

In the famous soliloquy "To Be or not To Be" Hamlet is clearly concerned with the ultimate questions of man's existence. Hamlet is not actually talking to himself. Indeed, the "first person" in his speech is plural and not singular. He uses the verbs "suffer" and "take arms". To suffer misfortunes is to put up with it; to take arms, by contrast, is to become a warrior. The verbs connote active resistance and introduce the antithetical alternatives that will surface later in the speech between submission and intervention. So the Hamletic doubt is between reacting to the situation he is involved in (to take arms against a sea of troubles) or putting up with it (..to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...)

In lines 5-10 an alternative is introduced, to die and therefore to sleep and put an end to suffering. But there is an obstacle which prevents man from committing suicide and this obstacle is the fear of what might happen after death.

In lines 15-19, Hamlet lists the injustices and miseries inflicted on humanity, that is the passing of the time, political oppression, social discrimination, unreturned love, the delays of justice, insolence, and ingratitude. What could bring relief to man? A small knife. So why does man suffer all these injustices when "he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin?" It is the fear of something after death, which is expressed in the image of the unknown country from where no traveller comes back (lines 24-25) which paralyses the will and prevents self-destruction.

Hamlet is not a hero, he doesn't have the courage to experience the undiscovered country and so he will "bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law's delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes..."

The use of infinite forms (To Be or not To be; To sleep, to die; to dream; to suffer.....) give voice to Hamlet's uncertainty and enable him to distance himself from action. The frequent questions give way to further questions, instead of finding a solution.

The images from the battlefield in which the choice of existence is expressed give an impression of how violent the struggle within Hamlet's mind is. The situation presented in lines 2-5 implies inevitable defeat. It might be possible to endure and survive a sea of troubles; it is highly impractical to take up arms against it. It might be possible to reply to an assault with slings and arrows. Both passive and active resistance is bound to meet failure.

It's interesting to consider how death is viewed in lines 8-9. Death is seen as a welcome relief. Later, death is divided into sleep, which is desirable, and dreams. Hamlet sees death in a medieval perspective according to which it is considered as physical liberation from the prison of the body and earthly affliction. It is countered by the doubt (line 13) of the Renaissance man concerning the after death.