



Corruption
(Disease/Unease)

HAMLET



Corruption –*noun*

1. the act of corrupting or state of being corrupt.
2. moral perversion; depravity.
3. perversion of integrity.
4. corrupt or dishonest proceedings.
5. bribery.
6. debasement or alteration, as of language or a text.
7. a debased form of a word.
8. putrefactive decay; rottenness.
9. any corrupting influence or agency.

Have a look at the definitions above.
In 'Hamlet' which characters or actions fit
definitions: 2,3,4,5 &8?

Clearly, there are different types of corruption:

- Social Corruption;
- Religious/Moral Corruption and
- Political Corruption.

Act 1 Scene 1 – Introduction of corruption/disorder/unease

- Significant areas – *'Who's there?'* – Lack of trust – insecurity
- *'It is bitter cold and I am sick at heart'* – ill health/disease
- The very fact that it is set at night
- The ghost – *'This bodes some strange eruption to our state.'*
- The talk of war

All these things suggest that there is disorder in Elsinore.

Corruption has begun before the very start of the play.

- Political corruption – the killing of the king – is told to us through the exposition:

*My father's spirit---in arms? all is not well-- /
I doubt some **foul play**; would the night were
come!*

*Till then sit still, my soul: **foul deeds will rise**,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's
eyes. (Act1 scene 2 254-257)*

Claudius – The Source of Corruption?

- Moral corruption – incest (adultery?)
- Political corruption – Elizabethan audiences would have been aware of the ‘divine right of kings’ – this idea would suggest that Hamlet would have automatically become king – Therefore it is possible that Claudius could be seen as a usurper. However, Hamlet does tell us that Claudius ‘popped in between th’election and my hopes’(Act 5)

*‘Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon--
He that hath **kill'd** my king and **whored** my mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage--is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this **canker of our nature** come
In further evil?’ (Act 5)*

Act 1 Sc 2 - Hamlet's First Soliloquy

Look at his feelings of frustration and disillusionment:

Look at the language used:

- How does this opening reference to 'self-slaughter' convey Hamlet's mood?
- Find examples of language with negative connotations.
- How does Shakespeare use the metaphor of a garden here?
- What are his views on women and his mother's marriage?
- What does the image of a 'satyr' convey about Claudius?
- 'an unweeded garden that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely'.

Act 1 Scene 4

- (start of the scene) – Returns to cold atmosphere. Includes Hamlet's comments on the custom of drinking, and the effect this has on men.

Ay, marry, is't:

But to my mind, though I am native here

And to the manner born, it is a custom

More honour'd in the breach than the observance.

This heavy-headed revel east and west

Makes us traduced and tax'd of other nations:

They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase

Soil our addition; and indeed it takes

From our achievements...,

...the stamp of one defect,

Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,--

Their virtues else--be they as pure as grace,

As infinite as man may undergo--

Shall in the general censure take corruption

From that particular fault: the dram of eale

Doth all the noble substance of a doubt

To his own scandal.

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." *Marcellus 1.4.67*

The Ghost

- Suggestion of purgatory – dying in sin - images of the serpent
- The suggestion that poison could be a metaphor for corruption – poisoning the ear of Denmark – in fact, apart from Polonius and Ophelia, all the characters are killed by poison.

The King = The State

*A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death*

*Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,
The **serpent** that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.*

*Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The **leperous distilment**;*

Hamlet's Murder of Polonius

Hamlet's murder of Polonius does itself generate more corruption. It leads to:

- Ophelia's suicide (an unforgivable sin in the eyes of the church) and
- Leartes' need for revenge.

Suicide

- Think about the other references to suicide in the play – Hamlet's soliloquies.
- He mentions God the first time he talks about suicide but not the second time. Could there be a reason for this?
- Is he losing faith?
- Is his soul being corrupted by everything?

Act 3

Ophelia and Hamlet

- Look at the references to corrupt and diseased images in the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy and the
- 'get thee to a nunnery' speech. – eg 'breed of sinners'./"God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another".
- Look at Hamlet's language towards her at the play.

Ophelia – passive victim?

- How is she presented as a victim of corruption in the court? Look at the following scenes:
- Act 1 scene 3 / Act 2 scene 2 / Act 3 scene 1 / Act 3 scene 2
- Hamlet's disillusionment causes him to reject her and kill her father. This leads to her death in ACT 4.

Claudius – Act 3 Scene 3

1. Why does he mistrust Hamlet?
2. How does he plan to deal with him?
3. "*Never alone / Did the King sigh but with a general groan*" - what is the meaning of this line? How might this be ironic in the light of the effect of his crime upon Elsinore?
4. Why does his crime have the "*primal eldest curse upon't*"?
5. What might he mean when he says that he stands "*in pause*"?
6. What reasons does he give for wanting to "*look up*" and pray?
7. Why is he unable to pray, however?
8. Where and how do questions and exclamations convey his mood?
9. What effect does the imagery have at the end of his speech?
10. Claudius's final couplet: what might Shakespeare be suggesting about the true nature of Claudius' character?

Act 3 Scene 4

- Look at Hamlet's view of his mother. Are there links here with the corruption in the court?

The Corruption of Hamlet

The ghost asks Hamlet to take revenge – thereby corrupting Hamlet by setting him the task of murdering another.

Hamlet himself questions this in his soliloquy of at the end of Act 2 scene 2 (*the spirit I have seen may be a devil*).

Madness = disease of the mind

Hamlet's decision to act mad is him practicing deception.

Connection between

- madness/diseased mind
- Elsinore/diseased place

Polonius

A most corrupt character – and interestingly the first to die.

Link death with the idea of punishment for corruption? All the corrupted characters die (many by poison)

- Polonius – He dominates both of his children giving orders to Laertes and being abusive to his daughter:

Act 1 Scene 3

*Affection! pooh! you speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them
I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,
Have you so slander any moments leisure,
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to't, I charge you: come your ways.*

Polonius The Spy

- We see him organising a spy to watch over Learthes in France.
- He uses his own daughter to help catch Hamlet.
- He, himself spies on H&G
- He constantly schemes and plots:

Think of the occasions where Polonius is 'in the thick of it'.

How many examples of spying are there? How to they add to the corruption?

Hamlet's Disillusionment

- One of the lines that runs throughout the play and through the character of Hamlet is his feelings about humanity.
- He understands how great men can be.
- However, all around him corruption and disease spread, and he is aware of man's weaknesses.

Hamlet's Disillusionment - His Father

'Hyperion' - images of a godlike man in his first soliloquy.

However, later he says to Horatio:

*'He was a man, take him for all in all
I shall not look upon his like again'.*

Hamlet's Disillusionment

-About the Nature of Man 2 Sc 2 (to R&G)

*What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason!
how infinite in faculty! in form, in
moving, how express and admirable! in action how like
an angel! in apprehension how
like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of
animals! And yet, to me, what is this
quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor
woman neither, though, by your
smiling, you seem to say so.*

Hamlet's Disillusionment

- Look at his soliloquies. Look again at Hamlet's comments about the behaviour of the king's court.
- Hamlet is slowly corrupted. He says himself that his 'wit's diseased' Act 3 Sc 2

Hamlet as Victim/Tragic hero

In keeping with the tragic structure of Shakespeare's play, the protagonist's fall is that much more sympathetic because he is a person of high estate or noble character.

Our protagonist is infected with the disease of corruption and, as with the other characters, must die as a punishment for this.

Unlike the other characters though, the final words spoken **about** Hamlet remind us that he **was a victim of this corruption.**

Hamlet as Tragic Hero

- "Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (Act 5 scene 2.302-3)
- 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 (Act 5 scene 2)

Resolution

- The two characters who do not succumb to the corruption in Elsinore survive – Horatio and Fortinbras.
- The elements which drew the corruption and disease into the nation have been dispelled.

Diagram

- Can you draw a diagram showing the sources of corruption?
- Indicate who is corrupted by whom.
- Indicate how this is done.
- Add quotes.

Task

- Choose a play which has a theme of revenge or corruption or sacrifice.
- Show how the dramatist explores your chosen theme and discuss how this treatment enhances your appreciation of the play as a whole.

Answer the **WHOLE** question from the *Introduction* right through

- Title and playwright.
- Reuse words from the task.
 - 1 *Show how the dramatist explores the theme.*
 - 2 *Discuss how it enhances your appreciation of the play as a whole.*
- Mention techniques such as soliloquy, dialogue structure (structure of tragedy) ...

Possible points to consider

- T.S. - Atmosphere of disorder/unease from opening. (Dark, ghost, sick at heart etc.)
- T.S. Source of corruption – The character and actions of Claudius (notice his language in lii and soliloquy 3iii)
- T.S. Corruption of Hamlet (Sullied? Revulsion re. Gertrude/women/Ophelia; murders, disillusionment... You must look at the soliloquies.)
- T.S. 'Purging' of Denmark Resolution

Conclusion

- Refer back to the task and your introduction
- End strongly

P.S.

- I think Hamlet's problem is how to accept the reality of his situation regarding the corruption around him while still keeping his integrity.
- Revenge – justice or murder? (like Laertes?)
- Do nothing – remain passive? Accept the murder of his father? (Ophelia)
- Suicide – what happens afterwards – hell?
- (But I could be wrong.)