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# Dadless: Dead Dads In Hamlet And The Effects On Their Children

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DADLESS: DEAD DADS IN *HAMLET* AND THE EFFECTS ON THEIR CHILDREN

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## **Abstract**

This research is a close look at the methods of grief as depicted by the children who lose their fathers in William Shakespeare's classic, *Hamlet*. The goal is to track each child's reaction to the sudden bereavement in a variety of physical and emotional manifestations. This has been done by first examining current literature on the text, followed by a review of historical context of the period in which the play was written, and finally analyzing each character's behavior. In doing so, this research seeks to highlight the importance of the presence of fathers within *Hamlet* and provide insight as to how bereavement shapes the narrative of not only a series of characters, but also of hundreds of years' worth of audiences.

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## 1. Introduction

Within *Hamlet*, the paramount display of a dead father is the Ghost of King Hamlet. He has died and continues to roam the earth, bound by a supernatural system of rules surrounding his own free will, confined by the limitations that his ghostliness has put on him. He is the first major subject and catalyst of events discussed in the play. This foundation implies a menacing responsibility for the events to follow by its mere presence; the instant his identity as Hamlet's father is made known, *Hamlet* revolves around his absence.

When a parent dies, grief is not just about grief; it is about abandonment on the most rudimentary human level: the caregiver leaving the dependent. The third definition of the word *abandon*, and the first definition relevant to human relationships as listed in the Merriam Webster online dictionary, is written, "to withdraw protection, support, or help from," ("abandon"). With this detachment from a parental unit, then, comes a sudden fear for survival that pronounces itself regardless of the child's age. Thus, *Hamlet* is very clearly not just a play about a dead father; it is an examination of the pinnacle of vulnerability that a human can experience, the feeling of utter helplessness that emerges as a result of this loss, and the unique, multi-faceted intensity of coping as exhibited by various characters.

While abandonment has a widely emotional connotation, it can also be or stem from a physical experience. The severing of the umbilical cord from the mother - the push of the child from the mother - is the first major experience of abandonment in a person's life. Ironically, it is also this emancipation from the mother's protection that starts one's life as an autonomous living thing. This action begins a series of little abdications from the mother. For example, if breastfed, the infant must experience being weaned off of their mother. Once the child grows in size and strength, another little abdication is that the child must learn to walk, and they will no longer be

held by their mother. An infant then becomes used to being cut off by the mother. The repeated experience of physical disengagement becomes part of the relationship. The abandonment by the mother is therefore expected, if not celebrated; it is an opportunity to cut ties with the cause of the child's ultimate extinction. Herein the father becomes the source of stability in a child's life, the element of constancy, whose physical relationship with the child is unchanging throughout their entire life. Consequently, the abandonment by the father, or the death of the father, is the next (and possibly most) significant in a person's life. Because of this, *Hamlet's* revolution around dead fathers is critical in its focus on the abandonment of Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes, and Fortinbras by the parent who was supposed to be their rock.

A second relevant definition of *abandon* is "to give (oneself) over unrestrainedly," ("abandon"). It holds a connotation of spontaneity, a mobilizing uninhibitedness that sets one on a course they cannot control. When each bereaved child (Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes, and Fortinbras) feels the loss of their father, they react with an unbridled passion distinctive to this definition of abandonment. My ultimate goal is to explore how the loss of a father affects his child/children within *Hamlet*, with an emphasis on evaluating their rising recklessness or lack of restraint that affects their motives, actions, and behavior throughout the duration of the play, specifically after the point where their father dies.

Previous research on *Hamlet* has examined the actions of each of the major characters as reflections of their personalities, rather than symptomatic of their grief. My research challenges this notion, arguing that every action that occurs post-death of the father is a coping mechanism. As the play progresses, these mechanisms contribute to the rest of the character's story in a way that changes their life forever - perhaps, in some cases, effectively shaping their future personas - but are inherently separate characteristics from those with which they were born. In the ongoing

battle of the value of nature versus nurture, grief and its outpourings are learned, and it is significant to note that in order for an actor to accurately portray their character they must understand the complexities of loss and how it affects their inner personalities. Audiences flock to the theatre for a sliver of human connection; perhaps *Hamlet* is considered by many the greatest play in the English language because its depiction of grief in its purest form is relatable in a way that typical dramas of personal motives simply are not.



