

# **WORKSHEETS**

for  
William Shakespeare's  
**HAMLET**  
adapted by Clive Duncan

by  
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# William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

## adapted by Clive Duncan (2018)

### Introduction

"*Hamlet* is, without a doubt, the best play ever written, partly because it lends itself to so many changes and interpretations." –Laurence Olivier

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is possibly Shakespeare's most famous play. It has been performed more than any other play in the history of theatre. It's the most popular play ever written. More books have been written about the play than about any other play in the English language; it has led to an academic industry! It's been translated into dozens of languages, and is probably being performed somewhere in the world at this very moment.

It was probably first performed in 1602. But the play is a timeless thriller, a gripping drama of revenge. It's also a philosophical drama. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Hamlet tells his confidant Horatio. In this sense, it is, arguably, the most famously 'problematic' play ever written. *Hamlet* has been the subject of more excited critical debate than any other work of literature.

Shakespeare's original play, in full performance, is a 5-hour, bum-numbing experience! (even actor and director Kenneth Branagh's film lasts 232 minutes...) *Hamlet* has a loose, wayward structure; it's straggling and digressive in places.

In adapting the original, Clive Duncan has edited the storyline and tightened up the structure, making the story more logical and coherent. He has removed a few of the characters, including Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but included aspects of their roles in other characters. For example, Laertes's role is not simply as a brother to Ophelia, but he also acts *in loco parentis*!

Academic purists might argue that Clive Duncan has over-simplified the story and watered down, diluted, the poetic essence of the text. But what Clive Duncan has achieved is remarkable: he has made the text accessible even for CEFR B1 Level students, and has re-created the iambic pentameter!

That iambic pentameter consists of five feet, each with a weak beat followed by a strong beat or stress, originally marked by the right foot coming down on that strong beat (hence the term 'five feet'). It's a basic rhythm of the English language. The steady thrust forward helps to drive an ongoing narrative.

I first met the play when I was 16, at an all-boys Manchester grammar school. Our English teacher really brought the text alive. I was immediately gripped. We ended up chanting some of the speeches to the rhythms of the iambic pentameter! A few of us empathized closely with the figure of Hamlet. I identified so much with the troubled character that I took to wearing all black!

My sympathy for Hamlet involved going out of myself, as a troubled adolescent, and trying to share or identify with another person's position. When we go to see a play, we often put ourselves on stage, so allowing us to see ourselves with critical distance.

## For the teacher approaching the play

The printed text is not the play; the play is what we see when we go to the theatre. The text is a set of instructions to be interpreted by the director, the actors and stage-technicians.

Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed, but generations of academics have turned his language into literary texts. Clive Duncan has turned the play back into a working script for our classrooms: a script to be experienced, to be played with, actively explored, visualized imaginatively, and even brought to life by acting out certain scenes.

We don't need to delve too deeply into Wolfgang Iser's *Rezeptionsästhetik*, into his work on reader-response theory, to know that every student seeks to create meaning for her-/ himself. Students can and *do* engage with texts that are intrinsically motivating, that turn them on. As teachers, we are not university literature professors *manqués*, imposing authoritarian interpretations, but real practitioners, people with authority, trained in the principled practice of engaging learners.

*Hamlet* invites active, free-wheeling exploration of possibilities. A purely text-based approach is a solitary, individual activity. Besides, there is no one 'right answer' to interpreting *Hamlet*, only a range of possible interpretations. Shakespeare himself collaborated with his company, originally the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men from 1603. As actors in rehearsal – which Shakespeare himself also was – we can assume they talked together about every aspect of the play they were then presenting. Collaborative groupwork is the essence of drama and theatre – and of using Shakespeare in the classroom.

To encourage collaborative participation, you may find it useful to have an open physical space in the classroom, allowing the students to sit in a circle and to act out parts of scenes.

We have offered a series of scene-by-scene questions, tasks and activities, in order to....

- enable students to engage with the storyline, characters, and themes of the play
- encourage students to think for themselves ('learner autonomy'), and be prepared to offer their own ideas and conclusions
- help students work independently: either individually, pairwise or in groups, in class or at home

***We do not by any means encourage you to tackle all the questions, tasks and activities. What we offer is not a fixed buffet menu, but à la carte! Knowing your class as you do, you will no doubt choose those exercises that engage your learners best.***

The vocabulary notes at the bottom of each page are meant to make the text even more accessible to students. We have used definitions, synonyms, paraphrase and explanations. While reading the play, we would encourage students to use a masking card to cover up the vocabulary notes: this allows them to focus primarily on the text, and to speculate what a difficult or challenging word might mean in context. They can then cross-check by lifting the masking card. Your comments as a teacher on this approach would be most welcome. (You will find contact details at the very end of these notes.)

## For the student approaching the play

As you read the play, imagine how it could be performed. Try to visualize what is happening. Follow the storyline. Who survives at the end of our play? Who dies? Why?

Drama is about conflict in one form or another. Some conflicts are deeper, below the surface. Try and identify the various conflicts in *Hamlet*. This will help you to identify the main themes and ideas in the play. Underline key points in your booklet, make notes in the margin, colour-code aspects of characters, and so on. Reading the play is an interactive process: you need a pen or pencil in your hand! Who do you like or dislike in the play? Note down why you do so. With the interaction between characters, do your sympathies for any one character change in the course of the play? How do certain characters change in the course of the play?

It's worth keeping a 'reading log' or 'journal', in which you can document your response to the characters and what is happening. Building up a sociogram – a diagram of the social inter-relationships between the characters – can be useful as you work your way through the play.

For each scene in the play, there are several questions, tasks and activities. You may also be invited to be creative: to speak aloud, mime, act out, discuss and even do some research!

We hope you will find the work with the play enjoyable, instructive and useful. There is no way you can cover all the questions, tasks and activities. Our aim is to offer a wide choice of exercises. Why not discuss and negotiate with your teacher which of our suggestions you wish to work with?

