

# The language of *Hamlet*

## Imagery – ‘the morn in russet mantle clad’

*Hamlet* abounds in **imagery**: vivid words and phrases that conjure up emotionally charged pictures or associations in the mind. When Hamlet thinks of how the First Player would perform if he had suffered such grief as Hamlet, he declares, ‘He would drown the stage with tears’. The image passionately conveys the depth of Hamlet’s feelings. Similarly, Polonius abruptly dismisses Hamlet’s ‘holy vows’ of his love to Ophelia as ‘springes to catch woodcocks’: merely traps to snare innocent and foolish birds.

Imagery carries powerful significance, far deeper than its surface meanings. Images enrich particular moments, as when Claudius agonises that his hand is stained with his brother’s blood: ‘Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow?’ Imagery repeatedly illuminates the themes of the play such as revenge or madness (as when Gertrude describes Hamlet as ‘Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend / Which is the mightier’).

Imagery stirs the audience’s imagination and deepens the impact of particular moments or moods. It provides insight into character, and intensifies meaning and emotional force. In *Hamlet* the imagery is sometimes so brilliantly complex that, although it can be analysed and understood, it defies any final ‘explanation’, as in Hamlet’s words:

*Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them.*

Act 3 Scene 1, lines 57–60

➤ All Shakespeare’s imagery uses metaphor, simile or personification. All are comparisons that in effect substitute one thing (the image) for another (the thing described).

A **simile** compares one thing to another using ‘like’ or ‘as’. Ophelia describes Hamlet’s derangement as ‘Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh’. The Ghost tells how the poison spread through his body ‘swift as quicksilver’.

A **metaphor** is also a comparison, suggesting that two dissimilar things are actually the same or have something in common. The distraught Hamlet speaks of his head as ‘this distracted globe’. He describes one play as ‘caviary to the general’ (caviar to ordinary people – too good for them). To put it another way, a metaphor borrows one word or phrase to express another.

**Personification** turns all types of things into persons, giving them human feelings or attributes. In the quotation from Act 3 Scene 1, ‘fortune’ is personified. The dying Hamlet memorably personifies death itself as a cruel officer of the law: ‘this fell sergeant death / Is strict in his arrest’.

Certain image clusters recur through the play, notably those of corruption and disease, the theatre and acting.

### Corruption and disease

In the play’s opening moments Francisco’s ‘I am sick at heart’ is the first indication of the many images of infection that pervade *Hamlet*. Marcellus declares that ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’. Hamlet is haunted by the corruption of his mother’s incest, seeing it as an infectious disease: ‘the ulcerous place / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen.’ Claudius thinks of Hamlet as a fever: ‘like the hectic in my blood he rages’. Hamlet describes Claudius as ‘a mildewed ear’ and as ‘this canker of our nature’. Watching Fortinbras’s army marching towards death, Hamlet reflects that ‘This is th’impostume [abscess] ... That inward breaks, and shows no cause without / Why the man dies’ (Act 4 Scene 4, lines 27–9). This final image refers to an inner problem, like the development of cancerous cells, that cause death without there being any visible signs of the disease.



### Theatre and acting

Page 250 describes how the language of theatre and acting recurs in the play: 'play', 'act', 'cue', 'prompted', 'mutes' and so on. Shakespeare's fascination with his own professional world is evident in *Hamlet*: the players, the play-within-a-play that reveals Claudius's guilt, the talk of the 'little eyases' (boy actors). In Hamlet's first appearance he uses 'actions', 'play' and 'show' as he angrily denies that his grief is reflected only in his outward appearance (Act 1 Scene 2, lines 84–5):

*For they are actions that a man might play,  
But I have that within which passes show –*

The notion of acting as a pretence that somehow convinces finds expression in Hamlet's amazement that an actor can weep for a fictional character: 'And all for nothing? / For Hecuba!'

Lastly, imagery is intimately and deeply connected with the themes in the play. In many ways, it operates to indicate the themes, as in the clusters of images mentioned immediately above – along with what the actors explicitly say and do (the plot). It points towards unconscious connections in the play, and the preoccupations of the characters who express their thoughts.

- ◆ Identify a dozen images in the play that especially appeal to you. Write an analysis of how they operate, both for immediate effect in the scene and in the play as a whole, reinforcing and complicating its themes.

