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PERSONAL INTEGRITY OF SIR THOMAS MORE: A CASE STUDY OF ROBERT BOLT'S A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

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Abstract:

In A Man for All Seasons, Robert Bolt attempts to give his characters heroic dimensions by striking back into history. Believing that our need today is "a sense of personal individuality or selfhood," he chooses as his hero of selfhood, Sir Thomas More, who is described by his contemporaries as "A Man for All Seasons," is not only flexibly adjusted to Renaissance society but also managed to preserve "An inner core of unassailable integrity. This project work aims at a close study of the play to highlight the character of Sir Thomas More whose personal integrity is the governing principle of his destiny. The theme discusses the main action of the play. Sir Thomas More does not become corrupt. In a personal relationship, he refuses to perjure himself. He is ready to sacrifice his comforts for the sake of his integrity. He loses his chancellorship rather than appear to accept the submission of the church to the King. Finally, he goes uncomplaining to the block. Integrity is beautifully brought out in the discussion by contrast with involvement in society. Throughout the play more resists temptations, the temptations of friends, family and the unity of the state. Sir Thomas More symbolizes the theme "he is a man adamantine sense of his self." He is a man for all seasons.

Key Words: A Man for All Seasons, Robert Bolt, Personal Integrity, Selfhood, Adamantine Sense & Temptations

Introduction:

Personal integrity is the Subject matter of A Man for All Seasons by Robert Bolt. The play opens to show Sir Thomas More in domestic society. We see More's balanced view of what social success is worth and his integrity even within a society. We see him in a wide variety of circumstances and settings in contact with a wide variety of persons, family, friends, enemies and acquaintances. Robert Bolt, in his introduction to A Man For All Seasons, explains what most attracts him to More. He sees him as a man of "splendid social adjustment" with an adamantine sense of his self. More loves life and yet could not live it if this involves renouncing his integrity. The play is a graph on which Bolt plots to convert the steady rise of an opportunist and the decline of a man of principle. At the beginning of the play, Richard Rich, who studies Machiavelli, is looking for a job. A graduate of Cambridge, he has been in London for seven months, which he has spent for a long time waiting about in ante-rooms. But he is contemptuous of More's offer to get him a post of a teacher. In the presence of the Duke of Norfolk, he has a name-dropping sycophancy, but he lands a modest job in the Duke's household as a librarian. There he exploits his acquaintance with More to make himself useful to Cromwell. The latter needs information about him because the king briefs him to make More toe the line over the question of the divorce from Katherine of Aragon or to destroy him. Richard rises higher and higher socially as he stoops lower and lower morally, ending up as an Attorney General for Wales and a perjurer. His perjury supplies Cromwell with the 'evidence' he needs to discredit More and secure his death as a traitor. Rich is a man who can be pushed indefinitely without ever finding a point where he has to dig his needs in.

More is a man who cannot compromise beyond a certain point. He enjoys life, success, society, comfort and the king's friendship and he is quite adept at making the adjustments that a public figure has to make if he has to survive. When Wolsey falls it is More who succeeds him. But much as he wants to retain Henry's goodwill, conscience prevents him from giving his approval to the divorce when Henry is set on marrying Anne Boleyn. As chancellor, More involves in Henry's actions and he compromises by agreeing not to make his misgiving public and he even accepts the act of Supremacy which pronounces Henry 'the Supreme Head of the Church in England', taking cover under the qualifying phrase 'so far as the Law of God allows'.

But when Henry breaks with Rome and convocation knuckles, More resigns his office hoping to stay active by staying silent. He refuses to swear to the Act of succession and goes to prison for his refusal but so long as he keeps silent about his reasons for denying, he cannot be condemned as a traitor. It is a psychological commonplace that in literature we tend to find what we are looking to perceive. In the story of Sir Thomas More Bolt explains in his preface that he at first attracts a man who has a tremendous appetite for living life to the full. He goes on to discuss the lessening sense of selfhood apparent in our Society.

