THE DIFFICULT FACE OF DEATH: HAMLET'S CONVERSATION WITH YORICK'S SKULL AND OPHELIA'S BURIAL IN SCENE ONE OF ACT FIVE OF SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

In this exercise, as well as the next one, we will deal with two subjects that seem, at least on the surface, to be opposites and that both apparently concern—though not exclusively—our physical existence: the posthumous decomposition of our "hide" and its reproduction during life through the physical expression of love: sex.

In an earlier exercise based on Joyce's Dubliners, we dealt with death in the distant past (the youthful love of the central character's wife) and in the near future (the central character's thoughts about the death of his elderly aunt). Now, in preparation for our class "Thoughts on Life and Death," we arrive at the truly difficult matters: the face of death in the present, as presented by the incomparable Elizabethan playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616) in the first scene of the fifth and final act of his tragedy Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. This classic, timeless masterpiece, whose central character is the young prince of Elsinore, was written in 1599 or 1601. It is one of the most representative works of world drama, encompassing a vast range of thoughts and emotions related to human existence. Hamlet, the melancholy prince of Denmark and grieving son of the murdered king, is undoubtedly Shakespeare's most psychologically complex character and is considered the greatest dramatic role ever created.

The tragedy's plot revolves around Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. After his father's death, his uncle Claudius marries his mother, Queen Gertrude, and is proclaimed king of Denmark. One night, the young prince's father appears as a ghost, telling him that his brother Claudius is responsible for his sudden death and asking him to take revenge. Hamlet feels he needs more proof before committing a murderous act. He therefore pretends to be mentally ill while investigating his dead father's claims. He is then deeply affected by the distressing situation in the much-afflicted palace of Elsinore. His mind is clouded by his overriding desire for revenge, which poisons his relationship with his fiancée, Ophelia. Hamlet then accidentally kills Polonius (his fiancée's father) instead of Claudius. On hearing the news, the young woman goes mad and drowns in a river. The climax of Shakespeare's drama comes when Hamlet and Laertes (Ophelia's brother) fight with swords to the death. Laertes has dipped the tip of his sword in poison and has also put poison in a cup of wine. This leads to the deaths of Laertes himself, Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius.

The Prince of Denmark is introspective and conflicted, torn between his desire for revenge and his doubts about the morality of the terrible act he is considering. His complexity makes him an unconventional character in Shakespeare's world,

whose personal struggles continue to resonate with readers and theatre audiences.



Shakespeare was extremely popular during the Romantic period, influencing French creative artists such as the composer Hector Berlioz, the writer Victor Hugo, and the painter Eugène Delacroix. Delacroix's temperament, lifestyle, and interests made him the ideal Romantic artist. He travelled to warm, vibrant, exotic places such as Morocco, but also travelled in his imagination to romantic and alluring, dark and dramatic past eras. He was also an avid reader. The words of Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, and others nourished his soul and fired his imagination. His passionate love of literature was accompanied by a productive

ability to illustrate the scenes he read. One subject to which he often returned was Shakespeare's Hamlet, especially the scene in which Hamlet and his best friend Horatio are in a cemetery. In the painting Hamlet and Horatio in the Cemetery, Delacroix takes us into one of Shakespeare's best-known and most macabre scenes. Death and the afterlife haunt the young Prince Hamlet from the beginning of the play—from the famous "To be or not to be" to its end. In the cemetery, Hamlet encounters the material manifestation of death: decomposing human bodies. He sees the skull of Yorick, the palace's former jester, unearthed in the graveyard and reflects on mortality and the fragility of life. Yorick's skull symbolizes the inevitable decomposition of the human body. His lips, along with his jokes, pranks, and songs, have completely vanished with time. Delacroix had seen a performance of Hamlet in Paris and was fascinated by the mercurial, enigmatic prince. He made a series of lithographs and paintings of scenes from the play, and even painted a self-portrait as Hamlet. Interestingly, Delacroix may never have seen this particular scene performed. Although it is an essential part of the play, the mixture of comedy—especially at the beginning, in the gravedigger's dialogue with his assistant—and tragedy did not fit French theatrical conventions, so it appears not to have been staged in Paris. This may explain why Delacroix does not show Hamlet holding the jester's skull, as was customary in English performances and illustrations of the text.

