

Lecture

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES

When William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England, Queen Elizabeth I was the ruling monarch. It was a time of national strength and wealth, and the prevailing attitude was that life was exciting. It was an age of exploration, not only of the world, but also of man's nature and the English language. Shakespeare's time was also considered the English Renaissance of 1500–1650. Some ideas that characterized this period that are important to this play are:

- Humans had potential for development.
- The idea of medieval Christianity, that this world is a preparation for eternal life, was questioned. Instead, people began to see everyday life as meaningful and an opportunity for noble activity.
- This was a time for heroes. The ideal Elizabethan man was a talented courtier, adventurer, fencer, poet, and conversationalist. He was a witty and eloquent gentleman who examined his own nature and the causes of his actions.
- Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth.
- Women had a lower social status than men.
- People were concerned over the order of things. They felt there was "a great chain of being." This concept originated with Plato and expressed the idea that there is a proper order within all things, and among all things, based on complexity, from the tiniest grains of sand to heaven and God. When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony. When the order was broken, everything was upset and everyone suffered.
- People felt that their rulers were God's agents. To kill a King was a heinous crime; the heavens would show ominous signs when such evil was present.

FEATURES OF SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTER AND THEME DEVELOPMENT

Formal versus informal forms of address:

Modern English has lost this division, but in the Renaissance, there were two forms of second-person address—the formal and the informal. As is the case in German and several Romance languages, the formal form of address was used when an inferior was talking to a superior, when two business colleagues who were not close friends were speaking, or when the speaker wanted to maintain a distance. The informal was more intimate, to be used among friends, family members, and persons to whom the speaker wanted to imply closeness.

You was the formal form of address, and *thou* was the familiar.

Notice how, in Act I, Scene II, Claudius address Laertes, inviting him to present his petition to return to France:

And now, Laertes, what's the news with you?
You told us of some suit. What is't, Laertes?
You cannot speak of reason to the Dane,
And lose your voice. What wouldst *thou* beg, Laertes,
That shall not be my offer, not *thy* asking?

As the King shifts from the formal to the familiar, a reader can almost see him rise from the throne, step down from the dais, and place a warm and friendly arm around Laertes' shoulders.

Now notice how he speaks to Hamlet in just a few lines:

KING CLAUDIUS: But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son,—
... How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

QUEEN GERTRUDE: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Gertrude, of course, uses the familiar *thou* when addressing her son, but Claudius, though he calls Hamlet "son," never addresses him in the familiar.

Note this exchange between Hamlet and his mother in Act III, Scene IV:

QUEEN GERTRUDE: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Throughout the play, Gertrude uses both the formal and familiar while addressing her son. Hamlet stays always in the formal, implying—certainly—his status as her son, but also clearly establishing the distance he feels from her.

Be aware of how the various characters address one another and in what contexts they use what form of address.

Motifs:

Notice how Shakespeare returns to certain themes for emphasis and development:

The Garden—Serpent:

In Act I, Scene V, we learn, first of all, that the belief is that Hamlet's father died after having been stung by a snake while napping in his garden. Then the Ghost tells Hamlet, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown."

The serpent in the garden is, of course, an allusion to the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis in which the serpent tempts the woman, who then tempts the man, to sin. The consequence of their sin is to be evicted from the Garden to a life of toil and hardship. The particular sin in Genesis is their eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their *gaining* this knowledge is their loss of innocence. The death of Hamlet's father and the hasty remarriage of his mother is, for Hamlet, something of a loss of innocence.

In his soliloquy in Act I, Scene II, Hamlet says that the world is "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed." This is a further allusion to the Garden of Eden story in which, because of Adam and Eve's sin, the very ground is cursed: "thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you ..." (Gen. 3:18 NRSV).

This Garden Motif is echoed later when Ophelia, in her madness, distributes flowers and then dies hanging flower garlands on a tree.

Finally, the gravedigger (Act V, Scene I) likens his graveyard to a garden and himself to Adam.

Hamlet's desire for (and concept of) Death:

Act I, Scene II:

O, that this too too sullied [solid] flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!

Act III, Scene I:

To die, to sleep—
No more—and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep—
To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub!
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—

Act V, Scene I:

[Hamlet's speculation about the identities of the skulls unearthed by the gravedigger and his awareness that none of their earthly troubles or achievements really matter in the face of death.]

Hamlet concludes: "To what base uses we may return, Horatio!"