### Antithesis

**Antithesis** is the opposition of words or phrases against each other, as in 'To be, or not to be', and 'I must be cruel only to be kind'. This setting of the word against the word ('To be' versus 'not to be', 'cruel' versus 'kind') is one of Shakespeare's favourite language devices. He uses it extensively in all his plays. Why? Because antithesis powerfully expresses conflict through its use of opposites, and conflict is the essence of all drama. In *Hamlet*, conflict occurs in many forms. Claudius versus Hamlet, revenge

versus justice, son versus mother; and dark shadows versus a more colourful presence (for example, in the acting troupe that visits Elsinore). Antithesis intensifies the sense of conflict and definition.

Claudius's many antitheses in his first speech (Act 1 Scene 2) suggest a man attempting to balance conflicting emotions and values as he tells of his marriage to Gertrude – for example, lines 11–13:

*With one auspicious and one dropping eye,  
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole*

For an Elizabethan audience the antithesis 'With one auspicious and one dropping eye' implied deviousness, because a contemporary proverb held that a false man looked up with one eye and down with the other. The other antitheses imply a similar two-facedness: someone who can simultaneously express joy and sorrow, or show an inappropriate emotion at a funeral or a marriage. In Act 3 Scene 1, lines 51–3, Claudius uses an image full of antitheses to acknowledge that a prostitute's use of make-up is similar to how he hypocritically conceals his evil deed behind a mask:

*The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,  
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it  
Than is my deed to my most painted word.*

Laertes's passionate desire for revenge on Hamlet ('To cut his throat i'th'church') is given additional emotional power by the opposition of the bloodiness of the action with the sanctity of the holy place. In the very last moments of the play (Act 5 Scene 2, lines 380–1), Fortinbras opposes the appropriateness of dead bodies on the battlefield ('field') with their inappropriateness in the court ('here'): 'Such a sight as this / Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.'

- ◆ Collect between ten and twenty examples of antithesis in the play script. Use them in an essay showing how antithesis helps create a sense of conflict and paradox in *Hamlet*.



## Verse and prose

Just under three quarters of the play is in verse, and just over one quarter in prose. How did Shakespeare decide whether to write in verse or prose? A rough rule of thumb is that aristocrats speak verse, and low-status and comic or mad characters speak prose. But context is very important. Thus the players (low status) speak verse in the Gonzago play to emphasise that they are playing aristocratic characters. Hamlet and Ophelia (high status) express madness in prose.

Verse was thought more suitable than prose to moments of high dramatic or emotional intensity. So 'serious' scenes are likely to be in verse, 'comic' episodes in prose. Hamlet uses prose with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Gravedigger and Osric. Hamlet's 'What a piece of work is a man' speech (Act 2 Scene 2, lines 286–91) is also in prose, but has all the qualities claimed for poetry.

Hamlet is written mainly in **blank verse**: unrhymed verse written in **iambic pentameter**. This is a rhythm, or **metre**, in which each line has five unstressed syllables (/) alternating with five stressed syllables (x) (often expressed as da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM), as in Act 3 Scene 2, line 196:

/ x / x / x / x / x  
But die thy thoughts when thy first lord is dead

By the time he wrote *Hamlet*, Shakespeare had become very flexible in his use of iambic pentameter. He often uses **enjambement** (running on), where one line flows on into the next, seemingly with little or no pause. Lines may have more or fewer than ten syllables.

- ◆ Choose a verse speech and speak it to emphasise the metre. Then speak it as if it were prose, then as you feel it should be delivered on stage. Finally, write eight lines of your own in any form of verse.
- ◆ Choose a passage of verse from the play and 'translate' it into prose. What is gained or lost in translation? How do the effects of each differ?

(See also the activities on pp. 92 and 184.) Why is this exercise not so satisfactory or useful if you are asked to convert prose to verse?

## Questions

*Hamlet* is full of questions. Barnardo's opening challenge 'Who's there?' sets the questioning tone that characterises the whole play. Virtually every character wishes to find out something. On almost every page questions are asked. Hamlet is often self-questioning.

- ◆ Turn to any page of the script. Identify the questions on that page, and check how many are answered. Repeat for several more pages. Decide which questions can be answered, and which cannot. Then make up a few questions of your own about the play. Try to answer them in a small group. Put any you cannot answer to the class as a whole – and to the teacher!

## Soliloquies

Hamlet is famous for his **soliloquies**. A soliloquy is a kind of internal debate spoken by a character who is alone on stage (or believes themselves to be alone). Soliloquies reveal the character's true thoughts and feelings. Hamlet's soliloquies, in parts, give the impression of a man discovering what he thinks as he speaks.

- ◆ Hamlet's soliloquies appear at the following points in the play:

- Act 1 Scene 2, lines 254–7
- Act 1 Scene 5, lines 92–112
- Act 2 Scene 2, lines 501–58
- Act 3 Scene 1, lines 56–90
- Act 3 Scene 3, lines 349–60
- Act 3 Scene 3, lines 73–96
- Act 4 Scene 4, lines 32–66

Select one and work out a dramatic presentation. You could share the lines around your group, and have several people echoing key lines or phrases. Try speaking it as a conversation, or to the audience.

or to a portrait of another character, or to a stage prop. Experiment with styles of delivery (for example, as an observer disgusted with the human condition, or as a bloodthirsty revenger).

- ◆ Divide the class into seven groups. Each group takes one soliloquy. First, in your groups, enlarge a copy of your text so that you can see the whole speech in one poster or banner. Annotate it with verbal commentary and with images. Have two of the group stand by the poster while the others in your group visit the other posters/banners and pose questions about the nature of the soliloquies.
- ◆ If you wish to explore the meaning differently and perhaps in more depth, perform a dialogic version of the soliloquy using more than one voice, and employing techniques such as choral presentation, question and answer, and emphasis of key words and phrases.

### Doubling language: a cause of delay?

All kinds of 'doubling' go on in *Hamlet*: the two sentries at the play's beginning; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Cornelius and Voltmand; two English ambassadors; two kingly brothers, Claudius and old Hamlet. Furthermore, Hamlet and Laertes are both students, sons, revengers and opponents.

Such doubling is strikingly reflected in the play's language. It appears in repetition of words and phrases: 'Tush tush', 'Speak, speak', 'this too too solid flesh', 'To be, or not to be' and so on. Polonius seems to say everything twice: 'You have me, have you not?' Most commonly the doubling is by means of the conjunction 'and'. When Laertes requests Claudius for permission to return to France, he uses 'leave and favour', 'thoughts and wishes', 'leave and pardon'.

*Hamlet* contains around 250 examples of such 'doublings'. In Act 3 Scene 1, lines 144–55, Ophelia's lines lamenting Hamlet's treatment of her ('Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!') includes doubling of single words

(observed/observers, quite/quite, seen/seen, see/see), together with six examples of doubles using 'and':

- expectancy and rose of the fair state
- glass of fashion and the mould of form
- deject and wretched
- noble and most sovereign reason
- out of time and harsh
- form and feature.

A special type of such doubling is known as **hendiadys** (pronounced hen-die-a-dees), a technical term meaning 'one through two'. Here, the two words express a single idea. They duplicate the sense rather than amplify or modify each other, as these few examples from the script show:

- food and diet
- grace and mercy
- spark and fire
- cheer and comfort
- lecture and advice
- flash and outbreak
- pith and marrow
- duty and obedience
- native and indued
- book and volume
- heat and flame
- strange or odd.

This tendency to use two words when one would be sufficient to convey meaning contributes to dramatic effect. It lengthens the play, adding to the sense of delay. In its suggestion of 'one through two' it echoes the play's concern with marriage and incest (the union of separate or like selves).

- ◆ Search through the play for examples of these 'doubling' devices. Talk together about their dramatic effect and how they provide insights into character and situation.



Dr Johnson, an eighteenth-century essayist, poet and Shakespeare critic, believed Hamlet's thoughts when he found Claudius at prayer 'too terrible to be read or uttered'. Johnson's view influenced productions for over 100 years. Hamlet's speech (Act 3 Scene 3, lines 73–96) was either cut in performance or interpreted as not expressing Hamlet's real intentions, but simply an excuse to procrastinate, to delay the action.

