

**Theme of Betrayal: A Study in Selected Plays by
William Shakespeare**

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Abstract:

In his writings, William Shakespeare tries to dig deep in the human feelings such as envy, hatred, love and betrayal that manifest themselves eventually in physical acts. His depiction of such issues seems so realistic; reflecting the psychological depth of his characters and leads to the audience to a better comprehension of the human nature. In this respect, the theme of betrayal in his plays should be put within a wider context. He delves deep in his characters minds, both the victims and the victimizers, to probe the feelings that cause people betray each other.

Kay words: Betrayal , Shakespeare, Realistic, Realistic, Tragedies.

**“The Saddest thing about
Betrayal is that it never comes
From your enemies.”**

By: Ash Sweeny

www.Livelifehappy.com

Central to the Elizabethan world view was that of the chain of all beings. They believed that the whole universe is built round a hierarchal order in which everything in this world has its own place, there is no vacancy in that perfect chain. On the top of this order, God has his throne then comes the place of the angels followed by the common people. Below them, comes animals arranged in sub order, plants and trees. The chain ends up with inanimate things. Man, in this system has a central place; a place half way between body and soul. He is the monarch of this world (Bullough, 95).

According to this world view, the Al mighty God is the head of the macrocosm and the king is on the top of the microcosm, the lion is the king of the jungle. Within the animal kingdom the hawk is leader of all birds. Similarly, the sun is the most important planet in the solar system. Even within the human body, the head is the chief organ. Human beings have to accept and respect their natural place in such a well-knit hierarchal system. In this respect, it is the duty of the common people to serve and blindly obey their monarchs and women should show the some reverence to their parents (Tillyard, 43).

Social relationships and class distinction have a central place in Shakespeare’s dramatic world. In the Post - modern era, critics’ started reconsidering his works in the light of the modern critical theories especial those related to psychology and class struggle. They began shedding more

light on his plays that evolve round such issues. In some of his plays, William Shakespeare manipulates the gap between the upper and the lower classes for dramatic purposes since this often arouses the audience feeling of suspense (Campbell, 104).

Western people used to trust the leaders of the state and this is regarded as a sign of good citizenship. Yet, when he realizes that his confidence is in the wrong place he would then suffer a betrayal trauma which happens as a reaction the deep feeling of fury (Freyd, 85).

In *Othello*, Iago managed to ponder over Desdemona's faithfulness, by making Othello suspect his wife's unfaithfulness. Othello says:

**If I do prove her haggard
Though that her jesses were my dear heart – strings
I'd whistle her off, and tell her down the wind
To prey at fortune. (III,ii,255-258)**

Othello's soliloquy reflects his personality and frame of mind. The general's inability to make up his mind regarding his wife's supposed betrayal reflects the weakness of the human nature under stress and shows also the contrast between his public face as a military leader and the his private face as a husband. He is deceived by Iago whom he used to trust and believes his lies. Othello is deceived by Iago, and believes him as:

**This fellow's of exceeding honesty
And knows all qualities with a learned spirit
Of human dealing (III ,ii, 255-257)**

In the character of Iago, William Shakespeare presents one of his most villainous dramatic personae. He leaves his victim suffer the conflict between his love to his wife and his doubts about her loyalty. He begins imagining things about her supposed love affair with Cassio:

**She's gone, iam abused, and my relief
Must be to loath her. Oh, curse of marriage..**

The seeds of doubt that Iago plants in the head of Othello lead him to lose his balance and question the validity of his love. He decides to sacrifice that love that would stain his reputation as an honorable public figure, who should not be matched with treacherous wife. Ironically, in this play, Desdemona's supposed betrayal leads Othello himself unwittingly to betray himself as a noble warrior with ethical principles and betray his innocent wife.