The total action of the play illustrates the theme of personal integrity in the career of Sir Thomas More. In his legal career, we see his refusal to accept bribes and his dislike of being in a position in which he is open to attempts at bribery. This honesty stands him in good state when Cromwell tries to frame him on a charge of accepting graft in office. Norfolk's assertion is that he is the only judge when Cato does not accept corruption is proved correct.

More: "No- (Alice exhibits indignation) Alice, it is a point of law. Accept it from me, Alice that in silence is my safety under the law, but my silence must be absolute, it must extend to you."

Thomas More goes on to illustrate to Norfolk by vivid action the reason for his non-committal attitude and his fear of the king. Then we see the result of Chapuys' efforts to tempt him. More has maintained his religious and political integrity as he tells Norfolk of dangers in the North. The flash of jealousy of Cromwell which escapes him like his slight loss of temper with Roper and now with Norfolk adds to the spice of human infirmity to his character and gives him a clear impression on the stage.

In Personal relationships too More refuses to perjure himself. He consistently refuses to recommend the unreliable Rich for positions of trust, or even to employ himself although this, in the end, leaves Rich open to corruption by Cromwell and the tool of More's death. He will not sacrifice his sincerity for the sake of friendship when Norfolk begs him to do so, nor will even succumb to the pressure of his much-loved family to serve himself.

More: That's very neat. But look now…If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly. And we would live like animals or angels in the happy land that needs no heroes. But since in fact, we see that avarice, anger, envy, pride, sloth, lust and stupidity commonly profit far beyond humility, chastity, fortitude, justice and thought and had to choose, be human at all….. Why then perhaps we must stand fast a little even at risk at being heroes."

We see Thomas More is seen again in his family circle. But this time events in the outside world are more an integral part of this scene than an eruption into it. More scarcely has time to show us again his teasing humor and a sense of proportion than we are suddenly presented with his first real and active stand against the king. He tells Roper of his decision to resign the chancellorship if convocation supports the king in denying papal authority over the Church or England. He still relies on the letter of the laws. He also dislikes the idea of sainthood and martyrdom, covering his alarm, as usual by flippancy and teasing. In the Interview with Chapuys we see More the diplomat again, non-committal and utterly discreet. Chapuys' efforts to win More to stand openly against the king have the opposite result of lending weight to the temptation. It presents his patriotism to accept the king's demands on him. But Thomas More can distinguish the extent of his patriotic duty from that of his religious customs.

Chapuys: My dear Sir Thomas, I have taken extreme precautions. I came here very much incognito, (Self-indulgent chuckle) very nearly in disguise.

More: You misunderstand me. It is not a matter of your precautions but my duty, which would be to take his letter immediately to the king. We return to domesticity to hear Chapuys' judgement on More, Cromwell's parallel and opposite. Chapuys can feel the force of his patriotism. He again brings out in More the complete discretion of a diplomat.

More: well it's a luxury while it lasts… there is not much sport in it for you is there (She neither answers nor looks at him from the depths of her fatigue. After a moment's hesitation he braces himself) Alice, the money from the Bishops. I wish-On heaven now I wish I could take it. But I can't. The discomfort of poverty now shows how deep goodness runs in More. He is genuinely unconcerned when this poverty is displayed before Chapuys. He is indomitably cheerful. He no longer teases his wife but tries to win her to accept the situation by understanding and serious kindness. He is not aware of danger than she is, and will not accept the Church's gift despite her pleasing. As before, he transmutes his fear into flippancy, but the symbolism of the stage lighting shows that this time he learns not to under estimate Cromwell, although he still relies on the law.

Cromwell: [Laughing and Shaking head] Sir Thomas, Sir Thomas…… you know it amazes me that you, who were once so effective in the world and are now so much retried from it, could be opposing yourself to the whole movement of the times?

