

Quotes and Analysis

1. ***O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
/ Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God,
God, / How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this
world!***

Act One scene two, ll. 129-34

Hamlet's first soliloquy finds him more melancholic, more desperate, than at any other point in the play. In the beginning, his motives and feelings are clear in a way that they never are after his encounter with the ghost. Hamlet is simply disgusted that his mother, who had appeared to be so much in love with his father, has married Claudius, her vastly inferior former brother-in-law. For Hamlet as the play opens, existence itself is a burden; he wishes that the body could simply melt away and free him from his torment. Although sometimes his rhetoric in the ensuing Acts resonates with this first declaration of misery, Hamlet's sincerity becomes much more difficult to judge once he has received his supernatural charge. His moods become more manic, his language more explosive and punning, and his motivation becomes infinitely mysterious. Here, though, freed from the need to act on his thoughts and feelings (he even says, at the end of the speech, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue"), he is truly in his miserable element.

By the way, the first line of this speech reads differently in different editions. Some editors follow the second quarto and admit "sallied flesh" (or even "sullied flesh"). Others follow the first folio and put "solid flesh." The emphasis is either on the flesh's innate depravity or on its frustrating solidity. Because Hamlet expresses a desire that the flesh go from a firm and resilient to something like a liquid or gaseous state, I have opted for "solid" as more consistent with the elemental imagery of the passage.

2. ***There, my blessing with thee, / And these few precepts in thy memory / Look
thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought
his act. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. / Those friends thou hast,
and their adoption tried, / Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel, /
But do not cut thy palm with entertainment / Of each new-hatched, unfledged
sopran. [...] Neither a borrower nor a lender be, / For loan oft loses both itself
and friend, / And borrowing dulls th' edge of husbandry. / This above all, to
thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst
not then be false to any man.***

Act One scene three, ll. 55-80

Beloved of refrigerator magnet and bumper sticker companies everywhere, Polonius' advice to Laertes puts the critic in a double bind. On the one hand, there is no denying that his advice is often sound, if generally clichéd and obvious, and very memorably expressed. On the other, the speech must be read in context, and when done so it becomes deeply ironic. One phrase in particular is very rich coming from Polonius -- "to thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man." Polonius is, of course, the quintessential false man. He is forever plotting stratagems and eavesdropping behind the arras. That he nevertheless feels comfortable positing that one should be true to oneself (whatever that means) and thereby never false to any man is a testament to his shallow disregard for the deeper import and meaning of his language. Polonius mouths words without meaning them. He is windy and empty. And this speech in particular, with its smug certainties, serves as a stark contrast to Hamlet's searching, questioning, endless attempts at self-exploration.

3. ***I have of late -- but wherefore I know not -- lost all my mirth, forgone all
custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this
goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent
canopy the air, look you, this brave o'er-hanging firmament, this majestic roof
fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent
congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason; how
infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action;***

in the fall of the sparrow." At the same time, he asserts that we know nothing of the world -- "no man of aught he leaves knows." So all things are rich with meaning, yet we know not what such meaning might be. Thus Hamlet closes the play in a quiet and mysterious counter-poise with fate. He no longer attempts to understand the unknowable, but accepts it as such; indeed, he accepts unknowability as an inescapable condition of all existence. What good is it, then, to roil one's guts over future plans? On the contrary, not the action, but the readiness, is all.

Suggested Essay Questions

1. **Hamlet is widely hailed as the first modern play in the English language. Which characteristics of its central character might account for this label?**

Hamlet is considered the first modern play partly because of the psychological depth of its main character -- Hamlet suffers from melancholy, self-doubt, and even delusions. The audience never quite knows what Hamlet is thinking, or what is real. In fact, Hamlet himself declares again and again that he doesn't understand his doubts either ("I have of late, *but wherefore I know not*, lost all my mirth.")

2. **Death is a constant presence in this play. Does Hamlet's speech to Yorick's skull represent a philosophy of death? How does his attitude toward death differ from that of the gravediggers?**

Death was a much more ordinary presence in Elizabethan England than it is in the modern world. Infant mortality was high and plagues swept whole nations. In this sense, the gravediggers exhibit a much more realistic approach to death than most people. Hamlet uses the occasion for a more general examination of mortality. His attitude toward death is not necessarily inconsistent with that of the gravediggers, but it is different in his emphasis on metaphysical rather than physical implications of death.

3. **Does the text hold up to a Freudian reading of Hamlet's relationship with his mother? How does Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia support, complicate or work against an Oedipal interpretation of the play?**

Certainly Hamlet does visit his mother's bedroom, and is immensely interested in her sexual relationships with other men, both of which are classic elements of an Oedipal complex. Freud's reading of the play may have influenced his sexual theories—but it is important to remember the order of events, especially because scholars tend to label Hamlet "Freudian." Better stated, Freud is Shakespearean, not the other way around.

4. **"To be or not to be" is the famous question that Hamlet poses in Act Three, Scene One. Explore this speech. What does he mean by this famous question? What events of the play prompt this speech?**

Hamlet is musing about death, but whose death, or what kind of death, is frustratingly difficult to pin down. He is perhaps contemplating suicide, perhaps thinking about the risks he must run in order to fulfill the task of revenge. He has an audience of Ophelia, Polonius and Claudius, who are eavesdropping on him; but he most likely does not realize that they are present.

5. **The play within a play, the long soliloquies wherein Hamlet faces the audience and speaks to them directly, the vivid discussions of whether or not Hamlet is "acting" mad -- there are many elements of Hamlet that call attention to its status as a play, rather than reality. By showing the trappings of theater and non-reality, does Shakespeare make Hamlet's suffering seem more acute or more distant? How?**

"Life's but a stage," another Shakespearean character proclaims, and the playwright recognized quite well the dramatic trappings of life and the life-like elements of staged productions. Soliloquies are modern in that they break what is much later termed the "fourth wall" separating audience from stage; the character speaks directly to the audience. Although the whole atmosphere seems patently false and theatrical, this serves to draw Hamlet somehow closer. Somehow, the effect of such "metatheatrical" gestures is to show not how different acting is from life, but how similar life is to acting.

6. **In terms of the usual categorizations, Shakespeare's tragedies end in death, his comedies in marriage. By this measure, Hamlet is a tragedy. But Shakespeare's best plays are a tragicomic mix. Choose and discuss two comical or farcical elements in Hamlet.**