

Shakespeare's presentation of Hamlet essay



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The Revenge Tragedy of Hamlet (approx.

1601), written by William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616), could be described, as the most popular play ever written. It has been translated into dozens of languages, is doubtless being performed somewhere in the world as you read these words and has been the subject of more excited critical debate than any other work of literature. However, why is the play so popular? It is globally popular because the central character, Hamlet, is somebody whom many people can form different views on. In this essay I will try to explore Shakespeare's presentation of the protagonist and to form my own view of Hamlet's character. To do this I shall look carefully at the play and the character, focusing on the soliloquies, which Hamlet is famous for. The soliloquies in Hamlet give the audience "the impression of a man discovering what he thinks as he speaks" ('Hamlet', Cambridge School Shakespeare series).

There are more plausible descriptions of the characters of Hamlet than any other Shakespearean character, probably than any other character in drama and fiction. A list of these descriptions would include amiable, cruel, compassionate, determined, diseased, hypocritical, mad, misogynous, Oedipal, reflective, vengeful, and witty, to name just a few. Critics have believed that the basis for Hamlet's behaviour and problems lies in the unnatural degree of his love for his mother, his Oedipus complex. This complex makes him unable to have a loving relationship with Ophelia and his hatred for Claudius is based on sexual jealousy.

This in itself is hard to believe but can be understood; Hamlet seems to hate women and can't stand the fact that his mother is having sex with his uncle. I personally don't believe that Hamlet suffers from an Oedipus complex; however, I believe that Hamlet is an intelligent, determined and noble man whose main flaw is his procrastination. Throughout the play, strong impressions of the Shakespearean "hero" are given through his soliloquies: they contain no lies or deceptions and express his own thoughts. Hamlet's first soliloquy occurs early in Act I. Hamlet cannot confide his feelings in anyone around him, so Shakespeare does not use dialogue to show Hamlet's growing burden, he uses soliloquy.

Throughout the soliloquy Hamlet's feelings quickly change from one to another. First of all Shakespeare presents a very isolated character in Hamlet; someone who stands in a corner still dressed in black. This is evident in the use of the soliloquy rather than dialogue with the other characters on stage."

. Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God, How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world!...

" In the beginning of the soliloquy Shakespeare demonstrates a Hamlet that could be nicknamed 'Hamlet on the edge', a very depressed and suicidal version of Hamlet. From the words "'gainst self-slaughter" we can assume that Hamlet is contemplating suicide (but is rejecting it) and from his view of the world as "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" we can clearly see that he is depressed and weary, seeing a world around him that appears to be worth

nothing. The limp rhythm of the words conveys his weariness and the disjointed rhythm and dislocated progress of Hamlet's thoughts throughout the soliloquy convey to the audience his inner turmoil. As the soliloquy progresses Hamlet works himself up into anger.

"...Let me not think on't; frailty thy name is woman-A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body..

." In this section of the soliloquy we can see that Hamlet is extremely angry with his mother for marrying so fast after his father's death and for marrying his uncle. Shakespeare conveys those intense feelings of anger through language like " frailty, thy name is woman" and later " gall'd eyes"; giving the audience the impression of loathing that Hamlet is feeling for his mother. Hamlet's feelings, however, quickly turn to revulsion, as he can't bear to think about his mother's sexual habits in the " incestuous sheets".

The end of the soliloquy portrays the same feelings of isolation that it did at the beginning, ending with."...But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" In this line Shakespeare conveys the impression that Hamlet feels that he must suffer in silence. However the audience guess that this will not be the case so Hamlet's words are a little ironic.

From the previous scene the audience know about the ghost of Old Hamlet that is wandering the castle. After Hamlet's soliloquy the audience realise that Hamlet will not be allowed simply to suffer in silence. Hamlet's first soliloquy is important as it gives the audience an idea of what has happened recently and how he is reacting to it. Hamlet expresses his melancholy and his disgust with the state of affairs, as well as expressing despair, anger,

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loathing and other emotions. In Hamlet's soliloquy in Act II Scene 2 we see Hamlet going through several changes of mood.

