

Hamlet

HAMLET
T. S. Eliot

Introduction

A towering figure of 20th century poetry, T.S. Eliot also did much to shape critical opinion about poetry, drama, and literary history through his essays, reviews, and work as an editor at Faber and Faber. As a critic Eliot wrote widely on multiple literary traditions, paying special attention to the metaphysical poets, Dante and Shakespeare. Eliot's impact on the field of literary criticism is immense; F.R. Leavis called him "*a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind.*" In his criticism, Eliot generally emphasized difficulty in poetry, appreciated metaphysical techniques like the conceit, and championed ideas such as "impersonality" and the influence of tradition upon the poet. Eliot also believed that poetry should be judged from an objective set of criteria, and perhaps his most famous formulation of such criterion came in an essay originally titled "Hamlet" and published in his influential volume of criticism, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920).

In the essay, Eliot notoriously deems Shakespeare's most famous tragedy an "*artistic failure,*" maintaining that the play represents a "*primary problem,*" and that it contains certain weaknesses as a whole. For Eliot, the most glaring is that **Hamlet's emotional response to his situation exceeds the realities of that situation as dramatized in the play itself:** "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." **Eliot uses this "problem" to formulate his definition of the "objective correlative";** though not the first person to use the term, Eliot made it a permanent fixture in the literary and critical fields.

According to Eliot, Hamlet's true feelings are unknowable because they do not find adequate representation in the play. The "**objective correlative**" **requires that emotion in art be expressed through an equivalent, or as Eliot puts it, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion."** **Emotion cannot be expressed directly, Eliot says, but "when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."**....

If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. **The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet.**

Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him.

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