

Worksheet 7 – The Players, Representation and Truth

Review

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

1. Who is a reflection or mirror image of Hamlet?
 - a) Fortinbras
 - b) Laertes
 - c) Horatio
 - d) Claudius

2. Hamlet carries the weight of responsibility that the other characters do not understand. What is this responsibility?
 - a) The grief of his father's death
 - b) The knowledge of his mother's relationship with Claudius
 - c) The truth about his father's death and the need for revenge
 - d) The fact that he is trapped in Denmark and wants to leave.

3. What is Hamlet's first step towards action?
 - a) Banish all useless emotional and intellectual thought.
 - b) To test his friendships
 - c) To question his mother
 - d) To pray for guidance

Recall

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

4. What is comical about the way that the Players act?
 - a) They are old-fashioned and over-dramatic
 - b) They are dressed in a ridiculous way.
 - c) They are all played by men.
 - d) They use dance to communicate meaning.

5. What line of Shakespeare does John McRae use to demonstrate the rhythm of Iambic Pentameter?
 - a) So fair and foul a day I have not seen
 - b) So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
 - c) Shall I compare thee to a summer's day.
 - d) To be or not to be that is the question.

6. Why does Hamlet trust the travelling players?
 - a) Because they are fake.
 - b) Because he can guide them
 - c) Because they are funny
 - d) Because they are his friends.

Analysis :

7. Re-watch the section where John McRae discusses the importance of rhythm in Shakespeare's work. (1.37 – 2.36)

He talks about how the use of iambic pentameter led to Shakespeare's work feeling and sounding more natural and realistic. He compares the rhythm to those based on Latin metre and rhythm and how these were more poetic and artificial.

- a) Read carefully the handout below written by the RSC explaining iambic pentameter. You may have covered this rhythm at GCSE level but it is worth revising and looking at the rhythm in more detail as Shakespeare uses this regular rhythm to convey meaning and especially the ideas of certainty and insecurity.



Shakespeare's Language

Introduction

In Shakespeare's words lie all the clues to character and situation that any reader or actor needs. It's simply a matter of knowing how to find them. The clues are not necessarily in the meanings of the words - the rhythms of the language and the patterns and sounds of the words contain a great deal of valuable information.

Here are some suggestions for finding the clues in Shakespeare's language:

Blank verse

Both written and spoken language use rhythm - a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Most forms of poetry or verse take rhythm one step further and regularise the rhythm into a formal pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. A formal pattern of rhythm is called **metre**.

Shakespeare writes either in **blank verse**, in **rhymed verse** or in **prose**. Blank verse is unrhymed but uses a regular pattern of rhythm or metre. In the English language, blank verse is **iambic pentameter**. Pentameter means there are five poetic feet. In iambic pentameter each of these five feet is composed of two syllables: the first unstressed; the second stressed. The opening line of *Twelfth Night*, is a perfect iambic line :

'If music be the food of love play on'

With its unstressed and stressed syllables marked or 'scanned', it looks like this:

u / u / u / u / u /
'If mu sic be the food of love play on'

u = weak / = strong

The rhythm of blank verse is conversational and with its dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM rhythm, it imitates the heartbeat.

In conversation, we often break the rhythmic pattern and this throws specific words into focus. Shakespeare does the same with blank verse: he often deviates from the perfect iambic line. When he does, it's a clue to a change in the character's feelings or thoughts or a change in situation or both. When the rhythm is changed, the energy and dynamic of the language have been changed. Feel how abrupt, uneven and ragged the rhythm is in the final scenes of *Macbeth* – here, Macbeth's last hope is dashed and Birnam Wood is seen to move to Dunsinane.

MACBETH u / u / u / u / u /
 Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it.
 / / u / u / u / u /
 Come, put mine armour on; give me my staff.
 / u u / / u u / u / u /
 Seyton, send out. Doctor, the thanes fly from me.
 / / u /
 Come, sir, dispatch.

King Lear's anguished protest against the murder of Cordelia (and perhaps of the Fool as well) reverses the rhythmic order of the syllables as Lear's world itself has been incomprehensibly upended:

 / u / u / u / u / u /
 KING LEAR Never, never, never, never, never.

In addition to the repetition of 'never,' the emphasis on the first syllables of each foot suggests a blocking, a refusal to accept the unacceptable. The unstressed syllable ending each foot communicates a sense of hopelessness.

When the line ends in an unstressed syllable rather than a stressed one, as is usual with iambic pentameter, this is sometimes called a **feminine** or **weak ending**. Several lines ending in unstressed syllables in a speech call for investigation on the part of the reader. Consider the opening lines of Othello's speech to the Venetian Senate:

OTHELLO u / u / u / u / u /
 Most potent, grave and reverend signiors,
 u / u / u / u / u / u /
 My very noble and approved good masters,
 u / u / u / u / u / u /
 That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
 u / u / u / u / u /
 It is most true; true I have married her,
 u / u / u / u / u /
 The very head and front of my offending
 u / u / u /
 Hath this extent, no more...

What accounts for this series of weak endings? Is Othello feeling defensive in putting his case to the senators? Or is he, with irony, subtly undermining their power and status? Or is there another reason? This is an actor's choice, but a choice that will have vital implications for characterisation.

