

 To be or not to be

William Shakespeare

Hamlet (1601)

Act III, Scene I

*Here is Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, the most complete and impressive meditation on life and death written by Shakespeare.*

HAMLET To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune<sup>1</sup>,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 5 And by opposing end them? To die to sleep.  
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wish'd<sup>2</sup>. To die, to sleep;  
 10 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub<sup>3</sup>;  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil<sup>4</sup>,  
 Must give us pause: there's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life;  
 15 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time<sup>5</sup>,  
 The oppressor's wrong<sup>6</sup>, the proud man's contumely<sup>7</sup>,  
 The pangs<sup>8</sup> of disprized love, the law's delay,  
 The insolence of office<sup>9</sup>, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes<sup>10</sup>,  
 20 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin<sup>11</sup>? who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary<sup>12</sup> life,  
 But that<sup>13</sup> the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
 25 No traveller returns<sup>14</sup>, puzzles the will<sup>15</sup>,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 30 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought<sup>16</sup>,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment<sup>17</sup>  
 With this regard their currents turn awry<sup>18</sup>  
 And lose the name of action. [...]

- 1 The slings ... fortune. I colpi e dardi della sorte nefasta.
- 2 a consummation ... wish'd. Un completamento da desiderare con tutto il cuore.
- 3 there's the rub. Qui sta il difficile.
- 4 When we ... coil. Lett.: da questo viluppo mortale; qui: quando ci siamo liberati dalla vita.
- 5 the whips and scorns of time. Le sferzate e le derisioni del tempo.
- 6 wrong. Torti.
- 7 contumely. Oltraggio.
- 8 pangs. Fite al cuore.
- 9 office. Lett.: carica; qui: potere.
- 10 the spurns ... takes. Lo scherno che il merito paziente riceve dagli indegni.
- 11 might ... bodkin. Potrebbe darsi da solo la propria quietanza con un nudo pugnale.
- 12 weary. Faticosa.
- 13 But that. Se non fosse che.
- 14 from ... returns. Dalla cui frontiera nessun viaggiatore ritorna.
- 15 puzzles the will. Confonde la volontà.
- 16 the native hue ... thought. Il colore naturale della decisione è reso malsano dal pallido incarnato del pensiero.
- 17 of great pitch and moment. Di grande ambizione e importanza.
- 18 their currents turn awry. Le loro correnti deviano.



## Commentary

### A pause of reflection

This soliloquy is made particularly effective by the apparent lack of connection with what precedes and follows it. Only a few minutes have passed since the audience heard Hamlet's plan of proving the King's guilt (Act II, Scene II) by means of a play to be performed by the actors who have come to Elsinore. Shortly before Hamlet enters, the king and his chancellor Polonius hide to spy him. This builds up the audience's expectation. What will Hamlet reveal? What further plans? But Hamlet is now different, his thoughts are not concerned with the here and now but with the ultimate questions of man's existence. The audience, too, is forced to pause and reflect. Hamlet is not actually talking to himself, in fact the 'first person' in his speech is plural and not singular (line 6).

### The shape of thoughts

His thoughts take shape slowly, according to a process of seeking, reflecting and associating. The opening line, 'To be, or not to be' has become very famous. Various grammatical structures are used; a series of infinite forms ('To be, or not to be', line 1, is followed by 'to suffer', line 2, 'to take arms', line 4, 'to say', line 6, 'to die', 'to sleep', line 5, 'to dream', line 10, 'to grunt and sweat', line 22) give voice to Hamlet's uncertainty and enable him to distance himself from the action. The frequent questions give way to further questions instead of finding a solution.

### The choice of existence

The images from the battle-field in which the choice of existence is expressed, gives an impression of how violent is the struggle within Hamlet's mind. The situation presented in lines 2-5 implies inevitable defeat. It might be possible to endure and survive a sea of troubles. It is highly impractical to take up arms against it. It might be possible to reply to an assault with slings and arrows. If they are simply endured they will inevitably overcome their target. Where both passive and active resistance is bound to meet failure, death is seen as a welcome relief (lines 8-9).

### To die, to sleep, to dream

But then death itself is divided into sleep, which is desirable, and dreams. The thoughts advance, but an obstacle is pointed out (line 10). The Medieval perspective in which Hamlet sees death as physical liberation from the prison of the body (line 12) and earthly affliction, is countered by the doubt (line 13) of the Renaissance man, concerning the after death (line 11).

### The calamity of life

In six successive phrases (lines 15-19) Hamlet lists the injustices and miseries inflicted on mankind. They range from the passing of time through unreturned love to social discrimination and political oppression. It would only take a small knife to bring relief but the fear of something after death, expressed in the image of the unknown country from where no traveller comes back (lines 23-25), paralyses the will and prevents self-destruction.

### A problem of 'conscience'

The conclusion of this argument is maybe the most remarkable part of the soliloquy (lines 28-33). There is a clear relationship between 'conscience' and 'consciousness' or the power of thought. The opposition of sickness and health which characterises the whole play, returns here in the 'pale cast of thought' (line 30) which turns the 'native hue of resolution' (line 29) pale and sick. Yet the kind of thought which prevents men from committing suicide is not far from a moral conscience.

### Courage and cowardice

The effect of the whole passage is to make the audience consider what the meaning of 'cowardice' is. If it is brave to kill oneself, and cowardly to remain alive, then conscience makes cowards of us all. Hamlet calls the ability to cross the border between life and death courage, the ability to stay alive and bear the pain of human condition cowardice. The preoccupation of modern man - his dilemmas, vain quests and searching - are confirmed. The great art of this soliloquy lie in the way in which the personal is elevated to the level of the universal.

## COMPREHENSION

### 1 READ the text and do the following activities.

- Do you get the impression that Hamlet is concerned with
  - the here and now?
  - the ultimate questions of man's existence?
  - madness and lack of sleep?
- Circle the personal pronouns. Is Hamlet talking to himself?
- What do the verbs 'suffer' and 'take arms' mean?
- What alternative is introduced in lines 5-10?
- What is pointed out in lines 10-13?
- List the injustices and miseries inflicted on mankind mentioned by Hamlet in lines 15-19.
- What meaning does the word 'conscience' in line 28 acquire at the end of the soliloquy?