

# Hamlets dilemma – why can't he act essay



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One of the focal aspects within the play is a dilemma he is forced to face.

This dilemma is whether or not he should murder his uncle to revenge his father's death. In Act 1 Scene 5, Hamlet comes face to face with the ghost of his father, who is doomed to suffer eternal damnation unless his sins are purged; yet this can only occur through the revenge of his own death.

Hamlet believes that despite doing his father the justice, he will go to hell, since according to the Christian religion; all life is sacred and should not be ended by anyone but God. Evidence of Hamlet's religious belief, in relation to afterlife, can be found in Act 1 scene 2 in which he expresses a desire to end his life: “..

. that the everlasting had not fixed his canon gainst' self-slaughter. How weary, stale and unprofitable seem to me all the uses in the world! ” This is an explicit expression of Hamlet's melancholic state of mind. He has near lost the will to live, yet cannot commit suicide, as he holds a Christian belief that life is sacred; and so if he ends his own life, he will be sent to hell.

Hamlet is not a man of action, barely possessing the will to go on with his life.

Therefore it is a tragic turn of bad luck when his father asks Hamlet to revenge his death, because he is suffering from melancholia and consequently a lack of decisiveness and action; yet he has to face a dilemma concerning whether or not he should act on his father's will. Hamlet's indecisive manner is also stimulated by his belief that he will be sent to hell if he murders his uncle. This further intensifies the ultimate dilemma he is faced with. I shall explore the nature of his dilemma and those various

factors that influence Hamlet's indecisiveness throughout the play. But in order to understand the nature of Hamlet's indecisiveness throughout the play, I shall first explore his initial state of mind and his personal estrangement from the world. In the play, Hamlet is portrayed as being prone to melancholia.

Depression is a state of mind usually triggered by a traumatising event, which leads the person to feel estranged from his/her environment in general- friends, relatives, institutions, nature etc. A Shakespearean theory states there are 4 elements making up a human: Earth, wind, fire and water. A perfectly harmonious being consists of all four elements, all in equal portion. Hamlet has too much earth inside him, which makes him prone to feeling depressed.

These repressed feelings further fuel Hamlet's inner turmoil and constant feelings of melancholia. It is believed that such a feeling is represented by the dryness and cold of the earth. Within Hamlet's first entry in the play, we see much evidence of Hamlet suffering from depression. In a long, anguished speech, he describes the world as being like ' an unweeded garden'. As previously mentioned, he also describes the uses of the world as seeming ' weary, flat, stale and unprofitable'.

This emphasises his absolute discontent with the world around him, caused by the situation involving his father's death and then his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle. His depression is also linked to an unhealthy lust for his mother, which can be denoted by Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. The theory is based upon the story of Oedipus, in which a number of stages

in the story lead Oedipus to sleep with his unknowing mother. Another sexually-related factor for Hamlet's depression (in relation to his mother) can be denoted in terms of Freud's 'nothing' theory. This theory states that because a woman has 'nothing' between her legs, the male feels a sense of power over her, Yet on the other hand, it unconsciously brings about the male's fears of possible castration, reminding him that his own being may not be as perfectly complete as he had thought.

The sight of an external lack between the woman's legs may create a sense of vacancy within himself, which he, paradoxically, wants to be filled. If a woman has nothing between her legs then she is desexualised and virginal, her purity of being can protect the male totemically against the chaos threatened by the female 'nothing'. This concept can be related to Hamlet's feeling of inner turmoil. In act 1 scene 2, Hamlet expresses his inner turmoil, caused by the death of his father and hurried marriage of his mother to his uncle: " Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, she married.

O, most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets! On the surface, we can denote Hamlet's reasoning for being upset as being his mother's marriage (and sexual intercourse) with his uncle, very soon after his father's died. Hamlet appears to be upset that his mother has to get over the death of Claudius very quickly, as it shows lack of respect for his dead father. However, we can connote a deeper feeling of chaos felt by Hamlet at the thought of his mother sleeping with another man. By society's standards of the time, it was considered scandalous for a woman to reveal herself capable of desire. Hamlet's Oedipus complex causes him to suffer intense

sexual jealousy at observing sexual desire in his mother, especially because that desire is not for Hamlet himself, but for another man.

Among others, this is the sort of psychology that constitutes Hamlet's inner turmoil, which is initially prone to indecisiveness and inability to act is a symptom of. Hamlet's melancholia and inability to act is a crucial flaw in Hamlet's character and according to Aristotle; it is essential to the progression of the plot. According to Aristotle's theory, in revenge tragedy there is a tragic flaw in the hero (main protagonist), which to an extent undermines his/her purpose as the tragic hero of the play. As previously mentioned, Hamlet's purpose is to revenge his father's death.

