

## HAMLET

Source: Shakespeare's Hamlet –

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### Introduction:

The origin of Drama- Mysteries – Miracles – Morality plays – Interludes – Drama Proper

Greek drama – Tragedy Greek Tragic hero highly placed & suffering disaster even death due to Destiny fate and strong outside forces that ruin a man – ruling or prevailing element.

Greek Comedy – Simple effort to show life and manners of the time and to caricature and poke fun at them

Imp Pt- No mixing of tragedy and comedy in the same play.

### Other Characteristics of Greek Drama –

- Little action but much dialogue and song
- Chorus – to summarize events or explain events that happened in the intervening days or years, but it failed to dispel unreality - Result – the concept of Unities.
- Aristotle – the unities – aim: to attain dramatic form completeness
  - a) The Unity of Time – The time duration of the action or story of a drama must not exceed one day.
  - b) The Unity of Place: The scene of the incidents of the drama must be constant characters cannot appear in different places.
  - c) The Unity of Action: There must be only one main story or plot, with no introduction of subordinate or minor plots.

### Divisions/stages of a play:

- 1) The Exposition: The opening/introduction –causes which lead up to the development of dramatic action.
- 2) The Rising Action: The causes in the Exposition lead the action to a situation / complication.
- 3) The Crisis or Climax: The highest point of the dramatic action the effect brought about by the causes in the Exposition.
- 4) The Falling Action: Where the interest is less intense and the ultimate result is foreseen.
- 5) The Close or Catastrophe: the final results are shown.

(In Shakespeare, the climax is not always in the centre of the drama; In Macbeth it comes much earlier, in Hamlet, later In Othello however it comes exactly at the centre)

Aristotle was concerned chiefly with form and construction (plot).

Shakespeare rather followed the ideal of creating life-like characters, who should reveal themselves in natural dialogue and action. (Characters)

The Unities were disregarded by Shakespeare and English dramatists to a great extent.

Shakespeare's plays have certainly a Greek atmosphere, because there is a sense of destiny of karma which must be worked out to its completion. We feel that the powers which affect the centre-figure are as personal and spiteful as the offended deity in a tragedy.

(\* Character becomes destiny in Shakespeare)

It is obvious that the action of Hamlet covers a long period, though it is not clearly defined. Hamlet has no "Secondary Plot" and there is but one action. The sole motive is Hamlet's obligation to avenge; any apparent departures from this, as his love for Ophelia, and the intrigue which leads to his being sent to England, are integral parts of the main story. If we consider the place-unity the action is all in Elsinore or in its immediate neighbourhood.

Shakespeare's dramatic career spans from 1588 to 1612 A.D.

1<sup>st</sup> Period 1588 to 1595

2<sup>nd</sup> Period 1595 to 1600

3<sup>rd</sup> Period 1601 to 1608

4<sup>th</sup> Period 1608 to 1612

Division according to Prof Dowden

### **First period (In the Workshop)**

#### **Comedy**

Love's Labour Lost

Comedy of Errors

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Midsummer Night's Dream

#### **Tragedy**

Titus Andronicus

Romeo and Juliet

#### **History**

Henry VI (Part I)

Henry VI (Part II)

Henry VI (Part III)

Richard III

Richard II

### **Second Period (In the World)**

#### **Comedy**

The Merchant of Venice

Much Ado about Nothing

As You Like It

Taming of the Shrew

Merry wives of Windsor

Twelfth Night

#### **Tragedy**

#### **History**

King John

Henry IV (Part II)

Henry IV (Part I)

Henry V

**Third Period (Out of the Depths)****Comedy**

All's Well that Ends Well  
Troilus and Cressida  
Measure for Measure

**Tragedy**

Julius Caesar  
Hamlet  
Othello  
King Lear  
Macbeth  
Timon of Athens  
Cariolanus  
Antony and Cleopatra

