

# [Hamlet tragedy](https://assignbuster.com/hamlet-tragedy/)

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The dramatis personae of mythical or literary tragedy are characters
towards whom fate slowly reveals inevitable destruction, but tragedy is
not limited to the unfolding of an unavoidable fate. In Hamlet, tragedy
extends its concerns into landscape and axial directionality. Landscapes
in plays of myth and literature give a specific location for imagining
the moods and elements for the particular genre. Axial direction refers
to the aim of the play's action, as in what direction is the play's
action aimed. The clowns at the grave, much like the ghost Hamlet,
orient the Dane prince to the psychology of verticality, and, by means
of homeopathic language, lead young Hamlet's soul into memoria.

Any serious investigation of tragedy, and tragedy is vested in
seriousness, needs to track ideational antecedents (rather, go into the
past by means of tragedy's relationship with past events). Aristotle
(1992) laid the first tie on the track to the modern understanding of
tragedy when he wrote the following:
Tragedy, therefore, is an imitation of a worthy or illustrious and
perfect action, possessing magnitude, in pleasing language, using
separately the several species of imitation in its parts, by men acting,
and not through narration, through pity and fear effecting a
purification from such like passions. (pp. 10-11; italics mine)
The action of tragedy is perfect since it is inextricably tied to fate.
There is no way out of the circumstances except onward and further into
them. The magnitude that tragedy possesses is a leap out of a personal
history and into the realm of mythology. Theater-goers from Aristotle to
present seek tragedy to witness " myth, which gives full place to every
sort of atrocity, and offers more objectivity to the study of such
lives and deaths than any examination of personal motivation" (Hillman
1964/1988, p. 81). Pity and fear (or terror) are principle emotions of
the characters of Shakespeare's tragedy. The words, " Alas, poor ghost"
(Shakespeare, p. 894), marks Hamlet's pity for the ghost, and terror is
expressed in his cry, " Oh, God" (ibid.)! Hamlet pities the skull of poor
Yorick at the open grave, and his imagination becomes full of terror and
abhorrence as he contemplates death (p. 927). The language of the Hamlet
tragedy is pleasing to the audience but not the characters, and it is
the possessive magnitude of tragedy's language that pleases.
An obscure association rises when Chaucer's idea of tragedy in the
Canterbury Tales is juxtaposed to the image of the grave in tragedy. The
monk defines tragedy as " a story concerning someone who has enjoyed
great prosperity but has fallen from his high position into misfortune
and ends in wreched-ness (sic.). Tragedies are commonly written in verse
with six feet, called hexameters" (Chaucer 1989, p. 575; italics mine).
Contemporary associations with the metaphor of 'six feet' leads to
imagining a grave, as in six feet under. Elizabethan graves were shallow
(Rogers-Gardner 1995) and bear no direct allusion to contemporary
notions of a grave's depth, but, as meaning-making through imagination
takes place today, the association is allowed. What this obscure
excursion elucidates is the relatively mercurial influence that the
image of the grave provides tragedy. Somehow, the grave is difficult to
approach directly; therefore, by means of indirection I make my
The deep impression of the grave's image in tragedy is indirectly
contained in Nietzsche's idea of the effect of tragedy. " Now the grave
events are supposed to be leading pity and terror inexorably towards
the relief of discharge" (1993, p. 106-7; italics mine). Nietzsche uses
the word 'grave' to carry a weighty importance for the plot of tragedy.
He does not use the grave plot as a weighty image for tragedy. Where do
some of the principal characters of tragedy lie in the end? Oedipus at
Colonos, Medea's children, Antigone, Haimon, Polyneices, King Hamlet,
and Ophelia all relentlessly end in a grave plot. The very image of the
grave imbues people with pity and terror.

Pity is feeling which arrests the mind in the presence whatsoever is
grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human
sufferer. Terror is feeling which arrests the mind in the presence
whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with
the secret cause. (Joyce 1916/1970, p. 204)
Joyce uses the word " grave" much as Nietzsche does above, to express
serious importance. There is a grave pity for the human sufferer and a
grave terror of the secret cause in tragedy. For Hamlet, pity is the
emotion that enables him to feel into, in other words 'unite with', the
personal sufferings of his father's spirit. Also, terror is the emotion
that binds Hamlet into swearing to remember the ghost. A major complaint
of Hamlet, other than the begging question of madness, lies in his
inability to act. The action of tragedy, according to Joyce, is arrested
because the feelings are equivocally static. " The tragic emotion, in
fact, is a face looking two ways, towards terror and pity" (Joyce, p.
205). Is it a wonder that Hamlet does not act overtly in the tragic
landscape of Elsinore when his emotion is arrested between pity and
Although the emotion may be arrested in tragedy, what do landscape and
vertical directionality have to do with the tragedy of Hamlet? The
global landscapes of Hamlet are as follows: a platform, rooms in castles
and houses, the queen's closet, a plain, a hall, a church yard. They
offer little in a macrocosmic scheme and beg for detail. So if landscape
may offer anything in particular to the understanding of tragedy, it
must come through a specific detail (taken up below). The vertical
psychology of Hamlet is below: a question of the throne's succession,
the ghost's intonement to swear from beneath the platform -- " fellow in
the cellarage" (Shakespeare, p. 895), the shallow depth of the grave,
Claudius' speech to Hamlet about lineage. Vertical imagination takes H
amlet into ancestry, the ghost, and the grave.

