



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets

with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 6: Hamlet

Outline:

Hamlet

- Act I, Scene I
 - What's the atmosphere of Act I, Scene I? There is mystery, terror, and a vague sense of impending doom.
- Act I, Scene II
 - The title character is the most interesting in the entire play.
 - Hamlet is frustrated with the new king and queen.
 - Hamlet is an idealist. He detests hypocrisy.
 - He is a noble soul. He can't handle the messiness of the world. This causes him to put things in fairly extreme terms.
 - He's saying he won't commit suicide, although he would like to. Does this imply piety, respect for God?
- Act I, Scene III
 - Have the students trace Laertes' argument to Ophelia.
 - Ophelia has a naturally submissive character.
 - How often does Hamlet consider what is needed for the state of Denmark (not often)? He is fixated on large and cosmic questions.
 - It might be that you are born with a defect, or it might be by some habit that you've allowed yourself to be habituated to imperfect activity.
 - Hamlet's mind is very shaped by Christian concepts. The honor code is more on the pagan side.
 - Is it true that you're almost a perfect human being, and you make one mistake, and that is all that anyone talks about?
- Act I, Scene IV
 - Hamlet says that if his body is destroyed, this isn't even of interest to me.
 - My soul cannot be killed.
 - Taking care of the physical realm is probably not worth it.
 - Are we supposed to see this as a kind of nobility? Is it a kind of courage?
 - Aristotle says that courage is valuing something and still risking it. Hamlet is saying that he doesn't even value his life.
- Act I, Scene V



- He is told by the ghost not to get worked up against his mother.
- Hamlet takes it that the universe is disjointed. It is on Hamlet to fix the universe.
- Should Hamlet believe the ghost? Is the ghost a demonic trick?
- Revenge is for yourself versus killing in defense of the state.
- Act II, Scene II
 - Read some dialogue out loud. There is sarcasm, sharpness, and wit from Hamlet.
 - One of the cardinal points of stoicism is whether you are happy or not happy is not about your external circumstances. It is all about your disposition.
 - “Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”
 - Is that a statement of relativism?
 - Is he saying there is no truth to what is good or bad? Right or wrong? Does it just depend on what we decide is true?
 - He is saying that your thoughts and attitude can shape whether you are happy.
 - The scene with the players:
 - Hamlet fixates on the question of why he doesn't show more emotion.
 - Hamlet wonders what is within me that is missing. It's not me, but I am looking for an external source, a God, to push me to complete the act.
 - Hamlet interprets any ambivalence to cowardice. Why is calling himself a coward? What kind of person accuses himself of cowardice?
- Act III, Scene I
 - What is the actual argument of the speech? He wishes he could kill himself.
 - This reflects Catholic Protestant disputes about the nature of divine will (Luther and Erasmus on free will).
 - It is Calvinist to think that the will is inscrutable.
 - The Catholic side is that God is working in a way that is consummate with reason even as human being can access it.
 - Hamlet has a revulsion for physical reality. He despises all seeming, hypocrisy. Artifice is the enemy.
- Act III, Scene II
 - Hamlet talks about fortune a lot.
 - Hamlet would like himself to be the perfect stoic. Desires are irrelevant to you.
 - Isn't Hamlet disturbed by sexual sin? This is not playful in a happy sense.
- Act III, Scene III
 - Claudius is praying. He wants to connect with God. He doesn't want to be evil but he wants the crown.



- The classical definition of tyranny is that you are controlled by parts of yourself, your baser desires are always controlling your decisions.
- Hamlet fixates on the cosmic. What does it mean metaphysically if I kill him? I will play the role of God (divine prerogative).
- Act III, Scene IV
 - Hamlet kills Polonius. He thinks he kills Claudius.
 - He is fixating on the loyalty to his father (filial piety), and the sexual betrayal of his father. This is more repulsive to him than the murder.
- Act IV, Scene III
 - Everything ends up in the same dark place (king or peasant). The hierarchy doesn't matter.
- Act IV, Scene IV
 - Why haven't I killed him yet? It must be some cowardice.
 - Hamlet is very taken with the pagan honor code. He is caught between a pagan ethic and Christian ethics. He is caught between these worlds.
- Act V, Scene I
 - This is the graveyard scene.
 - Hamlet asks what is wrong with Horatio's response of singing in the graveyard. Hamlet is highly theoretical and it removes him from the more concrete aspects of reality.
 - Hamlet is very aware of hierarchy. It doesn't mean that he is happy with the particular implications of the order, but he does respect it.
 - There is a highly theatrical and bizarre competition between Hamlet and Laertes.
 - There is a notion of making your behavior prove how you are.
 - Seeming is what it is.
- Act V, Scene II
 - Ask Hamlet: Is there an ethic in this? Is there something morally true about this?
 - This scene is fusing the pagan ethic with Christian terminology. This is revelatory of the confusion in Hamlet's mind.
 - Saint Augustine, "Pray as if everything depends upon God, and act as if everything depends upon you."
 - Hamlet seems to be saying that God is in charge.
 - Is this faith? Is this piety?
 - Is he being imprudent here? He seems to be walking to his death.
 - Hamlet is operating in the vein of fatalism.
- Closing comments
 - Hamlet argues with Horatio to not follow him in death (Hamlet's interest in honor).
 - Hamlet elects Fortinbras to lead Denmark. Why?