

# Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Tragedy of Moral Idealism

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## **Abstract:**

*Hamlet*, it goes without saying, is one of Shakespeare's major tragedies. There are people who tried to interpret the tragic nature of this play in different ways. The first group of these people holds the view that the hero of this play suffers from the fatal flaw of inaction, and as such Hamlet is called a tragedy of delay or inaction. In support of this view point these people tell us that in spite of what the ghost of his father narrates to Hamlet and in spite of the ghost's occasional appearance to encourage hamlet to fulfill the mission, he does not kill Claudius. It is difficult to accept this thesis. There are others who maintain that the hero of this play is a sentimental fool, a man of weak nerves, a mere daydreamer, and they therefore suggest that the tragic content of the play lies contained exclusively in sentimentality or nervous collapse. This view also is untenable. *Hamlet*, then, is neither a tragedy of delay nor of inaction, nor is it a tragedy of sentimental deviation; it is, really speaking, a tragedy of moral idealism. Hamlet is a character who may in all respects be called a moral idealist.

**Keywords:** tragedy, delay, inaction, sentimental fool, moral idealism, meaningful introspection

## **Introduction:**

*Hamlet*, it goes without saying, is one of Shakespeare's major tragedies. It is a tragedy which is usually grouped with Shakespeare's such other tragedies as *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. But as and when we go through Hamlet a little closely, we find that it is different from Shakespeare's other major tragedies. There is admittedly a common link between Hamlet and King Lear, for in each of these plays the hero has a feeling of having been wronged and betrayed by the closest of his relations. And yet, *Hamlet* is different from *King Lear* too.

## **Poetic Justice in *Hamlet***

In *Macbeth* the hero is ambitious, and it is his vaulting ambition which prompts him to commit murder after murder. It is in the course of time that he has finally faced the terrible consequences of his action. In *Othello* the hero gets jealous of his wife, kills her on suspicion, and ultimately commits suicide when truth gets revealed to him. There is something of what we call poetic justice in these two major tragedies. In King Lear, the old and affectionate king is betrayed by his two daughters, and in the last analysis he is compelled to suffer death as also to witness the death of his youngest daughter. In Hamlet the principle of poetic justice obviously does not hold good, nor is there much tangible action in the play, the kind of which we find in *King Lear*. It is a different kind of tragedy which demands treatment on an extra physical level.

### **Hamlet as a Tragedy**

*Hamlet* may be called a tragedy because the hero of the play dies at the end. It may even be called a tragedy because along with Hamlet's death, we witness in this play a number of other deaths too, such as those of Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude. But these physical events in the play do not actually count for its tragic content or spirit. The essence of Hamlet as a tragedy lies contained in the character and the behavior of the hero. Hamlet as a tragedy provokes us into reflecting on the very mental make up of its protagonist.

### **Character of Hamlet**

Hamlet is the prince of Denmark. He had been educated at the University of Wittenberg, and about the time of the play he attained the age of thirty. He had resided for some time at his father's court at Elsinore. There he had become extremely popular with the common people and was regarded as the hope and pride of the State. He had acquired a reputation as a scholar, a soldier, and a gentleman and was the admiration and model of the fashionable youth of the day. He was of an open and unsuspecting nature, most generous and free from all contriving. In other words, he was an ideal renaissance nobleman, an idealist with an unbounded delight and faith in everything good and beautiful. These lines sum up the qualities of Hamlet: What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!

(Act II, Scene II)

Hamlet is a character who is given to introspection and self-analysis. He is not timid; in fact, he is thoughtful. He is not an idler; in fact, he is a meditative sort of being. He has to perform a kind of delicate and dangerous duty which requires plenty of circumspection and alertness. His uncle Claudius has murdered his father who was the king of Denmark and has ascended the throne of Denmark. He married Hamlet's widowed mother, Gertrude. Hamlet is profoundly shocked by his mother's marriage to his uncle in less than two months after her first husband's death, although he has no conscious suspicion that his father has had been murdered or that his mother had committed adultery. His father's ghost meets him and commands him to perform the task of killing Claudius who has usurped the throne of Denmark, but he knows the consequences that would flow from such an attempt. On the one hand he is a sad and grief-laden man on account of his father's cruel murder, but on the other he is expected to shake off his sorrow and goad himself into action. Hamlet knows his mission very well, but he seeks a suitable opportunity to fulfill his dead father's desire. He is in a state of dilemma, and it is only natural that whenever he is alone, he weaves and reweaves his ideas and feelings, or at least he tries to do so into a coherent pattern.

In a soliloquy in Act I, Scene II, Hamlet expresses his feelings of deep grief and comes out with his personal opinions about the general scheme of the world. He finds nothing but shame, intrigues and disasters in this world, and considers this planet of ours to be so cheerless that he compares it to an unweeded garden. He is broken hearted, for his father has been killed by his uncle and his mother has married the later within a few months of his father's death. Hamlet finds it difficult to reconcile himself to his mother's infidelity and her hasty marriage with Claudius. Hamlet says:

O, that this too-too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His cannon against self slaughter! O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,  
Seen to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on it! Ah fie! It is an unweeded garden,  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.

(Act II, Scene II)

Hamlet's discovery of his mother's lust and the fact that the kingdom is in the hands of an unworthy man shatter his picture of the world, the state and the individual. His sense of evil in all three spheres is closely interwoven in his soliloquy in which he first thinks of the general rottenness, then passes to a consideration of the excellence of his father as King, compared to his satyr like uncle, and finally dwells on the lustfulness of his mother who has violated the natural law by the brevity of her grief and the hastiness of her marriage. His mother's hasty makes Hamlet generalize thus: "frailty, thy name is woman!" Hamlet's soliloquy shows his reflective and speculative nature, and also his poetic nature.

