**Hamlet: Themes and Issues**

**Death**

In all of SP’s tragedies, death is inevitably a major concern, but it is in *Hamlet* that it receives its most elaborated and extended treatment.

For Hamlet, death is an ever-present reality. It is at the heart of the two main plots: Hamlet’s bereavement and consequent mental suffering are paralleled in Ophelia’s loss of her father and her subsequent madness.

Violent grief, violent death in *The Murder of Gonzago* are a reflection of the events and emotions involving the King Hamlet – Claudius – Gertrude triangle.

Five characters are killed and Ophelia buried before our eyes.

The plot is set in motion by a particularly hideous death, graphically described by its ghostly victim.

The activities of Fortinbras involve the slaughter of thousands of men.

Hamlet sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths.

The treatment of death in *Hamlet* is more ambitious and adventurous than in the other tragedies of Shakespeare. In these, death is the end.

The repulsive bodily effects of death are exposed to by Hamlet in his comment on the dead Polonius (“A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him” 4:3, 19-20).

Hamlet is much preoccupied with morbid reflections on bodily decay after death, particularly in relation to his enemies, visualising with relish how a king (one like Claudius) may go in procession, courtesy of the worms that eat him, “through the guts of a beggar” (4:3, 39-30).

We know from the time when Claudius and Laertes formulate their plans against Hamlet’s life that his death is imminent; the long scene of Ophelia’s funeral keeps the issue in suspense for a time; but the same scene keeps the death theme before our minds.

Death in *Hamlet* is presented in many forms.

That of Polonius is gruesome. He is killed like a rat behind the curtain in Gertrude’s closet, his body lugged about and thought of by Hamlet as being eaten by worms even before it is buried.

Ophelia’s death, by contrast, is a beautiful tableau.

Her own song is her requiem and she is garlanded wit flowers in the stream and in the grave.

The graveyard scene (5,1)is one of the most potent evocations of the nature of life and death on all literature.

The tone is largely humorous, but the underlying jokes of the singing gravedigger is a powerful affirmation of the permanence of the grave. “Who builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright of the carpenter?” asks the second gravedigger. “A grave maker”, replies the first, “the houses he makes last till doomsday”.

Just as he is saying this, Hamlet, the manner of whose death we know, is already planned, comes upon the scene, and the skulls the gravedigger unearths prompt him to meditate most movingly on mortality.

The graveyard scene is marked by one singular stroke of inspiration, easy to miss on a casual reading or watching.

Hamlet’s conversation with the gravedigger raises the subject of his own birth.

When Hamlet asks him how long he has been at the trade, it transpires that “it was that very day that young Hamlet was born” (5:1, 140).

The terrible inevitability of death is suddenly brought into a new focus: the very day on which Hamlet came into the world, a gravedigger began his occupation.

To add a further chilling emphasis to the point, the procession that soon enters the graveyard include the king and Laertes, who are planning to end Hamlet’s life.

Two of Hamlet’s soliloquies look on death from another aspect: as a welcome escape from the weariness of the world.

This emphasis is present even before the encounter with the Ghost:

“O that this too, too, solid flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed

His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (1:2, 129-32)

This world-weariness intensifies after he has heard the Ghost’s account of Claudius and Gertrude.

Nobody, he reflects, would willingly endure “the whips and scorns of time”, and would continue to “grunt and sweat under a weary life” were he not restrained from suicide by the dread of an uncertain hereafter.

Hamlet’s great meditation on Yorick’s skull looks back to his earlier denunciations of female vanity and frailty; “Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour [the facial appearance of a skull] she must come. Make her laugh at that” (5:1, 183-5).

There is more than one layer of irony here. As Hamlet speaks, he is holding the grinning skull of Yorick who once made men laugh when he was court jester.

He speaks without knowing that Ophelia is dead, her corpse approaching the very “favour” Hamlet is anticipating for her with misplaced relish.