These are self-criticism ("...O what a rogue and peasant slave am I?.

.."), imagining someone's reaction to real grievance ("...

Had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?..."), self-disgust ("...

Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal...can say nothing..

.."), rage ("...Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindles villain!..

.."), and self-reproach for his emotional outburst ("...Why, what an ass am I!.

.."). Through the soliloquy the audience are given the impression that

Hamlet is a 'layered' character.

It seems clear that Shakespeare presents Hamlet as a complex individual. He portrays the ability to think about a situation carefully, proving that he is a rational thinker in most cases. His background, given to him by Shakespeare, supports this (we see at the beginning that Hamlet has studied at Wittenberg University). This can also be seen in his plan to catch the King with the actors' play. The Act II Scene 2 soliloquy also shows the audience that Hamlet is a normal person, capable of feeling emotions like anger and rage. In this soliloquy Shakespeare allows Hamlet to get rid of a lot of emotion, leading to the cunning, intelligent Hamlet that devises the plan to catch his uncle.

"...What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her?

What would he do, Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have?..

." However, Shakespeare also uses this soliloquy to present Hamlet's major flaw to the audience: his procrastination. The line beginning "..

. Yet I...

" disturbs the regular rhythm of the soliloquy because Hamlet's mind is at its most distracted when he thinks of himself and what he has failed to do. In the soliloquy Hamlet becomes clearly angry at his inability to act / carry out the murder."...

Am I a coward? Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across, Plucks off my bread and blows it in my face, Tweaks me by th'nose, gives me the lie I'th'throat As deep as to the lungs?...It is here that the audience see that, although Hamlet is a thinker, it is his tendency to think things through that leads to his procrastination. Shakespeare does this to Hamlet to show the audience that Hamlet is suffering, both emotionally and mentally with what he has been asked to do. At the time the play would have been set, murder (let alone the murder of a monarch) would have been punishable by death.

Hamlet's procrastination suggests to the audience that he is thinking deeply about the consequences that his actions might bring. This indicates that Hamlet is not the kind of character that can easily pick up a weapon and kill someone. The audience will start to wonder that perhaps, if roles were reversed somehow, what they would do in his situation. I believe that it is this that makes Hamlet one of, if not the, most identified with character in

English Literature. Towards the end of the soliloquy Hamlet expresses doubt towards and about the ghost and whether it is honest.

"...The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil...

" Hamlet fears that the Ghost may be the devil, telling him lies to tempt him into eternal damnation by killing Claudius. The soliloquy ends with elation at the thought he will prove his uncle's guilt. He decides that a play of his father's murder will test the words of the spirit that visited him. Hamlet hopes that the play will give him some proof that the Ghost was telling the truth and it will provoke Claudius into revealing his guilt.

"... I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll
catch the conscience of the king." The speech is completed with the rhyming couplets of thing and king.

This not only completes the speech but also indicates to the audience what is going to happen. Act II Scene 2 is also useful in other ways when looking at the portrayal of Hamlet (Shakespeare uses the scene to portray Hamlet in many different ways). We have seen that the soliloquy at the end of the scene portrays Hamlet as a complex thinker, but his thinking often leads to his delay in acting. However, the rest of the scene is useful as well. Hamlet's complexity of character is presented very effectively to an audience in this scene.

It is difficult to imagine any other tragic hero in pursuit of revenge who could pause to chat with easy familiarity and keen knowledge to a group of actors about their careers and their art. It shows the audience that Hamlet is

obviously a complex character, not driven by one emotion or event, someone who is struggling with conflicting emotions but still able to put them aside to be polite to strangers and intellectualise about the art of drama. Hamlet is again presented as a thinker in Act III Scene 1. He is seen to be thinking about suicide and life after death.

It is also here that we experience another soliloquy. Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech has been classified as the most famous soliloquy in Shakespeare's plays, although technically it is not a soliloquy. During the scene Ophelia is also on stage. However, since he sees Ophelia for the first time in line 88, it is clearly a speech expressing honestly Hamlet's thought processes and should be regarded as a soliloquy.

