

William Shakespeare

Hamlet (1601)

The story

First Act. Hamlet's father, the King of Denmark, has been dead only two months, but his mother, Queen Gertrude, has married her brother-in-law, Claudius, who has now become king. A Ghost, that looks like the late King of Denmark, has appeared to the sentries at the castle of Elsinore, which is armed in case of attack from Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. Hamlet and his friend Horatio arrange to meet at night to see whether the ghost will appear, which he does. He tells Hamlet he has been murdered by Claudius who poured poison in his ear while he was sleeping in his orchard. He asks Hamlet to avenge him, but to leave his mother's punishment to heaven.

Second Act. Hamlet pretends that he is mad so that he can carry out his plans more easily. Polonius, the King's counsellor, thinks Hamlet's madness is caused by his love for his daughter Ophelia. Hamlet arranges for a troupe of actors, who have come to provide entertainment for the court, to perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play whose story is similar to the one revealed by the ghost.

Third Act. The play is presented: the King rises and rushes away. While going to his mother's bedroom Hamlet sees the King at prayer, but doesn't kill him, so that he will not be saved because of dying in a state of grace. During an argument with his mother, Hamlet kills Polonius who is hiding behind a curtain to overhear their conversation. The King decides to send Hamlet to England to get rid of him.

Fourth Act. Hamlet is sent to England to be killed. Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself. Her brother Laertes wants revenge and the King, after receiving the news that Hamlet has escaped, plots his death in a duel with Laertes.

Fifth Act. The duel follows. Hamlet is urged to drink a poisoned drink but does not. The queen drinks the wine instead. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned tip of his sword but then the swords are exchanged and Hamlet wounds Laertes. The queen dies, Laertes falls and denounces the King who is stabbed by Hamlet. Both the King and Laertes die. Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his story, recommending that Fortinbras be elected King and then he too dies. Fortinbras enters and takes possession of the kingdom after having given military honours to Hamlet.

COMPREHENSION

1 ANSWER the following questions about the plot.

- 1 What is the name of the castle where the story is set?
- 2 What appeared to the sentries?
- 3 What nationality is Fortinbras?
- 4 Who is Horatio?
- 5 How was Hamlet's father killed?
- 6 What is the cause of Hamlet's madness according to Polonius?
- 7 What is the title of the play performed at court?
- 8 Who plans for Hamlet to be killed once he arrives in England?
- 9 Does Ophelia die by sword, poison or drowning?
- 10 Whose son is Laertes?

Hamlet and the tragedy of revenge

In the Elizabethan age the Church, the State and the regular morals of people did not accept revenge, they considered it sinful but enjoyed seeing it in plays. All revenge tragedies derived from the Greeks, then came Seneca who set the rules for all revenge play writers in the Renaissance, including William Shakespeare. The two most famous English revenge tragedies written in the Elizabethan age were *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd and performed from 1587 to 1589. In all revenge tragedies a sexual or violent crime is committed against a family member of the hero and for various reasons laws and justice cannot punish it; so the hero goes through with the revenge, he usually has a period of doubt which often involves complex planning. Other features are the appearance of a ghost to get the avenger to carry out the task. The avenger also has a very close relationship with the audience through soliloquies and asides. He places himself outside the normal moral order of things, and often becomes more isolated as the play develops, an isolation which may turn into madness. There is bloody action and many deaths occur throughout the entire play. What Thomas Kyd added to his play was that minor characters were left to deal with the situation at the end. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare largely followed the conventions and at the same time analysed them. The

play shows much psychological penetration through the reflections of the hero and through his relationship with the outside world. Maybe Shakespeare, merely simulating the grand themes of classical tragedy (vengeance, madness, the struggle for power), wanted to shake the established certainties and chose, in the end, to present the only themes which for him had any fundamental importance: doubt and uncertainty. In this, he could have been a precursor of the theatre of the twentieth century: he may, in 1601, have anticipated the theatre of the absurd.

Main themes

Hamlet could be read simply as a revenge tragedy. However, through the theme of vengeance, Shakespeare develops a series of themes that are central to humanity: the relationships between father and son, mother and son, and Hamlet and his friends; love relationships; madness; youth and age; action and inaction; the corruption linked to power; the existence of God; the meaning of the theatre itself. Hamlet is a play of life and death and of man's ambiguous relation to them both. It is also about melancholy and doubt. It is through Hamlet's struggle to act, and to act wisely, that the concept of 'man's complex nature' is illustrated. The shock Hamlet receives on the death of his father, and on the remarriage of his mother, causes anxious questions about the peace of the soul. The world changes its colour, life its meaning, love is deprived of its spirituality, woman of her prestige, the state of its stability, the earth and the air of their appeal. It is a reduction of the world to the absurd, of peace to bitterness, of reason to madness. Hamlet sees a contagious disease which spreads from man to

the kingdom, from the kingdom to the universe. A major question for man is the relation between 'appearance' and 'reality': how does one separate what appears to be real or absolute from what actually is so? Truth seems to reside in the 'existential idea': all that individual man knows is that he exists. The essence of truth is thus divorced from substance and from the means through which substance appears. Another important theme is 'honour' and honourable action. The theme of honour makes clear that any action to correct a wrong should be reasoned, not emotional. Justice is accomplished through the various deaths and the ascent of Fortinbras to the throne. Even Hamlet's death is ennobled by his final honourable actions tending to destroy the sources of corruption within the state.

Hamlet's ambiguity

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) thinks that the real psychological dimension of the play lies not in Hamlet's behaviour but in his language. In his famous essay, entitled *Desire and the interpretation of desire in Hamlet*, he holds that the most striking characteristic of Hamlet's language is its ambiguity. Everything he says is conveyed through metaphor, simile and, above all, wordplay. His words have a hidden meaning which often surpasses the apparent meaning. They have, therefore, enormous affinities with the language of the unconscious which proceeds equally by various forms of distortion and alterations in meaning. Hamlet is himself aware of the ambiguous nature of his own speeches as well as of the feelings which drive them.

COMPREHENSION

2 ANSWER the following questions about *Hamlet*.

- 1 Can *Hamlet* be regarded as a revenge tragedy? Why?
- 2 What other themes are linked to the theme of revenge?
- 3 What is the major question in the play?
- 4 What are the features of Hamlet's language?
- 5 What is the function of the play within the play?