X-kit

The definitive literature exam kit

Hamlet

LITERATURE SERIES

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SHAKESPEARE’S WORLD

Shakespeare lived during a period we call the Renaissance, when a new interest and output in all forms of art reached a peak that has yet to be surpassed. This was at the time of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

A world in transition

The Elizabethans were moving away from the ideas of the Middle Ages, which were dominated by God and Fate, to a belief that they were more in control of their own destinies. Like any transitional period, it was full of contradictory ideas. The philosophy of humanism sees people as individuals, with the capacity for a rich physical, spiritual and intellectual life. However, the superstitions of the Middles Ages, with its belief in witchcraft and ghosts, and the influence of the stars on the destiny of humankind, persisted. Both worlds influenced Shakespeare’s plays.

England’s position in Europe

Under Elizabeth I, England became one of the most powerful countries in Europe. In 1588 Sir Francis Drake defeated the Spanish Armada (fleet), which had tried to invade and conquer England.

Religion

Shakespeare lived in a God-centred universe, where it was assumed that all Englishmen were Christians. Heretics were cruelly persecuted, and people of other faiths, such as Jews, were viewed with suspicion, and discriminated against. Henry VIII had broken from the Church of Rome and founded the Anglican Church. Under Elizabeth I, the rigid religious orthodoxy that had dominated previous reigns was slowly changing into a more accepting and tolerant view of various forms of Christianity. But tension between Catholics and Protestants was still a reality.

The body and medicine

It was believed that a person’s temperament was controlled by the way in which the four humours, or elements, of the body were mixed. These were melancholy, phlegm, blood and cholera (bile). A dominance of melancholy created a sad, pessimistic nature; too much phlegm made one phlegmatic, calm and lacking in passion; a sanguine personality had an excess of blood, and was optimistic and courageous, but also quick-tempered; a choleric person was bad-tempered and irritable.

Life expectancy was short. Frequent outbreaks of bubonic plague caused the theatres to be closed from time to time, and diseases such as smallpox, typhus, malaria and tuberculosis regularly decimated the population. Doctors could do little to fight disease. Some of the treatments were more likely to kill the patient than the sickness itself!

City life

In London, people were crowded together in extremely dirty and unhygienic conditions. Sanitation was rudimentary, with open sewers running down the middle of the streets. Rats were everywhere, spreading disease such as plague.
The Chain of Being

The Elizabethan Chain of Being structured the universe in a series of ranks, known as the Natural Order. God was the supreme power at the head of the Chain of Being, and any attempt to disturb the God-given order of the world led to chaos. The following diagram greatly simplifies the Chain of Being, but it should help you to understand the Natural Order of the world.

GOD
(the creator and controller of the universe)

THE HIERARCHY OF HEAVEN
(known as the Order of the Angels)

THE HIERARCHY OF THE STARS
(known as the Astrological Order)

THE HIERARCHY OF EARTH
(known as the Natural Order)

- The king
- The nobility
- The common man
- Animals and plants
  (each species was allocated a specific position in the order of the universe)

Human beings are part passion (emotions and feelings) and part reason (understanding and knowledge). Their task is to balance passion and reason and so move to a state of perfection.
3. **SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY**

What is a tragedy?

For a definition of tragedy, we need to go back to the words of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. In the 4th century BC he wrote a work called *The Poetics*, in which he discusses poetry and drama. If we paraphrase his words, this is how he defines tragedy:

- The subject matter deals with serious and important events.
- It has a clear beginning, middle and end.
- The hero passes from happiness to misfortune. This may be as the result of a tragic flaw in the character of the hero, because of the workings of Fate, or through a combination of these factors.
- The tragic hero is essentially a good person, so the audience experiences the emotions of pity and fear as the tragedy unfolds. If this were not the case, we would feel that the fall of the tragic hero was justice, and not tragedy.

The tragic hero

All Shakespeare's tragic heroes and heroines are from the ranks of royalty or the nobility, or are extraordinary in some way.

Each play is set in a particular social context, and the tragic hero has to make various moral choices about the problems that confront him. These concerns - or themes - deal with the basic issues of life, such as love, hatred, ambition, jealousy, and so on. The choices and actions of the tragic hero help to determine his fate.

The structure of Shakespearean tragedy

All Shakespeare's tragedies have a similar structure:

- **Acts 1 and 2** The tragic hero becomes involved in events and makes choices that have a significant impact on his life.
- **Act 3** There is a moment in the plot that seals the tragic fate of the hero.
- **Acts 4 and 5** The remainder of the plot is worked out, leading to the death of the tragic hero in Act 5. There is a slight lift in the mood at the end of the play, as the initial situation has been resolved to some extent, and the way forward is indicated.

![The structure of a Shakespearean tragedy.](image-url)
SHAKESPEARE’S THEATRE

Plays in Shakespeare’s day were performed in the courtyards of inns, or in theatres built in Bankside, on the south bank of the River Thames, from 1577. Some of the best known were The Curtain, Rose, The Swan and The Globe. In 1988, a reconstruction of The Globe was begun in London, and today the theatre-goer can experience a Shakespearean play in a very similar venue to the theatres of the 1500s and 1600s.

The illustration below should give you a good idea of the kind of stage on which these great plays were performed, but you will get a far better idea of The Globe theatre if you watch the video or DVD of the Oscar-winning films Shakespeare in Love and Stage Beauty.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

The story of Hamlet

The story of Hamlet is not original. Shakespeare's play is based on a story that first appeared in Historiae Danicae, or History of the Danes, by Saxo Grammaticus. This story became popular in a 16th-century French tale (Histoires Tragiques by Francois de Belleforest) and was well known to Shakespeare. In the story, Hamlet butchers the Danish court and chops off his uncle's head. Shakespeare may also have referred to another play about Hamlet that has since disappeared (Ur-Hamlet), as well as a very popular revenge tragedy of the time by Thomas Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is also known as a revenge tragedy. The elements of this type of play are:

- the appearance of a ghost of a murdered kinsman
- a hero's quest for revenge
- real or feigned madness
- a play-within-a-play
- graveyard scenes and scenes of carnage
- the hero's death.

However, in Hamlet, the hero departs from this convention through his hesitation and moral complexity.

Shakespeare's Hamlet

Hamlet was written at the turn of the 16th century. At this time, Queen Elizabeth's health was failing, and there was no apparent heir to take her place. It was a time of political instability. Thus Hamlet is a comment on the uncertainty surrounding the not-yet-certain succession to the English throne of James I, and the turmoil and bloodshed that results from illegal succession. The Chain of Being needed to be upheld.
SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

The following summary will help to give you an overall view of the action of *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s seven soliloquies with their first lines are also indicated.

**Act 1**

**Act 1, Scene 1**

Bernardo and Marcellus, who are on sentry duty, wait with Horatio for a Ghost, which has appeared twice before. Horatio challenges the Ghost, which refuses to reply. They decide to inform Hamlet, Horatio’s friend, of this strange phenomenon.

**Act 1, Scene 2**

**Soliloquy 1** *O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt*

Claudius holds court and explains that Denmark is preparing for war against Norway. He sends two envoys, Cornelius and Valtemand, to the Norwegian king, to quell the rebellion of his nephew, Fortinbras. Claudius grants Laertes permission to continue his studies, but denies Hamlet’s similar request. In spite of Claudius and Gertrude’s concerns about his melancholy, Hamlet remains aloof. He hears of the appearance of the Ghost from Horatio, and is determined to speak to it.

**Act 1, Scene 3**

As Laertes takes his leave, he warns his sister Ophelia not to give in to Hamlet’s protestations of love - advice echoed by their father, Polonius, who tells Ophelia to reject Hamlet’s advances, and Laertes how to conduct himself.

**Act 1, Scene 4**

Hamlet challenges the Ghost on the battlements.

**Act 1, Scene 5**

**Soliloquy 2** *O all you host of heaven*

The Ghost informs Hamlet that Claudius murdered Hamlet’s father. Hamlet is given the task of avenging his father’s death. He swears Horatio and Marcellus to silence, and decides to feign madness in order to investigate the truth of the Ghost’s allegations.

**Act 2**

**Act 2, Scene 1**

Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes, and decides to tell Claudius of Hamlet’s strange behaviour towards Ophelia, who had ignored Hamlet.

**Act 2, Scene 2**

**Soliloquy 3** *O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I*

Claudius recruits Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out the reason for Hamlet’s ‘madness’. Polonius tells Claudius that Hamlet’s behaviour stems from his unrequited love for Ophelia. Valtemand’s mission to Norway has succeeded - Fortinbras will now divert his army to Poland. The arrival of the travelling Players gives Hamlet the opportunity to prove Claudius’ guilt.
Act 3

Act 3, Scene 1
Soliloquy 4 *To be, or not to be, that is the question*
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report their failure. Polonius and Claudius eavesdrop on Ophelia and Hamlet. Hamlet is vindictive and offensive, and Claudius - realising that Hamlet is not mad and that he poses a threat - decides to send him to England. Polonius suggests that Gertrude confront Hamlet.

Act 3, Scene 2
Soliloquy 5 *'Tis now the very witching time of night*
Hamlet coaches the Players on how to perform. Before and during the play, he treats Ophelia coarsely. The Players enact the dumb-show and then 'The Murder of Gonzago'. Claudius, overcome with guilt, stops the play, proving to Horatio and Hamlet the truth of the Ghost's allegations.

Act 3, Scene 3
Soliloquy 6 *Now might I do it pat, now he is a-praying*
Claudius, in conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, repeats his determination to send Hamlet to England. Gertrude, through Polonius, indicates her wish to talk to Hamlet. Claudius attempts to pray but fails because of his guilt. Ironically, Hamlet, viewing Claudius at prayer, decides not to kill him because his sins would then be forgiven and he would go to heaven. Hamlet's decision is a mistake.

Act 3, Scene 4
Hamlet confronts Gertrude, who cries out. The eavesdropping Polonius calls out and Hamlet mistakes him for Claudius and kills him. Hamlet berates Gertrude for her lack of judgement, and becomes so abusive that the Ghost intervenes and commands Hamlet to treat her kindly. Hamlet rejects Gertrude's belief that he is mad (she did not see the Ghost) and urges her to abstain from sexual relations with Claudius. Gertrude agrees to Hamlet's demands.

Act 4

Act 4, Scene 1
Gertrude tells Claudius of Polonius's murder. Claudius decides to ship Hamlet to England immediately.

Act 4, Scene 2
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern order Hamlet to tell them where he has placed Polonius' body. Hamlet, feigning madness again, refuses.

Act 4, Scene 3
Claudius confronts Hamlet, telling him he will be sent to England for his own safety. In a soliloquy, Claudius reveals that, actually, he is sending Hamlet to his death.

Act 4, Scene 4
Soliloquy 7 *How all occasions do inform against me*
Hamlet encounters Fortinbras' army on the way to Poland. This causes Hamlet to reflect on humankind's ability to reason. Hamlet shows disgust at himself for his own inaction. He views the war as a misguided enterprise because many lives will be lost for a trifling cause, but admires the sense of honour that is the motivating reason.
Act 4, Scene 5
Gertrude reports Ophelia's madness to Claudius. Laertes returns to accuse Claudius of Polonius' death, a charge Claudius denies.

Act 4, Scene 6
Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet, who writes that he has escaped aboard a pirate ship and is returning to Denmark.

Act 4, Scene 7
Claudius persuades Laertes to challenge Hamlet to a duel. Claudius plans to poison Laertes' rapier so that Hamlet is killed. If this fails, he will give Hamlet poisoned wine. Gertrude announces that Ophelia has committed suicide.

Act 5

Act 5, Scene 1
After debating death humorously and darkly with the gravediggers, Hamlet witnesses Ophelia's funeral and scorns Laertes' excessive display of grief. Hamlet protests his love for Ophelia, and Gertrude intervenes to prevent a fight.

Act 5, Scene 2
Hamlet informs Horatio of how he rewrote the letters in order to bring about the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Osric brings Hamlet a challenge to a duel from Laertes. In the duel, Hamlet gains the upper hand but Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup. While Hamlet's attention is distracted, Laertes wounds Hamlet; rapiers are exchanged, and Hamlet then wounds Laertes. Gertrude dies, and Laertes informs Hamlet of the plot. Hamlet stabs Claudius, who dies. Laertes' death quickly follows. Hamlet gives the task of telling the truth about himself to Horatio, and hands over the kingship to Fortinbras, who has recently arrived from Poland.
# LOOKING AT CHARACTER

## Hamlet

### Stage 1
His normal character - noted throughout the play

- Balanced
- Respected
- Admired
- Witty
- Intelligent
- Courageous

Hamlet conforms to the ideal Renaissance man. Ophelia and Fortinbras acknowledge his nobility. His keen sense of justice values truth and goodness. He detests falseness and is appalled by treachery. Horatio greatly admires him. The king notes his generosity of spirit (*most generous and free from all contriving*). Hamlet has a forgiving nature (the treatment of Laertes).

### Stage 2
After his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage

- Melancholy
- Disillusioned
- Cynical
- Despairing
- Bitter
- Contemplative
- Unstable

Hamlet's father's death and his mother's incestuous remarriage are terrible blows. He becomes listless, dark-humoured, and sick at the corruption of the world. His distrust of women distorts his relationships. He becomes unbalanced and shams madness. His intellectual approach leads him to reflect deeply on matters: suicide, the nature of death, inherent character flaws. His reason and emotions split. He becomes judgemental and treats people cruelly. He is filled with self-disgust at his inability to act. He loses faith in God.

### Stage 3
After his rescue by the pirates and his return from England

- Balanced
- Discerning
- Resolute
- Resigned
- Rational

On his return, Hamlet is at peace with himself. He resigns himself to the direction that providence provides, and no longer resents the cruel task that fortune has imposed on him. The split in him between his reason and passion has been resolved. He accepts that both good and evil exist in the world, and that there is a fitness in performing his duty of revenge. His nobility and balance restored, he avenges his father’s murder and purges Denmark of corruption.

