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| Tara Anglican School for Girls |
| Module B - Hamlet |



Contents

[Context 3](#_Toc366867515)

[Characters 4](#_Toc366867516)

[Relationships – Love, Loyalty, Duty 4](#_Toc366867517)

[Hamlet/Old Hamlet 6](#_Toc366867518)

[Ophelia and Gertrude 11](#_Toc366867519)

[Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes and Fortinbras 15](#_Toc366867520)

[Claudius and Polonius 16](#_Toc366867521)

[Themes 17](#_Toc366867522)

[Justice 17](#_Toc366867523)

[Friendship 19](#_Toc366867524)

[Disillusionment 23](#_Toc366867525)

[Responses to Grief 25](#_Toc366867526)

[Action/ Inaction 27](#_Toc366867527)

[Death and Mortality 28](#_Toc366867528)

[Humanism/Existentialism 30](#_Toc366867529)

[Order/Chaos 32](#_Toc366867530)

[Duality/Doubling 34](#_Toc366867531)

[Religion 35](#_Toc366867532)

[Readings 37](#_Toc366867533)

[Feminist 37](#_Toc366867534)

# Context

1. Saxo Grammaticus
* Danish Historian
* Advisor to Valdemar I of Denmark
* Legend of Hamlet written in the third and fourth books of Gesta Danorum (completed at the beginning of the thirteenth century)
1. François de Bellefort
* French author, poet, and translator of the Renaissance
* Took inspiration from the Italian Matteo Bandello
* Translated and adapted the work into French
* English version was translated and published in 1608

*The story as given by Saxo Grammaticus and in Belleforest’s* ‘Histories Tragiques’ *is substantially the same (the part where he marries his widow is in this story – incestuous relationships added)*

1. Thomas Kyd
	* English dramatist, one of the most important figures of Elizabethan drama
	* Author of ‘The Spanish Tragedy’
	* Feature a play within a play and a vengeful ghost
	* Proposed as the possible author for Ur-Hamlet
	* Written in the late 1580s
2. Ur-Hamlet
	* Play of unknown author, featuring the character Hamlet
	* Well known through the 1590s (10 years before Shakespeare create Hamlet)
	* “Its author was doubtless attracted to the plot because it enabled him to use some of the popular ingredients of *The Spanish Tragedy”*
	* We may be reasonably sure that the author of the Ur-Hamlet, imitating *The Spanish Tragedy* invented the *Mousetrap*, the Ghost, the madness, and death of Ophelia
	* Whichever source the author of the Ur-Hamlet used, he would have found the germ of all the main characters, except Laertes – Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – as well as the basis for the feigned madness, and the interview with Ophelia
	* In *Ur-Hamlet*, the Queen apparently took positive steps to aid the Prince in his revenge, whereas in Shakespeare’s play she conceals her son’s secret and probably keeps herself from her husband’s bed, without doing anything more positive to assist her son.
	* Shakespeare’s Hamlet is based on lost play of same title
		+ Both include:
			- Ghosts demanding vengeance
			- Concern madness
		+ Puts on an *“antic disposition*” in this story as well

# Characters

## Relationships – Love, Loyalty, Duty

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|  | Hamlet |
| Claudius | * Unrelenting pursuit of the truth – Hamlet uses a façade to uncover the truth of his father’s murder without arousing suspicion from Claudius

*antic disposition”* paradoxically highlights how his relationship with Claudius is based on lies* Hamlet becomes mad due to failure to act upon the ghost’s information, his inability to inflict revenge on Claudius
* Significant male role model despite his negative influence (e.g. Hamlet becomes hypocritical because of Claudius’s murder)
 |
| Laertes | * Action vs. inaction
* Forces Hamlet into action, he is Hamlet’s foil. Shakespeare uses him as a contrast to Hamlet. Fortinbras is also a foil to Hamlet’s character, although the relationship is not directly expressed by Shakespeare.
* Doubling is used to demonstrate their relationship.
 |
| Gertrude | * Gertrude has a negative influence upon Hamlet, but it should be positive. Through lack of maternal support and her quick marriage her actions force Hamlet to question important moral truths, which are inverted through her infidelity. This creates a mistrust of women.
* Parents should behave as role models, but Hamlet is/feels betrayed. Gertrude, as a female, should protect and fulfil a maternal role. She remarries quickly in order to provide Hamlet with a father figure.
* Thus, Gertrude is seen as weak as she feels she needs someone to lead/control her
* As a result Hamlet distrusts women and this is why Hamlet associates Ophelia as inferior, prominent in the nunnery scene.
 |
| Ghost | * *Positive experience:* Hamlet is exposed to the truth, rather than him endlessly searching for answers.
* *Negative experience:* Hamlet feels obligated to avenge his father’s murder. The ghost accentuates the doubt he feels about the corruption in the world. It may be considered that the ghost causes Hamlet’s madness by emphasising his indecisiveness and inability to act, causing his ultimate downfall.
* *Influences values:* the ghost’s appearance in the play initiates request for action and retribution.
	+ Conflict between duty and values. Avenging his father vs. his personal/religious/moral values.
	+ The ghost’s revelation results in Hamlet’s revenge, madness and anger towards others. The ghost’s attitude towards life/death/characters/himself alters Hamlet’s own. E.g. The ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy, negative attitude between Ophelia and Gertrude as well as scolding himself after watching the players.
 |
| Ophelia  | * *Negative influence:* Ophelia’s rejection and death impacts greatly upon Hamlet. He would have been deeply affected – even when in a right state of mind – but due to his circumstances Ophelia is detrimental to his sanity.
* If Ophelia wasn’t a victim to manipulation their relationship wouldn’t have failed, and the subsequent relationship would have been positive for Hamlet.
* Their relationship was Hamlet’s last straw of hope but her dismissal causes his internal destruction.
 |

## Hamlet/Old Hamlet

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| **Quotes** | **Analysis** |
| “Seems madam? I know not seems” | * Jibe toward Gertrude that demonstrates the distaste Hamlet feels at the speed she married Claudius and moved on
* Believes himself to be of a moral high ground.
* Hamlet despises the theatrics and façade that Gertrude and the others put on.
 |
| *“O that this too too solid flesh would melt.”* | * Metaphor for dying 🡪 solid flesh (body)
* Sullied/Solid 🡪 Hamlet’s flesh has been defiled, when he was wronged by Claudius
* Asceticism: “A person who dedicates their life to a pursuit of contemplative ideals and practices extreme self-denial and mortification”
 |
|  *“Or that the everlasting had not fixed/ His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter.”* | * 6th Commandment 🡪 “thou shalt not kill”
	+ Gertrude and Claudius’ marriage is worse than murder
	+ He compares himself to them by portraying himself as more moral
* Wants to die, but God does not allow it
	+ Therefore he won’t do it 🡪morality
 |
| “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/ Seems to me the ways of this world!/ Fie on’t, ah fie, ‘tis an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature” | * The world lacks meaning
* *“Unweeded garden”*
	+ Garden = Society (Claudius)
	+ The court is infected by ‘weeds’
	+ Fertile, continues to grow
	+ Foreshadows Hamlet attempting to ‘weed’ the garden of immoral people – moral high ground
 |
| “Hyperion to a satyr” | * Hyperion 🡪 One of the twelve titans. God of light and the sun
* Satyr 🡪 Half-human, half-god
* Hamlet is the ‘Hyperion’, Claudius ‘satyr’
	+ Comparing Hamlet and Claudius as he does in Act 3 Scene 4- duty to his father to portray him positively
	+ It is possible that his father’s murder has left him with very fond memories of him (even if they did not get along well when he was alive) as he feels that sense of duty and comparison to Claudius (idea of not knowing what you have until its gone)
 |

Act 2, Scene 1

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| “My father’s brother, but no more like my father/ Than I to Hercules” | * Hercules
	+ Greek demi-god
	+ Zeus – father (King Hamlet)
	+ Mother is mortal (Gertrude?)
	+ Famous for strength, masculinity, and independence
* Juxtaposition between King Hamlet and Claudius
	+ King Hamlet is like Zeus, and Claudius is nothing in comparison to him
* Could also be a comparison to himself- he could be showing that he is nothing special, as he is implying that he could not be the son of Hercules – perhaps has a low opinion of himself
 |

