;ENGELS, 1995a, p.102) astounds Westerners, but history is always a constant movement forward. Therefore, Renaissance is to revive the good cultural traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, not by returning to the distant past but by aiming for the development of the new. Following the cultural traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, the Renaissance cultural movement showed respect and honour for people and upheld the spirit of fighting for human freedom. This contrasts with the spiritual autocracy of feudalism and the Catholic Church. Thereby, this highlights humanism, the mainstream of the Renaissance cultural movement.

Covering Renaissance humanism was the restoration of the fine traditions of the Greco-Roman civilization, criticizing and denouncing the crimes of feudalism and society. At the same time, he expressed his desire to liberate people from spiritual bondage, creating conditions for developing a new person and a new society. The new men of the Renaissance were "giant men... giants of thought, enthusiasm, and character, giants of talent in all respects and of vast knowledge."(MARX;ENGELS, 1995a, p.106) Those giants woke up from the night of the Middle Ages and gradually brought Western Europe into the Modern Age with many brilliant achievements.

## 1.2 Humanism - the basic movement of Renaissance literature and art

The birth of Renaissance humanism created a turning point in history, assessed by Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) as "the greatest and most progressive turning point that mankind has never seen so far (MARX;ENGELS, 1995a, p.113)." That turning point took place in all areas of social life. It profoundly changed Western European society's material and spiritual life and gave Western Europe a new, prosperous and energetic appearance.

The Renaissance humanists used the excuse of restoring Greco-Roman culture, a culture tallowed by God, so that the Church had no reason to ban it. Thanks to that, the new humanist spirit shone and became the basic movement of Renaissance literature and art. "The human spirit is first and foremost a spirit of struggle. Fighting for the urban bourgeoisie against feudalism. Fighting for the Italian people against the invasion of the aliens"(MARX;ENGELS, 1995a, p.23) and, at the same time, "The human spirit is the spirit of fighting for a more progressive ideology, a regime, a healthier, fuller and fairer life than the feudal life (MARX;ENGELS, 1995b, p.23)." Thanks to the spirit of fighting against the rigors of feudalism and the Church's authoritarianism, humanism has spread throughout Europe, and it has become a realist thought movement with great power and deep meaning.

It can be seen that the Renaissance is a revolution in the field of culture and ideology, preparing people to carry out the social revolution in the 18th century. The purpose of the Renaissance was upholding the spirit of struggle against tyranny and ecclesiastical domination, praising the dignity of the person, as well as awakening everyone to serve the common interests of progressive humankind, especially workers; Renaissance humanism has gathered powerful forces and talented and enthusiastic people to build a rich theoretical system, meeting the requirements of practice. Therefore, Renaissance humanism has shown the spirit of the times through the following primary contents: (1) Affirming that the world is created by nature (denying the role and existence of God); (2) Man is a product of natural development, not created by God out of a "plot" or "a rib" (against Christian creeds); (3) Life is not a place of exile, but a place where people can build happiness on earth, without having to wait for heaven (against the enslavement of feudal forces and the church); (4) Life contains innumerable beauties of which a human is the center of beauty, so the human must become the object of art (appreciating and praising the beauty of human) (DO, 2001, p.44).

## 2. Hamlet – typical literary work for Renaissance Humanism

The history of humanity has witnessed a period of "culture and art that preceded the sword and the gun (DO, 2001, p.211)." The human spirit became the strength of the Renaissance. As a typical humanist of that period, William Shakespeare used his pen to act for human love. The human spirit of the era permeated each of his works and literary characters. Hamlet is a prime example of that.

Hamlet's full name is "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark", written by Shakespeare around between 1599 and 1601 and premiered in 1602. Shakespeare's Hamlet re-enacted the story of the Danish prince Hamlet, who was studying in Germany when he heard the news that his father had died. He immediately returned to mourn. However, when he returned, a heartbreaking scene took place. In a short time, Claudius, his biological uncle, who had just succeeded to the throne, married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. The pain of losing his father is aggravated by what he is witnessing: a selfish, ungrateful uncle, a betrayal, an incestuous mother, the whole court in ecstasy, etc. Hamlet was told in a dream by his father that Claudius was the one who killed his father to usurp the throne and called on him to take revenge.

