

The Marginalization of Lower Classes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Salina Zhang

IB Candidate Number: xxxxxxxx

Skyline High School

May, 2019 Exam Session

Diploma Programme, Group 1

Language A: Language and Literature HL

Written Task 2

Supervisor: Laura Matheny

Word Count: 920 (no less than 800, no more than 1,000)

## Outline

**Name:** Salina Zhang

**Text:** William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

**IB English Language and Literature HL:** Written Task Two Outline/Part One

**Topic:** Power and Privilege

### Research Question:

*Which social groups are marginalized, excluded or silenced within the text?*

**Thesis:** Shakespeare characterizes the absence of lower classes to emphasize the importance of status in Elizabethan society, highlighting how the common is discarded for the fantastical and extraordinary.

- I. **BTS (body thesis statement) #1:** Shakespeare crafts Claudius's characterization to address the perceived ignorance of the lower class, underscoring the disparity of the identified royals and the faceless masses.
  - a. "Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone/With this affair along."
    - i. "Better wisdoms" - addresses their lack of resistance toward the incestuous marriage between Gertrude and Claudius
      1. The high class view the lower class's lack of action as being "better;" doing nothing is better than being involved with political changes.
    - ii. None of the public are named or mentioned otherwise
  - b. He's loved of the distracted multitude,/Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes"
    - i. "Distracted" - negative connotation establishes Claudius's derision toward the public
      1. Describes the public as being incapable of focusing on what matters
    - ii. "Not in their judgement, but their eyes" - Claudius claims that the public only focuses on appearances and fails to use reason to comprehend the truth
      1. In his own awareness of political intrigue, this sets a stark contrast between aware noble and unaware commoner.
- II. **BTS (body thesis statement) #2:** The author uses the motifs of incompleteness to degrade the characterization of the lower classes, reinforcing the idea that they are lacking in comparison to the aristocracy.
  - a. "Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,/And fall a-cursing, like a very drab"
    - i. "Like a whore, unpack my heart with words" - Hamlet, in comparing himself to a lowly whore, derides his inability to act on his intents, rendering his objectives incomplete.
      1. Shakespeare uses this characterization of the lower class to reinforce the idea of an inactive and uninvolved public.
    - ii. "Fall a-cursing, like a very drab"
      1. Idea of a fall - suffering misfortune
      2. Coupled with the initial phrase, Shakespeare uses the phrase to illustrate how the people's inability to act is to blame for their

sufferings → self-perpetuating cycle rather than the dynamic inner workings of the royal court.

- b. “This same skull,/sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.”
  - i. “The king’s jester” - Yorick is only a skull, rather than a complete person
    - 1. In comparison, Ophelia and Polonius’s bodies are still intact

III. **BTS (body thesis statement) #3:** The author uses imagery of decay to highlight the unimportance of the lower class, this emphasizing how the norms of Elizabethan England shape the perception of the lower class.

- 1. “Madness in great ones must not unwatched go”
  - a. Prose of mad nobles rather than the typical blank verse
    - i. Prose of clowns/lower classes on a normal basis
  - b. Equivalency of lower classes to madness in nobles
    - i. Not equal to some of a higher class → only equal to higher class when they are broken and decaying
    - ii. The lower class’s capabilities are not worth noting despite the idea that the madness of the higher class should be watched
- 2. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”
  - a. Play on words: state as condition and state as government
  - b. Nobles as barometer - the condition of minority determines the holistic condition

## **Which social groups are marginalized, excluded or silenced within the text?**

There is something about the exceptional which strikes the human fancy. However, in focusing on the remarkable minority, the reality of the majority is systematically excluded and, as a result, largely ignored. This is especially reflected in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which centers around the intrigue of the Danish court, where royals - be it King Claudius or the titular Prince Hamlet - bandy words and deviously plot against each other without regard for the Danish public. Shakespeare characterizes the marginalization of lower classes to emphasize the importance of status in Elizabethan society, highlighting how the common is discarded for the extraordinary.

Shakespeare crafts Claudius's dismissive characterization to address the perceived ignorance of the lower class, underscoring the disparity of the identified royals and the faceless masses. When speaking about his marriage to Queen Gertrude, Claudius proclaims to the public, "Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone/With this affair along" (I, ii). The author uses Claudius's remark about the people's lack of resistance toward his incestuous marriage with Gertrude to establish the nobles' perspective of the lower classes: the people are, due to their unimportance, nameless and their ignorance and passive response are "their better wisdoms" - inaction is better than active involvement.

