

Hamlet's melancholy

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



Black Bile Excess: Hamlet's Melancholy June 15th, 2010 Word Count: 1287 In William Shakespeare's Hamlet, the tragic hero Prince Hamlet of Denmark, returns home after the death of his father, King Hamlet. His return, however, was not one simply of mourning. The murderer of King Hamlet and also Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, observes that "there's something in [Hamlet's] soul/ O'er which his melancholy sits on brood..." (III, i, 165-166). From the outset of the novel in which his character is introduced, Hamlet is troubled by his melancholic condition. Melancholia is a disorder in which one suffers severe depression, apathy, and withdrawal (Britannica Encyclopedia). Throughout the play, Hamlet displays signs and characteristics of his inability to cope with this condition.

Hamlet's indecisiveness keeps him from performing the mission that he has been told to complete by his father's ghost. He is also vulnerable to falling victim to impulsively driven action as a result of being emotionally propelled to act without thinking. Hamlet develops a barrier between his friends and family that keep him from side tracking and thus ruining his plans of revenge. Finally, Hamlet's determination and self awareness is the only thing that keeps him focused on what he must ultimately accomplish, and provides him with an unstoppable recklessness with which he pursues his goal.

Melancholia is one of the primary driving forces behind both Hamlet's irrational, and rational decisions in the play. Hamlet's constant thoughts and self-assessments spawn from his melancholy. His continual and deliberate contemplation in his numerous soliloquies throughout the play, provides what he is thinking, feeling, and behaving, which subsequently prevents him from acting on the ghost's direction.

Hamlet always manages to persuade himself out of committing the revenge that he craves which consequently give him more to reflect on when re-evaluating his status and the progress he has made towards vengeance. His self-examinations soon compile, and being an educated scholar he is, Hamlet refuses to complete his mission without first questioning the morals and ethics of each aspect of his revenge plot. In contemplating, he begins to question the consequences of the task and then further ponders and doubts his own stance on his commitment. After failing to kill Claudius in the chapel due to "thinking too precisely on the event" (IV, iv, 41), Hamlet is able to recognize the flaw of the pattern in his unusual behavior when he says that "[he has] the cause and will and strength and means to do it" (IV, iv 46). Hamlet is either unconsciously, or unwilling to change his current problem, even after finding the source of the problem. He evidently recognizes his fault when he forces himself to unconsciously murder Polonius, under the assumption that Claudius was the one in hiding. In killing Polonius, Hamlet suddenly submits immediately to his passions and impulse rather than debate them, which result in a short term positive act rather than long pointless excuses for his lack of action.

Hamlet would rather follow what he knows is the more logical course based on his education experience, but is forced, under the circumstances, to alter his method of action given such a situation. Hamlet's suspicion and distrust of others around him are also born out of his melancholic nature. Different characters he comes in contact and interacts with try to hide an external purpose, that is, to trick Hamlet into revealing his ultimate goal or at least, the extent of what Hamlet claims to be the truth. His friends, Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern, have been sent for by the Claudius to find the reason behind Hamlet's "madness". When Hamlet questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's motives on whether they were here because "of [their] own inclining ...[or] a free visitation," (II, ii, 277-9) he is demanding an answer from his schoolmates as to their surprise arrival and to "deal justly with [him]". Hamlet's melancholic skepticism is a valuable tool to him, since, had he revealed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the truth about his 'insanity,' his cause would have been discovered and stopped by Claudius. Hamlet declares that he cannot allow himself to be "easier played on than a pipe" (III, ii, 373-4) by them, and that they should value the trust between their friendship a lot more.

Instead, Hamlet has to rid of their long time friendship because of his discovery of their weak willed nature to do the right thing. Hamlet's doubting nature again becomes evident when he questions the source of the ghost. In one of Hamlet's soliloquy, he fears that "the spirit that [he] have seen may be the devil: and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape;...and perhaps out of [his] weakness and [his] melancholy - as he is very potent with such spirits - abuses [him] to damn [him]" (II, ii, 603-8). Hamlet would like to believe the ghost but is skeptical because the devil might be trying to tempt him into killing Claudius. He is reluctant to do the bidding of the ghost as the act of killing a blood relative condemns his own soul to Hell. By killing a king, Hamlet would be no better off than Claudius, as he himself would be condemned to hell, and unable to ascend to Heaven because of what he had done. Hamlet acknowledges the possibility of being manipulated by the devil, and searches to whether or not the ghost is reliable.

Hamlet's melancholy is also exemplified by his overwhelming emotion and obsession for any mood that currently concerns him. After the death of King Hamlet, he falls into a deep depression that binds his mind and spirit for the rest of the play. However, it is not merely a mood of mourning. Hamlet has become obsessive about preserving the righteousness of the deceased king and despises Gertrude and Claudius for tainting his father's throne. Hamlet is also the only person in the court to continue grieving for King Hamlet, and represents his sadness by dressing in "nighted color" (I, ii, 68). He is trying to justify his cause to any and all those who observe him that he will not simply dismiss and move on from the death. Gertrude interprets the physicality that Hamlet displays as showing the entirety of Hamlet's grief, however, Hamlet tells her that it "does not denote me truly" (I, ii, 83).

He refers to the fact that his black attire narrowly scratches the surface on how incredibly deep his sorrow is, and that his true emotions cannot simply be expressed by a physical appearance such as attire. Hamlet, the tragic protagonist of the play, suffers from the hamartia of melancholia, to which most of his actions can be accredited. His constant internal debates with himself and his untaken actions make him unable to act on his inclinations consistently throughout the course of the play. Hamlet is then caught up in drastic emotional mood swings which then sidetrack him from his mission, such as the grief of his father's death swiftly followed by the cheery mood established by the Mousetrap actors. His natural suspicion allows him to be cruel and indifferent in his distrust of all the characters in the play, which is the only thing that protects him from his ignorance. The stubbornness of his character is the final window to view his melancholia. He rejects all

opposition to what he has planned, except himself, in order to remain in control of his own outcome Hamlet's decisions and subsequent actions is determined and, to a certain extent, clear from the beginning of what the outcome would be.

Oblivious to the rather fatal consequences, Hamlet dooms himself and all those around him to a grisly death as a result of a serious case of incurable melancholia.