

Hamlet Gen.Vision & Viewpoint

1. DAILY LIFE: Do the characters have fulfilled and worthwhile daily lives? Do they offer a positive or a negative vision in their way of life?

- The characters are noble and head their social hierarchy; does that leave them fulfilled? No, the human condition, as evidenced by the corruption of some and the misfortunes of many, would appear to be negative. Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes and ghost of the murdered King all seemingly lack fulfilment. The fact that all of them die may also colour the reader's perception of GVVP negatively.
- At the top of the social hierarchy is an *'incestuous, murderous Dane'* who is accused of usurpation: *'A cutpurse of the empire and the rule, That from a shelf the precious diadem stole'* in the words of his brilliant but disillusioned step-son, Hamlet.
- The main characters suffer deep physical, emotional or spiritual hurt throughout the play. Constant reminders of their suffering offer a negative vision of life. In addition, the revelations of the Ghost and the unfolding action reveal society to be, in Hamlet's words, *'stewed in corruption'*. Innocent Ophelia is a pawn of a complex intrigue that grows between Hamlet and her father, both of them motivated by their desires to manipulate King Claudius in different ways. The abuse of Ophelia in the off stage closet scene, in the nunnery scene, before the play within the play and Polonius' conversation where he calls her a green girl and forbids her growing romance with Hamlet, provide evidence that the ruthless of pursuit of goals can impose cruel sacrifices on the innocent. Ophelia's madness, suicide and muted burial ceremony suggest a negative vision of life, especially from the female perspective. This negative perspective can be reinforced by the actions, falling asunder and manslaughter of Gertrude.
- Hamlet begins the play a melancholic: *'How is it that the clouds do hang on you?'* He is suicidal, because he has *'that within'* which leaves him suicidal: *'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, seem to me all the uses of this world'*. This is a far from cheerful viewpoint.
- Hamlet endures existential torture over his revenge task: *'O what a rogue and pleasant slave am I'*. Hamlet, a moral zealot tutored outside the court in the Reformation hotbed of Wittenberg, is tortured by moral ambiguity and fear of the afterlife until his own survival demands that he mature into a decisive man. Eventually he returns as *'Hamlet the Dane'*, only after he has met evil with evil in sealing the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
- At first, it is impossible for Hamlet to act in the same manner as Laertes, who also suffers intense grief at the loss of his father, Polonius: *'I dare damnation....only I'll be revenged most thoroughly for my father'*. Ironically Laertes dies, poisoned in his flawed attempt at redress. His father—who had sent the spy Reynaldo to gather evidence of Laertes' vices in Paris—had died largely because his over-zealous protection of King Claudius led him to eavesdrop on the Prince and the Queen as they met to resolve deep antagonisms that marred life in the court. This part of the narrative provides the audience a grim viewpoint.
- When a son's words to his mother are like *'daggers'* to her ears just after he has slain an intruder, Polonius, with a dagger, then the viewpoint on life can seem only negative.

2. OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC? Have the characters any hopes or dreams? Are these realisable or hopelessly beyond them? Does the ending of the play show that hopes have been realised?

- From a simple point of view, Hamlet and the Ghost share one main aim: to revenge the ghost's *'foul murder'*. The death of Claudius marks the fulfilment of that hope. In a narrow sense therefore the final scene can be explored and compared as a key-moment that shows a positive outcome to the play.
- Yet from the point of view of Claudius, his journey of usurpation leads to despair: *'O heavy burthen'*.
- Claudius speech to Gertrude after the murder and funeral of Polonius in Act 4 provides a substantial amount of material to help a reader to weigh up the GVVP. This speech tips the balance to the negative side: *'the people muddied,*
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers,
For good Polonius' death; and we have done but greenly,
In hugger-mugger to inter him: poor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgment,
Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts:
Last, and as much containing as all these,
Her brother is in secret come from France;
Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death;
Wherein necessity, of matter beggar'd,
Will nothing stick our person to arraign
In ear and ear. O my dear Gertrude, this,
Like to a murdering-piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death.'
- The conduct of Hamlet to Ophelia in which he contributed to the defeat of his dream of marrying her is a good example of how dreams are hopelessly beyond characters. Ophelia's dreams are hopelessly defeated, as are those of Gertrude for herself as re-married wife and Queen, *'imperial jointress'*, and for Hamlet and Ophelia: *'I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;*
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave'.
- The fact that Hamlet was a Medieval Prince also placed obstacles in the way of fulfilling that dream: *'For he himself is subject to his birth*
He may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself; for on his choice depends
The safety and health of this whole state'.
- But the death of Hamlet at the finale takes from the argument that he fulfilled his dream. He had decided just before this that he was ready to assume the throne as *'Dane'*, casting aside the usurper who with *'cozenage... Popp'd in between the election and my hopes'*. Therefore Hamlet's hopes are only partially fulfilled. Your own death is not much of a fulfilment of hopes.

