

Hamlet - Theme Of Revenge

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Revenge as a Moral Duty

The main example of this emanates from the appearance of the ghost of King Hamlet to his son, telling him of the circumstances of his death, and that he expects Hamlet to exact revenge upon Claudius for his regicidal deeds.

"He will revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."

In Act 3 Scene IV, when the ghost reappears to Hamlet, after the death of Polonius, he rebukes him for his procrastination, given that Hamlet, in Act 1 Scene V, had declared himself willing to perform the duty.

"I find thee apt."

In Act 4 Scene VII, Claudius mirrors the ghost's request, telling Laertes, if he really loved his father, he must show it in actions.

The third example of this is when Fortinbras also plans to avenge his father's death, at the hands of King Hamlet. This is reinforced at the conclusion of the play when Fortinbras says:

"I have some rights of memory in this kingdom." (Act 5 Scene II)

Consequences of Revenge

The result of the death of King Hamlet is, in effect, young Hamlet becoming a murderer, and also turning against his own mother.

He accidentally kills innocent Polonius, so heightened by his emotions, that he stabs him. (Act 4 Scene III)

The terrible consequences of this event are Ophelia's madness and subsequent death by suicide. The culmination of the consequences are seen at the conclusion of the play.

Inadvertently, all the main characters end up facing their own demise as a result of this facade.

Revenge and Religion

We are presented by two outlooks: a Christian one regarding murder as sinful, and a Pagan one that sees moral duty as of the highest importance.

Hamlet would seem to regard his revenge as a holy duty.

"Prompted to my revenge by heaven." (Act 2 Scene II)

Claudius also makes a similar point when he says that the victims should not be allowed to seek refuge in the church. (Act 4 Scene VII)

An Eye for an Eye

There is a sense in the play that the revenge must match the original crime.

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This is shown when Hamlet doesn't immediately murder Claudius, having decided that it is no revenge to send Claudius directly to Heaven, while his father suffers in purgatory, when the King is committing a sinful act. (Act 3 Scene III)

"A villain kills my father, and for that, I his sole son, do this same villain send to Heaven."

Hamlet deems it to be a better opportunity to kill Claudius when he is committing a sinful act, so that Claudius will be subject to suffer in Hell forever.

Contrast between Hamlet and Laertes

As both characters are similar in their desire to exact revenge upon the murderer of their fathers, both exhibit different characteristics in their methods of action.

While Hamlet is perceived as a pedantic procrastinator, Laertes is very hot-headed and doesn't hesitate to act.

However, this may have to do with the fact that Hamlet is in need of proper evidence before he can do anything, whereas Laertes jumps straight to conclusions, claiming Claudius was responsible for Polonius' murder.

"To hell allegiance, vows, to the blackest devil!" (Act 4 Scene V)

The play of Hamlet raises many questions about the notion of vengeance. Laertes and Fortinbras are accurate personifications of revenge let loose. If we blame Hamlet for not rushing to take revenge, then we are approving a code of vengeance beyond all control is presented in the image of Pyrrhus, who murders the geriatric Priam, in order to avenge Achilles, his father.

This is an interesting parallel to Hamlet, who didn't eliminate Claudius at the first opportunity he received.