Act 3, Scene 1 – To be or not to be

* This soliloquy establishes Hamlet’s characterisation as a detached, reflective, analytical and moral character
* Shows his complete existential angst (frustration with existence)
* As well as existentialism, explores themes of death and revenge
* Shows he is variably unlike the active, simple minded figures of Old Hamlet, Fortinbras and his son and the rash Laertes
* He feels weighted by the ghost’s charge of revenge

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| **Quote** | **Analysis** |
| *“To be or not to be”* | Metaphor 🡪 For Hamlet at the time, is a very important question, literally one of “life” and “death”* Hamlet boils down the issue to its most simple yet abstract form
 |
| *“take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them”* | Metaphor* Hamlet is deliberately confused 🡪 captures these feelings of being unequal to the task that has been assigned to him
 |
| *“bear the whips and scorns of time”* | * Hamlet associates life with pain and struggle
* He derives no pleasures from life, rather likens it to that of physical conflict
 |
| *”to die, to sleep; to sleep perchance to dream”**“undiscover’d country”* | * Hamlet contrastingly associates death with peace and escape
* “sleep” carries connotations of inaction and rest 🡪 relaxing imagery portrays his association with death as the ultimate release
* But ultimately it is the ambiguity of that which conflicts with Hamlet’s initial desire for suicide
 |
| *“thus conscience does make cowards of us all”* | * Mystery and fear keeps humans alive
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| Structure and form* Hamlet speaks eloquently in iambic pentameter, though at times proceeds to a halt mid-sentence 🡪 these interruptions convey Hamlet’s internal dilemma
* The structure of the soliloquy has a dejected uniformity of tone and tempo
	+ It serves as a powerful, dramatic contrast to the passionate exchanges which follow (“nunnery” scene with Ophelia)
 |
| To note* Hamlet never uses words like “I” or “me” 🡪 rather reflects generally on how tempting it is to try and escape the wretched human condition
* There is no mention of the ghost, of the play about to be performed or his mother’s betrayal 🡪 everything is generalised into a bleak philosophical consideration of the popular Renaissance theme of whether humans’ troublesome life is worth living
 |

Act 3, Scene 1 – Ophelia and Hamlet

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| **Quotes** | **Analysis** |
| *“That if you be honest and fair your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty”*“for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd” | * Honest 🡪 chaste (Hamlet defines as a male trait)
* Attempting to establish gender conventions (?)
* Hamlet believes to be beautiful is to be honest. Physical attributes do not mean much to him in comparison
* To be beautiful is to be superficial

Taunts her in order to discover the truth (if she is being honest or someone has put her up to it) |
| *“Get thee to a nunnery”* | * Hamlet commands Ophelia to a nunnery. He comments on society’s flaws, and says people like Ophelia should be removed from society so they cannot tarnish humanity further.
* Two possible reasons:

1. To control her lust and move her taint away from society 2. Nunnery = brothel 🡪 moving her to where she really belongs |
| “Virtue cannot inoculate our old stock” | No amount of virtue can hide what is in your blood/ the traits of humanity |
| “I have heard of your paintings too” | * Accuses Ophelia of being duplicitous
 |
| *“the fair Ophelia! Nymph…”**“I loved you not”* | * He feigns indifference after she returns his letters
 |
| Ophelia“Oh what noble mind here is o’erthrown”“Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state” “Glass of fashion” | * Insight into his old self (Genuine? Or tainted by Ophelia’s love?)
* Courtier 🡪 polite, knows how to act
* Scholar 🡪 smart
* Soldier 🡪 has military training
 |
| *“marry a fool for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them”* | * Angered towards her as she turns away his love, the only relationship which was ‘real’ and ‘true’ to him had fallen apart
 |
| Significance of Hamlet’s prose* Signifies madness and anger
	+ Hamlet’s anger escalates as he witnesses the pity of others, especially Ophelia
	+ He is very self-aware despite his ‘madness’
* He attempts to test Ophelia
* Blunt and commanding
 |

Act 3, Scene 4 – The Bedchamber Scene

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| **Technique** | **Quotes** | **Analysis** |
| Imperative,commanding tone | *“Come, come and sit you down, you shall not budge. You shall not till / I set you up a glass”* | Hamlet attempts to show Gertrude the grievances she has caused him |
| Sensory imagery | * *“Have you eyes?”*
* *“O Hamlet, speak no more:Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;And there I see such black and grainéd spotsAs will not leave their tinct.”*
* *“rank sweat of an enseamèd bed”*
 |
| Bestial imagery | * *“nasty sty”*
* Act 1, Scene 2:*“A beast that wants discourse of reasoning”*
 | * Hamlet views his mother as an animal
 |
| Questioning | * *“What judgement / Would step from this to this?”*
* *“Have you eyes?”*
 | * Insulting of Gertrude and increases Hamlet’s incredulous tone
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| Mythology | * *“Look here upon this picture, and on this / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers”*
 | * Mythological figures used to juxtapose King Hamlet and Claudius
	+ Jove -> king of the Roman gods
	+ Mars -> god of war
	+ Mercury -> the winged messenger
 |
| Stichomythia | *“Now, mother, what’s the matter?”* *“Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.”**“Mother, you have my father much offended.”**“Come, come, you answer with a wicked tongue.”**“Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.”* | * Alternate lines of verse, indicative of a violent dispute. Effective due to the rhythmic intensity and conjunct statements
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| **Quotes** | **Analysis** |
| *“I do repent, but heaven hath pleased it so”* | * Fate
 |
| The Arrival of the Ghost*“This visitation / Is to whet thy almost blunted purpose”**“Do you not come you tardy son to chide”* | * The ghost appears to berate Hamlet for his inaction and treatment of Gertrude
	+ Metaphor -> whet a blade
	+ Significant choice of metaphor, blades are used to kill
* Hamlet knows he has been lax
 |
| Madness*“It is not madness / that I have uttered.”* | * Gertrude claims the ghost was “coinage” of Hamlet’s brain
* Throughout the rest of the scene Hamlet speaks in prose, yet in this verse he speaks in verse, indicating the falsity of his madness
* Hamlet reveals his true self to women (Gertrude and Ophelia)
 |
| Freudian Reading* Oedipus complex, a term coined by Sigmund Freud (20th century philosopher)
* Based on the Greek mythological character, Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother
* Freud theorised that in adolescent development, sons are jealous of the love the father has for their mother
* It may be interpreted that Hamlet has a ‘repressed sexual urge for his mother’, demonstrated by the physicality and intensity of this scene
 |

## Ophelia and Gertrude

**Ophelia**

Hamlet and Ophelia

* Relationship founded on a love that is poisoned by external influences (in Hamlet’s eyes)
	+ Polonius has a very strong influence
	+ Ophelia is influenced by politicsand family 🡪 she is ruined by influence of father and his political status
* Hamlet's misogynystems from rejection
* Marriage
	+ Hamlet’s struggle may be seen through Ophelia’s betrayal: his disgusted attitude toward marriage
	+ Marriage turned into power struggle 🡪declaration of love is corrupted.
* Flower motif
	+ Represents the beauty of Ophelia before she becomes tainted
	+ Presents idea of youth and innocence being corrupted.
* Ophelia
	+ Is manipulated by her father and abused by Hamlet
	+ Exhibits dignity, intelligence and sensitivity.Her madness is real (juxtaposed with Hamlet)
		- By Hamlet feigning madness he creates Ophelia’s madness, and takes a life
		- Ophelia’s madness is a tragic break down of a complete innocent🡪result of the repression of her identity and her sexuality.Her madness is proof of her loss of innocence.
	+ Offers insight into Hamlet’strue character. She indicates his previous qualities and how these change
	+ Dilemma: Should Ophelia remain obedient to her father, or be loyal to lover? 🡪 forces her into madness
	+ Her rejection and marginalisation provokes sympathy
	+ Ophelia’s death representsthe plight of women oppressed by a patriarchal society
	+ She is an innocent pawn who is sacrificed during the course of the larger drama taking place around her
* Hamlet believed the institution of marriage (and love within it) is impure and corrupt when the relationship becomes a struggle for power. His unequivocal statement “*there shall be no more marriages”* recognises his hatred of the superficiality of such a union. The restriction of marriage constricts love until its purity is lost.

