

ENGLISH: *HAMLET*

In the context of your critical study, to what extent does your response to the closing scenes of Hamlet inform your judgement of this play as a whole?

Much activity occurs within the final act of Hamlet, and the closing scenes of the play work to reflect and provide a means to ending the confusion, tragedy and sense of melancholia and that marks the play as a whole. A satisfying ending to an otherwise uneasy play, the deaths of Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius, and arrival of Fortinbras to restore peace and order effectively re-shape my judgement of Hamlet's multi-faceted personality while deepening my understanding of the play as a reflection of Elizabethan context and values. In particular, the ideas, language and theatrical devices in Act 5 of Hamlet contribute to the mystery of Hamlet's character and continue to address the universal question of human mortality that make the play so successful in entertaining audiences today.

The presentation of Denmark as an unweeded, disorderly and disturbed state throughout Hamlet does much to influence my judgement of the play as one that reflects the chaos, confusion and tragedy that can occur when corruption reigns unchecked in a governing body. Fortinbras's comment at the conclusion of the play "but here shows much amiss" not only describes the tragedy caused by the court's corruption, but echoes another ominous observation made by Marcellus in the play's opening scenes, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark". The image of the nation decaying and becoming infected by Claudius's and Gertrude's actions then prompts reference to Hamlet's observation in his first soliloquy, that Denmark had become "an unweeded garden/That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature". By the closing scenes of the play, the extended metaphor of Denmark, a Garden of Eden now poisoned by a king and his wife, reaches a conclusion and the corruption of Denmark's court is complete. In the final scene Horatio also summarises how the corruption of his country has come about, through "...carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts", "accidental judgements, casual slaughters" and "deaths put on by cunning and forced cause". The use of the word "unnatural", coupled with the listing and accumulation of disorderly events not only emphasise the destructive power of the supernatural forces at work around the play but also work to summarise an ending satisfying the requirements of revenge tragedy in Elizabethan theatre. Hamlet closely follows the conventions of the revenge tragedy genre, and in the final scenes it is difficult to reflect upon the play as a whole without considering Shakespeare's context.

In Hamlet, the fight over control of a country ultimately results in the country being taken over by a foreign power. First performed in 1601 during the last year of the reign of Elizabeth I, the play perhaps foreshadows the possibility of a fight over Elizabeth's heir-less crown that would ultimately weaken the country and allow foreign powers such as Spain a chance to invade. The English Ambassador reports to the dead members of the Danish court "our affairs from England come too late:/The ears are senseless that should give us hearing", serving as a warning for England to hold a strong government during a time of political instability. Shakespeare's reference to ears and hearing is a motif that resounds strongly with Claudius's murder of the king by pouring poison into his ear and the Ghost's claim that "the whole ear of Denmark" has become "rankly abused" by Claudius's lie. The metaphor depicting the poisoning of the Danish people serves as a warning for both Shakespeare's audience and modern viewers to examine their own political context, and not to turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to corruption within the governing bodies of society. Despite the serious nature of the play's message, the closing scenes of Hamlet are also perhaps the most entertaining. The occurrence of conflict, suspense and violent action all provide a dramatically satisfying end to which Hamlet tells Horatio "Thou livest; report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied". Spoken by an outsider of Denmark, Fortinbras's final speech provides a sense of relief not only for Denmark but for audiences watching the play, that order and peace will be restored.

Perhaps more so than anywhere else in the play, the closing scenes reveal a great deal about Hamlet's multi-faceted character, whose vengeful designs and melancholic, philosophical musings

reflect upon the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the play as a whole. Throughout the play the reader is offered multifarious choices to make, and is encouraged Shakespeare to immerse themselves in the character of Hamlet, only to find themselves reflected back in his vacillating, contemplative ways. Continuing the discussion of Fortinbras's comment, "here shows much amiss" provides not only a summary of the tragic events in court but uses the shifting s's to sound the problems that arise when appearances are deceptive and do not match reality. Hamlet's feigned or real "antic disposition" throughout the play deceives and confuses his mother, Claudius, the play's audience, and, to an extent, himself. Shakespeare asserts that there is "much amiss" within Hamlet's mind and presents his behaviour towards others in high contrast to his true thoughts and feelings. This internal chaos is manifested predominantly through structural and theatrical means. In Act 2, the careful placement of Hamlet's energetic exchange with the players juxtaposes his self-depreciating musings and melancholic disposition within his subsequent soliloquy, where Hamlet's true feelings are conveyed through symbolism within the speech. Labelling himself as "a rogue and peasant slave", he believes that vengeance is an order, not a choice, and by comparing himself to a "slave" and beggar, represents his subservience to the orders of the ghost. Although unsure whether the ghost is a "spirit of death or goblin damned", Hamlet he feels compelled and as if the retaliation is a necessary order. Here the audience is again invited to formulate an opinion of Hamlet, either as a truly "pigeon-livered", "muddy-mettled rascal" or, as Horatio describes him in the closing scenes of the play, a "sweet prince" with "noble heart".

The closing speech by Fortinbras also highlights that Hamlet is a play about misinterpretations and misreading of situations. Fortinbras, hearing only of Horatio's good opinion of Hamlet, unfitting commands for Hamlet to be honoured "like a soldier to the stage", and for "soldier's music" to accompany his "royal" passage. As audiences are aware, the greatest war Hamlet fought was within himself, and in that struggle he displayed very few qualities of a soldier. Hamlet was not a man who was mechanical or automatic in his actions, rather, he preferred to think thoroughly before taking action. Although his preoccupation with questioning the human condition inhibited action throughout the entire play, Shakespeare's discussion of universal questions contributes to the appeal and mystery of Hamlet's character. In particular, the alliteration of the concise 'c' sound in Hamlet's claim "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" dramatically positions Hamlet in order to allow audiences to sympathise with his difficult situation. Hamlet's philosophising involves much suspense and mystery, both of which are dramatic devices used by Shakespeare to entertain and empower audiences so that, unlike Fortinbras, they can gain a better, if not complete understanding of Hamlet's contradictory character at the conclusion of the play. However, a close reading of Fortinbras's final speech exposes one last side of Hamlet, that of Hamlet the performer. Fortinbras's selection of words such as "stage", "put on", "music" and "speak" in his speech have close links with the world of the theatre and echo Hamlet's earlier observation of the Players in Act 2 as "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time." Thus, as Hamlet the play reveals much about Shakespeare's society, the misreading of Hamlet's performance as a character reveals much about the introspective nature of theatre, and acting as a means to reveal in dramatic form the nature of human society.

Moreover, it seems that the closing scenes of Hamlet present audiences with the most freedom to form a judgment the play as a whole. The confusion, violence and revisiting of themes such as corruption, mortality and deceptive appearances within Act 5 help to draw my conclusion that Hamlet is predominantly a play that not only gives insight into the unscrupulous nature of human behaviour during times of political unrest, but reveals the ambiguity and contradiction that have the potential to destroy the character of one plagued by internal conflict.