
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The date of the first performance of *Hamlet*
- 1.3 The sources of the *Hamlet* story.
- 1.4 The text of the play.
- 1.5 Tools of scholarship: textual criticism; emendation; historical criticism; new criticism; others.
- 1.6 Let us sum up
- 1.7 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to provide background information which will be useful for a better understanding of the play. After, reading this unit you will be able to

- appreciate why background information is relevant to the study of a text;
- acquire an understanding of the text of the play.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Hamlet has inspired more critical speculation and comment from critics and scholars than any other play by any dramatist in English Literature, including Shakespeare himself. The character of Hamlet has inspired even more varied, complex, and intense reaction among its audience as well critics and scholars, actors and directors. So much so that Hamlet has often found to have acquired a life of its own, a life outside the context of the play. And the play has become a cultural icon of our times. No other text commands instant recognition of such a large number of moments, images, lines and words as *Hamlet* does.

A work of such value, meaning, and complexity as *Hamlet* must, therefore, be studied in the context of professional knowledge that scholarship of several centuries has provided for us. Before we can go on to understanding the complex issues of meaning and interpretations of the play and the symbolic value of the vision embodied in it, we must understand how literary scholarship determines a number of related, subsidiary issues and how the tools of scholarship are used before we can learn to appreciate those issues: the issues such as when the play was published,

written or performed; the sources that Shakespeare drew upon to construct his plays; Shakespeare is notoriously known to have almost always borrowed his stories from outside sources rather than invent them himself. Shakespeare's plays have come down to us in many versions and the most authentic and reliable texts of his plays almost always need to be determined or reconstructed by scholars. We have to learn to understand how this determination is achieved.

1.2 THE DATE OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE OF *HAMLET*.

There is general agreement that the date of the first performance of *Hamlet* falls in all probability within 1601-1602. There are two reasons offered by scholars who believe that the play was not written before 1598. One, Francis Mere's (1565-1647) list of plays in his *Palladis Tamia* published in this year makes no mention of *Hamlet*. Second, a children's company, the Children of the Chapel Royal--began acting at the Blackfriars theatre in London and Shakespeare and other playwrights of the time treated them with some hostility as they were considered to be a threat to the popularity of the Chamberlain's men, the group to which Shakespeare belonged and for which he wrote plays as well as acted in them. *Hamlet* contains a slurring reference to the child actors—an "aery of children" (II. ii. 354-355)--which could have been made only a year or two after they were in business long enough to cause professional discomfort to Shakespeare and other playwrights of the times. The speculative date of such a reference, thus, appears to be between 1598 and 1601. There is yet another piece of evidence to help determine the date of the play. In an edition of Chaucer's works published in 1598, there is a marginal note by the Cambridge scholar and a friend of Edmund Spenser, Gabriel Harvey (1545?-1630), which states:

The Earl of Essex much *commends* Albion England. . . . The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*: but his *Lucrece*, and his tragedy of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, have it in them, to please the wiser sort.

Essex was executed in 1601. Harvey refers to him in the *present tense* in the same paragraph in which he refers to *Hamlet*, clearly establishing that the play must have been performed before 1601. It is not, then, without a certain knack for detective work that we are able to answer some of the ticklish questions for which we otherwise do not have definite answers.

1.3 THE SOURCES OF THE *HAMLET* STORY

Shakespeare appears to have used an earlier play which told the story of Hamlet. Many references to this lost play have been traced and this play, much to the convenience of all, is referred to as *Ur-Hamlet* (the "original" *Hamlet*). Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) makes an indirect reference to it in his *Epistle to the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities*, prefixed to *Menaphon*, a novel by Robert Greene (1558-1592), which was published in 1589. Nashe writes: "... yet English Seneca read by Candle light yields many good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar*, and so forth, and if you entreat him faire in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfulls of tragical speeches." *Ur-Hamlet* must have been very well known, indeed, in London in the 1590s. Philip Henslowe (d. 1616), the manager of Admiral's Company, a theatrical group, records a performance of a *Hamlet* on June 11, 1594 at the theatre at Newington Butts, when it was jointly occupied by

Admiral's Men and Chamberlain's Men (the latter being the theatrical group to which Shakespeare belonged, wrote plays for and also acted). The fact that a mere eight shillings was the cost of the ticket suggests that the play was on the boards for some time and was not exactly sought after by the London theatre-goers. Thomas Lodge (1557/8-1625) in his *Wits Miserie, and The Worlds Madnesse* (1596) vividly describes a devil looking as pale as "the wizard of the ghost which cried so miserably at the theatre, like an oyster wife, Hamlet, revenge." As the theatre up to 1596 was occupied by Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men, Hamlet obviously belonged to it. Thomas Dekker's (c.1572-1632) play *Satiromastix* (1601) contains a reference which is generally regarded as an allusion to *Ur-Hamlet* rather than to Shakespeare's play as the phrase "Hamlet revenge" does not occur in Shakespeare's play: "my name's Hamlet revenge: thou hast been at Parris garden, have you not?" (IV. I. 150)

Scholars have relied upon a German play, *Der Bestrafte Bruder-Mord (Fratricide Punished)* to gain an idea of what *Ur-Hamlet* was like. *Ur-Hamlet* itself owes its origins to the early Scandinavian folk tales focusing on the essential Hamlet story which acquired a literary form in the hands of the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (1150?-1206). A version of the Hamlet story appears in *Histoires Tragique* by Francoise de Belleforest (1530-1583) which he found in Saxo. The author of *Ur-Hamlet* owed much, it seems, to both de Belleforest as well as Saxo for constructing his tale.

Shakespeare put together the story of Hamlet thus on the basis of his familiarity of *Ur-Hamlet*, which in turn was based on an account of Hamlet in Belleforest and Saxo. There are many elements of the story of Hamlet that Shakespeare took from the earlier sources: fratricide, incest, antic disposition and the shape and form of Hamlet's relationship with the other characters in the play. But then there is much that Shakespeare adds to the Hamlet-story on his own. The doubt regarding the certainty of the crime as well as the criminal is planted in the play by Shakespeare himself. Many elements of Hamlet's character, such as his melancholic temperament, owes itself to Timothy Bright's (c. 1551-1615) *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586). Nashe provided a precedent for Hamlet's comments on the bibulous Danes. Some of the details of Ghost as well as Ophelia's burial have come from the Catholic practices in these matters. A sceptical frame of mind that Shakespeare gave to Hamlet may have owed itself to Montaigne's (1533-1592) *Essais* (1580; 1588; 1595) which had been widely known since their first publication in 1580. In the Saxo's version there are no mad songs of Ophelia, nor her suicide, nor the character of her brother. There is no Osric, nor the grave-diggers, or the play and the players. And finally there is good reason to believe the real life and career of the Earl of Essex may have provided a real-life model for Shakespeare to frame the Bard's most popular creation. Shakespeare's own stamp on the character of Hamlet is revealed in the play in the intensity of the impact on Hamlet of his encounter with the ghost, the ambiguity of Hamlet donning a mask of madness, his ambivalent attitude towards Ophelia, his peculiarly cold and insensitive response to the death of Polonius, his development as an unconventional avenger, his obsessive interest in suicide, elements of ambition and a sense of insecurity in his character—all these are the result of Shakespeare developing his tale in myriad directions for which sometimes there is no suggestion in any of the earlier sources, and sometimes earlier elements are put to a different use. An element of ambiguity, in a sense, thus, dominates the play and adds a degree of depth and mystery to the mind and character of Hamlet's character. With the result we have a profounder work of imaginative creativity than any of the earlier versions of the Hamlet story.

Shakespeare, it would appear, did much to distance himself from his original sources and make his own play essentially distinct: his use of long soliloquy points to his

emphasis on Hamlet's inner life, which makes his treatment of Hamlet singularly different from the handling of the character of Hamlet done before or after Shakespeare created his Hamlet. Shakespeare's interest in the inner life of Hamlet fascinated his readers long after the play was first written. Both Goethe (1749-1832) and Coleridge (1772-1834), for instance, were fascinated by inner spiritual depths of his character.

1.4 THE TEXT OF THE PLAY

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about the "play"? Contrary to our expectations, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* does not exist in an authentic manuscript—a text that we could claim Shakespeare wrote and left for us to read, study, examine and interpret. If you look around you might find that the text of *Hamlet* is available in a number of editions—all quotations for example from the present lesson are taken from the New Cambridge Shakespeare (second edition 1936; reprinted 1971) edited by John Dover Wilson. Many other readers, scholars or students use different editions, such as the Oxford Shakespeare, the Arden edition or the Riverside Shakespeare or the editions prepared by scholars in earlier centuries, such as by Pope (1723), Theobald (1733) and Rowe (1709) in the eighteenth century, and by Clark and Wright (1872) and Dowden (1899) in the nineteenth century. Different editions of the same play tend to be in some sense different from each other. And these differences are the result of thoughtful analysis rather than personal whims or fancies or mere individualistic preferences of the editors of these editions.

The answer to the question with which we began this section is that there are so many editions because there is no standard text of the play—the play as it was written by Shakespeare and performed by his theatrical group to which he belonged. Unfortunately there is no such thing as a finite, fixed object called Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When we look around we find that there are at least three versions of the play which can claim to be the authentic Shakespearean text.

As was the custom, a *Hamlet* was entered in the Stationers' Register ("the official organisations of the Elizabethan printers and publishers") on July 26, 1602 as "A book called the *Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*." And there are three different texts of the play: the *first quarto* edition which appeared in 1603, the *second quarto* edition which was published in the following year, in 1604, and the *first folio* edition which was published in 1623. (The quarto editions were so called on account of the size of the publication (approximately the size of an ordinary book today) while folio editions were larger in size, almost double the size of quarto editions.) The first quarto is generally believed to be the worst of all the texts, a "bad quarto" (bad quartos is a label attached to early corrupt quarto editions which are full of omissions and interpolations and garbled passages), perhaps a pirated edition as its text "distorts the meaning and mutilates the verse" (as Campbell and Quinn have remarked in *The Readers' Encyclopaedia of Shakespeare*; p. 284), and this was the result, it is believed, of "memorial reconstruction": either actors or the printers' agents who sat among the audience later tried to recollect the play from memory to publish unauthorised editions. When the memory failed the "writer" filled in lines from other sources, perhaps from the *Ur-Hamlet*, or lines from other parts spoken by other characters.

The second quarto was published as "*The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. By William Shakespeare. Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true and perfect copy. At London, Printed by I.R. for N. L. and are to be sold at his shop under Saint Dunston's Church in Fleetstreet. 1604." First folio edition is believed to be the transcript of a "prompt book"

(that is how the copies of the plays for use on the stage were referred to) made by a careful, even a professional scribe. It is shorter than the second quarto edition by about two hundred lines and leaves out many passages full of philosophical and or moral elements. For instance, it leaves out the last long soliloquy ("How all occasions . . .") (IV. iv. 32-66).

Of all the three versions the second quarto is the longest—about 4000 lines, and appears to have been printed from a corrected copy of the first quarto and partly from Shakespeare's "foul papers"—an author's original but uncorrected draft of a play, marked with deletions, interlineations and corrections, before it was finalised and copied on clean sheets and became a "fair copy," suitable for submission to an acting company. Shakespeare is also thought to have generally worked only on foul papers as his drafts of plays needed little revision and corrections. Any changes needed were worked into the drafts only. The second quarto contains many new scenes, some of the characters have been given new names (Corambis becomes Polonius, and Rosencraft, Rosencrantz) and some of the important passages are truly recast and enriched. The following lines from the first quarto

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all . . .

are transformed to

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The Slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—
No more . . .

(III.i.57-62)

The first folio leaves out some well known lines such as ("How all occasions do inform against me") – and it is shorter by a total of 222 lines but contains eighty-three new lines.

1.5 TOOLS OF SCHOLARSHIP

What, then, we have is three versions of the printed text of *Hamlet*. But which one of these is *the* text of the play?—the authentic, correct, true, original, real text of the poet-playwright? And can we ever hope to find out which of these could possibly have been the text that Shakespeare either wrote, or approved for performance or publication? The answer to all these question is: perhaps not. On top of it, to bring in the question of performance is to make matters even more complicated. Why must we think of a play in terms of its manuscripts; what about the performance of the play; could one not claim that the first, original, first night performance was *the* performance of the play. But performance of a play is never the same night after night. So which one is the authorial, authentic text—on stage or page?

Scholars down the centuries have dealt with this problem by using their judgements on a variety of issues and have given us critical editions of the play that in their view represent the authorial intentions the most—most faithfully reflect the contemporary tastes and circumstances, the level and the kind of authorial skill that we have come to expect as the targeted audience, or the moral and intellectual framework within which a playwright writing in the Elizabethan times functioned. Many indeed are

the scholarly tools, methodologies, analytical skills and arguments employed to recreate an authentic text of the play in the form of a critical edition of the play. Essentially what an editor seeks to achieve is coherence, impart an architectonic quality to the form of the play so that the play can be made to embody, and then impart, a similarly coherent meaning—a coherent vision of man's predicament in the universe and meaningful insights into the value if any in human existence.

But before interpretation can be achieved scholarship employs tools to arrive at meanings in the parts before the whole can be imparted meaning. In other words, once the larger question of the text of the play has been established, scholarship gets to work on the subtler issues. "Textual critics," for instance, use "emendation" to free the text of errors due to careless printing. W. W. Greg has explained "emendation" thus: "... A conjectural correction inserted in a Shakespearean text by an editor in an attempt to restore the original meaning." He goes on to define an acceptable "emendation" as "one that strikes a trained intelligence as supplying exactly the sense required by the context, and which at the same time reveals to the critic the manner in which the corruption arose." One of the finest example of "emendation" in *Hamlet* was the one proposed by John Dover Wilson to correct a first folio reading of Hamlet's first soliloquy in line 129 of act one, scene two, which reads: "O that this too too *solid* flesh would melt . . ." while both the first as well as the second quarto read this as "sallied" flesh. No emendation was traditionally felt necessary until John Dover Wilson pointed out that "sallied" should be treated as misprint for "sullied" as in Elizabethan handwriting "a" and "u" could be easily confused. Also, Wilson points out,

"sullied flesh" is the key to the soliloquy and tells us that Hamlet is thinking of "kindless" incestuous marriage as personal defilement. Further, "sullied" fits the immediate context as : "solid" does not. There is something absurd in associating "solid flesh" with "melt" and "thaw"; whereas Shakespeare always uses "sully" or "sullied" elsewhere with the image . . . of dirt upon a surface of pure white; and the surface Hamlet obviously has in mind is snow, symbolically of the nature he shares with his mother, once pure but now befouled.[*Hamlet*. The New Shakespeare. John Dover Wilson, ed. (1971), p. 151-2.]

Historical Criticism, heavily relying on scholarly research, similarly seeks to place Shakespeare in his own times and to study his plays in the light of Elizabethan philosophical, moral and dramatic traditions and beliefs and prepare a Shakespearean text for us to understand and appreciate it better. Historical critics study the contemporary language, social and philosophical concepts and the political structures and relate them to the study of Shakespeare. **New Criticism** brought to bear upon the text of the play their finer insights and consolidated the meaning behind the authorial intentions through a focus on the texture of the play.

A great deal of scholarship focuses on the detail rather on the larger issues.

Some of the more stimulating and, in fact, provocative insights into the challenge that a scholar faces in interacting with *Hamlet* frequently take the form of brief notes and short comments. Journals such as *The Explicator*, *Notes & Queries* and *The Shakespeare Newsletter* provide much needed opportunities for the scholars to share such insights with their peers. In a short note, Dominick I. Bongiorno ["Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 1.5.23," *The Explicator*, 54(2) (Winter 1996):67.] points out how there is more to a distraught Hamlet's visit to Ophelia's chamber in Act 2, scene 1 than suggested in the theories generally held by scholars, such as Hamlet is pretending insanity or that he is mentally disordered. Bongiorno seeks to establish that Hamlet's visit to Ophelia is exploited by the playwright to establish "the identity between the King's ghost and the son" through "the grammatical similitude intrinsic to their frightening entrances as also by establishing that Hamlet is driven, much like

the ghost, by a need to find someone compassionate, as Ophelia puts it, "To speak of horrors."

