Finding Peace

The iconic play of *Hamlet* is characteristically riddled with obstacles that create a disturbance of mind for the title’s namesake. Gloria Naylor uses this characteristic in her book *Mama Day* to not only further the plot, but does as Shakespeare did in using this device to convey higher themes. One of these higher themes is the establishment of true peace and what that constitutes. The characters of George and Hamlet find peace through overcoming the obstacles gender bias, reconciling the past and the present, and escaping from a world they cannot live in.

Both Hamlet and George find peace through overcoming gender bias they had held in the past. This bias manifests itself in Hamlet’s treatment of Gertrude and Ophelia. In Act 1 Scene 2, it is quickly seen that Hamlet holds a grudge against his mother and associates it with gender in the line: “frailty, thy name is woman” (146). The monologue in which this line is found conveys Hamlet’s feelings about his mother marrying Claudius, and not about Claudius marrying his mother. Gertrude does hold some blame for not being as faithful to the late Hamlet; yet, Hamlet mistakenly assumes it is almost wholly hers when Claudius is the one who has committed the greater amount of evil between the two.

Hamlet overcomes this gender bias he associates with his mother when he chooses to avenge her death, not only his father’s, when he kills Claudius. As soon as Hamlet hears Laertes’s cry, “They mother’s poisoned./The King, the King’s to blame,” he is able to go through with bringing justice to Claudius (5.2.264). It is true that Hamlet had to overcome many moral and emotional obstacles in the play in order to be more prepared to destroy Claudius, but it is poignant that the moment that propels him forward to absolute action is when he forgives his mother and decides to avenge her, along with his father. Hamlet puts his mother on the same
plane as his father by avenging their deaths as one; equality was finally reached, leading to Hamlet having peace by letting go of the grudges he held based on gender when he dies. Hamlet was able to finally take this step towards equality because of the change of heart he experiences when he leaps into Ophelia’s grave, and received with the sole understanding of Gertrude.

After Hamlet recognizes and publicly admits his feelings for Ophelia, he is able to make up his mind to kill Claudius. Before Hamlet developed gender bias when Gertrude married Claudius, his attitude towards women seemed quite chivalrous. Ophelia laments this change; she had once “sucked the honey of his music vows,/Now see that noble and most sovereign reason/Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh” (3.1.155). Hamlet had once harbored warm feelings for Ophelia. His change of heart is charged with such bitterness and hatred because Hamlet once regarded the women in his life with great respect. This change of heart that occurs in the scene where Hamlet jumps in Ophelia’s grave is eased through Gertrude being Hamlet’s lone supporter when he is grieving for Ophelia. The others are baffled by Hamlet and tell him to cease, but Gertrude tries to understand him by asking, “O my son, what theme” (5.2.253). A few lines down, Gertrude, again, acts as Hamlet’s only advocate present when telling Laertes to “For the love of God, forbear him” while the others choose to pass judgement on him (5.2.258).

Gertrude recognizes the grief Hamlet has for Ophelia’s loss, while Hamlet recognizes the incorrectness of his actions towards Ophelia, that is the main factor in the change he undergoes in this scene. Ophelia’s life was controlled by men: She obeyed Polonius and Laertes, following “the traditions of masculine authority in the family”, despite the feelings she still held for Hamlet; Polonius’s death by Hamlet’s hand drove her mad, which then led to her suicide. Benjamin Newman says on the subject (McDonald, 263):
Hamlet has turned away from Ophelia, but not out of unkindness. In despair with the world and with the mankind that inhabits it, he urges her to escape from it, in effect, to bring existence to an end. Her madness and suicide have a similar symbolic significance, the consequence of what has been endured, a culmination that bears the same finality as the one Hamlet had pondered for himself in ‘To be or not to be.’ (24)

Ophelia had been caged in by men and their decisions, leaving her no way of escape this world except through the liberation of understanding or death. As she did not receive understanding from the source she thought would give it to her most in the form of Hamlet, she could only escape through taking her own life. Hamlet realizes the tragic consequences his actions and influence, as well as the actions of other men, had on Ophelia when Hamlet sees her body: “What is he whose grief/Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow/Conjures the wand’ring stars and makes them stand/Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,/Hamlet the Dane” (5.2.238). As one of the most eloquent lines in the play, Hamlet’s grief is highlighted against all others in the scene, even that of her brother Laertes. Hamlet describes the planets stopping to listen to his sorrowful rhetoric because his is world and his perceptions of the universe have completely stopped in their usual orderly orbit in that moment. This complete disillusionment is more poignant with the death of Ophelia than the death of the late Hamlet because Hamlet realizes how wrong he was and has to take responsibility for his actions towards Ophelia.

He knows that he did not treat Ophelia as she ought to have been treated in the anger of his prejudice. Hamlet ironically calls himself “Hamlet the Dane” in juxtaposition to the tragic situation he is in. It seems to be a confession that he does not think himself worthy of being king because of the mistakes he made towards Ophelia. He recognizes the wrongs other men have
committed against her when telling Laertes, “Forty thousand brothers/Could not, with all their quantity of love,/Make up my sum” (5.2.254). Hamlet is not only saying that he has loved, and loves, Ophelia more than her brother, but that she was not loved in the way that she deserved in her lifetime. He realizes that he didn’t understand her in time to give her the freedom she so desperately sought for beforehand. It was too late for Ophelia to gain peace, but Hamlet could find peace by finally seeing women as the equals they really are.

George, in *Mama Day*, also had to find peace through seeing women as they really are, not as something to control. George also had to overcome his negative perceptions of his mother. Although he did not know the entire story, he assumed his “mother was a whore” (Naylor, 130). This, along with his heart condition, led him to exercise extreme control over the aspects of his life that were in his power, since he couldn’t change his or his mother’s past. This bled over into his relationship with Cocoa, but found that control was the element that wouldn’t allow her and her family to have peace. When he had to confront the feminine nature of Willow Springs, he first felt liberated by its enticingly new atmosphere, until he had to relinquish complete control over Cocoa. The scene in the chicken coop represents George’s inability to do this of his own free will. Virginia Fowler explains this scene with potent clarity:

George's masculine inability to enter the different reality he finds in Willow Springs prevents him from being able to live once he has "crossed over" the road that feels "like water." Only as a ghost can George and the secular, scientific, white, male world he represents become a part of Naylor's spiritual, natural, female island. Perhaps Juhasz is correct in suggesting that he is better dead because, "as a ghost, George has shed the encumbrances of his masculinity. Now he can stay on in Willow Springs and in the life of its next mother.” (97)
The watery end that his mother, Cocoa’s grandmother, and Ophelia in Hamlet met, hauntingly compound in this scene when George “‘crossed over’ the road that feels ‘like water.’” George is having to confront not only his own gender biases, but those of men that have gone before him by walking in the shoes of the women they refused to let go of willingly. Represented in the hens that attack George, he is faced with the fact that he has to let go of Cocoa, but he also has to forgive the other women for finding independence in the ways that they could for himself to understand Cocoa, but also for the men in the past that couldn’t give the women they loved the peace they so desperately sought.

George not being able to forgive those women only left him the option of relinquishing Cocoa unwillingly for her to finally find peace. Cocoa’s physical insecurities, which manifest her descent from the “ancient mother,” as Mama Day says, demonstrates Cocoa’s inability to find peace within herself and her heritage (Naylor, 40). She hid this part of herself from George and is having to try and merge her two selves together, but can’t do so without George allowing it because he is a part of her life now. They were unable to overcome the past together because of George’s refusal to see beyond his own life with Cocoa. George’s influence wouldn’t allow her to embrace the past, as seen in the chicken coop. “She done bound up more than her flesh with” George, and as long as that was the case, Cocoa’s fate was inextricably linked to George forgiving the women and events of the past (Naylor, 294).

Hamlet and George overcome their gender bias by reconciling their past with the present in order to create a peaceful future. This reconciliation of the past and present provide another route to the peace they achieve at the end for themselves and for others. They both act in proxy for those who had gone before them. George acts in the place of the men in the Day line, while Hamlet acts in the place of Hamlet senior because they inherited their problems from these
forebears. They both do not seem to be able to come to terms with the injustice of this, as Hamlet points out, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right,” until they make peace with the past for others around them, as well as for themselves (1.5.189).

Hamlet most obviously makes peace with the past by him finally killing Claudius who “is justly served” as Laertes accurately puts it, in the name of his murdered father (5.2.269), but there are other moments in this last scene that Hamlet makes sure to address past issues, bringing him further peace until he receives final peace in death. Firstly, Hamlet asks for Laertes’ forgiveness for the death of Polonius and Ophelia. As a prince and higher-ranking individual, Hamlet could essentially not ask the pardon of Laertes for his actions. Elizabethans belief in The Great Chain of Being is a support for his rash action: “This theory of cosmic organization […] held that God had created the universe according to a system of hierarchies” (McDonald, 319). Hamlet was in a much higher position in the Great Chain of Being than Laertes was and would have been excused. However, Hamlet values his peace of mind rather than his pride by descending to Laertes’s position in The Great Chain of Being for forgiveness: “Give me your pardon, sir. I’ve done you wrong;/But pardon’t as you are a gentleman,” Hamlet asks in humble supplication (5.2.163). Hamlet even goes on further to call Laertes his “brother” in line 181, which raises Laertes’s station to be equal to Hamlet. Hamlet receives the forgiveness he sought from Laertes after the death of Claudius in the line, “Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet./Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee,/Nor thine on me” (5.2.271). Hamlet is able to die in peace knowing that he is not blamed for the murders of Polonius, Ophelia, nor Laertes, which weighed on his mind enough to deny his social station and pride in being willing to not duel Laertes in the first place.
Hamlet not only brings peace to his nation by destroying Claudius as a murderer and dishonest king, but also by making sure that Fortinbras’s place is secure through his personal and weighty consent. The line “But I do prophesy th’election lights/On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice” overcomes the obstacle of election in Shakespeare’s monarchy of Denmark and allows Fortinbras to assume the position as Denmark’s rightful king (5.2.298). Hamlet ensured his own kingship with the death of Claudius and takes up this title for the last moments of his life, although this factor is frequently overlooked. With his last breath, Hamlet does his majestic position justice by thinking of his country and friend, Horatio, first by having them both survive through his word as king. Fortinbras does not realize that Hamlet was already “put on” and rose to the challenge when the throes of death would have, understandably, taken Hamlet’s mind elsewhere to more personal matters (5.2.341).

Hamlet is able to provide his own memory peace through ensuring Horatio’s survival to relate Hamlet’s story. He petitions Horatio, “Absent thee from felicity a while,/And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/To tell my story” (5.2.291). Through these lines, it is seen that Hamlet has finally accepted himself and his actions as noble. The self doubt that is so incredibly prevalent throughout the play has dissipated with his self-validation. Benjamin Newman describes Hamlet’s moment of triumph: “What follows is the successful completion of his mission that can be read as the resolution of the dilemma of ‘To be, or not to be,’—undertaking to do righteous battle with an invincible foe, that ‘sea of troubles,’ and reclaiming thereby a worthwhileness to mankind’s existence” (26). Newman acknowledges that Hamlet’s story is worth retelling because he has overcome what was given as an impossible challenge, enabling hope to be restored for the fallen human condition in general. Hamlet has finally overcome the misunderstanding others projected onto him in his life and will live on as a savior to many.
Hamlet’s noble death is set even higher in the ranks of literature as he tries to tie up loose ends with his father, mother, past mistakes, and responsibilities he has towards his country. Bringing peace to those from the past allows the future to begin with a fresh start, with no unfinished work or quarrels left behind. Fortinbras, as a foil of Hamlet, is allowed to start ruling with no issues resurfacing from the past and can use Hamlet’s own story from the past to bring peace to his new subjects.

George also has to overcome the past. George foreshadows his tragic end when he doesn’t forgive Cocoa for their “worst fight ever,” although she tried to make amends (Naylor, 230). This stubbornness hurt Cocoa and was the basis of the curse that was brought upon her. The curse was performed by Ruby, but it could have been avoided if George had been forgiving. Virginia Fowler is correct in saying “that Cocoa's insecurities about her physical appearance and her identity, both connected in turn to her relationship to George, are what Ruby exploits” (109). Cocoa has not been able to embrace the past on her own, and when linking her life to George, it makes it even harder for her to accept. Mama Day admits this when she says, “He’s a part of her, Abigail. And that’s the part Ruby done fixed to take it out of our hands” (Naylor, 267). George is from beyond the bridge, which has never boded well for those living in Willow Springs, which is capitalized on by Ruby’s jealous hate. George demonstrates that he has so completely tried to forget his past that he has lost any connection he might have had to the organic spirit of Willow Springs, and therefore, to Cocoa.

