The Impossible Step Usually Not Taken

*Illustrating the Cowardice Present in Hamlet*

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 The distinct line that separates the cowards from the bold often appears endless in width and is nearly impossible to cross. Any coward has the capability to formulate a plan against evil, however only those who possess true courage and take that valiant step of action are considered heroes. Reading Hamlet allows one to be witness to a variety of characters who reflect the necessity of having the dignity to stand strong in genuine will, and to further use this motivation as fuel to ignite a flame of action. Laertes, the only noble character in the play, demonstrates true heroism in actively avenging his father and sister’s death for justice’s sake. Claudius, a once guilty King responsible for murder becomes desensitized to immorality, ultimately causing the loss of his conscience. Despite Hamlet’s eventual killing of Claudius during his final breathes of life, his constant indecisiveness and inability to act upon deep thoughts unveiled his inner cowardice, and brought him and many of his companions into the abyss of insanity. In analyzing Hamlet, one can see that once cowardice manifests the brain, the inability to take action ultimately leads to insanity, while malicious acts create a rotten soul. Hamlet stresses the importance of not only having a genuine heart that fights for justice, but to own the bravery necessary to put those plans into motion.

The satisfaction brought forth from the success in fighting for justice masks the pain felt from the wounds attained. Life has its way of constantly throwing those most undeservingly to the ground; it is those strong in spirit and courageous at heart that get back up and battle even after suffering a devastating blow. In reading Hamlet, Laertes is the only character to exemplify the execution of a just act, for although his revenge against Hamlet is brutal, Hamlet was responsible for the death of two innocent beings by mentally killing Ophelia and physically murdering Polonius. Hamlet and Laertes both seek to revenge the innocent deaths of their father, yet as Hamlet contemplates everything and prolongs his vengeance, Laertes becomes a man of action and immediately pursues his desires. “My lord, I will be ruled, the rather if you could devise it so that I might be the organ” (Laertes, Act IV Scene VII). This distinction between Hamlet and Laertes depicts the difference between an indecisive coward and a bold man of action, and how one died insane while the other a noble death. Contrast to the brave Laertes, Hamlet often preferred to end his life rather than to respond with action against his underserved grief and sorrow. “Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, or that the Everlasting had not fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter!” (Hamlet, Act I Scene II). Laertes’ immediate response to the death of his father and sister through fighting Hamlet to the death bears one witness to how a valiant human must possess the inner bravery to charge back against the unmerited fate brought forth by others, while understanding that possible repercussions felt in the future are worth the chance to avenge a wrongful and despicable act. For not satisfying inner anguish often results in destruction to the peace of mind, to which the only path left to follow is the path towards madness.

The wound left on the conscience from a malicious act tends to hurt more as time progresses forward; however, with enough gashes, all feeling is lost, and the heart becomes a site of eternal darkness. The ability to courageously take action is a precious gift that few are blessed with, while some misuse it and turn their soul rotten through evil actions. Through the succession of Hamlet, one is witness to the transformation of a guilty criminal into a heartless human being capable of no remorse. After the superficial fulfillment of attaining the throne through committing a wrongful act had vanished, Claudius was left solely with a guilty heart. “O, 'tis true! How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience…O heavy burden!” (Claudius, Act III Scene I). Although Claudius did take action in completing the assassination of King Hamlet, his spirit became dark from the immoral nature of the act itself. Therefore, the mark of intrinsic bravery is not only the ability to set in motion the thoughts and plans one may have, but to also ensure that these thoughts are genuine and integrous. Claudius’ spiteful acts accounted for so many slashes to the conscience that enough scar tissue was formed so that he could no longer feel any guilt for even the most villainous of acts. “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (Claudius, Act III Scene III). One who acts selfishly is a coward, since he does not battle for the greater good of humanity. The power of guilt has the ability to tear the mind to the point of insanity, while an overexposure to its pain results in the utter demolition of the heart’s compassion and empathy.

No matter how intelligent one may be, the inability to respond to an attack with vengeful action results in a frail minded coward. The universe is cruel, and often presents only one perfect opportunity to make the difficult decision of whether to hide in the shadows or emerge from the darkness; it is bravery that enables one to swing back with full force. Hamlet was a Prince blessed with an incredible mind capable of devising elaborate plans, but was cursed with cowardice, which ultimately fueled his indecisive actions and spiraled him into insanity. “Now might I do it, now he is a-praying…No. Up sword, and know thou a more horrid hent” (Hamlet, Act III Scene III). At this very moment, Hamlet was afforded with the unbelievable opportunity to quietly slaughter the man who dehumanized his own father, and stole his seat to the throne. A true hero would have pounced on this chance; instead, cowardly excuses were made, and the opportunity was inevitably lost. Shakespeare uses irony to depict the importance of having the guts to take action when the world pushes back; killing Claudius would have actually resulted in him burning in hell, yet Hamlet’s justice was once again deprived of action due to his lack of strength. With every failure to regain peace of mind through avenging his father’s unjust murder, Hamlet’s sanity slowly crumbled to the point where he calls himself a coward and later questions suicide. “Now I am alone. Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I...am I a coward?” (Hamlet, Act II Scene II). The mark of a valiant human is their constant desire to make right the wrongs of the world, using only hope to fuel their ambition. With each blow to his mind, Hamlet lost the battle against life, and lost the desire to live. One may argue that the eventual killing of Claudius proves Hamlet’s courage, however at this point the act is meaningless; Hamlet will be dead within minutes, and his past failures have left too many permanent scars on the heart. There is no heroism in attempting to fight once the war is already lost.

Life’s short span affords no time to hold back in the shadows or act selfishly to later feel guilt. Through the reading of Hamlet, it is proven that the cowardice which fuels the inability to pounce on valuable opportunities results in a descent towards insanity, while actions out of spite, greed, and evil produce a heartless beast. Thoughts and dreams must constantly be put into practice, so long as they are genuine and kind. A life without independence is a life without meaning. Ophelia, an innocent girl undeserving of her fate, was delivered into madness due to her inability to make her own decisions and dignify herself as a human being. Ophelia was used solely as a pawn, to the point where her father and brother were making decisions about who she could love. “Perhaps he loves you now, if with too credent ear you list his songs, or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity. Fear it, Ophelia” (Laertes, Act III Scene I). With each new thought or desire that Ophelia could not act on, she was led into insanity by her inability to take hold of life. If only Ophelia bravely stood up against Laertes and Polonius to become an independent woman; Ophelia would have flowered into a strong-minded and future Queen of Denmark. Instead, it was her insanity that finally allowed her to make an independent decision; to end life. Laertes, a man who fights for justice, illustrates how acting upon moral desires are noble. Claudius tarnished his own heart due to his villainous actions, a fate arguably worse than madness. Hamlet, the future King of Denmark, was brought into madness by his tragic flaw of cowardly failing to set motion to his intelligent plans. For there is no worse feeling in the body than the sharp pain in the soul that results from a lost opportunity to act upon a genuine desire.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon and Schuster, Paperbacks, 1992. Print.