Describing Hamlet's visit to her chamber, Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet looked "Pale as shirt, his knees knocking each other, / And with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors - *he comes* before me." The use of the third person singular pronoun, "he", followed by "comes" occurs before Hamlet's visit to Ophelia only with reference to the dreadful coming of the ghost. Bernardo, in Act one, scene one, is interrupted by an excited Marcellus: "Peace ! break thee off! Look where *it comes* again!" Ninety lines later Horatio speaks: "But soft! Behold! Lo, where *it comes* again!" ; and then, later, again, "Look, my lord, *it comes*." In all the four instances grammar is combined with the a mood of dismay to create resemblance between Hamlet and the ghost. Also, Ophelia's later description of Hamlet's facial expression as similar to the ghost's establishes "an additional, shared identity, one of mood". In lines such as "Ghost: List, list, O list!" "list" is generally glossed as "listen" or "hear" as in *OED*, v2, 1. But it should be obvious. Christopher Baker ["Why Did Hamlet Enter Ophelia's Closet?," *The Shakespeare Newsletter* (Summer 1996): 32. maintains, that ghost does not want Hamlet merely to receive the information passively but more in the sense of "to desire, like, wish *to do* something" as in *OED* v1, 2. It is for example in this sense that this word is used in Wyatt's poem "Whoso list to hunt." Hamlet thus is commanded not only to "Hear of this murder!" but "Desire this revenge." The modern remnants of this sense of this word exist in, for example, "listlessness" which *OED*, b, defines as "characterised by unwillingness to move, act or make any exertion."

Lisa Hopkins draws attention ["Hell in *Hamlet* and '*Tis Pity She's a Whore*," *Notes and Queries* (March 1997): 102-3] to echoes from *Hamlet* in '*Tis Pity She's a Whore* (c.1626) by John Ford (1586-post 6140): "But soft, methinks I see repentance work" appears to echo "But soft, methinks I scent the morning's air." But this apparently minor verbal parallel serves to point up "both a larger similarity between the two plays as well as some fundamental difference between them." The two plays define the horrors of the Hell in similar terms to point to what awaits mankind after death. Both Hamlet and Vasques are very anxious for their victims to be killed while in the act of committing habitual crimes so that their souls may go straight to hell. Both the plays make an issue of Catholicism. Hopkins maintains: "In the case of Hamlet, it is worryingly noticeable that the Protestant prince, hailing from the heartland of Lutheranism and educated at Wittenberg, a university famous in England chiefly through its association with Luther and the Pope-baiting Faustus himself, nevertheless has a father whose ghost is in Purgatory, a location in which only Catholics believe." In '*Tis Pity She's a Whore* Ford presents two faces of Catholicism in the virtuous and conscientious Friar and the venal cardinal. Ford's invoking the earlier play is used to draw attention to the role purgatory plays in avoiding damnation.

James Persoon, in a provocative short note in *The Explicator*, ["Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," *The Explicator*, 55 (2) (Winter 1997): 70-71] focuses on Ophelia's words: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; / pray you, love remember. And there is / pansies, that's for thoughts." Persoon wants us to ask *what* is Laertes to remember and what are to be his thoughts. A meaningful interpretation of the symbolic function of the flowers can be arrived at, he suggests, by focusing on the "inner resonance" within the play. While conventionally flowers signify funerals, courtship or marriages, and pansies specifically suggests love's wounds or an Ophelia bruised in love, a useful way of looking at this context will be to look at the two conventional meanings Ophelia assigns to flowers. Remembrances echo throughout the play—such as when Ghost seeks to goad Hamlet to avenge his death, "Remember me!"; or,

"do not forget", when in his mother's closet Hamlet seems to forget his darker purpose. Similarly "thoughts" too resonate throughout the play. Hamlet's thoughts are directed towards revenge: he blames them for impeding his immediate purpose in almost every soliloquy. Persoon concludes: "Ophelia's flowers are thus not so much funereal and memorialising, . . . , as they are epiphanies focusing the earlier energies of revenge into a camera-like close-up evoking the causes, meanings, and results of the revenges that are blossoming in the second half of the play."

David Thatcher points out how names for Shakespeare "confer status, reputation, lineage, legitimacy" ["Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," *The Explicator*, 54 (3) (Spring 1996): 134-36]. And yet Claudius remains a nameless king. In *Hamlet* "The erasure of the pejorative Claudius seems complete. . . ." Only at one juncture the king's name makes its presence felt, paradoxically in the form of an elision. In the quatrain

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself: and now reigns here
A very, very—pajock

editors have sought to emend "pajock" as "peacock" (as Pope felt it should be emended), "patchcock", apart from arguing for emended spelling for "pajock" itself. It has been suggested that a clue to a meaningful emendation lies in Horatio's reply to this quatrain: "You might have rhymed" and a widespread view maintains that Hamlet was about to finish with the word "ass"—a suggestion that Theobald first made. Thatcher proposes: "Not just 'ass,' . . . which is metrically deficient, but the word Hamlet cannot bring himself to utter: Claudius, that is, *Claudi-ass*. Claudius as the end word for this line was first proposed by Appleton Morgan a hundred years ago but has remained ignored even though it fits rhyme, meter, and context. Thatcher offers three additional arguments in its favour. Throughout the play Hamlet is extremely partial to the word "ass"; he is addicted to word-play, especially to quibble; and the practice of punning on names rhyming or near-rhyming with ass was common in Shakespeare's time. Hamlet thus "took advantage of the latter end of his uncle's name to share a victor's witticism with comprehending confidant."

A valuable source of insights into the complexities of *Hamlet* is comparative studies that seek to examine *Hamlet* in the light of insights gained from one's study of literary texts from other cultures and languages. Over the last few decades the work of the Greek-Egyptian poet C. P. Cavafy (1863-1933) has received a great deal of international attention and acclaim. The impact on the life and times of the poet of the culture and empire of Great Britain has been much analysed. Martin McKinsey has translated some of Cavafy's original Greek material into English and has added valuable commentaries ["C. P. Cavafy on Shakespeare: 'King Claudius' and Two Early Essays," *In-between: Essays & Studies in Literary Criticism*, 6 (i), No. 11 (March 1997):3-18].

This includes Cavafy's refashioning of the events of a literary text in "King Claudius," and two of his early essays, "Shakespeare on Life" and "Greek Traces in Shakespeare." In its eleven syllable blank verse the poem, "King Claudius" narrates:

In all the houses of the poor
they wept for him—secretly,
for fear of Fortinbras.

Claudius is portrayed as

A mild and peace-loving monarch
(the land had suffered much

from the campaigns of his predecessors)
he treated everyone with respect,
both great and small. He avoided
throwing his weight around, and always,
in affairs of state, sought advice
from serious, seasoned counsellors.

Background

Claudius, thus, is portrayed as a benign monarch. The poem develops oppositionally and the opposing elements in Cavafy's retelling are "Hamlet's *idanikai* (abstract, conceptual) suspicions" and the people's perception of Claudius as a just ruler. McKinsey quotes Diana Haas who points out how King Claudius" can be read in terms of Cavafy's conversion from decadent Romanticism to a post-Enlightenment rationalism. What chiefly appears to have interested Cavafy is the political dimension of "these contending ways of thinking": while the poem is not an attack on monarchy as a form of government, it does reduce to its essential absurdity the belief of the divine right of the kings. The poem, as McKinsey points, out belongs to the listeners. In equating the "majority" with the "poor" Cavafy may have had a political motive in terms of his own place and time. The British had occupied the Egypt since 1882 and the occupation had proved devastating for the Greek merchant-class who had lived in Alexandria.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

It is thus of utmost importance for us to realise that our initial obligation, before we attempt to study, analyse and understand a Shakespearean text, is to establish the text of the play by using the tools of scholarship as well as the resources that scholarship has amassed for us for this purpose. The use of scholarly tools, such as "emendation," or critical approaches such as New Criticism, illustrated above, point to the need for an ever alert, sensitive attention that a literary text—any text—requires before it can be fully studied by professional students of literature, or even read by non-professional readers for pleasure and profit.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. Why is it necessary to master the tools of scholarship for a professional student of literature? How would our understanding of *Hamlet* suffer if we ignore this aspect?
2. Write short notes on (i) emendation; and (ii) textual criticism.
3. When was *Hamlet* first staged? What is the nature of the evidence available to establish this fact?
4. What are the major variations in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as compared to the sources he drew upon?

UNIT 2 INTERPRETATIONS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 *Hamlet* as a revenge play
- 2.3 Theatre as a theme in *Hamlet*
- 2.4 *Hamlet* as a Tragedy
- 2.5 *Hamlet* as a Religious Play
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After a careful reading of this unit you will be able to understand

- what *Hamlet* is about
- what it seeks to talk to us about
- how it is a revenge play and
- how it can be variously interpreted.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Once the text of a literary work has been established to our satisfaction—or we have, at least, decided to accept a certain version, pending final judgement—on the basis of the principles of authenticating a text, the more complex part of the critical endeavour begins to seize out mind and thought.

A work of art is an organic whole. It is one work. It has one voice and that voice must speak for the whole work. It must speak collectively for every part that makes up the whole that the work of art before us is. It is not the same thing as suggesting that a work of art must or can have only one meaning. Great books have a tendency to speak to each reader in a different mood and meaning and impart a different significance. In fact, each reader finds himself responding to a different significance each time he reads a great work of art. But that one meaning must answer every question that that text must raise, and justify all that happens, for instance, in a play, in its every word, gesture and action. In other words, all interpretations proffered as meaning of a play must derive validity from the text of the play itself.

What we are *not* looking for is the most authentic meaning—how are we to arrive at its authenticity?—or the meaning that the author may have had in mind when he wrote—we have no access to the mind of William Shakespeare. One way of looking at this issue is to remember that once a work of art is written the author is merely a reader of this work; one more reader of this work. Maybe a principal, even *the* principal reader of this work, but merely a reader nonetheless. Once a text sees the light of the day—or the darkness of the print, if you like—it becomes an angle in the triangle with the author and a common reader or a professional scholar as the other two angles. The interaction between these three angles offers endless possibilities of intellectual pleasure and profit. But our ultimate focus is the work of art that is before us. The meaning that we are looking for is the one that satisfies a reader the most and explains in every way the complex entity that the work of art in question is.

There is thus a great deal of freedom for the professional student of literature to apply his mind and look at the text of the play in any way his personal predilection, sensitivity to life and letters and professional training lead him to. A work such as *Hamlet* with its endless diversity and richness, is likely to provoke myriad responses compared to, say, an average play by minor playwright. Yet, one must contend that certain interpretations of the play might appear to do greater justice to the readers' expectations from the playwright; or even respond to the expectation of the times in which the play is being read, the mood, the pressures and knowledge that is brought to bear upon the play by a reader.

After such a heavily qualified caveat, how does one look at *Hamlet*? What is *Hamlet* about; what does it seek to talk to us about; what does it mean—the meaning, the voice that will acquaint us most meaningfully and profitably with the heart and soul of the play?

2.2 HAMLET AS A REVENGE PLAY

Revenge is an important part of the plot structure of a large number of Renaissance tragedies. Thomas Kyd's (1558-1594) *The Spanish Tragedy* (published perhaps in 1589) was perhaps the first Elizabethan play in which revenge is the primary motivating force both for the protagonist as well as the plot. The tragic denouement of the play shows the murderers as well as the avengers alike being killed. Kyd introduced many elements in his play which became standard conventions for the revenge plays that followed: the ghost, intrigue, betrayal, a hesitant, unsure hero, and his inaction chiefly based on moral scruple, madness, and melancholia, the black dress, the reading of a book and philosophical musings and a gradual deterioration of the hero's moral stature which alienates the audience's sympathy for the hero. Many more plays followed Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*: John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, Tourner's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* and John Fletcher's *Valentinian* are some of the plays that belong to the literary tradition that Kyd appears to have initiated. Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* were great crowd pullers. A major influence on the development of the Elizabethan revenge play was that of Seneca, the Roman dramatist and essayist who died in A.D. 65. He was translated in the sixteenth century and was much admired for his revenge tragedies that had many of the features that Kyd made popular through his play, *The Spanish Tragedy*. Other sources of influence include Italian *nouvelle* and the works of writers such as Machiavelli.

Even though revenge-focused literature during the Renaissance was very popular, the general attitude to revenge was one of disapproval, even revulsion. Christian ethics disapproved vengeance as personal principle --

Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

Thou God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself.

Be ye angry and sin not: let no the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil. *St Paul*

Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.

-- and the law of the land made personal revenge anti-social and punishable. The moral preachers and church fathers characterise it as immoral and constantly spoke against it from the pulpit. Much debate was carried out in public to condemn revenge as morally and legally totally indefensible. Revenge fostered anti-social behaviour, made men self-centred as they set themselves up as judges of their own cause, leading to an exaggerated rather than a fair view of the injuries suffered, and discourages forgiveness and a charitable temper. Yet it is clear that there was understanding shown—if full approval was not accorded—for certain kinds of acts of revenge. The Elizabethans believed, despite legal and religious disapproval, that personal honour had to be defended. Murder had to be avenged. A son had a sacred duty to avenge the murder of his father. The sixteenth century civil law could deny the heir of a murdered father his inheritance unless he avenged the unnatural death of the victim. For the Elizabethans, there existed a well known work which defined the properties for honourable revenge: The *Courtiers Academie* by Count Remei which became available in an English translation around 1598. Francis Bacon wrote in 1625:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature run to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of the wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior. . . .

The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs for which there is no law to remedy, but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; or else a man's enemy is still beforehand, and it is two for one. Some when they take revenge, are desirous the party should know whence it cometh. This is the most generous. For the delight seemeth to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent. . . .

This is certain, that a man that studies the revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges for the most part are fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

The public sentiment thus acknowledged the official and religious disapproval of the acts of revenge but showed understanding for the avenger's passion.

It is against this background that we should attempt to appreciate Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Revenge as an aspect of the plot structure of the plays appears in many plays of Shakespeare. It appears in varying degrees of importance in *Richard II* as well as in *Tempest*. As a minor motif it appears several other plays such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*,

Romeo and Juliet, *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*. *Hamlet* it is which embodies Shakespeare's most significant handling of the revenge theme.

Hamlet has not one but four revenge plots. Hamlet commits himself to avenge his father's death at the hands of Claudius, his uncle, who also marries his mother and usurps the throne of Denmark. Another son, Laertes, vows to take revenge for the killing of his father by Hamlet. Fortinbras invades the kingdom of Denmark to avenge his father's death at the hands of old King Hamlet. And there is yet another son who vows "revenge" in *Hamlet*: Pyrrhus slaughters Priam, whose son had killed Pyrrhus's father.

A typical structure of a revenge play can be viewed in five parts. The first part of the structure of a revenge play was an "exposition" usually by a ghost but in some plays exposition is carried out by other characters, even victims in the moments of their death. The exposition is followed by "anticipation" in which an elaborate plan for carrying out the revenge is prepared. A central and most dramatic part of the structure of the revenge play used to be the "confrontation" in which the avenger and the intended victim come face to face, so to say, though some time the confrontation takes a different form as it does in *Hamlet* in the prayer scene. "Delay" is a major structural device which allows the revenger to deliberately keep postponing taking action on account of moral scruples, a feeling of inadequacy to the intended task that lies ahead of him, or for other reasons. The "fulfilment" or "completion" of revenge takes the form normally in which both the victim and the avenger are destroyed along many other innocent bystanders.