## I - LEADING IN

In the opening paragraph to his *Author's Note*, Clive Duncan asks five direct, personal questions. Discuss each of them in turn. (You might like to underline all references to 'mental health' when you work through the play.)

### Paragraph 2

From Clive's brief synopsis of the play (*in italics*), how do you think Hamlet might feel, and why? Read on to find out how Hamlet reacts to his dilemma. (A personal question only: To what extent have you ever felt depressed? What do you think led you to feel depressed?) You might like to check whether 'the girl he loves dumps him without explanation', or whether it is the reverse!

### Paragraph 3

How does Clive explain that Hamlet is a 'real human being and not an action hero'?

### Paragraph 4

In his adaptation, which aspect has Clive focussed on? How has Clive made the play more accessible for us today?

### Paragraph 5

How can you access Shakespeare's version of the play? (*cf.* film versions on DVD: directed by Olivier/ 1948, Richardson/ 1969, Zeffirelli/ 1990, Branagh/ 1996, Almereyda/ 2000. For a compact version, access the 30-minute Animated Tales film, directed by Orlova/ 1994).

## II - WORKING OUT

Characters in the Play.

In the course of reading the play, build up *your* sociogram of the main characters to show how *you* see how the characters inter-relate.

### Scene 1

1. To help you visualize the stage, draw a diagram of the set. Such a stage set needs to enable the action to flow swiftly and continuously.
2. Apart from being a character within the play - namely, Hamlet's friend and confidant, which role does Horatio have in the theatre performance?
3. By presenting, in a tableau, the very end of the play here at the very start, we the audience are invited to experience the story in retrospect. What could Clive's aim be here? How effective do you think this will be?

### Scene 2

4. How is the stage setting switched so quickly and efficiently?
5. The opening of the play gives us high tension: the old king dead; the coronation of Claudius as newly elected king; the threat of invasion by a foreign army; an armed guard for a funeral. How might Gertrude's wedding surprise us?
6. Which colour of costume might Hamlet wear? And Gertrude?
7. Imagine you are an ambassador from England who has just arrived in Denmark. Write a report to Queen Elizabeth I, informing her of recent developments and the political situation in Denmark. Alternatively, imagine this is current news today; give a brief radio or tv report.

### Scene 3

8. How sincere do you find Claudius's speech?
9. To what extent is Claudius a pragmatic politician?
10. How would *you* feel if you were Hamlet suddenly returning home?
11. How does Hamlet contradict his mother Gertrude?
12. Try reading Claudius's lines (from "Your mother's right..." to "...in this grief.") in different ways: being warm to and supportive of Hamlet; being hard and uncompromising to his stepson; being reasonable and sincere; ...
13. How easy or not is it for Hamlet to 'move on'?
14. In his aside, how does Claudius use Laertes?
15. Will family love really help Hamlet? Predict how he might react to Claudius's and Gertrude's advice.
16. In Hamlet's soliloquy, what do we learn of his state-of-mind?
17. The soliloquy reveals Hamlet's true thoughts and inner feelings. Try reading this speech in different ways: Hamlet speaking to himself as if he were thinking aloud; Hamlet speaking directly to us the audience; several different voices speaking the soliloquy, a line or two at a time.

#### Scene 4

18. How is the Ghost of Old Hamlet, the former king, presented to us, the audience?
19. Following the stage directions, act out this part of the scene.
20. What does the Ghost, the Spirit, of Hamlet's father want the son to do, and why? What is Hamlet determined to do?
21. Why does Hamlet now feel insecure? What has he promised to do? What will he pretend to be?
22. Hamlet keeps a notebook in which he writes down some of the things he learns. Write his notebook entry for this day, and how he feels about events.
23. Try organizing all the words Hamlet uses for 'crazy', from colloquial to formal language.

#### Scene 5

24. How did Hamlet express his love for Ophelia?
25. Compare the lines Hamlet wrote for Ophelia with Shakespeare's original Sonnet 18, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.' Go on to study the full sonnet. (Cleo Laine, jazz-singer, has recorded the sonnet as a song on her wonderful album 'Wordsongs') You might like to compare the sonnet with Sinead O'Connor's song *Nothing compares 2 U!*)
26. Listen to the music by Thomas Morley for the song 'It was a lover and his lass'. (Cleo Laine also has a version of this on her album 'Wordsongs'.) Which season is the song set in? Speculate what the lover and his lass actually did...and Hamlet and Ophelia...? The English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams also set 'It was a lover and his lass' to music, in 1922.
27. What is the relationship between Laertes and his sister Ophelia like? Is it genuinely affectionate, or does he have a sexist and condescending attitude? For which various reasons is Laertes not happy about his sister's liaison with Hamlet? How does Laertes express his advice to Ophelia: sympathetically, imploringly, aggressively, or ... ?  
How would *you* feel as Ophelia if your brother spoke so strongly against the relationship?  
Would *you* as her brother feel justified in speaking to your sister like that?  
Now in pairs, practise reading aloud this part of the scene, playing with different tones of voice. Then think about body language, gesture and facial expression. Try acting out the scene.
28. How do you think Ophelia feels after giving in and obeying Laertes? What might she do as a result?
29. Why does Hamlet act as he does towards Ophelia?
30. When Laertes informs Claudius about Hamlet, how does the King interpret Hamlet's state-of-mind?
31. Why has Laertes 'planted' Ophelia for Hamlet? Is Ophelia the King's 'cat's paw'?
32. Which book might Hamlet be reading? (a book by Seneca on Stoic philosophy? Essays by Montaigne? Machiavelli's *The Prince*? The Bible? or ... ? Find out about some of these books.)
33. We have reached a critical moment in the play. Which dilemma does Hamlet confront in his speech 'To live...'? What makes Hamlet avoid taking dramatic action?  
In this speech Hamlet explores several ideas. Imagine he is confused, but has jotted down mixed-up thoughts, in jumbled order. Sort them out in the order he finally gives them in his speech.
  - but what happens after death?
  - thinking stops us from acting

- I look forward to the sleep of death
  - what stops people from committing suicide, in spite of all problems in this life, is the fear of terrors that await the dead
  - should I suffer or fight?
  - should I commit suicide?
34. What is Hamlet's tone of voice in this speech? Is it neutral, calm, depressed, confused, sincere, ironical, bitter, or ... ? Try speaking the lines aloud in different ways:
- a. as if he has only suicide in mind
  - b. as if he has only killing Claudius in mind
  - c. as if every line, phrase, or thought is a question (*cf.* rising intonation)
  - d. as if giving a philosophy lecture to a group of students
- (NB.** We deal in greater detail with the original text 'To be, or not to be' in the 'Following up' section towards the end of these worksheets.)