King Claudius reinforces this perspective of the common people while lamenting how Prince Hamlet is "loved of the distracted multitude,/Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes" (IV, iii). Shakespeare emphasizes Claudius's derision toward the public, describing the public as incapable of focusing on what matters. The specification that the public decides who to favor based on "not in their judgement, but their eyes" illustrates how the common people focus on appearances and fail to use reason to comprehend the truth; with the king's own awareness of political intrigue, Shakespeare creates a stark contrast between aware noble and unaware commoner.

Shakespeare uses the motifs of incompleteness to degrade the lower classes, reinforcing the idea that they are lacking in comparison to the aristocracy. Deriding his inability to act, Hamlet exclaims that he “Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,/And fall a-cursing, like a very drab” (II, ii). Shakespeare uses a simile to establish how Hamlet, in comparing himself to a lowly whore, hates his misfortune and inability to act upon his intents, rendering his objectives incomplete. Coupled with the association of “fall” and failure, Shakespeare also uses the phrase “And fall a-cursing, like a very drab” to illustrate how the people’s inability to act causes the self-perpetuating cycle of their own suffering and marginalization.

When Hamlet happens on some “clowns” - gravediggers - who discuss Ophelia’s burial, they show him a skull, commenting that, “This same skull,/sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester” (V, i). Shakespeare uses the skull to symbolize how, instead of being an intact skeleton, the jester - a non-royal - is an incomplete person. Additionally, Shakespeare juxtaposes this with Ophelia’s circumstances - a traditional burial despite her suspected suicide - to illustrate how the nobles’ life of overwhelming sin are greater than a layman’s moral life. Excusing the elites’ excessive wrongdoing illustrates the disparate standards between social classes, given how the ordinary public would be punished for the same offense.

The author uses imagery of decay to highlight the unimportance of the lower class, thus emphasizing how the norms of Elizabethan England shape the higher class’s perception of the lower class. When discussing Hamlet’s recent antics, Claudius muses that, “Madness in great ones must not unwatched go” (III, i). Shakespeare uses the implications of Claudius’s concern to reinforce the noble’s view of the commoners. For instance, the author uses prose to signify madness in the Danish nobles, such as when Hamlet raves that Ophelia should “get thee to a nunnery” (III, i). However, lower classes are commonly characterized by prose; through this, Shakespeare thereby equates lower

classes to insane nobles, highlighting a fundamental disparity between the classes (“KS3 Literature”). The author implies that the lower class’s actions are not worthy of extra attention despite also being in prose, reflecting the lower class’s marginalization during Elizabethan England (“The Social Structure”). Despite being wholly human, Shakespeare establishes that the nobles are naturally greater than the laymen and conveys the focus on the higher classes.

After accompanying Hamlet to communicate with the supposed ghost of the dead king, the guard Marcellus comments that “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (??, ??). Shakespeare uses “state” as a pun to convey how both the government and the condition of the country is decaying. Furthermore, this emphasizes how nobles are the barometer for the country despite being an elite minority, reflecting the focus on the monarchy and royal court in Elizabethan England (“The Social Structure”). By paralleling the importance of royalty during the period, Shakespeare characterizes the marginalization of the lower class, in which they are largely ignored and unequal to the nobility.

Shakespeare crafts a marginalized characterization of the lower classes to highlight the emphasis on status in society, conveying how elitism concerning excellence enables the dismissal of an ordinary majority. Shakespeare characterizes Claudius’s arrogance to address the lower class’s supposed ignorance, highlighting the disparity of the elites and the laymen. Shakespeare leverages motifs of incompleteness to devalue the lower classes, emphasizing the idea that high classes are extraordinary in comparison with ordinary people. The author utilizes decay imagery to highlight the perception of a lesser lower class, thus emphasizing how the societal standards shape the lower class’s status. In catering to elites, the common majority perpetuate the cycle of marginalization that validates the the high class minority’s status and privilege.

**Word Count: 920**

## Works Cited

“KS3 English Literature - Language and Relevance - Revision 2.” *BBC Bitesize*, BBC,  
[www.bbc.com/bitesize/guides/z67fr82/revision/2](http://www.bbc.com/bitesize/guides/z67fr82/revision/2).

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. Print.

“The Social Structure in Elizabethan England.” *The British Library*, The British  
Library, 17 Feb. 2016, [www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/the-social-structure-in-elizabethan-england](http://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/the-social-structure-in-elizabethan-england).