

Fine & Performing Arts Theatre Department
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Kate Hanley

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark Analysis

With the end of the semester drawing near, it is now time to take on the six-page final paper the class has been dreading. It seems only fitting that we test our skills, and take on *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, which is arguably one of the best plays ever written. The play sheds light on many moral and philosophical issues, many of which center around death, obsession, and social commentary. By analyzing each act individually, I will piece together the play in order to find the conflict-resolution structure and answer the overarching major dramatic question, which is, *'Is Hamlet's obsession with revenge enough to drive him to act?'*

Act I opens on a dark night in Denmark during the changing of the guards. Though subtle, Scene I gives the audience the setting for the play, the given circumstances, the introductory incident, the moment of engagement, and the major dramatic question. To begin, the audience is able to draw the conclusion that the setting is outside of a castle, due to the changing of the guards, and the point that Francisco makes to remark how cold it is outside. It is later revealed that the location is in Denmark, due to Marcellus saying, *"And liegemen to the Dane,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). To reinforce the location, Horatio also remarks on the state of Denmark throughout the scene, and how they are in service to it.

As the scene progresses, the guards discuss the curious incident of a ghost that has been appearing the last two nights, which serves as the given circumstances. Barnardo explains how the ghost looks eerily like the old King Hamlet, but the alarming part is that he is dressed for battle. He explains that the king has, *"...that fair and warlike form, in which the majesty of buried Denmark,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). This is an important event that has happened prior to the beginning of the play, as it implies that the ruling power in the country could possibly be at an upset. This idea is later clarified, as Horatio explains how the armored could represent the rumors he has been hearing. Horatio's monologue gives more information on the state of the country and what has transpired, that being Old King Hamlet killed Fortinbras, the King of Norway, and took his land. Fortinbras' son, also named Fortinbras, has assembled an army and has the potential to try and avenge his father and take their land back. It is these given circumstances that allows the guards to draw the conclusion of what the ghost's purpose is, and how they should go about solving it. It also gives the audience a sense of suspicion that something isn't right in the state of Denmark.

With the setting and given circumstances established, finding the introductory incident and moment of engagement becomes much easier. The introductory incident is when Horatio tries to speak to the ghost, but it refuses to answer him. He says, *"Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). The conflict is introduced, that being the ghost has a message they must hear in order to prepare for something ominous, but it can only speak to a certain person. The moment of engagement is when Horatio says, *"Let us impart what we have seen tonight unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life, this spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). The guards have committed to telling the young Hamlet of the ghost in hopes that the ghost will finally speak, which bleeds into the overarching major dramatic question for Act 1, which is, *'Will the ghost be heard?'*

Act I, Scene I is crucial because it sets up the entirety of the first Act. In Scene II it can be gathered that Claudius is a sensible ruler, as he can sympathize that King Hamlet was a great man that should be mourned, but he also has a duty to protect Denmark from Fortinbras. He tries to cheer Hamlet up, but Hamlet is too struck with grief and anger to listen. When Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus enter, they explain how they saw the ghost and convince Hamlet to stand guard with them in order to speak to the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus are driving the action forward, because they are taking steps in order to answer the MDQ, which can be answered if the ghost speaks to Hamlet. This makes them the protagonists of Act I, and the ghost the opposing force, because the ghost will speak to no one but Hamlet.

Scene III is a device in order to give more depth to Polonius and Laertes, as well as introduce Hamlet's love interest, Ophelia. Before Laertes departs for France, he gives his sister wise advice about being weary of Hamlet's affections, and keeping herself pure. Polonius enters and arguably gives some of the wisest advice a person can give before sending his son off. This scene could be used in order to illustrate how Polonius and Laertes aren't a problem now, but they will oppose Hamlet's objective in future acts. It also goes to illustrate how clever Polonius is, and will make Hamlet tricking him in the future that much more impactful.

Scene IV and V consist of the ghost appearing to Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus, and Hamlet eventually going with the ghost. The ghost explains his need for Hamlet to take revenge, and reveals his killer, saying, "*The serpent that did sting thy father's life, now wears his crown,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). The ghost has tasked Hamlet with killing Claudius in order to prevent the crown of Denmark from becoming, "*A couch for luxury and damnèd incest,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Hamlet takes on the quest, and Act I is concluded because the major dramatic question has been answered. The ghost has spoken, and Horatio was correct in thinking that he was an omen for things to come, as things are, "*...rotten in the state of Denmark,*" (Shakespeare, 2017).

Act I relates to the overarching MDQ because it is what shifts Hamlet's obsession with death over to an obsession with killing Claudius. Due to his immense grief over his father's death, as well as anger towards his mother for her quick marriage, he is willing to commit to acting crazed in order to achieve his objective. It is not enough to push Hamlet into action though, as he needs further proof due to his uncertainty over the ghost.

