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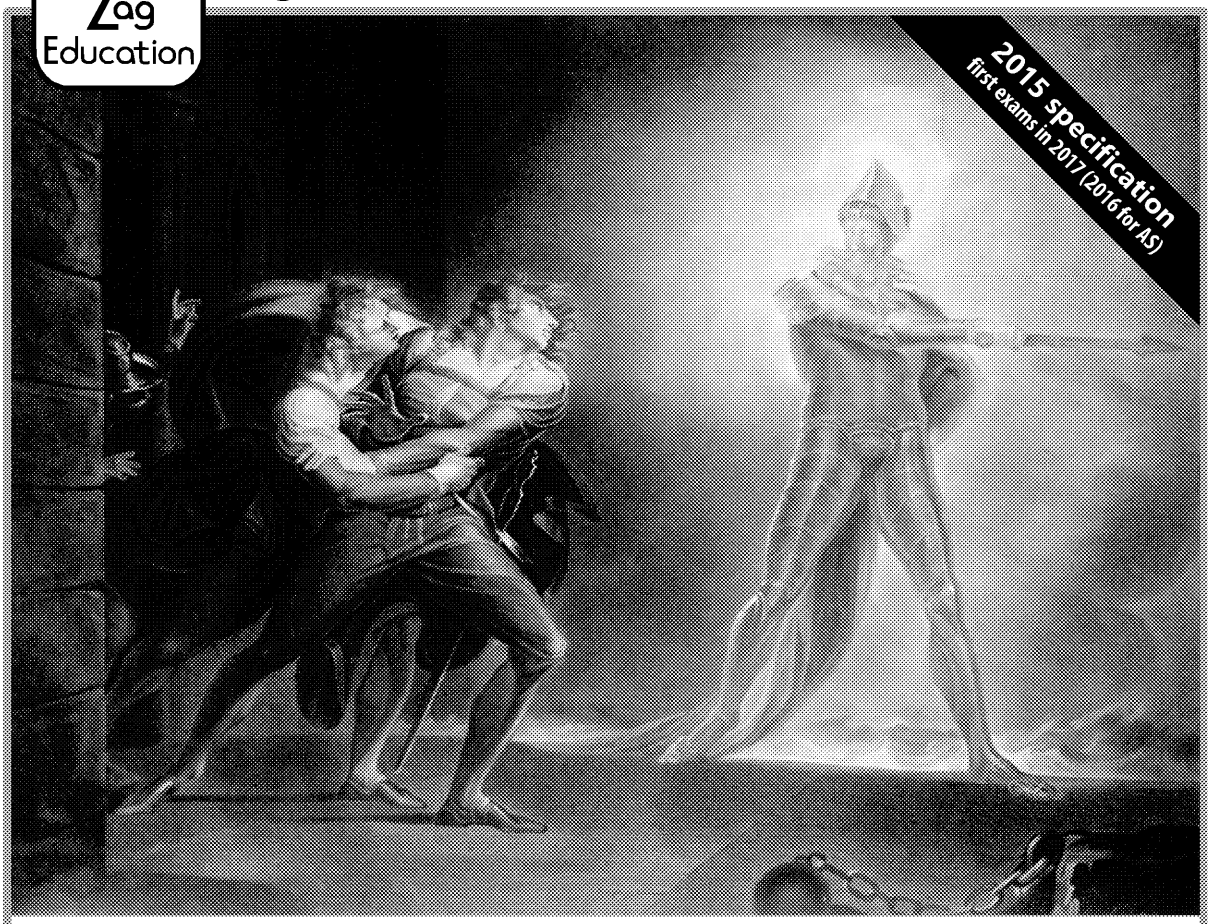


# *Hamlet*

## Comprehensive Guide for AS and A Level

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**POD 9356**

# Contents

**Thank You for Choosing ZigZag Education** ..... **Teacher Feedback Opportunity** ..... **Terms and Conditions of Use** ..... **Teacher's Introduction** ..... **The Background to *Hamlet* (AO3)** ..... **The Critical Reception of *Hamlet* (AO5)** .....
Neoclassical Criticism .....
Romantic Criticism .....
Early Twentieth-century Criticism .....
Late Twentieth-century Criticism .....
***Hamlet*: One-page Plot Summary** .....
**Detailed Scene Analysis (AO2)** .....
Act 1 .....
Act 2 .....
Act 3 .....
Act 4 .....
Act 5 .....
**Character Analysis** ..... **Key Relationships between Characters** ..... **Genre, Form and Structure (AO2)** ..... **Shakespeare's Use of Language (AO2)** ..... **Themes in *Hamlet*** ..... **The Context of *Hamlet* (AO3)** ..... **Literary Approaches to *Hamlet* (AO5)** ..... **Glossary** ..... **Further Reading** ..... **Suggested Answers** .....

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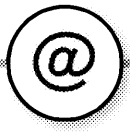

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then the teacher should remove or adapt this material to avoid this unless it is the t
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suitability of coursework/project publications and to decide which pages, if any, to l

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the material, if any, to provide to the students and which parts to use as backgroun
Likewise, the teacher must determine what additional material is required to cover
cover each specification point to the correct depth.

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# Teacher's Introduction

This study guide is intended to support the whole-class study of *Hamlet* by Willia
for line references in this guide is the New Cambridge Shakespeare, updated edi
/2325/1–/2. Line numbers in other editions may differ. Students should use ann
most of the archaisms in the text. Students will find the detailed scene analysis s
have a copy of the play open next to them.

*Hamlet* is a rewarding text to teach because it combines universally profound an
action and tension of a well-made thriller, expressed in some of the finest langua
students enjoy talking and writing about the issues of life, death, love, sex and su
and respond well to the subtleties of Shakespeare's style. The complexity of the
of commentary and criticism, and this guide is intended to provide signposts and
shape their responses.

The guide has not been tailored to one particular specification but has been writ
demands of the following examinations.

| Board and Level | Brief summary of the type of question |
|---|---|
| AQA (B) A level | Essay topic within the context of the 'crime writing' |
| Edexcel A Level | Essay topic |
| Eduqas A Level | (a) Close analysis of a passage provided AND (b) Ess |
| OCR A Level | (a) Close analysis of a passage provided AND (b) Ess |
| OCR AS Level | Essay topic |
| WJEC A Level | (a) Close analysis of a passage provided AND (b) Ess |

**The assessment objectives (AOs)**
The assessment objectives for A and AS Level English Literature are set by Ofqua
boards, and have been adopted by the Welsh Government for the WJEC examina
information within the guide have been created to support students to meet the

**What is included in the guide** (also see contents p. i)
The guide covers the following areas of study. AO1 is common to almost all wor

1. Key themes relating to typical essay questions (all five AOs involved).
2. Close, evaluative analysis of Shakespeare's language (mainly AO1 and AO2).
   examiners within essay answers even where a set passage for separate anal
   not provided.
3. Key contextual elements (mainly AO3; also AO5) and connections with othe
4. Examples of the range of interpretations of *Hamlet* offered by different schoo

**The assessment objectives (AOs)**

- **AO1:** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and 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 literary texts are written and received.
- **AO4:** Explore connections across literary texts.
- **AO5:** Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

**Using the guide**

Students should read the whole play independently before starting to study it. S
referred to as needed, rather than after all the scenes have been discussed. Indi
where appropriate for the question sections that run throughout the guide. Ma
range of AOs: only the main AOs are signalled in the text, where appropriate. Ca
the guide and icons are used to signal subtopics as follows:


**Further reading**


**Key terms**


**Debate prompt**


**Active learning task**

# The Background to *Haml*

## William Shakespeare

Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616. For most of his life Queen Elizabeth I was the English monarch. Elizabeth I was born in 1533, and reigned from 1558 until her death in 1603. Her long reign (almost 45 years) is known by historians as the Elizabethan period. After her death James I became King of England (and Scotland) until his death in 1625. This period (1603–1625) is known as the Jacobean period. The period 1500–1600 is termed 'the sixteenth century' and the early 1600s as 'the early seventeenth century.' The Elizabethan and Jacobean ages are also referred to as the English Renaissance or the Early Modern period. When studying *Hamlet* (written around 1600, as explained below) it is simplest to see Shakespeare as an **Elizabethan dramatist**, writing in the **Elizabethan period**.

Although Shakespeare is one of the most important writers in the whole of English literature, we have little detailed information about his life, although the broad outline is known. The written records that we take for granted today were preserved) in the Elizabethan period, and a lot of detective work has gone into dis Shakespeare's life. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, in April 1564. S tradesman and a town official; his mother was the daughter of a farmer and there well-educated. He married Anne Hathaway (a farmer's daughter, of whom we kn much is known about his early life until 1592, by which time he had established h playwright and poet. He helped to establish a group of actors, The Lord Chamber Men after 1603, supported by King James I. It is thought that Shakespeare divide London until his death in 1616 at the age of 52.

Shakespeare wrote almost 40 plays as well as a large number of sonnets and othe plays is unknown since there is some evidence of plays written by Shakespeare w

## Hamlet: the first performance and the text

It is impossible to set an exact date for the first performance of *Hamlet*, as the re of such an event (for example, newspaper reviews or advertisements) did not ex research has gone into this question, with scholars taking into account reference period and references **within** *Hamlet* to (for example) the boy actors' companies until 1600. The most likely date is probably **sometime between 1600 and 1601**. play was first performed at the Globe Theatre in London, but again we cannot be

Shakespeare wrote his plays for his company of players to act, and he was more on stage than with producing a finished or final play script. He wrote scenes for p and so not every performance would use the same script. Actors had their own p learn, but not the parts of the other actors, except their cues.

The earliest printed versions of *Hamlet* that have been discovered are the First Qu (1604), and the First Folio (1623). Quarto and Folio are references to the size of th (including the text that you are using today) are based on these early versions. Th some extent. The First Quarto (sometimes called 'the bad quarto') is a poor-qualit and it may have been a 'pirated' version – although another theory is that it was in The Second Quarto ('the good quarto') is a superior version printed from Shakespe ignores Shakespeare's corrections, including some passages which Shakespeare ha version. This Second Quarto may have been authorised by Shakespeare's compan

poor-quality version. The First Folio is a published collection of 36 of Shakespeare's
based (in part) on a more accurate corrected version of Shakespeare's original ma

Editors of modern texts of *Hamlet* have drawn upon all three of the versions liste
carefully edited, scholarly editions are slightly different, with different line numb
normally considered to be too long to perform on stage, and over the years direc
to decide which sections to cut out. For example, in the early part of the twentie
was often cut, because the jokes of the rustic gravedigger were not thought to fi
rest of the play.

**Further reading: the original texts of *Hamlet***
Philip Edwards (Ed.), *Hamlet*, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambri
Introduction, pp. 8–32

## *The significance and continued popularity of H*

*Hamlet* is undoubtedly one of the world's best-known plays. It has been translat
is always in performance somewhere in the world. There have also been many fi
these stage and film performances are discussed in the Context section of this gu

*Hamlet* is famous for a complex mixture of reasons, but three important ones ca
examines some of the most serious and profound issues that human beings have
inevitable fate of all of us – our death – and the philosophical speculations assoc
Secondly, the story has the excitement and tension of a well-crafted thriller. Thi
importantly) the language that Shakespeare uses has a power, inventiveness and
an audience today, despite the inevitable changes in the English language that ha
years since the play was first performed.

# The Critical Reception of *Ha*

## Neoclassical Criticism

The historical term 'neoclassical' (new classical) refers to the period from 1660 to
thinkers of the period were heavily influenced by the classical style of the Roman
philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) produced a very detailed analysis of the elem
a work of literary theory called *Poetics.* Early commentators on *Hamlet* such as J
Aristotle's principles to their analysis of *Hamlet*, but there is no evidence that Sh
*Poetics* or used Aristotle's theories. Evelyn found *Hamlet* too coarse and was off
and the ungentlemanly struggle between Hamlet and Laertes at Ophelia's graves
**Jeremy Collier** (1650–1726), author of the pamphlet a *Short View of the Immora*
*English Stage* (1698), disliked the play's sexual and religious themes, which he th
popular: a diary entry by the diarist **Samuel Pepys** (1633–1703) for Wednesday 2
he enjoyed seeing a performance of the play.

## Romantic Criticism

The 'Romantic Period' was a movement seen in literature, painting, music and many other areas of life from the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century. It rejected the ordered, rational world of neoclassicism and instead stressed the emotions and spontaneous individual responses. The publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and S
is generally seen as the starting point of the English Romantic movement in litera
interested in the play as a study of character and emotion rather than as a drama
judged according to Aristotelian values. The complex, **ambiguous** personality of
critics. The poet **Coleridge** (1772–1834) admired the way that *Hamlet* raised pro
death, referring to Shakespeare's 'deep and accurate science in mental philosoph
**Hazlitt** (1778–1830) called Hamlet 'the prince of philosophical speculators'.

## Early Twentieth-century Criticism

Twentieth-century critics of *Hamlet* continued to focus on the motivation and ch
specific psychological theory was applied to the play by **Sigmund Freud** (1856–19
critic: he was an Austrian neurologist (i.e. specialist in treating diseases of the br
developed the theory of psychoanalysis, which examined the subconscious work
Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude as an example of his theory of the 'Oedipus C
subconsciously sexually attracted to his mother and wishes to kill his father.

The literary critic **A C Bradley** (Andrew Cecil Bradley, 1851–1935) was the author
*Shakespearian Tragedy* (1904), which includes sections on *Hamlet*. Bradley's app
analysing characters (including Prince Hamlet) as if they were real people; for ex
hesitancy as a logical result of his circumstances rather than an emotional or psy

# Late Twentieth-century Criticism

From the late 1960s, new approaches to literary criticism began to develop in Eu
States. **Freudian** approaches to literature were based on Freud's psychoanalytic
applied the ideas of the political theorist Karl Marx (1818–1883) to the study of l
approached literary works from a perspective which criticised patriarchal society
controlled and dominated by men), and **Historicist** criticism looked at texts in rel
context.

The 'Literary Approaches' section of this guide (p. 84) examines some ways in wh
used when examining *Hamlet*.

**Further reading: critical approaches to *Hamlet***
Huw Griffith (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Hamlet,* A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2005)

# *Hamlet*: One-page Plot Su

Horatio and Marcellus see a ghost appear at midnight on the battlements of Elsi
Hamlet (Hamlet's father), who has recently died. They decide to tell Hamlet wha
Denmark is threatened by Fortinbras, a Norwegian prince whose own father was
Hamlet many years earlier.

The next day, King Claudius (old King Hamlet's brother, who was elected to the t
Hamlet's death) is talking to Hamlet and other members of the court. He expres
We learn that Claudius has married his brother's widow, Gertrude, shortly after h
describes his sorrow and disgust at his mother's hasty remarriage.

Shortly afterwards we meet Laertes (the son of the senior courtier, Polonius). He
Hamlet, who he thinks may attempt to seduce her. Polonius also warns Ophelia a
no more to do with Hamlet; Ophelia obeys.

That night Hamlet waits for the ghost on the battlements of the castle. Old King
Claudius murdered him. Hamlet tells no one what he has discovered, but hints t
fashion: we can deduce that this is in order to keep his knowledge a secret, and t

Hamlet's subsequent erratic and disturbed behaviour worries Claudius, who arra
Guildenstern (friends of Hamlet) to spy on him. We learn that Claudius has preve
Denmark. Polonius suggests to Claudius that Hamlet has been driven mad by his
actors visit to entertain the court. Hamlet secretly arranges for the players to re
so that he can see how Claudius reacts.

Claudius and Polonius arrange for Ophelia (as if by accident) to meet Hamlet. Af
life and death, Hamlet speaks harshly to Ophelia. She thinks he is mad and is ups
Hamlet and plans to send him to England.

The actors perform their play for the court, which includes a scene added by Ham
of his father. Claudius rushes from the room, confirming his guilt. Later Hamlet f
to pray for forgiveness regarding his murder of King Hamlet. Hamlet decides not
wait until he can kill him when he is **not** confessing his sins, ensuring he will not g

Hamlet meets Gertrude and harshly criticises her relationship with Claudius. Pol
behind a curtain spying on the meeting) makes a noise. Hamlet thinks it is Claud
sword. Claudius sends Hamlet away to England. Ophelia becomes mad with grie
father's death and Hamlet's treatment of her. Hamlet returns from his voyage. C
scheme to kill Hamlet in a fencing match with Laertes. They discovered that Oph
and was too mentally disturbed to save herself.

Hamlet is in the churchyard prior to Ophelia's funeral. He talks and jokes with th
party arrive, Hamlet and Laertes argue violently.

Hamlet accepts Laertes' challenge and the fencing match takes place. Laertes ar
of the swords to be sharp and poisoned, and for Hamlet's drink to be poisoned. H
wounded by the poisoned sword. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup by mis
Claudius, then he and Laertes are reconciled and then die. Just before Hamlet di
kingdom to be inherited by Fortinbras.

# Detailed Scene Analysis

**Please note:**

- Line numbers refer to the New Cambridge Shakespeare Edition of *Hamlet* (200
  of this play may be different. Where numbering is listed as '1.1.34', this denot
- Activity numbers correspond to numbers in the answer section.
- Terms defined in the key terms boxes are written in **bold** (or in *italics* if part
  used. These terms are also listed in the glossary.

## Act 1, Scene 1

The castle of Elsinore. A look-out platf

### Summary

It is midnight in Elsinore Castle. Francisco is on guard duty until Barnardo takes o
another sentry, Marcellus, who has brought Horatio (one of Hamlet's friends) with
Barnardo and Marcellus have twice seen a ghost appear at one o'clock in the mo
watch. Marcellus has told Horatio, who has come to see for himself. The ghost ap
does not speak. They agree that it looks like King Hamlet (Prince Hamlet's father
They think that the ghost might be a sign of approaching danger – perhaps linke
and Norway are preparing for war. Horatio and Marcellus decide to tell Hamle

## Anxiety and suspicion in the opening lines

The first nine lines of the play might seem on the surface to be a simple exchang
and anxious **tone** of the brief conversation between Barnardo and Francisco whe
each other in the opening lines sets the scene for the disturbing events that follo
complains of is the real, physical cold of winter, but it is also a **symbol** of a threat
Denmark. When Francesco says he is '*sick at heart*' (1.1.9), he is referring to an e
feeling' that he has, rather than a physical illness. The opening scenes of the pla
Francesco has a premonition of something sinister.

## The first appearance of the ghost

Several dramatic techniques are used by Shakespeare to make the appearance of the ghost a vivid theatrical experience for the audience. Remember that most of the early seventeenth-century audience would be seeing the play for the first time, and will not know what is about to happen in any scene – even if they have a general understanding of the basic plot.

**Key**
**Tone**
creat
somb
**Symb**
some
might
**Genr**
featu
miser

- Horatio's conversion: it is clear that at first Horatio does not believe in the ghost; he '*will not let belief take hold of him*' (1.1.24). Therefore, seeing Horatio, a sceptic, later convinced and frightened by the reality of the ghost makes its appearance more believable.
- The ghost's sudden and unexpected appearance: at the moment that the gh
  and Marcellus have just sat down to hear Barnardo tell the story of the ghos
  night. At this point the audience are expecting to hear a description of the g
  when Marcellus interrupts Barnardo – '*Peace, break thee off. Look where it*
  dramatic surprise.

### Context (AO3): revenge tragedy and the ghost

*Hamlet* is one of a number of plays in a **genre** (popular in Shakespeare's time) th
'revenge tragedy'. In a revenge tragedy, there is someone (in this case Hamlet)
him, and is seeking revenge. A vengeful ghost is a common element in this genre.

## Themes: Politics and Power (the ghost as an omen

Shortly after the first sighting of the ghost, Horatio makes an important observat
*some strange eruption to our state'* (1.1.69), i.e. 'this predicts some unexpected
affect our country (Denmark)'. This fact has already been suggested by the ghos
*warlike form'* (1.1.47) – dressed in armour and frowning. Horatio's comment leads naturally to Marcellus asking Horatio and Barnardo about Denmark's preparations for war. The same point is made by Barnardo when he refer to the ghost as *'this portentous figure'* (1.1.109).

D
•
•
•

Horatio's answer makes it clear to the audience that the state of Denmark is in serious danger. He explains that Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, is planning to use force to take back territory seized from Norway by Hamlet's father many years ago: *'to recover of us by strong hand, / And terms compulsatory those foresaid lands'* (1.1.102–103). Horatio underlines the idea of a bad omen of political upheaval by comparing the appearance of the ghost to the frightening events which (according to legend) took place before the assassination of Julius Caesar. Shakespeare's own
performed in 1599 (several years before the first performance of Hamlet) and m
*Hamlet* would have remembered the omens described in *Julius Caesar*. When th
time Horatio asks it a direct question about what it knows concerning any threat
Although the ghost does not answer, the question raises the expectation that th
important to say, and builds up the tension and excitement in the scene.

### Context (AO3): fear of war or invasion

When *Hamlet* was first performed around 1600 many in the audience would hav
dangerous threats to Britain from the 1550s onwards. For example: in 1569 the
attempt by noblemen in the north of England to overthrow Queen Elizabeth I anc
of Scots. After the rebellion failed, hundreds of people in Yorkshire were execut
was sent to invade Britain in 1588. This context of recent national danger helps
to the threat to Demark.

### Active learning task: threats to Britain in the second hal century [2]

Using the Internet and other resources, find out what OTHER crises threatened the
in addition to the Northern Rising and the Spanish Armada. The following website
start: ***http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/spies/ciphers/mary/ma3.htm***

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): use of verse and prose

At first glance the opening lines of the play appear to be written in prose, but a closer analysis shows that prose is intertwined with **blank verse**. The first line, '*Who's there?*' has the characteristics of everyday speech, but Francisco's reply '*Nay answer me. Stand and unfold yourself*' has the formal rhythmic pattern of **iambic pentameter**, as do the exchanges between Barnardo and Francisco a few lines later (1.1.6–9). The use of blank verse here adds solemnity and significance to the opening exchanges, adding to the sense of foreboding.

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): imagery

Imagery is used less in Act 1, Scene 1 of *Hamlet* than in the increasingly tense, dramatic and emotional scenes that follow. However, there is a good example of a striking image at the end of the scene when dawn is breaking and Horatio suggests that Hamlet should be told about the ghost (1.1.166–167):

> *But look, the morn in russet mantle clad*
> *Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill*

In this **personification** Shakespeare is comparing the red sky often seen in the morning to someone wearing a red cloak. The sun's rise in the east, and its gradual move westward, is compared to the 'morning' in her red cloak walking over the hills from the east.

The personification of morning helps the audience to appreciate the sense of urgency that Horatio feels at this moment in the opening scene. Daybreak is fast approaching – walking towards Horatio and his companions – and it is important that they tell Hamlet what they have seen as soon as possible. The language used also contrasts with that seen in the troubled encounter with the ghost that occurs a little earlier. The abrupt rhythms of Horatio's appeal to the ghost – 'Speak to me' – are replaced by a more measured iambic pentameter, helped by the **alliteration** of 'morn' and 'mantle', and of 'high' and 'hill'. This suggests that, as well as urgency, Horatio and his companions feel a sense of relief that the night-time encounters are behind them. The personified 'morn' is an unthreatening figure, and the vivid description, with its striking image of a traveller walking through the morning dew – and the association of dawn with rebirth and renewal – signals a hope (a false hope as it turns out) that the dreadful **portents** of the ghost might yet be avoided.

### Active learning task: Shakespeare's verse form [3]

Reread the speech that Horatio makes after the ghost appears for the second tim to *Stop it, Marcellus* (1.1.126 to 1.1.139).

- Make notes on the characteristics of the verse form in these lines.
- What dramatic effect does this verse form produce?

# Act 1, Scene 2

Inside Elsinore Castle

## Summary

Claudius explains that he has overcome his sorrow at his brother's death, and has (Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother). He reminds the courtiers that young Prince F threatening war on Denmark. Claudius gives Laertes permission to return to Fran persuade Hamlet to be less sorrowful about his father's death, and they persuad not go back to his studies in Wittenberg. Hamlet delivers a powerful soliloquy d mother's remarriage. Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo tell Hamlet about the gho them that evening to wait for the ghost's appearance.

## Themes: politics and power and characterisation:

When Claudius says that Fortinbras may be '*... thinking by our late dear brother's and out of frame*' (1.2.19–20) he is echoing Horatio's earlier observation in Act 1, the ghost '*bodes some strange eruption to our state*' (1.1.69). Of course the imp that the state of Denmark is NOT in crisis. In fact the whole of Claudius's speech a cheerful and positive tone, in contrast with Act 1, Scene 1, but it is a forced, hy king is aware that many of his subjects will be concerned about his marriage to G brother's death, and does his best to reassure them. The first seven lines of his s difficult to follow (even with the footnotes typically provided) so an explanation

> *Our memory of our dear brother's death is still fresh in our mind we grieved for him, and that our whole kingdom was saddened. judgment has managed to overcome our natural emotion. We have therefore been wise enough to feel sorry for King Hamlet but at the same time remember our own needs and wishes. (1.2.1–7).*

Claudius talks sadly of his '*dear brother's death*' (1.2.1) when he is responsible for the King's murder. It has been argued that Claudius's speech cannot be described as **dramatic irony** because the audience do not know (at this stage) that he has killed Hamlet's father. However, it is reasonable to see dramatic irony here, since many of the audience are likely to know the basic facts of the plot (even if they have not seen the play performed before), and also because the memory of Claudius's hypocritical speech will remain in the mind of the audience when they are watching the later scenes of the play.

**Key**
**Drama**
know s
the cha
know.
audien
play w
expres
hypoc
**Irony:**
langua
the rec

## Themes: sexual relationships and attitudes

Marriage to your (dead) brother's wife does not of course involve sex between t related to each other. Nevertheless, in Shakespeare's time such a marriage was between people in forbidden categories) and was forbidden by the Church, both and as stated in the Bible in Leviticus 20:21 'And if a man shall take his brother's ban was overturned by an Act of Parliament in 1907. We already know that the portrayed in the play) is a Christian country, because of the references that Marc '*our Saviour's birth*' (1.1.159). It is, therefore, clear that Claudius is choosing to i power as king to get his own way. The view of this marriage as incestuous is stre 'unnatural' relationships in statements by Claudius and Hamlet during this scene refers to '*our sometime sister, now our queen*' (1.2.8). (By sister he means sister and addresses him as '*my cousin Hamlet, and my son*' (1.2.64) – that is, son-in-la *courtier, cousin and our son*' (1.2.115).

### Context (AO3): private sin and public confusion

In Elizabethan England it was believed that private sin could lead to a
consequences. For example, the audience for *Hamlet* in the early 1600
VIII of England was given special permission by the Pope to marry Katl
Arthur, in 1509. Although this was not strictly speaking a sin (the Pope
Henry), when Henry later tried to get the marriage annulled (i.e. decla
Reformation – the split with Rome and the establishment of the Protesta
England. The early seventeenth-century audience would know that the
years of chaos and persecution. Another example of private misdeeds
fate of Mary Queen of Scots, who in 1567 married the man suspected
eventually executed herself, for treason.

### Active learning task: Mary Queen of Scots [4]

- Using the Internet and other resources, research the history of Mar
  would be a good place to start:
  ***http://www.historyinanhour.com/2013/02/08/mary-queen-of-scots-***
- Can you find any similarities between her real-life story and that

## Characterisation: Prince Hamlet and Themes: mortality

In Act 1, Scene 2, Hamlet's complex and troubled character begins to re
itself to the audience. The first four lines of his **soliloquy** which begins
*this too too solid flesh would melt'* (1.2.129) show a tortured, suicidal st
mind: Hamlet is wishing either that he could be dead (his 'flesh' or phys
body disappeared) or that it was NOT a crime against God to commit su
Although the immediate reason for his sadness and anger is the hasty
marriage of his mother to Claudius, it is clear that his he finds the whol
to be distasteful, as in his comment (1.2 133–134) that:

> *How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable*
> *Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

It might be argued that Hamlet's disapproval of his mother's hurried re
everything – although, if this is the case, he could be seen as oversensit
interpretation is that Hamlet suffers from **misanthropy** and that he see
example of an unpleasant world. There is also some evidence that Ham
sex, as outlined below.

