

Sue Guildenstern

The theme of "To thy own self be true" in Hamlet

EN 152 summer 1994 Monday - Wednesday 6:00 - 9:40PM

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In the play Hamlet, the theme of "to thine own self be true" poses a problem for the main character. The ghost of the king appeals to Hamlet's sense of honor and causes him to avenge his father's death. Not only does the ghost deprive Hamlet of reason, but it also deprives him of his sense of self. Ironically, as Hamlet gives in to the code of honor that the ghost espouses, he loses himself. As the ghost confronts Hamlet on the parapet and tells him about the circumstances of his death, Hamlet vows to avenge the ghost's honor. Hamlet obsessively thinks only of the commandment of the ghost:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!"

Hamlet decides to live only to fulfill the ghost's "commandment". He is profoundly disturbed by what the ghost asks him to do. As a result, he contemplates suicide. This is an extreme act which Hamlet finds he cannot do because of his religious beliefs and his conscience. It is in this soliloquy that Hamlet struggles with himself, and yet it shows him to be the man of intellect that must complete an act which is foreign to his nature.

"To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;...
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,...
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all:...

Just as Hamlet cannot easily do away with himself, so too, he finds it difficult to murder the present king of Denmark in cold blood. As Hamlet finds Claudius in the chapel confessing the murder he has committed, he still finds reasons to postpone the slaughter:

"Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do't. And so 'a goes to heaven;
And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.

Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
'A took my father grossly, full of bread;

With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May; And how his audit stands who knows save heaven? But in our circumstance and course of thought, 'Tis heavy with him: and am I then reveng'd,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No!"

In this soliloquy, Hamlet cites Christian beliefs as an excuse for not dispatching Claudius to his death. He feels that because Claudius has confessed, he will go blame free to heaven.

The irony of the play lies in the fact that the ghost demands that Hamlet restore order to the ruling house of Denmark by killing the usurper to the throne...Claudius. But at the end of the play, chaos reigns because of the plotting of Claudius. The duel between Laertes and Hamlet is to the death. In a very real sense, the ghost is diabolical, because the vengeance that he demands causes the death of his son (Hamlet) and the death of his wife (Gertrude).

As both Hamlet, and Gertrude are dying, Hamlet manages to run his sword through Claudius. Because he witnessed the poisoning of his mother, Hamlet can now kill Claudius with the same poisoned wine.

Throughout the play, Hamlet finds it difficult to go against his Christian beliefs and shows himself to be a man of thought rather than senseless revenge. This conflict between what Hamlet wants to do and what the ghost demands of him causes his madness and demise.