Act II opens on Polonius ordering Reynaldo to go to France in order to find out what Laertes has been up to. Though fairly short, Scene I is a way of showing the audience how clever Polonius is, and how he uses different tactics in order to achieve his objective. From what we've seen of him in Act I, he should be considered wise and trustworthy. He even "forgets" what he was going to say in order to ensure Reynaldo was listening and understood what he wanted him to do. For example, "*What was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Polonius' use of tactics and life experience are what make him the protagonist of Act II, as he comes to the conclusion that Hamlet is crazy with love over Ophelia's rejection of him, and uses this belief to drive the plot forward. He takes his beliefs to Claudius and Gertrude, and devises a plan in order to prove his hypothesis as to why their son is acting oddly.

This makes Hamlet the opposing force, as he has his own motives to convince people that he is crazy, in order to look less suspicious when he does take his revenge. For example, when Polonius tries to speak to Hamlet about what book he is reading, Hamlet replies with crazy sentences that sometimes make sense. This tricks Polonius, who uses an aside to say, "*How pregnant sometimes his replies are. A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Hamlet has convinced

Polonius that he is crazy, as he exhibits the signs that are often associated with crazy people. The introductory incident is when Polonius asks Ophelia if Hamlet is mad with love for her, and the moment of engagement is when he takes her to the King in order to tell them of his findings.

The major dramatic question of Act II is, *'Will Hamlet take action?'* His given circumstances of having talked to the ghost ensure that he has reasonable proof that Claudius has something to do with his father's death, but he needs solid evidence before he can fully let himself take action. Hamlet has allowed himself to plant the seeds in order to carry out his revenge by making the people around him think he is crazy, but he hasn't committed to his goal, yet. He only starts committing once he sees that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are working under Claudius, which draws a line between them. It takes seeing the actors to help Hamlet formulate a plan to take action towards revenge. If the actors can draw a response out of Claudius by reenacting how Hamlet's father died, then Hamlet can commit fully. The major dramatic question is answered at the end of the act, because Hamlet decides to write a play for the actors to perform, and takes action by committing to his plan to get the evidence he needs.

Act II relates of the overarching MDQ because Hamlet ends the act with a monologue about how although he is able to recognize that he should get revenge on Claudius, all he can do is curse at his circumstances. His obsession with revenge seems to take a backseat, as Hamlet spends his time committing to his insanity scheme rather than formulating an actual plan to kill Claudius. It is only in his ending monologue that Hamlet commits to using the actors as a way of tricking Claudius into admitting his guilt. Though this could be considered a form of taking steps that will eventually lead to action, his obsession in Act II does not serve as enough reason to force Hamlet into action.

Claudius serves as the protagonist for Act III, as he opens the act by questioning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet, and continues to drive the act by making plans in order to prevent Hamlet from corrupting his throne. Throughout the act, Claudius comes up with a plan to send Hamlet to England to help with his madness, and Hamlet confirms that it has been put into action in Scene IV. This would make Hamlet the opposing force, as he uses his wits and silver-tongue in order to prevent Claudius from seeing his plan prematurely. For example, in Scene I, Claudius suspects that Hamlet's madness may not be caused by love, saying, *"Love? His affections do not that way tend,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). In order to get his proof and trick Claudius, Hamlet makes a point of sitting next to Ophelia during the play and harassing her with sexual innuendos.

The introductory incident is Claudius' line of, *"Love? His affections do not that way tend,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). Claudius suspects that Hamlet's madness might not be caused by love, but rather grief or sadness over his father. Claudius, knowing that insanity could lead to Hamlet doing something destructive, decides he must watch him closely less something bad happens as a result. This leads to the moment of engagement, when Claudius says, *"Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England,"* (Shakespeare, 2017).

This ties into the major dramatic question for the act, which is, *'Will Claudius' plan come to fruition before Hamlet can take revenge?'* In Act III, both Claudius and Hamlet are making plans in order to get what they want from the other. Hamlet writes a script for the actors in order to confirm Claudius' guilt, and Claudius uses Ophelia to figure out why Hamlet's gone mad. Due to Hamlet's impulsive choices, he is unable to complete his revenge task due to focusing on criticizing his mother, rather than sticking to his revenge plot for Claudius. The Ghost even reminds Hamlet that he is not pursuing the right goal, saying, *"Do not forget. This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose,"* (Shakespeare, 2017). Due to Hamlet not killing

Claudius when presented the chance, as well as taking too long to prove Claudius' guilt, his uncle is able to send him off to England before he can act.