## Shakespeare's use of language (AO2): Haml

In his soliloquy *'O that this too too solid flesh would melt'* (1.2.129) Ham
unacceptable between his mother and his uncle, but as generally distas
sex. The world is described (1.2.135–137) as

> *… an unweeded garden*
> *That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature*
> *Possess it merely…*

This effective **metaphor** comparing the world to a neglected garden wo
on several levels (like many metaphors found in Shakespeare's plays). C
one level, he thinks that the world (humanity) has become unpleasant.
another level the particular example he uses is one of a rapid and
uncontrolled growth that reflects the uncontrolled passion that he see
between his mother and his uncle, and is repelled by.

Later in this soliloquy Hamlet contrasts his father with Claudius, saying they are l
(1.2.140). Hyperion (Hamlet's father) was the Greek god of the sun, a noble bein
contrast, is an ugly mythological creature, half human and half goat, associated w
promiscuity. Hamlet adds to his disgust at the thought of a goat-like Claudius ma
revulsion at her keenness to get into bed with Claudius. *'Oh most wicked speed,*
*incestuous sheets'* (1.2.155–156). 'Dexterity' also suggests enjoyment – Gertrud
Claudius, which disgusts Hamlet.

**Active learning task: Hamlet in performance [5]**

Use the following YouTube links to watch Hamlet's first soliloquy being delivered
(a) Kenneth Branagh in 1996
***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCBVmiVkzTM***
(b) David Tennant in 2009
***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbYiM5XXSEo***

What differences or similarities do you find between these two performances?

**Interpretations of *Hamlet* (AO5): a Freudian perspective**

The relationship of Hamlet with his mother, Queen Gertrude, has led some criti
interpretation of the play: one based upon the theories of Sigmund Freud, the f
(1856–1939). This draws upon Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex: a child's
one parent, and wish to exclude the other. Freudian interpretations of the play
his mother not as unique to Hamlet, but as representative (in extreme form) of
characteristic. Like all schools of criticism, Freudian interpretations should be s
perspectives and approaches rather than theories which can be proved 'right' o

## Themes: sexual relationships and attitudes

At the end of Hamlet's soliloquy, contemplating his mother's marriage to Claudius (1.2.157–158), he says:

> *It is not, nor it cannot come to good*
> *But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.*

These words signal a tension, or conflict, within Hamlet between his inner turmoil and his decision to say nothing about his real feelings of disgust about the marriage of his mother to his uncle Claudius: a tension that could be seen as one of the reasons for his increasingly disturbed state of mind later in the play. The last section of this scene, where Hamlet meets Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo (1.2.159–257), further emphasises Hamlet's revulsion at his mother's marriage, and adds to the rising tension and anticipation of Hamlet's meeting with the ghost. The language and tone of this scene – a meeting between young friends – is less poetic than that of Hamlet's preceding soliloquy. At first we see amusing **repartee** between the friends, but there is bitterness underlying Hamlet's sardonic comments. The following lines are a good illustration of this mood (1.2.176–182).

> ***HORATIO:*** *My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.*
> ***HAMLET:*** *I pray thee do not mock me fellow student,*
> *I think it was to see my mother's wedding.*
> ***HORATIO:*** *Indeed my lord, it followed hard upon.*
> ***HAMLET:*** *Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats*
> *Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.*

Hamlet does not waste the opportunity here to emphasise the speed at which hi
of Horatio's response, 'it followed hard upon', is humorous; a typical stage produ
Horatio smiling as he says these words. Hamlet is also joking when he says that
was 'thrift' (i.e. to save money by using the pies left over from the funeral for the

anger here. 'Coldly' refers to the fact that the hot pies have cooled down, but it
remarry so soon shows a **cold-hearted** lack of sensitivity (as Hamlet sees it) on th

From the moment that Horatio tells Hamlet about his sighting of the ghost – *'the*
dramatic pace of this part increases, with frantic cross-questioning between Ham
urgency is increased by Marcellus and Barnardo answering in chorus, i.e. togethe
stage at the end of the scene he makes the strongest prediction yet that someth
revealed: *'Foul deeds will rise / Though all the earth o'erwhelm them to men's ey*
horrible things will be discovered, even though the whole world tries to bury the

**Extended essay question [7]:**
Reread Claudius's speech at the beginning of this scene 'Though yet of Hamlet's d
(1.2.1–39) and his speech later in the scene 'Tis sweet and commendable in your
With close reference to Shakespeare's use of language in these passages, show h
present Claudius's character.

# *Act 1, Scene 3*

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**
Laertes is leaving to go to France. He warns Ophelia (his sister) against Hamlet,
serious about his love for her, and that he may attempt to have a sexual relation
father of Laertes and Ophelia) arrives and gives Laertes advice about how he sh
leaves, Polonius warns Ophelia against Hamlet and tells her not to have anything
She agrees to obey Polonius.

## Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia: a subplot of *Hamlet*

This **subplot** is introduced in this scene with the first appearance of Ophelia and her brother Laertes. It is important to understand the literal meaning of Laertes' second speech in the scene, which the modern audience or reader may find hard to understand (1.3.5–10).

| | |
|---|---|
| *For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,* | [Concerning Hamlet attention to you] |
| *Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood,* | [Consider it just a te superficial sexual att |
| *A violet in the youth of primy nature,* | [His love is like a vio youthful prime] |
| *Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,* | [Keen but not perma short-lived] |
| *The perfume and suppliance of a minute,* | [Lasting just long en sweetness for a minu |
| *No more.* | [Nothing more than t |

'Trifling' in the modern sense would mean treating carelessly, but there is no sug
been purposely misleading Ophelia. It is Laertes' opinion (expressed in the rest o
should not take Hamlet's vows of love too seriously. Laertes argues that Hamlet
the King of Denmark) and is not free to make his own choices about whom he ev
warns Ophelia of the danger of sexual activity with Hamlet, telling her 'what loss
chaste treasure open' (1.3.29–31), i.e. if she has sex with Hamlet, losing her virgi

As the play progresses, there are increasing comparisons between Laertes and H
**foil** to Hamlet. Already we see that both show nervousness at the thought of sex
by the thought of the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius, whereas the
scene when he warns Ophelia against Hamlet also shows that he is repelled by p
seen in the following **extended metaphor** (1.3.38–41) where Laertes warns Ophelia that being young and virtuous is no guarantee against losing her reputation, i.e. being 'talked about'.

> *The canker galls the infants of the spring*
> *Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,*
> *An in the morn and liquid dew of youth*
> *Contagious blastments are most immanent.*

**(AO2):** The image is effective and original. 'Canker' means both a parasitical insect and 'cancer' in the more general sense, and it is here pictured as attacking the 'infants of the spring', i.e. the young spring flowers. The metaphor associates the young, virginal Ophelia with fresh flowers – but flowers that are destroyed in a horrible manner, before their buds have blossomed. The metaphor is cleverly extended by Shakespeare when he makes the additional point that in nature, young plants are most vulnerable to disease: Laertes is pointing out that young people (in particular, young women) are particularly at risk from the destructive criticism of society.

### Context (AO3): the role of women in Elizabethan England

The way that Laertes and Polonius 'lecture' Ophelia might seem excessive to the
to be interpreted within the context of the role of women in the sixteenth and ear
at that time (in all social classes) had a very subservient role. Upper-class Elizab
education at home, but women did not go to school or university. Employment op
women – upper-class women did not work as such, and poorer women would do
employed in skilled trades. Marriages were arranged for the good of the family
woman's reputation and hence her chances of making a suitable marriage. Quee
powerful female monarch, but if she had ever married then all her royal power

## The staging of Hamlet: characterisation of Poloni

Polonius is a good example of a character who can be portrayed in different way
the same, it is certainly possible for the producer of the play and/or the actor pla
the way he is presented.

It is very common to see Polonius presented as a pompous, boring, self-importan
fool. When he gives his lengthy advice to his son Laertes, several of the 'precept
recommends are versions of well-known proverbs used in Shakespeare's time, a
clichéd. However, it is also possible to see Polonius's advice to Hamlet as very se

### Active learning task [8]

Imagine that you are directing *Hamlet* for stage or film, and have decided that y
'boring dad', giving unoriginal and obvious advice (to Laertes first of all). Make
Polonius to act when he is listing his 'precepts' or rules of behaviour. Would reac
of paper be a good idea? What about Polonius's tone of voice and mannerisms?
to react (silently) when his father is lecturing him?

Now imagine that you have changed your mind, and would prefer Polonius to be
concerned father, giving his son some sensible advice. What changes would you
actors?

## Relationships: Ophelia and Polonius

Polonius's advice to Ophelia (1.3.90–136) has a different tone from the one he a
Polonius raises the same topic as Laertes did when he warned Ophelia about her
whereas Laertes adopts a helpful and respectful tone – *'fear it my dear sister'* (1.
and critical towards his daughter. He tells Ophelia *'you do not understand yours*
that Hamlet's promises to Ophelia are *'springes to catch woodcocks'* (1.3.115), i.e
several layers of meaning in the metaphor. Firstly, Ophelia is compare to a bird –
secondly, woodcocks are supposed to be easy to catch. His mocking, disrespectf
authoritarian instruction: she must no longer *'give words or talk with the Lord Ha*
Ophelia might secretly think of this instruction, she is careful to give a submissive

**Interpretations of *Hamlet* (AO5): a feminist perspective**
The subplot involving Ophelia has led some critics to put forward a feminist inte
looks at the way that the patriarchal society of the time contributes to Ophelia's
feminist literary criticism p. 84).

# Act 1, Scene 4

On the castle battlements

### Summary

Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus meet on the battlements at midnight, as arranged
Claudius celebrating (Claudius promised earlier on that he would do this to celeb
in Denmark – see 1.2.125–128). The ghost appears and Hamlet insists on follow
Horatio and Marcellus to stop him.

## Themes: politics and power (the troubled state of

The opening lines of this scene take the audience back to the start of the play, w
the bitter cold is a symbol of a threatening atmosphere in the state of Denmark.
of the cold, but it has the same symbolic significance. The metaphorical use of 'b
opening lines adds to the sense of unease and suppressed violence.

Claudius's midnight celebrations are also symbolic. As Hamlet points out (1.4.12
the country of Denmark a bad reputation and it represents the kind of sensual, s
Hamlet has already objected to in relation to his uncle's sexual relationship with
reappearance of the ghost later in this scene, it is clear to the audience that som
to be revealed. As Marcellus puts it, *'something is rotten in the state of Denmark*

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): diction

> *The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,*
> *Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels,*
> *And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,*
> *The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out*
> *The triumph of his pledge.* (1.4.8–12)

K
Di
wo
wh
de
no

Shakespeare's evocative use of language in these lines is effective in
showing the lack of respect that Hamlet feels for his uncle, King Claudius. The **di**
and 'drains', suggests coarse and drunken behaviour, not appropriate for a king.
heard accompanying Claudius's entertainment, kettledrum and trumpet, are ass
rather than the quiet dignity of a royal court. 'Bray out' has the literal meaning o
striking metaphor, suggesting the braying of a donkey. The association of Claudi
compared with, for example, a lion) again helps to denigrate his character. Allite
down') adds to the sense of gluttony and overindulgence. Claudius, we are told,
is, his success in persuading Hamlet to remain in Denmark – but the triumph cele
drunken cheeriness rather than noble satisfaction.

## Characterisation: Hamlet's increasing desperatio

Hamlet's words and actions from the moment he first sees the ghost until the en an increasing impatience, linked to growing mental instability. His frightening vis Hamlet, dressed in a full suit of armour, contrasts with the preceding picture of C merrymaking.

The striking and frightening portrayal of the ghost is increased by the fact that Ha the play) whether or not this vision is really that of his father, or 'goblin damned'

### Context (AO3): attitudes to ghosts and spirits in Elizabet

While it would be true to say that nearly everyone in Shakespeare's audience w ghosts', their beliefs would have covered a range of different perspectives. Gho Elizabethans variously as the visons of disturbed minds (that is, without any extern of dead people; as portents of danger; and as evil spirits out to cause mischief. in the revenge tragedy genre: for example, the ghost of Don Andrea in Thomas K (1582). Ghosts feature in other plays by Shakespeare: for example, the ghost o

When Horatio tries to prevent Hamlet from following the ghost, Hamlet's reply – *fee*' (1.4.65), i.e. 'I do not think my life is worth the price of a pin' – reveals a dev eventually lead to the shocking events which occur later in the play. His final thr who tries to stop him – in other words, to kill anyone who gets in his way – migh takes on a tragic literal meaning.

### Active learning task [9]

Imagine that Marcellus decides to write to a friend or relative giving a vivid acc battlements when he, Horatio and Hamlet see the ghost. Write one or two parag in modern English.

## *Act 1, Scene 5*

Another part of the castle battlement

### Summary

The ghost tells Hamlet he is Hamlet's father's spirit. He asks Hamlet to revenge hi that when he (King Hamlet) was sleeping in an orchard, his brother (Claudius) pou Hamlet died before he could ask forgiveness for his sins, and so his spirit (the gho has to spend time suffering for his sins before going to heaven. Hamlet does not he has found out, but swears them to secrecy. Hamlet hints that he might start to

The ghost's speeches in this scene comprise its most significant contribution to t scene the ghost speaks only once more, in Act 3, Scene 4 when it returns to urge

## Hamlet's fears and forebodings are confirmed by

The fears expressed earlier by Horatio and Hamlet – that the appearance of the g very sinister was going to happen – are quickly confirmed in this scene. When H (1.5.40) he is thinking back to his closing words at the end of Act 1, Scene 2, i.e. t suggests '*foul deeds*' have occurred (1.2.256). However, it is important to remem show that even after the ghost has spoken here, Hamlet is not absolutely convin We know this because Hamlet arranges for the players to act out the murder of K watches Claudius to see how he reacts (Act 3, Scene 2).

## Themes: revenge

The ghost makes it absolutely clear that its mission is to persuade Hamlet to reve *most unnatural murder*' of King Hamlet by his brother Claudius (1.5.24). Hamlet' by the ghost telling him that it is condemned to suffer in purgatory until its bad d *away*' (1.5.13).

### Context (AO3): the doctrine of purgatory in Elizab

'Purgatory' was seen as a place where some people have to go after d hell-like place for those who had committed some sins (not enough to se penance for those sins before entering heaven. Although this is a Roma in the early seventeenth century was officially a Protestant country), the well understood by Shakespeare's audience.

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): imagery and

Hamlet's emotional reaction to the ghost's suffering is influenced by th ghost uses, as in the example considered below (1.5.15–17):

> *I could a tale unfold whose lightest word*
> *Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,*
> *Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,*
> *Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part*
> *And each particular hair to stand on end*
> *Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.* [i.e. angry porcu

A harrow is an agricultural implement drawn by horses (in Shakespeare the soil with rows of wooden or metal spikes (modern harrows use disc 'harrowed' is a powerful one, suggestive of extreme physical torture of sixteenth century. The **hyperboles** of blood freezing, eyes bulging and because they exaggerate the normal physiological reactions when scar piloerection ('goose bumps'). The **simile** in the last line is enhanced by Elizabethans) for the comparison, suggestive of strangeness and the un

## Themes: sexual relationships and attitudes

The ghost's monologue, starting '*Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate b* information to what Hamlet (and the audience) know about Claudius. N marrying someone in a forbidden category – he has also committed ad comments on sex and sexual relationships and attitudes have a similar t Scene 2, when Hamlet criticises the sexual impulses of his mother and C *dexterity to incestuous sheets*' (1.2.157).

### Active learning task [10]

Make some notes on the similarities between Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 1, S *too too solid flesh would melt*' (1.2.129–158) and the ghost's monologue *incestuous, that adulterate beast,*' (1.5.42–91).

Consider:

- What similarities are there between the *ideas and opinions* expresse
- What similarities are there between Shakespeare's *use of language*
- Do you think any similarities are intentional, and if so, why?

You may wish to set out your notes in a table such as the example belo

| Speech | Hamlet: 'O *that this too too solid flesh would melt,*' (1.2.129–158) |
|---|---|
| Ideas and opinions | |
| Language | |

**Context (AO3): the concept of 'madness' in Elizabethan ti**
**(and our use of this word today)**
The words 'mad' and 'madness' are seen today as an oversimple (and unaccepta
with mental health problems. However, it is acceptable to use the words 'mad' a
about *Hamlet*, as the words are then being used in a specific historical and literar
early seventeenth centuries mental illness was 'treated' by prayers, charms and c
and there was still a belief that in some cases mentally ill people were possessed

After the ghost leaves – at the end of his second long speech – Hamlet begins to
distress and instability. Hamlet's mental state during the course of the play is co
the end of Act 1, Scene 5 he makes it clear that he intends to pretend to be mad
(1.5.73). However, it is clear that the shock of his discovery of his father's murde
him. Hamlet's first two lines after the ghost exits show his tormented state of m

> *O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?*
> *And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart…'* (1.5.97)

The disjointed rhythms of the blank verse in these lines and the repetition of 'O'
He calls heaven, earth and hell to witness what he has heard – in other words, th
and spiritual.

## Dramatic form in *Hamlet* (AO2): seriocomic episo

When Horatio and Marcellus enter there is a change of tone as a **seriocomic** element is introduced. Hamlet's sombre preceding speech is followed by some humorous remarks. Hamlet makes fun of the way that Marcellus calls to him, comparing Marcellus' cry of *'Illo, ho, ho, my lord!'* (1.5.115) to the traditional cry of a falconer calling to his preying bird to return. After Hamlet has made Marcellus and Horatio promise to keep Hamlet's revelations about the ghost a secret, instead of telling them about the ghost's important revelations Hamlet comes out with a nonsensical and apparently meaningless statement, telling them:

> *There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark*
> *But he's an arrant knave* (1.5.123–124)

This is an intentionally foolish **tautology**. Horatio believes that Hamlet is talking nonsense, commenting that '*These are but wild and whirling words, my lord*' (1.5.133).

However, in this scene (as in others later in the play) some serious points are ma
comparing Marcellus' cry to that of a falconer, Hamlet compares himself to a falc
the falcon out to hunt (and kill) wild animals, the ghost has instructed Hamlet to
Hamlet's tautology also has a serious underlying meaning, associating Denmark w
contributing to the idea of Denmark as a corrupt state with a villain (Claudius) in

## Themes: mortality (and the afterlife)

After the ghost has cried out urging Horatio and Marcellus to swear not to revea
Horatio remarks on the strangeness of the manifestation (1.5.164–167):

> ***HORATIO:*** *O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.*
> ***HAMLET:*** *And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.*
> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*
> *Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

Hamlet's much-quoted reply neatly sums up his attitude both to the ghost and to t
the appearance of the ghost raises. Hamlet is not sure what the ghost actually is o
calls it a 'stranger' – but he is sure that there are things in life that go beyond the e

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): the use of prose

Act 1, Scene 5 contains sections in both verse and prose. Shakespeare uses pros
to-earth tone is needed. Prose is also used for seriocomic scenes where there is
words.

# Act 2, Scene 1

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**
Polonius tells his servant (Reynaldo) to spy on Laertes in Paris. Ophelia tells Polo
strangely towards her. She tells Polonius that she carried out his orders to have r
Polonius decides to tell King Claudius that Ophelia's rejection has sent Hamlet ma

## Characterisation: Polonius

The depiction of Polonius in Act 1, Scene 3 as pompous and self-important is con
suggests a complicated strategy for finding out how Laertes has been behaving.
confused, overelaborate fussiness are summed up in the short passage where he

> ***POLONIUS:*** *And then sir does a this – a does – what was I abo*
> *I was about to say something. Where did I leave?*

## Dramatic structure in *Hamlet* (AO2): parallels bet relationships

Shakespeare's intention in this dialogue between Polonius and Reynaldo is to am
further significance to the exchange. Although Polonius is portrayed as a figure o
shows him to be a caring father; at the start of the scene he gives Reynaldo mon
are probably letters of introduction). Polonius's concern for his son contrasts wi
get his stepson (Hamlet) out of the way by having him killed.

## Themes: madness

Ophelia's description of Hamlet's peculiar appearance and behaviour can be interpreted in a number of ways. Her account of Hamlet's disordered clothing (and in her next speech of his dramatic gestures and sighing) is a **melodramatic** description of a distraught lover, and Hamlet's earlier hint to Horatio about putting on *'an antic disposition'* (1.5.172) – pretending to act st
dressed up like this on purpose. However, the last two lines of the same speech,
been 'loosed out of hell' (2.1.80–81), have a much more serious tone, reminding
the case throughout the play, the audience or reader can never be sure whether
his madness is a pretence and part of some cunning plan; or whether, as Hamlet
disturbed state is a mixture of madness and sanity: *'I am but mad north-north w
know a hawk from a handsaw'* (2.2.346–347).

# Act 2, Scene 2

This is the longest scene in *Hamlet*. For analytical purposes, in this guide it has b
sections'. This division is for convenience only; students should not refer to sect
when writing about the play.

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

**Study Section A (2.2.1–212)**

Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (friends of Hamlet
troubling him. The Danish ambassadors to Norway (Voltemand and Cornelius) te
Norway has stopped Prince Fortinbras from invading Denmark. Polonius (in a ve
Claudius that he thinks Hamlet has been driven mad by his love for Ophelia and
Polonius suggests that he and Gertrude should spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. Ham
suggesting madness, but has some serious points within it.

## Study Section A (2.2.1–212)

### Shakespeare's language (AO2): dramatic irony

Shakespeare makes effective use of dramatic irony in Claudius's first speech in th
used by Claudius is one of polite thoughtfulness. As King of Denmark he could co
Guildenstern to do what he wanted, but instead he begs their help as a favour: '*I*
However, the friendliness and concern shown by Claudius masks a very different
*dream of*' (2.2.10) what might be troubling Hamlet, and asks Hamlet's two friend
*us unknown afflicts him thus, / That opened lies within our remedy*' (2.2.17), Rose
his words at face value. However, the audience will be aware that underneath th
actually worried that Hamlet may have discovered something about his father's
the King as a dissembling hypocrite is confirmed a little later in the scene when G
together on stage and Gertrude speculates whether the real reason for Hamlet's
*and our o'erhasty marriage.*' (2.2.57).

### Themes: sexual relationships and attitudes: Hamlet and Ophelia

The florid language used by Hamlet in his letter to Ophelia (read out by Polonius) suggests an artificial passion (1.2.119–126). Hamlet's salutation *'To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia'* (1.1.110) is an unconvincing hyperbole, and his verses about the stars and the sun (1.1.115–116) are clichéd. The fact that these high-flown opening words are meant to sound poorly written is reinforced by the **bathos** of the bald statement in prose which follows the hyperbole of his opening address:

> *O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers [I don't write verse we*
> *reckon my groans; but that I love thee best, O most best, believe*

The forced descriptions of Ophelia as 'celestial' and 'beautified' revert to a comm
cannot write good verse. However, the relationship between Ophelia and Hamle
we cannot be certain here whether his letter is trying to flatter her without any r
passion), or whether he is trying to amuse Ophelia by using stereotyped lover's l
good at it.

## Themes: Hamlet's madness – and the 'method' (or

Hamlet talks alone with Polonius after Claudius and Gertrude leave (2.2.166–212). Hamlet's conversation suggests madness, but his surreal, teasing comments also have a serious purpose. Polonius sums this up when towards the end of their conversation he says '*Though this be madness, yet there is method in't*' (2.2.200).

Hamlet's opening comment when he pretends to mistake Polonius for a fishmonger is a good example of a deeper meaning lying behind the comical **wordplay**. Hamlet uses a fishmonger as an example of an honest man: an ordinary tradesman, with no pretentions to power or influence. (Some critics have suggested that 'fishmonger' was an Elizabethan term for 'brothel keeper' but it is now believed that there is no firm evidence for this inte Polonius that '*To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten* thinking of the troubled condition of Denmark, where he sees the very opposite sexual excess. Similarly, Hamlet's comments about how the sun will breed magg but he couples this with a warning to Polonius, telling him that Ophelia should n or she might conceive, i.e. breed or become pregnant. These remarks tease Polo that he has given Ophelia against Hamlet. It is also possible that Hamlet is thinki i.e. of the dead King Hamlet, and, therefore, a threat (in Polonius's eyes) to Ophe

The closing lines in Hamlet's dialogue with Polonius show Hamlet's cleverness and are a powerful argument against considering him 'really mad'. When Polonius announces he is leaving (2.2.208–210) – *'I will most humbly take my leave of you*' – Hamlet wittily replies *'You cannot sir take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal…'* In other words, he is delighted to see Polonius go. However, when Hamlet goes on to complete his reply with '*… except my life, except my life, except my life*' he moves from witty repartee to an expression of deep inner sorrow, as his thoughts turn once more to the dilemma of suicide.

## Polonius: characterisation

This scene further develops the character of Polonius as a pompous figure to be explanation of his theory about Hamlet becoming mad with love for Ophelia is m ironic comment that '*brevity is the soul of wit*' (2.2.90): the irony lies in the fact t is a good one (i.e. that clever writing or speech should not be long-winded) he d Hamlet later sums Polonius up as one of 'These tedious old fools!' However, Pol stupidity – he can also show insight and understanding, as when he comments o

**Summary**
**Study Section B (2.2.213–558)**
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet Hamlet and admit that Claudius has sent ther
tell his two student friends the real reason for his unhappiness. His friends tell Ha
a company of players (actors) to entertain the court. Hamlet secretly arranges fo
the play. In his soliloquy which ends the scene Hamlet criticises his own delay in t
he will arrange for the players to re-enact the murder of his father, so that he ca

## Characterisation: Hamlet's misanthropy

The teasing exchanges that we see in the dialogue between Hamlet, Rosencrantz
meet for the first time in the play is (on the surface) the kind of cheerful banter t
between three young friends and fellow students (2.2.215–276). However, unde
see increasing evidence of Hamlet's growing misanthropy. Guildenstern's perso
three friends an opportunity for a sexually suggestive double-entendre regarding
227), but when Hamlet refers to Fortune as a strumpet (i.e. a prostitute), he is th
luck', but as 'fate'. Fate – the predetermined course of events – is degraded in H
offer, or offers false promises, like a 'strumpet'. The personification of Fortune a
in this scene, during the first player's speech: *'Out, out, thou strumpet fortune!'*

Hamlet is scornful at the idea of the world becoming an honest place, saying tha
'doomsday' – the end of time (2.2.229). He sees the world as a 'prison' (2.2.235)
*bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I*
In other words, he would be happy to live anywhere – it is not his physical surrou
the mental torment that has resulted from the ghost's revelations about King Ha

Hamlet's cynical view of human nature can also be observed later in the scene, w
*every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?'* (2.2.485).

The explanation that Hamlet gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to account for h
*why…'* (2.2.278–291) is designed to put his two friends off the scent. In this spee
world has become dull and meaningless to him (expressing a fashionable melanc
his father which is distressing him. However, it is clear from the rest of the play t
honest here about the specific cause of his troubled state of mind, his melancho
commented '*How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of*

### Context (AO3): melancholy

Hamlet is expressing a feeling of melancholy, which was a fashionable literary a
*Hamlet* was written. Melancholy consisted of a gloomy, pessimistic view of life, a
philosophising poets, or brooding, intellectual discontent with the perceived ills of

## Themes: madness

Hamlet makes a very significant comment to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern after
when he tells them: '*I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly*
(2.2.347–348). This can be broadly understood as 'I am only a little distant from
sanity – when I want to, I can spot the truth and reason things out perfectly well'
what they have probably already realised; whatever Hamlet's state of mind, he h
of reason.

## Hamlet meets the players: the significance of the
## a trap is set for Claudius

When Hamlet meets the players (i.e. actors) he remembers a play that he once h
13 lines from it by memory (2.2.410–422). To please Hamlet, one of the players

the play (2.2.246–475). No record of an actual play with these lines in it has ever usually thought that Shakespeare has written these lines himself, although it is p from a play that has been subsequently lost.

The play extract is an episode from the fall of Troy, described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, B episode has not been chosen by Shakespeare by chance. It describes how Priam Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles; his wife, Queen Hecuba, witnesses Priam's death. H implicitly critical of Gertrude. The passage draws out the contrast between Hecu Gertrude's reaction to the death of her husband, King Hamlet. While we are not not upset by her husband's death, the fact that she had a sexual relationship wit and married Claudius soon afterwards – implies that she could not have been to

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): pastiche and parody

The extracts from the play which are spoken by Hamlet and one of the players are written in a very melodramatic, sensational style, not at all typical of the language used in the rest of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare is writing a **pastiche** of other more melodramatic and less skilful playwrights. For example, Pyrrhus is described as *'o'er sizèd with coagulate gore, / With eyes like carbuncles'* (1.2.420–421). This image of Pyrrhus covered in sticky bloo gemstones is so exaggerated it is close to **parody**.