Love and the effect it has on relationships

* Impacted by corruption
* Hamlet feels Ophelia is far too influenced by father. Hamlet’s question *“ where is your father?*” indicates he recognises Polonius’ influence in her life
* Hamlet’s repetition of *‘get thee to a nunnery’* reflects his hatred of a corrupt society from which he wishes to shelter her, as it is the corrupt nature of Elsinore which ruined their relationship, and he doesn’t want her to be with anyone else.
* Hamlet accuses Ophelia of having multiple identities:

Hamlet: *‘‘God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another’*

* Shakespeare uses metaphor (making, costume) to clearly highlight how Hamlet perceives Ophelia as having a changed identity
* Shakespeare has further emphasised this identity change through the repetition of ‘see’ and ‘seen’ 🡪 superficiality

Familial and Political Obligations

* “*I loved you not”* represents his plan to alienate and isolate Ophelia so that she does not become collateral damage in his murderous plan for revenge
* Ophelia has a great deal of respect for her father and unquestioningly obeys his instructions
* Ophelia is influenced by both political and family ties, specifically to her father and his political status, which Hamlet identifies by the comment *“ where is your father”* which indicated he knows the influence Polonius has in her life
* Ophelia is torn between being a dutiful lover or a dutiful daughter. Polonius tells Ophelia “*Do not believe his vows for they are brokers*”. She responds with “*I shall obey, my Lord*”.
	+ This is ironic as Polonius is also a ‘*broker*’ of promises who manipulates his daughter to spy on Hamlet
	+ Shakespeare’s depiction of Ophelia is the perfect example of an obedient daughter in the 16th and 17th centuries who must obey her father’s rules.
* Hamlet struggles with Ophelia’s betrayal, evident through the quote*“virtue cannot inoculate out old stock”*🡪 represents his inability to love Ophelia due to her attachment to the corrupt royal institution

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| **Ophelia & Hamlet** | **Technique** | **Evidence** | **Effect** |
| Betrayal | Questioning | *“Where’s your father?”* | He knows now that Polonius is spying on him and Ophelia. He feels betrayed and angry, adding to his distrust and change in view of women  |
| Rhyming couplet | *“noble mind… prove unkind”* | As if it were rehearsed speech 🡪 sounds unnatural and nervous in the ears of Hamlet and he is suspicious |
| Disillusionment with women, misogyny | High modality | *“Get thee to a nunnery… why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners”* | Urges Ophelia to go to nunnery, saving her from becoming an immoral woman and “*breeder of sinners*”He sees women as ‘evil’ |
|  | Religious context |  | Ophelia was not given a Christian burial as people committing suicide were believed to go straight to hell |

**Gertrude**

* Hamlet is disgusted by his mother’s actions🡪she causes his disillusionment in regards to women
* She lives obediently from king to king. Her need for self-preservation and advancement means she relies on men
* Gertrude causes Hamlet to question his ideas on love. This leads him to become disillusioned and disconnect from the institutions of royal governance and marriage (and the corruption within them)
* Act 3 Scene 4 – The Closet Scene
* Animalistic imagery *(“a beast, that wants discourse for reason”)*indicates Hamlet’s belief that even a creature incapable of speech could mourn longer than Gertrude did for her husband
* Hamlet exploits Gertrude’s faults through quick, cynical dialogue, reflecting the anger and disdain Hamlet has for his mother and her actions
* *“look here upon this picture, the counterfeit presentment of two brothers”*🡪symbol of the contrast between Claudius and Old Hamlet, highlighting Claudius’ foul nature “*Hyperion to a satyr*” and the corruption which has infested Elsinore. This is perceived to be as a result of Gertrude’s betrayal.
* Sensory imagery 🡪*“have you eyes?”*Hamlet yearns to explain to Gertrude her wrongdoings
* Freudian reading: Shakespeare portrays Hamlet with the same behaviours and frustrations that Freud describe, called the *Oedipus complex*
	+ A child’s desire for their parent of the opposite sex, and their jealousy and anger toward their parent of the same sex, as they feel they are competingfor possession
* Interest in Gertrude’s sexuality seen through vivid and visceral imagery*“in the sweat of an enseaméd bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty”* 🡪 presents Hamlet’s distaste in her actions
* Director Laurence Oliver in his 1948 film - closet scene Hamlet presses onto Gertrude in an overly sexual way

The betrayal of Ophelia leads Hamlet to demonstrate misogyny, causing Ophelia’s demise. This is noted by Gertrude when describing Ophelia’s death:  *“When down her weedy trophies and herself. Fell in the weeping brook”.*

* Shakespeare has utilized imagery to portray a hopeless and deserving death.
* ‘Weedy’ is symbolic of self-neglect. Shakespeare metaphorically portrays her incident as ‘accidental’, seen with the verb, ‘fell’.
* This use of anti-climax diminishes her unethical action of suicide.
* One may see this symbolically demonstrates Ophelia’s identity was easily influenced, which did affect with her relationship with Hamlet as she was mentally displaced.

**Context – Subordination of Women**

* 'Hamlet' reflects the subordinate position of women in Elizabethan England
* Husbands and father strictly controlled the lives of wives and daughters
* Indirect judgement by Shakespeare of Queen Elizabethan due to this negative characterisation of women
* Ophelia lectured by her father and brother; she is to obey them "my lord" is used constantly in their conversation
* Like most Elizabethan women, she is regarded as a man's possession. "I'll lose my daughter to him" he says as is she is his possession to "[lease]"

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| **Gertrude & Hamlet** | **Technique** | **Evidence** | **Effect** |
| Disillusionment with women  | Metaphor | *“A beast… would have mourned longer” (1,ii)* | This shows Hamlet’sdisappointment and disgust towards his mother for her hasty remarriage with her brother-in-law and his uncle, Claudius. |
|  | *“Frailty, thy name is woman”* | Shows signs of misogyny in Hamlet, however in the context of Shakespearian times, it shows subordination of women, social “frailty”🡪 no power |
|  | *“most seeming virtuous queen”* | Old Hamlet🡪 raises question to Hamlet and to the audience as to whether Gertrude was having an affair with brother-in-lawUse of word “seems” highlights the uncertainty of appearance within Elsinore |
| Hamlet’s comparison of Old Hamlet to Claudius | High modality and shift in tense | *“This was your husband… here is your husband”* | Further emphasises Hamlet disapproval of her rapid marriage to Claudius |
| Quotes from Act 3, Scene 4 | Simile | *“here is your husband, like a mildewed ear”* | His insults towards Claudius- comparison to an infected ear-in this scene emphasises disgust toward GertrudeAlso references the death of Old Hamlet through poison in the ear |
| Imagery | *“stews in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty”* | Heightens disgust and disappointment in Gertrude“nasty sty” sty sound is unpleasant 🡪can be related to the unpleasantness of her “incest” |

## Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes and Fortinbras

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| **Character** | **Points** | **Textual Evidence** |
| Rosencrantz and Guildenstern | * Exploited by those of a higher power
* Manipulated by Claudius and does not listen to Hamlet 🡪 leads to downfall
* Their relationship is aesthetic, for their own personal gain
	+ The society is competitive and encourages disloyalty 🡪immoral society
* Predictable, easy targets
* They turn on Hamlet🡪Hamlet is disillusioned by the fact his friends turn on him so easily
 | * *“To be demanded of a sponge…*

