

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT 3: *HAMLET*

**Response due: Feb. 18**

**Comment due: Feb. 20**

### **Meeting Hamlet: What are your first impressions of Hamlet in Act I, scene ii?**

When we first see Hamlet, he is self-isolated, that is, he is sitting or standing apart, his black clothing sets him off from the colorful and luxurious clothing of the court, and he holds himself apart emotionally. He ignores the King as much as he can and makes cutting responses to his mother as well as to the King.

Do you think his attitude and behavior are justified by his circumstances (father's death two months earlier and mother's remarriage to his uncle)? Or do you think that his behavior is extreme and that something else is going on emotionally with Hamlet, even if you don't know yet what it might be? (Other possible explanations for his behavior: he might be unduly attached to his mother or to his father, be extremely egocentric, or be unrealistically idealistic and naive. Maybe he's just been spoiled by his mother.)

### **The Ghost's Functions and Effects:**

The Ghost introduces or develops a number of major elements in this play: appearance and reality; the poison, disease, death, revenge, and rotting imagery which runs through the play; mysteriousness; loss and aloneness; undeserved suffering and destruction.

Shakespeare also uses him to arouse powerful emotions in the audience—horror and fear (look especially at his speeches in I.v.9-91). Do his speeches arouse our pity? Certainly the Ghost's speeches arouse pity in Hamlet, who refers to him as "thou poor ghost" (I.v.96).

### **Does Hamlet's age matter? The play is contradictory about Hamlet's age.**

According to the gravedigger, Hamlet is 30; the gravedigger says he became a gravedigger when Hamlet was born, thirty years earlier (V.i.146-64). However, Horatio tells the guards they should speak to "young Hamlet" (I, i). Laertes too calls him a "youth" (I.iii.6). Ophelia refers to his "blown [blooming] youth" (III.i.162). And Polonius comments, "he is young" (I.iii.125). Hamlet's wanting to return to Wittenberg and the university suggests he is still a student. These references suggest he is no older than 20.

There are a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy: the play was revised, whether by Shakespeare, an actor, or a manager; it is a misprint; it is a miscopying (in Shakespeare's day Roman numerals were often used, instead of Arabic numerals).

But what I am interested in is the effect of his age. Do we judge Hamlet and look at the action differently if Hamlet is in his late teens rather than if he is a thirty-year old man? Does his age affect anything else in the play—for instance, does his age affect the way we see his relationship with Ophelia or the way we see the Queen and his response to her?

### **The characterization of Claudius:**

The critic George Lyman Kittredge found Claudius "a superb figure--almost as great a dramatic creation as Hamlet himself. His intellectual powers are of the highest order. . . . To neglect or undervalue Claudius destroys the balance of the tragedy." How do you see Claudius, as just a villain, say, or is he more complex? For a long time, the traditional way to play Claudius on stage was as a melodramatic villain, often as a drunk

and/or a buffoon.

Is our view of Hamlet affected if Claudius is a negligible person, someone contemptible? Does the interpretation of Claudius affect the way we see anyone else in the play, such as Gertrude or the Ghost?

Does the interpretation of Claudius's character have significance for the political implications of the play? The murder of King Hamlet violates the Great Chain of Being which gives order to all being or creation; this disorder is reflected in the threat of Fortinbras's threatened invasion and in the disease, rotting, corruption, and garbage images which run through this play.

### **The Ghost's Nature: Is the Ghost, as Hamlet says, only "an honest ghost" (I.v.138)?**

G. Wilson Knight thinks the Ghost is enigmatic<sup>1</sup> or ambiguous<sup>2</sup>. He calls the Ghost "a thing of darkness." In his view, the Ghost is unnatural, something which the living must reject; at the same time, the Ghost

is a loved father, an honoured king. Father and King: both are important. The ideals of love and kingship are at stake. But that father, that king, is dead. So, clearly, the Ghost is also Death....He certainly tells a tale which enlists our sympathy. He is morally justified by all laws of man.... the dark forces are given ethical sanction: but this alters not their darkness. Thus the Ghost must return to his prison-house at dawn...