- It can be argued that revenge was never his personal hope, but a hope imposed on him by a combination of parental and supernatural authority: *'The time is out of joint, O Cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right'*.
- Yet the journey to that moment of killing Claudius provided many obstacles and negative events that taint it with pessimism. The lies, betrayals, hurts and general attrition of character on that journey provide many key moments that tarnish the vision of what happened. The consequences of intrigue lead to many sorrows: *'One woe doth tread upon another's heel'*. Horatio's final speech is a good basis for demonstrating incomplete fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of characters, thus pointing to a negative general vision and viewpoint:
*'And let me to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' reads'*.

3. MORAL VISION?

**Are right and wrong (good and evil) clearly distinguishable in the world of the text?
Is the Good affirmed and Evil condemned?**

- The point of view of the play is that evil stands condemned. Thus the moral argument of the plot may be considered optimistic, despite the overwhelming evidence of evil in society, which Hamlet describes in his first soliloquy as *'rank and gross'*.
- The Ghost has a negative viewpoint of goodness: *'seeming-virtuous'*. Both the Ghost and Hamlet seem to regard human nature as flawed by evil, but also seem to regard it as their mission to cut evil out of the world. Hamlet in particular and the Ghost who commands his actions both set out to eradicate the evils that blight Denmark: *'that I, with wings as swift As meditation or the thoughts of love, May sweep to my revenge'*. It is in that crusading spirit that one may argue the play has an overall positive moral vision.
- Yet an examination of the characters, one after the other, may suggest that human life is mired in lies, self-advancement and corruption. One can support this argument by looking at minor characters as well as major characters. Osric, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius, Laertes and Claudius are guilty of actions that drag down the moral image of the world of the story. As Polonius comments *'with devotion's visage and pious action we do sugar-o'er the devil himself'*. Again, evil is defined in this comment, showing that the text leaves the audience certain of the moral compass of the play. That is an argument for a positive GVVP. Evil stands accused and condemned. But from the angle of the world of the play as seen through its main characters the vision can be argued as a negative one, with graft being the only significant outlook of Polonius and some of the others.
- And it can be argued that Revenge is never an innocent action, as its motive is not merely just and moral but it gratifies a hatred, feeds a dark desire. The satisfaction of a desire to merely even the score is not noble. In so far as it is an attempt to satisfy a deep seated anger, it is not of itself a moral action, and that argument may support the viewpoint that the play is negative: *'now could I drink hot blood'*.

- The ghost comments on how lust can corrupt the most angelic creature, a comment which influences the viewpoint in an extremely negative manner: *'So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd, Will sate itself in a celestial bed, And prey on garbage'*. This comment applies to Gertrude's betrayal of Hamlet's father as well as Claudius seduction of her to commit adultery. This important background to the plot suggests that Denmark is polluted by immorality, painting an extremely negative image of the world of the text.
- The moral vision of the play can easily be regarded as bleak. As Hamlet says to his mother in the closet scene, life has been spoiled by evil: *'rank corruption, mining all within, Infects unseen'*.
- Claudius uses *'witchcraft of his wits'* to prepare Gertrude for future marriage after he poisons his brother and monarch while he sleeps in his orchard. Later Claudius places a poison pearl in a goblet to ensure the death of Hamlet, a deeply treacherous action. Overall the intent of his key actions— as well as the methods— is evil. The most powerful man in the play is therefore a source of evil, according to this viewpoint.
- Hamlet agonises over the task of slaying Claudius, *'and thus the pale hue of resolution is sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought'*. Hamlet cannot bring himself to kill Claudius without having a clear conscience: *'Conscience doth make cowards of us all'*. This line of thought can be supported by the prayer scene where Claudius partially redeems himself at prayer for his *'rank'* crime, *'the primal eldest curse upon't, A brother's murder'*. His agnostic honesty may also be used to argue that the play has a positive moral vision, even though the characters do not have the satisfaction of reaching moral serenity: *'What if this cursed hand Were thicker than itself with brother's blood, Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens To wash it white as snow?... My thoughts remain below'*. Claudius may deceive others but he avoids self-deception and doesn't attempt to deceive God. Thus his corruption is not a simple moral question as he also faces the moral truth about his decisions. The moral vision of the play is far from black and white.