Although George unwillingly brought peace to Cocoa by giving her up through death, he gives her the chance for her and her family to have a fresh start, unburdened by the curse of unrest that had plagued generations before them. George is truly able to reconcile the past by taking Cocoa’s place in death, an act that Hamlet seemingly didn’t have the opportunity to do.
This final act of sacrifice, like Hamlet sacrificing himself for a better world, not only allows for peace to come to the generations to come in Cocoa’s line, but earns him the name of the “man who looked just like love” (Naylor, 310). George ensures that his story will be told through Cocoa in way that allows him to be the most noble version of himself, as Horatio does for Hamlet.

George is only able to live in the world of Willow Springs when he has sacrificed the life he has devoted to in forgetting the past. He demonstrates his ability to confront the past as a spirit through the narrative of the book when he is discussing what happened from his point of view with Cocoa. He tells his story how it actually happened from his perspective, not how he wanted it, or didn’t want it, to happen. He is able to acknowledge his blindness to the situation and accept the reality of Cocoa’s past when he says, “I felt we had something to give—maybe something we owed—to those other couples who tried but didn’t make it. I was that sure about us; we could defy history. Obviously, I was not the first young man to stand on that verandah and feel that way” (Naylor 226). George recognizes in retrospect that no one can “defy history,” but rather that one can only define history with one’s actions that are built upon those performed in the past—a past that gives life to the present and hope to the future, regardless if it is acknowledged or not.

The futures that George and Hamlet create are not possible for them to live in. They are essentially spared from trying to live in a world that they couldn’t come to grips with during their lifetimes. They died in their effort to reconcile the past and the present because they could not live with the results of their actions. They both took action out of necessity, not because that was what they particularly desired to do. George and Hamlet felt like their agency was taken away from them, constituting an enormous part of their freedom. Their mental obstacles became so
much a part of themselves, that when they were overcome, there was nothing left for them to accomplish.

Death does not seem to be much of a reward for the goodness Hamlet and George show throughout their particular stories, at first glance; yet, Hamlet “realizes that existence is nothing more than a prison of the body, and the body, in turn, a prison of the mind. And in this prison of Chinese boxes, Fate is the jailer and the Unknown is the warder” (Ortego, 24). Hamlet is seen over and over again as an intellectual individual with a calm disposition and not with “splenative and rash” tendencies, as he tells a murderous Laertes in Ophelia’s grave (5.1.247). His peace-loving soul was forgiven by Laertes, but it needed to be utterly released in order to find the tranquility he so desperately yearned for and deserved after conquering his earthly, unearthly, and mental demons. Hamlet did what was asked of him and more. There is little doubt that “in the sleep of death what dreams may come” to Hamlet will not be the nightmares he feared they would be after he brought so many people true peace (3.1.68).

Hamlet was spared in living without Ophelia. His heart-wrenching grief for her death is what spurs him on to change, forgive, and finally give up his life. Hamlet knew going into the duel that he might not come out alive and seemed to lost the will to live when he accepted Laertes’s challenge right after seeing Ophelia’s body. Hamlet was given the opportunity to escape from a world that he had to cope with her death in and his actions that led up to it. He didn’t have to live with the knowledge that Ophelia was trying to help him by feigning indifference, and his reactions had grievous consequences.

The world Hamlet knew is completely gone at the end of the play. We see it progressively decay through his troubled soliloquies, till finally a new era is completely ushered in with Fortinbras. It is hard to imagine Hamlet being able to thrive in such a world with the
amount of confusion he underwent before his death. Hamlet’s true nobility is that he sacrificed himself in his battle to overcome this confusion. He wasn’t able to see it for himself in a mortal frame, but it is fitting that the pinnacle of his greatness is him being released from the world that was too unjust for him to bear.

As a trope of Hamlet, George has the opportunity to take Ophelia’s place in death. He couldn’t live after not understanding Cocoa so completely when it mattered most, but he could provide a new life for her and for those that would come after her. He was given his wish that he thought was impossible “to get inside and change places” with Cocoa” (Naylor, 298). George was rewarded for the goodness he showed in the majority of the novel, despite his wretched past. He was conflicted throughout the story, and was able to finally receive peace when he couldn’t come to terms with a world that had been thrust upon him, just like Hamlet. They are very similar in the way that their conditions set them up to fail, in a way, with their particular trials. George couldn’t overcome the conditioning he went under in his childhood in the orphanage, but was able to come to terms with the past, “as [his] bleeding hand slid gently down [her] arm, there was total peace” (Naylor, 302). Hamlet couldn’t circumvent the corruption of humanity he witnessed when he had been led to believe in such high ideals, as he was taught at Wittenberg, the home of Martin Luther.

Cocoa is left to pick up the pieces of the shattered world George left behind. Although she was left with a grief that seemed unbearable, she had been familiar with the supernatural world that George couldn’t wrap his head around and was able to survive. George wasn’t able to accept the world that Cocoa was so inseparably part of, making him unable to accept Cocoa as her whole self, a self that is infused with the supernatural. George conflicted Cocoa even further—as Hamlet did to an already conflicted Ophelia—when he couldn’t accept her past, but
criticized her being unable to accept her appearance. He would do anything for her except let her go, and death proved a tender escape from the knowledge that he had not only caused Cocoa’s illness, but that he had exacerbated her insecurities until they reached a breaking point. Truly giving up Cocoa meant that George couldn’t be part of her new life. He had to do what the men before him couldn’t do—learn to let the women they loved go. George wasn’t willing to do this, so the only option for him was death in order to save Cocoa.

The comparison of George and Hamlet in their gender biases show that they prevented others from finding peace. By relinquishing such a tight grip on gender prejudice, others are able to create a new life for themselves with authorship over their independence and identity. Both George’s and Hamlet’s death had the widespread effect of forcing those around them to start over, while painful at first, led to greater happiness. They had to be willing to give up what they desired for others and themselves in order to give true peace.

They were also able to give others peace by overcoming the past, most importantly through forgiving others, especially themselves. Cocoa was able to maintain a relationship with George’s spirit in Willow Springs because he had finally come to terms with his actions and what had actually occurred during his time of trouble. Hamlet was able to rest in peace because he had resolved the issues that were troubling those around him. They both had to be completely selfless and self-sacrificing in order to achieve the complete peace that would allow others to move on without regrets and learn from the past, which enabled Hamlet and George to find true peace in their own right.

Whatever Hamlet and George thought of death at the beginning of their narratives, they were able to find true rest in death. This death did not come without a price; each had to sacrifice everything that he was and knew in order to achieve this peace. Hamlet had the particular
courage to act even when all of his surroundings, including his troubled mind, told him all was lost and nothing could be done to better the situation. George was able to give Cocoa and the rest of her family a chance for a new start, which Hamlet was unable to give Ophelia. They come together to create the other’s story. While they had their weaknesses, Hamlet’s and George’s strengths fill the gap the other bore in his actions and character.

We complete each other. We can’t achieve complete greatness without those that we love. Truly embracing the past means that we must be willing to do what we are called upon to do for the greater good. George did this for Cocoa and her family, while Hamlet did this for those he avenged and the people that survived him. There is incredible sacrifice that comes along with this greatness; yet, it is on the path to this sacrifice that we discover the demons that lie deep in our souls and can stare them in the face, seeing them for what they truly are, choosing to not let them conquer us, and being willing to act while they still exist. This is the fight of the unbeatable foe, which destroys every semblance of a past self we may possess, but out of the ashes emerges a self that is living in death. There is is always a way out of soul-crushing hardships, whether it is in this world or the world of the supernatural. The paradox of embracing the past while being willing to let go of everything that we know through learning about the past leads to true liberation. This can be said for those that do the liberating and those that experience the liberation. Either way, it is a choice that is most precious and difficult: being willing to give up what we believe and know to be true, taking a leap of faith, and embracing the encompassing abyss that opens before us through the earthquakes of the past. The fact that the abyss was made does not go away, but is rather the framework for that leap of faith into the unknown and world of beginnings.
Works Cited


