

Shakespeare and Hamlet 101

1. **Characteristics of the English Renaissance (the Golden Age of England/the Elizabethan Age):**
 - a. *The Ideal Elizabethan Man*: best at fighting, dancing, singing, court manners, etc
 - b. *Tragic Heroes*: The greatest tragic heroes were those who caused their own downfall while combined with fate
 - c. *The Great Chain of Being* → everything is ordered on a hierarchy from the natural world to the social classes; if there was disorder at the top of the structure, then the whole structure was threatened (i.e. issues with the king could lead to rebellion and the downfall of society)
2. **Formal and Informal Speech**
 - a. *Formal* → using I, you, we, us = between colleagues, inferior to superior; used to create distance
 - b. *Informal* → using thou, thy, thine = between family members, close friends; used to imply closeness
3. **Common Themes:**
 - a. *Allusions to the Bible*: Garden of Eden, Paradise, Savior-like heroes
 - b. *Desires and Concepts of Death* (especially Hamlet's)
 - c. *Images of Disease and Decay*
4. **Meta-Drama** → Where the author/playwright uses characters to critique common drama practices from the era (such as using children rather than real talent)
5. **Tragic Hero** → man of high position who falls to utter desolation and death while bringing those around him down also; more control over his destiny so his flaw is more a waste of human potential
6. **Ghosts**
 - a. *Protestants*: no ghosts; a spirit would, then, be a demon assuming the dead's likeness
 - i. *Hamlet* → educated at Wittenberg (where Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation)
 - b. *Catholics*: because of Purgatory, there can be ghosts
7. **Graveyards**
 - a. Death is the equalizer of all men
 - b. Others, death still separates people by class (locations in graveyard, tombstones etc)
 - c. People not eligible for Christian burial: unbaptized people, suicides, unmarried, pregnant women; those who died in the state of a mortal sin
8. **Ophelia**
 - a. Hamlet's girlfriend
 - b. Torn between her love of Hamlet and her allegiance to her father
 - c. Why does she go mad?
9. **Hamlet's Downfall:**
 - a. Is Hamlet responsible for his own downfall as a consequence of his inability to act and a botched attempt at revenge, or is he the hapless pawn of evil forces that have machinated the enlightened prince's downfall?