WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)
Hamlet (c.1600)

*Hamlet*, the longest and most frequently performed of Shakespeare’s plays, contemplates some  fundamental moral issues.  Hamlet is called upon to kill his uncle as an act of revenge for the murder of Hamlet’s father.  Will this be a justified act of retribution, or another murder?  How can Hamlet resolve his doubts?

When first we meet Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, he has been called home from college because of the unexpected death of his father.  He arrives to find that his father’s brother, Claudius, has ascended to the throne.  And, less than two months after his father’s death, his mother, Gertrude, has married Claudius.  Hamlet, outraged at the turn of events and still reeling from the death of his father, falls into melancholy.

While he is in this dejected mood, the ghost of his father appears, reveals that Claudius had murdered him, and insists Hamlet avenge the crime.  Thereby the dead reach back from the grave to direct the fate of the living, and death becomes the end point of the play.

In his soliloquy “To be or not to be”—the single most recognizable passage in Western literature—we contemplate a serious issue: Is it better to endure suffering, or end one’s life and take a chance in an uncertain afterlife?  It’s a personal question for Hamlet, but in Shakespeare’s time (as in ours), there were competing versions of the afterlife.  A lot of people had strong opinions, wars were fought… but those who went to the afterlife, the “undiscovered country,” seldom returned.  Now, having talked with the ghost, Hamlet begins to realize that there’s a lot more to earth and heaven than he had ever dreamed of.

Now he has to sift his way through family obligations, state politics, and heaven’s requirements.  He can’t rely on the government for justice; Claudius is the government.  And revenge was a bit more significant.  In the setting of the play the Danes were an aggressive warlike nation who believed in blood feuds and trials by ordeal.

Hamlet, whom some critics portray as weak and indecisive, is exactly the opposite.  He shows both courage and prudence.  He is not going to risk his life until he is sure the ghost is right.  The CSI lab hadn’t been invented, so Hamlet has to trick Claudius into revealing his guilt.  Hamlet feigns madness to throw off suspicion and buy time.  Good strategy, but not good enough.  Polonius, one of the king’s ministers, spies on Hamlet and is killed as a result.  A regrettable error because now Laertes, Polonius’s son, resolves to exact revenge on Hamlet for his father’s murder.

In the final scene, all of the remaining major characters are killed: the queen, Laertes, the king and Hamlet.  With his dying breath, Hamlet names the prince of Norway as the next king of Denmark.
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We have been challenged anew by deep-seated questions of suicide, loyalty, revenge, justice, and responsibility.  But it is Hamlet’s consuming doubt—doubts that haunt us to this day—that give the story its universal appeal.

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| *To be, or not to be, that is the question:Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to sufferThe Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,And by opposing end them: to die, to sleepNo more; and by a sleep, to say we endThe heart-ache, and the thousand Natural shocksThat Flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummationDevoutly to be wished. To die to sleep,To sleep, perchance to Dream; Ay, there's the rub,For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,Must give us pause. There's the respectThat makes Calamity of so long life:For who would bear the Whips and Scorns of time,The Oppressor's wrong, the proud man's Contumely, [poor]The pangs of despised Love, the Law’s delay, [disprized]The insolence of Office, and the Spurns* |  |

