

Hamlet (1601)

- There were earlier versions of Hamlet, as a revenge story, in the Middle Ages. There was also a Renaissance play with the same name, probably written by Thomas Kyd.

THE PLOT

- It is set in **Denmark**

Act 1: the protagonist, Hamlet prince of Denmark, is sad because his father, the King, died and only after two months his mother, Queen Gertrude, has married his uncle Claudius.

The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to the sentries. Hamlet decides to wait for the ghost one night, and the ghost appears, telling him that he was murdered by his brother Claudius and asking him for revenge. **(Tragedy of revenge?)**

Act 2: Hamlet pretends to be mad to carry out his plans more easily. **(Appearance vs reality)** Polonius, the King's counsellor, thinks Hamlet is mad because he is in love with his daughter Ophelia. Polonius and the king secretly observe a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, but Hamlet badly rejects her. Hamlet calls at court a group of actors and asks them to play "The Murder of Gonzago", to find out the truth about his father's death. **(Theatre as a way to discover the truth!)**

Act 3: When the king sees the play, he reacts and he runs away. Now he knows that King Claudius is guilty and he should take revenge. However, he is too undecided: he has the opportunity to kill Claudius but he doesn't because he's praying. **(Doubt and uncertainty, typical of a modern hero, or an anti-hero)**

Later, while he's talking with his mother, he sees somebody hiding behind a curtain. He kills him with his sword, thinking that it's Claudius, but it's Polonius. **(Hamlet is not able to make a decision, and when he decides impulsively, without thinking, he makes a mistake!).**

Act 4: King Claudius sends Hamlet to England to be killed. In the meantime, Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself. Her brother Laertes comes back home and finds that both his father and his sister have died because of Hamlet. Hamlet manages to come back to Denmark and Laertes wants to have a duel with him to take revenge.

Act 5: King Claudius plots against Hamlet in the duel: he poisons Laerte's sword and he prepares some poisoned wine to offer Hamlet. But during the duel Hamlet and Laerte exchange swords and they both wound each other with the poisoned sword. Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine by mistake. When Hamlet realizes he's going to die he finally stabs the king. Before dying, Hamlet tells his friend Horatio to offer the country to Fortinbras, king of Norway.

- **Typical themes of revenge tragedies present in Hamlet:**
 - A violent crime has been committed against a family member of the hero, but law and justice cannot punish it.
 - Period of doubt
 - Appearance of a ghost
 - Close relationship with the audience through soliloquies and asides.
 - Isolation and madness of the hero

Shakespeare's originality:

- Shakespeare improves the story: it becomes **more than a tragedy of revenge**: it is a **tragedy of will**. In fact, he doesn't take revenge immediately. He's full of doubts and hesitations (Is Claudius really guilty? Was his father's ghost real or was it just the product of his imagination?). These **thoughts kill his action**.
- Deep psychological penetration
- Emphasis on doubt and uncertainty (he was a precursor of 20th century drama; Hamlet is a modern hero)
- Hamlet only pretends to be mad in order to carry out his plans.

Other important themes in Hamlet

- **Relationship** between father and son; mother and son; love relationship (Ophelia), friendship.
- **The power of the theatre:** “the play within the play”, a mere fiction, shows the truth.
- **Appearance vs reality:** what appears to be true doesn't correspond to reality, appearance doesn't often correspond to the real feelings of people. (This theme is also connected to the sense of doubt and ambiguity typical of the 16th century, when the certainties of the past were disproved or modified).
- **Madness vs sanity:** Hamlet pretends to be mad to carry out his plans more easily (“there's reason in his madness”, Polonius says after talking to him).

- **Honour:** any action to correct a wrong should be reasoned, not emotional (many actions taken impulsively by Hamlet cause great trouble to other people: Polonius, Ophelia)
- **Action vs inaction** (see the monologue): thinking too much prevents Hamlet from taking action.
- **Hamlet as the first modern hero:** like Hamlet, modern man is tormented by doubt, by a lack of religious or moral certainties (which takes him to inaction) and by an inability to communicate.
- **Ambiguity of Hamlet's language:** he uses metaphors, similes and wordplay. His words often have a hidden meaning that goes beyond their apparent meaning.

Hamlet's mourning (Act I, scene II)

CLAUDIUS

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—

HAMLET (*aside*) A little more than kin and less than kind.

CLAUDIUS How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET Not so, my lord. I am too much i' the sun.

GERTRUDE Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off, and let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Do not forever with thy vailèd lids

Seek for thy noble father in the dust.

Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,

Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET Ay, madam, it is common.

GERTRUDE

If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee?

CLAUDIUS

And now, Hamlet, my nephew and my son—

HAMLET

(*speaking so no one else can hear*) I little more than a relative, but not loving

CLAUDIUS

Why are you still so gloomy, with a cloud hanging over you?