## 2. Literature Review

In order to best explore how they grieve, I found it imperative to understand significant literary criticism pertaining to each character and their significant relationships and motivations, as well as vital insight on opinions and beliefs of Early Modern England, the time period in which William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. This review begins with Hamlet, the Man as an exploration of various understandings of the title character's behavior. Of course, a person is nothing if not made up of their roles in life, so the review moves onto Hamlet, the Son as explanations for further motivations as a son of two crucial characters (Gertrude and King Hamlet). After Hamlet comes Ophelia, another character heavily criticized by scholars. The concept of youth is then examined as a construct of the time, its difference in connotation from today's view, and how this status involves each bereaved character. Next, the burden of Women and Mothers, both of Early Modern England and within the play, is assessed, and subsequently the weight of Fathers is also considered. Lastly, the perceptions of Death and Grief in Early Modern England as expressed during the period are explored. This investigation of the literature fully informs my own research in allowing me to not only fully understand the characters from a variety of perspectives, but draw my own conclusions of characters' behavior as grieving people written through the lens of a man in a time surrounded by death.

### 2.1 Hamlet, the Man

Hamlet is notorious for his inability to perform the task outlined for him by his dead father: namely, killing his uncle, and in doing so taking revenge on his father's murderer. Much of his inaction, ironically, is attributed to his own blatant intention to procrastinate, rather than a series of excuses as iterated throughout his various soliloquies. A. C. Bradley, in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* lectures series, was one of the most notable scholars to assert that

Hamlet's undoing was directly linked to his own procrastination. He argues that Hamlet continually finds excuses to avoid killing his uncle by fabricating doubts of the Ghost that he does not possess, pondering suicide when he should be plotting his next move, and questioning whether or not he should kill his uncle at the perfectly opportune moment (Bradley 132-135). In support of this theory, Harold Bloom suggests that Hamlet acts as a variety of people in a theatre: sometimes an actor, sometimes a director, but usually a poet, finally relinquishing this role and therefore giving up his own destiny in the final act. His introspection is a result of trying to write his own story while simultaneously living it (Bloom 234). He moves slowly, trying to find the best possible outcome, attempting to prevent an end as tragic as his own father's while blindly unaware that his obsessive dawdling is the cause of seven unintended deaths: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, Gertrude, and lastly, himself (Bradley 136). Hamlet could be harshly judged for his foolish, melancholic, compulsive self-reflection, except, as Arthur Kirsch reminds us, for the fact that he is grieving. His behavior and garb is typical of Elizabethan mourning, and his reaction is also typical of a young man whose mother has, two months after the death of his father, gone off and married his uncle (Kirsch 19).

Truthfully, the only thing that makes Hamlet unique in his struggle is the complete lack of support from his elders. In contrast to his own grief, Queen Gertrude and Claudius are supposed to be in mourning as well; however, the pair are not only moving on, but celebrating their own marriage. In contrast to this clear apathy and the consequential apathy of the court, Hamlet appears to be exceptional in his grief. In summation, had his elders not been needlessly critical of his grief, Hamlet's mourning would not have been perceived within his own community as unusual.

## 2.2 Hamlet, the Son

A son is not only the child of a father, but of a mother. As aforementioned, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, proves to be the catalyst to much of Hamlet's anguish through her lack of grief towards her own dead husband, and for this reason has received not merely literary but personal criticism against her for generations. Some critics, like Bradley, describe her as "dull and shallow," (Bradley 167) while others, such as Granville-Barker, have the audacity to claim that her age would prohibit her from being a sexual person, judging that her reasons for marrying Claudius are not sexually motivated but are motivated by a pitiful desire to cling to anything that would make her seem youthful or worthy of attention (Granville-Barker 1: 227).

Carolyn Heilbrun, on the other hand, demands more respect of the Queen. Gertrude consistently proves herself capable and involved, like when she announces the poisoned cup the moment she feels her life slipping away in an effort to save her son; she also proves to know her son's heart, believing him capable of murder only the moment before he stabs Polonius (Heilbrun 204). On the other hand, Gertrude is also responsible for marrying Claudius, acting as impetus for the tragedy to follow (206). As such, Gertrude's fatal flaw was not one of frailty, as Hamlet claims, but instead of lust and the desire to be desired (202).

On the whole, Gertrude is arguably a better parent and role model than King Hamlet had been in young Hamlet's youth, as Bloom indicates that Hamlet was Yorick's "true son," letting young Hamlet ride piggyback and kissing him like a good father would have (Bloom 241). Through his own flashes of joyful memories, Hamlet proves that his paternally-associated childhood does not come from his father, it comes from Yorick. Perhaps this is part of the reason why Hamlet is so hesitant to carry out the Ghost's orders: he does not know his father enough to tell if his words are characteristic. Perhaps this is also part of the reason why it is so difficult for

him to mourn his father: it is much easier for a person to grieve someone loved and lost than someone whose memory still echoes anger and unfinished business. Nevertheless, Hamlet's maternal relationship lies appropriately with his mother, proving that Gertrude has been more than competent in her duties as a parent for Hamlet's entire life.