Act III focuses more on the theme of obsession. Hamlet is so obsessed with his revenge over Claudius that he is willing to throw away his reputation over it. For example, after his meeting with Ophelia, she recounts how he is no longer the shining prince she fell in love with. She says, "*Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword. Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion and the mould of form, th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). This is an interesting scene, because Hamlet claims he doesn't love her, and begs her to take herself to a convent in order to her from breeding more sinners. It is a contrast to Act V, when he cries over her dead body and expresses how his love for her is greater than her brother's. These contrasts could represent how his obsession led him to say things he didn't really mean in order to achieve his revenge, and eventually resulted in the death of his lover. It begs the question of if obsession is worth everything you lose along with it. Hamlet's obsession can also be seen with his visit to Gertrude. He is so obsessed with the idea of showing her the sins she committed against her late-husband that she fears for her safety. It is also what leads him into accidentally killing Polonius. The shocking part is that Hamlet doesn't seem to care that he has just taken a life, as he is more obsessed with how it should have been Claudius. This can also be seen in Polonius, as he is so convinced of his hypothesis that Hamlet is mad with love, he refuses to believe anything else, even when there is proof in front of him. It is what leads Polonius to hide behind Gertrude's tapestry to listen in on their conversation, despite the fact that Claudius has already made the decision to send his nephew to England. It is ultimately what leads to his death.

This relates to the overarching MDQ, as it shows that not only has Hamlet's obsession with revenge driven him to cut ties with his lover, it also drives him to take the life of Polonius without first checking to see who he was killing behind the tapestry. His revenge is driving him to make impulsive choices, yet he does not act when given the chance. Hamlet often comments on how he has many reasons to murder Claudius, yet never pinpoints why he won't take the initiative to do so. It looks more as though he is trying to show everyone their faults more than he wants revenge on them.

Claudius again serves as the protagonist for Act IV, as he drives the action forward. With the quick burial of Polonius, many nasty rumors have arisen as to why. The public are starting to question Claudius, and he is starting to worry due to Laertes' return from France. He even says so, saying, "*My soul is full of discord and dismay,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). With so much slander going around, Claudius is also worried about maintaining control of the Danish crown. The introductory incident is, "*It will be laid to us, whose providence, should have kept short, restrained and out of haunt, this mad young man,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Claudius understands that the general public love Hamlet, and will overlook his crimes due to their adoration for him. If Claudius were to severely punish Hamlet, the crowd would most likely turn on him. This leads to the moment of engagement, which is, "*The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch, but we will ship him hence, and this vile deed, we must, with all our majesty and skill, both countenance and excuse,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Claudius knows he must use every diplomatic trick he can in order to excuse Hamlet of the murder. As the act progresses, things get progressively worse for Claudius, which leads to the major dramatic question.

The major dramatic question of Act IV is, '*Will Claudius remain in control of Denmark?*' Not only does Claudius have to appease the general public and avoid a scandal, but he must also appease Laertes. Laertes poses a real threat, because he is also beloved by the public. Now that

the public doubts Claudius as a ruler, they are turning to Laertes to be king. With Laertes' anger over his father's death, he is fired up enough to kill Claudius. It also doesn't help that he sees that Ophelia has gone insane with grief. Claudius, being the clever man that he is, is able to calm Laertes down enough to see reason, and convinces him to compare accounts of the murder with his friends. With Laertes redirected, Claudius also takes the time to ensure that Hamlet will no longer pose as a threat. He sends a letter to the King of England and tells him to kill Hamlet when he arrives, thus making Claudius look innocent to the public. Another way Claudius pushes the plot forward and assures his continued rule is the plan he makes with Laertes when he finds out that Hamlet is coming back to Denmark. Having heard of Laertes famed fencing skills, he convinces Laertes that he can avenge his father's death and make it look like an accident by using a sharpened blade which he can add poison to. As a failsafe, he even plans to plant a poisoned cup in case Laertes can't land a hit.

The opposing force of the Act is the general public, as Claudius is constantly having to find sneaky ways to get around them in order to assure he won't look bad or lose his control of Denmark. Many of his decisions derive from thinking of how the public will react. Laertes is also an obstacle that Claudius must get around in order to stay in control, because Laertes could take his crown, should he want it. He convinces Laertes that he may take his revenge, but it must be the person who committed the murder. He says, "*Why, now you speak, like a good child and a true gentleman, that I am guiltless of your father's death, and am most sensible in grief for it, it shall as level to your judgment pierce, as day does to your eye,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Due to Claudius' use of rational arguments and persuasion, he is able to lead the act in his favor.

The overarching MDQ of obsession with revenge is shown more in Laertes than Hamlet in this Act. Laertes has his weapon ready and is more than ready to eternally damn himself if it means avenging his father. In contrast, Hamlet seems keen on commenting on the idea of what a person is worth after death, instead of making a plan on how to return from England in order to kill Claudius. Laertes is the only character of the play to allow obsession with revenge to allow him to take action.

