

Hamlet



Stop video at 2:29

Hamlet

- written sometime between 1599 and 1601 - Elizabeth died 1603
- considered the greatest achievement of the world's greatest playwright
- “To be or not to be” is the most quoted phrase in the English language
- There have been more than 45 movie versions
- Shakespeare's longest play

Historical context + Topicality in Hamlet

- Uncertainty in England: Beloved Queen Elizabeth 1 is getting older. She hasn't had a son. Who will be her heir?
- King James of Scotland (cousin) could reign (rival to Elizabeth; misogynistic; adheres to the Divinity of Kings & traditional beliefs). Elizabeth challenges tradition.
- Highly political + Highly controlled (no free speech here).
- "Madness" is a fascination.
- Uncertainty in Hamlet: King Hamlet (Hamlet's father) dies. Who should be on the throne?
- Uncle Claudius is jealous of King Hamlet and takes the throne.
- Hamlet's loyalties are challenged
- Misogynistic views explored
- Hamlet is constrained by politics - torn between divine honour and secular constraints.
- Hamlet challenges perspectives on "madness" and humanity.

Important Historical Context:

- Divinity of kings
- Natural Chain of Being
- Classism in Elizabethan times:
- Elizabeth's rule
- Women in Elizabethan time

A person's class determined how they could dress, where they could live, and the kinds of jobs people and their children could get.



Madness and Melancholy

Madness: “seen as the result of an imbalance of the four humours: if there was an excess of the choleric humour the person was manic; if too melancholic, the person was depressed. Madness was especially disturbing because, in defiance of the natural order humans became like beasts when they lost their power of reason*.”

Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) was, in Shakespeare’s day, the most important work on the subject.

Emotions were thought to be governed by four bodily fluids, blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. An excess of black bile, arising from the spleen, was seen as the root of melancholy (p. 101).

Symptoms of Melancholy

Bright says melancholy can cause

- 'distrust, doubt, diffidence, or dispaire', leading both to anger and 'false laughter' or sardonic wit (p. 101).
- Sufferers are distracted by 'phantasticall apparations' and 'counterfeit goblins' (p. 103).
- Their 'dreames are fearefull' and their 'resolution' delayed by 'long deliberation' (p. 131).
- Even their house may seem 'a prison or dungeon, rather than a place of repose or rest' (p. 263).

Source: British Library (online)

Setting of *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's play takes place in Denmark in pre-Viking times. Some scholars locate the story during the time of King Canute (1014-1035).

Source of *Hamlet*

- Shakespeare's source, referred to by scholars as the "Ur-Hamlet", was a lost play popular in London in the 1580s. It was believed to have been written by Thomas Kyd
- That story was derived in turn from a ninth-century saga about a pre-Viking prince called Amleth

New Literary Criticism

GOAL: Analyze character development, literary devices, and plot events to determine the theme.

Themes:
Identity

What are we learning about Identity?

We are focusing on the internal and external influences on the character (Hamlet):

- Psychoanalytic = internal pressures
- Marxist = external pressures
- Feminist = external pressures
- New Lit Crit = how is the author's message communicated through literary devices/elements of fiction?
- New Historicism = how is this text a reflection of the society in which the text was written?

Show Me What You Know

Topics:

- New Literary Criticism
- Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism
- Feminist Literary Criticism
- Marxist literary Criticism
- New Historicism
- Dramatic Devices in Shakespeare's plays: monologue, soliloquy, aside, dramatic irony, iambic pentameter, hubris, tragic hero
- Important Terms: Context, Perspective, Authority, Diction, Pathetic Fallacy, Anti-Hero

Final Evaluation for the unit:

You will write a literary essay in response to a prompt that invites you to give your insights into our course theme: identity.