Of course, Hamlet is technically of age and therefore should be able to take care of himself. Freud asserts that his anger was due in part to an Oedipal complex and inherent longing to be with his mother sexually (Freud). Bradley acknowledges this longing, but from a less sexual perspective, suggesting that all Hamlet desperately wants in the end is to do well by his mother despite their differences (Bradley 138). Through this devotion to his mother, we see Hamlet behaving not merely through the lens of an autonomous person, or a person devoted to his father, but as a son with a living mother who refuses to show him how to grieve through her immediate marriage to her own husband's brother and constant urgings to cheer up.

### **2.3 Ophelia**

Ophelia is unique in that, like Hamlet, her grief for her father is oftentimes dismissed as symptomatic of other problems in her life. She is derogated by Carroll Camden, who frames her as a pitiful, weak thing that pines for a man who does not love her (Camden 255). On the other hand, some attribute her propensity for madness to her surroundings: a people who hold fast to the misogyny characteristic of Early Modern England, which will be elaborated upon later. Elaine Showalter argues that in a way, Ophelia's madness is a way to break free of these misogynistic chains. Ophelia spends much of her time throughout *Hamlet* holding fast to the image she has as her father's obedient daughter, and while her last moments are grim, they are the only way she knows how to declare her autonomy as a woman (Showalter 81). These opinions leave little room for the idea that she is simply acting out of her own grief - a focus

which many critics, intentional or not, exclusively reserve for the character of Hamlet.

## 2.4 Youth

*Hamlet's* major characters can be divided into two categories regardless of physical age: the parents, namely Gertrude, Polonius, Claudius (a stepfather), the King Hamlet (deceased), and the King Fortinbras (also deceased), and their children, Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes, and Fortinbras. While these characters are portrayed as young adults, some possibly in their twenties or thirties, they are still considered within the play to be children due to their lack of familial or economic responsibility, or due to their clear dichotomy as a unit separate from the adult, parental figures.

An *age-graded* influence is an event that strongly coincides with the age of an individual on a universal level, such as when a person learns to speak or hits puberty (Berk 10). *Age norms*, on the other hand, are behaviors that are expected of a person in accordance with their age; for example, in current western culture, one age norm is the assumption that by age thirty-five a person is no longer living with their parents (Siporin). In Early Modern England, the labels of *childhood*, *youth*, and *age* were not considered age grades defined by a strict number on a social clock, but rather as age norms, social constructs guided by biological occurrences that could be easily distorted should an individual not themselves bear children. Youth, distinct from our current understanding of the word, was viewed in Early Modern England as a time when one was too old, or biologically developed, to be considered a child but too inexperienced, irresponsible, and physically fit to be considered aged (Strode 245). In *Hamlet*, the “children” are labeled as such because they behave as such: they have their love affairs, they sneak out at night, they whine, they behave selfishly and act in self-interest, or they are perceived to be living autonomously yet much of their behavior continues to live in the shadow of their parents. Youth still defines every fiber of their emotional and spiritual existence.

Youth's broad definition as a state of limbo between the stages of childhood and age can be attributed to the rise of sentimentality within the family structure during the Black Plague in Shakespeare's time. In modern Western culture, it is considered typically socially normative for parents to take care of their children. This attitude, however, is considered somewhat recent history. Some historians believe that before approximately 1600, children were treated as miniature grownups, smaller versions of adults that were expected to behave as contributing members of the household, while other historians believe that a multitude of age norms existed (Young 24). Nonetheless, at this time any relationship between parent and child would have been more physicalized - feeding, dressing, carrying from place to place, etc. - than emotionally dependent, as children were considered adults by the ages of twelve or fourteen (Young 24).

But by the time of the Elizabethan era, a major shift occurred that influenced parents to perceive their children as helpless and demanding of care. Due to the wave of plague that struck during this time, children were dying rapidly: approximately twenty-five percent of children died by the age of ten (Young, 54), with approximately thirty percent of children dead by the age of fifteen (Payne). England was traumatized, and with this trauma came a need for intimacy that would get them through these incredible losses (Jost 199). One of the ways this psychological need for intimacy was met was through personal bonding as exhibited between parent and child, as the child's life expectancy was so short and the parent could expect so little earthly time with them. Consequently, the relatively new emotional bond established between parent as caregiver and child as dependent was formed. Where a person was once considered a child until they were physically capable enough to be considered adults, now a person was able to emerge from childhood but still be considered a youth in their family's eyes until they had a family of their own.

## 2.5 Women and Mothers

Seen often enough in the way Hamlet treats Ophelia, one incredibly pertinent factor within Elizabethan England was the inherent misogynistic attitudes stemming from the country's religious Protestant background. "Nothing" was a slang word for the vagina, a blatant indication that if one didn't have a penis, she was nothing (Showalter 80). Women were dismissed as apathetic and unwilling to love (McEachern 195-196) while ironically also judged as weepy and moody (Showalter 80).

