Trauma Theory

In the most general sense, trauma theory examines the ways in which traumatic occurrences are processed by and through literary texts. Trauma theory attempts to understand the different ways by which traumatic occurrences are demonstrated, processed, exposed, and repressed throughout a variety of literary and historical texts. Trauma theorists are interested not only in how various writers might attempt to negotiate and resolve their own personal traumas through their writings, but also the ways in which fictional characters attempt to do so, as well as the ways in which literary texts serve to record and pronounce cultural traumas.

The term “trauma” refers to the sudden intrusion of new and unexpected knowledge into someone’s psyche, usually due to a sudden confrontation with violence or death. This traumatic event leaves the survivor emotionally and intellectually divided between what he or she felt or believed in before the event and what he or she now knows or believes in, in turn causing a psychic separation in identity and consciousness, which often leaves the survivor confused, frightened, and disturbed. A traumatic event is often an event which leads one in to an immediate confrontation with the reality or possibility of death, a confrontation which leads to a new and sudden awareness of one’s mortality and vulnerability, something which serves to deeply upset one’s psychic state.

Trauma theorists have shown a particular interest in acts of “testimony” in literary and historical texts. Testimony refers to the attempt by a survivor of a traumatic event to attempt to place him or herself on record, to give voice and meaning (and, by effect, understanding) to the traumatic event which he or she struggles to reconcile him or herself to. Testimony—the assertion and attempted reconciliation of the traumatic event—offers a way for a traumatic event to be ordered, understood, and resolved. Testimony depends upon the testifying subject having a “witness” who will listen, view, or read the testimony; process it; and engage the testifying subject in some discussion or examination of the traumatic event.

**Application in Shakespeare’s Hamlet**

*Hamlet* is a literary text that is perfectly applicable to a trauma theory interpretation. Hamlet himself, in fact, seems to possess and downright embody a post-traumatic psychology. A psychoanalytic/trauma theory focused interpretation of *Hamlet* might center on Hamlet’s psychology and argue that he, in many respects, stands as the perfect example of someone in possession of a traumatized psyche. Hamlet, throughout the play, shows signs of what is today known as “post-traumatic stress” (restlessness, depression, manic episodes, hallucinations, moodiness, emotional outbursts, intellectual and spiritual doubt, etc.) as a result of his father’s sudden death,
his mother’s abrupt remarriage to his uncle, and his visitation from his father’s dead spirit. Hamlet not only exhibits signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress but attempts to reconcile and overcome his trauma(s) by offering a testimony to his friends, enemies, and audience as to the nature of his trauma. This particular theoretical approach serves to offer a deeper understanding not only of Hamlet’s psychological motivations but also Shakespeare’s understanding of human psychology. A trauma theorist might also take an interest in the character of Ophelia, and argue that she also suffers from post-traumatic stress, but unlike Hamlet is unable due to her social and cultural position as a woman to locate someone who can bear witness to her own post-traumatic testimony and allow her to begin to reconcile herself to her new traumatic awareness.

Study Questions:

1. What is the critical purpose and goal of trauma theory?
2. What is the purpose of testimony according to trauma theorists?