

## Use of Symbols & Classical Allusions in Hamlet

Zaheer Ahmad

University of Lahore Chenab Campus Pakistan

### Abstract

Shakespeare is one of the greatest writers of the world particularly he has no equal in English literature. As a dramatist he has provided the world with the best of material. His plays are read, interpreted and translated in other languages. Samuel Johnson claims that puns are to Shakespeare what "luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire." Language in literature has always been a very typical way. The writers take help of many things used in figurative language. That is why literary language becomes different from common language. Shakespeare makes use of many rhetorical devices, ranging from the commonplace (metaphor, simile, and so on) to the exotic (polysyndeton—the repetition of conjunctions in a series of coordinate words, phrases or clauses). An important step, though, is simply being aware that these texts are highly rhetorical, and the rhetoric works both to embellish the text and express characterization. Being a great writer, Shakespeare uses the language which is not easily comprehended by a new reader. Beyond any doubt, his language is aphoristic and full of depth and profoundness. The aim of this study is to point out symbols and classical allusions used in Hamlet but at a limited level. The study will be of assistance for the new readers to understand Hamlet.

**Keywords:** Particular language, pun, rhetorical devices, wordplay, metaphor, embellish, aphoristic, allusions, symbols.

### 1. Introduction

The word symbol is derived from "symballein", meaning 'to throw together', from the Greek 'symbolon' and Latin 'symbolum', which meant token, sign" (Webster, 2003: 1190). Although the school of symbolism appeared in France in 1880, but one thousand year before appearing this school, people used symbols for expressing their feelings and thoughts about phenomena, life and death. "The founders of school of symbolism were three great poets, Stephan Mallarme, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, who used symbols for expressing their thoughts" (Farshidvard, 1373: 4). Symbol is defined in the online 'Encyclopedia Britannica' as "a communication element intended to simply represent or stand for a complex of person, object, group, or idea." It is a kind of figures of speech used for increasing the beauty of the text and has figurative meaning besides its literal meaning. Shaw (1881: 367) presents the following definition for symbol: "(Symbol is) something used for, or regarded as, representing something else. More specifically, a symbol is a word, phrase, or other expression having a complex of associated meanings; in this sense, a symbol is viewed as having values different from those of whatever is being symbolized. Many poets have used the rose as a symbol of youth and beauty; a flag is a piece of cloth which stands for or is a symbol of a nation". As Perrine (1974) states, "a literary symbol is something that means more than what it is. It is an object, a person, a situation, an action, or some other item that has a literal meaning in the story, but suggests or represents other meanings as well" (211). Here are some universal symbols in literature: Tree: It is the symbol of growth and the sign of immortality (Gostaniong, 1377: 10). The symbol of tree in myths has an important role. For instance, "forbidden tree" of paradise or Moses talking with his interlocutor by the use of a tree are of this kind. Sea: It is the symbol of purity, innocence and sacredness of man (Gostaniong, 1377:10).

In a work of literature allusion is a brief reference, explicit or implicit, to a person, place, or event or to another literary work or passage (Abrames, 1971). As Wheeler (1979) puts it, "Allusion helps to elucidate the meaning of each text and to indicate the literary modes and conventions in which its author works." (p.5). According to Lass allusion is a figure of speech through which some counterparts are compared on the basis of their aspects to history, mythology, literature, religious books, etc. (Leppihalm, 1997, p.57). Allusion is bound up with a vital and perennial topic in literary theory, the place of allusive substitutions are as old as English. Thus, an allusion is understandable only to those with prior knowledge of the covert reference in question. What is important is that allusion moves in only one direction: if A alludes to B, then B does not allude to A. For example we can say that one sonnet of Shakespeare alludes to a specific part of the Bible but the reverse is not true. Allusions enrich the texts in which used since they as literary devices make the texts ambiguous or exaggerated and at the same time they are used to create ambiguity especially when it is not possible to speak directly because of social or political considerations. It can rightly be said that allusion plays the most important role in persuading its readers to accept what the author says especially when they quote some parts from religious texts or famous literary works. According to Leppihalm (1997, p.10) Functions of allusions can be broadly divided into three groups: Creating humor, delineating characters and carrying themes. The first of these, humor, tends to function on a more local level than the other two, which are essentially cumulative. Humor

(including parody and irony) is employed to detract from the importance of a situation or character. Conrad's allusion to the "whitened sepulcher" in his *Heart of Darkness* is an example of irony which depicts religious hypocrisy. Allusion can also function as an economical aid to characterization. Characters who make use of allusions, as Leppihalm (1997,p.44) puts it, seem to be well-educated, literate and intelligent and they use allusions in order to serve their interests, as when a central character, who is a professor with a well established reputation in the expanding field of children's literature frequently alludes to Lewis Carroll and other children's classics. On the other hand, naïve and ignorant characters fail to recognize allusive remarks as addressees, and they themselves usually use allusions which are trite and hackneyed.

