

The dominant images  
of the play powerfully  
reinforce the main  
theme

[Government](#), [Corruption](#)



In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the theme of corruption and decay is a running feature. We follow a sequence of this corruption mostly through one character, King Claudius, which inevitably leads to all other characters who come in contact with this man being ultimately tarnished also. The very moment we are informed of Claudius' "foul and most unnatural murder", the state of Denmark begins to perish. I believe that this evident theme of corruption and decay is reinforced by Shakespeare time and time again by his masterful use of dominant images throughout. Shakespeare tends to create patterns of imagery to define his characters and in this case his themes. I will discuss three images in relation to the play's theme. One form of this imagery is that of the weed, which despite best efforts to overcome it, still manages to thrive and overrun the better part of human nature. Similar to the multiplication of weeds is the spread of disease, another potent metaphor that is used often throughout Hamlet. Finally, there is poison, which acts in many forms both literally and metaphorically. We are first introduced to the image of the disease and the weed near the beginning of the play. Shakespeare uses the image of the weed in Hamlet's soliloquy just before he has learned of his father's murder. Hamlet has just met with Claudius and Gertrude, who have convinced him not to go to Wittenburg, but to stay in Denmark with them. Hamlet's grief is heartfelt and is exacerbated by his mother's untimely marriage to his uncle "so soon that the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables". He quickly goes on to speak about the corruption in Denmark, and expresses his hatred for the world believing that it is "an unweeded garden/ that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/ Posses it merely". It is clear to me that Denmark is

rotting from the inside out while the entire world is corrupt to young Hamlet — reiterating the main theme of the play using this imagery. The images of disease and the weed continue throughout the play and restate the theme of corruption and decay throughout - the most remarkable and vivid ones occur mainly in Hamlet's speeches. In one scene alone Hamlet speaks of Claudius as "a mildew'd ear, blasting his wholesome brother"; he talks to his mother of "rank corruption, mining all within" and how her marriage to Claudius "takes off the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love/ and sets a blister there". I feel that Shakespeare's continuous use of disease imagery constantly reinforces the theme to great effect. Shakespeare uses his masterful techniques to create the image of disease within Claudius. Irony lies in the fact that Claudius looks upon Hamlet as a disease when in fact it is he who possesses it. Hamlet is viewed as a burden which must be remedied immediately in the eyes of Claudius who considers him to be a threat to both his position and his life. Claudius swears that he is mad believing that "there's something in his soul/o'er which his melancholy sits on brood;/ And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose/ will be some danger" and because of this "like the hectic in my blood he rages. " Although Claudius denies the fact that he is the disease, he is still aware of the fact that his "offence is rank...smells to heaven" and "hath the primal, eldest curse upon't. " He perceives his soul's rottenness and he is trapped by his sin, unable to cleanse his rank soul. We know from the prayer scene that he possesses a conscience yet the disease of corruption that he holds overpowers this guilt. He planted the weed and spread the poison and he infects the uncorrupted whilst manipulating the uncorrupted. It was clear to me, owing to the

expertly crafted images Shakespeare creates, that had this infectious disease of Claudius been left to spread further, the state of Denmark would soon have been in danger of complete infestation of its population. The final image shaped by Shakespeare which restates the main theme of corruption is the image of poison. It runs throughout the play and causes death and disorder in Denmark. The use of poison both begins and ends the play, and metaphorically runs throughout, causing disorder, ruining relationships and corrupting the nation. Denmark is plunged into disorder and corrupted by the poisoning of King Hamlet. To Hamlet, Denmark is even more poisoned than it is to other characters. He sees his whole world as having been thrown in to disorder by the death of his father, and he thinks "Denmark's a prison". Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern this because he feels that while he is in Denmark his life is poisoned and corrupted by Claudius having the throne. Like incestuous marriage, murder between brothers for power is foul and deviant. King Hamlet's ghost describes the sulfurous, tormenting flames of Hell and the murder - foul, strange, and unnatural — carried out against him. The poison, which Claudius poured in King Hamlet's ear, curdled his blood and scaled his skin with a consuming rash. Once this poison was unconstrained into the body of King Hamlet, so too is the "whole ear of Denmark.. by a forged process of my death rankly abused" according to the deceased King. I agree that King Hamlet's body is a symbol of the state of Denmark where in all things that the poison touches are destroyed and I feel that this makes clear, the ever-present theme of corruption. Poison also corrupts many relationships between the characters throughout the play, especially those involving Hamlet. Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius use

Ophelia to discover the cause of Hamlet's madness and regrettably in the process, poison the loving relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet went from loving Ophelia to cursing her all because of the poisoning of Denmark. It is understandable then that Ophelia would refer to Hamlet as "the glass of fashion and the mould of form" in one of her soliloquies. But I think that the purpose of this is to show the essential Hamlet, whose splendid qualities of mind and character are degraded and contaminated by the influence of his father's murder by poisoning. Even the relationship between Hamlet and his mother is poisoned by the metaphorical poisoning created by Shakespeare. Emotions are poisoned throughout the play too. After Polonius' murder, Ophelia is grief-stricken, and according to Claudius her resulting madness "is the poison of deep grief". Here, the image of poison is meant as a great sadness resulting in madness, poisoning one's mind. The poison of grief leads to Ophelia's suicide and more grief for everyone else. It is ironic that in the last act, all major surviving characters — Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes — all meet their deaths by poisoning, unable to escape its intoxicating outcome. In conclusion, weeds, disease and poison are continuous images, both literally and metaphorically throughout the play. They are the main driving forces for the plot which ruin Denmark and the people within it. Every single character is affected by them, along with Denmark as a whole. Metaphorically they ruin relationships and corrupt the state; literally poison is a treacherous and deceitful method of murder, and in both cases these images affect more than just the intended target, they diffuse to all the people around that target. Undoubtedly, without these strong metaphorical images, the theme of

corruption and decay would be unknown to the audience. It is Shakespeare's expertises that allow us view the main theme in conjunction with these images, continuously reinforcing the theme.