Hamlet’s Psychological State:

*Analysis Through the Theories of Maslow*

Eric Zuniga Manzo

Washington Union High School
Abstract

Throughout *The Tragedy of Hamlet, King of Denmark*, written by William Shakespeare the main character Hamlet has various struggles through the kingdom which affect his mental state. For years physiologists have tried to analyze Hamlet's mental state to determine whether or not he is mentally sane. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is just one of the examples of theories used to diagnose Hamlet. Through this interpretation it can be seen that Hamlet’s mental state is a cause of the insufficiencies in many of our “needs” as determined by Maslow. However, the theory of Maslow does fall short of clearly being a concrete mold and explanation for the actions that Hamlet chooses to take. Many times experiences can also play a part in once motivations for action thus resulting in some of Hamlet’s questionable decisions.
Hamlet's Psychological State

Analysis Through Theories of Maslow

Throughout *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, written by William Shakespeare, we see the character of Hamlet truly evolve into many states of mental well being. This is all triggered because of him discovering the death of his father King Hamlet who he later finds out was killed by his uncle and current King Claudius. Throughout the play, Hamlet attempts to gain revenge for his father and this leads to the problems. His death is clearly tragic for Hamlet but as he sees his mother progress with her life so easily it creates a poor relationship between him and his mother. To him she does not care and feels betrayed because instead of leaving room for Hamlet to take over the crown left open after his father's death, Gertrude his mother chooses to marry him instead. For years those in the the science community especially in the realm of psychology have tried to understand the problems that hamlet faced and have tried to diagnose his mental state in various ways. One example of the metrics and ideas used to “diagnose” Hamlet are is the theory of Maslow with his Hierarchy of Needs. This theory attempts to diagnose Hamlet by describing how certain situations and gaps in his brain create the possibility of mental instability. From these interpretations it can be determined that Hamlet in fact is not necessarily insane, rather he has suffered in his development and family aspects of his mental health that have created a problem to his overall psyche.

Analysis

Firstly, there is the ideas American psychologist Abraham Maslow. In his studies, Maslow developed what in his words in known as the Hierarchy of Needs. The theory was formed out of Maslow's want to understand what drives human motivation. That is, what is
making us make our life choices? For this reason he set up this hierarchy of needs. Each need must be filled before one can continue on to the next phase of what motivate a person's life. As explained by english educator Ms. Ashley Butler, Maslow believes that “...for a person to truly learn, they must first have the basic needs fulfilled”. Maslow set the needs as deficiency and growth needs (About, 2012). This theory then separates a human's physiological needs into 5 levels almost always depicted as a Pyramid. From there they are divided into tiers of what needs are being met by the specific characteristic. The first tier of what needs to be met are what are know as basic needs which includes physiological needs and safety needs. Physiological needs are the most primal needs that need to be met which are food, water, warmth, and rest (Maslow, 2016). Next there are what are known as safety needs which include safety and security in every sense of the word. That may be interpreted as in a family, job security, or whatever needs to be protected in an individual's life (Maslow, 2016). The next tier would be your psychological needs, which would include belongingness and love needs followed by esteem needs. Belongingness and love needs refer to the building and development of intimate relationships and friendships (About, 2012). Esteem needs can be interpreted as a person’s prestige and feeling of accomplishment (About, 2012). The final stage and tier is that of self fulfilment needs which includes self actualization. This is would be the apex of our needs of motivation that leads are life and includes truly achieving one’s full potential. Many, however, warn that this is not a final stage and the peak, rather one can life their life in this stage yet progressing within it leading to increased fulfilment in one’s life. Maslow does say that the pyramid is not one directional and can in fact fluctuate and that is what is evident through Hamlet’s mental state. His focus fluctuates depending on the need that isn’t currently being met.
Throughout the play we see pieces of the Hierarchy of Needs that are missing which is what influences some of his actions or lack thereof. For example one of the most apparent and obvious missing pieces of his hierarchy of needs is the need for safety. We know that Hamlet’s father has died and that seems to be the cause for his loss of safety, that being in the family aspect. This is greatly heightened by the fact that Hamlet discovers through the revelations of the ghost that his father’s killer may very well be his uncle, a description he later verified as true. This lack of safety leads Hamlet to fear greatly for himself he doesn't feel safe because the King is a murderer. The next stage that seems to be out of balance would be that of his belongingness and love needs. Many can interpret it as his loss of love for Ophelia as what's causing this unmet need but instead it truly is that of his and his mother's relationship (Crash Course, 2014). The relationship that he and his mother have as a result of his father's absence is clearly a troubled one. There’s this example from the first act that describes his belief in the poor relationship pretty well. Hamlet: A little month, or ere those shoes were old/With which she followed my poor father's body,/Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she/(O, God, a beast, that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourned longer!),/married with my/ uncle,/My father's brother, but no more like my father/Than I to Hercules. (Act I Scene ii, 151-158). As seen here in Hamlet's eyes, his mother really betrayed him and his family by marrying his and his father's uncle. She did not even seem to care that his father dies as she quickly remarried. This broke the relationship because as Hamlet sees it his mother did not care very much for his father as she quickly remarried and for Hamlet because if she hadn’t remarried the throne would be rightfully Hamlet's. Also, it is great to notice how Hamlet is not speaking in complete sentences which further shows his heightened emotions of feeling let down by his mother. Finally, the last
missing piece of his needs seems to be the feeling of accomplishment. Hamlet has no sense of prestige or accomplishment for two reasons. Firstly, his throne was taken away from him. And secondly and most importantly, because after his father's death, he is then tasked with avenging the death of his father. GHOST: Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder./HAMLET: Murder?/GHOST: Murder most foul, as in the best it is,/But this most foul, strange, and unnatural./ HAMLET: Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love,/May sweep to my revenge./Ghost: ...The serpent that did sting thy father's life/Hamlet: O, my prophetic soul! My uncle! (Act I, Scene iii, 31-48). Hamlet is eager to get revenge his father's death but when his father reveals it was his uncle who “did sting thee” Hamlet is thrown back. Clearly, Hamlet is affected by this because the entire development of the play is Hamlet struggling through how to avenge his father's death even if he should do it and wondering if it's truly what he is meant to do. He focuses on this so much that the rest of his needs seem also seem to suffer being left on the back door.