Reading Hamlet, one can find different points of view. Some only see Hamlet as a bloody revenge story (WELSH, 2001). Another point of view is that Shakespeare has dissected a type of person who has a pessimistic, depressed mood when falling into an undesirable situation. Others think that Shakespeare has deposited his thoughts in this play. But beyond those very ordinary views is a profound human spirit. Contrary to the nature of tragedy, as is often thought, Hamlet's tragedy does not spread pessimism or defeatism but is always illuminated by an undying belief in man's inclination toward Truth,

Goodness and Beauty, the potential within, and in the conscience. It can be affirmed that, in terms of the content and nature of Renaissance humanism that we have presented above, Hamlet is a typical work and a typical character for that thought movement.<sup>2.1</sup> True reflection of life and empathy for human pain

Shakespeare's significant contribution to literature and art was transformation of an old revenge story into a unique tragedy that reflected the characteristics of the Renaissance. In a shocking socio-political context, which suppresses people, and many political events that move people's hearts, Hamlet's play expressed concerns about the reason for life and people's aspirations in that era. Hamlet's anxiety and concern before taking revenge were also people's worries about the development trend of the socio-political situation. Some scholars have speculated that the character Polonius might have been inspired by Lord Burghley (CHAMBERS, 1930, ROWSE, 1995, WILSON, 1932). This is happening not only in the United Kingdom but also in many other European countries.

Hamlet's pain in the play is no longer his own pain. That pain has become a common pain of the whole society and the world. He suffered the common pain of the people of his time. In the face of historical twists and turns, what he refers to as the "chaos and violence" have turned Denmark into "Denmark's a prison" (CAVANAGH, 2017, SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.255) and turned the whole "world" into a "black prison."

"The purpose of theatrical art is to reflect the true face of one's time in such a way that it is true to its shape and characteristics, its good and bad sides, its imperative requirements (DO, 2001, p.218)."

Through the work of Hamlet, Shakespeare exposes an era of chaos. He vehemently denounced a world prison in which Hamlet's Denmark (used to refer to the United Kingdom at his time) was the darkest prison. According to Shakespeare, society is witnessing the most cunning and corrupt things when money can rule everything, the murderer's hands can repel justice, and nonsense can be legal. He called it *a world of corruption*. In Hamlet, Shakespeare faithfully recreated a Renaissance society as it developed, revealing many inadequacies in human alienation. Brothers harm each other, and the Queen is incestuous; the whole court is engulfed in a feast of pleasure. Therefore, Hamlet is a work that combines poetry and philosophy, art and thought, between theatre and life.

The prison world is also synonymous with awareness of the greatest human suffering. Prisons full of garbage, filth, and corruption are gradually making people lose themselves and fall. With fierce criticism, Shakespeare has outlined a reality about the dregs of society, "Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden. That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.101)." People in that society are degenerating. Living in a crazy world, facing the suffering that has gradually led Prince

Hamlet to the people and humanity, making him blend in with the people and humanity. Hamlet's pain is also humanity's pain. He is suffering the pain of humanity. In the drama, Hamlet is suffering the rotten things, but, out there, humanity is suffering, groaning under shackles and chains and being deprived of freedom.

## 2.2. Cheers to the struggle against power

In the play, Hamlet is exceptionally shocked, painful and indignant at the feud that killed his father and the destruction and incest happening before his eyes. He had to say, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.126)." After struggling to choose between two ways of life: suffering, living humiliation or rising up to fight to eliminate suffering despite facing death, Hamlet unequivocally affirms, "What is a man. If his chief good and market of his time. Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.203)." Since then, he pretended to be crazy to cover his enemies' eyes, secretly investigate the truth and seek revenge.