Hamlet opens with the officers guarding the royal palace who are terrified by the appearance of the ghost who would not speak to them. Nor will the ghost confide the reason for his appearance in Horatio who joins the guards on the third night. But he speaks to Hamlet:

List, list, O list!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love-- . . .
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. . . .

Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange and unnatural. . . .
O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!
If thou hast nature in thee bear it not,
Let not the royal bed of Denmark bell.
Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me.

[Act 1, sc.v, ll. 24, 26, 27-8, 80-83 and 91]

Hamlet is horrified to learn that the murderer is Claudius who had seduced his wife and poured poison in his ears as he slept. Hamlet promises to carry out his obligation as a son and avenge his father's death. But many weeks pass and no action is taken. Hamlet suspects that the ghost may have been an evil spirit. But chiefly he does not relish the role of an avenger. He needs to make sure that the ghost did give him facts. To ascertain the truth he feigns madness which confounds his enemies but brings him no closer to the certainty of truth.

A group of actors comes to castle and Hamlet decides to have them act out a tragedy which contains an incident much like the murder of Old King Hamlet: Hamlet hopes to determine Claudius's guilt by the latter's reaction to the play. If he reacts guiltily, the ghost was not an evil spirit. Claudius suspects the truth is out and plans to send Hamlet to England. When the players present the enactment of the murder of the Old King Hamlet, Claudius leaves the royal court in terror of retribution at the hands of

Hamlet. He orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take *Hamlet* to England and plans to have him killed.

Alone, Claudius tries to pray:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven,
It had the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder! Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. . . .

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash [this cursed hand] white as snow? . . .

O bosom black as death!

O limed soul, that struggling to be free,
Art more engaged; . . .

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without never to heaven go.

[Act III, sc. iii, ll. 36-43; 45-46; 67-69; 97-98.]

Hamlet find Claudius "a-praying"—

And now I'll do't. . . .

. . . and am I then revenged

To take him in the purging of his soul
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?

[Act III, sc. iii, ll. 74; 84-86]

--and decides not to avenge his father's murder.

On the one hand Hamlet vacillates between his belief that the ghost was actually his father's spirit and had just cause to approach his son, and his apprehension that it was an evil spirit and meant to cause trouble. Hamlet's ambivalent thinking reflects the confused thinking of his times. Unlike the other pagan heroes of the Icelandic sagas Hamlet is burdened with the value-system of his faith—the Protestants had no faith in ghosts which came to haunt the earth on account of their unfulfilled desires.

What makes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a different and superior work is not its faithful adherence to the conventions of revenge plays which dominated Elizabethan stage and drew admiring crowds for many decades in the Elizabethan age. Even though *Hamlet* is a revenge play, the focus of the play is on higher principles of life and living. Hamlet is shocked as much by his father's murder as by his mother's unfeeling haste with which she marries another man. He finds Ophelia collaborating with her father against him totally repugnant. Polonius's lack of loyalty to the old King Hamlet, his friends' attempt to allow themselves to be used by the King for his own nefarious purposes are acts which violate the social laws, moral order and religious sanctity. Shakespeare endows Hamlet with finer characteristics which raises him above level of the stock protagonist of the revenge play. Hamlet's sensitivity to the values of personal relationships is another characteristics that enriches his character. The crudity of violence gives place to intellectual reflection that dominates a major part of the play.

The psychological emphasis placed upon plays characters makes it a finer work of art than any other revenge play produced during the Elizabethan dramatic tradition. Hamlet procrastinates; but he thinks. He finds himself unable to stoop to revenge; but he knows and ruminates upon a myriad issues that are issues of pivotal significance to man's life. Above all the great poetic richness of the play raises it to a higher plane of enriched creativity and distances it away from the average revenge play and their insistent focus on blood, violence and amoral and villainous unthinking protagonists.

But there are other view-points. There are readers of the play who consider any attempt to read *Hamlet* as a tale of vengeance a great disservice to the memory of the great poet and a denigration of the play. In their recent book, *Hamlet*, Thompson and Taylor maintain that the treatment of the play by scholars such as John Dover Wilson, Eleanor Prosser and Fredson Bowers, among others, who focus on the revenge theme their respective studies of the play. Such studies with their focus on the revenge theme, Thompson and Taylor remark:

... while illuminating many aspects of the play, set it in a relatively remote historical and literary context by putting stress on such things as the ethics of revenge and the Elizabethan belief in ghosts. Thus *Hamlet* may have begun to seem in the mid-twentieth century primitive and quaint, an appropriate subject for academic and antiquarian investigation but not very relevant to the modern world. . . . [p. 5]

But the study of the revenge theme in a Shakespearean play has some justification: The Elizabethan revenge play has a long generic tradition. Moreover, revenge had and continues to have, one might say a social and psychological reality. Our own sense of legal subtleties, Francis Bacon notwithstanding, recognises consolatory justice as a necessary part of a civilised society.

Despite the overwhelming support that the play extends to those who wish to read *Hamlet* as written in the Elizabethan tradition of revenge theatre, the play can be read in many more ways. There is a sense in which *Hamlet* is less of a revenge play than a play about revenge. Shakespeare subjects the human compulsion to seek revenge under a philosophical enquiry to show all facets of this human compulsion and its impact on man. As we have already seen, Francis Bacon maintains:

This is certain, that a man that studies the revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges for the most part are fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

The desire for revenge and its influence on an avenger find an elaborate analytic expression in the narrative of the play.

But *Hamlet* can be studied many more vastly different ways.

2.3 THEATRE AS A THEME IN *HAMLET*

In no other play does Shakespeare subject to intense and detailed scrutiny the art of theatre itself. Shakespeare's belief in the importance of theatre led him to focus on theatre as one of the social institutions. He universalises the concept of character as

role and stage as universe by showing all of life in Elsinore as play-acting. So much so that the submerged theatre within the play, as if, takes over and, we have in *Hamlet*, reality looking like theatrical activity. Life in Elsinore becomes full of theatrical activity. Plays are staged, role-playing is resorted to, false, metaphorical, as well as real, masks are put on—as Claudius does—to deceive others. The power of art to change the world is put under a question mark. Shakespeare apparently makes enormous claims behalf of the craft that he practices. But in the end his scepticism regarding theatre as an infallible weapon to perceive and discover the truth prevails. Characters are actors in the hands of forces which pull their strings and that is how the meaning of life is achieved.

Shakespeare is expansive with fulsome praise when he dwells upon actors: a magnanimous tongue it is that he puts into the mouth of Polonius when Shakespeare seeks to compliment them:

The best actors in the world, either of tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited. . . .

. . . what a treasure hadst thou!

He gives them most generous praise when he wants pay them a tribute:

They are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.

A reference in *Hamlet* to a group of boy-players who had been enjoying a great deal of success in London provokes an outburst (not of anxiety about a threatened livelihood) but of professional jealousy:

Rosencrantz. . . but there is, sir, an aery of children, little eyases, // that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't: these are now the fashion, and so // berattle the common stages (so they call them) that many // wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills, and dare scarce come thither. [III. ii. 342-47]

Hamlet. . . What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? . . . Will they pursue the quality no // longer than they can sing? [III. ii. 348-50]

Bad acting is strongly castigated:

O there be playes that I have seen play—and heard others praise, and that highly—not to speak of profanely, that neither having th'accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor, an, have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had men. And not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. [III. ii. 28-34]

Among any audience there are “the judicious” as well as “the unskilful” and “barren” theatre-goers: Hamlet would want actors to never play to the gallery but only to judicious, discriminating audience.

After Hamlet hears one of the actors deliver a speech, he reflects:

Is it not monstrous that this player here
But in fiction, in a dream of passion;
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned

Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,

A broken voice . . .

. . . and all for nothing! . . .

. . . what he would do,

Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have ? He would drown the stage with tears.
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears; . . .

[II. ii. 554-559; 560; 563-569]

The play within the play is the central action of the play and is the key to the very mystery of the plot. "The play is the thing," says Hamlet, "wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." And he succeeds. Simulation, dissimulation, acting, role-playing are the weapons that he resorts to throughout the play to achieve his objectives.

Hamlet is full of references to the language of theatre. Words like "play," "perform," "applaud," "prologue," "part," etc. The players are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time," and the purpose of the theatrical art is

at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as t'were, the // mirror upto nature,
to show virtue her own feature, // scorn her own image, and the very age and
body of the // time his form and pressure. . . . [III. ii. 21-24.]

The play contains numerous private jokes, as if, shared between the actors of the play, such as the comment in act III by the actor playing Polonius: "I did enact Julius Caesar"; or in act II, ". . . thy face is valanced since I saw thee last . . . Pray God your voice . . . be not cracked."

All the characters in the play have an obsessive compulsion to act a role. Frequently, characters seek to "By indirections find directions out," [II. i. 66] and role-playing is the method used. In the play, no opportunity is missed to exploit the potential of a theatrical situation: eight deaths, high-pitched rhetorical speeches, the play-within-play, the fencing match, the grave-yard scene, the duel between Laertes and Hamlet and numerous rhetorical speeches including Hamlet's own soliloquies: The humanity's histrionic predilection has never before or since and nowhere else been put on show in such exciting terms.

2.4 HAMLET AS A TRAGEDY

As we have remarked earlier, Hamlet rises above the average revenge play and answers to subtler demands of a great tragedy. In the end *Hamlet* turns out to be a great tragedy rather a mere revenge play.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as:

The imitation of action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a

narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

Later he defines the tragic hero:

There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement, . . . The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the hero's fortune must be not from misery to happiness but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part.

Hamlet responds to the definition of an Aristotelian tragedy in more ways than one though there are elements which are typically Shakespearean. In a Shakespearean tragedy the accent is on human responsibility rather on supernatural intervention, chance, fate or any other extra-human factor. The fate, destiny, the "written," too, plays a role but in the ultimate analysis it is the protagonist's own actions that bring about his tragic fall. In *Hamlet* the extra-human agency takes the form of the Ghost but the tragic disaster occurs on account of Hamlet's acts of commission or omission. Hamlet's tragic flaw that brings about the tragic end to the total human endeavour is his failure to act; or act fast enough; or act as a result of premeditation and reflection rather impulsive aggression. As Coleridge remarked:

Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical. He does not want courage, skill, will or opportunity, but every incident sets him thinking, and it is curious and at the same time strictly natural that Hamlet, who all the play seems reason itself, should be impelled at last by mere accident to effect his object. I have a smack of Hamlet, if I may say so. . . . [from *Table Talk*, 1827]

A thinking Hamlet with his compulsive reflective habit remained a standard view of Hamlet for a long time in the history of *Hamlet* criticism. That his failure to act is not the result of any other factor is easy to establish. That he is not a coward the play gives us many opportunities to establish. He is a thinking man, given to retrospection and self-analysis. That he hesitates and is often irresolute is provable, too. But what he is not is a coward, incapable of decisive action. His tragic flaw, as Coleridge saw it, is that he thinks too much.

2.5 *HAMLET AS A RELIGIOUS PLAY*

The Christian element so predominates the play that *Hamlet* comes across as concerning itself with the theological questions of sin, damnation and salvation. Elizabethans had an obsessive concern with after-life and believed in heaven, hell and purgatory. Hamlet is obsessed with the thoughts of after-life--

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. . . . [I. ii.129-32]

--and longs for the peace that the end of life alone can bring, regretting that suicide is forbidden. In his famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," he reflects upon the uncertainty of what follows death:

To die, to sleep;
 To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there is the rub.
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled of this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause. . . .

The undiscovered country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills that we have
 Than fly to others we know not of?

The ghost describes his experience of the purgatory where he had to go as he died without an opportunity to confess his sins. Ophelia is denied a Christian burial as she was considered to have committed suicide. The question whether the ghost is "a spirit of health, or goblin damned" resounds through the whole play. Hamlet's refusal to take advantage of the opportunity to avenge his father's death when he comes upon Claudius in prayer, is the result of his belief in sin and salvation.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

There other themes and other foci with reference to which, too, *Hamlet* can be studied for a meaningfully enriched understanding of the text. *Hamlet* has been treated as a study in melancholia and madness, as a study in ambition and political manipulation, as a philosophical enquiry into a number of issues that feature in the writings of Montaigne, or even as a study in the art of characterisation.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that the primary focus of the play's thematic burden lies on interpreting *Hamlet* as a revenge play?
2. Comment on the nature and significance of the ethics of revenge in *Hamlet*. How do various characters in the play respond to the issue of revenge?
3. How does the preponderance of the metaphors of theatre, acting, stage etc. in *Hamlet* condition our response to the play?
4. Does your own reading of the play suggest to you that one could profitably read and enjoy the play without paying attention to the issue of "theme" and "meaning"?

UNIT 3 LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Words
- 3.3 Rhetorical Devices
- 3.4 Imagery
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with Shakespeare's use of language in *Hamlet* and how words have been used to convey the meaning of what is being said. At the end of this unit you will understand the use of rhetorical devices as well as the imagery employed in *Hamlet*.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

When we, along with Hamlet, finally arrive at the end of the play and gain our share of the wisdom, "The rest is silence!"—we suddenly realise that in one sense *Hamlet* progresses through a whole series of events, actions and ruminations to grapple with the significance of the absence of silence. Language seeks to make possible apparently what is not possible through silence—communication. And in *Hamlet* characters constantly question the wisdom of relying upon words. Words fascinate them, and there is an ongoing debate in the play about the use, abuse and futility of resorting or not resorting to the medium of words.

One of the major issues in *Hamlet* appears to be: Does language stand in polar opposition to action? Is it irreconcilable to action? Can it, or can it not, further or motivate action? Can language be considered a valid tool to evaluate actions, their validity, morality and justness. The philosophical relationship between thoughts, words and deeds, thus, turns out to be a major issue in the play.

3.2 WORDS

Words stand out in our recollection of *Hamlet* as much as vivid visual images. One of the intriguing things about *Hamlet* is the fact that everybody remembers words

from *Hamlet*—more than any other play by Shakespeare or any one else. Everyone can recollect, quote, or recognise quotations from *Hamlet*;

To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .

There is divinity that shapes our end . . .

What a piece of work is man . . .

The time is out of joint . . .

The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns . . .

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy . . .

If almost all these words that linger in our mind long after we finish reading the play belong to *Hamlet*, it is also because the prince who speaks these words is much better with words than with actions. To justify his procrastinating taking action he plays with words, argues with them, through them, for and against them—of course in words. *Hamlet* is full of long conversations with Polonius, Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and just about every other major or minor character. He talks too much. He repeats. **Repetition** of words and phrases occurs so frequently in the speeches of *Hamlet* as also in those of other characters that one suspects that an ongoing march of words is used to reflect one of the major themes of the play, procrastination. Expressions such as “This *too too* sullied flesh,” abound in the play. Horatio’s language is full of a different kind of repetitive effect: “law and heraldry,” “hot and full,” “here and there,” “food and diet,” “strong hand and terms compulsory.” *Hamlet* has a knack for deliberately “misunderstanding” other people’s words and indulge in puns.

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet. Not so, my lord, I am too much in the “son.” [I. ii. 66-67]

Polonius . . . What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet. Words, words, words.

Polonius. What is the matter, my lord?

Hamlet. Between who?

Polonius. I mean the matter that you read, my lord?

[II. ii. 192-196]

And so does one of the grave-diggers:

Hamlet: Whose grave’s this sirrah?

1 Clown. Mine sir-- . . .

Hamlet. What man dost thou dig it for?

1 Clown. For no man, sir.

Hamlet. What woman then?

1 Clown. For none neither.

Hamlet. Who is to be buried in’t?

