William Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet,’ is a timeless play which remains relevant across all generations due to its engagement with universal concepts of what constitutes a ‘man’ and rational thought over rash action. Within the medieval context, to be subservient to one’s patriarch in vengeance was a noble cause. However, prince Hamlet struggles with his avenger role as his moral conscience forbids him from the misguided act which is corruptive and a mere ‘trick of fame’. Thus, I view him as an embodiment of Renaissance Humanist values of rational thought conflicting with medieval ideologies where honour was revered. Although Hamlet is self-deprecating due to his failure to uphold his filial duty, I believe Hamlet’s decision to refuse his avenger role was the most ethical response. This is apparent upon juxtaposing him to his foils, Laertes and Fortinbras, whose failure to reach the same level of enlightenment corrupted their nobility. Shakespeare’s creation of such a complex and wondrous character allows the play to achieve textual integrity and makes it a highly appreciated and endearing text.

Hamlet initially establishes that we are compelled to be loyal to our filial duty through three heirs; Laertes, Fortinbras and Hamlet. The love to one’s parents is mutually foremost valued by audiences across all receptions and thus all three possess equal commitment to revenge. Laertes is lent his resolution through the grief of losing his father and sister. In Claudius’s statement, ‘No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize; Revenge should have no bounds.’(A4S7) His righteous tone perfectly highlights the medieval perception that revenge is needed to uphold filial piety and noble code of honour. Furthermore, Fortinbras’ role as a warrior prince leading an army to Denmark in a quest to seek honour is captured in Hamlet’s admirative remark, ‘led by a delicate and tender prince, whose spirit with divine ambition puff’d.’ Hamlet’s admiration lets us realise that vengeance is of divine and restorative nature. This is reinforced when even Hamlet makes a passionate promise to his father’s apparition in the extended metaphor, ‘wipe all trivial fond records … that youth had copied there … thy commandment alone shall live.’ Hamlet makes an oath to forgo all his memories and simply commit to his mind his father’s vengeance. Yet, we are inevitably filled with a sense of apprehension at how Hamlet will lose his identity and innocence by engaging in revenge. Samuel Taylor Coleridge had explained that, ‘Hamlet is obliged to act on the spur of the moment,’ which to me is an affirmation that his father’s visit has in fact constrained Hamlet’s free will and choice. In this way, we learn how each of the three characters must uphold their filial duty to prove their honour and nobility, although it may come at a cost.

The costs are highlighted through the actions of Laertes and Fortinbras which ironically results in their corruption and loss of independent and ethical judgment. Laertes is completely manipulated by Claudius to become a tool for killing Hamlet. In the lines, ‘What would you undertake to show yourself your father’s son in deed…?’ ‘To cut his throat I’ the church,’ (A4S7) the bloodthirsty conviction by Laertes diminishes his noble character to a murderous fiend as he is willing to commit the sin in a church, which symbolises forgiveness. We are in disdain at how Laertes forfeits his identity and individual agency to satisfy his impulse of vengeance. Yet Hamlet’s conflicting state of mind from not upholding his filial duty leads him to ironically admire what Laertes and Fortinbras represents and in his final soliloquy he muses, ‘imminent death of twenty thousand men … for a fantasy and trick of fame.’ The hyperbole shows his awe at the extent Fortinbras will go for honour which leads him to believe that he is lacking in conviction and courage. However, we as the audience are shocked at Fortinbras’ reckless act of sacrificing twenty thousand lives. His apathy towards the value of human lives forces us to ponder if the concept of revenge is really righteous. Hamlet is inherently different in that he rationally reflects on the true nature of his duty, and in doing so becomes the delayer. Hamlet’s continuous hesitation convinces me that his moral conscience forbids the inherently wrong of revenge. As Catherine Belsey pronounces, ‘[Revenge] is an act of injustice on behalf of justice,’ suggesting to me that no matter the sense of righteousness, revenge is undeniably a sin. Hamlet’s exceptional prudence and honesty to himself gains our utmost respect and is what separates him from his foils whose blind loyalty leads to their corruption.
Hamlet not only has the wisdom to subvert his fate but also didactically teaches us how we should act as humans and this allows the text to transcend the barriers of language and time. He achieves this by showing his awareness that revenge degrades our humanity in the simile, ‘What a piece of work is a man! ... in action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a God!’ (A2S2) Hamlet instructs us of the uniqueness of man in that we share with God the infinite faculty for thought. We are reminded that angels, despite their majesty, are mere subjects of God and implies that humans are great for their capacity for critical reflection. This is reinforced in the logos that, ‘[God] gave us not that capability and god-like reason to fust in us unused,’(A4S4) which further demonstrates how our ability to contemplate is what distinguishes us from beasts. By giving up this ability we are not only undermining our humanity but God’s own wishes. His soliloquy inspires our awe as by doing so, Hamlet answers the question that has plagued humanity since our existence, which is the opening of National Theatre’s Hamlet character guide: ‘What is a man if his chief good ... be but to sleep and feed? a beast no more.’ Hamlet knows there is more to a man than to merely eat and sleep and follow one’s destiny and this is our capacity for free thought. Finally, Hamlet highlights the supremacy of thought over action in the irony, ‘Conscience makes cowards of us all ... currents turn awry and lose the name of action.’(A3S1) The irony exists in that the more we think, the less we act but in doing so, retain what makes us moral and human. It is even more ironic in that Hamlet is definitely not slow to act, which AC Bradley proves, ‘impossible that the man we see rushing after the ghost ... boarding with the pirates ... could ever be shrinking in emergency.’ Hamlet is not a coward, rather my perception is that he is self-deprecating due to his guilt of not upholding his oath to his father, which Laertes and Fortinbras does. His subversion of destiny attains our immense respect and even inspires us to take the same stance.

**ESSAY 2**

*The inevitable tensions between the individual and society are the foundations for the most engaging moments in Hamlet.*

Through an introspective dialogue of binary oppositions, in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet Prince of Denmark, individuals seek to reconcile their identity and moral conscience with a variety of competing societal expectations. Confronted by the disparities of a world in figurative decay, characters experience internal conflict as they search, largely in vain, for definitive answers to questions of duty, authenticity and mortality. By portraying the human experience as a series of tensions between the individual and society, Shakespeare explores his protagonist’s tragic self-awareness. In doing so, he lays the foundations for scenes of moral uncertainty and metaphysical anguish that I believe are the most universally engaging moments in Hamlet.

The desire of Shakespeare’s protagonist Hamlet to forge or elucidate a personal identity, independent of societal definitions, is fundamentally problematised amidst spreading ‘corruption’. Living within a metaphorical “prison” of perennial surveillance that Shakespeare employs to mirror the Elizabethan Court at the turn of 17th century, Hamlet perceives that, in light of his father’s “foul’ murder, Denmark has been rendered “rotten”. For this reason, Shakespeare personifies the State as the body of old King Hamlet with the synecdochic images of Denmark’s “ear” “Rankly abused” (1.5.38). Incorporating mythological and biblical allusions, Shakespeare further juxtaposes old Hamlet – a “Hyperion” and a “stallion like the herald Mercury” (3.4.57) – with Claudius, a “serpent that did sting thy father’s life/Now wears his crown” (1.5.39). Honour “bound to hear” the testament of the “apparition” that purports to be his father, Hamlet’s humanist ideals that place mankind below angels in a Renaissance conception of ‘Great Chain of Being’ are severely undermined upon hearing of Claudius’ murderous act. Nevertheless, Hamlet cannot passively endure Denmark’s corruption, as he asserts that he has been “born to set it right”. In this way, by highlighting Hamlet’s acute consciousness of his social responsibility, Shakespeare establishes the foundations for his protagonist’s timelessly engaging crisis of identity.

Exposed to Renaissance discourse, yet disillusioned by the expectations of a corrupted society, Hamlet’s consideration of humanist philosophy places him in conflict with medieval notions of ‘Duty’. In Hamlet’s soliloquy (1.5.91-112) “O you all host of heaven”, Shakespeare utilises tautological repetition of phrases such as “Remember
thee!” alongside comparisons of the “heart” and the head – a “distracted globe” – to establish a dichotomy between dutiful, impassioned revenge and rational action. Employing the foil of young Fortinbras, a ‘medieval’ figure, Shakespeare deepens Hamlet’s sense of divided duty, while heightening the dramatic tension between ‘action’ and ‘inaction’, by illustrating an alternative young man’s pursuit of “foresaid lands” and vengeance for his father. The code of chivalry that Fortinbras upholds values brutal vengeance, and is linked through Shakespeare’s classical allusion to “the mightiest Julius” with a violent Roman past that preoccupied the medieval imagination. In contrast, as A.C Swinburne rightly affirms, Hamlet’s innermost nature is subject to a “strong conflux of contending forces”. This can be seen when Hamlet asks his father’s ‘spirit’, if he brings “airs from heaven or blasts from hell”. By utilising antithesis, Shakespeare elucidates Hamlet’s uncertainty regarding the origin of the ghost, an “apparition” that asks him to forsake Christian morality through enacting revenge. Thus, torn between the expectations of filial duty and societal notions of God’s divine justice, Hamlet attempts to proceed in the manner of a rational Renaissance man, asserting, “I’ll have grounds more relative than this”. Ultimately, in moments such as these, Shakespeare problematizes conventions of the revenge tragedy form by making his protagonist introspective, thus elucidating competing perceptions of ‘Duty’ that appeal to his responder as compelling explorations of moral uncertainty.

