Hamlet
Notes by A Zimmermann

Guidelines
Study Guide

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THE BLUE BOOK SERIES
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Short biography of William Shakespeare

Many people think that William Shakespeare, the man who wrote *Hamlet* as well as many other plays and poems, was the greatest playwright of all time because of the very high quality of the plays that he wrote and how they have influenced theatre ever since they were first presented to the public about four hundred years ago.

*Shakespeare's early years*

Not very much is known about the life of William Shakespeare, despite the fact that he is so famous today. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon and was baptised on 26 April 1564, probably a few days after he was born. Stratford-upon-Avon is a small town in England about 120 kilometres from London. In those days, that was about a three- or four-day journey from London, by horse or on foot.

Shakespeare's parents were respected people in the community, and he probably received a good education at the local school. He probably started school at about the age of seven. School hours were long - they seem to have lasted nearly all day, for six days a week - and holidays were short. He probably left school at the age of 15, but not much is known about what he did after that.

In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, about whom also very little is known. He was 18 and she was probably 26. They had three children: a daughter, Susanna, born in 1583, and twins, Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585. After this there is a gap in what we know about Shakespeare's life, which is often called "the lost years". These lasted until 1592, when we know he was working in the theatre in London as both an actor and a playwright.

*London and the theatre*

When Shakespeare first went to London, he probably first acted in plays, but soon he began writing them. By 1594 he was a member of a company, which was a group of actors, called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who performed before Queen Elizabeth, the queen of England at the time, as well as in London theatres. During this period, Shakespeare became a popular and successful playwright.

In 1596 Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, died, and Shakespeare went home to Stratford-upon-Avon for his funeral. When he was at home he bought a new house for himself and his family and he started living there, with his family, more and more. He travelled often between his new home and London, and his career continued to flourish.

In 1599, a group of people, of whom Shakespeare was one, built the Globe theatre on the bank of the Thames River in London. This theatre had space for an audience of 2 500 people.

*Last years*

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Guidelines for studying a play

Our aim with this study guide is to make the play easier for you to understand and so help you to answer any questions based on the play that might be set in your examinations.

This study guide is not a substitute for reading the play, but should be read together with the play.

Studying plays

An important part of studying literature, such as a play, is to make sure that you understand the text in its context. In other words, you must be able to say how the setting, circumstances or events that form the environment within which the play takes place affect the play. For example, if a play is set in a particular country, or at a particular time in history, how does this setting make a difference to what happens in the story and to your understanding of what happens?

Another aspect of context is the historical setting or context within which the author wrote his or her play. How does the setting of the writer influence what he or she writes? Do you think that relationships between people were the same in sixteenth-century England as they are in South Africa in the early twenty-first century? Do you think they spoke in a similar way? Your understanding of the play will be affected by how you answer these questions.

Be critical of what you read. Does the playwright make you think differently about things? Do you agree with his or her point of view? You must be able to explain your responses to these two questions by referring to parts of the play. This is what "justifying your answer" means.

When you study a play you must be able to explain and interpret:
- the development of the plot
- the way in which conflict works
- the presentation of characters
- the way that different characters speak and what the language they use says about them
- the messages and themes in the play and their significance in the text
- how background and setting relate to characters and/or themes
- changes in mood and atmosphere
- the timeline of events
- any ironic twists
- the ending
- how word choices, imagery and sound techniques affect mood, meaning and theme
- how dialogue and action are related to character and theme
- how the setting of the play relates to its themes.

In a play it is also important to be able to explain and interpret:
- how verse, rhyme, rhythm and punctuation shape the meaning
- how dramatic irony works
- what the dramatic purpose of a particular scene, incident or character is.

Plot and sub-plot

The plot is a description of the events that take place from the beginning to the end of the play.

- Exposition: The exposition can be considered as the introduction, and will be at the beginning of the play. It gives the reader an opportunity to meet the characters and to understand the setting.
- Rising action: A good play has tension and a build-up to the climax. The rising action refers to the event or events that occur that set off the action.
- Conflict: There are two different kinds of conflict in a play – internal conflict and external conflict. Internal conflict refers to how a character may be feeling. This could be revealed through his or her speech in the play, or thoughts (if the playwright has included asides and soliloquys). External conflict refers to the conflict between characters, or characters and other outside forces (for example, the law). Conflict keeps the story interesting.
- Climax: The climax of a play is the part of the play where the conflict hits its peak. The climax determines whether or not the conflict will be resolved.
- Falling action or anti-climax: Now that the climax has been reached, the play needs to come to some kind of conclusion. The falling action leads to the end of the play.
- Denouement or resolution: This is the ending. At this point, the reader should be able to say what has happened and how it has ended.

The plot of a play

The structure of a play is its framework, or how it is organised and put together. Shakespeare’s plays are always divided into five acts, and each act is divided into several scenes. A play needs to have tension, conflict among the characters, plot, action and changes in tone and pace to be interesting. Shakespeare provides all these things in
All Hamlet. Other important parts of the framework are the style of language, themes, imagery and symbolism used in the play.

Other plot devices

Foreshadowing: The playwright uses foreshadowing to hint at an upcoming event or plot twist. Often, the characters will not be aware of something to come, so foreshadowing can draw the audience in and create tension.

Flashbacks: This is a scene or part of a scene that is set in a time earlier than the action in the play. It can be used to offer a glimpse into a character’s backstory, or to explain a particular event.

Pace: This refers to how quickly or slowly the playwright takes the audience or reader through the story. In some acts or scenes, the action may unfold quickly. While in others, the playwright may choose to slow the pace down.

Staging

Shakespeare wrote most of his plays for the Globe Theatre. The Globe Theatre was different from the theatres we know today. It was made of wood and was roughly round in shape. The raised stage jutted out into the yard in the middle where the poorer people, known as the groundlings, stood. The whole central area, except for the stage itself, was open to the sky. Many of the plays lasted for three hours and they usually took place in the afternoons because there was no electricity to produce artificial light. Richer patrons sat in three galleries built one above the other surrounding the open space, or even on the stage itself. As a result, there was more direct interaction between the actors and the audience than there is in a modern theatre.

The Globe Theatre

Very little scenery was used on the stage of the Globe Theatre, but good use was made of the various parts of the stage, such as an inner stage, an upper stage, a trapdoor in the floor of the stage and doors at the back.

All scenes usually began with actors entering, and ended with them exiting (which means leaving the stage), since there were no curtains to draw after a scene was over. The same empty stage was used for many different scenes. If it was necessary to let the audience know that a scene had changed, then it was done either by telling the audience by including a mention of the different scene in one of the speeches of the actors, or using a very simple prop, such as a chair placed on the stage.

It would be broad daylight in the Elizabethan theatre because plays were put on in the afternoon, but the words of the characters would tell the audience what to imagine here. Because most scene changes were told to the audience, they had to listen carefully to the dialogue. To help make up for the lack of scenery, the actors dressed in splendid costumes, while the language of the plays – particularly those of Shakespeare – are full of wonderful poetic descriptions of particular scenes.

Other ways were found to make the plays more realistic and exciting. For example, the Globe Theatre was burnt down in 1613 when it caught fire after real cannons were fired during a play by Shakespeare about one of the kings of England, Henry VIII. And the sword fights like the one at the end of Hamlet would have been played out very realistically for, at the time, many people carried swords for personal protection and would have known how to use them properly. There were also special effects to make it appear as if someone were bleeding from a wound.

Shakespeare’s language

Hamlet was written more than four hundred years ago, so the language is very different from what you are used to. Shakespeare’s plays are mainly written in blank verse, the form used by most of the dramatists in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. There are sections, however, that are written in prose.

Prose is written language, for example, the type of language you see in a novel. Poetry looks different on a page because a poem is divided into lines. These lines have a particular pattern of sounds and rhythm, and they often rhyme. Blank verse is a type of poetry that has a regular pattern of sounds, but the lines do not rhyme.

The advantage of using blank verse is that it is flexible. What does this mean? Let us compare blank verse to the human voice. The human voice is capable of expressing a wide range of feelings – it can show anger or surprise or fear or joy and many other emotions. Blank verse is capable of a wide range of tones in the same way. Emotions can be expressed most effectively in blank verse. In blank verse, the lines are ten syllables long. These syllables have alternating stresses, very similar to ordinary English. Each line divides into five divisions or “feet”. The technical name for this is “iambic pentameter”.

Sometimes in this study guide, two or more lines of blank verse are written as continuous text, with a forward slash (/) to show where one line of verse ends and a new line begins.

Variations in the blank verse

Shakespeare wrote mostly in blank verse, and sometimes in prose. However, he was far too good a writer to use exactly the same metre all the time in the various scenes because this would have a very boring effect. So he used many techniques inside the blank verse so that he could emphasise some words, speed up the rhythm or slow it down, and create interest or tension.

Here are two of the many variations that he uses:

When you read a Shakespeare play, you will notice that there are many apostrophes in the words that he uses. You will see these in words such as “ne’er”. The apostrophe is put in so that you do not say the letter that is left out (never), to make the language
sound more like everyday language that people speak (in the way that we use abbreviations like “can’t” and “shouldn’t” when we speak English today). Shakespeare also uses rhyming couplets (two lines where the last words of each line rhyme with each other) on certain occasions. Rhyming couplets are used to show very strong emotion.

Another language technique that Shakespeare uses is contrast. Contrasts are things or ideas that are different in a noticeable way. By contrasting things, ideas or characters, the unique qualities of each are more clearly brought out. For example, if we place a light object against a dark background, the contrast between the two allows us to see that object more clearly. Shakespeare uses contrasting images or ideas in the play for the same basic purpose.

Dialogue, monologue, soliloquy, aside and action

**Dialogue:** a conversation between two or more people.

**Monologue:** a long speech by one character (usually directed at other characters in the play).

**Soliloquy:** when one character, usually a major one, speaks his or her thoughts aloud so that the audience is aware of what is happening. It is used to bring the audience up to date with events that have happened; to show us the plans that one of the characters is intending to put into action; or to tell us the opinion of one character regarding another character.

**Aside:** a comment made that is not part of the main argument or discussion, but added to tell us what is happening or what a person is thinking.

**Action:** events that form the plot of the play.

Language and literary devices

Authors use language and literary devices for a variety of reasons. Often the use of these helps with characterisation, or the development of themes in the novel. It is important that you know what these literary devices mean, so that when you are studying the novel, you are able to understand how and why they work.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Device</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simile</strong></td>
<td>The comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind.</td>
<td>For example: She runs like the wind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metaphor</strong></td>
<td>The use of one thing to represent something else that is not related to make a point about it.</td>
<td>For example: He is my rock. An extended metaphor is when a metaphor is used throughout a large section of the novel, or the entire novel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personification</strong></td>
<td>The use of human characteristics to describe non-human objects or things.</td>
<td>For example: The winter was kind to us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alliteration</strong></td>
<td>The repetition of the first sounds of a phrase or string of words.</td>
<td>For example: The winter was kind to us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example: Live, laugh, love.

**Onomatopoeia**

A word that imitates the sound of the thing or action it is describing.

For example: The egg fell on the floor with a loud splat.

**Hyperbole**

The use of extreme exaggeration to make a point.

For example: I have a ton of novels to read this year.

**Contrast**

Two completely different or opposing ideas or things placed next to each other to emphasise the difference between them.

For example, an author might describe a beautiful day and then introduce a nasty and cold-hearted character within that setting.

**Irony**

Irony means that we say one thing but actually mean something different, or that something appears to be one way, but in fact it is not.

There are three kinds of irony:

- **Verbal irony:** this occurs when there is a hidden meaning behind something that is said. In other words, there is a difference between what is said and the underlying meaning.
- **Situational irony:** here the irony is to be found in the events that are taking place and not in the words said.
- **Dramatic irony:** this happens in a play when a character says something without realising its full meaning, but the audience or reader understands the full meaning.

**Sarcasm**

The use of irony to mock another person or an idea. It is also when someone says the opposite of what they mean in order to express annoyance or to mock.

**Anti-climax**

This is different from the anti-climax used as a plot device. Anti-climax in this context refers to an unsatisfying conclusion to a particular event or situation, particularly if the reader was expecting something dramatic to happen.

**Symbol**

A picture, shape or object used to represent a particular idea or quality.

For example: A wedding ring as a symbol of love or a dove as a symbol of peace.

**Euphemism**

The use of mild phrases or words when saying it directly could be considered too rude, too harsh or too upsetting.

For example: He passed away. (He died.)

**Pun**

This is a joke, or play on words, that uses a word that may have two different meanings for a completely different purpose.

For example: A horse is a very stable animal.

**Understatement**

This is the opposite of hyperbole. Understatement is the deliberate use of language to play down a situation to make it seem less serious or dramatic than it is.

For example: If an author is describing a long, wet season in which there was flooding but wants to use understatement, he or she might say: It rained more than usual this year.
Introduction to Hamlet

Historical and social background for the play

The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods

William Shakespeare lived during a time when the popular Elizabeth I was queen of England (known as the Elizabethan period), followed by James I (Jacobean period). It was an exciting time in English history as many voyages of discovery were taking place by famous explorers such as Sir Francis Drake, who sailed right round the world, and was only the second person to do so.

One way in which some English people expressed pride in their country was to write plays and other works of literature in the English language, which at the time was developing into a language that would one day be one of the most important in the world, spoken by huge numbers of people in many countries. The plays of William Shakespeare helped to establish English as a language of importance, in which great works of literature could be written.

Drama during these periods in history

Some of the best plays in the English language were written at this time. Queen Elizabeth and, after her, King James, encouraged learning, music and literature. Drama in particular became very important during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and the first permanent theatres ever to exist in England were built in London at this time.

Before the first permanent theatre was built in London in 1576, plays were performed by groups of all-male actors who travelled from place to place and set up their stages where there was suitable space. (Women were forbidden, by law, to appear on the stage, and the parts of women in plays were taken by young boys whose voices had not yet broken.) These actors often performed their plays in the courtyards of inns, or in large houses of noblemen. In London, the first theatre, called simply The Theatre because there was no other theatre at the time, was built in 1576. It was pulled down later, and Shakespeare and his associates used the wood from it to build the Globe Theatre in 1599.

Why Hamlet is a tragedy

One view of tragedy in literature is that the tragic character is one caught up in a destiny that cannot be avoided. Hamlet's destiny is to avenge the murder of his father. It is a destiny that is thrust upon him by his father's ghost. It is a destiny not in accordance with his nature. This will result in an intense conflict within Hamlet, as he is aware:

"The time out of joint: O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right."

Another definition of tragedy is a play in which the audience is able to identify with the hero and admire him for his truly great and noble qualities, but that he is brought to destruction by a fatal flaw (failing or weakness) in his personality. This flaw brings about intense suffering that usually leads to the death of the hero. This, however, is regarded as a victory in defeat because of the insight he has gained on life and the nature of human existence.

Summary of the plot

Hamlet is deeply depressed. Denmark is in a state of readiness for war, because young Fortinbras of Norway feels honour bound to restore to his country the land seized by Hamlet's father. On top of this, Claudius, who is Hamlet's uncle and now the king, has married Gertrude (Hamlet's mother).

Hamlet discovers that his friends have seen a Ghost that resembles his father. He seeks it out, and speaks to it. The Ghost tells Hamlet that it has appeared to him because he must avenge his father's death. He had not died of a snakebite, but had been poisoned by Claudius who had first seduced Gertrude. Claudius had poured poison into the ear of his sleeping brother. Old Hamlet had thus not been given the chance to absolve himself of his sins before dying. Hamlet should not permit the incestuous relationship between his mother and Claudius to continue. It is his duty to take revenge; however, he should in no way harm his mother, whose conscience will punish her enough. The Ghost leaves at the approach of dawn, telling Hamlet not to forget his words.

Hamlet swears that revenge will occupy his life entirely until it has been carried out. He does not tell Horatio and Marcellus what has passed between him and the Ghost, but still swears them to secrecy. The Ghost's voice is heard asking them to swear. Hamlet also tells his friends that he may pretend to be mad, and that they must show no knowledge of the true state of affairs. Hamlet feels that a cruel fate has determined that he should be the one to set things right in Denmark.

Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been paid to keep an eye on him, and asks them more than once what has brought them to Elsinore. They eventually admit that they are there at the request of Claudius and Gertrude, and Hamlet says he knows it is to find out the cause of his strange behaviour. Hamlet tells them that he is very depressed, and finds no pleasure in the world anymore. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell him that a troupe of travelling players is on its way to Elsinore.

Hamlet welcomes the players and, left alone with them, asks the First Player if he will recite a speech the next day that Hamlet will write for him. The player agrees. Hamlet has heard that criminals have given themselves away when their own crime has been enacted on the stage. He decides to write a scene that will mirror the murder of his father, and if Claudius as much as turns pale he will know what to do. Hamlet seeks this proof because he thinks the Ghost might have been an evil spirit leading him to his doom. Hamlet
decides that "the play's the thing, Wherein (he'll) catch the conscience of the King".

The court has gathered for the performance of the play. The players mime the scene of a murder by poisoning. The play proper then begins, involving a scene in which a queen swears eternal love for her husband, and that were he to die, she would never marry again. Hamlet asks his mother what she thinks of the play, and she says the queen should not be quite so vehement. Claudius says he hopes that the play will not give offence in any way. Hamlet says it should have no effect on those who are free of guilt. As the play proceeds, poison is poured into the ear of the sleeping king by the lover of the queen. Claudius rises in confusion and flees from the room, his guilt revealed. Hamlet now has the proof he needed that the Ghost may be believed.

Claudius tries to pray for forgiveness for the sin of killing his brother, but his guilt is so great that he cannot pray. He longs for heaven's pardon, but knows that as long as he is in possession of his ill-gotten gains - Gertrude and the Kingship - he cannot hope for pardon. On his way to his mother's bedroom, Hamlet sees Claudius at prayer. It would seem the perfect opportunity to kill him, but Hamlet knows that if he kills him while Claudius is at prayer, his soul will go straight to heaven. He would rather kill Claudius while he is committing some sin so that his soul will suffer in hell.

Hamlet accuses his mother of offending his father. Gertrude tries to leave, but Hamlet forces her to stay. She cries out for help, and Polonius moves behind the arras. Thinking it is Claudius, Hamlet stabs him to death. He is not dismayed at the death of Polonius, only disappointed that it wasn't Claudius.

It is reported to Gertrude that Ophelia has gone mad. When Ophelia is brought to the queen, she sings songs that are apparently meaningless, but which reflect on her tragic relationship with Hamlet. Claudius makes Laertes (Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother) his ally by blaming Hamlet for Polonius's death and Ophelia's madness. Claudius also says that Hamlet wishes to kill him. Claudius offers both encouragement and help in Laertes scheme for revenge. He says that Hamlet was jealous when he heard of Laertes's skill with a rapier. Claudius then outlines his plan: he will arrange a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, but Laertes's sword will be unbudded, and the tip will be poisoned. Claudius will also offer Hamlet a poisoned drink.

The court is gathered to watch the match. Laertes chooses the poisoned foil, and Claudius places a pearl (poisoned) in a cup of wine, which he says will be Hamlet's should he score early points. Hamlet scores the first point, but declines to drink the wine Claudius offers him. When Hamlet scores another point, Gertrude drinks to his success; she has, however, taken a drink from the poisoned cup.

Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier, and in the struggle they change rapiers. Laertes is wounded and also poisoned. Gertrude dies, and as Laertes is dying, he confesses the plot to Hamlet. Hamlet stabs Claudius and forces the poisoned wine down his throat.

The dying Laertes asks Hamlet's forgiveness, and is freely forgiven. Hamlet asks Horatio to make sure that his true story is told, but Horatio would rather die with him. Hamlet prevents Horatio from drinking the poisoned wine, and asks him to tell his story.

Canon fire heralds the return of Fortinbras on his way from Poland, and with his dying breath Hamlet decrees that Fortinbras should be the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras mourns the scene of slaughter, and Horatio explains how all these deaths came about. Fortinbras laments that he can claim the right to be king under such tragic circumstances, but Horatio assures him that was Hamlet's wish. Fortinbras gives orders for Hamlet to be buried with all the rites that befit his noble and heroic spirit.

Themes

The conflict between passion and reason
When Claudius maintains, "The head is ... native to the heart" he touches on an essential feature of Hamlet's tragedy: Passionately Hamlet knows that he must kill Claudius, but time and time again his reason inhibits the act of revenge.

This theme may be regarded as the main theme of the play - and partly answers a favourite examination question: Why does Hamlet delay killing Claudius?

Evil, corruption and disease
Throughout the play we come across images that refer to corruption and disease. Here are a few of the many examples:

"I am sick at heart"
"the world ... 'tis an unwedded garden"
"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark"
"O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven"

Appearance vs. reality
Hamlet detests hypocrisy and false outward appearance. As he tells his mother about his grief: "Seems, Madam, nay it is; I know not 'seems" (2.2.76). Similarly, the Ghost is hurt by his "most seeming-virtuous queen" (1.4.46). Hamlet is struck by the fact that King Claudius "may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (1.4.108). Polonius tells Ophelia to read a prayer book so "That show of such an exercise may colour/Your loneliness" (i.e. so that Hamlet will not suspect a trap - 3.1.45-46). In order to survive in such a world, Hamlet puts on an outward show and pretends to be mad.

Revenge
Hamlet is called on by his father's Ghost to avenge his "most unnatural murder". The dramatic organisation of the play depends on the revenge being carried out. Even the secondary plot is linked to the main plot because of the revenge theme. When Hamlet kills Polonius, he becomes the object of Laertes's revenge. The play reaches its climax
when the hero is killed as a victim of revenge while at the same time fulfilling his own
revenge.

**Honesty**
As in most great works of art, the structure of Hamlet is based on an opposition of
themes. Against the theme of evil (see above), the theme of honesty and virtue is
balanced. Hamlet demands the extremes of honesty but it is a quality that even the
woman he loves (Ophelia) betrays. Thus is Hamlet’s suffering intensified by loneliness,
because “to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand”
(2.2.178–179).

**Characters**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Claudius</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is worth noting that Hamlet is really the only major character in the play; all the other characters are minor.</td>
<td>Hamlet’s mother. We know little of Gertrude apart from the influence that she has allowed Claudius to have on her. It is clear that her late husband loved her dearly, and thought her to be pure and faithful. That Hamlet loves his mother is also clear – part of his dreadful suffering is caused by the fact that she has so debased herself in her marriage to Claudius. She is also not entirely bad – she is genuinely concerned about her son, shows affection for Ophelia, and when Hamlet confronts her, she is filled with dreadful grief (she says “Oh Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain”).</td>
<td>Hamlet’s uncle, and the King of Denmark. Although we judge Claudius to be capable of great evil, he is not an entirely evil man. He is capable of remorse, despite the awful nature of his deeds. However, he does not have either the strength or the desire to give up the things that would make his remorse valid.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Ophelia</th>
<th>Polonius</th>
<th>Laertes</th>
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<td>Ophelia’s innocence and sweetness are clear, as is her love for Hamlet. She is young and inexperienced. Her fault lies in her weakness. Her madness and subsequent suicide show the extent of her distress at the loss of her love and then the death of her father.</td>
<td>Polonius is a tedious old fool who offers unwanted advice to all he meets. He is, however, worse than tedious; he is also a meddler. It seems to be poetic justice that one who chooses to hide behind an arras and spy on others should die behind an arras in a case of mistaken identity.</td>
<td>Laertes is in temperament the opposite of Hamlet. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes wishes to exact revenge immediately when he finds out that Hamlet killed his father. Before the deaths of Hamlet and Laertes, the truth is revealed and they are reconciled to each other.</td>
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<th>Horatio</th>
<th>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern</th>
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<td>Horatio is apparently the perfect balance between emotion and reason. Horatio is not a cold man. He feels love and loyalty and anger, but he does not allow passion to rule him; he is not “passion’s slave”. Horatio is utterly loyal, and we know that he will carry out Hamlet’s dying wish. Horatio pays the final tribute to Hamlet: “good night sweet Prince, And flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest.”</td>
<td>Hamlet treats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the contempt they deserve. They come to him pretending to be his friends, while in fact they have been sent by the king and queen to “pluck out the heart of (his) mystery”. It is not surprising that the two characters are often discussed as a pair and that it is difficult to distinguish between them. They are both spineless, and lack any quality that would identify one from the other.</td>
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Act-by-act analysis of *Hamlet*

**Act 1 Scene 1**

*Lines 1–18 (Bernardo: Who's ... Give you good-night)*

**Content**
The scene takes place on the battlements of the royal castle in Elsinore in Denmark. It is midnight and bitterly cold. Bernardo enters to relieve Francisco of sentry duty. Marcellus and Horatio follow him.

**Comment**
These opening lines establish the atmosphere that pervades the play as a whole. For example, Bernardo and Francisco are nervous and ill at ease (note how Bernardo is anxious not to be left alone – lines l. 12–13). In this way, the audience is informed that something unusual is afoot. The weather is hostile (l. 8), and thus creates an atmosphere that is not conducive to pleasure and comfort. In other words, nature provides a backdrop against which tragic events will be played out. Francisco’s comment: “And I am sick at heart”, particularly prepares us for Hamlet’s tragic situation. The theme of disease and corruption is an important one throughout the play.

The words “Long live the King!” (l. 3) will prove to have considerable dramatic irony. The action of the whole play is concerned precisely with how long the king will live. Marcellus remarks on Francisco’s honesty (l. 16), and we shall see that honesty is an important theme in the play. At the end of the play, the dead Hamlet will be carried out as a soldier (he, too, will at last become a man of action).

*Lines 19–39: (Marcellus: Holla! ... The bell)*

**Content**
Marcellus explains to Bernardo that he has brought Horatio with him to witness, with his own eyes, the appearance of the Ghost that they have seen the two previous nights. Horatio, however, is skeptical.

**Comment**
We are introduced to Horatio, Hamlet’s closest friend. He is a down-to-earth and reasonable sort of man and in many ways provides a complement to Hamlet’s character (see l. 3.1.53–57).

Horatio is not given to fancy and imaginative flights (Hamlet is, perhaps, too imaginative on occasion). He calls the dreaded Ghost “this thing” (l. 21) and his tone of voice when he says: “Well, sit we down” (l. 33) would be openly skeptical. He is also immune to the threatening hostility of the weather and is able to joke about it (l. 19).

Unlike Francisco, Horatio is not “sick at heart” (l. 9). Consequently, when the Ghost does appear, Horatio’s reaction will be all the more striking by way of contrast and the audience, also, will experience his awe.

Note how Bernardo’s words in lines 35–39 (“Last night ... beating one”) convey the impression of regular, continuous and eternal time. Very often in tragic poetry stars symbolise the ordered pattern of the universe. But the tragic events that will occur will bring about a “strange eruption” in the state of Denmark (see line 69). Only when Claudius and Hamlet are dead will order be restored.

*Lines 40–51 (Enter Ghost ... Exit Ghost)*

**Content**
The Ghost appears. It is in the form of Hamlet’s dead father and is wearing armour. Horatio is a scholar and can speak Latin, the language used to exorcise an evil spirit. He speaks to the Ghost. It stalks off as if it were offended.

**Comment**
The appearance of a Ghost would be perfectly acceptable to an Elizabethan audience. However, it has considerable dramatic significance for a modern audience as well. Firstly, it is the source of Hamlet’s tragic destiny (it will command Hamlet to kill Claudius). In other words, it is a symbol of an external and implacable fate, which the tragic hero (Hamlet) cannot avoid. Secondly, the Ghost comes from the eternal world beyond death and throughout the play emphasis is placed on the natural world, which has become a source of such bitter disillusionment for the idealistic Hamlet. Heaven and earth (a phrase used by Hamlet more than once) are contrasted. It is only when Hamlet is dead and “flights of angels have sung him to his rest” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 352) that the Ghost’s dreaded command will have been fulfilled. Thirdly, Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio suspect that the Ghost might be an evil spirit. We shall see that a similar doubt in Hamlet will be a cause of much anguish for him. Note how Horatio’s use of the word “usurpist” (line 46) echoes the fact that Claudius usurped the throne by the unnatural act of murder.

