

Suicide theme in hamlet

Literature, British Literature



Hamlet, written by William Shakespeare, is a classic tragedy of death and revenge that occurs in Denmark in the sixteenth century. The play begins with Hamlet returning to Elsinore Castle from the University for the untimely death of his father. Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, seeks revenge upon his uncle who had murdered his father for the crown. Hamlet is distraught by the death of his father and his mother's overhasty marriage, which he considers incestuous. In addition to his anger towards his uncle, his succession to the throne was taken away when his uncle became the king. Hamlet puts on a façade of lunacy as part of his scheme of vengeance. However, despite his vow to take revenge, he appears to lack the courage to kill his uncle; instead he puts on a play, with a reenactment of his father's murder, to disclose his uncle's guilt. Unfortunately, his feigned insanity and lack of action lead to deaths of his loved one and of innocents. The themes of death and suicide pervade throughout the entire play as it unfolds the tragic fate of each principal character. In Hamlet, the passionate and hasty Laertes and the vengeful Fortinbras are foils for Hamlet's introspective personality and provide a basis for comparison of the hero's course of action. Laertes and Hamlet share a common goal of revenge for the murder of their father. Though their situation and the circumstances of their father's death coincide, their individual responses to the fatalities differ greatly, and serve to highlight Hamlet's tragic flaw. Upon hearing of his father's death, Laertes becomes totally preoccupied with thoughts of revenge. While Hamlet scrutinizes and evaluates the consequences of his actions, Laertes acts without forethought, saying, " Let come what comes ... only I'll be revenged / Most thoroughly for my father" (IV. v. 138). However, his hastiness allows

him to fall victim to Claudius' manipulative nature and he becomes a puppet in Claudius' plot to dispose of Hamlet. This accentuates one of Hamlet's strengths, one that he reveals when he states, " Call me what instrument you will ... you cannot play upon me." (III. ii. 380) – he is not easily influenced by the people around him. Laertes further highlights Hamlet's strengths when he states that he would " cut [Hamlet's] throat i' the church" (IV. vii. 126). Hamlet on the other hand, constantly seeks to be honourable, as seen in his soliloquy, in which he questions "[w]hether ' tis nobler in the mind to suffer..." (III. i. 37) and when he refuses to kill Claudius while he is praying. Nor does he use poison and treachery to achieve his goals, as Laertes did. Though both are of princely status, in Fortinbras' introduction, he is portrayed as inferior to Hamlet, being " of unimproved metal, hot and full" (I. i. 96) and having "[s]harked up a band of lawless resolute" (I. i. 98), contrasting greatly with Hamlet, who is described as " sweet and commendable" (I. ii. 87). However, as the play proceeds, Hamlet's weaknesses are emphasized as Fortinbras works towards achieving his goal and as Fortinbras' strong-willed character is developed. Fortinbras' single-minded determination towards the revenge of his father's death differs markedly from the sporadic effort put forth by Hamlet. Though he is not present in person for most of the play, his grand entrance, complete with an army, before Hamlet's exile, demonstrating his ability to plot, to overcome obstacles, and to execute his plan in order to further his goal of revenge contrasts greatly with Hamlet's lack of action towards his own revenge. Fortinbras' entrance spurs Hamlet to disclose his tragic flaw – his inability to act when required – in a self-criticizing soliloquy, in which he resolves to

make his " thoughts be bloody" (IV. iv. 66). While Fortinbras' vigor weakens Hamlet's character significantly, this final statement weakens it even more: even after acknowledging his weakness, he maintains that only his " thoughts" should be bloody, and not his actions. All three characters, Fortinbras, Hamlet, and Laertes, while sharing similar circumstances and a common goal of revenge, differ greatly on their chosen course of action and provide the reader with what " could have been" for Hamlet. Of the three, Fortinbras seems to be the most successful in achieving his mission, and is in fact, the only character in Hamlet who does so and remains alive. He clearly defines his goal on the outset " to recover...by strong of hand...those forsaid lands / So by his father lost" (I. i. 102), and then works towards it immediately by gathering " up a band of lawless resolute" (I. i. 98), but is hindered when he "[r]eceive[s] rebuke from Norway". However he is not deterred and in the end, " old Norway ... Gives him threescore thousand crowns in annual fee / And his commission to employ those soldiers" (II. ii. 74), and finally, is successful in " embrace[ing] [his] fortune" (V. ii. 378). This contrasts with Hamlet, who is easily distracted by his thoughts and emotions. His resolution to " set it right" (I. v. 189), referring to the murder of his father, gradually weakens following the "[loss of] all [his] mirth" (II. ii. 304), the death of Ophelia and his dialogue with Gertrude. Coupled with his penchant for overanalyzing his actions, his inaction - his tragic flaw - is made even more obvious by Fortinbras success. In the end, only when he is acting out of character, enraged by Laertes betrayal, Claudius' underhandedness and Gertrude's death, is he finally able to succeed, at the cost of his own life. Perhaps the most striking example of the difference

between Fortinbras and Hamlet occurs when Fortinbras strides into the room at the end of the play to become the King of Denmark, showing the failure of the man who thinks and the success of the man who acted instead.

Evidently, the similarities between Laertes' and Fortinbras' circumstance with Hamlet's allow the audience to compare their respective courses of action. Conversely, by analyzing their differences, the audience gains insight regarding Hamlet's character, his strengths and weaknesses, without needing them stated explicitly. Through the use of foils, Shakespeare develops Hamlet's character to a much greater extent, and