

Hamlet (1601)

- It is set in **Denmark**
- There were earlier versions of Hamlet, as a revenge story, in the Middle Ages. There was also a Renaissance play with the same name, probably written by Thomas Kyd.
- **Typical themes of revenge tragedies present in Hamlet:**
 - A violent crime has been committed against a family member of the hero, but law and justice cannot punish it.
 - Period of doubt
 - Appearance of a ghost
 - Close relationship with the audience through soliloquies and asides.
 - Isolation and madness of the hero

Shakespeare's originality:

- Shakespeare improves the story: it becomes **more than a tragedy of revenge**: it is a **tragedy of will**. In fact, he doesn't take revenge immediately. He's full of doubts and hesitations (Is Claudius really guilty? Was his father's ghost real or was it just the product of his imagination?). These **thoughts kill his action**.
- Deep psychological penetration
- Emphasis on doubt and uncertainty (he was a precursor of 20th century drama; Hamlet is a modern hero)
- Hamlet only pretends to be mad in order to carry out his plans.

Other important themes in Hamlet

- **Relationship** between father and son; mother and son; love relationship (Ophelia), friendship.
- **The power of the theatre:** “the play within the play”, a mere fiction, shows the truth.
- **Appearance vs reality:** what appears to be true doesn't correspond to reality, appearance doesn't often correspond to the real feelings of people. (This theme is also connected to the sense of doubt and ambiguity typical of the 16th century, when the certainties of the past were disproved or modified).
- **Madness vs sanity:** Hamlet pretends to be mad to carry out his plans more easily (“there's reason in his madness”, Polonius says after talking to him).

- **Honour:** any action to correct a wrong should be reasoned, not emotional (many actions taken impulsively by Hamlet cause great trouble to other people: Polonius, Ophelia)
- **Action vs inaction** (see the monologue): thinking too much prevents Hamlet from taking action.
- **Hamlet as the first modern hero:** like Hamlet, modern man is tormented by doubt, by a lack of religious or moral certainties (which takes him to inaction) and by an inability to communicate.
- **Ambiguity of Hamlet's language:** he uses metaphors, similes and wordplay. His words often have a hidden meaning that goes beyond their apparent meaning.

Important themes in the soliloquy:

- The first lines of the soliloquy (“to be or not to be”, lines 1-5) can be interpreted in two ways and present two important themes:

life vs death (or stoic attitude vs suicide): is it better to go on living (and suffering) or to commit suicide and put an end to our suffering?

action vs inaction: is it better to remain indifferent and leave things as they are or to fully realize one’s potential and take important decisions?

- We choose life because we are afraid of death. The **fear of what there is after death** is an obstacle to action. (Monologue: lines 9-13: “To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub....”. “...the undiscovered country.....puzzles the will....” lines 23-33)

- In lines 15-19 Hamlet makes a list of all the causes of **mankind's suffering**, which are still very true today: the cruel passing of time, the aggressive attitude of proud people, unreturned love, the inefficiency of law, political oppression, merit given inappropriately to people who don't deserve it.
- **Consciousness** makes us afraid to take action (according to Hamlet it is brave to kill oneself and cowardly to remain alive).
- So thinking too much makes us unable to act (lines 29-33 explain how **thought kills action**, through a metaphor which opposes sickness – *“the pale cast of thought”*- to health – *“the native hue of resolution”*).
- In this soliloquy the personal problem of Hamlet becomes a **universal** meditation on life and death.