

Task: Choose a play in which the deterioration of a marriage or relationship is important.

Show how the dramatist presents the deterioration and why it is, in your opinion, important to the play as a whole.

References to the relationship are in orange.

Techniques mentioned in green.

References to the importance to the rest of the play are in blue.

Quotes are in plum.

If the colours make it difficult to follow then just get rid of them!

In the tragedy, 'Hamlet' by William Shakespeare, the deteriorating relationship between the eponymous hero and his mother, Gertrude, is vitally important to the action of the play. Shakespeare's use of structure and language - particularly word choice, imagery and figures of speech - makes plain the deep anguish and isolation felt by Hamlet because of this rupture. Hamlet's pain and inability to accept his mother's behaviour affect his actions and motivation throughout the play.

'Hamlet' opens with a question from a nervous sentry, 'Who's there?' Elsinore Castle is on guard against possible attack from Norway. Shakespeare has written this effective opening for a play which goes on to layer question upon question and conflict upon conflict. The troubled ghost of Hamlet's warrior father stalks the battlements, the guard is 'sick at heart' and, as one of the officers, Marcellus later remarks, 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. We discover the source of this corruption in Act 1 Scene 2 when Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and now step-father makes a highly polished, well-rehearsed speech to the court, referring to himself royally in the third person and mentioning 'our sometime sister, now our queen'.

His flow is only interrupted when he finally addresses 'my son' Hamlet. Hamlet's responses to both Claudius and Gertrude show intelligence and barely suppressed anger and loathing. When Claudius asks:

'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?'

Hamlet responds:

'Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun.'

He puns sun/son to express his irritation at being called 'son' by Claudius, while his answer could be interpreted as being warmed in 'the sun' of the

King's radiance. His mother expresses gentle exasperation as his persistence in mourning, 'Cast thy nighted colour off' explaining that death is 'common'. Hamlet plays the same word-game that he had with Claudius by repeating, 'Ay Madam, it is common.' with an emphasis which implies his disgust at her unacceptable conduct. Because of this veiled criticism - shown to us but not to the courtiers - the audience is made to share the discomfort of Gertrude and Claudius. We connect this feeling of unease to the dark troubles alluded to in Scene 1.

When he is alone Hamlet delivers his first soliloquy, erupting with outrage, horror and self-pity. Hamlet wants his 'solid flesh' to 'melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew!' Shakespeare uses a list of verbs to reflect this almost gentle dissolution of the body then contrasts it with a brutal reference to 'self-slaughter'. Hamlet is so lost that he considers suicide often during the play. Another list, this time of adjectives:

'How weary, stale, dull and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!

emphasises his desolation by building a sense of how grey and useless life has become for him. Short exclamations and repetition, 'O God! God!' indicate his emotional state. We come to the root of the problem as Hamlet uses hyperbole to speak of his adored father as 'Hyperion' (a titan) as opposed to Claudius, whom he calls 'a satyr' (a lecherous goat/man) and comparing Denmark under his father to Eden, 'a garden' which, under Claudius:

'... grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

The repulsive metaphor of something lovely rotting and smelling expresses the way Hamlet feels, not only about the mess that Denmark is in but mostly about the incestuous relationship between his uncle and his mother. Added to this is the unseemly haste, emphasised by the repetition of the word 'month' with which they wed. He speaks of his mother in insulting terms:

'O God! A beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer...'

This is the first of many references to Gertrude as an unthinking animal. Clearly, the betrayal by his mother has also affected his view of women generally, as he exclaims 'Frailty, thy name is woman.' This misogyny goes on to affect the relationship he has with his former love, Ophelia, with tragic results later in the play. Hamlet idolises his dead father and, as a result has an extreme response to the reality of his situation now - Claudius has 'Popp'd in between the election and my hopes', that is, he has become King, and he has 'whored my mother', as Hamlet expresses it much later in the play.

In Act 1 scene 5, Shakespeare adds to his already intolerable burden by having the ghost of Hamlet's father explain that Claudius poisoned him. Hamlet must revenge this 'Murder most foul' but yet he must not:

'... let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven'

But how can Hamlet kill or expose Claudius without his mother being disgraced too? By the end of Act 1 Shakespeare has completed the exposition of the characters and the plot and the action begins to rise.

Though Hamlet continues to dwell on his feeling of horror over his mother's situation they do not actually meet or converse again till two months later in Act 3 Scene 2 when the King and Queen attend a play through which Hamlet hopes to 'catch the king'. He has rewritten sections of an existing Italian play to parody the murder of Old Hamlet and Gertrude's remarriage. The gap in communication increases the sense of distance between Hamlet and his mother. It also makes Gertrude quite mysterious to the audience. She has no soliloquy so we do not know if she is guilty or lecherous or ambitious – these qualities are all suggested by Hamlet and the Ghost but we are left wondering. She is obviously upset by the play and requests that Hamlet visits her in her private 'closet'.

Hamlet has not yet confronted either his mother or Claudius but he feels that Claudius' response to the play proves him to be the murderer of his brother. As a result, in Act 3 Scene 4, he approaches Gertrude's closet with energy and, for the first time in the play, a sense of power. This scene is a climax - all the pain and anger that Hamlet has been nursing spews out onto Gertrude. This is the first time we have seen Hamlet and Gertrude in private – at least Hamlet believes they are alone but Gertrude has allowed a spy to listen in. Hamlet mocks Gertrude by echoing her words:

G:Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
H: Mother you have my father much offended.
G:Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
H: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

This parallel structure has a very arresting sound for the audience. We wonder what this commanding version of the Prince will do next. Hamlet seizes Gertrude and forces her to come to terms with what she has done. His language is direct unlike the veiled insults of Act One. He kills the spy and when Gertrude upbraids him he says:

'A bloody deed! – almost as bad, good mother
As kill a King and marry with his brother.

Her response, 'As kill a king?' tells us that she is at least innocent of the murder of her first husband. The language from here on in shows the

change in status between them: **Hamlet has control and he swamps her with criticism.** Old Hamlet is again praised as a god-like being **compared to 'Hyperion' 'Mars' 'Jove':** Claudius, however is **'like a mildew'd ear, blasting his wholesome brother.'** Again, Claudius is described as a noxious, diseased thing. He pushes his advantage, describing their union in the most abusive terms:

'Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.'

Shakespeare evokes a sickening image of foul, unnatural activity by appealing to the senses of smell and touch with the word choice of 'sweat', 'stewed' and 'honeying'. He adds the image of this activity happening over the pig-sty. Again, we have the implication that she is no better than a 'beast'. Gertrude **repeats 'O speak to me no more!'** giving the impression that she is becoming overwhelmed. By the end of the scene she has agreed that she will lie to Claudius to back up Hamlet's pretence of madness and even asks Hamlet, **'What shall I do?'** For the first time we feel some sympathy for Gertrude and relief that mother and son have come to some sort of understanding.

Hamlet is so agitated during this confrontation with his mother that he kills the spy and seems scarcely moved by the murder. However, there are serious repercussions, making the closet scene a **turning point** in the play. **Because of the death of Polonius (the spy), Ophelia goes mad and dies.** **Because of her death and the death of Polonius, Leartes (Ophelia's brother) swears revenge on Hamlet.** Hamlet himself appears to be more active and decided. It leads directly to the final scene in the play when, during a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Gertrude takes a 'poisoned chalice' intended for Hamlet and despite a shouted warning from Claudius, drinks the health of Hamlet and dies, warning him, **'The drink, the drink! I am poisoned.'** **As Hamlet dies shortly after he says, 'Adieu, wretched queen.'** They have become reconciled but only in death.

One of the reasons that 'Hamlet' remains relevant is because of Shakespeare's handling of the extreme nature of **Hamlet's response to what he sees as his mother's betrayal.** The use of **soliloquy** allows us to hear his thoughts and follow his convoluted thought processes. **This deteriorating relationship** is one of the main causes of Hamlet's misery at the start of the play, his obsessive dwelling on it and desire to 'set it right' both **push the action along and delay it** as he wrangles with his conscience and fears. Shakespeare's memorable **imagery and masterful handling of the play's language and structure** ensure that we follow the story avidly, connecting each scene's development up until the play's tragic and inevitable end.