

## Analysis of the Image of Clown A in Hamlet

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### Abstract

The "clown A" in Hamlet is an extreme marginal character, but a closer look at the text and its presentation on the stage reveals the unique value of this character. It is possible to analyze the optimism and equality that Shakespeare gives to this small character, as well as his inspiration to Hamlet in life and time. The most significant thing is that this character fits the main theme of Hamlet's madness. From the meaning of clown A on the theater stage to make viewers laugh, we can also appreciate the role breaks the "fourth wall" between the stage and the audience, highlighting the superiority of the audience.

### Keywords

Shakespeare; Hamlet; Image; Aesthetic Value.

### 1. Introduction

The clown is a common but special character in Western theatre, and it is also high frequency content in Shakespeare's plays. In Shakespeare, the image of clown can be broken down into mostly two categories: the first category of clown does not play the main role in the play, appearing less often, mostly used to adjust the atmosphere and gag; the second type has its own status and assumes important roles in the play, such as the Touchstone in *As You Like It*, the fool in *The King Lear*, and Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Some seemingly crazy and stupid clowns are actually wise men who hold the insightful opinions. Although the Clown A tends to be marginalised in Hamlet and does not even receive its own name (only distinguished by A and B), this is not a dispensable character. He has his own personality traits and is closely related to the main line in the plot. Readers can dig profound connotations from him.

### 2. The Necessity of the Existence of Clown A

The central characters in Shakespeare's plays are often prominent figures like kings and princes, and it is conceivable that ordinary people can only be stooges, appearing as a tool to move the plot along. In Hamlet, the clown A is a highly fungible character, which is mainly manifested in different versions of Hamlet's drama interpretation, the basic setting of this character is different: in the 1990 Lin Zhaohua version of Hamlet, two male actors were chosen to play the role of the clown A and B. Bob Jones University students' version of Hamlet chose one actor and one actress to play these two parts. The 2017 Almeida Andrew Scott version of Hamlet only casted one actor as the clown. It can be seen that due to the codification of "A and B", the number and the gender of the character can be freely changed during each show.

But this role is also crucial, and the presence of Clown A dovetails with the core spirit of Hamlet, which makes it impossible to remove the character from various adaptations. The procrastination and madness shown in Hamlet's revenge process represent his dramatic action and character respectively, which are regarded as the core issues of classical dramatic theory. In addition to his identity as a "clown", "Clown A" is also Ophelia's "gravedigger" and is closely related to death. Hamlet's madness in the delay is the tragic significance of the play. Michel

Foucault mentions in *Madness and Civilization*: "Madness fascinates because it is knowledge. It is knowledge, first, because all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning. These strange fonnns are situated, from the first, in the space of the Great Secret." [1] Hamlet has been pretending to be crazy after the ghost told him the truth, trying to verify whether his uncle is his father's killer. In the process, he expresses madness in a way that transcends rationality. His language is so grotesquely but wise that even Polonius cannot help but say, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." [2] The indistinguishable wisdom and madness is the essence of Shakespeare's creation of this play. But Hamlet admits his madness before the duel with Laertes: "Give me your pardon sir, I've done you wrong; But pardon't as you are a gentleman. This presence knows, and you must needs have heard, how I am punished with a sore distraction. What I have done, that might your nature, honour and exception roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness. Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet. If Hamlet from himself be tane away, and when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it. Who does it then? His madness. If't be so, Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged, his madness is poor Hamlet's enemy." [2] Hamlet is not trying to shirk or escape responsibilities. As a humanist, he perceived human beings as the spirit of all things, a perfect and remarkable masterpiece, and should not have hypocritical and bad behaviour. And he tried to end it all by the hand of God in a duel. Hamlet is insane because he cannot explain those dark and bad facts with reason, and the contradiction makes him fall into a kind of mental imbalance, that is madness.

From this perspective, Hamlet is irrational due to great despair, and his "feigned madness" can be understood as "true madness" to this extent. " By a strange paradox, what is born from the strangest delirium was already hidden, like a secret, like an inaccessible truth, in the bowels of the earth. When man deploys the arbitrary nature of his madness, he confronts the dark necessity of the world; the animal that haunts his nightmares and his nights of privation is his own nature, which will lay bare hell's pitiless truth; the vain images of blind idiocy-such are the world's Magna Scientia; and already, in this disorder, in this mad universe, is prefigured what will be the cruelty of the finale. In such images-and this is doubtless what gives them their weight, what imposes such great coherence on their fantasy-the Renaissance has expressed what it apprehended of the threats and secrets of the world. "[1] In the midst of madness, Hamlet expresses his thinking in the wisest terms; his madness is a way of wisdom. People say he is crazy because no one can really understand Hamlet's profundity.

