The Fatal Flaw in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Revenge and its affects on emotional stability

William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy primarily made up of characters teeming with emotional and mental instability. Throughout the events of this play, Hamlet, the protagonist, finds himself amidst a quandary. Because of Hamlet’s philosophical and contemplative nature, he remains in a constant state of distress, which the audience perceives sporadically throughout the play as Hamlet expresses his feelings concerning the events taking place. He becomes further confused in his efforts as he continues to contemplate the consequences of his decisions. Hamlet’s main expressions of his emotionally torn state are made known primarily through his renowned soliloquies. In his famous “to be or not to be” speech, Hamlet contemplates death and discusses how, in his eyes, death may prove to have relieving qualities in that if he commits suicide, he will no longer have to worry about making his decision. Hamlet appears to be the character most concerned with reality, but seems to be the least tied to it, due to this, he is left in a state of sheer mental distress that only he can get himself out of.

As the events of the play progress the audience perceives that Hamlet develops an inward struggle as he attempts to decide whether or not to avenge his father’s death by killing his murderer, Claudius. His continuous awareness and doubt delays him from acting. To highlight Hamlet’s inability to take action, Shakespeare includes a number of other characters capable of taking resolute and headstrong revenge as required. In one instance Fortinbras travels many miles to take his revenge and ultimately triumphs in conquering Denmark. In another instance, Laertes schemes to assassinate Hamlet as an
act of avenging the death of his father, Polonius. Hamlet finally acts to kill Claudius, his fathers’ murderer, only after realizing that he himself is poisoned. By procrastinating, everyone whom he ridicules and targets also dies along the way. Rene’ Girard’s comments on Hamlet’s predicament in his essay “Hamlet: the Pseudo-Procrastinator” when he says:

To seek singularity in revenge is a vain enterprise but to shrink from revenge, in a world which looks upon it as a “sacred duty” is to exclude oneself from society, to become a nonentity once more. There is no way out for Hamlet and he shifts endlessly from one impasse to the other, unable to make up his mind because neither choice makes sense (102).

Hamlet’s tragic flaw is his hesitation to kill his father’s murderer when given the chance. The audience discovers after the events of the play unfold that Hamlet’s indecision was what ultimately led to his demise.

*Hamlet* is a work that transcends time and was revolutionary for the time period it was penned, in that it was structured in an unordinary fashion when compared to other popular dramatic works. It proceeded from current dramatic works of the time by specifically focusing on characters and what was happening inside their minds rather than focusing on plot and actions occurring within the play. The belief that dramas were supposed to focus on action stemmed from Aristotle’s teachings, which is why Shakespeare’s techniques were all the more shocking. Shakespeare expertly set up the play through the use of soliloquies to better enlighten the audience on how characters
were feeling, which helped to better clarify why certain characters elect to act the way they do.

In the opening of the play, the audience is made to understand Hamlet’s consummate fixation with bereavement and also begin to see hints to his overall mental instability. Despite that his friends feared the supposed ghost of the former King, Hamlet resolves to speak to the ghost and afterwards obeys the ghost when it beckons him. The only line that hinted to his hesitation to follow the ghost is seen when he says “Angels and ministers of grace defend us” (49, line 39). This slight hesitation is soon forgotten as he begins to confidently speak with the ghost and proceeds to follow it’s demands – something no man in his right mind would do. These events at the commencement of the play are only the first clues that may be “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark (3, line 90).”

Hamlet seems to be stuck in a paradoxical cycle of choosing inaction over action. It has been speculated that Hamlet’s procrastination to seek revenge is in part due to the fact that the task seems too large to take on in the first place. Hamlet feels everything is against him when he exclaims, “How all occasions do inform against me, and spurn my dull revenge (191, lines 33-34).” It is interesting that he declares this, but continually fails to act. It is easy to make Hamlet out as a coward because of his hesitation in carrying out the murder of Claudius when he has obvious motive and cause to do so, but one can examine Hamlets hesitation farther and identify it as his hesitation as a tragic flaw. The possession of a tragic flaw within a character usually is an indication that the character can be categorized as a tragic hero, but unlike classical tragic heroes, however,
Hamlet is well aware of his fatal flaw from the beginning. Throughout the play he persistently questions himself regarding why he continues to delay the fulfillment of his duty. His continuous awareness and doubt delays him from acting which is an indication that what finally results will probably not be what Hamlet intends.

