

Hamlet, shakespeare analysis essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

To understand Hamlet in the play we need to understand the context of the story and the beliefs in which Shakespeare's audience would have held on ghosts.

These beliefs in which the Elizabethan audience would have are the key to understanding Hamlet's predicament in the play and why he acts and behaves in the manner in which he does. There were three main views on ghosts within the Elizabethan era which were that of the catholic faith, the protestant faith, and the more sceptical view of ghosts. The catholic view of ghosts was that as well as heaven and hell, after death a soul may go to another place called purgatory, to pay for their sins. From here they may return to earth to fulfil a particular purpose. However protestants, though they usually believed in ghosts undoubtedly, held the view that there was no such place as purgatory and that a person could go to either heaven or hell, a " bourn from which no traveller returns" and so if ghosts did appear they may be angels however in the most part they were devils who took the image of departed relatives or friends to tempt the person whom it visits, to cause physical or spiritual harm upon them. The final major view was that in which ghosts only appeared to those who were depressed or sad, " in a word, apparitions are either the illusion of melancholic minds or flat knavery on the part of some rogue" however spirits did exist, they thought, as the bible had said it was so, but they believed that they could not take the form of an living or once-living being and therefore could not be seen.

To entertain these different views in the audience and also to reveal the difficulty Hamlet has in deciding whether to believe the ghost, Shakespeare uses different characters that see the ghost to represent each of these

Elizabethan beliefs. To prove to members of the audience who could believe the ghost to be part of Hamlet's imagination due to his current state of melancholy, Shakespeare structured his play so that three characters see the ghost even before Hamlet knows of it. It is they who reveal the ghost to Hamlet. Marcellus and Bernardo are the lesser educated guards who see the ghost first.

Their lack of knowledge on theology leaves them to a superstitious belief as they think that Horatio who is educated, is the only one who may speak to it, "thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio," this reveals that they accommodate the old belief that only those can speak Latin the religious language could speak to the ghost. However though there is an element of uneducated suspicion they mainly represent the catholic view, "we do it wrong, being so majestic, To offer it the show of violence, For it as the air, invulnerable," Marcellus then withholds the catholic belief, not only does he believe it to be the spirit of the "majestic" king but entertains the idea that they could not harm it as it is as the Catholics believed, "a phantasmal" body not real flesh. Horatio and Hamlet both go to "school in Wittenberg" a university renowned not only for its studies in theology but also as being a protestant university. So the audience would understand that both characters should have a greater understanding of the ghost along with their protestant belief.

However Hamlet and Horatio differ in their view of the ghost. Horatio, when proposed with a visit from the ghost, says that "'twill not appear," showing his scepticism and that he has a slight disbelief and perhaps maintaining the belief that it is the "illusion... of flat knavery" in which case there would not

be any appearance of the ghost to Horatio. However when he does see it he is at a loss as to what he should believe,” What art thou, that usurp’st this time of night” he is now unsure as it defies his sceptical belief and as a protestant thinks it must be either devil or angel, “ by heaven I charge thee, speak! ” Hamlet conveys his belief clearly, “ Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned.

.. Thou comest in such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee” It is evident that Hamlet cannot be sure in his mind whether the ghost is an angel “ of health” or a devil from the “ damned” there is no question of a third possibility in Hamlets mind. However after he has spoken with the ghost he is left with such a revelation that he cannot ignore. Only then does Hamlet hint at new ideas, such as purgatory, “ O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? ” Hamlet already questions whether there is anything else in the spiritual world from which the ghost may have come as he couples “ hell”.

The audience, in context could understand why Hamlet would be uncertain of the ghost, for his normal belief that heaven and hell is a “ bourn from which no traveller returns”. The fact that the ghost does appear, in the shape of his father, leaves many questions in Hamlets mind. Even two months later Hamlet is uncertain whether the ghost is from heaven or hell, “ Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell. ” Hamlet shows that it is only the ghost who has given him any hint of the murder and that the ghost has” prompted” him to take revenge almost as though Hamlet needed an excuse to avenge his uncle.

Also Hamlet says that ghost is from “ heaven and hell” demonstrating that Hamlet cannot decide if the ghost is from one or the other and so in his confusion , until he knows any different, he must name it from both. Hamlet fears that the ghost may be from hell and so he must find out the truth of the ghost, “ The spirit I have seen may be the devil. And the devil have power T’assume a pleasing shape...

and perhaps out of my weakness and my melancholy... Abuses me to damn me” he fears, as Horatio would, that the devil is tempting him to murder as he is at his weakest and so in his mind is susceptible to temptation.

