

Hamlet 1.2 Close Reading Analysis

King Claudius's Speech

Use of Royal "We"

King Claudius refers to his brother in the royal sense, talking about "our dear brother" (1.2.1) and "our late brother's death" (1.2.19), as if the death of his brother were an everyday occurrence or something else of little importance. Similarly, the wedding appears to be similarly dispirited when he again uses the royal "we" in "our queen ... have we ... taken to wife" (1.2.8-14). Together, these suggest that his brother's death is something that he is not really sad about, and the marriage is not something he is happy about, suggesting an ulterior motive to the entire event: the search for power (analyzed below in "Order of Ideas").

Interestingly, Claudius only uses the personal "I" to refer to Hamlet: "my cousin Hamlet and my son" (1.2.66). He repeats the idea that Hamlet is part of his family: "And with no less nobility of live \ Than that which dearest father bears his son \ Do I impart toward you" (1.2.114-116). This suggests one of two possibilities: that he truly loves his nephew Hamlet and feels sorry for his loss, or that he wants to appeal to the better side of prince Hamlet, the rightful heir to the throne, so as to avoid anger and a rightful overthrow. The latter option aligns with the business-like manner of the wedding event.

Antithesis

From a literal perspective, the antithesis is a metaphor for the happy and sad events taken place so close to one another, giving a mixed mood to the event.

I'm not exactly sure what the intended purpose of the antithesis was, but it only seems to cloud the happiness of the marriage and make King Hamlet's death seem trivial. "A defeated joy" (1.2.10) seems to put a damper on the jubilation of a wedding, but the king asserts that "in equal scale weigh ... delight and dole" (1.2.13)—that the happiness will balance out the sad. Perhaps he is trying to assure his people that his reign will be as happy as his brother's was, that the recent sadness should only be turned over to delight at a glorious new reign.

While this seems to reassure the people, regarding the event "with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" (1.2.12) seems very disrespectful to the late king. It doesn't seem very sincere of him to talk so lightly about his brother's death.

Word Choice

King Claudius says that it is "befitted \ To bear our hearts in grief" (1.2.2-3). But to be "befitted" means that it is *appropriate* that the people grieve for their lost king—a sort of formality, a shallow act. This goes along with his frequent usage of referring to his brother's death with the royal "we," as if his brother were just another political figure. "Wisest sorrow" (1.2.6) again distorts the normal human reaction of sorrow, injecting some sort of political correctness into it. If he were more sincere, he may have said something more mournful, ignoring any mention of wisdom or formality: simply that he is mourning his brother's loss, and that it is very sad. His wording implies that it may be a good idea to appear sorrowful, but that is not the true emotion.

Order of Ideas

1. Acknowledge his brother's death
2. Talk about marriage to his brother's wife
3. Negotiate with Fortinbras to avoid an attack
4. Talk to Laertes about his future ambitions
5. Talk to Hamlet about his future ambitions

This order of events seems a very clear power play, a quick and utter usurpation of prince Hamlet. First, he addresses the issue of his dead brother, without very sincere sadness, indicating the lack of a person in power. Next, he establishes his right to power to fill in the absence left by his brother by marrying his brother's wife. The next events (dealing with Fortinbras, Laertes, and Hamlet) consolidate his power by closing his grip against the three young men most likely to take power over the kingdom: subduing Fortinbras (who has the potential to attack the kingdom), asking about Laertes (who is the son of powerful royalty), and asking about Hamlet (who was the presumed heir to the throne). In one "business meeting," Claudius quickly and effectively seizes and establishes his rule over the kingdom.

Hamlet's Soliloquy

Paraphrasing (ten sentences)

[1] I want to commit suicide but cannot because my religion dictates against it. [2] I feel that the world has fallen into disarray, with no restrictions placed against corrupt, foul things. [3] It hasn't even been two months since my father died. [4] He was so great, so loving to my mother— how could the world have come to this? [5] She used to love him so much too. [6] Why do women have to be so weak? [7] My mother cried for a short time, but changed loyalties so quickly, without logical thought, a stupid move. [8] The current king is no uncle to me, and definitely not a father. [9] The relationship between my uncle and my mother is disgusting and is even almost incest— it cannot end well by its nature. [10] I should probably keep my thoughts on this matter quiet.

Notes on Style

The tone is clearly one of disgust and hopelessness. Prince Hamlet discusses the marriage with clear repulsion ("unrighteous" (1.2.159), "wicked speed" (1.2.161), "incestuous sheets" (1.2.162)), criticizes his mother of being weak ("a beast that wants discourse of reason \ Would have mourned longer!" (1.2.154-155), "frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2.150)), his uncle for being so unlike his father (*antithesis*: "hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.144), "my father's brother, but no more like my father \ Than I to Hercules" (1.2.156)), and he even is disappointed at himself for not being able to commit "self-slaughter" (1.2.136). He laments the rise of his uncle to power and his wife to her lowly state (both of whom he compares against his loving, strong-willed father), and none of his words have hope for a positive change in fortune— very hopeless.

Similar Character?

Prince Hamlet is a little like Grendel in that they are both pessimistic about the current state of affairs due to skepticism, and they both question the strength of women. Grendel, for example, hates that Wealtheow could so easily turn herself over to Hrothgar and sacrifice her love to her kingdom simply for a political affair, similar to how Queen Gertrude is so easily swayed to marry the new king. Both of these characters are compelled to commit suicide shortly afterwards, but neither follows through with it.