

Hamlet



MODULE B

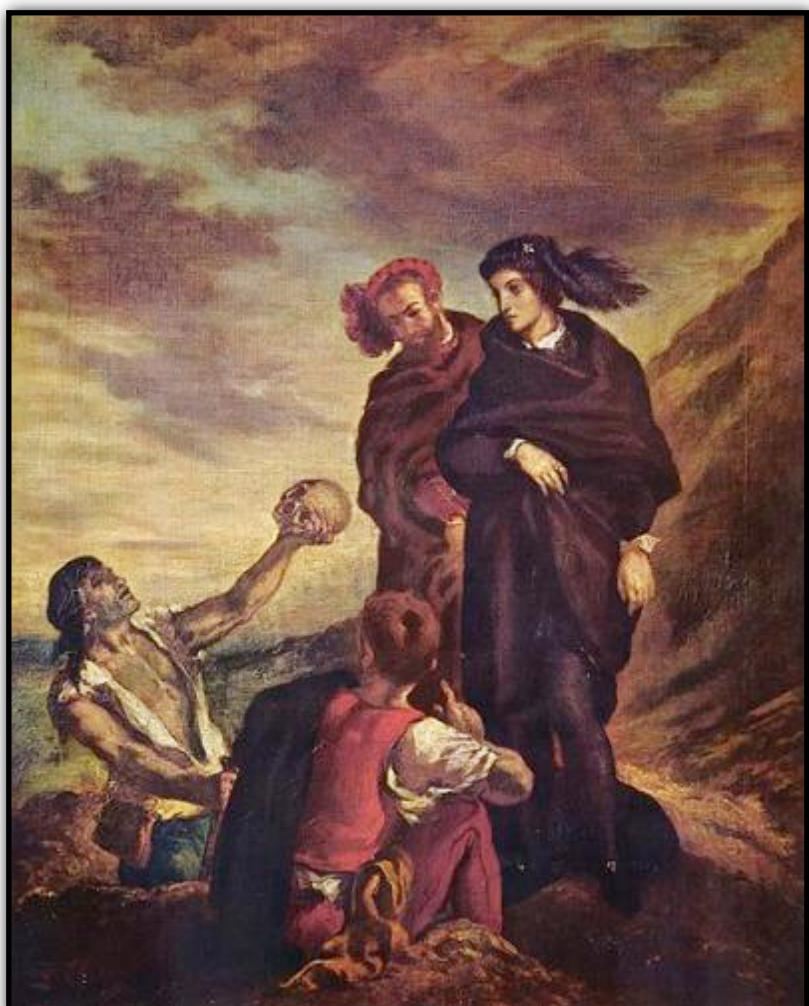
A Critical Study of Texts

“This module requires students to explore and evaluate a specific text and its reception in a range of contexts. It develops students’ understanding of questions of ***textual integrity****.

Each elective in this module requires close study of a single text to be chosen from a list of prescribed texts.

Students explore the ideas expressed in the text through analysing its construction, content and language. They examine how particular features of the text contribute to textual integrity. They research others' perspectives of the text and test these against their own understanding and interpretations of the text. Students discuss and evaluate the ways in which the set work has been read, received and valued in historical and other contexts. They extrapolate from this study of a particular text to explore questions of textual integrity and significance.

Students develop a range of imaginative, interpretive and analytical compositions that relate to the study of their specific text. These compositions may be realised in a variety of forms and media.”



- * ***textual integrity*** – the unity of a text; its coherent use of form and language to produce an integrated whole in terms of meaning and value



Table of Contents

Prescribed Text Introduction: “Hamlet”	pg. 4
Tragedy - A Definition	pg. 6
Revenge - A Definition	pg. 7
Key Focus Points for the Study of “Hamlet”	pg. 8
Context: <i>The Elizabethan Period</i>	pg. 9
<i>The Renaissance</i>	pg. 12
<i>Renaissance Humanism</i>	pg. 14
<i>Revenge Tragedy</i>	pg. 15
Study Guide Questions	pg. 17
Key Focus Point 1. Commentary	pg. 21
Key Focus Point 2. Commentary	pg. 27
“Hamlet” - Stephen Greenblatt, Cambridge Shakesp.	pg. 33
Nine Critical Extracts	pg. 45

Introduction to the Prescribed Text

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*



Hamlet is the new man of the Renaissance, in opposition to the old Feudalism. He's a student intellectual oppressed by an older generation whose lives are governed by political expediency and by military force. He's an aristocrat who's rebelled against his background by going to a forward-thinking foreign university, by making friends with commoners, by falling in love with a politician's daughter, and by hanging around with actors. Hamlet's been dominated by his late father, a notoriously tough soldier, and his father's ghost obliges him to take revenge on his murderer, Hamlet's uncle. So the gentle, contemplative young man is forced to become a man of action, a killer for his father.

As a man, Hamlet is everything that the world of politics and soldiering isn't. He's vulnerable, imaginative, sensitive, and he's half-mad with grief. His world is bound by feelings and intellect and, like most young people, he is inflamed by the compromises and the duplicities of the adult world.

The play charts one of the great rites-of-passage: from immaturity to accommodation with death. Until Hamlet leaves for England after his murder of Polonius, he's on a reckless helter-skelter, swerving between reason and chaos. When he returns from England, he's changed, aged, matured, reconciled somehow to his end; he's cauterised his feelings, he's become a soldier. He's grown up, in effect, to grow dead.

Hamlet

Now, he can coolly examine the physical consequences of death in a graveyard, and he can talk dispassionately about his premonition of death. His dying words are: "the rest is silence." Even to us, with our agnosticism and our atheism, it's a terrifying vision. There is nothing there after death; a white wall, silence.



The “*Undiscovered Country*”



Tragedy

Our study of Shakespeare's Hamlet will require an acknowledgement of its place within the larger tradition of Aristotelian tragedy.

The centrepiece of Greek philosopher Aristotle's key text Poetics is his examination of tragedy:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions.



Revenge

The revenge plays generally share certain conventional assumptions:

1. Revenge is an individual response to an intolerable wrong or a public insult. It is an unauthorised, violent action in a world whose institutions seem unable or unwilling to satisfy a craving for justice.
2. Since institutional channels are closed and since the criminal is usually either hidden or well protected, revenge almost always follows a devious path toward its violent end.
3. The revenger is in the grip of an inner compulsion: his course of action may be motivated by institutional failure – for example, the mechanisms of justice are in the hands of the criminals themselves – but even if these mechanisms were operating perfectly, they would not allow the psychic satisfactions of revenge.
4. Revengers generally need their victims to know what is happening and why: satisfaction depends on a moment of declaration and vindication.
5. Revenge is a universal imperative more powerful than the pious injunctions of any particular belief system, including Christianity itself.



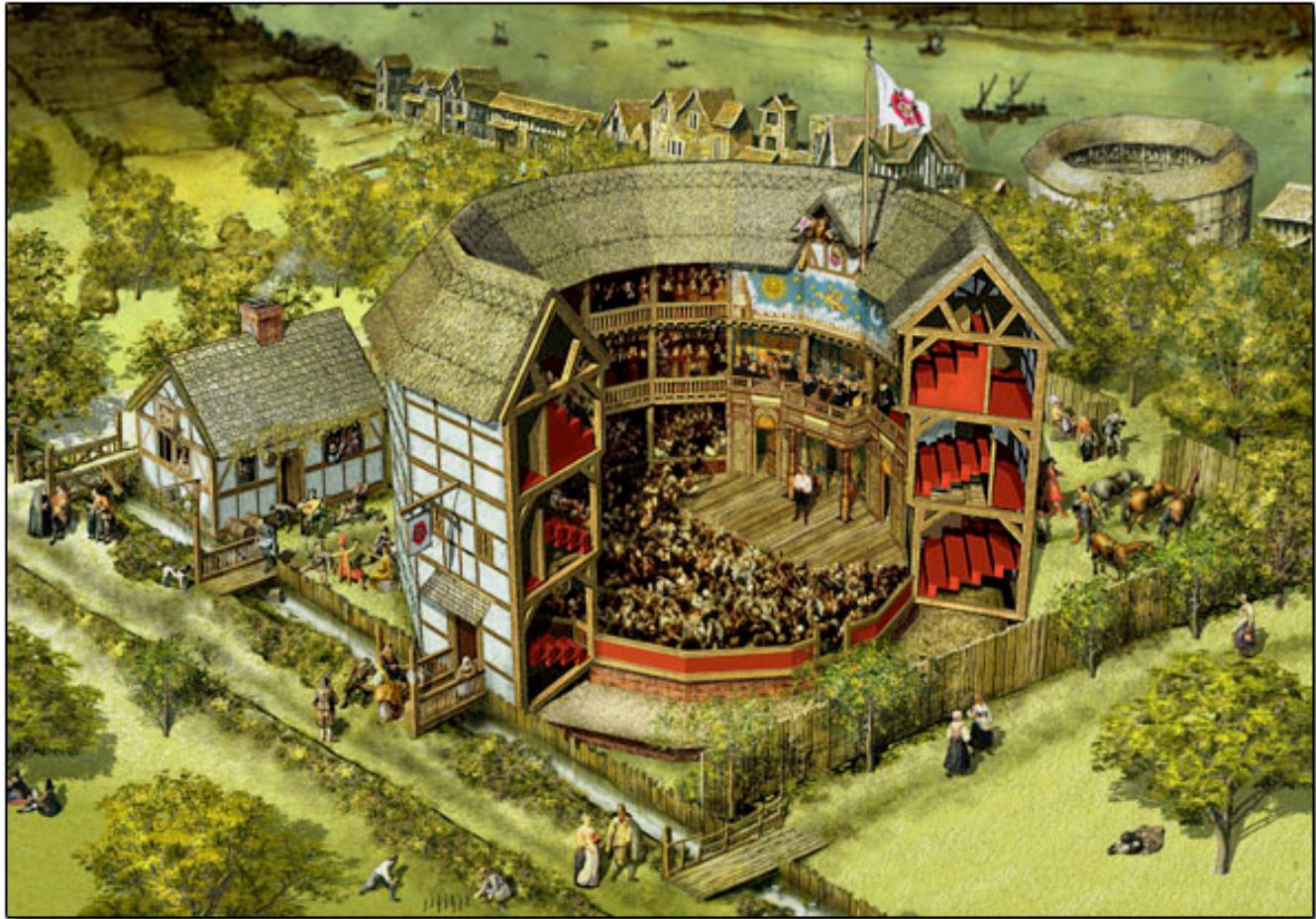
Key Focus Points for Study

Throughout our study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we will focus principally on what could well be considered the text's primary concern:

“What is a man...?”

