

### **Shakespeare's play Hamlet has been described as "a disturbing psychological thriller". To what extent do you agree or disagree with this description of the play? (2017)**

After studying William Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' it is evident to me why the play has been described as a disturbing psychological thriller. Shakespeare's use of language, imagery and characterisation all contribute greatly to this description.

While it may be possible to argue that the play is not a thriller due to Hamlet's consistent procrastination and the fact that the play is not driven by action, I would argue that indeed it is a thriller. There is suspense and dramatic tension sustained from beginning to end. The characterisation of Hamlet and his mental state, and the evident tension between him and his mother Gertrude that we are introduced to early on, I find to be disturbing with regard to Hamlet's later 'madness'. 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". In reality, she made a pragmatic decision for the stability of her kingdom, yet in Hamlet's eyes this the biggest betrayal. By choosing to overlook Hamlet for the throne, his mother is indirectly telling him that he is not the "so excellent to 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. Immediately this adds an element of dramatic tension to the play, as we are engaged and eager to find out if this fury and outrage is further unleashed upon Gertrude. This palpable suspense that is

sustained throughout the course of the play between Hamlet and his “oh most pernicious” mother is undeniably captivating and the key element for my agreement with the description of Hamlet as a thriller. 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 is instantly gripping as even before the concept of an “antic disposition” is introduced we are questioning whether this character is showing signs of madness or simply moving through the stages of grief. What this tension reveals to me that I also find to be disturbing is in relation to Hamlet’s later ‘madness’. This is supporting evidence that his later actions were not insane acts and he was instead incentivised by rage, as right from the off-set we see Hamlet with a mindset dominated by anger towards his mother.

This hatred towards Gertrude results in Hamlet having an extremely negative attitude towards all women. The language he uses to describe women throughout the play portrays the clear disdain he has for them, something I find to be undoubtedly disturbing. I can afford to pity Hamlet in the beginning. He is unable to see any good in life and exclaims how the world “seems to me a sterile promontory”. A promontory is exposed and battered by the elements revealing to us that this is how Hamlet feels, while ‘sterile’ represents his feelings of marginalisation. However, any pity I may have had towards him diminishes when he labels all women as morally weak in his outburst towards Gertrude of “frailty thy name is woman”. He is not just blaming Gertrude but apportioning the blame to all women; all women personify weakness.

During a soliloquy of self-criticism, he makes multiple negative references to women; “whore”, “drab” and “scullion”. These words are linked with prostitution and women of no nobility or virtue. When he is accusing himself of lacking in nobility, he compares himself to women, highlighting the lack of value he places on them. He also makes reference to make-up and equates that with the duplicity of women, saying “God hath given you one face and you make yourself another”. He believes all women are one thing on the surface and something else in their core. This is a shallow and superficial view based on the hurt and anger that Gertrude has caused him. All of his vocabulary surrounding women is crude and unrefined as there is hatred driving it. Women like Gertrude and Ophelia are maligned. They are strong and forward thinking but seen as morally decadent by Hamlet. He believes only ‘wise men’ know their true duplicitous nature, exclaiming “for wise men know well what monsters you make of them”. This highlights his own insecurities and issues with women, that stem from Gertrude’s ‘betrayal’. His constant use of extremely negative imagery towards all women is representative of the complete lack of value he places on them. How can this utmost disdain for an entire gender be anything but disturbing?

The play deals heavily with the psychological consequences of guilt, in relation to Claudius. The language and imagery he uses during his soliloquy provides us with a disconcerting insight into his inner psyche. He exclaims “is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow”. This is an image of blood that cannot be washed off. Snow is representative of purity. He will be forever stained by the crime he has committed. He uses imagery of decay, referring to himself as a “limed soul”. The spiritual part of his body is being withered away. He exclaims “o my offence is rank”. This is another image of his permanent decay. He knows that he will never be forgiven. There is no denial. It is an absolute confession of his guilt. The directness of his language mirrors the direct acceptance of what he has done. His use of negative and corrosive imagery illustrate that he is evidently burdened by this guilt but ironically it only makes him more dangerous. He believes he is already condemned to the “sulphurous and tormenting flames” of hell. He now has nothing left to lose. Claudius has the pretence of an honest and trustworthy man yet in reality is the complete antithesis. He was capable of killing his own brother to obtain the kingdom of Denmark. In front of the court he suggests that he has Denmark’s best interests in mind, exclaiming “we have here writ to Norway”; he is in control of this brewing conflict.