*Lines 52–69 (Marcellus: ‘Tis ... This bodes)*

**Content**
A pale and shaken Horatio remarks how much the Ghost resembles the dead king whenever the latter went into battle. Horatio fears that the Ghost’s appearance means an upheaval in the state of Denmark.

**Comment**
The line: “This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (l. 69) is an important one. The normal, ordered pattern of existence will be disrupted – in a moral as well as political and social sense – by the tragedy that is about to be set in motion. Only when the tragic events have run their course and Fortinbras (about whom Horatio will now tell us) is established on the throne of Denmark, will political order be restored. The restoration of moral order will be Hamlet’s task.
The fact that Horatio refers to heaven (I. 49) and God (I. 56) emphasises again that the Ghost might be a spirit of evil. Moreover, it indicates that one of the main themes of the play is the conflict between good and evil.

Horatio accentuates the fact that Hamlet’s father was a warrior (I. 60–63). In other words, he was a man of action, whereas Hamlet suffers from an inability to act.

**Lines 70–125 (Mar: Good now ... Unto out)**

**Content**

Marcellus asks why such a careful watch is kept and why preparations are made for war day and night. Horatio explains that old Fortinbras, the King of Norway, challenged old Hamlet (Hamlet’s father) to war. Old Hamlet killed old Fortinbras and, in keeping with the terms of a legal contract that had been drawn up, old Hamlet took possession of certain lands held by Fortinbras. However, young Fortinbras has now put together an army and intends to seize the lands taken over from his father by old Hamlet. For this reason Denmark is preparing for war. Bernardo agrees and suggests that it might also be the cause of the appearance of old Hamlet’s Ghost.

Horatio recalls how before the murder of Julius Caesar in Rome, strange and unnatural events took place. Similarly, a disaster can now be expected in Denmark. This foreshadows the tragic events to come.

**Comment**

Old Fortinbras is survived by his son young Fortinbras and old Hamlet is survived by his son, young Hamlet. Young Fortinbras will eventually succeed to the Danish throne that was intended for Hamlet, and the destiny of the two nations will work out. But what is of added significance in the play is the difference in character between Fortinbras and Hamlet. Unlike Hamlet’s inaction, Fortinbras does not let time and passion lapse. His “native hue of resolution is (not) sickled o’er with the pale cast of thought” (Act 3 Scene 1 lines 84–85), and he is “of ... mettle hot and full” (I. 96). In contrast, Hamlet accuses himself of being “A dull and muddy-mettled rascal” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 561). Fortinbras is not guilty “Of thinking too precisely on the event” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41) but knows, as does Claudius, that “That we would do, / We should do when we would, for this would changes” (Act 4 Scene 7 line 117–118). Thus Shakespeare not only prepares us for a future event in the plot but also establishes important characterisation.

Horatio’s references to unnatural events (I. 112–117) again provide a background to the unnatural act of old Hamlet’s murder that is soon to be revealed to Hamlet. The normal pattern of society is about to be disrupted (see I. 69) by the coming tragedy, but by referring to disruption in the cosmos and in nature, Horatio makes us aware that man’s moral crimes have a universal and metaphysical significance as well. Both “heaven and earth together” (I. 124) are affected.

By using the words “the fates” (I. 122), Horatio reminds us of Hamlet’s destiny. And Horatio also prepares us for the fact that it will be a tragic destiny.

**Lines 126–142 (Re-enter Ghost ... Exit Ghost)**

**Content**

The Ghost reappears. Horatio demands that it speak to him. Perhaps Horatio can do a good act that will relieve the Ghost’s torment. Or perhaps the Ghost can reveal how the war with Fortinbras can be avoided. However, a cock crows and the Ghost disappears in spite of Marcellus’s attempt to strike it with his spear.

**Comment**

The words “if there be any good thing to be done” (I. 130) will take on a profound significance when the Ghost commands Hamlet to avenge his murder. It is a good thing in the sense that moral right will be restored. But at the same time it will be the cause of much anguish for Hamlet and will eventually lead to his death.

The word “fate” (I. 133) echoes Horatio’s use of the word “fates” (I. 122) and thus accentuates our awareness of Hamlet’s destiny.

**Lines 143–175 (Mar: ‘Tis gone ... Exeunt)**

**Content**

Marcellus claims they are wrong to strike at the Ghost that has such royal bearing. Horatio says that he has been told of how a wandering Ghost must return to its abode when the clock crows at dawn. What they have just seen is proof of this.

Marcellus tells the legend that at Christmas the cock crows all night. Consequently no Ghost dares to wander and there is no evil abroad. Horatio is cautious about accepting the truth of this fully. He suggests that they tell Hamlet about the Ghost. He is sure that the Ghost will speak to Hamlet.

**Comment**

The fact that the spirit of Hamlet’s father is “so majestical” (I. 144) gains our sympathy for it. We will be all the more prepared, therefore, to side with Hamlet against Claudius, the murderer of his father.

Marcellus compares the Ghost to “air” (I. 145). This, together with the words “in sea or fire, in earth or air” (I. 153) suggests that the events that result from Hamlet’s meeting with the Ghost will have an elemental as well as a metaphysical dimension. Both “heaven and earth together” (I. 124) will be involved.

The word “wholesome” (I. 162) occurs several times in the play (see Act 1 Scene 5 line 70; Act 2 Scene 2 line 440; Act 3 Scene 2 line 310; Act 3 Scene 4 line 65; Act 4 Scene 5 line 81). It means good physical or moral health or producing a good effect. This is a word in strong contrast to the many images of disease and rotteness that occur throughout the play. Together with the words “hallow’d and so gracious” (I. 164) and the reference to Christ (I. 159), the word “wholesome” touches upon the whole theme of good and evil in this play. Denmark has become a Godless land and the time is not “gracious” but “out of joint” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 184). When Horatio says “and do in part
believe it” (l. 165), he reveals a great deal about his character: he is cautious and not given to fantasy (l. 23) or to extreme reactions (like Hamlet).

Act 1 Scene 2

Lines 1–41 (King ... Exeunt Voltimand)

Content
King Claudius addresses his court. He acknowledges that the death of his brother (and Hamlet’s father) deserves a period of mourning. At this time, however, sorrow must give way to joy since he has just married the former king’s wife who now rules with him.

Claudius next mentions Fortinbras’s demands for the territory that old Hamlet legally won in the war against Fortinbras’s father. Claudius announces that he has written to Fortinbras’s uncle, the King of Norway, to restrain Fortinbras. Claudius then dispatches two ambassadors with letters to this effect.

Comment
Several features of Claudius’s character are revealed by his speech. We shall soon learn that he murdered his brother in a vile manner so that he could gain the throne. Consequently, his remarks about his grief for his “dear brother” (l. 1) are lies. Note how Claudius unconsciously places emphasis on the physical outward appearance of grief: “One brow of woe” (l. 4) “with one auspicious and one dropping eye” (l. 11). It is this sort of hypocrisy that disgusts Hamlet (theme of honesty and virtue).

The careful and bland sentences reveal Claudius to be a coolly calculating man who avoids extremes (l. 5). He carefully weighs opposing emotions in an “equal scale” (l. 13). In this he provides a contrast to the character of Hamlet who experiences the extremes of (real) grief. Indeed, line 5 develops one of the main themes of the play: the theme of conflict between passion and reason, and we note that Hamlet will later say, “Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well/When our deep plots do pall” (Act 5 Scene 1 line 8–9). During this speech we must think of Hamlet sitting apart in bitter loneliness among the glitter and brilliance of the court. Claudius asks for joy that “our sometime sister (is) now our queen” (l. 8). The haste with which his mother married Claudius is at the heart of Hamlet’s suffering – and we must remember that long ago marrying a dead brother’s wife was considered a crime of incest. In addition to this, Hamlet is acutely aware that his mother’s new husband, Claudius, is not as worthy as his dead brother (Hamlet’s father).

Claudius claims that Fortinbras is wrong if he thinks the “state to be disjoint and out of frame” (l. 20). But that is exactly what it is, as Hamlet tells us after he has heard that Claudius is the murderer of his father: “The time is out of joint” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 189). In other words, there is no harmony, no wholesomeness but evil and strife. Only through the death of the “mighty opposites” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 62) of Hamlet and Claudius will harmony be restored and the conflict of good and evil be over.

Note the contrast between Claudius and the King of Norway. Claudius is lusty, whereas the King of Norway is “impotent” (line 29). However, they do have one thing in common – a nephew whose purpose they are unaware of. Naturally, therefore, we make a comparison between these nephews, Fortinbras and Hamlet. Fortinbras is an impetuous young man in action who has little regard for the law (l. 24). Later, however, we see that this passionate nature is tempered with reason and that he will prove to be a worthy ruler. By way of contrast, Hamlet is inclined to be an idealistic thinker bound too much by the law of speculative reason. It is only in the height of passion that he fulfills the purpose that his reason has told him is morally right.

Lines 42–63 (And now, Laertes ... And thy best)

Content
Claudius asks Laertes to state his request. Claudius holds Laerte’s father, Polonius, in such high esteem that it will be unlikely that he turns down any reasonable request. Laertes asks to be allowed to return to Paris now that the coronation is over. Polonius says that he has granted his permission. Claudius accordingly grants his permission.

Comment
We are introduced to Laertes who, like Fortinbras, will provide a foil (a contrast and a complement) to Hamlet’s character. For example, we can see in this extract that once Laertes has made up his mind he is determined to act (l. 58–59). In this way, he provides a contract to Hamlet who knows what he must do but suffers from the incapacity to do it.

Claudius’s words: “The head is not more native to the heart” (l. 47) develop one of the main themes of the play. We reason with our heads whereas our hearts are the source of our passions. If the head and the heart are “native” to each other it means that they are in perfect harmony with each other and belong naturally to each other. With Hamlet, however, this is not so. His passion tells him to kill Claudius; his reason tells him why he must not.

Lines 64–68 (But now, my cousin ... These but the)

Content
Claudius turns to Hamlet who immediately forbids any familiar form of address. Hamlet’s mother pleads with Hamlet not to look so downcast and sorrowful. She argues that by dying his father only obeys a law of nature that everyone must obey. Hamlet bitterly retorts that his sorrowful looks and clothes of mourning are only the outward signs of his real inner grief. Unlike others he is not merely putting on a show.

Comment
The first words that Hamlet speaks in the play are, naturally, important to our understanding of his character. His tone is angry and bitter and reveals his hatred and contempt for Claudius. To be called Claudius’s son (l. 64) would be repulsive to him. What he means is that he is more than a cousin, because he is a nephew, but less than a natural (“kind” is the Elizabethan word for “natural”) son. Possibly, however, there is a further play on the word “kind” and Hamlet means Claudius can expect no hypocritical kindness from him. There may even be a further meaning, namely that Hamlet and
Claudius are certainly not two of a kind.

Hamlet’s words “I am too much i’ the sun” (l. 67) are also enigmatic. The sun was a commonly accepted symbol for the king and Hamlet may mean that he is too close to King Claudius for comfort. He is also punning on Claudius’s use of the “son” (l. 64), and means because of the marriage he is Claudius’s stepson, a situation that he finds very uncomfortable. In any event, we are given a glimpse of a mind that is capable of wit. The tragedy is that Hamlet’s wit has to be employed to express bitter irony rather than joy.

The queen’s words “Passing through nature to eternity” (l. 73) are a euphemism for death. However, what we witness in Hamlet is the tragic process of Hamlet passing through nature (i.e. life on earth) into death (see Comment on Act 5 Scene 1 line 351–352). The word “particular” (75) emphasises the loneliness of Hamlet’s position. It is loneliness that, in turn, intensifies his tragic course.

Lines 76–86 develop one of the main themes of the play: the theme of appearance and reality. This theme is allied to the theme of honesty and virtue. The words “But I have that within which passes show” (l. 85) reveal that Hamlet is concerned with truth. He demands truth from those around him — and is betrayed. Note how Hamlet’s reference to the “eye” and the “visage” (l. 80–81) deliberately echo Claudius’s hypocritical references in lines 4 and 11.

Lines 87–128 (King: ‘Tis sweet ... Exeunt)

Content

Claudius says that Hamlet is to be admired for the way he mourns his father. It is Hamlet’s duty to do so — but not for too long. Hamlet’s behaviour is unmanly, against the will of heaven, and simple-minded. If an event is inevitable, it is silly to try to oppose it and let it affect us too deeply. To do so is unnatural and unreasonable. That fathers die is an unavoidable fact of existence and we must accept it. So Claudius wishes Hamlet to stop mourning his father. He wants Hamlet to regard him, Claudius, as his father. He declares publicly that Hamlet will succeed to the throne. He says he loves Hamlet as much as the most loving father could. He hopes that Hamlet will not go back to Wittenberg to study but will remain in the court. Hamlet’s mother also asks him to stay. Hamlet somewhat sullenly says that he will. Claudius makes the best of Hamlet’s reply and calls for a bout of drinking in order to celebrate.

Comment

The reason why Claudius tries to persuade Hamlet not to mourn his father’s death so deeply is because his own superficial grief is shown up by contrast. Hamlet’s grief is extreme whereas Claudius is a politician who carefully avoids extreme feelings in public. Even if Claudius was sincere in his argument about the nature of mourning, his views are poles apart from the very real feelings that Hamlet is experiencing. Hamlet’s grief is much more than merely a “filial obligation” (l. 91) which custom demands. Hamlet and Claudius are indeed “mighty opposites” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 62). The structure of the play is based not only on the conflict of themes but also on the conflict of characters. It is, of course, Claudius and not Hamlet who is guilty of “impious stubbornness” (l. 94) and it is his and not Hamlet’s will that is “most incorrect to heaven” (l. 95) and a “fault to heaven” (l. 101 and see Act 1 Scene 4 line 91: “Heaven will direct it”).

Claudius accuses Hamlet’s behaviour of being a “fault to nature” (l. 102) but as the Ghost insists it is Claudius who has been “most unnatural” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 25 and l. 28). It is ironic that Claudius advises Hamlet to employ his faculty of “reason” (l. 103). If Hamlet obeyed only the dictates of his passionate “heart” (l. 101), Claudius would be killed much sooner than he is. So, too, if it were true that Hamlet has a “mind impatient” (l. 96).

It is quite impossible for Hamlet to think of Claudius “As a father” (l. 108). It sickens him to make the comparison between Claudius and his father (l. 139–140 and Act 3 Scene 4 line 64–65). Similarly, Hamlet would regard Claudius’s words “Be as myself in Denmark” (l. 122) with bitter irony because to be like Claudius would mean to be corrupt, hypocritical, ruthless, adulterous and a murderer.

Claudius is ambitious for power. He would naturally think that anybody else would also be, and his declaration that he has appointed Hamlet to succeed him (l. 109) is an attempt to soften Hamlet’s attitude. Yet again we see that he does not truly know Hamlet. The real reason why Claudius wants Hamlet to remain “in the cheer and comfort of our eyes” (l. 116) is, of course, so that he can spy on him. Having usurped a throne himself, Claudius is suspicious of Hamlet’s behaviour. Thus his words mean the direct opposite of what they appear to say.

One cannot help admiring the bold way with which Claudius can conceal the truth. Hamlet’s reply is anything but “loving and fair” (l. 121) and his agreeing to stay is certainly not “gently and unforc’d” (l. 123). The actor playing Claudius would be smiling broadly here (l. 124) but he in fact is a “smiling, damned villain” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 106). Yet another difference between Hamlet and Claudius is that Claudius can perform the “actions that a man might play” (l. 84) whereas Hamlet has “that within which passeth show” (l. 85).

For Hamlet there would be bitter irony in Claudius’s announcement of a drinking bout to celebrate his “gently and unforc’d accord”. Claudius’s drinking habits are one of the features Hamlet finds most distasteful (Act 1 Scene 4 line 14–20).

Lines 129–159 (Hamlet: O! ... But break)

Content

Hamlet is alone. He wishes God had not decreed suicide to be a sin. He can find nothing of value in the world anymore. It has become corrupt. He is particularly hurt by the haste with which his mother married after the death of his father. What is more, his father compared to Claudius was like a god compared to a bestial figure. His father’s love for his mother was gentle and protective, and she thrived on her love for him. And now she married again within two months. By doing so she has revealed the frailty of all women. At the funeral of her husband, she wept copious tears but now — even a beast would have mourned longer than she did — she is married to her dead husband’s brother who cannot
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Claudius are certainly not two of a kind.

Hamlet’s words “I am too much i’ the sun” (l. 67) are also enigmatic. The sun was a commonly accepted symbol for the king and Hamlet may mean that he is too close to King Claudius for comfort. He is also punning on Claudius’s use of the “son” (l. 64), and means because of the marriage he is Claudius’s stepson, a situation that finds him very uncomfortable. In any event, we are given a glimpse of a mind that is capable of wit. The tragedy is that Hamlet’s wit has to be employed to express bitter irony rather than joy.

The queen’s words “Passing through nature to eternity” (l. 73) are a euphemism for death. However, what we witness in Hamlet is the tragic process of Hamlet passing through nature (i.e. life on earth) into death (see Comment on Act 5 Scene 1 line 351–352). The word “particular” (75) emphasises the loneliness of Hamlet’s position. It is loneliness that, in turn, intensifies his tragic course.

Lines 76–86 develop one of the main themes of the play: the theme of appearance and reality. This theme is allied to the theme of honesty and virtue. The words “But I have that within which passes show” (l. 85) reveal that Hamlet is concerned with truth. He demands truth from those around him — and is betrayed. Note how Hamlet’s reference to the “eye” and the “visage” (l. 80–81) deliberately echo Claudius’s hypocritical references in lines 4 and 11.

**Lines 87–128 (King: ‘Tis sweet ... Exeunt)**

**Content**

Claudius says that Hamlet is to be admired for the way he mourns his father. It is Hamlet’s duty to do so — but not for too long. Hamlet’s behaviour is unmanly, against the will of heaven, and simple-minded. If an event is inevitable, it is silly to try to oppose it and let it affect us too deeply. To do so is unnatural and unreasonable. That fathers die is an unavoidable fact of existence and we must accept it. So Claudius wishes Hamlet to stop mourning his father. He wants Hamlet to regard him, Claudius, as his father. He declares publicly that Hamlet will succeed to the throne. He says he loves Hamlet as much as the most loving father could. He hopes that Hamlet will not go back to Wittenberg to study but will remain in the court. Hamlet’s mother also asks him to stay. Hamlet somewhat sullenly says that he will. Claudius makes the best of Hamlet’s reply and calls for a bout of drinking in order to celebrate.

**Comment**

The reason why Claudius tries to persuade Hamlet not to mourn his father’s death so deeply is because his own superficial grief is shown up by contrast. Hamlet’s grief is extreme whereas Claudius is a politician who carefully avoids extreme feelings in public. Even if Claudius was sincere in his argument about the nature of mourning, his views are poles apart from the very real feelings that Hamlet is experiencing. Hamlet’s grief is much more than merely a “filial obligation” (l. 91) which custom demands. Hamlet and Claudius are indeed “mighty opposites” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 62). The structure of the play is based not only on the conflict of themes but also on the conflict of characters. It is, of course, Claudius and not Hamlet who is guilty of “impious stubbornness” (l. 94) and it is his and not Hamlet’s will that is “most incorrect to heaven” (l. 95) and a “fault to heaven” (l. 101 and see Act 1 Scene 4 line 91: “Heaven will direct it”). Claudius accuses Hamlet’s behaviour of being “a fault to nature” (l. 102) but as the Ghost insists it is Claudius who has been “most unnatural” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 25 and l. 28). It is ironic that Claudius advises Hamlet to employ his faculty of “reason” (l. 103). If Hamlet obeyed only the dictates of his passionate “heart” (l. 101), Claudius would be killed much sooner than he is. So, too, if it were true that Hamlet has a “mind impatient” (l. 96).

It is quite impossible for Hamlet to think of Claudius “As a father” (l. 108). It sickens him to make the comparison between Claudius and his father (l. 139–140 and Act 3 Scene 4 line 64–65). Similarly, Hamlet would regard Claudius’s words “Be as ourself in Denmark” (l. 122) with bitter irony because to be like Claudius would mean to be corrupt, hypocritical, ruthless, adulterous and a murderer.

Claudius is ambitious for power. He would naturally think that anybody else would also be, and his declaration that he has appointed Hamlet to succeed him (l. 109) is an attempt to soften Hamlet’s attitude. Yet again we see that he does not truly know Hamlet. The real reason why Claudius wants Hamlet to remain “in the cheer and comfort of our eyes” (l. 116) is, of course, so that he can spy on him. Having usurped a throne himself, Claudius is suspicious of Hamlet’s behaviour. Thus his words mean the direct opposite of what they appear to say.

One cannot help admiring the bold way with which Claudius can conceal the truth. Hamlet’s reply is anything but “loving and fair” (l. 121) and his agreeing to stay is certainly not “gently and unfor’cd” (l. 123). The actor playing Claudius would be smiling broadly here (l. 124) but he in fact is a “smiling, damned villain” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 106). Yet another difference between Hamlet and Claudius is that Claudius can perform the “actions that a man might play” (l. 84) whereas Hamlet has “that within which passeth show” (l. 85).

For Hamlet there would be bitter irony in Claudius’s announcement of a drinking bout to celebrate his “gently and unfor’cd accord”. Claudius’s drinking habits are one of the features Hamlet finds most distasteful (Act 1 Scene 4 line 14–20).

**Lines 129–159 (Hamlet: O! ... But break)**

**Content**

Hamlet is alone. He wishes God had not decreed suicide to be a sin. He can find nothing of value in the world anymore. It has become corrupt. He is particularly hurt by the haste with which his mother married after the death of his father. What is more, his father compared to Claudius was like a god compared to a bestial figure. His father’s love for his mother was gentle and protective, and she thrived on her love for him. And now she married again within two months. By doing so she has revealed the frailty of all women. At the funeral of her husband, she wept copious tears but now — even a beast would have mourned longer than she did — she is married to her dead husband’s brother who cannot
be compared with her former husband. To have married so soon betrayed the fact that her tears must have been insincere. The speed with which she hastened into this incestuous alliance cannot lead to anything good. But Hamlet must keep these thoughts to himself, a burden that will break his heart.

Comment
When an actor is alone on the stage his speech is known as a soliloquy. And it is often in a soliloquy that a character reveals the most about himself. The soliloquys are high points in the play.

Lines 129–133: Hamlet has reached such an extreme of despair that he contemplates an extreme act - suicide (as he does also in his famous “to be, or not to be” soliloquy in Act 3 Scene 1).

Many editors now hold the belief that Shakespeare originally wrote “sullied flesh” rather than “solid flesh”. In other words, his own flesh has become soiled and corrupted through the licentious and incestuous (see line 157) behaviour of his mother. And indeed, the corruption of pure love is the theme of the soliloquy as a whole. However, the image of “solid flesh” is equally effective. It conveys how acutely Hamlet is aware of the physical body, which has been corrupted by his mother’s hasty marriage to Claudius.

The image of “resolve itself into a dew” (l. 130) has an interesting echo in Act 1 Scene 3 line 41–42 when Laertes tells Ophelia: “And in the morn and liquid dew of youth Contagious blastments are most imminent”. Then, as here, it is suggested that dew is fresh and pure. Moreover, dew forms on the grass and the flowers but now the garden is “unweeded” and “rank and gross” (l. 135–136).

There is a tone of nostalgia in Hamlet’s words. It is as if he is mourning the loss of his youthful innocence, which has been replaced by his experience of corruption and betrayal (i.e. Gertrude – and we shall see, Ophelia also – do not live up to Hamlet’s extreme demands).

In lines 131–132, it is clear that Hamlet abides by God’s law. It is significant that Horatio says: “Heaven will direct it” (Act 1 Scene 4 line 91), and when Hamlet dies Horatio is sure that “flights of angels (will) sing (him) to (his) rest” (Act 5 Scene 1 line 352). Again we are reminded that the struggle between the “mighty opposites” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 62) of Hamlet and Claudius is a struggle of good and evil.

Lines 132–133: Does this, perhaps, partly account for Hamlet’s inability to act? In any event, it is a tragic view for a young man to hold. By “uses” Hamlet primarily means “customs”. He is weary of the hypocrisy, of the frailty of women (l. 146) and of corruption.

Lines 135–137: (Note the word “merely” means “absolutely, utterly”.) The impression of the Garden of Eden after the fall from innocence and purity is a strong one. In any event, it is one of many images in the play that refer to corrupt beauty.

Lines 137–138: Hamlet has until now commented in general terms on the causes of his despair. He now refers to the particular and immediate cause – his mother’s marriage to Claudius so soon after the death of her former husband, Hamlet’s father.

Note how throughout the soliloquy Hamlet names the time that has lapsed since his father’s death (see also lines 145, 147, 153), thus indicating the importance it has for him.

Lines 139–142: Hyperion was the sun god, whereas a satyr was a half-human half-bestial being. Hamlet’s father’s love for Gertrude was pure and gentle, whereas Claudius’s is lustful and beastly only. In Hamlet’s eyes his mother has betrayed and perverted not only the excellent virtue of his father but also the act of love itself (l. 139).

Hamlet’s expression “Heaven and earth” has a far greater significance than being merely an oath. In a sense we may say that what Hamlet demands of the world around him is that it be heaven on earth. But it is not. It is a form of hell for him. It is only when he dies that flights of angels will sing him to his rest (Act 3 Scene 2 line 352).

Lines 143–146: The image “she would hang on him” conveys an attitude of loving adoration, while the words “increase”, “crown” and “fed” convey a love that was natural and self-generating. But now, by her hasty marriage to Claudius, Gertrude has perverted what was once natural. The flowering of her love has become “rank and gross” (l. 136).

The words “Frailty, thy name is woman!“ have a profound significance in the play. Not only has Hamlet’s mother betrayed and failed Hamlet, but also we shall see that Ophelia will fail him (for example, by allowing Polonius to use her so that he can spy on Hamlet). And it is interesting to note that twice (Act 2 Scene 2 line 236–7 and Act 2 Scene 2 line 488) fate is referred to as a “strumpet”, a derogatory accusation that Hamlet levels at Gertrude and Ophelia also.

Line 150: Claudius claimed that Hamlet is not being reasonable by mourning for his father so deeply and so long. Hamlet claims the opposite – that to mourn the way Gertrude and Claudius have is to be worse than a beast, which does not have the faculty of reason. Note how the word “beast” emphasises the idea that was suggested by the “satyr” in line 140.

Line 153: Hercules was a man of action if ever there was one! Hamlet is aware that his own nature is made up more of rational thought and imagination than participation in direct, physical action.

Line 154: The word “unrighteous” means “insincere”. Insincerity in the world around him contributes a great deal to the idealistic Hamlet’s despair.

Lines 156–157: Note how the alliteration of the “s” sounds expresses Hamlet’s disgust. Gertrude had married the brother of her dead husband. Such a marriage was considered incestuous and it is one of the main causes of Hamlet’s disgust and anger.
Line 158: Indeed it does not “come good” – all three, Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius will lose their lives in the tragedy that ensues because of it. And again we are reminded that among the many conflicts of opposites in the play there is an eternal conflict between good and evil.

