**HAMLET - A WORLD IN TRANSITION**

**A CHANGING WORLD.
Hamlet is a man caught between two worlds---the old medieval world and the modern age. It is a world in transition, and Hamlet himself shifts between these two worlds. He questions the certainties of the old world, where everything was fixed and unchanging, where death was an everyday occurrence, not worth commenting on, where there was an absolute certainty about an afterlife, a final Judgment, ghosts and spirits. This was a world where the individual or his choices were of little importance. Each human life in itself was not important. Life was cheap. Human beings could exercise little choice over their destiny. They had to accept their lot.

The new emerging world was centred round the Individual, and believed that Man was the measure of all things. The individual had control over his fate. There were no absolute certainties. The meaning of life---if life had any meaning--- had to be worked out by reason. What the individual thought or felt was as important as tradition, ritual, or religious ceremony. Each human life was important. Human beings could exercise individual choice. Intelligent people had to work things out for themselves, not just follow tradition. This was a rational world---a world where reason ruled, not superstition or empty ritual, or blind obedience. Hamlet was exposed to this new world through his studies at Wittenberg University. His friend Horatio, a fellow student at Wittenberg,  is a perfect model of this new, modern man, and Hamlet admires him. “Give me that man that is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him in my heart’s core”  Horatio is cool, balanced, reasonable, an educated man, yet loyal and kind.

Hamlet is moving between these two worlds. He moves from one world view to another. He does not accept the old certainties, but questions them constantly. In the opening scenes at Court, he despises the hypocrisy of Claudius’ empty, outward performance of Court mourning. He thinks that his inner feelings matter more. He stands apart from the Court, a separate individual, with his own individual ideas, and a different world view.. He wants his feelings acknowledged “I have that within which passeth show / These but the trappings and the suits of woe”

In the old medieval world, death was no big deal. Disease, plagues, wiped out whole populations. Human life was brutal and short. Death was everywhere, and life was cheap. Claudius tries to get Hamlet to see this: ”All that lives must die / passing through nature to Eternity”. By grieving too long, Hamlet is challenging the accepted attitude to death.

In the Graveyard Scene we see Hamlet thinking deeply about death, the transience of life, the meaning of it all. The great and the good—the rich landowner, the beggar, old Yorick the court jester, Alexander the Great, all come to the same end. “To what base uses we may return, Horatio”   “This skull had a tongue in it and could sing once”.

He is annoyed that the gravedigger can sing as he digs, knocking skulls out of the way with his shovel.  “Has this fellow no feeling for his business? He sings at grave-making”. But the grave digger is part of the old, unquestioning world, and treats death as an unimportant, everyday event, singing and joking as he works.

At Wittenberg University Hamlet was studying the new ideas of the age---Humanist ideas which were replacing the old superstitions. Man the Individual was central to this new thinking. We see  Hamlet thinking about these new ideas: “What a piece of work is Man!  How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties”

Hamlet also believes in the modern idea that Man’s reason makes him God-like and sets him apart from the animals. A human life must have meaning. “What is a man if his chief good…be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more”  It is by using our mind and our reason that we set ourselves above the animals.

Hamlet questions the old medieval view of man as having no control or say in his own life. He weighs up the options” To be or not to be, that is the question”. Should we accept our lot in life, or exercise free choice and end it all? Why do we not end it all? Because we fear what lies beyond death, Hamlet expresses no certainty about an after life here. He is not sure that he believes in the simple explanations that were accepted in the medieval world.. Hamlet questions all of this. If we were certain about Hell or Heaven, we would not fear dying. We cannot know what lies beyond. After death is “the undiscovered country”. We are afraid of the unknown—a modern idea. In the old world there were no unknowns---only death, judgment, Hell, Heaven, Purgatory.

But Hamlet is also very influenced by the old medieval world.

He accepts the idea of the Ghost, and he also accepts that he must carry out the ghost’s command.

He shows some fear of Divine Judgment and punishment if he takes his own life “O that the everlasting had not fixed his canon gainst self-slaughter”

He accepts that God may have a Divine plan laid out for us, and that we cannot really control our own destiny. It is out of our hands. “There’s a divinity which shapes our ends. Rough-hew them how we will.”

He shows a certain belief in an afterlife when he refuses to kill Claudius while he is praying, as he will go immediately to Heaven, dying in a state of Grace. “And now I’ll do it, and so he goes to Heaven”

But in this scene also we see Hamlet acting as a modern man, making his own choices over life and death. He will carry out the ghost’s request at a time of his choosing.**