

HAMLET DISCUSSION GUIDE

SETTING THE SCENE

As you watch the movie, put yourself in Hamlet's shoes. You are 16 or 17 years of age. You are a prince (princess) of Denmark. Your father is this fabulous King who has won many victories. You adore him. Your mother is a beautiful queen. She raised you herself and you are closer to her than to anyone.

When you are away at school the King suddenly dies. Arriving home you find that your uncle, the new king, has married your mother! And then a ghost appears who looks just like your father. He says that your uncle killed him!! The ghost/father demands that you avenge his murder.

But your uncle is now the King and it is medieval times. The King is the government. You can't go to the district attorney or the courts and ask for help. These institutions, as we know them, don't yet exist. You can't go to your mother, your uncle's new wife. By religious teaching and by custom, wives must obey their husbands without question. And besides, your uncle's not a bad king. He's popular at court and with the people. Finally, it's the Middle Ages and people believe that the devil is a force in the world trying to seduce people into sin. What if the ghost has been sent from Hell to tempt you?

For quick discussion questions relating to this movie, click here: <http://teachwithmovies.org/samples/hamlet.html>

HELPFUL BACKGROUND:

"Hamlet" shows what the loss of a loved one does to four different people. By comparing what happens to each of them, we can discover at least some of what Shakespeare is trying to tell us in this play. Much of it is about revenge.

Gertrude, the Queen, does not express her grief at the loss of her husband through normal mourning. She allows herself to be taken up by a new husband and involved in a new relationship. Note that Gertrude had many reasons to marry the new King. In the Middle Ages an aristocratic lady whose husband died, even a queen, suffered a substantial loss of status. Marrying Claudius allowed Gertrude to retain her status as Queen of Denmark. There was also a tradition, dating back to the Bible, in which a surviving brother would take up the wife of a deceased brother. Psychologically, marrying Claudius allows Gertrude to avoid facing her grief at the tremendous loss that she has suffered. But most importantly, Gertrude seems to love Claudius and be genuinely happy in her new marriage.

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Ophelia's life is destroyed when Hamlet murders Polonius. Loving her father, she cannot forgive Hamlet for killing him. Loving Hamlet, she cannot hate him or take revenge upon him. Ophelia has no place to go for emotional support and is unable to find an outlet for her various and conflicting griefs. Her pent up emotions weigh her down and she sinks, literally and figuratively, to her death.

Laertes, Ophelia's brother, has an outlet for his grief. He seeks revenge, eagerly conspiring with Claudius against Hamlet. In the duel, Laertes' own instrument of revenge, the poisoned sword, is turned against him. (He drops it and Hamlet picks it up. Not knowing the sword is poisoned, Hamlet begins to use it and pricks Laertes.) The unintended consequence of Laertes' act of revenge is his own death. (In this way Laertes' fate is similar to that of Romeo in Romeo and Juliet. Romeo avenges Mercutio's death by killing Tybalt. Killing Tybalt leads inexorably to Romeo's death and that of Juliet. While Romeo's death is not immediately caused by his instrument of revenge, his act of revenge sets in motion the chain of events that, in the end, causes his death.)

The law of unintended consequences holds that whether or not what you do has the effect you intend, it will have consequences that you don't expect and therefore consequences that you don't intend. Some unintended consequences can be very unpleasant.

The law of unintended consequences applies with special force to acts of revenge for three reasons. First, in any person's life, acts of revenge are infrequent. Experience is an excellent teacher. If we have little experience with an action, our anticipation of the consequences will be less accurate than if we have taken the action frequently in the past. Second, revenge usually affects a number of people, either directly or indirectly. Everyone is different and when other people are affected by our actions, there is an increased risk that we won't accurately predict how they'll react. Third, revenge is often taken in a rage or a fit of passion. Our actions are often not well considered when we are in such a state. Therefore, the risk that we'll fail to anticipate some of the consequences is increased.

Hamlet's loss, like Ophelia's, is more than simply the loss of a father. The murderer is his uncle and then Hamlet's mother allies herself with the murderer in the most intimate way. Hamlet is tortured by these circumstances. But unlike Ophelia, he has a potential outlet in action.

Hamlet finds disaster when he tries to follow the Ghost's demand for quick revenge. Polonius, rather than the King, is behind the curtain. The killing of Polonius sets in motion the events that seal Hamlet's fate, motivating Laertes to kill Hamlet and making it clear to Claudius that Hamlet is a threat to his power. The attempt at simple revenge, even after the positive proof of Claudius' guilt at the play, makes Hamlet, like Romeo and Laertes, subject to the law of unintended consequences.

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One of the central questions of the play is why Hamlet delays in killing Claudius. Many people have advanced theories to explain why Hamlet's urge for revenge is blocked. Some say that Hamlet is an intellectual neurotic who cannot act. Others say that his Oedipal conflicts block him. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of theories. But perhaps the answer doesn't lie in what is blocking Hamlet. Actually, Hamlet did try, fairly early in the play, to take revenge on the King. He not only failed, but he killed another man and isolated himself forever from the woman he loved. (He also set in motion the chain of events that would lead to his death. But he didn't know this until the very end of the play.) So, the question is not why didn't Hamlet act, the question is why did Hamlet wait to try to take revenge a second time? The answer is that he learned from his first attempt at revenge that revenge itself is evil. Hamlet cannot act until the killing of Claudius is necessary to save the state and revenge is only a secondary motive.

Just before Hamlet takes the action we've all been waiting for, the King allows Gertrude, the only person for whom he has any affection, to drink the poisoned wine. In order to save the Queen, Claudius would have had to admit the conspiracy against Hamlet and his own guilt. When Laertes discloses that Claudius is to blame for the killings, the King is revealed as an evil person who will continue to corrupt others and cause their deaths, just as he had done to Laertes and the Queen. The killing of the King is now an execution, an act that is necessary for the good of society as a whole.

The key to understanding this play is to evaluate our instinctive reactions to the various revenge killings.

Hamlet tries to take relatively quick revenge on Claudius but mistakenly kills Polonius, the father of the girl he loves. Hamlet's killing of Polonius, while rash, unthinking, and even criminal, was a mistake made under great provocation.

Laertes takes revenge upon Hamlet for the death of his father. Like Hamlet's attempt at revenge that led to the death of Polonius, Laertes' action is rash and poorly thought out but also taken under great provocation. Laertes is remorseful, and we agree with this remorse because Hamlet's killing of his father, even when considered the indirect cause of Ophelia's death, did not justify full retribution.

But no one feels the need for an apology when Hamlet kills Claudius. In fact it's a point of catharsis, a great relief. Would we have felt this way had Hamlet not kept his revenge waiting and had killed the king just after the scene with the Players? (Shakespeare gives him an opportunity while Claudius is praying.) Would we have felt this way if, immediately after killing Polonius, Hamlet went after the King? Claudius is not a bad ruler and, until the last scene, he is a loving husband.

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Claudius is tortured by the crime by which he became king. Had Hamlet killed Claudius early in the play, we would have felt some sympathy for the King while Hamlet would have been just another angry son avenging the death of his father.

Hamlet waits and attains the status of hero because, learning from the killing of Polonius, he won't kill for revenge alone. Hamlet's revenge is postponed until Claudius, who is the King and absolute power in Denmark, is revealed as someone so evil that his extermination is necessary for the protection of society. This is why, by the end of the play, Claudius' death is something we applaud, regretting only that he was not dispatched sooner. It is the delay itself that is Hamlet's moral triumph. Hamlet's hesitation to act after he has mistakenly killed Polonius is his heroic quality.

Shakespeare, using our own instinctive reactions to the events of the play, shows revenge as a potent force for evil when it rules the actions of someone rash like Laertes, like Romeo, or like Hamlet when he kills Polonius. As Laertes, Romeo, and Hamlet discover, unexpected and disastrous consequences flow in the wake of revenge. Hamlet is not a hero throughout most of the play. Rather, he becomes a hero by keeping his revenge waiting until its expression serves other, more legitimate ends. Through this play, Shakespeare reaches beyond the grave, and instructs us all that revenge alone is never an adequate basis for taking action. There must also be some overriding disinterested purpose beneficial to society as a whole.

In modern society, revenge by individuals is not permitted because it leads to breaches of the peace and cycles of vengeance. (Note e.g. the problems caused by tit-for-tat revenge in honor cultures, see Learning Guide to "Behind the Sun".) The government, through courts and administrative agencies, tempered by the due process of law, has a monopoly on punishment. The state also decides when to take action to prevent wrongdoing in the future. In modern society, all impulses to revenge rightfully go through the government.

Hamlet and Tragedy: We know Hamlet is a tragedy because Shakespeare tells us. The title to the play is: "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark". However, this tragedy departs from the classic plot structure of a tragedy in which the protagonist has made a mistake or done something that leads inevitably to his destruction (the main action). In a classic tragedy, situations then follow that bring the character face to face with his mistake (confrontation/realization). Through the confrontation/realization, the protagonist either learns from his mistake or he dies (resolution). "King Lear" and "Oedipus Rex" are examples of this basic plot structure.

Hamlet, however, is just a young kid thrust by events over which he has no control into the role of purifier of his society/avenger for the deaths of his father, mother and himself. His only choice is whether "to be or not to be": whether to step up to the plate and purify Danish society or not.

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Very little in the Elsinore of “Hamlet” is what it seems. Claudius appears to be a good king and a caring husband. Hamlet appears to be mad. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear to be friends of Hamlet. Polonius appears to be a fool except for the advice that he gives to his son Laertes as the young man leaves Elsinore to continue his education in France. (Yet Polonius is much more than a fool and his advice much less valuable than it appears. For an excellent discussion of the appearance vs. reality issue and especially about the character of Polonius, see Introductory Lecture on Shakespeare’s Hamlet by Ian Johnston; search for “Appearance and Reality.”)

Hamlet acts harshly towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but (1) they were commoners who didn’t really count in Hamlet’s world and (2) even if they were imprisoned for a time in England, it is possible that if they were not killed they would somehow get word to the King about what Hamlet

In addition to being characters that advance the plot, Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia are symbols. Polonius represents the falseness of Claudius’ regime: the show of wisdom hiding deceitful plotting. Laertes represents the youth and promise of Denmark that will be corrupted if Claudius continues to rule. Ophelia represents Hamlet’s hope for a relationship with a woman that is beyond that of his mother; a romantic relationship with a future.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS USING THE SIX PILLARS OF CHARACTER

1. Does Shakespeare’s play “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” have a moral message? Suggested Response: Yes. The message is that mere revenge does not justify taking action against another person, no matter how great the injury they have caused. Hamlet is not justified in killing Claudius until it is clear that Claudius corrupts everyone around him and that he needs to be removed for the good of the state. (In modern society, revenge by individuals is not permitted because it would lead to breaches of the peace and cycles of vengeance. The government, through courts and administrative agencies, has a monopoly on punishment. The state also decides when to take action to prevent wrongdoing in the future. In modern society, all impulses to revenge rightfully go through the government.)

2. Is Hamlet governed by a moral or ethical code? Suggested Response: Hamlet doesn’t appear to be concerned with ethics or morality except that through the course of the play he learns that revenge by itself is evil. In one interpretation of the play, Hamlet’s lack of a moral compass is his tragic flaw.

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3. Does Hamlet honor the Six Pillars in his actions toward Gertrude? Suggested Response: At times no -- see for example the bedroom scene (Act III, Scene IV) -- but eventually, under the tutelage of the Ghost, he comes around and forgives her. This is an important part of “caring”.

4. Does Hamlet honor the Six Pillars in his actions toward Polonius? Suggested Response: No. Hamlet kills the old man in a rash act aimed at Claudius. This was an egregious violation of the Pillars of Respect and Responsibility toward Claudius. Hamlet’s actions were the result of his grief for his father and his understandable anger at Claudius. But this did not give him the right to act violently toward Claudius. These considerations may affect the degree by which Hamlet violated moral precepts, his eligibility for forgiveness, and the extent of his punishment if called to account in a court of law. But Hamlet is still responsible for his actions. Ethics and morality apply to negligent as well as intentional conduct. The fact that Polonius had no right to be secretly listening from behind the curtain doesn’t justify killing the man.

5. Does Hamlet honor the Six Pillars in his actions toward Ophelia? Suggested Response: No. He killed her father, albeit accidentally. Ophelia was one of the stakeholders in Hamlet’s decision to stab the man behind the curtain before he knew who it was. When Hamlet violated the Pillars of Respect and Responsibility toward Polonius, he violated them with respect to Ophelia as well. Hamlet is also insufficiently “caring” toward Ophelia. Wrapped up in his own troubles and angry at her betrayal, he is blind to her pain. Many people served Ophelia poorly, including Claudius and her father. But Hamlet loved her and should have been more attentive. Hamlet also fails to forgive Ophelia until after her death.

6. Does Hamlet honor the Six Pillars in his actions toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Suggested Response: No. While they betrayed Hamlet at the behest of the King, Hamlet had many alternatives that would have protected himself from harm but which were not so drastic as to cause the death of his former friends. For example, the instructions to the English King that Hamlet forged could have required that they should be exiled from England, or imprisoned for a year and then released. Hamlet’s actions towards his former friends lacked both respect (in that he caused them harm unnecessarily) and caring (in that he didn’t forgive them).

7. Who acts more unethically toward the other, Hamlet or Laertes? Suggested Response: Hamlet wronged Laertes by killing his father. Laertes was a stakeholder in Hamlet’s decision to stab the man behind the curtain. But this was accidental. Laertes intended to kill Hamlet. Generally, intentionally wrongful conduct is worse than negligent conduct. The conclusion is that Laertes acted more unethically toward Hamlet than Hamlet did to Laertes.

RESPECT

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8. In the context of this play, when kings held absolute power and there was no independent justice system, can you think of any way to deal with Claudius other than to kill him?
Suggested Response: We must first remember that this is a play which requires dramatic action. The answer is “No.” Given the absolute power of medieval monarchs and the fact that Claudius was intent on killing Hamlet, there was probably no way to deal with him other than assassination. This was certainly true after Hamlet was poisoned in the duel.

CARING

See questions 3 and 5 above.

9. In his dealings with one of the characters in the play, Hamlet violates each of the principles of caring set out above. Tell us who the character is and describe how Hamlet violates the principles of caring as to this character.
Suggested Response: It was Ophelia. Hamlet loved her, but could not forgive her for her betrayal and was oblivious to the pain that he caused her that drove her out of her mind. Another possible answer is Gertrude, but by the end of the play, under the Ghost’s tutelage, Hamlet has forgiven her.

10. Should Hamlet have forgiven Claudius for killing his father, seducing his mother, and stealing the crown? What are the limits of forgiveness?
Suggested Response: Had Claudius confessed, renounced the crown, accepted punishment, and permitted the marriage to be annulled, Hamlet should have forgiven him. Forgiveness is a two way street. A person seeking forgiveness must renounce and return the fruits of his unlawful or unethical conduct. Claudius was unable to do this. Hamlet had no obligation to forgive him.