Tensions between the individual’s struggle for authenticity and widespread societal deception extend Hamlet’s anguished questions of duty and morality. Caught between ‘authentic’ and ‘responsible’ action, Hamlet remains “unpregnant” of his cause and thus unable to achieve self-definition within societal expectations. As a consequence, Hamlet’s paradoxical decision to seek authenticity in deception by putting on an “antic disposition” is emblematic of the entire play - juxtaposition of ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ being crucial to its structure. In accordance with Polonius’ maxim “The apparel oft proclaims the man” (1.3.72), clothing becomes a powerful image of disguise. Thus Hamlet’s assumption of a ‘costume’ (“doublet unbraced, No hat upon his head” (2.1.78), symbolises his outward show of madness. For this reason, Hamlet’s soliloquy “O what a rogue and peasant slave I am” (2.2.501-558) provides an engaging moment of private introspection that, in the context of Hamlet’s ‘pretence’, elucidates the intensity of his private struggle. Reinforcing the motif of theatrical “show”, Hamlet’s soliloquy resembles a play within a play. The accusations that Hamlet hurls at himself reflect roles that an actor might adopt: “villain,” “rogue,” “rascal,” “coward”. Furthermore, as the soliloquy proceeds, Hamlet moves from being a self-flagellant questioner, to the role of a scheming playwright. By employing alliteration when Hamlet states “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?” Shakespeare achieves fluidity of Hamlet’s dialogue with a sonorous quality that, in the manner of a player, effectively cleaves “the general ear”. Nevertheless, unable to act upon his filial duty, Hamlet is appalled that a player, “But in a fiction, in a dream of passion” can “force his soul” so that “his whole function” is committed to his role, “And all for nothing”. In this way, Shakespeare’s responder is captivated by Hamlet’s inability to actualise his ‘duty’ to avenge.

Comparatively, when ambitious individuals reject societal expectations, resultant internal conflict forms the foundation for moments of dramatically engaging theological anguish and moral questioning. A complex villain, Hamlet’s uncle Claudius is not a static character, but rather a Machiavellian man who takes Renaissance humanism (with its focus on individualism) to its logical extreme. Though Claudius is an adept statesman whose rehearsed, antithetical statement “With mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage” embodies his diplomatic skill, Shakespeare employs the extended metaphor of “plastering art” upon the “harlot’s cheek” to emphasise the ugly “burden” upon Claudius’ conscience. For this reason, Claudius’ confessional soliloquy “O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven” (3.3.36-72), is an engaging moment in which he concedes that he cannot seek absolution for misdoings when still “possessed/Of those effects for which I did the murder/ My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.” Claudius’ tragic self-awareness is dramatically emphasised by his physical isolation and by his repetition of the inarticulate sound “O” which breaks the pattern of intensive verbal design that has, until this point, characterised his speech. Invoking references to “heaven”, Shakespeare reinforces Claudius’ “rank”, unnatural offense with biblical allusion to “the primal eldest curse”, Cain’s murder of Abel. Furthermore, Claudius’ imperative self-command “Bow stubborn knees, be soft as the sinews of a new-born babe” evokes an image of vulnerability that unsuccessfully attempts to mimic contrition. Ultimately, though Claudius takes responsibility for his violation of fraternal duty, his theological questions remain unanswered, words flying “up to heaven”, thoughts remaining “below”.

Dramatic tension between societal duty and the individual’s conception of mortality is the foundation for universally
engaging moments of paralysis or empowerment for Hamlet as he confronts the metaphysical paradoxes of an ambiguous world. Shakespeare’s preferred form in which to explore ‘tragic self-awareness’ central to the play’s structure – the soliloquy – is once again employed for Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech. Use of the opening rhetorical question “That is the question” betrays Hamlet’s deep existential scepticism towards the notion of traditional duty in the face of unalterable human weakness and the certainty of death, described with the metaphor “a thousand natural shocks”. Shakespeare’s further use of cataloguing and chain syllogism in Hamlet’s discussion with Claudius, “a man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that fed of that worm”, subverts the paradigm of divinely imposed duty and the traditional Elizabethan perception of a King as an ‘immortal’ figure. To a large extent, Hamlet is paralysed by his inability to achieve definitive metaphysical answers, thus espousing the nihilistic statement “What piece of work is man!/And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust”. As an extension of Hamlet’s obsession with the physicality of death, this motif of dust is reiterated when, as he contemplates the skull of Yorik, Hamlet alludes to Alexander the great as an indomitable human figure who “returneth into dust” and might now “stop a beer-barrel”. Yet as he stares into the twin abyss of Yorrik’s hollow eyes, Hamlet symbolically confronts the very face of death. For this reason, it is only when Hamlet grasps the fragile nature of human life and the return of history’s greatest men such as Caesar to “clay” that he can he stoically accept death’s consequence and allow himself to be guided by an intuitive sense of duty. In this way, Hamlet’s reconciliation of his metaphysical anxiety and society’s competing demands with his sense of personal identity enables him to take dutiful action in Shakespeare’s final scene.

Shakespeare’s examination of his protagonists’ tragic self-awareness makes Hamlet an extraordinarily alluring play. While characters vacillate between action and inaction, appearance and reality, introspection and careless disregard, ultimately, tensions between the individual and society manifest in scenes of metaphysical and moral anguish that remain the most engaging moments of this play.

ESSAY 4

An inherent tension between confrontation and resolution is revealed through characterization in Shakespeare’s Hamlet

A philosophical rendering of the everyday leads to a tension between reflection and action. In Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy play Hamlet, this is highlighted through the characterisation of Hamlet himself, and his engagement with the philosophical and academic concerns of Elizabethan England through his interactions with Horatio. By drawing on elements of this, and contrasting them with contextual concerns about religion and spirituality, Hamlet is constructed as a deeply meditative play, which finds itself continuously delayed and stunted in its attempts to reach fruition.

The use of delay to create a play, which happens outside of ‘reality’ and thus remains internalised and wrought with anaphasia is most evident in the characterisation of Hamlet. Hamlet’s diction is littered with binary oppositions, such as in his opening line “a little more than kin and less than kind”, indicating that he inhabits and speaks within a space where the constant state of ux has rendered ideas without opposition unpalatable. Hamlet’s inability to speak without binary oppositions is directly related to his inability to act, and this is shown in his soliloquy, “to be or not to be, that is the question”, where the binary oppositions of existence and selfhood are placed in the sphere of movement, only to cause further inaction, adding to the overall delay of the play. It is this delay in the action which causes Act 5 Scene 2 to erupt with such bloodshed, as shown through the repetitious stage directions: “He dies”, and “dies” are repeated four times in the scene. And yet, even in the single scene of action in this play, these deaths, too, are delayed.

Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet all speak between receiving their final wounds and dying, indicating that it is the loss of speech, rather than loss of life, that is the most crucial part of mankind, and will be lost in death. In addition to this, despite the question of whether or not to kill Claudius functioning within the play as a metaphor for the question of whether or not existence is worthwhile, it is Claudius who is the last to die (barring Hamlet), delaying resolution even in a moment of confrontation. This delay and its cause has been widely attributed to the Elizabethan
guilt complex, and obsession with “the functions of conscience and especially its especially its morbid preoccupation with past sins and omissions” (Reed 1958). By obsessing over the dangers of inaction, Hamlet creators further delay for himself, ultimately halting any action or resolution that the play could come to.

The power of academic and philosophical engagement with issues of morality and political structure is an undeniable force in the conclusion of Hamlet. The relationship between Hamlet and Horatio is one of academic engagement, as shown through Horatio’s continual allusions to the rendering of Caesar’s death in the Shakespearian version of the story, which was written concurrently with Hamlet, such as in his description of the ghost’s appearance “in the most high and palmy state of Rome/a little ere the mightiest Julius fell”. This dialogue with history and politics is emphasised through the vehicle of this friendship, and, in using this, Shakespeare questions the virility of the Danish political system and the role of the monarchy. This parallel between Rome after the assassination of Caesar and the rapidly-declining political system of Denmark is furthered by Horatio’s return to this metaphor in the final scene “I am more antique Roman than a Dane”. Through this juxtaposition the audience is forced to call into question Hamlet’s role in the Julius Caesar parallel, creating yet another layer of separation between Hamlet and the audience.

It is in Hamlet’s conversations with Horatio that his philosophical musings are most prominent, and through this we can see Horatio as an agent both of Hamlet’s conscience, and of the play’s delay. In John Quincy Adam’s analysis of the play, he points at the friendship between Hamlet and Horatio as being crucial to the development of Hamlet’s moral code which is only the result of “a mind cultivated by the learning acquirable at a university, combining intelligence and sensibility” (Adams, 1839). By characterising Horatio as the intellectual force within the play, and subsequently the source of socio-political commentary, Shakespeare adds to the moral and cultural instability of the play in a manner which results in further delay of confrontation or resolution.

The apostrophe of “out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune!” shows Hamlet’s resistance of what he perceives to be the only path available to him. In Act 5 Scene 2, when Hamlet finally takes action, he begins to refer to himself in the third person, a bizarre subversion of a play which previously obsessed with the use of “I”. This switching of mode of speech indicates that it is only through the abandonment of his self-identity, and thus moral code, that he is able to complete the actions which divine providence demands of him. This is supported by Dwery’s reading of the play’s resolution, where he argues that “Hamlet recognizes the inevitability of death, accepting his father’s death and recognising his own unavoidable fate.” (Dwery, 2004) By understanding the contextual concerns with the nature and role of fate and divinity in the everyday, a deeper understanding of the character of Hamlet emerges.

The tension between action and inaction in Hamlet stems from the contextual role of fate, which forces Hamlet into a position where he repeatedly delays himself, until his self-identity is erased, and he performs the actions which fate requires of him. My interpretation of the delay highlights the contribution of socio-political forces to the delay, and ultimately the tension which permeates the play, which is depicted through the characterisation of Hamlet and Horatio.

**Essay 5**

One of the most important elements of Hamlet that make it an interesting play is Hamlet’s conflict as a hero – whether he should avenge his father, or simply abandon his quest through philosophical moralizing.

The demands of Elizabethan society and even our society would be that one should return an eye for an eye, most of our films and drama support this idea of righteous justice towards someone who has wronged us.

Initially Hamlet also communicates this idea through the “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” of the king. From Hamlet himself, he uses strong emotional language to swear that “I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,” “And thy commandment all alone shall live”, clearly indicating that he knows exactly what is expected of him, and this is his role in the play and his life. What society expects is also shown through the reference to the Chain of Being,
through which a false king would lead to the collapse of the natural system. Hamlet describes this in the metaphor, ‘tis an unweeded garden, That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely…” Using the garden imagery to show that a false king leads to weeds and other unnatural elements in the world. Thus at least initially, there appears to be no conflict, and Hamlet will merely be a revenge tragedy play.

