

Hamlet | Sample answer

“Hamlet’s madness, whether genuine or not, adds to the fascination of his character for the audience.”

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the play, Hamlet. (2012)

After studying William Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’, it is evident why an audience would be fascinated by the character of Hamlet. Undoubtedly his “antic disposition” is a key factor in this fascination. While at times Hamlet’s actions may appear to be a result of genuine madness, I would argue that his captivating behaviour is fuelled by arrogance and anger, not insanity.

In our first encounter with Hamlet he exclaims how he does not “set my life at a pin’s fee”. He values his life at nothing. This statement combined with the suicidal “self-slaughter” image in his first soliloquy would seem to indicate a melancholic and suicidal psyche. However, I believe it is an expression of grief and anger. He is grieving his “Hyperion” father. Old King Hamlet is constantly referred to as this image of perfection by Hamlet, also seen in “canonised bones”. A saint is canonised, illustrating to us just how influential and important this man was to Hamlet. His anger stems from his inability to comprehend why Gertrude married Claudius, after his beloved father was “nay two months dead”. She made a pragmatic decision for the stability of her kingdom, yet in Hamlet’s eyes this is the biggest betrayal. By choosing to overlook Hamlet for the throne, his mother is indirectly telling him that he is not the “so excellent a King” that his father was. This outrage towards his mother becomes evident when he exclaims “frailty thy name is woman!”. He is venting his frustration by making the statement that women personify weakness. Hamlet’s thought process is dominated by the fury and outrage of his father’s untimely death and his mother’s betrayal and abandonment. For an audience, this would be instantly gripping and fascinating as even before the concept of an “antic disposition” is introduced they would be questioning whether this character is showing signs of madness or simply moving through the stages of grief. In relation to Hamlet’s later ‘madness’ this is supporting evidence that he was not insane and instead incentivised by rage as right from the off-set we see Hamlet with an anger prominent mindset.

For an audience, the sense of superiority and arrogance that Hamlet portrays both before, during and after his ‘madness’ would be fascinating. Hamlet is an intellect. He is clever with words. He

uses this intellect to undermine and insult Polonius. He calls him a “fishmonger”, an offensive dig at Polonius’ lower status, and mocks his physical appearance, saying “old men have grey beards”. Hamlet has had every advantage in life yet is deliberately mocking a man of inferior intellectual capacity regarding his frailty and age. Even in death, Hamlet makes jokes at Polonius’ expense saying “not where he eats but where he is eaten”. Polonius is supper; his decaying body is being feasted upon by worms. This light-hearted and immature treatment of a man’s death illustrates the corruption and lack of regard at the top of society. There is an exact parallel conversation to that of Polonius and Hamlet at the start of the play, at the end with Osric. He calls him a “waterfly”, again a negative comment regarding Osric’s lower status. Hamlet evidently has a habit of preying on the weak and taunting those not in a position to retort. He feels the need to prove his power and authority. He has a psychological need to appear more powerful. This is an identifiable and rationale trait, not insanity. Despite all of the tragedy throughout the play, there is no change in Hamlet’s behaviour. His arrogance prevents him from learning. Hamlet’s inability to stop scorning those less fortunate from beginning to end of play is the most prominent evidence to suggest that he was not mad but instead fuelled by his own conceited nature.

What would fascinate the audience most is that if Hamlet is truly of sound mind then why not kill Claudius much sooner? I would argue that it is because Claudius is not the real villain in Hamlet’s eyes, his mother Gertrude is. Throughout the course of the play Hamlet had ample opportunity to kill Claudius. In one scene, Hamlet walks by Claudius in an empty chapel, fresh from confirming Claudius’ guilt and vowing to get his revenge “now might I do it pat, now he is praying”. Almost immediately after these words left his mouth, which brought a shred of reality to the idea, did he come up with a rationale not to kill him. He asks himself what kind of revenge would it be if Claudius went to heaven? This is a poor excuse, as Hamlet’s father never had time to repent his sins yet still had “canonised bones”, he was saint-like in Hamlet’s eyes. This suggests that he never actually had the intention at all. Instead what he does is of much greater importance to him; he leaves to confront his mother. This is not the first time that he makes his mother’s actions of greater significance than Claudius’. When he says “here thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane” we see him mention Claudius’ relationship with his mother before his father’s murder, evidently showing us what Hamlet felt the real crime was, to choose Claudius over her. What has been denied to Hamlet is the taking of his father’s place whom he idolised and aspired to be like. This was enabled by Gertrude. He didn’t expect her to fail to support him. Her actions have unhinged him and he cannot cope. It was her alone that emasculated him.

