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Written from 1599 to 1601, William Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' is widely acknowledged as portraying a society in which the natural order has been attacked. Through the characterisation of Hamlet himself it is evident that this bleak portrait of a world in which the balance has been disturbed has an impact on his entire life's journey where traditional values and goodness is overshadowed by Machavellian schemes and Faustian bargains. Though contextually this play encapsulates the Jacobean zeitgeist, its timeless interpretation of one man grappling to deliver justice in a world corrupt from within continues to resonate with modern audiences. The play encompasses perennial notions such as the morality of revenge, antithetical conflict between appearance and truth, and existential conceptions of mortality, all of which have been injected with an overarching disillusionment fostered by a dangerous landscape. As Hazlitt in 1817 supported such issues burdening the psyche of the misanthropic hero as 'as real as our own thoughts - it is we who are Hamlet.

The challenge of fulfilling an injunction for vengeance whilst pertaining to theocratic values encompasses the play in its entirety as Hamlet's moral compass is skewed by the disturbance in the natural definition of good and evil. Carrying out revenge is no easy feat for a humanistic Renaissance man in a jaded medieval world, and as Marcellus rightly implores in Act 1 Scene 5 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. The concept of a Divine Monarchy within a 'great Chain of Being' exacerbates Hamlet's filial duty to avenge his father's 'foul and most unnatural murder' and yet this task goes against every moral fibre of his being. In his first soliloquy filled with acrimonious intent he describes Claudius as a 'Hyperion to a Satyr' ~~in juxtaposition~~ juxtaposed with the virtues of his father. However, once the ghost makes his desire known it is realised that it could be a 'goblin damned'; this uncertainty thus culminates in Hamlet's delay. The character foils of Laertes and Yoricus make no hesitation on discovering their

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father's had been murdered, the former blaspheming 'conscience and grace to the profoundest pit! / I dare damnation'. The recurrent ~~image~~^{motif} of miasma in phrases such as 'things rank and gross in nature / possess it merely' in reference to Denmark itself and 'tis an unweeded garden / that grows to seed...' are poignant examples of a world not lush with happiness and goodness, but in which evil has taken hold. The nexus of this decay is Claudius and the apparently incestuous marriage to Gertrude who went 'with such dexterity' to those sheets. Indeed 'the serpent who did take thy father's life / now near his crown' and thus as it appears satan himself is ruling the country there is no space for morality to thrive. It is only after the Metatheatrical device of 'The Mouse Trap' (The Murder of Gonzago) that Hamlet vowed 'my thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth', referring to kill Claudius with an emphatic 'no' when he is 'fit and seasoned for passage'. In



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Start here. Hamlet could only commit murder after it was certain Claudius was the killer and 'justice' in his eyes was restored. However, compromising his own integrity and losing his life were high prices to pay. Had the world not transfigured into such a corrupt lair as it is depicted in the play, ~~the plot~~ one could argue that the plot would be entirely different.

The Danish court is a microcosm of political subterfuge where the ruling couple is impure, feeding into a bleak portrait of this world. Hamlet himself cryptically states 'nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so', a sentiment which is blatantly wrong in any other context where there would be a balance between what is acceptable. The 'antic disposition' which he puts on in a setting where the Keynesian traits of intrigue and duplicitous manipulators reign is necessary to uphold an air of secrecy. However, the very fact that 'though this be madness, yet there be method in it' is recognised

reveals that this society is one of normalcy subverted. Polonius himself states to Laertes 'thus above all - to thine own self be true' while actually calculating his every move. In the setting of Elsinore castle, 'revenge should have no bounds' according to the King, once again highlighting that this 'canker of our nature' is perpetuating a web of deception. The 'Dumb Show' of Act III scene V is the ultimate act of a skilful interspersion of drama with reality, which incited a reaction from Claudius to which the phrase 'we have true souls, it touches us not' certainly did not apply. The most poignant manifestation of deception however is that of disloyalty, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become collateral damage in the many scenes unfolding, to which Hamlet responds by ordering their execution, 'I must be cruel, only to be kind'. Even in his indifference towards Ophelia he states 'I am proud, forgetful, ambitious', while in a paroxysmic moment of aphasia only a few lines later discounts his

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prose in the phrase, 'we are arrant knaves all, believe none of us'. Thus, the enduring deceptiveness of all in the Danish court reinforces the notion of a world in which the balance has been disturbed, culminating in an unbridled sense of rampant disillusionment.

The notion of life after death and the fate of one's soul is called into question as Hamlet must face the possible reality of his actions. In his soliloquy of Act II Sc ii he describes death as an 'undiscovered country'. The longing for 'self slaughter' is what truly pains a bleak portrait of the world however. In his seminal speech he laments 'the wonder of nature and paragon of animals, and yet what is this quintessence of dust?'. As Tillyard suggests, this is the epitome of the struggle which the Renaissance man faces: Hamlet is left with the baffling humor predicament of being made in the image of God

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and being descended from fallen Adam'. Therefore, this new epoch of existentialist thinking and enlightened thought means that 'just as Alexander returneth to dust' so too does everyone in the mortal realm. As Helen Gardner writes in 'The Business of Criticism' (1959), a dichotomy of the mind must exist in every thing; man who wishes to achieve justice without outrage to conscience. Hamlet's struggle with a fatal task and Dionysian paradigm result in the pondering of death which a man of his age should not have to endure. Ego, this conception of mortality is present in a world where young and old are corrupted by the harsh world around them.

In conclusion, William Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' does indeed depict a world where much goodness and hope has been lost and balance can only be destroyed through sin.

and death. Though this ~~bleak~~ interpretation
of the play is bleak, it is nonetheless a
fascinating one to explore by readers.

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