TO BE OR NOT TO BE

An Analysis of Hamlet's Famous Soliloquy

Hamlet’s soliloquy begins with what must be the most famous line in the English canon: “To be or not to be.” For the character at that moment, it is an important question, literally one of “life and death”, but the general terms in which it is phrased gives it a resonance that reaches out past Hamlet. Hamlet poses the question on the most metaphysical level – not “shall I kill myself?”, nor “can I live like this?” but “to be or not to be”. It is existence itself that is up for debate in this speech.

The form of words guarantees that Hamlet’s question will be interpreted on a general level: the line uses one of the most basic verbs in the language, one without which English itself would surely be impossible to speak. The verb is then phrased in the infinitive, “to be”, rather than attaching it to any specific noun or pronoun (not even Hamlet’s own “I”). Balancing it on the other side of “or” is the simplest possible opposition, the same verb with a one syllable prefix: “not”.

Again, at the risk of labouring the point, “to be” is not opposed by “suicide”, “death” or “non-existence” but its simple grammatical opposite. Shakespeare boils down the issue to its simplest and most abstract form, until it almost doesn’t make sense – it would be interesting to know how many people who recognise the phrase “to be or not to be” could explain what it means. Shakespeare avoids any imagery, any particular reference that could narrow the question’s application, which is surely one reason why the phrase has resounded throughout our literate culture.

The "To Be or Not To Be" speech in the play, "Hamlet," portrays Hamlet as a very confused man. He is very unsure of himself and his thoughts often waver between two extremes due to his relatively strange personality. In the monologue, he contemplates whether or not he should continue or end his own life. He also considers seeking revenge for his father’s death. Evidence of his uncertainty and over thinking is not only shown in this speech, but it also can be referenced in other important parts of the play.

The topic of Hamlet’s soliloquy is his consideration of committing suicide. Throughout the speech, it is obvious that Hamlet is over thinking and wavering between two different extremes: life and death. "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them" (3, 1, 56-60). In this quotation, Hamlet wonders whether he should live and suffer the hardships that his life has to offer him or die in order to end the suffering. He believes that life is synonymous with suffering. The "whips and scorn of time, Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, The pangs of disproiz'd love, the law's delay, The insolence of office, and the spurns That patient merit of th'unworthy takes" (3, 1, 70-74) are all the suffering he sees in life. Hamlet wonders if living is worth enduring these numerous pains. "To die, to sleep - no more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks...To sleep, perchance to dream" (3, 1, 60-65). Should Hamlet choose to kill himself, all of his heartaches would be put to rest. He would no longer have to watch his uncle reign over the kingdom that he believes should belong to him and his father. He would no longer have to feel obligated to avenge his father’s death.