

CHARACTER ANALYSIS - HAMLET

The character of Hamlet dominates Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name, yet Hamlet at the start of the play is not a commanding figure. Indeed, when we first see the Prince, his posture is defensive, Hamlet taking a passive, if resentful, stance toward the events that have befallen him. Slow to the conviction that the ghost is his dead father and that Claudius is guilty of regicide, Hamlet does not go straight to the task at hand.

Hamlet's delay or procrastination is something about which critics have wondered and that the character himself agonizes, his self-reproach reaching an apex in Act IV, scene iv, which concludes with the words "O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (lines 65-66). The question remains: Why doesn't Hamlet act?

One response to this question stresses Hamlet as a man of thought and words, as opposed to deeds.

Shakespeare's Danish prince is one of the most intelligent protagonists in tragic drama. Unlike many other Elizabethan revenge tragedy heroes, Hamlet is given to philosophy and abstraction. At times, it seems that the play is less about Hamlet taking action in the external world, than it is about his grappling with the key existential problems of human existence. From this standpoint, Hamlet does not act immediately because he is too preoccupied with analyzing his situation and himself in the broadest terms imaginable.

Hamlet is also a melancholy figure, given to depression, who is victimized by a cruel fate and compelled to undertake a revenge mission for which he is not prepared. Not only are Hamlet's musings about life extensive, they are uniformly dark. Seen in this light, Hamlet does not act because he lacks the emotional fortitude to do so, depression and courage being difficult to reconcile.

There are, however, good reasons for Hamlet to avoid acting precipitously. The story of Old Hamlet's murder is known to him only through the agency of a ghost, and killing the king on the word of an apparition is plainly a problematic (and possibly mistaken) act. Claudius explains his exile of Hamlet to England by referring to the Prince's popularity among the Danish people. But the Danish people are a fickle lot; many of them come to Laertes' cause against the Prince. Killing a king is a weighty matter, and many modern critics have argued that, in his particular circumstances, Hamlet is wise to defer action.

In the end, Hamlet does act, defying augury in accepting the challenge to duel with Laertes. But the change in Hamlet's character takes place in scene I of Act V, and is expressed in his self-assertion that he is "Hamlet the Dane." It is not in the final scene, but in the graveyard, scene immediately preceding it that a "new," self-defined Hamlet appears on the stage, ready for action however it may be directed by divine will or by chance. A complex personality at the play's start, Hamlet is all the more fascinating because he undergoes dramatic character development.