35. Meeting with Ophelia. Draw up a list of possible reasons that might explain why Hamlet treats Ophelia as he does here. Hamlet's verbal attack on Ophelia is extreme. What is it like to be on the receiving end of such a tongue-lashing? After studying the dialogue closely, in pairs read it aloud.

(In the original play, Hamlet says to Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunnery." In Elizabethan times, 'nunnery' was also a colloquial word for a brothel!)

Pay special attention to tone of voice, stress and intonation, as well as voice pitch, speed of delivery and rhythm.

Now go on to consider how you might act out the scene: think of varying distances between the two, stance, posture, movement, gesture and varied facial expression.

Combine what you have learned from reading aloud with what you have experienced with body language. Video your performance. Do voice and body language converge, even synchronize, or is there a disjunction between the two? Offer constructive feedback to other pairs with their performance.

During the performance, use 'freeze-frame' technique at a particular critical moment. Stop the action suddenly. This technique creates a tableau or a still image. In fact, it's worth taking a photo at this point. Staying in role, ask yourself: How do I feel at this moment? What am I thinking? Why am I acting as I am?

Finally, take out key words or phrases from the dialogue, and produce 'cue cards' (not role-play cards, with the full text!) This is an activity known as 'cued improvisation'. You improvise freely *your* version of the meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Ask yourself again: What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of a tongue-lashing?

36. Back to the script: How does Ophelia feel at the end of Hamlet's verbal assault?
37. Why does Claudius now decide to remove Hamlet from Denmark?

## Scene 6

38. Hamlet suspects foul play in the death of his father, not yet murder. Are his suspicions the first sign of real madness, or not...? Where is the line between real madness and simulated madness?
39. Why does he hesitate in taking revenge on Claudius?

40. How does the arrival of the travelling actors offer Hamlet a special opportunity?
41. Hamlet tells the first actor to 'change the murder – Gonzago is to be poisoned'. Which lines might Hamlet add to the script of the play? Write them.  
Hamlet changes the play because he wants to 'capture the conscience of the King'. In Shakespeare's original play, Hamlet calls this new play 'The Mousetrap'. Why, do you think?
42. Which favour does Hamlet ask of his friend Horatio, and why? How do *you* choose your friends? Could *you* share a secret like Hamlet's with a friend like Horatio?
43. What is Claudius's reaction to the play? Is he calm and dignified, or confused, or worried, or even terrified? There's an opportunity here for 'Forum Theatre': the play is interrupted and Claudius, remaining in role, answers questions as to how he feels at this point. Try this in class.
44. What proof does Hamlet now have? The scene shows how Gonzago was poisoned, murdered. Murder is now the trigger for what follows, leading to revenge by Hamlet. But will Hamlet carry it through, and – if so – how? Predict, speculate.....!

## Scene 7

45. Notice how Scene 6 leads immediately into Scene 7. In Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, the scenes followed quickly and smoothly, without any lengthy intervals for scene-changing. How do you think the actors of Vienna's English Theatre will handle this scene-change?
46. Why is Claudius praying? What exactly is his dilemma? To what extent does his conscience trouble him? Try reading Claudius's lines like a developing argument that he is having with himself. Which parts might he whisper?
47. Why does Hamlet still hold back from killing Claudius? By remaining passive at this point in the action, does Hamlet lose the initiative to Claudius? Predict or speculate why Hamlet's hesitation and delay might be fatal. Experiment with dramatic ways of saying Hamlet's lines.
48. Why is Gertrude re-applying her make up? In the original play, the scene between Gertrude and Hamlet takes place in a 'closet', a private room. (Research: in the Globe Theatre, find out where the inner stage would have been, and how it would have been divided from the main stage. Draw a diagram to illustrate this.)  
Stage convention has often set the scene in Gertrude's bedroom, suggesting perhaps that Hamlet has an Oedipus Complex, not only wanting to kill, in this case, his uncle rather than his father, but also to sleep with his mother! Ironically, it is Claudius who has killed Hamlet's father, and married Hamlet's mother! So, is this a reason why Hamlet wants to displace Claudius? In our production, Gertrude 'sits at a small table'. What might this otherwise suggest?
49. Will the 'picture' (that Hamlet holds up to his mother) be a miniature portrait, or in a locket round her neck, or a full-scale portrait on the wall?
50. Hamlet is testing not just Claudius, but his mother as well. Does Gertrude know that Claudius killed her husband, or does she only suspect this, or ... ? How guilty *is* Gertrude?
51. How does Hamlet challenge his mother? Which words show how disgusted Hamlet is by his mother's actions? How does she feel at such a tongue-lashing?
52. What makes Hamlet calm down and reflect?
53. Might Gertrude's inability to see the Ghost (that Hamlet thinks he sees) reflect her moral blindness? Worth discussing?



54. Hamlet's words to his mother at the very end of this scene: does he say them as an order, a demand, a request, or is he begging? Practise saying the words in different ways. Will Gertrude follow Hamlet's advice, do you think?

### Scene 8

55. Claudius wants Hamlet to be killed outside Denmark. Why? Could it be that the deaths of two Hamlets might not go down well with the Danish people? And why is Claudius's court at remote Elsinore on the coast, and not in the capital Copenhagen? What might Claudius's sealed letter contain? Write such a letter.

### Scene 9

56. Why does Ophelia let herself drown in the river? Is it an accident or suicide? Study Millais's picture of Ophelia (1852). What impression does this picture give you?

