

Elements of crime writing: Text overview - Hamlet

What follows is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of crime. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.



“Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.”

Overview

The events in *Hamlet* are a direct response to a crime which predates the action of the play. The regicide of Old Hamlet by his brother Claudius is the begetter of a series of events that ultimately lead to the suffering and deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The magnitude of Claudius' crime against familial, social and hierarchical order is so great that a whole catalogue of crimes and immoralities follow in its wake, corrupting the court of Elsinore, destroying families, poisoning Denmark itself and leaving it vulnerable to an invading Norwegian force.

Murder and poison

A crime of considerable magnitude is central to the text and this leads to further crimes, several of which are murders. The murder of Old Hamlet, anointed King of Denmark, drives the protagonist's actions and the subsequent events of the play. Old Hamlet has been murdered by his brother, Claudius, prior to the play's opening. However, the audience is not immediately aware that a murder has taken place, simply that the previous king has died and a new king has been crowned. Typical of crime writing, though, is the disquiet that pervades the play's opening which signals that all is not as it appears. The ghost of the former king has been seen walking the battlements and the son of the former king is suicidal

and angry at the speed of his mother's remarriage so hot on his father's death ("The funeral baked meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.", he tells his friend Horatio), and Hamlet is angry too at his uncle's coronation, at the replacement of the satyr to Hyperion.

Within a few scenes of the enigmatic opening, though, Shakespeare reveals that a murder has taken place and graphic details of the crime are disseminated through the highly charged encounter between the ghost and his son. This is typical of crime narratives where murders are often announced at the start (for example *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Brighton Rock* and *When Will There Be Good News?*). Here the ghost explains that while he was sleeping in his garden, Claudius had poured the "juice of cursed hebona...in the porches of [his] ears", how the poison had acted "swift as quicksilver", coursing through his blood, instantly making the skin of his entire body erupt in "vile and loathsome" sores. Such was the painful manner of his death and such was the pre-meditation of the criminal. But worse than the physical pain, in the God-fearing world of the play and to the God-fearing audience, was Old Hamlet's being deprived of the last rites, dying with all his imperfections on his head. Interestingly, the murder scene is re-enacted in the inner-play, foregrounding its structural and symbolic significance to the whole drama.

Claudius' crime of fratricide is a crime against familial, religious and domestic order and, in this case, the crime is compounded by the fact that he has murdered a king ordained by God. Regicide, the deliberate killing of a monarch, is a capital crime against the state and social order, the deadly and destructive consequences of which are made manifest as the plot develops. The rottenness at Denmark's core is the chief consequence. Claudius has clear motives for his crime. The murder of Old Hamlet and the marriage to his queen, secures an elevation in his status and power, but the marriage also smacks of sexual corruption, an infringement of God's law as set out to Moses in Leviticus: "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it *is* thy brother's nakedness". The transgressive, incestuous nature of this coupling is foregrounded in Hamlet's early soliloquies as it is this which so repels him: "married with my uncle/My father's brother, but no more like my father/Than I to Hercules.....such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" Corruption is not just evident in the sexual and domestic sphere: moral and political corruption spreads to affect the body politic, neatly summed up in Marcellus' comment to Horatio, after the ghost is about to speak with Hamlet, that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark".

Perpetrators, guilt and victims

The rottenness can perhaps best be seen in the murders which follow Claudius' killing of Old Hamlet. Hamlet stabs to death Polonius erroneously thinking it is Claudius; the Prince also authorises the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whom he despises for making love to their employment; Gertrude is mistakenly poisoned by the cup that Claudius prepares for Hamlet; Claudius sets up Laertes to murder Hamlet, poisoning the end of Laertes' rapier; Hamlet kills Laertes with

the same rapier after it gets exchanged in their duel; at the end of the play Hamlet avenges his father's death by stabbing his uncle with the same sword used against Laertes and himself; he also forces Claudius to drink from the poisoned chalice thereby administering justice by causing treachery to fall on the head of the perpetrator. It is important to note here Claudius' choice to use poison to rid himself of Hamlet, instantly recalling what he did to Hamlet's father.

A key element in crime writing is remorse or the lack thereof. The extent to which the criminals in *Hamlet* experience guilt is debatable. Claudius is made to confront his murder of his brother in the Mousetrap play and his attempt to atone for his sins is dramatised in the confessional scene. However, although he knows his offense is rank and "smells to heaven", although he knows his bosom is "black as death!" his words are hollow. He is not prepared to give up the crown, the fruits of his crime and so although his words fly up to heaven, his "thoughts remain below". It is also significant that even as he prays, he has already set in motion his plot against Hamlet. There is also no final act of contrition for his crimes against Hamlet or Laertes or even Gertrude (he tells her not to drink from the poisoned cup, but when she does, he only says "It is too late"). Laertes, although full of venom against Hamlet for the murder of Polonius and for the suicide of his sister, does feel remorse before he dies: "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet./Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,/Nor thine on me!" Hamlet's final words to Laertes show a similar remorse but he does not show any contrition for killing Polonius or for putting the death sentence on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and although he is sad at Ophelia's death, he does not blame himself. He feels no remorse for killing Claudius, though he is troubled by his own "wounded name" which he leaves behind him at his death.

