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Key Features

Full Title:	<i>The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark</i>
Written:	Between 1599 – 1601
Published:	1603 (First Quarto), 1604 (Second Quarto).
Lit Period:	The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
Genre:	Tragic drama; Revenge tragedy
Setting:	Denmark during the late middle ages (circa 1200), though characters in the play occasionally reference things or events from the Elizabethan Age (circa 1500).
Protagonist:	Hamlet
Antagonist:	The Ghost's demand for vengeance which Hamlet accepted

The Plotline

Hamlet Here's how this bloodbath goes down:

- 
1 Ghost
A ghost is seen flying around the walls of Elsinore castle.
- 
2 Revenge
The ghost tells Hamlet he's his dad and that he was killed by poison. He then asks Hamlet to avenge him.
- 
3 Crazy
Hamlet begins to act crazy. No one is sure if it's real or just an act.
- 
4 Theater
Hamlet puts on a play to determine if his ghost dad was telling the truth.
- 
5 Oops
Hamlet kills Ophelia's dad by mistake. Enraged, Ophelia's brother wants a duel.
- 
6 Note
Hamlet finds a letter written by his "friends" with instructions to kill him.
- 
7 Duel
At the duel, Hamlet, Claudius, and Laertes all die from the same poisoned sword.

shmoop

A ghost resembling the recently deceased King of Denmark stalks the battlements of Elsinore, the royal castle. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, a decision is made to tell Hamlet, the dead King's son. Hamlet is the nephew of the present King, Claudius, who assumed his dead brother's crown and married his widow, Gertrude. Claudius seems an able king, easily handling the threat of the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras. Hamlet is angered by Gertrude's marriage to Claudius. He meets the ghost, which claims to be the spirit of his father, murdered by Claudius, and quickly accepts the ghost's demand for revenge.

Hamlet, who is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, delays the revenge wanting to ascertain the truth of the ghost's revelation and decides to act mad as a ruse. He enters into a deep melancholy and becomes furious at all women. Claudius and Gertrude employ a pair of



Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to find the cause of his erratic behaviour. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with her. Meanwhile, Hamlet develops a plot to test his uncle's guilt: a troupe of actors will put on a play resembling Claudius's alleged murder of King Hamlet.

Polonius and Claudius spy on the meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, during which Hamlet flies into a rage against women and marriage. Claudius concludes Hamlet neither loves Ophelia nor is mad. Seeing Hamlet as a threat, he decides to send him away. At the play that night, Claudius runs from the room during the murder scene, proving his guilt. Frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, Claudius orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once. Hamlet gets his chance for revenge when, on his way to see Gertrude, he comes upon Claudius, alone and praying. However, he delays as he believes that if Claudius is praying as he dies then his soul might go to heaven. In Gertrude's room, Hamlet aggressively berates his mother for marrying Claudius and she fears he might kill her. Polonius, who is spying on the meeting from behind a tapestry, calls for help. Hamlet thinks it is Claudius, and kills Polonius.

Claiming that he wants to protect Hamlet from punishment for killing Polonius, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment: he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet immediately be executed. Meanwhile, Polonius's son, Laertes, returns to Denmark in a rage to get revenge for his father's death. Claudius convinces Laertes the death is Hamlet's fault. When a pirate attack allows Hamlet to escape back to Denmark, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes's desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death: a supposedly friendly duel between Hamlet and Laertes will actually be a trap, because Laertes's blade will be poisoned. As a backup, Claudius will also poison some wine that he'll give to Hamlet if he wins.

Meanwhile, grief drives Ophelia insane, and she drowns in what seems to be a suicide. Hamlet arrives just as the funeral is taking place. He claims to have loved Ophelia and scuffles with Laertes. Back at the castle, Hamlet tells Horatio he switched the letter sent to England: now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be executed. He also says he is ready to die, and agrees to participate in the fencing match.

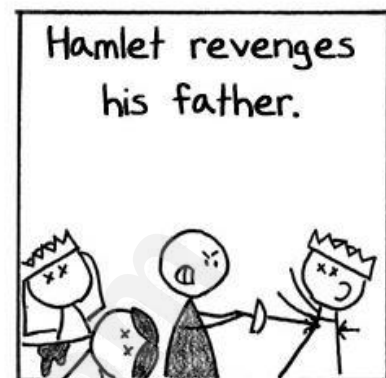
During the match, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet's success from the poisoned glass of wine before Claudius can stop her. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned blade, but in the scuffle they exchange swords and Hamlet wounds Laertes. Gertrude falls, saying the wine was poisoned, and dies. Laertes reveals Claudius's treachery. Hamlet kills Claudius, and exchanges forgiveness with Laertes. Laertes dies. As Hamlet dies, he hears the drums of Fortinbras's army marching through Denmark after a battle with the Polish, and says Fortinbras should be the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras enters with the Ambassadors from England, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio tells Hamlet's story as Hamlet's body is taken offstage with the honours due a soldier.



HAMLET (in 3 Panels)

