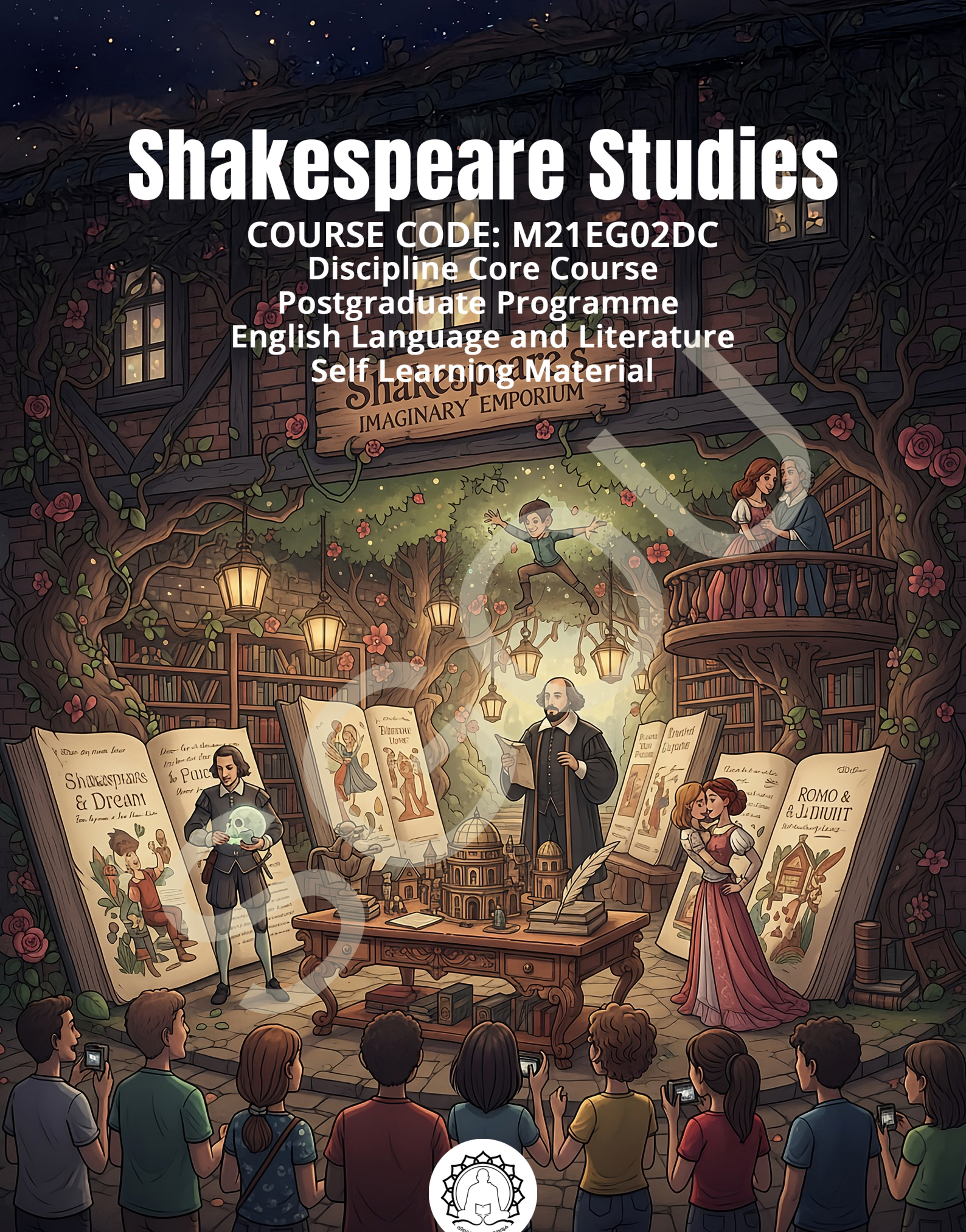


# Shakespeare Studies

COURSE CODE: M21EG02DC  
Discipline Core Course  
Postgraduate Programme  
English Language and Literature  
Self Learning Material



SREENARAYANAGURU  
OPEN UNIVERSITY

## SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



# SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

## Vision

*To increase access of potential learners of all categories to higher education, research and training, and ensure equity through delivery of high quality processes and outcomes fostering inclusive educational empowerment for social advancement.*

## Mission

To be benchmarked as a model for conservation and dissemination of knowledge and skill on blended and virtual mode in education, training and research for normal, continuing, and adult learners.

## Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

# **Shakespeare Studies**

Course Code: M21EG02DC

Semester - I

**Discipline Core Course**  
**Postgraduate Programme in English**  
**Self Learning Material**  
(With Model Question Paper Sets)



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# SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

Course Code: M21EG02DC

Semester- I

Discipline Core Course

Postgraduate Programme in English

## Academic Committee

Dr. Lal C. A.  
Dr. B. Hariharan  
Dr. Suja Kurup PL  
Prof. Dr. M. Devakumar  
Dr. Cynthia Catherine Michael  
Dr. Niji CI  
Dr. Manoj. S  
Dr. Chitra V. R  
Dr. Teena Rachel Thomas  
Dr. Meera Baby R.

## Development of the Content

Salim M., Dr. Anupriya Patra,  
Mahaswetha Devi P. S.,  
Tomson Thomas, Dr. Sucheta Sankar V.

## Review and Edit

Dr. Tommy John

## Linguistics

Dr. R. Premkumar

## Scrutiny

Salim M.,  
Dr. Anu Alphons Sebastian,  
Akhiles U., Dr. Anupriya Patra,  
Dr. Anfal M., Dr. Sucheta Sankar V.,  
Aravind S.G., Dr. Erfan K

## Design Control

Azeem Babu T.A.

## Cover Design

Jobin J.

## Co-ordination

Director, MDDC :

Dr. I.G. Shibi

Asst. Director, MDDC :

Dr. Sajeevkumar G.

Coordinator, Development:

Dr. Anfal M.

Coordinator, Distribution:

Dr. Sanitha K.K.



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# MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed “blended format,” a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The university aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The MA English programme by the University offers a detailed exploration of literature, linguistics, and language studies. We provide rigorous curriculum in literary analysis, linguistic theories, and applied language skills. The Self-Learning Material has been meticulously crafted, incorporating relevant examples to facilitate better comprehension.

Rest assured, the university’s student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.



Regards,  
Dr. Jagathy Raj V. P.

01-10-2025

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# Socio-Political and Literary Background

## BLOCK-01

### Block Content

- Unit 1 - Elizabethan England and William Shakespeare
- Unit 2 - Senecan Influence
- Unit 3 - Major Classifications of Shakespearean Plays
- Unit 4 - Shakespearean Criticism and Poetry



# Unit 1

## Elizabethan England and William Shakespeare

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ examine and understand Shakespeare's contributions to English literature
- ▶ understand the social, political, and cultural environment of Elizabethan England, and how the age affected Shakespeare's works
- ▶ comprehend Shakespeare's biography, early career, and influences
- ▶ study the nature of theatrical production, actors, and performance spaces
- ▶ gain insights into the use of literary elements in Shakespeare's plays

### Background

William Shakespeare is a name familiar to nearly everyone, regardless of their level of education. You may know him as the famous English playwright and poet who lived centuries ago but remains relevant and widely celebrated even today. Many people first encounter Shakespeare during their school years, performing or reading scenes from his works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *Macbeth*. Perhaps you recall famous lines like "To be or not to be," "Friends, Romans, countrymen," or "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," even if you're unsure which plays they belong to. You may have even heard rumours questioning the authorship of his plays, or that someone of higher social standing penned them instead.

Whether through school recitals, live theatre, films, or literary studies, Shakespeare's stories and themes have touched audiences from all walks of life. Over time, you might have accepted him as a distant figure from your school days or cultural history. Yet, Shakespeare's works offer more than old tales; they reflect the dynamic society in which he lived, the vibrant but complex world of Elizabethan England.

This unit aims to provide a brief introduction to Shakespeare's England, covering the social, political, and cultural environment that shaped his plays, as well as Shakespeare himself, the man behind enduring masterpieces. It explores the historical context marked by Renaissance ideas, shifting

social orders, religious tensions, and vibrant artistic life. By understanding the background of Shakespeare's time, learners can better appreciate his creativity, his insight into human nature, and his lasting influence that continues to resonate across centuries.

## Keywords

Elizabethan Era, Shakespeare, Theatre, Quarto, Folio, Shakespearean Plays, Literary Elements, Dramatic Devices, Audience

## Discussion

### 1.1.1 Social and Political Environment of Elizabethan England, and its Reflection in Shakespeare's Plays

#### ► The Renaissance Context

Elizabethan England in the late sixteenth century experienced the influence of the wider European Renaissance, a cultural movement that revived interest in classical learning and human potential. Unlike medieval times, when religious authority and the supremacy of God were central, Renaissance thinkers began exploring the relationship between humanity and the divine. They looked to the literature, philosophy and art of ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. Though the Renaissance came to England later than other countries, its ideas were well established by Shakespeare's time, giving writers new freedom to explore the human experience.

#### ► Decline of Feudalism and Rise of Capitalism

The traditional feudal system, which had structured English society for centuries, was breaking down. Large lands owned by feudal lords were increasingly leased or sold to merchants and traders. This created a rising middle class of merchants, lawyers and civil servants with growing wealth and influence. The emerging capitalist economy encouraged initiative and social mobility, challenging old hierarchies. Shakespeare's England was in transition, with increased opportunities for ambition and change amid a mix of old and new social structures.

Humanism, a key Renaissance belief in human dignity and critical thinking, deeply influenced Elizabethan society. Educated men and women studied classical





► Humanism and Elizabethan Culture

languages and texts, shaping a culture rich in literature and intellectual debate. Shakespeare's plays show this influence in their richly drawn characters, who experience complex emotions such as fear, ambition and guilt. Monarchs in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* have tragic flaws, while *Hamlet* presents an introspective mind grappling with doubt. Shakespeare's empathy for characters from all social ranks reflects the humanist values of his age.

► Religious tension under Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth I enforced the Anglican Church as England's official religion, requiring attendance at its services and penalising Catholics who refused to conform. While open Catholic worship was banned, many families kept their Catholic faith privately. Shakespeare's plays show subtle and respectful engagement with Catholic rituals and themes of confession and redemption. Though he publicly adhered to Anglicanism, his complex portrayals suggest a deeper understanding of religious divisions and complexity in Elizabethan society.

► The growing importance of London

During Elizabeth's reign, London grew rapidly into England's political, cultural and economic centre. Theatres such as the Globe and the Curtain welcomed audiences from all social classes, from nobles to craftsmen and labourers. This diverse public gave Shakespeare a wide-ranging audience. His plays address contemporary political concerns, explore questions of national identity, and reflect a nation both proud and anxious about its place in the world.

► Kingship and Humanity

### Reflection in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare's portrayal of kings and rulers as deeply human shows the Renaissance belief in individual dignity. In *King Lear*, Lear's decision to divide his kingdom based on his daughters' expressions of love leads to betrayal and madness. Lear's suffering in a storm, stripped off his royal power, reveals that even monarchs are vulnerable to error and grief. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, a nobleman's ambition drives him to murder. Macbeth's guilt and visions reveal the heavy cost of violent power. Shakespeare gives his kings rich inner lives, showing that rank offers no protection from human weakness.

In exploring moral complexity, Shakespeare engages with issues of justice and mercy. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's demand for a "pound of flesh" raises difficult

► Justice and mercy

questions about law and compassion. Portia's speech on "the quality of mercy" praises forgiveness as noble, yet Shylock is portrayed with sympathy. *Measure for Measure* deals with sexual morality and harsh punishments, exposing hypocrisy and testing ideas of justice. Through these plays, Shakespeare reflects Elizabethan debates on religion, law and society.

► Comedy and social change

Shakespeare's comedies explore social change and role reversals. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola disguises herself as her brother, entering a noble court and cleverly outwitting others. This disguise challenges social and gender boundaries, suggesting that intelligence and worth can overcome birth status. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind lives in exile and guides relationships freely, questioning social rules. Through pastoral settings and disguise, Shakespeare celebrates the potential for personal reinvention and social mobility.

► Classical allusions

Finally, Shakespeare's use of classical allusions and humanist learning strengthens his plays. He drew on authors like Ovid, Plutarch and Seneca to enrich plot and character. In *Julius Caesar*, Marc Antony's funeral speech, "Friends, Romans, countrymen," uses classical rhetoric while exploring political persuasion. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Homeric heroes are reinterpreted through Elizabethan ideas of honour and disorder. Shakespeare's blending of ancient texts with contemporary drama brings Renaissance humanism vividly to the stage.

### 1.1.2 William Shakespeare: Biography



Fig 1.1.1 William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare stands as the most celebrated writer in English literature; a playwright whose extraordinary

- Literary genius world-wide

works continue to captivate audiences more than four centuries after his death. Born in 1564 in the charming market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare created a literary legacy that has transcended time, geography, and culture. His thirty-seven plays, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, and narrative poems have been translated into more than fifty languages, making him the most filmed author in history and earning him the enduring title of “The Bard” or “The Bard of Avon”. Shakespeare’s influence extends far beyond literature itself, as he coined or popularised hundreds of expressions that remain integral to modern English, demonstrating how deeply his creative genius has shaped our language and thought.

- Grammar school education.

Shakespeare was baptised on 26 April 1564, though scholars traditionally celebrate his birthday on 23 April, a date that holds special significance as it is also believed to be the day he died fifty-two years later. The son of John Shakespeare, a prosperous glove-maker and alderman, and Mary Arden, daughter of a local landowner, William grew up in a household that valued education and civic responsibility. His father’s success in business ensured that young William attended the local King’s New School grammar school, where he studied Latin literature, rhetoric, and classical authors such as Terence, Virgil, and Horace. This education, though he apparently never attended university, provided the foundation for the remarkable literary knowledge that would later permeate his works. At eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six and already expecting their first child, and together they had three children: Susanna in 1583, followed by twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585. The tragic death of his son Hamnet at age eleven profoundly affected Shakespeare and may have influenced the themes of grief, loss, and mortality that echo throughout his later plays.

- London theatre success

Between 1585 and 1592, known as Shakespeare’s “lost years,” little documentation exists about his activities, though by 1592 he had established himself in London as both actor and playwright. During plague outbreaks when theatres were forced to close, he turned to poetry, gaining the patronage of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to whom he dedicated his narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The first poem proved particularly popular, being reprinted several times and helping to establish his reputation beyond the theatre. His

association with the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men under James I, proved instrumental to his success. As both playwright and shareholder in the company, Shakespeare profited directly from their achievements, a business arrangement that contributed significantly to his eventual wealth. In 1599, the company built the iconic Globe Theatre on the south bank of the River Thames, which became the primary stage for many of his masterpieces and remains a symbol of his enduring legacy.

► Early experimental works

Understanding Shakespeare's artistic development requires examining his career chronologically, as it reveals a remarkable journey of creative evolution spanning nearly twenty-two years from 1590 to 1612. During his apprenticeship period from 1588 to 1594, Shakespeare was learning his craft through collaboration, revision of older plays, and experimentation with established forms. His early works display frequent use of rhyme, puns, and conceits, with an artificial style that reflects his status as a developing playwright. These plays remain largely experimental as he explored different approaches to dramatic storytelling, featuring boisterous and farcical themes, regular classical allusions, and abundant wit and imagery. Key works from this period include *Love's Labour's Lost*, considered his first entirely original work, *The Comedy of Errors*, a spirited farce, *Richard III*, his first successful historical drama showing Marlowe's influence, and *Romeo and Juliet*, a lyrical love tragedy that he later revised and refined. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a magical fantasy that concluded his apprenticeship, demonstrates his growing confidence in blending comedy with supernatural elements.

► Masterful confident writing

From 1594 to 1600, Shakespeare entered what scholars call his "in the world" phase, having found his distinctive voice and gained complete mastery of his theatrical craft. He abandoned rhyme in favour of blank verse, which he handled with notable ease and flexibility, creating wholly original works that were unmistakably his own. His writing during this period is robust and vigorous, free from the crudities of his earlier attempts and marked by sophisticated character development and plot construction. This phase produced some of his most beloved comedies, including *Much Ado About Nothing*, a delightful romance that elevated wit and humour to new levels, and *As You Like It* and *Twelfth*





*Night*, mirthful comedies marked by romance and frank enjoyment of life. He also created *The Merchant of Venice*, a complex work that borders on tragedy despite its comic classification, and his great history plays *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, which depict sweeping national events whilst exploring profound human motivations. These works demonstrate Shakespeare's growing confidence in tackling both intimate human relationships and broad political themes with equal skill.

► Profound tragic masterpieces

The period from 1600 to 1608 marked Shakespeare's most profound and psychologically complex phase, during which he seemed to write "out of the depths" of his heart and mind. This era of dark comedies and tragic masterpieces suggests that Shakespeare experienced some form of inner turmoil, as themes of frustrated love, betrayed trust, and human corruption cast a sombre tone over his works. His style during this period, driven by intense thought and passion, can sometimes be obscure but reveals unprecedented psychological depth. The dark comedies *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida* bear tragic weight despite their comic labels, exploring the darker aspects of human nature and society. His Roman plays *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* examine power, ambition, and political corruption with unflinching realism. Most significantly, this period produced the four great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*, universally acknowledged as Shakespeare's greatest achievements and among the finest works in world literature. These plays explore the deepest questions of human existence: mortality, madness, evil, and the fragility of civilisation itself.

► Serene creative freedom

Shakespeare's final creative phase from 1608 to 1612 saw him standing "on the heights" of his artistic achievement, writing with complete freedom and indulging his imagination without conventional constraints. The darkness of his tragic period gave way to a remarkable serenity, as he sought what one critic described as "refreshment in irresponsible play" after the intensity of his great tragedies. His late romances, including *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, demonstrate a unique style that one scholar characterised as "the syntax of thought rather than of language," featuring compressed meaning

and suggestive hints that reward careful study. These plays explore themes of reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, and the magical power of art itself, suggesting that Shakespeare had achieved a philosophical perspective that transcended the conflicts and sufferings depicted in his earlier works. *The Tempest*, often considered his farewell to the theatre, contains some of his most beautiful poetry and profound meditations on the nature of reality, illusion, and human potential.

► Valuable educational benefits

Shakespeare's educational value for contemporary learners extends far beyond literary appreciation, encompassing language development, critical thinking skills, and emotional intelligence. His rich and complex vocabulary challenges students to expand their linguistic repertoire whilst engaging with texts that reward careful analysis and interpretation. The universal themes he explores, love, jealousy, friendship, power, ambition, and mortality - remain as relevant today as they were four centuries ago, allowing students to connect personally with characters and situations that mirror their own experiences and concerns. His intricate plots and sophisticated character development provide excellent models for understanding narrative techniques and storytelling craft. Research has shown that studying Shakespeare through active, performance-based approaches significantly improves students' language acquisition, confidence, and willingness to engage with complex ideas. Students who participate in Shakespearean activities often demonstrate increased critical thinking abilities, as they learn to analyse characters' motivations, ethical dilemmas, and social contexts. This analytical approach not only deepens literary understanding but also prepares students for real-world challenges that require thoughtful decision-making and the ability to see multiple perspectives.

► Timeless human truths

Shakespeare's lasting influence on education and culture demonstrates the enduring power of great literature to speak across centuries and cultural boundaries. His works continue to be adapted, interpreted, and reimagined in countless ways, from traditional stage productions to modern film adaptations, graphic novels, and digital media. This adaptability reflects the fundamental human truths that Shakespeare captured in his writing - truths about love, ambition, jealousy, friendship, and the complexities of human nature that transcend historical periods and



cultural differences. Students who engage seriously with Shakespeare often discover not only literary appreciation but also personal growth, as his characters and situations provide a safe space to explore complex emotions and moral dilemmas. The continued presence of Shakespeare in educational curricula worldwide testifies to the transformative potential of his works in developing critical thinking, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence.

► Timeless  
Relevance  
and Influence

The journey through Shakespeare's works reveals a writer who evolved from promising beginner to supreme master of his craft, leaving behind a body of work that continues to reward study and performance. His career charts the development of English drama from its medieval origins to sophisticated psychological realism, establishing many of the conventions and possibilities that continue to influence writers today. Shakespeare wrote for audiences who came to be entertained, moved, and enlightened, not to be impressed by literary cleverness. His plays reward attention with insights into human nature, beautiful language, compelling stories, and profound themes that remain as relevant today as they were four hundred years ago. The Bard's invitation to understand ourselves and our world through the mirror of dramatic art remains as compelling today as it was for the groundlings who first cheered his plays at the Globe Theatre.



Fig 1.1.2 Holy Trinity Church



Fig 1.1.3 The original gravestone marking William Shakespeare's final resting place lies set into the floor of the chancel at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. The epitaph serves both as a plea for reverence and a deterrent against disturbance. In modern English:

*Good friend for Jesus sake forbear,  
To dig the dust enclosed here.  
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,  
And cursed be he that moves my bones.*

### Timeline of Major Events

- 1564** – Baptised in Stratford-upon-Avon (likely born 23 April).
- 1582** – Marries Anne Hathaway.
- 1583** – Birth of daughter Susanna.
- 1585** – Birth of twins Hamnet and Judith.
- 1585–1592** – The “lost years.”
- 1592** – Active in London as actor and playwright.
- 1593–1594** – Publishes *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.
- 1599** – Globe Theatre built by his company.
- 1609** – Sonnets published.
- 1613** – Retires to Stratford.
- 1616** – Dies on 23 April, aged 52.



## Chronological Table of Shakespeare's Works

| Year (approx.) | Title                               | Category                                      |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1590–1591      | <i>Henry VI</i> (Parts 1, 2, and 3) | History                                       |
| 1592–1593      | <i>Titus Andronicus</i>             | Tragedy                                       |
| 1593–1594      | <i>The Comedy of Errors</i>         | Comedy                                        |
| 1593–1594      | <i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>  | Comedy                                        |
| 1593–1594      | <i>Taming of the Shrew</i>          | Comedy                                        |
| 1594–1595      | <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>             | Tragedy                                       |
| 1595           | <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>    | Comedy                                        |
| 1595–1596      | <i>Richard II</i>                   | History                                       |
| 1596           | <i>King John</i>                    | History                                       |
| 1596–1597      | <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>       | Comedy                                        |
| 1596–1597      | <i>Henry IV, Part 1</i>             | History                                       |
| 1597–1598      | <i>Henry IV, Part 2</i>             | History                                       |
| 1598–1599      | <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>       | Comedy                                        |
| 1598–1599      | <i>Henry V</i>                      | History                                       |
| 1599–1600      | <i>Julius Caesar</i>                | Tragedy                                       |
| 1599–1600      | <i>As You Like It</i>               | Comedy                                        |
| 1599–1600      | <i>Hamlet</i>                       | Tragedy                                       |
| 1601–1602      | <i>Twelfth Night</i>                | Comedy                                        |
| 1602–1603      | <i>Troilus and Cressida</i>         | Problem Play                                  |
| 1603–1604      | <i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>    | Problem Play                                  |
| 1604           | <i>Measure for Measure</i>          | Problem Play                                  |
| 1604–1605      | <i>Othello</i>                      | Tragedy                                       |
| 1605–1606      | <i>King Lear</i>                    | Tragedy                                       |
| 1605–1606      | <i>Macbeth</i>                      | Tragedy                                       |
| 1606–1607      | <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>         | Tragedy                                       |
| 1607–1608      | <i>Coriolanus</i>                   | Tragedy                                       |
| 1607–1608      | <i>Timon of Athens</i>              | Tragedy (possibly unfinished, with Middleton) |
| 1608–1609      | <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i>     | Romance (partly by George Wilkins)            |
| 1609–1610      | <i>Cymbeline</i>                    | Romance                                       |
| 1610–1611      | <i>The Winter's Tale</i>            | Romance                                       |
| 1611           | <i>The Tempest</i>                  | Romance                                       |
| 1612–1613      | <i>Henry VIII</i>                   | History (collaboration with John Fletcher)    |
| 1612–1613      | <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>        | Romance (collaboration with Fletcher)         |



### 1.1.3 Production of Plays

- Shakespeare's recognition and early censorship

By 1592 Shakespeare had already become a recognised figure on the London theatrical scene, as suggested by Robert Greene's *A Groatsworth of Wit*, which mocked him as an "upstart crow." This shows that Shakespeare had gained enough attention to be noticed, perhaps even resented, by his fellow writers. The theatre in Elizabethan England, however, was not a free space for creative expression. The government kept a close watch on drama, and rules were made to control what could and could not be performed. As early as 1559, a royal proclamation had banned plays that dealt with religion or matters of state. This meant that playwrights could rarely speak openly about politics or faith. Still, clever writers like Shakespeare often found ways to comment indirectly on sensitive matters through allegory, historical parallels, or symbolic scenes.

- Role of Master of Revels and censorship example.

Censorship was an important part of theatrical life. From 1581 onwards, every play had to be shown to Edmund Tilney, the Master of the Revels, before it could be staged for the public. Tilney had the power to approve or censor plays, and his role was central to theatrical production. He not only oversaw censorship but also arranged performances at court. He held this office until 1610, and his successors continued the practice. An example of this censorship can be seen in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. When the play was first printed in 1597, the famous scene showing the king's deposition was left out, probably because it was too politically sensitive during Elizabeth I's reign. Only after James I became king in 1603 was the scene restored to the printed text.

- Language restrictions and legal penalties

There were also restrictions on language. In 1606 the "Act to Restrain Abuses of Players" was passed. This law made it illegal for actors to use the names of God or Jesus on stage in a light or mocking way. If they did, the theatre company could be fined £10, a very large amount of money at the time. What is more, half the fine would go to the person who reported the offence, giving the public a direct interest in watching for mistakes. As a result, many oaths and references to God were softened or altered in printed versions of Shakespeare's plays, including those collected in the First Folio of 1623.



- Social status of actors and patronage.

The government's concern with the theatre also extended to the social position of actors. Performers, unless they belonged to an established company supported by a nobleman or the Queen, were often treated as vagrants and criminals. However, it is not entirely true that all actors were labelled as rogues. Some companies enjoyed real respectability thanks to aristocratic patronage. Shakespeare himself was part of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men under James I, and both the company and its actors gained recognition and security through royal support. Noble households sometimes kept troupes of actors as part of their retinue, while others gave occasional patronage by allowing companies to perform under their names.

- The Queen's Men influence on Shakespeare.

The Queen's Men, a company formed in 1583 with royal backing, played a crucial role in shaping the theatrical world Shakespeare entered. They not only performed in London but also toured across the country. In 1587, they even visited Stratford-upon-Avon. Some stories suggest that Shakespeare might have briefly acted with them, perhaps stepping in to replace a performer who had died in a quarrel. This is probably more legend than fact, since it seems unlikely that a major company would hire an unknown youth without experience. Yet, what is certain is that their repertory included plays such as *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, and *King Lear*. These were subjects that Shakespeare would later rework with greater artistry in his own plays. The Queen's Men, then, offered him models of history plays and early dramatic forms that he would eventually transform into masterpieces.

#### 1.1.4 Sources

- Sources / main texts

Most of Shakespeare's plays were not invented from scratch. He usually borrowed stories from history, legends, or earlier literature. His Roman plays were based on Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated into English by Sir Thomas North. For the English history plays, he used Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577) and *Edward Hall's Chronicles*. At times, he turned to old legends, as in *Hamlet* and *Pericles*, or to more recent Italian authors such as Boccaccio. With plays like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, he drew from well-known tales, while *Othello* came from

a lesser-known story. For *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*, he borrowed from popular prose novels of his own time. Some plays, such as *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, explored legendary or distant history.

► Adaptation / creativity

Although Shakespeare relied on existing stories, he always transformed them. He compressed long tales into dramatic form, created new characters, or gave greater importance to minor ones. Characters like Mercutio, Falstaff, Beatrice and Benedick, and the Fool in *King Lear* show his genius in turning small hints into unforgettable figures. He also rearranged events to heighten drama and contrast, as in *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *As You Like It*. His philosophical depth is especially clear in *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, where the plays go far beyond their original sources.

► Reading / influences

Shakespeare's reading habits are not fully known, but his wide vocabulary and quick response to both written and spoken words show that he read actively. He drew on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (in Golding's translation), Montaigne's essays, Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostors*, and even the *Bible*. He was influenced by contemporary writers such as Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, and Sir Philip Sidney. Translations of Homer by George Chapman and of Greek romances like Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* also left their mark. These influences appear in plays like *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Twelfth Night*.

► Critical studies

Later critics and scholars traced these sources more carefully. In the seventeenth century, Shakespeare was often seen as a "natural" genius who did not rely much on books, but studies later proved otherwise. Charlotte Lennox in the eighteenth century, John Payne Collier in the nineteenth, and Geoffrey Bullough in the twentieth produced collections that connected Shakespeare's plays with their original materials. These studies reveal how Shakespeare turned borrowed material into rich drama through economy, invention, and powerful dialogue.

For learners today, studying Shakespeare's sources is more than a matter of tracing old stories. It helps us see how he worked as an artist, turning raw material into living drama. It also shows us that great literature often grows out of earlier traditions, but through imagination, skill, and vision, it becomes something fresh and timeless.





### 1.1.5 The Actors

- Companies / multiple roles

The actors who performed in Shakespeare's plays were organised into companies, which were supported by noble patrons or influential figures. All the actors were men. Women were not allowed to act on the English professional stage until the monarchy was restored in 1660. A company usually had twelve to fourteen actors on permanent contracts, with the option to employ extra "hired men" when needed. Shakespeare often wrote with this limitation in mind. His early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has only thirteen named characters (plus a dog). In longer plays, he cleverly arranged things so that one actor could play two or more parts. This could be confusing backstage, especially in plays like *Henry VI, Part Two*, which contains between seventy and eighty distinct characters.

- Burbage / Kemp

Many actors spent their whole career with the same company. Richard Burbage, the leading man of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was a founding member in 1594 and stayed until his death in 1619. He played some of Shakespeare's most famous roles, from Romeo and Hamlet to Othello, Macbeth, Lear, and Prospero. Other actors specialised in comic roles. Will Kemp, a member until around 1600, was famous for his clowning.

- Tailored roles / Armin

Shakespeare often wrote with specific actors in mind. In *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600), his own manuscript shows that he sometimes replaced the character names Dogberry and Verges with the real names of Kemp and Cowley. This shows how directly he connected his characters with his performers. He also understood his actors' strengths and weaknesses. Burbage was often given sword fights but almost never required to sing, while Robert Armin, who replaced Kemp, was a talented musician. Armin probably played the singing clowns such as Feste in *Twelfth Night*, the Fool in *King Lear*, and Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*.

- Boy actors / female roles

Because women could not appear on stage, all female roles were played by boys. Many of these boys came from choir schools, where they learned music and stage skills. They continued acting female parts until their voices broke, and their appearance changed, what Shakespeare calls in *Cymbeline* "the mannish crack." There is no evidence that men over twenty played female roles. Shakespeare did

write a few strong and demanding female parts, but there are fewer of them compared to the male roles. For example, *The Tempest* has only one named woman, Miranda, while plays such as *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* have only two. Even *Romeo and Juliet* has only four named women compared with many more male characters.

### 1.1.6 Theatres

#### ► Improvised spaces

In the early years, before purpose-built theatres appeared, plays in England were performed in makeshift settings. Acting companies entertained audiences in the courtyards of inns, in guildhalls, in town halls, in ballrooms, and even occasionally in churches. At court, performances were staged in palaces for royal audiences. These spaces lacked the proper facilities for dramatic effects, so adjustments often had to be made to suit each location. Without a trapdoor for Ophelia's grave or an upper level for Juliet's balcony, actors and writers had to adapt their performances creatively.

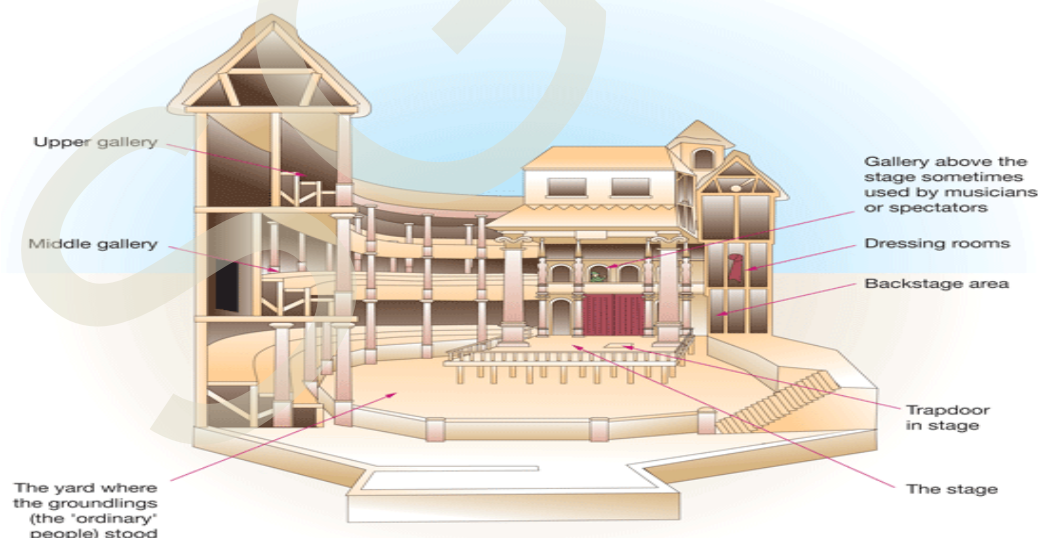


Fig 1.1.4 Structure of Elizabethan Theatre

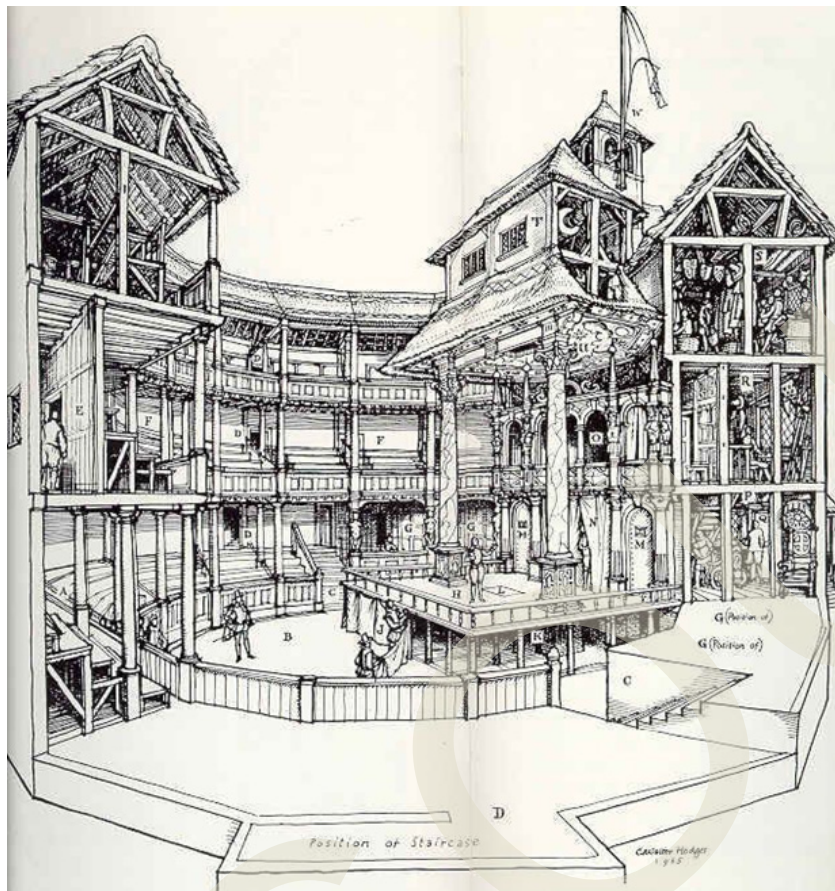


Fig 1.1.5 Structure of Elizabethan Theatre

► Early play-houses

A major change came with the building of the Theatre in Shoreditch in 1576, the first permanent structure designed for plays. This marked the start of the great flowering of Elizabethan drama. The location was significant: the Theatre, and later playhouses such as the Rose (1587), the Swan (1595), and the Globe (1599), were all built outside the City of London's boundaries. The authorities within the city, especially Puritans, disliked playhouses, seeing them as immoral places where men dressed as women and where vulgar jokes and violence entertained the crowds. Officials also feared that large gatherings might spread disease or attract criminals and prostitutes. For this reason, most theatres were placed in Southwark, across the Thames, an area also known for its taverns, brothels, and bear-baiting rings.

The structure of the public theatres greatly influenced the kind of plays written for them. They were usually round or polygonal, three storeys high, and open to the air. The stage

### ► Theatre design

was a wooden platform projecting into the yard, about five feet high, forty feet long, and twenty-eight feet wide. The cheapest tickets, costing a penny, allowed spectators known as “groundlings” to stand in the yard, right in front of the stage. Wealthier audience members could pay more to sit in the surrounding galleries, while the most privileged had seats in the Lords’ Room close to the stage. A canopy, sometimes called “the heavens,” was supported by pillars and contained trapdoors through which gods or spirits could descend. A flag flying from the roof signalled that a play was being performed, and music was often announced by a trumpeter from a hut above the stage.

### ► Stage features

The stage itself contained doors for entrances and exits, as well as a central opening for larger props such as beds or thrones. There was also a curtained inner stage used for scenes set indoors, such as studies, bedrooms, or tombs. Above it was a balcony or upper stage, which served as Juliet’s window or the walls of a castle. Trapdoors in the stage floor allowed devils or ghosts to rise suddenly before the audience. Sound effects were produced from the hut above, where guns packed with powder, wool, or cotton created thunder or the noise of battle. There was no scenery as we know it today, so plays depended on language, costumes, and imagination. Shakespeare famously appealed to his audiences to “eke out our imperfections with your thoughts” in *Henry V*.

### ► Dramatists and influence

These conditions shaped the drama of the time. Writers created plays that matched the dynamic possibilities of this stage, using swift changes of scene, powerful dialogue, and vivid spectacle. The first wave of professional dramatists included the University Wits -Marlowe, Lyly, Greene, Lodge, Peele, and Nashe -alongside Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Their work provided a model for the young Shakespeare, who learned from them and soon surpassed them. In his early years in London, Shakespeare would have watched their plays, acted in some, and adapted their techniques. Audiences at the Rose and other theatres enjoyed works such as Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, and Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, as well as early Shakespearean efforts like *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry VI, Part One*. Marlowe was the most admired of these early dramatists, but Shakespeare absorbed their lessons and went on to transform the stage with his originality.





### 1.1.7 Collaborators

#### ► Collaboration examples

Shakespeare, like most dramatists of his age, did not always write alone. The theatre world was busy and competitive, and collaboration was common. Some of Shakespeare's plays were shared with other writers, while others may have been altered later. In some cases, such as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, there is clear evidence from the time itself that Shakespeare worked with John Fletcher, who later replaced him as the leading writer for the King's Men. Scholars also believe that George Peele may have contributed to *Titus Andronicus*, though this rests mainly on the study of style and vocabulary rather than on records. Other possible collaborators include George Wilkins, who probably helped with *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, and Thomas Middleton, who may have reworked *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* and written parts of *Timon of Athens*. Modern attribution studies, using close reading and computer analysis, have made these suggestions stronger, though debates continue.

#### ► Career pattern

Most of these collaborations occurred at the beginning and the end of Shakespeare's career. In his early years, when he was still learning the craft of playwriting, he probably joined with more experienced men. At the end of his career, when he was withdrawing from London and writing less, he collaborated with younger men like Fletcher. This shows that collaboration was not unusual or shameful but rather a natural part of the profession. It helped playwrights meet the constant demand for new works and brought together different strengths. Shakespeare's ability to shape borrowed material and combine his talent with that of others added richness to his plays and allowed the theatre to flourish.

### 1.1.8 Audience

#### ► Audience composition

Shakespeare's audience was drawn from all levels of society, from the very wealthy to the poorer classes. The cheapest tickets, at one penny, were bought by the so-called groundlings, who stood in the yard immediately before the stage. Here they were on eye-level with the actors, often exposed to sun or rain. Those who could afford more paid two pennies for a place in the covered galleries at the sides, or three for the top galleries, which gave a clearer view. The most privileged seats were in the lords' rooms close to the stage itself. These private galleries allowed a select

► Audience behaviour

audience to be seen as much as to see and so became a symbol of social prestige. Shakespeare understood this mixture of classes and carefully shaped his plays so that all could enjoy them, whether through clowning and spectacle for the groundlings or wit and poetry for the educated. The behaviour of the audience, especially in the public theatres, was far from quiet or restrained. Plays were lengthy, and many spectators moved about, eating, drinking, or talking while the action unfolded. Hissing, booing, and even brawls were common, while many impatient members of the crowd waited only for a comic exchange or a moment of horror to catch their interest.

The city authorities often complained that such playhouses encouraged riotous behaviour, gambling, and prostitution, particularly in the galleries where the wealthier citizens sat. It was not unusual for elegant seduction and more expensive forms of entertainment to accompany the drama on stage. The theatres were therefore both popular gathering places and constant sources of worry for London's civic leaders.

At the same time, Shakespeare's company, like other leading groups, also performed in private theatres and in more controlled settings. The Blackfriars Theatre, for example, attracted a smaller but wealthier audience, who were usually better behaved and more attentive. Later in his career, Shakespeare's company was often invited to play at court before Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Here the audience was aristocratic and expected a higher degree of refinement. Courtiers listened carefully, and Shakespeare's more subtle use of language and philosophy was likely designed with them in mind. These performances offered not only prestige but also financial security, as royal favour was vital to the success of a company.

► Private and court audiences

► Shakespeare's response to audiences

Although some playwrights grumbled about their spectators, calling them ignorant or unruly, Shakespeare seems to have been more generous. He was a shrewd judge of his market, able to entertain a wide range of people at once. His blend of comedy, tragedy, history, and poetry ensured that no matter where a person sat, whether in the noisy yard or the quiet of the lords' rooms, they could find something in the play to enjoy. This breadth of appeal is one of the reasons why his works survived, not just as performances for a mixed Elizabethan crowd, but as drama for the world.



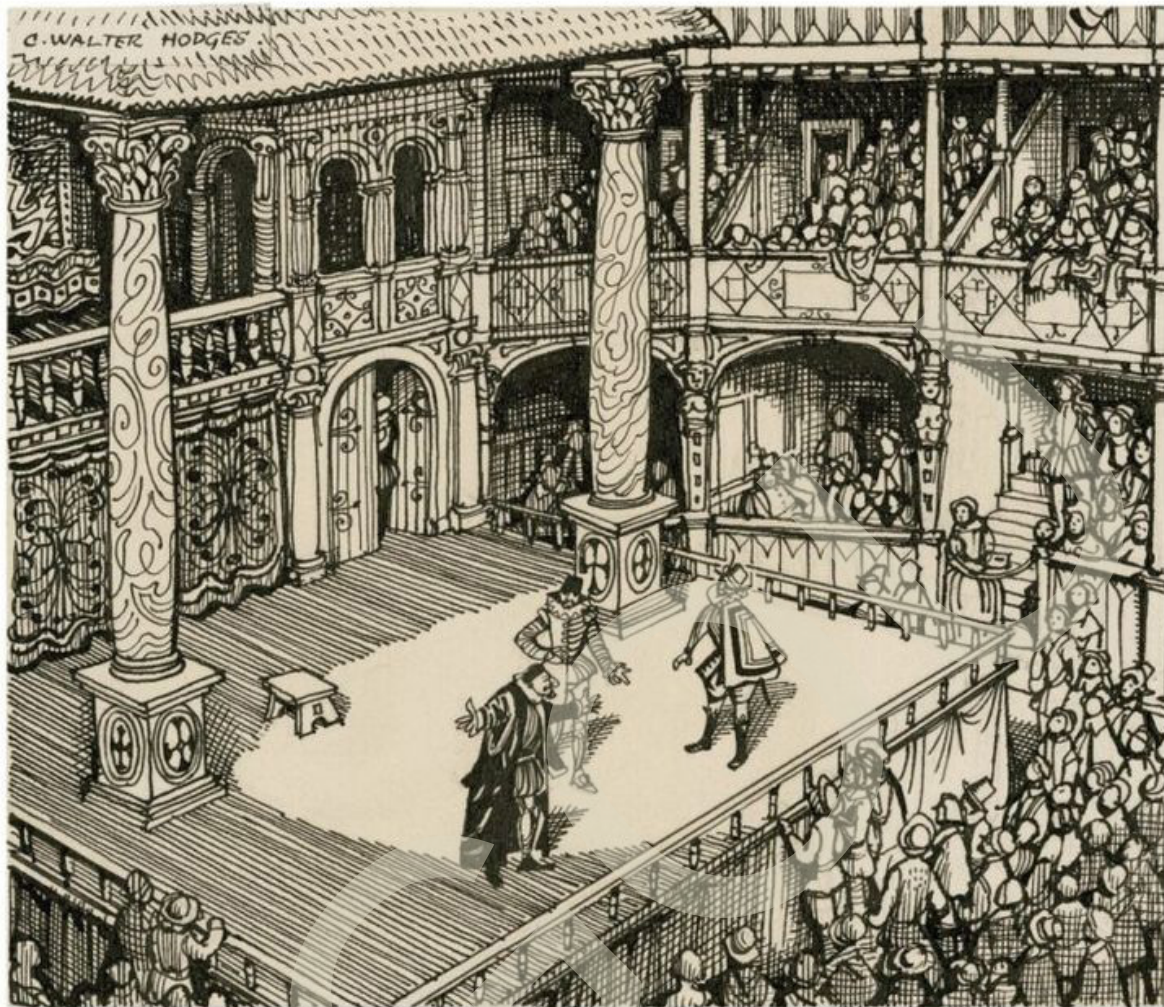


Fig 1.1.6 Elizabethan theatre and audience.

### 1.1.9 Structure of the Shakespearean Plot

#### ► Five-act framework

Shakespeare usually followed the five-act structure of Elizabethan drama, which itself was influenced by the traditions of Greek theatre. This structure gave shape and rhythm to his plays, whether comedy, tragedy, or history, and allowed him to build suspense gradually while keeping audiences engaged. Each act served a distinct dramatic purpose and moved the story forward step by step.

#### ► Exposition and inciting action

The first act normally contained the exposition and inciting action. Shakespeare introduced the main characters, the setting, and the background, while also creating the central conflict that would drive the play. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the ghost of the dead king tells Prince Hamlet of Claudius' treachery. Hamlet is burdened with the duty of uncovering the truth behind his father's



death. Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Duke of Athens sets the opening situation by demanding that Hermia marry Demetrius, even though she loves Lysander. This conflict sparks the action that follows.

► Turning point and complications

The second act usually presented a turning point or series of complications for the main character. In *Hamlet*, this happens when the prince realises that Claudius and Queen Gertrude are using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern against him. Here Hamlet devises his plan to stage the “play within a play” to “catch the conscience of the king.” In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the second act moves the lovers into the enchanted forest, where magical interference from Oberon and Puck creates confusion and sets up the main comic disorder.

► Climax or crisis

The third act often contained the climax or crisis of decision. This is the moment of greatest tension, when the character must make a decisive choice. In *Hamlet*, the famous soliloquy “To be or not to be” captures his deep conflict over life, death, and revenge. Soon afterwards, he is convinced of Claudius' guilt and knows that action can no longer be delayed. In the comedy, Act III heightens the chaos: in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all four young lovers chase one another through the woods under the influence of Puck's mistaken enchantment, while Bottom is transformed into an ass's head. The confusion peaks, providing the comic “crisis.”

► Falling action

The fourth act was the falling action, where the results of the climax unfolded. The tension continued to build, but the path towards resolution became clearer. In tragedies like *Hamlet*, the audience might still hope for the hero's survival or redemption, but events usually moved steadily towards catastrophe. In comedies, the falling action begins to unravel the disorder: in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon orders Puck to correct his mistakes, restoring the proper pairings of lovers, though not without more comic moments.

► Resolution and closure

Finally, the fifth act brought resolution. In tragedies, this usually meant the death of the hero and the restoration of order at a heavy price. Hamlet's death, along with the deaths of other central characters, shows the destructive consequences of revenge. In comedies, however, the resolution was often joyful, usually ending with marriages,





reunions, or reconciliation. The fifth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* concludes with three weddings - Hermia with Lysander, Helena with Demetrius, and Theseus with Hippolyta - followed by the performance of the comical play-within-a-play by Bottom and his company. The fifth act, whether tragic or comic, gave a sense of closure and moral clarity to Shakespeare's plays.

### 1.1.10 Editions and Emendations Folios and Quartos

During Shakespeare's time, plays were not intended for publication. Printing a play reduced its potential to earn money from performances, as competitors could access the script. Nevertheless, dishonest actors or publishers sometimes copied plays from memory or by attending performances. This often resulted in flawed texts. Occasionally, the company that owned the play arranged for authorised publication, but multiple versions circulated, some genuine and others not. Even Shakespeare's poetry faced similar issues, with works sometimes falsely attributed to him. His plays were published in quartos and folios, which differed in size: a folio measured approximately twelve by nineteen inches, while a quarto was smaller, around nine and a half by twelve inches.

#### ► Publication context

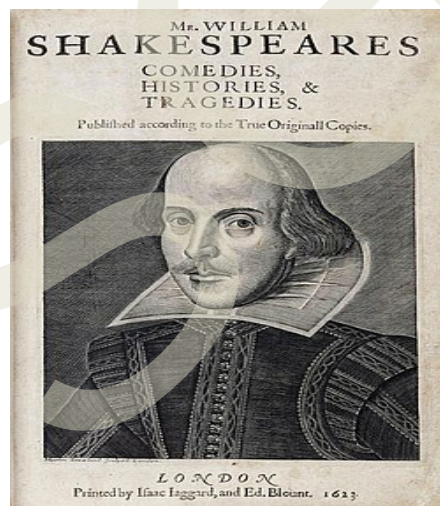


Fig 1.1.7 First Folio

► Quarto format and issues

A quarto was made by folding a printed sheet once to create four pages. By repeating this process with multiple sheets, a complete playbook could be assembled. Despite some accurate quartos, many contained errors, often called “bad quartos,” believed to have been reconstructed from memory by actors. Early quartos of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* are examples, making it challenging for editors to determine the authentic text.

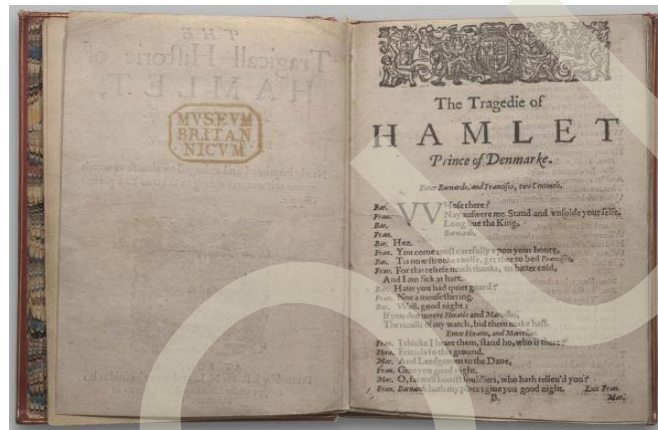


Fig 1.1.8 Quarto

► First Folio

To preserve Shakespeare’s plays, his colleagues compiled thirty-six of them in the **First Folio** of 1623, titled *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*. This large folio, printed and published by William Jaggard with assistance from Shakespeare’s son, Isaac, provided a more reliable text than many quartos. The First Folio, edited by John Heminge and Henry Condell, both close associates of Shakespeare in the King’s Men, contained previously unpublished plays and was divided into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Later folios appeared in 1632, 1663, and 1685.

► Quartos versus folios and modern scholarship

About twenty-five Shakespearean texts appeared in quartos between 1591 and 1622. Nineteen were plays, the rest narrative poems and sonnets. Quartos were small and convenient, ideal for individual plays. Some early editions were “bad” or corrupted quartos, reconstructed from memory by actors, which complicated textual scholarship. The folios, in contrast, were larger and suitable for complete collections, and they gained authority because the editors had access to authentic company copies. Over the seventeenth century, folio editions gradually drifted from the original texts, but by comparing quartos and folios,

modern scholars can establish more reliable versions of Shakespeare's works.

### 1.1.11 Heminges and Condell

#### ► Background

John Heminges and Henry Condell were close friends and colleagues of William Shakespeare. Together, they edited and published the first collected edition of his plays, which is known as the First Folio. This book appeared in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. Both Heminges and Condell had worked as actors in the King's Men, Shakespeare's company. Their efforts ensured that many of Shakespeare's plays were preserved for future generations.

#### ► First Folio

Heminges and Condell's contribution is significant because the First Folio included thirty-six plays, with eighteen of them printed for the very first time. Without their hard work, plays like *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Twelfth Night* might have been lost. In their preface, "To the Great Variety of Readers," Heminges and Condell addressed their audience and encouraged people to buy the book, explaining its value and importance. This preface and their dedicatory letter to the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery appear in many editions today.

#### ► Organisation

The First Folio plays were organised into comedies, histories, and tragedies. Heminges and Condell aimed to create the most accurate and complete text by using original manuscripts, playbooks, and the memories of actors. They wrote that earlier, unofficial printed versions ("quartos") of some plays were often incomplete or incorrect. Their edition replaced these with versions that, they claimed, were "absolute in their numbers as he conceived them."

Both Heminges and Condell enjoyed successful lives in London, gaining respect through their acting careers and other ventures. They lived during a vibrant period in the city's history and became wealthy through their connection with the theatre. Shakespeare showed his gratitude by leaving each of them money for a memorial ring in his will. Their tireless work preserved the text of some of the most famous plays in English literature and secured Shakespeare's legacy for all time.

### 1.1.12 Later Editions

#### ► Publication history

Following the success of the First Folio, Shakespeare's plays were published in three further collected editions during the seventeenth century. These editions are known as the Second, Third, and Fourth Folios. The publication of these folios continued to preserve Shakespeare's works and made them more widely available to readers and theatre practitioners alike.

#### ► New Plays and attribution

The Third Folio claimed to include new plays by Shakespeare. However, modern scholars believe the majority of these additional works were written by other playwrights. Despite this, the folios contributed to building Shakespeare's reputation over time by expanding the canon attributed to him and providing various versions of his plays.

#### ► Textual Changes

Each new edition involved numerous changes to the text originally printed in the First Folio. Publishers edited the plays to correct obvious mistakes, update old-fashioned language, and adapt the works to the changing tastes and understandings of their audiences. These continual changes helped keep Shakespeare's works accessible and relevant over the centuries.

#### ► Adaptation

Through these multiple editions, Shakespeare's writings were reshaped and sometimes rewritten. Nonetheless, this process ensured that his reputation as England's foremost playwright remained secure. The folios show a unique balance between preserving Shakespeare's original works and adapting them so they could continue to influence audiences for generations.

### 1.1.13 Literary Elements

#### ► The foundation of modern techniques, Stream of consciousness.

When a writer appears to invent a new literary style, a closer look often reveals that Shakespeare had already used that style centuries ago, demonstrating his remarkable prescience and enduring influence on literary development. This phenomenon illustrates how the Bard's innovative techniques continue to resurface in contemporary literature, often being rediscovered and rebranded by later writers who may not even realise they are following in Shakespeare's footsteps. For example, the "stream of consciousness" technique famously used by James Joyce in *Ulysses* is evident in Shakespeare's work, particularly in his soliloquies where characters' thoughts





flow in an unstructured, psychological manner that mirrors the natural patterns of human cognition. Consider *Hamlet*'s "To be or not to be" soliloquy, where the prince's mind wanders through existential questions, death, dreams, and moral dilemmas in a manner that anticipates Joyce's technique by several centuries. Similarly, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene presents a fragmented, associative flow of guilt-ridden thoughts that jumps between different moments and memories, creating the same psychological realism that Joyce would later perfect. The technique also appears in *King Lear* when the titular character, during the storm scenes, delivers speeches that blend external observations with internal turmoil in a stream-like fashion that reveals his deteriorating mental state.

Similarly, Harold Pinter's unique use of cryptic language, filled with pauses and silences, called "Pinteresque", can also be found in Shakespeare's plays, where the playwright masterfully employed subtext, pregnant pauses, and unspoken tensions to create dramatic intensity. After Duncan's murder in *Macbeth*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth engage in a frantic, tense exchange that is strikingly similar to Pinter's style, with fragmented sentences, loaded silences, and words that carry meanings far beyond their surface value. Their conversation is punctuated by what they cannot say directly, with each character understanding the subtext while speaking in coded, anxious phrases about blood, sleep, and guilt. This scene anticipates Pinter's technique of using everyday language to mask deeper psychological conflicts, where characters speak around their true feelings rather than expressing them directly. Another striking example appears in *Othello* during the handkerchief scene, where Othello's interrogation of Desdemona is filled with the kind of menacing pauses and indirect accusations that would become hallmarks of Pinter's theatrical style. The tension builds not through explicit statements but through what remains unsaid, through the gaps between words, and through the characters' inability to communicate their true feelings directly.

► Pinteresque dialogue

Furthermore, Shakespeare's experimentation with unreliable narrators and multiple perspectives predates postmodern literary techniques by centuries. In plays like "Hamlet", the ghost's testimony, Hamlet's feigned madness, and the play-within-a-play create layers of uncertainty

► Postmodern techniques

about truth and reality that anticipate writers like Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges. The fragmented narrative structure of *The Winter's Tale*, with its dramatic time jump and shift in tone, prefigures the kind of experimental storytelling that would later be celebrated as innovative in twentieth-century literature. Even Shakespeare's use of metatheatrical elements, where characters comment on the nature of performance itself, as seen in *As You Like It* with Jaques's "All the world's a stage" speech, anticipates the self-reflexive techniques that would become central to postmodern literature and theatre.

► Allusion

One of Shakespeare's most important literary techniques is "allusion." This is when a writer refers to a person, place, event, or story without naming it directly. Shakespeare made frequent allusions to mythology, the Bible, historical events, or other literary works. Such allusions help create mood, draw comparisons, or transport readers to different worlds. For example, the play *Antony and Cleopatra* is rich in mythological allusions, often comparing the lovers to Roman gods. These comparisons highlight how their love rises above ordinary human feelings.

► Dramatic devices

Shakespeare mastered dramatic devices, which are tools used to drive the plot forward. Although Shakespeare did not invent these devices, his skill in using them made his plays extremely gripping. In *Macbeth*, dramatic devices come one after the other: the witches plant the idea of kingship in Macbeth's mind, Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth, she persuades him to commit murder, and Duncan's arrival at the castle sets the scene for his murder. Each event pushes the action forward, creating suspense that lasts until the play ends.

► Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony is another key element in Shakespeare's works. This happens when the audience knows something the characters do not. For example, in *Macbeth*, when Duncan's body is discovered, Macbeth pretends to be shocked by the murder, but the audience knows he is the killer. Dramatic irony creates tension and lets the audience see the hidden truths within the story.

► Monologues and soliloquies

Shakespeare's plays contain many monologues, long speeches delivered while other characters are on stage to hear them. These speeches reveal the speaker's thoughts openly. Different from monologues, soliloquies are speeches by a character who is alone on stage, speaking their inner



thoughts aloud. Soliloquies give audiences direct insight into the character's private feelings and struggles. One famous soliloquy appears in *Hamlet*: "To be or not to be."

#### ► Symbolism

Symbolism is a powerful feature of Shakespeare's writing. It involves using objects, characters, or words to stand for larger ideas. When a word or image appears repeatedly, it often carries symbolic meaning beyond the literal. For instance, the word "blood" appears often in *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*, symbolising violence, passion, and family ties. In *King Lear*, imagery of fierce animals with claws and teeth symbolises the cruelty the older generation suffers from the younger. These symbols add profound layers of meaning to the plays.

## Summarised Overview

This unit introduces learners to the complex historical, social, cultural, and theatrical background of Elizabethan England that shaped William Shakespeare's life and works. Students explore how Renaissance humanism, social change, religious tensions, and evolving theatre practices influenced Shakespeare's plays. The nature of theatrical production, censorship, performance conditions, and collaborations are examined, along with textual transmission through quartos and folios. An overview of Shakespeare's biography and his mastery of literary techniques rounds off the comprehensive study of the era's impact on his enduring legacy.

## Self Assessment Questions

1. Describe the impact of the Renaissance on Elizabethan society and Shakespeare's works.
2. What were the main features of Elizabethan theatre affecting play production?
3. Explain the role of censorship in shaping Shakespeare's plays.
4. Discuss Shakespeare's use of classical sources in his works.
5. Identify and describe the social composition of Shakespeare's theatre audiences.

## Assignments

1. Write an essay discussing the influence of Renaissance humanism on Shakespeare's portrayal of characters.
2. Explain the effects of Elizabethan political and religious conditions on the content of Shakespeare's plays.
3. Describe the structure and features of Elizabethan theatres and their influence on Shakespeare's drama.
4. Compare and contrast quartos and folios in the preservation of Shakespeare's works.
5. Analyse the role of collaboration in Shakespeare's career and its impact on his plays.

## Suggested Reading

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3. Taylor, Gary. *Shakespeare Plays on Renaissance Stages*. Cambridge UP, 2002.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.

## Unit 2

## Senecan Influence

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand the influence of Senecan tragedy on Shakespeare's plays
- ▶ identify and analyse various character types in Shakespeare's works, including protagonists, antagonists and heroines
- ▶ explore the portrayal and significance of women characters in Shakespearean drama
- ▶ recognise and evaluate the use of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays
- ▶ comprehend key poetic and dramatic techniques such as blank verse, imagery, soliloquy, irony, disguise and quibbles
- ▶ examine how Shakespeare's language and stagecraft create dramatic effects

### Background

Shakespeare's dramatic art was deeply shaped by earlier classical influences, especially the Roman playwright Seneca, whose themes of revenge, violence, and moral complexity found resonance in Elizabethan tragedy. Seneca's style inspired Shakespeare's use of supernatural elements, characters' psychological depth, and dramatic monologues, which form the backbone of many of his greatest works. The Elizabethan stage offered unique opportunities and challenges that shaped his innovative playwriting.

Shakespeare's characters defy simple categorisation. Unlike some dramatists who reused stock types, Shakespeare created profoundly unique individuals in every play. These include complex heroes struggling with ambition and moral dilemmas, as well as vivid supporting figures such as clowns, confidants, and layered antagonists. Women in Shakespeare's plays exhibit remarkable range, from witty paradoxical heroines to tragic figures and powerful queens, reflecting contemporary debates on gender roles and identity.



This unit also explores Shakespeare's masterful use of language and theatrical devices -- from his inventive use of blank verse to dramatic irony, symbolism, disguise, and quibbles. These techniques bring rich imagery and psychological depth to the stage, enable characters' inner thoughts to be shared with the audience, and provide moments of tension, humour, and revelation that keep Shakespeare's plays enduringly compelling.

## Keywords

Seneca, Character Types, Women Characters, Supernatural, Blank Verse, Imagery, Soliloquy, Dramatic Irony.

## Discussion

### 1.2.1 Senecan Influence on Shakespeare's Works

During the sixteenth century, Seneca's tragedies had a strong influence on English writers and audiences. Seneca was a Roman philosopher and playwright whose nine tragedies were originally written as closet dramas, meaning they were intended more for reading than for theatrical performance. Elizabethan dramatists looked to Seneca's works as models because they struggled to create the perfect structure for their own tragedies. Seneca's themes of revenge and violence, as well as his dramatic style, appealed to the tastes of English audiences of the time.

Seneca's plays were deeply steeped in Greek mythology and often included elements of mysticism and magic. Unlike many early playwrights, Seneca tried to engage audiences directly by addressing them within the plays. Shakespeare borrowed heavily from these features and incorporated them skillfully into his tragedies. For example, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Titus Andronicus* all reflect Senecan motifs such as revenge, supernatural occurrences, and moral contemplation.

One of the most notable Senecan influences on Shakespeare is seen in his portrayal of ambitious, morally complex characters. The relentless aspirations of *Richard III* and *Macbeth* are examples of characters who echo Seneca's tragic heroes. These figures are caught in cycles of ambition,

► Introduction to Seneca

► Senecan themes in Shakespeare

► Character and genre adaptation



guilt, and destruction, similar to Seneca's protagonists. However, Shakespeare also adapted Senecan motifs to his unique style, using them not only in tragedies but also in comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where elements of magic and the supernatural play a significant role.