**History****Fourth Period (On the Hights)****Romantic Dramas**

Pericles, Prince of Tyre  
Cymbeline  
Winter's Tale  
The Tempest

**Histories**

Henry VIII

The early plays of Shakespeare are marked with frequent use of rhymed couplets and ten-syllable lines. This made the lines monotonous. Soon Shakespeare replaced rhymed verse with blank verse but the lines ended with some punctuation mark and making the verse still a monotonous due to use of end stopped lines. With passing of time Shakespeare started using "run-on" lines instead of end-stopped lines. This helped overcome the monotony of the blank verse used by him. He also started varying the number of syllables in the lines to break the monotony of iambic pentameter lines. In later plays Shakespeare tried to avoid artificial diction by using irregular verse and prose making the dialogue less like formal poetry and more like natural talk of daily life. In real life people do not speak verse at all, although sometimes under stress of emotion their speech may attain a rhythmic quality. As Shakespeare gained both in dramatic skill and in mastery of rhythm, he came more and more to vary the blank verse line; instead of counting and emphasizing the beats he harmonised the rhythm with the natural rhythm of human speech. In scenes full of emotion and tension, he used blank verse and for speeches of clowns, minor characters or scenes where the tragic tension is less, he shifted to use of prose and commonplace talk. Thus, by using ordinary prose for ordinary situations and high poetry for loaded situations, Shakespeare beautifully managed to do away with the monotony of language.

An important feature of Shakespeare's dramatic art is his use of soliloquies. Soliloquies imply a character speaking alone with no other character on the stage. Through soliloquies the characters reveal the working of their minds or else communicate events and things not perfectly known to the audience. Hamlet indulges in long and moralizing soliloquies. In modern plays however, preference is given to dialogue and action as part of character development. A character is delineated or developed through 1) his action 2) his words 3) estimation of his character by others and 4) his own views about himself-soliloquies some critics object to the use of soliloquies, especially such long soliloquies as being unnatural i.e. not seen in reality. But many of the soliloquies and asides in Shakespeare's plays can hardly be called soliloquies in the true sense. They rather qualify as

monologues and were often addressed or meant for the groundlings that surrounded the stage on three sides. It should however be noted that soliloquies play an important role in Shakespeare's plays. Apart from Hamlet, the soliloquies of Iago in Othello play a very significant role in the character delineation; his motive hunting or ultimately motiveless malignancy and also his confession that he is not what he seems. Such vital inputs are often provided by the soliloquies. Shakespeare's soliloquies are in way precedents to the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning which are psychological studies, the subject being caught in pouring out his inner mind in a moment of self-revelation. Shakespeare moreover uses the soliloquies in the tragic plays wherein we find abnormal characters in abnormal environments and circumstances. The complexity of his characters called for the use of soliloquies. In case of such characters who are not likely to reveal the inner workings of their minds even the most intimate of their friends, and still, when the author wants us to get as full a picture as possible, soliloquy becomes the best tool for it. Soliloquies are in fact confessions of the characters.

Horatio is a tried and trusted friend of Hamlet but he fails to become the confidant of the Prince. There is a sharp and tense conflict being waged within Hamlet's little state of self, and no friend is intimate enough to receive confession of Hamlet's deep feeling of moral cowardice and self-contempt. Hamlet is a tragedy of man's soul, rather than a tragedy of action. The abnormality of the prince is revealed more in his soliloquies, because it cannot be imparted in dialogue.

#### **The Date of Composition and Publication of Hamlet**

Shakespeare never mentioned the date of composition for any of his plays. The date therefore is approximate, based upon internal and external evidences.

The first reference to Hamlet appears in the Stationer's Register as July 1602, when the Lord Chamberlaine's servants enacted "The Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark". So it must have been written before 1602. But it does not find any mention in Francis Meres' book *Palladis Tamia* of 1598 which mentions other earlier plays of Shakespeare. So the date of composition can be taken to be between 1598 and 1602 but nearer to 1602. Among internal evidences, the most prominent is a reference to the formation of a company of young boy actors that had become very popular with the London Public and started performing at the Blackfriars theatre from about 1600. It has adversely affected the response received by the older companies, including Shakespeare's. The said reference appears in a conversation between Hamlet and Rosencrantz in Act II, Sc II. As Shakespeare's company was on tour all through 1601, the play must have been written around 1601. Moreover, there is a lot of parallelism between Hamlet and Julius Caesar (Which was written in 1600). Both the plays deal with the internal conflict in the mind of the protagonist. The use of ghost in the plays is common. The over philosophic and idealistic nature of Hamlet is to some extent, the same fault that is displayed by Brutus. In view of the thought and handling it appears that Hamlet was written in 1601 soon after Julius Caesar (1600).