More specifically, we will consider such aspects of the tragic hero's journey as:

- ***the compromises inherent to position and power.***
- ***the struggle to effect control in a universe prone to tragedy***



Context

Elizabethan Period

The Elizabethan era was a time associated with Queen Elizabeth I's reign (1558–1603) and is often considered to be the golden age in English history. It was the height of the English Renaissance and saw the flowering of English poetry, music and literature. This was also the time during which Elizabethan theatre flourished, and William Shakespeare and many others composed plays that broke free of England's past style of plays and theatre. It was an age of exploration and expansion abroad, while back at home, the Protestant Reformation became more acceptable to the people, most certainly after the Spanish Armada was repulsed. It was also the end of the period when England was a separate realm before its royal union with Scotland.



The Elizabethan Age is viewed so highly because of the contrasts with the periods before and after. It was a brief period of largely internal peace between the English Reformation and the battles between Protestants and Catholics and the battles between parliament and the monarchy that engulfed the seventeenth century. The Protestant/Catholic divide was settled, for a time, by the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, and parliament was not yet strong enough to challenge royal absolutism. England was also well-off compared to the other nations of Europe. The Italian Renaissance had come to an end under the weight of foreign domination of the peninsula. France was embroiled in its own religious battles that would only be settled in 1598 with the Edict of Nantes. In part because of this, but also because the English had been expelled from their last outposts on the continent, the centuries long conflict between France and England was largely suspended for most of Elizabeth's reign.

The one great rival was Spain, with which England clashed both in Europe and the Americas in skirmishes that exploded into the Anglo-Spanish War of 1585–1604. An attempt by Philip II of Spain to invade England with the Spanish Armada in 1588 was famously defeated, but the tide of war turned against England with an unsuccessful expedition to Portugal and the Azores, the Drake-Norris Expedition of 1589. Thereafter Spain provided some support for Irish Catholics in a debilitating rebellion against English rule, and Spanish naval and land forces inflicted a series of reversals against English offensives. This drained both the English Exchequer and economy that had been so carefully restored under Elizabeth's prudent guidance. English commercial and territorial expansion would be limited until the signing of the Treaty of London the year following Elizabeth's death.

England during this period had a centralised, well-organised, and effective government, largely a result of the reforms of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Economically, the country began to benefit greatly from the new era of trans-Atlantic trade.



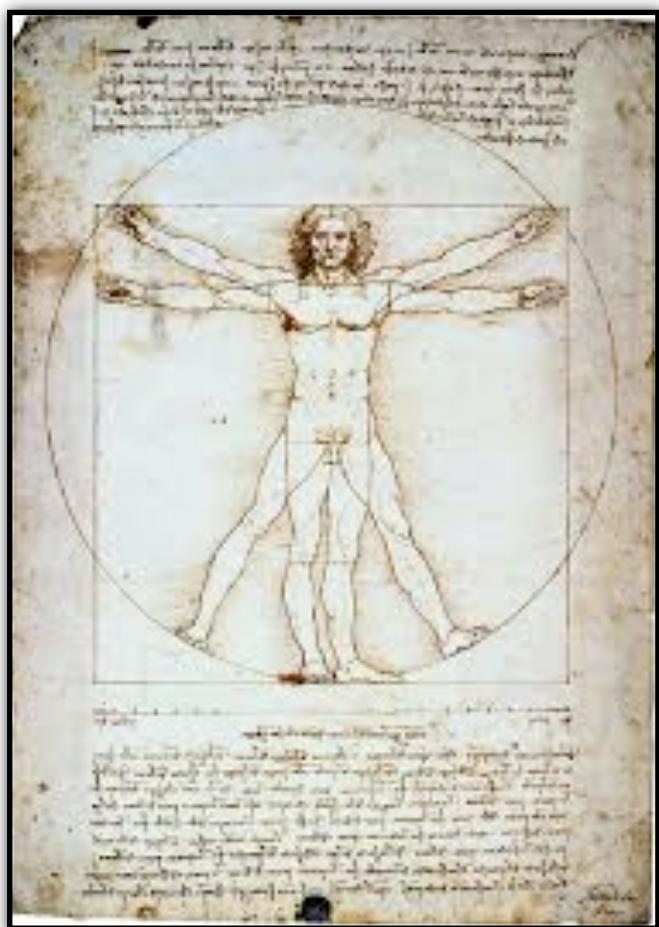


The Renaissance

The Renaissance (from French Renaissance, meaning "rebirth"; Italian: Rinascimento, from re- "again" and nascere "be born") was a cultural movement that spanned roughly the 14th to the 17th century, beginning in Italy in the late Middle Ages and later spreading to the rest of Europe. The term is also used more loosely to refer to the historic era, but since the changes of the Renaissance were not uniform across Europe, this is a general use of the term.

As a cultural movement, it encompassed a revival of learning based on classical sources, the development of linear perspective in painting, and gradual but widespread educational reform. Traditionally, this intellectual transformation has resulted in the Renaissance being viewed as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Modern era. Although the Renaissance

saw revolutions in many intellectual pursuits, as well as social and political upheaval, it is perhaps best known for its artistic developments and the contributions of such polymaths as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, who inspired the term ‘Renaissance man’.



There is a general, but not unchallenged, consensus that the Renaissance began in Tuscany in the 14th century. Various theories have been proposed to account for its origins and characteristics, focusing on a variety of factors including the social and civic peculiarities of Florence at the time; its political structure; the patronage of its dominant family, the Medici; and the migration of Greek scholars and texts to Italy following the Fall of Constantinople at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

The Renaissance has a long and complex historiography, and there has been much debate among

historians as to the usefulness of Renaissance as a term and as a historical delineation. Some have called into question whether the Renaissance was a cultural "advance" from the Middle Ages, instead seeing it as a period of pessimism and nostalgia for the classical age, while others have instead focused on the continuity between the two eras. Indeed, some have called for an end to the use of the term, which they see as a product of presentism – the use of history to validate and glorify modern ideals. The word Renaissance has also been used to describe other historical and cultural movements, such as the Carolingian Renaissance and the Renaissance of the 12th century.

Renaissance Humanism

Humanism – group of philosophies and ethical perspectives which emphasize the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers individual thought and evidence, over established doctrine or faith.

Hamlet

Renaissance Humanism was an activity of cultural and educational reform engaged by scholars, writers, and civic leaders who are today known as Renaissance humanists. It developed during the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, and was a response to the challenge of Mediaeval scholastic education, emphasising practical, pre-professional and - scientific studies. Scholasticism focused on preparing men to be doctors, lawyers or professional theologians, and was taught from approved textbooks in logic, natural philosophy, medicine, law and theology. The main centres of humanism were Florence and Naples.

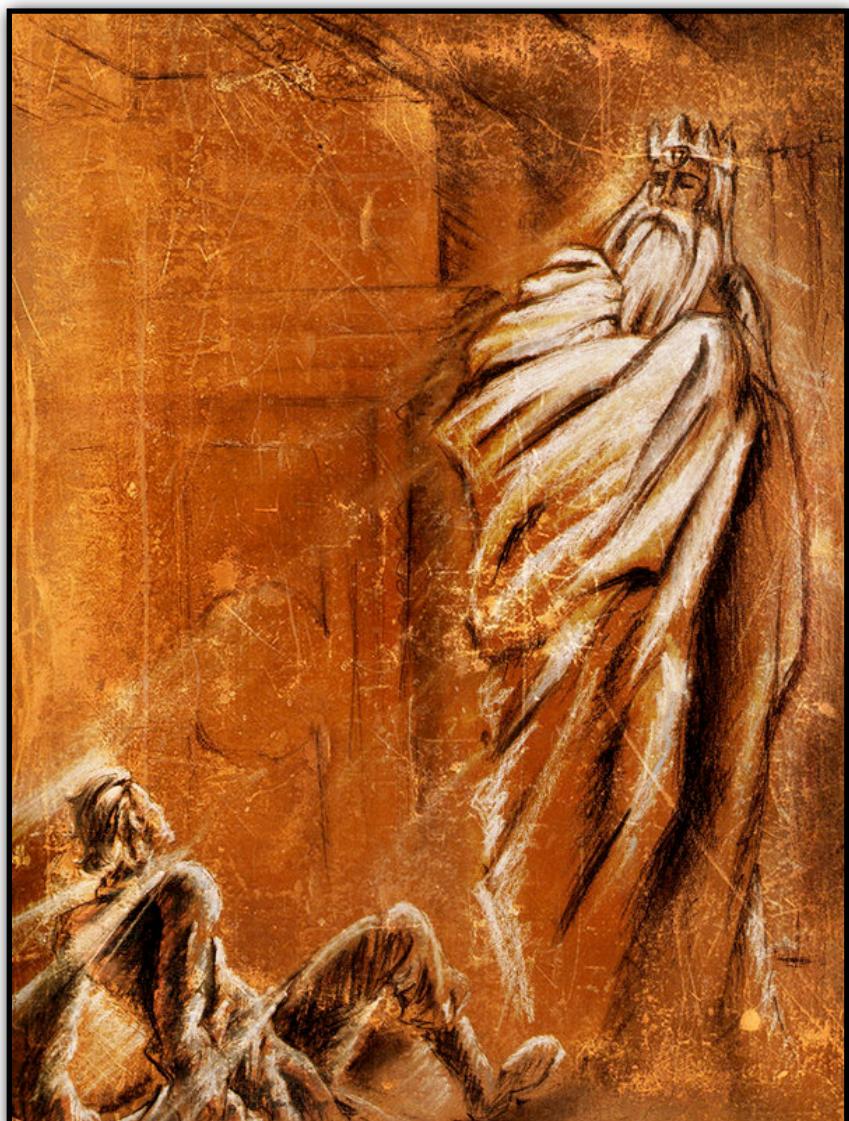


Rather than train professionals in jargon and strict practice, humanists sought to create a citizenry (sometimes including women) able to speak and write with eloquence and clarity. Thus, they would be capable of better engaging the civic life of their communities and persuading others to virtuous and prudent actions. This was to be accomplished through the study of the studia humanitatis, today known as the humanities: grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy.

Revenge Tragedy

The revenge play or revenge tragedy is a form of tragedy which was extremely popular in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. The best-known of these are Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The genre was first categorized by the scholar Fredson Bowers.

The only clear precedent and influence for the Renaissance genre is the work of the Roman playwright and Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger, perhaps most of all his *Thyestes*. It is still unclear if Seneca's plays were performed or recited during Roman times; at any rate, Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights staged them, as it were, with a vengeance, in plays full of gruesome and often darkly comic violence.



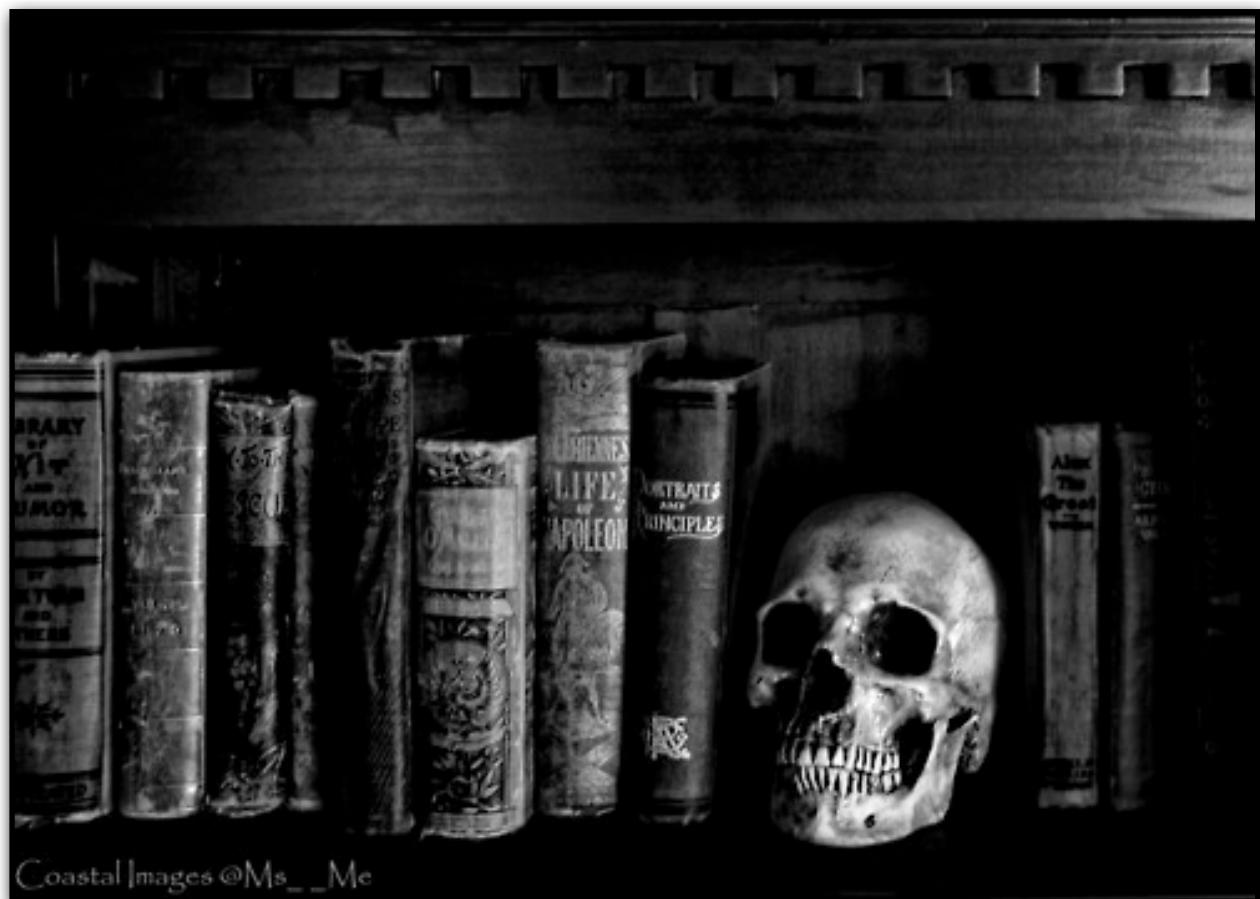
The Senecan model, though never followed slavishly, makes for a clear definition of the type, which almost invariably includes:

- ***A secret murder, usually of a benign ruler by a bad one .***
- ***A ghostly visitation of the murder victim to a younger kinsman, generally a son.***

- *A period of disguise, intrigue, or plotting, in which the murderer and the avenger scheme against each other, with a slowly rising body count.*
- *A descent into either real or feigned madness by the avenger or one of the auxiliary characters.*
- *An eruption of general violence at the end, which (in the Renaissance) is often accomplished by means of a feigned masque or festivity.*
- *A catastrophe that generally decimates the dramatis personae including the avenger.*

Both the stoicism of Seneca and his political career (he was an advisor to Nero) leave their mark on Renaissance practice. In the English plays, the avenger is either stoic (albeit not very specifically) or struggling to be so; in this respect, the main thematic concern of the English revenge plays is the problem of pain. Politically, the English playwrights used the revenge plot to explore themes of absolute power, corruption in court, and of faction – all concerns that applied to late Elizabethan and Jacobean politics as they had to Roman politics.





Coastal Images @Ms_Me

Study Guide

ACT 1, Scene 1

How is a sense of mistrust and unease in the state of Denmark conveyed by Shakespeare in this opening scene?

ACT 1, Scene 2

A key dynamic is foregrounded in this scene: the relationship between Denmark's newly crowned king – Claudius – and his nephew Hamlet – son of the late King Hamlet. How are these two characters positioned through Shakespeare's use of dialogue in this scene?

ACT 1, Scene 3

Scene Three introduces the family of the king's adviser Polonius. What early perceptions of these three characters emerge?

ACT 1, Scene 4

How does this scene offer important psychological insights into the play's tragic hero? Furthermore, how is his perceptiveness conveyed through his reflections on the vulnerability of man in lines 18-39?

ACT 1, Scene 5

In this scene, we witness Shakespeare's ability to both work with genre and to extend it. While widely regarded as one of the great Elizabethan tragedies, how does this scene work to position Hamlet within the revenge tragedy genre?

ACT 2, Scene 1

In the previous scene, Hamlet determined it "meet/To put an antic disposition on". How is his strategy revealed in this scene and to what effect?

ACT 2, Scene 1

Hamlet's reunion with his two "schoolfellows" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reveals much of his current disposition. In particular, how does Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man!" monologue (lines 287-299) powerfully reflect his current crisis of identity?

How does the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy (lines 527-582) demonstrate a theatrical sensibility in Shakespeare's prince?

ACT 3, Scene 1

How does Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy work to problematise his status as revenger?

ACT 3, Scene 2

It is in this scene that the self-conscious theatricality of Shakespeare's tragic hero becomes most palpable. How does Hamlet appear to be harnessing the power of theatre in the broader context of his revenge quest?

Following his uncle's guilty response to the actors' performance, Hamlet declares himself now ready to "drink hot blood,/And do such bitter business as the day/Would quake to look on." To what extent can this statement be reconciled to our previous perceptions of Hamlet and his response to his duty?

ACT 3, Scene 3

This scene offers a rare confessional on the part of the play's antagonist, Claudius. How is Hamlet's refusal to enact vengeance in this scene significant?

ACT 3, Scene 4

Hamlet's slaying of Polonius represents a key moment in his tragic journey. How do both this act and Hamlet's brutal treatment of his mother constitute a critical phase in his larger revenge quest?

ACT 4, Scene 1

Discuss Shakespeare's use of imagery in Claudius and Gertrude's articulation of the prince's response to his "heavy deed!"

ACT 4, Scene 2

To what extent does Hamlet appear to be resigned to his fate in this scene? How is the prince characterised at this point?

ACT 4, Scene 3

How is the play's central political tension, between Hamlet and Claudius, characterised in this scene? Assess each character's current response to the other.

ACT 4, Scene 4

Shakespeare offers a broader political context to Hamlet's revenge quest in this scene. How does the character of Fortinbras – "nephew to old Norway" – become significant in this regard?

ACT 4, Scene 5

The political turmoil in Denmark claims another victim in this scene. In what ways can Ophelia's psychological demise be read?

ACT 4, Scene 6

How might this rather brief scene be seen to foreground the inevitable confrontation of Act Five?

ACT 4, Scene 7

In many ways, parallels are clearly emerging between Hamlet, Fortinbras and Laertes. How does Shakespeare position Laertes against his young counterparts in this scene?

Hamlet

ACT 5, Scene 1

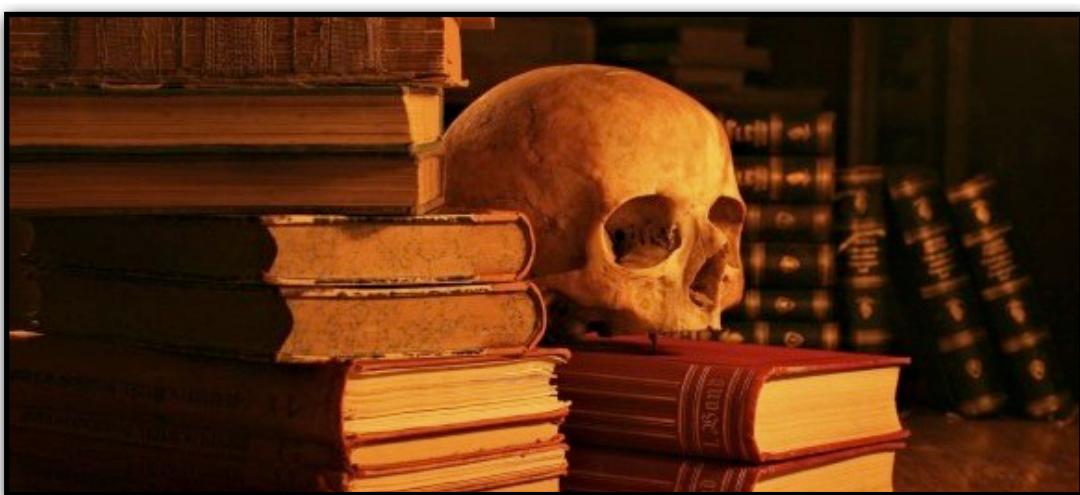
How does Hamlet's satirical banter with the gravedigger in this scene offer poignant insights into his current disposition?