### Scene 10

57. Why shouldn't Ophelia be granted a Christian burial?
58. How does the mood of the play change abruptly from tragedy to comedy? Why might Shakespeare have done so in the original play for the Globe Theatre audience?
59. Underline all examples of the gravedigger's ironic, black and 'killing' humour. Put an exclamation mark(!) in the margin each time.
60. Retell in your own words how Hamlet managed to escape.
61. Why can Hamlet now be legally and morally justified in killing Claudius?
62. What does the gravedigger's casual throwing up of a skull lead Hamlet to do? (Bear in mind that Hamlet has been a student at Wittenberg, is intellectual, 'bookish', and prone to philosophical speculation ... )
63. How does Hamlet feel when he holds Yorick's skull? Is the skull also a reminder to Hamlet about how transitory life is, about death (a 'memento mori')?
64. From what the gravedigger says, how old do you think Hamlet is? And so, how old might Gertrude and Claudius be?
65. 'Hamlet climbs into the skip'. In some productions of the original play, Hamlet leaps into the grave, and Laertes struggles with him there, as if they were fighting over Ophelia!
66. How do we know that Hamlet really loved Ophelia after all?

### Scene 11

67. What is the role of 'Actor 1' at this point in the play?
68. What has made Claudius feel complacent?
69. How does Claudius persuade Laertes to avenge Ophelia?
70. What tells us that Claudius is a shrewd politician?
71. Which devious plan does he have?

## Scene 12

72. Why is Hamlet self-confident about the forthcoming fencing match?
73. But which reservations does Hamlet have about the duel? What is Hamlet's tone of voice here? Calm, determined, reflective, excited, uneasy, or ... ?
74. 'Even the death of a sparrow is planned', says Hamlet. Does Hamlet, therefore, accept determinism, and even destiny or fate? Does he think his degree of free will is limited, after all? (Footnote: in one of his parables, Jesus claimed that no sparrow fell from its nest without God being aware of it. Is Hamlet a Christian, then? Does he believe in God's Providence?)
75. How does Hamlet apologize to Laertes for Ophelia's death? To what extent is Hamlet's apology genuine and sincere? How does he explain his conduct towards Ophelia?
76. Why does Gertrude collapse? Does she know that the glass of wine is poisoned? Is her collapse and subsequent death an accident, or perhaps even suicide?
77. How are the tables turned in this scene? How do Claudius's plans backfire?
78. What tells us that Laertes, as he dies, is reconciled with Hamlet?
79. Imagine Horatio is required to make a statement to the police, who then question him about events. Write Horatio's statement.
80. Carry out an interview with Horatio for a newspaper or radio or TV report. Hold a series of tv news conferences with the survivors: court attendants, the actors, and the gravedigger.
81. Choose the words that you think Hamlet would wish to be included in any obituary, that is, description of him after his death. Then choose your own words to describe how *you* see Hamlet. To what extent do the two texts match each other, or not...?
82. For atmosphere, play Henry Purcell's 'Death is now a welcome guest, / When I am laid in earth, may my wrongs create/ No trouble in thy breast./ Remember me, but ah! Forget my fate.' This is from the end of his 1689 opera *Dido and Aeneas*.  
Other pieces of music to round off our work on the play might be 'Flow my tears' or 'In Darkness let me dwell' (1597), for voice and lute, by Shakespeare's contemporary John Dowland. Pop singer Sting produced a stunning rendering of that last song in his 2006 album 'In the Labyrinth'.  
With so many people killed in this 'dance of death' by the end of the play, perhaps *La Danse Macabre* (1875) by Saint-Saëns might be suitable...?

## III - LIVING THROUGH

Having worked through the text and seen the play performed, here is now a series of tasks and activities to encourage you to review your experience of the play.

- A. Having started your **sociogram** – your diagram of the social inter-relationships of the characters, complete it and compare with fellow-students. Is Hamlet central, or perhaps peripheral? Have you used the vertical dimension symbolically, for example? (for parents or superiors) How close is Hamlet to Gertrude? How close or apart are Hamlet and Ophelia? How have you shown the change between them? Where have you put the gravedigger, and even Yorick's skull? Down below, or ... ?

- B.** Which **characters** are still alive at the end of the play? Write down the names of those who died, and in the order their deaths happened. How or why did these deaths happen? Compare the list of characters in our version of the play with the full list of ‘Dramatis Personae’ in Shakespeare’s original drama.
- C.** Sort out the jumbled order of events (a to m) in this list to complete a brief **summary** of the play (1 to 13).
- Ophelia goes mad and kills herself.
  - In a fencing match, Laertes stabs Hamlet with a poisoned foil.
  - Warned by his father’s ghost, Hamlet vows to take revenge on his uncle Claudius.
  - Gertrude dies from drinking poison.
  - Hamlet holds back from killing Claudius.
  - Hamlet’s uncle Claudius secretly murders Hamlet’s father, and marries his mother.
  - Claudius now decides to get rid of Hamlet.
  - Claudius dies.
  - To hide his motives, Hamlet pretends to be mad.
  - Finally, Hamlet dies in Horatio’s arms.
  - Hamlet kills Laertes.
  - A play is staged in front of the court that shows how Hamlet’s father died.
  - Hamlet rejects Ophelia.
- D.** ‘**Tell my story**’. Hamlet says to Horatio at the very end: “Let all the world know what has happened here.” Write Horatio’s subjective account, as a friend, about what happened, and why. Now write an objective journalist’s report that summarizes what happened, and why. Finally, compare your two versions.
- E.** Present a ‘**bare bones**’ or ten-minute version of the play by stripping it down to its essentials, still using the language of the play.
- F.** **Contextualize** each of these quotations. Who says this, and to whom? When in the play? What is the person talking about?
- “It’s written proof of all his treachery.”
  - “There are more things in heaven and earth than we can ever imagine.”
  - “I have a sense of foreboding.”
  - “Do not look so sorrowful. Be happy for me and ....”
  - “Our own imagination makes us cowards.”
  - “A noble man, fair, good, honest. A man of grace, authority.”
  - “I am rightly killed by my own treachery.”
  - “I was bitten by a snake.”
  - “I hope this present crisis will explain the urgent need to fill the throne.”
  - “Is there a way to test your theory?”
  - “Been laying here for twenty years.”
  - “I am powerless to speak out, though I curse my silent tongue.”
  - “There is no doubt, he tipped her over the edge.”
  - “My political career should be dead.”
  - “Desperate diseases require desperate remedies.”