#### **The Sources of the Play**

The source of Hamlet is believed to be taken from *Historia Danica* (i.e. History of Denmark) the work of a Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus (which means "Saxo the learned"). It was written about 1200. The story of Hamlet appears in it. Here, the hero's name is Amleth. However, as usual, Shakespeare has altered the story to suit his purpose. It is a story of utter

revenge and full of violence. Wherein Amleth succeeds ultimately in killing his treacherous uncle and becomes king and latter dies in a battle.

In 1570 Belleforest translated Saxo's story in French and included it in a book with other historical tragedies. Before Shakespeare, Kyd, one of the dramatists among the University wits is believed to have written a play on the story of Amleth, according to Nashe. The play is however, lost. It may well be expected that if Kyd had recreated the story in English, it is sure to have lot of external, physical violence as he was known to have written revenge/ horror tragedies in the Senecan tradition. However, Shakespeare has completely transformed these models and turned to an immortal play. To Kyd's version he has added the supernatural element as there is no mention of the ghost of Hamlet's father. Moreover the introduction of the "Play within the Play" to entrap the conscience of the usurping uncle is also Shakespeare's own. He has also added several other characters to the play. It is these additions by Shakespeare that have transformed a simple revenge tragedy into a classic.

In the source play there is just a mention that Amleth suspects a spy behind the arras and plunges in his sword to kill him. Shakespeare introduces engrossing dialogue in the scene and there is also the scathing denunciation by Hamlet of his mother Gertrude's sin. Shakespeare has used the incident to vent moral philosophizing. In the source Claudius uses a common harlot in order to tempt Amleth and ascertain if he is really mad. Shakespeare has taken the opportunity to introduce the sad and pathos-compelling figure of Ophelia. He loved the beautiful Ophelia but the mental turmoil in him makes him to speak very harshly to Ophelia.

(Some critics are of the opinion that the bitter mood of self-contempt and disgust with abused sex and human vice in some of Shakespeare's plays notably Hamlet, King Lear, Love's Labour Lost, Timon of Athens and to a certain extent even Othello) came after his burning experience with the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. By making the protagonists lash out against adultery and sexual vice, when it had no bearing on the play, critics believe, Shakespeare gave an outlet to the bitter disgust in his mind.

### **Shakespeare's Conception of Tragedy**

Shakespeare's four great tragedies deal with the downfall of the central figure. In the other three tragedies there is at least one character who takes some of the interest, like Iago in Othello, Lady Macbeth in Macbeth and Cordelia in King Lear. But in Hamlet, the entire play revolves round the main character. All the four plays have an atmosphere of Destiny of powerful forces which the characters cannot resist. But they differ significantly in one respect from the Greek tragedy, where the hero is a helpless victim of Destiny. The tragic heroes of Shakespearean tragedies are not blameless, puppets in the hands of Destiny, but each suffers from a flaw or weakness in character that brings about his downfall. Shakespearean tragic heroes are given a chance, a choice but invariably make the wrong choice and as a result see their misfortune and downfall. We can therefore conclude that if characters are destined in Greek tragedy, character becomes destiny in case of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are noble and high placed (like Greek tragedy). Each has a special weakness, and in each it is this weakness which is fatal in the circumstances which surround them. It is probably this feature, a commanding character in the grip of Destiny that made Shakespeare take up the old Danish story of Amleth. (He had by then mastered the

comedy). From 1600 onwards, he was on the look-out for plots with this theme. He found them in the four great tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Shakespeare's conception of a tragic hero is that of a great man in the grip of a remorseless destiny which is strong enough to destroy him.