However, because he suffers from depression, he has not the personal conviction to commit to any form of action. Throughout the play he is contemplating whether or not he should murder his uncle to revenge his father's death, believing that if he does, he will surely go to hell. This creates an enormous dilemma: Hamlet either revenges his father's death, subsequently freeing his father from purgatory whilst Hamlet himself goes to hell; or he decides not to kill his uncle, saving his own soul whilst leaving his father to face eternal damnation. This theme reflects the enormous part religion played in Elizabethan society. There was the belief in the Divine Right of Kings/Queens, which meant the King/Queen was supposedly ordained by God (or at least the ordaining of a King was intended by God). Therefore it was also believed that it was the King/Queens duty to God to uphold a strong tradition of Christian belief & teachings throughout the country.

e. ruling the country in a way that would please god). Therefore judicial law, parliamentary law etc. was define entirely in terms of Christian belief e. g. belief in Divine Right of Kings entailed the severe punishment of those who expressed opposition to the King/Queen, as it was believed this expressed (indirect) opposition to God.

There were also laws making attendance of Sunday church services compulsory and punishment for those that didn't adhere. But moreover, it was believed the harshest punishment of all was eternal damnation inflicted on those that didn't adhere to/broke Christian principles. Expression of atheist beliefs/teachings were illegal in England and so any person living at the time would be immersed only in Christian beliefs about the afterlife and so the conditioned, popular belief was that anyone could be sent to hell if they displeased God. It was therefore considered every man/woman's goal in life to adhere to Christian principles in order to reach heaven, as opposed to hell/purgatory; and so this general fear among the English population resulted in the majority going to church every Friday, adhering to the 10 commandments etc. In parallel to this Elizabethan way of life, throughout the play a number of characters express fear of reaching purgatory either for a crime they have committed or the crime they might commit if it weren't for such fear. For example, in act scene 3 the King is repenting his sins: murdering his brother to gain the crown and marriage to his wife.

However he also expresses his fear that no degree of repentance can purge him of his sins: " What then? What rests? Try what repentance can. What can it not? Yet what can it when one cannot repent? " This outlines popular Elizabethan belief that a crime as despicable as murder can rarely be purged

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by any degree of repentance. This is why Hamlet is so certain he will receive eternal damnation if he kills his uncle. At another point in the scene, Hamlet considers killing his uncle with a sword there and then, but his inability to act is furthered when he considers the possibility of his uncle going to heaven.

Because the beliefs concerning afterlife are based entirely on faith (as there is no evidence to support the concept) Hamlet has no way of being certain that his uncle won't go to heaven if he kills him; especially because he thinks that if he kills his uncle during repentance, he may be saved from purgatory. Then Hamlet considers killing his uncle while he is committing a sin, such as gambling. In the hope that his uncle is sent into purgatory: “..

. At game, a-swearing, or about some act that has no relish of salvation in't- Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven, and that his soul may be as damned as black as hell... This shows the ambiguity within Christian belief, as there is no evidence to support any beliefs about the afterlife.

It is believed that if one commits the acts of murder, he/she will surely go to purgatory; yet it is believed that even if one has committed that offence, if he/she is killed whilst praying/repenting, that person may not end up in purgatory- this uncertainty further adds to Hamlet's confusion over what action he should take, if any. My personal feeling is that Hamlet's religious fears and uncertainties intensify Hamlet's dilemma so strongly, that it is only natural that Hamlet is forced into action by a change in the plot or a moment in which Hamlet is pushed into a corner and has to act- I am referring to Act 5 Scene 2 in the play, in which the King and Laertes plot to kill Hamlet by putting poison on the tip of the sword, or alternatively, by handing him a

drink of poison of the former plan fails. The scene takes a crucial turn when the Queen drinks from the cup, in respect to Hamlet's health. She dies, and then Laertes blames the King. It is only at this point that Hamlet is fuelled into a course of action that he would have otherwise felt too indecisive to take.

Hamlet of course kills his father in revenge of his mother as well as his father. This scene is an essential device in providing a logical conclusion to the play. Without being fuelled into such a vengeful rage, it is likely that the time taken for Hamlet to commit any action could not be married with any suitable duration of time a play should last for! On this note, I conclude that Hamlet's dilemma, influenced by his fears; depression and indecisiveness could not be logically resolved on his own exclusive decision to act.