*That soaks up the king’s countenance…**His rewards, his authorities…**Squeezing you…**You shall be dry again.”** *“Tis as easy as lying, govern these ventages with your finger and thumb”*
* *“Such bugs and goblins in my life”*
 |
| Polonius | * Older generation
* Comic character? – he is a fool
 | *“’mobled queen…”* (Hamlet)*‘Oh that’s good, ‘mobled queen is good’”* (Polonius)🡪 Hamlet is mocking Polonius  |
| Laertes | * Deliberate foil/juxtaposition to Hamlet
* Action man
* Hasty and Decisive
* Over- protective of Ophelia
 | * *"To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil! ... I'll be revenged most thoroughly for my father."*🡪 Action: high modality language
* *“Hold off the world a while till I have caught her once in mine arms.”*🡪 Laertes and Hamlet are in the grave fighting
 |
| Fortinbras | * Willing to die for an *“egg shell”*
	+ Hamlets soliloquy (4.4.45)
* Mirror to himself – Hamlet is the coward in comparison
* Hamlet feels he needs to do bloody deeds to feel any worth.
* Sacrifice lives for their duty
* In the end is given land- honourable
* Highlights contrast of Shakespeare’s tragic play to traditional classical tragic form
 | * *“To all that fortune, death, and danger dare, even for an eggshell.”*
* *“Oh, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!”*
* *“I do prophesy the election lights on Fortinbras. He has my dying voice”*
 |

## Claudius and Polonius

**Polonius**

* Polonius can be played either as a clown, a wise fool, or a scheming conniver with the support of the text
* When he is characterised as evil, it takes away from the Claudius’ character, but a fool who loves to plot and scheme and propose theories leaves Claudius’ full villainy intact
* Although usually played as a figure of fun, a doddering old fool, he has been clever enough to survive as first minister to Old Hamlet and Claudius, no mean tight-rope feat
	+ Peter Hall’s describes him as ‘a man who sends himself up and uses silly humour as a weapon’.

*Tony Church* on playing Polonius:

* + *The “Establishment” against which Hamlet ranged himself was well-nigh impregnable, and Polonius was its epitome. Sexual curiosity was the driving force. Now the Polonius of this production was an oppressive Victorian style paterfamilias, who held his daughter on a tight rein and lectured his son: but the underbelly of Victorian life was sexually vicious, and the comparison seemed to hold. The heavy, moralizing father wanted the details of Hamlet’s behaviour of Ophelia, and of Laertes’ escapades in the brothels in Paris. Sexual prurience was a source of energy within the character of Polonius.*
	+ *After the exchange* "What do you read my lord?", "Words, words, words", *Polonius asks,* "What is the matter, my lord?"*Hamlet, deliberately misunderstanding, replies “*Between whom?” “I mean the matter that you read, my lord”*, says Polonius, laughing as if to say,* “I know you are mocking me”*, so the noise of the laughter was weary and patronising. After the reference to the ‘Crab’ going ‘backward’, Polonius’ aside,* “Though this be madness, yet there’s method in’t”*, meant ‘He cannot fool me.’ The watchword was, as Humpty Dumpty said, ‘Impenetrability’.*
	+ *The contradictions make up a fully-realised character.*
* Note that, although Hamlet is peculiarly indifferent about killing Claudius, the deaths of Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bring out a show of callousness in him.
* Critics writing about Polonius usually try to resolve or explain away what they see as contradictions in his character, but these contradictions may be purposeful devices used by Shakespeare to enliven the Hamlet character.His chameleon nature is vital.

**Claudius**

* He must always be leading others away from his means of ascension through the convolution of pomp and circumstance. By constructing the façade of perfect royalty he hopes to escape the consequences of his actions, but he discovers that “*the mask of kingship grows roots*” into the wearer’s face.
* Kingship takes on a life of its own: Claudius’ statement to Laertes, “*there’s such divinity doth hedge a king/ That treason can but peep to what it would*” (4.5 138-140) may reflect his dawning awareness that man and office are one. His options for saving his own life become limited to what propriety and custom dictate him. His goal becomes keeping those around him from knowing too much.
* Every time Hamlet speaks of Claudius, it is in the most violent language indicative of deep disgust of the worst villain that ever smiled in Denmark.

# Themes

## Justice

* Revenge
	+ *“the serpent that did sting thy father’s life now wears his crown“* (King Hamlet)

The metaphoric reference to the biblical snake in the Garden of Eden has connotations of deceit and poison,highlighting Claudius’ immoral usurpation of the throne.

* + - Shakespeare was writing this within a time of political intrigue 🡪 influence of context upon the work
	+ *“and so have I a noble father lost…”* (Laertes)

Laertes is a foil, represents a contrasting approach to revenge

* + - *“what would you undertake to show yourself indeed your fathers son more than in words?...to cut his throat i’th church”*🡪 a complete opposite to Hamlet, exemplifies the fact that he is what Hamlet should be, he responds with action
		- His idea of seeking justice is following through with violent revenge, which is what was expected of Hamlet. However, Hamlet has been overwhelmed with moral dilemma and his new approach and rationality in regards to justice is what hinders his action.
	+ Hamlet must be the one to administer revenge, thus delivering his moral perception (he believes he has the moral high ground over all the other characters)
		- *‘thou be a breeder of sinners’, ‘get thee to a nunnery’*🡪 showing his own moral beliefs
		- HOWEVER, he is also conflicted about his own plight and his actions toward Claudius 🡪 he is confused about the differences between what is ‘just’ and what is ‘moral’. Shakespeare highlights the complexity of the human condition, and the innate human confusion about the idea of morality
		- The Renaissance involved a crisis between the whole and the individual, between the expected opinions and feelings, and the personal opinions and feelings🡪 humanism
		- Conflict of Religion is also shown in Hamlet’s indecision- reflecting societal shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, and Shakespeare’s reference to purgatory and the religious implications of murder
* Moral dilemma and moral correctness
	+ Hamlet uses logic to be rational and to be sure of the guilt of Claudius
		- Meta-theatre serves as Hamlet’s own way to find evidence and proof
	+ *“retched rash intruding fool”*🡪 amygdala (the part of the brain involved in the emotions of fear and aggression) hijacking. Flight or fight.
		- Hamlet’s emotions take over when dealing with Gertrude 🡪 his guise of logic is partially lost
	+ Shakespeare seeks to show the false dichotomy of morality in justice. Shakespeare demonstrates how neither of these ways provide satisfaction
		- [Action vs.inaction]
		- William Hazlitt: *“This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history… He is the prince of philosophical speculators.”*
	+ Hamlet is the modern man, in terms of his attitudes toward justice and his rejection of religious beliefs
		- Frank Kermode in Shakespeare’s Language, 2000:*“but none much like Hamlet ever existed before… to take him as the herald of a new age is neither idolatrous nor hyperbolical. In this new age we need not expect matters to be made easy for us”*
* Loyalty
	+ Gertrude’sinconsideration of Hamlet is unjust
		- *“two months dead, nay not so much, not two”*🡪 This distain is demonstrated in the repetition which emphasizes the disillusionment of his shattered ideal of his mother
		- *“oh god, a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer”*🡪 imagery equates Gertrude with a beast, lower than animals on the chain of being
			* *“but break my heart, for I must hold my tongue”*🡪 the effect of this betrayal upon Hamlet
		- *“the freshly baked funeral meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage table”* 🡪 comparison between the ‘freshly baked meats’ and ‘coldly furnish’ have a sarcastic tone which highlight Hamlet’s feelings
		- *“H: Hamlet, thou hast my father much offended.
		G: Mother, you have my father much offended.
		G: come, come you answer with and idled tongue
		H: Go, go, you answer with a wicked tongue”*
			* The stichomythia 🡪 highlights the clash and contrast between views in regards to Hamlet’s feelings towards his mother. The contrast between views may contribute to his delay in achieving justice. Hamlet is critical of Gertrude’s unjust treatment of King Hamlet’s death, and her “*o’er hasty marriage*” to Claudius.
		- Was Gertrude’s death just?
			* To a Shakespearean audience, her sexual perversions would have been reflective of the negative perception of female sexuality
				+ *“incestuous sheets”* etc.
			* However, modern interpretations of Gertrude see her as being a victim of Claudius’ deception, and her death was more tragic than just.

