Masks Of Hamlet Essay, Research Paper

Masks of Hamlet

In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Hamlet, there is a prevalent and almost overwhelming theme. All throughout the play, all of the characters appear as one thing, with one standpoint, and one outlook. However on the inside, all of these characters are completely different. This “mask” theme, the way that all of the characters portray themselves as one person on the outside and one different one on the inside, is not in the least disguised by Shakespeare. Claudius, the murdering king, appears to be a somewhat kind, caring, and friendly person. But inside he is different. He is cold, calculating, and self-serving. But this might also be a mask. The women in the play, Ophelia and Gertrude, both use a type of mask to cover what is obvious in their lives, masking it so that they can continue living as if their existence was without cruelty. And finally Hamlet hides behind his madness, be it real or pretend, a person who is indecisive and spiteful. Masks in this play are not just a theme; they are the whole basis of it.

The mask theme develops throughout the play as various characters try to cover their secret intentions with a veneer of a whole other person. One of the most obvious, of course is Claudius. Claudius murdered his brother, the former king Hamlet, in order to become king himself. This murder, which was done in secret, with no one but Claudius knowing that the act was committed by him. Not only is he the King of Denmark, but he is also married to Queen Gertrude, his brothers former wife. These hideous and awful crimes have not been punished, and no one knows that Claudius has done this. When Claudius confronts anyone, he must become someone totally different. Claudius puts on a mask of his own. He is no longer the self-serving, cold, calculating man that he really is, out he becomes a kind, caring man who does his very best to ensure that Gertrude stays with him, and also so that he can do his best to keep Hamlet from trying to take the kingdom and destroy what Claudius has worked for so long to gain.To this end Claudius wears his mask. But is Claudius really the mask or what he is underneath? This is called into question when Claudius tries to seek redemption for his sins. This scene shows that his character, like Hamlets is not quite as clear cut as most men. Claudius wrestles with his guilt by asking himself, ^УWhere to serves mercy/ But to confront the visage of offense?/ And that^Тs in prayer but his twofold force,/ to be forestalled are we come to fall,/ Or pardoned being down?^Ф He then answers his own question by saying, ^УBut, O, what form of prayer/ can serve my turn? ^УForgive me my foul murder?^Ф/ That cannot be, since I am still possessed/ of those efforts for which I did the murder!/ My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.^Ф So Claudius comes to the understanding that, even though he wears redemption like his outside self, his real self cannot give up the trappings of this position. Claudius, in his questioning, has separated the mask from the person and has found that the mask is the fake Claudius. Not every character is so confused as to their nature, however.

The females roles in Hamlet are confused in a much different way. Both Ophelia and Gertrude mask themselves to the harsh realities of their life. Ophelia^Тs mask is far more fragile than any other. Despite Hamlets almost incessant cruelty to Ophelia drives her, eventually insane. She puts up a defense at first, trying to protect herself from Hamlet^Тs cruelty, but it fails. Ophelia believes for awhile , that Hamlet loves her deeply, and that he would never harm her directly. But soon, through his words and his actions, such as killing her father, shatters her mask that served to protect her from Hamlets assaults. When the truth and reality bit her, she breaks under its pressure and commits suicide. Gertrude, the other woman in the play, has a much stranger mask. She refuses to see or believe the truth that Hamlet shows her, the truth that Claudius murdered her husband for the kingdom. She is also convinced of Hamlets madness, but what he says does not affect her much at all. Even at her death she does not realize of see the truth of Claudius^Т betrayal. Her mask is one that puts herself into her world. As long as she lives her life unaffected, she is happy, and she will not let anything shatter her fantasy.

But the most complicated, and one of the best examples of a mask is Hamlet himself. The line between Hamlet^Тs mask and his reality is very fine and difficult to understand. His mask, or as it would seem to be, is his madness. Hamlet certainly acts the part well, for even if his madness is real, it is still a mask to cover his real self and his real plans. In his mad delusions he hurts countless people with his verbal attacks. He ruins his standing and the standing of others as well. Either way his madness can be looked upon, it still acts as a mask of his real self, an undecided, cruel, suspicious person who care for little but those who either are close to him, or have wronged him. Hamlet kills innocent people such as Rosencratz, Guildenstern, and Polonius, with no thought at all to the possible repercussions that murder could have.

After killing Polonius, Hamlet encounters Laertes, Polonius^Т son. Laertes, knowing that Hamlet was responsible for Polonius^Т death, attacks Hamlet. Hamlet cannot understand why; he literally does not realize that Laertes might be enraged with anger. Later Hamlet blames Polonius^Т death on his own madness, saying to Horatio, ^УIf Hamlet from himself be ta^Тen away,/ And when he^Тs not himself does wrong Laertes,/ Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it./ Who does it then? His madness.^Ф The fact that Hamlet can differentiate between his madness, his mask, and himself shows that not only does he not care about the damage he causes, but also that he has a mask and it. If he has a mask of madness, then it proves that he cares not for Ophelia. His actions towards her are atrocious, his attacks basically unnarrated. After she kills herself, Hamlet finds her grave site and says, from his true self, ^УI loved Ophelia, Forty thousand brothers/ could not with their quantity of love/ Make up my sum.^Ф If Hamlet loved Ophelia so, then he would not have treated her so badly. His madness was a mask, no matter how thin, that covered up his resentment of Ophelia, and women in general. He treats his mother horribly, threatening her, and forcing her to submit to his will. Also Hamlet shows his real self by forging a death warrant for them, and having them killed without their last rites. This unabashed cruelty is not madness- it is Hamlet himself. His madness is a simple cover to mask his real doings and feelings.

Everyone in Hamlet has a mask. These all serve to provide their ^Уinner selves ^У with protection, and also to enable them to receive something that they want to get. From the women wanting a perfect world; to Claudius seeking to convince everyone of his kindness, while inside he is venomous, and to Hamlet and his mad masking of his inner spite and indecisiveness. The theme of masks is developed early on, and reaches a climax where all characters at one time hear false appearances. And as such, this theme is the control basis for the actions of the characters in the play.