

Hamlet philosophy essay sample

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



Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, is an Elizabethan tragedy. Hamlet, a young Prince of Denmark, suffers a dilemma between the unrelenting ambition of revenge and clashing moral standards. This is very much a play about revenge, but the reason that it continues to intrigue literary and theatrical audiences for almost 400 years, is because of the underlying philosophical meanings. Hamlet is more a philosophical play than it is a play about revenge. Throughout the play, Hamlet analyzes the uncertainty that death brings, questions the final arbiter in judgement and defies society's belief in the great chain of being.

Hamlet is surrounded by death. However, he is the only character that confronts death philosophically. Despite the revenge he is planning, Hamlet considers taking his own life. He strives to extract revenge upon Claudius, but the more guidance he seeks, the more lost and indecisive he becomes. Hamlet seriously questions if life is worth living from his life crisis. This is seen in Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, that is said at the kingdom of Elsinore, before being spied upon by Claudius and Polonius. " To be, or not to be? That is the question: / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep— / No more—and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation/ Devoutly to be wished! To die, to sleep. / To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub, / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause.

There's the respect / That makes calamity of so long life. / For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, / Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, / The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, / The insolence of office, and the spurns / That patient merit of th' unworthy takes, / When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns, puzzles the will / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of? / 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 pith and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action."(3. 1. 57-89) In this soliloquy, Hamlet speculates if suicide is preferable; but it soon occurs to him that death is not a way out, because it is not possible to know what fate comes after death. Hamlet contemplates that the journey to death may lead to an eternal sleep, but it may not; the next life may in fact be worse than the life we are aware of. It is the uncertainty death brings that inhibits people from ending their lives.

Furthermore, Hamlet also questions the final arbiter in judgement. This is seen when Hamlet discovers the treachery of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's visit, and reveals his depression. " Why, then, 'tis none to you: for there is nothing / either good or bad but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison."(2. 2. 249-251) Hamlet is referring to how there is no final arbiter in judgement, but that people with differing morals and ethics decide to believe in desired opinions that correspond to their beliefs. This

observation that Hamlet makes can be compared to the philosophy of existentialism, which holds that “ The starting point of philosophical thinking must be the experience of the individual.” (Existentialism) Hamlet is referring to how there is no definitive truth but only subjective truth, and society’s accepted values will favour one kind of truth, no matter how flawed it may be.

Lastly, Hamlet’s fascination with death leads him to draw his own conclusions on the moral beliefs of society. Hamlet challenges the great chain of being; the religious hierarchal structure of all matter and life on earth. Upon his obsession with death, Hamlet asks Horatio for guidance on his perceived speculations at the cemetery about Alexander the Great. “ No, faith, not a jot. But to follow him thither with / modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it, as thus: / Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander / returned into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make / loam: and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, / might they not stop a beer barrel? / Imperious Caesar, dead and turn’d to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away: / Oh, that that earth which kept the world in awe, / Should patch a wall to expel the winter’s flaw!”(5. 1. 201-210) Hamlet realizes that death is the inevitable fate of everyman; that the fate of everyman is a journey into dust. Death eliminates the differences between all people, regardless of how distinguished or insignificant they may be. Hamlet concludes that the great chain of being is false and everything in it, ultimately crumbles into dust, just like the bones in the cemetery.

Hamlet is more a play about philosophical ideas and speculations, than it is a play about vengeance. There have been an exorbitant amount of tragedies produced, but Hamlet remains the most produced and analyzed Shakespearean play of all time because of all of the philosophical meanings and interpretations. Hamlet philosophies over death, judgement and the great chain of being. The most prominent philosophical idea in Hamlet is the mysteriousness of death. Interestingly, in Hamlet's soliloquy "To be, or not to be: That is the question..." (3. 1. 57-89), it is addressed as the question, not a question. This can be interpreted as the most important question a person may ever have to face in life. Indeed, Hamlet is Shakespeare's philosopher. Perhaps Shakespeare was attempting to philosophically question society's motives in life, similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a theory of successive human motivation.

References

"Existentialism." n. d. Wikipedia. 06 December 2012. . Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Toronto: Harcourt Canada Ltd., n. d.