1 Clown. One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul she’s dead.

[V. i. 126-132]

Characters are sensitive to words and their implications: Claudius in the prayer scene says:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
 Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
 [III. iii. 97]

Speech is important; understanding what one may hear is important:
 Horatio, the scholar, is asked to make sense of what the Ghost says—"Thou art a scholar, speak to it Horatio" [I. i. 42]—and at the end of the play he is requested by Hamlet to "tell my story" [V. iii. 349.] whose "mouth" Horatio offers to become to tell Fortinbras the story of the prince. Ophelia's language of madness draws a response:

Her speech is nothing.

Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
 The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,
 And botch the words up to fit their own thoughts,
 Which as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
 Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
 Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.
 [IV. v. 7-13]

Polonius, whose verbosity provokes Claudius to demand "More matter with less art" [II. ii. 95] himself objects to the speech by the First Player as "This is too long." [II. ii. 498.] As he reads Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, he comments: "That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase, 'beautified' is a vile phrase." [II. ii. 111-12]

They all **play with words**. Hamlet indulges in a quibble in responding to Claudius: "A little more than kin, and less than kind." [I. ii. 65] "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" [II. ii. 17-18], he later tells the players. "Is thy union here? / Follow my mother" [V. ii. 326-27], Hamlet tells Claudius after he forces the king to drink the poison. But Hamlet is not the only who indulges in puns and quibbles. Claudius describes Laertes as one who "wants not buzzers to infect his ear / With pestilent speeches of his father's death." [IV. V. 90-91] Polonius quibbles with words in his advise to Ophelia:

Think yourself a baby

That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay
 Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,
 Or—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
 Running it thus—you'll tender me a fool.
 [I. iii. 105-9]

All the characters resort to **language** to communicate with each other, but in the process they reveal a great deal of their inner selves to us. Shakespeare chooses his words carefully and gives them to his characters in subtler combinations of syntactical complexity and semantic choice. Claudius's speech in ACT I [I. ii. 1-16.] is a case in point:

1. Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
2. The memory be green, and that is us befitted
3. To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
4. To be contracted in one brow of woe,
5. Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
6. That *we* with wisest sorrow *think on him*
7. Together *with remembrance of ourselves*.

8. Therefore *our* sometime *sister*, now our Queen,
9. Th'imperial jointress of this warlike state,
10. Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
11. With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
12. With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
13. In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
14. **Taken to wife.**

Claudius the political manipulator has mastered the art of manipulation through speech and language. It is in his interest that he in his first royal address to the court keeps the focus of attention on matters other than himself. And if he can keep the focus on something that is dear to the heart of people at large, and can practice a degree of self-effacement, even better. He after all had taken over the kingdom of his own brother and married his brother's wife. The people had old King Hamlet. In the whole speech, you would notice, the major part [lines 1-5] is focused on matters away from himself.

And finally he allows the speech to change its course and the focus finally rests on him: "... we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves." But reference to himself, despite the royal plural personal pronoun, is not assertive, but an understatement tagged to the "wisest sorrow."

The second section [lines 8-17] seeks to assert that he has possessed his brother's wife but the assertion emerges at the end, after a long and meandering passage through the mixed emotions of sorrow over his brother's death and the happiness of having married her.

The political upheaval that has preceded his ascending the throne has to be given a direction. The subjects' minds have to be made to rest upon, not the usurper's violent wresting of the throne from its lawful possessors, but away from it. The whole speech is an exercise in political rhetoric that seeks to manipulate people to respond to the new king in a certain way. And to begin with, Claudius succeeds.

Through the play one would notice, characters are forever asking **questions**. Hamlet is forever inquisitive about something or the other. "Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?" "Is not parchment made of sheep-skin?" The questioning frame of mind of Hamlet questions, above all, his own self, his own actions, words, and gestures. The play opens with a question, "Who is there?", and, as if, sets the tone for the whole play.

3.3 RHETORICAL DEVICES

Language plays a major role in the definition of a character's trait in conditioning our response to him. We must appreciate that great popularity that Shakespeare and his characters have enjoyed over the last four centuries owes itself in a major way to the language of his plays. What the characters say is important, because they linger in our minds for what they say as much as for what they do or feel or suffer. But the way they say what they say is of paramount importance. The manner and method of a speaker affects the response of the audience to what they hear. Theatre-goers respond not merely to the meaning of words, but also how the words are conveyed to them. Shakespeare's choice of metre, rhythm, imagery and, of course, diction, determines how we respond to what the characters say, and to the characters themselves. Ultimately this affects—enriches—the total experience of interacting with a play on stage or on page. The meaning of the word is important but attention

should be paid to what goes into making the meaning of words effective communication and manipulation of audience response.

An interesting aspect of Shakespeare's use of language is the fact that certain linguistic features are meant to be appreciated as **rhetorical devices** for their own sake and not merely as starting points for generalisations for the larger context of the text. Rhetorical devices and figures of speech such as chiasmus ("His time a moment, and a point his space"—*Pope*; "Love's fire heats water, water cools not love"—*Shakespeare*) or anaphora ("This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, / This other Eden . . ."—*Shakespeare*) are considered of little importance on a closer examination of the text today. Thompson and Taylor have drawn attention to George T. Wright's analysis of Shakespeare's use of hendiadys, a rhetorical figure which Shakespeare uses over 300 times and there are sixty-six examples of it in *Hamlet* alone. J. A. Cuddon defines a hendiadys as "a figure of speech in which one idea is expressed by two substantives, as in "gloom and despondency", or "darkness and the shadow of death": but as Thompson and Taylor elaborate, there is more to it:

It is necessary that two entities being joined should be related but not in exact parallel: there is something odd, unexpected, even uneasy about hendiadys, as if the relationship between the two terms does not quite fit. But this can make the resulting expression more intense, as in Edmund's "nothing like the image and horror of it" [*King Lear*, I. ii. 175] as compared with "nothing like the horrible image of it", or Macbeth's "full of sound and fury" (*Macbeth*, V. v. 27], as compared with "full of furious sound."

In the examples quoted from Cuddon, it is not the same thing if "darkness and the shadow of death" is reduced to the "dark shadow of death," or "we drink from cups and from gold" [*pateris libamus et auro* is the original Latin sentence from Vergil] is reduced to "we drink from golden cups."

Hamlet provides many exciting examples of hendiadys:

The very age and body of the time. [III. ii. 23-4]
So far from cheer and your former state. [II. ii. 164]
Out of the shot and danger of desire. [I. iii. 35]
Divided from herself and her fair judgement. [IV. V. 86]

Wrights points out how different characters in the play use hendiadys on different occasions and for different purposes. Laertes's use of hendiadys in his advice to Ophelia reveals his uncertain and divided sensibility while Polonius's use of hendiadys in his instruction to Reynaldo reveals his devious nature. If "misleading dualism and false parallels" is one of the obsessive concerns of *Hamlet*, hendiadys draw our attention to it in vivid detail.

3.4 IMAGERY

Hamlet is rich with **imagery**. Vivid descriptions, carefully chosen words and phrases and used with deliberate effort and intention provoke us to see imaginative reconstruction of what is otherwise mere communication through words on a page—They add to the pleasure of interacting with a text. Shakespeare appears to have loved imagery. Dr Samuel Johnson remarks:

A quibble is to Shakespeare what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way and sure to

engulf him in the mire. . . . its fascinations are irresistible. . . . A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth. A quibble was to him fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it.

[Preface to Johnson's edition]

But Dryden was exasperated by the bard's habit of saying "nothing without a metaphor, a simile, an image, or description" [Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*] and he decided to improve Shakespeare by removing as many embellishments from the text as possible. It was later that imagery was found to work by spreading its wings through the whole fabric of a play. Imagery enriches specific moments—

There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
That can but peep to what it would.

[IV. V. 123]

But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks ov'r the dew of yon high eastern hill.

[I. i.166-7]

For 'tis sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar.

[III. iv. 206-7]

--and gains a sharper focus of our attention.

All major plays by Shakespeare have been found to have clusters of images that centre around certain concepts and colour our understanding of the play. The image clusters that dominate a play help us arrive at the "symbolic" vision of the play. Spread through the whole, imagery influences the way we respond to the play and its major issues. That is one of many ways a playwright determines the direction he wants us to take in appreciating his view point as expressed in a work of art.

Caroline Spurgeon who did pioneering work in this area drew attention to the fact that:

recurrent images play a part in raising, developing, sustaining, and repeating emotion in the tragedies, which is somewhat analogous to the action of a recurrent theme of "motif" in a musical fugue or sonata, or in one of Wagner's operas. . . .

. . . as the leaping tongues of flame which illuminate the pages of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* show the visual form which Blake's thought evoked in his mind, and symbolise for us the purity, the beauty, and the two edged quality of life and danger in his words, so the recurrent images in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* reveal the dominant picture or sensation—in terms of which [Shakespeare] sees and feels the main problem or theme of the play, thus giving us an unerring clue to the way he looked at it

When Spurgeon closely looks at *Hamlet* she finds images of sickness, disease, or blemish of the body and "we discover that the idea of an ulcer or tumour, as descriptive of the unwholesome condition of Denmark morally, is, on the whole, the dominating one. Hamlet finds in her mother "rank corruption, mining all within, /

Infects all unseen.” Later he compares the fight between Norway and Poland as a kind of tumour. When he comes upon Claudius in the prayer scene, he exclaims: This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.” Claudius later says: “diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are relieved, / Or not at all.” He begs the English king to help him get rid of Hamlet: “For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me.” He tells Laertes: “Goodness, growing to a plurisy, / Dies in his won too much.” And he describes Hamlet’s arrival as: “But to the quick o’ the ulcer: / Hamlet comes back.” The dominating thought in *Hamlet* is not even sickness but, Spurgeon points out, “rotteness, disease, corruption, the result of dirt.”

3.5 LET US SUM UP

The raw material that goes into the making of works of literature is nothing but words. A close attention to how the words are used and controlled--rhetorical devices, meter, rhythm, intonation, syntax—is of great importance before a meaningful appreciation of the text itself can take place.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. *Hamlet* is full of comments and observations made by various characters on the failure and success of words as a means of communication. Comment.
2. Write a short note on the use Shakespeare makes of hendiadys to enrich verbal exchanges between various characters. Illustrate and analyse.
3. Comment on Shakespeare’s use of recurrent cluster images. What use does Shakespeare make of them to further his major thematic concern in the play?.
4. Comment on the use of words by Claudius to manipulate his audience on many occasions in the play.
5. Analyse Claudius’ first court speech in act one scene two for what it seeks to communicate as well as hide.

UNIT 4 *HAMLET* : OTHER DIMENSIONS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 *Hamlet's* Soliloquies
- 4.3 The question of subjectivity
- 4.4 Osric
- 4.5 Claudius
- 4.6 Horatio
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to acquaint you with the soliloquy as an important dramatic convention, as well as focus on the many soliloquies present in *Hamlet*. By the end of this Unit you will also be made familiar with the various characters present in the play *Hamlet*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A linguistic phenomenon has been described as “the outcome of natural situations and the state of character’s emotions” [Liisa Dahl, *Nominal Style in Shakespearean Soliloquy with Reference to Early English Drama* . . . , (sic.) 1969]. Charles Lamb, therefore, thought of the dramatic language as imperfect means of communicating “the inner structure and workings of mind in a character.” Characters do, and at some length, what persons never do—speak alone for a considerable length of time, and in verse, too. But the soliloquy, as we shall see, has this unique ability to suggest the subtleties of the hidden self of the speaker. In the Elizabethan dramatic tradition soliloquy became widely used as a vehicle for subjective utterance and became an important dramatic convention. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Dr Faustus*, all contain important examples. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean period the playwrights made extensive use of the soliloquy in their plays and the soliloquy, in turn, opened up many dramatic opportunities for the development of theatre. In the process of developing the soliloquy, the Elizabethan verse found an opportunity to attain superior levels of achievement.

Much like a monologue a soliloquy implies a single speaker. It also implies a listener. In the imaginative space of a soliloquy, a speaker as well as a listener become legitimate *dramatis personae*. Frequently, the listeners are the audience. The dramatists, thus, were able to convey a great deal of information about characters—their innermost thoughts, feelings, passions and motives—directly to the audience.

One must add that in *Hamlet* what Richard Hillman describes as “fictional interiority” is created and communicated not only through soliloquies but also “various kinds of monologues, asides and even silences” [*Self Speaking in Medieval and Early Modern Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage*, 1997]. Other mechanisms by which the illusion of interiority is maintained include Hamlet’s book in act II: reading can be considered as “one way of presenting interiority, or at least contemplation, on stage,” Edward Burns [*Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage*, 1990] maintains.

The development of the villain as an important ingredient in the dramatic tradition of this period further contributed to the refinement of the soliloquy. Much like the Devil in the Morality plays, the villains, too, comment on other characters and action of the play, manipulate the plot and reveal their own mind and thoughts to the audience. For instance, Iago’s soliloquy in *Othello*.

Soliloquies often tend to be interior debates—that is what Hamlet’s soliloquies are—as much as direct addresses, such as the one Falstaff makes on honour while speaking directly to the audience.

4.2 HAMLET’S SOLILOQUIES

Two of the seven soliloquies in *Hamlet* occur in act I [scene ii, lines 129-159 and scene v, lines 92-111], and one in act II [scene ii, lines 553-585]. There are three soliloquies in act III, one each in scene one [lines 56-88], scene two [lines 371-382] and scene three [lines 73-95]. The last soliloquy occurs in act IV, scene iv [lines 32-66]:

1. that this too too sullied flesh would melt, . . . I.ii.129-159
2. O all you host of heaven! . . . I.v.92-111
3. O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! . . . II.ii.553-585
4. To be, or not to be, that is the question, . . . III.i.56-88
5. 'Tis now the very witching time of night, . . . III.ii. 371-382
6. Now might I do it pat, now a’is praying-- . . . III.iii. 73-95
7. How all occasions do inform against me, . . . IV.iv.33-66

The first soliloquy occurs before the ghost has appeared and the suggestions of a possible treacherous murder have been made to Hamlet. He comes to the world of Elsinore, so to say, with his heart heavy with grief for his father’s death and the haste with which his mother disowns his father posthumously and accepts Claudius as her husband. Hamlet emerges as a ruminative, reflective and a private person, much loyal to the memory of his father and stunned at his mother’s incestuous conduct. This soliloquy also marks Hamlet’s recognition that the world is full of both evil and good—a world in which Hyperion and satyr are brothers. His mother’s conduct pains him the most—

so loving to my mother
That he might not between the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly . . .
 . . . Why she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it had fed on; and yet within a month-- . . .
 . . . ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears . . .
 . . . married my uncle, . . .

It is the corruption in his mother's conduct that makes him feel his own flesh "too, too sullied." It is in this frame of mind that Hamlet reacts to what life in the world of Elsinore offers him.

The next soliloquy shows Hamlet committing himself to avenge his father's death. This soliloquy too deepens his disgust with his mother's conduct and the fact that he is his mother's flesh and blood receives a reminder. The third soliloquy finds him remorseful for not having taken any action to avenge his father's death. There is yet another implied and understated reference to his mother in the lines in which he describes Claudius as "bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"

To be, or not to be, the fourth soliloquy, is the most philosophical statement that Hamlet makes in the play and has provoked much debate and is perhaps the most discussed and interpreted. One of the major concerns that Hamlet's ruminations focus on in this soliloquy is the conflict between passion and reason. In the seventeenth-century books such as Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* (1601) as well as in books published abroad and circulated in the original as well as in English translation including Philippe de Mornay's *The Defence of Death* (1577) and Nicolas Coeffeteau's *A Table of Humane Passions* (1621), passions clouded reason and it was in the interest of the individual as well as the society to keep them in check. Cicero had described passions as "perturbations, the troubled or stirred motions of the mind strayed from reason: enemies of the mind, and also of a quiet life."