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**Context (AO3) : possible origins of Shakespeare's pastich**
Possible originals which inspired Shakespeare's pastiche include *Dido, Queen of C* Marlowe (c. 1593).

## Characterisation: Hamlet's hesitancy and search

Before his soliloquy which ends the scene Hamlet introduces an important plot d the actors can perform *The Murder of Gonzago.* He also asks the player to put in which Hamlet will write.

When he is alone on stage at the end of Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet delivers a soliloqu his delay in avenging his father's death (2.2.501–558). At the beginning he exclai *slave am I!*' (2.2.502). He compares his own hesitancy to avenge an *actual* wron showed in feeling sorrow for Hecuba, a mere character in a play.

This hesitancy in Hamlet might be interpreted as a defect in his character. However, the last lines of Hamlet's soliloquy – and the last lines in the scene – show that there may be a very good reason for his hesitation (2.2.551–558). Hamlet cannot be certain the ghost really is the spirit of his father – he '*May be a devil*' (2.2.552). Hamlet, therefore, decides that he needs stronger evidence: '*I'll have grounds/ More relative than this. The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king*' (2.2.556–558)

**Debate**
- Is Ha on Cl
- Is his p that t anoth sensib

## Shakespeare's stagecraft: letting dramatic tensio build up

Earlier in this scene Hamlet has asked a player to put some extra dialogue into th *Gonzago*, and he now tells the audience that he will use the play to trap Claudius here is that Hamlet does not say exactly what type of trap he is planning. Of cou probably know what is to come (i.e. the re-enactment of the murder), but most o seeing the play for the first time, and by revealing some (but not all) of what is t tension and excitement.

**Active learning task [13]**
Read Act 2 of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Christopher Marlowe (c. 1593). This Project Gutenberg website: ***http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16169***

Note down any similarities between the language used by Marlowe and the lang the play about the Trojan War in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*.

# Act 3, Scene 1

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

Claudius and Polonius arrange for Ophelia (as if by accident) to meet Hamlet. T
Claudius is troubled by a guilty conscience. Hamlet enters alone and delivers his
meditating on life and death. He meets Ophelia and rejects her, speaking harshl
apparent madness. Claudius is suspicious of Hamlet and plans to send him to Eng
Claudius to wait until after the play and to let Gertrude try to get the truth out o

## Characterisation: Claudius show a guilty conscien

Claudius shows early in this scene that he is not a stereotypical villain, but is awa
actions. His guilt is triggered by Polonius's preceding comments. After telling Op
book when she meets Hamlet, to provide a reason for her being by herself, Polon

> *'Tis too much proved, that with devotion's visage,*
> *And pious action, we do sugar o'er*
> *The devil himself.*

That is: 'It is all too often seen that by looking and behaving honestly we can cov
responds in an **aside** (3.1.49–54):

> *Oh, 'Tis too true.*
> *How smart a lash that speech does give my conscience!*
> *The harlot's cheek, beautified with plastering art,*
> *Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it*
> *Than is my deed to my most painted word.*
> *O heavy burden!*

Claudius compares his bad deeds, covered up by his hypocritical words, to the ch
cosmetics. His understanding of his wickedness and hypocrisy is a heavy burden

## Themes: mortality

Hamlet's soliloquy *'To be or not to be…'* (3.1.56–89) continues his earlier philoso
death as seen in his first soliloquy, *'O that this too too solid flesh would melt'* (1.2
line, Hamlet is asking 'Is it better to live or to die?' More specifically, it is clear fr
he is asking 'Is it better to live or to commit suicide?' Anyone who had arrived la
entered the theatre at this point, knowing nothing about the play, would probab
However, Hamlet's question is based upon the fact that at this point in the play h
unpleasant. The lines that follow his opening question, therefore, examine whet
follow death is worth the benefit of escaping from an intolerable life.

We know from Hamlet's first soliloquy that he is aware that there is a religious p
there is an injunction *''gainst self-slaughter'* (1.2.132). It is possible to interpret H
*does make cowards of us all'* (3.1.83) as meaning that he thinks religious belief ('
to escape from the difficulties of life by committing suicide. It is also possible to
examination, i.e. thinking deeply about what might happen after one's death. Th
with the questions that Hamlet poses about the uncertainties of the afterlife, '… *
*death, / The undiscovered country…*' (3.1.78–79).

When Hamlet talks about hesitancy in relation to suicide, he also makes a more g
indecisiveness – how important schemes can '*turn awry / And lose the name of c*
up not being undertaken. Hamlet is thinking here of his wish to take revenge up

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): personification

As so often in Shakespeare's plays, the impact of this soliloquy comes as much fr
effectiveness of the language and imagery used as it does from the ideas expres
original and striking personification of resolution in the following lines (3.1.83–8

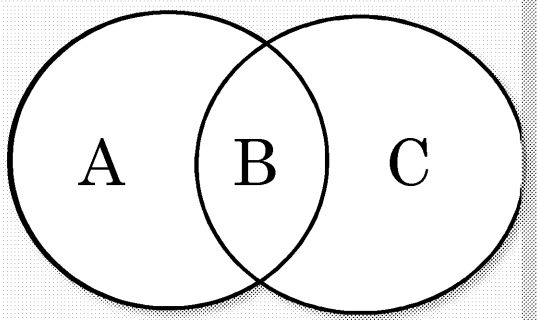
> *And thus the native hue of resolution*
> *Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought*

'Resolution' here means 'determination' – the forceful personality trait which ge
case too much thought has made resolution sick. In the same way that a strong p
through disease, resolution has become pale and sick because of exposure to tho

### Active learning task: Hamlet's first two soliloquies [14]

Reread Hamlet's first soliloquy: '*O that this too too solid flesh would melt*' (1.2.129–
this scene: '*To be or not to be…*' (3.1.56–89).

Using a two-circle Venn diagram of the type shown below, in area (B) note down a
expressed in both soliloquies; in area (A) record the key ideas found only in the Ac
area (C) record the key ideas found only in the Act 3, Scene 1 soliloquy.




## Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia: a subplot of *H*

A common reaction of the audience or reader to Hamlet's exchanges with Ophel
does Hamlet treat her so harshly?' His unpleasantness towards her can be seen a
following factors.

(a) Hamlet is continuing his plan to cover up his knowledge of his father's murd
state that this has produced in him) by persisting in his 'antic disposition' or
to believe that he has any true feelings for Ophelia, as he is willing to sacrifi
order to continue the deception by aiming 'mad' insults at her.

(b) Hamlet is hurt by Ophelia's rejection of him when she returns his love token
'*… I have remembrances of yours / That I have longèd long to re-deliver*' (3.1
be offering Hamlet things such as pretty boxes, jewellery or letters.) He
may also think it strange that Ophelia just happens to have these with
her, and suspect that her meeting with him is not accidental.

(c) His anger represents a more general **misogyny** and distrust of intimate
relationships. By this stage in the play he knows that his mother
committed adultery and he may now distrust women in general.

Hamlet's harshness towards Ophelia in this scene can be seen in the unpleasantr
asks '*Ha, ha, are you honest?*' (3.1.103) he means 'are you virtuous?' – this is an
young woman. His blunt statement '*I loved you not*' (3.1.117) is abrupt and crue
Ophelia should '*go to a nunnery*' (3.1.119) is also offensive, as he suggests that o
company of men) will she be able to resist sexual temptation.

Ophelia's last speech in this scene makes it clear that she believes Hamlet's beha
madness – a genuine mental disturbance: '*Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthro*
logically this means that in her eyes Hamlet is not rationally antagonistic towards
belief that the man she cares for has lost his mind still throws her into a dejected

## Claudius's suspicion of Hamlet

When King Claudius and Polonius re-enter, it is clear they have overheard Hamle
Claudius's opening comments show that he does NOT think Hamlet is mad; furth
present a danger. Although Claudius does not say so, the implication is that he i
something about the murder. Polonius persuades Claudius to let Gertrude try to
is sent to England, but Claudius's last lines – the final couplet in the scene – are f
*shall be so. / Madness in great ones must not unwatched go'* (3.1.191–192).

### Active learning task: Ophelia's character [15]

Reread the part of this scene which shows the encounter between Ophelia and H
reaction to it (3.1.90–155). What does the audience learn about Ophelia's char

# Act 3, Scene 2

Inside Elsinore Castle

### Summary

Hamlet asks Horatio to observe Claudius's reaction to the play when it shows the
Hamlet speaks cryptically to Claudius and insults Ophelia with sexual innuendoes
show showing the Player King's murder. Claudius leaves the performance in ang
that the ghost was telling the truth. Hamlet agrees to see Gertrude but tells hims
harm her.

## Dramatic form in *Hamlet* (AO2): metadrama: 'the

### Context (AO3) and connections between texts (AO4): the 'play within a play'

Use of the dramatic form of a 'play within a play' is a common device in Elizabe
example, it can be seen in Thomas Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy*, probably wr
This device can also be found in Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dre*

Shakespeare's use of **metadrama** through the incorporation of the player's performance of *The Murder of Gonzalo* into the play is significant for both the plot and the themes of the play. When Hamlet sees Claudius's guilty reaction to the Player King's murder, he is finally sure that the ghost has been telling the truth. Before the play is enacted Hamlet considers the possibility that Claudius might *not* show any reaction, in which case Hamlet would conclude *'It is a damnèd ghost that we have seen'* (3.2.72), i.e. a ghost from hell, and, therefore, a liar. After Claudius has left the performance in anger, Hamlet is convinced, saying *'I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound'* (3.2.260). The metadrama also a enactment of the murder of King Hamlet, which has so far been described but n metadrama acts as a form of the 'flashback' often used in modern film.

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## Themes: appearance versus reality

This overarching theme is developed through the players' performance. Hamlet spying, lying and deceit: during the performance of the play he is being observe with Claudius on the brink of sending him to England, and Gertrude preparing to reason for his wild words and behaviour. However, during the players' performa he (and Horatio) watch the King and Queen closely for any reaction.

Hamlet's instruction to the players is on the surface a straightforward piece of ac specifically, he warns the players against overacting and improvisation (3.2.1–36 ironic, in that Hamlet's own *'torrent, tempest'* and *'whirlwind of… passion'* (3.2.5 the course of the play. There is a second irony: Hamlet tells the players that acti

make their performance seem more true to life; but his own wild speech and bel
has been adopted in order to prevent Claudius and the other members of his roy
about the ghost's appearance and accusation.

## Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia: a subplot of *H*
## continued harsh treatment of Ophelia)

Hamlet's unpleasant and insulting behaviour towards Ophelia in Act 3, Scene 1 is
can be seen in the sexual innuendoes in the passage where Hamlet asks Ophelia
followed by a crude reference to *'country matters'* (3.2.103) with its **pun** derived
'country', and his explicit comment *'That's a fair thought to lie between maids' le*

When Ophelia says (describing the players' prologue): *''Tis brief, my lord'* (3.2.134) Hamlet takes another opportunity to offend her when he replies *'As woman's love'* (3.2.135). Although Hamlet's reply could in theory be seen as a general comment, it suggests to Ophelia that it is her love for him which he is calling into question.

**Debate**
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Hamlet continues his sexual innuendoes later in the scene, when he speaks to Ophelia during the players' performance (3.2.225–227).

***OPHELIA:*** *You are keen my lord, you are keen.* [You are sharp, i.e. bitter]
***HAMLET:*** *It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge.* [ with me to cure me]
***OPHELIA:*** *Still better and worse.* [You always reply with a 'sm which is offensive]

This exchange shows that Ophelia is not some naïve young woman who does not
she is well aware of his hidden meanings, which (arguably) makes his behaviour

**Extended essay question [17]**
'Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia cannot be excused by his personal circumst
making close reference to the text to support your answer.

## Themes: power and politics

When Hamlet asks Horatio to observe Claudius's reactions to the play he greets Horatio by paying him a compliment: *'Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man / As e'er my conversation coped withal'* (3.2.44–45), i.e. 'You are as honest a man as anyone I have met.' Horatio's modest response implies that he thinks Hamlet is flattering him. Hamlet responds with a speech about flattery and influence (3.2.47–64) which reveals his dislike of the dishonest and hypocritical behaviour that he has (we can assume) seen from his position as a Danish prince close to the centre of power. Hamlet's **rhetorical question** *'Why should the poor be flattered?'* (3.2.49) has its own answer supplied later in his speech: people only flatter when they think they can get profit by it.

**Key terms**
**Rhetorical qu**
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**Machiavellia**
methods, espe
*Prince* and oth
sixteenth-centu
**Pun:** Use of a
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In the same speech Hamlet praises people (and Horatio in particular) who have t
enable them to resist flattery and the influence of others in general: *'And blest a*
*judgement are so well commeddled / That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finge*
passion and reason are so well balanced that they can't be 'played on'.

Hamlet's dislike of **Machiavellian** political plotting is also seen in his irritated reactio towards the end of the scene. Hamlet knows they have been sent to spy on him. W rhetorical question *'... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?'* (3.2.334 earlier in the scene (3.2.58–60), showing his resentment of the idea that he should b

Further evidence of the hypocrisy and flattery which Hamlet associates with the country can be seen when Polonius asks Hamlet if he will speak to the Queen (3.2 pretence of madness, Hamlet points out a cloud formation, comparing its shape and a whale. Each time Polonius agrees with his description. Although Polonius court (he is the king's counsellor, or chief adviser) he does not rank as highly as H obsequiously to any opinion that Hamlet expresses.

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): imagery

Shakespeare's striking image *'... let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp'* (3.2.50 dishonest) courtier licking the hand of a pompous, powerful person like a fawnin metaphor for flattery, showing the flatterer as debasing themselves.

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): form: prose; varied

This scene is a good illustration of the variety of forms of language used by Shake purpose.

- **Prose:** The scene opens with Hamlet's advice to the players, written in prose for a number of reasons: Hamlet is talking to his social inferiors, who usually Shakespeare's plays; and the advice he gives has the practical tone of an ins poetic intensity of much of the verse in the play. Prose is also used in the di Ophelia; Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude; Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildens This form gives Shakespeare a suitable vehicle to craft short, rapid, back-an
- **Verse – iambic pentameter:** as elsewhere in *Hamlet*, this verse form is used for more poetic language and denser imagery. An example can be seen in the last lines of the scene. After Hamlet has agreed to meet with Gertrude, Polonius leaves and Hamlet is left alone on stage, where he delivers his short soliloquy, *"Tis now the very witching time of night'* (3.2.349–360). Here Hamlet's cryptic dialogue with Polonius, conducted in everyday language, is replaced with dark, threatening imagery, starting with a horrifying personification where hell's mouth gapes like an open grave, and breathes out the breath of disease over the world.
- **Verse – the rhyming couplets used in *The Murder of Gonzago*:** There is no evidence that *The Murder of Gonzago* is an actual play; we can be almo invented it. The verse form contrasts with the 'real' play, *Hamlet*, increasing

### Context (AO3): the simple verse form of *The Murder of Go*

The end-stopped lines and relatively unsophisticated diction and imagery are typ Elizabethan period, and are probably intended to seem old-fashioned or 'quaint An example of an early play of this kind is the play about the life of Cambyses, Thomas Preston around 1569.

- **Verse – Hamlet's *ballad*.** Hamlet delivers two verses after the King walks ou with *The Murder of Gonzago,* no evidence of a pre-existing ballad containing These verses could be recited or sung, according to the wishes of the directo *let the stricken deer go weep*' (3.2.229) clearly refers to Claudius, who has b enactment of his crime. Shakespeare's use of the ballad form here allows H revealing his own part in the scheme to trap Claudius into revealing his guilt

### Extended essay question [18]

Reread Act 3, Scene 2 from the entry of Horatio – 'Here sweet lord, at your serv of the dumb-show '... the hobby-horse is forgot' (3.2.43–3.2.120). With close re Shakespeare uses verse and prose forms in this passage for dramatic effect. The section of this guide (p. 59) will help you answer this question.

# Act 3, Scene 3

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to get ready to take Hamlet with the
Claudius he intends to spy on the forthcoming meeting between Hamlet and Gert
Claudius on his knees praying and decides not to kill him, as he thinks Claudius's
save his soul.

## Themes: politics and power (kingship)

When at the start of this scene Claudius (the new King of Denmark) instructs Ros
take Hamlet to England, Claudius represents Hamlet's threat to him as a threat t
Claudius's statement *'I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madnes*
means Claudius's role as King of Denmark. As Claudius says a few lines later, he
in Denmark *'The terms of our estate may not endure / Hazard so near us'* (3.3.5–
the institution of monarchy – 'our estate' – as under threat from Hamlet's action
Shakespeare's effective use of dramatic irony, because (unknown to Rosencrantz
himself undermined the institution of monarchy in a wicked fashion by his murd
the murder would be considered morally wrong at any time in history, the mona
Shakespeare's audience.

**Context (AO3):**
**The Elizabethan concept of 'kingship' and the divine rigl**

The concept of 'the divine right of kings' has its origins in the medieval period, wh
was seen as derived directly from God. The concept was reinforced during the r
1547), who needed to establish his power during the Reformation, when England
Church. Queen Elizabeth I (reigned 1558–1603) encouraged the belief that her
Most of Shakespeare's audience would have accepted this doctrine, and so the m
Claudius would have been seen as directly contradicting God's will.

Later in the play (again ironically) Claudius invokes the same doctrine when he tells Gertrude that he has nothing to fear from Laertes (4.5.123–125):

> *Let him go, Gertrude, do not fear our person.*
> *There's such divinity doth hedge a king*
> *That treason can but peep to what it would…*
> [i.e. that treason can only peer through the 'hedge' and cannot cause harm]

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## Themes: corruption

Claudius's soliloquy when he is attempting to pray for forgiveness brings into focus the overarching theme of 'corruption' that runs through the play. When he states that *'Oh my offence is rank, it smells to heaven'* (3.3.36) Cla
corruption; the offence of the individual against accepted standards of behaviou
Claudius links his personal wrongdoing to the corrupt stage of the world as a wh
*this world / Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice*' (3.3.57–58).

## Characterisation: Claudius

Claudius's soliloquy in this scene is the first time in the play that the audience kn
responsible for the murder of old King Hamlet. Claudius's first four lines (3.3.36–
regretful. Although he says 'Pray can I not' he adds 'Though inclination be as sha
wish to pray is as great as my motivation'; this suggests a genuine desire to pray,
holding him back.

However, when Claudius goes on to explain **what** is stopping him from praying, h
first concern is that there might not be enough mercy in heaven to forgive him fo
rhetorical question *'Whereto serves mercy / But to confront the visage of offence*
purpose of mercy is to confront misdeeds. It seems that Claudius is willing to be
task for what he has done. He then argues that prayer has two possible purpose
committing a wicket act, or praying to be pardoned. The first is not relevant to C
past' – he has already done the offensive act. Claudius also finds the second pur

> *'Forgive me my foul murder'?*
> *That cannot be, since I am still possessed*
> *Of those effects for which I did the murder,*
> *My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen*

The obvious response to this (and one that will surely occur to the audience) is th
he holds on to what he has gained. A true repentant could renounce the Crown,
he has gained and **also** be forgiven. His speech concludes by admitting that altho
justice in the earthly world, in heaven there can be no escape. His tortured excla
speech can be assumed to be genuine, as he thinks he is alone so there is nothin
emotion. The speech leaves us with a complex portrayal of a man aware of his w
rewards but also conscious of the consequences and seeking absolution.

Note down any brief quotations which you think illustrate Claudius's character w
following table to format your notes.

**Active learning task: the characterisation of Claudius up**
**Scene 3 [20]**

Look again at the part played by Claudius in *Hamlet* up to and including this poi
about what his actions reveal about his character. Include consideration of wheth
wholly evil character, or if he has any redeeming features. Note down any brief
illustrate his character well. You may wish to use the following table to format yo

| Act and scene where Claudius appears (up to end of Act 3, Scene 3). | His actions and what they reveal about his character | B |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

## Characterisation: Hamlet

Hamlet has sometimes been characterised as a hesitant character, given to proc
unwillingness to kill Claudius when he is praying (as seen in Hamlet's soliloquy 3.
by the reason he gives: he wants Claudius to go to hell, not risk the possibility of
because his death coincided with a prayer for forgiveness. The last line of Hamle
*prolongs thy sickly days'* (3.3.96), metaphorically compares the medicine (physic)
to the prayers (observed by Hamlet) which keep Claudius alive.

This line of Hamlet marks a turning point in his state of mind. He was prepared t
at being prevented from doing so – by Claudius's prayers – generates a fierce de
the next scene of the play.

# Act 3, Scene 4

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

Hamlet meets Gertrude and accuses her. When Polonius (hiding behind a tapest
Claudius and thrusts his sword through the tapestry, killing him. Hamlet's vehemer
until it is interrupted by the appearance of the ghost, invisible to Gertrude. The g
revenge upon Claudius. Hamlet tries to persuade his mother not to have sex with
promises to say nothing about her realisation that Hamlet is only pretending to b
drags Polonius's body with him.

## Characterisation: Hamlet's troubled state of mind treatment of his mother

Hamlet's first words in this scene are significant. His cry of '*Mother, mother, mo*
agitated state of mind that pervades his language, actions and attitudes through

Gertrude's first words to Hamlet have the tone and content of a traditional exch
mother and a 'difficult' son: '*Hamlet, thou has thy father much offended*' (3.3.10
comment that might be made to a son who has (for example) borrowed his fathe
forgotten to deliver a letter. Hamlet (and the audience) appreciate the irony in t
refers to Claudius; Hamlet, in his reply, is thinking of the old King Hamlet when h
and says *'Mother, you have my father much offended'* (3.3.94). Hamlet comman
listen to him. The language that Hamlet uses at this point is not directly threater
is going to kill her. From this point onwards the tone and atmosphere of the sce
Gertrude's calm remonstrance to Hamlet's feverish accusations.

**Active learning task [21]**

Reread the beginning of Act 3, Scene 4 from Hamlet's entry up to Gertrude's cry
*thou wilt not murder me? / Help, help, ho!'* (3.4.8–21). Her sudden fear cannot b
alone. Imagine that you are directing *Hamlet* for stage or film. What stage dire
give Hamlet and Gertrude to explain Gertrude's sudden fear to the audience, re
movement, positions or tone of voice?

When Polonius (hidden behind the wall hanging) responds to Gertrude's cry, Hamlet does not hesitate to thrust his sword through the curtain and kill him. It is clear from Hamlet's words a few lines later that he thought he was killing Claudius; he says to Polonius *'I took thee for thy better'* (3.4.32). From that point onwards until the end of the scene Hamlet mounts a sustained and vituperative verbal attack on his mother. Hamlet criticises her for her adultery, telling her that the whole of creation is disgusted with her: '*Heaven's face… Is thought-sick at the act'* (3.4.47–50); he continues by elaborating on his disgust at Gertrude's attraction to Claudius.

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## Shakespeare's language: *classical allusions*, simil questions and repetition (AO2)

Hamlet's monologue directed to Gertrude, '*Look here upon this picture…*' (3.4.75–88) contains a number of examples of Shakespeare's effective use of language to enhance meaning, produce dramatic effects and present feelings and emotions (in this instance, those of Hamlet). NB The director of the play has to decide how to provide the two pictures that Hamlet comments on; for example, they could be hung on the wall next to each other.

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Hamlet's monologue compares his father (old King Hamlet) with Claudius, seekin
ashamed by Claudius being so obnoxious in comparison to her former husband.
allusions to describe King Hamlet – Hyperion, Jove, Mars and Mercury – associat
and power of the classical gods. The allusions here are particularly effective bec
notable feature of the god in question: the attractive hair of Hyperion; the noble
commanding posture of Mars; and the athletic posture of Mercury. These virtue
Hamlet a composite supreme god.

Shakespeare uses a striking simile to contrast Claudius to Hamlet: *'Here is your [r
ear, / Blasting his wholesome brother'* (3.4.64–65). Here Claudius is compared to
passes on its sickness to the grain next to it. The bathetic contrast – from god to
appear small and insignificant as well as fatally flawed.

Forceful examples of rhetorical questions can be seen in this monologue, reflecti
amazement concerning his mother's attraction to Claudius. One of these, *'Have
repeated; the repetition further reinforces our sense of Hamlet as barely able to
in the play.

## Characterisation: Gertrude and her complicity (o
## King Hamlet's murder

After Hamlet has killed Polonius by stabbing him through the wall hanging, the su
between Gertrude and Hamlet raises an important issue (3.4.27–31).

***GERTRUDE:*** *Oh what a rash and bloody deed is this!*
***HAMLET:*** *A bloody deed? Almost as bad, good mother,*
*As kill a king and marry with his brother.*
***GERTRUDE:*** *As kill a king?*
***HAMLET:*** *Ay lady, 'twas my word. [Yes lady, that's what I*

Critics and commentators on *Hamlet* have pointed out that it is surprising that ne
mention this significant exchange of words again. However, Hamlet's words do n
suggesting that Gertrude was directly involved in the actual killing of old King Ha
she knew about it. We can interpret her silence on this accusation as either evid
involvement, *or* as suggesting that she has no idea what Hamlet is talking about a
words. There is no evidence in the play that Gertrude knew anything about the m

Later in this scene Gertrude is so affected by Hamlet's criticism of her relationshi
herself as having acted immorally (i.e. having committed adultery with Claudius,
marriage) and begs him to say no more to her.

**Extended essay question [23]**
'Gertrude is a victim rather than a villain.' Discuss this opinion with close referenc
the end of Act 3, Scene 4)

## Themes: corruption; sexual relationships and atti

The theme of corruption continues in this scene. As mentioned above, Claudius i of cereal, a 'mildewed ear' (3.4.64). Later he visualises Gertrude with a particula repulsive) image of Gertrude and Claudius in bed together (3.4.91–94).

> *Nay, but to live*
> *In the rank sweat of an ensemèd bed,*
> *Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love*
> *Over the nasty sty.*

(NB In Shakespeare's time the phrase 'making love' meant courting and talking i meaning of having sex.)

These lines hark back to Hamlet's earlier revulsion at his mother's relationship w them for being keen *'to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets'* (1.2.157) on the contrast between 'honeying [i.e. exchanging lovers' endearments] and ma repugnance generated by the picture of a sweaty, greasy bed and a pigsty. The i meaning of 'Stewed' (brothels were known at the time as 'stews') and the associa As well as associating Gertrude's moral failings with physical corruption, the sens that it also shows Hamlet's own repugnancy at the physical manifestations of sex

Later in the scene Hamlet warns his mother not to try to excuse her behaviour (a arguing that he is mad. The metaphor that he uses to depict her self-delusion ag corruption, and the image is again both powerful and intentionally repulsive (3.4

> [Your self-deception] *will but skin and film the ulcerous place,*
> *Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,*
> *Infects unseen*

In other words, what might look from the outside like a healthy patch of skin is i covering the infected, ulcerous diseased flesh beneath.

## The last appearance of the ghost

Shakespeare uses a common theatrical device in dealing with supernatural even The fact that Gertrude is in the presence of the ghost and cannot see it generate Hamlet surprised by the ghost, but Gertrude is equally surprised by what she see apparently talking to himself. Hamlet immediately assumes that the ghost has c delaying his revenge, and the ghost confirms this.

## Shakespeare's stagecraft: *foreshadowing*

At the end of this scene, Hamlet reminds Gertrude that he is about to travel to England. He states that he does not trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, refers to the sealed letters that they carry, and hints that he (Hamlet) is plotting to outwit them by turning their scheme against them. He compares them metaphorically to a military engineer 'Hoist with his own petard' (3.4.208), i.e. blown up with his own bomb. This hint engages the curiosity of the audience and makes them speculate about what is to come. It also means that when the audience later find out about Hamlet's scheme (he changes Claudius's instructions so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are put to death, not him) they connect this with the original hint, satisfying their curiosity in a dramatically

## Theme: madness

This scene confirms the important fact that although Hamlet is very agitated and in the play, he clearly states that is not 'mad' in the sense of having lost the capa

Quite reasonably Gertrude fears that Hamlet's conversation with the ghost (whic he is suffering from 'ecstasy' or madness (3.4.139). However, Hamlet responds b (3.4.140–144).