English Protestantism upheld some of these beliefs through their beloved Bible stories. Many stories featuring a man's downfall at the hand of a woman, such as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or Samson and Delilah, were enough to justify and uphold these attitudes (Gilmore 85), and affected every facet of men and women's relationships out in the world as well as within the family structure. George Strode's 1618 *The Anatomie of Mortalitie* outlines some of these implications. Entering the world via a woman, as all humans do, is looked upon as a source of punishment. Reconciling generation after generation for the sins of Adam and Eve, humans stopped being born of their father's rib, to be born of their mother instead. As iterated in *The Anatomie of Mortalitie*, humankind's ultimate demise is fulfilled by simply existing; it was created by God from slime and continues, person by person, to be brought screaming into the world in a mix of their own and their mother's bodily fluids. People were conditioned to expect their own downfalls, directly linked to their association with the women in their lives.

## 2.6 Fathers

If the mother is believed to be the cause of pain, the father is believed to be the cause of pleasure. Fathers, like the King, were viewed as chosen by God to carry out their jobs - in this case, the job of teacher and breadwinner (Young 31-32). This attitude is not unique to

Elizabethan England alone, though; it is one that continues to permeate through all of society. Children, young men in particular, find that without their fathers present, they feel an overwhelming anxiety loaded with the task of living up to their own expectations without actually having the figure present in their lives (Csikszentmihaly 167). Upon the death of a father, an individual experiences an unparalleled sense of loss that proves to be so deep it makes them question their own existence.

## **2.7 Death and Grief**

George Strode's letter/essay *Anatomie of Mortalitie* outlines for a couple of bereaved parents the three possibilities, or certainties, of death, namely: the body, the soul, and eternal damnation (Strode 2). The body dies by natural causes, the soul dies by sinning, and damnation leaves the body and soul in hell for all eternity (Strode 2). Grief, accordingly, is equally physiological in practice, rather than simply an emotional or psychological response (Barclay et al. 5). In Early Modern England, grief was considered dangerous; it was forceful and all-encompassing and, in severe cases, there could be no escape (Campbell 112-113).

In *Immoderate Mourning for the Dead*, another such letter/essay by John Owen in 1680, reminds the mourning parents that, as iterated in the Bible, no amount of weeping and wailing would ever bring a person back from the dead (Owen A3). He also mentions that he does not believe in ghosts, although witchcraft and the paranormal were commonly believed to have existed at the time, and were represented in popular media and entertainment (54). With death at every corner, it was easy to lose oneself in it; grief was normal, but criticized if excessive.



### 3. Methodology

My main goal is to examine how the deaths of the fathers in *Hamlet* affect their offspring through the ways that they grieve and, on a deeper level, the permanent changes that occur due to both the height and depth of their grief. Specifically, I am searching for alterations in mood, temperament, or physicality that are indicative of grief, especially when they seem reckless or uninhibited in support of my emphasis on the use of the word “abandon.”

The majority of my research is qualitative, considering a variety of sources from across the spectrum of literary criticism to explore their perspectives on the “human condition” as portrayed within Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I have done my own thorough investigation of the text, poring over a 1980 Bantam Edition of *Hamlet* for insight. This edition happens to be the very same text I used in high school, stolen from my alma mater. A dear friend two years ahead of me in high school had coincidentally used the same copy as a senior and tragically died of a brain tumor the year it magically wound up in my possession. Using the text, I outline the course of each character’s major temperamental and attitude shifts, noting how their relationships with themselves or others are affected by the loss of their fathers, and comparing them with my own shifts - remembering the pain I felt as each day grew farther from my friend’s last living day on earth. While different from the way I mourned my father, my grief for her still echoed through the pages.

Upon beginning my research, I understood from my own father’s death that dead dads can be very impactful; however, I was still left with the questions. If Shakespeare’s own son, Hamnet, had historically died shortly before *Hamlet* was written, why didn’t he write a play about a dead son? Why, instead, did he write a play about absent fathers? I believe he wanted to investigate the experience of abandonment potentially experienced by his own son in the last

years of his life.

Where my own research stands apart from similar work in my field is the fact that I was drawn to a different interpretation of the text, influenced by the historical significance and attitudes of both Elizabethan and modern grief into account, whereas many contemporary critics focus mostly on a text-based approach. Subsequently, in order to understand the significance of absent fathers in the Elizabethan Era, I had to go straight to the source. With a grant from the Pforzheimer Honors College at Pace University, I was able to travel to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC. There, I found some extremely helpful primary documents that helped to give me an idea of the significance of not only death and grief in Early Modern England, but also topics like religion and gender, that allow me to fully understand the scope of the characters' pain.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Hamlet

Hamlet, the title character, is the most candid and developed exploration of grief and abandonment within the play. He displays this grief through three major devices: first, through his physicality and moodiness as depicted throughout the play; second, through his inaction or inability to carry out his own desires; and third, through his eventual insanity.

