

Hamlet's Second Soliloquy – Analysis

Read the following soliloquy carefully.

Then write an essay that describes Hamlet's attitudes toward himself and his situation and that analyzes the devices such as imagery, figurative language, diction, and structure that Shakespeare uses to convey these views.

Now I am alone. 576
 O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage waned,
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit—and all for nothing!
 For Hecuba! 585
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
 That he should weep for her? What would he do,
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
 Make mad the guilty and appall the free,
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
 The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, 595
 And can say nothing—no, not for a king,
 Upon whose property and most dear life
 A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
 Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
 Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
 Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
 As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
 Ha! 'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this 605
 I should have fatted all the region kites
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
 O, vengeance!
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
 That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
 And fall a-cursing, like a very drab, 615
 A scullion! Fie upon't! foh!
 About, my brains!—Hum, I have heard
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play
 Have by the very cunning of the scene
 Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaimed their malefactions;
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks; 625
 I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 May be a devil, and the devil hath power
 T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds
 More relative than this: the play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. 634

580-81. **Could...wanned**: could work his soul into such accord with his thought that, from his soul's working on his body, his face grew pale

583-84. **his whole function...conceit**: all the bodily powers that express emotion responding with outward appearances to match his thoughts

591. **Make mad...free**. Madden guilty spectators and terrify those who are innocent

592. **amaze**: astound

594. **muddy-mettled**: dull-spirited; **peak**: mope

595. **John-a-dreams**: a proverbial name for an absent-minded dreamer; **unpregnant of**: unfilled by, and therefore never to give birth (to action)

598. **defeat**: overthrow

601-2. **gives me...lungs**: calls me an absolute liar

603. **'Swounds**: an oath, by Christ's wounds

606. **kites**: birds of prey

608. **kindless**: unnatural

611. **brave**: admirable

615. **drab**: prostitute

616. **scullion**: kitchen servant

617. **About,...!**: turn around

619. **cunning**: art, skill; scene: performance

620. **presently**: instantly

626. **tent**: probe (as into a wound)

631. **spirits**: emotional states (such as melancholy)

632. **abuses**: deceives, deludes

633. **relative**: pertinent

“To be, or not to be . . .” Analysis

Name:

Read the following soliloquy carefully.
 Then write an essay that describes Hamlet’s attitudes toward life and death and that analyzes the devices such as imagery, figurative language, diction, and structure that Shakespeare uses to convey these views.

To be, or not to be, that is the question: 64
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, 66
 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 70
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation 71
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep; 72
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub, 73
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, 75
 Must give us pause. There's the respect 76
 That makes calamity of so long life. 77
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, 78
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, 79
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, 80
 The insolence of office, and the spurns 81
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes, 82
 When he himself might his quietus make 83
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, 84
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country from whose bourn 87
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will, 88
 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; 91
 And thus the native hue of resolution 92
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, 93
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment 94
 With this regard their currents turn awry, 95
 And lose the name of action. 96

- 66 **slings** – missiles
fortune – luck; fate; destiny

- 71 **consummation** – completion; accomplishment
- 72 **devoutly** – sincerely; religiously

- 73 **perchance** – perhaps
there's the rub – there's the obstacle

- 75 **shuffled off this mortal coil** – untangled ourselves from the flesh, also, detached ourselves from the turmoil of human affairs
- 76 **give us pause** – make us pause
respect – consideration
- 77 **That makes . . . life** – That makes us put up with unhappiness for such a long time
- 79 **contumely** – rudeness & disrespect
- 80 **despised** – unrequited
- 81 **office** – those in office
- 81-82 **the spurns that . . . the unworthy takes** – the insults a patient person receives from unworthy people
- 83 **his quietus make** – settle his own account (from *quietus est*, a legal term meaning “he is quit”)
- 84 **a bare bodkin** – a mere dagger
- 84 **Who would fardels bear** – Who would bear burdens

- 87 **ourn** – boundary

- 88 **puzzles** - paralyzes

- 91 **conscience** – knowledge, consciousness
- 92 **native hue** – natural color

- 93 **cast** – tinge, shade of color
- 94 **pitch** – height (the pitch is the highest point in a falcon’s flight)
- 94 **moment** – importance
- 95 **With this regard** – on this account
- 95 **their currents turn awry** – great enterprises are like rivers that, turned aside from their main channels, lose momentum and become stagnant