

Hamlet – a 'noble' man?

| | GOOD | BAD |
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| ACT 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspires devotion in his friends and subjects – Horatio & Marcellus follow Hamlet & are determined to protect him. • Loyalty to his father's memory <i>"I have that within which passes show, these but the trappings & the suits of woe"</i> • Disgust at his mother & uncle's immorality <i>"a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer" /// "oh most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets"</i> • Remains respectful to Gertrude <i>"I shall in all my best obey you madam" /// "It is not nor it cannot come to good, but break my heart for I must hold my tongue" [1st soliloquy – scene 2]</i> • Certain that evil does not go unpunished on this earth <i>"Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes"</i> • Love for Ophelia is pure <i>"My lord he hath importuned me with love in honourable fashion" [Ophelia to Polonius]</i> • Disapproves of excessive drinking <i>"It is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance"</i> • Brave: willing to risk God's wrath to speak to his father one more time <i>"I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape and bid me hold my peace"</i> <p>Is this evidence that Hamlet is good? Already we see that it is possible to corrupt Hamlet – he will risk doing the 'wrong' thing if it means easing his grief & psychological suffering. His actions in speaking to the ghost show extreme bravery (it could be the devil in disguise) but also a disregard for his own safety because he is already experiencing suicidal despair <i>"I do not set my life at a pin's fee"</i> and does not care if he lives or dies.</p> | |

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| Act 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eager to avenge his father <i>"Haste me to know it that I may with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love sweep to my revenge"</i> This can be interpreted as a good thing because it shows his loyalty to his father & his determination set things right in Denmark. Hates the thought of killing anyone & doesn't relish the thought of having to use violence. <i>"The time is out of joint O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right"</i> Determined to be sure of Claudius' guilt before he gets revenge – does not want to kill an innocent man <i>"The spirit that I have seen may be the devil... I'll have grounds more relative than this/the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king"</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determined to be sure of Claudius' guilt before he gets revenge – does not want to go to hell (selfish!) He is afraid of the afterlife <i>"for in that sleep of death what dreams may come"</i>. <i>"The dread of something after death"</i> is what stops him from committing suicide (see Act 3, scene 1 soliloquy). Perhaps it is cowardice & a selfish desire to protect himself which prevents him from avenging his father's death. If this is your opinion then you don't agree that Hamlet is essentially a good man, you think he is a coward & is extremely self-absorbed. |
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| Act 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows suicide is wrong <i>"To be or not to be, that is the question / whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them" (see soliloquy Act 3, scene 1) "thus conscience does miske cowards of us all".</i> Ophelia believes the 'real' Hamlet would never treat her so badly <i>"o what a noble mind is here o'erthrown"</i> Even Claudius finds Hamlet's behaviour totally out of character <i>"Madness in great ones must not unwatched go"</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cruel towards Ophelia <i>"Get thee to a nunnery"</i> Can we excuse his behaviour towards her? - He is bitter that she rejected him and that she accepted her father's view (that Hamlet only wanted her for sex) so easily despite all the evidence to the contrary. - He jokes that no man can be trusted "<i>we are arrant knaves all, believe none of us</i>" but underneath his sarcastic comments we can see that he is deeply hurt by her betrayal just when he needed her the most. - He also seems to know that this is a set up and that Polonius is watching them "<i>where is thy father?</i>" - Later before the insert play begins he continues his emotional torment & public humiliation of Ophelia "<i>Lady shall I lie in your lap?</i>"... "<i>Do you think I meant country matters?</i>" "<i>That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs</i>" Relishes the psychological torment he inflicts on Claudius & Gertrude during the insert play <i>"O but she'll keep her word" "poison in jest"</i> Is this evidence that he's a bad person or simply that he is human? After all, who wouldn't want to make their father's murderer feel guilty for what they had done??? Prayer scene – he takes pleasure in the thought of Claudius burning in hell for all eternity <i>"Trip him that his heels may kick at heaven, and that his soul may be as damned and black as hell whereto he goes"</i> However there is a certain logic in his belief that he is not truly avenging his father if he kills him now: "<i>a villain kills my father and for that I his sole son do this same villain send to heaven. Why this is hire and salary not revenge</i>" Uses cruel & obscene language when accusing his mother even though she begs him to stop <i>"You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife, and would it were not, you are my mother"</i> <i>"O Hamlet speak no more, thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul"</i> <i>"to live in the rank sweat of an unseamed bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty"</i> Murders Polonius – barely reacts <i>"I'll lug the guts to the neighbour room"</i> <i>"This counsellor is now more still, most secret,</i> |
| Act 3 (contd) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sees his cruelty towards Gertrude as necessary to save her soul <i>"Let me be cruel not unnatural. I will speak daggers to her but use none"</i> <i>"Confess yourself to heaven. Repent what's past, avoid what us to come"</i> Accidentally murders Polonius – now believes he is doing God's will <i>"thou wretched rash intruding fool farewell, I took thee for thy better"</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayer scene – he takes pleasure in the thought of Claudius burning in hell for all eternity <i>"Trip him that his heels may kick at heaven, and that his soul may be as damned and black as hell whereto he goes"</i> However there is a certain logic in his belief that he is not truly avenging his father if he kills him now: "<i>a villain kills my father and for that I his sole son do this same villain send to heaven. Why this is hire and salary not revenge</i>" Uses cruel & obscene language when accusing his mother even though she begs him to stop <i>"You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife, and would it were not, you are my mother"</i> <i>"O Hamlet speak no more, thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul"</i> <i>"to live in the rank sweat of an unseamed bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty"</i> Murders Polonius – barely reacts <i>"I'll lug the guts to the neighbour room"</i> <i>"This counsellor is now more still, most secret,</i> |

