ELA B30

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Hamlet

**Act II Questions**

1. What does Reynaldo and Polonius’ conversation reveal to the audience about Polonius's character? What theme does it introduce in the play?
2. How does the interaction between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern help to explain what's wrong with Hamlet? Why are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Denmark?
3. Hamlet's "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" soliloquy moves him to action? What does he decide to do at the end of this speech?
4. What is Ophelia upset about?
5. What mistake does Polonius fear he may have made?

Answer #2

In Act II Scene II, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are introduced as Hamlet’s former schoolfellows and courtiers. They are in Denmark, under the guise of casually visiting Hamlet but, in fact, they have been summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to find the reason behind Hamlet’s sudden bizarre behaviour and cheer him up as he is unable to recover from his father’s death. Claudius, also wants to know what and how much he knows about his father’s death and what might he do. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have their encounter with Hamlet, he questions them as to why they are in Denmark, by saying, “What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of fortune that she sends you to prison hither?” (II.ii.237-239). Hamlet feels Denmark is a prison as he is burdened by the death of his father and he suspects that his paternal uncle, Claudius, is involved in this foul play. He strongly feels the weight of the responsibility of avenging his father’s death. He also feels as if it is a sort of prison sentence that is withdrawing him of his inability to execute his free will and to select his own destiny.

 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern then redirect the conversation toward Hamlet’s ambition. They ask him that it must be his ambition which makes Denmark appear to be a prison, by saying, “Why then, your ambition makes it [Denmark] one [a prison]. ‘Tis [ambition] too narrow for your mind.” (II.ii.248-249). As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk to Hamlet in an attempt to uncover the reason behind his madness, Hamlet is already aware that Claudius has summoned his two friends to Denmark to spy on him. Therefore, Hamlet does not disclose any information about his mad behaviour. Instead he says that he is not ambitious, but the real reason to why he feels Denmark is a prison is due to his bad dreams. He says, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space--were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.254-256). The bad dreams that Hamlet mentions are subtle hints that correspond to the reasons behind his insanity. The reader can assume that by bad dreams, Hamlet is referring to the current events that are occurring in his life; father dying, mother’s hasty marriage with Claudius, father’s ghost appearing and telling Hamlet to avenge his death and now Claudius telling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet.

The conversation between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has shown that Hamlet perfectly fills the type of the most cunning and intelligent person in the play. Since, the moment he had talked to his ghost-father, he is up to some kind of planning about taking revenge from Claudius. The whole time he is pretending to be mad but actually he has full control over himself and the situation. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that, “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.” (II.ii.376-377). By saying this he is telling them that he is only mad sometimes. He is not completely mad as the king and the queen thinks but his madness follows in the direction of the wind. He pretends to be mad when this madness benefits his plan of revenge and helps to confuse his enemies.

In writing Hamlet, Shakespeare has adopted a revenge tragedy. Revenge implies to an individual who takes the law into his own hands in order to satisfy an inner urge. Some people associate revenge with seeking justice. These people are motivated by anger and brutality, and have no idea on how to conduit their negative feelings into something positive. These people believe that revenge will make them feel happy but it seems to have reverse effect. A person gets tied up in the continues back and forth cycle which leads to destruction on both sides. But, in a civilized society like ours, giving punishment to a criminal is given by the state or the government.