



Hamlet's seven soliloquies

1 Act I scene 2 lines 129–59

Hamlet is suicidally depressed by his father's death and mother's remarriage. He is disillusioned with life, love and women. Whether 'sullied' (Q2) or 'solid' (F) flesh, the reference is to man's fallen state. This is the fault of woman, because of Eve's sin, and because the misogynistic medieval church had decreed that the father supplied the spirit and the mother the physical element of their offspring. Both words apply equally well, linking with the theme of corruption or the imagery of heaviness, but 'solid' is more subtle and fits better with the sustained metaphor of 'melting', 'dew' and 'moist', and the overarching framework of the four hierarchical elemental levels in the play: fire, air, water and earth. Melancholy was associated with a congealing of the blood, which also supports the 'solid' reading. In all likelihood it is a deliberate pun on both words by the dramatist and Hamlet. (A third reading of 'sallied' in Q1, meaning assaulted/assailed, links to the imagery of battle and arrows.)

Other imagery concerns a barren earth, weed-infested and gone to seed, making the soliloquy an elegy for a world and father lost. Hamlet condemns his mother for lack of delay, and is concerned about her having fallen 'to incestuous sheets'. His attitude to his dead father, his mother and his new father are all made clear to the audience here, but we may suspect that he has a habit of exaggeration and strong passion, confirmed by his use of three names of mythological characters. His reference to the sixth commandment — thou shalt not kill — and application of it to suicide as well as murder introduces the first of many Christian precepts in the play and shows Hamlet to be concerned about his spiritual state and the afterlife. Many of the play's images and themes are introduced here, in some cases with their paired



opposites: Hyperion versus satyr; heart versus tongue; heaven versus earth; 'things rank and gross in nature'; memory; reason.

2 Act I scene 5 lines 92–112

Having heard the Ghost's testimony, Hamlet becomes distressed and impassioned. He is horrified by the behaviour of Claudius and Gertrude and is convinced he must avenge his father's murder. This speech is duplicative, contains much tautology, and is fragmented and confused. To reveal his state of shock he uses rhetorical questions, short phrases, dashes and exclamations, and jumps from subject to subject. God is invoked three times. The dichotomy between head and heart is mentioned again.

3 Act II scene 2 lines 546–603

Hamlet's mood shifts from self-loathing to a determination to subdue passion and follow reason, applying this to the testing of the Ghost and his uncle with the play. The first part of the speech mirrors the style of the First Player describing Pyrrhus, with its short phrasing, incomplete lines, melodramatic diction and irregular metre. This is a highly rhetorical speech up to line 585, full of lists, insults and repetitions of vocabulary, especially the word 'villain'; this suggests he is channelling his rage and unpacking his heart with words in this long soliloquy, railing impotently against himself as well as Claudius. He then settles into the gentler and more regular rhythm of thought rather than emotion. The irony being conveyed is that cues for passion do not necessarily produce it in reality in the same way that they do in fiction, and that paradoxically, deep and traumatic feeling can take the form of an apparent lack of, or even inappropriate, manifestation.

4 Act III scene 1 lines 56–89

This was originally the third soliloquy in Q1, and came before the entry of the Players. In Q2 it has been moved to later. Some directors therefore place this most famous of soliloquies at II.2.171, but this has the effect of making Hamlet appear to be meditating on what he has just been reading rather than on life in general whereas the Act III scene 1 placing puts the speech at the centre of the play, where Hamlet has suffered further betrayals and has more reason to entertain suicidal thoughts. The speech uses the general 'we' and 'us', and makes no reference to Hamlet's personal situation or dilemma. Although traditionally played as a soliloquy, technically it is not, as Ophelia appears to be overtly present (and in some productions Hamlet addresses the speech directly to her) and Claudius and Polonius are within earshot. At the time this was a standard 'question' (this being a term used in academic disputation, the way the word 'motion' is now used in debating): whether it is better to live



unhappily or not at all. As always, Hamlet moves from the particular to the general, and he asks why humans put up with their burdens and pains when they have a means of escape with a 'bare bodkin'.

Hamlet also questions whether it is better to act or not to act, to be a passive stoic like Horatio or to meet events head on, even if by taking up arms this will lead to one's own death, since they are not to be overcome. There is disagreement by critics (see Rossiter, p. 175) as to whether to 'take up arms against a sea of troubles' ends one's opponent or oneself, but it would seem to mean the latter in the context. Although humans can choose whether to die or not, they have no control over 'what dreams may come', and this thought deters him from embracing death at this stage. Although death is 'devoutly to be wished' because of its promise of peace, it is to be feared because of its mystery, and reason will always counsel us to stick with what we know. Strangely, the Ghost does not seem to count in Hamlet's mind as a 'traveller' who 'returns'. Given that Hamlet has already concluded that he cannot commit suicide because 'the Everlasting had...fixed/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter', there is no reason to think he has changed his mind about such a fundamental moral and philosophical imperative.