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| | <p><i>"for this same lord I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so... that I must be their scourge and minister"</i></p> | <p><i>and most grave, who was in life a foolish prating knave"</i></p> |
| Act 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular in Denmark <i>"He's loved of the distracted multitude"</i> • Philosopher Guilty of "<i>thinking too precisely on the event</i>" • Feels guilty about his inaction <i>"I do not know why yet I live to say 'this thing's to do', sith I have cause and will and strength and means to do it"</i> (see soliloquy Act 4, scene 5) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reluctantly embraces violence <i>"from this time forth my thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth".</i> |

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| Act 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is so caught up in his own suffering that he cannot see others pain Says to Laertes "<i>What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever</i>" Repents bad behaviour towards Laertes <i>"I am very sorry, good Horatio, that to Laertes I forgot myself; for by the image of my cause I see the portraiture of his"</i> Exchanges forgiveness with Laertes <i>"Exchange forgiveness with me noble Hamlet"</i> <i>"Heaven make thee free of it"</i> Prevents Horatio from committing suicide "<i>give me the cup, let go</i>" Inspires the absolute devotion and loyalty of Horatio, the person who knows him best <i>"Now cracks a noble heart: good night sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest"</i> Murder of Claudius is fulfilled as Claudius becomes the victim of his own evil plans, the agent of his own destruction, which allows Hamlet to remain guilty only of an exaggerated form of self-defence. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cruel towards Laertes <i>"Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum"</i> <i>"I'll rant as well as thou"</i> <p>Hamlet's behaviour towards Laertes is completely inappropriate, especially considering the role Hamlet has played in the deaths of Laertes' father Polonius and sister Ophelia. However, Hamlet seems to be lashing out at Laertes because he has just realised that Ophelia is dead and Laertes has accused him of being partially responsible for her death "<i>treble woe fall ten times treble on that cursed head whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense deprived thee of</i>". Hamlet cannot bear the thought that he has in some way caused the death of his true love.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arranges murder of Rosencrantz & Guildenstern without apology Told the King of England "<i>He should those bearers put to sudden death not shriving time allowed</i>" meaning they won't even have time to make their peace with God. Hamlet suggests they are getting what they deserve "<i>They are not near my conscience</i>" but the audience cannot agree. Their punishment far outweighs their crime. Murder of Claudius is so profoundly a case of 'too little too late' that 7 other people have died unnecessarily – Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern and Hamlet himself |
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