Decoding dramatic tension: the climax of tragedy in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Abstract.
This essay delves into the pivotal climax of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' in Act III, Scene IV, known as the 'closet Scene,' emphasizing its significance in university literature courses. Focused on the strategic use of the mousetrap play as foreshadowing, the analysis explores five escalating events leading to the death of Polonius, a crucial figure in the Danish court. Gertrude's complex attitudes towards Hamlet and intricate familial dynamics add to the emotional complexity. The essay extends to Gertrude's awareness during the 'closet scene' and stresses the importance of understanding events before and after the climax for a comprehensive grasp of the narrative. Ultimately, it aims to critically examine the climax's role in character dynamics, themes, and the enduring relevance of Shakespearean works in literature curricula, providing a nuanced exploration of 'Hamlet' within the constraints of university studies.

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The climax of Hamlet holds a central place in English literature curricula for courses that explore the Renaissance period as a pivotal study topic. Shakespeare's timeless tragedy is often dissected and analyzed in literature courses, providing students with an opportunity to delve into the complexities of character dynamics, themes, and narrative structure. By including 'Hamlet' in the literature curriculum, universities aim to foster a deep understanding of literary devices, cultural context, and the enduring relevance of Shakespearean works, challenging students to engage critically with one of the most celebrated pieces of literature in the English canon.

As Hamlet grapples with internal conflicts and familial tensions, the ghostly revelation of his father's murder to 'revenge foul and most unnatural murder' (in Act 1, Scene 5) propels the narrative towards an inevitable collision of personal vendettas and political intrigues within the Danish court. While opinions on the exact placement of the climax in Hamlet may vary (Claudius in prayer, in Act 3, Scene 3; the death of Polonius, in Act 3, Scene 4; the duel between Laertes and Hamlet, in Act 5, Scene 2), we contend that the death of Polonius, councillor to King Claudius, in Act III, Scene iv marks the pinnacle of tension and dramatic intensity. The death of Polonius not only precipitates a cascade of dire consequences but also catalyzes Hamlet's inevitable collision with the machinations of the Danish court.

Therefore, the purpose of this essay is an in-depth analysis and critical examination of the climax in Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet,' with a particular focus on Act III, Scene iv (commonly referred to as the 'closet Scene' or 'bedroom Scene'). The closet, according to the note in the Arden edition, is “a private chamber used for prayer, study or in the case of Ophelia’s closet [...] needlework” (Shakespeare, Taylor&Thompson, 2006), that is, also a place for reading. In theatrical presentations, the scene known as the closet scene is rarely staged in a "private chamber used for prayer"; instead, it is often set in a bedroom (Engler, 2010).

The chosen fragment for critical analysis consists of five events, featuring four that gradually escalate towards
a peak of heightened emotional intensity, juxtaposed with the fifth event designed to alleviate or release the built-up tension. The entire sequence unfolds in just thirty-three lines, and as the scene continues with nearly two hundred more lines ahead, it sets the stage for a passionate but no longer hysterical clash between mother and son. At this juncture, both of them carry the burden of significant guilt (Barry, 1973).

Understanding what precedes and follows the climax in a narrative is crucial for a comprehensive grasp of the story's structure and impact. The events leading up to the climax provide the necessary context, setting the stage for the heightened tension and pivotal moment. Moreover, exploring the aftermath of the climax allows for a thorough examination of the consequences that arise, shaping the overall narrative's depth and resonance.

The strategic use of the mousetrap play cleverly foreshadows the climax. Hamlet explains his plan. The play is designed to reenact the circumstances of King Hamlet's death in a way that will provoke a guilty reaction from Claudius if he is indeed the murderer. Hamlet wants to 'have grounds / More relative than this: the play's the thing', wherein to 'catch the conscience of the king' (in Act 3, Scene 2).

This theatrical performance becomes a catalyst, propelling the narrative into a Scene of heightened emotional tension. Rather than maintaining a neutral relationship between Hamlet and his parents, the play-within-a-play becomes a poignant medium through which the developing emotional conflicts are brought to the forefront. As the events of the mousetrap play unfold, the intricate dynamics between Hamlet and his parents, particularly his mother, Queen Gertrude, are laid bare. After the Mousetrap play, Queen Gertrude's distress becomes evident. Hamlet observes her reaction and seizes the opportunity to confront her about her role in the events surrounding King Hamlet's death. In response to Hamlet's probing questions, Queen Gertrude exclaims: 'O, speak to me no more. These words like daggers enter in mine ears.' (in Act 3, Scene 2) This line reveals Queen Gertrude's emotional turmoil and the impact of Hamlet's accusations on her conscience. Her plea for Hamlet to stop
speaking emphasizes the depth of her distress and suggests the guilt she may be feeling. The emotional tension sets the stage for the forthcoming climax, adding depth and complexity to the unfolding tragedy.

