THEMES, MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

THEMES AND MOTIFS

The central subject or topic in a work of literature (or art) is referred to as its theme. A sophisticated work will usually explore several, interrelated themes. A motif is a recurring idea or contrast examined in a work of literature and these will usually relate to the themes being explored. There are several major themes and motifs in Hamlet.

ACTION VERSUS INACTION

One of the central themes in Hamlet is action versus inaction. Hamlet is the epitome of inaction in many ways. He is asked to take action (to kill King Claudius) by the Ghost, but he struggles to do so. He debates his options and hatches a plan to verify the Ghost’s story first. Once he is certain of the king’s guilt, Hamlet seems ready to act, but, yet again, opts against doing so when he hesitates to kill the king while the monarch appears to be praying.

Hamlet’s inaction is contrasted with the two other men who have also lost their fathers: Laertes and Fortinbras. Both of these men are of quick resolve and action. Laertes immediately wants revenge and only exercises a degree of patience at Claudius’ urging (and when Hamlet apologises to him for his father’s death). Fortinbras is also eager to avenge his father’s death and has to be dissuaded by the King of Norway and offered another fight.

Critics explain Hamlet’s inaction in many ways. Some blame his youth, others the indecisiveness of his personality and many suggest it is his strong sense of morality that holds him back (he is worried that taking revenge is an immoral act). Perhaps it is a combination of all three?

There are also occasions when Hamlet is quick to act, lending weight to the argument that his inaction is not a character flaw, but a response to the specific task of revenge. Unfortunately, one of those instances is when he murders Polonius at the end of Act III, thinking he is killing the king — a mistake that perhaps serves only to heighten his caution and hesitancy.

MADNESS

Madness is a key theme in Hamlet. On hearing the Ghost’s story, Hamlet decides to ‘put an antic disposition on’ (Act 1, Scene 5, line 191). His madness begins as a ruse to elude the suspicious king and his prying spies, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to be left free to investigate the truth of the claims made by the Ghost.

As the play develops, however, and Hamlet remains stuck in his own confusion and inaction, there are times where he appears to stray into genuine madness and doubts arise about the actual soundness of his mind. Certainly, it would not be unreasonable for his circumstances to make him paranoid and to weaken his mental state. The pressure of feeling obliged to kill Claudius, in spite of his strong moral and philosophical objections to the act, combined with the fact that he knows he is surrounded by people he cannot trust and who are constantly plotting against him, would test the psychological stability of any character.
In this manner, Shakespeare adds a fresh new dimension to the theme of madness (which was a common theme in revenge tragedies at the time). He makes Hamlet’s madness ambiguous and keeps the audience guessing to what extent it remains a subterfuge or has become real.

The theme of madness also informs the character of Ophelia. Overwhelmed by her grief at her father’s sudden death, she appears to lose her grip on reality and wanders about, singing songs and handing out flowers. Interestingly, the flowers she chooses to give each person are aptly symbolic, despite her mental instability. Her grief-driven madness ends, tragically, in suicide when she drowns in the river. Ophelia’s madness becomes a foil to Hamlet’s. Her madness is genuine and without ambiguity, whereas his is an ambiguous deception, driven by an ulterior motive.

**DISEASE AND DECAY**

Images of decay and disease are used repeatedly throughout the play. These images relate to the corrupt state of Denmark as a result of the unnatural death of the old king and unnaturally quick marriage of the queen to her dead husband’s brother.

This theme is introduced very early on in the play through Francisco’s claim that he is ‘sick at heart’ (Act 1, Scene 1, line 9). This sense of unease or dis-ease intensifies with the appearance of a ghost, prompting Marcellus to exclaim ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’ (Act 1, Scene 4, line 99).

The imagery of rotting and decay is used again and again; for example, when Hamlet uses the imagery of a worm’s supper in his conversation with the king about Polonius’ dead body (Act 4, Scene 3).

There are also references to Denmark descending into a state of decay. Hamlet laments that the country has become ‘... an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature’ (Act 1, Scene 2, lines 137-138).

The many references to diseased and contagious bodies — mentions of ulcers and cankers marring the skin, in particular — and to images of decay in nature and even the celestial bodies, all amplify the concept that the state of the physical world is a reflection of the state of the spiritual realm.

The idea is that the moral fabric of society is rotting because of the dishonest and corrupt behaviour of the leaders of the nation. The king is a usurper who ‘stole’ the throne dishonestly and this corrupt state of affairs is compounded by the queen’s swift decision to marry her husband’s brother.