> *Ecstasy?*
> *My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time,*
> *And makes as healthful music. It is not madness*
> *That I have uttered.*

His subsequent speeches, which are rational as well as forceful and emotional, conv truth. We know this because when Hamlet tells Gertrude not to tell Claudius '*That I But mad in craft* (3.4.188–189) she agrees that she will say nothing to Claudius abou

# Act 4, Scene 1

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius. Claudius send Rosencrant
Polonius's body.

## Shakespeare's stagecraft: characters enter mid-co

At the start of this short scene Gertrude remains on stage after Hamlet has left. V
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he continues his ongoing conversation with them
asks her 'Where is your son?' The stage director will probably ask Claudius to tu
speaks to her (4.1.1–3).

> *There's matter in these sighs, these profound heaves.*
> *You must translate, 'tis fit we understand them.*
> *Where is your son?*

This is a dramatically effective device. Of course in reality there has been no pric
the king and his two companions, but the effect is to suggest to the audience a p
reality beyond the stage that they occupy – and mentally the audience will use th
in what the three have been discussing. Claudius is of course referring to Hamle
out exactly what lies behind Hamlet's apparent madness.

**Active learning task [24]**

Reread the play up to this point and find some other scenes that start mid-conver
has to imagine the previous details.

Do any of these scenes offer a particular challenge to the audience's ability to su
conversation that they have missed?

## Characterisation: Gertrude's loyalty to Hamlet

Gertrude keeps her promise not to reveal Hamlet's true state of mind. When Cla
replies *'Mad as the sea and wind'* (4.1.6).

# Act 4, Scene 2

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet and ask him what he has done with Po
refuses to tell them and responds with some wordplay and riddles.

## Shakespeare's use of language: wordplay

By this point in the play the cheerful banter that took place between Hamlet and
Act 2, Scene 2 (2.2.215–276) is replaced by a much more pointed type of exchan
suspicion of the pair; a little earlier he described them to Gertrude as 'adders fan
snakes. When he calls Rosencrantz a 'sponge' (4.2.12) Hamlet's explanation of th
for the pair, typifying them as soaking up the king's rewards, in the same way tha
who is over-reliant on others can be called a 'sponge'. Hamlet's closing remark, '
(not included in all editions of *Hamlet*) may be a reference to the children's game
fact that Hamlet is hunting for Claudius like a fox hunter hunts for a fox.

# Act 4, Scene 3

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**

Claudius tells his courtiers that Hamlet is too popular in Denmark for the law to pu
that instead Hamlet should be sent away to England. Hamlet jokes about corpse
he has put Polonius's body. In an extended aside at the end of the scene Claudiu
a letter to England, commanding the authorities to kill Hamlet.

## Characterisation: Claudius

Despite earlier evidence of Claudius's pangs of conscience, this scene reinforces h
Claudius is politically astute, and understands that Hamlet is popular with the pe
cannot be punished by the law for his murder of Polonius. Claudius's Machiavell
when he says that Hamlet's expulsion from Denmark must seem *'Deliberate pau*
has been intentionally planned rather than a sudden and unexpected act.

Claudius's hypocrisy can be seen when he tells Hamlet that he is being sent away
*Which we do tender'* (4.3.37–38) whereas it becomes apparent at the end of the s
Hamlet to be killed.

## Theme: mortality

When Hamlet is asked about Polonius's body, Hamlet's seriocomic, riddling langu
exchanges with the gravedigger in the graveyard scene (Act 5, Scene 1). As in the
wordplay here has two purposes: to entertain the audience, and at the same time
On one level Hamlet's comments on Polonius's body (4.3.17–34) are straightforw
Claudius that Polonius is '*At supper*', a phrase which the audience (and Claudius)
image of someone sitting down to eat their meal. This is momentarily puzzling (w
moment later Hamlet reveals his play on words; Polonius is the supper, and is be
grotesque and unexpected double meaning is amusing. Hamlet's later quip, whe
and replies 'In heaven', is an intentional comic misinterpretation of Claudius's qu

### Context (AO3): The Diet of Worms

The early seventeenth-century audience for *Hamlet* would have been amused by
contained in these lines. In 1521 an important meeting or 'diet' was held in the E
meeting, known as 'The Diet of Worms', was held to discuss the Protestant beliefs
course an unintentionally amusing double meaning in this title.

On another level Hamlet's wit is more profound. His joking comments about Pol
that all worldly rank and importance becomes irrelevant after death. The worm
humans use creatures for food (and are thus more powerful than animals) and w
outrank us). Hamlet also presents a subsidiary idea: as both beggars and kings e
distinction between them in life (as well as after death) is less than it seems. Thi
example of a beggar eating a king (via a fish/worm).

### Active learning task [25]

Shakespeare uses a mixture of verse and prose in this scene. Suggest reasons fo
prose forms in the following sections:

- Claudius's speech at the start of the scene (4.3.1–11) and the end of the sce
- The short exchanges between Hamlet and Claudius (4.3.17–36).

# Act 4, Scene 4

Somewhere in the Danish countryside

**Summary**

We learn that Claudius has allowed Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, to march acro
attack Poland. Hamlet meets a captain of the Norwegian army. The captain tell
about to capture a small piece of worthless Polish territory which the Poles are g
captain leaves, Hamlet delivers a soliloquy in which he uses the captain's news to
against Claudius.

## Characterisation: Hamlet

The concluding lines of Hamlet's soliloquy, *'Oh from this time forth, / My though*
(4.4.65–66) appear to suggest that it is at this moment that Hamlet becomes det
However, this interpretation appears to conflict with the fact that Hamlet has *al*
determination when he kills Polonius (in mistake for Claudius) by thrusting his sw
Scene 4).

This apparent contradiction can be explained by considering Hamlet's state of m
Claudius and killed Polonius by mistake. His deadly attack was an instant decisio
Claudius's voice from behind the curtain. Where Hamlet has more time to think –
Claudius attempting to pray – he is less decisive.

The message of this soliloquy is that Hamlet has now decided that he will no long
situation, but will act immediately in defence of his honour. This key thought is e
They are important, but also quite hard to interpret due to the implied double ne
is given alongside (4.4.52–55):

| | |
|---|---|
| *Rightly to be great* | [Acting correctly] |
| *Is not to stir without great argument,* | [Does not mean 'not doing very strong reason'] |
| *But greatly to find quarrel in a straw* | [It means that you need to slightest thing] |
| *When honour's at the stake.* | [If you think that your hon |

## Shakespeare's language: similes (AO2)

Hamlet's soliloquy in this scene does not contain the density of striking images th
speeches, but there are two examples of similes which are effective because of t
mediocre writing is often typified by *unoriginal* figures of speech such as 'as dry a
haystack'. In contrast, Shakespeare's writing is characterised by its inventiveness

When criticising himself for his inaction, Hamlet says that he has some obvious e
inspired him: *'examples gross as earth'* (4.4.45), i.e. 'as obvious as earth'. In cho
identifies a ubiquitous aspect of everyday life – the land or earth around us – and
inspired to take action by observation of equally obvious events.

A few lines later he compares himself unfavourably to Fortinbras, saying that For
everything, even for something as worthless as *'an egg-shell'* (4.4.52). The effec
by a further layer of meaning. Not only is Fortinbras ready to risk everything for
fragile nature of an eggshell implies the vulnerability and danger of the mission i

# Act 4, Scene 5

**Summary**
Gertrude is told that Ophelia is acting very strangely. After Ophelia leaves, Cla
events that might have caused Ophelia's insanity. A messenger brings the news t
against King Claudius and is heading for the castle of Elsinore. When Laertes en
he (Claudius) did not kill Polonius. Ophelia enters singing and talking in a confuse
Claudius says that he will tell Laertes the truth about who killed Polonius, and invi
facts with his friends.

## Characterisation: Ophelia and Theme: madness

This scene is the last time that Ophelia appears in the play. She speaks strangely
which appear superficially nonsensical. There is nothing in the play to suggest th
distraction. Ophelia's mental and emotional distress is genuine (unlike Hamlet, s
pretending to be insane). However, much of what might appear to be confused
in fact, meaningful. As Laertes comments after Ophelia's second appearance in t
*than matter*' (4.5.173), i.e. 'This 'nonsense' is more significant than plain speech'

Laertes' comment is similar to the comment that Polonius makes about Hamlet's
conversation earlier in the play in Act 2, Scene 2: '*Though this be madness, yet th*
There is, however, a difference between the apparently incoherent (though, in fa
and Ophelia. Hamlet, though clearly emotional and distraught, is well aware of t
is saying. Ophelia, on the other hand, is acting irrationally, and her bizarre and o
product of her mental distress. This does not mean that what she says is random
together without reason, but are a distorted reflection of her concerns and her e

At the beginning of the scene Shakespeare makes the significance of Ophelia's words (still to come) very clear, when a courtier describes his recent observations of Ophelia: *'Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshapèd use of it doth move / The hearers to collection* (4.5.7–9). This idea of sense lurking within Ophelia's madness is continued by Horatio, when he persuades Gertrude to see Ophelia: *'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds'* (4.5.14–15). These introductory comments prepare the audience to take Ophelia's words – both spoken and sung – as significant and worthy of in

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Ophelia's strained mental state is the product of grief. She is sad because of Ham
towards her (Act 3, Scene 1) and may also be regretting her obedience to her fat
more to do with Hamlet. She is also upset because of the murder of her father.

Ophelia's first song, '*How should I you true love know*' is delivered in three separ
is based on a popular Elizabethan ballad in which a deserted lover (an old man) a
lost love. The second verse, where Ophelia answers her own question to say 'He
referring metaphorically to Hamlet (i.e. his love for her is dead); or to her father,
both. The third verse regrets that Polonius was not properly mourned.

Ophelia's comment made shortly after her first song ends, '*They say the owl was*
appears bizarre today, but the reference to a folk tale would have been understo

Ophelia's second song, delivered in two verses (4.5.48–66), is not based on any o
The sexualised content of this second song is further evidence of Ophelia's ment
been considered socially unacceptable for a young woman of Ophelia's class to b
matters; she only does so because she has lost much of her powers of reason.

The sexual language is quite explicit. The young man lets a 'maid' (i.e. a virgin) in
she is no longer a maid. In the second verse Ophelia moves from a specific anec

comment about young men: they'll 'do't' (i.e. have sex) if they get the chance. T
sometimes used as a substitute for 'By God', but here the double meaning is obv
example: the seduced woman complains that the man promised to marry her, a
done if she had *not* had sex with him.

The explicit content of this song has caused some critics and commentators to su
with Hamlet, or indeed is pregnant by him. However, it is equally possible to arg
of mind has led her to dwell upon a sexual relationship which she has *not* experi

Ophelia concludes her first appearance in this scene by talking (presumably about P
*'I'th'cold ground'* (4.5.69). The reference to death ominously foreshadows Ophelia'
departing words, *'Good night ladies, good night sweet ladies, good night, good nig*
tone of politeness allied to sorrow and emphasised by repetition.

In Ophelia's next (and final) appearance in this scene she enters singing the first two lines of another lament, followed by some lines from a popular song; both these brief snatches of song suggest death and desertion. She then distributes flowers and herbs to those around her. Again there is great pathos in the sight of the distraught young woman, with the delicate beauty of her gifts mirroring her own fragility. Shakespeare's a
of the extensive folklore surrounding the properties and symbolic meanings of fl
understood the significance of Ophelia's actions. The line which she sings next –
*joy'* (4.5.182) – is from a popular song which has not survived, but is thought to c
two verses from her final song (of which we have no record, and which may be S
to refer to the death of Polonius, since there is a reference to the corpse having

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The disjointed collection of snatches of song from Ophelia in her last appearance
confused mental state; the subject of her verses again foreshadows what is to co

**Active learning task [27]**

Using the evidence in the text and the footnotes in your edition of *Hamlet*, and/o
following table.

| Flower/herb | Traditional property or symbolic significance | The person t |
|---|---|---|
| **Rosemary** | | |
| **Pansies** | | |
| **Fennel** | | |
| **Columbines** | | |
| **Rue** | | |
| **Daisies** | | |
| **Violets** | | |

## Themes: Revenge and Characterisation: Laertes a

When Laertes hears the news of his father's death his reaction is violent and dec
chooses to bide his time, Laertes jumps to the conclusion that it is King Claudius
rebellion and attacks the castle of Elsinore. When Claudius cries '*The doors are b*
Laertes' impulsive actions, summed up afterwards in his words to Claudius (4.5.1

> *To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,*
> *Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!*
> . . . . . .
> *Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged*
> *Most thoroughly for my father.*

This is in direct contrast to Hamlet, who before he is willing to take his revenge s
Claudius to prove the accusation made by the ghost. Laertes also decides to dela
Claudius convinces him to first make sure who really murdered his father. Laerte
making it obvious to the audience that Claudius will soon be able to prove to him
Because Laertes' fierce frame of mind has already been established, this raises d
the revenge tragedy genre conventions) that the action of the play will soon culm
the twin revenge plots of Hamlet vs Claudius and Laertes vs Hamlet start to conv

**Extended essay question [28]**
With detailed reference to Shakespeare's use of language, show how Ophelia's
Include comment on how her character is developed during the course of the play

## *Act 4, Scene 6*

Inside Elsinore Castle

**Summary**
Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet. The letter explains that Hamlet was captu
continued towards England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on board. Hamlet
implication is that a ransom has been paid) and Hamlet wants Horatio to meet hi
some important news.

## Shakespeare's stagecraft: foreshadowing

Following the dramatic expectations raised at the end of the previous scene (see
raises the tension with Hamlet's urgent letter to Horatio. Hamlet writes *'I have w*
*make thee dumb, yet they are much too light for the bore of the matter'* (4.6.20–
words are of extreme importance, and yet even so they will not be sufficient to c
is going to say. The military metaphor (the words are compared to shot which is
of a cannon) is appropriate for the subject, since some kind of violent climax is n

# Act 4, Scene 7

Inside Elsinore Castle

## Summary

Claudius has convinced Laertes that Hamlet killed Polonius. When Laertes asks C
taken action against Hamlet, Claudius gives two reasons: the love that Gertrude h
popularity among the public. Claudius explains his scheme for getting rid of Ham
arranged between Laertes and Hamlet, and Laertes will be given a sword with a
also poison the sword. Claudius adds to the plan – a poisoned drink will also be
other plan fails. Gertrude enters to announce that Ophelia is drowned, making L
take his revenge on Hamlet.

### Genre conventions and context (AO3): revenge tragedy

The modern audience or reader is likely to find Claudius's plot to kill Hamlet melo
sword, poison by sword and (if necessary) poison with a drink appears excessive
violence was an expected feature of the revenge tragedy genre. For example, i
*Spanish Tragedy* (written between 1582 and 1592) Don Horatio is both hanged a
Genre conventions (including the conventions of revenge tragedy) allow the audie
'real life' would be unrealistic or unlikely. For example: in the modern 'action mo
seeing the hero surviving one crisis after another in an improbable fashion.

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): Gertrude's accoun
## Ophelia

When Claudius and Laertes are planning their scheme to kill Hamlet, Gertrude en
drowned (4.7.166–183).

*There is a willow grows askant a brook,*
*That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.*
*Therewith fantastic garlands did she make,*
*Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,*
*That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,*
*But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.*
*There on the pendant boughs her cronet weeds*
*Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,*
*When down her weedy trophies and herself*
*Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide*
*And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,*
*Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,*
*As one incapable of her own distress,*
*Or like a creature native and indued*
*Unto that element. But long it could not be*
*Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,*
*Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay*
*To muddy death.*

The description that Gertrude gives of the circumstances of Ophelia's death is bo
contrasts with the harsher diction and violent imagery that can be seen in the pre
Laertes.

The first four lines of Gertrude's account portray what appears to be an idyllic **pa**
willow tree bends over a peaceful stream, while Ophelia makes garlands of wild f
the sense of 'intricate and complex' rather than our modern meaning of 'amazin
scene is reinforced by the sweet-sounding assonance in the opening two lines of
'hoar' (i.e. grey). However, a different tone is introduced in the comment on the 'long purples'. It is likely that the 'grosser name' relates to the testicle-shaped tubers of these plants, or to the phallic shape of the flower. This apparently gratuitous comment with its sexual **connotations** evokes in the mind of the audience Ophelia's previous distress at a real or imagined seduction. When we are told that 'cold' (i.e. chaste) young women call the plant 'dead men's fingers', the sombre phrase contrasts with Ophelia's apparently happy garland-making, injecting a premonition of mortality into the pastoral scene.

**De**
The
that
Oph
she
•

When the premonition is fulfilled a few lines later the 'glassy stream' is transformed and personified as a 'weeping brook'; this personification is effective attributes of a stream (running water) with tears of sadness. The striking descrip subject of many paintings since) derives its power from the contrast between the Ophelia, and her own obliviousness to it. What is portrayed here is far more sub desperate person to drown themselves, and is, therefore, more moving. Ophelia but her mental instability means that she is unable to react normally and save he picture of a young woman 'incapable of her own distress'; that is, unaware of the she appears, paradoxically, almost to welcome the soft, watery bed in which she tunes. The simile 'mermaid-like' suggests that the brook is as benign to her as it in water, the thought reinforced later when she is shown to be as content as a riv

The last four lines of Gertrude's description shatter the pastoral idyll. The caesur be' is an ominous pause which signals a move from happy insanity to death. The lines of 'pulled' and 'poor' emphasises the tragic fate which awaits Ophelia; we n connotations of 'melodious' to the grim reality of 'muddy' in the space of four w Gertrude's speech, 'To muddy death', has a resonant tone of grim finality.

### Active learning task: Ophelia's death [30]

Use the Internet to find an image of Sir John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia* ( Ophelia's death.
How closely does the picture match the description given by Gertrude in the play?

## Characterisation: Gertrude

We receive some important information about Gertrude in this scene from comm Laertes. When referring to Hamlet he says '*The queen his mother / Lives almost b* devoted to Hamlet.

### Active learning task: Claudius's character [31]

Reread this scene and note down what aspects of Claudius's character are revea further developed.

# Act 5, Scene 1

A Churchyard

## Summary

A gravedigger who is a clown (this means a 'comical character', not a circus clown) and his companion joke and clown while they dig Ophelia's grave. Hamlet and Horatio arrive in the graveyard and watch as the gravedigger unearths several skulls. Hamlet and the gravedigger speculate about the origins of the skulls, including Yorick, the king's jester. Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes and a priest enter, with other mourners. Hamlet discovers it is Ophelia's coffin and Hamlet and Laertes argue violently. After Hamlet leaves, Claudius speaks to Laertes, implying that Hamlet will soon be dealt with.

## The gravedigger and his companion: traditional comic characters

The dialogue between the two 'clowns' which takes place before Hamlet enters seems to be designed to provide some comic relief within the tragic events depicted in *Hamlet*, and to contrast with some of the serious themes in the play. Seriocomic episodes of this kind were common in the Elizabethan period.

### Context (AO3): comic characters and scenes in Elizabethan drama

The character of the 'fool' in English theatre has a long tradition, going back to the 'Vice' in medieval religious plays. There is also a historical tradition of the 'court jester' who entertains the monarch. The clown or fool character appears in many Shakespeare plays; for example, the fool in *King Lear* (1606) and Nick Bottom and the other rustics in the comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Comic scenes also appear in the work of other Elizabethan playwrights; for example, there is comic relief in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1592) and Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* (1599). Two broad types of fool appear in Elizabethan drama. Firstly, the 'natural fool'; an uneducated (usually rustic) character who may show some natural quick-wittedness. The two clowns in *Hamlet* fall in this category. Secondly, the 'motley fool' or 'wise fools', such as the fool in *King Lear*.

## Theme: mortality

As soon as the gravedigger and his companion stark to talk at the start of this scene, it is clear that they are not just on stage to amuse the audience, because they discuss the case of the unnamed woman who is to be buried, and whether she should be given a Christian burial. It is obvious to the audience that this woman is Ophelia. Later the priest informs us that *'Her death was doubtful'* (5.1.194), i.e. it is not clear whether she committed suicide.

The theme of mortality is continued in this scene when the gravedigger unearths skulls.

### Context (AO3): Elizabethan graveyards

In Elizabethan times graveyard plots were less organised than they are today and it was common practice to reuse the sites of older graves.

Hamlet speculates on who the skulls might have come from; perhaps a politician, a lawyer or a courtier. In each case he compares the grimness of the skull to the pretentions and finery of the person it once belonged.

### Context (AO3): the skull as a 'memento mori'

This Latin phrase meaning 'reminder of death' describes the symbols of death which were popular in the Elizabethan period. People often kept human skulls on their desk or shelf to remind them of the brevity of life, and to prepare them for the day of judgement. Memento mori also appear frequently in the art and jewellery of the period. For an example, use the Internet to find an image of the painting by Caravaggio, painted around 1605.

The politician, who once 'overreached' (i.e. outwitted or triumphed over) his riva
by the gravedigger, who stretches out a hand to pick up the skull (5.1.66–67). Th
spoken courtier now suffers the indignity of being knocked about with a spade. T
legal knowledge, is now *'full of fine dirt'* (5.1.90). After consideration of the poss
unidentified skulls, Hamlet then speculates upon the skull of someone whom the
Yorick, the jester at the court of old King Hamlet. When Hamlet was a young boy
jester's company, which makes the sight of Yorick's skull all the more poignant.
generalised speculation, thinking of the great historical figures Alexander the Gre
might is now no more than dust.

The idea that Hamlet is elaborating here is that death both puts an end to all hur
status and privilege, and also illustrates the ultimate pointlessness of worldly am
*'To what base uses we may return, Horatio!'* (5.1.171): in other words, 'Just thin
dust after we die.' Of course this does not mean that Hamlet thinks that there ca
saying is that the concerns of human life do not survive death.

**Active learning task [32]**
Reread Act 4, Scene 3. Can you find any similarities between the issues raised i
raised in the graveyard scene?

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): wordplay in the gr

The amusing riddles and puns which occur between the two 'clowns' (the graved
in the scene between Hamlet and the gravedigger are not *all* connected with the
For example, an exchange occurs when the gravedigger tells Hamlet that it woul
had remained mad after being sent to England, because *"Twill not be seen in hin
mad as he'* (5.1.130). The punning joke about Adam being the first man to bear a
disconnected from the ideas developed in the scene. However, the gravedigger's
which of various tradesmen builds the strongest, has the answer of *'a grave mak
doomsday'* (5.1.49). Although on one level this is just an amusing riddle, the **sub**
and resurrection – has a clear link to the theme of 'mortality' which runs through

Another example of wordplay with a more serious undertone can be seen in the e
the gravedigger when Hamlet asks who is to occupy the grave. The gravedigger i
neither a man nor a woman. Hamlet is understandably puzzled, until the graved
emphasising the word 'was') that the grave is for *'One that was a woman sir, but
(5.1.114). The underlying idea that once someone is dead they are no longer ma
lost any connection with the world relates closely to Hamlet's speculations upon
people into grim skulls.

## Shakespeare's language (AO2): diction in the grav

Hamlet's speculation about the skulls that are unearthed by the gravedigger is m
Shakespeare's striking and original use of language. Much of the language in this
strength through the effectiveness of the diction rather than through more elabo
example can be seen in Hamlet's comments on the second anonymous scull (5.1

> *There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? W
> now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why do
> knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel…*

The impact of the language is derived from the contrast between the complicate
etc. with its connotations of impressive professional status and expertise, and th
'knock him about the sconce'; high-flown legal vocabulary meets a mundane 'dir

A similar example can be seen in the later comments of Hamlet regarding Yorick's
*most excellent fancy, he hath borne me on his back a thousand times… Where be
flashes of merriment*…? (5.1.157–161). The hyperbole and the repetition of 'you
the lively, witty jester, in contrast to the skull forever grinning with the fixed still

## Themes: revenge and Characterisation: Laertes a

When Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, the priest and others enter with Ophelia's cof upon Hamlet is quickly apparent, as he cries out *'Oh treble woe / Fall ten time tre* (5.1.213–214). When Hamlet arrives a moment later Laertes grapples with him, (5.1.225).

Hamlet's calm reply reinforces the contrast between Laertes' desire for immedia restrained vengefulness. There is a tone of quiet menace in Hamlet's words: *'Fo rash, / Yet have I in me something dangerous / Which let thy wisdom fear'* (5.1.2

Hamlet's comments about Ophelia are significant. He declares that he loves Oph brothers' and says that he will mourn her more than Laertes. His extreme, hyper bystanders that he is mad, and calls in to question whether the love that he expr passage illustrates the complexity of any kind of character analysis of Hamlet. Re the feelings he expresses for her in this scene are genuine; or that they are cons Hamlet's plan to assume an 'antic disposition'; or that his mental state is so agita his emotions cannot be relied upon.

### Interpretations of Hamlet (AO5): a Marxist perspective

Elements within this scene which relate to the social class structure of Elizabethan E critics and commentators who have applied a Marxist critical perspective to the p victim of the gravedigger's joke about neither a man or a woman being buried, H *grown so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier,* That is: 'our society has become so refined that the peasant is treading on the he to give the courtier a blister.' The metaphor implies that Hamlet thinks that there social classes. Later in the scene the priest suggests that Ophelia would not have not benefited from the influence of powerful people. Hamlet's comments on the s a comment on the ephemeral nature of social distinctions.

# Act 5, Scene 2

Inside Elsinore Castle

### Summary

Hamlet tells Horatio how (when he was sailing to England) he found the sealed le Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to deliver to the English, and substituted their name that he is determined to kill Claudius. Osric, an obsequious, affected courtier, de match from Laertes. Hamlet feels uneasy about this but accepts. Queen Gertrud by mistake. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the sharp, poisoned rapier. They drop in the confusion. Hamlet now has the poisoned rapier. Gertrude calls out that sh wounds Laertes with the poisoned rapier. The dying Laertes tells Hamlet that the that King Claudius is to blame. Hamlet then wounds Claudius and forces him to d Claudius and Laertes die. Horatio threatens to poison himself but Hamlet stops hi order to tell the story of what has happened. Hamlet says that Fortinbras should Denmark then dies (after early being reconciled with Laertes). Fortinbras arrives and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio promises to tell Fortinbras what happened, away to be honourably buried.

## Characterisation: Hamlet's fatalism and Shakespe metaphors (AO2)

By this stage in the play Hamlet has developed the philosophical stance of 'fatali actions are subject to destiny, and that there is little that the individual can do to This attitude is expressed at the start of the scene when Hamlet tells Horatio abo letter that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been given to deliver to the English had not been for the fact that he could not sleep (Hamlet argues) then he would in the dark or come across the letter (5.2.8–11).

*Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well*
*When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us*
*There's a divinity that shapes our ends,*
*Rough-hew them how we will –*

In the first two lines Hamlet is saying that we (humanity) may plan things very ca
objective, only to find that our random acts are just as important. The second tw
using a very effective and appropriate metaphor. The metaphor cleverly answer
criticism of fatalism (also called determinism). This criticism is based on the appa
extent we <u>are</u> in charge of our own destinies; for example, a person can decide w
apply to university, or where they go to on holiday. This self-evident truth, says
like a carpenter roughly cutting a piece of wood to size. However, the fine detail
is finished off) is still out of our control and in the hands of 'divinity' or fate: the u
over by a bus on her first day, or the tourist board a plane that crashes. Hamlet'
he tells Horatio that he feels uneasy about the fencing match but is going to go a
*not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come –*

## Themes: power and politics

Hamlet's statement in this scene that Claudius *'Popped in between th'election ar*
fact that Claudius was elected King of Denmark by the noblemen of that country
reasonably expected to be the next king. Of course the Danish nobles did not kn
King Hamlet. Claudius's ability to persuade the Danish nobles of his own superio
illustration of his political astuteness and cunning. The Danish system of royal su
nominate Fortinbras as his successor at the end of the play.

### Context (AO3): the Danish rules of succession

Unlike England, which had a hereditary monarchy at the time *Hamlet* was written
the nobles to elect the next king. The Danish nobles would usually take the advic
making their choice.