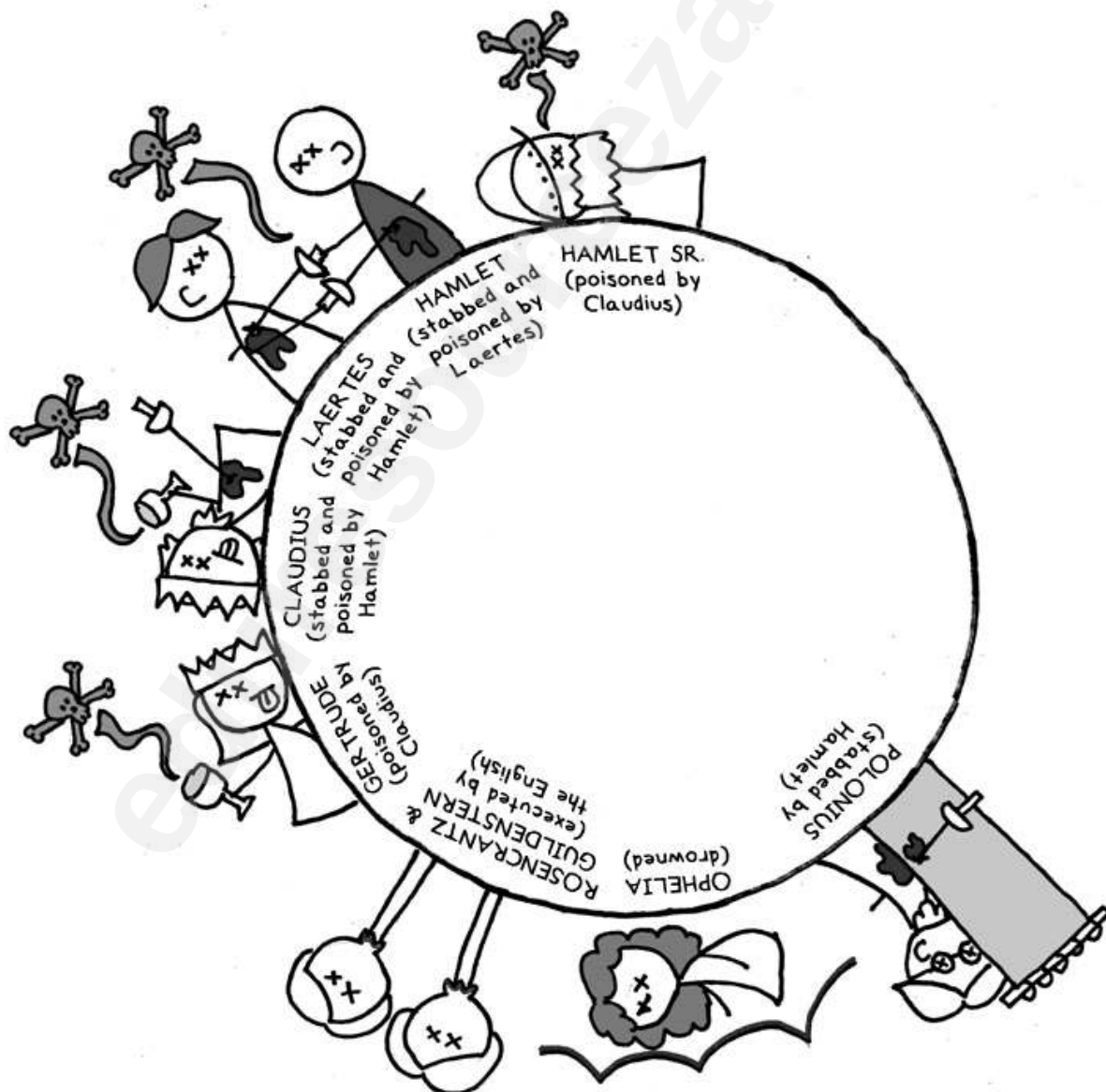


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THE HAMLET DEATH CLOCK



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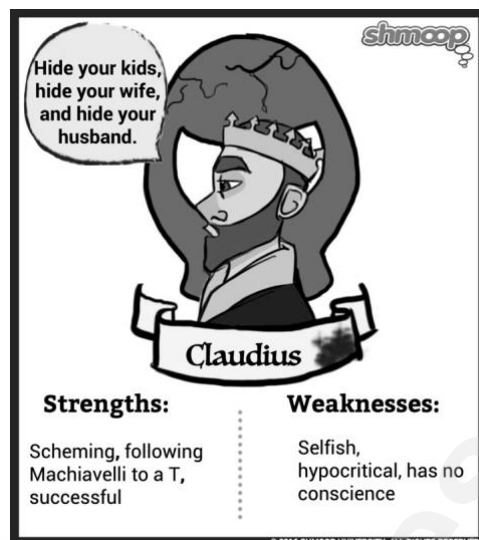
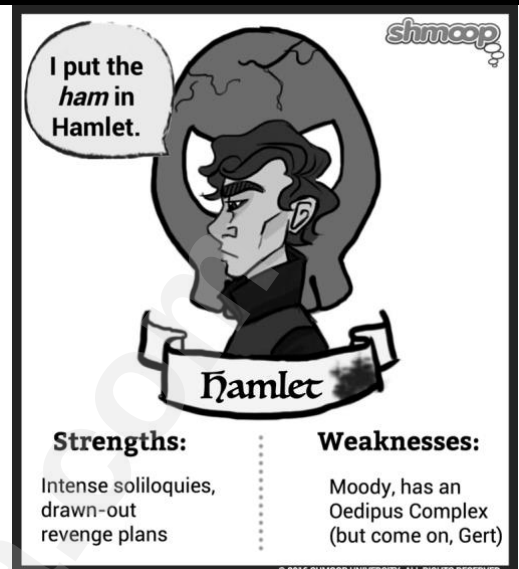
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CHARACTERS

HAMLET, Prince of Denmark

Hamlet is a deep thinker, focusing on impossible-to-answer questions about religion, death, truth, reality, and the motivations of others. He even contemplates the fact that he obsessively contemplates. He loves Ophelia and his mother, but his mother's marriage to Claudius makes him mistrust and even hate all women. He detests all forms of deception, yet plots and pretends to be insane. At times he even seems to be insane. Despite his obsessive thinking, he can act impulsively, as when he kills Polonius. Hamlet is an enigma, a man so complex even he doesn't completely know himself. In other words, he seems like a real person.

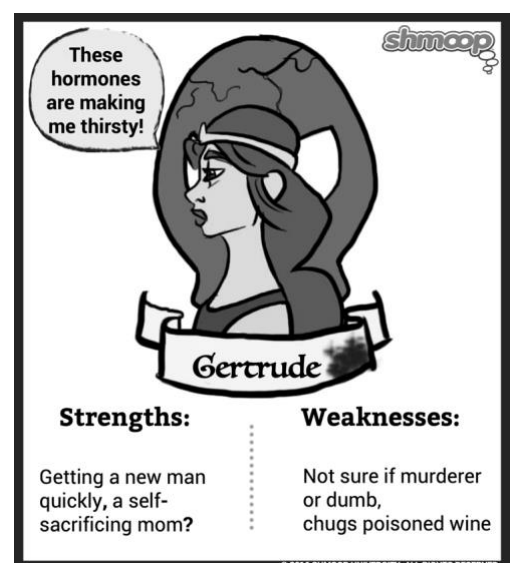


CLAUDIUS, King of Denmark

Power-hungry and lustful, Claudius murders his brother in order to take the throne of Denmark and marry his wife. Claudius is a great talker and schemer. He easily charms the royal court into accepting his hasty marriage to his brother's widow, and comes up with plot after plot to protect his ill-gained power. He is the perfect politician, yet his hold on power is slightly fragile. At various times he does show guilt for killing his brother, and his love of Gertrude seems genuine. As with all the supporting characters in Hamlet, Claudius is not developed to his full potential. His primary role in the play is to spawn Hamlet's confusion and anger, and his subsequent search for truth and life's meaning.

GERTRUDE, Queen of Denmark

Gertrude quickly marries Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. Though she is a good woman and loving mother, she is weak-willed and unable to control her personal passions. Whether because of lust, love, or a desire to maintain her status as queen, she marries Claudius, though this is clearly a breach of proper morals. Though some critics have argued that Gertrude might have been involved in Claudius's plot to kill Old Hamlet, evidence in the text suggests that she is unaware of and uninvolved in the plot. Gertrude is the opposite of her son. Hamlet is a scholar and a philosopher, searching for life's most elusive answers. He cares nothing for this "mortal coil" and the vices to which man has become slave. Gertrude is shallow, and like a child she longs to be delighted, and it is her search for pleasure that turns Hamlet so violently against her.





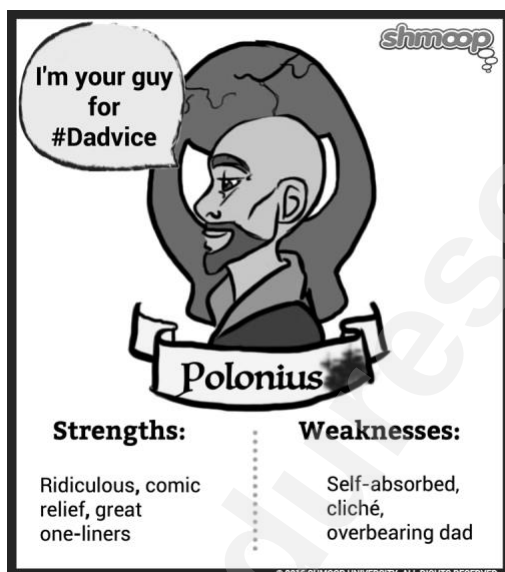
THE GHOST, former King of Denmark



The spirit that claims to be Hamlet's dead father, is forced to endure the fires of Purgatory because he was murdered by Claudius in his sleep without being able to ask forgiveness for his sins. The Ghost orders Hamlet to get revenge against Claudius, but spare Gertrude. Evidence in the play suggests that the Ghost really is the spirit of Hamlet's father, though Hamlet himself wonders at times if the Ghost might be a demon in disguise.