## Friendship

* Hamlet and Rosencrantz & Guildenstern
* Claudius and Polonius
* Hamlet and Laertes
* Hamlet and Horatio

**Hamlet and Rosencrantz & Guildenstern**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quote**  | **Analysis** |
| *“Heavens make our presence and our practices pleasant and helpful to him”***(G to Claudius and Gertrude)*** **Act 2 scene 2**
 | * R & G act as *“excellent good friends”*, helping Hamlet in a time of need, to provide him with a *“remedy”.*
* The use of alliteration of the ‘h’ and the ‘p’ explores the notion of their loyalty within their friendship with Hamlet. This influences the audience’s initial perception of R &G as helpful, heartfelt, caring friends.
 |
| *“My honoured lord! /My most dear lord!”***(R & G to Claudius)*** **Act 2 scene 2 lines 215-216**
 | * R & G sycophantic behaviours are evident through the use of sycophantic language where it is obvious that “we both obey” yet they adore the new King Claudius. There further obeying of Claudius corruptive tendencies, and plan to reveal the truth behind Hamlet’s *“crafty madness”* and *“antic disposition”* reflect their disloyalty towards him and his manipulative ways.
 |
| *“Foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”***(Hamlet to R)*** **Act 2 scene 2 line 285**
 | * Hamlet’s use of highly emotive language to emphasise his distaste for his world, as he is aware of his friends disloyal behaviours and that he will not be “played upon”.
 |
| *“To be demanded a sponge”***(Hamlet to R)*** **Act 4 scene 2**
 | * The metaphor here suggests that Hamlet has lost all trust in R & G’s friendship as they are as vulnerable and naïve as a sponge who takes in and obey to anything the king demands of them.
 |

**Claudius and Polonius**

* Polonius is Claudius’s advisor
* Polonius is a distrusting, disloyal, cynical, selfish and foolish man
* Polonius is loyal to Claudius but he is foolish and insensitive

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quote** | **Analysis** |
| “To thine own self be true”**(Polonius to Laertes)*** **Act 1 scene 3 line 78**

*“More matter with less art”* **(Gertrude to Polonius)*** **Act 2 scene 2 line 95**

*“Though this be madness, yet there be method in it”***(Polonius – aside)****Act 2 scene 2 lines 200-201** | * Polonius is a crafty man who has perfected the arts of protecting his interests and of projecting seeming virtues. (His belief in being “true” to himself and others). However contradicts himself by spying on Hamlet for King Claudius.
* Polonius announces that he will tell king Claudius about Hamlet’s so called madness and *“ecstasy of love”*
* Polonius traps his daughter, conspiring with Claudius
* Polonius and Claudius conspire together to figure out Hamlet and try to remove him
* Claudius tells Polonius that he has decided to send Hamlet on a mission to England
* Polonius informs Claudius that Hamlet is about to speak to his mother
* Polonius just wants praise from Claudius, and for him to think he is a useful person in his plan
* Polonius and Claudius – *“Lawful espials”* - carry out their plan to watch hamlet while he speaks with Ophelia.
 |

**Hamlet and Laertes**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quote** | **Analysis** |
| *“To hell, allegiance… I’ll be revenged most thoroughly for my father”***(Laertes to Claudius)** * **Act 4 scene 5 line 132**

*“Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift/**As meditation of the thoughts or love,/may sweep to my revenge”***(Hamlet to Ghost)*** **Act 1 scene 5 lines 29-31**
 | * Parallel of Laertes as a foil to Hamlet
* Laertes and Hamlet both commonly have their father murdered.
* Though they both have murdered fathers, their attitudes towards the situation differ as Hamlet is hesitant to take action and Laertes takes a more strong-willed approach.
 |
| *“My lord, I will be ruled”***(Laertes to Claudius)*** **Act 4 scene 7 line66**
 | * Laertes is vulnerable, naïve and easily manipulated by Claudius
 |
| *“Your skill shall like a star I’th’darkest night”***(Hamlet to Laertes)*** **Act 5 scene 2 line 227**
 | * With this line, they prepare for their fight.
 |
| “I loved Ophelia”**(Hamlet to Gertrude)*** **Act 5 scene 1 line 236**

“Hope off the earth awhile/ ill I have caught her once more in mine arms”**(Laertes to Hamlet)*** **Act 5 scene 1 lines 216-217**
 | * Common love for Ophelia: Although Laertes and Hamlet are in conflict, they both share love for Ophelia, and are protective of Ophelia
 |
| *“Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet”***(Laertes to Hamlet)*** **Act 5 scene 2 line 308**

*“I am justly killed with my own treachery”***(Laertes to Osric)** * **Act 5 scene 2 line 287**
 | * Attitudes and perceptions of each other: Laertes and Hamlet throughout the play are very conflicting towards and at the end of the play they hit a mutual acceptance of each other’s purpose
 |

**Hamlet and Horatio**

* One constant companion who Hamlet trusts and confides in
* Horatio has a genuine concern for Hamlet’s safety (shown when he tried to tell him not to follow the ghost)
* Horatio is rational and sensible compared to hamlet, making him rely on Horatio

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quote** | **Analysis** |
| “Deprive your sovereignty of reason, and draw you into madness”**(Horatio to Hamlet)*** **Act 1 scene 4 lines 73-74**
 | * Horatio is the only person who knows that Hamlet is faking his insanity, highlighting Hamlet’s trust in
 |
| “Here’s yet some liquor left” **(Horatio to Hamlet)*** **Act 5 scene 2 line 321**
 | * Here the extent of Horatio’s love for Hamlet is made evident, as he is willing to take his own life with Hamlet’s. Yet Hamlet stops him *“give me the cup”* and pursues him to stay alive as Horatio *“has my dying voice”*
 |
| “In his harsh world draw thy breath in pain to tell my story”**(Hamlet to Horatio)*** **Act 5 scene 2 lines 27-28**
 | * Trusts him to tell his story and the entire truth after his death. This reveals the strong bond that Hamlet shared with Horatio when Hamlet was still alive and emphasises Horatio’s loyalty to him.
 |
| “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince”**(Horatio to Hamlet)*** **Act 5 scene 2 line 338**
 | * Horatio here is saying goodbye to his friend, Hamlet. He is the only person in the play who understands Hamlet's *"noble heart”* and the only person who can now reveal the truth to the state of Denmark.
* Horatio sends Hamlet to heaven in peace
 |

## Disillusionment

**Disillusionment with Mortality (Act 3, Scene 1)**

* Quotes
	+ *“to be or not to be, that is the question”* (rhetorical question)
	+ *“to die, to sleep”* (repetition)
	+ *“for who could bear the whips and scorns of time”*
* Analysis
	+ Questioning the value of life demonstrates his disappointment with the outcome of life
	+ Contemplating suicide (through pauses) his uncertainty about mortality becomes clear
	+ Hamlet’s belief that why would you live when you could die demonstrates his disappointment/disillusionment with life
	+ Hamlet continually questioning the meaning of life makes us conscious about our own mortality

**Betrayal Leads to Disillusionment**

* Gertrude’s betrayal of old king Hamlet
	+ *“could you on this fair mountain leave to feed and batten on this moor”*
	+ *“leave her to heaven, and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge”*
	+ Hamlet is disappointed with Gertrude’s marriage and is disillusioned seen through his comparison between Claudius and old king Hamlet
* Claudius betrayal of Old King Hamlet
	+ *“revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”*
	+ *“Ay, that incestuous adulterate beast”*
	+ Hamlet’s feeling that Old King Hamlet has been betrayed by Gertrude has led to his disappointment with Gertrude
* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
	+ *“to lay our service freely at your feet to be commanded”*
	+ The murder of Old King Hamlet has led to disillusionment which is ignited by the ghosts message for revenge which leads to Hamlet’s struggle with revenge and his disappointment/disillusionment with his inability to carry out the revenge
	+ R&G betrayal of Hamlet leads to Hamlets disillusionment which is demonstrated in his actions to have R&G killed when delivering the letter to England

