

In act i what do we  
learn about the  
political and personal  
situation in denmark



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To understand a play fully, we must understand the setting and context in which it is set. To understand Hamlet fully, we must analyse its contextual setting through language, events and its characters. The first instance through which we begin our understanding of the social situation in Denmark is through the first scene of Act I. Immediately and economically, using fragments of conversation; he establishes a mood of anxiety and dread.

("... This bodes some strange eruption to our state") The verse does not flow.

The Broken rhythms generate an atmosphere of unease, apprehension and confusion. ("... And this I take it/Is the main motive of our preparations/ The source of this our watch, and the chief head/ Of this post-haste and romage in the land. " It is the fear, uncertainty, mystery, tension and impending doom are key elements which create an overall negative atmosphere.

The atmosphere in the first scene of Hamlet is created by both the environment and the characters of the play. It is excruciatingly cold, dark and quiet in Denmark and as a result of such a mysterious and gloomy atmosphere the characters in the first scene of the play react in such a way, that they too are a reflection of such atmosphere, 'Tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart. ' As readers, we can sense a great deal of tension, misfortune and hesitation among the sentries who guard the castle of Denmark, a country preparing for war. We empathize with Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio, for it is they who transmit to the readers the general atmosphere. Right from the beginning, when the play opens, Bernardo the guard emits the general atmosphere through his feelings of fear, uncertainty, tension and

perhaps impending doom This unease and tension springs from the markings of conventional tragedy.

Unrest in the higher social strata is reflected in the people of the state. Denmark has just had the death of a king of whom we are told was very great and caring to his people: "...

valiant Hamlet... the world esteemed him. " The Ghost in Hamlet is a very potent symbol of the decay that is taking place in Elsinore.

To an audience today it would be seen as a device used for dramatic effect yet in the period it would have told the audience that treachery was rife. Shakespeare had recently written Julius Caesar, and as such his audience would have been well aware of what it symbolised. It also symbolises unrest, the upset of not belonging to either this world or the next, that in fact it belongs nowhere. Another great belief was that ghosts were demonic and would attempt to make a living person do wrong, and some would have believed that the ghost was trying to get hamlet to kill Claudius wrongly. Yet it is not the Ghost that is actually rotten. He no longer exists as a person to contribute to the state of Denmark apart from in Hamlet's mind.

Marcellus comments that something is rotten in Act One scene four, after Hamlet has seen the ghost for the first time and has departed to talk to it. In a short space of time, Marcellus has seen the ghost of the old King in arms and Hamlet, the heir apparent to the Danish throne airing his suicidal tendencies. Horatio his fellow officer of the watch has similar foreboding and morbid thoughts ' This bodes some strange eruption to our state. Primarily this would appear to be the situation of Denmark as it prepares for war with <https://assignbuster.com/in-act-i-what-do-we-learn-about-the-political-and-personal-situation-in-denmark/>

the Norwegians, but could be a prophecy similar to Marcellus's that this would bode badly for their nation state. We are again given a taster of the political situation in the first scene when the ghost of Old Hamlet appears in military attire.

This is a direct link to conflict with Norway. The first scene also holds an invitation to the learned Horatio to explain Denmark's political situation to the audience. We learn how Old Hamlet has slain Old Fortinbras in battle resulting in Fortinbras' land being given to Denmark. Horatio then goes on to liken the situation in Denmark to the 'palmy state of Rome' where Julius Caesar died, and how the 'sheeted dead' did not rest, but walked the streets.

There is a general feeling that something disastrous is going to occur. Horatio speaks about heralds and goddesses of fate. He implies that the death of Old Hamlet is an omen. In the second scene of Act I we learn of the controversial marriage of the newly crowned king Claudius to his late brother's wife Gertrude, the Queen of Denmark.

This marriage engenders a number of conflicting opinions. However Claudius' marriage to Gertrude would have been regarded in Elizabethan times as incestuous and unlawful. To the Elizabethan audience Claudius would immediately be cast as an evil character because of his sinful behaviour. This makes us sympathetic to the people of Denmark for having such an immoral leader, and anxious as to the political future of the state. We know that it would have commonly been believed so as there are historical parallels of which we may compare the scenario to.