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More about character
Now consider some of the other main characters in the play. Extract and write down in your workbook your own notes on each character portrayed.
### Claudius

- Claudius is evil. His murder of Hamlet's father, his marriage to Gertrude, and his plotting to kill Hamlet are all wicked, criminal acts.
- He is shrewd and conniving. He manipulates people and persuades them to his point of view. His great strength is his capacity to see all sides of a situation.
- He is power-hungry. Maintaining power is all that matters to him.
- He is an excellent orator, and his chief weapon is his persuasive use of language, which enables him to smooth over situations and turn them to his own advantage.
- He is hypocritical. He lies smoothly and convincingly. Even when he knows he is mortally wounded, he says *O, yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt*. He knows Gertrude is poisoned but says *She swoons to see them bleed.*
- He earns our qualified pity. We see him as a man tortured by guilt over his actions. He is also an able king, resolving quickly the threat against Denmark.

### Gertrude

- She is dependent upon and dominated by powerful men. She wishes to please. She is compliant and passive, and tends to be gullible. She has a powerful instinct for self-preservation.
- She has no capacity for self-criticism, reflecting not at all on her situation. Only after Hamlet's attack does she perceive the extent of her betrayal of Hamlet's father.
- She is weak of character. After her promises to Hamlet she reports Hamlet's behaviour in full to Claudius. She is shallow, and seems to be morally frail.
- She has a natural grace and charm which are shown to best advantage in social situations such as in the court scene in Act I, and when she attempts to reconcile Hamlet and Laertes in the wager scene (Act 5, Scene 2).
- She also expresses her concern for
Ophelia

- Ophelia is sweet, pure and innocent, and this is symbolised by the freshness and the beauty of the flowers with which she is associated. The songs of Ophelia also show her innocence, but at the same time seem to indicate that she has had a sexual relationship with Hamlet (especially the St Valentine's song).

- She is dominated by her father and, to a lesser extent, Laertes. The only time she asserts her independence is when she tells Laertes to practise what he preaches. Her meek nature is evident in that both her father and brother expect her to listen and obey them. This proves to be tragic - Ophelia is led to reject Hamlet. He sees in the rejection a pattern of female untrustworthiness started by his mother and treats Ophelia viciously.

- Her sensitive nature is unable to handle Hamlet's cruel attacks on her (in the 'nunnery scene' and at the play). The impact of her father's murder (her lover has killed her father) and the loss of Hamlet so unsettle her that she loses her sanity and her life. She retreats from a horrible reality into insanity.

Polonius

- Polonius is shrewd and experienced, regarded highly by the king and Gertrude. He is filled with his own importance, and so is tedious, boring and long-winded. Even the queen tells him to employ *more matter with less art*.

- He meddles in other people's business, with disastrous results. He rules his children firmly, distrusts them, and spies on Laertes. He spies twice on Hamlet. His love of intrigue and plotting leads to his death.

- Polonius allies himself to the rottenness in Denmark. He has become immoral and hypocritical: he betrays his daughter for the State, polices his children's behaviour, and ignores his own seemingly wise advice to Laertes.
### Horatio

- Horatio is Hamlet's trusted friend. His loyalty and unwavering support are apparent throughout the drama. Hamlet and the other soldiers respect and admire him.
- Horatio is rational and calm. He embodies the balance between passion and reason that Hamlet lacks. He does not allow passion to govern him, and Hamlet acknowledges this when he says in his tribute to Horatio in Act 3, Scene 2: *Give me that man/That is not passion's slave.*
- Horatio represents the Renaissance man, who controls his life by not indulging in excessive joy or suffering. He remains steadfast throughout.
- Horatio's judgement is sound. He is truthful and entirely trustworthy. At the end of the play Hamlet entrusts him with the task of telling the truth in the full knowledge that Horatio will carry out his friend's last wish.

### Laertes

- Laertes seems to be much like his father. Despite his genuine affection for his sister, he is dictatorial and dominating. He preaches to Ophelia on how to behave, and dismisses her advice with an insincere *O fear me not!* (Act 1, Scene 3, line 51).
- Unlike Hamlet, Laertes is a man of action. He acts decisively but without thinking.
- Laertes is hot-tempered, and therefore prone to ranting and melodrama. He behaves excessively at the graveside and when he confronts the king.
- Laertes is unscrupulous and treacherous. Claudius easily persuades him to use a cowardly weapon, poison, which he himself has brought from France.
- Laertes redeems himself in the end when he confesses and asks forgiveness.
Fortinbras

- Initially shown as hot-headed and unscrupulous. He assembles a group of lawless gangsters to avenge the loss of Norwegian lands.
- Increasingly depicted as noble and honourable. Although Hamlet disapproves of his cause, he admires Fortinbras' qualities as a leader. His army on the way to Poland.
- Fortinbras' worthiness as a replacement king is endorsed by Hamlet with his dying words. His duty is to restore stability and morality to a corrupt society.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

- Hamlet's friends are depicted interchangeably. They are equally guilty in betraying Hamlet's friendship. Their lack of principle is brought into question.
- They are spineless, hoping to win favour with the king.
- They are flatterers and are themselves susceptible to flattery. They aspire to advantage and position at the king's court.

**THEME**

**Revenge**

Shakespeare incorporates the elements of a revenge tragedy (see page 6) into a play that deals with the task that a ghost sets a son (avenging his father's foul and most unnatural murder). But, unlike the traditional revenge tragedy, the demand is not straightforward: Hamlet has to answer a number of questions. Is the Ghost real or a devil? Is revenge a good or evil act? Is Claudius guilty? And is it really his responsibility to carry out this huge task? A further complication centres on a double revenge. Both Hamlet and Laertes focus on avenging a father's murder, but Hamlet is the target of Laertes' revenge.

Fortinbras also has obligations of revenge - his father was defeated by Hamlet's father, and lost certain Norwegian lands to Denmark. Hamlet delays his revenge not only because he is introspective, but also because he realises that acts have consequences. He is a Christian, and forbidden by the Bible to take revenge. Shakespeare intends to show that revenge (an evil act, unless punishment is left to the State) has consequences. Evil inevitably leads to more evil. In the course of revenge, the innocent are often destroyed along with the guilty (Ophelia being the prime example). Shakespeare's viewpoint is probably that things should be left to heaven.
Appearance versus reality

A central theme is the contrast between what is true (reality) and what appears to be true (appearance). Hamlet is depressed and melancholy because he believes he can see the evil reality behind the appearance of good in Denmark. The State should be just, but it is rotten. Man should be honourable, made in the image of God, but to Hamlet life is dust. Women, essentially pure and chaste, are unfaithful and impure. Love, supposedly loyal and honest, is dishonest and unfaithful.

So the characters in the play assume roles in order to hide themselves. Claudius appears to be the grieving brother, concerned uncle and lawful king, but in reality he is a murderer and usurper. Gertrude is a most seeming virtuous-queen, while in reality she is an adulteress. Polonius is the wise father but he spies on and betrays his children. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, cynical and opportunistic, abuse their friendship with Hamlet in order to win favour. The Players remind Hamlet that a person can play a convincing role in real life (the 'Hecuba incident' in Act 2, Scene 2). Hamlet himself pretends to be mad in order to establish his uncle's guilt, yet he says I know not 'seems'.

The appearance of the Ghost exemplifies the theme of appearance versus reality. Hamlet's delay is, in part, caused by his inability to decide on the Ghost's origins. The Gonzago play is not what it seems, but a trap wherein Hamlet will catch the conscience of the King. Here Hamlet is successful, but later he botches an opportunity to carry out his revenge. The king appears to be at prayer, and Hamlet decides not to kill his uncle while he is in a state of grace. The reality is that Claudius cannot repent, as he is unwilling to give up his crown or his queen. When Laertes declares that The King - the King's to blame (Act 5, Scene 2) reality and appearance finally meet. The play shows the difficulty of knowing the truth about people, living in a world of appearances. Essentially, Hamlet expresses the dilemma of living in that world.

Corruption

Marcellus' remark, Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, reflects the corruption that is found on all levels in the country. As a result, there are frequent references to, and images of, corruption. Claudius is irredeemably corrupt, guilty of fratricide (the murder of a brother) and regicide (the murder of a king). Hamlet refers to Claudius as a canker in our nature. The relationship between Claudius and Gertrude, which starts with adultery, is immoral, but this is glossed over. The corruption Claudius embodies taints everything: Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all lose their moral sense under Claudius's manipulation. The penalty they pay is the loss of their lives.

There is an explicit link between the moral legitimacy of a ruler and the health of the nation. If this is flawed, the State (the body) is sick, so Denmark is frequently referred to as a body made ill by corruption. Laertes ironically says of Hamlet (Act 1, Scene 2, lines 20-21) that on his choice depends/The sanity and health of this whole state. Unknowingly, he has hit upon Hamlet's task in the play - to restore soundness and morality to Denmark.
Reason and passion

The Chain of Being (see page 3) demanded a balance between the two opposites, reason, and passion. When passion overcomes reason (the murder of old Hamlet constitutes fratricide and regicide, and Gertrude, remarrying with indecent speed, commits incest) the balance is disturbed. Hamlet is the unwilling agent who has to restore soundness to Denmark. He has the necessary qualities, but the terrible shocks he receives unbalance him. The play explores Hamlet’s inability to reconcile reason and emotion.

Ophelia summarises Hamlet’s imbalance: *his most noble and sovereign reason/Like sweet bells jangled is out of tune and harsh.* Because Hamlet cannot *suit the action to the word,* he is paralysed by reflection, so he rages at himself. He knows that he has been thinking too precisely on the event and that *his native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.* However, it is in Act 4, Scene 4 (when he boards the pirate ship and deals with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) and Act 5, scenes 1 and 2 (when he is at peace with the idea of death, and accepts his role) that Hamlet harmonises his thinking and his emotions. He learns that the readiness is all.

Fortune versus providence

Hamlet feels overwhelmed by the evil and falseness in the world. Fortune - the operation of a random, indifferent universe - dictates to him and he is a victim. Human actions seem pointless in a world that is governed by the whims of fortune.

Fortune is depicted as a giant wheel rolling down the hill, lifting some men up and crushing others (Act 2, Scene 2, lines 441-445). However, Hamlet undergoes a journey of spiritual discovery. He learns to believe in providence. He tells Horatio about his belief in a divine order that governs human affairs, even to *the fall of a sparrow* (Act 5, Scene 2, line 190). He is resigned and ready. He accepts his destiny, instead of railing against it. Providence replaces fortune, and so Hamlet sees himself now as an instrument of justice: *There is a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will* (Act 5, Scene 2, lines 10-11).
SYMBOLISM/IMAGERY

Shakespeare uses a complex pattern of images in *Hamlet*. The imagery gives individuality to the major characters, and establishes major themes. You should look for the repeated images that create these themes and contribute to the unity of the play.

**Images of disease and sickness**

- Sickness and disease images abound in *Hamlet*. The governing image is that of an ulcer or tumour, which indicates the immoral, corrupt State of Denmark. Crucially, Marcellus says that *something is rotten in the state of Denmark*.
- For Hamlet, Gertrude’s sin is a *blist*er, heaven is *thought-sick* at her marriage, Claudius is a *mildew’d ear*, blasting his wholesome brother, and for Gertrude to have married Claudius, her sense is *sickly and apoplex’d*. If Gertrude blames her sin on Hamlet’s madness and not her own guilt, it *will skin and film the ulcerous place/, While rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen* (Act 3, Scene 4).
- Claudius uses many such images, but ironically he equates them with his and the State’s wellbeing. He identifies the State as suffering from a disease, but Hamlet - not himself - is the cause. The decision to send Hamlet to England is justified by *diseases desperate grown*, Hamlet is *like the hectic* in Claudius’ blood and England *must cure* him, and to *the quick of th’ ulcer* is his description of Hamlet’s unexpected return.
- Hamlet describes Denmark as a garden choked by ugly weeds (*’tis an unweeded garden*) - this is one of eleven references to a garden. Hamlet, disgusted by his mother, tells her not to *spread comport on the weeds/To make them ranker*. Even Claudius admits that his *offence is rank, it smells to heaven*.

**Images of poisoning**

- Poisoning is a recurring image. The poisoning of old Hamlet is the crucial event, and the effect of the *leperous distilment* is described vividly by the Ghost. This poisoning acts as a major symbol of Denmark’s moral condition.
- Ironically, Claudius describes Ophelia’s madness as the *poison of deep grief*.
- Lucianus re-enacts the poisoning of Hamlet’s father in the Gonzago play. Using a *mixture rank*, he poisons the king. In the final scene, all the major characters die by poison. Laertes loses his life, poisoned by the same *unction* he used to kill Hamlet.
- Ironically, Claudius describes how Laertes does not lack rumour-mongers to *infect his ear/With pestilent speeches of his father’s death*. The effect that Lamord’s prowess with the sword has upon Hamlet is to *envenom* him.

**Hamlet's use of imagery**

Hamlet’s images are grounded in a keen observation of the everyday world. They are designed to strip away appearance and break down disguises. They are concrete and simple. He uses ordinary things such as trades and the workplace, popular games, technical terms, and pastimes. He is at home with natural science, mythology, law, theatre and acting, and soldiery.
EXPLANATION OF LITERARY TERMS

Allusion - reference to something or someone well known
Aside - a comment made by a character in a play that is intended to be heard by the audience, and not by the other characters on the stage
Climax - the moment of greatest tension in a play
Diction - choice of words
Dénouement - the working-out of the plot following the climax
Drama - the genre of plays of various kinds
Dramatic irony - when the audience knows more than some or all of the characters on the stage
Dramatis personae - the characters in a play
Lambic pentameter - the metre in which Shakespeare wrote his plays. It consists of five repetitions of an unstressed and a stressed syllable in a line of poetry, as in the example below:

- / - / - / - / -
Absent thee from felicity awhile

This metre follows the natural rhythms of speech, which is why Shakespeare is easy to speak aloud. It is used mainly by noble characters. Lesser characters speak mainly in prose.

Image/imagery - the creation of a clear impression through the use of figurative language
Juxtapositioning - the placing of contrasting elements or scenes next to each other
Motif - a recurring theme or pattern of imagery
Plot - the events that happen during the course of the play
Soliloquy - a speech made by a major character, alone on the stage, in which the character reveals to the audience his or her most intimate thoughts and deepest emotions
Stage directions - instructions for the actors, generally written in italics and enclosed in brackets
Subtext - meaning that is implied in the text, which the actors and the audience need to interpret. Shakespeare's plays have such a rich subtext that very few stage directions are required. We understand from the words themselves how the actors should move and speak.

Suspension of disbelief - this happens when we do not apply the logical rules of real life to a play. Thus, in an aside, we imagine that the other characters cannot hear what is being said; or we accept that Ophelia is so good that she accepts Hamlet's false accusations without examining them.
Symbolism - a physical object that is used to represent something that is essentially of a conceptual nature
Theme - a central issue, message or doctrine a literary work is meant to convey
Tone - the attitude that a speaker or writer displays towards the person or thing addressed, as implied in the phrase 'tone of voice', through which the feeling of the writer for the subject can usually be inferred
HOW TO QUOTE

- Quotations of a single word, or a few words, should be included in the body of your sentence, e.g. in his soliloquy 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' (Act 1 Scene 2), Hamlet rages at himself for not dealing with Claudius, the 'bloody, bawdy villain'.
- A longer quotation should be set out as Hamlet's speech (his acceptance of death) has been written below:

  HAMLET
  if it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come.

- A slash (/) is used to indicate a break from one line of poetry to the next, e.g.

  Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother/Nor customary suits of solemn black

- Avoid long quotations in literary essays.
- Never misquote! Rather paraphrase in your own words if you cannot remember accurately.

HOW TO ANSWER CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

If there is no mark allocation, answer as fully as possible. If a mark allocation has been provided, follow these guidelines:

- Answers to questions worth one or two marks should be as brief as possible.
- For questions worth three or more marks, use the following technique:
  - Give your response in your own words.
  - Explain your statement.
  - Substantiate your answer, either by quoting from the text, or by giving a clear reference to the text.
  - Remember to use quotation marks when you quote from the play.

Some tips on answering contextual questions

- Read the passage through carefully to ensure you understand where it occurs in the play, and what is happening. (Not all the questions will relate directly to the passage. Some may ask for your understanding of the novel as a whole.)
- Now read the questions. Underline the question word as you go so that you know what to focus on in your answer. Question words are words such as examine, explain, justify, discuss, name, as well as the more obvious ones like why, when, where, etc.
- Reread the passage. (If you do not have time to do this in an exam, read the questions first. Then, as you read through the passage, you will be focusing on the specific information you will need to answer the questions.)
- After you have answered all the questions, reread your answers to check for careless spelling errors, and to see that you have written enough to justify the mark allocated.
HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE ESSAY

Writing a literature essay or long paragraph - What's your verdict?

Here is a suggestion as to how you can approach this task. Pretend that you are a lawyer arguing a case in a court of law. Let’s look at the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the lawyer would do</th>
<th>What you will do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look at the case and plan how to go about arguing it.</td>
<td>Carefully look at the question and plan how you will put across your argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow a logical progression.</td>
<td>Work chronologically. Use only those aspects that will support your view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All points will relate directly to what he is trying to prove. He will support all his points with evidence.</td>
<td>You do not tell the story. Substantiate every point you make either by quoting or by discussing what you have said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His introduction will relate directly to where his argument is leading.</td>
<td>Your introduction will restate the question and show where your argument is going.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His conclusion will show that he believes that the points he made are valid. He will try to ensure that the jury agrees with his opinion.</td>
<td>The essay will end with a strong statement; round off what you have said previously, and ensure that the reader will agree with you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here is an essay topic. We’ll work through the process step by step so that by the time you have reached the end of this table, you should be able to write this (and any) essay.

O, cursed spite,/That ever I was born to set it right!

Explain how both Hamlet’s nature and his circumstances prevent him from sweeping to his revenge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▶ What do you have to argue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Is this statement valid? If so, why? If not, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Put your point of view, but remember to substantiate what you say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Make your opening statement strong and direct.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet is tasked with avenging his father’s horrible and unnatural murder. However, he faces a dilemma: should he believe in the honesty of the Ghost? It might be a devil. By nature a thinker and philosopher, his first course is to assess the truth of the Ghost’s command, but this introspection causes delay. Moreover, his extreme depression at his mother’s dishonourable remarriage, and the fact that Claudius has been elected...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Body of essay
Discuss Hamlet's character.
- He is unable to act decisively because his intellect demands proof.
- Only when the Players arrive is he prompted to devise a plan, yet when he gets proof he is still inactive.
- Already in a state of melancholy, the further shocks he receives make him unstable on occasions. He becomes absorbed in himself, unable to act.
- Because of his strong sense of morality, acting as a revenger in a Christian world impedes him. Yet family ties urge revenge.
- Only when he has reconciled his problems is he capable of action.

Discuss the chain of circumstances.
- Hamlet should have believed the Ghost's other appearances.
- Claudius has won the court (including Polonius) over to his side because he is so believable and has persuasive language skills.
- Hamlet's rash decision in killing Polonius gives Claudius the moral high ground.
- Hamlet delays killing Claudius at prayer because he mistakenly believes the king is in a state of grace. His angry love for his mother prevents him from hurting Claudius.
- Hamlet's feigned madness makes him lose credibility.
- Anger at Gertrude and Ophelia's betrayal makes him concentrate on women's frailty at the expense of action.

Conclusion
Round off your essay.
Agree or disagree.
Try not to restate the introduction.
Use fresh ideas.
PART 3
Working with the text

ACT 1, SCENE 1
An ominous foreboding of tragedy

Plot

The organised military scene of the night watch is contrasted with a charged atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty. The presence of a ghost is unnatural, and contributes to the impression that all is not well since the death of the previous king, Old Hamlet.

Tension at the castle
In this opening scene, Bernardo relieves Francisco of his sentry duty, and Horatio and Marcellus appear (lines 1-19).

- The scene takes place on the sentry platform of the Royal Castle of Elsinore in Denmark. This platform allowed for the castle's guns to be trained on the sea passage between Denmark and Sweden, and so exact tolls on passing ships.
- It is midnight, and bitterly cold. The sentries are anxious. This leads to Francisco, the relieving sentry, challenging Bernardo, whose duty it is to challenge newcomers. This immediately creates tension.
- Note the irony of Long live the king (line 3). The entire play is concerned with the status and legitimacy of the king.
- Francisco's remark And I am sick at heart (line 9) points to unease and disquiet on his part. It is symptomatic of something wrong and sinister. Repeating Give you good night (lines 17 and 19) emphasises his nervousness.
- The language is simple, and statements are short. This reflects not only the military character of the guards, but also their tension and anxiety as they await the appearance of the Ghost. The rapid movements on and off the battlements underpin the quickness of the language.

The entrance of the Ghost (lines 20-50)
Most Elizabethans believed in ghosts. Ghosts were considered real, and were taken seriously. They could not initiate conversation, and came from an eternal world. This Ghost is dressed in military armour and looks like Hamlet's father, but it could well be a devil impersonating the dead king.
Looking at the text
1. What attitude does Horatio display towards the Ghost when he refers to it as a thing (line 2)? How is his attitude reinforced in lines 23, 29 and 33? Quote the line that shows where his attitude changes. (6)
2. Why does Marcellus expect that only Horatio can speak to the Ghost (line 42)? (2)
3. What are the two implications of usurps't (line 46)? (2)
4. Why would the onlookers be more inclined to believe that the Ghost was a spirit taking the form of the dead king rather than a devil? (3)
5. What does martial stalk reveal about the Ghost's attitude? (2)

(15 marks)

We learn about the State of Denmark (lines 51-125)
Look at how skilfully Shakespeare reveals the history and the current state of affairs in Denmark.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When he the ambitious Norway combated</td>
<td>Old Hamlet defeated Norway when he was king. Norway then forfeited certain lands to Denmark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This bodes some strange eruption to our state</td>
<td>Abnormal events, such as earthquakes (in this case, the appearance of the Ghost), are fore-warnings that the normal pattern of existence is about to be disrupted. The word eruption suggests the breaking out of something horrible (as in a disease). Such events occur when the Chain of Being is broken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanked up a list of lawless resolutes ... which is no other/But to recover of us by strong hand/... those foresaid lands /So by his father lost.</td>
<td>Fortinbras has indiscriminately collected a gang of ruffians to recover the lost land. He poses a threat to Denmark - the new king has to deal with this. Denmark is preparing for war.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second appearance of the Ghost (lines 126-175)
We learn the following from this second appearance:
- Horatio shows courage. He is prepared to confront the Ghost's path (I'll cross it) even though he might be harmed. He is also referring to crossing his arms which, forming a cross, would repel the spirit if it was evil.
- Marcellus believes that they wronged the Ghost by striking at it. Its majestic appearance makes their blows malicious.
- As the Ghost is about to speak, the cock crow. Traditionally, spirits can only walk the night. The mood now changes from the horrible fears and anxieties of the night to a discussion of Christian grace, and the freshness of a new day.
- Horatio is now convinced of the existence of the Ghost - his scepticism has been overcome (This present object made probation - in other words, provided proof).

The entire scene is geared towards two things: the occurrence of something unnatural in Denmark, and the appearance of the Ghost and the message it wishes to impart. So young Hamlet is naturally introduced right at the very end as the person to whom the Ghost will talk. Hamlet holds the key to the mystery.
ACT I, SCENE 2
We meet Claudius and Hamlet

Character and plot

Hamlet is unconvinced by his uncle's attempts to win him over. His uncle's marriage to his mother has made him extremely bitter and grief-stricken. He cannot come to terms with what he believes is an abnormal situation - his mother's marriage to the brother of his late father.

Claudius's first speech

Although the memory and the death of Hamlet, our dear brother, are still fresh, and although we have rightly mourned for him, and the entire kingdom has drawn together in unanimous grief - yet our common sense has struggled with our natural affection to the extent that we grieve for him sensibly, thinking also of ourselves. Therefore, we have married our former sister-in-law, now the queen and joint ruler of this country preparing for war. We did this with a joy overcome by sadness, with weeping both happy and sorrowful, bringing laughter to the funeral and sadness to the marriage, weighing out an equal quantity of delight and grief. Nor have we excluded your wise counsel, which has willingly supported the issue. We thank you all.

- This is the first formal gathering since the coronation and the wedding, and Claudius takes care to smooth over a very awkward situation. At the time, the Church considered marriage to a sister-in-law as incest (in other words, a sexual relationship between two people who are closely related). Moreover, although the king was elected, he has assumed the throne in Hamlet's absence and married hastily and indecently. (Today, such a marriage would not be considered incest.)
- Claudius skilfully conveys both sorrow and happiness. He weighs up the emotions against each other in carefully balanced sentences. But he is hypocritical and dishonest - we shall soon learn that he murdered his brother.
- He cleverly consulted the Council of State in order to gain their support. It appears that he persuaded them to give their consent to an 'illegal' marriage.
- The speech seems too carefully contrived, and the ease with which he glosses over huge problems shows his insincerity and lack of feeling.
- However, in the remainder of his speech (lines 17-39), Claudius shows that he is an able administrator. He swiftly organises and sends envoys, Cornelius and Valtemand, to negotiate with Fortinbras over the imminent war.
The king's treatment of Laertes (lines 42-63)
Laertes wishes to continue his studies, and asks permission of the king to return to France. Claudius treats him with great deference. Note that he uses Laertes' name four times in his greeting to him. Why does he wish to gain his favour?

- He wishes to please his Chancellor, Polonius, whose support he desperately needs in order to consolidate his position on the throne.
- He wishes to show Hamlet that he is amenable to reason, and will offer the same reasonable attitude to Hamlet. He knows that he must gain Hamlet's support and loyalty - Hamlet, dressed in black, is off to the side, and clearly antagonistic. See line 66: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Polonius
Read Polonius's first words (lines 58-61). How do they reveal his character?

Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude
The relationship between Hamlet and Claudius is immediately tense and problematic. Hamlet has lost his father, his uncle has become king, and his mother has married Claudius with improper haste. Let's see how Hamlet responds to the attempts of his uncle and his mother to win him over.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hamlet's responses</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A little more than kin, and less than kind</em> I am more than close in relationship to you (an uncle and a 'father'), but I resent you and have no feelings of liking and kinship.*</td>
<td>Hamlet's reply is a bitter and darkly coloured pun. He has seen Claudius's insincerity and attempt to gloss over what has happened. Hamlet displays clear hostility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun</em> Not so, my lord, I suffer from being too much in the sun.*</td>
<td>Another cryptic pun: Hamlet resents Claudius calling him my son (line 64). He also implies that he has been deprived of succession to the throne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ay, madam, it is common</em> Yes, madam, it is normal.*</td>
<td>Hamlet agrees that it is normal to die, but he implies that it is not normal to stop grieving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Seems, madam! Nay it is. I know not 'seems'. Seems, madam! No, it is. I do not agree with your 'seems'.</em></td>
<td>Hamlet disputes Gertrude's charge that he is being hypocritical. For him, she is the one who has shown hypocrisy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The king's strategies (lines 87-122)
The king, in a long speech, encourages Hamlet to stop mourning. He uses various strategies to do this. Consider some of these strategies by answering the questions that follow on page 26.
Looking at the text
1. What approach does Claudius use in the first six lines?
2. Why does he use the word unmanly (line 94)?
3. What accusations does he make about Hamlet in lines 96-106?
4. See lines 109 and 117. How does he try to appease Hamlet?
5. Comment on the king's reply to Hamlet (lines 121-122).

