william shakespeare’s

HAMLET

cowles library • drake university • des moines, iowa
directors
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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
Hamlet
**Directors' Note**

Hamlet is a Shakespearean play commonly known for its tragic nature, subtle wit, and its array of dramatic characters. Our “spin” that we put on the play was to incorporate it into our daily lives as college students. Since death is such a prominent theme in the play, we decided to parallel the occurrence of death with failure in college. Stress is so common in a college student’s life as is the pressure to give into behaviors that would lead to the demise of a student’s success in college. Our Hamlet in the play is exposed to these pressures and he will highlight a different kind of student: one that mourns for those who have not been successful in their academic career, rather than those who have passed away.

The things that would lead to a student’s downfall include laziness, apathy, abuse of intoxicating substances, or just outright stupidity. The gravediggers in the final Act take on all these roles with the exception of stupidity; they are actually quite witty and able to go toe to toe with those of higher class rank. We chose to model these gravediggers with a modern-day stereotypical “frat boy” illusion. He would be a relaxed, apathetic character that is an obvious partier, as shown by substitution of the skulls in the scene with empty alcohol bottles. While in Shakespeare’s original performance, the skulls signified death and the ghosts of those who had already passed, we substitute bottles that are meant to represent failure and self-abuse. Alcohol is also something that haunts a person and can become a prevalent obsession in a person’s life, just like death starts to become an obsession for Hamlet.

Hamlet in this production is a student that is trying not to succumb to these pressures and obsessions that have overtaken his fellow classmates. His “emo” appearance and astonishment at how carefree the gravedigger is show that he does not think in the same way that the gravediggers do. He is educated, sophisticated, and thus far has not fallen victim to the pressures of college life. Hamlet is even more surprised when he hears how witty the gravedigger is. By the end of the Act 5, Scene 1, Hamlet’s outlook on partying (a.k.a. death) has changed. He knows that it is unavoidable, and that it is part of life and nothing he can do will change that.

**Plot Summary**

On a dark and cold winter’s night a ghost is spotted by a pair of watchmen outside of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. The ghost resembles the body of the recently deceased King Hamlet. Prince Hamlet, King Hamlet’s son, is alerted of this ghost by the watchmen and proceeds to delve into the forest in search of the ghost of his father. Hamlet finally approaches the ghost and it is indeed the ghost of King Hamlet. The ghost approaches young Prince Hamlet and confides in him that he was murdered by his brother Claudius. King Hamlet’s ghost demands that Hamlet seek revenge against not only the newly appointed King Claudius but also his wife Queen Gertrude.

Prince Hamlet becomes obsessive over the murder of his father and he soon becomes mad with ways in which to enact the revenge of his father. Claudius and Gertrude become worried about Hamlet’s sudden erratic behavior and call upon his two friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to lift his spirits. A group of traveling actors visit Elsinore and Hamlet uses them as an instrument to test whether Claudius is guilty of murdering of his father. Hamlet instructs the actors to perform a scene that he believes is a reenactment of how his father was brutally murdered by the new king, Claudius, disgusted with the reenactment leaves the room in anger and disgust. Upon seeing this, Hamlet is sure of Claudius’s guilt and leaves to find Claudius and fulfill his father’s last wishes of revenge. As Hamlet is about to kill Claudius, he sees him quietly praying and Hamlet decides not to act on his father’s revenge at the moment believing that is Claudius were killed praying his soul would arise to the heavens. Claudius, frightened of Hamlet’s apparent madness and absurdity, orders that Hamlet be sent to England to regain his sanity.

Hamlet than confronts his mother in her chamber. During their encounter, Hamlet hears a noise, that he believes to be King Claudius, and immediately draws his sword into the wall killing Polonius (King Claudius’s Chief Counselor). As a result of the murder Hamlet is immediately dispatched to England under the King’s orders. The King also orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England, equipped with orders to the King of England to put Hamlet to death.

Hamlet’s ship is attacked by pirates and he returns to Elsinore Castle to finally fulfill his father’s wishes. Ophelia, Polonius’s daughter, drowns herself in a river in reaction to her father’s recent death. Laertes, the son of Polonius, is enraged by his father’s murder and arrives at Elsinore Castle demanding revenge. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is to blame for the deaths of his father and sister and they then construct a plan to ensure Hamlet’s death by inviting Hamlet to a sportive duel and treacherously poisoning the tip of Laertes’s sword. Claudius will also poison a cup from which he will offer Hamlet a drink. At the funeral of Ophelia, Hamlet confesses his love for her and attacks Laertes.

A fencing match is arranged at the castle between Laertes and Hamlet. Hamlet strikes Laertes first but declines Claudius’s offer of a drink. Gertrude than takes a drink from the chalice and dies immediately. Laertes then
wounds Hamlet, but the poison does not affect Hamlet immediately. Laertes is cut by his own sword and dies of the poison. It is now only Hamlet and Claudius on the stage. Hamlet charges towards Claudius and stabs him through the chest with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Hamlet then dies of the poison from the poisoned sword.

Theme

HAMLET IS A PLAY ROOTED IN CONTRASTS between the many characters of the play and many of the subjects in the play seem to be mirror images of one another. There are many scenes in the play that seem to be a celebration of death and dying. The scene that we chose to stage is a direct example of Shakespeare’s ability to correlate opposite subjects with one another.

The first scene of Act Five shows two gravediggers reacting in a comedic way to the suicide of the young Ophelia. As Hamlet becomes incorporated into the scene there appears to be a physical difference between the gravediggers and Hamlet. The gravediggers are blue-collar workers whereas Hamlet is royalty. The contradiction creates a tension that is generated not only in this scene but also throughout the entire play. We witness contradictions between stability and insanity, love and hate and life and death.

In our performed scene, we demonstrate how Hamlet’s view of partying is changed as a result of the gravedigger’s wit and intelligence. This is very similar to the other contrasts in the play. Many of the contrasts are very significant and clear but there seems to be an understanding between the two. A specific example of this occurs at the end of the play. Throughout the many scenes and acts, Hamlet expresses his fear of death and dying. He questions the meaning and worth of life. However, in the final scene of the play he tells Horatio to tell his valiant story of revenge and honor. The correlation between death and celebration and remembrance is pinpointed for the audience.

Hamlet is unique for its many contrasts and twists. The play is memorable for what those contrasts reveal. The contrasts show that even though subjects may seem disconnected there is a correlation between them. The play helps to dissolve the difference between a king and peasant, master and slave.

Symbolism

Skull

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! (HAMLET, 5.1.172-176)

There are not many physical symbols in Hamlet, but one worth noting is Yorick’s skull that Hamlet holds while making one of the famous speeches of the play. Yorick was the court jester, and his skull makes for a great vehicle for Hamlet to reflect on the nature of death. Here, the skull is a reminder of the finality of death, and Hamlet talks about how meaningless one’s body is after death. By holding the skull up, Hamlet is looking death in the face, which, at the end of the play, is foretelling of his fate. Death to him is the great equalizer, speaking with love and remembrance over a lowly court jester in nearly the same breath as Alexander the Great.

Ghost

Murder most foul, as in the best it is; But this most foul, strange and unnatural. (GHOST, 1.5.27-28)

The ghost is the single surreal, supernatural element in a play that otherwise does without magical props or plot points. The peculiarness of it is explored in a way, as Hamlet, for a good part of the play, contemplates whether to trust his eyes or take the word of the apparition with a grain of salt. Eventually, he stages the play to prove his convictions. When staged, no production of a Shakespeare play is completely similar to any other one, and the scene where Hamlet speaks with the ghost is rife with opportunity for artistic license.

Rosemary

There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies. that’s for thoughts. (OPHELIA, 4.5.174-175)

After Ophelia goes mad, she begins singing songs and handing out an assortment of flowers, and noting their individual symbolic value and importance. In a way, the feeling connected to each flower that she hands off represents her feelings or wishes, that, in her state, have been ignored. For example, the rosemary could have gone to Hamlet, along with the pansies, who had forgotten about her. She also mentions that rue are for regret, which could be Ophelia talking about Gertrude and her marriage to Claudius.
Designers’ Note

When working with our collaborators’ writings, we were at first confused since their directors’ note only emphasized one portion of the play rather than their take on the entire play as a whole. We tried to use the gravedigger idea in some of our sketches to start the idea process but the main theme that we decided on was the crown. We thought the crown was a good way to represent Hamlet without the usual cheesy representation of the skull. After deciding on the crown, we decided to continue with our own ideas and what we know of Hamlet, rather than solely concentrating on the collaborators’ interpretation. Through research about the play and discussing it with Professor Hogan, we found that such a complex play allowed us to take many different approaches towards our poster design. As a result, we had a wide variety of workable ideas to narrow down.

The shape that a drop of liquid creates as it hits a surface can be an intriguing form – oftentimes, it almost looks like a small crown. We thought this discovery would be extremely applicable to Hamlet – the crown aspect serves as a symbol of royalty and power, but the liquid can be poison or even blood, in keeping with the nature of death and betrayal in Hamlet. We placed this droplet-crown in several situations – simply blood dripping from an unknown source, then various swords, and a goblet. The group responsible for interpreting the play focused on alcohol as a symbol, and we thought this tied in with the poisoning scene. We traced a goblet and thought about ways to depict the crown as poison, wine, blood, or a combination. In the style of our design, we opted for a blend between modern and traditional Shakespearean – choosing streamlined vector graphics as a drawing style combined with details (such as the damask background) that allude to royalty.

It took a long time for us to get to our final design. We started with the crown, and we knew we wanted to incorporate it somewhere/somehow. However, then the crown turned into a blood droplet, having a dual purpose of representing a crown and blood, and yet being visually interesting. But then the question was, how did the blood droplet get there, how could we use it to be more intriguing. Therefore, we both went back and created two separate designs, one of a sword dropping blood, the other of a goblet dropping blood. In terms of formal choices, we adopted a more minimalist approach in order to get our ambiguous symbol to come across clearly. We also experimented with how the scale of the crown affected the idea, as well as how space worked effectively with the elements of the poster design.

For the program cover, we both had the idea of it being mostly text heavy. It isn’t something that needs a lot of visual elements seeing as the individual is already attracted to the play. We chose to use some of our previous ideas such as the crown and incorporate it differently into the cover. One way to adhere to the main poster design without simply copying it was re-arranging the items and re-contextualizing them. In a smaller scale, for example, the droplet-crown is able to function better on its own than in a large-scale setting where a blown-up image would lose its effect. The goblet tipped over hints to a continuation of the same thing that occurs in the poster, yet hints that a dramatic change will occur in the course of the play.
THIS PROGRAM and the corresponding theater poster were produced as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration between students in two Shakespeare in Context classes and two Graphic Design Two classes at Drake University in Spring 2011. The program is typeset in Chaparral Pro.

THIS PROJECT was conceived and organized by Sarah Hogan (Department of English) and Hilary Williams (Department of Art & Design).