

**2015 specification**  
first exams in 2016 (2015 for AS)



# ***Hamlet***

Flipped Learning Resource  
for AS and A Level English Literature

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# Teacher's Introduction

This resource is designed to support the teaching of William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* for AS and A Level English Literature. This resource focuses on activities relating to the text as well as giving students and teachers opportunity for discussion and reflection.

## Remember!

Always check the exam board website for new information, including changes to the specification and sample assessment material.

## Introduction to flipped learning

Flipped learning is a learner-centred approach to education, which allows students to take more responsibility for their own academic development by preparing for course content in advance of classroom lessons. Teachers provide the course materials and additional guidelines for home study, and the more analytical work, which is usually in the form of homework, takes place in collaboration with other students in the class. In the case of the present text, students are expected to read the play independently, reflect upon their comprehension of it, and be ready and able to debate its content and context in class.

This resource supports flipped classroom learning with the following format:

### **Activities outside the classroom**

- Background material on genre and context for pre-reading research, including questions for further research
- Chapter summaries, reading tasks and a student reading log to fill in outside the classroom after each chapter
- Class-based activities and discussion questions, for individual students and groups as required
- Background material on form and critical reception for post-reading, including questions for further research

### **Activities for the classroom**

- Classroom activities for each chapter which build on the students' prior reading and enhance their understanding
- Post-reading classroom activities that explore important textual elements such as characterisation, relationships, language, themes and structure

### **Additional resources for teachers and students**

- A glossary of key terms relevant to the study of the play
- A further reading list
- Indicative content for all activities

## How to use this resource

Students may be given a copy of the resource in full, in order to add their own notes and annotations. Alternatively, handouts may be limited to the activities that students are required to complete independently. It is recommended that students be given copies of the reading log questions, in order that they can record their impressions as they read through the text.

### **Sections of the resource that correspond to different assessment objectives**

- Background to the Text (AO3)
- Pre-reading Notes and Tasks (AO3)
- During-reading Summaries and Tasks (AO1/ AO2/AO3/AO4/AO5)
- Post-reading Notes and Tasks: Characterisation and Relationships (AO1/ AO2), Genre (AO3/AO4), Themes (AO2), Attitudes and Values (AO2), The Writer's Use of Language (AO2), Form (AO2), Structure (AO2) Critical Reception (AO3/AO4), Literary Approaches (AO5)
- Essay Writing Advice and Activities: (AO1/ AO2/AO3/AO4/AO5)
- Key Terms Glossary (AO1)
- Further Reading (AO4)

### **Edition of the text**

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Westrine) Folger Shakespeare Library  
<https://shakespeare.folger.edu/>

### **Safeguarding note**

*Hamlet* touches on the issue of mental health and young people in the characterisation of Ophelia.

March 2025

# Specification Information

The resource meets the requirements of the following specifications:

- AQA B A Level
- WJEC A Level
- OCR A Level
- Eduqas A Level

## Assessment Objectives

	Students must:
AO1	Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated and coherent, accurate written expression
AO2	Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
AO3	Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which texts are written and received
AO4	Explore connections across literary texts
AO5	Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations

### AQA B A Level (7717) [zzed.uk/12742-aqa-b](https://www.zzed.uk/12742-aqa-b)

The text *Hamlet* is studied under section '4.2.1 Elements of crime writing'. Many of the texts are concerned with transgressions against established order and the specific breaking of either divine or human laws. The focus in this component must be on 'Elements' in the texts. In this case the typical features to be studied will include the settings that are created as backdrops for criminal actions, the perpetrators of crime, the detection of the criminal, and how far there is a moral purpose to the crime.

### OCR AS Level (H072) [zzed.uk/12742-ocr-as](https://www.zzed.uk/12742-ocr-as)

The text is studied under Section 1 of 'Component 01: Drama and poetry pre-1900'. This section requires learners to demonstrate their detailed knowledge and understanding of the chosen play and engage with it by responding to it. They should be able to develop and effectively apply their knowledge of the play to communicate fluently their judgement on the chosen play. Learners are required to demonstrate an understanding of Shakespeare's use of language and dramatic effects. Learners are required to identify and analyse the ways in which meanings are shaped in the play, and explore the play informed by different interpretations. Learners should be able to explore the play across time and demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the play as it is written and received.

### OCR A Level (H472) [zzed.uk/12742-ocr-a-level](https://www.zzed.uk/12742-ocr-a-level)

The text is studied under 'Component 01: Drama and poetry pre-1900'. Learners are required to explore the text in detail, exploring Shakespeare's use of language and dramatic effects. Learners are required to explore a specific extract in relation to the whole play. Learners are required to explore how the chosen text is received by different audiences, including over time.

### Edexcel A Level (9ET0) [zzed.uk/12742-edexcel](https://www.zzed.uk/12742-edexcel)

The text is taught under 'Component 1: Drama – Tragedy'. Students will study aspects of the text in detail. The central focus of the drama study is the literary text. Students must explore the use of the text in the shaping of meanings in their chosen plays. Teaching and wider reading should address the contextual factors and engage with different interpretations of the chosen Shakespeare play. This should be enhanced by engagement with critical writing. Teaching of this is supported by the *Anthology: Tragedy* or *Shakespeare Critical Anthology: Comedy*, provided by Pearson free of charge.

### Eduqas A Level [zzed.uk/12742-eduqas](https://www.zzed.uk/12742-eduqas)

This text is taught under Component 2: Section A of the specification. Learners will need to demonstrate how meanings are shaped in drama texts and use accurately a range of literary concepts and terminology of the principles and conventions of drama and dramatic verse. Students should also demonstrate an understanding of cultural and contextual influences on readers and writers and should reflect on different interpretations, including, where relevant, critical interpretation.

### WJEC A Level [zzed.uk/12742-wjec](https://www.zzed.uk/12742-wjec)

This text is taught under Section A2: Unit 4 of the specification. Learners will need to demonstrate how meanings are shaped in drama texts, and use accurately a range of literary concepts and terminology of the principles and conventions of drama and dramatic verse. Students should demonstrate an understanding of the cultural and contextual influences on readers and writers and should reflect on different interpretations of the texts, including, where relevant, critical interpretation.

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# Students' Introduction

Welcome to this resource on William Shakespeare's famous **tragedy** *Hamlet* (1599). The character is one of the most enduring and iconic figures in all literature. Shakespeare's story of treachery and retribution among the ruling Danish monarchy and is a morality tale with a conclusion. So, enjoy!

This resource can assist you in your study of the text in two ways. It follows the 'pre-learning', whereby you complete your reading and most of your research outside of class, on the play through detailed analysis, discussions and activities in class. The resource is designed to:

1. Activities for you to complete independently. These include:
  - a) information for pre- and post-reading on characterisation, language, context and themes to aid your understanding of the text and to encourage further research;
  - b) a summary and reading log for each scene of *Hamlet*, allowing you to record your response to the play as you read and to gather material for the classroom exercises.
2. Classroom and group activities that allow you to reflect on what you have read and your interpretations and understanding of the play.

Your teacher may choose to provide you with copies of the entire resource to work on during your study of *Hamlet* and serves as an important basis for your A Level examination preparation.

The enduring popularity of *Hamlet* accounts for its appearance on several A Level English Language and Literature specifications. This resource is applicable across all examination boards and for use by both AS and A Level English Literature students and A Level English Language and Literature students. The assessment objectives are the same across all examination boards but they differ for the two qualifications mentioned.

The following section will inform you about how you are assessed for your particular qualification. You will be required to demonstrate when writing about the play. There is a short quiz at the end of the resource to test your knowledge about how you will be assessed.

I hope this resource proves useful in your study. Good luck with your examination preparation.

## Contextual Information (AO3)

Some acclaimed film adaptations of *Hamlet*:

- *Hamlet* (1996. Dir. Kenneth Branagh)
- *Hamlet* (1964. Dir. Grigori Kozintsev)
- *Hamlet* (1948. Dir. Laurence Olivier)
- *Hamlet* (1990. Dir. Mel Gibson)

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## Background to the Text

*Hamlet* was first performed in July 1602, and published between 1603 and 1604. The various sources of the play include an earlier play of the same name which is now lost but attributed to Thomas Kyd, a Latin history of Denmark, *Danorum Regum Heroumque Historiae* (1514), by Saxo Grammaticus, and Matteo Bandello's work of prose entitled *Le Cinquiesme Liure des Histoires Tragiques* (1576), translated by François de Belleforest. For details about the often riotous revelry at the Danish court, Shakespeare may have been influenced by Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse His Supplication to the Devil* (1592).

The plot centres on a Danish prince whose uncle Claudius murders the prince's father, King of Denmark, before marrying the prince's mother Gertrude and claiming the throne. The ghost of Hamlet's father tells Hamlet of Claudius's treachery, demanding that his son avenge the murder. The death of his father and his discovery of his mother's remarriage lead to his falling from his daughter Ophelia that Hamlet has paid her a visit in a distracted frame of mind. Ophelia's death leads to his becoming a lovelorn state. Polonius, acting on Claudius's behalf, sets out to trap Hamlet.

Hamlet, meanwhile, wishes to ascertain Claudius's guilt by staging a play that draws out Claudius's response to the play strongly suggests his guilt. However, on his first attempt, he mistakenly kills Polonius, who is hidden behind a curtain. Hamlet is sent away from Denmark. Ophelia loses her mind at these losses, and drowns. When Hamlet returns to court, his relationship with Ophelia's brother Laertes is agreed upon. However, Laertes has poisoned the contest Claudius poisons Hamlet's wine for Hamlet, only for Gertrude to unwittingly drink it, leading to her death. Claudius kills Hamlet. Before dying she accuses Claudius and Hamlet kills him. After this, Claudius is killed respectively by Laertes' rapier.

Thomas Kyd's original play is thought to have presented Hamlet as a character who is in order to fool Claudius into a false sense of security before killing him. Shakespeare's Hamlet is more complex, his apparent procrastination in avenging his father's death because of his doubts surrounding the death. In other words, he does not just take the word of his father but he is in a position to judge for himself. In addition, certain ideas and plot threads repeat themselves throughout the play, thus allowing an audience to share in Hamlet's dilemma. For example, is the ghost really his father, or is he actually that, and can its words and motives be trusted? Is Gertrude party to Claudius's crime? Does Ophelia love Ophelia after rejecting her? Does Ophelia die through suicide or misadventure? Does Claudius exacting revenge on Claudius? These ambiguities are all the more important given that the play brings the very kingdom of Denmark into peril.

Shakespeare adapted Kyd's **revenge tragedy** into an inquisition of the problems that arise in the period. The play offers up a philosophical inquiry into the limits of human potential. Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' (3.1.293) speech articulates. This speech is directly influenced by Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486). By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a greater scepticism about human potential for self-understanding in the pursuit of knowledge. Human experience of the world was increasingly seen as being based on outward appearances, but hidden beneath might prove beyond the power of human beings to attain. This is reflected in Hamlet's understanding Hamlet's dilemma: he can never reach the objective truth about his father's death, and the truth concerning the motives of others involved is similarly beyond him. All he has to do is appear to be at the Danish court, and his own subjectivity can never be left out of the picture.

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# Pre-reading Notes and Task

## Decoding the AOs

### AQA

#### Qualification: A Level English Literature B

The text *Hamlet* is studied under section '4.2.1 Elements of crime writing'.

### Edexcel

#### Qualification: A Level English Literature

The text is taught under 'Component 1: Drama – Tragedy'.

### OCR

#### Qualification: A Level English Literature

The text is studied under 'Component 01: Drama and poetry pre-1900'.

#### Qualification: AS Level English Literature

The text is studied under Section 1 of 'Component 01: Drama and poetry pre-1900'.

### WJEC; Eduqas

#### Qualification: A Level English Literature

This text is taught under Section A2: Unit 4 of both specifications.

#### Activity 1: Key Words

Carefully read the above information about your examination boards and the particular text. In your notes, write down the topical key word(s); the word(s) from your module that should be used. Note down some sample questions to assist you in this.

Example: for Edexcel, your key word would be 'Tragedy'. How does *Hamlet* fit the definition of the drama does Shakespeare focus on to create a sense of **tragedy**? What other exam questions have you read or seen, and in what way(s) does *Hamlet* compare or differ?

## Assessment objectives

### English Literature: all examination boards

Students must:	
AO1	Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression
AO2	Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
AO3	Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which texts are written and received
AO4	Explore connections across literary texts
AO5	Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations

#### Activity 2: True or False?

Listed below are some tips from your Students' Introduction and other information about your text. Some are useful, but some are not! Select the tips you think are useful and include them in your notes.

1. Using a reading log will help you prepare for classroom activities.
2. You should watch a film adaptation of *Hamlet* before reading the play, as this will make it easier to understand.
3. You should choose which of the five assessment objectives seem most relevant to your text.
4. As part of your notes, you should compile a glossary of terms relevant to the text you are studying.
5. Decide whether reading scenes of the play pre- or post-lessons suits you best and do this.
6. For your examination, you should read at least one other text with similar themes to *Hamlet*.
7. Learn key words from your assessment objectives and take a note of them at the start of your lessons.
8. You should not consider prominent critical viewpoints on *Hamlet* but rely on developing your own.

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## About the Author

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a middle-class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon. He was educated to the level of grammar school, but in 1582 he married the older Anne Hathaway and had three children, before moving to London to become an actor and playwright. His works were performed for both Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and James I (1603–1625) and saw him become part of a permanent troupe, his company given the title of King's Men. After authoring 37 plays and 154 sonnets, Shakespeare left Stratford and died in 1616 aged 52. Shakespeare's works were never intended for publication and were first printed in various editions after his death.

There is a scarcity of confirmed details known about Shakespeare, a fact that has led to many theories about who he is. One of the most commonly mentioned candidates is Francis Bacon. While some of the plays were collaborative in the sense that producers or actors may have added to the work, Shakespeare's role as author is widely accepted.

### Activity 1: 'William Shakespeare – This Is Your Life'

If you had an opportunity to ask Shakespeare three questions based on the above biography, what would they be?

### Activity 2: Prior Knowledge of the Story

1. Make a list of the associations the story of *Hamlet* already has for you.
2. Other than Hamlet himself, write down the names of any character(s) already familiar to you.
3. Have you seen any film adaptations of *Hamlet*? If so, write down your thoughts and impressions.

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# Hamlet and Genre

## Dramatic tragedy

### Classical Literature

Poetic **tragedy** has its known origins in Ancient Greek plays produced during the fifth century BC, exemplified by the plays of Aeschylus (525–456 BC), Sophocles (c.496–406 BC) and Euripides (c.480–406 BC). The four main historical periods for the production of literary **tragedy**, including the Roman **tragedy**, are summarised below.

#### Fifth Century BC: Classical tragedy

**Aeschylus:** *The Persians* (472 BC); *Seven Against Thebes* (467 BC); *The Suppliants* (463 BC); **Sophocles:** *Ajax*; *Antigone*; *Women of Trachis*; *Oedipus Rex*; *Electra*; *Philoctetes*; *Oedipus at Colonus*; **Euripides:** *Alcestis* (438 BC); *Medea* (431 BC); *Hippolytus* (428 BC); *The Trojan Women* (415 BC).

#### 1558 to 1625: English Elizabethan and Jacobean drama

**Thomas Kyd:** *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587); **William Shakespeare:** *Julius Caesar* (1599); *Othello* (1604–1605); *King Lear* (1605–1606); **Christopher Marlowe:** *Tamburlaine* (1587–1593).

#### Seventeenth-century France: Baroque Theatre and Theatre under Louis XIV

**Jean Mairet:** *La Sophonisbe* (1634); **Tristan L'Hermite:** *Penthee* (1637); **Pierre Corneille:** *Pompée* (1642); *Othon* (1664); **Jean Racine:** *Andromaque* (1667); *Bérénice* (1670); *Athalie* (1691).

#### Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century America and Europe

**Henrik Ibsen:** *A Doll's House* (1879); *An Enemy of the People* (1882); **Eugene O'Neill:** *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956); **Bertolt Brecht:** *Mother Courage* (1941); **Arthur Miller:** *Death of a Salesman* (1949); **Samuel Beckett:** *Waiting for Godot* (1953).

### English Literature

Poetic **tragedy** in England has its origins in Renaissance England. Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* is the first Christian **tragedy**, and presents a conflict between the Classical tradition of the hero and Renaissance thinking. Faustus sells his soul to the Devil, but the inner conflict involves a human figure. Shakespearean **tragedy** is classifiable as a distinct subgenre, with the play of the individual against overwhelming odds, and the failure of their own choices: *Julius Caesar* (1604–05), *King Lear* (1605–06), *Macbeth* (1606–07) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607–08) all explore this theme. The hero is not the sole focus in Shakespearean **tragedy**, as other characters provide perspectives on his plight. Ben Jonson's plays from the same period, such as *Sejanus*, follow the Classical tradition. An earlier play, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), is traceable to the Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, and dramatist Seneca (c.4 BC–c.65 AD) and the 'tragedy of blood'.

During the Jacobean era in the early seventeenth century, the status of **tragedy** declined as the prominent tragedians remained, including John Webster (author of *The Duchess of Malfi*), Thomas Middleton (co-author of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, c.1606, with Cyril Tourneur). In the nineteenth century, literary **tragedy** had found a new vehicle in the form of the novel: *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Thomas Hardy's *Native* (1878), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

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#### Activity 1: Classical Versus Shakespearean Tragedy

Identify which of the following are features of the genre of Classical **tragedy** and which of Shakespearean **tragedy**. Carry out your own research as required.

- The use of choruses
- Subplots
- Characters in charge of their destinies
- No use of comic relief
- Inclusion of supernatural elements (e.g. divine intervention, aka *deus ex machina*)
- No clear distinction between good and evil
- Adherence to the concept of the **three unities**

## Crime Writing

*Hamlet* is also studied under the AQA B specification's section '4.2.1 Elements of crime writing: an overview of the crime writing genre in Britain.

The crime writing genre in Britain has its origins in Victorian novels that incorporated the 'Newgate novels' of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Harrison Ainsworth in the 1830s, associated with London's notorious Newgate Prison. The first detectives in British fiction were based on real-life equivalents. These included Inspector Bucket in Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), Inspector Field; and Sergeant Cuff in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), who was based on a real-life detective. However, with the publication of Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), a professional detective, Sherlock Holmes, the first professional detective novel was introduced. Arthur Conan Doyle introduced the detective with a sidekick motif into British crime writing with Holmes and Watson.

### **Different Subgenres of Crime Writing**

#### **The British Golden Age; the Whodunnit**

This covers crime novels from Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, written in 1928, to the end of World War II. Aside from Christie, the major novelists included Dorothy L Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, C. D. Blake (aka Cecil Day-Lewis), Anthony Berkeley and Ngaio Marsh.

#### **The Police Procedural**

The police procedural is a variation on the American 'hard-boiled' subgenre, typically focusing on the investigation of a crime. In Britain, police procedurals include the novels of Colin Dexter and Ruth Rendell, and the novels of PD James.

#### **The Noir Thriller**

The noir thriller focuses on the **protagonist** villain and societal factors rather than the crime. Major writers of this subtype are James M Cain, Patricia Highsmith, Elmore Leonard, and Ted Lewis. Contemporary British 'neo-noir' writers include Ken Bruen and Christopher YOUNG.

In perhaps the most prestigious British novel to occupy this subgenre, the violence and the characters in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* owe much to the American noir thriller. The novel's dark and often down-at-heel world of its characters, and Greene's novel is rich in such detail. *Brighton Rock*, while a distinguished entry in the crime writing genre, is nonetheless a moral novel, of say, James Hadley Chase, or the much later Alistair MacLean. Like his contemporary, Greene's crime writing can be viewed within the context of the rise of fascism in the 1930s.

### **Generic Conventions and Motifs of Crime Writing**

The following conventions and motifs are common across the different subgenres:

- A serious crime
- Investigation
- Clues
- Violence
- An atmospheric setting
- A focus on ordinary lives
- A dangerous society

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#### **Activity 2: Is There Enough Suspense?**

As you read the play, reflect on your own response to it in terms of the suspense or fear you experience. Compare your response to reading a piece of crime writing. Does it have a similar impact on you as a contemporary crime novel? Where do the similarities or differences lie?

## Key Terms

**Tragedy** – originally a dramatic work that attempts to sincerely portray the struggle of heroic individuals; the term is now applicable to other literary forms, such as poetry.

**Tragedy of blood (aka ‘revenge tragedy’)** – a type of drama with the plot centred on the consequences that result.

### Further Key Terms Associated with Dramatic Tragedy

Literary device	Definition
<b>Anagnorisis</b>	The point in a drama where the main character has a sudden realization of their own circumstances and the intentions or identity of other characters.
<b>Antagonist</b>	The main source of conflict in the drama, the <b>protagonist</b> ’s rival.
<b>Catastrophe</b>	The climactic event in a play that precedes its denouement (e.g. the death of Hamlet).
<b>Catharsis</b>	The point at which the conflict is resolved and the audience is purged of their emotions.
<b>Foil</b>	A character whose fate both parallels and provides contrast to the main character (e.g. Laertes and Hamlet).
<b>Hamartia</b>	The fatal flaw of character or judgement that leads to the downfall of the protagonist.
<b>Hubris</b>	Excessive pride and self-confidence that leads to a character’s downfall.
<b>Peripeteia</b>	A sudden reversal in a character’s fortunes that has a meaningful impact on the plot.
<b>Protagonist</b>	The central character in a drama that most of the action concerns.
<b>Unities</b>	The concept that a play should be limited to a specific place, time, and subject.

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## Key Literary Terms Relevant to *Hamlet*

Copy and complete this table before discussing the first act of the play in class.

Literary device	Definition	Notes
In media res	e.g. the beginning of the dramatic action after an important event has occurred, one of which the audience has no prior knowledge	
Foreshadowing		
Semantic field		
Soliloquy		
Rhetorical language		
Anaphora		
Exposition		

## Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 1

### Scene 1

1. The play opens with the soldiers discussing the ghost's recurring appearance in the introduction to Hamlet. What tone does this establish for the play?
2. With reference to the genres of literature already mentioned, which (if any) does the evidence of the first scene?
3. How does Horatio's initial attitude towards the soldiers' story of the ghost's appearance characterise him?
4. Consider the writer's use of language in the following quotation from Horatio:

*Now, sir, young Fortinbras,  
Of unimprovèd mettle hot and full,  
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there  
Sharked up a list of lawless resolute  
For food and diet to some enterprise  
That hath a stomach in 't; (1.1.107–112)*

What **semantic field** is developed in this quotation, and what are the significant words?

