

# HAMLET - AN APPROACH

## Act One Scene One

### Lines 1 - 17 (Exit Francisco)

It is worth stopping after this section to establish the range of the play's key ideas that appear here.

1. " Who's there? " - Bernardo's opening question is directed into the darkness in an attempt to establish the reality of the figure that he dimly perceives appearing before him. This quest to establish the relationship between appearance and reality is at the heart of the play. It is worth pointing this out and stating that the question "Who's there?" is asked by a number of characters in the play as a whole:

- others ask the question about Hamlet. As the play progresses, a number of key figures are seen spying on Hamlet or attempting to get at the reality of his personality by questioning him.

- Hamlet asks the question about others. The Danish Court is steeped in corruption and this makes Hamlet very wary. Many of his actions are designed to help him discover who is friend and who is foe. Whilst doing this he also manages to hide his own reality with a most convincing disguise.

2. Most good editions highlight the reversal of the natural order that occurs when Bernardo asks "Who's there? ". As the relieving guard, it is not he who should ask this question, that is Francisco's job.

3. Get the class to comment on the mood of this opening. They could be asked to speculate on why the moods of fear and uncertainty are so dominant.

### Lines 18 - 107

Read it with the class and then get them to answer the following questions. It should prove to be a confidence builder.

1. How are the moods of the opening section built on here?
2. How would you describe the State of Denmark?
3. What reasons does Horatio give for the frenetic activity in Denmark?
4. What impression are we given of the former King?

Lines 108 - 175

I have no specific recommendations for this section. Much of it is concerned with the second appearance of the Ghost and reaction to it and there is also a great deal of verbal scene painting as the scene shifts from night to day.

Task - Look at lines 67 - 69 and 108 -126. How do the men interpret the appearance of the Ghost? What do they see it as a sign of being?

<sup>1</sup> This Hamlet resource by Andrew Kenning was found free at [www.englishresources.co.uk](http://www.englishresources.co.uk)  
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Generally, classes spot that they see it as a sign of trouble ahead. At this stage it is useful to get them see that it is also a sign that something evil has already happened. In doing so, they will come to the conclusion that Hamlet arrives at in scene 2.

Note also how the men are the first group of people in the play to ask the "Who's there?" question. They have seen the Ghost and become keen to establish the reasons for its appearance.

## Scene Two

### Main suggestions:

1. Spend some time looking at Claudius's language. Try to get the students to see beneath the surface of the opening 16 lines in particular. Claudius's abilities as a slick politician emerge quite clearly here. The polished appearance is one that hides the most ghastly of realities.
2. The appearance v reality thread also emerges in the exchange between Hamlet and his mother in lines 68 - 86. Ask the class to see if they can spot how it emerges. What do they think of Hamlet's defence of his actions? Finally, what is their opinion of Claudius's advice in the long speech that follows?
3. Hamlet's first soliloquy - it is certainly worth keeping a detailed record of the soliloquies. I tend to focus on Hamlet's mood in them, the views he expresses in them and their language/structure. Some students have tabulated their notes on each soliloquy under the headings suggested.
4. At the end of the scene Hamlet interprets the Ghost's appearance. How does his interpretation differ from that of the men in scene One?

Having read the scene, it pays to take it back to the beginning and think about its staging. Ask the class to suggest ways in which the scene can be set up. Claudius has to dominate its opening, surely he must take centre stage. If that is the case, where is Hamlet during the early part of this scene? How would an actor engage our interest in this character before he has even spoken a word?

### Public Scenes in Hamlet

This is the first of 4 public scenes in the play. This is worth considering as the play progresses because in them we are able to trace Hamlet's development in the play as a whole. You can mention this now or simply save it for a post-reading analysis of Hamlet in the play as a whole.

**A1 Sc2** - Hamlet on the edge of the scene watching the action.

**A3 Sc2** - Play within a play. Again Hamlet observing the action, watching the King.

**A5 Sc1** - Graveyard Scene - Hamlet begins by watching the scene but he moves to centre stage. He decides to become part of the action.

**A5 Sc2** - Sword fight - Hamlet occupies central stage. He chooses to be part of the action. He knows he has to be part of the action whatever the cost.

## Scene 4

It pays to omit scene 3 so that the central action can be focussed on. My advice is to skip it and return to it after Scene 5. The scenes involving the Polonius family can then be dealt with at the same time.

### Lines 1 - 38

We see a little more of Hamlet's character here. Read the section and ask the class to give an opinion on him. His views on Denmark merit particular attention.