Underneath he cares more about himself and his position, spending more time focusing on how “madness in great ones must not go unwatched” as Hamlet’s strange behaviour directly concerns him. People may act in one way in the public eye but alone their true colours prevail and true nature is shown. The disturbing element of this stems from that fact that as an audience we are simultaneously empathetic towards Claudius and repulsed by him. He is evidently greatly burdened by his guilt and is more honest with himself than Hamlet ever is. His awareness of his own wrong-doings illustrate that despite them he is still a human being and we begin to feel sorry for him. However, this acceptance of his guilt results in a loss of coherent thought and we are disturbed by the extreme negative actions his guilt drives him to take. He will go to any extent to protect his crown and views Hamlet as the most dominant threat to this. It is disturbing to see just how much his guilt impacts his rationale as he shows no regret, remorse or conscience for “the present death of Hamlet”.

Throughout ‘Hamlet’ we are provided with disturbing insights into the psychology of entitlement through Shakespeare’s clever use of both imagery and characterisation. I find the sense of superiority and arrogance that Hamlet displays both before, during and after his ‘madness’ to be patently disturbing. Why is it that despite all the tragedy that surrounds Hamlet, he can remain so conceited and self-absorbed? Hamlet is an intellectual. He uses this intellect to undermine and insult Polonius. He creates a negative image of him calling him a “fishmonger”, an offensive dig at

Polonius' lower status that questions his moral background. He mocks his physical appearance in the line "old men have grey beards", again creating a negative image of Polonius' character. Hamlet has had every advantage in life yet is deliberately ridiculing a man of inferior intellectual capacity regarding his frailty and age. Hamlet mocks Polonius' sycophantic nature when he likens the shape of a cloud to three animals that don't appear at all similar, telling him "tis like a camel", "methinks it is like a weasel", "or like a whale" to which Polonius hastens to agree with him. 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 an innocent man's death provides me with an unsettling insight into the corruption and lack of regard at the top of society.

There is an exact parallel between when Hamlet mocks Polonius about the shape of clouds and a later conversation about the weather with Osric. When Osric agrees that it is cold, Hamlet disagrees and notes how "it is very sultry and hot". He makes Osric appear foolish in the same way he previously did to Polonius. What captures my interest is the fact that Hamlet claims to be grieving and in the depths of despair after the death of his "dear, sweet Ophelia". He declares he loved her so much that he would be buried alive with her, exclaiming "Be buried quick with her?— and so will I." His behaviour does not add up as he almost immediately switches back to the same pattern of toying with his subordinates. Who would have the time to humiliate a courtier if they were genuinely broken-hearted? Hamlet evidently has a habit of preying on the weak and taunting those not in a position to retort. He has a psychological need to appear more powerful. Hamlet's inability to stop scorning those less fortunate from beginning to end of play is the most prominent evidence to support my view of his character as disturbing. Despite all of the tragedy throughout the play, there is no change in Hamlet's behaviour. His arrogance prevents him from learning. This psychological need to emphasize his authority is of a disturbing nature as it accurately portrays the deep-rooted arrogant mindset that the most entitled and privileged people have.

The final duel scene further emphasises the psychology of entitlement while simultaneously encapsulating the description of Hamlet as a thriller. How could a scene involving deception, unprecedented shock and the murder of the play's protagonists be anything but suspenseful and thrilling? Even as he lays dying, Hamlet's main concern is ensuring his "sweet prince" image lives on. 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, reinforcing this egotistical, conceited and arrogant nature that has been seen from his character throughout the play.