

Essay on hamlet

[Law](#), [Evidence](#)



Shakespeare coined the line, "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players." Discuss the importance of reality and appearances in Hamlet.

The opening two scenes of Hamlet signal Shakespeare's preoccupation with appearance and reality. In the opening scene, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo are at pains to stress that the ghost they have seen looks like the old king, but may not be. In the second scene Gertrude asks Hamlet why his grief for his father "seems so particular with thee"? (1, 2, 75). Hamlet's reply - "Seems madam? Nay it is; I know not seems" (1, 2, 76) shows that in his case his appearance (his black mourning clothes which he has refused to remove for his mother's marriage to Claudius) are a genuine reflection of how he feels inside. Not everyone in Elsinore is so honest about their feelings.

The players arrive at Elsinore in Act 2, scene two, and immediately Hamlet's mood changes. Earlier in the scene Hamlet has had to put up with Polonius's crass attempts to discover what has caused Hamlet's depression. Then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, and only after persistent questioning by Hamlet do they admit that, although they know Hamlet from their youth, they have not come to Elsinore freely - they have been summoned by the king and are being paid by him to find out what is wrong with Hamlet.

Therefore, when the players burst onstage (in productions there are often several of them and they are accompanied by music), they bring a breath of fresh air to Elsinore. Hamlet likes them, knows them from the past, and admires their skill. His enthusiasm is clear and he immediately requests the leading player to perform a famous speech from a play about the siege of Troy. By the end of the speech, the actor is crying. This is the ultimate

conflict of the dichotomy between acting and appearance. The player is trained to appear to feel emotion for the dead Queen Hecuba, but he is only acting. Shakespeare is preoccupied with the importance of acting and reality because in Hamlet so many characters are acting – pretending to be what they are not.

The players' arrival at Elsinore has two immediate consequences. Firstly, Hamlet asks them to perform The Murder of Gonzago on the following evening with a speech which Hamlet writes inserted into the performance. The performance of the play and Claudius's reaction to it give Hamlet his first proof that the Ghost's words are true and that Claudius really did kill Hamlet's father. This confirmation of Claudius's guilt leads to increased resolution on Hamlet's part. Secondly, when the players leave the stage, Hamlet delivers a soliloquy in which he notes the irony of the feigned affection of the actor for Hecuba in contrast with his own lack of action about his father's murder. He uses this contrast to criticize himself, although in truth he is yet to receive proof that the ghost is speaking the truth. Even the ghost's exact status is unclear: it looks like Hamlet's father and it sounds like Hamlet's father, but appearances in this play can be very deceptive.

Very few characters in Hamlet act in the way they really feel – most are especially putting on an appearance. Claudius spends the entire play pretending to like Hamlet and to be a responsible and caring king, but in reality he has murdered his own brother to get the throne and his apparent solicitude for Hamlet is merely a disguise to find out how much Hamlet knows about or suspects his past actions. In this sense he sees Hamlet as a threat to his political authority. It is unclear how far his affection for Gertrude

is real or feigned: in an elective monarchy a good way to secure your position might well be to marry the dead king's wife, so perhaps his 'love' for Gertrude is an act. In this sense he sees Hamlet as a political threat to his power and authority. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are clearly pretending to be Hamlet's friends, when they are actually being paid by the king. Polonius is always probing Hamlet in order to find out what is wrong with him and often says things he does not mean. Therefore, Hamlet is surrounded by people who pretend to be what they are not.

Polonius even uses his daughter in an attempt to manipulate Hamlet. It is clear that Hamlet and Ophelia have been romantically involved in some way. In Act1, scene 3, Polonius orders Ophelia to have nothing to do with Hamlet – not to communicate with him in any way. Then in Act 3, scene 1, he has encouraged Ophelia to see Hamlet again – but only so that she can return his “remembrances” (93) and, even more importantly, so that Polonius and Claudius can eavesdrop on their conversation in order to discover the cause of Hamlet's ‘madness’ or depression. At a specific point in the scene – just before Hamlet says, “Where's your father?” (131). In productions of the play there is a noise from behind the arras where Polonius and Claudius are hiding and this noise prompts Hamlet's question. It also, crucially, shows Hamlet that he cannot even trust the woman he once loved. Hamlet generalizes about all women in response to Ophelia's treachery and says to her:

God has given you one face and you make yourselves another; you jig, you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on it; it hath made me mad.

(3, 1, 145 -148).

Shakespeare shows here that in the world of Elsinore, even personal, intimate relationships are not always what they seem. Hamlet is watched and spied on all the time; he has no idea whom he can trust. However, even Hamlet's madness is an act, and the long quotation above is also for the benefit of Polonius whom he now knows is listening to his every word. Even Hamlet himself starts to act and pretend to be something he is not. He feigns madness and puts on an "antic disposition in order to deflect attention from his real concerns (whether the ghost was telling the truth about Claudius and what he should do if it was). It is significant that Hamlet is absent from the stage for most of Act Four. His adventures with the pirates away from the stifling deceit of Elsinore allow him to return and be his true self. He impulsively leaps into Ophelia's grave, and sets off for the fencing match in a calm and resolved frame of mind, despite Horatio's fears that he will be in danger. At it is at the fencing match with Laertes that he dies, because it is not a fencing match at all – it is a plot to kill Hamlet with the poisoned sword. Thus, at the end of the play Hamlet is a victim of appearances and he dies really because he is too trusting.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. 1996. London: Heinemann. Print.