

How does Shakespeare use imagery to portray challenging ideas about truth and deceit in Hamlet?

In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

The enduring relevance of Shakespeare's Hamlet is partially due to the universal nature of the protagonist's struggle, as his attempt to discern truth from deceit reflects a continued human struggle for moral clarity. At the same time, the capacity for Shakespeare's texts to be interpreted contextually or through a range of critical lenses enables challenging ideas to be displayed, as the play's treatment of truth problematises Elizabethan questions about secular humanism, orthodoxy, and the monarchy. At its core, Hamlet is a play about truth, as the prince's filial obligation requires him to reveal Claudius's deceit; whereas his delay is grounded in his doubts about moral truth. Ultimately, it is Hamlet's capacity to reconcile these competing questions that enables the play to endure, as Hamlet's final victory reflects the capacity for moral action to overcome deceptive attempts to promote political expediency.

Hamlet's filial obligation to avenge precipitates the first tension between truth and deceit in the play, as the questionable nature of the ghost's accusation requires Hamlet to uncover the deceitful nature of Claudius's ascent to the throne. Shakespeare's use of hellish imagery, in describing the ghost dressed in a "fair and warlike form", connotes purgatory: suggesting the ghost is either "doom'd for a certain term to walk the night", or else, is a demonic manifestation designed to "tempt" Hamlet. Hence, while Hamlet is bound by filial obligation to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder", the ghost's possible deceit forces Hamlet to confirm the accusation. As a result, Hamlet adopts an "antic disposition", as Claudius's dishonesty ironically forces Hamlet to act deceitfully to discern the truth. At the same time, Shakespeare suggests that some truth is beyond recognition—and not hidden simply by deceit—as the circumstances surrounding Ophelia's death remain unresolved at the play's conclusion. Indeed, the ambiguous theatricality of the antic disposition problematises our capacity to understand Hamlet, as—despite his claim that he merely "puts it on"—his impulsive murder of Polonius introduces the possibility that the deceit of "rotten" Denmark has caused a sincere mental breakdown. Hence, Hamlet's initial interaction with the ghost structures the play around questions of truth and deceit, as Hamlet's paralysis is informed partly by his need to confirm the Ghost's accusations—a need that is complicated by Shakespeare's portrayal of limits to truth, through the unattainable nature of some human understanding.

Furthermore, Hamlet's ongoing paralysis proceeds from his attempt to find moral truth, as his continued reflection enables Shakespeare to challenge the paradoxical Elizabethan morality. Early on, Hamlet recognises a tension between the burgeoning secular humanism of the Renaissance and the entrenched religious orthodoxy, as his desire to "drink hot blood" is tempered by a "dread of something after death". While religious orthodoxy prohibits murder, it also endorses the Great Chain of Being, which consigns Denmark to the status of an "unweeded garden" until the false monarch is deposed. At the same time, humanism's focus on man as a "quintessence of dust" paradoxically denies any value to a human life, while also suggesting that it is all we have, and so must be protected. As a result, Hamlet's attempt to discern moral truth within these competing strands precipitates his delay. At the same time, Claudius's insincere religious deception—as "words without thoughts never to heaven go"—falsely prevents Hamlet from consummating his revenge, as the suspicion that killing Claudius "in the purging of his soul" will deliver him to heaven stops him. In contrast to the Manichean nature of Elizabethan morality,

Shakespeare resolves the tension about moral truth by instead deducing that it is beyond human comprehension. Here, Hamlet resolves his delay by instead recognising a “special providence in the fall of a sparrow”, as the image of the bird connotes humanity’s comparable ignorance in the face of God, limiting our capacity to understand moral truths by saying we might be able to understand our place in God’s broader plan.

While Shakespeare challenges our capacity for moral truth, he does, however, use Hamlet’s attempt to restore Denmark as a means of promoting the image of the beneficent truthful ruler over the Machiavellian deception endorsed by Claudius. The unease within “rotten” Denmark is established in the opening question, “who’s there?”, as the heightened threat of invasion suggests Claudius’s inadequacy when compared to his “armored” predecessor. Here, Hamlet is obligated by his status as Prince to ensure the solidity of the state, as he bemoans “cursed spite that he was born to set it right”. While Hamlet’s dramatic foil Fortinbras is advised that “revenge should have no bounds”, Hamlet is ennobled to the “distracted multitude” partially because of his thoughtful restraint. In contrast to the Senecan tradition of the revenge tragedy hero as a rash actor, Hamlet instead promotes the maintenance of the state through the conservation of the Great Chain of Being. Similarly, while Hamlet fixates on his mother’s “incestuous sheets”, the Ghost’s injunction that he must not “contrive against thy mother” suggests that her decision to marry Claudius was more grounded in a pragmatic desire to protect the state from the mobilising Fortinbras, and that she was not privy to his deceit. The significance of Hamlet’s approach to governance can only be understood contextually, and must be received in light of Shakespeare’s treatment of the play-within-a-play as a way of discerning the truth, by using a simplified pantomime to show the ghost’s murder. Examining the play Hamlet in light of The Mousetrap shows that Hamlet has a special relevance to Elizabethan audiences as a comment on anxiety surrounding the virgin Queen Elizabeth I’s death. Here, by contrasting Hamlet against Claudius and Laertes, Shakespeare denounces deceitful attempts at rule, promoting instead the bloodless inheritance of rightful rulers, like Fortinbras.

Ultimately, Shakespeare’s Hamlet uses the tension between truth and deceit to reflect on the moral, social, and political climate of Elizabethan England, as the protagonist’s attempt to discern the truth acts as a model for moral rule. Part of the play’s enduring success is this contextual relevance, but it is also underscored by an enduring, universal question of moral truth. Indeed, the success of Shakespeare’s depiction is partially due to his florid imagery, as his realisation of Denmark in a supernatural state of deceit, enables him to problematise the paradoxical nature of morality and instead promote a third way, where Hamlet discards his pursuit of moral truth and instead embraces discerning his individual role within the world.