

# “‘The drops which fell from Shakespear’s pen’: Hamlet in Contemporary Fiction”

By Danielle Sorrells, English 300

In his article “‘The drops which fell from Shakespear’s Pen’: *Hamlet* in Contemporary Fiction,” Patrick Gill finds William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to be an ever-evolving text, constantly serving a purpose for contemporary writers and readers as they explore its characters and experiences in regards to their own. Citing three different authors and their works related to *Hamlet*, Gill offers insight into the multiple iterations, adaptations, and meanings of Shakespeare’s play, concluding that this plurality is a thing of tradition that should be respected, if not rejoiced.

Gill refers to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a “pre-text,” which is to say one text that precedes and leads to another (259). There are two distinct groups to which Gill is alluding in this classification of Shakespeare’s play: those who fundamentally agree with Shakespearean values and those who fundamentally disagree. He develops this thought further by exploring authors like John Updike, author of the novel *Gertrude and Claudius* (2001), who challenge Shakespeare through shifts in perspective in their retellings of and literary responses to *Hamlet*. He explains that this shift in perspective changes the subjectivity of *Hamlet*, thus altering the reader’s sympathy for one character (in Updike’s case Hamlet) to another (for Updike, Gertrude). In making his point, Gill asserts that for this group of readers and writers, Shakespeare is no longer the point of centrality in any understanding of literary and/or cultural values. Instead Shakespeare is looked to as a precursor of thought. The themes explored in his plays influence the themes explored in the next generation’s work (and so on and so forth). This augmentation of *Hamlet* is what Gill is referring to when he finds the play to be an ever-evolving work of literature.

The other group Gill alludes to—the ones who agree with Shakespearean values—are represented by Graham Swift in *Ever After* (1993) and Ian McEwan in *Amsterdam* (1998). Gill explores their works and their relationship to *Hamlet*, concluding that their agreement is not a product of naïveté (i.e.

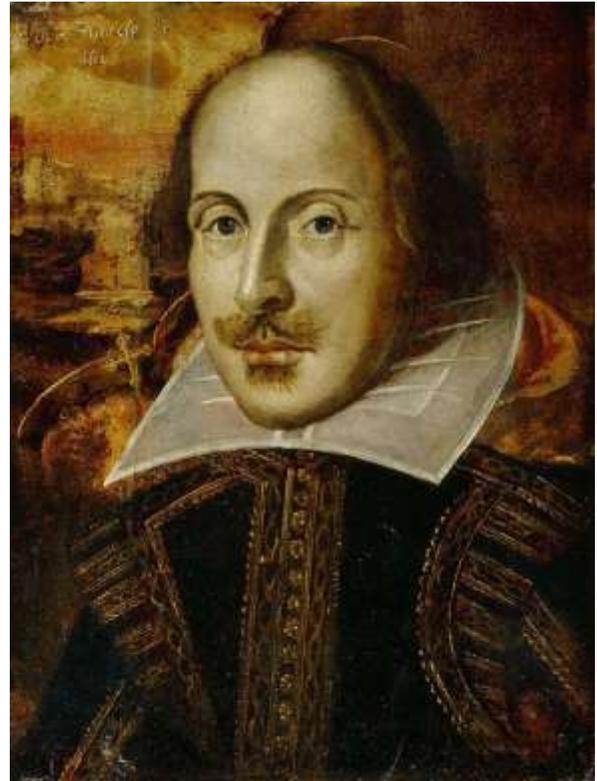


Figure 2 The Flower portrait of William Shakespeare, oil on canvas, c. 1820-1840, Royal Shakespeare Company. Image available at [Wikimedia Commons](#).

they do not agree with Shakespeare because they cannot form thoughts outside of his), but rather of a self-serving purpose. It serves their purpose and their novels’ purposes to agree with Shakespeare, his ideals, his blueprint. There is but one subjective perspective and through this perspective, the reader can experience the characters’ complex actions.

Gill goes on to assert that the novelistic platform on which so many writers stand today serves as a more introspective and liberating medium than the dramatic genre of Shakespeare’s day. The novel allows more freedom for the writer to rewrite or revise Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and offers the reader a more in depth and detailed perspective of the play. It is a genre of “open discourse where everyone can have their say” (Gill 265). This generic extension of

the play is another example of Gill's argument that *Hamlet* is an ever-evolving work of literature.

In his conclusion, Gill makes no compelling claim. He only points out that *Hamlet* is more than a canonical piece of literature. It possesses life. It gives life. The play creates its own history, one that changes the tapestry of the play itself into something much more grandiose and poignant. If we as readers and students are to learn anything from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is that the play has given us just as much voice as the actors themselves.

#### Works Cited

- Gill, Patrick. "The Drops Which Fell from Shakespear's Pen': *Hamlet* in Contemporary Fiction." *Revista Alicante Journal of English Studies* 25 (2012): 257-68. Print.