Hamlet is portrayed as possessed of the passion of melancholy—sorrow and fear being two other emotions, it was believed, that accompanied melancholy. Right from the beginning Hamlet is portrayed as melancholic. He himself says: "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seems to me all the uses of the world." His mother begs him to "cast" his "nighted colour off." "The dread of something after death" constantly hangs heavy upon the mind and thoughts of Hamlet. And yet he admires anyone who can control passions and rise above them. A stoic response to the misfortunes of life is something he aspires to be able to show. He praises Horatio as one who "is not passion's slave." He finds Ophelia, Polonius and especially his own mother slaves of passion.

While reviewing a performance of *Hamlet*, G. B. Shaw once wrote:

And please note that this is not a cold Hamlet. He is none of your logicians who reason their way through the world because they cannot feel their way through it: his intellect is the organ of his passion: his eternal self-criticism is as alive and thrilling as it can possibly be. The great soliloquy—no: I do NOT mean "To be or not to be"; I mean the dramatic one, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"—is as passionate in its scorn of brute passion as the most bull-necked affirmation or sentimental dilution of it could be.

All the soliloquies express various passions associated with melancholy and the longer soliloquies seek to attain the stoic ideal of "imperturbability." "To be, or not

to be,” shows Hamlet holding a book, a characteristic gesture on the part of a melancholic—nothing would seem to be more natural.

The fifth soliloquy, “’Tis now the very witching time of night,” reveals Hamlet resolute: “Now I could drink hot blood, / And do such bitter business of the day / Would quake to look on.” He, in this soliloquy, returns to his mother’s incestuous, unnatural conduct, refers to Nero (who had had his mother Agrippina put to death, who had poisoned her husband, the emperor Claudius), hopes to be able to control his anger while confronting her with the truth of her actions. The sixth occurs in the prayer scene and contains one more reference to his mother—“My mother stays,” as does the last soliloquy—“... my mother stained”

All the soliloquies emphasise the idea of the delay in the mental make-up of Hamlet, as well as the delay embedded in the plot-structure of the play. They reveal Hamlet given to self-reflection and excessively speculative, indecisive, and irresolute. Hamlet also comes across as a scholar, and a poet. The soliloquies reveal Hamlet’s tragic flaw that turns *Hamlet* into a tragedy and Hamlet as the prime agent who brings about the tragic denouement: Hamlet thinks too much. He weighs the consequences of action to such an excessive length that action becomes postponed as reflection takes the place of action itself. In a sense, one can characterise all the soliloquies as variations on the same theme: an obsessive concern with his mother’s incestuous conduct and the contamination that he feels has befouled him, too, as her son.

4.3 THE QUESTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

Laurel Amtower, [“The Ethics of Subjectivity in *Hamlet*,” *Studies in the Humanities*, 21.2 (December 1994):120-133] examines the “uncomfortably close connection between the subjective bias of human values and the so called moral enforcement of an absolute law.” *Hamlet*, Amtower maintains, exemplifies a situation in which there exist no absolutes. The task before Hamlet is left to him to interpret, to his discretion. The specifics of his obligation are not identified. Each character’s attempt to construct meaning for her/himself according to a perspective is severely limited by a context. If the subject is guided by its culture’s value system, the answer is that conformity is illusory as in the play value is always recreated from the standpoint of a subjective agency. Amtower counters the assumption of cultural materialists such as Dolimore, Barker, Reiss and Belsey, that the individual consciousness of the Middle Ages was essentialist and monolithic, isolated from the political and natural spheres, and naively comfortable with its moral responsibilities. Amtower believes that Hamlet’s subjectivity is “profoundly and imperturbably pre-modern, a summation in a single character of an entire age and its point of view.” Middle Ages thus for him had a highly developed sense of subjectivity. Hamlet thus has to justify his task not only politically and theologically but in the light of “who he is”. An early Hamlet seeks to efface his own subjectivity to the fulfilment of absolute prescription. His madness thus is the abandonment of ethics to solipsism of the subject, the abnegating of the social for the fullest satisfaction of the private. Amtower goes on: “Instead of realising that he, like every entity of the play, is moved by the greater contexts of discourse and community that immerse him, Hamlet responds with greater attempts at control and repression, marked by irrational outbursts, manslaughter, and finally murder.” The later Hamlet “judges by absolute law—but that absolute law is his own.” The tyrannical Hamlet, Amtower believes, “at the end of the play actually prefigures the tyrannical, moralising repression that will later characterise the Puritan Commonwealth. It is thus the later Hamlet, Amtower concludes, who offers a model of modern subjectivity. In *Hamlet*,

he maintains, "The concept of a balanced subject disintegrates, leaving in its stead only victims and tyrants."

4.4 OSRIC

Osric is generally considered a minor character and the only useful function his character serves in the play is to present a contrast through his ridiculous behaviour to Hamlet's serious and dignified conduct. He is also treated by the readers as well as the directors of the play as a clown who provides comic relief in the play.

But the attention that Shakespeare bestows upon his character would suggest that he had much more than this in his mind. He is surely not meant to be a comic character and, thus, a mere source of comic relief in the play. This is clear from the fact that the source of comic entertainment is, more often than not, the prince himself. Also, the gravediggers are the ones who provide comic pleasure in the play either through their own interaction with each other or with Hamlet. Osric performs no function in the play other than propose a wager—an action that Shakespeare could easily have assigned to any other unimportant character. He appears in one of the most important scenes in the play, in an important moment, and is shown interacting at some length with the play's most important character. The attention then that Shakespeare lavishes upon Osric is not without a larger purpose. But, then, where does lie the significance of the character of Osric?

He lends a certain lightness of tone to the play's last sombre moments and presents a contrast to the protagonist himself. Apart from this, Osric by his presence lends a sharper focus to some of the major themes of the play. He signifies the hollow courtier which is one philosophical strand in the thought-pattern of the play, and of which Claudius is the most important icon in the play. Osric stands for the emptiness of the youth and its predilection for the pointless pursuing of current fashions in dress, conduct and behaviour. Hamlet alludes to a lack of balance between the individual merit and reward; Osric is a perfect example of it. He is a double-dealing hypocrite, has scrupulous disregard for everything that could stand in his way of "advancement."

Claudius plans a scheme for involving Hamlet in the fencing match:

We'll put on those shall praise your excellence,
And set a double varnish on the fame
The Frenchman gave you, bring you, in fine, together,
And wager o'er your heads. [Hamlet], being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all contriving,
Will not peruse the foils, . . .

[IV. vii. 130-135]

Osric, like Laertes, is a stooge and a pawn, and a weapon in the hands of Claudius. He is the source of dread and tension—as he sets out to encourage Hamlet to lay a wager—as much as he is the source of immediate comic pleasure. Our sense of the impending disaster does not allow us to treat him merely as a source of comic relief. More than comic relief or comic pleasure he provides what has been described as "comic tension."

4.5 CLAUDIUS

After the ghost has revealed the story of the unnatural murder of the old King Hamlet, Hamlet describes Claudius as "O villain, villain, smiling villan / My

tables—meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.” Villain in the sense of “That character in a play, whose motives or actions form an important element in the plot” [OED] is the attribute easily and most commonly associated with Claudius. Hamlet refers to Claudius again later as “Bloody, bawdy villain. / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain.” [II. ii. 608-9]. There are seven other occasions when Hamlet refers to Claudius as a villain.

Apart from the meaning that “villain” is commonly understood to have, for Shakespeare, it also meant “a low born base-minded rustic”; OED also describes “villein” to mean as “one of the class serfs in the feudal system.” The two words in the Elizabethan English were interchangeable and, therefore, denoted base or bastard birth. Therefore, when Hamlet calls Claudius “A murderer and a villain” it means, “a murderer and a bastard” and not “a murderer and a wicked man.” As David Berkeley points out: “Villain” is the richest, most stinging, most unsheddable curse that can be offered a king in Shakespeare’s rich vocabulary of swearing. Hamlet’s extreme indignation against Claudius, partly founded on his knowledge that he a true born son of a true born father must yield the throne of Denmark to a bastard “villein” cannot be reconciled with the reiteration of the relatively waterish “villain” [in the ethical sense of the word].” That each time Hamlet refers to Claudius as a bastard has far reaching implications in the play and is of singular importance and must be appreciated.

Generally, Claudius is accused of incest, hurried remarriage, murder and being a usurper of the throne of Denmark. We must remember that Hamlet’s one major accusation against him is that he is a bastard. In a society to which Shakespeare belonged and which was essentially a class-ridden society, being a bastard meant a searing flaw. Shakespeare constantly invokes the images of “weed” and uses words such as “rank” and “gross” to imply “the base-born.” In his first soliloquy [“that this too too sullied flesh would melt,” . . . I.ii.129-159], Hamlet remarks: “Tis an *unweeded* garden, / That grows to seed, things *rank* and *gross* in nature / Possess it merely.” Later in act III, he tells the queen : “And do not spread the compost on the *weeds* / To make them *ranker*.” Shakespeare describes Claudius in comparison with his brother not in terms of wickedness but in terms of a bastard birth.

Hamlet draws attention to Claudius’s unprepossessing appearance --“hyperion to a satyr.” Hamlet asks his mother: “Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed / And batten on this *moor*?” For Shakespeare, lack of pleasant looks indicates an unethical character, while those of “gentle” birth had attractive looks. For the poet “beauty breedeth beauty” [*Venus and Adonis*, line 167]. In act III Hamlet himself is described as “the rose of the fair state” and “the mould of the from.”

Claudius lacks courage: he meekly listens to Laertes accusation, “O thou vile king,” and submits to Hamlet’s forcing poison down his throat without much resistance. Bastards, the Elizabethans believed, had envy as their ruling passion. As Francis Bacon remarked: “. . . bastards are envious, for he that cannot possibly mend his case will do what he can to impair another’s.” [*Of Envy*]. Claudius’s whole life arrears to be a series of attempts to “legitimise himself.”

In **Unit One** I referred to C. P. Cavafy’s version in which he recreates Claudius’s character in the light of his own post-colonial pre-occupations. You might like to compare his version with the assessment of Claudius’s character given above. The poem “King Claudius” is as follows:

King Claudius

My mind travels to distant parts.
I walk the streets of Elsinore,
I wander its squares, and remember
that sorrowful tale of an ill-starred
king
slain by his nephew, on grounds
of certain abstract suspicions.

In all the houses of the poor
they wept for him--secretly,
for fear of Fortinbras.
A mild and peace-loving monarch
(the land had suffered much
from the campaigns of his
predecessor)
he treated everyone with respect,
both great and small. He avoided
throwing his weight around, and
always,
in affairs of state, sought advice
from serious, seasoned counsellors.

They never said with certainty
why it was his nephew killed him.
He suspected him of murder.
His grounds for this suspicion
were that one night, while walking
the ancient battlements, he saw,
or thought he saw, a ghost,
with whom he held a conversation.
They say the ghost made certain
allegations concerning the king.

It was just his overheated
imagination,
of course, his eyes playing tricks.
(The prince was exceedingly
high-strung.
As a student at Wittenburg, he was
thought
quite deranged by many of his
fellows.)

A few days later, he went
to see his mother about certain
family matters. Suddenly,
in mid-sentence, he lost control
and started howling, screaming
that the ghost stood there in front of
him.

But his mother saw nothing.

The very same day he slew an elderly
nobleman, for no reason whatsoever.
Since in a day or two the prince

was due to sail to England, the king
did all he could to hasten his

departure
and deliver him from harm.
But people were so outraged
by this brutal, senseless murder
that a rebellious mob tried to storm
the palace gates let by Laertes,
son of the victim (a bold
and ambitious youth; in the
confusion,
certain of his friends shouted
"Long live King Laertes!").

When things had quieted down
and the king, thanks to his nephew,
was in his tomb (the prince
had never gone to England--
he'd skipped ship along the way),
a certain Horatio came forward
and tried to clear the prince's name
with all sorts of convoluted stories.
He said the trip to England
was just a ploy: word had been sent
to put the prince to death
(though this was never clearly
proved)

He also spoke of poisoned wine,
the king's handiwork. True,
Laertes said the same thing.
But what if he was lying?
What if he'd been duped?
And when did he say it?
While dying--his mind wandering,
no idea what he was saying.
As for the poisoned swords,
it later turned out the king
had nothing to do with it,
Laertes himself put the poison there.
But when pressed, Horatio
brought in the ghost as witness.
The ghost said this, the ghost said
that.

The ghost did this and that.

So while they may have listened
to what the fellow said, in private
most people mourned the goodly
king,
who with phantasms and fairytales
was basely slain, and flung aside.

Fortinbras, however, who'd had
the kingship fall into his lap,
paid close attention
to every word Horatio said.

4.6 HORATIO

Horatio is generally considered an uninteresting if not a completely unimportant character in the play. He speaks some memorable lines but generally his role is expected to be a mere foil to the protagonist. But Horatio appears in nine scenes of the play compared to Ophelia's six. He speaks about half as many more lines as she does and is the most important speaker both at the beginning and at the end of the play. He delivers a long speech in act I, scene i on the preparation of war in Denmark and the long history of discord between Denmark and Norway, vividly recalls the portents of Caesar's fall and how the spirits behave. His second speech is often remembered: "A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye." He speaks minor passages of little significance until the last act when he grabs the poisoned cup from *Hamlet*.

Careful readers of the play have encountered a number of inconsistencies involving Horatio in the play. Horatio comes across to the readers as the primary source of information on the appearance of the old King Hamlet and the likeness of the ghost to him.

Hamlet. Is it not like the king?
Horatio. As thou art to thyself.
 Such was the very armour he had on
 When he th'ambitious Norway combated.
 So frowned he once, when in an angry parle
 He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
 [I. i. 63-66]

Later he remarks: "I knew your father; these hands are not more like." In reply to Hamlet, he says about the ghost's beard, Horatio says: "It was as I have seen it in his life, / A sable silver'd." Horatio thus gives the impression that Horatio knew the king personally well, at least was well acquainted with the old King Hamlet's personal appearance. But he later says, "I saw him once; a was a goodly king." Suggesting that he had not known him well enough—not well enough to account for all that he has earlier said about him. But the answer lies in not reading "I saw him once; a was a goodly king" literally to mean that he had seen the old King Hamlet only *once*. After all, "once" can also be taken to mean "when": "I saw him once; a was a goodly king" can also be read to mean that when Horatio saw him on a certain occasion, "a was a goodly king."

Hamlet addresses Horatio as a "fellow student" and therefore it is naturally assumed that both Hamlet and Horatio are about the same age. But the later elements in the play do not bear this out. We are told in the gravediggers' scene that the duel between the old King Hamlet and Fortinbas took place thirty years ago, the same year young prince Hamlet was born. So if Horatio was among those who witnessed the duel, he must be appreciably older than Hamlet. But there is no reason to be believe that fellow students, even those who are closely acquainted with each other must be of the same age group.

Yet again Horatio is presented as one who is unacquainted with the custom of accompanying royal toasts with cannonade even though he also gives the impression of having been closely familiar with the current Danish political and other matters. There is nothing in the play to suggest that Horatio came from Elsinore. He, in fact, could have come from anywhere in Denmark and may have, thus, been unfamiliar with customs of the royal court and the city life and its ways in Elsinore.

There is yet another matter involving Horatio. We discover that a month elapses between the royal funeral and the royal wedding. Horatio tells Hamlet that he had come to Elsinore for the funeral but they meet only after the royal wedding. Obviously he had remained in Elsinore for the whole month without having once met Hamlet. How is it that they did not meet during this period? But this too appears understandable in view of the fact that during this month Hamlet should have been preoccupied with the funeral of his father and political and other developments in the court.