Polonius withdraws behind the arras when Hamlet calls insistently 'Mother, mother, mother!' (Act 3, Scene 4). Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, is a character known for his political cunning and desire to gain favor with the king. Acting on behalf of King Claudius, he eavesdrops on Hamlet's conversation with Gertrude to gather information. Polonius's decision to hide behind the arras reflects the pervasive atmosphere of secrecy and mistrust within the court of Elsinore. He is confident about Hamlet’s madness and warns Claudius '...Your noble son is mad: / Mad call I it; for, to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?' (in Act 2, Scene 2) His actions will contribute to the unfolding drama and tragedy of the play as a whole.

The Queen knows that there is a person in the bedroom so she has assistance in case of trouble. Gertrude's attitude toward her son Hamlet, after he descends into pretended madness, is a complex mix of concern, confusion, and possibly guilt. She may feel torn between her loyalty to her son and her new marriage to King Claudius. Gertrude's maternal instincts lead her to worry deeply about Hamlet's mental state and well-being. Gertrude finds herself caught in the intricate web of conflicting roles—torn between the obligations of being a good wife to King Claudius and the profound instincts of being a good mother to her troubled son, Hamlet. The struggle to reconcile these conflicting roles manifests as an emotional labyrinth, where Gertrude navigates the delicate balance between spousal duties and maternal instincts, attempting to find a path that satisfies both realms without sacrificing the well-being of either relationship.

The climax of Hamlet unfolds through a sequence of four escalating events, each intensifying the narrative tension. These events build towards a point of maximum emotional turmoil, culminating in the pivotal act of murder that sets the stage for the climax's top. Following the peak, there is a subsequent event that contributes to a decline in tension.

The sequence of climactic events unfolds as follows: the
lower tension, the heated argument, the escalation to physical abuse, the pivotal act of murder, and finally, a subsequent decrease in tension.

**Climax Mapping**

*Level one: Lower tension*

The commencement of climax in Hamlet doesn't begin with a neutral emotional tone, or an emotionally detached connection between Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude. The relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude has already been strained, and Hamlet is deeply affected by his mother's hasty marriage to Claudius, who is his uncle. We notice that the emotional distance between Hamlet and Gertrude has already been established in the early acts of the play and continues to play a significant role as the story unfolds. During his first soliloquy, Hamlet exclaims, 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' (in Act 1, Scene 2) expressing his deep disillusionment and anger regarding his mother.

The Mousetrap play catalyzes the growing tension between Hamlet and Gertrude, as the performance forces both characters
to confront the harsh truths of their strained mother-son relationship. Thus, Hamlet, driven by a desire for justice and retribution for his father's murder, skillfully uses the theatrical medium (in Act 3, Scene 2) to confront the guilt that weighed on his stepfather's conscience. As the staged events unfolded, Hamlet's strategic manipulation of the play's narrative elicited a visceral reaction from Gertrude and Claudius, exposing the underlying tension within the royal family.

Therefore, at the commencement of the climax, the tension between Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude, is notably low compared to what is to come next. Anyway, Gertrude is merely indignant and adopts the role of a scolding parent (Prosser, 1971). The primary reason for Gertrude's anger stems from Hamlet's confrontational behavior. Claudius acknowledges the power of the play-within-a-play to expose his guilt, stating, 'How smart a lash that speech doth give his conscience.' Claudius did understand its purpose and wants his wife to reprimand Hamlet. Unaware of the impending danger, Polonius is also secretly present in the room, hiding behind an arras. Polonius, the first character to be killed in the play, is none other than Ophelia's father. Hamlet's unwitting mistake now carries the burden of inadvertently harming the father of his beloved. The revelation adds a layer of tragedy to the unfolding drama, intensifying the emotional complexity and straining the love relationship within the couple. Polonius likely did not anticipate the tragic outcome that awaited him. Unaware of Hamlet's impulsive actions and the ensuing consequences, he could not have foreseen the fatal turn of events that would occur to him.

**Level two: Heated argument**

When, at the opening of the interview between Hamlet and his mother, the son, instead of listening to her remonstrances roughly assumes the offensive, she becomes alarmed (Bradley, 2010). The series of epistolophical exchanges of accusations are reinforced by the repetition of imperative verbs. Queen throws an accusation, 'Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended,' with your 'idle tongue.' (Act 3, Scene 4) Hamlet responds, 'Mother, you have my father much offended' with your 'wicked tongue.' (Act 3, Scene 4) The exchange of
accusations between Hamlet and Queen Gertrude elevates the tension and intensifies the conflict within the Scene. The use of strong language adds emotional weight to the dialogue, turning it into a heated argument between them.