Hamlet’s first great soliloquy (lines 129-159)

O, that this too too sullied​

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead, nay! not so much, not two ... 5
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly? Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month ... 8
Let me not think on't ... Frailty, thy name is woman, a
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, 10 all tears, why she, even she
(O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer) 11 married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules, 12 within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married, 13 O, most wicked speed ... to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! 14
It is not, nor it cannot come to good ... 15
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

1. Hamlet feels stained; he expresses a feeling of contamination.
2. Suicide is condemned by the Church, as expressed in the Sixth Command
   ment in Exodus. He feels trapped by religious law (canon).
3. He is completely despondent, and feels the world's affairs are entirely
   loathsome.
4. The metaphor of a neglected garden that is overgrown and festering
   suggests decay in the natural world.
5. He is overwhelmed by how quickly his mother remarried after his father's
dehit. It obsesses him.
6. By comparing the brothers to a sun god and a goatlike half-man, half-
   beast, Hamlet points to the enormous unworthiness he perceives in Claudius.
7. Hamlet cannot understand why his father's adoration of Gertrude can be so quickly forgotten.
8. He refers to the sexual attraction (appetite) Gertrude showed for
   Claudius; so her hasty remarriage disturbs him hugely.
9. These famous words depict how Gertrude's conduct has skewed his
   entire attitude to women.
10. Niobe is a symbol of a grieving mother who wept so much for her
    slain children that she was turned into stone. Gertrude's tears, in
    contrast, are hypocritical and have led to no lasting change.
11. Beasts lack reason, so Hamlet
   implies that his mother has turned into an animal.
12. Hercules, a legendary hero, had
   enormous strength, a quality Hamlet
   says he himself lacks.
13. Hamlet's disgust at the overhasty
   marriage (the redness left by
   Gertrude's tears of grief had barely
   gone) is once more apparent.
14. The theme of incest cannot be over-
   emphasised. Hamlet is totally appalled.
15. This line coincides with the feelings
    expressed on the battlements that
    something is abnormally wrong. This
    is a prophetic statement – a tragedy
    does result.
In this soliloquy, we have the first indication of Hamlet’s inner feelings. He pours out his emotions and disgust at his mother’s marriage. He perceives his uncle as a beast, in no way comparable to his father who, in his opinion, was a demi-god. His speech - full of exclamations, highly emotional questions, and commands to himself, ellipses and broken lines - also contrasts markedly with the controlled, but totally insincere, speech of Claudius. The entire mood conveyed by Hamlet is one of despair and distrust.

**Looking at the text**

In this scene, Horatio breaks the news of the Ghost’s appearance. Read from line 159 to the end of this scene and answer the questions below.

1. How do Horatio and Hamlet greet each other? What does this show about the relationship between the two? How does this contrast with the recent exchange between Hamlet and the king and queen? (6)

2. What sarcastic comment is Hamlet making about Claudius when he says, *We’ll teach you to drink deep ere you depart* (line 175)? In your answer, look at the connection with lines 125-128 (*No jocund health …*) (2)

3. Comment on the dark humour of Hamlet’s remarks to Horatio in lines 176-181 (*My lord, I came to see your father’s funeral …*) (3)

4. Quote the lines in which Hamlet once again comments on his father’s character. (1)

5. Show how Hamlet demonstrates his quick grasp of the situation when Horatio describes the appearances of the Ghost. (2)

6. What does *I’ll speak to it though hell itself should gape/And bid me hold my peace* (245-246) show about Hamlet’s character? (2)

7. Why does Hamlet instruct his companions to keep quiet about the Ghost? (2)

8. The rhymed couplet with which this scene ends expresses a universal truth. What is that truth? (2)

(20 marks)
ACT I, SCENE 3
The 'advice' scene

Plot

Both Laertes and Polonius wrongly assume that Hamlet only has a passing interest in Ophelia and all he is interested in is a sexual relationship. In so doing, they convince Ophelia and poison her mind.

Character

Laertes lectures Ophelia (lines 4-51)
In essence, Laertes says:

- Hamlet's interest in Ophelia is not lasting. It is a whim (toy). Like a flower, it blooms fast and will not endure. It is pleasing and an amusement.
- When Hamlet is older, he will have responsibilities and will be subject to his position as heir apparent. So those he rules must give their approval and consent.
- If he says he loves Ophelia, she should believe him only in so far as a man in his position can act with freedom.
- Ophelia should be sceptical, in order not to lose her virginity (honour and chaste treasure) to his passionate courting (unmasted impertinency).
- Ophelia must fear Hamlet, keep to herself, protect herself against scandal, and know that safety lies in fearing the worst.

Laertes thinks he is offering good brotherly advice to Ophelia. But he reveals his system of values:
- People are not to be trusted.
- Love is compared to a war (notice how he uses military metaphors in his advice).
- Young people cannot control themselves.
- Love is unhealthy and diseased.
- The best outlook is a pessimistic one.

Ophelia does not automatically take Laertes' advice to heart. She shows sound common sense and spirit in her response. She recognises the possibility of double standards, for she advises him not to disregard his own advice and take the path of pleasure and loose living (the primrose path of dalliance).

Polonius lectures Laertes (lines 58-81)

- Polonius's advice to Laertes has often been considered wise, paternal counsel.
- In isolation - and despite the fact that the advice is often clichéd - the words of advice are sound, and offer a good way to lead one's life.
- As evidence of the respect Ophelia and Laertes have for Polonius, we do not see them showing impatience or disregard.
- However, in his future actions, Polonius shows his insincerity - he completely disregards his own advice, so that the advice comes to seem tainted and moralising.
Looking at the text

Draw a table in your workbook and match Column A with Column B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Polonius's advice</th>
<th>B. What Polonius means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>This above all ... thou cans't not then be false to any man.</em></td>
<td>A. Fiercely keep your proven friends and do not make friends with every unproven hotheaded youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Neither a borrower nor a lender be ... borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.</em></td>
<td>B. Do not say what you think or put reckless thoughts into action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Give thy thoughts no tongue, nor any unproportioned thought his act.</em></td>
<td>C. Be consistent and it will follow as night follows day that you will not deceive any man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy ... For the apparel oft proclaims</em></td>
<td>D. Do not borrow or lend money. A lender often loses both money and friend, and becomes a spendthrift.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried ... Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged courage.</em></td>
<td>E. Be prepared to listen to everybody, but keep your counsel to yourself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>Give every man thy ear but few thy voice.</em></td>
<td>F. Dress as well as you can afford, and remember that you will be judged by what you wear.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Polonius lectures Ophelia (lines 90 to end)

Polonius mounts an argument against Ophelia in which he uses his skill with language to confuse and bewilder her so that she mistrusts her feelings and Hamlet's genuine expression of affection. Now answer the following questions.

Looking at the text

1. What does the metaphor *green girl* reveal about Ophelia (line 101)?
2. How does Polonius employ the word *tender* to discredit Ophelia's feelings?
3. How should Ophelia regard Hamlet's protestations of love?
4. What does Polonius instruct Ophelia to do? Quote the line that shows he will tolerate no argument. What is the tone of this command?

Ophelia, bullied into submission, unwittingly begins to comply with Hamlet's judgement that women are untrustworthy: *Frailty, thy name is woman!*
ACT I, SCENE 4
Hamlet follows the Ghost

Plot

Hamlet points to the excessive drunken and sexual way of life that Claudius's behaviour has encouraged in Denmark. Hamlet is determined to pursue the Ghost, despite the fear of Horatio and Marcellus that the Ghost may be a devil leading him to his death.

Denmark's drunken revelry (lines 7-22)
After hearing trumpets and the firing of a cannon, Hamlet comments that Denmark is acquiring a reputation for drunkenness. He condemns and scorns the king, and his feeling of contempt for Claudius is reinforced.

Hamlet reflects on human nature (lines 23-38)
Hamlet comments that a natural flaw (vicious mole of nature) in the character of man can grow to such an extent that it overpowers reason and becomes excessive. This fault, whether inherited (nature's livery) or an accident of fate (fortune's star), determines how the public judges people, irrespective of their greatness. One small spot of evil outweighs the man's entire nobility.

The Ghost beckons Hamlet (lines 39 to end)
Horatio and Marcellus fear that the Ghost - possibly, a devil - will harm Hamlet. Hamlet is horrified but displays great courage in his determination to hear the Ghost.

Theme

A number of important themes make their appearance in scenes 1-4. Let's take a look at some of these.

Corruption and disease
- An abnormal set of circumstances has led to the disturbance of the Chain of Being and infection sets in. The Universe, ordered by God, consists of different hierarchies - the angels were closest to God, and were followed by men, beasts, objects, and the devils in the Underworld.
- Although Hamlet does not yet know that his father has been murdered by his uncle, there are already ominous signs that all is not well.
  - Claudius has very hastily (and incestuously) remarried.
  - A ghost walks the night.
  - Denmark is being corrupted by revelry and drunkenness.
- Francisco is sick at heart (Act I, Scene 1, line 9). A strong feeling of wrongness is present.
- Horatio acknowledges that the Ghost's appearance signifies some strange eruption to our state (Act 1, Scene 1, line 69). The onset of disease is suggested. When the Chain of Being is broken, disorder is the result.
- Horatio cites unnatural events and disasters in the world and the cosmos (Act 1, Scene 1, lines 113-125), which are omens of imminent disturbance in the world order.
Contrasted against this soon-to-be disorder are the words wholesome, hallowed and gracious (Act 1, Scene 1, lines 162-164) and the depiction of what society should be – healthy, ordered, and moral.

Claudius claims that Fortinbras has wrongly judged Denmark to be disjoint and out of frame (Act 1, Scene 2, line 20). Ironically, Fortinbras has accurately assessed the true state of the country, even though the murder has yet to be revealed.

Hamlet feels that his flesh has been sullied (his mother's incestuous and immoral behaviour has led to his body being corrupted). The world is an unweeded garden, and it is possessed by festering and evil-smelling things (Act 1, Scene 2, lines 135-137). There are 11 references to a garden in Hamlet.

Both Laertes and Polonius see Hamlet's affection for Ophelia as inappropriate, beyond what she ought to expect, even corrupt.

**Appearance versus reality**

- Hamlet is a highly intelligent and perceptive man. His imagery throughout the play is drawn from the world of everyday life. He has the ability to see beneath the surface of things to a true reality, which he views with great powers of observation. He can, therefore, detect hypocrisy, and knows instinctively where a false appearance is being presented to conceal truth.

- Claudius's dishonourable marriage to Gertrude conceals an unpleasant reality – it is wrong and contrary to Church law.

- The grief exhibited by Claudius is false. The approval granted by the Council of State for the marriage cannot be right.

- Claudius abuses the Danish custom of cannons firing and trumpets sounding after toasts in order to conceal his excessive drinking habits.

- Claudius glibly smoothes over his marriage and pretends to have Hamlet's interests at heart. His entire speech is a lie.

- Hamlet's mother assumes that his grief is not real. Hamlet is deeply offended - Seems, Madam! nay it is, I know not 'seems'. in lines 75-86 of Scene 2, words such as cloak, suits, forced, forms, modes and shapes all refer to the pretended grief of Gertrude, and the outward disguises that she has put on. Hamlet is concerned with truth - But I have that within which passes show.
ACT 1, SCENE 5
Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost

Plot
The Ghost's revelation of incest, adultery and murder places an enormous burden of revenge upon Hamlet, who decides to feign madness in order to conceal his plans and baffle suspicion.

Looking at the text
In this scene, the Ghost speaks to Hamlet. Read lines 1-91 and then answer the following questions:

1. Look at lines 8, 25 and 29-31 in which the theme of revenge is first announced. Bearing in mind that revenge was prohibited by the Church and the State, what do you think the implications are for Hamlet? (3)
2. What irony is apparent in lines 29-31 (\textit{Haste me ... my revenge}). What indication is there in these lines of Hamlet's introspective nature? (4)
3. \textit{... the fat weed/That rots itself} (lines 32-33) and \textit{prey on garbage} (line 7). How do these images contribute to the theme of disease and corruption? (2)
4. O, my prophetic soul!
   4.1 What does this line mean? (2)
   4.2 Where did Hamlet earlier indicate that he had a sense of knowing that something was radically wrong? (2)
5. Read lines 42-57.
   5.1 How did Claudius seduce Gertrude? (2)
   5.2 What character trait of Gertrude led her to give in to Claudius? (2)
   5.3 Quote the line that particularly reinforces the theme of appearance and reality. Explain your answer. (3)
   5.4 How does King Hamlet's love for Gertrude contrast with that of Claudius's love for Gertrude (see lines 47-52)? (2)
6. The Ghost relates graphically and vividly the horrifying effect of the poison on King Hamlet's body (lines 61-73).
   6.1 How does this description link with the theme of disease and corruption? (2)
   6.2 What word in line 70 is used to point to the state in which Denmark should be? (1)
   (25 marks)

Hamlet is stunned by the revelations of the Ghost
While the Ghost is present, Hamlet has no doubts about its authenticity. But in its absence, he once again expresses doubt (\textit{And shall I couple [include] hell?}).

In lines 95-111, there are many references to memory and remembrance. Hamlet urges himself to set aside all past knowledge and write down what the Ghost told him. He does this because of the Ghost's command to \textit{remember me}, and also because he is an academic and needs to reflect on the written word. What he fails to do is remember the Ghost's command to avenge him and put into practice what he said he would immediately do (\textit{I'll wipe away all trivial fond records}). Ironically, reflection leads to delay on his part.
Looking at the text
Read about the oath of secrecy (lines 113-190).

1. Why does Hamlet's mood change and fluctuate so much when Horatio and Marcellus return?
2. Show how the interchange between them expresses this change of mood.
3. Why does Hamlet not take his companions into his confidence?
4. Why does he make them swear an oath three times?
5. In lines 169-180, Hamlet decides to take on an antic disposition (strange madness).
5.1 Why does he do this?
5.2 What theme does this link to?

O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right. Hamlet is played by Ralf Fiennes in a London stage production of the play.

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

Remember this important quotation. It expresses Hamlet's frustration and anger that he was born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. He has to shoulder the horrific burden of avenging his father's murder, and also restoring harmony to Denmark. In addition, Hamlet is already beset by a sense of melancholy, and he is at odds with the world. How, then, is he to act?
ACT 2, SCENE 1
Polonius shows his devious nature

Plot

Polonius betrays both his children. He spies on Laertes, and treats Ophelia inhumanely and with indifference.

Polonius instructs Reynaldo to spy on Laertes
Polonius is a crafty manipulator and a fool. He instructs Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris, telling him how to phrase his questions and even spread gossip in order to get at the truth. He displays his tiresome nature when he says, And then sir, does he this... he does... what was I about to say? By the mass I was about to say something... Where did I leave? Note the implications of this interaction:

- Polonius instructs Reynaldo to lie. Words are used to conceal reality, and appearance is all that counts. In similar fashion, Claudius skilfully constructed an appearance of normality in his silky-tongued address to the court in Act 1, Scene 1.
- The Secretary of State is shown to be corrupt. He is a symbol of the rottenness in Denmark. His behaviour is typical of Danish behaviour, where it is fashionable to deceive - forgeries (20) and falsehood (60) are the custom.

Character

The effect of Ophelia's rejection on Hamlet
- Ophelia has, as instructed, rejected Hamlet's advances.
- Hamlet is distraught - he looks as if he has been loosed from hell. His appearance might also be part of his feigned madness.
- He peruses Ophelia's face as if he is searching for the true Ophelia. He feels hugely betrayed.
- This turns out to be Hamlet's farewell to Ophelia.

Discuss with a friend: Is Hamlet's behaviour caused by the very ecstasy of love?
ACT 2, SCENE 2
Hamlet tries to advance his revenge

Plot

Hamlet continues in his feigned madness but is unable to further his plan of revenge. Polonius and Claudius continue their attempts to find out the cause of Hamlet’s strange behaviour.

This is the longest scene in the play, and can be divided into seven sections.

1. The recruitment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (lines 1–39)
The scene shifts to another set of parents who want to spy on their son. Two of Hamlet’s friends are recruited by the king to find out the reason for Hamlet’s abnormal behaviour. Take note of the following:

- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are supposedly Hamlet’s friends but they do not object in the slightest to spying on him. Nor does it concern Claudius that he perverts the idea of friendship or risks alienating Hamlet if the truth emerges.
- Claudius is a skilled diplomat so he welcomes them in gushing terms.
- Gertrude offers payment (lines 25–26), which is not refused. In Denmark, the harsh reality is that a man’s friendship can be bought and sold for money.
- Claudius claims that the exterior nor the inward man/Resembles that it was. This quotation is linked to the theme of appearance versus reality: Hamlet conceals his knowledge of the truth by a pretence of madness, Claudius is actually a killer, and the State of Denmark is, in reality, corrupt.
- Shakespeare depicts the two men as though they are interchangeable.

2. The resolution of the Norwegian business
The intervention of Cornelius and Valtemand has resolved the threat to Denmark. Fortinbras, forbidden by his uncle to attack Denmark, now turns his attention to Poland. Old Fortinbras, through the envoys, thus requests permission for his nephew to deploy his troops through Denmark. However, the principal focus of this scene is to highlight a number of contrasts and comparisons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hamlet/Fortinbras</th>
<th>Claudius/Old Fortinbras</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wants revenge/Wants revenge</td>
<td>Morally sick/Physically sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delays/Acts quickly</td>
<td>King of Denmark/King of Norway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruled by thought/Ruled by passion</td>
<td>Has a nephew/Has a nephew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son of a dead king/Son of a dead king</td>
<td>Killed Old Hamlet/Defeated by Old Hamlet</td>
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Hamlet is compared and contrasted with Fortinbras

Claudius is compared and contrasted with old Fortinbras
3. **Polonius believes Hamlet is mad (lines 86-158)**
Carefully read lines 86-158, and then answer the following questions.

1. Comment on the irony in Polonius's remark that *brevity is the soul of wit* (line 90).
2. Gertrude rebukes Polonius when she says *More matter with less art* (line 95). What does she mean? What does Polonius's response to her show about his character?
3. Where does Polonius show that he is egotistic?
4. Refer to the letter written by Hamlet to Ophelia. 'Although the letter is a parody of the Elizabethan practice of excessive protestations of love, it nevertheless is genuine.' Discuss this statement.
5. What does Polonius's use of the word *loose* (line 161) show about his attitude to Ophelia? What does it reveal about him?

4. **Polonius confronts Hamlet (lines 159-213)**
Polonius tries to interrogate Hamlet, but becomes the victim of Hamlet's *antic disposition*. Hamlet has overheard the plan to use Ophelia as bait. Each of Hamlet's cryptic replies to Polonius's questions illustrates his state of disillusionment at the corruption and lack of honesty in Denmark.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hamlet's remarks</th>
<th>Their hidden meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polonius is a <em>fishmonger</em> (line 173).</td>
<td>A fishmonger was a brothel keeper. Polonius has perverted love and turned Ophelia into a 'prostitute'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To be honest in this world is to be one man in ten thousand</em> (lines 177-178).</td>
<td>Honesty cannot be found. Polonius, and by implication, Ophelia and Denmark, are all dishonest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sun can breed maggots in the carcass of a dead dog because it is an excellent breeding ground (<em>carrion</em>) (lines 180-181). Do not let Ophelia walk in the sun for she may fall pregnant (lines 183-184).</td>
<td>The sun can breed new life even in dead matter (<em>carrion</em>), which may also mean live flesh available for sexual pleasure. So, the reference is to Ophelia and what might happen to her if she is allowed out into the sun where she might meet Hamlet whose intentions are no longer honourable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet says he is reading <em>lies</em> (<em>slander</em>) about old men (lines 194-200), ones that he does not believe it is decent to write down.</td>
<td>Hamlet mercilessly mocks Polonius who has all the defects and faults of old men - wrinkles, teary eyes, weak knees, and tediousness (<em>lack of wit</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polonius will grow old if he could go backwards like a crab as Hamlet does (lines 199-200).</td>
<td>The only protection Hamlet has in a world of corruption is crab-like backward movements (his put-on madness).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polonius requests Hamlet to come indoors (it was believed that the air was unhealthy), which Hamlet deliberately misinterprets as meaning to his death (lines 202-203).</td>
<td>Hamlet's gloomy view of life is represented. He does not see Polonius as trying to trap him by this invitation, but he shows how much he has lost interest in life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Hamlet sees through the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deception (lines 214–330)
Although Hamlet greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as *My excellent good friends* (line 218), he perceives in their conversation with him a strained, forced goodwill, which makes him suspicious. He pressurises them into revealing that they were sent for (line 274). Of course, this confirms his belief that Denmark’s a prison (234), and he sees that by spying on him they have betrayed their friendship. This leads him into a long speech (lines 276–288) in which he celebrates the wonder of man but concludes that life is sterile and useless, and that man is no more than dust.

In this speech, we see further why Hamlet is paralysed. He admires man but sees that man’s life is futile and poisoned (*a pestilent congregation of vapours*). His inability to reconcile these two views leads also to his inability to act.

6. Hamlet and the Players
Hamlet hears the news of the Players, welcomes them, recites a few lines of a play he once saw, and requests the First Player to continue the speech. While this happens, we note the following:

- Hamlet casts aside his feigned madness and shows everyone his true self: witty, gracious, charming, intelligent, courteous and civilised.
- Polonius once again shows in his repetitiveness how tiresome he is. He is self-important and excessive (look particularly at lines 355–359).
- Hamlet specifically wants to hear the speech about the slaughter of the Trojan king Priam, because it reflects on his own situation. Priam’s son, Paris, had killed Achilles, the father of Pyrrhus, who now seeks out Priam in an act of vengeance. So, when Pyrrhus slays Priam, Hamlet sees his own inability to act in contrast to Pyrrhus’s bloody act of murder. Hamlet also perceives that his father, like Priam, had been vilely murdered.
- The grief of Hecuba, Priam’s wife, is sincere and heart-rending. Hamlet makes the contrast with the insincere and short-lived grief of his mother.
- The First Player is so overcome with emotion in his acting that he halts, unable to continue. Hamlet immediately sees the link: he cannot respond to a real situation, whereas the actor – even in a fictional situation – feels real emotion and breaks down in tears.

7. Hamlet’s longest soliloquy (lines 331–548)
Read Hamlet’s soliloquy (491–548) and answer the questions below:

1. Two months have passed since Hamlet saw the Ghost. What is the tone of his speech, and why does he call himself a villain and a worthless wretch (line 492)?
2. What contrast makes Hamlet feel ashamed?
3. Explain the meaning of *What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba/That he should weep for her?* (These lines are very important.)
4. Of what does Hamlet accuse himself in lines 513–522? Why does he do this?
5. How does Hamlet’s passionate outburst, *Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain,* aptly summarise the qualities of Claudius?
6. In a sexual image, Hamlet compares himself to a *whore.* Why does he do this?
7. Where does Hamlet express doubt about the authenticity of the Ghost?

In this soliloquy, Hamlet shows his disgust at his inaction, but in the last 18 lines he becomes self-controlled, calmer and purposeful. He has berated himself vigorously and so acknowledged his faults. This enables him to make a plan with a twofold purpose: not only will he establish whether the Ghost is genuine, he will also expose Claudius’s guilty secret.
Act 3, Scene 1

Hamlet's great soliloquy

Plot

In this scene, Claudius begins to suspect that Hamlet’s madness is feigned. We see more evidence of Hamlet’s disillusionment with life, and his confirmation of the corruption around him.

After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern admit defeat in trying to find the cause of Hamlet’s disturbed behaviour (lines 1-26), Claudius and Polonius plan to eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia. But note the following:

Claudius and Polonius
They call themselves lawf‘l espials (spies). Spying is not legitimate. Their plan is immoral and corrupt. Spying and deceit have become a way of life in Denmark.

Polonius
Ophelia instructs Polonius to read a book so that show of such an exercise may colour your loneliness. The reality is that she is bait. He constructs an appearance that conceals the truth.

Claudius
In reaction, Claudius says The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word. Claudius admits his guilt. His deceptive words conceal his deeds.

The most famous soliloquy in English literature

By this stage, we are aware of the background to Hamlet’s soliloquy. He sees the world as weary, stale, flat and unprofitable (Act 1, Scene 2, line 133); his admired father is dead, murdered by his uncle; and his uncle is in possession of his mother and the throne.

However, the speech is not concerned with his personal dilemma but is general in scope, for it deals with the subject of whether life is worth living. Here is a modern paraphrase of his famous speech.

Is it better to die or go on living? Is it nobler to accept the miseries that cruel fate deals, or to fight against them and so die? But to die is very similar to sleeping, and this state makes us forget the pain and sorrow men have to endure. Dying is also a problem for we do not know what happens after death. If it is like sleep, then it may have dreams that haunt men. The thought of what man might experience after death makes a person hesitate to end his life, and rather tolerate suffering for so long. Who would bear the miseries of life - ill treatment, tyranny, contempt, spurned love, the delays of legal procedure - when he could end everything with a bare dagger? But we are prevented by the fear of death, of the unknown, of the hereafter from which no person returns. So we prefer to choose the troubles we have rather than fly to others we know nothing of. Thus knowledge may be said to be a source of trouble, as it is of comfort. But I have more comfort than you can say.
The crux of this soliloquy

And enterprises of great pitch and moment ... lose the name of action

Hamlet is unable to carry out the Ghost's instruction - the enterprise - because of his introspective nature. Thinking too much about right and wrong negates all action, including the one to which he has committed himself. He has consequently delayed, so the second part of his soliloquy is an attempt to rationalise and explain his delay. In general terms as though all men are subject to the same fault - thinking too much rather than acting.

The nunnery scene

Ophelia has been set up as a decoy, and is extremely nervous, knowing as she does that Polonius and Claudius are eavesdropping. Hamlet's dejection at his inability to act, and his disgust for women in general, colour what he says.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remark</th>
<th>Comment/meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good, my lord./How does your honour for this many a day?</td>
<td>This greeting is stilted and very formal. It alienates and angers Hamlet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, not I./I never gave you aught.</td>
<td>The emphasis is on you. Hamlet means that she has changed, and is not the same person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha, ha! are you honest?</td>
<td>Hamlet attacks Ophelia viciously, implying that she is a whore. He asks whether she is both truthful and chaste. Because of his mother's adultery and faithlessness, he sees all women in the same way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.</td>
<td>Hamlet challenges Ophelia by saying that if she were honest her beauty would not corrupt her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ay truly, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd, than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness.</td>
<td>It is easier for beauty to corrupt chastity than for chastity to turn beauty into a quality like itself. Hamlet accuses Ophelia of being corrupt (in the same way as his mother's beauty was corrupted).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did love you once ... You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock, but we shall relish of it - I loved you not.</td>
<td>Hamlet's words are sad and bitter, filled with loss. This image, taken from grafting trees, means that old trees will always have traces of the original even if new trees are grafted on. He implies he is Gertrude's son and so has her sins.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Looking at the text

Hamlet now turns viciously on Ophelia, shouting at her to go to a nunnery. Now read the remainder of this section (lines 118-141) and answer the following questions.

1. *Nunnery* can mean either a convent or a brothel. Show how Hamlet intends both meanings. (4)
2. Why does Hamlet invite scorn by making these accusations? (2)
3. Quote the line that shows Hamlet realises that he is being spied upon. (2)
4. Ophelia’s lie that Polonius is at home is unconvincing. How does this affect Hamlet’s next response? Some critics have said that he becomes genuinely deranged at this point. Do you agree? (4)
5. It is clear later in the play that Hamlet genuinely loved Ophelia. Why, then, does he treat her so cruelly? (2)
6. Quote and explain the line that is intended for Claudius’s ear. (4)
7. What is the purpose of Ophelia’s speech beginning, *O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown*? (2)

(20 marks)

The results of the confrontation

1. This clash, and rejection by Hamlet, is the beginning of Ophelia’s insanity.
2. Claudius is disturbed and sees that Hamlet suspects him. He determines to protect himself and get Hamlet out of the way by sending him to England.
3. Polonius shows his arrogance. He is completely unaltered by the exchange, and shows no father-feeling or sympathy for his daughter.

Theme

Passion and reason

- In lines 149-150, Ophelia says that Hamlet’s *most noble and sovereign reason/*Like sweet bells jangled is out of tune and harsh.* Except for the end of the play, Hamlet’s passion and reason are not in harmony.
- This tension accounts for his crippled inactivity as he attempts to pursue his revenge. He does not have the wholesomeness that Horatio displays. Horatio is not *passion’s slave.* Hamlet says the *time is out of joint,* when actually it is he who cannot reconcile the two opposites of action and inertia.
- Claudius’ remark about Polonius (Act 1, Scene 2) that *the head is not more native to the heart* (the head could not be more closely related to the heart) points to an ideal state in which there is harmony, and opposites are reconciled sweetly. Hamlet’s tragedy is that his *native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.* He falls into inaction so that he *unpacks his heart with words* (Act 2, Scene 2).
- Fortinbras, contrasted with Hamlet, acts immediately and does not allow introspection to impede him.
- Hamlet is a profound thinker but he is not in harmony. He cannot *suit the action to the word* as the First Player does (*What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba*/That he should weep for her?).
Plot

Act 3, Scene 2 rapidly accelerates the action. Hamlet gets proof of Claudius’s guilt, and Claudius becomes convinced that Hamlet is a threat to him.

Staging The Mouse-trap

Here is a suggested staging of the play, The Mouse-trap, in groups, discuss whether you agree. Then replace the numbers with the names of the participants. Can you suggest another way to stage this play?

Character.

Hamlet’s advice to the Players (lines 1-34)

Here we see Hamlet at his best - restored to the intelligent, lively, witty self that he abandoned to pursue vengeance and fool the court. Read his advice to the Players and work out the order in which it was presented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do not cut the air dramatically.</td>
<td>6. Do everything with restraint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The purpose of acting is to reflect reality and contemporary matters.</td>
<td>7. Do not act in a larger-than-life manner or underplay matters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do not overact.</td>
<td>8. Speak naturally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do not ham things up in order to play to the gallery.</td>
<td>9. Do not be feeble, but use your discretion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Develop a self-control that is easy</td>
<td>10. Do not overuse gesture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hamlet frequently uses the word *nature* in his talk to the players. His emphasis is on natural feeling, sincerity, and the truth in contrast to what he has experienced - falseness, lies and artificiality. Hamlet also insists on the control of passion, advice he is unable to follow - he uses the following terms to describe this state: *temperance* (line 8), *discretion* (line 18) and *modesty* (line 20).

**Hamlet reassumes his antic disposition**
Hamlet is in a high state of excitement. His speech of some dozen or sixteen lines (Act 2, Scene 1) - aimed at proving the genuineness of the Ghost and Claudius's guilt - is about to be performed. Now he feigns a disturbed mind once again in order to observe from behind his 'mask' what is going on and to act as a kind of general commentator or chorus. He is brutal and unkind to everyone as he transfers his hurt. His cryptic remarks suggest the reality that has been concealed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Hamlet's remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80 - air, promise-crammed</td>
<td>Claudius had announced that Hamlet was the heir (<em>air</em>) to the throne. Chameleons are supposed to eat air - in the same way Hamlet will not be satisfied with empty promises (a substance as empty as air).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88 - kill so capital a calf</td>
<td>Hamlet puns upon Julius Caesar's last words to Brutus (Et tu, Brute - You, too, Brutus) who was part of a group that assassinated him in the Capitol in Rome. Hamlet jeers at Polonium's poor acting ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98 - metal more attractive</td>
<td>Hamlet continues baiting Ophelia by remarking that she exerts an attraction like metal. He thus encourages Polonium in his false belief but also turns down his mother's invitation to sit with her because he wishes to observe her and Claudius during the play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 - lie in your lap 98 - country matters 100 - lie between maiden's legs</td>
<td>This unpleasant remark refers to having sex. It would ordinarily be thought of as indecent, and Hamlet would not generally make it, but his disgust with his mother's behaviour has led him to see all women as cheap. Ophelia confirmed his opinion by betraying his love and becoming part of the rottenness at court. So he also refers to having sex in the country, and in bawdy, vulgar fashion continues to refer to sexual intercourse. He is unfairly offensive and his behaviour verges on being unstable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110 - devil wear black</td>
<td>Clothes denoting mourning mean nothing: hypocrites feign grief by wearing black just as the devil does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111 - die two months ago</td>
<td>Hamlet, in this obvious reference to his father, bitterly wishes to bait his mother and her inconstancy.</td>
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</table>

Now read from lines 116-224 and note Hamlet's remarks and the intended effect.
The play-within-a-play

One quotation strongly reveals the connection between Hamlet's situation and the dramatic match.

Such love must needs be treason in my breast,
In second husband let me be accurst
None wed the second, but who killed the first

Such a love is treason in my breast, if I take a second
husband let me be cursed
None shall marry twice except those who killed the first.

The comment is blunt and pointed. This is where Hamlet possibly inserts his own lines in order to accuse his mother of infidelity and also being an accomplice in Claudius's plot.

The Mouse-trap explores the themes of marital infidelity and ambition. It defines the immorality at the heart of Hamlet. The decoy play, written in couplets, is stilted and formal, in strong contrast to the violence that it portrays. It pertinently parallels the events in Hamlet's life, and Hamlet keeps up a running commentary on the characters and their actions. After Claudius rushes from the room in guilt and confusion, Hamlet exults at the success of his stratagem.

Hamlet's fifth soliloquy (lines 343-354)

Still in a state of excitement, Hamlet plans how he is going to approach his mother and inform her of her shameful behaviour. Yet he must heed the Ghost's command not to harm her.

- In his first utterances, Hamlet is in a vicious rage - so much so that he could commit murder (drink hot blood).
- But then his mood changes (Soft!) and becomes more reflective. He admonishes himself to be aware of his natural feeling as a son, his nature, and not allow himself to follow the example of Nero, a Roman emperor who killed his mother because she poisoned her husband, the emperor Claudius.
- Notice once again the theme of appearance versus reality in the use of the word hypocrites. Hamlet acknowledges the necessity to play a game of pretence.
- Hamlet envisages that Gertrude will be shent (rebuked). Ironically, Hamlet urges himself not to act, but to confine himself to words. Yet during the play he scolds himself because he cannot translate words into action.
ACT 3, SCENE 3
Claudius’s false prayer fools Hamlet

Plot

Hamlet is given the perfect opportunity to avenge his father’s murder, but decides that his revenge will be better served at a later time.

Claudius prays for forgiveness (lines 36-72)
Claudius’s soliloquy is surprising, for it shows him to be struck by his conscience, pitiful and human. He makes an honest admission of his crime. However, the facts cannot be overlooked. He has committed a hideous crime (it is *primal* because it is similar to the original biblical sin in which Cain killed his brother Abel, and *rank* - note the disease imagery). But, despite his strong intention to ask for atonement, he is unable to do so because of the negative consequences in Heaven and his unwillingness to give up what he has gained through his crime (crown, ambition and queen).

So, Claudius abandons repentance. His prayer has made no difference, and he carries on unchanged.

Hamlet’s sixth soliloquy

In this scene, Hamlet delivers his sixth soliloquy. Read Hamlet’s soliloquy (lines 73-96) and answer the questions below.

Looking at the text
1. What does *might* reveal about Hamlet’s decisiveness?
2. How does your answer link with the theme of reason and passion?
3. Show how Hamlet’s reasoning has led him to a false conclusion.
4. Why can Hamlet’s reasons be construed as overstepping the limits of Christian morality?
5. Discuss the irony of the king’s closing admission (lines 97-98).

Why is Hamlet’s decision a mistake?
1. Hamlet believes he knows what is in the king’s mind. However, it is not possible for him to be certain.
2. He commits the error that he has all along fiercely condemned. He believes the king is sincerely praying, so he trusts appearance before reality. In reality, the king is preoccupied with worldly matters, and is not in a state of contrition (full of remorse or regret).
ACT 3, SCENE 4
The ‘closet’ scene

Plot

Hamlet’s furious condemnation of his mother is intended to make her see herself honestly, confront her sexuality and repent of her actions. His mistaken killing of Polonius unleashes another dimension of revenge.

The seven sections of this scene

1. Polonius instructs Gertrude to speak plainly to Hamlet. Polonius hides behind the arras (curtain) to eavesdrop (lines 1–5).

Polonius meddles once again by eavesdropping. Gertrude meekly obeys Polonius’s instructions. It is ironic that he tells Gertrude to be direct with Hamlet when his devious behaviour demonstrates the opposite.

Note the short, sharp exchanges and how Hamlet mocking twists Gertrude’s words. He is intense and bitter, verging on losing his self-control. He is brutal and cold, and Gertrude tries to appeal to the son in him. His aim is to make her look at herself honestly as in a mirror (glass) to see her inmost part.

2. Hamlet confronts his mother. He vents his bitterness at her hasty marriage to her husband’s brother (lines 6–21).

Only on impulse – he stabs Polonius in error for the king – is Hamlet able to bridge the gap between passion and reason. He contemptuously dismisses the death, calling Polonius a wretched, rash, intruding fool. He seems to be satisfied at Gertrude’s innocent reaction to his allegation of murder, then displays no remorse as he returns to berating Gertrude.

3. Hamlet frightens Gertrude into crying for help. Polonius reacts and is stabbed by Hamlet, who thinks Polonius is Claudius (lines 22–34).

4. Hamlet forces Gertrude to compare Claudius unfavourably with her late husband, and rails against her adultery (lines 35–103).

Hamlet viciously attacks Gertrude for her disgusting behaviour. Seeing her as part of a general corruption of natural laws, he uses images of disease: blister, mildewed, appalled, sickly part. Totally driven, he holds up pictures of the two brothers and vividly contrasts them. He admiringly presents his father in terms of the greatest classical gods, while Claudius is depicted in terms of darkness and corruption. He is disgusted at his mother having sex at her age; expressions like rank sweat, enameled bed, nasty sty express his horror at her sexual activities. Thus, focusing on the illegal nature and sensuality aspects of her marriage, he forces Gertrude into an admission of her sin and an awakening of her morality. Now virtually out of control, he rages against Claudius whom he vilifies as a thief (cutpurse) who stole the crown (diadem).
5. The Ghost reappears to warn Hamlet against treating Gertrude cruelly. Hamlet reads the visit as urging on his blunted revenge (lines 104-136).

The intervention of the Ghost successfully interrupts Hamlet's rage. He now acts gently towards Gertrude, who is further bewildered by her son's conversation with the empty air and his unkempt appearance (wild eyes, hair standing on end). The Ghost has reminded Hamlet of the conflict between his wishes and his emotions, a conflict still not resolved: laps'd in time and passion Hamlet has not followed the important acting of your dread command (line 108).

6. Hamlet denies that he is mad. Still intense but calmer, he begs Gertrude not to indulge in any sexual acts with Claudius (lines 137-198).

Hamlet's obsession with his mother's inappropriate sexuality shows itself in his choice of images of decay. Gertrude cannot ease her conscience by pretending Hamlet's madness is to blame. It will only serve to cover the ulcer with a layer of skin while corruption fester underneath. Then Hamlet uses the strongest possible terms to persuade her not to sleep further with Claudius: monster custom (habit is a monster), habits evil, bloat (flabby) king, reechy (revolting) kisses, damned fingers, paddock (toad), gib (tom-cat). Gertrude agrees as part of her compliant nature. Men dominate her easily.

7. Gertrude confirms Hamlet's claim that he is to be sent to England (lines 199-217).

The death of Polonius will worsen his situation (This man shall set me packing) and make the king even more determined to get rid of Hamlet. Hamlet reveals his complete distrust of his schoolfellows by using animal terms in his description of them (adders fanged). He has accomplished his mission of getting Gertrude to see and admit her full sin. Finally, as he leaves his mother, we sense a more resolute determination to carry out the Ghost's command.

Character

Gertrude

This scene offers us the opportunity to assess Gertrude. Her reactions to Hamlet's condemnation go through various stages:

- proud at the beginning
- frightened that he will hurt her
- shocked when Polonius is killed
- fearful and panicky when Hamlet condemns and blames her
- disbelieving when Hamlet talks to the Ghost
- remorseful at her actions.

Our general impression is that Gertrude is not at all self-critical. She wishes to please, and is easily manipulated, passive, and prefers soft choices - so she agrees with Hamlet and immediately afterwards reports to Claudius.
ACT 4, SCENES 1 AND 2

Hamlet becomes a threat

Plot

Denmark's Head of Council has been killed. This appalling act threatens the safety of the State. These two short scenes demonstrate Gertrude's reaction, Claudius's immediate self-concern, and his planning to smooth the death over and get rid of the threat to himself. Hamlet also shows lack of remorse.

Act 4, Scene 1

Gertrude allies herself to Claudius

- Gertrude portrays Hamlet as mad - mad as the sea and wind (line 7). She thus protects Hamlet who had instructed her to keep his feigned madness a secret.
- However, she betrays Hamlet by revealing the murder of Polonius. She shows by her frank revelation that she has allied herself with Claudius.
- She has chosen to ignore what Hamlet awakened in her: a morality and an understanding of her own dishonesty. In Act 3, Scene 4, lines 89-91, Gertrude acknowledged that Hamlet had made her see her inner self, stained with guilt (And there I see such black and grained spots). She is clearly a person with no fixed principles.

Claudius's reaction to the news of the murder

- Claudius reacts by showing absolute self-absorption. He expresses no regret at Polonius's death, or concern that Gertrude might have been in danger.
- He immediately begins to find a way to portray the killing so that it does not appear to be a crisis. He cannot afford to be judged as a person who failed to restrain this mad young man (line 19).
- It is ironic that Claudius compares himself to the owner of a foul disease (line 21) when he is the actual cause of the moral disease and corruption in the State.
- Claudius is now determined to exercise all his majesty and skill (line 31) to explain away this urgent situation. He demonstrates that he is a conniving politician.

Act 4, Scene 2

Hamlet disposes of the body

Hamlet shows no regret at his horrific mistake. The words Safely stowed (line 1) are callous and uncaring. He adopts a biting, dark wit. He once again attacks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and accuses them of being sycophants (sponges - flatterers). He is manic, virtually out of control, and close to instability. His attitude reveals clearly that he cannot be considered an unqualified hero.

Hamlet's similarities to and differences from Claudius are clear. He has killed a father just as Claudius did. However, Hamlet's killing was not planned, nor was it committed out of ambition and lust. The killing, however, means that Hamlet no longer has the high moral ground. The murder shows that Hamlet is unable to act unless he is impulsive and rash, otherwise his reflective personality will interfere.
ACT 4, SCENE 3
Hamlet's taunting

Plot

Claudius, the crafty politician, is once again motivated by self-preservation, but acknowledges that Hamlet's popularity means that he will have to act with caution. His stratagem in demanding that the English execute Hamlet reveals the extent to which he fears him. Hamlet barely disguises his hostility as he taunts Claudius.

