

# Hamlet tragedy

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



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 unbecoming emotional display (a knave song and jocularly 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.

Hamlet. 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: