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**Hamlet**

*Hamlet* is one of the most complex characters in world literature. He is brilliantly intellectual, irrepressibly witty, and highly educated. Yet he is also a man of intense passions, of obsessions which derange him. He is a victim of melancholy -essentially manic depression. This causes frequent and dramatic mood swings. For most of the play he suffers from self-doubt and a highly moralistic attitude. This leads him to agonise over the rights and wrongs of revenge, over his fears that he is simply a coward and over the nature and significance of the ghost of his father. All this time he displays a loathing of life and of fate, the wicked fate that has condemned him to a terrible predicament.

What is most characteristic of *Hamlet* is his obsession with the rottenness of the world. He perceives the whole world as a vile place, and everyone born into it is, in his opinion, a sinner and a villain. This confirms a characteristic tendency of his - to generalise based on his particular experience. His uncle's wickedness makes him think all men vile and his mother's weakness makes him cry out, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"  
  
We can further say that *Hamlet* has a thoroughly tragic vision of existence. Speaking on the castle platform before the ghost appears, he comments that it often happens with people that they are corrupted by "a vicious mole of nature", "the stamp of one defect", that even people of virtue are flawed and "take corruption from that particular fault." This is the theme of all tragedy; great men may be destroyed by the corrupting influence of "one defect."

The whole play turns on the confusion of appearance and reality. It is appropriate then that there should be not just one play within a play, but many. *Hamlet* tells his mother that he "know(s) not seems", meaning that he is only interested in what truly is. Yet he adopts an "antic disposition" in order to expose the guilt of the king. Is he not doing then exactly what Polonius, arch-deceiver, orders Reynaldo to do when he goes to Laertes in Paris - to try "by indirections (to) find directions out"?

Polonius, once an actor at the university, loves to stage-manage scenes just as much as *Hamlet*. Reynaldo becomes, in effect, an actor he directs. So too does Ophelia in the nunnery scene and Gertrude in the closet scene also. Claudius, too, puts on a performance as good husband, grieving brother and loving father. Aptly, then, the whole play finishes with another stage-managed performance, the duel between *Hamlet* and Laertes, ineptly directed by Claudius. In the end, the performance reveals the truth it was designed to conceal and *Hamlet* eventually sets right what was "out of joint."

**Genre**

*Hamlet* belongs to the genre of revenge tragedy. The man, *Hamlet*, is a sensitive young man and he is asked to carry out the act of revenge at the request of the ghost who wishes to avenge Claudius' "foul and unnatural" deed. Adopting an 'antic disposition' as a weapon for dealing with the corruption around him, he delays carrying out the revenge. In the final scene, however, he finally obtains the opportunity to gain revenge having banished Ophelia and driven her into a state of madness and attacked his mother for her sinful deed.

The tragedy concludes with the death of the main protagonist and many of the leading characters.

**Cultural Context**

The cultural context of this play is kingship, aristocracy and the political landscape. The monarch at this time was believed to have divine sanction.

*The role of women*  
Women were seen as weak characters and victims of the actions of men.

*Marriage*  
Marriage was not held in very high esteem, particularly among the nobility, however, marriage to a brother-in-law or sister-in-law was considered incest.

*Honour and loyalty to one's parents*  
Honour and loyalty to one's parents were important features of the society's value system. This is particularly evident in *Hamlet*, Fortinbras, and Laertes, all of whom are called in some way to avenge a wrong done to their father.

*Corruption and betrayal*  
Corruption and betrayal are rife in the play, as can be seen from the behaviour of Claudius and Polonius.

**Plot Summary**

Denmark is in an unsettled state as this play begins. Its great king, King *Hamlet*, has recently died; his brother Claudius has married his wife, Gertrude, and now sits on the throne; his son, the Prince*Hamlet* of the play's title, is in a deeply sullen mood, still mourning his dead father and appalled at his mother and his uncle for entering into an incestuous marriage; and to top it all, the country is under threat of invasion from Norway.

The event setting the play in motion is *Hamlet* witnessing the appearance of the ghost of his father. From the ghost he learns that his father was murdered by his brother, Claudius, who now sits on his throne and is married to his wife. *Hamlet* is horrified, and he resolves to devote himself entirely to revenge.