The verbs 'answer' and 'question' function as powerful speaking verbs, serving as catalysts that incite the argument between the two parties. The imperative nature of 'Come, come' and 'Go, go' intensifies the confrontational atmosphere, amplifying the urgency and commanding tone within the dialogue. The relentless back-and-forth of imperatives not only underscores the depth of the conflict but also reveals the underlying emotional turmoil and strained relationships within the characters. At the same time, the repetition of imperatives serves to emphasize the accusatory nature of the exchange and heighten the emotional intensity of the confrontation. Shakespeare often used repetition for stylistic reasons. It was a common rhetorical device in Elizabethan drama to enhance the linguistic and dramatic impact of the lines.

Queen's question: 'What's the matter now?' (in Act 3, Scene 4) reflects concern and a desire to understand the source of Hamlet's current emotional state or behavior. It suggests that something is amiss, prompting the audience to wonder about the cause of Hamlet's apparent distress. Hamlet's response: 'Have you forgot me?' (in Act 3, Scene 4) challenges the queen's awareness of their relationship and his emotional state, implying a sense of neglect or abandonment. The question is poignant and reveals his emotional vulnerability. It adds a dimension of familial tension, suggesting that Hamlet is conveying a more profound and underlying unease regarding the nature of their relationship and his mother's attentiveness.

Further, Hamlet accuses his mother of her incest 'your husband’s brother’s wife' (in Act 3, Scene 4). This accusation goes beyond a mere denouncement of Gertrude's hasty remarriage ('O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!'; in Act 1, Scene 2) to his uncle Claudius; it carries a weight of moral condemnation and a sense of betrayal. Hamlet, grappling with his grief and outrage over his father's death, perceives this union as not just an act
of marital infidelity but as a violation of familial sanctity. This accusation becomes a powerful catalyst for the increasing tension in Hamlet's relationships, further complicating the intricate web of familial dynamics and contributing to the tragic unraveling of the play.

Hamlet is in an uncontrollable rage. As Rosenblatt (1978) observes, in moments of uncontrollable rage, Hamlet emphasizes this offense directly: 'married with my uncle, my father's brother' (Act I. Scene 2); 'You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife.' In moments when his rage is kept under control, Hamlet names the offense more indirectly, noting that it imposes on his family a hyphenated set of unnatural mixed relations: 'my uncle-father and aunt-mother' (Act II, Scene 2). Avoid repeating an uncontrollable rage.

In Shakespearean times, influenced by religious beliefs, primarily Christianity, incestuous relationships were generally condemned and considered morally and socially unacceptable. However, from a judicial point of view, there is generally no legal issue or crime associated with this relationship.

The argument is full of parallelisms: 'Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended. / Mother, you have my father much offended.'; 'Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue. / Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.' (in Act 3, Scene 4) The parallel structure emphasizes the contrast between Hamlet's and Queen Gertrude's accusations. The repetition of the syntactical structure highlights the mirrored nature of their grievances, emphasizing the reciprocal accusations. It creates a sense of balance and symmetry in the dialogue. This rhythmic pattern can enhance the dramatic quality of the dialogue, making it more memorable and impactful for the audience.

**Level three: Physical abuse**

Hesitant, Hamlet would not let Gertrude go now that they were alone—or at least, he thought they were alone. Polonius was still hiding behind the arras.

In this event, Hamlet transitions from argument to physical abuse. He uses imperatives like sit you down'; 'you shall not budge'; 'you go not'. Taking his mother by the wrist, he held her fast and made her sit down. The imperatives
serve to convey Hamlet's authoritative and commanding tone. In this context, Hamlet is using them to assert control over his mother, Gertrude. The phrases all command Gertrude to take a specific action, reinforcing Hamlet's dominance in the situation. The purpose is to depict a shift in the interaction between Hamlet and Gertrude from verbal argumentation to a more physically assertive and forceful confrontation.

Now, Hamlet is overtly in a mood that Gertrude immediately recognizes as murderous. The Queen is visibly terrified, her eyes reflecting horror as she poses rhetorical questions. She senses an impending threat and wonders, 'What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?' (in Act 3, Scene 4) The second interrogative sentence is negative, reflecting her difficulty in accepting the possibility of something ominous happening. The negation within the question attempts to dismiss the potential reality that could unfold unexpectedly. It implies a denial or rejection of the possibility that the Queen might be subjected to harm or violence, specifically, murder. The use of 'wilt not' expresses a hope or expectation that Hamlet would not commit such a heinous act. In this context, the Queen is expressing her fear and seeking reassurance from her son that he does not intend to harm her.

