Suicide in Hamlet's First Soliloquy

The theme of suicide is startlingly and emotionally introduced by Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 2 – but there is more to this topic than the simple fact that Hamlet is suicidal, as A Level student Abi Marett reveals.

Innocence and Corruption

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt

Hamlet wants to use suicide as a way of escaping the corruption he sees around him in the Danish court and in human beings. His emphasised disgust at the 'too too sullied flesh' is a rejection of immorality and the sin of 'the flesh' – a Biblical term for worldly desires such as lust. Hamlet has come to regard physical desire as corrupted, dirtied and 'sullied', possibly from the association of his mother with 'incestuous sheets'. In an appealing alternative to being trapped in 'solid flesh' (the Second Quarto has 'sullied', but the Folio text has 'solid' – both versions have interesting implications), Hamlet wishes to 'melt, thaw and resolve', the gentle movement verbs suggesting a free flow of water.

Hamlet's desire to die by 'melt[ing]' into a 'dew' perhaps suggests a sympathetic yearning for innocence, which he imagines he can find through leaving his body behind in natural, cleansing death. Rejecting his 'flesh' as sinful, Hamlet wants to transcend his body in a state of purity

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idealised in the calming water imagery – the connotations of ‘melt’ and ‘dew’ suggest natural cleanliness and innocence.

Religious Barriers to Suicide

> *fix’d His cannon ‘gainst self-slaughter*

Hamlet is prevented from committing suicide by his religious obedience to The Commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ which was thought to include self-murder (that is suicide) as a sin, and by his fear of disobeying God, who is presented as a harsh and unsympathetic opponent. In Hamlet’s eyes, God has ‘fix’d his cannon’ against suicide, portraying God as the enemy on a battlefield. As well as meaning the weapon, ‘cannon’ is also the Christian doctrine, and Hamlet melds both meanings to suggest that religious inhibition to suicide is a hostile attack on his desires. Even God’s name, ‘Everlasting’, is a dark promise of eternal life to one who wants to die, focusing on the omniscient and all-powerful nature of God, rather than the more humane traits of sympathy and love. Hamlet’s suicidal impulses have created distance between him and God, who he views as unsympathetic to his suffering, while religious duty and fear of damnation act as powerful inhibitors.

The Pain of Death

The reality of suicide is violence and pain, in strong contrast to the idealised natural death of ‘Thaw[ing]’ into a ‘dew’. Brutal words with connotations of violence, such as

‘fix’d’, ‘cannon’ and ‘self-slaughter’ are used to shock the audience after the calm tone and slow listing in the previous two lines. The violent and explicit description of suicide as ‘self-slaughter’ suggests that Hamlet recognises the difference between his idea of a painless, purifying death, and the reality of suicide as a forbidden sin – ‘slaughter’ suggests the murder of something innocent, revealing that paradoxically Hamlet cannot fulfil his wish to leave behind the sinful world without damning himself too.

Searching for the Ideal in an Irredeemable World

> *weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable*

Perhaps the most convincing explanation for Hamlet’s despair is his loss of faith in humanity and the world around him. The Edenic ideal of the world as a ‘garden’ looked after by the human race ‘grows to seed’ as humanity fails in its task as gardeners, and the world remains ‘unweeded’. The lack of distinction between good plants and weeds, such as Hamlet’s father and Claudius (with implied blame on Gertrude for her lack of judgement) has led to a world ‘Possess[ed]’ by ‘rank’ and sinful leaders. Hamlet’s certainty that the world is corrupted by unpunished evil foreshadows the Ghost’s revelation of murder in Act 1 Scene 5.

In response to the fallen, irredeemable world he sees himself in, Hamlet reaches for the ideal, creating mythical counterparts for each member of his immediate family – his father is ‘Hyperion’, Claudius a ‘satyr’, Gertrude should be

‘Niobe’, while Hamlet compares himself to ‘Hercules’. These idealisations expose how Hamlet’s view of reality is distorted, perhaps by grief. Earlier in this scene the audience has seen how Claudius is in some respects an able King, controlling the court and managing a difficult political transition into power, which challenges Hamlet’s view of him as a half-bestial and lustful ‘satyr’. The audience may suspect that Hamlet’s father and Claudius do not actually fit into the somewhat binary categories of ‘Hyperion’ and ‘satyr’, divine and bestial, good and evil, that Hamlet has respectively assigned them. Gertrude is held to the impossible ideal of eternal and self-destructive sorrow in the comparison to ‘Niobe’, who wept until she became a stone fountain. Hamlet betrays a sense of inferiority and inadequacy as he sarcastically compares himself to heroic and superhuman ‘Hercules’, admitting in a moment of metatheatre that he is unsuited to play the revenge hero. Hamlet’s expectations for himself and others are impossibly high, so that reality is inevitably disappointing – this could be the source of his despair that ‘all the uses of this world’ (that is, living) are ‘unprofitable’.

‘Within a month’

Hamlet is perhaps most sympathetic in his grief for the death of his father – a grief which helps to explain his despair and isolation. His obsessive focus on the past, and his repetitions of ‘Within a month’, suggests that he is in denial over his father’s death, while throughout this soliloquy the fragmented structure and jarring changes in tone imply that Hamlet’s mental state is precarious, and that he is barely holding himself together. For instance, in the broken phrases

Let me not think on't – Frailty thy name is woman –
A little month

Hamlet initially makes a desperate promise not to dwell on the past, which is immediately broken by the angry outburst at his mother and the whole gender of 'woman', and then over the line-turn a different tone is introduced, one of grieving remembrance for his father, and pain at his mother's re-marriage. The intensely emotional tone of this soliloquy contrasts with Hamlet's often sarcastic public speeches, in which he must 'hold [his] tongue', even while between the lines his heart 'break[s]'. Hamlet's grief isolates him from a court which is trying to move onto a new King and a new era, possibly explaining why he despairingly views the world around him as shallow and forgetful.

Gertrude's 'o'er-hasty marriage' betrays a lack of grief and respect for the dead, forcing Hamlet to conclude that she is also corrupted by sin and physical desires. Hamlet rejects Gertrude for her 'wicked speed' in forgetting his father, suggesting that the mourning Gertrude has shown is merely a deceptive display of 'unrighteous tears', and that her 'flushing' from crying was mixed with blushing desire. Hamlet suggests that grief and remembrance are basic emotional values that even 'a beast that wants discourse of reason' can appreciate, and that Gertrude's lack of grief is therefore less than human. His rejection of a mother and a world that is sinful and doesn't value remembrance, or grieve for the end of relationships, could be a reason why Hamlet is suicidal.

‘it cannot come to good’

When in Act 1, Scene 4 Hamlet asks the Ghost

> *What shall we do?*

what he wants from this unexpected chance to talk to his father again is an answer to his problem of indecision and inaction. Hamlet’s choice to take up his father’s commands of ‘revenge’ and ‘remember’ set in motion the tragic plot that will eventually – perhaps even inevitably – lead to his death and the deaths of everyone around him. In this way, Hamlet’s indecision over whether to take active revenge and his indecision over whether to commit suicide are ultimately part of the same choice – in the end, his revenge is suicidal. Both threaten to ‘Taint his mind’ with sin and the corruption he fights to destroy.