- ◆ Talk together about what you think of Dr Johnson's view in the preceding paragraph.
- ◆ Imagine you are Hamlet and write a paragraph about each of the following characters: Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius. Say whether you feel responsible for their death, whether each one deserved to die, and what you think will happen to each character after death.

## Acting and theatre – 'The play's the thing'

\* Hamlet richly displays Shakespeare's interest both in his own profession as actor and playwright, and in the London theatres at the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. *Hamlet* is an intensely theatrical play, with many references to playing and acting. Play-acting is part of a puzzle that obsesses Hamlet: the difference between appearance and reality, truth and falsehood. Hamlet uses a company of travelling players to perform a stage murder. The performance traps Claudius into revealing his guilty conscience: a fiction has discovered the 'truth' of the Ghost's story.

The play resonates with the language of theatre: 'play', 'act', 'show', 'perform', 'applaud', 'prologue', 'shape' (costume), 'part' and 'stage' (see p. 265). Hamlet's soliloquies are like those of an actor reflecting on the part he has to play.

He sees the players as 'the abstract and brief chronicles of the time', and the purpose of acting as holding 'the mirror up to nature'. For Hamlet, the function of drama is to portray the nature of society: 'to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (Act 3 Scene 2, lines 19–20).

On Hamlet's first appearance he denies he is playing a part: 'I know not seems.' His grief is real. But he puts on 'an antic disposition', and throughout the play muses (or rages) about deceptive appearance: 'Smiling, damned villain!' Other characters dissemble, most obviously Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put on an act of friendship, and even Ophelia is instructed to 'show' to enable her father and Claudius to eavesdrop on Hamlet.

The play is filled with highly dramatic scenes: the Ghost's five appearances; Hamlet's raging at Ophelia and Gertrude; the dumb-show; the fight in the grave. The final scene has abundant theatrical opportunities and references: the duel between Hamlet and Laertes; the many deaths, witnessed by 'mutes or audience to this act'; the entry of Fortinbras (preceded by 'March afar off, and shot within'); Horatio's 'give order that these bodies / High on a stage be placed to the view'; Fortinbras's order that 'four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage'; and the final stage direction: 'Exeunt marching, after the which a peal of ordnance are shot off'.

## The 'tragedians of the city'

Shakespeare's own company of players was sometimes forced to tour when plague closed the London theatres. The players' appearance at Elsinore echoes the experience of troupes of London actors as they toured the English provinces or Europe. On tour, they performed in the great halls of country houses or on makeshift stages in inn-yards or town squares.

Around the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, an acting company of boy players was enjoying great success in London. For a short time, these 'little eyases' (unfledged hawks) threatened the livelihood of some adult professional acting companies. The adult players were forced to tour because they could not attract London audiences. Hamlet's exchanges with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2 Scene 2, lines 295–333, are thought to be about these boy players and the 'war of the theatres' (see p. 84). There was a brief but intense rivalry between adult companies as their resident playwrights mocked each other in their plays ('much throwing about of brains').

The members of Shakespeare's acting company (The King's Men, originally The Lord Chamberlain's Men) worked together closely for over twenty years. They knew each other very well and may have contributed to Shakespeare's script. Because of his fascination with acting, Shakespeare may have put into *Hamlet* private jokes and theatrical references that would have amused his fellow players at the Globe Theatre on London's Bankside:

- 'you hear this fellow in the cellarage' (the space under the Globe stage?) Act 1 Scene 5, line 151
- 'this distracted globe' (the Globe Theatre? Hamlet's head? The world?) Act 1 Scene 5, line 97
- 'I did enact Julius Caesar' (the actor who played Polonius may well have created the title role in *Julius Caesar*, written by Shakespeare shortly before *Hamlet*.) Act 3 Scene 2, line 91
- 'this majestic roof fretted with golden / fire' (the sky, or the painted 'heavens' of the Globe's stage?) Act 2 Scene 2, lines 284–5
- 'thy face is valanced [bearded] since I saw thee last'; 'Pray God your voice ... be not cracked' (was Shakespeare joking at his fellow actor's changed appearance, and the thought that the boy actors who played the female parts would all too soon grow up?) Act 2 Scene 2, lines 386–90

- ◆ Collect quotations from the play about actors, acting or the theatre. Use them to write an essay (or written dialogue in question-and-answer form) in response to the following: '*Hamlet* is a tragedy dominated by the idea of the play. Discuss'.