As a consequence, he argues, the Ghost cannot be a purely good apparition. Rather, it is related to evil. Consider the fact that the consequences of its revelation are mostly evil and that the Ghost is the result of an evil, Claudius's crime. Thus, it is "dangerous to life."

I know this is a more sophisticated and subtle analysis than most of the issues we have been discussing in class, but, as Hamlet might say, "give it welcome" and think about Knight's ideas even if you don't choose to respond to this passage.

### **Hamlet's Madness: Is Hamlet mad? Does his being mad all the time, some of the time, or none of the time affect the play?**

E.K. Chambers ties the issue of Hamlet's madness to the need for the tragic hero to have free will, for his fate to be the consequence of the choices he freely makes and is responsible for. He believes,

Shakespeare did not mean Hamlet to be mad in any sense which would put his actions in a quite different category from those of other men. How could it be so, since the responsibility of the free agent is of the essence of psychological tragedy, and to have eliminated Hamlet's responsibility would have been to divest his story of humanity and leave it meaningless?

### **Is Hamlet incapable of revenge?**

Willard Farnham thinks that Hamlet is "peculiarly ill suited" to avenge his father's death in order to get

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<sup>1</sup> *enigmatic*: puzzling or inexplicable.

<sup>2</sup> *ambiguous*: (1) having two or more possible meanings; (2) unclear meaning. Depending on the circumstances, ambiguity can be negative, leading to confusion or even disaster (the ambiguous wording of a general's note led to the deadly charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War). On the other hand, writers often use it to achieve special effects, for instance, to reflect the complexity of an issue or to indicate the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of determining truth.

justice for his murdered father. Shocked by the injustice of the world, Hamlet broods over this injustice and finds it difficult to act; "thus there is injustice in the very fate that assigns him the duty of obtaining justice."

Hamlet himself says,

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!

(I.v.188-9)

I have presented a number of ideas in this item: Is Hamlet unsuited for revenge by his nature? Is his problem his sense of injustice? Do the particular circumstances Hamlet finds himself in hamper his efforts at revenge?

### **Poison-corruption-disease-rotting-garbage imagery runs through *Hamlet*:**

These images have a basis in the action of the play: the real poison that Claudius pours in King Hamlet's ear spreads through his whole body and causes it to be covered with a "vile and loathesome crust," like leprosy (I.v.72). Similarly, Claudius's act spreads through Denmark causing disorder (the state or kingdom is often called "the body politic," meaning, the political body or nation).

King Hamlet's murder, W.H. Clemen explains, "is expanded into a symbol for the central problem of the play. The corruption of land and people throughout Denmark is understood as an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning"; the people and the nation are diseased; decay is spreading inexorably throughout the kingdom.

Thus the imagery parallels and reinforces the action and contributes to the feeling and atmosphere of the play. Here are some examples of what I mean:

There's something ROTTEN in the state of Denmark. (I.iv.90)

And in the morn and liquid dew of youth

CONTAGIOUS blastments are most imminent. (I.iii.41-2)

So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,

Will sate itself in a celestial bed

And prey on GARBAGE (I.v.55-8)

*Note:* I capitalized the corruption-rotting-disease imagery to make it clear.

### **The better king?**

This question is going to call on your to use your imagination.... Think back to a time before Claudius assassinated his brother. Based on the qualities we see in Hamlet and Claudius in the play, who do you think would be a better King: Hamlet or Claudius? Why?

### ***Hamlet and Aristotle:***

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle said that tragedy arouses pity and fear in the audience. In order for the tragic hero to arouse these feelings in the audience, he cannot be either all good or all evil but must be someone the audience can identify with. Does Hamlet meet Aristotle's criteria (*criterion*, singular form: standard; *criteria*, plural form)? You might consider one criterion, two criteria, or all three:

Does Hamlet arouse pity and fear in the audience?

Is Hamlet all good or all bad?

Is Hamlet someone whom the audience can identify with?

You may answer in general terms (that is, how PEOPLE or AUDIENCES feel) or personal terms (that is, how YOU feel).

### **A frivolous question:**

If you were dropped into the Court at Elsinore, whom would you like to talk with and perhaps spend the afternoon with? and why?