The reality of the exercise of power in the early seventeenth century can be seen in Hamlet's scheme to get rid of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius was confident that Hamlet would be put to death at his request, and Hamlet is confident that the same will apply to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Individual rights would have counted for little when influential leaders and politicians thought that their best interests were at stake. This is of course the scheme that is foreshadowed earlier in the play (3.4.208), and the audience will appreciate the dramatic conclusion of what was promised earlier.

### Debate p

Hamlet's pl
and Guilde
modern auc

- What
  excuse
- Do you

Criticism of the court and nobility of Denmark is presented indirectly through rid
who is portrayed as a foolish, over-wordy minion of the court, with absurdly affe

### Active learning task [34]

Reread the passages in Act 5, Scene 2 which feature Osric. Note down the meth
ridiculous.

## Characterisation: Hamlet and Laertes

The relationship between Hamlet and Laertes changes during the course of this f
match neither of them speaks honestly after they shake hands. In Hamlet's spee
*sir…*' (5.2.198–216) he gives his madness as his reason for killing Polonius, and ye

revenge upon Claudius (and his error in mistaking Polonius for Claudius) that was died. Nevertheless, Hamlet does express honest regret when he says to Laertes

Laertes' reply is completely dishonest when he tells Hamlet that he is *'satisfied in* as his own feelings go) with Hamlet's apology; he is, of course, planning to kill Ha

Later during the fencing episode, after Laertes realises he has been fatally wound speaks to Hamlet using words that convey regret about his actions: *'The foul pra* (5.2.297–298). Laertes soon follows his implied regret with a direct apology, deli *'Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet'* (5.2.308–310). Hamlet absolves L saying *'Heaven make thee free of it!'* (5.2.311); that is, may God forgive you.

The (literally) last-minute reconciliation of Hamlet and Laertes reflects their awar both been manipulated by Claudius, the real villain of the play.

## Theme: mortality

As stated above in the analysis of Act 4, Scene 7, the climax of *Hamlet* (which mig modern audience) is in line with the genre conventions of revenge tragedy. As w the presence on stage of a total of four dead bodies serves a further purpose. Th Claudius and Hamlet (together with the previous unnatural deaths of old King Ha Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) serve as a further illustration and reminder of a th play: the transience, brevity and ultimate insignificance of human life.

In Hamlet's last moments he also revisits an earlier theme. When he is trying to p himself, he asks (5.2.325–328):

> *If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,*
> *Absent thee from felicity awhile,*
> *And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain*
> *To tell my story*

Hamlet equates staying alive with being kept away from 'felicity', i.e. happiness. dead is to be happy – might seem a peculiar idea, but it fits in with the thoughts soliloquies which begin *'O that this too too solid flesh would melt'* (1.2.129–158) a (3.1.56–89). In the former he regrets that the Christian Church bans suicide, give unpleasant; in the latter he sees death (via suicide) as the solution for human suf does not bring penalties with it. As he lies dying, Hamlet does not regret his imm of reputation which might follow, and is anxious for Horatio to vindicate him.

**Active learning task [35]**
Imagine that after Hamlet's death, the people of Denmark decide to put up a co memory. Write a suitable inscription that might appear on the memorial for futur modern English and write around 50 words.

## Theme: revenge

The conventions of the revenge tragedy genre often involve the death of both th revenger him (or her) self, and such an ending can be seen in *Hamlet*. Hamlet ta and Laertes takes his revenge upon Hamlet; in both cases the revengers die.

The audience (both in Shakespeare's time and in the present day) are likely to fe Claudius. The outcomes for the other major characters in the last scene of the p ambiguous reaction. The extended essay task below allows you to explore your otherwise) of the fate of these characters.

**Extended essay question [36]**
Do the characters in *Hamlet* suffer the fate that they deserve? (Consider: Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

# Hamlet

## Complexity and ambiguity

Hamlet is undoubtedly one of the most prominent characters in English literature, and whole books have been written about his character and motivations. The reason for this lies in the complexity of his character. All the significant characters in great works of literature are (like real human beings) multifaceted. To take just one of many examples: the young woman Grushenka Svetlov, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), is portrayed as both a flawed and superficial person but also as someone capable of love and personal sacrifice.

Hamlet's character, as well as being complex, is also ambiguous; in other words, it is hard to 'pin him down'. For example, he says that he loves Ophelia as much as 'forty thousand brothers' (5.1.236) and yet he subjects her to bullying explicit banter: '*shall I lie in your lap*?' (3.2.99). He is famous for his hesitancy in taking his revenge, and yet when he thinks her hears Claudius hiding behind the arras (it is of course Polonius) he kills him in an instant with a thrust of his sword.

## Misanthropy and misogyny

It seems that Hamlet finds the whole world distasteful, as in his comment (1.2 13

> *How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable*
> *Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

He has a cynical view of human nature, as seen when he remarks to Polonius '*Us*
*who shall scape whipping?*' (2.2.485). He is also ruthless when he wishes to be;
deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet also has a negative view of women: he generalises his criticism of Gertru
the whole sex: 'frailty, thy name is woman' (1.2.145).

## Hamlet's madness

There is very clear evidence from the text of the play that (at least on one level)
insanity is assumed as a way of trapping Claudius. He tells us that he intends '*to*
(1.5.73) and that *I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I k*
(2.2.347–348). However, it is also possible to argue that his assumed madness c
mental distress, as evident in his many emotional outpourings in the play, such a
*solid flesh would melt*' (1.2.129–159).

## Indecision

Hamlet's character has very often been typified as full of indecision and hesitanc
the end of Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet delivers a soliloquy in which he criticises himse
father's death (2.2.501–558). At the beginning he exclaims '*O what a rogue and*
compares his own hesitancy to avenge an *actual* wrong to the emotion which th
for Hecuba, a mere character in a play.

It is certainly true that he could have waylaid Claudius and killed him as soon as t
King Hamlet) had been murdered by Claudius. However, there are counterargu
was exercising necessary caution. He was not sure that the ghost's story was tru
(the play within the play). Also, his reason not to kill Claudius at prayer was com
belief about the worse fate of dying without repentance or absolution.

## Attitude to sex and sexual relationships

On one level, Hamlet objects to the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius t
circumstances: their marriage is considered by the Christian church as incest, and
her husband's murder. However, on another level it does that that Hamlet is un
sexual relationships *per se.* This can be seen, for example, in his particularly vivid
image of Gertrude and Claudius in bed together (3.4.91–94).

> *Nay, but to live*
> *In the rank sweat of an enseméd bed,*
> *Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love*
> *Over the nasty sty.*

## Philosophical speculation

Hamlet is interested in the 'big questions' of life: issues which lie at the heart of p
philosophical questioning is seen most plainly in his too famous soliloquies, *'O tho
melt'* (1.2.129–159) and *'To be or not to be…'* (3.1.56–89). His speculation about t
lies at the heart of his character. Laertes (for example) is a young man of impulse
a thoughtful person, temperamentally prone to asking questions first and acting l

# *Claudius*

Although Claudius is a less subtly drawn character than Hamlet, it would be a mis
stereotypical 'stage villain'. He too shows some complexity of character. This can
scene in Act 3, Scene 3 where he is alone and trying to pray, when he seems genu
has done: *'Oh my offence is rank, it smells to heaven'* (3.3.36). However, when C
stopping him from praying, his regret seems less genuine. His first concern is that
mercy in heaven to forgive him for what he has done. Claudius's rhetorical questi
*to confront the visage of offence?'* (3.3.47) implies that the purpose of mercy is to
that Claudius is willing to be forgiven, but not to be taken to task for what he has
not repentance) can also be seen in an aside in Act 3, Scene 1:

> *How smart a lash that speech does give my conscience!*
> *…O heavy burden! (3.1.49–54)*

Claudius's 'good side' can also be seen in his love for Gertrude, and his kindly tre

However, first and foremost Claudius is presented in Hamlet as a cunning hypocri
when he first appears in the play at the start of Act 1, Scene 2 and refers to his b
murdered by Claudius) in loving terms as 'our death brother' (1.2.1). Another goo
be seen when he tells Hamlet that he is being sent away *'for thine especial safety*
38) when, in fact, Claudius intends Hamlet to be killed.

Claudius is also portrayed as being politically astute, well able to prosper in the w
can be seen (for example) in the prevention of Fortinbras' invasion of Denmark a
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both to spy on Hamlet and (unwittingly) to ensure

The most damning evidence of Claudius's fundamentally character can be seen in
reflects his character: it is cunning, underhand, clever and dishonest.

## Gertrude

Gertrude is a less 'developed' character in *Hamlet* than Hamlet himself or Claudi
lengthy soliloquies or monologues with which to express her opinions. As with H
be entirely sure of her motivations. This is not a criticism of Shakespeare's chara
of a 'real person' than if (for example) she was fully involved in all Claudius's wic

One unresolved question involves Gertrude's complicity (or otherwise) in the mu
After Hamlet has killed Polonius by stabbing him through the wall hanging, the su
between Gertrude and Hamlet raises this important issue (3.4.25–30).

Hamlet's words '*Almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry with his b*
Gertrude knew about the murder of his father. We can interpret her silence on t
of her knowledge or direct involvement, or as suggesting that she has no idea wh
simply puzzled at his words. There is no evidence elsewhere in the play that Ger
murder.

When in Act 3, Scene 4 Hamlet severely criticises Gertrude for her relationship w
regret, saying *'Oh speak to me no more. / These words like daggers enter in my e*

The worthy side of Gertrude's character shows itself in her true feelings for Ham
confirms Gertrude's love for Hamlet in comments he makes to Laertes: when ref
*queen his mother / Lives almost by his looks'* (4.6.11–12), i.e. she is devoted to H
Gertrude speaks in the play are *'O my dear Hamlet!'* (5.2.289). Gertrude's emoti
death in Act 4, Scene 7, when she announces that Ophelia is drowned (4.7.166–1
sensitivity.

## Ophelia

The enduring image of Ophelia from the play is of her floating down the river, an
shortly to drown. The power of this image is reflected in its popularity as a subje
art. See, for example, John Everett Millais's 1852 painting, *Ophelia*. This image d
from Gertrude's lyrical description of the young woman's death (4.7.166–183). T
circumstances of Ophelia's death – not exactly suicide, but submitting to her fate
her mind disturbed by the death of her father and her rejection and ill-treatmen
Hamlet – sum up her role in the play as a submissive and put-upon victim of
circumstance.

As discussed elsewhere in this guide, Ophelia's dependence upon (and subservie
men can largely be explained by the historical context, i.e. the role of women in
Elizabethan England. When we first meet her (in
Act 1, Scene 3) she suffers a 'double lecture' warning her against Hamlet, first fr
brother and then from her father.

The modern reader will usually be surprised at how meekly Ophelia agrees to ha
when her father orders her to break off her relationship with him: she responds b
(1.3.136). Her obedience is confirmed when she later returns his love-tokens '… *
*That I have longèd long to re-deliver'* (3.1.93–94).

Ophelia's response to Hamlet's insulting and unkind remarks to her in Act 3, Scen
him mad: '*Oh heavenly powers, restore him!'* (3.1.136); it is significant that she d
treatment of her.

Ophelia's last appearance in the play in Act 4, Scene 5 is one of the most poignan
Her snatches of song portray a young woman driven mad by circumstance, and v
eventual fate.

## Polonius

Polonius is traditionally portrayed on stage as a pompous, rambling old fool, and i interpretation. However, like many of the characters in *Hamlet*, his portrayal is n appear. The advice that he gives Laertes in Act 1, Scene 3 before he goes to Fran largely sensible. Likewise, his concern for Ophelia's chastity needs to be seen in c experience could blight a young woman's prospects in life. Polonius is also conce children, in contrast to Claudius's attitude towards his stepson, Hamlet.

Polonius's long, pompous speeches provide some comic relief in the play, but the and concentrated determination of his superior, Claudius. Polonius's death is the scheming, and it foreshadows the death of the other more competent schemers i

## Laertes

Laertes' role in the play is mainly as a foil for Hamlet. They share a number of cha important distinctions between them.

Most importantly, they both seek revenge for a murdered father. While it is true evidence against the murderer, there is still a marked contrast in the urgency wit proceeds. Laertes is a traditional 'revenge hero, a man of action', intent on killing fact, Claudius finds it necessary to calm him and produce a feasible scheme that w far more thoughtful, and wants to be absolutely sure of his ground before taking

The reconciliation of Hamlet and Laertes at the end of the play – '*Exchange forgi* (5.2.308), Laertes asks, and Hamlet agrees – signals a change in Laertes' characte impetuousness to a more considered view of events and how he has been duped change has come too late for him.

## The ghost

Although a ghost who visits relatives to ask for revenge is a common feature of re *Hamlet* is much more than just a messenger. The ghost is a character in its own ri an important dramatic role to play in the narrative.

Hamlet (and the audience) are never completely sure whether the ghost is the sp to earth, or, as Hamlet puts it, a *'goblin damned'* (1.4.40) – that is, an evil spirit. some of the ghost's manifestations (where it appears and speaks to Hamlet only) fevered imagination.

The ghost is an important part of the examination of mortality, a theme which ru After the ghost has cried out urging Horatio and Marcellus to swear not to reveal Horatio remarks on the strangeness of the manifestation (1.5.164–167):

> ***HORATIO:*** *O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.*
> ***HAMLET:*** *And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.*
> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*
> *Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

Hamlet's much-quoted reply neatly sums up his attitude both to the ghost and to that the appearance of the ghost raises. Hamlet is not sure what the ghost actua he calls it a 'stranger' – but he is sure that there are things in life that go beyond fact.

The ghost adds to the theatricality and dramatic impact of the play. For example, and unexpected, coming as a shock to the Elizabethan audience seeing the play f Barnardo and Marcellus have just sat down to hear Barnardo tell the story of the previous night. At this point the audience are expecting to hear a description of so when Marcellus interrupts Barnardo – *'Peace, break thee off. Look where it co* dramatic surprise. For the last appearance of the ghost Shakespeare uses a com with supernatural events – only Hamlet can see the ghost. The fact that Gertrud and cannot see it generates dramatic tension – not only is Hamlet surprised by th surprised by what she sees as his irrational response in apparently talking to him assumes that the ghost has come to take him to task for delaying his revenge, an

The ghost's various appearances act as a spur to Hamlet. The ghost makes it abs persuade Hamlet to revenge its death, i.e. the '*foul and most unnatural murder*' Claudius (1.5.24). Hamlet's desire for revenge is increased by the ghost telling hi in purgatory until its bad deeds are '*burnt and purged away*' (1.5.13).

The impact of the ghost's presence in *Hamlet* is increased by the powerful and st Hamlet's emotional reaction to the ghost's suffering is influenced by the forceful For example (1.5.15–17):

> *I could a tale unfold whose lightest word*
> *Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood…*

## Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not portrayed in any great depth as individual *Hamlet* is their contribution to the theme of power and politics which runs throu and morally corrupt, in that they are friends of Hamlet but are willing to betray h Claudius, and spying on Hamlet; they see it as more important to please the king They are also incompetent – Hamlet soon discovers that they are working agains most people would consider excessive. (Further consideration of these two char Relationships between Characters' section of this guide, p. 60.)

## Fortinbras

Although young Prince Fortinbras of Norway is a minor character who has few lin important dramatic role as a character in a similar situation to Hamlet. We learn (1.1.80–107) that (years earlier) Prince Fortinbras' father, old King Fortinbras, ch (Hamlet's father) to combat. King Fortinbras was killed and forfeited some land. revenge, and plans to invade Denmark and regain the lost territory. After Claudi uncle, the present King of Norway, redirects the invasion to Poland.

Fortinbras' determined action to take revenge for the death of his father contrasts regarding his own revenge upon Claudius. However, their situations are not direct in Fortinbras' mind about the reality of what happened to his father; Hamlet, on th by Claudius's reaction to the dumbshow (in Act 3, Scene 2) that his father really wa

# Key Relationships between

**Please note:** This section of the guide is not intended to cover all the complex co
between the main characters in *Hamlet*, but is intended to look at the most impo
subgroups of the characters. The 'relationship groups' identified have been chos
and are not the only way to analyse relationships in *Hamlet*.

## Relationship group (1): Hamlet, Claudius and G

Claudius and Gertrude have their own relationship independently of Hamlet. It i
a sexual relationship before Claudius's death by the ghost's monologue in Act 1, S
*incestuous, that adulterate beast*,' (1.5.42). Claudius has a genuine regard for Ge
suppose that Claudius is lying when he tells Laertes that Gertrude is '*conjunctive*
'inseparable from my whole existence'.

The depiction of their relationship as one of sexual excess and depravity is of cou
(for example) in his comment on their marriage soon after the death of his fathe

> *… within a month,*
> *Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears*
> *Had left the flushing of her gallèd eyes,*
> *She married. Oh most wicked speed, to post*
> *With such dexterity to incestuous sheets.*

However, it is possible to interpret their relationship as including strong sexual p
criticising it for this reason. The most damning criticism of their relationship is th
old King Hamlet. However, although this fact condemns Claudius in the audience'
the play that Gertrude had any knowledge of her husband's murder. Gertrude's
Act 3, Scene 4. In this scene Gertrude is so affected by Hamlet's criticism of her
she sees herself as having acted immorally (i.e. having committed adultery with C
incestuous marriage) and begs him to say no more to her (3.4.88–91).

> *O Hamlet, speak no more.*
> *Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,*
> *And there I see such black and grained spots*
> *As will not leave their tinct.*

Gertrude's own affection for Hamlet (despite his criticism of her) is shown (for ex
regarding Hamlet, that *'The queen his mother / Lives almost by his looks'* (4.6.11–
last words are an appeal to her son: '*O my dear Hamlet – / The drink, the drink –*

Hamlet's relationship with Claudius (within the context of a complex play) is rela
intense dislike for his uncle (also his stepfather) based firstly on the hasty (and, b
incestuous) marriage of Claudius to his mother. This hatred is vastly increased w
Claudius murdered his father. His description of Claudius in Act 5, Scene 2 sums
his stepfather: '*He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother*' (5.2.64).

Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude is more complex. The key confrontation bet
Scene 4 (this is discussed in detail in the 'Scene Analysis' section). In this scene H
at the strong sexual attraction between Gertrude and Claudius, visualising them
and trying to persuade Gertrude to have no more sexual contact with Claudius.
mother's sexual relationship with Claudius has led some critics and commentato
this element in the play. However, it is clear that Hamlet does not see his mothe
those of Claudius; he makes it clear that he wishes no physical harm to come to

## Relationship group (2): Hamlet, Ophelia, Polon

The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is an important subplot in *Hamlet*. in Act 1, Scene 3 suggest that there is some sort of romantic attachment betwee no more a superficial flirtation (1.3.5–10). Ophelia obeys Polonius's command to – she tells her father '*… as you did command, / I did repel his letters, and denied /* When Hamlet subsequently appears to be behaving towards Ophelia as if he was strangely and appearing dressed in a dishevelled state, Polonius asks Ophelia if H Ophelia replies that she is not sure: '*My lord I do not know, / But truly I do fear it*' cannot be sure either. It is possible that Hamlet is simply pretending to be mad t could be he is genuinely upset by Ophelia's rejection of him.

It is hard to defend Hamlet's later conduct towards Ophelia when he subjects he banter in Act 3, Scene 2, e.g. '*shall I lie in your lap?*' (3.2.99). His ill-treatment of a more general misogyny and distrust of intimate relationships. However, when funeral in Act 5, Scene 1 he insists that he loved her: '*… forty thousand brothers / of love / Make up my sum*' (5.1.236–238). It also seems highly likely that Ophelia' inaction' is caused by her grief at Hamlet's rejection of her, as well as the loss of

The modern audience or reader who is trying to discover the 'real truth' about th and Ophelia is probably asking the wrong question – or seeking too simple an an happens in *Hamlet*, their relationship is ambiguous. Ophelia may at the same tim to reject him as her father wishes. Hamlet may love Ophelia, while at the same t her to further his plan to appear mad and disguise his true purposes.

Laertes and Polonius are less developed characters than Hamlet or Ophelia. Polo figure of fun, although he is also seen to be a caring father to both Laertes and O Scene 1 he gives Reynaldo money to take to Laertes. When he warns Ophelia ab Hamlet, he might be seen as overprotective or intrusive by a modern audience; h context (where an upper-class woman could be ruined by slurs upon her reputat advice. Laertes' determination and energy to seek revenge upon Hamlet for Polo Hamlet's decision to obtain absolute proof of Claudius's guilt before taking actio between Hamlet and Laertes is never as great as that between Claudius and Ham reconciliation at the end of the play.

## Relationship group (3): Hamlet and the ghost

Hamlet is never sure that the ghost really is the spirit of old King Hamlet. This un relationship and lies behind Hamlet's hesitancy to take action against Claudius b Claudius murdered his father.

Paradoxically it is the ghost's various appearances which spur Hamlet into taking makes its final appearance in the play, in Act 3, Scene 4, Hamlet's words to it sug its genuineness (3.4.116):

> *Do you not come your tardy son to chide,*
> *That lapsed in time and passion lets go by*
> *Th'important acting of your dread command?*

However, Hamlet's self-criticism for his hesitation needs to be set beside his earl (2.2.550–557):

> *The spirit that I have seen*
> *May be a devil … [who] … Abuses me to damn me.*

When Hamlet speaks the above lines he is of course soliloquising in the absence o
in Act 3, Scene 4 are made in the ghost's presence: and, whatever the true natur
never be entirely sure), the dramatic reality of its appearance has such a powerfu
at least at that moment – to believe it is the true manifestation of his father.

## Relationship group (4): Rosencrantz and Guildenster with Claudius, and with Hamlet.

The relationship between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and (a) Claudius (b) Haml
theme of power and politics which runs through the play. It is clear from the first a
Guildenstern in the play that they are old friends of Hamlet: Claudius refers to thei
*him'* (2.2.11). Yet they show no loyalty to Hamlet: they immediately agree to act a
conscious of the power that Claudius and Gertrude have as king and queen. As Ro

> *Both your majesties*
> *Might by the sovereign power you have of us*
> *Put your dread pleasures more into command*
> *Than to entreaty.*

In other words, although Claudius very politely asks Rosencrantz and Guildenster
very brave to refuse the request of an all-powerful monarch. It is, therefore, pos
between Claudius (and Gertrude) and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as one of ex
such that Hamlet's friends can hardly refuse to spy upon him.

Hamlet is distrustful of his two friends. Shortly after they meet for the first time
makes it clear that he knows about their mission: '*You were sent for… I know the
for you'* (2.2.264–267). Hamlet's contempt for the pair becomes clear in Act 4, S
Rosencrantz as a 'sponge' (4.1.14–19):

> ***ROSENCRANTZ:*** *Take you me for a sponge my lord?*
> ***HAMLET:*** *Ay sir, that soaks up the king's countenance
> authorities. But such officers do the king be
> keeps them like an ape in the corner of his j
> stores food in his cheek] first mouthed to be
> he needs what you have gleaned, it is but s
> sponge, you shall be dry again.*
> ***ROSENCRANTZ:*** *I understand you not my lord.*

Hamlet's metaphorical depiction of Rosencrantz as a 'sponge' effectively convey
Guildenstern) obtaining benefits from the king. However, Hamlet also illustrates
exploited by the king through the powerful simile which typifies them as food to
swallowed. Rosencrantz's inability to understand Hamlet's imagery underlines th
Hamlet over Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, already demonstrated in his superio

Hamlet's cleverness allows him to arrange for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's de
names for his in the letter they are carrying to England. Given that they did not k
(i.e. they did not knowingly agree to have Hamlet killed) the modern audience m
them cruel. By modern standards it does seem a harsh revenge, but Elizabethan
than society today, where the price of political failure was often death.

## Relationship group (5): Fortinbras and Hamlet

Fortinbras' plan to revenge his father was directed at the state of Denmark, rath
Hamlet had no part in his father's defeat of old King Fortinbras, which took place
interaction between the two of them at the end of the play is, therefore, not so
recognition of each other's qualities.

Earlier in the play (Act 4, Scene 4) Hamlet expresses his admiration for Fortinbras
(4.4.47) who is willing to risk everything in battle. In his dying words Hamlet says
elected King of Denmark. Similarly, when Fortinbras arrives at the court of Denn
shortly after Hamlet dies, he gives the instruction to his soldiers to:

> *Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, [i.e. platform where the bo*
> *For he was likely, had he been put on, [put on = given the chanc*
> *To have proved most royal;* (5.2.374–377)

Fortinbras' comment right at the end of the play can be interpreted as Shakespe
complex character of Hamlet; there is nothing here to suggest that the audience

# Genre, Form and Structu

This section of the guide should be read alongside the section on 'Shakespeare's

Like many terms used in the study of literature, the concepts of 'genre', 'form' a agreed definition, and different critics and commentators will often use these t underlying concepts within each term which are important to understand, rath these concepts into the three categories. Genre, form, structure and language literary text. **These concepts are relevant to all AOs, but particularly AO2.**

### Key terms

**Genre:** Type of literature with common features, e.g. thriller, science fiction, miser content or ideas in a text).
**Subgenre:** a subsidiary category within a genre, e.g. the 'steampunk' subgenre o
**Form:** the way that language is shaped and presented: the style of a text. For e play (whatever the genre) may include: the use of verse or prose of various kind mime.
**Structure:** the way that the different elements in a literary work are put together includes the use of formal divisions, such as chapters in a book or scenes in a play include the timeline of the action and how plots and subplots interact.
**Language:** the choice and use of words to convey meaning: 'language' in this sen blocks' which underlie structure, form and genre. See the separate section on lan

## *Genre in Hamlet*

### Revenge tragedy (AO3 and AO4)

*Hamlet* fits within the dramatic genre of 'tragedy' and the subgenre of 'revenge t the fifth century BC and the ancient Greek dramatists Sophocles, Aeschylus and E whether Shakespeare knew much about ancient Greek drama, but he would cert tragedies of the Roman playwright Seneca (4 BC – AD 65). Seneca's plays were tra performed from the 1560s onwards.

The 'tragedy' genre of drama describes a serious play about terrible events whic The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) produced a very detailed a of Greek tragedy in a work of literary theory called *Poetics.* Early commentators (1620–1706) applied Aristotle's principles to their analysis of *Hamlet*, but there i had either studied the *Poetics* or used Aristotle's theories.

The genre label of 'revenge tragedy' was first used in the early 1900s by an Amer Shakespeare would have recognised. The term describes a type of play that beca 1500s. The revenge tragedy *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd, thought to ha between 1582 and 1589, was very popular. The translations of Seneca that had a also have many of the characteristics of revenge tragedy. Other revenge tragedi written in 1587, probably by Thomas Kyd, and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (w

Although revenge tragedies were not written to a rigid pattern, the reason that t because most of them share certain characteristics. Typical elements within rev character who seeks revenge against a powerful enemy; a 'play within a play'; sc violence; a ghost who also seeks revenge; and a deadly conclusion.

### Active learning task (AO4) [37]

Use the Internet to find a plot summary of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. The good place to start: ***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Spanish_Tragedy#Plot***

Write down a list of any similarities can you see between the plot of this play an

## Expectations and reactions of Shakespeare's audi

Most of the people in Shakespeare's audience would not have seen *Hamlet* performed before, but they would have understood the *type* of play that they had come to watch. Like a modern audience, they would have heard something about the play in advance, perhaps by talking to others who had heard about an earlier performance. Although the audience would not have the words 'revenge tragedy' in their minds they would be expecting a tense, emotional drama centred on a suffering main character, building towards a violent climax.

Genre-related audience expectations are an important element in the dramatic tension which builds up in *Hamlet.* For example, when Horatio sees the ghost in the first scene of the play, saying '*This bodes some strange eruption to our state'* (1.1.69) the audience will already be anticipating some rev conflict. Likewise, at the end of the play when Hamlet agrees to a 'friendly' fenci conventions lead to an expectation of a deadly conclusion. This is appreciated al because of their anticipation throughout the scene.