However, the play gets much more interesting when it becomes clear that Hamlet wants nothing to do with revenge, in fact, he is such a philosopher and thinker that he despises what is basically another bout of regicide. The critic Henry Mackenzie agrees with this idea that the play arises from Hamlet’s nature: even the best qualities of his character merely reinforce his inability to cope with the world in which he is placed. Textually, we can see this in the various ways Hamlet forces himself to stop his murder. His doubt, “[the devil] is very potent with such spirits, I’ll have grounds/More relative than this.” Show he is unwilling to simply go out and be a traditional avenger. Furthermore, his continues this idea of him trying to escape fate, “Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,” shows that society “heaven and hell” prompt him to go and murder his uncle, but he refuses to simply be a whore of fate – he is going to forge his own destiny. This conflict as a central element in the play can also be seen in Hamlet’s polar opposite. Laertes have his father killed, but gives no two lines about wanting to kill Hamlet – and straight away he dies in the attempt – his demand for “[daring] damnation to be most thoroughly revenged for [his] father.” not only ends his life, but draws Hamlet’s avoidance of his fate to an end, and ends up with all involved dying, and thus formatting the tragedy.

Another way that Shakespeare shows the conflict between society and the individual is through the play within a play dynamic of Hamlet. As a Avenger play, Hamlet is the tragic hero doomed to avenge his father. However, Hamlet as an individual refuses to, and this conflict, the putting off of the murder, is what makes the play philosophical and enjoyable. Unwilling Hero / Fate / Fight against Fate Both arguments are explored with excellent textual integrity by Shakespeare through a multi perspective approach of the conflict between individual and society.

Again, the concept of fate here is central – Hamlet is fated to get revenge, even if it costs him his life. His own self doubt in berating his own inaction such as “How stand I then, That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d And let all sleep?” Uses rhetorical questions to demonstrate the conflict in his heart. However contrary to popular belief, the Elizabethan perceptions of revenge had shifted from the Old Testament ‘an eye for an eye’ stance, to the New Testament perspective on revenge, ‘Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord’, so it is arguable that Shakespeare’s ‘humility and mercy’ Hamlet is much more interesting than a eager Hamlet. This is why Hamlet simply refuses to choose a fate, but rather tries to play the roles out. His acting, ”The best actors in the world // Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light.” shows that he realizes he cannot ‘give up’ his revenge, nor can he simply commit to it, as he is as tradition, going to die as a result. His constant placement of himself into the role of an Avenger is shown here in his own chastisement, “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”, whilst his utter unwillingness to carry out the deed is seen in the excuse he comes up with to put off the kill, “To take him in the purging of his soul, When he is fit and season’d for his passage? No!”. Together, these back and forth elements make the play very interesting for the viewer.

Ultimately, Hamlet does do the deed, and it becomes difficult to see how there is a conflict when he has already killed the king, no less forcing poison into his ear in many versions. However, what we should pay attention to is the fact that Hamlet even in death wants nothing to do with revenge. His final words to Horatio are, “Thou livest; report me and my cause aright, To the unsatisfied.” Literally asking him to tell Fortinbras what happened here. He is more interested in his kingdom and legacy than any act of having accomplished his revenge and sated the Gods of revenge and fate. This is continued in his repetition, “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, draw thy breath in pain, To tell my story.” that again clearly shows a Hamlet who is neither happy nor unhappy with the result – he simply wants to have his story told, “with the occurrencents, more and less, Which have solicited.” Hamlet is in the end like the description by Millicent Bell, “both the overstylized play-within-the-play and the conclusion of the play itself. Hamlet’s concern with revenge is nowhere to be seen when he is dying, noting that, rather than crying out for revenge, Hamlet asks only to be remembered.”
One of the most interesting elements of Hamlet for me is probably the way in which the female leads are portrayed by Hamlet himself — how their actions and roles, juxtaposed against what Hamlet tells us — creating tension and interest.

A big ironic element of Hamlet the Prince is that for someone who seems to have an incredible view of life, death, fate, and his own role as an Avenger, the guy seems to really, hate, women. This is agreed upon by the critics Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (1996) whom commented that Hamlet’s own misogynistic attitudes towards the women in the play is a reflection of the society of the play.

Gertrude is depicted as a whore — with a level of sexual imagery that is rare for a tragedy. She is described by Hamlet with completely hyperbolic, bestial metaphors such as her “O’erhasty marriage” to Claudius, creating an image of her as a character driven by lust. “O, most wicked speed, to post With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” Using the context of her marriage to her brother in law as incest. He continues to berate her with lines such as “Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul; And there I see such black and grained spots As will not leave their tinct.” Again a use of strong, over the top insult to create an image of her mother as someone sinful. Ironically however, he seems to be the only one in court with this opinion, no other character seems to insult Gertrude’s sexuality or sex life, and she herself even comments “The lade doth protests too much…” show that she is perfectly aware of her role as a Queen and woman in court.

On the other Hand, Ophelia is meant to be a beautiful flower — a pure maiden that many artists have painted romantic oil portraits of, like the famous portrait by Sir John Milliais. However, textual evidence shows that she is little more than a “toy in blood”, a sexual object that is traded like chattel amongst the powerful nobility. This is why even Hamlet calls her out, when he says “frailty, thy name is women!” further insulting her with his claim, “Get thee to a nunnery”. Hamlet further demonstrates that Ophelia is little more than a lying whore her self when he claims “God has given you one face and you make yourselves another”. Using both biblical reference and the metaphor of a mask to show that she is just a tool of the power players. Finally, Ophelia herself admits, that her violets have ,“withered along the way”. Violets are cultural symbols of modesty and virtue and thus, in “obeying” all her male leads, there is nothing virtuous left in Ophelia, and truly her only ‘way out’ is suicide. As such, a point of contention in the drama of Hamlet is the representation of gender roles and the women of Hamlet’s life itself.

Discussion Notes on Act III – Sc I – “get thee to a nunnery”

Prior to the “get thee to a nunnery” scene (Act III, Sc I), Shakespeare’s characterization of Hamlet positions the audience to perceive him as being somewhat selfish (self-reflective?) and driven by his own personal agenda. Hamlet appears to only focus on his own feelings, beliefs and self-protection. He is characterized as being insensitive to the dominant Elizabethan social values concerning romantic relationships and the religious beliefs surrounding death and mourning. A humanist reading of Hamlet’s characterization up until Act 3 suggests that Hamlet is more concerned with his own individual needs, reflections, emotions and personal values than the “good” of society [including his mother and his friends] and the “state of Denmark”. Plot developments in Act I and Act II which characterize this ‘selfish’ Hamlet include: his singular rejection of the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude [integrate quote and analysis]; his violent threats to Horatio and Bernado when Hamlet insists on following the Ghost [integrate quote and analysis]; the ensuing violence towards Horatio and Bernardo when Hamlet forces them to vow to reveal nothing about the Ghost to anyone [integrate quote and analysis]; Laertes’ warning to Ophelia about Hamlet’s dishonorable intentions and the futility of her romantic attachment to the Prince of Denmark [integrate quote and analysis]; Polonius reiterates Laertes’ initial warnings and instructs Ophelia to return Hamlet’s gifts and forbids Ophelia to continue the ‘insincere’ romance with Hamlet [integrate quote and analysis]; and, finally, we see
Hamlet playing mind games with his school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – and “performing” for his own interests and, seemingly, his own protection. Hamlet’s selfish and privately-guarded motivations appear to contrast with the shared concerns of the “state” and the other characters. The rest of the characters (save for Horatio) plot and scheme amongst each other, supposedly for the ultimate benefit of Hamlet’s peace of mind and – by definition – for the peaceful regeneration of the ‘State of Denmark’. Whilst the characters around Hamlet assume that his “mad” behavior is a direct reflection of his love for Ophelia… the dramatic irony of Hamlet’s soliloquies creates a sense of uncertainty in the audience. The audience is conflicted between their perceptions of Hamlet’s private musings and the public assumptions of the other characters? The explosive scene between Ophelia and Hamlet (Act III. Sc I) raises more questions than it answers. Is Hamlet abusive towards Ophelia because he truly is in love with her and he is trying to protect her by distancing himself from her? Is he “performing” purely in the knowledge that he is being spied upon and, subsequently, aims to confuse his spies? Is his ‘performance’ actually a true manifestation of his paranoia and inner-conflict which he uses to deflect his reluctance to follow the Ghost’s commands and is he even aware of the real reasons behind his own delay in avenging his father’s death?

In this scene, we watch Hamlet use Ophelia and his madness for ambiguous reasons. “Throughout the many versions of Hamlet, many productions suggest that Hamlet is aware that Claudius and Polonius using Ophelia and that they’re all conspiring to spy on him. In the scene, Hamlet exercises his abilities to play act. Ironically, Ophelia too is acting a part – against her true feelings and better judgement. Hamlet begins this scene with adoration and heartfelt happiness to see Ophelia. But, being in a crucial position not to trust anyone, and suspecting the contrived nature of the meeting with Ophelia, Hamlet’s behavior becomes nonsensical and erratic as he quizzes Ophelia. He closely observes her reactions and her “honesty”. Hamlet employed this tactic with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Act II, scene ii). In the clarity of the high modality of the mono-syllabic questions “are you honest?” (Act III, sc. 1, line 113) and “are you fair?,“(line 115) he watches Ophelia as she stumble over her answers. In a split second, Hamletsuspects that she too is ‘performing’. Hamlet deflects his suspicions by becoming increasingly erratic and abusive. Through his “lunacy,” he rants and raves to her, convincing Ophelia that his madness comes from her inconstant nature. He leads her through one more trap when asking about her father (line 141). Ophelia fails this last test miserably, and he knows that she lies to him willingly and her father locates himself within spying distance. Hamlet then falls farther into his playacting of lunacy and puts on a terrific display, leading Ophelia, Claudius, and Polonius to think that his madness sprouted from Ophelia. It would seem that Hamlet successfully deflects suspicion away from the task afforded him by the Ghost – to kill Claudius!

Shakespeare reassures the reader that Hamlet did love Ophelia, in “I did love you once.” (line 125) – but this admission conflicts with the abuse he forces her to endure. The audience is left uncertain and suspicious of Hamlet’s true character and his true feelings for Ophelia. Is he being completely self-obsessed and, as Laertes and Polonius believe, the equivalent of modern day “player”? Do you feel sympathy for Ophelia? Or – is Ophelia nothing more than a naive and “obedient” Elizabethan lady who has played a dangerous game with the Prince? Does the audience crave for Hamlet’s love for Ophelia to be true and genuine? Why? In the subsequent Acts of the play, it is confirmed that, indeed, Hamlet did love Ophelia. In act V, sc.i, Hamlet proclaims his love for her (and his grief) at the funeral.