- “She’s frightened, speak to her.”
- “There was commotion in the audience.”

**G.** Which words would you use to **describe each of the characters** in the play? Feel free to use some words for more than one person! Make a list for each character, then create a mind-map around the character that brings similar words and synonyms together.

ambitious, anxious, bewildered, bitter, brave, brutal, calculating, changeable, clever, complex, complicit, confident, confused, courageous, cruel, cynical, deceitful, decisive, dependable, depressed, desperate, devious, disgusted, dishonest, disillusioned, distraught, disturbed, divided, evil, excitable, faithful, forthright, frustrated, gentle, guilty, harsh, heartbroken, hesitant, honest, introspective, introverted, ironic, loving, loyal, mad, manipulative, melancholic, misogynist, mocking, neurotic, obedient, paralyzed, passive, quick-thinking, rebellious, reliable, revengeful, ruthless, scheming, self-absorbed, sensitive, sincere, sorrowful, split, strong-minded, sympathetic, treacherous, trustworthy, vacillating, weak

**H. ‘The most interesting question...’**

What is the question you would most like to ask each of the following: Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes and Ophelia? Write a separate question for each. Then pool all your questions in the class. Decide democratically which are most interesting. Answer them in role!

**I. Most....to least**

Compare and contrast the various characters. Place them on each of these scales. Discuss.

- youngest..... oldest
- most likeable..... least likeable
- morally the best .....morally the worst
- most identifiable with.....least identifiable with
- most decisive.....least decisive
- most reliable.....least reliable

**J. The character of Hamlet.**

Look at these opinions about the character of Hamlet. Which ones do you agree or disagree with? To what degree? Mark each one with a double tick, single tick, question mark, single cross, double cross to show to what extent you agree or disagree. Explain *why* you agree or disagree.

1. Hamlet is a weak and confused young man who cannot make a decision; he suffers from an identity crisis.
2. Hamlet cannot control his own feelings; he is very close to real madness.
3. Hamlet is an intelligent and thoughtful young man, who is caught up in an impossible moral problem, to which there is no easy answer.
4. Hamlet does not understand women. He is cruel to his mother and Ophelia.
5. Hamlet is violent and moody, dangerous and irresponsible.
6. Hamlet does not really believe that revenge is morally right.

7. Hamlet sees through Claudius, Gertrude, and even Ophelia, but he doesn't really see through himself.

**K. A 'SWOT'-Analysis of Hamlet the character**

Carry out a 'SWOT'-Analysis. On an A4 piece of paper, draw a vertical and a horizontal line down the middle. In the quadrants, put the letters 'S' (for Strengths), 'W' (for Weaknesses), 'O' (for Opportunities), and 'T' (for Threats or Dangers). Fill in each quadrant with your notes. Where does the main focus lie? On Hamlet's present strengths and weaknesses, or on his future opportunities, despite the threats and dangers? To what extent could his *present* weaknesses be converted into *future* opportunities or chances?

- L. Draw a **chart or graph** to show **Hamlet's mood swings** in the course of the play. On the horizontal axis, mark the chronological development of scenes 1 to 11. On the vertical axis, mark from Hamlet's deepest depression (0) to his greatest happiness (10). Plot the ups-and-downs of his emotions, and label what causes these fluctuations.

**M. Hamlet in the Spotlight. 'Hot-seating ' Hamlet.**

Here we invite you to organize a panel discussion in which you can ask 'Hamlet' questions about his motivation at key episodes during the play. Students volunteer to be in the 'hot seat'.

1. Would you describe yourself as a sensitive, idealistic person with a moral conscience, or as someone who is cruel and ruthless? Can you explain why you say that?
2. Can you explain why you hesitated in taking revenge on your uncle?
3. To what extent do you agree that you are indecisive, that you can't really make up your mind what the best thing to do is?
4. Do you yourself feel that you are mentally unstable? Or did you only pretend to be mad? And if so, why? Could it be that, by first pretending to be mad, you have actually gone mad?
5. Did you really love Ophelia? To what extent do you feel responsible for her death?
6. Would you describe yourself as a misogynist, as someone who actually hates women?
7. Would you say that you have a split personality? If so, can you say why?
8. Do you regard yourself as a 'tragic hero' in any way?

**L. Identifying with Hamlet?**

We may empathize, sympathize, or even identify with the figure of Hamlet. Why might this be the case? Try and rank-order these possible reasons. Do add your own reason(s).

- He fights against political corruption and false news
- He has a rebellious, 'misunderstood' nature
- He is desperately looking for some outlet for his feelings
- He is not sure who to trust and feels betrayed by some people
- He suspects he's under constant surveillance
- He constantly questions himself, seeking his own identity
- He tries all the time to interpret what he sees and experiences
- .....

**M. Role-Playing**

To help you understand motives and motivation, try identifying with each of these characters.

1. Imagine that you *are Hamlet*. You've been a critical student at Wittenberg in Germany, where many dogmas of the Catholic Church have been challenged by Martin Luther. You come home because your father has died, under mysterious circumstances. Your mother marries your uncle, Claudius, less than two months after your father's death. The Ghost of your father appears and tells you to take revenge on Claudius. The young woman you love refuses to see you or receive your letters; she may even be spying on you.....  
Try to explain your behaviour, first assuming that you are not mad; then assuming that grief and circumstances beyond your control have caused some mental breakdown....
2. Imagine you *are Ophelia*. You love Hamlet, but you are warned by your brother that a prince can't marry a commoner. You refuse to see Hamlet or to receive his letters. Hamlet insults you and you feel you may have caused his madness. You feel alone and helpless. Is your breakdown understandable? You end up singing songs and collecting flowers like pansies, for your thoughts....