Lines 169–194 (Enter Horatio … This marvel)

**Content**

Hamlet meets Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo. Hamlet expresses his friendship towards Horatio, who is a consistent friend. Horatio explains that he is in Elsinore because he wished to attend the funeral of Hamlet’s father. Hamlet comments that Horatio has been able to attend both funeral and wedding and expresses his disgust at the haste of the latter. Hamlet mentions that he can imagine the figure of his dead father in his mind’s eye. Horatio tells Hamlet to prepare himself for the news that (the Ghost of) his father has been seen.

**Comment**

The fact that Hamlet does not at first recognise his best friend Horatio (l. 160–161) shows how preoccupied he is with his thoughts about his mother’s marriage to Claudius. Horatio is joking when he says he is playing truant from the University of Wittenberg (l. 169). Hamlet, however, uses the word “truant” in a more general and profound sense when he says “I know you are no truant” (l. 173), and means that Horatio is a man who would never break his faith and would always remain constant. This quality would certainly differentiate Horatio from others in the court of Elsinore.

Line 175: (We’ll … depart) is a reference to the drinking habits of Claudius, which so disgust Hamlet. This theme is further developed in Act 1 Scene 4 line 8–22.

The sarcasm with which Hamlet utters the words “Thrift, thrift” (l. 180) reveals the extent to which Hamlet has been hurt by the speed with which his mother’s wedding followed his father’s funeral. One would normally wish one’s “dearest foe” (i.e. bitterest enemy – l. 182) to hell. We note that this line foreshadows the reason why Hamlet does not kill Claudius when Claudius is at prayer (Act 3 Scene 3) for then he would see Claudius, his “dearest foe”, to heaven rather than to hell. And just as heaven is the opposite of hell so does Hamlet now think of his father as the opposite of Claudius.

Line 195–257 (Hamlet: For God’s … end of Scene)

**Content**

Horatio tells Hamlet how Marcellus and Bernardo have twice seen the armed figure and how they were too afraid to speak to it. They told Horatio of this and on the third night he himself saw the apparition. It seemed as if it were about to speak when the cock crowed and it hastened away. Horatio asks for details about the Ghost. Horatio tells how its facial expression was more sorrowful than angry and that the likeness to Hamlet’s father was remarkable. Hamlet decides that he will watch for the Ghost that night and that nothing will prevent him from speaking to it. He asks his friend not to tell anyone. Hamlet is sure that the appearance of his father’s Ghost will reveal some evil act.

**Comment**

In a sense what the Ghost commands Hamlet to do will be “for God’s love” (l. 195) since it is Hamlet’s task to purge Denmark of corruption. We note that Horatio is sure that “Heaven will direct it” (Act 1 Scene 4 line 91). By “each word made true and good” (l. 210), Horatio merely means that what Marcellus and Bernardo reported to be so was in fact so. However, it is a phrase that reminds us of an important theme of the play – that if everyone around him spoke with words that were true and good Hamlet would not be in such an extreme state of despair. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the apparition is armed (l. 226 and 254). This “troubles” (l. 224) Hamlet and makes him suspect that there has been “some foul play” (l. 255 – i.e. his father’s spirit seeks revenge for some evil act committed against him). At the same time it draws attention to the fact that Hamlet’s father was a man of action and familiar with killing others. His son, however, will suffer much anguish before committing the extreme act of killing Claudius.

Note how the words “A countenance more in sorrow than in anger” (l. 231) give the spirit of Hamlet’s father a dignity and, at the same time, gains our sympathy for it. The words “moderate haste” (237) tell us a great deal about the character of Horatio: discreet, controlled, well-balanced. Hamlet on the other hand, swings from the depths of despair “into a towering passion” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 97); it is only when he is in a towering passion that he is able to act.

In Scene 1, we saw that Marcellus, Bernardo and Horatio were not sure whether the apparition was an evil spirit or not. Now (l. 243–245) Hamlet wonders whether the Ghost may be a devil in disguise sent to tempt him. We shall see that this possibility will be a reason (or an excuse?) for Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius. In any event, Hamlet lives in a world where all too often a person appears to be one thing and is in reality the opposite.

The repetition of the word “foul” (l. 255–256) develops one of the main themes of the play.

**Act 1 Scene 3**

**Lines 1–52 (Laertes: My … I stay too long)**

**Content**

Laertes is about to return to Paris and he gives his sister, Ophelia, some advice about Hamlet.

Laertes warns Ophelia that she must not take Hamlet’s love for her seriously as it is merely a young impulse and will not last. Ophelia is surprised at Laertes’s assessment of Hamlet’s attitude. But Laertes repeats that Hamlet is still young and has yet to mature in mind and soul. He admits that Hamlet’s intentions may be honourable but warns Ophelia that as Hamlet is a prince he cannot choose according to his own desires but must be ruled by the needs of the state. Consequently, Ophelia must not yield to Hamlet’s advances and lose her chastity. She must rule her emotions. It is when one is young that
one is most vulnerable to temptation and evil. Ophelia is prepared to follow her brother’s advice but tells him that he, also, must follow his own advice. Laertes assures her that she need have no fear on that score.

Comment

Although Laertes’s advice is well meaning, he certainly has no insight into Hamlet’s character. Hamlet’s love for Ophelia seems to be genuine (“I lov’d Ophelia: forty thousand brothers/Could not, with all their quantity of love, Make up my sum” – Act 5 Scene 1 line 262–264). She is certainly no trifle (l. 5) for him. Nor is his love for her “a toy in blood” (i.e. a freak of the passions, a mere impulse – l. 6). And because his love for her is so profound, sincere and idealistic, he is all the more hurt when she accedes to her father’s wish that she return his presents to him and when she allows herself to be “bait” so that Polonius and Claudius can spy on him. Moreover, Laertes is suggesting that Hamlet’s advances spring from sexual self-interest only. But in his letter to her Hamlet writes: “To the celestial, and my soul’s idol ...”, which hint at a more spiritual affection for her (Act 2 Scene 2 line 109). Hamlet’s “mind and soul” (l. 13) have already achieved the maturity that Laertes claims they lack.

It is indeed upon Hamlet that “the safety and the health of the whole state” (l. 21) depend. It is his function to purge the state of its moral rottenness. He is the one to do so because “no soil no cautel doth besmirth/The virtue of his will” (l. 5–16). However, the crux of the play is that there is a gap between Hamlet’s will and the execution of that will and it is only at the end of the play that he can “give his saying deed” (l. 27).

It is significant that the central image of Laertes’s speeches is derived from nature: Ophelia must compare Hamlet’s love to a violet “in the youth of primy nature” (i.e. it will not last beyond springtime – l. 7). He compares the development of a man’s mind and soul to a natural growth (“nature, cresent” – l. 11). He compares the corruption of youth and virtue to the way buds (“buttons” in l. 40) of roses are destroyed by the canker worm (l. 39) in spring before they have a chance to flower. Youth itself is compared to “liquid dew” (l. 41, and compare Hamlet’s own words “Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” – Act 1 Scene 2 line 130). But Laertes’s warning to Ophelia of what might happen, has already happened for Hamlet: the garden of innocence and purity has become “an unweeded garden,/That grows to seed; (and) things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 135–137). The words “Contagious blastments” (l. 42) also develop the theme of disease and corruption that occurs throughout the play. It is Hamlet’s function to restore wholesome natural growth and purge the state of its corruption.

Ophelia in her turn warns Laertes not to be “reckless” (l. 49). We shall see that when Laertes learns that his father, Polonius, has been killed, his behaviour is somewhat reckless and he storms back to Denmark demanding immediate revenge without any thought of the consequences. In this he provides a contrast to Hamlet who also has had a father killed but cannot bring himself to execute the act of vengeance. Both Laertes and Hamlet, however, are young men who achieve manhood through harsh experience of life – and death. Both die and both are instrumental in restoring the moral balance in the rotten state of Denmark.

We also learn significant features of Ophelia’s character in this passage. We cannot help but feel that her “no more but so?” (l. 10) is a somewhat weak protest against an attack on the man who loves her. Her acquiescence to her brother’s demands anticipates the unquestioning manner in which she will agree to her father’s demands to return Hamlet’s gifts and to be the lure to Hamlet so that Polonius and Claudius can spy on him. She will fail to reach Hamlet’s standards. Nevertheless, we are given the impression of a sweet, innocent young girl.

Lines 53–87 (Enter Polonius ... Laertes: Farewell)

Content

The father of Laertes and Ophelia, Polonius, enters. He gives Laertes some words of advice before the latter’s departure for Paris. Polonius tells Laertes that he must always be discreet and self-controlled. Laertes must never be over-familiar with others and must always choose his friends with discrimination. He must acquire himself manfully and honourably if ever caught up in a quarrel. He should listen to advice rather than give it. A man is judged by the clothes he wears and so Laertes must buy clothes that declare he is a man of good taste and breeding. He should neither borrow nor lend money. If he is true to himself it follows logically that he will not betray any other man.

Before Laertes embarks on board ship he reminds Ophelia of the advice he has given her. She replies that because of her affection for him she cannot help but remember it.

Comment

For the most part Polonius is portrayed as a garrulous bumbling old fool. But for dramatic purposes it is necessary to show that Laertes has affection for his father (as in lines 54–54: “A double ... second leave”). Otherwise Laertes’s desire to avenge Polonius’s death later in the play will not be convincing.

But of greater significance is the way in which Polonius’s words contribute to our understanding of Hamlet’s situation and character. For example, the central thought in Polonius’s advice is that a man must not be “unproportioned” (l. 60). In other words, he must not go to the extremes, even if his thoughts are extreme. Hamlet’s thoughts will be extreme (i.e. the killing of another man) and eventually he will “act” (l. 60) upon these thoughts.

Polonius tells Laertes: Give thy thoughts no tongue” (l. 59). But this is exactly what Hamlet does. In fact, he gives his thoughts too much tongue and this prevents him from acting – as he himself is aware: “I ... Must like a whore, unpack my heart with words” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 581). Thus Polonius’s words develop the theme of the conflict between passionate action and speculative reason, which is the main theme of the play.

The word “Grapple” (l. 63) reveals that Polonius has a mercenary and possessive attitude to friendship. The words “do not ... comrade” (l. 64–65) imply that one must not lose one’s power of discrimination, and so develop the theme that was established by the word “unproportioned” (l. 60). His advice that Laertes should “Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice” (l. 68) could well be followed by Polonius himself as he himself talks far
The words “For the apparel oft proclaims the man” (l. 72) tell us a great deal about Polonius and at the same time develop an important theme of the play (that of appearance and reality). Polonius is more concerned with outward appearance than he is with inner reality. Not so Hamlet who has “that within which passeth show” (see Act 1 Scene 2 line 85). “To thine own self be true/And it must follow ... Thou canst not then be false to any man” (l. 78–80). Again, this is advice that Polonius himself could hardly be said to follow. His method is one of spying and deceit. He employs the “bait of falsehood” (Act 2 Scene 1 line 63). He knows that with “pious action we do sugar o'er/The devil himself” (Act 3 Scene 1 line 48–49) but he himself is quite prepared to do just that.

The words with which Ophelia bids farewell to Laertes (l. 85–86) reveal the affection there is between brother and sister, and this makes Laertes’ rage when Ophelia is dead all the more convincing.

**Lines 88–136**

**Content**

Polonius asks Ophelia what Laertes has been saying to her. She tells him that it was about Hamlet. Polonius also warns Ophelia not to be too familiar with Hamlet. He asks her exactly what her relationship with Hamlet is. Ophelia tells her father that Hamlet has recently made gestures of affection towards her. Polonius tells her that she is too young and inexperienced to be able to judge such matters. He warns her that Hamlet is not sincere in his attitude towards her.

Ophelia protests that Hamlet has expressed his love in an honourable way. Polonius replies that it is easy to swear eternal love in the heat of the moment but the passion soon dies and so she should not trust Hamlet’s promises. Consequently he commands her to see Hamlet very infrequently. He claims that Hamlet’s vows of holy love and promises of marriage are only traps so as to deceive and seduce her. Polonius now forbids Ophelia to see Hamlet at all. She says she will obey him.

**Comment**

Polonius is a tiresome, meddling old man. Doubtless he was “told” (l. 91) of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia by his spies (in Act 1 Scene 1, he puts a spy on Laertes). He prevents a love that could have been “most free and bounteous” (l. 93).

However, Polonius appears to be right when he says to Ophelia “You do not understand yourself so clearly” (l. 96). She herself admits: “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (l. 104).

The word “green” (l. 101) means young and inexperienced. It is also a word that suggests growth and health in nature — nature that has not been made foul and polluted (see: “Things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely” — Act 1 Scene 2 line 136). It is ironic in the extreme that Polonius accuses Hamlet of insincerity (l. 106) and of deceit (l. 127–132). One of the outstanding features of Hamlet’s character is the way he has been hurt by the insincerity and hypocrisy of those around him. Polonius is projecting his own fault onto Hamlet when he accuses Hamlet of using the cloak of religion (l. 127–131) to hide his deceitful and self-seeking purposes, for this is exactly what Polonius himself does when he gives Ophelia a prayer book to read while he hides so that he can spy on Hamlet (Act 3 Scene 1). Moreover, Polonius could not be wider off the mark when he accuses Hamlet’s attitude of being no more than a fashionable game (l. 112; also compare Laertes’ words: “Hold it a fashion ...” in line 6). For Hamlet “fashion” and the “uses of this world” have become “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 133–134).

However, the words “When the blood burns, how prodigal (generously) the soul/Lends the tongue vows” (l. 116–117) develop the main theme of the play. Hamlet passionately vows to avenge his father’s murder and kill Claudius. But then, instead of action, he “unpacks his heart with words” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 581).

It is Claudius, not Hamlet, who has perverted “the holy vows of heaven” (i.e. of marriage — l. 114) into an “un holy suit” (l. 129) and this is one of the main causes of Hamlet’s disgust with the world. Note how the opposition of the world “un holy” with the words “sanctified and pious” (l. 129–130) develop the theme of the conflict between good and evil.

Ophelia’s “I shall obey, my Lord” (l. 136) seems somewhat tame. Because she complies with her father’s deception (Act 3 Scene 1) Hamlet will include her in his general accusation: “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 146).

**Act 1 Scene 4**

**Lines 1–38 (Hamlet: the air ... To his own)**

**Content**

Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus are awaiting the appearance of the Ghost. It is midnight. The sounds of trumpets and a cannon are heard. Horatio asks Hamlet what it means. Hamlet explains that Claudius is having a drinking orgy. Every time Claudius empties his glass there is a flourish of trumpets and a cannon is fired. Hamlet says that it is a Danish custom that he despises as it leads other nations to accuse the Danes of being drunken pigs, and mars the best achievements of Denmark. He says that this is often the case: that a natural fault in the character of a man can develop to the point where it overcomes the restraint imposed by the power of reason and becomes excessive. This defect, whether inborn or an accident of fate, will be what the public judge the man by, no matter how great his virtues are. This one fault in a man puts the nobility of the whole man in doubt and brings him to disgrace.

**Comment**

Lines 24–38 have an important bearing on the central theme of the play. The “pales
too much!

The words “For the apparel oft proclaims the man” (l. 72) tell us a great deal about Polonius and at the same time develop an important theme of the play (that of appearance and reality). Polonius is more concerned with outward appearance than he is with inner reality. Not so Hamlet who has “that within which passeth show” (see Act 1 Scene 2 line 85), “To thine own self be true/And it must follow ... Thou canst not then be false to any man” (l. 78-80). Again, this is advice that Polonius himself could hardly be said to follow. His method is one of spying and deceit. He employs the “bait of falsehood” (Act 2 Scene 1 line 63). He knows that with “pious action we do sugar o’er/The devil himself” (Act 3 Scene 1 line 48-49) but he himself is quite prepared to do just that.

The words with which Ophelia bids farewell to Laertes (l. 85-86) reveal the affection there is between brother and sister, and this makes Laertes’s rage when Ophelia is dead all the more convincing.

Lines 88–136

Content
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Ophelia protests that Hamlet has expressed his love in an honourable way. Polonius replies that it is easy to swear eternal love in the heat of the moment but the passion soon dies and so she should not trust Hamlet’s promises. Consequently he commands her to see Hamlet very infrequently. He claims that Hamlet’s vows of holy love and promises of marriage are only traps so as to deceive and seduce her. Polonius now forbids Ophelia to see Hamlet at all. She says she will obey him.

Comment
Polonius is a tiresome, meddling old man. Doubtless he was “told” (l. 91) of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia by his spies (in Act 1 Scene 1, he puts a spy on Laertes). He prevents a love that could have been “most free and bounteous” (l. 93).

However, Polonius appears to be right when he says to Ophelia “You do not understand yourself so clearly” (l. 96). She herself admits: “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (l. 104).

The word “green” (l. 101) means young and inexperienced. It is also a word that suggests growth and health in nature – nature that has not been made foul and polluted (see: “Things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely” – Act 1 Scene 2 line 136).

It is ironic in the extreme that Polonius accuses Hamlet of insincerity (l. 106) and of deceit (l. 127–132). One of the outstanding features of Hamlet’s character is the way he has been hurt by the insincerity and hypocrisy of those around him. Polonius is projecting his own fault onto Hamlet when he accuses Hamlet of using the cloak of religion (l. 127–131) to hide his deceitful and self-seeking purposes, for this is exactly what Polonius himself does when he gives Ophelia a prayer book to read while he hides so that he can spy on Hamlet (Act 3 Scene 1). Moreover, Polonius could not be wider off the mark when he accuses Hamlet’s attitude of being no more than a fashionable game (l. 112; also compare Laertes’s words: “Hold it a fashion ...” in line 6). For Hamlet “fashion” and “the uses of this world” have become “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 133–134).

However, the words “When the blood burns, how prodigal (generously) the soul/Lends the tongue vows” (l. 116–117) develop the main theme of the play. Hamlet passionately vows to avenge his father’s murder and kill Claudius. But then, instead of action, he “unpacks his heart with words” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 581).

It is Claudius, not Hamlet, who has perverted “the holy vows of heaven” (i.e. of marriage – l. 114) into an “unholy suit” (l. 129) and this is one of the main causes of Hamlet’s disgust with the world. Note how the opposition of the world “unholy” with the words “sacritified and pious” (l. 129–130) develop the theme of the conflict between good and evil.

Ophelia’s “I shall obey, my Lord” (l. 136) seems somewhat tame. Because she complies with her father’s deception (Act 3 Scene 1) Hamlet will include her in his general accusation: “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 146).

Act 1 Scene 4

Lines 1–38 (Hamlet: the air ... To his own)

Content
Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus are awaiting the appearance of the Ghost. It is midnight. The sounds of trumpets and a cannon are heard. Horatio asks Hamlet what it means. Hamlet explains that Claudius is having a drinking orgy. Every time Claudius empties his glass there is a flourish of trumpets and a cannon is fired. Hamlet says that it is a Danish custom that he despises as it leads other nations to accuse the Danes of being drunken pigs, and mars the best achievements of Denmark. He says that this is often the case: that a natural fault in the character of a man can develop to the point where it overcomes the restraint imposed by the power of reason and becomes excessive. This defect, whether inborn or an accident of fate, will be what the public judge the man by, no matter how great his virtues are. This one fault in a man puts the nobility of the whole man in doubt and brings him to disgrace.

Comment
Lines 24–38 have an important bearing on the central theme of the play. The “pales
and fort of reason” (l. 28) are very strong in Hamlet. It is largely because of too much rational speculation about what he has to do that he is unable to do it. When the fort of his reason is “broken down” he acts indescisively. For example, when he tells of sudden decisions to alter the letter that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are carrying to the English King and which contains instructions for his death, Hamlet tells Horatio: “Rashly! And pris’d be rashness for it, let us know. Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well. / When our deep plots do pall” (Act 5 Scene 1 line 6–9). And when at last Hamlet kills Claudius it is in a moment of passionate fury.

Ironically, Hamlet’s “mole (i.e. fault) in nature” (l. 24) is not something that reason must restrain. It is his fault of reason itself that inhibits action. The words “o’er-growth” (l. 27) and “o’er-leavens” (l. 29) are thus also significant. They imply excess, an imbalance among parts. If the parts are not in balance and function in harmony then the being is “out of joint” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 188). Note the contrast between the nervous men on the cold parapets and the boisterous dancers within the castle (l. 9). The words “bray out” (i.e. like a donkey – l. 11) are deliberately used by Hamlet to convey the bestiality of the drinkers. The custom (l. 12 and 15) of celebrating Claudius’s drunkenness is one of the uses of this world that Hamlet finds so “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 133–134). Note, too, how the word “soil” (i.e. make dirty – l. 20) develops the important theme of corruption (see also l. 35). It is Hamlet’s task to purge the state of that corruption.

**Lines 38–57 (Enter Ghost … the Ghost beckons)**

**Content**

The Ghost appears. Hamlet is determined to speak to it regardless of whether it is a good or an evil spirit because it resembles his dead father so closely. He asks why it has come out of the grave and why it is wearing armour. The presence of the apparition is beyond the comprehension of a mortal man.

**Comment**

One of the main themes of the play – the conflict between good and evil – is developed by Hamlet’s words. On the one hand we have “Angels and ministers of grace” (l. 39), “a spirit of health” (l. 40) which is associated with heaven” (l. 41); its intentions might be “charitable” (l. 42), and it may be the spirit of a man whose body was “canoniz’d” (i.e. consecrated – l. 47). On the other hand we have references to a “damn’d” (l. 40) soul from “hell” (l. 41) whose intentions may be “wicked” (l. 42). That the Ghost might be a devil in disguise is a possibility that will cause Hamlet much anguish and will partly account for his delay in killing Claudius. Hamlet is an idealist, a perfectionist. It will only be when he is convinced of the Ghost’s integrity and has a “perfect conscience” (Act 5 Scene 1 line 67) that he will carry out the Ghost’s command.

The words “a spirit of health” (l. 40) are particularly significant. Images of disease and corruption occur again and again throughout the play and it will be Hamlet’s task to restore health to the morally diseased state of Denmark. Nature (l. 54) has become corrupt and Hamlet is a “fool of nature” in the sense that he is bound to the earthly world while he lives. But he will purge (by killing Claudius) the corruption of that earthly world...
Hamlet asks the Ghost what it requires of him. The Ghost declares that it is the spirit of Hamlet's father that Hamlet will have to avenge once he has heard what the Ghost has to say.

The Ghost explains that it is doomed to suffer the torments of hell until the foul crimes committed while it was on earth have been purged away. Were it not that it is forbidden, the Ghost would tell Hamlet of the horrors that it has to endure. The Ghost then commands Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, a murder more horrific than most murders are. Hamlet wishes to hear about it quickly and declares that he will have his revenge at once. The Ghost implies that swift revenge is Hamlet's duty. The Ghost says that the story that Hamlet's father died as a result of a snakebite is false. It was not a snake, but Claudius who killed Hamlet's father.

Comment
The words “whither wilt thou lead me?” (1. 1) will take on a profound significance. Hamlet will be led to the extremes of himself and life. He realises the horrifying burden of his mission and the resultant loneliness.

The word “foul” (1. 12) is repeated twice in lines 25, 27 and 29. This, together with the word “purged” (1. 13) develops one of the main themes of the play. “Nature” (i.e. life on earth – 1. 12) has become corrupt and it is Hamlet's task to purge that corruption. It is significant that Hamlet calls on God in line 24. Hamlet avenges an “unnatural” act.

The course of the stars in their orbits (1. 17) represents order and harmony in the cosmos. Now, by the foul and unnatural event of murder, order and harmony have been disrupted, just as there is “some strange eruption to the (state)” (Act 1 Scene 1 line 69). The story of Hamlet has social, political, moral and cosmic dimensions. For “each particular hair to stand on end” instead of being “combined” with each other (1. 18-19) also denotes a disruption of harmony, as does the word “fretful” (1. 20).

Hamlet does not sweep to his revenge as he passionately declares that he will (1. 29-31). And one of the reasons for this is that his faculty of “meditation” and his “thoughts” prevent him from doing so. It will be Hamlet's task to cure “the fatness of these pursy times” (Act 3 Scene 4 line 153). This theme of the purging of moral rottenness is one of the central themes of the play and is developed here by the words “the fat weed/That rots itself” (1. 32-33). Again we are reminded that for Hamlet this world is an “unweeded garden/That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/Posse it merely” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 135-137).

Similarly, the reference to an orchard and the serpent (1. 35-36) again suggests the Garden of Eden. Claudius seduced Gertrude just as the satanic serpent seduced Eve. The throne of Denmark has been usurped resulting in general corruption. The words “a forged process” (1. 37) mean “a false report”. We have seen that Claudius is a master of deception and that the substitution of a false outward appearance for inner reality is one of the causes of Hamlet’s disgust (see Act 1 Scene 1 line 76-86). Hamlet refers to his “prophetic soul” because earlier he suspected “some foul play” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 255).

Lines 42-91 (Ghost: Ay, that ... Adieu, adieu)

Content
Hamlet receives another shock. The Ghost tells how Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle, seduced Gertrude, Hamlet’s seemingly virtuous mother who committed adultery while King Hamlet was still alive. Hamlet’s father had loved Gertrude with a pure and faithful love. But she betrayed him for someone far less worthy. She grew weary of her holy marriage vows and degraded herself in perverted sexuality.

The Ghost tells how Claudius poured poison into the ear of Hamlet’s father who was sleeping in his orchard. Thus Hamlet’s father died without a chance of receiving absolution for his sins. If Hamlet has any love for his father he must not allow the perverted and incestuous relationship between Claudius and Gertrude to continue. However, Hamlet must not harm his mother in any way. Her own conscience will be sufficient suffering for her. It will soon be dawn and the Ghost takes his leave with the injunction that Hamlet must remember what he said.

Comment
The word “incestuous” (1. 42) is echoed by the word “incest” (1. 83) and we are reminded of Hamlet’s “most wicked speed to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 156-157). In other words, Claudius and Gertrude have committed a crime against the law of the Church and, therefore, against the law of God. Hamlet’s father’s love for Gertrude, however, was in accordance with the Church's and God's will: “it went hand in hand even with the vow/I made to her in marriage” (1. 49-50). Hamlet’s love for Ophelia was of a similar nature and was expressed “With almost all the holy vows of heaven” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 114). Similarly, the word “celestial” (1. 56) is echoed in Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia (Act 2 Scene 2 line 109). The “falling-off” (1. 47) referred to by the Ghost is the fall from purity and grace such as occurred in the Garden of Eden. Note how the “traitorous gifts” (1. 43) parallel the traitorous gifts that the serpent offered Eve.

The use of the word “beast” (1. 42) is also of significance. Ideally – and Hamlet is an idealist – man can be like an angel and a god (Act 2 Scene 2 line 306-307) but with Claudius as king, man has become no more than a beast. The words “most-seeming virtuous” (1. 46) also develop an important theme of the play: namely, the theme of virtue and honesty, to which is alluded the theme of appearance and reality. The words would affect Hamlet deeply for he himself has told Gertrude: “Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 76). But in the court of Denmark moral values have become corrupted and inverted; “Lewdness can ‘take a shape of heaven’ (1. 54) and the “celestial bed” of marriage has become “garbage” (1. 57).

Images of vileness, corruption and disease occur throughout the play. This theme is further developed here by the use of words such as “leperous” (1. 64), “tetter” (i.e. scurf – 1. 71) and “vile and loathsome crust” (1. 72). Opposed to this, however, is the word “wholesome” (1. 70), a word that occurs several times in the play. It is Hamlet’s task to restore health to the rotten state of Denmark.
Lines 92–116 (Hamlet: O all ... Hamlet: Hillo)

Content
Hamlet tells himself that the Ghost’s command to avenge his father’s death will occupy his whole being from now on. He will exclude all else from his mind so that he can concentrate solely on the act of revenge. He curses Claudius for being so corrupt and evil beneath his smiling outward appearance. Marcellus and Horatio anxiously call out for Hamlet.