It is important to consider that Ophelia is an “obedient” daughter and a virtuous lady in society [integrate quotes and analysis]. Her character clearly contrasts with the humanist values which are revealed in Hamlet’s character. The contrast between “rigid social order” of Ophelia and the “renaissance humanist values” of Hamlet would challenge the changing social attitudes and religious attitudes of an Elizabethan audience. Can you now, as a member of a modern audience, still appreciate the personal conflict involved in complying to traditional social expectations on the one hand – and – on the other hand – fulfilling your true personal and more selfish emotions and beliefs?

Finally, after being visited by the ghost of his dead father, Hamlet’s top priority is to ascertain the truth of the Ghost’s allegations and then to avenge his father’s murder. Within an Elizabethan context, the audience is, like Hamlet, aware that revenge murder is a mortal sin. Similarly, it remains an act of treason to plot against a King. Whilst it appears that Hamlet is strategically performing and “becoming mad” to deflect suspicion and, potentially, his own murder – Shakespeare sustains that niggling element of ambiguity which raises the question… is it possible
that Hamlet is actually edging on madness from his paranoia and his inner-conflict between his religious indoctrination and his humanist values?

**ESSAY 8**

**Thesis:** Hamlet has textual integrity because its themes are exquisitely constructed by its dramatic structure and language techniques.

**Paragraph 1: Genre**
- Hamlet as Revenge Tragedy genre
- Dramatic 5 Act Structure intensifies tragedy.

**Paragraph 2: Characterisation**
- Characterisation of Hamlet as a Renaissance Man
- Wit and Wordplay.

**Paragraph 3: Language**
- The language of dilemma and madness.
- Feminine endings, em-dashed prose.
- Ophelia’s songs – speaks truth when mad.

**Paragraph 4: Relationships**
- Parent Child Relationships.
- Gertrude and Hamlet / Polonius and Ophelia
- Link to Hamnet’s death and Shakespeare’s guilt.

**Paragraph 5: Motif**
- Motif of corruption and deception.
- Denmark and the Great Chain of Being.
- Rosencrantz & Guilderstern disloyalty.
- Antic disposition, the Players.

**ESSAY 9**

William Shakespeare’s Hamlet presents an accessible and universal protagonist who surpasses the conventions of Aristotelian tragedy to embody the struggle of the human condition. The human condition is fuelled by the discrepancy between humankind’s desire and its circumstances. Hamlet provides a unique introspection into the destructive consequences of internal struggle on international politics as the “high strung dreamer” (E.K. Chambers) forfeits his father’s kingdom. Shakespeare’s dramatic meditation on power and leadership employs dramatic techniques and form to demonstrate that neither romantic idealism or barbarity are desirable in our leaders.

Hamlet’s frustration derives from his inability to reconcile living in an imperfect world and the dichotomous nature of mankind. The duality of humanity exists in our nature to be both good and evil. This is evident in Shakespeare’s adoption of the revenge tragedy genre, whereby Hamlet plays villain and hero in equal measure. In the Aristotelian tradition, as the play progresses this conflicted hero undertakes actions he once found repulsive. Shakespeare achieves this through character doubling, pairing Hamlet and Claudius, Hamlet and Laertes, and Hamlet and Fortinbras as foils. Hamlet and Claudius are bound by blood and distrust. Hamlet’s soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 2 embodies the struggle between rational thought and emotional action, Hamlet is torn between proving the guilt of his uncle and
Internal conflict. He is “a man to double business bound, / I stand in pause” (3.3) who tries to hold onto the spoils of his fratricide while struggling with guilt. Laertes is the foil to Hamlet the lial avenger. Laerte’s assertions that “I’ll be revenged / Most thoroughly for my father” (4.5) and will “cut his throat I’th’church.” (4.7) are impassioned outbursts that parallel Hamlet’s eventual and irrevocable passion. Filial obligations, per the old medieval social conventions Laertes and Fortinbras follow, demand that revenge supersede all rules and other concerns. Hamlet’s dialogue demonstrates his struggle to reconcile these beliefs with his humanist nature that argue revenge and violence only lead to further bloodshed. This is epitomised by his repetitive outburst: “bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” (2.2). Hamlet nds it easier to speak and perform vengeance than to raise a sword and act. The consequence of Hamlet’s indecision is embodied structurally: the rst three acts are long and drawn out as Hamlet wrestles with his lial obligation; the nal two acts as he struggles to cope with the ramifications of an impetuous and awed decision occur with inexorable and rapid momentum. Thus, Hamlet is metonymic for the awed human race – son of a godlike father and an incestuous mother – “our sometime sister, now our queen” (1.2). Ultimately, these doubling techniques represent Hamlet’s plight as they reveal the intrinsic dualism of the human condition.

Hamlet’s humanist idealism amounts to a psychoneurotic state of ‘Weltschmerz,’ he resents existence and equates evil with humanity’s existence. Individuals suffering psychoneurosis seek an outlet for their blocked frustrations. This is exemplified in Hamlet’s demand that Ophelia “Get thee to a nunnery!” and his interrogative accusation, “Why wouldst thou be a / breeder of sinners?” (3.1). Hamlet hints at the cause of his anguish in the apostrophe, “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2), transferring his anger at his mother onto his beloved. ‘Weltschmertz,’ the sense of melancholy and despondency present in Hamlet’s internal conict between expectation and desire, manifests itself in his perception that the state, and thus the world, is an “unweeded garden” (1.2), a metaphor of fallen Eden. Shakespeare employs Denmark to serve as a macrocosm, “the model of nature and human frailty” (Wilfred Guerin). So, when Hamlet describes the state as “stale, at and unprotable” and “rank and gross in nature” (1.2), he employs listing and …… scene, Hamlet struggles between thoughts of “self slaughter” (1.2) and his desire to not be frozen into inaction. Hamlet’s hatred of his own humanity is shown in the extended metaphor that “O that this too, too solid esh would melt!” (1.2). Inevitably, Hamlet’s idealism results in disenchantment and his nal antagonistic attitude to himself and the world.

The play’s central humanist concerns transcend the exoticism of its setting. Shakespeare’s contemporary theatre-goes would likely not have been familiar with the machinations of Denmark’s elected monarchy; thus, the extradiegetic principles of Hamlet are independent of any temporal or geographical stance. R.A. Foalkes has argued that the character of Hamlet is the “projection of the artist or intellectual who felt out of place in a world of philistinism.” I believe, though, that it is simply the case that Hamlet suffers from the paralysis of will caused by a mind too complex and sensitive to tolerate the realities of an imperfect world. Hamlet makes this clear in his aphorism, “thus conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1). Hamlet’s eventual conversion to “rash and bloody” barbarism is represented as ineffective, achieving only a “blunted purpose” (3.4) as his death cedes Denmark to Norway and undoes his father’s conquests. Hamlet’s hamartia is his inability to reconcile man’s dual nature of passion and reason. This is typied in his nal soliloquy in Act 4 Scene 4. Here, Hamlet considers the impending conict between Norway and Denmark to be “for an eggshell” and worries that it will send twenty thousand men “to their graves like beds” (4.4) (a slaughter his own death heroically avoids). It is ironic that Hamlet concludes with the decisive rhyming couplet, “O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (4.4). Despite understanding the importance of “god-like reason”, Hamlet determines to follow Fortinbras metaphorically and “nd quarrel in a straw when honour’s at the stake”. In Hamlet’s maxim “Let be” (5.2), the audience is made aware of his admirable qualities, both potential and manifest, and noble acceptance of his awed humanity generating the tragic pathos Aristotle argued was integral to tragedy. Hamlet’s tragedy is that his deneitive and positive action occurs too late, acting as a cautionary tale for audiences, and leaders, to balance their inner forces.
leadership. Instead, as the play asserts consistently, history is doomed to repeat itself. Thus, Hamlet represents the curse and consequences of humanity’s dualism: the inability to learn from past mistakes in the struggle between reason and passion and resolve itself to new courses of action.

A critical study of Hamlet reveals its essential textual integrity. Discuss.

In Hamlet, meaning is both subjective and transient, changing as a reader applies different ideas to the text. Thus, Shakespeare’s polysemous examination of humanity enables the play to transcend contextual restraints and [remain relevant to modern audiences][Q]. Paradoxically, this malleability of meaning is made possible by the fundamental textual integrity of the text – without such radical coherence, the play would fragment under the multiplicity of interpretations it is asked to bear and [Q]. A paradigmatic revenge tragedy, Hamlet reveals this textual integrity and so [Q] in its exploration of the ubiquitous search for identity, the significance of a natural order, and our inevitable confrontation with mortality, mirroring the enduring philosophical questions that arose in the Elizabethan era.

As captured in the first line of the play, “Who’s there?”, the universal search for identity is an essential theme of Hamlet, highlighting the unity of meaning within the play and [allowing it to retain its relevance in the modern era][Q]. Utilizing the notion that “to know a man well were to know himself”, Shakespeare employs Hamlet as a self-reflexive model of humanity, an ‘everyman’-like figure that confronts the audience’s notion of self. This vital identification with Hamlet is reinforced through the restricted view of the action of the play, which achieves, as Victor Cahn describes, “the dramatic equivalent of first-person narrative”. Through this identification, Hamlet’s self-questioning – “what is this quintessence of dust?” – challenges the audience to re-evaluate their conception of self, [Q].

However, Shakespeare goes further than merely questioning the nature of identity, also examining the adage “to thine own self be true”. This notion that, as Barbara Burge discusses, “man’s essential dignity is the result of his being himself”, is explored through Shakespeare’s characterization of Ophelia. Arguably the truly tragic character of the play, Ophelia’s role is entirely submissive, as captured in her statement to her father “I shall obey you”, reflecting the patriarchal dominance of Shakespeare’s milieu. Subtly and overtly reprimanded “you do not understand yourself”, her identity is circumscribed by the men that surround her, forcing her to deny her true self.

Consequently, upon the death of the man on whom she relied to define her, she descends into madness. In this state, she is finally able to assert her being: the broken syntax and sexual licence of her ballads, such as the innuendo in “you tumbled me and you promised me to wed”, represent a repudiation of the societal forces that caused her convulsed mental state. He thereby articulates the tragedy of her denial of her true identity in favour of a dutiful and submissive persona. In this way, Shakespeare confronts his audience with a play that coherently and consistently acts as “a glass where you may see the inmost part of you”, forcing them to reconsider their notion of identity and the importance of being true to oneself and thus [Q].

The upholding of moral and political order, a reflection of the Elizabethan notion of a Great Chain of Being, also demonstrates [Q], as well as the integrity of Hamlet as an integrated whole. Following the typical structure identified by Tzvetan Todorov, the narrative of the play opens with the disturbance of an initial equilibrium – the murder and deposition of King Hamlet, a violation of the Divine Right of Kings that causes time to be “out of joint”. Eulogized and accumulatively idealised by his son as “wholesome”, King Hamlet becomes emblematic of the ordained natural order. Thus, the gruesome imagery of his murder via a “leperous distilment” becomes a metaphor for the wider moral degradation of Denmark, later overtly decried as an “unweeded garden”, where “things rank and gross” grow.

The catalyst of this perversion of moral order, and therefore the symbol of the corruption of the Great Chain of Being, is Claudius. A quintessential Machiavellian figure, Claudius acts as a conduit for Shakespeare’s social commentary on those who allow their conscience to be defeated by ambition, as accentuated by the antithetical representation of the praiseworthy King Hamlet and the deceitful Claudius in the classical allusion “hyperion to a satyr”. Most importantly, Claudius’ death symbolically allows the protagonist to triumph, albeit tragically, over both
Machiavellianism and the corruption of Denmark, thereby restoring God’s harmonious order and the aesthetically expected Todorovian equilibrium. Thus, the integration of theme and structure in the examination of natural order serves to highlight the unity of the Hamlet as a whole and [Q].

Similarly, the contemplation of death has a pervasive presence in Hamlet, [Q] by forming the basis of the conflict of the play and providing the medium for its tragic resolution. However, while Shakespeare explores the inevitability of mortality, emphasising that “all that lives must die” through incessant imagery of death, more significant is his interwoven reflection upon what meaning death holds for the living. Shakespeare examines, as Robert Ornstein describes, “the debt that the living owe to the dead”, with the appearance of the ghost acting as a dramatic catalyst for Hamlet’s consideration of his duty of revenge his dead father. Through his characterization of Hamlet as a procrastinator, Shakespeare is able to confront the philosophical and moral ambiguity of such a duty, as evident in the insistent dichotomies of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, such as “to suffer...or to take arms”. Here, Shakespeare challenges contemporary Christian precepts by questioning the potential advantages of “self-slaughter” over committing murder, for the sake of revenge. Additionally, through Shakespeare’s representation of Claudius and Laertes as swift to action, both men become foils to Hamlet, highlighting his contrastingly careful consideration of his actions in taking revenge. This is apparent in the juxtaposition of Claudius’ statement that “revenge should have no bounds”, and Hamlet’s reminder that morally ambiguous actions “would be scanned”. Such permeating techniques, in exploring our duty to the dead, underscore the unity of the play and [Q].

Shakespeare’s Hamlet has been described as ‘a bleak portrait of a world in which the balance has been disturbed’. To what extent does this perspective align with your understanding of Hamlet?

The Renaissance world was one of transition from a society essentially medieval and God-centred to one approaching a modern, if not secular, world in which the potential of man’s ability to know and shape it was beginning to challenge existing beliefs. From within such a world in a state of flux, Shakespeare reveals the dangers of an arrogant confidence in the limitless power of man when supported by a kind of moral relativism. Hamlet is a representation of a world in which personal needs and desires have overtaken values both natural and divinely sanctioned set in place for the maintenance of social order. The external corruption evident in Elsinore is centred at the very top of the hierarchy and is triggered essentially by regicide. This act sets into motion the demand for a kind of justice through revenge in a world now characterised by deception, disloyalty and the disintegration of relationships, that ultimately destroys the good and innocent before it does the one responsible.

The disturbed world in which Elsinore is to be found is characterised by moral corruption on several levels. The play opens with a symbolic representation of a supernatural disturbance in the reported appearance of the ghost of the dead king, Hamlet’s father, which causes Marcellus to conclude that ‘something is rotten in the state of Denmark’. We soon learn that his inability to rest in peace is the consequence of his untimely and unrepentant dispatch by his own brother, Claudius, who has quickly married his wife/sister-in-law, Hamlet’s mother/aunt, and has become Hamlet’s uncle/step father. The violation of the established order (regicide), as well as the natural one (fratricide and incest), blurs and contaminates all the central relationships in the play. Claudius summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes, and Claudius and Polonius spy on Hamlet and Ophelia in a scene in which she is instructed by her father to sever her relationship with him, deepening his existing disillusionment: ‘How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world.’ Horatio alone remains a beacon of loyalty, hope and goodness in a world characterised by deception, disloyalty and spying. In such a disturbed world where the balance between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and deceit is no longer in equilibrium in the very relationships and offices where it should be found, a bleakness envelops those who can see and seek to address the corruption that has made Elsinore an ‘unweeded garden’.
The pervading sense of corruption, deception and betrayal ultimately contaminates and destroys the good and the innocent, reinforcing the bleak world in which the play unfolds. Overwhelmed by the morally questionable duty of revenge that his father’s ghost has thrust upon him, Hamlet first ironically puts on a deceiving ‘antic disposition’ in order to get at the truth, then rejects the only truly innocent Ophelia who is manipulated by her self-aggrandising father and who, in turn, is ultimately destroyed by a real madness stemming from true feelings of love and loyalty no longer sustainable in a world that sees her former lover murder her father. While Hamlet only feigns madness and contemplates suicide, Ophelia actually does go mad and commits suicide. In killing Polonius, Hamlet the moral avenger ironically becomes like the one who he seeks to bring to ‘justice’: ‘both scourge and minister’. Moreover, his foil, Laertes, the more conventional avenger, immediately seeks retribution and is prepared to cause civil unrest in order to achieve it: ‘The rabble call him lord,/ ... They cry ‘Choose we! Laertes shall be king.’ The corruption spreads beyond Elsinore and threatens the stability of Denmark itself. Ironically, had Hamlet killed Claudius when he had established his guilt through The Mousetrap and found him alone in his chapel trying to repent but failing to do so, he may have achieved his revenge and avoided all the other deaths that follow this scene. Unfortunately, instead he decides that he wishes not only to punish Claudius in this life but also in the next, and in this arrogant frame of mind his internal imbalance becomes an extension of the external world. Hamlet realises too late that ‘There is special providence in/ the fall of a sparrow, ... the/ readiness is all’. Not long after he kills Polonius in an uncharacteristic fit of passion, now fully contaminated by the world around him, Hamlet sends his former friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. The corruption of the tragic hero by the imbalance in his world is complete.

Characteristic of Shakespeare’s complex view of life, the conclusion of the play only seems to provide a kind of restoration of order. Wilson Knight has already noted that there is within the play a tension between Renaissance humanism and traditional Christianity. Having been thrust into a situation he could not avoid, ‘The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!’, Hamlet finally and spontaneously commits the act that has haunted, taunted and ultimately corrupted him throughout much of the play, reconciles himself with Gertrude and Laertes, and dissuades Horatio from suicide in order to report his story truthfully to those left behind. Towards the end of his young life, Hamlet re-affirms his love for the dead Ophelia and experiences an enlightenment that restores his internal balance: ‘There’s divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will.’ He declares Fortinbras, his other foil, as the rightful heir to the throne and restores balance to the state. Having been dissuaded from avenging his father near the beginning of the play, Fortinbras transfers his ambition to the conquest of Poland, where he sacrifices the lives of many ‘Even for an egg-shell’, much to Hamlet’s sense of misguided self-criticism. Now, supposedly on his way home to Norway, he happens to be at the right place and the right time on a stage covered in corpses to be given Denmark on a platter. Fortinbras, the pragmatic opportunist, more akin to Claudius and less Hamlet’s kind, takes the throne and with it the imbalance that was caused by corruption that became the bleak world of Elsinore is no more, or so it seems.

Rarely is Shakespeare’s perspective simply black and white. He deals instead, more often than not, in moral and ethical complexities and ambiguities; it is in the grey areas that he finds the more realistically challenging questions and predicaments that acutely define our existence. As he has Hamlet instruct the actors ‘to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature, …’, so too does he hold one to his world and ours. The notions of ‘balance’ and ‘bleakness’ are not easily defined in Hamlet, nor in its titular character, but rather they are explored on many levels in order to represent the dangers of moral corruption for whatever objective: greed, revenge, ambition or even justice. The conclusion of the play merely restores an order achieved at great cost, but given its fragility and human nature there is nothing to suggest that the chaos cannot come again.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet continues to engage audiences through its dramatic treatment of struggle and disillusionment.” In the light of your own critical study, does this statement resonate with your own interpretation of Hamlet?
William Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy Hamlet (1601) illuminates the eponymous protagonist Hamlet’s psychological transition from disillusionment and malcontentment to an ultimate state of clarity and resolution, achieved through his reconciliation of struggle in an elusive world. As a Christian humanist, Hamlet is caught in the introspective dilemma between religious ethics, political obligations as a prince and the chivalric duty of vengeance. The deceptiveness of surrounding characters and Hamlet’s self-disillusionment reflect the period of uncertainty and instability during the Jacobean era. Shakespeare’s dramatic delineation of Hamlet as a moral avenger, along with his conflicting conscience, transcends the boundaries of the canon and therefore continues to engage contemporary audience.

The corrupt world of Elsinore, fostered by Claudius’s regicide and Gertrude’s promiscuity, has consequently led to Hamlet’s disillusionment and struggle among morality, murder and death. This in turn leads to Hamlet’s reluctance to take revenge. Shakespeare portrays corruption through the analogy “Tis an unweeded garden...things ranks and gross in nature”. For Hamlet, he is malcontent about the Kingdom becoming a garden infested by evil due to the abnormal death of his father and the incestuous marriage of his mother. Hamlet’s struggle to confront the regicide is expressed through the religious metaphor “This too too solid flesh would melt...canon ‘gainst self-slaughter”. Here Shakespeare effectively portrays Hamlet’s disillusionment towards life and his inner conflict between the desire to suicide and the overarching Christian concern about purgatorial punishments which will strip off his nobility. Consequently Hamlet morally struggles between conscience and the necessity of revenge, demonstrated through the animal imagery “I am pigeon livered...and lack gall” in conjunction with the dysphemism “Oh what a rogue and slave am I”. Hereby Shakespeare illustrates the noble prince Hamlet’s self-deprecation due to his irresolution. He compares himself to an animal and a bonded slave – the most inferior beings in the Elizabethan Hierarchical Order because his inaction defies the contextual honour code for immediate revenge. The political tension in Denmark and Hamlet’s vividly striking, conflicting conscience effectively resonates with situations in the contemporary society and therefore Shakespeare can continue to engage the viewers.

Shakespeare’s dramatic implementation of the metatheatrical mousetrap play effectively allows Hamlet to ascertain the truth behind the regicide through a humanistic approach; hence steering Hamlet in a clearer direction with his revenge and existential research. Claudius’ reaction and the biblical imagery employed in his heartfelt repentance “Oh my offence is rank it smells to heaven” confirms Claudius’ guilt for regicide and usurped kingship. As a stern moralist however, Hamlet continues to be trapped in the Christian doctrinal belief in the Seven Deadly Sins and is reluctant when presented with the perfect opportunity to revenge. This is depicted through the ambivalent tone “Now might I do it pat” where he realises that murdering Claudius during prayer would ironically lead to his Ascension. Samuel Coleridge in his Criticism of Shakespeare similar pinpoints Hamlet’s problem as excess “intellectual activity, and the consequent proportionate aversion to real action”. Nevertheless, the personification “Up, sword and know thou a more horrid hent” signifies Hamlet’s willingness to execute the divine justice, indicated by the symbolism of the sword. Hamlet’s plan to spiritually perish Claudius, although implying moral decay, can be justified because justice is only fulfilled when Claudius undergoes the same purgatorial punishment as the Ghost of Old Hamlet. Evidently, Hamlet’s unexpected approach to unveil the truth and the startling complexity of human decision making both confronts and entices the modern audience.

Hamlet’s shifting psyche from hesitation and absurdity to clarity and resolution is motivated by his loss of moral high ground after the startling murder of Polonius and the determination of his foil Laertes. Hamlet’s antic disposition is demonstrated through his misogynous imperative language “Get thee to a nunnery!” towards Ophelia. Through Hamlet’s accusation of Ophelia as unvirtuous, Shakespeare portrays Hamlet’s disillusionment towards his loving relationship as he perceives Ophelia’s intentional spying as a confronting act of betrayal. Hamlet’s metaphor “To be demanded of a sponge!” further enhances the absurdist element as he conducts verbal swordplay with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As an outcome of Hamlet’s disillusionment, he accidentally murders Polonius and his insulting, apathetic tone “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool! Farewell!” reflects Hamlet’s consequent moral descent. This is a turning point that spurs Hamlet on to vengeful action. As a foil to Hamlet from a different spectrum, Laertes’ rebellion and eagerness in his revenge, expressed through the compelling personification “drop of blood that’s calm proclaims me bastard” triggers Hamlet’s shame and in turn stimulates his transformation.

Consequently, Hamlet’s shifting psyche from irresolution to preparedness for revenge is demonstrated through the determined tone of his
outcry “My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” Overall, the dramatic effect created by Shakespeare, through depicting the confronting murder of Polonius and the overwhelming determination of Hamlet by the end of Act IV, powerfully engages the audience.

Hamlet is ultimately enlightened by his epiphany towards the inevitability of death, and through his execution of divine justice vindicated by Laertes’ forgiveness, both his morality and the hierarchical equilibrium of Denmark are restored. Hamlet’s fatalistic outlook on life is illuminated by the symbolism of Yorick’s skull and the stage direction “Hamlet takes the skull” which is a proleptic irony signifying Hamlet’s acceptance of Memento Mori – the inevitability of death for all humanity. Shakespeare further depicts the idea of Vanitas through Hamlet’s religious connotation “Alexander was returneth to dust, the dust is earth”. The allusion to Alexander the Great offers Hamlet the greater understanding that no amount of wealth and power can make a man immortal, and death is neither divine nor humble. This epiphany allows Hamlet to be more determined to execute the revenge as he condemns the Machiavellian Claudius using the poisoned dagger. Divine justice is fulfilled as the root of evil is condemned by his malice through the situational irony “Then, venom, to thy work!” Consequently, Shakespeare characterises Hamlet as a noble avenger through Laertes’ sincere tone “exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet” and the metatheatre “Bear Hamlet like a soldier to stage” as his Humanist moral convictions are reconciled with the chivalric duty of revenge. Hamlet’s eventual fulfilment of vengeance, after resolving his reluctance and disillusionment, is a satisfactory outcome that the audience has eagerly anticipated for. Hence the play is able to transcend the barrier of time and captivate modern viewers.

Therefore, Shakespeare strikingly depicts Hamlet’s intellectual and emotional struggle and transformation through the effective use of dramatic devices. The Renaissance humanistic values and concerns on death and revenge remain universal in the contemporary society. Consequently, the play Hamlet calls for empathetic understanding of the protagonist’s self-conflict in a world of evilness, hence continuing to fascinate and engage a modern audience.

ESSAY 13

Shakespeare’s Hamlet has an intricate plot formed by the characters and themes throughout it. One major idea is Hamlet’s changing sanity, which fluctuates through the play as a performance and as a true madness. The other main theme which develops the play is the act of vengeance, with the delay and doubt that accompanies it. These themes, along with dramatic devices and the characters in the plot, add to the textual integrity of the play.

There is a duality to the character of Hamlet, as his madness changes from a performance to true insanity throughout the play. Initially, in Act 1 Scene 5, Hamlet is coerced by the ghost and decides that he will “put an antic disposition on”. This is the main use of dramatic irony in the play, as the audience knows Hamlet’s madness is performed. However as the play develops and changes, so too does Hamlet’s madness. Act 3 Scene 4 is the main turning point for Hamlet’s madness. The scene begins with a confrontation between Gertrude and Hamlet.

Gertrude: “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended”

Hamlet: “Mother, you have my father much offended”

The use of stichomythia in this conversation creates a sense of violence between the characters. It also confirms to the audience that Hamlet’s madness is still a performance, because he can respond quickly and with wit. When this is juxtaposed with Ophelia’s legitimate insanity, it becomes clear that Hamlet is still performing. Ophelia speaks cryptically in Act 4, using metaphors and imagery of nature. Her use of rhyme and poetry also adds to the audiences understanding of true madness.

Hamlet’s performance turns to reality directly after he murders Polonius in cold-blood. If Hamlet were sane he would have shown an emotional reaction. However he reveals nothing, - “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell”. The powerful and hurtful words used in this sentence clearly show that his performed madness has amplified to a true insanity. From this point until the final scenes of the play, the character of Hamlet has changed. He begins to use more metaphors, speaking cryptically to other characters. When the ghost appears to Hamlet later in the scene, only
Hamlet can see him. Gertrude is worried about Hamlet as he “bends [his] eye on vacancy”. For the ghost to be real, Gertrude must be able to see him - since in the beginning of the play the watchmen and Horatio can see the ghost. This is a further use of dramatic irony, as only the audience knows that the ghost can be seen by other characters. This shows that the ghost is now a figure of Hamlet’s imagination and he has lost control of his mind.

As Hamlet is in exile he abruptly decides to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death in England. He later tells Horatio that they were “not near [his] conscience”. This quote demonstrates how Hamlet has lost all sense of emotional attachment and has no moral responsibility towards his old friends. Just as the audience fears Hamlet is lost control entirely, he comes back to reality when he learns of Ophelia’s death in Act 5 Scene 1.

“I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum”

Hamlet’s choice of imagery, “forty thousand brothers”, shows the audience and other characters in the play the intensity of his love towards Ophelia. This is the turning point, yet again, for his madness. Once he realises that his true love is gone forever he snaps out of his mad trance and comes to terms with what is currently happening. This is proven by his apology to Laertes in the following scene, “Give me your pardon sir… I here proclaim was madness”. He speaks in third person when referring to his previous actions, demonstrating that he was not in control.

The idea of revenge is a large component of the plays overall plot. As the play begins the ghost acts as a catalyst and coaxes Hamlet into wanting to take revenge for his father’s “foul and most unnatural murder”. It is hard for Hamlet to commit to action because of his philosophical nature. He tends to ponder on issues that are less relevant to the things happening around him.

The main scene that demonstrates Hamlet’s inaction is Act 3 Scene 3. Claudius is praying and Hamlet’s trait as a philosopher prevents him from taking revenge. Instead he watches Claudius while he contemplates mortality and life after death, again. Further into the play, Act 4 Scene 4, Hamlet cannot understand why “twenty thousand men” can fight for an “eggshell” of land while he does nothing. He proclaims “Why what an ass am I!” since his father was “kill’d”, his mother “stain’d” and all he does is philosophise.

The other revenge plot in the play is Laertes avenging his father, Polonius. Laertes is manipulated by Claudius to fight Hamlet with the poisoned sword. As Laertes dies, he reveals his true emotions, “Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee”, demonstrating that he would not have acted against Hamlet if it wasn’t for Claudius’s pressure.

A major delay in the play, is Hamlet’s use of the “mouse-trap”. Hamlet chooses to doubt the ghost rather than taking action against Claudius. He uses the play-within-a-play as a means to “catch the king” and thus prove that the ghost was real, not “be the devil”. The use of this form of metatheatre creates a “chameleon” effect, where only the audience and Hamlet know the true use of this entertainment.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is shaped and defined by the major themes of madness, revenge and doubt within it. Along with these themes, his use of dramatic techniques and character interactions are what makes the play so famous.

Intro: In Act 3 Scene 2 of the Shakespeare tragedy “Hamlet”, we witness the guilt in Claudius through Hamlets ‘subliminal message’ in the performance of “The Mouse Trap”. It is the play within the play which enforces the story of King Hamlet’s death, or suspected murder. This scene is pivotal to the play as a whole, as it explores some of the plays fundamental themes such as loyalty and betrayal as a form of corruption, the anxieties of being watched or spied on and importance of theatre, which were all social apprehensions of the Elizabethan era.

Scene BD: In Act 3 Scene 1, we see Polonius and Claudius spy on the arranged meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, in which Ophelia has been “loosed” on Hamlet. He combusts into a speech of misogyny and bitterly attacks her before storming out and leaving her to mourn with the two spies.
In Act 3 Scene 3, we hear Claudius pray for the forgiveness of his anguish towards murdering his brother King Hamlet. Hamlet sees this opportunity to kill him but as he is praying, and if killed whilst praying ascends to heaven,
he ceases to do so as it would not revenge his father. These scenes are also looked at in addition to the importance of Act 3 Scene 2, as they also contribute to the discussion of themes and their context.

P1: The escalation of Hamlets madness and psychological pain is influenced by the betrayal of his so called friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. His outburst toward them after ‘The Mouse trap’ signifies the pain they have put him through by being dishonest and self-centred. This scene further develops the theme of betrayal with the use of Hamlets rhetorical question “do you think I am easier to be played as a pipe?” after he insists they play a recorder and they claim to be unable to. It shows the twos blindness towards Hamlets intelligence along with how their conniving plans have added to the corruption of Hamlet and his wellbeing.

P2: In contrast to the betrayal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a sense of loyalty is shown between the friendship of Horatio and Hamlet. At this point in the play, Hamlet shows a lack of trust between himself and any other character besides his closet friend Horatio. The quote “her election hath sealed thee for herself” highlights how Hamlet feels he has made the right decision when it comes to choosing his friends from the honest to the dishonest. The importance of the bond between Hamlet and Horatio, and the hostility between Hamlet and his “so called friends”, highlights the contrast of betrayal to loyalty and how the motif of corruption heightens the character, this scene and the play.

P3: This scene is the key to exploring the importance of theatre and its function to revelling aspects of reality in Elizabethan time. The use of the metaphor “to hold as ‘twere a mirror up to nature”, directed to the players of ‘The Mouse Trap’, amplifies Hamlets beliefs to the importance of theatre and its audiences reaction, specifically to Claudius. The idea of a mirror is interesting as mirrors, and the rest of the play, show ambiguity. This reaction is vital to the entire play as it predicts weather or not Hamlets assumptions and plans to revenge his father may go forward.

P4: As revealed later in that scene and in Act 3 Scene 3, the reaction gained from Claudius where he suddenly rises and the evoked language from “Lights Lights” proves that Hamlets assumption of Claudius’ guilt may be true. Through spying on Claudius, he then feels both enlightened by his “confession” and disheartened to be unable to fulfil his task of killing him as he is praying. This extends the previous discussion of the motif of betrayal and extends the theme of theatres importance, as it represents the idea of a story to reality and how it changes both relationships and faiths of characters in the play.

P5: The feeling of being watched and being spied on is a motif shown in a majority of the play and further represents the theme of betrayal and loyalty. At the end of the scene, Hamlet retaliates to Polonius by using the same recorder trick and then continues to mock him. Polonius then tells Hamlet that his mother wishes to speak with him, preparing to spy on the conversation. This is later ironic for Polonius as his curiosity gets him into trouble when he spies on Hamlet and then is accidentally killed by him. This shows how the theme of spying represents karma, what goes around comes around, and how in the play, things don’t always go according to plan especially when spying and betrayal is involved.

Conclusion: The motifs of betrayal, loyalty, theatre and anxiety are all large contributors in making Hamlet the character he is, influencing the other characters of the play and altering the future of each person. This scene shows a vast importance to the play as a whole as the context modifies the mentality and sanity of each character and defines their faith from then on. It is a great turning point for the story, and huge impact on the plot making it a pivotal scene of the play.

Essay 15

William Shakespeare is arguably the greatest playwright in the history of the English language. The popularity of his plays stems primarily from the universal and eternal themes explored within them, the foremost of which are present in Hamlet: the tragedy of revenge, human mortality and the workings of fate. These are all aspects of, and relevant to, todays society. Another of the works many strengths is Shakespeare’s ability to present characters with developed personalities that incite empathy. As each character progresses, their motivators, emotions, actions and
reactions to the events of the play impress on the audience an incredible sense of believability. By his or her soliloquies, actions and behaviour, that character’s growth can be attributed to each particular event and or scene.

It comes as no surprise then, that the title character of Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet*, is one of audience’s most acknowledged, because the author presents him as inherently human. Audiences identify with Hamlet’s complex character, situation and behaviour, a phenomenon peculiar in regard to the particular details of his situation as Prince of Denmark, suffering the loss of a father and the hasty remarriage of a mother to an uncle.

My thesis accepts that the character Hamlet is intrinsic to the entirety of the play. My thesis states that the audiences and my personal response to Hamlet’s character is a result of themes and their fundamental events within the play, which culminate in the closing scenes. The themes of focus are mortality and tragedy, fate, and the antagonism between resolution and action. Through an analysis of events in acts 2,3,4 and 5 I will argue that by the closing scenes of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the audiences and my own response to Hamlet’s character have been changed. The greatest shift in Hamlet’s character is an acceptance of the role of fate, notably poignant in the final act.

Fate is a fixed theme in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Apparently so is Hamlet’s regard for fate in the early scenes of the play. In Act 1 Scene 1 Hamlet sighs: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, /that ever I was born to set it right.’ [1.1.189-190]. Hamlet is in a position of responsibility and no longer a spectator. He resents this and damns (“Oh cursed spite”) this ‘fate’. Additionally, Hamlet states that “time is out of joint”; the natural order of things is amiss. This indicates Hamlet prefers his own judgment to accepting fate blindly. This is also shown by his approach to avenging the ghost.

Though he does act, the acts are disorganized and have varying degrees of success. He feigns madness very successfully, as well as arrange the performance of ‘The Murder of Gonzago”. However his appeal to Gertrude to seek repentance disturbs herself and the ghost of Old King Hamlet. Whereas the deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern serve no purpose other than to exacerbate his situation-Claudius is angered, Laertes vendgeful and Ophelia driven to madness. In comparing Hamlet’s position on fate in Act 1 with his position in Act 5 we see a stark contrast. After returning to Denmark Hamlet is asked if he will engage Laertes in a swordfight. This is an assination attempt designed by both Claudius and Laertes. Horatio attempts to dissuade Hamlet from going, convinced it can do no good. It is disconcerting that Hamlet accepts and acknowledges his readiness for death so timely. Hamlet says to Horatio “There is special providence in the fall of sparrow.” [5.1]; God has power over everything and thus there is a divine reason for all events. This acceptance is a shift from the previous “The time is out of joint” [1.3]. He continues, explaining his view on mortality: “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.” This resignation is significant when juxtaposed with Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” [3.1] soliloquy. When earlier he contemplated suicide, here Hamlet says death will come, when it will. If it isn’t in the future, it will be now; if it isn’t now, then it is to come in the future. All you can know is your readiness for death. This reflection and scene two ends with the poignant “Let be.”. This line also highlights Hamlet’s internal preparation. Therefore the contrast between Hamlet’s approach to fate in the opening and closing acts of the play inform the audience of the overall role of fate within the play. The futility of opposing fate is demonstrated through Hamlet’s journey as he rejects and ultimately accepts his own fate. Soon afterward he is slain and revenge finally taken upon Claudius. However, there is massive collateral damage, the result of Hamlet’s earlier aversion to his instructed purpose (fate).

Throughout *Hamlet* are numerous references to flesh, life, death and sin. In act 1 scene 2 Gertrude reminds Hamlet “Thou know ‘tis common, all that lives must die.”. Mortality as a theme is prominent in many of Shakespeare’s plays. Hamlet’s fixation with the nature of human existence is crucial in the first Acts of the play, as well as the last. In Act 3, Hamlet delivers his famous “to be or not to be soliloquy”. Within this, Hamlet debates whether it is worthwhile to stay alive and “suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (life) or commit suicide and “end the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to”. Eventually Hamlet strikes upon the idea that no-one knows what lies after death and thus “conscience does make cowards of us all”. Meaning fear of the unknown is stronger than the suffering
experienced by life. That thought can quell action is a recurring idea in Hamlet. Additional conflict arises between Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide and his Roman Catholicism. God has forbidden suicide; “that the everlasting had not fix’d his canon ‘gainst self slaughter!” The gravediggers at Ophelia’s funeral renew this idea of religious law in the final act of the play. In this scene death becomes personal when Hamlet holds Yorick’s skull. As he meditates on the skull, Hamlet again explores human existence and gains a fuller understanding of mortality. This event is a catalyst for Hamlet’s ‘readiness’ for death later in the play. Not only does the first scene of the final act influence Hamlet’s view of mortality and fate, it also informs the audience’s response to the nature of mortality as explored in Hamlet. I sympathise with Hamlet as he reminisces of Yorick. Hamlet is experiencing a combination of shock and grief, both strong universal emotions. By reminding the audience of his strong sense of humanity more light is shone on his past and future actions. It suggests a man with motivations confused by an excess of emotion.

In Hamlet, causes of death include murder, poison, drowning, accidental stabbing, poison and stabbing, or killed for revenge. The death may be accidental or inflicted by your brother, son, husband, lover, prince or enemy.