For example, Henry VIII divorced Catherine of Aragon believing he had sinned by marrying his brother's widow. We also know Denmark was Christian. An example of this fact influencing the text is Marcellus' reference to the celebration of 'our Saviour's birth.' This line explicitly identifies hamlet's Denmark as a Christian country. The union would have been forbidden in Leviticus XVIII. At this conference we also learn that in both Denmark and Norway, the dead kings have been succeeded not by their sons but by their brothers.

Apparently the court has 'freely gone/ With this affair along' (lines 15-16) although, as I have mentioned before, Shakespeare's audience would have considered this union incestuous. We also learn how Claudius has sent ambassadors to the King of Norway to deal with Fortinbras' threatened invasion. Claudius' eloquent, rational pragmatism immediately identifies him as belonging to a different mind-set from that of his old-fashioned warrior brother. His speech implies he has a more modern, practical style of kingship. Another symbolism used by Shakespeare is the transition period after old Hamlet dies and Claudius becomes King. There is a trial of strength between Old Hamlet who belongs to a world of feudal, chivalric values and behaviour very different from the modern world of pragmatic diplomacy represented by Claudius; From this we can interpret that Denmark is going through a transitional convention-defying period.

Claudius' breaking fourth commandment compelling men to work on the Sabbath, would convey to a sixteenth century audience that this was a modern pragmatic, Machiavellian King prepared to defy conventional

morality. This conclusion is supported by the parallel that The Queen of <https://assignbuster.com/in-act-i-what-do-we-learn-about-the-political-and-personal-situation-in-denmark/>

England at the time was Elizabeth I. Medieval England had never seen such a powerful, intelligent, influential queen; thus defying convention and breaking down old barriers and prerequisites. In scene four we are given more of a social insight into the domestic aspect of Hamlet.

In Shakespeare's day women played a small role socially, economically and politically. As a result of this, many works in literature were reflective of this diminutive role of women. Women were not allowed to perform on stage that meant that, in Elizabethan theatres, men dressed up as women and played their parts. So, female parts were kept relatively small when it came to writing plays. This could be why Shakespeare might have under developed the female role in Hamlet. In this scene, Polonius is telling Ophelia that she must avoid Hamlet and reject his affections.

He even makes sexual references implying that she must stay a virgin in order to have respect for herself. The fact that a father could be so intrusive shows the relationship between father's and daughters. Daughters were considered their father's property and theirs to command. To a modern audience it would be normal for a woman around 18 to know a lot about sex. The Elizabethan audience would expect Ophelia to be obedient to her father but presumably would understand the attraction between her and Hamlet. Through Hamlet's first soliloquy we can learn a lot about the society of Denmark as long as we bear in mind the fact that Hamlet is likely to be biased against Claudius' new reign.

Society is described as an 'unweeded garden', 'rank and gross in nature.'

We can also see society's stereotypical good man. As Denmark has only just

been weaned off its more traditional values, it is not surprising that old Hamlet is praised in such a way. “ He was a man, take him for all in all; I shall not look upon his like again. ” He is describing his warrior like masculine father as the ideal man.

Hamlet is a deeply complex character; he has many facets and many moral and emotional dilemmas which plague him. He has a glum, morbid and lacklustre soul, which rarely brightens. There are a chain reaction of events that take place due to Hamlet and his indecisiveness, beginning with the murder of Polonius. Had he been more incisive then Claudius would have been deposed, and everyone could return to their lives as they were before his accession, yet we can learn from the text that without him a war with Norway may not have been avoided. In conclusion, Act I introduces the central theme of Hamlet something being rotten in the state of Denmark.

Now this is both political and personal. The new King had gained his crown unjustly and has married his wife in what would have been considered an immoral way. The language and events signify the general unrest and the eminent fate of Denmark.