

# Death in hamlet

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



The story Hamlet is centralized around one common theme that stands as the constant dynamic struggle. Death threads its way through the entirety of Hamlet, from the opening scene's confrontation with a dead man's ghost to the bloodbath of the final scene, which leaves almost every main character dead. Despite so many deaths, however, Shakespeare's treatment of the issue of death is especially obvious through his portrayal of Hamlet who is presented as a person preoccupied with the idea of death and the Ghost of King Hamlet. Hamlet constantly contemplates death from many angles. He is both seduced and repelled by the idea of suicide, but, in the famous gravedigger scene, he is also fascinated by the physical reality of death. In a way, Hamlet can be viewed as extended dialogue between Hamlet and death. As Hamlet progresses as a character in the story, he advances through many understandings of mortality and death and how it applies to himself and the characters around him. In the beginning he is much more believing in the concept that life is just a cruel stepping stone to death and beyond, but as he grows as a character and becomes more experienced, he understands the huge negative impact death plays on man. It is through these characters that the dramatist reveals his ambiguous representation of the principal theme. From the very beginning Hamlet reflects a youthful idolization of death, living life as a journey toward death. Although he is afraid of the Ghost, he tries to get in touch with him. Initially Hamlet is anxious about death, because he does not know what awaits him after death. Hamlet reflects his anxiety in one famous soliloquy, where he demonstrates the controversy of the issue of death. As he claims, "But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose

bourne / No traveler returns, puzzles the will / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than to fly to others we know not of" (3. 1. 86-90). However, as Hamlet collides with cruelty, murders, injustice and deaths, he seems to form a certain unconcern towards death. In his search of revenge, Hamlet thinks much about death and afterlife. But these attempts to revenge for his father are only a prerequisite to Hamlet's thoughts of committing suicide. This obsession with death gradually drives him mad; William Shakespeare demonstrates this obsession with implicit mockery. For instance, when Hamlet kills Ophelia's father, he is not able to remember where he hides his body; instead he starts to madly speak about the worms that eat a dead body. Shakespeare demonstrates that even Hamlet's appearance shows his obsession with death; he wears black clothes and looks depressed. In the graveyard scene Shakespeare intensifies Hamlet's preoccupation with death, revealing Hamlet's gloomy thoughts. As he claims, "No, faith, not a jot; but to follow him thither with modesty enough and likelihood to lead it; as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returned into dust; the dust is earth (Shakespeare, 1985 5. 1. 201-206). In fact, the image of the grave is shown several times throughout the play to reveal the character's attitude towards death. With the exception of Hamlet, all characters demonstrate fear and pity at the sight of the grave that they associate with death. As Hamlet constantly thinks of death, he does not value his own life, as well as other people's lives. As a result, Hamlet appears to be also responsible for the death of Ophelia, Claudius, Polonius, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. Thus, Hamlet's obsession transforms him from a miserable youth into a cruel murderer. However,

contrary to other characters' deaths that are portrayed with a certain degree of irony, Hamlet's death is depicted in more serious terms. From the very beginning of Shakespeare's play each death seems to be blackened and is soon forgotten by other characters. For instance, Hamlet demonstrates that his father's death is already neglected by people, although King Hamlet died only a couple of months ago. When Horatio claims, My lord, I came to see your father's funeral, Hamlet responds: I prithee, do not mock me, fellow student. I think it was to see my mother's wedding (Shakespeare, 1985 1. 2. 183-185). Such an ironic viewpoint reveals that even the most generous people are forgotten. The death of Polonius is also ignored by the principal characters; Ophelia and Laertes are too preoccupied with their emotions and feelings to remember their father, and Hamlet who accidentally kills Polonius expresses only some sympathetic words: Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell (Shakespeare, 1985 3. 4. 38). Ophelia's death is described in even more ironical portrayal, as the dramatist presupposes that her death is a result of suicide and asks: Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation? (Shakespeare, 1985 3. 4. 38). Similar to Ophelia's death, the deaths of Gertrude, Claudius, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are able to arouse only sympathy in readers. In this regard, Hamlet's death stands out against a background of other deaths; it evokes respect and powerful emotions towards the character. Although Hamlet expresses irony to death throughout the play, his death is a tragedy for those who knew him. As Horatio claims, Now cracks a noble heart. / Goodnight sweet prince. And a flight of angels sing thee to thy rest (Shakespeare, 1985 5. 2. 397-398). Hamlet's death is the tragedy for the

