

Role of the ghost in shakespeare's hamlet

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In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the ghost plays a key role in influencing the destinies of the other characters. The ghost is important to the play as it symbolizes both fate and catalyses the plot. It also brings the play into the revenge tragedy. The late King Hamlet is forced to roam the earth as he was murdered before he could confess to his sins, having to remain in purgatory till his sins are washed from him and he is able to enter into heaven. Hamlet, the tragic hero of the play, and is influenced by the encounter with whom he believes to be his late father, the ghost. Hamlet was both horror-struck and mortified to hear of his father's betrayal. He immediately felt that he must avenge his father and this reveals the role of the ghost, who is able to affect the protagonist. The role of the ghost in Hamlet is twofold: firstly it is to create interest; secondly it is to further the narrative of the play.

Shakespeare recognized that he needed to create interest in the audience from the very first scene of the play. The play opens with a conversation between Officers of the Watch who patrol the Battlements of Elsinore castle. Their talk is of a ghost who has appeared before twice previously: "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" Immediately this arouses the audience's curiosity about the nature of 'this thing' that has appeared.

Horatio, who has not seen the ghost, voices the scepticism that some of the audience may have been feeling: "Tush, Tush, 'twill not appear". Suspense is therefore created in the minds of the audience about the appearance and existence of the ghost. When the ghost finally appears in line 40, cutting short Barnardo's line, it is a moment of high drama resulting from the tension that has been created. The appearance of the ghost has a huge impact on both the characters and audience. Horatio, sceptic, expresses his

fear and amazement in the first line he speaks since seeing the ghost: " It harrows me with fear and wonder". The audience would have been filled with similar emotions on seeing the ghost, and would have realised that the appearance of the ghost signifies that something is wrong. Elizabethans believed that only people who died without the chance of confessing their sins walked the earth as troubled spirits. Horatio questions the ghost, which disappears mysteriously without speaking. When the ghost fails to speak, it adds to the tension of the scene and the apprehension of the characters. The ghost makes a second appearance in Act 1 Scene 1 after Horatio has talked about preparations for war with Norway. This sets up the idea in the minds of the audience that the ghost may have something to do with the ongoing war, but, again the ghost does not speak, and so the audience is left with unanswered questions. This sense of mystery sustains interest and builds suspense in the preparation for scene 2. At this point the nature of the ghost is ambiguous. Is it a good ghost, it appears in the form of Old Hamlet, or is it an " erring spirit". It disappeared when the cock crowed i. e. at first light. The audience would have known that light represent goodness, and dark represents evil. Horatio comments: " And then it started like a guilty thing". Is the ghost to be trusted, or not? The only thing person who can decide is Hamlet: " Let us impart what we have seen tonight unto young Hamlet" In the next scene Horatio tells Hamlet after some prevarication, that he has seen his father's ghost. Horatio describes the ghost to Hamlet, emphasising that the ghost appears to look like Old Hamlet: " A figure like your father armed exactly, cap-a-pe" Hamlet wants to know everything about the ghost, where it appeared, whether it spoke etc, and through his short, excited

questions which he utters in quick succession, reinforces the mystery and ambiguity of the ghost, thus building the audiences anticipation of the second appearance of the spirit. The ghost appears to Hamlet in Act1, Scene 4. Immediately, the ambiguous nature of the ghost is addressed. Hamlet himself says, " Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned" Meaning is the ghost to be trusted, or it is some evil creature come to destroy. The ghost refuses to speak in front of the others, but beckons Hamlet away to speak with him alone. In scene 5, the role of the ghost moves from creating interest and suspense, to the function of moving on the narrative and plot line.

Hamlet is not naturally a man of action, and, although suspicious of his Uncle Claudius, would not have tried to find out more about the circumstances surrounding his father's death. It is the appearance of the ghost that forces Hamlet to take action, and therefore moves on the action of the play. The ghost begins by telling that he is in purgatory. " Doomed for a certain term to walk the night" Hamlet must have felt puzzled and, at the same time, full of wonder and despair at the terrible situation his father is in. When his father finally reveals that he was murdered, Hamlet is overwhelmed. To make matters worse, the ghost then asks Hamlet to revenge his murder. Ghost. " If ever thou didst ever thy dear father love!." Hamlet. " O God!" Ghost. " Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder". When the ghost reveals that he was murdered by Claudius, Hamlet reacts with: " O my prophetic soul! My uncle?" Hamlet had suspected from the beginning that his uncle was the complete opposite of Old Hamlet in appearance, personality and action. Now his worse fears have been confirmed. His mother has married a murderer! Before the ghost leaves, Hamlet swears to revenge his

murder. To make matters worse, the ghost describes the horrific nature of his death, by poison and the fact that he died without having confessed his sins: " With all my imperfections on my head". Finally, at the end of the scene Hamlet rejoins the others and confirms that the ghost is not evil but, " It is an honest ghost." The final appearance of the ghost follows the pivotal scene. Up to this point there has been little action-taking place. Instead the play consists of building up characters, making motives and giving the audience information. After this the action increases dramatically in pace. Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius, but fails because he believes that Claudius is praying. If he had known that Claudius cannot pray: " My words fly up my thoughts remain below, Words without thought never to heaven go" Therefore, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude he is full of frustration and anguish at his inability to act. In this scene, Hamlet almost loses his self-control and perhaps is truly " mad". Having killed Polonius, it is only the entrance of the ghost that prevents Hamlet from harming his mother. This time, the ghost appears, not in armour, but " In his habit as he liv'd" In other words, dressed in every-day clothes. The ghost has changed; no longer the warrior king seeking revenge for his murder, the ghost is more insubstantial a quieter, gentler ghost perhaps because it is nearer to oblivion. This ties in with the ghost's speech back in Act 1 Scene 5 when he says: " I am thy fathers spirit, Doomed for a certain term to walk the night" The role of the ghost in this scene is primarily to remind Hamlet of his promise: " Do not forget" However, the ghost also serves as a reproof to Hamlet, exhorting him to be gentle with Gertrude: " Oh step between her and her fighting soul: Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" Having

delivered its message, the ghost simply slips away. In this scene, in contrast to earlier scenes in which the ghost appears, there is no knocking from underneath the stage, the ghost merely "steals away". From this moment, the play gathers pace as Claudius attempt to have Hamlet killed, Ophelia's commits suicide in her madness, and the final scene of the play ends in a blood bath. In conclusion it could be stated the ambiguity of the ghost is never resolved. This is questioned again because as a result of the ghost, the majority of the characters die. Therefore despite Hamlets thoughts of the ghost, in the end the audience wonder is the ghost and its intentions really, true and good or actually bad and evil.