

## UNIT 3 LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

### Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Words

3.3 Rhetorical Devices

3.4 Imagery

3.5 Let Us Sum Up

3.6 Questions

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with Shakespeare's use of language in *Hamlet* and how words have been used to convey the meaning of what is being said. At the end of this unit you will understand the use of rhetorical devices as well as the imagery employed in *Hamlet*.

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

When we, along with Hamlet, finally arrive at the end of the play and gain our share of the wisdom, "The rest is silence!"—we suddenly realise that in one sense *Hamlet* progresses through a whole series of events, actions and ruminations to grapple with the significance of the absence of silence. Language seeks to make possible apparently what is not possible through silence—communication. And in *Hamlet* characters constantly question the wisdom of relying upon words. Words fascinate them, and there is an ongoing debate in the play about the use, abuse and futility of resorting or not resorting to the medium of words.

One of the major issues in *Hamlet* appears to be: Does language stand in polar opposition to action? Is it irreconcilable to action? Can it, or can it not, further or motivate action? Can language be considered a valid tool to evaluate actions, their validity, morality and justness. The philosophical relationship between thoughts, words and deeds, thus, turns out to be a major issue in the play.

### 3.2 WORDS

Words stand out in our recollection of *Hamlet* as much as vivid visual images. One of the intriguing things about *Hamlet* is the fact that everybody remembers words

from *Hamlet*—more than any other play by Shakespeare or any one else. Everyone can recollect, quote, or recognise quotations from *Hamlet*:

To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .

There is divinity that shapes our end . . .

What a piece of work is man . . .

The time is out of joint . . .

The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns . . .

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy . . .

If almost all these words that linger in our mind long after we finish reading the play belong to *Hamlet*, it is also because the prince who speaks these words is much better with words than with actions. To justify his procrastinating taking action he plays with words, argues with them, through them, for and against them—of course in words. *Hamlet* is full of long conversations with Polonius, Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and just about every other major or minor character. He talks too much. He repeats. Repetition of words and phrases occurs so frequently in the speeches of *Hamlet* as also in those of other characters that one suspects that an ongoing march of words is used to reflect one of the major themes of the play, procrastination. Expressions such as "This too too sullied flesh," abound in the play. Horatio's language is full of a different kind of repetitive effect: "law and heraldry," "hot and full," "here and there," "food and diet," "strong hand and terms compulsory." *Hamlet* has a knack for deliberately "misunderstanding" other people's words and indulge in puns.

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?  
*Hamlet*. Not so, my lord, I am too much in the "son." [I. ii. 66-67]

*Polonius* . . . What do you read, my lord?

*Hamlet*. Words, words, words.

*Polonius*. What is the matter, my lord?

*Hamlet*. Between who?

*Polonius*. I mean the matter that you read, my lord?

[II. ii. 192-196]

And so does one of the grave-diggers:

*Hamlet*: Whose grave's this sirrah?

*I Clown*. Mine sir-- . . .

*Hamlet*. What man dost thou dig it for?

*I Clown*. For no man, sir.

*Hamlet*. What woman then?

*I Clown*. For none neither.

*Hamlet*. Who is to be buried in't?

*I Clown*. One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul she's dead.

[V. i. 126-132]

Characters are sensitive to words and their implications: Claudius in the prayer scene says:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.  
[III. iii. 97]

Speech is important; understanding what one may hear is important. Horatio, the scholar, is asked to make sense of what the Ghost says—"Thou art a scholar, speak to it Horatio" [I. i. 42]—and at the end of the play he is requested by Hamlet to "tell my story" [V. iii. 349.] whose "mouth" Horatio offers to become to tell Fortinbras the story of the prince. Ophelia's language of madness draws a response:

Her speech is nothing.

Yet the unshaped use of it doth move  
The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,  
And botch the words up to fit their own thoughts,  
Which as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,  
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,  
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.  
[IV. v. 7-13]

Polonius, whose verbosity provokes Claudius to demand "More matter with less art" [II. ii. 95] himself objects to the speech by the First Player as "This is too long." [II. ii. 498.] As he reads Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, he comments: "That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase, 'beautified' is a vile phrase." [II. ii. 111-12]

They all play with words. Hamlet indulges in a quibble in responding to Claudius: "A little more than kin, and less than kind." [I. ii. 65] "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" [II. ii. 17-18], he later tells the players. "Is thy union here? / Follow my mother" [V. ii. 326-27], Hamlet tells Claudius after he forces the king to drink the poison. But Hamlet is not the only who indulges in puns and quibbles. Claudius describes Laertes as one who "wants not buzzers to infect his ear / With pestilent speeches of his father's death." [IV. V. 90-91] Polonius quibbles with words in his advise to Ophelia:

Think yourself a baby

That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay  
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,  
Or—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,  
Running it thus—you'll tender me a fool.  
[I. iii. 105-9]

All the characters resort to language to communicate with each other, but in the process they reveal a great deal of their inner selves to us. Shakespeare chooses his words carefully and gives them to his characters in subtler combinations of syntactical complexity and semantic choice. Claudius's speech in ACT I [I. ii. 1-16.] is a case in point:

1. Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
2. The memory be green, and that is us befitted
3. To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
4. To be contracted in one brow of woe,
5. Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
6. That we with wisest sorrow *think on him*
7. Together *with remembrance of ourselves.*

8. Therefore *our* sometime *sister*, now our Queen,
9. Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state,
10. Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
11. With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
12. With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
13. In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
14. Taken to wife.

Claudius the political manipulator has mastered the art of manipulation through speech and language. It is in his interest that he in his first royal address to the court keeps the focus of attention on matters other than himself. And if he can keep the focus on something that is dear to the heart of people at large, and can practice a degree of self-effacement, even better. He after all had taken over the kingdom of his own brother and married his brother's wife. The people had old King Hamlet. In the whole speech, you would notice, the major part [lines 1-5] is focused on matters away from himself.

And finally he allows the speech to change its course and the focus finally rests on him: "... we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves." But reference to himself, despite the royal plural personal pronoun, is not assertive, but an understatement tagged to the "wisest sorrow."

The second section [lines 8-17] seeks to assert that he has possessed his brother's wife but the assertion emerges at the end, after a long and meandering passage through the mixed emotions of sorrow over his brother's death and the happiness of having married her.

The political upheaval that has preceded his ascending the throne has to be given a direction. The subjects' minds have to be made to rest upon, not the usurper's violent wresting of the throne from its lawful possessors, but away from it. The whole speech is an exercise in political rhetoric that seeks to manipulate people to respond to the new king in a certain way. And to begin with, Claudius succeeds.

Through the play one would notice, characters are forever asking questions. Hamlet is forever inquisitive about something or the other. "Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?" "Is not parchment made of sheep-skin?" The questioning frame of mind of Hamlet questions, above all, his own self, his own actions, words, and gestures. The play opens with a question, "Who is there?", and, as if, sets the tone for the whole play.

---

### 3.3 RHETORICAL DEVICES

---

Language plays a major role in the definition of a character's trait in conditioning our response to him. We must appreciate that great popularity that Shakespeare and his characters have enjoyed over the last four centuries owes itself in a major way to the language of his plays. What the characters say is important, because they linger in our minds for what they say as much as for what they do or feel or suffer. But the way they say what they say is of paramount importance. The manner and method of a speaker affects the response of the audience to what they hear. Theatre-goers respond not merely to the meaning of words, but also how the words are conveyed to them. Shakespeare's choice of metre, rhythm, imagery and, of course, diction, determines how we respond to what the characters say, and to the characters themselves. Ultimately this affects—enriches—the total experience of interacting with a play on stage or on page. The meaning of the word is important but attention

should be paid to what goes into making the meaning of words effective communication and manipulation of audience response.

An interesting aspect of Shakespeare's use of language is the fact that certain linguistic features are meant to be appreciated as rhetorical devices for their own sake and not merely as starting points for generalisations for the larger context of the text. Rhetorical devices and figures of speech such as chiasmus ("His time a moment, and a point his space"—Pope; "Love's fire heats water, water cools not love"—Shakespeare) or anaphora ("This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, / This other Eden . . ."—Shakespeare) are considered of little importance on a closer examination of the text today. Thompson and Taylor have drawn attention to George T. Wright's analysis of Shakespeare's use of hendiadys, a rhetorical figure which Shakespeare uses over 300 times and there are sixty-six examples of it in *Hamlet* alone. J. A. Cuddon defines a hendiadys as "a figure of speech in which one idea is expressed by two substantives, as in "gloom and despondency", or "darkness and the shadow of death": but as Thompson and Taylor elaborate, there is more to it:

It is necessary that two entities being joined should be related but not in exact parallel: there is something odd, unexpected, even uneasy about hendiadys, as if the relationship between the two terms does not quite fit. But this can make the resulting expression more intense, as in Edmund's "nothing like the image and horror of it" [*King Lear*, I. ii. 175] as compared with "nothing like the horrible image of it", or Macbeth's "full of sound and fury" (*Macbeth*, V. v. 27), as compared with "full of furious sound."

