

Thomas, I emailed Mazel, so I hope he answers! We go way back when he was a grad student at USC in 1988 (when we were still offering a Master's in English.) We do

Thomas Bartlett Whitaker lunch at times. He and my hubby are (and were, in my husband's case) avid rock climbers. I hope he'll write you.

Dr Daley

ENG 403

18 December 2011

The whole department was moved to temporary quarters last semester, so he knows what happened to mail

✓ Arrant Knaves All

It is impossible to deny that Shakespeare's Hamlet is a masterwork of the English language. It could very easily be argued that

Hamlet was the first great tragedy to be produced by mankind since the fall of Greece. It is equally impossible to deny the

fact that Hamlet is an incredible perplexing tale. Its themes are misty and for the most part irregular, its morality confused.

Perhaps this is so due to the fact that we see the events of the play through Hamlet's eyes, a man clearly locked into a situation beyond his control. Pervading the play is a sense of sickness,

of brokenness. Francisco is sick at heart when we briefly come upon him, and Marcellus believes that something is "rotten" in

Denmark. In Hamlet's first soliloquy, he uses the imagery of an unweeded garden, of "things rank and gross in nature." Infection

and corruption abound, and life seems a blight. This decay is, at its core, the result of a lie, a duplicity so grand that it

not only infects the major players individually, but collectively extends off of the page and the stage to symbolize the religious

and political events occurring in Elizabethan England.

Hamlet is an intellectual. Rather than spend his days pursuing martial conquests (much as his father did), he stays at school.

Thus he can be seen as a figure at the forefront of a social movement, one that would eventually give birth to the Enlightenment. Such

transitory states are always confused to the extent of seeming almost schizophrenic. At the beginning of the play, Hamlet is

confronted with a moral quandary beyond his ability to reason

true

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away. Much like Orestes, he finds himself trapped between conflicting sanctions: on one hand, the ghost of his father demands vengeance splashed with a king's blood, while on the other hand justice required a trial and a public denunciation of Claudius. The theology surrounding the appearance of the ghost is troubling, both for Hamlet and for the contemporary audience. If god is omniscient and benevolent, then the ghost is acting under divine permission, the logical conclusion of which is that revenge killings are acceptable in the sight of god. If the ghost requires no permission of a deity to roam the material world, then Christians would need to do some drastic redefinings of their beliefs of the afterlife. In addition, a Catholic of the day might believe in a ghost, but Shakespeares Protestant audience would not. Hamlet himself doubts the ghost's word at various points in the play, a symbol of his confusion which extends the metaphor of sickness even to the level of the divine.

good points

Unlike many of the other major characters, Hamlet is not a man of action. He wallows in doubts and quickly fakes madness to attempt to cover up the internal divide which is tearing him apart. He is a mystery to the reader because he has become a mystery to himself. The moment Hamlet discovers the truth about his father's murder, the disease of duplicity infects him. He fears joining in the corruption of mankind, saying: "We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us," while at the same time sympathizing with the lot of mankind. His concepts of right and wrong are obliterated: "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

All become infected, save perhaps for Horatio. The confusion of the show builds, a fact Shakespeare knew all too well. Claudius asks about the subject of the Mousetrap, even when the dumb-show

has already told him. We are in the same boat: the Elizabethan audience probably knew the basic source for the Hamlet-myth, likely written by Kyd. But this knowledge helps not in the least, with Shakespeare's version defying description. The question is, of course, why. What was the Bard aiming for here? Unlike in the Greek tragedies, Hamlet has no fatal flaw, no hamartia to explain his downfall. It is the context which ruins him, and which drapes the play in such putrid tones. It is in this realization that one possible message for the tone of the play becomes clear.

good

Shakespeare's England was one of simmering class tensions. The peasants were beginning to feel the yoke of the nobility in a way perhaps unknown in human history. This sense of sickness, then, might represent the rotting carcass of the old order, symbolized by Claudius but in actuality representing the monarchical style of governance. In attempting to cure what ailed Denmark, Hamlet could be seen as a revolutionary figure, though in truth his solution to the problem was merely to change the figure on the throne. The mob following Laertes is clearly symbolic of the Third Estate, and this scene is swiftly followed by the one in the graveyard, with death representing the great equalizer of class. It is also in this scene that Hamlet's understanding of the sickness becomes most acute. Central to this scene is the conversation of the gravedigger, and the apparent lessening of the gap between commoners and nobility. On top of this realization Shakespeare heaps disdain: if any idiot can mimic the cultural habits of the court, then that court has truly become an empty thing. Though he wants to apparently sweep out the old order, ultimately his timidity and introspective nature prevent him from acting decisively. In the end, he can only react to the moves made by others. Perhaps the lesson here is that no modifications

so true

to the old system would be sufficient to save it, and only a revolution could be drastic enough to bring about real change and dispell the oppressive gloom. ✓

No answers are given in the play in response to Hamlet's dilemma. His world destroyed, he ultimately trusts to "Providence," but this is a last-ditch attempt to avoid falling into the pits of insanity. After all, what Providence could watch over the fall of a sparrow, but remain blind to the death of a king? Hamlet gets his vengeance, but there is no victory. If this was the will of heaven, then it is a thing of shadows and blurred edges. Fortinbras is to be king, a man more akin to the old-style feudal lord than the coming man of the Enlightenment. Horatio is urged to tell the truth of the tale and clear Hamlet's name, but to what end? I believe that Shakespeare left the play with this message of confusion because for him, the question about what society would do to cure the illness was still an open one. In a certain sense, the play was a mirror, asking us to view the horror and attempt to craft a better response in our own lives. Unlike with the Greeks, however, no answers are given, and this solution is left to each man to divine on his own. All tragedies ought to be didactic, but Hamlet goes beyond this to prod at the very nature of what it means to attempt to do good in a world filled with disease.

great
question!

excellent, 50/50

Thomas, you do not necessarily need to use internet sources; books and such are fine. You may also entirely rely on your own knowledge which has been proven to be quite sound, sophisticated, and in-depth.
Have a good 2012!

DR. Daley