

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Themes in Shakespeare

INTROSPECTION

HAMLET; HENRY V

As the Western world drifted from a mediaeval perspective, in which man was widely viewed as a creature in a coherent god-formed universe, the Renaissance took up the thinking of such as Erasmus, Montaigne, even Calvin, for what they saw in the mind of mortal man lodged in society and in social environments. Shakespeare was unmistakably a child of Renaissance thinking, and deeply sensitive to the fine textures of indecision, anxiety, and uncertainty. Out of such raw materials he created some of his finest male projections, into a Hamlet whose introspection diverts from the search for the truth, and into a newly crowned king, a one time rebel son—drinking buddy of Falstaff—who has come to a mature understanding of his historical role as King.

HAMLET Hamlet is introspective. He knows there is something seriously wrong with the State of Denmark: his mother and step father have conspired to kill the King, Hamlet's father, and Hamlet must do something to right this wrong. But he is reluctant to act. He finds reasons to put up with the state of affairs. In the end he is killed, without having 'drained the swamp.' He thinks too much about his problem, and cannot act.

HENRY V We barely recognize, in this play, the Hal who was the drinking buddy of Falstaff, in *Henry IV, Part I*—unless we skip to the Hal in the last scenes of that play, when he has already begun to take his impending succession seriously, and the gravity of his father's illness has started to weigh on him. From the outset of the present play we see the Hal who came to take the crown extremely seriously, and who had ultimately cared greatly about the state of mind of his father, as the old man passed away at the end of the previous play. Self-reflection and maturing are the themes of this play.