A fascinating passage in Hamlet's play is the description of Prince Hamlet's inner struggle, "To be, or not to be, (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.158)" "To live or not to live?" Further, "How to live worth living?" shows the sharp, ingenious writing of Shakespeare. The play is like a small space, recreating the extended life outside society. History has unique twists that force people to choose between life and death. Living a glorious life in the true sense of humanity or living humiliation in a way that the body exists, but the soul is dead. Living in a situation where evil is rampant, people are on the verge of alienation, and society is in turmoil, Hamlet realizes that, "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.138)." Finally, Hamlet understood the meaning of struggle. To be able to live in the real human sense, the only way is to stand up and fight to destroy suffering, prevent evil, and fight to restore social order. He bravely accepted the mission that belonged to him. "Oh from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.204)." Only fighting against power and crime can help him avenge his father's murder and, moreover, make his "chaos and violence" become "righteous and stable." To punish the man who killed his father, lead his mother into the filthy mud, and turn the whole country into "a disgusting prison," Hamlet was courageous to swing his sword to kill Claudius. It was decisive action without hesitation of the hero Hamlet to save the world from the most terrible dungeon. It was also the victory of justice over tyranny.

Commenting on the ideal of life, as well as the spirit of Hamlet's struggle to survive, to be human, Engels wrote: "a turning point in progress, the greatest ever that has ever happened (Engels)." The past will never return, but it can leave imprints to remind the next generation. Hamlet's ideals and

fighting spirit are an inevitable part of the historical movement, but, unfortunately, in that transition period (the Renaissance era in which he was living), history was not ready to receive that ideal and had not had the conditions to realize it. That makes the conflicts in the Hamlet tragedy of great socio-political significance. Hamlet's unjust death has the power to denounce the reality of society being dominated by evil and is a death for the spirit of fighting for life. The tragedy ends with the death of Hamlet and many other characters who have awakened human conscience in the struggle against power and crime, where the righteous always triumph over the unjust and the brutal. This gives the play a strong resonance; although the past is far away, today's advanced humanity still feels its vibration. History is not ready to receive that ideal; it has not had the conditions to realize that ideal. That makes the conflicts in the Hamlet tragedy have great socio-political significance. Hamlet's unjust death has the power to denounce the reality of society being dominated by evil and is a death that calls for the spirit of fighting for life. The tragedy ends with Hamlet's tragic death and many other characters who have awakened human conscience in the struggle against power and crime, in which the righteous always triumph over the unjust and the brutal. This has given the play a strong resonance; although the past is far away, advanced humanity today still feels its vibration.

### 2.3. Praise human beauty

Under the descriptive pen of Shakespeare, in the face of brutal evil, Hamlet became great, unusually tall to be able to fight heroically. Not only did he carry out that punishment in the name of the individual, but also in the name of the human. Hamlet's "revenge" does not stop at a simple personal grudge but also means saving Denmark from "[...]; Denmark being one o'th'worst (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.141)." Shakespeare praises Hamlet's struggle and sacrifice:

"Let four captains  
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,  
For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have proved most royal; and for his passage,  
The soldier's music and the rite of war  
Speak loudly for him (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.254-255)."

With a profoundly humane spirit, understanding of people's moods and aspirations and honouring the feats, Shakespeare built Hamlet to fight bravely. He praised the death of a soldier who "did not die" as "immortal." Hamlet fully deserved the title of human when he fought bravely in the name of justice to "rebuild it straight and solid" to protect the cause and regain freedom and independence for people even if the cost is sacrifice. Shakespeare, although mourning, loudly praised people like Hamlet who were worthy of the title of soldiers.

When building the character Hamlet, Shakespeare's humanistic thought was raised to a new height, reflecting the mainstream of Renaissance art. As early as in the Ancient Greece, thinkers had been interested in humans, but it was not until the Renaissance that they could make a remarkable discovery about humans. Hamlet is a concrete example. Shakespeare writes: "What a piece of work is a man! [...] The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.143)." This means that man is elevated to the center of the universe; man is the master of the universe. Even more miraculously, the beauty of the human being is raised to be the "the paragon of animals." Humans are rational and thinking species, so they have risen above other species and become a model for movement and development. It was Hamlet who had to exclaim, "Sure he that made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not. That capability and god-like reason. To fust in us unused (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.203)." Thanks to reason, people can wisely choose the path to fight for justice. "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.158)."