[The first skulls are anonymous for Hamlet to speculate about. When Yorick is dug up, death becomes more personal: "I knew him, Horatio." Finally, with the arrival of Ophelia's funeral procession, death becomes deeply personal: "I loved Ophelia ..."]

Act V, Scene II:

[Having literally stared death in the face, Hamlet has come to terms with it. He has arrived at a calm acceptance. When told that he will lose in his fencing match with Laertes, he responds (almost prophetically) as if he is expecting to die:]

... 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. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

Images of Disease and Decay:

Act I, Scene II:

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

Act I, Scene IV:

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Act I, Scene V:

... in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment, whose effect ...
... courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And, with a sudden vigour, it doth ... curd ...
The thin and wholesome blood ...
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
All my smooth body.

Act III, Scene II:

[I cannot] Make you a wholesome answer. My wit's diseased. But, sir, such answer as I can make, you shall command; or rather, as you say, my mother. Therefore no more, but to the matter! My mother, you say—

Act III, Scene IV:

This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother.

Act III, Scene IV:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!

Act III, Scene IV:

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.

Act IV, Scene I:

But, like the owner of a foul disease,
To keep it from divulging, let it feed
Even on the pith of life.

Act IV, Scene III:

Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are relieved,
Or not at all.

Act IV, Scene V:

the people muddled,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers ...

Metafiction/Metadrama:

Metafiction is a kind of fiction that comments on the very devices of fiction it employs. It usually involves irony and is self-reflective. **Metadrama** is similar—drama that calls attention to itself as a play or has occasion to comment on its own actions and devices.

This is most apparent when the Players arrive (Act II, Scene II). First, there is something of a digression while Shakespeare uses Hamlet to rail against the current fashion of parading little children around on stage (although he himself used children as the fairies Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, etc., in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*):

ROSENCRANTZ: ... there is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for't. These are now the fashion ...

HAMLET: What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? How are they escoted? Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players ...

Later in the same scene, Hamlet becomes Shakespeare's mouthpiece to speak about the difference between *popular* drama and *good* drama:

HAMLET: I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted; or if it was, not above once; for the play, I remember, pleased not the million, 'twas caviary to the general; but it was—as I received it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine—an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning.

Still later, Hamlet, alone on the stage, berates himself that he has been less purposeful and passionate in his *real* cause than the actors have been in their fiction:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech ...

This soliloquy, of course, ends with Hamlet's famous line:

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

Once Hamlet establishes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been summoned by the King and Queen to spy on him, Hamlet himself is essentially an actor performing for an audience. Keep this in mind during the famous "nunnery" scene (Act III, Scene I) when he is somehow aware that he and Ophelia are being watched.

Act III, Scene II begins with Hamlet instructing the actors how to deliver their lines; Shakespeare, of course, is venting his favorite frustrations with his own actors:

HAMLET: Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it ...

... Be not too tame neither; but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians' nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably ...

... And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them. For there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.

Of course, the entire play within the play allows Hamlet to comment on the action of the play which is, in reality, his commenting on the situation in Denmark.

Dramatic Conventions and Author's Techniques

DRAMATIC DEVICES

A **soliloquy** is a monologue. The character is alone onstage. It is a device the playwright uses to give the audience insight into the character's thoughts and emotions. Shakespeare uses soliloquies to allow the reader to learn the true cause of Hamlet's melancholy and to witness Hamlet's understanding of death and his desire to die.

The **aside** is another device used by the playwright to give the audience insight into the character. Here the character is speaking either to himself or directly to the audience. There are other characters onstage who, by convention, do not hear the aside.

An **allusion** is an indirect reference to another event, person's or work with which the writer assumes the reader is familiar. Shakespeare uses allusions as techniques for establishing character, building theme, and setting mood. In *Hamlet*, there are allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, Roman history, and the Bible.

Use of the **supernatural** is another device.

Madness, either real or pretended, was another popular device in Elizabethan drama.

One also cannot discuss Elizabethan tragedy without a discussion of the **tragic hero**.

There can be no drama at all without **conflict**. In *Hamlet*, the primary conflict is **internal** between Hamlet's sense of duty to avenge his father's murder and his inability to take action.

Since fiction was a relatively new concept (as opposed to legends and mythological stories that were believed to be, on some level, true), Elizabethans enjoyed **metafiction**; the characters in the play somehow calling attention to the fact that they are indeed fictional characters.

