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Literature, William Shakespeare



A Thin Line Between Justice and Fear: An Exploration of Hamlet's Inaction

In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, there are many situations that make the reader wonder why Hamlet doesn't take action in a timely manner. Hamlet seems to struggle with taking action due to moral and religious reasons. Aside from constantly thinking and considering things, he is also clever in coming up with excuses not to act. Because of this, Hamlet is not able to fulfill his father's wish of being avenged.

It can be argued that Hamlet is a coward, which Hamlet himself proves from the things he says in the play. This cowardice prevents him from obtaining justice for his father's death. The text says, " Thus conscience dost make cowards of us all" (3. 1. 85). By this, Hamlet acknowledges that his conscience keeps him from fulfilling his father's wish of avenging his death by killing Claudius. Claudius is Hamlet's uncle who becomes his stepfather very shortly after his father's death. Although Hamlet is able to gather some evidence that Claudius might have indeed poisoned and killed Hamlet's father, his moral obligations and his fears borne from religious beliefs outweigh his desire to avenge his father. His fears of the moral and religious repercussions of killing another man overshadow whatever courage and bravery he had in killing Claudius.

Another instance that shows Hamlet's cowardice is when he is contemplating suicide. In the text it says, " That the Everlasting had not fix'd his canon' gainst self-slaughter" (1. 2. 129-58). This scene is the very first time that Hamlet thinks about committing suicide, which is brought about by his frustration and desperation over the murder of his father and the marriage of his father's murderer to his mother shortly afterwards.

However, Hamlet is again seen as considering it without really acting on it. As Marowitz (n. pag.) so strongly comments, " I despise Hamlet. He is a slob. A talker, an analyzer, a rationalizer. Like the parlor liberal or paralyzed intellectual, he can describe every facet of a problem, yet never pull his finger out."

His contemplation of suicide in itself is a show of cowardice. " In order to escape his heartache, he cowardly thinks about killing himself" (" Soliloquy Essays").

Again, too, his moral and religious beliefs dictate that it is wrong to kill oneself. However, this can also be just an excuse to avoid death. It can be that his real reason for not wanting to commit suicide is that he fears death and the uncertainties that come with it. This is especially since no one has come back from the dead to talk about what death is like.

Another of Hamlet's quotes that shows his cowardice is when he says, " To be, or not to be: that is the question" (3. 1. 58-90). This is a very famous quote in our culture. With it, Hamlet is basically asking if he should live or not. Again, this shows his indecisiveness and lack of conviction about something that he wants to do, which in this case, is committing suicide.

Although he contemplates death to escape the things in life that he cannot control and although he believes that he'll be free of life's worries once he dies, his fear of death gets the better of him. He is also conflicted with the dilemma of whether killing for revenge would be a moral choice.

In Act III scene iii, Hamlet enters a room in the castle. He has just made the decision to kill Claudius. However, he finds Claudius praying where he is admitting to killing his brother, the former king of Denmark. This could have

been the perfect opportunity for Hamlet to kill Claudius, but again, Hamlet comes up with religious excuses to spare Claudius' life. He thinks that Claudius might go to heaven if he kills Claudius while the latter is praying, but he wants Claudius to suffer more. If Hamlet only knows, however, Claudius isn't sincere in his prayer. Claudius says, " My words fly up, my thoughts remain below" (3. 3. 96).

One can argue that Hamlet is not a coward but that he is quite brave. However, his cowardice is evident throughout the play - up until the very end. There are only a few instances where he shows some bravery. One is when he kills Polonius whom he thought at the time as Claudius. " How now a rat?" (3. 4. 58-90) shows Hamlet's bravery in that instance. Another instance where Hamlet shows bravery is when he finds out that Claudius tried to poison him and finally becomes brave enough to kill Claudius. This shows that Hamlet takes action only when there is just reason to do so. This can be because as a prince of Denmark, he is well respected by the citizens for his cleverness and understanding. He is concerned that acting without thinking and making a mistake may cause his people to lose respect for him. On the other hand, however, Hamlet's concern for his reputation may be because of his fear of having his reputation tarnished; hence, still pointing towards cowardice. He does not have the strength of will and conviction to stand by what he thinks is right and cares too much about what others think of him and his actions.

In addition, his acts of bravery in killing Polonius and Claudius may still be rooted in fear; hence, cowardice. Hamlet is quick to act in these cases for fear that Polonius - whom he thought was Claudius - and Claudius himself

would endanger his life or kill him; hence, Hamlet felt that he'd rather kill them first than be killed himself. This shows that he can be brave only when it suits himself.

It is very evident throughout the play that Hamlet is a coward for the most part. He is very indecisive and lacks conviction. His conscience, as well as his moral and religious beliefs, keeps him second guessing his decisions and actions, causing him not to act on them in the end. Although he can be brave when he chooses to and when bravery is favorable for him, he is for the most part a coward who would rather save himself - his image and well being - than take risks for the sake of justice.

In this light, it can be said that the attainment of justice requires courage and bravery, which Hamlet does not display at the beginning of the play. This is affirmed when, at the end of the play, Hamlet finally musters the courage to kill Claudius and gets to obtain justice for his father.

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