Comment
Much of the play revolves around the fact that Hamlet does not kill Claudius immediately. One critic has even over-simplified this theme by stating that Hamlet is the tragedy of a man who cannot make up his mind. However, this is absurd, as is clear from this passage. From the beginning Hamlet does make up his mind. It is how he “pursues this act” (l. 84) that occupies the main action of the play. Perhaps the basic reason for his delay is that his passionate desire for revenge cannot work in conjunction with his faculty of reason that insists on examining every facet of his situation. Hamlet himself comments upon this feature of his character several times during the course of the play.

In this passage, for example, Hamlet twice (l. 98 and 107) refers to his “tables” by which is meant the notebooks such as a scholar (and Hamlet was a scholar and student) carry. A student would write his own philosophical speculations about life. Such observations (l. 101) would be the result of the employment of his reason. But no sooner has Hamlet, in the passion of the moment, claimed that he will do without such rational speculation (l. 98–101) than he does just that and writes down (l. 107) a comment on hypocrisy. He says “Now to my word” (l. 110) but it will be a long time before his words become acts, before the philosopher becomes a man of passionate action. However, Hamlet’s delay remains a mystery. Hamlet himself does not know the reason: “I do not know/Why yet I live to say/This thing’s to do” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 43–44).

Just as important are the other themes of the play, some of which are developed in this passage. For example, we note that Hamlet often refers to “Heaven and earth” (l. 92 and refer to Comment on Act 1 Scene 2 line 142). Life on earth has become corrupt and moral values have been perverted. Hamlet is able to “couple hell” (l. 93) with the earth and it is his task to restore, by killing Claudius, the values of heaven. Revenge, after all, is motivated by the desire to right a wrong. It is significant that Hamlet says “Yes, by heaven” (l. 104), words that echo Horatio’s “Heaven secure him!” (l. 113) and “Heaven will direct it” (Act 1 Scene 4 line 91). In the end, the “host of heaven” (l. 92) will sing Hamlet to his rest (Act 5 Scene 2 line 352).

By “distracted globe” Hamlet is presumably referring to his mind within his skull. But they are words that could also refer to the earth. One meaning of “distracted” is “drawn in different directions”. In other words, there is no harmony in the world, it is “out of joint” (l. 188). So, too, is Hamlet drawn in the different directions of passion and reason.

In this passage, and particularly in line 101, Hamlet deliberately resolves to put his youthfulness aside.

Lines 117–190 (Enter Horatio ... end of scene)

Content
Horatio and Marcellus ask what has passed between Hamlet and the Ghost. Hamlet answers evasively. He is in a highly excited state. He apologises if his words have offended Horatio and Marcellus but makes them swear that they will tell no one what they have seen. The voice of the Ghost is also heard bidding them to take an oath. Hamlet answers the Ghost in a jocular fashion.

Hamlet also makes his friends swear that if in the future he puts on an appearance of madness (“antic disposition” – line 172) they must not reveal that they know about it. Hamlet remarks on the cruel destiny that has been imposed upon him.

Comment
This is a very different Hamlet from the melancholic and listless man who found the world “so weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 133). Possibly his excitement is due to the fact that he has been given a direction in which he can act against the evil in the world rather than merely suffer because of it. At last “business and desire” (l. 130) can become one. In any event, Hamlet’s near hysteria anticipates the madness he will assume (l. 170–178) so that no one will suspect him as he plans to kill Claudius. Hamlet can only survive by mimicking the world where false outward appearance hides true intention.

Once again we see that Hamlet refers to “heaven and earth” (l. 166) and to avoid needless repetition the learner is referred to the commentary on line 92 and Act 1 Scene 2 line 142.

The words: “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite./That ever I was born to set it right” (l. 188–189) are central to our understanding of the play. Hamlet is a tragic figure because a cruel task has been imposed upon him. That task is not only to avenge his father’s death but also to restore harmony and health to the rotten state of Denmark. Moreover, it is a particularly cruel burden for a man like Hamlet who, in a sense, is “out of joint” with himself. The words “rest, rest perturbed spirit” (l. 182) could well apply to Hamlet himself.

The words “It is an honest Ghost” (l. 138) and “true-penny” (l. 150) will later be doubted by Hamlet himself. The possibility that the Ghost is an evil spirit will be one of the reasons for Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius. To make sure, he sets a trap (see Act 3
Scene 2 line 283). Hamlet takes the word “offence” (l. 137) to refer to the murder of his father by Claudius. Claudius himself will later say “O! My offence is rank, it smells to heaven” (Act 3 Scene 3 line 36).

Act 2 Scene 1

Lines 1–74 (Give ... Polonius: Farewell)

Content
Polonius gives Reynaldo money to give to his son Laertes, who is in Paris. He also tells Reynaldo to find out about Laertes’s behaviour in an indirect way. Reynaldo must tell lies and say that he has heard Laertes is a very wild young man and vulnerable to the sins that tempt all young men. The person with whom Reynaldo is talking will then confirm or deny that Laertes has sinned. In this way, lies will discover the truth.

Comment
Polonius is telling Reynaldo to spy on Laertes, his own son. In the court of Denmark it is the fashion to use deception: “forgeries” (l. 20) and “falsehood” (l. 63) to conceal one’s real purposes. It is this perversion of the truth in the world around him that partly accounts for Hamlet’s disgust. Ophelia, the woman he loves, will allow herself to be a “bait of falsehood” (l. 63) and so fail him when he needs her most.

Polonius’s words also develop another theme of the play. Just as there is perversion of truth, so there is perversion of morals. Note how the words “rank” (l. 20), “taints” (l. 32), “sullies” (l. 39) and “soild” (l. 40) all develop the theme of corruption that plays such an important part in the play. So, too, is Claudius “open to incontinency” (l. 30) and doubtless often “O’took in’s rouse” (i.e. drunk – l. 58), two vices Hamlet finds particularly offensive (Act 1 Scene 3 line 14–22 and Act 3 Scene 5 line 91–94). Polonius uses too many words and Hamlet also, on his own admission, uses too many words (“I ... must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words” – Act 2 Scene 2 line 581) that prevent him from acting. However, the resemblance ends there.

Lines 74–120 (Enter Ophelia ... end of scene)

Content
Ophelia enters in a state of great agitation. She tells Polonius how Hamlet came into her room and behaved as if he were mad. Polonius is convinced that Hamlet is mad because Ophelia has obeyed his command to have nothing to do with Hamlet. He now regrets that he was so suspicious of Hamlet’s motives. He decides to tell Claudius at once of Hamlet’s behaviour.

Comment
Hamlet is carrying out his intention to “put an antic disposition on” (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 5 line 172). Though not actually driven mad by Ophelia’s rejection of him, he has been profoundly hurt. It is significant that she studies her face so carefully. She once appeared to love him but behind the face of love there has been betrayal of that love. She has not been true to herself but to her foolish father’s mistaken suspicions. It is because of the betrayal of his love – by Ophelia, Gertrude and Claudius – not because of love itself, that Hamlet is driven to “desperate undertakings” (l. 104).

Polonius remarks on “passion” (l. 105) and “discretion” (l. 117). This develops one of the main themes of the play. Discretion arises from rational thought. It is the control of a passionate desire. But far from lacking discretion (l. 117) Hamlet has perhaps too much and only fulfils his mission in a moment of active passion. Ophelia remarks that Hamlet looked “As if he had been loosed out of hell/To speak of horrors” (l. 83–84). So too, did the Ghost of his father’s spirit look when it told Hamlet of the betrayal of love.

This is the longest scene in the play, which emphasises Hamlet’s inability to fulfil the revenge plan.

Act 2 Scene 2

Lines 1–39 (King: Welcome ... Exeunt Rosencrantz)

Content
Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spend time in Hamlet’s company. As they are friends of his, Hamlet might be more open with them and reveal the cause of his strange behaviour. Gertrude tells them that they will be well paid if they succeed. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to try.

Comment
Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, just as Polonius gave instructions to Reynaldo to spy on Laertes. That this is a perversion of the concept of friendship does not worry Claudius at all (see also line 3). It is not surprising that Claudius makes a distinction between the “exterior” and “the inward man” (l. 6). His own exterior appearance does not correspond with his inward being (see Comment on “That one may smile, and be a villain” – Act 1 Scene 5 line 108). “What it should be” (l. 7) is, of course, that Claudius himself is the cause of Hamlet’s father’s death” (l. 8) and has married Gertrude.

Lines 33–34 show that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can hardly be distinguished from each other. This accentuates the separateness of Hamlet from the corrupt and hypocritical court around him. The fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet’s friends renders their agreeing to spy on him an even greater perversion of human values.

Lines 40–84 (Enter Polonius ... Exeunt Voltemand)

Content
Polonius tells Claudius that the ambassadors have returned from Norway with good news.
He says that he also knows the cause of Hamlet's madness, which he will explain after the ambassadors have made their report. Gertrude's opinion is that Hamlet's behaviour is owing to the death of his father and her own hasty marriage to Claudius. She shows a mother's understanding of her child's nature.

The ambassadors report that the King of Norway counselled his nephew, Fortinbras, not to wage war against Denmark. Fortinbras agreed not to do so and decided to invade Poland, for which purpose he now requests Claudius's permission to pass through Denmark. Claudius says that he will think about it and that he will probably grant the permission.

Comment

Fortinbras is shown to be a man of action and decision. At the same time he is a man who is prepared to listen to reason. In other words, there is an effective balance between passionate desire and reason. Like Horatio, Fortinbras is one of those men "Whose blood (i.e. passion) and judgment are so well co-mingled/That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger/To sound what stop she please" (Act 3 Scene 2 line 69–71).

In this respect, Fortinbras is unlike Hamlet who cannot, until the very end, combine his passionate desire to avenge his father's death with the dictates of his reason. Fortinbras is able to maintain the temper (balance) between passion and reason, whereas Hamlet suffers from "distermper" (l. 55) and swings from the depths of despair to a "towring passion".

It is by balancing one theme against another that Shakespeare builds up the structure of the play: The King of Norway is Fortinbras's uncle. The King of Denmark is Hamlet's uncle. Norway is physically sick (l. 66); Claudius is morally sick. Norway is impotent; Claudius is virile and lusty. Fortinbras is compared and contrasted with Hamlet; the King of Norway is compared and contrasted with the King of Denmark.

Claudius looks forward to a feast in the evening (l. 84). Instead Hamlet will trap him into betraying the fact that he is the murderer of Hamlet's father.

Lines 85–170 (Polonius: This business ... Exeunt King)

Content

Polonius's own actions are foolish and ignorant in contrast with the advice he gives. After a long, befuddled and garrulous preamble, Polonius claims that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's madness. He reads out a letter that Hamlet sent to Ophelia in which he expressed his love for her. Knowing of this love, Polonius explains that he forbade her to continue her relationship with Hamlet as Hamlet, a prince, was above her station. It is this rejection of love that has driven Hamlet mad, he says.

Claudius and Gertrude admit that this may be the reason and Claudius asks how it may be proved. Polonius says that he will set Ophelia as bait. He and Claudius will hide behind an arras (a wall hanging or screen) and eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia.

At this moment Hamlet is seen approaching, reading a book. Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude to hide.

Comment

Although Polonius talks a lot of nonsense, many of his words have an important bearing on the main themes of the play. For example, the question "What majesty should be" (l. 97) makes the audience ask indeed what it should be. The answer is anything but what King Claudius is - lecherous, adulterous, hypocritical and murderous. In contrast to Claudius we have Hamlet who, in the words of Fortinbras (who will become King of Denmark) was "likely, had he been put on,/To have prov'd most royally" (Act 5 Scene 11 line 389–390).

Polonius's words "outward flourishes" (l. 91) also develop an important theme of the play. Polonius, like Claudius, has no hesitation in hiding an evil intention beneath a false outward appearance. Hamlet cannot do this. Hamlet has "that within which passeth show" (Act 1 Scene 2 line 85) and he cannot endure hypocrisy. For Polonius it is natural to assume that "truth is hid" (l. 158). Hamlet reveals the truth and shows people what they really are (as he does with his mother in Act 3 Scene 4 for example). Claudius knows this and so attempts to send Hamlet to his death in England.

The words "more matter, with less art ... I swear I use no art at all ... I will use no art" (l. 95–99) continue the theme of appearance and reality. Polonius, the politician, survives by the art of deception and hypocrisy. It is Hamlet, the idealist, whom we believe when he says he cannot cloud the truth (l. 119–120). And yet Hamlet, too, must learn how to execute the "matter" (i.e. of revenge) rather than just talk about it.

The word "celestial" (l. 109) shows that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is not the coarse and lecherous affair such as exists between Claudius and Gertrude and the whole tone of his letter gives the lie to Laertes's and Polonius's accusations that Hamlet is trying to seduce Ophelia. For Polonius, truth and lies are not as clearly contrasted as they are for Hamlet (l. 117). Polonius blandly tells Reynaldo "the bait of falsehood takes the carp of truth" (Act 2 Scene 1 line 63). Similarly Ophelia will be a "liar" when she gives the impression that she is praying, whereas in reality she is part of the trap that Polonius has set for Hamlet (Act 3 Scene 1 line 43–46) – which also reveals that Polonius is anything but the "honourable" man he claims to be (Act 1 Scene 1 line 130–131). Indeed, for him, the only thing that matters is to be crafty enough to achieve his devious plans. By "Lord Hamlet is prince, out of thy star" (l. 141) Polonius means that Hamlet's social position is too high for her. In a moral sense we may say that Hamlet is "out of the star" of everyone in the corrupt court.

The fact that Hamlet sometimes "walks for hours together ... in the lobby" (l. 160–161) makes us think of a sad, lonely, speculative young man who takes no part in the garish pleasures of King Claudius's court. Just as Claudius is prepared to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet (Act 2 Scene 2 line 3) so is Polonius prepared to use his own daughter (l. 162). It is a perversion of the concept of love and family relationships.

The words "from his reason fallen" (l. 165) develop the theme that Hamlet is inclined to
He says that he also knows the cause of Hamlet's madness, which he will explain after the ambassadors have made their report. Gertrude's opinion is that Hamlet's behaviour is owing to the death of his father and her own hasty marriage to Claudius. She shows a mother's understanding of her child's nature.

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**Comment**

Fortinbras is shown to be a man of action and decision. At the same time he is a man who is prepared to listen to reason. In other words, there is an effective balance between passionate desire and reason. Like Horatio, Fortinbras is one of those men "Whose blood (i.e. passion) and judgment are so well co-mingled/That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger/To sound what stop she please" (Act 3 Scene 2 line 69-71).

In this respect, Fortinbras is unlike Hamlet who cannot, until the very end, combine his passionate desire to avenge his father's death with the dictates of his reason. Fortinbras is able to maintain the temper (balance) between passion and reason, whereas Hamlet suffers from "distemper" (l. 55) and swings from the depths of despair to a "towering passion".

It is by balancing one theme against another that Shakespeare builds up the structure of the play: The King of Norway is Fortinbras's uncle. The King of Denmark is Hamlet's uncle. Norway is physically sick (l. 66); Claudius is morally sick. Norway is impotent; Claudius is virile and lusty. Fortinbras is compared and contrasted with Hamlet; the King of Norway is compared and contrasted with the King of Denmark.

Claudius looks forward to a feast in the evening (l. 84). Instead Hamlet will trap him into betraying the fact that he is the murderer of Hamlet's father.

**Lines 85-170 (Polonius: This business ... Exeunt King)**

**Content**

Polonius's own actions are foolish and ignorant in contrast with the advice he gives. After a long, befuddled and garrulous preamble, Polonius claims that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's madness. He reads out a letter that Hamlet sent to Ophelia in which he expressed his love for her. Knowing of this love, Polonius explains that he forbade her to continue her relationship with Hamlet as Hamlet, a prince, was above her station. It is this rejection of love that has driven Hamlet mad, he says.

Claudius and Gertrude admit that this may be the reason and Claudius asks how it may be proved. Polonius says that he will set Ophelia as bait. He and Claudius will hide behind an arras (a wall hanging or screen) and eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia.

At this moment Hamlet is seen approaching, reading a book. Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude to hide.

**Comment**

Although Polonius talks a lot of nonsense, many of his words have an important bearing on the main themes of the play. For example, the question "What majesty should be" (l. 97) makes the audience ask indeed what it should be. The answer is anything but what King Claudius is - lecherous, adulterous, hypocritical and murderous. In contrast to Claudius we have Hamlet who, in the words of Fortinbras (who will become King of Denmark) was "likely, had he been put on, /To have prov'd most royally" (Act 5 Scene 11 line 389-390).

Polonius's words "outward flourishes" (l. 91) also develop an important theme of the play. Polonius, like Claudius, has no hesitation in hiding an evil intention beneath a false outward appearance. Hamlet cannot do this. Hamlet has "that within which passeth show" (Act 1 Scene 2 line 85) and he cannot endure hypocrisy. For Polonius it is natural to assume that "truth is hid" (l. 158). Hamlet reveals the truth and shows people what they really are (as he does with his mother in Act 3 Scene 4 for example). Claudius knows this and so attempts to send Hamlet to his death in England.

The words "more matter, with less art ... I swear I use no art at all ... I will use no art" (l. 95-99) continue the theme of appearance and reality. Polonius, the politician, survives by the art of deception and hypocrisy. It is Hamlet, the idealist, whom we believe when he says he cannot cloud the truth (l. 119-120). And yet Hamlet, too, must learn how to execute the "matter" (i.e. of revenge) rather than just talk about it.

The word "celestial" (l. 109) shows that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is not the coarse and lecherous affair such as exists between Claudius and Gertrude and the whole tone of his letter gives the lie to Laertes's and Polonius's accusations that Hamlet is trying to seduce Ophelia. For Polonius, truth and lies are not as clearly contrasted as they are for Hamlet (l. 117). Polonius blandly tells Reynaldo "the bait of falsehood takes the carp of truth" (Act 2 Scene 1 line 63). Similarly Ophelia will be a "fairy" when she gives the impression that she is praying, whereas in reality she is part of the trap that Polonius has set for Hamlet (Act 3 Scene 1 line 43-46) - which also reveals that Polonius is anything but the "honourable" man he claims to be (Act 1 Scene 1 line 130-131). Indeed, for him, the only thing that matters is to be crafty enough to achieve his devious plans. By "Lord Hamlet is prince, out of thy star" (l. 141) Polonius means that Hamlet's social position is too high for him. In a moral sense we may say that Hamlet is "out of the star" of everyone in the corrupt court.

The fact that Hamlet sometimes "walks for hours together ... in the lobby" (l. 160-161) makes us think of a sad, lonely, speculative young man who takes no part in the garish pleasures of King Claudius's court. Just as Claudius is prepared to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet (Act 2 Scene 2 line 3) so is Polonius prepared to use his own daughter (l. 162). It is a perversion of the concept of love and family relationships.

The words "from his reason fallen" (l. 165) develop the theme that Hamlet is inclined to
Lines 170–220 (Enter Hamlet ... Hamlet: These)

Content

Hamlet enters, reading a book. Polonius accosts him. Polonius is convinced that Hamlet has been driven mad by Ophelia’s rejection of him. Polonius asks what Hamlet is reading. Hamlet replies that it is a description of foolish and doddering old men (such as Polonius is). Polonius remarks (to himself) that some of Hamlet’s replies have more significance than a sane man could have achieved. He will contrive a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. He then takes his leave of Hamlet.

Comment

The word “honest” is mentioned three times (I. 176–178). This emphasis develops an important theme of the play: namely, that of corruption of honesty and virtue. Note how the words “maggots” and “carrión” (I. 181–182) express Hamlet’s disgust in a concrete and graphic way. The juxtaposition of “kissing” and “carrión” is grotesque and reveals to what extent Hamlet has been hurt by the way Ophelia has allowed their love to be destroyed. Bear in mind that Hamlet’s ideal of love has been destroyed by his obsession with his mother’s betrayal of his father.

A fishmonger’s daughter was Elizabethan slang for a prostitute. Hamlet feels that by playing Polonius’s game, Ophelia has prostituted herself and their love. She has contributed to the general betrayal of moral values that so sickens and saddens Hamlet. Even the act of love, which should be a “blessing”, (I. 184) has been corrupted. “Words, words, words” – Hamlet himself is a man of words rather than action. The very fact that he is reading reveals that he has a speculative mind. So, too, do the words “which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” (I. 211–212) develop an important theme of the play. It is because of too much rational speculation about his situation that Hamlet is unable to act. As he himself says: “Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well/When our deep plots do pall” (Act 4 Scene 2 line 8–9).

Lines 122–266 (Enter Rosencrantz ... We'll wait)

Content

Hamlet is pleased to see his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They tell him that they are happy and contented. Hamlet asks why they have come to Denmark (which he calls a prison). They say they think like that because he is ambitious.

Comment

The very fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet’s “excellent good friends” (I. 225) makes their betrayal (i.e. by spying on him) of that friendship yet another perversion of moral values. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not know the heights of fortune nor the depths of misfortune (i.e. “neither the cap nor the shoe of fortune” – lines 230–235). In other words, their is a “middle” (I. 233) course. In this respect, they provide a contrast to Hamlet who knows the extremes of suffering and despair.

Lines 266–314 (Hamlet: No such ... Why did)

Content

Hamlet again asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern why they have come to Denmark. He demands to know if they have been sent or if they have come of their own free will. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eventually admit that the king and queen have invited them. Hamlet knows that the reason is to find the cause of his strange behaviour. He explains that he has been in a depressed and listless state. He can see no beauty in the world but only foul corruption. And man for all his qualities of grace in action, reason and understanding, is for him now no more than the embodiment of dust. He can find no pleasure in the company of men and women any longer.

Comment

Yet again Hamlet refers to honesty (I. 265). He is a man who despises the putting on of a false outward appearance (Act 1 Scene 2 line 76–86). That is exactly what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doing now (I. 279–280): “and there ... to colour”. Like Polonius they try “By indirections (to) find directions out” (Act 2 Scene 1 line 66), whereas Hamlet is a man who wants honest and “direct” (I. 287) human relationships. And the fact that they have been his “dear friends” (I. 270, 273 and 282–286) renders Hamlet’s hurt all the more intense. He is indeed “most dreadfully attended” (I. 269) by his erstwhile friends.

Lines 292–310 provide the most important prose speech of the play. Hamlet explains the reasons for his madness. Hamlet can no longer know the joy of bodily movement (I. 305) because he is so morally and emotionally dispirited that he has “foregone all custom of exercise” (I. 297). “This goodly frame, the earth” (298) has become “disjoint and out of frame” (I. 2.20). The life force and rhythms of nature have become “sterile” (I. 299). Note
how the word “majestical” (l. 301) suggests that the concept of royalty has been perverted and corrupted (by Claudius). And the word “firmament” conveys that the corruption has taken on a cosmic dimension. The nobility of reason (l. 306) has been replaced by the need to assume a grotesque madness (and in Ophelia’s case it will be by real madness).

“Apprehension” (i.e. understanding – l. 306) has become clouded by hypocrisy, guile and deception. The “paragon of animals” (l. 307–308) has become the lowest beast on the scale (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 2 line 140 and 150; and Comment Act 1 Scene 5 line 42).

Note that Hamlet does not actually reveal the real cause of his “madness”.

**Lines 315–375 (Rosencrantz: To think ... Hamlet: I am)**

**Content**

Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that a troupe of theatrical players is on its way to the palace. Hamlet is interested in the theatre and shows his knowledge of the various stock theatrical characters. He is surprised that these particular actors have to travel but Rosencrantz explains that they are not as popular as they formerly were, owing to a new group of child actors who have drawn audiences away from the regular theatres. This has caused a controversy in theatrical circles and if a playwright does not mention it, theatre managers will not accept his play. Hamlet is not surprised that public opinion can be so fickle.

Before Claudius became king, people pulled faces at him. Now they pay a lot of money just to have his picture in miniature.

Hamlet bids farewell to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a formal fashion so that they do not think he finds the players more welcome than he does them. He tells them that he is not as mad as Claudius and Gertrude think he is.

**Comment**

The theatrical controversy caused by the group of child actors would have interest mainly for the audience of Shakespeare’s time. However, at the same time, some important themes of the play are developed. For example, Hamlet’s words “He that plays the King shall be welcome” (l. 319) is an obvious and sarcastic reference to Claudius who in all respects is not a real king both by law and by nature. Similarly, the words “the adventurous Knight shall use his foil (fencing sword) and target (shield)” (l. 320–321) will become reality when Hamlet, at last a man of action rather than words, will stab King Claudius to death with his foil.

Hamlet also is the lover” (l. 321) who does not find happiness in love and it will only be by death that he ends his own “part in peace” (l. 323). Hamlet would wish “the Lady” (Ophelia) to say her mind freely (l. 324–325) but she does not and says what Polonius tells her to say.

Again we see that Hamlet relies on “Philosophy” and rational speculation to provide an answer (l. 364).

Hamlet’s seemingly friendly welcome of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is a courtly formality. He deliberately puts on a false outward appearance of welcome, as he knows them to be Claudius’s spies. This realisation intensifies Hamlet’s melancholy and his disenchantment with his fellow men. His welcome to the players, whom he really likes, will be genuine and his outward gesture (l. 370) will be a true reflection of his inward emotion.

Note, too, how his words “uncle-father and aunt-mother” (l. 372) accentuate the disgust he feels at Claudius and Gertrude’s incestuous and perverted relationship.

**Lines 376–416 (Enter Polonius ... look where)**

**Content**

Polonius enters and, as Hamlet predicts the tedious old fool will, announces the players. Hamlet uses the opportunity to make an indirect reference to Ophelia, as he wants to further the impression that he has been driven mad because she has obeyed her father’s instructions to reject him.

**Comment**

Hamlet shows Polonius up as the boring old fool that he is. Of particular significance is Hamlet’s comparison between Polonius’ honour and an ass (l. 390–391). However, it is sad that Hamlet’s wit has to take such a bitter form. If Polonius really loves Ophelia “passing well” (l. 408) he would not have used her as a pawn and so destroyed the genuine love between her and Hamlet.

**Lines 417–455 (Enter Players ... this line: let me see)**

**Content**

Hamlet welcomes the players whom he regards as his very good friends. He asks their leader to give a speech from a play there and then. It is a speech that tells of the death of King Priam in the Trojan War. It appeals to Hamlet because although it is a passionate speech it is written with restraint and without affectation.

**Comment**

Hamlet is a lonely man. He welcomes friendship. But we have just seen that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have betrayed that friendship. So Hamlet now turns to his “good friends” (l. 418), the players. They are not courtiers but Hamlet can place his trust in them. Hamlet’s interest in the players has revived his flagging spirits and in his request for a speech at once he shows that he can be a man of decision.

It is interesting to note that Hamlet calls for a “passionate speech” (l. 428). After meeting the Ghost he himself passionately declared that he would swoop to his revenge (Act 1 Scene 5 line 29–31). Now, after he has heard the player’s speech, he curses himself for not taking action. It appears that for Hamlet contemplation is easier than action (l. 542–601). Hamlet likes the play from which the speech is taken because it is free from “affectation” and has an “honest method” (l. 439–440). “Affectation” means “pretence or an artificial manner”. Hamlet suffers because all too many of those who should be dear to
him are dishonest and pretend to be what they are not. It is sadly ironic that he has to turn to an actor, a man who assumes a role, for an experience of genuine emotion. Above all, Hamlet likes the play because it is “wholesome” and “sweet” (I. 440) and thus we are reminded of one of the main themes of the play – that Hamlet’s suffering is largely owing to his sense of corruption and moral disease in the world around him.

Lines 446–513 (The rugged Pyrrhus ... And passion)

Content
Hamlet starts to recite the speech from the play, which tells how Pyrrhus, after being in the Wooden Horse, is now fighting in Troy itself. He is smeared from head to foot with the blood of all the men, women and children he has killed. Now he seeks the elderly King Priam. The first Player takes up the narrative. Priam is too old to fight any more. Pyrrhus’ blows strike wide. Nevertheless Priam falls, and at that moment the whole city of Troy comes crashing down in flames. For a moment Pyrrhus will be paralysed. But his stillness is as the momentary lull before a storm. His desire for vengeance is rekindled and remorselessly he stabs Priam’s body again and again. It is a sight to make the gods break the power of cruel fate. The grief of Priam’s wife, Hecuba, is intense. The sight of her muffled in the rags and blankets she snatch’d up to her face was so piteous it would have made the gods weep.

Comment
The speech has, of course, a bearing on Hamlet himself. Priam (I. 474) may be compared to Hamlet’s father who was also the victim of a “vile murder” (I. 457). Hecuba’s grief for her dead husband contrasts sharply with Gertrude’s somewhat superficial and short-lived grief for Hamlet’s father. We can be sure that Hamlet chose this speech for these reasons also. He (Act 2 Scene 2 line 237) has also called fortune a “strumpet” (I. 488). He is also caught up in the conflict between “heaven” and “friends” (I. 491–492). But, above all, there is a contrast and a similarity between Hamlet and Pyrrhus. Hamlet is most certainly not “hellish” (I. 459) or a “tyrant” (I. 475). But his purpose, like Pyrrhus’ is “vengeance” (I. 483) and “like a neutral to his will and matter./Did nothing” (I. 476–477) for which he berates himself throughout the play (theme of passion and reason).

Lines 514–541 (Polonius: Look! ... Exeunt Rosencrantz)

Content
Polonius remarks on the fact that the First Player has been moved to tears by his own speech. Hamlet instructs Polonius to treat the players well. He arranges for a play to be performed the next day. Hamlet is left alone with the First Player. He asks him to include in the play they will perform a speech that he, Hamlet himself, will write. The Player agrees to do so and leaves.

Comment
Hamlet refers to the players as “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (I. 519) as they frequently satirised public figures on the stage. We may say that Shakespeare himself is just that – and not only for his time but also for all time. It is the players who bring “honour and dignity” (I. 525) to the court of Denmark. It is men like Polonius who have dishonoured and rendered grotesque the moral values of life and who deserve “whipping” (I. 524). It is the players and not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are truly his friends (I. 528, 539 and 538).

Lines 542–601 (Hamlet: Ay, so ... end of scene)

Content
Hamlet curses himself when he compares himself to the First Player, who, although he was only playing a part in his imagination, felt the emotions of pity and grief so intensely that he wept. Hamlet wonders how the First Player would have reacted if he had been in Hamlet’s situation. Certainly not like Hamlet who is so listless, dispirited and inactive that he wastes himself in idle dreaming and says nothing – not even about the horrid murder of his dear father. He tries to find the reasons for his inadequacy. If anyone were to call him a coward they would be right since he should have killed Claudius before now. Here he is, the son of a man who has been murdered and has been instructed by an immortal spirit to avenge that murder and all he can do is talk about it. Hamlet remembers that he has heard that people guilty of some crime or sin have given themselves away if they have watched a play that reminds them of their crime. Consequently, he will instruct the players who have just arrived to play a scene that resembles the murder of his father. Claudius only has to turn pale for Hamlet to know that he is guilty. He wants proof because the Ghost might have been an evil spirit in disguise, come to lead him to damnation. He will know if Claudius is really guilty by how he reacts to the play.

Comment
It is important to understand that in the soliloquies, Hamlet is thinking aloud and thus revealing to us the true picture of his state of mind. This soliloquy is the longest in the play. It expresses the centre of Hamlet’s problem: instead of carrying out the act of vengeance he unpacks his heart with words (I. 581) about that act. He lashes himself into a fury over his delay. Two months have passed since he saw the Ghost, yet he has done nothing positive to achieve revenge. His tone is one of bitter self-reproach. We know that the reason is not that he is a “coward” (I. 565) and “pigeon liver’d” (I. 572) – when the pirates attack the ship that is carrying him to England he proves himself to be braver than most. A possible reason (although some critics consider it an excuse) for his delay is that he fears the Ghost might be an evil spirit and that he must “have grounds/More relative than this” (i.e. he must have evidence of Claudius’s guilt more conclusive than the Ghost’s word for it – I. 599–601).

Hamlet is an idealist. He cannot kill Claudius unless it is with “perfect conscience” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 67). Another possible reason is that he is suffering from a malaise of the spirit known as “melancholy” (I. 597) brought about by the loss of all moral values in the world around him. In other words, his soul-weariness is so intense that he cannot bring himself to act. But perhaps the real reason is contained in Hamlet’s words about the First Player: “his whole function suit’/With forms to his conceit” (i.e. the Player’s actions are in keeping with his imagination – lines 549–550). In other words, the Player is a man of imagination and action at the same time. There is no gap between his passion (I. 545 and 554) and the effect of that passion. It is this that makes Hamlet aware of the contrast
between himself and the Player.

The word “treacherous” (I. 675) reminds us of how those around him have betrayed Hamlet’s ideals. Just as “the devil hath power/To assume a pleasing shape” (I. 595–596) so can Claudius smile and be a villain (Act 1 Scene 2 line 108), so can Gertrude weep at her husband’s funeral and then marry fewer than two months later, so can Ophelia pretend to be praying while in reality being part of a trap for the man who loves her, so too can Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spy on Hamlet under the guise of friendship. It is no wonder that Hamlet suspects the Ghost of deceit.

In the last 18 lines, his tone is calmer, more purposeful and positive. He has honestly acknowledged his own failings and doubts and resolved on a plan of action.

**Act 3 Scene 1**

*Lines 1–28: (King: And can ... Exeunt Rosencrantz)*

**Content**

Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what success they have had in ascertaining the cause of Hamlet’s strange behaviour. They reply that Hamlet craftily avoids committing himself. However, he was obviously pleased when the players arrived and hopes that Claudius and Gertrude will attend a performance of a play that night. Claudius accepts readily. He is pleased to hear about Hamlet’s revival of spirits.

**Comment**

The words “puts on” (Act 3 Scene 1 line 2) reveal that Claudius suspects that Hamlet is assuming madness. He does not regard Hamlet’s behaviour lightly, however, referring to it as “turbulent and dangerous lunacy” (Act 3 Scene 1 line 4). Note the dramatic irony in Claudius’s words “With all my heart; and it doth much content me ...” (I. 24). Were he to know of Hamlet’s true purpose he would be anything but contented.

*Lines 28–55: (King: Sweet Gertrude ... Exeunt King)*

**Content**

Claudius asks Gertrude to leave as he and Polonius plan to spy on Hamlet when he “accidentally” meets Ophelia. In this way they will be able to judge if Hamlet has been driven mad by his love for Ophelia. Gertrude hopes that Ophelia will be able to restore Hamlet to his former self. To account for her being alone, Polonius gives Ophelia a prayer book. He admits that one often employs religious hypocrisy to hide one’s unworthy intentions. To himself, Claudius admits that this is true and that he himself is guilty of it.

**Comment**

To assume a false outward appearance to hide an inner evil reality is an important theme of the play (theme of honesty and virtue). Polonius, for example, uses an outward “show” of religion (I. 45) whereas Hamlet has “that within which passeth show” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 85). For Ophelia to allow her “virtues” (I. 40) to be exploited in this manner is for Hamlet a betrayal of virtue itself and a cause of deep suffering. In his eyes she becomes like the harlot Claudius refers to in line 51. Note how the words “The harlot’s cheek, beautified with plastering art” are echoed by Hamlet’s words to Ophelia: “I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another” (I. 144–146, and refer also to Act 5 Scene 1 line 186–188: “Now get ... at that”). For Hamlet, Ophelia’s “good beauties” (I. 39) have become “ugly” (I. 52). It is one more perversion and distortion among many in the world around him.

Note how the words “sugar o’er/The devil himself!” (I. 48–49) echo Hamlet’s fear that the Ghost might be the devil who has assumed “a pleasing shape” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 596).

*Lines 56–90: (Enter Hamlet ... Be all my sins)*

**Content**

In the third soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates suicide and wonders whether it is nobler to endure cruel fate or to put an end to one’s sufferings by actively opposing them (presumably the act of suicide). If to die were no more than to sleep, no one could wish for a better way to end the suffering one experiences in life. But to sleep brings with it the possibility of dreams and one does not know what horrific dreams one may have in the life after death. It is this consideration that makes us hesitate and that makes suffering so enduring and long-lived. Otherwise we could be free from the hurt and cruelties of the world – tyranny, contempt, loss of love, the delay of legal procedure – simply by killing ourselves with a dagger. It is the fear of what might happen after death that makes us continue to bear the burdens of life. We prefer the sufferings that we know to that which is unknown. And thus thinking about an act takes away our determination to execute that act.

Hamlet then sees Ophelia and asks to be remembered in her prayers.

**Comment**

The crux of this famous speech, and of Hamlet’s character, is contained in the words “in the mind to suffer” (I. 57) “... and lose the name of action” (I. 88). Hamlet has been instructed by the Ghost “to take arms against” (I. 59) “... The oppressor’s wrong” (i.e. Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet – I. 71). His original “resolution” (I. 84) was strong and it was an enterprise “of great pitch and moment” (I. 86). But he has delayed – and in this soliloquy he rationalises his delay. He considers suicide as a way of escaping from life’s burdens, one of which is his duty to his father’s ghost. A major problem, however, is that even death may not give the desired peace. His mood is one of dejection. Thus we see that the soliloquy is generally about the nature of life and death and particularly about suicide.

*Lines 90–160: (Ophelia: God ... To a nunnery)*
Content

Ophelia tells Hamlet that she wishes to return some love-tokens that he had given her. Hamlet denies that he ever gave her anything and as Ophelia is about to give them back to him he suddenly asks if she is both chaste and beautiful. He tells the bewildered Ophelia that the beauty of a woman often leads to a perversion of virtue (chastity) as events in the court of Denmark bear witness.

In another bewildering shift Hamlet at first says he loved Ophelia once and then immediately denies it. He tells her to go to a nunnery so that she will not be a mother of men who are all, including himself, sinful by nature. Probably Hamlet here sees a movement behind the arras and suddenly asks Ophelia where her father is. She lies and says he is at home.

Hamlet says that if ever Ophelia marries he will put a curse on her – namely, that she will always be the victim of slander no matter how chaste and pure she is. In any event she should marry a fool since wise men know what deceitful foolish creatures women are. Hamlet then makes a threat that one married man (i.e. Claudius) will be killed.

Comment

Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia in this scene has puzzled critics. For example, G.B. Harrison writes: “When Ophelia, at the bidding of Polonius, rejects Hamlet, his first and natural thought is that some other suitor had displaced him, which is apparently confirmed when Ophelia hands back his gifts”. Another critic, George Rylands, writes that in this scene “Ophelia fails Hamlet, and that he forgets the girl he loves in a general indictment of the frailty and falseness of women. He speaks to her, but he is thinking only of his mother … The sudden abrupt question (‘Where is your father?’) suggests that he has seen a movement behind the arras or caught a glimpse of peeping Polonius or the king. Ophelia answers with a clumsy, pitiful lie which confirms Hamlet’s suspicions”.

We note that a great deal of Hamlet’s bitterness is centred on deception. The concept of honesty is remarked upon four times (l. 103, 107, 112, 113). The word has a double meaning in this context: Are you truthful? Are you chaste? Hamlet links Ophelia’s duplicity with his mother’s adultery (‘now the time gives proof’—l. 112). Ophelia is not being truthful with Hamlet at this moment. He cannot believe her. And so with intense bitterness and sense of loss he tells her not to believe his expression of love (l. 117 and 121). He says of all women “God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another” (l. 146–147). In other words men cannot trust women’s outward appearance. To drive this home Hamlet tells Ophelia “believe none of us” (l. 129–130). He insults her viciously imposing on her the hurt that comes from disillusionment. The betrayal of love and the perversion of the truth lead Hamlet to exclaim: “it hath made me mad” (149). He is not actually mad but Ophelia will be.

Hamlet apparently suspects that Claudius is listening in and his words “those that are married already, all but one, shall live” (l. 150–151) are in all probability meant for Claudius’s ears.

Is Hamlet only “indifferent honest” and is he really “very proud, revengeful, ambitious”?

(l. 122–125). He sarcastically asks “What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?” (l. 128–129). His self-abasement is a bitter comment on the way values have been perverted in the world around him.

Lines 153–164 (Ophelia: O! what … To have seen)

Content

Hamlet leaves Ophelia. To herself she remarks on the tragic change in Hamlet. He was once a man of many parts, a man of nobility and grace and admired by all. She had known the sweet expression of his vows of love, but now she has just seen a man at odds with himself and in the grip of madness.

Comment

Despite her weaknesses, Ophelia gains our sympathy by these lines. It is clear that she is deeply anxious about Hamlet and genuinely loves him. We notice that emphasis is placed on “mind” (l. 153) and “reason” (l. 160) and that is contrasted with “ecstasy” (i.e. the extreme of passion to the point of madness – l. 163). It is because reason and passion are at odds with each other in Hamlet that he is “out of tune” (l. 161) with himself and it is because of corruption, deceit and evil that he is out of tune with the world around him.

Ophelia draws our attention to the quality of sweetness, “honey” (l. 159) and “sweet bells” (l. 161) that she knew to be such a notable feature of Hamlet’s character. At his death, Horatio bids him farewell with the words “Goodnight, sweet prince” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 351). The words “rose” (l. 155), “blown” (l. 162) and “blasted” (l. 163) are images derived from nature and throughout the play we see that the moral tragedy is expressed in concrete (i.e. not abstract) and natural imagery.

Also important are Ophelia’s words: “soldiers, scholar’s … tongue, sword” (l. 154). It is important to be reminded of his noble and princely nature when he is so distraught.

Lines 164–191 (Re-enter King … end of Scene)

Content

Polonius and Claudius emerge from their hiding place. Claudius doubts very much that Hamlet’s behaviour has been caused by love, nor that it actually is madness. He suspects rather that Hamlet is brooding darkly over some plan that might well prove dangerous. For this reason he has decided to send Hamlet to England in the hope that a change of environment will cure him of his melancholy and make him himself again. Claudius appears to be concerned about Hamlet (theme of appearance and reality). Polonius still thinks that Hamlet’s behaviour is owing to rejected love. He would like to eavesdrop on a meeting between Hamlet and his mother. If she cannot find the cause of Hamlet’s grievances, then he agrees it will be best to send him to England.

Comment

Neither Hamlet, nor Claudius, is a fool. Hamlet sees Claudius’s hypocrisy and Claudius sees through Hamlet’s madness. But in one important respect Claudius provides a strong contrast to Hamlet – namely he acts with “quick determination” (l. 171). Realising the
Content

Ophelia tells Hamlet that she wishes to return some love-tokens that he had given her. Hamlet denies that he ever gave her anything and as Ophelia is about to give them back to him he suddenly asks if she is both chaste and beautiful. He tells the bewildered Ophelia that the beauty of a woman often leads to a perversion of virtue (chastity) as events in the court of Denmark bear witness.

In another bewildering shift Hamlet at first says he loved Ophelia once and then immediately denies it. He tells her to go to a nunnery so that she will not be a mother of men who are all, including himself, sinful by nature. Probably Hamlet here sees a movement behind the arras and suddenly asks Ophelia where her father is. She lies and says he is at home.

Hamlet says that if ever Ophelia marries he will put a curse on her – namely, that she will always be the victim of slander no matter how chaste and pure she is. In any event she should marry a fool since wise men know what deceitful foolish creatures women are. Hamlet then makes a threat that one married man (i.e. Claudius) will be killed.

Comment

Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia in this scene has puzzled critics. For example, G.B. Harrison writes: “When Ophelia, at the bidding of Polonius, rejects Hamlet, his first and natural thought is that some other suitor had displaced him, which is apparently confirmed when Ophelia hands back his gifts”. Another critic, George Rylands, writes that in this scene “Ophelia fails Hamlet, and that he forgets the girl he loves in a general indictment of the frailty and falseness of women. He speaks to her, but he is thinking only of his mother … The sudden abrupt question (‘Where is your father?’) suggests that he has seen a movement behind the arras or caught a glimpse of peeping Polonius or the king. Ophelia answers with a clumsy, pitiful lie which confirms Hamlet’s suspicions”.

We note that a great deal of Hamlet’s bitterness is centred on deception. The concept of honesty is remarked upon four times (l. 103, 107, 112, 113). The word has a double meaning in this context: Are you truthful? Are you chaste? Hamlet links Ophelia’s duplicity with his mother’s adultery (“now the time gives proof”—l. 112). Ophelia is not being truthful with Hamlet at this moment. He cannot believe her. And so with intense bitterness and sense of loss he tells her not to believe his expression of love (l. 117 and 121). He says of all women “God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another” (l. 146–147). In other words men cannot trust women’s outward appearance. To drive this home Hamlet tells Ophelia “believe none of us” (l. 129–130). He insults her viciously imposing on her the hurt that comes from disillusionment. The betrayal of love and the perversion of the truth lead Hamlet to exclaim: “it hath made me mad” (149). He is not actually mad but Ophelia will be.

Hamlet apparently suspects that Claudius is listening in and his words “those that are married already, all but one, shall live” (l. 150–151) are in all probability meant for Claudius’s ears.

Is Hamlet only “indifferent honest” and is he really “very proud, revengeful, ambitious”?

(L. 122–125). He sarcastically asks “What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?” (l. 128–129). His self-abasement is a bitter comment on the way values have been perverted in the world around him.

Lines 153–164 (Ophelia: O! what ... To have seen)

Content

Hamlet leaves Ophelia. To herself she remarks on the tragic change in Hamlet. He was once a man of many parts, a man of nobility and grace admired by all. She had known the sweet expression of his vows of love, but now she has just seen a man at odds with himself and in the grip of madness.

Comment

Despite her weaknesses, Ophelia gains our sympathy by these lines. It is clear that she is deeply anxious about Hamlet and genuinely loves him. We notice that emphasis is placed on “mind” (l. 153) and “reason” (l. 160) and that is contrasted with “ecstasy” (i.e. the extreme of passion to the point of madness – l. 163). It is because reason and passion are at odds with each other in Hamlet that he is “out of tune” (l. 161) with himself and it is because of corruption, deceit and evil that he is out of tune with the world around him.

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Also important are Ophelia’s words: “soldiers, scholar’s ... tongue, sword” (l. 154). It is important to be reminded of his noble and princely nature when he is so distraught.

Lines 164–191 (Re-enter King ... end of Scene)

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Polonius and Claudius emerge from their hiding place. Claudius doubts very much that Hamlet’s behaviour has been caused by love, nor that it actually is madness. He suspects rather that Hamlet is brooding darkly over some plan that might well prove dangerous. For this reason he has decided to send Hamlet to England in the hope that a change of environment will cure him of his melancholy and make him himself again. Claudius appears to be concerned about Hamlet (theme of appearance and reality). Polonius still thinks that Hamlet’s behaviour is owing to rejected love. He would like to eavesdrop on a meeting between Hamlet and his mother. If she cannot find the cause of Hamlet’s grievances, then he agrees it will be best to send him to England.

Comment

Neither Hamlet, nor Claudius, is a fool. Hamlet sees Claudius’s hypocrisy and Claudius sees through Hamlet’s madness. But in one important respect Claudius provides a strong contrast to Hamlet – namely he acts with “quick determination” (l. 171). Realising the
threat that Hamlet’s “madness” poses, he schemes to remove him from Elsinore. He decisively rejects any theories about Hamlet’s madness. The whole play revolves around the coming confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius; they are indeed “mighty opposites” as Hamlet says (see Comment on Act 5 Scene 2 line 62). Claudius remarks on the conflict within Hamlet between his “heart” and his “brains” (l. 176–177). This is another way of saying that there is a conflict between passionate desire and his faculty of reason (Act 1 Scene 2 line 47).

Act 3 Scene 2

Lines 1–51 (Enter Hamlet ... Exeunt Rosencrantz)

Content
Hamlet advises the players on how to act. His true nature is evident here: cheerful, enthusiastic, confident, intelligent and witty. We see a different Hamlet from the disturbed character of the previous scene.

The players must not overdo and rant and rave, even in the most passionate speeches. They must suit their actions to their words and their words to their actions. Art holds up a mirror to nature and expresses the spirit of the age and of contemporary manners. To strut and bellow on the stage is not to imitate humanity properly and appeals only to those in the audience who have no discernment.

Comment
To hear Shakespeare, the greatest playwright in the English language, comment on the art of theatre is, of course, of great interest in itself. But we notice that many of Hamlet’s comments have a bearing on his own situation within the play. For example, throughout his advice he insists on “temperance” (l. 8), “discretion” (l. 18) and “modesty” (l. 20). In other words, his advice is mainly about passion and the control of passion. But Hamlet does not follow his own advice. He swings from a too-rational control of passion (which is largely a cause of his inability to act) to an uncontrolled and what he calls “towering passion” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 79). Hamlet recognises this defect in himself, and so he admires Horatio’s balance between emotion and reason (l. 69).

Similarly, Hamlet constantly upbraids himself for talking too much instead of acting (as in Act 2 Scene 2 line 581–582: “Must, like ... a very drab”). It is only right at the very end of the play that he himself is able to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (l. 18–19) of revenge.

Lines 53–91 (Enter Horatio ... get you a place)

Content
Before the play is performed, Hamlet calls for Horatio and tells him, without any intention of flattery, that he admires him above all other men. Horatio is a man who accepts the cruelties and the rewards of fate with an even temperament. In him there is a balance and harmony between reason and passion, and consequently he is not at the mercy of fate, passion or reason. Hamlet then tells Horatio how he has arranged for the players to re-enact a scene similar to the brutal murder of his father. He asks Horatio to study Claudius’s reaction closely. If Claudius shows no guilt then the Ghost was an evil spirit and cannot be trusted. Horatio agrees to this plan.

Comment
Hamlet despises flattery (l. 56–62) because a flatterer does not mean what he says and cannot be believed. A false outward appearance is a perversion of the inner truth. “And bless’d are those/Whose blood and judgment are so co-mingled/That they are not a pipe for fortune’s finger/To sound what stop she please” (l. 68–71). These words not only tell us a great deal about Horatio but also are central to our understanding of Hamlet’s character. It is because his blood (i.e. passion) and judgement (i.e. reason) do not function in harmony and are at odds that he is cursed and not “bless’d”.

Lines 92–133 (Enter King ... the hobby-horse is forgot)

Content
The court has gathered to see the performance of the play. Hamlet deliberately utters riddling comments that, nevertheless, hint at Claudius’s death and insult Polonius. Ophelia remarks that Hamlet appears to be in a merry mood. Bitterly Hamlet remarks that there is nothing else for a man but to be merry in a world where a woman, like his mother, can be so cheerful so soon after her husband’s death. It seems that great men will have to build cathedrals to be remembered by since they are so soon forgotten otherwise.

Comment
There is method in Hamlet’s “madness” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 205–206). For example, he suggests that in the court of Denmark promises are as empty as air (l. 93–94). “Capons” (l. 94) were young cocks fattened for killing – in other words, it will only be a matter of time before Claudius is killed.

Polonius and Laertes told Ophelia that Hamlet’s interest in her was on a sexual level only. Their accusations were totally unfounded. Ophelia herself said that Hamlet “hath given countenance to his speech ... With almost all the holy vows of heaven” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 114–115). But she betrayed his love. In his eyes, she prostituted love and so he now talks to her with sexual and bawdy innuendos (l. 111–116). She has rendered their love “nothing” (l. 118). A “suit of sables” (l. 127) is said of black clothes which one wears when one is in a state of mourning. We are reminded of the time when Hamlet told his mother that the “customary suits” of solemn black (are) but the trappings and the suits of woe” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 78–86) and that, unlike her, his grief is genuine.

Lines 134–151 (Hautboys play ... Hamlet: As woman’s love)

Content
Two players mime in silence how a king and queen appear to be very much in love. The queen leaves, and the king sleeps. A man enters and pours poison in the king’s ear. The queen puts on a passionate show of grief and the poisoner appears to lament with her. It is not long before the poisoner successfully woos the queen. Ophelia asks Hamlet the
threat that Hamlet’s “madness” poses, he schemes to remove him from Elsinore. He decisively rejects any theories about Hamlet’s madness. The whole play revolves around the coming confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius; they are indeed “mighty opposites” as Hamlet says (see Comment on Act 5 Scene 2 line 62). Claudius remarks on the conflict within Hamlet between his “heart” and his “brains” (l. 176–177). This is another way of saying that there is a conflict between passionate desire and his faculty of reason (Act 1 Scene 2 line 47).

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And passionate lines expressed asks of us an important theme of the play: namely, appearance and reality.

It is for this reason that Hamlet so bitterly accentuates the word “show” by repeating it three times in lines 141–142. Ophelia put on an outward show of piety when she pretended to be praying while she was part of the plot to enable Polonius and Claudius to spy on Hamlet. When Hamlet says that a woman’s love is brief (l. 150–151), he returns to his obsession with the unfaithfulness of women. He may be referring to Gertrude as well as to Ophelia.

**Lines 152–226 (Enter two players ... And never come)**

*Content*

After the dumb-show and the Prologue, the play proper begins. The Player King comments on the time that has passed since he and the Player Queen were married. The Player Queen hopes that their love will be eternal—but she is anxious about his state of health. He admits that he might soon die but hopes that she will be happy with another husband. She says she will never marry again. To do so would be tantamount to killing the memory of her first husband.

The Player King does not doubt that she believes what she is saying now. But what one says in a moment of passion is not always carried out by action. The original and passionate determination soon fades. And so it is with love also. Love changes as one’s fortunes changes, and one cannot control the consequences of one’s thoughts. The Player Queen, however, swears that she will never marry for a second time (at which point Hamlet remarks that she dare not break such a deeply sworn oath). The Player King then asks the queen to leave him as he wishes to sleep.

*Comment*

We remember how the Ghost told Hamlet of his “most seeming-virtuous queen” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 46). The Player Queen swears eternal love, as Gertrude doubtless did also to Hamlet’s father and says “In second husband let me be accurst; None wed the second but who kill’d the first” (l. 176–177). But that of course is exactly what Gertrude does. Her speedy marriage is one of the basic causes of Hamlet’s misery particularly because it violates a union made “in most sacred bonds” (l. 157). And just as Hamlet’s father’s love for Gertrude was based on “most sacred bonds”, so was Hamlet’s love for Ophelia expressed “with almost all the holy vows of heaven” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 114). Both Gertrude and Ophelia have defiled the will of heaven and for Hamlet this is indeed “Wormwood, wormwood” (i.e. bitterness – l. 178). His “trust and hope” (l. 215) have been betrayed and he can only turn “to desperation”.

But this “play-within-a-play” has a bearing not only on Gertrude and, by implication Claudius, but is also central to our understanding of Hamlet. For example, consider the words: “But what we do to determine oft we break” (l. 186) “…what to ourselves in passion we propose/The passion ending, doth the purpose lose” (l. 191–192). Hamlet passionately vowed to himself that he would avenge his father’s death. But the whole play revolves around his attempt to put that passionate desire into action. He swore to kill Claudius, but we can say of him, as he says of the Player Queen/Gertrude: “If he should break it now” (l. 221). It is not until the very end of the play that Hamlet carries out his passionate vow of vengeance.

**Lines 226–251 (My spirits ... and worse.)**

*Content*

Hamlet asks his mother what her opinion of the play is at this stage. She replies that the Player Queen should not declare her eternal love for the king so strongly.

