

Hamlet. Let me see. [*Takes the skull.*] 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! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that. Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.

Horatio. What's that, my lord?

Hamlet. Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?

Horatio. E'en so.

Hamlet. And smelt so? Pah! [*Puts down skull.*]

Horatio. E'en so, my lord.

Hamlet. To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bunghole?

Alexander and the Jester: Understanding Death through Antithesis

All humans grapple with the subject of their own death and brief existence. As Act V, Scene I of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* shows, even princes struggle with the idea of death and its aftermath. Hamlet stumbles upon two gravediggers who have grown accustomed to death and make light of the macabre aspects of their work. Initially disturbed by their irreverence, Hamlet becomes interested in the permanent occupants of the graves. When he discovers the skull of his childhood jester, Hamlet experiences a sudden revelation about life and death. The passage (lines 185-206) employs antithesis between the past actions and the current states of two vastly different people in order to show that all humans attain an equally low status upon death.

The antithesis between the jester's present condition and past jests serves to demonstrate the debilitating nature of death. Hamlet begins the passage by first establishing the mental aspects of Yorick, the jester, when he was alive. Describing Yorick as a man of "infinite jest"

and “excellent fancy,” Hamlet portrays the jester as a fun, lively man (5.1.186-187). This characterization of Yorick establishes the jester as a person happily enjoying the prime of his life. However, Hamlet continues his speech by posing a series of rhetorical questions that emphasize the antithesis between the living Yorick and his deceased counterpart. He mockingly questions Yorick, “Where be your gibes now?” (5.1.191). With this derisive query, Hamlet intends to contrast Yorick’s past merriment and liveliness with his present mute and lifeless state. Further examples of antithesis between the past and present Yorick appear when he questions Yorick about the existence of his “gambols,” “songs,” and “flashes of merriment” (5.1.191-192). This antithesis is strengthened if one keeps in mind the context of these lines: Hamlet is holding the silent skull of Yorick as he poses these questions. In these lines, Hamlet intends to elucidate the distinctions between Yorick’s mental state in the present and the past. He takes the absence of these merry actions as proof of a fundamental change in the Yorick’s nature upon death.

Through his use of antithetical images, Hamlet also establishes the related concept of bodily impermanence. In order to prove the transience of the body, Hamlet must first depict the past corporeal actions of Yorick. An allusion to Yorick’s previous physical acts appears within the text when Hamlet states that Yorick carried him on his back “a thousand times” (5.1.187-188). This previous bodily strength of Yorick is juxtaposed with the fragile skull and bones that Hamlet holds before him. The image of Yorick supporting Hamlet on his back lends a sense of strength and virility to the living jester, but the lifeless image of the decrepit, decaying skull contradicts this depiction. Hence, this antithesis between the living and the dead implies that strength and power leave the body upon death. Another section of the passage utilizes a double entendre in order to portray the mental and physical deterioration that accompanies death.

Hamlet comically asks Yorick's skull if he is "Quite chapfall'n?" (5.1.194). The best definition for "chapfall'n" is down in the mouth or dispirited. As such, the dual meaning of this word presents two instances of antithesis. The discerning reader can take the literal or abstract interpretation of the word. A literal interpretation yields the understanding that Hamlet is mocking the skull's hanging jaw, while the more commonplace interpretation yields the understanding that Hamlet is teasing Yorick's lifelessness and lack of merriment. Taken together, these two definitions show that Hamlet utilizes wordplay to illustrate the mind and body degeneration of Yorick.

Although the passage makes a shorter reference to Alexander, this section also uses antithesis between his past deeds and current state to depict the dehumanizing process of death. The passage does not detail the past deeds of Alexander because most readers were familiar with him. Known to many as a great conqueror of lands and ruler of many, Alexander the Great was one of the most powerful human beings of his time. Since he ruled over so many people and was so successful in battle, many people considered him a "great" man. Hamlet recognizes the possibility that even Alexander "looked" and "smelt" like the corpse of Yorick (5.1.199,202). Thus, the stark contrast between Alexander's impressive exploits and his current state serves as the antithesis that demonstrates the effect of death. Hamlet's hypothesis has far-reaching implications for all other humans. If a man as exalted and powerful as Alexander ultimately ends up decaying in the earth, there is no hope for the lesser, "normal" people. The passage further develops this concept when Hamlet conjectures that Alexander's remains might be used to "[stop] a bunghole" (5.1.206). Referred to Hamlet as a "base use," this stopping of the bunghole represents an ignoble purpose for such a powerful man. This antithesis once again emphasizes

the disparity between greatness on earth and one's condition after death. The king that once conquered nations and ruled millions of people is reduced to dust, thereby losing his humanity.

The passage employs antithesis between Yorick and Alexander in order to highlight the universality of death's effects. Hamlet theorizes that Yorick's condition after death is similar to Alexander's state. He also references the jester and the king back to back, and this strategic placement of two differing characters necessitates a comparison. Yorick and Alexander are two people with vastly different positions in the social hierarchy. As a decorated king, Alexander resides at the top, and Yorick, as a jester, dwells near the bottom. Thus, the passage employs antithesis between their social statuses, but it also states that they have equal experiences after death. This shows that the ultimate outcomes for people are equal, regardless of their actions in life. Essentially, the antithesis advances the belief that death affects all people uniformly.

Antithesis is a common rhetorical strategy in *Hamlet*. By placing two dissimilar objects closely together, their differences become more apparent, and the reader may easily make inferences about the message of a passage. The deconstruction of examples of antithesis in this one passage from *Hamlet* reveals the various ways that the passage transmits its message. The contrast between the past condition and the current situation of deceased people serves to evince the debilitating nature of death. Also, the antithesis between a lowly court jester and a distinguished king demonstrates the wide scope of death's touch. This passage masterfully employs antithesis to implicitly convey its message.