

# Hamlet: analysis of shakespeare's main character

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William Shakespeare's Hamlet (1600-01), regarded by many scholars and critics as his finest play, is based on the story of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, which first appeared in the *Historia Danica*, a Latin text by the twelfth-century historian Saxo Grammaticus. The main protagonist, being Hamlet, the so-called "Dark Prince" of Shakespearean tragedy, is an extremely complex man with a great depth of personality who "suffers from insecurity and a sense of the absurd. . . and as a man and a revenger, shifts from an external struggle for vengeance to an internal one" (McConnell, Internet).

As a person, Hamlet experiences a wide range of emotions linked with specific events, such as being betrayed by his friends and family which causes him much grief and despair that eventually leads to a state of utter melancholy. As an emotional young man, Hamlet becomes greatly disillusioned by the incestuous marriage of his mother Gertrude to Claudius, the present king of Denmark, and grieves over his father's untimely death. He also views his own life with much disgust and disappointment and likens it to an "unweeded garden" full of pitfalls and weariness. Upon the realization that his father was murdered by Claudius, Hamlet's distress multiplies and becomes quite unnerving, especially after the ghost of Claudius demands that Hamlet seek revenge against those who murdered him. However, at the time of this revelation, Hamlet's grief is so overwhelming that he finds it difficult to obey the command of his dead father and wishes that he had never been born to bear the consequences.

Also, critics have often attempted to explain or interpret the actions of Hamlet in this play; the great Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) viewed the character of Hamlet as being full of evil, cruelty, violence and cynicism.

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Conversely, the famous British essayist William Hazlitt sees Hamlet quite differently, for he states that the Prince of Denmark “ is not marked by strength of will or even passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment” (AbsoluteShakespeare, Internet). Also, Hamlet’s sanity has been questioned over the years and has brought about many comments as to whether he was truly mad or was feigning madness; either way, Hamlet the man reinforces his psychological reality through his thoughts and actions.

In essence, Hamlet displays two of the major traits associated with characters of his kind as exemplified in many of Shakespeare’s great plays. Thus, Hamlet is a paradox—he is a noble and sensitive hero but also a tragic hero and a victim of his “ fatal flaw,” a character deficiency which propels much of the plotline in the play. As the ideal Renaissance gentleman/noble, Hamlet’s refinement of spirit is best represented when he criticizes Claudius, the murderous king, for his drunkenness; his great sensitivity of mind is exemplified in his stupor over his mother’s quick re-marriage to Claudius following the death of Hamlet’s father, and his humility is evident in his deep love for Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius the chamberlain and a woman who is socially beneath his stature as the king of Denmark.

As a tragic hero and victim, Hamlet passes through a series of events that test his strengths and weaknesses. At the opening of the play, it is clear to the reader that Claudius has violated the natural order of the kingdom with the murder of the former king and his take-over of the throne which profoundly disturbs Hamlet despite his ignorance of the evil that has been done by his new stepfather. Although Hamlet displays many signs of

weakness, his role in the creation of the evil that runs throughout the play is non-existent. His "fatal flaw" appears to hinge on his procrastination in avenging the death of his father, for if this flaw did not exist there would be no play to read or ponder, i. e. this "waiting game" moves the plot forward and forces the other characters into action. Yet in the conclusion of the play, Hamlet does achieve his revenge but at a cost far too high, for every major character, as a result of his "fatal flaw" induced procrastinations, is killed which places the play of Hamlet in the category of a genuine Greek tragedy.

But in contrast to this, Hazlitt understands Hamlet as "little of the hero as a man can well be" who is drawn by his thoughts and actions into the "strangeness of the situation" (AbsoluteShakespeare, Internet). In addition, Hamlet, despite being the dominant character in the play, "is not a commanding figure," for his "posture (as a prince) is passive. . . towards the events that have befallen him" (Moore, All Shakespeare, Internet), all of which goes against Hamlet as a true tragic figure.

Several key scenes in Hamlet illustrate these emotions and traits and also show other sides of Hamlet's complex character. He seems to derive great pleasure from observing and relishing the suffering of other people in his orbit, not to mention his obvious lack of concern for Ophelia, for he tells her that ". . . you make your wantonness your ignorance. . . I say we will have no more marriage. . . all but one shall live; to a nunnery, go" (III. i. 52). With this statement, Hamlet is telling Ophelia that she represents the lowest form of womanhood, and with this, Hamlet send her off to a nunnery which in his eyes is also a place for prostitutes, for he later tells her that she is a whore.

Yet Ophelia obviously has deep feelings for the "Dark Prince" and these harsh words set her into a position of much suffering which later led to her suicide.

Another incident closely related to a form of mental torture occurs when Hamlet finds himself alone with Claudius and slyly decides against instituting his revenge towards the new king until he is in a position of utter debauchery. "When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage, or in the incestuous bed" (III. iii. 92), Hamlet will then kill him and send his soul to eternal damnation. This may seem like an act of pure brutality, but in fact it is quite fair, due to Hamlet's father being murdered before given the chance to confess his sins to God.

In regard to Hamlet's alleged madness, it would appear that he is indeed mad, for following the tragic murder of his father and seeing his ghost, Hamlet falls into a state of complete insanity. After killing Polonius the chamberlain by stabbing him through a curtain, Hamlet is asked to reveal the location of his body, whereby he replies "At supper. . . Not where he eats, but where (he) is eaten" (IV. iii. 19), meaning that Polonius is now quite dead. Hamlet later tells Claudius that the body of Polonius is beneath the stairs; "You shall nose him," he says, "as you go up the stairs into the lobby" (IV. iii. 37).

The universal appeal of Hamlet seems to rest mostly on the character of Hamlet, for after being called upon to avenge his father's murder, he begins to experience many problems concerning duty, morality and ethics, all of which reflect the complexity of his character and his personality. As Frank N.

Magill points out, “ In Hamlet himself are mirrored the hopes and fears, the feelings of frustration and despair, of all mankind” (1449).

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