► Stylistic influence

Stylistically, Seneca influenced Shakespeare's use of speeches and soliloquies. Senecan tragedies often feature long, rhetorical speeches where characters justify their actions, plan revenge, or express moral dilemmas. These speeches create a strong connection between the character and the audience, making the viewers complicit in the unfolding drama. Shakespeare used a similar technique in his plays, allowing audiences to understand a character's innermost thoughts and motivations.

► Philosophical influence

Philosophically, Seneca's stoicism and ideas about fate and human weakness appear in Shakespeare's tragedies, but with notable differences. Seneca's plays express a pessimistic view of life dominated by fate and unstoppable cycles of violence. Shakespeare sometimes echoes this fatalism, as in *Hamlet*, but often balances it with elements of Christian morality and hope for redemption. Shakespeare's heroes have moments of moral choice and opportunity for forgiveness that are less present in Seneca's works.

Seneca's influence on Shakespeare was comprehensive and significant. Shakespeare drew on Seneca's dramatic structures, themes of revenge and violence, complex characters, direct audience engagement, and philosophical ideas of fate and morality. Yet Shakespeare crafted these classical elements into plays with unique emotional depth and moral nuance, creating works that have continued to captivate audiences for centuries.

### 1.2.2 Character Types in Shakespearean Plays

► Character Variety

Shakespeare is unique in that he rarely uses the same character kinds repeatedly, unlike other playwrights such as Molière, who often created similar characters with only minor differences. Each of Shakespeare's plays feels like a distinct world, a cosmos with its own unique and carefully crafted cast of characters. This originality means that he did not simply reuse the same character types again and again. However, there are a few generic



character types that frequently resurface, though always in countless variations reflecting different traits, motivations, and complexities. This variety ensures each character feels fresh and contributes uniquely to the story.

► Protagonists and antagonists

The protagonist in a Shakespearean play is typically the main problem-solver. This character faces the central conflict and must attempt to resolve it or suffer consequences, often tragic. For example, Macbeth begins as a heroic figure but gradually succumbs to villainy as his ambition destroys him. Despite this transformation, Macbeth remains the protagonist because the audience closely follows his perspective and inner struggles. Shakespeare's antagonists oppose the protagonist in various ways and create much of the conflict. These antagonists, such as Iago in *Othello*, frequently dominate the dialogue and action. Iago talks more than Othello himself and manipulates other characters skillfully. Similarly, Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is complex, being both an antagonist and a figure worthy of sympathy. Many of Shakespeare's villains are multi-dimensional, with redeeming qualities that add depth to the story.

► Friends, fools, dupes and heroines

Other important character types include the best friend or advisor, the clown or fool, the dupe, and the heroine. The best friend or advisor supports and counsels the protagonist, as seen in Ariel in *The Tempest*, Benvolio and Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Horatio in *Hamlet*. Not every play features such characters, but when they do appear, they often provide important moral guidance or contrast to the main figures. The clown or fool is a favourite Shakespearean archetype who appears even in tragedies to add humour, irony, or commentary. Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays serves as both an advisor and a clown. Shakespeare's Fool in *King Lear* and the gravedigger in *Hamlet* perform similar roles, mixing wit and poignancy. The dupe, present in both comedies and tragedies, is a character easily fooled or manipulated. Examples include Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and Roderigo in *Othello*. Finally, although male actors performed female roles in Shakespeare's time, most plays feature at least one significant female character. While women sometimes have small parts, as in *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare often portrays them as strong, complex figures central to the plot.

### 1.2.3 Women in Shakespearean Plays

#### ► Introduction

According to the critic John Ruskin, “Shakespeare has no heroes, he has only heroines.” This observation highlights just how important Shakespeare’s female characters are in his works. In fact, many commentators argue that his women are more memorable and significant than many of his male characters. Shakespeare’s female characters are so varied and realistic that some critics claim he has accurately depicted almost every type of woman. Over time, scholars have attempted to categorise these heroines into clear groups to better understand their traits and roles. One helpful way, suggested by Mrs. Jameson, divides them into a few broad categories.

#### ► Classification of women

The first group includes witty and assertive women such as Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. These characters are lively, intelligent, and outspoken, often using humour and cleverness to navigate their worlds. The second group includes loving and imaginative women, like Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Helena in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and Miranda in *The Tempest*. These women tend to be gentle, romantic, and sensitive, embodying youth and emotional depth. The third category comprises tragic heroines such as Desdemona in *Othello* and Cordelia in *King Lear*, whose pure intentions and strong moral standing often lead to suffering or loss. The final group features powerful and sometimes aggressive characters like Lady Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan, who display commanding personalities and ambitious nature. These distinctions offer a useful overview, though Shakespeare’s women are always complex and sometimes cross categories.

#### ► Strong heroines

Among Shakespeare’s most popular female characters are those who are intelligent, determined, and able to survive the difficulties they face. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is an example of a clever heroine who uses her wit and resourcefulness to succeed. Similarly, Viola, Beatrice and Rosalind, from some of Shakespeare’s finest comedies, dominate their plays with charm and sharp minds. Beatrice, for instance, is not just lively and witty; she also shows deep tenderness and love, as seen in her relationships with Hero and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Viola’s character in *Twelfth Night* is often misunderstood as simply passive,



but she is actually a clever woman who secretly controls many aspects of her fate. Her statement “I am all the daughters of my father's house” suggests she adopts many roles and exercises quiet strength.

► Range of female roles

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet is portrayed as loyal and self-sacrificing, maturing quickly through her love. Her devotion does not make her weak but rather shows her emotional strength. Portia, too, willingly submits to Bassanio as her husband in *The Merchant of Venice*, yet she remains a powerful and influential figure. Another tragic female is Portia, wife of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, who struggles with fear and ultimately takes her own life when her husband's cause fails. Ophelia in *Hamlet* represents a more passive and tragic type of love, caught in circumstances beyond her control. Some critics argue that Shakespeare's female characters are less prominent or substantial compared to the males, but this view overlooks the layered and varied portrayals he achieved.

► Powerful and complex women

Desdemona in *Othello* exemplifies innocence and loyalty, while Cordelia in *King Lear* embodies pride mixed with generosity and selflessness. These women act with integrity, often at great personal cost. In contrast, Shakespeare's violent and ruthless women are also significant. Lady Macbeth stands out as one of the most powerful tragic women. Like Clytemnestra from Greek tragedy, she is ambitious and determined, urging Macbeth to murder Duncan. Her strength is both her greatest asset and, ultimately, her downfall. Unlike her sisters Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth experiences intense guilt and moments of vulnerability. Goneril and Regan, Shakespeare's creations of pure cruelty, behave exactly as their father, King Lear, expects, showcasing political malice and unrelenting ambition. Cleopatra, the last of Shakespeare's most famous female characters, is renowned for her wit and charm, using feminine grace and intelligence to capture and control powerful men such as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.

### 1.2.4 Use of the Supernatural in Shakespearean Plays

In Shakespeare's time, belief in the supernatural was widespread and deeply ingrained in everyday life. People accepted the power of unknown forces such as witches, spirits, and magic without question. Popular books like Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, King James'

► Superstition  
in Elizabethan  
England

*Demonologie*, and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* were well-known and contributed to the culture of superstition. Shakespeare himself is thought to have held some belief in the supernatural, and he reflected this in his plays, which often imitated aspects of real life. Notably, five of Shakespeare's plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *The Tempest* feature significant supernatural elements.

► Supernatural  
characters  
and their  
roles

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairies, especially Puck, engage in mischievous but generally harmless behaviour towards humans. Their magical interference creates comedy and confusion, but they are not malevolent. By contrast, the ghost in *Hamlet* possesses a much stronger and darker presence, appearing as the spirit of Hamlet's father. The ghost cannot achieve its goal directly but profoundly influences Hamlet's actions and the play's tragic progression. The witches in *Macbeth* are even more sinister, using their prophecies to lure Macbeth into a path of ambition and destruction. However, their power alone is not enough to cause Macbeth's downfall; it arises because Macbeth already harbours evil desires deep within his heart.

► Supernatural  
as omens and  
controlled  
magic

The supernatural in *Julius Caesar* primarily serves as a forewarning of disasters. Strange, invisible forces manifest as omens and signs of death. The night before Caesar's assassination is filled with unnatural events - storms, burning skies, a lion prowling the city without harming anyone, and a ghostly figure appearing only to Brutus. These phenomena underscore the theme of fate's inevitability, leaving the characters and audience alike aware of looming tragedy. In *The Tempest*, the supernatural is more controlled and purposeful. Prospero, the magician, commands all magical beings, including Ariel and Caliban. Ariel, a spirit with remarkable powers, carries out Prospero's wishes, guiding events to achieve harmony by the play's end. Caliban, a wild and fearsome creature, is bound to serve Prospero's commands. Shakespeare carefully portrays these supernatural elements so that they reflect popular beliefs of the time, making them believable and engaging for his audiences.

Interestingly, Shakespeare limits the presence of supernatural beings to brief but impactful appearances. For example, the witches in *Macbeth* appear only at the play's beginning and once in the middle, creating a haunting



► Supernatural presence

atmosphere without overwhelming the plot. Similarly, the ghost of Caesar is visible only to Brutus, making this element more psychologically subjective and mysterious. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom the weaver is the only human character who actively interacts with the fairies, while the others remain unaware of their good deeds or mischief. This careful distancing emphasises the otherworldly nature of supernatural characters and maintains the mystery surrounding them.

► Role and impact

Shakespeare uses supernatural elements not only to enhance drama but also to explore human nature, morality, fate, and the unknown. The ghosts, witches, and magical spirits in his plays are more than mere fantasy figures. They challenge characters, provoke action, and deepen the thematic complexity of his works. Shakespeare's supernatural beings are vivid, memorable, and integral to the unfolding of the story, demonstrating the playwright's skill in weaving belief and imagination into his theatre.

### 1.2.5 Shakespeare's Use of the Blank Verse

► Historical background and influence

Since the mid-sixteenth century, blank verse has dominated English dramatic and narrative poetry. Blank verse is unrhymed poetry typically written in iambic pentameter, meaning each line usually has ten syllables arranged in five pairs, with the stress pattern falling on every second syllable. The form was introduced to English literature from Italy by the poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who translated parts of Virgil's *Aeneid* into blank verse and applied it to drama in the play *Gorboduc*. Later, the University Wits, including Christopher Marlowe, refined this style, turning it into a musical and flexible medium. Marlowe's talent for blank verse had a lasting impact on Shakespeare, who studied him closely and incorporated many Marlovian rhetorical devices into his early works. However, Shakespeare developed the form further, transforming its strictities into a flexible instrument capable of expressing natural speech rhythms and deep emotional nuances.

► Development and innovation

Shakespeare's consistent use of blank verse can be seen clearly in *Love's Labour's Lost*, one of his earlier plays, where the form is used lavishly in a playful, almost dazzling way. The language in this play is rich and complex, both poetic and dramatic, highlighting Shakespeare's artistic exploration of blank verse as a weapon in his creative

struggles. Over time, Shakespeare took increasing liberties with the form, stretching the pentameter to create longer lines (hexameter) or shorter lines, and frequently using double or feminine endings, where lines end with an extra unstressed syllable. This freedom enabled him to imitate natural speech and emphasize drama without losing the form's poetic qualities. Shakespeare's blank verse thus became a vehicle for both grandeur and subtlety, exploring the textures of human thought and emotion often better than prose could. His contemporaries were adept verbal artists too, but Shakespeare's mastery of blank verse set him apart.

- Style and dramatic function

Interestingly, Shakespeare's use of blank verse evolved with the nature of his plays. His earlier works feature intricate verbal displays, while his histories and more dramatic plays show a new vigour and focus on action supported by clear poetic structure. Unlike Marlowe, whose rhetorical and poetic virtuosity often dominated the stage, Shakespeare emphasised that poetry should serve the drama rather than overwhelm it. This belief led him to craft blank verse that is simple yet powerful, making it an ideal tool to communicate dramatic tension and character psychology. Shakespeare's blank verse often varies in rhythm and length to reflect changes in mood, character state, and narrative pace, enhancing the theatrical experience and ensuring that language feels alive and compelling.

### 1.2.6 Imagery

- Definition and purpose

Imagery in literature involves using figurative language to create vivid pictures in the mind, often accompanied by strong emotional undertones. In theatre, imagery increases the emotional intensity and helps develop characters or themes more compactly and powerfully. Shakespeare frequently employed metaphors and similes to highlight specific ideas or to add depth to his plays. His imagery often followed the conventions popular in Elizabethan England, drawing on familiar experiences and sights to create a connection with his audience. This use of imagery helped to develop central themes in his works and allowed readers or viewers to feel closely involved with the characters and their situations, making the emotions more palpable and real.

Shakespeare's imagery served many purposes: to set the mood, emphasise character emotions, and highlight broader themes. For example, in *Macbeth*, he makes frequent use of

► Symbolism and mood

imagery connected to clothing, darkness, and blood. These recurring images symbolise different aspects of the play. The blending of blood and sleep imagery after Duncan's murder creates a terrifying atmosphere that deepens the audience's understanding of Macbeth's growing madness. Lady Macbeth's final scene uses blood imagery to powerfully express her overwhelming guilt. In addition, Shakespeare uses imagery to heighten the audience's feelings of fear and dread, making the play's themes of violence and ambition more vivid. Similarly, Iago in *Othello* is strongly linked to the imagery of hell, which underlines his devilish nature. The contrast between good and evil is sharpened through frequent images of heaven and hell throughout the play, reinforcing the struggle between moral forces.

► Examples

Several other well-known examples of imagery come from Shakespeare's works. In *Romeo and Juliet*, light and dark imagery illustrates the intensity and fragility of young love. Romeo calls Juliet "the sun," while Juliet refers to Romeo as the "moon," creating a contrast that highlights their connection and the obstacles they face. The recurrent imagery of light, sunshine, moonlight, and stars against darkness creates a rich emotional backdrop. In *Hamlet*, imagery centered on sickness and corruption reflects the moral decay that drives the plot and the prince's inner turmoil. In *The Tempest*, the image of dreams and the material world's fleeting nature is central, summed up in the famous line "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." Shakespeare's use of imagery is not just decorative; it carries symbolic meaning that enriches the experience and understanding of each play.

Imagery provides Shakespeare's plays with vividness, emotional power, and thematic unity. Through figurative language, he transports audiences into the minds of his characters and the world of his plays. His skill in using repeated and linked images, sometimes known as iterative or thematic imagery, creates a deeper layer of meaning that resonates long after the play ends. This masterful use of imagery is key to the enduring impact and emotional force of Shakespeare's theatre.

### 1.2.7 Quibbles

A quibble is a clever storytelling device that hinges on a subtle or technical detail, often involving precise wording or legal language, to solve or complicate a conflict in a

story. It allows a character to exploit the exact terms of an agreement or situation to evade its intended meaning. Quibbles are frequently found in formal contracts or magical covenants within fiction. Shakespeare makes frequent use of this device to add drama, wit, and unexpected twists to his plays.

One of the most famous examples occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Portia saves Antonio by arguing that the contract granted Shylock the right to a pound of flesh but did not allow him to shed any blood. Since it is impossible to remove flesh without causing bloodshed, Shylock's claim fails. This clever technicality turns what seemed a tragic verdict into a legal victory.

The crucial dialogue occurs when Portia, disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, first appears to grant Shylock his demand:

**PORTIA:** A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine. The court awards it, and the law doth give it.

**SHYLOCK:** Most rightful judge!

**PORTIA:** And you must cut this flesh from off his breast. The law allows it, and the court awards it.

**SHYLOCK:** Most learned judge, a sentence! Come, prepare.

But then Portia delivers the decisive quibble that saves Antonio:

**PORTIA:** Tarry a little. There is something else. This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood. The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh.' Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh, But in the cutting it if thou dost shed One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods Are by the laws of Venice confiscate Unto the state of Venice.

► Definition, purpose, and example from *The Merchant of Venice*

This moment perfectly shows the power of the quibble. Portia's legal hairsplitting exploits the literal wording of the bond- it specified only flesh, with no mention of blood. Since extracting flesh without shedding blood is impossible, the contract becomes unenforceable, transforming Shylock's apparent victory into defeat through the precise interpretation of language.

Quibbles are not limited to legal matters in Shakespeare's work. The witches' prophecy in *Macbeth* that "none of





► Examples in Plays

woman born” can harm Macbeth appears to promise his invincibility. However, this prophecy is later cleverly countered when Macduff, who was “from his mother’s womb untimely ripped” (born by Caesarean section), kills Macbeth. This clever wordplay creates dramatic tension by twisting the meaning of the prophecy and surprising both Macbeth and the audience. These quibbles add layers of meaning and complexity to the narrative, showing Shakespeare’s skill in manipulating language for dramatic effect and keeping his audiences engaged with unexpected outcomes.

► Significance and Effect

Shakespeare’s use of quibbles reflects his fascination with words and their power. They create moments of tension, comedy, or surprise that enrich the storytelling. Quibbles often reveal characters’ wit and intelligence, especially when they use language cleverly to escape danger or achieve their aims. Beyond *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, quibbles appear in other plays too, demonstrating Shakespeare’s enjoyment of linguistic puzzles and his understanding of the nuances of legal and rhetorical language. This device contributes to the richness of his works, showcasing the importance of precise language and the cleverness of those who can twist it to their advantage.

► Johnson’s Criticism

Dr. Samuel Johnson, one of Shakespeare’s earliest and most influential critics, had mixed feelings about Shakespeare’s love of wordplay, especially his fondness for quibbles. Johnson regarded quibbles as Shakespeare’s “fatal Cleopatra,” a device for which the playwright was willing to “lose the world and be content to lose it.” In his view, Shakespeare’s use of quibbles sometimes weakened the drama because they distracted from the serious emotions and moral lessons of the plays. Johnson admired Shakespeare greatly and praised his natural language and vivid characterisations, but he also criticised him for lacking a clear moral purpose and for allowing his characters to pass through right and wrong indiscriminately, sometimes leaving justice to chance. Johnson saw Shakespeare’s quibbles as part of a broader tendency to favour clever language at the expense of unity and moral clarity. Despite these criticisms, Johnson acknowledged Shakespeare’s unmatched ability to capture human nature and his lasting impact on literature.

### 1.2.8 Soliloquy and Aside

#### ► Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a speech in which a character speaks their thoughts aloud, often while alone on stage. It is a form of self-reflection and self-analysis that reveals a character's innermost feelings, motives, and struggles. During the Elizabethan era, soliloquies were common and useful devices for advancing the plot or informing the audience of events and emotions that could not be shown directly on stage. Shakespeare's soliloquies are particularly rich in expressing complex emotions and hidden meanings. They allow the audience to understand the character's private conflicts and deeper thoughts, which might remain unknown to other characters in the play. For example, in *Hamlet*, the title character delivers several soliloquies, including the famous "To be or not to be" speech, which expresses his intense contemplation of life and death. Soliloquies help to deepen the psychological complexity of Shakespeare's heroes and villains alike.

#### ► Aside

An aside is shorter than a soliloquy and usually occurs when other characters are present on stage but are not meant to hear the speech. In an aside, the character speaks directly to the audience, revealing secret thoughts, opinions, or feelings that other characters do not know. Asides create a special connection between the character and the audience, often providing commentary or hints about upcoming events. For instance, in *Macbeth*, Macbeth occasionally uses asides to express his private doubts and ambitions without alerting others. Similarly, in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, characters use asides to disclose their true intentions or reactions. The key difference between an aside and a soliloquy is length and context: asides are brief and involve other characters on stage, while soliloquies are longer and usually delivered when the character is alone.

#### ► Role in Drama

Together, soliloquies and asides reveal a character's hidden motives and internal conflicts, helping the audience understand the play's deeper meanings. These devices enhance dramatic tension by allowing viewers to hear the private thoughts that drive the plot forward. Shakespeare's masterful use of soliloquy and aside contributes to the emotional depth and psychological realism of his plays, engaging audiences directly with his characters' minds. ()



### 1.2.9 Irony

#### ► Introduction to Irony

Irony in literature involves contradictory statements or situations that reveal a truth different from what appears obvious. William Shakespeare is renowned for his masterful use of irony, incorporating dramatic, situational, and verbal irony throughout his plays with a skill few writers have matched. Irony creates layers of meaning that engage the audience and deepen the emotional and thematic impact of a story. Shakespeare's use of irony is so notable that discussing irony in literature would be incomplete without mentioning him.

#### ► Verbal Irony

One clear example of verbal irony occurs in *Julius Caesar*, where Julius Caesar praises Brutus as “an honourable man” shortly before Brutus joins conspirators to assassinate him on the Ides of March. The audience, aware of Brutus' true betrayal, recognises that Caesar's words mean the opposite of what they literally say. Similarly, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet tells her mother she is not ready to marry but immediately contradicts herself by preparing to wed Romeo that very night, confusing her mother while revealing her true intentions to the audience.

#### ► Situational Irony

Situational irony appears in plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, which is often assumed to be solely a romantic story until the audience realises it ends in tragedy, with both lovers dying. In *Macbeth*, the title character murders King Duncan to claim the crown but quickly discovers that holding onto power requires more killing, which isolates him and prevents him from finding happiness. This reversal of expectations highlights the cruel consequences of his ambition and violent actions.

#### ► Dramatic Irony

Dramatic irony is frequently used to give the audience knowledge that the characters lack, building tension and anticipation. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience knows Juliet is alive while Romeo believes she is dead, leading to tragic consequences. Similarly, in *Othello*, the audience understands Iago's schemes while Othello remains deceived, intensifying the unfolding tragedy. Shakespeare's skill in weaving these layers of irony enriches his stories and makes his plays compelling and timeless.

Shakespeare's use of irony, whether verbal, situational or dramatic, adds complexity and emotional depth to his plays. By contrasting appearance with reality, Shakespeare

highlights themes of betrayal, fate, love, and ambition, engaging audiences in stories that continue to resonate across centuries.

### 1.2.10 Disguise

Disguise is a common dramatic device in Shakespeare's plays and often creates dramatic irony. The use of disguise has a long history dating back to Greek and Roman theatre, and Shakespeare frequently employed it for a variety of effects. During the Elizabethan period, disguising oneself was often seen as problematic and even dangerous because clothing was a clear marker of identity and social class. The English Sumptuary Laws regulated what people could wear based on their status, and breaking these laws by dressing outside one's rank could lead to punishments such as fines, loss of property, or even death. This context made the use of disguise on stage both exciting and risky, and Shakespeare used it with careful consideration.

#### ► Historical Context and Significance

Gender disguise is one of the most prominent forms used by Shakespeare, particularly involving female characters who dress as men. For example, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind disguises herself as a young man named Ganymede to avoid danger and to gain freedom. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer called Balthazar to save Antonio in court, demonstrating her intelligence and courage. Another well-known example is Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who adopts male clothing and the identity of Cesario. Her disguise creates complex emotional confusion, especially in the love triangle involving Olivia and Orsino. Disguise leads to comic situations and misunderstandings but also allows Shakespeare to explore gender roles and social conventions in a playful yet insightful manner.

#### ► Gender Disguise

Disguise also serves various other dramatic purposes. In *King Lear*, Edgar, the son of Gloucester, adopts the identity of a mad beggar named Poor Tom after being falsely accused of plotting against his father. This disguise allows him to survive, gather information, and ultimately seek justice. Shakespeare used disguise to develop plot complexity, provoke laughter, and build suspense. Despite the dangers and social restrictions of using disguise in his time, Shakespeare made it a powerful tool for creating mistaken identities, secret intentions, and dramatic tension. This device deepened character development and contributed to the entertainment and thought-provoking aspects of his plays.

#### ► Dramatic Function and Effects





## Summarised Overview

This unit provides an in-depth exploration of Shakespeare's literary and dramatic techniques, beginning with the profound impact of Senecan tragedy on his works. Seneca's themes of revenge, supernatural events, and complex characterisation established a framework which Shakespeare adapted and expanded, imbuing his plays with psychological depth and dramatic tension. Students will study Shakespeare's varied cast of characters, from commanding protagonists to subtle villains and dynamic heroines, highlighting their uniqueness and emotional complexity.

Key language and stagecraft techniques are introduced to demonstrate how Shakespeare crafted his plays to maximise impact. Techniques such as blank verse enable poetic yet naturalistic dialogue; soliloquies and asides create intimate connections between character and audience; irony and disguise generate suspense and comic effect. The use of imagery and quibbles enhances thematic richness, while supernatural elements explore fate, morality, and human nature. Together, these tools reveal Shakespeare's mastery of drama as a vibrant, multifaceted art that continues to captivate.

## Self Assessment Questions

1. What is the significance of Seneca's influence on Shakespeare's tragedies?
2. Identify and describe the main character types used by Shakespeare.
3. How do Shakespeare's female characters challenge contemporary gender roles?
4. In what ways does Shakespeare incorporate supernatural elements into his plays?
5. Explain the dramatic effects created by soliloquies and asides in Shakespeare's works.
6. Provide examples of dramatic irony from Shakespeare's plays and discuss their impact.

## Assignments

1. Discuss the influence of Seneca's tragedies on Shakespeare's plays with relevant examples.
2. Analyse the different types of characters in Shakespeare's plays and their dramatic functions.
3. Evaluate the portrayal of women in Shakespearean drama, citing key heroines.
4. Examine Shakespeare's use of supernatural elements and their thematic significance.
5. Illustrate how Shakespeare employs dramatic irony and soliloquy to deepen audience engagement.

## Suggested Reading

1. Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Penguin, 1991.
2. Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. Norton, 2004.
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4. Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Harvard UP, 1997.
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1. Ford, Boris, ed. *The Age of Shakespeare. The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. Vol. 2. Penguin, 1991.
2. Stern, Tiffany. "The Theatre of Shakespeare's London." *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Ed. Margreta de Grazia. Cambridge UP, 2010. 45-60.
3. Taylor, Michael. *Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford UP, 2001.



4. Bell Shakespeare. *Language and Literary Techniques in Shakespeare*. Bell Shakespeare Education, 2023.
5. BBC Bitesize. *Shakespeare Literary Techniques*. BBC, 2023.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.

## Unit 3

# Major Classifications of Shakespearean Plays

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand the thematic classification and complexity of Shakespeare's plays.
- ▶ differentiate between Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies, romances, problem plays, histories, and Roman plays.
- ▶ appreciate Shakespeare's contribution to enriching the English language.
- ▶ explore major social discourses in Shakespeare's works including humanism, imperialism, feudalism, patriarchy, and gender dynamics.
- ▶ recognise Shakespeare's nuanced exploration of identity, power, and social change in his plays

### Background

William Shakespeare's dramatic legacy spans a wide range of play types, categorized broadly after his lifetime into tragedies, comedies, romances, problem plays, and histories. His genius lies in blending genres, creating complexity in tone and theme, with tragedies incorporating comic relief and comedies often revealing deeper emotional truths. His plays explore universal themes of ambition, love, betrayal, and redemption, while challenging conventional genre boundaries.

Beyond genre, Shakespeare profoundly enriched the English language, coining over 1,700 words still in use and numerous idiomatic expressions. His linguistic creativity, especially in blank verse, added powerful poetic expression to drama. These innovations contributed to English's emergence as a rich literary language and to Shakespeare's enduring global cultural influence.

The social discourses encountered in his plays reflect Elizabethan England's values and tensions. Shakespeare engaged with humanism's celebration of individual dignity, imperialist views of cultural superiority, patriarchy's gender restrictions, and the shift from feudalism to capitalism. His plays provide a mirror



to his society's complexities, portraying the fragility of power, gender roles, racial tensions, and moral ambiguities with emotional depth and intellectual insight.

## Keywords

Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, Problem Plays, Language Enrichment, Humanism, Patriarchy, Imperialism.

## Discussion

### Shakespeare as a Dramatist: Chief Qualities

Shakespeare stands as one of the greatest geniuses ever born. While many are awed by the richness and variety of his plays, it is important to note that he did not always seek originality in plot. Following the practices of his time, he borrowed freely from existing plays and classical sources such as Plutarch's *Lives* and Holinshed's *Chronicles*, reshaping older plots rather than inventing new ones. Yet, his brilliance shines through more than three centuries later with a dazzling light. The secret of his enduring superiority lies not in plot originality but in other remarkable qualities.

#### ► His Immense Variety

Shakespeare's greatness comes from blending diverse talents found separately in other writers. He did not surpass Marlowe in tragic pathos or Webster in horror, nor did he match Ben Jonson in structured comedies or Fletcher and Dekker in lyricism. What sets him apart is how he combined all these gifts with endless variety. Shakespeare's flexibility was "marvellous," adapting to different genres with equal passion and joy. His plays span tragic and comic, sentimental and burlesque, lyrical fantasy and detailed character studies. He never repeats himself fully, always offering fresh and unique works.

Shakespeare's appeal is timeless and global. Ben Jonson said he belonged not to any one age or country but to all times and places. Though he wrote for the Elizabethan stage, his works are read worldwide today. His plays have been translated into many languages, and film adaptations continue to attract audiences. His freshness grows with each



► His Universal-  
ity

reading; his characters and themes remain relevant. The immortal mystery of his character Cleopatra exemplifies this timelessness:

“Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale

Her infinite variety...”

His dramas flow like a river of life and beauty from which all seeking art or truth can drink deeply.

The key to Shakespeare's universality is what Aristotle called the idealising power in art, lifting specific events into a broader human context. He moves from the particular story to the general human experience, so his characters represent humanity “unbroken from generation to generation.” Dealing with universal passions, joys and sorrows, his works engage every reader personally. With maturity, Shakespeare internalised conflicts, revealing the deepest motives behind human actions. His command of thought and emotions sweeps through all human experiences, from childish innocence to tragic despair, making his characters complex and fully human. Consequently, his works remain deeply interesting across centuries, offering wisdom and insights into human nature as well as poetic beauty.

► Its Secret

Shakespeare's tragedies reach beyond human reality to suggest a cosmic struggle with greater forces. His characters often seem like powerless figures driven by fate or malignant powers. This cosmic dimension adds to the universality of his plays, where characters symbolise humanity's eternal battle with evil. Bradley describes this as a vast atmosphere of nature's and human passion's turmoil, set in vague, misty surroundings that magnify the mysterious powers influencing fate. Though highly individualised, Shakespeare's characters also serve as universal types of humankind.

► Cosmic  
struggle

In characterisation Shakespeare reigns supreme, surpassing all rivals. His characters live and grow consistently throughout the plays. E. Albert notes that from kings to clowns, from lovers to misanthropes, all are depicted with masterly skill. Shakespeare treats good and evil impartially and with equal care, like the sun that shines on both the just and unjust. His characters are lifelike, rounded and full of humanity, unlike the wooden figures of

► Art of Charac-  
terisation



many contemporaries. This vitality maintains the sympathy and interest of audiences even today.

► His Theatrical Sense

Another key to Shakespeare's greatness is his realism and practicality. He accepted the limitations of his stage and transformed them into strengths. Lacking elaborate scenery, he used rich language to create vivid pictures. Knowing his audiences enjoyed humour, he did not reject clowns but elevated them into wise and sympathetic figures. He also grounded supernatural elements closely in character and action, enhancing their dramatic effect.

► Varied humour

Shakespeare is the greatest humourist in English literature. His humour is varied, subtle, and ever-present like a gentle perfume. It is mostly objective, kindly, and refined, though he could also be ironical, satirical or grim when needed. His laughter targets fools, pretenders, vanity, misunderstandings, and hypocrisy, often mixing farce with wit. The audience delights in seeing vanity exposed and evil humbled without cruel physical suffering.

► Blending of Humour and Pathos

While Shakespeare's laughter is exquisite, he also mixes humour with tragedy and pathos with skill. His mature works perfectly blend the comic and tragic, joyous and sorrowful. In tragedies, humour alleviates gloom, relieves tension, and heightens dramatic impact. Unlike Greek drama that kept comedy separate, Shakespeare's art mirrors life's mix of tears and smiles, capturing "nature" truly.

► Poetic style

Shakespeare was not only a great dramatist but also a great poet. His plays are filled with exquisite songs and a passion for beauty that matches his sonnets. His fusion of drama and lyricism is perfect, blending truth and beauty seamlessly. His mature style is marked by apt phrasing, eloquence, and thoughtfulness. Metaphors and similes from his pen shine like sparks from a fire. E. Albert praises his style for sweetness, strength, flexibility and an "inevitable and final felicity", the hallmark of genius. Shakespearean expression has become proverbial.

Shakespeare's greatness as a dramatist lies not in plot originality but in his unmatched variety, universal appeal, profound characterisation, and artistic unity. He combined and transcended the gifts of his contemporaries, adapting his style fluidly to varied material. His works speak across ages and cultures because they capture the essential nature of humanity and its cosmic struggles. With humour

and pathos, poetry and realism, Shakespeare created living characters and timeless dramas that continue to teach, delight and inspire. As Raleigh summarised, Shakespeare stands alone as the greatest poet of all times, whose works remain a perpetual source of wisdom, beauty and consolation.

### 1.3.1 Thematic Classification of Plays

Unlike many other writers, Shakespeare created a broad and diverse range of plays that explore different themes and styles. He wrote about thirty-seven plays that vary from comedic humour to deadly tragedy, intoxicating romances filled with magic and madness, and historical dramas based on real figures and events. Shakespeare was a master of many genres, creating works that defy simple classification. It was not Shakespeare himself but later editors who categorised his plays after their publication. These plays can be thematically grouped into tragedies, comedies, romances, problem plays, histories, and Roman plays.

► Classification and Complexity

No play of Shakespeare's completely fits into a single genre because his works often blend features from various types. For example, his tragedies often include moments of comic relief and very human experiences that add depth beyond pure sorrow. Similarly, his comedies frequently contain moments of fear, loss, truth, and melancholy alongside the humour and romance. Each play is a complex web of real emotions, decisions, consequences, love, hate, and terror. While each genre may have a typical way to end the play, Shakespeare's works are unique and do not strictly follow these rules, making them rich and varied experiences for audiences.

#### 1.3.1.1 Tragedies

Shakespeare's tragedies often focus on one or more central characters who either struggle against pressures from their family or society or bring about their own downfall due to inherent flaws. These flaws, often called a tragic flaw or hamartia, include pride, jealousy, ambition, and other weaknesses. Shakespeare's tragedies tell epic stories that can involve romance, family conflict, historical figures like kings and queens, political intrigue, social disillusionment, and profound moral questions. The central character's personal flaws combine with external forces to



create a dramatic trajectory that usually ends in disaster and death.

► Definition, Traits, Themes

A hallmark of Shakespearean tragedy is the tragic hero, a figure of high status such as a king, prince, or noble, whose fall causes great turmoil. Tragic heroes like Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear, and Julius Caesar are known for their complex personalities and moral struggles. Their downfall often results in a “tragic waste,” where not only the villain but also good and noble characters perish, highlighting the cost of human frailty and fate. Conflict, both internal and external, plays a key role in driving the plot, with characters battling forces within themselves as well as outside threats. Supernatural elements such as ghosts and witches create atmospheric tension and influence the characters’ decisions, as seen in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. These tragedies do not always follow the moral rule of poetic justice; sometimes good is destroyed along with evil, creating a complex and realistic reflection of human life. The suffering experienced by characters evokes emotions of pity and fear in the audience, fulfilling the cathartic purpose described by Aristotle in classical tragedy.

### 1.3.1.2 Comedies

► Plot Characteristics and Themes

Shakespeare’s comedies are known for their lively and often humorous plots, which frequently involve romance, mistaken identity, magical events, love potions, epic adventures, disasters, long-lost twins, and fools. A common plot device is the escape of protagonists from the constraints of city or courtly life, leading them to mysterious or foreign settings where the usual rules do not apply. In these new environments, characters often experience confusion, playfulness, and personal discovery. While there is much humour and lightness, some comedies also contain serious themes beneath the surface, such as social critique and human emotions.

► Ending and Examples

A defining feature of Shakespearean comedies is that none of the characters die, and the plays conclude happily with resolutions that often involve marriages. These endings restore social harmony and reward the lovers, tying up loose ends and providing joyful closure. Characters who try to disrupt this harmony usually face consequences. *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night* stand among Shakespeare’s most cherished comedies, each filled with witty dialogue, clever wordplay,

and intricate plots involving disguise and mistaken identity.

► Setting, Characters, and Themes

Shakespeare's comedy combines romance and realism, often taking place in idyllic or imaginative locales like the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* or the magical island in *The Tempest*. His comic characters, including witty heroines and memorable fools, engage audiences across social classes with their charm and intelligence. Music, song, and festive celebrations like weddings add to the joyful atmosphere. Despite their light-heartedness, Shakespeare's comedies also explore themes of love's trials, identity, and reconciliation, offering hope and insight alongside laughter.

### 1.3.1.3 Romances

► Definition and Tone

Shakespeare's romances, sometimes called tragicomedies, are typically late plays that blend elements of comedy and tragedy. They often tell stories of wandering, separation, and ultimate reunion, combining moments of sorrow and joy in a bittersweet tone. These plays bring a sense of healing and reconciliation after exploring the depths of human suffering and moral complexity found in Shakespeare's great tragedies.

► Characteristics and Themes

Common characteristics of romances include tragic or potentially tragic beginnings that are resolved happily by the end. For example, in *The Winter's Tale*, King Leontes' jealousy causes conflict, but the play ends with forgiveness and restoration. Magic and the supernatural are frequently present, such as the powerful illusions and spirits in *The Tempest*. The romances often show a mixture of courtly and pastoral scenes, with themes of redemption and second chances. Central to many romances is the reunion of family members who have been separated, such as the restoration of Perdita to her father in *The Winter's Tale* or Miranda's reunion with her father Prospero in *The Tempest*.

► Narrative Style and Significance

The plots tend to be more complex and flexible than in Shakespeare's earlier works, allowing for narrative gaps, time jumps, and symbolic figures like Time itself in *The Winter's Tale*. Romance heroes and heroines are less memorable but often embody ideals of forgiveness, transformation, and maturity. Unlike the Aristotelian tragedies where characters fall due to flaws and must die, the romances allow for repentance, redemption, and new beginnings. Spectacle and poetic language are





emphasised, enhancing the emotional and visual appeal of these plays. The romances reflect Shakespeare's evolving style and offer a hopeful vision of healing after pain, balancing darkness with light.

Common Shakespearean romances include *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. These plays continue to be admired for their beauty, complexity, and unique blending of tragic and comic elements, offering a different kind of dramatic experience focused on reconciliation and renewal.

#### 1.3.1.4 Problem Plays

##### ► Term Origin and Difficulty

Shakespeare's plays sometimes fall into a category called "Problem Plays," though this classification is controversial and debated among scholars. The term itself refers to the challenges in categorising certain plays that do not fit neatly into tragedy, comedy, or history. "Problem Play" can also describe works where characters express conflicting views on social or moral issues, leading to complex debates within the plot. The critic Frederick Samuel Boas first used this classification to group some of Shakespeare's works that present moral dilemmas and social controversies rather than straightforward comedy or tragedy.

##### ► Themes and Characteristics

Not all critics agree on which plays belong to this genre, but the most commonly cited problem plays include *The Winter's Tale*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. These plays often feature shifting tones, moving between dark psychological drama and lighter comic scenes, resulting in ambiguous endings or resolutions that seem insufficient or uneasy. Unlike typical comedies that end with happy marriages or tragedies with clear demises, problem plays pose difficult questions and leave audiences unsettled. For example, *Measure for Measure* deals with justice, morality, and mercy in ways that challenge the audience's expectations, while *Troilus and Cressida* presents a cynical view of love and war with no neat resolution.

##### ► Classification and Significance

Problem plays bridge the gap between Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies, often exploring uncomfortable or controversial themes without delivering clear moral answers. They provoke thought and debate rather than simple emotional responses. This category demonstrates Shakespeare's willingness to challenge social norms and theatrical conventions, making these works some of the

most intellectually complex and thematically rich in his repertoire.

### 1.3.1.5 Histories and Roman Plays

Shakespeare wrote numerous plays based on real historical figures, mostly English kings and queens. However, he often altered historical facts, characters, and events to craft compelling narratives with dramatic impact. While this creative liberty made for captivating theatre, it also attracted criticism; for example, Shakespeare's portrayal of King Richard III as a ruthless villain has been contested, with some arguing that the play unfairly damaged the king's reputation and legacy.

► Definition, Themes, and Examples

His history plays vividly depict power struggles, political intrigue, and national identity, often focusing on events like the Wars of the Roses. Notable history plays include *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2, *Richard II*, and *Henry VI* Parts 1 to 3. These plays brilliantly highlight the complexities of kingship, honour, and ambition within the context of English medieval and Renaissance society.

In addition to English histories, Shakespeare wrote four Roman plays: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Titus Andronicus*. These plays draw on ancient Roman history and legend, exploring themes of power, loyalty, betrayal, and the impact of public and private passions on the course of history. Together, Shakespeare's histories and Roman plays form a rich tapestry of political drama and human experience, blending historical events with timeless themes.

### 1.3.2 Shakespeare's Enrichment of the English Language

William Shakespeare's impact on English literature and language is profound and enduring. During Shakespeare's time, English was not yet a standardised language with fixed grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. Shakespeare's works helped bring consistency and richness to English, contributing more than 1,700 new words, many of which remain in everyday use. Words like "lonely," "frugal," and "dwindle" were popularised by Shakespeare, along with memorable expressions including "break the ice" and "heart of gold." His inventive use of language, particularly in blank verse, inspired generations of writers such as Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Alfred Lord Tennyson,



and Charles Dickens. Through his dramatic works, Shakespeare helped shape English into a language capable of great expressive power and flexibility.

► Words,  
Phrases, and  
Quotes

Shakespeare's contributions extend beyond words to include phrases and idioms still in common use worldwide. His works have been translated into many languages, including Malayalam, reflecting his global cultural significance. Among the words credited to Shakespeare are "alligator," "manager," "gloomy," "barefaced," and "fashionable." He adapted vocabulary from many sources, including Celtic, Old Norse, Latin, German, and French, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Elizabethan England. Phrases such as "all that glitters is not gold," "brave new world," and "a dog will have its day" demonstrate his creative mastery of idiomatic English. His quotable lines, like "To thine own self be true" (*Hamlet*) and "All the world's a stage" (*As You Like It*), have become part of everyday speech and cultural literacy.

► Cultural  
Importance

Shakespeare's work transcends time and place. His linguistic creativity, combined with his exploration of human nature and culture, makes his studies essential today. As the most quoted author worldwide, Shakespeare's legacy is not only literary but also linguistic and cultural. His plays remain a source of dazzling language and timeless wisdom, indispensable for understanding the evolution of the English language and the global literary heritage it helped shape.

### 1.3.3 Discourses Encountered

#### 1.3.3.1 Humanism

During the Elizabethan period, writers such as George Chapman, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare supported the philosophical and cultural movement known as humanism, which emphasises human dignity, individual potential, and reason. Among these, Shakespeare stands out by holding a mirror up to human nature through his richly drawn characters and empathetic exploration of human emotions. One famous example is the protagonist Hamlet, who praises the noble qualities of humanity in his famous speech:

*“What a piece of work is man!  
How noble in reason!  
How infinite in faculty!  
In form and moving, how expressive and admirable!  
How like an angel!  
In apprehension, how like a god!  
The beauty of the world!  
The paragon of animals!”*

Yet, Hamlet also acknowledges the darker side of life by calling human life “the quintessence of dust,” a reflection of his own deep melancholy and pessimism.

As Shakespeare’s work evolves from tragedies to romantic plays, the humanistic message grows stronger. In *The Tempest*, Prospero represents the civilising influence of the artist and educator, using his magical power to calm and guide human nature. Prospero embodies humanistic ideals such as charity, compassion, friendship, and wisdom. While Shakespeare acknowledges human flaws and limitations, his works often reflect the Renaissance scepticism characteristic of humanism. He presents contrasting pairs of ideas - action versus reflection, theory versus practice, decency versus immorality, individualism versus society—exploring the tensions inherent in human existence.

Though Shakespeare lacked a formal education typical of many humanist scholars, humanism clearly shaped his writing and thinking. His plays *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* reveal strong humanistic influences, as Shakespeare honours the dignity, complexity, and virtues of humanity even amid tragedy. Characters such as Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth, despite their suffering and tragic ends, exhibit admirable human qualities like compassion, courage, patience, and kindness, referred to in *Macbeth* as the “milk of human kindness.”

### 1.3.3.2 Imperialism

Post-colonial literary theories have recently helped scholars examine how racial, cultural, and national attitudes influenced Shakespeare’s works. These studies reveal how



► Imperialism context

Shakespeare, writing as a representative of English identity, presented European and English cultural superiority over the “Others” who were seen as uncivilised and inferior. His plays reflect the social and political contexts of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, upholding patriarchal and imperialist worldviews that justified domination and exclusion. Shakespeare’s perspective largely aligns with his era’s beliefs, though his works allow for nuanced portrayals of power and identity. This context is essential to understanding the values and ideas his plays present and question. Imperialist discourse and racial “otherness” were foundational to the social structures of the period.

► The Tempest

*The Tempest* is a prominent example of imperialism in Shakespeare’s drama. The play depicts Prospero as a coloniser who seizes control of a distant island and its indigenous inhabitants. The characters of Caliban and Sycorax are portrayed as savage and uncivilised, reinforcing racist and sexist stereotypes that legitimise Prospero’s domination. This unequal power dynamic reflects European colonialism’s justifications and strategies. The play shows the naturalisation of imperial conquest and the maintenance of power by a ruling elite. Literary critics such as Edward Said interpret *The Tempest* as an early text that consolidates orientalist knowledge supporting European control over colonised peoples. Shakespeare’s depiction of race and power reveals how deeply imperialist attitudes are embedded in his work.

► Cultural conflict

Shakespeare also explores imperialism through cultural conflict, as seen in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In *Othello*, the clash of East and West is central, with Othello portrayed as the exotic “Other,” whose authority is questioned due to race despite his noble service. The play dramatises racial prejudice and cultural tensions culminating in tragedy, reflecting Elizabethan anxieties about interracial relationships and social hierarchy. *Antony and Cleopatra* examines the political struggle between the expanding Roman Empire and the Egyptian kingdom. The passionate relationship between Antony and Cleopatra forms a nexus for exploring conflicts between empire, loyalty, and identity. Shakespeare addresses themes of power, race, sexuality, and political ambition, illustrating the complexities of imperialism in human relations.



### 1.3.3.3 Feudalism

#### ► Monarchy and Feudalism

Shakespeare's plays often reveal his preference for a centralised monarchy over the feudal system, which, though stable, was considered outdated in the political climate of his time. His political dramas portray a feudal society that appears strong but contains inherent flaws, while also illustrating the shift toward centralised royal authority. This foreshadows the emergence of the Age of Kings, when monarchs consolidated power and reduced the influence of feudal lords. The customs and titles held by characters in *Macbeth* clearly reflect a feudal order. The central practice of feudalism was the exchange of vows: a lord granted a fief to a vassal in return for loyalty and service. When Macbeth is rewarded with lands for his battlefield success, this act follows the rite of investiture, cementing loyalty through this ceremony. The betrayal of this loyalty, as Macbeth contemplates in his murderous plans, is seen as grave treachery and disrupts the feudal order.

#### ► Economic Transition

Shakespeare also uses *The Merchant of Venice* to depict the economic and social changes that marked the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. The relationships between characters such as Antonio, Shylock, and Portia reflect new economic roles like merchants, moneylenders, and landlords. Through these social interactions, Shakespeare explores the tensions brought about by the transition from a ritualised social system based on fixed roles to a more fluid market economy. The Venetians' mistrust of Shylock highlights fears that traditional social order might give way to unstable hierarchies governed by commerce. Shakespeare presents these conflicting economic forces, showing both the challenges of capitalism and the limitations imposed by feudal customs.

#### ► Social Change

This tension between feudal stability and capitalist change is a recurring concern in Shakespeare's writings. By reflecting on shifting loyalties, economic power, and social order, he captures the complexity and uncertainty of a society in transition. Through his characters and plots, Shakespeare reveals the cultural anxieties of his age and dramatizes the impact of economic, political, and social transformations affecting early modern England. His works invite audiences to consider how old systems break down and new ones emerge, making his plays relevant for understanding historical change as well as human nature.



### 1.3.3.4 Patriarchal Dominance

#### ► Patriarchy

Patriarchy was the unquestioned norm during Shakespeare's time, and his plays reflect this social order. Male dominance governed politics, family, and society, often limiting women's freedom and agency. Shakespeare's characters and their attitudes reveal this harsh patriarchy, yet his plays also feature strong women who challenge male authority and demand accountability. These women embody tenacity and resistance, though often still trapped within the male-dominated framework. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia and Helena are pressured by their fathers to marry men they do not love, reflecting women's lack of control over their own lives. The fairy queen Titania temporarily defies her husband Oberon, but he regains control through magical trickery, illustrating the limits placed on female independence.

#### ► Control and Conflict

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare exposes political concerns over women's roles in governance by portraying Gertrude's controversial marriage to Claudius, which unsettles the monarchy and fuels conflict. Women's entry into political spheres is shown as a source of instability, mirroring Elizabethan anxieties about female power. Similarly, the characters Polonius and Laertes instruct Ophelia to reject Hamlet, highlighting patriarchal control over women's relationships. The theme of male authority and family loyalty dominates *Henry IV*, where male bonds and masculinity shape honour and political succession. Female roles in this play are comparatively small and underscored by male concerns, reflecting societal views of women as secondary.

#### ► Gender Dynamics

Shakespeare's plays project both the fears and desires of a patriarchal society grappling with shifting gender dynamics. Though female characters occasionally exhibit strong agency, the resolution commonly reaffirms male dominance and social order. This tension between female resistance and patriarchal restoration enriches the dramas, inviting reflection on gender relations and power. Shakespeare's nuanced portrayal neither endorses simple submission nor advocates for full emancipation, but captures the complexity of women's experiences in his age. His work also subtly questions the constraints placed upon women, making it a fertile ground for modern feminist analysis.

### 1.3.3.5 Homosexuality

#### ► Censorship and Convention

Shakespeare would have faced censorship if he had openly portrayed homosexuality in his plays or poems, as same-sex desire was socially taboo and legally punishable in Elizabethan England. However, Elizabethan drama often included cross-dressing, partly because all female roles were played by male actors. This theatrical convention invited the audience, mostly male, to admire the beauty of boy actors dressed as women. When women characters disguised themselves as men, as Shakespeare frequently scripted, this added layers of gender ambiguity and attraction. For example, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind dresses as a young man and playfully asks Orlando to woo her while she pretends to be a man, challenging traditional gender and attraction roles.

#### ► Cross-dressing and Identity

Cross-dressing reaches its most complex expression in *Twelfth Night*, where Viola, the heroine, takes on the male identity of “Cesario.” This disguise leads to multifaceted attractions: Orsino falls in love with “Cesario” without knowing Viola’s true gender, while Olivia falls in love with “Cesario” believing him to be a man. Viola’s assumed masculinity and Olivia’s affection create a rich exploration of gender, identity, and desire. The confusion peaks when Olivia marries Viola’s twin brother Sebastian, thinking he is Cesario. The play’s resolution includes Sebastian calling himself “maid and man,” highlighting the fluidity and ambiguity of gender.

#### ► Gender and Desire

Elizabethan audiences navigated complex feelings about same-sex attraction and gender roles through these theatrical devices. While explicit depictions of homosexuality were banned, the presence of male actors in female roles and the use of disguise allowed Shakespeare to explore gender and sexual ambiguity subtly. These plays suggest that attraction and identity are not fixed by biological sex, inviting reflection on the performative nature of gender and the complexity of human desire. Shakespeare’s nuanced treatment of these themes has inspired modern discussions about gender fluidity and queer theory.



## Summarised Overview

This unit explores the rich variety of Shakespeare's plays, highlighting their thematic classifications and inherent complexity. Traditionally divided into tragedies, comedies, and histories, Shakespeare's works also include romances and problem plays that blend and defy genre conventions. His tragedies often focus on noble characters grappling with fatal flaws and inevitable downfall, eliciting pity and fear. Comedies embrace humor, mistaken identities, and joyous resolutions, while romances combine elements of tragedy and comedy with themes of reconciliation and renewal. Problem plays challenge simple categorisation by addressing controversial social and moral issues with ambiguous endings.

In addition to dramatic genres, Shakespeare's influence on the English language is profound, enriching vocabulary and popularising expressions that remain integral to English today. His plays also reflect the major social discourses of Elizabethan England, including the philosophical ideals of humanism, imperial ambitions, feudal traditions, patriarchal structures, and gender dynamics. Through complex characterisations and multifaceted narratives, Shakespeare examined the intersection of individual agency and social forces, producing enduring works that continue to resonate with contemporary audiences worldwide.

## Assignments

1. Compare and contrast Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies with examples.
2. Discuss the significance of Shakespeare's contribution to the English language.
3. Analyse how Shakespeare's plays engage with humanism and social hierarchy.
4. Examine the role of patriarchy and gender in select Shakespearean plays.
5. Evaluate the representation of imperialism and cultural conflict in Shakespeare's works.

## Suggested Reading

1. **Greenblatt, Stephen.** *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. Norton, 2004.
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5. **Holderness, Graham.** *Shakespeare: The Histories*. Routledge, 2010.

## Reference

1. **Bell Shakespeare.** *Genres of Shakespeare's plays*. Bell Shakespeare Education, 2021.
2. **Royal Shakespeare Company.** *Tragedies, Comedies, and Histories*. RSC, 2017.
3. **Folger Shakespeare Library.** *William Shakespeare's plays*. Folgerpedia, 2020.





## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.

## Unit 4

# Shakespearean Criticism and Poetry

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand major historical and modern critical perspectives on Shakespeare's plays
- ▶ explore key concepts like Keats's "negative capability" and Shakespeare's psychological complexities
- ▶ analyse critical debates on Shakespearean tragedy by prominent scholars including Bradley, Eliot, and others
- ▶ examine the role of literary devices such as soliloquy and irony in Shakespeare's works
- ▶ appreciate the evolution, form, and thematic richness of Shakespeare's sonnets
- ▶ investigate the identity debates surrounding the "Fair Youth" and "Dark Lady" in the sonnets

### Background

Shakespeare's works have attracted diverse critical interpretations across centuries, exploring themes of character, morality, language, and dramatic structure. Early critics like John Keats admired Shakespeare's capacity for "negative capability," embracing uncertainty and emotional complexity. Later, 19th and 20th-century critics such as Charles Lamb emphasized the challenges of performing Shakespeare's nuanced characters, while A.C. Bradley focused on tragic heroes' psychological conflict and social stature.

Modern criticism encompasses various theoretical approaches. T.S. Eliot critiqued *Hamlet's* structure and emotional expression, introducing concepts like the "objective correlative." Wilson Knight explored Shakespeare's use of symbolism and thematic oppositions, while thinkers like Leslie Stephen and William Empson highlighted Shakespeare's linguistic richness and ambiguity. Contemporary critics, including Terry Eagleton and Jonathan Dollimore, examine Shakespeare in political, cultural, and ideological contexts such as Marxism, feminism, and post-colonialism.



Alongside play criticism, Shakespeare's sonnets remain a vital site of scholarly engagement. The sonnets' form, language, and intimate voice reveal profound meditations on love, time, beauty, and mortality. Questions surrounding the sonnets' dedicatee "Mr. W.H.," the enigmatic "Fair Youth," as well as the "Dark Lady" and "Rival Poet" continue to invite reflection and debate, enriching our understanding of Shakespeare's poetic legacy.

## Keywords

Negative Capability, Character Complexity, Tragic Hero, Objective Correlative, Symbolism, Sonnet Form, Fair Youth, Dark Lady.

## Discussion

### 1.4.1 Shakespearean Criticism

Shakespeare's plays have inspired a wide range of criticism over the centuries. Early admirers such as John Dryden praised Shakespeare's inventive power and vivid characterisation, even as they sought to adapt his dramas to neoclassical ideals. In the eighteenth century, Dr Samuel Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare" combined deep admiration for Shakespeare's natural dialogue and lifelike characters with cautious moral judgment and concerns about dramatic unity. Building on this foundation, Romantic poets like John Keats celebrated Shakespeare's "negative capability," praising his ability to embrace uncertainty and mystery, and critics such as Charles Lamb, A.C. Bradley, T.S. Eliot, and others have since explored themes of gender roles, mistaken identity, and the interplay of humour and pathos in his works. They analyse literary techniques like monologues and asides, compare Shakespeare's language, metre, and rhyme with those of later writers, and assess how different productions, on stage, film, or digital platforms, shape our understanding. This genealogy of criticism, from Dryden and Johnson through Keats and beyond, offers a rich context for understanding Shakespeare's vast body of drama, which has entertained and enlightened audiences for more than four hundred years.

#### ► Overview

### 1.4.1.1 John Keats

- Keats and negative capability.

John Keats is one of the finest Romantic poets and is often compared to Shakespeare because of his vivid imagination. His reputation grew quickly, prompting Matthew Arnold to say, “He is, he is with Shakespeare.” After a keen discussion with the politician Charles Wentworth Dilke, Keats introduced the phrase “negative capability” to describe the ability to accept uncertainty and mystery without the need for clear answers. In a letter to his brothers George and Tom, Keats emphasised that not everything, especially in fiction, needs a clear explanation. Instead, it is more valuable to appreciate the beauty of a moment than to understand fully why or how it happened. Keats believed Shakespeare possessed this quality greatly.

- Shakespeare’s use of negative capability

Negative capability allows a writer to stay emotionally detached and avoid pushing personal opinions, enabling characters and stories to exist with their own doubts and complexities. Keats noted that Shakespeare used this ability in many of his plays, including *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. For example, Hamlet’s soliloquies show his confusion and hesitation about killing Claudius, reflecting this acceptance of uncertainty without rushing to conclusions. Likewise, in *King Lear*, Lear grapples with unanswered questions about his exile and false love from his daughters. Keats admired this quality as it gives Shakespeare’s works their richness and depth.

### 1.4.1.2 Charles Lamb

- Poor performances.

Charles Lamb, in his essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare” published in *The Reflector* magazine, argues that the success of Shakespeare’s plays depends greatly on their performance. However, he complains that many poor performances have made it impossible for him to fully appreciate some of Shakespeare’s greatest works. For example, Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy, which reflects on human suffering and suicide, has often been poorly acted. Lamb laments that this powerful speech has been so badly handled by actors that it has lost its life and power, becoming “a perfect dead member” to him. He believes this damage is partly because Shakespeare’s plays are less suited to stage performance than those of almost any other playwright. This seems paradoxical, but Lamb and other scholars think it is because Shakespeare’s



talent and the deep, almost supernatural wisdom of his plays are too great for mortal actors to fully express.

► Limits of acting

Lamb feels performances can limit the imagination and meaning that readers find in Shakespeare's plays. His tragic characters are inward and complex, often concealing deeper thoughts that actors find difficult to portray convincingly. For example, Hamlet's reflective soliloquies present profound sorrows and thoughts that are hard to show in physical acting. Lamb questions how an actor's gestures can truly represent these private musings. He also finds actors like Charles Macready ill-suited to depict the haunted mind of Macbeth. Lamb's study aims to reaffirm Shakespeare's authorship and argue that the author's vision cannot be fully realised on stage. He claims that no actor can share the poet's true creative mind, and that characters like King Lear cannot be faithfully represented on stage because acting changes them and reduces them to mere imitators of the poet's ideal conception.

► Reading vs performance

Lamb further distinguishes between ordinary audiences and true reviewers or critics who can appreciate Shakespeare's genius. He feels most theatre audiences lack the critical ability to truly understand Shakespeare's plays, which harms their reputation. For Lamb, reading Shakespeare stimulates the imagination and mental reflection far better than watching performances, which can reduce complex vision to physical reality and appeal only to basic senses. Lamb argues that Shakespeare's tragedies are best experienced through reading, which offers a higher level of abstraction and deeper engagement with the text and its many layers of meaning.

### 1.4.1.3 A.C. Bradley

► Emotional agony

A.C. Bradley is a widely referenced critic known for his definitive work *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Bradley's analysis revolves around three key ideas. First is the emotional torment experienced by the tragedies' protagonists. Macbeth, for example, wrestles all through the play with whether to murder Duncan, dealing inwardly with remorse and uncertainty despite outward success as king. Likewise, Hamlet's tragedy is marked by persistent ambiguity, torn between his mother's love and a call to avenge his



father's death. This inner emotional struggle is central to understanding Shakespeare's tragic heroes and their sufferings.

► Fate and chance.

The second of Bradley's points concerns the roles of fate and chance in disasters. In *King Lear*, Lear's loss of Cordelia is accelerated by a messenger's late arrival, adding a stroke of bad luck alongside his mental decline. Similarly, in *Julius Caesar*, Caesar ignores his wife's ominous dreams, leading to his demise. Small twists of chance affect events in *Macbeth*, Banquo is killed but his son escapes, and the witches' prophecies can be seen as fate shaping the tragedy. In *Othello*, the loss of Desdemona's handkerchief at a crucial moment leads to disaster. These examples show fate and chance as forces intertwined with human action in Shakespearean tragedy.

► Tragic heroes' stature

Bradley's third key idea is the high social status of the tragic heroes. Shakespeare's tragic protagonists are often kings or princes—figures of wealth, power, and honour. This stature makes their fall more significant and impactful to the audience, reflecting not just personal but societal tragedy. Lear is a generous king, Hamlet a wise prince, and Macbeth a brave warrior. Their dignity contrasts with the classical idea of hamartia, or a fatal flaw, as the source of tragedy; Bradley highlights Shakespeare's heroes as strong and moral yet vulnerable.

► Formalist approach.

Bradley's approach to Shakespeare is formalist, focusing strictly on the text. He analyses the causes that shape a tragedy without relying on outside historical or social context. Bradley's method seeks to identify what inside the play drives the tragic climax. This contrasts with later critics like Stephen Greenblatt, who explore connections between Shakespeare's texts and the broader world. Bradley's close reading emphasises Shakespeare's mastery in crafting internal conflicts and dramatic tension within the plays themselves.

► Lasting influence.

Finally, Bradley's work has been influential in defining how Shakespeare's tragedies are studied. His idea that tragedy involves the downfall of great individuals shaped much Shakespearean scholarship. By intimately exploring the psychological struggles, social stature, and the mix of fate and chance, Bradley's lectures remain a foundation for understanding Shakespearean tragedy today. His



work invites readers and audiences alike to appreciate the depth of character and dramatic intensity that make Shakespeare's tragedies timeless.

#### 1.4.1.4 T.S. Eliot

##### ► Criticism focus

T.S. Eliot's critical essay "Hamlet and His Problems" claims that the real issue is the play *Hamlet* itself, not just the character. Eliot argues that many critics, such as Coleridge and Goethe, mistakenly focused on Hamlet as a character but projected their own creative feelings onto him instead of analysing the play as a whole. He contends that these critics created their own versions of Hamlet rather than studying Shakespeare's original play carefully. According to Eliot, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in its true form, deals with the impact of a mother's guilt on her son. However, Shakespeare struggled to impose this motive effectively on the old and complex material of the play, resulting in a work that is fascinating but artistically flawed.

##### ► Artistic flaws

Eliot praises some critics like J.M. Robertson and Professor Stoll for trying to shift attention back to the play as a whole rather than just Hamlet's character. He points out that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play, but contains many unnecessary and illogical parts, such as the Polonius scenes, which show uneven writing and immature thought. Unlike Shakespeare's other great tragedies, *Hamlet* is puzzling and inconsistent, showing signs of artistic failure despite its length and effort. Eliot explains this by saying that Shakespeare failed to find a suitable "objective correlative", a set of external events or objects that evoke the emotions the character feels, for Hamlet's inner turmoil.

##### ► Objective correlative

Eliot introduces the concept of the "objective correlative" as a way to express feelings through external facts. According to him, this is the only way to evoke emotion effectively in art. He contrasts *Hamlet* unfavourably with *Macbeth*, where Shakespeare successfully communicates Lady Macbeth's disturbed mind through carefully arranged sensory impressions, making her sleepwalking scene emotionally inevitable and understandable. *Hamlet*, however, lacks this clear formula, leaving audiences confused about the prince's deep anguish. This failure means that Hamlet's feelings of horror at his mother's guilt cannot be fully expressed or understood within the play's context.