But revenge doesn't come easily to him. He even doubts that he can believe the ghost. With the help of a travelling troupe of actors, however, he cleverly establishes Claudius' guilt quite apart from the word of the ghost. He is thrown into a state of high excitement, in the course of which he kills the scheming counsellor Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius.

Claudius realises that *Hamlet* poses a threat to his kingship and his life and resolves to have him killed. He sends him to England on a commission and gives secret orders to the English to execute him on his arrival. However, *Hamlet* discovers his uncle's treachery and manages to make his way back to Denmark without ever going to England.

On his return he discovers that Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius whom he once loved (or seemed to), has died in an act caused by the madness into which she fell when she discovered that her beloved had killed her father.

With *Hamlet* back in Denmark the denouement approaches. Claudius now has the assistance of Laertes, son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia, in his plot to have *Hamlet* killed. Laertes is intent on getting revenge on the prince, whom he holds to be responsible for his family's double tragedy. He agrees readily to Claudius' plan to nick *Hamlet* with a poison-tipped sword during an apparently friendly duel.

As an extra security, Claudius puts poison in a goblet of wine for *Hamlet*'s refreshment during the duel. Everything goes awry, however. *Hamlet*'s mother, Gertrude, drinks the wine and dies. In the course of a scuffle, both *Hamlet* and Laertes are wounded with the poisoned sword and they die; but before *Hamlet* dies he kills Claudius. At last, then, he avenges his father's death.

**Themes and Issues**

*Revenge*  
Revenge is the main theme of the play. This theme centres on death. The Ghost's injunction to *Hamlet* in Act I, Scene V, carries an explicit command to revenge, "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." This confirms for *Hamlet* the reality of Claudius' guilt. *Hamlet* exclaims "O my prophetic soul! My uncle?"

*Hamlet* is faced with a moral dilemma with the truth about the evil nature of Claudius and his own father's death. *Hamlet* resolves to trust appearances no longer when he finds himself in this situation where appearance belies truth. He takes refuge in "an antic disposition."  
  
*Hamlet*'s deepest instincts are violated and his conscience is in revolt against his task of revenge. *Hamlet*'s delay in carrying out the command to revenge is, therefore, quite justifiable. Moreover, deep within *Hamlet*'s nature there is a doubt about the validity of the Ghost.

In the closet scene{Act III, Scene IV}, *Hamlet*'s vengeance is directed at his mother. In a violent verbal tirade, he attacks his mother and forces her to face up to her guilt and her behaviour. *Hamlet*does succeed in evoking the correct response within the Queen as her words confirm:

"O *Hamlet*, speak no more.  
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct."

Following this scene, *Hamlet*'s speedy despatch to England prevents him from immediately fulfilling his intention to murder Claudius while he is in an act of damnation. On *Hamlet*'s return to Denmark in Act V, Scene I, there is a change in his whole attitude to revenge. His attitude is that of a Christian Prince who knows that things will work out. *Hamlet*'s mood now is more serene and optimistic.*Hamlet* no longer consciously schemes, instead he calmly reasons that;  
"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will." {Act V, Scene II.}

He sees his role as avenger in a new light, he no longer chastises himself with his delay but sees himself almost as an agent of Divine Justice.

*Deception/False Appearance*  
In the court of Elsinore deceit and corruption are rife, the present King appears to be living in incest according to the law at that time. Claudius' first speech in the court of Elsinore shows him to be a King of considerable political skill. He demonstrates extraordinary qualities of decisiveness and self control as he swiftly combats the threat from Norway. Claudius appears to be a capable politician dedicated to his country's interest, in reality he is a murderous usurper.

Likewise, Polonius appears to be a loyal advisor to the King and a concerned father. He appears to be a wise man but the reality is that he is a corrupt plotter who is motivated totally by self-interest. His maxims are superficial and worldly.

*Hamlet* does not know whom to trust and realises that appearances can be deceptive. "One may smile and smile and be a villain." {Act 1,5}

Much of the play shows *Hamlet* having to conceal reality by appearance, in order to discover reality. So the issue of false appearance becomes synonymous with this theme of deception. *Hamlet* has to test the appearance of things to see if they tally with reality. During this testing period he disguises himself, and he puts on 'an antic disposition.'  
  
