

# Hamlet's To Be or Not To Be

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## Abstract:

This research is intended to cast light on some facets of Shakespeare's main character: Hamlet, particularly, his inaction and action. It also determines the point in which Hamlet exceeds the traditions of a revenge drama, as long as it belongs in some sort, to this literary genre. How does it deviate from it these traditions? It is known that revenge drama is principally based on the action of revenge. Its protagonist takes action of revenge. But Hamlet, although he doubts that his Uncle Claudius and his mother intrigued to kill his father, King of Denmark, cannot revenge himself upon the conspirators until too late in the play and it is revenge which leads to the collapse of the whole country action. It also tries to touches upon the reason behind Hamlet's inaction and indecisiveness. It attributes Hamlet's retreats to his state of mind which plunders him of his will to perform his retaliation. Hamlet, as per to his perspective, is in a dire need to something legal to justify the killing of his uncle.

Keywords: hamlet, action, inaction, crisis, perform etc

## Introduction

Hamlet is Shakespeare's miracle that never takes place again. One can say that Shakespeare is the genius of all centuries. Shakespeare in all of his works is a genius because they are almost masterpieces and classics; for examples, Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Macbeth and so on. He makes of Hamlet's character, despite its faults as per to the theatrical conventions, a gigantic tragic hero; a giant. Hamlet, as a character, is a treasure of contradictions; recklessness and cautiousness, courtesy and incivility, tenderness and ferocity. He is a model of idealism whose counterpart is hardly found in real life. Being built of such binary oppositions makes him lack equilibrium until his fall and the fall of Denmark at the end of the play. In this research paper, the researcher entirely focuses on the action of Hamlet, the central character . Shakespeare's aim is totally dramatic and artistic through the fluctuation between action and inaction.

The business of drama is character and action, not psychology, which science, not art. But action doesn't become active until performed by people who are real to us; and, as the reality of people is manifested in action, so the reality of the action depends on that of the people.

Due to the fact that he is being watched by his uncle stooges and surrounded by people whom he thinks are enemies, he takes up insanity and cynicism as a way of living with people around him. His melancholy and inability to take action make him isolate himself from the royal court, not a place but as individuals and use double levelled language. He speaks riddles with them but in his soliloquies, he uses clear-cut language, revealing the whole of his psychological crisis and the reasons behind his hesitation to take revenge. For

instance, on seeing his fellow-student, Horatio, again in Denmark, Hamlet asked him to know what has brought him here and when Horatio answered that he came to condole his father's funeral. Hamlet quickly retorted, no, to congratulate mother's wedding.

### Hamlet's crisis:

It is known from the beginning of the play that Denmark was not on terms with its neighbour Norway. There were night watches. It is natural that such a state prepares the audience for fear, which is strikingly reinforced by the appearance of the ghost of the dead king on the scene. Such appearance has two interpretations as per to the Elizabethan cultural traditions. First, the emergence of the dead, particularly in military form, wandering here and there is considered a warning of an impending catastrophe. Secondly, the rites of burial of the dead might not be duly. This new harbinger brings with it the whole of Hamlet's ordeal; action and inaction.

### Hamlet's Inaction:

Hamlet decided to see his father apparition as soon as the news was reported to him. He certainly knew that his dead father was duly buried. Then what does this return mean? What a message does it carry? Is there something ominous? So he was looking for the reasons behind this coming. He asked his father's ghost:

Hamlet:

Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death  
Have burst the ceremens;

Why the sepulcher

Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd.

Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws

To cast thee up again. What may this mean? That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel.

What does this return mean? (Act. I. Sc. IV)

By Hamlet's asking about the reasons behind King's return as an apparition, Shakespeare tries to raise and reinforce the audience's curiosity and fear, particularly when the ghost beckoned Hamlet to follow him up:

Horatio: As if it some impartment did desire  
To you alone. (Act. I. Sc. IV)

Although Hamlet did not know all about the intentions behind the ghost's invitation to follow, whether good or evil, he followed the ghost even if that would cost him his life. It seemed to him that the ghost had a secret to confess. It had something which would comply with what was lurking deep down in his soul:

Hamlet: Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd  
Be thy intents wicked or charitable  
(Act.I.Sc.IV)

Shakespeare, here, lets fear unfold to the audience gradually in the play so that it can poison the whole atmosphere. First, he embodies fear through Hamlet's beseeching all angels and messengers to protect him against this life and death manoeuvre:

Hamlet: Angels and ministers of grace defend us.