As she moves towards the door to seek assistance, Hamlet drops any pretense and roughly seizes her, laying bare the seething rage within him. Gertrude has good reason that he is on the verge of harming her, and she cries out in terror (Prosser, 1971). Following a conventional theatrical approach, it appears that he brutally pushes her into a chair, exerting pressure with his hands on her shoulders, suggesting that he is about to strangle her. Perhaps, he might lay his hand upon his sword or partially draws it (Hankins, 1971).

Gertrude is frightened by his earnest manner. She is fearful that, in his madness, Hamlet might do her some harm. Her nerve failed her, and she calls for help, 'Help, ho!' Her interjections are echoed by the male voice from behind the arras, 'What ho! Help!' (Act 3, Scene 4)

Gertrude's repeated interjections, 'Help, ho!' and the echoed response, 'What ho! Help!' not only conveys the immediate need for assistance but also creates a symphony of fear and tension. Gertrude's plea for help is a raw expression
of her vulnerability and fear in the face of Hamlet's intense behavior. The repetition of 'Help, ho!' underscores her desperation and the gravity of the situation, as she seeks external intervention to safeguard herself from potential harm.

Hamlet faces the possibility that he might kill her on impulse (Prosser, 1971), but his attention is diverted by a male voice. Hearing a muffled cry behind the arras, Hamlet lunges with his sword. There seems no reason to doubt that he believes he is stabbing the King. He had announced his intent to strike at just such a moment, and his shout is the victorious exclamation: 'How now! a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!' (Prosser, 1971) The forceful thrust of the sword, marked by the resonating sounds of repeated 't,' 'd,' and 'at,' releases energy akin to a sudden lightning flash. The thunder rumbles briefly as the true nature of the act is revealed, leaving the terrified Gertrude in stunned silence (Barry, 1973).

**Level four: The murder**

When Hamlet heard a voice, he thought it was the king himself who was hidden there. He was close to fulfilling his revenge like never before. At least that's what he thought at that moment. The person who believes that their life's purpose or goal can be achieved instantly may be overlooking rational considerations.

Hamlet 'makes a pass through the arras' and strikes out impulsively and fatally 'a rat', a derogatory metaphor used to suggest that Claudius is perceived as a deceitful, unscrupulous, and treacherous person. The phrase 'dead for a ducat' (in Act 3, Scene 4) expresses the expendability or worthlessness of Claudius's life. Hamlet repeats that his opponent is 'dead,' contemplating the accomplishment of his aim for revenge.

'O, I am slain!' With these words, Polonius falls and dies, marking a turning point in the play. His voice ceased and Hamlet decided the person was dead.

An exclamatory question follows 'O me, what hast thou done?' (in Act 3, Scene 4) The Queen is shocked because her son committed 'a rash and bloody deed'. The expression 'bloody deed' emphasizes the brutality and bloodshed associated with
Hamlet's impulsive and aggressive actions at that moment.

In the aftermath of his actions, Hamlet is gripped by a profound sense of perplexity and uncertainty. Hamlet does not immediately rush over to discover the identity of the eavesdropper. He assumes he knows who is behind the arras (Prosser, 1971), but he is sorely mistaken. The words 'Nay, I know not. Is it the King?' (in Act 3, Scene 4) echo in his mind as he grapples with disbelief, unable to fathom the possibility that he might have made a grave mistake. According to both Elizabethan and modern law, his intent, his 'malice forethought,' makes him as guilty of first-degree murder as if his victim had been Claudius. only at this moment, Hamlet comes under a sentence of death morally, legally, and dramatically. (Prosser, 1971).

Hamlet lifts the array and discovers Polonius. The lifeless body before him is not the intended target of his vengeance; instead, it is the unforeseen consequence of his impulsive actions. In this moment of revelation, Hamlet grapples with the gravity of the situation, realizing that the pursuit of revenge has not only failed but has led to an unintended tragedy. The stark reality that Polonius, an innocent victim, has become a casualty in the broader scheme of Hamlet's quest for justice will force the prince to confront the consequences of his actions.

While Hamlet attributes the killing of Polonius to his madness, the act itself does not appear as insane when we witness it – not in a pathological sense. However, sometime later, we are readily inclined to accept Hamlet's characterization of the act as insane. (Dover, 2010)

After the shocking discovery of Polonius's lifeless body, Hamlet turns back to accusations of his mother's incestuous union, drawing a parallel between the heinous act of murder and the perceived moral transgressions within his own family. With the declaration, 'A bloody deed!—almost as bad, good mother, As kill a king and marry with his brother,' (in Act 3, Scene 4) Hamlet not only condemns the regicidal marriage but also intertwines the concept of murder with the notion of incest.

