

## ENGLISH: *HAMLET*

**Changing relationships between characters is a central element in establishing the meaning of a text.**

**Examine the development of TWO key relationships in the text and explore their significance to the meaning of the text as a whole.**

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The changing nature of Hamlet's relationship with women and with himself is a significant element in Shakespeare's Revenge tragedy Hamlet. However, it is Hamlet's continual questioning of the morality of revenge, catalysed by the conflicting values within his society, which underpins Shakespeare's play and establishes the central meaning of Hamlet. Hamlet's increasingly hostile relationship with Ophelia and Gertrude reflects the Elizabethan role of women establishing meaning to a contemporary audience aware of gender inequality. Similarly, Hamlet's changing relationship with himself is meaningful as he moves from resisting to embracing the societal codes of revenge and his own role as a tragic hero. However, ultimately Hamlet reflects the disjunction between the religious condemnation of revenge and medieval codes of familial loyalty to force his audience to consider the moral dilemma of revenge, establishing significant meaning to the play.

Hamlet's changing behaviour in his interaction with female characters within the Revenge tragedy exposes the role of Elizabethan women in upholding honour. Prompted by her hasty marriage to his uncle, Hamlet's confrontation of Gertrude is reflective of the Elizabethan codes of morality within his patriarchal world. The dishonourable nature of Gertrude's marriage is revealed as Hamlet asks, 'Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, And batten on this moor?'; where the antithetical representation of Gertrude's first husband, Old Hamlet and her second, Claudius suggests Gertrude's degraded honour. Hamlet's didactic and forceful demands of Gertrude to 'go not to my uncle's bed; assume a virtue if you have it not'; critically contrast her mournful pleas 'speak no more...No more sweet Hamlet' to expose women's powerlessness in Elizabethan society, resounding with a society acutely aware of gender hierarchy. The repeated images of corruption and disease as Hamlet advises her 'not spread compost on the weeds' verify his disgust at her dishonourable actions and his horror at her immorality eventually precipitates Hamlet's deteriorating relationship with Ophelia. As Valerie Traub affirms, 'Hamlet displaces disgust for the Queen's erotic mobility onto Ophelia, and adopts his father's strategy of aggression'. Hamlet's misogynistic demands of Ophelia to 'go to a nunnery... To a nunnery, go' culminate in the ambiguous exclamation 'God has given you one face, and you give yourself another' as he extends his disgust of his mother towards not merely Ophelia, but all women. By presenting Ophelia's integrity as a foil to Gertrude's infidelity, Shakespeare places the audience in a privileged position to feel sympathy for Ophelia; emphasising the important role of honour in the lives of Elizabethan women and thus establishing resounding meaning to his text.

Shakespeare's Revenge tragedy, Hamlet, presents Hamlet's reconciliation with society's values and his own role within them through Hamlet's eventual acceptance of his role as an avenger. At the play's conclusion, following his mother's unintentional death at the hands of Claudius, Hamlet finally accepts his role as a medieval avenger. His firm affirmation 'If it be now... it will be now' enforces a sense of immediacy that contrasts previous indecision over exacting revenge; as Hamlet finally resigns himself to his fate as a tragic hero. His allusion to the Bible 'there is a special providence in the fall of the sparrow' synonymous with the calm suggestion to 'let be' projects confidence as Hamlet places himself within the paradigms of the Elizabethan world order; recognising all future events occur under God's immediate control. Hamlet's use of third person as he declares 'Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged' alludes to Hamlet's newfound clarity as he redefines himself under his societal context and embraces the values of his Elizabethan society. The dramatic action heightens as Hamlet finally confronts Claudius for his three crimes; 'Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane', and culminates in Hamlet's own death; signifying the fulfilment of the tragedy and the restoration of the natural order within Denmark. Hamlet's reconciliation with his society and

acceptance of his role as the avenger represents his altered relationship with himself and is expressed in Horatio's emotive statement 'Now cracks a noble heart'; facilitating and maintaining meaning within Hamlet.

However, it is the moral dilemma of revenge, presented through a confrontation of the tension caused by shifting values of Elizabethan society that provides the central meaning of Shakespeare's Revenge tragedy, Hamlet. Hamlet's inner turmoil between a desire for justice and fear for his soul resounds through the play and is reflective of the discord between medieval code of familial loyalty and religious condemnation of revenge. His despondent tone he debates avenging his father's murder in the soliloquy 'Oh what a rogue and peasant slave I am' characterises him as an introspective, Renaissance man, caught between these conflicting ideals. As Hamlet questions how players who worked themselves up into a passion by a mere fictitious speech would act if they had his 'motive and the cure for passion', Shakespeare alludes to Hamlet's own role as a character in the revenge tragedy. The parallelism between Hamlet's inaction in the face of his father's murder and the players' 'tears' and 'broken voice' is recognised by Hamlet and evokes self-deprecation. Rhetorically he asks 'Am I a coward?' 'Who calls me a villain?'; providing ironic contrast to the repetition and accumulation of negative adjectives in following descriptions of himself as a 'bloody, bawdy villain' a 'treacherous, lecherous villain!'. This reflects his inner turmoil as he debates whether to make true his promise to the ghost and avenge his father. The cry of 'O vengeance' marks the climax of the soliloquy, as Hamlet emulates the depth of emotion he sees in the actors, and reveals his turning point from self-recrimination to practicality. Shakespeare's use of religious paradigms as Hamlet questions whether the ghost 'be the devil', encourages us to view the ambiguity of the ghost as a dramatic representation of the ambiguous morality that causes the dilemma of revenge central to Hamlet's revenge. Within his drama, Shakespeare links the tensions between opposing moral values in the Elizabethan era and Hamlet's inner turmoil to cause us to question the moral dilemma of revenge in our own context, thus establishing deep meaning within his play.

Through the exploration of the changing relationship of Hamlet with Ophelia and Gertrude, and Hamlet's improved relationship with himself, revealed through his eventual acceptance of his role as an avenger, Shakespeare creates ongoing interest within Hamlet. However; it is this synonymous with the Hamlet's continual battle with the conflicting values within his society, through his questioning of the morality of revenge which creates such powerful meaning within the Revenge tragedy.

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