

# The dramatic significance of act one scene one of hamlet



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In Hamlet, Shakespeare carefully develops themes and characters in order to achieve the desired dramatic intensions. As Hamlet is a tragedy there is a strong sense of foreboding from the very beginning. This is fully intentional and is dependent on the development of relevant themes and characters. A final important factor of the dramatic significance of Hamlet is the creation of suspense and atmosphere in the opening through the themes and characters.

The atmosphere is composed carefully so to add to the sense of foreboding. Just from these elements in the beginning of the play the audience becomes aware that the play will involve death and suffering. The themes that can be recognised just in the first scene carry great dramatic significance for the rest of the play both in its intensions and its storey line. An obviously dominant theme in the first scene is the existence of supernatural beings.

The company of the ghost determines the proceedings of the scene. Like all themes the presence of the ghost is a source of conflict in the scene: "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy," Not only is the ghost a source of conflict it is causing conflict between the characters. This is because the characters are, like the audience, not sure on the reasoning behind the presence of the ghost. This is a very effective suspense device and makes the audience ask relevant questions.

There are significant symbolic answers to this question such as a spirit not being put to rest may forebode to some great misfortune. A possibility is that it is an ill omen who the men believe is bringing a message to forewarn them that great dangers are ahead for the country: " This bodes some strange

eruption to our state. “ This creates a great deal of suspense and an insecure atmosphere for the audience as they are not sure of events to come which is intentionally unsettling. These moods of fear and uncertainty felt by the audience are shared with the characters, which at this stage may be associated with the audience due to the mutual uncertainty about the ghost: “-It harrows me with fear and wonder. ” Horatio is clearly expressing his apprehension and insecurity about the apparition feelings, which at the same time are shared by the audience.

Fear may also be considered as another theme as the men’s actions are at times motivated by there fears: Shall I strike it with my partisan? ” Marcellus contemplates hitting the ghost, and does. This is because of his fear towards it. Another feature used to emphasise the ghost is its contrast with nature. This is done to state how unnatural the ghost is.

The reason it is being described as abnormal is so the moods of fear, tragedy and foreboding are heightened. The ghost being unnatural is a very important and deliberate element. This factor of nature versus the paranormal starts at the very beginning when Bernardo asks Francisco “ Have you had a quiet guard? and Francisco replies “ Not a mouse stirring. “ This indicates complete silence, unnatural silence even, as they are outside; this is a purposeful statement and creates an atmosphere of supernatural elements.

Another feature to emphasise the opposition between the ghost and nature is when the ghost leaves. Just before the ghosts second exit there is a cock crow which could be a sign of the return of normality and nature. In

conclusion the ghost and theme of paranormal activity is not only used as a symbolic icon but also as a device to help create a strong sense of foreboding and fear. This supports the already present theme of fear within the play as the characters are quite obviously apprehensive of the situation.

This maybe for reasons such as the setting of the first scene, this is expressed by the characters within the first words of the play: " Who's there?" Bernardo is quit clearly anxious at this moment in more than likely due to the fact that he is a guard on a castle wall at night. So immediately the audience are aware that the guards are apprehensive depending on how the scene would be set on stage. If made clear that they were on a castle wall in almost total darkness, it would create a tense atmosphere where the audience are almost being told within the first words of the play that something bad is going to happen. Another very prominent theme in Hamlet is the matter of power. The play is obviously set at a time where the monarchy is an important factor politically, " god save the king", So a the chain of being is possibly in effect, however we are made aware that the late king's son is not in fact on the throne.

This creates political tension, and brings up questions of kingship and sovereignty. This is another source of suspense in the scene. Misplaced power can be very forbidding as it implies that the person or people with the divine right are going to try and win that power back. So power can be the cause of conflict dramatically. A play dominated by the theme of power is also likely to have themes of physical conflict within the play as well. This is very foreboding and also clarifies Hamlet as a tragedy.

The presence of violence and conflict being at hand in the play is made clear from early on in the play: Dared to the combat; in which are most valiant Hamlet -For so this side of our known world esteemed him – Did slay this Fortinbras; This already present theme of extreme violence indicates that more is likely to follow and adds heavily to the foreboding atmosphere already strongly defined, because of the death and suffering associated with war. Evidence of war and violence comes from other sources as well. An Example of this is the armour being worn by the ghost indicating that the king had died at war. Another main feature that adds to the creation of suspense and atmosphere is the sentence structure of the dialogue, especially in the presence of the ghost: -In the same figure, like the kings that dead. -Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

-Looks it not like the king? -Most like – It harrows me with fear and wonder. - Question it, Horatio. ” This generates a lot of tension as the characters are expressing their anxiety through the construction of there sentences. As they are asking the questions that the audience are equally keen to hear the answers to once again the guards are in a similar situation as the audience.

It also adds to the theme of fear, and adds additionally to the sense of foreboding as the men quite obviously fear for their life. The characters hold a great deal of dramatic significance towards the atmosphere, themes and intentions of the play. The more minor characters such as Bernardo and Francisco are used to create the basis of the themes through their actions and dialogue. Such as power and conflict, this is done when they talk about kingship and political situation through the dialogue. The minor characters

are the main source exposition for the circumstances and history relevant to the plot.

Horatio a much more dominant character has a more of a symbolic role and contributes to the moods and creation of suspense. Horatio has an obviously higher status through his more educated and wealthier individual: "Thou art a scholar" Horatio being educated is the front man when communicating with the dead king so his decisions have a certain amount or control over the scenes proceedings. The most substantial effect that Horatio has on the atmosphere is when his educated, respected, non-superstitious, brave persona, "Horatio says it is but our fantasy", and is reduced in status through fear: "How now, Horatio! You tremble and look pale. Is not this something more than fantasy? What think you on it? This heightens the effect of the ghost as it can diminish a strong, dominant and still respected character. In conclusion Shakespeare uses a range of devices to stress the different themes and the dominance of the ghost.

Such as imagery with the contrast of the ghost and nature, characters for exposition and creating mood and the use of language to aid these elements. These factors make the opening of Hamlet very tense and educational for an audience as they become aware of the situation with relative depth and still are aware of the strong sense of foreboding.