"To be or not to be, that is the question -Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to sufferThe slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them..." What Hamlet is asking is 'is it better to live or die, to endure suffering or to fight against it?' The metaphor at the start of the soliloquy, "take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them" (lines 59-60) is purposely confused. It captures Hamlet's emotions of being unable to do the enormous undertaking that has been given to him. Hamlet feels that if he tried to set the world straight (as he thinks it should be), the task would be like committing suicide.

However in this soliloquy, there is no word about his father (Old Hamlet), his mother (Gertrude), his uncle (Claudius), or any plans for revenge. When the audience hear"...

But that the dread of something after death, The undiscovered country from whose bourn No traveller returns..." it seems as if Hamlet has completely forgotten that not long ago he was visited by the ghost of his dead father, who told him about the horrors of Purgatory. This soliloquy is very unlike the others Shakespeare gives Hamlet. There is a dejected uniformity of tone and tempo, none of the passionate agitation usually associated with someone wrestling heavily with complex and confused feelings.

The audience will also understand what Hamlet is saying. The point is that he is discussing issues common to other humans, common to everyone. No one has returned from death and no one knows what it is like. An Elizabethan audience, after hearing this part of the soliloquy may believe that Hamlet is a coward. As Hamlet is contemplating suicide they may have thought that Hamlet saw suicide as a more attractive option than his revenge task.

In the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy Hamlet changes his moods and thoughts quickly, much as in the soliloquy in Act II Scene 2. In the beginning he contemplates suicide ("To be, or not to be...").

From this part of the soliloquy Hamlet starts to think more deeply about the nature of death. "...To die, to sleep -To sleep perchance to dream.

Ay, there's the rub, For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause...." Hamlet looks forward to death as an end to all emotional and physical pain ("The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks"). However, he is troubled with what thoughts come after death.

Throughout the play, Hamlet's main characteristic is of a thinker, or to reword that slightly, someone who likes to be always in control (This is perhaps why Hamlet has so much trouble in killing Claudius because the situation he is now in is something he feels he can not control). Hamlet is worried that if he commits suicide and "shuffles off this mortal coil" he will not be able to control what comes after death. He compares death to sleep ("...

To sleep perchance to dream."). When we sleep and dream we are not in control of our bodies or thoughts. This seems to worry Hamlet when he links this to death. However the argument that Hamlet has with himself is clear-cut and its conclusion logical.

Why should we suffer in life when we could find peace in death? Because it might not be peace and no one has returned from death to set the record straight ("...The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns...

."). Therefore we "bear those ills we have". The soliloquy itself is fluent, impersonal and philosophical. In the end the audience hear "..

. conscience does make cowards of us all...

". The audience realises that Hamlet has decided that thinking stops people from acting. The audience can relate what Hamlet is saying to his present situation. When Hamlet says ("..

. the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pitch and moment...

“) we have an image of him thinking, which is preventing him (“...the pale cast of thought...

“) from committing, not suicide, but the act of revenge (“...enterprises of great pitch and moment...

“). Hamlet's final soliloquy is in Act IV Scene 4. It is similar emotionally for Hamlet to the soliloquy in Act I Scene 2. However Shakespeare gives us a much more penetrating insight into the processes of Hamlet's tortured thinking.” How all occasions do inform against me, And spur my dull revenge!..

.... Oh from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.”

Again, as in most of the other soliloquies, Hamlet moves from self-disgust to resolving to act.

Shakespeare starts the soliloquy with “ How all these...” etc to emphasise the tragic hero's fault of procrastination. These lines indicate that for Hamlet everything he has seen recently should have been spurring him on to commit revenge, but he still hasn't acted. At this point I believe that Shakespeare puts Hamlet ' on trial', in order to encourage the act that he has to perform.

Hamlet thinks back to “ all occasions” where he had a chance and all those that “ inform(ed)” him to kill Claudius. Shakespeare uses the opening of the soliloquy to remind the audience of Hamlet's failure to capitalize on former opportunities, which will add to the reaction later in the soliloquy.

