

**A100 Humanities – a foundation course**  
**A100/36 Retrospect**

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**Clip transcript: A100 Hamlet**

**Arnold Kettle**

Well of course the whole point is supposed to be that it increases the enjoyment. But a whole number of students have asked me – at Summer Schools and study centres – exactly what we mean, in the literature parts of the course, when we ask students to pay special attention to the way a particular writer uses language. Well here’s a pretty well-known bit of language.

**Extract: Hamlet**

**Contributor(s): Tom Chadbon**

**Tom Chadbon as Hamlet**

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, ’tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish’d. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause: there’s the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life;  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law’s delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin?

**Arnold Kettle**

Is this question of attention to language a formal thing? Do we want people to say to themselves “O what a splendid example of a metaphysical conceit!” or “Just listen to that subtle dissonance!” Well, I don’t think that is the main point, though of course it is good to recognise a conceit when you see one and to be aware of terms like internal rhyme. Being aware of these terms helps you to recognise the things and so formulate your more instinctive reactions. But the main point is to be aware that words aren’t to be taken for granted, that good writers use words in ways that help you to be aware of the full force (and

often complexity) of their meaning. When – in the “To be or not to be” speech – Hamlet asks “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” he isn’t just asking himself whether it’s better to put up with pieces of exceptionally bad luck, even though that’s a fair enough paraphrase of his meaning. But Shakespeare wrote ‘nobler’ not ‘better’. If he’d meant ‘better’ he could have written it. ‘Nobler’ brings in all sorts of associations ‘better’ wouldn’t. It makes us realise that because Hamlet is ‘noble’ he has special problems of how to act. It makes us realise even that there’s a difference between the social sense of ‘noble’ (someone who belongs to the nobility that’s to say) and the more abstract sense of the word to convey a high-minded, morally exalted sort of feeling. (Are nobles always noble?) What I’m getting at is that to read the sentence – “Whether ‘tis nobler” – for all it’s worth means to get the full force of the actual words (those words and no others) that Shakespeare’s using: and to ask you to pay that sort of attention to language is one of the chief things we’ve been trying to do in the literature aspect of the course.