## Genre in *Hamlet*: crime writing – AQA (B) A Level

The following section is only relevant to students who are studying *Hamlet* as o crime writing' option for Paper 2 of the AQA A Level (B) English Literature exam not consider *Hamlet* in terms of crime writing (or crime fiction) as a genre, as th (Something is 'anachronistic' if it seems out of place for its time, e.g. Shakespea

Students who are studying *Hamlet* as one of the texts in the 'Elements of crime w AQA A Level (B) English Literature examination need to print out and study the in headings '4.2.1. Elements of crime writing' and '4.2 Texts and genres' on pp. 23 a English Literature B specification, available as a download from the following site ***http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-77***

The AQA specification points out that although the genre of 'crime **fiction**' was n the middle of the nineteenth century, the concept of 'crime **writing**' can be still b is, these earlier texts (including *Hamlet*) have some features which can be found i

In other words: *Hamlet* (c.1601) is clearly NOT a 'crime writing' or 'crime fiction' t (for example) Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) or Agatha Christie's *The Mur* However, it does have some elements or qualities common to the modern genre the specification referred to above.

## *Hamlet* and crime writing: subgenres

Modern (1850s onwards) crime writing (or crime fiction) is a very varied field wit such as detective fiction (where clues are collected in order to solve a crime) and medical and scientific investigation solves a crime. One way to explore *Hamlet* a subgenre with which it has most in common: **psychological crime writing**. In thi concerns and anxieties of one or more characters are explored in detail, and use the solutions of crime.

**Extended essay question (AQA A Level (B) English Li**

Compare the state of mind of Hamlet with the state of mind of one other mo
other texts that you have studied for the 'Elements of crime writing' option.
following points (these are 'starter' ideas, not a list of points to make in you

- How do the two characters react when they are faced with a personal
- How important are the characters' psychological profiles for the plot o
- Do the characters' emotions change over time. What 'path' do their fee
  narrative?
- Can we make moral judgements about the two characters? To what ex
  outcomes, or praised for success?
- Are these characters' personalities shaped or influenced by events, or
  start?
- What personal empathy or antagonism do you feel towards the two ch

# *Form in Hamlet*

## Effect and purpose

The shaping and presentation of language in *Hamlet* is done to achieve a dr
about form is to ask the question: 'What is Shakespeare trying to achieve by
produced?'

## Verse forms

**Blank verse** (unrhymed iambic pentameter):

This is the dominant verse form in *Hamlet*. The use of blank verse as found
rhythm produces a more emphatic, serious, poetic tone than that produced
element of artificiality in this form (no one speaks in blank verse in real life!)
intended to mirror real life. The audience accepts the convention of verse d
modern example) that the modern audience for musical theatre accepts tha
song rather than through everyday speech.

Often a scene will be concluded with a rhyming couplet, as at the end of Act
his prayers (3.3.96–97):

> *My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.*
> *Words without thoughts never to heaven go.*

The reason for the use of the couplet form is that the rhyme is aesthetically
by signalling a break from the more speech-like unrhymed verse, giving a sig
about to start. The effect is increased as the action of the play continues an
signal of the end of a section of the drama.

Shakespeare's blank verse in *Hamlet* shows a lot of variety, designed to suit
speaking; or the sense of what is being said; or the feelings and emotions th

**Poetic blank verse**:

The most poetic, intense and memorable lines in *Hamlet* employ a form of b
language and powerful diction, as seen in Hamlet's soliloquies. Here the 'no
often broken up for effect: for example, when Hamlet speaks after he has ta

> *O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?*
> *And shall I couple hell? Oh fie! Hold, hold, my heart…'*

There is a **caesura** after the exclamation mark in the first line and a question mark in the second line which breaks up the iambic metre, showing Hamlet's frantic state of mind. The second line contains an extra iambic foot, 'my heart', signalling his strength of feeling.

**Key**
**Caesu**
withi

### 'Everyday' blank verse:

Where conversation between the main characters is straightforward, a plainer a pentameter is often used, as when Fortinbras tells one of his soldiers to send his *captain, from me greet the Danish king'* (4.4.1).

### Verse pastiche:

There are two verse pastiches in *Hamlet*. This is where Shakespeare imitates a ve playwrights. The first appears in Act 2, Scene 2 and is an extract from a play desc Troy, although it is almost certain that Shakespeare wrote the extract himself. T *Gonzago*, in Act 3, Scene 2, which is also almost certainly Shakespeare's original

Both these plays need to be clearly distinguished from the events of the 'real' pla Shakespeare achieves this by adopting distinctive styles for each. Both are depic play. The Troy episode is intentionally melodramatic, and *The Murder of Gonzag* couplets with none of the sophistication of the 'real' play in which it features.

### Ballads and songs:

Hamlet sings (or recites, if the play's director prefers) two verses from a ballad in 3.2.255–259). Ophelia sings verses from songs in Act 4, Scene 5 (4.5.23–66 and a form in these verses allows Shakespeare to make a poignant contrast between th Hamlet and Ophelia and the apparent simplicity of a traditional verse form and s (gravedigger) also sings some verses in Act 5, Scene 1.

### Metadrama

*The Murder of Gonzago* (the 'play within a play') is a common feature of revenge providing a way for Hamlet to prove Claudius's guilt, it also allows the audience t murder of King Hamlet, which has hereto been described but not performed. In form of the 'flashback' often used in modern film.

### Dumbshow (i.e. mime)

Dumbshows as a theatrical device were considered old-fashioned by the time that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, but the dumbshow at the start of *The Murder of Gonzago* confirms its outdated features, and provides a tense scene as the King is forced to watch it.

**Deba**
Reread
of the
out of
do you
the du
later s
king?

### Prose

Prose writing matches the patterns of 'normal' speech; it has no regular rhythmic or rhyming structure. Prose is used by Shakespeare for the following purposes (some of which overlap).

- ► To give a sense of realism – to produce a down-to-earth tone. Prose is used informally about everyday things, or where characters are talking to people
- ► For comic or seriocomic scenes where there is a dislocation of sense or a su or take fashion, or involving repartee.
- ► To provide a dramatic contrast with more poetic verse passages.

## Act and scene divisions

The traditional act and scene divisions which are used in almost all editions of *Ha* Shakespeare, but were added later (see context box below). Modern editions of divisions because everyone is used to them and changing them would cause con correct to refer to the traditional act and scene divisions when referring to the a locate episodes.

**Context (AO3): act and scene divisions in *Hamlet***

Although by the time Shakespeare died (1616) it was common for plays to be di there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever intended *Hamlet* to be divided up in versions of the play (the First Quarto of 1604 and the Second Quarto of 1604) h acts. Some scene and act divisions were made in the First Folio (1623) but it was full act and scene divisions were added.

## Plots and subplots

Subplots are used to provide variety in the narrative, and also to reflect and emphasise aspects of the man plot.

**Key**
**Paral**
can b
the m
scene

The main plot of *Hamlet* is Hamlet's discovery of the murder of his father and his mission to take revenge upon Claudius. Three subplots can be seen in the play.

- The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia
- The political threat from Norway, with young Fortinbras threatening war
- Laertes' wish for revenge after his father, Polonius, is killed by Hamlet. Laer Hamlet is not sure about Claudius's guilt and hesitates over taking revenge. own father (Old Fortinbras, King of Norway) was killed and is very determine of Denmark.

## Foreshadowing

This is a way of increasing dramatic tension by hinting at what might happen late compares Rosencrantz and Guildenstern metaphorically to a military engineer 'H (3.4.208), i.e. blown up with his own bomb.

## Parallels

A structural parallel can involve contrasts as well as similarities.
There are parallels between the three families featured in *Hamlet*.

**Del**
Wha
betw
in *Ha*

- The family of Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius
- The family of Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia
- The family of Fortinbras, his deceased father Old Fortinbras, and Fortinbras' uncle, the current king of Norway

## Language structure and stage performance

The nature of a dramatic performance (a stage play) means that the writer is not what people are thinking in the same way that a novelist can. For example, a no character's state of mind in some detail, or say something about a character's se different from their spoken words. Some of this information can be given in a dr character's physical (non-verbal) acting. Some other methods are as follows.

### Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a lengthy speech which a character makes when they are the only p
'talking out loud to themselves', revealing their inner thoughts to the audience.

### Monologue

A monologue is a lengthy speech which a character makes when others are on st
opportunity for the character to talk at length (in 'real life' most conversations co
Monologues allow ideas to be extended and developed. There is no exact distinc
a monologue. An example of a monologue can be found in Act 3, Scene 2 where
Horatio, starting '*Nay, do not think I flatter*' (3.2.47–76).

### Asides

Asides are brief spoken thoughts, like mini-soliloquies. They are not heard by the
They reveal a character's true feeling to the audience, and often contrast with th
example can be seen in Act 4, Scene 5 when Gertrude makes an aside before Op
*soul…'* (4.5.17–20).

**Extended essay question [42]**
How does the main plot work together with the subplots in *Hamlet* to develop the
the play?

# Shakespeare's Use of Lang

This section of the guide should be read alongside the section on 'Genre, Form a

## Examination requirements

Shakespeare's language is central to AO2, i.e. *Analyse ways in which meaning is*

- Three of the examination board syllabuses offering *Hamlet* as a set text (OC WJEC A Level) have a question where an extract from *Hamlet* is provided, a on Shakespeare's use of language **in that extract**. Extracts are typically betw are (typically) worded something like this:

*Discuss the following passage, considering Shakespeare's use of language and th*

**OR**

*With detailed references to the imagery and use of language in this passage, con Hamlet's feelings and emotions.*

**OR**

*Examine how Shakespeare's use of language and imagery shapes and enhances m*

- Three other syllabuses offering *Hamlet* as a set text (AQA (B) A Level, OCR A NOT provide an extract for analysis of language. However, because these e will be expected to include some detailed analysis of use of language as par example, an essay about Hamlet's madness would need to comment in deta by Hamlet in key passages.

## Analysis and evaluation: the key to writing about of language in *Hamlet*

It is not enough to **describe** Shakespeare's use of language. It is also necessary t choice and use of words. An example of just using description would be to say 'S when he compares the ghost's murder to a flower being cut' (see 1.5.74–80). A approach would try to say something about how the metaphor works; for examp comparison of sin to a blossoming flower is unusual but effective, suggesting sin appropriate to a powerful ruler.'

'Effective' can be an overused adjective when describing Shakespeare's language used where appropriate include: fresh; original; powerful; striking; unusual; pers forceful; potent; and evocative.

## Shakespeare's use of language: key element

### Use of blank verse

The use of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), with its regular rhythm, p serious, poetic tone than that produced by prose. Blank verse is similar to the rh eloquence and debate rather than the disjointed chatter of everyday conversatio

**Features that may be present in blank verse in order to shape meaning**

- Use of **varied rhythmic patterns** which depart from the regular or 'standard' pentameter.

In **regular** iambic pattern, each foot consists of an unstressed syllable followed b *'I would not hear your enemy say so'* (1.2.170). Each foot appears below in a box bold type.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *I* ***would*** | *not* ***hear*** | Your **en** | e-**my** |

- Use of a **caesura**: a break in the rhythm within a line of iambic pentameter.

- Use of **enjambment**: 'run on' lines: this feature is very common in Shakespe
  NB Lines which are NOT run on, i.e. where there is a comma, full stop or oth
  of every line – are referred to as **end-stopped lines**.

Example of a varied rhythmic pattern, a caesura and enjambment: the
Claudius in Act 4, Scene 5 after he is upset by Ophelia's madness (4.5.

*When sorrows come, they come not single spies,*
*But in battalions. First, her father slain;*
*Next, your son gone, and he most violent author*
*Of his own just remove; the people muddied,*

The first line is written in regular iambic pentameter (the brief pause
significant enough to be labelled a 'caesura').

The second line starts with an iambic foot 'But **in**'. However, the next
three syllables, leading to a distinct pause – a caesura – and the regula
breaks up. Shakespeare's use of a varied rhythmic pattern and caesur
dramatically effective. The two elements combine to create a break in
Claudius's sorrow at this point in the play as he takes stock to reflect.
also helps to emphasise the powerful and appropriate personification
leaving the image in the audience's minds for a moment before the sp

- Use of **half-lines**
- Use of **repetition** of words or phrases for emphasis

Example of half-lines and repetition: these lines are spoken by Horati
ghost after it appears for the second time (1.1.128–135)

*If thou hast any sound or use of voice,*
*Speak to me.*
*If there be any good thing to be done*
*That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,*
*Speak to me.*
*If thou are privy to thy country's fate,*
*Which happily foreknowing may avoid,*
*Oh speak.*

The repetition of words and phrases used at the start of a line ('If thou
example) is a rhetorical device known as **anaphora**. Anaphora is used
importance of the request. The anaphoric half-lines 'Speak to me' add
Horatio's plea.

## Use of prose

Prose writing matches the patterns of 'normal' speech; it has no regular rhythmic or rhyming structure. Prose is used by Shakespeare for the following purposes (some of which overlap).

- To give a sense of realism – to produce a down-to-earth tone. Prose is used where characters are talking informally about everyday things, or where characters are talking to people lower down the social scale.
- For comic or seriocomic scenes where there is a dislocation of sense or a surreal interplay of words in a give or take fashion, or involving repartee.
- To provide a dramatic contrast with more poetic verse passages.

## Use of rhetorical devices

Rhetorical devices are ways of making writing more powerful. 'Rhetoric' is the a
persuade the reader or audience. Please note that some of the language feature
this section and guide can also be called rhetorical devices.

- Use of **alliteration**: repetition of consonants for poetic effect.

Example: when Ophelia is speaking to Laertes in Act 1, Scene 3 (1.3.5
Laertes.

*Himself the **p**rimrose **p**ath of dalliance treads,*
*And **r**ecks no his own **r**eade. [doesn't listen to his own adv*

Alliteration is used (here and elsewhere) to focus attention on the wor
emphasise the connection between them. It also makes phrases more
used in advertising, e.g. 'Made to make your mouth water' (1970s slog

- Use of **assonance:** words close to each other that contain the same or simila

Example: Hamlet's comment on the afterlife in his soliloquy 'To be or

*The **un**discovered co**un**try from whose b**ou**rn*
*No traveller returns, puzzles the will,*

Assonance is used here and elsewhere for much the same purpose as
attention; to emphasise connections; and for memorability. In additio
sombre effect, as in the above atmosphere.

- Use of **hyperbole**: extreme exaggeration

Example: when Hamlet speaks to Gertrude and Laertes about his love
Scene 1 (5.1.236–238):

*I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers*
*Could not with all their quantity of love*
*Make up my sum.*

Hyperbole is best seen as a form of metaphor (i.e. imagery): although
literally be true, Hamlet is saying that it is AS IF his love was as strong
brothers, giving the audience a sense of the extreme love he says he fe

**Active learning task:**
Reread the above speech by Hamlet and his following speech up to 'I'll rant as well
Identify any other examples of **assonance** and **hyperbole** in these lines.

What dramatic effects do these rhetorical devices produce? How do these devic

- Use of **rhetorical questions**: questions where no answer is expected; the qu

Example: when Hamlet asks Gertrude to compare the picture of old K
in Act 3, Scene 4 (3.4.65–67):

*… Have you eyes?*
*Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed*
*And batten on this moor? Ha! Have you eyes?*

- Use of **classical allusions**: references (usually brief) to a character or event i
history, literature or legend.

Example: In Act 1, Scene 2 Hamlet describes his father compared to C
*'Hyperion to a satyr'* (1.2.140): that is, like a sun god compared to a fabl
creature.

- Use of **puns**: words which sound the same but have different meanings.

Example: In Act 1, Scene 2 Claudius refers to *'my cousin Hamlet, and m*
He then asks Hamlet why he is still unhappy (1.2.66–67).

***CLAUDIUS:*** *How is it that the clouds still hang on you?*
***HAMLET:*** *Not so my lord, I am too much i'th'sun.*

Hamlet uses the pun on son/sun to imply that he dislikes Claudius cal
are widely used by Shakespeare. As in this case, the effect of a pun is
simple humour but to make a sardonic or ironic comment. In this cas
further paradox; being 'in the sun' is usually seen as pleasant – feelin
here the experience is equated to being thought of as an incestuous hy

- Puns are an important element in Shakespeare's **wordplay**: language which
produce a comic effect (often combined with repartee). Shakespeare's wor
it, i.e. it is **seriocomic**.

Example: wordplay is used in the graveyard scene in Act 5, Scene 1 (5

## Use of symbols, motifs and allusions

A **symbol** is an object or action which stands for something else, i.e. which has a

Example: the physical cold of winter described in Act 1, Scene 1 (1.1.8
threatening atmosphere in the country of Denmark.

Symbols (like metaphors and other imagery) enhance meaning throug
and associations.

A **motif** is a recurring symbol or idea which contributes to the themes of the play

Example: A pipe (i.e. musical instrument) representing a gullible pers
upon' or influenced (see 3.2.58–60 and 3.2.334).

### Use of imagery

Imagery can also be referred to as 'figurative language' or 'figures of speech'. Im
and powerful aspect of Shakespeare's use of language. Imagery found in *Hamlet*

- **metaphors**: a metaphor enhances meaning by describing something as if it
- **extended metaphors**: continue and further develop the metaphor.

Example of an extended metaphor: the start of Hamlet's soliloquy in A

*To be, or not to, 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…*

The metaphor in the third line compares the troubles that fortune (fat
arrows', i.e. weapons of war. The metaphor is extended by comparin
military resistance.

- **similes**: a simile is the same as a metaphor except that the comparison is made clear using 'like' or 'as'.

Example of similes: when Hamlet compares his father to Roman gods in Act 3, Scene 4 (3.4.57–58):

*An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;*
*A station like the herald Mercury,*

**Deba**
Instead
metaph
might si
it is bet
fate, or
How do
metaph
meanin

- **personification**: personification gives human characteristics to non-human things.

Example: when Gertrude describes Hamlet's madness at the start of A

*Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend*
*Which is the mightier.*

These lines personify the sea and the wind as two opposing enemies,
to see who is strongest. The personification is effective because the in
matches the internal conflict in Hamlet's mind between action and ina
uncertainty.

## Shakespeare's diction

In literary criticism and analysis 'diction' means 'choice of words'. It therefore ap
Shakespeare's language. However, **diction** is a very useful term to use in relation
of vocabulary which is NOT part of a.

Example: In the graveyard scene in Act 5, Scene 1, when Hamlet looks
whether it might be from a lawyer's body (5.1.87–90):

*Hum, this fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with h
recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is
and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fi*

It is not necessary to understand all Shakespeare's obscure references
the Elizabethan period in order to appreciate this diction. The termin
arcane, in order to produce the bathetic contrast (i.e. using bathos) bet
prestigious legal matters – 'a great buyer of land' – and the reality of
'Recognizances' that filled the lawyer's mind are now just 'dirt'. The
enhanced by the repeated puns around 'fine'.

### Extended essay question [44]

Reread Hamlet's soliloquy spoken when he finds Claudius praying, from '*Now mig*
3.3.73–96.

Examine how Shakespeare's use of language shapes and enhances meaning in th

## Shakespeare's use of pastiche

A **pastiche** is a literary work which sets out to imitate another literary work or ar
pastiches in *Hamlet*, written in imitation of older style, melodramatic revenge tra
portraying an episode from Virgil's *Aeneid* which appears in Act 2, Scene 2 (2.2.4
second is *The Murder of Gonzago* which is performed in Act 3, Scene 2 (3.2.121–2

### Active learning task [45]

With reference to any of the authors of your set texts for A Level literature, write
10 lines of verse on a subject of your choosing, as a pastiche of that author's styl
which you have tried to imitate.

For example: here is a pastiche of Shakespeare's style, describing a visit to the d

*And then the whining drill brought forth its wrath*
*As if some screeching sea-bird, tossed in storm*
*Wrought on a hapless mariner its cries.*
*Vibrations next bore thru the victim's skull*
*As thoughts of desperation fought to flee*
*The chair of torture, like some barb'rous fate*
*Envisioned by the blasted souls in hell*

### Further reading: Shakespeare's use of language

Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin, 2000)

# Themes in *Hamlet*

NB Some information in this section also appears in the 'Scene Analysis' section o
This duplication has been retained in order to avoid confusing cross-references.

## Understanding the concept of 'themes'

A 'theme' is an underlying topic or idea identified in a work of literature. Many l
one theme. For example, the themes in Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist* (183
childhood friendship and criminality.

A complex work of literature such as *Hamlet* will have many themes. When stud
understand that there is no 'correct' list of themes. Examining themes in *Hamlet*
attention on interesting aspects of the play, but different audiences or readers w
perspectives. For example, additional themes which have been associated with *H*
examined in this section of the guide include religious belief and family relations

It is fully acceptable for a theme to be identified in *Hamlet* by a modern audience
been recognised as such by Shakespeare or his Elizabethan audience. This is bec
literature and will 'speak to' an audience in different ways in different historical a
example, Ophelia's subservience to her father and oppression by Hamlet would l
Shakespeare's audience and not worthy of comment or analysis.

Themes within a literary work are likely to interconnect and overlap, and this is c
This guide identifies two overarching themes within the play: appearance versus

**Important note:** The 'key quotations' section at the start of each theme is <u>not</u> in
in *Hamlet* that are applicable or relevant to that theme. For example, where a q
then the whole of that soliloquy will be relevant. The key quotations are provide
considering the theme.

## Mortality

**Key quotations (all spoken by Hamlet unless stated otherwise)**

> *O that this too too solid flesh would melt,*
> *Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,*
> *Or that the Everlasting had not fixed*
> *His canon 'gainst self-slaughter…* (1.2.129–132)

> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*
> *Than are dreamt of in your philosophy* (1.5.166–167)

> *To be, or not to be, that is the question –*
>
> *… For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,*
>
> *When we have shuffled off this mortal coil…*

*… the dread of something after death,*
*The undiscovered country from whose bourn*
*No traveller returns, puzzles the will* (from 3.1.56–89)

*… a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar* (4.3.22

*He is dead and gone lady,*
*He is dead and gone;*
*At his head a grass-green turf,*
*At his heels a stone* (4.5.29–32) OPHELIA

*Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?... his fine pate full of f*

*Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an*
*must she come. Make her laugh at that.* (5.1.163–164)

*… O proud death,*
*What feast is forward in thine eternal cell*
*That thou so many princes at a shot*
*So bloodily hast struck?* (5.2.343–346) FORTINBRAS

The theme of mortality is explored in *Hamlet* in a number of ways.

- The idea of **suicide** is examined. When Hamlet is anguished about his moth
  Scene 2 he wishes (in his soliloquy 'Oh that this too too solid flesh would me
  the teachings of the Christian Church. However, this does not necessarily m
  have killed himself at this point if the Church allowed it. His comments coul
  person saying 'I wish I was dead!' but not really meaning it. In his soliloquy
  Scene 1 Hamlet returns to the question of suicide, speculating that it is only
  the afterlife that makes suicide undesirable. Suicide is also an issue in the d
  she has not made a reasoned decision to kill herself, but there remains doub
  known she was floating away to her death. Horatio contemplates suicide at
  persuades him to stay alive so that he can tell the true story of what has hap

  **Suicide – a modern perspective**
  In past eras suicide was sometimes portrayed as an acceptable or desirable
  dishonour; for example, the suicide of Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesa*
  now know today that suicide is the result of untreated mental and emotion
  who is thinking of suicide (or who knows someone who has suicidal thoughts
  doctor, friends or family.

- The nature of the **afterlife** (life after death) is considered in the play. Hamle
  the ghost, although he is not sure exactly what the ghost is – it might be the
  other supernatural manifestation. In his soliloquy '*To be, or not to be*' In Act
  about what might happen after death, concluding that the afterlife is unkno
  that Hamlet is an atheist. Even religious believers (Christian or of other faith
  what might await them after death.

- The impermanent, **temporary nature of human existence** (given the inevita
  This is a major theme in the graveyard scene, where Hamlet compares the g
  lived by the people to whom the skulls belonged. In Elizabethan times skulls
  'memento mori' or reminder of death. The multiple deaths at the end of the
  limits of earthly power and ambition.

# Madness

**Madness – a modern perspective**
The words 'mad' and 'madness' are seen today as an oversimple (and unaccept
with mental health problems. This is because modern psychology and psychiat
understanding of the complexities of mental and emotional distress. However,
words 'mad' and 'madness' when writing about *Hamlet*, as the words are then
and literary context.

**Key quotations**

*As I perchance hereafter shall think meet*
*To put an antic disposition on* – (1.5.171–172) HAMLET

*Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbraced,*
*No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled*
*…As if he had been looséd out of hell*
*To speak of horrors…* (2.1.76–81) OPHELIA

*Though this were madness, yet there is method in it* (2.2.200–20

*I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I k*
*handsaw' (*2.2.347–348) HAMLET

*… I essentially am not in madness,*
*But mad in craft* (3.4.188–189) HAMLET

*Come, my coach. Good night ladies, good night sweet ladies, go*
(4.5.71–72) OPHELIA

*… she chanted snatches of old lauds,*
*As one incapable of her own distress* (4.7.177–178) GERTRUDE

The **nature or definition of madness** (of what it consists) is explored in *Hamlet* th
of Hamlet's madness and of Ophelia's madness.

- **Hamlet's madness.** On one level it might seem obvious that Hamlet is not m
be insane. He makes several clear statements about faking his madness (se
Polonius agrees with him. The cleverness of Hamlet's apparently garbled w
intelligence behind his wildness and agitation. However, such an interpreta
Hamlet is emotionally distraught by the knowledge of his father's murder (m
uncertainty that he feels about the ghost's revelations) and his mother's rel
be mentally unstable as well as determined to act as if he is mad. The elem
could explain (though of course not excuse) his unusually harsh treatment o
- **Ophelia's madness** is easier to interpret. She is distressed by two tragic eve
Hamlet's cruel treatment of her. Her own disjointed singing and conversatio
experiences but far less calculated than Hamlet's wild speech. While Hamle
pretence, there is nothing to suggest that Ophelia's madness is not genuine

# Revenge

**Key quotations (all spoken by Hamlet unless stated otherwise)**

*Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder* (1.5.25) GHOST

*And am I then revenged*
*To take him in the purging of his soul,*
*When he is fir and seasoned for his passage?*
*No.* (3.3.84–87)

*Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged*
*Most thoroughly for my father* (4.5.135–136) LAERTES

*For though I am not splenitive and rash,*
*Yet have I in me something dangerous*
*Which let thy wisdom fear* (5.1.227–230)

*He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,*
*. . . . . – is't not perfect conscience*
*To quit him with this arm?* (5.2.64–68)

*Hamlet* is a play in the revenge tragedy genre, and the 'revenge' elements in the
conventions of that genre. The section on 'Genre, Form and Structure' in this gu
this genre (p. 59). These conventions include the murder of a blameless person;
encourage the revenger; and a violent conclusion in which the major characters
However, Shakespeare uses the revenge tragedy genre conventions in *Hamlet* in

- Hamlet is not a typical revenge 'hero'. He is sometimes characterised as bei
exacting his revenge, but this is because Hamlet is not absolutely convinced
know this because Hamlet arranges for the players to act out the murder of
watches Claudius to see how he reacts (Act 3, Scene 2). Although revenge w
Elizabethan England (it was seen as something for God to take care of, not f
Hamlet's wish to be certain of the facts before taking action is a much more
dilemma than that of a traditional revenge tragedy protagonist.
- There are two other revengers in *Hamlet*, Laertes and Fortinbras, and they b
Hamlet's approach to revenge.

Laertes seeks revenge against Hamlet both for Hamlet's murder of Polonius and
driving Ophelia into insanity and subsequent death. Whatever the rights and wr
Laertes has a much more direct approach; the only reason he does not kill Hamle
Claudius suggests a scheme for ensuring Hamlet's death. However, like Hamlet,
revenger. This is shown by the way that he is reconciled with Hamlet when they
Like Laertes and Hamlet, Fortinbras also seeks revenge for his father's death. Ho
takes political rather than personal action. His decision to start a war against De
Old Fortinbras reveals a more thoughtful, less passionate approach to revenge, a
superior one, since he is ready to involve thousands of soldiers in his personal re

# *Politics and power*

**Key quotations**

*This bodes some strange eruption to our state* (1.1.69) HORATIO

*[Young Fortinbras seeks to]… recover of us by strong hand*
*And terms compulsatory those forsaken lands*
*So by his father lost…* (1.1.102–103) HORATIO

*[Fortinbras may be]… thinking by our late dear brother's death*
*Our state to be disjoint and out of frame* (1.2.19–20) CLAUDIUS

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* (1.4.90) MARCELLUS

*Why should the poor be flattered?*
*No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp* (3.2.49) HAMLET

*I like him not, nor stands it safe with us*
*To let his madness rage* (3.3.1–2) CLAUDIUS

*There's such divinity doth hedge a king* (4.5.124) CLAUDIUS

*Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay*
*Might stop a hole, to keep the wind away* (5.1.180–181) HAMLET

*[Claudius] Popped in between th'election and my hopes* (5.2.65)

The theme of power and politics is explored in a number of ways in *Hamlet*.