## 2. Symbols in Hamlet

Though there are abundant symbols in the play yet a few of them which are more significant can be pointed out as follows:

### 2.1 The Royal Court

The Royal Court of Elsinor is a symbol of this huge world which is attractive, gorgeous and luxurious for many people like Claudius who hold the sway though at the cost of the blood of his brother whom he himself poisoned to get throne and the queen. This is favourable for such people for the time being. These people are shrewd, cunning, opportunist and hypocrite. In the following lines the hypocrisy of Claudius is apparent.

Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy  
With an auspicious, and a dropping eye,  
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole  
Taken to wife;

On the other hand the same world is different for many people like Prince Hamlet who is fret with sorrow and grief of death of his father and also wonderstruck over the hasty marriage of his mother with his uncle. The world is not ideal for Hamlet. So the palace is symbol of this unfaithful world.

### 2.2 The Ghost

The ghost is a symbol of revenge. The ghost comes to unveil the murder of the late King Hamlet and to instigate Prince Hamlet to take avenge of his unlawful killing. The ghost is also symbol of an evil spirit as it announces to come out of hell doomed to suffer in sulphurous and tormenting flames. That is why Hamlet wants to testify the story of murder before killing his uncle. Before the Ghost tells Hamlet who killed him, he tells Hamlet to take revenge on his murderer. Hamlet replies

**"Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge." (1.5.29-31)**

As one can see, Hamlet's insanity takes the Ghost's side and is ready to take vengeance.

Charles Boyce proves that the Ghost plays a crucial role in this play, "The Ghost pushes Hamlet to face the trauma of his father's murder and his mother's acceptance of the murderer. It keeps his anguish sharp. However, the Ghost is absent at the end of the drama. It has represented the emotional demands of Hamlet's grief and despair; when Act 5 offers the play's reconciliation of good and evil, the Ghost has no further function"

### 2.3 Poison

Poison plays a big role in Hamlet. It is a symbol of betrayal, corruption, deceit, revenge and death. In Act 1 Scene 5, Hamlet follows the ghost of his father, King Hamlet and learns the entire story of how Claudius kills him. King Hamlet says,

**"...Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole  
With juice of cursed hebe in a vial,  
And in the porches of my ears did pour..." (I.v.61-63).**

When Claudius pours the poison into Hamlet's ear and murders him, it demonstrates how much the need for power can corrupt someone. In this case, the need for power motivated Claudius to poison his own brother. Later, when Laertes and Claudius are planning to kill Hamlet for revenge, they also decide to use poison. When the poison actually comes into play, it ends up killing Queen Gertrude (thus betrayal), and eventually leads to the death of Laertes, King Claudius and Hamlet.

### 2.4 Yorick's (Jester's) Skull

The skull represents death and the afterlife. When Hamlet picks up the skull of Yorick and begins to talk to it, he questions death, and what happens after. Hamlet eventually realizes that no matter what kind of a life someone may lead, everybody dies and ends up in the same place after death – as mere dust. He questions the importance

of being important while alive, and the importance of being alive in general. He talks about how someone like Yorick could end up in the same position and place as someone such as Alexander the Great, when he says,

**“as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried,  
Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth,  
of earth we make loam ,  
and why of that loam, whereto he was converted,  
might they not stop a beer-barrel” (V.i.209-213)**

Ellen Rosenberg says in *Death in Hamlet*, "The human condition, however—that is, the idea that all who live must eventually yield to death—encompasses larger questions than those posed by the quest for vengeance." As Ellen Rosenberg comments in "Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature", "In *Hamlet*, the theme of death goes hand-in-glove with the play's objective of bringing retribution to those who do evil" (Rosenberg) The audience learns early on in the play that Hamlet wears all black to mourn his father's death, which seems to irritate Gertrude. Hamlet seems to be the only one in the royal court who is mourning the king's death. Hamlet gets very offended when his mother comments on his clothing. Gertrude says

**"Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
Do not forever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die.  
Passing through nature to eternity." (1.2.68-73)**

