**Hamlet – Themes and Issues**

**Moral Questions in Hamlet:**

**Conscience and Responsibility**

*Hamlet* deals with crime and its punishment, with complex questions of right and wrong, moral decisions, moral responsibility for actions, questions of conscience.

Most of the moral issues raised in *Hamlet* arise from the role imposed on its central character: the role of revenger.

To appreciate the full implications of these issues, we have to remember that the play confronts us with two starkly conflicting moralities, two radicallyopposed views of the task which defines Hamlet’s role in the play: to be the avenger of his father’s death.

On the one hand, SP presents his characters against an obviously Christian background. The outlook of the characters has been conditioned by Christian teaching, and the play itself is based on an acceptance of the Catholic teaching on the after life: the Ghost returns from Purgatory, for example.

Marcellus celebrates miracles at Christmas, and the burial of Ophelia is in accordance with prescribed Christian ritual in relation to a woman in her circumstances.

Claudius at prayer clearly believes in traditional teaching on adultery, and the Christian prohibition of suicide.

The world of *Hamlet*, then, is a Christian one, and the characters view themselves and the significance of their actions and beliefs against Christian teachings and practices.

On the other hand, the totally anti-Christian ethic of revenge is proposed as an imperative for Hamlet by the ghost of his father, a saved soul returned from Purgatory.

This makes the moral effect of the play extremely confusing and ambiguous.

*Hamlet* embodies two incompatible moral systems, one Christian, the other pagan.

If Hamlet accepts the Ghost’s command, takes the law into his own hands and commits regicide, not just murder, nut slaying Claudius as an act of vengeance, he is defying one of the great fundamental Christian teachings: that vengeance is an evil thing.

His Christian alternative is to refrain from acting against Claudius and to live in patience, leaving vengeance to God.

To pursue Claudius will involve the spilling of blood.

The extraordinary moral confusion at the heart of the play, the grave moral compromise into which his revenger’s role plunges Hamlet, is dramatically highlighted in the ‘Prayer Scene’ (3:3, 36-98).

Here Claudius is desperately struggling to settle his account with heaven and repent of his crimes, knowing as a Christian believer, that no forgiveness is possible until he has given up the gains for which he committed the murder: his crown, his ambition and his queen.

Hamlet, finding Claudius praying, has a perfect opportunity to kill him.

The reason he gives for not doing this has shocked four centuries of commentators.

Believing that the King’s prayerful posture means that he is in the state of grace and so ready for heaven, Hamlet refuses to send him there, instead preferring to kill him at some future time when he is engrossed in sinful pursuits, so that “his soul may be as damned as black/ As hell whereto it goes” (3:3, 94-5).

Had Hamlet been a pagan avenger, he could not have advanced this reason for sparing Claudius, but would have been satisfied with bringing the bodily life of Claudius to an end.

Hamlet, however, is behaving as he does precisely because he is a Christian, believing that the soul’s state at the point of death will determine its immortal destiny, although his project to send Claudius to eternity when he is sure he will be damned is decidedly un-Christian, however, it accords with Hamlet’s notions of poetic justice.

Hamlet’s savage sentiments here are among the strongest indications in the play that his moral sense is debased by the evil that pervades in the play.

His callous, dismissive attitude to the dead Polonius is another.

Does Hamlet take the Ghost’s command to revenge as a moral duty, and if he does, is he tight to do so?

If he does, does the play as a whole insist that we approve of his attitude?

In other words, is Shakespeare content to allow his hero to make his own of an anti-Christian ethic of revenge, without testing this against the Christian ethic which should govern the world in which he and the other characters live?

One must take it that SP, for the purposes of the play, accepts the revenge ethic as an appropriate basis for Hamlet’s actions.

Hamlet himself is in no doubt about the Ghost’s “honesty”.

There is no suggestion in the play that Hamlet entertains doubts about the morality of the act of vengeance: his delay in fulfilling the Ghost’s command, whatever its motivation, is certainly not prompted by moral scruples on this score.

He spontaneously accepts as a sacred duty the task of avenging his father, promising to make this his only occupation “And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain” (1:5, 102-103)

Even after he has been tardy in fulfilling the command of the Ghost, he continues to see vengeance as a moral duty, reminding himself that he has “cause, and will, and strength and means” to kill Claudius (4:4, 45).

It is true that his tardiness up to the Play scene can be interpreted in terms of moral uncertainty, if we are to take his own word for it, is his fear that the Ghost may be a devil who has assumed a virtuous shape in order to deceive him.

Furthermore, the overall tone of the play persuades us to admire Hamlet and to identify with his concerns, and by implication, with his acceptance as a duty of the task of vengeance.

To argue otherwise would be to see a massive irony in the ending and in Horatio’s parting tribute “Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”.

In Hamlet’s soliloquies, he pronounces the sternest moral verdicts on himself for his failure to meet the demands of his chosen role “Yes I/ A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak/ Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause”, (2:2, 554-6).

In his most famous soliloquy, he deals with the most fundamental of all questions.

Before he can decide whether the better moral choice for a rational, noble creature is to suffer the blows of fate in patience or to struggle against them and perhaps die in the struggle, he must decide whether death is preferable to life (“To be or not to be”... 3:1, 56).