

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a complex and multi-faceted play bringing together many themes. Shakespeare uses the framework of a REVENGE TRAGEDY to convey the ideas of the human condition and what it means to be human, appearances vs reality, social indoctrination vs our free will and the notion of betrayal and corruption. These themes are a reflection on society and humanity as a whole. They are explored through many characters, with some characters representing a key idea such as Horatio demonstrating humanistic characteristics.

Hamlet questions the social indoctrination that young men go through as they grow up. Traditionally and socially Hamlet is expected to avenge his father's "foul and most unnatural murder" yet he struggles with this expectation. Hamlet does not want to be the one that has to avenge his father as shown in the rhyming couplet "O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right". One can argue that this is Hamlet's own free will struggling with the social expectations placed upon him. This is in contrast to the actions of Laertes who "dares damnation" and "Vows, to the blackest devil" to avenge his father as per the social standard of the time. This is important to consider when responding to the text's theme of the meaning of life.

Underneath Hamlet's outer framework of a Kydian revenge tragedy lies the key Shakespearean theme of the human condition. The character Hamlet throughout the play explores, through his thoughts and particularly his soliloquies, the meaning of life. For example, Hamlet wishes that his "too too solid flesh would melt" and that God has not "fixed his gun 'gainst self-slaughter". Hamlet questions the meaning of life and what the point of it is. He wonders if Caesar might now "stop a hole" and if Alexander would "stop a beer-barrel". Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy shows Hamlet's struggle between avenging his father at the price of his own life or to simply "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune". Eventually, Hamlet comes to the conclusion that the struggles of life are futile because we all end up being "eaten" by worms. Hamlet then says that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will."

By linking the two ideas of social indoctrination and the human condition, it is possible to come to the conclusion that we simply do as we are expected to by society because no matter how we "hew" our actions, our "ends" are all the same. The play of Hamlet clearly shows this, Hamlet and Laertes both seek revenge; there are two different approaches but the same ending. Hamlet himself states "what a piece of work is man... this quintessence of dust". Despite our best intentions to shape our future, we simply become part of the machine that is society which we have to mould to.

Hamlet also explores the idea of revenge as a motive for our actions. It is socially expected of him that he complete his revenge. As well there are other revengers in the play that carry out their duty that have revenge as expected of them. Laertes and Fortinbras also seek their revenge and their actions. The use of revenge is used to further and drive the plot. Many of the major turning points in the play derive from the need for revenge. Some productions such as the David Ritchie production have omitted the very last statement by Fortinbras in which order is restored, a Kydian convention.

Hamlet deeply explores the difference between what "seems" and what actually is. Hamlet is a play about the deceptions of reality. Hamlet's "antic disposition" is a clear example of appearances not being what they seem. Hamlet on the surface appears crazy however underneath there is a clear, logical mind and sometimes Hamlet forgets his act such as when Polonius states "there is method in't". Even though Hamlet does not know the truth behind how Claudius comes to power, he states early on "villain, villain, smiling, damned villain". Hamlet knows that Claudius is not what he seems,

he even sets up the “mousetrap” or play in a play to “catch the conscience of the king”. Hamlet himself states early on in the play that there “are actions that a man might play” to “seem” different to their true self. Hamlet also perceives that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are there to spy on him. The David Ritchie production shows the ultimate act of betrayal when his so called “friends” use force to extract information from him. Things not being what they seem is a clear theme in Hamlet.

Study of Hamlet initially focused on the play as a whole however during the 20th century, there was a greater focus on the character of Hamlet and his psychological condition. Some have argued that Hamlet was indeed mad however from the text, it can be seen that he is only acting, his puns, retorts and sharp wit all go towards demonstrating that he is mainly in control however it could be argued that by acting mad, it would have to have some form of mental impact on Hamlet. A rational person does not cry “a rat” and murder a man where only moments before he delayed his act of revenge because he did not want Claudius to go to heaven.

Hamlet is also a commentary on social and political corruption. Claudius’ reign as king is filled with deception and betrayal. He “stung” his own brother for the throne, Hamlet describes the world as an unweeded garden with “things rank and gross in nature” that “Possess it merely”. Even the soldiers state that “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. This corruption stems from the human instinct to do what is best for oneself which is also imbued into society. Shakespeare’s commentary drills to the core of our society and human nature particularly the less pleasant aspects.

Hamlet is an extremely complex play which has been interpreted in many different ways over time. It can be interpreted to show revenge, social and political commentary, a mockery of religion and more however despite these interpretations, it is clear that the play Hamlet simply uses the Kydian revenge tragedy framework to convey the idea that the actions of humans are determined by our society expectations and indoctrination we receive from an early age. Despite our actions in life, in the end we all return to dust and we become insignificant in the eyes of time.