**Ophelia Disillusioned by Hamlet**

* Quotes*“his will is not his own, for he himself is subject to his own birth”*
	+ *“or lose your heart, or you chaste treasure open”*
	+ *“he hath importuned me with love”*
	+ *“think yourself a baby that you have ta’en these tenders for true pay, which are not sterling”* – Polonius
	+ “*My lord, he hath importuned me with love in honourable fashion….. and hath given countenance to his speech, my lord, with almost all the holy vows of heaven”* – Ophelia
	+ *“his will is not his own, for he himself is subject to his own birth”* – Laertes
	+ *“lady, shall I lay in your lap?”… “I mean, my head upon your lap”*
	+ *“ get thee to a nunnery”* - repetition
	+ *“wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them”*
	+ *“pray for you, love, remember”*
* Polonius and Laertes warn Ophelia that Hamlet will not love her forever and leave her when he becomes king but Ophelia defends him – but Ophelia is soon disillusioned by Hamlet
* Hamlet betrays Ophelia and insults her numerous of times – Ophelia is highly disappointed by Hamlet and disillusioned by Hamlet – leads to her own madness and death

**Lack of Knowledge Leads to Self-Disillusionment**

* Quotes
	+ *“but me revenge will come”*
	+ *“like-a-John a dream unpregnant of my cause and can say nothing at all”*
	+ *“… some act that no relish of salvation in’t”*
* Analysis
	+ Imperative: paints a mirror of Laertes personality to the audience, showing them something that Hamlet is not and that is decisive – he lacks the knowledge to be decisive
	+ Simile: shows that Hamlet is chastising himself for his lack of knowledge to take revenge on other characters
	+ High modality: talks of killing Hamlet when he cannot be saved

## Responses to Grief

**Ophelia**

* Her sanity deteriorates rapidly after the death of her father. She becomes manic, irrational and incoherent – singing
* “her speech is nothing” (Gentleman)
* She enters a trance-like state where she is not conscious of her surroundings and self but the reasons for her grief are evident in her singing
* *“He is gone, he is gone,*

*And we cast away moan,*

*God-a-mercy on his soul.”*

Ophelia sings her grief at her father’s death and her hopes that God will have mercy on him.

* She hands out flowers as a symbol of her grief
* *“I would give you some violets but they withered all when my father died”*

The different flowers she hands to each character are representative of her feelings towards them.

* *“There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance…and there is pansies, that’s for thoughts.”*

She gives rosemary and pansies to Laertes.

* *“There’s fennel for you, and columbines.”*

The fennel and columbines are for Claudius. Both are symbolic of foolishness, as they wilt soon after being picked, and male adultery.

* *“There’s rue of you”*

Rue is given to Gertrude as it is a symbol of adultery.

* *“There’s a daisy”*

Ophelia chooses to ignore the daisy, not handing it to anyone, as it is symbolic of innocence. She is saying that no one here is innocent.

**Hamlet**

* Hamlet loses hope in all humanity after he learns that his uncle killed his father
* *“What a piece of work is a man…in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god…and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – no, nor woman neither”*

Hamlet is not delighted by mankind, despite man’s similarity to angels and gods.

* His loss of hope causes him to question the purpose of life and whether it is worth living
* *“To be, or not be, that is the question –*

*Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer*

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*

*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,*

*And by opposing end them.”*

Hamlet questions whether it is better to suffer through the difficulties of life or to commit suicide and be free of them.

* Hamlet expresses a desire to avenge his father but continuously procrastinates and calculates instead of taking action.
* *“Oh from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth”*

Although Hamlet is talking about his revenge he calls for his thoughts to be bloody as opposed to his actions

**Laertes**

* Laertes first shows grief at the death of his father. His response is anger and a strong desire for revenge.
* *“I’ll be revenged most thoroughly for my father”*
* Unlike Hamlet, Laertes acts on impulse so his revenge is not overanalysed. His impulse makes him both determined and stubborn.
* *“Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge, it could not move thus”*

Laertes tells Ophelia that even if she was still sane she could not convince him to alter his plans.

* Laertes also expresses his grief after Ophelia’s death when he jumps into Ophelia’s grave and has an outburst of emotions
	+ - *“The devil take thy soul!”*

Laertes says this to Hamlet when they are fighting in the grave, he is angry with Hamlet and blames his sister’s and father’s death on Hamlet, and states that he wants the devil to take his soul (go to hell)

* + - *“Oh, treble woe. Fall ten times treble on that cursèd head, / Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense / Deprived thee of! Hold off the earth awhile / Till I have caught her once more in mine arms.”*

Before he and Hamlet have the confrontation in Ophelia’s grave Laertes is distraught about Ophelia’s death and wants to hold her one last time buried. This quote shows the great love he feels for his sister.

## Action/ Inaction

* The inaction within the play perpetuates interest and excitement and works to emphasise Hamlet’s periods of action
* Modulates from being *restless, troubled* and *dissatisfied* to being *quietened, content* and *satisfied*
* Inaction within play is effectual in presenting Hamlet’s emotional standing
* *‘Hamlet’s excessive reflection led to a deficiency of his active powers and thus prevented him from acting’*  - Coleridge
* *“Haste me to know’t, that I with wings as swift as meditation of the thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge”* (Hamlet - Act 1, Scene 5)
	+ Use of intellectual metaphors; contrasting ‘swift’ **with ‘**meditation’; thoughts of love that, instead of accentuating his haste, shows his delay (lacks equilibrium in mindset)
* Two perspectives to be taken:
	+ Hamlet’s prolonging of action (action only occurring predominantly toward the end of the play) is more attributed to him planning to execute his intentions well and with purpose

***OR***

* + His delay is due to his indecisive character (a weaker argument)
* Hamlet is conflicted and confused. He lacks connections with others as he is unable to make rational and just decisions
* Inaction exemplified through foils (Laertes and Fortinbras)
	+ “*To this point I stand, /That both the worlds I give to negligence, / Let come what comes, only I’ll be revenged / Most thoroughly for my father”* (Laertes – Act 4, Scene 5)
	+ *AND* doubling:
		- Compulsively utilised by Shakespeare in an attempt to amplify a desired emotive response from an audience
		- Hamlet’s inaction is doubled with action – we do not witness him taking action, though we witness Fortinbras and Laertes, whom we compare Hamlet to.
* Hamlet’s division between Action/Inaction arises from loyalty to his father and the commitment he attempts to maintain to his steadfast morals
* *“I loved Ophelia; forty thousand bothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?” – “Woo’t weep, woo’t fight, woo’t fast, woo’t tear thyself? /Woo’t drink up easel, eat a crocodile?”* (Act 5, Scene 1) (hyperbole)
	+ Hamlet reaches the point where he publicly proclaims his love for Ophelia – drops the façade/antic disposition and becomes much more transparent
	+ His feelings are now unadorned
* Act 5 Scene 2 – *“Let be...”*
	+ Hamlet giving up on/into fate
	+ *“providence in the fall of the sparrow”* – he does not follow fate or attempt to shape/change it
	+ *“we defy augury”* –no longer looking for signs
	+ *“the readiness is all”* = no more intervention (unlike in the closet scene); Hamlet becoming passive, quietened and resigned
	+ Refusing to worry self with what he should do/not do

## Death and Mortality

* Hamlet’s moral dilemma: whether he has the right to choose whether to end his life, knowing if he does commit suicide that he will miss all that life has to offer. The words *“weary, stale, flat and unprofitable”* have an accumulative effect, accentuating his horror and depression. Natural imagery is effective as it personifies death as disease, growing and spreading until, finally, a large majority of the characters die. Hamlet sees mortality as detrimental to human progress.

*“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt*

*Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!*

*Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd*

*His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!*

*How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,*

*Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

*Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,*

*That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature*

*Possess it merely.*

Soliloquy – Act1, Scene 2

* Hamlet does not use first person (“I” or “me”) to demonstrate he has begun to consider mortality as a human condition, not just his own affliction. He explores the reasons why people wouldn’t commit suicide. He contemplates whether it’s worth trying, because in the end everyone will die.