Hamlet starts out grieving in very typical fashion. Upon his earliest moments in the play, in response to his mother accusing him of seeming to grieve too hard, he says,

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”  
 ‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good Mother,  
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
 Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
 Nor the dejected havior of the visage,  
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
 That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,  
 For they are actions that a man might play.  
 But I have that within which passes show;  
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.76-86)

In doing so, Hamlet outlines for his audience (both within the play and outside of the play) exactly how he grieves in dress, breath, gaze, and mood. In one short monologue, he describes the black clothes he wears, his constant sighs, his constant crying, his gloomy face, and the fact that his inner self is as full of grief and anxiety as his outer self might seem to over-indicate.

His moodiness is also indicated to us by the remarks of his own family members, such as Claudius's accusation of "'Tis unmanly grief," (I.ii.94), as well as his own sarcastic comments, such as responding to his uncle's questioning of his blue attitude with, "Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun," (I.ii.67).

It is clear that Hamlet is much more upset with his mother more than he is with his own uncle, as he very directly insults her to her face and behind her back. For instance, as editor David Bevington notes, Hamlet insinuates that Gertrude is "common," referring to sexual baseness (12n72). He also famously declares, "... frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146), denouncing an entire gender of people over Gertrude's marriage to his uncle. While it is true that at this point Hamlet is unaware that Claudius is responsible for his father's death, Claudius still managed to marry Gertrude, and yet receives little punishment for doing so. This furiousness on Hamlet's part can best be justified by his hope that she, as the mother, would teach him how to grieve properly; instead, she advises him against it, telling him to move on because death happens to everyone (I.ii.68-73). Because of this, Hamlet feels like he is responsible for teaching Gertrude how to grieve, a role reversal that leads to his bitterness towards her. Hamlet mentions in his soliloquy in Scene ii that "Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes, / She married," (I.ii.154-156). Gertrude mourned her dead husband for but a moment, and once she was finished, felt that she was okay enough to remarry. Hamlet, in contrast, does not believe that he will ever be okay. His grief goes beyond a few tears; it knows no bounds, continues to maintain control over him for the rest of the play.

The second symptom of grief that is depicted of Hamlet is that of his constant inaction. Considered by many critics to be a character flaw, his ineptitude to carry out his own wishes must rather be considered a mere tendency ignited by his bereavement and feelings of isolation

during the time in which the play takes place. In other words, while Hamlet might often be stuck in his own head, it is his grief that prevents him from killing Claudius even when he desires to carry out his dead father's wishes. Hamlet is depicted as stubborn by his uncle the first time we see him. Regardless of Claudius's own personal motives, he says of Hamlet's grief, "But to persever / In obstinate condolement is a course / Of impious stubbornness," (I.ii.92-94). In this way, it is established very early on that Hamlet is stuck, so to speak. Hamlet himself might argue that it is an intentional kind of stuck, a willingness to grieve that no one else has, but nevertheless it ironically sets the course of a person who cannot be changed, regardless of who instructs him.

Simultaneous to the main action of the play, Hamlet isolates himself from various relationships and friendships. In Act II, immediately following his dead father ordering him to commit the act, Hamlet has very little support or companionship helping him move past his grief, a factor that is largely indicative of how Hamlet copes with his grief. First of all, he isolates himself from his girlfriend, Ophelia. Ophelia is mentioned for the first time in Act II Scene i, where she mentions that he is acting very strangely but does not indicate what is the matter, but merely gets up and leaves (II.i.89-102). Then, of course, in Scene iii Hamlet breaks up with Ophelia, saying "Get thee to a nunnery," (II.iii.122) more than once, rather than be her boyfriend. Secondly, he isolates himself from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his old school friends. While they are clearly puppets of Claudius and Gertrude, a fact of which Hamlet is fully aware, they still constitute former companions from which Hamlet distances himself (II.ii.294-311). He does so by feigning insanity, which he carries out by speaking in metaphors and jumping from thought to thought. Lastly, even his best friend, Horatio, is absent from Act II in its entirety. In Act III he makes a short appearance and pledges his loyalty to Hamlet's cause (III.i.52-88), but has very little time or opportunity to speak. Even aside from his mother and

stepfather, Hamlet copes with his loss by isolating himself, creating a vacuum for himself and the memory of his father that proves to be impenetrable by even his closest companions.

Hamlet also shows a number of physical symptoms throughout the play, including a great deal of fatigue. He proves to be exhausted in Act II, when he conveys that he "...lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises..." (II.ii.297-298). Lack of exercise can prove to be both an effect as well as a cause of fatigue, but either way, it is evident that Hamlet is not taking care of his body due to his grief. Moreover, there is evidence that he is not sleeping well, which can lead to exhaustion. His potential experience with insomnia is outlined in the famous "To be, or not to be" speech, when he says,

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause. (III.i.66-69)

In these lines, he admits that he fears death in large part due to the fact that he might be stuck forever in his nightmares, a fear that one suffering from a regular calendar of nightmares might consider. He comes back to this idea in Act V, when he confirms that he has been kept awake by nightmares (V.ii.4-5). His insomnia and resulting exhaustion are directly correlated with the pain of losing his father (Monk et al. 674).

Hamlet's obvious contemplation of suicide is also a major indicator of his grief-related misery. In his primary soliloquy in Act I, Hamlet bemoans, "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (I.ii.131-132). He is fiercely upset that God so adamantly detests suicide, as it would be an easy out to his unhappiness. The entire "To be, or not to be" speech is also a contemplation of suicide, whether or not Hamlet actually intends on killing

himself (III.i.57-89). He finds it more and more difficult to function through his grief, and ponders whether just ending his life altogether would be the best way to stop his suffering.

Furthermore, this sentiment best ties in with Hamlet's obvious incapability of killing his uncle. As iterated earlier, Bradley believes that Hamlet does not actually want to carry out the task bestowed upon him by his father. Instead, one may categorize Hamlet's inaction as symptomatic of his grief, as a facet of what would be perceived as modern-day depression. The goal, however, is not to diagnose Hamlet for diagnosis's sake; depression happens to be a common emotional state in which Hamlet's fluctuation in emotions seems to align. As psychologists have found, an individual with major depression feels sad or hopeless, with high levels of fatigue and an overall difficulty in performing emotional or physical tasks (Matlin and Farmer 30). Hamlet also shows many of these symptoms as noted earlier, in both his physical and emotional unease. Unresolved grief can often lead to major depression, and in this case, it results in extreme difficulty to perform a task that he may desperately want to carry out.

Finally, Hamlet's grief is best outlined through his journey of insanity. He exemplifies a sentiment of uninhibited abandon while feigning insanity, as he declares he will do Act I (I.v.180-181) and subsequently shows in Ophelia's bedchamber and towards his family and friends. Arguably, he *actually* comes unhinged later - when, in a fury that he could not kill Claudius, he rushes to his mother's bedchamber and impulsively and unknowingly stabs the hidden Polonius.

This moment in which he ends Polonius's life can be considered insanity because he has no logical reason to believe that the King is hiding behind the curtain. Hamlet leaves before Claudius does in Act III Scene iii, and in his mother's bedchamber, he is displacing what he sees (a moving curtain) with his own worst nightmare (Claudius and his mother conspiring against

him). Upon killing Polonius he exhibits no remorse, a reaction very rarely attributed to a sane person, especially one who intended to kill someone else.

Additionally, in this moment he sees the Ghost, but the Ghost cannot be seen by his mother. In the past, the Ghost has always been apparent to all parties present, be it a series of guards or peers; in this case, only Hamlet can see it. Gertrude says in reaction to this whole grotesque and confusing scene, “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.” (III.iv.163) to which he replies “O, throw away the worser part of it, / And live the purer with the other half.” (III.iv.164-165). Almost in reaction, he agrees to go with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act IV Scene ii, knowing that he must remove himself from an entire city of people that has seen his inner turmoil come undone. He can see, now, that a part of him is poisoned – and allows for his own departure from Denmark, where he can no longer harm anyone.

In summation, Hamlet’s own journey of grief is multifaceted. It consumes every part of his being to varying lengths: his mood, his body, his efficacy, and his sanity. Unfortunately, he is only a single character in a play of many children whose grief leads them into their own graves; it is only when he knows he is going to die that he takes his uncle’s life, and the two king-slayers go down together.



## 4.2 Laertes

Laertes most certainly exemplifies abandon in his inability to be restrained once his father dies. Almost immediately, he comes pounding at the doors with a troupe of men at his heels that declare him their true king, demanding justice of Polonius (IV.v.101-139). He is so willing to seek revenge for his father that he does not even question the King Claudius's motives to kill Hamlet; this, in part, could also be attributed to the fact that after Claudius states his plot, Gertrude enters with news of Ophelia's death. Laertes is very clearly a foil to Hamlet in his reactivity – his problem, rather than inaction, is acting too quickly without considering consequences. The fire is so brightly lit underneath Laertes that he does not stop for a moment and think, but keeps the gas on high until the fire burns out and burns him with it.