Act V is the final act in the show, and Claudius is the protagonist. Due to his plans for Hamlet, he drives the scenes forward and leads to the deaths of many people. Surprisingly, Hamlet is not the protagonist, despite killing Claudius, anyways. For example, when Hamlet comes back from England, he doesn't have a plan on how he is going to seek revenge on his uncle. Instead, he has a meltdown in a graveyard over Ophelia and returns to the castle, only to tell Horatio how he indirectly murdered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Even in Act IV, Scene IV, when he said he would keep his thoughts, "*...bloody, or be nothing worth,*" Hamlet does not take action in trying to find another way to kill Claudius. Claudius drives the act because he initiates the duel between his nephew and Laertes, as well as poisons the cup that kills Gertrude.

Laertes serves as the opposing force, because he is the one who exposes Claudius' plan to the court. For example, Claudius' objective was to take care of Hamlet without anyone knowing the murder was preconceived. When Laertes realizes he is going to die, he exposes Claudius, saying, "*The king, the king's to blame,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). Had Laertes not said that, there was a chance Hamlet might not have stabbed Claudius in a rage. Claudius would have succeeded in his plan and Hamlet would have died from the poisoned blade.

The introductory incident is when Claudius says, "*O, he is mad, Laertes,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). By saying this, Claudius is introducing Laertes to the problem and convincing him that he should still take his revenge on Hamlet. The moment of engagement is when Claudius says, "*We'll put the matter to the present push,*" (Shakespeare, 2017). He is telling Laertes that he

must be patient and remember the plan, as well as commit to kill Hamlet once the time comes. This leads into the major dramatic question of Act V, which is, '*Will Claudius get away with the murder of Hamlet?*' Claudius does everything that he can to assure Hamlet will be killed: giving Laertes a sharpened blade, letting him poison the blade, and giving Hamlet a poisoned cup. He places bets on Hamlet in order to make the duel look convincing, and even lets Gertrude die instead of admitting what he did. It is only due to the push from Laertes that Hamlet does finally kill Claudius, which is the climax. The denouncements are when Hamlet names Fortinbras the next King of Denmark and dies.

The overarching major dramatic question of *Hamlet* is, '*Is Hamlet's obsession with revenge enough to drive him to act?*' In my analysis of the play, I find that the answer is no. Hamlet killed Claudius in the spur of the moment rage, not in a long-term revenge scheme that he was obsessed with. In the beginning, Hamlet was obsessed with death, but only pondered suicide. When given an obsession for revenge, he takes steps toward his goal but never acts. From supplemental research, I found that Professor Kiernan Ryan believes it is due to, "*No adequate course of action open to him, paralysed by the futility of the revenge his society demands that he seek, Hamlet wavers and stalls, playing for time until circumstances force his hand and he kills Claudius in anger on the spur of the moment,*" (Ryan, 2015).

I agree with this statement, as although Hamlet does take steps in order to get revenge, he doesn't seem to have enough of an obsession with it to allow himself to just kill Claudius. He does commit in small ways, such as acting crazy as a guise to kill the King, but it is never enough. If Hamlet were truly obsessed with killing Claudius and avenging his father, all his time would have been spent thinking about it and making plans to act on. He instead spends a rather large amount of time making social commentary on other things, such as discussing death with the skull, or making comments about the ideals of love. It almost seems as though Hamlet is more obsessed with death than he was with reaping it, as his revenge plot often leads into monologues about people's fate and the meaning of life. Shakespeare could have used obsession as a jumping block in order to have his characters explore these ideas, as they all center around human flaws. Humans are very 4-dimensional creatures. Human nature is reflected in Hamlet, as he is neither good nor bad. He is willing to kill, but he also shows his deep capacity for love, as shown with his friendship with Horatio. By giving Hamlet an obsession with revenge, Shakespeare was able to explore human nature and what drives humans to make the decisions that they do. Obsession could just be used as one of the many human flaws people possess.

Obsession plays a big role in *Hamlet*, as it leads to characters obsessing over one purpose too fully, which results in more lost than won. The whole play could be a comment on obsession, as it brings out the evils of humans and how far we are willing to go in order to get what we want. It could also illustrate how much we have to lose by allowing obsession to rule us. This idea also goes for other human flaws as well, such as lust and pride. Claudius was willing to kill his brother over lust for his queen and his kingdom, while Polonius was willing to do almost anything in order to prove he was correct. By making obsession a prominent theme, Shakespeare was able to explore human nature and make content that is still relevant, today.

In conclusion, by analyzing each act individually, I was able to find the conflict resolution structure and relate it back to the overarching major dramatic question, which was, '*Is Hamlet's obsession with revenge enough to drive him to act?*,' to which the answer was no.

References

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