

Finding Courage to Die

In William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" we see a young man paralyzed with grief over his father. So much so that he is believed to have gone mad. Hamlet is such a complex character that one must look deeply to find what drives him. Did he really have the courage to kill the king or was it madness? Hamlet's character will be illuminated by explaining both soliloquies and finally Hamlet himself.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question," (Beaty, 1348) is one of the most famous and well known excerpts from the play "Hamlet." What most people do not realize is the significance it has in the portrayal of the character Hamlet. During this soliloquy Hamlet is debating his fate. Hamlet is asking himself whether it is more noble, in the mind, to passively accept and suffer through all the pains of life fate throws at him, or to actively destroy, in death, these numerous troubles, and ultimately end his pain. Hamlet is questioning whether it is better to live in a world where he cannot see any goodness or take his own life. Hamlet has a very intense, philosophical personality. For this reason, he cannot take his life because he does not know what happens after one dies. He is not positive of an afterlife, therefore he doesn't have the courage to end his life.

"Now might I do it prat," (Beaty, 1363) is a soliloquy in which we see a shift in Hamlet's rationalization. Hamlet, as his fathers only son, is seeking revenge for his

Page 2

fathers death, but is afraid that a quick death for Claudius would not be enough. Hamlet feels that waiting until Claudius is in an immoral situation would make him suffer in death because he would not be allowed to repent for his sins. During this soliloquy Hamlet is caught up in his plot for revenge and has foregone, for the moment, his plan of suicide.

The contradictions in these two soliloquies sheds much needed light on Hamlet's personality. Hamlet is very outraged by the immoral actions of some of the other characters. He is deeply offended by his mothers hasty marriage to her brother-in-law and king. Hamlet begs his mother to stop being intimate with Claudius and to think more upon her late husband. This shows that Hamlet has a very clear perception of right and wrong. He also shows this characteristic by being suspicious and even hurt by his childhood friends loyalty to Claudius. Even though Hamlet is despondent over his fathers death, he keeps in mind his moral convictions and sets out to right what he sees as a wrong doing towards his father, and ultimately his family.

The plays tragic ending is just more proof that Hamlet was bound by his own ethics to avenge his fathers wrongful death. Hamlet's character traits are very deeply ingrained and he does what he must to keep those traits from being exploited by what he sees as unethical people.

Page 3

Works Cited

Shakespear, William. "Hamlet." The Norton Introduction to Literature. Ed. Beaty, Hunter, Paul. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 1306-1405.