In the examples quoted from Cuddon, it is not the same thing if "darkness and the shadow of death" is reduced to the "dark shadow of death," or "we drink from cups and from gold" [*pateris libamus et auro* is the original Latin sentence from Vergil] is reduced to "we drink from golden cups."

*Hamlet* provides many exciting examples of hendiadys:

The very age and body of the time. [III. ii. 23-4]  
So far from cheer and your former state. [II. ii. 164]  
Out of the shot and danger of desire. [I. iii. 35]  
Divided from herself and her fair judgement. [IV. V. 86]

Wrights points out how different characters in the play use hendiadys on different occasions and for different purposes. Laertes's use of hendiadys in his advice to Ophelia reveals his uncertain and divided sensibility while Polonius's use of hendiadys in his instruction to Reynaldo reveals his devious nature. If "misleading dualism and false parallels" is one of the obsessive concerns of *Hamlet*, hendiadys draw our attention to it in vivid detail.

---

### 3.4 IMAGERY

---

*Hamlet* is rich with imagery. Vivid descriptions, carefully chosen words and phrases and used with deliberate effort and intention provoke us to see imaginative reconstruction of what is otherwise mere communication through words on a page—They add to the pleasure of interacting with a text. Shakespeare appears to have loved imagery. Dr Samuel Johnson remarks:

A quibble is 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. . . . its fascinations are irresistible. . . . A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth. A quibble was to him fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it.

[Preface to Johnson's edition]

But Dryden was exasperated by the bard's habit of saying "nothing without a metaphor, a simile, an image, or description" [Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*] and he decided to improve Shakespeare by removing as many embellishments from the text as possible. It was later that imagery was found to work by spreading its wings through the whole fabric of a play. Imagery enriches specific moments—

There's such divinity doth hedge a king,  
That can but peep to what it would.

[IV. V. 125]

But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad  
Walks ov'r the dew of yon high eastern hill.

[I. i. 166-7]

For 'tis sport to have the enginer  
Hoist with his own petar.

[III. iv. 206-7]

--and gains a sharper focus of our attention.

All major plays by Shakespeare have been found to have clusters of images that centre around certain concepts and colour our understanding of the play. The image clusters that dominate a play help us arrive at the "symbolic" vision of the play. Spread through the whole, imagery influences the way we respond to the play and its major issues. That is one of many ways a playwright determines the direction he wants us to take in appreciating his view point as expressed in a work of art.

Caroline Spurgeon who did pioneering work in this area drew attention to the fact that:

recurrent images play a part in raising, developing, sustaining, and repeating emotion in the tragedies, which is somewhat analogous to the action of a recurrent theme of "motif" in a musical fugue or sonata, or in one of Wagner's operas. . . .

. . . as the leaping tongues of flame which illuminate the pages of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* show the visual form which Blake's thought evoked in his mind, and symbolise for us the purity, the beauty, and the two edged quality of life and danger in his words, so the recurrent images in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* reveal the dominant picture or sensation --in terms of which [Shakespeare] sees and feels the main problem or theme of the play, thus giving us an unerring clue to the way he looked at it. . . .

When Spurgeon closely looks at *Hamlet* she finds images of sickness, disease, or blemish of the body and "we discover that the idea of an ulcer or tumour, as descriptive of the unwholesome condition of Denmark morally, is, on the whole, the dominating one. Hamlet finds in her mother "rank corruption, mining all within, /

Infects all unseen." Later he compares the fight between Norway and Poland as a kind of tumour. When he comes upon Claudius in the prayer scene, he exclaims: "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days." Claudius later says: "diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are relieved, / Or not at all." He begs the English king to help him get rid of Hamlet: "For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me." He tells Laertes: "Goodness, growing to a plurisy, / Dies in his won too much." And he describes Hamlet's arrival as: "But to the quick o' the ulcer: / Hamlet comes back." The dominating thought in *Hamlet* is not even sickness but, Spurgeon points out, "*rottenness, disease, corruption, the result of dirt.*"

---

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

---

The raw material that goes into the making of works of literature is nothing but words. A close attention to how the words are used and controlled—rhetorical devices, meter, rhythm, intonation, syntax—is of great importance before a meaningful appreciation of the text itself can take place.

---

### 3.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. *Hamlet* is full of comments and observations made by various characters on the failure and success of words as a means of communication. Comment.
2. Write a short note on the use Shakespeare makes of hendiadys to enrich verbal exchanges between various characters. Illustrate and analyse.
3. Comment on Shakespeare's use of recurrent cluster images. What use does Shakespeare make of them to further his major thematic concern in the play?
4. Comment on the use of words by Claudius to manipulate his audience on many occasions in the play.
5. Analyse Claudius' first court speech in act one scene two for what it seeks to communicate as well as hide.