► Limitations of play

To Eliot, *Hamlet* is an artistic failure because Shakespeare attempted to portray an idea too difficult for him to handle fully. Shakespeare's artistic skill was not lacking, but the material and characters he chose could not support the emotional depth he wanted to convey. Therefore, the play's inconsistent parts and confused narrative are a result of Shakespeare's struggle to express an indescribable horror, not a failure of effort. Eliot likens this to an artist who cannot paint a masterpiece due to limited colours and canvas; the artist's ambition exceeds the tools available.

Despite this criticism, Eliot's essay remains immensely influential for its fresh approach to literary analysis. By praising Shakespeare's ambition while acknowledging the play's artistic weaknesses, Eliot encourages readers to think critically about the relationship between character, plot, and emotion. His introduction of the "objective correlative" has deeply impacted modern literary criticism, shaping how emotions are studied and represented in literature and drama. Eliot's study of *Hamlet* challenges traditional views and invites deeper reflection on Shakespeare's works as complex, sometimes flawed, but always significant art.

#### 1.4.1.5 Wilson Knight

► Unity through symbolism

Wilson Knight is one of the most influential Shakespearean critics of the 20th century, known for reshaping how Shakespeare's plays are interpreted. In works such as *The Wheel of Fire* and *The Shakespearian Tempest*, Knight rejected traditional criticism that focussed on sources, character psychology, or ethics. Instead, he emphasised Shakespeare's poetic use of images and symbols, particularly opposing "tempests" and "music," which he saw as central to the unity of Shakespeare's dramas. Knight argued that the atmosphere or spatial elements of a play deserve equal attention to its plot or chronology. This poetic symbolism forms a core underlying unity across Shakespeare's plays.

Knight introduced the idea of "values" and "negations" in Shakespeare's work. Values represent the virtuous qualities and actions such as honour, monarchy, love, and religion. These appear in conflict in some plays, like *Antony and Cleopatra*, where love and war clash. On the other hand, negations such as hate, evil, and death symbolize dark forces, represented by imagery like storms, illness, and iron. Knight noted that some images

► Values and negations

carry both positive and negative meanings, such as the sea, which can be tragic or serene. The most important opposition underpinning Shakespeare's unity, for Knight, is between music and tempest, which he regarded as the single organising principle of Shakespeare's poetic world.

► Importance of atmosphere

A key part of Knight's approach is the emphasis on atmosphere or "spatial components" over plot chronology. He believed most criticism placed too much importance on the storyline and overlooked the holistic experience of mood and setting, which he calls "pure Shakespeare." These atmospheric elements create a unique unity that is absent in source materials Shakespeare adapted. Knight distinguished his method of "interpretation" from ordinary criticism, focusing on uncovering the play's "burning core" or main theme. Once this central idea is understood, all the incidents and imagery fall into a coherent order.

► Character and thematic progress

Knight also de-emphasised character as fixed personality, viewing characters as masks that Shakespeare uses to reveal deeper human truths. For Knight, Shakespeare penetrates beyond surface personality to reveal universal motivations and archetypes that all humans share. Knight termed the progression of Shakespeare's plays, from *Julius Caesar* to *The Tempest*, as "Shakespearean Progress," suggesting a spiritual and artistic journey connecting the works. He also highlighted recurring themes of hate and evil throughout the tragedies, using them to explore human existence deeply.

► Symbolic interpretations

Drawing on his symbolic method, Knight offered profound interpretations of key tragedies. He saw *Hamlet* as rooted in pain and death, *Macbeth* as an apocalypse of evil, *Othello* as a struggle between intellect and humanity, and *King Lear* as an exploration of man's place in the universe. He ranked *Antony and Cleopatra* as Shakespeare's most complex and sophisticated work, a rich blend of elemental and idealistic humanism. Knight's contributions have expanded Shakespearean criticism, revealing new dimensions of Shakespeare's genius and deepening understanding of literature and human nature.

#### 1.4.1.6 William Empson

Sir William Empson, a noted poet and critic, is best known for his 1930 book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. In this work, Empson argues that literary texts resist simple

► Ambiguity theory

classification into moral or historical categories. Instead, he analyses how language in poetry can have multiple, overlapping meanings, creating rich complexity. His method involves identifying seven types of ambiguity, ranging from metaphors and double meanings to subtle contradictions within a single word or phrase. This approach encourages deeper engagement with texts, revealing layers of irony, suggestion, and emotional depth that traditional criticism might miss.

► Hamlet's complexity

In an essay about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Empson explores how the difficulty and richness of Hamlet's character and the play's theme create intentional complexity. He suggests Shakespeare initially faced a technical challenge in turning a poorly structured revenge story into a compelling mystery that captivates audiences. Empson believes Shakespeare made Hamlet enigmatic on purpose, creating inconsistencies in Hamlet's behaviour and confusing motivations to add depth. For example, Ophelia is not the main target of Hamlet's anger, which instead highlights

► Language and influence

Empson's broader literary criticism emphasises how characters come alive through language and metaphor. He shows that many of Shakespeare's works, as well as other classic poems, use ambiguous language to evoke complex psychological and social meanings. Empson's studies have influenced modern literary scholarship deeply, making visible the intricate and often contradictory layers within poetry and drama. His analysis of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 94* helped establish its reputation for difficulty and richness, demonstrating his lasting contribution to literary interpretation and appreciation.

### 1.4.1.7 Leslie Stephen

► Approach to Shakespeare

Leslie Stephen, considered one of the most important Victorian critics after Matthew Arnold, approached Shakespeare with hesitation, aware that only those of exceptional insight could critique such a towering figure. In his essay "Shakespeare as a Man," Stephen explains that reading great literature is like having a conversation with the author. He believes every writer, consciously or not, reveals their own personality in their works. However, Stephen criticises much Shakespearean criticism for excessive exaggeration and hyperbole, which obscures





rather than clarifies Shakespeare's true qualities. He argues that Shakespeare's genius sometimes seems both prophetic and ordinary, which creates a sense of awe in readers.

► Character variety

► Imaginative creation

Stephen suggests that Shakespeare's greatness lies not in sharing his own personal views but in creating a vast range of vivid, original characters. Unlike other dramatists who might closely identify with their characters, Shakespeare often does not align himself directly with any single persona in his plays. Characters such as Falstaff and Hamlet are distinct from Shakespeare himself. This diversity in character types is what defines "Shakespearean" writing, though Stephen notes difficulties in fully understanding Shakespeare's intentions due to the limits of language and the challenge of interpretation. He leaves the task of deeper analysis to literary critics who strive to unpack Shakespeare's complex artistry.

Finally, Stephen argues that a dramatist has the power to bestow upon characters qualities and talents the author may not personally possess. Shakespeare's skill lies in this imaginative creation of characters who can exhibit traits beyond the author's own. He emphasises how the dramatist's role is to reveal universal human experiences through these varied characters, rather than merely reflect personal beliefs or characteristics. Stephen's criticism encourages an appreciation of Shakespeare's artistic imagination and his ability to encompass the broad spectrum of human nature.

#### 1.4.1.8 Frank Kermode

► Balanced view

Frank Kermode does not engage with the modern theories that either exaggerate or diminish Shakespeare's significance. Nor does he support the tendentious idolisation of Shakespeare that demands the plays be flawless. Instead, Kermode delights in Shakespeare's language as a beautiful and rich source of meaning. He celebrates Shakespeare's gift for balancing clarity with complexity, often walking "in-betweenness" rather than extremes. Kermode acknowledges that even Shakespeare's original audiences likely found some soliloquies and speeches difficult to understand, as we do today. Some passages appear cryptic or unnecessarily complicated, reflecting Shakespeare's experimentation with language and thought.

► *Complex poetic style*

Kermode identifies a “new style” that emerges in plays like *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, developing into the intense, complex soliloquies of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. This style often pushes Shakespeare’s poetic expression beyond the limits of reason and clear understanding, creating moments of deep, tangled thought. He praises Shakespeare as a dramatic poet who skillfully uses analogy and metaphor to capture the workings of the human mind. In *Richard II*, Kermode highlights a passage where the character Bushy struggles to express comfort through a complex and puzzling metaphor, showing how Shakespeare dramatises thought itself, even when the words falter.

► Individuality and language

Kermode views Shakespeare as a pioneer of Western individualism, with *Hamlet* marking a major transformation in literary representation. He notes that Shakespeare’s characters have unique, distinct voices, tailored to their personalities and situations. This linguistic variety is especially notable in non-human characters, such as Ariel in *The Tempest*, whose speech reflects his ethereal nature. Kermode admires Shakespeare’s willingness to mix comic elements with tragedy and to imbue his characters’ language with subtlety and diversity. His criticism highlights how Shakespeare’s poetic drama attempts to portray the complexity of the mind and the contradictions within human experience.

#### 1.4.1.9 Terry Eagleton

► Marxist themes and paradox

Terry Eagleton provides a bold and original Marxist and political interpretation of Shakespeare’s major plays. He explores recurring tensions in Shakespeare’s work, such as the contradictions between words and objects, body and language, and how these conflicts relate to social issues like law, sexuality, and nature. Eagleton’s writing combines a rigorous academic style with sharp paradoxes and irony. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, he notes the paradox that maintaining the law sometimes requires breaking its letter, challenging readers to think deeper about justice and authority in Shakespeare’s plays.

Eagleton believes Shakespeare’s plays cannot be directly aligned with Marxism but can be interpreted to reveal Marxist-relevant ideas. He argues that Shakespeare at times misunderstood his own works, and that

- Marxism and ideological complexity.

Shakespeare's plays expose contradictions in ideology. For instance, Eagleton views *The Tempest* as revealing tensions between humanism and colonialism. Eagleton respects Shakespeare's complex thought and notes his retirement was financially secure, suggesting contradictions between artistic genius and practical life. His criticism refuses to idolise Shakespeare, instead showing him as a figure who resists simple ideological categorisation.

Ultimately, Eagleton's criticism highlights Shakespeare's enduring greatness by recognising the plays' complex engagement with social and political contradictions without reducing them to any single viewpoint. While Eagleton's Marxist perspective shapes his interpretations, he avoids radicalising Shakespeare into a Marxist figure. His work demonstrates why Shakespeare remains relevant and profound, continuing to engage readers and scholars who appreciate the layers of meaning in his plays.

#### 1.4.1.10 Jonathan Dollimore

- Political context.

Jonathan Dollimore, along with Alan Sinfield, popularised Cultural Materialism, a Marxist-influenced approach to New Historicism, which offers a radical and politicised reading of Shakespeare's works. This approach stresses the importance of examining the historical, social, and political contexts, especially focusing on the voices and experiences often ignored or suppressed in traditional histories. Cultural Materialism rejects apolitical interpretations and insists that power and ideology are embedded in texts, including Shakespeare's plays. By using close textual analysis backed by Marxist and Feminist perspectives, Dollimore highlights the social struggles, and subversive potentials present in Shakespeare's work and its ongoing reinterpretation in modern times.

- Dynamic culture

Dollimore argues that culture is inseparable from political and economic systems; it is not merely a reflection but an active site of power relations. Shakespeare's plays must be assessed not as isolated literary artifacts but as texts constantly shaped by and shaping their cultural institutions. The history relevant to Shakespearean drama is not frozen 400 years ago but is dynamically re-created through various modern performances and interpretations. Dollimore stresses the significance of considering the institutions and practices that reproduce Shakespeare's

work and the possibility of contemporary critiques to challenge dominant readings.

► Ideology and resistance

This perspective represents a major shift from the idealist humanism that dominated Shakespeare studies. Dollimore sees Cultural Materialism as answering the “Crisis in English Studies” by offering a critical framework that exposes ideological conflicts and highlights resistance and agency. Through this lens, Shakespeare’s dramas become battlegrounds where issues of sexuality, power, and social order are negotiated and contested, opening new avenues for understanding literature’s role in society and history.

### 1.4.2 Poetry

Before exploring Shakespeare’s sonnets, it is important to acknowledge his other significant poetic works. Notably, Shakespeare wrote powerful narrative poems such as *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. These early works blend classical stories and vivid emotion, showcasing Shakespeare’s skill with longer poetic forms. They helped establish his reputation as a poet and reveal themes of desire, beauty, and tragedy that also appear in his sonnets. Together, these poems demonstrate Shakespeare’s command of language and verse, forming an essential backdrop to the more personal and structured sonnet sequence.

William Shakespeare’s sonnets stand as one of the most celebrated achievements in English literature, capturing the complexities of love, time, beauty, and human emotion in just fourteen lines. As Wordsworth famously noted, Shakespeare’s sonnets are “the key in which he unlocked his heart,” reflecting deeply personal and universal themes that continue to resonate across centuries. Unlike his public plays and narrative poems aimed at audiences, Shakespeare’s sonnets reveal an intimate voice and a unique poetic form that allowed the poet to explore relationships, desire, and the passage of time with remarkable subtlety and depth.

The sonnets follow a precise and enduring form known as the Shakespearean sonnet, comprising three quatrains and a final heroic couplet with a distinct rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef gg). This structured approach creates a dynamic flow, allowing Shakespeare to develop ideas progressively and conclude with poignant resolutions

► Shakespeare's intimate poetic legacy

or surprising turns. The sonnets' publication in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe introduced a dedication to "Mr. W.H.," whose identity remains a mystery, adding an element of intrigue surrounding the sonnets' intended audience and patronage. The poems predominantly address a young man, often called the Fair Youth, breaking from traditional sonnet conventions that usually praised a beloved woman.

Beyond the Fair Youth, Shakespeare's sonnets explore varied and complex relationships, including those with a mysterious "Dark Lady" whose sensual and shadowed presence contrasts with the idealism of earlier poems, and a "Rival Poet" symbolising rivalry and jealousy. Rich themes of love's tension with lust, the inevitability of ageing, the power of poetry, and the struggle between personal desire and societal expectation permeate the sequence. Through potent imagery, from stars and seasons to flowers and fate, Shakespeare's sonnets continue to inspire reflection on the fragile and eternal aspects of human experience.

### Structure of the Shakespearean Sonnet

The Shakespearean sonnet, also known as the English sonnet, is a poetic form consisting of 14 lines that are structured into three quatrains followed by a concluding couplet. The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg, which allows Shakespeare to present several ideas or arguments in the quatrains and then wrap them up or twist them in the final two lines. This precise organisation creates a dynamic tension within the poem, enabling a progression of thought or feeling, culminating in a powerful resolution or epigrammatic concluding statement.

Each line in a Shakespearean sonnet is composed in iambic pentameter. This means that every line contains ten syllables, arranged in five pairs called "iamb," where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one (da-DUM). The regular rhythm mimics natural speech but lends a musical quality to the poem. Shakespeare was skilled at varying the rhythm subtly to add emphasis and emotion, demonstrating the sonnet's expressive versatility.

The "volta" or "turn" typically occurs between the third quatrain and the final couplet. This turn signals a shift in the poem's subject, tone, or argument, often reinterpreting the meaning presented earlier or offering a solution to the problem posed. For example, in Sonnet 18, Shakespeare



- Sonnet form, rhythm, and emotional depth

moves from admiring the young man's beauty to asserting poetry's power to grant immortality: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." This turning moment is pivotal in maintaining the sonnet's dramatic and thematic coherence.

William Wordsworth, one of England's most revered Romantic poets, praised Shakespeare's sonnets as "the key in which he unlocked his heart." This highlights how the sonnets provided Shakespeare the means to explore deeply personal and universal themes such as love, time, beauty, and mortality. Wordsworth's comment reminds us that beyond their technical brilliance, the sonnets reveal the inner emotional world of the poet, inviting readers into intimate reflection.

Unlike the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, which divides the poem into an octave and a sestet, Shakespeare's sonnets evolved to suit the English language's sounds and rhythms. This form's flexibility enabled Shakespeare to innovate within the sonnet tradition, ensuring his poems' lasting popularity and influence. The balanced combination of structure and fluid expression in Shakespearean sonnets has inspired countless poets, making it a cornerstone of English literature.

### Dedication of Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets were first published together in 1609 by the London publisher Thomas Thorpe. It remains unclear whether Shakespeare himself authorised this publication or if Thorpe released the poems independently. A notable feature of this edition is the dedication addressed to "Mr. W.H.," a mysterious figure whose identity has intrigued scholars and readers for over four centuries. The dedication reads: "*To the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets Mr.W.H. all happinesse and that eternitie promised by our ever-living poet wisheth the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth.*" The ambiguity and lack of further explanation have led to intense speculation.

Several candidates have been proposed as the true identity of Mr. W.H. The two most prominent figures are Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, and William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke. Both men were notable patrons of the arts and had connections to

Shakespeare's circle. Wriothesley was the dedicatee of two of Shakespeare's earlier long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, suggesting a close relationship. William Herbert later dedicated Shakespeare's First Folio and had similar artistic connections. The inversion of initials, W.H. rather than H.W., adds to the mystery, with some suggesting it could be a printer's error or a deliberate cipher. Other less widely accepted theories propose that Mr. W.H. may have been a friend, patron, or even a literary agent who helped secure the publication.

Most sonnet sequences popular during the Renaissance were dedicated to imagined or idealised women, often depicted as unattainable and angelic figures. Shakespeare's sonnets, however, notably address a young man, referred to as the "Fair Youth." This departure from tradition is significant and has spurred extensive debate about Shakespeare's intentions. The "Fair Youth" sonnets explore themes such as beauty, love, immortality through poetry, and the urgent plea for procreation to preserve the young man's beauty. Encouraging offspring to defeat the ravages of time is a recurrent motif. The dedication "Mr. W.H." is commonly thought to be connected to the "Fair Youth" figure, although this is not conclusively proven.

► Dedication mystery and significance

The personal tone throughout the sonnet sequence suggests an intimate audience, perhaps a close circle of friends or patrons who understood the layered meanings behind the poems. Yet, it is still debated whether the dedication and sonnets are autobiographical or simply imaginative creations. The mysterious dedication continues to invite readers into the enigmatic world of Shakespeare's poetry, adding a layer of romance and secrecy that resonates even with modern audiences.

Thus, the dedication "Mr. W.H." remains one of the greatest puzzles of English literature, symbolising both the private and public aspects of Shakespeare's work. It encapsulates the intertwining of literary art, patronage, and personal expression that characterised the poet's sonnets and their historical context.

### Identity of the 'Dark Lady' and the 'Rival Poet' and Stock Sonnets Themes

The "Dark Lady" sonnets (127–152) form a passionate and candid counterpoint to the idealised "Fair Youth" sonnets. The Dark Lady is portrayed as having dark hair

and complexion (“dun” skin) and is characterised by sensuality, deceit, and emotional complexity. These sonnets explore raw, often troubling themes of lust, betrayal, and complicated relationships. The speaker’s oscillation between desire and disillusionment reflects a more realistic and mature treatment of love, contrasting with the youthful idealism earlier in the sequence. Candidates for the Dark Lady’s historical identity include Mary Fitton and Emilia Lanier, but no definitive conclusions exist.

► Major figures and themes

The “Rival Poet” sonnets (78–86) introduce a third figure, possibly a real or imagined competitor vying for the young man’s admiration and patronage. Shakespeare’s speaker expresses jealousy and competition, adding a layer of tension in the poetic narrative. The Rival Poet symbolizes the challenge of artistic rivalry and personal insecurity within the literary world.

Throughout the sonnets, Shakespeare tackles enduring themes: the passage of time and aging, the impermanence of beauty, the tension between true love and lust, absence and betrayal, and the power of poetry itself to immortalise and transcend mortality. Rich symbolism - stars, flowers, seasons, and weather-frequently frames these themes. For example, weather imagery often represents the unstable nature of human emotions, while stars can signify fate or destiny. Shakespeare’s sonnets delve into the conflict between individual desires and societal norms, reflecting on the limits of beauty, love, and life itself.

## Summarised Overview

Shakespearean criticism spans a broad spectrum of approaches, from early Romantic praises of his imaginative subtlety to modern theoretical analyses exploring ideological, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Foundational critics like John Keats celebrated Shakespeare’s “negative capability,” his ability to hold ambiguity and emotional depth without forcing resolution. The rich psychological portraits and social conflicts in Shakespeare’s plays inspired A.C. Bradley, who dissected tragic heroes’ inner torment and societal stature, while other scholars have debated issues of performance limitations, formal structure, and dramatic effectiveness. Critics such as T.S. Eliot and Wilson Knight developed innovative ideas including the “objective correlative” and thematic symbolism, challenging

and expanding the ways in which Shakespeare's complex works are interpreted.

The unit additionally focuses on Shakespeare's sonnets, which are central to his poetic achievement. The sonnets' precise structure and emotional candour explore enduring themes of love, identity, and mortality. Scholarly discussions on the sonnets' mysterious dedicatees, the "Fair Youth" and "Dark Lady", highlight the intimate and personal dimensions of these poems. Through detailed analysis of form, language, and themes, learners gain deeper insight into Shakespeare's literary artistry and the ongoing cultural significance of his poetry.

## Self Assessment Questions and Answers

### **Block 1: Socio-political and Literary Background (Questions 1-20)**

1. Who was Edmund Tilney in relation to Shakespeare's theatrical career?

Answer: The Master of the Revels who censored plays

2. The Globe Theatre was built in which year?

Answer: 1599

3. Which Roman playwright most influenced Shakespeare's tragic style?

Answer: Seneca

4. The concept of "negative capability" was introduced by:

Answer: John Keats

5. According to A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean tragic heroes are characterized by:

Answer: High social status and noble stature

6. T.S. Eliot introduced the concept of:

Answer: Objective correlative

7. Wilson Knight's approach to Shakespeare emphasized:

Answer: Poetic symbolism and atmosphere

8. The First Folio was published in:

Answer: 1623

9. Shakespeare's sonnets were published by:

Answer: Thomas Thorpe

10. The Shakespearean sonnet rhyme scheme is:

Answer: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

11. Blank verse consists of:

Answer: Unrhymed iambic pentameter

12. The "University Wits" included all EXCEPT:

Answer: William Shakespeare

13. Shakespeare's primary source for his Roman plays was:

Answer: Plutarch's Lives

14. The Queen's Men theatrical company was formed in:

Answer: 1583

15. Female roles in Shakespeare's time were played by:

Answer: Boy actors

16. Shakespeare's dramatic career spanned approximately:

Answer: 22 years

17. Which period represents Shakespeare's "tragic phase"?

Answer: 1600-1608

18. The four great tragedies include all EXCEPT:

Answer: Julius Caesar

19. The "Dark Lady" sonnets explore themes of:

Answer: Physical passion and betrayal

20. Shakespeare died on:

Answer: April 23, 1616





## Assignments

1. Explain the concept of “negative capability” and analyse its presence in Shakespearean characters.
2. Compare the critical perspectives of Bradley and Eliot on *Hamlet*.
3. Discuss the role of symbolism and imagery in Shakespeare’s tragedies as interpreted by critics.
4. Analyse the form and thematic concerns of Shakespeare’s sonnets, focusing on the “Fair Youth” and “Dark Lady.”
5. Critically evaluate contemporary ideological perspectives on Shakespeare's plays, such as feminist or Marxist readings.

## Suggested Reading

1. Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Penguin, 1991.
2. Eliot, T.S. “Hamlet and His Problems,” in *The Sacred Wood*, 1920.
3. Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. 1930.
4. Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy*. Manchester UP, 1984.
5. Armstrong, Isobel. *Shakespearean Grammar and Style*. Routledge, 2014.

## Reference

1. British Library. *Shakespearean Criticism through the Ages*. Accessed 2025.
2. Cambridge University Press. *Contemporary Shakespearean Criticism*. 2024.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.



# Poetry and Drama

## BLOCK-02

### Block Content

- Unit 1 Plays (Detailed)
- Unit 2 Poetry (Detailed)
- Unit 3 Poetry (Detailed)
- Unit 4 Drama (Non-Detailed)

# Unit 1

## Plays

(Detailed)

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ analyse the elements and conventions of Shakespearean tragedy as exemplified in *Hamlet*.
- ▶ examine the characteristics and structure of Shakespearean comedy through the study of *Twelfth Night*.
- ▶ evaluate the character development and psychological complexity of tragic and comic protagonists.
- ▶ compare and contrast the thematic concerns, dramatic techniques and literary devices employed in both genres.
- ▶ assess Shakespeare's treatment of universal themes such as love, identity, madness and appearance versus reality.

## Hamlet and Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare

### Background

Shakespearean drama represents the pinnacle of English Renaissance theatre, combining classical influences with innovative dramatic techniques. Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, written during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, reflect the intellectual curiosity and cultural sophistication of the Elizabethan age. *Hamlet*, composed around 1601, stands as the most celebrated of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, exploring the psychological torment of a prince torn between duty and moral uncertainty. The play's complex protagonist embodies the Renaissance ideal of the scholar prince while grappling with existential questions about life, death and human nature.



*Twelfth Night*, written during the same period, exemplifies Shakespearean romantic comedy at its finest. Set against the backdrop of festive celebration, the play explores themes of love, identity and social transformation through mistaken identities and gender disguise. The title refers to the twelfth day after Christmas, traditionally a time of revelry and social inversion when normal hierarchies were playfully overturned. This carnival atmosphere permeates the play's exploration of desire, deception and the fluid nature of human affection.

Both plays demonstrate Shakespeare's mastery of character creation, poetic language and dramatic structure. While *Hamlet* delves into the darker aspects of human experience through its meditation on revenge and mortality, *Twelfth Night* celebrates the regenerative power of love and the possibility of renewal through comic resolution. Together, these works showcase the breadth of Shakespeare's dramatic vision and his profound understanding of the human condition.

## Keywords

Tragedy, Ghost, Revenge, Madness, Melancholy, Comedy, Disguise, Mistaken identity

## Discussion

### Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespearean tragedy has its roots in the classical definition provided by Aristotle, but Shakespeare expands and adapts this framework in unique ways. According to Aristotle, tragedy is a serious drama that depicts a noble person's downfall due to a combination of fate and personal flaws, ultimately eliciting feelings of pity and fear in the audience. While Shakespeare's plays share these foundations, they differ notably in their inclusion of comic relief within the serious plot, giving a truer reflection of life, where moments of joy and sorrow coexist. This balance of tragedy and comedy adds depth and realism to Shakespeare's works.

- Shakespeare adapts Aristotelian tragedy

At the centre of a Shakespearean tragedy is the tragic hero, a character usually of high social or political rank, such as a king, prince, or nobleman. This hero is not only important because of their status but also because their fall



- Noble hero's full affects world

affects others and the world around them. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist is Prince Hamlet, a man of great intelligence and moral sensibility who suffers deeply, particularly due to his mother's quick remarriage to his uncle Claudius, who has also murdered Hamlet's father. Hamlet's tragic journey begins with this psychological and moral shock, and his suffering forms the heart of the play.

- Tragic flaw causes down-fall

The tragic hero possesses a tragic flaw, a personal weakness or error in judgment that leads to his downfall. Hamlet's flaw is often seen as his indecision or hesitation to act on the Ghost's demand for revenge. Unlike other Shakespearean heroes like Macbeth, whose ambition drives him forward, Hamlet is reflective and philosophical, caught in deep moral conflict. He understands what he must do but struggles with how and when, which creates tension both within himself and in the unfolding plot. Scholars often quote A. C. Bradley's idea that tragedy arises from the flaw of character combined with fate, and Hamlet exemplifies this well.

- Fate and free will co-exist

Alongside the hero's character flaw, Shakespeare also introduces elements of fate and destiny. The supernatural plays a crucial role, as seen in the appearance of King Hamlet's Ghost, which sets the revenge plot in motion. Fate seems to control events beyond the hero's control, such as Hamlet's capture by pirates, which changes the path of the story dramatically. Hamlet himself acknowledges the power of destiny when he says, "There is a divinity that shapes our ends." This suggests Shakespeare's view that fate and free will coexist, with human choices having consequences but within a broader, sometimes mysterious plan.

- External and internal conflicts

Conflict is central to Shakespearean tragedy and appears on two levels: external conflict among characters and internal conflict within the hero's mind. In *Hamlet*, the external conflict includes Hamlet's struggle against Claudius, who has stolen the throne and married Hamlet's mother, and the later confrontation with Laertes, who seeks revenge for his father Polonius's death. Internally, Hamlet battles with questions of morality, action, and existence, famously expressed in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. These overlapping conflicts contribute to the psychological depth and emotional intensity of the play.



- Good potential also perishes

Shakespearean tragedies feature an element of tragic waste, meaning that when the hero falls, it is not just the evil that perishes but also much good and noble potential. Hamlet's death results in the downfall of Denmark's royal family and several innocent lives, including Ophelia's. This sense of loss and wasted greatness enhances the tragedy's emotional effect, reinforcing the idea that tragedy is not just about death, but the loss of what might have been.

- Comic relief contrasts tragedy

Though deeply serious, Shakespeare's tragedies often include comic relief to lighten the mood and underline the tragic elements by contrast. In *Hamlet*, characters such as Polonius bring humor through their foolishness, and the gravediggers provide dark but witty moments that examine death itself with humor and irony. Hamlet's sharp wit adds another layer of complexity, making the play both entertaining and profound.

- Rich poetic language

The language and poetry of *Hamlet* are other reasons for its lasting popularity. Shakespeare's use of beautiful, memorable lines makes the play rich and quotable. Hamlet's speeches reveal his thoughts and emotions in powerful ways, and each character's unique style contributes to the play's texture.

- Memorable Scenes engage audiences

Finally, the play's structure and scenes add to its appeal. *Hamlet* contains many memorable scenes, such as the ghost's appearance, the "play within a play," the nunnery scene, the graveyard, and the duel. Each scene not only advances the plot but also deepens character development and explores key themes. The diversity of events in the play keeps audiences engaged and provides different emotional experiences ranging from fear and sorrow to amusement and tension.

- Timeless universal masterpiece

Shakespearean tragedy as seen in *Hamlet* includes a noble hero with a fatal flaw, the interplay of fate and free will, deep psychological conflict, a tragic waste of potential, and a balance of humor with seriousness. *Hamlet* stands as a universal work because it addresses eternal human questions and emotions. Its rich characters, beautiful language, and dramatic scenes continue to resonate, making it not just a product of its time but a timeless masterpiece.



### 2.1.1 *Hamlet*- An Introduction



Fig 2.1.1 *Hamlet*

- Hamlet's unique tragedy

*Hamlet* stands as one of Shakespeare's most unique achievements, embodying the highest reach of his tragic power. It is not only the earliest but also the most celebrated of his four greatest tragedies, with *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* making up the other three pillars. Each of these plays is renowned for its respective portrayal of tragic conflict, but *Hamlet* especially has captured the imagination of audiences and readers across generations. The sheer complexity and variety found in its depiction of human relationships, ranging from love and friendship to betrayal and revenge, ensure its enduring popularity. Over centuries, *Hamlet* has drawn sustained interest for its searching exploration of the changing patterns of relationships, its deep sense of the complexity of the human soul, and above all, its enigmatic central character. The protagonist, Prince Hamlet, is notable for qualities that seem at once fascinating and elusive; readers and theatregoers have found themselves both charmed and perplexed by him, and critics have continuously debated his motivations and actions. In this play, Shakespeare hands down a drama that expresses not only a sense of the soul's infinity but also a moving awareness of the inevitable limitations and disasters that shape human existence.

At its core, *Hamlet* transforms what was originally a legendary tale of revenge into a work of profound aesthetic and philosophical resonance. Shakespeare's artistry is apparent in the skill with which he adapts sources from legend and reinvents them for his age, infusing the play

► Adaptation and depth

with the spirit of the Renaissance, a period marked by intellectual curiosity, creative invention, and a deep appreciation of life's mysteries. In *Hamlet*, the historical roots of the story are reshaped so that themes of revenge are no longer simple, but are instead presented as part of a broader meditation on fate, justice, and the human condition. The inconclusive nature of Hamlet's experience and the sense of an infinite soul trapped by worldly doom make this play a masterpiece beyond comparison. It is little surprise, then, that among all the works of Shakespeare and indeed of any English dramatist, *Hamlet* has evoked the most extensive and varied body of critical interpretation in literature. Critics from many backgrounds and centuries have sought to unravel its secrets, leading to interpretations that span philosophy, psychology, history, and theatrical performance. The play's enduring strangeness and vitality ensure that, even now, it remains a living text, open to new readings and constant rediscovery.

### Hamlet's Textual History

The textual history of *Hamlet* is both complex and vital to its enduring status as a world classic. Three principal early versions of the play offer distinct perspectives on how *Hamlet* has survived and changed over time. The first, known as the "Bad Quarto" or Fat Quarto (1603), is generally regarded as a pirated and error-ridden edition, likely constructed from memory by an actor rather than Shakespeare's manuscript. This process resulted in a fragmented and corrupted text, but research, such as that by Duthie, suggests it is a later derivative, helping us better understand the evolution and transmission of plays in early modern England. The second chief version, the Second Quarto (1604), called the "Good Quarto," is much longer and more faithful to Shakespeare's original, containing nearly twice as many lines and closely reflecting his language and intentions. It remains the foundation for most modern editions due to its length and completeness, though it still differs in places from other versions. The third significant text is the First Folio (1623), published after Shakespeare's death by his fellow actors, which drew on the Good Quarto and sometimes a prompt book or independent transcript to correct or expand the play. While the Folio adds over seventy lines not found in the Quarto, it omits nearly two hundred thirty present in the earlier text, presenting unique material but also complications in establishing a final version. The existence

► Textual complexity, evolving masterpiece

of these rival texts forces editors to weigh conflicting passages and to make careful choices about which lines best reflect Shakespeare's intentions, ensuring that every new edition is an active engagement with a living, evolving masterpiece rather than a static monument.

### The Probable Date

Determining the date of a Shakespearean play is always complex. For most works of the dramatist, there is no definitive record that states the exact year of composition or first performance. Scholars must rely on two principal methods: external evidence, which includes official records such as the Stationer's Register or notices in contemporary documents, and internal evidence, which is based on the play's stylistic features, references to then-current events, and its language or poetic technique. The external evidence for Hamlet points towards the period between the late 1590s and the early 1600s. There is no mention of Hamlet in Francis Meres's list of Shakespeare's plays in his 'Wit's Treasury,' published in 1598, suggesting that Hamlet was not yet written. However, Hamlet is entered in the Stationer's Register in July 1602, which provides a *terminus ad quem* for its composition. Internal evidence, particularly references within the play to "the tragedians of the city" and to the contemporary fad for child actors, as well as the general style of verse and metre, further suggest that Hamlet was most likely written around late 1601 or early 1602. This dating has generally been accepted by modern scholars, with some leaning towards 1600 or 1601 as the earliest possible date. The earliest printed edition of Hamlet appeared in 1603 in a quarto format, followed by a revised enlarged edition in 1604.

- Composition complexities, dramatic adaptation

While the play is set during a vague period of Denmark's history, often associated with the time of Danish invasions of England prior to the Norman Conquest (about the year 1000 AD), it is clear that Shakespeare integrates elements and references from his own era into the play. There are a number of historical inaccuracies, termed anachronisms, arising from Shakespeare's blending of contemporary customs with the ancient setting. One glaring example is the use of cannon and other firearms, which did not exist until several centuries after the play's supposed time frame. The University of Wittenberg, where Hamlet is said to have studied, was not founded until long after the events depicted. The employment of child actors, the restrictions

- Anachronisms highlighted





imposed on theatrical players by the authorities, and Ophelia's call for her coach are all details that reflect Elizabethan England rather than medieval Denmark. Shakespeare's widespread use of such anachronisms reflects both his interest in dramatic effect and his freedom to adapt historical and cultural details for artistic purposes.

## The Setting

### ► Setting in Elsinore

The story of *Hamlet* is set in Elsinore, now known as Helsingør, a coastal town in north-west Denmark, not far from Copenhagen. The central location is Kronborg Castle, a formidable building constructed by Frederick II, which Shakespeare refers to simply as "the castle." Even though Hamlet's journey to England is mentioned, the action steadfastly remains in Elsinore. All accounts of travel are relayed as reports, and the audience is rarely taken outside the walls of the Danish stronghold. The castle's imposing architecture and position on the Baltic Sea lend an atmosphere of tension and isolation that is crucial to the drama's overall mood.

## The Source

### ► Original sources

It was common practice for Shakespeare to adapt and rework existing stories for his plays. *Hamlet* was no exception and derives from a variety of earlier sources. The earliest known version of Hamlet's story appears in 'Historica Danica,' written by Saxo Grammaticus in about 1208, where the character 'Amleth' seeks to avenge his father's death. This narrative was translated into French and published by Belleforest in 1579 under the title 'Histoires Tragiques.' Given Shakespeare's knowledge of French literature, he may have consulted Belleforest's account directly, or, as some scholars suggest, relied on an English translation or adaptation which is now lost. There was also an earlier play, known as the 'Ur-Hamlet,' possibly authored by Thomas Kyd. Reference to this earlier work appears in Nash's preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589), in Philip Henslowe's diary from 1594, and in Thomas Lodge's 'Wit's Miseries' from 1596. Whether Shakespeare saw or read the *Ur-Hamlet*, or merely heard reports of it, he drew on these predecessors, transforming and deepening their plots in his own version. What distinguishes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from earlier versions is the complexity of its characters and the philosophical depth of its dramatic action, innovations which are the fruit of Shakespeare's genius rather than mere borrowing.



## Shakespeare's Treatment

- Shakespeare's creative treatment

Shakespeare's approach to his sources was typically inventive. He adopted only the basic outline of the narrative and infused it with new life, creating characters and relationships of remarkable depth. In *Hamlet*, he added psychological complexity and developed dramatic contrasts which foreground the titular character's inner struggles. The emotional power and intellectual scope of the play find few parallels elsewhere in theatre. Shakespeare's ability to transform a simple story of vengeance into an exploration of existential themes and human nature is widely recognised as one of his greatest achievements.

## Popularity of the Play: Its Causes

- Universal character appeal

*Hamlet* is often described as a "world-book", its reputation and influence have reached beyond the boundaries of English literature to become part of global culture. Its fame is unequalled, even among Shakespeare's own works. The reasons for this popularity are many and varied. At its centre is the character of Hamlet himself, Prince of Denmark, a figure whose universality has led critics to describe him as one of the immortals of literature. Hamlet's complexity is staggering; generations of scholars have offered conflicting interpretations of his motives, personality, and moral stance. The drama presents a vivid series of character contrasts, each throwing the figure of Hamlet into sharper relief.

- Tragedy of thought

*Hamlet* is, above all, a tragedy of thought. The central figure's indecision and intense contemplation, his wrestling with the problems of life and death, and his philosophical pondering on fate and justice, make the play a record of the deepest meditation in all drama. The action hinges upon Hamlet's inability or unwillingness to take swift revenge, highlighting themes of doubt and moral uncertainty. Shakespeare uses Hamlet to consider the mysteries that challenge human understanding and the "problems that knock for answer at every heart." The play is overflowing with aphorisms and profound observations, treasures of Shakespeare's wisdom.

- Tragedy of action

At the same time, the play is a tragedy of action. Alongside Hamlet's contemplation, there are moments of electrifying drama - thrilling encounters, tense scenes, and high-stakes confrontations. The play's structure includes melodramatic



episodes and great crises, ensuring its appeal to audiences in the theatre and in reading.

- Renaissance spirit reflected

The play is also notable for its reflection of Renaissance values. The period's interest in the world's beauty and deepest mysteries, its curiosity and zest for life, and its spirit of questioning are seen throughout the drama. The Renaissance backdrop, with intrigues, double-dealings, and exploration of new ideas, is vividly rendered in the play's setting and tone.

- Madness theme explored

One of the most remarkable aspects of *Hamlet* is its treatment of madness. The question of whether Hamlet is truly mad or merely feigning insanity has puzzled critics and audiences for centuries. The portrayal is nuanced and realistic, inviting speculation and debate. Ophelia's descent into real madness provides a moving contrast to Hamlet's assumed state. The play's representation of mental disturbance and the challenges of distinguishing reality from appearance contribute significantly to its lasting intrigue.

- Varied dramatic interests

The variety of interests in the play is immense. The tender sorrow of Ophelia's fate, the unsettling presence of the supernatural, the sharp humour delivered by characters such as the gravediggers, and the wide range of character types ensure that *Hamlet* appeals to those with very different tastes and interests.

### Some Shortcomings

- Minor plot flaws

Despite its renown and celebrated status, *Hamlet* is not without imperfections. As with many of Shakespeare's dramas, it contains improbable events and unresolved questions. Some aspects stretch the bounds of plausibility, such as the King's lack of reaction to the dumb show, Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia in the nunnery scene, and the ease with which Laertes incites revolt among the Danish people. Certain episodes and references, like Hamlet's extensive dramatic criticism, the mention of Lambord's equestrian skills, or the subplot involving Fortinbras, appear extraneous. Coincidence is employed as a plot device, sometimes straining credibility; for example, the timely arrival of the players, the convenient repertoire, Hamlet's encounter with pirates, and the crucial possession of his father's signet ring all serve the unfolding of fate in ways that defy logical explanation. These blemishes, however, are minor in the broader context of the play's achievement.

and do not seriously detract from its overall greatness. Even the argument advanced by T.S. Eliot, who described Hamlet as an “artistic failure,” fails to diminish its stature as one of Shakespeare’s, and the world’s, masterpieces.

### Key characters and elements of Hamlet

1. **The Ghost in Hamlet**-The Ghost is the spirit of King Hamlet, who reveals to Prince Hamlet that Claudius murdered him. It drives the plot by demanding Hamlet’s revenge, playing a central role in the tragedy. The Ghost creates an eerie, supernatural atmosphere and reflects the Renaissance tension between paganism and Christianity.
2. **The Mousetrap (The Play within the Play)**-Hamlet stages ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ to ‘catch the conscience of the king.’ The dumb show and reenactment of the poisoned king’s death provoke Claudius to leave abruptly, confirming his guilt. This device exposes Claudius and intensifies Hamlet’s resolve, yet also highlights his tendency to delay action.
3. **Comic Elements in Hamlet**-Comedy arises from Hamlet’s sharp wit and satire, Polonius’s foolishness, the gravediggers’ dark humour, and Osric’s pompous speech. These moments provide relief from tragedy and illustrate the coexistence of joy and sorrow in life.
4. **Hamlet’s Madness**-Hamlet adopts an ‘antic disposition’ after meeting the Ghost. Though many speculate if he is truly mad, his soliloquies reveal a sound mind. Polonius suspects lovesickness, but Hamlet’s calculated behaviour shows ‘method in his madness.’
5. **Ophelia**-Ophelia is a minor but poignant character. Loving Hamlet sincerely, she obeys her father’s commands and suffers deeply from Hamlet’s cruelty. Polonius’s death and Hamlet’s



rejection drive her to madness and death by drowning, embodying innocence destroyed by court politics.

**6. Gertrude**-Hamlet's mother and Claudius's wife, Gertrude is portrayed realistically. Though she marries Claudius soon after King Hamlet's death, she is loving and not complicit in the murder. Her concern for Hamlet grows, and she is a figure caught between loyalty, guilt, and maternal love.

**7. King Claudius**-Claudius is a complex villain—his ambition drives him to murder his brother, usurp the throne, and marry Gertrude. He plots against Hamlet but displays moments of genuine love for family and skillful statecraft, embodying the tension between villainy and kingly dignity.

**8. Laertes**-Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, Laertes is a man of action, seeking immediate revenge for his father's death. His impetuosity contrasts with Hamlet's hesitation, and his alliance with Claudius drives the final conflict.

**9. Horatio**-Hamlet's loyal friend and confidant, Horatio stands faithful throughout the play. Skeptical yet supportive, he serves as Hamlet's moral anchor and survives to tell Hamlet's story.

**10. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**-School-friends of Hamlet turned spies for Claudius. Their betrayal leads to their deaths by Hamlet's design, marking the dangers of deceit and misplaced loyalty.

**11. Fortinbras**-Prince Fortinbras of Norway acts decisively to reclaim lost lands and later claims Denmark's throne. He offers a foil to Hamlet's indecision, symbolising action and political restoration.



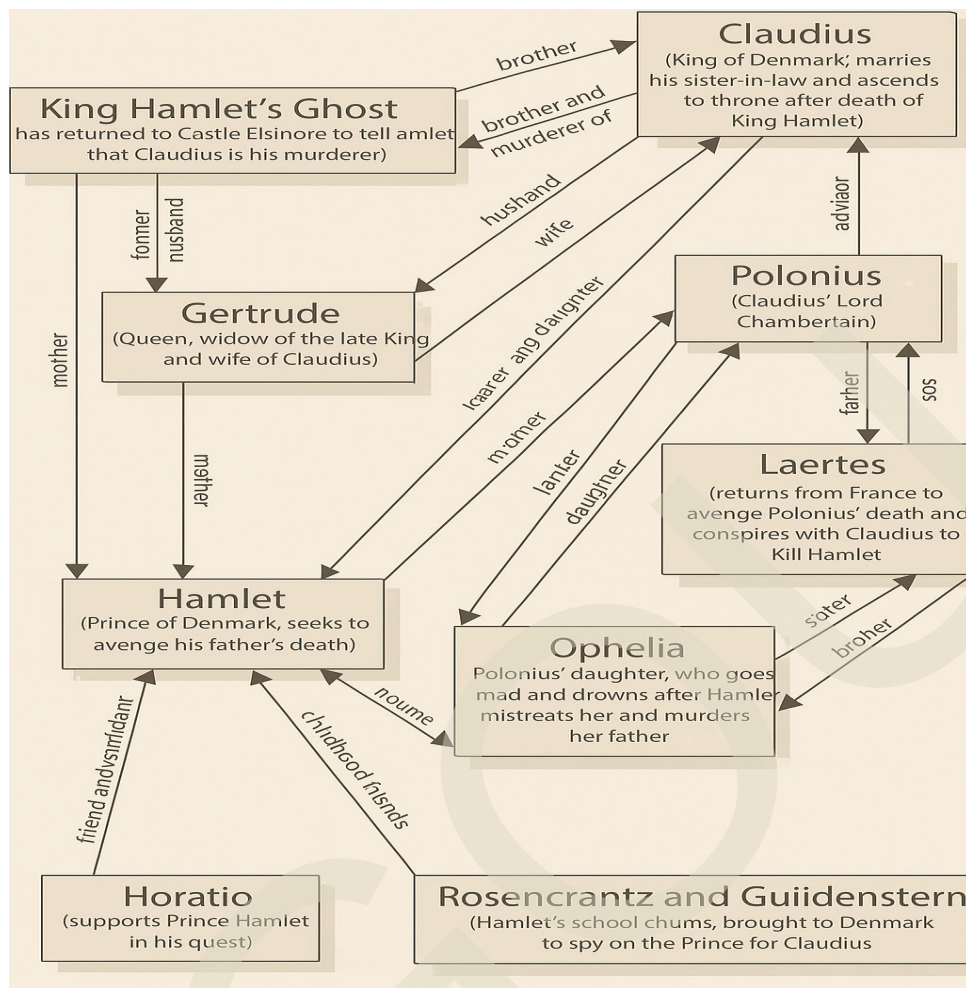


Fig 2.1.1:1 *Hamlet's* characters and their relationships.

## 2.1.1:1 Outline of the Play

### Hamlet: The Murder of His Father

The story follows Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, who rushes home from his studies at the University of Wittenberg to Elsinore, the capital of Denmark, after learning of his father's death. His grief is accompanied by confusion when he discovers that his mother has married his uncle, Claudius, just two months after the king's death. Claudius has now become king himself and is working to prevent Prince Fortinbras of Norway from invading Denmark to reclaim territory lost by his father in a battle against Hamlet's late father. Claudius allows Laertes, son of the Lord Chamberlain Polonius, to return to study at the University of Paris. With the Queen's support, Claudius persuades Hamlet to remain at court rather than resume his studies. For advice and support, Hamlet turns to his trusted friend Horatio, as the Queen sides with Claudius. Ophelia, daughter of Polonius

and the woman Hamlet loves, has promised her father and brother that she will reject Hamlet's affections and avoid meeting him.

### **The Ghost**

Hamlet's distraction deepens when Horatio and two officers report that the ghost of his deceased father has been seen at midnight on the castle battlements. Curious and troubled, Hamlet decides to confront the ghost. In a terrifying encounter, the spirit reveals that Hamlet's uncle Claudius poisoned his father to seize the throne. The ghost charges Hamlet with avenging this murder. From then onwards, Hamlet is consumed by this dark mission, his mind restless and clouded by doubt.

### **Hamlet: His Madness**

To conceal his true intentions, Hamlet feigns madness. This leads the confident and talkative Polonius to conclude that Hamlet has lost his mind because Ophelia has rejected him. However, King Claudius remains sceptical and employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, childhood friends of Hamlet, to spy on the prince and uncover the truth. Hamlet plans to use a group of travelling actors to stage a play that mimics the murder of his father, hoping to "catch the conscience of the King" and observe Claudius's reaction. Meanwhile, Claudius accepts Fortinbras's promise not to invade Denmark but grants him permission to march through the country on his way to attack Poland.

### **The Gonzago Play**

Despite their efforts, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius fail to learn the cause of Hamlet's strange behaviour. Claudius then decides to send Hamlet to England with the two spies, secretly ordering that Hamlet should be killed there. When Hamlet watches the murder play, Claudius's guilty reaction confirms to Hamlet his uncle's crime beyond doubt.

### **Hamlet's Interview with His Mother**

Although Hamlet knows of Claudius's guilt, he hesitates to kill him while the king is praying, fearing that such a death would send Claudius's soul to heaven. Soon after, Hamlet confronts his mother in her chamber. Gertrude reproaches him for his harshness towards Claudius, but Hamlet responds with fierce anger. When Gertrude cries out for

help, Hamlet, thinking Claudius is spying behind a curtain, kills Polonius by stabbing through the fabric. The ghost appears again to Hamlet but is unseen by Gertrude, urging Hamlet to act with greater resolve. Hamlet persuades his mother to keep his secret and promise loyalty. The Queen begins to understand her mistakes and resolves to be more sympathetic towards Hamlet.

### Hamlet's Departure for England

The murder of Polonius prompts Hamlet's departure to England. Hamlet manages to escape the voyage by boarding a pirate ship. He intercepts the letter carried by the English king's envoys ordering his execution, replacing it with a letter that condemns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death instead. Hamlet returns to Denmark, sending letters to Horatio and King Claudius to announce his arrival. Meanwhile, Polonius's death and secret burial have driven Ophelia into madness, and Laertes, enraged by his father's death, leads a mob to storm the castle. Claudius manipulates Laertes's fury against Hamlet, and the two conspire to kill Hamlet during a fencing match using a poisoned blade. Laertes's plan is strengthened by Ophelia's drowning, which is treated as suicide.

### The Catastrophe

At Ophelia's funeral, a distraught Hamlet, learning of her death, grapples with Laertes in the grave. The two are separated only with great difficulty. Hamlet then reveals to Horatio that, during his journey, he substituted the orders for his own execution with ones that caused the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel, Hamlet is struck with the poisoned sword. During the fight, the weapons are exchanged, and Laertes is wounded with the same poisoned blade. Queen Gertrude, unknowingly drinking poisoned wine meant for Hamlet, collapses and dies. As they all lie dying, Laertes and Gertrude reveal Claudius's villainy, and Hamlet finally kills Claudius with the poisoned rapier. Hamlet drinks from the poisoned cup at Horatio's urging and asks him to survive to tell the true story.

### Hamlet's Death

#### ► Hamlet's death

As Hamlet succumbs to poison, English ambassadors arrive to report Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. Fortinbras returns from Poland, claiming the throne of Denmark and bringing order to the fallen kingdom.



This is the tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. It is a tragedy shaped by Hamlet's "noble inaction." At the end, the stage is left strewn with the bodies of the dying and dead.

### 2.1.1.2 Detailed Summary

#### ACT I: Scene I



Fig 2.1.1:2 A Scene from *Hamlet*

#### ► Ghost's first appearance

The play opens at midnight on the cold, dark battlements of Elsinore Castle. Marcellus, a watchman, arrives to relieve Bernardo of his guard duty and brings with him Horatio, Hamlet's close friend, to witness the ghost that has appeared twice before. Despite Horatio's initial scepticism, the ghost of the late King Hamlet soon appears, but vanishes when Horatio attempts to speak to it. The ghost's sudden appearance unsettles the men deeply, symbolising a troubled state in Denmark. Horatio explains that Norway's young Prince Fortinbras threatens war to reclaim lands lost by his father to the dead king. This political unrest explains the castle's strict watchfulness. The reappearance of the ghost is a foreboding sign, hinting at deep trouble ahead. The ghost vanishes at dawn with the crowing cock, and Horatio resolves to tell Hamlet what they have seen. Ghost's first appearance

The famous remark, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," spoken by Marcellus, perfectly captures the scene's eerie atmosphere and the underlying sense of decay and corruption. This line foreshadows the moral and political disorder that will permeate the play.

This scene is a masterpiece of dramatic atmosphere, effectively setting the supernatural and political tensions right

- Dramatic atmosphere and tension

at the start. The chilling silence, the ominous appearance of the ghost, and the cold setting combine to create a haunting mood that prepares the audience for the tragedy unfolding. Coleridge praised the scene for its striking visual and sensory details such as the “armour, the dead silence, the watchfulness,” all of which work harmoniously to build suspense. The scene also reveals the unease gripping Denmark, a country on the edge of potential war and internal turmoil.

## ACT I: Scene II

- Claudius's rule and Hamlet's position

The scene moves to the royal court at Elsinore, where King Claudius addresses his council. He informs them that he has sent ambassadors to the King of Norway to prevent Prince Fortinbras, who threatens to invade Denmark to recover his father's lost lands. Claudius gives permission to Laertes, son of his Lord Chamberlain Polonius, to return to study in France. Turning his attention to Hamlet, Claudius, with the Queen's support, persuades him to remain at court instead of returning to the University of Wittenberg. Claudius publicly declares that Hamlet will succeed him as king, addressing him as 'my son' out of political convenience rather than genuine affection.

- Hamlet's soliloquy of grief

After the council disperses, Hamlet is left alone and delivers his first soliloquy, expressing his deep grief and disgust at his mother's quick remarriage. He laments, “O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew,” revealing his overwhelming sorrow and sense of despair. Hamlet also bitterly condemns his mother's hasty marriage, exclaiming, “Frailty, thy name is woman,” showing his perception of her weakness and moral failure.

- News of the ghost and Hamlet's resolve

Horatio then arrives and tells Hamlet about the ghost seen on the battlements. Intrigued and unsettled, Hamlet resolves to keep watch that night in the hopes of encountering the spectre himself.

**Critical Comments:** This scene introduces many of the play's central characters and sets the political context. Claudius's duplicity is clear, as he feigns concern for Hamlet and the kingdom while masking self-interest. Hamlet's soliloquy provides vital insight into his troubled mind, revealing themes of grief, betrayal, and moral disillusionment that drive the play. His melancholy





and brooding nature contrast with Claudius's outward confidence, setting up the conflict between appearance and reality.

### ACT I: Scene III

At Polonius's house, Laertes prepares to depart for Paris. Before leaving, he warns his sister Ophelia to be cautious about Hamlet's expressions of love, reminding her that Hamlet's royal status limits his freedom in choosing a partner. He warns that Hamlet's affections may not endure, advising her to guard her virtue carefully.

- Laertes's advice to Ophelia

- Polonius's counsel to Laertes and Ophelia

Polonius arrives and advises Laertes to adopt a prudent and moderate lifestyle while abroad. After Laertes leaves, Polonius turns his attention to Ophelia, instructing her to reject Hamlet's advances and behave with decorum. Polonius's warnings reveal his controlling attitude and the social pressures on Ophelia as a young woman.

**Critical Comments:** This scene highlights themes of family duty, reputation, and the control exerted by patriarchal authority. Laertes and Polonius both caution Ophelia against trusting Hamlet, reflecting the suspicion with which royal courtship is viewed. The scene also serves as dramatic relief, contrasting with the tension of the earlier ghost scenes, while setting the stage for Ophelia's conflict between love and obedience.

#### Polonius's Advice to Laertes

- "Give thy thoughts no tongue,  
Nor any unproportioned thought his act."  
(Be cautious in speech and actions.)
- "Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment."  
(Listen carefully but speak sparingly; be discerning.)
- "Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy."  
(Dress well but avoid extravagance.)

- ▶ “Neither a borrower nor a lender be;  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend.”  
(Avoid borrowing or lending to maintain good relationships.)
- ▶ “This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”  
(Be honest with yourself, and you will be honest to others.)
- ▶ “Take heed of entrance to a quarrel; but,  
Being in, bear’t that the opposed may beware of thee.”  
(Avoid fights, but if engaged, hold your ground.)
- ▶ “Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment.”  
(Choose carefully when and to whom you speak and judge.)

This advice reflects Polonius’s cautious, practical, and somewhat conservative approach to life and behaviour.

### **ACT I: Scenes IV and V**

Late at night on the battlements, Hamlet awaits the ghost with Marcellus and Horatio. The ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it away from the others. In a secluded spot, the ghost reveals he is the spirit of Hamlet’s father and discloses that he was murdered by his brother Claudius, who poured poison into his ear while he slept. The ghost demands that Hamlet avenge this foul deed but advises him to spare his mother’s honour.

### **Ghost’s Revelation (Act I, Scene V):**

“‘Tis given out that, sleeping in mine orchard,  
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.”



This quote reveals that the official story of King Hamlet's death by snakebite is a lie. The "serpent" is actually Claudius, his brother, who murdered him to seize the crown, setting the tragic events of the play into motion.

- Hamlet's vow and plan of feigned madness

Overcome with shock and grief, Hamlet swears to carry out his father's revenge, saying, "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" When Hamlet returns to his companions, he asks them to swear secrecy regarding the ghost's revelation. He hints that he may "put an antic disposition on"- pretend madness to conceal his plans. His troubled state intensifies, feeling "the weight of all this world" upon him.

**Critical Comments:** These scenes reveal the core inciting incident of the tragedy. The ghost's revelation installs the theme of revenge and justice as central to the plot. Hamlet's emotional turmoil and resolve to feign madness introduce the complex psychological layers that characterise the play. Shakespeare skillfully blends the supernatural with human conflict, heightening the suspense. The phrase "The time is out of joint" metaphorically conveys the disorder in both Denmark and Hamlet's soul. This tension between action and hesitation underpins the tragedy's development.

## ACT II: Scene I

- Polonius spies

Some time has passed since Laertes departed for Paris, and Polonius is anxious about his son's behaviour. To keep tabs on Laertes, Polonius sends his trusted servant Reynaldo to Paris with money and carefully crafted notes. Polonius instructs Reynaldo to inquire indirectly about Laertes by spreading vague rumours among Laertes's acquaintances, claims of gambling, drinking, and visiting questionable companions. Polonius's method reveals his manipulative nature; he prefers subtlety and deception to open communication. This desire to control and spy foreshadows the tangled web of surveillance and mistrust that pervades the play.

- Ophelia's disturbance

Ophelia then enters, visibly upset and disturbed. She tells her father of a strange encounter with Hamlet, who appeared to her disordered and pale, acting erratically, holding her tightly yet speaking no words. Polonius quickly

concludes that Hamlet's madness arises from true love for Ophelia, undeterred by her recent rejection of him on his advice. Polonius is eager to confirm his theory and hurries to inform King Claudius.

► Lovesick madness

Polonius's famous counsel to Reynaldo, "By indirections find directions out," encapsulates the cunning approach he favours. Though he loves his son, his excessive suspicion and overbearing attitude reveal his flaw: more conceit than true understanding. Hamlet's assumed madness bewilders the court, and Polonius's misinterpretation of causes adds to the confusion.

**Critical Comments:** This scene deepens the portrait of Polonius as a self-important, manipulative figure. Shakespeare uses Polonius's overreaching schemes to explore themes of truth versus deception and the dangers of espionage. His attempt to police Laertes's behaviour contrasts with Hamlet's own mysteries, highlighting the play's preoccupation with appearance and reality. Ophelia's fear and distress introduce her vulnerability and foreshadow the tragic consequences of court intrigues.

## ACT II: Scene II

► Rosencrantz, Guildenstern recruited

King Claudius and Queen Gertrude welcome Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to Elsinore. Concerned by Hamlet's odd behaviour, they enlist the two to uncover the cause of his melancholy and strange mannerisms. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, well aware of their mission, hope Hamlet will confide in them due to their close friendship.

► Fortinbras' peaceful passage

Meanwhile, Claudius receives ambassadors from Norway who report that Prince Fortinbras has been instructed by his uncle, the ailing King of Norway, to cease his aggression toward Denmark. However, Fortinbras now seeks to invade Poland and requests permission to march through Denmark. Claudius grants this passage, securing peace on the northern border.

► Polonius' love theory

Polonius arrives and confidently presents his theory that Hamlet's madness stems from love frustrated by Ophelia's rejection. To support this, he produces a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia, demonstrating what he believes are signs of love-sickness. To test this hypothesis,



Claudius and Gertrude agree to secretly observe a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, watched by Polonius from behind a curtain.

- Hamlet's feigned madness

When Hamlet enters, Polonius requests the King and Queen to leave, telling them he will speak with Hamlet alone. Hamlet's quick wit and feigned madness easily fool Polonius, reinforcing the notion that his madness has a deeper purpose. Hamlet's behaviour puzzles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who attribute his melancholy to disappointed ambition rather than madness.

- Arrival of players

The arrival of a troupe of travelling players prompts Hamlet to request a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, into which he plans to insert a specially written speech. He hopes the play will "catch the conscience of the King," revealing Claudius's guilt.

- Hamlet's self-reproach

In a closing soliloquy, Hamlet reflects on the intense emotions evoked by the player's performance, contrasting their vivid display of grief with his own inaction. He laments his "pigeon-livered" cowardice and resolves to use the play as a test.

**Critical Comments:** This scene is a turning point, revealing multiple layers of deceit. Polonius's misguided love theory, the King's anxiety, and Hamlet's secret plotting illustrate a court rife with suspicion and intrigue. The presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heightens the theme of espionage. Hamlet's plan to use theatre as a means to expose truth is a brilliant dramatic device, marking the start of his active response to Claudius's crime. The soliloquy reveals Hamlet's profound self-awareness and internal conflict, central to his tragic character.

In the closing soliloquy of Act II, Scene II, Hamlet reflects deeply on his own inaction compared to the passionate grief displayed by the actor.

In his soliloquy, Hamlet contrasts the actor's vivid display of sorrow with his own failure to act upon the murder of his father. He criticises himself as "pigeon-livered and lack[ing] gall," unable to summon the righteous fury required to take revenge. Hamlet asks rhetorically, "What would he do, Had he the motive and



the cue for passion That I have?" This reveals his self-reproach for hesitation. He further expresses his resolve to frame and stage a play that will "catch the conscience of the King," hoping that watching a re-enactment of his father's murder will provoke guilt in Claudius. The soliloquy poignantly captures Hamlet's inner turmoil, oscillating between self-doubt and determined action.

"What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and 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*, Act II, Scene 2

### ACT III: Scene I

The scene unfolds in King Claudius's castle, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to the King and Queen that despite their efforts, they have failed to discover the cause of Hamlet's madness. They inform the royal couple of Hamlet's excitement about the arrival of a troupe of players and his wish to have them perform before the court. Seizing the opportunity to spy on Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius hatch a plan. They instruct Ophelia to walk through the hall pretending to read a religious book. Polonius explains that such pious behaviour often "sugars o'er" evil intentions and may prick the King's guilty conscience, hinting that Hamlet's madness arises from deeper troubles. As Hamlet approaches, everyone else exits, and Polonius hides behind a curtain to eavesdrop.

► Failed spy report

Hamlet enters, beginning with a profound soliloquy that meditates on life and death, famously questioning, "To be, or not to be: that is the question," where he contemplates suicide and the uncertainties of the afterlife. His reflection reveals his torment and the depths of his despair.

Ophelia then approaches to return Hamlet's love tokens and inquire about his feelings. Hamlet denies ever having loved her, urging her to "get thee to a nunnery,"



- Hamlet re-jects Ophelia

and commands her to forget him. Suddenly suspecting he is being observed, Hamlet's tone turns bitter and cruel. He lashes out at Ophelia and at womankind in general, calling her a "breeder of sinners," and accusing women of deceit. His harsh words convince Ophelia that Hamlet's madness is real, leaving her heartbroken.

- Claudius fears danger

After Hamlet departs, Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding. Claudius realises that Hamlet's turmoil is rooted in matters beyond love and concludes that Hamlet is dangerous. He resolves to send Hamlet to England, an important mission secretly intended to rid Denmark of him.

- Plan to spy

Polonius advises that Queen Gertrude summons Hamlet after the forthcoming play to uncover the source of his grief. Meanwhile, Polonius will continue spying on Hamlet himself. The King agrees to this plan, setting further traps for the troubled prince.

**Critical Comments:** This scene is a key moment in the unfolding of Claudius's plots. His suspicion that Hamlet's madness has causes deeper than romantic frustration marks a turning point, leading to the decision to remove Hamlet under the guise of diplomacy. Hamlet's brutal interaction with Ophelia exposes his inner conflict and intensifies the theme of appearance versus reality. Ophelia emerges as a tragic figure, genuinely loving Hamlet but powerless as a pawn in the schemes of her father and the King. The scene illuminates the dangers of deceit in the Danish court and heightens the dramatic tension as multiple plots begin to intersect.

### Hamlet's Soliloquy (Act III, Scene I)

**To be, or not to be: that is the question:**

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more; and, by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation



Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
 To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause: there's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life;  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
 The insolence of office and the spurns  
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action.—Soft you now!  
 The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons  
 Be all my sins remember'd.

### Analysis

This soliloquy is Hamlet's profound meditation on life and death when he contemplates suicide as an escape from suffering:

- **Existential Question:** Hamlet ponders the value of existence itself, weighing the pains of life against the fear of the unknown after death ("the undiscover'd country").



- ▶ **Fear of the Afterlife:** The uncertainty about what dreams or punishments await after death causes Hamlet to hesitate, rendering him inactive and fearful.
- ▶ **Suffering and Endurance:** Hamlet lists various human sufferings—oppression, unrequited love, injustice—and questions why people endure these hardships instead of ending their lives.
- ▶ **Conscience and Cowardice:** Reflection (“conscience”) makes people cowardly, stopping them from acting decisively, leading to procrastination even in grave matters.
- ▶ **Internal Conflict:** The soliloquy vividly portrays Hamlet’s deep inner conflict and philosophical despair, contributing significantly to his character’s psychological complexity.
- ▶ **Interruption:** The arrival of Ophelia reminds us Hamlet is not truly alone, blending his private turmoil with external reality.

This speech is central to understanding Hamlet’s hesitations and the theme of action versus inaction that drives the tragedy.

### ACT III: Scene II

The scene moves to a hall in Elsinore Castle where Hamlet meets with a troupe of travelling players. Before the performance, Hamlet gives the players advice on the art of acting. He urges the First Player to speak his lines “trippingly on the tongue” and advises against overacting or exaggeration, saying it “offends me to the soul” when actors “tear a passion to tatters.” Hamlet wants them to be natural and restrained, to “hold a mirror up to nature,” reflecting life truthfully rather than indulging in theatrical spectacle. His words reveal Shakespeare’s own ideas on good acting and dramatic effect.

- ▶ Hamlet coaches actors

Once the players retire to prepare, Hamlet talks with Horatio, expressing faith in his friend’s steady character and clear temper. He asks Horatio to closely observe Claudius’s reactions during the play, which Hamlet has specially chosen to resemble the murder of his own father. Hamlet explains that the ghost told him of Claudius’s crime and he has written an added speech for the players to include. He hopes that if Claudius reacts with signs of guilt, it will confirm the truth of the ghost’s story and justify avenging his father.

- ▶ Horatio watches Claudius

When Claudius, Gertrude, and the court enter, Hamlet resumes his “antic disposition.” He mocks Ophelia harshly with crude and insulting wordplay, displaying a bitter

- ▶ Hamlet mocks Ophelia



- Poison scene shown

and cynical mood. The play begins with a dumb show, a silent pantomime depicting a king and queen's loving relationship. The king rests, but a sneaky man enters, removes the crown, kisses it, and pours poison into the king's ear. The king dies, and the queen is wooed and quickly marries the murderer. During this dumb show, Claudius is distracted, speaking with the queen and missing some of the symbolism.

- Claudius's guilty reaction

The main play then starts, narrating the death of a king by his nephew. At the exact moment the poison is poured in the king's ear, Claudius rises and calls for light, visibly disturbed. He abruptly leaves the hall, followed by the court, and the play is cut short.

- Hamlet confirms guilt

Left alone, Hamlet and Horatio discuss the king's reaction. Both agree that Claudius's guilt is now undeniable. Hamlet's joy is tempered with purpose: he gains proof but still bears the heavy burden of action. Soon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return to inform Hamlet that the queen, "in most great affliction of spirit," has summoned him. Hamlet, aware that his school friends are spying on him for the king, mocks their flattery but agrees to meet the queen. Polonius arrives to escort Hamlet and receives scornful and cryptic replies.

- Queen summons Hamlet

- Hamlet plans confrontation

When Hamlet is alone, he prepares himself to confront his mother with fierce words, telling himself he will "speak daggers but use none," indicating he plans a battle of words rather than physical violence.

**Critical Comments:** This scene is pivotal, as Hamlet reveals both his intelligence and his strategic mind. His advice to the players reflects Shakespeare's own views on theatrical art, a famous "play within a play" technique that advances the main plot while commenting on performance itself. Claudius's startled exit confirms his guilt, marking the dramatic turning point from suspicion to conviction. Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia demonstrates his inner torment and growing bitterness. The scene also highlights themes of appearance versus reality, manipulation, and surveillance. Hamlet's resolution to confront his mother with words rather than weapons foreshadows the intense personal conflict in the next scene.





### ACT III: Scene III

- Claudius orders exile

The scene is set in a room within the King's castle where Claudius, deeply fearful for his own safety, orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to prepare for Hamlet's journey to England. Claudius is convinced that Hamlet has uncovered the secret of the murder and poses a threat that must be removed swiftly. Polonius arrives to inform Claudius that Hamlet has consented to speak with his mother in her private chamber and that Polonius will conceal himself behind the curtain to eavesdrop on their conversation, reporting back to the King.

- Polonius spies, Claudius's false prayer

Once left alone, Claudius attempts to repent for his crime. He prays fervently, acknowledging his guilt and pleading for forgiveness. However, his words reveal an inner turmoil and selfishness; he admits that, although he wishes to repent, he is unwilling to part with the gains of his wickedness. This is reflected in his anguished confession: "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't, A brother's murder." Yet, he laments that his prayers bring no true peace, because he still clings to the fruits of his sin.

- Hamlet's hesitation

As Claudius kneels in prayer, Hamlet enters the room quietly, drawing his sword with the intention to kill the King and avenge his father's death. However, in a moment of hesitation, Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius, reasoning that to kill the King while praying would be to send his soul to heaven, which Hamlet does not desire. Hamlet says to himself: "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying; And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven; And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd: A villain kills my father; and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send To heaven." Hamlet's failure to act is not due to moral conscience alone but stems from his internal paralysis and lack of resolve.

- Missed revenge opportunity

- Moral conflict

Though Claudius appears repentant, his admission that he "still enjoys the fruits of [his] wickedness" shows that his prayers are hollow and ineffective. This reveals him as a complex villain whose guilt is shadowed by his unwillingness to truly repent or relinquish power.

**Critical Comments:** This scene is crucial for the play's dramatic tension. Claudius's fear and guilty conscience are brought into sharp relief, revealing him as a deeply flawed and tormented character. At the same time, Hamlet's



hesitation is made painfully clear. He passes up an ideal opportunity to avenge his father, and his excuse, fear of sending Claudius's soul to heaven, suggests a deeper psychological turmoil. This moment highlights Hamlet's tragic flaw: an indecision that stalls action with devastating consequences. His delay initiates a chain of events that draw not only himself but multiple characters into ruin, underscoring the play's exploration of human frailty, morality, and the consequences of delay.

### ACT III: Scene IV

The scene is set in the Queen's private chamber. Polonius conceals himself behind the arras, eager to listen in on the expected confrontation between Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude. When Hamlet arrives, Gertrude begins by reproaching him for his disrespectful behaviour towards Claudius. However, Hamlet quickly turns the tables and forces his mother into a seat, speaking with intensity and threat. His anger erupts as he accuses her of moral corruption and infidelity, condemning her hasty marriage to Claudius.

- Polonius spying

Gertrude's cries for help are unexpectedly echoed by Polonius from behind the curtain, alarming both mother and son. In a violent moment, Hamlet lunges at the sound and thrusts his sword through the arras, killing Polonius instantly. At first, Hamlet believes he has slain Claudius, his enemy. Yet, even after realising the truth, he shows no remorse for murdering Polonius, whom he dismisses derisively as a "rash, intruding fool."

- Hamlet confronts Gertrude, Polonius killed

In the midst of this intense exchange, the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears, unseen and unheard by Gertrude. The spirit sharply reminds Hamlet of his vow to exact revenge on Claudius but also cautions him to treat his mother gently.

- Ghost's reminder

The Ghost vanishes, leaving Gertrude bewildered, unsure whether Hamlet's accusations are the ravings of madness or harsh truths. Hamlet persuades her of his sanity and convinces her to keep their conversation secret. He reveals awareness of the plot to exile him to England, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carrying sealed orders. Hamlet vows to outwit this plan. With a sombre farewell, he drags the body of Polonius from the room, intending to dispose of it quietly.

- Gertrude bewildered, Hamlet's secret



- Plans  
England trip

Hamlet's rebuke to his mother includes the famous line, "Get thee to a nunnery," resurfacing his complex feelings on morality and womanhood. He lashes out with bitter words, confronting her with "Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul, And there I see such black and grained spots As will not leave their tinct," condemning her moral failings.

**Critical Comments:** This scene is dramatically crucial for several reasons. Hamlet's confrontation with his mother marks a turning point in their relationship, which transforms from estrangement to an uneasy alliance. Gertrude's eventual sympathy for Hamlet makes her a more complex character, torn between loyalty to her husband and love for her son. The unexpected killing of Polonius sets in motion a series of tragic consequences, including Laertes's enmity and Ophelia's descent into madness. This violent act, born of misunderstanding and impulsiveness, further exposes the chaos consuming Elsinore. The Ghost's appearance highlights the supernatural and moral dimensions of the play, serving as a reminder of Hamlet's solemn mission and the necessity of measured action.

#### ACT IV: Scene I

- Claudius  
plans, Hamlet  
exiled,  
Urgent  
departurePo-  
litical danger

This scene unfolds in another chamber within Elsinore Castle. Queen Gertrude informs King Claudius of the shocking murder of Polonius. She explains that Hamlet, in a fit of madness, killed Polonius, and she portrays her son's behaviour as dangerously unhinged. Claudius feigns belief in this explanation but swiftly concludes that Hamlet must be sent to England immediately to prevent scandal and secure the kingdom. He orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to summon Hamlet before the court, to take charge of the corpse, and to prepare for a secret voyage with Hamlet that very night. The urgency and secrecy underline the precarious political situation and Claudius's growing fear of Hamlet's unpredictable actions.

**Critical Comments:** This scene demonstrates Gertrude's loyalty to Hamlet. She remains true to her promise to keep Hamlet's secret and shields him by insisting his madness is genuine. The murder of Polonius, though accidental, is exploited by Claudius as a convenient pretext to remove Hamlet from Denmark. The scene highlights the convergence of personal and political motivations driving the characters, advancing the tragic momentum as Hamlet faces exile.

## ACT IV: Scene II

- Hamlet taunts spies

In another room of the castle, Hamlet playfully taunts his school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He behaves in an erratic and evasive manner, deliberately concealing the location of Polonius's body. Hamlet's behaviour resembles a game of hide and seek, as he dodges their questions and frustrates their attempts to obtain information. It takes considerable effort and persuasion before Hamlet agrees to accompany them to the King. His assumed madness grows more pronounced, disguising his true intentions and heightening the tension between Hamlet and the courtiers.

**Critical Comments:** This scene emphasizes Hamlet's strategic use of madness as a shield against his enemies. His refusal to reveal Polonius's whereabouts frustrates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and confirms his unpredictability. The playful yet evasive interaction reveals Hamlet's control over the situation despite his outward appearance of insanity. This scene further complicates the web of suspicion and surveillance within the Danish court.

## ACT IV: Scene III

- Hamlet's defiant madness

The scene takes place in another room of the King's castle where Hamlet is brought, closely guarded, before King Claudius. Claudius demands to know the location of Polonius's body, but Hamlet refuses to disclose it. His speech is erratic and cryptic, resembling that of a madman, but it is laced with sharp and insulting insinuations aimed at the King. Hamlet mocks Claudius's authority while simultaneously maintaining a façade of madness that confuses his captors. Despite his defiance, Hamlet consents to accompany Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England without delay.

- Claudius's murder plot

Left alone, Claudius delivers a revealing soliloquy. He confesses that he has sent secret sealed letters to the King of England, requesting that Hamlet be put to death immediately upon arrival. Claudius's growing paranoia and fear of Hamlet's potential for revenge have compelled him to resort to this dark plot, demonstrating the depth of his villainy and his determination to secure his throne by any means necessary. This revelation highlights the treacherous power struggles occurring behind the scenes and foreshadows the deadly events that lie ahead for Hamlet.



**Critical Comments:** This scene reveals the serious consequences of Hamlet's impulsive killing of Polonius. Claudius seizes the opportunity to exile Hamlet, but his intentions are far more sinister, as the secret orders to have Hamlet executed indicate. Hamlet's refusal to disclose Polonius's body's location serves both as a manifestation of his resistance and as a source of suspense in the unfolding drama. The scene underscores the mounting danger surrounding Hamlet and the high stakes of his mission, deepening the atmosphere of tension and foreboding.

#### ACT IV: Scene IV

The scene shifts to a plain in Denmark where Prince Fortinbras of Norway leads his army across the stage. Hamlet encounters a captain in the army and inquires about the purpose of their march. The captain reveals that Fortinbras is leading twenty thousand men to claim a seemingly insignificant piece of Polish territory that "hath in it no profit but the name." Struck by the willingness of Fortinbras to risk so much for so little, Hamlet reflects with a profound soliloquy on his own delay in avenging his father's murder and addressing his mother's disgrace.

- Fortinbras marches onward

Hamlet contrasts Fortinbras's prompt and decisive action to his own hesitation, lamenting his "pigeon-liver'd" cowardice and failure to act. He muses on how Fortinbras follows "divine ambition," fighting "for an eggshell" while Hamlet has allowed his noble cause to be thwarted by endless contemplation. Hamlet vows that from this moment onwards, he will be "promptly put on" to bloody purpose and embrace decisive action, resolving to emulate Fortinbras's example and restore his family's honour.

- Hamlet self-reflects, Resolute, bloody purpose

**Critical Comments:** This scene provides valuable insight into Hamlet's evolving character through a stark contrast with Fortinbras, who embodies the virtues of swift, resolute action. Fortinbras's determined march for a trivial cause highlights Hamlet's internal struggle with paralysis and doubt, deepening the play's exploration of revenge, honour, and the consequences of vacillation. Hamlet's newfound resolve marks a turning point, symbolising his readiness to embrace his tragic destiny. Shakespeare skillfully uses this character foil to amplify the themes of action versus inaction and the honour-bound demands of revenge.



## ACT IV: Scene V

### ► Ophelia's madness

The scene unfolds in a room within the King's castle where the tragic consequences of Polonius's murder manifest dramatically. Hamlet's violent act has driven Ophelia to madness, and unrest simmers among the people of Denmark. Laertes, having recently returned from Paris, capitalises on this unrest, rallying a furious mob and storming the palace demanding justice and revenge for his father's death. Claudius meets Laertes with calm courage, steadfastly protesting his innocence. He promises to lay all the facts clearly before Laertes so that the young man may judge the truth for himself.



Fig 2.1.1:3 A Scene from *Hamlet*

### ► Laertes's fury, Claudius's manipulation

Ophelia enters, a tragic and pitiable figure, carrying a handful of wild flowers, which she distributes among Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude. She imagines them all standing with her in mourning at her father's grave. Her erratic singing of sorrowful songs and her incongruous gift-giving deeply touch those present, evoking tender sympathy and profound pity. After Ophelia departs, Claudius pulls Laertes aside to speak privately. He counsels the grieving son to "commune with his grief" and work to suppress the seeds of rebellion. Claudius further promises to reveal the true murderer and provide proof, thereby persuading Laertes to ally with him against Hamlet.

This scene covers a considerable lapse of time since the last one, during which Laertes's return and rousing of the people escalate tensions to the brink of open rebellion.

► Mourning ritual

Laertes's readiness for action starkly contrasts with Hamlet's prolonged hesitation, highlighting the divergent responses to tragedy among Shakespeare's characters. Claudius, portraying himself as a composed and clever strategist, deftly manipulates Laertes's wrath, diverting it toward Hamlet and thus preserving his own position.

► Rising unrest

The pathos surrounding Ophelia's mad state is a central feature of the scene. Her utter despair, represented through her distributed flowers and plaintive songs, strikes a chord with the audience, underscoring the devastating impact of the unfolding tragedy. Her madness acts as an emotional counterpoint to Hamlet's philosophical torment, a poignant visual of innocence destroyed by the court's corruption.

► Tragic consequences

Claudius's manipulation of Laertes also underscores the growing web of conspiracy and betrayal, intensifying the atmosphere of impending doom. Hamlet's own inaction is thus implicated not only in personal tragedy but in the broader unraveling of the Danish realm.

**Famous Lines:** Ophelia's flower speech includes symbolic references such as, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies, that's for thoughts," which metaphorically reflect the themes of memory and sorrow pervasive in the play.

#### ACT IV: Scene VI

The scene takes place in another room of Elsinore Castle where Horatio is approached by sailors bringing letters from Hamlet. Horatio reads aloud from one of the letters, learning that shortly after setting sail for England, Hamlet's ship was attacked by pirates. During the skirmish, Hamlet bravely boarded the pirate vessel, which then disengaged from the ship carrying Hamlet's escorts, leaving him as the pirates' prisoner. Remarkably, the pirates treat Hamlet with unexpected kindness, "like thieves of mercy," and inform him that he will be returned to Denmark in exchange for a favour. Hamlet asks Horatio to help ensure that the sailors deliver letters to King Claudius, and he urges Horatio to follow the men who will guide him to where Hamlet is currently hidden.

Hamlet's letter hints at significant developments yet to be revealed, promising tales "that will make thee

dumb,” suggesting he is piecing together a plan involving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who continue their journey to England unaware of Hamlet’s fate.

Hamlet’s urgent tone is palpable in his written words, “Repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly death,” conveying a pressing call for action and signalling the dramatic momentum building toward the play’s climax.

**Critical Comments:** This scene underscores the theme of chance and fortune in the tragedy. Hamlet’s unexpected capture by pirates and subsequent mercy is a demonstration of Providence or fate intervening at a crucial moment. His timely return to Denmark, despite Claudius’s machinations, reflects the delicate balance of power and luck that governs the unfolding drama. The scene also reveals Hamlet’s increasing agency and readiness to confront his destiny, contrasting with his earlier hesitation.

#### ACT IV: Scene VII

- Claudius manipulates Laertes

The scene takes place in a secluded room of the King’s palace, where King Claudius engages Laertes in a confidential conversation. The King skillfully poisons Laertes’s mind against Hamlet, blaming him for the murder of Polonius and suggesting that justice must be served. Claudius appeals to Laertes’s sense of honour and filial duty, fanning the flames of his anger and ambition.

- Hamlet’s letter arrives

Just as the tension builds, a messenger arrives bearing a letter from Hamlet announcing his sudden and unexpected return to Denmark. Claudius is taken aback by the news but quickly composes himself. He reveals to Laertes a deadly plan to kill Hamlet under the guise of a friendly fencing match. Claudius proposes that Laertes will use an “unblunted foil”, a sharpened sword, to ensure Hamlet’s defeat and vengeance for Polonius’s death. Furthermore, to guarantee Hamlet’s demise, Claudius promises a poisoned cup, which they will offer to Hamlet during the match. Should Hamlet call for a drink, as he likely will, the cup will seal his fate.

- Claudius’s murder plot

- Gertrude announces death, Laertes seeks vengeance

The two villains finalise their nefarious plot when Queen Gertrude enters with the dreadful news that Ophelia has drowned. Her death is a devastating blow to Laertes and solidifies his resolve to follow through with the plan. The once hesitant Laertes is now fully committed to avenging his sister’s tragic madness and death.





Fig 2.1.1:4 A Scene from *Hamlet*

► Plot thickens

Claudius's villainy is laid bare in this scene. His cruelty and ruthless cunning reveal a man who will stoop to any depths to maintain power and eliminate threats. The alliance between Claudius and Laertes creates a formidable opposition to Hamlet, stacking the odds of his survival against him.

► Revenge versus hesitation

As critic Verity observes, "For Laertes, the news of Ophelia's death clinches the whole matter and dispels any reluctance he may have felt in agreeing to the plot against Hamlet." The personal loss drives Laertes's blind vengeance, while Hamlet's own sensitive approach to revenge exposes the moral contrasts between the two young men.

**ACT V: Scene I – A Scene in the Graveyard**

The scene begins in a churchyard near Elsinore, where two gravediggers (clowns) are digging a grave on a cold day. The first gravedigger asks the second if Ophelia, who apparently drowned herself, will receive a Christian burial. The second gravedigger assures him that she will, because she was a "gentlewoman," thereby qualifying for the rites despite suspicions about her death being suicide. Their conversation is light-hearted and filled with dark humour, which provides a brief comic relief amid the tragedy.

► Gravediggers debate burial

As the gravediggers work, Hamlet and Horatio enter and observe the unusual behaviour of the first gravedigger, who is singing merrily as he digs. Hamlet is puzzled how such



a solemn task can be carried out with such cheerfulness, to which Horatio replies that the gravedigger has become desensitised by the routine of his work, for “custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.”

- Hamlet observes skulls

During the digging, the gravedigger throws up a skull and remarks on how all that remains of a once-living person is just this “achedy” skull. Hamlet reflects philosophically on the fate of all human beings, noting that the skull could have belonged to an ambitious politician, a courtier, or a lawyer who once thrived on legal entanglements - “this fellow might be in’s time a great buyer of land.” This reminder of human mortality brings home the equality that death imposes on rich and poor alike.



Fig 2.1.1:5 *Hamlet*, Grave-digging scene

- Skull sparks reflection  
Hamlet jokes verbally

Hamlet then questions the gravedigger about whose grave is being dug. The gravedigger answers, humorously, “Mine, Sir,” sparking a wittily paradoxical exchange on lying in the grave that plays with words between existence and burial. When the gravedigger sifts out another skull, he tells Hamlet it belonged to Yorick, the King’s jester whom Hamlet recalls fondly from his childhood days. Hamlet’s joyful recollection turns sombre as he realises that even Yorick, who once “held a thousand jokes” and delighted him, has succumbed to death’s finality.

Shortly after, a funeral procession arrives. The mourners



- Funeral procession arrives, Laertes mourns sister

- Hamlet challenges Laertes

- Queen attributes madness

include the King, Queen, Laertes, priests, and attendants. The priest informs Laertes that because Ophelia's death is suspected as suicide, she is not automatically entitled to the full Christian burial rites. Laertes, overcome with grief, curses whoever is responsible for her death and leaps into the open grave, declaring his wish to be buried with his sister. Hamlet then steps forward and questions who dares to compete with Laertes in mourning. Moved by his emotions, Hamlet leaps into the grave to challenge Laertes, and the two grapple until they are separated by the attendants.

Hamlet declares his love for Ophelia passionately: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum." He challenges Laertes to prove who loved her more. The Queen attributes Hamlet's unusual behaviour to madness. Hamlet then leaves, and Claudius attempts to calm Laertes.

#### **Critical Comments:**

This scene merges the tragic and comic elements expertly. The grave-diggers' humour offers brief relief while introducing themes of death's universality and the inevitable decay of all humans, regardless of status. Hamlet's philosophical rumination on Yorick's skull, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio," poignantly explores the ravages of time and death's inescapability. The stark imagery reminds audiences that even the mighty and joyous will ultimately share the same fate. Hamlet's dramatic involvement in Ophelia's funeral reveals a profound emotional awakening, previously suppressed by his duty to avenging his father. The impulsive grappling with Laertes reveals tension and foreshadows the fatal duel to come.

Ophelia's flowers and songs, though absent in this scene, have already established her tragic decline, and her death continues to ripple through the narrative, intensifying themes of lost innocence and familial grief. Claudius's attempt to soothe Laertes juxtaposes political control against personal tragedy, heightening the scene's emotional and thematic complexity.

The graveyard scene pushes Hamlet to confront the "haunting mystery of life, of evil, and of reality" as Shakespeare presents a meditation on mortality that is both deeply personal and universal. Hamlet's reflections on human limitations, ambition, and the inevitable decay of

“emperors,” “kings,” and jesters alike represent one of the most profound passages in English literature.

### ACT V: Scene II

The final scene unfolds in a hall within Elsinore Castle, where Hamlet reveals to Horatio the unexpected turn his voyage to England took. Hamlet recounts how, aboard the ship destined for his exile, he discovered a secret letter penned by Claudius, ordering the English king to execute Hamlet immediately upon his arrival. Displaying his cunning and resolve, Hamlet substituted the original letter with one of his own design, sealed with his father's signet, commanding the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. Hamlet shows no regret for this ruthless act, telling Horatio, “They are not near my conscience; their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow.”

- Hamlet re-veals plot

In this conversation, Hamlet also expresses sorrow for his harsh behaviour toward Laertes during Ophelia's funeral, recognising in Laertes a mirror of his own desire for revenge. He pledges to make amends and regain Laertes's friendship.

Their talk is interrupted by the arrival of Osric, a pompous courtier who announces the King's arrangement of a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. The King has placed a large wager backing Hamlet's victory, reflecting the high stakes of this duel. Horatio advises Hamlet to reconsider, warning of Laertes's superior skill, but Hamlet accepts calmly, stating, “There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (V.ii.219). Hamlet's acceptance reveals his readiness to face fate without fear.

- Duel announced formally

As the court gathers, Hamlet approaches Laertes and offers a sincere apology for the insults exchanged at Ophelia's burial. Laertes, while withholding full forgiveness until counsel from elders, accepts the gesture and agrees to the match. The duel begins with tense energy. Hamlet wins the first two rounds, prompting the Queen to raise a cup of wine in Hamlet's honour. To everyone's horror, she drinks from the cup despite Claudius's plea to stop. As Claudius mutters, “It is the poison'd cup: it is too late,” the Queen collapses, poisoned.

- Hamlet seeks forgiveness, Queen drinks poison





Fig 2.1.1:6 *Hamlet*, fencing

► Laertes wounded fatally

► Laertes confesses treachery

► Hamlet kills Claudius

► Hamlet dies peacefully

► Fortinbras seizes throne, Military funeral ceremony

In the final round, Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword, but they grapple, exchanging weapons. Hamlet wounds Laertes with the same poisoned blade. Laertes confesses his and Claudius's deadly conspiracy, proclaiming, "I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" before he dies. Hamlet, enraged, fatally stabs Claudius and forces him to drink the remaining poisoned wine. Claudius dies begging for mercy.

With Laertes and the Queen dead, Hamlet himself succumbs to the poison. Before dying, he implores Horatio to survive, telling him, "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart... / Tell my story" and expresses his wish for Fortinbras to assume the Danish throne.

Shortly after, Fortinbras arrives, victorious from a campaign in Poland, accompanied by English ambassadors who report the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as ordered by the Danish King. Horatio promises to explain the tragic chain of events leading to the play's bloodbath. Fortinbras orders a military funeral for Hamlet, marking a solemn end to the Danish royal line.

**Critical Comments:** The final scene erupts abruptly into violence and tragedy, delivering the delayed revenge that Hamlet had pondered so deeply. The swift succession of deaths - Claudius, Laertes, Gertrude, and Hamlet - underscores the catastrophic cost of vengeance. Hamlet's

calm acceptance of death and forgiveness of Laertes signal a transformation from a tormented youth to a tragic hero at peace with his fate. His reflection on providence and fate illustrates Shakespeare's complex meditation on destiny.

The arrival of Fortinbras symbolises political renewal and contrasts with the morally corrupted Danish court. Hamlet's military funeral, while appropriate given his royal status, also reflects the ambiguities of his character, a philosopher prince navigating chaotic revenge in a world governed by often senseless death. The scene powerfully concludes the themes of mortality, justice, and the consequences of human frailty that permeate the play.

### 2.1.1:3 Critical Analysis

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play that has fascinated audiences and critics for centuries. It evokes a wide range of opinions, from high praise to critical doubt, largely because of the many complex problems presented within the play and the mysterious nature of its main character, Prince Hamlet. The play itself has undergone changes over time, and Hamlet's complex personality adds to the challenge of understanding it fully. Despite this, Shakespeare's skill and the powerful themes he explores - the nature of revenge, madness, and human suffering - are clear throughout the play.

- Complex play fascinates critics

Unlike modern readers who often come to *Hamlet* loaded with critical theories and expectations, Elizabethan audiences approached the play without such barriers. The story of Hamlet was well known, and the conventions of revenge and ghost stories were familiar to them. These audiences did not wrestle with the uncertainties or ambiguities that later generations encounter, giving the play a more straightforward reception. Today, however, much of our understanding is filtered through established criticism, sometimes making Hamlet appear only as an indecisive scholar rather than the multi-faceted character Shakespeare created.

- Elizabethans understood play directly

The old English language and Elizabethan culture add additional layers of difficulty for modern readers. Hamlet's witty speeches contain riddles, puns, and references that were clear to the original audiences but can seem puzzling now. Even commonly accepted elements such as the ghost's presence hold different meanings today. For the Elizabethans, ghosts were real and powerful figures

- Language barriers complicate understanding



influencing human affairs; today, they are often seen as symbolic or theatrical devices.

- Historical contexts needed today

Many parts of the play rely on knowledge of the politics and customs of the era. For example, fencing was a popular entertainment, helping the audience appreciate the importance of the duel at the play's end. The political situation concerning the Danish throne was also well understood then but needs explanation today for the story to make full sense.

- Minor inconsistencies do not weaken impact

Critics often point to inconsistencies and gaps in the play. Polonius's character, for instance, changes from a sensible advisor to a meddling fool. Horatio, while a loyal friend to Hamlet, sometimes seems unaware of the political realities of Denmark. Some crucial stage directions have been lost, making certain scenes unclear, such as Hamlet's behaviour in his mother's chamber or whether Claudius sees the play's dumb-show. However, these minor issues do not significantly weaken the emotional and thematic impact of the play.

- Delay reveals human psychological depth

A central topic of debate is Hamlet's delay in taking revenge. While frustrating to some viewers, his hesitation reveals a deeply human trait, our difficulty in making decisions where morality and emotion collide. Shakespeare portrays Hamlet not as a simple avenger but as a thoughtful man caught in a tragic dilemma. This psychological depth is one reason the play has remained so powerful and relevant.

- Universal themes remain relevant

At its core, *Hamlet* explores deep questions about life, death, revenge, and human nature. Hamlet's struggles and reflections tap into universal themes that continue to resonate with audiences around the world. Hamlet's character shows both greatness and flaw. His noble mind and commitment to justice earn our admiration, but his tendency to overthink brings tragedy. Through his journey, Hamlet grows in wisdom; by the end, he faces death courageously and with acceptance.

- Fate and choice shape destiny

In the end, *Hamlet* offers a complex view of fate and free will. The ghost's demand for revenge, Hamlet's internal conflicts, and unexpected turns of events demonstrate a mix of destiny and human choice shaping lives and deaths. Hamlet's acceptance that "there is a divinity that shapes



our ends” shows his final readiness to embrace his fate with courage.

- Timeless exploration of human spirit

Understanding *Hamlet* requires moving beyond superficial views to appreciate its exploration of the human spirit - its doubts, its anger, its love, and its search for meaning amid chaos. Shakespeare’s genius lies in making this tragedy feel as real and troubling today as it was four centuries ago.

#### 2.1.1:4 The character of Hamlet: Its infinite variety

- Hamlet’s enduring mystery

Hamlet is a universal figure, a personage so complex and intricate that more has been written about him than about any other literary creation. The keynotes of his character are complexity and mystery, and more than four centuries of criticism have failed to solve the Hamlet enigma. His intricacy defies analysis and, as Verity observes, “the chemistry of criticism has evolved no Hamlet formula.” Treatises, dissertations and books abound, offering views that are often contradictory. Professor Williamson, in his monumental *Readings on the Character of Hamlet*, collects some one thousand opinions, and the very diversity of these views demonstrates Hamlet’s complexity. Shakespeare has cast over him an atmosphere of vague suggestion, as mysterious as twilight, and this mystery is the source of his eternal fascination. Others may abide our question, but Hamlet, like his creator, is free.

- Shakespeare’s Knowledge of Human Nature

Hamlet’s character reveals the infinite variety and depth of Shakespeare’s understanding of human nature. He has many aspects, each shading indefinitely into another. He is Shakespeare’s most multifaceted creation and is shown in every kind of company. We see him with the woman he loves and with the mother he once adored. We encounter him with his closest friend and confidant as well as with his school associates. He is a different man with Claudius, with Laertes and with Polonius. We laugh with him at Osric and hold our breath with him before his father’s ghost. He fascinates us most among the common folk, the players and the gravediggers. We also meet him alone, when he confides his innermost thoughts and moods and emerges as a psychologist and speculative philosopher. We learn what others think of him and what he thinks of others and himself. Every situation reveals a new facet of his intricate nature. Walt Whitman put it well when he wrote that Hamlet “contains multitudes.”



Every reader and every critic has turned Hamlet into material for personal reflection. He is at once individual and universal. He is courtier, soldier and scholar - the Elizabethan ideal of action, combining chivalry with Renaissance curiosity. His psychology reflects the period's study of Melancholy and the theatrical type of the Malcontent. So many influences and Shakespeare's profound insight into human nature went into his creation that Hamlet endures as an enigma, a riddle that baffles understanding and resists analysis.

#### ► His Irresolution

The "Hamlet problem" confronts each generation: "Why does Hamlet delay? What causes his irresolution?" Critics offer opposing and conflicting explanations, none entirely satisfactory. Some regard him as physically cowardly. Goethe describes him as a sheltered idealist crushed by fate's burden. Coleridge sees a brave man and fearless of death but a speculative thinker who "vacillates from sensibility, procrastinates from thought and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve." Bradley traces his inaction to morbid melancholy caused by his mother's hasty and incestuous remarriage. Yet none of these accounts encompasses the whole truth. Hamlet's nature is too complex for a single label. As Verity warns, the dogmatism of "mere dreamer," "mere student" or "simply idealist" captures only part of a multifaceted whole.

#### ► His Madness

Similarly, the question of Hamlet's madness remains unresolved. Is he truly insane or merely feigning madness? The "mad doctors" almost unanimously argue for genuine lunacy. Dr Ray asserts that every train of Hamlet's reason is marred by disease. Dr Bucknill regards his lunacy as a mixture of feigned and real madness. Drs Conolly and Kellogg marshal evidence for genuine insanity. On the other hand, critics such as Deighton, Furness and Bradley insist that Hamlet is mad only in craft. He may be melancholic or unsettled but never so out of his senses as to be irresponsible. The very controversy shows that Shakespeare's portrayal of madness is so convincing that it has confused even the most learned analysts. Cardinal Wiseman aptly remarks, "Hamlet feigns madness so realistically that he deceives not only the characters but also the critics." This achievement testifies to Shakespeare's profound knowledge of both normal and abnormal states of mind.



- Hamlet mirrors life's mystery

Hamlet remains complex and enigmatic, and the mystery that surrounds him mirrors the mystery of life itself. As Lewis observes, "the lasting mystery of Hamlet's nature is the best evidence that the eternal mystery of our human situation has been powerfully depicted." Hamlet is free; he has defied all questioning through the centuries. He is the measure of his creator's intricate and profound understanding of human nature.

# Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare



Fig 2.1.2 *Twelfth Night*

## 2.1.2 Discussion

### Shakespearean comedy

#### The Nature and Structure of Shakespearean Comedy

Shakespearean comedy represents a distinctive and sophisticated genre that combines entertainment with profound insights into human behaviour. Unlike classical comedies which adhered to rigid structural rules, Shakespeare's comedies blend romance, humour, and occasionally serious themes to create a fuller reflection of life's complexities. These plays characteristically conclude with joyful resolutions where conflicts find peaceful settlement through marriages, reunions, or reconciliations. The focus on love and marriage serves as a central organizing principle, with most plots revolving around young lovers who encounter various obstacles including parental opposition, social barriers, or personal misunderstandings before achieving their romantic goals. The promise or actual occurrence of marriage at the conclusion symbolizes hope, renewal, and the restoration of social harmony. This pattern reinforces the optimistic worldview that characterizes Shakespearean comedy, suggesting that despite temporary disruptions, order and happiness can ultimately prevail.

► Love and Resolution

## Mistaken Identity and the Power of Disguise

### ► Identity and Disguise

A fundamental characteristic of Shakespearean comedy lies in its masterful use of mistaken identity and disguise as plot devices that generate both humour and dramatic tension. Characters frequently assume false identities or become confused with others, creating intricate webs of misunderstanding that propel the action forward while providing abundant opportunities for comic situations. These deceptions serve multiple purposes beyond mere entertainment, as they often reveal hidden truths about characters and relationships while exploring themes of appearance versus reality. The confusion generated by disguises allows Shakespeare to examine questions of identity, gender roles, and social expectations in ways that would be impossible in more straightforward dramatic contexts. By the play's conclusion, these mistaken identities are typically resolved in scenes of recognition and revelation that bring clarity to the confusion while highlighting the transformative power of the experiences characters have undergone. The temporary chaos caused by disguise ultimately serves to strengthen bonds between characters and deepen their understanding of themselves and others.

## Humour, Wit, and the Role of Fools

### Wit and Wisdom

The rich tapestry of humour in Shakespearean comedy encompasses multiple forms including sophisticated wordplay, clever puns, witty dialogue exchanges, and physical comedy that appeals to audiences across social and educational levels. Shakespeare's comedies frequently feature professional fools or clowns who serve as more than mere comic relief, functioning instead as wise commentators who use their wit to make penetrating observations about other characters and broader social issues. These figures, exemplified by characters like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, possess a unique licence to speak truths that other characters cannot, mixing entertainment with subtle social criticism and philosophical reflection. The humour in these plays operates on multiple levels simultaneously, providing surface amusement while encouraging deeper contemplation of human folly and social conventions. Shakespeare's skill in crafting dialogue that sparkles with intelligence and verbal dexterity ensures that the comedy engages the mind as well as the emotions, creating lasting





pleasure that extends far beyond the immediate theatrical experience.

### Strong Female Characters and Exotic Settings

► Character and Setting

Shakespeare demonstrates remarkable skill in creating compelling female characters who occupy central positions in his comedies, often displaying greater agency and complexity than their counterparts in his tragedies. These women, including memorable figures like Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, exhibit intelligence, wit, resourcefulness, and emotional depth that makes them the driving forces of their respective plots rather than passive objects of male desire. Many of Shakespeare's comedies unfold in imaginative or exotic locations such as enchanted forests, magical islands, or distant courts that provide liberation from the normal constraints of Elizabethan society. These alternative spaces allow characters to explore questions of identity, love, and personal growth in environments where conventional social rules may be suspended or transformed. The contrast between urban and rural settings frequently appears in these plays, with the natural world representing innocence, freedom, and authentic emotion while court or city life embodies artificiality, corruption, and social constraint. This geographical and thematic movement often parallels the emotional journeys of characters as they discover their true selves and desires.

### Music, Fortune, and Optimistic Resolution

The integration of music and song throughout Shakespearean comedy serves both structural and thematic functions, with musical elements often opening or concluding plays while appearing at crucial moments to emphasize emotional content or heighten atmospheric effects. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, music establishes a magical and celebratory tone that permeates the entire dramatic experience, reflecting the play's concern with harmony, love, and festive joy. The role of fortune, chance, and providence emerges as another significant theme, with characters frequently encountering obstacles and misunderstandings that seem insurmountable until lucky coincidences or unexpected interventions provide resolution. This emphasis on the power of fate suggests

► Music and Hope

an underlying optimism about human potential and the possibility of happiness even in difficult circumstances. The overall tone of Shakespearean comedy remains fundamentally light hearted and hopeful, celebrating human resilience and the capacity for growth and change. Even when exposing human follies or criticizing social customs, these plays maintain their faith in the possibility of renewal and improvement. Shakespeare's comedies ultimately offer audiences both entertainment and reassurance, reinforcing the belief that problems can be overcome, relationships can be repaired, and happiness remains achievable through patience, wisdom, and good fortune.

### 2.1.2.1 *Twelfth Night*

► Mistaken identity, festive reversal

*Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, was written and first performed around 1601 to 1602. Its story draws on a rich mix of sources, including an Italian play called *Gl'Ingannati*, or *The Deceived*, from the 1530s, which features themes of mistaken identity. The English writer Barnaby Riche's tale "Apollonius and Silla," from his 1581 book *Farewell to Military Profession*, also influenced the plot. John Manningham, a contemporary observer, noted a link between *Twelfth Night* and the Latin comedy *Menaechmi* by Plautus, which was also a source for Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. This shows Shakespeare's interest in complex plots of confusion and disguise. The title *Twelfth Night* refers to January the sixth, the twelfth day after Christmas, marking the revelation of Christ's divinity to the three Magi. Traditionally, this date ended the Christmas holidays and began the Carnival season, a time of festivity and reversal of social order, when roles were often humorously inverted with servants acting as masters and men and women dressing as the opposite sex. This festive atmosphere of fancy, fun and transformation is captured in the play by characters such as Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who live carefree lives and believe that "care's an enemy to life." The subplot involving Malvolio's foolish ambitions and his trickery by others fits well within this carnival spirit, while the clown Feste's very name connects to festive traditions.

The subtitle *What You Will* invites many interpretations; it points to the shifting desires and motivations of characters like Orsino and Olivia and to the varied responses of the



- Joy, confusion, timeless appeal

audience, who create their own meanings. The word will also connects to sexual desire, with the play exploring androgyny through Viola disguised as Cesario, adding layers of meaning about identity. Desire and interpretation can lead to false readings, such as Malvolio's mistaken belief in his lady's affections. *Twelfth Night* blends festive misrule, mistaken identities, shifting desires and playful inversions to create a comedy that celebrates both joy and confusion in life, echoing the spirit of the *Twelfth Night* feast itself. It invites audiences to consider questions about love, identity and truth in a world where appearances deceive, ensuring the play's enduring popularity and appeal across time and cultures.

### Source

- Inspired, original, timeless

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, written and performed around 1601 to 1602, draws on several earlier sources including Barnabe Riche's *Apolonius and Silla* and the Italian comedy *Gl'Ingannati*. These works inspired key plot elements like mistaken identity and disguise. However, Shakespeare added original comic characters such as Malvolio and Feste, enriching the play with humour and vivid personality. His poetic language and emotional depth transform borrowed tales into a lively, complex drama that explores love, identity and social order. This blend of inspiration and creativity has secured the play's lasting popularity as one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies.

### Setting and Characters

The play *Twelfth Night* is set in a fictional place called Illyria, an imaginative land inspired by a historical region along the Adriatic coast. Most scenes take place at the court of Duke Orsino and in the household of Countess Olivia, with a few others set in the streets of Illyria's capital city. Shakespeare uses Illyria as a whimsical and flexible setting that allows for the play's themes of mistaken identity, disguise, and romantic confusion to unfold freely. This exotic backdrop provides an atmosphere where social rules can be bent, creating space for unexpected encounters and joyful chaos.

*Twelfth Night* features a vibrant and diverse cast centred on Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, who is more in love with love than with Olivia, the wealthy countess in mourning who soon

falls for Cesario—actually Viola in disguise. Viola, secretly in love with Orsino, loyally serves him while delivering his messages to Olivia, and her twin brother Sebastian's later arrival causes further confusion due to their similarity. Supporting characters include loyal sea captains Antonio and another, Orsino's gentlemen Valentine and Curio, and Olivia's lively household filled with comic figures like the merry uncle Sir Toby, the foolish suitor Sir Andrew, the pompous steward Malvolio, and the witty servants Maria, Fabian, and clown Feste. Set across the Duke's court, Olivia's home, and Illyria's seacoast, the play paints a world mixing nobility and rustic humour. As disguises are worn and loves declared, these initially strangers become entwined, and by the end, true identities are revealed, lovers united, and harmony restored with laughter and delightful folly.

### 2.1.2.2 Detailed Summary



Fig 2.1.2.2 A Scene from *Twelfth Night*

#### Act I

#### Act I, Scene 1

Orsino, Duke of Illyria, appears in his sumptuous court, surrounded by musicians whose strains soothe and stir his heart. He sits hidden from view, listening intently as the instruments weave melodies that echo his own romantic fervour. Opening with the line, “If music be the food of love, play on,” he invites the musicians to overwhelm him with sound. He hopes that, by feasting too richly on these harmonies, his passion for Olivia may sicken and subside. Yet, when the final notes fade, Orsino finds himself still deep in love’s pangs.

► Orsino seeks musical cure



- *Duke contemplates love's burden*

At that moment, he dismisses the players with equal whimsy: "Enough, no more," he declares, and sends them away. Free of distraction, he turns to ruminate aloud on love's power. He compares his own soul to a garden overrun with "outrageous fortune," weighed down by the "slings and arrows" of unrequited affection.

- *Curio suggests hunting remedy*

Curio, one of his loyal pages, ventures a suggestion: perhaps a vigorous hunting expedition would restore his master's spirits. Physical exertion, Curio argues, is a proven antidote to melancholic musings. Orsino entertains the idea yet transforms hunt into courtly metaphor: he would rather pursue the heart of his beloved Olivia than any stag. He confesses he has already despatched another page, Valentine, as his envoy, carrying lines of ardent flattery to Olivia's estate.

- *Valentine brings devastating news*

Valentine arrives in haste - pale, distressed, and begging not to be admitted. He bears devastating tidings: Olivia's only brother has perished, and in grief she has sworn to renounce all company, including that of would-be suitors, for seven long years of mourning. Yet even this solemn vow does not subdue Orsino's spirits. On the contrary, he marvels at the depth of her feeling. How noble, he muses, that a gentle heart should grieve so entirely! If Olivia can devote herself so utterly to a brother's memory, how boundlessly and loyally might she love a true romantic partner, once her heart is set free?

- *Orsino remains optimistic*

With these thoughts, Orsino leaves the hall to pursue his suit, buoyed by the promise of her capacity for devotion, even as he basks in the lingering echo of the music he has just forsaken.

- *Viola assumes male disguise*

**In Act I, Scene 2**, Viola and her twin brother Sebastian have just been separated by a violent shipwreck off the coast of Illyria. Viola has been rescued by a captain and nurse and is hopeful that Sebastian also survived, though she remains uncertain. The captain tells Viola about Duke Orsino, the powerful but lovesick ruler of Illyria, who is infatuated with Olivia, a countess who is mourning her brother and refuses all suitors. Viola, intrigued by Olivia's situation and wishing to stay safe in this foreign land, decides to disguise herself as a young male page, Cesario, and enter Orsino's service. This decision introduces the theme of disguise and mistaken identity that drives much of the play's comic tension. Viola's inner conflict is poignant;



she herself falls in love with Orsino while preparing to help him woo Olivia, who ironically falls for Cesario instead. This complex love triangle creates dramatic irony and emotional depth.

- *Household revelry introduces comedy*

**Act I, Scene 3** reveals Olivia's household life, where Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, indulges in drinking and late-night revelry, much to the annoyance of Olivia's steward, Malvolio. Maria, Olivia's clever lady-in-waiting, disapproves of Sir Toby and his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a foolish and dim-witted suitor hoping to win Olivia's hand. Wordplay and teasing dominate the scene, with Sir Andrew oblivious to the wit around him. Despite his intentions to leave because of Olivia's coldness, Sir Andrew is persuaded to stay and continue his hopeless courtship. This scene introduces key comic characters whose antics provide a humorous counterpoint to the romantic tensions.

- *Cesario gains Orsino's trust*

**In Act I, Scene 4**, Viola, now disguised as Cesario, has quickly gained Orsino's trust, as praised by his attendant Valentine. Orsino entrusts Cesario with the delicate task of delivering his love messages to Olivia, confident that the young page's charm will soften Olivia's coldness. Viola, however, is troubled by the irony of wooing a woman for a man she loves herself. Despite her misgivings, she dutifully sets off to Olivia's home, underscoring themes of loyalty and sacrifice.

- *Olivia falls for Cesario*

**Act I, Scene 5** introduces Feste, the witty and melancholic fool who serves Olivia and provides commentary on the play's events through song and sharp observations. Feste's return to Olivia's household adds liveliness and insight. Olivia's disapproving steward Malvolio is introduced here, depicted as self-righteous and humourless, which makes him a target for ridicule by other characters. Malvolio's strictness contrasts sharply with the play's festive spirit. When Maria informs Olivia of a young gentleman, Viola disguised as Cesario, who refuses to leave her house despite Malvolio's orders, Olivia grows curious. Viola's private conversation with Olivia is charged with unspoken attraction and mistaken intentions. Olivia's decision to send Malvolio with a ring to Cesario, a token she later refuses herself, highlights her growing fascination and love, adding complexity to the unfolding love triangle.

Throughout these opening scenes, Shakespeare uses disguise, mistaken identities, and contrasting characters to



- Shakespeare establishes comedic foundations

set the stage for a comedy that blends romance, humour, and social commentary. Famous lines such as Orsino's "If music be the food of love, play on" (Act I, Scene 1) introduce the theme of love's consuming nature, which runs through the play. Similarly, Malvolio's self-importance and eventual downfall provide a source of comic tension and critique of social ambition.

- Complex emotions meet comedy

Critically, these scenes reveal Shakespeare's mastery in combining complex emotional states with light-hearted humour. The interplay between serious love and playful trickery invites the audience to explore themes of identity, desire, and social roles, all while enjoying spirited characters and witty dialogue. This skillfully crafted mixture continues to make *Twelfth Night* an enduring and beloved comedy.

## Act 2

- Sebastian survives with Antonio

In Act II, Scene 1, the focus shifts to Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, who has survived the shipwreck and been rescued by Antonio, a sea captain. Sebastian reveals his true identity, explaining to Antonio that his father was "Sebastian of Messaline" and he fears that his sister, Viola, may have drowned. Despite his affection for Antonio, Sebastian decides to travel alone to Duke Orsino's court, refusing Antonio's offer to accompany him because he worries his misfortunes might endanger Antonio. The scene introduces a key element of the play, the separated twins whose chance reunions drive much of the plot's confusion and eventual resolution. Antonio's decision to follow Sebastian into potentially hostile territory highlights his loyalty and sets up dramatic tension, as he is an enemy of Orsino.

- Ring reveals Olivia's love

In Scene 2, Malvolio, Olivia's steward, catches up to Viola, still disguised as Cesario, and delivers a ring Olivia has sent back. Viola rightly suspects that Olivia's gift is a sign of her affection toward 'Cesario', while Viola herself is secretly in love with Orsino. Viola's poignant reflection, "Poor lady, she were better love a dream," reveals her sympathy for Olivia's unintended love for a woman disguised as a man. This moment deepens the theme of mistaken identity and unrequited love that fuels much of the comic and romantic tension.

Scene 3 offers a vivid look into the subplot's comedic world. Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek engage

- Maria plots against Malvolio

in drunken revelry with Feste, the clown, singing lively tunes. Their loud behavior disturbs Olivia's household, prompting Maria and Malvolio to object. Malvolio's strict, self-righteous nature makes him a target for ridicule, especially as he confronts the merrymakers about turning Olivia's house into "an alehouse." Maria devises a cunning plan to trick Malvolio, exploiting his vanity by writing a fake love letter in Olivia's handwriting. This scheme, praised by Sir Toby as "perfect cunning," aims to make Malvolio act foolishly and serves as a major comic thread, showcasing Shakespeare's use of wit and social satire.

- Viola advises melancholic Orsino

**In Act II, Scene 4**, Viola returns to Orsino's court to find him in a melancholic state, still pining for Olivia. Viola gives thoughtful advice about love, subtly revealing her own feelings without breaking her disguise. She describes the woman Orsino loves as pale and unresponsive, just like Olivia herself. Orsino, confident in his feelings, insists that Viola visit Olivia again to woo on his behalf. The Fool's melancholy song about unrequited love underscores the play's theme of romantic longing.

- Malvolio discovers forged letter

**Scene 5** continues the subplot's comic intrigue. Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian plan to observe the results of Maria's letter trick on Malvolio. Malvolio, evident in his self-adoration, practices domineering behaviour and fantasizes about marrying Olivia and becoming "Count Malvolio." When he finds the letter promising him Olivia's love if he behaves nobly and wears yellow stockings with cross garters, he eagerly accepts the plan, setting himself up for ridicule. Sir Toby's admiration for Maria's cleverness and their potential union adds warmth to this humorous subplot.

### Critical Comments

These scenes blend comedy with deeper emotional undercurrents, contrasting boisterous humour with themes of forbidden love, identity, and social ambition. Shakespeare brilliantly balances dramatic irony, the audience knows Viola's secret and Olivia's mistaken love, with lively, character-driven humour. Lines such as Viola's reflection on Olivia's love and the Fool's songs enrich the play's exploration of love's complexities. The subplot's playful mockery of Malvolio also critiques social pretention and ambition, highlighting the complex social dynamics at

- Comedy balances emotional depth



work. This blend of serious and comic elements is a key strength of *Twelfth Night*, making the play engaging, multi-layered, and timeless.

### Act 3

- Olivia confesses love directly

In Act III, Scene 1, Viola, still disguised as Cesario, returns to Olivia's garden to deliver another message of love from Duke Orsino. While waiting, she encounters Feste, Olivia's witty clown, and they engage in a playful exchange of words. Viola remarks, "They who dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton," hinting at the theme of the tricky power of language throughout the play. Feste teases Viola about not having a beard, a subtle jab directed at her disguised identity. Soon, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek arrive, both exhibiting their usual foolishness. Olivia appears and, after dismissing the others, speaks alone with Cesario. To Viola's surprise, Olivia confesses her love for Cesario, defying her previous rejection of Orsino's suit. Although Viola tries to clarify her own feelings and her loyalty to Orsino, Olivia's passion remains strong. Olivia's line, "Love's night is noon," poetically expresses how her feelings have overtaken her reason. Viola's reply, "I am all the daughters of my father's house," subtly acknowledges her disguise, while keeping her secret safe. Olivia invites Cesario to return, hopeful that love may yet be won.

- Duel challenge creates tension

**Act III, Scene 2** shifts to the comedic subplot where Sir Toby Belch plots to encourage Sir Andrew to challenge Viola to a duel. Sir Andrew, feeling jealous and inadequate, had earlier threatened to leave Olivia's household, but Sir Toby convinces him to stay and act boldly to win Olivia's favour. The idea of a duel introduces physical comedy and dramatic tension as Sir Toby exaggerates Sir Andrew's abilities. They eagerly anticipate the outcome, adding lively humour to the scene.

- Sebastian reunites with Antonio

**In Act III, Scene 3**, Sebastian arrives safely in Illyria's capital and reunites with Antonio, the sea captain who saved him. Antonio is cautious about accompanying Sebastian openly because of his own political troubles with Duke Orsino. Their friendship shows loyalty and concern, deepening the emotional layers of the play. Antonio's fear makes this reunion bittersweet, hinting at difficulties ahead.

**Act III, Scene 4** returns focus to the main action and subplot. Olivia nervously awaits Viola's arrival, preparing

- Malvolio's madness escalates

a feast and hoping to win Cesario's affections. Meanwhile, Malvolio's bizarre behaviour shocks Olivia and her household. Dressed in yellow stockings and cross-garters as instructed by the forged letter, Malvolio's confused antics confirm Olivia's fear that he has lost his mind, "midsummer madness." Sir Toby, Fabian, and Maria plot to further torment Malvolio, locking him away as if he were truly mad. Meanwhile, Sir Toby coerces a reluctant Sir Andrew to follow Viola, escalating the promise of a comically mismatched duel. These intertwined plots of love, disguise, and mistaken identity highlight Shakespeare's skill in layering humour with meaningful character development.

### Critical Comments

- Identity themes deepen

Throughout these scenes, Shakespeare probes themes of love, deception, and the nature of identity. The clever dialogue and famous lines, such as Viola's "I am all the daughters of my father's house" and Olivia's "Love's night is noon," enrich the emotional depth while maintaining the play's comic tone. The subplot surrounding Malvolio provides sharp social commentary and comic relief, contrasting with the romantic confusion. This blend of humour and heartfelt emotion is a key reason *Twelfth Night* continues to captivate audiences centuries later.

### Act IV

- Sebastian fights mistaken attackers

**In Scene 1**, near Olivia's house, the Clown, Feste, mistakes Sebastian for Cesario (Viola in disguise) and tells him that Olivia has sent for him. Sebastian, confused and annoyed, initially thinks Feste is mocking him and tries to leave. However, Feste insists he knows who Sebastian is, even claiming to be known to Cesario as well. Annoyed but generous, Sebastian pays Feste to go away and threatens to beat him if he persists. Soon Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, and Fabian arrive, and Sir Andrew, also mistaking Sebastian for Cesario, strikes him. Sebastian quickly fights back, overpowering Sir Andrew. Sir Toby tries to stop the fight and grabs Sebastian's hand, but Sebastian breaks free and challenges Sir Toby to swordplay. Olivia enters just in time to end the quarrel; she sends Sir Toby and the others away, apologises to Sebastian for their rude behaviour, and invites him inside. Sebastian, overwhelmed and thinking he is dreaming, agrees to enter Olivia's house with her, amazed by the unexpected love and hospitality he receives.





- Feste torments imprisoned Malvolio

**Scene 2** shifts to the dark room where Malvolio has been confined as part of the subplot ridicule. Maria and Sir Toby plot to torment Malvolio further by having Feste disguised as “Sir Topas” the curate, visit him. Feste pretends to exorcise Malvolio’s supposed madness, speaking cleverly and ironically to confuse him. Malvolio insists he is sane and complains about his unjust imprisonment. The mock priest plays with logic and philosophy, referencing Greek ideas, telling Malvolio he should remain confined unless he accepts the “darkness of ignorance.” Despite this harsh treatment, the scene is comic and highlights Malvolio’s vanity and narrow-mindedness. Near the end, Feste, back in his normal self, sings to Malvolio and promises to help get him writing materials so that Malvolio can explain his situation honestly to Olivia.

- Olivia marries confused Sebastian

**In Scene 3**, Olivia brings Sebastian to her home, still believing he is Cesario. Sebastian is amazed and confused by Olivia’s affection. He wonders whether he is dreaming, feeling the warmth of the sun, the air, and the ring Olivia has given him. He reflects on his absent friend Antonio, knowing his advice would help him understand the situation. Olivia enters with a priest and asks Sebastian to swear loyalty and love to her in marriage. Sebastian agrees, swept up in the powerful and confusing emotions stirred by Olivia’s love and the mysterious situation he finds himself in.

### Critical Comments

These scenes build the tension of mistaken identity that is central to the play’s humour and drama. The comic fight between Sebastian and Sir Andrew shows Sebastian’s confident and bold nature, contrasting with Viola’s more cautious and witty personality. Meanwhile, the subplot’s development with Malvolio’s imprisonment provides humour and social critique, exposing his vanity and the consequences of self-importance. The scene where Olivia proposes to Sebastian deepens the romantic confusion and sets the stage for the final unveiling of identities. Shakespeare’s skillful intertwining of these threads creates a compelling mix of comedy, romance, and intrigue.

- Mistaken identities reach climax

### Act V

**Act V, Scene 1** begins with Duke Orsino arriving at Olivia’s estate, accompanied by Viola (still disguised as Cesario), Curio, and Lords. At the door, Orsino encounters Feste, Olivia’s witty clown, and they engage in a brief



- Antonio accuses ungrateful Cesario

exchange of clever remarks before Orsino offers Feste a gift. Officers soon bring Antonio before the Duke. Antonio had recently attacked Orsino's ships and wounded his nephew. The officers also inform the Duke that Antonio was arrested while causing a disturbance in the streets of Illyria. Viola recognises Antonio as the man who came to her aid in a duel, though Antonio mistakes her for Sebastian. Antonio accuses "Cesario" of ingratitude, claiming he rescued Sebastian from drowning and has loyally cared for him, yet was denied recognition and the return of his purse. The Duke finds Antonio's tale hard to believe and dismisses him, but promises to consider the matter further.

- Twins reveal stunning truth

Olivia then enters and questions Orsino about his visit. She tells him that she was willing to help him but did not want to be pressured for love. Seeing Viola beside Orsino, she mistakes her for Sebastian and addresses her as her husband, complaining of his failure to keep promises. Violently confused, Orsino vows to punish the deceiver, whether it be Olivia or "Cesario." Sir Toby and Sir Andrew arrive, complaining about injuries they blame on Cesario, who they also mistake for Sebastian. Sebastian appears, apologising for wounding Sir Andrew when provoked. The striking resemblance between Sebastian and Cesario stuns Olivia and Orsino. Sebastian greets Antonio warmly, and then Cesario reveals that she is actually Viola, Sebastian's sister. Overjoyed, Orsino transfers his love to Viola and pledges to marry her.

- All plots resolve harmoniously

The Clown enters with a letter from Malvolio, exposing the trick played on him. Malvolio is freed and assured that those who plotted against him will be punished. Fabian then announces that Sir Toby has married Maria. The play ends happily with the Duke united to Viola and Sebastian married to Olivia, resolving the play's intricate web of mistaken identities and romantic entanglements.

### 2.1.2:3 Critical Analysis

- Viola's romantic idealism

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* explores romantic love in many guises, revealing its varied nature through the actions and feelings of several characters. Viola's quiet devotion to Orsino demonstrates love's idealistic side, marked by deep tenderness but also a dreamy, unreality. Through her famous speech about concealed love "like a worm i' the bud," Shakespeare captures the noble melancholy of silent passion. Viola's love is sincere yet restrained, highlighting



how love might be more about feeling than practical expression or resolution. Her steadfastness contrasts with other views of love in the play, inviting reflection on how romance can both nourish and torment the human heart.

► Olivia's impulsive love

Olivia embodies love's blinding power and impulsiveness. Vowing seven years of mourning for her brother, she rapidly forgets this pledge when she falls for Cesario, unaware he is Viola in disguise. Olivia's swift, extravagant passion contrasts sharply with rational restraint, showing how love can overthrow reason and warp judgment. She falls not for a man, but a woman, which dramatizes love's irrational nature and its subversion of conventional norms. Olivia's unpredictable ardour adds energy to the plot and invites audiences to consider love as a force that can defy social expectation and personal intention.

► Orsino's sentimental excess

Orsino personifies love's self-indulgence and fickleness. He delights in the feeling of being in love more than in any particular object of affection. His moods change rapidly like shifting music, and he declares, "If music be the food of love, play on," suggesting he enjoys the drama of unrequited passion itself. His affection shifts abruptly by the play's end to Viola, showing his constancy is shallow and more about his own emotional experience than genuine devotion. Orsino's exaggerated melancholy underlines the playful critique of romantic sentimentality found throughout the play.

► Comic, practical love

The comic subplot offers a contrast with more earthbound and practical views of love. Sebastian stumbles into romance and fortune by mistaken identity rather than deep feeling. Sir Andrew Aguecheek's courting of Olivia is motivated more by vanity and foolishness than by genuine love, encouraged by Sir Toby Belch's rowdy influence. In contrast, Maria's marriage to Sir Toby, though lighthearted, is grounded in mutual respect and affection rather than mere passion. This variety showcases Shakespeare's insight into the many motivations behind love, from exalted passion to pragmatic alliance.

► Malvolio's vanity folly

Malvolio's story provides a humorous take on self-deception in love. Eager and vain, he is duped by Maria's forged letter into thinking Olivia secretly loves him. His gleeful misreading, leading to absurd behaviour such as wearing yellow stockings and cross-garters, becomes a

source of comic ridicule. Through Malvolio, Shakespeare exposes how romantic ambition mixed with vanity produces laughter and tragedy alike. This subplot offers a sharp reminder that love can blind and make fools of the best of us, especially when mixed with self-importance.