C. S. Lewis claims that Hamlet does not suffer from a fear of dying, but from a fear of being dead, of the unknown and unknowable. However, Hamlet later comes to see that this is a false dichotomy, since one can collude with fate rather than try futilely to resist it, and then have nothing to fear. The 'conscience' which makes us all cowards probably means conscience in the modern sense, as it does in 'catch the conscience of the King' (II.2.603). However, its other meaning of 'thought' is equally appropriate, and the double meaning encapsulates the human condition: to be capable of reason means inevitably to recognise one's guilt, and both thought and guilt make us fear punishment in the next life. With the exception of Claudius, intermittently and not overridingly, and Gertrude after being schooled by Hamlet, no other character in the play shows evidence of having a conscience in the sense of being able to judge oneself and be self-critical.

This has a slower pace than the previous soliloquies, a higher frequency of adjectives, metaphors, rhythmical repetitions, and regular iambics. Hamlet's melancholy and doubt show through in the use of hendiadys, the stress on disease, burdens, pain and weapons, and the generally jaundiced world view. The 'rub' referred to in line 65 is an allusion to an obstacle in a game of bowls which deflects the bowl from its intended path, and is yet another indirection metaphor.



What is the question Hamlet is asking in his fourth soliloquy?

The following interpretations are offered by the editors of the Arden edition (p. 485), who favour the first one.

- 1 He is comparing the advantages and disadvantages of being alive and only tangentially recognising that man has the power to escape a painful existence by committing suicide.
- 2 The 'question' concerns the abstract choice between life and death and focuses on suicide throughout, but as a concept only.
- 3 Hamlet is debating whether to end his own life.
- 4 The question is whether or not Hamlet should kill Claudius.
- 5 Hamlet is persuading himself that he wishes to proceed with revenge and that he must not let thought interfere.
- 6 The speech is asking whether one should act or not act as a general principle and practice.

5 Act III scene 2 lines 395–406

Now Hamlet feels ready to proceed against the guilty Claudius. He is using the stereotypical avenger language and tone in what the Arden edition calls 'the traditional night-piece apt to prelude a deed of blood' (p. 511). He is aping the previous speaker's mode as so often, trying to motivate himself to become a stage villain, by identifying with Lucianus, the nephew to the king. This is the least convincing of his soliloquies because of the crudity of the clichéd utterance, and one suspects it is a leftover from an earlier version of the revenge play. The emphasis at the end, however, is on avoiding violence and showing concern for his own and his mother's souls; his great fear is of being 'unnatural', behaving as a monster like Claudius. He is, however, impressionable to theatrical performance, as we saw from his reaction to the Pyrrhus/Hecuba speeches earlier, and this carries him through to the slaying of Polonius before it wears off and, if we can believe it, "A weeps for what is done'. This soliloquy creates tension for the audience, who are unsure of how his first private meeting with his mother will turn out and how they will speak to each other. He mentions his 'heart' and 'soul' again.

6 Act III scene 3 lines 73–96

Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius while he is praying, claiming that this would send him to heaven, which would not be a fitting punishment for a man who killed his father unprepared for death and sent him to purgatory. For Hamlet revenge must involve justice. It begins with a hypothetical 'might', as if he has already decided to take no action, confirmed by the single categorical word 'No' in line 87, the most decisive utterance in the play. The usual diction



is present: 'heaven' (4), 'hell', 'black', 'villain' (2), 'sickly', 'soul' (2), 'heavy', 'thought', 'act'.

7 Act IV scene 4 lines 32–66

Hamlet questions why he has delayed, and the nature of man and honour. He resolves again to do the bloody deed. Once again, he is not really alone; he has told Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to move away but they are still on stage, following their orders to watch him.

Despite exhortation and exclamation at the end, this speech excites Hamlet's blood for no longer than the previous soliloquies. Though it seems to deprecate passive forbearance and endorse the nobility of action — by definition one cannot be great if one merely refrains — the negative diction of 'puffed', 'eggshell', 'straw', 'fantasy' and 'trick' work against the meaning so that it seems ridiculous of Fortinbras to be losing so much to gain so little, and neither Hamlet nor the audience can be persuaded of the alleged honour to be gained. Fortinbras — who is not really a 'delicate and tender prince' but a ruthless and militaristic one, leader of a 'list of lawless resolute' (I.1.98) — seems positively irresponsible in his willingness to sacrifice 20,000 men for a tiny patch of ground and a personal reputation. Critics dispute whether Hamlet is condemning himself and admiring Fortinbras, having accepted that the way to achieve greatness is to fight and win, like his father, or whether he has now realised how ridiculous the quest for honour is, and that one should wait for it to come rather than seek it out. As the Arden editors point out, there is double-think going on, whereby 'Hamlet insists on admiring Fortinbras while at the same time acknowledging the absurdity of his actions' (p. 371). As so often when Hamlet is debating with himself and playing his own devil's advocate, the opposite meaning seems to defeat the conscious argument he is trying to present. Lines 53 to 56 are grammatically obscure and add to the confusion. What is clear is Hamlet's frustration with himself at the beginning of the soliloquy, which the 26 monosyllables comprising lines 43–46 powerfully convey.