- **External threats to the state:** It is clear from the opening scene of the play t under threat. There is a tense exchange between the sentries, followed by t ghost. Shortly afterwards we learn from Horatio that there is a military thre Fortinbras, who has plans to invade. Although this threat is later neutralised by the end of the play, albeit through a peaceful route to the throne.
- **Internal threats to the stability of the state:** Although the Danish constituti King, the fact that he has 'jumped in' before Hamlet (and has swiftly marrie an incestuous marriage) injects uncertainty and instability into the state of D of old King Hamlet has been kept secret.
- The concept of **kingship** (an important issue for the Elizabethan audience) is kingly 'divinity' protects him despite his murderous route to the throne.
- There is criticism of the flattery and **superficiality of the court** (nobles and p
- The **ephemeral nature of political power** is examined (overlapping with the
- The **dishonest, Machiavellian scheming** of Claudius is associated with his ur power.

# Sexual relationships and attitudes

**Key quotations**

*… Oh most wicked speed, to post*
*With such dexterity to incestuous sheets* (1.2.156–157) HAMLET

*Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats*
*Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables* (1.2.180–181) HAMLET

*My lord, he hath importuned me with love*
*In honourable fashion* (1.3.110–111) OPHELIA

*Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,*
*…So to seduce, won to his shameful lust*
*The will of my most seeming virtuous queen* (1.5.41–46) GHOST

*Get thee to a nunnery – why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?*
HAMLET

*Nay, but to live*
*In the rank sweat of an ensemèd bed,*
*Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love*
*Over the nasty sty* (3.5.91–94) HAMLET

*Young men will do't if they come to't –*
*By Cock, they are to blame* (4.5.60–01) OPHELIA

*I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers*
*Could not with all their quantity of love*
*Make up my sum* (5.1.236–238) HAMLET

The theme of sexual relationships and attitudes can be seen from a number of pe

- **Hamlet's revulsion at Gertrude and Claudius's relationship**: Hamlet is clear mother, Queen Gertrude, having a sexual relationship with Claudius. This m fact that Gertrude's husband was murdered by Claudius and that the relatio However, the strength of feeling in Hamlet's language suggests a physical re physical sex per se, not just in this specific instance. This revulsion is mirror and the language used by the ghost. If we choose to see the ghost as a refle than as a wholly independent entity, then the ghost's views are also Hamlet
- **The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia**: this reflects the expected ro Elizabethan England as well as the specific circumstances of the play.

**Deba**
In Shak
*Juliet*, Ju
despite
family (
contrad
portray
woman

Women were expected to play a subservient role in Elizabethan England, despite the existence of a powerful female monarch. Marriages were arranged for the good of the family, and premarital sex would risk a woman's reputation and hence her chances of making a suitable marriage. Thus, when Ophelia is given a 'lecture' by Laertes and then by Polonius warning her against any sexual contact with Hamlet, this would have been seen as entirely normal by the Elizabethan audience. This context also explains why Ophelia is so willing to agree to her father's instruction to have no more to do wi

The context of the power relationships which existed in the patriarchal society o explain Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia, when he uses insulting, sexualised l intent on his pretence of madness and is unconcerned that Ophelia might be offe there is no reason to suppose that Hamlet is lying when (at Ophelia's graveside) h

- Ophelia's sexualised language when she is <u>really</u> driven out of her mind is a p A young woman of her superior social class would never consider using expli fact that she does so shows that she is not in control of her own emotions.

# Corruption: an overarching theme in *Hamlet*

**Key quotations**

*And I am sick at heart* (1.1.9) FRANCISCO

*How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable*
*Seem to me all the uses of this world!*
*Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis and unweeded garden*
*That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature*
*Possess it merely* (1.2.133–137) HAMLET

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* (1.4.90) MARCELLU

*Make you a wholesome answer; my wit's diseased: but, sir, suc*
*make, you shall command* (3.2.291–292) HAMLET

*Oh my offence is rank, it smells to heaven*
*… In the corrupted currents of this world*
*Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice* (3.3.36 and 3.3.57–

*Look you now what follows.*
*Here is your husband; like a mildewed ear*
*Blasting his wholesome brother* (3.4.63–65) HAMLET

*Nay, but to live*
*In the rank sweat of an ensemèd bed,*
*Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love*
*Over the nasty sty* (3.5.91–94) HAMLET

*[Your self-deception] will but skin and film the ulcerous place,*
*Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,*
*Infects unseen* (3.4.148–150) HAMLET

*Her brother is in secret come from France,*
*Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,*
*And wants not buzzers to infect his ear*
*With pestilent speeches of his father's death* (4.5.87–90) CLAUD

*Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an*
*[a skull] must she come* (5.1.163–164) HAMLET
*Faith, if a be not rotten before a die, as we have many pocky cor*
*scarce hold the laying in… [a = he; pocky corses = syphilitic corp*
CLOWN

A useful way of looking at the theme of 'corruption'(sometimes labelled as 'disease') in *Hamlet* is to see it as a **motif** within the play which interconnects with the major themes.

- The theme of **mortality** is associated with **bodily corruption**.
- The theme of **madness** is associated with **mental corruption**.
- The theme of **politics and power** is associated with **political corruption**.
- The theme of **sexual relationships and attitudes** is associated with **moral co**

The motif is introduced right at the start of the play, when Francisco states that h
metaphorical symbol of corruption and disease is used throughout the play to sig
corruption which centres on the murder of old King Hamlet, and (as Hamlet sees
relationship between Claudius and Gertrude. The motif is used not only by Ham
and disgust, but also by Claudius when he acknowledges his own '*rank*' and '*corr*
3.3.57–58).

The madness afflicting (or assumed by) Hamlet is also typified by Hamlet as a for
that '*my wit's diseased*' (3.2.292); in one of the most striking and repulsive image
mother not to excuse his criticism of her by calling him mad, as her self-deceptio
*ulcerous place* (3.4.148).

In the graveyard scene (in Act 5, Scene 1), motif and reality coincide to reinforce
brevity and insignificance of individual human life is literally demonstrated throu
skulls, and their state of decay and corruption compared to the pretentions of th
message is that all human ambition must end in death; the painted face is doom
just as Hamlet's own conflicting passions are brought to an end by his own death

## *Appearance versus reality: an overarching ther*

Another way of looking at the theme of 'appearance versus reality' in *Hamlet* is t
which interconnects with the major themes.

The theme of **mortality** is associated with the appearance of permanence and st
with the reality of death where we are all equally insignificant. It is also associat
of 'reality' is represented by the ghost.

The theme of **madness** is associated (in part) with the appearance of Hamlet's u
with the reality of his rational search for revenge.

The theme of **politics and power** is associated with the appearance of Claudius's
with the reality of his hypocrisy and murderous crime; also with the appearance o
and Guildenstern put on, compared to their untrustworthy nature. Hamlet uses
as a political ploy, in order to prevent Claudius and his courtiers discovering the t
appearance and accusation. In the 'play within a play' the performance appears
fact it is designed to entrap. In the final scene an apparently innocuous fencing n
deadly plot.

The theme of **sexual relationships and attitudes** is associated (in Hamlet's mind)
Claudius and his stately, regal wife – he refers to her as his 'imperial jointress' (1.2
of what Hamlet sees as sordid seduction and sexual desire.

**Key quotations**

> *… I set it down*
> *That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain* (1.5.107–108) H
> Claudius)
>
> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*
> *Than are dreamt of in your philosophy* (1.5.166–167)
>
> *'… I essentially am not in madness,*
> *But mad in craft* (3.4.188–189) HAMLET
>
> *Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?...his fine pate full of*
> 94)
>
> *Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an*
> *must she come. Make her laugh at that.* (5.1.163–164)

**Extended essay question [47]**
How relevant are the themes in *Hamlet* to a modern (twenty-first-century) audien

# The Context of *Hamlet*

## What 'context' means

'Context' is an important concept when studying *Hamlet* for A or AS Level, as it is objectives' (AOs) assessed by all the examination boards (see p. 3 of this guide fo

- **AO3:** *Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the co written and received.*

AOs overlap and can rarely be commented on in isolation, and AO3 (context) is c (connections between texts) and AO5 (different interpretations of texts).

There is no exact or final definition of 'context' in relation to a work of literature, all be included in this concept. These elements are labelled (a) to (g) for clarity a necessary to other sections of the guide. No order of importance is implied.

## (a) The literary context

### *Elizabethan drama*

The Elizabethan period saw a sudden surge in the popularity of drama. The man addition to Shakespeare, include Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593); Thomas Ky Middleton (1580–1627); Francis Beaumont (1584–1616); John Fletcher (1579–16 and Robert Greene (1558–1592). By the 1550s, plays were put on by companies and boys, since women were not permitted to act on stage until 1660. Until 157 travel around carrying their costumes in a wagon. The first theatre (a building de plays) was built in 1576. Elizabethan theatres had large open stages surrounded original Globe Theatre opened in 1599 and many of Shakespeare's plays were pe of the Elizabethan Globe Theatre was opened in London in 1997, although mode is not an exact copy.

**Active learning task [48]**

Visit the modern Globe Theatre website and follow the links to learn more about What were the main differences between the original Globe and a modern thea ***http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/***

You may wish to use a table similar to that below for your answer.

| Features of the original Globe Theatre | Features of a |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

**Further reading: the Elizabethan theatre**

Ryan Kiernan (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 200 'Shakespeare's Theatre' by Helen Hackett, pp. 31–48

### Revenge tragedy

Revenge tragedy was a popular subgenre in the Elizabethan period, and *Hamlet* s
typical revenge tragedy. These include a main character who seeks revenge agai
within a play'; scenes of madness; scenes of violence; a ghost who also seeks rev
(See the further comments on revenge tragedy in the 'Genre, Form and Structur

### Shakespeare's language

One of the most obvious contextual features apparent to someone seeing or rea
Shakespeare) for the first time is the very different use of language compared to
have changed their meaning over the period of more than 400 years since *Hamle*
performed, but this is in some ways the least significant contextual feature. The
Shakespeare's language from that of modern-day playwrights are, firstly, his use
elaborate imagery and diction which permeate the play. These features should n
simply as different in expression and style. (See the comments in the 'Shakespea
guide, p. 65.)

## (b) The origin of the story of *Hamlet* (A

Modern-day playwrights will usually (but not always) use their own original ideas
However, Elizabethan dramatists (including Shakespeare) would base their plays
legends. For example, Christopher Marlowe's play *Dr Faustus* (c. 1592) is based
legend about a man who sells his soul to the devil.

It is likely that Shakespeare drew upon a number of sources for the story of *Ham*
the ancient Nordic legend about a young man called Amleth whose father is mur
marries Amleth's mother. Amleth pretends to be mad in order to revenge his fa
was written around AD 1200 by Saxo Grammaticus, and a French version appeare
Shakespeare may have known about.

An earlier version of *Hamlet* (usually referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*, using the Ger
original) is known to have been performed in London in the late 1580s. The text
we do not know who wrote it. It might have been a source of ideas for Shakespe
an early version written *by* Shakespeare.

Some literary critics have speculated that there might be an autobiographical ele
play was influenced by events in Shakespeare's life. We know that Shakespeare
died in 1596 aged 11. However, other than the similarity between the names 'H
direct evidence of any link between Hamnet's death and the themes of the play.

Whatever the sources for *Hamlet*, it is important to understand that the original
Shakespeare. The profound ideas which run through the play and the striking la
Shakespeare's original creation.

# (c) Depictions of *Hamlet* on stage and scree

## *Hamlet on Stage*

NB Only a small sample of the many notable stage performances of *Hamlet* is commented on here.

Productions of *Hamlet* by the eighteenth-century actor and theatre manager **David Garrick** (1717–1779) helped to establish the popularity of the play. He introduced lavish set designs and costumes (very different from the plain setting used when the play was first performed) and stage effects; these include a devic to lift up Hamlet's wig in fear when he was the ghost! Garrick's version of *Hamle* would seem strange to modern audiences, as he cut out nearly all of Act 5 – including the graveyard scene and the duel. Garrick's acting style would also puzzle a modern audience; it was full of dramatic, posturing gestures and exaggerated pauses that would today seem artificial and stilted.

The early nineteenth-century actor **Edmund Kean** (1787–1833) replaced the stilted (as we would see it today) style of his predecessors with more naturalistic emotional energy and passion. He became a great celebrity in Georgian England, earning as much in one night as a manual labourer would in a year.

Innovation in staging *Hamlet* is not as 'modern' as on American actor **John Barrymore** (1882–1942) played production used a single, simple design for every sce an arch and a set of steps. Barrymore's production e relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude, with Har

Later productions of *Hamlet*, including those with **Ric** the 1950s, stressed the psychological unravelling and Prince. In the 1989 production of *Hamlet* **Mark Rylan** with wild derangement and insane excitement.

Hamlet continues to attract theatre audiences, and t Hamlet himself) gives the opportunity for widely diff production by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), role in a modern-dress production, demonstrated the continued popularity of th was portrayed as a wild, witty character, with rapidly changing moods and unpre

## *Hamlet on screen*

NB Only a small sample of the many notable screen versions of *Hamlet* is comme Many screen versions of *Hamlet* (for film and television) are based on an original versions have to be shorter than stage versions because of the conventionally sh

***Hamlet* directed by Laurence Oliver (with Laurence Oliver as Hamlet): 19**

*The Daily Telegraph*'s review of this film by their film critic, Campbell Dixon, publ Olivier for his portrayal of Hamlet as a fierce, ruthless Prince rather than a 'chiva Olivier's production stresses the psychological aspect of Hamlet, including his rel play is set in a huge, confusing castle with winding stairs, mist and fog.

***Hamlet* directed by John Gielgud (with Richard Burton as Hamlet): 1964**

Richard Burton plays Hamlet as a strong, confident figure, although some critics 'detached' manner with which he delivered some of his lines.

***Hamlet* directed by Kenneth Branagh (with Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet)**

This production is unusual because it is one of the very few film versions which i the film runs for 242 minutes. The film makes the most of lavish 'big screen' sett Branagh emphasises Hamlet's recklessness as well as his indecision.

***Hamlet* directed by Robin Lough and Lyndsey Turner (with Benedict Cum**
In this production Hamlet is portrayed as being far more balanced and sane than
madness is only a pretence, with Hamlet's humour featuring prominently. This p
imaginatively; although Shakespeare's words are not altered, scenes are moved
some lines are spoken by different characters.

### *Hamlet*: comparing performances and productions

Once you have seen two or more productions of *Hamlet* (on stage or on screen)
between them. A good way to start thinking about these differences is to conce
the active learning task on p. 13 of this guide.

## (d) The writer and the writer's life

The context of the writer and the writer's life often offers important insights into
know a great deal about the life of Emily Brontë, and this is helpful when interpreti
*Heights* (1847). However, there is very little known about Shakespeare's life whi
*Hamlet*. (See the comments on Shakespeare's life in the 'Background to *Hamlet*'

## (e) *Hamlet*: the first performance and t

Exploring the context of the first performance or the first printed edition of a mo
in the case of *Hamlet* the position is very different, and a great deal of research h
written edition and the first recorded performances of *Hamlet* in the theatre. (S
performance and text in in the 'Background to *Hamlet*' section of this guide, p. 3

## (f) The political context of *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* depicts a society where political threat and violence are never far away.
tension, and early in Act 1, Scene 1 Marcellus and Horatio make it clear that the
with invasion and is preparing for war. As well as external political threats, the in
also deadly dangerous. The current King Claudius has gained power by murderin
plans to murder Hamlet to remove the threat of revenge. Hamlet is also involve
his determination to revenge himself on Claudius, he also arranges for the death
Guildenstern.

Modern Western European society (unlike many other parts of the world) has be
political violence for over 70 years, and a reader or audience from that society m
threatening political context of *Hamlet* as mere entertainment, as if Shakespeare
*of Thrones* with its make-believe alliances and conflicts. However, *Hamlet* (altho
Denmark) closely mirrors the political context of Elizabethan England, with its th
Armada of 1588) and various plots to get rid of Queen Elizabeth I (e.g. William Pa
Elizabeth I in 1584). The Elizabethan audience would, therefore, have found the
chilling and believable. (See the comments on fear of war and invasion in the sce
guide, p. 9.)

# (g) The social context of *Hamlet*

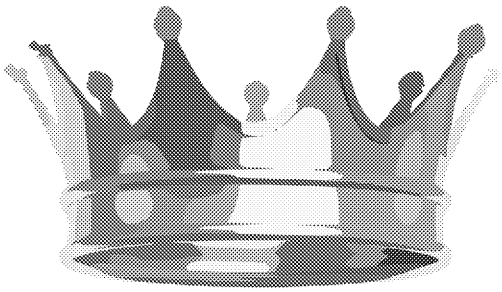
*Hamlet* (like any work of literature) necessarily reflects the beliefs and values of t
written. Two aspects of Elizabethan society are particularly important to help th
understand the play:

## *The role of women in Elizabethan England*

Elizabethan England was a patriarchal society (i.e. a society governed, controlled
dominated by men). An understanding of this aspect of the social context of *Ha*
essential when considering **Ophelia's role in the play**, especially her relationship
Polonius and with Hamlet. The subservient role played by women (who could no
formal education or what we would now call 'professional' jobs) meant that Oph
passive obedience to her father's wishes (that is, to have no more to do with Ha
would not have been seen as unusual. Of course, there were independent and a
women in the Elizabethan period, including the monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, but
women had little influence outside the home.

Marriages for women from the higher social classes (such as Ophelia) were arran
and premarital sex would risk a woman's reputation and hence her chances of m
when Ophelia is given a 'lecture' by Laertes and then by Polonius warning her ag
Hamlet, this would have been seen as entirely normal by the Elizabethan audien

Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia can also be explained (though not excused)
power in the patriarchal society of Elizabethan England. The insulting, sexualised
towards her (Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2) is used in the knowledge that she is powerle
Hamlet wishes to continue the pretence of madness, and if he hurts Ophelia's fe
concern to him.



## *The Elizabethan concept of*

In Elizabethan England the power of
derived directly from God. This beli
medieval period) was known as 'the
when Claudius murders old King Ha
as a criminal and immoral act (see t
of kings in the 'Scene Analysis' secti

# Literary Approaches to *Ha*

## The concept of 'literary approaches'

Literary criticism (the process of analysing and commenting upon works of litera
procedures or approaches. Since the early 1960s the study of literature has seen
known as 'literary theory', where many diverse (and often competing) perspectiv
literary works from different social, cultural, political, psychological and linguistic

**Further reading: literary theory**

Literary theory can be confusing for students, as it is a large and ever-changing
some good general surveys which can be used as a starting point for exploring th
Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), F

The following literary approaches are among those which can be used to provide
on *Hamlet*. There is nothing wrong with using, or referring to, perspectives whic
recognised as such by Shakespeare, but it is important not to directly associate t
would be an **anachronism**. For example, a student can write 'a feminist reading o
but not 'Shakespeare uses a feminist argument when he characterises Ophelia as

## Feminist literary criticism

Feminist literary critics analyse literary texts in a number of ways. They look at how literature reflects (and often reinforces) a **patriarchal society**. They are interested in how women are portrayed in literature, and the way that women characters have traditionally been discussed by male (and female) critics.

**Key t**
**Anach**
not fit t
is assoc
1802 C
his opiu
**Patriar**
governe
by men

The characters of Ophelia and Gertrude give opportunities for a feminist literary perspective to be applied to *Hamlet*. Ophelia's unquestioning obedience to Polonius's order to end her relationship with Hamlet, and Hamlet's harsh treatment of her, can be interpreted as being a result of the extremely patriarchal nature of Elizabethan society, rather than of any implied weakness in Ophelia's character. A feminist perspective might defend Gertrude's right to have sexual d
argue that Hamlet overemphasises (obsesses about) the sexual side of her relatio

## Marxist literary criticism

Marxist literary critics are interested in how the political theories of **Karl Marx** (1
explored in literary texts. Marx believed that there was a class struggle between
society, and thought that the existence of inequalities of wealth and status was w
be interested in the portrayal of politics and power in *Hamlet*, including Claudius
way that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as subservient characters w
fate which they do not deserve.

## Freudian literary criticism

Freudian approaches to literature are based on the psychoanalytical theories of S
Freud himself saw the plot of *Hamlet* as an example of what he called the 'Oedip
subconsciously sexually attracted to his mother and wishes to kill his father. Fre
interested in the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude in the play.

## A note on 'close reading'

'Close reading' means a detailed examination of a writer's choice and use of words
produce effects or convey ideas. Close reading is an element in <u>all</u> literary criticism
employed. Examples of close readings of *Hamlet* are given throughout the 'Scene A
Elements to consider in a close reading are summarised in the 'Shakespeare's Use o

# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| **Alliteration** | Repetition of consonants for poetic effect, e.g. 'the fair f |
| **Ambiguous** | Having more than one possible meaning or explanation ( |
| **Anachronistic** | Something is 'anachronistic' if it does not fit the historic associated, e.g. Julius Caesar pictured smoking a cigaret |
| **Anaphora** | Repetition of words and phrases used at the start of a li |
| **Aside** | A spoken thought which is not heard by anyone else on s true feelings. |
| **Assonance** | Repetition of words that contain the same or similar-so effect. |
| **Ballad** | A traditional form of narrative poem of a kind originally alternate lines rhyming. |
| **Bathos** | The anticlimax caused by a sudden change from a seriou very ordinary (adjective: bathetic). |
| **Blank verse (or iambic pentameter)** | A rhythmic pattern where a line of verse is made up of f stressed syllables. |
| **Caesura** | A break in the rhythm within a line of iambic pentamete |
| **Classical allusions** | References (usually brief) to a character or event in anc literature or legend. |
| **Connotations** | Associated meanings or connections. |
| **Diction** | Choice and style of words. |
| **Dramatic irony** | When the audience know something that one or more o NOT know. |
| **End-stopped lines** | Lines of verse with a comma, full stop or other punctua |
| **Enjambment** | Lines of verse which are 'run on', i.e. not end-stopped. |
| **Extended metaphor** | A figure of speech in which a metaphor (comparison) is e points of comparison. For example, 'Jane's career had h *stormy* temper'. |
| **Figures of speech** | Words or phrases which have a meaning different from |
| **Foil** | A character who is compared with or contrasted to ano |
| **Foreshadowing** | Where the author or playwright gives a hint about what |
| **Form** | 'Form' is the way that language is shaped and presented example, the dramatic form of a play (whatever the gen verse or prose of various kinds and styles; metadrama; o |
| **Genre** | Type of literature with common features, e.g. thriller, sc |
| **Hyperbole** | Extreme exaggeration. |
| **Iambic pentameter (or blank verse)** | A rhythmic pattern where a line of verse is made up of f stressed syllables. |
| **Imagery** | Language (including figures of speech and other descrip pictures' in the mind. |
| **Lyrical** | Expressing emotion in a moving and graceful way. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Irony** | The use of language that means the opposite of the |
| **Machiavellian** | Using clever but dishonest methods, especially in po early sixteenth-century writer Niccolò *Machiavelli*.) |
| **Melodramatic** | Sensational and clichéd. |
| **Metadrama** | A device which draws the audience's attention to th performance, e.g. a 'play within a play' or a prologue directly. |
| **Metaphor** | A figure of speech which refers to something (A) as i make a comparison. For example: 'Carol's room is a |
| **Misanthropy** | Dislike of humankind. |
| **Misogyny** | Dislike or distrust of women. |
| **Motif** | A recurring symbol or idea which contributes to the |
| **Parallel** | A subplot or scene which can be compared or contra subplot or scene. |
| **Parody** | A humorous imitation of a literary work or style. |
| **Pastiche** | A literary work or piece of writing which imitates an |
| **Pastoral (literature)** | Depicting an idealised country life or scene. |
| **Pathos** | The quality in an experience of evoking a feeling of p |
| **Patriarchal society** | A society governed, controlled and dominated by me |
| **Personification** | A non-living object or concept described as if it is a h |
| **Poignant** | Evoking a feeling of sadness or regret. |
| **Portents** | Signs that something (usually unpleasant) is going to |
| **Pun** | Use of a word which has two meanings, or sounds lik funeral is usually a grave event': often used for hum |
| **Repartee** | Conversation involving quick, amusing exchanges; co |
| **Prose** | Words constructed in the everyday patterns of ordi poetic). |
| **Rhetorical question** | A question that is asked not to get an answer, but to or audience thinking. |
| **Riddles** | Puzzles which use puns, e.g. Q: 'Why couldn't the po voice.' |
| **Seriocomic** | Mixing serious and comic elements. |
| **Simile** | A simile is the same as a metaphor except that the c or 'as'. |
| **Soliloquy** | A speech made by an actor when they are alone on s loud' and lets the audience understand the actor's in |
| **Subplot** | A less important plot that runs alongside the main p subplot). |
| **Structure** | The way that the different elements in a literary wor organisation of a text. This includes the use of forma book or scenes in a play. Other structural features in and how plots and subplots interact. |
| **Subgenre** | A subsidiary category within a genre, e.g. the 'steam |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Symbol** | Something which stands for something else, e.g. stormy conflict. |
| **Tautology** | Saying the same thing twice over, using different words very intelligent'. |
| **Tone** | The mood or feeing that is created by the language used casual. |
| **Verse** | Words written in poetic form, usually with a distinctive p |
| **Wordplay** | Language which uses puns, riddles and puzzles to produc combined with repartee). |

# Further Reading

## Literary theory

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (M
University Press, 2017)

## General Background to *Hamlet*

Boris Ford (Ed.), *The Age of Shakespeare: The New Pelican Guide to English Literatu*
Collinson, Patrick, *The Sixteenth Century: Short Oxford History of the British Isles* (Oxf
Kiernan Ryan (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 20
Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxfor
Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin, 2000)

## Editions of *Hamlet* with introductory sectio

Philip Edwards (Ed.), *Hamlet*, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambrid
Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (Eds.), *Hamlet*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Thor
Robert S Miola (Ed.), *Hamlet*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2011)
Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Ed.), *Hamlet*, RSC Shakespeare (Basingstoke:

## Criticism and sources

John Jump (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Hamlet*, Casebook Series (Basingstoke: Macmillan
Huw Griffith (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Hamlet,* A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism (
Sean McEvoy (Ed.), *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Sourcebook* (Abingdon: Rou

# Suggested Answer

**Please note:** the notes given below for extended essay questions are intended to provi
not a comprehensive framework for a full essay answer.

## Act 1, Scene 1 Activities: Indicative Content

### [1] Debate prompt: ghosts

- Beliefs: put 'supernatural beliefs survey' into a search engine and you will find t
today seem to have some sort of belief in the supernatural. However, they are
Shakespeare's audience. The last execution for witchcraft in England was in 168
performance of *Hamlet*.
- A modern audience can 'suspend their disbelief' and ignore the unreality of the
in *Macbeth* – or the superpowers of Wonder Woman.

### [2] Active learning task: threats to Britain

Examples include:

- The Babington Plot (1586)
- The Ridolfi Plot (1571)
- The Throckmorton Plot (1583)

### [3] Active learning task: verse form in Horatio's speech

- Extensive use of repetition of words and phrases
- Lines are alternated with half-lines to form a regular pattern
- The effect produced is that of a chant, prayer or incantation

## Act 1, Scene 2 Activities: Indicative Content

### [4] Active learning tasks: Mary Queen of Scots and Hamlet/Claudius/

- Mary married her cousin, Lord Henry Darnley, in 1565. Darnley became King of S
1567, probably by the Earl of Bothwell with Mary's approval.
- In the same year Mary married Bothwell, a divorced man, causing a scandal. Sh
escaped) and was eventually executed (in 1587) for plotting against Queen Eliza
- Parallels with the events in Hamlet: regicide (murder of a king) by a man who w
unsuitability of Mary's marriage to Bothwell/Claudius; eventual violent death of

### [5] Active learning task: *Hamlet* in performance

- Tennant's performance of this soliloquy is delivered with more intense emotion
his lines more slowly, with some significant pauses which are intended to enha
- Both actors use body language to signal their state of mind. Tennant kneels down;
- Tennant's modern suit contrasts with the nineteenth-century style of Branagh's
- NB It is better to think of these performances as different interpretations rathe
than the other.