Later on in the play, in the graveyard scene, {Act V, Scene I} *Hamlet* holds the skull of Yorick in his hands and declares with contempt,  
"Get to my lady's chamber and tell her to paint an inch thick,  
to this favour she must come."  
This means that reality cannot be concealed forever. What *Hamlet* is saying is that in the final analysis ultimate truth will assert itself. All the painting and acting cannot conceal the fact that man is mortal, it cannot hide the reality of man's transience.

*The Supernatural*  
The Ghost introduces us to the atmosphere of the supernatural in the play. The Ghost is the catalyst of the play's action. It is the Ghost's words to *Hamlet* about the nature of his death and the actual murder by Claudius which triggers off the plot of this play. The Ghost sets the mood for the opening of this play. He appears at night while the two guards are on duty on the platform. He sets the play in a tense atmosphere of anxiety and foreboding. The Ghost is an indispensable piece of dramatic machinery in the mechanism of this play as the knowledge he conveys is what gives rise to the plot of the play.

The Supernatural theme is shown in the figure of the Ghost. It also forms the governing factor for much of the various characters' ways of acting or choosing not to act. For example, Claudius realises that his deed  
"smells to heaven,  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't  
A brother's murder." {Act III, Scene III.}

Claudius' sentiments are clearly those of a Christian who recognises that his evil deed will be punished. He is able to face the consequences of his deed on a supernatural level, yet he lacks the moral fibre to actually do something about rectifying his behaviour. Instead, he dulls his conscience and chooses to consolidate this evil path. He moves forward and organises the killing of *Hamlet* in England. When this fails proceeds to organise a corrupt duel with *Hamlet*'s murder as its objective.

The whole play explores the problem of human conduct and particularly in the light of the supernatural world. Many of the characters recognise this world, whether directly as *Hamlet* does in his encounter with the Ghost or through their own conscience. Some of these characters choose to ignore the demands of their conscience and continue on their path of expediency or the pursuit of self-interest.

As the logic of events unfold and the play concludes, we bear witness to the exposure of this evil and its destruction.

*Women and Frail Womanhood*  
Gertrude's twofold sin of incest and possible adultery is the dominant influence on *Hamlet*'s attitude to life for most of the play. She has desecrated womanhood for *Hamlet* and embodies the theme of frailty or fickle womanhood. Like Niobe she is upset about Old *Hamlet*'s death yet within a month is in incestuous wedlock. Described as a "seeming virtuous Queen", *Hamlet* sees shallow feeling and coarse sensuality in her action. This poisons his mind and turns him against all women.

He can never see Ophelia in the same light again. Because she is a woman like his mother, she too is guilty of sin. This horror and loathing is given full vent and expression in the nunnery scene which culminates in her banishment to a nunnery,  
"Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a  
breeder of sinners?" {Act III, Scene I.}

Gertrude is in many senses morally obtuse. In the play within a play she cannot see her own hypocrisy acted out before her. She is neither a very profound nor deep character. She is easily influenced and could be emotionally insecure. For that reason, she could have formed an alliance with Claudius out of loneliness. It is in the closet scene that she first confronts her guilt when *Hamlet*attacks her.

On the other hand, Ophelia is projected throughout the play as a "green girl" who is weak and inexperienced. She is an example of one whose sufferings are totally disproportionate to her original offences.

As a subordinate character, she falls victim to the inconsideration and abuse of others. For *Hamlet* she represents a symbol of the frailty of womanhood. She is virtuous although she seems to *Hamlet*not to be. Naive, biddable and obedient, her father Polonius hands her a pious book to read just before the nunnery scene in order to justify her position.

Thus *Hamlet* finds her at the beginning of the nunnery scene a vision of maidenly virtue. He soon understands that her innocence is being used against him and denounces the falsity of woman. Yet Ophelia is an innocent girl. Despite his cruelty and Polonius' manipulation, Ophelia is a constant lover. Her mad scenes are filled with songs and poems that speak of lost love. Her tragedy is that she is forced to play a role by a corrupt father and to reject the man she loved only to find herself rejected by him.