

# Universal themes in hamlet

Literature, William Shakespeare



Hamlet English Assessment Hamlet is a famous Shakespearean play and also boasts major popularity as an English literature text. The text was written early in the 17th century (being performed in 1603) and its ability to last the test of time is solely due to the universal themes that Shakespeare has infused it with. These universal themes include repentance, revenge and madness or more precisely feigned madness. In this essay context, techniques, critical analysis and these key universal themes will be described so that the timelessness of Hamlet can be recognised and understood. The play Hamlet is a revenge tragedy that was written during the Elizabethan era where Christianity was cemented in the people's culture. A revenge tragedy depicts the journey of a central figure as they seek vengeance; a fatal flaw often complicates their journey towards vengeance and becomes the cause of the characters' end, usually occurring shortly after the character completes the act of revenge. The character of Hamlet links to the context of the time as at the time, the uprising of the Renaissance Humanist movement was occurring and Shakespeare uses this as he portrays Hamlet's character as an intelligent humanist. One of the universal themes that Hamlet includes is gaining repentance for sin; this is a major scene in the play that which is most evident in Act 3, Scene 3. In this scene we see Claudius desperately trying to attain some salvation over the rush of guilt that Hamlet's play has placed upon him because of the crime he committed — " a brother's murder". The strong use of imagery and personification highlights Claudius great level of struggle that he is undergoing due to his crime " Oh my offence is rank... " and the metaphor he finishes the sentence with "... it smells to heaven". At this point Hamlet has found Claudius, yet still struggles

to kill him as he does not believe that Claudius deserves to be sent to heaven for being killed while he is in prayer. This is an important scene as it contrasts with the scene where Hamlet impulsively kills Polonius and finally when the revenge he takes on Claudius is also a spontaneous action.

Hamlet's soliloquy in this scene provides dramatic irony and also a display of Hamlet's tragic flaw which is his intellectual ability rendering him incapable of acting spontaneously. The dramatic irony is present in Hamlet's soliloquy as he decides not to kill Claudius while he is praying; however Claudius prayers are in vain as he states that he is unable to repent. " My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go".

Hamlet's tragic flaw in this scene leaves the reader doubting that Hamlet is capable of avenging his father, although it is known in a revenge tragedy that revenge is only accomplished shortly before the hero's demise. This comes in accordance to the natural order of God which is formerly known as the chain of being, when a king is slain, many must meet their demise for the world to be resolved allowing living to return to normal. In Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet shows his respect and forgiveness of Laertes " But I am very sorry, good Horatio, that to Laertes I forgot myself. " Even though they both ended up fighting to the death they were at peace with one another and had each gained forgiveness. This suggests that these characters were able to attain salvation as each of their deaths were peaceful, this contrasts with Claudius appeal for forgiveness in Act 3, Scene 3, as we know that it was in vain.

Claudius death was displayed as violent and absent from peace which suggests that Claudius did not receive salvation. This contrast depicts a good versus evil situation as it suggests that those who are good receive peace in

death and therefore ultimately receive salvation, in comparison to the evil who receive pain and violence in death which reflects their eternity. The next theme I'll analyse is feigned madness which is most evident in Act 3, Scene 1. In this scene Hamlet begins to converse with Ophelia using terms of great affection and imagery " The fair Ophelia. --Nymph in thy orisons. " This contrasts strongly with the terms of animosity which he uses towards Ophelia later in the scene. " You should have not believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not. " This contrast provides evidence for Hamlet's mental instability or ' madness'. The scene ends with Ophelia's soliloquy, within this soliloquy she doubles her sentences " Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down" " T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see. " This doubling within her sentences is used to create emphasis to the pain she felt when witnessing Hamlet's madness due to his state of mental instability " Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown. " In Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet tells his old friends Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that he is feigning madness. " You are welcome but my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived. " " I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. " This is an unexpected and odd admittance as earlier in the scene Hamlet had suspicions that these two were involved in the plot against him. " Nay then I have an eye of you. —If you love me, hold not off. " The excerpts from these two scenes make it evident that Hamlet is not legitimately mad and is instead using madness as a ploy to trouble those against him. Hamlet is portrayed as partially paranoid as he is accusing his old friends and using madness to confuse the girl he loves, however there is good reason for his

paranoia as in both situations he was being played. It can be suggested that this is reason for his tragic flaw of delayed action due to over thinking as he has few people he can trust and therefore feels the need to research his own answers. He also used his feigned madness tactically as he used it to put on a suspicious play that unveiled Claudius secret and was proof to Hamlet that he was guilty/ worthy of revenge. The final theme is central to a revenge tragedy, and like many other Shakespearean tragedies the revenge is delayed. The concept of revenge is most evident in Hamlet's second soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 2, where he states that he was " Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell. " This line is the reason that Hamlet does not seek revenge immediately as he was unsure if the ghost of old Hamlet was a conjuration of the underworld or not and in part if old Hamlet provided valid information. This idea also returns in Act 3, Scene 3, where Claudius is praying, Hamlet decides to delay his revenge so that he doesn't attenuate Claudius' fate and send him to heaven rather than hell. Through this task of avenging his father Hamlet assesses all components, as he is struggling with thoughts of killing for honour yet not killing as a Christian. Hamlet struggles with this dilemma up to the final scene where he is able to resolve it because two more factors occurred, self-defence as the king has had Hamlet poisoned and to amend another wrong. Hamlet struggles with his own understanding and who is trustworthy due to this great task laid upon him. This suggests that although personal battles are difficult a task or battle in the name of someone else is often massive in comparison. I feel that the universal themes discussed in this essay as well as others that weren't discussed are central to the timelessness of Hamlet. Through analysing these themes in

key scenes i have gained a greater understanding of Hamlet's character and i feel the reader makes connections to Hamlet because of his humanistic nature and traits. This connection between character and audience as well as Shakespeare's representation of the context of the time through the character Hamlet engage the reader in Hamlets journey towards the Elizabethan theme of morality in obeying God's natural order. A modern audience has less confrontation with the issues of sin and death however the moral values and the values of life present in Hamlet are still applicable. Hamlet's ability to convey moral and textual principles with a Christian based humanism character persevered its popularity through to modern society.