

AP English Notes November 22, 2004

Major Test on Hamlet tomorrow, November 23.

Act 5: Scene 2

Claudius orders his attendants to bring him a cask of wine. He then announces that if Hamlet is able to score a hit in the first, second or third exchange then he will drink some wine and drop a pearl of exceptional value into the cup for Hamlet. Claudius then drinks to Hamlet as a salute for good luck and orders them to begin.

Hamlet and Laertes fight until Hamlet shouts, "One" (5.2.220). Laertes disputes the hit and Osric decides in favor of Hamlet. Claudius halts the match and drops a pearl into his wine cup. He then offers the cup to Hamlet, who refuses to take it and tells him that he would rather continue the match. They fight and Hamlet again claims a hit that Laertes grants him. Gertrude takes the cup with the pearl in it and offers to drink for Hamlet. Claudius begs her not to, but she ignores him and drinks anyway, thereby ingesting the poison that Claudius had planned to give to Hamlet.

Laertes meanwhile has poisoned his rapier's tip and in the next scuffle he manages to wound Hamlet. They continue fighting and Hamlet accidentally exchanges rapiers with Laertes after which he wounds him as well. Both men stop fighting when they realize that Gertrude has fallen onto the ground. She tells Hamlet, "The drink, the drink - I am poisoned" (5.2.253) before she dies. Laertes also falls to the ground from the poison he received when Hamlet wounded him. He tells Hamlet that both of them are poisoned to death and blames the king for everything.

Hamlet, realizing that the point of the rapier is envenomed, slashes at Claudius and wounds him with it. The courtiers cry out, "Treason, treason!" (5.2.265), but they cannot stop Hamlet who has also grabbed the poisoned wine and is making Claudius drink it. Claudius quickly dies from the poison. Laertes, still barely alive, tells Hamlet that he forgives him for Polonius' death before he too dies.

Hamlet orders Horatio to stay alive and report everything he knows to the public. Horatio instead has grabbed the cup and is preparing to commit suicide, but at Hamlet's plea he relinquishes the poison. Osric enters the room and tells them that Fortinbras has arrived with his army. Hamlet gives Fortinbras his vote to become the next King of Denmark before he dies.

Fortinbras and the English ambassadors arrive together. Fortinbras looks over the scene of carnage and compares it to a massacre. The Englishmen inform Horatio that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been put to death. Horatio takes charge and tells Fortinbras and the ambassadors to put the bodies on a stage in view of the public so that he may tell the full story of what has happened. Fortinbras agrees with this and orders his men to obey Horatio. He compares the scene to a battlefield and ends the play by ordering the soldiers to shoot their guns in honor of Hamlet's death.

Analysis of Act Five

This act marks a move to action, evidenced by the lack of soliloquies and the decisive murder of all four main characters. Hamlet's language likewise undergoes a shift to active verbs only. For example, when Hamlet searches for the letters from Claudius to the King of England, he says, "In the dark, / Groped I to find out them, had my desire, / Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew / To mine own room again, making so bold, / My fears forgetting manners, to unseal / Their grand commission" (5.2.14-19). Thus Hamlet has now reached the same level as Fortinbras in that he is able to attack Claudius or alternately defend himself from Laertes.

The gravediggers, or clowns, are the only characters who finally disabuse language of its political double meaning. The First Clown in particular takes every word literally, forcing Hamlet to say exactly what he means. He further coherently evaluates the use of the word "act", saying, "if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act; and an act hath three branches: it is to act, to do, and to perform" (5.1.10-11). This raises the question of why Hamlet fails to act before this scene. After all, he has acted, he knows what he needs to do, but he is unable to perform the final action needed to kill Claudius.

This scene also marks a return to material death in contrast with the ghost. Hamlet confronts death directly rather than metaphysically when he handles Yorick's skull and holds it in his hand. For the first time, the skull is material, it is not a ghost, and it reveals the true person underneath without any makeup or lies. Thus, just as the gravedigger

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strips language to its essential meaning and speaks the truth without realizing it, Hamlet is able to strip the murder of his father to its brutal meaning. Hamlet finally learns to act at this point, and he shows his change by assuming his father's name for the first time, using a description that denotes the King of Denmark, "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.241-242).

However, even though Hamlet assumes the title of the King of Denmark later, he actually starts to act like the king on his voyage to England. He uses his signet ring to mark the letters that he falsifies when he has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put to death. "I had my father's signet in my purse, / Which was the model of the Danish seal; / Folded the writ up in the form of th'other, / Subscribed it, gave't th'impression, placed it safely" (5.2.50-53). Thus Hamlet is growing more powerful and more kinglike even before he sees the skulls.

The choice of weapons again marks the distinct break from the past that Claudius represents when contrasted with Old Hamlet. Hamlet and Laertes use rapiers in a fencing match. These are new weapons for revenge, not the old armor of Old Hamlet. They also are weapons of sport, not war, showing how politics has become a game rather than a bloodbath. It is interesting to note the parallel between this murder scene and the final scene of **Romeo and Juliet**, which also ends with a dagger and a poisoned cup.

There is strong foreshadowing during the burial of Ophelia. Laertes leaps into her grave, thereby sealing his own death. Hamlet follows, also foreshadowing his death following that of Laertes.

Only in the final scene does Hamlet speak directly to us, not just himself or Horatio. "You that look pale and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes or audience to this act...Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (5.2.276-77,281-82). Thus he asks the audience to make sure his story is told correctly. The reason is because only we can testify properly, since only we have heard the soliloquies. The injunction to tell the story is how humans make tragedy bearable, and it also serves to bring the play full circle, from the tragedy of Old Hamlet ordering Hamlet to "remember me" to the new Hamlet asking Horatio "To tell my story" (5.2.291). This is an order to replay the play.

Fortinbras recognizes Hamlet as the hero in the end, "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royally" (5.2.340-42). Indeed, Hamlet does all the criteria of a tragic hero by the time Fortinbras arrives. In the final scene he is a man of action who is killed by circumstances rather than any direct fault of his own. The debate over whether Hamlet is a hero depends heavily on how much weight is placed on the final act versus the play as a whole. It is difficult to call Hamlet a hero based on his actions during the beginning and middle of the play, where his madness seems to be a form of escape from action rather than a way to defeat Claudius.