

Reality and  
appearance: a  
comparison of hamlet  
and the revenger's  
tragedy



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout both Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the disparity between how things seem and how they really are is a constant underlying motif; the depth in which both plays examine the concept of appearance and reality justifies the claim that they are a 'sustained exploration' of the theme. Within *Hamlet*, in particular, the protagonist is presented as constantly attempting to fathom through a mist of duplicity, equivocation and pretense which, in turn, leads him to create his own elaborate deceptions to establish the truth in others. This capacity for deception he shares with *The Revenger's Tragedy*'s Vindice. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that almost all of the principle characters within *Hamlet* have become involved in a deception of some kind clearly demonstrating to an audience the differences between how things or characters seem to be and how they truly are.

Throughout *Hamlet*, the protagonist is presented as entirely and relentlessly surrounded by the blurring of appearances and reality, much of which is arguably self-inflicted. From the opening Act of the play, the audience is made aware of Hamlet's tendency to muse on the nature of appearances and reality; he suspects and sees deception in everything and everyone, a tendency which is fostered by the circumstances within which he finds himself. Perhaps the earliest example of Hamlet's mistrust of appearances is his judgement of his mother as crying 'unrighteous tears' over the death of his father. The adjective 'unrighteous' perhaps suggests her grief to be false and tainted by her 'o'er hasty' marriage to Claudius; Hamlet sees the outward manifestation of her grief i. e. the tears as a hollow pretense. This idea of outward appearances as a concealment is also reinforced when

Hamlet talks of Claudius as a 'smiling, damned villain'; the juxtaposition of the contradictory 'smiling' and 'villain' powerfully expresses the ability of outward appearances to manipulate and distract from what is real. It has been noted that Shakespeare's imagination was haunted by the image of the smiling villain; he used it to express the theme of deceptive appearances (for example, 'there's daggers in men's smiles' (Macbeth)) As a response to the dishonesty surrounding Hamlet, throughout the play he frequently reflects on the nature of deception in the world, for example he claims that 'to be honest as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand'; Hamlet, and potentially Shakespeare, blatantly recognize deception within everyone and dishonesty as an innate human trait. Vindice, within The Revenger's Tragedy makes an almost identical observation claiming that 'to be honest is not to be i'th'world' ; both characters' belief in truth has been subdued by the duplicity surrounding them.

In an almost 'vicious circle' of deceit, both protagonists resign themselves to create elaborate disguises as a means to decipher what is real. For example, Vindice disguises himself as Piato in order to discover whether his mother and sister are truly pure or not: 'I'll put on that knave for once', the term 'put on' is a reference to the disguise he will create. The appearance of Vindice attempting to seduce his mother and sister disguises the antithetical purpose of testing their virtue. Similarly, Hamlet resorts to deception on numerous occasions throughout the play. For example, he chooses to 'put on' an 'antic disposition' in order to distract people from realizing his true purpose, he blatantly deceives Ophelia when he claims 'I loved you not' as he later expresses his overwhelming love for her: 'I loved Ophelia, forty

thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum.' In addition, to test the truth of the ghost's words: 'The play is the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King'; the play seems to be simply entertainment when, in reality, it is a trap, another classic facade and an example of something scheming and negative being obscured by a positive outward appearance. The use of the play within a play is very much reflective of the growing popularity of theater within Shakespeare's Elizabethan context, although it was considered to be a bad influence by some.

Many have argued that the lack of distinction between reality and what appears to be is taken to such an extent that the protagonist, on some occasions, appear to deceive himself. For example, he convinces himself that the ghost of his Father may not be real thus creating a delay in the killing of Claudius: 'The spirit that I have seen may be a devil.' He also convinces himself not to kill Claudius whilst praying as this would send him to heaven. This perhaps presents yet another example of the differences between reality and what seems to be; Hamlet, on numerous occasions, claims to act according to a Christian moral guideline for example when he concludes not to kill himself as 'the everlasting...fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter.' However, the very act of revenge is blatantly atypical of someone abiding by Christian guidelines; 'turn the other cheek' appears to be discarded. Perhaps Hamlet's outward presentation of his morals is different from the reality of them.

Towards the denouement of Hamlet it becomes clear to the audience that almost all of the major characters within the play have become entangled in <https://assignbuster.com/reality-and-appearance-a-comparison-of-hamlet-and-the-revengers-tragedy/>

the web of deception and this, in turn, leads to their death. Horatio is the only character left alive at the end of the play and the only one not involved in a deception of some kind; this perhaps suggests didactic intent on the part of Shakespeare. For example, Laertes is ultimately killed by the poisoned sword he intended for Hamlet: ' I am justly killed with mine own treachery.' The adjective ' justly' perhaps suggests this idea that deception and duplicity warrants punishment. Gertrude deceives her husband by keeping the truth of Hamlet's sanity from him: ' I have no life to breathe what thou hast said to me'; she ultimately dies. Polonius, throughout the play, enjoys the thrill of deceit; for example, he sends a spy to watch over his son. His death behind the ' arras' is perhaps symbolic of his tendency for concealment leading to his death. Claudius is coupled with a duplicitous nature from his entrance into the play; he conceals his secret behind the facade of a good, honest king and proves to be, as Hamlet observed a ' smiling villain'. For example, he demonstrates an artificial concern for the kingdom by using collective pronouns such as ' our dear brother' and ' our hearts'. He boasts an insincere grief over the death of his brother: ' brow of woe' and consistently claims to act in the interests of the kingdom, for example he sends Hamlet away as ' his liberty is full of threats to all.' However, his intentions are ultimately selfish- he claims he acted for his ' crown, (his) own ambition, and (his) queen.' In a similar way to Shakespeare, Middleton ultimately ends the play with the execution of Vindice, who carries out the greatest deceit: ' bear 'em to speedy execution.' However, whereas within Hamlet the principle characters ultimately die as a result of their deception and dishonesty, Vindice dies as a result of revealing his deception: " twas we two murdered

him.' The truth ultimately condemns Vindice where deceit itself condemns the characters in Hamlet.

In conclusion, throughout both Shakespeare's Hamlet and Middleton's The Revenger's Tragedy, the differences between how things seem and how they really are are constantly explored. The protagonist within Hamlet is depicted as besieged by pretense which, in turn, leads him to create his own elaborate charades to distinguish between truth and deception. This capacity for deception he shares with The Revenger's Tragedy's Vindice. Almost all of the principle characters within Hamlet ultimately boast dual personalities or concealed motifs demonstrating to an audience the differences between how things or characters seem to be and how they truly are.