*“To be, or not to be: that is the question:*

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer*

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*

*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,*

*And by opposing end them?”*

Soliloquy – Act 3, Scene 1

* Religious perspective is very important. Hamlet often references God, but as he has a humanist perspective on life, he is caught between traditions (Catholicism vs. Protestantism). He is progressive in his thinking. He is in constant fear of the religious consequences for human action.
	+ *“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt*

*Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!*

*Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd*

*His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!*

Soliloquy – Act1, Scene 2

* + *“When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,*

*Must give us pause. There's the respect*

*That makes calamity of so long life.*

Soliloquy – Act 3, Scene 1

* Shakespeare defies Elizabethan religious convention through the regicide committed within the play - ‘Great Chain of Being’. The play (and Hamlet’s eventual revenge) may be interpreted as a struggle to correct the natural order of the world. Shakespeare also defies social convention. Hamlet, as a prince and the future heir of Denmark, should have power and ambitions (like Fortinbras), but he is seemingly powerless in his situation.
* Toward the end of the play Hamlet reconciles himself to the fact that everyone is mortal. Despite this, Hamlet continues to struggle with purposelessness, as seen in his speech on Alexander the Great. He questions the nature of being (ontological questioning).Repetition of the words “death”, “dust”, “loam” emphasise that despite Alexander’s legacy and greatness he is now nothing but dirt.

*“Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander return’th to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?”*

Act 5, Scene 1

## Humanism/Existentialism

**Humanism**

What is humanism?

* *Definition:* Humanism is a group of philosophies and ethical perspectives which emphasise the value of human beings. It generally prefers individual thought and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) overestablished doctrine or faith.
* The purpose of cultivating reason was to lead to a better understanding of how to act. The hope was that the coordination of action and understanding would lead to great benefits for society as a whole
	+ The entire play is a struggle between humanism (i.e. reason and ethics, etc.) and counter-humanism or superstitious 'reasoning'
* Hamlet was written in response to the Renaissance's humanism.
* Humanists living prior to Shakespeare's time had argued that man was godlike, capable of anything. This attitude is clearly expressed in Hamlet's ‘What a piece of work is a man’ speech

Act 2, Scene 2 – ‘What a piece of work is man’

*"What a piece of work is a man—how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals."*

* + Showcases the humanist belief of the importance and abilities of man
	+ Directly based upon one of the major texts of the Italian humanists, Pico Della Mirandola’s 'Oration on the Dignity of Man'.

**Existentialism**

The Theory of Existentialism

* Questions death, human existence, and the place of god in human existence
* Sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless and absurd world
* Philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility

Alireza Mahdipour (essayist)'s reading

* Hamlet has *“inescapably to choose and create his identity or essence or self because man, according to existentialism, has no fixed nature”*.
* This freedom of choice brings *“commitment and responsibility, and therefore, it causes anguish”*
* Hamlet lacks the ability to make decisions hastily; he hesitates and ponders extended periods of time before arriving at a decision. Hamlet suffers *“from perplexity in his self or selves”*
* Hamlet’s character is far more than just a revenger hero; however, he lacks any significant obstacle for action which builds his hesitant attitude. He avoids responsibility and is reluctant to enact the promise he has made with his father. E.g. observed in scene 3 of Act 3 where Hamlet restrains himself from killing Claudius while he is praying.

Quotes and analysis

Hamlet is obsessed with his pursuit of determining the reason for his existence.

*"To be or not to be: that is the question"* soliloquy (3.1.57)

* Hamlet is confused about whether or not it’s worth staying alive despite all of his hardships
* Hamlet is torn between two choices: life and death
* The main reason he stayed alive is because of his fear of death, and his eagerness to get the revenge he wanted

Hamlet finally overcomes his existentialist dilemma in Act V. In his last couple of breaths, Hamlet becomes aware of his true identity; a saviour.

* It is believed that Hamlet exemplifies a person who strives for justice no matter how comprehensive the consequences may be.
* He had finally slain Claudius for his father even though he sacrificed his own life in the process.
* Hamlet is to be used as a model or representation of man seeking his identity.

## Order/Chaos

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Order  | * The timing – the ghost came at a dead hour, at midnight

*“Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour / With martial stalk hath he done by our watch.”** The Great Chain of Being – the world was ordered in a hierarchy and every creation had a particular position in the hierarchy. The Elizabethans heavily believed in this. They considered the concept of keeping natural balance and sticking to Gods plan to be very important.
* The natural order in life – Old King Hamlet, life, death, purgatory, hell
	+ Every death that takes place is of ‘unnatural origin’ 🡪death through poisoning, murder, suicide. All coincide with the view of righting the natural order
* Religion provides order, but this in turn leads to chaos.
	+ God is at the centre of existence but through the monarchy individuals were empowered with their own fate and destiny
	+ The natural order (Great Chain of Being) is disrupted.This is evident through the corruption which follows
* Shakespeare’s context
	+ Humanism and the revival of classical philosophy 🡪 resulted in the growth of concern and questioning of alternative ways of thinking about death.This is reflected with the unnatural deaths in the play
	+ Women in society obedient to her father- this is shown through both Ophelia and Gertrude *“I shall obey my lord”* (Ophelia to her father)
* “This bodes some eruption to our state” (Act 1 scene 1). Horatio comments about the ghost – natural order is challenged
 |
| Chaos  | * Hamlet was meant to get kingship when Old King Hamlet died
* Horatio - *‘Disasters in the sun’*
* Destruction of natural order
	+ In Elizabethan times the Ghost was symbolism for chaos🡪A ghost appears only if it has unfinished business on Earth or to give warning about something. The ghost is thus a sign of disorder. “*This bodes some strange eruption to our state.”*
	+ Every death that takes place is of ‘unnatural origin’ 🡪death through poisoning, murder, suicide. All coincide with the view of righting the natural order.
		- The Kingdom of Denmark is being ruled by Claudius who was not truly appointed, and who murdered to attain his position. Chaos ensues and each of the ‘unnatural’ or ‘morally corrupt’ players are killed. As a result of this, the ‘diseased’ nation will be returned to normal ‘health.’
		- Claudius is also morally corrupt, *“something rotten in the state of Denmark”*
	+ Shakespeare conveys the destruction of natural order through the use of negative language

*“and in the porches of my ears did pour the leperous distilment, whose effect holds such enmity with blood of man’… ‘the natural gates and alleys of the body”** Disease
	+ ‘Rotten’ events 🡪 the king was murdered, the queen remarried the murderer (even before the mandatory year of mourning). The murder was a fratricide and regicide, which is disordered because the king is God’s representative on Earth.
	+ *“Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven”* – it is disordered to get to heaven and the reoccurring motif of disease and garden imagery ‘thorny’
	+ *“Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden”, “things rank at gross possess it merely* 🡪 the motifs/imagery of corruption/chaos
	+ *“Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”* – ‘unnatural’ means to work against nature and the order of the universe.
* Textual integrity 🡪 the whole play is a tragedy, meaning that the play will be chaotic
* *“The air bite shrewdly”* – this is foreshadowing of the future, that it will be disorderly, and leads to anarchy
* Characters
	+ Fortinbras of Norway is threatening to invade almost represents disorder.
	+ As Hamlet acts like he is insane, it further adds to the chaos that already exists.
	+ Fortinbras enters in the end of the play to find all of the royal family dead. He then is able to restore the natural order by taking control of Denmark and.
	+ The royal family, in the search for power and revenge caused the disorder that destroys them all.
 |

## Duality/Doubling

* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
	+ Twins, however instead of being two different personalities, they are one entity
	+ Suggests that corruption and too much ambition results in the lack of a proper identity
	+ Lose their traits that identify them as individuals
* Claudius’s speech
	+ *“mirth in funeral”* and *“dirge in marriage”*
	+ Conflicting images
	+ Suggests Claudius’s façade of being a good king, truth is he is corrupt
* Hamlet and Laertes
	+ Hamlet is inactive, he procrastinates and ponders revenge while Laertes immediately jumps to action
	+ Hamlet is philosophical and caught between differing views – Catholic vs. pagan, Renaissance versus traditional views
	+ Laertes aims purely to avenge, however despite being “honest” by not putting on a façade, his life is ruined by Claudius and Hamlet who are duplicitous
* Hamlet and Horatio
	+ Hamlet, as rational as he is, is irrational compared to Horatio, who is grounded and also uncorrupted
* Ironically, relationship between Hamlet & Laertes and Hamlet & Horatio is in itself doubling. However this shows the duplicity within Hamlet as he is both inactive and irrational.
* Hamlet and Claudius
	+ Hamlet uses figurative language to appear insane, his façade is duplicity as he pretends to be something he is not *“I am but mad north north west”* However his act blurs with reality.
	+ Claudius pretends to be a good king without ambition in order to seize the kingdom [refer to point on him]
	+ The two of them also lose their sense of selves as they attempt to fool each other and bystanders with their act, but in doing so contribute to their own downfall and the corruption of Denmark
* Hamlet and Gertrude/Ophelia
	+ Extended metaphor of theatrical devices to suggest his belief that women are duplicitous
	+ *“God gives you one face but you paint yourselves another”*
* Mimesis
	+ The play
	+ The mime

## Religion

**Context**

* Hamlet is a play that dramatizes the spiritual uncertainty and religious confusion of sixteenth century Europe
* Shakespeare's play weaves together Christian attitudes toward murder with the classic tenets of revenge tragedy, which can't always be reconciled; this makes the play all the more dramatic and complex.

