

Evidence that Hamlet and Laertes are Dissimilar

The differences between Laertes and Hamlet affect a main theme of the play-- revenge. Both men have fathers killed, and both are seeking revenge. Hamlet, though he knows who murdered his father, hesitates to take direct action against the villain. In stark contrast is Laertes, who doesn't know who killed his father but will kill anyone on a whim. Laertes' rashness throughout provides the play with an unlikely stereotypical hero-- brave, unwavering, ready to kill-- and is rather ironic because Laertes is not the play's "hero" role. The hero instead is Hamlet, and Hamlet is not a typical hero, in that he shies away from violence, and is portrayed as insane for half of the play (though that is by his own doing). Hamlet is not even able to kill his uncle until Act 5, by which time he can be argued to be mentally and emotionally unstable, if not insane. In order to avenge his father's death, Hamlet must lose himself in insanity; he must become, essentially, an entirely different character.

Another considerable difference between Hamlet and Laertes are their relationships with Ophelia. Hamlet is obviously taken by Ophelia in the first two acts of the play, as he writes her letters and even tries to grab her in his lustful advances. This is clearly not the case with Laertes, as he is Ophelia's brother; although Shakespeare is not beyond writing about incest, it is not being portrayed here. Instead, Laertes takes on a protective role of "big brother" (although we do not know which sibling is the elder), warning Ophelia of Hamlet's advances as being juvenile and false. Hamlet later begins to treat Ophelia badly, scorning her affections and seemingly driving her insane and to her inevitable death. Laertes seems to dislike Hamlet from the beginning of the play, and emotions collide in Act V: the two men scuffle in the open grave of Ophelia, each believing that they loved her the most, and jealous of the other's affections for her.

Hamlet's clashes with Claudius also build the plot of the play; knowing that his uncle killed his father in cold blood, Hamlet's scorn of the new king grows throughout the play. Hamlet continually struggles with his emotions as he fights the desire to avenge his father's death by killing the king. He uses circuitous means to take metaphorical stabs at his uncle: a play about a man killing his uncle by pouring poison in his ear (the same method of murder used to kill Hamlet's father). Claudius eventually gets the feeling that Hamlet knows more than he is letting on, and begins to feel threatened. Claudius begins looking for ways to get rid of Hamlet, and eventually decides to send him off to England, where he has sent orders to have his nephew killed.. His plan, however, is thwarted when Hamlet discovers the orders for his death. Claudius now needs Laertes, a rash and violent person, to kill Hamlet for him. He tells Laertes that Hamlet killed Polonius, and Laertes allies with Claudius against Hamlet. Thus, another dissimilarity is disclosed, as Hamlet would never consider allying with Claudius for anything, and Laertes, hungry for blood, is willing to ally with anybody who will give him an easy kill.

How the characters feel about their fathers is also very dissimilar. Hamlet loves his father and is devastated when King Hamlet is killed; Hamlet is suicidal at the beginning of the play due to his father's death. Hamlet feels that, for the love of his father, he must take revenge, yet is unable to do so for lack of courage and ambition. Laertes (while the level of his relationship with his father is unclear in the play) shows very little emotion over the actual death of his father, but is over-eager to avenge it. It is therefore apparent that while Hamlet truly loves his father, Laertes is more concerned with the saving the pride of the family by avenging his father's death than with realizing that his father is dead. Therefore, Hamlet seems to be more exocentric, while Laertes, continuing his father's quest for personal gain, appears to be more egocentric.

Hamlet seems to fancy himself an actor; several times during the play, he either gives "pointers" to other players or excessively dramatizes a scene. The famous line, "Alas, poor Yorick!" finds Hamlet dramatically talking to a skull. In order to enhance emotion and to add a mood to a monologue, Elizabethan actors often talked to inanimate objects. In this scene Hamlet is utilizing the skull and the overall dark aura of the graveyard to speak of Ophelia's death. In addition to these instances, Hamlet is acting insane for the majority of the play, in order to put his devious schemes into action without being suspected by his uncle. He uses his surroundings to enhance his words, thus acting out a philosophical monologue in a regular conversation. Laertes seems to be more rough and unrefined than Hamlet-- like his actions, his words are bold and to the point. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes' lines at the end of the play tend to be short and to the point-- he speaks no more than eight lines at a time in all but one occasion beginning in Act 4, Scene 5. Hamlet frequently goes into long monologues that can exceed fifty lines.

The distinctions between Hamlet and Laertes are significant because they provide some insight into the personalities of both characters, particularly Hamlet. By introducing Laertes into the play as a fiery, compulsive person, any semblance of ambition or courage displayed by Hamlet pales in comparison. This enhances the emotion in Hamlet's monologue at the end of Act II, when Hamlet examines himself and finds him lacking in courage. The inner turmoil in Hamlet is strong, as he calls himself a "coward" and thinks himself as weak as a woman. He wants to avenge his father's death at Claudius' hands, yet, like his uncle, he does not approach conflict directly-- he takes covert action. Conversely, Hamlet's lack of action allows him to think through his plans before he puts them into effect, allowing for much deviousness in planning on his part; Laertes does not tend to think before he puts his throat to a person's throat. Laertes provides a counterpart to Hamlet-- they are in relatively the same situation, but they deal with their problems in entirely different ways.