### Lines 39 - 57

Appearance v Reality

How does this speech relate to the ideas already looked at in previous scenes?

### Lines 58 - end of scene

A straightforward section. Marcellus's penultimate comment merits brief attention.

Task - In what ways have we witnessed corruption in the previous scenes; in what ways is the state of Denmark rotten?

## Scene 5

After a reading of this scene the following of lines of exploration and discussion are worth pursuing:

1. Claudius - the reality beneath the appearance is exposed. You could revisit Claudius's speech at the beginning of Scene 2 and reassess it. Note in particular the methods that Claudius uses to bring about his brother's demise. He spies, he waits, he poisons. The imagery used to describe the way in which Old Hamlet dies is worth paying particular attention to. In Shakespeare's time parallels were often drawn between King and Country. The body of the King can be seen as a representation of the land itself. Extend this idea by asking the class to come up with parallels between the effects of Claudius's poisoning of the old king's body and his corruption of the Danish Court. What evidence is there to suggest that his poisonous influence has spread through the corridors of power at Elsinore? As the play progresses, his ability to poison or corrupt the minds of others becomes more apparent.
2. Hamlet's behaviour - trace his mood shifts within the scene. Focus in particular on his decision "to put an antic disposition on" - why does he do this? and what sort of place will this make the Danish Court? are questions that could be explored.
3. Hamlet's Second Soliloquy- Lines 92 - 112. Follow the guidelines suggested for the first soliloquy. Compare and contrast.

## **Act One Scene Three and Act Two Scene One**

After reading both scenes, split the class into two groups.

### **Group One - A1 Sc3.**

### **Group Two - A2 Sc1.**

Allow a free rein here. Ask them to comment on anything that strikes them as being significant. Keep the focus on character and theme.

## **HOMEWORK - HAMLET - ACT ONE - MAKING NOTES**

### **Scene One**

1. How do the opening 39 lines establish the moods of doubt, uncertainty and apprehension?
2. Lines 59 - 107 contrast the current state of Denmark with its condition under old Hamlet. What are the main differences?
3. In what way is the appearance of the ghost interpreted in this scene?
4. In what ways does the central opposition between appearance and reality feature in this scene?

### **Scene Two**

1. What does Claudius attempt to achieve in this scene? How successful is he ?
2. Lines 65 and 76 - 86 introduce us to Hamlet. What is his mood?
3. Hamlet's 1st soliloquy (lines 129 - 159). Comment on his state of mind and the reasons for it. Include some comment on the language.
4. In the last speech in this scene, Hamlet draws his own conclusions about the appearance of the Ghost. How does his opinion differ from those views expressed earlier?
5. How is the appearance v reality theme developed in this scene?

### **Scene 4**

1. Lines 14 - 38. What is Hamlet's opinion of certain Danish traditions? What does this tell us about his character?

### **Scene 5**

1. In this scene the Ghost describes the way in which he was murdered and the nature of his horrific death. What are the similarities between the effects of Claudius's actions on old Hamlet and the Danish nation?
2. Hamlet's second soliloquy. (Lines 92 - 112)
  - (a) What is Hamlet's mood here?
  - (b) How do his comments on Claudius relate to the theme of appearance v reality?

### **Scene 3 and Act Two Scene One**

1. Ophelia is warned twice in this scene. What is she warned about and how do those warnings relate to the appearance v reality theme?
2. Lines 55 - 81 contain Polonius's advice to Laertes. Is it good advice?
3. A2 Sc1 - Comment on Polonius's instructions to Reynaldo. What evidence is there to suggest that Claudius has corrupted him?
4. Hamlet has begun to feign madness. What does it prompt Polonius to think?
5. How does this scene relate to others that we have studied? Think in particular of the appearance v reality thread and the question of "Who's there?"

## **Act Two Scene Two**

### **Lines 1 - 58**

Corruption Spreads! - That would be my two-word summary of this section. My challenge to the class is to find reasons for this and for them to offer an alternative two-word synopsis that I have to justify or question. Their attempts to "trick Sir/Miss" are often ingenious. This type of game can be played at any stage of the text and it makes a change.

**Lines 60 - 80** - Voltimand's Report. Earlier troubles sorted! Note the description of Fortinbras though. Appearance v Reality?