HORATIO, a scholar

Horatio went to university with Hamlet at Wittenburg, and remains his loyal best friend. Horatio's role in the play is minor and most critics agree that he is not developed beyond a character foil for the great Prince. However, Horatio serves two purposes central to the drama: he is our harbinger of truth. It is through Horatio that the actions taken by Hamlet and other characters gain credibility. He is the outside observer to the madness. Horatio's second purpose is to be Hamlet's one true confidant. Apart from Hamlet's soliloquies, his conversations with Horatio are the only insight the audience have into what the Prince is really thinking and feeling. Horatio is presented as



a studious, sceptical young man, perhaps more serious and less ingenious than Hamlet but more than capable of trading witticisms with his good friend.

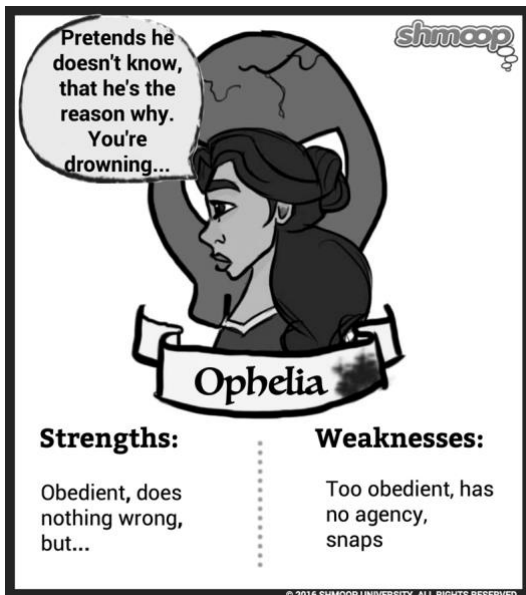
POLONIUS, advisor to Claudius

The elderly Lord Chamberlain is the father of Ophelia and Laertes, and the chief counsellor to the throne of Denmark. Polonius is a tedious, pedantic, interfering, suspicious, silly old man, a "rash, intruding fool," in Hamlet's phrase. Polonius is forever provoking intrigue and hiding behind tapestries to spy. He is very aware of his position and role, and is always careful to be on the good side of power.

LAERTES

Laertes is Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother who lives primarily in Paris, France where he studies. He is a hot-headed and passionate young man who deeply loves his family. As a man prone to action rather than thought who also seeks to revenge the death of his father, he serves as a "double" to Hamlet, providing numerous points of comparison: neither of them wants to stay in Denmark; both lost their fathers due to murder; both seek revenge for their fathers' deaths; and experience a change in conscience.





OPHELIA

Daughter of Polonius, sister of Laertes, and beloved of Hamlet. As a woman, Ophelia must obey the men around her and is forced by her father first to stop speaking to Hamlet and then to help spy on him. Ophelia's loyalty to her father and resulting estrangement from Hamlet ultimately causes her to lose her mind. Though Laertes and Fortinbras are the characters usually seen as Hamlet's "doubles," Ophelia functions as a kind of female double of Hamlet—mirroring Hamlet's half-madness with her own full-blown insanity, and takes his obsession with suicide a step further and actually commits it. Of all the pivotal characters in *Hamlet*, Ophelia is the most static and one-dimensional. She has the potential to become a tragic

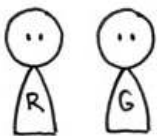
heroine – to overcome the adversities inflicted upon her – but she instead crumbles into insanity, becoming merely tragic. It appears that Ophelia herself is not as important as her representation of the dual nature of women in the play. The extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by Gertrude is far more apparent because of Ophelia's presence.

FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway

A prince of Norway, whose father, Old Fortinbras, died in battle with Old Hamlet and lost lands to Denmark. Fortinbras is bound to avenge his father's death by the Danes' hands. In many ways his story is parallel to Hamlet's: he too has lost his father by violence; he too is hindered from ascending the throne by an interfering uncle. But despite their biographical similarities, Fortinbras and Hamlet are constitutional opposites. Where Hamlet is pensive and mercurial, Fortinbras is all action. He leads an army through Denmark in order to attack disputed territory in Poland. At the end of the play, and with Hamlet's dying assent, Fortinbras assumes the crown of Denmark.



ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, friends of Hamlet's in Wittenberg



Claudius invites them to court in order to spy on Hamlet. Hamlet sees that the two are, essentially, spying on him, and turns on them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often treated as comic relief; they are sycophantic, vaguely absurd fellows. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aren't the smartest fellows, but they do seem to mean well, and the announcement of their deaths at the end of the play helps to drive home the absurd and bloody lengths to which vengeance can extend once it is unleashed.

REYNALDO

A servant of Polonius who receives absurdly detailed instructions in espionage from Polonius and is sent to Paris to observe and report on Laertes's conduct.





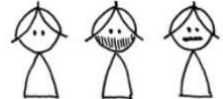
THE PLAYERS, group of (presumably English) actors who arrive in Denmark.



Hamlet knows this company and uses the players to stage an adaptation of "The Death of Gonzago" which he calls "The Mousetrap" (a play that repeats almost perfectly the account of Old Hamlet's death as told by the ghost) in order to be sure of Claudius' guilt.

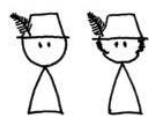
FRANCISCO, BARNARDO and MARCELLUS

Danish officers on guard at the castle of Elsinore. They are among the first to see the ghost of Old Hamlet.



Osric

An impressionable courtier who plays a minor role as the King's messenger. He comes across as a ludicrous, flowery, senseless courtier who invites Hamlet to fence with Laertes, then serves as referee during the contest.

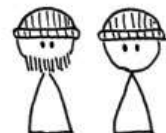


Voltimand and Cornelius

Danish courtiers sent by Claudius as ambassadors to the Court of Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

Two Gravediggers

They figure only in Act 5 Scene 1 yet never fail to make a big impression on readers and audience members. The primary gravedigger is a very witty man, macabre and intelligent, who is the only character in the play capable of trading barbs with Hamlet. They are the only speaking representatives of the lower classes in the play and their perspective is a remarkable contrast to that of the nobles.



A Priest



Charged with performing the rites at Ophelia's funeral. Because of the doubtful circumstances of Ophelia's death, the priest refuses to do more than the bare minimum as she is interred.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

APPEARANCE VS. REALITY / IMPOSSIBILITY OF CERTAINTY

Hamlet differs from other revenge plays in that the expected action, particularly from Hamlet himself, is continually postponed while Hamlet tries to obtain more certain knowledge about what he is doing. This play poses many questions that other plays would simply take for granted:

- ✎ Can we have certain knowledge about ghosts?
- ✎ Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it a misleading fiend?
- ✎ Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded?
- ✎ How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses?
- ✎ Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius's soul by watching his behaviour? If so, can he know the facts of what Claudius did by observing the state of his soul?
- ✎ Can Claudius (or the audience) know the state of Hamlet's mind by observing his behaviour and listening to his speech?
- ✎ Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have?



👉 Can we know anything about the afterlife?

Every character is constantly trying to figure out what the other characters think, as opposed to what those characters are *pretending* to think. The characters try to figure each other out by using deception of their own, such as spying and plotting. But Hamlet takes it a step further. He not only investigates other people, he also peers into his own soul and asks philosophical and religious questions about life and death. Hamlet's obsession with what's real has three main effects: 1) he becomes so caught up in the search for reality that he ceases to be able to act; 2) in order to prove what's real and what isn't Hamlet himself must hide his "reality" behind an appearance of madness; 3) the more closely Hamlet looks, the less real and coherent everything seems to be.

Many analyses of *Hamlet* focus only on the first effect, Hamlet's indecisiveness. But the second two effects are just as important. The second shows that the relationship between appearance and reality is indistinct. The third suggests that the world is founded on fundamental inconsistencies that most people overlook, and that it is this failure to recognize inconsistencies that allows them to act. Hamlet's fatal flaw isn't that he's wrong to see uncertainty in everything, but that he's right.

Hamlet's grief and misery is such that he frequently longs for death to end his suffering, but he fears that if he commits suicide, he will be consigned to eternal suffering in hell because of the Christian religion's prohibition of suicide. In his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy (III.i), Hamlet philosophically concludes that no one would choose to endure the pain of life if he or she were not afraid of what will come after death, and that it is this fear which causes complex moral considerations to interfere with the capacity for action.

Many people have seen *Hamlet* as a play about indecisiveness, and thus about Hamlet's failure to act appropriately. It might be more interesting to consider that the play shows us how many uncertainties our lives are built upon, how many unknown quantities are taken for granted when people act or when they evaluate one another's actions.

ACTION AND INACTION

Hamlet turns the traditional revenge play on its head in an ingenious way: the man seeking revenge, can't actually bring himself to take revenge. For reason after reason, some clear to the audience, some not, Hamlet delays. In *Hamlet*, the question of how to act is affected not only by rational considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, ethical, and psychological factors.

Hamlet himself appears to distrust the idea that it's even possible to act in a controlled, purposeful way. When he does act, he prefers to do it blindly, recklessly, and violently. The other characters obviously think much less about "action" in the abstract that Hamlet does, and are therefore less troubled about the possibility of acting effectively. They simply act as they feel is appropriate. But in some sense they prove that Hamlet is right, because all of their actions miscarry.



Claudius possesses himself of queen and crown through bold action, but his conscience torments him, and he is plagued by threats to his authority (and, of course, he dies). Laertes resolves that nothing will distract him from acting out his revenge, but he is easily influenced and manipulated into serving Claudius's ends, and his poisoned rapier is turned back upon himself.

In the end, *Hamlet* does not provide a conclusion about the merits of action versus inaction. Instead, the play makes the deeply cynical suggestion that there is only one result of *both* action and inaction: death.

POISON, CORRUPTION, DEATH



In medieval times people believed that the health of a nation was connected to the legitimacy of its king, thus the health of a nation is connected to the welfare of the royal family. Throughout the play, Denmark is often described as a physical body made ill by the moral corruption of Claudius and Gertrude, and many interpret the presence of the ghost as a supernatural omen indicating that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv). It is as if the poison Claudius poured into Old Hamlet's ear has spread through Denmark itself. The dead King Hamlet is portrayed as a strong, forthright ruler under whose guard the state was in good health, while Claudius, a wicked politician, has corrupted and compromised Denmark to satisfy his own appetites. At the end of the play, the rise to power of the upright Fortinbras suggests that Denmark will be strengthened once again.

Hamlet also speaks in terms of rot and corruption, describing the world as an "unweeded garden" and constantly referring to decomposing bodies. But Hamlet does not limit himself to Denmark; he talks about all of *life* in these images. In fact, Hamlet only seems comfortable with things that *are* dead: he respects his father, claims to love Ophelia once she's dead, and handles Yorick's skull with tender care. What disgusts him is *life*: his mother's sexuality, women wearing makeup to hide their age, worms feeding on a corpse, people lying to get their way. By the end of the play, Hamlet argues that death is the one true reality, and he seems to view all of life as "appearance" doing everything it can (from seeking power, to lying, to committing murder, to engaging in passionate and illegitimate sex) to hide from that reality.

RELIGION, HONOUR, AND REVENGE

Every society is defined by its codes of conduct. There are many scenes in *Hamlet* when one person tells another how to act:

- ⇒ Claudius lectures Hamlet on the proper show of grief;
- ⇒ Polonius advises Laertes on practical rules for getting by at university in France;
- ⇒ Hamlet constantly lectures himself on what he should be doing.

In *Hamlet*, the codes of conduct are largely defined by religion and an aristocratic code that demands honour and revenge if honour has been soiled.

But as Hamlet actually begins to pursue revenge against Claudius, he discovers that the codes of conduct themselves don't fit together. Religion actually opposes revenge, which would mean that taking revenge could endanger Hamlet's own soul. In other words, Hamlet discovers that



the codes of conduct on which society is founded are contradictory. In such a world, Hamlet suggests, the reasons for revenge become muddy, and the idea of justice confused.

MADNESS



Hamlet originally acts mad to fool people into thinking he is harmless while investigating his father's death and Claudius's involvement. Early on, the bumbling Polonius says "[t]hough this be madness, yet there is method in't" (II.ii). Polonius's assertion is ironic because he is right and wrong. Polonius falsely believes Hamlet's madness stems from Hamlet's love of Ophelia. But as the play progresses, Hamlet's behaviour becomes more erratic. His acting mad seems to cause Hamlet to lose his grip on reality. The circumstances he has to manage emotionally are difficult, to say the least. Succumbing to physical violence when under extreme stress shows that Hamlet has deeper-set issues than merely acting mad. In reflection, Hamlet's choices and impulses beg the question, what gives him the right to act as such without consequences?

WOMEN



There are two important issues regarding women in *Hamlet*: how Hamlet sees women and women's social position. Hamlet's view of women is decidedly dark. In fact, the few times that Hamlet's pretend madness seems to veer into actual madness occur when he gets furious at women. Gertrude's marriage to Claudius has convinced Hamlet that women are untrustworthy, that their beauty is a cover for deceit and sexual desire.

As for women's social position, its defining characteristic is powerlessness. Gertrude's quick marriage to Claudius, though immoral, is also her only way to maintain her status. Ophelia has even fewer options. While Hamlet waits to seek revenge for his father's death, Ophelia, as a woman, cannot act. All she can do is wait for Laertes to return and take his revenge. Ophelia's predicament is symbolic of women's position in general in *Hamlet*: they are completely dependent on men. The presence of only two named female characters says something about the role of women within *Hamlet*. The death of both women also indicates a social commentary.

Hamlet is at his most agitated state when talking to either female character. Although he cares for both, he is suspicious, as well. In the case of his mother, Hamlet feels she remarried too quickly and that her remarriage means she did not love her first husband all that much. The idea deeply perplexes Hamlet. Then there's Ophelia. From the way the characters talk, we know Hamlet has been wooing Ophelia for some time. But after Hamlet starts to act mad, it doesn't take long for him to assume that Ophelia is in cahoots with Gertrude, Claudius, and Polonius. In reality, Ophelia obeyed her father and her monarch.

In both cases, Hamlet feels as if each woman has let him down. He's critical and quick to point out flaws though puns and backhanded comments. Ophelia is usually viewed as a true victim, while Gertrude's role is interpreted with more flexibility.

Symbolism



Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

YORICK'S SKULL



Throughout the play, Hamlet muses on and toys with the idea of death. His famous fourth soliloquy's opening lines, "To be, or not to be" shows Hamlet thinking about suicide. His turning point of realisation comes in the graveyard scene. Hamlet looks at the skull and remembers the man he was fond of, the court jester Yorick.

In his musings, Hamlet realises that death eliminates the differences between people. The hierarchical structure of society is illusory and ultimately crumbles into dust, just like the bones of those long gone.

THE GHOST

What is the ghost? What does it want? Where has it come from? Is it a "spirit of health or goblin damned" (I.i)? We just don't know for sure. But here's what the spirit claims:



- (1) The ghost says he's Hamlet's father;
- (2) The ghost also says that he was murdered by his brother, who happens to be Hamlet's uncle Claudius, the guy who's now married to Gertrude and sitting on the throne of Denmark;
- (3) The ghost also claims he's "doomed" to suffer in "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" until the "foul crimes done in [his] days of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (I.i) This sounds a lot like Purgatory, where sins had to be "purged" before a soul could make it to heaven.