- Balanced view of love

*Twelfth Night* as a whole offers a nuanced and ironic view of love. Shakespeare neither celebrates nor condemns romantic passion wholesale, but reveals its charms and absurdities with equal affection. His characters display love's noble heights and its ridiculous follies, inviting audiences to engage with its perplexities. The play's tone, rich in lyrical beauty yet grounded in comic situations, reflects its exploration of desire's shifting, illusory nature. This balance makes the play both entertaining and thought-provoking for new generations of learners and viewers.

- Women as heroes

In addition to romance, the play highlights the contrasting strengths of its female and male characters. Shakespeare often shows his women as more courageous, intelligent, and resourceful than the men. Viola's resilience and cleverness allow her to navigate unfamiliar and dangerous circumstances, while Olivia's passionate impulsiveness reveals strength of heart. Maria's domestic wisdom and wit bring order to chaos unlike the folly of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, whose behaviour borders on childishness. This contrast supports John Ruskin's claim that Shakespeare wrote no heroes, only heroines, emphasising the women's true heroic nature.

- Light satire on Puritanism

Finally, the play lightly satirises Puritanism through the character of Malvolio, whose stern, joyless demeanour and contempt for festivity provoke rebuke. However, Shakespeare does not seem to condemn Puritanism harshly, as the mockery arises more from Malvolio's vanity and rigidity than from his faith. The humour targets unthinking hostility and self-importance rather than sincere religious devotion. This gentle satire reflects Shakespeare's larger spirit of tolerance and his preference for amusement and freedom over austere repression.



## Summarised Overview

*Hamlet* presents the story of Prince Hamlet of Denmark, who is visited by the ghost of his murdered father demanding vengeance against Claudius, Hamlet's uncle who has usurped the throne and married Hamlet's mother Gertrude. The play follows Hamlet's psychological journey as he struggles to fulfil his duty while grappling with moral uncertainty and existential doubt. His feigned madness, philosophical soliloquies and delayed revenge create a complex portrait of a Renaissance prince torn between thought and action. The tragedy culminates in a catastrophic duel that claims the lives of the major characters, including Hamlet himself, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes. Central themes include the corruption of power, the nature of appearance versus reality, and the psychological cost of revenge. Hamlet's character embodies the tragic hero whose noble nature is undermined by his fatal flaw of excessive deliberation, making him one of literature's most enigmatic and compelling protagonists.

*Twelfth Night* explores the romantic entanglements that arise when Viola, shipwrecked and believing her twin brother Sebastian dead, disguises herself as a young man named Cesario. Serving Duke Orsino, who loves the Countess Olivia, Viola finds herself caught in a complex web of unrequited love when Olivia falls for her disguised identity while she herself loves Orsino. The main plot interweaves with comic subplots involving the household of Olivia, including the revelries of Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and the gulling of the pompous steward Malvolio. The play's resolution comes through the arrival of Sebastian, Viola's twin, whose presence resolves the romantic confusions and allows for multiple marriages. The comedy celebrates the transformative power of love while exploring themes of gender identity, social mobility and the thin line between madness and folly. Through its festive atmosphere and intricate plotting, *Twelfth Night* demonstrates Shakespeare's skill in creating comedy that entertains while offering insights into human nature and social conventions.

## Assignments

1. Analyse Hamlet's character development through his major soliloquies, examining how his understanding of his situation evolves throughout the play.
2. Compare the treatment of madness in both plays, contrasting Hamlet's feigned madness with Ophelia's genuine insanity and the comic madness attributed to Malvolio.



3. Examine the use of disguise and deception in *Twelfth Night*, discussing how these devices advance the plot and explore themes of identity and gender.
4. Evaluate the role of the supernatural in *Hamlet*, considering how the Ghost influences the action and reflects Elizabethan beliefs about the afterlife.
5. Discuss the concept of dramatic irony in both plays, providing specific examples of how Shakespeare uses audience knowledge to create tension or humour.

## Suggested Reading

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1. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Shakespearean Criticism*. Edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor, Harvard University Press, 1930.
2. Eliot, T. S. "Hamlet and His Problems." *Selected Essays*. Faber and Faber, 1932.
3. Frye, Northrop. *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*. Columbia University Press, 1965.
4. Wilson Knight, G. *The Wheel of Fire*. Oxford University Press, 1930.



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.

## Unit 2

## Poetry

(Detailed-Study)

### Learning Outcomes

On completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ demonstrate knowledge of the origin and development of the English sonnet form.
- ▶ explain the contributions of Wyatt, Surrey and Shakespeare to the sonnet tradition.
- ▶ identify the structural features of the Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains and a rhymed couplet in iambic pentameter, ABAB CDCD EFEF GG).
- ▶ Critically analyse themes of time, beauty, love, truth and immortality in Sonnet 18 and Sonnet 55.

### Background

The sonnet originated in 13th-century Italy and was perfected by Francesco Petrarch, whose octave-sestet structure and ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme became models across Europe. Wyatt and Surrey introduced the form into English, adapting the sestet to CDDCEE and later evolving Surrey's ABA CDCD EFEF GG pattern into the Shakespearean form. Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, published in 1609, address two central figures—the Fair Youth (often identified as W.H.) and the Dark Lady—and explore themes of beauty, truth and the ravages of time, demonstrating the sonnet's capacity for both personal intimacy and universal reflection

### Keywords

English sonnet, Shakespearean form, iambic pentameter, Fair Youth sequence, poetic immortality, Imagery



## Discussion

### Shakespeare's Sonnets

- Masterful form and mystery

Shakespeare's sonnets represent the pinnacle of English sonnet writing through their masterful handling of form and emotional complexity. Following the English sonnet structure introduced by Surrey, each poem consists of three quatrains developing thematic variations before concluding with a rhymed couplet offering resolution or commentary. Written predominantly in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, these 154 sonnets address two primary figures: a young man called W.H. (about 126 sonnets) and the mysterious Dark Lady. The opening seventeen "Procreation Sonnets" urge the young man to marry and preserve his beauty through offspring, whilst scholars continue debating the identities of both the fair youth and the Dark Lady, with candidates including the Earl of Southampton and Mary Fitton respectively.

- Personal themes and endurance

The sonnets explore enduring themes of beauty, love, truth, time and mutability with remarkable emotional range and sincerity. Shakespeare demonstrates the destructive power of time against beauty and love whilst asserting poetry's ability to grant immortality to these fleeting qualities. Unlike mere Petrarchan imitations, his sonnets reveal genuine feeling and personal experience, whether autobiographical or imaginative. The betrayals by both the young friend and Dark Lady create complex emotional tensions that elevate these poems beyond conventional love poetry. Published formally in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe after circulating privately since at least 1598, the sonnets remain Shakespeare's most personal literary works, combining technical mastery with profound psychological insight into human relationships and the passage of time.

#### 2.2.1 Sonnet 18 and Sonnet 55

Shakespeare's sonnets are renowned for their exploration of time, beauty, love, and the power of poetry. Within the *Fair Youth* sequence, *Sonnet 18* and *Sonnet 55* stand out as bold declarations of art's ability to grant immortality. Both poems address the same beloved young man, but instead of merely praising his beauty, they claim that poetry itself can preserve it beyond the reach of time, decay, and death. This theme of poetic immortality reflects not only Renaissance

confidence in artistic achievement but also Shakespeare's personal ambition to eternalise his subject through verse.

*Sonnet 18* takes a gentle and intimate approach, drawing imagery from the natural world. The beloved is compared, and ultimately elevated, above a summer's day, whose beauty fades too quickly and is marred by "rough winds" or "the eye of heaven" shining too hot. The sonnet affirms that the youth's "eternal summer" will live on through poetry, transforming the transience of natural beauty into something everlasting. The imagery here is pastoral, delicate, and personal, reflecting the closeness between the poet and his subject.

In contrast, *Sonnet 55* adopts a grander and more public tone, relying on monumental imagery. Marble statues, gilded tombs, and even war are invoked as symbols of impermanence, subject to the ravages of time and violence. Against these forces, Shakespeare positions poetry as a "living record" that cannot be destroyed. The imagery is bold and civic, moving beyond the natural to the monumental, suggesting that verse not only preserves beauty but also triumphs over the grandeur of kings and empires. Together, the two sonnets reveal Shakespeare's dual strategy: through the intimate language of nature and the majestic language of monuments, he proclaims poetry's unique power to eternalise love and memory.

### **Sonnet 18**



Fig 2.2.1 sonnet 18



Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

### Central Idea:

In Sonnet 18, the poet begins with the famous question, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" He then explores how his friend surpasses a summer's day in beauty and temperance. While summer is fleeting and sometimes subject to harsh conditions, such as "rough winds" and an overly hot sun, his friend's beauty is gentle, moderate, and eternal. He declares that his friend's "eternal summer shall not fade" and asserts that the poetry itself will immortalise the youth's beauty, keeping it alive "as long as men can breathe, or eyes can see."

### Detailed Summary

The poem begins with the quintessential literary question, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" This rhetorical question immediately engages us and sets the metaphorical framework for the entire sonnet. The first quatrain establishes the comparison but quickly distinguishes his friend from the summer day, noting that he is "more lovely and more temperate." Here, Shakespeare begins to praise the constancy and balanced nature of the friend's beauty.

The second quatrain explores the limitations of a summer's day. Summer, personified through vivid imagery, is portrayed as unpredictable and transient. The "rough winds" shaking "the darling buds of May" symbolise nature's harshness and impermanence. The sun, described as "the eye of heaven," sometimes shines too hot and is sometimes dimmed by clouds, emphasising summer's inconstancy and imperfection. The line "every fair from fair sometime declines" conveys a universal truth about the fleetingness of beauty and life, reminding us of the inevitable decay that time brings.

The turn, or volta, occurs at the start of the third quatrain (line 9), where the poem shifts from describing the shortcomings of summer to celebrating the immortality of his friend's beauty. Shakespeare proclaims, "But thy eternal summer shall not fade," suggesting that unlike the natural world, his friend's beauty will endure forever. This transformation from temporal to eternal beauty is the poem's profound assertion. The friend's transcends nature's limits through the power of poetry.

The couplet at the end serves as a triumphant conclusion, declaring that as long as "men can breathe or eyes can see," the poem will keep the friend's beauty alive. This closing couplet underscores the theme of immortality through art, a hallmark of Shakespeare's sonnets. The idea that poetry can defy time and death by capturing and preserving beauty gives the poem a hopeful, almost magical quality.

Shakespeare's use of simple yet evocative language, combined with the sonnet's structured format, three quatrains and a final rhymed couplet, creates a musical rhythm that enhances its praise. The poem's imagery is vivid but not overly embellished, making its message clear and accessible. The balance of natural imagery and philosophical reflection contributes to the sonnet's timeless appeal and emotional resonance.

### **Theme:**

Shakespeare in Sonnet 18 explores the theme of beauty and its relationship to time and mortality. While physical beauty inevitably fades, the power of poetry confers a kind of immortality. The poem itself preserves the youth's loveliness beyond the natural decay that time brings. There is also a subtle meditation on art and its ability to eternalise what life cannot. Additionally, the sonnet reflects



an intimate relationship between the poet and the youthful subject, intertwining admiration, affection, and the anxiety of loss.

### Critical Analysis

This sonnet is celebrated for its universal meditation on immortalising beauty through verse, making it one of his most accessible and enduring poems. Its simple language conceals profound reflection on human mortality and art's power to transcend it. Scholar Helen Vendler highlights how the sonnet “invites the reader to marvel at the poet's confident claim that he possesses the art to grant immortality.” Whether viewed as part of the Fair Youth sequence urging posterity or as a standalone tribute, its clear, lyrical praise secures its status as an iconic celebration of love preserved against time's ravages.

- Accessible, enduring reflection

Opening with the question “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?”, Sonnet 18 boldly asserts the poet's power to defy “Devouring Time” by immortalising his friend through enduring verse. Addressed to the mysterious Fair Youth—often identified with Shakespeare's patron—the poem combines conventional themes of poetic immortality with Shakespeare's intimate and lyrical voice, rising above commonplace treatments to create a deeply personal tribute.

- Bold, intimate tribute

The poem's structure follows the Shakespearean sonnet model of three quatrains and a final couplet, yet it also echoes Petrarchan tradition through its clear division into an octave and sestet at the conjunction “But” in line nine. In the quatrains, Shakespeare contrasts the imperfections of a summer's day, “rough winds” that shake “the darling buds of May” and a sun that may “shine too hot”, with his friend's superior, unchanging beauty, reminding readers of nature's fragility and life's fleetingness.

- Contrasting natural frailty

In the sestet, the tone shifts to defiance and hope as the poet insists that his friend's “eternal summer shall not fade” and that “Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade.” The concluding couplet, “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”, confidently proclaims that as long as humanity reads the sonnet, the beloved's beauty endures.

- Defiant, hopeful declaration

Shakespeare roots this assertion of poetic immortality in classical tradition by drawing on Horace's claim in

- Classical tradition honoured

Ars Poetica, “Exegi monumentum aere perennius”, and Ovid’s belief in *Metamorphoses* that poetry preserves life beyond death. By weaving Renaissance humanist thought with his own poetic ambition, Shakespeare elevates Sonnet 18 beyond mere praise of physical beauty into a profound meditation on art, time, mortality, and memory. ()

- Art’s eternal promise

The poem unites the themes of beauty and time with the optimistic power of poetry, demonstrating that art can overcome nature’s ravages and grant eternity. Its clear imagery and elegant structure proclaim that, unlike the changing seasons, verse can offer permanence. This sonnet stands as a testament to Shakespeare’s mastery and continues to inspire readers and writers to reflect on the eternal nature of art and love.

### 2.2.2. Sonnet 55

Sonnet 55 by William Shakespeare asserts the immortality of the poet’s verses, declaring that they will outlast physical monuments and survive the ravages of time and war.



Fig 2.2.1:1 Sonnet 55

*Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
 Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme,  
 But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
 Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.  
 When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
 And broils root out the work of masonry,  
 Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn  
 The living record of your memory.  
 'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity  
 Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
 Even in the eyes of all posterity  
 That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
 So, till the judgment that yourself arise,  
 You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.*

### Central Idea:

The poet claims that neither marble statues nor gilded monuments, created to honour princes, can outlive his powerful rhyme. Although previous sonnets expressed doubts about the lasting power of his verses, here the poet confidently states that his poems will preserve the memory and beauty of the young man beyond the destruction caused by time or human conflict. His "living record" will endure when physical monuments are defaced or destroyed. Shakespeare boldly proclaims that death and oblivion are powerless against the immortality granted by his poetry, promising that the youth's praise will continue until the end of the world, or "the ending doom." The beauty and memory of the beloved will live as long as people live to read the sonnet.

In the first quatrain, the poet opens by contrasting the lasting power of his poetry with the fragility of marble statues and golden monuments. He claims that these physical memorials, no matter how grand, will not survive time's corrupting force ("sluttish Time"). This sets up the central theme of art's triumph over decay.

In the second quatrain, the poet further criticises physical monuments by describing how Time steals "jewels" from



them, leaving them “unswept stone, besmear’d with sluttish time.” In contrast, his verse does not erode but preserves his friend’s beauty eternally. This creates a vivid metaphor for art’s power versus nature’s impermanence.

In the third quatrain, the poet asserts that not even “the dreadful Mars” (war) or “conflicting fate” can destroy his poem. Human battles might destroy statues and cities, but cannot kill the “living record” contained within his rhymes. His poetry achieves victory over both nature and human violence.

The concluding couplet restates the sonnet’s triumphant message: as long as humanity lives (“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see”), this poem will keep the youth alive. The poet imagines the beloved rising at the “judgment day,” eternalized by verse until the end of time.

The poet contrasts the temporary existence of physical monuments with the everlasting nature of poetry, proclaiming that his verses will immortalise the young man. His powerful rhyme will outlast time, war, and destruction, preserving the beloved’s memory through all ages. This sonnet celebrates art’s profound ability to grant immortality beyond the reach of death or decay.

### Theme

The poem explores the enduring power of art and poetry to overcome time, mortality, and destruction. It affirms poetic immortality, the triumph of creative expression over physical impermanence, and the lasting nature of memory and praise through verse. Shakespeare confidently claims poetry as a means to eternalize beauty, fame, and love beyond natural decay and human violence.

### 2.2.1:2 Critical Analysis

Sonnet 55, among Shakespeare’s most celebrated poems, powerfully explores the theme of poetic immortality against the inevitable decay of time and human achievements. The poem boldly asserts that while physical monuments such as marble statues and gilded memorials erected to honour princes will eventually crumble and be defaced by “sluttish time,” the poet’s verses will endure, preserving the memory and beauty of the young man celebrated in the sonnet. This theme of art’s triumph over death builds on ideas found in Sonnet 19, where Shakespeare claims

► Verses outlast physical monuments



mastery over “Devouring Time.” Yet in Sonnet 55, the tone is calmer, combining confident assertion with vivid imagery to elevate poetry above both nature’s and man’s destruction.

- Classical tradition elevates youth

Shakespeare’s claim to poetic immortality for his subject draws on classical literary traditions notably expressed by Roman poets Horace and Ovid. Horace’s famous declaration in *Ars Poetica* of having built a monument “more lasting than bronze” echoes in Shakespeare’s confident central image that “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” Similarly, Ovid’s belief that his poetry bestowed eternal life by capturing and transforming fleeting beauty into enduring art is reflected in Shakespeare’s sonnet. However, Shakespeare creatively shifts this classical pride in personal poetic achievement by emphasizing that his art glorifies the young man rather than himself. The “record” or “living record” of the youth’s praise becomes a bulwark against the ravages not only of time but also of “wasteful war,” where “broils root out the work of masonry.” The poem implies that even the brutal destructiveness of human conflict, symbolized through Mars, the god of war, cannot erode the immortal life granted by verse.

### 2.2.1:3 Imagery in *Sonnet 18* and *Sonnet 55*

- Imagery contrasts beauty and time

Imagery is one of Shakespeare’s most powerful tools in his sonnets, shaping how readers experience beauty, time, and immortality. In *Sonnet 18*, imagery drawn from nature establishes the contrast between fleeting physical beauty and the enduring power of poetry. In *Sonnet 55*, the imagery shifts towards monuments, war, and destruction, highlighting the ability of verse to outlast even stone and steel. Both sonnets belong to the Fair Youth sequence and share the central theme of poetry’s immortality, but each develops it with a distinct symbolic language.

- Nature imagery shows transience

In *Sonnet 18*, Shakespeare’s imagery is drawn from the natural world, especially the metaphor of summer. The opening line, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” sets up the entire sonnet as a comparison between natural beauty and the beloved’s qualities. The imagery of “rough winds” shaking “the darling buds of May” emphasises nature’s instability, while the “eye of heaven” (the sun) is sometimes too hot or dimmed by clouds.

These personifications and metaphors underline the fleeting nature of summer and, by extension, of all worldly beauty. Against this transience, Shakespeare introduces the imagery of an “eternal summer,” symbolising the permanence of the youth’s beauty as preserved in poetry. The imagery moves from the temporal and unstable to the eternal and secure, underscoring the triumph of art over time.

- Monuments imagery reveals resilience

In *Sonnet 55*, the imagery is grander and more dramatic, contrasting art with monuments of stone and gold. The opening quatrain declares that “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” Here, the imagery of statues and tombs conveys the fragility of physical memorials, which are defaced by “sluttish time.” In contrast, poetry becomes a “living record” that resists decay. The second quatrain intensifies this contrast, as time’s dirt and corruption destroy monuments, while verse remains untouched. The imagery then shifts to war: “the wasteful war shall statues overturn, / And broils root out the work of masonry.” By invoking Mars, the god of war, Shakespeare elevates the struggle between art and destruction to a cosmic level. Yet, the poetry triumphs even over Mars, suggesting that words endure beyond the reach of swords and fire.

- Varied imagery conveys immortality

Together, the sonnets show Shakespeare’s mastery of imagery to express a single theme in two distinct ways. In *Sonnet 18*, the images are pastoral and intimate, grounding the theme of poetic immortality in natural beauty and seasonal change. In *Sonnet 55*, the imagery is monumental and martial, stressing the resilience of poetry against the grand forces of time and violence. Both sonnets affirm that art possesses a unique power to outlast decay, but by drawing on such different symbolic registers -- one gentle and natural, the other bold and monumental-- Shakespeare demonstrates the flexibility of imagery to carry universal truths in diverse forms.

- Poetry transcends temporal decay

#### 2.2.1:4 The Theme of Immortality in Sonnets 18 and 55

William Shakespeare’s Sonnets 18 and 55 both celebrate the power of poetry to transcend the natural decay of time and secure a form of immortality for their subjects. In Sonnet 18, the poet opens with the question “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” before explaining how his friend’s beauty surpasses and outlasts the changing



seasons. Summer may be marred by “rough winds” or a too-hot sun, yet the friend’s “eternal summer shall not fade.” The closing couplet reinforces that as long as humanity breathes and sees, the poem itself will preserve the youth’s loveliness for ever. Similarly, Sonnet 55 asserts that neither “marble” nor “gilded monuments” can outlast the poet’s “powerful rhyme.” While statues crumble under time’s corruption and the ravages of war, the living record of verse remains untouched. Both sonnets insist that art, in particular, Shakespeare’s verse, provides a refuge from mortality and a promise of enduring remembrance.

- Imagery contrasts decay/endurance

The two poems use vivid natural and cultural imagery to contrast that which decays with that which endures. In Sonnet 18, Shakespeare personifies summer as fickle and transitory. He describes how “rough winds do shake the darling buds of May” and how the sun, “the eye of heaven,” can sometimes “shine too hot.” These images remind readers that all living beauty diminishes. By contrast, the poet’s verse enshrines the beloved’s constant grace. The final couplet, “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,” expresses confident faith in poetry’s ability to defeat time. In Sonnet 55, the poet turns to human creations, statues and monuments, to show that even the greatest works of stone and gilding fall victim to “sluttish Time” and to “wasteful war.” By painting such grand structures as vulnerable, he magnifies the triumph of his own words. The poem’s promise that “your praise shall still find room / Even in the eyes of all posterity” confirms that love immortalised in verse surpasses the physical world.

- Written word ensures immortality

Together, these sonnets propose that poetry outlives both nature’s cycles and human hubris. They challenge readers to recognise the humble yet enduring power of written word. Whereas natural beauty will fade and monuments will shatter, art preserves memory and emotion across the ages. In celebrating the beloved’s “eternal summer” and the unbreakable force of “powerful rhyme,” Shakespeare reveals his conviction that true immortality lies not in marble or in flesh, but in the living lines of poetry that continue to speak to each new generation.

## Summarised Overview

This unit examines Sonnet 18's intimate pastoral imagery, which elevates the beloved's "eternal summer" above the fleeting beauty of a summer's day, and Sonnet 55's monumental symbolism, which declares that powerful rhyme outlives marble statues and war. Together, they exemplify Shakespeare's assertion that poetry, more enduring than nature or stone, grants immortality to love and memory.

## Assignments

1. Analyse how the volta in Sonnet 18 transforms the poem's focus from natural imperfection to poetic immortality.
2. Discuss the ways in which Sonnet 55 contrasts physical monuments with the lasting power of verse.
3. Compare the use of natural imagery in Sonnet 18 with monumental imagery in Sonnet 55 to explore their shared theme of immortality.
4. Examine Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter and rhyme scheme in reinforcing the themes of time and permanence.
5. Reflect on the personal and universal dimensions of love as portrayed in these two sonnets

## Suggested Reading

1. Kerrigan, John, editor. *The Sonnets; and, A Lover's Complaint*. Revised edition, Penguin, 1969.
2. Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Harvard UP, 1997.
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5. Vendler, Helen. "Sonnet 55." In *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, pp. 127–37. Harvard UP, 1997.





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1. Kerrigan, John, editor. *The Sonnets; and, A Lover's Complaint*. Revised edition, Penguin, 1969.
2. Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Harvard UP, 1997.
3. Mowat, Barbara A., and Paul Werstine, editors. *Shakespeare's Sonnets (Folger Shakespeare Library)*. Simon & Schuster, 2016.
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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.



## Unit 3

## Poetry

### Sonnets 130 and 144

(Detailed Study)

### Learning Outcomes

On completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand the history and defining features of the sonnet form.
- ▶ explain Shakespeare's contributions to the Elizabethan sonnet tradition.
- ▶ identify and analyse the structural elements of Shakespearean sonnets.
- ▶ critically evaluate themes of realism, parody, moral conflict, and imagery in Sonnets 130 and 144.

### Background

The sonnet sequence numbered 127–154, known as the Dark Lady sonnets, departs from the earlier Fair Youth poems' idealised praise to examine darker facets of desire. Shakespeare explores honesty over exaggeration in Sonnet 130, parodying Petrarchan conventions by depicting his mistress in realistic, sometimes unflattering, terms. In Sonnet 144, he dramatises an inner struggle between two loves: the “better angel” of innocence embodied by the Fair Youth, and the “worser spirit” of temptation represented by the Dark Lady. These poems showcase Shakespeare's range from comic subversion to moral anxiety.

### Keywords

English sonnet, Dark Lady sequence, parody, moral conflict, imagery

## Discussion

### 2.3.1 Sonnet 130 and 144

The second group of Shakespeare's sonnets, often called the *Dark Lady sonnets*, shifts away from the youthful idealism of the earlier poems to a more complex and troubled exploration of love. Unlike the praises of eternal beauty found in the Fair Youth sonnets, these works often question desire, honesty, and temptation. They reveal Shakespeare's deeply human struggle between affection and frustration, attraction and disillusionment.

In *Sonnet 130*, Shakespeare challenges the artificial style of love poetry popular in his time. Instead of exaggerating his mistress's beauty with impossible comparisons, he insists on describing her realistically, even unflatteringly. Yet this honesty makes his love appear stronger and truer. The poem is both humorous and radical, offering a vision of love that values truth over false praise.

By contrast, *Sonnet 144* captures the poet's darker conflict between two loves: the Fair Youth, symbolising innocence and comfort, and the Dark Lady, representing lust and corruption. The poem dramatizes a moral struggle in which the poet fears losing purity to temptation. This mixture of jealousy, uncertainty, and moral anxiety makes the sonnet tense and unsettling. Together, Sonnets 130 and 144 highlight the wide emotional range of the Dark Lady sequence, from playful parody to profound inner turmoil.

#### *Sonnet 130:*

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130* is an unconventional love poem that pokes fun at the exaggerated praise often found in Elizabethan sonnets. Instead of comparing his mistress to the sun, roses, or music in the usual flattering way, Shakespeare describes her in ordinary, even unflattering, terms. However, the poem ends with a twist: despite her lack of "goddess-like" qualities, he loves her sincerely and finds her beauty rare and genuine.



# Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing  
like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, why then black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress <sup>when</sup> she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.  
by William Shakespeare

## Central Idea

In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare challenges the common style of Elizabethan love poetry, which usually exaggerated the beloved's beauty through unrealistic comparisons. Instead of describing his mistress as brighter than the sun or more fragrant than perfume, he humorously points out that she does not meet these exaggerated ideals. Yet, by the end of the sonnet, he makes it clear that his love for her is real and sincere, based on truth rather than false comparisons.

## Detailed Summary

The poem begins by mocking conventional love sonnets. Shakespeare declares that his mistress's eyes are "nothing like the sun," her lips are less red than coral, and her breasts are not as white as snow. Her hair, he says, resembles black wires, and her cheeks lack the rosy perfection often praised in poetry.



In the second and third quatrains, the poet continues this playful attack on poetic exaggerations. He admits that her breath is not sweeter than perfume, her voice is not more pleasing than music, and she walks on the ground like any ordinary woman, not like a goddess. These comparisons are deliberately unflattering, even shocking, because they go directly against the flowery praise of Petrarchan sonnets.

The final couplet changes the tone with the words “And yet.” Here, Shakespeare affirms that despite all her ordinary qualities, his mistress is just as rare and beautiful to him as any woman falsely described with unrealistic comparisons. This twist gives the poem both humour and sincerity, showing that true love values honesty over exaggeration.

### **Theme**

The main theme of Sonnet 130 is real love versus artificial praise. Shakespeare suggests that genuine affection does not require unrealistic comparisons or false flattery. Beauty should be appreciated in its natural, modest form rather than dressed up in poetic exaggerations. The poem also reflects the idea that love is not blind worship but an honest recognition of another person's real qualities.

### **2.3.1:1 Critical Analysis**

Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 is one of his most strikingly original love poems because it openly rejects the poetic conventions of his time. During the Elizabethan period, poets often copied Petrarch's style, filling their verses with exaggerated comparisons that made the beloved seem almost divine. In contrast, Shakespeare deliberately avoids such flattery, presenting a mistress who does not fit those artificial ideals.

The poem unfolds as a series of negative comparisons. Her eyes are “nothing like the sun,” her lips lack coral's redness, her hair is like black wires, and her cheeks do not glow like roses. Her breath and voice are compared unfavourably to perfume and music, while her ordinary walk makes it clear she is no goddess. At first, these descriptions may sound harsh or mocking, but they serve a deeper purpose: to strip away false praise and expose a more genuine form of admiration.

The volta, or turning point, comes with the couplet: “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare.” Here, Shakespeare reveals that his

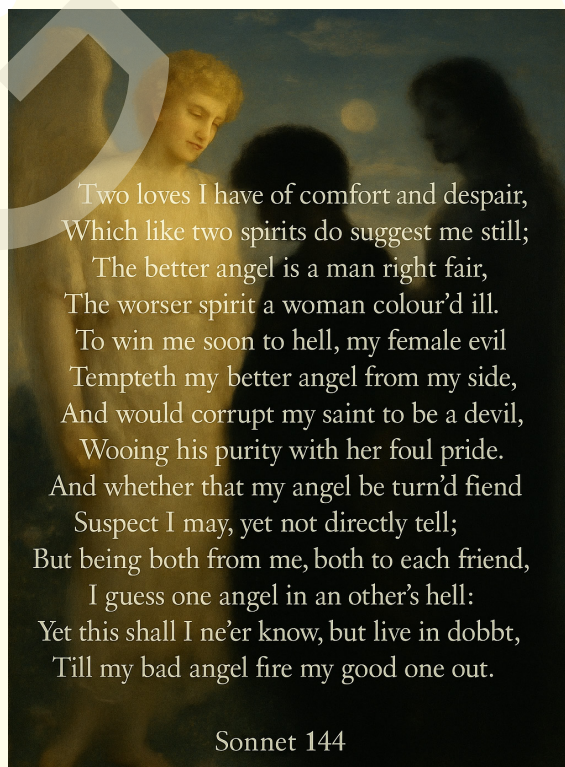


love is neither diminished nor weakened by honesty. On the contrary, it is strengthened. By rejecting exaggeration, he asserts that his mistress's real, earthly qualities make her beauty rare and valuable.

Sonnet 130 is therefore both a parody and a declaration. It ridicules the artificial standards of Petrarchan poetry while affirming that authentic love is based on truth. The sonnet also carries a quiet radicalism, suggesting that women should not be praised for impossible ideals but loved for their natural selves. This combination of humour, honesty, and sincerity makes Sonnet 130 a timeless and powerful piece, one that continues to challenge readers' ideas of beauty and love.

### 2.3.2 Sonnet 144

*Sonnet 144* is one of Shakespeare's most striking poems because it openly presents the poet's inner conflict between two powerful loves: the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady. The Fair Youth is associated with purity, comfort, and goodness, while the Dark Lady symbolises temptation, lust, and corruption. The poem dramatises this emotional and moral struggle, showing the poet's anxiety about whether the forces of goodness or temptation will prevail.



## Central Idea

In this sonnet, Shakespeare presents his divided affections as a spiritual battle. The Fair Youth is described as a “better angel,” representing virtue and light, while the Dark Lady is the “worse spirit,” associated with sin and destruction. The poet imagines the Dark Lady trying to corrupt the Fair Youth, drawing him into lust and despair. Torn between hope and fear, the poet confesses he may never know the outcome, leaving him in painful uncertainty.

## Detailed Summary

In the first quatrain, the poet introduces his “two loves” as contrasting spiritual figures — a fair young man who symbolises purity and a dark woman who embodies sin and temptation. This sharp contrast sets up the central conflict of the poem.

In the second quatrain, the Dark Lady is depicted as a corrupting influence who may lure the Fair Youth away. She is the “female evil” who could “corrupt my saint to be a devil.” The poet fears her power to turn innocence into guilt, purity into sin.

In the third quatrain, the poet acknowledges his uncertainty. He cannot know whether the Dark Lady has succeeded in seducing the youth. His words suggest deep jealousy, anguish, and helplessness. The expression “fire my good one out” has been interpreted by critics as either a metaphor for sexual conquest or even a hint at venereal disease. The sonnet closes with a tone of resignation. The poet expects to live “in doubt,” never certain whether the Fair Youth remains untainted or has been overcome by the Dark Lady’s corrupting influence.

## Theme

The sonnet explores themes of temptation, jealousy, inner conflict, and moral struggle. It contrasts the purity of spiritual love with the destructive force of lust. Shakespeare captures the tension between good and evil within human relationships, showing how love can be mixed with fear, suspicion, and despair.

### 2.3.3 Critical Analysis of Sonnet 144

Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 144* is one of the most revealing sonnets in the sequence, exposing the poet’s divided



emotions towards the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady. Unlike the light-hearted satire of *Sonnet 130* or the lyrical celebration of beauty in *Sonnet 18*, this poem is dark, anxious, and morally charged.

The sonnet is built on sharp contrasts. The Fair Youth is the “better angel,” representing comfort, purity, and perhaps the poet’s ideal of spiritual love. In contrast, the Dark Lady is the “worse spirit,” associated with lust, sin, and “hell.” Shakespeare imagines her as a corrupting force, working to seduce and ruin the youth. The imagery is deliberately moral and religious, portraying love not just as a personal matter but as a struggle between good and evil.

The quatrains build the conflict step by step. At first, the poet sets up the moral battlefield. Then he fears the Dark Lady’s destructive power, before admitting his uncertainty about the outcome. The couplet concludes with no resolution, only despair: the poet expects to live “in doubt.” This lack of closure mirrors the poet’s psychological turmoil, making the sonnet emotionally raw and deeply personal.

Critics have noted the boldness of this sonnet. By casting the Dark Lady as a corrupting devil and the Fair Youth as a vulnerable angel, Shakespeare lays bare his conflicting desires and fears. The phrase “fire my good one out” has sparked much debate, with some reading it as a reference to sexual disease, a reminder that desire is not only emotional but physical and dangerous.

In the end, *the sonnet* reveals Shakespeare’s view of love as a double-edged experience: it can uplift, comfort, and inspire, but it can also tempt, corrupt, and destroy. The poem’s honesty, tension, and moral imagery ensure its place as one of the most strikingly human sonnets in the sequence.

#### 2.3.4 Imagery in *Sonnet 130* and *Sonnet 144*

Imagery plays a central role in Shakespeare’s sonnets, shaping meaning and emotion through vivid comparisons. In the Dark Lady sonnets, imagery is particularly striking because it often overturns poetic tradition or exposes inner conflict. Sonnets 130 and 144 are good examples of this: the first uses comic and realistic imagery to challenge false praise, while the second employs religious and moral imagery to dramatise a battle between purity and temptation.

In *Sonnet 130*, Shakespeare uses images that seem deliberately unflattering. Instead of saying his mistress's eyes shine like the sun, he insists they are "nothing like the sun." Her lips are compared unfavourably with coral, her breasts are duller than snow, and her hair resembles black wires. Even her breath is said to be less sweet than perfume. These images shock the reader because they reverse the flowery exaggerations of Petrarchan poetry. Yet, by stripping away false comparisons, Shakespeare presents a love that is honest and grounded in reality. The imagery, though plain and comic, serves to highlight truth: his mistress may not match poetic ideals, but she is rare and valuable in her natural beauty.

In *Sonnet 144*, the imagery is darker and more symbolic. Shakespeare imagines his divided loves as spiritual beings: the Fair Youth is the "better angel," representing innocence and comfort, while the Dark Lady is the "worser spirit," linked to hell and corruption. Religious and moral images dominate the poem, words like "devil," "hell," and "corrupt" show how deeply the poet feels the struggle between purity and temptation. The phrase "fire my good one out" adds further weight, suggesting both sexual passion and possible disease. Unlike the humour of *Sonnet 130*, this imagery is anxious and unsettling, expressing jealousy and despair.

Taken together, the two sonnets show the wide range of Shakespeare's use of imagery. In one, ordinary and even crude comparisons are used to mock convention and celebrate truthful love. In the other, the imagery of angels and devils dramatises an emotional and moral conflict that remains unresolved. Both approaches reveal Shakespeare's genius for transforming imagery into a powerful tool: not only to describe beauty or desire, but also to question ideals, expose human weakness, and capture the complex nature of love.

## Summarised Overview

This unit examines Shakespeare's two Dark Lady sonnets. *Sonnet 130* subverts Elizabethan hyperbole by describing the mistress with plain imagery yet affirms genuine love. *Sonnet 144* frames the poet's divided affections as a spiritual battle between purity (the Fair Youth) and corruption (the Dark Lady), ending in haunting uncertainty. Both poems reveal Shakespeare's innovative use of form, theme, and imagery.





## Assignments

1. Compare Sonnet 130's treatment of the mistress with that of a conventional Petrarchan sonnet.
2. Analyse how honesty and humour combine to convey true affection in Sonnet 130.
3. Examine the "two loves" conflict in Sonnet 144 and its moral implications.
4. Discuss jealousy and temptation as depicted through imagery in Sonnet 144.
5. Explore how both sonnets use religious or comic imagery to challenge poetic conventions.

## Suggested Reading

1. Kerrigan, John, editor. *The Sonnets; and, A Lover's Complaint*. Revised edition, Penguin, 1969.
2. Qadria, Rashna Jennifer. *Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare: A Conventional Romantic Poem?* GRIN Verlag, 2020.
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1. Kerrigan, John, editor. *The Sonnets; and, A Lover's Complaint*. Revised edition, Penguin, 1969.
2. Qadria, Rashna Jennifer. *Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare: A Conventional Romantic Poem?* GRIN Verlag, 2020.
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5. Huse, Susanne. Comparison and Contrast Essay: Shakespeare's Sonnet 60 vs. Sonnet 144. GRIN Verlag, 2008.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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1.



## Unit 4

## Drama

(Non-detailed Study)

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit the learners will be able to:

- ▶ acquire a general understanding of the genres of Shakespearean comedy and history
- ▶ critically analyse the structure and form of the selected texts
- ▶ describe the predominant themes and stylistic features of the selected texts
- ▶ examine in depth the stylistic features of the selected texts

### Background

Few playwrights enjoy the enduring fame of William Shakespeare, whose works have transcended cultural and linguistic boundaries to be performed and adapted worldwide. From amateur stage productions to professional theatre companies, and from radio dramas to film adaptations in English, German, Russian, French and Japanese, Shakespeare's influence is universal. His plots, characters and poetry have inspired novelists and dramatists such as Charles Dickens, Bertolt Brecht, William Faulkner and Tom Stoppard, who have sought to capture his spirit and style while situating his themes within their own historical contexts.

This unit focuses on two of Shakespeare's late works that resist simple categorisation yet have earned widespread acclaim: *The Tempest* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *The Tempest* is often regarded as Shakespeare's final play and draws upon contemporary accounts of a 1609 shipwreck at Bermuda to explore themes of governance, colonial encounter and the ethics of power. Prospero's relationship with the native islander Caliban invites postcolonial critique, questioning the legitimacy of European claims to new territories and the treatment of those deemed uncivilised.

By contrast, *Antony and Cleopatra* stands apart from Shakespeare's great tragedies in tone and structure. Written around 1607, this play presents a grand tragic romance between two middle-aged lovers whose conflict between private desire and public duty unfolds on a historical stage. Mark Antony's

struggle to balance his Roman obligations with his passion for Cleopatra offers a meditation on love, ambition and the consequences of choice on an epic scale. Together, these two plays exemplify Shakespeare's capacity to blend genres and engage with enduring questions of identity and power.

## Keywords

Last Plays , dramatic Romances, Supernaturalism, Colonialism, Historical Tragedy, Power, Political intrigue.

## Discussion

### Shakespeare's Last Plays

Shakespeare's final plays, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, written between 1609 and 1613 .They are often called dramatic romances or tragicomedies. In these plays, we can see a clear shift in his outlook, dramatic technique and poetic style as he moved from the everyday human world into a more symbolic realm where far-fetched stories of loss and recovery, sudden jealousies, magical control and enduring love unfold with both improbability and profound emotional depth. In *The Tempest*, for instance, the potential tragedies of Antonio's treachery, Prospero's exile with his daughter Miranda, Alonso's separation from Ferdinand, Caliban's attempted assault and the conspiracies of Antonio and Sebastian are countered by joyous reunions, romantic love and reconciliation, embodying the plays' central message of forgiveness and redemption. These works weave together Shakespeare's earlier themes of sin, atonement, purification, the contrast between nature and society, illusion versus reality and colonisation, all while adapting to new theatrical tastes at the indoor Blackfriars Theatre through spectacular music, dance and pageantry, as seen in the sheep-shearing scene of *The Winter's Tale*, the exotic Welsh setting of *Cymbeline* and the enchanted island of *The Tempest*. Critics have long debated their tone: some see in them the calm peace Shakespeare had found in his later years, emphasising tenderness alongside sorrow and championing mercy, as in Prospero's "The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance", while others argue that the force of evil remains potent and that the happy endings serve merely as dramatic contrivances masking a deep



weariness that resonates in the plays' dream-like, haunted atmospheres. Whether viewed as renewed tragedy or sublime romance, these last works celebrate both the wisdom of age and the beauty of young love, offer a "brave new world" of regeneration after destruction and achieve a unique blend of philosophy, imagination and poetry, culminating in some of Shakespeare's finest verses, such as Ariel's "Full fathom five thy father lies" and Prospero's "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.", testaments to divine truth and the enduring power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

### 2.4.1 Introduction to *The Tempest*

*The Tempest* first appeared in print as the opening play in Shakespeare's 1623 *First Folio*, and from its earliest days critics have praised it as a pinnacle of his dramatic achievement, an embodiment of the human condition, and a play containing perhaps his most autobiographical character in Prospero, the magician ruler. The text in the *First Folio* shows relatively few omissions or corruptions, although it contains unusually detailed stage directions compared with Shakespeare's other works and exhibits occasional inconsistencies in spelling and formatting, with prose sometimes set as verse and vice versa, leading scholars to suggest that it may derive from a transcript of a later court performance, while others believe it came directly from Shakespeare's own manuscript or a close copy. The earliest recorded performances took place at the court of James I in 1611 and 1613, and the inclusion of a Jacobean masque confirms this timeframe, although evidence indicates that the play may have undergone revisions and received London performances between those dates; indeed, the betrothal masque in Act IV was probably added for the 1613 staging to celebrate the wedding of Princess Elizabeth, making the play especially fitting for the festive occasion. Despite the popularity of several of Shakespeare's plays before 1650, *The Tempest* did not enjoy widespread acclaim at that time, and during the Restoration Davenant and Dryden's adaptation proved more popular for a period, despite reducing the original almost to parody by introducing new characters and family relations; later, from the seventeenth century until the 1930s Ariel was often portrayed as female against textual evidence, and during Victorian times Caliban was reimagined as less diabolical and more tragic, reflecting



► Introduction  
summary

anti-slavery sentiments and later Darwinian influences. For many years the play was classified simply as a comedy, yet its blend of tragedy, comedy and romance means it resists any single genre label and is most often grouped with *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *Pericles* as one of Shakespeare's late romances. The inspiration for *The Tempest* is thought to lie in a letter by William Strachey describing shipwreck survivors on Bermuda after a hurricane struck the Virginia Company fleet in 1609, a letter that circulated in manuscript from 1610 and was printed in 1625; Shakespeare's connections with figures in the Virginia Company and possible acquaintance with Strachey himself make it highly likely that he drew on this vivid account when crafting his tale of shipwreck, magic and reconciliation, which was performed at court around a year after the letter first reached London.

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### Themes

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#### **Atonement and Reconciliation**

Betrayal leads to repentance and a joyous union, showing innocence mends ambition.

#### **Purification through Suffering**

Trials on the island redeem the contrite and doom the unrepentant.

#### **Nature versus Society**

Caliban's raw instinct clashes with Prospero's civilisation and Gonzalo's ideal commonwealth.

#### **Illusion versus Reality**

Storms, magic and masks deceive until true order is restored.

#### **Shakespeare's Farewell**

Prospero's relinquishing of magic mirrors Shakespeare's final farewell to the stage.

## 2.4.2 Critical Summary

### **Opening Storm and Exposition**

*The tempest* begins with a violent storm at sea as King Alonso's royal ship, carrying his son Ferdinand, brother Sebastian, counsellor Gonzalo and the usurping Duke Antonio, struggles against nature's fury. The crew battles desperately to save the vessel whilst noble passengers

- Storm establishes natural democracy

interfere with nautical duties, highlighting class tensions and human vulnerability. The Boatswain's blunt dismissal of royal authority establishes the theme that natural forces recognise no earthly hierarchy. When the ship appears to break apart, all passengers are scattered across an unknown island, setting the stage for Shakespeare's exploration of betrayal, punishment and ultimate reconciliation.

- Exposition reveals providential design

On another part of the island, Prospero reveals to his daughter Miranda the history behind their exile. Years before, his brother Antonio usurped his dukedom with King Alonso's assistance, placing Prospero and infant Miranda in a boat to perish at sea. Fortune brought them to this enchanted island where Prospero, through his salvaged books, mastered magical arts and now commands the island's spirits. Miranda's compassion for the storm's victims contrasts with her father's calculated revenge, establishing her as the play's moral centre. Prospero's explanation that everything has been orchestrated for her benefit introduces the theme of providence guiding human affairs despite apparent chaos.

- Act I: The Storm and Shipwreck



Fig 2.4.1 *The Tempest*

### Act I: Magic and First Encounters

Prospero summons his spirit servant Ariel, who reports successful completion of the shipwreck without harming any passengers. The ship rests safely in harbour with crew asleep, whilst Ferdinand believes himself the sole survivor. Ariel's longing for promised freedom introduces questions about service, bondage and liberation that resonate throughout the play. Prospero's reminder of rescuing Ariel

from Sycorax's imprisonment establishes his role as both liberator and master, creating moral complexity around power relationships.



Fig 2.4.1:2 The Scene from *The Tempest*

The introduction of Caliban, son of the deceased witch Sycorax, presents the play's central debate about nature versus nurture. His bitter resentment towards Prospero stems from losing his island inheritance, whilst his attempted assault on Miranda justifies his enslavement. Caliban's poetic appreciation of the island's natural beauty contrasts sharply with his crude behaviour, suggesting that civilisation cannot entirely suppress natural instincts. His eloquent cursing demonstrates that education can be turned to destructive purposes, complicating simple moral judgements about colonisation and cultural transformation.

- Caliban embodies nature's complexity

Ariel leads Ferdinand to Prospero's cell through enchanting music, causing immediate mutual attraction between the prince and Miranda. Their love at first sight fulfills romantic conventions whilst serving Prospero's political purposes of securing dynastic alliance. Miranda's wonder at seeing her first young man parallels Ferdinand's amazement at finding a goddess-like maiden, emphasising innocence and purity. Prospero's harsh treatment of Ferdinand tests the prince's character whilst ensuring their love deepens through adversity rather than easy conquest. Their exchange of vows establishes hope for redemption transcending previous generational conflicts.

- Love transcends political scheming



## Act II: Conspiracy and Comic Relief

- Shipwreck reveals true characters

King Alonso wanders the island grieving for Ferdinand, whom he believes drowned, whilst his companions offer varying responses to their circumstances. Gonzalo's optimistic vision of an ideal commonwealth without hierarchy or labour echoes Montaigne's essay on noble savages, presenting utopian alternatives to European civilisation. Antonio and Sebastian's cynical mockery reveals their corruption, whilst their plotting against the sleeping Alonso demonstrates how shipwreck has not reformed their treacherous natures. The contrast between Gonzalo's wisdom and the conspirators' malice establishes moral polarities that will determine characters' fates.

- Evil resists redemptive suffering

Ariel's intervention prevents regicide by awakening Gonzalo just as Sebastian and Antonio draw swords, demonstrating how providence works through supernatural agents to protect the innocent. The would-be assassins' excuse about defending against wild beasts shows their practised deception, whilst their willingness to murder sleeping companions reveals depths of moral corruption. Sebastian's easy agreement to fraternal murder parallels Antonio's earlier betrayal of Prospero, suggesting that evil breeds evil across generations. The episode establishes that some characters remain irredeemably corrupt despite opportunities for redemption through suffering.

- Comedy mirrors tragic themes

Meanwhile, Caliban encounters Trinculo and Stephano, the king's jester and butler, in a comic subplot that mirrors the main plot's themes. Caliban's immediate worship of the drunken Stephano parodies religious devotion whilst demonstrating how oppression creates susceptibility to false gods. His promise to reveal the island's secrets in exchange for freedom echoes colonial encounters where indigenous knowledge serves European exploitation. The trio's conspiracy against Prospero provides comic relief whilst darkly reflecting the serious political machinations elsewhere on the island.

## Act III: Love, Conspiracy and Illusion

Ferdinand's cheerful acceptance of log-carrying demonstrates love's transformative power, turning servitude into joy through Miranda's presence. Their exchange of vows occurs against Prospero's explicit prohibition, showing genuine affection transcending

- Love overcomes patriarchal control

patriarchal authority. Miranda's bold marriage proposal reverses conventional gender roles whilst emphasising her agency despite her sheltered upbringing. Ferdinand's acceptance celebrates equality in love whilst promising dynastic union that will heal political divisions. Prospero's secret approval reveals his manipulation has succeeded in creating authentic emotion rather than mere political alliance.

- Knowledge equals magical power

Caliban's detailed conspiracy against Prospero involves burning his books, recognising that magical power depends upon learning and knowledge. His description of Prospero's vulnerable afternoon naps humanises the powerful magician whilst revealing intimate knowledge gained through servitude. Stephano's agreement to murder his host and claim Miranda as queen demonstrates how alcohol unleashes basest impulses, whilst Ariel's invisible interference creates comic confusion among the plotters. The subplot's failure foreshadows the defeat of all conspiracies against rightful authority.

- Divine judgment appears as illusion

The vanishing banquet presented to Alonso's party represents divine judgment masquerading as hospitality. Ariel's appearance as an avenging harpy transforms classical mythology into Christian allegory, denouncing the "three men of sin" for their crimes against Prospero. The feast's disappearance symbolises how worldly pleasures prove illusory for the guilty, whilst Gonzalo's immunity to the torment confirms his innocence. Alonso's recognition of divine punishment in his son's apparent death demonstrates the beginning of genuine repentance, contrasting with Antonio and Sebastian's continued defiance.

#### **Act IV: Masque and Revelation**

- Art elevates human experience

Prospero's blessing of Ferdinand and Miranda's betrothal through a spectacular masque celebrates fertility, marriage and natural abundance through classical goddesses. The elaborate entertainment demonstrates reconciliation between magic and morality, as Prospero uses supernatural power to bless rather than punish. The pageant's emphasis on chastity and legitimate marriage contrasts sharply with the attempted rape by Caliban and the political corruption of the court. Ferdinand's wonder at the spectacle reflects the transformative power of art to elevate human experience beyond mundane reality.





- Reality proves as fragile as dreams

Prospero's sudden termination of the masque upon remembering Caliban's conspiracy reveals the fragility of artistic illusion when confronted with practical threats. His famous speech about dreams and the dissolving of all earthly things provides the play's philosophical centre, suggesting that reality itself may be no more substantial than theatrical performance. The meditation on mortality and transience prepares for Prospero's renunciation of magic whilst offering comfort through the recognition of universal impermanence. Miranda and Ferdinand's concern for Prospero's distress shows love's power to transcend generational boundaries.

- Material temptation corrupts rebellion

The punishment of Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo through being led into thorns and stagnant water provides comic justice whilst demonstrating the consequences of rebellion against rightful authority. Their distraction by gaudy clothing reveals the power of material temptation to corrupt even revolutionary impulses. Prospero's description of Caliban as irredeemably evil, "on whose nature nurture can never stick," articulates the limits of education and civilisation in transforming fundamental character. The episode reinforces hierarchical order whilst acknowledging the persistent threat of barbarism to civilised society.

### Act V: Forgiveness and Resolution



Fig 2.4.1:3 A Scene from *The Tempest*

Prospero's decision to choose mercy over vengeance represents the play's moral climax, as he declares that "the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance." His forgiveness

- Mercy triumphs over vengeance

of enemies demonstrates Christian virtue triumph over classical revenge, whilst his decision to abjure magic suggests the superiority of natural over supernatural power. Ariel's encouragement of mercy shows how even spirits can inspire human compassion, whilst Prospero's promise of the spirit's freedom rewards faithful service. The magician's transformation from vengeful exile to merciful duke completes his moral education through suffering.

- Joy emerges from tragedy

The reunion of Alonso with Ferdinand and introduction to Miranda creates joy from apparent tragedy, as the king's grief transforms into celebration of his son's betrothal. Miranda's wonder at the "brave new world" reflects innocence encountering corruption, whilst her father's ironic response suggests experience's knowledge of human frailty. Ferdinand's presentation of Miranda to his father ensures dynastic continuation whilst healing political divisions through marriage alliance. The chess game symbolises strategic thinking yielding to love's spontaneous emotion.

- Civilisation restored through forgiveness

The restoration of the ship and crew through Ariel's magic prepares for return to civilisation, whilst Prospero's forgiveness extends even to Caliban, who recognises his folly in worshipping Stephano. The native's promise to "seek for grace" suggests spiritual transformation through suffering, offering hope for redemption across cultural boundaries. The play concludes with plans for Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding in Naples, where Prospero will resume his dukedom whilst abandoning magical arts for natural governance.

### Epilogue: Art and Reality

- Art requires collaborative creation

Prospero's direct address to the audience breaks theatrical illusion whilst paradoxically affirming art's power to transform reality. His plea for applause to secure release mirrors the Christian emphasis on mercy and forgiveness that pervades the play. The magician's renunciation of supernatural power parallels the playwright's completion of his dramatic career, suggesting autobiography beneath allegorical surface. The epilogue transforms audience members into active participants in the drama's resolution, blurring boundaries between performance and reality. By requesting the audience's "good hands," Prospero acknowledges that art requires collaborative creation between performer and spectator to achieve its transformative purpose.



### 2.4.3 Critical Appreciation

- Outcome known early

It is often said that *The Tempest* contains little action or progressive movement, for the outcome is apparent as early as the first act. The injury done to Prospero will be redressed through the gathering of the wrongdoers and the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. The two conspiracies that emerge on the enchanted island are bound to fail, since Prospero's supernatural powers ensure his control over events. At first sight, then, the play may seem little more than a fairy tale.

- Service reveals true freedom

Yet the real interest of the play lies elsewhere. Its appeal rests on its magical setting, its memorable characters, and its deeper message. As Dowden remarks, the thought that runs like a coloured thread through the whole of *The Tempest* is the idea that true freedom is found in service. The contrast between Ariel and Caliban illustrates this most vividly. Ariel, though longing for liberty, serves Prospero faithfully and even with eagerness, for he respects his master. Caliban, by contrast, resents all forms of service. To him, obedience is slavery, and he sees Prospero only as a usurper of his rights. When he meets weaker men such as Stephano and Trinculo, he is suddenly inflamed with a reckless desire for liberty. Ferdinand's character further illustrates Shakespeare's idea of service. He embraces his labour out of love for Miranda, showing that service freely given can be noble and fulfilling. Prospero himself, by choosing to return to Milan, also recognises that he must resume his duty to the state he once neglected.

- Forgiveness over vengeance

Another central theme of the play is forgiveness and reconciliation, a theme shared with Shakespeare's other late plays such as *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. Again and again we see that pardon is stronger than vengeance. Ariel plays an important role in provoking Prospero towards forgiveness. Though a spirit of air, Ariel shows compassion for Alonso and his companions when they are tormented by illusions. His plea that Prospero should show mercy marks a turning point in the play. If Ariel, "but air," can feel pity, then Prospero, a man, must rise above anger and take "the rarer action" of virtue. Caliban, however, stands as Ariel's opposite. He resists all attempts at civilising influence, and his isolation at the end of the play symbolises his inability to be reconciled.

► Prospero as Shakespeare

Many critics have seen *The Tempest* as an allegory. Prospero is thought to represent Shakespeare himself, and his renunciation of magic : “I’ll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I’ll drown my book” is often read as Shakespeare’s farewell to the stage. Ariel may symbolise poetic inspiration, while Caliban represents the brute forces of untamed nature.

► Colonial conquest metaphor

The play has also been read as having political overtones. Written during the period of early colonial expansion, it seems to reflect the tensions of colonisation. Prospero’s rule over Caliban, the “savage and deformed slave,” can be seen as a metaphor for European conquest of the New World, with Caliban standing for the indigenous peoples, displaced and mistreated by colonisers. The conspiracies in the play -- Antonio’s usurpation of Milan, Sebastian’s attempt to seize Naples, and Prospero’s domination of the island - echo contemporary anxieties about power and possession. In this view, Shakespeare presents a world where colonised peoples are seen as incapable of reform and unworthy of true freedom.

► Suffering leads moral transformation

Modern critics, however, often reject purely allegorical or political readings, arguing that they overlook the deeper experience at the heart of the play: the moral transformation of men through suffering. From the apparent shipwreck at the beginning to the gathering before Prospero’s cell, Alonso and his companions are made to endure trial and torment, leading to repentance and renewal. Alonso, in particular, undergoes a profound emotional change, his grief and remorse reshaping his character. Prospero, then, is not simply a fairy-tale magician. He is like a modern scientist or psychologist, using his arts to expose human weakness and guide others towards self-knowledge. In this sense, *The Tempest* is less a romance or allegory than an exploration of how pain and compassion can bring about moral and spiritual healing.

► Mercy defines true authority

Prospero emerges as Shakespeare’s most comprehensive heroic figure, combining scholarship, power and parental affection. His mastery of elemental forces through “secret studies” underscores both the promise and peril of knowledge. In his relationship with Miranda, Prospero reveals a tender protectiveness, dedicating every action to her welfare. His eventual abjuration of magic signals not only a restoration of his dukedom but also an acceptance



of human limitation. By choosing mercy over vengeance—and by promising to drown his art—Prospero fulfils the play's ethos that true authority lies in benevolence rather than domination.

- Spectacle fosters moral reflection

Music and masque in *The Tempest* extend the play's thematic concerns through sensory enchantment. Ariel's songs, from the serene "Come unto these yellow sands" to the haunting "Full fathom five thy father lies," exemplify how art can soothe, transform and illuminate. The masque of Iris, Ceres and Juno celebrates fertile union while also revealing the ephemerality of all human creations, as Prospero himself reminds us that "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." This blending of spectacle and philosophy demonstrates Shakespeare's late-period mastery: he invites distance-mode learners to consider theatre not merely as entertainment but as a medium for moral and spiritual reflection.

### ***The Three Unities***

- Unity of Time

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is notable for observing the three classical unities more closely than nearly any of his other plays. The unity of time requires that the action of a drama unfolds within the same span as its performance. In *The Tempest*, all events occur within a single morning and afternoon, mirroring the play's running time of three or four hours and creating a tight sense of immediacy.

- Unity of Place

The unity of place demands that the entire drama remain in one locality without scene changes across distant regions. In this play, most scenes occur near Prospero's cell on the island and only a few take place elsewhere on that same island. By restricting the action to one setting, Shakespeare invites the audience to inhabit Prospero's enchanted world without distraction.

- Unity of Action

The unity of action insists on a single dominant theme or plotline driving the drama. In *The Tempest*, the theme is forgiveness and reconciliation. Prospero's magic brings his enemies within reach so that he may restore his dukedom and secure Miranda's happiness. Every development from the shipwreck to the masque serves this central purpose, ensuring that no subplot diverts attention from the core motive.



► Economy of Enchantment

It may seem surprising that Shakespeare, famed for his imaginative licence, would adhere to these classical principles at all. Yet by confining his supernatural marvels to a single spot and time frame, he lends them plausibility. In a work where enchantment is the dominant force, this measured economy allows the audience's mind to accept the miraculous and focus on the play's theme of mercy triumphing over vengeance.

## 2.4. 4 Antony and Cleopatra

### Date of Composition of the Play

The composition of Antony and Cleopatra is generally dated to 1606 to 1607, since its entry in the Stationers' Register on 20 May 1608 shows it was written earlier. Further evidence comes from Samuel Daniel's thorough revision of his own tragedy Cleopatra in 1607, which introduced characters and lines echoing Shakespeare's play, suggesting Antony and Cleopatra was already in circulation by that date. Similarities with other contemporary works registered in 1606 and 1607 support this timeframe. Internal changes in metre that feature more run-on lines, weak and feminine endings, and a broader more expansive blank verse align Antony and Cleopatra with Shakespeare's later tragedies, confirming an early dating to around 1606 to 1607.

### The Historical Background of the Play

► Span covers ten years

The events of Antony and Cleopatra cover a span of about ten years, beginning with the establishment of the second triumvirate and ending in 30 B.C., when Antony's death left Octavius Caesar the absolute master of the Roman Empire.

► Caesar and Pompey rivalry

In 60 B.C. the first triumvirate was formed, consisting of Julius Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey the Great. This alliance was short-lived, for Caesar and Pompey soon became rivals. In 48 B.C., at the battle of Pharsalus, Caesar defeated Pompey, who fled to Egypt, only to be murdered there. Caesar pursued him to Egypt, where he was captivated for a time by Cleopatra, who was then twenty-two years old. Their relationship produced a son, Caesarion. Caesar's remarkable success, however, created powerful enemies in Rome. On 15 March 44 B.C., he was assassinated in the Senate House by a group of conspirators led by Brutus, his close friend, and other senators.



- Second triumvirate established

Following Caesar's death, Mark Antony delivered a famous funeral oration that stirred the Roman people and turned them against the conspirators. For a time it seemed that Antony would inherit Caesar's power. Yet Caesar's great-nephew and adopted son, Octavius, only nineteen years old, soon returned from the East to claim his rights. Together with Antony and Lepidus, he formed the second triumvirate, which divided the empire among them. Lepidus controlled Italy, Octavius ruled the West, and Antony was given the East. In 42 B.C., the triumvirs defeated Brutus and Cassius at the battle of Philippi, ending the hopes of the conspirators.

- Antony enthralled by Cleopatra

After this, Antony travelled east, where he summoned Cleopatra to account for her earlier support of Brutus during the civil war. She came before him in all her splendour and captivated him with her presence and charm. Antony fell under her influence and followed her to Egypt, where he spent a winter in Alexandria. His wife, Fulvia, who had remained in Rome to support his interests, was troubled by his absence. She attempted to meet him at Corinth but was met with coldness and indifference, which broke her heart. She died soon after.

- Octavia marriage political alliance

Antony then married Octavia, the sister of Octavius, in order to strengthen his position within the triumvirate. Around this time, Sextus Pompeius, the son of Pompey the Great, threatened Italy with his powerful navy. Octavius reached an uneasy agreement with him at Misenum. Meanwhile, Antony invaded Armenia, captured its king, and displayed him as a prisoner in Alexandria. His attachment to Cleopatra now grew without restraint. He insulted Octavia, bestowed eastern territories upon Cleopatra and her children, and appeared more like an eastern monarch than a Roman statesman.

- Power shifts prompts war

This alarmed Rome, for many feared that the centre of power might shift from the city to Alexandria. Octavius Caesar could no longer endure Antony's behaviour. Claiming to avenge the wrongs of his sister, but also eager to rid himself of a dangerous rival, he declared war. The two forces met at Actium in 31 B.C. During the naval battle, Cleopatra retreated with her fleet of sixty ships. Antony abandoned the fight to follow her, leaving his forces in disarray.

► Despair leads suicide

In Egypt, Antony soon realised that his allies had deserted him and that Octavius was closing in. Despairing, he took his own life. Cleopatra, refusing to be humiliated as a captive, killed herself with the bite of an asp. Antony died in the fifty-sixth year of his life in 30 B.C. When Octavius heard of his death, he is said to have shed tears for the man who had once been his ally but had ended as his greatest rival.