While Hamlet's behavior learned through grief ultimately shapes his character, Laertes's personality and inner moral code proves to be stronger than Hamlet's. While his way of coping does, in due course, lead to his downfall, he also proves that his fury is a brief outpouring rather than an intrinsic part of who he is, particularly through an exchange he has with Claudius in Act IV:

KING. What would you undertake  
To show yourself in deed your father's son  
More than in words?

LAERTES. To cut his throat i' the church. (IV.vii.126-127)

While some could argue that this actually makes Laertes immoral for being so willing to take down a man in God's house, it turns out that his fury is only temporary. In contrast, Hamlet is given the chance to slit his uncle's throat while he is praying, but refuses because he does not want Claudius's soul to go to heaven. The inner machinations of Laertes's mind, on the other

hand, do not even consider wanting Hamlet's soul to rot in damnation. This kindness is proven just before his death, as he admits his involvement, confesses that the cup is also poisoned, and warns that King Claudius is to blame (V.ii.316-323). Laertes is inherently not a cruel person; his ferocity is merely a surface-level affect used to cope with his feelings of loss.

Interestingly enough, his relationship with his father seems to be equally surface-level. Upon his preparation to depart from Denmark early on in the play, Polonius gives him some bumbling, generically fatherly advice as he makes himself ready to leave. Even his most important piece of advice, "... to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man," (I.iii.78-80) is a simple cliché, an order to stay true to himself without any real meaning behind it. Ironically, this same advice is the only thing that saves Laertes's soul once his body is doomed: he casts away the guise of anger that grief has placed upon him, and he repents his sins.

### 4.3 Ophelia

Ophelia's grief is characterized by her drastic change in emotional state. She suddenly presents herself as completely derailed, almost a caricature of a crazy person: singing songs, picking flowers, and confusing the people around her. Finally, at the height of her grief, she commits suicide.

As iterated earlier, many modern critics like Carroll Camden argue that her insanity and suicide are not due to her grief – instead, they argue, she is a weak, heartbroken girl whose rejection by Hamlet proves too much to handle, defending their arguments by citing the songs she sings in Act IV Scene v, and calling upon the fact that they are love songs to dissuade readers from believing that she could be so grief-stricken by the death of her father that it would break her.

When it comes down to it, however, a young woman singing a love song does not necessarily mean that it must point to a lover. There are countless examples of love songs that have been written about and dedicated to muses of nonromantic quality for centuries: gods, children, or in this case, parents. Even songs that have a sexual connotation do not alone provide enough evidence that she is not in mourning for her father. The evidence that Ophelia sings various lines such as “Quoth she, ‘Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed,’” (IV.v.63-64) cannot, on their own, cancel out lines like “He is dead and gone, lady, / He is dead and gone,” (IV.v.29-30), as her father, and not Hamlet, most certainly is.

This outburst is preceded by a Gentleman announcing Ophelia's odd behavior at the top of Act IV Scene v. He says,

She speaks much of her father, says she hears

There's tricks i' the world, and hems, and beats her heart,

Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt  
 That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,  
 Yet the unshapèd use of it doth move  
 The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,  
 And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,  
 Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,  
 Indeed would make one think there might be thought,  
 Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV.v.4-13)

This monologue does an excellent job of not only outlining the way Ophelia grieves, but also by proving that her abnormal behavior is a result of her grief. Her symptoms are recalled as separate notes in a list; the most basic note of importance, of course, is that Ophelia speaks much of her father. The rest of the list does not delve into what she speaks of her father, but leaves that a secret, only leaving the audience aware that Polonius is constantly on Ophelia's mind: enough to drive her to beat her heart and use "nothing" and "unshapèd" speech.

In addition, Claudius is quick to identify that Ophelia's strangeness comes from her bereavement. While one may argue that he would merely "...botch the words up fit to their own thoughts," on the contrary, Claudius immediately tells the Gentleman to "Follow her close. Give her good watch, I pray you," (IV.v.75) because he believes that whatever she is feeling is dangerous enough to inflict actual harm. He also seems to be the only one to take this sentiment seriously, as the command is not heeded, and Ophelia is able to take her own life. As a person who could predict what she is capable of, he is also able to comprehend the cause of her wild emotions.

Identifying her grief, the Gentleman's words and Ophelia's own comportment throughout

Act IV Scene v suggest that her faculties have almost immediately become impaired. She protects herself within her own mind, using methods of self-soothing to keep her world safe after the trauma of losing her father. Hamlet uses a very similar tactic, mirroring her crazy talk with his own, and using speech/soliloquy in a similar way that Ophelia uses song. The two devices are similar in that they are rhythmic in nature as well as a solo device used to convey and sort through their own grief. Perhaps these two bereaved children are drawn to this way of communicating because it helps to compensate for the lack of control they have over their own lives.

