

# The conflicts in hamlet research paper examples

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



It is just about impossible to discuss Hamlet without the word “ conflict” coming up. From beginning to end, the tortured path that the young prince of Denmark has to travel is beset with both internal and external battles that begin with the untimely death of his father and end with the death of everyone who could have held power in the kingdom, leaving matters quite vulnerable just as the Norwegian prince Fortinbras shows up. It is this reason why the actors who have played Hamlet have all had to show such range in terms of demonstrating the different modes of internal and external conflict: frustration, rage, acceptance, and resignation, all in their own proper portions of the play. The manic shifts that Mel Gibson, for example, shows as he oscillates from one stage on the conflict cycle to the next, makes his portrayal of the Dane one of the more effective among the film adaptations of the play.

One of the first conflicts that might occur to readers of Hamlet has to do with Man vs. Society and is encapsulated in the question: Why isn't young Hamlet the new king? In the vast majority of monarchies in those days, the crown would have passed from father to son. However, there was some sort of election among the Danish nobility, and the elder Hamlet's brother, Claudius, was named king instead. This oddity gives the play a slightly jarring note from the beginning. It is not the fact of the election itself that makes this unusual; instead, it is the fact that Hamlet does not seem to have been the natural choice. In other countries, when the crown prince is not yet of the age of majority, a regent is named until the monarch reaches that age; however, Hamlet is clearly of adult age, as he is occupied by university studies in Wittenberg. The play itself never explains why Hamlet is not the king, and so

this is a ripe topic of speculation. It may be that the Danish nobility was aware of Hamlet's mental instability and so had demurred at giving him the keys to the government. It may also have been that, given the fact that Hamlet was out of the country pursuing university studies, the nobles wanted a king who was ready to be in the country full time. It is difficult to imagine, though, any incoming king skipping the chance to rule in order to finish a few more semesters; as a result, the first option makes more sense. Many of Hamlet's conflicts are internal, and his first internal conflict hits him right in the first scene: should he believe in the Ghost or not? The Ghost purports to be the elder Hamlet and laments his own "murder most foul, as in the best it is, But this most foul, strange and unnatural" (I. v. 33-34). However, as Hamlet duly notes, this spirit could also have come from the Devil and could be inciting Hamlet to do evil. Even though the Ghost is able to describe his own demise, there is never solid proof (if there can be such a thing) that this is really the spirit of Hamlet's father. Even if one had been able to find or create such proof, there is nothing establishing that the Devil did not send this ghost on an errand to create chaos and tragedy; looking at the way the story turns out, it certainly is plausible that the Devil might well have been looking to cause this sort of trouble.

The next internal conflict that Hamlet faces is how to deal with his new "parents." Within a very short time after the violent death of his father, his mother has married his father's brother, and it is clear from the beginning of the story that this is an erotically charged relationship. On several levels, this is an uncomfortable relationship for just about everyone. Even if one clings to the idea that Gertrude had to marry swiftly in order to maintain her royal

position after the election of Claudius, it is difficult to imagine that (a) Claudius would not have granted her a generous living, given that he was a family member, or that (b) if this had merely been a wedding of convenience, the couple's interactions would not be so erotically charged. As a result, Hamlet has to decide whether or not he is going to be kind to his mother. He is disrespectful to her in public; when he talks to her in private, he angrily confronts her about her relationship with Claudius, given the extremely recent death of her husband. His meanness cuts her to the quick, to the point that she tells him he has "cleft [her] heart in twain" (III. iv. 160); however, it does not cut her to the point where she is willing to leave Claudius. Hamlet's rash murder of Polonius, who had been hiding behind the curtain, gives Gertrude insight into Hamlet's unhinged state of mind. He is clearly conflicted; he loves her and wants her to do the right thing, but his disgust with her actions makes it difficult for him to be civil to her, in public or private.

Hamlet also has to decide what he is going to do with Claudius. On an internal level, this involves the decision whether or not to gain revenge for his father's death. When he comes upon Claudius at prayer, Hamlet has an easy, defenseless target before him – almost as defenseless as the elder Hamlet had been, napping in his garden when Claudius stole up close to him and poured the poison into his ear. The conflict, of course, is that Hamlet believes that if he kills Claudius right after Claudius has finished making confession, then Claudius' soul will be clean and he will go to heaven: "And so he goes to heaven, And so am I reveng'd" (III. iii. 74-75). Of course, the fact that Hamlet is still too conflicted about the deed itself plays a strong role

as well. He simply does not have the resolve to kill Claudius, at least not yet. As a result, this conflict rages on within him further into the play.

The last internal conflict that Hamlet faces in the play is the decision about whether or not to love Ophelia. Clearly, she has decided to love him and even to give her virginity to him. However, his cold refusal of her love ends up leading to her suicide. There is some conflict at work, though, before he refuses her. There is a part of him that scorns her for being so free with his love; when he teases Polonius for being a fishmonger, the play on words indicates that Ophelia is something of a tramp. However, he is also tender with her at times. It is clear that there is something awful at work within his mind when it comes to relationships with women. The betrayal that Gertrude has committed, in Hamlet's mind, by marrying another man so soon after her first husband's death (setting aside, for a moment, the fact that she has married her husband's murderer), appears to have colored his relationships with other women as well. He cannot see Ophelia as anything other than the tramp that he has declared his mother to be, because of her conduct after the death of the elder Hamlet. This conflict resolves itself in a way that brings considerable pain to Ophelia – and to her family.

Externally, Hamlet faces a number of conflicts as well. The first, of course, has to do with Claudius – the only source of both internal and external conflict. Because he knows that he is a murderer, and that the young Hamlet will eventually be more than ready to avenge his father's death, Claudius is on the lookout for signs of conflict. The first does not take long, as Hamlet refers to his relationship to Claudius as “a little more than kin and less than kind” (I. ii. 67). From that point on, the external conflict between the two

men continues to grow. Claudius is wiser in his handling of the building drama, seeing that nothing good will come as Hamlet gets closer and closer to establishing his guilt. Once he finds that Hamlet has slain Polonius (thinking that the man behind the curtain in Gertrude's room was Claudius), and especially once he gives his own guilt away in the play within the play, Claudius realizes that he must remove Hamlet. Using both the ruse with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and then by luring Laertes to his side, Claudius uses all of his wiles to remove this potential thorn from his adulterous, homicidal side.

The conflict with Laertes might be the saddest of them all, even sadder than the internal conflict regarding Ophelia. Laertes and Hamlet had long been friends, but Ophelia's suicide and Polonius' death have made Laertes thirst for revenge. Before their duel, Hamlet laments that he "is of the faction that is wronged/ His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy" (V. ii. 252-253). The insanity that has consumed Hamlet by this point in the play is the simple result of all of these conflicts tearing at his stability. When they stand to fight, Laertes knows that his sword is poisoned; by the end of the duel, when he has been fatally poisoned himself, Laertes realizes – but only too late – that it was Claudius that had orchestrated everything. This loss of such a deep friendship is especially tragic, because it had been such a promising friendship before.

The sum total of all of the conflicts attacking Hamlet is the destruction of his entire family – and the potential conquest of his country. The evil deeds of murder and adultery do not take long to come home to roost; while Claudius may well have thought that he could get away with taking his brother's

place, his time there was but temporary. It is watching these conflicts slowly eat away an intelligent, articulate young man that makes Hamlet such compelling theater.

## **Works Cited**

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