

## The Significance of the Themes of ‘Disease’ and ‘Corruption’ in *Hamlet*.

**Suman Sarkar**

Department of English  
Tezpur Central University  
Napaam, Sonitpur, Assam, India

### Abstract

This paper tries to explore the themes and symbols of disease and corruption in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The earliest of the great tragedies, *Hamlet* was written in the early seventeenth century. It was entered in the register of the stationers’ company in July 1602 and was first published in printed form in 1603 followed by an enlarged edition in 1604. The legend of Amleth, preserved in *Gesta Danorum* by a twelfth-century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, and a prose work by the French writer François de Belleforest, entitled *Histories Tragiques*, are the possible sources from where the story of *Hamlet* was derived. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare weaves the dominant motif of disease into every scene to illustrate the corrupt state of Denmark and Hamlet’s all consuming pessimism. Images of ulcers, pleurisy, full body pustules, apoplexy and madness parallel the sins of drunkenness, espionage, war, adultery and murder are shown to reinforce the central idea that Denmark is dying due to rampant corruption. To Hamlet the very air he breathes is “A foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.” Hamlet himself is a victim of a deep melancholy that results in fits of mania, and, until very late in the drama, he rots with a diseased will, unable to take the necessary action to avenge his father’s murder and save his country. Imagery is defined as language that appears vividly to the senses, particularly sight. Language that paints an evocative picture using images. Often, this language is linked to an idea, and in this way becomes figurative or symbolic.

**Key Words:** Corruption, disease, language, murder, imagery.

INTRODUCTION: The earliest of the great tragedies, *Hamlet* was written in the early seventeenth century. It was entered in the register of the stationers’ company in July 1602 and was first published in printed form in 1603 followed by an enlarged edition in 1604. The legend of Amleth, preserved in *Gesta Danorum* by a twelfth-century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, and a prose work by the French writer François de Belleforest, entitled *Histories Tragiques*, are the possible sources from where the story of *Hamlet* was derived. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare weaves the dominant motif of disease into every scene to illustrate the corrupt state of Denmark and Hamlet’s all consuming pessimism. Images of ulcers, pleurisy, full body pustules, apoplexy and madness parallel the sins of drunkenness, espionage, war, adultery and murder are shown to reinforce the central idea that Denmark is dying due to rampant corruption. To Hamlet the very air he breathes is “A foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.” Hamlet himself is a victim of a deep melancholy that results in fits of mania, and, until very late in the drama, he rots with a diseased will, unable to take the necessary action to avenge his father’s murder and save his

country. Imagery is defined as language that appears vividly to the senses, particularly sight. Language that paints an evocative picture using images. Often, this language is linked to an idea, and in this way becomes figurative or symbolic.

Important to Hamlet is the idea that Denmark was once a healthy state but it has now become sick, corrupted state, with a worm in it that is eating it up from inside. Guardsman Marcellus sets the tone early in the play by stating “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. The reason for this is that its court has been infected with various forms of sinfulness and destructive behavior, starting with the new King’s murderous, fratricidal treachery and his lust, along with the Queen’s sexual disloyalty. Later, adding to the corruptive decay is Hamlet’s wildness, rashness and ruinous inability to act, Leartes’ too easily manipulated thirst for quick satisfaction in revenge and then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s duplicitous betrayal of their childhood friend. By the end the state is so diseased and rotten that all the deaths at the end almost seem like a bloodletting scenario.

Also, in Hamlet’s eyes the world and the people in it (especially women) have gone from seeming healthy and pure to sick and corrupted. In his eyes, the world has impaired. Shakespeare puts images of sickness and corruption into the mouths of other characters to show the corruption taking place in the state, finally driving with vivid overall effect the idea that here is a corrupt state whose core is being eaten away, as if by a worm or a pestilence, by the sinful, destructive, corrupt, fallen behavior of the play’s main characters, especially Claudius is exhibited.

