The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Author: William Shakespeare

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by William Shakespeare tells how Prince Hamlet responds to the discovery that his father the King has been murdered by the King’s own brother Claudius, who assumes the throne, and to the reality that his mother Queen Gertrude has married Claudius within a few months of her husband’s death. On several occasions, Hamlet is visited by his father’s Ghost who urges him to avenge the murder. Hamlet finds confirmation of the assertion of murder by the Ghost in watching how King Claudius reacts with an outburst of negativity to an in-house play that involves the poisoning of its protagonist. But he delays and delays in taking decisive action.

Close associates of Hamlet believe that he has lost his mind, since his behaviour seems so erratic and unkind in the way that he addresses the Lord Chamberlain Polonius, Polonius’ daughter Ophelia, Queen Gertrude, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (University friends). However another scholar and friend, Horatio, seems to understand what is bothering Hamlet. In the meantime King Claudius plots to exile Hamlet. Thinking that it is his uncle hiding behind a curtain, Hamlet slays Polonius by mistake as the latter eavesdrops on an argument between Hamlet and his mother. Ophelia, whom Hamlet in fact dearly loves, is discovered drowned in the river after experiencing a brutal verbal rejection by Hamlet. Hamlet himself continues to be frustrated by his tendency to procrastination.

The play climaxes at the funeral of Ophelia when her brother Laertes duels with Hamlet with a poisoned sword supplied by King Claudius. Queen Gertrude drinks a poison cup in error, and dies. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poison tip. Hamlet kills both Laertes and King Claudius before he himself succumbs.

In this play Shakespeare allows us to enter into Hamlet’s stream of consciousness as he deals with the tumult of emotions engulfing him as a consequence of his father’s murder. When he is with people he spits venom, and lashes out - at his uncle, his mother, his girlfriend, the aged Lord Chamberlain, and his university friends. He is vehemently upset. He is tortured in his mind, and considers the possibility of suicide as a way out, but his religion forbids this and he fears the purgatory or hell that he will endure on the other side of the grave in consequence of doing such a deed. His mind is always in a flood of anger, and frustration at his own long reflections and indecisiveness.
Minds in Flood and How to Respond

Hamlet’s mind is always working overtime to discern the best course of action, to get a handle on his desires. Shakespeare opens a window into his mind, heart and soul. We get to see inside of Hamlet, his mind and emotions in flood both when he is in company and when he is alone. The Catholic monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) also had a mind that was always in flood. This facet of Thomas Merton is already well known, but it is brought into relief in the most recent biography of Merton, *Thomas Merton - Faithful Visionary* (2014) by Michael W Higgins. Merton grew up in France, moved to the States, experienced a religious conversion that resulted in him becoming a devout Catholic, and entered the Cistercian monastery in Kentucky. His superiors there recognized his talent as a writer, as well as his capacity to be self-reflective, so he was put to work in recording his own stream of consciousness in books and diaries in which he endeavoured to be honest in every manner of being. Merton lived in a state of very intense self-awareness. In numerous writings he elaborated what was going on in his personal experience in hopes that this would be of service in the wider community. Even though he lived as a monk secluded in a monastery he had a huge range of contacts and correspondence with the wider world around a host of issues and in particular the arms race and nuclear power. His personal relationships... his vulnerabilities,... disagreements with his superiors... a full blown romantic relationship with a nurse when he was in his fifties... all of this is recorded and put on paper. He died tragically in an electrical accident whilst on a speaking trip to Asia when he was only 53. Merton was hugely critical of the traditional monastic life. He was hugely critical of North American culture. He never had to cope with the level of personal betrayal portrayed in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. But he was a person who lived in his own “sea of troubles” and was articulate enough to be able to write about them in the way that we experience somewhat in Hamlet’s soliloquies.

Hamlet and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola

Another person who lived an intense interior life and put it down on paper was St Ignatius of Loyola (1492-1561) who went on to found the Society of Jesus... the Jesuits. Recovering as a thirty year old from the wounds of battle he came to discern the movement of God’s Spirit in his life. He came to figure out which of the desires in his heart he needed to follow, and how. He came to several conclusions that drove him forward to want to be a Companion of Jesus, to want to find God in all things and situations, to want to serve the Church and the Pope, to desire to give greater glory to God in all circumstances, to want to be free from all the biases – cultural, personal, existential - which hold us back.

It is fair to ask how Hamlet would have coped with the challenges and stresses of his situation if he came under the influence of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. He would certainly find that the flood gates of his thoughts, feelings and concerns would be completely

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*Note: The text has been slightly adapted for natural reading, maintaining the flow and context of the original content.*
respected. He would find a way of dwelling on his anger, and his desire for revenge, but he
would be challenged to struggle towards a profound interior freedom – one that could only be
won under the influence of the grace of God actively engaging with his heart. He would find his
love for life, for his father, for Ophelia, for the Kingdom of Denmark, and for his friend Horatio
to be affirmed. He would find his capacity for reflection and depth of feeling fully confirmed.
He would find the mourning in his heart accompanied, and discover a path of hope and healing.

At a critical juncture in his journey when he was wracked with scrupulosity St Ignatius was
tempted towards suicide. Hamlet faced a similar challenge. St Ignatius used the term
“desolation” to describe the mood of the soul that took one away from God, and he strongly
advised that when one was in desolation one should not make important decisions. This can be
difficult since it happens that a person in “desolation” is often not aware that this is the case
and they may be making self-harming decisions that they will come to regret.

The Voice of Conscience

“Conscience does make cowards of us all.” (Hamlet Act 3 Scene 1 line 90)

Hamlet makes the point that the voice of conscience causes us to lack courage. We do not do
what we want to do, what we think needs to be done because of the torment that conscience
can cause us. Hamlet laments the fact that this faculty of the mind can be so powerful. Hamlet
presupposes that we are too sensitive in that area. Of course social science research tells us
that this is not always the case and that people can suppress their consciences. The Catholic
Church in its teaching on conscience at the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) made the point
that the voice of God resides in the conscience of each person, and gives us direction on how to
act in the various situations of life. Catholic teaching does re-affirm the view that we have a
duty to obey our consciences. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in its summary of
“conscience” notes that conscience is a part of a person that needs to be “formed”. In other
words conscience needs to be educated by right reason. The strong winds of ideology can
easily distort the capacity of one’s moral judgment, so that one’s conscience is ill advised and
feels itself forced into actions that turn out to be destructive.

How do we confront the “sea of troubles” that people inevitably face in living a normal life?
Hamlet considered the possibility of ending it in taking his own life. This is a current discussion
in our culture as the issue of doctor assisted suicide is considered. The Catholic Church has a
consistent teaching in this matter that is articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church,
and in several documents from the Canadian Conference of Bishops. It states that we may not
kill, that palliative care should be excellent, that palliative care may include pain medication
whose side effect might be to shorten one’s life, that in terminal illness we share in the
redemptive power of the Cross of Jesus, that through the sacrament of the Sick we receive grace to sustain us on the difficult path of death should healing not be possible and, that the death and resurrection of Jesus grounds our hope in a life beyond death that will transform us and everything. The Church is concerned that doctor assisted suicide will put pressure on doctors to go against their consciences, and will put pressure on patients not to be a burden on their relatives and on the health care system.

**God’s Providence and the Free Will of Humans**

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends rough-hew them how we will.” (Hamlet, Act 5, scene 2, lines 10-11)