All of this fury caused by his mother's betrayal is unleashed by Hamlet when he goes to confront her in her chambers. He uses imagery of blindness "hoodman", a person with a hood over their eyes. This is accusatory, she is not seeing what she has done. There are images of sickness "sickly part". He sees her marriage to Claudius as a moral decay that has affected the entire court. He urges Gertrude to "see the inmost part of you". He is unprepared to let her leave until he has made her guilt crystal clear to her. While all of this is said in a fit of rage, it is not until Gertrude uses the keyword "father" that ignites Hamlet's impetuosity and fully enraged fury. His body language was so threatening that Gertrude truly believed he was going to kill her. Instead he lashes out with a pure show of anger and emotion killing Polonius. It didn't matter who was behind the curtain, Hamlet was infuriated. Polonius' murder was a release of Hamlet's anger with his mother, not an insane act. Gertrude is a catalyst for Hamlet's rash and turbulent actions. It is her alone that causes the extremity of his actions. Throughout the course of the play Claudius never once evoked these feelings from Hamlet as it was his mother who committed the real crime in his eyes. Hence, Hamlet's priority was never to kill Claudius.

Hamlet's eventual killing of Claudius would be most fascinating for the audience. This man has just spent the entirety of the play procrastinating the killing of Claudius, so why finally do it when on his own deathbed? Hamlet had just watched his mother die and is aware that he too is about to die by the "point envenomed too!". Only then does he take action. He stabs Claudius in a similar way to Polonius, instinctively and in a fit of rage. This is one final enraged act again fuelled by Gertrude. He is furious that his "wretched queen" has died with no guilt for what Hamlet feels was her betrayal and abandonment of him. He now has nothing left to lose. The two most important things to him, himself and his mother, are gone. He was fuelled by his own sense of superiority and his mother's betrayal.

Hamlet's murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would undoubtedly be of great fascination to the audience. What would make this most fascinating is the fact that this was not a result of insanity or madness. During a conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Hamlet becomes increasingly exasperated. They ask him questions such as "what is your cause of distemper" and if his reason for discontent were his "dreams of ambition" for the crown. All these men are doing is attempting to find out what is wrong with Hamlet, exactly what the King and Queen summoned them to do. A man of Hamlet's arrogance is going to react badly to this. He exclaims "why look you now, how unworthy thing you make of me! You would play upon me". His anger is palpable. He is asking them if they can't play a pipe then why think they can play him? Two men of a lower status have dared question him directly. The tenacity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to attempt to

undermine Hamlet infuriates him. Hamlet is oblivious to the fact that they have done nothing wrong. They were not on the societal high-ground to say no to the King and Queen. While they may be sycophantic in nature and eager to grab the opportunity to be of assistance to royalty it does not make them manipulative, There was no sin involved. So why is it that Hamlet forged King's orders to have it's bearers (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) put to death with "no shriving time allowed"? The fact that he wasn't even giving them time to make their peace with God is representative of the absolute disdain that Hamlet has for these men and everything that they represent. They have done no wrong. Their murder however was not accidental. Hamlet plotted it out of a psychological need to emphasise his sense of superiority. He even goes as far as to boast to Horatio about it, telling him "they are not hear my conscience". He doesn't feel morally responsible for what he's done and believes that they brought it upon themselves. He is proud of what he's done. These men were killed out of spite and arrogance for daring to try and out-wit Hamlet, not an action of insanity, further adding to the captivation of Hamlet's character for the audience.

Hamlet's self-centred nature would be of fascination for an audience. He showed no remorse in the slightest for his murders of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He even denies Polonius dignity in death , refusing to tell anyone where his body is simply saying that it is "safely stowed". Later during Ophelia's funeral Hamlet exclaims how "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum". This is arrogant and histrionic. He believes that he loved Ophelia immensely yet is unable to associate his feelings for her with his action of killing Polonius. He lacked empathy for this act which in turn was a factor in the tragedy of Ophelia's death, yet makes his feelings the centre of the situation. He is blind to the consequences of his actions asking Laertes what he ever did to hurt him "What is the reason that you use me thus?". He has no regret, remorse or conscience for the killing of his father, Polonius, and the indirect killing of his sister, Ophelia. Things are only important if they impact him. This shows us the conceited and self-absorbed mindset of someone at the top of society. It doesn't matter what chaos and tragedy surround him, he is the most important. Even on his deathbed, Hamlet's main concern is how he appears. He asks Horatio "In this harsh world draw thy breath in pain to tell my story". His foremost matter is ensuring that he is represented as a victim and not a villain. For an audience this is captivating as some of Hamlet's last words are reinforcing his egotistical, conceited and arrogant nature that has been seen from this character throughout the play.