Correlating evidence

Draw the following table in your workbook. For each statement find an appropriate quotation. Arrange the statements in order of their occurrence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hamlet wittily indicates that Polonius is dining.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. If Polonius cannot be found in heaven, he can be found in hell.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hamlet's sending away must seem considered and well motivated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Claudius puts forward Hamlet's safety as his reason for sending him to England.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hamlet is loved by the people of Denmark.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. England owes Denmark a debt, which Claudius calls upon.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. People will be able to find Polonius by his smell.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Hamlet is under guard.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The theme of corruption is shown by the disease image Claudius uses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Kings and beggars are of equal stature.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. All people are equal in their corruption, and so are man and wife.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hamlet For England.
King Ay, Hamlet.
Hamlet Good.
King So is it if thou knew'st our purposes.
Hamlet I see a cherub that sees them.

Looking at the text

1. What is the tone of this exchange between Hamlet and the king?
2. What double meaning does the king intend? Explain the dramatic irony.
3. Explain...
ACT 4, SCENE 4
The ‘Fortinbras goad’

Character and plot

Fortinbras' forceful, misguided action is in strong contrast with Hamlet. It spurs him on to strive towards an ideal that he admits he lacks. Here Hamlet is calm and noble.

Hamlet’s seventh soliloquy

Hamlet’s encounter with a Norwegian captain reminds us of the important role Fortinbras plays. Hamlet shows his amazement and dismay that an entire army is deployed to reclaim a worthless piece of land (possibly with huge loss of life).

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 fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scuple
Of thinking too precisely on th'event
(A thought which quartered 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,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell … Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? While to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.
Act 4, Scene 5

Ophelia's madness

Plot

Ophelia has been driven mad by her memory of the past: the advice of her father and Laertes, which she heeded but instinctively knew was harmful to her, then Hamlet's rejection, and finally the death of her father. The songs Ophelia sings represent the longings, losses and fancies that arise in a deranged mind.

Ophelia's four songs

Looking at the text

Song 1 (How should I your true love know?) is sung to Gertrude about a lover.
1. Why is it significant that Gertrude is the one to whom the song is directed? (3)
2. Show how this song applies to both Hamlet and Polonius? (4)
3. What theme is reflected in this song? (3)

Song 2 (To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day) is sung to Claudius, the seducer.
4. The theme - a lover takes a maiden's virginity and then deserts her - implies that Hamlet made love to Ophelia. Discuss this statement, stating whether you agree or not. (3)

Song 3 (They bore him barefaced on the bier), a song about death, is sung to Laertes about their recently buried father.
5. What ceremony is Ophelia imagining she is participating in? Why? (3)

Song 4 (And will he not come again?) is sung generally to everyone.
6. Show how this song refers to both Hamlet and Polonius. (4)

(20 marks)

The songs are poignant and heart-rending. They speak of lost love, betrayal and death. Ophelia and Hamlet experienced true love, but it was distorted through the false counsel of Polonius and Laertes, so leading to Hamlet's perception of love as untrustworthy and revolting. The tragedy is one of destroyed innocence.

It is underlined by the childlike simplicity of the songs and the purity suggested by the purity of the maiden's voice and gesture.
Symbolism/imagery

The significance of the distribution of flowers
Ophelia enters a second time and hands flowers to everyone present. Even in her mad state, she is lucid enough to link the flowers with people to whom they apply. The table below indicates how her mind works.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flowers</th>
<th>Possible recipient</th>
<th>Symbolism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>Laertes</td>
<td>Remembrance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansies</td>
<td>Laertes</td>
<td>Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fennel and columbine</td>
<td>Gertrude</td>
<td>Unfaithfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rue</td>
<td>Claudius/Ophelia</td>
<td>Repentance/sorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>Unrequited love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violets</td>
<td>No one is deserving</td>
<td>Faithfulness/constancy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Laertes threatens the king, but is easily won over

Laertes leads a revolt of commoners against the king. His father has been buried in secret, without the honours due to him, and Laertes is bent on vengeance. Claudius’s attempts to calm him are interrupted by Ophelia’s re-entrance, which once more provokes him into a rage. Claudius convinces Laertes that he is not responsible for the death and that he should listen to his version of what happened.

- Laertes has the legitimacy of a wronged son on his side. Hamlet has forfeited this legitimacy because of his delay and his impulsive act of homicide.
- Both Hamlet and Laertes have fathers to avenge, and are obviously contrasted.
  - Laertes does not hesitate to act, while Hamlet cannot bring himself to do so.
  - Laertes acts without thinking, while Hamlet reflects.
  - Laertes displays no morality (Vows to the blackest devil!), while Hamlet is delayed by the morality of his contemplated vengeance.
  - Laertes is prepared to face damnation (Let come what comes), while Hamlet is deterred by the dread of something after death ... that puzzles the will (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 77–80).
- Laertes’ vigour and hot temper are channelled by Claudius, who shows calm, diplomatic skill in meeting the challenge to his throne.
- Notice the irony at the end of the scene. The king’s remark And where th’offence is let the great axe fall actually points to his own downfall when he is punished by Hamlet’s ‘axe’, i.e. his rapier. We are also reminded of Claudius's admission in the church: O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven.

In Ophelia’s last words - And of all Christian souls I pray God, God by you. - she prays for all Christian souls and that God may be with everyone. Her gentleness and innocence are demonstrated in these simple, poignant words.
ACT 4, SCENES 6 AND 7
Hamlet's sudden return

Plot
In Scene 6, Hamlet is returned by a deus ex machina device (an improbable way of resolving a situation) to Denmark. The scene accelerates the action, and increases the pressure on the king, who has had to deal with the twin threats of Ophelia's madness and Laertes' revolt. In addition, we see a vigorous, active Hamlet – he boards the pirate ship - but, in character, he acts only when it is forced on him. However, the action signals the start of a change in Hamlet.

Looking at the text
In this scene, Claudius manipulates Laertes' desire for revenge.

1. Laertes: But tell me/Why you proceeded not against these feats./So crimeful and so capital in nature? (lines 5-6)
1.1 Give the two reasons the king advances. (4)
1.2 What tone does he use, and why? (4)
2. Explain the dramatic irony of Claudius’s claim to Laertes that You shall shortly hear more (line 33). (2)
3. What does line 34 (I loved your father, and we love ourself) show about the way Claudius handles Laertes, and about Claudius's attitude to himself? (4)
4. Read Hamlet's letter to Claudius. Look at the diction. What is the tone of the letter? (3)
5. Laertes welcomes Hamlet's return, for it will enable him to pursue his revenge. How does his comment, It warms the very sickness in my heart, link with one of the main themes of the play? Can you think of a further reference right at the beginning of the play? (4)
6. Claudius: Laertes, was your father dear to you?/Or are you like the painting of a sorrow/A face without a heart? (lines 105-107)
6.1 Why does Claudius spring this question on Laertes? (2)
6.2 Explain how this reference links thematically to appearance and truth. (2)

The central issue of the play is restated (116-121)
as a contrast to Hamlet.

That we would do
We should do when we would for this 'would' changes,
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents.
And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh
That hurts by easing.

What we want to do we should do straight away. Otherwise determination changes and has hesitations and delays as many as there are words and deeds and reasons. Then duty ('should') becomes like the sigh of a spendthrift - if we do not act in time, duty becomes difficult and painful.
King But to the quick o'th'ulcer,
Hamlet comes back. What would you undertake
To show yourself your father's son in deed?

More than in words?
Laertes To cut his throat in 'th'church.
King No place should murder sanctuarize.
Revenge should have no bounds

Revenge should have no bounds
Hamlet is a revenge play. At the time Shakespeare wrote Hamlet (1603), this was a very popular genre. It had certain conventions: a villain commits a murder; the son of the murdered man swears revenge; he carries out his duty and oath, but in so doing destroys himself. In Hamlet, the entire action of the play is centred on the task assigned by the Ghost to Hamlet to avenge his father's murder. But Hamlet has to answer four questions: Is the Ghost real? Is revenge good or evil? Is Claudius guilty? Is it my responsibility? Complicating Hamlet's decision are his reflective, intellectual nature and the revenge obligations of Laertes and Fortinbras that parallel the main plot.

Ophelia's death

- It is unclear if Ophelia committed suicide. Certainly an accident (she tried to hang a garland on a branch hanging over the river) led to her falling into the stream, but the question remains unanswered as to why she did not try to save herself.
- Ophelia drowning among long streams of her flowers is one of the most poignant images of the play, and the overriding impression of her death is pity, sadness and doomed innocence.
- In her choice of a willow tree and in the flowers she uses in the garland, Ophelia once again makes a comment about her situation: her forsaken love (willow), her beauty and its loss (crow flowers), her hurt and loss of love (nettles), daisies (the death of Polonius), and long purples (her blunted sexuality; gestured at by the association of these orchids with the male sexual organ).

There is a willow aslant the brook.
In this painting the artist depicts the tragic drowning of Ophelia.
ACT 5, SCENE I

The graveyard

Plot

This scene is macabre (gruesome), but also witty. It enables us to see a maturer, calmer, more accepting Hamlet, who has come to terms with the physical and corrupt reality that so revolted and appalled him.

Looking at the text

Look at the following questions and answers (in bold) that summarise the grave-diggers' wordplay and Hamlet’s interaction with them.

1. What information do the grave-diggers provide in the first 25 lines of this scene?
   Answer: Ophelia is to have a Christian burial although the common people believe she committed suicide and, as a result, should not be buried in consecrated ground. The inquest took Ophelia’s social position at court into account.

2. What function does this scene perform?
   Answer: The by-play and witty exchanges provide relief before the climax of the play. However, the lightness sharpens our sense of imminent tragedy. Death is shown to be an everyday event that reduces human beings to the same level.

3. Hamlet engages in discussion with the first clown, using examples ranging from Cain, a politician, a courtier, a lawyer and a tanner, to Yorick, Old Hamlet’s court jester. Comment on the significance of his choice of people.
   Answer: Hamlet is debating the very meaning of life and death. No people – great or ordinary – are exempt from death despite their high or low stations in life. Time brings change, and we must come to terms with death’s inevitability.

4. Hamlet remarks, Mine ache to think on’t (line 73). What does he mean, and how does it reflect a new attitude on his part? Comment also on the dramatic irony.
   Answer: Hamlet’s own bones ache in sympathy at the thought that people’s bones cost so little to raise that they can end up by being used as pieces of wood in a game. He talks wittily and calmly about death, a subject that once aroused in him feelings of revulsion and disgust at the human condition. The irony is that the audience, unlike Hamlet, is aware that his death is about to play out.

5. Alas, poor Yorick! What emotions does the skull cause in Hamlet, and what does it lead him to reflect on?
   Answer: Hamlet fondly remembers the past when he used to play with Yorick, whose death leads him to speculate that men such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar suffered similar fates. Death is an equalising force. It reduces all, whether great or small, to dust.
'Lay her i’th’earth
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring’

Ophelia is laid to rest in the 1990 film version of Hamlet, starring Mel Gibson and Helena Bonham Carter.

The confrontation with Laertes

- Hamlet’s behaviour at the graveside loses him the advantage of a sudden return to Denmark. He acts extremely in an embarrassing public incident that reinforces the general belief that he is mad.
- However, he is somewhat justified. Laertes’ ranting and parade of grief offends Hamlet, who detests insincerity.
- Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, no longer disguised by his condemnation of all women as untrustworthy, is clearly shown.

Character and theme

Looking at the text

1. What ceremony else? (line 181) What does Laertes mean? How does he speak to the priest?

2. Describe Laertes’ emotional frame of mind.

3. Whose great command (line 187) changed the Church’s decision to regard Ophelia’s death as a suicide? Did Ophelia commit suicide?

4. Comment on the frequent references to flowers in lines 200-206. Refer also to previous scenes.

5. Scrutinise Laertes’ actions and statements in lines 207-214. What do they show about his character?

6. Why does Hamlet act so extremely in response to the speech of Laertes?

7. When Hamlet announces himself This is I, Hamlet the Dane what challenge is he mounting to the king, and what change of attitude does it indicate?

8. For though I am not splenitive and rash
Yet have I in me something dangerous (lines 223-224).
Assess the accuracy of Hamlet’s comment about himself.

9. Hamlet condemns Laertes’ melodramatic outburst. How does his own reaction point to his own weakness?
ACT 5, SCENE 2

The resolution

Plot

Hamlet has strong misgivings about the duel with Laertes, but displays a new frame of mind. He accepts his role, showing a readiness and calmness in which he no longer agonises over his delay. The revenge, long delayed, takes place now at hectic speed, and Denmark is purged of corruption.

This last scene can be divided into six sections.

1. The execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (lines 1-79)
In his explanation to Horatio of what happened in the ship bound for England, Hamlet shows that he is now capable of action not delayed by reflection.

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly,
(And praised be rashness for it) let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pail.2 And that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.3

1. Hamlet resolves the problem he has struggled with all along - the clash (fighting) between passion and reason.
2. He has learnt that it is sometimes better to act spontaneously (rashly) and without long deliberation (deep plots). Reflection now comes after rather than before action.
3. These key words show that Hamlet now understands that God controls our lives. The time is no longer out of joint. An important shift in Hamlet's character has occurred.

Now read the rest of Hamlet's description. Copy the table below into your workbook and find a relevant reference from the play for each comment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. It is ironic that Hamlet will allow his ex-friends no time to confess their sins (in contrast to how he treated Claudius).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. **Osric's role** (lines 81-161)
It is not by chance that a new character is introduced so late in the play. Osric plays a specific role - the affected, servile, 'yes-man' - with the characteristics of triviality and shallowness that Hamlet so detests. He symbolises the nature and values of the king's court, qualities to which Hamlet is opposed.

- Osric is a fop - a person who is vain and completely concerned with how he looks and speaks. His aim is to impress people. He is welcomed at court because he is rich and has extensive lands. He is valued for the wrong things.
- He is too foolish to realise that Hamlet baits him. In a scene reminiscent of Polonius and the way he changed his mind over the shape of a cloud (Act 3, Scene 2), he contradicts himself and agrees with everything Hamlet suggests.
- Osric cannot speak plainly. He hides the truth behind elaborate language. He is false, and his appearance conceals a decadence, insincerity and lack of truth.
- Osric praises Laertes excessively in order to make Hamlet jealous. He is unsuccessful, but he does get Hamlet to agree to the duel.