### **Lines 85 - 171**

After a reading of this section, it is worth spending some time relating it to the Appearance v Reality theme and the "Who's there?" question. Note again Polonius's fondness for espionage. Note also how many characters are employed in the act of spying on Hamlet.

### **Lines 171 -352**

Before reading this section it is worth considering the idea of madness. Ask the class to brainstorm the word so that their perceptions of what constitutes madness can be explored. I tend to direct the discussion into the areas of how a mad person would speak / behave. Hopefully, the class will point out that not everything that a mad person says or does can be explained in a rational way. In doing so they should prepare themselves for aspects of Hamlet's performance in this section. He is aiming to confuse, he is trying to bewilder and so if they experience those feelings, they should not, as they so often do, feel worried or alarmed by a lack of understanding. If you wish, you could then leave a detailed exploration of the language and imagery in this scene and return to it at a later date. The key speeches that do require some close attention are those beginning:

Ham: "Why anything - but to the purpose...." Here, Hamlet shows us that he has seen beneath R and G's friendly appearance.

Ham: " I will tell you why ... " Compare the imagery that he uses here with that found in his first soliloquy.

Ham: " It is not very strange..." The state of Denmark!

### **Lines 352 - 521**

Key focus = those speeches that depict Pyrrhus's avenging actions. Here we have the depiction of someone sweeping to his revenge. A profitable line of discussion at this stage is:

Why is Hamlet unable to act in a similarly determined fashion?

### **Lines 521 - end of scene. Hamlet's Third Soliloquy**

Again the approach outlined before is worth maintaining here. The broken structure of this speech is one that emphasises the struggle that Hamlet is facing. This is worth spending some time on.

### **Act Three Scene One**

#### **Lines 1 - 55**

A straightforward section in which Ros and Guild. report back. Note in particular Polonius's words in the speech beginning "Ophelia walk you here" and Claudius's reaction to them.

#### **Lines 56 - 91. Hamlet's Fourth Soliloquy**

See approach outlined above.

#### **Lines 92 - 149**

Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is the centre of attention here. It is worth reminding the class of the "Frailty thy name is woman" observation from Hamlet's first soliloquy. I tend to look closely at what this scene tells us about Hamlet's attitude to women at this point in the play. What does he feel and why is he feeling this way?

Note: Return to this scene after reading the graveyard scene. It is worth reassessing Hamlet's actions here in the light of what he later says about Ophelia. Is it possible to argue that Hamlet is trying to protect Ophelia here?

#### **Lines 149 - end of the scene**

Compare and contrast the King and Ophelia's interpretations of Hamlet's words and actions.

### **Scene Two**

The play within the play is the second public scene in Hamlet (see previous note on Act 1 Scene 2). It is worth asking the class to analyse this for themselves. They should easily be able to establish the relationship between this section and the remainder of the text. Get them to establish links via theme rather than character.

#### **Lines 362 - end of scene. Hamlet's Fifth soliloquy.**

Hamlet briefly submits to the "blasts from Hell". Use the analytical approach outlined above.

## **Scene Three**

### **Lines 1 - 26**

Claudius's opening speech should be linked to his last but one speech in Scene 1 of this act. Does Claudius still intend to achieve the purpose he outlined in the previous speech? Ros and Guild's sycophantic behaviour is also worthy of comment.

### **Lines 27 - end of the scene (Containing Hamlet's 6th soliloquy.)**

Polonius indulging in espionage - again!

Claudius and Hamlet's soliloquies - use the method outlined above to analyse these. Note also the interplay of some of the forms of appearance and reality here:

Claudius tries to pray but is only able to put on the appearance of praying.

Hamlet sees Claudius praying and accepts the gesture at face value. He does not kill the King because of this.

## **Scene Four**

A fraught scene in which Hamlet tears down the wholesome appearance of his mother's marriage to Claudius and exposes its hideous reality.

Explore: (i) Hamlet's methods of making his mother see the truth. An examination of the language he uses to compare Claudius and Old Hamlet should prove profitable here.

(ii) The nature of her responses. Was she a part of the murder plot or was she seduced after the deed had been done? This is a hotly debated, contentious issue. Either view can be argued convincingly, so be prepared to encourage and accept diverse opinions.

## **Act Four Scene One**

Gertrude reports the events of the previous scene. Claudius recognises the danger he is now facing. Analyse his reaction in detail. Note the importance of appearances to him (line 40).

## **Scene Two**

Hamlet's wonderful digs at his erstwhile school friends are hilarious but it also pinpoints the nature of the corruption that is spreading through the court.

