

How do we understand the ghost in act 1 scene 5 of hamlet essay sample

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From the opening scene of the play, the ghost of Hamlet the King of Denmark is a figure that is shrouded in mystery. Only appearing in the dead of night, and moving “ like a guilty thing”, its intentions remain uncertain until Act 1 Scene 5. Despite giving its reasons for its “ walking of the night”, the issue of the ambiguity of the ghost continues to arise, and no question is more prominent in the minds of the audience than its intentions: “ wicked or charitable? Having guided the main character Hamlet away from his company of Horatio and Marcellus, Shakespeare uses hendiadys when the ghost describes the catholic perception of hell: “ sulphurous and tormenting flames”. This proves to be a common feature of the ghost’s idiom, and this quotation in particular solves a certain aspect of the mystery that had surrounded the apparition since its haunting appearance in the first scene; the ghost is catholic.

The “ torment” of purgatory that he describes is a catholic concept. However, as the audience will discover, there are many more aspects of ambiguity to the character. Having gained Hamlet’s “ pity”, which is immediately dismissed, the genre of this famous tragedy is revealed as the ghost commands “ So thou art to revenge when thou shalt hear. ” Not allowed by law or christianity this questionable apparition demands revenge, which from now on will be the central point around which the plot is based.

Shakespeare is making the intentions of the apparition clear in order to allow the audience to focus on the story of his “ murder most foul. ” The ghost uses early Elizabethan language, such as “ harrow up thy soul”, and Shakespeare combines this with the alliteration of a powerful simile: “ two

eyes like stars from their spheres". This monosyllabic quotation is very lucid due to the alliteration, yet the imagery is enforced through the carefully selected lexis.

The ghost's use of language at times peaks with emotion, as is shown through repetition: " List, list, O, list! " Through exclamations such as this Shakespeare portrays the torture of purgatory, this is followed by a plea appealing to Hamlet's affection and grief for his beloved father; " If thou didst't ever thy dear father love -" It is after this unfinished sentence that the audience begin to question the ghost's incentive, as this is clearly, in my opinion, an attempt to manipulate the emotions of a vulnerable Hamlet.

The audience were informed earlier in the play that King Hamlet was asleep in his orchard when bitten by a serpent; this was believed to have been the cause of his death until the revelation made by the ghost. It is a shock to the audience and the character Hamlet to discover that " the serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown. " Claudius is personified as a snake, this creates the image of the garden of Eden, and is not Shakespeare's only biblical reference in the scene. The revelation of the murder is combined with biblical imagery to shocking effect.

I feel the sentence gains its power from the of the verb " sting"; to sting a life seems considerably more terrible than to take a life. The ghost's narrative of the murder is full of vivid description, such as " with vile and loathsome crust all my body", this is done in an elaborate fashion in order to confirm the audiences suspicions of Claudius to dramatic effect, but more

importantly to provoke emotion in the already unstable Hamlet. The audience are reminded of Hamlet's reference in the previous scene to "the stamp of one defect".

Could this be his weakness, will the murder of his father prove to be his downfall, will he "take corruption from that particular fault"? The heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies are plagued by a small weakness that proves to be their downfall; the audience is always aware of what the outcome will be. "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest." This metaphor, in which Shakespeare yet again makes use of hendiadys, demonstrates another aspect of ambiguity in a play that is riddled with contradictions.

Were Gertrude and Claudius having an "incestuous" relationship before the death of the king? Shakespeare chooses to never reveal the answer to his audience. The ghost commands Hamlet not to "contrive" against his mother, despite dwelling on her sexual depravity in the previous speech, but to let the "thorns in her bosom lodge to prick and sting her" when she enters heaven. The issue of the soul is mentioned by a figure who walks the night in the torture of purgatory, this demonstrates how crucial heaven and hell are to the dynamics of the play.

The ghost's use of spiteful verbs ("sting" and "prick") combine with the image of thorns, replicating the torture of Christ on the cross. This is truly powerful imagery; in my opinion suggesting that only God can decide the fate of the "seemingly virtuous queen", and the audience will never know the

truth. The contradictions of instructions that the ghost gives Hamlet; murder Claudius but leave Gertrude, demonstrate the incongruity of its moral code. In my opinion the giving of instructions of such discrepancy is evidence that the ghost is no "radiant angel".

Furthermore, it is not without irony that Shakespeare chooses "Remember me" as the parting words of the ghost, as Hamlet can not forget the treachery of his uncle and the behaviour by the "pernicious woman" that is his mother. I feel that the ghost is very effective at adding to the confusion of the play and the dubiety that surround its characters. Despite the emotive intensity of the issues that arise due to the ghost's presence in Act 1 Scene 5,. Shakespeare uses humour later in the scene to show his awareness of the limitations of the Elizabethan stage.

For having made a swift departure due to the arrival of morning, the presence of the ghost remains till the end of the act. "Swear" echoes its voice from beneath the stage, we know that the voice comes from below because Hamlet refers to the apparition as "old mole". The question of the soul of the former king arises again through the character's location below the ground. However, Hamlet's language is jovial when addressing the ghost beneath the stage; "this fellow in the cellerage".

Shakespeare is almost ridiculing the audience's belief in the ghost and the limits of stagecraft at the time in this clear reference to the area beneath the stage in the Globe Theatre. Despite Shakespeare's realistic approach to the metaphor of purgatory, and the Elizabethan stage, the end of the scene

certainly does not lack power or emotion as Hamlet swears to avenge his father's death. To conclude, the ghost remains one of the most prominent aspects of the play's ambiguity. The plot is riddled with mystery and questionable outcomes, and I feel that this stems from the appearance of the ghost in the opening scene.

The question of its religion and incentive, are key issues that in 1600 would leave a protestant Elizabethan audience questioning the reliability of a Catholic ghost; Shakespeare's paradoxes are evident. Furthermore, I feel that the apparition represents Hamlet's conflicting emotions and the moral dilemma that will prove to be his downfall. The ghost is not merely a questionable figure of purgatory, but the character that represents the confusion of Prince Hamlet, and him on to a confused quest for revenge that proves to be the downfall of many.