**Hamlet – Themes and Issues**

**Appearance vs. Reality**

Appearance vs. reality is verifiably a recurrent motif in Shakespeare.

In Act 1 Scene 2, the anxious Gertrude asks her son why he is taking the death of his father so personally...

Why seems it so particular with thee?

Hamlet indignantly asserts the sincerity of his grief....

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye  
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
For they are actions that a man might play;  
But I have that within which passes show,  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Here the prince may be implying that his mother's grief, unlike his own, is merely an appearance.  
  
When the ghost of old Hamlet appears and reveals to his grieving son the horrific details of his death at the hands of his treacherous brother, the theme of appearance versus reality becomes firmly rooted in the plot as Hamlet is presented with a moral dilemma. If the ghost is in reality what he appears to be, then Claudius is merely an appearance, an arch-hypocrite. The king is not in reality the grieving brother he had pretended to be in the previous scene, but a ruthless fratricide. This is Hamlet's initial reaction to his dead father's revelations.

O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain

And Gertrude too is exposed as a hypocrite, a 'most seeming-virtuous queen'. However, if the ghost is not what it appears to be, a 'spirit of health' (come from purgatory with divine permission to right a great wrong), but a 'goblin damn'd' (a devil assuming the Old King's appearance to trick Hamlet into killing an innocent man and so damning his own soul), then Claudius really is a grieving brother and the queen is in fact a virtuous woman who did not commit adultery with her brother-in-law.Following his passionate outburst

I know not 'seems'

It is supremely ironic that Hamlet should himself subsequently assume an appearance, should

Think meet  
To put an antic disposition on

in order to lull his uncle into a false sense of security, thereby enabling him to penetrate the King's outward appearance and establish the reality of his cunningly concealed quilt. The pretence of madness also becomes a protective mask beneath which he can conceal his grief and from behind which he can comment freely on people and situations, thus relieving the emotional pressure which is building up inside him following the Ghost's horrific revelations.  
  
Polonius, a tool of Claudius, uses an appearance in an attempt to please his political master by penetrating Hamlet's disguise and cynically uses his daughter Ophelia as a decoy, pretending that she is praying in the lobby. The callous father hopes that Hamlet will confront Ophelia there and inadvertently reveal his true feelings to the concealed King and to himself. However, Hamlet sees through the pretence and realises that a trap has been laid for him and consequently he lashes out viciously at the hapless Ophelia, suspecting that she too (like his mother) is guilty of deceit and betrayal.

I have heard your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another.

Polonius is fully aware of the hypocrisy of what he is doing. While he pretends to Gertrude that his actions are motivated by concern for her son's mental health, he is in reality an agent of Claudius, seeking to ingratiate himself with the King.

We are oft to blame in this,  
'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage  
And pious action we do sugar o'er  
The devil himself.

These words in turn 'catch the conscience' of the king and though a strikingly appropriate image he reveals his duplicity to the audience

O 'tis too true.  
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.  
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,  
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it  
Than is my deed to my most painted word.  
O heavy burdon!

For the first time we are given a glimpse of the man behind the mask. Hamlet's boyhood friends and fellow students at Wittenberg, his 'excellent friends' Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, pretend that they are concerned for Hamlet's well-being. But in reality they are cynical opportunists, agents of the King, who ruthlessly abuse their friendship with Hamlet in an attempt to win Claudius' favour. However, Hamlet is only briefly taken in by the devious pair, astutely seeing them for what they really are, sponges that soak up the King's countenance.

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me

Hamlet makes a second use of an appearance when he has the players

Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,  
I know my course.

The Prince uses the Gonzago play in an attempt to flush out Claudius, expose the King's guilt, and prove to himself that the ghost really is the spirit of his dead father.

The spirit that I have seen  
May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
More relative than this. The play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

The stratagem is successful. The King buckles under the psychological pressure exerted upon him, and rushes from the hall

marvellous distempered.......

Hamlet now knows Claudius is guilty, but Claudius knows that Hamlet knows. The masks are off and there will be no more pretence between these 'mighty opposites'. On his way to his mother's apartments Hamlet comes upon the King who appears to be praying and repenting his evil deed.

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't-  
A brother's murder.

The Prince is taken in by this appearance and decides not to kill his uncle when the latter is in a state of grace.

Up, sword and know thou a more horrid ent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th'incestuous pleasure if his bed,  
At game a-swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't  
Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven  
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto it goes.

But the King cannot truly repent, as he is not prepared to give up his crown or his queen

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

Finally Claudius cynically assumes an appearance to achieve his objective - the death of Hamlet. He pretends to be the bereaved Laertes' friend, deeply concerned about the death of Polonius and anxious that justice be done and that Hamlet pay the price for his crime. He tells the young man:

I lov'd your father

In reality, however, the King is merely using Laertes. Hypocritically he asks the vulnerable, grieving young man

Laertes, was your father dear to you?  
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,  
A face without a heart?

Tragically this emotional blackmail succeeds. Yet with fitting irony it is the son of Polonius who finally exposes publicly to the Danish court the ugly reality that lies behind Claudius' plausible appearance when he declares with his dying breath

The King - the King's to blame

Thus the theme of appearance versus reality which began with the appearance of the Ghost of the murdered Hamlet in the opening scene of the play is finally worked out with the public exposure of the man who murdered him in the final scene of the drama. in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in

action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the

beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me,

what is this quintessence of dust? (II, ii, 303-8)

Hamlet is indeed most aware of “the evil reality under the good appearance” (Spencer 39).

Evidently, the play is full of ideas, images, episodes as well as characters that can suggest the appearance/reality contrast. In his “The World of Hamlet,” Maynard Mack has discussed the ideas of seeming, assuming, and putting on; the images of clothing, painting, mirroring; the episode of the dumb show and the play within the play, together with the characters of Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet himself. And his conclusion is: “all these at one time or another, and usually more than once, are drawn into the range of impli-cations flung round the play by ‘show’” (52).

The idea of “show” brings us to the Freudian concept of the conscious and un-conscious levels of mental activity. In this concept, the human mind is structured like the iceberg: what is shown above or appears to be seen is the level of consciousness, while what lies hidden beneath the surface or what counts as its great real weight is the level of unconsciousness. If we consider the appearance vs. reality motif in the light of the conscious vs. unconscious psyche, we may find that Hamlet is indeed a show of the conscious Hamlet in conflict with the unconscious Hamlet.