

Amanda Mabillard

Name of Teacher

Name of Course

Due Date

Introduction to Hamlet

Hamlet is arguably the greatest dramatic character ever created. From the moment we meet the crestfallen prince, we are enraptured by his elegant intensity. Shrouded in his inky cloak, Hamlet is a man of radical contradictions—he is reckless yet cautious, courteous yet uncivil, tender yet ferocious. He meets his father's death with consuming outrage and righteous indignation, yet shows no compunction when he himself is responsible for the deaths of the meddling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the pontificating lord chamberlain, Polonius. He uses the fragile and innocent Ophelia as an outlet for his disgust towards the queen, and cannot comprehend that his own vicious words have caused her insanity. Hamlet is full of faults. But how is it that even seemingly negative qualities such as indecisiveness, hastiness, hate, brutality, and obsession can enhance Hamlet's position as a tragic hero; a *prince among men*? To answer these questions, we must journey with Hamlet from beginning to end, and examine the many facets of his character.

Our first impression of Hamlet sets the tone for the whole play. Even without Shakespeare providing an elaborate description of Hamlet's features, we can envision his pale face, tousled hair, and intense, brooding eyes. Dressed totally in black, Hamlet displays all the *forms, moods and shapes of grief*. His mother cannot help but notice Hamlet's outward appearance of mourning, but Hamlet makes it clear that the overt signs of grief do not come close to conveying how much sorrow he feels inside:

For they are the actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.84-6)

Hamlet cannot forget his father, even when all those around him have resumed their merry lives, content to offer the occasional conciliatory words of wisdom. The queen, considering she has lost a husband, offers up the rather unhelpful "Thou know'st tis common, all that lives must die/Passing through nature to eternity" (I.ii.71-2), and Claudius adds, amongst other things, "We pray you to throw to earth/This unprevailing woe, and think of us/As of a father" (I.ii.106-8). Hamlet's tremendous grief is intensified by this lack of feeling by those around him, and more significantly, by the cold-hearted actions of his mother, who married her brother-in-law within a month of her husband's death. This act of treachery by Gertrude, whom Hamlet obviously loved greatly at one time, rips the very fabric of Hamlet's being, and he tortures himself with memories of his late father's tenderness towards his mother:

So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly; heaven and earth,
Must I remember?... (I.ii.141-45)

The respect and awe Hamlet has for his father are seen in the above passage, as the Prince compares the late king to Hyperion, a Titan in classical mythology. The godlike view of his father is enhanced by the comparison of Claudius to Hyperion's antithesis, the satyr, a creature half-goat and half-man, known for its drunken and lustful behavior—the behaviors of the new king, Claudius. It is no wonder, then, that Hamlet develops a disgust not only for Claudius the

man, but for all of the behaviors and excesses associated with Claudius. Hamlet begins to find revelry of any kind unacceptable, but particularly he loathes drinking and sensual dancing. As they await the Ghost on the castle wall, Hamlet hears the King engaging in merriment down below, and tells Horatio that the whole world is feeling the same contempt for his drunken countrymen:

This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduc'd, and tax'd of other nations;
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition; and indeed it takes
From our achievements, though perform'd at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute. (I.iv.17-22)

It is unfortunate for the innocent Ophelia that the actions of Claudius and Gertrude have also tainted forever Hamlet's thoughts and feelings towards women. Based on the letters and gifts Hamlet gave his once-cherished Ophelia, it is apparent that he did love the girl, and likely felt those feelings of sweet devotion that his father felt for his mother. But, whether due to some overwhelming desire to become the mouthpiece for his father who cannot himself chastise his traitorous wife, or due to the sad fact that all the love in him has truly dried up, Hamlet turns on Ophelia and destroys her, with cruelty almost unimaginable:

I have heard of your paintings well enough
God hath given you one face,
and you make yourselves another: you jig,
you amble, and you lisp,

you nick-name God's creatures, and
make your wantonness your ignorance. (III.i.144-48)

As the play he has arranged for the King begins, Hamlet takes a much different tone with
Ophelia:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Lying down at Ophelia's feet.

Ophelia: No, my lord.

Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?

Ophelia: Ay, my lord.

Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs. (III.ii.111-20)

Some argue that this scene supports the theory that Hamlet is truly mad; that, unable to control his own thoughts and feelings, he hates Ophelia one moment and longs to engage in sexual intimacy with her the next. But Hamlet is not expressing his desire for Ophelia; he is not lost in the fog of his own madness. Although he does not, this time, lash out at her with overt cruelty, he is nevertheless once again heartlessly mistreating her with demeaning and disrespectful behavior. And Hamlet obviously is using Ophelia to further his facade of insanity—his actions are clearly for the benefit of old Polonius, who already believes that Hamlet has gone mad for want of Ophelia's love.

Hamlet must be held accountable for his treatment of Ophelia. He is not incoherent or paranoid; his ferocity cannot be blamed on insanity. In his destruction of his beloved creature, Hamlet is lucid and brilliant, fueled by rage and thoughts of Gertrude's betrayal. Ophelia is the

only outlet for the hostility that he must keep secret from the King. The belief that Hamlet still genuinely loves Ophelia, and that his deep sensitivity and hunger for justice compel him to behave the way he does, allows us to conclude that Hamlet is at once so heartless and yet so virtuous. The actual recognition of his love for Ophelia can only come when Hamlet realizes that she is dead, and free from her tainted womanly trappings:

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum. (V.i.263-4)

Hidden beneath Hamlet's bitter cynicism and cruel words is a desire to embrace those that fate dictates he must despise. Even when he confronts his mother and is so relentless that the Ghost must intercede on her behalf, we know that Hamlet longs to show her affection; to comfort her and to be comforted by her. But love, pleasure, and tenderness all have disappeared behind Hamlet's encompassing wall of depression and overwhelming responsibility. The royal couple's actions have destroyed his faith in humanity, and he contemplates suicide. He declares, "I do not set my life at a pin's fee" (I.iv.65), and, in act III, he soliloquizes:

...To die; to sleep,
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; (III.i.60-4)

Any possibility he had of regaining a semblance of normalcy and happiness is gone when the Ghost of his father demands Hamlet seek revenge. Although Hamlet himself desires to see Claudius pay for his crime, he realizes the evil in the deed of killing the King, prompted by both

"heaven and hell" (II.ii.586). The Ghost has placed Hamlet in a most unnatural position by asking him to commit murder. Hamlet hates the King for his treachery, but he would not act on that hate if he were not prompted to do so by the Ghost. Hamlet is an introspective scholar. He is reflective and pensive, and we see this trait throughout the play as Hamlet delays the moment of revenge as long as he possibly can. It appears to the audience that only a little time has elapsed since Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost, but, in fact, months have gone by. And the perfect opportunity to kill Claudius as he prays alone in his chamber is passed up by Hamlet, who makes excuses that the timing is not yet perfect. As Gareth Lloyd Evans writes in his book *Shakespeare IV*:

...Hamlet's arguments for not killing Claudius at prayers are both subtle and logical—too subtle, in fact, considering the enormity of Claudius' deed and the virtual certainty that Hamlet possesses of his guilt. Yet he holds back his sword—his heart does not seem to lie in its blade. (35)

Hamlet's perpetual introspection does finally help him to overcome his great anxiety. When he returns from exile in Act V, we see a very different Hamlet. He is calm, rational, and less afraid of death than merely indifferent. He has come to the realization that destiny is ultimately controlling all of our lives:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting,
That would not let me sleep: methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly,
And prais'd be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. (V.ii.4-11)

Hamlet is ready to confront the paradoxical truth that to avenge his father's death, he must commit the very same act for which he seeks revenge. Using fate as the scapegoat, Hamlet can distance himself from the act of killing Claudius. He can now admit that he knows nothing of the world, "since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be" (V.ii.209-14). Hamlet has reached the climax of his philosophizing; he has prepared himself for death.

When Hamlet does finally die, it is his princely qualities that make the lasting imprint in our minds. Hamlet remains

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form
The observ'd of all observers. (III.i.151-154)

Works Cited

Evans, Gareth Lloyd. *Shakespeare IV*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.