whole country, because it has lost its noble king and can hardly find another great person. Fortinbras considers that For he was likely, had he been put upon, to have proved most royal Speak loudly for him (Shakespeare, 1985 5. 2. 443-446). Hamlet's noble death corresponds with the ideas of death maintained by such a Renaissance philosopher as Michel de Montaigne (1910) who claims that death uncovers the true essence of a person. According to him, a person can be really judged at his/her last moments. The similar attitude towards death is revealed by Sir Walter Raleigh who claimed that only death could provide people with real understanding of life. During his imprisonment Raleigh demonstrated real courage and was not afraid of death. As he wrote in the letter to his wife, I perceive that my death was determined from the first day (Raleigh, 1940, p. 82). In this regard, Hamlet's real self is obvious only after his death. At the end of the play Hamlet accepts his death with courage and inevitability. However, Shakespeare demonstrates that, despite Hamlet's indifference to life, he needs much time and courage to prepare himself for killing and death. As Hamlet observes numerous deaths, he becomes immune to his own fortune. He starts to perceive death with irony, realising that life has no value for him. To a certain extent, it is Hamlet's insanity that helps him to adjust to the idea of death and succeed in his revenge. As Hamlet collides with cruel reality, he seems to be mentally destroyed by it: Who does it, then? His madness. If't be so, / Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd; His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy (Shakespeare, 1985 2. 233-235). Simultaneously, the principal character manages to create an ironical attitude towards death that is intensified by the utilisation of Biblical and classical allusions. For instance,

Hamlet's revenge resembles the classical story of Priam and Pyrrhus; when Priam kills the father of Pyrrhus, the latter decides to kill Priam in revenge. In Hamlet's case the irony is explained by the repetition of the situation, but Hamlet finds it difficult to succeed in his revenge; he avoids some fortunate situations and kills Claudius only at the end of the play. Another allusion is taken from the Bible: when Shakespeare (1985) mentions the primal eldest curse A brother's murder (3. 3. 40-41), he draws a parallel between the story of Cain and Abel with the murder of King Hamlet by Claudius. Although Claudius seems to ask for forgiveness in the church, he does not really repent of his action. When Hamlet recognises the truth about his father's death, he decides to make a play 'The Murder of Gonzago', where he implicitly depicts the murder of his father by King Claudius. Ironically, the play has a great impact on Hamlet who has to suppress his desire to kill Claudius and his mother Gertrude. As he states, Let not ever the soul of Nero enter this firm bosom. / Let me be firm, not unnatural. / I will speak daggers to her, but use none (Shakespeare, 1985 3. 2. 426-429). As Agrippina, the character of the play 'The Murder of Gonzago', is killed by her son Nero, Hamlet is afraid of his desire to also kill his mother. Another element of death that Shakespeare strengthens in his play is the Dance of Death that is crucial for understanding the dramatist's interpretation of the issue. In the Renaissance this dance was performed in the form of a carnival, during which some people disguised themselves into skeletons and guided other people into 'afterlife'. As a humorous festivity, the Dance of Death was popular among different groups of people and was depicted in many dramatic works (Freedberg, 1989). The image of the Dance of Death

occupies the principal place in Hamlet's graveyard scene. In Hamlet's conversation with the gravedigger, Shakespeare uncovers many important issues of existence. For instance, Hamlet asks Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with them? Mine ache to think on't (Shakespeare, 1985 5. 1. 91). The Dance of Death has a great impact on Hamlet, especially when he sees the skull of his friend Yorick who occupied a position of fool in the court during his life (Triggs, 1990, pp. 73-76). Hamlet realises that death is inevitable for all people, as he puts it, We fat all creatures else to fat us and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service - two dishes but to one table (Shakespeare, 1985 4. 2. 21-24). The controversy of the Ghost reflects the controversial attitude of Elizabethan society to the issue of death and afterlife. If the Ghost is thought to come back from Purgatory, then Hamlet may believe that it is the Ghost of his father who suffers much and is in search of revenge (Low, 1999, pp. 463-472). However, the Ghost may also appear to come back from Hell; in this regard, his aim is to turn Hamlet into insanity. William Shakespeare reveals this controversy, but he does not solve it. The issue remains open throughout the play and is aggravated with the disappearance of the Ghost. Greenblatt (2001) even claims that purgatory exists in the imaginary universe of Hamlet and [it provides] many of the deep imaginative experiences, the tangled longing, guilt, pity and rage evoked by More (p. 252). However, the deaths of Hamlet and other principal characters of the play uncover the truth about these people. In particular, throughout the narration Hamlet pretends to have a secret, although he does not reveal it, but at the end he seems to expose his heart and all his secrets:

Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter It is but foolery (Shakespeare, 1985 5. 2. 208-211). Hamlet tries to fool other characters, but instead he fools himself, as he is not able to admit that he is also afraid of death.