

# By close examination of three soliloquies, discuss hamlet's changing

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



Hamlet's state of mind changes throughout the play, and the soliloquies studied show this clearly. To better understand how and why Shakespeare uses dramatic devices, language, punctuation and imagery, to create effects, it would be beneficial to look at a brief background of the play, along with Shakespeare's writing style and the idea of a 'Tragic Hero' evident in his tragedies. Clearly, the tragic hero in question is Hamlet. Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's most acclaimed tragedies, was written in about 1602, and published in 1624.

Shakespeare, it would appear, set it in the 16th Century, however the time period fluctuates depending on the group who perform it. Kenneth Brannagh's version, for example, is set in the early 19th century; this much can be ascertained simply by costume and technology shown within the production, Hamlet. Hamlet is written in blank verse, usually unrhymed iambic pentameter. Hamlet himself is what is known as a tragic hero; in Shakespearian context, the term 'tragic hero' usually refers to someone high-born, in a difficult situation; they must resolve this situation, however their 'fatal flaw' often prevents them from doing so.

The 'fatal flaw' is common in Shakespearian tragedies, meaning literally that: a character flaw which usually leads to their brutal demise, and the death of those around them; the death of friends and family in the case of Hamlet. Hamlet's fatal flaw is his indecision, something clearly shown in the three selected soliloquies; by the second and third he has recognised this, however he still does nothing about it. Despite mentioning that by procrastinating, his

thoughts 'turn awry, and lose the name of action', he fails to confront this flaw.

By the third soliloquy, he resolves to be more decisive, however he seems to be uttering empty words; it is only right at the end, some time after the soliloquy, that he decides to act. This is too late anyway, however, as he has already been stabbed by the poisoned rapier; he is already condemned to death; only in the face of certain death does he act directly and kill his scheming uncle, without first attempting a futile analysis.

Analysis of the three soliloquies causes Hamlet's changing state of mind to become obvious; the fact that the soliloquies come after major events emphasises his changing outlook on mortality and other things on his mind. The language and punctuation used, along with the imagery created, help to convey his state of mind, each giving the audience a little more insight into his character; Shakespeare really allows the audience to relate to Hamlet in this way, which is clearly evident in the soliloquies.

Soliloquies in Hamlet come after events which deeply affect Hamlet; in the first, Hamlet's father has just been killed, and his mother, Gertrude, has married his uncle, Claudius. The ghost of his father has told him that Claudius was the murderer. Hamlet's initial reaction is one of disbelief; this is shown in such sentences as: 'Let me not think on't - Frailty, thy name is woman! - A little month or ere those shoes were old With which she follow'd my poor father's body, Like Niobe, all tears: - why she, even she -'.

In this broken sentence, there are four caesuras in as many lines. This emphasises Hamlet's heightened emotions, as he cannot control everything he is feeling; many of his thoughts on the matter run into each other, each so strong and important to him that he tries to express them at the same time, hence the caesuras. They are sporadic outbursts as Hamlet is so disorientated from the shock of recent events that he cannot keep any of his thoughts contained or orderly. This clearly shows a melancholy state of mind, as he is so upset and confused.

Too much has happened too quickly for Hamlet to cope with; Hamlet's broken mind runs parallel to this broken sentence, an analogy which, intentional or not, builds upon Hamlet's character and state of mind. Before this sentence, the line 'Must I remember?' shows that Hamlet finds it hard to confront the fact that his father is gone to be replaced by his uncle: a deceitful, murderous character. The character of Hamlet expresses layers of meaning in ways other than punctuation; Shakespeare here alludes to the classics with imagery of Niobe.

In the text he also compares his father to his uncle with 'Hyperion to a Satyr' and then he makes the same comparison 'no more like my father than I to Hercules'. These really emphasise how he feels, as they are comparisons between two extremes; Hyperion, benevolent and great Roman sun God, and the satyr, a sly deceptive man-goat creature. The same is true for Hercules, a strong-headed and physically strong character, compared with Hamlet, an indecisive comparatively weak character. Shakespeare depersonalises the

situation here, generalising it as something for the audience to relate to, increasing audience appeal.

People in Shakespeare's era would have had a much better understanding of classic mythology and tales than the current public, so they would understand these comparisons better; they would be more familiar with this classical imagery. Imagery also features in the soliloquy with the idea of decay, events turned dire. The line 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable', most lucidly expresses this. The 'weary, stale, flat' is a list of three, and despite having 'unprofitable' on the end, it still carries the literary significance of a list of three.