There is little doubt that Hamlet and Horatio were friends but their friendship need not have been too close as is obvious from the fact that Hamlet uses "you" while addressing him. He uses "thou" when he addresses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is only later that he starts using "thou" for Horatio. Of course, when he discovers the truth about his two friends, he uses "you" for Guildenstern in act II, scene ii. There is little doubt that Horatio matters to Shakespeare as he does to Hamlet. Shakespeare draws upon the long-standing tradition of heroes's companions which imparts much significance to such a character.

Hamlet forever addresses his friend by his name—in the second scene Hamlet addresses Horatio by his name five times in about twenty lines. Horatio is portrayed as a scholar and a sceptic. He is a man of much courage: he is not afraid to confront the ghost, though his loyalty to the prince demands that he try and dissuade him from confronting his father ghost. For Shakespeare's audience that was a dangerous enterprise.

Horatio enjoys Hamlet's trust, friendship, and confidence. More than that, Hamlet respects Horatio for some of his personal virtues:

Horatio, thou art e'ven as just a man
As e'er my conversation cop'd withal. . . .

Nay Do not think I flatter,
For what advancement may I hope from thee
That no revenue hast but thy god spirits
To feed and clothe thee? Why should be flatter'd? . . .

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
And could of men distinguish her election,
Sh'ath seal'd thee for herself: for thou has been
As one, in suffering all that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well commeddled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's fingure
To sound what stop she pleases. Give me that man
that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay in my heart of heart,
As I do thee. . . .

[III. ii. 54-55; 56-59; 63-73]

He does come across as a "foil" to Hamlet after the play-within-the-play scene: to Hamlet's feverish questioning, he gives replies that are cool, objective and his demeanour calm. "Didst perceive?" "Very well, my lord." "Upon the talk of the poisoning?" "I did very well note him." Horatio's stoic calm is Hamlet's greatest advantage.

4.7 LET US SUM UP

There are, in addition, many aspects of the play that should be looked into. The opening scenes in the plays of Shakespeare always have a major significance. In *Hamlet* a number of other scenes must be carefully analysed for additional value; the closet scene, the nunnery scene, the prayer scene, the grave-diggers' scene, the dumb-show and the play scene, the fencing scene: these are some of the situations in the play that are imbued with meaning. Similarly, a careful analysis of the characters --other than the most important ones--Hamlet, Claudius, Getrude-- should be done. The characters of Ophelia and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be examined. Hamlet's character can be further studied as a scourge or purifying agent or even as a Fool. His madness, his attitude to his mother remarriage, his father's death, his attitude to his father, his character as pulled in the opposing directions of the twin forces of sentimentality and intellectualism, his divided nature, his eloquence, his romantic nature are other angles which provide useful insights into his personality. You might like to look up a reference work such as *Index to Hamlet Studies* [1990]: there are numerous entries listed under appropriate headings which would suggest various approaches to a topic. There are, in fact, hundreds of entries under the heading "Hamlet."

There are many issues that are part of the current critical debate about *Hamlet*: the question of "delay" is one of those issues. It has been on the minds of readers-theatre-goers-scholars for longer than two hundred years in the history of *Hamlet* criticism. Hamlet's attitude to Ophelia is also a question that deserves a closer examination. *Hamlet* has been examined in the light of philosophical notions such as appearance and reality, or idealism versus pragmatism. The dominance in *Hamlet* of the ideas of death, decay and corruption, both of the body as well as mind and soul, has caught the readers' attention. *Hamlet* has been studied in comparison with Greek tragedies, in the context of Elizabethan culture, Elizabethan and Jacobean politics and in many other contexts such as current interest in psychoanalytical literary criticism.

Some of these issues are discussed in greater detail in many books and articles listed in the bibliography appended to the last unit.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. What are the major themes in *Hamlet's* soliloquies?. How do they contribute to the major thematic concerns of the play?
2. Analyse "To be, or not to be" in act III, scene i, for its dramatic significance in the context of the play.
3. Analyse the role played by Osric in the larger context of the Danish politics as reflected in the play.
4. "Claudius rather than *Hamlet* is the protagonist of the play." Do you agree?

UNIT 5 “THE WORLD AS STAGE” : WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 *King Lear* and *Hamlet*
- 5.3 Reinventing *Hamlet*
- 5.4 Privatisation of *Hamlet*
- 5.5 Universalization
- 5.6 Let us sum up
- 5.7 Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to make you look at *Hamlet* from a wider perspective. By the end of this Unit you will be able to see how other cultures respond to *Hamlet* and how it has emerged as a cultural icon and also be able to assess its canonical status.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first four units we have looked at *Hamlet* with a close-focused eye. We began, in **Unit I**, with an appreciation of the problems of identifying the text of *Hamlet*: the long gap of four hundred years has surely put us at a disadvantage. We tried to determine the date of the first performance of *Hamlet*, the sources that Shakespeare drew upon to construct the *Hamlet* story, the various versions of the text of the play that have come down to us from various sources. We then went on to appreciate the tools of scholarship and various methodologies such as textual criticism, emendation, historical criticism, new criticism, among others.

In **Unit II** we attempted to examine the meaning of *Hamlet* in the light of the Elizabethan revenge tradition—a perspective which perhaps brings us closer to seeing *Hamlet* as the Elizabethan audience themselves might have understood and enjoyed the play. We examined ways of determining the meaning of a Shakespearean text, attempted to interpret *Hamlet* as a revenge play, and looked, albeit briefly, into various other interpretations of *Hamlet* that have found favour with scholars as well readers and theatre-goers.

Subsequently, **Unit III** was devoted to learning how to read *Hamlet* between the lines: the language of Shakespeare, his interest in rhetorical devices and imagery and other related matters. **Unit IV** focused on *Hamlet*’s soliloquies, the question of

subjectivity in the play as well its general philosophical implications in the context of the early modern literature, and looked at the issues raised by various characters such as Osric, Claudius and Horatio.

Having looked at *Hamlet* at such close quarters, it is time we withdraw ourselves a little and look at *Hamlet* from a wider perspective, in larger contexts. We can look at *Hamlet* in the context of Shakespeare's work. We can assess its canonical status down the centuries, as well as at the present time. We shall take a look at the raging controversies among the lovers of *Hamlet* and the admirers of *King Lear* for allotting the pinnacle of glory to either play. *Hamlet* has emerged as cultural icon in the twentieth century: it has emerged as a cultural icon not only in the Western world but also elsewhere in the world. It might be interesting to look at how other cultures have responded to the mystery and joy of interacting with *Hamlet*. There are *Hamlet* versions in print, on stage, and screen in which *Hamlet* is re-constructed according to the needs, pressures, and the inner urges of those who have dealt with the play as creators and artists and even as readers and theatre- and cine-goers.

5.2 KING LEAR AND HAMLET

R. A. Foakes in his 1993 study *Hamlet 'versus' King Lear* demonstrates how an unprecedented shift took place in the canonical status of *Hamlet* between 1955 and 1965. During the decade *Hamlet* was displaced by *King Lear* as the Bard's greatest tragedy. *Lear* was interpreted "not as a redemptive parable but as bleak version of suffering and despair. The mood of the cold war period with its threat of total nuclear devastation found a new topical meaning in lines such as "Is this promis'd end / Or image of that horror?" [*King Lear*, V.iii.264-5]. In the late twentieth century world controlled by old men obsessed with power, *Lear* echoed the thoughts of men more than did the violent musings of the brooding prince. *Lear* surely speaks to us in more ways than one. But *Hamlet* is surely back at its eminent position. *Hamlet* occupies a significant place in the cultural landscapes all over the world.

No wonder *Hamlet* is described as a "cultural work of formidable status," and "a literary and cultural phenomenon of enormous proportions." Words and phrases in no other play by Shakespeare are so instantly recognisable to anyone anywhere. The language of *Hamlet* can be found to be seeping into the very fabric of the mind or thought everywhere in the world. *Hamlet* is a challenge of immense proportion for any actor/director creative artist as *Hamlet* becomes a milestone in the life of any artist. No other work of Shakespeare has been subjected to such varied and myriad transmutations as *Hamlet*. As Thompson and Taylor argue later in their book:

If a political interpretation of *Hamlet* was topical around 1600, it has also seemed relevant when *Hamlet* has been staged more recently in countries where there has been a real fear of the secret police, such as the former Soviet Union and the eastern Europe . . . [p. 30]

5.3 RE-INVENTING HAMLET

Michael Cohen ["On Reading *Hamlet* for the First Time" [*College Literature*, 19.1 (1992):48-59] considers "the desirability and the difficulty of approaching *Hamlet* without preconception, without a kind of 'pre-reading'." He wonders whether it is

possible to find someone who does not come to the play with foreknowledge of the details of the play or whether one can create conditions in which one can read the play for the "first time." Considering the power the play wields as a cultural icon—"the extra textual *Hamlet* has a real, unquenchable and even frightening existence"—it would be a gigantic task to shed, or persuade readers, students and others to shed, the baggage of familiarity, to "unteach" before one could teach!

There is little doubt that an innocent first reading of *Hamlet* unencumbered by one's prejudices--acquired by being part of a social and cultural context--has always been considered an ideal pre-condition to a fuller and meaningful appreciation of the play. An innocent first reading of the play, the recovery of that pristine experience "uncontaminated by our subsequent intellectualising" of the play has been considered inescapable to our attaining the truth. And there are a great many believers in the truth of the first impressions: Cohen refers to G. B. Harrison, Thomas Kettle, Karl Werder, A. C. Bradley, G. Wilson Knight, C. S. Lewis, and Maynard Mack, among others.

Attempts have been made to view the question of reading *Hamlet* for the "first" time as a historical problem and to recover what must have been the initial response of the Bard's own audience. Cohen refers to the studies done in this regard by Mushat and McGee. What both the first-impression school of critics as well as the historical-retrieval school of critics seek to do is to offer an *ideal reading* of the play.

That Shakespeare seems to have made an attempt to "make new" (and to take away the predictability of the plot from an existing story) can be easily inferred. Cohen quotes Susan Snyder who believes that Shakespeare did his best to make the plot of *Hamlet* less predictable by throwing a shadow of obscurity, for example, on the queen's guilt and ghost's reliability. In other words "Shakespeare did his part towards making it possible to read or see *Hamlet* for the first time." In other words Shakespeare saw the "merit of reading a play for the first time."

What we have today is "a reading of *Hamlet* . . . overdetermined from the beginning: in the mind of the person reading *Hamlet* for the 'first' time, a culturally determined received extratextual interpretation of *Hamlet* joins a culturally determined way of receiving any text."

But what is the solution to this problem? Cohen locates the genesis of his problem in the scholarly practice of preparing an "editorial" text which the editor always insists is the real thing. We have looked into this question at some length in **Unit I**. Cohen finds these scholarly reconstructed editions of the play as "social constructions." The current editions of the play are nothing but a modern-type, modern-spelling conflate of early printed texts that reflect the individual editors's whims and outdated, unexamined assumptions and prejudices about the early printed texts.

For Cohen the solution lies in the suggestion made by Michael Warren when the latter recommended a text providing "the earliest versions--the First Quarto, the Second Quarto, and the First Folio--in photographic reproduction with their original confusions and corruptions unobscured by the interference of later sophistications . . . the editions get between the student or the scholar and the peculiar originals from which they derive." Editors generally privilege the Second Quarto but almost all editors adopt readings from the other versions of the play, too. The editorial principles themselves, thus, are not consistently followed.

It is in one sense no exaggeration to say that no student reading only a modern edition of the play has read the play yet. A student who reads either all or any one of

the three versions of the play has the best chance of reading the play for the first time. If then it is desirable to be able to have a first reading of the play at all, the solution lies in abandoning the editorially reconstructed textual editions of the play as “given” and allow the students to “compose” their own texts by reading all the three versions in photographic facsimiles. Leaving the student alone to decide what the real *Hamlet* is to offer them the best chance of achieving the first reading of the play.

On the other hand this also is true that admirers of *Hamlet* have sought to make up, in more ways than one, for the unfortunate lack of opportunity of having been there when the play was first staged to taste the flavour of the original! There are *Hamlet* versions in print, on stage, and screen in which *Hamlet* is re-constructed according to the needs, pressures, and the inner urges of those who have dealt with the play as creators and artists and even as readers and theatre- and cine-goers: and these reconstructions are unique, different and new. *Hamlet* has been printed, screened and staged in many different ways to give it a new shape and form and fit the needs of the time and space in which, and for which, it was being reconstructed.

5.4 PRIVATISATION OF *HAMLET*

Bowdlerised Shakespeare. Thomas Bowdler [1754-1825] was a clergyman and editor. He prepared a four volume edition of the works of Shakespeare in 1807 (which he later expanded to ten volumes in 1818) in which his objective was to offer to the readers an edition “in which nothing is added to the original, but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read in a family.” Shakespeare’s plays, he felt, had given us “an inexhaustible fund of instruction as well as pleasure which even the severest moralist would not wish to withhold from innocent minds.” He thus prepared a version of Shakespeare’s plays which could be read in a family in the presence of women and children “unmixed with anything that could raise a blush on the cheek of modesty,” or that could be unfit “to read aloud by a gentlemen to a company of ladies.” The Bowdlerised Shakespeare, called *The Family Shakespeare*, was widely read throughout the nineteenth century and earned high praise from many including the poet Swinburne who remarked that “no man ever did better service to Shakespeare than the man who made it possible to put him into the hands of intelligent and imaginative children.”

Marowitz *Hamlet*. Charles Marowitz, the author, critic, playwright and director, has decided to take *Hamlet* “imprisoned by three-and-a-half centuries of critical appreciation and grand acting,” (as the blurb to the Penguin Plays edition [1968] of *The Marowitz Hamlet and The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* describes it), “boldly, broken it into pieces and reassembled it in a collage which he hopes makes its meaning real again.” *Hamlet* is described in the sub-title as “A Collage Version of the Shakespeare’s Play.” In his introduction to this edition Marowitz says:

Can a play which is well known be reconstructed and redistributed so as to make a new work of art? If *Hamlet* were a precious old vase which shattered into thousand pieces, could one glue the pieces all together into a completely new shape and still retain the spirit of the original. . . . if Shakespeare is our contemporary, why can’t we speak to him in our own tone of voice, in our own rhythm about our own concerns? . . . [p.10]

And that is what precisely the play turns out to be: a collage of broken pieces put together again into a shape. And the play opens in the very first scene with:

Hamlet and Fortinbras standing facing each other. After a moment Fortinbras moves down to meet the Captain. Hamlet falls in behind the Captain like soldier in the ranks.

"The World As Stage" : Wider Perspective

Fortinbras: Go, Captain, from me greet the Danish King . . .

and we have *Hamlet* beginning his famous soliloquy, "How all occasions . . ." at line sixteen of act one, scene one!

The Haunted House *Hamlet*. Tamahous Theatre of Vancouver, Canada presented a version of *Hamlet* in the summer of 1986) which was spread all over a three-storey house. Every room in the house had a scene from *Hamlet* being staged and the audience were free to roam about the three floors, peep into different rooms and piece together what was going on in those rooms and re-construct a *Hamlet* for themselves. The beginning of the play as well as the ending, along with the Players' scene was all that the entire audience shared in common. Otherwise while some watched Claudius in his court, some others went and eavesdropped on the conversation between Horatio and Hamlet or between Polonius and Ophelia. There was the whole house full of goings on that would remind the audience of the play that they know as *Hamlet*, but it was also a new play. The angry outbursts of Hamlet could be heard when Ophelia sat whimpering in one room and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern plotted their own plans in another. The house became a metaphor and the householders revealed themselves, an unhappy lot, each with a tale of his own to tell.

