

*The difference between theme and motif is: a theme is something like appearances are deceiving while a motif would be using a symbol like a mirror (e.g. shows a superficial reflections of a person, etc.) throughout a play to help reinforce the theme.*

## **Themes in Hamlet**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

### **Appearance vs. Reality**

- Every character in *Hamlet* hides behind a veil of duplicity
- Everything appears to be fine but in reality the opposite is true
- Everyone in the play appears to be genuine and sincere whereas they're plagued with lies

### **The Impossibility of Certainty**

- Can we have certain knowledge about ghosts?
- Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it really a misleading fiend?
- Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded?
- How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses?
- Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius' soul by watching his behavior?
- Can Claudius know the state of Hamlet's mind by observing his behavior and listening to his speech?
- Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have?
- Can we know anything about the afterlife?

### **The Complexity of Action**

- How is it possible to take reasonable, effective, purposeful action?
- Don't we need the best possible, most accurate information before undertaking a serious action?
- Is it better to wait and be rational about a decision or to act out of passion?
- Fortune appears to favor the bold, e.g. Claudius gains kingdom and queen through boldness, etc. but at what cost?
- What are the risks to being single-minded in purpose like Laertes was when he sought revenge?

### **The Mystery of Death**

- What happens to us after we die?
- Would what follows death finally give us answers to our deepest questions thereby giving us truth in an otherwise ambiguous world?
- Is suicide a morally legitimate action to take in an unbearably painful world?
- Do people persist in life only because they fear what comes after death?

### **The Nation as a Diseased Body**

- Is the health of the nation reflected in the health of the royal family?
- Why did so much uncertainty follow the death of a king?
- Is it reasonable to observe that Denmark was made "ill" through the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude?

## Motifs

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.*

### Incest and Incestuous Desire

- Hamlet's fixation on Gertrude's sex life
- subtly presented with Laertes and Ophelia, e.g. coffin hugging incident, etc.
- Claudius with Gertrude

### Misogyny

- Hamlet unimpressed with Gertrude remarrying so quickly *and* marrying Claudius in particular
- Hamlet perceives a connection between female sexuality and moral corruption
- He tells Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" so as not to be a "breeder of sinners"
- To Gertrude he observes "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

### Ears and Hearing

- Language can be "slippery", i.e. words can communicate *and* distort the truth, etc.
- Claudius poisons his brother by pouring poison in to the king's ear, e.g. "The whole ear of Denmark" is "Rankly abused" (I.v.36-38)