**N. Problem Page.** As Hamlet or Ophelia, write a letter to an 'Agony Aunt'. Explain your present dilemma and seek advice. For example, are you as Hamlet projecting your mother's guilt on to poor, innocent Ophelia?

**O. 'To be, or not to be, that is the question'** (see the full speech in the section 'Following up')  
Imagine you are a team of psychologists dealing with Hamlet. Some of the team are independent psychologists, others have been appointed by Claudius. You have acquired a diary entry which contains a number of lines starting 'To be, or not to be, that is the question'. Work through the speech and analyse the patient's mental health. Report back to a case conference on your findings.  
Having discussed the patient, interview him to try and help with your diagnosis.  
Hamlet might have different voices in his head: that of the revengeful son, of the son fixated on his mother, of the misogynist, of the cynical intellectual, of .... ?

**P. Critical evaluations of Hamlet's character**

How valid are these opinions of Hamlet, do *you* think?

- a. "A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve that forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear. ... He winds, and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; ... yet still without recovering his peace of mind." (Goethe, from *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1796)
- b. "He is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others." (A.W. von Schlegel, *Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1809-11)
- c. "He is a dreamer, and he is called upon to act. He has the nature of the poet, and he is asked to grapple with the common complexity of cause and effect, with life in its practical realization, of which he knows nothing." (Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, publ. 1905)
- d. "An intellectual who is no longer certain how to behave and what to do." (Heiner Müller)

**Q. Themes and Ideas in the play**

Any play is about conflict, about contrasting characters, values and themes. Which of these themes do you think our play deals with? Give examples from the play to support your view.

fake news vs. the truth; appearance vs. reality; honesty vs. corruption; surveillance and control vs. freedom and individual self-expression; betrayal vs. loyalty; madness vs. sanity; free human choice vs. determinism, destiny, fate; revenge vs. forgiveness; life vs. death; ..... vs. .... ?

## R. Analyzing Plot and Structure

An effective plot should...

- maintain the interest of the audience from start to finish
- advance the story, moving the action on from one episode or scene to the next
- arouse the interest of the audience in character and situation
- create high points or moments of crisis at intervals
- create expectation and surprise
- resolve mystery and suspense
- show how a character develops and changes in the course of the action

Here are some of the key elements of plot and structure:-

For each drama term (1 – 13), **choose the correct definition** from the list (A – O). There is one extra definition which you don't need! We've given you the first one as an example.

0. *Climax (A)*

1. Conflict ( ), 2. Dénouement ( ), 3 Dramatic Irony ( ), 4. Exposition ( ), 5. Falling Action ( ...), 6. Foreshadowing (...), 7. Motif ( ), 8. Rising Action ( ...), 9. Turning Point ( ), 10. Aside ( ), 11. Soliloquy ( ), 12. Tragedy, 13. Monologue ( )

A. *highest point of tension of the play*

B. a character's short speech to the audience, often in a low voice, so that it's not heard by the other characters; a brief 'side' comment

C. a character doesn't see what his fate holds in store, but the audience know better

D. a speech given by a single person to an audience

E. the critical point when an important change takes place

F. the action following the climax

G. the struggle between opposing forces or characters

H. a serious play, in which the tragic hero/ heroine, by his/ her own tragic flaw or error, ends in a final catastrophe

I. the action after the exposition, leading to the climax

J. the introduction, setting the action going, suggesting the theme, introducing the main characters, sketching the setting, arousing suspense

K. the last part after the climax, in which the conflict is worked out, is resolved (the resolution)

L. verbal and dramatic hints suggesting what is to come later

M. a single element (phrase, image, device, incident) that is frequently repeated to emphasize some aspect of the theme

N. a speech in which the actor speaks to him- or herself, expressing inner thoughts (ie. thinking out loud)

O. an appendix (usually a concluding address) to a play.

*Question:* What might be the word for the extra definition you didn't need? Yes, 'epilogue'!

*(Key: 1 G, 2K, 3C, 4J, 5F, 6L, 7M, 8I, 9E, 10B, 11N, 12H, 13D)*

### **S. Drawing the Plot and Structure of the play**

Draw a 'time-line', plotting the sequence of events in the play.

Any playwright knows a play has 'gotta have a structure, points you gotta hit': dramatic turning points, so that the spectator's interest is captured, sustained and satisfied. How far do you think Clive Duncan has achieved this with *his* version of *Hamlet*?

A play is driven forward by cause and effect, by conflicts that emerge. This leads to tension and even suspense. This is what gives any play its dynamic structure.

A plot often follows a pattern: *exposition* (where an initial situation is presented and the background explained), a *complication* or *conflict* (in which the initial situation is disturbed and becomes a problem), which leads to a *climax*, *crisis*, or *turning point* (where everything comes to a head). This crisis is then resolved (*resolution*) in a *dénouement*, in which the various strands of the action are 'unknotted' or untied (*dénoué*).

Examine closely the structure of our play. Draw a diagram to represent the way the action of the play develops: this could, for example, be a pyramid, which shows the 'rising action', key turning point (the 'Mousetrap' play about the murder of Gonzago...?), and the subsequent 'falling action'.

## **IV - FOLLOWING UP**

### **1. 'To be, or not to be ... ' This is a key question!**

This speech in Shakespeare's original play has, sadly, become a cliché, often misquoted, taken out of context to stand as a self-contained speech, and mis-interpreted.

We wait in suspense for Hamlet's meeting with Ophelia. Is he reading a book meanwhile? The dramatic action of the play is interrupted - it actually stops - as he gives this soliloquy instead, in a mood of despair and frustration, of brooding introspection.