To what extent do we accept Hamlet's proclamation "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" in his confrontation with Laertes beside Ophelia's grave?

ACT 5, Scene 2

In his exchange with Horatio, Hamlet offers not only the reflection that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will" but also the powerful suggestion that "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all." Assess the Hamlet that has returned from abroad, as opposed to that of the play's earlier Acts.

In Act One, Marcellus claimed there to be something "rotten in the state of Denmark." To what extent does Shakespeare resolve this in the play's closing scene?



Key Focus Point 1.

The compromises inherent to position and power



The Drowning Ophelia

At the outset of Hamlet, Denmark is the domain of Claudius, Shakespeare's supremely political king. Manipulative, calculating, secretive and suspicious, Claudius is generally well-served by malleable courtiers. As a usurper himself, it is fitting that Elsinore, his newly-acquired kingdom, is characterised by its eavesdroppers, its note-takers and its double agents. Marcellus' initial observation on the battlements that "***Something is rotten in the state of Denmark***" (1,4) immediately positions the kingdom of Claudius as a place where innocence indeed does not thrive. While the tortuous maze that is Elsinore effectively swallows up the innocent – such as Ophelia, who fails both to negotiate its pitfalls and to understand the cynical logic of its twists and turns – it

becomes a “**prison**” for Shakespeare’s protagonist, the reflective Prince Hamlet, who multiplies its complexities while ostensibly attempting to purge them.

Hamlet’s public problem is how to avenge a political murder in a culture where private vengeance is politically and morally unacceptable; his equally pressing private problem is how to come to terms with the death of his father, the late King of Denmark, with his uncle’s murderous accession, and indeed with his mother’s seemingly hasty remarriage (and possible complicity in Claudius’s crimes). The intertwined dilemmas posed by these problems render the Prince an unsteady and ineffective filial revenger. Alone onstage in Act 1 Scene 2, Hamlet discloses, in the first of his soliloquies, a near-suicidal despair and a corrosive bitterness centred on the “**most wicked speed**” with which his mother has remarried. This bitterness is intensified by Hamlet’s idealised image of his father and by painful memories of what had seemed to him his parents’ perfect mutual love. Here, Shakespeare clearly foregrounds the inherent limitations of the Prince’s political drives.

In many ways, Hamlet, written at a time when the feudal mediaeval society was being transformed into the beginnings of modernity, dramatises the response of an ‘advanced’ contemporary intellectual to the specific political circumstances of his day. In his ‘neo-Marxist’, late 20th century assessment of the Prince’s journey, Graham Holderness argues that Hamlet is a tragic figure precisely because he is caught between the spent values of his father’s ‘feudal’ heroism and Claudius’s ruthlessly pragmatic conception of how a ruler should behave. Holderness clearly recognises Hamlet’s idealising of the more characteristically medieval world of his father – that strange chivalric realm in which kings could gamble with their territories in fighting heroic single combats – for its pointed contrast with the more ignoble, yet thoroughly modern politics of his brother, who opts for a brief summit negotiation when similarly confronted by the challenge of a restless Norway (1,2).

Hamlet indeed seems stranded between the two worlds, unable to emulate the heroic values of his father – “**I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams**” (2,2) – nor to engage with the modern world of political diplomacy. Representative of the renewal of Marxist criticism in the late 20th century, Holderness’s view postulates a tension for Shakespeare’s protagonist between the two great Renaissance polarities of idealism and Machiavellianism, attempting a confirmation of the true source of his tragedy. This ‘materialist’ view conflicts with more abstract perceptions of Hamlet’s tragedy, preferring to recognise the influence of history and politics on the Prince’s ‘tragic situation’ over more romanticised depictions of an intellectual enigma. Such a view promotes a recognition of the world Hamlet inhabits as itself no more integrated and whole than the personality of the tragic hero.

Indeed Hamlet himself recognises his transitional political time as being “**out of joint**”, cursing that “**ever I was born to set it right.**” (1,5) Herein, Shakespeare sets his tragic hero on a path of resistance that will place him at odds with the feudal code of honour exemplified by his late father. It is in this way that Shakespeare, in turn, sets out to at once reproduce the conventions of the Renaissance revenge play and simultaneously call them into question. The audience knows for certain – from Claudius’s tortured attempted to pray in Act 3 – that there has been a “foul murder”, a fratricide successfully covered over by the story that a serpent stung the sleeping King. Hamlet however does not overhear Claudius’s confession and has only the dubious testimony of his father’s ghost. Indeed the ghost speaks as if he were condemned to purgatory, “**Doomed for a certain term to walk the night...Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purged away.**” (1,5)

Protestant theologians however vehemently denied that purgatory existed, arguing that spirits thought to be ghosts were in fact devils sent to lure humans into sinful actions. While seemingly justifying Horatio’s concern that the apparition may “**deprive your sovereignty of reason/ And draw you into madness**”, Hamlet spurns this advice in at first believing the ghost to be the authentic spirit of his father returned from

the dead. The Prince's subsequent doubts however further complicate his revenge quest, culminating in his assessment of death, in the play's most famous soliloquy, as the "***undiscovered country from whose bourn/No traveller returns***" (3,1). Through his uncertain relationship with the last remaining image of his father, the problematic nature of Hamlet's political, and indeed personal, journey becomes clear; suspended in his own imagined narrative, Hamlet can achieve only coarse reconciliation with his monarchical heritage.

The problematic notion of Hamlet's task poses interesting questions as to Shakespeare's tragic intent. Like Holderness, Kiernan Ryan applies a late 20th century lens to Hamlet's tragedy in his 'new historicist' recognition of the Prince's political rebellion. Rather than acknowledging Hamlet's tragedy as 'an unfortunate, enigmatic failure to conform to...prescribed codes of behaviour', Ryan indeed sees this 'tormented reluctance' as a 'legitimate rejection of the whole way of life' that festers in the "prison" Denmark has become. Hamlet's withdrawal into the dramatic limbo and licensed discourse of his "***antic disposition***" (1,5) functions, according to Ryan, as a sustained 'estrangement-effect', sabotaging the revenge play formula and thereby striking at the social order whose validity that formula presupposes. In this way, the tragic loading of Hamlet's journey finds its source not merely in the protagonist's psyche but in the "***unweeded garden***" that is Denmark.

While the 'cultural materialist' discourse clearly foregrounds important social and political markers within the text, preceding critical receptions of Hamlet's journey may appear to be equally justified in their focus on the dangers of Hamlet's 'reflective genius'. Specifically, it is A. C. Bradley's early 20th century view of the Prince that most comprehensively acknowledges his psychology as a key factor in his inability to truly embrace his inherited duty. Perhaps more than any other theatrical character, Hamlet is a figure constructed around an unseen or secret core. Indeed from his place onstage at the centre of a courtly world in which he is the "***observed of all observers***" (3,1) and hence a person allowed virtually no privacy, Hamlet insists that he has "***that within which passes show***" (1,2). While psychologically compelling, the political resistance

that such a comment infers – a subversive challenge to a corrupt, illegitimate regime – remains equally intriguing.

The test Hamlet devises to authenticate the ghost's accusation – carefully watching the reaction of his uncle to The Mousetrap – appears to resolve any doubts: "**I'll take the ghost's word,**" Hamlet exults, after the King has stormed out in a rage, "**for a thousand pound**" (3,2). Yet even here Shakespeare introduces an occasion for uncertainty: after all, the murderer in the play-within-the-play is "**one Lucianus, nephew to the king.**" Claudius's anger could have arisen from the spectacle of the player-nephew killing his player-uncle and not from the spectacle of his own hidden crime. The effect on the audience is not so much to cast doubt on the ghost's word as to uncouple Hamlet's inner life once again from the external world, even at the moment that he himself thinks they are at last securely linked. Again, our scrutiny falls on the Prince's problematic reconciliation of duty and instinct; as an intellect, he cannot truly embrace the sense of practical reason required of a revenger.

This uncoupling, this sense of inward thoughts and feelings painfully cut off from the world around him, haunts virtually all of Hamlet's relationships. When he speaks with his old school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with the courtier Osric or with Polonius, his is deliberately evasive, but his exchanges with Ophelia are equally oblique and baffling. Even with his intimate friend Horatio, there is some gap across which Hamlet struggles to speak: "**There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.**" (1,5) When Hamlet directly confronts his mother with the charge of murder, she reacts with astonishment. The painful words that follow – Hamlet's weird, tormented admonition to his mother to shun her husband's bed – do indeed seem to strike home: "**These words like daggers enter in my ears.**" (3,4) When the ghost suddenly appears however – visible only to him – she can only conclude that her son is indeed hallucinating.

Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge finds the source of the Prince's inability to reconcile himself to his political context in a psychological condition. For Coleridge, Hamlet is a man for whom the imagination, in all its ambiguity, seems somehow more real than the external world. In Hamlet, any sense of 'equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds...is disturbed'. Indeed demonstrating a powerful Romantic sensibility in his recognition of "this most excellent canopy the air...this brave, o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire", Hamlet's melancholy facilitates an equally vivid rejection of this: "**why, it appeareth no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.**" (2,2) What Coleridge's Romantic reading recognises then is an 'enormous intellectual activity' in the Prince that, in practicality, leads to a kind of self-delusion – "**it cannot be/But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall/To make oppression bitter**".

Ironically perhaps, the distance between what Hamlet sees and what those around him see is smallest in the case of Claudius, since both share a knowledge of the secret crime that has poisoned the kingdom, and each manoeuvres against the other throughout the play. Their fatal opposition however never rises to view until the final violent seconds, nor does Hamlet ever establish unequivocal, unambiguous public confirmation of his uncle's guilt. Rather than offering any such resolution, Shakespeare chooses instead to leave what Horatio calls the "**th'yet unknowing world**" (5,2) in the dark. Until the explosion of treason and murder, the horrified bystanders know only a court in which the loving Claudius appeals to Hamlet as his "son" and wagers on his skill in fencing. Hamlet begins an explanation – "**oh I could tell you**" – but he is cut short by death. The effect is to extend Hamlet's tragic isolation, his gnawing inward pain, all the way to his final silence.

Key Focus Point 2.