Critical

Although this theory seems to answer the questions of Hamlet’s disorganized self and sense of motivations at different points throughout the play it is not the perfect mold to describe all of the actions taken by Maslow. Hamlet is a very complicated character and his persona can be interpreted in many different ways. The most evident lack of the theory of Maslow is that the theory fails to recognize other needs of motivation to sticking to a specific need. While Maslow states that an unmet need is what causes someone to be stuck on a certain stage and its resulting actions it can also be a result of past experiences as Piaget’s constructivism theory states. If we take Hamlet’s character and analyze him as constructivism does with children, it is fair to assume
Hamlet’s Psychological State

that past experiences dictate his fixation on his personal esteem and love needs for example. A perfect example of Hamlet evaluating his life and making decisions based on what going on around him can be found in Act 1. Hamlet: O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God, How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world! (Act I Scene ii, 133-138). He sees that his father is dead at the hands of his mother and realizes that his mother remarried so fast all of which makes him question his existence. It is him almost acting out like a child because in his life of royalty he is quite experiencing much pain and anguish. This is in turn seen in his acting out, not from an unfulfilled need but rather as a result of his past experiences with his family situation.

In respect to his love need Hamlet is fixed on needing to fix his relationship with his mom. It is evident that he knows that do regain that relationship with his mother Claudius must die as his father did. This conclusion does not simply arrive because of his motivation at the time, rather it comes from his experience in Claudius’ and Gertrude's relationship in which Claudius killed to be able to enjoy a relationship with Gertrude. Also, although we see Hamlets esteem being broken and in need of repair because of not receiving the thrown he rightfully deserves as King, Hamlet technically still has his needs met as he is still part of royalty. He enjoys all of the same pleasures and benefits thus technically meeting his need for prestige and recognition yet we know that Hamlet still has this need to be met because of circumstances with his father and his need to avenge his death. Additionally, although it can be said that he loses a sense of safety because he knows that Claudius has set out for him to be killed, that does not happen until further into the play. If we were to analyse it as Maslow states than his need to fix
his physiological needs should not have occurred as they did until Hamlet was sure that he was going to die because that’s how the stages build off of each other.

Overall Hamlet’s mental state throughout the play can be interpreted in one way as through the Hierarchy of Needs that is established by Abraham Maslow. The suggestion that a person's actions are a result of the motivation they have to meet certain basic and psychological needs fits the description of Hamlet. His needs of love, safety, and sense of prestige for the crown are all lacking and are very evident as driving factors in his actions throughout the novel. However, we also see that this theory is flawed as the experiences he lived through with his family and friends after his father was killed we also a major part of the decisions he made for his own progression through life.
Works Cited


