

Midterm Essay - HAMLET

Now I am alone.
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage waned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.

For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? (HAMLET 2.2.526-37)

Hamlet's famous speech on playacting provides a core of ideas for thinking about the dilemma he faces and the courses of action - or inaction - available to him. Discuss HAMLET's treatment of acting (in all its senses); other key terms for your thinking might be memory, humanness and interiority, loss and grief, or truth and falsehood, but you should feel free to frame your discussion in ways that you find to be fruitful and compelling.

Acting is a dominant topic in the play HAMLET. There are many different situations in which the play discusses acting and in which acting fulfills different functions for the play. A very important figure for this topic is Hamlet himself of course, who is a near-perfect example for acting in all its different layers. Not only that the character of Hamlet himself is played by an actor (here we have the first, or outer layer of pretending) but also that this character Hamlet himself plays different roles, which constitutes the second level. He is not only just the son of the murdered king but also a very witty and astute observer of the things that are going around him. And he tries to use the course of events for his own aims and goals, though hesitantly. Acting plays a very important part in this scheme. He is the character who initiates the play-within-the-play in order to demask his mother and Claudius. But it is also subject of a great deal of discussion whether he is more than just the, say, director, of *The Mousetrap*. He becomes a spectator of his own play, thus reaching a third level of acting, one which can be called meta-level. But most importantly he himself puts on the air of a madman in order to fool the characters around him and to give himself more leeway to achieve his goals.

It has to be stated that he in his acting mad is quite consistent as he does not change his mannerisms and attitudes towards Ophelia, who he loves. In pretending to be someone else he is willing - whether deliberately or by coincidence - to cause pain and suffering for others, such as Ophelia. However, Hamlet is not an evil character by doing so, it is rather a conflict with his interiority. Hamlet does not find a satisfying answer or surrounding to live in the court with all its lies and the people who are actively plotting against him: In order to defend and care for his own feelings, including the feeling of uncertainty and his hesitation, he builds around himself this wall of acting, which allows him to be more free behind this mask. One could argue that this is only human, as nobody wants to allow harm to himself to an unnecessary extent. Therefore this protection of his 'self' through acting mad is a very understandable and humane reaction. It also fulfills the function of protecting him from the loss of his father and the subsequent grief about this. Hamlet takes the task given to him by his father, in the form of the ghost, very seriously and he tries hard to succeed. Although his hesitation has become proverbial, in this case he is rather forceful. But the question of truth and falsehood bothers him, as this soliloquy shows: By discussing the art of acting he shows the frailty of this art, best exemplified in the sentence "And all for nothing." Playacting is a very important device in the course of action in the play Hamlet, yet it is also a moment of nihilism as acting is not a form of art that lasts through times, but has its own function just in the moment it is performed. Therefore he has to be (and he is) consistent in playing his own roles throughout the play.

The volatility of this is also the main instance that makes him susceptible to harm from outside. His devices to protect himself are the same that are used in acting: Words. At the very end of the play where he gives up his acting in different roles he both succeeds and fails at the same time: Though he is able to kill Laertes he gets killed himself.