By transferring fear from Hamlet to the audience which shares the same Elizabethan mythological traditions, Shakespeare makes his audience highly alerted and scared. It is unbearable for Hamlet to see his father in his complete form armed to teeth. The ghost's scene fearfully and powerfully puts him at the rim of losing all strengths; of body, mind and hear. It renders him a completely frustrated and defeated disable. Yet, Hamlet's reaction is regarded as a natural reflection of anyone who is an integral part of Elizabethan mythology. So despite what the results would be, Hamlet followed up the ghost. At this point, his friend Horatio, the voice of mind in the play, tried his best to prevent him from being tempted; beseeched him not to follow the ghost, even he used nature to keep his friend away:

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Horatio: What if it tempts you toward the flood, my lord  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff

That beetles o'er his base into the sea

And there assume some other horrible form

Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason

And draw you into madness? Think of it

But the latter insisted, however, the outcomes might be: Hamlet: Why what should be the fear

Being a thing immortal as itself

It waves me forth again. I'll follow it. (Act .I. Sc. IV)

But Hamlet paid him no attention and went on his course. No sooner than the dead father's ghost disclosed the mystery of his murder in a conspiracy by his mother and uncle, Hamlet set a dark cry out of his heart: Oh, my prophetic soul This cry echoes his covert suspicions about his father's death; which suddenly burst them out to the audience. What the spectre confessed to Hamlet precisely comes in compliance with his inner consuming doubts, revealed by his appealing phrase; Oh, my prophetic soul. His doubts come primarily from the fact that when he was called to attend his father's funeral, he found his mother, the Queen, married to his Uncle Claudius who made himself King of Denmark. Mother's hasty marriage and the crowning of his uncle King of Denmark greatly and horribly shocked him. How did his mother dare to marry and his father's corpse was not yet buried? And how did his uncle dare to usurp his throne since he was the only heir of his father? So these two things filled Hamlet's heart with unfathomed suspicions. Neither his mother nor his uncle consulted him about the marriage and Uncle's coronation as not regarded the single legitimate heir of Denmark Crown. He smelled treason; usurpation and incest. Then, why didn't Hamlet take revenge since he considered his mother and Uncle Claudius conspirators and killers of his father?

### Discussion of Hamlets crisis:

It can be said that the ghost's confession is the beginning of Hamlet's crisis, which lays unbearable burdens on his shoulders: retaliation. As long as the play, in some sense, is considered a traditional revenge play, Hamlet violates the tradition in that its hero is unable to take revenge. Hamlet's incapacity is attributed to the fact that, on contrary to all

revengers, Thus, Hamlet lacks legally solid evidence to revenge himself upon Claudius. That's why he delays his revenge. In this case, the theme of revenge changes into the minor theme in the play and is replaced by his indecisiveness and inaction. Shakespeare in Hamlet deviates from the traditions of the revenge drama. His protagonist is unable to take action. Hamlet sums up his problem in his well-renown soliloquy which put him on crossroads either ... or:

Then, how to be and how not to be is Hamlet's ordeal which contaminates the whole of his life. To be is to take revenge, not to be is not to take revenge; his father passed away or was killed. All of these choices devour his marrow, bequeath him indetermination and indecision. Then, how is it to come to choose among these options? There is no other way before him but to obey the power of his mind to weigh which one to choose. It is known that mind, from one perspective, kills the physical readiness in man and deprives him of any initiative to take physical action, particularly killing, if there is no logical justification or direct challenge. His obedience to mind power puts him in a middle spot between either to act or not to act. This spot is indecisiveness, which is triggered by his state of mind. Hamlet is a thinker and a student of philosophy whose ambition is concrete facts, not deceptions. So what would he do? To take revenge and become like Laertes who claimed the head of his father's killer without indulging in any kind of thinking, or not to take revenge and hand himself to melancholy and madness and indecision. Hamlet, consequently, becomes before three options; revenge, surrender, and indecisiveness. His mind imposes upon him indecisiveness and not revenge, divides him into two halves after giving up the attempt of committing suicide since it is against God's Will as per to Christianity teachings:

