UNIVERSITY LECTURE

HAMLET — WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Scene 5: The Ghost's Revelation

Act I, Scene V | Elizabethan Drama | Third Year

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Subject	Elizabethan Drama
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Lecture focus: The Ghost reveals the alleged murder of King Hamlet and commands his son to remember and avenge him, setting the central revenge plot in motion.

1. Learning Outcomes

- Summarise the Ghost's account of King Hamlet's death.
- Explain how the revelation changes Hamlet's understanding of Claudius and Gertrude.
- Discuss the moral and psychological burden of the revenge command.
- Analyse the significance of memory, secrecy, and the oath at the end of the scene.

2. Background and Context

The scene takes place in a more isolated part of the castle platform. Hamlet follows the Ghost away from Horatio and Marcellus. The apparition identifies itself as the spirit of Hamlet's father and claims that he was murdered by Claudius, who poured poison into his ear while he slept in the orchard. The Ghost demands revenge but tells Hamlet not to harm Gertrude.

3. Scene Summary

1. The Ghost tells Hamlet that it is the spirit of his father, condemned to suffer after death because of the circumstances of his murder and his unfinished earthly business.
2. The Ghost describes the murder: Claudius allegedly poured a deadly poison into King Hamlet's ear while he was sleeping in the orchard. The poison spread through his body and caused his death.
3. The Ghost calls the crime a murder and identifies Claudius as the murderer. It also explains that Claudius has taken the crown and married Gertrude.
4. The Ghost commands Hamlet to avenge the murder. However, it tells him to leave Gertrude to divine judgement and to avoid harming her.
5. Hamlet reacts with shock and anger. He vows to remember the Ghost's words and to make revenge his central duty.
6. Horatio and Marcellus arrive. Hamlet refuses to reveal the Ghost's message and makes them swear secrecy. The Ghost's voice is heard beneath the stage, urging them to swear.
7. Hamlet warns that the world is out of joint and suggests that he may have to take on the task of setting it right. The scene ends with the three men agreeing to keep the encounter secret.

4. Critical Analysis

The revenge tragedy
The Ghost's command establishes the central structure of a revenge tragedy: a murdered father, a son charged with revenge, a concealed crime, and a morally difficult response. The command creates the main dramatic question: will Hamlet act, and what will revenge cost?

The murder through the ear
The method of murder is symbolically important. Poison enters through the ear, turning the organ of hearing into a point of vulnerability. This image can be connected to the play's wider concern with listening, language, false reports, and the difficulty of knowing the truth.

Memory and identity
The Ghost's repeated demand to be remembered gives memory a moral force. Hamlet's identity becomes tied to the duty of remembering his father and the crime. The command threatens to dominate his thoughts and future actions.

The Ghost's reliability
The Ghost presents a detailed accusation, but the audience has not independently verified it. The supernatural source of the information leaves room for uncertainty. This tension is important because revenge based on mistaken knowledge would itself be morally dangerous.

Gertrude and the limits of revenge
The Ghost tells Hamlet not to harm his mother. This distinction complicates the revenge command: Hamlet must punish Claudius while leaving Gertrude to judgement. The scene therefore establishes limits as well as obligations.

Secrecy and performance
Hamlet makes Horatio and Marcellus swear not to reveal what they have seen. Secrecy becomes a practical necessity, but it also begins a pattern of concealment and uncertainty that shapes the rest of the play.

The burden of action
Hamlet's final recognition that the world is out of joint suggests that revenge is not simply a private act. He sees himself as responsible for restoring a damaged moral and political order.

5. Important Quotations and Their Significance

Quotation	Interpretation
"Murder most foul, as in the best it is; / But this most foul, strange and unnatural."	The Ghost emphasises the exceptional horror of the crime.
"The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown."	The serpent image identifies Claudius as a source of hidden danger and political corruption.
"The whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abused."	The Ghost suggests that the public has been deceived about the cause of the king's death.
"Remember me."	The short command makes memory the foundation of Hamlet's duty.
"Leave her to heaven."	The Ghost places a limit on Hamlet's revenge by instructing him not to harm Gertrude.
"The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!"	Hamlet recognises the scale of the task and the burden placed upon him.

6. Dramatic and Literary Techniques

- The Ghost's narrative supplies exposition while maintaining supernatural suspense.
- Poison imagery turns murder into a symbol of hidden corruption.
- Repetition of words associated with memory and remembrance establishes a central motif.
- The oath and the Ghost's voice beneath the stage create theatrical spectacle and reinforce secrecy.
- The final metaphor of a dislocated time or world presents revenge as an attempt to restore order.

7. Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Fratricide	The killing of one's brother.
Regicide	The murder of a king.
Purgatory	In Catholic belief, a state of purification after death.
Vengeance	Punishment or retaliation for a wrong.
Perjury	The act of lying after taking an oath.
Motif	A recurring image, idea, or element in a literary work.

8. Discussion Questions

8. How does the Ghost describe the murder of King Hamlet?
9. Why is the method of murder—poison poured into the ear—symbolically significant?
10. Should Hamlet accept the Ghost's accusation immediately? Why or why not?
11. What does the command "Remember me" require Hamlet to do?
12. Why does the Ghost tell Hamlet not to harm Gertrude?
13. Does Hamlet's final speech suggest confidence, fear, or a sense of burden?

9. Assignment

Write a 300–400-word response discussing how Scene 5 establishes the revenge plot. Consider the Ghost's accusation, the command to remember, and the uncertainty surrounding supernatural testimony.

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.