## **Scene Three**

Claudius's three main speeches require the close attention here. What aspects of his character are developed here? Get them to work in pairs on this. 10 minutes maximum.

## **Scene Four (containing Hamlet's 7th soliloquy)**

An important scene for 2 reasons:

1. It develops our view of Fortinbras.
2. It contains Hamlet's final soliloquy.

The discussion of Fortinbras's character need not take up too much time. A fuller analysis of his role in the text is advisable after the last scene. More on this will appear later.

However, it is worth stopping at this point to reflect on all of Hamlet's soliloquies. Present them all on separate sheets to the class and get the students to "declutter" them. Spend a whole lesson on this. Split the class into groups of four or five.

Focus on:

1. The subject matter of each of them.
2. His mood in each of them.
3. Any decisions that he makes.
4. The language that he uses.

Obviously, the aim is to trace any development that takes place and to look for any similarities/differences between them.

## **Scene Five**

At this point I advise you to read scenes 5, 6 and 7 and then show the video for Act 4 before progressing with your analysis. Kate Winslett's performance in the Branagh version of the play is particularly powerful. Seeing Ophelia gives them a better feel for the scene and makes analysis of it easier.

### **Scene 5 can be divided in two:**

1. Ophelia - how is sympathy for her created in this passage?
2. Laertes - what are the group's thoughts and feelings for him here?

## **Scene 6**

Hamlet's taken some decisive action! What hints of a change are there here?

## **Scene 7**

The Poisoning of Laertes - Claudius's skilful manipulation of Laertes dominates this scene. Look closely at the section from line 56 ( Cl: If it be so Laertes....) to the end of the scene.

1. What methods does Claudius use to corrupt Laertes?
2. What effects do Claudius's words have on Laertes?

Comment on the similarities/differences between Laertes and Hamlet.



## **Act Five Scene One**

After the initial exchange between the First and Second Gravedigger, we have the conversation between Hamlet and the First Gravedigger.

1. Ask the class to define the mood of Hamlet during that conversation.
  2. Having established Hamlet's mood, ask them to tell you what the subject of that conversation is.
  3. Now ask them if they can identify any ways in which Hamlet has changed.
- 3rd Public Scene (Ophelia's burial) See note on Act 1 Sc2

A scene in which Hamlet moves centre stage and declares his love for Ophelia. Comments?

## **Scene Two**

### **Lines 1 - 80**

Hamlet gives Horatio a full account of how he escaped from Ros and Guild and he explains how he turned the tables on them. Look back to the end of his final soliloquy. What evidence is there to suggest that Hamlet has fulfilled his stated intention.

Key lines:

10 and 11, 48 and 64-70. These mark the change in Hamlet's attitude.

10/11 - the realisation that there is a force beyond our control that determines our fate. Our actions are within our control but the consequences of them are in the hands of Providence. This is a key realisation for Hamlet who is now prepared to take action because he believes that the consequences of it lie beyond his control. It is this that he puts his faith in when he agrees to the swordfight (Line 202 " Not a whit we defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow....") Note also the link to the Player King's words in Act Three Scene 2: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run/ That our devices still are overthrown;? Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own."

48 - "heaven ordinant" - again, Providence was on Hamlet's side.

64 - 70 Hamlet now recognises that it is his duty to kill Claudius. It is he argues "perfect conscience to kill the King because of the corruption that Claudius has spread through the Kingdom.

### **Lines 81 - 183 (Hamlet and Osric)**

This section shows Hamlet at his ironic best. His handling of Osric brings in much needed comic relief before the swordfight.

### **Lines 184 - 206 ( Hamlet and Horatio)**

Hamlet defies augury and accepts the challenge.

4th Public Scene (Lines 208 - 340)

Hamlet confidently takes centre stage and tries to make his peace with Laertes. Note the deception employed throughout this scene:

- Laertes is pretending;
- the King pretends to put a pearl into the cup of wine;
- all of the swords appear to be bated but one of them isn't and its tip is poisoned;

The action is easy to follow. Discussion can profitably be focused on the appropriateness of the ending. Do all that die deserve to because they have all in some way been corrupted by the poisonous influence of Claudius? What is particularly interesting here is the way in which the poison eventually finds its way back to Claudius having spread across the stage at his instigation.

### **Closing Section**

Is Fortinbras a worthy successor to the throne of Denmark? Consider this in the light of his actions in the play as a whole.

Would Hamlet have been a better King?