### 2.5 Ophelia's Flowers

In Act 4, Scene 5, Ophelia has gone mad because of her father, Polonius' death. She enters the scene, carrying many different types of flowers (however some editors believe that the flowers were just imaginary), and begins to give different flowers to different people. Each of the flowers represents something, and there is a reason behind why Ophelia gives certain flowers to certain people. First, she gives the rosemary to Laertes, which is a symbol of remembrance. She also gives pansies to Laertes, as they represent a symbol of thoughts – particularly thoughts of love. Although she gives both to Laertes, Ophelia most likely has Hamlet in her mind when she says, **“There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember; and there is pansies, that's for thoughts” (IV.v.173-175).**

She then gives fennel and columbines to King Claudius. Fennel represents flattery, and columbines represent having no faith in marriage. They were both given to Claudius because of his incestuous marriage and betrayal. Next, Ophelia gives daisies to both King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, which represent deceit and lies, because they both lied to the public and betrayed King Hamlet. Finally, violets are a symbol of faith and many people believe Ophelia gives these to Horatio because at this point, he is the only one that she still has faith in. Also, although Ophelia does not realize it, Horatio is the only person Hamlet still trusts and has faith in as well.

**“There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays: O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when my father died. They say made a good end” (IV.v.178-183)**

## 3. Allusions

### 3.1 Hyperion, Hercules & Niobe, Nemean Lion

In pondering Claudius' utter substitution of himself in the bed as well as on the throne of Old Hamlet, the moody Prince compares his deceased father to Hyperion, the Greek sun god, and the usurping Claudius to a satyr, a Greek mythic amalgam of man and goat. The comparison is apt when one recalls that the satyr was held to be the very epitome of animal lust and carnal passion.

**So excellent a king, that was to this  
Hyperion to a satyr ..... (I-ii 139-140)**

In no uncertain terms, Hamlet holds his father up to his mother as a divinity who combines the best aspects of the chief Graeco-Roman deities: Old Hamlet was (if we follow the logic or mental processes of these allusions) as enlightened and dazzlingly attractive as the sun god, as wise and majestic as the king of the gods, as valorous and able to take charge of military affairs as the war god, and as dignified and youthful in his bearing as the messenger of the gods. Hamlet, in employing such similes, however, reveals that he has not accepted his father's mortality; in short, by comparing his father to gods, Hamlet shows that he cannot accept the fact that his father has died. Nor does the son acknowledge the many “imperfections” (I. V. 84) in character that the Ghost confesses he possessed in life. Nevertheless, the image of his father obsesses him, as is evident in the scene in Gertrude's closet, in which for Hamlet the Ghost serves as the reviver of memory.

**“Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,  
No reckoning made” (I. V. 82-3)**

### 3.2 Niobe

Gertrude, lacking so powerful a memory of her first husband and (associated with this deficiency) so scrupulous a moral sense, seems to have completely replaced Old Hamlet's image for that of Claudius, not only in the concrete image worn on her breast, but also in her heart. In his initial soliloquy, Hamlet imagines her at his father's funeral "Like Niobe, all tears" (I. ii. 151). Again, Hamlet expresses himself in a classical commonplace: Niobe, who witnessed the destruction her whole family as nemesis for her own arrogance towards the mother of Apollo and Artemis, epitomizes grief as Hyperion does majestic (male) beauty. But this allusion, unlike that to Hyperion, involves a human and flawed figure in an Ovidian tale. The image suggests more than grief, for Niobe was in effect responsible for the deaths of those whom she mourned. And at this point in the play, before consulting with the Ghost in Act One, Scene Four, Hamlet suspects both Claudius and Gertrude of involvement in his father's untimely demise. The metaphor, therefore, reveals something of this suspicion of his mother and stepfather since they married so quickly after his father's death. So far Hamlet's classical allusions have defined how he sees others: the King is a lustful beast, his father a dazzling god, his mother a foolish sinner. The images by which he defines himself are of far greater significance. For Hamlet, his father's usurping brother is no more like his father "Than I to Hercules" (I. ii. 153). Taken at face value, the remark indicates the speaker's self-deprecation and sense of unworthiness; Hamlet's image suggests that he sees himself as unheroic and incapable of noble action. But several other references to this Graeco-Roman demi-god provide further insight into Hamlet's psychology.

