

HAMLET - Plot

- In a wood, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is visited by his father's ghost. He tells Hamlet that the present king, his brother Claudius (Hamlet's uncle) had murdered him after seducing Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. He asks Hamlet to kill Claudius but to spare Gertrude.
- To hide his intentions, Hamlet pretends to be mad and refuses the love of Ophelia, the daughter of the king's adviser, Polonius.
- Hamlet arranges the performance at court of a play representing Claudius's crimes: the king leaves the hall upset and this reaction confirms his guilt. **FOCUS 1**
- Hamlet faces his mother in such a violent way that Gertrude is scared; during the quarrel, Hamlet kills Polonius, who is behind the curtain: Hamlet had thought Claudius was overhearing them.
- Claudius sends Hamlet to England, while Ophelia becomes insane and drowns herself.
- Laertes, Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, returns from France to avenge his father and Claudius arranges a challenge between the two young men. To ensure success, Laertes is to use a poisoned sword and a cup of poisoned wine is prepared for Hamlet.
- Laertes wounds Hamlet, but the latter manages to seize the poisoned sword on Laertes who confesses the king's treachery.
- The queen drinks from Hamlet's cup by mistake and dies. Hamlet stabs the king and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup.
- Before dying, Hamlet welcomes the new king Fortinbras and asks him to tell his story.

MAIN THEMES

THE TRAGEDY OF REVENGE - In the Elizabethan age the Church, the State and the regular morals of people did not accept revenge, they considered it sinful but enjoyed seeing it in plays.

All revenge tragedies derived from the Greeks, then in Roman times, Seneca set the rules for all revenge playwrights in the Renaissance.

In all revenge tragedies a sexual or violent crime is committed against a family member of the hero and for various reasons laws and justice cannot punish it; so the hero goes through it with the revenge.

Its features are:

The hero usually has a period of doubt which involves complex planning.

- the appearance of a ghost to get the avenger to carry out the task.
- the avenger also has a very close relationship with the audience through soliloquies and asides.
- he places himself outside the normal moral order of things, and often becomes more isolated as the play develops, an isolation which may turn into madness.
- There is bloody action and many deaths occur throughout the entire play.
- What Thomas Kyd added to his play was that minor characters were left to deal with the situation at the end.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare largely followed the conventions of classical tragedy but he introduced much psychological insight through the reflections of the hero and through his relationship with the outside world.

Thanks to it, besides the theme of vengeance, Shakespeare develops a series of themes that are central to humanity: the relationships between father and son, mother and son friendship, love relationships; madness, the corruption linked to power, the existence of God, the meaning of the theatre itself.

The most relevant themes are:

LIFE AND DEATH - The shock Hamlet receives on the death of his father, and on the remarriage of his mother, causes anxious questions about life and the peace of the soul. The world changes its colour, life its meaning, love is deprived of its spirituality, woman of her prestige, the state of its stability, the earth and the air of their appeal.

It is a reduction of the world to the absurd which leads to melancholy and doubt and this is probably the reason why he is often held up as an example of the classic "indecisive" person, who delays decisions in a world of uncertainties.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY – In Act 1, scene 2, while she is getting married to Claudius, Gertrude asks Hamlet why he is still in mourning two months after his father died: "Why seems it so particular with thee?" Hamlet responds: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not 'seems.'" (1.2.75-76). The difference between "seems" (appearance) and "is" (reality) is crucial in Hamlet.

The events and people within the play appear to be true and honest but in reality are infested with evil and many of the characters in the play hide behind a **mask of falseness** and each character is constantly trying to figure out what the other characters think, as opposed to what those characters are pretending to think.

Polonius, the king's royal assistant, has a preoccupation with appearance, he always wants to keep up the appearance of a loving person, of a caring father: he speaks to his son Laertes with advice that sounds sincere but in reality it is rehearsed, hollow and without feeling.

From behind this mask, Claudius gives the impression of a person who is sincere and genuine, in reality he is plagued with lies and evil.

Hamlet himself hides behind madness.

The murder of Gonzago, the play which Hamlet wants to be performed to expose his father's murderer, is, paradoxically, the only true thing: what is fictionalised on the stage is truer than reality, which is instead fake acting.

This **play-within-the-play** is also a theatrical expedient which turns the characters into audience: the real audience watches the characters transform into audience themselves, who watch another play. When the real audience starts to get involved in the story and to lose awareness of its fictional value, their awareness is restored for a moment through this device.

RELIGION, HONOR, AND REVENGE - In Hamlet, the codes of conduct are largely defined by religion and an aristocratic sense of honour that demands revenge. But as Hamlet actually begins to pursue revenge against Claudius for his sense of honour, he discovers that religion actually opposes revenge, and taking revenge could endanger Hamlet's own soul. In other words, Hamlet discovers that the codes of conduct on which society is founded are contradictory and the idea of justice confused.

FOCUS 1 – *To be or not to be*

Hamlet is commonly depicted as reciting this monologue while holding a skull, although it actually occurs later, in Act V, Scene I, when Hamlet sees the skull of the exhumed dead body of Yorick, the late court jester, and he meditates on the inevitability of death and earthly vanity.