Claudius hopes that the play will not prove to be offensive in any way. Hamlet’s ambiguous reply is that it is only a joke and should not be taken seriously. He says that if one is free from guilt the play should have no effect.

A player enters. His part is Lucianus, a nephew of a king—as Hamlet pointedly explains. He urges the players to continue with the play, which is about revenge.

*Comment*

Hamlet is being sarcastic when he tells his mother: “O! but she’ll keep her word” (l. 228). He implies that the Player Queen will be as faithless as Gertrude has been. (But we must ask ourselves: does Hamlet keep his own word—i.e. to “sweep to his revenge”?—Act 1 Scene 5 line 31).

**Lines 252–287 (Lucianus ... Horatio: I did)**

*Content*

The “play-within-a-play” continues. Lucianus pours poison into the ear of the sleeping Player King. Hamlet explains that soon the poisoner will win the love of the Player Queen. Unfortunately, Hamlet has given Claudius every excuse for calling off the play without exposing his own discomfort. In the eyes of the court, Hamlet’s pointed remarks would be regarded as offensive. However, Claudius betrays himself to Hamlet when he rushes from the room in confusion.

Hamlet is in a state of high excitement and makes up a rhyme on what has occurred. He is now convinced that the Ghost was not an evil spirit and may be believed.

*Comment*

It will be only at the very end of the play that for Hamlet his hands will be “apt ... and
Lines 288–337 (Re-enter Rosencrantz ... is something musty)

Content
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return after the confusion caused by Claudius's flight. Hamlet, however, gleefully calls for some musical instruments and is quite unperturbed by the news that Claudius is exceedingly angry. If he, Hamlet, attended Claudius it would only make him worse.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inform Hamlet that his mother is upset and astonished by his behaviour. Hamlet is unmoved but will abide by his mother's request to see him. Rosencrantz asks Hamlet, in the name of friendship, to account for his wild and strange behaviour. Hamlet lets them think that it is owing to thwarted ambition.

Comment
The words: “Make you a wholesome answer — my wit's diseased” are mocking in tone. Hamlet is, however, very interested in his mother's reaction to the play. Remember that a great deal of it was directed at her. Hamlet's sarcastic remark “O wonderful son that can so astonish a mother!” (I.321) is a bitter comment on the fact that it is she who has been tyrannized by him through her behaviour with Claudius.

By “these pickers and stealers” (I.329) Hamlet means his “hand” but they are words that suggest that it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who wish to steal and “pluck out the heart of (his) mystery” (I.358). Frustrated ambition (I.333) is not the real reason for Hamlet's “madness”. But it is convenient for them to believe so (see Comment of Act 2 Scene 2 line 252).

Lines 338–365 (Enter players ... play upon me)

Content
The players return with the musical instruments (oboes, a type of flute) that Hamlet asked for. Hamlet insists that Guildenstern play one of them. Embarrassed, Guildenstern pleads that he does not know how to play. Hamlet angrily tells him that in that case Guildenstern should not try to manipulate him as if he were a simple musical instrument. In other words, Hamlet is not going to dance to his tune.

Comment
Hamlet admires men “whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled/That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger/To sound what stop she please” (Act 3 Scene 2 line 69–71). He, however, baulks at being the plaything of men such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Note how the word “lying” (I.350) touches on the whole theme of hypocrisy and deception that is partly the cause of Hamlet's disgust with the world.

In any event, the words “you would pluck out the heart of my mystery” (I.358–359) serve as a warning to any critic not to attempt a final “solution” to Hamlet's character. He is a great dramatic figure simply because he retains the mystery that is in all of us.

Lines 366–392 (Enter Polonius ... end of scene)

Content
Polonius enters to announce that Hamlet's mother wishes to speak with him. Hamlet makes Polonius appear the fool that he is by encouraging him to change his mind about the shape of a cloud. Hamlet is then alone. He is in a murderous mood but warns himself that he must make his mother aware of her shame with words only. He must restrain himself from killing her.

Comment
The business about the cloud reveals Polonius to be a hypocritical flatterer, which Hamlet despises. Hamlet is now in a mood of passionate determination. He could “drink hot blood” (I.382). We must ask ourselves why he does not kill Claudius when he comes across him on his way to his mother's room. The answer is contained in the word “hell” (I.382). If Claudius is killed while he is praying he will go to heaven and not to hell, where Hamlet wants him.

“O heart! lose not thy nature” (I.386): it is not natural for the human heart, and least of all Hamlet's, to harbour murderous feelings. Murder is “unnatural” (I.388 and refer back to the Ghost's words of Act 1 Scene 5 line 25–28). “To give them seals” (I.392) means “to ratify the words by actions”. It is ironic that for once Hamlet tells himself not to do this. For the most part he curses himself for not matching his words with actions.

Act 3 Scene 3

Lines 1–26 (King: I like ... Exeunt Rosencrantz)

Content
Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet's mad behaviour is a threat to his safety. Consequently they must prepare themselves to escort Hamlet to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are willing to protect the king since the prosperity of the nation depends on the king's safety.

Comment
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's comments about the function of kingship echo Laertes's words: “for on his choice depends/The safety and the health of the whole state” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 20–21). In his characteristically decisive manner, Claudius makes arrangements for Hamlet to leave for England immediately, escorted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Lines 27–35 (Enter Polonius ... Exit Polonius)
time agreeing” (I. 252) and that he will kill the man who killed his father. The words “rank”, “weeds” (I. 254), “infected” (I. 255), “wholesome” (I. 257) and “i’ the garden” (I. 258) develop one of the main themes of the play – the theme of corruption, which Hamlet must purge.

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**Comment**
Hamlet admires men “whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled/That they are not a pipe for fortune’s finger/To sound what stop she please” (Act 3 Scene 2 line 69–71). He, however, baulks at being the plaything of men such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Note how the word “lying” (I. 350) touches on the whole theme of hypocrisy and deception that is partly the cause of Hamlet’s disgust with the world.

In any event, the words “you would pluck out the heart of my mystery” (I. 358–359) serve as a warning to any critic not to attempt a final “solution” to Hamlet’s character. He is a great dramatic figure simply because he retains the mystery that is in all of us.

**Lines 366–392 (Enter Polonius ... end of scene)**

**Content**
Polonius enters to announce that Hamlet’s mother wishes to speak with him. Hamlet makes Polonius appear the fool that he is by encouraging him to change his mind about the shape of a cloud. Hamlet is then alone. He is in a murderous mood but warns himself that he must make his mother aware of her shame with words only. He must restrain himself from killing her.

**Comment**
The business about the cloud reveals Polonius to be a hypocritical flatterer, which Hamlet despises. Hamlet is now in a mood of passionate determination. He could “drink hot blood” (I. 382). We must ask ourselves why he does not kill Claudius when he comes across him on his way to his mother’s room. The answer is contained in the word “hell” (I. 382). If Claudius is killed while he is praying he will go to heaven and not to hell, where Hamlet wants him.

“O heart! lose not thy nature” (I. 386): it is not natural for the human heart, and least of all Hamlet’s, to harbour murderous feelings. Murder is “unnatural” (I. 388 and refer back to the Ghost’s words of Act 1 Scene 5 line 25–28). “To give them seals” (I. 392) means “to ratify the words by actions”. It is ironic that for once Hamlet tells himself not to do this. For the most part he curses himself for not matching his words with actions.

**Act 3 Scene 3**

**Lines 1–26 (King: I like ... Exeunt Rosencrantz)**

**Content**
Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet’s mad behaviour is a threat to his safety. Consequently they must prepare themselves to escort Hamlet to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are willing to protect the king since the prosperity of the nation depends on the king’s safety.

**Comment**
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s comments about the function of kingship echo Laertes’s words: “for on his choice depends/The safety and the health of the whole state” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 20–21). In his characteristically decisive manner, Claudius makes arrangements for Hamlet to leave for England immediately, escorted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

**Lines 27–35 (Enter Polonius ... Exit Polonius)**
Content
Polonius tells Claudius that Hamlet is on his way to his mother's bedroom and that he, Polonius, will hide himself behind the arras.

Comment
Gertrude's hasty marriage to Claudius has been unnatural and because of it the natural bonds between son and mother have been severed: "Since nature makes them partial" (l. 32; see also Act 3 Scene 2 line 386-388).

Lines 36-72 (O my offence ... all may be well)
Content
Claudius desperately attempts to pray for the forgiveness of the sin of murdering his brother. But so strong is his sense of guilt that he is unable to pray. Desperately he hopes for heaven's pardon and mercy so that he may be cleansed of his brother's blood. But he can find no form of effective prayer. How can he ask for pardon when he is still in possession of what he gained by the murder - the crown and his wife? In this corrupted world the power of kingship, once seized, puts a man above the law. But this is not so in heaven. There a man is judged truly and must submit himself totally to that judgement. And the more he struggles to repent, the more he becomes ensnared in his own guilt. Desperately he tries once more to pray.

Comment
Claudius gains a certain amount of our sympathy in this scene. His is a soul in genuine torment and for once he displays an intellectual and emotional honesty. He reveals anguished guilt beneath his facade of ruthless statesmanship. Had Shakespeare not shown us this complexity of Claudius's character and made him no more than a caricature of a ruthless and ambitious villain, then Hamlet would have simply been a melodrama. As it is, the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius now takes on an added interest.

Note how the words "rank" (l. 36), "foul" (l. 52) and "corrupted" (l. 57) develop the theme of corruption and disease.

Lines 73-98 (Enter Hamlet ... end of scene)
Content
On his way to his mother's bedroom Hamlet sees Claudius at prayer. It is a chance for Hamlet to kill him and so be avenged. But Hamlet realises that if he kills Claudius while he is praying, Claudius's soul will go to heaven. That would be payment and reward for Claudius rather than revenge for himself. No, Hamlet will wait until Claudius is in the process of committing some sin before he kills him. In that way Claudius's soul will go to hell and be forever damned.

Comment
Critics are divided in their interpretation of this scene. Some maintain that it is yet another example of Hamlet "thinking too precisely on the event" (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41) and so delaying the act of revenge yet again. Other critics maintain that Hamlet is being ruthless and taking the act of revenge to its extreme by wishing that his enemy should not escape the everlasting torments of hell.

While it is true that Hamlet's father was killed without a chance to repent his sins (l. 81 and refer to the Ghost's words: "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin" - Act 1 Scene 5 line 76), it is also true that Hamlet does not allow "shriving time" for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Act 4 Scene 2 line 47).

Note the irony in the concluding couplet of the scene. Claudius's prayers have been in vain and his rationalisations wasted, as he has mistaken appearance for reality.

Act 3 Scene 4

Lines 1-7 (Polonius: He will ... Polonius hides)
Content
Polonius arranges with Gertrude that he will hide behind the arras while she confronts Hamlet about his strange behaviour. She is to say that she has protected him from the king's anger.

Comment
It is ironic in the extreme that Polonius of all people advises someone to speak plainly (l. 5) since he himself is quite incapable of doing so. The way in which Gertrude meekly complies with a plan to have her son spied upon parallels Ophelia's similar behaviour.

Both Gertrude and Ophelia betray the bonds of love.

Lines 8-33 (Enter Hamlet ... Thou find'st to be)
Content
Hamlet accuses his mother of offending his father and even goes as far as to wish that she were not his mother. Gertrude is at a loss as to how she should interpret Hamlet's behaviour and makes a move to leave. He forces her to stay, saying that she shall not leave until he has shown her what she truly is.

Gertrude calls out for help. Polonius becomes agitated behind the arras. Thinking that it is Claudius, Hamlet stabs Polonius to death. He is not at all dismayed, but rather disappointed, to discover that he has killed Polonius and not Claudius.

Comment
The focal point of this scene is Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude. Although it is possible that Gertrude committed adultery with Claudius (Act 1 Scene 5 line 42-47), it is quite clear from this passage that she knows nothing of the murder of her former husband. In any event, Hamlet's bitterness stems more from her hasty marriage to her "husband's brother" (l. 15).

Just as it is the function of a play to hold "the mirror up to nature", so will Hamlet hold
the mirror up to Gertrude (l. 19–20) – just as he did to Ophelia (see Comment on Act 3 Scene 2 line 23–24). Hamlet deliberately accentuates the word “inmost” (l. 20) because once before he bitterly accused his mother of being more concerned with outward appearance at the expense of inner reality (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 2 line 76–86).

It is ironic that when Hamlet does at last act on a passionate impulse he kills the wrong man. Having just spared the king at prayer, he hopes that he has now killed the king in the despicable act of eavesdropping. He is mistaken, however. He blames Polonius for his rashness and is not so much concerned about having killed him as disappointed that it is not Claudius.

Lines 34–51 (Leave wringing … at the act)

Content
Hamlet tells his mother that if she has any sensitivity left she will make her suffer from the shame of what she has done. Her behaviour (with Claudius) perverts pure love and innocence and debases the holy sanctity of marriage vows. Both heaven and earth mourn over what she has done.

Comment
Again we note Hamlet’s obsession with the inconstancy of women. When Ophelia put on the pretence of praying (Act 3 Scene 1), she too, was being hypocritically virtuous (l. 42). Prostitutes were branded on the forehead (l. 43–44) and Hamlet virtually called Ophelia a prostitute as he is calling his mother here. Hamlet expressed his love for Ophelia “with almost all the holy vows of heaven” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 114), just as Gertrude married Hamlet’s father according to “marriage vows” (l. 44). Both Ophelia and Gertrude have desecrated “sweet religion” (l. 47) by rendering the words of holy vows false (l. 45) and meaningless. Doubtless, Hamlet is thinking of the Ghost’s words of Act 1 Scene 5 line 49–51. Because of the fraility of women (Act 1 Scene 2 line 146) Hamlet, too, is “thought-sick” (l. 51).

Lines 51–88 (Queen me! … and reason)

Content
Gertrude is still unaware of what Hamlet is referring to. Hamlet makes her compare a picture of his father to a picture of Claudius. The former has a grace and an almost god-like quality. The latter, Claudius, is evil and rotten in comparison.

Hamlet asks how Gertrude could possibly have left her first husband and turned to Claudius. She is past the age of wild young love and should be capable of discernment. But even a mad person would be able to judge the difference in quality between her first husband and Claudius. It must have been the devil that made her so blind. A person without the faculty of his senses would not act as she has done. If lust in a woman of Gertrude’s age is uncontrollable then virtue can have no power in youth. There is no hope for a youth’s will to be controlled by reason if wantonness cannot be controlled in a woman of Gertrude’s age.

Comment
The god-like qualities of Hamlet’s father (l. 56–61) are further emphasised by the words “grace” (which in one sense, means the “favour of God”) and “heaven kissing” (l. 59). These references demonstrate Hamlet’s reverence for his deceased father. Gertrude, and by implication Claudius, on the other hand, are associated with the devil (l. 76) and “rebellious hell” (l. 82). Note the contrasting images that Hamlet uses. It is Hamlet’s mission to restore the grace of God to the rotten state of Denmark.

And just as moral values and virtue have been corrupted, so has nature itself, as we note from the words “like a mildew’d ear” (i.e. of wheat) (Blasting his wholesome brother) – l. 64–65). This theme of the corruption of nature is one of the main themes of the play.

Lines 89–102 (Queen: 0 Hamlet! … Hamlet: A King of)

Content
Gertrude pleads with Hamlet to stop. He has made her see the extent of the sin within herself. But Hamlet continues to rail against her perverted sexual relationship with Claudius, who is a murderous usurper and a caricature of a king who can in no way compare with her first husband.

Comment
Gertrude calls her son “sweet Hamlet” (l. 96); and Horatio calls his friend “sweet Prince” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 351). But here we see him in a vicious and ugly mood, and we cannot help but pity the transformation. This transformation has been brought about by the “rank corruption” (l. 92–93) of the world in which “things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it merely” (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 2 line 136–137). The comparison of Claudius’s bed to a pigstye reveals the depth of Hamlet’s disgust.

Note how Gertrude’s words: “These words like daggers enter in mine ears” (l. 95) echo Hamlet’s “I will speak daggers, but use none” (Act 3 Scene 2 line 289).

Lines 103–135 (Enter Ghost … Exit Ghost)

Content
The Ghost, seen by Hamlet only, appears. Hamlet asks whether it has come to reprimand him for not carrying out its command to kill Claudius. The Ghost acknowledges that this is so. It then tells Hamlet to tend to his mother who is in a state of terrified astonishment. Gertrude cannot see the Ghost and thinks that Hamlet must indeed be insane. She asks him what he is staring at in such a wild and terrified way.

Hamlet is distraught at the harrowed look of the Ghost. It is such a pitiful sight that Hamlet says he may shed tears instead of extracting blood (i.e. of Claudius). Hamlet tries to point out the Ghost to Gertrude as it leaves. But she has seen and heard nothing.

Comment
We have seen that Hamlet’s father loved his wife dearly, so it seems right that the Ghost
of old Hamlet has appeared in time to intervene and prevent Hamlet from being too cruel to his mother.

Also of importance are Hamlet's words "That laps'd in time and passion, let's go by/The important acting of your dead command" (I. 107-108) and the Ghost's "This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose". They are words that develop the theme of the conflict of passion and reason. They also make us realise how far Hamlet has moved from his mission of revenge through his obsession with his mother's unfaithfulness. He seems to have forgotten the Ghost's instruction: "nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught" in Act 1 Scene 5.

Gertrude calls Hamlet "O gentle son!" (I. 121). Again, as in line 96, we are reminded of what Hamlet could have been: "The expectancy and rose of the fair state" (Act 3 Scene 1 line 155). But the fair state has become a rotten state (Act 1 Scene 4 line 90).

**Lines 136-172 (Queen: This ... I'll blessing beg of you)**

**Content**

Gertrude thinks that Hamlet's madness has created an imaginary phantom. Hamlet vehemently denies that he has uttered any madness. He tells his mother that she should not deceive herself and look for the excuse that what he has told her has been owing to his madness. If she does not confess, the corruption within her will grow worse. She must avoid contamination from the vice that is so widespread. He begs her to lead a pure life from now on and avoid any sexual relationship with Claudius. If she practises virtue it will become a habit and so will become easier as time goes on.

**Comment**

Opposed to the word "healthful" (I. 141) are the words "rank corruption" (I. 148) and "ulcerous place" (I. 147). This theme of moral health and disease is one of the most important themes of the play. And, as throughout the play, this corruption is reflected in nature itself - note how the words "And do not spread the compost on the weeds/To make them ranker" (I. 151-152) echo Hamlet's former: "Ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,/ That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely." (Act 1 Scene 2 line 135-137).

Note, too, how the alternation of words such as "virtue" (I. 152), "vice" (I. 154), "virtue" (I. 160), "Devil" (I. 162), "Angel" (I. 162), "devil" (I. 169) and "bless'd" (I. 171) convey that among the many series of conflicting opposites in the play the conflict between good and evil is at the centre.

**Lines 172-217 (For this same ... end of scene)**

**Content**

Hamlet leaves his mother on a note of tenderness. He says that his killing of Polonius was the will of heaven. Once more he begs his mother not to have sexual relations with Claudius or to let the latter find out that there is a plan behind Hamlet's "madness". Gertrude assures Hamlet that she will reveal nothing to Claudius. Hamlet reminds his mother that he is to be sent to England accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whom he does not trust at all. But he will foil their secret plans. Hamlet then leaves, dragging the body of Polonius unceremoniously behind him.

**Comment**

These words require consideration: "... But heaven hath pleas'd it so,/To punish me with this, and this with me/That I must be their scourge and minister" (I. 173-175). We remember that right at the beginning of the play Marcellus remarked: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark"; and that Horatio replies: "Heaven will direct it" (Act 1 Scene 4 line 90-91). Moral values and health have to be restored and the agent of that restoration is Hamlet - "heaven hath pleas'd it so". Hamlet may be regarded as a "scourge and minister" in the sense that he is God's means of punishing evildoers and purging Denmark of corruption.

Note: Act 3 is the climax of the play. Claudius has revealed his guilt and resolves to send Hamlet to England. Feeling afraid and threatened, he resorts to ruthless measures. Hamlet, reminded of his task by the Ghost, becomes more resolute and determined. Gertrude, though a shallow and confused woman, has been made aware of her sin. The total situation is ready to play itself out.

**Act 4 Scene 1**

**Lines 1-45 (King: There's matter ... end of scene)**

**Content**

Claudius asks Gertrude to tell him what has happened. She relates how, in a sudden fit of madness, Hamlet killed Polonius behind the arras. Claudius says that Hamlet's madness is a threat to everyone and that he should have had the foresight to have Hamlet locked up. Gertrude attempts to defend Hamlet but Claudius says he will be sent to England at once. In the meantime they must try to explain the death of Polonius to the public.

Claudius instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and the body. He can only hope that he will not be blamed.

**Comment**

The words "lawless it" (I. 8) and "brainish apprehension" (headstrong fancy - I. 11) imply that Hamlet's faculty of reason had no control over his passion. That Gertrude considers Polonius to be "a good old man" (I. 12) reveals that she is somewhat naive - which would also account for the fact that she has no idea that Claudius is a murderer. However, there is something touchingly pathetic in her attempt to defend Hamlet (I. 25–27). If we had absolutely no sympathy for her the situation between her and Hamlet would not be as complex and as tragic as it is.
it is significant, and ironic, that Claudius compares himself to “the owner of a foul disease” “that feeds even on the pith of life” (l. 21–22). It is largely owing to him, who should represent “the safety and the health” of the whole state (Act 2 Scene 3 line 21) that moral disease and corruption are so widespread in the rotten state of Denmark. And to say that he has so much love (l. 19) for the young man whose father he has killed hardly rings true.

It is also ironic that Claudius is afraid of being blamed for the death of Polonius when, in fact, he is the cold-blooded murderer of Hamlet’s father and is planning to have Hamlet himself murdered in England. He plans to send for his “wisest friends” to ensure that they are informed about what has happened. He is worried about the threat to his name and image as king. We have little sympathy for the fact that Claudius’s “soul is full of discord and dismay” (l. 45) since it is he who has disrupted the harmony of the state that he has usurped (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 1 line 69).

**Act 4 Scene 2**

**Content**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask Hamlet where the body of Polonius is. Hamlet evades the question and instead tells them that they are worthless flatterers. He also says that Claudius is worthless.

**Comment**

Hamlet is hardly weeping “for what is done” as Gertrude claimed (Act 4 Scene 1 line 27). He regards Polonius as worthless as dust (l. 6) and despises flatterers such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (l. 15–20 and refer to Act 3 Scene 2 line 56–62). Claudius, too, is a “thing of … nothing” (l. 28–30).

**Act 4 Scene 3**

**Lines 1–38 (King: I have seen … Exeunt Attendants)**

**Content**

Claudius explains to the court that they must handle Hamlet carefully as all the people love him. The decision to send him to England must not appear to be too sudden.

Hamlet enters escorted by guards. When asked where the body of Polonius is, Hamlet says that he is giving the worms their supper. If Claudius wants to find Polonius he had better send a messenger to heaven. If he wants to look for him in hell then Claudius himself can go there. Hamlet then hints that the body of Polonius is under the staircase.

**Comment**

Claudius is an experienced politician and his first thought is how to make one thing “seem” to be another (l. 8–9). Afraid that his evil deeds will be exposed, he uses all his diplomatic skills to appear sympathetic to Hamlet but at the same time to remove him from Elsinore. He is ruthless in preserving his own safety. Hamlet is a popular prince. The fact that the common people of the state love Hamlet (l. 4) tells us much about his character.

**Lines 39–67 (King: Hamlet … end of scene)**

**Content**

Claudius tells Hamlet that, for his own safety, he is to be sent to England at once. Hamlet hints that he knows the real purpose behind Claudius’s decision. Before he leaves, he makes a bitter comment about the fact that Claudius is married to his mother.

**Comment**

It is, of course, for Claudius’s own “safety” (l. 39) that Hamlet is sent to England. Claudius acts with “fiery quickness” (l. 42) to bring about the “present (i.e. immediate) death” (l. 64) of Hamlet. His actions provide a contrast to Hamlet’s irresolute behaviour. However, it will not be the King of England who will “cure” Claudius of the “hectic” (i.e. fever – l. 65–66) in his blood, but Hamlet himself. Yet again, the theme of moral disease is developed by Hamlet.

**Act 4 Scene 4**

**Lines 1–31 (Fortinbras: Go … Exeunt all)**

**Content**

Fortinbras has arrived in Denmark on his way to wage war against the Poles. Hamlet sees the Norwegian troops in the distance and asks a captain about them. The captain explains that they are on their way to fight for a small piece of land that, in monetary terms, is valueless. Nevertheless, the Poles are prepared to defend it against Fortinbras. Hamlet is amazed that men should risk their lives and wealth for such a cause.

**Comment**

Note the direct and straightforward way in which Fortinbras gives his orders (l. 1–7) and how this contrasts with the philosophical tone of Hamlet’s soliloquy (l. 32–66). It is perhaps significant that Hamlet’s father, also a warrior and a man of action, waged war against the Poles (Act 1 Scene 1 line 63). This provides a further contrast to Hamlet, the speculative man.

**Lines 32–66 (How all … end of scene)**

**Content**

The example of Fortinbras leads Hamlet to curse himself for his own lack of action. God did not make man merely to sleep and feed like an animal. Man has the power of reasoning. Hamlet wonders if it is an animal-like lack of awareness in himself or a too-acute faculty of reason, which has prevented him from avenging his father’s death. There is nothing else to prevent him from doing so. He is surrounded by examples that encourage him to act. Fortinbras, for example, acts without considering the consequences
and defies fate – and all for the sake of honour.

Hamlet has more imperative reasons for acting: His father has been murdered, his mother’s virtue has been stained. Both mentally and emotionally he has strong reasons for acting. And yet, to his shame, he has done nothing. He tells himself that from now on both his thoughts and emotions must work together to bring about the death of Claudius.

Comment
Note the following points in this soliloquy: After several scenes in which Hamlet was highly excited, he is now calm. He analyses his behaviour, questioning his inability to act.

He compares himself unfavourably with Fortinbras whose princely qualities he admires. However, Hamlet has "god-like reason" (l. 38). The fundamental dilemma is once more raised of whether it is nobler to endure or to act. Hamlet concludes "from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" (l. 66).

Act 4 Scene 5

Lines 1–20 (Queen: I will not ... It spills itself)

Content
Ophelia has gone mad. She insists on speaking to Queen Gertrude who tries to avoid the issue. The courtier who is making the request on behalf of Ophelia tells how her speech only makes half-sense. Those who listen to her can only infer her meaning. Horatio advises Gertrude to see Ophelia lest some people construe her words in such a way that they become suspicious about Polonius’ death. Gertrude acknowledges that because of her own guilt she is afraid she will betray herself.

Comment
Ophelia has suffered two heavy blows: rejection by Hamlet and the death of her father. Because Ophelia betrayed and rejected Hamlet’s love he was driven to say: "It hath made me mad" (Act 3 Scene 1 line 148–149). Now Ophelia pays the price – real madness. Thus the themes of appearance and reality, betrayal and sincerity, are put into a cruel and tragic perspective. Shakespeare has shown us the consequences of taking pure and holy love lightly.

In other words, Ophelia avoided the responsibility of the demands of profound love. So did Gertrude with Hamlet’s father (and note how she avoids responsibility now in line 1). Consequently it is masterful dramatic technique on Shakespeare’s part to bring Ophelia and Gertrude together now.

Although Ophelia failed the demands of Hamlet’s love, we cannot help but agree with the comment that she “needs be pitied” (l. 3). Like Hamlet she has had a father killed (l. 4). And like Hamlet she suffers because “there’s tricks (dishonesty and deception) i’ the world” (l. 15). Until Hamlet showed her the truth, Gertrude tried to deceive herself (Act 3 Scene 4 line 144–149). But now she knows what “sin’s true nature is” (l. 17). And note how her words “my sick soul” develop the theme of disease and corruption.