### Scene 2

1. The scene opens with the newly crowned Claudius's address to the Danish court. Which rhetorical devices can you identify in his speech?
2. From his interactions with other characters in this scene (e.g. Polonius, Laertes), what impressions of Claudius's character do you get?
3. Is the manner in which Gertrude responds to Hamlet's grief about his father's death revealing?
4. Why do you think that Hamlet seeks so many details about the ghost from Horatio? What does this tell you about Hamlet's worries about the ghost's manifestation?

### Scene 3

1. Identify the **semantic field(s)** in the following words to Ophelia from Laertes:

*For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,  
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,  
A violet in the youth of primy nature,  
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,  
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,  
No more. (1.3.6–10)*

2. Summarise Laertes' 'good lesson' (1.3.14–48) in a paragraph.

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### Scene 4

1. At this point in the play, what is Hamlet's major complaint about the Danish ruler?
2. What explanation does Hamlet offer Horatio and the soldiers for his apparent lack of action?
3. At this point in the play what do you think Marcellus means when he says 'So Denmark' (1.4.100)?

### Scene 5

1. What seems to be Hamlet's reaction to the revelation of Old Hamlet's ghost?
2. Consider the ghost's following words to Hamlet:

*Murder most foul, as in the best it is,  
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.* (1.5.33–34)

What contextual significance do these words have within the play?

3. What is striking about the tone and language of Old Hamlet's ghost's description?
4. In groups, research how to translate for a contemporary audience the ghost's description of how the poison affected his body:

*... And a most instant tetter barked about,  
Most lazarus-like, with vile and loathsome crust  
All my smooth body.* (1.5.78–80)

5. Analyse part of Hamlet's **soliloquy** (1.5.99–104). What rhetorical devices can you identify?
6. Why do you think Hamlet seems initially reluctant to share any information about the ghost with Horatio and Marcellus?

## Class Consolidation Activities for Act 1

### Activity 1: Analysis of Key Quotations

Analyse the following key quotations for your notes. The first example has been completed.

#### Example:

HAMLET: "“Seems,” madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage.” (1.2.78–84)

Hamlet's words are characterised by rhetorical devices, such as **anaphora**, **inversion** and **metonymy**. The urgency of his communication of his despair while implicitly criticising his mother's lack of sympathy for his father's death.

Add the following key terms to your reading log:

**Anaphora** – a rhetorical device involving the repetition of a word or phrase at the start of successive clauses.

**Inversion** – the ordering of words in a sentence in an unusual or unconventional way, for emphasis or to create a particular effect upon something in particular.

**Parallelism** – the placing together of phrases, words or clauses that are similarly structured.

1. HORATIO: 'What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,  
Together with that fair and warlike form  
In which the majesty of buried Denmark  
Did sometimes march? By heaven, I charge thee,  
speak.' (1.1.54–58)
2. POLONIUS: 'Marry, I will teach you. Think yourself a baby  
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,  
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,  
Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,  
Running it thus) you'll tender me a fool'. (1.3.114–118)

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**Activity 2: Themes and Characterisation**

Copy and complete the table below to summarise what you have learned so far about the secondary ideas and how characters and quotations illustrate these in the first act of *Hamlet*. The text is supplied.

Themes	Characters and Quotations
Revenge	e.g. Characters: Old Hamlet (Ghost); Hamlet; Claudius  Quote: 'Let not the royal bed of Denmark be A couch for luxury and damnèd incest. But, howsoever thou pursues this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge To prick and sting her.' (1.5.89–95)
Family	
Political Power and Corruption	
Thought versus Action	
Mortality	
Appearance and Reality	
The Meaning of Existence	
Secondary Ideas	Characters and Quotations
Love	e.g. Characters: Hamlet; Ophelia; Laertes  Quote: 'Forty thousand brothers Could not with all their quantity of love Make up my sum.' (5.1.285–287)
Crime	
Insanity	
Loyalty/Disloyalty	
War/Fighting	
Friendship	

**Activity 3: Critical Appreciation of Extract**

Write a critical appreciation of the ghost's speech (1.5.66–86), relating your discussion to within the context of crime writing and making a comparative analysis with your partner's.

**Activity 4: Foregrounding**

Write a page summarising the ways in which the ghost's role has been foregrounded in Act 1.

**Activity 5: Plot Summary**

Fill in the brackets using the correct words to summarise plot details of Act 1.

For ( ) nights Marcellus and ( ) have seen a ghost on the battlements. ( ) investigates, but ( ) appears in the form of the dead king wearing ( ). The ghost moves away, offended by ( ). ( ) addresses the Danish court about his brother's death and his marriage to ( ). Wishing to ( ), ( ) sends ( ) and Cornelius abroad with that purpose. When an initially sceptical Hamlet meets ( ), ( ) tells his son that he awaits sentencing in ( ). He also tells Hamlet that he was murdered with poison ( ) was asleep in the ( ). The ghost identifies his ( ) as the murderer, and directs Hamlet to ( ). The ghost demands that Horatio and Marcellus are sworn to secrecy by their ( ).

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## Act 2

### Summary: Act 2 Scene 1

Polonius directs his servant Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes in Paris, hoping to shield him from others with bad ones. Polonius learns from Ophelia of Hamlet's encounter with her and interprets this as evidence that Hamlet loves her and has. Polonius decides to report this to the king.

### Summary: Act 2 Scene 2

Claudius invites Hamlet's childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore about his nephew's odd behaviour. Polonius enters and shares his view with Claudius. Claudius lovesick, reading from a letter to Ophelia in supporting his claim, and informing Claudius of measures to keep Hamlet and Ophelia apart. Polonius comes up with the plan that Claudius should see Hamlet from behind some curtains when he is talking to Ophelia. Polonius meets Hamlet seemingly mistaking Polonius for a fishmonger; however, Polonius identifies himself. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, Hamlet reveals his contempt for the Danish court, his humour and the fact that he knows that his friends were sent to spy on him. When Claudius performs speeches and Hamlet requests of the main actor that they perform *The Murder of Gonzago* on the following evening; in addition, Hamlet gains the actor's consent to write a speech for him in the play. When alone, he reveals the purpose of the play, which has a scene similar to the performance of which will allow Hamlet to witness Claudius's reaction and ascertain if he is guilty for all.

### Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 2

#### Scene 1

1. What scheme is Polonius setting in motion at the outset of this scene?
2. What is the significance of this scheme regarding the structure of the play?
3. What clues to Ophelia's personality can you identify from her first exchanges with Hamlet?

#### Scene 2

1. How would you describe the tone of Gertrude's first words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
2. Which of the following adjectives, on the evidence of his appearance so far, best describes Claudius?  
Official  
Nosey  
Nervous  
Condescending  
Verbose  
Obsequious
3. Give your reasons why these are or are not suitable descriptors of Polonius's character.
4. Consider the information that Voltmand gives Claudius concerning the affair of Hamlet (2.2.64–85). How does this relate to your view of the state of politics in Denmark?
5. Study Polonius's immediate response to Gertrude's reproach 'More matter with these words' (2.2.100). To what extent does he oblige her with his response?
6. Why do you think that Claudius and Gertrude regard Polonius as a reliable intermediary?
7. What precisely is Polonius's view of Hamlet's 'madness', and does Hamlet himself agree with it?
8. What is the effect of the various entrances and exits in this scene regarding the audience's perception of the characters?
9. Why do you think Hamlet mentions his 'bad dreams' (2.2.275) to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
10. What do you think is the purpose behind Hamlet's recital of 'Aeneas' tale to Claudius?

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## Class Consolidation Activities for Act 2

### Activity 1: Quotation Analysis

Consider the following famous quotation and the questions that follow:

*I have of late, but  
wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all  
custom of exercises, and, indeed, it goes so heavily  
with my disposition that this goodly frame, the  
Earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most  
excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging  
firmament, this majestic roof, fretted  
with golden fire—why, it appeareth nothing to me  
but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.  
What a piece of work is a man, how noble in  
reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving  
how express and admirable; in action how like  
an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the  
beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and  
yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.318–332)*

1. How does this quotation elaborate on what you have already learned about Hamlet?
2. What **semantic field**(s) can you detect in the quotation?

#### Further Reading

For modern translations of the words from the quotation, visit [zigzagged.uk/12742](https://www.zigzagged.uk/12742)

### Activity 2: Key Quotes

Give definitions or explanatory descriptions for the following quotes from Hamlet's closing **soliloquy** from Act 2 Scene 2:

- 'fall a-cursing like a very drab' (2.2.615)
- 'John-a-dreams' (2.2.595)
- 'For Hecuba!' (2.2.585)
- 'I should have fattened all the region kites  
With this slave's offal' (2.2.606–607)
- 'I'll tent him to the quick.' (2.2.626)



#### Top Words

For this activity, visit [zigzagged.uk/](https://www.zigzagged.uk/)

### Activity 3: Context

What contextual factors help illuminate Hamlet and Rosencrantz's protracted discussion about the play? Write a paragraph to illustrate each factor you can identify.

### Activity 4: Adjective Usage

Discuss what the following adjectives are used to describe in Act 2. What connotations do they have for you?

- Polonius: 'wanton, wild, and usual' (2.1.24); 'unreclaimed' (2.1.38)
- Ophelia: 'Ungartered, and down-gyved' (2.1.90)
- Rosencrantz: 'dread' (2.2.29); 'indifferent' (2.2.245)
- Hamlet: 'satirical' (2.2.214); 'beaten' (2.2.290), 'valanced' (2.2.447); 'mobled' (2.2.555); 'miraculous' (2.2.623)

### Activity 5: Summary so Far

Ask yourself a focus question about the play; for example, which pairs of characters are most responsible for the events of the play? Write a summary of the play so far using this context.

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## Act 3

### Summary: Act 3 Scene 1

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Claudius that they do not know the reason for Hamlet's behaviour. Claudius seems to think his eccentricity is forced. Claudius is happy at the news of Hamlet's return and agrees to attend. The king then arranges a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet and Ophelia observe from a concealed vantage point, in order to confirm whether Hamlet is in love. Hamlet delivers his famous **soliloquy** about the human condition in which he questions the meaning of life and his purpose. When Ophelia arrives, Hamlet makes contradictory statements about his love for her, insulting her and repeatedly telling her to confine herself to a nunnery for repentance. Ophelia believes Hamlet has succumbed to madness. However, having witnessed the excitement of the meeting, she believes that Hamlet's words were sincere even if his manner came a little close to madness. Claudius believes that Hamlet's mood poses a threat and tells Polonius that he has arranged for Hamlet to go to England. Polonius advises the king that he should wait until Gertrude has sought Hamlet's counsel (Polonius observing) before reaching a decision about Hamlet's fate.

### Summary: Act 3 Scene 2

Hamlet gives the actors some directions before they perform. He wants the actors to refer to the events that preceded Old Hamlet's death. Hamlet instructs Horatio to watch the actors and report if the actions being performed stimulate any signs of guilt. Before the play begins, Hamlet speaks to Gertrude rather than Gertrude and he makes inappropriate overtures towards her. The play is about a happily married king and queen, but the king is ill and apparently worried about his death. Claudius tells Gertrude that the play is called 'The Mousetrap'. As the drama continues, another actor speaks to both of the king's ears. On cue, Hamlet announces to the audience that this man has stolen the royal estate, and Claudius rises furiously, calling for the lights before storming out of the room. Claudius leaves all bar Hamlet and Horatio. Hamlet and Horatio believe they have their proof of the king's guilt. Claudius's words, and that Claudius did kill Old Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return, bringing news of Claudius's anger and Gertrude's puzzlement; she wishes to speak to Hamlet in her closet before Polonius enters to reiterate Gertrude's request. Left alone, Hamlet speaks violently to himself.

### Summary: Act 3 Scene 3

Claudius is wary now of Hamlet's behaviour and instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet. He wants Hamlet out of the way. Polonius arranges with Claudius that Hamlet should have a conference with his mother in her closet, by concealing himself behind the arras. When alone, Claudius confesses his brother's murder in prayer to God, clearly aware of the extent of his sin. He is praying but refrains from killing Claudius while the latter prays, preferring to wait for a better opportunity.

### Summary: Act 3 Scene 4

Hamlet visits his mother in her closet and runs riddles around her concerning the death of Old Hamlet (not Claudius). When Hamlet appears to threaten Gertrude, she lets him know that she is not his mother. Claudius makes an exclamation from his place of concealment behind an arras. Taken by surprise, Hamlet believes he is his uncle, Hamlet stabs Polonius to death through the arras with his rapier. Hamlet's disloyalty builds as he draws unflattering comparisons of Claudius with Old Hamlet. Claudius persuades Hamlet to go easier on his mother, who either cannot see the ghost or perceives Hamlet's distraction at the ghost's presence. Hamlet demands that his mother keep his secret and changes her behaviour. Hamlet also tells her that he will go to England. Claudius is fully aware that this is down to Claudius's plotting against him. Hamlet leaves Gertrude and her corpse into the next room.

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## Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 3

### Scene 1

1. From their replies to Claudius at the start of the scene, what impression of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern formed?
2. Why does Claudius request that Gertrude leave while he and Polonius engineer Ophelia's death? Why does she obey him?
3. How would you describe Ophelia's language in this scene, when she corrects Claudius's letters (3.1.106–112)? Does her tone change in the course of the scene?
4. Why does Hamlet tell Ophelia 'Get thee to a nunnery' (3.1.131)?
5. Why, specifically, has Claudius decided to have Hamlet sent 'with speed to England'?

### Scene 2

1. Identify an example of usage of the rhetorical device *adnominatio* in Hamlet's speech.
2. What do you think is Hamlet's purpose behind the theatrical directions he offers Shakespeare's be?
3. Why is Horatio given the main role in Hamlet's scheme to uncover Claudius's guilt?
4. What does Hamlet mean when he says just before the play is due to begin, 'I am sorry that my fall must prove their trial'?
5. Who do you think Hamlet's flirtatious display towards Ophelia (3.2.119–131) is intended to achieve?
6. When Hamlet is talking to Ophelia about his father's death, he says the line 'I am not more than my father's son' (3.2.143–144). What is he referring to?
7. What (if any) is the impact of the play within the play's being recited in rhyme on the scene?
8. Explain Hamlet's use of the 'pipe' (or recorder) metaphor in his exchange with Ophelia.

### Scene 3

1. From what you have seen of their interactions so far, why do you think Rosencrantz is so ready to betray Hamlet by colluding in Claudius's scheme?
2. Does Claudius's sense of guilt at his crime seem in keeping with what you have seen of him until now?
3. Study Hamlet's **soliloquy** (3.3.77–101) at the scene's conclusion while he is waiting for the ghost. Do you think that his words and thoughts justify the accusation of procrastination against his character?

### Scene 4

1. Why does Gertrude fear that her son will murder her? Is there anything in the text to justify such a fear?
2. What is significant about Hamlet's accidental slaying of Polonius, given our prior knowledge of his character?
3. What is Hamlet's objection to the ghost's return at this point?
4. How, if at all, has Hamlet's intention to avenge his father's death been affected by this scene?
5. How would you summarise Gertrude's behaviour over the course of this scene?

#### Further Reading

For a good article on the pattern Hamlet's revenge follows, see:  
Robert Hapgood, "'Hamlet' Nearly Absurd: The Dramaturgy of Delay', *The Tulane Drama Review*, pp. 132–45. Available at: [JSTOR, \*\*zzed.uk/12742-nearly-absurd\*\*](https://www.jstor.org/stable/12742) [accessed 21 Oct. 2023].

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## Class Consolidation Activities for Act 3

### Activity 1: Analysis of Key Quotation

Analyse Hamlet's famous **soliloquy** (3.1.64–98) (with assistance online, as required), noting Shakespeare's usage of rhetorical devices, then rewrite it in contemporary English, being careful to express its original meaning.

NB a helpful analysis of the **soliloquy** can be found at: [zzed.uk/12742-soliloquy](http://zzed.uk/12742-soliloquy)

Some examples of rhetorical devices are included below:

- **anastrophe** – *To be or not to be—that is the question* (3.1.64)
- **conduplicatio** – *To die, to sleep—  
To sleep, perchance to dream.* (3.1.72–73)
- **anaphora** – *Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office...* (3.1.79–81)

#### Key Terms

**Anastrophe** – a deviation from the typical ordering of a sentence for rhetorical effect.

**Conduplicatio** – a rhetorical device where the same phrase or clause ends one sentence and begins the one immediately following.

### Activity 2: A Scene from 'The Mousetrap'

*Hamlet* was originally performed at the Globe Theatre on a simple thrust stage without proscenium or trapdoor. Do some further research online about this type of stage layout. Then in groups perform *The Murder of Gonzago* using this stage layout, with the audience of the Danish court.

For research, access: [zzed.uk/12742-globe](http://zzed.uk/12742-globe)

### Activity 3: Group Sketch (Extension)

In groups create a tableau of the actions depicted in the dumb show that precedes *The Murder of Gonzago*.

### Activity 4: Quotation Analysis

Give definitions and contextual explanations for Hamlet's use of the following words or phrases using online assistance as required:

- 'Termagant' (3.2.14)
- 'occulted' (3.2.85)
- 'Vulcan's stithy' (3.2.89)
- 'wormwood' (3.2.204)
- 'Tropically' (3.2.261)
- 'pickers and stealers' (3.2.364)

### Activity 5: Rhetorical Questions

As in the soliloquies of Hamlet, Claudius's confessional **soliloquy** (3.3.76) is punctuated by rhetorical questions. Examine the following quotations and assess what dramatic **tone** Shakespeare creates in each. Choose a key word or phrase on which to focus your analysis. Some examples are included below:

1. *What if this cursed hand  
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?* (3.3.47–48)  
A key word; phrase is \_ because...
2. *Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens  
To wash it white as snow?* (3.3.49–50)  
A key word; phrase is \_ because...
3. *Whereto serves mercy  
But to confront the visage of offense?  
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,  
To be forestall'd ere we come to fall,  
Or pardoned being down?* (3.3.50–54)  
A key word; phrase is \_ because...

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## Act 4

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 1

Gertrude breaks her promise to Hamlet by telling Claudius about the night's event and her son as mad. Claudius directs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out the body's location in the chapel, and tells Gertrude of his plans to seek counsel regarding how the state of Denmark will handle Polonius's murder.

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 2

Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Claudius is just using them, and he tells them the whereabouts of Polonius's body.

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 3

Claudius worries that Hamlet's popularity in Denmark will preclude his punishment. When Claudius questions Hamlet concerning the location of Polonius's body, Hamlet tries to conceal the fact that Polonius is dead. After reiterating that Hamlet needs to be punished, Claudius in **soliloquy** reveals the existence of letters sent to England ordering Hamlet's murder.

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 4

Fortinbras directs one of his captains to get Claudius's permission to march across Norway with his army's expedition to claim back land from Poland. On meeting him, Hamlet agrees to Fortinbras' mission, but when alone he bemoans the interference to his plans of revenge.

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 5

A mentally deteriorating Ophelia visits the queen, who is initially reluctant to see her. When Claudius arrives he agrees with Gertrude that Ophelia is sick, attributing this to her grief. Messengers then report that Laertes has returned and it is the will of the Danish king that he should be executed. An enraged Laertes enters, demanding an explanation of his father's death and Claudius's role in it. Claudius is responsible, before being angered further when confronted with Ophelia's condition. When Laertes is responsible for his family's misfortune, he vows to kill Hamlet and leave him buried in the graveyard.

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 6

Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet saying that he was kidnapped by pirates after escaping from the ship. They are treating him mercifully; the letter hints at some further skulduggery being afoot. Claudius and Guildenstern have gone to England and this seems related to the shocking news Hamlet received.

### Summary: Act 4 Scene 7

Claudius explains to Laertes that Hamlet was unpunished prior to leaving Denmark. A letter from Hamlet reaches Claudius with Hamlet informing him that he will be a swordsman. Claudius and Laertes plan to set up a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Claudius acting as a swordsman. Laertes plans to poison the tip of his sword prior to the fight, while Claudius plans to poison Hamlet's drink in case Laertes does not manage to wound him. Upon receiving the news that Ophelia has drowned herself, Claudius deceitfully tells Gertrude that Hamlet is responsible and fears that this loss will enrage him again.

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## Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 4

### Scene 1

1. What action constitutes a **motif** in this scene?
2. Why do you think Claudius wishes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to bring Polonius 'haste' (4.1.38)?
3. How might Gertrude's loyalties and motivations seem obscure in this scene?

### Scene 2

1. In contemporary language, try to decipher Hamlet's riddle in response to Rosencrantz's question about the location of Polonius's corpse (4.3.27–31).

### Scene 3

1. What is Hamlet's purpose in trying to illustrate to Claudius 'how a king may go a beggar' (4.3.34–35)?
2. Which subplot of the drama is decisively activated in this scene?

### Scene 4

1. What purpose is served by Hamlet's discussion with the Norwegian sea captain about his journey to Poland?
2. Does Hamlet feel humbled or ashamed by the example of Fortinbras?

### Scene 5

1. Why do you think Gertrude is initially reluctant to speak with Ophelia?
2. What might be Horatio's deeper motive in encouraging Gertrude to speak to Ophelia?
3. What dramatic effect does Shakespeare achieve by putting Gertrude's aside with the rhyming couplets?
4. How does Ophelia seem to feel about Polonius's death, particularly given the context of the play?
5. What is Laertes' initial suspicion regarding the death of his father, and what does this suspicion lead to?

### Scene 6

1. What is the purpose of Hamlet's letter to Horatio, and (in a general sense) the letter's function as a motif in the play?
2. At this stage of the play do you regard Horatio as Hamlet's only ally? Is his loyalty absolute?