FLOWERS

In Act 4, Scene 5, Ophelia has gone mad because of her father, Polonius' death. She enters the scene, carrying many different types of flowers, and begins to give different flowers to different people. Each of the flowers represents something, and there is a reason behind why Ophelia gives certain flowers to certain people.

First, she gives the rosemary to Laertes, which is a symbol of remembrance. She also gives pansies to Laertes, as they represent a symbol of thoughts – particularly thoughts of love. Although she gives both to Laertes, Ophelia most likely has Hamlet in mind when she says, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember; and there is pansies, that's for thoughts." (IV.v).

She then gives fennel and columbines to Gertrude. Fennel represents flattery, and columbines represent infidelity. This highlights her incestuous marriage and betrayal. Rue is given to King Claudius, which represents repentance and it highlights his guilt in both killing his brother and marrying his widow. Next, Ophelia gives daisies to both King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, which represent deceit and lies, because they both lied to the public and betrayed King Hamlet.

Finally, Ophelia says, "I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when my father died." (IV.v) Violets are a symbol of faith and fidelity and it is therefore fitting that there are no violets to hand out as there are so few characters representing these qualities. The fact that she mentions that they have "wither'd all when my father died" further highlights the corruption and decaying morale present on the play.



MOTIFS

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

INCEST AND INCESTUOUS DESIRE

The motif of incest runs throughout the play and is frequently alluded to by Hamlet and the ghost, most obviously in conversations about Gertrude and Claudius, the former brother-in-law and sister-in-law who are now married. A subtle motif of incestuous desire can be found in the relationship of Laertes and Ophelia, as Laertes sometimes speaks to his sister in suggestively sexual terms and, at her funeral, leaps into her grave to hold her in his arms. However, the strongest overtones of incestuous desire arise in the relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude, in Hamlet's fixation on Gertrude's sex life with Claudius and his preoccupation with her in general.

MISOGYNY

Shattered by his mother's decision to marry Claudius so soon after her husband's death, Hamlet becomes cynical about women in general, showing a particular obsession with what he perceives to be a connection between female sexuality and moral corruption. This motif of misogyny, or hatred of women, occurs sporadically throughout the play, but it is an important inhibiting factor in Hamlet's relationships with Ophelia and Gertrude. He urges Ophelia to go to a nunnery rather than experience the corruptions of sexuality and exclaims of Gertrude, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I.ii).

EARS AND HEARING

One facet of Hamlet's exploration of the difficulty of attaining true knowledge is slipperiness of language. Words are used to communicate ideas, but they can also be used to distort the truth, manipulate other people, and serve as tools in corrupt quests for power. Claudius, the shrewd politician, is the most obvious example of a man who manipulates words to enhance his own power. The sinister uses of words are represented by images of ears and hearing, from Claudius's murder of the king by pouring poison into his ear to Hamlet's claim to Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb" (IV.vi). The poison poured in the king's ear by Claudius is used by the ghost to symbolize the corrosive effect of Claudius's dishonesty on the health of Denmark. Declaring that the story that he was killed by a snake is a lie, he says that "the whole ear of Denmark" is "Rankly abused. . . ." (I.v).

Significance of the Play within Play

Hamlet has been entrusted with the duty of avenging his father's death by his father's Ghost. He learns that his father has been murdered by Claudius. But he hesitates to execute the command of the Ghost. He has doubts about the authenticity of the Ghost and Claudius's sin. He wishes to have strong proof before taking revenge and allows time to lapse until the arrival of the players. Their arrival inspires him with a sudden idea of enacting a play to catch the conscience of Claudius.

Hamlet receives the players with enthusiasm and plans with them to stage a play called *The Murder of Gonzago* with some modification in the speeches. On the day of staging the play



Hamlet prepares the players well in advance to make the play a great success. He advises them to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" so that they would not "overstep the modesty of nature", for the aim of a play is to hold the mirror up to nature. He then seeks the help of Horatio, to whom he has already revealed the secret of the Ghost's revelation, to watch the King's feelings while the play is staged. Thus he prepares the players, Horatio and himself to 'catch the conscience of the King'. The play is to be the driving force for further action. The King, the Queen and the courtier are invited to see the play.

The pantomime is the prelude to the actual staging of the play. Hamlet chooses to sit at Ophelia's feet rather than next to the Queen, partly to encourage the idea that his madness is caused by disappointed love, but mainly because he could not watch the King's face if he sat next to the royal pair. Hamlet plays the part of the commentator too. The pantomime is the first part of the King's ordeal: it represents very closely the crime of Claudius. Yet it is surprising that he does not betray his feelings. Some critics feel that Claudius, being lost in his conversation with the Queen, missed the pantomime. Certain other critics feel that Claudius does see the show, but he hopes that it is only an unlucky coincidence that *The Murder of Gonzago* resembles his own crime or he naturally suspects that the choice of the play is deliberate and knows that Hamlet is watching his reactions. As the remarks about second marriages, which he has heard, are grossly offensive, he pretends not to have noticed them. The dramatic importance of staging this pantomime is that as the play is stopped before the end, Shakespeare, in order to inform the audience of the full plot, uses the pantomime for the purpose.

The pantomime is followed by the actual play, *The Murder of Gonzago* with its deliberately artificial style, full of repetitions and indirectness enabling us to concentrate on the real drama which is being enacted, with Hamlet's eyes riveted on his uncle's face with the King trying hard not to reveal his feeling. However, Claudius's guilt is confirmed. After the exit of the Player Queen, Claudius appears to be frightened. Hamlet's declaration that the play is titled *The Mousetrap* is a veiled threat of which the King is perfectly aware, especially as 'mouse' is his term of endearment for Gertrude. When Lucianus enters, Hamlet's comment that he is 'nephew to the King' is taken as another threat, and Claudius suspects that Lucianus's lines are written by Hamlet himself. Claudius watches for the second time the re-enactment of his crime and is about to reveal himself, and when Hamlet gives a last twist to the knife by explaining, 'You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife,' the King rises, terrified with false fire. The Ghost's story is confirmed.

By enacting the play Hamlet has confirmed the Ghost's story, but at the expense of revealing his own knowledge to the King. His own fate is sealed unless he follows up his victory. The victory is imperfect, in any case, because Hamlet's behaviour during the performance, as well as the apparent gross lack of taste in his choosing a play with such a theme can allow the King to cover up his guilt with a show of anger. On the other hand, Hamlet is extremely happy at having discovered the truth. Now he gives more weight to the words of the Ghost. Thus, the situation leads to the turning point of the play. Hamlet has to act now. But when he gets the opportunity to carry out his work, he fails to act as he finds Claudius at prayer. In his soliloquy he justifies his lack of action by saying that if he kills Claudius, who is at prayer, his soul would enjoy the pleasures of heaven, instead of suffering the tortures of hell.



The Murder of Gonzago play puts both Claudius and the Ghost on trial, the former for fratricide and the latter for its honesty. Hamlet's doubts are removed. Still, he hesitates to act. Hence this play emphasises Hamlet's procrastinating nature. Hamlet is inspired by the play with greater desire to act, but it fails to have the effect to make him act. It only shows him as a 'pigeon-livered' man who shrinks from action on moral grounds. It allows Hamlet and Claudius to know exactly what the other feels. It is a climax and a crisis, and the pivot of the action in *Hamlet*. Now, Hamlet has no excuse for delay, Claudius will set forth his own manoeuvres to destroy Hamlet, and with the unseen hand of fate, Hamlet will grow to self-realisation.

This play-within-the-play further helps the dramatist to reveal his own theories of playacting. Hamlet acts as a mouthpiece for Shakespeare, through whom he expresses his ideas of playacting and shows his contempt for the contemporary actors. To Shakespeare, the aim of drama is to hold the mirror up to nature, with the actors not indulging in extravagant passions. They should "suit the action to the word, the word to the action", and should not "overstep the modesty of nature". This piece of advice given by Shakespeare through Hamlet shows Hamlet at his best. He is playing the part of Deputy Providence, plotting, arranging, baiting the trap, etc. His making fun of Ophelia, his darting sarcasm at his mother and playing the part of a Chorus, his mocking the King, all shows his versatile genius.

The play-within-the-play serves to emphasise that *Hamlet* is not the traditional revenge play. The hero, after the Ghost's words have been confirmed, he yet spares Claudius' life because the King is praying. The problem is that Hamlet sees himself as one who is to ensure the victim's punishment in the next world also. He is overestimating his role, and it is only towards the end that he will truly understand that man must accept certain conditions and act within them readily. However, it would be wrong to consider the scene the central act and the crisis of the play. It is important as far as bringing Claudius and Hamlet to a full awareness of one another's true nature.

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Contextual questions

Background and drama device questions

- 1.1 Identify the setting (time and place) of *Hamlet*.
- 1.2 Make a graphic representation of the act/plotline development of a typical Shakespeare play.
- 1.3 Explain the term *revenge drama*.
- 1.4 Explain the following literary devices:
 - (a) Dialogue
 - (b) Soliloquy
 - (c) Aside
 - (d) Stage directions
- 1.5 Explain the difference between **verse** and **prose** in a drama. Discuss why Shakespeare shifts between verse and prose in his plays.
- 1.6 Tragedies make use of **hamartia**. Explain what it is and identify Hamlet's hamartia.
- 1.7 What is the difference between **comic relief** and a **filler scene**?
- 1.8 Explain the roles of 'filling in the background' and 'tying up the loose ends' as used in a play.

ACT ONE Scene 1

- 1.1 Comment on the atmosphere created by the opening scene. (2)
- 1.2 Comment on the significance of the Ghost's appearance in this scene (p8). (3)
- 1.3 Explain why both Marcellus and Bernardo encourage Horatio to speak to the Ghost. (3)
- 1.4 Evaluate how lines 48 – 53 ("It is offended ... think you on't?") add to the tension in this scene. Pay attention to the line arrangement and style in your response. (3)
- 1.5 Refer to p 9 – 10. Discuss what is learned about the state of Denmark. (2)
- 1.6 Account for Horatio's long speech (p10) at this stage in the scene. (3)
- 1.7 Comment on the significance of the crowing of the cockerel (p11) by comparing the explanations given by Horatio and Marcellus. (4)
- 1.8 Explain Horatio's initial response to the reports of the apparition and how it changes during scene 1. (3)
- 1.9 Using your knowledge of the play up to this point suggest how the mood (or atmosphere) is created. (3)

ACT ONE Scene 2

- 1.1 This scene begins with a long speech by Claudius which is both diplomatic and manipulative. With reference to the diction in lines 1 – 16, explain how he manipulates the people of his court. (4)
- 1.2 Summarise how Claudius deals with the threat posed by young Fortinbras. (3)
- 1.3 State what Laertes requests of Claudius on p 15 and explain why Claudius easily grants his request so easily. (2)
- 1.4 Refer to Hamlet's first words in this drama: "A little more than kin, and less than kind." (p15, line 65). Discuss what this line reveals to the audience. (3)



- 1.5 Refer to Claudius's long speech on p 16 – 17. Comment on his feelings about Hamlet's mourning and the tactics he uses to try to change Hamlet's behaviour. (4)
- 1.6 What favour does Claudius and the Queen ask of Hamlet (p17)? Provide two plausible reasons for this request. (3)
- 1.7.1 Refer to Hamlet's soliloquy on p18. If you were the director of this play, fully explain how you would instruct the actor playing Hamlet to perform this scene. Refer to BOTH body language and tone of voice. Validate your answer. (4)
- 1.7.2 Discuss how Hamlet feels about his mother's marriage to Claudius. (2)
- 1.8 Explain the innuendo in "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart." (line 174) (3)
- 1.9 Give a brief character sketch of Hamlet and Horatio at this stage in the play. (8)

ACT ONE Scene 3

- 1.1 Why does Laertes tell his sister, Ophelia, to be cautious of Hamlet? (2)
- 1.2 Refer to Ophelia's response (lines 45 – 51) to her brother's advice. (3)
What does Ophelia's response reveal about her character?
What does this suggest about her brother's general behaviour?
- 1.3 List the 9 points of advice that Polonius gives to Laertes. (9)
- 1.4 Discuss how Polonius makes use of complicated language when speaking to Ophelia (p 27 – 29). What does this reveal about his character?

ACT ONE Scene 4

- 1.1 Describe what Claudius doing in the background of this scene and state what Hamlet thinks of this custom. Quote a line that reveals Hamlet's thoughts. (3)
- 1.2 Shakespeare makes use of antithesis/contrast in Hamlet's speech when he first sees the ghost (lines 20 – 23). Discuss how and why Shakespeare does this. (3)
- 1.3 According to Horatio and Marcellus, what could happen to Hamlet should he follow the ghost? (2)
- 1.4 What does Hamlet mean by his comparison to the Nemean lion (line 60)? (2)
- 1.5 Quote the famous line by Marcellus which indicates all is not well in Denmark. (1)
- 1.6 Discuss two aspects/incidents from this scene which relate to the theme of appearance versus reality. (4)

ACT ONE Scene 5

- 1.1 Where does the Ghost reveal he must soon depart to? What is his punishment now? (3)
- 1.2 Explain the Ghost's words to Hamlet: "I find thee apt" (p34). (2)
- 1.3 Discuss why Shakespeare makes reference to the "Lethe wharf" in line 33. (2)
- 1.4 What cause of death is publicly known, for the murdered King? (1)
- 1.5 Clarify the implication of Hamlet's words in line 41: "O, my prophetic soul!" (1)
- 1.6 Discuss how the late king of Denmark was murdered and how it led to him becoming a ghost. (4)
- 1.7 The ghost does not want Hamlet to harm Gertrude. What reason does he give? (1)
- 1.8 In your opinion, why does Hamlet not take his friends into confidence at this stage? (2)



- 1.9 In line 173 (p40) Hamlet talks of putting on “an antic disposition”. Explain what he means by this and why this will be necessary. (2)
- 1.10 At the start of this scene the ghost can be seen on the stage. However, after the ghost leaves on page 36, he speaks from underneath the stage on p39 and 40. Explain why the ghost does not appear on stage when he tells the men to “swear” at the end of this scene. (3)
- 1.11 Discuss why Hamlet asks Horatio and Marcellus three times to swear an oath of silence regarding this night. (3)

