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Re-interpretation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through the Principles of General Semantics

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, according to Hazlitt, is 'a means of general reasoning'. The play makes its readers aware of the complex realities and problems of life. Hence, it can be a good example to discuss general semantics in its light. General Semantics give ways to avoid problems of daily life with its formation and tools. The GS tools such as structural differential, time-binding, indexing, dating, etc. helps individuals to ponder upon the problems which disturbs their life. However, through General Semantics one can find reasons behind Hamlet's fall. There are many reasons for Hamlet's delayed reactions and indecisive nature which one can find out through the devices/tools of General Semantics. The present research paper is focuses on the action and reaction of Hamlet with the light of General Semantics theory.

Keywords: General Semantics, Structural Differential, Time-binding, Hamlet.

Introduction:

It is an evident that literature and other arts have contributed in founding theories for other humanities as psychology, history, economics, sociology and politics. Literature too has gained through developing the literary theories based on these disciplines to interpret literary works contextually. Psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, Post-colonial theories, Feminist theories, etc., have enriched the reading and analysis of literary text. Similarly, General Semantics is a concept/process, scientific and multidisciplinary in nature to attempt General anthropology. This research paper is an attempt to apply General Semantics to literature. Among great writers Shakespeare needs no introduction and the human interest or anthropocentric bent of this great renaissance mind becomes an obvious choice due to his mastery in representing human life. The true greatness of any work is in its possibility of multiple interpretations. The

interpretation of Shakespearean plays all through the last four centuries has a history of its own. It would be a challenge to take up much discussed play *Hamlet* but it is a humble and simple attempt to apply General Semantics on my part if not add or contribute to the critique of the plays which has its own legacy.

General Semantics (GS), according to Levinson, is a 'process – oriented' problem solving system, which helps individuals to evaluate better and understand the world and therefore they are able to make intelligent decisions. The founder of this theory was Alfred Korzybski, a Polish engineer and intellect who came to United States during World War I. He had a firsthand experience of death and human follies in the war, and then decided to give the proper ways to evaluate human behaviour and avoid conflicts in their life. To live happily, he recommends to 'observe' and 'evaluate' the situation around us, takes the help of our past experiences and behave sanely with every minute problem of life. GS is a practice rather than a theory to evaluate the problems of everyday life. With reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* one can said that neither the playwright nor the protagonist is aware about the GS theory but the actions and reactions of the protagonist can be study through the different tools of GS.

Levels of Abstracting Process in the Character – Hamlet

Like Marlowe's Faustus, Hamlet was a scholar at the University of Wittenberg, where he presumably had studied theology and therefore had a special knowledge of the world of the spirits, so he could not trust the ghost when he first approached him and tried to verify his tone with the help of the players. Here he uses structural differential which is a key tool of GS theory. Through structural differential one can go closer to the reality and hence able to take wise decision. In this process one goes through the different levels of abstraction and try to identify the basic problem with him/her. In the play one can find that Hamlet also gone through the different levels of abstraction and tried to identify the reality/problem. Before Horatio reported about the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost, he himself saw him in his dream: "My father, methinks I see my father – ... / "In my mind's eye, Horatio" (I. II. 91); and then Horatio reveals that he too saw the ghost of his father:

... Been thus encountered. A figure like your father,
Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe,
... By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes
... Almost to jelly with the act of fear,
Stand dumb and speak not to him... (I. II. 91-2)

On this account Hamlet tried to verify the truth through asking different questions to Horatio and Marcellus; here he enters in the Event Level of abstraction (WIGO – What Is Going On) through these questions:

Hamlet: Armed say you?

Marcellus & Barnardo: Armed my lord.

Hamlet: From top to toe?

Marcellus & Barnardo: My lord, from head to foot.

Hamlet: Then saw you not his face?

Horatio: Oh yes my lord, he wore his beaver up.

Hamlet: What, looked he frowningly?

Horatio: A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

Hamlet: Pale, or red?

Horatio: Very pale.

Hamlet: If it assume my noble father's person,

I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape (I.II. 93)

From event level, Hamlet moved to the object level of abstraction, where he, meet and talked to the ghost of his father: Be thy intents wicked or charitable, / Thou com'st in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane. Oh answer me. (I. IV. 103) He followed the ghost without any delay, when it beckons him. The ghost told him:

Ghost: Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing

To what I am unfold.

Hamlet: Speak I am bound to *hear*.

Ghost: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt *hear*.

(Italics mine) (I.V. 105)

His father unveils the secret of his murder and wants that Hamlet takes the revenge for his murder. Though he came to know from the ghost about the injustice done to his father, he also wanted to verify the truth; so he took the help of the players to identify the culprits, where he entered in descriptive level of WIGO:

... I *observed* his looks,

I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,

I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil – , ...and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

(Italics mine) (III. I. 143)

Hamlet's evaluation process of descriptive level continued in his request to Horatio to watch his uncle's expression during the play within the play and he also tried to catch his uncle's expression through informing him about the history of the 'Mousetrap play':

Hamlet: ... There is a play tonight before the King:

One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death.
I prithee when thou *seest* that act afoot,
Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imagination are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note,
For I mine *eyes* will river to his face,
And after we will both our judgements join
In censure of his seeming. (III. II. 156) (Italics mine)

During the play Hamlet tried to catch the conscience of his uncle, which referred as the Inference level¹, in which he made statement about the facts:

Claudius: Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?

