

2. This led me to more closely examine some of the more intriguing words in the fools' cloud, looking for underlying themes that I may have missed during my close reading of the text. I first looked at the word "skull." I was originally drawn to this word because the mind is something that is widely discussed in *Hamlet*, so an empty head is very symbolic. "Skull" was used 10 times total in the play, and the fools said it five of those times. The word tree looked like this:



Upon re-reading Act V, Scene I with this in mind, I could see how the comedy of the Gravediggers actually serves to accentuate the weight of the scene. Because the rest of the play is so somber, the humor is easily detected, and makes the audience pay attention to what is happening on stage.

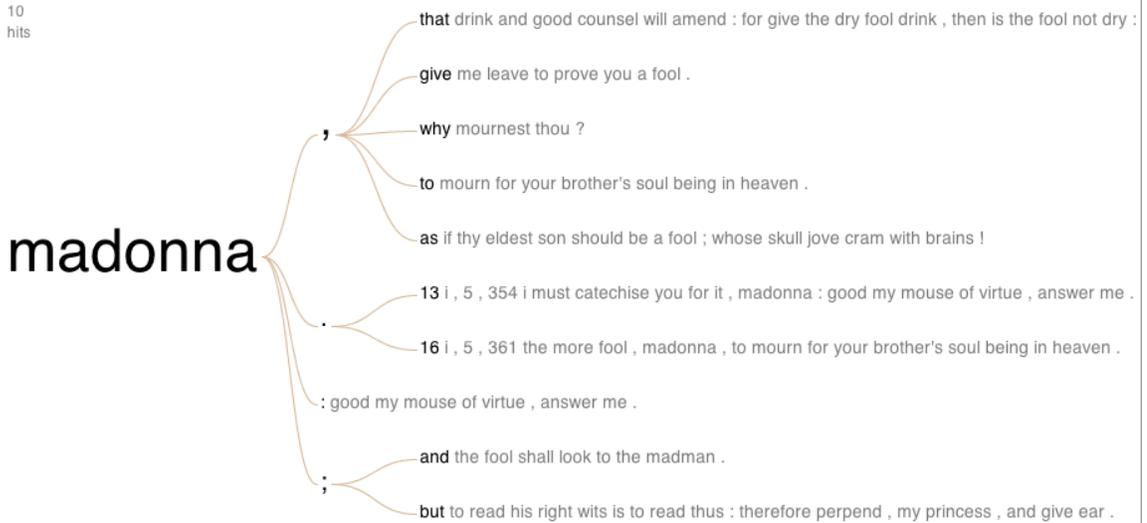
3. The word “mad” is also used by the gravediggers five times, furthering the prominent theme of insanity in the play. It was interesting to see how the fools used the word because they are supposed to be mad themselves.

5
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4. As a further comparison, I looked at the Fool’s lines from *Twelfth Night*, and found that he uses the word “Madonna” 10 times. This is not insignificant, and considering the sexual and religious connotations attached to the word, it must serve to perpetuate some kind of theme. Perhaps it has something to do with obsession with sexuality and virginity that is also prominent throughout the play, particularly on the part of Orsino. Or maybe the Fool is just making fun of Olivia’s vow of abstinence. Either way, the fools are interesting because of their unique situation. They are typically peasants, yet they are privy to the lives of the upper class. The fools are able to quietly observe under the disguise of madness, and can therefore see a situation for what it really is.

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Grace Horlock

English 1102

Dr. Higinbotham

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The Importance of the Little Guy in *Hamlet*

Philip Glass is an influential character in today's musical world. Upon first listen, his pieces sound relatively simple. In fact, it takes one's full attention to realize that the basic and often repetitive overtones are layered with complex undertones that could potentially go unnoticed. These layers blend seamlessly together so that it is difficult to discern between them, yet the overall feeling of the individual pieces is dictated by the intricate undertones as opposed to the more uncomplicated overtones. This same method of layering elements of a piece can also be found in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the same way that the driving force behind Philip Glass' pieces is the various undertones that are often not fully registered by the listener, the characters that provide the most insight into the themes of *Hamlet* are the minor characters that are easy to overlook. While Hamlet is the main character and raises numerous questions throughout the play, the characters that provide answers are the minor ones, specifically the gravediggers. While the gravediggers have relatively small roles, they do as much to illustrate and answer the questions central to the plot of the play as Hamlet or any other character because of what they symbolize, their objective perspective, and the ways in which they perpetuate and emphasize the darkness surrounding the play.