**Hamlet**

*Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.
(1.2.118-11)*

* "Wittenberg" is shorthand for "Protestant," since that's the city and university where Martin Luther wrote his [Ninety-five Theses](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/luther_martin.shtml). But the play can't seem to make up its mind about whether or not the play is set in a Catholic or Protestant world—just like England
* Hamlet wants to die, but "self-slaughter" is a sin. Cue a major religious and moral dilemma that will haunt him (and us) throughout the play.
* Hamlet is caught between his duty as a son and the pre-Christian value of revenge being God’s prerogative and a duty and the Christian values of murder.  His death then becomes sacrificial and redemptive
* We know that for Hamlet, the power of his religion over him is more negative than positive (‘to be or not to be’ speech) as well as his actions throughout the play. As long as the power of Hamlet's religion remains negative it cannot destroy the influence of the honor code upon his spirit, but simply inhibits its power to motivate sustained positive action

**The Ghost**

*“I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.” (1.5.5)*

* The Ghost not only claims to be Hamlet's "father's spirit"; it also suggests that it's a *Purgatorial* ghost. Purgatory was often imagined as a fiery place where souls "purged away" their sins before going to heaven. There is one major difference, though: purgatorial spirits returned to ask loved ones for prayers that could help them reach to heaven faster
* "...the Ghost is Catholic: he comes from Purgatory.”
* The ghost is not from hell. It represents the growing protestant assault on Purgatory. Therefore, whether the play is Protestant or Catholic is open for debate.

Essayist readings

* *Lily Campbell:* "Shakespeare has pictured a ghost from Purgatory according to all the tests possible," but adds, "Shakespeare chose rather to throw out suggestions which might satisfy those members of his audience who followed any one of the three schools of thought on the subject."
* *Roy Battenhouse:* "The ghost, then, does not come from a Catholic Purgatory, but from an afterward exactly suited to fascinate the imagination and understanding of the humanist intellectual of the Renaissance."
* *Harold Bloom's* Shakespeare: The Invention of the Humanargues that whatever sociologists, theologians, psychologists or psychiatrists mean by personality comes from Shakespeare: to wit he invented the very concept

**Death**

* HaHHahhhhhDeath had to be Christian. This meant that there was a **certainty** of an afterlife for the soul; hence Hamlet’s concern about his father’s soul as King Hamlet had not had a chance to show forgiveness or redemption before he was killed.  In contrast, Hamlet did not want to kill Claudius while he was praying because then he would be assured of an afterlife.
* Suicide 🡪 Ophelia’s death was suicide (from her overbearing grief as a result of the loss of her father and Hamlet going mad and treating her badly).  Suicide was seen as anti-Christian and therefore she could not be given a Christian burial
* Afterlife 🡪 Hamlet has the certainty of an afterlife but before he is aware of that he questions the Christian ideologies linked to both life and death.  He is fearful of the unknown and being trapped by death. This is what causes him to procrastinate over killing Claudius. He comes to the conclusion that the known is better, but only after he questions the value of life (“*what a piece of work is man”* and the “*To be or not to be*” speech)
* Hamlet reveals how Shakespeare uses rhetoric to create a religious message about the church and re-shape the values of right and wrong according to his own view, so he punishes sinners by creating disastrous endings.

# Readings

## Feminist

**Context**

* 1600s Elizabethan period
* Few woman continued beyond basic learning
* Most were discouraged from achieving more education
* Mostly trained to become mothers and housewives
* No influence in politics and legal issues
* No right to own a business or to hold any of the property once married
* **Female characters don’t possess any power**
* **Male characters are dominant**
* **Role of women: one of passivity and fierce obedience**

**Gertrude**

* Controlled by the men in her life
* Silenced by the king
* Portrayed as weak by marrying Claudius so soon after the death of King Hamlet
* *“O god, a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer”* (Hamlet)

**Ophelia**

* Ophelia’s inner struggle to do justice reflects the struggles of modern women. However, Polonius and Hamlet’s treatment of her paints her as an out-dated and objectified symbol of women in the Shakespearean era
* Controlled by Polonius and Laertes – Ophelia can’t love hamlet
* *“Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity”* (Polonius)
* *“tender yourself more dearly”*  (Polonius)
* Subservient
* *“I shall obey, me lord”*  (Ophelia)
* Treated harshly by Hamlet
* *“Get thee to a nunnery”*  (Hamlet)
* **Hamlet’s view of women is a negative one; a generalisation of all women in his life**
* **Women are ‘silenced’ in the play; they are never given a soliloquy which would have allowed them to confess to the audience**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quote** | **Analysis** |
| *“Calls virtue hypocrites, take off the rose on a fair forehead of innocent love and sets a blister there”* (Hamlet) | * Inappropriate use of language as he accuses Gertrude of disloyalty to his father
* Diseased imagery of a blister on the forehead refers to the loss of innocence.The forehead is an indication of purity and boldness in an Elizabethan context.
 |
| *“Frailty thy name is woman!”* (Hamlet) | * Hyperbolised tone of discontent toward the female gender is reinforced through the use of exclamation
* Hamlet generalises the whole female gender as ‘frail’. As a consequence of this conviction, he sees Ophelia as the same as every other woman.
 |
| *“Get thee to a nunnery… to a nunnery go, and quickly too”* (Hamlet) | * The repetition of ‘go’, use of imperative and obnoxious language places Hamlet in a higher position in his relationship with Ophelia
 |
| *“Enter Ophelia distracted”* (stage direction)*“I must put on an anti-disposition”* (Hamlet) | * Ophelia’s ‘true’ madness is evident through the stage direction
* The idea of women being ‘frail’ is evident in Ophelia’s ‘true’ madness, in contrast with Hamlet, whose sanity is questionable but not challenged
* Hamlet’s madness is a ‘façade’, stated by himself at the beginning of the play
* Both experience the deaths of their fathers.While Hamlet remains rational, Ophelia goes mad because women are more susceptible to madness.🡪a common assumption of the period e.g. Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*
 |
| *“Our sometimes sister, now our queen”* (Claudius) | * Gertrude is an oversimplified female character. She is defined as Queen, Hamlet’s mother, and the wife of her dead husband’s brother. Each role is defined by men.
 |
| *“be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny”* (Hamlet) | * Simile which explores how no matter what a woman does, she cannot escape what her female nature entails
 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *“I did repel his letters and denied his access to me”*(Ophelia) | * Ophelia is obedient, and does exactly what Polonius, her father, tells her to do.
 |
| *“Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on”* (Hamlet) | * Refers to women as animals through the imagery in *“by what it fed on”.*Women seem as though they are of a lower class than the men in society.
 |
| *“How cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within these two hours… O heavens! Die two months ago, and not forgotten yet?”* (Hamlet) | * Hamlet speaks in a sarcastic tone; his encounter with the truth behind Claudius’ actions has reignited hatred for his stepfather further. His relationship with Gertrude has disintegrated, and his view of his mother has been affected by his urge for revenge.
 |
| *“I did love you once…”* (Hamlet) *“…you made me believe so”* (Ophelia) | * This dialogue demonstrates Ophelia’s submissive nature and inability to control her emotions. She is easily ‘pushed around’.
 |