This soliloquy occurs in Act 3, Scene 1, after Hamlet finds out about his father's murder by his uncle Claudius and is considered to be one of the most important and fundamental in English literature because the hero's desperate question, "To be, or not to be," is of philosophical nature, questioning life and death—in short, existence. **TI**

- At first Hamlet ponders whether he should live with the pain of his father's murder or take action against his "sea of troubles" and seek revenge for his father's death.
- After his proposal of vengeance, though, Hamlet also contemplates whether it is better to stay alive or commit suicide to put an end to all the troubles of human life. *"To die, to sleep--/No more--and by a sleep to say we end/The heartache and the thousand natural shocks/That flash is heir to--'tis a consummation/Devoutly to be wished" (III,i,68-71).*
- But when Hamlet considers the consequences of death and afterlife, he concludes that no one would choose to endure the pain of life if he or she were not afraid of what will come after death, which is unknown to everybody. *"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"*
- and that it is this fear which causes complex moral considerations to interfere with the capacity for action.

Enter HAMLET

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,¹ 1 i colpi e i dardi
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, della sorte nefasta
 And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep.
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end 2 un completamento
 The heartache and the thousand natural shocks da desiderare
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation con tutto il cuore
Devoutly to be wish'd!²To die, to sleep; 3 qui sta il difficile
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub³,
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil⁴, 4 quando ci siamo
 Must give us pause. There's the respect liberati dalla vita
 That makes calamity of so long life.

5 le sferzate e le derision del tempo

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time⁵, 6 torti
 Th' oppressor's wrong⁶, the proud man's contumely⁷,
 The pangs⁸ of despised love, the law's delay, 7 oltraggio
 The insolence of office⁹, and the spurns 8 fitte al cuore 9 potere
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes¹⁰, 10 lo scherno che il
 When he himself might his quietus make merito paziente riceve
With a bare bodkin^{11*}? Who would fardels bear, dagli indegni
 To grunt and sweat under a weary¹² life, 12 faticosa
But that¹³ the dread of something after death, 13 se non fosse
 The undiscovered country from whose bourn che
No traveler returns¹⁴, puzzles the will¹⁵ 14 dalla cui frontiera
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have nessuno ritorna
 Than fly to others that we know not of? 15 confonde la volontà

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^{16*},
 And enterprises of great pith and moment^{17*}
 With this regard their currents turn awry¹⁸, 18 le loro correnti
 And lose the name of action. Soft you now, deviano
 The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
 Be all my sins remembered.

*11 potrebbe darsi da solo la propria quietanza con un nudo pugnale

*16 il colore naturale della decisione è reso malsano dal pallido
 incarnato del pensiero

*17 di grande ambizione e importanza

Entra Amleto

AMLETO

Essere, o non essere...questo è il nodo:
 se sia più nobile sopportar le fiondate
 e le frecciate d'una sorte oltraggiosa,
 o armarsi contro un mare di sciagure,
 e contrastandole finir con esse. Morire; dormire;
 nulla più. E con un sonno dirsi di por fine
 alle doglie del cuore e ai mille mali
 che da natura eredita la carne. Questa è la fine
 che dovremmo augurarci a mani giunte. Morire..
 dormire, sognare, forse; ma questo è il dubbio:
 perché in quel sonno mortale quali sogni ci possono
 venire, quando ci fossimo scrollati via da questo nostro
 involucro? ciò deve arrestarci: Ecco il dubbio
 che fa così longevo il nostro vivere in tal miseria.

Se no, chi sopporterebbe le frustate e i malanni della
 vita, le angherie dei tiranni, l'oltraggio dei superbi,
 le pene dell'amore disprezzato, i ritardi nell'applicar le
 leggi, l'arroganza dei pubblici poteri, gli oltraggi fatti
 dagli immeritevoli al merito paziente,
 quand'uno, di sua mano, potrebbe prender pace
 con un semplice pugnale? E chi porterebbe questi
 fardelli, a gemere e sudare sotto il peso d'una vita
 grama, se il timore di un "che" dopo la morte,
 quella regione oscura, inesplorata, dai cui confini non
 v'è viaggiatore che ritorni - non intrigasse tanto
 la volontà, da indurci a sopportare quei mali che già
 abbiamo, piuttosto che a volar, nell'aldilà, incontro ad
 altri mali sconosciuti?

Ed è così che la nostra coscienza ci fa vili;
 è così che si scolora al pallido riflesso del pensiero
 il nativo colore del coraggio,
 ed alte imprese e di grande momento,
 a cagione di questo, si disviano
 e perdono anche il nome dell'azione. (Vede Ofelia)
 Ma zitto, adesso!... La leggiadra Ofelia!
 Ninfa, nelle tue preci rammemoràti siano i miei peccati.

PARAPHRASING

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AMLETO

The question is: is it better to be alive or dead?
Is it nobler to face
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 catch:
because in death's sleep who knows what kind of dreams
might come, after we've put the commotion of life behind
us. That's certainly something to worry about.
That's the consideration that makes us stretch out our
sufferings so long.

After all, who would accept all life's humiliations
the abuse from superiors, the insults of arrogant men,
the pangs of unreciprocated 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 find his peace with a simple knife
(committing suicide)? 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?

The 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. But *shh*,
here comes the beautiful Ophelia. Pretty lady,
please remember me when you pray.