In the beginning of Act 5, the gravediggers are in the middle of exhuming skeletons in the churchyard. While Hamlet tends to remain introspective and takes most things seriously, the gravediggers are talking about Ophelia's recent suicide in nonchalant terms, using word play and

bantering about her death. Hamlet on the other hand is horrified when he learns what will become of him when his “too too solid flesh” (1.2.133) actually does melt away. Hamlet is just discovering the realities of death whereas the gravediggers are fully aware of it. For instance, Hamlet originally is outraged when he sees the desecration of graves, and talks about the potential occupations of the various bones strewn on the ground. Unlike the gravediggers, he does not yet realize that their professions do not matter. Slowly, Hamlet arrives at a conclusion that the gravedigger has known all along –that everyone returns to the Earth without any kind of glamour. Everyone’s bones will stay underground long after the flesh has rotted away, and eventually everyone ends up looking the same. This equalizing process is important to understanding the question of identity prevalent throughout the play. It illustrates that in death, there will be nothing that distinguishes a king from a clown. One’s identity is of no consequence.

Throughout the play, Hamlet raises questions about his existence and purpose on the Earth. “To be or not to be –that is the question” (3.1.64) describes existentialism in a single line and is concrete evidence of Hamlet’s existential and identity issues. Hamlet’s emotional identity is unclear throughout the play. He is unable to take action against Claudius because he is conflicted about killing him, and then soon becomes conflicted about being conflicted. In a monologue, Hamlet exclaims “is it not monstrous that this player here, / [b]ut in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / [c]ould force his soul so to his own conceit...” (2.2.578-80), expressing his frustration that an actor has more passion about a play than he does about his own father’s death. This is just one example of Hamlet’s inability to take action on behalf of his father and his subsequent infuriation when he does nothing. He is tormented by the task set before him, which arguably causes him to go mad. These sentiments lead him to question the nature of being, and wish that he did not exist. Characters such as Claudius, Laertes, Fortinbras, and Polonius, as well

as Hamlet, obsess over their individual power struggles and attempt to ascend the social ladder. All of these characters get stuck in the mire-like dramas with which they concern themselves, Hamlet more so than anyone. Although he is highly contemplative, Hamlet never actually carries out a plan to kill Claudius. In regard to the others, Claudius was so overcome with lust for power that he killed his own brother. Polonius becomes so interested in solidifying his position as Claudius' confidante that he uses his daughter as puppet to spy on Hamlet, eventually resulting in her tragic suicide. Even Laertes is blinded by grief and anger after Hamlet kills Polonius. Instead of letting fate determine course of action, the main characters attempt to change the outcomes of their situations. For some reason, none of the major characters are able to see a situation for what it truly is and act accordingly. Their thoughts of revenge and social standing blind them so that they cannot see the larger issues.

The gravediggers are important symbols because they can be viewed as responses to many of the existential questions the reader (as well as the characters) asks earlier in the play. While their profession is deemed lowly by many, "[t]here is no ancient gentleman but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers. They hold up Adam's profession" (5.1.30-32). Everyone must die. No matter how glorious someone is in life, their time will come to an end, and eventually their legacy will fade from the memories of those still living. The only final thing in life is death, and the "houses," (5.1.60) built by gravediggers "last till doomsday" (5.1.61). Within the context of the play, the gravediggers serve to say that revenge does not matter, and neither does anything else. The gravediggers have no regard for whose bones they are disturbing because "...such distinctions are merely superficial and of no consequence to [them]... the gravediggers need acknowledge no differences of rank or achievement" (Fly 266). They perform the same work for a king or a peasant.

