

Shakespeare & the modern world

To the course leader

There are 5 separate documents in this course “kit”.

- Full notes.
- Background to Shakespeare
- Plot summaries
- Synopsis
- To the course leader

The course is intended for delivery over a minimum of four 1½ hour sessions. The number of sessions needed will depend on the amount of discussion generated and the number of supplementary activities undertaken. **The aim of the course is to have participants come to see Shakespeare’s plays as relevant to modern times** – to recognise that in the 21st century we are facing the same challenges and asking the same questions as Shakespeare’s characters faced and asked. An essential element of the course is sustained reaction to/discussion of issues raised in the plays.

To help the course leader initiate and sustain discussion ‘**trigger questions**’ are interspersed throughout the **full notes**. They are by no means exhaustive. The course leader will come to sense what is interesting his/her audience and ‘run’ with it. The important thing is for the course leader to pause regularly and invite participants to relate issues raised in the play to their own experience and understanding of the times in which we live.

It is not essential for participants to have read the plays prior to the course, nor is it necessary for them to bring copies of the play to class with them, although some participants like to do so. A **plot outline** is provided for each play. It has been found useful to issue copies as each play is introduced. Participants seem to find the quotations of interest and the fact that they would all be recognisable serves to help illustrate that Shakespeare is still with us and relevant! Perhaps they might like to volunteer further quotations from Shakespeare.

A sheet titled **Background to Shakespeare** is included. The same information is included at the beginning of the full notes, but you may decide to provide it as a hand-out to help participants more fully understand the times in which Shakespeare wrote.

There is also a **synopsis** which can be used as a hand-out. I’ve used it prior to splitting the class into groups for discussion. Participants also seem to appreciate it as a final take-away from the course – hopefully this means they spend some time pondering those final questions on the sheet! If they do, the aim of the course would seem to have been achieved.

Course leaders should **feel free to adapt** these notes as needed. He/she may, for example, choose to:

- include more direct quotation from the play;
- develop themes/issues raised in the play which are not addressed in these notes;
- expand on or reduce emphasis on the themes which are dealt with in the notes;

- suggest alternative characterisations.
- expand the course by using **film version** of the plays. There is Mel Gibson's version of *Macbeth* – brilliant! Kenneth Branagh and Ian Holme have both portrayed King Lear on film and there are the 1948 (Lawrence Olivier") and 1996 (Branagh again) versions of *Hamlet*.

Activity 1.

The course lends itself to **group work**. Perhaps divide the class into 3 groups and have them discuss issues raised in the plays which are still relevant to the modern world. Here are just a few examples.

ambition – good or bad? Give examples of both over the past 100 years. (*Macbeth*)

isolation – how do we in the 21st century cope with an ever-changing world? (*Hamlet*)

justice: what is the nature of justice? In the 21st century are the law and justice synonymous? (*King Lear*)

Activity 2

Put one of the characters “on trial” (e.g. Macbeth or Lady Macbeth)

Divide the class into two groups.

- Group one prepares the case for the prosecution and appoints a Prosecutor:
Group 2 prepares the case for the defence and appoints a defence counsel. (20 minutes)
- Group leader is presiding Judge Group as a whole the jury.
- Accused takes the stand.
- Prosecution presents opening case (5 minutes)
- Defence presents opening case (5 minutes)
- Both prosecution and defence question the accused. (10 minutes each)
- Summing up by both sides (5 minutes each)
- Jury votes

Activity 3

A debate

- “That ambition is a positive force in society”
- “That one must to his own sense be true”
- “That parents always know best.”

(I'm sure the group will be able to suggest others.)

It has been found that this course generates a lot of discussion. On one occasion (to date the course has been presented eight times to different groups) so much discussion ensued that it extended into lunch at a nearby club and continued as people walked to their cars. Who said Shakespeare was dead?

The message is – feel free to adapt! Make it **your** course!

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this course and/or its presentation, please don't hesitate to phone me on (02) 4959 2867 or email mel.d@westnet.com.au

Mel Davies

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Shakespeare and the modern world

How believable do we find the central characters in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and to what degree are the issues raised in these plays relevant to us in the 21st century?

BACKGROUND

Any literature needs to be seen against the world as it was at the time of writing. So before we embark on a look at three of the Plays of William Shakespeare, let us look briefly at his world – Elizabethan England.

The Renaissance came late to England. That outburst of learning through art and industry that came with the Renaissance marked the change from the medieval to the modern world, from feudalism to capitalism, from loyalty to a lord to patriotism for a nation. Also what has come to be called “The Great Age” in literature had begun. There were writers such as John Donne; Christopher Marlowe [*Tamburlane*]; Edmund Spenser [*The Faerie Queene*]. During the reign of James I the “Authorised Version Bible – a translation from the Latin – was produced by a committee. There was a translation of Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey*. And of course William Shakespeare was born in 1564. [died 1616]

It was not only the arts which flourished, but all kinds of intellectual endeavour – and we need to realise that distinctions which we today make between science and art and technology and superstition would have had no meaning for the Elizabethans. For example, John Dee, [1527-1608] who was Elizabeth’s fortune-teller, was also a brilliant mathematician and believer in the Copernican system of astronomy before the rise of Galileo [1564-1642] the great Italian astronomer whose observations first demonstrated that the Sun and not the Earth was the centre of the universe.

Sir Walter Raleigh [1552-1618] courtier and adventurer, founded the first English colony in America. Journeys of exploration, trade and in many cases simple piracy were financed by the nobility and the great merchant companies of London.

But though England’s power, wealth and importance increased enormously, though Queen Elizabeth 1 and her Council provided good and stable government, and though she was loved and revered by her subjects, we should not accept too rosy a picture of the life of that time. In a period of rapid and radical economic, social and intellectual change the efforts of the government were mostly conservative and like most governments at all times they usually applied yesterday’s solutions to tomorrow’s problems. (Beginning to sound familiar?) Unemployment was common, particularly in rural areas. There was congestion of the cities, particularly London, by the dispossessed, and squalid suburbs developed. Plague was common. In 1564, the year of Shakespeare’s birth, more than 250 people died of it in the little town of Stratford alone. Though the Queen was enlightened as despots go, she was certainly no democrat and maintained an efficient Secret Service under Sir Francis Walsingham.

The use of torture was a normal judicial procedure; public executions were common and sometimes spectacularly horrible and bestial.

Geocentric V Heliocentric universe.

Before going any further it is important to note that during Shakespeare's time there were two views of the nature of the universe: the old medieval geocentric (earth) and the new heliocentric (sun) view of Copernicus. While both theories existed parallel in Shakespeare's time, the most widespread belief was still the medieval one. It was to be decades before the new Copernican theory gained wide acceptance.

The philosophers of the Middle Ages had constructed and built upon a system of the world which was orderly, harmonious and self-consistent, and it was still this view which held sway. It is therefore understandable that a playwright would use this in his plays and not become involved in the latest academic findings. Something to remember is that Shakespeare was *not* an academic, although he seems to have had at least a little grammar school education. However, he'd certainly never been to a university. He was a practicing playwright with the perennial concern of playwrights – bottoms on seats!

Elizabethan concept of order or degree – maintaining the natural order of things.

When studying Shakespeare it is necessary to have some understanding of the Elizabethan hierarchical view of life & the world, i.e. the Elizabethan concept of ORDER or DEGREE. An essential part of this system was 'the great chain of being'. This idea of a hierarchical cosmos is older than Christianity, but Christianity gave it extra support, e.g. Paul says in Romans 13:1 "*Let every soul be subject to the higher power*" and in 13:7 "*Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour*". There was a "chain of being" or "scale of degrees" which stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects. (Place table below on whiteboard, or issue printed sheets) The lowest level was mineral – mere existence without life; the next vegetable – life without feeling; then animal – life with feeling; then man – life with intelligence. Ranking high above these, on a purely spiritual level, were the angels. Above all, God.