The theme of corruption patterned with disease imagery in *Hamlet*: Corruption and disease are intertwined in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*. They show different types of corruption being practiced in the state, the physical, mental, spiritual, social and political. Shakespeare depicts that corruption is a disease that depletes the body from inside as well as outside. In *Hamlet* this idea of disease is used to show how corruption also ruins a healthy state. This corruption is like a disease that remains hidden and keeps hollowing the state from its interior to the exterior.

In the first act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, one of the guards named Marcellus, who has witnessed the ghost of Hamlet’s father, observes that, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”.(I.iv) This observation begins the imagery of disease. Marcellus means that something is wrong in the state and also hints towards the ongoing corruption in the state.

Hamlet says his body and the world are contaminated. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet says of the world, “Things rank and gross in nature/Possess it” (I.ii). He feels that the whole world is diseased, that it is “an unweeded garden/That grows to seed”.

Leartes says spring flowers (young women) are especially in danger of getting infected (by sexual “stain”). “The canker galls the infants of the spring/Too oft before their buttons be disclosed” (I.iii). He says this to Ophelia, as he is warning her to be away from her relationship with Hamlet. The “canker” is a worm and “gall” is to break the skin. “Infants of the spring” is metaphorical for early spring flowers, and their “buttons” are their unopened buds. In Leartes’ thinking, Ophelia is the young, innocent bud. The “canker” or the worm is her love for Hamlet. Leartes believes that Hamlet, being of royal blood, cannot marry Ophelia and so he can only

break her heart. Then she would be like the flower bud which has been eaten by a canker, hollowing out her heart.

Hamlet says about the King, “For me to put him to purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more”, by this statement he means that men who are in all other ways good can be corrupted by one vicious defect that undoes them. Hamlet speaks of how a single fault, “Some vicious mole of nature” (I.iv), can destroy the reputation of a nation or an individual. The speech concludes with a statement that a tiny amount of evil can drive all the good out.

The ghost (King Hamlet) describes the poison’s effect as a wickedly vivid kind of leprosy to his son Hamlet. “Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole, /With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial, /And in the porches of my ears did pour/The leperous distilment(I.v).This is the opening of the King Hamlet’s description of how he died. The poison turned his blood into sour cottage cheese and his skin into a kind of disgusting scabs and sores.

Hamlet gruesomely links women’s body with dead, putrefying dogs and the children that are bred from their maggots. “For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion” (II.ii).He says this in the midst of making a series of bitter jests at Polonius. Some editors read “good” for “god”, but that doesn’t make much difference to the general idea, which is that even the life –giving sun can give cholera”(III.ii).After Hamlet has frightened the king with the performance of the murder of Gonzago, Guildenstern tells Hamlet that the king is “distemp’red...with cholera”. “Distemper” can mean irritability or it can mean disease. Likewise cholera can mean either anger or the disease of biliousness. So, in effect, Guildenstern tells Hamlet that he has made the king angry, and hamlet replies that is what the king really is, he is sick. Furthermore, Hamlet adds, his cure for the king’s sickness would make him sicker and angrier.

“O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven” (III.iii), says the King as he begins his effort to pray. Here the word rank means having a strong and offensive odor and it strongly implies that the King is morally diseased. This implication is supported by the play’s other uses of rank. The word also means growing excessively for example weeds would be ranked if they choked out a farmer’s wheat. It has both meanings. Hamlet, in a state of deep depression describes the world as “An unweeded garden, /That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely” (I.ii).

Hamlet tells his mother, “It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, /whilst rank corruption, mining all within, /Infects unseen” (III.iv), warning her against thinking that his accusations are only a result of his madness. We become familiar with the sort of “ulcerous place” that Hamlet has in mind. It’s the infection under the skin that eats away the flesh, forming a pool of pus, and the skin above the pus gets crusty.