The painting is stripped of all unnecessary details and ornament. There are only four figures in a distant landscape and a stormy sky filled with black clouds. This allows Delacroix to focus on the characters and the drama unfolding in the scene. The gloomy setting, with clouds hiding the blue sky and Hamlet's black mourning clothes, creates a melancholy atmosphere. The gravedigger, bare-chested and holding a skull, is a striking sight, but every gaze is drawn to Hamlet. Delacroix viewed him through the lens of Romanticism and depicted him as a pale, melancholy, frail, noble man dressed in black. His pale, small, almost feminine hands stand out against his dark clothes. His hair blows in the wind, and the storm clouds seem to echo the tempest in his soul. Pale and wan, lost in thought about life and death, Hamlet resembles a fragile lily just emerging from the earth. He is presented as an erotic figure, mourning his father and soon to mourn his fiancée Ophelia, who drowned, perhaps by suicide, and whose grave is now being dug. At the same time, Hamlet never stops contemplating revenge against his corrupt uncle and now stepfather, the current king Claudius, murderer of his father. The gravedigger, half-hidden in the hole he is digging, seems to be pushing the skull toward Hamlet. The line of his arm and his gaze lead toward Hamlet's face, forming a powerful dramatic diagonal that makes Hamlet's eyes the focus of the scene. Delacroix's treatment of the subject is full of melancholic intensity. Hamlet's eyes almost seem to burn. Yet here Hamlet appears rather passive,

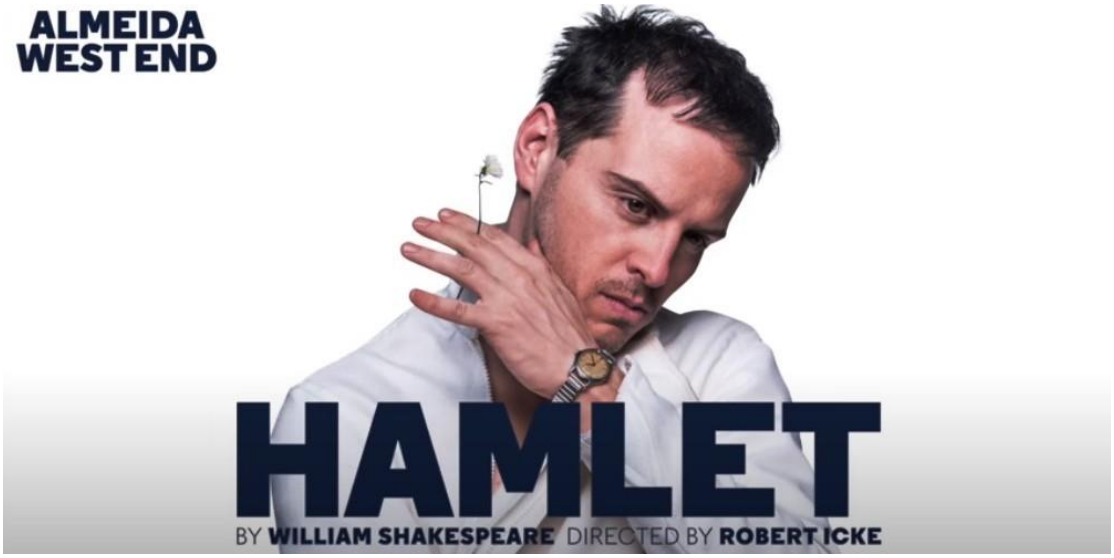
seeming to withdraw and pull his hand away, in contrast to the active, bearded figure of his friend Horatio. The image is undeniably melodramatic, but Delacroix succeeds in capturing a sense of mournful tension—a thoroughly Romantic view of Hamlet by a thoroughly Romantic painter.

In Shakespeare's tragedy, we face a whirl of questions about death and the role of mourning in human life. Prolonged reflection on the nature of death and the dramatic text's continual, subdued resonance with the mystery of mortality are among the work's dominant obsessions. The play touches on the theological and metaphysical anxieties of its age, as well as Hamlet's character, and these may be connected with the death of Shakespeare's eleven-year-old only son in 1596. Certainly, however, they connect the melancholy prince and the Elizabethan audience with us today, as we do not seem to have made much progress in coming to terms with the world of the dead and the "mystery of death."

The gravedigger scene at the beginning of the play's final act is a profound lesson in speaking with mortality, one of literature's sharpest and most relentless meditations on death: a fugue and variations on the ashes of Alexander the Great (what is a king, or a soldier?) and a lesson for each of us. Here, before the open grave awaiting Ophelia's body, there seem to be no spirits or ghosts, no Purgatory, no soul, no afterlife, and no Christian reconciliation with death. Only earth, ashes, and bare bones.

In the scene we are about to watch, Hamlet, recently returned from a journey, meets his "best buddy" Horatio and a gravedigger who sings as he digs a grave. Hamlet tries to discover for whom the grave is intended and reflects on death and the transience of life as he sees skulls being unearthed, including that of Yorick, the palace jester he knew during childhood. A funeral procession approaches. Hamlet soon realizes that the body is Ophelia's. When the dead woman's brother Laertes, overcome with grief, jumps into her grave and curses Hamlet as the cause of Ophelia's death, Hamlet appears before everyone. He and Laertes clash and grapple, with Hamlet declaring his love for and grief over the dead Ophelia.

We will watch an excerpt from Scene One of Act Five in a 2018 television adaptation of a stage production, starring Andrew Scott as Hamlet.



https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iwLKULqFHlgD1-4UZETSO34FTumCxF7s/view?usp=sharing

This realistic scene, with its comic elements—especially at the beginning, in the dialogue between the gravedigger and his assistant (which was not included in the performance we watched)—and its simultaneous otherworldly atmosphere intensifies the tragedy's impact. In this sense, the effect is paradoxical. Its humour foreshadows disaster. It is the calm before the storm.

Samuel Johnson said that Shakespeare is highly realistic in his depiction of the world. In the real world, one person's suffering has almost no effect on other people's lives. Some people go out casually to enjoy themselves while others go to bury their loved ones. This naturalistic depiction is embodied by the gravedigger. Death is tragic, painful, bleak, grotesque. But who ever knew that death could be made comic? Here the gravedigger works cheerfully and sings as he digs up human skulls, introducing a symbolic dimension into the play and prompting us to become philosophers of death.

Analysing what we saw:

Hamlet and Horatio enter and strike up a conversation with the gravedigger. Although Hamlet has previously spoken rather favourably about suicide and death, he now feels disgusted by the stench of decay. Seeing the gravedigger working among the dead and behaving so cheerfully makes him reflect. Hamlet has spent much of the play talking and thinking about death, but coming face to face with actual human remains affects him differently from even encountering his own father's ghost. Hamlet begins to consider what it really means for a life to end, for a body to begin decomposing, and for a person to fade from both physical and emotional memory. The gravedigger and Hamlet engage in a witty exchange

of questions and answers. Although Hamlet is socially superior to the gravedigger, they are clearly intellectual equals. The gravedigger continues to spar verbally with Hamlet and appears not to recognize him as the prince being discussed. It is also possible that he does recognize Hamlet but conceals it, playing along out of contempt for the upper classes. When the gravedigger tosses a skull onto the ground, the prince is forced to consider death as the great leveller of all people.

Throughout the play, Hamlet is obsessed with the body's physical decomposition. At the beginning of the tragedy, in his first soliloquy, he already reflects:

"Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,

And resolve itself into a dew."

