Most Important Line In Hamlet Essay, Research Paper

The most important line in Hamlet is, “The play?s the thing, wherein I?ll catch the conscience of the king.” (II, ii, 617). In the play, the issue of a clear conscience forms a key motif. When the conscience of the characters appears, it does so as a result of some action; as in the case of the aforementioned line, which follows Hamlet?s conversation with the player. This line is of particular significance because it ties action and its effect on the conscience of the characters. The nature of Hamlet is conscience, and action plays an important role in creating the development of the plot.

No where is this development seen clearer than with Hamlet. The Prince?s development comes as a result of the self-evaluation of the actions that have taken place, and the ensuing actions that he takes are a clear result of this self-evaluation. So, in essence, the actions cause him to think of his conscience and then act upon these feelings. Hamlet?s several soliloquies are a testament to this method. His first soliloquy, following a conversation with his recently wed mother and uncle reflect the uneasiness he feels. He feels betrayed. “O, most wicked speed, to post, with such dexterity to incestuous sheets. . . but break my heart, for I must hold my tounge.” (I, ii, 156-159). Hamlet?s conscience tells him what is wrong-in this case, the hasty marriage-but he is ambivalent as to how to approach it; before he meets the ghost, silence is his method. When Hamlet meets his father?s ghost however, he feels sure of himself, and knows what he must do. As a result of the dialogue with the ghost, Hamlet?s conscience makes him feel that revenge is the best method to deal with the problems that face him.

The consciences of Hamlet, and to a lesser extent, Claudius, affect their decisions in the play. However, both characters only question themselves after they have been prompted by some specific action or dialogue. By self-evaluation, the characters then make the conscious decision to take action with their feelings. An example of this is at the end of act II, following Hamlet?s conversation with the player. In the soliloquy to end the act (whereupon the most important line is derived), Hamlet questions his passion for the plot he has planned, and his conversation has clearly affected this ambivlance. However, after mulling over his passion- or lack thereof-towards his plot, Hamlet ends the soliloquy determined to carry out the play. Hamlet is questioning his allegiance to the “pact” he made with his father in Act I, but by the end of the soliloquy, he has a clearer conscience and knows what action he is to take.

Claudius is prompted by the Murder of Gonzago to do penance for his sins. He does this to absolve himself of his guilty conscience, and it is the first time we see the king show any penitence towards the sins he committed, and it offers a different perspective towards Claudius. Although he is a man who is crafty and wicked in the play, and his actions following this confessional do little to offer anything to the contrary, it is possible to say that the penance is the action which follows a conscience mulling action by the king. At the beginning of Act III, Claudius states, “How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.” (III, i, 49-50). The remark is made in response to a statement by Polonius speaking of “sugaring the devil”, which Claudius alludes to himself. By doing this, the king?s conscience is brought up because this is the first time he confesses to comitting the “crimes”. With a little insight, even the actions of the king follow suit with the conscience to action motif.

All of the soliloquies in Hamlet are prompted by some sort of action, and they all serve to clear the Prince?s conscience. From the aforementioned first soliloquy to his last soliloquy following his conversation with the captain of Fortinbras forces, Hamlet?s conscience is affected by some action. Hamlet?s decision?s are keyed by pondering over his conscience and it is the decisions he makes which further the actions of the play. It is action which prompts Hamlet to mull over his conscience, and the clearing of his conscience which prompts action.