

To Avenge, or Not to Avenge

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Revenge is “an act or instance of returning evil for evil.” It is perhaps one of the strongest emotions and it is seen often in today’s world whether through sports, political disagreements, and/or violent conflicts. Vengeance can take many forms and often controls a person’s actions. But what constitutes revenge? Is it losing a game? Being embarrassed during an argument? Or perhaps in Hamlet’s case, losing a father? In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, young Hamlet is persuaded to believe that it is his responsibility to avenge the murder of his father, the former king of Denmark. However, in accordance to the late 16th century Elizabethan code, was Hamlet in the right to avenge the death of his father, and did he ever truly get revenge for his father’s murder.

During the later part of the 16th century, “the Church, State, and conventional morality fulminated against private revenge [written at eastern Alamance hs in 05] in any form and under any circumstance”(Prosser). This means that Elizabethans were told not to attack in a vengeful manner mainly because it was said the vengeance would be an act of God. Therefore, it would have been frowned upon for young Hamlet to kill his uncle for murdering King Hamlet. Now, one might argue that the ghost who appeared to young Hamlet was sent by some divine power. However, in one part of the play, Horatio tells the ghost to identify himself in the name of Heaven and immediately, the ghost leaves(Shakespeare). This would seem to suggest that it could not have been sent by a divine power. In fact, when Marcellus and Bernardo refer to the ghost, they use the term “it,”(Shakespeare) as if in doubt of whether the ghost is actually the soul

of King Hamlet. Lastly, it can be argued that when the ghost first appears and speaks to young Hamlet, it talks more of the poisoning done by Claudius to try and create anger within young Hamlet rather than a desire to right what has been wronged. Despite all of the signs that Hamlet was in the wrong to avenge the death of his father, he struggles with the conflict of whether to kill Claudius.

Throughout, the play, the reader and the audience see the internal conflict that young Hamlet faces as he tries to decide if getting revenge is the right and moral action to take. In fact, he puts it off when he has the perfect opportunity to kill Claudius as he is down praying; but Hamlet rationalizes with himself and decides that was not the right time since Claudius would have been forgiven of his sins. However, one has to wonder if the delay and procrastination of young Hamlet to kill Claudius allows him to actually avenge his father's death. Throughout the play, the ghost plays a small role the further the reader gets into it; the ghost gradually fades out and becomes a presence that is almost forgotten. So, Hamlet's final decision to kill the king can not be blamed [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] on the presence of the ghost. Barbara Everett argues that as the delay continues, Hamlet is out to revenge himself. Not only has King Hamlet been murdered, but the rightful heir to the throne, young Hamlet, has been cheated out of becoming the new king of Denmark. That is a good motive for vengeance. Secondly, young Hamlet does not actually kill Claudius until he finds out that Claudius has deliberately set out to plot young Hamlet's death(Shakespeare). So, I think it reasonable to assume that in the end, Hamlet is getting revenge for all the ways that he has been wronged by Claudius. The ghost was not enough to push young Hamlet over the edge; something had to happen to him before vengeance was taken.

All in all, vengeance is definitely a controlling emotion. In the play Hamlet, the thought of revenge drives young Hamlet, normally a man of class and logic, to become a different person who was driven crazy. However, I think it is apparent that Hamlet had no ethical right to even think about avenging his father's death, and in all actuality, never did avenge the murder of his father. It is important [written at eastern Alamance hs in 05] to be able to learn from others' mistakes and too often, students question their teachers on why certain literature is assigned. However by reading Hamlet, we can learn how dangerous and detrimental revenge can be to one's health, thus persuading the reader to think twice upon taking vengeance on another.

Works Cited

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