Shakespeare shows Hamlet’s doubt in the line as the devil “ assumes” his fathers image conveying the supposed falsity of the ghosts image and that Hamlet would see it as “ a pleasing shape” as he misses his father and so to see him again, it would be assumed, he would be trusting towards the ghost and glad to see his father again. Though this view is only now spoken it is the reason that for the past two months Hamlet has not done anything about what the ghost has said until he can find proof of what the spirit has said to him.

Hamlet now seizes this very first opportunity to find out if his uncle did truly murder the king and so clear the ghost of Hamlet’s suspicions, “ The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king. ” Shakespeare uses a rhyming couplet with alliteration which overall emphasises the words and makes the lines clearer to the audience, the thought of catching the king’s conscience gives an audience the idea of a trap which coincides later in the play, “ King: What do you call the play? Hamlet: The mousetrap” So the spectators completely feel that Hamlet is trying to catch the King out in

trying to prove the truth of the Ghost. Dover Wilson describes the ghost as the “linch pin” to the play; he is the key to finding out why Hamlet acts as he does and the way he proceeds. Without the ghost the rest of the events would not take place and therefore there would be no story. Hamlet would not have found out about his fathers murder and so it is unlikely he would try to avenge his uncle.

The ghost however informing Hamlet not only allows for an input of information to set off the action and storyline but allows for argument on the true origins of the ghost. Hamlets confusion of what to believe is all due to the ghost. His beliefs rise doubt as to the honesty and real intents of the apparition. His fears are evident in act one scene five where Hamlet encourages the other characters to swear to secrecy and the ghost follows them, “ Hamlet: Nay, swear it.

.. Upon my sword Ghost: [calls out from under the stage] Swear... Hamlet: Hic et ubique? Then we'll shift our ground” The voice of the ghost arises from under the stage and this would connotates as coming from hell and so Hamlet, afraid asks them to move and the ghost follows them again three more times.

This creates anxiety in Hamlet and he now begins to question the ghost. Shakespeare deliberately stages the voice so to make it clear to the audience the reason for Hamlet's fears as the ghost follows them underground. With the ghosts determination that the characters swear to secrecy Hamlet feels that he should not go straight ahead with his revenge

and feels he has to prove the ghosts honesty, “ Perhaps out of my weakness...

As he is very potent with such spirits Abuses me to damn me. I’ll have grounds more relative than this. ” Shakespeare shows that Hamlet is determined to find more facts to convey the king’s guilt with “ relative grounds”, and so uses the play in Hamlet to reveal the king’s guilt, out of doubt of the ghost. The second appearance of the ghost in Hamlet is reveals the queens innocence of the murder of her husband but however as can be suggested the guilt of her adultery. When the ghost appears the queen cannot see him, “ Alas, how is’t with you, that you do bend your eye on vacancy? ” the queen can only see Hamlet as if he is staring into the air the “ vacancy” she talks of is where Hamlet see’s the ghost.

Shakespeare compares the emptiness to her previous husband who is in the space. It almost demonstrates a space that Hamlet would feel that would be left in his fathers place that only his father could fill however the queen filled it with Claudius and now cannot see her previous husband. This to an Elizabethan audience would mostly likely reveal her as an adulterer as it was commonly believed that if you did such an act that you could not see that spirit of your lover. This is reinforced by Shakespeare as Hamlet describes the ghosts look of sadness that pains Hamlet himself feels as the realisation is dawned upon the ghost, “[to the ghost] Do not look upon me lest with piteous action you convert my stern effects..

. tears perchance for blood. The ghost appears to be looking at Hamlet in such a saddened way that Hamlet himself is so moved that he too is nearly

drawn to tears instead of wanting to draw blood. Hamlet tells the ghost not to look at him because it makes him want to cry. This is emphasised further with the exit of the ghost, “ Look how he steals away” this sense of “ stealing” by Shakespeare makes the audience pity the ghost, the first time he see’s his wife since his death and this is revealed to him and has made it clear that the person he loved most will be separate from him forever even in death.

This also confirms further that the ghost is the true spirit of his father with the ghost’s reaction. We can then clearly see that if we did not understand what the Elizabethan’s believed about ghosts we would not understand Hamlet and his task, his fear and puzzlement would be incomprehensible to the modern reader. We would not know why Hamlet waits so long to avenge his father, why he cannot decide the origin of the ghost and why his mother cannot see the ghost. The knowledge of the audience’s beliefs is vital when understanding Hamlet.