There was ranking within each category. In the mineral kingdom mud was on the lowest level, with gold on the highest. There was a "link" to the vegetable kingdom, moss – immobile yet living. The lowest animals were oysters (they have the sense of touch but are as immobile as plants). The highest animals were the elephant or lion – there is disagreement among the experts about this. The lowest among humans were the peasants, the highest emperors, who came quite close to the lowest of the angels. Every human being had a superior and an inferior fellow human. Social ranks were hereby explained as God-given and unalterable. The English rules of succession are based on this belief; according to these rules even a distant cousin can accede to a title. This helped to create a sense of an enduring aristocracy, and of course was the basis for the concept of the Divine Right of Kings.

SEE TABLE BELOW

GOD	
Angelic creatures	Pure intelligence
Man (sense/intellect/feeling)	Intelligence
Plants	Animals Sense
Inorganic matter	Growth but no sense
Chaos	Mere existence
	Nothingness

It is important to note that within *each* given rank there are sub-hierarchies: just as God is the highest spiritual being so is the sun to the plants, the king to his subjects, the lion or elephant to all animals, man to woman, father to children, gold to other metals etc. This hierarchy was seen as the structure of the universe and to challenge any part of the structure was to risk **CHAOS**, i.e. utter confusion, the reduction of all existence to formlessness. To us today chaos means hardly more than confusion on a large scale: to an Elizabethan it meant the cosmic anarchy that existed before Creation and the wholesale dissolution of everyone and everything. One link missing in the chain could destroy the whole order. The only way to ensure that this chain of being remained intact was to restore and maintain **order**.

To defy this *NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS* was a dangerous practice because such action would *release evil!* The interesting thing in Shakespeare's plays, of course, (and equally a concern today!) is where evil resides. A universal theme. More about that later.

This chain of being was a simple system, yet it had contradictions. All ages have had them. The quest for the Grand Unified Theory in physics can be seen as an attempt in our time to explain contradictions in our modern world view. However, the quest for the ultimate answer to the ultimate question – **‘what is man?’** - goes on. In fact it is one of the central issues in one of our plays in particular. We'll get to it later. But for now, let's accept that the concept of ORDER is central to all three tragedies we are about to consider.

What is tragedy?

Now, let's look briefly at what is meant in the theatre by tragedy, in particular Shakespearean tragedy.

The Classical (Ancient Greek) tragic hero:

- Must be noble in nature, but imperfect so the audience can see themselves in him.
- He is doomed from the start, as his Fate is decided for him by the gods.
- He is destroyed by his own actions (i.e. defying the will of the gods.)
- He is in the end destroyed.
- Those close to him are often destroyed as well.

- He eventually comes to see and understand his doom.
- His story arouses empathy and fear.

The Shakespearean tragic hero.

All the above dramatic conventions apply, except one. Shakespeare gave his characters **free will**. Their Fate is not determined by external forces. They determine it themselves through their own decisions and actions.

Now: to our three plays.

In the three plays we are to consider, Shakespeare examines the nature of man. Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear are three of his most complete characters – and note I say are and not were. They’re still with us today. Hopefully during our discussions throughout this course you’ll be able to identify some contemporary Macbeths, Hamlets and King Lears!!

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MACBETH

Circa (1605)

Macbeth was written to be performed for King James 1. Before his accession to the English throne James had been King James VI of Scotland, now he was King of both. Like all artists of his time, Shakespeare depended on the patronage of wealthy people, and James was interested in and an accepted expert on demonology, writing a book on the subject which is still today an accepted text for the study of this belief. It is generally believed that Shakespeare introduced the characters of the 3 witches to please the King. (Early extant folios of the play do not include them.) He succeeded – the play was first performed at Hampton Court before the King and his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark in 1606. You have your summaries of the plot. Let’s quickly run through them. **(Summary at end of notes as Appendix)**

Ambition

The irony of Macbeth’s situation is that what destroys him – his ambition - is what has made him great and has the potential for making him greater.

However, from early in the play Macbeth himself recognises it as his “fatal flaw”, in Act 1 Scene 7 he acknowledges his:

*Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself
 And falls on the other side*

When we first meet Macbeth he is presented to us as a loyal subject of his King, a mighty soldier, a man of action. The “bleeding captain” praises “..... *brave Macbeth*”, and King Duncan himself calls him “*noble Macbeth.*” But things are rarely what they seem in *Macbeth*. The Witches introduce this theme when they

intone “*Fair is foul and foul is fair*”. The play – an exceptionally violent play – is full of ambiguity and double meanings, beginning with the Witches’ prophecies. Then:

- Duncan goes to a place of shelter and security and is murdered.
- One of Duncan’s sons calls “*murder*” in his sleep and the other laughs.
- Is the dagger (*Is this a dagger I see before me...?*) real or an hallucination?
- Is Macbeth regretting his actions when he says “*Had I but died an hour....*” or merely regretting that he’s getting into trouble?
- Does Lady Macbeth really faint at the banquet or is she creating a diversion from her husband’s over-reaction to his vision of Banquo’s ghost.?
- Does Lady Macbeth die naturally or commit suicide?
- What exactly does Macbeth mean when he responds to news of his wife’s death with “*She should have died hereafter*”?
- Is Macbeth driven to murder by his wife, or does she merely provide him with excuses to do what he really wanted to do anyway?

Q: Are things always as they seem today?

This is an intensely violent play. While most of the killings take place off-stage, the characters provide the audience with gory descriptions of the carnage, from the opening scenes when the captain describes Macbeth and Banquo wading in blood on the battlefield to the numerous references to the bloodstained hands of the Macbeths. In fact the action of the play is book-ended by a pair of bloody battles: in the first battle Macbeth defeats the invaders. In the second he is slain by Macduff. By the end of the action, blood seems to be everywhere. (Blood is mentioned some 39 times in the play.) “*Will all great Nature’s ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?*” cries Macbeth after he has killed Duncan. Lady Macbeth cries “*Out, damned spot, out I say....who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?*” Blood symbolises their guilt. In fact, the two dominant colours in the play are red and black – seldom does the sun (symbolic of the light of goodness) shine. As in other Shakespearean tragedies, Macbeth’s grotesque murder spree is accompanied by a number of unnatural occurrences in the natural realm. Just prior to the murder, Lennox arrives at Macbeth’s castle and reports that:

*“The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,
Lamentings heard I’ th’air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion (tumult) and confused event....”*

Immediately following the murder of Duncan there are reports of such unnatural acts as noble falcons being killed by common owls, and the King’s thoroughbred stallions breaking loose from their stalls and, it was rumoured, eating one another. Furthermore, terrible storms reflect this violation of the natural order, symbolising corruption in the moral and political world of the play.

What has happened, of course, is that **the natural order of things has been disturbed**. Duncan was King of the realm, and as such at the top of this “world”. Macbeth had been his subject, one who had been honoured by Duncan and who owed

his king loyalty and obedience. Instead he had murdered him, so breaking the chain of being. The breach also occurred on another level - it was the convention that when someone was a guest under your roof it was your duty to protect them. So Macbeth had offended on three levels – as a host, as a friend and as a subject. In addition, to go even further up the chain, the King held his position as the direct representative of God, so in challenging the King Macbeth had challenged God. Dire consequences were to follow, and the wild weather and the reported unnatural acts were but the beginning. Society was in danger of disintegration.

Q: Do you see moral parallels?