The hero Hamlet has heroically fought against the evil that is destroying people and society. He is ready to die for justice and considers death as light as a feather.

"To die, to sleep -  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to - 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep -  
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay," (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.158)

For him, death was like a long sleep with gentle dreams. It can be affirmed that covering the entire work is a profound human spirit. That is the main inspiration of Shakespeare when writing the tragedy Hamlet. Under his pen, the character Hamlet shines with beauty, living, fighting and sacrificing for the right. Hamlet is a symbol of Renaissance humanism.

#### 2.4. Incisive humane philosophy

Hamlet is a philosophical character, more specifically, existentialist and skeptical. Through Hamlet, Shakespeare has expressed his profound conception of life that seems to be influenced by the French Renaissance humanist Montaigne (1533 –1592) as many scholars discussed (KNOWLES, 1999, p.1052-1053, MACCARY, 1998, p.49, SHAKESPEARE, 2016, p.73-74). In other words, he has invested his thoughts into the character. Hamlet knows his own pain and the pain of life. The sudden death of his father and the hasty remarriage of his mother to his uncle caused him great pain. However, he is extremely wise and sober to find out the cause and a way to revenge. He bitterly mocked life when exclaiming,



“Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.103).” It was his irony for his mother's infidelity and incest. Hamlet said,

“Let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman [...] O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason. Would have mourned longer - married with my uncle, [...] She married. Oh most wicked speed, to post. With such dexterity to incestuous sheets (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.101).”

Lost in a crazy island world, immersed in morals and feasts, people advised him to give up his sad and painful face and enjoy the pleasures of the world. However, he did not fall; on the contrary, he knew how to rise up to fight against evil and prevent alienation from humans.

“Gertrude: [...] Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity.  
Hamlet: Ay madam, it is common.  
Gertrude: I f it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?  
Hamlet: Seems madam? nay it is, I know not seems. [...] These indeed seem, For they are actions that a man might play (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.98).”

Shakespeare created the contrast between phenomenon and nature, between the so-called “seems” and “indeed,” between the supposedly normal and the unusual. While his mother and her like-minded people considered the king's death and her marriage with Claudius to be expected, Hamlet, on the contrary, considered it strange. The accusation exposing the immediate fakes is clearly shown when Hamlet asserts that “they are actions that a man might play (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.98).” Falsehood often borrows the outer appearance to hide the true essence inside. Not accepting that lie, Hamlet is not caught up in the glamor and temptations of the outside but is determined to find the truth and stand up to fight for justice.

The most profound human philosophy in this play is the problem that Hamlet poses. The first big question that makes him wonder about is whether to live or not to live? To be or not to be? How to live meaningfully? These are questions about the meaning of life. Therefore, it is no longer his problem alone but has become a human matter of all time. To not live is to die; that is, if you do not live out of your life, live not worthy of the title of man, in disgrace, a cowardly life, you are no different from being dead. Living like this, the body still exists, but the soul is dead. The second big question that Hamlet asked was, “The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them [...] (SHAKESPEARE, 2003, p.158).”

The following question has clarified the meaning of the previous one and is also an expression of Hamlet's decision. The problem Hamlet posed has a universal meaning and shows Shakespeare's attitude to the problems of the times and also the general spirit of the Renaissance.

## Conclusion

As a fundamental trend of the Renaissance period in Europe, Renaissance humanism is deeply imprinted in the literature and art of this period. This is an anti-Christian movement aimed at promoting people, liberating individuals from the spiritual oppression of feudalism, opposing scholasticism and the church, and directing people to build a real life. In that spirit, Renaissance humanism was present in most literary works of Shakespeare, most notably Hamlet. Hamlet is a typical character of the renaissance humanist movement. Hamlet appeared in pain, but not pessimistic, always looking toward the values of Truthfulness, Compassion and Beauty. A character with enough strength and reason to overcome brutality and awaken the human conscience, Hamlet considers a gentle death like a long sleep, ready to sacrifice for the sake of justice. He became a symbol of the human spirit in the Renaissance. Through the play, Shakespeare's humanistic thought did not only bring vitality and luster to the Renaissance but also inspired the flow of humanity, making progress in human history.

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