And in "Hamlet", madness has always been with death. In the Middle Ages, people's perception of death was the relief of returning to heaven. But the subversion of Christianity during the Renaissance left people with no way to face and bear death, they could only use parody to cover up this pain. Although death is the destiny of human beings, Hamlet still mocks Christian rationality with insanity. Clown A's identity as a gravedigger matches the main theme of the whole play. He spends his days in the company of corpses and coffins, and the skeleton he shows Hamlet is the central image of the Dance of Death. He fools around with Hamlet, deconstructing the fear of death in a half-mad, half-joking way. Foucault said: "From the discovery of that necessity which inevitably reduces man to nothing, we have shifted to the scornful contemplation of that nothing which is existence itself. Fear in the face of the absolute limit of death turns inward in a continuous irony; man disarms it in advance, making it an object of derision by giving it an everyday, tamed form, by constantly renewing it in the spectacle of life, by scattering it throughout the vices, the difficulties, and the absurdities of all men. Death's annihilation is no longer anything because it was already everything, because life itself was only futility, vain words, a squabble of cap and bells. The head that will become a skull is already empty." [1] Therefore, the clown A is associated with the main idea of the whole drama, their madness is a way to face death and dissolve the threat and fear of it. This is also an important reason why the clown A cannot be replaced.

### 3. The Characteristics of Clown A

Clown A and Clown B are the prologue characters of the fifth scene, inherited the appearance of many subsequent main protagonists. Although they only have a low status in the story, their actions and dialogues also show their standout wisdom. Act V takes place after the committing suicide of Ophelia, when sadness and hopelessness are mixed among the stage. And the crowd hurriedly exits after the queen announces Ophelia's drowning, while the depressing atmosphere cannot be dissipated for a long time, but this scene somehow comes to an abrupt end. When the characters appear again on stage, they are two dirty, silly "clowns" whose performances ease the sorrow, but their gag continues the truth of Ophelia's death in the fourth act. Therefore, the appearance of these two clowns has the effect of calming down the atmosphere and giving a sense of continuity to the rhythm of the play. From their seemingly crazy demeanor and speech, we can discover their otherworldly value

#### 3.1. The Survival Wisdom of Clown A

##### 3.1.1. Helplessness and Optimism at the Bottom

Clown A chats with Clown B on the question of whether Ophelia committed suicide or not. Clown A asks, "Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?" [2] Because suicide is a serious sin in Christianity, they were nevertheless ordered to bury Ophelia with Christian rites. Although they know exactly how Ophelia died, but still absurd to say the coroner's logic of pirates: "But if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life." [2] This is actually a very disappointed emotion: Clown A is not qualified to evaluate the decisions made by the noble class, but they do feel unjust and doubtful about it, just as Clown B says: "If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial." [2] They have no choice but to obey the aristocracy, and such unreasonable words are used to put off the civilians. People of the lower class can only go along with these ridiculous words of self-hypnosis; they even have to help the aristocratic class to make up for their absurd injustice. Therefore, in the later part, clown A uses a riddle of "The gallows-maker" to show his pride in his job. He believes that their work is inherited from Adam, and that what they have made will last forever. This passage not only mocks the absurdity of the aristocratic ruling class, but also shows the optimism and vividness of Clown A.

##### 3.1.2. Equality and Tolerance for the "Other"

Although the clown A is humble, his concept of equality is fraternal and pioneering. When Hamlet asks him for whom the tomb is dug, his answer is profound:

*HAMLET* What man dost thou dig it for?

*CLOWN* For no man sir. no

*HAMLET* What woman then?

*CLOWN* For none neither.

*HAMLET* Who is to be buried in't?

*CLOWN* One that was a woman sir, but rest her soul she's dead. [2]

Clown A believes that when the soul is at rest, there is only peace, no gender, no discrimination, no self or other, no madness or civilization. Ophelia is almost an aphasic when she is alive, existing as the instrument and property of the three males who surround her, constantly being admonished, controlled and used. She is not allowed to pursue her love, and everything she can do is placed under the discourse of male power. It is not until the double blow of the loss of her father and her lover that she breaks her silence through the mouth of madness. However, while her madness may seem to give her back her voice, the image of the mad person is one that is excluded from sanity. The crazy person's words are meaningless, so the mad Ophelia is rejected

to another marginal zone. She lived a miserable life, as a female in relation to a male as the Other, and as insanity in relation to reason as the Other, too. It is only after death, in the mouth of Clown A, that her soul is truly treated as normal and equal.

After the crowd took the stage, Hamlet later also jumped off the tomb in the argument. This act disintegrated the identity class difference between noble and commoner, allowing him to shed his crown from his high position. So that both madness and sanity also tend to the same. Hamlet gave up his status as a prince in that moment and was on par with the clown. At the same time, he also put on the mask of a clown, using madness as a cover for his true self, to say those truths and emotions that normally have no way to say. This is also his rebellion against those hypocritical aristocrats.

