

Memento Mori

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Memento Mori

Definition

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *memento mori* as:

"Remember that you have to die."

It is a warning or a reminder of death or mortality.

Voice over script: To be obsessed with mortality or not to be, is not in question at all Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Indeed, Hamlet, like a rejected lover who carries photographs and letters of the woman who scorns him, obsesses over a mistress who will leave him in the dust, the lady Death. From the start of the play Hamlet aches from his father's death and his need to avenge it. His own death also looms large in his mind as he copes with his inability to act and later the consequences of his foolish actions.

History

Memento Mori was at one time a common tombstone inscription (Carroll 108). The words from the dead reached out to the living, reminding them that they too would find themselves in the ground one day.

Voice over script: Without a doubt Shakespeare's *Hamlet* revolves around the Latin concept of *Memento mori*, or the remembrance of mortality, which is seen in the symbols and events of the play, as well as the motivations of the main character.

***Memento Mori* as theme in art and literature**

"In some Medieval and Renaissance visual art, a *memento mori* was indeed often introduced, and this tendency (which underwent considerable regeneration in the late 16th and early 17th centuries) is certainly germane to *Hamlet*" (Maslen 4).

Voice over script: *Memento mori* was a popular theme in art and literature from the 14th to the 17th centuries.

"In some Medieval and Renaissance visual art, a *memento mori* was indeed often introduced, and this tendency (which underwent considerable regeneration in the late 16th and early 17th centuries) is certainly germane to *Hamlet*" according to the scholar Elizabeth Maslen (4).

Memento Mori* in *Hamlet

Shakespeare reminds his audience of the morality of:

- Kings
- Princes

- Lovers
- Common Men.

Voice over script: The entirety of Hamlet can be read as *memento mori*. He returns again and again to symbols and speeches on mortality and the transience of life. Claudius and Gertrude, at the beginning of the play, begin to introduce this theme by trying to rouse Hamlet from his melancholy by pointing out that all men die eventually. ". . . as the King and Queen turn to Hamlet, they offer him *memento mori* consolation for the death of his father, persisting some forty lines, and he refuses this consolation," states Elizabeth Maslen (4). They try to rouse Hamlet from his melancholy state by pointing out that all men die eventually, a strategy which plunges Hamlet deeper into his obsession with death.

Ghosts as *Memento Mori*

"The ghost of Hamlet Senior, then, serves as a more emphatic reminder of death by tempting Hamlet with "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (I.iv. 56).

Voice over script: Hamlet's dead father also drives him further down the path of *memento mori*. The ghost of Hamlet, Sr. serves as a more emphatic reminder of death by tempting Hamlet with "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (I.iv. 56).

***Memento Mori* scenes**

- Polonius's death
- Ophelia's rosemary
- Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech
- Ophelia's suicide
- The gravedigger's scene

Voice Over Script: Additionally, Ophelia invokes *memento mori* when she tells her brother, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember" (4:5:57-58), before she commits suicide. The most intense revelation of *memento mori* happens in Hamlet's famous 'death the leveler' soliloquy, and most dramatically, in the gravedigger's scene. This scene, V.i., is *memento mori* in every sense of the word, because of the appearance of the skulls, in particular Yorrick's. Maslen adds that "here the basic commonness of skulls, their appearance on stage, gives Hamlet *memento mori* emblems he can interpret without ambivalence for the first time in the play (10)."

***Memento Mori* in The gravedigger's scene**

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how

abhorred in my imagination it is!
(5:1:185-87)

Voice over script: Yorrick's skull is Hamlet's first tangible *memento mori*. He was a real person who Hamlet knew with some intimacy. Ironically, instead of thinking about death at this point, Hamlet turns instead to thoughts of his childhood. It is at this point in the play that Hamlet perhaps accepts his own mortality and acknowledges that he may, in fact, die in avenging his father's murder.

***Memento Mori* Hamlet's Obsession**

Memento mori paralyzed and inspired Hamlet's tragedy.

Voice over script: The *memento mori* of Hamlet explores the problem of obsession with death; for when one is consumed with *memento mori*, as Hamlet is, it is difficult to live and act in the present. The remembrance of mortality resounds in Hamlet as young and old, men and women, king and commoner succumb to death by various means. Symbols of death like the skull of Yorrick and Ophelia's rosemary reinforce the obsession with death that holds the Prince in its grasp. Viewing Hamlet as a *Memento mori* offers the audience a reminder that life should not be spent in the shadow of the grave as Hamlet's life was spent. *Memento mori* paralyzed and inspired Hamlet's tragedy.

Works Cited

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