What is troubling Hamlet at this point in the play? Which contradictions does he grapple with? Which conclusions does he reach? Why does he not use the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular at any point? Why does he not refer to his father or mother? Why does he not mention revenge? When he says 'To be, or not to be', is he talking about life and death, *or* about suicide or not, *or* about actually being oneself rather than play-acting and keeping up an appearance, *or*....even whether Claudius should continue to live or be killed....?



The soliloquy begs more questions than it answers.

The confused opening lines seem to reflect Hamlet's inner conflicts; his undecided state is shown in the many questions he asks. He debates whether death is simply the end of life, the absence of everything, and so of all problems, or – possibly, and frighteningly – the beginning of something that we cannot know or even guess at. The speech ends on a gentler note, as Ophelia appears.

Curiously, in Derek Jacobi's interpretation of the role of Hamlet, he spoke the soliloquy as a monologue directly to Ophelia. He believed that Hamlet and Ophelia had been lovers in the fullest sense. He regarded this as his last chance to say to someone who loved him: "Look, this is what's wrong with me. I'm contemplating suicide. Just listen!"

Let's look at the original speech more closely. Here it is.

*Enter Hamlet*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| To be, or not to be, that is the question:               | <i>Whether to live, or not to live</i>                               |
| Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer                | <i>put up with</i>   |
| The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,             | <i>missiles</i>  |
| Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,               |  |
| And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep –             |  |
| No more; and by a sleep to say we end                    | <i>And have to endure nothing more ....to be able to say</i>         |
| The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks          |  |
| That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation               | <i>that humans are born to endure; a very appealing ending</i>       |
| Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –                |  |
| To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub,        | <i>perhaps obstacle (in a game of bowls), difficulty, problem</i>    |
| For in that sleep of death what dreams may come          | <i>that nightmare, death itself</i>                                  |
| When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,              | <i>shaken off life, like a snake shedding off its skin, ie. died</i> |
| Must give us pause; there's the respect<br><i>reason</i> | <i>make us hesitate, stop and consider explanation,</i>              |
| That makes calamity of so long life.                     | <i>that makes us put up with disasters throughout our lives</i>      |
| For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,         | <i>insults that simply living through time brings</i>                |
| Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,        | <i>contempt, humiliating scorn</i>                                   |
| The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,             | <i>rejected, unvalued</i>  |
| The insolence of office, and the spurns                  | <i>officials the criticisms that good people have to put up with</i> |
| That patient merit of th' unworthy takes                 | <i>that patient, good people must take from unworthy people</i>      |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| When he himself might his quietus make                          | <i>bring about his own release (from debt), cf. peace in death</i>    |
| With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,                     | <i>just a (naked) dagger      loads, burdens</i>                      |
| To grunt and sweat under a weary life,                          |   |
| But that the dread of something after death,                    | <i>deep fear, terror</i>  |
| The undiscovered country from whose bourn                       | <i>the unknown about death      boundary, border</i>                  |
| No traveller returns, puzzles the will,                         | <i>confuses</i>   |
| And makes us rather bear those ills we have,                    |   |
| Than fly to others that we know not of?                         |   |
| Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,                    | <i>(1) consciousness, reflection, meditation (2) moral awareness</i>  |
| And thus the native hue of resolution                           | <i>the natural colour (red) in the face of a determined person</i>    |
| Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,                 | <i>is made to look sick      paleness, pallor      sad reflection</i> |
| And enterprises of great pitch and moment                       | <i>potential and importance</i>                                       |
| With this regard their currents turn awry,<br><i>directions</i> | <i>when looked at in this way      are channelled in wrong</i>        |
| And lose the name of action. Soft you now,                      | <i>Hush, Be quiet, Easy now</i>                                       |
| The fair Ophelia. – Nymph, in thy orisons                       | <i>Beautiful girl, Maiden      prayers</i>                            |
| Be all my sins remembered.                                      |   |

## 2. *Hamlet* – a tragedy?

Find out how the Greek philosopher Aristotle defined 'tragedy': about the weakness, or 'fatal flaw' of a character (*cf.* Hamlet's indecisiveness; Gertrude's haste in getting re-married), about a character's 'hubris' (overweening pride), about striking awe and terror into an audience, and about the audience experiencing 'catharsis', the cleansing effect after the emotions of pity and fear.

According to Aristotle's principles, could this version of *Hamlet* be defined as a 'tragedy'?

Do we experience 'tragic inevitability' in *Hamlet*? Hamlet does not think that he will lose the duel with Laertes, but feels a kind of foreboding. He seems ready to accept whatever fate has in store for him. He confides to Horatio: "We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all." What matters, Hamlet believes, is the right frame of mind to meet death.

## 3. *Hamlet* – an Elizabethan 'Revenge Tragedy'?

The typical structure of a 'Revenge Tragedy' had 5 parts.

- Exposition, usually by a ghost (providing motivation for revenge)
- Anticipation, in which detailed planning of the revenge takes place
- Confrontation between avenger and intended victim

- Delay as the avenger hesitates to perform the killing
- Completion of the revenge, often with the death of the avenger

To what extent does Shakespeare's *Hamlet* follow that pattern?

Thomas Kyd's 'The Spanish Tragedy' (1588) led to other 'Revenge Tragedies' in the early 17<sup>th</sup>c., such as those by Webster, Middleton and Tourneur. (Research project!)

#### 4. Staging *Hamlet*

- Find out about different stage shapes: proscenium arch or end-on; thrust stage; extended stage; avenue theatre; theatre-in-the-round.  
Which stage shape does Vienna's English Theatre use? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a stage-shape?  
Which stage-shape might also suit their production and performance? Say why.
- Find out about Shakespeare's original Globe Theatre and how the stage would have been used then for a production of *Hamlet*. How could the gallery, inner stage, and trap-door have been used, and for which scenes? Also find out about the re-constructed 'New Globe' (1996) on the South Bank, London. If you ever have the chance to go there to see a performance of a play by Shakespeare, grab it!

#### 5. Madness and Melencolia

Do we think Hamlet really is mad at any point during the play, or just pretends madness throughout?