The **tragic hero**, according to Aristotle, was a man (god, demi-god, hero, high-ranking official) who rose to a high position and then fell from that high position—usually to utter desolation and death. Two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy—the tragic hero's tragic flaw (or hamartia), and fate. Some tragic heroes clearly bring about their own downfall, as in the case of Creon in *Antigone*, whose downfall is due to his hubris (excessive pride)—he believes his law holds precedence over the gods' sense of right. Other tragic heroes seem to be more a pawn of fate, like Oedipus, who has done everything in his power (as had his parents before him) to prevent the fatal prophesy from coming to pass that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother. It is in the very act of trying to avoid destiny that the prophesy is fulfilled. By the Renaissance, however, people generally felt themselves to be less pawns of fate and more in control of their own destinies. The Elizabethan tragic hero, therefore, is much more often responsible for his own downfall. This "waste of human potential," as it were, seems to be much more tragic to the Elizabethans than the vagaries of fate.

Ghosts, Girlfriends, and Graveyards

THE GHOST OF HAMLET'S FATHER

By the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, having a ghost appear at the beginning of a play and call on someone to avenge its murder was an ancient dramatic convention—almost a tool of the hack writer. The convention probably originated in the tragedies of Seneca, which were rediscovered during the early Renaissance.

For Shakespeare's audience, however, the existence of ghosts—and their nature, if they did exist—were matters of great philosophical and theological debate. For the majority of Protestants (and remember that England was officially a Protestant nation), there simply were no ghosts. The afterlife consisted of two regions, Heaven and Hell, and—once there—the soul of the dead did not return. There were those, however, who believed that, while the spirits of dead persons were unable to return to earth and haunt their survivors, demons certainly could assume the likenesses of the dead. Hence, a strictly Protestant reading of the play would assume that the ghost of Hamlet's father is no ghost at all but a demon—just as Hamlet suspects.

Catholics, however, believed in the existence of the afterlife regions of Limbo and Purgatory, and it might be possible for souls of the dead to return to earth while existing in these regions. A close look at the ghost's description of his afterlife in Act I, Scene V, "I am thy father's spirit, / Doom'd 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," reveals that he is clearly in Purgatory, where he suffers a Hell-like torment "for a certain term" until his crimes "are burnt and purged away." Therefore, if the ghost is from [Catholic] Purgatory, he could honestly be the ghost of Hamlet's father.

Hamlet and Horatio, however, are being educated in the very-Protestant Wittenberg. It was in Wittenberg in 1517 (at least 83 years before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*) that Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation by nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of All Saints Church. Thus, it makes sense that Horatio's and Hamlet's first reaction to the ghost (and Hamlet's lingering doubt) is that the ghost is actually a demon.

Shakespeare leaves it ambiguous what the audience is to make of this ghost, and this contributes to both the suspense and the final evaluation of Hamlet as a tragic hero. Is he responsible for his own downfall as a consequence of his inability to act and a botched attempt at revenge, or is he the hapless pawn of evil forces that have machinated the enlightened prince's downfall?

Ophelia: Much has been made of the character of Ophelia and her relationship with Hamlet to the point that there are those who would see her as a more important and well-rounded character than the tragic hero himself. It is important to remember, however, that, in this play, Hamlet is the title role and tragic hero and Ophelia a supporting character. There are still several interesting questions regarding this enigmatic character and her role in the tragedy:

What role does Ophelia play in Hamlet's madness?

If Hamlet did not love Ophelia and the attentions he has paid to her prior to the play's opening are merely rakish games, then she probably does not have much impact on his madness.

However, if his love is sincere (as he claims in Act V, Scene I), then for her to break up with him for no apparent reason, to suddenly return all of the gifts he had given her and all of the letters he had written to her, all within a few weeks of his father's death and his mother's hated remarriage, seems terribly cruel. Granted, Ophelia is merely following her father's orders (does she really have any choice?) but we have no reason to believe that Hamlet knows this.

Not only does she act so apparently cruelly to someone she claimed to love; in the process, she calls *him* cruel.

Finally, in the "nunnery" scene, Hamlet becomes convinced that Ophelia is a member of the conspiracy against him. This is probably the hardest betrayal for him to take.

Why does Ophelia apparently go mad?

Consider Ophelia's position. She is a young girl. In her time and place, she has really no choice but to obey her father. When the time comes, she will probably dutifully marry the man her father chooses for her—assuming, of course, a marriage hasn't already been arranged. She is in love with a man who claims to also love her, but, for some reason, her lover seems to have suddenly fallen out of favor with everyone, including her father.