3. **Hamlet's readiness** (lines 162-193)
Horatio thinks that Hamlet will lose, but Hamlet does not agree as he has been practising, and the odds favour him (Laertes has a handicap of three). Hamlet admits deep misgivings - *But thou would'st not think how ill all's here about my heart. But it is no matter.* Hamlet would be very naíve to think that the duel has not some sinister purpose. Horatio offers to postpone the match but Hamlet refuses, then reveals his new-found certainty and balance of mind.

*Not a whit, we defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.*

I defy augury (forecasting the future). Even the death of a sparrow shows that everything is carefully pre-ordained. If death comes now, it will not come in the future. If it is not to happen in the future, then it will happen now. If not now, then it will come. Being ready for it is what counts. Since no man has any knowledge of the life he leaves behind him, what does an early death matter? Leave the matter.

- This serene speech alludes to the Bible (Matthew 10:29: *Are not sparrow two a penny? Yet without your father's leave not one of them can fall to the ground*).
- Previously, Hamlet had lamented how fortune played a negative role. He has now undergone a fundamental shift. Providence has replaced fortune.
- Here we see Hamlet in a state of certainty and readiness as he accepts his destiny. He does not rail against the world but accepts it on its own terms.
4. The challenge (lines 194-303)
Read the diagram below from the bottom of the page upwards.

1. **Hamlet apologises unreservedly to Laertes.**
2. **I am satisfied in nature/... I do receive your offered love like love/And will not wrong it.**
3. **This is too heavy. Let me see another.**
4. **And in the cup a union shall he throw.**
5. **I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me.**
6. **Have at you now!**
7. **O villainy! Ho! Let the door be locked! Treachery! seek it out.**
8. **The foul practice has turned itself upon me**
9. **Here thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane Drink off this potion, Is thy union here?**
10. **Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet/Mine and my father's death come not upon thee/Nor thine on me!**

Claudius dies, followed by Laertes.

Hamlet stabs and poisons Claudius.

The queen dies, Hamlet is wounded, and Laertes admits his guilt.

Laertes lunges at Hamlet.

Hamlet and Laertes duel. Hamlet scores two hits. Gertrude drinks a toast.

Laertes inspects the rapier.

The court enters.

5. Hamlet's death (lines 304-333)
As Hamlet dies the following takes place:

- He freely forgives Laertes and calls upon Heaven (line 304) to acquit him.
- He pleads with Horatio to tell the truth to the court who stand aghast. Appearance (his perceived madness and seeming treachery) must not be allowed to obscure the truth.
- Horatio wishes blindly to follow the antique Roman custom of committing suicide out of loyalty if a superior officer died. This demonstrates the depth of Horatio's love for Hamlet. Horatio is usually controlled and calm.
- Despite being under the destructive effect of the poison, Hamlet summons up enough energy to stop Horatio. His reference to Heaven once again shows his newly acquired belief that providence governs affairs on earth.
Hamlet once again pleads with Horatio to restore his wounded name (his damaged reputation) if no one is left behind. Hamlet's command Absent thee from felicity awhile shows he regards death as happiness. This is a distinct change in the Hamlet who previously feared death.

Hamlet is now king, and has the right to nominate Fortinbras as his successor.

Hamlet, dying quietly and with dignity, attains peace in death.

6. The arrival of Fortinbras (line 334 to end)
The arrival of Fortinbras restores order to Denmark after the wild violence that led to a stage strewn with corpses. Fortinbras is a forceful, capable leader who promises a new future. The illness in Denmark has been purged. Hamlet has fulfilled his father's command, but he has paid the price for his rashness (Polonius's death led him to remark in Act 3, Scene 4 that God has chosen to punish me with this and this with me). Horatio pays tribute to Hamlet in terms of providence, which has directed matters - companies of angels will sing the noble Hamlet to his rest. Hamlet is honoured by Fortinbras - if Hamlet had been crowned king he was most likely to have proved a royal, worthy king. Hamlet, treated like a soldier who has performed his job, is promised a military funeral. Fortinbras' final words of praise for Hamlet prove a solemn, fitting climax. The sound of cannon shots brings the play full circle. In the time of Claudius, those shots had signalled decadence and corruption.
PART 4
Now for the answers

Please note that these are not the only possible answers. You may come up with answers of your own that, if you can substantiate them, may be equally acceptable.

Act 1, Scene 1 - Looking at the text (page 23)

1. Horatio is sceptical. He dismisses the appearance (it will not happen). He is resigned and bored. His attitude changes in line 43: It harrows me with fear and wonder. (6)
2. Horatio is educated, and would know the correct way to address the Ghost. (2)
3. The Ghost has usurped (taken over) both the night and the form of the dead king. (2)
4. The Ghost’s clothing (armour), looks (frown), and walk (martial stalk) are exactly like those of the king. (3)
5. The Ghost shows disdain for all except Hamlet. It wishes to talk only to him. (2)

(15 marks)

Act 1, Scene 2 - Polonius (page 25)

Polonius is long-winded, likes his own voice, and never says anything directly.

Act 1, Scene 2 - Looking at the text (page 26)

1. Flattery
2. He implies that his grief is feminine, too woman-like.
3. He is going against human nature and exaggerating his grief.
4. Hamlet will succeed him as king; he loves and wants to take care of him.
5. Claudius is no fool. He knows Hamlet has just snubbed him (I shall ... madam) yet he chooses to smooth this over when he says Hamlet’s agreement is unforc’d.

Act 1, Scene 2 - Looking at the text (page 27)

1. Their greetings are sincere. They are close friends, in contrast to the hypocritical exchange between Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude. (6)
2. Claudius is a heavy drinker and uses affairs of State as an excuse for revelry. (2)
3. Hamlet refers to the hasty marriage. Hard (closely) implies the marriage was hard to bear. He is disgusted by his mother’s second marriage. (3)
4. He was a man, take him for all in all/I shall not look upon his like again. (1)
5. His many questions quickly sum up the situation and point the way forward. (2)
6. Hamlet’s life could be in danger, yet he shows bravery confronting the Ghost. (2)
7. Hamlet must establish the Ghost’s identity without interference. (2)
8. Your sins will find you out/You cannot conceal your wrongdoings. (2)

Act 1, Scene 3 - Looking at the text (page 29: top)
**Act I, Scene 3 - Looking at the text (29: bottom)**

1. Young, innocent.
2. By using the pun tender (make a fool of him or fall pregnant), Polonius is warning Ophelia to respect him and also to stay clear of Hamlet.
3. As a means to win her to his bed, of trapping her (springes to catch woodcocks).
4. Not to speak further to Hamlet. Look to't I charge you. Authoritative, commanding.

**Act I, Scene 5 - Looking at the text (page 32)**

1. He will have to trespass against the accepted moral values of Church and State.
2. Hamlet cannot act swiftly without reflection, yet he is urging himself to do this.
3. All the images - weed, rot, prey, garbage - suggest decay and disease.
4.1 He had suspected that something was wrong.
4.2 When Horatio tells him about the Ghost.
5.1 Through his clever wit and gifts.
5.2 Her sensuality. Possibly her compliant nature.
5.3 The will of my most seeming virtuous-queen shows her disguise of virtue.
5.4 King Hamlet's love was faithful, dignified and devoted.
6.1 The description graphically depicts the horrible effect on the body, in the same way the State is going to be as poisonously affected by this sickness.
6.2 wholesome

**Act I, Scene 5 - Looking at the text (page 33)**

1. He is disturbed and distracted. He has received a huge shock and has reacted to it.
2. Hamlet moves from intense joking Hillo, ho, ho, boy! to dead serious and evasive - Never to speak of this that you have heard and shake hands and part.
3. Revenge is something he alone must undertake; he has to authenticate the Ghost.
4. He must be able to trust in their silence. The news is potentially very dangerous.
5.1 Hamlet will need to hide his intentions. Feigning madness will not arouse suspicion, and he will be able to observe from behind his mask.
5.2 Appearance and reality.

**Act 2, Scene 1 - The effect of Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet (page 34)**

Hamlet is certainly in love, but he is in a state of shock at the news of the murder, the adultery and the complex burden of revenge he now bears.

**Act 2, Scene 2 - Polonius believes Hamlet is mad (page 36)**

1. Polonius is anything but brief.
2. Get to the point with fewer showy words. Polonius is vain and unaware of his fault.
3. When he asks What do you think of me? and says that he has never been wrong.
4. Although written in the style of the day it is a genuine letter of love.
5. He is uncaring as he is prepared to use Ophelia as a decoy. Manipulative, callous.

**Act 2, Scene 2 - Hamlet's longest soliloquy (page 37)**

1. Angry and frustrated. He has not acted upon the Ghost's command.
2. The Player's real emotion, displayed in an imaginary scene, contrasts with Hamlet's inability to act in real circumstances.
3. Hecuba meant nothing to the actor and vice versa, yet the Player could still convey genuine emotion and passion.
4. Of cowardice. He does this to spur on his blunted revenge.
5. His description is accurate - it deals with each of his crimes. He feels no regret for the murder, his lust for Gertrude or his betrayal of his family bonds (kindless).
6. A whore is not genuine - her words are as false as Hamlet’s.
7. The spirit that I have seen/May be a devil.

Act 3, Scene 1 - Looking at the text (page 40)

1. Ophelia must live in a nunnery where she cannot seduce men. Ophelia is so promiscuous that she may as well live in a brothel.
2. He is disgusted at his inaction and his behaviour towards Ophelia.
3. Where’s your father?
4. He becomes increasingly angry and critical because he cannot handle their hypocrisy and betrayal. Hamlet may have become temporarily deranged. He is certainly unstable.
5. He cannot deal with the way she has perverted her love as Gertrude has.
6. Those that are married already/All but one shall live means that of all married men only one shall be killed. Hamlet threatens Claudius.
7. To show remorse for her behaviour and to indicate that Hamlet is still truly noble.

Act 3, Scene 2 - Hamlet’s advice to the Players (page 41)

1. Speak naturally: Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.
2. Do not cut the air dramatically: do not saw the air too much with your hand.
3. Do not overuse gesture: use all gently.
4. Develop a self-control that is easy: acquire and beget a temperance.
5. Do not ham things up in order to play to the gallery: it offends me ... to hear a fellow tear a passion to tatters ... to split the ears of the groundlings ...
6. Do everything with restraint: dumb shows and noise ... Pray you avoid it.
7. Do not be feeble, but use your discretion: Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor.
8. The purpose of acting is to reflect reality and contemporary matters: the purpose of playing ... is to hold ... a very mirror up to nature, to show ... the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.
9. Do not act in a larger-than-life manner or underplay matters: Now this overdone, or come tardy off ...
10. Do not overact: there be Players that I have seen ... have so strutted and bellowed

Act 3, Scene 3 - Looking at the text (page 44)

1. Possible, not definite intent
2. Hamlet’s thinking impedes his actions. Because he reasons that Claudius at prayer gives him immunity, he decides not to kill him.
3. Hamlet reasons that if he kills Claudius at prayer, the king will go to heaven. But Claudius cannot pray, and this false impression leads to Hamlet’s delay.
4. Christians should believe that punishment is God’s, not man’s, territory.
5. Hamlet is scornful of how appearance misleads, yet falsely believes the king is praying.

Act 4, Scene 3 - Correlating evidence (page 48)

5 - line 3; 3 - lines 8-9; 9 - line 9; 8 - line 14; 1 - lines 17-19;
10 - line 29; 2 - lines 31-32; 7 - line 33; 4 - line 37; 11 - line 48;
Act 4, Scene 3 - Looking at the text (page 48)

1. Claudius' tone is sinister but disguised by concern. Hamlet's tone is mocking.
2. Double meaning of purposes: sending Hamlet to England, but also to his death.
3. A guardian angel (cherub) will watch over events. Thus heaven directs matters, and what happens will not be random.

Act 4, Scene 5 - Looking at the text (page 50)

1. Gertrude was unfaithful.  
2. Ophelia believes Hamlet's love had died, and Polonius had betrayed her love.  
3. Betrayal  
4. Uncertain. The song implies that Hamlet had made love to her, but she told Polonius that Hamlet courted her honourably (Act 1, Scene 3). Possibly, Ophelia wishes that this had indeed occurred.  
5. Her father's funeral. She is distraught over his death and wishes to honour him.  
6. Ophelia wishes that both Polonius and Hamlet could again be part of her life.

Act 4, scenes 6 and 7 - Looking at the text (page 52)

1.1 Claudius does not wish to hurt Gertrude because she loves Hamlet. The people love Hamlet and would turn against Claudius.  
1.2 Rational and placatory. He needs to calm Laertes.  
2. He expects news of Hamlet's murder, but the audience knows that Hamlet has escaped.  
3. He calms Laertes by expressing his love for Polonius. He shows his own egotism, too.  
4. His excessively formal diction and exaggerations are mocking and insulting.  
5. Corruption and disease. Francisco in Act 1, Scene 1 says: I am sick at heart.  
6.1 He wants to urge Laertes into action by questioning the depth of his feelings.  
6.2 The play is about people who pretend to be what they are not in the same way as a painting is only a reflection of reality. Ironically, Claudius is the chief perpetrator, and here he accuses Laertes of the very thing he is guilty of.

Act 5, Scene 1 - Looking at the text (page 55)

1. What other funeral rites should Ophelia have? Aggressively and angrily.  
2. He is distraught and angry. The funeral service is highly unsatisfactory.  
3. Claudius. Her suicide is debatable, but possible as she did not try to save herself when she fell in the river.  
4. Ophelia used flowers to signify her emotions. Here she is honoured in the same way.  
5. Although he is upset, his actions are melodramatic, showy and impulsive.  
6. Ophelia's death took Hamlet by surprise, so he was shocked. He detests overacting and insincerity, and it is this that caused him (ironically) to overreact.  
7. He challenges Claudius's right to be king. He now asserts himself openly.  
8. Hamlet's usual mode is first to reflect. He now knows he is capable of blending thought and action (as he proved when he boarded the pirate ship). This makes him dangerous.  
9. Hamlet's weakness is that he can only act impulsively, as Laertes did.

Act 5, Scene 2 - The execution (page 56)

1 - lines 46-47;  2 - lines 48-49;  3 - lines 57-59;  4 - line 65;  5 - lines 68-70;  
6 - line 73;  7 - line 76;  8 - line 78