It is obvious from early in the play that that Macbeth is well aware of the significance of what he is about to do. In his soliloquy commencing “*Is this a dagger I see before me....?*” he speaks of “*wicked dreams*” which “*abuse the curtained sleep*”. Yet he persists with the plan to murder his friend, his guest and his King. There is also good reason to believe that he has been considering something like this for some time. When Macbeth and Banquo meet the Witches on the Heath and they (the Witches) deliver the prophecies, the two men react differently. Banquo bluntly dismisses them, remarking that:

*“....oftimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to be tray’s
In deepest consequence.”*

On the other hand Macbeth’s reaction prompts Banquo to comment that his companion seems both startled by what has been said and fascinated by it. This, together with Lady Macbeth’s detailed analysis of the situation in Act 1 Scene 5 leads us to suspect that the prospect of Macbeth becoming King and how he might go about it has been discussed by them previously. It is obvious she has been thinking about the possibility of her husband becoming king –one suspects for some time and at some length. *Immediately* on receipt of Macbeth’s letter informing her of his promotion and of the Witches’ prophecies, she soliloquises:

*Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.....*

Q: Here are two men – Macbeth & Banquo - faced with the same challenge/temptation but reacting differently. What accounts for this? Any modern parallels?

How guilty is Lady Macbeth?

We now come, of course, to what is probably the most frequently asked question about this play – in fact it has been asked *ad nauseam* over the years – to what degree was Lady Macbeth responsible for what followed? She speaks in her soliloquy of Macbeth being “*....too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness...*”, *great, not without*

ambition, but “without/The illness should attend it...” Macbeth enters immediately afterwards and they discuss the prophecies, with Lady Macbeth telling him to “...look like th’ innocent flower/But be the serpent under ‘t.” Macbeth’s response is “We will speak further” and his wife replies “Leave all the rest to me.” Note that never at any time during this interchange is there mention of murdering Duncan, but there is the underlying impression that both know exactly what is being referred to, because this is a continuation a previous discussion. The next time we meet Macbeth is in soliloquy, one which makes it clear that he is fully aware of what is being considered – the murder of his King so he, Macbeth, can succeed him. This speech is so significant that it needs to be considered her in full:

ACT 1, Scene vii, opening speech: “If it were done.....And falls on th’ other

Now let us analyse what has been said.

If he is to act he must act quickly.

BUT:

Macbeth is both Duncan’s kinsman (friend) and his subject

AND

On this occasion his host.

ALSO

Duncan is someone so admired that his murder would horrify and enrage all who knew him.

THEREFORE

While Macbeth admits to possessing “ambition”, he is not prepared to take the necessary risk/action.

What does he mean when he says “.....I have no spur/To prick the side of my intent?” Has he decided that he cannot abandon his duty?? Has he convinced himself that such a course is unwise, dangerous, that “vaulting ambition” (note “vaulting”) can, indeed, lead to disaster? Does he lack the courage to act?

Q: What do you think?

As Macbeth is still soliloquising, his wife enters and he tells her:

*“We will proceed no further in this business”,
He hath honoured me of late,
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which could be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.”*

Is he trying to put himself in the best possible light here? Who knows, but one thing is certain – Lady Macbeth is *not* impressed. She rants at him and, if we analyse all that she says, we can see that she concentrates on challenging her husband’s manhood and, most significantly, his courage.

Read speech beginning “Was the hope drunk.....”

Lady Macbeth *knows* her husband. He is a soldier, a man of action, not a thinker. To accuse him of cowardice is to strike at what he values most, his bravery. To accuse

him of cowardice is to strip him of his self-esteem. When his determination not to act begins to waver, he asks “*If we should fail!*” and she replies: “...*screw your courage to the sticking place/And we’ll not fail.*” Finally, the decision is made. Duncan will be murdered.

Q: Right – now - who is to blame?

It is significant to note that it is Macbeth who refers to what is about to happen as “this terrible feat.” He is, we have seen and heard, well aware of all the implications of what he is about to do – personal, moral, political. He chooses to murder Duncan. At this stage and at any subsequent stage he could have exercised his **free will** and called a halt. But he does not.

The “noble” warrior sets out on a path which will see him degenerate into a “butcher.”

Another major issue raised by Shakespeare in *Macbeth* is one he examines in all three of our plays.

The nature of evil.

Q: What is evil? Where is it to be found?

Macbeth examines the nature of evil, the corruption of the human soul. In this play evil is the opposite of humanity, the deviation from that which is natural for mankind. Yet evil is shown to originate within man himself; it is the “darkness of the human heart” that Shakespeare examines in all his tragedies. Many other writers have followed his lead. (Joseph Conrad, the 20th century English novelist is just one of them – one of his novels is in fact titled *Heart of Darkness*.) The supernatural and unnatural forces in the play are shown as the *agents* of human beings, *not* their instigators. There is no external “evil force” out there waiting to pounce. It is something lying latent within all humans.

Q: Who/what are the Witches?

Having killed Duncan Macbeth is immediately filled with remorse. “*wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst.*” he says **But**, he does nothing to right the wrong, even though he has free will and the power to do so. His fear of earthly justice compels him to make even more inhuman choices. He places the blame on the guards and kills them before they can establish their innocence. He has Banquo, his closest friend, killed because he fears he is suspicious. Having missed the opportunity to kill Macduff, he extracts revenge by having the innocent Lady Macduff and her children slaughtered.

By the end of the play Macbeth is a bloody tyrant, disappointed in all aspects of his life: his reign, his marriage, no chance of a family to establish a dynasty. Knowing he is doomed to lose, Macbeth still persists in battling against Macduff, the representative of virtue and the character who sets out to redress the evil in the play.

He is no longer “noble Macbeth” but he clings to that which he has prized so highly during his life – his courage. When Macduff demands “...yield thee, coward,” and points out to Macbeth that only humiliation awaits him if he lives, Macbeth cries “*I will not yield...*” and faces Macduff with the words:

“.....*Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries ‘Enough!’*”

Macbeth. dies, as he has lived, by the sword.

Q: How much, if any sympathy, do we have for Macbeth? Do we retain any respect for him? Are we moved to pity by the sight of a hero transformed into a monster? Any 20th/21st century “monsters”?

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Hamlet; Prince of Denmark.
(circa 1600)

Before we proceed with a discussion of this play, it is especially necessary that we take note of the historical period in which it was written. Shakespeare wrote his plays at the height of the Renaissance, the humanistic revival of art, architecture, literature and learning that originated in Italy in the 14th century and later spread to the rest of Europe, lasting until the 16th century. It marked the **transition** from medieval to modern times. It was characterised by a spirit of enquiry, of the **questioning of tradition and established ideas.**

Q: Sound familiar in the 21st century?

Now – to the play. If we were to describe the plot of Hamlet to someone quite ignorant of the play, and provided we were careful to tell our listener nothing about Hamlet’s character, what impression would our synopsis make on him/her? Perhaps the response would be something like:

“What a sensational story! Why, here are some eight violent deaths, not to speak of adultery, a ghost, a mad woman and a fight in a grave!?” Then he/she might go on to ask:

“But why in the world didn’t Hamlet obey the Ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?”

The answer is - because of the peculiar nature of the central character.

The play certainly does have elements of a revenge tragedy, popular with the Elizabethans, with its ghost seeking revenge, frantic behaviour by the avenger and a bloody finale. Elizabethan audiences were familiar with such plots; however, they would also have been very aware of the huge moral dilemma involved in revenge, especially for a character such as Hamlet, **a thinker rather than a man of action: a man commanded to do what he is not sure is right.** He is very much a Renaissance man – refusing to accept things as they have always been, exposing old customs and old values to intellectual examination, thinking for himself. At the same time, of

course, he is a man caught between two worlds – the old and the new – and not belonging fully to either.

Hamlet is **an isolated man**. This is reflected dramatically in performance: at his first appearance at Court the audience is struck by the symbolic contrast between the brooding young Hamlet in his unadorned black cloak and the superficial brilliance of the richly garbed Court at Elsinore. Here dramatic irony is at work – the audience already know of Hamlet’s meeting with the Ghost when Hamlet first faces the Court – those at Court do not.

