# Hamlet: emotion or reflection Yi Wen Ho

A Level student Yi Wen Ho argues that our desire to pin down Hamlet's problems to too much emotion or too much thought creates a false dichotomy.

It takes Hamlet 14 scenes and five soliloquies to fulfil his role as avenger from the time the Ghost appears to set him the task. Critics over the centuries have struggled to isolate the root of his passivity, and whilst superficially at least Hamlet's few actions appear dictated by passion, it is passion itself - the passion of the modern man torn between 'those two great Renaissance oppositions, idealism and Machiavellianism' (Holderness), or the sexual passion of a son for his mother (Freud) - which renders him impotent for the majority of the play. It is thought which serves to clarify his emotional turmoil. Inextricably linked, it is impossible to isolate thought from passion as opposing forces in terms of action and inaction.

## Absence of thought

The Lawrence Olivier 1948 film version of Hamlet labels the play 'the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind'. In the Olivier interpretation, it is clearly the intellect which appears responsible for Hamlet's inability to act decisively in pursuit of revenge. Indeed, thought seems clearly to be absent from his murder of Polonius, one of his rare moments of impetuous activity. In the exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude, 'What hast thou done?' 'Nay I know not', the use of double negatives serves to emphasise the absence of consciousness or awareness on


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From emagazine 38, December 2007.



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the part of the prince. Furthermore, in the murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet cites 'fears' and 'desires' as the motivation for his actions, the emotive language underlining the idea of visceral impulse overriding reason.

## Impetuousness

This impetuousness derives from the traditional Elizabethan dramatic stereotype of the 'revenger', which the characters of Fortinbras and particularly Laertes embody. The language used by the latter is emotive and hyperbolic in the extreme, such as 'To hell allegiance... I dare damnation'. A strongly Christian Elizabethan audience would have recognised this blasphemy as a negative force to be treated with caution, highlighting the essential moral paradox of revenge: as Philip Edwards writes, 'Is Hamlet's sense of mission divine or demoniac?'. Indeed Hamlet questions the possible duality of the Ghost from the moment he sees it, saying 'be thou a spirit or a goblin damned... Be thy intents wicked or charitable' with language of antithesis used to reflect a sense of uncertainty.

## Thinking and passivity

What clearly distinguishes Hamlet from these other 'revengers' is his ability to think, which is demonstrated in Shakespeare's liberal use of soliloquy and aside. In these moments of introspection, Hamlet equates reflection with passivity, for example in the line 'conscience does make cowards of us all', with alliteration used here as a means of linking the two abstractions. Furthermore, the use of inclusive language creates a sense of involvement with the

audience, a rhetorical device which gives strength to his line of argument. Indeed, his soliloquies (representative of thought and rational process) cease following Act 4 Scene 4, and it is in this abrupt silence that most of Hamlet's actions, such as killing Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Claudius, as well as leaping into Ophelia's grave, are played. Here, the negative correlation between reflection and action can clearly be seen.

## A divine spur for action?

Nevertheless, critics such as Holloway argue that the conclusion of Hamlet is representative of 'the power and design of Providence', as opposed to the victory of emotional impulse over intellect. Indeed, the language used by Hamlet upon his return from England is clearly changed. Previously, he made no direct reference to religion or God, instead viewing life in terms of 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', the personification of 'fortune' and the use of battle imagery indicative of a pessimistic, almost nihilistic world view which refutes the existence of a benevolent deity. In contrast to this, in Act 5 Scene 2 Hamlet speaks of 'a divinity that shapes our ends' and 'special providence', the language here clearly spiritual in tone. This change in attitude could be regarded as the catalyst for the sudden acceleration in pace, the reconciliation of the inquisitive, doubtful Renaissance student-philosopher with Christianity providing Hamlet with the freedom to act.

It is not only in Act 5 that Hamlet is active, however; earlier on in the play he demonstrates moments of endeavour for example in staging 'The Mousetrap', or 'The Murder of Gonzago'. Acknowledging the need to ascertain Claudius's guilt, Hamlet speaks the line 'About, my brains!', the abrupt

exclamation highlighting the importance of intellect in providing motive or means of action. By using the play as a means of validating the authenticity of the Ghost's command ('the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King'), Hamlet's actions are clearly shown to be premeditated. Furthermore, the importance of consciousness as an essential element of humanity can clearly be seen in lines such as 'Without [fair judgment] we are pictures, or mere beasts'.

## Impeding passions

L.C. Knights goes as far as to state that feelings do not facilitate action on the part of Hamlet, but instead limit their occurrence: 'His god-like reason is clogged and impeded by emotions of disgust, revulsion and self-contempt'. Throughout the play Hamlet demonstrates the intensity of his passion using hyperbolic and violent language such as 'Now could I drink hot blood' and 'I should ha' fatted all the region's kites with this slave's offal'. Nevertheless, he remains passive following these declarations - it is clear that it is not purely emotion which provides the motivation for his deeds.

## A final synthesis

What frees Hamlet, ultimately, is the synthesis of emotion and reflection. He recognizes this, saying to Horatio in Act 5 Scene 2 'blest are those whose blood and judgment are... well co-meddled'. Rationality becomes a means of expressing and distilling emotion, an almost cathartic experience as is demonstrated through the use of unburdening imagery 'I must unpack my heart with words'. The last line of Hamlet's final soliloquy, 'My thoughts be

bloody, or be nothing worth', uses reflective language to combine language of intellect with that of emotion; the absence of soliloquy after this speech could be seen as an inner peace or resolution once this state of harmony is achieved.

Trying to isolate any one particular attribute as the source of the actions played by Hamlet in the end proves unhelpful.