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English 301: Roadcap

Outline

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1325 (1261 w/o quotes)

Hamlet the Villain.

Hamlet is not often considered a dishonorable character. In fact, he is more likely to be viewed as a very honorable young prince. At the end of *Hamlet*, once Fortinbras hears the story from Horatio, he says “Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage, / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal” (5.2 362-64). Fortinbras honors Hamlet as a good soldier who proved his merit and valor. However, looking at Hamlet throughout the play, it is easy to question just how honorable he really was, and it is easier still to point out his dishonorable actions. Whether or not Hamlet was virtuous person with honorable intentions in the beginning of the play, by the end of the story he turns into an identifiable villain.

Claudius is viewed as the evil murderer in *Hamlet*. However, counting the number of people killed, Hamlet wins by far. Claudius only kills one person by his own hand. Hamlet, on the other hand, kills three people with his sword and arranges for the additional deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He even makes Claudius drink from a poisoned cup when Claudius is going to die anyway from the poisoned sword. According to Declan Stow from the United Kingdom, the audience of *Hamlet* would be more willing to accept Hamlet’s murders because of his motive for revenge. However, to the charge of unneeded bloodshed, Hamlet stands guilty (Stow). It would have been more honorable of Hamlet to face off with the King and

not involve innocents (if they may be called innocent). Instead, Hamlet walks a path of a murderer; not to mention that he is also responsible for the death of Ophelia.

It all starts with the drive for revenge. Hamlet meets the ghost of his father and immediately promises to revenge his death. The honorable way to do this would be for Hamlet to face Claudius, the murderer, face to face in a duel, and for Hamlet to be quick about it. Instead, Hamlet uses an indirect approach against Claudius, and he takes his time with revenge. Although Hamlet's motive for revenge may be considered honorable by some, he does not carry it out in any honorable way. Professor Eleanor Prosser states that in heeding the commands of The Ghost, Hamlet has already abandoned the teachings of Christianity and morality, and he is following the course of blood-revenge and villainy; he is yielding to his human nature and forgetting his spiritual side (Prosser 187).

Another aspect of Hamlet's degrading morality is his relationship with Ophelia. Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is not the conduct of a noble gentleman. Even if Hamlet was trying to protect Ophelia from the whole scheme of murder, his conversation with her shows lack of sensitivity. It may be said that Hamlet is brutal with her. He even admits to her "I did love you once" (3.1.113-14). Hamlet may have been lying when he said that, but a proper gentleman would have restrained himself from saying such harsh things. Hamlet keeps going with his brutality and says "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.119). He is completely attacking Ophelia from all sides. He is diminishing her status as a woman, and he pokes at her beauty. Hamlet is taking his revenge so far that he is hurting the people that he loves. That is a description for a villain.

The most powerful point of Hamlet's dark side comes when Hamlet has an opportunity to kill the King in the Prayer Scene. According to Paul Gottschalk, an author from *Shakespeare Quarterly*, one of the most perplexing moments from *Hamlet* is the Prayer Scene when Hamlet is

about to kill the King. He unsheathes his sword and is about to swing—and then he stops because he thinks he will send Claudius’ soul to heaven and Hamlet’s revenge will not be complete (Gottschalk 155). Dr. Samuel Johnson, a very famous English author wrote about the Prayer Scene saying “Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish” (Johnson 236). In saying this, Samuel Johnson is pointing out that Hamlet is not as virtuous as he is often presented to be. He just may be another villain with blood on his hands; a very similar thing to Claudius.

Professor Eleanor Prosser takes the analysis further. She says that by the time Hamlet comes to the Prayer scene, he is no longer represented as an honorable character (187). Hamlet feigned madness, manipulated Ophelia and others, insulted his mother, and Hamlet restrained himself from taking proper action. Instead of taking immediate retribution and punishing the murder of his father, Hamlet is simply scheming about in a dishonorable way.

It may be argued that Hamlet was not always such a villainous character. Ernest Jones, a psychoanalyst, argues that in the beginning of the play Hamlet was simply indecisive, and that he could not rush forward to challenge the King. He also argues that Hamlet was still trying to align himself to the task at hand. Hamlet needed to kill the King, yet he could not fully commit himself to the task. Hamlet was still seeking his own identity in the matter (60-61). However, after the Prayer Scene, it becomes evident that Hamlet has a dark side to him now. The fact that he temporarily abandons his greatest opportunity to kill Claudius even after being convinced of his guilt shows how Hamlet can no longer be identified as a virtuous character. According to Paul Gottschalk, whether or not Hamlet was a virtuous in the beginning of the play, he became a revengeful villain directly after the Prayer Scene (Gottschalk 160).

The decay and corruption of Hamlet's character comes out even more when he accidentally murders Polonius. When Hamlet is in the room with his mother he stabs at the curtain. Once he sees that it is not the King but Polonius he says "I took thee for thy better" (3.4.33). According to Adam Cole, an online publisher and teacher, Hamlet did not concern himself much over Polonius's death. Instead, Hamlet makes light of the murder with word games (Cole). As the story progresses and more and more people die, Hamlet's moral decay becomes even stronger. Instead of feeling sorrow and remorse for his actions and mistakes, Hamlet acts self-righteous and even plans for the additional murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Cole).

Summarizing Hamlet in the entire play, one can say that Hamlet was a villain in the end. It is the entire point of Shakespeare's tragedy was to portray the disaster of Hamlet's actions. If Hamlet would have acted otherwise, then things would have ended differently. If Hamlet would have challenged Claudius to a duel or simply killed him during the Prayer Scene, then the play may have turned into a comedy instead of a tragedy. However, Hamlet chose a different path. He chose the path of a revengeful villain who argues his righteousness when wetting his sword with blood. Despite Fortinbras honoring Hamlet as a worthy soldier, Hamlet still was an identifiable villain throughout the play.

Works Cited

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