

Questions and Answers on Hamlet

1. Do you agree that Hamlet is «The Mona Lisa» of literature? Why?

1. It was written a lot about the mystery of *Hamlet*. According to the poet and critic Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Hamlet* is “The Mona Lisa” of literature. Due to the fact that *Hamlet* seemed mysterious, he was considered a great work of art. None of Shakespeare's work is so puzzling and disturbing as this play. The image of Hamlet has always concealed a special appeal for critics; it still causes many commentaries, as it is one of the few literary characters that live outside the text and outside the theater. A work of art cannot be interpreted as such, as there is nothing to explain; it can only be subjected to critical evaluation in accordance with certain criteria. I agree with Eliot that Hamlet can rightfully be called «The Mona Lisa» of literature, because his name is meaningful even to those who have never read Shakespeare. At this point, this work of art is similar to the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci. Even before looking at this painting, everyone knows that she is smiling. Mona Lisa Smile seems as if detached from the portrait; it contains not only what Leonardo has expressed in it but also all what is written and said about this smile, as too many scientists, poets, and artists have tried to unravel the mystery of this smile. Not only Mona Lisa is smiling to people now but also those, who wanted to investigate and explain that smile, and who imitated it. The same has happened with *Hamlet*, because not only the independent life of this play in literature and culture but also its scale is between the readers and the text.



2. What would be your literary lens if you were to write on Hamlet?

2. If I wrote the criticism on *Hamlet*, I would understand the nature of the tragic protagonist primarily as a psychological portrait. Shakespeare puts Hamlet in very difficult circumstances: the endless work of mind that encourages to action is replaced by the endless tricks to get away from this action, and then again, the incessant pangs of conscience for being careless. This self-flagellation takes all the energy of his soul. Hamlet appears before the readers as a thinker, philosopher, and idealist. As for me, the study of Hamlet should be based on the psychological criticism, as the character of Hamlet is one of the most interesting subjects of psychological study. The full interpretation of the play is impossible if the researcher does not try to understand the tiniest psychological motives that guide all the characters, from the protagonist to the secondary ones. According to Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytical approach, the strange behavior of Hamlet can be explained by the influence of Oedipus complex. The prince of Denmark also experienced a subconscious attraction to his mother and the desire to eliminate his father. In Claudius, who poisoned his father and married his mother, he also saw the reflection of his own secret desires, so the internal resistance of his mission to avenge the assassination appears. The interpretation of the image of Hamlet as a potential parricide openly contradicts with the text of the tragedy, in which the hero repeatedly speaks of his love to his father. It turns out that the better Hamlet speaks of his father, the more he hates him, which is called the ambivalent feelings.



3. What is Eliot saying about criticism in general? That is, what does Eliot argue critics like Coleridge and Goethe have missed?

3. Elliot argues that the idea of the criticism as a self-contained area of creative activity seems absurd. Few critics have admitted that the main question in *Hamlet* is the play itself, while the personality of protagonist is the secondary question. *Hamlet* has always been an interesting field of investigation to the most dangerous type of critics, who by nature have a creative mind, but due to the lack of creative power manifest themselves not in their works but in criticism. Accordingly, Goethe and Coleridge tried to find in Hamlet an indirect expression of their own identity as the artists. None of these writers seemed to remember that their first duty was to understand *Hamlet* as a work of art. According to Eliot, the criticism of *Hamlet* in the works of Goethe and Coleridge is improper, and he calls it a vicissitude. For example, Coleridge's Hamlet is an impartial investigation into the extent, which allows to reach then-known facts, or an attempt to present himself in a more attractive way. The failure of critics to interpret *Hamlet* can be explained by the fact that they ignore the obvious: *Hamlet* consists of the efforts of several playwrights, who processed the works of their predecessors in their own way. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would appear before the readers and critics in a very different light if they ceased to treat its plot as exclusively Shakespeare's plan. Hamlet should rather be seen as the imposition of a much rougher basis, which can be felt even in the final version.



4. Identify at least one other form of criticism, besides formalism, that Eliot alludes to in his essay. What does he say about Hamlet or Shakespeare, with this form of criticism?

4. In Eliot's essay, two partly opposing trends are incorporated: on the one hand, there is the desire for isolation of the product from the context of its writing, and on the other hand, historicism can be seen. Both of these trends were taken over by New Criticism, which conceptualized and reinterpreted the concept of "objective correlative". The idea of the autonomous status of literary work in relation to the writer was extremely productive: it allowed the new critics to work out a complex formalism, which radically changed the English literature, that primarily relied mainly on historical and biographical methods. Eliot theoretically justified formalism in literary criticism. One of his main principles was the rejection of considering the work of art in the context of the writer's personality and his biography. While being a representative of New Criticism, Eliot also judged *Hamlet* from the historical context of the play. Eliot claimed that Hamlet is just a remake of Thomas Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy*. Eliot refers to Robertson's remark that Shakespeare's Hamlet is the reworking of an earlier Kyd's play, because there are some strange scenes, which are written not in the style of Shakespeare. The main theme of Thomas Kyd's play is just a revenge; and the fact that Hamlet hesitates with it is explained by the difficulty to kill the monarch, surrounded by the guards. So Hamlet's madness is added by Shakespeare with an aim to avoid suspicion. Eliot thinks that the play is Shakespeare's artistic failure, as there is no purity of artistic decoration, and his thought is sometimes unclear. Thus, it can be concluded that



Eliot's criticism has gone deeper than formalism or New Criticism, and the historical approach to the analysis of literary work is important for him. Eliot's thoughts and observations still have not lost their relevance and value.