The gravediggers also offer an objective outside perspective on death and recent events. While the reader has become just as caught up as the characters in the spectacle that is the Danish court, the gravediggers have been absent from the entire play up until Act 5. Because they do not have any particular relationships with any of the other characters, they are able to cast a humorous light on what has otherwise been an angst-ridden play. They illustrate that everyone is equal in death by using word-play and jokes, making the rest of the characters seem foolish for getting so upset about something as trivial as revenge. “We grasp the more familiar memento mori readily enough,” writes Allan Shickman, “but we may be less inclined to attribute significance to the fact that a clown delivers it” (201-202). It is a clown (gravedigger) that initially discusses the inescapable nature of mortality when he says “[b]ut age with his stealing steps/ [h]ath clawed me in his clutch, / [a]nd hath shipped me into the land, / [a]s if I had never been such” (5.1.73-76); however, this is often overlooked because the clowns have such small roles. Hamlet, which some prompting from the gravediggers, makes a few big realizations in this scene. “Hamlet is the liar, the true clown. Such an exchange of values, making fools of wise men, gravediggers of princes, is the fundamental skill and purpose of clowns in Shakespeare” (Hunt 74). The gravediggers change all previously established beliefs. While Hamlet goes on to talk about mortality at length shortly afterwards, it is the gravedigger that originally – and much more succinctly – points out the transient nature of life. Many scholars such as Richard Fly focus on Hamlet’s contributions to this scene, but in actuality it is the fools who drive this scene’s inherent darkness and make it a turning point in the play. This scene casts light on the futility of the characters’ actions, directly contradicting how their problems have been portrayed throughout the play. Hamlet preforms another long monologue juxtaposing Yorick with Alexander the Great, whereas the gravedigger communicates the same point from a much less

emotional standpoint using a song. By singing about something that makes everyone else so uncomfortable and depressed, the gravedigger makes the idea that much more terrifying because he does not pay it the same mind others do. The gravediggers' ease with regard to death reinforces the idea that it does not matter if one dies. While the rest of the characters are trapped in the chaos of their lives, the gravediggers live a relatively calm existence and have no fear of dying. This indicates that the gravediggers are privy to insights regarding that the rest of the characters are not.

Act Five Scene One conveyed much of the play's darkness due to the gravediggers. The play is a tragedy and the reader can sense the darkness throughout the play. Beforehand, there is a general sense of mistrust among the characters in light of everything that has happened. The play thus far has been colored with paranoia and madness. This particular scene, however, can be viewed as a turning point in the play because it provides the answers that have been evading both the reader and the characters for the past four acts. In Walter King's words, "[o]ne expects – and finds – in the two scenes of act 5 a developing resolution of the issues so long in conflict in Hamlet's mind" (136). These answers can be found because the gravediggers provide the vehicle for their deliverance. The gravedigger answers the question of identity when he says, "[b]ut age... Hath shipped me into the land, / [a]s if I had never been such" (5.1.75-76). Data mining also proved to be helpful in discovering that Act Five, Scene One makes up a large portion of the dark language used in *Hamlet*. Upon deeper examination of Hamlet's lines, Ophelia's lines, and the gravediggers' lines, it is apparent that while Hamlet and Ophelia are often regarded as vessels for "melancholy, used throughout the play to define the distance between Hamlet and the other characters" (Gellert 58), the gravediggers actually use darker language in one scene than the other two characters use in the entire play.

Perhaps the reader is supposed to overlook the gravediggers. After all, as Roland Mushat Frye says in her article “Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls: *Hamlet* and the Iconographic Traditions”, the picture of a man contemplating a skull is considered to “represent the highest achievements in painting and in poetry of a widespread memento mori tradition” (Frye 28). The reader is captivated by the seeming profoundness of Hamlet’s revelations regarding death; however, in reality the most profound characters in this scene are the two gravediggers because of what a gravedigger represents. They have always existed and will always exist, seemingly as one massive, immortal body. For some reason, they only have a few lines in the play. Perhaps this is a comment on social structures, implying that although they are the ones that make the whole scene possible, Hamlet still takes the spotlight because he is the prince and therefore more important than lowly gravediggers. No matter Shakespeare’s intentions in casting the gravediggers, he either wittingly or unwittingly created two characters that embody the root of the darkness in *Hamlet*, and serve as direct answers to Hamlet’s musings.

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