HAMLET
BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Hamlet, unlike any other text of its kind, has stood the test of time because of its remarkably modern exploration of the deep concerns of humanity. Despite this, the play is very much an object of its time and reflects a period of great change and uncertainty. Shakespeare’s Hamlet was written and performed in the final years of Elizabeth I’s reign. Just as the play ends with the death of the Hamlet family line, Elizabeth was the last of the Tudors and she was dying without an heir. Elizabeth’s upcoming death could throw the country into political upheaval, as it was feared that with her death, the religious war between Catholicism and Protestantism would be reignited.

Dating

Hamlet has had a long publishing and performance history which complicates the dating of the play. Although the text is lost, references from the period have allowed scholars to determine the existence of what is called the Ur-Hamlet (meaning early or primitive), which would have been performed during the 1590s. Despite this, Hamlet (as we know it today) was probably written during 1599-1600 and then first performed in the following year.

The text

The Hamlet that we have today is a mixture of the various versions of the text that have come down to us through history. The play was first printed in quarto is 1603. However, this version is known as the ‘bad quarto’ as it only contains half the text. Also, famously, instead of asking, ‘To be or not to be, that is the question’, the Hamlet of the bad quarto says, ‘To be, or not to be, aye there’s the point’. The next version of the play was the second quarto, published in 1604–5. It is the longest version of the play and what most modern editions are based on. Finally, Hamlet was again published in the Folio of 1623 in the collected edition of Shakespeare’s works.
INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Theatrical
While Shakespeare was writing Hamlet, the new Globe Theatre was being built to house the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the theatre company Shakespeare wrote for. The theatre itself becomes a presence within the play, with constant meta-theatrical references to acting, costumes, a play-within-a-play, and watching theatre. Much of Hamlet is a meditation on life being like a play that we have to perform a role in. Hamlet, however, does not want to play his given role of the avenger.

Generically, Hamlet is a revenge tragedy. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, this genre was extremely popular. These sorts of plays would mix gruesome violence with black comedy, telling the story of an avenger who ultimately dies in his pursuit of revenge. This type of plot was used by playwrights to explore the themes of political absolutism and corruption. Shakespeare, however, developed the genre further. He uses violence as a way to create moral ambiguity and to question the results of violent action.

Theological
Shakespeare wrote Hamlet at the end of a century ridden with religious upheaval. In the 70 years before the staging of the play, England went from Catholic to Protestant to Catholic and finally back to Protestantism again with Queen Elizabeth. Protestantism had finally been cemented by the reign of Elizabeth. However, Catholicism was still part of the English psyche (Shakespeare's father was himself a Catholic). This religious debate was at the heart of England’s political development during the sixteenth century, and Shakespeare draws upon this for his play.

It is significant that Hamlet hails from Wittenberg, the city where Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Church, a catalyst for Protestantism sweeping through Europe. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet, he says that he has come from purgatory, which is a Catholic belief. Hamlet initially distrusts the Ghost as to believe him would mean to accept the truth of the Catholic doctrine. Despite Hamlet’s trust in the Ghost, he still questions religion at every turn. As a character, Hamlet is ultimately unable to find any consolation in religion. Despite this, Hamlet looks back with some nostalgia towards Catholicism and with some hope that the two religions could exist side by side in the same world.

Philosophical
Although the philosophical questions posed in Hamlet are ones eternally faced by humanity, the process of answering them are a reflection of Shakespeare’s time. The characterisation of Hamlet as a university student allows the play to explore the humanist philosophy of the period, which Hamlet would be studying. Humanism in the Renaissance aimed to understand the full capabilities of humanity and lead to the betterment of society. Humanists believed in the importance of education and the concept of the individual. However, by the end of the Renaissance, humanist thinking became more sceptical, arguing that human knowledge was flawed and limited. This scepticism is reflected in the play as Hamlet is unable to see humanity as good, but evil. Furthermore, sceptical humanism argued that truth is not easily found nor understood. In the play, Hamlet’s understanding of the world is shown to be opaque, despite his skills of rhetoric and reasoning.