### 3.3 Nemean Lion

Hamlet, thrusting aside his friend Horatio to follow the Ghost, proclaims that "each petty artere in this body [has been rendered by the role which Fate has thrust upon him] As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve" (I. iv. 82-3). The allusion is to the mythical beast slain by Hercules in the first of the twelve labours, necessary to expiate his murdering his wife in a fit of insanity sent by his jealous step-mother. Hercules was justly proud of his vanquishing a beast whose hide was so tough no weapon could pierce it and proclaimed this feat ever afterward by wearing the lion's hide instead of armour. For Hamlet, following the Ghost, which might well be a visitation of the Devil, calls for the same heroic determination as the classical demi-god required to accomplish that labour. However, Hamlet, as he admitted earlier, is not naturally suited to such a role--rather, his "fate cries out" (I. iv. 81) from beyond the grave and he is morally obligated to follow.

### 3.4 Priam's Slaughter

All the allusions discussed so far have been spontaneous in their utterance, being employed chiefly in metaphors and similes. However, Hamlet's allusion to Aeneas's after-dinner narrative for Dido's court in Virgil's Aeneid is conscious and intentional. Hamlet recalls "Priam's slaughter" (II. ii. 454) by Pyrrhus in revenge for the ignominious death of his father, Achilles, effected by the poisoned arrow of Paris. Although one would expect Hamlet to identify himself with the avenging son, the quality of language in the set speech tends to indicate his sympathy with the old Trojan King. This confusion lies partly in Hamlet's repugnance at the thought of actually having to take revenge himself and partly in his identification of the victim with his father and the killer with Claudius. Hence, as Pyrrhus advances towards the subject of his revenge, he resembles "th' Hyrcanian beast" (II. ii. 456) rather than the invincible warrior of Book Two in The Aeneid. Hence, "Pyrrhus' bleeding sword" (II. ii. 498) falls with the force of a hammer wielded by a Cyclops, a one-eyed, savage giant who labours for the smith of the gods, Vulcan or Haephestus. In fact, Hamlet uses "Vulcan's Stithy" (III. ii. 84) as a metaphor of foulness for his mind if it has only imagined that the Ghost has designated Claudius as Old Hamlet's killer. Pyrrhus as revenger, then, is described by Hamlet as bestial and by the Player as freakish and quasi-human. Such is the type of man who pursues what Bacon termed "a kind of wild justice." Freudian critics undoubtedly have made much of Hamlet's insistence that the Player hurry the speech to "come to Hecuba" (II. ii. 508), for his interest in the grieving Trojan Queen may reflect his obsession with his mother, the "Mobbled [muffled or disguised] queen" (II. ii. 510). However, unlike Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, Hecuba, Queen of Troy, was witness to her husband's death:

**When She saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport  
In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs  
The instant burst of clamor that she made  
(Unless things mortal move them not at all)  
Would have much milch the burning eyes of heaven  
And passion in the gods. (II. ii. 520-525)**

These words are not Hamlet's, of course, but the Lead Player's--however, they have, as it were, been placed in the Player's mouth by the Prince.

### 3.5 Hecuba

As with the reference to Niobe earlier, Hamlet is utilizing a classical allusion for contrast: Niobe's grief, like Hecuba's, was paralyzing in its force, not so easily forgotten as Gertrude's apparently was. In Virgil's Aeneid, Hecuba is the very picture of grief, but in Ovid's Metamorphoses she signifies revenge, scratching out the eyes of her son's killer with her bare hands. Unlike Gertrude, Hecuba, after her husband's death, becomes "a queen of sorrows/Now a poor queen in chains, less than a slave." 4 While Gertrude has no tears to shed for Old Hamlet, Hecuba's "tears drowned in the desert of her grief" (p. 366). The player could counterfeit a passion when describing Hecuba's plight, but Hamlet cannot pity his mother because he is so choked with self-pity. With his mother's example before him, Hamlet cannot believe that a woman is capable of grief so passionate as his: he equates the character of Hecuba with a literary figment or construct, a "nothing" (II. ii. 562), for he cannot credit that woman is other than shallow and fickle.

### References

- Blake, N. (1983). *The Language of Shakespeare*. London: The MaximillanLtd.
- Guerin, L. (2005). *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hussey, S. S. (1982). *The Literary Language of Shakespeare*. London: Longman.
- Jones, E. (1976). *Hamlet and Oedipus*. New York: Norton.
- Kermode, F. (2004). *The Age of Shakespeare*. London: Phoenix.
- Leppihalme. (1997). *Culture Bumps: An Empirical Approach to the Translation of Allusions*. Cleve don: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Ryan, K. (2002). *Shakespeare*. New York: Palgrave.
- S.Wells, M. D. (2001). *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- West, G. (1995). *An Approach to Shakespeare*. London and New York: Cassell.