### [6] Debate prompt: Hamlet and Gertrude

- Hamlet's suppression of his feelings is a feature of his character. He is characte
given to inner doubt and questioning, and likely to 'bottle up' his feelings.
- The formality of relationships within a royal court around 1600 would mean tha
Queen) with great respect. Society would consider it inappropriate for him to c
that her marriage is not illegal in any way.

### [7] Extended essay question: Claudius's character development

**First speech** (1.2.1–39)

- Shows hypocrisy by calling old King Hamlet his 'dear brother' and expressing his
hyperbole depicting the 'whole kingdom… in one brow of woe' illustrates his ca
- Reveals insensitivity to the accusation of incest by referring to Gertrude, his sister
- Shows political skill and cunning in his plan to prevent young Fortinbras' plans t
- Tone of the speech is self-satisfied and self-important; his is polite to Cornelius a
commanding: 'let your haste commend your duty'.

**Second speech** (1.2.87–117)

- Claudius continues his hypocritical concern by saying that it is 'sweet and comm
  father
- He argues that losing a father is a common occurrence (and, therefore, unwort
  of course aware that old King Hamlet is dead because of an unnatural murder.
- Claudius again shows his cunning by asking Hamlet to remain at Elsinore and n
  Claudius is already suspicious of Hamlet and wants him close by, where he can

# Act 1, Scene 3 Activities: Indicative Content

### [8] Active learning task: directing Polonius

- A 'boring dad' Polonius might (for example) deliver his lines in a slow, didactic f
  An uninterested Laertes could react with a shrug of the shoulders or a 'whatev
- A 'helpful father' Polonius might (for example) nod and smile at his son, or touc
  spoke. A thankful Laertes could smile and nod, or bow respectfully at the end o

# Act 1, Scene 4 Activities: Indicative Content

### [9] Active learning task: Marcellus describes his encounter with the g

Personal response

# Act 1, Scene 5 Activities: Indicative Content

### [10] Active learning task: Hamlet's soliloquy, Act 1, Scene 2 and the gho

| Speech | Hamlet: *'O that this too too solid flesh would melt,'* (1.2.129–158) | Ghost: *'Ay, tho* |
|---|---|---|
| **Ideas and opinions** | • Contrasts wickedness of Claudius to the superior nature of old King Hamlet<br>• The sexual relationship between Claudius and Gertrude seen as repulsive and sordid<br>• Criticises Gertrude's current affection for Claudius | ← Likewise<br>← Likewise<br>• Criticises Ge relationship |
| **Language** | • Metaphorical comparison of Claudius to a beast (satyr)<br>• Description of sexual relationship: the pair hurrying 'with such dexterity to incestuous sheets' | • Claudius is c<br>• Description as 'a couch |

NB Shakespeare must have been aware of the similarities – one possible reason is for the
Hamlet's opinions.

# Act 2, Scene 2 Activities: Indicative Content

### [11] Debate prompt: use of the image of the sun breeding maggots in a

- The image is made more powerful by its association with 'breeding', a term th
  procreation, i.e. the danger that Ophelia 'may conceive'.
- The image is also intended to be shocking and offensive, and its subject matte
  because it is repulsive.

### [12] Debate prompt: Hamlet's hesitancy

- Two opinions are possible. It could be said that Hamlet is 'weak', but it could a
  sure he is doing the right thing is a point in his favour.
- There is nothing in the play to suggest that the ghost must be telling the truth
  Hamlet to gather further evidence.

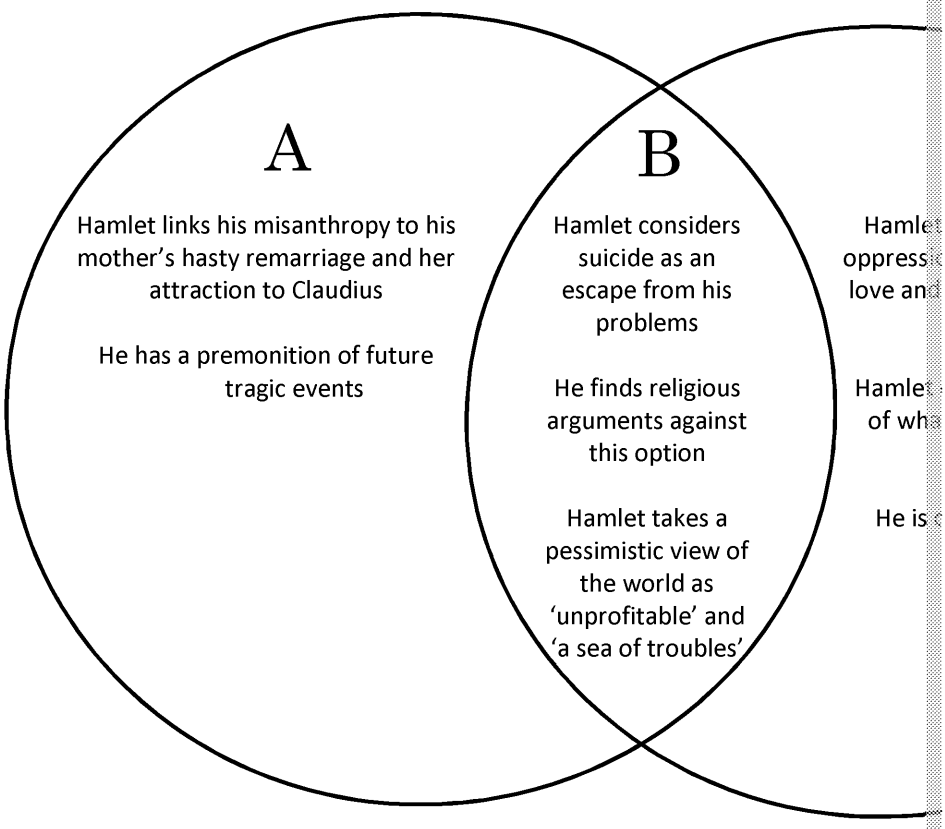
**[13] Active learning task: Act 2 of Dido, Queen of Carthage and the Tr**

- Marlowe's play contains the same kind of bombastic, hyperbolic language as t
  For example, Aeneas describes the destruction of Troy:

  *Young infants swimming in their parents' blood,*
  *Headless carcasses piled up in heaps,*
  *Virgins half-dead dragged by their golden hair,*
  *And with main force flung on a ring of pikes,*
  *Old men with swords thrust through their aged sides*
- The imagery and diction used is unoriginal, e.g. 'swimming… in blood'; 'main f
- In both *Dido* and the Trojan War extract the verse form is unsophisticated and of enjambment.

## Act 3, Scene 1 Activities: Indicative Content

**[14] Active learning task: Hamlet's first two soliloquies**




**[15] Active learning task: Ophelia's character**

This passage shows Ophelia's subservience towards Hamlet and demonstrates the p
important to remember the context of the patriarchal society of Elizabethan Englan

- The words she uses are very deferential, e.g. '*Good my lord'* (3.1.90); '*What m*
  *what a noble mind…'* (3.1.144).
- She makes no attempt to challenge his insulting behaviour, putting all the blam

**[16] Debate prompt: Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia**

- A modern audience are far more likely to find Hamlet's behaviour offensive, d
  the more equal status of women.
- It is acceptable to criticise Hamlet, provided that our different social perspecti

## Act 3, Scene 2 Activities: Indicative Content

**[17] Extended essay question: Can Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophel**
**personal circumstances?**

- After Ophelia (as commanded by her father, Polonius) tells Hamlet that she w
  frightens Ophelia (as she tells Polonius in Act 2, Scene 1) by appearing to her i
  if he has been driven mad by his love for her. If we accept that Hamlet's madn
  for frightening her.

- Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia (read out by Polonius in Act 2, Scene 2) is writt
can assume it is insincere. His trouble circumstances (seeking to revenge his f
insincerity.
- Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia reaches its climax, where Hamlet's wild a
stem as much from a general misogyny – as in his comment '*Frailty, thy name*
cause that she has given him by her earlier rejection of him. This treatment is
madness and suicide. NB We need to bear in mind the social context of Hamle
patriarchal society where women played a subservient role. While this does n
Ophelia, it helps to *explain* it.
- In conclusion: Hamlet may have been upset by Ophelia's rejection of him, but
is hardly a proportional response.

**[18] Extended essay question: Shakespeare's use of verse and prose (3**

- The first part of this extract (where Hamlet is talking to Horatio) is in blank ver
conversation which follows (between Claudius, Hamlet, Polonius, Rosencrantz
- The blank verse section consists mainly of Hamlet's speech starting 'Nay, do n
- Shakespeare's use of blank verse for Hamlet's speech is an effective vehicle fo
language which he uses. For example, Hamlet criticises what he sees as the ha
powerful with the striking metaphor 'let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp
blank verse reinforces the serious, poetic tone. The closing lines of Hamlet's s
use of variety within the blank verse structure: the caesura following 'As Vulca
audience a moment to dwell on the possibility that Hamlet fears that the ghos
about the death of his father.
- The prose form is well suited to the conversation between several people whi
Horatio. The wordplay found in the short, witty exchanges is suited to the pat
contrasts with the extended poetic deliberations of Hamlet's critique of societ
example, Hamlet's punning wordplay in response to Polonius's story about his
- Hamlet's final speech in this extract, starting 'So long? Nay then let the devil w
prose can be successfully used to convey emotion as well as conversational int
'O heavens! Die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a
life half a year…' (3.2.116–118). The diction here is straightforward rather tha
chosen by Shakespeare for this speech of Hamlet is well suited to the directne

## Act 3, Scene 3 Activities: Indicative Content

**[19] Debate prompt: the divine right of kings**

- Guildenstern makes the point that it is not just a political duty, but a 'holy and
subjects; this clearly identifies the king as appointed by God.
- Rosencrantz says that while every individual needs to keep him or herself from
stay safe and alive) is much more important for someone whose well-being is
subjects. Rosencrantz uses two powerful metaphors to state that when a king
- Strictly speaking, Rosencrantz's words could apply to a political leader as well
extreme terms he uses suggest that he agrees with Guildenstern's previous co
status as God's representative.
- The tone of the speeches suggests sycophancy, i.e. a desire to flatter Claudius

**[20] Active learning task: the characterisation of Claudius up to the e**

| Act and Scene (up to Act 3, Scene 3). | His actions and what they reveal about his character |
|---|---|
| Act 1, Scene 2 | When Claudius first appears he shows himself to be an accomplished hypocrite, regretting the death of his brother and celebrating his marriage to Queen Gertrude. |
| Act 1, Scene 2 | Claudius's hypocrisy is seen again when he tells Hamlet to accept his father's death as a natural and inevitable part of life – when in fact it was an altogether unnatural death at the hand of Claudius. |

| Act and Scene (up to Act 3, Scene 3). | His actions and what they reveal about his character | Brief significant quotations (where |
|---|---|---|
| Act 2, Scene 2 | Claudius reveals that he is concerned about Hamlet's eccentric behaviour, and asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. Claudius also agrees to Polonius's plan to use Ophelia as a trap. This reveals Claudius's suspicion and Machiavellian cunning. | |
| Act 3, Scene 1 | Claudius shows that he feels guilty about what he has done. | |
| Act 3, Scene 2 | Claudius rushes out from the players' performance when Lucianus enacts the murder. His inability to contain his emotion suggests feelings of guilt, as a completely hard-hearted murderer might have had the composure to sit throughout the performance. | |
| Act 3, Scene 3 | Claudius sends Hamlet to England. At this stage in the play the audience are not aware that Claudius has ordered Hamlet's death as soon as he reaches England, but this shows Claudius's ruthlessness – we can assume that Claudius has deduced that Hamlet knows about his father's murder.<br><br>At this stage in the play, the only thing that can be said in Claudius's favour is that he is certainly aware of wickedness of his behaviour – but he does not regret it enough to change course. | |

## Act 3, Scene 4 Activities: Indicative Content

### [21] Active learning task: Gertrude's fear of Hamlet

- Hamlet's body language might be threatening or oppressive; he could stand c
personal space; his fists might be clenched, or his hands brought forward as if
the hilt of his sword.
- Hamlet's speech could be loud and threatening, or quiet and sinister.
- Gertrude could step back from him in fear, or she might sit down in a chair an

### [22] Debate prompt: Hamlet's criticism of Gertrude

- If Hamlet thought that Gertrude had been complicit in the murder of her husb
for his response. If he knew that she was guilty of adultery and a hasty remar
there is an argument for saying that the extreme nature of Hamlet's criticism
his strained and febrile state of mind as it does upon her misdeeds.
- Hamlet is aware of his harshness, as he says *'I must be cruel to be kind'* (3.4.17
duty to turn Gertrude against her husband.

### [23] Extended essay question: Is Gertrude victim or villain?

- We know from an earlier comment made by the ghost that Gertrude has com
*that incestuous, that adulterate beast*,' (1.5.42). (A suggestion that the ghost
dramatic purpose of the ghost, i.e. to reveal the truth to Hamlet.)
- It can be argued that in marrying Claudius so soon after her husband's death
i.e. that she should have realised that Hamlet might have been upset by this.
that it was up to Gertrude to exercise her own choice in the matter, and that
based on an unwillingness to accept his mother's sexual interest in Claudius.
- There is no evidence in the play that Gertrude knew anything about Claudius'
- Gertrude's love for Hamlet appears to be genuine – no evidence to the contra
- From Gertrude's point of view, Hamlet's behaviour towards her must seem ha
- Gertrude regrets her actions: '*there [in my soul] I see such black and grained s*
- Gertrude's death in the final scene is accidental; throughout the play Hamlet
deserving of physical punishment.

# Act 4, Scene 1 Activities: Indicative Content

**[24] Active learning task: scenes that start mid-conversation (up to Ac**

- Act 2, Scene 1: When Polonius tells Reynaldo to 'give him this money, and the his behaviour' the audience has to deduce to whom him/his refer. Some audi is being discussed until Polonius refers to 'Paris' shortly afterwards, when it ca referring to Laertes.
- Act 3, Scene 1: Claudius enters talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about
- Act 3, Scene 3: Polonius enters talking to Gertrude about Hamlet.
- Act 4, Scene 1: Claudius enters talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about
- The start of Act 2, Scene 1 probably offers the greatest challenge to the audie

# Act 4, Scene 2 Activities: Indicative Content

No content for this section

# Act 4, Scene 3 Activities: Indicative Content

**[25] Active learning task: choice of verse and prose forms**

- The blank verse form used for these two speeches by Claudius is suitable for th (including imagery) that he adopts: telling the courtiers about his planned exp his scheme to have Hamlet killed.
- Prose is also used for Hamlet's wordplay because it is a more effective vehicle puns, and seriocomic humour. It is not constrained by the formal rhythms of v riddles and double meanings, creating a sense of surreal dislocation.

# Act 4, Scene 5 Activities: Indicative Content

**[26] Debate prompt: Why does Gertrude not wish to speak to Ophelia?**

There is no definitive answer. Possibilities include:

- Gertrude may have already heard of Ophelia's mental state, and be worried th her (Gertrude) which she does not want others to hear.
- Gertrude may have already heard of Ophelia's mental state, and be too upset

**[27] Active learning task: Ophelia's flowers and herbs**

| Flower/herb | Traditional property or symbolic significance |
|---|---|
| Rosemary | Remembrance |
| Pansies | Thought |
| Fennel | Flattery |
| Columbines | Infidelity |
| Rue | Sorrow/repentance |
| Daisies | Various contradictory properties are attached to this flower, including innocence, love and untruthfulness |
| Violets | Faithfulness |

**[28] Extended essay question: Ophelia's portrayal in *Hamlet***

- Act 1, Scene 3: When Ophelia is warned about Hamlet (first by her brother, th submissive to their wishes, saying very little. Her words are full of calm, dutifu 'I shall the effect of this good lesson keep/As watchman to my heart' (1.3.45–4 'I shall obey, my lord' (1.4.136)
  Her attitude towards Hamlet at this stage in the play is one of trust and respec hath importuned me with love / In honourable fashion' (1.3.110–111). Howev when Polonius orders her to have no more to do with Hamlet, responding me
- Act 2, Scene 1: Ophelia makes it clear that she has obeyed her father and rejec / I did repel his letters, and denied / His access to me' (2.2.106–108). When O and apparently insane behaviour towards her, the language that she uses bec describing Hamlet 'As if he had been loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors… herself as 'affrighted' (2.1.73) by Hamlet's wild behaviour and bizarre unkemp her own mental distress.
- Act 3, Scene 1: Ophelia agrees to the scheme thought up by Claudius and Gert meet Hamlet while Claudius and Polonius spy on them. Ophelia is shocked by crying out 'O *heavenly powers restore him!*' (3.1.136). Her short soliloquy beg *o'erthrown!*' (3.1.144) again signals her growing distress.

- Act 3, Scene 2: Although Ophelia shows little reaction to Hamlet's insulting co players' dumbshow, it is reasonable to assume that she suffers further distres
- Act 4, Scene 5: By the time that Ophelia makes this (her last) appearance in th from a submissive daughter to a mentally disturbed young woman, as evidenc language (see the commentary on this scene for a detailed analysis).

## Act 4, Scene 7 Activities: Indicative Content

### [29] Debate prompt: Why didn't Gertrude rescue Ophelia?

- It might be that Gertrude was told about the circumstances of Ophelia's death scene at the time. However, this does not seem very likely because, firstly, tha Ophelia, and secondly, Gertrude's description is so detailed that it could hardl
- A better explanation of this puzzle is to remember that Hamlet is not intended Shakespeare allows himself to use Gertrude as the mouthpiece for the descript witnessed. In this respect she has a metadramatic function, like the reader of a

### [30] Active learning task: Ophelia's death

The painting is very close to the description given by Gertrude. Details incorporate stream'; 'fantastic garlands' (Ophelia holds one, while another floats downstream a wide' keeping her afloat. Her calm, other-worldly expression and her hands raised state of mind. NB Researchers have noted the interesting fact that the flowers in th same time; Millais painted the picture over a period of five months and included flo

### [31] Active learning task: aspects of Claudius's character developed in

The audience is given further evidence of Claudius's Machiavellian cunning and abil

- At the beginning of the scene Claudius gives Laertes two reasons why he (Clau against Hamlet following Hamlet's murder of Polonius. Firstly, because of Ger because Hamlet is loved by the population of Denmark. However, Claudius do Hamlet might tell the truth about the murder of old King Hamlet, or that he ha for Hamlet's death.
- Claudius not only hatches a plot to kill Hamlet, but wants it to look like an acci modern audience to see how the plot that is described a little later on could e is still Claudius's intention.)
- Claudius draws upon his knowledge of Hamlet's vanity about his fencing skills
- Claudius realises that the plan to use a poisoned sword may not work, and so back-up plan.

## Act 5, Scene 1 Activities: Indicative Content

### [32] Active learning task: Act 4, Scene 3 and the graveyard scene in Ac

When Hamlet describes how the status of kings and beggars is equal after death – h through the guts of a beggar' – he is making the same point that he makes when he are now no more than grim skulls.

## Act 5, Scene 2 Activities: Indicative Content

### [33] Debate prompt: Hamlet's reasons for arranging the deaths of Ros

**Hamlet argues that:**

- They chose to become spies for Claudius of their own free will
- If they had not decided to come between Hamlet and Claudius they would not
- It is always risky for inferior people to get involved in the quarrels of their bett

**Possible counterarguments:**

- They had little choice than to help Claudius, given that he is king
- They did not know that their letter contained instructions for Hamlet's death

### [34] Active learning task: how Osric is made to look ridiculous

- Hamlet greets Osric ironically and calls him by an insulting name – 'this water
- Hamlet causes Osric to demonstrate his sycophancy by making contradictory c which Osric agrees.
- Hamlet mimics Osric's over-elaborate style of speech.
- Horatio and Hamlet make insulting comments about Osric after he leaves.

### [35] Active learning task: Hamlet's memorial

Personal response

**[36] Extended essay question: Do the characters in the final scene get**

- Hamlet would not have deserved to die if he had just killed Claudius, the murd
showed no regret at killing Polonius (even though that was an accident) and h
contributing directly to her suicide. His death, however, might seem a rather h
- Claudius has very few redeeming features; where he does express regret, this is
course or give up any of the benefits he has gained from his wicked actions. His
- Gertrude probably knew nothing about the murder of her husband, and certai
Hamlet. She did undertake a hasty and unsuitable second marriage, but clearl
she did not know that Claudius killed her first husband.
- Laertes was very willing to conspire with Claudius to kill Hamlet – revenge for
justification, although it would have been more ethical simply to challenge Ha
kill him in a cowardly, underhand fashion.
- As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have never intended to kill Hamlet, their ow
punishment to a modern audience.

## Genre, Form and Structure: Indicative Content

**[37] *The Spanish Tragedy*: similarities with *Hamlet***

- Don Andrea (a Spanish nobleman) was killed in combat with Balthazar, a Portu
earth as a ghost to seek revenge (compare ghost of old King Hamlet).
- Balthazar falls in love with Bell Imperia, the former lover of Andrea (compare C
- Horatio, son of the Spanish Marshall Hieronimo, falls in love with Bell Imperia a
- Hieronimo goes mad when he discovers his son is dead (compare madness of O
- At the end of the play a 'play within the play' is put on and Hieronimo kills Lor
herself (compare play within play in *Hamlet* and violent ending).

**[38] Debate prompt: genre-related expectations**

No set answer for this task.

**[39] Extended essay question (AQA A Level (B) English Literature ON**

No additional notes have been provided; the answer will depend on the text chose

**[40] Debate prompt: Claudius's lack of reaction to the dumbshow**

One possibility is that Claudius realises that the dumbshow is aimed at him, but has
incriminate himself. Then, when the later scene shows the murder, Claudius can no

**[41] Debate prompt: parallels (contrasts and/or similarities) between**

- Laertes and Ophelia have a better relationship with their father Polonius than
his mother. They both respect Polonius's wishes.
- Polonius is concerned for the welfare of his two children; whereas Gertrude is
stepson as a threat to be violently removed.
- It is clear that Fortinbras respects the wishes of his uncle, who orders him not
- All three of the young men in these families are seeking to avenge the death o

**[42] Extended essay question: How does the main plot work together**
**to develop the themes and dramatic impact of the play?**

Reminder – the main plot and the subplots.

**The main plot:** Hamlet's desire to take revenge for the murder of his father by Clau

**The subplots:**

- ► The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia
- ► The political threat from Norway, with young Fortinbras threatening war
- ► Laertes' wish for revenge after his father, Polonius, is killed by Hamlet

All three of the subplots develop the 'revenge' theme in the play. This theme is see
involving Laertes' desire for revenge after Hamlet kills his father, Polonius. Althoug
killed Polonius by mistake (thinking it was Claudius behind the arras) Laertes does n
take swift revenge upon Hamlet is in direct contrast to Hamlet's hesitancy. Howeve
to be interpreted as weakness of character – he is unsure whether the ghost's story
Hamlet is genuine.

The threat from young Fortinbras to invade Denmark also contributes to the 'reven
taking revenge on the person who killed his father (i.e. old King Hamlet, who is alre
itself (i.e. the country of Denmark). The fact that Fortinbras can be persuaded by h

not to attack Denmark can be explained by the fact that Fortinbras is not taking rev in the case of Laertes, Fortinbras' preference for taking swift and violent action con thoughtful, questioning approach to his dilemma.

The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia has *some* connection with the reven Hamlet with the death of his sister. However, this subplot makes an important con Ophelia's genuine mental distress contrasts with Hamlet's madness, which to a larg directly associated with Hamlet: she is shocked by the death of her father, and is hu

**[43] Debate prompt: extended metaphor**

The metaphor creates a visual image which gives the meaning far more impact.

## Shakespeare's Use of Language: Indicative Conte

**[44] Extended essay question: Shakespeare's use of language in Haml Claudius praying (3.3.73–96)**

- This powerful soliloquy is notable for the directness and relative simplicity of t however, this adds to the impact of the passage. Hamlet is not speculating ab making a cold, calculating decision about how best to take his revenge.
- The blank verse structure is enhanced by a good deal of effective rhythmical v lines '*To heaven'* and '*No*' (3.3.78 and 87) allow both actor and audience a mo that Hamlet must choose to take – or to delay.
- Repetition of 'now' is used powerfully in the opening lines to emphasise the imm
- The figurative language, although relatively straightforward, has a fresh imme that when his father (old King Hamlet) was killed by Claudius, the old King was *bread… as flush* [lively] *as May'* (3.3.80–81). The image of Hamlet tripping Cla *heaven'* (3.3.93) – that is, so that he will not go to heaven – is also simple, but the audience or reader a picture of a potent monarch tumbled over in undigni
- The rhetorical questions posed by Hamlet in the passage successfully convey h is torn between the attractive option of killing Claudius immediately, or waitin prepared for his death.

**[45] Active learning task**

Personal response.

## Themes in *Hamlet*: Indicative Content

### Sexual relationships and attitudes

**[46] Debate prompt: Romeo and Juliet**

Juliet is portrayed as a much stronger and more independent and determined chara social attitudes shown in *Romeo and Juliet* – the expectation that Juliet should mar reinforce the attitudes towards women revealed in *Hamlet*. The difference is that w follows her own path.

**[47] Extended essay question: How relevant are the themes in Hamlet century) audience?**

The following themes can be identified in *Hamlet*, although it should be noted that themes: different critics have (at different times) identified other groupings. This is dealing with a wide range of profound issues.

- Mortality
- Madness
- Revenge
- Politics and power
- Sexual relationships and attitudes
- Corruption
- Appearance vs reality

The latter two themes are best seen as motifs which run through the play. Some p century audience are as follows.

**Mortality**

- A modern Western European audience is likely to be largely secular (that is, n However, this arguably makes Hamlet's speculations about the afterlife even m belief in a specific state of continuance after death then they are liable to sym Hamlet raises about the afterlife.
- Hamlet also links mortality (the inevitability of a person's death) with what he importance and worldly achievement. This is a relevant theme today, when m as acquisitive and materialistic Western culture.

**Madness**

- Mental health is a major issue in modern life, and the exploration of 'madness' (
and emotional distress or difficulties) in *Hamlet* is, therefore, of great interest. I
of Ophelia raises issues about how the isolated or pressurised young person ma

**Revenge**

- The 'revenge' theme in the play raises important moral and ethical issues for t
acceptability of violence (and the correct attitude of society towards it) and th
punishment are all explored through this theme.

**Politics and power**

- Modern Western politics is democratic (i.e. consensus is reached by majority o
and influence, and issues such as the acceptability (or otherwise) of spying up
relevant today.

**Sexual relationships and attitudes**

- Although Shakespeare would not have thought of *Hamlet* as raising important
between men and women in society, it is perfectly acceptable for a modern au
century perspective to the play. The relationship between Hamlet and Opheli
relationship between men and women in Elizabethan society. There are many
argue that there is *still* this relationship in modern society, and question to wh
verbal bullying of Ophelia might still be present in current relationships.
- Hamlet's repugnance at the overt sexuality which is seen in the relationship be
raises issues for the modern audience; for example, the acceptability (or other

# The Context of *Hamlet*

## Elizabethan drama

### [48] Active learning task: The Elizabethan Globe Theatre

| Some key features of the original Globe Theatre (Not a full list) | Feature (these apply to m |
|---|---|
| Stage covered but most of the audience sat in the open air | Audience sit indoors |
| Poor members of the audience would stand in the 'pit'. More than a thousand could be packed in. | Audience all have sea |
| Well-off theatregoers could sit in the three storey of galleried seating | Seats can be bought i give a raised view of t |
| Very important or rich people could sit on a chair on the edge of the stage | Audience not normall |
| Women were not allowed to be actors | Women actors allowe |
| Plays were performed in the afternoons to take advantage of daylight | Evening performance |
| Trapdoors gave access to a space beneath the stage and could be used for special effect, e.g. the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet* | Trapdoors still in use, |