## Further themes

In addition to the themes discussed above, ideas of confinement, responsibility and freedom, attitudes towards sex, and the nature of existence pervade the play.

**Confinement** manifests itself in terms of the prison-like nature of Denmark for Hamlet, who seems trapped and shackled by his presence there. He is back from university, and finds the transition to home difficult ('For your intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg / Is most retrograde to our desire', Act 1 Scene 2, lines 112–14) – particularly because his mother has married Claudius and the Ghost indicates that his father has been murdered. Some productions of the play emphasise Denmark's dark, prison-like nature and the sense that Hamlet has limited choice in his actions. His stature as prince of Denmark also constrains him.

**Responsibility and freedom** are closely related to Hamlet's position as prince. On the one hand, Hamlet has freedoms and privileges – he appears not to have to work or account for his time, and can afford to sink into melancholy with only gentle chiding from his mother ('Good Hamlet cast thy nighted colour off', Act 1 Scene 2, line 68). But at the same time, he has responsibilities weighing upon him as successor to the throne of Denmark. The sight of Fortinbras passing through the country with his army reminds Hamlet of his inaction and his need to put things right.



Around the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, an acting company of boy players was enjoying great success in London. For a short time, these 'little eyases' (unfledged hawks) threatened the livelihood of some adult professional acting companies. The adult players were forced to tour because they could not attract London audiences. Hamlet's exchanges with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2 Scene 2, lines 295–333, are thought to be about these boy players and the 'war of the theatres' (see p. 84). There was a brief but intense rivalry between adult companies as their resident playwrights mocked each other in their plays ('much throwing about of brains').

The members of Shakespeare's acting company (The King's Men, originally The Lord Chamberlain's Men) worked together closely for over twenty years. They knew each other very well and may have contributed to Shakespeare's script. Because of his fascination with acting, Shakespeare may have put into *Hamlet* private jokes and theatrical references that would have amused his fellow players at the Globe Theatre on London's Bankside:

- 'you hear this fellow in the cellarage' (the space under the Globe stage?) Act 1 Scene 5, line 151
- 'this distracted globe' (the Globe Theatre? Hamlet's head? The world?) Act 1 Scene 5, line 97
- 'I did enact Julius Caesar' (the actor who played Polonius may well have created the title role in *Julius Caesar*, written by Shakespeare shortly before *Hamlet*.) Act 3 Scene 2, line 91
- 'this majestic roof fretted with golden / fire' (the sky, or the painted 'heavens' of the Globe's stage?) Act 2 Scene 2, lines 284–5
- 'thy face is valanced [bearded] since I saw thee last'; 'Pray God your voice ... be not cracked' (was Shakespeare joking at his fellow actor's changed appearance, and the thought that the boy actors who played the female parts would all too soon grow up?) Act 2 Scene 2, lines 386–90

- ◆ Collect quotations from the play about actors, acting or the theatre. Use them to write an essay (or written dialogue in question-and-answer form) in response to the following: '*Hamlet* is a tragedy dominated by the idea of the play. Discuss'.

## Further themes

In addition to the themes discussed above, ideas of confinement, responsibility and freedom, attitudes towards sex, and the nature of existence pervade the play.

**Confinement** manifests itself in terms of the prison-like nature of Denmark for Hamlet, who seems trapped and shackled by his presence there. He is back from university, and finds the transition to home difficult ('For your intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg / Is most retrograde to our desire', Act 1 Scene 2, lines 112–14) – particularly because his mother has married Claudius and the Ghost indicates that his father has been murdered. Some productions of the play emphasise Denmark's dark, prison-like nature and the sense that Hamlet has limited choice in his actions. His stature as prince of Denmark also constrains him.

**Responsibility and freedom** are closely related to Hamlet's position as prince. On the one hand, Hamlet has freedoms and privileges – he appears not to have to work or account for his time, and can afford to sink into melancholy with only gentle chiding from his mother ('Good Hamlet cast thy nighted colour off', Act 1 Scene 2, line 68). But at the same time, he has responsibilities weighing upon him as successor to the throne of Denmark. The sight of Fortinbras passing through the country with his army reminds Hamlet of his inaction and his need to put things right.