Shakespeare adds the next part of the soliloquy to emphasis the over-

thinking tendency of Hamlet. This is essentially the last time that Hamlet thinks in the depth that he has previously as he goes on to try and define what separates men from animals.”.

.. What is a manIf his chief good and market of his timeBe but to sleep and feed...

“ Hamlet argues that God gave humans reason and it is their duty to use it. Thinking and making moral choices is what distinguishes men from animals. Hamlet questions himself, asking himself if his tendency to think too much is completely healthy and whether it is better to think things through before acting.”...

or some craven scrupleOf thinking too precisely on th’event-A thought which quartered hath but one part wisdomAnd ever three parts coward...”

Shakespeare uses this to present Hamlet’s character as an ‘ ironic observer’.

Hamlet knows that he is thinking too much and tries to resolve to act but can’t stop himself from thinking. We have seen that Hamlet does what people should do; think before attacking a situation. However Hamlet criticises himself of the opposite, of thinking too much (“..

. some craven scruple of thinking too precisely on th’event...”). As the soliloquy continues Hamlet tells the audience,”.

.. I do not knowWhy yet I live to say this thing’s to do, Seth I have cause, and will, and strength, and meansTo don’t...

" As with many of Hamlet's speeches the audience will see this as ironic and clearly not the case. Hamlet may have the cause, the strength, and the means to commit the murder asked of him, but if he had the will, then he would have acted a long time before and would not be in the position he is in now. Shakespeare also compares Hamlet to his Norwegian counterpart, Fortinbras. Throughout the play it has been suggested that Fortinbras has been in a similar situation to the Danish prince. When Hamlet compares himself to him he sees a " delicate and tender prince" with " divine ambition" who is ready to fight for a mere " egg shell", whereas he can not take revenge against his uncle.

Hamlet realises that the prince of Norway is a fine specimen, prepared to face death for something completely useless and he is stuck where he is wrestling with his conscience. The Fortinbras character is used to motivate Hamlet towards the end of the play ("...

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse / Looking before and after, gave us not / that capability and god - like reason / to fust in us unus'd...")Shakespeare adds the final words so that Hamlet sounds determined: " Oh from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth". However these words are ironic.

As the audience have seen so often throughout the play, Hamlet's actions contradict his words. Shakespeare uses " Oh from this time forth...

" to show the audience that Hamlet knows about his missed/wasted opportunities and " My thoughts be bloody" obviously means his thoughts and the play are appearing to move towards a bloody conclusion. The

rhyming couplet at the end of this soliloquy represents the feelings of resolution that will prepare the audience for what is to come. But the speech is a mass of contradictions. It is a supreme example of Shakespeare showing that what someone says is not always what that person believes. Here, with the determined final words of this soliloquy, the audience finally get the idea that Hamlet is going to act, despite his previous actions.

The audience now realise that Hamlet, despite being a constant thinker, has finally decided that he is going to kill Claudius. The audience, at this point, could draw a parallel between Hamlet and Laertes. Shakespeare is portraying Hamlet in a different light; not as the thinker he always was but more similar to the hot - blooded Laertes who has just returned from Paris. Shakespeare's ' Hamlet' is a very thought-provoking play, and everybody has his or her own opinion of Hamlet. Some describe Hamlet as " full of weakness and melancholy" or as "(an) epical hero fighting overwhelming odds". The character is by no means extraordinary simple and is far more complex than any other Shakespearean tragic hero.

I believe that Hamlet is an intelligent and witty young man, which can be seen throughout the play in his scenes with Claudius and the gravedigger for example. However, like most of the other tragic heroes, Hamlet has one central flaw, his procrastination. In my opinion it is Hamlet's inability to act and tendency to over think that eventually leads to his death. It is of little importance what opinion we form of Hamlet when we first meet him; he fascinates and mystifies us at the same time.

The play is popular across the world because the central character is somebody to whom few people can feel unresponsive. For every playgoer or reader who feels that Hamlet is a bully or a coward, there will be somebody who finds him a hero. This is what Shakespeare has achieved through Hamlet's soliloquies, whether that was his intention or not. It is these speeches that give Hamlet its distinction.