Hamlet makes this remark in the context of his conviction that fate is controlling his life. With the growth of atheism and agnosticism in post-modern culture, there is not the same sense in many circles that there is a God who is master of the house. The view of Karl Marx that God is a construct of the wealthy class to keep the lower classes in control has had significant traction. The view of Sigmund Freud that God is a projection of the human person’s need for an ultimate father figure is influential. The fact that significant voices in the scientific community experience no need for the place of God in order to explain the workings of the Universe has also had an impact. Philip Fogarty SJ writes about *The Missing God Who Is Not Missed* (Columbia Press 2003). However for those who live within a religious horizon, this statement of Hamlet is a telling one. The sense of the Hebrew and Christian Scripture is laced throughout with a conviction that God is immersed and totally active in history, that God has a plan, that the plan is in God’s mind from all eternity, that in spite of all the trouble and suffering in life the plan is being implemented in the person of Jesus, and in the action of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of people. Especially in its text, “*The Church in the Modern World*”, the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) voiced the conviction that God is totally present to the world in every facet of it, and that through God’s presence to it the world is being “saved”. There is no attempt whatsoever to diminish the harsh reality of the evil at work in the world and the lack of intelligibility that drives it, but whether in the interpretation of Genesis, Exodus, the Prophets, the Gospels or the Epistles of St Paul there is an underlying acceptance of God’s Providence actively engaged, and working things out. This is no clock maker God who has wound the machine and then wandered off as some of the philosophers thinking about the possibility of God had concluded as deists. No, this God is in the flesh of the world. This God
transforms the brittle tragedy of life, and makes it into something unimaginable...something that when it is talked about causes one’s heart to burn inside....something that is healed and is intensely good.

The Search for Freedom

It is thought by some that the most significant question in theology concerns the tension between two truths – the affirmation of the infinite power of God on the one hand, and the affirmation that human beings have the gift of freedom on the other. Significant philosophers do not espouse the reality of human freedom, but rather propose that different degrees of determinism account for the decisions and actions of humans. They argue that we are conditioned by our genes and by our culture and the force of the human condition. Yet the life of democracy, the workings of the court system, the desire of oppressed peoples are grounded in the contention that we are oriented towards freedom of mind, heart and action, and that we can come to realize this freedom really and truly. Taken at face value though, and without denying the presence of freedom as a true factor in human living, Hamlet comes down on the side of divine purpose and power. Though we attempt to claim our freedom and shape our lives as best we can in the circumstances that brought us here, ultimately there is according to this reading a higher power at work in all the complexity and mystery of life. Yet Catholicism rejects the view that we are being manipulated, or forced, or cajoled by God. Under the influence of God’s Holy Spirit, we are all the time being invited to participate, to grow, to engage, to live to the full, to realize the potential in all our gifts of mind, body and soul. Yet among the great Catholic thinkers and spiritual writers there is too a deep conviction that God’s Providence guards and guides the course of history from a higher viewpoint and integrates all that is chaotic and disordered, all that is painful and hopeless, all that is without meaning or apparent value, and transforms it though grace into something of unimaginable fullness. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus point us in this direction.
Virtue Living

“Assume a virtue, if you have it not.” (Hamlet Act 3, Scene 4, line 178)

This line from Hamlet, spoken in the context of a heated conversation with his mother about her marriage to her brother-in-law, is part of the wisdom that has been passed down to us through Shakespeare. If we do not have good habits, we can pretend to have them, and thereby develop good habit muscles. We often associate this wisdom from the teachings of Confucius in China. You wear the mask of cheerfulness and patient endurance even though you are dying inside. In our world of employment this value is very much to the fore; in many situations we are expected to wear a uniform, and then to conform to the criteria of “professionalism” in our attitudes and manner towards the people that we may be serving. In many roles this means that we are to hide our feelings if they are contrary to the expectations of the clients. The North American psychologist Carl Rogers used to highlight the importance of congruity between one’s feelings, thoughts and behaviour in living a healthy life. In many of our public venues in society we are not encouraged to develop that congruity. William Shakespeare presents in Hamlet a person who is deeply in touch with his running feelings, and is not afraid to express them fully, even though this is unpleasant sometimes for those around him. When we look to the Gospels we see in Jesus a person who was quite straightforward in speech, and honest and vulnerable in his emotions. He doesn’t appear to wear a mask. Depending on the circumstances, he weeps, he lashes out, he pokes fun, he expresses frustration. Yet behavioural psychology would certainly see the value of Hamlet’s assertion that we should pretend towards the virtues that we lack.
Resources


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**Websites:**
Pope Francis Encyclical on the Environment [https://laudatosi.com/watch](https://laudatosi.com/watch)
St John XXIII Encyclical on Peace [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html)
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