Here are other examples of disease and corruption imagery found in act IV:

Early in this first scene, Gertrude describes to King Claudius that when Hamlet killed Polonius, he seemed deranged and his mind diseased. While Polonius was behind the arras in Gertrude’s chamber, Hamlet heard him stirring, and he stabbed Polonius. Later, when Claudius asks what is the condition of Hamlet, Gertrude describes what has happened by saying, “Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend/Which is the mightier: in his lawless fit,/Behind the arras hearing

something stir,/Whips out his rapier, cries, ‘a rat, a rat!’./And, in this brainish apprehension ,kills/The unseen good old man”.(IV.i) Here “brainish apprehension” means insane imagining, which denotes mental disease, as is suggested by the words mad and fit.

“We would not understand what was most fit; /But, like the owner of a foul disease, /To keep it from divulging, let it feed/Even on the pith of life” (IV.i). The King says this about his handling of the problem presented by Hamlet. He means that because he loved Hamlet, he didn’t want to admit that Hamlet was mad, and so he didn’t do anything regarding the problem, thus letting it get worse. He’s lying about his attitude toward Hamlet, but the metaphor he uses strongly echoes the one used by Hamlet in the previous scene, when he warned his mother that if she denied her own guilt, she would “But skin and film the ulcerous place,/Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,/Infects unseen”(III.iv). In both cases we are given a picture of a hidden disease which gets worse because it is hidden.

In the third scene of this act, King Claudius plans to send Hamlet away. He ponders what methods he will use to do this: he must seem fair-minded and calm and without motive. While he ponders, Claudius thinks Hamlet to be a disease, a fever in the brain as he says “For like the hectic in my blood he rages, /And thou must cure me”. (IV.iii)

“This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace, /That inward breaks, and shows no cause without/Why the man dies” (IV.iv), says Hamlet of Fortinbras’ attack on Poland for a worthless little piece of ground. An “imposthume” is an abscess, and so once again the disease or poison is imagined as working below the surface, unseen, until it becomes deadly.

In the fifth scene, Queen Gertrude perceives sin as a disease of the soul as she speaks in an aside, “To my sick soul, as sin’s true nature is, / Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.”(IV.v)

Again Claudius says of Ophelia’s madness: “O, this is the poison of deep grief” (IV.v), in the same speech, the King complains about the people being “muddied, /Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers” (IV.v), and refers to rumors about Polonius’ death as “pestilent speeches” meaning that they will spread like the plague, thus giving a disease imagery. In his soliloquy, Claudius speaks figuratively of words as filling Leartes’ ear with infected speeches of the masses regarding his father’s death.

Finally, in the last act, speaking about the King, Hamlet asks, “Is’t not to be damn’d, /To let this canker of our nature come/In further evil?”(V.ii) here, a canker is a cancerous lesion, and our nature means our common human nature. Thus Hamlet sees the king as a kind of disease who will make other people worse and destroy the faith of people in human nature.

To conclude, we can see the mask of Denmark under the mask of a well governed country, there lays the terminal disease of Denmark. William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* portrays the theme of corruption through various imageries of disease and decays which causes the deterioration of the state. The country had a king with the ability to keep the country healthy. Then Denmark experienced disorder upon his sudden yet unnatural death. Upon his death, King Hamlet sent his son Hamlet to avenge his death. The entire kingdom is filled with hate and discouragement.

The thematic image of rottenness illustrates the moral and political corruption of the society in three different ways. At first, this fatal collapse begins with the foreshadowing mood in the beginning of the play. Then, it emerges into the decay of virtues and leadership from various characters. With no cure, the disease leads to the corruption of the country.

Therefore we see that the state of Denmark becomes a rotten place which is presented by Shakespeare throughout the play. This rottenness prevails due to corruption that is taking place in the form different diseases. The readers hope to see a positive ending. However Shakespeare makes the climax a little unjustified by making the hero die along with the villain.

#### REFERENCES:

- [1]Mabillard,Amanda. *Imagery of Disease and Corruption in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Shakespeare Online*.15 Jan.2014. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/diseaseimageryhamlet.html>.