The struggle to effect control in a universe prone to tragedy

Hamlet

Hamlet opens on a perplexed world, where the need to know is urgent but frustrated. Indeed the fundamental certainties of identity – “**Who’s there?**” (1,1) – and purpose – “**Say, why is this? wherefore? What should we do?**” (1,4) – seem suddenly suspended. Though there are proximate and specific causes for this unease – Fortinbras’ threatened invasion of Denmark; the terrifying appearance of the ghost – at bottom, the confusion is symptomatic of the inalienable finitude whereby humanity is “**mortal and unsure**” (4,4). In the world of the play, the exercise of reason is conspicuously threatened by madness. What becomes increasingly clear then is the tendency of Shakespeare’s characters to succumb to the seemingly permanent threat of uncertainty. Not only is it the naive Ophelia who claims to “**not know my lord what I should think**” (1,3) but Hamlet also who, much later, bemoans his inability to “**know/Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do**” (4,4).



Hamlet slays Polonius

Hamlet's need to know his own defining and consummating purpose is intensified by the melancholy which has already estranged him from the conventional doctrines of purpose which he once accepted: "**How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world!**" (1,2). Yet paradoxically, Hamlet's fate is to understand purpose only through first deepening his perplexity concerning it. In the "**To be, or not to be**" soliloquy (3,1), life is initially construed as deprived of any purpose but release or "**quietus**" from its own suffering. This sole remaining purpose however is itself problematised by uncertainty concerning the consequences of enactment: "**For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,/When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,/Must give us pause.**" The only reasonable purpose then is the forfeit of purpose. Hence, there is nothing to be done but restrain "**resolution**", lest its "**consummation**" exacerbate the circumstances provoking it.

Indeed the possibility of cleansing, definitive action at once continually tantalises and eludes the Prince. Such action is embodied in the soldier Fortinbras, but if Hamlet finds some way of easing his mental anguish, it is not through any comparable martial exploit, nor is it through the secret plotting undertaken by Laertes. The spiritual calm to which he gives voice near the play's close – "**There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all**" (5,2) – descends upon him before, not as a result of, his revenge. The act of revenge itself happens in a flash of rage, without planning, without any self-vindicating declaration by Hamlet to Claudius, and without any public confession of guilt by the usurper. Revenge leaves the Prince not with inner satisfaction but with intense anxiety over his "wounded name".

Standing on a stage littered with corpses, Horatio promises to fulfil Hamlet's dying request to tell his story, but his account of "**carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts**" (5,2), though it may be accurate, must be inadequate to the play we have just witnessed. For Hamlet situates the need for revenge in a context that goes beyond any crime, however heinous, and that seems resistant to violent solutions. Before the ghost

disclosed his uncle's villainy, Hamlet was suffering from the traumas of mortality: the searing pain of his father's death, a troubled recognition of his mother's sexuality, a sickening awareness of the vulnerability and corruptibility of the flesh. There was a time, the play implies, when Hamlet embodied all the hopes and aspirations of his age and his own vision of human possibility was unbounded – “***What a piece of work is a man!***” – but that vision has given way to bitter disillusionment: “***and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?***” (2,2).

In his late 20th century work *Revenge Tragedy*, John Kerrigan offers a postmodern acknowledgement of the importance of theatricality to the Prince's melancholy: only performance, he argues, can meaningfully bring back the longed-for past. Here, the self-reflexivity of Shakespeare's protagonist opens up possibilities for an inspection of Hamlet's 'duty' as a theatrical exercise rather than simply a filial or political one. Kerrigan indeed posits that revenge is far less important to Hamlet than the impulse to remember. Such an imbalance is arguably dramatised in the performance of ***The Murder of Gonzago*** (3,2). As Hamlet re-enacts the events of his father's orchard, we witness the staging of a desire to see his father alive again. Here, revenge is so stifled by remembrance that when the Player King announces “***Purpose is but the slave to memory***”, he does more than gird unwittingly at Gertrude's forgetfulness of her husband: he ironically illuminates the Prince's retrospective tardiness.

With characteristic audacity, Shakespeare gives Hamlet his best chance of killing Claudius immediately after '***The Mousetrap***'. Approaching his mother's bedchamber, the Prince comes across his nemesis at prayer. Here, Kerrigan observes a theatrical conflation of Hamlet and Lucianus, as the Prince shows some rare steel both in resolving to strike – “***Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying...And so I am revenged***” (3,3) – and in ultimately deciding against it – “***And am I then revenged/To take him in the purging of his soul...No.***” Now that the playlet has recovered the past, showing King Hamlet asleep in his orchard “***Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled***” (1,5), the punitive inadequacy of anything but complete retribution is freshly in mind. Through the Lucianus-like

ruthlessness of his speech, Hamlet registers a recognition that revenge is incoherent unless it possesses that recapitulative power which the passage of experience makes impossible.

Furthermore, the self-reflexive nature of Shakespeare's tragic hero highlights the significance of the tragedians to Hamlet. Clearly the Prince's interest in them stems from his preoccupation with 'seeming' and 'being', and the fact that they can act while divorcing themselves from their actions – something he must necessarily do. They also interest him, however, because they make remembrance their profession. The Prince must struggle to keep his promise to the ghost, to preserve his memory against the tide of the world's indifference, but the First Player can reach back effortlessly to the crash of "**senseless Ilium**" and the murder of Priam (2,2). Profoundly moved by this, Hamlet has the players do the same for his father in The Murder of Gonzago. In this instance, the more immediate past of Vienna is dramatised and, through that, Denmark, before melting into the present of the larger play, with the murderer finally in possession of both crown and queen.

What seems to Hamlet a lens though which to examine his world and his place within it may in fact be little more than another symptom of his unyielding inwardness. If there were only the evil usurper to depose, Hamlet might compass a straightforward course of action, but his soul-sickness has receding layers: beyond political corruption, there is the sycophancy of his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and beyond this there is Ophelia's dismaying compliance to her father, and beyond this there is his mother's disturbing carnality, and beyond this there is the ongoing, endlessly transformative, morally indifferent cycle of life itself. For Hamlet, the quintessence of dust is not only the cold, inert matter produced by the nauseating triumph of death but also living matter pullulating with tenacious, meaningless vitality, produced by the equally nauseating triumph of life – "**we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.**" (4,3)

In a world pervaded by decay, the process of natural renewal has come to seem grotesque and disgusting: "**an unweeded garden/That grows to**

seed, things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely.” (1,2) These lines immediately give way to bitter reflections on his mother’s sexual appetite: in Hamlet’s diseased consciousness, the spectacle of nature run riot, of uncontrolled breeding, centres on the body of woman; Hamlet’s challenge to Ophelia to “**Get thee to a nunnery – why wouldest thou be a breeder of sinners?” (3,1)** implies renunciation of the flesh as the only virtuous course of action. Indeed the fragile Ophelia begins to crack under the strain of Hamlet’s misogynistic revulsion. Gertrude, who takes the full force of this revulsion, is evidently made of stronger stuff, but when confronted alone by her son, she fears for life: “**What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?” (3,4)** Both women sense the violence seething in Hamlet beneath his “antic disposition.”

In her late 20th century analysis of gender and madness in Hamlet, Carol Thomas Neely draws interesting contrasts between Hamlet’s ‘antic disposition’ and the ensuing breakdown of Ophelia. According to Thomas Neely, Hamlet is presented as ‘fashionably introspective’ while Ophelia becomes ‘alienated, acting out the madness Hamlet only plays at.’ Whereas Ophelia’s madness is ‘somatised’ and its content eroticised, Hamlet’s madness is ‘politicised in form and content’. By acting out the madness Hamlet feigns and the suicide that he theorises, the representation of Ophelia ‘absorbs pathological excesses’ open to Hamlet and enables his reappearance as a sane, autonomous individual and a tragic hero in the final Act. There he appears detached from family and from sexuality, capable of philosophical contemplation and revenge, and worthy of a soldier’s funeral; his restored identity is validated over Ophelia’s grave: “**This is I, Hamlet the Dane.” (5,1)**

Whilst offering a kind of ‘feminist’ commentary on the representation of Ophelia in the play, Thomas Neely’s assessment simultaneously offers a worthy reflection on the extent to which Shakespeare’s protagonist indeed achieves resolution at the play’s close. Indeed what becomes evident in Act 5 is the heightened perception of mortality that brings peace to the Prince. In his comic exchange with the gravedigger, Hamlet observes that all the dead are equally dead, and their remains equally malodorous: “**And smelt so? Pah!” (5,1)**. Consequently, death not only erases distinctions of

relative status but, more profoundly, transforms the end or purpose of human individuality. In death, the purpose of the individual is no longer to formulate and consummate his own ends, but to be the means to an end beyond himself: “***Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table; that's the end.***” (4,3)

Hamlet’s insight concerning the status of individuality in death becomes the basis for his climactic epiphany:

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will –

” (5,2). Just as the dead, construed as mere matter, are means to ends which exceed their awareness, so the living, construed as agents striving to fulfil their respective purposes, are also means to ends “***beyond the reaches***” (1,4) of their awareness. Having struggled to effect some form of control throughout his tortuous journey, Hamlet relinquishes it in his final, and perhaps greatest, gesture. In death, Shakespeare’s tragic hero becomes reconnected with mankind in a way that confirms the most revealing distinction between Claudius and himself. One, through his “***majesty***” (3,3) exploits the whole as the means to satisfy his own ends. The other, through his ‘readiness’, ultimately achieves a view of the whole through which individual ends achieve their supreme “***consummation***” (3,1).



Hamlet

Stephen Greenblatt - Cambridge Shakespeare

Hamlet



Stephen Greenblatt is regarded as the founder of **New Historicism**, a school of critical literary theory, that developed in the 1980s, and gained widespread influence in the 1990s. New Historicists aim to understand the literary work through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. New Historicism sits in conflict with a Post-Modern approach to critical theory.

"Who's there?" Shakespeare's most famous play begins. The question, turned back on the tragedy itself, has haunted audiences and readers for centuries. Hamlet is an enigma. Mountains of feverish speculation have only deepened the interlocking mysteries: Why does Hamlet delay avenging the murder of his father by Claudius, his father's brother? How much guilt does Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, who has since married Claudius, bear in this crime? How trustworthy is the ghost of Hamlet's father, who has returned from the grave to demand that Hamlet avenge

his murder? Is vengeance morally justifiable in this play or is it to be condemned? What exactly is the ghost, and where has it come from? Why is the ghost, visible to everyone in the first act, visible only to Hamlet in Act 3? Is Hamlet's madness feigned or true, a strategy masquerading as a reality or a reality masquerading as a strategy? Does Hamlet, who once loved Ophelia, continue to love her in spite of his apparent cruelty? Does Ophelia, crushed by that cruelty and driven mad by Hamlet's murder of her father, Polonius, actually intend to drown herself, or does she die accidentally? What enables Hamlet to pass from thoughts of suicide to faith in God's providence, from, "To be, or not to be" to "Let be"? What was Hamlet trying to say before death stopped his speech at the close? Hamlet, as one critic has wittily remarked, is "the tragedy of an audience that cannot make up its mind."