The grave is an image of tragedy left out of much psychological and
literary reflection. For example, the grave scene with the clowns in
Shakespeare's Hamlet is brushed off by literary critics as superfluous
and trivial (Rogers-Gardner 1995, lecture, May). Literary critics
question the necessity of the scene and propose that its removal
improves the play (ibid.). I searched the MLA and the Psychology
Journals and Books at San Jose State's Clarke Library for Hamlet and
Gravediggers or Clowns. Out of 1122 literary books and journals about
Hamlet, the search yielded one five-page article on the combination. The
psychological search on Hamlet was not as fruitful, having no references
in 42 journals and 24 books. In the last art presentation of our class,
the artist proclaimed that the little girl with the knife in her chest
was dead and on her way to the grave. Many students would not allow
themselves to imagine this little girl dead and in a grave. How can the
grave's image, so preponderant in tragedy, be covered up with dirty
Archetypal psychology starts in pathology (Hillman 1993), and what could
be more pathological than to go against one of the fundamental
prescriptions from Christianity: " Thou shalt not make unto thee any
graven image" (Exodus 21: 3). A graven image is one that is etched in
stone, permanently engraved. A grave's tombstone is not only an artifice
for remembrance of a dead body's place, it is engraved (indelibly fixed)
with an epitaph that holds a particular image of the deceased. The plot
of Hamlet is to indelibly fix Claudius for his murderous sin against the
throne. It is my fantasy here that the 2000-plus year sanction against
graven images inhibits fantasizing about the image of tragedy's grave.
Completing his thoughts about knowing the downward plunge and imagining
an upward lan, Bachelard writes, " The fact is that we have great
difficulty imagining what we know. On this point, Blake writes: 'Natural
Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in
Me...'" (1943/1988, p. 92). We know that we die and bury the dead in one
grave or another. The fact of the statement 'death is natural' keeps us
from imagining fantasy into nature.
Material anthropology indicates that culture began with the first
burial. A grave site is imagined as evidence that people remembered the
once-living by means of reflection. The burial ground or grave is
thought to give the dead a landscape in the imagination of those alive.
Living people paid homage to and remembered the lives of the dead
through burial, and burial or the grave focused the living on memory.
The ghost breaks into Hamlet's black-biled bereavement to instill a
furor melancholia and to demand of him to keep alive the memory of his
father. The ghost does not respond to the earlier demands of Horatio:
have something good to say; tell of the country's fate that it may, if
forewarned, avoid; give information of a buried treasure. Marcellus and
Bernardo threaten the ghost with spears. Is it a wonder the ghost leaves
without a word? The manner in which Hamlet approaches the ghost is less
demanding and " more phenomenological. He says he will call it as it
seems, 'Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane'; he confesses himself a fool,
limited, ignorant of supernatural truths, so when the ghost beckons, he
follows" (Berry, p. 129). On another part of the platform, the ghost
reveals to Hamlet the detail of the death of its likeness: "'Tis given
out that, sleeping in my orchard, a serpent stung me.... But now, thou
noble youth, the serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his
crown" (Shakespeare, p. 894). Homeopathic (like cures like) forensics:
If you are to catch a serpent you must speak as a serpent-with a forked
tongue that makes two points! The equivocation of the serpent is
precisely what the ghost initiates into Hamlet: the vertical psychology
of the ghost is to speak and hear equivocally.
Although Hamlet accepts the vertical psychology of the ghost and
promises the oath to remember, he squanders his new orientation when he
is once again on the horizontal plateau with his comrades. Here is where
Hamlet reports lightly of his meeting with the ghost: " Hillo, ho, ho,
boy! Come, bird, come" " Oh, wonderful!" " Ah, ha, boy! Say'st thou so?
Art thou there truepenney" " Well said, old mole! ... once more remove,
good friends" (Shakespeare, p. 895). Each time for four times that
Hamlet entreats his comrades to swear to secrecy and the ghost intones
" swear" from beneath the stage, Hamlet shifts to another location.
" Hamlet's triviality, giddiness, superficiality-the 'more removed
ground' here becomes a horizontal defense, shifting ground to
evade-nevertheless attest to the seriousness of Hamlet's task" (Berry,
p. 134). The task of bringing his newfound vertical axis to the realm of
Let us review the image of a 'removed ground,' for it is a grave image.
Horatio says, " It waves you to a removed ground" (Shakespeare, p. 893).
With the ghost, a grave conversation takes place on removed ground which
leads Hamlet to swear to remember; with the clown, the ground removed
creates the grave over which a conversation puts Hamlet's wit to the
memory of his childhood with King Hamlet vis--vis Yorick's skull, and,
by equivocation, the ghost. The clown conjures up through equivocation
the oath to the ghost at the grave.
What is in the landscape of the grave site? It is set in a churchyard.
There is a priest in the background. Two clowns or gravediggers use
equivocal language to sort through the efficacy of nobility in relation
to Christian burial law regarding suicides. Jokes are told and songs
sung as skulls are unearthed. There is irony in the juxtaposition of
community or religious concern (the hair-splitting argument of the
Christian burial of a suicide) with an unbefitting emotional display (a
knave song and jocularity while digging a grave). A clown makes
reference to Adam as the original digger, and King Hamlet was poisoned
in the garden (remember the serpent?). The O. E. D. says, " clown form
Colonus, one that plougheth the ground" (p. 443). Etymologically the
word clown means, 'clod,' 'clot,' 'lump.' The clowns derange the
naturalistic fallacy with their clod-like jokes, songs and rude
mannerisms. " What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the
shipwright, or the carpenter?", asks clown 1 (Shakespeare, p. 925).