ACT TWO Scene 1

- 1.1 Discuss briefly what Polonius requests of Reynaldo. What does this request imply about the father-son relationship? (3)
- 1.2 According to Polonius, what “wanton, wild and usual slips” are associated with the young men of those times? (6)
- 1.3.1 By what trick is Reynaldo supposed to get information about Laertes? (2)
- 1.3.2 What does this reveal about Polonius's character? (2)
- 1.4 Explain why Polonius interrupts Reynaldo in line 35/36. What does this reveal about Polonius' attitude toward Reynaldo? (3)
- 1.5 Refer to line 61: “Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth.” Identify the figure of speech and comment on its effectiveness. (3)
- 1.6 How does Ophelia describe Hamlet's appearance to her (p51)? (3)
- 1.7 Why, according to Polonius (lines 102 – 106), does Hamlet appear so dishevelled? (2)
- 1.8 Relay the true reason behind Hamlet's dishevelled appearance. (2)
- 1.9 Account for Shakespeare's choice of words in line 83: “As if he has been loosed out of hell.”. (2)
- 1.10 In line 106 Polonius interrupts himself to question Ophelia. How would you instruct the actor playing Polonius to voice his question to Ophelia? Refer to tone of voice and body language. Fully validate your answer. (4)

ACT TWO Scene 2

- 1.1 Explain what Claudius and Gertrude expect of Rozencrantz and Guildenstern. (2)
- 1.2 Polonius delays giving his reasons regarding Hamlet's madness to Claudius and Gertrude (line 51). Why does he do this? (2)
- 1.3. What news do Valtemand and Cornelius bring back from Norway? (3)
- 1.4 Comment on the irony in Polonius's remark that “brevity is the soul of wit” (line 91). (2)
- 1.5 Refer to lines 160 – 168. Describe the plan that is formed to test Polonius's hypothesis that Hamlet is mad from rejected love. (3)
- 1.6 In line 175 Hamlet calls Polonius a “fishmonger”. Why? (2)
- 1.7 In Polonius's two asides (p61), what does he say about the contrast between madness and sanity? (3)
- 1.8 Refer to lines 294 – 311 (p64/65). Summarise the purpose of Hamlet's answer to Rozencrantz and Guildenstern regarding his current condition. (3)
- 1.9 Clarify why Hamlet calls Polonius “Jephthah” in line 410. (2)



- 1.10 In lines 449 – 517, Hamlet and the First Player recite lines from a play. This play tells how Pyrrhus slays the Trojan king Priam to avenge his father's murder.
- 1.10.1 How is Hamlet like Pyrrhus? (2)
- 1.10.2 How is he unlike Pyrrhus? (2)
- 1.11 Refer to Hamlet's soliloquy starting on p73.
- 1.11.1 How long has it been since Hamlet first saw the ghost of his father? (1)
- 1.11.2 What causes Hamlet to exclaim, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"? (2)
- 1.11.3 Explain the meaning of "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba/That he should weep for her?" (p74) (3)
- 1.11.4 How does Hamlet's passionate outburst, "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain" (line 581), aptly summarise the qualities of Claudius? (3)
- 1.11.5 Lay out Hamlet's plan to ascertain Claudius's guilt. (3)
- 1.11.6 Why does Hamlet feel he must have evidence of Claudius's guilt? (3)
- 1.11.7 The soliloquy moves through three stages. Identify the lines and summarise the gist of each stage. (9)

ACT THREE Scene 1

- 1.1 In your opinion, do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have any luck discovering what is bothering Hamlet, and do they report the whole truth? Substantiate your answer. (3)
- 1.2 Explain what Rosencrantz says brought Hamlet "a kind of joy" (line 20).
- 1.3. Refer to Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy on p84/85.
- 1.3.1 Discuss what Hamlet is deliberating in this famous soliloquy. (4)
- 1.3.2 What is the relation between death and sleep in context of the soliloquy? (2)
- 1.3.3 Refer to line 90: 'And lose the name of action'. Clarify Hamlet's greatest frustration at this stage in the play. (3)
- 1.3.4 This soliloquy can be used to prove that Hamlet is **not** mad. Critically evaluate the validity of this statement. (3)
- 1.4.1 Describe Hamlet's tone when he speaks to Ophelia on p 85 to 88. (1)
- 1.4.2 Find evidence in the text that explains his reaction to Ophelia is a reflection of his negative attitude towards women because of his mother's behaviour. (3)
- 1.5 Read Ophelia's soliloquy on p88.
- 1.5.1 What is the function of Ophelia's speech, with relevance to Hamlet's character in the text? (3)
- 1.5.2 Considering the Renaissance belief in the Chain of Being, why is she particularly horrified? (2)
- 1.6 What does Claudius conclude about Hamlet after overhearing the conversation with Ophelia? What does he decide to do? (3)
- 1.7 After watching Ophelia and Hamlet interact, what does Polonius decide to do next? (2)

ACT THREE Scene 2



- 1.1 Hamlet asks Horatio to watch Claudius's reaction throughout the play. Why does Hamlet choose to ask Horatio? (3)
- 1.2 Hamlet chooses to sit by Ophelia, instead of with Gertrude and Claudius. Why? (1)
- 1.3 Summarise the story of the play and Claudius's reaction. (4)
- 1.4 In lines 351 – 359, to what object does Hamlet compare himself? Why? (2)
- 1.5 As Hamlet goes to his mother at the end of this scene, what does he say he'll do? (2)

ACT THREE Scene 3

- 1.1 How does Claudius plan to rid himself of Hamlet? (3)
- 1.2 Explain why Polonius insists on eavesdropping on Gertrude and Hamlet's conversation. (2)
- 1.3 Summarise Claudius's soliloquy (p107/108). (4)
- 1.4 What does Claudius mean when he asks, "Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens/ to wash it white as snow?" (lines 45/46) (2)
- 1.5 Discuss why Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius when Claudius is at prayer. (3)
- 1.6 Refer to Hamlet's aside on p109. If you were the director of this play, fully explain how you would instruct the actor playing Hamlet to perform this scene. Refer to BOTH body language and tone of voice. Validate your answer. (4)
- 1.7 Clarify Claudius's closing lines of this scene. (2)

ACT THREE Scene 4

- 1.1 Describe Polonius' advice to Gertrude. (2)
- 1.2 Clarify Hamlet's words to his mother: "Come, come ... part of you." (p111) (2)
- 1.3 Whom does Hamlet think he is stabbing when he strikes through the curtain? (1)
- 1.4 What is the significance of the following quote: "How now, a rat? Dead! For a ducat, dead!" (line 23)? (3)
- 1.5 Refer to Hamlet's speech on p113. (2)
- 1.5.1 In this conversation with his mother, Hamlet again (l.ii.140) refers to his father as 'Hyperion'. What qualities do Hyperion and his father have in common? (2)
- 1.5.2 Claudius is described as **mildewed** and Old Hamlet as **wholesome**. Explain carefully, with specific reference to the words in bold, what these words mean in Hamlet's comparison and description of Claudius and King Hamlet. (4)
- 1.6 The ghost of King Hamlet appears on p114. Explain how this appearance affects Hamlet and Gertrude, respectively. (4)
- 1.7 What does Hamlet tell Gertrude to do (p117 and 118)? (3)
- 1.8 Find three examples of imagery that features disease or corruption in scene 4. Write down the quotes and explain their significance. (6)

ACT FOUR Scene 1

- 1.1 What bothers Claudius when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet murdered Polonius? (2)
- 1.2 Claudius makes use of a disease imagery in 20. Explain what he is saying. (3)
- 1.3 What does Claudius ask of Rozencrantz and Guildenstern? (2)



- 1.4 Gertrude keeps her promise to Hamlet to not let Claudius know that Hamlet is not really mad. Do you think Gertrude believes Hamlet's claim to sanity in Act 3 scene 4? Validate your answer. (3)

ACT FOUR Scene 2

- 1.1 What does Hamlet mean when he says: "Safely stowed." In line 1? What is the implication of his words? (2)
- 1.2 Hamlet calls Rozencrantz a "sponge" (line 11). Explain what this implies. (2)
- 1.3 Clarify Hamlet's witty remark: "The body is with the King, but the King is not / with the body." (2)