Shakespeare probably wrote Hamlet in 1600 (shortly after Julius Caesar, to which Polonius seems to allude at 3.2.93), but the precise date of composition is uncertain, and this uncertainty is compounded by the exceptionally complex state of the text. ***The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*** is included in the First Folio of 1623, but most editions of the play since the eighteenth century have incorporated passages that appear only in an earlier text, the Second Quarto, dated 1604 and entitled ***The Tragical Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke***. In the present edition of the play, based on the Folio text, lines that appear only in the Second Quarto are indented and numbered separately, so that readers will be able to assess the difference between the two versions. The Second Quarto has come to be known as the good quarto- in contrast to the so-called bad quarto, the first known printed version of Shakespeare's play, published in 1603. This First Quarto, regraded by most scholars as a highly suspect text, is little more than half the length of the play we now read and even in what it includes contains many striking differences. (The Prince's most famous soliloquy, for example, begins "To be, or not to be, ay there's the point") ***Hamlet*** is a monument of world literature, but it is a monument built on shifting sands.

With a text so fraught with uncertainty, it is tempting to think that our unresolved questions are largely the result of the perplexities that must inevitably come with the passage of time and the vagaries of editors. Yet the play in all its versions seems designed to provoke such perplexities. "What art thou?" Horatio asks the Ghost, and the question, unanswered, is echoed again and again until it seems to touch on everything: "Is it not like the King?" (1.1.57); "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.75); "What does this mean, my lord?" (1.4.8); "Whither wilt thou lead me?" (1.5.1); "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" (2.2.536-37); "Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" (3.1.122-23); "What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?" (3.1.127- 28); "Do you see nothing there?" (3.4.122); "What is it ye would see?" (5.2.306). The dream of getting answers to such questions tantalises many of the play's characters and drives them to scrutinise one another. But the task is maddeningly difficult. When Hamlet repeatedly asks Guildenstern, one of the school friends whom his uncle has set to spy on him, to play the recorder, Guildenstern protests that he does not know how. "You would play upon me," Hamlet returns, "you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery.... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.335-40).

Hamlet at once invites and resists interrogation. He is, more than any theatrical character before and perhaps since, a figure constructed around an unseen or secret core. Such a figure in the theatre is something of a paradox, since all that exists of any character onstage is what is seen and heard there. But from his place onstage at the centre of a courtly world in which he is "the observed of all observers" and hence a person allowed virtually no privacy, Hamlet insists that he has "that within' which passeth show" (1.2 .85). What is it that he has "within"? In the nineteenth century, following a suggestion by the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, critics frequently argued that Hamlet has within him the soul of a poet, too sensitive, delicate, and complex to endure the cruel pressures of a coarse world. In the twentieth century, following a suggestion by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, many critics have speculated

that Hamlet has within him an unresolved Oedipus complex, a sexual desire for his mother that prevents him from taking decisive action against the man who has done in reality the thing that Hamlet unconsciously desires to do: kill his father and marry his mother. On occasion, this psychological speculation has been challenged by a political one: Hamlet hides within himself a spirit of political resistance, a subversive challenge to a corrupt, illegitimate regime shored tip by lies, spies, and treachery.

Hamlet

These recurrent attempts to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery are a modern continuation of an interpretive activity that goes on throughout the play itself. Attempting to solve the riddle of Hamlet's strange behaviour, Polonius speculates that the Prince is desperately lovesick for his daughter, but Claudius concludes, after spying on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia, that "his affections do not that way tend" (3.1.161). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern propose that Hamlet is suffering from ambition after all, though Denmark is an elective monarchy, the Prince could have hoped to succeed his father on the throne - but Hamlet vehemently refutes the charge: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (2.2 .248-50). Claudius doubts that Hamlet is mad and, though he never directly articulates this suspicion, seems to fear that the Prince somehow knows of his secret crime, but Hamlet's painful interiority, his melancholy insistence that he has something "within," is already clear from his first appearance, before the Ghost's revelation. Gertrude therefore seems wiser to argue that her son's distemper at least originates in "his father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" (2.2.57).

As we first encounter him, Hamlet is a young man in deep mourning, which his mother and uncle both urge him to cease. The death of fathers is natural and inevitable, they point out, and while it is customary to grieve, it is unreasonable to persist obstinately in sorrow, Hamlet responds that his grief is not a theatrical performance, a mere costume to be put on and then discarded. When he is alone onstage a few moments later, he 'discloses, in the first of his famous soliloquies, a near-suicidal despair and a corrosive bitterness centred on the haste with which his

mother has remarried. This bitterness is intensified by Hamlet's idealised image of his father and by painful memories of what had seemed to him his parents' perfect mutual love. As he broods on the brief time between his father's death and his mother's remarriage, Hamlet's tormented mind convulsively shortens the interval: "two months," "nay, not so much, not two," "within a month."

Hamlet

Hamlet's soliloquies are carefully crafted rhetorical performances. Thus, for example, the celebrated lines that begin "To be, or not to be; that is the question" (3.1.58ff.) have the structure of a formal academic debate on the subject of suicide: prudently considering both sides of the question and rehearsing venerable commonplaces, Hamlet does not once use the words "I" or "me." Yet here and elsewhere his words manage with astonishing vividness to convey the spontaneous rhythms of a mind in motion. Shakespeare had anticipated this achievement in such plays as Richard II, 1 Henry IV, and Julius Caesar: King Richard, Prince Hal, and Brutus all have intimate moments in which they seem to disclose the troubled faces that are normally hidden behind expressionless social masks. But in its moral complexity, psychological depth, and philosophical power, Hamlet seems to mark an epochal shift not only in Shakespeare's own career but in Western drama; it is as if the play were giving birth to a whole new kind of literary subjectivity. This subjectivity, the sense of being inside a character's psyche and following its twists and turns, is to a large degree an effect of language, the product of dramatic poetry and prose of unprecedented intensity. In order to convey a traumatised mind straining to articulate perceptions of a shattered world, Shakespeare developed a complex syntax and a remarkably expanded diction. By one scholar's count, he introduced over six hundred words in Hamlet that he had not used before; many of these words do not appear, at least with the form or meaning they have here, in any previous English text. The innovative inwardness is not restricted to scenes in which Hamlet is alone onstage, nor is it restricted to the Prince himself; indeed, many of the deepest psychic revelations in the play are conveyed not in moments of isolation but in disturbing exchanges, intimate encounters in which love and poison are intertwined.

These innovations are not called for by the story itself. In Hamlet, as in so many of his plays, Shakespeare was recycling narratives long in circulation. The legendary tale of Hamlet (Amleth) was already recounted at length in the late-twelfth-century Danish History ·compiled in Latin by Saxo the Grammarian. In Saxo's version, which was adapted in ,French in Francis de Belleforest's ***Histoires Tragiques (1570)***, the unscrupulous Feng ambushes and kills his brother Horwendil and marries Horwendil's wife, Gerutha. Horwendil and Gerutha had a son, Amleth, who, though young and surrounded by Feng's henchmen, undertakes to avenge his father. The problem is survival: Amleth's every move is carefully watched. In order to avert suspicion and buy time, the cunning Amleth pretends to be feeble-minded. His strategy works with the active assistance of his mother, whom he has shamed into collaborating with him, Amleth eventually succeeds in killing his uncle, along with the uncle's followers, and is enthusiastically proclaimed King of Denmark. No ghost and no sickening uncertainty: the murder of Amleth's father is public knowledge, flimsily justified by Feng's claim that Horwendil was mistreating Gerutha. (In Belleforest's adaptation, Fengon and Geruth were having an adulterous affair.) Not only is there no problem of doubt for Amleth, there is also no problem of conscience, for in pre-Christian Denmark revenge was not a violation of the moral or religious law but a filial obligations.

This is the rough outline of the story Shakespeare inherited, along, it seems, with at least one other version about which we know tantalisingly little: by 1589, English audiences had evidently seen a play, now lost, on the theme of Hamlet. Apparently, this play - which 'scholars call the Ur (original)-Hamlet-featured a ghost who cried, "Hamlet, revenge!" On the basis of the barest shreds of contemporary evidence, scholars have constructed elaborate theories about this supposed source play, but there is little agreement among them. Further details have been pieced together speculatively by studying a German version of Hamlet, called ***Der bestrafte Brudermord (Fratricide Punished)***. The text of this crude version dates from 1710, long after SHakespeare, but some scholars conjecture that it was based on the Ur-Hamlet, perhaps as performed in

Germany by an itinerant company of English actors. The text (which other scholars argue was based on Q1, the bad quarto) includes such features as the use of the play-within-the-play to test the truth of the ghost's tale, the sparing of the usurper king at prayer, Ophelia's madness, and the climactic slaughter resulting from poisoned sword and poisoned drink. Still other scholars, though a distinct minority, dispute the whole existence of a non-Shakespearean Ur-Hamlet and speculate instead that the bad quarto reflects a very early version of the play that Shakespeare himself authored and that gave rise to the smattering of early allusions to the Hamlet story.

Assuming that there was an Ur-Hamlet, an Elizabethan staging of the story that preceded Shakespeare's, its author remains unknown. Many scholars have assigned¹ it to Thomas Kyd, who wrote ***The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587)**, one of the most successful and enduring Elizabethan plays. ***The Spanish Tragedy*** itself has features that strikingly anticipate Shakespeare's tragedy, including a ghost impatient for revenge, a secret crime, a hero tormented by uncertainty and self-reproach, the strategic feigning of a madness that seems disturbingly close to the real thing, a woman who goes mad from grief and commits suicide, a play-within-the-play, and a final slaughter that wipes out much of the royal family and court, along with the avenger himself. Kyd's play is entirely structured around the problem of revenge "wild justice," in Francis Bacon's haunting phrase, and gave rise to a whole genre of revenge plays in which Hamlet participates.