Since the student of philosophy, who adopts mind as a means of conflict settler, has had nothing but a ghost confession, considered an echo of his own covertly doubts and disappointment bequeathed via his father's death and his mother quick marriage to Uncle Claudius, the usurper of the throne, what does he need to implement his mission? He badly needs concrete evidence on his uncle's and mother's engagement in his father's murder. Due to his being void of any legal pieces of evidence, he resorts to acting a play before the King and the Queen to fathom their reactions, to what extent it is in conformity with his own doubts? But it is known for all those who are concerned with justice that reactions and expressions are not convincing evidence to weigh on crimes. Justice requires material testimonies. Hamlet by acting the play inside the play "Gonzalo" could not convince justice although it stirred the feelings and expressions he wanted to see on the faces and behaviour of Claudius and the Queen. The play is not something real. It consists of mere imaginary events which justice does not accept. Then, why does he delay his revenge? There is a Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's inaction. Psychoanalytically speaking, Hamlet delays his vengeance due to his Oedipus complex as Freud refers: vol.4,p.(Freud,367:1900)That means Hamlet by killing his uncle, kills himself because the latter has achieved what he wished to achieve. Yet this is regarded as one of the interpretations behind his delaying his retaliation. Melancholic Hamlet loses connections with the world around him and embarks on a realm of insanity, whether pretended or true. He portrays Denmark as a diseased dying country; everything in it is contaminated and corrupt.



Not only do diseases spread in Denmark but also air pollution dominates. Hamlet breathes pollution from every mesh there; "A foul and pestilent congregation of vapors." Such images can be interpreted that Hamlet might be psychologically ill. He is a desperate, solitary, plundered, disappointed, besides, being besieged and watched and plotted against. All these things certainly drive on to madness, particularly espionage, as demolishing aspect of corruption in Denmark; espionage isolated Hamlet from society and made him adopt a double language for protective measures, pretending to be crazy or he was really crazy since he was suffering from all the things mentioned above for most of the play: Therefore, He is always careful, using violent words for disgusting others and keeping them away from his way, particularly his mother and the usurper of his throne, Uncle Claudius.

**QUEEN GERTRUDE:**

Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

**HAMLET:**

Mother, you have my father much offended. **QUEEN GERTRUDE:**

Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue. **HAMLET:**

Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue. **QUEEN GERTRUDE:**

Why, how now, Hamlet!

**HAMLET:**

What's the matter now?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

Have you forgotten me?

**HAMLET:**

Where you may see them in the most part of you. **QUEEN GERTRUDE:**

What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me? Help, help, ho! (Act.III. Sc. IV)

Living under circumstances such as: being submissive to mind power, isolated, watched, plotted against, Hamlet was waiting the proper hour to revenge himself upon his rival Claudius. He could not rise against him since Claudius declared him the King of Denmark. Hamlet's action.

Looking at Hamlet, from another perspective, when a logical justification or a challenge is available for taking action, Hamlet in no time initiates to take action, without giving mind an opportunity to intervene in his actions, however brutal his actions are! No retreats overcome him. It is worth mentioning that he is a valiant prince as described by Horatio while discussing with his friends on their night tour Fortinbras of Norway's threats to invade Denmark;

There are many examples of Hamlet's actions in the play which may be considered acts of brutality such as sending both spies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death, killing Lord Chamberlain, Polonius in cool blood and driving his love Ophelia to madness and killing Laertes. Polonius is killed by mistake. Hamlet thinks it is uncle spying on him behind the curtains. Hamlet describes Polonius's death cynically and carelessly.

But as regards both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he has had the solid evidence about their involvement in Uncle's conspiracy to get rid of him. As regards Ophelia, he knows that she is entirely innocent and not deserving his reproaches. But being unknowingly a play at the king's and Queens' hands to spy on Hamlet, in addition to his heart being dried of its passion due to his unfathomed despair, made him drive her into insanity and later to suicide by his annalistic language, without taking into account her being his love and a transparent green girl who could not bear such words:

But this equilibrium leads to the collapse of Denmark at the hands of Fortinbras without any resistance to mention at last. Norwegians come in the favorable time to find all of leading Danes, King, Queen, Lord Chamberlain, Hamlet, Laertes killed due to their involvement in conspiracies against each other. The Hamlet himself is the cause of all this chaos because of his twisted thinking. Had he killed his father's killer Claudius directly as Laertes did when his father was killed, Denmark would have avoided its collapse. So he is the messenger of death, not of life in the play since he equates between the two in his philosophy. He describes Denmark as a large prison and no place to live in, revealing to the audience his melancholia and the reasons for his despair. Thus the revenge or whatever action to be done is not supposed to be based on mere conditions and circumstances rather than on the type of people, those people known to us as real doers of actions. Hamlet is the only person who is supposed to direct and implement his actions and not inactions.

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