ACT FOUR Scene 3

- 1.1 Refer to Claudius's opening soliloquy. If you were the director of this play, fully explain how you would instruct the actor playing Claudius to perform this scene. Refer to BOTH body language and tone of voice. Validate your answer. (4)
- 1.2 Why must Claudius "not put the strong arm on" Hamlet (line 3)? (2)
- 1.3 Explain Hamlet's answer (lines 20 – 26) to Claudius, and what point is he making (3)
- 1.4 When asked where Polonius's body is, Hamlet replies: "If your messenger / find him not there, seek him i'th' other place yourself." (lines 35 – 36) (3)
- Discuss why this statement can be viewed as defiant. Also mention the implication of this statement.
- 1.5 What are Claudius's secret orders to England and why does Claudius believe his orders will be carried out? (4)

ACT FOUR Scene 4

- 1.1 What is the dramatic role of this scene? (3)

ACT FOUR Scene 5

- 1.1 What do we learn about Ophelia in the opening lines of this scene? (2)
- 1.2 Shakespeare makes use of song with both Hamlet (Act 3 scene 2, p101) and Ophelia but for different reasons. Evaluate this statement. (4)
- 1.3 Account for Laertes's anger with his return to Denmark. (2)
- 1.4 Discuss the significance of flower imagery in this scene (p140). (7)
- 1.5 Describe how Claudius appeases Laertes in this scene. (2)
- 1.6 Explain the irony of Claudius's concluding lines.

ACT FOUR Scene 6

- 1.1 Describe the content of Hamlet's letter to Horatio. (3)
- 1.2 Explain why this action is relayed in a letter instead of on board the ship. (4)

ACT FOUR Scene 7

- 1.1 Discuss Claudius' reasoning for not wanting to kill Hamlet in lines 9 – 24. (3)
- 1.2 In Hamlet's letter to Claudius (p145), Hamlet deliberately reveals that he is alone. Why do you think He does this? Validate your answer. (3)



- 1.3 Describe how Claudius manipulates Laertes into killing Hamlet. (3)
- 1.4 List the three steps in Claudius' and Laertes' plan for Hamlet. (3)
- 1.5 What is significant about the way Ophelia dies? (4)

ACT FIVE Scene 1

- 1.1 Why do you think Shakespeare has chosen to include the scene with the gravediggers at this stage of the play? How does it affect the tone of the play? (3)
- 1.2 Explain the 1st Gravedigger's words in lines 26 – 31. (2)
- 1.3 Why is it controversial for Ophelia to be given some form of Christian burial? (2)
- 1.4 How does Hamlet's verbal sparring with the 1st Gravedigger reveal his sanity? (2)
- 1.5 Explain the relevance of Yorick's skull (p164). (2)
- 1.6 Why does Hamlet comment on Alexander the Great (p165) when he is looking at all the skulls in the ground? (2)
- 1.7 In what ways do Hamlet's reactions to the skulls in the graveyard seem to suggest a change in his outlook? (2)
- 1.8 Laertes thinks that Ophelia should have a better funeral service. What is the priest's answer? (3)
- 1.9 How does Hamlet react when he realizes that the funeral he is watching is Ophelia's? (3)
- 1.10 What does the King say to Laertes to console him after Laertes and Hamlet are separated? (2)

ACT FIVE Scene 2

- 1.1 Discuss how the conversation between Hamlet and Horatio ties up some loose ends. (4)
- 1.2 What news does Osric bring Hamlet? (1)
- 1.3 Explain why Shakespeare included the character of Osric. (2)
- 1.4 Why does Horatio say that Hamlet "will lose this wager" (line 155)? (1)
- 1.5 Why does Hamlet believe he stands a chance to win the wager? (1)
- 1.6 Discuss the biblical allusion (about the sparrow, p175) in Hamlet's brief speech. What does it imply? (3)
- 1.7 What is Hamlet's attitude toward Laertes at the beginning of the match? (1)
- 1.8 How does Shakespeare raise suspense during the fencing match? (2)
- 1.9 Claudius has a chance to stop Gertrude from drinking the poisoned wine. Why do you think, does he not stop her? (2)
- 1.10 As Gertrude dies, Hamlet exclaims: "O villainy! Ho! Let the door be locked! / Treachery, seek it out!" (p180). What is Hamlet's state of mind? Substantiate your answer with reference to the punctuation and diction. (3)
- 1.11 In line 267, Laertes repeats Hamlet's name. What is the significance of this? (2)
- 1.12 After Hamlet kills Claudius, the courtiers all cry out: "Treason, treason!" Why? (2)
- 1.13 Explain the significance of Horatio's words: "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane." (line 294). (2)
- 1.14 Why is it fitting that Horatio is the one who will recount the truth? (3)
- 1.15 Refer to Horatio's lines after Hamlet dies (lines 313 -315, p182). If you were the director of this play, fully explain how you would instruct the actor playing Horatio (4)



to perform this scene. Refer to BOTH body language and tone of voice. Validate your answer.

- 1.16 What does the arrival of young Fontinbras signal at the end of the play? (2)

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Questions to ponder on

1. The big question of all of English literature: why does Hamlet drag his feet so long to avenge his father's murder? Sure, plenty of scholar-types have tried to answer that, but maybe they've missed something. Give it a shot.
2. What is the role of theatre within Hamlet? What is the purpose of the Hecuba speech, the play-within-the-play, and Hamlet's advice to actors? What practical purposes do theatrical moments serve in the plot? What symbolic purposes do they serve? Does theatre really "hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature" (3.2.23-24)?
3. Hamlet is full of madness, both real and feigned (maybe). What's the difference between the mad and the sane characters in the play, especially in what they say and how they say it? What are the similarities and differences between Hamlet's madness and Ophelia's?
4. Hamlet's conflicts take place in the context of a single family's domestic problems, and also in the context of political decisions that affect an entire country. How do the familial and political levels of Hamlet interact? Where do they reinforce each other, and where, if ever, do they contradict each other?
5. Almost from his opening lines, Hamlet is obsessed with suicide. He never does it, but he sure thinks about it a lot. How do Hamlet's reasons for avoiding suicide —and his attitude towards his own death —change throughout the play?
6. One of the more famous lines in Hamlet is, "To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man" (1.3.84-86). Which of the characters in Hamlet are true to themselves? Does that prevent them from being false to one another? Does the meaning of this quote change for you when you consider that it's spoken by Polonius, one of the play's most frequently mocked characters?
7. Hamlet seems pretty grossed out by his mother's sexuality. Why does he dwell so obsessively on the "incestuous sheets" of her marriage bed? What other weird sex-obsessions does Hamlet have?
8. It seems like half the characters in Hamlet are foils for Hamlet, and the rest of them are foils for each other. How do the different foils bring out different aspects of Hamlet's character? What other effects does all this doubling produce?
9. Is Hamlet's reaction to his mother's remarriage reasonable, or are his standards of fidelity too high? In the play-within-the-play, which Hamlet himself revised, the player Queen vows never to marry again: "Such love must needs be treason in my breast" (3.2.201). Does Hamlet expect his mother to remain single for the rest of her life? If so, why?
10. As he's dying, Hamlet begs Horatio to tell his story. Do you think the story Horatio will tell is the same one the readers or the audience have just experienced? Is Horatio capable of telling Hamlet's true story?
11. At the close of the play, Fortinbras says, "Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal" (5.2.442-444). Fortinbras, who never met Hamlet, characterises him as a good soldier who would have made a good king. Do you think Hamlet would have made a good king? Why or why not?