Hamlet was staged outside Britain fairly soon. It reached France in 1745, Russia in 1748 and in America 1759. Within the next hundred it was being staged all over the world: so much so that foreign companies would come to London to perform their versions of *Hamlet*. An Indian company was in London 1877 to stage a performance of *Hamlet*. There are more than half a dozen film versions known to exist: those by Olivier, Kozintsev, Richardson, Bennett, Zeffirelli.

5.5 UNIVERSALIZATION

Hamlet thus appears to speak a **universal language**. In the West Shakespeare occupies a position of unique centrality. Harold Bloom has recently maintained in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* [1994], Shakespeare "is the central figure of the Western Canon" [p.2] "... more central to the Western culture than Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein." [p. 10] Shakespeare's "aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgement of the four centuries," [p. 23] Bloom tells us. "His powers of assimilation and contamination are unique." [P.3] "We owe to Shakespeare not only our representation of cognition but much of our capacity for cognition." [p. 40]

"The enigma of Shakespeare," Bloom says elsewhere, "is his universalism: Kurusawa's film versions of Macbeth and King Lear are thoroughly Kurusawa and thoroughly Shakespeare." [p. 524] Bloom then isolates what makes Shakespeare so unique and so universal:

What is the Shakespearean difference that demands Dante, Cervantes, Tolstoy and only a few others as aesthetic companions? To ask the questions is to undertake the quest that is the final aim of literary study, the search for a kind of value that transcends the particular prejudices and needs of societies at fixed points in time. Such a quest is illusory, according to all our

current ideologies . . . *There is substance in Shakespeare's work that prevails and that has proved multicultural, so universally apprehended in all languages as to have established a pragmatic multiculturalism around the globe, one that already far surpasses our politicised fumbblings towards such an ideal. Shakespeare is the centre of the embryo of a world canon, not Western or Eastern and less and less Eurocentric; . . .* [p. 62; emphasis added]

But let us not forget that even in the West Shakespeare's supremacy has not gone unchallenged. Charles Forker, a noted Shakespeare scholar, once remarked to this writer in an interview:

In America black American response to Shakespeare is a racial response. A black American student regards Shakespeare as a white man's cultural baggage. In my classes very few black American students take interest in Shakespeare or even attend classes. When they are educated at higher levels, they respond to Shakespeare much the same manner as educated Indians. But an average educated black American tends to contain his interest in Shakespeare. . . ."

Referring to one of his black American student who did his doctoral work on Shakespeare, Forker said, "But then he is not too popular with his fellow black American students who regard him as having identified with a symbol of white man's oppression." But generally speaking one could say that Shakespeare in America is an off-shoot of British literature and the Bible and Shakespeare are the two most profound and pervasive influences on American literature. Even the Gettysburgh address by Abraham Lincoln, Forker claimed, could be shown to embody these two influences. Not only in Britain, but also in America, Shakespeare is treated not merely as literature or theatre but has become a cultural construct.

Indian failure to respond to deal with Shakespeare at deeper levels is perhaps because English language and literature is associated in the minds of the people with the oppressors which the British colonisers were for a such a long time. In Japan, where they did not have the advantage or the disadvantage of a similar cultural interaction forced upon them, Shakespeare has permeated the life of the Japanese obviously because of a choice deliberately made and consciously cultivated. Thus the cultural and literary scene in Japan is inundated with novels, poems, films and other artistic manifestation derived from, or inspired by, Shakespeare. But Shakespeare came to India early, indeed.

Hamlet in India. *Hamlet's* Indian connection took shape even before the play crossed over to the Indian ocean. The third voyage sponsored by the East India Company to India left England in 1607. One of the three ships, *Hector*, while anchored at Sierra Leone, is reported to have had two performances of *Hamlet* aboard done by the sailors of the ship. The development of the Parsi theatre in the mid-nineteenth century led to an upsurge of interest in Shakespeare in India. The Parsi theatre companies had grown out of amateur theatrical activities organised by the Parsi community, British-run schools and colleges and clubs such as the Elphinstone Club. About this time British administrators were looking for ways and means to create a class of Indians who would share the burden of running the administration of the country at lower levels. The desire to improve the native cultures through the means of British education too was not far from their minds. Even the educated Indian leadership believed in the need for revitalising the Indian culture. The Parsi theatre's attempt to appropriate Shakespeare and package it for the Indian audience received a great deal of encouragement. *Hamlet* in Urdu translation done by Munshi Mehdi Hasan with a new title, *Khune Nahaq*, was

performed in 1898 by Parsi Alfred Company. *Hamlet*, we must remember was not the only play that was being staged by the Parsi theatrical companies. *Othello* and *Macbeth* were frequently staged, as also *Cymbeline*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Winters Tale*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Measure for Measure*. With the advent of the motion pictures, many theatrical companies turned to film-making. Sohrab Modi and his elder brother Rustem filmed their popular play *Hamlet* or *Khoon ka Khoon* in 1935 in which Sohrab and Naseem performed. Another Marathi adaptation of *Hamlet* called *Vikar Vilasit* featured Kamlabai Gokhale at the age of four as a boy in the "play" scene.

I remarked in an earlier unit that *Hamlet* has often found to have acquired a life of its own, a life outside the context of the play. No other text commands instant recognition of such a large number of moments, images, lines and words as *Hamlet* does. Words and phrases from the play have become part of our daily vocabulary. In a recent edition of the *Delhi Statesman*, a news item commenting on the uncertainty surrounding a politician's joining a political party carried the title: "To be or not to be—that is the question Madam!" [March 11, 1998] *Hamlet* exists in translation in many vernacular languages. In fact, there are many translations of *Hamlet* even in Sanskrit!

Another interesting example of an alien culture taking to Shakespeare is **South Africa**. *Hamlet* was first produced in South Africa in 1799 in Port Elizabeth and has enjoyed continued popularity ever since. Most Shakespeare productions were organised by English speaking whites and one of their objective used to be to ensure the triumph of English culture in a society where the Blacks and the other minorities were considered, under the then prevailing laws, inferior. The first Afrikaans production was staged in 1947 and was received with a great deal of enthusiasm. Afrikaners travelled from all over the country to see the production. So much so that first Afrikaans production was seen as part of the resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism. Afrikaans culture, considered crude and inferior by the English speaking whites, sought to claim for itself the sophistication of a great English playwright by staging *Hamlet* in Afrikaans.

Shakespeare in South Africa thus, always became a showcase for cultural sophistication whenever staged by the English speaking whites, Afrikaners, Coloured, or Indians. The English speaking whites used Shakespeare to maintain their cultural superiority, the Afrikaners sought to challenge this colonial-imperial pride and to validate their own culture. Other minorities groups such as Indian, Coloured and Blacks to claim a place in an equal opportunity, just society. Their access and ability to negotiate a play by Shakespeare was used to prove that they, too, were cultured or sophisticated groups within the South African society.

5.6 LET US SUM UP

Hamlet, thus, should be understood and appreciated not merely as a literary text in the context of the times and the literary conventions in which it was written. Over the last many centuries the world has become a much smaller place and cultural artifacts have tended to break loose from the tyranny of their geographical roots. In the larger context of today a play such as *Hamlet* has been appropriated by many other cultures. It is useful to examine how such diverse and varied readers from diverse and varied cultures have responded to it.

5.7 QUESTIONS

1. *Hamlet* is credited with a unique ability to communicate with diverse audiences in varied countries and cultures all over the world. Which elements of the play make it possible for the play to achieve this universal appeal?
2. Analyse Cohen's views on the significance of reading a play "for the first time" with reference to *Hamlet*.
3. Bowdlerised Shakespeare represents censorship at its worst. Comment.

UNIT 6 **CURRENT CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *HAMLET***

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Twentieth Century Approaches upto the Sixties
- 6.3 Modern Literary Theory : Structuralism
- 6.4 Feminism
- 6.5 Marxism
- 6.6 Psychological Criticism
- 6.7 New Literary Theory and *Hamlet*
- 6.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.9 Bibliography

6.0 **OBJECTIVES**

After reading this Unit you will gain a knowledge of

- Critical approaches : Twentieth Century Scene upto the sixties
- New literary theory : major approaches and
- New Literary theory and *Hamlet*.

6.1 **INTRODUCTION**

As professional students of literature post-graduate students must realise that their obligations as students, and as future researchers and scholars, are not confined merely to reading literature, however diligently and meaningfully. The joy of immersing oneself into mankind's endless source of pleasure and instruction is in itself a great reward. But works of literature have to be studied for a fuller appreciation of their meaning and significance, also in the light of the organised body of thought that has developed in response to scholastic attempts to understand and appreciate literature.

Over a period of time an organised body of literature about literature—many schools of thought, approaches and view-points governing literary criticism--of myriad hues and shapes and forms has emerged. Some of the finest minds over the last many centuries have developed the discipline of literary studies and studied

works of literature in the light of intellectual methodologies specially created to make study of literature a rewarding exercise. Even when critics do not consciously belong to a specific school of thought and subscribe to a definite ideology, they certainly speak from a position of reasoned thought.

6.2 TWENTIETH CENTURY APPROACHES UPTO THE SIXTIES

In the twentieth century upto about the sixties literary criticism developed in many more complex ways. René Wellek's monumental study of the twentieth century criticism initiates his study with "symbolism" and goes on to devote a section to the academic critics who functioned within the universities and furthered the discipline of literary studies. He then devotes a chapter each to The Bloomsbury Group and another to The New Romantics. The focus then shifts to the early pioneering work done by T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis and the consolidation of the early work into a substantial body of admirable proportions by T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and the contributors to *Scrutiny*, the widely influential literary journal that Leavis helped found and edited for twenty years, and critics such as F. W. Bateson and William Empson.

Some of these approaches particularly benefited students of Shakespeare. Some other schools of thought and critical approaches, in turn, received a fillip because of their attempts to engage the Shakespearean canon.

Upto the sixties, then, the islands of certainty included a number of notions: That there is an entity called literature as different from what is not literature. Journalistic writing is not literature, for example. Literature was considered an activity specially carried out by those who are competent to do so. The existence of an author was always taken for granted. When we did not know for sure who had created a particular work, a large body of scholarship developed to figure out the identity of the author. Also, scholarship, literary criticism and other related activities were subordinate to literature. An act of critical appreciation was secondary to, next to, even inferior to an act of creativity. Interpreting a work of art constituted the effort of lesser mortals.

Also, there was something ineffable--inexpressible, unutterable, transcendent--about the act of creation. Even Aristotle who gave us the view that art is an imitation of life ended up suggesting a great deal more about the creative faculty than his concept of literature as mimetic activity would otherwise suggest. In section iv of *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes between the world of poetry produced through mimetic activity and points out that "... the reason of delight ... is that one is at the same time ... gathering the meaning of things." Aristotle returns to this gathering the meaning of things through mimesis which produces poetry in section IX: "The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened but the kind of thing that might happen ... The distinction between the historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other writing verse ... it consists really in that one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is more philosophical and graver in import than history, since its statements are of the nature universals whereas those of history are singulars." Poetic imitation thus becomes creative imitation because it is something more than the actual. In section XVII Aristotle gives yet another dimension to the concept of mimesis by defining the nature of the faculty involved in the art: "Hence it is that poetry demands a man with a special gift for it or else with a touch of madness in him."

Again, the concept of mimesis has to be appreciated also in terms of what is said about the structural aspect of a work of art. To Aristotle unity is what gives a poem or a drama its wholeness. And this question is also a question of beauty. In Section VII he says: "... to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts but also be of certain definite magnitude." So, mimetic activity involves an act of ordering, an act of producing a new organism. Equally significant, in this context, is Aristotle's view that characters should be described as they ought to be, and his insistence that poets need not use language "such as men do use." No wonder the Greeks used the same word for poet [creator=maker=writer] as they used for God. Creativity was special for sure, and depended on the creative abilities of very special, divinely gifted individuals.

"Language such as men do use"—Ben Jonson used the phrase for his choice of diction for his highly mimetic poetic activity—right in the tradition of Aristotle. Also established, as another major concept of Anglo-American tradition of literary critical thought, was the fact that language is a transparent medium—a medium that remains non-interfering, totally objective, a kind of container, a paper-bag which receives from the giver what is given and remains available to yield its contents, totally untouched, unimpaired, or modified.

6.3 MODERN LITERARY THEORY STRUCTURALISM

In the sixties a **new view of literary critical practice** emerged and almost all these literary orthodoxies were subjected to intense scrutiny. The traditional view of the significance of literature, the role of criticism, the value of language, the very notion of an "author," the moral and aesthetic values of literature, and its cultural and political context, literary history, literary biography: all these notions underwent a sea-change. Modern literary theory changed the way we look at literature in more ways than one through, as Rice and Waugh put it, "its unprecedented attack on the grounding assumption of the Anglo-American critical tradition." Let us look at these major departures from the tradition one by one.

Structuralism. One of the most trenchant attack on the literary orthodoxies came from the **structuralists** who chose as their primary concern "language" in its most general sense. Literature, the followers of structuralism believed, does not reflect reality or life through the medium of language: it is the product of language. In other words, literature is born out of language, not out of the rigours of life or living. The site for literary works to be born out of is not life but words. As I have remarked earlier, the view that that language is a transparent medium—a medium that remains non-interfering, totally objective, a kind of container, a paper-bag which receives from the giver what is given and remains available to yield its contents, totally untouched, unimpaired, or modified—this view of language took a heavy beating. Ferdinand de Saussure [1857-1913] revolutionised thinking by maintaining that words signify objects—the word 'table' refers to an object called 'table' only arbitrarily and such denotation of any external reality has no connection with any inevitably absolute logic. All signs [=words] signify objects [=signifiers] which are arbitrarily so equated.

Saussure observed:

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to

make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.

And:

... the absolutely final law of language is ... that there is nothing which can ever reside in *one* term, as a direct consequence of the fact that linguistic symbols are unrelated to what they should designate.

Also:

The arbitrary nature of sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up. ...

Saussure also drew a distinction between a specific language (English, Hindi) and a particular sentence, text or speech in a particular language as individually employed by a user, as also between the language as a phenomenon to be identified (or studied) through its growth and development, historically speaking, and a body or system of language existing at any given point in time. Thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Noam Chomsky and Ronald Barthes contributed to structuralism by adding new dimensions to it. Lévi-Strauss, for instance believed that the way human beings interacted in society (the pattern of interaction or behaviour and other social structures (=institutions) depended on the modes of communication that they employed.

Based on his theory of language Saussure sought to develop a “general science of signs” (Semiology). While structuralism grew out of Saussure’s attempts to develop semiotics, it spread its wings far and sought to examine a wide variety of cultural phenomena. More than the “meaning” that Saussure sought to investigate through the opposites in his “general science of signs,” the structuralists were more interested in understanding the conventions that make it possible to arrive at “meaning,” the conditions that make it possible for a language—and therefore meaning—to arise in the first place, the communicative function of language. They sought to define, describe and understand the system rather than its individual manifestations. The desire to achieve this led Todorov to propose a general grammar or poetics of literature. What the structuralists, then, aimed at was the general principles as embodied in individual works. Form rather than content was given pride of place in this system. And a science of literature was sought to be developed. While a unified system was sought to be developed, texts were treated as manifestation of the system in operation. Works of literature were, thus, divorced from their socio-historical contexts. Structuralism, on the one hand sought to analyse a literary text, and on the other, developed itself as method of understanding the conditions of existence of literature (as a system) and a text (as manifestation of the system in operation).

Structuralism more or less put an end to the notion that literary studies had to exist in some kind of isolated vacuum even within the humanities. Literary studies were now for sure interdisciplinary in nature. Now there was a larger context to put a literary text in. But its supposed antihumanistic, overtly “scientific” attitude to the study of literature and an attempt to create a “science” of literary studies drew great hostility.