### Characters

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, history and romance meet upon the grand stage of the Roman Empire and the golden land of Egypt. The play is filled with rulers, generals, friends, and attendants, each caught between the duties of power and the desires of the heart. To follow their journeys, let us first become acquainted with the main figures.

At the heart of the drama stands Mark Antony, one of the three rulers of Rome, a man of great military power yet torn between his Roman duty and his passion for Cleopatra. Beside him is Cleopatra, the proud and dazzling Queen of Egypt, whose wit, beauty, and charm captivate Antony and hold him fast in her world of splendor. Opposing Antony is Octavius Caesar, cold and ambitious, who seeks to bring all of Rome under his firm control. With them, as a fellow triumvir, is M. Aemilius Lepidus, though weaker than his two companions and soon outshone by their rivalry.

Among Antony's loyal companions is Domitius Enobarbus, whose sharp tongue and keen observations provide wisdom, truth, and at times bitter humor. Others who serve Antony include Ventidius, Eros, Scarus, Dercetas, Demetrius, and Philo, brave soldiers and followers bound to his cause. By Caesar's side stand Mecaenas, Agrippa, Dolabella, and Proculius, men of counsel and arms. Thyreus and Gallus too lend their service to Caesar's designs.

Shakespeare also brings forth Sextus Pompeius, son of Pompey the Great, who threatens Rome from the sea, aided by his friends Menas, Menecrates, and Varrius. Other men of war include Taurus, Caesar's lieutenant-general, and Canidius, Antony's lieutenant-general. A Roman officer named Silius serves under Ventidius, while Euphronius appears as Antony's ambassador in delicate negotiations.



In Cleopatra's court we find her attendants: Alexas, Seleucus, and Diomedes, as well as Mardian, her faithful eunuch, who provides gentle companionship and loyalty. Her closest companions are Charmian and Iras, women who share both her secrets and her fate. A Soothsayer brings prophecy into the tale, and a Clown offers a touch of rustic humour, even in moments of tragedy.

The stage is peopled, too, with officers, soldiers, messengers, and attendants, for this is a story that moves from the palaces of Alexandria to the streets of Rome, and from the seas where fleets clash to the plains where armies contend.

When the play begins, Rome is divided, Egypt glitters with enchantment, and Antony must choose between empire and love. In their choices, the characters reveal the grandeur and frailty of human ambition, and the fierce power of desire that can shake even the rulers of the world.

#### 2.4.5 Critical Summary



Fig 2.4.2 A Scene from *Antony and Cleopatra*

Shakespeare borrows the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra* mainly from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius*, and he closely follows the original source. The reader is advised carefully to go through the passages from Plutarch given in this book, and to compare them with the corresponding passages in the play in order to see for himself how closely Shakespeare follows the Greek biographer. Shakespeare may also have made some slight use of Appian's *History of the Civil Wars*, and of Leo's *History of Africa* translated by John Pory. But he is mainly indebted to Plutarch for the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

As the events of the play begin, we find that Antony has already fallen victim to the charm of Cleopatra. His

► Source  
drawn from  
Plutarch's

- Antony's devotion neglects Rome

followers resent his infatuation for the Egyptian Queen, for he is neglecting all business of state and is totally unmindful of the events as they are developing in the empire. "Let Rome in Tiber melt," says Antony, "and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall." He finds his highest pleasure in embracing Cleopatra, and so long as she is with him, he does not care what happens to the world and the empire.

- Messengers spur Antony's return

Presently, messengers from Rome arrive, and Cleopatra employs her feminine art to prevent Antony from attending to them. To a certain extent she succeeds, for at first Antony refuses to give audience to them. But soon he realises his mistake and orders the messengers to be brought before him. The messengers have brought grave news. Antony's wife Fulvia, assisted by his brother, made war upon Caesar, who drove both out of Italy. The Parthians, taking advantage of Antony's indolence, have invaded and annexed part of the empire. And the gravest of all the news is that Fulvia died of a long illness at Athens. Antony is moved by the news of his wife's death. No love was lost between the two, and yet now that she is dead he wishes she were alive. She had upset the peace of the empire and created an unnecessary rift between him and Caesar. Hence it has become necessary for Antony to go to be reconciled with Caesar, his partner in the empire, otherwise the triumvirate would be broken. There is another reason also for his hasty departure for Rome: Sextus Pompeius, the son of Pompey the Great, has acquired a mighty sea power with which he is threatening to invade the west coast of Italy. Antony sends for Enobarbus, a trusty lieutenant, and when he comes reveals to him his intention of leaving Egypt immediately. But Cleopatra will not easily let him go out of her grip. She exercises her subtle feminine art to detain him at Alexandria. But Antony is adamant, and nothing can shake his will to leave Egypt immediately. At last Cleopatra gives way and bids farewell to Antony in these words:

- Political alliance through marriage

*Your honour calls you hence; Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly,  
And all the gods with you! Upon your sword  
Sit laurel victory! And smooth success  
Be strewed before your feet.*





- Pompey threatened western coasts

While Antony is yet on his way to Rome, Caesar is impatiently awaiting his arrival in the city. News is brought to him of the rapid growth of Pompey's power. Those Romans who are dissatisfied with the present regime are going over to him. His sea pirates, Menecrates and Menas, capture a vessel from Rome as soon as she leaves the harbour. While the empire is facing the greatest peril, Antony is engaged in his carousals at Alexandria. Caesar, however, is reminded of the days when Antony cheerfully bore the greatest hardships. Neither pangs of hunger nor prospect of death could affect his brave spirit in the least. What a change has come over him!

- Antony's absence alarms Caesar

Sextus Pompey is busy with his preparations for war against Caesar, when news is brought to him that Antony is about to reach Rome. A chill comes over his spirit. He had been sure of his victory against Caesar, but aided by Antony, Caesar has become invincible. For Antony is a first-rate fighting soldier and a commander of rare ability; Pompey cannot defeat him. Antony comes to Rome and meets Caesar in a conference. Each has a number of complaints against the other. Antony resents Caesar's concern about his stay in Egypt. Caesar pleads concern on the ground that Alexandria has become a centre of intrigues against him. He hints at Fulvia's revolt against him. But Antony replies that he had no concern in that revolt. He never instigated his wife to revolt against Caesar, and was ashamed of her conduct. Caesar's other complaint is that Antony did not allow his messenger to appear before him, and did not care to read the letters he had sent. Antony puts forth the plea that when Caesar's messenger came he was drunk. But the next day he explained that fact to him, which was as much as asking apology of him. At length Agrippa interposes with a suggestion. Antony is now a widower, and Octavius has a sister, Octavia. Let Antony take Octavia to wife. He and Octavius will thus become brothers, and all their petty jealousies will vanish. Antony accepts the proposal which offers him a chance of making peace with Caesar. After the principals withdraw, the lieutenants carry on their conversation.

- Antony and Caesar meet

Enobarbus gives a gorgeous, lyrical description of Antony's first meeting with Cleopatra on the river Cydnus. When asked about Cleopatra, he says:

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety; other women cloy  
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies.*

- Enobarbus praises Cleopatra

Hence, in his opinion, Antony will go back to Cleopatra in spite of his marriage with Octavia. Antony has brought with him an Egyptian soothsayer. He advises him to leave Rome as early as possible, for his guardian angel is afraid of Caesar and is easily dominated by him. Though Antony is better than Caesar in many respects, yet Caesar is luckier of the two. Hence Antony can never defeat him whether in sport or in war.

- Cleopatra enraged by marriage

Cleopatra receives the news of Antony's marriage with Octavia and is beside herself with anger. She strikes the messenger who has brought her that ominous news, and draws out a knife to stab him. But presently she calms down, and sends for the messenger to describe to her Antony's new wife.

- Triumvirs negotiate with Pompey

The triumvirs meet Pompey near Misenum. A conference is held in which terms of peace are discussed. The triumvirs are prepared to allow Pompey to retain Sardinia under his possession, provided he clears the seas of all the pirates and sends a certain amount of wheat to Rome. After a little face-saving protestation, Pompey accepts the terms offered by the triumvirs, and invites all to feast on his galley. Menas, one of the lieutenants of Pompey, is of the opinion that his leader has committed a blunder in accepting the terms of the triumvirs. Menas and Enobarbus converse on different topics. They talk about Antony's marriage with Octavia. Enobarbus thinks that though Antony has married Caesar's sister, he will go back to Cleopatra, and thus "the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very strangler of their amity."

- Feast ends in revelry

The triumvirs arrive at Pompey's galley. Lepidus and Antony get drunk at the feast, and even Caesar finds that his tongue "splits what it speaks." During the dinner, Menas draws Pompey aside and offers to set the vessel adrift and then cut the throats of the triumvirs. If Pompey accepts the advice of his lieutenant, he is sure to be the master of the world. But he lacks the nerve to execute it, and replies



that as a true Roman he would never betray his guests. Thus Pompey's cause is lost for want of courage. Lepidus is now too drunk to sit any more at the dinner table, and is therefore carried ashore by a servant. The revelry is distasteful to Caesar, who is therefore anxious to rise. The banquet comes to an end with a Bacchanal in which all present take part.

Antony returns to Athens with his new wife Octavia. When they were leaving Rome, Caesar admonished Antony to treat her well:

*Most noble Antony,  
Let not the piece of virtue, which is set  
Betwixt us as the cement of our love,  
To keep it builded, be the ram to batter  
The fortress of it; for better might we  
Have loved without this mean, if on both parts  
This be not cherished.*

- Antony assures Caesar's sister

Antony assured Caesar of his lasting love for Octavia, and Caesar was satisfied with his reply. But the promise quickly made is soon forgotten. The "brothers" cease to be friends, find fault with each other's actions, exchange letters of mutual accusations, and finally prepare for war. Antony is angry with Caesar for several reasons. He went against Pompey without consulting him, his partner in the empire, and did all he could to belittle him in the public eye. Caesar accuses Antony of disregarding the authority of Rome and acting like an eastern despot. Antony was enthroned as an Emperor at Alexandria and bestowed many honours as he pleased without consulting Rome.

- Friendship sours into rivalry

A war between the "brothers" now appears to be inevitable. Octavia, however, tries to prevent its outbreak by acting as a mediator between the two. Her attempts result only in a still further rupture between Caesar and Antony. Caesar resents Antony's malicious motive in Octavia's unostentatious entry into Rome. He had not sent an army with her in order to show Caesar that he held his sister in contempt. In vain Octavia protests that it is of her own accord that she has come to Rome unattended by an army. Caesar's anger would not be pacified.



- Cleopatra sways battle strategy

Antony goes to Athens, where he prepares for a war against Caesar. But his will is dominated by Cleopatra, and he will not listen to the sound counsel of his tried and trusted captains and soldiers. One and all they advise him to fight Caesar by land. But against their better reason, Antony decides on a naval engagement with Caesar, simply to satisfy a whim of Cleopatra. His generals point out numerous advantages of fighting by land. Antony's forces are specially trained for such a fight. Besides, he has proved his ability as a general in many land battles. So, if he fights Caesar by land, his victory is assured. But Antony cannot go against Cleopatra's wish; he must fight Caesar at sea.

- Fleet rout at Actium

Antony's fleet engages the enemy near Actium. In the thick of the fight, when either side is at an equal advantage and the issue is undecided, Cleopatra turns the rudder of her ship and flees from the battle with her sixty sails. Antony, like a doting mallard, flies after her. Thus Caesar gains an easy victory and Antony's cause is ruined. His fleet melts away and his supporters desert him. Shorn of his glory, he reaches Egypt as a vanquished monarch.

- Antony's remorse and courage

Keen is Antony's remorse for what he has done. He, the greatest soldier on earth, ran away from the battlefield like a coward and thus brought about his own ruin. He reflects on what he was in the past, the victor of Philippi, the conqueror of conquerors, and the seniormost member of the triumvirate. But now he has been defeated by a mere boy, who as a soldier stands no comparison with him. Cleopatra comes to console him. He reproaches her. She weeps, and her tears soften him. Then he kisses her and revives in a moment of desperate courage.

- Caesar denies their requests

Antony and Cleopatra send their petition to Caesar through their messenger. Antony has asked Caesar to allow him to live in Egypt or to reside in Athens as a private citizen. Cleopatra requests him to allow her heirs to retain the crown of the Ptolemies. Caesar's answer is curt and brutal. He rejects both the requests of Antony. As for Cleopatra's petition, he is prepared to consider it, provided she turns Antony out of Egypt or puts him to death. Then he sends his messenger, Thyreus, to win Cleopatra away from Antony. Antony is highly incensed to receive Caesar's reply to his request. Defeat has robbed him of common sense and wisdom. He sends a challenge to Caesar to a personal combat, sword to sword.

- Antony challenges Caesar



- ▶ Antony's anger at Cleopatra

Thyreus arrives to persuade Cleopatra to betray Antony to Caesar. Cleopatra receives him cordially and even allows him to kiss her hand. Just then Antony comes there and flares up to see what is going on. He orders his servants to whip Thyreus until he cries out in pain. Then he lets loose his anger on Cleopatra. She was a whore and a deceiver, but the gods shut up his eyes, so that he might not see the truth. Cleopatra waits until he is calmer. Then she protests solemnly that she has always been sincere to Antony. Antony decides to attack Caesar the next morning and calls for one last gaudy night as a prelude to his heroic onslaught.

- ▶ Omens foretell desertion

On the night before the battle, Antony takes farewell of his faithful followers and leads them to a supper. That very night his sentries hear strange music in the air, and believe that the god Hercules, Antony's ancestor, is withdrawing his support from him.

- ▶ Enobarbus's betrayal and death

Antony puts on his armour long before the morning dawns. When the first rays of the sun fall on Alexandria, he rides to the battlefield accompanied by his soldiers and captains. On the battlefield he learns that Enobarbus, one of his most devoted followers, has left him and gone over to Caesar's side. This is the worst of all the blows; but Antony cannot forget the faithful services Enobarbus has rendered to him. He orders that all the wealth Enobarbus left behind, together with his own bountiful presents, be sent to him immediately. When Enobarbus hears that Antony has sent all the wealth he left behind, together with Antony's own generous gifts, he is filled with deep remorse at deserting such a master, and dies of a broken heart.

- ▶ Temporary victory then defeat

In the ensuing battle Antony succeeds in driving back Caesar's troops to their tents. In the evening he returns to Cleopatra as a victor. This, however, is his last victory. Next morning he repeats the mistake he had committed at Actium; he decides to fight Caesar by sea. He goes to an elevated place to watch the battle, but he finds that his entire fleet has surrendered to the enemy. He suspects that Cleopatra has betrayed him, and decides to kill her and then to commit suicide. Cleopatra, terribly afraid of Antony, shuts herself up in her monument and sends word to him that she is dead. Mardian, who is sent to give the news to Antony, tells him that she died with his name on her lips. On hearing this, Antony removes his armour and prepares



- ▶ Antony's suicide attempt fails

to commit suicide. He asks his servant Eros to give him mortal strokes with his sword. But instead of doing that Eros stabs himself and falls down dead. Antony is moved by the heroism of his servant, and saying that he would follow the noble example, falls on his sword. But though mortally wounded he does not die immediately. He calls upon his guards to kill him, but they all flee his presence.

- ▶ Cleopatra revives Antony

Cleopatra, recovering her senses, realises the blunder she has committed in sending the false news of her death to Antony. In haste she sends Diomedes to inform him that she is still alive. But he arrives too late; for Antony is already at the threshold of death. Antony implores Diomedes to take him quickly to Cleopatra. Accordingly, he is carried to the monument. Cleopatra is afraid to come out, for if she does she will likely be captured by Caesar's soldiers. So, she and her maids heave Antony up to where they are. Antony now speaks his last words of advice. "Of Caesar seek your honour, with your safety," he says. Cleopatra replies that honour and safety do not go together. Antony repeats that she should trust Proculeius, but she answers that she will trust no one. With this, Antony dies as he lived, a mighty emperor and a brave Roman. Cleopatra swoons after his death, and her maids think that she has followed him. But by and by she regains consciousness and declares her determination to do "what's brave, what's noble ... after the high Roman fashion."

- ▶ Antony's final farewell

- ▶ Caesar plans Cleopatra's triumph

Caesar is moved to tears on hearing that Antony is dead. He is now anxious to lead Cleopatra in triumph to Rome; but he fears lest she should commit suicide. So he sends messengers to assure her that he means to offer honourable terms. But one of Caesar's men, Dolabella, tells her in confidence that his master wants to take her to Rome as a war prisoner. Cleopatra, however, is not prepared to bear that insult. She will not suffer the humiliation of following Caesar's triumphal car, nor will she allow herself to be exhibited in Rome like an Egyptian doll.

- ▶ Cleopatra rejects humiliation

- ▶ Caesar offers false assurances

Caesar personally visits Cleopatra to assure her that he will offer liberal and honourable terms. But the real purpose of his visit is to persuade her not to commit suicide, so that he may fulfil his ambition of leading her in triumph. He threatens to kill all her children if she chooses to follow Antony's example. Cleopatra hands over to Caesar an inventory of her possessions, assuring him that she has kept back nothing. She calls upon her treasurer, Seleucus,



to testify to the truth of her statement. But Seleucus replies that she has kept back articles valuable enough to purchase what she has included in her list. Cleopatra is exasperated at his disloyalty, but Caesar consoles her.

- Cleopatra prepares for death

When Caesar leaves, Cleopatra tells her maids that they should summon courage to die like brave women. For Caesar means to take them to Rome, where they will face the greatest possible humiliation. She has already ordered the means of her deliverance to be brought to the monument, and she is expecting it any moment. But a queen as she is, she must die in her royal robes. Hence, she orders her maid Charmian to attire her in crown and robes. Charmian goes to bring the royal dress, and in her absence a villager with a basket of figs comes to her. Under the figs there are poisonous asps in the basket. The villager, unaware of the tragic purpose, talks to Cleopatra in a simple manner which provokes laughter.

- Ira's suicide inspires Cleopatra

Charmian returns with the royal robes. When Cleopatra has been attired as a queen, she gives a farewell kiss to her maid Iras, who falls down dead immediately. She had already swallowed poison to end her life. Cleopatra's courage is redoubled by the heroic example of Iras. She takes an asp from the basket and applies it to her breast, saying it is her baby "that sucks the nurse asleep." Then she applies another asp to her arm and falls down dead. After her death, Charmian sets straight the crown on her head, and then herself commits suicide by applying an asp to her arm.

- Cleopatra's royal suicide

Caesar, on being informed of Cleopatra's death, comes to the monument. In spite of his best efforts he has failed to prevent her suicide. But he admires her courage:

- Caesar honours Cleopatra's courage

*Bravest at the last,  
She levelled at our purposes and, being royal,  
Took her own way.*

He orders that she should be buried beside Antony in a manner befitting her high status and dignity.

## 2.4. 6 Critical Analysis

- Complex tragedy through character

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* stands as one of his most complex and richly drawn tragedies, combining political intrigue, grand spectacle and intense personal drama. Unlike many classical tragedies where the fate of the hero is unknown until the climax, this play's tragic outcome is clear early on, with Antony's eventual downfall and Cleopatra's demise. Yet, the true power of the play lies not in suspenseful plot turns but in Shakespeare's exploration of character contradictions, emotional depth and the clash of personal passions with political duty. This layered drama commands attention because of its human truths rather than narrative surprise.

- Infinite complexity of Cleopatra

Cleopatra herself is one of Shakespeare's greatest creations, embodying infinite variety and contradiction. She is at once charming and capricious, tender and deceitful, queenly and intimate. Her moods shift like lightning, captivating and bewildering those around her, especially Antony. This continuous changeability makes her both irresistible and unpredictable, enhancing the play's tension between reason and passion. Cleopatra's mastery of theatricality and social power reveals Shakespeare's understanding of femininity as a living, contradictory force rather than a simple archetype.

- Antony's tragic conflict

Mark Antony emerges as a larger-than-life figure who combines worldly power with personal vulnerability. His magnetic presence, famed military skills and leadership are contrasted by moments of weakness, indecision and infatuation with Cleopatra. Antony's tragic flaw lies in his inability to reconcile his public responsibilities with private desire, a conflict that leads to his ruin. Shakespeare portrays him neither as a hero nor a villain but as a richly drawn human subject to the forces of fate and folly. His decline following Actium is as much emotional as military, marked by regret and reconciliation with his own frailty.

- Love and power tension

The relationship between Antony and Cleopatra is both the play's emotional core and thematic focus. Their love transcends political calculation, representing a surrender to passion that defies Rome's stern ideals. Yet their union is inevitably doomed because these two worlds - East and West, love and empire - clash irreconcilably. Shakespeare explores the tension between public power and private

vulnerability as Antony's devotion to Cleopatra weakens his command and contributes to his downfall. Their love ultimately becomes a sublime but tragic force that transforms destruction into something almost heroic.

► Enobarbus as moral conscience

Enobarbus, Antony's faithful lieutenant and perceptive observer, functions as the play's chorus and critical conscience. His vivid descriptions of Cleopatra's beauty and charm provide invaluable insight into her character. Yet Enobarbus's candid scepticism about Antony's decisions and eventual desertion add complexity to the narrative's moral texture. His tragic death from remorse highlights themes of loyalty, betrayal and human weakness. Through Enobarbus, Shakespeare reflects on the costs of greatness and the painful limits of friendship.

► Political struggle and tragedy

*Antony and Cleopatra* also engage deeply with political themes. The struggle for power following Caesar's assassination provides a backdrop for personal tragedy. Shakespeare examines the instability of empire, the volatility of alliances and the destructive consequences of ambition. Through the characters' intrigues and battles, from Rome to Alexandria, the play questions the nature of leadership, sovereignty and the costs of empire-building. The political subplot enriches the romance by situating passion within the broader sweep of history.

► Complex tragic dualities

Critically, *Antony and Cleopatra* challenges traditional definitions of tragedy. Rather than a classical fall from grace provoked by a single flaw, it presents a constant tension between opposing forces: love and duty, East and West, passion and reason. The play's tragedy emerges from these irresolvable contradictions, producing a narrative that is both grand and intimate. Shakespeare's portrayal of transcendent love, even amidst destruction, marks the play as a profound meditation on human complexity and fate. The blend of heightened emotion and historical sweep demands that audiences and readers consider tragedy not only as loss but as transformation.

► Language and poetic richness

Finally, the play's language and imagery contribute to its richness and enduring appeal. Shakespeare's use of poetry, metaphor and dramatic contrasts deepens themes and characterisation, rendering the ancient world vibrant and immediate. Cleopatra's speeches showcase an enchanting blend of wit and sorrow, while Antony's soliloquies reveal inner turmoil. The play's mixture of

political dialogue, sensual description and philosophical reflection elevates it beyond mere storytelling into an exploration of the human spirit's contradictions.

## Summarised Overview

This unit examines *The Tempest* and *Antony and Cleopatra* as two late works that challenge conventional genre boundaries and demonstrate Shakespeare's evolving outlook on humanity, art and politics. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare draws inspiration from accounts of a real shipwreck to construct a narrative in which Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan, wields magical power over an isolated island and its inhabitants. Through the relationships between Prospero, his daughter Miranda, the spirit Ariel and the native Caliban, the play explores themes of betrayal, atonement and reconciliation. The island becomes a microcosm for debates about nature versus culture, the legitimacy of colonial rule and the possibility of forgiveness. Learners will analyse how Shakespeare's use of magical spectacle, pastoral imagery and careful control of dramatic unities creates a work that is both philosophically rich and theatrically innovative.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the unit shifts to a Roman world of political intrigue and passionate romance. Learners will study how Shakespeare dramatises the tension between public duty and private desire through the relationship of Mark Antony, triumvir of Rome, and Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. The play's structure combines grand historical events, such as battles, alliances and political machinations, with intimate scenes of love, jealousy and betrayal. Students will explore how Shakespeare uses contrasting imagery of East and West, mastery of rhetoric and shifting verse styles to reflect the characters' inner conflicts and the play's tragic trajectory. Together, the two selected texts illustrate Shakespeare's late mastery of combining spectacle and subtlety, philosophy and entertainment, and invite learners to consider the ongoing relevance of questions about power, identity and the nature of human agency.

## Self Assessment Questions and Answers

### Block 2: Poetry and Drama (Questions 21-40)

21. Hamlet is set in:

Answer: Elsinore

22. The play-within-a-play in Hamlet is called:

Answer: The Murder of Gonzago





23. Ophelia's madness in Hamlet is:

Answer: Genuine, unlike Hamlet's

24. In "Twelfth Night," Viola disguises herself as:

Answer: Cesario

25. The comic subplot in "Twelfth Night" centers around:

Answer: The gulling of Malvolio

26. Malvolio is tricked into wearing:

Answer: Yellow stockings and cross-garters

27. The setting of "The Tempest" is:

Answer: A deserted island

28. Prospero's sprite in "The Tempest" is named:

Answer: Ariel

29. In "Antony and Cleopatra," the decisive battle occurs at:

Answer: Actium

30. Cleopatra's death is caused by:

Answer: Asp bites

31. Sonnet 18 begins with the line:

Answer: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

32. The "Fair Youth" sequence in Shakespeare's sonnets comprises approximately:

Answer: 126 sonnets

33. The volta or turn in a Shakespearean sonnet typically occurs:

Answer: Between lines 12 and 13

34. Each line in a Shakespearean sonnet is composed in:

Answer: Iambic pentameter

35. The textual history of Hamlet includes:

Answer: Three principal early versions

36. The “Bad Quarto” of Hamlet was published in:

Answer: 1603

37. The “Good Quarto” of Hamlet is dated:

Answer: 1604

38. Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “To be or not to be” explores:

Answer: Death and existence

39. In “The Tempest,” Caliban is:

Answer: The native inhabitant of the island

40. The tragic flaw of Antony in “Antony and Cleopatra” is his:

Answer: Inability to reconcile public duty with private desire

## Assignments

1. Examine the postcolonial aspects in *The Tempest*.
2. Write a detailed comparison between the characterisation of Ariel and Caliban.
3. Is Prospero justified in his quest for revenge? Provide examples from the play to validate your answer.
4. How does William Shakespeare use romantic and historical elements to weave a tragic tale in *Antony and Cleopatra*?
5. Closely examine the characterisation of Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s play *Antony and Cleopatra*.

## Suggested Reading

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3. Durband, Alan. *The Tempest*. The Guernsey Press, 1985.
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5. Rickett, Compton. *A History of English Literature*. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1950.
6. Frye, Northrop. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Tempest*. Englewood Cliffs, 1969.
7. Smith, Hallet. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Tempest*. Englewood Cliffs, 1969.
8. Spencer, Theodore. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Tempest*. Englewood Cliffs, 1969.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.



# Modern Adaptations and Re-workings of Shakespeare

## BLOCK-03

### Block Content

- Unit1 - Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead - Tom Stoppard  
(Non-detailed)
- Unit 2 - Shylock is My Name - Howard Jacobson (Non-detailed)
- Unit 3 - Ran - Akira Kurosawa (Non-detailed)



# Unit 1

# Play

(Non-Detailed)

## Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand the background and significance of Tom Stoppard and his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.
- ▶ critically analyse the play's themes of identity, fate, and free will.
- ▶ recognise the connection and contrast between Stoppard's work and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
- ▶ appreciate the play's use of language, humour, and absurdist elements.
- ▶ discuss the characterisation of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and other key figures.

## Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead -Tom Stoppard

## Background

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a play by Tom Stoppard that expands the story of two minor characters from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most frequently adapted plays in theatre history, inspiring countless reinterpretations, retellings, and works derived from its themes and characters. These adaptations often explore different perspectives or untold parts of the original story. Stoppard's play is a modern example of this tradition, taking minor figures, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have small and somewhat comic roles in *Hamlet*, and placing them at the centre of a new narrative. This kind of adaptation invites audiences to rethink Shakespeare through fresh eyes while reflecting on larger philosophical questions.

Tom Stoppard, born Tomas Straussler in 1937, is a British playwright renowned for his clever and intellectually engaging works. His writing is marked by witty dialogue, wordplay, and an exploration of deep philosophical themes such as identity, meaning, fate, and free will. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* draws from the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd and blends humour with existential inquiry. The play focuses on the confusion and powerlessness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they become caught up in events that they cannot fully understand or influence,



reflecting ideas about the human condition and the nature of reality. Stoppard's work, while amusing and entertaining, encourages audiences to think critically about the limits of free will and the role of individuals within predetermined narratives. The play's success led to a film adaptation in 1990, directed by Stoppard himself and starring Gary Oldman and Tim Roth.

## Keywords

Adaptation, Theatre of the Absurd, Meta-theatre, Identity, Fate, Free will, Doubling/ Doppelgänger, Philosophical Comedy.

## Discussion

Shakespeare's plays have captivated audiences for over four centuries, yet their language and settings can feel distant to modern learners; adaptations therefore play a vital role in bridging this gap by reimagining his works in fresh contexts while preserving the core themes of love, power and betrayal. Film adaptations offer a rich canvas for directors to reinterpret Shakespeare's dramas; Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* transposes *King Lear* to medieval Japan and emphasises visual spectacle and family tragedy in a feudal context, while Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* uses *Hamlet* as a backdrop for absurdist comedy and existential inquiry, demonstrating how cinema's combination of imagery, music and performance can open Shakespeare to audiences who might find the original text challenging. On stage, directors also innovate by employing modern dress and unconventional venues, with productions set in urban streets or corporate boardrooms showing how ambition and betrayal remain relevant today, and some companies adopting minimalist staging and ensemble casting to emphasise the poetry and rhythm of Shakespeare's language so that learners focus on dialogue and emotion rather than elaborate sets. Beyond Europe, Shakespeare adaptations flourish across cultures, with productions staged in Hindi, Japanese and West African languages that reveal new dimensions of the originals;

cultural customs and local folklore enrich character motivations and plot details, and Indian film adaptations often integrate music and dance while Japanese theatre highlights stylised movement and chorus, showcasing the universality of Shakespeare's insights into human nature. Analysing adaptations alongside the original text deepens understanding of narrative structure and thematic universality; comparing directorial choices, cultural contexts and audience reception encourages critical thinking and helps learners appreciate Shakespeare as a living, evolving literary phenomenon that continues to inspire and challenge new generations.



Fig 3.1.1 Tom Stoppard

Tom Stoppard is a famous British playwright known for his clever and thoughtful plays. He was born Tomas Straussler in 1937 in Czechoslovakia. His family moved to Singapore soon after. Due to World War II, his father died, and the family moved to India, then later to England. Stoppard left school early because he found academics boring, and he started working as a newspaper reporter. He discovered he loved theatre and soon began writing plays.

Stoppard's plays are known for being intelligent and full of jokes, yet they often explore deep and complex ideas. He uses language playfully to entertain his audience while also making them think. His writing combines wit and philosophy with themes about life, existence, and the role of art. One of his best-known plays is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which brought him major success.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is an adapted work in the sense that Stoppard took two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* - which we explored in detail in the previous block- and expanded their story into an entire play. The title refers to these two characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are childhood friends of Prince Hamlet but have small roles in Shakespeare's play. Stoppard's version imagines their perspective and thoughts, focusing on their confusion and lack of control in the events leading to their deaths.

This play belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd tradition, which often highlights the meaninglessness and confusion in life by using strange and funny situations. Stoppard mixes serious ideas about fate and free will with humour and clever dialogue. The play questions the nature of reality, identity, and purpose while keeping the audience entertained.

### 3.1.1 Absurd Drama and Tom Stoppard

The Theatre of the Absurd is a remarkable movement in modern drama that began in France during the 1950s and soon spread across Europe and beyond, influencing many playwrights worldwide. This type of drama questions whether life has any real meaning, reflecting ideas from existentialist philosophy which suggests we live in a universe without clear purpose, leaving people feeling alone and uncertain. Instead of offering answers, Absurd plays show life as strange, puzzling, and sometimes even ridiculous. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was first used by the English critic Martin Esslin in 1960 to describe playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter, who rejected traditional playwriting with clear plots and realistic dialogue, instead using circular conversations, illogical scenes, and strange, repetitive behaviour in their characters. One famous example is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where two men wait endlessly for someone who never comes, highlighting the endless search for meaning. Ionesco's *The Chairs* shows an old couple preparing chairs for invisible guests, hoping for a meaningful message that never arrives. Absurd Drama mixes humour with sadness; characters often behave comically, but this laughter reveals deeper tragedy. Common features include little plot, flat characters who often seem helpless or puppet-

- Absurd drama: meaninglessness, humour, uncertainty

like, broken communication, and unresolved endings that leave audiences reflecting on uncertainty and death. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is influenced by Absurdism, taking minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and placing them at the centre, where they play games, explore confusion, and face death in a world that makes little sense. Like other Absurd plays, it is both funny and thought-provoking, exploring questions about identity and free will. Understanding Absurd Drama helps learners appreciate how Stoppard reimagines Shakespeare through the ideas of existential uncertainty and absurd humour, connecting Renaissance tragedy with modern philosophy and theatre.

### Metatheatre

Metatheatre is a unique form of drama that draws attention to itself as a play rather than pretending to depict real life, constantly reminding the audience that they are watching a performance. The term was first introduced by critic Lionel Abel in 1963. Metatheatre uses techniques such as plays within plays, role-playing, and breaking the "fourth wall," where characters may act as though they know they are part of a story or directly speak to the audience. This creates a double effect in which the audience both enjoys the performance and is invited to reflect on the nature of theatre itself. Unlike traditional drama, metatheatre blurs the lines between reality and fiction, mixing humour with seriousness and challenging viewers to think critically about freedom, choice, and the idea that life might be like a scripted performance. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a prime example, where the tragedians perform a play mirroring the fate of the two main characters, who feel trapped as if following a script written by others, encouraging the audience to see their own lives in a similar light of uncertainty, comedy, and tragedy.

- Metatheatre: self-aware, reflective, challenging



## Background and Literary Context



Fig 3.1.1 A Scene from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is one of Tom Stoppard's most celebrated plays, taking is both comic and philosophical, often amusing the audience while inviting reflection on fate, free will, and the purpose of life. Stoppard described it as "intellectual entertainment," designed not to teach a moral lesson but to provoke thought with a warm and playful tone. Influenced heavily by Samuel Beckett, known for *Waiting for Godot*, Stoppard's characters share a sense of waiting and powerlessness similar to Beckett's, though Stoppard lightens the mood with humour and absurd situations. T.S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* also influenced the play, with its theme of hesitation and being a minor character in one's own life reflected in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's experience of being caught in events beyond their control. The play fits within the "Theatre of the Absurd," a movement that highlights the meaninglessness of life and breaks theatrical conventions by reminding audiences they are watching a performance. The play features characters who address the audience and joke about acting and storytelling. The 1990 film adaptation, directed by Stoppard and starring Gary Oldman and Tim Roth, captures the spirit of the play while adding visual humour and making Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem like more distinct individuals. Overall, the play is a clever modern tribute to Shakespeare, blending humour and philosophical depth while prompting audiences to laugh and consider life's profound questions.

| <i>Characters</i>   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Guildenstern</b> | Rosencrantz's best friend is Guildenstern. He is the more pessimistic of the titular team, attempting to maintain sanity and reason despite their existential dilemma.                                                                |
| <b>Rosencrantz</b>  | Guildenstern's best friend is Rosencrantz. He is upbeat, simple-minded, and easily distracted, and he frequently draws emotional and intellectual cues from Guildenstern.                                                             |
| <b>Player</b>       | The leader of a hungry band of wandering tragedians who appears to pursue Ros and Guil throughout the play.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Alfred</b>       | He is the only one of the tragedians who had a name. He is generally cast in feminine roles.                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Tragedians</b>   | Hamlet's troupe of actors recruited to play in Elsinore. Their poverty forces them into prostitution.                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Hamlet</b>       | The prince of Denmark and Ros and Guil's former schoolmate. The pair is called in to spy on Hamlet, whose sanity has been called into doubt as a result of his uncle marrying his mother after murdering his father, the former king. |
| <b>Ophelia</b>      | Polonius' daughter and Laertes' sister. She was once Hamlet's prospective bride, but his treatment of her drives her to despair.                                                                                                      |
| <b>Claudius</b>     | The King of Denmark, and Hamlet's uncle and stepfather. He slew his brother, the former king, and married his brother's wife, assuming the kingdom while Hamlet was away. He is the one who dispatches Ros and Guil.                  |
| <b>Gertrude</b>     | Denmark's Queen and Hamlet's mother. She is disturbed by Hamlet's strange behaviour, but she is oblivious of her husband's wicked intentions.                                                                                         |
| <b>Polonius</b>     | An old and clumsy but well-intentioned King's counsellor. Hamlet kills him by mistake.                                                                                                                                                |

### 3.1.2 Act-wise Critical Summary



Fig 3.1.2 A Scene from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*



## Opening Scene: The Philosophical Coin Toss

- *Probability laws suspended mysteriously*

The play commences in an undefined, liminal space where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage in an extraordinary coin-flipping sequence. Each toss results in heads, with Rosencrantz accumulating seventy-six consecutive victories. This seemingly impossible streak troubles Guildenstern, the more intellectually inclined character, who contemplates whether supernatural forces are at work or if they are trapped in an endlessly repeating moment. The suspension of probability laws suggests their existence within a predetermined theatrical universe rather than reality. When the pair attempts to recall their past, they discover alarming gaps in their memory, remembering only a mysterious summons from a messenger for unspecified important business. This amnesia establishes the theme of identity confusion that permeates the entire work.

- *Theatre and reality boundaries blur*

The entrance of the Player and his troupe of tragedians introduces the metatheatrical elements that define Stoppard's work. The Player attempts to sell performances to Rosencrantz, euphemistically describing shows featuring "faithless wives" and "ravished virgins." Rosencrantz's innocent misunderstanding of these sexual innuendos contrasts sharply with Guildenstern's immediate comprehension and moral outrage. When Guildenstern challenges the Player to a wager, the supernatural coin behaviour continues, with heads appearing consistently and the tragedians losing repeatedly. Unable to pay their gambling debts, the troupe agrees to perform a play instead, establishing the blurred boundaries between performance and reality that will dominate the narrative.

## Act One: Court Arrival and Identity Crisis

- *Royal mission assigned confusingly*

The scene transitions abruptly to Elsinore's royal court, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern witness Hamlet's distressed embrace of Ophelia. King Claudius and Queen Gertrude welcome them warmly but immediately confuse their names, a recurring motif highlighting their interchangeable nature. The royal couple explains Hamlet's transformation following his father's death and assigns them the task of comforting their childhood friend whilst discovering the source of his troubled behaviour. The courtiers feel embarrassed by the awkwardness of their royal audience and subsequently discuss strategies for approaching Hamlet.

- *Preparation through role playing games*

To prepare for their encounter with Hamlet, they engage in practice sessions including the Question Game, where conversation must consist entirely of questions without statements. Growing weary of this exercise, they switch tactics with Guildenstern impersonating Hamlet whilst Rosencrantz interrogates him. Through this mock interview, they reconstruct Hamlet's circumstances and emotional state. Their preparation concludes when Hamlet himself appears, greeting them warmly but, like everyone else, mispronouncing their names. This consistent name confusion reinforces their lack of distinct individual identity within the larger narrative structure.

- *Existential questions about autonomous existence*

Guildenstern's philosophical nature emerges as he ponders their circumstances, observing how they seem to exist only when summoned by others. He articulates the disturbing realisation that they have no autonomous existence, appearing only when needed by the main plot. Rosencrantz, simpler and more accepting, focuses on immediate tasks rather than existential questions. Their contrasting personalities become clearly defined: Guildenstern as the intellectual questioner and Rosencrantz as the passive follower.

## **Act Two: Interrogation Failures and Theatrical Revelations**

- *Hamlet outwits amateur investigators*

Act Two opens with the conclusion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's questioning of Hamlet, who responds with characteristic riddles, cryptic imagery, and perplexing analogies that frustrate their investigative efforts. Hamlet's evasive wordplay and deliberate obfuscation leave them more confused than enlightened. When Polonius interrupts to announce the arrival of actors, Hamlet departs, leaving the pair to debate their interview's success. Guildenstern optimistically argues they achieved meaningful progress, whilst Rosencrantz pessimistically insists that Hamlet cleverly deflected all their inquiries without revealing anything substantive.

- *Theatre as meaningful performance art*

The Player's return introduces crucial discussions about the nature of theatrical performance and its relationship to reality. He berates them for failing to watch his troupe's earlier performance, complaining about the humiliation of performing before an empty audience. His subsequent monologue about acting reveals his philosophy that theatrical death is more meaningful than real death because





it serves a narrative purpose. The Player explains that his troupe will perform “The Murder of Gonzago” at Hamlet’s request, unknowingly foreshadowing the play-within-a-play sequence. His encouragement to act with authenticity and honesty paradoxically comes from someone whose profession involves deliberate deception.

- *Social pressures create false reporting*

Queen Gertrude’s inquiry about their progress with Hamlet forces Rosencrantz to exaggerate their success, demonstrating his desire to please authority figures despite his private doubts. His growing unease intensifies with constant interruptions from other characters, creating a sense of being trapped within someone else’s narrative structure. When Rosencrantz attempts fresh conversation with Hamlet, he fails awkwardly, further undermining his confidence. His embarrassing mistake of addressing Alfred, a male Player dressed as a woman, as the Queen adds comedy whilst highlighting his confusion about reality and performance.

- *Warning signs ignored completely*

The troupe’s rehearsal of the dumb show presents a silent performance mirroring Hamlet’s plot: a king poisoned by his brother, who marries the widowed queen and seizes the throne; the dead king’s son horrified by incestuous marriage; Polonius accidentally killed; the son sent to England with two spies who are executed instead. Significantly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail to recognise these parallels to their own situation, demonstrating their inability to interpret the signs of their impending doom. Their blindness to obvious warning signs emphasises their powerlessness within the predetermined narrative structure.

### **Act Three: Sea Voyage and Inevitable Doom**

- *Darkness symbolises growing ignorance*

The setting shifts to a ship bound for England, initially shrouded in darkness that symbolises both their literal circumstances and metaphorical ignorance. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern struggle to find their bearings whilst recalling their mission to escort Hamlet and deliver Claudius’s letter to the English king. To alleviate their mounting anxiety, they engage in word games, but these distractions cannot diminish their fundamental unease about their uncertain situation. The ship’s enclosed environment intensifies their sense of entrapment within forces beyond their control.



- *Fatal letter switch undetected*

Their examination of Claudius's sealed letter reveals its horrifying contents: orders for Hamlet's immediate execution upon arrival in England. This discovery deeply troubles them as they grapple with the moral implications of betraying their childhood friend. However, whilst they sleep, Hamlet secretly substitutes the original letter with one bearing their own names as the intended victims. Upon awakening, they remain oblivious to this fatal switch, continuing to worry about Hamlet's fate whilst unknowingly approaching their own destruction.

- *Truth revealed too late*

A pirate attack provides dramatic interruption, during which Hamlet manages to escape whilst Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek shelter in barrels. They discover the Player and his troupe also aboard, hiding similarly. Still uncertain about Hamlet's whereabouts, they begin contemplating explanations for the English king. When Guildenstern rereads the letter, he discovers the name substitution and realises their death sentence. This moment of recognition represents their final understanding of their powerless position within the larger narrative structure.

- *Theatrical death versus real death*

The Player assumes a pedagogical role, delivering lessons about death's nature and meaning. He confidently claims that actors are experts in staged death, treating the subject with arrogance that enrages Guildenstern. In a moment of fury, Guildenstern stabs the Player, who appears to die before revealing the knife as a theatrical prop. The Player's dramatic collapse and resurrection demonstrate how theatrical death differs from actual mortality. His troupe then performs a stylised sequence of deaths, showing the artificial and repetitive nature of staged endings.

- *Resigned acceptance of inevitable fate*

### Final Resolution: Acceptance and Disappearance

Exhausted, frustrated, and overwhelmed by their circumstances, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience the full spectrum of human emotions: confusion, anger, and despair. Having struggled against forces they cannot comprehend or control, they finally resign themselves to their inevitable fate. Their quiet acceptance of death represents the only autonomous choice available to them within the predetermined structure of Shakespeare's original play. They begin to vanish into silence, accepting mortality as the natural conclusion to their bewildering journey.



- *Deaths reported without ceremony*

The play's conclusion returns to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an English ambassador enters with matter-of-fact news of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. His emotionless delivery offers no reflection on their loss or the tragedy of their circumstances. This stark confirmation emphasises how minor characters in great dramas often disappear without ceremony or recognition. Stoppard's play gives voice and depth to characters who were merely functional in the original work, transforming them into fully realised individuals worthy of audience sympathy and philosophical consideration.

#### Thematic Synthesis

The play blends existential philosophy with theatrical innovation, creating a tragicomic exploration of fate, free will, and individual identity within predetermined narrative structures. The characters' struggle with questions of purpose, chance, and meaning reflects broader human concerns about agency and significance in an apparently random universe. Their entrapment within someone else's story serves as a metaphor for how individuals often feel powerless against larger historical and social forces that shape their destinies without their understanding or consent.

### 3.1.3 Critical Analysis

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* offers a rich blend of comedy and philosophy that examines human existence through the limited perspective of two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. From the outset the play begins in a neutral space where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern toss a coin that lands on heads repeatedly. This surreal event unsettles Guildenstern who wonders whether chance still operates in their universe or whether they inhabit a world governed by predetermined rules. The persistent sequence of identical outcomes becomes a theatrical metaphor for a reality in which apparent randomness conceals an underlying script. It prompts reflection on whether what we perceive as coincidence might actually reflect larger forces that shape our lives beyond our control or comprehension.

- *Coin Toss inevitability*

Their mutual confusion over names illustrates another key theme. Unable to keep track of which one is

► Interchangeable identities theme

Rosencrantz and which one is Guildenstern they highlight their status as interchangeable figures whose personal identity matters less than their function in the narrative. This interchangeability speaks to modern concerns about individuality and anonymity in society where people can feel reduced to roles rather than recognised for their unique qualities. Stoppard uses this dynamic to remind us of that history and literature often celebrate major figures while overlooking the many participants who play essential yet invisible parts.

► Theatre reality blur

The play explores the relationship between theatre and reality by introducing the Player and his troupe. The Player insists that dramatic performance reveals truths about human nature that everyday life conceals. He argues that theatre gives shape and meaning to actions that in real life may seem random or devoid of purpose. Guildenstern longs for something genuine beyond artifice yet discovers that his own life is a performance within Shakespeare's original play. Stoppard plays with this paradox to suggest that the boundary between performance and reality is porous. We enact roles in our lives often unaware that we follow scripts written by circumstances we did not choose.

► Fate versus agency

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to exercise free will by speculating on their circumstances and debating choices, yet they remain powerless to alter the course that Shakespeare's text has set for them. Their mission to escort Hamlet to England carrying a secret letter becomes a vehicle for exploring fate versus freedom. When they finally learn that the letter condemns Hamlet to death, they feel guilty but continue obediently. To their astonishment Hamlet swaps the letter so that it will order their own execution. Their struggle to influence events only deepens the sense of cosmic irony. The audience knows their fate from the start and watches as every attempt at autonomy ends in failure. This dramatic irony exposes the tension between human desire for agency and the possibility that destiny is already determined by forces beyond our control or understanding.

► Character contrast dynamics

Rosencrantz's naivety and willingness to accept surface appearances provide a stark contrast to Guildenstern's intellectual restlessness. Rosencrantz views the world with a simple optimism that borders on ignorance. He focuses on immediate experience and resists deep questioning of

meaning. Guildenstern by contrast forces himself to impose logical frameworks on absurd circumstances but each attempt leads to confusion. Their relationship embodies two common human responses to uncertainty: blissful acceptance and anxious inquiry. Through their interactions Stoppard reveals how people oscillate between seeking comfort in unexamined routines and suffering through existential doubt.

► Wit and word-play

The language of the play brims with wit and clever wordplay. Stoppard uses verbal games that entertain while also underscoring the play's deeper themes. The "Questions" game demonstrates how language can both connect and obstruct understanding. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to converse only by asking questions yet soon discover that this constraint leads to circular reasoning. Their banter features puns and rapid exchanges that keep the audience laughing even as they witness the characters' mounting despair. The integration of comedy and tragedy through dialogue reflects the playwright's insight that laughter can serve as a defence against life's harsh realities and that tragedy gives substance to what might otherwise seem meaningless.

► Absurdist immersion effect

Drawing on traditions of absurdist drama, the play highlights life's inherent lack of clear purpose. Absurd theatre often presents characters who struggle to make sense of illogical situations and repeatedly fail. Stoppard's use of an undefined setting along with abrupt scene changes immerses the audience in the same bewilderment that plagues the protagonists. This immersion transforms spectators from passive observers into participants in the search for meaning. By making the audience share in the confusion the play evokes direct empathy with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's plight. We experience the bewilderment and anxiety that define modern existence.

► Perspective shift focus

Stoppard shifts perspective by taking two marginal Shakespearean figures and granting them centre stage. This reframing questions why certain characters receive prominence while others remain in the background. By humanising Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and giving them voice Stoppard invites audiences to reconsider assumptions about significance and narrative importance. He shows that fresh interpretation can breathe new life into classic works and that even minor characters hold untapped potential for insight.

► Artifice and death

The Player's commentary on acting and death offers another layer of philosophical reflection. He describes death on stage as more convincing than real death because it conforms to narrative expectations. This commentary underscores the distinction between artifice and reality while suggesting that life itself may follow narrative conventions. Stoppard uses the Player's dramatic speech to reinforce the idea that theatre not only entertains but also models patterns of meaning that audiences apply to their own lives.

► Open reflection invitation

Stoppard avoids offering neat answers to the questions he raises. Instead he creates a space for personal reflection. The play's open ended exploration of fate, identity, and purpose encourages each audience member to bring their own experiences into the theatre. The unresolved tensions echo beyond the final curtain prompting ongoing engagement with the work's themes. This openness is a source of lasting appeal because it respects the audience's intelligence and invites an active role in interpretation.

► Comedy philosophical fusion

Comedy and philosophy coexist throughout the play in a finely tuned balance. Stoppard demonstrates that entertainment and intellectual inquiry are not mutually exclusive but can enhance each other. By combining humour with deep thought, he makes challenging ideas accessible and emotionally resonant. The play's structure alternates moments of farce with sudden glimpses of tragedy reflecting the unpredictable rhythms of life itself.

► Author or character

At its heart the play asks whether human beings are authors of their own stories or characters in scripts written by unseen forces. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in a liminal space between stage and reality where their search for meaning collides with the certainty of their own demise. Their journey through absurd situations and philosophical speculation mirrors the universal struggle to find purpose in a world that often seems indifferent.

► Existential theatrical transformation

The play transforms existential anxiety into theatrical entertainment. Stoppard uses two overlooked courtiers to illuminate profound questions about identity and fate. By blending witty language with absurd scenarios he creates a work that is both thought-provoking and emotionally engaging. The play remains compelling because it honours the complexity of human experience without simplifying it,





demonstrating that life's deepest truths often emerge from the interplay of laughter and sorrow.

## Summarised Overview

Tom Stoppard, born Thomas Straussler in 1937, is a distinguished British playwright and screenwriter renowned for his intellectual wit, philosophical depth, and innovative theatrical techniques that characteristically blend verbal brilliance with existential inquiry, exploring themes of identity, fate, and the meaning of existence through clever wordplay and absurdist elements. Shakespeare adaptations serve as vital bridges between classical literature and contemporary audiences, reimagining timeless works through fresh cultural contexts while preserving universal themes, with directors employing various strategies including cultural transposition, modern staging, and international interpretations to make these works accessible across different societies and generations. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966-1967) established Stoppard's theatrical reputation through its groundbreaking approach to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, illustrating his signature collision pattern where two confused minor characters from the original tragedy, uncertain of their identities and purpose, engage in coin-flipping and word games while being swept along by the incomprehensible events of *Hamlet's* story. Drawing from Theatre of the Absurd traditions and metatheatrical techniques, the work transforms forgotten courtiers into fully realised protagonists struggling against predetermined fate, with the play's three-act structure following their journey from bewildered summoning through failed attempts at agency to ultimate acceptance of mortality. Through impossible probability sequences, name confusion, and theatrical performances within the performance, Stoppard explores fundamental questions about free will, individual significance, and the nature of reality itself, with the characters' final acceptance of death becoming paradoxically liberating, offering their only autonomous choice within Shakespeare's predetermined narrative framework and providing profound insight into the human condition's tragic yet comic dimensions.

## Assignments

1. Compare and contrast the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in terms of personality and outlook.
2. Discuss the role of the Players in the play and their significance in relation to the theme of reality versus appearance.
3. How does Stoppard use language and humour to reflect the existential themes of the play?
4. Analyse how *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* fits within the Theatre of the Absurd tradition.
5. In what ways does the play comment on fate and free will? Use examples from the text to support your answer.

## Suggested Reading

1. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Methuen Drama editions
2. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Vintage Books
3. Ann McMullan (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*, Cambridge University Press
4. Harold Bloom (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead Books
5. Esslin, M., *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Methuen

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1. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Vintage, 1962.
2. McMullan, Ann, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
3. Bloom, Harold, editor. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998.
4. Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Purloined Letter*. Various editions (for comparative reference)
5. [Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Methuen Drama]



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.

## Unit 2

# Shylock Is My Name - Howard Jacobson

(Non-detailed study)

## Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand the plot, setting, and key characters of *Shylock Is My Name*.
- ▶ appreciate Howard Jacobson's background and his approach to retelling Shakespeare.
- ▶ identify the main themes such as identity, mercy, revenge, and assimilation.
- ▶ reflect on the differences between the original *Merchant of Venice* and Jacobson's novel.
- ▶ analyse key quotations and their relevance to Jewish identity and father-daughter relationships

## Background

Howard Jacobson is a well-known British novelist, journalist, and critic, born in Manchester in 1942. He studied at Cambridge University and developed a writing style that blends sharp humour with deep philosophical thought. Much of Jacobson's work focuses on British Jewish identity, the complexities of relationships, and how humour can be used to explore serious social issues. He has been recognised internationally and won the prestigious Man Booker Prize for his novel *The Finkler Question* in 2010. Due to his thoughtful and witty approach to topics of culture and identity, critics often compare him to the American novelist Philip Roth.

Jacobson is not only known for his original novels but also for his skill in adapting and reinterpreting classic literature for modern readers. His novel *Shylock Is My Name* is a part of the Hogarth Shakespeare project, an initiative inviting contemporary writers to retell Shakespeare's works in new ways. This project aims to make Shakespeare's plays more accessible and relevant by placing the stories within contemporary settings and social issues.



In *Shylock Is My Name*, Jacobson focuses on one of Shakespeare's most controversial characters, Shylock, the Jewish moneylender from *The Merchant of Venice*. Rather than simply retelling the original story, Jacobson reimagines Shylock as a living person in twenty-first-century Manchester, a city known for its cultural diversity and vibrant Jewish community. Through this relocation, the novel explores modern themes of cultural identity, prejudice, and assimilation, drawing parallels between historical anti-Semitism and contemporary social challenges.

The novel also probes deeply into family dynamics, particularly the strained relationship between fathers and daughters. Jacobson uses these personal conflicts to highlight broader questions about belonging and cultural survival in a world that is often hostile or indifferent to difference. His work invites readers to consider how history continues to shape identity and how timeless stories like Shakespeare's continuing to speak to present-day experiences.

## Keywords

Shylock, Revenge, Mercy, Judaism, Identity, Father-daughter relationship, Theatre adaptation

## Discussion

### 3.2.1 Discussion



Fig 3.2.1 Howard Jacobson



► Jacobson's background

Howard Jacobson is a prominent British novelist, critic, and journalist. He was born in Manchester in 1942 and studied at Cambridge University. Jacobson's writing often focuses on issues of British Jewish identity, humour, and relationships. He is the author of several acclaimed novels including *The Finkler Question*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2010. Jacobson has been described as "the English Philip Roth," due to his witty and intelligent explorations of cultural identity and gender.

► Themes and adaptation

He is known for his ability to blend humour with serious philosophical concerns. His works frequently deal with Jewishness, social outsiders, and father-daughter relationships. In recent years, Jacobson has turned his attention to literary adaptation, reworking classic texts for modern audiences, most notably with *Shylock is My Name*.

► Modernising Shylock

*Shylock is My Name* was published in 2016 as part of the Hogarth Shakespeare project, where contemporary writers reinterpret Shakespeare's plays. Jacobson chooses to retell *The Merchant of Venice* by focusing on Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most controversial and complex characters. The Hogarth Shakespeare series attempts to bring the Bard's concerns into 21st-century society, making themes like prejudice, identity, and power immediate for today's readers. For Jacobson, this meant taking Shylock beyond the setting of Renaissance Venice and relocating him to present-day Manchester, a city known for its diversity. []

## Setting and Structure

► Locations

The novel is set in Manchester, UK, not Venice. Key locations include Strulovitch's house, the cemetery where Shylock and Strulovitch meet, the football stadium, and various social spaces where the drama unfolds. The plot sometimes revisits Venice symbolically, these moments help learners understand how Jacobson keeps the connection to Shakespeare's play alive.

► Narrative style

Jacobson employs a third-person narrator and frequent dialogue, which makes the novel feel conversational and accessible. Learners will notice that much of the book is driven by conversations, especially between Shylock and Strulovitch, but also including Beatrice, Gratan Howsome, D'Anton, and Plurabelle.



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### Characters

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**Shylock** – Shakespeare’s moneylender, mysteriously alive in the modern day. He serves as both a conscience and a provocateur, forcing Strulovitch to examine his anger and his Jewishness.

**Simon Strulovitch** – A wealthy, middle-aged Jewish art dealer and the novel’s protagonist. Like Shylock, he is a widower and a father fearful of losing his daughter to assimilation.

**Beatrice Strulovitch** – Simon’s teenage daughter, who tests the limits of his authority and becomes romantically involved with Gratan Howsome.

**Gratan Howsome** – A notorious footballer, known for giving a Nazi salute, who desires Beatrice and becomes the target of Strulovitch’s revenge.

**Anna Livia** – A glamorous socialite who plays the Portia role, presiding over the climactic “trial” scene and embodying the superficial morality of the English upper

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### 3.2.2 Critical summary



Fig 3.2.2 A Scene from *Shylock Is My Name*

Howard Jacobson’s *Shylock Is My Name* is a daring reimagining of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, commissioned as part of the Hogarth Shakespeare project. Jacobson, often described as Britain’s pre-eminent “comic novelist of Jewishness,” takes on one of literature’s most complex and controversial characters and brings him into the twenty-first century. The novel is set in contemporary Cheshire, where Simon Strulovitch, an affluent Jewish art collector, encounters Shylock in a cemetery and invites

him into his life. What follows is not merely a retelling but a meditation on Jewish identity, assimilation, vengeance, and mercy.

Jacobson uses Shylock not just as a character but as a lens through which to explore perennial questions about belonging, justice, and historical memory. Strulovitch's relationship with his rebellious daughter Beatrice mirrors Shylock's torment over Jessica, while his confrontation with Gratan Howsome, a loutish footballer, becomes a modern-day "pound of flesh" drama, complete with a demand for circumcision in place of physical mutilation. With biting wit and philosophical depth, Jacobson interrogates whether vengeance can ever offer consolation and whether mercy can be given without condescension. The result is a darkly comic, intellectually rich novel that forces readers to wrestle with Shakespeare's legacy and its continued relevance.

## Chapter 1

The novel begins in a cemetery in Cheshire, England, where Simon Strulovitch, a wealthy Jewish art collector, is visiting his late mother's grave. There, he encounters a mysterious figure who introduces himself as Shylock, the very Shylock from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Strulovitch is bewildered but compelled by the man's strange mixture of the ancient and the eternal. Shylock explains that he is mourning his daughter, Jessica, who abandoned him long ago to wed a Christian. This chance meeting marks the start of a peculiar relationship that becomes central to the narrative. Strulovitch feels a deep connection with Shylock, sensing in him the embodiment of Jewish grief, anger, and the unhealed scar of betrayal.

### ► A Meeting in the Cemetery

## Chapter 2

Returning home, Strulovitch finds himself consumed with thoughts of his only daughter, Beatrice. Much like Shylock's Jessica, Beatrice is restless, rebellious, and determined to escape the confines of her father's influence and Jewish upbringing. Strulovitch's fears intensify when he learns she has been seen with Gratan Howsome, a disgraced footballer infamous for boorish behaviour and once photographed giving a Nazi salute during a match. For Strulovitch, the parallels with Shylock's fate are impossible to ignore. He becomes convinced that he is reliving the ancient drama of paternal loss, replaying the role of Shylock in modern-day guise.

### ► Father and Daughter



### Chapter 3

#### ► Shylock the Confidant

Intrigued and unsettled, Strulovitch invites Shylock into his home. Over long evenings of wine and conversation, the two men become sparring partners and confidants. They debate profound questions of identity, justice, vengeance, and mercy. Shylock urges Strulovitch to confront his anger rather than bury it, for denial, he argues, only deepens the wound. This chapter forms the moral and philosophical centre of the novel, as Jacobson reimagines Shakespeare's play. Here, Shylock is given the voice that Shakespeare denied him: an opportunity to articulate, with wit and sorrow, the weight of centuries of loss and exclusion.

### Chapter 4

#### ► Anna Livia and Society

The narrative shifts to Anna Livia Plurabelle Cleopatra A Thing of Beauty Is a Joy Forever Christine, an ostentatious socialite who rules Cheshire's high society with glamour and self-assurance. She serves as a modern equivalent of Portia: beautiful, privileged, and supremely sure of her own judgement. To Strulovitch, she is both enthralling and infuriating, the epitome of a Christian world that fuses delight with duplicity. Jacobson uses this chapter to lampoon social pretension, exposing the way English high society regards Jewishness as a curiosity, welcome only when trimmed of its sharp edges.

### Chapter 5

#### ► The Bargain, or the "Bond"

Strulovitch's fears reach a climax when Gratan openly pursues Beatrice. Furiously protective and desperate to assert control, Strulovitch devises a shocking condition: if Gratan wishes to marry his daughter, he must submit to circumcision. This becomes the novel's echo of Shakespeare's "pound of flesh." It is a demand freighted with meaning - both a serious assertion of Jewish identity and survival, and an act of caustic satire directed at Gratan's ignorance and arrogance. Shylock looks on as a witness, part commentator, part conscience, raising the question of whether vengeance ever truly satisfies the wounded heart.

### Chapter 6

Beatrice continues to defy her father. Drawn to Gratan's glamour and unbothered by his infamy, she rejects Strulovitch's authority. Her actions deepen his anguish, for he sees in her not only the disobedience of youth but

► Beatrice's Rebellion

the looming possibility of cultural erasure. Once again, Shylock's own pain shadows the narrative. He warns Strulovitch that daughters cannot be possessed, not really, yet he sympathises with the loneliness of a father watching his daughter walk away from her heritage.

## Chapter 7

► The Courtroom Confrontation

The tension culminates in a courtroom-style scene, almost theatrical in its staging. Anna Livia, assuming Portia's role, presides with effortless superiority. In attendance are Strulovitch, Beatrice, Gratan, and Shylock, each standing for conflicting values. Strulovitch clings to his demand; Gratan blusters; Beatrice rebels; Shylock watches. Anna Livia delivers her version of Portia's celebrated speech on mercy, but her words ring hollow, exposing themselves as social platitudes rather than moral conviction. Jacobson turns Shakespeare's solemn trial scene into a sharp satire on moral pretence, showing that Cheshire society's "mercy" masks a desire for order and surface harmony rather than compassion.

## Chapter 8

► Resolution and Reckoning

In the end, Strulovitch relinquishes his demand. He recognises that vengeance will not restore dignity, nor secure Beatrice's love. Beatrice, though still defiant, begins to reveal a trace of tenderness towards her father. Gratan is left diminished, humiliated yet physically unscathed. Shylock remains enigmatic, he neither condemns nor endorses Strulovitch's choices. The novel closes without reconciliation but with solidarity, as Shylock and Strulovitch share a recognition: their lives, centuries apart, are bound by a history of suffering, resistance, and paternal grief.

By the closing pages, Strulovitch is both chastened and enlightened. He has faced the absurdity of vengeance and rejected it, though not without pain. Shylock, still mourning Jessica, gains through Jacobson's reimagining the dignity of an enduring voice, a chance to argue and grieve across centuries. The novel resists neat closure, but it insists on memory, dignity, and the necessity of conversation between past and present.

Thus, *Shylock Is My Name* is at once tragicomic, satirical, meditative, and deeply humane: a modern reimagining that asks how Jews and non-Jews can live together without betraying history or silencing sorrow.





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### Major Quotes

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“She is my daughter, she is my flesh.” – Strulovitch’s lament links fatherhood and bodily identity, central to the circumcision demand.

“I am not sorry for hating them.” – Shylock articulates centuries of Jewish pain, offering a counter-narrative to enforced Christian forgiveness.

“Mercy is not something to be begged for.” – A rebuke to Portia’s speech, reframing mercy as mutual recognition, not patronising charity.

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### 3.2.3 Analysis

Howard Jacobson’s *Shylock Is My Name* presents a strikingly nuanced and humanised portrayal of Shylock when compared with Shakespeare’s original character in *The Merchant of Venice*. In the Shakespearean play, Shylock is largely seen as a vengeful, often villainous moneylender, characterised more by his bitterness and demand for a “pound of flesh” than by any deep exploration of his humanity or motivations. The play treats him both as a figure of fear and ridicule within a Christian-dominated society, and while it touches on issues of injustice and anti-Semitism, it ultimately confines Shylock within a tragicomic and somewhat one-dimensional role. Jacobson, on the other hand, expands Shylock’s character into a deeply reflective and dignified presence. His Shylock is a grieving father mourning his daughter Jessica’s betrayal, burdened by centuries of persecution yet still capable of profound insight and pain. This transformation allows for a reclamation of Shylock’s voice, turning him from an object of mockery into a symbol of Jewish resilience and suffering, thereby addressing the limitations and biases inherent in Shakespeare’s portrayal.

► Humanised Shylock

The theme of mercy also undergoes a significant evolution between the two works. Shakespeare’s play features Portia’s famous “quality of mercy” speech, which elevates Christian mercy as a divine and superior virtue, urging forgiveness from a position of authority. Jacobson satirises this through the character of Anna Livia, whose version of mercy reveals itself to be shallow social posturing rather than genuine compassion. This critique exposes the hypocrisy and superficiality of modern societal tolerance, especially as practiced by the English upper class in the

► Mercy satirised

novel, contrasting starkly with Shakespeare's more solemn and idealised depiction.

► Parental conflict

Moreover, the father–daughter relationship, central to the emotional power of both works, is more intricately developed in Jacobson's novel. Whereas Jessica's elopement in the play bars Shylock with profound betrayal, Jacobson's narrative deepens this conflict, depicting Strulovitch's struggles with his daughter Beatrice as a modern echo of that ancient pain. The emotional complexity of parental love mixed with control and cultural anxiety is laid bare, revealing universal tensions between tradition and personal freedom that resonate across time and culture.

► Symbolic vengeance

Revenge in the two texts also differs meaningfully. Shakespeare's Shylock demands his "pound of flesh" as a literal, brutal assertion of justice and dignity. In contrast, Strulovitch's demand for Gratian's circumcision is both symbolic and satirical. It is a marker of cultural identity and resistance, as well as a form of humiliation aimed at imposing the gravity of Jewish history on an outsider. However, Jacobson's narrative recognises the futility of vengeance; unlike Shakespeare, who ends with Shylock's defeat, the novel closes with an ambiguous reflection on the limits of revenge and the possibilities for solidarity and understanding.

► Modern hypocrisy

Finally, the social contexts vary considerably. Shakespeare's Venice is a closed, overtly Christian society steeped in rigid social hierarchies and explicit anti-Semitism. Jacobson's Cheshire presents a modern English society where prejudice persists beneath a polished veneer of multicultural tolerance. This setting provides a sharp satire of contemporary social hypocrisy and the enduring challenges of Jewish existence in the diaspora.

► Reimagined themes

Thus, the novel transforms Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* by granting Shylock continued life, voice, and dignity. It interrogates the original play's themes through a modern lens of identity, justice, mercy, and cultural survival, challenging the reader to reflect on the ongoing relevance of these conflicts and the ways in which history and literature shape our understanding of belonging. This literary re-imagining blends satire, philosophical discourse, and emotional depth to offer a fresh, critical engagement with one of Shakespeare's most controversial characters.

### 3.2.3.1 Features of the Adaptation

Howard Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name* offers a complex, modern reimagining of the character Shylock from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, expanding and deepening the portrayal with contemporary literary features and thematic concerns. Here is a critical analysis based on adapted features and comparison with the original play:

#### ► Humanising Shylock

Unlike Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock as a somewhat one-dimensional villain, Howard Jacobson gives him much greater depth and humanity. In *Shylock Is My Name*, Shylock is presented as a deeply aggrieved and grieving father who mourns the loss of his daughter, Jessica. His character wrestles with centuries of marginalisation and pain endured by the Jewish people. Throughout the novel, Shylock's presence adds solemnity and moral weight, elevating him from a mere caricature to a figure deserving of sympathy and understanding. Jacobson grants Shylock a voice that Shakespeare's play largely denied him, allowing the character to express his suffering and to challenge the dominant Christian narratives of mercy and justice that have framed his story for centuries.

#### ► Past-present bridge

Jacobson cleverly intertwines the past and present through a metafictional encounter. The novel begins with Simon Strulovich, a modern-day Jewish art dealer in Manchester, meeting the immortal Shylock in a Cheshire cemetery. This meeting symbolises a bridge between centuries of Jewish experience, connecting Shakespeare's original story to contemporary anxieties about identity, assimilation, and survival. This narrative device not only retells but also questions the original play, encouraging readers to reconsider Shylock's legacy considering modern perspectives.

#### ► Identity symbolism

The theme of Jewish identity and assimilation is powerfully explored, especially through symbolism. For instance, the demand by Strulovich that his daughter's Christian suitor undergo circumcision parallels Shakespeare's famous "pound of flesh" demand by Shylock. Here, circumcision represents cultural belonging and the struggle to resist assimilation. This symbol highlights ongoing tensions between preserving tradition and adapting to modernity, particularly within family dynamics, such as the conflicts between fathers and daughters.

► Satirical critique

Jacobson's novel is rich with satire and social critique. Through characters such as Anna Livia, who stands in for Shakespeare's Portia, the novel lampoons English high society. Anna Livia and her friends embody the superficial tolerance of the upper classes, masking underlying prejudice and casual antisemitism. The courtroom scene, reimagined in the novel, becomes a biting commentary on social posturing, where the appearance of justice and mercy is often hollow.

► Family conflict

At the heart of the novel lies the conflict between fathers and daughters. This emotional tension is central to both Shakespeare's original and Jacobson's narrative. The daughters, Jessica in the original play and Beatrice in the novel, rebel against paternal authority and tradition. Their resistance forces the fathers to confront the painful limits of control and the challenges posed by modern autonomy. This theme resonates deeply as a universal reflection on family, culture, and change.

### Comparison with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

| Aspect                       | <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>                                                                                     | <i>Shylock Is My Name</i>                                                                              |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Shylock's Portrayal          | Often a villainous, vengeful Jewish money-lender; lacks a full sympathetic voice; subjected to mockery and defeat | A nuanced, humanised figure; bereaved, dignified, wiser; given agency and voice to articulate his pain |
| Treatment of Mercy           | Portia's "quality of mercy" speech promotes Christian mercy as superior, hierarchical                             | Satirised through Anna Livia; mercy shown as social posturing, lacking genuine spiritual depth         |
| Father-Daughter Relationship | Shylock is strict, unyielding; Jessica's elopement causes betrayal and humiliation                                | Strulovitch struggles with similar paternal pain but shows more internal conflict and self-awareness   |
| Revenge Motif                | Shylock demands "pound of flesh" as brutal justice                                                                | Strulovitch demands circumcision as symbolic resistance; reflective on the futility of revenge         |



|                 |                                                                                    |                                                                                       |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Context  | Venetian Christian society with entrenched anti-Semitism, social exclusion of Jews | Contemporary English society, satire of high-class hypocrisy and latent anti-Semitism |
| Narrative Style | Elizabethan play, comedic tragedy with poetic structure                            | Modern novel blending metafiction, philosophical debate, satire, and dark comedy      |

## Summarised Overview

*Shylock Is My Name* is Howard Jacobson's modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, set in present-day Manchester. The story follows Simon Strulovitch, a rich Jewish art dealer who meets Shylock, still alive centuries later, in a cemetery. Both men share deep pain: Simon's daughter Beatrice rebels against her Jewish upbringing and falls for a controversial footballer, echoing Shylock's lost daughter Jessica. Jacobson uses this relationship to explore themes of Jewish identity, assimilation, revenge, and mercy. The demand that Beatrice's suitor be circumcised mirrors Shylock's original demand for a "pound of flesh." The novel gives Shylock a voice and dignity absent in Shakespeare's play, presenting him as a grieving father wrestling with injustice and cultural survival. Through sharp humour and social satire, Jacobson critiques contemporary society's shallow tolerance and exposes the struggles faced by Jews in modern England, making Shakespeare's story relevant for today's readers.

## Assignments

1. Discuss how Howard Jacobson reimagines Shylock and what new perspectives he brings to the character.
2. Explore the theme of father-daughter conflict in the novel and how it relates to cultural identity and assimilation.
3. Imagine you are Beatrice. Write a letter explaining your feelings about your father's demands and your place in society.
4. Investigate the Hogarth Shakespeare project and the idea of reinterpreting classic plays for modern readers.



## Suggested Reading

1. *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare (original play)
2. *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson
3. Kermode, Frank. Introduction. *Shakespeare's Language*. Straus, 1998. 3-24.
4. Spurgeon, Caroline F. E. *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us*. 1935. Cambridge UP, 2004.

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1. Jacobson, Howard. *Shylock Is My Name*. 2016.
2. Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*.
3. "Book Note: Shylock is my Name" Bardfilm, 2017. <http://bardfilm.blogspot.com/2017/03/book-note-shylock-is-my-name.html>
4. Herman, Judi. "Review: *Shylock is My Name* – Howard Jacobson's gift for comedy glisters pure gold" Jewish Renaissance, 2016. <https://www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk/blog/review-shylock-is-my-name>.



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.

## Unit 3

## Ran

(Non-detailed study)

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, learner will be able to:

- ▶ describe the narrative and thematic parallels between *King Lear* and *Ran*
- ▶ analyse how Akira Kurosawa adapts Shakespearean tragedy to a Japanese historical context
- ▶ examine the film's use of visual and musical symbolism to convey themes of power and chaos
- ▶ evaluate characterisation and its role in exploring betrayal, loyalty and madness

### Background

*Ran* (1985) is Akira Kurosawa's epic film adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, set in sixteenth-century feudal Japan. The title, which means chaos or turmoil, reflects both the internal disintegration of Lord Hidetora Ichimonji's family and the wider political disorder of warring samurai clans. The story follows Ichimonji's decision to divide his realm among his three sons and the tragic consequences of pride, betrayal and revenge. Lear's themes of ingratitude, madness and reconciliation are transposed into Japanese culture through spectacular battle scenes, vivid colour design and a haunting musical score.

To gain the fullest understanding of the unit's themes and stylistic choices, learners are strongly encouraged to watch the film *Ran* before engaging with the textual analysis and comparative discussion. Viewing Kurosawa's visual storytelling will illuminate how cinematic techniques, such as composition, costume and sound, reinforce the narrative's exploration of loyalty, ambition and chaos.

### Keywords

Adaptation, King Lear, Power, Betrayal, Loyalty, Madness, Symbolism, Chaos



## Discussion



Fig 3.3.1 Akira Kurosawa

► *Kurosawa's cinematic impact*

Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) was a pioneering Japanese film director whose career spanned five decades. Renowned for his epic storytelling, dynamic compositions and humanistic themes he brought Japanese cinema to global prominence. Films such as *Rashomon* (1950), *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Ran* (1985) combine Western narrative structures with Japanese aesthetics to explore moral complexity, social change and the resilience of the human spirit. *Ran* in particular draws on Kurosawa's long standing admiration for Shakespeare to retell *King Lear* in a feudal Japanese setting. Kurosawa's mastery of visual style and his collaborations with composer Masaru Sato and actor Toshiro Mifune created some of the most enduring works in world cinema.



Fig 3.3.1:2 A scene from *King Lear*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* begins with the ageing monarch dividing his realm among his three daughters based on their professions of love. Goneril and Regan flatter him to secure large portions, while Cordelia's honest affection earns her banishment. Lear's rash judgment sets in motion a tragic chain of events as his elder daughters reveal their cruelty, stripping him of dignity and forcing him into exile. Cast out into a storm Lear's mind unravels on a desolate heath where wind and rain mirror his inner

► *Lear's tragic downfall*

turmoil. Parallel to Lear's journey, the subplot follows the Earl of Gloucester whose illegitimate son Edmund betrays him, forcing his legitimate son Edgar to feign madness. In the final act Cordelia returns with an army in a gesture of filial loyalty but is captured and executed. Lear dies of grief while cradling her body leaving only Kent and Edgar to witness the ruin wrought by pride and betrayal.

► *Lear in Japanese form*

*Ran* (Japanese for "chaos") reimagines Lear as the warlord Hidetora Ichimonji in sixteenth century Japan. Ichimonji decides to divide his kingdom among his three sons only to find himself betrayed and cast into exile when his heirs seize power. Kurosawa preserves the play's exploration of pride madness and family conflict while enriching it with vivid colour, sweeping battle scenes and Japanese cultural motifs. Burning castles and shifting loyalties heighten the sense of political turmoil and personal tragedy. Clocking in at nearly three hours *Ran* combines breathtaking cinematography, striking colour design and a deeply human examination of power loyalty and the corrosive effects of pride to create a masterpiece of world cinema.



Fig 3.3.1:3 A Scene from *Ran*



| Character Parallels Between Ran and King Lear |                                                                     |                  |                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Ran (Film)                                    | Role in Ran                                                         | King Lear (Play) | Role in King Lear                                       |
| Ichimonji Hidetora (Tatsuya Nakadai)          | Aging warlord who divides his domain among his sons                 | King Lear        | Aging king who divides his kingdom among his daughters  |
| Ichimonji "Taro" Takatora (Akira Terano)      | Eldest son, inherits First Castle, manipulated by Kaede             | Goneril          | Eldest daughter, ruthless and manipulative              |
| Ichimonji "Jiro" Masatora (Jinpachi Nezu)     | Second son, ambitious, seizes power from Taro and father            | Regan            | Middle daughter, treacherous and power-hungry           |
| Ichimonji "Saburo" Naotora (Daisuke Ryu)      | Youngest son, banished for honesty, remains loyal                   | Cordelia         | Youngest daughter, disowned for honesty, remains loyal  |
| Lady Kaede (Mieko Harada)                     | Taro's wife, vengeful manipulator, seeks family revenge             | Edmund           | Illegitimate son, deceitful, sows discord               |
| Lady Sué (Yoshiko Miyazaki)                   | Jiro's wife, pious and gentle, her family wadedestroyed by Hidetora | Albany           | Regan's husband, morally conflicted but ultimately just |
| Tsurumaru (Mansai Nomura)                     | Sué's blind brother, victim of Hidetora's past violence             | Gloucester       | Loyal nobleman, blinded for loyalty                     |
| Hirayama Tango (Masayuki Yui)                 | Hidetora's loyal retainer, follows him into exile                   | Kent             | King Lear's loyal nobleman, banished but faithful       |
| Kyoami (Peter)                                | The fool, offers comic relief and bitter truth                      | The Fool         | Lear's jester, truth-teller, loyal companion            |
| Kurogane (Hisashi Igawa)                      | Jiro's pragmatic general and adviser                                | —                | No direct counterpart                                   |
| Ikoma Kageyu (Kazuo Kato)                     | Official of the Ichimonji clan                                      | —                | No direct counterpart                                   |
| Lord Ayabe (Jun Tazaki)                       | Rival daimyo, shifting allegiances                                  | —                | No direct counterpart                                   |
| Lord Fujimaki (Hitoshi Ueki)                  | Rival daimyo, based on King of France                               | King of France   | Marries Cordelia, supports her claim                    |

### 3.3.1 Critical Summary

#### Part 1

► *Warriors hunt together*

The film opens with four mounted warriors riding through the Japanese countryside during the medieval period. We observe numerous wild boars roaming through tall grass, which the horsemen pursue, attempting to hunt them with bows and arrows. The soldiers rest and dine at a nearby encampment. Lord Hidetora Ichimonji, the aged warlord, has successfully killed the wild boar, and his warriors celebrate his victory. They discuss the hunt, and one of Ichimonji's sons enquires whether they should prepare and consume the boar at the camp. "He was quite an old animal. His meat is too tough and unclean," he observes. Ichimonji compares the boar to himself and asks his followers whether they would consume him. The other warlords who have joined the hunt respond that they have come to strengthen the alliances between their houses. One warlord, Ayabe, informs Ichimonji that he wishes to arrange a marriage between his daughter and one of Ichimonji's sons. The warlord beside Ayabe shares this desire to wed his daughter to one of Ichimonji's sons and requests that Ichimonji choose between them. Ichimonji mentions that his second son, Jiro, is already married but offers no further comment.

► *Saburo shows filial care*

One of Ichimonji's sons summons Kyoami, the fool, to entertain the gathering. Kyoami appears and performs an elaborate rabbit display, delighting the warriors. During the performance, the youngest son, Saburo, makes a remark to Kyoami that everyone considers extremely rude. Ichimonji falls asleep whilst sitting, and everyone decides to take a brief rest. "It is unlike Father to sleep before distinguished guests," Jiro comments to Taro, the eldest son, concluding that Saburo's interruption must have embarrassed Ichimonji. As everyone watches, Saburo cuts branches from a nearby bush and places them beside Ichimonji to shield him from the sun.

Everyone moves to the opposite side of a tent, where Jiro and Taro discuss how their father has never fallen asleep in this manner before. They instruct Kyoami to wake Ichimonji, but Ichimonji emerges from the other side of the tent, appearing distressed. He sits down and tells the group that he has experienced a vision in which he was



► Ichimonji announces abdication

alone in the forest. Suddenly, he bursts into laughter and tells them that he heard Taro's voice calling him back and saw his three children. Saburo becomes concerned about his father's condition and withdraws in fear. Ichimonji takes his place before his sons and the lords, Fujimaki and Ayabe, to make an announcement. He gathers everyone around him and delivers a speech. He mentions being born in a neighbouring castle during a period of almost constant warfare. "When I was merely seventeen years old, I raised my banner over that castle, and for fifty long years I waged war." He then suddenly declares that he wishes to transfer leadership of his kingdom to Taro, his eldest son, and that he will relocate to the outer tower. "I shall retain an escort of thirty men as my personal guard, and I shall also retain the title and insignia of Great Lord," he states. ()

► Three arrows lesson fails

As Jiro enquires what will become of him and Saburo, the peasants all bow in reverence to Ichimonji. He informs them that the Second and Third Castles shall be their responsibility. Taro immediately bows before his father, insisting that the burden of governing the kingdom is too great for him and that he is unsuitable for the position. Saburo laughs, suggesting that Taro is merely saying these things to impress their father, but Jiro shares Taro's reverent demeanour. Ichimonji orders Kyoami to bring arrows, which he distributes to his sons one at a time, instructing them to break them in half. He then gives his sons three arrows bound together and instructs them to break the bundle in half. He tells them that if they work together, they would be unable to break it, as Saburo grabs the bundle and smashes it across his knee. "More of your foolishness," Ichimonji declares, as Saburo attempts to argue with his father, calling him senile. "How dare you insult your father," Ichimonji responds, and Saburo replies that they live in "a world devoid of loyalty, a world without feeling." He criticises his father for ruthlessly killing so many people throughout the years. He accuses his father of being senile and foolish for trusting his sons, despite having raised them to be mercenary warriors.

Ichimonji is taken aback and labels Saburo a traitor. Saburo maintains that he is merely attempting to protect his father from his brothers' treachery, but this enrages Ichimonji further. Saburo argues that the lesson with the three arrows was pointless since the brothers are not united. Ichimonji becomes furious and banishes Saburo from the

- Saburo banished for honesty

kingdom, suggesting that he has spoiled him by loving him more than his other sons. Tango, one of the nobles, speaks in defence of Saburo, claiming that he is honest and true. Ichimonji grows more enraged and seizes a sword from Kyoami, banishing both Tango and Saburo. Tango, alone in a field with Saburo, asks what he intends to do. Saburo maintains that he is more concerned about his father than himself. When a group of soldiers approaches, he tells Tango he was foolish to speak up. Saburo and Tango flee, pursued by troops.

- Power shifts to Kaede

In reality, their pursuers have no malicious intent. Given his courageous display before his father, one of the nobles, Fujimaki, states that he wishes to marry his daughter to Saburo. He invites Saburo and Tango to his home, but Tango declines, preferring to serve Ichimonji in disguise. Lady Kaede, Taro's wife, receives news from Ichimonji's concubines that they are leaving the palace but obstructing her retinue. She instructs him to remove them and declares herself the lady of the castle. Meanwhile, Ichimonji observes from above as the messenger separates the concubines for Lady Kaede. "This is unacceptable. My ladies bowing before Taro's wife?" Ichimonji tells his adviser. Kyoami performs a dance and appears to mock Ichimonji, implying that he was foolish to lose his castle.

- Tensions escalate quickly

Taro and Kaede are now in their new quarters in the castle. He informs her that he gave the armour and flag that once hung in these rooms to the people, but she believes the banner should remain in the residence. He tells Kaede that his father wishes to retain all his insignia, but Kaede insists that if they do not keep the visual symbols of his father's rule, they will be nothing more than a shadow of the former court. After she shames him for not being more assertive, he rushes to retrieve the family banner. As a quarrel breaks out amongst the subjects over the return of the banner, Kyoami makes light of the situation and is pursued by one of them. However, as soon as the subject chases the fool, he is struck by an arrow and falls dead. The subjects look up to see that Ichimonji shot the arrow that killed his subject. That night, before a fire, Kyoami performs a humorous dance for the subjects and Ichimonji, mocking the kingdom's power struggle, particularly Taro's subdued authority. Suddenly, a messenger arrives, announcing Taro's gathering to commemorate the transfer of power. He invites Ichimonji and his attendant, and they proceed to meet Taro and Kaede.



## Part II

- Father son conflict deepens

When Ichimonji arrives, only Taro and Kaede are present, and he is surprised by the small size of the gathering. Kaede offers him a cushion beneath them, and he takes offence, insisting that he remains the Lord and Master, even though he has surrendered his fortress. Finally, he sits, and Taro reminds him that he has relinquished his authority and that his father's guards are misbehaving, referring to Kyoami's mocking song about him. "They are simple soldiers without courtly manners," Ichimonji argues, claiming these are merely foolish songs. "Comic songs can go too far," Taro remarks curtly, referring to the fact that Ichimonji killed his guard that afternoon whilst the guard was defending him against mockery. He instructs his father to sign a pledge of respect and seal it with his blood. Ichimonji is outraged at accepting a commitment surrendering all his authority to Taro.

- Kaede reveals revenge motive

"Everything in it you yourself declared before Lord Ayabe and Lord Fujimaki, both very honourable witnesses," the assistant declares, implying that it makes no practical difference. Ichimonji violently signs it and seals it with his blood. "Is this the manner of a son towards his father?" Ichimonji enquires of Taro, suggesting that Kaede has influenced him. He rises and declares that he will move in with his other son, Jiro. Kaede informs the assistant that he performed well when Ichimonji departs. Kaede and Taro remain silent for a moment before Kaede speaks, "I was born and raised in this castle. It belonged to my father. But I left it to marry you. After the marriage, my father and brothers relaxed their vigilance. Then, they were all murdered by your father, Hidetora. And now, I am back here in this castle, seized from my family. How impatiently I have longed for this day." She then points out the location where her mother committed suicide.

- Brothers turn against father

Jiro receives a letter at his castle informing him that Ichimonji is travelling there. Jiro explains, "Taro expelled him from the First Castle. He says Father has become eccentric." He mentions his father's counsellor, Ikoma, who is now Taro's special adviser, and states that allowing Ichimonji to visit would be unwise. According to Jiro's counsellors, Taro is behaving very disrespectfully, and Jiro should be the one to take the crown from his father. "You ought to seize the opportunity," one of them urges, and Jiro resolves to challenge his brother, who is merely twelve





months older, for the kingdom. When one of his advisers suggests that he attempt to steal Kaede from Taro, Jiro claims that the problem is not Taro, but Kaede. He dismisses this notion but recommends that when his father and his thirty warriors arrive, they must defeat them.

- Sué shows Buddhist compassion

Ichimonji arrives at Jiro's residence, where the staff welcomes him. As they enter, Ichimonji informs one of the servants that he wishes to speak with Jiro's wife, Lady Sué. He seeks Sué in a small cottage, but she is not there. She is elsewhere, watching the sunset and praying to Buddha. Ichimonji approaches her and speaks to her, recognising her sorrowful demeanour and apologising for killing her entire family. He tells her, "You should regard me with hatred. It would be far easier to bear." Sué simply responds, "I do not hate you. Everything is decided in our previous lives. The heart of Buddha embraces all things." As Jiro approaches them, Ichimonji suggests that Buddha is no longer watching over them. Jiro informs his father that he received a letter from Taro stating that Ichimonji's soldiers were extremely rude, and therefore he would not allow Ichimonji's guards into his castle. Ichimonji is incensed, arguing that he cannot be alone in the castle. Jiro suggests that his father return to Taro's castle and apologise, but Ichimonji is offended.

- Ichimonji becomes homeless

Ichimonji's guards are barred from entering the castle, much to Ichimonji's dismay. He realises Jiro is as cunning as Taro and instructs Jiro's soldiers to open the gates so he may depart. They open the gates, and he leaves his son's realm, vowing never to see Jiro again. Ichimonji searches for somewhere to go, but his guards inform him that the peasants have stolen everything and fled to the mountains to avoid them. He listens quietly whilst an adviser suggests he travel to the Third Castle, but Ichimonji states that he would go if he could, but Saburo's followers would never accept him. Ogura arrives at the Third Castle and explains that Taro has granted him control of it. The gates open, and a soldier emerges, saying, "Without our Master Saburo, the castle means nothing to us. We therefore leave it to you. We have recently received news that he is staying with Lord Fujimaki, and we are riding out now to join him there." Saburo's warriors depart from the Third Castle in search of Saburo.

Tango returns to Ichimonji's tent with food and bows to his master. He informs Ichimonji that he remains his servant



- Tango remains loyal

and begs him to accept him back. Ichimonji suddenly orders his soldiers to kill the peasants, but Tango maintains that the villagers were merely following Taro's orders. Tango states, "Taro issued a decree that anyone who gives you food or shelter will die." Tango informs Ichimonji that he may travel and stay with Saburo, who is residing with Lord Fujimaki, despite his difficult situation. Ichimonji refuses, suggesting that Saburo will never accept him again after what occurred. "Saburo loves you and is always thinking of your welfare," Tango insists, telling Ichimonji that Saburo instructed him to watch over him. As a messenger arrives to inform them that Saburo's warriors have gone to meet him at Fujimaki's residence, Ichimonji begins to weep. ()

- Castle siege begins

According to one of Ichimonji's counsellors, Fujimaki is planning to arrange his daughter's marriage to gain control of Saburo's men and thus cause turmoil in the region before assuming the kingdom himself. Tango is adamant that this is not the case, but the adviser insists on taking Ichimonji to the Third Castle. When Kyoami jokes about being killed, Ichimonji strikes him and instructs him to remain behind with Tango. Tango and Kyoami spend the evening in the forest. Tango explains that their only transgression was telling the truth as Kyoami weeps. Ichimonji arrives and spends the night in the Third Castle. He becomes terrified in the middle of the night and flees to check whether an invasion is occurring. Taro and Jiro's forces attack the castle, killing virtually all of Ichimonji's men and setting fire to the fortress. Ichimonji rushes down and discovers one of his soldiers, wounded, who informs him that Ogura and the others deceived them into remaining there. As Ichimonji's warriors attempt to defend him in a high tower, Jiro and Taro's forces capture the Third Castle. Ichimonji enters a room only to witness two ladies committing suicide together, then climbs to the top of the tallest tower.

### Part III

Taro and Jiro advance towards the castle. Taro is shot by one of Jiro's generals, sparking a fierce conflict between the two brothers' warriors. Jiro enquires about Ichimonji, and the general informs him that his father will very likely perform seppuku or ritual suicide. As Ichimonji sits in solitude, burning arrows stream into the tower, presumably

- Ichimonji survives castle destruction

driving him mad through the betrayal he has endured. After the battle has ceased, Ichimonji considers killing himself but decides against it. He pauses amidst the fires engulfing the tower and waits until all of Jiro's warriors have departed before wandering down the stairs and out of the castle, a distressed expression on his face. Soldiers have gathered outside the castle, and they part as he walks through the centre and out into the woods unharmed. Jiro's general advises him to kill his father, but he merely stands there and observes as Ichimonji walks away.

- Ichimonji descends into madness

Tango and Kyoami appear, riding a horse towards the Third Castle. They encounter Ichimonji in the middle of a stormy field and ride towards him. They prostrate themselves before Ichimonji, who gathers flowers and appears to be insane. Kyoami states, "In a mad world, only the mad are sane." Ichimonji grows apprehensive after glimpsing his wicked life. Tango and Kyoami approach a small cottage and wish to spend the night. Whilst the villagers initially refuse to accept them, they eventually force their way in. The owner of the home sits quite motionless inside, not looking up at them. They lay Ichimonji down and ask the homeowner for something to cover him with before realising that the peasant with whom they were staying was blind.

- Ichimonji confronts past victims

Ichimonji awakens, his sanity restored. "Too bad, he was better off mad," Kyoami remarks, as Ichimonji recounts the fact that Taro and Jiro betrayed him and attempted to have him killed. "I am the one who should have died," he cries, as the peasant drops a blanket on the ground. Tango mistakenly identifies the peasant as a woman, but he corrects him. Tango recognises the peasant as Tsurumaru, Jiro's wife's brother, as they light a fire. Tsurumaru claims that Ichimonji burnt down their castle and gouged his eyes out when he was a child. "I tried to be like my sister, to pray to Buddha, to rid myself of the hatred that is always within me, but for a single day, I could not forget. Not one night do I ever sleep in peace." He says that he has a flute, a gift from his sister, and takes it out to play it as a symbol of hospitality. As Tsurumaru plays his flute, Ichimonji becomes agitated and falls through the door into the grass outside.

Jiro enters the scene, handing Kaede a lock of Taro's hair. He speaks eloquently of his brother, whilst Kaede merely enquires about Taro's whereabouts. Jiro informs her that they did not bring the corpse due to the heat from the fire,

- Kaede seduces and manipulates

but instead burned it. Jiro grows agitated when she requests her husband's armour and helmet, suggesting that he is now wearing the equipment himself. He summons his warriors to assist him in removing the armour and proceeds to undress before Kaede. Meanwhile, she takes Taro's hair and walks into another room with it. Suddenly, we find Jiro on his throne, dismissing the traitorous servants. Lady Kaede enters the court just as the servants are being dismissed to speak with Jiro. She appears, holding Taro's helmet, and apologises for her harsh remarks earlier. She alludes to the idea that Ichimonji has gone insane, and Jiro thinks that this should make her pleased because she despises Ichimonji. Jiro accepts Taro's helmet before she snatches his knife and holds it to his throat. "Now prepare to die!" she screams, but he insists that he did not kill Taro. "It was Kurogane who killed him!" he gasps, but she is not satisfied by his answer, insistent that it was he who gave the orders to kill Taro. She closes the sliding doors that surround them, cackling, then walks towards him with the knife. "The truth is, I do not care at all about my husband's death," she says, "The only thing that concerns me is what happens to me! I refuse to live like a widow with my hair cropped, or a nun rotting inside a convent, with my head shaved! This castle once belonged to my father. And I have no intention of leaving!" Kaede tells Jiro that she will tell no one about his crimes if he takes care of her and makes her his wife. She kisses him abruptly, then licks the cut she made on his neck with the knife.

#### Part IV

Kaede informs Jiro that she wants to be his wife after seducing him. He offers to divorce Sué for her sake, but this is insufficient. Instead, she wants him to murder his wife, a scheme to which he reluctantly agrees. Kaede weeps and says she could not handle the thought of him sleeping with another woman. Kyoami and Ichimonji are sitting in a flower field. The fool claims, "If fate had decreed it, Tsurumaru would be living here. Just imagine, you are taking refuge in the very castle you destroyed." Ichimonji is silent, but smiles, which makes Kyoami laugh. Tango, meanwhile, cooks something in a pot over a fire before heading to Ichimonji. Kyoami is placing a grass helmet on the warlord's head, with two lilies on either side, like plumes. Tango approaches Ichimonji as Kyoami announces the arrival of Jiro's recently discharged servants. Tango returns and informs Kyoami and

- Kaede demands Sué's death

Ichimonji that they must travel to Saburo. Tango concludes that bringing Saburo there is the only option when Kyoami informs him that Ichimonji would flee at the mention of Saburo. Tango rides away to find Saburo.

- Kurogane refuses murder orders

The scene changes to Jiro informing an adviser, Kurogane, that he wishes to marry Kaede. Kurogane believes that it is Jiro's right to take Kaede as his wife, but to have Sué killed would be "an act of complete folly." He refuses to do Jiro's bidding as Kaede enters and tells Kurogane to ensure he salts Sué's head before bringing it back.

## Part V

- War preparations escalate

As Jiro's army approaches, we observe Saburo resting on his horse in the midst of a field. A messenger rides forward, informing Saburo of where he might locate his father. "We are to withdraw as soon as we have Father," Saburo tells the men to wait until it becomes dark, when a soldier notices Lord Ayabe's forces gathered on a nearby hillside. The scene turns to Jiro, who is warned by Kurogane that Fujimaki and Ayabe are encircling them. He urges Jiro not to give the lords any reason to attack. Jiro misinterprets Saburo's actions, believing him to be intending to deploy his forces in war as he goes in pursuit of Ichimonji. Kurogane attempts to dissuade Jiro from attacking, but Jiro is determined. "Kaede barks and you grovel!" Kurogane expresses his disappointment to his master, and Jiro dismisses him from the battlefield. He then instructs his warriors to launch an attack. Meanwhile, Saburo's soldiers dispatch a message to notify him about the attack. Saburo's men flee into the forest as Jiro's foot soldiers gather.

- Father son reconciliation

Kyoami locates Ichimonji in the grasslands and summons Saburo. Saburo attempts to rouse his father, who sits up and stares at the sky. They gaze up at the clouds that are moving swiftly above them. "What a terrifying sky. Am I in another world? Am I in paradise?" Ichimonji says. As Saburo tries to help his father, Ichimonji becomes angry, accusing them of trying to deprive him of his own death. Saburo reminds Ichimonji that he is his son, and Ichimonji stops and remembers, running away in fear. "How can I face you after what I have done to you?" Ichimonji says, stumbling away, "No words can forgive me. I deserve to die." Saburo assures his father that he ought not be remorseful, and Tango insists that Ichimonji look at his son. "You will live with us, and you





will forget this bad dream,” Saburo says to his father, as Ichimonji weeps.

Meanwhile, Jiro’s troops attempt to assault Saburo’s force, but several of them are killed by soldiers hidden in the jungle. Jiro orders his forces to fire on the woodland to bring Saburo’s men out into the open. A messenger appears, informing Jiro that Ayabe’s army has crossed the border and is on its way to the First Castle. Jiro becomes concerned and orders his men to return to the fortress. We observe Ichimonji travelling with Saburo on his horse, stating that he has much to tell him. They are laughing at their reunion when Saburo is shot from his horse. Ichimonji, Tango, and Kyoami crouch over Saburo’s body, understanding Saburo is no longer alive. Ichimonji is heartbroken, and addresses his son, saying, “I have so much to tell you.” He embraces his son’s corpse in a frenzy, then collapses on top of him, dying himself. Kyoami weeps over the two dead bodies.

► Tragic father son deaths

Kurogane goes to Kaede to confront her about the killing of Sué. “All I wanted was to avenge the destruction of my own family,” Kaede says, “I wanted to see this castle burn.” Kurogane suddenly draws his blade and murders Kaede, splattering her blood on the wall behind her. Kurogane then warns Jiro to brace himself for death and defeat. Ichimonji and Saburo’s bodies are carried over the plains by Saburo’s men. We observe Tsurumaru waiting for his sister, holding his Buddha image, before dropping it from a great height. The camera focuses closely on the Buddha picture, then pans out to see Tsurumaru alone.

► Violence and destruction conclude

### 3.3.2 Critical Analysis

*Ran* shows how a classic work of literature can be successfully reimagined within a new cultural framework while retaining its original emotional and thematic strength. The film’s title, which means chaos or turmoil in Japanese, immediately signals its central preoccupation. Kurosawa charts the collapse of order when the warlord Hidetora Ichimonji decides to divide his realm among his three sons. This decision unleashes unchecked ambition and greed, mirroring the breakdown of moral and social harmony. The visual style reinforces this theme of disorder through images of burning castles, drifting autumn leaves and expansive empty landscapes. In each shot the viewer senses the tension between individual desire and communal stability. This visual language helps us to understand that chaos and

► *Chaos versus order*

order are not merely plot devices but fundamental forces shaping human destiny. Kurosawa's lifelong fascination with Shakespeare finds a natural home in this story of power abdicated poorly and the tragic consequences that follow.

► *Pride humility loyalty*

Pride and humility emerge as twin themes that drive Ichimonji's journey from arrogance to insight. In his youth he was a mighty warrior, celebrated for victory and strength. His decision to relinquish power rather than seek reconciliation with his heirs reveals a blindness born of pride. He cannot see the true character of his elder sons until they betray him. Only through suffering exile and madness does Ichimonji come to recognise the futility of power and the fragility of human bonds. Through his descent the film suggests that true wisdom often emerges only when a person loses everything. Betrayal and loyalty further enrich this exploration of human motives. Two of Ichimonji's sons, Taro and Jiro, seize power through treachery, demonstrating how easily filial duty can yield to self interest. Saburo, the youngest son, and the court fool Kyoami remain steadfast in loyalty. Their contrasting responses invite the viewer to reflect on what it means to honour family and to stay true to one's word even in the face of cruelty. The role of Kyoami is especially poignant. Like Lear's fool in the original play, he serves as the voice of truth. He mocks his master's folly yet never abandons him. In the film's final moments Kyoami kneels beside Ichimonji's body, weeping and questioning the cruelty of life itself. His loyalty and compassion bring solace and humanity to a narrative otherwise dominated by ambition and revenge.

► *Madness and symbolism*

The film's exploration of madness underscores another layer of insight. Ichimonji's loss of sanity echoes Lear's tragic unraveling in Shakespeare's play. Madness here is more than personal breakdown. It becomes a form of clarity unclouded by the illusions of power. Ichimonji's wild ramblings in the wilderness reveal truths he could not face in his court. His disordered mind allows him to perceive the real causes of suffering and to feel the weight of his own errors. This progression from control to chaos to insight suggests that, at times, madness may be the most honest response to a world ruled by hypocrisy and violence. In tandem with these themes Kurosawa's mastery of visual and musical symbolism deepens the emotional impact.



Bright reds signify blood and passion, melancholic yellows evoke decay and regret, while stark greys underscore desolation and loss. The haunting score by Toshiro Mayuzumi, which blends traditional Japanese instruments with orchestral arrangements, complements the imagery by underscoring the film's epic scope and tragic heart.

► *Adaptation  
and focus*

While *Ran* is rooted in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Kurosawa made deliberate changes that enrich the narrative and ground it firmly in Japanese history and legend. Shakespeare's original weaves together Lear's fall and the parallel subplot of Gloucester's betrayal. Kurosawa chose to concentrate almost exclusively on Hidetora and his sons. This focus allows a deeper psychological portrait of his central characters and gives the story a tighter emotional core. To compensate for the absence of Gloucester's storyline Kurosawa elevates the character of Lady Kaede, who emerges as a powerful antagonist. Her cunning vengeance and aristocratic bearing introduce fresh thematic strands that resonate with Japanese notions of honour, loyalty and retribution. She becomes the pivot of political intrigue and personal vendetta, driving much of the film's sustained tension. In this way Kurosawa honours the spirit of Shakespeare's complexity while bringing a new perspective to the dynamics of power and revenge.

► *Gender  
inversion*

Another significant transformation concerns the composition of the family itself. Shakespeare's story revolves around a father and his three daughters. Kurosawa adapts this to a father and three sons, reflecting the Japanese emphasis on male lineage and martial tradition. Early in the film Hidetora and his sons demonstrate their skill with the bow as each draws three arrows to illustrate the strength found in unity, a reference to the historical warlord Mori Motonari. This ritual foreshadowing adds cultural resonance and heightens the sense of tragic irony when that bond is broken. The inversion from daughters to sons shifts the story's emotional focus. The audience sees sons' betrayal as an affront not only to familial love but also to martial and societal values that prize loyalty above all.

The transposition of setting from mythical ancient Britain to sixteenth century Japan further enriches the narrative. Shakespeare's *Lear* takes place in a timeless, legendary

► Cultural transplant

Britain, evoking ideas of natural order and divine justice. *Ran*, in contrast, unfolds during the Sengoku period, an era of social upheaval and constant warfare. The film's landscapes – misty mountains, tile roofed castles and fiery autumn leaves – evoke Japanese aesthetic principles and Buddhist ideas of impermanence. These elements intensify the sense of political and personal transience. Ichimonji's rise and fall echo the swift fortunes of warlords in that era, reminding the viewer that power is fleeting and alliances ever shifting. In this context the universal themes of loyalty, madness and redemption gain fresh urgency.

► Verse versus images

Finally, language and mode of expression highlight the differences between theatre and cinema. *King Lear* is written predominantly in verse, using iambic pentameter to elevate speech to a poetic register. The mixture of verse and prose demands that actors and audiences navigate shifts in tone and metre. Kurosawa, working in film, opts for direct dialogue that feels modern yet laden with subtext. He relies on visual storytelling – long takes, dynamic framing and colour contrasts – to convey what words cannot. Scenes of burning castles and silent forests speak volumes about Hidetora's inner state and the tragic fall of his house. The cinematic medium allows Kurosawa to use image and sound as poetic devices, creating a visual rhythm equivalent to Shakespearean verse. In this way *Ran* demonstrates that film can parallel the emotional and intellectual power of classical dialogue through the artistry of composition and performance.

*Ran* remains a meditation on human folly and the fragile nature of authority. Through its vivid characters, sweeping visuals and tragic narrative, it invites viewers to reflect on leadership, family and ambition. For learners, the film offers cultural insights into Japanese history and the adaptability of Shakespeare's themes. Kurosawa's adaptation honours the original's examination of pride and betrayal while creating a work that stands on its own as a cinematic masterpiece. In combining the universality of Shakespeare's tragedy with the particularities of Japanese culture Kurosawa crafted a film that resonates across time and place. *Ran* continues to challenge and move viewers, reminding us that the struggle between chaos and order, pride and humility, loyalty and betrayal is as relevant today as it was in Shakespeare's age or in feudal Japan.

## Summarised Overview

*Ran* retells the story of an ageing warlord, Lord Hidetora Ichimonji, who abdicates his power by dividing his territory among his three sons. The eldest, Taro, and the middle child, Jiro, outwardly receive their inheritances with respect but are easily swayed by ambition and revenge. The youngest, Saburo, openly criticises his father's folly and is banished in a subplot that mirrors Cordelia's exile in *King Lear*. As Taro and Jiro seize full control, Ichimonji is cast out and descends into madness, wandering the wilderness with only his loyal fool, Kyoami. The violence intensifies through battles, castle burnings and shifting allegiances until even the sons fall victim to betrayal and the clan collapses into ruin.

Kurosawa enriches Shakespeare's themes with Japanese cultural motifs, using striking colour palettes of crimson robes, autumnal leaves and grey ruins to evoke emotional states. The score combines traditional instruments and modern orchestration to heighten moments of tension and tragedy. Through its characters' contrasting responses including Saburo's loyalty, Kyoami's truth speaking and Kaede's vengeance, the film examines the thin line between order and chaos, the price of pride and the possibility of forgiveness amid destruction.

## Self Assessment Questions and Answers

### Block 3: Modern Adaptations of Shakespeare

41. "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" was written by:

Answer: Tom Stoppard

42. Tom Stoppard was born as:

Answer: Tomas Straussler

43. The Theatre of the Absurd movement began in:

Answer: France in the 1950s

44. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by:

Answer: Martin Esslin



45. In Stoppard's play, the coin toss consistently results in:

Answer: Heads

46. "Metatheatre" refers to:

Answer: Theatre that draws attention to itself as a play

47. The 1990 film adaptation of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" starred:

Answer: Gary Oldman and Tim Roth

48. "Shylock Is My Name" was written by:

Answer: Howard Jacobson

49. "Shylock Is My Name" is part of:

Answer: The Hogarth Shakespeare Project

50. In Jacobson's novel, the modern-day Shylock meets:

Answer: Simon Strulovitch

51. The setting of "Shylock Is My Name" is:

Answer: Manchester

52. Howard Jacobson won the Man Booker Prize for:

Answer: The Finkler Question

53. "Ran" was directed by:

Answer: Akira Kurosawa

54. "Ran" is an adaptation of:

Answer: King Lear

55. "Ran" was released in:

Answer: 1985

56. The title "Ran" means:

Answer: Chaos or turmoil

57. In "Ran," the King Lear character is called:

Answer: Hidetora Ichimonji



58. Kurosawa's "Ran" is set in:

Answer: Feudal Japan

59. In "Shylock Is My Name," the demand for circumcision parallels:

Answer: The pound of flesh demand

60. The Theatre of the Absurd often features:

Answer: Circular conversations and illogical scenes

## Assignments

1. Compare the film's depiction of madness with Shakespeare's portrayal of Lear's storm-tossed exile.
2. Analyse the role of Kyoami as the fool and his function in highlighting truth and loyalty.
3. Discuss how colour design and cinematography convey themes of chaos and order.
4. Examine Lady Kaede's character as a fusion of Goneril and Regan and her impact on the narrative.
5. Evaluate the film's ending and its interpretation of reconciliation and loss

## Suggested Reading

1. Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. University of California Press, 1996.
2. Martine, Tom. "Ran: Kurosawa's Masterpiece." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1987.
3. Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
4. Hoffman, David. "Shakespeare on Screen: The Japanese Connection." *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 55, 2002.
5. Prince, Stephen. *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Princeton University Press, 1991.



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1. Crowds, Gary. "Shakespeare and Kurosawa: A Comparative Study of *Lear* and *Ran*." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1989.
2. Desser, David. "Feudal Ethics and Epic Cinema in *Ran*." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1986.
3. Robertson, James. "Kurosawa's Narrative Techniques." *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1992.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.



# Critical Responses

## BLOCK-04

### Block Content

Unit 1 Revisiting Shakespeare

Unit 2 Critiquing Shakespearean Drama

Unit 3 Reading the Shakespearean Sonnet

Unit 4 Studying Shakespearean Adaptations

# Unit 1

# Revisiting Shakespeare

## Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ acquire a general critical understanding of Shakespeare and his literary output
- ▶ contextualise some of the major theories used to critically read Shakespeare
- ▶ describe the features and concerns of different theoretical approaches to Shakespeare
- ▶ familiarise themselves with some prominent Shakespearean critics

## Background

Across time, literature has always been connected to questions of identity, culture, and power, just as much as it has shaped and been shaped by them. Critical readings of literature open out a space where we may explore the formation of these aspects. In order to do so, a variety of approaches and perspectives can be wielded, as is apt for our purpose.

One of the primary focuses of such investigations is the process of literature. In particular, queries about how power works in and through literature, framing portrayals of identity and culture, are significant. Equally important is an understanding of the social and historical backdrop in which literature is created.

Representation, i.e. the specific ways in which meaning is constructed in literature and presented to its readers, is a vital part of the same. Literary representations often contain a relationship of subordination and dominance. They may seek to naturalise, or to portray as natural, certain beliefs and hierarchies. In doing so, they may provide legitimacy to particular ideologies.

For instance, in the traditional English novel, women were often represented as 'Angels in the House'. The novels' ideals of women being focused on the affairs of the home, of being passive, self-sacrificing, and pure were naturalised as proper feminine conduct. This extends from the legacy of the very first novel *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), down to the popular fiction of the





succeeding ages. Of course, such a pattern of representation throws light on the manner in which patriarchal beliefs were legitimised across different periods.

In this way, literature does not stand separated from society. Rather, its creation, reception, and circulation in society should be understood as a reflection of its interactions with socio-cultural institutions. This extends to various aspects such as class, caste, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and ethnicity. All of these, with respect to the text, the writer, and the reader, determine how a particular genre or literary work is viewed at a particular point of time.

As we come to the focus of this unit, the above context is vital. Traditional Shakespearean critiques explore thematic and formal aspects, throwing light on how the bard transformed the literary and linguistic landscape of English. More recent critical examinations of Shakespeare have shown that his dramas and poetry, as well as their modern adaptations, can be read using other critical perspectives.

As non-native readers of Shakespeare, particularly being located in a former British colony, we need to reflect on the significance of revisiting the works of the bard. William Shakespeare, the poet and playwright, was introduced to us as part of a colonial legacy. His writings, often, embrace the very principles and philosophies that validated imperial authority and certain cultural norms. The act of critically exploring Shakespeare allows us to make visible the techniques through which this was done.

## Key Concepts

Psychoanalytical criticism, Post colonial criticism, Marxist Criticism, Gender Studies Criticism

### 4.1.1 Discussion

#### ► Contextualising Shakespeare

The question of how to put William Shakespeare (1564-1616) into context has always followed the field of Shakespeare Studies. The body of works as well as the person behind them has fascinated readers and scholars across centuries for a variety of reasons. Traditional Shakespearean criticism studies these dimensions as features of his unique literary merit and his representation of the spirit of his age.

To a certain degree, the peculiarities of the period have played a part in his growth as a playwright and a poet.



- Elizabethan Era and English Renaissance

Shakespeare wrote during the heights of the Elizabethan era and the English Renaissance. Certain biographic and historical details emphasise the role played by the social climate of the time.

- Socio-cultural benefits

Shakespeare hailed from a common family without aristocratic titles or land ownership. Yet, unlike his father who was a successful glover, he was able to pursue theatre as a profession. Many critics consider this to be a sign that he benefitted from the social and cultural upheavals of the age.

- Urban and Technological advancement

The period also witnessed urbanisation, technological growth, and economic expansion. His move to the city of London, undoubtedly, allowed him to be close to the nerve centre of the Elizabethan stage. The development of print technology in the preceding period had immense impact on the reception of his plays and sonnets. This permitted the circulation of his works as publications that could be bought and read at leisure.

- Human-centric

Further, it is possible to trace some of the core values of the Renaissance in his works. The humanism that characterised the artistic and cultural movement to an extent, finds expression in his body of writings. For instance, Shakespearean plays display a renewed focus on the human condition. This is evidenced in some of his complex characters such as Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth. The audiences and readers see a multi-dimensional portrait of their greatness and failures, instead of a simplistic picture.

- Disregard of social position

These complicated characters are drawn from elite social ranks, from monarchs, nobility, and courtiers. The presentation of their raw emotions, mistakes, and imperfections identifies them as fallible human beings, despite their position on the Elizabethan social ladder. This manner of characterisation might have been made possible, due to the sense of humanism fostered during the period.

- Distinctive writing style

Aside from embracing some of the literary and cultural tendencies of the Elizabethan and Renaissance eras, Shakespeare's distinctive writing style earned him fame. His verses have been variously referred to as "sweet", "sugar'd", "mellifluous" and "honeyed". Many of his plays such as *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* were taken on



tour, translated, and performed in other languages during the author's lifetime.

► Shakespeare and 'Englishness'

In this way, we might view the preoccupation with Shakespeare as being rooted in how he was received during his day. Yet, this alone does not account for his ongoing acceptance in English literary circles as a 'national poet'. Unlike other Elizabethan and Renaissance writers, he has come to be regarded as central to the idea of 'Englishness', English culture, and national character.

► Theatre in Elizabethan culture

An important aspect to be considered when reading Shakespeare critically, is the cultural significance of the theatre in Elizabethan England. It offered a space for popular entertainment for the poor and the rich alike. While ordinary people found a way to escape their daily hardships by attending plays, the nobility and aristocracy saw the theatre as a way of spending their leisure time.

► Reflection of social values

Despite the theatre being frequented by members of the lower and elite classes alike, its structure reveals a sense of division between different social groups. The ordinary people or 'groundlings' stood in a pit near the stage, while upper class spectators would be seated in the cushioned gallery. In certain theatres, rich nobles could watch the play from chairs set on the side of the stage. Thus, in a way, the Elizabethan theatre reflected the values of Elizabethan society.

The Renaissance era had its fair share

of theatres and playhouses. Some of the most famous of these were *The Theatre*, *The Swan*, *The Rose*, *Blackfriar's Theatre*, and *The Globe*. Many of Shakespeare's plays were staged in these establishments and by several Elizabethan acting troupes. Explore them in detail at this link: [https:// writersinspire.org/content/elizabethan-jacobean-theatres](https://writersinspire.org/content/elizabethan-jacobean-theatres)

As with any other society, the Elizabethans too functioned within a hierarchy. The monarchy stood at the top, followed closely by the clergy. They were followed by different noble classes and landed gentry. The merchants, middle classes, and the poor comprised the lower rungs of society.

► 'Natural order' of things

This organisation of power was viewed as a reflection of the 'natural order' of things.

► Dissent

The beliefs, practices, and institutions of the age were, more often than not, deployed to uphold the legitimacy of the Elizabethan social order. Dissent against the authority of the crown, the privileges given to the elite classes, or indeed, against any aspect of the dominant way of life was demonised. 'Otherness' in thought or deed was often seen to represent a threat to the 'rightful' system itself.

► Contradictory space of theatres

It is in this ideological backdrop that the theatre gains additional significance in Elizabethan England. Built on the South bank of the Thames river, on the outskirts of the city, Elizabethan theatres were akin to double-edged swords. On the one hand, they offered a public arena where otherwise strictly regulated classes and sexes could mingle in however restricted a manner. On the other hand, they also seemed to promote unruly behaviour and anti-establishment opinions.

► Censorship

The monarchy was so cautious of the influence of the theatre on the public that there was a government branch called the Office of the Revels, to monitor and censor plays. It was their duty to ensure that no politically or socially sensitive material would be presented on the stage. Authorities would read the manuscript of the play before every theatre performance at court and take out offensive or subversive content.

► Anxiety about influence of theatres

In fact, authorities were deeply anxious about the power of the theatre to incite rebellion, to sway public opinion against the monarchy. Sir Henry Wotton, an Elizabethan courtier, has pointed out that plays have the potential for "making greatness familiar, if not ridiculous." Thus, the fear was that the theatre would unveil the aura of authenticity that surrounded state power.

► Instructional value of theatres

However, this predominant concern is addressed by Thomas Heywood in his *Apology for Actors*. Heywood reiterates that plays were written and performed so as to teach "subjects obedience to their king" by demonstrating the pathetic ends of those who have created "tumults, commotions and insurrections." Many Elizabethans subscribed to the view that theatres could instruct and educate the public in desirable ways.



Theatres in the Elizabethan era operated under a financial and cultural arrangement known as patronage. This is a system of economic support extended to acting troupes and playwrights by the monarchy and rich nobles of the Elizabethan society. There was an understanding that the flourishing of art, theatre, and music enriched the social status of the patrons, and created a sense of overall prosperity. Here is an in- depth exploration of Shakespeare's patrons: <https://politicworm.com/oxford/oxfords-life-in-a-nutshell-shakespeare/shakespeares-patrons/>

► Herald of English values

As observed by Kathleen Mcluskie, "Shakespeare... gave voice to the social views of the age..." On the surface, many of his works appeared to advocate for monarchy, divine right to rule, absolute power, English imperial aspirations and social norms. The glorification of the established order in his works has allowed Shakespeare to be accepted as a bearer/ herald of English values.

► Subversive elements

Yet, deeper readings of the bard show discrepancies within this neat understanding of his works. Characters such as Sir John Falstaff (*Henry IV, Parts I and II, and Henry V*), The Fool (*King Lear*) and Caliban (*The Tempest*) showcase a subversive understanding of state power and colonialism. Indeed, his Roman plays explore power in a manner that is instructive and cautionary to the crown and political authorities. So, it is vitally important that Shakespearean criticism function in grey areas, than in black-and-white spaces.

► Close Reading

The critical strategies for reading Shakespeare evolved across a period of time. Early twentieth century Shakespearean critiques were dominated by close reading, genre studies, and character studies. Close reading (I.A.Richards, 1920s) approaches poetry in terms of its formal, linguistic, and poetic features, without reference to author, date, historical context and cultural backdrop. The principle was to encounter literary works on their own terms.

While these foundational methods held immense value as tools for analysis, other critical perspectives have opened out powerful readings from where



- Ernest Jones - "Hamlet and Oedipus"

Shakespeare could be studied anew. A case in point would be Ernest Jones's essay, "Hamlet and Oedipus" (1899), which examines the psychology and internal motivations of Hamlet. In it, Jones argues that Hamlet is driven or controlled by the unconscious part of his mind.

- Oedipus Complex

Specifically, he identifies in Hamlet an example of the Oedipus Complex. According to the Freudian theory, Hamlet harbours a strong attraction towards his mother and has always resented his father for marrying her. So, his uncle has fulfilled Hamlet's repressed desire by killing his father and uniting with his mother. This is viewed as the root cause for Hamlet's hesitation in unflinchingly carrying out his revenge.

- Features of Psychoanalytical criticism

As we saw above, psychoanalytical criticism works by giving significance, in literary analysis, to the distinction between the conscious and unconscious mind. In order to interpret the inner life of the characters portrayed in the work, it pays close attention to unconscious motives and feelings. Psychoanalysis identifies the psychological context of the work, typically locating the individual's mental state as opposed to social structures such as class or race.

Despite the vast readership and literary scholarship that surrounds William Shakespeare, the question of his identity remains a puzzle. The evidence for his identity comes from details in his own works and from the commentary of his contemporaries. Many critics accept the standard biography of Shakespeare while others put forward different possibilities. Follow this link to discover the long history of investigations into who Shakespeare is: <https://lithub.com/the-ongoing-obsession-with-shakespeares-true-identity/>

- Ania Loomba - "Outsiders in Shakespeare"

Another intriguing example of a diverse critical reading of Shakespeare can be found in Ania Loomba's essay "Outsiders in Shakespeare". Loomba examines images of racial, national, religious, and cultural differences as they appear in Shakespeare's plays. In particular, she notes



how 'outsiders' to the Elizabethan society were utilised to represent otherness, wildness, and savagery. This is an instance of postcolonial criticism, wherein Annia Loomba exposes the notions of privilege that are attributed to western civilisation.

► Representation of Race

Loomba provides a wide range of textual evidences from various Shakespearean works. The depiction of the Prince of Morocco, Portia's suitor, in *The Merchant of Venice* is a poignant illustration of how racial features are employed to signify social undesirability. The Prince of Morocco's blackness is described as "the complexion of a devil" by Portia who fears and loathes it. In *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'Ethiope' is used as a derogatory term.

► Features of Post-colonial Criticism

Postcolonial criticism aims to reject claims of universalism attached to Western literatures and culture, often highlighting their inability to "empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference" (Peter Barry). As seen in Loomba's methodology, they explore how other cultures, races, and religions are represented in dominant literature. They emphasise the ways in which literature is silent or implicitly supportive of colonial discrimination, imperialism, and colonisation.

► Hugh Grady - Reification

Hugh Grady, an American scholar, approaches Shakespeare through the lens of Marxism. In one of his essays, he examines the concept of reification, the process of transforming an abstraction or an ideal into a concrete form (having Valentine's Day symbolise eternal love, for example). An excerpt from Ulysses's speech in *Troilus and Cressida* is taken up to further discuss this.

► Depiction of Capitalist system

In the final part of the speech, Ulysses attempts to warn about what will occur if the established order is not followed: "Then everything includes itself in Power, Power into will, will into appetite; And appetite, an universal wolf... Must make perforce an universal prey, And last eat himself up." Grady sees in the description of the 'universal wolf', full of power, will, and appetite, a powerful reification of the capitalist system. Grady sees this passage as a defence of the Elizabethan social system against the emerging capitalism of Shakespeare's age.

However, other marxist readings have described the ways in which Shakespearean works have bolstered

- Paul Innes  
— *Class and Society in Shakespeare: A Dictionary*

- Portrayal of social ranks

- Features of Marxist criticism

- Valerie Traub - Feminist Critique

- Marginalisation of women in literary representation

class divisions. Paul Innes has noted how different social ranks are categorised throughout Shakespeare's body of works in *Class and Society in Shakespeare: A Dictionary*. Specifically, he examines how marginalised sections of Elizabethan society are depicted.

He succeeds in showcasing, for example, how the term churl (referring to a feudal servant) becomes a class-based insult in Shakespeare. It is used as a derogatory reference to someone born in a 'low' social rank. Innes points out that the word appears in several Shakespearean plays, with the most telling usage being rendered by Suffolk in Henry VI. In the text, he insinuates that a member of the opposite faction was born out of a union between his mother and "some stern untutor'd churl".

As is clear from the discussions on Grady and Innes, Marxist literary critique has a direct focus on both capitalism and class divisions. It interprets literary works through an analysis of class struggle or social progression from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Often, they examine literary genres in the context of the society and writers in terms of the social- class to which they belong. This allows Marxist readings to locate literary works as the 'product' of the social assumptions and cultural values of the time in which it is 'consumed', or circulated and read.

In the essay "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare", Valerie Traub investigates how the author responded to gender and sexuality as factors of human identity and political power. She details how ideas about sex and gender that existed during the Renaissance era are expressed in several Shakespearean dramas. Different elements such as the patriarchal household, notions of chastity, and sexual morals are studied herein.

Such exercises of feminist criticism reflects on the representation of the different sexes, and challenges the marginalisation of women in literature. Traub highlights the manner in which plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew* instructs women to be subservient in their domestic and public roles. This makes clear the patriarchal ideological base of seemingly 'neutral' works of literature.



- Features of Feminist criticism

As such feminist criticism revisits the canon, positioning women's experience and identity as central. It examines the role of language and literature in constructing power relations that sustain patriarchy and the social othering of women. It uses a wide range of approaches and theories to tease out the gendered nature of literary representation.

- Stephen Greenblatt - Self-fashioning

A radically different reading of Shakespeare and the Renaissance era emerged with the work of Stephen Greenblatt. In his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, he notes that questions surrounding self-identity heavily influenced the culture of this period. In particular, he studies *self-fashioning* as the process of constructing identity in tune with a set of socially acceptable standards and a conscious aspiration towards imitating a praised model in society is examined.

- Parallel reading of literary and non-literary

In order to bring out the different ways in which literature engages with self-fashioning, Greenblatt reads in parallel literary and non-literary texts, such as historical documents. He focuses attention on how identity practices maintain structures of power. For example, his reading of *Othello* reveals how male sexual anxieties are perpetuated by patriarchal self-fashioning in the Renaissance era.

- Features of New Historicism

This is an instance of a New Historicist critique where history and literature are given equal weightage, and understood as aspects that inform each other. This deviates from the conventional model of seeing literary texts as a matter of creative genius and aesthetics. Rather, literature becomes understood as a product of the social, political, cultural, and intellectual conditions at the time of its production and circulation.

- Alan Sinfield - Theatre and ideology

Another key rethinking of Shakespeare is seen in Alan Sinfield's study "Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology." In it, he examines the contemporary rise to prominence of the Royal Shakespeare Company, a British theatre group. Their role in constructing the concept of 'Shakespeare' as a powerful cultural token in the specific political conditions of postwar Britain is examined.