This is contrasted with the ascension of young Fortinbras to the throne at the end of the play. The audience is given a glimpse of a hopeful future in which the country might begin to heal.

**APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY**

Closely linked to the theme of madness versus feigned madness is the theme of appearance versus reality. This idea is introduced in Act One. Queen Gertrude asks Hamlet why he is still so heavily mourning the death of his father, claiming that he seems to be grieving more than is necessary. He responds to this by saying ‘Seems, madam! nay it is, I know not “seems”’ (Act 1, Scene 2, line 78), highlighting the idea that there can be a schism between what things appear to be and what they really are.

This theme is also reflected in all of the plotting by the characters. Almost all of the schemes are, ultimately, attempts to uncover what other characters are really thinking and doing since nearly everyone in the play is hiding his or her true feelings and intentions. The king and Polonius are trying to figure out what might lurk beneath Hamlet’s madness, for instance, while the prince is feigning the appearance of madness to obscure his secret mission to reveal the king’s true murderous nature and to kill his deceitful uncle. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also appear to be Hamlet’s old
friends, but this is merely a ruse to conceal their secret assignment to spy on the prince. Polonius sends his servant, Reynaldo, to spy on his son in France as well, convinced that Laertes is not the respectable young man he appears to be, but actually embroiled in activities of a dubious nature. (Yet, contrary to this, he pretends to be a trusting parent when Laertes asks him for advice.)

The Ghost is another investigation of this theme. Is it an apparition, is it real or is it somehow both? It appears to be the previous king, but can its appearance be trusted? The sensational claims made by the Ghost appear to contradict reality (the belief that Hamlet's father was bitten by a poisonous snake and not deliberately poisoned by Claudius), but the Ghost is, in fact, exposing Hamlet to the real truth.

The ‘play within the play’ is also an exploration of this theme, and a great example of metafiction. The very nature of acting is the putting on of an appearance and this is wonderfully illustrated when Hamlet asks the actors to make the play as realistic as possible. In this instance, the actors are trying to make a fictional play (that actually accurately reflects the reality of the previous king’s murder) as realistic as possible.

HONOUR AND REVENGE

As a revenge tragedy, one of the central themes in Hamlet is vengeance. Closely related to revenge is the idea of honour. Hamlet’s duty to avenge his father is tied to his honour as a ‘good son’. When speaking to the Ghost, for example, Hamlet declares, ‘Speak, I am bound to hear’, to which the Ghost responds: ‘So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear’ (Act 1, Scene 5, lines 10-11). This exchange highlights the relationship between revenge and honour, and the accepted duty of a son to take revenge on behalf of his father.

This theme is emphasised and expanded through the inclusion of Laertes and Fortinbras, two other sons who feel it is their duty to avenge their fathers’ deaths. The fact that both men are portrayed as highly honourable and dutiful reinforces how acceptable and established this duty was considered.

THE SUPERNATURAL

Shakespeare, like many Elizabethan playwrights, often made use of the supernatural in his plays and Hamlet is no exception. The opening scene takes place at midnight, traditionally ‘the witching hour’ and the time when supernatural creatures are most likely to appear.
The appearance of a ghost sets the tone of the play, invoking a sense of foreboding and fear. The same technique is still used in horror and suspense stories today. When a movie starts with an ominous looking house, at night, against a stormy sky, the audience immediately knows something eerie or scary is about to happen.

The presence of a ghost would have conveyed the idea that ‘all is not well’ to Elizabethan audiences and Shakespeare uses its appearance in Hamlet as the catalyst for the action in the play — revealing the murder of the previous king and inciting Hamlet to take revenge.

Shakespeare establishes that the Ghost is not just an illusion by having several people witness it, including the ever-rational Horatio. In Elizabethan times, ghosts could be either good or evil spirits and so the audience would have been intrigued to find out this one’s intentions. The ambivalent nature of ghosts is why it would have been perfectly natural for Hamlet to question its purpose and to devise a way of confirming that it is telling him the truth.

SYMBOLS

Symbols are objects, characters, shapes or colours used to represent something else, usually an abstract idea or quality. Symbols usually represent something else by association, resemblance or convention. Shakespeare employs symbolism throughout his plays, using physical things to represent intangible or invisible ideas or qualities in particular.

YORICK’S SKULL

The appearance of Yorick’s skull in the final act of the play symbolises death and its inevitability. Hamlet knew Yorick, the court jester, as a child and his fond memories of the man lead him to ponder the idea that death serves as an equaliser among people, whether rich or poor, good or bad, lower class or highborn. He wonders out loud where the remains of Alexander the Great ended up, concluding that we all share the same fate in the end and return as dust to the earth.