The theme of betrayal can also be traced in *Macbeth* another Shakespearian great tragedy. The play is set in Scotland during the tenth and eleventh centuries. It opened with the return of the valiant general Macbeth from a battle with Banquo. The triumphant leader describes his day as "so foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I,iii,38). At his return, Macbeth comes a cross the witches who tell him two prophecies. The first is that to be the lord of Cawdor in return for his military service and the second is that he would be the king of Scotland:

**All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of cawdor!
All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!**

(III, iii,49-50)

The two predictions of the witches play upon the ambitions of Macbeth who begins thinking of killing his own king. This may indicate that the young military leader has contemplated upon such ideas even before the encounter with those witches. Macbeth stands for the noble warrior who because of his greed he betrays his ideals to be Machiavellian villain. Macbeth goes through an internal conflict fueled by the noble

Scottish lords' objections to his decision. Nevertheless, he makes up his mind of murdering Duncan, the king to seize the throne. The appearance of the witches in the play has an important dramatic function. They feed the feelings of grudge and ambition inside Macbeth and gives momentum to the action of the play. Again the ambitious young leader had a great inner struggle whether to kill the king, and afterwards his friend Banquo, so as no one will accuse him if he is not caught. And if he is caught he is going to be accused for treason (Slideshare.net/themes-in- *Macbeth*).

Greed and betrayal work hand in hand to motivate Macbeth to realize his dream. He and his wife lady Macbeth, who is not less evil than the witches, put their plan in action by inviting the king to their feast. Arriving there at night, Duncan positively describes their castle with these words:

**This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air nimbly
And sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses.
(I,vi,1-3)**

These lines imply a situational irony since the castle that the king admires becomes the crime scene. Thus, the castle which stands for beauty and hospitality becomes a place of treason and betrayal. This act of is repeated with Macbeth's friend to whom he shows signs of friendship and then kills them to avoid the future consequences of his villainous act.

From the beginning Lady Macbeth is depicted as a greedy woman with evil ambitions that she hopes to realize at all costs. These following words clearly reflect her morbid desire:

**How tender tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face have plucked
My nipple from his boneless gums, and dashed the
Brains out.
(I,vi, 55- 58)**

These lines reflect her grotesque character that is ready to crush the head of her own little child to achieve her dreams. Ironically, after realizing her dream of becoming a queen after killing the real king, she becomes mentally unbalanced. She can neither live peacefully nor forget her feeling of guilt. (bookrags.com) Accessed on 6/12/2014.

As in most of his plays, William Shakespeare in *Macbeth* uses the natural world as a reflection of human acts. Disorder in nature takes place usually when there is a violation of the natural order. Similarly, the betrayal of Macbeth of his own country leads to disorder even in nature. The messages of Macbeth speak about the chaotic movement of the forest:

**As I did stand my watch upon the hill I looked toward Birnam,
And a non, methought, the wood began to move.
(V,v,33-35)**

The theme of betrayal has also a strong presence in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Again here, betrayal is manifested through deception and the exploitation of others trusts for evil ends. The whole action of the play evolves round the betrayal of Cassius, before and even after the death of Caesar.

The signs of this betrayal of Caesar can be sensed at early stages when Flavius and Marcillus discharge the commoners and begin removing the scarves and other signs celebrating the victory of Caesar. They justify this act as wise since, according to them;

**These growing feathers pluck'd from Caesar's
Wing will make him fly an ordinary pitch.
(I,I,75-80)**

The conspiracy against Caesar goes on when we next see Cassius trying to win Brutus to his side by letting him lose his confidence in Caesar. He expresses to Brutus his worries about the increasing power of Caesar:

**Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty man
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonorable graves.
(I,ii,135-138)**

In these lines, he compares him to colossus the gigantic statue of Apollo, the Greek god of music. This huge statue is placed at Rhodes harbor and is so big that ships pass through from under its legs. According to Cassius the thriving influence of Caesar on people would lead other great men like Brutus to disgraceful death (Lawrence, 201).