These plays generally share certain conventional assumptions:

- First, revenge is an individual response to an intolerable wrong or a public insult. It is an unauthorised, violent action in a world whose institutions seem unable or unwilling to satisfy a craving for justice.
- Second, since institutional channels are closed and since the criminal is usually either hidden or well protected, revenge almost always follows a devious path toward its violent end.
- Third, the revenger is in the grip of an inner compulsion: his course of action may be motivated by institutional failure-for example, the mechanisms of justice are in the hands of the criminals themselves -

but even if these mechanisms were operating perfectly, they would not allow the psychic satisfactions of revenge.

- Fourth, revengers generally need their victims to know what is happening and why: satisfaction depends on a moment of declaration and vindication.
- And fifth, revenge is a universal imperative more powerful than the pious injunctions of any particular belief system, including Christianity itself.

Shakespeare had already produced a sensational violence, crude version of these conventions in ***Titus Andronicus***. In Hamlet, he at once reproduces them and calls them into question. The audience knows for certain, from Claudius's tortured attempt to pray in Act 3, that there has been a "foul murder," a fratricide successfully covered over by the story that a serpent stung the sleeping King. But Hamlet does not overhear Claudius's confession and has only the questionable testimony of the Ghost. That testimony is open to question because the nature of the Ghost is open to question. The Ghost speaks as if he were condemned to a term of suffering in the realm Catholics called purgatory:

***Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away***

(1.5 .10-13).

But Protestant theologians vehemently denied that purgatory existed and argued that spirits thought to be ghosts were in fact devils sent to lure humans into sinful actions. Hamlet responds at first as if he believes the Ghost to be the authentic spirit of his father returned from the dead, but he subsequently expresses serious doubts, and in the play's most famous soliloquy he speaks of death as:

"the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.81-82) .

The test Hamlet devises to authenticate the Ghost's accusation, carefully watching the reaction of his uncle to ***The Mousetrap***, appears to resolve any doubts: "***I'll take the Ghost's word***," Hamlet exults, after the King has stormed out in a rage, "***for a thousand pound***" (3.2 .263- 64). Yet

even here Shakespeare introduces an occasion for uncertainty: after all, the murderer in the play-within-the play is "**one Lucianus, nephew to the King**" (3.2.223). Claudius's anger could have arisen from the spectacle of the player-nephew killing his player-uncle and not from the spectacle of his own hidden crime. The effect on the audience is not so much to cast doubt on the Ghost's word as to uncouple Hamlet's inner life once again from the external world, even at the moment that he himself thinks they are at last securely linked.

This uncoupling, this sense of inward thoughts and feelings painfully cut off from the world around him, haunts virtually all of Hamlet's relationships. When he speaks with his old school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with the courtier Osric or with Polonius, he is deliberately evasive, but his exchanges with Ophelia are equally oblique and baffling. Even with his intimate friend Horatio, there is some gap across which Hamlet struggles to speak:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.168-69)

Hamlet says this to Horatio just after his first encounter with the Ghost. (The quarto variant- "**in your philosophy**" marks the gap between them still more sharply.) When Hamlet directly confronts his mother with the charge of murder, she reacts with astonishment. The painful words that follow, Hamlet's weird, tormented admonition to his mother to shun her husband's bed, do indeed seem to strike home: "**These words like daggers,**" Gertrude exclaims, "**enter in mine ears**" (3.4.85). But the Ghost's sudden reappearance, visible this time only to Hamlet (and, of course, to the audience), convinces his mother that her son is mad. "**Do you see nothing there?**" asks Hamlet, to which his mother, certain that her son is hallucinating, replies steadfastly, "**Nothing at all, yet all that is I see**" (3.4.122- 23).

Ironically, the distance between what Hamlet sees and what those around him see is smallest in the case of Claudius, since both share a knowledge of the secret crime that has poisoned the kingdom, and each manoeuvres against the other throughout the play. But their fatal opposition never rises

to view until the final violent seconds, nor does Hamlet ever establish unequivocal, unambiguous public confirmation of his uncle's guilt. It would have been easy for Shakespeare to provide such confirmation, for example in a last speech by the mortally wounded usurper, but he chooses instead to leave what Horatio calls "*th'yet unknowing world*" (5.2.323) in the dark. Until the explosion of treason and murder; the horrified bystanders know only a court in which the loving Claudius appeals to Hamlet as his "**son**" and wagers on his skill in fencing. Hamlet begins an explanation - "*Oh I could I tell you*" - but he is cut short by death. The effect is to extend Hamlet's tragic isolation, his gnawing inward pain, all the way to his final silence.

What would it take to get rid of this pain? The possibility of cleansing definitive actions at once continually tantalises and eludes the Prince. Such action is embodied in the soldier Fortinbras, but if Hamlet finds some way of easing his mental anguish, it is not through any comparable martial exploit, nor is it through the secret plotting undertaken by Laertes. The spiritual calm to which he gives voice near the play's close:

"There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.157-60)

descends upon him before, not as a result of, his revenge. The act of revenge itself happens in a flash of rage, without planning, without any self-vindicating declaration by Hamlet to Claudius, and without any public confession of guilt by the usurper. Revenge leaves the Prince not with inner satisfaction but with intense anxiety over his "**wounded name.**"

Standing on a stage littered with corpses, Horatio promises to fulfil Hamlet's dying request to tell his story, but his account of "**carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,**" though it may be accurate, must be inadequate to the play we have just witnessed. For Hamlet situates the need for revenge in a context that goes beyond any crime, however heinous, and that seems resistant to violent solutions. Before the Ghost disclosed his uncle's villainy, Hamlet was suffering from the traumas of mortality: the searing pain of his father's death, a troubled recognition of

his mother's sexuality, a sickening awareness of the vulnerability and corruptibility of the flesh. There was a time, the play implies, when Hamlet embodied all the hopes and aspirations of his age and his own vision of human possibility was unbounded- "**What a piece of work is a man!**" - but that vision has given way to bitter disillusionment: "**And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?**" (2.2.293- 94, 297-98).

Hamlet

In Hamlet's melancholy consciousness, human existence has been reduced to dust at its dustiest. Though Claudius's secret crime is a political act that has poisoned the public sphere, the roots of Hamlet's despair seem to lie in a more intractably inward place, a place perhaps less consonant with revenge than with suicide. If there were only the evil usurper to depose, Hamlet might compass a straightforward course of action, but his soul sickness has receding layers: beyond political corruption, there is the time-serving shallowness of his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and beyond this there is Ophelia's dismayingingly compliant obedience to her father, and beyond this there is his mother's disturbing carnality, and beyond this there is the ongoing, endlessly transformative, morally indifferent cycle of life itself. For Hamlet, the quintessence of dust is not only the cold, inert matter produced by the nauseating triumph of death-the flesh of Alexander the Great metamorphosed into a plug of dirt stopping up a beer barrel - but also living matter pullulating with tenacious, meaningless vitality, produced by the equally nauseating triumph of life. "We fat all creatures else to fat us," Hamlet tells Claudius, "**and we fat ourselves for maggots**" (4.3.22- 23).

In a world pervaded by decay, the process of natural renewal has come to seem grotesque and disgusting:

*'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.'*

(1.2.135-37)

These lines immediately give way to bitter reflections on his mother's sexual appetite: in Hamlet's diseased consciousness, the spectacle of nature run riot, of uncontrolled breeding and feeding, centres on the body

of woman. His bitterness at his mother's remarriage spreads like a stain to include all women, including the woman he had once ardently courted. "**Get thee to a nunnery,**" Hamlet urges Ophelia, as if the only virtuous course of action were renunciation of the flesh. "**Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?**" (3.1.122-23) Even this desperate advice seems to be undermined by Hamlet's obsessive sense of rampant female sexuality and of his own corruption, since in Elizabethan slang "**nunnery**" could also be a term for "brothel."

The fragile Ophelia begins to crack under the strain of Hamlet's misogynistic revulsion. Gertrude, who takes the full force of this revulsion, is evidently made of stronger stuff, but when confronted alone by her son, she fears for her life. Both women sense the violence and despair seething in Hamlet beneath what he calls his "**antic disposition**" (1.5.173). That disposition, manifested in his disordered dress and in the "**wild and whirling words**" (1.5.137) that he begins to speak after encountering the Ghost, casts Hamlet in the strange role of jester in the court in which he is the mourning son and the heir apparent. Of all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, he is at once the saddest and the funniest. His blend of sarcasm, riddling, and sly wordplay initially strikes those around him as folly, but this first impression continually gives way to an uneasy awareness of hidden meanings: Claudius, alert to danger, notes that

"there's something in his soul/o'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (3.1.163- 64).

The "**something**" Claudius senses is in part the murderous design of the revenger, but it is also the philosophical meditation on life and death that haunts Hamlet throughout the play. This meditation reaches a climax in the graveyard, where Hamlet, trading zany quibbles with the gravediggers, directly confronts the corruption and decay that had obsessed him ever since "his father's death. If there is any release for Hamlet from this obsession, and it is not clear that there is, it comes from an unflinching gaze at a skull, the skull of the jester Yorick, but also, by extension, his father's skull and his own.

Nine Critical Extracts

Hamlet

"Hamlet's Great Song."

Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe.

Jeffrey Hart. New Haven:
Yale UP, 2001.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare clearly decided to express a wide range of poetic possibilities and make him the epitome of his age. The artistic product is a credible human being and even a credible genius. Hamlet fully engages most or even all of the contradictory possibilities of the Renaissance, from the lofty aspirations of **Pico della Mirandola** to bottomless skepticism, from the ideals of

humanism to recurrent thoughts of suicide, from the intellectual reaches of Wittenberg to mocking cynicism and an awareness of the yawning grave. The stature of Prince Hamlet as a great tragic hero rests upon the fact that though in all practical terms he was a catastrophe, (*those dead bodies all over the stage*), he nevertheless gave himself to and fully articulated the world available to him in all of its splendor, horror, and multiple contradiction. What Hamlet says becomes the core of the play. It is his voice, not his deeds, that dominates the stage. The great loss, the terror, we feel at the end of the play comes from the realization that his



Tondall's Vision of Madness

voice, that great song, is now stilled and that nothing like it will be heard again.

“To be, or not to be”: Hamlet’s Dilemma.”