The same meditation on death and human mortality develops further in this scene. Hamlet's preoccupation with mortality is evident in his attention to Yorick's skull, as he imagines physical features such as the lips and skin that have now decomposed from the bones. Similarly, in an earlier scene, Hamlet told his stepfather and current king, Claudius, that the dead Polonius was at dinner, being eaten by worms. Hamlet returns to death and to the fact that all people become worm-meat, that everything alive will one day die, and that neither rank nor money can change death's equality.

Hamlet is fascinated by the equalizing effect of death and decay: great men and beggars alike end up as dust. In this scene, he reflects on the irony that politicians, lawyers with their tricks, self-serving courtiers, vain court ladies who wear make-up, and even those regarded as examples of greatness in this world are ultimately nothing but the "quintessence of dust." He also imagines the dust from the decomposing corpses of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Alexander died too, and his body became dust over time. Dust is earth used to build walls. Julius Caesar also died, and his body likewise became dust. Thus, death is the great leveller.

Let us now focus on Yorick's skull:

Realizing that he is holding Yorick's skull—a man he once knew and loved—Hamlet reflects deeply on the nature of life, death, and decay. The fact that all Yorick's distinctive and endearing features have been completely erased by death adds another layer of nihilism to Hamlet's existential thoughts. Why should anyone value their own life or the lives of others, or act morally—or act at all—if death ultimately makes all these things insignificant? Hamlet is devastated by the stark realization that everyone ends up anonymous, rotting in the ground. This difficult moment confirms his feeling throughout the play that his life is meaningless.

Yorick, the old king's former jester, plays no significant role in Hamlet, but his skull does! The gravedigger knew Yorick well and refers to him as a "mad fellow." Yorick's skull in the cemetery scene symbolizes life's futility, the inevitability of death, and the pointless vanity of the human body. Yorick died twenty-three years earlier. According to the play, he was a jester at the court of the king, Hamlet's father, and knew Prince Hamlet well. They played and enjoyed themselves together when Hamlet was a child. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a jester entertained the royal court with humour, foolishness, and amusing stories. A jester was not highly esteemed in medieval society, but was beloved by the royal family and courtiers.

First, Hamlet introduces Yorick's character to the audience. According to Hamlet, Yorick was "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." Yorick's imagination and entertaining manner appealed to Hamlet as a child. During his childhood, Yorick carried him on his shoulder "a thousand times" and played with him. Hamlet grieves for his old playmate. The inevitability of death has snatched Yorick away from the unfortunate Hamlet. This part of the scene, in which Hamlet speaks to a skull, adds great complexity to the tragedy. After taking Yorick's skull from the gravedigger, Hamlet says: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio…" He briefly remembers their childhood games. The skull of the palace's old jester reminds him of his own existence and past. It also triggers deeper questions in Hamlet's mind and intensifies the existential crisis he experiences inwardly. Shakespeare uses Yorick's skull as a dramatic device.

Yorick's skull therefore has symbolic meaning in relation to the themes Shakespeare adopted in Hamlet. Let us emphasize them again:

Yorick's skull reminds the audience of the futility of human life. Hamlet holding the skull illustrates the futility of the court jester's life. Once he astonished the palace court with his wit; now, lying beneath the earth in a lonely cemetery with others, he has forever lost his intellectual abilities. Is it worth making an extra effort in life if it leads to the grave regardless? Yorick's skull symbolizes death, the ultimate destination of life (?). Hamlet holding the skull represents the duality of life and death: Hamlet symbolizes life, while the skull in his hand represents death. They are only a hand's breadth apart! "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." By using Yorick's skull in Hamlet, Shakespeare made the famous theme "Memento mori" a dramatic foundation of his tragedy. This Latin phrase means "remember that you must die." Yorick's skull depicts the inevitability of death and plunges Hamlet into an existential crisis. Hamlet contemplates his own existence through the old, decomposed skull in his hands. After seeing Yorick's skull, he thinks of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. They achieved much, but ended up as particles of dust. Hamlet's existence in this world is just like dust, shifted by the passage of

time and taking on new forms. The skull leads Hamlet to wonder how futile his life is. The scene also contains another symbolic but ironic reference to the human body. Yorick's rotten, foul-smelling skull presents the image of a human body decaying. The body houses different ideals, physical splendour and, most precious of all, our soul. At the end of the day, when the bird flies away, it begins to rot like a potato.

