

Hamlet, prince of denmark: shakespeare's philosophy of life second

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In Act V, Scene 1, of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the gravediggers unearth the skull of King Hamlet's jester Yorick while they are digging the grave for the dead Ophelia. Young Hamlet, who is watching the action, comes to comment on the skull, saying that he knew Yorick well, allowing himself to indulge for a moment in childhood reminiscence before he lapses back into the philosophical ruminations about the nature of life that are the primary subject of the play. In this scene, Shakespeare relays a powerful message about his own philosophy of life as he shows through the symbolism of the remains of dead Yorick that when we come to the end of our lives, there are very few values that ultimately matter.

The impermanence of material condition is one major consideration that drives Shakespeare to his view of life. Shakespeare's graveside scene must be viewed through the symbolic importance of the remains of Yorick. By having Hamlet speak directly to the skull, telling him (in jest) to go to his lady and make her laugh and make her understand the temporary nature of life, Shakespeare is pointing out that material conditions, in the end, do not matter. Neither does the application of make-up to enhance beauty nor the accumulation of goods to enhance wealth matter, once you are put in the grave. Yorick's skull is found in a grave where other unknown skulls are found, showing that, despite his position in the court, he came to be buried among the unknown. In this Shakespeare indicates that afterlife is over, the relative wealth we accumulate does not matter. In death, we are all equal, Shakespeare suggests. Therefore what matters is what we do while we are alive.

But if this is so, then shouldn't reputation, at least, matter? Shakespeare

seems to indicate that it doesn't much, in the end. By making an analogy between Yorick's remains and the dust of Alexander the Great and Julius Ceasar, Shakespeare suggests that the dust of those great men may be fit to plug a beer barrel or patch a wall, but not much else.