

Worksheet 5 – Hamlet – John McRae: From Zero to Avenging Hero

Review

Answer these questions about the previous video lecture to check how much you remember.

1. Which item in Renaissance iconography represents the physical strength that was needed to be a traditional hero?
 - a) Dagger
 - b) Shield
 - c) Book
 - d) Sword

2. Which theology professor is credited with starting the religious Reformation that challenged the Catholic Church?
 - a) Martin Luther
 - b) Henry VIII
 - c) Erasmus Darwin
 - d) Philip Marlow

3. Which three words are repeated in the play to focus the audience on the journey through the Renaissance iconography of Book, Flower and Sword (or Head, Heart and Hand)?
 - a) Books, fine, touch.
 - b) Ink, bloom, mark.
 - c) Words, well, hit.
 - d) Paper, scent, wound.

Recall

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.

4. What does John McRae feel that 'O' at the start of Hamlet's first soliloquy in Act 1 scene 2, means?
 - a) That he is appealing to God.
 - b) It means nothing – he is at point zero.
 - c) That he is appealing to his mother.
 - d) That he is crying.

5. Which Renaissance concept does John McRae say is disrupted in the play?
 - a) The concept of purgatory.
 - b) The idea of perfection in numbers.
 - c) The Divine Right of Kings.
 - d) The Harmony of the Spheres.

6. The Biblical story of Adam and Eve and their eviction from the Garden of Eden is shown in which book published in 1666?
 - a) Paradise Lost.
 - b) Paradise Found
 - c) The Garden of Good and Evil.
 - d) The Garden of Earthly Delights.

Analysis :

7. Let's look again at the confusion regarding time in the play. John McRae discusses this throughout this lecture but watch again from 1.50 to 4.08. The matter of time being out of joint is discussed in terms of Hamlet's confusion regarding his father's death but also in terms of how he is a man born in the wrong time.

Read the article here about the references to time within the play and note down all the references in your own copy.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36002/36002-h/36002-h.htm>

Then write your own timeline for the action that takes place.

James Shapiro's text *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005) claims that 'Hamlet was born at the crossroads of the death of chivalry and the birth of globalisation.' Check back through the references to time you have made and colour code them to relate to these two directions. Which references are about the past and the old ways and which are to do with the future and more modern concerns and principles?

Extension: There is also a very good article by Sean McEvoy in the English and Media Centre's publication EMag (EMag 40 2008) which discusses the issue of the time that Hamlet has and how he is conflicted in a fractured time that he is trapped in.

I would recommend that if you have a subscription, you spend some time reading this article and writing your own response to it. Do you agree or do you feel something else is more important here?

Evaluation

8. In the late 16th century, the image of the Garden is hugely significant and Professor McRae discusses some of the important references at 4.08 – 4.55. The Garden was not only important Biblically as it represents and refers to the disobedience and Fall of Man from an intimate relationship with God. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is the cause of Man's suffering and hardship and also illustrates the concept of Free Will. That whilst God is omniscient, Man has the freedom to choose his own direction even if that goes against the will of God.

McRae references *Paradise Lost* by Milton, an epic poem written in 1666 which covers this episode.

- a) Read through the Wikipedia page and consider how this idea can link with the concept of chaos versus order that we see in Hamlet. Write down 3 or 4 bullet points to summarise these concepts.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise_Lost

There is also a very interesting video tutorial that takes you through the main plot and themes within the poem. Remember though that you are looking at this for its contextual

relevance to Hamlet and so should be looking for parallels and shared imagery where you can.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgD92i5HFW0>

John McRae also references the first Biblical murder which is quoted in Hamlet, the slaying of one brother by another in the story of Cain and Abel. Genesis 4 verses 1 – 16. The story is one of brotherly jealousy with one offering to God being preferred over another and leads to murder and deception.

- b) Go through the play and see how many times this story is referred to. Claudius calls it 'the eldest curse' so make some notes about how Claudius is cursed by his own actions.

The Garden in Elizabethan England was very important and a sign of a wholesome and well-ordered house. The style of gardening was very intricate and needed daily attention and weeding and so the 'unweeded garden' that Hamlet talks about would have been quickly understood by his audience as a sign of disorder.

Here is the Elizabethan garden at Kenilworth castle which is still maintained as it used to be so you can get a good idea of the intricacy. Although lost 400 years ago, this was re-created in 2009 so that visitors can experience the tranquility and order from the day.



- c) Read the blog below which outlines the importance of symmetry and order within the image of the garden.

- d) Can you link it to ideas of symmetry that John McRae has started to talk about with the mirroring of Hamlet and Laertes? With this in mind, can you consider other mirroring and symmetry within the play and notice where the differences are. If symmetry is the ideal, the differences are going to tell us something.

Extension:

Hieronymous Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* painted between 1490 and 1510 is also referenced and worth further study.



The painting is a triptych and shows the life with God in the Garden of Eden on the left, and the last judgement of man as a horrifying reality on the right.

The painting has been analysed and discussed in much detail and there are recurring images of bathing, representing the attempt to cleanse and the images of fruit being offered in many different guises which refers to the temptation of the apple in Eden.

Spend some time looking in detail at this image and see what the ideal is, on the left and what the result of sin and distance from God becomes, on the right.

This will hopefully give some good background details to the nature and ideology of the time period.

The image has been used in much merchandise and is its own iconic image. Think about why this is and why the imagination of Bosch is so important. The picture even has its own festival where people dress as the characters and parade on a river in Holland.

<https://boschparade.nl/en/>

Glossary

Antithesis: a person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else.

Humanist: a rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.

Harmony of the Spheres: The *musica universalis* (literally universal music), also called music of the spheres or harmony of the spheres, is a philosophical concept that regards proportions in the movements of celestial bodies – the Sun, Moon, and planets – as a form of music. The theory, originating in ancient Greece, was a tenet of Pythagoreanism, and was later developed by 16th-century astronomer Johannes Kepler. Kepler did not believe this "music" to be audible, but felt that it could nevertheless be heard by the soul. The idea continued to appeal to scholars until the end of the Renaissance, influencing many schools of thought, including humanism.

Primal: relating to an early stage in evolutionary development; primeval.

Chaos: complete disorder and confusion; the property of a complex system whose behaviour is so unpredictable as to appear random, owing to great sensitivity to small changes in conditions.

Kin: one's family and relations.

Incestuous: sexual relations between people classed as being too closely related to marry each other.

Dumb Show: gestures used to convey a meaning or message without speech; mime; (especially in English drama of the 16th and 17th centuries) a part of a play acted in mime to summarize, supplement, or comment on the main action.