Hamlet is a play that begins in the cold darkness of the night watch. This is not unlike the internal climate of the hero. In the character of Hamlet we encounter a man of unsurpassed intelligence and passion, a rare combination in itself and perhaps never before expressed to such a superior degree. This brilliant student of theology is suddenly plunged into a profound grief, a grief interrupted by a most extraordinary sequence of events. The chilling appearance of a vengeful ghost throws into motion one of the most complicated mechanisms ever joined together in the mind and soul of a single creature. This ghost may not be what it seems, yet this puzzle proves to be only the beginning in a series of mind-bending questions every bit as haunting as any ghost.

The setting of this play is the Danish capitol fortress of Elsinore. The threat of war with Norway hangs over the state of Denmark (1.1.94-104) and a new king has been crowned. Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle, has taken the throne and wed his mother within a very short space of time. Claudius seems to suggest that haste and great dispatch were needed to avoid war (1.2.5-25). Unbeknownst to the court, a few of the night watchmen have seen a ghostly apparition for the previous two nights and on the third night a young scholar and friend of Hamlet has just witnessed it for himself and resolved to disclose it to the prince.

When we first encounter Hamlet, he is in a sullen mood. It becomes clear that he has no love for his uncle the new king. His first soliloquy reveals how his uncle measures up to his father, “Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.140). What seems to really be bothering him is his mother’s hurried marriage to his uncle: “O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason would have
mourned longer” (1.2.150-151). Even with these thoughts, there is no sense of any action on Hamlet’s part. A bitter consideration of suicide perhaps, but nothing that would suggest any action against his mother or his uncle.

The effect of the ghost upon Hamlet is absolutely decisive. When Hamlet is first informed of the ghost’s appearance, he is alarmed. “My father’s spirit in arms! All is not well. I doubt some foul play” (1.2.254-255). When the ghost appears to Hamlet, he is immediately aware that this spirit may not be what it seems: “Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned?” (1.4.21). Nevertheless, Hamlet resolves to follow the apparition, and the revelation of his father’s “most foul, strange, and unnatural” murder (1.5.28) confirms his suspicions: “O my prophetic soul” (1.5.41).

It is important to recognize the iron link between Hamlet and the ghost. The transformation of Hamlet’s mood in response to the ghost’s revelation is sudden and definite. It is as if someone has thrown a switch inside of Hamlet and produced the light of purpose instantaneously within the room of his mind. What that light reveals is a clutter of subsequent problems and objections that cloud his course, not the least of these being the nature of the ghost himself.

It would be beneficial to take a few paragraphs to explore Hamlet’s state of mind at the time of the ghost’s appearing. It is easy to mistake Hamlet as indecisive if revenge is the only motive considered. It is true he says the ghost’s charge “all alone shall live” (1.5.102) within his mind, but does he follow through with this promise? Are other objectives introduced as the play moves forward? After the ghost has departed, Hamlet laments, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to make it right” (1.5.189-190). If we accept that Hamlet’s determination to make it right means avenging his father’s death by killing Claudius, that would
be a reasonable interpretation. However, what if we were to accept that making it right refers to a broader aim? It may be informative to explore that possibility by starting with what Hamlet’s expectations may have been had his father died in less exceptional circumstances.

Had old Hamlet died a natural death, Hamlet would have been the natural heir to the throne. Having seen his father’s apparent affection for his mother he would have expected her to return his father’s love by showing the appropriate grief via observing the full time of mourning. He also would have needed to marry in order to ensure a successor. This marriage might have been with Ophelia if we accept Gertrude’s words at burial: “I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife” (5.1.227).

The reality is this is nothing like what happens. Old Hamlet dies suddenly, and his brother Claudius quickly secures the throne, cutting off Hamlet’s claim. His mother neglects her mourning duties by rushing into a new marriage and thereby treating her conjugal bond to Hamlet’s adored father with a kind of cheapness. If anyone has a reason for developing a level of complex grief, Hamlet does. This complex grief could also be the basis for the suicidal references found throughout the play (1.2.131-132, 3.1.58-90)

It is into this not-rightness that the ghost appears in the form of old Hamlet. The status old Hamlet held in his son’s worldview was absolutely central. When Hamlet first speaks with Horatio he says of his father “I shall not look upon his like again” (1.2.187). Now, looking upon him again as a fell ghost, Hamlet is shaken (1.5.36-37).