During his rumination, Hamlet is, quite literally, staring death (in the form of Yorick’s skull) in the face. This is particularly poignant when one considers the death surrounding the prince: his plans to kill the king, the king and Laertes’ plans to kill him, and the funeral about to take place for Ophelia.

This symbol of death and its inescapability appears at a critical moment in the play: shortly before its catastrophic ending when most of the major characters will meet their deaths.

It should also be noted that the idea of death recurs throughout the play: Hamlet explores the idea in his famous ‘To be, or not to be’ soliloquy (Act 3, Scene 1); the presence of a ghost; the murder of the previous king; the enacting of murder in the play within the play (The Murder of Gonzago), the repeated use of poison and, of course, the many deaths. The use of a skull at this point in the play is a way of physically representing this recurring idea of death.
OPHELIA’S FLOWERS

The tragic scene during which Ophelia hands out flowers exploits the symbolism of the flowers. The rosemary she gives to Laertes represents remembrance and was traditionally worn at weddings and funerals. She also gives her brother pansies, which represent grief — a very apt gesture considering his circumstances. The fennel and columbines she gives to Claudius represent flattery, deceit and ingratitude, respectively.

The rue she hands to the queen — keeping some for herself as well — represents repentance and was often worn in church in order to gain God’s mercy. Ophelia also says to the queen, ‘There’s a daisy: I would give you / some violets, but they withered all, when my father / died’ (Act 4, Scene 5, lines 195-197). Daisies represent false appearances and violets are used to symbolise faithfulness, making it quite apt that these had withered, considering the queen’s lack of faithfulness towards her late husband.

Despite the fact that she is so stricken with grief that no one can reason with her, Ophelia’s handing out of flowers is uncannily appropriate. She gives each person a flower that is most suited to his or her situation. The flowers become a way of emphasising the qualities different characters are expressing at that particular moment in the play.

The flowers also take on extra meaning shortly after this scene as Ophelia drowns trying to hang her flowers on a tree and will then be the one who is ‘receiving flowers’ when they are strewn across her grave. As the queen scatters flowers on Ophelia’s grave, she observes that she had always thought she would be laying flowers on Ophelia and Hamlet’s wedding bed, rather than on Ophelia’s grave.
THE ‘PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY’

The modified version of *The Murder of Gonzago* — the play within the play — also serves as a symbol for the actual murder of the old King Hamlet by King Claudius. As the ‘play within the play’ is a physical representation of the original murder, the symbolism is direct and straightforward: the ‘king’ in the play represents the old King Hamlet, the ‘queen’ represents Queen Gertrude, and the ‘poisoner’ represents King Claudius.

**KEY FACTS**

**FULL TITLE:** The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark  
**AUTHOR:** William Shakespeare  
**TYPE OF WORK:** Play  
**GENRE:** Revenge Tragedy  
**LANGUAGE:** English  
**COMPOSED (TIME AND PLACE):** England, between 1599 and 1602  
**PUBLISHED:** 1603: condensed version published in the *First Quarto*. The full-length version was published a year later in the *Second Quarto*.  
**TONE:** Dark, brooding, contemplative and violent  
**SETTING:** Denmark, during the late middle ages, although precise time is unclear.  
**PROTAGONIST:** Hamlet  
**ANTAGONIST:** Claudius  
**CONFLICT:** Hamlet’s duty to kill King Claudius to avenge his father’s murder.  
**RISING ACTION:** Hamlet feigns madness to hide his intentions, while the king and Polonius plot to uncover the cause of his madness. Hamlet sets a trap for the king, using a re-enactment of the murder of his father to bait a damning reaction from him.  
**CLIMAX:** After successfully confirming the king’s guilt, Hamlet is resolved to take action. He mistakenly kills Polonius behind the arras, which gives the king a pretext to send him away and prompts the return of Laertes from France. Laertes’ loathing of Hamlet helps the king to orchestrate the prince’s murder.  
**FALLING ACTION:** Hamlet is sent away to England, but events allow him to return. He and Laertes have an altercation at Ophelia’s grave, which leads to a fencing match between them and, ultimately, the deaths of Hamlet, Laertes, the king and the queen.  
**FORESHADOWING:** The Ghost and his warnings regarding the state of corruption in Denmark.  
**THEMES AND MOTIFS:** Action and inaction, madness, decay and disease, appearance versus reality, honour and revenge, and the supernatural.  
**SYMBOLS:** Yorick’s skull, Ophelia’s flowers and the ‘play within the play’.