Before turning to Ophelia's burial, let us listen to the rich voice of the legendary African American contralto Marian Anderson, accompanied on piano by Franz Rupp, in Franz Schubert's 1817 Lied "Der Tod und das Mädchen" ("Death and the Maiden"), with words by the poet Matthias Claudius.

The Maiden:

Away! Ah, go away!

Go, wild skeleton!

I am still young! Go, dear one,

And do not touch me.

The Maiden:

Oh, go away and leave me!

You wild skeleton!

I am still so young! Forget me!

Please go away! Do not touch me!

Death:

Give me your hand, you beautiful and delicate creature!

I am a friend, and I do not come to punish you.

Take heart! I am not fierce;

You shall sleep gently in my arms!

Death:

Give me your hand, you beautiful and delicate creature!

I am a friend, and I do not come to punish you.

Take heart! I am not fierce;

You shall sleep gently in my arms!

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LwgG6IqPTpH6njbUd1yKxALLCDeT5AX2/view?usp=sharing

With the entrance of King Claudius and the funeral procession, we move to the next unit of action, which concludes Scene One of Act Five. Hamlet does not yet know that Ophelia is dead—but he is about to attend her funeral. From the procession's appearance, he can tell what kind of funeral it is, but he does not yet know who is being buried. This second part of the scene, Ophelia's burial, reveals Hamlet's whole personality as his detached, contemplative mood comes to an end. The burial scene, in which Hamlet appears as a different person, reveals his inner state of mind. As Ophelia's body is placed in the grave, Hamlet watches his mother, the queen, scatter flowers on the coffin. "Sweets to the sweet," she says. "I hoped you should have been my Hamlet's wife." Hamlet now realizes that Ophelia is the one lying dead in the coffin. The priest says little about how Ophelia's powerful family secured a proper Christian burial for her. He seems to imply that Ophelia was not a virgin when she died—but she was allowed to be buried as one, just as she was allowed funeral rites despite apparently having committed suicide. Laertes does not take kindly to the priest's words about his recently deceased sister and says Ophelia will be an angel while the priest will howl in Hell. No longer able to restrain himself, Laertes cries out in grief and jumps into the grave, asking to be buried with his sister. At this point Hamlet reveals himself and demands to know why Laertes emphasizes his grief so much. He says:

"I loved Ophelia.

Forty-two thousand brothers

Could not, with all their quantity of love,

Make up my sum."

Here Hamlet emerges from his feigned madness when he confronts the reality of Ophelia's death, the young woman he always loved. It breaks his heart to watch

her burial and realize that he has lost her forever. Entirely preoccupied with revenge against his stepfather, King Claudius, he knows that he "let" her slip from his grasp into the river. Now he feels utterly alone, having lost his father, his mother to his uncle, and his true love. Unable to bear the pain any longer, he jumps into Ophelia's grave beside Laertes. Hamlet's utterly human response shows that no philosophy can lessen heartbreak and no revenge can fill the void left by the death of a loved one. Hamlet and Laertes try to outdo one another—in a rather ridiculous way—to prove which of them loved Ophelia more. Neither seems able to accept her death, and each believes the other is somehow to blame. This morbid graveyard scene shows how tragically unprepared both men are to face the reality of death—even as they wish for each other's destruction.

The entire cemetery scene allows the audience to see Hamlet in his normal state of mind once again. With his subtle sense of humour, he can appreciate the gravedigger's wit even amid his troubles. Possessing great sensitivity and emotional depth, Hamlet abandons his pretence and openly expresses his grief by entering Ophelia's grave. He does not realize that he will soon enter his own.