
Summary: The True Age Of Young Hamlet

William Shakespeare has one of the most powerful and well-known repertoires of any writer and playwright of the past millennium—his name and his plays have perceived throughout centuries of new art and thought. One of Shakespeare's most famous, as well as longest works he's made is *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Written sometime between 1599 and 1602, *Hamlet* has made itself an quintessential component in modern-day English literature and theatre throughout the world. *Hamlet* tells the story of young Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, son of Old Hamlet King of Denmark, who was murdered by his uncle Claudius, now new crowned king of Denmark. Hamlet then spends the rest of the story developing a way to avenge his father's untimely and unnatural death. At the end, being a tragedy, eight named characters are dead, including Hamlet himself. Throughout the play, he's developed into a complex and cynical character; becoming intensely emotional, distraught, and vengeful while being witty, persistent, and self-aware at the same time. His character embodies teenage angst—his behavior is radical, almost borderline insane. His character also embodies adult maturity—he thinks maturely and can clearly justify the reasons behind his thoughts. He can be smart about the decisions he makes while also making stupid and naïve ones. His soliloquies lead to brilliant epiphanies, while being self-absorbed at the same time. What kind of character Hamlet is reflecting onto an audience is an analysis on its own, but what kind of age can someone become such a character is not easy to say either.

In the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*, it implies that Hamlet is thirty years old from the Graveyard scene in Act V, Scene I. It never directly states that Hamlet himself claims to be thirty years old, but the gravedigger he's is having a conversation with states that he has been working for as long as young Hamlet had been alive. The conversation they're having revolves around Hamlet asking the gravedigger about his profession and how long it takes for a body to turn to bone. Later dialogue mentions the remains of a Jester names Yorick that Hamlet knew as a child, who had died early in his youth, buried about 23 years ago. This would make Hamlet have to be older than 23, and further support the idea that he's about thirty at the time that the story is taking place. Interestingly, this is the only time throughout the play that any sort of age is addressed about anyone; all that the audience knows prior is that the King had died two months before the story begins. There's no other explicit detail that tells of Young Hamlet to be of any other age, so the answer would be 30, except there's a lot of problems with that number.

"Four hundred years ago life expectancy at birth levels in Europe are estimated to have been in the 25 to 35 year range." (Johansson 4) Logistically, assuming that Hamlet is 30, would cause problems for other character's ages as well. This would place both his parents, Gertrude and Old King Hamlet, and his uncle Claudius in their late 40s to about mid 50s. This wouldn't make much sense. "Socially privileged adults living in the 1600s and 1700s continued to die between the ages of 20 and 50 years." (Johansson 21) This means that his family would already near the end of their lives and he would be well past his prime. Shakespeare wrote many other plays such as *Othello*, where the main character is presumed to be 28, being described as "old". Contradictory to that, in *King Lear*, the king is presumed to be 80 which is actually way older than any person in the 16th/17th century would realistically live to. (The Shakespeare Project) Shakespeare could've written *Hamlet* to be much older based on characters from his other plays, though it's more difficult to prove that he actually did. On a side note, Shakespeare

himself only lived to be 51. Letting Hamlet be so old also raises the questions about how credible/relatable the play would be to audiences that it was originally intended for, as well as the logistics behind it. Again, only the second Quarto suggests that Hamlet's age is 30, while the other two versions don't mention anything about his age.

The defense for a much younger Hamlet comes from contextual support written in the play. In a discussion about adolescent representation in Hamlet by Donald Metzler, published through the Psychoanalytic Association of Biella, he suggests that "[Hamlet] is a clear representation of adolescent struggles and instability. He's seen in all the relevant contexts –as a child in the family, as a rebellious adolescent, as a member of an adolescent gang, and also, in isolation from his group." (qtd 2) In terms of rebellion, he holds a strong resentment against his uncle, he constantly is insulting and belittling his mother, and his romantic relationship with Ophelia is completely immature. He finds comfort in his closest ally, Horatio. He also completely isolates himself to think and to reflect on his own. This argument is disregarding the fact that Hamlet is referred to Young Hamlet numerous times by several different characters—for all intent and purposes "young" in this context is referring to the fact that he is the son of King Hamlet (known as "Old Hamlet") and is used to distinguish both rather than being an element indicating his age. One of the biggest indicators of his age comes at the beginning, when Claudius and Gertrude get married, and he assumes the throne. By doing so, "Claudius sidesteps the possibility that ... the prince would no longer be a youth but a king. [Who] would consider a young man... let alone a thirty-year-old of the play's final act, too young to inherit a kingdom." (Harkins 6) This is evidence that is implying that Hamlet has to be younger than 30 based on the premise that he could still not inherit the kingdom of Denmark, even as the rightful heir. Other clues throughout the play also support that Hamlet is much younger than initially thought, including going back to the graveyard scene.