With so many murders, poisonings and crimes, there are of course many victims, a key element of crime writing. Old Hamlet, Hamlet himself, Polonius, Gertrude and Ophelia are all victims. While it is easy to see Claudius as a criminal, the victims are less clear cut since they are themselves all guilty of some deception or wrong doing. Old Hamlet's crimes or indiscretions are unknown but his being murdered has prevented him from confessing his sins, hence his being consigned to purgatory. Hamlet is a most interesting victim cum criminal since he fulfils many of the roles associated with crime writing. He is a victim on a number of levels: of Claudius' coming between the election and his hopes to be king, of Old Hamlet's demand that he revenges his "foul and most unnatural murder" and of Claudius' machinations where he plots against his life. His greatest suffering is perhaps caused by the demand of his father. Although Hamlet says he is willing to carry out revenge ("Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love,/May sweep to my revenge.") he is actually an unwilling avenger – an innocent scholar/philosopher whose mind is tainted by the call to murder and who looks for all manner of reason not to carry out the deed. He is also the victim of a variety of plots that Claudius practises against

him, the most deadly being the orchestrated fencing match with Laertes where Claudius doubly ensures that Hamlet will die.

Detective

While Hamlet has a clear role as victim and perpetrator of crime in this crime writing text, he also has the role of detective. Before he can punish Claudius, he investigates the ghost's claim that his father has been murdered by his brother. As detective, he shows skill and cunning, feigning madness in order to better investigate the veracity of the accusations against Claudius. The 'Mousetrap scene' is a classic 'setup' scenario. Hamlet contrives to expose Claudius' guilt through enlisting travelling mummers to perform a play about regicide: "the play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King". He receives the proof of Claudius' guilt by noting his uncle's reaction to the drama; Claudius rises in discomfort and calls for "some light". Typical of detective fiction, Hamlet takes his time to bring the criminal to account. Much criticism of the play has often focused on Hamlet's procrastination. However, if *Hamlet* is seen as an example of crime writing then it is entirely in keeping with the genre that the confrontation between the criminal and his pursuer (the detective) and the revelation that the pursuer knows all (Hamlet publically denounces him in the final scene as "incestuous, murderous, damnèd Dane"), does not take place until the end of the text.

Suspense

Suspense and prevarication run through the narrative of the play and are key elements of crime writing. What Shakespeare dramatises is the stand-off between the criminal and his pursuer, the cunning stratagems and temporising used by both in their evasion or pursuit. There is much plotting and counter-plotting. Claudius' use of Ophelia and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what Hamlet is thinking are matched by Hamlet's pretence of madness and his dispatch of his two friends in England. Hamlet, in certain speeches and scenes, seems determined to kill Claudius swiftly (notably after the ghost has told him of his horrible murder and how Claudius "won to his shameful lust/ The will of [his] most seeming-virtuous Queen") but Shakespeare maintains the suspense by having Hamlet, at other points in the play, internally question his thirst to avenge his father's death ("O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!") or have him seeming to wane into a state of almost inaction ("I do not know/ Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do',/Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means/ to do't.") Only at the end of the play when Laertes tells Hamlet that Hamlet has been poisoned and there is no antidote does the Prince spring to action, turning the venomous sword upon the king. Suspense and intrigue are important, recognisable elements in the narrative structuring of crime writing. Having succeeded as the detective figure, Hamlet then takes it upon himself to exact revenge and retribution and in doing so becomes not only the hand of justice but also a parallel of sorts to Claudius.

Pursuit

Hamlet is noted for his self-reflection, and Shakespeare foregrounds this through the character's use of soliloquies. Hamlet is obsessed by the crime that has been committed and discusses how he means to investigate and ultimately achieve his revenge. This has much in common with the common conceit of the detective's commentary that we often get in crime writing, where the detective's thought processes and deductive reasoning are shared with the reader (Sherlock Holmes and Poirot are classic examples of logical thinkers who articulate their thoughts). Thus Hamlet tells his audiences his plans to catch the king's conscience, his reasons for not killing Claudius at prayer (he wants him to suffer in the same way his father suffers in purgatory), his purpose in putting on his antic disposition and his determination to finally avenge himself on his uncle (told, on his return from England, in the exchange with Horatio who, in effect, becomes his side-kick).

Vengeance

There is a clear thread of revenge and retribution informing the narrative of the play, unfolding from the moment that the ghost commands Hamlet to, "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." The play itself is a revenge tragedy amongst other things. In this revenge tragedy, Hamlet like other avenging protagonists faces a spiritual dilemma, a conflict between exacting personal revenge for the crime committed, or as Christian religion dictates allowing heavenly retribution and judgment to take its course. This conundrum is referenced in Hamlet's soliloquies. Yet in spite of the debate and procrastination, the narrative moves steadily forward towards the climactic confrontation between murderer and avenger. Claudius knows he is being tracked down and tries his hardest to thwart the avenger, but this does not happen.

Resolution

As with all crime writing texts, the ending of *Hamlet* is a key area for consideration. At the play's conclusion Claudius, the guilty criminal, lies dead, murdered by Hamlet and punished for his various crimes. However, set against this sense of justice being carried out is the fact that Hamlet, the avenging detective figure, has also been killed, along with many others. The resolution may not be finally consolatory. Although order is restored at the end with Fortinbras taking over to cleanse the state, Horatio's words suggest that this is a very dark crime story: "So shall you hear/Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,/Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,/Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause/and, in this upshot, purposes mistook/Fallen on th'inventors' heads."