### Scene 7

1. How does Claudius try to present himself to Laertes in explaining why Hamlet is in England?
2. What is the purpose of Hamlet's letter to Claudius (4.7.49–53)?
3. Consider the following quotation, from Claudius to Laertes regarding Hamlet's death:

*He, being remiss,  
Most generous, and free from all contriving,  
Will not peruse the foils, so that with ease,  
Or with a little shuffling, you may choose  
A sword unbated, and in a pass of practice  
Requite him for your father. (4.7.153–158)*

What thematic significance do these words have within the play?

4. To what extent is Laertes culpable in Claudius's plan?
5. What is the significance of the setting of Ophelia's death with its floral associations?
6. What is Claudius's priority at the end of this scene?

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## Class Consolidation Activities for Act 4

### Activity 1: Figurative and Rhetorical Language

Identify the types of figurative and rhetorical language that occur in the following quotations (an example has been provided below).

#### Example:

CLAUDIUS: *There's matter in these sighs; these profound heaves  
You must translate; 'tis fit we understand them.* (4.1.1–2)

This is an example of **anastrophe**, a deviation from the common order of a sentence intended to increase the impact of the words.

1. GERTRUDE: *In his lawless fit,  
Behind the arras hearing something stir,  
Whips out his rapier, cries "A rat, a rat..."* (4.1.8–10)
2. CLAUDIUS: *My soul is full of discord and dismay.* (4.1.46)
3. ROSENCRANTZ: *Take you me for a sponge, my lord?* (4.2.14)
4. HAMLET: *The body is with the King, but the King is not  
with the body.* (4.2.27–28)
5. HAMLET: *Not where he eats, but where he is eaten.* (4.3.22)
6. HAMLET: *Nothing but to show you how a king may go a  
progress through the guts of a beggar.* (4.3.34–35)
7. HAMLET: *Father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother*
8. HAMLET: *Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honor's at the stake.* (4.4.56–59)
9. MESSENGER: *Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds...* (4.5.117)
10. LAERTES: *O rose of May,  
Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!  
O heavens, is 't possible a young maid's wits  
Should be as mortal as an old man's life?* (4.5.181–184)

### Activity 2: Hamlet's Character

Below are 20 adjectives that may (or may not) be applied to Hamlet's character. Choose their use with evidence from the text in your reading log. In addition, if there are any adjectives inappropriate, explain why.

Stately; mysterious; ruthless; patronising; eloquent; hospitable; disloyal; misogynistic; coercive; temperamental; athletic; duplicitous; impressionable; theatrical; seductive; misanthropic; megalomaniacal

### Activity 3: The Meaning of the Scene

What do you think is the meaning of Act 4 Scene 4?

Choose from the explanations listed below, ranking them from most likely to least likely, and give your choice:

- To illustrate how well-travelled Hamlet is
- To illustrate that Hamlet has a sense of perspective
- To illustrate by Fortinbras' behaviour that not all rulers are as corrupt as Claudius
- To illustrate Hamlet's grasp of military strategy
- To illustrate that Hamlet is a failure
- To illustrate that Hamlet recognises the need to reevaluate his behaviour

### Activity 4: Semantic Fields

Read through Act 4 Scene 5 again and identify as many examples as you can of a semantic field.

### Activity 5: The Character of Claudius

Read Act 4 Scene 7 again. Write a paragraph describing how the devious nature of Claudius is revealed.

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## Act 5

### Summary: Act 5 Scene 1

Two gravediggers argue about Ophelia's entitlement to a Christian burial, given he throw about the bones of the dead and sing while digging her grave, and their belief in passing with Horatio. Hamlet gleans from his conversation with one of the gravediggers that his opinion is towards news of his madness. Hamlet is shown the skull of the court jester, which he takes as a child, and this leads Hamlet into contemplation of the fragility of human existence. Laertes then arrive at the graveyard to bury Ophelia. A grief-stricken Laertes leaps into the grave and Hamlet approaches him the two fight. Upon their separation Hamlet complains that his father's love is greater in value a brother's love of his sister. After Hamlet and Horatio leave, Claudius arrives for Hamlet with Laertes and promises Laertes that Ophelia's grave will have a fitting burial.

### Summary: Act 5 Scene 2

Hamlet tells Horatio that he found the sealed letter Claudius had written giving instructions to kill him in England. Hamlet used his father's seal to write another letter ordering the death of Claudius and swapped these with Claudius's original. Hamlet tells Horatio that he regrets his actions and wishes to make amends, and a courtier invites him to do so by contesting the duel. After Hamlet apologises to Laertes, the two men select their weapons, with Hamlet choosing the poisoned tip. Meanwhile, Claudius arranges to toast Hamlet if he should manage to win. When the fight happens during the contest, Claudius drinks some wine then drops a poisoned pearl into the cup. Hamlet is having the better of the duel and tells them to set the cup aside. Claudius then drinks the poison while the fight continues. Laertes, meanwhile, seems to be having a pang of conscience about defeating Hamlet by foul means, but wounds Hamlet nonetheless. In the melee the king is also wounded, ending up wounded with the fatal poison. At this point Gertrude collapses and tells Hamlet she is poisoned before she falls dead. Hamlet demands the court be sealed and the traitor be executed. On the ground, Laertes warns Hamlet of his fate and implicates Claudius. An enraged Claudius orders Hamlet to drink the wine and suffer the same fate as his mother. Laertes and Hamlet then fight and the former dies. Hamlet then predicts that Fortinbras will ascend to the Danish throne. Horatio, the army, celebrating their success in Poland while ambassadors inform the court of the death of Claudius. Guildenstern. Horatio explains everything that has occurred, and a sympathetic Fortinbras agrees to receive a soldier's burial.

### Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 5

#### Scene 1

1. What purpose do the gravediggers' discussion about Ophelia's burial and the skull symbolise? How do these with Hamlet serve? Have these a wider contextual significance within the play?
2. When Hamlet asks the gravedigger 'why was he [Hamlet] sent into England?' what does he have another motive?
3. How well is the play's theme of 'the meaning of existence' supported by Hamlet's references to Alexander and Caesar?
4. What does the skull symbolise?
5. Why do Hamlet and Horatio step out of sight to watch the burial of Ophelia?
6. What does the expression 'virgin crants' (5.1.240) refer to?
7. What does Hamlet's reaction to Laertes' action at the grave suggest about Hamlet's character?
8. Write a brief **soliloquy** having Hamlet explain his behaviour in this scene. The soliloquy should be in contemporary prose.

#### Scene 2

1. What is significant about Hamlet's switching of the letters in terms of his character?
2. Why does Hamlet regret his treatment of Laertes at Ophelia's burial?
3. From their asides to one another (5.2.94–101), what opinion do Hamlet and Horatio have about the change in the course of the scene?
4. What is Hamlet's attitude towards the duel? What is Horatio's?
5. Why does Hamlet refer to 'the fall of a sparrow' (5.2.234) in reference to his father's death?
6. Where is there an example (or examples) of **situational irony** in this scene?
7. What lies behind Horatio's intention to drink from the poisoned cup? What does this suggest about his character?
8. Do you think Fortinbras has an ulterior motive in affording Hamlet full military funeral?

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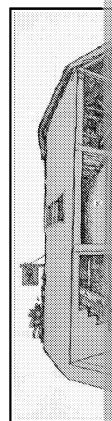
## Class Consolidation Activities for Act 5

### Activity 1: Staging

Consider the four most common forms of theatrical staging. These are 'In-the-round', 'End-on', 'Arena', and 'Thrust'. In groups, research online to find out more information about them. Which type of staging would be most effective for the duel between Hamlet and Laertes? Which do you think would be the least effective? Write three paragraphs to justify your decisions and finish off by listing the four forms of staging from most to least effective with a short summary of your reasons for ordering them so.

### Activity 2: Staging

Consider the representation of the Globe Theatre in Shakespeare's time in the image opposite. Looking at the stage layout, what opportunities or problems does the stage layout present to staging the duel between Hamlet and Laertes in Act 5 Scene 2?



### Activity 3: Textual Comparison

By comparing at least two texts prescribed for the topic of 'Elements of Crime Writing', discuss to what extent suspense is a key feature of Act 5 of the play. For example, you might compare *Hamlet* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.



### Activity 4: Context

What contextual factors can you find that might help explain the king's wager with Laertes? How does Osric bring news of it to Hamlet?

Osric: *The King, sir, hath wagered with him six Barbary horses, against the which he has impawned, as I take it, six French rapiers and poniards, with their assigns, as girdle, hangers, and so. Three of the carriages, in faith, are very dear to fancy, very responsive to the hilts, most delicate carriages, and of very liberal conceit.* (5.2.160–166)

### Activity 5: Key Quotes

Give definitions or explanatory descriptions for the following quotes from Act 5:

Gravedigger: 'crown's quest law' (5.1.23)

Hamlet: 'bung-hole' (5.1.211)

Hamlet: 'Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay...' (5.1.220)

Hamlet: 'eisel' (5.1.293)

Hamlet: 'Make Ossa like a wart' (5.1.300)

Hamlet: 'yeoman's service' (5.2.40)

Hamlet: 'cozenage' (5.2.75)

Hamlet: 'the most fanned and winnowed opinions' (5.2.206–207)

### Activity 6: Word Connections

Choose three words in the play or related to its themes that can be connected with each other in a diagram similar to that below and fill in the blanks with the three words. Discuss the connections in the context of the play. An example is as follows:

GRAVE

If there's a grave, there's a  
body to go in it

If there's a grave, a  
coffin is needed to hold the

BODY

Both body and coffin go into a grave

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# Post-reading Notes and Ta

Having read the play to its conclusion, use the following activities to reflect upon a  
should be carried out in pairs or in groups unless otherwise indicated. Students should  
of presenting their answers and ideas to the class, wherever applicable.

## Characterisation and Relationships

### Activity 1: Match the Quote

A. Without looking at the text of the play, try to match the following quotations to the char

1. *The Queen your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you.*
2. *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.*
3. *I am justly killed with mine own treachery.*
4. *That hath made him mad. I am sorry that with better heed and judgment I had not coted him.*
5. *Before my God, I might not this believe Without the sensible and true avouch Of mine own eyes.*

B. Without looking at the text of the play, try to match the following quotations to the char

1. *I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted, or, if it was, not above once...*
2. *Aboard, aboard, for shame! The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail, And you are stayed for.*
3. *How is it that the clouds still hang on you?*
4. *It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge.*
5. *A 'thing,' my lord?*

C. Match the following quotations to one of the play's main **themes** or **ideas**, such as those listed below. More than one theme or idea may be applicable.

**Themes: Revenge; Family; Political Power and Corruption; Thought versus Action; Idealism and Reality; the Meaning of Existence**

**Secondary Ideas: Love; Crime; Insanity; Loyalty/Disloyalty; War/Fighting; Friendship**

1. *How dangerous is it that this man goes loose! Yet must not we put the strong law on him. He's loved of the distracted multitude, Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes... (Claudius on Hamlet)*
2. *That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard, Cries 'cuckold' to my father, brands the harlot Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow Of my true mother. (4.5.130–134) (Laertes about Polonius and his killer)*
3. *It likes us well, And, at our more considered time, we'll read, Answer, and think upon this business. Meantime, we thank you for your well-took labor. Go to your rest. (2.2.86–90) (Claudius to Voltmend concerning the latter's news)*
4. *A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm. (4.3.30–32) (Hamlet on Polonius's fate)*
5. *Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, And can say nothing—no, not for a king Upon whose property and most dear life A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward? (2.2.593–598) (Hamlet on himself)*

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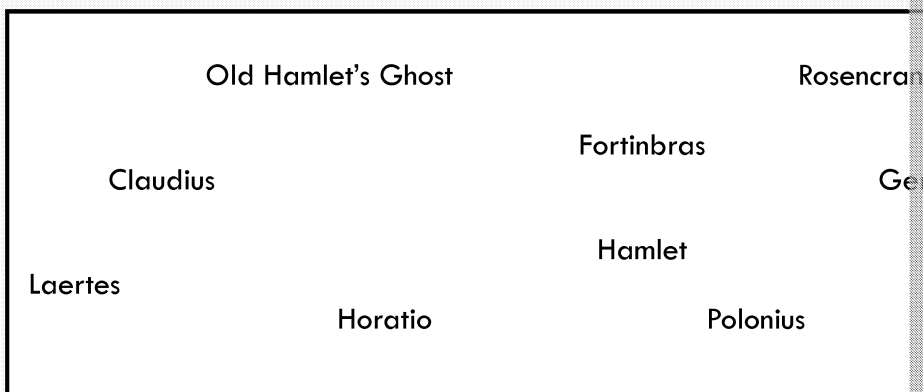


## Activity 2: Characterisation and Relationships

- A. Below is a map of the main character relationships in the novel. Copy and complete the following labels to indicate the correct relationship.

Add the labels as often as required.

**'Adversary', 'Perpetrator', 'Victim', 'Ally', 'Romantic Partner', 'Leader', 'Follower'**



- B. This exercise should take the form of group work. Create a table ranking the play's characters from worst to least. In two groups prepare arguments that support your ranking of each character. Once done this, swap your list of arguments and consider counterarguments to those produced by the other group.
- C. Referring mainly (though not necessarily exclusively) to three of the characters listed in the map, write a short story in the form of crime writing (e.g. whodunnits and other forms of detective stories). Write a conclusion for each of these characters.

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## Character Summaries

Most of the characters in *Hamlet* belong to the royal court of Denmark, which is clouded by suspicion after Old Hamlet's untimely death, increasingly suspected to be murder. In this Shakespearean tragedy, the characters have tragic flaws which contribute to their downfall. The political instability of Claudius that supports the present critical context for studying the play is of crime writing.

### Hamlet

Hamlet is a popular, and highly intelligent prince and university student, loyal to his father. His father's death, Claudius' marriage to his mother create a deeper psychological crisis for the young prince, and he is directed to avenge his murder by Claudius, the complexity of Hamlet's character and obsessed with revenge. His inability to act on his dead father's wishes drives him to madness.

It is at this early stage of the play that we begin to appreciate the often contradictory nature of Hamlet's character. While he actively feigns madness in order to fool Claudius and his uncle's role in his father's death, nothing is certain about his true mental state. The Hamlet being a difficult character to work out in general, a point he makes himself clear to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For example, he often seems to be withholding so much information in his soliloquies and dialogues and ponders philosophically challenging questions concerning life and death (among other things), questions that have no definite answers. For example, his famous 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy where he questions the most noble course of action he might follow offers a full demonstration of a character trait of Hamlet's, a seeming compulsion to make things more difficult for himself. The evidence of Claudius's culpability in Old Hamlet's murder seems damning, Hamlet's lack of an independent proof of his uncle's guilt before taking action: it is in this 'detective' connection with crime writing can be more fully appreciated.

Despite his oft-noted procrastination, Hamlet also behaves rashly on occasions, most notably in the murder of Polonius, his brutal rejection of Ophelia, his threatening behaviour towards Gertrude, his acceptance of the King's arrangement of a duel with Laertes, despite being fully aware of the danger to him. Indeed acting without thinking, but instead in anger, may be Hamlet's real trait. His (3.4.33) murder of Polonius, for example, proves to be the catalyst for the death of his intended victims in Hamlet's scheme of revenge.

Hamlet's downfall can be largely attributed to this contradictory combination of excessive self-examination on the one hand and, on the other, an impatience that drives him to rash action.

### Claudius

Claudius is Hamlet's villainous **antagonist**, the king of Denmark through fratricide, incest and murder. His intelligence is of the strategic and manipulative kind, as opposed to Hamlet's more expansive style of thinking. The two men are well suited opponents.

Initially, Claudius seems to underestimate Hamlet, telling him off for brooding over his father's death and forbidding his return to the University of Wittenberg. When he realises that Hamlet is a threat to his overthrow the Crown, Claudius arranges Hamlet's death. This plan backfires and leads to Claudius' death at the play's conclusion.

Claudius is not entirely without conscience, as his feelings of guilt in reaction to the murder of his brother reveals; he leaves the performance and reveals his guilt in **soliloquy**. However, for the purposes of 'Elements of Crime Writing', it is crucial that students focus on Claudius as the villain. To put it another way, if *Hamlet* was a crime thriller, Claudius would be the mob boss. Due to the subtlety of Shakespeare's play, we must seek less generic reasons for why Claudius is the villain. Claudius desired both Gertrude and the Crown, while Gertrude responded to the younger, more energetic man than Old Hamlet. There is also evidence in the text, particularly about Gertrude (in places in Act 1 and more notably in Act 4 Scene 7), that his feelings for her could have had a strong bearing on his actions. To Hamlet, however, Claudius is merely 'Incestuous, murderous, damned Dane' (5.2.356) whose 'soul may be as damned as mine'.

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## Gertrude

Gertrude's hasty marriage to the new king Claudius, her former brother-in-law, in (himself) to view her initially with a degree of suspicion. Did she conspire or take a murder? It is clear that Gertrude enjoys Claudius's lovemaking, a point that disturbs her son. She undoubtedly loves her son, and seems a little weak in character to be a Lady. In the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Gertrude dies after drinking the poisoned goblet. Claudius views her as another unintended victim of Claudius's treachery.

Perhaps Gertrude's major flaw is her insensitivity, or lack of emotional intelligence, to understand his sense of loyalty to his father and his family, and interprets his reaction due to his grief at his father's death. Nonetheless, her decision to remarry quickly in terms of her insensitivity to her son. There may have been valid political reasons for Denmark's stability during its period of conflict with Fortinbras' Norway, for example, her advances in the official announcements when he describes Gertrude as 'Th' imperious' (1.2.9), which suggests that she shares the power of the throne with him. Also, if she committed the murder, then retaining her position as Claudius's queen would afford her some protection.

## Polonius

Polonius is Claudius's Lord Chamberlain, both his main advisor and his dupe, a useful tool to execute his plotting. He is often pompous and overbearing, and Gertrude is particularly irritating on occasions. As father of Ophelia and Laertes, Polonius also plots ostensibly for their benefit, with unintended results. Misinterpreting Hamlet's 'antic disposition' in Ophelia's presence, he convinces her to lay a trap for Hamlet (whose interest in Ophelia he disapproves of), with disastrous results: Hamlet's death and Ophelia's fatal descent into madness. Polonius is similarly unhelpful with Hamlet in Scene 3 about studying in France, giving him confusing and contradictory advice. He fails to make a distinction between spying on his own children and Hamlet, as he wants his man to spy on his [Laertes'] behavior' (2.1.4–5) in Paris.

## Ophelia

Polonius's daughter Ophelia is Hamlet's lover, but obeys Polonius's demand not to see him. She also spies on Hamlet at Claudius's request. This is curious because she believes that Hamlet loves her, and appears distraught in Act 3 Scene 1 when they have a conversation. She is forced to confine herself to a nunnery and appears to hold her in contempt. After Hamlet's death, she loses her wits and drowns in a river, possibly a suicide.

Ophelia hardly fits the femme fatale motif beloved of noir crime writers. Her culpability is relatively mild: she is primarily a victim of loyalty and obedience to her father, her love for Hamlet, and later playing her part in setting up Polonius's trap by going to see him for instruction. In discussing Ophelia's character within the context of 'Elements of Crime', we can consider the extent of her victimhood, and this involves analysing the possible causes of her death. The most straightforward explanation is advanced by Claudius after the court hearing: 'Ophelia appears before Claudius and Gertrude singing odd songs and speaking nonsense. This behaviour is 'the poison of deep grief. It springs/ All from her father's death'. This suggests that Hamlet's culpability in Polonius's death, and her brother Laertes' treachery, has left Ophelia 'Divided from herself and her fair judgment' (4.5.92). However, Ophelia's 'Tomorrow is Valentine's day' (4.5.53) in one of her short songs suggests that Hamlet's rejection has affected her mind.

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## Horatio

Horatio is Hamlet's best friend and a loyal and reliable confidant: he would be the whodunnit. He is a scholarly man, guided by reason, which is perhaps shown in his accompanying Marcellus to find the ghost of Old Hamlet, and in his advice to Hamlet in Act 1 Scene 4. Hamlet admires him greatly, describing him as 'e'en as just a man/withal' (3.2.56–57). In the same scene, Hamlet relies upon him to scrutinise Claudius in *The Murder of Gonzago*, and Horatio confirms that Claudius looks very guilty.

Until the end of the play Horatio stays loyal to Hamlet, even wishing to take his own life. Hamlet convinces Horatio to stay alive and explain the events that have taken place. Horatio keeps journals about his adventures with Sherlock Holmes. Horatio eventually ensures a full ceremonial trappings of a state funeral.

## Laertes

Laertes functions in the play as a **foil** to Hamlet; however, the young nobleman's character is complex, that suggests, as indicated by the uncertainty his father Polonius has about his character. He is assigned a bizarre task Polonius assigns to Reynaldo. Suspecting his son to be something of a spy, Polonius asks Reynaldo to misinform Laertes' friends about certain things that he has supposedly reported back how these friends react. At the same time, Reynaldo is not supposed to harm Laertes' honour as a nobleman.

Laertes' main character flaw is that he is hot-headed, a man of action but poor judge of character. After hearing of his father's death, for example, Laertes is ready to rebel against Claudius. His mental deterioration is exploited by Claudius to redirect Laertes' ire towards Hamlet. In Claudius's scheme against Hamlet, in order to avenge his family, but after being slain by Hamlet.

Within the context of crime writing, Laertes is the wronged victim, hell-bent on revenge. He is not a real culprit, a common scenario in crime fiction and television dramas. He is also a hired assassin (exactly a hired assassin) due to his participation in the duel. However, it is impossible to ignore his account of his love for and loyalty to his family. He is the concerned older brother, careful with Hamlet, the dutiful son when he returns from Paris after Polonius's murder, and the one who is careful when Ophelia takes her own life.

It is fair to introduce a caveat when contemplating Laertes' status as victim. Although he is a victim, Claudius he displays some relish at the prospect of poisoning Hamlet, telling of how he is a 'mountebank' (4.7.161), a deadly poison, and vowing that 'I'll touch my point/ With him slightly,/ It may be death' (4.7.166–168). The ownership of such a poison may say more about Laertes' true character.

## Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two courtiers and former school friends of Hamlet. Initially they are asked to spy on Hamlet in order to find out what is driving him. They have limited intelligence, and so perfect dupes for Claudius. This becomes especially clear when Claudius kills Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are instructed to accompany him. They are to present a threat to the Danish court. Guildenstern tells the king 'Most holy and reverend, we have many many bodies safe/ That live and feed upon your majesty' (3.3.9–11). They hear from the King of England that will see Hamlet executed on his arrival, and Guildenstern illustrates the depth of their treachery.

Hamlet's handling of his old school friends illustrates his fully grown ruthlessness, and an important function in illustrating the **protagonist's** character development. It is through them that he divulges how he stole the King of England's commission for his own execution to Hamlet. He ordered the King of England to put Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death, and sees that they are ordered he fortuitously was carrying with him. Hamlet passes a damning indictment on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern saying because they 'did make love to this employment;/ They are not near my con-

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## Fortinbras

Within the context of 'Elements of Crime Writing', Fortinbras, the prince of neighbouring Norway, is a rival crime boss. We learn from the first scene that he is out for revenge after his father's death. Claudius describes the young prince as 'Of unimproved mettle hot and full' (1.1.155). His ambitions are not held in high regard by anyone, including his uncle, the King of Norway. In this opinion, admires Fortinbras as a man of action, able 'to find quarrel in a straw' (4.4.58–59). Fortinbras arrives in Denmark at the play's climax, and due to Hamlet's distant blood relationship, he becomes king of Denmark after Hamlet's death. This political power that may within the present context invite comparison with the model of the National Crime Syndicate in twentieth-century America, a business model largely inspired by Al Capone and Luciano in the 1930s.

## The Ghost

The ghost of Old Hamlet is easily associated with the genre of supernatural horror writing. He appears as a ghost in the first scenes of the play to Horatio and the soldiers. When Hamlet sees the ghost for the second time (this time alone) he learns that Claudius is pouring poison into his ear while he slept, a revelation that serves as the catalyst for his revenge. Although emotionally predisposed to accept his father's words, Hamlet is not fully convinced. He considers the possibility that the Devil is setting a trap for him.

*The spirit that I have seen  
May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. (2.2.27–32)*

Hamlet's need to 'have grounds/ More relative than this' (2.2.632–633) indicates that he is not decisive in driving his desire for revenge.

### Activity 1: Multiple Choice

- Why does Hamlet stab Polonius in Act 3 Scene 4?
  - He blames him for Ophelia rejecting him
  - He thinks he is Claudius
  - He mistakes his movement for that of a rat
  - His mother has put him in a temper
- Which of the following characters does Polonius NOT spy on?
  - Gertrude
  - Ophelia
  - Hamlet
- Why does Gertrude agree to see Ophelia in Act 4 Scene 5?
  - She is feeling guilty about Ophelia's illness
  - She wants to hear the truth about Hamlet's madness
  - She wishes to apologise for Polonius's death
  - Horatio thinks Ophelia's strange behaviour while speaking could make some matter of her shocking revelations
- Why does Hamlet want Horatio to tell his story after he dies in Act 5 Scene 2?
  - He trusts Horatio to salvage his reputation
  - He trusts Horatio to do what is best for Denmark
  - He does not trust Fortinbras, who he thinks will take advantage of the scandal and chaos
  - He wants the Danish people to know that he was a better duellist than Laertes

### Activity 2: Character Representation

For this task you will need either a digital camera or your mobile phone, and a laptop and projector for the class.

Organise students into pairs and provide each pair with a character profile.

One of you should choose to be the character and the other the photographer.

Consider the character's positioning and poise and what it reveals about their psychology.

The photographer and character should then join with other characters in the larger group and discuss.

- the Danish court
- Polonius's family
- Hamlet's friends

Students can then upload their photos and have them displayed on a screen using PowerPoint. Discuss which character is the most convincing.

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## Themes

The main themes identified in this resource are as follows:

Themes	Examples in Text
Revenge	The revenge of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras for the murder of Old Hamlet
Family	The far-reaching impacts of family loyalties and traumas
Political Power and Corruption	Claudius's treachery and Gertrude's compliance
Thought versus Action	Hamlet's procrastination versus decisiveness of Claudius
Mortality	Hamlet's consideration of what actions define a man
Appearance and Reality	The role of the ghost and Hamlet's feigned madness
The Meaning of Existence	Hamlet's philosophising on the meaning of existence
Secondary Ideas	Examples In Text
Love	Ophelia's love for Hamlet and her dismay at Hamlet's rejection; Gertrude believed that her feelings were reciprocated ('My love is your love/ That I have longèd long to redeliver./ I pray you [3.1.102–105])
Crime	Claudius's murder of Old Hamlet and attempted poisoning of Hamlet; the actual poisoning of Gertrude; Hamlet's fatal stabbing of Claudius
Insanity	Hamlet's feigned madness contrasted with Ophelia's real madness
Loyalty/Disloyalty	Horatio's loyalty to Hamlet; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's disloyalty to Hamlet; Gertrude's disloyalty to Old Hamlet's memory; Claudius's disloyalty to Hamlet in failing to keep his confidence
War/Fighting	Young Fortinbras' ambition to take over the Danish throne
Friendship	Hamlet and Horatio: Hamlet's admiration for Horatio and his loyalty to him as 'e'en as just a man/ As e'er my conversation' (4.1.120–121)

### Activity 1: Additional Themes

Can you think of another theme (or other themes) that might be classified with the above? Write a paragraph explaining your choice, and include supporting passages from the text.

### Activity 2: The Compatibility of *Hamlet's* Themes with Crime Writing

Write a paragraph explaining how each of the main themes or secondary ideas is illuminated within the context of 'Elements of Crime Writing'. If you feel that any of the themes or ideas are not compatible with crime writing, explain your reasons in single paragraphs.

### Activity 3: Secondary Idea – Ophelia's Insanity

In Act 4 Scene 5, talking to Claudius and Gertrude, Ophelia seems in a terrible way. Has she really lost her mind? Copy and complete the following table using the numerical scale to indicate how her behaviour may be interpreted in light of the accompanying quotations.

Quotation	Cordial/ Ladylike	Sensitive
Where is the beautiful Majesty of Denmark? (4.5.26)		
He is dead and gone, lady, He is dead and gone; At his head a grass-green turf, At his heels a stone. (4.5.34–37)		
They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are but know not what we may be. (4.5.47–49)		
I hope all will be well. We must be patient, but I cannot choose but weep to think they would lay him in the cold ground. My brother shall know of it. (4.5.73–76)		
And so I thank you for your good counsel. (4.5.76)		
Indeed, without an oath, I'll make an end on 't. (4.5.62)		

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## Attitudes and Values

Studying *Hamlet* within the context of 'Elements of Crime Writing', the first question is whether the values that the play reflects are absolute or relative. *Hamlet*, perhaps more than other later tragedies, is a complex psychodrama, as summarised in Hamlet's own terms. The morality of the play is typically relative. After Old Hamlet's ghostly visitation, Hamlet tells Horatio when he says 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy' (1.5.187–188). In a universe full of uncertainty, who can have absolute faith in the

Hamlet's character is defined by his need to act of his own accord, free of external influences. Satan. Part of his reasoning for delaying following the ghost's instructions to avenge his father is Hamlet's suspicion that the ghostly intervention may be the work of the Devil. He needs the freedom to act when he is surer of the facts of his father's murder. However, it is also that his inner philosophical struggle over whether to live or die, or whether to act at all, that his action is worth (i.e. his suicide or death at the hands of others, as well as the death of others) preoccupy him at the expense of any plan of action. At the end of the play, he still hesitates and is only spurred to enact his revenge against Claudius by the latter's attempt on his life.

Hamlet's dilemma relates to the broader question of what is considered sinful in the afterlife. However, Hamlet's own attitude towards life and death is hardly Christian. In his soliloquy in Scene 1, Hamlet equates dying to sleep and the afterlife to dreams:

*To die, to sleep—  
No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—  
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause. (3.1.68–76)*

According to Hamlet, death is 'Devoutly to be wished', or would be, were it not for the uncertainty of the aftermath, 'the undiscovered country' (3.1.87) that represents the content of the afterlife (heaven (or hell) would be like). This metaphor might suggest that death itself and the uncertainty that precede it are things to which Hamlet has become desensitised, but his conscience and the uncertainty of the afterlife still trouble him.

### Activity 1: Attitudes and Values: Crime

When Hamlet is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2 Scene 2, he describes Denmark as 'a prison' and 'one o' / th' worst' (2.2.265–266). What attitudes on Hamlet's part are suggested by this description borne out by the events of the play?

### Activity 2: Attitudes and Values: Life and Death

Choose and carefully analyse one scene in the play, in order to demonstrate what it reveals about Hamlet's attitude towards death. Present your conclusions in no more than a page.

### Activity 3: Attitudes and Values: Christianity and Morality

Is there any evidence of Christian morality in the play?

### Activity 4: Attitudes and Values: Crime

Can you find a parallel between Hamlet's attitude to crime and that of a detective in a work of crime fiction? Present your conclusions in no more than a page.

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A comprehensive study of Shakespeare's use of language in *Hamlet* would require a brief overview of certain stylistic traits is included below.

## Figurative Language: Motifs

Motifs are literary elements of any kind that recur in a work of literature, and create its themes. In *Hamlet* the following ideas form motifs.

## Decay and Disease

Natural decay is a metaphor for political corruption in *Hamlet*, made explicit in Marston's 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.5.100). However, the language also sometimes suggests a morbid sense of humour. When speaking to Polonius about his human conception to 'the sun breed[ing] maggots in a dead/ dog' (2.2.197–198), Hamlet reveals a similar morbidity to his character with his questions about the process: 'How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?' [5.1.168]). On the other hand, Hamlet is repulsed by the world around him as 'an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed' (1.2.139.140) and is repulsed when he holds the skull of the late court jester Yorick in his hand ('My good friend, you shall see that I have kissed I know not how oft./ Where be your gibes now?' [5.1.194–199]).

Both official corruption and the grimmer details associated with death are common, but far less common is the criminal's confrontation with his own guilt, and here again Claudius's **soliloquy**.

*O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,  
A brother's murder. (3.3.40–42)*

Claudius recognises his moral failure in terms of decay, his life having led him to a commit an unpardonable crime, one that he seems to understand he will have to complements the idea of moral failings elsewhere in the text. The ghost tells Ham foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away' (1.5.17–18), the medical procedure (e.g. induced vomiting, cleansing of the blood using leeches, etc) to drain infection from the body. A **semantic field** relating to disease complements Gertrude seems to feel her tainted morality as an infection when she refers to her black and grainèd spots/ As will not leave their tinct' (3.4.101–102), while in the same mother to repent, Hamlet uses the metaphor of an ulcer-ridden body to describe

*It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,  
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen.* (3.4.168–170)

The motif of decay and disease is used to direct complex examinations of character and political corruption of the Danish court.

## Ears and Hearing

The motif of hearing is one that lends itself well to an analysis of *Hamlet* in the context of the dangerous and secretive environment as the Danish court, hearing or overhearing a convenient way to discern the truth. Polonius states this plainly in advising Laertes 'Give every man eare that best that comes by thee' (1.3.74), although there is obvious irony in this advice to listen and learn coming from Polonius. Hamlet's knowledge of the importance of keeping ears open leads him to eavesdrop upon, and 'Behind the arras hearing something stir' (4.1.9), he slays the unseen Polonius. The motif of hearing is also associated with reluctance on the part of those behaving dishonourably, as is the case when Gertrude reacts to Hamlet's volley of home truths by pleading 'O, speak to me no more; Hamlet, thou art mad as the wind: enter in mine ears' (3.4.107–108).

Conversely, hearing can also allow verbal deception and manipulation. Laertes makes her cautious against believing Hamlet's declarations of love, telling her to 'weigh/ sustain/ If with too credent ear you list his songs/ Or lose your heart or your chastity/ unmastered importunity./ Fear it, Ophelia; fear it, my dear sister' (1.3.33–37). Laertes

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as a threat. There is also the matter of Hamlet being the only character to hear the voices, which raises the possibility that hearing voices can deceive the mind, as we are never sure if he is instructed to take revenge by an apparition or whether he is just imagining these voices.

In addition, in this play, Old Hamlet's ear is also the vehicle of his murder when Claudius kills him. This murderous act symbolises how Claudius's corruption is corroding the politics of Denmark. Claudius has been told a lie about the cause of Old Hamlet's death: as Old Hamlet's ghost phrases it, 'O Denmark/ Is by a forgèd process of my death/ Rankly abused' (1.5.43–45). Claudius's discourse amounts to lies and propaganda.

### **Misogyny**

Verbal and action motifs relating to the idea of misogyny are also elements of the play, where macho criminals and tough-talking detectives are prone to verbally denigrate women, the detective genre being a prime example. While both Gertrude and Ophelia's destinies are so easily manipulated by men (Claudius, Polonius, Hamlet himself) compromise their status as a tragic flaw than a source of pity. Neither Gertrude nor Ophelia demonstrate enough agency to qualify as tragic heroines.

Hamlet strikes a misogynistic tone early in the play, in Act 1 Scene 1, when he curses women and aside in his **soliloquy**, exclaiming '(Let me not think on 't; frailty, thy name is woman! Is that infidelity comes easily to women because they are too emotionally weak to resist? Prior to this, Gertrude's response to Claudius's hasty courtship of her is described as a ceremony of state as 'In equal scale weighing delight and dole' (1.2.13), which unfairly makes her appear fickle. As daughters and wives were often treated as the property of their fathers in Elizabethan times, Claudius's words may reflect the historical context, but they also reflect a description of Gertrude as 'Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state' (1.2.9).

Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia, however, doesn't reflect this historical norm. In his love letters in Act 3 Scene 1, he both refuses to admit that he wrote them or that he loves her. Polonius has quoted lines from the letters to Gertrude in Act 2 Scene 2. Hamlet goes on to accuse her of infidelity, suggesting she should retreat to a nunnery, and scoffs at her naivety for trusting him. Again he makes a misogynistic generalisation about women in his caustic advice to her: 'marry,/ marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what/ monsters you make of them' (3.1.123–124).

Perhaps the most significant strain of misogyny running through the play is Gertrude's role as an unperceptive mother. She fails to comfort Hamlet over the loss of his father and instead encourages him by his feigned madness. While she seems to encourage Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship, she also hopes your virtues/ Will bring him to his wonted way again,/ To both your honors' (1.2.100–102). Gertrude's hope for the happiness of the young lovers by assisting Claudius and Polonius in their scheme to spy on Hamlet assists their ill-fated attempt to spy on Hamlet. Her disloyalty continues when she marries Claudius, his father's murderer, despite surely understanding Laertes' potential for taking revenge. Gertrude's actions are either born of callousness or stupidity and it is never entirely clear which. Gertrude's role in Claudius's scheming, being poisoned by the goblet intended for Hamlet, suggests a complex character on the queen's part.

### **Acting/Drama**

The theme of 'Appearance and Reality' in *Hamlet* is supported by a motif relating to acting, which is structural with the play staged by Hamlet at the royal court, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which is the play within the play that mirrors the dramatic action of *Hamlet*. The theme is introduced when Hamlet cautions one of the actors to perform with subtlety and restraint, warning him 'Beware/ Of playing false/ From the purpose/ of playing, whose end, both at the first and/ now, was and is to/ nature' (3.2.21–24).

There are several additional allusions to acting in the text. When Gertrude questions Hamlet in Act 3 Scene 2, he responds by saying that while 'they are actions that a man might play, yet they are but passeth show –/ These but the trappings and the suits of woe' (1.2.87–89). When Claudius asks Guildenstern about the staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet refers to Claudius's performance by saying 'He that plays the king shall be welcome—his/ Majesty shall have his play' (3.2.344), which suggests that Claudius's royal status is illegitimate, being no more than a performance. In Act 3 Scene 2, Hamlet refers to himself as 'this player' (2.2.578) and when describing 'The Murder of Gonzago' to Claudius, he describes it as 'This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna' (3.2.262).

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## War

War is an idea explored in the play, with Old Hamlet's prior campaigns and the army in the background. However, there is also present recurrent imagery relating to Hamlet and others) which characterises it as a type of war or fight to the death. This is perhaps a reflection of history in the Danish military, as testified to by the military send-off and Fortinbras's arrival.

War imagery focuses mainly on the conflict between nephew and uncle. For example, Barnardo says to Horatio, concerning his scepticism about reports of the ghost:

*Sit down awhile,  
And let us once again assail your ears,  
That are so fortified against our story... (1.1.36–38)*

Relationships in the play are discussed as if they were battles. Claudius talks of Hamlet using a martial metaphor in talking about him having 'a heart unfortified' (2.1.100). In the play, Hamlet repays the insult when Claudius walks out, asking whether he has 'a heart unfortified' (3.2.292). Laertes tells Ophelia to keep 'Out of the shot and danger of desire' (1.3.108). Ophelia (1.3.42) may strike down her virtue unless she guards against it. Polonius extends this to his daughter to 'Set your entreatments at a higher rate/ Than a command to parley' (1.3.150). Laertes' susceptibility to the temptations of the flesh, Polonius compares these to a battle.

In his famous **soliloquy** about the possibility of suicide, Hamlet asks 'Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ Slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them' (3.1.65–68). He also besmirches his mother's character by querying whether her 'heart is against sense' (3.4.46), while bemoaning the loss of his father's 'eye like Mars to threat' and threatening in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to 'delve one yard below the moon' (3.4.231–232). Claudius tells Gertrude how they may escape slander 'As level as the cannon to his blank/ Transports his poisoned shot, may hit where it wounds air' (4.1.42–45). Discussing Ophelia's lapse into madness, Claudius also says 'come not [as] single spies/ But in battalions!' (4.5.83–84).

The preponderance of imagery relating to war and conflict supports the central image of Hamlet and Claudius. Hamlet has to ascertain Claudius's guilt; Claudius must find a way to deal with apparent madness, employing others to help him. The purpose of Hamlet's feigned madness is to uncover Claudius's guilt. Claudius must kill Hamlet to maintain his power. Hamlet knows the truth, also realising that he must kill Claudius or Claudius will kill him.

### Activity 1: Complementary Quotes

Find a quotation from the text that complements the description of each motif. Explain how the quotation complements the particular quote.

### Activity 2: Motifs and the Theme of 'Appearance and Reality'

Include the above motifs in a table, like the one below. Which of them complements the idea of 'Reality', or which carries an ambiguous meaning? An example is included below.

Motif	Appearance	Reality
Decay and disease		... what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.332) In Hamlet's most famous <b>soliloquy</b> he concludes by referring to the basic reality of decay that lies beneath the impressive facade of human beings.
Ears and hearing		
Misogyny		
Acting/Drama		
War		

### Activity 3: The Motif of War in *Hamlet*

Complete a mind map to chart the development of this motif throughout the play.

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## Idiosyncratic Language: Puns, Paradoxes and Riddles

Punning is an important feature of the language of *Hamlet*, and puns are often used to illustrate a **paradox**. An early example occurs in Act 1 Scene 2 after Claudius asks Hamlet to which Hamlet utters in an aside 'A little more than kin and less than kind' (1.2.64). Claudius criticises what Hamlet sees as the paradoxical family relationship, for although Claudius is Hamlet's stepfather, Hamlet does not consider him his 'kin' or 'kind' at all. Hamlet continues to ask why 'the clouds still hang on you' (1.2.68) to which Hamlet responds 'Not so, my lord, / I am too much in the sun' (1.2.69). The punning on 'sun' is Hamlet's way of objecting to Claudius calling for judgement on the slain Polonius also employs punning, here on the word 'grave':

*This counselor*

*Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,*

*Who was in life a foolish prating knave.* (3.4.236–238)

Elsewhere Hamlet objects to his mother's remarriage by creating a **paradox** out of words by telling her that 'You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,/ And (would you were) his mother' (3.4.20–21).

Hamlet's use of apparent riddles conceals his meaning from those he distrusts. When Claudius asks Hamlet concerning his ambition, Hamlet responds to the former's own comparison of his mind to a shadow' by stating 'Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs/ and outstretch'd empires, shadow' (2.2.281–283). This is an elaborate way of saying that a person is only what others think they are. Claudius and the other courtiers are real enough the 'heroes' are likely to be no more than figments of the imagination. Hamlet nor Guildenstern appears to grasp Hamlet's meaning. Later in the play, Hamlet uses a riddle to criticise Rosencrantz's inability to understand him, saying 'A knavish speech sleeps in me. I had like to have said more' (3.2.370–371). Here Hamlet is criticising Rosencrantz for being too stupid to realise that he is being evasive.

### Activity 4: Hamlet's Riddles

Consider Hamlet's words to Rosencrantz about the location of Polonius's body:

*The body is with the King, but the King is not  
with the body.* (4.2.27–28)

What is the meaning of this riddle? Consider the Elizabethan context of *Hamlet*'s production.

### Activity 5: Hamlet's Riddles

Seek out an example not already mentioned in this section of *Hamlet* using a riddle to criticise someone he is speaking to. Write a paragraph explaining the meaning and relevance of the riddle.

### Activity 6: Hamlet and Punning

Can you find any evidence to suggest that Hamlet enjoys punning for the sake of it?

## Patterns in Usage of Figurative and Rhetorical Language

Shakespeare's literary reputation is principally attributed to his boundlessly inventive use of language. In this section, we will examine some prevalent literary devices, with an emphasis placed upon how they are used in the context of dramatic tragedy and crime writing.

### Symbolism

The symbolism in Shakespeare's drama plays an important part in establishing a sense of atmosphere. Possibly the most important symbol in this regard is 'The Ghost'. It is the first sign of the crime that has taken place and for directing Hamlet to commit a second crime to avenge the first. The ghost is a messenger of ill fortune for the state of Denmark, as its instruction to kill the king is a direct challenge to the divine order. In other words, the ghost is an instigator of a political assassination.

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Two further symbols, 'Skulls' and 'The Graveyard', support the theme of mortality and ruminate upon the fragility and ultimate meaninglessness of existence. It also serves as a reminder to Hamlet after his death, and further symbolises Hamlet's loss of enthusiasm for life.

*He hath bore me on his  
back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in  
my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. (5.1.192–194)*

The skull also serves as a powerful reminder to Hamlet of the illusory nature of glory. To Horatio 'Dost thou think Alexander [the Great] looked o' this/ fashion i' th' earth?

Where the skull symbolises the frailty of existence and existential dread at what 'The Graveyard' carries a different type of symbolism, that of death as a business that must be done. The gravedigger embodies this sentiment with his irreverence about Yorick's skull: 'A rogue!/ He poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once' [5.1.184–185]) and his mockery of the integrity of human corpses ('your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson's death'). The gravedigger is not unlike a hard-bitten forensic pathologist from a TV cop show.

The frailty of existence and of the human mind is also symbolised in the play by fiction. Ophelia's character. After losing her senses, Ophelia appears, handing out different flowers to different characters, complete with the individual symbolism of each:

*There's rosemary, that's for remembrance.  
Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies,  
that's for thoughts. (4.5.199–201)*

For Ophelia, the flowers symbolise the pain of her betrayal and bereavement, representing her and the death of her father, Polonius.

Another symbol in the play is 'The Sword', which symbolises the end of Hamlet's powers of Denmark, as he, Laertes and Claudius all die at its point. A contrasting symbol is the 'The Graveyard', which symbolises Denmark's (often dark) past.

### Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is stated to be another in order to highlight a similarity of meaning between the two. Metaphor is used twice in the play to foreground sleep and death and the afterlife with a country yet to be discovered:

Hamlet: *To die: to sleep;/ No more; and by a sleep to say we end/ The heart-ache and the thousand shocks/ That flesh is heir to. (3.1.68–71)*

Hamlet: *But that the dread of something after death,/ The undiscovered country from whose bourn returns, puzzles the will/ And makes us rather bear those ills we have/ Than fly to others that we know not of. (3.1.86–90)*

Metaphor is one of Hamlet's main verbal weapons. Hamlet's misanthropic streak is evident in Scene 2 when he says of the world 'Tis an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed. In this scene he condemns Gertrude's hasty remarriage, saying 'O, most wicked speed, to more incestuous sheets!' (1.2.161–162), making the unflattering comparison of the couple to a garden.

Metaphor is also used to support the play's major motif, that of ideas relating to death. Hamlet uses such metaphors on several occasions when referring to the King's guilt, at one point comparing Gertrude as 'a mildewed ear Blasting his wholesome brother' (3.4.74–75). Earlier in the play, Hamlet uses a **soliloquy** to a surgeon with Claudius as his patient, remarking 'I'll tent him to the quick' (3.4.161). Hamlet uses a metaphor when he fails to assassinate Claudius, observing 'This physic but prolongs my sorrow' (3.4.161). In the play's final scene, Hamlet compares Claudius to 'this canker [cancer] of our state' (5.2.311).

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play, Claudius also uses metaphors of disease when describing Hamlet, describing death in England by saying ‘Diseases desperate grown/ By desperate appliance are’ and describing Hamlet’s return from England to Laertes as ‘the quick of th’ulcer’ (4.7.11–12).

## Deviation in Sentence Structure

A feature common to Shakespeare’s plays is deviation from the common sentence structure for rhetorical or rhythmic impact, or the use of rhythm to place emphasis on a particular word or phrase. This allows a character their own idiosyncratic style of speech. A common rhetorical device is the use of the verb. In the first scene, in describing the visitations of the ghost, Marcellus says ‘Tis this dead hour,/ With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch’ (1.1.76–77). Not only is this a turn of phrase on Marcellus’s part, giving a minor character added impact, but it also draws attention to the significance of the event being described.

A form of deviation in sentence structure regularly employed by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* is the separation of words that would ordinarily go together. For example:

- Horatio: *Such was the very armor he had on/ When he the ambitious Norway*
- Horatio: *... our last king,/ Whose image even but now appeared to us,/ Was, like a king, of Norway,/ Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,/ Dared to the combat.*
- Claudius: *Nor have we herein barred/ Your better wisdoms, which have freely* (1.2.14–16)

## Hamlet’s Irregular Iambic Pentameter

Shakespeare’s most common verse form is iambic pentameter, lines of 10 syllables with the second syllable in each pair of syllables. The regular use of iambic pentameter indicates a well-balanced state of mind. In Hamlet’s case, and notably during his soliloquy in Scene 1, the first four lines have an extra syllable (11 in total), while the lines that follow are in iambic pentameter, the variations making it less clear where the proper emphasis on words should be.

*To die, to sleep—  
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause. (1.2.72–76)*

This is an example of Shakespeare’s poetic method being used to convey Hamlet’s

### Activity 7: Metaphor

Find an example (or examples) in the text of the use of metaphor to convey ideas that are complex or abstract. Explain the use of these metaphors in a paragraph.

### Activity 8: Reordering Sentences

Find three examples in the text of sentences that display substantial structural deviation. Rewrite these sentences so they closely resemble everyday speech. What is gained and what is lost by this exercise?

### Activity 9: Allusion

Identify an example of allusion in *Hamlet*. Write a paragraph explaining its relevance.

### Activity 10: Other Literary and Rhetorical Devices

Identify one example of the following literary or rhetorical devices in the play:

- |              |                  |
|--------------|------------------|
| • antithesis | • dramatic irony |
| • assonance  | • simile         |
| • chiasmus   | • stichomythia   |
| • consonance |                  |

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## Structure

The play is presented in five acts, the typical structure used by Shakespeare. Each act represents a different stage in Hamlet's psychological journey. The play's narrative arc is that of resolution, a transition from the murder of the King of Denmark to the restoration of order and Fortinbras' succession at the play's conclusion.

Some of the key structural features of *Hamlet* are described below:

### Prior to the Action

King Hamlet's death occurs prior to the action depicted in the play. In this way Shakespeare sets the atmosphere at the outset with the battlements of Elsinore requiring guards on look-out, and Hamlet's sorrow and resentment at his father's death and mother's remarriage.

The deadly events that occur in *Hamlet* are in direct response to the regicide of Old Hamlet by Claudius. This is the catalyst leading to the multiple deaths in the play and the social and political criminality that characterises the Danish court. This adds further layers of tension to the plot, not least by leaving Denmark susceptible to a Norwegian invasion.

### The Ghost as Structural Device

In the words of Horatio, the ghost's initial wordless appearance 'bodes some strange eruption' (1.1.80), and the ghost has the structural function of **foreshadowing** the dark events to come. When the ghost returns in Act 1 Scene 5 this event sets the course for the whole narrative, as Hamlet receives his father's murder and the instruction to avenge it. The ghost makes its final appearance in Act 3 Scene 4 when Hamlet is confronting Gertrude about her misdeeds. The ghost's purpose on this occasion is focused upon revenge against Claudius and not on punishing his mother.

### Structural Features – Plots, Subplots, Play within a Play, and Soliloquies

Shakespeare's plays consist of the main plot and subplots which bear some thematic relationship to the main plot. The main plot in *Hamlet* is Hamlet's revenge against Claudius, while the two subplots involve Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia and the political tensions between Denmark and Norway.

#### 'Play within a Play'

Old Hamlet's murder is performed twice in the 'play within a play' in Act 3, Scene 3. This serves a crucially important structural function in the **tragedy**, occurring at the midpoint of the play, just before the climax. Effectively, the staging offers Hamlet the proof of the legitimacy of the ghost's story and Claudius' guilt, and provides the impetus for the remaining action of *Hamlet*.

#### Activity 1

To what extent is the play within the play successful in serving Hamlet's purpose to enact his revenge?

### Subplots

#### *The Romance between Hamlet and Ophelia*

The romance subplot involves four characters: Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes and Polonius.

#### Activity 2

Create a timeline illustrating each significant event in this subplot.

#### *The Political Tension between Denmark and Norway*

The political subplot involves seven characters: Hamlet, Fortinbras, Horatio, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Laertes.

#### Activity 3

Create a timeline illustrating each significant event in this subplot.

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### Parallels in the Subplots to the Main Plot

- Laertes and Hamlet are both young noblemen intent on avenging their father, contrasted in temperament and the approach to avenging their losses: Hamlet is thoughtful, Laertes is impatient and impulsive.
- Ophelia's actual madness and possible suicide is contrasted with Hamlet's feigned suicide for fear of consequences in the afterlife.

### Activity 4

Can you find any additional parallels between the main plot and either of the subplots?

### Soliloquies

Another structural device used in the play is its eight soliloquies (Hamlet has seven, Claudius has one). They are used to dramatise the characters' inner conflicts and to offer the audience insight into the relation to the dramatic action and other characters. At the same time, by employing soliloquies, Shakespeare is able to preserve the character's secret thoughts from the other characters.

It is worth paying attention to the thematic significance of some of these soliloquies. The first extended **soliloquy** reveals Hamlet's relationship to his immediate family, and his father's memory. Unsurprisingly, he expresses an idealised view of Claudius, who he considers little more than an animal, and even clings to the idea of a loving relationship. He describes his father as being 'so loving to my mother/ That he might have said 'This phoenix/ Winds of heaven/ Visit her face too roughly' (1.2.144–146). This helps explain why Hamlet's uncle is unfathomable to him, and why he extends this apparent deficiency in his understanding of women generally. Perhaps this distracts him from a recognition of his own weakness. The second **soliloquy** by deferring any act of revenge, a choice that will lead him into deeper conflict.

Sure enough, in the extended **soliloquy** in Act 2 Scene 2, he expresses a sense of self-doubt. He compares himself unfavourably with the actors who, 'in a fiction, in a dream of passion/ Could achieve the madness/ In retribution in *The Murder of Gonzago*. Rather than blaming the political situation, he blames himself for his inability to publicly defend his father, 'a king/ Upon whose death/ My damnable defeat was made' (2.2.596–598). However, by the **soliloquy**'s conclusion, Hamlet has managed to gauge Claudius's guilty reaction as spectator to the play.

The play's most famous extended **soliloquy** in Act 3 Scene 1 returns to the depressed Hamlet. He welcomes the possibility of suicide with the proviso that it would lead to oblivion, without any consequences for the sinner. Uncertainty of what awaits after death is what stays Hamlet. He considers the role of conscience in his present dilemma: he needs to be certain he is guilty before avenging Old Hamlet's death. Hamlet believes himself to be cowardly and is under a great moral strain underpinning his behaviour.

### Activity 5

In what way(s) are the soliloquies essential to the play's overall structure? Write half a page. You are free to argue against the structural value of the soliloquies using the same method.

### Deus ex Machina

Another structural device employed by Shakespeare for plot coherence is **deus ex machina**, which was employed in Classical Greek drama and involved a God figure being lowered on a crane. The phrase now refers to a writer's solution to fill potential holes in the plot. In *Hamlet*, the signet being in Hamlet's purse at sea, allowing him to seal the replaced letter he wrote to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in his place. A second example is the arrival of the pirate ship on his voyage to England, thus making possible his return to Denmark.

### Activity 6

Can you find any holes in the plot of the play that Shakespeare did not resolve?

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## Critical Reception

*Hamlet* studies constitute a sizeable subdivision of Shakespearean criticism generally. This page provides a selection of resources available online to support your study. Included here is a brief overview of critical reception.

### Early Reviews

*Hamlet* was a success from its inception, with contemporary dramatist Ben Jonson comparing him to the Greek trinity of great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Jonson, being a superior comic dramatist to any found in 'insolent Greece or haughty Rome', was not a contemporary critic. Contemporary critics echo the positive sentiment, but neoclassical criticism in the 17th century held to be the first body of criticism based on principles and arguments, and the foremost critic of the age was the poet John Dryden. Dryden both commended and criticised Shakespeare. He praised some of his tragic heroes, the criticism being 'that the fury of his fancy often transported him beyond the bounds of judgment, either in coining of new words and phrases, or racking words which were not in the language, or in a catachresis'.<sup>2</sup> The speech of the actors in *Hamlet* is given as an example of this lack of judgment. Dryden overblown caricature to Dryden. A still more famous and important work of neoclassical criticism is Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), in which Johnson draws attention to Shakespeare's

*Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of the age, who holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life... In the writings of other poets, we often find an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.<sup>3</sup>*

Among other things, Johnson is arguing that there are no heroes in the classical sense. Perhaps relatedly, he sees little moral purpose in Shakespeare's plays:

*He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is much more careful to please than to do right. He writes without any moral purpose;... he makes no just distribution of good or evil, but follows the loose and loosely formed... and so carelessly pursued... His declamations are commonly without any moral purpose.*

Writing about *Hamlet* specifically, Johnson is critical about the plotline of Hamlet's feigned madness:

*... there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not do with perfect sanity. He plays the madman most, when he treats Ophelia with so much rudeness and useless and wanton cruelty. Hamlet is, through the whole play, rather an instigator than a sufferer. He has, by the stratagem of the play, convicted the King, he makes no attempt to punish him, but last effected by an incident which Hamlet has no part in producing.<sup>5</sup>*

Johnson's ultimate conclusion is that *Hamlet* lacks moral purpose and is flawed in its execution. The **protagonist's** act of revenge is neutralised or even negated by the price in innocent lives. Johnson's argument here is a precursor to that of many current critics, which is to question the requirement to execute the ghost's wish for revenge against Claudius. Most critics have been ready to accept that Hamlet was morally obliged to honour his family and his friend, and Claudius, and have identified the **protagonist's** main failings as those of excessive procrastination.

Critics writing well into the Victorian age abided with Johnson's focus on character and the depiction of characters. One example is A C Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1905), in which he argues that Hamlet's procrastination is a consequence of a depression that would be common to other young men (the commoners) facing similarly challenging family circumstances.

<sup>1</sup> 'Critical Approaches', Internet Shakespeare Editions [online] (Victoria: University of Victoria, NaN). Available from: [https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham\\_CriticalSurvey/index.html](https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham_CriticalSurvey/index.html) [accessed 3 Aug. 2024].

<sup>2</sup> Manpreet Kaur Anand, *An Overview of Hamlet Studies* (University of Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765). Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1765/1765-h/1765-h.htm> [accessed 3 Aug. 2024].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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Modernist critics offered more rigorous and imaginative analyses of the play – T. S. Eliot's 'Hamlet and His Problems' being one of the most prominent examples. In the essay Eliot argues that the greatest artistic impact out of the poetic material used for *Hamlet*. Eliot's concept of the 'objective correlative' was advanced in this essay, and is explained by Nasrullah Mambrol as follows:

*For an emotion to be 'immediately evoked' in a work of literature, Eliot contends, 'the objects, a situation, a chain of events' that constitute 'that particular emotion' must be formulated in a way that, when the formulation is presented, it will result for the reader or viewer in a sensory experience of the emotion. 'The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external form to the emotion, precisely what is deficient in Hamlet.'*<sup>6</sup>

The 'objective correlative' refers to the optimum arrangement of the poetic material that will elicit the responses that the artist wishes to elicit from the reader or spectator. Eliot regards *Hamlet* as a failure in this regard. Two criticisms that illuminate his theory is that the play has an excess of emotion and that the essential emotion, according to Eliot, is Hamlet's feelings towards his guilty mother. The play is by an emotion that is difficult to express because it exceeds its supposed cause. As a result, the play contains superfluous scenes (the Polonius–Laertes and the Polonius–Reynaldo scenes). The work of art is less than it should be.

A highly influential guide to Shakespeare's use of imagery is Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935).<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon's work emphasised the primary importance of the language, especially in the conveyance of emotions and creation of atmosphere. She identifies three different types of Shakespearean play, including those associated with sickness, poison, and death. She identifies the play's dominant image as the ulcer. It is Shakespeare's 'pictorial imagination' that creates the play:

*To Shakespeare's pictorial imagination... the problem in Hamlet is not predominantly one of a mind too philosophic or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly. It is the problem of an individual at all, but as something greater and even mysterious. The individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man who is struck by a disease which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless, in its course and development, relentlessly, annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike. That is the perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life.*<sup>8</sup>

This analysis can be seen to refer to a world in disarray, one where laws of nature have been broken.

### Activity 1: The Objective Correlative

Do some research online into T. S. Eliot's concept of the 'objective correlative'. Do you think it adequately explains the integrity of Shakespeare's play?

### Further Reading

For a good article on the subject, see:

David L. Stevenson, 'An Objective Correlative for T. S. Eliot', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 13:1 (1954) pp. 1-10. Available at: JSTOR, [zzed.uk/12742-objective](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3021274) [accessed 21 Aug. 2024].

### Activity 2: Debate

Arrange yourselves into groups of four. On a piece of paper make a two-column list headed 'I like' and 'I dislike'. Write everything you like and dislike about the play, considering what elements work or do not work for you. Discuss your list among your group and then among the other groups.

<sup>6</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, 'Analysis of T.S. Eliot's Hamlet and His Problems', *Literary Theory and Criticism* (July 4, 2020), <https://literariness.org/2020/07/04/analysis-of-t-s-eliot-hamlet-and-his-problems/> [accessed 3 Aug. 2024].

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 318–319.

# Literary Approaches

## Historical Approaches: Formalism and New Criticism

Spurgeon's focus on textual analysis generally and Shakespeare's use of imagery had a great influence over subsequent literary criticism of *Hamlet*, and laid the foundation for the American New Critics of the early to late twentieth century. A prominent formalist text is *The Verbal Icon* (1954)<sup>9</sup> by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, where the focus is very much on the language (dialogues and soliloquies, similes and metaphors, etc.) rather than contextual factors. The use of technical language are also common, one example being 'Shakespeare's Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in *Hamlet*'<sup>10</sup> which explores Shakespeare's use of the language of the theatre to posit the Danish court as a theatrical setting, 'a stage upon which all the major characters, play roles, and practice to deceive',<sup>11</sup> which clearly complements the play's 'Reality'. The symbolic and iconographic significance of particular scenes in the play has been a ground for its students, an interesting example being Bridget Gellert's study of the iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*' (1970),<sup>12</sup> which she discusses the subject of melancholy (an idea that creates distance between Hamlet and Shakespeare) in a highly condensed and pictorial form'.<sup>13</sup> A central example she discusses is Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy which compares with visual personifications of Melancholy from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

### Activity 1

Either refer to one of the texts listed above or research online some background on either Formalism or New Criticism. Write a paragraph explaining the value of these critical approaches to the text of *Hamlet*.

### Further Reading

William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [2nd Ed.] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952)  
 Hugh Kenner ed., *T. S. Eliot; a collection of critical essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1955)  
 Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965)

## Contemporary Approaches

Despite the proliferation of studies decoding the symbolism and lexis of *Hamlet*, post-structuralist and contextual criticism are also commonplace today in Shakespeare studies. Inevitably, the fragmenting of literary studies into many different fields, considerations of Shakespeare's works segmented into different critical approaches. Some of the main approaches relevant to *Hamlet* are:

## Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

There are a number of fields in psychoanalytic literary criticism, the most long-established being Freudian criticism. The reading techniques applied initially by Sigmund Freud to his patients were used to seek out the underlying motivations of the author or to analyse the narrative.

A post-war Freudian analysis of *Hamlet* is supported by Marshall W. Stearns in 'Hamlet and Freud', in which the author considers prevailing responses to Freudian interpretations of the play. He notes that Freud's own interpretation of *Hamlet*, which was that it disguised the Oedipus complex, was that Hamlet was unable to kill Claudius for much of the play as Claudius had fulfilled Hamlet's childhood wish to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Stearns explains Freud's own analysis of Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy: *Reasoning from evidence in the play and elsewhere, Freud concludes that Hamlet is in conflict with himself and that this conflict is the product of a similar state of mind in Shakespeare.*

<sup>9</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1954) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130jn4t> [accessed 4 Aug. 2024].

<sup>10</sup> Charles R Forker, 'Shakespeare's Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 14:3 (1963) <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867805> [accessed 4 Aug. 2024].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> Bridget Gellert, 'The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of "Hamlet"', *Studies in Philology*, 67:1 (1970) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173662> [accessed 4 Aug. 2024].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall W. Stearns, 'Hamlet and Freud', *College English*, 10:5 (1949) pp. 265–72. Available at: JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3000000>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

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Other Freudian interpretations of the play see Hamlet's behaviour and Shakespeare's *thanatos*, or the death instinct. Certain of Shakespeare's biographical details were interpreted, including the recent death of Hamlet's father and the untimely death of Hamnet. The idea is easily supported by the **soliloquy** of Act 3 Scene 1 which has a refuge from the world. Amanda Mabillard argues that by the time of the **soliloquy** Hamlet has encountered Fortinbras and the Norwegian army, Hamlet is better prepared than Claudius as a matter of honour, something for which his death would retain some

Freudian readings of Shakespeare became less fashionable in the 1980s/1990s, with contextualised readings influenced by the group of critics known as New Historicists.

*With the rise of theory in the 1980s, Shakespeare studies began to suffer from a tendency to look too closely at the literary text was 'to fetishize' it, and at least for a while to publish anything that involved close attention to poetry.<sup>17</sup>*

H.R. Coursen argues in favour of psychoanalytic critiques of the play, while believing that an archetypal interpretation of *Hamlet* gets beyond some problems associated with Freudian interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Such interpretations seek out recurring symbols, themes, characters and identify an archetypal or universal significance to these. Among other points, Coursen uses a Jungian framework Hamlet and his mother (as well as Claudius) are opposing psychological types: Hamlet introverted, the latter extroverted. However, Coursen's general position is that a psychoanalytic study of the play is the default one:

*All Hamlet criticism must be 'psychological criticism,' even when it claims to be anything else. It is framed to elicit from its auditors a subjective response. No matter how 'objective' one is in dealing with Hamlet, answer the question with which the play opens: 'Who's there?' The objectivity signals an inevitable surrender to unperceived subjectivity.<sup>19</sup>*

In his essay, Coursen also raises the important question that has influenced much of the criticism: is whether Hamlet should kill Claudius or not, given that the ghost has merely told

### Activity 2

Do some online research into the following psychoanalytic theories and concepts: repression, the Madonna-whore complex. Which, if any, of the characters in the play can be constructively analysed using these?

### Activity 3

Examine Hamlet's soliloquies in which he condemns his lack of action against Claudius. What are the main factors that prevent him taking action?

### Activity 4

What part do you think the idea of mourning plays in the development of the play's characters? Outline your argument.

### Activity 5

Write an essay about the Oedipal relationships discernible in *Hamlet*.

### Further Reading

Detailed background on Freud's theories can be found at [zzed.uk/12742-freud](http://zzed.uk/12742-freud) [retrieved 20 Dec. 2023].  
M. H. Abrams (ed.), *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1990).  
R. H. Hopcke, *A Guided Tour of the Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Mabillard, 'Hamlet Soliloquy Glossary', *Shakespeare-online* (15 Aug. 2008). Available at <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/soliloquies/allocationanalysis.html> [accessed 20 Dec. 2023].

<sup>17</sup> M. P. Jensen, 'Talking books with Russ McDonald', *Shakespeare Newsletter* 65 (2016), pp. 75–81 (78).

<sup>18</sup> H. R. Coursen, "'Who's There?': Hamlet", *The Compensatory Psyche: A Jungian Approach to Shakespeare* (Marlborough: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 63–99.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

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## Feminist Literary Criticism

A constantly evolving theoretical approach towards society and the arts, feminism advocates for women's political, social, educational and economic equality with men. Feminist critics have explored these issues in relation to literary and other cultural material. Feminist critics have also examined the play's complex family relationships and the role female characters play in them.

Given the recurring idea of misogyny running through the play, it comes as little surprise that scholars have found plenty of material to work with in *Hamlet*. Gertrude and Ophelia's roles tend to be viewed unfavourably, with Findlay in her dictionary of Shakespeare's female characters noting that 'Ophelia' translates from Greek as 'helper'.<sup>20</sup> Ophelia's role is merely to assist her (and, in her own mind, at least) Hamlet to get better. When those two men in her life die, she is left to survive without them, succumbing to madness and possibly suicide. On the other hand, her strength can be translated as 'strength',<sup>21</sup> her strength lying in the fact that she is prepared to die for her loyalty to her immediate family. However, the perception of her that dominates the play is that of Hamlet, who sees her as a gullible, lust-driven woman. Hamlet believes that her death is necessary but risks erasing the memory of his father. As Hamlet's and the play's priority is revenge, the play presents Gertrude as a disloyal mother, Findlay concludes that Shakespeare is writing from a patriarchal viewpoint. Similarly, Gertrude's collusion in Claudius's plotting against her 'insane' son, and her support to the new king also reflects this viewpoint.

The two female characters are also victims, of course, included in the list of fatal victims of the play's affinity with crime writing. However, it seems in Ophelia's case that she is already a victim of the play. Scholars have debated whether Hamlet is aware of being overheard on the night of his 'soliloquy' in Act 3 Scene 1; however, Ophelia's presence is perhaps symbolic of her role. Worsley describing the **soliloquy** as 'a spontaneous confession of his thoughts, without the aid of a standing by'.<sup>22</sup> Worsley justifies Ophelia's presence onstage by pointing out that 'Ophelia is not on the stage in any of the texts, so it is possible to imagine a staging in which Hamlet is alone'.<sup>23</sup> If this interpretation is allowed no insight or commentary upon such a revelatory moment in the drama, it supports the view that Shakespeare is writing from a patriarchal viewpoint. Wagner, describing Ophelia as 'Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device' in her article with the same title, notes Samuel Johnson's commentary on Ophelia, Wagner describes her dual function in the play as a convenient hinge for several of Hamlet's analytical scenes, and of providing the emotional impact for the audience'.<sup>25</sup> The summary of Wagner's argument is that Ophelia has more impact on spectators and readers of *Hamlet* than she was to Shakespeare. A similar point is made by Ophelia's neglect by literary critics:

*Though she is neglected in criticism, Ophelia is probably the most frequently mentioned of Shakespeare's heroines. Her visibility as a subject in literature, popular culture, film, opera, and even Redon who paints her drowning, to Bob Dylan, who places her on Desolation Island, and a film which has named a flowery sheet pattern after her, is in inverse relation to her neglect in Shakespearean critical texts.*<sup>26</sup>

Wagner argues that both Ophelia and Gertrude are unsophisticated characters, but that Gertrude is more so by her carnal desires. That is perhaps different from describing them as inconsequential. Both women have an impact on the futures of the male characters. Ophelia's death leads to the deaths of Laertes, Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius, while Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius leads to the final overwhelming tragedy.

<sup>20</sup> A. Findlay, *Women in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 311.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>22</sup> Amelia Worsley, 'Ophelia's Loneliness', *ELH*, 82:2 (2015) pp. 521–51 (523). Available at: *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2454888>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Welshimer Wagner, 'Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14:1 (1963) pp. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2868164> [accessed 25 July 2024].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (eds.), 'Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibility of the Question of Theory' (London: Methuen, 1985) pp. 77–94 (77).

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**Activity 6**

Research contemporary meanings of the following exchange between Hamlet and Ophelia. Write a paragraph explaining your findings.

Hamlet: *Do you think I meant country matters?*

Ophelia: *I think nothing, my lord.*

Hamlet: *That's a fair*

*thought to lie between maids' legs.*

Ophelia: *What is, my lord?*

Hamlet: *Nothing.* (3.2.123–128)

Write a further two paragraphs making a case for OR against these lines having been written.

**Activity 7**

Split into two groups, one of girls, the other boys. Consider the same dialogue in full from 'L' (3.2.119) to 'You are naught, you are naught: I'll mark the play' (3.2.168–169), ignoring the breaks it up in the text. The girls should summarise and prepare to debate Hamlet's part in it. The boys should do the same for Ophelia. After presenting each interpretation to the class, discuss each of them. Which is most important when interpreting the dialogue.

- What do you think Ophelia actually feels about Hamlet's behaviour towards her? Support your interpretation with textual evidence.
- What feelings or response is Hamlet trying to elicit in her? Support your interpretation with textual evidence.
- Is Ophelia humouring Hamlet, in his word games, etc.? Support your interpretation with textual evidence.
- Finally, the class should consider the different possible interpretations of Ophelia's character as portrayed onstage. In doing this exercise, consider creating stage directions to support your interpretation as her general appearance, her gestures, her costume, and her props.

**Activity 8**

Read through Laertes' advice to Ophelia regarding Hamlet at the start of Act 1 Scene 3. Write a paragraph explaining with textual evidence the following:

- What is Laertes really worried about?
- Can you detect any resistance on Ophelia's part to Laertes' advice?

**Activity 9**

Research online the Elizabethan idea of *erotomania*. How far does this provide a context for Ophelia's behaviour?

**Further Reading**

Pamela Kester-Shelton (ed.), *Feminist Writers* (London: St. James Press, 1996).

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1991).

**Marxist Literary Criticism**

Marxist literary theory interprets a text as an ideological representation of the real world. It is interested in a literary work's socio-economic context, and specifically the position of the author towards the issue of social class. Either a narrative will consolidate a status quo or it will pose a challenge in some way to the sociopolitical order. As such the fates of the characters are examined in terms of an impact upon the socio-economic order that the narrative represents.

Peter Stallybrass offers an analysis of *Hamlet* which starts with the observation that Shakespeare was the favourite writer, and what the German political philosopher and economist admired. He resisted a classical theory of dramatic representation.<sup>27</sup> This amounts to an appreciation of the apparent resistance to grand narratives and its place in understanding that the past is not the present (as, for example, in Marx's famous maxim about war; the first instance of which is around, farce). This is what Stallybrass refers to as 'unfixing', and he qualifies the theory by saying it 'depends upon repetition'.<sup>28</sup> Effectively, the repeated mistakes and tragedies of his plot action of *Hamlet*.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Stallybrass, "'Well Grubbed, Old Mole': Marx, Hamlet, and the (Un)Fixing of Representation', in *Marxist Literary Criticism* (eds.) (London: Routledge: London, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

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Most Marxist critics seek to evaluate the works of Shakespeare within a social context of Western cultural hegemony. Georg Lukacs aligned Shakespeare with the emerging nineteenth-century England, arguing that 'Shakespeare sees the triumph of humankind over money in this advancing new world, the oppression and exploitation of masses, and ruthless greed'.<sup>29</sup> Lukacs argues that the clash between those representing the future and those who succeeded them is most clearly explored in Shakespeare's historical plays.

Other critics attribute Shakespeare with an influence in shaping Marx's political philosophy. Shakespeare's influence to the family of Marx's wife, Jenny Von Westphalen, 'a far more significant influence', describes how Marx's boyhood education within the circle of the Westphalens and his exposure to Shakespeare. Conversely, Gabriel Egan makes the claim that 'Marx's interest in Shakespeare criticism', with areas such as 'ideology, dialectics, exchange, alienation and reification'<sup>31</sup> being of particular interest to Marxist critics.

Dollimore identifies a problem with contemporary Marxist criticism in relation to Shakespeare's occasional lack of clarity that emerges in writing across the many subsets of Marxist literary theory: 'Cultural Materialism', 'Marxist Humanism' and 'New Historicism'. Dollimore is pessimistic that literary theory is an overcrowded field that requires careful navigation by the inexperienced.

### Activity 10

Acquire some more background knowledge of Marxist literary theory either online or from a textbook. Write a short essay of no more than two pages exploring how a Marxist theorist might explain Hamlet as an archetypal scapegoat or outcast.

### Activity 11

Write an essay of no more than two pages in which you explain the play's conclusion, with reference to order and Fortinbras' succession as historically inevitable.

### Activity 12

Arrange yourselves in class into groups of two. One of you should adopt the position that there is a 'Sphinx' among literary works that defies interpretation, while the other should make the critical analysis (in this activity, a Marxist one). Take a page worth of notes to support your argument and present another in front of the class.

### Further Reading

Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).  
Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).  
University Press, 1991).

Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays on the Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1985).

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<sup>29</sup> Maynard Solomon ed., *Marxism and Art* (New York: Routledge, 1973), p. 401.

<sup>30</sup> Christian A. Smith, *Shakespeare's Influence on Karl Marx: The Shakespearean Roots of Marxism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Gabriel Egan, *Shakespeare and Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, 'Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism', *New Literary History*, 34 (2003), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/469122> [accessed 10.7.2024].

# Essay Writing Advice and Act

## Key Guidelines:

- Write down topic sentences before starting your essay.
- Focus on the question, and use some of the question keywords at the outset.
- Make your argument clear and concise.
- Demonstrate your understanding of the author's intention.
- Be analytical, not descriptive.

### Activity 1: Discussion

Taking the above guideline into consideration, evaluate which of the following topic sentences is the strongest in answering the question below:

Question: 'Explain the significance of letters in *Hamlet*.'

1. Letters are convenient structural devices for fixing holes in the plot.
2. Letters are an important motif in dramatic **tragedy**.
3. The sending and receiving of letters is a metaphor for sexual activity.
4. Letters prevent an unwieldy amount of dialogue.
5. In *Hamlet* a sealed letter is associated with integrity and propriety.
6. The sending and receiving of letters in *Hamlet* tells the audience which characters are

### Activity 2: Sample Essay Titles

Using the following sample essay titles, write four or five topic sentences for each title.

1. 'In a Freudian reading of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras can be identified with the Id, Hamlet with the Ego.' To what extent do you agree?
2. 'In *Hamlet* Shakespeare uses his contemporary Elizabethan England to represent 14th-century Norway.'
3. '*Hamlet* presents female characters as pawns manipulated by men.' Do you agree?
4. '*Hamlet* is as much an Elizabethan detective story as a dramatic **tragedy**.' To what extent do you agree?

### Activity 3: Critical Analysis of Topic Sentences

How are the following characters represented in *Hamlet*?

In groups of four, decide which of the following topic sentences are strong and which are weak.

Write a brief explanation of your decision under each sentence.

1. 'Fortinbras and Horatio are Hamlet's only friends.'
2. 'Gertrude is manipulated throughout the play by Claudius.'
3. 'Gertrude certainly knows that Old Hamlet was murdered.'
4. 'Shakespeare leaves it to the audience's conjecture whether Hamlet had to obey the king.'
5. 'Shakespeare creates pathos with the characters of Ophelia, Laertes and Gertrude.'
6. 'Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is unjustifiable.'
7. 'Hamlet's real dilemma is knowing what to do after returning home to find his mother and father dead.'
8. 'The ghost is as annoyed at having been cuckolded as murdered.'

### Activity 4: Association of Plot Elements

In groups of four, decide which of the following are elements of the Norway subplot in *Hamlet*.

1. Fortinbras amasses an army to take back the land lost to Denmark under King Hamlet.
2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive from Norway to try to ingratiate themselves with Claudius by spying on Hamlet.
3. Fortinbras talks admiringly about Laertes' fencing skills.
4. Claudius sends a letter to the King of Norway informing him of his nephew's plans to invade Denmark.
5. Marcellus and Voltmand are Claudius's emissaries to the King of Norway.
6. The King of Norway has known of his nephew's intentions all along.
7. A major worry of Claudius's concerning Hamlet is that he wishes to assist Norwegian claims to the Danish throne.
8. Hamlet is given a full state burial according to Fortinbras' orders.

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# Practice Essay Question

## (Exam-style and Non-exam-style)

1. Hamlet's love for two women costs him the kingdom of Denmark. Do you agree with this proposition?
2. Read the passage from *Hamlet*, provided below, and respond to the following questions:
  - How does Shakespeare present aspects of love in this passage?
  - Examine the view that, in this passage and elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare presents a character who is indirectly involved in all the main action up to and including the end of the play.

OPHELIA: *He took me by the wrist and held me hard.*

*Then goes he to the length of all his arm,  
And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,  
He falls to such perusal of my face  
As he would draw it. Long stayed he so.  
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,  
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,  
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound  
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk  
And end his being. That done, he lets me go,  
And, with his head over his shoulder turned,  
He seemed to find his way without his eyes,  
For out o' doors he went without their helps  
And to the last bended their light on me.*

POLONIUS: *Come, go with me. I will go seek the King.  
This is the very ecstasy of love,  
Whose violent property fordoes itself  
And leads the will to desperate undertakings  
As oft as any passions under heaven  
That does afflict our natures. I am sorry.  
What, have you given him any hard words of late?*

OPHELIA: *No, my good lord, but as you did command  
I did repel his letters and denied  
His access to me.*

POLONIUS: *That hath made him mad.  
I am sorry that with better heed and judgment  
I had not coted him. I feared he did but trifle  
And meant to wrack thee. But beshrew my jealousy!  
By heaven, it is as proper to our age  
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions  
As it is common for the younger sort  
To lack discretion. Come, go we to the King.  
This must be known, which, being kept close, might  
move*

*More grief to hide than hate to utter love. (2.1.99–132)*

3. Claudius is part lustful lover, tormented sinner and cowardly killer. Discuss the complexity of Claudius's character.
4. Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents human weakness in *Hamlet*. Consider the influence of relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

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5. With close reference to relevant contexts, consider the view that Shakespeare's political power in *Hamlet* has universal interest and relevance.
6. Explore Shakespeare's presentation of guilt in *Hamlet*. You must relate your contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.
7. The action of *Hamlet* progresses in accordance with 'The Law of Unintended Consequences'.
8. Explore how Shakespeare makes use of setting in *Hamlet*. You must relate your contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.
9. Read the extract from *Hamlet* below and then answer the question. Explore the relation to the tragedy of the play as a whole. Remember to include in your answer Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

HAMLET: (taking the skull) *Let me see. Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that.—Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.*

HORATIO: *What's that, my lord?*

HAMLET: *Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?*

*E'en so.*

*And smelt so? Pah!*

HORATIO: *E'en so, my lord.*

HAMLET: *To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole?*

HORATIO: *'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.*

HAMLET: *No, faith, not a jot; but to follow him thither, with modesty enough and likelihood to lead it, as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?*

*Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.*

*O, that that earth which kept the world in awe  
Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw!* (5.1.190–223)

10. 'Hamlet is an ideal man.' Discuss.

## Sample Exam Answers

For a collection of strong exam and essay answers, see the OCR A Level Exemplar in English Literature at: [zzed.uk/12742-ocr-exemplar](http://zzed.uk/12742-ocr-exemplar)

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## Key Terms Glossary

<b>Adnomination</b>	Repeating a word, but in a different form. Using a cognate in close proximity to the original.
<b>Alliteration</b>	The recurrence of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words in close proximity to one another.
<b>Anagnorisis</b>	The point in a drama where the main character has a sudden realization of their own circumstances and the intentions or identity of others.
<b>Anaphora</b>	A rhetorical device involving the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of sentences or clauses.
<b>Antagonist</b>	The main source of conflict in the drama, the protagonist's opposite.
<b>Antithesis</b>	A pair of statements in close proximity that contradict or oppose each other.
<b>Assonance</b>	The recurrence of the same vowel sounds in words in close proximity.
<b>Catastrophe</b>	The climactic event in a play that precedes its denouement (e.g. the death of Hamlet).
<b>Catharsis</b>	The point at which the conflict is resolved and the audience's emotions are purged.
<b>Chiasmus</b>	A figure of speech in which the structure of the grammar is reversed in adjacent phrases or clauses.
<b>Chremamorphism</b>	Literary technique whereby the qualities of inanimate objects are attributed to people or animals.
<b>Conduplication</b>	A rhetorical device where the same phrase or clause ends two sentences or one immediately following.
<b>Consonance</b>	The recurrence of the same consonant sounds in words in close proximity.
<b>Deus ex machina</b>	A theatrical effect originally employed in Classical Greek drama, a figure being lowered onstage using a crane. The phrase is used to fill potential holes in the plot.
<b>Dramatic irony</b>	Dramatic irony occurs when a character acts in ignorance of information that the author has shared with the reader.
<b>Elliptical phrasing</b>	A clause in which one or more words are omitted on account of being already clear.
<b>Enumeration</b>	The listing of things for rhetorical effect.
<b>Exclamatio</b>	The use of exclamations for rhetorical effect.
<b>Exposition</b>	Summary of the backstory.
<b>Foil</b>	A character whose fate both parallels and provides contrast to the main character (e.g. Laertes and Hamlet).
<b>Foreshadowing</b>	Literary device that hints at a future plot element or development.
<b>Hamartia</b>	The fatal flaw of character or judgement that leads to the downfall of the hero.
<b>Hypophona</b>	A figure of speech in which the writer poses a question (e.g. 'What if he/she then answers immediately).
<b>In media res</b>	Beginning of the dramatic action after a major event has already occurred.
<b>Inversion</b>	The ordering of words in a sentence in an unusual or unexpected way for the purpose of placing an emphasis upon something in particular.
<b>Oxymoron</b>	A group of words or figure of speech that are incongruous or contradictory, but create a striking literary effect when used together.

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<b>Paradox</b>	An apparently self-contradictory statement that reveals
<b>Parallelism</b>	The placing together of phrases, words or clauses that are
<b>Protagonist</b>	The central character in a drama that most of the action
<b>Rhetorical language</b>	Language used to communicate something in a particular way to influence the opinions of others.
<b>Semantic field</b>	A set of words linked to a specific subject or concept (e.g. war)
<b>Simile</b>	A figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another by association or similarity of meaning between the two.
<b>Situational irony</b>	A type of irony denoting events in a narrative that 1) have the manner in which the conclusion is reached is not as expected and 2) a contradiction between what is expected and what actually happens.
<b>Soliloquy</b>	Dramatic device whereby characters make a speech to themselves, giving information to the audience while keeping it concealed from other characters.
<b>Stichomythia</b>	Style of dialogue from Classical Greek drama in which two characters exchange lines of verse.
<b>Synecdoche</b>	Literary term for when a part of something is used to represent the whole.
<b>Tragedy</b>	Originally a dramatic work that attempts to sincerely portray the downfall of a hero faced by heroic individuals; the term is now applicable to plays, poems and novels.
<b>Tragedy of blood (aka 'revenge tragedy')</b>	A type of drama with the plot centred on an act or acts of violence and the consequences that result.
<b>Three unities</b>	The concept that a play should be limited to a specific place, time and subject.
<b>Verbal irony</b>	The variation between what a speaker or writer says and what is meant.

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## Further Reading



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# Indicative Content

## Pre-reading Summaries and Tasks

### Decoding the AOs

#### Activity 1: Key Words

Examples of other key words for different specifications:

AQA: 'crime'; 'murder'; 'guilt'

OCR: 'Elizabethan'; 'Renaissance England'; 'Dramatic prose'

#### Activity 2: True or False?

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

### About the Author

#### Activity 1: 'William Shakespeare – This Is Your Life'

Possibly three of the most pertinent questions are:

1. What contributions did actors, producers or others have in the writing of the final play?
2. To what extent did you invest some of your own character in that of Hamlet?
3. Why did you not want your plays published for posterity?

#### Activity 2: Prior Knowledge of the Story

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

### Hamlet and Genre

#### Activity 1: Classical Versus Shakespearean Tragedy

Two examples;

- The **three unities** of Classical **tragedy** are unity of time, action and place;
- Shakespeare's plays are characterised by subplots which differentiate them from the unities of the Greek and Roman dramatists.

#### Activity 2: Is There Enough Suspense?

The key point to develop here is the ghost's appearance at the play's outset and the suspense over whether it will reappear. A secondary point to explore is given the complexity of the play, whether this aspect of the play does not more resemble a psychological thriller than a star of this context, Hamlet's 'procrastination' is itself a source of dramatic suspense.

## During-reading Summaries and Tasks

### Act 1

#### Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 1

##### Scene 1

1. It creates a suspenseful, foreboding and mysterious tone.
2. The first scene evokes a ghost story rather than **tragedy** or crime writing. Students should consider the purpose is to establish a sense of mystery and foreboding.
3. It establishes calmness and rationality as character traits.
4. The **semantic field** relates to devouring or predatory behaviour. Keywords and phrases include 'a stomach' and 'food and diet'.

##### Scene 2

1. Some rhetorical devices include:
  - **Inversion** (e.g. 'Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death/ The memory be') (1.2.11)
  - **Anaphora** (e.g. 'With an auspicious and a dropping eye,/ With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage' [2.1.11–12])
  - **Elliptical phrasing** (e.g. 'Now follows that you know.' [1.2.17])
2. He is attempting to project an air of a benevolent and patient counsellor, someone who is concerned for his relationships. For example, when Laertes announces his intention to return to France, Hamlet asks 'What says Polonius?' (1.2.59). This projected air is also evident in his advice to Gertrude to seem paternal and reassuring to Hamlet.
3. The student's answer should take into account the ambiguity concerning Gertrude's relationship with Hamlet after Old Hamlet's death.
4. This is an early example of Hamlet's caution, his need for proof, or for enough evidence before acting. He is being told. That is why he is so insistent with Horatio about how the ghost looked and what he said.

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**Scene 3**

1. One **semantic field** here relates to 'flowers' (e.g. 'violet', 'nature', 'sweet', 'perfume')
2. Key points to include:
  - Laertes believes Hamlet is an insincere lover;
  - He argues that there is no future for Ophelia as Hamlet's wife, because he is a p
  - Although he loves his sister, he believes her weak;
  - He believes that fear of damage to her reputation should be her best defence ag

**Scene 4**

1. Hamlet feels that Denmark is looked down upon abroad for its customs, specifically i
2. He believes that he is following his designated fates. The strength of his conviction is i  
*My fate cries out*  
*And makes each petty arture in this body*  
*As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.*  
*Still am I called. Unhand me, gentlemen.*  
*By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!*  
*I say, away!—Go on. I'll follow thee. (1.4.91–96)*
3. It could mean at least two things: 1) The ghost is a threat to Hamlet, and this explains presumably to protect him from harm; 2) The ghost is what it appears to be – that of is clearly criminality at state level behind the murder.

**Scene 5**

1. He pities him, which is significant since it implies that Hamlet may be convinced that ghost of his father.
2. The contextual relevance is to the theme of family, because the ghost seems to imagine order will be the result of Hamlet's revenge. While Hamlet is supposed to hate the fa Claudius's wife and lover, and has to kill Claudius to end this state of affairs, the ghost no repercussions against Gertrude, warning Hamlet against even thinking badly of he
3. Students should analyse the lines closely for the use of **rhetorical language**, as this st special effort to persuade Hamlet, and creating a rather theatrical element to the cor Shakespeare's use of **anaphora** ('Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,/ With wit gifts' [1.5.49–50]), **alliteration** ('O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power/ So to se **exclamatio** ('O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!' [1.5.54]).
4. No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.
5. Some examples:
  - **anaphora** and **exclamatio** ('O all you host of heaven! O Earth!' [1.5.99])
  - **rhetorical questions** ('What else?/ And shall I couple hell?' [1.5.99–100])
  - **anaphora** and **enumeration** ('I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,/ All saws of [1.5.106–107])
  - **hypophona** ('Remember thee?/ Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a see [1.5.102–104].
6. Hamlet has promised to take revenge upon the King, which will be highly dangerous, his plans, even to friends. He does, however, later in the play share the ghost's mess present he is clearly delirious at the ghost's revelation and probably incapable of pas His behaviour is driven by emotions, excitement and the enormity of the task he mus

**Class Consolidation Activities for Act 1****Activity 1: Analysis of Key Quotations**

1. No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion but they can use
2. No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

**Activity 2: Themes and Characterisation**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion. Some suggestions pr

**Activity 3: Critical Appreciation of Extract**

Students should look for how the following ideas are used in the speech to create the stor

- Murder and poison
- Guilt and betrayal
- Attacks on reputation
- Justice
- Political responsibility
- Family loyalty

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**Activity 4: Foregrounding**

One method is by the ghost's presence being central in the first and last scenes of the Act. Another is the dramatic placement of the ghost's off-stage exclamation ('Swear' [1.5.203]) Hamlet that ends the Act. This ensures that the ghost's presence stays in the spectator's mind of Act 2. Students should write a summary of these sorts of methods.

**Activity 5: Plot Summary**

For **(two)** nights Marcellus and **(Barnardo)** have seen a ghost on the battlements. **(Horatio)** However, the ghost appears in the form of the dead king wearing **(armour)**. The ghost mo questioning him. King Claudius addresses the Danish court about his brother's death and Wishing to avert a war with **(Norway)**, Claudius sends **(Volte)** and Cornelius abroad with the sceptical Hamlet meets his father's ghost, the ghost tells his son that he awaits sentencing he was murdered with poison poured in his **(ear)** whilst he was asleep in the **(orchard)**. Th the murderer, and directs Hamlet to avenge him. Both Hamlet and the ghost demand that to secrecy by their **(swords)**.

**Act 2****Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 2****Scene 1**

1. Polonius is sending money and letters of advice to Laertes, and behind this lies his suspicion. Believing that Laertes will not be honest with him, he directs Reynaldo to track down the implications about Laertes' wild behaviour, in order to see how the friends respond.
2. It foreshadows a major plot development. Hamlet will also pose a test of Claudius's guilt in order to ascertain Claudius's guilt from his reaction to the play's murder scene.
3. The fact that she runs to her father in such a state of distress suggests that she is entirely dependent on his protection. She apparently has no female family member to turn to, and her repeated addressing her father suggests that it is a rigid patriarchal relationship.

**Scene 2**

1. Her tone is somewhere between hospitable and ingratiating, but without the servile element, also a 'knowing' element to her suggestion of some remuneration for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In short, she is being manipulative.
2. No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.
3. In general, this conveys the impression of Denmark's political instability posing a potential threat. At the same time, Norway's Old Fortinbras buys off his nephew with 'three-score thousand crowns' for his commission to employ those soldiers, 'So levied as before, against the Polack...' (2.2.156). War and corruption are by no means isolated to the royal court of Denmark, both in terms of political and military ambitions (possibly a ruse to get more money from his uncle) and Old Fortinbras' nephew for carrying out what he has already been commissioned to do.
4. He doesn't oblige her with brevity at all. He expostulates at still greater length on the subject of her father's death.
5. They might not be inclined to, if not for the fact that Polonius produces Hamlet's letter to the prince's madness and proposes the plan to spy on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia.
6. Polonius believes that Hamlet's lovesickness regarding his daughter is the cause of his madness. His strict direction to Ophelia to ignore Hamlet's advances began a process of mental deterioration. He: 'Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, / Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, / And thence to a declension, / Into the madness wherein now he raves / And all we mourn for' (2.2.156-160). Polonius's opinion of him but only because Polonius does not understand that Hamlet's enemies have him as their target. However, Polonius's opinion is short of a full conviction, considering that 'this be madness, yet there is / method in 't' (2.2.223-224).
7. One possible interpretation is that they may create the suspicion that certain characters are not meant to. The entrances and exits of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suggest that there being plots afoot against Hamlet and thus heighten the tension of the drama.
8. Mentioning his dreams may be an attempt on Hamlet's part to divert Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from regarding the subject of Hamlet's ambition. Rosencrantz has broached the subject in his conversation about Denmark being like 'a prison' (2.2.270), and the pair might imagine if they could talk back to Claudius, explaining his odd behaviour in this light, Claudius would be grateful.
9. This tale recounts the killing of King Priam, which may mirror Hamlet's desire to dispose of Claudius.

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## Class Consolidation Activities for Act 2

### Activity 1: Quotation Analysis

- Students might focus on Hamlet's depressive and introspective characteristics while
- One **semantic field** relates to divine elements ('angel'; 'god' [2.2.330]), whilst the other, in contrast, relates to human existence on the earth.

### Activity 2: Key Quotes

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

### Activity 3: Context

Students may want to consider the theme of Appearance and Reality as one contextual factor.

### Activity 4: Adjective Usage

One example: 'muddy-mettled' (2.2.594) means lack of clear purpose or commitment.

### Activity 5: Summary so Far

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

## Act 3

### Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 3

#### Scene 1

- They think that he is mentally disturbed but wary with it, Guildenstern describing how 'When we would bring him on to some confession/ Of his true state' (3.1.8–10). They are wary of his untrustworthiness, as they don't disclose to Claudius that Hamlet has figured out why he is acting this way.
- She doesn't make clear why she obeys, but from her words to Ophelia, Gertrude seems to be the cause of Hamlet's lovesickness. Perhaps Gertrude wishes to hold onto this hope for a better future by Hamlet's behaviour.
- Students should examine her language within the context of her evasiveness regarding her love for Hamlet. For example, she asks Hamlet to take back his gifts because he doesn't love her anymore. 'Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind' (3.1.110–111). She is acting as though she is being unkind when it is the other way around. If there is a shift of tone in her language it is from being receptive to her love to one of dismay that Hamlet is indeed mad ('O, help him, you sweet heavens/ I have seen what I have seen, see what I see!' [3.1.174–175]).
- Students may wish to consider different interpretations of this outburst: Hamlet may be warning himself from duplicitous men (himself included) and a harsh world, or he may be confronting his mother, the Queen, whose beauty attracted Claudius and (as Hamlet sees it) turned her into a whore. This interpretation is viable then Hamlet is telling Ophelia that her own beauty could lead her to become a whore, that she should, therefore, remain chaste. Hamlet tells her to get to a nunnery twice, the second time with more venom as she has evaded answering about the whereabouts of her father. The word nunnery is being used as a slang term for a whorehouse.
- While making out that the journey to England would benefit Hamlet's mental state, Claudius is neither mad nor lovesick and that he presents a threat to the Crown while in Denmark. Hamlet's love for Ophelia then it is his father's murder that is troubling Hamlet, posing a direct threat to the Crown.

#### Scene 2

- An example is 'Speak the speech' (3.2.1), where the cognate of a given word is spoken.
- He wants the performance to be as realistic as possible, in order to make it a more powerful experience and thus affect his response. Shakespeare has Hamlet give the directions at such length that the playwright is airing some of his own criticisms of stage actors.
- Hamlet's lavish praise of Horatio reveals that Hamlet thinks his friend unique at court. Being 'as just a man/ As e'er my conversation coped withal' (3.2.56–57), Horatio's loyalty is a rare quality.
- He seems to not want to draw attention to himself and possibly arouse Claudius's suspicion. This is unclear, because he subsequently seems to go out of his way to make himself conspicuous, aimed at Claudius, Polonius and Ophelia.
- It is probably aimed squarely at Ophelia, indicating that Hamlet does not trust her, suspecting her of Claudius and Polonius's schemes, and wishing to appear mad to keep her off the scene.
- 'For oh, for oh, the hobby-horse is forgot' was the title of a song lamenting the removal of the hobby-horse during the late 1500s. The term 'hobby-horse' was also a slang term for loose women.
- The couplets are outdated and do not flow well, which befits a play that is meant to be a parody of Shakespeare.
- Hamlet is telling Guildenstern that he knows he is trying to 'play' him, but he is making a point to do so.

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**Scene 3**

1. They are weak characters without any loyalty to their supposed friend. However, because of the matter of sovereign power and state security, their acquiescence comes as no surprise. Students might focus on Claudius's exact words to the pair: *The terms of our estate/ Doth hourly grow/ Out of his brows* (3.3.5–7).
2. Claudius needs to be forgiven but struggles to feel repentance, and has to force himself to be a wicked man and he knows it, and so this does not seem at odds with his character as a villain.
3. Hamlet overthinks the situation, believing that killing Claudius at prayer would ensure he is penitent, when in fact the king by his own admission fails to repent through prayer: *He'll remain below;/ Words without thoughts never to heaven go*' (3.3.102–103). The sign is gone ahead and killed Claudius, the latter would not have gone to heaven.

**Scene 4**

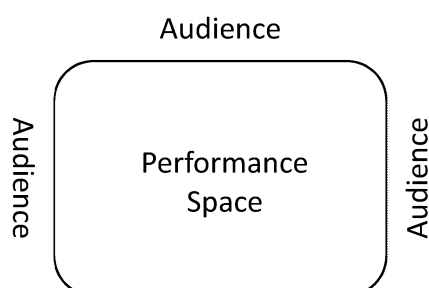
1. Gertrude only says that she will fetch others who can reason with Hamlet ('I'll set the table on fire'). However, Hamlet clearly does something to frighten her when he says 'Come, come, budge./ You go not till I set you up a glass/ Where you may see the inmost part of your question whether he means to kill her and she cries out for help. This reaction justifies the director's omitted stage directions at this point, and so any threatening physical gesture Hamlet makes is an actor's interpretation.
2. Hamlet acts instinctively here, without any hint of deliberation, as soon as he senses the ghost's return.
3. The ghost's return reminds Hamlet that in the previous scene he has botched a clear-cut death. When he says to the ghost that he is 'lapsed in time and passion' (3.4.123) he seems to want for him to launch his tirade against Gertrude than kill Claudius. This would seem to suggest that his lengthy tirade against his mother to be cathartic, and the ghost has done him little good.
4. Hamlet regrets killing Polonius because it will cause a great deal of trouble. However, he says: *so,/ To punish me with this and this with me,/ That I must be their scourge and minister. I will not be cruel only to be kind./ This bad begins, and worse remains behind*' (3.4.199–200). Hamlet frames this as a heavenly-ordained course of revenge.
5. In answering this, students should acknowledge that Gertrude's behaviour raises more questions than it answers. Certainly, Hamlet pricks her guilty conscience with his anger about his father, and this is a sign of his agitation and mortal fear of her son. When Hamlet accuses her directly of complicity in the murder, she questions the accusation. Yet later, after he describes Old Hamlet's murder and draws comparisons between Claudius and his father, Gertrude responds with the distraught: *Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,/ And there I see such black and grainèd spots* (3.4.99–102). Then after Hamlet describes Claudius as 'A murderer and a villain' (3.4.103), she seems surprised. Taken together, these responses seem like an admission of guilt on Gertrude's part, to what, as she does not accept Hamlet's accusations of murderous and slatternly behaviour (she is a duress) is that 'I have no life to breathe/ What thou hast said to me', which amounts to her son is 'not in madness,/ But mad in craft' (3.4.209–210), one promise at least.

**Class Consolidation Activities for Act 3****Activity 1: Analysis of Key Quotation**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

**Activity 2: A Scene from 'The Mousetrap'**

A general design of a thrust stage is below:



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**Activity 3: Group Sketch**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

**Activity 4: Quotation Analysis**

One example:

'Pickers and stealers' (3.2.364) – this answer is in response to Rosencrantz beseeching 'My' (3.2.363). Hamlet replies 'So I do still, by these pickers and stealers' (3.2.364). This is a reference to the fact that made the flock promise to prevent their hands from 'picking and stealing'. So Hamlet is not a hand of friendship, but that of 'pickers and stealers', people who cannot be trusted.

**Activity 5: Rhetorical Questions**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion. Examples have been given.

**Act 4****Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 4****Scene 1**

1. The action motif consists of the silent exits and entrances of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, more than puppet characters, completely under the power of Claudius's will.
2. Claudius wants to control the narrative, as Polonius's murder might suggest that he is the master of the Danish court. The idea that the body may have been hidden or disappeared, should compound the criticisms.
3. She does not tell Claudius that Hamlet has admitted to feigning madness, claiming that 'when both contend/ Which is the mightier' (4.1.7–8). She also lies about Hamlet she weeps for what is done' [4.1.28]), for reasons that are not clear, other than possibly to cast a favourable light to Claudius.

**Scene 2**

1. No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

**Scene 3**

1. He says that 'a man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that will illustrate how 'a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar' (4.3.30–35). He also mentions the splendour of royal processions and addresses to state.
2. The subplot is the sending of Hamlet to England to be executed. Since England has received the body of Denmark, and left looking 'raw and red/ After the Danish sword' (4.3.69–70), Claudius is wary of the consequences of not implementing his order of execution.

**Scene 4**

1. This is another rumination upon the value of human life. The Captain tells Hamlet that in the battle with Poland 'to gain a little patch of ground/ That hath in it no profit but the name' (4.4.1–2). Hamlet estimates, this will cost Norway 'Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats' (4.4.3–4). Life and treasure.
2. Fortinbras is a go-getter, whereas Hamlet is increasingly self-conscious of failing to carry out his sanctioned act of revenge. However, it would be wrong to conclude that he is humble. Hamlet's supposed admiration for Fortinbras is undermined by his own observations that Fortinbras is essentially reckless and foolish. Fortinbras is 'a delicate and tender prince,/ Whose senseless and unfeeling sword/ Makes mouths at the invisible event,/ Exposing what is mortal and unsure/ To all that strike/fall' (4.4.51–56). Even for an eggshell' (4.4.51–56).

**Scene 5**

1. Gertrude mentions the reason in an aside when she says 'To my sick soul, as sin's true slave, doth tell the tale/ Of some great amiss' (4.5.22–23). She is still feeling guilty after her show of remorse for anything else going wrong.
2. It is probable that Horatio feels he is protecting Hamlet's interests, as Hamlet might be in a state of shock.
3. Couplets make the aside seem lightweight, possibly even insincere. This maintains a sense of normalcy about Gertrude's behaviour.
4. Polonius is 'dead and gone' (4.5.34–35), but so is King Hamlet, so maybe Ophelia is singing to the dead.
5. He initially suspects Claudius to be responsible, principally due to the talk about affairs of state and the people (e.g. the mob outside the Court).

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**Scene 6**

1. The letters allow Hamlet and others to express their thoughts and true feelings in a environment where such expression might prove dangerous.
2. The confidential tone of the letter to Horatio suggests that Hamlet trusts him uniquely. Horatio to deliver the letters from the English to Claudius shows that he trusts Horatio, hoodwinked by Claudius.

**Scene 7**

1. The King has two explanations. He explains that he loves Gertrude, and Gertrude loves him 'Lives almost by his looks' [4.7.13–14]). He also tells Laertes that Hamlet has great love the general gender bear him' [4.7.20]). Accusations against Hamlet, therefore, provoke hostility against Claudius.
2. Speaking broadly, Hamlet is keeping Claudius guessing about his intentions.
3. This is an example of **verbal irony** on Claudius's part. He should know very well that 'contriving' (4.7.154), as that is why he fears his presence in Denmark.
4. Very. Laertes embellishes the plot by mentioning a poison that he can put on his sword to cause demise with the slightest scratch.
5. Ophelia made garlands from willow branches, the willow being a symbol of forsaken love. Ophelia's garland after rejection. Ophelia then climbed the willow tree to hang her garlands and she ended in the water with the garlands. The significance of the setting and its romanticism is to confirm that Ophelia's derangement and death was the result of Hamlet's rejection. Another question that arises is that given Ophelia's fall into the water seems to have been a present try to save her?
6. Claudius is still focused on maintaining his position. He tells Gertrude that Laertes will be angry. News of Ophelia's death may have reignited his anger, which he may once again feel.

**Class Consolidation Activities for Act 4****Activity 1: Figurative and Rhetorical Language**

Sample answers:

- Quotation 1: **Elliptical phrasing**: 'He' is omitted from the start of line 10.
- Quotation 2: **Alliteration** on 'd'; **assonance** on 's'.
- Quotation 3: **Rhetorical question**.
- Quotation 4: An example of **oxymoron**.
- Quotation 5: An example of **adnomination**.
- Quotation 6: An example of **chremamorphism**.
- Quotation 7: An example of **paradox**.
- Quotation 8: An example of **verbal irony**.
- Quotation 9: An example of **synecdoche**.
- Quotation 10: An example of **anaphora**.

**Activity 2: Hamlet's Character**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

**Activity 3: The Meaning of the Scene**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

**Activity 4: Semantic Fields**

Some examples of relevant words and phrases include: 'importunate' (4.5.2); 'distract' (4.5.92); 'from herself and her fair judgment' (4.5.92).

**Activity 5: The Character of Claudius**

Students should focus upon Claudius's methods of manipulating Laertes, beyond convincing Polonius's murder and turning Laertes' attention onto Hamlet. Claudius does the following:

1. Explains his reluctance to prosecute Hamlet in Denmark using half-truths – Gertrude's love for Hamlet; Gertrude's popularity with the people. The real reason is Claudius's fear of the public, given the possibility that Hamlet knows how his father was murdered.
2. Convinces Laertes that he is a tough leader and that he loved Polonius.
3. Praises Laertes' skill as a swordsman, suggesting he is internationally respected for it.
4. Challenges Laertes to prove his love for his father by acting swiftly against Hamlet, in return for his father's death.
5. Reveals the full details of his plan to kill Hamlet only after he is certain of Laertes' commitment.

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## Act 5

### Independent Work: Reading Tasks for Act 5

#### Scene 1

- The scene serves several purposes, without contributing directly to the plot.
  - It provides the setting for Hamlet's extended ruminations on life and death which regarding mortality and the meaning of existence;
  - The gravediggers' discussion about whether the deceased (Ophelia) committed suicide surrounding Ophelia's last moments, leaving this an unanswered question rather than a definite answer;
  - Although the gravediggers are clowns who often use the wrong words (e.g. 'salvation' for 'damnation'), their insights into matters of mortality are not any less meaningful. The first gravedigger says of Ophelia's suicide 'she drowned herself in her own depth' and they talk in riddles a bit like Hamlet also reinforces this comparison (e.g. 'If thou turnest him himself, it is (will he, nill he)/ he goes; mark you that. But if the water come to him, he drowns himself. Argal, he/ that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his/ own life').
  - The gravedigger's conversation with Hamlet discloses Hamlet's age. The gravedigger tells him that he started his job 'that very day that young Hamlet was born' (5.1.152–153) and that he has been 'sexton here, man and boy, thirty years' (5.1.166–167). We learn, therefore, that Hamlet is about thirty years old.
- Hamlet asks the gravedigger how Hamlet went mad, probably wishing to learn what leaked from the Danish court to the population at large. The gravedigger does not know.
- Opinions will vary. However, it is not clear how it supports the theme because Hamlet is holding the skull of the court jester he knew as a child. Initially he seems affected by the sight (5.1.194), which means choking back tears. However, he then makes a few cruel jibes, complaining about the smell of the skull and tossing it aside. This mood swing is difficult to interpret.
- The skull symbolises the related ideas of mortality, life as illusory and the meaninglessness of existence.
- At this point (still not knowing it is Ophelia) the pair are possibly curious to see why the 'corrupt' hand/ Fordo its own life' (5.1.227–228) is being buried in sanctified ground, a place reserved for the virtuous.
- A garland of flowers.
- Hamlet is incensed by Laertes' melodramatic display of grief, which he feels inappropriate for their relationship. This illustrates a strong sense of propriety on Hamlet's behalf. However, the edge of the grave after Laertes (leading the latter to jump out of it) seems merely to prove that he stayed in the grave with his dead sister to be covered in dirt as he proclaimed that he would. Hamlet says later to Laertes 'Dost thou come here to whine? To outface me with leaping in my tomb? Do you think I am easier than you, to learn that? No, you shall know that I am harder than you are. But even so, I shall not be moved.' The root of his anger seems to lie in the conviction that Laertes' excessive display of grief is a sign of his lack of love for his sister. An intriguing question arising from this is whether Hamlet is experiencing a deep sense of guilt about Ophelia's death and uncertainty about whether he is doing the right thing.
- The key point of this exercise is that Hamlet's behaviour as things stand is obscure. Students may be asked to consider the contradictory attitudes towards death revealed in the scene and Hamlet's feelings about death.