Rhodri Lewis, professor of English literature at Oxford University, supports the case that Hamlet is a teenager—putting an estimation of about sixteen* years old. He says "[Hamlet] is an inhabitant of the intermediate category between boyhood and the assumption of adult masculinity... the period between one's fourteenth and twenty-first birthdays." (1) Lewis also extends to discredit the second quarto as satirical or sarcastic about the gravedigger being genuine when he says that he's worked since the day young Hamlet was born; that day, thirty years prior. He goes on to prove that the gravedigger is not a reliable source for that number, and that his math is purposely meant to be off. Lewis also introduces that the Folio that has sexton written as sixteene*, although many literary historians consider it just a word play. In the first Quarto, it also has Yorick buried for 12 years, but this is also often discredited as written by an actor from memory rather than by Shakespeare himself. Both versions don't mention Hamlet's birth. Joshua Held, an English professor at Trinity University, reviews Lewis's position and finds that it stands on a very faulty premise. Held says that "[Lewis] attempts to contravene the usual view that Hamlet is thirty, he could have considered the possibility that... Shakespeare was of two different minds about the matter, and that this division results in the different texts." (605) Held doesn't rebuke the position that Hamlet could be less than 30, but he also continues to find the problems in Lewis's thesis, as well as supporting textual evidence, making him unable to solidify the theory that Hamlet as an adolescent; it's nothing more than a stretch.

There also substantial evidence to counterargue a young Hamlet, in terms of his mental maturity as well as mental deterioration. "The themes upon which Hamlet philosophizes are not beyond the grasp of a young student or, indeed, if taken together, really suggestive of a thirty-year-old thinker." The way that Hamlet thinks, speaks, and addresses himself is much more mature than

any teenager would be able to make. His “to be or not to be” speech is one of the most recognized scenes from all of Shakespeare’s works, elaborately and eloquently describe his judgement of both life and death; describing the murder of his father as well as deciding whether or not he’s going to go through with murder. He’s complex in his own nature: He pretends to go slightly mad to the point where the audience no longer knows if he’s pretending or if he’s genuinely gone insane. It’s also that element of his mental state that makes him even more elaborate. It fuels his passive obsession with death and grief as it develops into part of his persona. “Some scholars, in fact, view the character’s inwardness and single-minded focus on his response to death as ultimately destructive of his selfhood.” (Lodine-Chaffey 121) His self-destructive nature by itself is not an indicator of age, in fact, many adolescents’ manifest attributes of self-destructive behavior. What makes it more mature is the dialogue and the choices that he makes are more adult-like overall. His vendetta against Claudius had depth aside from vengeance, with Hamlet facing his own personal demons. Anders Zachrisson, professor of the psychological department at the University of Oslo states: “Hamlet does not seem to be driven by an urge for revenge at any price. He is troubled by a question of knowledge... adolescent in the beginning of the play, while expressing a much more profound experience of life at the end.” (144-145) Hamlet’s growth throughout the play may indicate multiple things about his age and how he changes from beginning to end. The question of how much time passes between Acts remains unanswered.

Taking a glance at the structure that the story of Hamlet takes might provide some more clues to how Shakespeare might have intended the story to play out. Overlooking at the structure of Hamlet there are some clues that may have. Associate professors of the English Department at the University of Lleida, Emma Domínguez-Rué and Maximilian Mrotzek, wrote an article about generic structures that can be identified in Shakespearian plays. In their article, it lays out three main steps that drive the plot of Hamlet: “1. the discovery or receiving of the wrong which must be revenged; 2. the struggle to consummate this revenge; 3. the final satisfaction of hero – and audience – in a successful revenge” (674) This is not a complicated premise to follow at all (just limiting the scope to the three points.) What makes it more complex is that to get from one point to the next, the Hamlet must undergo a fundamental change. That alone is not an indicator of how old anyone is or how long the play is taking place, but it does leave room for interpretation that it’s a much larger time span than a couple of days. To illustrate a more elaborate version of the direction that the play is taking, the flowchart below shows both perceived and hidden factors that are driving the plot of the story, indicating a more interconnected set of plot points that influence one another significantly.

It’s not simple, and it wasn’t built to be anything less than complex. Shakespeare chose not to explicitly tell the audience any detail about how long it actually takes for Hamlet to carry out his revenge. Being one of his longest plays, it has to contain a lot more substance to the plot than anything that he’s previously written. In the three points of revenge, the struggle to consummate the revenge is the body of the play. The events that aggravate the cycle of the plot forward are under that point of struggling. All the previous paragraphs are explaining that struggle and they separate the factors within that context that support a much more mature and older Hamlet versus a much more rebellious and younger Hamlet. What’s also important in identifying the structure of a Generic Shakespeare writing formula is that it helps see what kind of maturity he gives to the plots of other stories as well. The audience is not given much reference to time or how much time is passing between each Act of the play. At the beginning, it’s noted that Hamlet comes back from university two months after his father’s death, but only at the end is there any mention of time again by the gravedigger that he’s worked for about 30

years. Because there are hidden elements that are influencing Hamlet, it's not known whether time was supposed to be a factor of influence that made him become more unstable near the end. Though it's highly doubtful that Hamlet would've been able to span the time of years, it's more than likely it spanned a couple months, or about a year at most. It would make sense that it takes over the span of a couple months since Hamlet is very patient about finding a solution and deciding what to do with that information. His hesitation to take immediate revenge only drives that point further that he has time to reflect.

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