

HAMLET - THE SHAPE OF THE DRAMA

MOVEMENT 1 – THE BLACK PRINCE vs. THE NORMAL WORLD (Act 1)

MILITARY OPENING (Battlements, Sentries, Fear of invasion by Fortinbras)

HAMLET'S MELANCHOLY (Grieving, bitter, suicidal– Father dead, mother shamed)

THE GLITTERING COURT (But The Black Prince “knows not seems”)

THE GHOST – THE TRUTH - THE MISSION – REVENGE

MOVEMENT 2 – THE QUEST TO FIND OUT (Act 2 – Act 3 Sc. 2)

POLONIUS re LEARTES and re HAMLET'S LOVE FOR OPHELIA

CLAUDIUS re HAMLET'S MADNESS (Uses Polonius, Ros. & Guild.)

HAMLET re GHOST Soliloquy Act2 (“The spirit I have seen may be
the devil. ... The play's the thing..”)

THE SPYING SCENE (Claudius/Polonius re Hamlet)

THE PLAY WITHIN PLAY (Claudius's guilt established fully)

MOVEMENT 3 – CHAOS AND UPROAR (Act 3 Sc. 3 – Act 4 Sc. 6)

HAMLET ATTACKS HIS MOTHER

HAMLET KILLS POLONIUS

HAMLET SENT TO ENGLAND

OPHELIA'S MADNESS AND SUICIDE

LEARTES IN REBELLION

MOVEMENT 4 - HAMLET'S RETURN & REVENGE

LEARTES CORRUPTED BY CLAUDIUS

OPHELIA'S BURIAL/HAMLET'S RETURN (Love, Passion)

THE FINAL RECKONING (Revenge and Death of Hamlet)

MILITARY CLOSE (Fortinbras takes control, Army, Soldiers Exeunt)

THE THREE HAMLETS

Hamlet is a difficult character to pin down. Sometimes he seems very normal as when he is with Horatio.

Sometimes he goes around pretending to be mad,

LORD POLONIUS

Do you know me, my lord?

HAMLET

Excellent well; you are a fishmonger.

LORD POLONIUS

Not I, my lord.

Sometimes he is impassioned and hurts those he loves, “Get thee to nunnery..” Or he is too quick to act as when he kills old Polonius in his mother’s chamber thinking it is Claudius, “How now! a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!”.

WHY THE THREE HAMLETS?

NORMAL

- with Horatio
- with The Players
- with The Gravediggers

With these characters he is thoughtful, sane and reflective.

ANTIC DISPOSITION

with Ophelia (“O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown..)

with Polonius (“You are a fishmonger..”)

with Ros. And Guild. (“I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.”)

Does the use of the Antic disposition allow Hamlet to tell truths and find out truth from others?

THE MAD IMPASSIONED HAMLET

with Ophelia (“Get thee to a nunnery”)

*with Gertrude (“What have I done, that thou dar’st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?”)*

with Leartes (“Forty thousand brothers...”)

These three versions of Hamlet are not the result of his character development. They can occur at any time. The three versions possibly reflect the huge forces that are exerted on a character who is unfit to be a successful revenger and whose main concern is how to confront and deal with his own death. Remember at the beginning of the play he wanted to kill himself and in the last Act of the play he is at his calmest as he contemplates the skull of Yorick.

HAMLET THE UNFIT REVENGER

So why is Hamlet such an unfit revenger whose final act of revenge on Claudius, though satisfying and very appropriate in the circumstances, occurs almost by chance?

- 1. He is a man of thought rather than of action. He is an intellectual who records his thoughts “Meet, I set it down that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain”*
- 2. He is a student of philosophy who asked Claudius permission to return to study at Wittenberg. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”*
- 3. He has a finely tuned moral sense and loathes the corruption of his mother and of Ophelia almost more than the guilt of Claudius. Indeed, straight after the play’s confirmation of Claudius’ guilt, Hamlet goes to his mother to beg her not to sleep with Claudius anymore. Not the action of one who is bent on revenge.*
- 4. He is troubled by self-doubt. The soliloquies suggest a character who is sometimes suicidal, “O that this too, too sullied flesh...” and often expressive of self-doubt, “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I...” Such a nature finds it difficult to summon up the mental energy needed for a life and death struggle with a master tactician such as Claudius.*
- 5. He is grieving for a dead father, sickened at the fall of his mother, and forced to abandon his love for the innocent Ophelia. All of these circumstances combine to make him very disillusioned and less likely to hasten in the act of revenge.*

Note the promise he makes to his father;

*“Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.”*

“Meditation” is not by its nature swift and “the thoughts of love” are often languid and slow!