These early examples of betrayal in the play represent the rising action that leads eventually to the climax; the murder of Caesar which is the best example of betrayal in the play. Mark Antony, Caesar's bosom friend acts cleverly to deceive the traitors that he is on their side so as avenge the death of his friend. When he gets at the crime scene he shakes hands with the conspirators through they are still covered by his friend's blood. He apologizes to the dead Caesar for doing so:

**Shall it not grieve thee dearer than thy death to see thy
Antony making his piece, shaking the blood fingers
Of thy foes, most noble! In the presence of thy corpse?
(III,I, 216-218)**

Mark Antony uses the same weapon of betrayal to avenge the death of his friend upon his murderers. He regards that as a lawful right to do justice. He warms the mob up against Brutus and the lords. When they understand his message, the citizens get enraged and begging calling for revenge:

**Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill!
Slay! Let not a traitor live! (III,ii,215-216)**

In a soliloquy, Antony prophecies the outbreak of violence and turmoil all over Italy as a result of the betrayal of Caesar:

**A Curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy
Blood and destruction shall be so in use.
(III,I,282-285)**

The violent reaction of the crowd ushers the starting point of Antony's ominous prophecy.

Julius Caesar illustrates another kind of betrayal; when a member of a family betrays another. In the fifth act we see Lepidus agrees to have his brother killed conspiring with others. He does not object when Octavius asks him "your brother too must die: consent you Lepidus" (v,I, 2). Betrayal takes place also in another family Mark Antony gives his consent that Publius, his sister's son is also put to death. To that Antony gives a direct answer without hesitation "He shall not live; look with a spot I damn him" (v,I, 7). Thus, the theme of betrayal is the central one in this play. It is the theme that involves most of the characters and it is the focal point round which the whole action evolves.

In *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare's great tragedies, the betrayal motif brings down the misfortunes of many characters. Betrayal sometimes is responsible for the ups and downs of power. The first example of this is King Lear's betrayal of his daughter Cordelia which leads her to lose her power. The king asks his daughters to show how they love him. While the two eldest daughters flatter him and play upon his feelings, Cordelia express a true simple love towards her father:

**Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth; I love your
Majesty According to my bond; no more
Nor less.**

(I, i, 92-94)

This reality made the king so angry that he tells her “come not between the dragon and his wrath” (I, i,124). This can be the first instance of betrayal in the play. Cordelia’s true love to her father is betrayal by his foolishness and distrust. True is the lesson that King Lear could not understand first. With the passage of time the true metal of the eldest daughters Goneril and Regan begin shining. They rise in power through deception and the betrayal of their father and sister. They begin to think of how they seize this opportunity to get rid of their father and dethrone him:

**Then must we look to receive from their rise
Not a lone the imperfections of long- engragged condition
(I,i, 120)**

They feel that it is their due time to carry out their plan, making use of their father’s old age and their sister’s exile (O’Brien, 75). The sisters’ betrayal leads them at the end to seize his power and have control over his wealth.

Edmund is another example of betrayal in the play. His true intentions and real motives are revealed later on. He puts in mind the betrayal in the play. His true intentions and real motives are revealed later on. He puts in mind the betrayal of his brother Edgar by having first his father’s love. Since he is the illegitimate son of Gloucester, he feels that he is socially outcast:

**I hope for my brother’s justification,
He wrote this but as an essay or taste
Of my virtue. (I,ii, 42)**

Through lies, Edmund cleverly fools both his brother and father. He misuses their trust that blinds them to realize his selfish intentions. They think that he is loyal to them and is ready to stand by their side at all costs. He could win them both through the lies he tells them which they foolishly believe. Like King Lear, they could not sense the truth underlining his false claims.

On the other hand, Goneril and Regan betray not only their father but their husbands as well. They both have a hidden lust for Edmund. This common physical desire leads them to stand against each other. It is not love in the true sense of the world. It is rather an admiration and attraction to Edmund's mischievous character. They find him the embodiment of success and power. In fact the three characters Goneril, Regan and Edmund have many things in common. Like Iago, they are Machiavellian characters for whom the end justifies the means.

In *King Lear*, William Shakespeare has actually various motives that lead to different forms of betrayal. One betrayal in the play often paves the way for another. The play also shows that betrayal has the seeds of destruction within it. In *King Lear*, William Shakespeare uses the theme of betrayal as an effective dramatic motif to create powerful situations and reveal the complexity of the human psyche and hidden motives.

The theme of betrayal has a felt presence in *Hamlet* also. Claudius betrays his brother, the late king by killing him, seizing his throne and marrying the queen.

**Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,
O Wicked wit and gifts, that have the power.**

(I,v, 25-27)

The queen herself is an example of betrayal. Gertrude, the late king's wife betrays him through her fast marriage. According to her son, Hamlet, this marriage is illegal and morally unacceptable. He describes the relationship of Gertrude and Claudius as 'Incestuous':

**She married, O, most wicked
Speed, to post
With such dexterity to
Incestuous sheets!
It is not nor it cannot come to
Good
But break, my heart; for I must
Hold my tongue.**

(II, ii, 6 – 12)

Hamlet's delay of his decision to avenge the death of his father can be viewed as a kind of betrayal since he promises his father's ghost to take action at once. Afterwards he begins thinking that this ghost might be an evil spirit, and therefore decides to wait:

**Do not forget; this visitation is but to whet
Thy almost blunted purpose.**

(III, iv, 110-111)

On the other hand, Claudius is indirectly responsible for the death of Gertrude, the queen. He does not tell her about the poisoned cup in advance. He even does not try to prevent her from drinking:

**It is the poison'd cup; it is too late
[For Gertrude]**

(V, ii, 282)

He betrays her again when he plans to kill Hamlet without telling her. Furthermore, Polonius betrays Laertes his own son when he sends one of his servants to spy on him:

**You shall do marvelous wisely, good
Reynaldo, Before you visit him, to make
Inquire of his behavior.**

(II, ii, 3-4)

Though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are loyal to the kingdom but also betray their old friend Hamlet by spying on him. For that, he says:

**For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar,
The Tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark.
(III, iv, 224-225)**

In his turn, Hamlet betrays Ophelia by rejecting her love. This betrayal leaves her distracted and frustrated. She could not understand his strange behavior and the sudden change of feelings towards her. This leads her to suffer the pangs of despair and confusion. Hamlet's words gnaw her heart and bones:

**You should not have believ'd me
For virtue cannot so
Inoculate our old stock but we
Shall relish of it. I lov'd you not.
Get thee to a nunn'ry, why
Woulds't thou be a breeder of sinners?
(III, i, 114-121)**

In doing so, Hamlet does not betray Ophelia only, he betrays himself through denying his own love. This denial adds more pain to injuring. He goes on living in psychological making a distance between his public face that he should adopt and the private one that he should shun.

Conclusion:

Betrayal is a vicious human act resulting from negative feelings of envy, greed and lust. It is part of the human nature. In most of his plays, William Shakespeare exploits these immoral behaviours from dramatic purpose. It enables him to create dramatic scenes and reveal the complexity of the human psyche. Betrayal is seen as a threat of the Elizabethan order and a violation of the Elizabethan chain of being.

Most of the major characters in Shakespeare's great tragedies are Machiavellian villains who adopt immoral means to attain their ends. Such characters include Iago, Macbeth, Cassius, Goneril, Regan and Edmund, and Claudius. The betrayal of the other characters such as Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius through less effective yet it helps creating disorder.

The message deduced from the reading of these plays is that on public and private levels, betrayal leads to confusion and destruction.

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موضوع الخيانة دراسة في مسرحيات مختارة من شكسبير

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الملخص:

اشتهر وليم شكسبير في أغلب كتاباته بالتعمق بالمشاعر الانسانية على سبيل المثال ، الحب والموت والخيانة التي غالبا ما تتجسد في النهاية الى افعال جسديه.. لم يكن شكسبير راضيا بالتفسير البسيط وراء الافعال والمشاعر ومن ضمنها الخيانة واتسمت معالجته لتلك الامور بالواقعية التي من شأنها جعل الجمهور يفهم الطبيعة البشرية بصورة افضل . تمتاز اعماله بكونها حيوية وقريبة من الواقع ، لأنه شخص تعقيد الحياة الحقيقي الحياة وصوره متجنباً التبسيط المبالغ فيه الذي يحدد فهمنا للبشر. ويجب وضع موضوع الخيانة في أعماله في هذا السياق ، و سبر أغوار شخصياته سواء الضحايا ، أو من يخونهم ؛ ليتحسس المشاعر التي تؤدي بالناس الى خيانة بعضهم بعضا .