The character of Hamlet embodies the increasing complexity of society and its moral order.

**Q: Is 21st century man isolated?
What aspects/developments over, say, the past 100 years might lead us to answer
“yes?”**

During Shakespeare’s time there was a move away from primitive reaction such as “an eye for an eye” to a life governed by law, order and morality. Queen Elizabeth 1, for example, instituted a number of reforms in England which made assault or murder of a fellow citizen illegal. The rule of law came to be the accepted norm and personal revenge less so. This gave rise to an essential human dilemma – that on one hand a person would instinctively want to seek revenge on someone who had murdered or injured a family member or loved one, yet on the other hand know that such revenge was morally and legally wrong. It is this dilemma that Shakespeare examines in this play. It seems that what finally destroys Hamlet is procrastination – his delay in deciding on a course of action. The plot outline shows how he procrastinates. Why does he do this? Is he justified in doing so? What effect does his procrastination have on others? Let’s address these questions.

Q: Revenge – do we still find ourselves seeking it?

When Hamlet is first confronted with the truth about his father’s death his spontaneous reaction is one of **pure revenge**. In Act 1 Scene 5 he speaks with the Ghost (of his dead father):

*Ghost: Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.*

Hamlet Speak, I am bound to hear.

Ghost So art thou to revenge,.....

On hearing the Ghost tell the tale of murder most foul, Hamlet replies:

*HamletI, with wings as swift
As meditation (thought) or the thought of love
May sweep to my revenge.*

However, by end of the same scene the Hamlet exclaims:

*The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!*

So, even though Hamlet realises that he must act both to punish his Father’s murderer and repair the damage done to the State of Denmark (of which he is the heir) he cannot reconcile what he accepts is his duty with his intellectual need to do what he thinks is right – and to be seen as doing so.

Q: Are people today confronted with situations in which it is demanded, or at least expected, that we act according to tradition, even though we are not convinced such action is either wise or right? What are/have been some of these situations?

Throughout Act 11 Hamlet seems incapable of making a decision. He is the malcontent, overwhelmed by grief and disgust for the world. He berates himself in a soliloquy (Act 11 Scene 2) for being a coward, for being a “*dull and muddy-mettled* (weak spirited) *rascal*”, (attempting, perhaps, to whip himself into such a frenzy that he will extract swift revenge?)But then, significantly, at the conclusion of the soliloquy and on uttering the words “*About, my brain....*”, (that is, now let me think about it,) he decides to seek more proof of Claudius’s guilt and so “.....*have grounds* (for action) *more relative than this.*”

Q: Is Hamlet really concerned about being absolutely sure of the new King’s guilt or is this just another excuse for putting off action that is repugnant to him?

Even after he is presented with clear and uncontrovertible evidence of Claudius’s guilt (in the play-within-a-play) and when he has the chance to kill the King while he is at prayer (and so “in a state of grace”) he does not do so. His stated reason – if he kills Claudius while he (Claudius) is at prayer he will go straight to Heaven. Hamlet determines to find a more perfect kind of revenge, perhaps:

*When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in th’ incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At game aswearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in’t*Act 111, Scene 3

Unfortunately, by the time Hamlet does act, Claudius has become aware of his intentions and implements a plan of his own. Hamlet’s continued procrastination continues to lead not only to his own destruction , but to the destruction of those around him. Claudius has had time to realise that Hamlet is aware of the truth about his father’s death and puts his own plan in place, with tragic consequences for the assassins Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Meanwhile Hamlet’s protracted insensitivity towards the innocent Ophelia has driven her to madness and suicide. Hamlet id manipulated into a public duel with Laertes. His mother, guilty of nothing more than foolishness, falls into the trap designed by her husband and intended for Hamlet – she drinks the poisoned wine. Laertes dies because he loved his sister. Earlier the bumbling, pompous but non-threatening Polonius had died when he was mistaken for Claudius. Hamlet finally wounds Claudius with the poisoned sword and, having achieved his purpose, kills himself. **But** how many could have been saved had Hamlet not taken so long to decide on a course of action?

Q: Does today’s society procrastinate – i.e. delay acting on difficult issues? Examples?

Corruption as a symbol of evil.

Let us look at another universal theme in Hamlet. – corruption as a symptom of evil. This is conveyed by the sustained image of a leprous skin disease – an ulcer, which lurks beneath a layer of seemingly healthy skin but rots the flesh underneath, just as the colourful, attractive and sumptuous trappings of the Court at Elsinore hides what is infecting and fatally eating away the whole body of the society. Repulsive images of sickness appear continually. This image is introduced is introduced by the Ghost of Hamlet’s father when he reveals how he was murdered:

*And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leprous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset (curdle)
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood: so it did mine;
And a most instant tetter (scab) bark’d about,
Most lazar-like, (leper-like) with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.*

Now, of course one can’t leave our look at this play without examining perhaps one of the best known Shakespearean speeches : *To be or not to be.....* Act 111 Scene 1 (p65) **READ**

For many years, indeed several centuries, a common interpretation of this soliloquy has been that Hamlet is considering suicide. However, this is not the contemporary view, there is another, one with which I agree. Hamlet is a thinker, given to analysing situations, some would say *ad nauseam*. Therefore, it is not surprising to find him considering objectively the alternatives in the situation in which he finds himself. Furthermore, would we expect a young man considering taking his own life to be capable in this situation of the reasoned, logical argument he presents in this passage? Let us look at how his argument is developed.

“To be or nor to be.....end them.” Should I act or try to escape from the problem? he asks. Now he sets out, in his inimitable way, to consider the alternative. First, logically, the ultimate escape is death, “to sleep, perchance to dream “ BUT here his argument changes course with an acceptance that this alternative is not as complete (or desirable) as it might at first appear “ay, there’s th’ rub” he says. The change in direction is signalled by the word “dream” – after all, what Hamlet is seeking here is something more desirable than his current situation, and a dream is just that – something that is unreal, intangible and transitory. Indeed there is, as he says later in the speech, “....*the dread of something after death/the undiscover’d country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns.*” Why then, go from one uncertainty to one even more uncertain? So, he reasons, it is more logical to “.....bear those ills we have/Than fly to others we know not of.....” than to seek escape via a “bare bodkin”, especially considering the uncertainty of what one is escaping to. Far from considering death by his own hand, I would suggest, Hamlet uses the concept purely in an intellectual sense, to construct a balanced argument.

Do we see Hamlet simply as a young man who can't make up his mind? And what about his relationship with his mother – his intense fury at her hasty re-marriage, his seeming obsession with the sexual relationship she has with Claudius. Understandable? A little too much?

What is man?

As I mentioned in my introduction to this course, Shakespeare's work is relevant to all ages because he deals with universal themes. Throughout the play, for example, Shakespeare has Hamlet reflect on the degree of control we humans have over our own lives. Shakespeare has Hamlet say:

*There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will Act V, Scene 2, lines 10-11*

Q: Do we in the 21st century believe we are controlled by a higher force of some kind, or do we believe we determine our own fate? What are the implications of both beliefs as far as restrictions on our behaviour and the way we live our lives are concerned?

These questions are probably more relevant for us today than any generation since Shakespeare wrote his play. He lived in a time of rapid change, when traditional beliefs were being challenged. We live in that kind of world. You see what I mean by a universal theme – an issue which is of relevance to all people at all times. The question “Am I controlled by a higher force?” has been asked ever since man first walked on the earth. Hamlet asks in desperation:

“.....*What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed?.....*”

As always, Shakespeare doesn't give us the answer, he only asks the question, inviting us to think about it. That is why we are still reading, watching and studying Shakespeare's plays.

There is just so much to consider in this, Shakespeare's longest play. However, we'll conclude our consideration of it by asking ourselves the questions:

Q: How much patience with/sympathy for Hamlet do we have?