### **3.1.3. Warning for Hamlet: Time and Death**

The clown A also assumes the role of revelation to Hamlet, deepening his sense and understanding of life and time. When clown A digs up the skull of the lord Yorick, Hamlet truly sighs about the impermanence of life: "Let me see. Alas poor Yorick! I knew him Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy, he hath borne me on his back a thousand times - and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning?" [2] No matter how unbeatable a person is in life; he will be reduced to dust after death. Buried in the ground emitting the same stench as the most ordinary people. Clown A and B's job is clearly to dig graves, clown A engaged in this occupation even have thirty years. Why are they not directly referred to as "Gravediggers A and B", but are instead codenamed "Clowns A or B"? The reason for this, in addition to their use of many puns and witticisms to lighten the atmosphere, an important role is to make the plot of digging up the skull of the Yorick become more dramatic: one clown digs up the skull of another clown and gives it to Hamlet. Clown A uses the cruelty of death educate him directly about the equality of all beings in the face of time. There is more of a sense of theatricality.

## **3.2. The Comic Effect of Breaking the "Fourth Wall"**

Breaking the "fourth wall" comes from Brecht's theoretical theory of "dissociation", where the "fourth wall" is the invisible barrier between the audience and the actors. Due to the existence of the "fourth wall", actors on stage can immerse themselves in their performance and make their interpretation more realistic. The breaking of the "fourth wall" allows the actors to communicate directly with the audience and makes the audience aware that they are watching the performance, allowing them to reflect on the content of the play.

The role of the clown is common in Shakespeare, and is divided into three main categories: fools, jesters and clowns. The term "fool" often refers to a person who is mentally deficient due to a physical disease, or who is unable to function in society due to a lack of knowledge. Education and knowledge are the symbols of the upper class in a hierarchical society, and country people are often regarded as fools due to the lack of these rituals, thus are discriminatorily excluded from the upper crust. The other type of "jester" image is more inclined to be the court keep for amusement, they have a slightly higher status, and try their best to flatter and cater to their masters.

However, the clown in Act V of Hamlet belongs to the third category of "clown", which is "a kind of clown image on the theatrical stage, highlighting the pantomime, comic farce performance, mostly wearing exaggerated uneven countryman costumes, which is not directly related to classical drama, but is a stage behavior characteristic." [3] In my opinion, Clown A bridges the gap between the stage and the audience. In a way, this breaks the fourth wall between the actor and the audience, as Clown A has his own occupation in the play, the gravedigger, and his identity as a "clown" is for the audience. Once the audience realizes that the actor's performance

is all for their amusement, they will quickly detach themselves from the world of the play and realize that they are watching a drama. Although the actors did not speak directly to the viewers, certain lines had a clear point of laughter to the audience. For example, Clown A says to Hamlet, "There (England) the men are as mad as he." [2] When the performance was underway, there were several theatrical performances offstage audience were emitting laughter. But this is not a funny point for Hamlet, so these words are deliberately formed for the spectators. The clown A is the audience's clown, and those "fools" and "jesters" are belong to the play. In Act II, Scene II of Hamlet, it is also written, "the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle." [2] The great writers brought about the era of the literary theatre. It is to prevent the audience from being distracted by phenomenal bodies, so that the actor's function "would be limited to communicating to the audience the meanings expressed by the poets in their texts." [4] The laughter brought by the clown usually consists of two senses: firstly, comic laughter. The clown makes the audience laugh by selling stupidity and unconscious flattery. This kind of laughter strengthens the comic effect of the drama. The second is sarcasm, the clown's language expression is not meaningless, rather it shows the character's attitude and feelings towards the events of the time. The critical perspective and satirical laughter can lead the audience to reflect deeply. Not only does Clown A use riddles and puns to give the audience (especially native English speakers) a stronger comedic effect, those perspectives, clearly formed for the audience, highlight the audience's superiority and promote reflection on the play.

#### 4. Conclusion

The "clown" is a person who lives in a mask, and "A" embodies his multiplicities. The main theme of "Hamlet" is the coexistence of madness and death. As a clown, Clown A is insane, and as a gravedigger, he is often in the company of death. Hamlet's use of madness to mock and deconstruct death has a high degree of homogeneity with the existence of the clown armor. "Buffons struggle with the aristocratic stratum. These struggles form the dramatic conflicts in polyphonic structures." In addition, the "laughing point" formed by Clown A for the audience breaks the "fourth wall" between the stage and the audience to a certain extent, reflecting the superiority of the audience. Therefore, this small role has its own unique charm and cannot be replaced as the prologue character of Act V.

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