

Dean Gladish

Wysocki

AP Literature and Composition

24 February 2016

*Hamlet* Motif Essay

In his play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare artfully constructs a story of revenge and deceit wherein the entire Danish royal family succumbs to tragic death. Shakespeare tells the story of a young man who is forced by the hand of fate to avenge his dead father.

Exploring numerous themes including indecisiveness and misanthropy, Shakespeare tells a gruesome tale of moral decadence and decay. Throughout the play, Shakespeare makes use of the motifs of death to show Hamlet's uncertainty and derision of social categories, skulls to portray Hamlet's attitude toward death as an equalizing force, and theater in order to progress the theme of trickery and the plot of the play itself.

As the world of *Hamlet* becomes increasingly filled with decay and disease, Shakespeare uses Hamlet's obsession with death in order to elucidate his sense of uncertainty as well as his derision for the corrupt social order. In his soliloquy "To Be or Not to Be", Hamlet concludes that "the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns, puzzles the will / And makes us rather bear those ills we have" (3.1.86-89). Hamlet's soliloquy ultimately expresses the larger theme of uncertainty that pervades the play; Hamlet is unable to act because he is uncertain, whether it is of Claudius' culpability or of the world after death. Shakespeare also uses death as an equalizing force - when the King questions Hamlet regarding Polonius' whereabouts, Hamlet tells the King that Polonius is at supper. He

then clarifies that Polonius is being eaten by a "convocation of politic worms" (4.3.23). The implication of this statement is that Hamlet feels a great deal of spite toward the King and his ill-gotten wealth, and believes that death will bring him to be no more than worm food.

Through Hamlet's encounter with the skulls of the graveyard, Shakespeare demonstrates how Hamlet's view of death as a good thing changes to recognition that it is merely a dispassionate equalizer. Initially, upon hearing the news of the circumstances surrounding his father's death, Hamlet wishes that "the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (1.2.135-136). When Hamlet stops in the graveyard after returning from England, he is initially joyful when he sees the skulls that the gravedigger reveals. Hamlet is delighted to imagine in these skulls the faces of corrupt politicians and dishonest lawyers (5.1.100-105). In these moments, the skulls provide Hamlet with an ironic sense of amusement and serve as a reminder of the certainty of death in a corrupt and dishonest world. Hamlet finds that death is the ultimate revolution – the final reversal of fortune for the corrupt. However, Hamlet soon encounters the skull of Yorick. After recalling how he once rode on Yorick's back and listened to his humorous songs, Hamlet's disposition changes from happiness to despair (5.1.190-198). Ultimately, Hamlet realizes that death does not purposefully bring justice but rather is the common end of the just and the unjust alike.

Shakespeare also uses the motif of theater in order to advance the plot and explore the theme of trickery. While theater is typically thought of as a form of entertainment, Hamlet's play *The Murder of Gonzago* serves as a catalyst to progress the plot and to criticize society. In his play, the Player King says, "I do believe you think

what now you speak, / But what we do determine oft we break. / Purpose is but the slave to memory” (3.2.209-211). Implying that women break their promises, Hamlet’s play parallels his situation. Hamlet clearly seeks to criticize his mother’s disloyalty to the late king and determine if she feels any guilt. The primary aim of the play, which plays on the theme of trickery, is to get a reaction out of Claudius. Through his work of fiction, Hamlet is able to confirm that Claudius is indeed the murderer of his father (3.1.291). Shakespeare’s use of theater also shows the way in which Hamlet tries to gain knowledge and gain the resolve to commit to his plan. For Hamlet, certainty is of the utmost importance.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare explores numerous thematic elements such as vengeance, uncertainty, and justice through the inclusion of various motifs. With the use of motifs such as skulls and theater, Shakespeare shows that truth can be found, perhaps not through Hamlet's contemplation of death, but through the reader's contemplation of Hamlet. By retaining his belief in the divine, Hamlet is able to ultimately reject the moral relativism of Claudius, saying that there “is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.233-234). Shakespeare is thus able to portray Hamlet as a tragic hero.