KING LEAR
(Circa 1607)

Lear is a mythical figure, there is no historical evidence that he ever lived (as opposed to Macbeth) The actual story of Leir and his daughters had existed prior to Shakespeare's time. However, it had been a simple melodrama with a happy ending.

Shakespeare took the basic storyline and crafted his play – one which is in many ways unsettling. It asks many questions but provides no answers, rather it presents us with

diametrically opposed viewpoints. The story is deliberately set in ancient pagan Britain, far back in the mists of time. There is no mention of the Christian God; there is reference to gods plural and certain characters speak of supernatural deities believed to control events on earth. It is as if Shakespeare chose to begin at the beginning – to have Lear as **Everyman** asking the basic human question: “*Who is it that can tell me who I am*”

Lear himself.

To begin we need to look at the character of Lear himself. Here is an old man who moves step by step from a position of enormous power, status, wealth, responsibility, social complexity and security into a terrible isolation from his fellow human beings, his family, and nature itself, suffers horribly from the stripping away of his entire identity, goes mad as a result of his experience, recovers briefly and descends into despair and insanity again moment before his death.

The central struggle in the play (other than the main one going on in Lear's own mind) is between people who see their relationship with Lear and with others from different perspectives. Those who seek to assist Lear and strive to combat the forces who wish to abuse him (e.g., Kent, Cordelia, the Fool, Edgar, Gloucester, and eventually Albany) are motivated principally by a traditional sense of love, respect, and allegiance—

The other group is made up of those who serve primarily themselves, whose attitude towards others is largely determined by their desire to use people for their own self-advancement (e.g., Regan, Goneril, Cornwall, Edmund, Oswald). For them, traditional notions of the importance of bonds are illusions, outmoded conventions standing in the way of their individual desire for power. Thus, they are ready to violate established bonds (like those between a father and child or between a husband and wife or between a king and subject) in order to pursue their own agendas.

Q: Sound familiar?

At the start of the play King Lear has a rich, powerful, and complex social identity. He is both king of his country and patriarch of his family, the lynch pin which holds together the structure of a society which the opening scene presents to us in full formal splendour. Everyone looks to him as the source of order and meaning. Lear himself is very aware of his importance and his chief purpose at the beginning of the play is to retain it. However in this scene he is officially transferring the power and the responsibilities of the throne onto his children: i.e. he is resigning. We are not given an explicit reason other than that Lear wants to spend the rest of his life free of the cares which come with the position of king. But we are to discover that in surrendering the position, Lear has no intention of ceasing to be treated as if he is, in fact, still the king.

*Only we still retain
The name, and all the additions to a king. . . (1.1.135-136)*

Lear's story is a tragedy because, faced with external circumstances which increasingly do not support his vision of himself, Lear refuses to compromise. He will not listen to what the fool is telling him, he resists his own growing awareness that he might have made a mistake, and, most important, he will not adjust his desires or his conduct to fit what his daughters are prepared to do for him.

Q: Once again - sound familiar?

Relationships between parents and children and between siblings are at the core of the plot. Both plot and sub plot of the play focus on what happens when children turn against parents. Although in King Lear this results in a kingdom being torn apart and leads to several deaths, the basic conflict in the story is a version of a simple, ordinary, universal situation: what aged parents expect from their children and the reaction of their children to these expectations. Shakespeare is here dramatising the point at which power is shifting from one generation to the next.

When the play opens Lear is planning to abdicate, but the love-test he imposes shows that he really wishes to retain the authority he is ostensibly renouncing. He demands love and gratitude., **attempting to manipulate affection**.

Q: Can this be done?

When Cordelia refuses to honour him with extravagant overtures of love, he rages. Later, when Goneril and Regan begin to wear him down with their subsequent refusal to honour him, he rages. This rage at the injustice he sees in his children's ingratitude is what drives him to madness.

*"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!....."* he cries in fury – and self-pity.

The violence of his language – of father to daughter - towards Goneril is horrendous:

READ: Act 1 Scene 4 commencing "*Hear Nature, hear dear Goddess.....*" up to "*To have a thankless child.*"

Cordelia and Edgar are part of the "old" order. They love their parents, bear no grudge for the wrongs done them and honour the elderly, faults and all. Goneril, Regan and Edmund, on the other hand, are part of a "new" order, full of (usually vicious) energy and unwilling to wait for power and position to pass naturally to them. In a sense they are the modernists, the self-serving revolutionaries **who** want their future, now – or even yesterday!

Q: Any modern parallels?

We are given tantalizingly few hints as to what sort of ruler Lear was, or whether Gloucester deserved honour and respect as a parent. But the little evidence we do have, combined with the rage and fury and unnatural punishment both men unleash on their children suggest that neither old man was a model parent.

Q: Shakespeare is suggesting that respect must be earned, not demanded, and that parents have duties towards children just as children have duties towards parents.

A 21st century issue?

Indeed we cannot but ask, however quietly, whether Goneril, Regan and especially Edmund (more about him shortly) are not at least a little justified in their demands at the beginning of the play. The later deeds of these three characters may render this question irrelevant, but it is still an issue to consider at the beginning of the story. The question is complex and debatable, but accounts in part for the timeless relevance of this story of King Lear and his daughters and Gloucester and his sons.

What we have been considering so far is an absolute monarch. We are reminded of the adage “**Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**” The play is not only a tragedy of parents and children, of pride and ingratitude; it is also a **tragedy of kingship**. Power corrupts not only the possessor’s capacity for loving, but the spontaneity of other’s love. The person with the power can never be sure that the professed love of friends and relations is disinterested, it may easily be purposeful flattery.

Q: Is this why very wealthy people are often unhappy? Examples?

Evil in the worldA reverberating issue in this play is the sense that *evil is something normal*, residing in the hearts of people all around us, those who are on the surface indistinguishable from ourselves, people whom we would have no reason to suspect of being capable of evil acts and who, were circumstances different, might very well not turn to evil.

Regan and Goneril, after all, are not witches. Their most distinctive characteristic is, in some ways, their normality. They are ambitious women who have waited a long time to receive the power which is to be their inheritance. And once they have the power, they are anxious to use it for their own immediate self-interest. No special criticism can really be made of them for telling their father how much they love him; what they say is obviously an exaggerated lie, but they are playing a game which he has set up. And their objections to Lear's retinue are (or can be seen as) largely justified. One can even have some sympathy for their sense that if they turn their father loose with all those knights, there may be some political trouble.

The source of their evil is an absence of love or respect for their father, both as a father, a king, and a human being. Lear may very well be a difficult person to deal with--a strong egotist with excessive demands. But Regan and Goneril, once they have power, have no further interest in Lear as a person. He is simply a nuisance. We do not need to demonize this attitude, because Lear clearly is a nuisance. But the casual way in which they rationalize away their neglect of him speaks volumes. They set their own interests above those of anyone else, including their father. This does not spring from any particular desire to hurt their father. It is simply an

expression of their pre-eminent concern for their own interests, a concern which enables them to treat anyone who has nothing they want as an object. But the habit, once initiated, leads step by step to conduct of extreme cruelty (like the putting out of Gloucester's eyes) and his banishment to Dover.

Regan and Goneril thus represent a particular vision of evil as stemming from a self-interested quest for power and self-interest which simply ignores any limits which an attention to traditional "bonds" might require (other than a pretense to honour such bonds when it serves their interests).

Q: Modern examples?

Edmund's attitude is precisely the same. He is not a diabolically evil person, a devil incarnate. Nor does he have a specific agenda. He is a recognizably normal person who wants to get on the world and who is prepared to abandon ancient communal traditions in order to secure an advantage for himself. He's not all that interested in being cruel to others or killing them just for sake of hurting others, but he's not going to let any traditional notions of obligation, respect, virtue, or bonding prevent him from making what he can of his opportunities. And to be fair, he has reason to resent his position in his own family. We can understand his seething resentment. Consider our introduction to him in the opening scene of the play - his own father speaking about him to a friend in his (Edmund's) own presence (we all hate that - being treated as if we were not present!). Let us look to the opening lines of the play for an example of Edmund's humiliation.