As Clive Duncan mentions in his Author's Note, doctors and psychiatrists rarely use the word 'mad' or 'lunacy'. Instead, they use expressions such as 'manic-depression' (violent mood swings), 'schizophrenia' (deranged perceptions and emotions), 'suffering from a nervous breakdown', 'psychotic' (suffering from delusions, dangerously out of contact with reality), 'emotionally disturbed', 'mentally ill', and so on.

Choose one of the modern descriptions, and write a report on Hamlet under that heading.

Study Albrecht **Dürer**'s engraving of 'Melencolia I' (1514). What can it tell us about Hamlet's mental state?

#### 6. 'There is a willow...'

In the original play, it is Gertrude who tells how Ophelia drowned: she fell from the branch of a willow-tree as she tried to hang flowers, and was pulled under by her clothes. Gertrude's words appear in Act IV, Scene 7, from "There is a willow grows askant a brook..." to "...To muddy death." The Pre-Raphaelite artist **John Everett Millais** used the text to exhibit his **picture of Ophelia** in 1852. The painting shows her floating down a lovely, flower-strewn stream, her mouth open, perhaps singing, seemingly unaware that she is about to drown.

Work in pairs: one person reads the lines aloud; the other listens and studies the picture. Exchange roles and repeat. Identify particular lines or words that Millais used as a basis for his painting. Which aspects of the original text are missing from the painting?

Ophelia holds a small bunch of flowers in her right hand. In the 1850s, when modern psychology began, mentally ill women were often compared to the fictional Ophelia. In fact, when such women

were first photographed, doctors often asked them to put flowers in their hair so that they might look like Ophelia. **John William Waterhouse's** paintings of Ophelia show her with flowers in her hair. Waterhouse did three versions of Ophelia (1889, 1894 and 1910). That last version shows a staring-eyed, full-bosomed woman in a silk gown, clutching a handful of flowers: an image of Edwardian social elegance! Strange...

By contrast, **Arthur Hughes** (also 1852) had depicted Ophelia as a very young, frail, emaciated girl, with green rushes in her hair, distractedly dropping petals into a stagnant pool.

Shakespeare's lines on the drowning of Ophelia have also inspired musicians. **Hector Berlioz** penned his own words in verse around 1842 and set them to music. In English translation:

"Beside a stream, Ophelia,/ Following the bank, gathered/ in her gentle, tender madness,/ buttercups, opal-tinted irises,/ and those pale pink blossoms/ called dead man's fingers. Ah!/"

Then, ..... she hung them on the branches of a nearby willow,/ But the branch was too frail, it bent/ and broke, and poor Ophelia/ fell, still holding her garland in her hand./

For a while her wide-spread dress/ bore her upon the surface, ... / But .... Her dress, made heavy with water,/ soon dragged the poor, mad girl/ into the depths,/ leaving her melodious song/ hardly begun. Ah!"

Another Frenchman, **Ambroise Thomas**, composed a complete opera (1868) based on *Hamlet*. Sadly, it's all too rarely heard these days. Ophelia features as almost the most important person in the fourth and last act; in the end Hamlet collapses over her body:

"Ma tâche est accomplie./ Ophélie, je meurs avec toi!" (Il tombe, mort, à côté du corps d'Ophélie.)

Further musical evocations? William Walton composed the score for the music to Laurence Olivier's 1948 film of *Hamlet*, as did Dmitry Shostakovich for Kozintsev's stunning 1964 Russian film version.

## 7. Film Versions of *Hamlet*

There are some 80 films and over 20 TV versions of *Hamlet*!

These include the ones directed by Laurence Olivier (1948, starring Olivier), by Grigory Kozintsev (1964, starring Innokenti Smoktunovski), by Franco Zeffirelli (1990, starring Mel Gibson), by Kenneth Branagh (1996, starring Branagh), and by Michael Almereyda (2000, starring Ethan Hawke).

Do try and access the startling 30-minute Animated Tales version (1994), directed by Natalia Orlova. It's based on a Graphic Novel of the play, brought to life through animation, and uses the original text, albeit in abridged form!

Compare and contrast ...

- how the Ghost is shown in each film: do we as viewers need to exercise our 'willing suspension of disbelief' (as Coleridge argued), or is the presentation convincing enough?
- where in the castle Hamlet's soliloquy 'To be, or not to be' is spoken?
- the body language, facial expression and tone of voice of the actor playing Hamlet in that speech
- how Claudius reacts to the 'Mousetrap' play

### **8. Dying young?**

How old do you think Hamlet is when he dies? Is there some mystique about dying young?

Think of James Dean, Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Amy Winehouse, .... What do they all have in common? What marks them out as individuals?

Read Roger McGough's poem 'Let Me Die a Youngman's Death' (1967).

- 9. A Moral Issue resulting from the play.** Think of cases where someone might want to take a private revenge, and kill another person for a crime. Can that ever be morally right? Why, or why not? Discuss.

### **10. Rewriting a Scene**

Read Margaret Atwood's essay 'Gertrude Talks Back', from *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994). Here Gertrude takes Hamlet to task: she explains that her first husband was no fun at all, that Claudius may be fat, but he enjoys a laugh and likes drinking and eating. She advises Hamlet to take another girlfriend and 'have a nice roll in the hay'. At the end she admits that she was the one who killed her husband...and Hamlet's father.

Notice how details from the original play are turned round for comic and grotesque effect. Choose one scene yourself and change it round. This activity is perhaps best done in pairs or a small group.

### **11. Writing a Review**

Study a number of reviews of different productions of the play. Is there a catchy headline? How is the review structured? What information is given about the production and performance? Which pros and cons are mentioned? On balance, what is the overall verdict?

Now write a review of Vienna's English Theatre's production and performance. Hand it to a fellow-student for comment and proof-reading. Then submit it to your teacher as editor, for constructive feedback. Finally, send it to V.E.T.!

**Wishing you all the best with your work on *Hamlet*. Enjoy the play in performance!**

**With thanks,**

*Andrew Milne-Skinner*