According to George Detmold’s essay “Hamlet’s all but Blunted Purpose,” there are three characteristics that define a tragic hero “The first of these is a willpower surpassing in its intensity anything displayed by average men; the hero admits of no obstacle and accepts no compromise; he drives forward with all his strength to his desired goal (124).” This quality of strong will, is one Hamlet seems to have at many instances in the play, but quickly seems to loose in others. At one point, as in the gravedigger scene, Hamlet seems resolved to kill Claudius. In the next scene, however, when Claudius emerges, he suddenly becomes tame and is no longer determined to murder him. These sudden twists and changes in Hamlet’s demeanor are in place to underline the play’s overall theme of confusion and duality. Finally Hamlet’s impassioned feelings are what definitively take over, which is why this idea of strong will is characterized as a tragic flaw, because what results is indeed tragic.

In discussing the second tragic flaw Detmold writes: “The second is a power of feeling likewise more intense than that possessed by average men; he rises to heights of happiness forever unattainable to the majority of us, and correspondingly sinks to depths of misery (124).” This characteristic of deep sensitivity is one of Hamlet’s most painfully obvious traits and is the one, which causes him the most distress. His power of
feeling, in many instances, may be seen as a gift, but throughout the play, it only seems to act as a hinderance.

The last and most definitive characteristic

...is an unusually high intelligence, displayed in his actions and his powers of language. Aristotle sums up these characteristics in the term *hamartia*: the tragic flaw, the failure of judgment, the refusal to compromise, passionately pursuing the thing he desires, the hero is incapable of compromise, of the calm exercise of judgment. (124)

Hamlet seems more concerned with the analyzation process than with actually making the decision. Hamlet’s high intelligence acts as a stumbling block, because if he were to stop thinking and simply do, much conflict and tragedy could have been avoided.

It is apparent that Hamlet greatly values words and there abilities to instill emotion and confidence, but the audience also finds that words can prove to muddle rather than illuminate, which is one of Hamlets main struggles throughout the play. Concerning this subject, John Russell Brown remarked: “Even when Hamlet's wordplay is intentional and nicely judged, it is not always clear to what purpose he uses it. To confuse or to clarify?”

It’s arguable that Hamlet so often debates his situation and philosophizes on its possibilities because it is easier than simply acknowledging and confronting the issue. Hamlet is very comparative in nature in that he compares what he feels and how he acts to other characters, which in part contributed to his emotional volatility.
There is a perpetual internal conflict occurring within the complex character of Hamlet, which often characterizes him as an enigmatic individual. As he ponders death he expresses how easily it could take away his anguish. Death seems appealing to him because he feels it could serve to soothe his tortured mind and soul and he even goes so far as to compare it to sleep. The first suggestion of hesitation toward suicide is seen soon after he equates death to sleep “, To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come.” (121, line 66) Ultimately, Hamlet is unable to take the final step into conceivable oblivion when he laments, “But that the dread of something after death, the undiscover’d country from whose bourn No traveler returns, puzzles the will.” (121, line 79) So numerous are the ambiguities partnered with death, that he finds himself unable to end his own life, and so continues his pursuit in avenging his father’s death. Eventually Hamlet concludes that he can no longer escape the necessity for action, and in this way he becomes a prisoner of his obligation for revenge.

Later when Hamlet organizes the play as a ploy to expose his uncle’s guilt, and receives the very incriminating proof he desires, instead of carrying out the deed he only is driven deeper into a state of melancholy. Subsequently begins his contemplation of suicide as he recognizes the magnitude of his troubles. Hamlet begins to ask which is more preferable; to suffer in one’s own mind or to attempt to act in a situation where action is evidently necessary but any action performed will certainly have great consequences. Hamlet seems baffled by the lack of morals in so many of the people close to him, the main person being his mother Gertrude. He recognizes that the situation he is enveloped will eventually force him to act– he either must remain quiet and forget all that
has happened and thus suffer, or must work to expose and kill his uncle, and neither option seems appealing to him.

Without the soliloquies the play would seem hard to follow and Hamlet’s actions as well as the actions of others in the play would seem even more irrational then they already do. At one point, as in the gravedigger scene, Hamlet seems resolved to kill Claudius. In the next scene, however, when Claudius emerges, he suddenly becomes tame and is no longer determined to murder him. These sudden twists and changes in Hamlet’s demeanor are in place to underline the play’s overall theme of confusion and duality.