(**READ** opening speech of ACT 1 SCENE 2.) We can understand Edmund's humiliation. It's certainly reflected in the soliloquy. But can his experience be accepted as an excuse for his later behaviour?

Relevance to the concept of evil in modern times. Part of the disturbing power of *King Lear* comes from the fact that Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall are at first so normal in their vision of themselves and their actions. We all know people like them, and we can even feel some genuine sympathy for how they initially behave. What this play forces us to consider, however, is where this individualistic, aggressive self-fashioning stance logically leads. Everything that Edmund and the sisters do in this play is quite consistent with their initial attitude, so that we are invited to consider how the grossest of evils arise out of something we see all around us and perhaps even feel from time to time in ourselves

In the twentieth century we have become familiar with his vision of evil, largely as the result of World War II, in which horrific evil was organized, carried out, and justified by ordinary people, who often began by simply wanting to "get ahead." The best known example is Adolf Eichmann, for whom Hannah Arendt, in her study of his trial (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*), coined the phrase "The Banality of Evil." The frequent attempt to demonize such in the

individuals, that is, to make them as abnormal and unnatural as possible, is one indication **of how uncomfortable we are with the notion that they are recognizably normal.**

Part of the disturbing power of *King Lear* comes from the fact that Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall are at first so normal in their vision of themselves and their actions. We all know people like them, and we can even feel some genuine sympathy for how they initially behave. What this play forces us to consider, however, is where this individualistic, aggressive self-fashioning stance logically leads. Perhaps to the “Blow you Jack, I’m all right” attitude?

Everything that Edmund and the sisters do in this play is quite consistent with their initial attitude, so that we are invited to consider how the grossest of evils can arise out of something we see all around us and perhaps even feel from time to time in ourselves

Nature of Justice.

Edmund’s stand is against the convention of his time. Other characters believe the gods control the actions of man and this is significant, because if this is so, a significant issue arises – that of **justice**.

Some have believed that Shakespeare, as well as Gloucester, believed that:

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport.*

Others have supposed that he would have subscribed to Kent’s exclamation that the stars govern our condition, or, more plausibly, that he would have agreed with Edgar’s stern summing up:

*The gods are just, and of our vices
Make instruments to plague us.*

But all these, and other, statements about the gods are appropriate to those who speak them, and to the immediate condition in which they are spoken. Shakespeare the dramatist stays in the background, showing us his pagan characters groping their way towards an understanding of justice.

Cordelia, Edgar and Goneril’s husband Albany are the only characters in this pagan story who appear to have belief in gods with virtues as least similar to those we would class as Christian. Edgar claims the gods are just. Cordelia calls on “you kind gods” to restore her father’s sanity. Albany states the hope that while Cordelia is in prison the gods will defend her. **However**, Lear’s sanity is not restored and immediately following the line “May the gods defend her” comes the stage direction “enter Lear, the dead Cordelia in his arms.”

In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* justice is clearly done at the end: Hamlet kills his father’s murderer and Macbeth is killed by the man whose family suffered most from his

ruthless grab for power. The gods at work in *King Lear* certainly punish wrongdoing – Edmund, Goneril, Regan and her husband die: Lear is punished with madness for his sins against Cordelia, Gloucester with blindness for his actions against Edgar. **But** the most innocent, virtuous person in the story is murdered. This lack of justice, in the conventional sense at least, contributes to this play being the bleakest and most harrowing of any Shakespearean work. What happens seems more a cruel and final settlement of scores than justice. At the end of both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* there is hope for the future: in *King Lear* none is expressed.

Q: Justice in the 21st century? How do you see it?

Is the play totally pessimistic? The noted 20th century Shakespearean critic Kenneth Muir says not. He claims that Shakespeare went back to the beginning – to a pre-Christian world - and built up the nature of man from within man himself and had the characters seek to develop moral parameters without the aid of an established belief or revealed religion. Muir asserts that in the created world of lust, cruelty and greed, with extremes of wealth and poverty, it is shown that man really needs neither wealth nor power, nor even physical freedom. Instead he needs patience, love mutual forgiveness and stoical fortitude. Muir points to Edgar’s stern admonition that:
“.....*Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.*”

That is, all man can do is accept what ever life brings and deal with it as best he can.

Q: Any relevance to man’s position in the modern world? The novelist George Orwell maintained that “*The tragedy of 20th century man is that he exists in a moral vacuum.*” What do you think?

A huge number of critics have written about *King Lear*. It is considered by most Shakespearean scholars to be one of his greatest plays. Much of the thinking and philosophy is focused on the role and position of the **individual** and less on systems of belief and strict social order, which makes it especially relevant for modern man. During the 20th century there was a growing climate of humanism. Man was charged with, indeed urged to, determine his own fate and learn to live with it. This is what the characters in *King Lear* had been forced to do. They had not been provided with set answers to life’s problems. Their gods were at the best unpredictable. The characters in *King Lear* are on their own. Free (or is it forced) to make their own decisions. Today we call this individualism.

So let us consider this concept of individualism. People are very ready to demand their rights as individuals – sounds great. No one can tell me what to do, they say. Blow you Jack, I’m all right, Taken to the extreme, individualism is the law of the jungle – the survival of the fittest.

Q: Do we have a 21st century “law of the jungle”? How does it manifest itself?

What is the true nature of man?

Moving to the broader philosophical issue of the play, the thread that ties everything together is the “journey” that Lear makes: from ruler of a kingdom through madness to **an understanding of himself** and the world. As already pointed out, Lear himself asks the central question of the play: “*Who is it that will tell me who I am?*” i.e – **what is the nature of man?** *What am I? Why am I?* All the main characters ask this question at some time. Lear himself finally comes to a realisation of what true humanity is when during the storm on the heath he sheds his power, his pride, his egocentricity (and symbolically his clothes) and recognises his one-ness with all men.

It is significant that at this moment, before he goes mad, Lear stops thinking about himself and calling attention to his own sense of injustice. Instead, for the first time, he expresses genuine feeling for the sufferings of others:

*Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall our houseless heads and unfed sides,
You looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! (3.4.29-34)*

Isolation – a theme in all three plays.

One thing you will have noticed about all three of our characters - Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear is that they become progressively isolated as the action progresses. Even at the start, of course, they are “isolated” from mankind in general by their eminence, but throughout the play they are projected into a private world – Macbeth finds that he can confide in no-one, not even his wife, Lear “abdure all roofs” and moves to the stormy heath, and even at the outset of the play Hamlet is estranged and his isolation intensified by his estrangement from Ophelia. Through this isolation each is thrown back upon himself.

Lear feels his identity crumbling when, astounded by his daughters’ ingratitude, he asks:

*Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Who is it that can tell me who I am.....Act I Scene 4:*

On the heath he comes to know who he is: he is one who has taken too little care, and accepts his common humanity. But, as we would say, it had been a rough ride.

Macbeth comes to a recognition that his actions have had a result opposite from what he had intended. He aimed at the crown, thinking it would bring him happiness, but his hopes deceived him:

*I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n in the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,*

*I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.*

Surely one of the saddest speeches to be found in literature. He achieved his ambition – to become king – but at what price?

Q: Deals done on the way up – then paying the price. Modern examples?

Hamlet's isolation is nowhere in the play more clearly summed up than in the lines previously quoted;

*The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!*

He is living in a world which he finds alien:

*How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seems to me all the uses of this world!*

Here Hamlet is being Hamlet – thinking, thinking thinking and aloneuncertain of himself in a rapidly changing world.