HAMLET

It's not true, sir. Your son is out in the sun.

GERTRUDE

My dear Hamlet, stop wearing these black clothes, and be friendly to the king. You can't spend your whole life with your eyes to the ground remembering your noble father. It happens all the time, what lives must die eventually, passing to eternity.

HAMLET

Yes, mother, it happens all the time.

(“common” = vulgar)

GERTRUDE

So why does it seem so particular to you?

HAMLET

“Seems,” madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,

Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced
breath,

No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods,
shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These
indeed “seem,”

For **they are actions that a man might play.**

But I have that within which passeth
show,
These but the trappings and the suits
of woe.

HAMLET

“Seem,” mother? No, it is. I don’t know what you mean by “seem.” Neither my black clothes, my dear mother, nor my heavy sighs, nor my weeping, nor my downcast eyes, nor any other display of grief can show what I really feel. It’s true that all these things “seem” like grief, since a person could use them to fake grief if he wanted to. But I’ve got more real grief inside me that you could ever see on the surface. These clothes are just a hint of it.

- Explain the **puns** (= plays with words) and **metaphors** present in the text.
- What does Hamlet want to express about his relationship with his uncle Claudius?
- Where and how does Hamlet express the contrast between appearance and reality? What world does he refer to when he speaks of “appearance”?

Hamlet's soliloquy (act 3, scene1)

The soliloquy is a pause in the action of the play. Hamlet has just decided to call a company of actors at court to prove the king guilty.

Claudius and Polonius hide and spy on him.

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.

Life vs death

Action vs inaction

Words related to war

Death as a possible liberation

We are afraid NOT of death, but of
what there might be after death!

This fear is the reason why we go on
living

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?

List of human sufferings:
life's humiliations, the abuse from
superiors, the insults of arrogant men,
the pangs of not corresponded love,
the inefficiency of the legal system, the
rudeness of people in power, and the
mistreatment good people have to take
from bad.

It's the fear of what there might be
after death

This fear stops our will and makes us
accept all the sufferings of this life.

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.

Important metaphor: sickness vs
health

RESOLUTION is healthy

THOUGHT is an illness

Thought infects our ability to make
decisions and so important actions
lose their direction.

Thought kills action (tragedy of will!)

HAMLET 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.

The question is: is it better to be alive or dead? Is it nobler to put up with all the nasty things that luck throws your way, or to fight against all those troubles by simply putting an end to them once and for all? Dying, sleeping—that's all dying is—a sleep that ends all the heartache and shocks that life on earth gives us—that's an achievement to wish for. To die, to sleep—to sleep, maybe to dream. Ah, but there's the problem: in death's sleep who knows what kind of dreams might come, after we've put the noise and commotion of life behind us. That's certainly something to worry about. That's the consideration that makes us bear our sufferings for so long. After all, who would put up with all life's humiliations—the abuse from superiors, the insults of arrogant men, the pangs of unrequited love, the inefficiency of the legal system, the rudeness of people in office, and the mistreatment good people have to take from bad—when you could simply take out your knife and put an end to that? Who would choose to grunt and sweat through an exhausting life, unless they were afraid of something dreadful after death, the undiscovered country from which no visitor returns, which we wonder about without getting any answers from and which makes us stick to the evils we know rather than rush off to seek the ones we don't? Fear of death makes us all cowards, and our natural boldness becomes weak with too much thinking. Actions that should be carried out at once get misdirected, and stop being actions at all.

Important themes in the soliloquy:

- The first lines of the soliloquy (“to be or not to be”, lines 1-5) can be interpreted in two ways and present two important themes:

life vs death (or stoic attitude vs suicide): is it better to go on living (and suffering) or to commit suicide and put an end to our suffering?

action vs inaction: is it better to remain indifferent and leave things as they are or to fully realize one’s potential and take important decisions?

- We choose life because we are afraid of death. The **fear of what there is after death** is an obstacle to action. (Monologue: lines 9-13: “To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub....”. “...the undiscovered country.....puzzles the will....” lines 23-33)

- In lines 15-19 Hamlet makes a list of all the causes of **mankind's suffering**, which are still very true today: the cruel passing of time, the aggressive attitude of proud people, unreturned love, the inefficiency of law, political oppression, merit given inappropriately to people who don't deserve it.
- **Consciousness** makes us afraid to take action (according to Hamlet it is brave to kill oneself and cowardly to remain alive).
- So thinking too much makes us unable to act (lines 29-33 explain how **thought kills action**, through a metaphor which opposes sickness – *“the pale cast of thought”*- to health – *“the native hue of resolution”*).
- In this soliloquy the personal problem of Hamlet becomes a **universal** meditation on life and death.