Hamlet: No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest, no offence i' th' world.

Claudius: What do you call the play?

Hamlet: The Mousetrap... This play is the image of a
murder done in Vienna... You shall see anon. 'Tis a knavish
piece of work... and we that have free souls, it touches us not.

Let the galled jade winch, our withers are unwrung. (III. II. 163)

After the performance, Hamlet confirmed about the murder of his father and the ghost's words as the thousand pounds; and made up his mind to take the revenge for his father's murder:

Hamlet: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Horatio: Very well my lord.

Hamlet: Upon the talk of the poisoning?

Horatio: I did very well note him. (III. II. 165)

From the above discussion of Hamlet's evaluation technique, one sees him as an intellect, a person with wide-range of knowledge and intelligence, a reliable commentator with a probing mind. He took decisive actions in some situation, e.g. he turned from rant to action, because he felt that if he was a proper avenger he would exhibit a huge amount of passion, and he culminated his thought in a great stage-cry, 'O vengeance!' The idea of using the players to test the Ghost's veracity was in his mind before he fell 'a-curing like a very drab' (II. II. 142). His decisive action was also observed when he gave exuberant advice to the players before, the play within the play, starts. Even he showed his unusual strength and cunningness on the pirate ship, while changing the letter and put Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death. In his duel with Laertes he sounded critical: "I shall win at the odds" (V. II. 234). Like Othello and Macbeth, Hamlet did not make the fundamental errors in his life but his inaction and wrong decisions became the cause of his tragedy. Hamlet was a critical thinker when compared to Othello and Macbeth. Othello, who relied on others while getting the truth, and took wrong decision based on his common sense, which resulted in assassination of Desdemona; on the other hand Macbeth, performed the action as guided by witches and Lady Macbeth, for his power of throne, which lead him to the disaster. But here in the play *Hamlet*, Hamlet did not rely on the ghost and verified the truth on his own which termed in GS as the abstracting process of evaluation.

Here one can argue that if Hamlet was able to take right decision than why he failed and met with the bloodshed. It is equally true that he has critical insight but his critical rigor did not come when he really had to act. For example, he thought critically while identifying

the culprit of his father's murder through the enactment of the play entitled 'Murder of Gonzago' but when he had a chance to punish his uncle while he was praying, he failed to do it. It is also applicable to Hamlet when A. C. Bradley admits, "we feel how strange it is that strength and weakness should be so mingled in one soul, and that this soul should be doomed to such misery and apparent failure". (Smith: 45) So, in its true sense, Hamlet's weakness played a major role in taking the decision when it really needed. Philip Edwards in his introduction to *Hamlet* argued that '*Hamlet* is indeed a tragedy of delay, but procrastination is only one special form of delay'. (47) General Semantics also consider delayed reactions as the means of avoiding problems in life but procrastination is harmful for taking effective decision and also blocks one's critical thinking. Although Hamlet succeed in his abstraction process but after that he needs to take certain steps to achieve his goal of revenge but he fails to do that. For his failing GS shows certain blocks which are responsible for his inaction.

Jumping into the Wrong Conclusion Block:

According to Levinson, people jump into the wrong conclusion when they make inferences but could not verify them. They may stand their inference on such observations that cover many points leading to the same conclusion. The same thing happened with Hamlet when he kills Polonius, assuming that he is Claudius. After the performance of play 'The Murder of Gonzago', Hamlet had been satisfied that the word of the ghost were true, and not an illusion; but before he could make up his resolution as to how and in what way he could take his revenge, he was called by the queen, his mother, to a private conference in her closet. When Hamlet enters in his mother's chamber, she began to strain him in the roundest way with his actions and behaviour, and she told him that he had given great offence to his father, meaning the present king, his uncle but with the same sharpness Hamlet replied: "Mother, you have much offended my father". The queen asked him if he had forgotten whom he was speaking to? Hamlet replied: "Alas! I wish I could forget. You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife; and you are my mother: I wish you were not what you are." (III. IV. 174-5) The queen tried to send the king and Polonius to him but Hamlet didn't let her go, he held her fast, and made her sit down. Gertrude terrified at his intense behaviour, and fearful lest in his lunacy he should do her a mischief, cried out; and a voice was heard from behind the hangings: "Help, help, the queen!" (III. IV. 175) which Hamlet heard and thought that if the king himself was concealed there, he drew his sword and stabbed at the place where the voice came from, he concluded the person to be dead. But when he dragged for the

body, it was not the king, but Polonius, the old officious counsellor, that had planted himself as a spy behind the hangings. Hamlet's identification, lead him to jump into the wrong conclusion and it resulted into death of Polonius. In General Semantics identification involves confusing levels or orders of abstraction by assuming that two structures existing at different levels are exactly the 'same' in all respects (DYS; 95). So, Hamlet didn't question but assumed that his perception of Claudius is correct and thus he wounded Polonius behind the curtains; it reveals when he said: "Nay I know not, is it the king?" (III. IV. 175)

