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Hamlet: Tragic Hero Example

William Shakespeare's play Hamlet is one of his greatest plays and the play was written in 1599. There are many characters within this story but only one of them stands out the most which is Hamlet himself. Hamlet is the prince of Denmark and he is the son of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude. After finding out that his father King Hamlet was murdered, Hamlet goes on a dramatic journey to avenge his father's death. He is a brave and noble character, but his indecisiveness ultimately leads to his downfall. After reading this play, the reader can determine that the tragic hero of this story is Hamlet. In order to be exactly sure about who the tragic hero is in this story, the reader will need to know what it takes to be a true tragic hero. A well-known philosopher named Aristotle says that a tragic hero is a character who makes a judgment error that inevitably leads to his or her own destruction. The tragic hero's downfall or death is his or her own fault and the tragic hero's misfortune is not deserved. After a careful examination of the facts, Hamlet seems to fit this definition the most. Therefore, Hamlet is the true tragic hero because he experiences many events that dramatically change his character throughout the story, and he is eventually destroyed by his own indecisiveness in the end.

In the beginning, when Hamlet returns home to Denmark, he finds out that his father has died. Not only does he

find out that his father has passed away, but he also discovers that his mother has married his uncle Claudius. Hamlet begins to show signs of depression and suicide when he states, "O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew" (1.2.129-128). Although he wishes his flesh would melt, he knows that he cannot commit suicide because it is a sin. Hamlet's character begins to slightly change and shows signs of anger toward his mother and uncle Claudius when he states, "She married. O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! / It is not, nor it cannot come to good" (1.2.156-158). Within this statement, the reader can see that Hamlet is angry about his mother's quick marriage to Claudius and he knows this marriage will not come to good. Although his father has died, his father's ghost comes to him and tells him that the person that killed him is the one who now wears his crown which is Hamlet's uncle Claudius. Also, his father's ghost tells him that he must get revenge on the person who killed him. After Ophelia, Hamlet's lover, is forbidden to speak to him by her father Polonius, Hamlet begins to show even more signs of depression and suicide when he states, "To be, or not to be, that is the question:" (3.1.56). Although he is not directly stating that he wants to commit suicide himself, he is thinking about why other people commit suicide.

Furthermore, when Hamlet shows the King and Queen his play "The Mouse-trap", Claudius realizes that Hamlet now knows the truth of what really happened to his father. After Claudius leaves, Hamlet follows him and plans to kill him because he is certain that Claudius murdered his father. However, when Hamlet sees Claudius, he mistakenly believes Claudius is praying when Hamlet states,

"Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying,

And now I'll do't—and so 'a goes to heaven,

And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.

A villain kills my father, and for that,

I, his sole son, do this same villain send

To heaven" (3.3.73-78).

Although Hamlet is filled with anger and rage, he is indecisive on killing Claudius because he believes that if he kills Claudius while he is praying, then he will go to heaven instead of hell where he belongs. According to an author named Junqing Liang, "As a prince, Hamlet is fully aware of his responsibility for his people and that his decision might have effects on the whole country, so when it is time to take actions, he always hesitates" (Liang). Even though Hamlet is indecisive and hesitates during this scene, this is also the main cause of his own death later in the story. While Hamlet is still filled with anger and rage, he confronts his mother and threatens her. He hears someone behind the arras, and he believes it is the King, so he stabs his sword through the arras killing Polonius who is the one hiding behind the arras. When Claudius learns that Hamlet killed Polonius, Claudius sends Hamlet off to England in hopes that he will never return. While on the ship to England, Hamlet's character begins to change drastically. Hamlet states, "O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (4.4.65-66). Here the reader can see that Hamlet is no longer scared to kill Claudius and he is completely determined to avenge his father's death. Therefore, Hamlet has now regained his confidence that he lost when he found out about his father's passing and he is now ready to act against Claudius.

After being attacked by pirates, Hamlet returns to Denmark. When Hamlet returns to Denmark, him and Horatio stumble upon a gravedigger digging a grave. While talking to the gravedigger, Hamlet sees Ophelia's funeral taking place and realizes that the grave is for Ophelia. Hamlet and Laertes begin fighting because Hamlet believes no one can love her as much as he does. Hamlet states, "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?" (5.1.221-223). Here the reader can see that Hamlet's emotions are changing yet again because he is heartbroken by Ophelia's death. He knows that Ophelia's suicide is his fault because he accidentally killed her father. After Ophelia's funeral, Hamlet tells Horatio how Claudius tried to kill him, but he replaced his name with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's names before he escaped from the pirates. While they are talking, a courtier named Osric, who is sent by Claudius, tells them that Laertes has challenged Hamlet to a swordfight. Hamlet's confidence continues to grow as he tells Horatio, "I have been in continual / practice. I shall win at the odds" (5.2.176-177). Before the fight, Claudius poisons Laertes sword

so if he wounds Hamlet during the fight, Hamlet will die from the poison. In case this plan does not work, Claudius comes up with another plan to poison the cup of wine that he tells Hamlet to drink after he hits Laertes at least once or twice. During the fight, Laertes wounds Hamlet and then Hamlet seriously wounds Laertes. Suddenly, things go wrong when the Queen drinks the poisoned cup of wine and dies. Before Laertes dies, he tells Hamlet that the King is to blame for the poisoning of his mother. Hamlet then takes the poisoned sword and stabs the King. Also, he makes the King drink the poison that killed his mother. Finally, Hamlet follows through with avenging his father's death by killing Claudius; however, Hamlet also dies from being wounded by the poisoned sword. After Hamlet's death, the Ambassadors and Fortinbras, the prince of Norway, arrives and sees the horrible act that has just taken place. He tells Horatio that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio responds by telling Fortinbras Hamlet's story. Therefore, the story ends with Fortinbras stating that Hamlet should be laid to rest "like a soldier to the stage" (5.2.364).

As can be seen, Hamlet changes several times throughout the play. In the beginning he is sad and depressed because of his father's death. His emotions suddenly change to anger because of how quickly his mother married the new King which is his uncle Claudius. His emotions change yet again as he becomes suicidal because he cannot let go of the depressed and miserable feelings he continues to have after his father's death. When he gets the best opportunity to kill Claudius, Hamlet's fatal flaw, his indecisiveness, causes him to hesitate on killing Claudius. After he accidentally kills Polonius, Claudius puts him on a ship to England. While he is on the ship, he changes drastically from being depressed to becoming confident and determined to avenge his father's death. Although when he returns from Denmark, he is heartbroken by Ophelia's death, he quickly shifts his emotions back to being confident in being able to defeat Laertes in the swordfight. After things go terribly wrong, Hamlet finally goes through with killing Claudius. However, Hamlet dies right after Claudius because of the poison cut he received during the swordfight. Perhaps Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, his mother Gertrude, and Hamlet himself would all still be alive if only Hamlet had not let his indecisiveness get in the way of his most perfect chance to kill Claudius earlier in the story. An author named Paul A. Jorgensen believes that, "Hamlet is our hero because, although forced into cruelty and even sadism, he is one of the most beautiful in soul of any man Shakespeare created" (Jorgensen). Overall, as Hamlet experiences the many events that dramatically

change his character throughout the story, his indecisiveness on killing Claudius in the middle of the story, ultimately leads to the tragic hero's death in the end.