*Hamlet*: The “To be or not to be” soliloquy

Essentially, Hamlet wonders whether it is better to live or not. He also debates with himself whether patient endurance of wrong and trouble is better and more honourable than courageous opposition to it. He is probably wondering: should he kill himself and find peace, or fight on in hopelessly doomed and corrupted Denmark? Should he endure the wrongs of the murderous Claudius and his adulterous (as he sees it) mother, or should he fight them, hurt them, make them pay? He speaks of the peacefulness of death: how it is like a sleep, a final rest we could ardently wish for. However, he says the thought of something after death makes us hesitate. Is there an afterlife? If so, may it not contain a hell awaiting those who broke God’s law and took their own life? He concludes that we all put up with the many evils, sorrows and pains of this world because we would rather bear the troubles we have then rush to others we don’t know about, but which might nonetheless be awaiting us in death, the undiscovered country. In fact, thinking straitjackets us all, even in great, important enterprises, as we ponder on what could be. Consciousness - the working of our thinking, imagining, wondering brains - makes cowards of us all.

The content of this famous speech is important for a number of reasons.

First of all, it develops important themes of the play. The first is “thought paralyzes action”. Hamlet is given to inaction: overthinking and the delay it causes. He deflects and postpones. This is part of his tragedy. The second is “death, mortality and the human condition”. We all live unsatisfied, we all suffer, we all die. Death is both boon and bane.

Also, this speech reveals important things about Hamlet’s character and psychology. He is a thinker, a schooled intellectual, with a philosophical, inquiring mind. He is also a procrastinator. He is conflicted: opposite feelings and inclinations push and pull him. He is depressed: confused and spiralling in the turmoil his life has become. In fact, he’s semi-suicidal. Note how this speech assumes that life is burden and trouble, full of problems. He is hyperbolic: from the pain of his life he makes claims about the pains of life in general. Does he feel lost, pointless and futile in the world now that Claudius’ sin has broken the proper order of nature, the sane and sensible way of things? Lastly, he is a poet, if one of dark vision, speaking with eloquence of futility and paralysis.

The style of this speech is equally important.

Literary and rhetorical devices are used here to support the content. For example, the long sentence in parallel structure from lines 70-76, with so many subordinate clauses piled on top of one another, each describing one kind of troublesome pain in life, reinforces the idea that life’s calamity is “long” (69) and that life troubles are many. Think of one bag after another being piled onto a donkey’s aching back: that’s what the clauses are like in this long sentence. Next, the jumbled, mixed metaphors in lines (58-59) - grammatically speaking, you are not allowed to compare life’s troubles and misfortunes to a sea and to slings and arrows in the same sentence – aptly express Hamlet’s sense of futility, turmoil and dislocation. Also, this speech about hesitation has a number of pauses in it, signalled by the dash after “die” (60), the fitting dash after “pause” (68), the dash after “dream” (65) and the colon after “rub” (65), which means catch or snag. The repetition of to die, to sleep could signal wishing (he’s lingering over those thoughts), but also pause-filled pondering. There are two long questions central to this speech which begins with the notion of “the question”. And isn’t it elegant that the long sentence of parallel structures comes to a point, finally, on the word for knife?