Decreasing tension.

With this impulsive and fatal act, Hamlet takes a decisive
step toward physical confrontation and initiates a chain of events that will shape the course of the play. From this point onward, he can't turn things back.

When Hamlet stabs Polonius through the arras, he commits himself to overtly violent action and brings himself into unavoidable conflict with the king. Claudius realizes the immediate threat to his life and changes his plan of counterattack from self-defense to murder (Prosser, 1971). As we can see later, after revealing to Laertes that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius attempts to incite Laertes' anger and desire for revenge against Hamlet, exclaiming, 'O, speak to me no more; these words like daggers enter in mine ears! No more, sweet Hamlet!' (in Act 4, Scene 7) This emotional plea underscores Claudius's manipulation of the situation, as he seeks to turn Laertes against Hamlet for the tragic death of Polonius.

So, following the highest point of the climax, where tensions reached their peak, there was a noticeable decrease in tension in dynamics, reverting to emotional arguments. Turning from the lifeless body of Polonius with no sign of remorse, Hamlet begins the castigation of his mother. However, this rebuke is considerably less severe than the sin of premeditated murder (Prosser, 1971).

Hamlet describes the act as one that 'blurs the grace and blush of modesty,' implying a degradation of virtue. He goes on to suggest that this act 'takes off the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love' and 'makes marriage-vows as false as dicers' oaths,' expressing his deep skepticism and criticism of the sincerity of the union. Hamlet's words convey a sense of moral outrage and condemnation, underscoring his profound disapproval of the rapid remarriage, which he perceives as a betrayal of his father's memory and the sacredness of marital vows. In Elizabethan times, marital vows were regarded as sacred and binding commitments that carried significant religious, social, and legal weight. Couples exchanged vows during the marriage ceremony, making promises to each other and before God.

In Gertrude's response, 'What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?' (Act 3, Scene 4) she seems genuinely perplexed and hurt by Hamlet's
accusations. The phrase 'wag thy tongue' implies speaking disrespectfully or harshly, and Gertrude questions why Hamlet is using such strong language against her.

The murder sets in motion a chain of events that will ultimately lead to a dramatic confrontation.

In the aftermath of the climax, Claudius perceives that Hamlet harbors a deep-seated animosity and is actively conspiring against him, setting the stage for a heightened and tense confrontation between uncle and nephew. Alarmed by Hamlet's behavior, Claudius expresses concern about the potential danger that Hamlet poses. The palace becomes a breeding ground for suspicion and fear as Claudius grapples with the realization that Hamlet's actions may seriously threaten his reign. Claudius finds himself navigating the complex realms of political intrigue and familial betrayal, setting the Scene for a dramatic confrontation that holds the power to shape the destiny of both individuals and the entire kingdom.

To conclude, the climax in Act 3, Scene 4, offers additional evidence of Hamlet's gradual descent into evil, as noted by Prosser (1971). Dramatically, this scene may be considered the most successful in the play because it showcases Hamlet's most heartfelt lines. Significantly, it stands out as the sole scene where Hamlet's interactions with others are as striking as his moments of introspection. This is attributed to its central exploration of the same theme in the soliloquies: Hamlet's anger (Jorgensen, 1964).

The unfolding events in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' depict a dynamic interplay of tension and release, wherein characters contend with their decisions and the ensuing consequences. Hamlet's impulsive and fatal actions catalyze a series of dramatic events, leading to intense confrontations and shifting power dynamics within the play. The fluctuating emotional states of the characters, from the highest point of the climax to the subsequent decrease in tension, reflect the complexity of human relationships and the profound impact of individual decisions on the overarching narrative. As the characters navigate themes of betrayal, manipulation, and familial bonds, the play offers a rich exploration of human nature, leaving a lasting imprint on the landscape of...
Shakespearean tragedy.

Hamlet's pivotal moment can offer promising avenues of research for university curriculum enhancement. Delving into the psychological aspects of Hamlet's decision-making and the societal implications of his existential crisis can provide rich ground for in-depth analysis with students. Additionally, investigating the cultural and historical contexts that influenced Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet's internal struggles can open up exciting avenues for students to explore and contribute to understanding this literary masterpiece. Incorporating such learning opportunities into the curriculum can enrich students' engagement with the text and foster a deeper appreciation for the complexities within Hamlet's character and the play's broader themes.

References: