UNIVERSITY LECTURE

HAMLET — WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Scene 4: The Ghost Appears

Act I, Scene IV | Elizabethan Drama | Third Year

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Class	Third Year
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Lecture focus: Hamlet confronts the Ghost, while the scene questions the morality of revenge and criticises the court's culture of excessive celebration.

1. Learning Outcomes

- Explain why Hamlet joins the guards on the platform.
- Discuss the Ghost's power over Hamlet and the decision to follow it.
- Analyse Hamlet's criticism of Danish drinking customs.
- Explain how the scene increases suspense and prepares for the revelation in Scene 5.

2. Background and Context

It is night on the platform outside Elsinore. Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus as they wait for the Ghost. In the castle, the sound of Claudius's drinking and celebration can be heard. The Ghost appears and signals to Hamlet, who believes it may have something important to reveal.

3. Scene Summary

1. Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus on the platform. He discusses the noise of the court's drinking and the custom of celebrating with cannon fire.
2. Hamlet criticises the Danish habit of excessive drinking, arguing that it damages the reputation of the nation. He suggests that one fault can overshadow a person's or country's good qualities.
3. The Ghost appears. Hamlet recognises it and attempts to speak to it.
4. The Ghost beckons Hamlet to follow. Horatio and Marcellus fear that the spirit may harm him and try to prevent him from going.
5. Hamlet refuses to be restrained. He declares that his life is not worth preserving if the Ghost has a message that concerns him, and he follows the apparition.
6. Horatio and Marcellus follow at a distance. Marcellus concludes that something is seriously wrong in Denmark.

4. Critical Analysis

The public image of Denmark

Hamlet's criticism of drinking is not merely personal. He worries that the behaviour of the king and court damages Denmark's reputation abroad. The scene links private habits with national identity.

The Ghost's command
The Ghost does not explain its purpose; it communicates through gesture. This creates suspense and gives the apparition authority over Hamlet, who is desperate for answers.

Hamlet's impulsiveness
Hamlet follows the Ghost despite warnings. His decision shows courage and emotional urgency, but it also exposes him to danger. The audience must consider whether the Ghost can be trusted.

Revenge and moral uncertainty
The scene prepares the audience for a possible demand for revenge. Yet the identity and intentions of the Ghost remain uncertain, so the audience cannot assume that following it is morally safe.

The language of disorder
The final statement about something being rotten in Denmark transforms the Ghost's appearance into a national crisis. The image of corruption suggests that the problem extends beyond one individual.

Stagecraft and suspense
The Ghost's silent gesture, Hamlet's physical movement, and the attempts of Horatio and Marcellus to stop him create a dramatic sequence that depends on stage action as much as dialogue.

5. Important Quotations and Their Significance

Quotation	Interpretation
"The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold."	The physical cold reinforces the scene's threatening atmosphere.
"The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse."	The line refers to Claudius's drinking and exposes the court's celebratory excess.
"So, oft it chances in particular men, / That for some vicious mole of nature in them..."	Hamlet reflects on how one fault can damage an otherwise positive reputation.
"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!"	Horatio's words express fear that the Ghost may be dangerous.
"My fate cries out, / And makes each petty artery in this body / As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve."	Hamlet describes an overwhelming sense of destiny and courage.
"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."	Marcellus's famous line identifies the apparition as a sign of deeper political and moral corruption.

6. Dramatic and Literary Techniques
- Symbolism: cold, darkness, and the platform create a space between the ordinary world and the supernatural.
- Sound: the court's celebration is heard from offstage, contrasting with the tense silence of the platform.
- Foreshadowing: the Ghost's gesture prepares the audience for its revelation.
- Metaphor: the image of rot suggests corruption spreading through the state.
- Stage movement: Hamlet's decision to follow the Ghost turns internal urgency into visible action.

7. Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Rouse	A period or occasion of drinking; here, a drinking celebration.
Corruption	Moral decay or dishonest conduct.
Omen	An event believed to predict something significant, often bad.

Beckon	To signal or summon someone with a gesture.
Revenge	Harming someone in return for a wrong or injury.
Reputation	The general judgement of a person, group, or country.

8. Discussion Questions

7. Why does Hamlet criticise the court's drinking customs?
8. What does the scene suggest about the relationship between personal behaviour and national reputation?
9. Is Hamlet brave, reckless, or both when he follows the Ghost?
10. Why might Horatio and Marcellus fear the Ghost?
11. What does Marcellus mean by saying that something is rotten in Denmark?

9. Assignment

Explain how Scene 4 connects the Ghost's appearance with the idea of corruption in Denmark. Include a discussion of Hamlet's comments about the king's drinking.

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.