This shows the idea of festering and that Hamlet feels no good will come out of the circumstances. He is clearly unhappy with life, due to the negativity of these adjectives. This idea of a wish for suicide is consistent within the soliloquy, along with contempt for his uncle's marriage to his mother and, obviously, grief for the death of his father, also named Hamlet. Hamlet's state of mind regarding his mother is clear towards the end of the soliloquy; he uses the adjectives 'unrighteous', 'wicked' and 'incestuous'.

These show that Hamlet sees his mother's actions as wrong and evil, morally indefensible. He describes his mother's relationship as 'incestuous', despite there being no blood relation. This implies he is not thinking rationally; his anger and despair at his mother's actions cause him to mentally exaggerate the marriage in this soliloquy. In the second soliloquy, Hamlet is still recovering from his shock at his mother, and is feigning madness to mask his

intentions with a travelling theatre troupe he hired to re-enact his father's death.

Hamlet's state of mind has shifted from focus on a personalised situation involving his mother to a more universal outlook on life itself; there are far fewer references made to Hamlet himself, and he lists injustices and problems in the world. There seems to be a pattern in the idea of mortality and death; he is clearly contemplating suicide. The line showing this most noticeably is the now clichéd: 'To be, or not to be - that is the question'. This obviously shows that he cannot decide between life and death, and in fact the whole soliloquy seems to be an inward discussion on the meaning of life.

Shakespeare has here used repetition to add another layer of meaning to the phrase, with an emphasis put on the contrast; 'to live or to die' simply doesn't emphasise the fact that they are opposites as much as 'to be or not to be', as here Shakespeare shows it is one idea (life) or not that idea. The fact that he mentions 'not to be' shows that he seeks oblivion, complete non-existence. Non-existence is what Hamlet sees death as at the beginning of the soliloquy. However his state of mind shifts, even within this same soliloquy, when he describes death as an 'undiscovered country'.

This is after he has considered the idea of death, and mused upon the prospect of an afterlife. Shakespeare made the comparison between death and an undiscovered country because it was topical; at the time it was performed, the 'New World' was still being discovered, and explorers didn't always come back. This increases the audience appeal because they would

understand this, in the social context of Shakespeare's time; they would be able to better understand this analogy of a philosophical concept of after-life. Life is seen as a constant battle by Hamlet, and to represent this Shakespeare utilises military imagery throughout the soliloquy.

Hamlet speaks of life as suffering 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'; he clearly feels that fate is against him. This line also shows that Hamlet feels he is involved in some form of conflict with himself, his uncle and life itself. The military imagery, of which the quote is only one example of many, is present throughout the soliloquy showing he feels attacked from all sides, and he feels that this causes him suffering. Suffering the pains of life is another key point Hamlet makes, showing he has set his mind against life; there are only negative points.

Following a list of life's problems ('Th' oppressor's wrong... th' unworthy takes'), Hamlet then asks 'Who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life? '; here he is essentially asking who would bear the burden to struggle with a tiresome life. The question here is not rhetorical but directed inwards; later on he answers this by effectively saying humans live for fear of death. Fear of death, according to Hamlet, 'makes cowards of us all'; as potentially fatal actions are contemplated, decisive thoughts pale over with deliberation and 'lose the name of action'.

Here, Shakespeare uses the word 'coward', quite an extreme word, to emphasise the human weakness of indecision, almost personified in Hamlet. Rather than simply saying that people fail to take action, Shakespeare uses

the word 'lose'; this implies that action would otherwise have taken place, that there was something to lose in the first place. This accentuates the fact that Hamlet feels deliberation prevents action. In this last part of the soliloquy, Hamlet looks inwards at his fatal flaw, yet ironically fails to take action to prevent it; he merely has an inward discussion.

Discussion has lessened in the third soliloquy, as Hamlet resolves to be more decisive. The soliloquy comes after Hamlet sees Fortinbras's army heading for a minor war in Poland. In this soliloquy, Hamlet first remarks on how God gave us reason so that we may act appropriately, as opposed to taking no action. He remarks on how he is able to take action, yet still doesn't. He then expresses admiration for the impulsive, compassionate prince of Norway, Fortinbras, who is almost an opposite of Hamlet.

His admiration for his opposite suggests some form of self-loathing, along with his comments on his own indecision. Indecision is marked by punctuation in previous soliloquies, with question marks and caesuras commonplace. In this soliloquy, there are far fewer question marks and caesuras than in previous soliloquies, showing Hamlet trying to curb his indecision. At the beginning and end, there are exclamation marks, showing that he is trying to be more decisive.

