Through Shakespeare’s perspicacious genius, in Hamlet he has depicted an aspect of humanity that belongs essentially not to his age but ours. He does so by subverting the audiences’ expectations of a revenge tragedy through his characterization of Hamlet as having an over-active intellectual mind, which results in his delay from action. Hamlet spends the vast majority of the play ruminating over philosophical questions related to the typical themes of revenge tragedy; action, murder, revenge, but also the purpose of theatre, philosophical questions of life, family relationships and the importance of rituals (such as funerals). Therefore, Hamlet is essentially about the attempt to hold a mirror up to human nature and work towards expressing the inexpressible and scrutinizing the inscrutable aspects of human experience.

Hamlet as a whole is primarily concerned with exploring our relationship with death; that our fear of death comes from the notion that there must be something else, and therefore from the very fact that we cant ever know for sure if there is. This idea is explored in Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy, where he realizes that we suffer the “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” rather than “by opposing, end them”, because of the “Dread of something after death”; the “undiscovered country”. For this reason theatre is presented as something potentially unsettling as it reflects the fear that life is nothing more than an act in some enigmatic drama. As well as this, theatricality becomes incredibly intertwined with Hamlet’s obsession with understanding death, as what he believes is that he can ‘stage-manage’ death to make it significant like a piece of art. He wants to give death, which in the play is messy and sudden, form and order; he wants to rehearse it like a play. All of which mirrors the aspect of human nature where we want things categorised and understood, whilst his failure to create meaningful death, also mirrors the fact that there are things that we cannot categorise and understand.

To reinforce this notion, Shakespeare places incredible importance on theatre in Hamlet, through the direct use of the theatre; the players and their play, theatrical metaphors and imagery; filling the script with words such as perform, act, show and encouraging his actors to perform in a self-consciously theatrical style for example in Claudius’s address in act 1. The effect of this was that it allowed the emphasis of the contrast between truth and pretence, reality and illusion. The plays and fictions of Hamlet fit inside one another until the boundaries between reality and illusion become incredibly blurred. The major themes that therefore arise from this blurring are the conflicts between truth and illusion, honesty and pretence, reality and appearance and the boundaries between youth and age, audience and actor, and most importantly the inescapable boundary between death and life. The play itself constantly hovers between reality and pretence, and at the zenith of its dramatic tension; during the performance of The murder of Gonzago, the boundaries of identity between Gertrude and the Player Queen and Claudius and the Player King creates the merging of pretence and reality, momentarily, into one confused band.

Hamlet himself is the most consciously theatrical character and is the most affected by the forceful metatheatricality of the play. Hamlet spends the entire play struggling between the ambiguities of the numerous connotations of the word “to act”; “to do something” and “to pretend or perform as an actor”. Hamlet’s core conflict and what he is so often criticized for, especially by himself, is his inability to act (“do something”) but his expert ability to act (that is to pretend and perform). Coleridge argued that Hamlet is a man incapable of acting (doing); that “Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth, that action is the chief end of existence”. But perhaps it is the very fact that Hamlet does not just act (do something) straightaway, as the audience would have expected the protagonist of a revenge tragedy to do, that is most important.

But it is not his father’s death alone that is upsetting Hamlet, but more importantly the lack of respect for his death that is demonstrated by the hasty re-marriage of his mother and the taking of the throne by his uncle (“you are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife…and would it not be so, you are my mother”) The reason this is unsettling for Hamlet is simply because it causes him to become disillusioned about the nature of death and the significance of life. If his father, who was a great man, can be forgotten so quickly upon his death, then to Hamlet life seems rather pointless. In Hamlet’s soliloquy in act one scene two where he first contemplates suicide, Shakespeare begins his discourse with death. The notion of suicide is a major philosophical question – perhaps the greatest, as it argues between religious issues; “that the Everlasting had not fixed his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter”, the boundaries between life and death, expressed through the boundaries between the physical and non-physical, that he wishes that this “too too solid flesh would melt”, but most significantly the point of life and the point of death, where all the “uses of this world” seem “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable”. There is an importance placed on death rites in this soliloquy, that Gertrude “followed my poor father’s body ” evoking imagery of a funerary procession, but Hamlet still feels that this was not enough, he feels especially that it was a deceit- that her tears were “unrighteous”.

Hamlet expresses an extreme disgust towards the corruption and deceit within Denmark; he is trying to understand these disgusting events where with “most wicked speed” his mother made “With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!. In a wider application, this is representative of human experience and again reflects Shakespeare’s desire to attempt to scrutinize the inscrutable.

Through his insistence on the theme of deceit throughout the play, he comments on the complexity of human nature and the duality of man as it highlights the struggle between truth and pretence. This is seen in the motif of doubling throughout the play. In the Murder of Gonzago, Lucianus not only represents Claudius killing the King but also Hamlet, reflecting the fear that to kill Claudius, Hamlet has to become him. The doubling of the word acting goes along with the doubling found in the very idea of performing; the distinction between the false self (the part one is playing) and the true self. Everything in Hamlet works in pairs; for example the double image of Lucianus in the Mousetrap scene as, both Young Hamlet and Claudius, Claudius as the antithesis of King Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a pair and Gerturde and Ophelia. But this doubling comes to its most obsessive at the climax of the Play with the rhyming couplets spoken by the Player King and Queen in the Murder of Gonzago. As well as this there is also doubling in the language used, seen in the use of puns, such as when Gertrude says “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended” and Hamlet replies “Mother, you have my father much offended”, and in the use of Hendiadys. All of this doubling reflects the core of what haunts Hamlet, and that is the fear of the duality of man.

Although Hamlet sees nobility of man, the beauty of women and the majesty of the universe his imagination dwells on bones, the nasty, sty the prison. Therefore there is connection between the death wish and the image of the corrupt world; “tis an unweeded garden/ that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/possess it merely”. The “mildew’d ear”, the ulcer, the imposture grow and infect, hamlet therefore sees fertility as manifesting itself in the vile forms of life. Therefore he cannot bear to bring his love to fruition and thus shuns marriage and procreation, which is where the Ophelia subplots illuminates the central theme. Hamlet denies his own nature, declining to act out the part that life purposes him.