UNIVERSITY LECTURE

HAMLET — WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Scene 1: The Ghost on the Battlements

Act I, Scene I | Elizabethan Drama | Third Year

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Subject	Elizabethan Drama
Class	Third Year
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Lecture focus: The opening scene establishes an atmosphere of uncertainty, political instability, supernatural disturbance, and threatened national order.

1. Learning Outcomes

- Explain how the opening scene creates suspense before the main character appears.
- Identify the dramatic function of the Ghost and the guards' changing reactions.
- Discuss the connection between the supernatural event and Denmark's political condition.
- Analyse the importance of selected lines, imagery, and stage effects.

2. Background and Context

The play opens at night on the platform outside Elsinore Castle in Denmark. The setting is cold, dark, and militarised. The guards are changing shifts, and the sentinels are anxious because a mysterious figure resembling the recently deceased King Hamlet has appeared on previous nights. Horatio, a scholar and friend of Prince Hamlet, has been invited to witness the apparition.

3. Scene Summary

1. Francisco is relieved from duty by Bernardo. The exchange is brief and tense, immediately establishing the darkness and uncertainty of the setting.
2. Bernardo and Marcellus discuss the apparition they have seen. Horatio initially doubts the story, but the Ghost appears and is recognised as resembling the dead King Hamlet.
3. The Ghost does not speak. It disappears when Horatio attempts to address it, and it returns briefly before vanishing again.
4. Horatio connects the apparition with the military preparations of Denmark. He explains that the dead king had defeated the Norwegian King Fortinbras, whose son, young Fortinbras, is now preparing to recover the lands lost by his father.
5. The men decide that Prince Hamlet should be told about the Ghost, since it may speak to him. The scene ends with the expectation that the apparition will return.

4. Critical Analysis

A suspenseful opening
Shakespeare begins with a question rather than an explanation: the guards do not know what they are seeing. The short exchanges, repeated questions, darkness, and sudden appearance of the Ghost make the audience share the characters' uncertainty.

The Ghost as a dramatic sign
The apparition resembles the dead king in appearance and military clothing. Its silence makes it mysterious. At this point, the audience cannot know whether it is a truthful spirit, a warning, or a dangerous supernatural force.

Private fear and public disorder
The Ghost is not merely a family matter. Its appearance is linked to Denmark's military readiness and the threat from Norway. The play suggests that disorder in the royal family may be connected to disorder in the state.

The political background
The account of old King Hamlet's victory over Fortinbras introduces a history of conflict. Young Fortinbras's plans create an external threat while the royal household faces an unexplained internal disturbance.

Horatio's role
Horatio is educated and sceptical. His presence gives the event credibility: he does not accept the story until he sees the Ghost himself. He also provides the historical and political explanation needed by the audience.

Elizabethan beliefs and the supernatural
An Elizabethan audience could associate ghosts with unresolved crimes, disturbed burial, purgatory, or divine warning. Shakespeare uses these beliefs to create uncertainty rather than offering an immediate explanation.

5. Important Quotations and Their Significance

Quotation	Interpretation
"Who's there?"	The first line introduces uncertainty and makes identity a central concern from the beginning.
"What, has this thing appear'd again tonight?"	The word "thing" conveys fear and uncertainty about the apparition.
"It harrows me with fear and wonder."	Horatio's reaction combines terror with astonishment, showing the Ghost's powerful effect.
"A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye."	The image suggests that the apparition disturbs perception and thought.
"This bodes some strange eruption to our state."	Horatio links the supernatural event to political crisis.

6. Dramatic and Literary Techniques

- Dark, night-time setting and cold weather create a Gothic atmosphere before the Gothic genre formally develops.
- Questions, interruptions, and brief exchanges build tension.
- The Ghost's entrance and disappearance create visual spectacle and suspense.
- The contrast between silence and speech makes the apparition more disturbing.
- Foreshadowing prepares the audience for political and moral disruption.

7. Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Apparition	A supernatural appearance, especially a ghost.
Sentinel	A soldier or guard keeping watch.
Battlements	Protective walls or raised sections of a castle.
Usurp	To take power or a position unlawfully.
Foreshadowing	A hint of events that will happen later.
Ominous	Suggesting that something bad is going to happen.

8. Discussion Questions

6. Why does Shakespeare begin the play with guards rather than with Hamlet?
7. How does the night-time setting contribute to the scene's mood?
8. Why is Horatio's scepticism important to the audience?
9. What relationship does the scene establish between the Ghost and Denmark's political condition?
10. At the end of the scene, what questions remain unanswered?

9. Assignment

Write a short analytical paragraph explaining how Shakespeare creates suspense in Scene 1. Support your response with at least two short quotations.

10. Suggested Study Method

Read the scene in the original text before reviewing this lecture. Mark the speaker and situation for each quotation, then explain how Shakespeare's language contributes to character, theme, and dramatic effect. In written answers, avoid retelling the plot alone: make an interpretive point, support it with textual evidence, and explain the evidence.