At the end of the soliloquy, he determines to be more decisive, saying 'O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody or nothing worth!'. Firstly, the exclamation mark on which he ends the soliloquy show that he is attempting to take a more proactive approach to life. Here, Shakespeare ends the



soliloquy on a sight-rhyming couplet, to underline the point and to make the end of the soliloquy strong. Ironically, earlier in the soliloquy, he says 'Why yet I live to say " This thing's to do"', then mentions that he still does nothing. He resolves to act and do this no more, where the cruel irony of it all comes in; he is deciding to be more decisive, however he fails to act upon these words.

Words referring to sleep are common within the soliloquy, and the meaning changes subtly throughout. Firstly, it means to take no action, when Hamlet asks how he stands when he has suffered 'Excitements of my reason and blood, and let all sleep? '. 'Excitements' here refers to stimuli, things which should have triggered a response. He feels annoyed with himself at letting 'all sleep', and decides it is time to take direct action (although never does). This tells us that his mind is again searching inward, to try and expose his flaw and seek to prevent it from ruining his life further.

He has by this point discovered his fatal flaw, but it is too late and he still struggles to iron out this flaw, in this reflective reference to sleep. Sleep is next mentioned when Hamlet says that Fortinbras's soldiers 'for a fantasy and trick of fame, go to their graves like beds'. Here he is comparing the fact that the soldiers are brave, and are prepared to die for very little, whereas Hamlet himself is not prepared to take any real risks for something major; his mother is tainted and his father is dead due to Claudius.

Here the sleep reference shows the casual, courageous nature of Fortinbras's army, again contrasting with his own nature: almost opposites. Opposites

feature in the soliloquy, often emphasising a contrast between Hamlet and Fortinbras (and his army). One example of this is when he calls himself, and indecisive people in general, 'three parts coward' compared to Fortinbras's 'army of such mass and charge'. The word coward re-occurs here to highlight Hamlet's view of such procrastination.

'Charge' refers to the headstrong, energetic nature of Fortinbras and his army. The contrast between the two is really what shows Hamlet's state of mind, how he is unhappy with, almost angry at, himself and the world generally. Generally speaking, Hamlet's state of mind fluctuates throughout the play, and he shifts his focus gradually inwards, as highlighted by the soliloquies studied. In the first soliloquy, Shakespeare uses many caesuras to convey to the audience the fact that Hamlet is very confused, shocked and questioning about his mother and uncle's actions.

Shakespeare uses classical imagery to help convey and underline Hamlet's state of mind to the audience; his anger at his mother and uncle, and grief for his father. Hamlet is unhappy in this soliloquy, and wishes for a righteous death. Death is seen first as oblivion in the second soliloquy, as Hamlet ponders upon the idea of suicide, but then he describes it as an 'undiscovered country'. He sees life as a constant battle, full of suffering. He is clearly still thinking deeply on events, shown by question marks and caesuras; he looks inwards, seeing procrastination as cowardly, yet still continues to do so.

Here he begins to realise his fatal flaw, yet considers no remedial or preventative action. Action, in particular the lack of it, is a major theme within the third soliloquy. Punctuation changes as there are fewer question marks and caesuras, with exclamation marks opening and closing the soliloquy. Shakespeare does this to try and show Hamlet's effort to be more proactive. The idea of sleep in this soliloquy is used to compare Hamlet's lack of action and Fortinbras's soldiers' bravery.

Other such opposites in the play compare Hamlet with Fortinbras and his army, showing Hamlet's perspective changing as he looks progressively inwards as the play draws to a climactic conclusion. In conclusion, Hamlet at first tries to generalise his situation, and is contemplating suicide. By the second soliloquy, he speaks of life as little more than suffering wrongs, and feels that fate seem to conspire against him. Here he begins to look inwards, as his state of mind has stabilised slightly; he is no longer reeling from the initial shock of events.

He begins to think more rationally, and starts to realise his fatal flaw. By the third soliloquy his mind is geared far more towards inward reflection; he sees Fortinbras as the prince he could, and should, have been like. Here he has all but submitted to despair and self-loathing, with a hint of jealousy towards Fortinbras. He resolves to be more strong-headed, finally trying to take action against his fatal flaw. Unfortunately for Hamlet, this revelation comes all too late and he only really acts impulsively when he knows he has been fatally poisoned, and faced certain death.