

“self-preservation is  
the first law of  
nature.”

[Law](#), [Security](#)



" Self-preservation is the first law of nature. " The above quote is an often heard line regarding an individual's response to the demands of nature. It can be said that self-preservation and security outweigh the need to act independently and freely of the constraints of others. This is but one of the ways one can attempt to balance out the desire to act independently but also with the need for security. The idea of resolving these seemingly irreconcilable needs is brought up in Shakespeare's play Hamlet, wherein he writes of two main characters who attempt to resolve their need for independence and security. The playwright utilizes character to suggest that in the attempt to reconcile independence and security, it is ultimately the need for self-preservation that takes immediate priority. A character who is faced with the task of uniting his desire to act independently with his need for security is Hamlet. Hamlet shows a melancholy side to him when confronted by these opposing demands. From his soliloquies, the reader is immersed in the thoughts of a pensive young man who struggles with the need for safety and freedom. He debates whether " to be, or not to be, " and although he does not hold his life at a " pin's fee, " his heart harbors discontent with the " unweeded garden that grows to seed. " It is seen that he is conflicted with the demands set upon him by his dead father, as well as that of Claudius and the people of Denmark who want to move on from the passing, and he struggles with the desire to resolve his need for security and autonomy in this matter. From this, it is seen that Hamlet values self-preservation over independence as his soliloquies are only words and not actions, and as such, are the product of his own safety thereby allowing him to immerse himself in the safety of his own thoughts. Furthermore, it is

evidenced that he is a procrastinator in his quest for independent action, and this ultimately turns out to be his tragic flaw. Even though he is set upon the task of avenging his father's "foul and most unnatural death," he stands "unpregnant of his cause." It is clear from this that Hamlet procrastinates in order to preserve his own well being and acts in his own self interest despite the desire to take revenge upon Claudius for his father's death. He does not wish to act independently when his security is put at risk, especially in the presence of a "smiling, damned villain," so he procrastinates in order to put off dealing with matters that might jeopardize his wellbeing. Conversely however, Hamlet has been shown to have an impulsive streak in the face of settling his desires for safety and freedom. This is clearly seen when he "follows [the ghost]" despite the apparitions intentions being unknown. The ghost could be the work of the devil, only to condemn Hamlet to his own personal oblivion, however, he still actively seeks out the spectre because he wishes to learn the truth of the matters concerning his father's death. As well, he displays decisive action when he says the "rat dead, for a ducat, dead." This violent and impulsive action results in the death of Polonius who was eavesdropping on his and Gertrude's conversation. In both of these examples it is seen that Hamlet acts independently and decisively, with the underlying intent being that of self-preservation. He seeks out the ghost's intentions because of his desire to live securely despite the rule of Claudius, and he kills Polonius only because he was acting on behalf of his own primal instinct to preserve himself. From these examples it is inferred that in his desire to harmonize safety and the need for independent action, hamlet acts impulsively to secure the security he craves. Lastly, it is seen that Hamlet

exudes an aura of intelligence and quick wit when opposed by the daunting task of reconciling safety and independence. He has an innate ability to transform a turn of events to his advantage as is witnessed when the players come to put on a show. He utilizes them in order to " catch the conscience of the king, " wherein he collects enough evidence to cement the validity of the ghost's statements. His ability to think quickly is invaluable, as this keeps his wellbeing a top priority while still unifying his need to act freely as well.

Another character who deals with the prospect of reconciling his need to act independently with his need for security is Claudius. Unlike Hamlet who is a procrastinator in his deeds, Claudius is a man of decisive action. This is clearly seen when he decides to have Hamlet sent to England with " fiery quickness" due to his " antic disposition. " It is evident that Claudius does not deliberate on matters that require immediate attention as "[he'll] have Hamlet hence to-night. " From this, it can be inferred that Claudius wishes to preserve himself against a suspicious threat as he manages to actively deal with his adversary as well. In combination with his decisive action, it is known that Claudius is incredibly manipulative in his desire to unify freedom and safety. When Laertes makes his return to Denmark with every intention of avenging his father by killing Claudius, he does everything in his power to give "[Laertes's soul] it[s] due content. " He placates Laertes's indignant spirit and as a result, Laertes end up " rul'd by [Claudius]. " From this, it is seen that Claudius utilizes manipulation for the sake of self-preservation while keeping his own independent actions an ulterior motive. As well, Claudius has displayed a creative and strategic ingenuity when it comes to reconciling his own security and free will. He is determined to be rid of

Hamlet, but his strategic nature indicates that he will do so by way of a cunning scheme. When Laertes and Claudius plan hamlet's demise, Claudius maintains a skillful approach that will allow " purpose[to] hold there. " It is evidenced that Claudius utilizes his own strategic nature in order to act for sake of saving his own flesh. While in the process of working towards acting independently, he also manages to keep his safety a top priority which is his ultimate motive against a dangerous opposition such as Hamlet. Lastly, it is seen that in his pursuit of uniting his own independent action and security, Claudius has shown a paranoid and guilt stricken side to him. He is responsible for the death of his own brother as his " stronger guilt defeats [his] stronger intent. " However, he cannot truly repent as his " words [are] without thought, " and as a result, they will " never to heaven go. " It is seen that because of his desire to remain secure in not only the eyes of the public, but as well as Hamlet and Gertrude, he cannot openly admit to his wrong doings. This is due to the fact that in doing so, he will risk the unbridled and justified wrath of hamlet which will compromise Claudius's sport on the throne. Just like a scavenger whose actions are cowardly in order to live another day, Claudius too, lives securely to rule in the coming days due to his own inability to act independently. In conclusion, it is seen that in the attempt to reconcile ones desire for independent action as well as security, it is ultimately the self-preserving instinct that takes immediate control. This is clearly evidenced by both hamlet and Claudius in Shakespeare's play Hamlet, who although take different approaches to this matter, fundamentally have the same mentality of keeping their desire to be secure the utmost priority. It is derived from the play that it is almost always

security that takes precedence over freedom of actions; however it is up to the members of society to decide for themselves how they wish to approach their own attempt to reconcile their own need for security as well as the desire to act independently. There are many different approaches and ways to attempt this harmonization, and as such, each is tailored to an individual's unique ability to decipher what it is that one really values and desires.