### **Hamlet as a Tragedy of Delay or Inaction**

There are people who tried to interpret the tragic nature of this play in different ways. The first group of these people holds the view that the hero of this play suffers from the fatal flaw of inaction, and as such Hamlet is called a tragedy of delay or inaction. In support of this view point these people tell us that in spite of what the ghost of his father narrates to Hamlet and in spite of the ghost's occasional appearance to encourage hamlet to fulfill the mission, he does not kill Claudius. It is difficult to accept this thesis for the simple reason that Hamlet, a trained fighter must have kept himself away from direct action for certain fundamental reasons. We must remember that it is the same Hamlet who, on the slightest irritation, kills Polonius, who manages the meaningful drama on the stage so wonderfully well, who, while being sent to England, fights courageously with the sea robbers and is able to get back to Denmark, and who jumps into Ophelia's grave and enters into a bloody duel with Laertes. Hamlet loved Ophelia sincerely and passionately; there is no question about that:

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
Could not with all their quality of love  
Make up my sum.

It is just a careful study of hamlet and a close attention to these details which can prevent us from arriving at the conclusion that Hamlet is a tragedy of delay or inaction.

### **Hamlet as a Sentimental Fool**

There are others who maintain that the hero of this play is a sentimental fool, a man of weak nerves, a mere daydreamer, and they therefore suggest that the tragic content of the play lies contained exclusively in sentimentality or nervous collapse. This view also is untenable because Hamlet is neither a weakling or nor a sentimental fool. He knows that it is he who ought to have been the king of Denmark; he knows also that he is extremely popular among his subjects, and he knows as well that his is not being killed by Claudius, who murdered his father, for fear of public rebellion. Had Hamlet been a sentimental fool, would not have tried to ascertain what his father's ghost had spoken to him. He is not yet certain of the

truthfulness of all that the ghost has said to him, and that is why he embarks on the idea of staging a play with a theme similar to that which was put into action by his uncle. In a soliloquy Hamlet says:

The play is the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

(Act II, Scene II)

Hamlet is a character who always tries and wants to discharge the duties that his father's ghost has assigned to him. It is, however, for other reasons that he cannot fulfill his mission easily.

### **Hamlet as a Tragedy of Moral Idealism**

*Hamlet*, then, is neither a tragedy of delay nor of inaction, nor is it a tragedy of sentimental deviation; it is, really speaking, a tragedy of moral idealism. Hamlet is a character who may in all respects be called a moral idealist. When he learns from the ghost that Claudius is responsible for his father's death and that his mother has been guilty of divided loyalties, he finds himself in a state of dilemma, of acute mental agony. In a soliloquy he expresses his sense of dilemma, his feeling of being confused and lost in the peculiar predicament in which he finds himself to be. He does not have the proper frame of mind to enable him to distinguish truth from falsity, reality from illusion, and this explains the use of the word "to be or not to be". Hamlet wonders if at all he is capable of rising in revolt against the king and, thus, putting an end to dishonesty and injustice. At the same time, he is not able to decide also if it is really noble to resign himself to fate and suffer the pangs of sorrow in the core of his heart. It is true that Hamlet tries to make a choice between action and inaction, but what is really outstanding is the expression of his death wish. He compares death to a kind of sleep that puts a necessary end to all physical troubles and spiritual anxieties and he says:

To be, or not be- that is the question:

Whether 't is nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or 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 heart-ache and thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to. 'T is a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd.

(Act III, Scene I)

The ghost has asked Hamlet not to be cruel to his mother, and that is why even though he speaks harsh things to her, he does never intend to kill her. He is, however, all the time anxious for a suitable opportunity to be able to kill Claudius; in fact, he kills Polonius under the impression that the person hiding himself behind the curtain of his mother's apartment would be none other than Claudius himself. He does not go into immediate action, first because the king, Claudius, is guarded all the time by soldiers, secondly because he fears that people will not look upon him as one who has murdered his uncle for the sake of the throne, and lastly because Claudius is after all his mother's new husband, the so called madness from which he is supposed to suffer is not really madness, it is actually his obsession with moral idealism, his weakness of going deep down into things. Hamlet is so great a moralist that he does not kill Claudius at the time when he finds him offering prayers to God, although he could have taken his revenge so easily

then, he believes that a person dying at a sacred moment goes straight to heaven, and he certainly does not like Claudius to go there. Hamlet says:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;

And now I 'll do 't- and so he goes to heaven,

And so am I revenged? That would be scann'd;

A villain kills my father; and for that,

I, his sole son, do this same villain send

To heaven.

Why, this is higher in salary, not revenge.

'A took my father grossly, full of bread,

With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as may;

And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?

But in our circumstance and course of thought

'T is heavy with him; and am I then revenged,

To take him in the purging of his soul,

When he is fit and seasoned for his paasage?

No.

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage;

Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;

At gaming, swearing, or about some act

That has no relish of salvation in it-

Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,

And that his soul may as damned and black

As hell, where to it goes

(Act III, Scene III)

Hamlet poses to be insane because of his inner troubles, because the problem of propriety and honesty haunts him all the time. It is worth noting that Shakespeare's tragic heroes do not renounce the world. The dying Hamlet is concerned about the welfare of the State and his own worldly reputation. Such values are never denied, but at the end of the tragedies they are no longer primary values. At such moments the central thing is the spirit of the man achieving grandeur.

## Conclusion

Hamlet, thus, is perhaps the most complex among Shakespeare's tragedies, and the best clue to its tragic content and spirit can be found through the heroes' moral idealism or meaningful introspection.

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