

How does hamlet's character develop during the play

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The character of Hamlet develops in many complex ways throughout the play. Shakespeare develops the character incorporating all the major elements of what has now become to be known as a "revenge play". The main conventions and strict formula of a "revenge play" are all observed in Hamlet. Just as in Hamlet, all the "revenge plays" contain the appearance of a ghost who cries for revenge. The hero must disguise himself in order to obtain the information he needs to justify his acts of revenge. Sometimes the hero employs physical disguise; at other times he feigns madness which threatens to become real.

Also, a female character goes mad from excessive grief. The main villain is a scheming politician who has murdered for both lust and power. The hero is forced by some circumstance to delay the consummation of his plot. Finally the act of revenge demands the death of the revenger as well. Hamlet as a character goes through many changes during the play; states of madness, anguish, sorrow and desire for vengeance. In parts of the play he is not able to cope with the stresses and strains that his elusive form of revenge is thrusting upon him. At the beginning of the play, when we first meet Hamlet, we see the first aspect of his character.

He is suffering inconsolable grief over the death of his father. We also see that Hamlet's character considers honour, loyalty and a sense of morality to be very important virtues. He has all these characteristics himself. At the beginning we see that he is very preoccupied about the unseemly haste with which his mother Gertrude has married his uncle Claudius. In Act 1, Scene 2 he talks about "incestuous sheets". He is very distressed about his mother's

disloyalty to his father's memory. In fact he is in such a low state of mind about Gertrude and Claudius's betrayal that he even considers killing himself:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God,
O God. But he knows this is wrong as it would go against God's will, therefore staying true to God. This shows that Hamlet is a religious man, and we can see the character's great sorrow and anguish. We also learn a great deal about Hamlet's melancholic state of mind from his soliloquies. He is gloomy about the whole world, and therefore he is not only despondent about his father's death and the recent events in Elsinore, but life in general: How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to all the uses of this world! " This shows the full extent of his character.

Because of the tone of these soliloquies, we learn that he was never really a happy, carefree student, but someone who was a thinker and philosopher. He is clearly an intellectual and well-educated. Interestingly, although Hamlet condemns the marriage of Gertrude to (in his opinion) the inferior Claudius he vows to keep silent. We therefore learn of his ability to control himself and his emotions early on in the play: It is not, nor it cannot come to good.

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. In Act 1, Scene 4 the ghost reveals that he is Hamlet's father and how he met his death. He urges Hamlet to seek revenge for his " foul and most unnatural murder". From this

point onwards, Hamlet tries to come to a decision about taking revenge for his father's murder. But we learn of the character's major flaw, that of indecision and delay. Indeed, it is fair to say that had Hamlet acted early, he could have prevented seven out of the eight deaths that occurred in the play. We learn more about Hamlet's character when we see that he is a very thoughtful and introspective man.

He is painfully aware of the moral consequences of killing another man.

Hamlet is a deeply moral person and he knows that to kill a man will mean that he is also condemning himself to Hell. But equally he is breaking the moral code of the time that states that blood must be revenged by blood. So he is caught in this very complicated decision. Hamlet suffers great anguish because he is analysing everything and feels unable to take immediate action. His character is that of an honourable man, and he considers his father to have been an honourable king. As an honourable man he cannot take a straight forward "eye for an eye" type of revenge.

But by the same token, he feels great guilt that he is not taking the action that people of the time would expect of him. Hamlet's character is also full of contradictions too. He behaves in a way which is dishonourable by killing Polonius. He is very ruthless when he rewrites the warrant that sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths: I will delve one yard below their mines And blow them at the moon. (Act 3, scene 4) He also behaves very badly towards Ophelia. Hamlet's character shows great moral complexity. He takes a very rigid and unbending view of female honour. He thinks both Gertrude and Ophelia lacked purity.

He attacks Ophelia in Act 3, scene 1, when he is "mad": Get thee to a nunnery-why wouldst though be a breeder of sinners? But he is also aware of his own character flaws and weaknesses, and the character has much self-loathing: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, or time to act them in... We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us. This is a low view of all men. Ophelia's speech in Act 1, scene 1, shows us how Hamlet's character has changed.

She says he was the ideal prince ("the expectancy and rose of the fair state") i. e. the hope and crowning glory of Denmark. But now he is "blasted with ecstasy" i. e. madness. "Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" When Hamlet swears revenge for the murder of his beloved father he does not do it straightaway. We learn that Hamlet feigns madness to disguise an investigation into the murder of his father. However this delays the killing of Claudius (he puts on this "antic disposition"). Frequently Hamlet shows his intellectual side when he takes part in witty exchanges with Polonius or when he takes part in clever banter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

He also presents to us his philosophising side when he gives his famous speech on mortality in the Gravediggers scene. He talks about death and how it cannot be avoided even with wealth and power. Hamlet's over-analytical character is shown over and over again. One example of this is in Act one, Scene four when he is answering Horatio. Gradually as the speech goes on his thoughts start to wonder and he philosophises about topics which are not related to Horatio's inquiry. Hamlet demonstrates another side of his character when we learn that he can be a man of action.

For example, he is speaking with his mother Gertrude about the wrongs of her marriage with Claudius and how she is betraying Old Hamlet. He then hears noise behind the curtain and automatically assumes it is Claudius. Hamlet stabs the man behind the curtain only to find it is actually Polonius. Another example is when Hamlet boards the pirate ship which is pursuing him. We learn this in Act 4, Scene 6, when Horatio reads Hamlet's letter. Hamlet put on "compelled valour" and "in the grapple I boarded them". However he is not enough of an action man.

It is in fact his delaying and indecisiveness on whether to exact revenge that proves to be his downfall. It does not only lead to his downfall and that of six other characters. Hamlet is a procrastinator and this is shown many times. In Act 3, Scene 3, he says "Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge". In Act 2, Scene 3, he convinces himself that his plan to add sixteen lines to the play, The murder of Gonzago, and watch Claudius's reaction is the best plan of action. Time and again Hamlet substitutes thought for action. He also expresses his thoughts on death throughout the play, which cause his thoughts not to be focused on revenge.

Hamlet's longing for death is shown a great deal over the course of the play. It occurs in Act 3, scene 1: To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows o outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles... We also learn that because Hamlet's inability "to do" rather than merely just "to be" is another reason for his tragic death. His tendency to reflect rather than act is shown in his speech mainly about death: Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of
thought,

And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents
turn awry And lose the name of action. Soft you now, We have learnt over
the course of the play Hamlet is a melancholic young man with thoughts
always focusing on one main obsession of death. He demonstrates himself to
be at times a man of action but also a man whose indecisiveness leads to his
own death. His delay and unfocused thoughts on revenge also result in the
deaths of six other characters. But most of all it is his moral integrity that
proves to be the tragic flaw of Hamlet's character.