Ophelia's flowers, often a topic of discussion, are known for their common meanings that would have been transparent to an Elizabethan audience. As editor David Bevington notes, rosemary is for remembrance at both weddings and funerals, pansies are for courtship, fennel is for flattery, columbines are for unchasteness, rue is for repentance, daisies are for faithlessness, and violets are for faithfulness (112n179-188). What is so interesting about this passage, however, is not that she has so carefully chosen flowers to represent each person present; instead, it is critical to look at the bigger picture. Ophelia is gathering bunches of flowers for her dead father, her dead future self—and, little does she know, the imminent deaths of the flowers' recipients as well. She wistfully insists on this ceremony of sorts, a proper mourning of her father with a bouquet of funerary flowers representative of the insidious people and traits that caused her father to die, before taking her own life in anguish.

Ophelia is the only daughter of a dead father in the whole play. At the same time, Ophelia is the only bereaved child in *Hamlet* who does not seek justice for her father. Instead, she leaves a physical reminder in the form of a flower in the hands of all those who will remain alive to remember him, and then she leaves the living world herself.

#### 4.4 Fortinbras

Young Fortinbras is the most powerful foil of each of the bereaved men for the simple fact that his actions after his father's death contrast with those of both Hamlet and Laertes. Specifically, he is able to take action towards avenging his father, unlike Hamlet, and to stop, strategize, and review his game plan, unlike Laertes. This contrast is outlined very early on in the play, before the audience even meets Hamlet and Laertes. The first mention of Fortinbras is by Claudius, when he is notified of Fortinbras's advancement on Denmark. He says,

Now follows that you know young Fortinbras,  
 Holding a weak supposal of our worth,  
 Or thinking by our late dear brother's death  
 Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,  
 Colleaguèd with this dream of his advantage,  
 He hath not failed to pester us with message  
 Importing the surrender of those lands  
 Lost by his father, with all bonds of law,  
 To our most valiant brother. (I.ii.17-25)

In a way, Fortinbras's behavior acts as harbinger to the eventual tracks of Hamlet and Laertes. He first juxtaposes Hamlet's inaction by immediately moving to take revenge on Denmark for his father's murder, plotting to seize the throne the moment he receives news of King Hamlet's death and Denmark's chaos. His decision to pick up where his father left off and occupy a country with little to no experience as an autonomous leader marks the same wanton abandon that many of the other bereaved children exhibit.

At the same time, however, Fortinbras proves to juxtapose Laertes by calculating his rash

decision. He waits until the moment when Denmark's leader dies, seizing the moment when the nation is transitioning power as the perfect opportunity to transfer it, instead, to himself. While Laertes grieved too angrily and in too hotheaded a fashion to seek justice for his father, Fortinbras is able to accomplish his goals.

Fortinbras, oddly enough, seems to grieve much like Ophelia. He does not seek revenge for his father's murder by shedding the murderer's blood; instead, he is intent on the goal of restoring his father's rightful legacy. Ophelia hands a flower with a special meaning to every member of the court in order to remember him after death, while Fortinbras ensures that the court must swear loyalty to Norway and his father's kin (himself) in order to remember him after death. Alternatively to Ophelia's end, however, Fortinbras refuses to turn his grief in on himself. Instead, like the rest of the bereaved sons, he turns his grief outward, intending to seek some kind of revenge for his father's death and refusing to wither away from his pain.

## 5. Conclusion

On a fundamental level, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depicts the variety of ways in which children react to the loss of their own father. The death of the father is more than simply a loss of a parent – it is a complete abandonment by the head of the family, and in the case of each child within the play, they experience their own cathartic reckless abandon in reaction to their grief. In three of four cases, it is this wholehearted desire to grieve with their whole spirits that ultimately becomes their fatal flaw. Some, like Laertes, realize that this is the case, while others, like Ophelia, are never able to do so. Hamlet, in the end, is able to accomplish his goal, but his stubborn hold to his grief still brings him down in the end.

As the lone surviving child enters the bloodbath in the final scene of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras finds that his father's spirit has kept his fire spreading – not burnt up like Laertes, or blown out like Hamlet, or drowned like Ophelia. Written at a time when many believed that there was a wrong way to grieve, *Hamlet* ends by presenting the other option, and the kingdom that awaits those who choose right. *Hamlet* has continued to resonate for so many years, however, because it strikes a particular chord in the hearts of its audiences: where is that line drawn? The body and mind grieve as they will, and in times of great pain it is not always possible to “choose right” as Fortinbras does. Perhaps, like Hamlet, each of us is left to find our own way.



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