How isolated is modern man?

Conclusion.

If one were charged with identifying one outstanding feature of Shakespeare's art, it would have to be his **creation of character** – not just the provision of people who are there so the plot can unfold, so things can happen to them, but rounded, flesh-and-blood, complex characters – believable characters - who make things happen. Before Shakespeare presented his vast cast of characters to the world, audiences, had never been shown such *real* people. But by watching his plays, observing such characters, his audiences could come to see the humanity in those around them in a new and more enlightened way. We are still doing this, and sometimes it can be a very unsettling process! His plays bring us to ask, along with his characters, such universal and eternal questions as:

- What is man?
- Why am I here?
- How free am I to determine my own destiny?
- Does evil exist and if so where does it reside?
- What is the nature of justice?
- How do I cope with an ever-changing world?

We are still pondering these questions 500 years after Shakespeare had his characters ask them and five hundred years, five thousand years into the future man will still be asking them, because times change but human nature does not.

Shakespeare created in his dramas **the basic understanding of what we call humanity** – that is why his work is still relevant in the 21st century.

As Dame Judi Dench said recently when interviewed by Michael Parkinson, *“Anyone who has ever loved, hated, envied, been passionate about anything, is ready for Shakespeare.”*

Synopsis: Shakespeare & the modern world

MACBETH (circa 1606)

A 'dark' play. Predominant colours black & red (blood). Contrast between the reactions of Banquo and Macbeth to the initial predictions of the Witches. The idea of gaining the kingship is obviously already in Macbeth's mind. This is reinforced when he meets his wife at Glamis Castle. Obvious from Macbeth's soliloquy in the last scene of Act 1 that he is aware of the significance of what he is considering (i.e. kill Duncan & gain the throne). Decides against it but persuaded to change his mind by Lady Macbeth who accuses him of cowardice. So **in the full knowledge of what he is doing**, Macbeth exercises **his free** will and kills Duncan. This is a **challenge to the order-of-being** on several levels. Macbeth has allowed his **"vaulting ambition"** to take over. However, the significant thing to note is that as things unfold, he could at any time have decided to stop – to have exercised his **free-will**. However, his ambition (**tragic flaw**) escalates and he becomes more brutal. The **evil** in the play does not come from the Witches, it is not an external force – it comes from within Macbeth himself and he fails to use his **free will** to suppress it. He consults the Witches once again and chooses to believe what they tell him – they are of course only telling him what he wants to hear, that his position as King was meant to be and that he must retain it (known as **self-justification**), that he is invincible. (**Power corrupts & absolute power corrupts absolutely**) Finally he is totally isolated and finally destroyed by the thing that had, ironically, served to make him great – **ambition**. The one thing he clings to as he dies is his bravery. We are left wondering if we feel pity or revulsion for him, and asking ourselves **how many Macbeths have strutted (& continue to strut) the world stage during our lifetime?**

HAMLET (circa 1600)

Hamlet is a true **"Renaissance Man"** – a **thinker, rather than a man of action: a man commanded to do what he is not sure is right**. He is a man caught between two worlds – the old and the new – and not belonging fully to either. He asks "why"? He is **an isolated man**. He faces an essential human dilemma – that on one hand a person would instinctively want to seek revenge on someone who had murdered or injured a family member or loved one, yet on the other hand know that such revenge was morally and legally wrong. It is this dilemma that Shakespeare examines in this play. The **evil (corruption)** at the Court of Elsinore lies beneath the surface. Things are not as they seem. Hamlet is aware of this, but his **"tragic flaw"** is **procrastination**, He spends an inordinate amount of time **thinking** - agonizing over the **nature of man**, clarifying his own concept of **justice**. By the time he finally **acts** a number of innocent people have been destroyed. Do we today spend too much time thinking, talking about righting a wrong but failing to do anything about it? Do we sometimes refuse to compromise, take the high moral ground and refusing to face up to reality, Do we believe that corruption (evil) will always be visible, that something "ordinary" and "socially "acceptable" cannot be evil (e.g the "ordinary" Adolph Eichman?) How just, how humane is society? These are just a few of the questions asked by Hamlet that are as relevant today as they were in Shakespeare's time. The character of Hamlet embodies the **increasing complexity of society and its moral order**. **HAMLET IS MODERN MAN**.

KING LEAR (circa 1607)

The story is deliberately set in ancient pagan Britain, far back in the mists of time. There is no mention of the Christian God; the reference is to gods plural and certain characters speak of supernatural deities believed to control events on earth. It is as if Shakespeare chose to begin at the beginning – to have Lear as *Everyman* asking the basic human question: **"Who is it that can tell me who I am"**. In other words, a universal, timeless struggle. Lear's **tragic flaw** is **egotism**. At the beginning of the play he cannot see the world through any eyes other than

his own. The play is a record of his journey towards **self-knowledge** – a tragic and painful journey towards a recognition of his basic one-ness with all mankind. The central struggle in the play (other than the main one going on in Lear's own mind) is between two groups of people - those who are motivated principally by a traditional sense of love, respect and allegiance, (Kent, Cordelia, the Fool, Edgar, Gloucester and eventually Albany) and those who serve primarily themselves (Regan, Goneril, Cornwall, Edmund, Oswald.) There is in both the main plot and secondary plot an investigation of the relationship between parents & children and between siblings. **Evil** is shown as being an absence of love or respect for others and not some external force. There is ambivalence about the **nature of justice in the play**: is man, we are asked, at the mercy of spiteful, unpredictable gods or does he decide his own fate? The only hint to be drawn from the action of the play is to observe that wrong-doing is punished but goodness not necessarily rewarded. Much of the thinking and philosophy in the play is focused on the role and position of the **individual** and less on systems of belief and strict social order, which makes it especially relevant for modern man. During the 20th century there was a growing climate of **humanism**. Man was charged with, indeed urged to, determine his own fate and learn to live with it. This is what the characters in *King Lear* are forced to do. They had not been provided with set answers to life's problems. Their gods were at the best unpredictable. The characters in *King Lear* are on their own. Free (or is it forced) to make their own decisions. Today we call this **individualism**.

One thing you will have noticed about all three of our characters, Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear, is that they become progressively **isolated** as the action progresses. Even at the start, of course, they are isolated from mankind in general by their eminence, but throughout the play they are each projected into a private world – Macbeth finds that he can confide in no-one, not even his wife, Lear “abdures all roofs” and moves to the stormy heath, and even at the outset of the play Hamlet is estranged, and later his isolation is intensified by his estrangement from Ophelia. Through this isolation each is thrown back upon himself. **How isolated is modern man?**

Conclusion.

The above plays bring us to ask, along with his characters, such universal and eternal questions as:

- What is man?
- Why am I here?
- How free am I to determine my own destiny?
- Does evil exist and if so where does it reside?
- What is the nature of justice?
- How do I cope with an ever-changing world?

Perhaps for us in the 21st century the last question is the most relevant of all.

PLOT SUMMARIES

Macbeth.

