

Shakespeare's Hamlet

Dr. Alan Haffa

Please Silence Cell Phones

Tragedy

- Aristotle's definition: 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; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . .

Baroque Drama

- Dark characters
- Complex motives
- Extreme or unnatural passions
- Complex Plot: plots within plots
- Morbid, horrific, and spectacular endings
- Appearances are untrustworthy—Reality and Illusion are blurred

Mature Tragedies

- Macbeth
- Othello
- Hamlet
- King Lear

Staging Hamlet

- Is the Ghost real or imagined?
- Is Hamlet mad or sane?
- Why does Hamlet hesitate?
- What is the nature of relationship between Hamlet and his Mother?
- Are any of the characters redeemed in the end?

Ashland Production: 2009

- Dan Donahue as Hamlet
- Sat silently at a funeral, with just the casket of King Hamlet
- Chairs removed one by one.
- Highlights the **grieving of Hamlet**
- Calls attention to the temporal contrast between the **funeral and the wedding party in I.2.**
- **Hamlet is not mad:** he is in the early stages of grief.



Hamlet and Baroque

- Ghost—Magical and Mysterious
- Illusion and Acting: Claudius the King; Hamlet and his madness; Ophelia and her madness
- Play within the Play
- Interpretative Complexity
- Falsity: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Poisoned Sword of Laertes
- Psychological Complexity and Character Motivation: Why does Hamlet hesitate so long?

Theme: Fathers and Sons

- What should Fathers pass down to their children?
- What do children owe to their fathers?
- Memory of injustice weighs heavy on Hamlet, Ophelia, and Laertes
- Ophelia is unable to seek revenge as a woman; goes mad
- Laertes and Hamlet are forced by Memory of Fathers to seek vengeance

Theme: Memory

- Memory of deceased demands mourning: part of what stinks in Denmark is that there was not sufficient time for mourning
- The cycle of violence is unavoidable
- Hamlet had no other choice: honor and memory demand vengeance
- His choice creates ethical dilemma: Orestes
- Cycle of Violence is like a Disease

Claudius and Hamlet: Father and Son

- “But now, my cousin Hamlet and my son—” I.2
- Hamlet: “A little more than kin and less than kind.”
- Claudius indicates that Hamlet is like a son in claim to the throne
- Claudius is attempting to steal not only the throne but his brother’s own son.

Nature as Metaphor and Symbol

- Nature as Sex
- Nature as Death
- Hamlet: "Tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely." Speaking of his mother's marriage.
- Nature as Disease: "for some vicious mole of nature in them...the stamp of one defect...shall in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault." (I.4)

Sex as Diseased

- Laertes to Ophelia on the love of Hamlet:
“Virtue itself `scapes not calumnious strokes.
The canker galls the infants of the spring too
oft before their buttons be disclosed, And, in
the morn and liquid dew of youth, contagious
blastments are most imminent.” (I.3)
- Hamlet will say the same of Her (whore) and
his mother
- “rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stewed in
corruption, honeying and making love Over the
nasty sty!” (III.4)

“Unnatural Murder” I.5

- The prefix “un” stands out in the context of so many utterances of Nature
- “Murder most foul, as in the best it is, But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.”
- He insinuates to Hamlet that he suffers in Hell for his crimes yet he calls on his son to commit a crime, vengeful murder.

Incestuous Marriage

- Hamlet calls it incestuous as will the ghost
- Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon
- It isn't clear if a marriage of a widow to her brother's uncle would be considered legal or biblical incest or not in the 16th century
- Incestuous is unnatural: the unnatural desire of Gertrude and Claudius is at the core of what ails Denmark

Hamlet and Players

- They recite verses from Pyrrhus
- Son of Achilles who kills the aged King Priam while his wife, Hecuba, looks on
- Foreshadows the vengeance of Hamlet, like the vengeance of Pyrrhus against Troy
- He asks the players to perform "The Murder of Gonzaga"
- These theatrical choices reveal design, not madness

Nature and Sickness

- Once the plot against him is revealed, Hamlet compares King to a canker
- "And is 't not to be damned to let this canker of our nature come in further evil?" V.2
- Evil must be cut away
- To permit it to stay is itself to be damned
- To kill the king would not be a sin; it would be a sin to let him live
- Nature herself is sick and must be healed only by killing the King

Closing Thoughts

- Hamlet is in a state of grieving
- He hesitates for good reason
- Hamlet is a great play because of its psychological complexity
- Explores the most intimate human relationships; child and father and child and mother.
- It plays upon some fundamental themes— Nature as life giving (the sex instinct) and yet corrupt (death and disease and poison)