She sees the pain Hamlet is in—reeling from the sudden death of his father, the tastelessly hasty remarriage of his mother to his uncle, the apparent usurpation of his throne by said uncle. But rather than being allowed to comfort her love, she is ordered to end her association with him. She is manipulated like a pawn by her father and the king and forced to essentially spy on Hamlet. In the "nunnery" scene, then, when she laments the "overthrowing" of the person that Hamlet was, she is most likely expressing a significant amount of guilt for the role she had played in this transformation.

Finally, when, in this madness, Hamlet kills her father and treats the body with incredible disrespect, it is probably guilt as much as any other cause of Ophelia's madness.

It is also interesting to note that, just as the Greeks considered the individual's downfall at the hand of destiny or the caprices of the gods as tragic, Shakespeare is able to sympathize with the downfall of the innocent and powerless at the hands of human manipulators.

Does Ophelia commit suicide or is her death an accident?

Shakespeare leaves this ambiguous. Gertrude's description of the death in Act IV, Scene VII, makes the death seem accidental. Ophelia is madly hanging flowers on a tree and falls into the water. Being mad, she has no sense of her own danger, and she sings songs until she sinks and drowns.

(Of course no one in the play asks Gertrude how she knows this. If she was an eye witness to the event—as her account seems to indicate—why did she not summon help?)

However, in Act V, Scene I, both the gravediggers and the priest suggest that her death was a suicide. The gravedigger is offended, saying that—if she hadn't been the daughter of a nobleman—she would not even be buried in hallowed ground. Laertes is offended that his sister receives so little funerary pomp and ceremony, while the priest is worried that he has offered this girl whose death was “doubtful” too much.

The bottom line for Shakespeare's tragedy is that the hero's downfall had to create widespread calamity and suffering; the madness and death of an apparent innocent like Ophelia is simply part of that calamity. She was a pawn, and, whether her death was accidental or suicide, she was destroyed by the corruption of the court that also destroyed her father and will soon destroy Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius.

Eve versus the Virgin Mary:

Some critics assert that Ophelia herself is not as important as her part in Shakespeare's portrayal of the dual nature of women in the play. Ophelia's purpose is to contrast Gertrude—not as characters or character types themselves, but as manifestations of Hamlet's warped view of women: at once the seducing temptress, and the innocent and virtuous.

Ophelia's presence in the play highlights the extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by his mother. Hamlet's feelings of rage against Gertrude are directed toward Ophelia. He can even blame Ophelia for his own feelings of lust, just as—in some irrational way—Hamlet can blame his mother for seducing his uncle. Through Ophelia we witness Hamlet's deterioration into a man convinced that all women are whores, seemingly pure, but inwardly corrupt with sexual desire.

Graveyards: While Hamlet seems to lament the fact of Death as the great equalizer, the gravediggers complain that, even in death, class distinctions persist. However, there is evidence in Act V, Scene I, that Ophelia's status as the daughter of the late Polonius has continued beyond her earthly life.

Several groups of people were not eligible for a full Christian burial in the hallowed ground of the churchyard: unbaptised persons (including babies); suicides; unmarried, pregnant women; and any person who died in a state of mortal sin. The gravedigger complains that Ophelia, an apparent suicide, is being buried in a hallowed grave; however, a family with the political influence of Polonius would more than likely have a conspicuous family plot with an appropriately conspicuous family monument or mausoleum (think of Juliet being buried in her family's tomb). Yet Ophelia's grave is in the ground in an obscure part of the graveyard.

The fact that the gravediggers keep unearthing skulls suggests that Ophelia is to be buried in a pre-used grave. This was not an uncommon practice, especially among the lower classes, who would lease a burial plot for a period of time. That one of the skulls unearthed is identifiable as the court jester Yorick suggests that Ophelia's grave will be in the section of the cemetery where servants were buried.

Of course, the graveyard scene is merely a vehicle for Shakespeare. It affords him an opportunity for a little comic relief; it allows Hamlet to philosophize about death and the purpose of earthly strife; it provides the opportunity for Hamlet to narrow his view of death from anonymous speculation to "I knew him" to "I loved her"; and it allows for the wonderful foreshadowing of Hamlet and Laertes' jumping into Ophelia's grave to fight.

Still, the burial of Ophelia—after Hamlet's scandalous treatment of Polonius' body—seems to emphasize the rottenness in Denmark that Hamlet mentions at the opening of the play.