

# Compare the first four soliloquies in hamlet

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



“ To be or not to be, that is the question”. This is, arguably, the most famous line ever recorded by William Shakespeare. It is a part of the fourth of seven major soliloquies in his play Hamlet, and is a part of the speech in which Hamlet contemplates his intended revenge upon his Uncle, and the new King, Claudius, for the murder of his father, who was also the previous King, and appears as the Ghost in this play when informing Hamlet and the audience of Claudius’s betrayal.

The soliloquies in this play are considered widely as one of the key elements in its renown as the definitive revenge tragedy.

We can see the personal turmoil that Hamlet suffers through the play and how different intrinsic and extrinsic conflicts arise around him at different points. In Hamlet’s first soliloquy, which can be found in Act 1 Scene 2, Hamlet shares with the audience his wretchedness and his abhorrence of the King and Queen.

He tries to come to terms with the recent loss of his father and the indecent haste with which his mother has remarried his uncle, a man utterly unlike his father. He wishes suicide were not a mortal sin.

The world has become a tedious, degenerate, foul place, populated only by “ things rank and gross in nature” (Line 136) Contrary to the impression given by Claudius and the Queen, we discover that King Hamlet has been dead for only three weeks. Hamlet’s attitude to the revenge he is supposed to take is obvious confused in this initial reflection on the news from the Ghost, his deceased father. He does not seem fully committed to his task that he has been set, something that changes dramatically over the following soliloquies.

<https://assignbuster.com/compare-the-first-four-soliloquies-in-hamlet/>

The disjointed rhythm and dislocated progress of Hamlet's thoughts convey to us his inner turmoil. In Hamlet's second soliloquy, he feels on the brink of madness as a result of what he has been told. The phrase "In this distracted globe" (Line 97) is richly ambiguous, referring to Hamlet's mind, to the world in which he finds himself and also, of course, to the theatre in which the play is being performed. Shakespeare deliberately uses the word "commandment" to draw attention to the moral dilemma Hamlet finds himself in.

The Ghost's commandment is absolutely at odds with God's. The repetition "remember... remember... remember" in Hamlet's short soliloquy suggests that he fears he may not be able to, or wish to, remember what he has been told to do. As in the previous soliloquy, here too he seems unsure of how to complete his task. Shakespeare draws Hamlet into examining his present state of mind in what is, although technically being the third soliloquy, the second major one.

Impressed by the simulated passion of the Actor in the 'Hecuba' speech, Hamlet feels inadequate and ashamed of his delay in avenging his father's death. In the second half of the speech, Hamlet expresses for the first time his doubts about the Ghost's honesty and intentions: "The spirit that I have seen may be the devil", sent "to damn me [Hamlet]." (Line 551). He resolves to test the truth of the Ghost's story by having the actor perform a play which closely re-presents the Ghost's account of his murder. Guilty people watching plays have been shocked into confessing their crimes.

Hamlet hopes the play will give some proof that the Ghost was telling the truth and that it will provoke Claudius into revealing his guilt: "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." (line 557). This is the first time we see Hamlet question the legitimacy of the task set for him by the Ghost. We also observe Hamlet acting cautiously, devising a strategy to test Claudius's conscience, and it appears as if Hamlet has finally decided to try and make a decision on whether or not revenge is necessary, and consequentially whether or not he has to pursue it.

In the final, fourth soliloquy that I am going to be analysing, Hamlet delivers the aforementioned "To Be or Not to Be." The dramatic purpose of this all too familiar episode is to establish Hamlet as characteristically detached, reflective, analytic, thinking and moral - as someone unlike the active, simple-minded figures of his father, Hamlet, Fortinbras and his son, and the rash Laertes. Just a few hours before the play designed to "catch the conscience of the King" is to be performed, we see its impresario absorbed in abstract reflection.

The metaphor at the start, "take arms against a sea of troubles. And by opposing end them" (Line 59) is deliberately confused. It captures Hamlet's feelings of being unequal to the task that has been assigned to him. He feels that trying to set the world to rights would be like committing suicide.

However in contrast, the rest of his speech is fluent. He reflects dispassionately, in general terms on how tempting it is to try and escape the wretched human condition.

There is no mention of the Ghost, of the play about to be performed, of Hamlet's father's murder or his mother's behaviour. Everything is generalised into a bleak but surprisingly calm, philosophical consideration of the popular Renaissance theme of whether our troublesome life is worth living. In this soliloquy, Hamlet seems to have forgotten that his dead father visited him not long ago, saying " The undiscovered country from whose bourn No traveller returns" (Line 79).

This soliloquy is very unlike the others Shakespeare gives Hamlet. There is a dejected uniformity of tone and tempo, none of the passionate agitation associated with someone wrestling with complex and confused feelings, much unlike the previous soliloquies, so this serves as a powerful dramatic contrast to the other passionate occurrences in the play. It appears from this soliloquy that, to some extent, Hamlet has resigned himself to the fate that the Ghost set out for him in Act 1, and intends to take action presently.

In conclusion, I think it is possible to see when comparing the first four soliloquies in Hamlet by William Shakespeare, that chronologically there is an obvious development. Over the period of time that passes between each soliloquy, you can see to some extent Hamlet's gradual acceptance of his fate. The language Hamlet uses, when combined with other factors employed by Shakespeare to such effect, seems to become gradually more complicated and fluent, indicating his evolving resolve towards revenge.