

Summary of “Tragedy and the Mind of the Infant” by Ernest Jones

In Ernest Jones’ analysis of *Hamlet*, he describes two major reasons for Hamlet’s delay in accomplishing his task of killing Claudius. According to Jones, Hamlet’s unconscious sexual desire from his infancy in regards to his mother, which surface to his conscious mind and leads him to reject sexuality as a whole, and his indirect relationship with his uncle force Hamlet to delay the murder because Claudius executed the action that he himself yearned for.

A.C. Bradley describes Hamlet’s surge of repulsiveness in regard to his mother’s marriage by stating that “Her son was forced to see in her actions not only an astounding shallowness of feeling, but an eruption of coarse sensuality, ‘rank and gross,’ speeding post-haste to its horrible delight” (201). These feelings resurfaced once again when Gertrude marries Claudius, and began in infancy when his mother and father got married. Hamlet’s desire to take his father’s place was stolen when Claudius marries the Queen. In doing so, the repressed thoughts emerge into his conscious mind and are seen when Hamlet declares the marriage “incestuous.”

As the sexual desires over Gertrude begin to rise in Hamlet’s conscious mind, Ophelia becomes his alternative option in trying to release these emotions and at the same time reject his mother. Ophelia may not have such an important role in Hamlet’s life as it may seem: “Her naive piety, her obedient resignation, and her unreflecting simplicity sharply contrast with the Queen's character...” (201). In reality she served as a way to “play her off” against Gertrude, “just as a disappointed and piqued lover so often has resort to the arms of a more willing rival” (201).

Jones states that “[Hamlet’s] moral fate is bound up with his uncle’s for good or ill” (205) because Hamlet’s own wishes to have killed his father ties in with his uncle who actually fulfilled his wishes from infancy. It is the fact that Claudius kills the King and then proceeds to marrying Gertrude that halts Hamlet’s vengeance. In essence, killing Claudius would mean killing a part of himself. Jones mentions Freud and his ideals for suicide in melancholia and the steps Hamlet adopts to show the destruction and indecisiveness of the protagonist.

The controversy in Hamlet’s mind comes to play when his unconscious and conscious mind are not in accordance with one another. His conscious mind knows it must kill Claudius in order to not only regain the throne, but to avenge his father’s death, and to stop the incestuous actions of the Queen. However his unconscious mind does not allow him to do so because of two reasons; according to Jones, Hamlet refuses to abandon his own incestuous wishes, which only perpetuates the sin which leads to the torture of his conscious mind. The second reason is, by killing Claudius he would be committing a sin equivalent to that of the original, which would only bring even more guilt to the conscious mind.

Works Cited

Jones, Ernest. "Tragedy and the Mind of the Infant." *Hamlet: An Authoritative Text, Intellectual Backgrounds, Extracts from the Sources, Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Cyrus Hoy. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1992. 200-06. Print.