Hazlitt too argues that Hamlet seemed incapable of deliberate action, and hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he had no time to reflect as in the scene where he killed Polonius, and again, where he altered the letters which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were taking with them to England, purporting his death. Hamlet, the son who had to revenge his dear father murder, had himself murdered a father and will fall by the vengeance of the son: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run,/ That our devices still are overthrown:/ Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own. (Rylands; 12)

Wishful Thinking & Perfectionism Blocks:

Hamlet's wishful thinking and perfectionism caused the indecisive action for revenge. The only thing that is perfect in life is imperfection. Those who do not accept it are perfectionists and they make their own life and of others painful. They procrastinate while making decisions. On the other hand, wishful thinking involves fantasizing, which leads to enormous waste of time and energy on destructive ruminations. Hamlet, a revenger of his father's murder suffered by these blocks and could not take the decision to kill Claudius when he was in his prayer. He argues:

And am I then revenged
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No (III. III. 173)

Hamlet waited for a perfect time to kill Claudius, arguing that if I kill him while he is praying, he will go to the heaven but I want to send him to hell. He waited for an opportunity in which Claudius indulges in sinful deeds so that he will make revenge more complete and damnation more certain. As he said, "Then trip him that heels may kick at heaven, / And that his soul may be as damned and black / As hell whereto it goes" (III. III; 174), this was a

mistake by Hamlet which lead him to another mistake i.e. killing of Polonius. His mistakes not only caused his death but others too. Dr. Johnson considered Hamlet's behaviour as 'useless and wanton cruelty', and argued that his refrain from killing Claudius for not sending him to heaven was 'too horrible to be read and to be uttered'. He further argued that Hamlet is rather an instrument than an agent, and made no attempt to punish Claudius after he had a confirmation of his guilt. Coleridge, too felt that Hamlet possess thinking power but he lacks in action. As he said: "...Hamlet knows perfectly well what he ought to do, and he is always promising to do it, but he is constitutionally averse to action, and his energy evaporates in self-reproach" (Hamlet; 33). It is clear that he was not able to take the right decision and kill his uncle during the prayer which led him to further problems. Coleridge in his lecture on *Hamlet* rightly opined, "Hamlet, though brave and careless of death, had contrasted a morbid sensibility from this overbalance in the mind, producing the lingering and vacillating delays of procrastination and wasting of energy of resolving the energy of acting" (Smith: 32)

Knee-jerk Reaction Block:

Many critics believed that Hamlet's delayed reaction causes his failure/death, but General Semantics recommends delayed reaction to avoid knee-jerk reaction, our impulsive behaviour while taking decision. Though Hamlet, delayed his actions while taking revenge, acted impulsively on the grave of Ophelia. When Hamlet saw Laertes in his intense grief leaps into his sister's grave, he immediately loomed Laertes because he could not bear that anyone should seem to outgo him in grief for the death of the fair Ophelia. So, though he was in disguise, he revealed himself and grappled with Laertes and said:

I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not with their quantity of love
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her? (V, I; 223)

Even though, he expressed his deep love for Ophelia, he did not understand her properly and behaved very brutally with her in nunnery scene and told her to 'go to nunnery'. He was frustrated by his mother's hasty marriage with his uncle, and believed that every woman does the same thing, he generalized Gertrude and Ophelia's behaviour as – "frailty, thy name is woman" (I, II; 89). According to General Semantics generalization stops our critical thinking, so one should avoid it by indexing, which Hamlet didn't do, and when the time came, he reacted impulsively. This was another mistake in the part of Hamlet which

leads him into another mistake i.e. accepting the combat challenge by Laertes and Claudius, and caused death of his mother and himself. Even Horatio stopped him when he was ready to combat with Laertes: 'If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit' (V. I. 234). If Hamlet didn't reveal him at that time then he would have been succeeding in his plan of taking revenge. Claudius himself considered Hamlet as careless, high-minded, and unsuspecting.

Conclusion:

However, various critics try to critique or interpret Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the tragedy of fate, it can be interpreting through Korzybski's concept of General Semantics in different way which leads to the conclusion that it is not fate but Hamlet's own weaknesses and procrastination leads him to 'hamartia' or 'tragic flaw'. Hamlet's jump into the wrong conclusion obstacle, lead him to, many mistakes in his life, e.g., his harsh behaviour with Ophelia, not killing Claudius when he was in prayer, his insensitive behaviour with his mother, killing of Polonius, etc. On the other hand, his wishful thinking procrastinates his idea of taking vengeance for his father's murder. And the most and powerful reason for his death/failure is his knee-jerk reaction i.e. jumping into the grave of Ophelia, accepting the combat, etc., which opens the new block for his indecisive action. It shows that he became the victim of IFD disease (Idealization – Frustration – Demoralization), which lead him to delay his decisions and to end the play in bloodshed and doom.

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