Hamlet and Horatio have their doubts at first and these doubts do not diminish as the play progresses. Is there anything about the ghost that would seem to suggest it is what it claims to be? The ghost appears in the form of Old Hamlet and identifies himself as the dead king. He has intimate details associated with the circumstance of Old Hamlet’s death which would have had
Hendricks

no other witnesses besides the perpetrator, Claudius. He also appears to desire to protect his wife from earthly retaliation on Hamlet’s part, which suggests a remaining conjugal bond. This is reinforced when the ghost reappears to interrupt Hamlet in the bedroom scene with Gertrude where he redirects the prince from his mother back to his “almost blunted purpose” (3.4.101).

The ghost also gives an interesting command: “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.85). At first, Hamlet indeed resolves that “thy commandment all alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain” (1.5.102-3). This sounds like a noble and pious command, but there is good reason to doubt whether this is even possible. Can a man pursue a course of revenge and remain pure? The whole issue of a ghost claiming to be in purgatory advocating vengeance is perhaps the most compelling argument for the theory of the ghost being a demon in disguise. According to some manuscripts from the Elizabethan period, “Revenge is a terrifying force from Hell…it poisons the reason and perverts the will” (Prosser 32).

There are other arguments against the ghost’s validity besides its distinctly unchristian objective. A devil would have the advantage of ages worth of experience in subtle tempting and deceiving. The truth of the accusation would add force to its aim of damning souls. Even if Hamlet had only killed Claudius, both of them would be under judgment for mortal sins. Moreover, if things went wrong, they could hardly go wrong in a good way. The devil-as-ghost would hope for as much collateral damage as possible and that is precisely what does happen. If the words of Christ himself were to enlighten this issue, perhaps the following would be appropriate: “Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit” (Matthew 7:17). With the ensuing lies, murders and suicides, it would be easy to agree that the fruit of this ghost is evil fruit indeed.
In fact, it is the sheer scope of collateral damage resulting from Hamlet’s delays that is the primary reason he is criticized for his apparent indecision. Even if Hamlet’s problem is indecision, he would have at least one excellent reason for it. Initially, he is dealing with a very dubious revelation. There is no independent proof besides the ghost’s word until the confirmation of Claudius’ reaction to *The Mousetrap*. He is keenly aware that his actions will determine the fate of his soul. It is this “dread of something after death” that “puzzles the will” (3.1.80, 82). This may be his best defense in the matter: with damnation on the line, any wise soul would want to double check.

The news of the murder committed by his uncle animates Hamlet and he quickly swears to carry out the honor killing (1.5.113). Nevertheless, is revenge Hamlet’s only objective? If revenge is not Hamlet’s only motive, what are his other grievances and what textual evidence is there for them? Let’s look at four basic motivators that come to light in the course of the play. These four are: ambition for the throne, reacting to betrayal, the redemption of his mother, and the obvious revenge for his father’s murder.

In *Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare*, the interpretation of Hamlet’s motivation is very straightforward: kill Claudius in such a way as to secure the throne and avoid being executed for treason (Asimov 103). This interpretation is overly simplistic and neglects Hamlet’s internal struggles with uncertainty (1.4.21-24) and suicide (1.2.129-132). However, it does remind us that Hamlet is ambitious and he does reference Claudius coming “between th’election and my hopes” (5.2.66). Hamlet faces external problems as well as internal. It is easy to focus on Hamlet’s plentiful internal dilemmas, not the least of which is the uncertain nature of the ghost. Even so, he is also faced with a formidable opponent in Claudius as well as a treacherous network of spies.
Throughout the play, Hamlet deals with betrayal. It could be argued that the first betrayal of the play occurs when Gertrude marries Claudius, thereby insulting Old Hamlet’s memory, violating the canon laws on marriage and giving Claudius the throne instead of Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s fellow students, turn spy on him. Finally, Ophelia is used as bait to trap him. Who is left? His uncle, mother, schoolmates, even his lover have turned against him. Only Horatio proves a true friend. Perhaps this is why Hamlet refers to the “quintessence of dust” (2.2.298). This speech is more than a ruse to throw Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off the trail; it is also a statement of Hamlet’s disillusionment with the inconstancy of humankind. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply provide the examples.

In A.C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy*, the author very rightly suggests that Hamlet regards his mother’s fall with horror and is filled with a longing to redeem her (135). His mother’s behavior has disturbed him from the very beginning as has been discussed above. Hamlet sees his opportunity to confront Gertrude in the bedroom scene. In fact, in act five, scene two, Hamlet’s second complaint against Claudius after killing his king is that he has “whored my mother” (65). His desire to “get through” to her certainly has an effect: “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.147). Hamlet’s reply to “throw away the worser part and live the purer with the other half” (3.4.148-149) finds Gertrude willing to change, asking “What shall I do?” (3.4.164). Gertrude’s character then finds some redemption in this encounter in that she presumably refrains from continuing in her sexual connection with Claudius. She also keeps faith with her son by concealing his secret of feigned madness.

Finally, revenge is certainly a motivator. This is Hamlet’s first complaint against Claudius. In fact, the revenge called for by the ghost seems to act like the motive that gives expression to all the others. After the ghost, the floodgates are opened and Hamlet actively
begins to confront his many challenges. The “But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (1.2.168) is transformed into “O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!” (1.5.106).

It would seem that though the revenge demanded by the ghost operates as the prima causa of Hamlet’s emotional exodus, it is by no means the only motive. With his passionate temperament, the complex requirements of having so many irons in the fire take their toll on Hamlet. His use of an “antic disposition” (1.5.173) fits this picture precisely because he is so passionate. He could have continued at court in a somber melancholy and contrived against the king in that mode as if nothing ever happened, but he cannot. The encounter with the ghost and the fresh knowledge burning in his soul is more than he can contain. If his temperament will not allow concealment, it must settle for disguise. His madness must veil his pathos, though imperfectly. Claudius recognizes “There’s something in his soul o’er which his melancholy sits on brood” (3.1.163-164) and even the asinine Polonius sees a “method in’t” (2.2.203-204). Hamlet’s method of faking insanity does allow him to release emotional pressure in the form of threats and insults without incurring the normal penalties (i.e. 3.1.147-148).

So much for his motives, but what of his mind? Hamlet is in many ways a renaissance man. He has a singular genius and as a student at the theological university at Wittenberg he would be well acquainted with subtle and obtuse problems. One author goes so far as to say *Hamlet* is about “a mind, in the world of its mind” (Rossiter 172). However, dealing with issues in a library is not in the same league as what he finds upon his return to Elsinore. He is always miles ahead of the would-be spies, even entertaining himself at their expense as in the case of Polonius (2.2.196-202) and Rosencrantz (4.2.14-22). Or as Hamlet himself put it so aptly, “though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me” (3.2.341).
Hamlet possesses the skepticism of a scientist. His heart may be eager to jump to action but this enthusiasm never survives long before being carefully examined under the light of reason. Perhaps the best example of this is when Hamlet discovers Claudius praying alone. He has just witnessed the sought-after proof confirming the ghost’s story and even so his sword stroke is deferred while the timing “would be scanned” (3.3.75).

It is striking that Shakespeare places his greatest prodigy outside of the certain and in the company of the transcendent. Hamlet is stretched to extraordinary lengths in every way. This has given rise to questions of whether-or-not he ever becomes truly mad. It may be a faux-pas to quote Herman Melville when writing an essay about Shakespeare. Nevertheless, in the story of Billy Budd Melville brilliantly expresses the trouble with madness as a category with this analogy: “Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? So with sanity and insanity” (2791). Hamlet does approach the brink of insanity on several occasions, giving way to outbursts like the altercation with Laertes in Ophelia’s grave (5.1.238-277). Is this really madness though? Hamlet reacts passionately but given the circumstances it would perhaps be more disturbing if he did not. The man who can keep his cool after the murder of his father, the betrayal of his friends and the likely suicide of his lover would probably warrant greater caution than a man showing his affectedness.

Tragic heroes are usually people with extraordinary gifts who also possess one damning fault. Hamlet highlights this for us himself when referring to this same phenomenon: “The dram of evil doth all the noble substance over-daub to his own scandal” (1.4.18.20-22). Considering the emotional and intellectual complexities discussed above, what exactly is Hamlet’s fault?

Horatio may hold a key to Hamlet’s dilemma. As Hamlet’s only real confidant, he manifests a trustworthiness unique among the characters of the play. However, there must be
more to him. In one of the few times we can be sure Hamlet is speaking plainly, he voices his admiration for Horatio. The substance of his praise is summed up in the statement that Horatio’s “blood and judgment are so well comingled” (3.2.62). Horatio has a balanced relationship between his passions and his intellect. This can serve as a clue to the internal struggle of Hamlet. Could it be that Hamlet’s problem lies in having such an exceptional mind paired with an equally passionate soul that these two aspects vie for primacy? Hamlet has been accused of being too intellectual, but is it not the contrast with his impulsivity at times that fuels this impression? This is exactly why the ghost poses a singularly difficult problem. First, the claims are so incendiary they cannot be ignored. Second, the claimant is so dubious he cannot be immediately trusted. Hamlet must act on what he has heard, but how can he reconcile his finely tuned mind and his fierce passion?

The turning point for Hamlet’s fortunes is the moment he spares Claudius in the chapel. If he had killed him there, he would have been able to claim the evidence of the witnesses to the ghost. He could also say he had tested the ghost’s claim by devising the alterations to The Mousetrap and observing Claudius’ reaction which the court would also have observed. He then could have claimed “hot blood” to excuse his immediate action and so would have his revenge. Polonius would still be alive and Ophelia still in tenuous control of her sanity so, had he wanted to, he could have patched things up with her, regaining their love. He would also have removed his mother from the “damned incest” (1.5.83) of her relationship with his uncle which seems to be one of the most galling aspects of the whole business. Finally, and significantly, he would have gained the crown with perhaps enough time to fortify against young Fortinbras.

Nevertheless he does not strike. The reason is given to us. In order to pay his uncle back in kind for old Hamlet’s murder, Claudius must die as his brother did: “his crimes broad blown”
The ghost’s words “almost blunted purpose” (3.4.101) to Hamlet immediately after he spares Claudius and during his chastisement of his mother suggest he is off course, even badly off course. “Almost blunted” should be interpreted here as nearly overthrown. The reason for this is Hamlet has opened his arms too wide and his excellent mind has bitten off more than it can chew. He steps beyond revenge and tries to determine the ultimate destiny of his victim. This is seen in Hamlet’s words to Horatio after returning from the ship, admitting that “our dear plots do pall… there’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.9-11).

As Harold Bloom rightly points out in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, there is nothing of Hamlet’s feigned madness after the grave scene. Even then it evolves into “an intense irony directed at the gross images of death” (390). There is something resolved here that paves the way for the calm acceptance of divine timing (5.2.157-161). Hamlet’s encounter with death at the gravesite certainly deals with his ambition. It is not a coincidence that Hamlet speaks directly about the fates of Alexander (5.1.182-183) and Imperial Caesar (5.1.196). If they have come to such ignoble ends, then why should Hamlet be concerned about his fate?

During Hamlet’s conversation with Horatio just prior to the treacherous fencing match, he discloses the result of all his internal processing. It is as if all the diverse motions of his heart and mind have finally coalesced into a single guiding principle: readiness. The very fact that Hamlet settles upon this principle says something about the unsolvable nature of his dilemma. Readiness stops short of “providing a solution to the question of conscience”; rather, it serves as an “affirmation of the question’s irresolvable paradoxicality” (Lukacher 130). This is mirrored by the ghost who represents an unsolvable problem in itself. This seems to be a deliberate use of uncertainty on Shakespeare’s part. The audience finds themselves, like the characters, grasping at “desperate explanatory hypotheses” (Greenblatt 158). We are drawn into the quandary by the
very ambiguity of it. For the audience, mental loops not unlike anxiety emerge where the facts are considered over and over without yielding definitive results. In reality, the play “goes out of its way to unsettle any attempt to determine what substantial claim to reality the intimations of the other world—the world of ghosts…actually possess” (Greenblatt 192). This technique is pure genius, and combined with the fascination inherently aroused by the supernatural it makes excellent theatre.

Hamlet remains a hero to the end. He faces his fate calmly. He achieves the revenge upon Claudius (5.2.267-269) and is reconciled with Laertes (5.2.271-274). He even manages to appoint a successor (5.2.298), all within a few short minutes (Cope). In a way the last few hours of his life are a sort of postscript of redemption. Hamlet is not only a hero; he is a modern hero. He is armed with a brilliant mind tempered by a cautious skepticism. He struggles to come to grips with grief, death and uncertainty. He fails to solve the enigmas of the play and yet he does not fail to come to terms with them. The “readiness” of Hamlet is the courage to play the hand that is dealt to him. He does not control his destiny, but neither is he controlled by it. He is reconciled to himself and out of that place of serenity we can cry with Horatio “Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (5.2.302-303).


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