How is *Hamlet* an exploration of the human condition?

First, you would have to define the human condition. And this is no easy task. Generally speaking, a condition is the state of being, appearance, quality or working order. The human condition deals with the state of being human. You tend to see the human condition expressed in terms of the search for meaning, facing mortality, and dealing with loneliness, relationships and the limitations of freedom.

The human condition is something we all face, so it is different for each person, even though it is supposedly a universal quality, something that pertains to all humans. Another way of putting it is, for the individual, the human condition concerns what it means to be alive and, socially, what it means to be with others. And this manifests in different ways: how we see the world, how politics and economics affects our lives, etc. *Hamlet* deals with a lot of these broad philosophical themes. In fact, in the “to be or not to be” soliloquy¹ in Act 3 Scene 1, Hamlet directly addresses a fundamental and profound question on the human condition, mortality: is it better to live and face life's struggles or is it wiser to distance yourself or even commit suicide?

He is so obsessed with grief, anger, and his plan for revenge that he has lost all enjoyment in life. His condition and the condition of Denmark (“rotten”) is deplorable. In the end, he chooses to live at least to carry out his revenge. And despite the fact that his only reason for living is to avenge his father, he does at least face his condition rather than run (suicide) from it. That is, he decides to take the “noble” route and deal with his, and Denmark’s, condition:

> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
> Or take arms against a sea of troubles,  
> And by opposing, end them. (III.i.57-59).

Begrudgingly, Hamlet does choose life. At least for the sake of exposing Claudius, Hamlet decides that it is nobler to deal with unfortunate events than it is to "end them," meaning to ignore them or avoid them altogether by ending his life.


**Hamlet - Comment on Humanity**

The Elizabethan play *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* is one of William Shakespeare's most popular works. One of the possible reasons for this play's popularity is the way Shakespeare uses the character Hamlet to exemplify the complex workings of the human mind. The approach taken by Shakespeare in Hamlet has generated countless different interpretations of meaning, but it is through Hamlet's struggle to confront his internal dilemma, deciding when to revenge his father’s death, that the reader becomes aware of one of the common interpretations in Hamlet; the idea that Shakespeare is attempting to comment on the influence that one's state of mind can have on the decisions they make in life.

As the play unfolds, Shakespeare uses the encounters that Hamlet must face to demonstrate the effect that one's perspective can have on the way the mind works. L.C. Knight compares Shakespeare's use of these encounters to a journey into the workings of the human mind when he writes:

¹ A soliloquy (from Latin solo "to oneself" + loquor "I talk") is a device often used in drama when a character speaks to himself or herself, relating thoughts and feelings, thereby also sharing them with the audience, giving off the illusion of being a series of unspoken reflections.
What we have in *Hamlet* is the exploration and implicit criticism of a particular state of mind or consciousness. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses a series of encounters to reveal the complex state of the human mind, made up of reason, emotion, and attitude towards the self, to allow the reader to make a judgment or form an opinion about fundamental aspects of human life. (192)

Shakespeare sets the stage for Hamlet's internal dilemma in Act 1, Scene 5 when the ghost of Hamlet's father (also called Hamlet) appears and calls upon Hamlet to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.24). It is from this point forward that Hamlet must struggle with the dilemma of whether or not to kill Claudius, his uncle, and if so, when to actually do it. As the play progresses, Hamlet does not seek his revenge when the opportunity presents itself, and it is the reasoning that Hamlet uses to justify his delay that becomes paramount to the reader's understanding of the effect that Hamlet's mental perspective has on his situation. In order to fully understand how Hamlet's perspective plays an important role, the reader must attempt to answer the fundamental question: Why does Hamlet procrastinate in taking revenge on Claudius? Although the answer to this question is at best somewhat complicated, Mark W. Scott attempts to offer some possible explanations for Hamlet's delay:

Critics who find the cause of Hamlet's delay in his internal meditations typically view the prince as a man of great moral integrity who is forced to commit an act which goes against his deepest principles. On numerous occasions, the prince tries to make sense of his moral dilemma through personal meditations, which Shakespeare presents as soliloquies. Another perspective of Hamlet's internal struggle suggests that the prince has become so disenchanted with life since his father's death that he has neither the desire nor the will to exact revenge. (74)

Morality and disenchantment, both of which belong solely to an individual's own consciousness, are pointed out as two potential causes of Hamlet's procrastination, and therefore it supports the idea that Shakespeare is placing important emphasis on the role of individual perspective in this play. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare gives the reader an opportunity to evaluate the way the title character handles a very complicated dilemma and the problems that are generated because of it. These problems that Hamlet faces are perhaps best viewed as overstatements of the very types of problems that all people must face as they live their lives each day. The magnitude of these "everyday" problems are almost always a matter of individual perspective. Each person will perceive a given situation based on his/her own state of mind. The one, perhaps universal, dilemma that faces all of mankind is the problem of identity (and one could add, mortality). As Victor L. Cahn writes, "Hamlet's primary dilemma is that of every human being: given this time and place and these circumstances, how is he to respond? What is his responsibility?" Hamlet's delay in seeking revenge for his father's death allows Shakespeare's look into the human mind to manifest itself. If Hamlet had killed Claudius at the first opportunity, there would have been little chance for Shakespeare to develop the internal dilemma which he wants to comment on, that is, the complexity of the human mind, and the power that a person's mental perspective can have on the events of his life.

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