

Ms. Kuo

English 12, Block 1-1

6 April 2015

Hamlet's Soliloquies

In the play Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Hamlet is a complex character, who shows one personality to the public and another when alone. Throughout the play, Hamlet is on the verge of insanity, and it is debated among many critics whether this insanity is real or feigned. However, Hamlet's time alone reveals much about his personality and the way he deals with revenge. Hamlet's three soliloquies show the conflict between emotions and reason, and the consequences of over-thinking.

Hamlet's soliloquies showcase the war between feelings and logic in the process of making decisions. In his soliloquy from 2.2, Hamlet mentions how an actor can imagine sorrow real enough to move an audience, while Hamlet himself cannot even act upon his genuine grief and take revenge. Hamlet is obviously upset and compares himself to a "dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (2.2.552) for not being able to kill King Claudius. As stated by Heartley Coleridge, "By natural temperament [Hamlet] is more a thinker than a doer." He spends more time thinking about how he is not accomplishing anything as opposed to actually going out and killing King Claudius. On one hand, Hamlet is desperate to avenge his father, who had his kingdom, his wife and his life stolen from him by his own brother. He is fueled by his grief and

anger to take revenge for his father. On the other hand, Hamlet has the tendency to doubt and over-think. Hamlet seems reluctant to actually kill King Claudius and spends most of his time plotting rather than actually doing. While his emotions tell him to avenge his father, the more logical side of him tells him to carefully think his plans through before acting. Hamlet's tendency to get mad at himself for thinking too much causes his tragic indecisiveness.

This indecisiveness causes Hamlet to stall for time by only plotting to kill King Claudius. Instead of carrying out the deed, he gets angry at himself for his inaction. He compares talks about an actor who can move the hearts of the audience "in a dream of passion," whereas he can't even bring himself act on the behalf of a king who was unjustly murdered. He calls himself a coward for not being able to kill King Claudius, but ends the soliloquy with, "the play 's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king;" (2.2.590-91) and decides to, instead of killing King Claudius, re-enact the old King's death in a play to see if he can get some kind of reaction from King Claudius. Again, he puts off the actual "revenge" part of his plans and tries to extend the "sneaking around and scheming" part, most likely because he needs even more time to over-think his plans. It is obvious at this point that Hamlet believes King Claudius to be guilty; if it were not so, his idea of revenge would not exist because there would not have been any crime. Hamlet is simply stalling for time because he is unsure of his actions, which in this story, brings extreme consequences.

Hamlet seems meticulous because of his excessive plotting and over-thinking, but he is still impulsive and subject to his emotions. William Hazlitt notes that Hamlet "seems incapable

of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again, where he alters the letters which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death." Hamlet, believing Polonius is King Claudius, stabs him. This is because he is unable to balance his emotions with reason, and this causes both irrational outbursts in addition to inaction. As a result of Polonius's death, Ophelia commits suicide by drowning, and Laertes soon becomes obsessed with revenge like Hamlet, and plots with King Claudius to kill Hamlet. Laertes ends up getting stabbed by his own poisoned sword, and Gertrude dies after drinking the poison meant for Hamlet. Claudius eventually meets his fated death as the antagonist of the tragedy, but not after the unnecessary deaths of characters who were not directly involved with the original crime. These characters would not have died if Hamlet had just killed Claudius without hesitation. Hamlet's violent outburst is a result of his paranoia, because he failed to exact revenge on Claudius. His inability to reach a firm decision eventually leads to the deaths of innocent characters.


Hamlet's soliloquy from 3.1 is a clear example of how Hamlet ends up being unproductive when left to think. Here, Hamlet notes that it would be easier to simply commit suicide and end all of his sorrows, but he is still unsure of what comes after death. Hamlet relates dying to sleep, speaking of it in a way that death is seen as peaceful and tranquil. If he were to commit suicide, his pain would disappear and revenge would be irrelevant and impossible; he would sleep and be able to sleep forever. However, he is unsure of life after death, and worries that he will not go to heaven because those who avoid the "whips and scorns of

time” (4.4.105–39) surely must pay their dues eventually. Because he wastes so much time thinking about this, he never really reaches a conclusion and is pulled away from his thoughts by Ophelia. Also, as stated by Alfred Bates, “Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else. From expressions of religious confidence he passes over to skeptical doubts; he believes in the ghost of his father as long as he sees it, but as soon as it has disappeared, it appears to him almost in the light of a deception.” Hamlet’s emotions and thoughts are extremely flighty and volatile. He believes one thing and then quickly changes his mind after, which affects how confident he is about his final decision. His procrastination when making a decision makes him even more inconclusive, especially when much is at stake.

In act 4 scene 4, Hamlet decides that someone who simply thinks and does not act is nothing better than a beast that only eats and sleeps. Again, he is angry at himself for not being able to act on his revenge. Seeing as he is talking to himself about his indecisiveness again, it is obvious that he never reached a conclusion in the first place and is again trying to reach one. By the end of the soliloquy, Hamlet has managed to get himself hyped up to kill King Claudius. However, it takes the deaths of the people around him to actually get him to Kill King Claudius. He waits until the last minute, when everyone is dead or close to death, before doing the deed. Hamlet then dies soon after, paying for his hesitance and indeciveness with his life.

Hamlet is a perfect example of how both emotion and reason affect the way humans make choices. Often, we put off decision making until the very last moment because of our

tendency to change our minds. This over-thinking is a waste of time, and instead hinders the likelihood of success. With Hamlet, he manages to achieve his goal of exacting revenge, but suffers unnecessary casualties in the process, all because of his inability to act. Hamlet's poor decision making skills and procrastination tendency serves as a very relatable problem amongst high school students, who make poor decisions about time management and thus must suffer the consequences of sleep deprivation or low marks.



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