In this act of mounting pressures, both More and Cromwell come face to face on stage for the first time in a serious situation. They indulge in a little dispute, testing each other out. Cromwell gives his view of the situation that More's opposition "to the whole movement of the times" amazes him. This we remember has also the view of the common man's history. More blindly agrees that it amazes him too. We see More the social man. One can understand that his amazement is genuine as well as touched with irony. We find another glimpse of More in his family circle in these sad circumstances. Still, he is loving and considerate, attempting cheerfulness and even managing to tease Roper as usual. But he is now dependent on them for approval of his conduct begging pathetically for their moral support in his coming martyrdom. With urgent emotion, he is to argue his case with Margaret and then appeals to her humor. But she will not accept his argument and nor will dame Alice when he tries to flatter her into relenting. At last he is open to appeal desperately and Alice is beaten.

Alice: [covers his mouth with her hands s……sh…… As for understanding, I Understand you're the best man that I ever met or am likely to …]

She cannot understand him, but she can manage to trust him. His relief and comfort are visible in his face. During the trial scene, we watch the inevitable and final crumbling of all More's defenses. He renounces his happiness. Most of the scene is based on historical accounts of the proceedings. It is therefore unavoidable that we see a slightly different Thomas More from Bolt's creation in the earlier parts of the play. This probably

goes unnoticed on the stage in the growing emotion and tension of the scene. But in the study, we can observe that More speaks even a more vividly patterned prose than that of his earlier big speeches and his reliance is on Christ with slighter mention of his integrity as a motive for martyrdom.

More: "The Law is not a 'light' for you or any man to see by; the Law is not an instrument of any kind. [To the FOREMAN]. The law is a causeway upon which so long as he keeps to it a citizen may walk safely. [Earnestly addressing him] In matters of conscience in his dual with Cromwell after the latter's speech for the Prosecution, she shows all his old quickness of wit in legal matters and all his old idealistic feeling for the law. The dual ends with Sir Thomas More's final statement of his principle of personal integrity. "A man's soul is his self" and only by loyalty to the truth that is in him can a man be truly loyal to his king and country.

When Norfolk rises to pronounce judgment, More as is historically accurate, forestalls him, and for the rest of the scene, it is the condemned prisoner who is in a complete moral change of the situation.

More: "Now that the count has determined to condemn me, God knows how I will discharge my mind…..Concerning my indictment and the king's title. The indictment is grounded in the act of parliament which is directly repugnant to the Law of God. The king in the Parliament cannot bestow the supremacy of the Church because it is spiritual supremacy." And more to this the immunity of the Church is promised both in Magna Carta and the king's coronation oath.

Finally, we see his integrity openly declaring the beliefs which he has silently held throughout and goes uncomplaining to the block. More's integrity is testified not only by Norfolk but also by some of the other characters who oppose him, find his integrity. Wolsey, for instance, sneers at his 'moral acquaint' which disqualifies him from being a statesman and Henry loves him for his honesty. Cromwell: Now we see that you are malicious.

More: I am the king's true subject and pray for him and all the realm….I do none harm, I say none harm, I think none harm. And if this is not enough to keep a man alive, in good faith, I long not to live…… I have, since I came into prison, been several times in such a case that I thought to die within the hour, and I thank Lord I was never sorry for it, but rather sorry when it passed. And therefore, my poor body is at the king's pleasure.

Now More deliberately follows the footsteps of Christ in words and actions as he refuses the wine Norfolk offers. This incident unquestionably shows him a martyr in death with his crucified Lord. The author gives More three main statements of his view of integrity. The first defines the boundary where loyalty to the king himself must cease: the next brings out the importance of the self:

More: But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true or rather nor that I believe it, but that I believe it.

Finally to More religion depends upon personal integrity:

More: "Affection goes as deep in me as you I think but only God is love right through, Howard; and that's myself." The maintenance of personal integrity is made cleverer at times by an explicit contrast with involvement in society. Integrity of society can of course only be apparent when the two come into conflict. Until the question of the king's divorce comes up, More happily adjusts to society as Cromwell points out. More even agrees:

"It amazes me too."

The temptations he resists, of friends, family and unity of the state, can also be seen as temptations towards alignment with society, regardless of personal integrity: and of course, these pressures are upon us today no less than they were upon the men of Tudor times.

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