Lines 21–73 (Re-enter Gentleman ... good-night)

Content
Ophelia is brought into the presence of the queen. She sings songs that appear to be irrelevant but which in fact have a bearing on her relationship with Hamlet and Polonius. Claudius enters and is appalled at the sight of the mad Ophelia. Ophelia continues to sing songs, which have a bawdy tone and which reflect in a tragically ironic way on Hamlet’s love for her.

Comment
The words "How should I your love know?" (l. 24 and 40) are at the heart of Ophelia’s tragedy. Hamlet’s love for her was “true love” but in a deceitful way she allowed it to be exploited and returned the signs of his love to him. Her words are relevant to Gertrude’s situation also. Gertrude was also not faithful to the love of Hamlet’s father. The song has great “import” (l. 27) for Gertrude.

Ophelia’s second song (l. 29–32) is motivated by her grief for her father’s death. It is a grief as deep as Hamlet’s for his father. And note how the words “which be to the grave did not go/With true love showers” (l. 39–40) parallel Hamlet’s comments on the way Gertrude wept at his father’s funeral and then promptly married Claudius (Act 1 Scene 2 line 146–149).

The words “sweet flowers” (l. 38) will take on further significance when Ophelia distributes flowers later in this scene. We are also reminded that weeds have replaced flowers in the rotten state of Denmark (theme of corruption and disease).

Ophelia’s next two songs (l. 48–55 and 58–66) have strong sexual connotations and thus echo Hamlet’s harsh treatment in Act 3 Scenes 1 and 2. That a young virgin sings bawdy songs shows to what extent moral values have become inverted. There is also tragic irony in Ophelia’s words: “and so I thank you for your good counsel” (l. 71). Polonius and Laertes gave her wrong counsel about Hamlet – the effects of which we are witnessing now.

Lines 74–95 (King: Follow ... Queen: Alack)

Content
Claudius comments on the way he and Gertrude are beset by troubles. Not least is the fact that the people suspect him of Polonius’s death and are suggesting this to Laertes, who has returned from France.

Comment
It is ironic that Claudius uses the words: “this is the poison of deep grief” (l. 75) since it was he who administered poison to Hamlet’s father and so caused the grief of Hamlet.
But even when pressure is on him, Claudius still manages to play the politician—it is he who is the author of Hamlet’s unjust “remove” (l. 79–80). It is also ironic that it is Claudius who uses the words “unwholesome” (l. 81), “infect” (l. 89) and “pestilent” (l. 90), since it has been largely owing to him that there is so much corruption in the state.

Another theme of the play is developed by the words “Divided from herself and her fair judgment, Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts” (l. 84–85). It is a situation that Hamlet himself remarked upon in Act 4 Scene 4 line 32–66.

**Lines 96–110 (Enter a Gentleman ... King: The doors)**

**Content**
A tremendous noise is heard at the palace doors. A gentleman hurries in with the news that Laertes has stormed the palace at the head of a mob that are shouting that Laertes should be king.

**Comment**
Laertes acts with “impetuous haste” (l. 99). In this he is a foil for Hamlet, who is inclined to delay the act of avenging his father’s death by “thinking too precisely on the event” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41). This contrast is accentuated by the fact that Laertes’s behaviour is owing to his father’s death.

It is Claudius himself who has “antiquity forget” (i.e. broken with the tradition of royal succession to the throne – l. 103) by having killed Hamlet’s father and usurping the throne unlawfully and it is he who is a “false Danish dog” (l. 109).

**Lines 111–151 (Enter Laertes ... Laertes: How now)**

**Content**
Laertes storms in and, ignoring Gertrude’s plea to be calm, angrily demands the truth about his father from Claudius. He is prepared to break his vow of allegiance to the king and defy fate itself in order to be avenged. Claudius turns Laertes’s anger to his own advantage by telling him that he is not guilty of Polonius’ death and by encouraging Laertes to seek revenge on the actual murderer.

**Comment**
It is a testament to Shakespeare’s skill as a playwright that while Laertes holds the stage we are continually reminded of Hamlet’s situation. For example, the fact that Hamlet’s mother has not been “chaste and unsmirched” and has not been a “true mother” (l. 118–119) is at the centre of his despair.

Laertes dares damnation ... “Let come what comes” (l. 131–133) in ringing tones that are very different from Hamlet’s meditative “But that the dread of something after death ... puzzles the will” (Act 3 Scene 1 line 78–80). Laertes, the man of impulsive action; Hamlet, the man of speculative words. Note how the “swoopstake” (l. 14) echoes Hamlet’s vow to “sweep to my revenge” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 31). He has yet to do so.

However, Laertes is naive and Claudius is easily able to direct his anger from himself and towards Hamlet.

Claudius displays considerable courage in this scene. However, it is more than somewhat brazen of him to claim the divine right of kings (l. 12) when he has sinned against heaven itself.

**Lines 152–216 (Re-enter Ophelia ... end of scene)**

**Content**
Ophelia enters. Laertes is dismayed at the pitiful sight that comes so hard upon the death of his father. It sharpens even further his desire for revenge. Ophelia distributes flowers among Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude and sings a song of lament for her dead father.

Claudius tells Laertes he will give him the possibility of judging whether he, Claudius, is in any way to blame for Hamlet’s insanity. If then Laertes still considers him guilty he will give up the throne and even his life. If not, he will help Laertes achieve his revenge. Laertes agrees to Claudius’s suggestion.

**Comment**
It is perhaps significant that Laertes calls Ophelia “O rose of May!” (l. 155), for we remember that Ophelia herself called Hamlet the “rose of the fair state ... Blasted with ecstasy” (i.e. madness – Act 3 Scene 1 line 155–163). Again, as throughout the play, there is the suggestion that the human tragedy is reflected in nature.

Note, too, how the words “Till our scale turn the beam” (l. 155) is a comment on the nature and purpose of revenge—a restoration of good over wrong, a restoration of moral balance. Ophelia’s mad words “And in his grave rain’d many a tear” (l. 164) would remind the audience of how Gertrude was “like Niobe, all tears” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 148) at the grave of Hamlet’s father—and how it was but a short while before she married Claudius.

The flowers that Ophelia distributes have their own language and are given by Ophelia to the appropriate characters:
- Rosemary for remembrance to Laertes
- Pansies for thoughts or love-thoughts for herself
- Fennel and columbines for flattery and ingratitude to the king
- Rue for sorrow to herself
- Rue for repentance to the queen
- Daisies are the emblem of dissembling and might be given to one who can “smile and be a villain” or to herself as a warning “not to trust every fair promise that amorous bachelors make” – the very warning that Laertes had given her so long ago, or the queen seduced by Claudius.
- Violets are the emblems of faithfulness.

The distribution of herbs and flowers was an old funeral custom, and Ophelia imagines
But even when pressure is on him, Claudius still manages to play the politician – it is he who is the author of Hamlet’s unjust “remove” (l. 79–80). It is also ironic that it is Claudius who uses the words “unwholesome” (l. 81), “infect” (l. 89) and “pestilent” (l. 90), since it has been largely owing to him that there is so much corruption in the state.

Another theme of the play is developed by the words “Divided from herself and her fair judgment, Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts” (l. 84–85). It is a situation that Hamlet himself remarked upon in Act 4 Scene 4 line 32–66.

**Lines 96–110 (Enter a Gentleman … King: The doors)**

**Content**
A tremendous noise is heard at the palace doors. A gentleman hurries in with the news that Laertes has stormed the palace at the head of a mob that are shouting that Laertes should be king.

**Comment**
Laertes acts with “impetuous haste” (l. 99). In this he is a foil for Hamlet, who is inclined to delay the act of avenging his father’s death by “thinking too precisely on the event” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41). This contrast is accentuated by the fact that Laertes’s behaviour is owing to his father’s death.

It is Claudius himself who has “antiquity forget” (i.e. broken with the tradition of royal succession to the throne – l. 103) by having killed Hamlet’s father and usurping the throne unlawfully and it is he who is a “false Danish dog” (l. 109).

**Lines 111–151 (Enter Laertes … Laertes: How now)**

**Content**
Laertes storms in and, ignoring Gertrude’s plea to be calm, angrily demands the truth about his father from Claudius. He is prepared to break his vow of allegiance to the king and defy fate itself in order to be avenged. Claudius turns Laertes’s anger to his own advantage by telling him that he is not guilty of Polonius’ death and by encouraging Laertes to seek revenge on the actual murderer.

**Comment**
It is a testament to Shakespeare’s skill as a playwright that while Laertes holds the stage we are continually reminded of Hamlet’s situation. For example, the fact that Hamlet’s mother has not been “chaste and unsmirched” and has not been a “true mother” (l. 118–119) is at the centre of his despair.

Laertes dares damnation … “Let come what comes” (l. 131–133) in ringing tones that are very different from Hamlet’s meditative “But that the dread of something after death … puzzles the will” (Act 3 Scene 1 line 78–80). Laertes, the man of impulsive action; Hamlet, the man of speculative words. Note how the “swoopstake” (l. 14) echoes Hamlet’s vow to “sweep to my revenge” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 31). He has yet to do so.

However, Laertes is naive and Claudius is easily able to direct his anger from himself and towards Hamlet.

Claudius displays considerable courage in this scene. However, it is more than somewhat brazen of him to claim the divine right of kings (l. 12) when he has sinned against heaven itself.

**Lines 152–216 (Re-enter Ophelia … end of scene)**

**Content**
Ophelia enters. Laertes is dismayed at the pitiful sight that comes so hard upon the death of his father. It sharpens even further his desire for revenge. Ophelia distributes flowers among Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude and sings a song of lament for her dead father.

Claudius tells Laertes he will give him the possibility of judging whether he, Claudius, is in any way to blame for Hamlet’s insanity. If then Laertes still considers him guilty he will give up the throne and even his life. If not, he will help Laertes achieve his revenge. Laertes agrees to Claudius’s suggestion.

**Comment**
It is perhaps significant that Laertes calls Ophelia “O rose of May!” (l. 155), for we remember that Ophelia herself called Hamlet the “rose of the fair state … Blasted with ecstasy” (i.e. madness – Act 3 Scene 1 line 155–163). Again, as throughout the play, there is the suggestion that the human tragedy is reflected in nature.

Note, too, how the words “Till our scale turn the beam” (l. 155) is a comment on the nature and purpose of revenge – a restoration of good over wrong, a restoration of moral balance. Ophelia’s mad words “And in his grave rain’d many a tear” (l. 164) would remind the audience of how Gertrude was “like Niobe, all tears” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 148) at the grave of Hamlet’s father – and how it was but a short while before she married Claudius.

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- Violets are the emblems of faithfulness.

The distribution of herbs and flowers was an old funeral custom, and Ophelia imagines
Another important theme of the play is madness. Ophelia's inconsequential madness echoes Hamlet's. However, his insanity was an "antic disposition"—it was assumed, while hers was real. Madness is the polar opposite to reason. Line 185: "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself" can be related to the theme of passion and reason. Note, too, how the words "hell itself" contrast with the words "And of all Christian souls I pray God. God be wi' ye" (l. 197). Again we are reminded that the basic conflict is that between good and evil and that the course of events will ultimately be "directed by heaven" (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 4 line 91). Again and again we see how Shakespeare achieves structural unity of thought, theme, character and plot with Claudius's words: "And where the offence is let the great axe fall" (l. 215). In the very first act of the play Hamlet reacted to the Ghost's revelation of the murder of his father with the words: "And much offence, too" (Act 1 Scene 5 line 137). Then Claudius himself admits: "O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven" (Act 3 Scene 3 line 36). It is on Claudius that the great axe will fall and so purge the rotten state, Denmark, of its sin, corruption and moral disease. Hamlet will yield a rapier when he eventually kills Claudius, but in effect, his rapier will be "the great axe".

Act 4 Scene 6

Content
Some sailors give Horatio a letter from Hamlet. The letter tells how on the way to England, the ship on which Hamlet was travelling was attacked by pirates. Hamlet was taken prisoner but released on the promise of a reward. He asks Horatio to give some letters to Claudius and then to meet him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the meantime continue on their way to England.

Comment
The purpose of this short scene is to carry the action of the plot forward. The mighty opposites of Hamlet and Claudius are now heading towards their final confrontation.

Act 4 Scene 7

Lines 1–35 (King: Now ... And that, I hope)

Content
Claudius tells Laertes that they must be allies since Hamlet, who has killed Polonius, also has the desire to kill him, Claudius. Laertes agrees that this appears to be the case but wonders why Claudius did not take more immediate and sterner measures against Hamlet.

Claudius says that there are two reasons: firstly, the love that Gertrude has for Hamlet; secondly the people also love Hamlet and so to punish him would boomerang onto Claudius. Laertes expresses his determination to avenge the death of his father and the madness of his sister. Claudius not only encourages him to do so but also offers help.

Comment
Claudius is a master at manipulating a situation so that "it well appear" (l. 5). For example, in his words "that he which hath your noble father slain/Pursu'd my life" (l. 4–5), he excludes the words: "Who killed his noble father".

Note the shrewdness of Claudius's words: "which may to you, perhaps, seem much unsinew'd" (feeble—l. 10). He is flattering Laertes as a strong man of action and at the same time reminds him of his love for Ophelia by remarking on his own love for Gertrude. In other words, he knows well that the bonds of love are anything but "unsinew'd". And, we must ask ourselves, is Gertrude so much a part of Claudius's "life and soul" (l. 14)? After all, he has sent her son to his death and is, at this very moment plotting to make sure. We cannot help but feel that when he says "we love ourselves" (l. 34) he is being more accurate than when he claims to be dependent on Gertrude. However, Laertes is too gullible to question such discrepancies.

The fact that the general populace loves Hamlet (l. 18) and not Claudius, conveys the idea that Hamlet would have made much the better king "had he been put on" the throne (Act 5 Scene 1 line 389). Note how Claudius's words: "That we can let our beard be shook with danger/And call it pastime" (l. 32–33) echo Hamlet's "Who plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?" (Act 2 Scene 2 line 566). Claudius and Laertes would react immediately. Hamlet would be inclined to philosophise about it.

Lines 37–161 (Enter a Messenger ... Our purpose)

Content
The letters in which Hamlet asks permission to see Claudius the next day are brought in. Laertes welcomes this chance to achieve his revenge. Claudius mentions that he has been thinking of a plan that cannot fail to result in the death of Hamlet. Moreover, it will appear to be an accident. Claudius tells Laertes how jealous Hamlet was when he heard a visitor praise Laertes's skills with a rapier. Claudius then asks Laertes if he is really determined to avenge his beloved father's death. Laertes assures him that he will stop at nothing.

Claudius tells of his plan to arrange a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Hamlet, however, will not suspect that Laertes's sword will be unblunted. Laertes says that he will go further and poison the tip of his rapier with a deadly poison for which there is no cure. To make doubly sure that Hamlet will die, Claudius says he will poison the wine that Hamlet is bound to drink when he is hot and thirsty.

Comment
This is a somewhat grisly scene. Notice how many references there are to poison: "envenom" (l. 102), the "unction" and "contagion" (l. 140 and 146), "venom'd" (l. 160). The wheel of fate will have turned full circle: Hamlet's father was poisoned by Claudius,
herself giving her father a proper burial. But so rotten is the state of Denmark that flowers have become weeds (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 2 line 135: “tis an unweeded garden”). Thus we see that this scene develops the theme of the corruption of nature, which reflects the corruption of human and moral values.

Another important theme of the play is madness. Ophelia’s inconsequential madness echoes Hamlet’s. However, his insanity was an “antic disposition” – it was assumed, while hers was real. Madness is the polar opposite to reason. Line 185: “Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself” can be related to the theme of passion and reason. Note, too, how the words “hell itself” contrast with the words “And of all Christian souls I pray God. God be wi’ ye” (l. 197). Again we are reminded that the basic conflict is between good and evil and that the course of events will ultimately be “directed by heaven” (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 4 line 91). Again and again we see how Shakespeare achieves structural unity of thought, theme, character and plot with Claudius’s words: “And where the offence is let the great axe fall” (l. 215). In the very first act of the play Hamlet reacted to the Ghost’s revelation of the murder of his father with the words: “And much offence, too” (Act 1 Scene 5 line 137). Then Claudius himself admits: “O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven” (Act 3 Scene 3 line 36). It is on Claudius that the great axe will fall and so purge the rotten state, Denmark, of its sin, corruption and moral disease. Hamlet will yield a rapier when he eventually kills Claudius, but in effect, his rapier will be “the great axe”.

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Comment

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who will die by the poisoned rapier wielded by Hamlet, who himself will die by poison. But by so doing, Hamlet will have purged the rotten state of Denmark of its moral and spiritual poison. And again we see that this human, moral disease is reflected in nature – i.e. the poison will be extracted from herbs that kill (l. 143). We also note how Laertes’s words “the very sickness in my heart” (l. 54) echo words that were spoken within the very first ten lines of the play: “And I am sick at heart” (see Comment on Act 1 Scene 1 line 9). King Claudius should represent the “health and graveness” of the state (l. 80), as Laertes himself remarked to Ophelia in Act 1 Scene 3 line 21, but here we see him as the morally corrupted being that he is.

The plot to kill Hamlet is basically one of deception. It must appear to be an accident (l. 66-67). Their real purpose must not “look through” the surface appearance (l. 15). In strong contrast to Claudius is Hamlet who is “most generous and free from all contriving”(l. 134) – a fact that Claudius recognises and exploits with ruthless cynicism. This theme of appearance and reality is further developed by Claudius’s words: “Or are you like the painting of a sorrow” (l. 107) – as Claudius himself was after the death of Hamlet’s father. It is Hamlet who suffers because he knows not “seems”.

The delay is well expressed in lines 116-121. Finally Claudius arrives at his goal – the question he has skilfully led up to: “What would you undertake/To show yourself father’s son in deed/More in words?” (l. 123-125). It is a question that could have been asked of Hamlet himself. Laertes, the man of action, would not hesitate to cut Hamlet’s throat “i’ the church” (l. 125). Hamlet, the man of words, did not cut Claudius’s throat when Claudius was praying and, therefore, Claudius’s words: “No place indeed should murder sanctuarize/revenge should have no bounds” (l. 126-127) are doubly ironic.

If Hamlet had followed Claudius’s advice of “That we would do,We should do when we would, for this ‘would’ changes./And hath abatements and delays ...” (117-119), Claudius himself would not be alive.

Shakespeare presents the important theme of the conflict of passion and reason through both plot and characterisation. Note, too, how the words “For goodness growing to a plurality” (l. 116) and “to the quick of the ulcer” (l. 122) develop further the theme of disease and corruption.

Lines 162-194 (Enter Queen ... end of scene)

Content
Gertrude enters and announces that Ophelia has drowned. While she was trying to hang a garland of flowers on a bough overhanging a river, the branch broke. It was not long before her clothes became saturated and she was dragged under while still singing hymns. Laertes is overwhelmed by this additional grief.

Comment
The speech fulfils various ends. It gives actuality to Ophelia’s unseen death ... and the beauty and pity of it incidentally help to rescue Gertrude in our eyes from the degradation of Hamlet’s painting of her in the closet scene.

The emphasis on flowers has a further significance. We normally associate flowers with the creative laws and beauty of nature. But here they are associated with death and madness. Just as the moral laws have become inverted in the rotten state of Denmark, so have the natural laws.

We note that Claudius says of Laertes: “How much I had to do to calm his rage” (l. 192). We have just seen how he has subtly fanned that rage. Doubtless Claudius is planning how to absolve himself from the blame of the death of Hamlet, Gertrude’s much-loved son.

Act 5 Scene 1

Lines 1-59 (First Clown: Is she ... Exit Second Clown)

Content
Two gravediggers are preparing a grave for Ophelia. It appears as if Ophelia’s death is considered to have been suicide. Because of this, one of the gravediggers objects to the fact that Ophelia is to be given a Christian burial. The other points out the niceties of the law and especially how it appears to differentiate between high-born and common people.

Comment
Many critics are inclined to gloss over this scene by saying that it simply provides “light relief” to the intensity of the tragedy that has come before and will come after. It is comic but is also very important structurally. This “comedy” is different from comedy in the accepted sense of the word. Here the witticisms of the gravediggers are macabre and involved with death and, therefore, actually reinforce the mood of the play.

Lines 60-114 (First Clown: In youth ... Whose grave’s this?)

Content
The First Clown sings a song about youth, marriage and age. Hamlet is amazed that a man can sing while digging a grave. Horatio says that familiarity has bred contempt in the gravedigger. The Clown throws up a skull from the grave he is digging. Hamlet remarks on the indifference with which the Clown treats the skull, which might be that of a man who was once of some standing. Now he has become no more than food for worms and a pile of bones.

The Clown throws up another skull. Hamlet meditates on the possibility that it might have belonged to a lawyer or a wealthy buyer of much land. But now all their highly-skilled professional techniques are worth no more than the dust into which their bodies have been transformed.

Comment
Hamlet, the meditative philosopher, considers the very meaning and purpose of life and death.

Again, however, we see that the passage is relevant to the play as a whole. For example, when Hamlet says "mine ache to think on't" (l. 89) we are made aware that his own inevitable death is imminent – but the tragedy of it will be redeemed by his being an agent for the restoration of moral law and procreative nature.

Hamlet is shown to have attained a mature, rational perspective. He is impressed with the levelling force of death. Everyone must die – king and pauper. We all return to dust. He makes veiled references to Claudius ("Cain's jawbone" – l. 63), to Polonius ("a politician" – l. 64) and to others.

**Lines 115–174 (First Clown: Mine ... the King's jester)**

**Content**

Hamlet addresses the First Clown (i.e. gravedigger) and asks him whose grave he is digging. The gravedigger impertinently makes puns of all Hamlet's questions. However, in answer to a direct question, the gravedigger reveals that he has followed his trade since the day that old Hamlet conquered Fortinbras – the very day young Hamlet was born.

Hamlet asks how long it is before a body decomposes in the grave and the gravedigger replies that it is usually about eight or nine years. He pulls out one skull that has been buried for 20 years. In reply to Hamlet’s question, he reveals that it is the skull of Yorick, who was the king's jester when he was alive.

**Comment**

Again we see that the words, though apparently irrelevant, have a direct bearing on the themes and meaning of the play as a whole. For example, the play on the word “lie” (l. 118–124) and Hamlet’s words “we must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us” (l. 132–133) remind us how lies and deception have pervaded the court of Denmark and how this has contributed to Hamlet’s bitterness (see theme of honesty and virtue).

When the gravedigger says “Faith, if he be not rotten before he die” (l. 158), he refers to a physical rottenness (i.e. smallpox). But throughout the play we have seen how natural disease and corruption reflect moral corruption. Just as there appears to be a plague in Denmark – “we have many pocky corpses nowadays” (l. 159) – so is there an all-pervading moral plague in the rotten state of Denmark (Act 1 Scene 4 line 90). The emphasis on madness (l. 144–155) also reminds us of Ophelia’s tragic death through insanity and that the “excellent white bosom (of) the most beautiful Ophelia” (Act 2 Scene 2 line 109 and 112) will soon be a stinking corpse gnawed at by worms.

**Lines 175–210 (Hamlet: This! ... But soft!)

**Content**

Hamlet takes Yorick's skull in his hands. He remembers how Yorick often used to play with him when he, Hamlet, was a small boy and how Yorick used to make everyone roar with laughter with his jokes. Now all that is left is an evil-smelling skull. The fate of Yorick leads Hamlet to speculate that a similar fate awaited Alexander the Great. Death reduces all, both great and small, to insignificant dust.

**Comment**

We notice, in this passage for example, how Shakespeare makes us acutely aware of the disagreeable aspects of death by using graphic imagery and focusing our attention on the physical details such as lips that have rotted away (l. 182) and the awful smell of death (l. 194). However, perhaps we should take Horatio’s advice and not “consider too curiously” (l. 199). The word “curiously” here means “precisely”, and reminds us that Hamlet himself is aware of the danger “of thinking too precisely on the event” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41). Horatio would not go to the extremes of either thought or passion (Act 3 Scene 1 line 69) and again we are reminded of how he provides a counterpoint and a complement to Hamlet's character.

**Lines 211–258 (Enter King ... Horatio: Good, my lord)**

**Content**

Hamlet sees Claudius, Gertrude and the courtiers in a funeral procession. He can tell from the lack of ceremony that the deceased committed suicide. He and Horatio conceal themselves.

They overhear Laertes demand of the priest whether the burial service is to have no more ceremony. The priest replies that as the deceased might have committed suicide, the service should have been even less ceremonious.

Laertes mentions the word “sister” and Hamlet is shocked to learn that it is Ophelia who is about to be buried. Gertrude throws flowers on Ophelia’s grave and mourns the fact the Ophelia can never now be Hamlet’s wife. Laertes, however, curses Hamlet for having driven Ophelia mad and leaps into the grave to hold his sister in his arms once more. Hamlet cannot contain himself and also leaps into Ophelia’s grave and grapples with Laertes so fiercely that they have to be parted.

**Comment**

“For though I am not splenetic and rash/Yet have I in me something dangerous” (l. 254–255). These words are central not only to this passage, but also to the play as a whole. Hamlet is most certainly not rash. The fact that, on his own admission, he is inclined to think “too precisely on the event” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41) has resulted in his not killing Claudius. On the other hand, as he has just shown us by leaping into Ophelia’s grave, Hamlet is capable of “a towering passion”. At such moments, there is indeed “something dangerous” in him – as Claudius will also find to his cost when Hamlet stabs him to death. Note, too, how these words will be developed later by Hamlet when he tells Horatio how he contrived to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths: “rashly./And prais’d be rashness for it, let us know/Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well/When our deep plots do pall” (Act 5 Scene 2 line 6–9).
Again (l. 213—214 and 220), it is mentioned that Ophelia committed suicide — and for the same reasons that Hamlet contemplated suicide: the loss of a father and the rejection of love. It is paralleled and dramatic balances such as these that contribute to the tragedy as a whole. Similarly the fact that both Hamlet and Laertes may be described as “very noble” youths (l. 217 and compare Act 3 Scene 1 line 153: “O! what a noble mind and ... now cracks a noble heart”) provides a dramatic tension that is more convincing than if Hamlet had simply been a good man and Laertes simply a bad man.

As throughout Act 4, Ophelia is here associated with flowers: “yet here she is allow’d her virgin crants (wreaths, her maiden strewments)” (l. 225—226) and “I thought thy bride bed to have deck’d, sweet maid, / And not have strew’d (i.e. with flowers) thy grave (l. 238—239). But in the rotten state of Denmark the sweetness and natural beauty of flowers have become weeds (Act 1 Scene 2 line 135) and the source of deadly poison (Act 4 Scene 7 line 143). Nature has become polluted, as have moral values. But through death, life is restored and Laertes is able to pray: “And from her fair and unpolluted flesh/May violets spring” (l. 232—233). So too with the death of Claudius will moral values be restored, for which renewal of moral values Hamlet also will have to die.

**Lines 259—292 (Hamlet: Why, I will ... end of scene)**

**Content**

Hamlet passionately declares how much he loved Ophelia and that Laertes’s grief cannot compare to his and is mere bravado (see Act 5 Scene 1 line 79). Gertrude attempts to excuse Hamlet’s behaviour by saying that it is a momentary fit of madness.

After Hamlet has left, Claudius tells Laertes that it is now obvious that they must carry out their plan (to kill Hamlet) immediately.

**Comment**

Although Hamlet and Laertes are strongly contrasted in many ways, their situation has much in common: both have lost a father and seek revenge and both have lost a woman they loved. And here Hamlet shows that he can be as passionately impulsive as Laertes. The fact that Hamlet and Laertes could have been friends (l. 183) renders their killing of each other all the more tragic.

