

## Hamlet Essay

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, a very clear moral order is established as the protagonist, Hamlet, completes his journey through the phases which define a Shakespearean tragedy. The play begins with Hamlet encountering his father's ghost, at which point he learns his father had in fact been murdered by his own brother, Claudius. It is Hamlet's wish to avenge his father that causes all other moral dilemmas in the play, and this is what defines the play's particular moral order: As the play progresses, the gravity and seriousness of Claudius sins lessen, and Hamlet's grow, although never reaching the moral plateau on which Claudius rests. In the beginning of the play, Hamlet is morally "in the right", always taking precautions to ensure this remains so. Claudius, on the other hand, not only murders Hamlet's father, but then plots to do away with Hamlet as soon as he feels threatened. As the play progresses, Hamlet continues attempting to right the original wrong, but only succeeds at the finish, with Claudius' death. Hamlet's words in Act III, Scene IV -- "thus bad begins, and worse remains behind" illustrate the moral order well; the actions against him were wrong, but, to a lesser extent, so was his revenge.

Near the start of the play, The Ghost tells Hamlet of the crime committed by Claudius. When Hamlet finds out his father was murdered by his own brother, who then stole his wife and crown, he immediately commits himself to avenging the murder; "Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love/May sweep to my revenge." At this point, Hamlet is completely justified in his feelings, and most would agree that his revenge is morally right. Although the act of murder itself is wrong, an "eye for an eye" almost wholly justifies it. The gravity of Claudius' crime grows when one considers that all the deaths throughout the play would not have come if it were not the murder. The crime itself is, in a sense, worse because of the circumstances; not a simple murder, but the murder of one's brother wholly for personal gain, his crown and queen. It is this which balances out any morally wrong actions Hamlet may take.

Hamlet, on the other hand, begins the play as a very rational and intelligent man. Although it is shown he can be impulsive and rash, his rationality wins out - at least in the beginning of the play. When seeing his father's ghost, he unquestionably accepts all he hears as truth, but doesn't act on it until he can verify it in some way. His organization of the players' performance of "The Murder of Gonzago" shows this well; only after seeing Claudius' reaction to the play does he prepare to act on the Ghost's plea for revenge. Claudius' reaction to the depiction of what were almost his exact actions all but announces his guilt, and Hamlet is morally justified in any revenge he may wish to exact. As the play progresses, each of Claudius' morally wrong acts is balanced by a morally correct response by Hamlet. When Claudius' feels threatened by Hamlet, he arranges to have Hamlet spied on by his friends, and eventually even to be exiled in England, where he is to be killed. Hamlet, on the other hand, spares Claudius' life, rather than to kill him at prayer. Hamlet's indecisiveness is born of his internal struggle to remain morally correct.

As the play continues, Hamlet's murder, a mistake, of Polonius - a minor character - serves to balance the moral wrongs committed against Hamlet by Polonius and Laertes, Ophelia's father and brother. Both Laertes and Polonius had ridiculed Ophelia in thinking that Hamlet was serious in his intentions to her, "In few, Ophelia/Do not believe his vows .. but mere implorators of unholy suits." Morally, this is not so morally wrong, but the sum of these actions and others by Polonius and Laertes are balanced by Hamlet's killing of Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius. As the play reaches it's conclusion, possibly the most important events take place regarding the moral order. Laertes and Claudius conspire to kill Hamlet, who was returned from abroad, in a rigged fencing match or, failing that,

with poisoned wine. Claudius virtually absolves himself of all guilt in Polonius' murder and uses his son to plot Hamlet's death. These actions, again, morally wrong, once again outweigh Hamlet's. During the duel between Laertes and Hamlet, after Hamlet is wounded with the poisoned sword, their swords are exchanged in the battle and Laertes is mortally wounded by his own sword. As he is dying, Laertes realizes he is killed by his own treachery, and realizes he was immoral. During the fight, Gertrude drinks the poisoned glass of wine meant for Hamlet, and before dying manages to tell Hamlet the wine was poisoned. As Hamlet attempts to find the murderer, Laertes tells him they are both near death and the King is to blame, at which point Hamlet finally murders him, before he himself dies. The conclusion of the play straightens out all moral questions, especially the first; Claudius' killing of the king. Since this first wrong is now righted, by the Claudius' death, Hamlet is not morally wrong in killing him. Gertrude's death due to poisoning is as punishment for her abandonment of her husband, and that issue as well is resolved. Finally, Laertes' treachery towards Hamlet is paid for in his death, and only Hamlet's own death remains as the tragic consequence to the morally wrong actions taken by Claudius. Since Hamlet himself commits a murder, this can be viewed as the final step in establishing a moral order.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's Hamlet contains a very definitive moral order. Each crime committed is punished, and each morally wrong action is balanced by one that is right. Claudius' uncaring murders and plots are balanced by Hamlet's internal struggle with his own conscience and morals as he attempts to right the wrongs committed against him. Laertes, who does not have a counterpart as Claudius does Hamlet, eventually admits to his wrongs and realizes they are that, helping clear Hamlet's name in his dying moments. Hamlet's indecisiveness and procrastination throughout the play were caused because of his morals; even though Claudius murdered his father, Hamlet could not kill him at prayer. This shows the opposite sides of the moral issue, and helps ensure that at the end, there is no imbalance, and the sequence leads up to a balanced end in which no single side has triumphed.

