

SAMPLE PAPER

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Tracking Hamlet's Madness

Often, when we feel overwhelmed, we might find ourselves talking aloud when no one else is in the room. And, often, in these self-conversations, we learn a lot about ourselves and come to sound conclusions. In Shakespeare's play "Hamlet", the main character, Hamlet, talks to himself extensively. But while talking aloud can sometimes bring clarity, Hamlet talks himself into madness. In the play, there are seven times that Hamlet speaks to himself and vocalizes his inward thoughts to both himself and the audience. Through these soliloquies, Shakespeare demonstrates how, over time, Hamlet becomes obsessed with revenge and drives his own self insane.

In the first soliloquy, Hamlet is grieving the death of his father, but he appears to have a sound mind. He says, "O that this too solid flesh would melt / Thaw, and resolve itself to dew! (1.2.33-334)" On the surface, this might seem like Hamlet is expressing a desire to end his life, but I don't believe he is *literally* suicidal. Hamlet isn't saying "I want to kill myself" as much as he's saying, "I want this pain I feel to end," because he is emotionally exhausted. This is a natural part of grieving. He also feels hurt and slight anger towards his mother because for marrying his uncle Claudius so quickly—he calls it "wicked" and "incestuous" (1.2.360-361). But again, anger is a normal emotion to experience when grieving. Quickly, Hamlet comes to grips with the

fact that he can't (and probably shouldn't) say anything to his mother or uncle. At this point, the feelings Hamlet is experiencing are typical and understandable, given his current situation.

After the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him and plants the idea of revenge in his head, Hamlet starts to change. First, his feelings towards his mother and Claudius go from a natural anger to a burning hatred and scorn. In the second soliloquy, he calls his mother a "most pernicious woman" and Claudius (whom the ghost accused of murder) a "smiling, damned, villain" (1.5.844-845). Although Hamlet swears to his father's ghost he will avenge him, he later expresses feeling unsure if the ghost was *actually* his father (and thus also unsure if Claudius is *truly* a murderer). At this point, Hamlet is beginning to question his own state of mind. Since he's unsure of the truth, Hamlet simply holds the idea of revenge inside and ruminates on it. This failure to act begins to drive him crazy; in the third soliloquy, he scolds himself for not acting, calling himself a "coward" and "an ass" (2.2.1632-1657). The lack of action, feeling unsure of reality, his obsession with revenge, and the internal rollercoaster of emotions all cause his mental state to continue to decay.

By the time we reach the halfway point of the play, Hamlet has descended even further into insanity. *Now*, Hamlet is *actually* suicidal when he asks his famous question: "To be, or not to be—that is the question (3.1.1749)." Unlike the first soliloquy, Hamlet is now wondering if life is worth living at all; however, because of his religious beliefs, he is too afraid to kill himself, saying, "But that dread of something after death...does make cowards of us all (3.1.1771-1776)."

Throughout the play, despite being obsessed with revenge, Hamlet is really all talk. Many times, Hamlet gets opportunities to take his revenge but finds excuses to put it off. However, in the final soliloquy, Hamlet explodes. He is completely consumed with the idea of avenging his

father and vows to himself that he will do whatever is necessary to carry out the revenge. Hamlet declares, “Oh from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (4.4.2854-2855)” It is after this decree that Hamlet finally actually plans out and acts upon his revenge.

Mapping out the progress from the first to the final speech, it is clear that over time, Hamlet descends into complete madness. He goes from having normal feelings of grief and anger to violent, bloody images of suicide, murder, and revenge. In the end, Hamlet does indeed carry out the revenge he’s obsessed over, but it doesn’t only destroy his target, Claudius. It brings death and destruction to everyone he loves, and eventually leads to the destruction of Hamlet himself.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. 1601. Web. 7 Oct. 2015.

<http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=hamlet&Scope=entire&pleasewait=1&msg=pl#a1,s2>.