In Act IV, scene ii, the murder of Polonius and the succeeding harrowing encounter Hamlet has with Gertrude leave him in a frenzied, volatile state of mind. This is the point in the play when his behavior begins to come the closest to approaching actual madness. He then begins to affront Claudius, for whom his enmity is now scarcely concealed. He also pretends to be excited at the idea of sailing for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which the audience can see is not actually the case. The theme of human action is restored as the focus of the play when Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern encounter Fortinbras on their way to the ship bound for England. Hamlet’s encounter with the Norwegian captain serves to remind the audience of Fortinbras’s existence in the realm of the drama and gives Hamlet another example of the will to action that he lacks, which elevates within him an even higher tension.

Hamlet becomes enthralled by the enthusiasm and passion with which Fortinbras motivates his army to reclaim a seemingly insignificant chunk of land. This scrap of land
holds significant value for Fortinbras just as Hamlet’s father meant a great deal to him. He becomes inspired by Fortinbras tenacious attitude. He contemplates the ethical ambiguity of Fortinbras’s action, but over all else seems to be impressed by the impassionedness of his demeanor. This dynamic approach that Fortinbras is driven by, inspires Hamlet and becomes an ideal concerning which he resolves to strive. This is made evident when Hamlet declares “My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth (193, line 67)! Of course, he fails to put this exclamation into action, as he has failed in all of his previous attempts to avenge his father. His choice of words is noteworthy in that he declares “My thoughts be bloody,” rather than saying, “My deeds be bloody.” The word “thoughts” acts as foreshadowing, suggesting he will fail to act yet again. Through his bold and exaggerated language, it seems as though Hamlet may be trying to convince himself.

Gertrude serves as the antithesis to the character Hamlet, and her betrayal is what definitively drives him into madness. Gertrude seems to be mainly concerned with the physical pleasures of life, and seeks, almost like a child, to be entertained. She is a woman of the world and appears, at times, to care more about her possessions and her appearance than she does about her own son. This perceived neglect virtually troubles Hamlet more than the event of his father’s death, which caused so much confusion and turmoil in the first place. The audience discovers later that underneath her shallow exterior, Gertrude truly loves her son as any mother would. It is only when he communicates to her that she understands her actions to be wrong: “O Hamlet, speak no more: / Thou turn'st my very eyes into my soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots (169, line 90-92).” We find that Gertrude sincerely does not recognize what she has done to cause Hamlet to be so frantic.
Like Gertrude, Laertes also acts as a foil to Hamlet. He parallels Hamlet but behaves in the opposite manner. Where Hamlet is verbal, Laertes is physical; where Hamlet ruminates, Laertes acts. Laertes' love for Ophelia and obligation to Polonius drive him to fervent action, while Hamlet's love for Gertrude and duty to King Hamlet drive him to passionate procrastination. Shakespeare purposefully places these characters in the play to make the audience more closely examine Hamlet and his situation.

Everyone experiences and copes with grief differently and Hamlet seems unable to handle the fact that Gertrude seems not to mourn at all. All the characters in the *Hamlet* experience vast emotions throughout the play's events, and in consequence struggle with how to deal with them. Gertrude serves as the antithesis to the character Hamlet, and her betrayal is what definitively drives him into madness. Gertrude seems to be principally concerned with the material indulgences of life, and seeks chiefly, like an adolescent, to be entertained. She is a woman of the world and seems to care more about her possessions and her appearance than she does about her own son, or at least this is how it appears to Hamlet in many instances. This perceived neglect is the chief reason why Hamlet is inconsolable.

The central question brought up in analysis of Hamlet is the question of why Hamlet delay's. It’s obvious that Hamlet’s power of feeling surpasses that of all the other characters in the play. His great emotional capacities are made known through his poetic diction, and the fact that he has a greater capacity to respond to things emotionally sets him apart from the other characters. Through *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that being indifferent to life’s predicaments may be superior to having any thoughts about them at
all, because when feelings become involved incidents tend to spiral out of control. If one
were to go through life without reacting positively or negatively to life’s dilemmas then
one would remain in a constant state of numbness, which Shakespeare suggests is
definitively preferable to the alternative; to exist in a persistent state of melancholy.
Work Cited

Bevington, David, and David S. Kastan, eds. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New York: Bantam Classics, 2005. Print. (all the text from the play comes from this source)


