

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Shakespeare

HAMLET (conscientious)

Character The character of Hamlet has for three centuries been a major discussion point in English literary criticism. The mystery with Hamlet is that he seems unable to act, that he is introverted and 'sicklied over with the pale cast of thought,' even though the opportunity for revenge on the King and Queen, for his own father's murder, is palpably present. Is it that the young prince has lost his motivation in life, that he can't find the right moment to kill the King, or has he—by interacting with the 'evil' spirit of the ghost on the battlements—been rendered unable to clean up his moral life? Hamlet the introvert has little strength to ask these questions of himself.

Inwardly Hamlet meets with the King and his mother—now the King's wife. He lets them see that he is disturbed—by their revolting murder and marriage—but refuses to let them inside his thoughts. 'I have that within which passeth show/ these but the trappings and the suits of woe.' He makes a pretense of obedience to his new parental pair, while burying his woe inside—in such a way that they can't miss either it or his fury. The oversubtle, action-wary stepson confronts his authority figures with a quiet hatred; he turns his rejection of the elders in on himself.

Bitter After Hamlet's parents exit, he launches into a soliloquy—'Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt...'—in which he pours out his despair about the whole human condition. He bases his despair largely on the brutality with which his step father murdered his mother, and on the speed with which his mother then posted 'with such dexterity to incestuous sheets,' those of her new husband. Hamlet lays all his bitterness on the table, speaking to himself like a true introvert but at the same time explaining and advancing the narrative.

Determined Hamlet directly encounters the Ghost of his true father, the ghost who earlier terrified Horatio, and who has come to demand Hamlet's revenge for the wrongs that have been done. Hamlet swears to the ghost, that he will carry out the revenge. Although Hamlet's friends question the authenticity and motives of the Ghost, Hamlet insists on the ghost's trustworthiness. He proclaims his fidelity to his mission of revenge, and yet he does so with such rhetorical fervor that he lets us wonder whether he 'has the guts.' Is he just talking to himself, to rev up his courage?

Crafty Rejoined by his comrades Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet lets out his feelings about 'life,' and the nature of humanity. 'What a piece of work is a man,' he expostulates, while adding that 'man delights not me.' Hamlet is forcing us to wonder whether he is mad or whether he is finding extravagant language in order to test out his duty to avenge his Father. Hamlet finally makes it clear that he knows what's up, and is planning to get more evidence of his parents' guilt. 'I know a hawk from a handsaw.' But does he have the strength to carry out the act his inner self defines for him?

Parallels Wherever the literary theme in question involves a young man pondering revenge on stepdad and mom, it is likely that the author is rethinking the Hamlet legend, as Shakespeare molded it. Orestes, in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 B.C.), is haunted by the need to avenge his father's death, by killing his mother and her lover; the same preoccupation is starkly modernized in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931). Among the substantial post-Shakespearean literary encounters with Hamlet, we need to include texts like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1778-96), Melville's *Pierre* (1852), or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Wilhelm Meister and Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's work, both make Hamlet—character and play—a reference point for recurrent concerns with human duty, weakness, and responsibility. Melville goes profoundly for the crippling relationship between Hamlet and his mother, the crux of the prince's difficulty with action.

Discussion questions

What is Hamlet's problem? Is he a narcissist, interested only in himself, or is he a true detective, waiting to act when all the evidence is in?

Has Hamlet any allies in the play, who can help him to penetrate his dilemma of how to act?

Hamlet is often called 'the melancholy Dane.' What is he melancholy about? Is it the actual violence done to his father, or is it his inability to do anything about that violence.