#### Scene 2

- It is an example of Hamlet thinking decisively on his feet. As he tells Horatio, 'When I have sworn to burn, I have a fated end; / When I have said I will, I will perform it. / And though I know that I shall lose / Myself in this, I will not care, / For I am determined / To prove myself / As I am bound to do. / And so, I will not fail. / When I have sworn to burn, I have a fated end; / When I have said I will, I will perform it. / And though I know that I shall lose / Myself in this, I will not care, / For I am determined / To prove myself / As I am bound to do. / And so, I will not fail.'
- He sympathises with Laertes' feelings of loss of a father.
- Osric is a definite type, a superficial dandy, and Hamlet and Horatio treat him consistently. Hamlet's upstages Osric's excess of compliments towards Laertes, for his own and Horatio's benefit.
- Hamlet reacts to the idea very casually, saying 'If it please his/ Majesty, it is the breath of the fated end' (5.1.186–187), which means roughly 'I'll look forward to the exercise'. Horatio, in contrast, is more concerned. Hamlet subsequently seems to have some misgivings, even after assuring Horatio that he will do it. He refuses to allow Horatio to arrange the cancellation of the duel, and seems philosophical about it: 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be/now; if it be not now, yet it will come. For man has aught of what he leaves, / what is't to leave betimes?' [5.2.234–238]).
- The reference to the sparrow is biblical (Matthew 10:29). Jesus encourages the disciples that a sparrow 'shall not fall on the ground without your Father'. Quite whether this is a reference to the sparrow is hard to determine. Students may advance their own interpretation.
- Situational irony** may be summarised as implementing the law of unintended consequences. Hamlet with the pearl dropped in his celebration cup of wine, but Hamlet does not drink it and dies. Also, in the scuffle Hamlet picks up Laertes' poisoned rapier. Finally, the major example of **situational irony** that is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death as ambassadors at the play's conclusion, and they wonder given the king's death, who will be the next to die. That if Claudius were alive, he certainly wouldn't be offering thanks for the failure of his plot.

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7. Horatio says that he is 'more an antique Roman than a Dane' (5.2.374), and his urge to loyalty to Hamlet. However, Hamlet stops him and tasks him to make sure his full story is not be thought of as a traitor and murderer.
8. Surveying the carnage at the court, Fortinbras observes 'Such a sight as this/ Become amiss' (5.2.447–448). Since the deaths have to be explained (especially Claudius's), Hamlet's emergence the hero will leave less resistance to Fortinbras' accession amongst the Danes.

### Class Consolidation Activities for Act 5

#### Activity 1: Staging

Firstly, students should pay heed to the fact that the play was generally performed using 'traverse' staging. Consider the pros and cons of this type of staging for the duel scene. The best option for a modern production is probably traverse staging.

#### Activity 2: Staging

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

#### Activity 3: Textual Comparison

Some general points to consider while making the comparison:

- The key element of suspense is the fate of Hamlet. Will he survive, or will Claudius?
- Hamlet's words to Horatio about 'a kind of/ going giving as would perhaps trouble a weak man' (5.2.374–375), that he may be ill, adds to the dramatic tension before the fight.
- The dramatic stand-off between Hamlet and Laertes is itself a suspenseful scenario.
- At the end of the play, could Fortinbras' succession be challenged, or result in more bloodshed?
- There are moments in the scene where the dramatic tension seems to be relieved. Which?

#### Activity 4: Context

One contextual factor is the corruption of the Danish court. The bet with Laertes is weighted in favour of Hamlet, betting six horses against six rapiers from Laertes that in the first to a dozen bouts, Laertes will win. A question to ponder is would the bet stand should Hamlet be slain?

#### Activity 5: Key Quotes

Two examples:

- 'crown's quest law' (5.1.23) – coroner's inquest
- 'cozenage' (5.2.75) – trickery

#### Activity 6: Word Connections

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the student's discretion.

## Post-reading Notes and Tasks

### Characterisation and Relationships

#### Activity 1: Match the Quote

- A. Two examples:
  1. Guildenstern
  2. Marcellus
- B. Two examples:
  1. First Player
  2. Laertes
- C. One example:
  1. Claudius on Hamlet: Political Power and Corruption; Appearance and Reality

#### Activity 2: Characterisation and Relationships

- A. One possible example:  
Fortinbras–Hamlet: 'Leader–Follower'
- B. No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.
- C. One example:  
An intriguing comparison might be with Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, with either Hamlet and Gertrude OR Hamlet and Ophelia reimagined along the lines of that of Pinkie and Sybil in *Brighton Rock*, where the relationship is based on expediency rather than love (e.g. Claudius marrying Gertrude for the throne, Hamlet's marriage to Ophelia for other self-interested reason).

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## Character Summaries

### Activity 1: Multiple Choice

1. b. He thinks he is Claudius
2. a. Gertrude
3. d. Horatio thinks Ophelia's strange behaviour while speaking could make some more shocking revelations
4. b. He trusts Horatio to do what is best for Denmark

### Activity 2: Character Representation

No indicative content. Student responses will vary.

## Themes

### Activity 1: Additional Themes

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

### Activity 2: The Compatibility of *Hamlet's* Themes with Crime Writing

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

### Activity 3: Secondary Idea – Ophelia's Insanity

No indicative content. Student responses will vary.

## Attitudes and Values

### Activity 1: Attitudes and Values: Crime

Students ought to consider the term 'prison' metaphorically. Hamlet is frustrated at the manner in which his late father's behalf, often the cause of his much criticised 'procrastination'. In fact, his actions are dictated by his circumstances. Claudius is protected by courtiers and a Swiss guard, and Hamlet could not act on the ghost's revelations. Although others have seen the ghost, Hamlet alone has heard these revelations. If other witnesses to support his story should he confront the King with it at court. His proof would be his story, and Claudius's corrupt court would waste no time in having Hamlet declared insane and confined.

### Activity 2: Attitudes and Values: Life and Death

There are several choice scenes to select. Act 3 Scene 3 is one of the most relevant, as this is where Hamlet contemplates killing the praying Claudius, reasoning 'am I then revenged/ To take him in the purging of his soul, who would have seasoned for his passage?' (3.3.89–91). Clearly Hamlet believes that Claudius's death ought to be a just punishment, but the taking of a life must be justly deserved. He takes death very seriously, and for this reason, Students may wish to refer back to Act 3 Scene 2 and Hamlet's earlier words about confronting Claudius.

*O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever*

*The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.*

*Let me be cruel, not unnatural.*

*I will speak daggers to her, but use none. (3.2.426–429)*

Nero killed his mother for being unfaithful to his father. Hamlet believes the taking of a life is a much more serious crime than this.

### Activity 3: Attitudes and Values: Christianity and Morality

There is a conventional Christian morality evident in Hamlet's fear of the influence of Satan. He seeks to 'secure him!' (1.5.122), seeking divine protection for Hamlet after his encounter with his father's ghost. It is possible that Gertrude's inability to see the ghost after Hamlet has slain Polonius in Act 3 Scene 1 is due to her lack of faith in the afterlife. However, this does not indicate that 'good' characters display religious faith. Hamlet kneels to pray for his soul after his confessional **soliloquy** in Act 3 Scene 3.

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#### Activity 4: Attitudes and Values: Crime

Hamlet's metaphor of 'the undiscovered country' (3.1.87) might suggest that death itself and the things that precede it are things to which Hamlet has become desensitised, but his conscience and fear trouble him. This is perhaps a little reminiscent of the character trait of famous literary detectives suggested by his creator Raymond Chandler:

*P. Marlowe has as much a social conscience as a horse. He has a personal conscience, which*

Chandler's characterisation of Marlowe explains his actions, which are seldom dictated by (Hamlet) more often by his own sense of justice. Marlowe also shares a characteristic with Hamlet: he really means and wants and who he really is as a person. With both characters, the veil is of a bitter, ironic kind. Like Hamlet, Marlowe's veil of humour and his storytelling keep the reader from seeing the real character. This is also a central trait of Shakespeare's creation which betrays an attitude of irony. Marlowe's attitude towards stories is not as pronounced as his tendency to talk in riddles, but it is notable at several points, such as the recital of Aeneas' tale to Dido in Act 2 Scene 2. The recital itself makes him appear witty and charming, a performance designed to mask his intention to expose Claudius. Hamlet and Marlowe's attitudes may be described as blasé attitudes in order to deceive hint at an interesting parallel between the milieus of Shakespeare's **tragedy** and twentieth-century noir fiction.

### The Writer's Use of Language

#### Activity 1: Complementary Quotes

One example:

Disease – Laertes: 'The canker galls the infants of the spring/ Too oft before their buttons

Explanation:

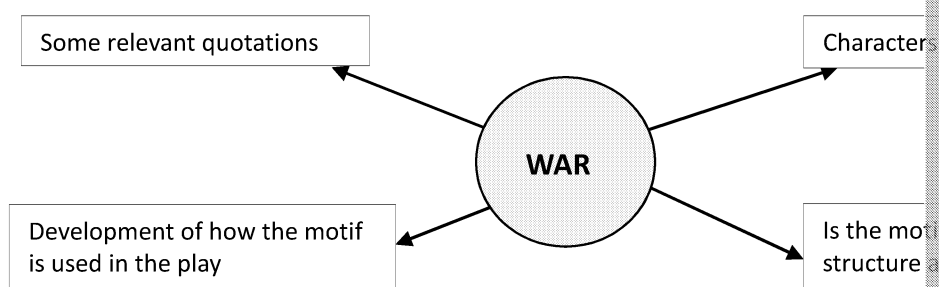
Laertes is warning Ophelia off Hamlet. The 'canker' refers to a worm, and it 'galls' by breaking the skin. The 'infants of the spring' is a metaphor for the first spring flowers, and 'buttons' are their unopened buds. Laertes is warning Ophelia that Hamlet is an innocent bud, but the worm that will eat her from inside is her love for Hamlet, who, being a worm, is a canker. The metaphor for her heartbroken state is the flower bud which has been eaten by the worm, leaving her empty. In addition, should she become pregnant to Hamlet out of wedlock, it would lead to her death. The metaphorical worm would also have broken her hymen, taking her virginity, and leaving her a virgin.

#### Activity 2: Motifs and the Theme of 'Appearance and Reality'

No indicative content. Example is provided in resource.

#### Activity 3: The Motif of War in Hamlet

A mind map such as the one below may be of use here.



#### Activity 4: Hamlet's Riddles

Hamlet's words to Rosencrantz are related to Elizabethan legal doctrine. 'The body is with the king is the lawmaker and enforcer of the land. However, 'but the king is not with the body' continuing paying the king's taxes after his death, because the king is more than a person - an immutable representation of law. When Guildenstern queries this and says 'A thing, my lord, is nothing'.

This means that a king is an idea of the immutable representation of law, but this king – Claudius – will soon be no more than a dead body.

#### Activity 5: Hamlet's Riddles

A good place to look would be Act 2 Scene 2, where Hamlet repeatedly belittles the dumb

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<sup>33</sup> MacShane, Frank (ed.) *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) p. 45

### Activity 6: Hamlet and Punning

In support of this and related to punning is Hamlet's use of sexual innuendo when talking of his performance in Act 3 Scene 2. When Ophelia tells Hamlet that he is 'keen' – meaning witty – using the metaphor 'It would cost you a groaning to take off mine/ edge' (3.2.273–274). Later, in the same scene, Hamlet let fly with a barrage of puns when considering whether one of the skulls might be

*Hum, this fellow might  
be in 's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes,  
his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers,  
his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines and the  
recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full  
of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more  
of his purchases, and double ones too, than the  
length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very  
conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box,  
and must th' inheritor himself have no more, ha?* (5.1.105–114)

In this instance the puns develop within a **semantic field** relating to the legal profession. For example, the documents kept together on the same paper, while the pun on 'indentures' clearly refers to the lawyer's only indentures now are his teeth. The extract also shows how Hamlet apparently

### Activity 7: Metaphor

One metaphor to consider:

'an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it more than we  
for degeneration.

### Activity 8: Reordering Sentences

Some possible examples to rewrite include:

- Ghost to Hamlet: 'But virtue, as it never will be moved,/ Though lewdness court it in her ways/  
to a radiant angel linked,/ Will sate itself in a celestial bed' And prey on garbage.' (1.5.71–77)
- Hamlet to First Player: 'I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it/ was never acted before/  
the play, I remember, pleased not the million:/ 'twas caviary to the general.' (2.2.458–461)

### Activity 9: Allusion

Hamlet: 'Make Ossa like a wart' (5.1.300) – Ossa is a mountain in Greece.

### Activity 10: Other Literary and Rhetorical Devices

Two examples:

**Simile:** 'The leprous distilment, whose effect/ Holds such an enmity with blood of man/  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through/ The natural gates and alleys of the body,/ And  
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,/ The thin and wholesome blood' (1.5.71–77).

**Antithesis:** 'To be or not to be—that is the question:/ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/  
And, by opposing, end them.' (3.1.64–68)

### Structure

#### Activity 1

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

#### Activity 2

The first three incidents to include in the timeline:

Act 1 Scene 3:

- Laertes warns Ophelia off Hamlet.
- Ophelia tells Polonius of Hamlet's romantic interest in her ('He hath, my lord, of late  
affection to me' [1.3.108–109]).
- Polonius orders Ophelia not 'to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet' (1.3.143).

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**Activity 3**

The first three incidents to include in the timeline:

**Act 1 Scene 1**

- Horatio's mention of the past threat to Denmark 'by Fortinbras of Norway' (1.1.94), the threat of disputed lands.
- Horatio's mention of Young Fortinbras' plan to reverse Norway's defeat and losses.

**Act 1 Scene 2**

- Claudius's address to the Danish court, informing it of a letter written to Young Fortinbras about his nephew's plot, the letter to be delivered in person by Cornelius and Voltemand.

**Activity 4**

One example:

There is a parallel between the roles of Polonius and Osric, both dupes of Claudius who plot against Hamlet (the first by spying upon him with Ophelia, the second by presenting Hamlet with the king's letter to Laertes). Both are in a similar position in being unaware that the king's intentions might be to kill him.

**Activity 5**

The soliloquies contribute to the play's structure in the following ways:

1. Dramatic focus: They keep the dramatic focus on the ghost's instruction to Hamlet, and on Hamlet's response to it.
2. Structural unity: The soliloquies occur at important points in the drama, as though they were scenes that advance the plot. The first **soliloquy** occurs before Hamlet has seen the ghost, and so is a response to the ghost's instruction. The second **soliloquy** occurs just after the ghost's instruction, and Hamlet after much self-criticism, thinks of a plan to trap Claudius. The third **soliloquy** occurs after Hamlet's first meeting with his mother, in which he is criticising himself for inaction and stating the need to establish proof against Claudius. The fourth **soliloquy** occurs after Hamlet's second meeting with his mother, in which he is querying the worth of existence and assessing the justification for suicide. The fifth **soliloquy** occurs after Hamlet's third meeting with his mother. The sixth **soliloquy** occurs in his mother's closet, addressing her. The seventh **soliloquy** occurs in his mother's closet, addressing Gertrude. Hamlet's seventh **soliloquy** is in response to young Fortinbras' imminent invasion of Denmark, in which he compares his own inaction unfavourably to Fortinbras' bravery.
3. Motif development: The soliloquies allow for the introduction and development of the play's major motifs and structural devices. For example, the first **soliloquy** introduces the motif of decay/dissolution of the world as 'an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature/ That so foul a kind of death.' As another example, the third **soliloquy** also develops the acting motif, and his seventh **soliloquy** introduces the motif of the play's structure.

**Activity 6**

One example:

There is never any resolution to whether or not the Queen was an accessory to the murder of King Hamlet. When Gertrude describes Claudius as 'A murderer and a villain' (3.4.110), Gertrude is distressed and wants to know what Hamlet is thinking. She is neither surprised by the accusation nor refutes it. Hamlet simply abandons the subject after this point.

**Critical Reception****Activity 1: The Objective Correlative**

No indicative content: Student responses will vary. For an article hostile to Eliot's formula of the Objective Correlative, see 'Eliot's Impudence: *Hamlet*, Objective Correlative, and Formulation', *Criticism*, 49:2 (2007) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23128735> [accessed 23 Oct. 2024].

**Activity 2: Debate**

No indicative content. Student responses will vary.

**Literary Approaches****Activity 1**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

**Activity 2**

Use of psychoanalytic theory may help in interpreting the following characterisations:

- Madonna-whore complex: Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude and Ophelia; his revulsion at his mother's sexual relationship with Claudius.
- Oedipus complex/ Electra complex: Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude; Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet.
- Repression: Hamlet's repressed desire for Gertrude is not sufficient for him to kill Claudius. Claudius won't allow him to act because Claudius (as his mother's lover) is his alter ego.

Only after Gertrude's death can Hamlet launch himself at Claudius with both the rapier and the word. Additionally, Gertrude may be allowed to keep her unconscious desire for her son repressed, as she is his mother and his dead husband.

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**Activity 3**

Some practical difficulties and possible psychological factors have already been mentioned. Draw their own conclusions from this material in explaining Hamlet's procrastination; how they explain. One approach is to draw some evidence from Hamlet's second **soliloquy** in Act 2. His lack of passion compared to the performance of an actor. His lack of passion suggests too little and insufficient hatred toward Claudius. He tries to work himself up into a passion like an actor. At this point that he has to calm down, step back and take another approach:

*About, my brains!—Hum, I have heard  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaimed their malefactions;  
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ. (2.2.617–623)*

A simple (or simplistic) explanation for Hamlet's inaction, therefore, is the want of a viable

**Activity 4**

The idea of mourning (and the failure of it) plays a large part in psychoanalysis and within that part in character development in the following ways:

- It is Gertrude's behaviour that sends Hamlet awry. Hamlet is the repository of his father's grief. He mourns Old Hamlet. Gertrude fails to demonstrate love for her son.
- Gertrude's failure to mourn her dead husband is symptomatic of her deeper problem with Claudius between her husband and his brother.
- Gertrude's marriage to Claudius allows her to avoid mourning her husband. Her lack of mourning her unconscious physical attraction towards her son Hamlet. The remarriage to Claudius (her husband) allows her to avoid confronting both her grief and her forbidden incestuous attraction to her son.
- The 'lost objects' that Hamlet mourns are both his father and mother.
- There is no healing process without mourning. Hamlet cannot mourn until his father's revenge leads to loss of desire for love with Ophelia. He rejects her brutally, even alienating her from his ill-fated course of action.
- For Ophelia's part, her inability to marry Hamlet and his rejection of her causes her grief and descent into insanity. Her fractured mental state allows her to cope with Hamlet's attack on her by healing herself by confronting and mourning her loss.

**Activity 5**

Key psychological concepts to include are:

- Mourning (Hamlet; Gertrude; Ophelia)
- The Oedipus complex (Hamlet; Gertrude)
- The Madonna-whore complex (Gertrude; Ophelia)
- Repression (Hamlet; Gertrude; Ophelia)

**Activity 6**

Hint:

In Elizabethan times 'nothing' is a slang term for female genitalia. Through Hamlet's male gaze, Ophelia is seen as 'nothing' between Ophelia's legs (i.e. she has nothing to offer him sexually or otherwise).

**Activity 7**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

**Activity 8**

Laertes is clearly worried about Ophelia's reputation as it affects that of their family. Ophelia follows his advice with meek obedience, but warns him against potential hypocrisy regarding how he will behave on his visit to Paris.

*Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,  
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,  
Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads  
And recks not his own rede. (1.3.51–55)*

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**Activity 9**

Ophelia's behaviour and appearance are perhaps intended by Shakespeare to be characterised as a response to frustrated love identified in Victorian England as biological and emotional in nature. She is bedecked in flowers with wild flowing hair, and speaks using flamboyant metaphors and figures of speech that seemed compatible with the idea of erotomania to Elizabethan audiences.

**Activity 10**

Key points to consider:

- The corruption of court and expedient leadership of Claudius represents the failure of the state.
- Claudius (described by Hamlet as 'A cutpurse of the empire and the rule' [3.4.113]) takes ownership of the reigning Queen Gertrude, and depriving her son of the throne and power in a way that a Marxist analysis would recognise. Similarly, all of Claudius's decisions are intended to protect his power and status.
- Hamlet may be thought of as the archetypal outsider in his recognition of Claudius's actions and associated failings. In avenging his father's murder he must expose and destroy the state.
- However, Hamlet is highly popular with the Danish public, a fact that may compromise his effectiveness.

**Activity 11**

Key points:

- Fortinbras offers a renewal of hope in Denmark's structure of government.
- Horatio and Hamlet's positive view of Fortinbras suggests his role as potential saviour.
- A Marxist critique of this conclusion is that Shakespeare believes poor governance to be a result of individual failings rather than systemic in nature.

**Activity 12**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

## Essay Writing Advice and Activities

**Activity 1: Discussion**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

**Activity 2: Sample Essay Titles**

Some examples of topic sentences (one per question):

1. Fortinbras is considered the fitting successor to the throne by Hamlet and Horatio. He is a more effective ruler than Claudius.
2. The Victorian concept of *erotomania* influences the characterisation of Ophelia.
3. Gertrude and Ophelia are used as pawns in Claudius's plotting against Hamlet, without their own true intentions.
4. Hamlet must find evidence of Claudius's guilt before he can take his revenge against him.

**Activity 3: Critical Analysis of Topic Sentences**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

**Activity 4: Association of Plot Elements**

No indicative content. Answer is entirely at the students' discretion.

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