

Example by StudyDriver

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The English Civil War in Henry V Example

William Shakespeare often used historical settings in his plays even though the stories themselves may have been exaggerated or written with a great amount of artistic license. In Henry V, the English civil war has ravaged Britain and Henry V has ascended the throne. The main issue with new king is that he has a history of being childish and immature, spending lots of time drinking in taverns and finding friends who were thieves. Upon ascending the throne, Henry suddenly changes his ways and comes to his senses. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in the opening scene of the play, tells of this:

“The courses of his youth promised it not. The breath no sooner left his father’s body but that his wildness, mortified in him, seemed to die too. Yea, at that very moment consideration like an angel came and whipped the offending Adam out of him, leaving his body as a paradise t’ envelop and contain celestial spirits....never came reformation in a flood with such a heady currency scouring faults....”

From this, one can see that the change in Henry was sudden and unexpected. Because Shakespeare often fantasizes the protagonists in his work, the question from this follows; is the character change that Henry underwent realistic, and if so, is he a good man?

Firstly, it should be established what exactly is meant by “realistic”. Realistic means that the change in the character is actually appropriate given the circumstances of the story. For instance, in the story of Ivanhoe, Ivanhoe is a Catholic during the 12th century, which was a time of great anti-semitism. He loves another Catholic woman named Rowena, but is injured in a joust and taken under the care of a young Jewish woman named Rebecca. In the end, Ivanhoe married Rowena, even though he respected Rebecca and admired her beauty as well. However, if Ivanhoe had made complete turnaround and married Rebecca, it would have been out of place in the story. The author makes a point of the division between the Jews and Catholics of the time, and to suddenly have Ivanhoe marry a Jewish woman would undercut that emphasis. So a “realistic” change is one that makes sense given the circumstances of the story or situation. Good.

The character of Henry V is first introduced in the play Henry IV as Prince Hal of Wales. From the earliest onset of the story, Prince Hal is described as a rebellious youth. In fact, Hal is introduced for the first time while he plots a highway robbery. The next time Henry is introduced, he is found drinking in a seedy tavern. His friend Poins asks where he has been, to which Hal replies: “With three or four knuckleheads and a few dozen kegs of liquor. I’ve been with the lowest of the low”. However, an interesting twist in his character comes when he admits in a monologue which he is addressing to his friends who have just left the room that his recklessness is really an act:

“I know you all, and will awhile uphold the unyoked humour of your idleness. Yet herein will I imitate the sun, who doth permit the base contagious clouds to smother up his beauty from the world.... So, when this loose behaviour I throw off, and pay the debt I never promised, By how much better than my word I am, by so much shall I falsify men’s hopes; and like bright metal on a sullen ground, my reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault....

Essentially, Henry is saying that he is pretending to be reckless and immature in order that, when the time comes, he can show who he really is and prove that he would serve as a good king. He chooses this method because he feels that people will be more apt to accept him if they see his moral change as opposed to hearing it from his own mouth.

In the time approaching Henry IV’s death, Hal stays out of the public eye. In fact, he isn’t mentioned in the second

part of Henry IV for a while. When he does finally show up, King Henry is finally approaching his death and Hal is preparing to ascend the throne. He seems to have stopped his old hijinks- there's no mention of him drinking or being mischievous. Henry though doesn't seem to notice this, as Hal still spends time around his old bad influences like Falstaff. Even though the king can't tell, Hal's friends assure him that when the time comes Hal will be ready. Eventually, Hal reconciles with his father before he dies. Then having become King Henry V, decides to finally shed his bad past by publicly disowning Falstaff and his companions when they come to visit him after he has just been crowned. When they get on hands and knees before the King, Henry gives them a scolding refusal (specifically Falstaff):

"I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers. How ill white hairs become a fool and jester....Presume not that I am the thing I was, For God doth know—so shall the world perceive—That I have turned away my former self. So will I those that kept me company. When thou dost hear I am as I have been, approach me, and thou shalt be as thou wast, the tutor and the feeder of my riots. Till then I banish thee, on pain of death, as I have done the rest of my misleaders, not to come near our person by ten mile....and, as we hear you do reform yourselves, We will, according to your strengths and qualities, give you advancement...."

Henry is banishing them publicly for their crimes but tells them that if they reform, they may be able to come back. By this act, Henry demonstrates that he has finally shed his past completely and is ready to take on his responsibilities as King.

In Henry V, Henry's character change comes to the forefront as his duties as King become a big part of the story. In the very beginning of the play, he is insulted by the Dauphin of France, who mocks Henry for laying claim to parts of France on account of his youth and reckless past. In response, Henry invades France to take what he has claimed by force. The English army is small in comparison to the French and as time wears on, they grow weary. Henry cares about his people, so one day he dresses as a commoner and walks among the men to see what the spirit of the army is. After he has listened to them for a while, he proceeds to reveal in a long monologue his inner feelings. He explains that he wishes to have the sleep of a slave, in other words, that he wishes that he could sleep

as soundly as common man and not worry about the weight of the lives of his men bearing on him as the King:

“Tis not the balm, the sceptre, and the ball, The sword, the mace, the crown imperial, The intertissued robe of gold and pearl, The farcèd title running for the king, The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp, That beats upon the high shore of this world— No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony, Not all these, laid in bed majestical, Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave Who with a body filled and vacant mind

Gets him to rest, crammed with distressful bread....”

So, based on all of the above, is the character change in Henry realistic? It is indeed. This is because in order for the story itself to make sense, it has to happen. What if Henry had just stayed a youthful, immature, reckless man and then not changed when he ascended the throne. Would he have been the great leader that was needed for unity in England at that time? Would his men still have been as loyal to and had as much respect for him? Would his people have trusted him? The circumstances of the story necessitate that Henry have a change of character because without it, the story can't hold together.

Now having answered that question, does Henry's change make him a good man? A good man is someone who does the right thing even when it's hard. Henry certainly fits that category. In some ways, he probably found his old life of drinking and partying to be fun and more enjoyable than the duties of kingship, but when the time came, he still chose to leave that behind him. More difficult still was abandoning his former friends, banishing them publicly and in one case, even sentencing one to death. Surely that act was the hardest of all, but Henry still chose to do it.

From the above evidence, one can conclude that Henry's change was realistic and that he was a good man because of it. The loyalty he drew from his men was astounding, rallying them to defeat the French even though they were severely outnumbered. Most importantly, he gained the respect of his people, and as a result, he was a successful king and one of Shakespeare's greatest characters.