Just as an actor will 'beat through' the verse (for example, by clapping), when looking for clues to his character's state of being, so students of Shakespeare can benefit from beating out the rhythms of the verse and considering what might explain deviations from the iambic line.

Rhymed verse

4 I say away! – Go on! I'll follow thee. (1.4.86)

Extension:

Write your own line of speech that uses each rhythm and metrical foot.

E.g. iambic pentameter:

Oh **would** you **like** a **lovely cup** of **tea**?

Trochaic tetrameter:

Goodbye, I **hate** **to** hear **you** leave

If you get carried away, you can try to have a conversation using only blank verse. See how although you will have to think carefully about the words you use and the order you put them in, the conversation will feel, sort of, natural.

Evaluation

8. Looking back at the classical references John McRae refers to in Hamlet's 3rd soliloquy re-watch this part of the lecture from 4.00 to 4.40.
Hamlet refers to Aeneas' talk to Dido about the slaughter of the King Priam and the excessive grief that Hecuba feels.
Both The Aeneid by Virgil (29 – 19 BC) and Homer's Iliad discuss this story.
The references to Classic Literature fit with the past generations that the travelling players bring to the play but they also link with the classical comparisons that Hamlet makes between him and his parents and their ideal classic counterparts.
To think about them in further detail, I think it is worthwhile to briefly look at the plot of this tale.
- a) Read through the Wikipedia summary of the plot below and highlight where the play of Hamlet may echo the action within this classical work.

In Book 3 of Homer's *Iliad*, Priam tells Helen of Troy that he once helped King Mygdon of Phrygia in a battle against the Amazons.

When Hector is killed by Achilles, the Greek warrior treats the body with disrespect and refuses to give it back. According to Homer in book XXIV of the *Iliad*, Zeus sends the god Hermes to escort King Priam, Hector's father and the ruler of Troy, into the Greek camp. Priam tearfully pleads with Achilles to take pity on a father bereft of his son and return Hector's body. He invokes the memory of Achilles' own father, Peleus. Priam begs Achilles to pity him, saying "I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before – I put my lips to the hands of the man who killed my son." Deeply moved, Achilles relents and returns Hector's corpse to the Trojans. Both sides agree to a temporary truce, and Achilles gives Priam leave to hold a proper funeral for Hector, complete with funeral games. He promises that no Greek will engage in combat for at least nine days, but on the twelfth day of peace, the Greeks would all stand once more and the mighty war would continue.



Priam killed by Neoptolemus, detail of an Attic black-figure amphora, ca. 520–510 BC

Priam is killed during the Sack of Troy by Achilles' son Neoptolemus (also known as Pyrrhus). His death is graphically related in Book II of Virgil's *Aeneid*. In Virgil's description, Neoptolemus first kills Priam's son Polites in front of his father as he seeks sanctuary on the altar of Zeus. Priam rebukes Neoptolemus, throwing a spear at him, harmlessly hitting his shield. Neoptolemus then drags Priam to the altar and there kills him too. Priam's death is alternatively depicted in some Greek vases. In this version, Neoptolemus clubs Priam to death with the corpse of the latter's baby grandson, Astyanax.

Priam is said to have fathered fifty sons and many daughters, with his chief wife Hecuba, daughter of the Phrygian king Dymas and many other wives and concubines. These children include famous mythological figures such as Hector, Paris, Helenus, Cassandra, Deiphobus, Troilus, Laodice, Polyxena, Creusa, and Polydorus. Priam was killed when he was around 80 years old by Achilles' son Neoptolemus.

The themes of loss and revenge are upper most in this play. Other themes that may not initially seem linked such as war and violence and sacrifice do have some links with Hamlet. The grief of a bereaved wife and the revenge necessary is clearly of interest.

- b) Write a paragraph from Hamlet's point of view explaining why this play above all others is important to you and why it is this play that you have memorized extracts of and this play that you long to hear a speech from.
- c) Look back at the actual lines that the Player King speaks (2.2.405-456) and underline anything that links or hints at the ways that grieving wives behave. Link this with the accusations that Hamlet makes of his mother and the way that she behaves.

Extension:

Consider the words of Professor Dover Wilson who argued that the Player King's lines are problematic stating that 'Critics are agreed neither upon the purpose of the episode ... nor whether Shakespeare himself approved of the Pyrrhus speech.'

Look at the following pictures and try to examine what they tell you about the relationship between Hecuba and Priam and why the reaction of the Player King might cause Hamlet to judge himself and his actions so harshly.



Glossary

Meta-theatre - describes the aspects of a play that draw attention to its nature as drama or theatre, or to the circumstances of its performance

Metre - the regular arrangement of syllables in poetry according to the number and type of beats in a line:

Syllable - a unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound, with or without surrounding consonants, forming the whole or a part of a word; for example, there are two syllables in *water* and three in *inferno*.

Rhythm - the measured flow of words and phrases in verse or prose as determined by the relation of long and short or stressed and unstressed syllables.

Replicate - make an exact copy of; reproduce

Rogue - a dishonest or unprincipled man.

Peasant - an ignorant, rude, or unsophisticated person

Slave - a person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them