Sinfield highlights the fact that several of Shakespeare's plays were rewritten, and scenes often rearranged, to convey the author's acceptance of order. For instance, the death of certain characters were moved to the end of the play so as to serve a moral message. Further, the

- Functioning of RSC as institution

very purpose of the RSC, which was to propagate theatre to the masses, is deconstructed. Sinfield challenges the assumption that it would be desirable to distribute high or elite culture amongst the public, as the RSC does with its selection of plays from Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

- Features of Cultural Materialism

This is a clear illustration of cultural materialism, where the focus is on recovering the context of exploitation or history from which a literary text or discourse emerges. As seen above, the work's transmission in the present and its politics are explored in depth. This methodology combines attention to historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis.

## Summarised Overview

This unit explores the question of critically revisiting William Shakespeare, outside of conventional criticism. In the beginning, it enumerates the various queries that are raised when approaching the author. This includes the issue of his popularity, his ability to capture the spirit of his age, and the reception of his individual talent. However, these points alone do not explain his current status as a literary icon.

The cultural significance of the theatre and Shakespeare's engagement within the socio-cultural and political sphere is an important aspect. However, a range of theoretical approaches have changed the perception of Shakespeare. This includes psychoanalytical criticism, postcolonial criticism, Marxist criticism, Feminist criticism, New Historicist and Cultural Materialist criticism. They establish the need for continued investigations.

## Assignments

1. What is the cultural significance of the theatre in Elizabethan England?
2. Detail some of the features of psychoanalytic criticism with reference to Ernest Jones.
3. List examples of marginalised representations of 'Outsiders' in Shakespeare as discussed by Ania Loomba.
4. What are some of the specific concerns of Marxist literary criticism?
5. According to Valerie Traub, how are women portrayed in *The Taming of the Shrew*?





6. What is *Self-Fashioning*? How does New Historicism discuss the concept with relation to *Othello*?
7. Detail Alan Sinfield's critique of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

## Suggested Reading

1. de Grazia, Margaret and Stanley Wells. editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
2. Carter, Ronald and John Rae. *The Routledge History of Literature in England*. Routledge, 2007.
3. Gajowski, Evelyn. editor. *The Arden Research Handbook on Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*. The Arden Shakespeare, 2021.

## Reference

1. Carter, Ronald and John Rae. *The Routledge History of Literature in England*. Routledge, 2007.
2. Gajowski, Evelyn. editor. *The Arden Research Handbook on Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*. The Arden Shakespeare, 2021.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.



## Unit 2

# Critiquing Shakespearean Drama

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ possess a general insight into how the structure and conventions of the Elizabethan theatre influenced Shakespearean Drama
- ▶ define and detail some of the major classifications of Shakespearean plays
- ▶ critically contextualise some of the salient features of Shakespearean plays
- ▶ analyse some of the predominant themes and dramatic techniques employed in Shakespearean drama

### Background

Often placed at the forefront of the English literary canon, the Shakespearean drama has always been explored for the philosophies, life lessons, and other insights it offers. Either taken as a genre or as different genres mediated by a unique playwright, the 37 existing plays have been at the centre of wide-ranging critical discussions for many years.

The act of critically reading a Shakespearean play supposes an appropriate and valid response at the end. It involves coming to terms with the language of the play, often versified, dense, and old-fashioned. It requires us to understand the broad outline of the drama, contextualising the roles of the characters, identifying different dramatic devices, and seeing how all of these elements fit into the final product.

The current unit explores various strategies for critically reading Shakespearean plays, with special reference to the three works prescribed in Module 2. Particularly, it would provide perspectives through which a reader could undertake a deeper study of the plays. This includes a more thorough delineation of stage craft, genre, and themes.



# Keywords

Elizabethan Stage, Dramatic conventions, Classification, Genre

## 4.2.1 Discussion

### ► Framework

A viable starting point for studying a Shakespearean play is the shared conventions of drama of the writer's time. This includes the structure of the stage as well as that of the play. Both these elements exert influence on each other. They determine how a play is shaped and how it is eventually performed. The structure of the play, along with a combination of dramatic devices and themes, add to this.

### ► Material conditions

The evolution of the Elizabethan stage in terms of physical features and settings had a tremendous influence on Shakespeare's dramatic output. It has to be noted that the dramas of earlier ages, such as the mystery and morality plays, were severely limited in their portrayal of human nature and psychology. As opposed to this, Shakespearean plays pay renewed attention to the interior life of characters. The opportunity to do so arose as a result of the peculiarities of the Elizabethan stage.

### ► Structure

The typical Elizabethan stage consisted of a raised platform, often as large as 40 square feet, which jutted out to the middle of the yard. The spectators would surround it on all three sides. The area immediately behind the platform would function as the main stage. It would be sheltered by a roof, called "the shadow" or "the heavens". The roof was a vital space that often concealed an upper area from which objects and props could be raised or lowered.

### ► Multiple purposes

At the end of the stage was a multi-level construction with two large doors leading to the stage. There was a space for "discoveries" of characters who were hidden or listening in secret, to take the plot forward. This was probably between the doors. The top level of the construction could function as a balcony, viewing gallery, or fort, depending on whether the scene called for it.

The presence of the platform, inner main stage, and upper stage level made movement possible in all directions. It enriched the range and complexity of actions



► Imagination

that could be presented in dramatic plots. Since there were no curtains or other ways to veil the stage completely from the audience, only the most essential props were allowed on stage. It is clear that the members of the audience were required to imagine the settings and stage properties for most part of the performance.

► Social divisions

The audience were seated at different levels that reflected their social status. The aristocracy and the nobility, who wielded the most economic and cultural power, would be seated in balconies and in the highest parts of the gallery. Wealthy merchants and landed gentry would occupy the positions below them. Commoners who had the means to purchase tickets would throng in the area between the jutting platform and the galleries. They would have to stand, and were referred to as 'groundlings'.

► Influence

These specific arrangements went a long way in moulding the structure of the Shakespearean play. For instance, since there was no way to hide the stage from the audience, whenever a death happens onstage, the playwright had to plot events in such a way that the body was eventually carried out by the characters. For instance, in *Henry IV*, when Prince Hal kills Hotspur, Falstaff later discovers the body and carries it off-stage. This allows the next scene to be acted out without disruption.

► Provision for context

The barrenness of the stage in terms of props was balanced with elaborate costumes and language. The social status of characters could be understood from their costumes, as well as the richness of their dialogue. Most characters spoke in a manner that was heavy with imagery and allusions, allowing audiences to understand or imagine the settings of the scene.

In other words, even as Shakespearean plays followed the pattern of exposition, complication, and resolution, the details of the performance were controlled by consideration of stage features. The plays fit into a five-act structure, with each act being sub-divided into scenes. Each of the acts roughly performed the following functions:

1. Act 1 operates as the *exposition*. Here, the audience is made aware of the general setting, characters are developed, and a conflict is introduced.
2. Act 2 serves to escalate the *rising action* or *complication*.



Here, the rising action brings in complications and the protagonist encounters various obstacles and setbacks.

► Purpose of Acts

3. Act 3 usually marks the *climax* of the play. Here, the action and narrative reaches a turning point, building tension and interest.
4. Act 4 generally functions to denote *falling action*. Here, the story is coming to an end, and any unknown details or loose plot twists are dealt with.
5. Act 5 offers a *denouement or resolution*. Here, conflicts and tensions that drove the first four acts are resolved. Often, this part of the play brings out a moral or a philosophical lesson.

► Concept of order

Importantly, Shakespearean plays emphasise a kind of order that prevails at the beginning of the play. As the drama progresses, this order is thrown into chaos. Depending on the type of play, the results of this chaos may vary. In a romantic comedy, the eventual result would be a complete resolution of the tensions. In tragedies, the dissolution of this order is so complete that violence occurs and the main characters meet with death. So the message that the audience takes home differs from play to play.

As noted by John Peck and Martin Coyle, this gives us a way of contextualising all aspects of the play as a reflection of the conflict between the ideal of order and its disruption. This includes the action, characters, their speech, the language used, and the themes explored. Here, we must note that all plays do not strictly adhere to this format. The functions of acts may overlap in some cases, or they may be entirely different according to the context. But, in the broad sense of structure, most Shakespearean plays share these conventions.

► Social ideal

Traditionally, Shakespeare's plays have been classified into four: Comedies, Histories, Roman Plays, and Tragedies. Though not completely water-tight, these divisions are based on the stories, themes, and overall tone of the plays. While several other categories have been added in recent years, these four remain the standard types.



The nineteenth-century Shakespearean critic, F.S. Boas, famously introduced the classification known as *Problem Plays*. Using this term, he refers mainly to three works of Shakespeare that are difficult to be put into any conventional type. The plays are *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. They have also been called dark comedies.

#### ► Categories

Shakespearean comedies are those plays in which dramatic conflict and narrative tension are resolved happily. They are characterised by a comic or satiric tone, with the depiction of amusing or entertaining people and incidents. The protagonists of comedies often triumph over adversity to reach a happy ending.

#### ► Resolution

Consider the play, *Twelfth Night* in this regard. It employs features that are traditionally associated with Shakespearean comedies, such as mistaken identities, humorous misconceptions, physical comedy, and a happy ending. Typically, as in this play, Shakespeare's comedies end with a wedding. The two sets of lovers, Olivia and Sebastian, and Viola and Orsino are united.

#### ► Happy ending

Other comedic aspects in the play are the misunderstandings and the complications that initially keep the lovers apart. Since Viola is pretending to be a man named Cesario, she cannot return Olivia's interest. At the same time, her own attraction towards Orsino is disrupted because of her playacting as Cesario. It is only when her true identity is revealed that the lovers can be united with their preferred partners.

#### ► True identity

The silliness and fun that is generated as a result of the farcical plot, cross-dressing, and series of misunderstandings is a distinguishing mark of comedies. While the protagonists pursue wrong partners, minor characters such as the Fool, Sir Toby Belch, and Sir Andrew engage in comic relief. They come up with rhymes, songs, innuendoes, and physical antics that are meant to cause mirth.

#### ► Tone

#### ► Romanticisation

*Twelfth Night* is often cast as a romantic comedy because the theme of love is so dominating in the play. Its concept is built on the idea of love at first sight, as seen

in Olivia's statement: "Even so quickly may one catch the plague." This idea of romantic love runs against the notion of reason, and is based on passion.

#### ► Setting

The mysterious island of Illyria is a significant component of the plot. The scene of action is distant and remote, and exists only in imagination. In a sense, this adds to the romantic tone of the play and encourages the audience to suspend their disbelief. Had the location been a familiar one such as London or Venice, some of the comic aspects of the plot might have seemed excessive.

#### ► Conflict

In fact, it is possible to trace a confrontation between emotion and reason in the play. Within the plot, we see the characters struggle with their deep passions and the realities of their life. At the level of structure, the dramatist's imagination has to contend with the audience's sense of reality.

#### ► Transformation

Despite the mirthful and farcical elements of the narrative, the play engages a serious philosophical question about the nature of desire. It presents the idea that romantic desire, though changing, may be strong enough to overturn the social order. The noble-born Olivia falls in love with Cesario, who is a servant, whereas Duke Orsino feels attracted to Cesario despite the fact that he is a boy. The lovers also shift the object of their affection easily as their passion shifts. In other words, desire in the play is an aspect that wreaks havoc on everything that is socially relevant such as class, gender, and so on.

However, the happy ending of the play is reserved for the noble-born characters. Malvolio, being of a lower social station, is unable to win over Olivia. Further, many critics look at Antonio's feelings for Sebastian as being homoerotic in nature. They remain unrequited in the play. Thus, the happy ending of the play actually restores the social order.

As is evident from this, some of the most common features of Shakespearean comedy are evident here:

1. Comic tone and language
2. Mistaken identities or misconceptions
3. Physical comedy



► Social order intact

► Commonalities

4. Conflict of reason and emotion
5. Fate or chance
6. Idyllic settings
7. Separation and reconciliation
8. Happy endings

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, discusses three classical unities that are to be followed in drama, specifically tragedy. According to this, plays were to represent a single action that takes place over the course of a single day, at the same location. These were known as the unities of action, time, and place. *Twelfth Night* does not follow these unities.



Fig. 4.2.1 From a performance of *Twelfth Night*, The Belasco Theatre, New York, 2013. Photo by Ralph H. Daily.

► Tragic hero

Shakespearean tragedies, while following his typical dramatic structure, are more serious and elevated in tone. Its protagonists are noble, but flawed, individuals who commit a grave error. Their mistake leads them on a downward spiral and causes a shift in the established order. While normalcy is restored at the end of the play, tragic protagonists often pay for their miscalculations with their life.

A short look at the plot of *Hamlet* shows us how the play becomes a tragedy. The drama opens with a few guards

► Revenge

talking about a ghost who resembles Hamlet's father, the former king of Denmark. The ghost reveals that the King was murdered by Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, who is currently the King and married to Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. The Ghost instructs Hamlet to avenge his death.

► Tragic flaw

Due to his own confusion and doubt, Hamlet delays killing Claudius. He spends a long time reflecting on his inability to take revenge. When he does set out to act, he accidentally kills Polonius, the father of his lover, Ophelia. He is banished to England, apparently mad. Ophelia kills herself, unable to bear the grief of her father's death and her lover's exile.

► Ending

Upon his return to Denmark, Hamlet enters into a duel with Polonius' son, Laertes, who kills him with a poisoned sword. Having understood that his suspicions about Claudius were right, he kills Claudius before dying. Gertrude also dies after drinking from a poisoned cup.

► Question

In the beginning, the Ghost hints at something that has disturbed the established order — the murder of Hamlet's father. This leads to Hamlet's quest to justify the wrong and confront the chaos before him. The audience is presented with the question of how an unnatural act such as a man murdering his brother, or an incestuous marriage (Uncle marrying mother) impacts the moral fabric of the world around them.

► Symbolic

This dichotomy of good and evil is a vital feature of the Shakespearean tragedy. The struggles of the protagonist mirror the greater cosmic battle. Hamlet, in trying to make sense of the Ghost's revelation, is also trying to make sense of the potential for evil in humans. It is ironic that revenge, and the act of murder, is necessary for rectifying the same.

► Empathetic representation

Even as Hamlet hesitates to carry out the murder, and later accidentally murders the unfortunate Polonius, the audience sympathises with him to a great extent. This is, in part, because Hamlet represents the figure of the 'tragic hero'. As mentioned earlier, he is a 'noble' individual, who possesses a singular flawed quality that brings about his downfall.

This tragic flaw or 'Hamartia' in Hamlet is often considered to be his indecisiveness or inaction. He does



► Weakness

not take appropriate action after the Ghost's revelation of the murder, or even later when opportunities present themselves. It is for this reason that he pays heavily as the play progresses. This creates an understanding of the human condition as well.

► Rectification

The concept of revenge as a righteous act is played out in the narrative of *Hamlet*. It is equated with justifying a wrong, and setting the disordered moral system on its right path. The plot revolves around Hamlet's emotional and psychological preparations for revenge. Yet, when he finally achieves the goal of killing his stepfather, it happens because Claudius's plan to murder Hamlet backfires. Thus the role of fate or chance is also explored.

The theme of righteous revenge can be found in a long line of works, as early as classical Greek and Roman plays. The revenge tragedy as a genre is often credited to Seneca, a Roman politician and philosopher, who supposedly wrote a series of ten plays revolving around plots of bloodthirsty revenge. Explore in detail at this link: <https://www.britannica.com/art/Senecan-tragedy>

► Supernatural interventions

The presence of the ghost is another classic element of the Shakespearean tragedy. It appears that Hamlet's moral choices are ordained by fate. He has no choice but to carry out the revenge so that the ghost or the spirit of his father may be laid to rest.

As we can understand from the discussion above, the major characteristics of the Shakespearean tragedy include:

1. A dichotomy of good and evil
2. A tragic hero
3. Tragic flaw
4. Fate or chance
5. Revenge
6. Supernatural elements

► Features

Herein, we must consider the purpose of tragic drama, with reference to *Hamlet*. The play deals with a range of themes such as revenge, morality, corruption, conscience, justice, love, and the evil nature of humans. Combined



together, and presented in this particular fashion, these themes stand to convey a particular message — the possible disorderliness of life. It is this disorder that is experienced by Hamlet, and that which forces him into conflict. The audience is meant to witness this downfall and take away moral and philosophical lessons from it.

► Reason

Aristotle defines the effect of true tragedy on the spectator as a process of *Catharsis* or emotional purgation. Tragedies, in his opinion, should make the audiences experience repressed emotions such as fear and pity, thereby giving them a psychological release. Find out more about his theory here: <https://www.britannica.com/art/catharsis-criticism>

► Multiple genres

*Antony and Cleopatra* is a play of Shakespeare that challenges many of the classifications that it is put into. Traditionally, it is categorised as a Roman play or a history play in that it focuses on a character from Roman history. So, it reimagines and fictionalises individuals and historical events. However, this aspect alone does not define the work.

► Duty and passion

At its core, the play presents a conflicted picture of Antony, now one of the Roman triumvirate. He struggles between his political purpose and his love for Cleopatra. This leads to a war between Rome, led by Octavius Caesar, and Egypt, marshalled by Antony and Cleopatra. Based on our understanding of order in Shakespeare, we can see the disruption that has been posed.

► Generic outcome

At the end of the play, believing Cleopatra to be dead, Antony kills himself. Consequently, Cleopatra, too, kills herself. The deaths of the protagonists bring in a tragic element to the play. In the manner of other Shakespearean tragedies, these deaths are connected to Antony's tragic flaw. He errs in neglecting his obligations and duties for the sake of passion.

► Pairing

Yet, there are comic overtones within the tragic plot of the play. The theme of two opposites desiring each other is often a mainstay of comic stories. Many critics have suggested that it is only the fatal outcome of their desire that transforms the play into a tragedy. Otherwise, what is seen as a tragic flaw would have been seen as a passionate commitment.



► Centrality of theme

At the same time, the narrative uses opulent, extravagant language to describe the romance between Antony and Cleopatra. Even as we are aware of the crisis looming in the background, the play creates a sense of the genuine human passions at play. While the outcome of the romance is tragic, the mode of its representation celebrates the emotion. In this way, the work focuses on love in a way that Shakespearean romances often do. In short, *Antony and Cleopatra* reveals the intertwining of different genres.

► Open-ended

A frequent query that accompanies the play is whether it is a condemnation of irresponsible passion or a celebration of magnificent love. There are elements in the play that make both readings possible. Due to its hybrid form, conclusive statements about its philosophical stands cannot be made. Rather, we see a creative, complicated exploration of themes that has provoked readers across centuries.

## Summarised Overview

The current unit provides a detailed account of the various critical approaches that may be used to contextualise the plays prescribed for study. It specifies the importance of dramatic language, characterisation, conventions of stage, devices, and themes in critically analysing them. The interconnections between the physical features of the Elizabethan stage and the structure of the Shakespearean play are also detailed. It further looks at how the concept of social order is relevant in Shakespearean drama and the ways in which specific genres use the idea. Additionally, it explores selected plays as examples of the various genres, illustrating how they might be critically approached and studied.

## Assignments

1. What are the different steps involved in formulating a critique of Shakespearean plays?
2. Describe the physical features of the Elizabethan stage.
3. How did Elizabethan stage features influence Shakespearean plays?
4. Briefly explain the five-act structure of the Shakespearean play.

5. How is the concept of order employed in Shakespearean drama?
6. Which are the four types of Shakespearean plays?
7. Consider *Twelfth Night* as a Shakespearean comedy.
8. Examine *Hamlet* as a Shakespearean tragedy.
9. Detail the intermixing of different dramatic types in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

## Suggested Reading

1. Coyle, Martin, and John Peck. *How to Study a Shakespearean Play*. Macmillan, 1985.
2. Grazia, Margaret de, and Stanley Wells. eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge UP, 2001.

## Reference

1. Coyle, Martin, and John Peck. *How to Study a Shakespearean Play*. Macmillan, 1985.
2. Grazia, Margaret de, and Stanley Wells. eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge UP, 2001.



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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1.

## Unit 3

# Reading the Shakespearean Sonnet

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ acquire a general insight into the evolution of the Sonnet form
- ▶ describe the socio-political contexts that influenced the Shakespearean sonnet
- ▶ analyse some of the major stylistic elements and themes in the Shakespearean sonnet
- ▶ critically explore Shakespeare's development and practice of the genre

### Background

The literary history of the sonnet extends well beyond William Shakespeare and Renaissance England. The poetic form originated in Italy, drawing its name from the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning 'little song'. Its inventor, Giacomo da Lentini, was an official poet in the Sicilian court of Emperor Frederick II. The sonnet has certainly travelled a long way from its beginnings.

Traditionally, the sonnet refers to a fourteen-lined poem, written in iambic pentameter. It employs one of several possible rhyme schemes, depending on its style. Further, the genre follows a specific thematic organisation. Most often, the sonnet makes a proposition or an argument that is resolved within its rigid structure. While these general characteristics of the sonnet remain the same, the form has been used in many different ways by diverse writers over time and space.

It has been said that the sonnet is one of the most well-travelled of poetic forms. This stands testament to the versatility of the genre. It carries features of the lyric, in its brevity and ability to express intense personal emotion (sometimes in a manner suggestive of a song). The art of dialogue and persuasion are vital in a sonnet since it presents or argues out a case. Further, sonnets commonly use the volta, a sharp change in poetic perspective, to play out differing opinions.

One of the earliest poets to master the genre was Francesco Petrarca or



Petrarch (1304-1374), an Italian writer of verse. His sublime use of the sonnet as a vehicle of courtly and romantic love made the form popular in his time. The general conventions, rhyme scheme, and structural order that Petrarch followed is considered to be the classical form of the sonnet. Though he did not invent it, and indeed borrowed it from other poets, this specific variation is named the Petrarchan sonnet.

The Petrarchan sonnet consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentametre, divided into two stanzas of eight and six lines. The first stanza of eight lines is called the octave, and it follows the rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA. The second stanza of six lines is called the sestet, and its rhyme scheme is CDCDCD or CDECDE. The octave would state a problem, ask a question, or express conflict, whereas the sestet would present a solution, an answer, or would reconcile the tension.

While the Petrarchan model remained the conventional form, the sonnet acquired different features over time, as it travelled across various cultures. One of the most discussed variations of the genre is the Shakespearean sonnet or the 'English sonnet'. Just as with Petrarch, the invention of this particular form is credited to another English poet of the early Renaissance era. However, Shakespeare's sublime use of the sonnet in the English literary canon has ensured that it is associated with his name.

## Keywords

Petrarchan Sonnet, English Sonnet, Publication History, Classification of sonnets, Formal interpretation, Thematic analysis.

### 4.3.1 Discussion

#### ► Circulation of form

The sonnet form, despite its foreign origins, arrived on English shores in the 1530s. The names of Sir Thomas Wyatt, English ambassador, and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, are synonymous with the development of the genre in English. It was the publication of their sonnets in *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) that popularised the form in England.

Sir Thomas Wyatt contributed to the advancement of the sonnet in English by translating Petrarch's sonnets, and writing his own in the model of the Italian poet. His poetry drew attention to the form as suited to expressions of love and courtly romance. Another reason that Wyatt's sonnets



### ► Contributions

remained much discussed is because they professed love to Anne Boleyn, a significant figure in English political history.

The course of English history was changed by King Henry VIII's desire for Anne Boleyn, an elegant and well spoken young woman who returned from France in 1522. She was offered the title of the sovereign's chief mistress, but refused to take it up. However, this solidified the king's interest in her, and soon, his interests were focused on marrying her. As Henry VIII was already married to Catherine of Aragon, and the Catholic Church forbade divorce, the king broke away from Papal rule. He took control of the English Church and arranged for this marriage to Catherine to be annulled. This paved the way for his union with Anne Boleyn to be recognised as valid. Explore more of this part of English history here: [https:// www.britannica.com/biography/Anne-Boleyn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anne-Boleyn)

### ► Contributions

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, played a vital role in the development of the genre. A military campaigner and courtier to Henry VIII, he was heavily involved in the political turmoil of his age. In fact, most of his poetry came to be written during his confinement at Windsor, under the charge of treason. Surrey acknowledged the mastery of Wyatt, and composed his own translations of Petrarch that were closer to the Italian original.

### ► Transformation

In the matter of composing his own sonnets, however, Surrey made variations to the classical Petrarchan model. He changed the stanza structure and rhyme scheme in a way that better suited the rhythm of the English language. Instead of dividing his sonnets into octaves and sestets, he employed three quatrains (stanzas of four lines) and a concluding couplet (stanza of two lines). Surrey followed the rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. This would become known as the 'English Sonnet'.

Despite changes in certain formal aspects, four features remained constant in the anatomy of the sonnet over the course of its evolution:

- (i) Number of lines
- (ii) Standardised rhyme scheme



(iii) Consistent metre

(iv) Volta or 'turn'

► Consistent features

Take, for instance, the Earl of Surrey's sonnet titled "Set me whereas..." Fourteen lines in length, it follows the rhyme scheme of the English sonnet. Its opening line is as follows: *Set me/ whereas/ the sun/ doth parch/ the green.* As you can see, the ten syllables in the line are ordered in a particular pattern where unstressed syllables alternate with stressed ones (boldened). This pairing of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable is known as an *iamb*. Since there are five such pairs, the above line is said to be composed in *iambic pentameter*. This poetic metre imitates the natural cadence of English speech, and is one of the most used in English poetry.

► Metrical pattern

Poetic metre refers to the rhythmic structure of verse or lines in a poem. Depending on whether a poem uses metre or not, or what kind of metre is used, poetry may take on a musical or conversational quality. Here is a list of some prominently used metres in the English language:

| Style      | Type       | Stress Pattern<br>U - Unstressed/<br>Stressed | Number of<br>Syllables |
|------------|------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Iambic     | Iamb       | U/                                            | 2                      |
| Trochaic   | Trochee    | /U                                            | 2                      |
| Spondaic   | Spondee    | //                                            | 2                      |
| Phyrric    | Phyrric    | UU                                            | 2                      |
| Anapestic  | Anapest    | /UU                                           | 3                      |
| Dactylic   | Dactyl     | UU/                                           | 3                      |
| Amphibraic | Amphibraic | U/U                                           | 3                      |
| Amphimacer | Amphimacer | /U/                                           | 3                      |

► Reversal

Another feature that accompanied the form over the years, is the use of the *volta* or the 'turn'. This is a poetic device that indicates a thematic, emotional, or philosophical reversal within the text of the poem. Sometimes, it functions as a revelation or as a reconciliation of tension. In the English sonnet, the rhyming couplet usually contains the *volta*.

The *Volta* is a poetic device that reverses meaning and creates irony. It is widely used in sonnets, haikus, sijos, and other poetic types. Depending on how it has been used, it creates different effects within the poem. Go to this link to explore diverse examples of the usage of the volta: <https://literarydevices.net/volta/>

#### ► Representation

The traditional themes of the sonnet include love, courtly romance, longing, yearning for the beloved, and reflections connected to the same. This continued from the Italian variation down to the English model. While it was certainly not the only form of love poetry in the Elizabethan age, it was generally understood to be one that required great technical skill. The sonnet's focus on relating the experience of desire and inner conflict of the speaker in such a short, structured way made them a unique literary exercise.

#### ► Convention

In the larger English canon, well before Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney composed a collection of sonnets titled *Astrophil and Stella* (1591). It consisted of 108 sonnets that described Astrophil's unrequited love for Stella. In 1595, Edmund Spenser published his sonnet sequence *Amoretti*, addressing his love for his future-wife. Thus, the sonnet was clearly a part of Elizabethan love conventions, especially among the upper echelons of society.

#### ► Social conditions

William Shakespeare's sonnets were first published as a Quarto in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, though they were probably composed in the 1590s. The latter date is suggested because a severe plague outbreak shut down London theatres in 1593 and 1594. Further, there was growing support for the puritan perspective that theatres were immoral spaces, and needed to be regulated or shut down entirely. Many critics consider it likely that Shakespeare could have turned to poetry during this uncertain period.

#### ► Publication

The sonnet sequence was titled *Shake-speares Sonnets. Neuer before Imprinted*. [Shakespeare's Sonnets. Never Before Imprinted]. It consisted of 154 consecutively numbered sonnets and a long narrative poem entitled "A Lover's Complaint". Individual sonnets are referred to by their assigned number instead of titles. The specification that this work contains sonnets that have never before been



printed suggests that some of Shakespeare's sonnets may have been printed before.

#### ► Authorisation

There is no direct evidence to say that Shakespeare authorised the publication of his sonnets by Thorpe or that he was involved in numbering and ordering the sonnets. Early scholarly opinion was that Thomas Thorpe was a "disreputable pirate" who published Shakespeare's sonnets without consultation or permission. However, in the 1980s, Katherine Duncan-Jones dismantled this view by pointing out that Thorpe had published the works of many popular writers of the age including Ben Jonson. She pointed out that the publication style of the sonnet sequence closely resembled that of other collections of sonnets during the 1590s. Further, she noted that many Elizabethan sonnet series ended in a poem of narrative complaint as seen with "A Lover's Complaint". Duncan-Jones also emphasises many thematic and structural connections between the different sonnets within the collection that makes it possible that there was a coherent arrangement of the works.

A matter of serious contention, even today, is the identity of the individual to whom the sonnets are dedicated. After the title page of Thorpe's Quarto, the following words are printed:

#### ► Identity

It is generally considered that the term 'onlie begetter' refers either to the person who inspired Shakespeare to write the sonnets. There are many who believe that the initials W.H. stands for William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke or for Henry Wriothesley, a generous patron of the poet. Several others have suggested that the reference is to the person who 'procured' or collected the sonnets for Thorpe — William Hall. As such, there is no definitive answer to this question.

In terms of approaching the sonnets themselves, we need to familiarise ourselves with their formal style and thematic classification. In terms of poetic form, Shakespeare employed the 'English sonnet' made popular by Surrey. Except for three poems (sonnet 99, 126, and 145), the remaining 151 follow the scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. Though the poems revolve around love and desire, they branch out to include several diverse reflections on the nature of romance, beauty, time, sexual attraction, and art.



► Format

The arrangement of the sonnets has provoked some readers and critics to see them as a coherent, continuous narrative. This is based on the addressee of the sonnets. The most popular categorisation ranges from:

- Sonnets 1-126: The Fair Youth Sequence
- Sonnets 127-154: The Dark Lady Sequence

► Arrangement of theme

There are certain variations of theme within these broad classifications. For instance, in Sonnets 1-17, the poet urges the Fair Youth to marry and beget children. In the sequence from 78-86, a 'rival poet' emerges who appears to be competing for the Fair Youth's attention and patronage. Several poems allude to a love triangle between the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady, and the speaker (sonnets 40-42, 144 etc). There are many theories as to the real-life identities of these three figures as well as readings that suggest that their presences are symbolic only.

► Nature of relationship

The Fair Youth sequence often highlights the speaker's friendship and platonic love for the youth. Idealised attributes of the Elizabethan age, such as beauty, courtly behaviour, accomplished life, and elite social station, are associated with him. The tone of the poems varies between admiration, sensual attraction, a sense of betrayal, and jealousy.

► Contrasting portrayals

While the cultural ideals of the Elizabethan era appear to be embodied in the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady seems to deviate from this. The Dark Lady sequence often hints at a passionate relationship centred on sensuality and desire. Her beauty is depicted as unconventional for the time, with her complexion described as "dark as night". As the sequence progresses, the relationship between the speaker and the Dark Lady takes on conflicted overtones. The lady is deemed to be untrustworthy and manipulative, often taking lovers other than the speaker.

► Recurring ideas

Let us now take up Sonnets 18 and 55, prescribed for study in Block 2 of this course. According to the above classification, both poems fall under the first sequence. The philosophical message of the poems is then addressed to the persona of the Fair Youth. The underlying themes of love, art, and immortality are present in both sonnets, though explored differently.



Given that Shakespeare places the 'Fair Youth' as one of the central objects of admiration and desire in his sonnet sequence, there have been many discussions about the poet's sexuality. There is constant disagreement about whether these poems signify male friendship in the renaissance, a celebration of nonsexual, Platonic love, or a homoerotic/bisexual love affair. Visit this link for more critical discussions on the same: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare/Sexuality>

eternal beauty of the beloved may be preserved. The speaker notes how seasons and objects in nature such as the sun or trees often fade away or lose their beauty. Unlike those things, the "eternal summer" of the beloved would remain memorialised in the verses of the poet. The "eternal lines" of the sonnet itself becomes a vessel for the Fair Youth to live on. The speaker ends by referring to the remembrance provided by art:

*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,*

*So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

#### ► Function of Art

Sonnet 55 presents the relationship between the speaker, his beloved, and poetry along very similar lines. However, the intimate depiction of nature in Sonnet 18 is replaced by civilisational imagery. Instead of summer, buds, and the sun, the speaker introduces marble, gilded monuments, masonry, and war. He argues that while time and wars may wipe out memories and monuments, they would never touch the "living record" of the beloved's memory. Since the "powerful rhyme" encapsulates the lover, the concluding couplet states:

*So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,*

*You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.*

#### ► Memorialisation

Outwardly, both sonnets appear to be statements of praise intended for the lover. This ties into the status of the sonnet as a conventional expression of romantic interest at the time. Sonnets 18 and 55 convey those idealised emotions that are typically attached to quaint, courtly notions of love. The refined language of these sonnets correspond to the speaker's idealisation of the Fair Youth.



► Idealised love

The exaggerated comparisons of the beloved, in both sonnets, are borrowed from existing conventions of Renaissance and Elizabethan love poetry. The opening lines of Sonnet 18, for illustration, compares the Fair Youth with a summer's day — but finds that he is, in fact, far more pleasant than the season. In Sonnet 55, the speaker claims that his poetry would allow his lover to “pace forth” against death. These far-fetched analogies and hyperbolic language were part and parcel of the voicing of love within the sonnet genre.

► Genre and language

On a deeper level, both sonnets form part of a commentary on the nature of the genre itself. The works highlight the power of literature and art to defy time, living on long after their subjects have been lost to the past. This reflection on the power of the form to immortalise the beloved appears to be a validation of the genre, rooted in the fact that the speaker's artistry arises out of love.

► Validation

On the other hand, there is a considerable shift in tone and diction as we arrive at Sonnet 130. It is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing works in the Dark Lady sequence. It parodies the sensational language of the sonnet and love poetry, mocking the far-flung comparisons and unattainable ideals of the genre. Rather than project the Dark Lady as an exemplary object of affection, the sonnet establishes her as an ordinary woman with flaws and imperfections.

► Realistic

The sonnet opens by dismantling high-sounding declarations of the beloved's beauty. Her eyes are not like the sun, the coral is far redder than her lips, and there are no roses in her cheeks. Despite moving away from such hyperbole, the speaker considers his love as more “rare” and valuable than any praise that the lover has received through false comparison. In other words, the sonnet advocates against the idealisation of the beloved.

► Inversion

The usage of the sonnet form to challenge its internal conventions is particularly interesting. Its language lacks the flowery sweetness expected of a love poem, and complements the revelation that the speaker has in the concluding couplet. Further, it creates a tonal picture of his love for the Dark Lady as a conflicted one.

The representations of the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady, as seen in the above instances, come into play in Sonnet 144.



► Conflict

Here, we have direct references to the way in which these two figures influence the speaker, and how the speaker reacts to them. The opening line of the sonnet generates the notion of two different and contrasting types of love — one of comfort and one of despair. The speaker appears to be trapped in this binary.

► Binary

The speaker describes the two loves that guide him, thus: *The better angel is a man right fair, / The worser spirit a woman coloured ill*. As with earlier portrayals, the ‘fair’ man is privileged in terms of the speaker’s affection and regards. His hostility seems to be directed at the ‘ill-coloured’ woman as the “worser” spirit. The sonnet is filled with the speaker’s anxiety that the ‘female evil’ would corrupt the ‘angel’.

► Anxiety

The sonnet explicitly discusses the speaker’s suspicion of the man and the woman engaging in a secret affair. He alludes to this as he suggests that the “purity” of the better angel may be won over by the “foul pride” of the Dark Lady. Yet, he can only live in doubt until his “bad angel” fires the good one out. Thus, the poem concludes on a note of despair and suspicion, affirming the speaker’s emotional turbulence.

► Love triangle

Through the course of these four sonnets, we see the progression and devolution of the speaker’s relationships with the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady. From being a symbol of virtue and beauty, the young man becomes open to corruption. His betrayal of the speaker, in entering into a relationship with the Dark Lady, appears to symbolise a moral or spiritual decline. This is signified in the perceived loss of purity on the part of the young man. The “worser spirit” becomes the source of the apparent temptation.

► Moral Betrayal

The complicated contents of the sonnets have raised various critical readings. A much discussed aspect has been the representation of gender and race in the poems. Even in the selected texts, we can see how male bonding is given predominance over male-female relationships. On the one hand, this follows the existing Elizabethan convention of male friendship. On the other hand, it marginalises the Dark Lady for holding sexual power over the speaker and the youth, suggesting that being attracted by her is equal to being corrupted.

- Male friendship and female sexual attraction

Feminist critics have emphasised that the Dark Lady appears to function outside the boundaries of Elizabethan propriety and ideal femininity. She represents a threat to the social and spiritual virtues symbolised by the Fair Youth. Her sexual appetite and her refusal to conform to norms such as chastity and fidelity, transform her into the speaker's "bad angel"; an emotional influence with the power to damage his moral sense.

- Threat to patriarchal norms

Similarly, most descriptions of the Dark Lady focuses on her foreign, 'othered' features - specifically, the colour of her skin. While Sonnet 130 presents the unconventionality of her beauty, Sonnet 144 directly refers to her as an 'ill coloured' woman. Many critics argue that the corruptive nature of her desire might be related to her darkness, thus denoting a cultural otherness.

- Perception of race

These sonnets also explore the connection between selfhood and desire. The speaker seems to cherish his longing for the Fair Youth, even characterising his craft as a way of memorialising that desire. However, his attraction towards the Dark Lady, and her affair with the young man, appears to unsettle him. It leaves him in doubt as opposed to the exalted admiration that he feels for the Fair Youth.

- Self-identity

## Summarised Overview

To fully contextualise the Shakespearean sonnet, as genre and as a work of poetry, we need to recognise how the writer has played with artistic conventions. The traditional love sonnets in the collection, celebrating beauty and desire, are addressed to a man. They take on a philosophical and symbolic nature as well. The sonnets focusing on a woman, the traditional subject of the sonnetry of his age, are bitter and despairing. Even though the selected sonnets follow the English model, it is possible to see thematic patterns of the Petrarchan sonnet within them. The first two quatrains may raise a question or an argument that is resolved in the third quatrain and the concluding couplet. Such juxtapositions show how the poet innovated established styles.

Explore other sonnets by William Shakespeare at the following link:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-shakespeare>



## Assignments

1. Trace the brief history and general characteristics of the sonnet form.
2. Why is the sonnet form considered to be versatile?
3. Who were the early pioneers of the Sonnet genre in English?
4. What are the features of the 'English sonnet'?
5. Explain the usage of *iambic pentameter* in the sonnet form.
6. What is the *volta*?
7. Describe the primary theme of sonnets across ages.
8. Briefly describe the history of the publication of Shakespeare's sonnets.
9. What are Katherine Duncan-Jones's views on the 1609 Quarto?
10. Write a short note on the questions raised by the dedication page of the Quarto.
11. Briefly describe the format followed by Shakespeare in composing his sonnets.
12. How are Shakespearean Sonnets popularly classified?
13. Compare and contrast the representation of the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady.
14. How are Sonnets 18 and 55 interconnected?
15. Describe the representation of the Dark Lady in Sonnet 130.
16. How does Sonnet 144 present the progression of the speaker's relationship with the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady?

## Suggested Reading

1. Cousins, A.D. and Peter Howarth. editors. *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*. CUP, 2011.
2. Fuller, John. *The Sonnet*. Routledge, 2018.
3. Regan, Stephan. *The Sonnet*. OUP, 2019.
4. Schiffer, James. *Shakespearean Sonnets: Critical Essays*. Routledge, 2010.



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## Unit 4

# Studying Shakespearean Adaptations

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ contextualise the nature and politics of selected Shakespearean adaptations
- ▶ critically explore the influence of some features of the medium of adaptation
- ▶ analyse the selected works in the backdrop of socio-cultural context
- ▶ describe the import of certain themes and narrative strategies in the selected works

### Background

Adaptations are, in principle, akin to translations. They refer to an artistic or literary work that is shifted into another medium or genre. While some elements of the source, such as theme or plot, remains the same, the adapted work is generally regarded as a new creative contribution. How a work is adapted, into what form or genre, and how much is retained, depends on a wide array of factors.

Often, the politics of the adaptation transforms the settings or the thematic context of the original. A Shakespearean play about a power-hungry Scottish general (*Macbeth*) might become a Hindi film about a henchman, eager to take over the reign from a powerful underworld don (*Maqbool* 2003). The changed settings allow for target audiences to identify with and immerse themselves in the narrative.

The vast oeuvre and legacy of Shakespeare has been the subject of many adaptations. Ranging from alternative drama, radio plays, novels, cinema, series, and graphic novels, the author's words and imagination have been placed onto many different canvases. What informs these adaptations and their politics? How can they be critically contextualised? The following unit offers relevant perspectives on Shakespearean adaptations, with special reference to prescribed works in Modules 2 and 3.





## Keywords

Genre, form, politics of adaptation, context, socio-cultural elements

### 4.4.1 Discussion

Many of Shakespeare's plays have been adapted from different sources including from historical writings, works of other dramatists, and mythological references. Our idea of what is original and what is a copy might need to be revisited. Explore this link for more details: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare/Shakespeares-sources>

#### ► Variations

Tom Stoppard is a Czech born British dramatist of the modern era. He was born in 1937, and in 1966, he wrote and directed *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which was a commercial triumph. It draws its source material from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Both have similar characters and plots, but they differ because of their respective historical, social, literary, and priority contexts. The language, theatrical approach, ideals, characters, and subjects of the plays vary as well.

#### ► Perspective

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* revises the focus of the original by centralising the minor characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from the Shakespearean original. The events of *Hamlet* continue all around them as Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wander around, debating existential questions.

#### ► Absurdity

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* drew great critical acclaim upon its premiere in 1966. By reversing the perspective to Hamlet's childhood friends, both of whom experience the uncertainties and madness around them, Stoppard managed to comment on the meaninglessness and theatricality of life in general.

In Act 1, the two friends wander through a wilderness, competing with coin flips. The coin lands on heads every time, and Rosencrantz wins each time. This has gone on for many times in a row. Guildenstern points out the



► Logic

improbability of the fact while Rosencrantz merrily continues to flip the coin. He wonders if they are in a world where the laws of chance and time are absent. In fact, the pair cannot even remember why they are travelling. They only know that they have been summoned by a messenger.

► Awareness

Even in this opening scene, the audience witness the absurdity of the world in which the two friends exist. Those familiar with the original text are aware that the two are probably headed for Elsinore castle, having been called there by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. In this sense, the spectators have information that the actual characters seem not to possess.

► Chance

The duo encounter a troupe of actors, known as the Tragedians. The Player, the leader of the group, indicates that they specialise in sexual scenes. He insinuates that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can participate in these sexual performances for a fee. Though the two appear to be disgusted, they are intrigued by the offer. Guildenstern plays a few betting-games with the Player, taking advantage of the coin-flipping episode. He wins and asks for a play. He reveals that the coin has landed on tails now.

► Purpose

The scene suddenly shifts and the two friends are now inside Elsinore castle. They watch Hamlet and Ophelia burst onto the stage and leave in opposite directions. Claudius mistakes Rosencrantz for Guildenstern, and commands them to find out what is bothering Hamlet, their childhood friend.

► Spectators within their own play

The sudden change of scene emphasises the transient nature of human experience. Inside Elsinore, they watch the main characters of the Shakespearean original. It is almost as though they are watching the play from within, without being aware of it. Earlier, while they seemed to have no purpose or logic, Claudius now provides one for them.

► Self-identity

Act 2 sees Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss how they might interrogate and probe Hamlet about the reason behind his supposed madness. They play a round of question and answer during which they confuse themselves. They even end up confusing their own identities. Guildenstern suggests that he pretend to be Hamlet and Rosencrantz question him. They come to the conclusion that Hamlet is disturbed about the death of his father and the usurping of the throne by his uncle.

► Madness

Hamlet further confuses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a cryptic speech. Polonius arrives to tell Hamlet that the Tragedians have arrived. The two friends are stumped by Hamlet's bizarre behaviour and cannot decide if he is truly mad. Later when the Tragedians enter, they discuss the matter with the Player. They also enter into a philosophical debate about what happens after death.

► Lack of Rationale

The theme of confused identities continues from the earlier parts of the play. Claudius, Hamlet, and even the friends themselves cannot seem to distinguish one from the other. In part, this speaks to their interchangeability as characters. Further, they cannot decide if Hamlet is faking his madness in a world that increasingly seems not to make sense.

► Unexplained action

The play progresses as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern explain to Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia that Hamlet wants them all to attend the play tomorrow. The group leaves, but Hamlet enters. Not noticing his two friends, Hamlet wonders whether he should commit suicide. Ophelia enters, praying. They exit after a short conversation.

► Play within a play

The Tragedians rehearse their play which has parallels to Claudius's rise to power and marriage to Gertrude. In between, a distraught Ophelia enters, followed by an angry Hamlet. He demands her to become a nun and leaves. Claudius and Polonius enter and depart with Ophelia.

► Counterparts

The Tragedian's performance appears to metaphorically retell the events at Elsinore. Disturbingly, it foretells the death of two spy characters who resemble the two friends. While Rosencrantz sees some amount of familiarity in these characters, he does not recognise them for himself and his companion. They discuss whether death can truly, adequately be represented on stage. The screen goes black.

► Strategising

A voice-over in the darkness indicates that the play has shaken Claudius. The next day, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are asked to find Hamlet who has killed Polonius. Alone, they create a plan to trap the prince with their belts and thus immobilise him. They fail when Hamlet enters from a different, unexpected direction. He leaves, carrying Polonius's dead body. The duo call Hamlet back but he refuses to say what he has done with the body.



► Orders

Hamlet accuses the two friends of conspiring with Claudius and being his tools. He, then, escapes as Claudius enters. Later, he is escorted onstage under guard. The scene shifts yet again. Guildenstern tells Rosencrantz that they must travel with Hamlet to England. They reluctantly depart.

► Indecisiveness

In Act 3, on the ship to England, it is revealed that Guildenstern has a letter from Claudius which demands the execution of Hamlet in England. Initially they cannot find the letter, and later they find it. When they sleep, Hamlet switches the letter with a new one that he has written.

► Irrational elements

The next morning, they discover music coming from the barrels onboard. Just as pirates are about to storm the ship, the Tragedians startle everyone by coming out of the barrels. The lights dim as Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Hamlet, and the Player plunge into the barrels. Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Player emerge from the barrels as soon as the lights are turned back on. Hamlet has left.

► Desperation

The Player is informed about the letter by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who also practise their response to the English king. Guildenstern learns that the letter now specifies that Guildenstern and Rosencrantz will be put to death. The two are surrounded by the Tragedians. Guildenstern steals a dagger from the Player and stabs him out of desperation for his fate. The Player appears to cry out and stumble.

► Blurred boundaries

The Player, however, lives since the knife was only a prop with a retractable blade. Only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are now visible due to a shift in lighting. They say their parting comments before leaving the stage. The play concludes with Horatio reciting Hamlet's farewell speech as two diplomats arrive in Elsinore to bring the tragic news of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths.

► Form and plot

The particular form taken by the adaptation points to the way in which absurdist theatre explores the human condition. The play investigates abstract, fundamental aspects of existence such as death and human capacity for free will. In doing so, it tries to make sense of a world that appears to be characterised by utter randomness, apathy, brutal existence, and meaninglessness. Thus

every action, utterance, and thought contributes to the absurdity.

#### ► Technique

The language of the play, incorporating wordplay and insensible linguistic constructions, reflect this absurdity. This is done to demonstrate the difficulty of conveying meaning in a world such as the one portrayed by *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. All that is known and certain is turned on its head. As Guildenstern says: "All your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque..." This is true of Rosencrantz's description of the sunset as "The sun's going down. Or the earth's coming up" rings similarly true.

#### ► Abstraction

Additionally, the play's numerous incidents of miscommunication and misunderstanding begin to seem more and more accurate. It frequently reminds the audience, death is the unknown and is outside the realm of human perception. Guildenstern answers to Rosencrantz's attempt to justify death by equating it to a boat: "No, no, no...Death is...not. Death isn't... Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat."

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* reveal some of the principal features of the absurdist theatre:

#### ► Common elements

1. A world without meaning
2. The isolation of the individual
3. Experimentation with form
4. Devaluation of language and meaning
5. Lack of coherent plot

#### ► Adaptation

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* served as the inspiration for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, which was then altered by the addition of fresh ideas and viewpoints. Stoppard posed questions about the two minor characters from one of the most frequently performed plays in history. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only appear in a few scenes during *Hamlet*, and Stoppard's play fills in the blanks of what Shakespeare thinks might have happened in between moments.





Tom Stoppard wrote and directed a film version of the play, also titled *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, in 1990. Its cast comprised of such actors as Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, Ian Glen, Richard Dreyfus, Joanna Miles, and Donald Sumpster. It opened to mostly positive reviews, though many criticised the script as more suited to the stage.



Fig. 4.4.2. Mark Fossen as Rosencrantz and Mark Macey as Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. Directed by Jerry Rapier.

#### ► Stereotype

Of the many villains that have been depicted in Shakespearean theatre, the character Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* has retained a sense of intrigue. The play presents him as a miserly, Jewish moneylender who demands “a pound of flesh” from a merchant who defaults on a loan payment. It has been widely noted that he conforms to many of the stereotypes believed of Jews in sixteenth century England. This includes the depiction of his ‘greed’ and ruthlessness, as well as his hostility towards the Christian characters in the play.

#### ► Impact

Harold Bloom, a renowned literary critic, has pointed out that the very plot of the play espouses hatred towards Judaism, and is antisemitic. In his 1998 book, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, he considers the play to have done “real harm...to the Jews for some four centuries...” because of its representation of Shylock.



Jewish communities across the world have been historically discriminated against through the propagation of harmful stereotypes. Common objects and tropes which are used to highlight or mock Jewishness include certain physical features, personality traits, or even cuisine. Organisations such as the Anti-Defamation League and American Civil Liberties Union fight against such negative representations in popular culture, media, and elsewhere.

#### ► Recasting Shylock

It is in this context that Howard Jacobson's novel *My Name is Shylock* marks a fresh approach to the character of Shylock. Published in 2016, the text presents a sympathetic yet complicated portrayal, which results in a striking retelling of the original story. The narrative is set in the twenty-first century, with Simon Strulovitch standing in as a modern counterpart for Shakespeare's Shylock. Strulovitch is a Jewish art collector, who struggles against the antisemitism and discrimination of the outside world. In accessing his perspective as a cultural and religious outsider in contemporary England, the reader empathizes with Strulovitch.

#### ► Symbolism

There is an intertextual dialogue between the Shakespearean play and Jacobson's novel in that the character of Shylock appears and plays a crucial role in the narrative. Strulovitch discovers him in a graveyard and declares: "Of course Shylock is here, among the dead. When hasn't he been?". He seems to have been wandering the earth for centuries, grieving for his daughter who elopes with a Christian in the source material. Shylock is on the run to evade forcible conversion to Christianity, as the ruling had been made at the end of the Shakespearean play.

Shylock, himself, becomes a symbol of the persistence of Jewish suffering across the ages. In the twenty-first century, Strulovitch shares many of the anxieties and discriminations that Shylock faced in the sixteenth century. Comparing himself to Shylock, Strulovitch cannot see many resemblances except their enduring love for their daughters. Yet, he wonders, "So what was it Gentiles [Christians] saw that told them they were both

- ▶ Continued discrimination

- ▶ Weight of identity

- ▶ Continuation of theme

Jews?" In other words, he is still trying to contextualise the discrimination and hatred that he and Shylock have been facing for their Jewish identity, even across different ages.

One of the most telling dialogues in the novel is uttered when Shylock says, "These Jews! They don't know whether to cry for me, disown me, or explain me." In short, there is a constant struggle as to whether Jewish identity, with its inheritance of 'othering', is to be accepted, discarded, or made palatable to other communities. This parallels the experience of the followers of Judaism in a world that is actively hostile to them.

As in the source text, Strulovitch is motivated by a desire for revenge against D'Anton (the counterpart to Antonio), whose antagonism is displayed through petty insults and subtle antisemitism. His hatred of Jews form the undertone of his actions and words; quite often, he employs sophisticated jokes to make outsiders uncomfortable and aware of their status. The first meeting between the two occurs at a local council meeting. Strulovitch proposes that a historic house be converted into a gallery of British Jewish art, named in the memory of his parents. D'Anton dissuades the council from going forward with the idea, claiming that such a gallery would not be culturally apt. As expounded in the novel: "Strulovitch, who didn't like the way D'Anton pronounced his parents' names, saw his proposal turn putrid. It hung in the air of the council chamber like a malign presence."

William Shakespeare might have derived the theme of *The Merchant of Venice* from a real-life incident from 1594, where the queen's physician, Rodrigo Lopez, was executed for treason. Lopez was a recent convert to Christianity, with Jewish ancestry, and was accused of trying to poison Queen Elizabeth. Many critics consider him to be the inspiration for the character of Shylock.

Unlike in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, wherein Antonio and Portia epitomise Christian values, Plurabelle (a version of Portia) and D'Anton in the novel toy with people's emotions for entertainment. When they meet Gratan, a footballer infamous for giving the Nazi salute on the field, they feel it would be fun to encourage a relationship between him and Beatrice, Strulovitch's daughter. They manipulate the relationship, ignoring the

- ▶ Subversive characterisation

grounded and discriminatory realities of Jewish life, mostly to alleviate their boredom.

#### ► Retribution

The infamous “pound of flesh” demanded of Antonio in the Shakespearean version is transformed here; Strulovitch demands that Gratian undergo the ritual of circumcision required to join the Jewish faith, if he is to continue the relationship with Beatrice. D’Anton and Plurabelle aid the young couple to elope, seemingly evading the threat. However, Strulovitch plays his trump card – either Gratian or one of his friends must perform the rite, or he will reveal the fact that Gratian, aided by his friends, entered into a relationship with Beatrice while she was still underage. Under threat of social disrepute and legal trouble, D’Anton offers to undergo circumcision if his friend fails to do so. In this way, Jacobson appears to offer partial vindication to the historical Shylock. However, on the agreed time and date, Strulovitch is informed by the doctor that D’Anton has already been circumcised. Thus, despite having been initiated, the revenge is not completed.

Akira Kurosawa has adapted several Shakespearean plays onto the silver screen. His filmography includes *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*) (1957) and *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Hamlet*) (1960). Both movies were grounded in traditional Japanese culture, with elements of Noh theatre and folk mythology interspersed with the Shakespearean narratives. Can you identify this technique in *Ran*?

#### ► Critical Acclaim

Akira Kurosawa, a Japanese filmmaker, combined *King Lear*, from Shakespeare, with the legends of Mori Motonari, a Japanese daimyo, to create *Ran*. It was released in 1985, and is regarded as a sublime cinematic creation. Many hailed its outstanding visual composition at the time of its release, and costume designer, Emi Wada was awarded the Academy Award for Best Costume Design.

The movie follows warlord Ichimonji Hidetora as he tries to decide which of his three sons can be relied upon to succeed him as king. Although Taro and Jiro, his older kids, are incredibly polite, their flattery turns out to be hollow as they demonstrate how power-hungry each of them is. Ichimonji only has Saburo, his youngest son, whom he exiled from his realm to protect him. The movie centres



► Plot

on Ichimonji's struggle to find safety and acceptance as he ages, as well as his tragic reunion with Saburo.

► Modifications

While transposing *King Lear* to feudal Japan, Kurosawa adapts the work to be relevant to its new settings. Instead of the three daughters, the film portrays three sons. This shift in gender would certainly have made more sense in the patriarchal ethos of Japan. Another key change lies in the politics of the medium. While *King Lear* is full of poetic reflections and thundering dialogue, *Ran* is devoted to the power of the visual.

► Cause and effect

At the same time, Kurosawa also brings changes to the parallel plot in Shakespeare. Kaede, the wife of the eldest son, belongs to a family that Ichimonji had killed to usurp their wealth and lands. This sets in motion the series of events that finally results in the ageing ruler's downfall. Thus, a reflection on the past of the protagonist is brought into the film's storyline.

► Dismantling of 'fate'

Lear's madness, which appears to be arbitrary in the original, is given a context in *Ran*. Ichimonji is driven mad as a direct result of his past brutality and warmongering. Unlike in the Shakespearean narrative, the tragic warlord is not driven by the tragic flaw of pride alone. Rather, it is the tyranny and violence unleashed in the desire for power that destroys the protagonist of *Ran*.

► Historical commentary

The larger scheme of the movie comments on a political era in Japan when its decentralised feudal territories were slowly being consolidated into larger unions (sixteenth century). The introduction of European weaponry, particularly firearms, is crucial in this context. The battle sequences in *Ran* bear testimony to the same.

► Deeper context

As noted by Brian Parker, one of the highlights of the Kurosawa's movie adaptations is the providing of moral and historical explanations for the decline of the protagonist. Where Shakespeare's Lear appears to have been struck down by fate and 'hamartia', the film's Ichimonji brings about his downfall as a direct result of human error and evil.

*Ran* also foreshadows much of the plot developments using symbols, allegories, and other imagery. For instance, the opening image of the movie shows the silhouettes of Ichimonji and his three sons mounted on horses. They ride off into different directions, just as, later on, they end

► Visual techniques

up divided in life. Similarly, the wild boar is symbolic of aggression in Japanese culture. It corresponds to Ichimonji, himself. After it is hunted and killed, the warlord states that it is too old to be eaten, making the parallels clear.

The screenplay of *Ran* is considered to be a masterpiece in terms of powerfully adapting a work of literature onto the screen. It shows evidence of various strategies used by the screen writer and director to mould a believable and potent universe around which the movie could be produced. Read the screenplay here: <http://www.cinephiliabeyond.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Ran.pdf>

## Summarised Overview

The unit explores the politics of adapting Shakespeare into different genres and media, across different periods of time. While Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* draws upon absurdist theatrical traditions to centralise the narrative of two minor characters from *Hamlet*, Howard Jacobson's *My Name is Shylock* places the events of *The Merchant of Venice* in a contemporary fictional setting. In both these adaptations, the writers interpret the dominant plotlines of the respective Shakespearean plays to offer creative, subversive takes. *Ran*, on the other hand, transforms the plot of *King Lear* into a different cultural and artistic setting. It restructures the play into striking visual elements that, while conveying the themes inherent in the Shakespearean drama, proves its relevance along universal lines.

## Assignments

1. How does Stoppard's play change the focus of its source material?
2. Examine the actions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play.
3. In what ways are the plot of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* absurdist?
4. How does *My Name is Shylock* revisit Shakespeare.
5. Detail *My Name is Shylock* as a work of postmodernist fiction.



6. Explore the changes Kurosawa made to the plot of *King Lear*.
7. What are the different techniques used to foreshadow plot developments in *Ran*?

## Suggested Reading

1. Belsey, Catherine. "Shakespeare and Film: A Question of Perspective." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 11.3 (1983): 152-58.
2. Cartmell, Deborah. *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen*. St. Martin's, 2000.
3. Gross, John. *Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy*. Simon and Schuster, 1994.
4. Hornby, Richard. *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*. Bucknell UP, 1986.

## Reference

1. Greer, Richard. *Screening Shakespeare: Using Film to Understand the Plays*. Longman, 2002.
2. Gross, John. *Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy*. Simon and Schuster, 1994.
3. Holderness, Graham. *Visual Shakespeare: Essays in Film and Television*. U of Hertford- shire P, 2002.
4. Hornby, Richard. *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*. Bucknell UP, 1986.



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

*Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.*

1.





# SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE: .....

SET-1

Reg. No : .....  
Name : .....

FIRST SEMESTER MA English Language and Literature  
DISCIPLINE CORE - **M21EG02DC SHAKESPEARE STUDIES** (CBCS - PG)  
2022-23 - Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

## Section A

*Answer any five of the following questions in two or three sentences each. Each question carries 2 marks.*

1. Define the term “volta” in a Shakespearean sonnet.
2. What insight does the Ghost provide to Hamlet?
3. What is the basic structure of a Shakespearean sonnet?
4. Why does Prospero renounce his magic at the end of *The Tempest*?
5. What does the phrase “fire my good one out” suggest in Sonnet 144?
6. State the main theme of Tom Stoppard’s “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.”
7. How does Kurosawa adapt King Lear in his film “Ran”?
8. What is the significance of the coin toss in Stoppard’s play?

(2×5=10)

## Section B

*Answer any six of the following questions in half a page each. Each question carries 5 marks.*

9. Examine the influence of Senecan tragedy on Shakespeare’s dramatic style.
10. Distinguish between soliloquy and aside as dramatic techniques in Shakespeare’s plays.
11. Analyse the significance of the supernatural in *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*.
12. How does Shakespeare subvert Petrarchan conventions in Sonnet 130?
13. Evaluate the storm scene’s symbolic importance in *The Tempest*.
14. Compare the modern-day Shylock with Strulovitch in Howard Jacobson’s novel.



15. Discuss the concept of metatheatre in Stoppard's work.
16. How does "Ran" reflect feudal Japanese society compared to Shakespeare's England?
17. Examine the father-daughter relationship in *Shylock Is My Name*.
18. Significance of the songs and music in *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*

(5×6=30)

### Section C

*Answer any two of the following questions in four pages each. Each question carries 15 marks.*

19. Critically examine the major literary elements Shakespeare employs in his tragedies with detailed examples from *Hamlet*
20. Compare the treatment of revenge as a theme in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*
21. Discuss how Howard Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name* addresses contemporary issues of Jewish identity and antisemitism in modern England.
22. Analyse the concept of absurdity and existentialism in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and its relationship to Shakespearean themes.

(15×2=30)





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QP CODE: .....

SET-2

Reg. No : .....  
Name : .....

FIRST SEMESTER MA English Language and Literature  
DISCIPLINE CORE - **M21EG02DC SHAKESPEARE STUDIES** (CBCS - PG)  
2022-23 - Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

### Section A

*Answer any five of the following questions in two or three sentences each. Each question carries 2 marks.*

1. What is Quibbles?
2. How are Ariel and Caliban contrasted in *The Tempest*?
3. Explain the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet.
4. What is the central conflict in Sonnet 144?
5. Why is Antony's relationship with Cleopatra considered tragic?
6. What does "Theatre of the Absurd" mean in relation to Stoppard's work?
7. How does the title "Ran" relate to the film's themes?
8. What is the significance of play within the play in *Hamlet*?

(2×5=10)

### Section B

*Answer any six of the following questions in half a page each. Each question carries 5 marks.*

9. Discuss the socio-political context of Elizabethan England reflected in Shakespeare's works.
10. Analyse the use of dramatic irony in Shakespeare's plays with suitable examples.
11. Examine Shakespeare's contribution to the English language through his works.
12. How do Sonnets 18 and 55 explore the theme of poetic immortality?
13. Critically assess the role of magic and illusion in *The Tempest*.
14. Outline the major themes explored in Akira Kurosawa's "Ran."
15. Write a character sketch of the protagonist in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.



16. Compare Shylock's portrayal in Shakespeare's play with Jacobson's modern interpretation.
17. Discuss the significance of the Hogarth Shakespeare Project in contemporary literature.
18. Significance of the title *Twelfth Night*

(5×6=30)

### Section C

*Answer any two of the following questions in four pages each. Each question carries 15 marks.*

19. Analyse the evolution of Shakespeare's dramatic career from his early experimental works to his final romances, examining the thematic and stylistic changes.
20. Compare and contrast the comic elements in *Twelfth Night* with the tragic elements in *Hamlet*, discussing how both reflect Elizabethan social values.
21. Examine how modern adaptations of Shakespeare's works, particularly Kurosawa's "Ran," transform the original while preserving universal themes.
22. Critically evaluate the treatment of mercy and justice in both Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Howard Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name*.

(15×2=30)



സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാതൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം  
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം  
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണം

കുരിട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ  
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം  
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം  
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം  
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ  
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണം

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# SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

COURSE CODE : M21EG02DC

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Kollam, Kerala Pin- 691601, email: [info@sgou.ac.in](mailto:info@sgou.ac.in), [www.sgou.ac.in](http://www.sgou.ac.in) Ph: +91 474 2966841