While structuralists looked for conditions that created meaning, and moved towards an understanding of phenomena to which they sought to impart coherence and order, (what Michel Foucault calls a “principle of unity”), the **deconstructive discourse**

wished to point to, not the source of completer, comprehensive meaningful pictures, but to the limits of the ability of discourse and understanding to impose such coherent patterns upon what apparently appeared as chaotic and formless. Deconstruction aims at examining and questioning self-evident truths, and registers its distrust of appropriating all new inexplicable phenomenon into structuralist models of meaningful order.

6.4 FEMINISM

There were, in fact, other pockets of dissatisfaction which led the questioning of the long accepted principles on which the citadel of literature and literary studies rested. Feminism was in the forefront of the demolition squad that sought to change the very texture of literature and literary studies. Endless expressions of the repressed and agonised clarion call for arms included Simone de Beauvoir's who wrote in her highly influential *The Second Sex* (1949):

... humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. . . . Woman lack concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. . . . The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatic Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but women cannot even dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressor is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. . . .

Simone de Beauvoir sought to analyse the social construction of the gender and drew attention to the distinction between gender and sex. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* focused on the oppression of women under the patriarchal social system and the stereotyping of women's rôle in it. The early feminists in the seventies for example sought to analyse the image of women in cultural representations such as literature. While the development of the feminist view-point developed in many directions, some of its manifestations were the result of uncritical hostility to the rising domination of women in various walks of society.

Let us look at the two widely familiar Indian novels and see how the principles of feminist discourse have been understood by their authors and what kind of application and treatment these principle receive in these two books. Feminism finds itself treated in them rather overtly and deliberately and in many ways rather simplicly. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the protagonist young Rukmani's reactions to the world around her are motivated by a recognition that life is for living and when the going gets tough the human mind must draw its strength from an unambiguous acceptance of the inescapable, and that the desire to escape is anathema. Not to break-up or destroy, but to persist and rebuild is what life is about. Not self-pity but self-esteem is what human existence must derive its sustenance from. Rukmani is endowed with an awareness of the possibilities of life. She sees value in living. For her the act of living is important; life is important. And therefore the question of woman's search for identity, meaning, alienation, or fulfilment in marriage within and without, must be part of the larger question of life and living.

Markandaya's strength lies in the fact that the female protagonist of her novel emerges as a character whose engagement with the inevitable conflicts of life and living do not take the form of vulgar dog-bite-dog situations so familiar from some of the more recent feminist fiction. One can illustrate this point from the other novels.

Shashi Deshpande's feminist heroine in her otherwise admirable and delightful novel, *That Long Silence*, experiences, as the blurb goes, "[d]ifferences with her husband, frustrations in their seventeen year old marriage, disappointment in her two teenage children, claustrophobia [sic] of her childhood." One of the episodes in which the female protagonist seeks to correct the imbalance of her marital life is as follows:

"The keys," he says, holding out his hand.

But the woman, ignoring that importunate hand—it becomes that as he continues to hold it out--takes some keys out of her bag and unlocks the door. Still ignoring him she enters the flat. He continues to stand there for a moment, the hand held out, it now looks like a supplicatory gesture, and then he abruptly follows her in, closing the door firmly behind him.

She goes on to justify her action:

We all do it is part of family life. Rahul refusing to have his bath before meals, Rati refusing to tell us who it was she was talking to on the phone, Appa crushing a raw onion and eating it with relish. . . .

Deshpande's female--*therefore* discontented, suffering, and oppressed--protagonist does not appear to struggle to find meaning, identity, or even escape from a context that she finds antagonistic. She only has contempt for human relationship. Her contempt for her husband who had "reconciled to failure" in life is motivated by her lack of understanding that to cushion an individual's failure is what a family is all about. She is too narcissistically self-centred to appreciate her contribution to a deteriorating relationship.

Thus even though the universe of *Nectar in a Sieve* is dominated by a protagonist who is a woman and in which the authorial focus is on a woman's interaction--even confrontation--with the world around her, that universe is not artificially narrow, not sequestered, nor an insular world inhabited by insular characters. In their anger to destroy the wrong that the world has done to woman, some of the feminists have tended to ignore the fact that women are and have to be, and inescapably so, part of the same universe. I have quoted Simone de Beauvoir's allusion to this point earlier.

A world-view conditioned by the necessity of its having to be a feminist world view distorts the nature of its objective. Rukmani, in Markandaya's novel, looks at the world around her through the eyes of a human being: for her--and for her creator--her being a woman remains incidental to her being a human being.

In *That Long Silence* woman's search for self, identity, and meaning so easily takes the form of low comedy that genuine, finer issues of life and living and are soon forgotten. What distinguishes Rukmani's character in her encounters with the facts of life is that Markandaya proposes to project not the crude encounters of a life of which one gets an inkling from Deshpande's award winning novel. Markandaya's heroine responds to the drama of life in its entirety. She treats life as one, as a whole in which man-woman relationship is only one aspect. Failure to appreciate that life is larger than love, even sex, even man-woman relationship, leads to an inadequate appreciation of the very nature and significance of human predicament.

Shashi Deshpande misjudges the import and significance of the feminist movement and thought. Elaine Showalter, one of the most influential feminist writer, thinker and intellectual, even as she drew attention to the heavy sexist bias in the male dominated liberal tradition, believed that ultimately there is one human nature; human nature encompassing both male and female human nature. There is, thus, a universal human nature. She treated literary tradition as a continuous, unbroken chain despite the feminist interruption of this tradition that the radical feminists sought to achieve. It is interesting that despite Showalter's attempt to chart the course of an alternative female literary tradition, and her belief that the female experience of life had something unique to offer, she was treated by more radical feminists as affirming the orthodox beliefs.

Showalter pointed out how feminist criticism can be divided into two categories: first type is concerned with women as reader: "consumer of male produced literature It probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history." The second kind of feminist criticism is concerned with women as writer: "Its subjects include psychodynamics of female creativity, linguistics and the problem of female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history and, of course, studies of particular writers or works. .

Along with Simone de Beauvoir another influential name was that of Virginia Woolf who in *A Room of One's Own* focused on the problems of the woman writer. She concluded that lack of "a room of one's own"—implying a lack of a certain kind of economic and social independence--meant that a woman's ambition in the area of literature remained constrained. The literary forms had developed—"hardened"—in such a manner that they were not suitable for women to deal with or work through.

What feminism does not do, therefore, is to hit back—do unto men what women have been done to: feminism as a movement is not an extended historical revenge play that Shashi Deshpande makes this ideology out to be.

Like the Marxists, the feminists were concerned with the wider social and cultural issues before turning to imaginative literature, and found much to be dissatisfied about. As we can thus see, feminism developed not merely as a movement in literature but developed in many directions. And one thing that they all had, and have, in common for sure was, and is, intensity.

Briefly, feminist literary critics were concerned with women's experience as presented in literature. They questioned the age-old dominant male phallogentric ideologies and male evaluation of literature to the latter's advantage to perpetuate the status quo. They questioned male notions of how women feel and think and act — and by implication are supposed to feel and think and act. In short male prejudice about women and the later stereotyping were attacked and questioned. Women had been politically exploited and suppressed and the balance could be righted by examining the socio-political issues and the political machinations behind these issues.

6.5 MARXISM

It is common knowledge that Marx and Engels chiefly concerned themselves with an appreciation of capitalist theory and mode of production and their primary interests

were political, economical and philosophical. An aesthetic of art, literature or culture was far from their minds, even though Marx always managed to say just the right thing about classical, traditional literatures. But the followers of Marxist thought who were concerned with literature, for instance, adapted "socialist" thought to put together a theory of literature. The Marxist critic therefore responds to a work of literature from the stand-point of Marx's political, economic and philosophical ideas. Class-struggle is uppermost in his mind and socio-historical and socio-economical factors shape the thought that is applied to a work of literature. As J. A. Cuddon points out: "... Socialist realism required a writer . . . to be committed to the working class cause of the Party. And it required that literature should be 'progressive' and should display a progressive outlook on society. This necessitated forms of optimism and realism. Moreover, literature should be accessible to masses. . . ." And: "Modernism in Western literature was deemed to be decadent . . . because it was, among other things, subjective, introverted and introspective and displayed a fragmented vision of the world." The focus of a Marxist critic, therefore, was on the content, rather than form and literary ingenuity was not valued.

6.6 PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Ever since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud has, so to say, dominated the minds of literary critics in more ways than one. The gains from the study and development of psychology as discipline were readily applied to literature. Literature was psychoanalysed for a variety of reasons. It allows for disconnected, syncopated structures and disparate apparently unconnected details in a narrative to be appreciated as part of pattern. Psychological criticism also allows us to read multiple interpretations of a work of art simultaneously. Recent reinvigorated interest in Psychological criticism emerges from its appropriation by feminists and deconstructionists, for example, to reach, and connect literary texts, with political power, female sexuality and the current complex attitudes to language.

6.7 NEW LITERARY THEORY AND HAMLET

How have these developments changed our response to Shakespeare?

Let us start with how the use of feminist political ideology and the resultant literary critical apparatus has influenced our reading of Shakespeare.

We must realize that when a literary ideology is the result of its having been borne out of a political or socio-political ferment, literary-critical responses are naturally conditioned by our appreciation of that ideology. The political agenda and the goal of the feminist ideology was — one has to unfortunately simplify such matters to be able to go any further at all — to fore-ground, to lay bare, what always lay hidden, the suppression of the female self. If the repression, the silence, and the denial of identity to a living human being by virtue of her gender has been the fate of women, the political ideology of the feminist movement was and is to expose, question and then compensate for the wrongs done to women. The literary splinter group of this movement seeks to examine literary texts with a view to performing a similar task: the exposition of the repression, the silence, and the denial of the identity to a living human being by virtue of her gender, as found in literary texts. Women want to be redefined and given true identities, not the identities men have chosen for them. Men make women their points of reference. Women should have the freedom to define themselves as individuals rather than as symbols to suit men's preconceived

notions of what women should stand for, become and contribute to a society that is determined thus, by the needs and desires defined by men. Literary texts in this context were treated as instruments of perpetuating the patriarchal ideologies.

We have had a brief look at how the feminist ideology as part of the literary critical movement as it developed and where it drew its sustenance from. Now we can turn to see how a text like *Hamlet* gains or suffers at the hands of a feminist ideologically committed critic.

One would not think Shakespeare would earn high marks at the hands of feminist ideologues considering how totally conventional – patriarchal – his depiction of, and the resultant inherent attitude to women are. A number of major feminist scholar critics have sought to examine women characters in *Hamlet* and have insisted on drawing inferences that have frequently been at variance with what can be called commonly accepted readings of those characters. There are a number of questions that the feminist critics have focussed on to create a variant, politically correct reading of Gertrude, for example. Rebecca Smith points out that the two major accusations against Gertrude, that she is involved in the murder of her husband, and that she had an adulterous relationship with her present husband even as her first husband was alive can be easily examined in her favour. And yet, Gertrude has always suffered at the hands of a tradition in which men wielded the pen that wrote their fate. Smith points out how the old kind *Hamlet's* Ghost makes no mention of Gertrude's involvement in his murder. He accuses Claudius of taking his life but not Gertrude. One could argue that the Ghost wants his son to avenge his murder but at the same time leave his one-time beloved wife to her conscience and her ill-conceived actions to the judgement of the fate. Again, Gertrude never admits to her guilt on account of her involvement in her husband's murder.

When she reacts to *Hamlet's* aggression—

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of innocent love
And sets the blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oath – O such a deed

(III.IV.40-45)

--her reaction—

Ay me, what act
That roars so loud and thunders in the index?

--underscores her innocence rather than anything else – certainly not any admission of guilt.

Rebecca Smith goes on to examine the second question, the one regarding Gertrude's adulterous behaviour. The Old King Hamlet's ghost describes her as "...so lust.../will sate itself in a celestial bed/And prey on garbage" (I.V.55-7) it would seem to imply that at least the Ghost considers her guilty of an extra-marital relationship. Even Bradley agrees with the ghost: "She did not merely marry a second time with indecent haste: she was false to her husband while he lived." Bradley also goes on to argue: "This is surely the most natural interpretation of the words of the ghost .. coming as they do before his account of the murder." (Shakespearean Tragedy)

Yet Smith would consider Gertrude totally innocent. All such reference to Gertrude's behaviour could refer to her over-hasty marriage rather to her having had an

adulterous relationship with her present husband. All the biting innendoes could be taken to mean that all those morally culpable actions took place after her second marriage. There is a sharp and pointed comparison made between her first and second marriage by the ghost. Also, seen through the eyes of Hamlet, whose father it is who is wronged, at least in the eyes of the son, she would be considered guilty even if she merely rejected her first husband by not mourning long enough for him .. *Hamlet* has numerous references to inadequate mourning: Not enough tears are shed for Ophelia, for Polonius, certainly not for old king *Hamlet*: "...a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourned much longer," (I.II.150-1) *Hamlet* regrets.

Smith insists that *Hamlet*'s pain is at the speed with which she married his uncle, disowning his father's name and memory and rejecting the life and time that she spent as his wife and queen.

Lisa Jardine in her analysis of Gertrude's character maintains that *Hamlet*'s anger stems from not the immoral haste with which she marries, but the fact that the haste implies lust and it is this that led Gertrude to hastily embrace a man who then became an obstacle between *Hamlet* and his ambition. After *Hamlet*--if he were to remain childless it is now the first-born of Claudius and Gertrude who will inherit the crown. Gertrude then should be viewed in the light of a theme of the play--certainly not one of the central themes of the play but rather on the relative periphery--in which she is portrayed as the target of much anger and aggression, much of which is made to sound moral, self-righteous, and 'well-deserved.'

As you would notice, an attempt to view Gertrude as a victim rather than a guilt-ridden, lustful, murderous woman can present itself as an alternative reading of the play in fully convincing and cogent terms.

6.8 LET US SUM UP

Similarly one can apply other critical approaches that we have briefly discussed above to the play to arrive at conclusions that are totally different from the ones we have studied so far. The post-colonial discourse, for instance, views *Hamlet* as a symbol of the colonial-imperial hegemony and how in a climate marked by new awareness, different cultures such as South Africa, for example, interpret *Hamlet* to suit their new aspirations, as we have discussed in Unit V. The Marxists, the structuralists, the deconstruction devotees, admirers of Freud and Lacan and many more in-between, have give myriad ways of looking at *Hamlet*. And there are other approaches that open up new vistas of thought and emotions leading to versions of *Hamlet* that are so different from each other as *Hamlet* is from *Waiting for Godot*. But does that matter, indeed? After all there is a sense in which *Hamlet* is no different from *Waiting for Godot*.

6.9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following critical works may be consulted in addition to the books and articles referred to in the body of the units.

- Bloom, Harold. Ed. *Major Literary Characters: Hamlet*, 1990.
 Donnawerth, Jane. *Shakespeare and the Sixteenth Century Study of Language*, 1984.
 Dusiinberre, Juliet. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 1975; 1995.

Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet" in *Selected Essays*, 1951.

Foakes, R. A. *Hamlet versus Lear*, 1993.

Michael Hattaway. "*Hamlet*": *The Critics' Debate*, 1987,

Maher, Mary Z. *Modern Hamlets and their Soliloquies*, 1992.

M.M. Mahood. *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, 1957.

Prosser, Eleanor. *Hamlet and Revenge*, 1967.

Shakespeare Survey 45: Hamlet and its Afterlife, 1992.

Gary Taylor. *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*, 1990.

Taylor, Neil. "The Films of Hamlet" in Davies and Wells, eds., *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: The Plays on Film and Television*, 1994.

Thompson, Ann and John O. Thompson. *Shakespeare, Meaning and Metaphor*, 1987.

Tillyard, E. M.W. *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, 1950.