

Caleb
 Dr. Wilson
 Expos 20.044: Shakespeare's Inventions
 25 February 2014
 Cover Letter: Essay 1

When I first began to think about what I wanted to write this essay on, I really didn't know; I thought that a few of my analytical questions that I asked in the first response paper had potential, but they just didn't feel like they had much of a punch and certainly didn't feel like they would be enjoyable to write. Eventually, after staring at the analytical questions for awhile, I adapted the question I posed about the morality of Hamlet's revenge. But the questions that turned out to be at the forefront of this paper were quite different: instead of pondering Hamlet's revenge, I looked closer at why Hamlet eventually allows himself to let revenge be the dictator of his existence and compared that with his desire to satisfy his conscience.

As predicted, I ended up pretty far from where I originally started; this search led me to the conclusion that along with the battle for revenge was the battle within Hamlet's mind between his conscience and his duty to the ghost. The evidence I used I think is pretty commonly used by many people—what really struck me, though, was that when the pieces connected, I arrived at a conclusion about the play that I didn't have before: that the main character (in the sense that a main character should be multi-faceted and have conflicts and struggles) of Hamlet dies far before the physical character of Hamlet is poisoned by Laertes' rapier. If this is indeed true, then we as an audience are really left with no protagonist to root for in act V. And that's the real tragedy of the play.

Putting this down on paper proved to be more of a challenge than I expected; I didn't quite know how to put Hamlet's desire for revenge and his conscience on the same playing field so they could duke it out in my essay; it's also hard to convey the meaning of the words revenge and conscience without using those words every single time. Suggestions of any possible synonyms or alternative ways of saying this would be helpful.

I attempted to convey how I thought Hamlet was a one-dimensional character up until his first soliloquy questioning his existence, a multi-dimensional character from then on, and then a single dimension character again as soon as he bans his conscience from his mind. But this was more of a secondary argument in the essay that I didn't intend at first and then edited in after a few second glances. I'm not quite sure how it turned out and would love to have a second look at it.

After thinking about the idea I settled on for so long, I'm not totally sure how much of my thesis adequately got across through the paper and if the thesis carried through the whole paper consistently. It's hard for me to tell if I got a bit too sidetracked when I started talking about Horatio's part in the play—it's debatable if the idea that Horatio could be telling the story of *Hamlet* himself and that's what the play is, and so I am a little unsure about how that will be received when I reference it so quickly and without analysis.

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Comment [1]: Yes, this is very good, and very original: we need to amplify the whole "character of Hamlet dies before the body of Hamlet dies" idea in the paper.

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Comment [2]: I'm not the biggest fan of these terms, single vs multi-dimensional, thought I don't know if there's another way to pull it off.

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Comment [3]: Yes, that's extraneous to your argument; probably cut it.

Caleb

Dr. Wilson

Expos 20.044: Shakespeare's Inventions

25 February 2014

The Four-Act Tragedy of Hamlet

1. “*The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*”—so reads the full title of Shakespeare’s dramatic masterpiece that explores the human constructs of fate, revenge, and purpose. The play spans a full five acts, but by its end we find Hamlet in the final throes of anguish, gasping to his scholar-friend, “Horatio, I am dead; / Thou livest; report me and my cause aright / to the unsatisfied”(Shakespeare, 5.2.321-323). Such is the culmination the prince’s inward battle with his **conscience**, and such is the ultimate tragedy of *Hamlet*...or is it?
2. A cursory interpretation of the final scenes, in which the fresh memory of Ophelia’s passing and bodies of Queen Gertrude, King Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet are throw at the audience one after the other, might read that the **tragedy** is the disastrous and deadly consequences of Prince Hamlet’s righteous vendetta in act five. But ascribing to that conclusion would ignore the battle raging within Hamlet’s consciousness and mistakenly overlook the outcome of that psychological fight. “To be, or not to be – that is the question”(3.1.56), the contemplative Hamlet wonders, following his anger-driven vow to “catch the conscience of the king”(2.2.544). **Back and forth between anger and existential contemplation does the prince’s conscience swing**, and later he swears again, “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth”(4.4.65-66). It is clear that two forces—his filial duty of revenge and his duty to remain **true to himself**—slowly rip Hamlet’s conscience apart as the lines fly by, until he must choose between one or the other or become mad without direction. The true tragedy of *Hamlet* is

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Comment [4]: Why “conscience”? You set up the intro with “fate, revenge, and purpose.”

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Comment [5]: I like how you set up the problem by outlining one version of *tragedy* and then pivoting toward another. Let’s talk a little bit about tragedy.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/25/2014 7:06 AM

Comment [6]: Nicely put.

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Comment [7]: What does “true to himself” mean?

neither the prince's nor any of the other major character's demises, but is Hamlet's acceptance of a fate that his conscience urges him to resist. The Hamlet of the play's final act is already dead; his revenge-fueled actions that result in the deaths of all those around him are the product of a mind that is no longer controlled by the conscience, but by the fate that the ghost has deemed his.

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Comment [8]: You're setting up some interesting conceptual pairings here: Ghost and fate vs. mind and conscience.

3. With Hamlet soul-searching and desiring only to return to his studies in Wittenberg, the appearance of the ghost initiates the looming conflict within the prince's soul. But until the shadowy figure of the late King Hamlet appears, the young heir of Denmark is quite content with leaving the affairs of the state to his uncle, regardless of the suspicious circumstances in which Claudius ascended to the throne. For young Hamlet, the mechanics of the state are not for him to tinker with, at least not yet. Ironically, it is Claudius himself who wishes for his nephew to postpone his desire to leave for Wittenberg. "For your intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg, / It is most retrograde to our desire, / And we beseech you, bend you to remain"(1.2.112-115), the newly crowned king implores, ignorant of the coming storm ahead. Though the ghost has not yet materialized to Hamlet, it is clear that he is already extremely disturbed by the marriage of his uncle to his mother in just two months following King Hamlet's passing, but knows that he "must hold [his] tongue (1.2.159). For Hamlet to be spurred to action, it takes the words of the ghost to convict him. But once he commits to the ghost's charge, the prince's words are rife with oaths and absolutes. "Yea, from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, / And thy commandment all alone shall live / within the book and volume of my brain, / Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven"(1.5.98-9, 102-4), he swears. He transforms from a character without a purpose into a one-dimensional protagonist possessed only by rage and anger.

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Comment [9]: Nice orienting material here.

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Comment [10]: Well, yes, but only for a short time, baulking only a few lines later and deciding to delay, i.e. to put on an antic disposition.

4. Though the ghost's emergence gives the character Hamlet a purpose and finally gives the play *Hamlet* a storyline, the explicit narrative is not the only one that emerges. From the moment Hamlet swears to live only by the ghost's commandment, the play becomes the story of revenge. But just a few lines after his initial oath to the ghost, Hamlet words betray his true feelings. "O curséd spite / That ever I was born to set it right"(2.1.191-2), he moans, as if he knows that was brought into the world for the sole purpose of defending his deceased father's honor. The emergence of Hamlet's conscience in his third soliloquy further complicates this linear storyline, offering Hamlet a choice to divert from the typical tale of revenge. He opines, "To be or not to be – that is the question"(3.1.56), suddenly calling into question the integrity of the oath of revenge he swore not long ago. In this apostrophe, Hamlet swings back and forth between the purpose of living and the ease of death, concluding, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought"(3.1.83-5). Indeed, Hamlet's conscience does try to prevent him from carrying out his fatal plan, and this is a major verbal cue that the duty of avenging his father is not the only force grappling for control of Hamlet's mind.

5. For a time it seems as though the conscience takes the upper hand, but the reappearance of the ghost during Hamlet's confrontation of his mother revives the battle anew. "Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose"(3.4.110-1), the ghost tells Hamlet. The ghost-king explicitly uses the word 'purpose' to describe Prince Hamlet's duty, driving away the strongholds of held by Hamlet's conscience and replacing them with hardened thoughts of anger and revenge. Placed back on the path of the duty to his father, Hamlet encounters the army of Fortinbras that is marching to attack the Polacks even though there is little to nothing to gain from a victory. "Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats / Will

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/25/2014 7:12 AM
Comment [11]: Yep.

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Comment [12]: This is a great point, but it's undercooked. I think you need to map out "the emergence of Hamlet's conscience" here, because that's pivotal to your argument.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/25/2014 7:14 AM
Comment [13]: Good evidence.

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Comment [14]: Good analysis.

not debate the question of this straw... / and shows no cause without / Why the man dies”(4.4.25-6, 28-9), Hamlet ponders, troubled by the sense of purpose that drives the soldiers of Norway that are fighting for nothing more than pride. “How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge”(4.4.52-3), he exclaims, immediately juxtaposing the stout honor of Fortinbras’ foot soldiers with his lack of resolve due to the existential ideas posed by his conscience, such as whether there is life after death and why mankind must suffer (3.1.57-82). To Hamlet, his inability to fully embrace the honorable duty his father has chosen as his purpose is wholly hypocritical in the face of thousands of soldiers going to die for the pride of their nation. The prince chides his own cowardice, questioning, “How stand I then.../ And let all sleep, while to my shame I see / The imminent death of twenty thousand men / That for a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds”(4.4.56, 59-62). Shamed by his lack of resolve when he has more reason than any to embrace the societal expectation of his duty to his family, Hamlet banishes his conscience from his mind, swearing again, “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth”(4.4.65-6). From this point forth, we hear no more of Hamlet philosophizing about the purpose of life or what comes after death; he has fully accepted his purpose as the duty of revenge the ghost of his father has thrust upon him.

6. It is at this moment onwards that Hamlet is no longer the multi-dimensional character he was when he was influenced partially by his conscience, and his rejection of his conscience as a guide for living is the real tragedy. If we rewind the play back to the few minutes Hamlet spends watching the forces of Fortinbras march by in formation, what do we see? Each and every soldier walking by is a version of Hamlet, in the sense that each is fighting for his honor, for his country, and for revenge for the fathers they have lost in conflicts against kings such as King Hamlet. Though Hamlet may not realize it, the men passing by are the reflection of his life and a

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Comment [15]: You really earn this with your detailed evidence and analysis of the play.

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Comment [16]: This analogy you set up is very nice, but it could be handled a little better. The “at this moment onward” in the previous sentence flings us ahead, and then we “rewind,” which is a bit disorienting.

foreshadowing of the march towards death that Hamlet too will soon make. Just as the men of Norway will fail in the war even in victory because their pride is merely damning them to death for no material gain, so too will Hamlet fail because his blind sense of honor drives him to follow the ghost's command and accept the ghost's purpose. His conscience had compelled him to do exactly the opposite: to ignore his father's call to join him in the cycle of honor, revenge, and death, and instead to follow his own heart and purpose. But the thousands of soldiers caught in the cycle "inform against [him]"(4.4.32) and induce Hamlet "to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"(3.1.57-8), which is the exact action that the prince dreaded taking earlier in the play. Hamlet does not "take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them"(3.1.59-60), but **he joins the very troubles he hoped to resist**. Hamlet joins the dark side by accepting the ghost's call as his fate and fails in his quest to find purpose for his own life—his mind is dead, controlled by the ghost and not by Prince Hamlet.

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Comment [17]: Nicely put.

7. By the time Hamlet utters his final breath, his words no longer have poetic or philosophical meaning and are uninfluenced by his conscience, further supporting the hypothesis that **the true Hamlet had passed long before his physical body faded**. In his final words to his trusty scholar, Hamlet gasps, "Horatio, I am dead; / Thou livest; report me and my cause aright / to the unsatisfied"(5.2.321-323). From these lines it could be inferred that the *Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* is the recollection of past events by Horatio, and that Horatio is the person relaying Hamlet's story to the audience. If so, then Horatio has passed on Hamlet's cause as best he could, and yet we, the audience, are still left unsatisfied. We were led to believe that we should have been rooting for Hamlet's quest for revenge when in fact we should have seen **his conscience as the true protagonist of the story**—but that protagonist breathed its last far before Hamlet's body does. In the play's final act, Shakespeare leaves his audience with a

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Comment [18]: This is an interesting reading: Hamlet is "dead before he is dead," as epitomized in his "I am dead," which is said while still alive. I suggest you make this reading part of your intro, as a way to lead into your thesis.

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Comment [19]: Very interesting suggestion: maybe strong enough to be a part of your thesis?

vengeful, violent Hamlet who causes the deaths of all those around him in quick succession.

This Hamlet is boring, predictable, and single-dimensional; he's only concerned with his duty to fulfill the ghost's calling.

8. But a flat main character doesn't make for a quality work, much less a striking, if not immortal, Shakespearian drama—and this should make us skeptical of the argument that the tragedy is simply the deaths of almost every major character. The play isn't about a prince seeking revenge who fails and watches the consequences unfold; the timeless narrative is one of a prince who is torn between revenge and conscience and chooses wrong, following the footsteps of Fortinbras' soldiers marching to their deaths. As the audience, we are challenged to learn from Hamlet's choice and ensure that our purposes are our own, not the ones of the ghosts in our lives.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/25/2014 7:33 AM

Comment [20]: Very eloquent, here, how you're wrapping up many of the issues you raised throughout the paper: color me impressed.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. 1957. Ed. A.R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/1/2015 8:27 AM

Comment [21]: Needs to be on its own page.

25 February 2014

Dear Caleb,

I really enjoyed reading your paper. You've managed to bring together a number of the things that I've myself felt about *Hamlet* in a very tight presentation. One of the questions that you're asking, which I'm not sure that you know that you're asking, is, "What is tragedy?" Your argument, as I see it, is that *Hamlet* is a tragedy insofar as it represents a tension between conscience and revenge, and that the meaning of the tragedy is not to be found in the death of the protagonist but in the disappearance in one of the poles of the tragedy (in this case, conscience). The body of the paper is well-structured, dealing first with the call to revenge, then the emergence of conscience, then the renewed call to revenge, and then the tragedy that ensues.

Here are some additional points for us to focus on in our conference:

- *Key Terms*: The paper currently has a lot of moving parts: *tragedy*, *revenge*, *honor*, *conscience*, *one-dimensional*, *multi-dimensional*. You need to spend some time in your introduction setting up these terms, so that you can make meaningful relationships between them in your thesis statement. Let's spend some time mapping out these relationships.
- *Evidence*: There were a couple of moments (para. 5) when I felt like the paper was over quoting, and that it almost devolved into plot summary instead of analysis. But those moments didn't last long.

Please let me know if you have any questions about my feedback. I look forward to our conference, where we can talk more about my marginal feedback, my feedback letter, and the ideas for revision that you raise in your Cover Letter.

Yours,

Wilson

16 March 2014

Dear Caleb,

I really enjoyed “A Four-Act *Hamlet*.” Your revision made some major improvements upon your draft, especially with respect to the focus and presentation of your argument. Clearly you put a lot of thought into this revision – thanks for your time and attention! As you read through my comments below, think about what an even further revision of this paper might look like, but also (and perhaps more importantly) how you can transfer the skills we’re discussing with respect to this paper into your Essay 2 Draft.

Your argument, in its simplest form, is that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* provides us with a new understanding of tragedy. Traditionally, revenge tragedy is understood as the story of an individual act of injustice that builds, in the attempt to set it right, to a catastrophe for the protagonist and his/her family. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, however, the life and energy of the tragedy come from Shakespeare’s characterization of Hamlet as a complex man torn between a desire for revenge and his dregs of conscience. It is the death of this complex character, which occurs in Act IV, that marks the catastrophe of Shakespeare’s tragedy. I must say that I find this reading very compelling, not only insightful and educational but also playful and entertaining. It is also worth noting that you have come, completely on your own, to a reading of tragedy that was first offered by the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and popularized by the Shakespearean scholar A.C. Bradley – *tragedy as existential angst* – which really changed the way everyone thought about tragedy. So you’re in good company here.

As we look toward Essay 2, on the basis of this paper, I’m very confident in your ability to generate an original and daring *argument*, one which is clearly presented in a *thesis*. The *structure* of the paper was very effective: we knew where we were going, thanks to your clear thesis statement, but the body of your paper also had a sense of unfolding about it. For the most part, you had a great ratio of evidence to analysis: you made sure to unpack the aspects of the play you presented in plenty of detail. In your conclusion, you followed your argument up nicely with an interesting discussion of *what’s at stake* (that passage on potential parallels between Horatio and Shakespeare was excellent). Make sure that these successes reappear in Essay 2! For that paper, let’s work on:

- *Thesis*: Your idea in this paper is big and complex, with many moving parts. You do a good job bringing it together, but you could also have previewed some of the (to me) more interesting and ambitious aspects of your argument, namely the idea that Act V is boring because Hamlet the complex character has receded.
- *Evidence*: Some of the early body paragraphs feel a little to plot-summary-ish. There’s going to be some degree of tracking the plot, because your claim is about how Hamlet shifts back and forth between revenge and conscience, but you could have streamlined your evidence and favored analysis a bit more.

Hopefully your continued work on these Elements of Academic Writing will translate into your draft of Essay 2, and this time around you'll be able to approach the draft phase with more perspective on the draft/revision process. Feel free to get in touch with me if you'd like to discuss your revision in more detail in office hours.

Yours,

Wilson

Grade: A