Clown 2 offers the answer of a gallows-maker, " for that frame outlives
a thousand tenants" (ibid.). As Hamlet and Horatio enter the churchyard,
clown 1 announces with finality, "'A gravemaker.' The houses that he
makes last till Doomsday" (p. 926). Before he appears on the scene, the
clowns foreshadow the return of Hamlet through the use of equivocal
language. Double entendres, puns, and equivocations precede like a ghost
Hamlet's concerns are of the qualities of Polonius and Ophelia, the
people whom have died due to his earlier actions. Hamlet carries
Polonius in respect to the language that focuses on custom: " Has this
fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making" (p.
926). Hamlet wears his Ophelia as he naively goes along reconstructing
the possible life of a random skull and imagining a generalized death.
Whereas Hamlet and Horatio were high on the platform when the ghost
appeared, they peer beneath the earth's crust when they come upon the
grave. It is here that Hamlet makes a move similar to when he
phenomenologically met the ghost-saying, " I will speak to thee. I'll
call thee Hamlet, King, Father, royal Dane" (p. 893); he decides to
speak to this fellow, this gravedigger, for here Hamlet again seeks out
assurance of what has come across his path.

Hamlet. ... Whose grave's this, sirrah?
Haml. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in 't.

I. Clo. You lie out on 't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours. For my
part, I do not lie in 't, and yet it is mine.

Haml. Thou dost lie in 't, to be in 't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the
dead, not for the quick, therefore thou liest.

I. Clo. 'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away again, from me to you.

Hamlet is coached by the gravedigger into crafting space between
meaning. The gravedigger's job is to create a space wherein a dead body
may be laid to rest. 'To lie' is the equivocation through which the
gravedigger vertically orients Hamlet. The gravedigger calls it like it
is: Hamlet, in your job, " you lie out on it, sir." You are lying down on
the job and your job--crafting equivocal space of meaning--is to lie.
"'Twill away again, from me to you," may be the very meta-hodos or
method by which Hamlet creates confusion and uncovers buried truths via
linguistic puns and double-entendres.
The clown is the sole character of the play who produces words
(equivocation, puns, and double-entendres) that work to beguile Hamlet.
Hamlet digs deeper with inquiry, as if he did not learn the equivocative
lesson well enough from the gravedigger.
Haml. What man dost thou dig it for?
I. Clo. One that was a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.

Haml. How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or
Hamlet begins to feel the very method that he employed with all of the
previous characters of the play. " By poisoning what is said," writes
Berry, " Hamlet creates a space within which words because of their
duplicity (multiplicity) have meaning" (1982, p. 139). Hamlet's
insouciant attitude upon his return goes through a mortification (he is
mortified by the gravediggers nonchalant attitude while grave-making) by
speaking to the clown. Hamlet re-members his method of speech by a dose
of homeopathic dis-course with the clown. There is just one element
Bibliography: