

**Hamlet**

S. M. I., '43

Lovers of Shakespearean tragedy delight to recall the hero of the drama in which are realized the highest ambitions and noblest aspirations of the greatest literary genius the world has ever known. For all of the characters created by Shakespeare, Hamlet is the one most loved and admired, and in him is reflected in a greater degree the universality of Shakespeare's genius.

Hamlet is essentially a man of thought. As a student in the University of Wittenburg, wrapped up in his ideal world peopled by books and fancy, he is entirely unconscious of the intrigue and sham in the physical world about him. Suddenly this ideal world lies shattered at his feet and he stands face to face with the stern realities of life.

His father, whom he idolized, has died suddenly, even mysteriously, and he is summoned home in haste. Indeed, so exceptional is the condition of the late king's body that interment has to take place before his son's arrival. It is the first shock in a life hitherto unflecked by even the slightest shadow. In the vehemence of his love he has never seen in his kingly father aught save—

“A combination and a form indeed  
Where every god did seem to set his seal  
To give the world assurance of a man”.

This is but the first in a series of sorrows which follow one another in rapid succession. Within a month the gay life of the court is resumed, to Hamlet's intense sorrow, whilst his mother's “o'er-hasty marriage” to his despised uncle crushes his heart almost to the breaking. This unexpected event causes the young prince to “doubt some foul play”. His suspicions are soon confirmed by the apparition of his deceased father divulging all the particulars of his unnatural death and urging him on to revenge.

“If thou didst ever thy dear father love  
Revenge this foul and most unnatural murder.  
The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown”.

Bewildered he stands helpless before a “sea of trouble” whose every wave threatens to engulf him. It is only the

dread of "something after death" which prevents him from putting an end to it all. He feels that the world is "out of joint" and that it has become his God-given task to set it right. Here is a man of a philosophic turn of mind, ignorant of the ways of the world, inexperienced in the diplomacy of the court, placed in a situation which demands immediate and drastic action. He must revenge his father's murder, but without injuring his mother's reputation.

"But howsoever thou pursuest this act,  
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught".

Another crushing blow falls upon him. He must sever the strong cords of love which bind him to a nymph of exceeding physical and spiritual beauty, "the fair Ophelia".

In his dilemma his fertile mind suggests the course of madness—a madness that will serve as a convenient disguise while he is maturing his plans. On this point much has been said. However, the generally accepted opinion is that Hamlet made use of this "antic disposition" as a camouflage behind which to mask his schemes. Certainly Shakespeare did not intend it to be true insanity. For would it not be preposterous to think of his attempting to build his masterpiece around a creature deprived of that quality which makes of man the "paragon of animals, infinite in faculty, angelic in action, and godlike in apprehension?" However, it must be admitted that there are moments in his life when, immersed in a sea of doubt and despair or worked up to a pitch where the tension snaps, he can scarcely be held responsible for his actions.

The Gonzago-play proves beyond the semblance of a doubt that his father's apparition is an "honest ghost" and that his Uncle Claudius is the murderer. Hamlet's mother has ever been for him the ideal womanhood. Was she a party to his father's murder or did she know of it? As he thus soliloquizes, his soul is torn with the deepest anguish, for, although his idol has crumbled before him, he still loves the ruins even to the extent of veneration.

He will speak to her in no uncertain terms of the invalidity of her second marriage, for "he must be cruel in order to be kind". In a private interview with her he throws off his mask and gives vent to his fury in a torrent of such passionate words as to force her to cry out from the depths of her soul,

"O, Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain"

Hopeful that he has touched her conscience, and satisfied that he has "spoken daggers but used none", he leaves her

"to heaven

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge"

His mother's fall has undermined his confidence in the whole human race—"Man delights me no more, no, nor woman neither".

Ophelia alone stands like a lily in an "unweeded garden that has grown to seed". But is she honest? Can she be superior to his mother? That he still loves her is never to be doubted. Indeed,

"Forty thousand brothers  
Could not with all their quality of love  
Make up this sum".

When later, in the graveyard scene, he learns that it was his feigned insanity and the unfortunate murder of her father that have deprived her at once of reason and of life, he becomes frantic. There is no need now to conceal the truth, and with violent emotion he protests the sincerity of his love.

The subsequent quarrel is the first shadow to darken the friendly relations that have existed between Laertes and Hamlet. The former burns with a desire to revenge his sister's and his father's deaths. Claudius, ever bent on Hamlet's ruin, seizes the opportunity for the consummation of his wicked designs. With the "witchcraft of his wit—O wicked wit that has power so to seduce"—he poisons the unsuspecting mind of Laertes. A game is planned in which Laertes requites his supposed enemy with a foil unbated and anointed with poison. Hamlet, perceiving that the thrust has been made too keen for a bated point, suspects foul play. Then follows one of the passionate moments when he passes to the borderline of sanity. He seizes the foil from his opponent's hand and punishes him with his own treachery. Then, learning that the point is poisoned and that "the king's to blame" he accomplishes in a moment what he has deferred so long—the revenge of his father's death.

With the subsiding of his passion he beholds in Laertes the semblance of his own cause; they are both innocent

victims of the ambitions of others. Laertes, realizing that he has been an agent for the king's malice, begs Hamlet to "exchange forgiveness with him". Fortified by a reassurance that flows from the noble heart of the prince, he passes into eternity, to

"The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns".

Hamlet has accomplished his task. In an effort to claim his rightful inheritance he staggers up into the throne, but the "patent poison quite o'er-crows his spirit". He lifts his voice to proclaim the mysteries of his soul, but the "fell-sergeant, death, is quick in his arrest" and silence forever seals his lips.

Thus ends a life whose morn was bright and full of promise, but whose eve closes on a scene of incarnate misery—a life whose mystery no one has been able to solve, for it is the creation of the mind of a genius.



Seven hours to law, to soothing slumber seven,  
Ten to the world allot, and all the heaven.

—Sir William Jones

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A wise man never loses anything, if he has himself.

—Montaigne