Macbeth, a brave soldier and highly-respected Scottish nobleman has just defeated the traitor, the Duke of Cawdor in battle. With his close friend Banquo he is on his way to meet King Duncan when they meet three witches who predict that Macbeth will be "Thane of Cawdor and King hereafter." At first Macbeth dismisses what they say, but when he discovers that in fact the King had bestowed the title on him he begins to wonder if the rest of the prophecy is destined to be fulfilled. He invites the King to his castle and with the aid of his wife, Lady Macbeth, murders King Duncan. Macbeth is declared King. However, he begins to fear that Banquo knows too much and has him assassinated. At a banquet attended by the entire Court, Macbeth (and only Macbeth) sees the blood-stained ghost of Banquo, and his terrified and obviously guilty reaction supports what have been growing suspicion among the nobles, especially Macduff. Macbeth seeks out the Witches who provide him with prophecies which seem to indicate that he is invincible. Meanwhile Macduff, realizing that Macbeth is aware of Macduff's growing conviction that Macbeth had murdered Duncan,, flees south to England to enlist the aid of the English King in removing Macbeth from the throne. Enraged by Macduff's escape, Macbeth takes revenge by ordering the slaughter of Macduff's innocent wife and infant son. Now the truth is obvious and Macbeth becomes more and more brutal and isolated, even from his wife. While Lady Macbeth had collaborated in Duncan's murder, she had naively assumed that there the matter would end, and she is initially unaware of the subsequent murders and

brutality. When she realizes how the situation had escalated and how far into iniquity her husband had sunk, she is consumed with guilt, goes mad and dies. Macbeth retreats to his castle, Dunsinane, which is surrounded by the forest, Birnam Wood. It is here that Macduff and the English forces find him. The Witches' prophecies are finally fulfilled, but not in the way Macbeth had expected. Macbeth and Macduff fight, Macbeth is killed and Malcolm, son of Duncan, takes the throne.

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The Witches' Prophecies:

Hail, Thane of Cawdor!

Thou shalt be King hereafter!

Be bloody, bold and resolute.

Laugh to scorn

The pow'r of man, for none of woman
born

Shall harm Macbeth.

Be lion mett'l'd, proud and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where
conspirers are:

Macbeth shall never vanquish'ed be until
Great Birnam Wood to great Dunsinane
Hill

Shall come against him.

.....
Fair is foul and foul is fair.

Nothing in his life

Became him like the leaving it.

....too full of the milk of human kindness

....screw your courage to the sticking place.

....sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of
care.

Now good digestion wait on appetite.

Stand not upon the order of your coming.

Cans't thou not minister to a mind diseased?
Out, out brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his life upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Some literary titles taken from the play

<i>The Sound and the Fury:</i>	Willam Faulkner
<i>The Ravelled Sleeve</i>	M.C. Munday
<i>Told by an Idiot:</i>	R. Macaulay
<i>Vaulting Ambition:</i>	Ellis Middleton
<i>Tomorrow and Tomorrow:</i>	Philip Barry
<i>This Petty Place:</i>	B. Pinkerton
<i>Brief Candle:</i>	Aldous Huxley
<i>Toil and Trouble:</i>	T. Brooks

Hamlet.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, returns home from university to find his father dead and his mother married to her late husband's brother, Claudius, who is now King. His grief turns to desperation when he is approached by his father's Ghost, who tells him that he had been murdered by Claudius. The Ghost demands instant revenge for his murder and tells Hamlet that it is his duty as a son to carry it out. This creates a problem for the introspective Hamlet, who is a thinker rather than a man of action. He is torn between his duty to revenge his father's death, his uncertainty as to the guilt of Claudius and the morality of pure, instinctive and unthinking revenge, a concept foreign to his nature. At the same time he is revolted by what he sees as his mother's unseemly haste in marrying Claudius. It ha been expected at Court that Hamlet would marry the gentle Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, a politician. Unfortunately for the bumbling Polonius he is also a meddler who chooses to spy on Hamlet and his mother, Queen

Gertrude when they are arguing about her marriage to Claudius. Hamlet works himself into a rage, detects Polonius hiding behind a curtain and, assuming it is Claudius, thrusts his sword through the curtain. Exit Polonius - permanently. Hamlet inexplicably begins to treat Ophelia with contempt and this injustice, combined with her father's death, sends her mad. Hamlet procrastinates - he decides not to act until he is sure Claudius is guilty. He arranges for a band of players to present a play at Court using as the plot the scenario the ghost had presented. On observing the nervous reaction of Claudius, Hamlet decides he is indeed guilty. However, Hamlet has spent so much time being indecisive and made his suspicions so clear that Claudius decides to take action of his own, He sends Hamlet off on a sea journey as his representative at the English Court, and arranges to have him assassinated. Coincidence causes this plan to fail, Hamlet kills both assassins and returns to Court, to find that the tragic Ophelia has drowned herself. Her brother, blaming Hamlet for her death, challenges him. to a duel. The wily Claudius manipulates the situation, has the combatants fight in view of the Court and arranges to have the point of Laertes' sword poisoned. As extra insurance he poisons Hamlet's pre-duel cup of wine, but Hamlet's distraught mother, Queen Gertrude, drinks it in error and dies. Hamlet (finally) kills Claudius, fights Laertes, and both of them die.

.....frailty, thy name is woman.,

Neither a borrower nor a lender be.

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't

I must be cruel, only to be kind.

There are more things in heaven and earth,
Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Brevity is the soul of wit.

To sleep, perchance to dream.

The time is out of joint O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

.....though I am native here
And to the manor born, it is a custom
More honour'd in the breach than in the
observance.

The apparel oft proclaims the man.

I shall not look upon his like again.

To be or not to be, that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against sea of troubles
And by opposing, end them.

Good night, sweet Prince
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance:
Remember: and there is pansies, that's for
thoughts.

Murder most foul.

And above all else, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be.

The rest is silence.

King Lear

There are two parallel plots.

Main plot:

King Lear, a petulant and self-centred old man, decides he wants to shed the burdens of kingship by dividing his kingdom between his three daughters, Regan, Goneril and Cordelia (the youngest and his favourite.) He "tests" them by bringing them together before

the Court and demand that each publicly proclaim the depth of her love for him. Regan and Goneril participate readily - and insincerely - but Cordelia refuses to be part of the exercise, saying that she does not see the need for such public display, as her father has ample evidence of the strength of her love for him. Lear, unaccustomed to being thwarted in any way, banishes Cordelia from the kingdom in a fit of temper. She leaves with her suitor, The King of France. When the Earl of Kent, one of Lear's closest advisors, attempts to intervene on Cordelia's behalf, he too is banished. Regan and Goneril, now in possession of their father's kingdom, waste no time in revealing their true natures. They obviously see their father as a doddering old fool, and treat him accordingly. When he attempts to retain some of his kingly privileges they remind him that they are now in charge and that he can't expect to relinquish the burdens of kingship yet retain the rights and privileges that go with it. Lear is so distraught he loses his mind and wanders off into the wilderness, his despair becoming all the more acute when he finally realizes how unjust he has been to Cordelia. Unbeknown to Lear, his old and loyal friend the Duke of Kent stays close at hand to watch over him.

Meanwhile:

Secondary plot:

The Earl of Gloucester has two sons; Edgar is legitimate, Edmund illegitimate and bitterly resentful of what he perceives as the injustice of his situation. He is especially jealous of Edgar, and sets out to discredit him in their father's eyes. He tricks Gloucester into believing that Edgar is plotting against his father. Gloucester is deceived and appoints Edmund his heir in Edgar's place. At the same time Edmund ostensibly helps Edgar escape their father's wrath while continuing to poison Gloucester's mind against him,

and in addition conspires with Regan and Goneril in their pursuit of power.

The two plots are resolved.

Cordelia, now Queen of France, hears of her father's plight and returns to the kingdom to help him. Goneril's husband has both Lear and Goneril thrown into prison. Regan and Goneril are both infatuated with Edmund. Goneril has her sister killed to eliminate her as a rival. Goneril herself dies. Edgar, learning of his brother's treachery, returns to Court and reveals the truth. He demands that Lear and Goneril, under sentence of death in prison, be freed. The reprieve comes too late for Cordelia, who has already been hanged. Lear dies of grief.

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How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child.

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.....

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child.

I am a man
More sinn'd against than sinning.

The prince of darkness is a gentleman

Fie, fo and fum.
I smell the blood of a British man.

A flies to wanton boys are we to the
gods,
They kill us for our sport.

The gods are just, and of our pleasant
vices
Make instruments to plague us.

Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem
vile.