**Act 5 Scene 2**

**Lines 1—55 (Hamlet: So much ... Thou know'st)**

**Content**

Hamlet tells Horatio how, on the voyage to England, he could not sleep one night and on a sudden impulse stole the letter Claudius had given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to give to the English King. It was thus that he discovered he was to be killed in England. Hamlet wrote out new orders instructing the English King to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed without delay. He sealed it with an impression made by his father’s royal ring and placed it in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s parcel.

**Comment**

Ironically, Hamlet comments on his own introspective nature that has allowed his “deep plot” (l. 9) to avenge his father’s murder and kill Claudius to “pall”. This has been largely owing to his tendency to speculate and think “too precisely on the event” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 41). But now he has acted “ rashly” — i.e. without deliberation and “ere (he) could make a prologue to (his) brains / They (i.e. his brains) had begun the play” (Act 30—31). In other words, there was no gap between his faculty of reason and his physical action. Once he had reasoned, but now he has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their sudden deaths with no “shriving-time allow’d” (l. 47).

The words: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will” (l. 10—11) mean that no matter how hard we try to guide our destinies, God directs them ultimately. These lines seem to echo lines 173—5 in Act 3 Scene 4: “Heaven hath pleased it so, to punish me with this, and this with me, that I must be their scourge and minister.” Bernard McElroy in *Shakespeare’s Mature Tragedies* comments that Hamlet’s attitude is not the fatalism it is so often taken to be. He does not accept an external force or destiny over which he has no control but is resigned to the mysteriousness of events.

Note how Hamlet parodies the artificiality and hypocrisy of diplomatic language in lines 38—45. We have seen how he despises deceit in all forms. But in order to survive he has to employ it himself.

**Lines 56—80 (Horatio: So Guildenstern ... Horatio: Peace)**

**Content**

Hamlet tells Horatio that he feels no pangs of conscience about the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They deserved their deaths and should not have intervened between him and Claudius. He can now kill Claudius with a perfect conscience and so rid the world of his evil and corruptive influence. Hamlet regrets his behaviour towards Laertes. He realises that Laertes, like himself, has just cause for grief but Laertes’s act of bravado drove him into a fury.

**Comment**

The words “and is it not to be damn’d / To let this canker of our nature come / In further evil” (l. 68—70) develop one of the main themes of the play — that the moral corruption of the state is reflected by corruption and disease in nature. It is Hamlet’s mission to purge the state of this corruption. He and Claudius are indeed “mighty opposites” (l. 62). Hamlet is the agent of God (i.e. a divinity — l. 10) while Claudius is the agent of the devil. Like many great works of art, Hamlet is basically about the eternal conflict between good and evil.

The fact that Hamlet can say of Laertes “For by the image of my cause, I see / The portraiture of his” (l. 77—78) renders both their tragic deaths all the more intense. Hamlet says: “I forgot myself” (l. 76) because it is not in his nature to fly into a “towering passion” (l. 79 and see also lines 225—229). Now his faculty of reason has told him that he can act with “perfect conscience” (l. 67) and we have just seen that he can act in passion — there will be no separation of reason and passion when he stabs Claudius to
death.

And Claudius's death will be at the point of a “fell incensed” sword (l. 61). Note also how line 74: “And a man’s life no more than to say ‘one’” is an image derived from fencing and so also anticipates the finale of the play which will (l. 73) occur shortly.

**Lines 81–188 (Enter Osric ... the bubbles are out)**

**Content**
A courtier, Osric, enters. Hamlet mocks his foppish and fawning manners and his over-embellished way of speaking. Osric praises Laertes to the skies and tells Hamlet that the king has laid a wager on a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes with the odds in favour of Hamlet. Hamlet accepts the challenge.

**Comment**
This passage is, of course, much more than merely a satirical attack on a certain type of courtier. It provides the short “interim” (l. 73) before the events rush to their conclusion.

At the same time several themes of the play as a whole are developed. For example, the words “let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the King’s mess” (l. 87–88) imply that the king is open to bribery and also that he judges a man’s worth by material values only. The way Hamlet makes Osric change his opinion about the weather (l. 94–99) is similar to the way he showed Polonius up as a fool over the shape of a cloud (Act 3 Scene 2 line 370–375). Hamlet cannot endure men like Osric who “let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp:/And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee/Where thrift may follow fawning” (Act 3 Scene 2 line 60–62). A flatterer is a man who has no regard for the truth and praises someone insincerely. As such he is an object of Hamlet’s contempt.

When Hamlet says “Is’t not possible to understand in another tongue!” (Act 1 Scene 4 line 125), he means that Osric should speak in a more direct language. Hamlet demands that men “be even and direct” with him (Act 2 Scene 2 line 287). To distort language is yet another perversion of the truth that he cannot abide. The words “but, to know a man well, were to know himself” (l. 137–138) also convey that Laertes, the impulsive man of action, is in a sense the “alter ego” of Hamlet. Throughout this scene we are aware of this Hamlet/Laertes theme — in words. Soon we shall see this theme resolve itself — in action, when they kill each other. The scene, in other words, is the prologue to the finale of the play.

Osric has “only got the tune of the time” (l. 184–185) — i.e. he follows the present fashion. Hamlet, of course, has a much broader vision of time. For him, passing fashions are “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 133). And Hamlet would particularly despise a man who lives only by the “outward habit of encounter” (l. 185). This theme of false, convenient outward appearance in lieu of inner reality relates to the theme of honesty and virtue. Hamlet is a man who sees beyond the outward appearance of things: “Seem, madam! Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’” (Act 1 Scene 2 line 76). The values by which Osric and his like live are but “bubbles” (line 188) but the values by which Hamlet lives and dies, are eternal.

**Lines 189–216 (Enter a Lord ... let be)**

**Content**
A Lord arrives to ask Hamlet if he will fence with Laertes immediately. Hamlet replies that he is ready. The Lord says that Gertrude wishes Hamlet to speak to Laertes in a friendly manner.

As Hamlet has been given advantageous odds, he is confident of winning. And yet he has a feeling of uneasiness and foreboding. Horatio pleads with him to postpone the match but Hamlet says that one cannot avoid one’s fate.

**Comment**
Hamlet has not always been, “constant to his purposes” (l. 193). Indeed the Ghost visited him a second time with the words: “this visitation/is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose” (Act 3 Scene 4 line 110). But now he is “ready” (l. 194) and, as he himself says, “the readiness is all” (l. 214). Throughout he has obeyed the dictates of his “mind” (l. 209). Before leaving for England he commented many times on the role fortune (fate) plays in life. It is only at the end of the play, however, that he decides to resign himself to “a divinity that shapes our ends”. He has learnt to accept that there is “a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (l. 190). This attitude enables him to accept his role as the avenger of his father’s death more calmly. Note, too, how the words “if his fitness speaks” (l. 194) indirectly suggest that Claudius is fit to die. For all concerned it will be anything but a “happy time” (l. 197).

**Lines 217–271 (King: come ... And you, the judges)**

**Content**
All are gathered to watch the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Hamlet apologises to Laertes for his behaviour at Ophelia’s grave, saying that it was owing to his madness and that he had no deliberate intention to insult him. Laertes appears to accept Hamlet’s apology. Hamlet and Laertes choose their foils (swords). Laertes exchanges his for the poisoned one. Claudius calls for wine to be set up before him. He will put a large pearl in one cup (it is, of course, poison), which will be Hamlet’s should he score some early points.

**Comment**
Hamlet calls Laertes “my brother” (l. 236) and says: “I’ll be your foil, Laertes” (l. 247). We are reminded of his words to Horatio: “For, by the image of my cause, I see/The portraiture of his”. At the same time the word “foil” means: a thing that sets another off by contrast. Though their cause (i.e. revenge — l. 238) is the same, the ways in which they have approached it have been very different. A foil is, of course, also a rapier and Hamlet’s words thus unconsciously predict both their deaths.

The custom of firing cannon’s every time Claudius drinks his cup of wine is one of the many causes of Hamlet’s disgust (see Act 1 Scene 4 line 7–22). Claudius here reaches the heights of cynical deceit. He will not drink to Hamlet’s “better breath” (l. 263) but to his death. He exploits the lustrous beauty of a pearl to conceal a deadly poison. It is he who
has illegally disrupted the process of “successive Kings” and perverted Denmark’s crown (l. 265-266). If we regard ourselves as “the judges” he refers to in line 271, it is we who must “bear a wary eye” on him. But he is soon to die and the heavens will once again speak to the earth (l. 269).

Lines 273–319 (Hamlet: Come on, Sir ... folly my mother)

Content
Hamlet wins the first point in the fencing match against Laertes, but declines to drink the (poisoned) wine that Claudius offers him. Hamlet scores another point. Gertrude drinks to his success, but from the poisoned cup. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the “unbated” (l. 289) and poisoned rapier. They grapple and change rapiers. Hamlet wounds Laertes.

The poisoned wine takes effect and Gertrude dies. The dying Laertes reveals to Hamlet their plot to kill him. Hamlet stabs Claudius and forces the poisoned wine down his throat. Claudius dies.

Comment
We note how many times poison and venom is referred to (l. 284, 302, 309, 311, 313 and 314). The effect is to remind us of how moral corruption has also pervaded the court of Denmark. “No medicine in the world” (l. 306) can save Hamlet from death. But when he kills Claudius he is, in effect, the medicine that purges the state of Denmark of its rottenness.

Note how Laertes’s words “Why, as a woodcock to mine own spring” (l. 298) reminds us of how Polonius told Ophelia that Hamlet’s vows of love were “springes to catch woodcocks” (Act 1 Scene 3 line 115). Polonius died because he set snares to trap Hamlet. Laertes dies, because he has also used Hamlet’s offer of friendship and love as a snare.

Laertes says, “I am justly killed with mine own treachery” (l. 299). They are words that could equally be said by Claudius. But whereas Laertes is now true to himself (and see also l. 288: “And yet ... conscience”), Claudius is deceitful right to the end. He knows Gertrude is dying but says: “she swoons to see them bleed” (l. 300). He knows that he himself is dying but says, “I am but hurt” (l. 316). He who killed with poison and is now also killed by poison. The wheel of fate and justice has turned full circle.

By using the word “union” (l. 318) Hamlet is making a bitter pun. He is referring to the “pearl” that has killed Gertrude and also to the union of marriage, which Claudius has perverted. One of the reasons why he killed Hamlet’s father was that he wished to marry Hamlet’s mother. Now he has killed her also. Laertes is right indeed when he says: “The King, the King’s to blame” (l. 312).

Lines 319–353 (Laertes: He is ... What does the drum)

Content
Before he dies, Laertes asks forgiveness. Hamlet freely gives it. The dying Hamlet asks Horatio to tell the world the justice of his cause. Horatio says that he would rather commit suicide but Hamlet prevents him from drinking the poisoned wine and again pleads with him to “tell his story” truly.

A sound of marching and of canon fire is heard. Osric explains that Fortinbras has returned from Poland and is greeting ambassadors who have come from England. With his dying breath Hamlet decrees that Fortinbras should be the next king.

Comment
Hamlet’s newfound resolution is evident when he prevents Horatio from committing suicide in order to tell the true story and in his decree that Fortinbras must succeed him as king. So he restores the legal succession of kings that Claudius has disrupted. It is right that his dying voice (l. 348) should go to Fortinbras who is, like Hamlet himself, “a delicate and tender prince” (Act 4 Scene 4 line 48). He quietly bids farewell to the world “the rest is silence” (l. 34) and finally attains peace through death. With Horatio we wish that “flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (l. 352).

Lines 354–395 (Enter Fortinbras ... end of scene)

Content
Fortinbras mourns for the scene of slaughter that meets his eyes. The ambassadors from England report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio says he will explain how all these deaths came about owing to incest, murder, madness (Ophelia’s) and treacherous plots that have turned against the instigators themselves.

Fortinbras laments that he can claim his right in Denmark under such tragic circumstances. Horatio tells him that Hamlet’s wish was for him to be king. Fortinbras gives orders that Hamlet be buried with all the rites that befit his noble and heroic spirit.

Comment
Note how the steady, measured rhythms of the speech provide a strong contrast to the wild violence we have just witnessed. Right at the beginning of the play we were told of something that “bodes some strange eruption to (the) state” (Act 1 Scene 1 line 69). Now the tragic events have run their course and the ordered rhythm of time and nature (see l. 373) has been restored - the time is no longer “out of joint”. Hamlet has set it right (Act 1 Scene 5 line 189). He is carried out “like a soldier” (l. 388); he has fulfilled his soldier-father’s will. Shakespeare ends his play with solemnity. But perhaps the most tragic aspect of Hamlet’s story is that “he was likely, had been put on/To have proved most royally” (l. 389–390).
Guidelines on examinations

Tips on how to answer contextual questions

Read the question carefully.

Underline all the verbs – the doing words – in the question, such as:
- compare
- contrast
- select
- describe
- comment on
- evaluate.

These are the words that tell you what you need to do to answer the question correctly.

Make sure that you understand what the words listed above mean:
- To compare is to list similarities or to say how one thing is like another.
- To contrast two things is to list the ways in which they are not the same and to say how they are different.
- To select means to choose somebody or something from among several people or things.
- To describe means to give the details of a thing’s or a person’s characteristics – to say what something looks like or how it works.
- To comment on means to express an opinion about someone or something.
- To evaluate means to consider or examine something in order to judge its value, quality and importance – to say whether you think something is a good thing or a bad thing.

Read the rest of the question carefully and see what it is referring to, such as “Comment on this attitude in the female characters in the play …”

The subject of the question is the area that you must focus on; in other words, the subject tells you what you must write about. Be careful to keep to the subject and make sure that you do what the question asks you to do. If you give too much or too little information in your answer, you can lose marks for either not answering the question fully or for not keeping to the topic.

Answering contextual questions

Make sure you understand the passage before you begin to answer any questions. Read it as many times as is necessary for you to understand it.

Read all the questions carefully before you begin. Make sure you really understand what is being asked of you.

1. Read the passage below, and then answer the questions:

QUEEN: Good Hamlet, cast thy nightly colour off, And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. Do not forever with thy vailed lids Seek for thy noble father in the dust; Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, Passing through nature, to eternity.
HAMLET: Ay Madam, it is common.
QUEEN: If it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?
HAMLET: Seems Madam? nay, it is, I know not seems: 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
No customary suits of solemn black ... Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief. That can denote me truly. These indeed seem. For they are actions that a man might play, But I have that within, which passes show; These, but the trappings and the suits of woe.

1.1. At what point in the play does this conversation take place?
1.2. What does Gertrude mean when she refers to Hamlet’s “nightly colour”?
1.3. She asks him to “look like a friend on Denmark”. What two meanings can be given to the word “Denmark”?
1.4. In what way is Gertrude’s attitude surprising?
1.5. Hamlet says to his mother: “Seems Madam? nay, it is: I know not seems:” In what way do these words reflect one of the main themes of the play?
1.6. Which two characters, present during this conversation, were very good at “seeming”? Justify your answer.
1.7. Hamlet says that he has “that within, which passes show”. Would you agree that this is true? Give reasons for your answer.

2. Read the passage and answer the questions:

After you have answered the questions, check that you have kept to the point.
HAMLET: How all occasions do inform against me, And spur my dull revenge!
What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more: Sure he that made us with such
large discourse Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fast in us unus’d. Now whether it be Bestial oblivion, or some craven
scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th’ event,
(A thought which quarter’d hath but one part wisdom,
And ever three parts coward), I do not know Why yet I live to say ‘This thing’s
to do’,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do’t; ... Examples gross as earth exhort me. Witness this army of such
mass and charge, Led by a delicate and tender Prince ... Exposing what is
mortal, and unsure,
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare, Even for an egg-shell.

2.1. At what point in the play does Hamlet say these words?

2.2. What does Hamlet mean by the words he speaks in the first two lines? (“How ... revenge”)

2.3. Quote from the passage a phrase that expresses the cause of Hamlet’s inaction.

2.4. What argument does Hamlet put forward in lines 2–7 of this passage?

2.5. What major theme of the play does this speech touch on?

2.6. What do “Examples gross as earth” exhort Hamlet to do?

2.7. What has Hamlet witnessed that has caused him to think in this way?

2.8. What is it that is being risked for “an egg-shell”, and what is the “egg-shell”?

2.9. What does Shakespeare convey by the use of this metaphor?

2.10. This speech ends with the words (spoken by Hamlet in soliloquy) “from this
time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth”. What subsequent
action of Hamlet’s seems to indicate that he has acted on this resolution?

3. Read the passage and answer the questions.

HAMLET: As thou’rt a man,
Give me the cup: let go; by heaven, I’ll have’t.
O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
seems unable to shake off.

1.3. The word “Denmark” refers both to the country, and to the new king, Claudius.

1.4. It is surprising that Gertrude could so soon put aside grief for her late husband, and ask her son to do the same. After all, it is reported that she did love Hamlet’s father.

1.5. The word “seems” reflects on the theme of appearance and reality – things might appear to be one thing but, in fact, are actually quite different in reality. It appeared that Gertrude, for example, loved old Hamlet, but his brother Claudius had, in fact, seduced her.

1.6. Both Polonius and Claudius were good at “seeming”. Claudius puts on an act of being sorry about the death of his brother when he is in fact his murderer. Polonius appears to wish Hamlet well, but he spies on him on several occasions.

1.7. Hamlet certainly does hide his true feelings, to the extent that Claudius and Gertrude set various people, including Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the task of trying to “pluck out the heart of (his) mystery”. Hamlet pretends to be mad in order to hide his real motives.

2. Answers to Contextual question 2.

2.1. Hamlet says these words when he is about to board the ship for England on Claudius’s instructions in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He discovers Fortinbras’s intention to regain a piece of worthless land from the king of Poland.

2.2. Hamlet means that many examples of the action of others make him feel guilty because he has not yet done anything to avenge his father’s murder.

2.3. The words are “... some craven scurpel / of thinking too precisely on th’ event”.

2.4. The argument Hamlet puts forward is that we were not created with the capacity for reason if we were not intended to use it before we act. He says reason should not be allowed to rust unused in us.

2.5. This speech touches on the theme of the conflict between reason and passion.

2.6. “Examples gross as earth” exhort Hamlet to take revenge for his father’s murder and kill Claudius.

2.7. Hamlet has seen Fortinbras’s army on its way to attack Poland.

2.8. The lives of many Norwegian soldiers are being risked for a worthless piece of land.

2.9. By using the phrase “egg-shell” to suggest the prize that will be bought by war, Shakespeare intends to convey that some men are prepared to risk a great deal for a fragile aim. Hamlet’s aim, on the other hand, should be a powerful one – he knows that Claudius is guilty, and that it would benefit Denmark to be rid of such an evil king.

2.10. Shortly after this, Hamlet sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death by changing the instructions in the letter to the English king. It seems that at last he is able to act.

3. Answers to Contextual question 3.

3.1. He is telling him to live (Horatio wants to drink from the poisoned cup), and to spend the rest of his days telling Hamlet’s story.

3.2. Laertes, upon hearing that his father has been killed, returns to Elsinore swearing revenge. Claudius tells him that his father was killed by Hamlet. When Ophelia goes mad, this is also blamed on Hamlet. Claudius and Laertes decide that Laertes will challenge Hamlet to a duel. They will poison the tip of the rapier or sword and also poison Hamlet’s wine to ensure that he is killed. During the duel, the poisoned rapier injuries both Hamlet and Laertes. Gertrude has also taken a drink from the poisoned cup and dies. Laertes confesses the plan to Hamlet, who stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink from the cup. Claudius and Laertes have both died.

3.3. Fortinbras is the nephew of the King of Norway. At the beginning of the play, he was threatening to invade Denmark to take back the land that Hamlet’s father took from his father.

3.4. Fortinbras and Hamlet are both nephews of kings, and they are both good men. They differ in temperament: Fortinbras is decisive and hot-headed, while Hamlet is considered and, in some ways, not capable of action.

3.5. One of the main themes is the theme of good vs. evil. Many times, Hamlet and other characters have made reference to heaven and hell. Hamlet delays killing Claudius while Claudius is praying because then he may have gone to heaven instead of hell. Now that Hamlet has restored morality to Denmark by killing Claudius, he has restored balance to Denmark and done what he was destined to do. Now, he can die peacefully. Also, he contemplates suicide often throughout the play. However, this is a sin and to commit suicide would mean that he would not go to heaven. But the circumstances of his death mean that he has not had to take his own life and can be absolved of sin.
Tips on how to answer essay questions

Writing an essay for class and for an exam requires the same set of skills. You need an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

Introduction:
In a brief introduction, say what you are going to do in this essay, explain what point of view you are writing from, and give some idea of the kind of points you plan to make.

Body:
In the body of the essay, write a paragraph or two about each of your main points. Try to link your paragraphs smoothly. Whenever you make a point, you must give an example from the play to support what you say. If you can, quote from the text. If you cannot remember the exact quotation, describe what was said in your own words. You do not have to agree with other people’s ideas, as long as you can back up what you say. Never retell the story in your essay. Use those parts of the play that help you to answer the question.
Make sure that you keep to the point and that you answer the question. Do not go off the point and write about something that was not asked for in the question. When you have finished a paragraph, read it through and check that it is helping to answer the question. Change it or cross it out if it does not help to answer the question.

Conclusion:
In your conclusion, sum up your argument and your main points. Do not introduce any new ideas.

General:
Make sure that your language is formal and not chatty, unless you are answering a creative response question where chattiness may be appropriate.

How to quote from a play
Quoting from the text can be very useful. Quotes can help you to justify your answer or show that you know the text well. But you must always make sure that, if you quote, you repeat the text correctly, word for word. The way to quote text in your answers is to write the text using quotation marks at the beginning and the end of the quoted words. These quotation marks are “ and ”. For example,

Joe said to Martha while they were standing in the field, “I’m upset by what you did.”

If you want to quote from the text, but cannot remember the exact wording, rather write what you want to say in your own words and give the context in which the speech you are talking about appears. For example,

Joe told Martha while they were standing in the field that he was upset by what she did ...

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Essay questions

Question 1
Hamlet says: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right”.
Write an essay in which you explain in what way the “time is out of joint” in Denmark, and why, in your opinion, Hamlet delayed in setting things right.

Question 2
Would you agree that Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern get their just desserts in the play, or do you feel sorry for them? Justify your answer by tracing their various roles in the play, and commenting upon them.

Question 3
Show how the theme of evil and corruption is developed by Shakespeare’s use of imagery throughout the play.

Question 4
In what way is Hamlet’s hesitation in killing Claudius while he is at prayer fatal for Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet himself?

Suggested answers to essay questions
Generally, when answering essay questions, your own opinion is required, but it must be supported by references to the play, the roles of the characters concerned and the themes and imagery in the play. The notes on characters, the themes and the summary of the plot will be useful in helping you to formulate answers.

It may benefit you to learn a few important quotes from the play, which you may be able to use in your answers. However, this is not essential. The examiners will understand if
3.6. It means that Hamlet, who is actually the rightful King of Denmark (both because his father died, but especially because his uncle is now dead too), has decreed that Fortinbras be the King of Denmark.

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Question 4
In what way is Hamlet’s hesitation in killing Claudius while he is at prayer fatal for Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet himself?

Suggested answers to essay questions

Generally, when answering essay questions, your own opinion is required, but it must be supported by references to the play, the roles of the characters concerned and the themes and imagery in the play. The notes on characters, the themes and the summary of the plot will be useful in helping you to formulate answers.

It may benefit you to learn a few important quotes from the play, which you may be able to use in your answers. However, this is not essential. The examiners will understand if
you paraphrase quotes and passages. You should have a good knowledge of the play, however, as you will need to substantiate your answers with examples.

**Question 1**

Things to remember when answering the question “In what way is “time ... out of joint” in Denmark:

Hamlet's father (King of Denmark) has died.

Denmark is in a state of readiness for war because Fortinbras (nephew of the King of Norway) is planning to attack Denmark.

Hamlet’s mother has married Hamlet’s uncle (the dead king’s brother) only two months after her husband’s death – considered incest at that time.

Things are not as they seem: friends are turning on friends, people are suspicious of others, people are arranging spies to catch one another out, lovers are betraying one another – Hamlet even has to pretend to be mad so that the king does not guess his real state of mind.

Nature seems to reflect that things are not right: there is a lot of imagery of flowers turning to weeds, etc.

Things to consider when answering why Hamlet delayed in setting things right:

This question asks for your opinion. Remember that you will still have to substantiate your reasons with examples from the play.

Consider the theme of appearance vs. reality: does Hamlet believe the Ghost from the beginning, or does he perhaps require some proof of the murder?

Consider Hamlet’s personality. He is presented as a young man who is a deep thinker (as evidenced by his soliloquies – particularly the one in the graveyard with Yorick’s skull).

Consider the theme of good vs. evil: perhaps he is not keen to commit murder because he does not want the guilt associated with such a crime? Does this change when he kills Polonius?

**Question 2**

To answer this question, you will need to know quite a bit about Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s characters.

Consider the following points:

Polonius is mostly presented as a meddling old fool, who talks too much. Does this endear the audience to him, or rather put them off?

Ophelia is driven mad by Hamlet’s rejection and her father’s death. This makes us believe that she was fond of her father. Likewise, Laertes is also fond of his father. How does this change our opinion of Polonius?

Polonius is killed while in the act of spying on Hamlet. Throughout the play, he is presented as a character that is deceitful and two-faced. Does this make his death justified?

Also consider Hamlet’s indifferent attitude to killing Polonius. He does not seem overly concerned about it (aside from being disappointed that it wasn’t Claudius behind the arras). He then drags his body off the stage in an undignified way, and stashes it under the stairs (as opposed to a dignified funeral).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are never seen separately, and they are almost considered to be one character. They are indistinguishable from one another.

It is said that they are good friends of Hamlet’s. However, they also accept payment for spying on him, and ultimately escort him to London where it is intended that he be killed.

They are presented as somewhat “below” Hamlet (in other words, they are not on his intellectual level) and he often outsmarts them. They are not as ambitious as he is, and it is unlikely that they will amount to much.

**Question 3**

This question requires an analysis of the language of the play, and how it relates to the theme of corruption.

Consider the following when answering this question:

Perhaps you could begin your essay with the quotation “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”.

You could then explain why Marcellus makes this comment, and you could go on to trace the major developments, and how Shakespeare underlines this particular theme in his imagery.

The source of the roteness and corruption in Denmark is that its present ruler has gained the throne by foul means, that he has married the widow of his brother and now lives with her, according to Hamlet, in “the rank sweat of an enseamed bed”.

The imagery used throughout the play is dark and, in some cases, quite graphic.

Consider Hamlet's harsh language when he talks about Claudius. He is also quite graphic with his use of imagery when he is talking to Ophelia and to his mother.

This theme is an important one, so it will be worth learning a few quotations from the play to support it.

**Question 4**

Many critics regard Hamlet’s hesitation at this time as crucial to the plot: because Hamlet does not at this point, when he has proof of Claudius’s guilt, kill him.

Various other characters die in the course of the events leading up to Claudius’s eventual death at the hands of Hamlet.

Polonius dies because he hid behind the arras and Hamlet takes him to be Claudius. Ophelia dies in mad grief for her lost love and the death of her father. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die because they allow themselves to be used by Claudius.

Gertrude dies when she drinks the poison meant for Hamlet.

Laertes and Hamlet die as a result of Claudius’s plot, but not before the truth has been revealed and Hamlet at last kills the villain who was the cause of it all in the first place.

You could then end your essay with some speculation about what might have happened if Hamlet had killed Claudius then and there.
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