**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**The Ghost**

The most obvious, and most important feature of the Ghost’s role in *Hamlet* is that it is an indispensible piece of dramatic machinery.

Without its revelations to Hamlet, the action could never get underway, and Claudius would remain secure in the fruits of his crime.

From Hamlet’s point of view, the Ghost has come primarily to place the full weight of an almost intolerable burden on his shoulders; the knowledge the Ghost conveys and the task of vengeance he imposes are sources of intense suffering to Hamlet and to every other major character, and ultimately lead to the extinction of the royal house of Denmark and its leading courtiers.

Early reactions to the Ghost on the part of those who encounter it are confused.

Horatio, at first sceptical, dismisses it as ‘fantasy’, but comes to believe that it has appeared for a purpose and that it can be put to rest if its wishes are carried out.

In (1:4), Marcellus and Horatio fear that it may be a devil, endangering Hamlet’s sanity and even his life.

At the end of Act 1, Hamlet, after some doubts, comes to accept that it is indeed his father’s spirit.

Later he has renewed doubts (“The spirit that I have seen/ May be a devil”, 2:2, 587-8).

The main problem posed by the Ghost may be put in the form of a question: is it possible to suggest a single, consistent explanation of its nature and significance?

Hamlet’s query as to whether it is good or evil, “a spirit of health or a goblin damned” (1:4, 40) seems to get a reasonably clear answer before the end of act 3: the Ghost has come from Purgatory as an agent of divine justice to sanction the punishment of an evildoer.

But this poses a problem: How can the Ghost’s status as a saved Christian soul coming from Purgatory be compatible with its eloquent call for vengeance?

One of the moral problems of *Hamlet* is that the anti-Christian ethic of blood revenge is never tested by, or brought up against, the values of the Cjristian world in which the play is set.

**The Single-Minded Quest**

The Ghost poses other problems. In the closing movement of the play Hamlet becomes conscious of being in the hands of providence, and develops a conviction that the “divinity that shapes our ends” will bring about a just resolution of events whatever he or Claudius may decide.

The Ghost, however, seems strangely unaware of the evolving pattern of events in the play, and of the impending development of Hamlet’s thought and the deepening of his insights.

The momentum of the action will make it unnecessary for Hamlet to be an active agent of vengeance, since his enemies will unwittingly provide the means of their own destruction.

But the Ghost, on its last, brief experience, before it passes into oblivion, still insists on the barbaric code of vengeance, and rebukes Hamlet for not honouring it:

This visitation

Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose. (3:4, 111-12)

If the divine purpose which hamlet finds at work in his affairs has any kind of reality, one would expect the Ghost to have access to reliable information about it.

It gives no sign of having any; on the contrary, it seems to stand for a negation of all that the shaping divinity is working to bring about.

The fact that Hamlet is led to question the Ghost’s nature and purposes for the first half of the play has important dramatic consequences.

His determination to test the truth of the Ghost’s story may be regarded as genuine, which means that the insert-play, *The Murder of Gonzago,* cannot be dismissed as a mere excuse for deferring action against Claudius.

The questionable status of the Ghost until the end of the Play scene also has important consequences for our interpretation of Claudius, and for our understanding of Hamlet’s view of him.

Until the Play scene, hamlet is not fully sure whether Claudius is guilty, which means that for him his uncle is a more formidable, enigmatic, troublesome opponent than he would be if he, Hamlet, knew with certainty that Claudius was really the “smiling villain”, as his nephew sometimes calls him.

As Hamlet looks at the bland, courtly Claudius, he must, for the first half of the play, be haunted by the feeling that the king may be what he seems to be, and that he himself has been deluded by weakness and melancholy into a hideous error.