Harold Jenkins. Hamlet Studies 13, 1991

The question of ‘to be, or not to be,’ though it does not relate directly to Hamlet’s particular problems, is nevertheless evoked by Hamlet’s dramatic role, so that the hero’s particular dilemma is set in context with an archetypal dilemma which enables it to be viewed in a universal perspective. The question is applied to the universal man in whom the particular revenger is subsumed. Hamlet, no less than Augustine, is working out a theorem, which is of general application based on a fundamental question, perhaps *the* fundamental question concerning human life, the desirability of having it at all. The response found in this famous soliloquy seems a grudging affirmative one and decides in favour of life from a fear that death might be worse. But the answer that springs from Hamlet when he speaks of his own individual plight and gives vent to his personal feelings is most often negative, the answer which Augustine thought improbable and even reprehensible. For example, directly after the ‘**To be, or not to be**’ soliloquy, Hamlet rejects Ophelia, rejecting life and its opportunities for love, marriage and procreation. It is his choice of ‘**not to be**’. Yet this negative answer is not the play’s final answer. In the graveyard scene, Hamlet comes to accept his mortal destiny, thus allowing him to achieve the readiness to do the deed of revenge which he has so long delayed. Ultimately, Hamlet and Laertes both avenge their fathers’ murders as well as forgive and absolve one another suggesting a very moral play. Hamlet recognizes original sin, the presence of evil in man’s nature; and accepts that guilt must be atoned for. It offers us a hero who, in a world where good and evil inseparably mingle, is tempted to shun the human lot but comes at length to embrace it, choosing finally ‘**to be**’.

“Hamlet: From Physics to Metaphysics.”

Eugene P Wright. Hamlet Studies 4 1992

Hamlet struggles with the spiritual mystery of the nature of the cosmos, the nature of mankind, mankind's relationship with the cosmos and finally, his place within this cosmos. Hamlet initially views the cosmos as a chaotic garden, but he discovers evidence of moral order in the grave yard. The unearthed skulls provide tangible evidence, showing clearly that emphasis upon things physical, like: material gains, heroic deeds, or death; is useless and insignificant. His shift to metaphysical contemplation is based upon his understanding of the physical. Although not a product of distinct logic, the conclusion Hamlet comes to is that indeed a moral order of the universe does exist and that he, and by implication all humans, must act in accordance with that order. Ultimately, it is reason that Hamlet uses to get at the answers to his most challenging question, that being: what is the cosmos and where is my place within this mystery?

“Remember Me.” Hamlet in Purgatory.

Stephen Greenblatt. Princeton UP, 2001.

The psychological in Shakespeare's tragedy is constructed almost entirely out of the theological, and specifically out of the issue of remembrance that lay at the heart of the crucial early-sixteenth-century debate about Purgatory. Although the Church of England had explicitly rejected the Roman Catholic conception of Purgatory and the practices that had been developed around it in 1563, the Elizabethan theatre circumvented the resulting censorship by representing Purgatory as a sly jest, a confidence trick, a mistake . . . But it could not be represented as a frightening reality. Hamlet comes closer to doing so than any other play of this period. Through a network of allusions to Purgatory, e.g.,

“for a certain term” [1.5.10], “burned and purged” [1.5.13], “Yes, by Saint Patrick” [1.5.136], “hic et ubique” [1.5.156]”,

as well as Hamlet's attention to and brooding upon the Ghost's residence source, the play presents a frightening, yet, absolving alternative to Hell. The play also seems a deliberate forcing together of radically

incompatible accounts of almost everything that matters in Hamlet, such as Catholic versus Protestant tenets regarding the body and rituals.. The prevalent distribution of printed religious arguments heightens the possibility that these works are sources for Shakespeare's play, they stage an ontological argument about spectrality and remembrance, a momentous public debate, that unsettled the institutional moorings of a crucial body of imaginative materials and therefore made them available for theatrical appropriation. The space of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage where old Hamlet's Ghost is doomed for a certain term to walk the night.

“How infinite in faculties”: Hamlet’s Confusion of God and Man.”

Chris Hassel. Literature and Theology 8 1994

Hamlet is frustrated throughout most of the play precisely because he does not balance thought and action, or understand the proper relationship between his faculties of memory, reason, and will and those of his maker. Hamlet's comment:

*Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused. (4.4.36-39)*

marks his “confusion about his own moral faculties of reason and memory and their role in the relationship between God the maker and man the made. Donne, Andrews, Luther, and Calvin describe the creation of man as a discourse among the Holy Trinity, but because Hamlet holds himself up as author and finisher of his own salvation, not God, not Christ, he will remain outside the discourse of faith. Rather than heed Donne's sermon on the subject, he also mistakenly assumes that his understanding, will, and memory do not require grace. Hamlet complains about the malfunctioning of his moral faculties and criticizes the place of original sin in God's providential plan. He does not comprehend that these natural faculties can only be serviceable to God, as Donne cautions; nor does his self-absorption allow him to appreciate fully the traditional competing vision of faith in providence, which is the paradox of our remembering

both our creation and redemption. The accidental killing of Polonius allows Hamlet a glimpse of his personal imperfection and initiates the concession that grace is needed. Hamlet returns from sea trusting providence, seeming to have escaped at last from the ‘augury’ of his mind. But closure is out of the question, whether our visions are Christian or otherwise, Hamlet leaves us guessing with his last words and Fortinbras restores the throne.

“Hamlet and the Trauma Doctors: An Essay at Interpretation.”

Simon Bennett. American Imago 58.3, Fall 2001.

Trauma research provides insights pertinent to Hamlet: trauma victims often experience the following:

- ***oscillations between numbness and overwhelming emotions,***
- ***difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy,***
- ***a sense of unreality,***
- ***a sense that the self and the world become loathsome,***
- ***a thirsting for revenge or scapegoat,***
- ***and a profound mistrust of the future as well as of other people including family members and friends.***

But secrecy associated with a trauma is especially devastating because secrets combined with confusion about fact and fantasy often lead to incomplete or fragmented narratives. A story that cannot be told directly in narrative discourse finds expression through displacement, symbolization, and action.

In Hamlet, the protagonist’s trauma derives from his first encounter with the Ghost, which leaves Hamlet both certain and uncertain of his father’s death, his uncle’s responsibility, and his mother’s involvement. Following this meeting, Hamlet mutely expresses his story in Ophelia’s closet. His madness, perhaps more real than even Hamlet realizes is a symptom of the ‘feigning’ and deceit around him, such as Claudius’ secrecy and Ophelia’s seeming betrayal. In comparison, Ophelia experiences various traumas, including:

- ***a web of half-truths,***
- ***paternal attempts to deny her perceptions,***

- *the loss of male protection,*
- *the secrecy surrounding her father's murder and her lover's responsibility,*
- *as well as the impossibility of any kind of open grieving or raging, let alone discussion.*

While her feelings are consistently ignored and she is silenced, Ophelia's madness is focused on her speaking in such a way that she cannot be ignored. In this aura of a traumatized environment, the theater audience must live with a discomforting set of ambiguities that Horatio's promised narrative cannot entirely clarify.

"Parison and the Impossible Comparison."

Lisa Hopkins. New Essays on Hamlet. Hamlet Collection 1. New York: 1994.

The length of Shakespeare's "**Hamlet**" and the play's enigmatic nature are two interrelated characteristics because the play doubles and redoubles its situations, its characters, its events and, ultimately, its meaning. The play abounds with the rhetorical trope of **parison**, (a repetition of the same grammatical construction in successive clauses or sentences), but Claudius is particularly fond of the **parison**. For example, in his first speech (1.2.1-14), Claudius speaks in a constant generation of twinned structures: by offering two possible locations of meaning, they cancel out the possibility of any ultimate, single, authoritative interpretation or label. The Prince no less than his uncle is caught in the trap of doubled language and of doubled rhetorical structures, and most particularly in that of **parison**. From his initial pun to his "**To be, or not to be**" soliloquy, Hamlet's obsessive use of **parison** presents oppositional terms as yoked together and forced into a position of syntactic and rhetorical similarity which militates considerably against the fact of their semantic difference. An audience's every encounter with the play becomes a complex negotiation between a series of incompatible choices where meaning is first offered and then shifted or denied, and where its production is always a delicate balancing act.

“Thou com’st in such a questionable shape”: Interpreting the Textual and Contextual Ghost in Hamlet.”

Reuben Sanchez. Hamlet Studies 1996

In rendering the ‘shape’ of the Ghost ‘questionable,’ or indeterminate, Shakespeare has created a text that both resists and embraces context. It begins with a survey of critical studies regarding the Ghost to show diversity based on selective contexts. In an historical context, Hamlet’s Ghost, a spirit, is perceived as distinct from a soul, and Protestants “might very well suspect the spirit of having evil intentions. But Hamlet does not act as though he suspects the Ghost to be a devil, at least not initially) and the scene of this first meeting may be even regarded as humorous. In the plays’ opening scene, the Ghost’s pattern of appearance / disappearance / reappearance conveys the fright and curiosity, but also the extreme confusion resulting from the Ghost’s appearances. Also in this scene, Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus attempt to explain the ghostly visitations, representing at least two different interpretive communities: Christian and Pagan. Whether one speaks of text or context, however, Shakespeare seems to be interested in presenting a Ghost who conveys information and withholds information, a Ghost who educates and confuses, a Ghost who evokes terror and humor, a Ghost whose signification is both textual and contextual.

“The Politics of Hamlet.”

Lord Rees-Mogg. Hamlet Studies 17, 1995.

Claudius as the model of a medieval ruler. Like many British rulers, e.g., Henry IV, Elizabeth I, Richard III, Claudius kills a family member, performing an act of state and following a tradition which every English monarch had had to accept for hundreds of years. Once on the throne, Claudius must begin the process of securing his position: praising the dead king, forming political alliances, marrying Gertrude, dealing with the threat of Fortinbras, conciliating ministers, e.g., Polonius, and attempting a reconciliation with his primary rival Hamlet. Because Hamlet refuses to embrace the new king, Claudius must engage in spying tactics to gain

knowledge about his potential enemy and, ultimately, decide to terminate the threat. But in Shakespeare's political tragedy, unlike the realities of British history, murderers are destined to fail. Aside from the fact that all of his supporters die, e.g., Polonius, Laertes; Claudius proves a weak leader because he invariably prefers compromise to confrontation, placatory gestures to open defiance. Perhaps if Claudius had not delayed his efforts to kill Hamlet, he might have been able to maintain his position as ruler; but the King's decision to defer the action leads to his demise. It is not only Hamlet who allows his reason to get in the way of decisive action.