In Hamlet the play and Hamlet the man is an antagonism between thought and action. Hamlet is all resolution in words, all hesitation in acting. From acts one to three, the play explores the consequences of this hesitation and Hamlet’s resolutions. By Act 4 however, Hamlet has murdered Polonius and cruelly rebuked Ophelia whilst Claudius is listening. Rather than rejoice in his unrestrained action, I as an audience recoil from him. Furthermore, Hamlet shows no visible remorse for his actions. Nor is there for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who lose their life as result of Hamlet’s vengeful reaction. Hamlet’s likeability suffers when he commits these acts. This raises an interesting comparison between Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes’ nature is to act without justification but as an essential heroic decision. Examples of this are his rapid return to Elsinore after his father’s death, his rage at Claudius and his desire for revenge upon Hamlet. When asked what Laertes would do to avenge Polonius, he replies “To cut his [Hamlet’s] throat i’ the church.” [4.7]. Clearly Laertes has no reservations or hesitations, and is seen as the opposite of Hamlet. It is interesting that these qualities are appealing in Laertes, but not in Hamlet. Where Hamlet feels incapable of action, Laertes feels incapable of doing otherwise. Laertes’ passion is eventually his downfall however, as he is manipulated by Claudius and falls victim to his own treacherous act. The closing scene’s setting of a sword fight (a performance) is excellent to support the futility of violent action. In this setting Laertes, Claudius and Hamlet are all poisoned and stabbed in acts of passion. The revenge exacted upon Claudius is bittersweet; Hamlet, like his father, has fallen victim to Claudius. Ultimately, the final scenes of the play reinforce tragedy as a result of action without thought. This enforcement influences our response to Hamlet, Laertes and Claudius. Hamlets hesitation to act now appears wise, whereas Laertes hasty action is to be scorned. Laertes’ likeability, though victim of tragedy, suffers as Hamlet’s rises. Fortinbras summarises these thoughts in the closing stanza: “For he [Hamlet] was likely...to have proved most royal...Such a sight as this becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.” [5.3]

The final scenes of Hamlet satisfy the plays genre as revenge tragedy, though not a typical one. The ending of Hamlet in tragic circumstances influences the play as a whole. The tragic end of Denmark reflects the disruption of the state caused by Claudius’ mortal sin. This influences the audience’s response to the importance of moral and religious teaching.

At the beginning of the play I see Hamlet as a man, imperfect and grieving. He is in a state of emotional turmoil, it is by drawing from this that he carries his “antic disposition” so well. As the play progresses Hamlet allows the intensity of his façade to ebb and peak. Oftentimes his actions are confused for real insanity. Similarly his likeability undergoes several shifts. His nobility is brought into question, as is his selfishness. Hamlet is the perfect antihero, whose tortured impotence is replaced by acceptance and humility.

Hamlet remains incomplete: “Goodnight sweet prince.” [Horatio]
‘Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* continues to engage audiences through its dramatic treatment of struggle and disillusionment.’ In the light of your critical study, does this statement resonate with your own interpretation of *Hamlet*? In your response, make detailed reference to the play.

The tragedy of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* lies in its protagonist, Prince Hamlet’s, struggle and disillusionment with life. Through Hamlet’s character, the audience sees the Danish prince’s downfall as he struggles to overcome his unfortunate situation but in vain. His disillusionment stems from the sudden lack of support from the people around him, with which he struggles to come to terms. A.C. Bradley wrote that Hamlet found himself in ‘a state of profound melancholy’ with the world around him. Of the world, Hamlet uses the metaphor ‘an unweeded garden’ where ‘things rank and gross’ thrive.

Hamlet’s first disillusionment comes when the ghost reveals King Hamlet’s murder. The ghost is a device to increase dramatic tension and carry the play forward. To investigate the ghost’s story, Hamlet puts on an ‘antic disposition’ and staged a play ‘to catch the conscience of a king’. Shakespeare adopts the technique of a play-within-a-play to reveal Claudius’s guilt. When Claudius rises and calls for light, Hamlet learns that Claudius is the villain that the ghost says he is. Hamlet could not have imagined his own uncle committing such an act of atrocity and betrayal. He then becomes disillusioned with his discovery and swears to avenge his father’s murder by killing Claudius, the ‘bloody, bawdy villain,’ although every time he backs down from real action. Hamlet is disillusioned over whether to play the role of the avenger. Later, he chides himself as a ‘rogue and peasant slave’ for his inaction. Much of Hamlet’s hatred for Claudius is also owing to the fact that Claudius had married his mother, Queen Gertrude. To Hamlet, Claudius is not only a ‘smiling damned villain’ but also an ‘adulterous beast’.

Hamlet’s disillusionment with his mother follows her hasty remarriage to her husband’s brother. Hamlet perceives it as utter betrayal to the memory and love of his late father. Literary imagery in the play has made allusions to poison, disease and corruption. Hamlet describes the relationship between his mother and uncle as a corrupt act. He struggles to overcome the disgust he feels of Gertrude and Claudius ‘stewed in corruption, honeying, and making love/Over the nasty sty’. But more importantly Hamlet feels deserted by the woman who is supposed to be his protector and refuge after the blow from his father’s death. He had expected his mother to stand by his side. Hamlet’s idealised view of his parents’ marriage—‘so loving to my mother/That he might not beteem the winds of heaven/Visit her face too roughly’—lies behind his distress at his mother’s marriage to Claudius’s ‘incestuous sheets’. The motif of corruption and the rotten surfaces as Hamlet warns his mother against ‘rank corruption, mining all within’ as he becomes disillusioned by his mother’s fickleness of heart and grows to distrust women.

Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia is negatively affected by his disillusionment with his mother. The critic Frank Kermode sees the play as ‘obsessed with doubles of all kinds’ and it is claimed that the play’s preoccupation with false appearance is a form of ‘doubling’. In Act 3, Scene 1 Hamlet rails at her, accusing her of falsehood representative of her gender: ‘God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another.’ Having been advised by Polonius and Laertes to stay away from Hamlet, Ophelia follows suit and when Hamlet becomes “mad” she agrees to be used by her father to find out the reason behind it. Despite his love for Ophelia, Hamlet feels betrayed by his lover’s dishonesty as she lies about her father’s spying on them. Hamlet rudely instructs her to ‘Get thee to a nunnery’ and reviles Ophelia, wishing her ill and slandering all women ‘for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them.’ He finds it difficult to trust Ophelia as a result of his disillusionment with women. In fact, Hamlet condemns them, ‘Frailty, thy name is woman.’

Having lost the support of his uncle, mother and lover, Hamlet is further disillusioned when he discovers that his university friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, too have been disloyal and dishonest friends who are willing to betray their friend in order to gain the king’s favour. They are ordered by Claudius to spy on Hamlet and report to him. They even escorted Hamlet to England to be executed. When Hamlet realises that he cannot trust them, he becomes sarcastic and cruel to them, comparing Rosencrantz to a sponge that soaks up the king’s ‘countenance, his rewards, his authorities.’ When Hamlet insists that Guildenstern play the pipe, his wit is brutal as he taunts his
former friend: ‘You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops.../Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe?’ Hamlet becomes disillusioned with friendship, knowing that his only loyal friend is Horatio.

Being the rightful heir to the throne, Hamlet again finds himself disillusioned when the Danish court chose to support his uncle’s accession to the throne. Hamlet uses the imagery of disease and worms to depict the state of corruption that Denmark is in: The earth is a ‘sterile promontory’, a ‘barren rocky point’ and ‘Denmark is a prison’. He also describes the politician Polonius as a ‘politics worm’. Hamlet feels disillusioned as he realises that the courtiers who once swore their loyalty and allegiance to King Hamlet now fawn over Claudius.

Hamlet becomes thoroughly disillusioned as a direct consequence of his relationships with his family, lover, friends and the court. His only friend was the loyal Horatio. It is the lack of support from the outside world that further exacerbates his ‘tragic flaw’ of inaction. He can be seen as struggling between thought and action. In his ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, Hamlet even contemplates suicide as a ‘solution’ to his disillusionment with life. The soliloquy is a tempo-slowing device by Shakespeare that allows the audience to see how Hamlet juxtaposes thought with action: ‘And thus the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought’.

Struggle and disillusionment are important themes in Hamlet. They affect Hamlet’s perception of himself in relation to everyone else. They also help drive the play’s essential plot. In A.C. Bradley’s reading, Hamlet’s final struggle—and Fortinbras’ installation to the Danish throne—allows the ‘restoration of order’ to overcome the struggle and disillusionment clouding the royal Danish court, finally bringing peace and stability to the ‘diseased’ kingdom.

ESSAY 17

‘The exploration of betrayal and loss in Shakespeare’s Hamlet gives the play its dramatic tension.’

To what extent does your interpretation of Hamlet reflect this point of view? In your response, make detailed reference to the play.

The thematic concerns of betrayal and loss are both the causes and effects of a rising dramatic tension; however, they are not exclusive to giving the play its dramatic tension. Shakespeare utilises the thematic concern of dishonesty, betrayal and loss to allow a strengthened dramatic tension to give a greater impact of events in the play on the audience.

Shakespeare utilises the concept of dishonesty to create a controversial atmosphere in the diegesis which the audience can feel as a rising dramatic tension. The fact that the play begins with a question, ‘Who’s there’, and on a watchtower, creates the Mise en scene to be one of danger and ambiguity. A sense of confusion should develop throughout the audience and this is what Shakespeare uses as the foundation for developing the eventual thematic concerns of dishonesty, betrayal and loss. Even dialogue of Marcellus directed at Horatio concerning the Ghost, ‘Horatio says tis but our fantasy’ and ‘How now Horatio, tis this anything but fantasy” alludes to differences of opinion and ultimately, controversy. Discrepancy is a key element in creating tension, the audience would be given the building blocks to the exploration of betrayal and loss; the discrepancy between Horatio and Marcellus and old king Hamlets death.

Hamlet’s relationship with his parents is one which causes great dramatic tension due to Claudius’ dishonesty, Claudius’ betrayal to the king and Gertrude’s betrayal of Hamlet by marrying Claudius. Act 1 Scene 2 develops, for the audience, the context in which the dramatic tension is built. Hamlet’s mourning was typical of a grieving son yet both Gertrude and Claudius hindered it immediately, due to it creating controversy in the kingdom. Both Gertrude and Claudius offered their ‘profound wisdom’, Gertrude saying “all lives must end” and Claudius “to preserver in obstinate condolement, shows a will most incorrect to heaven, the heart unfortified, the mind impatient, a understanding simple and unschooled”. Shakespeare gave Gertrude short and pithy and Claudius long and pompous statements which give the effect that they are not heartfelt, which in turn, adds to the feeling of betrayal by Hamlets mother and Claudius to Hamlet himself. He refers to the king and queen as sleeping in “incestuous sheets” and that
“a beast...would have mourned longer”, which for the audience, would be extremely controversial to insult the monarchy, especially by one of the monarchs. This is the controversial nature which the dramatic tension is built on.

Claudius’ betrayal of the king is one of the most important factors in creating dramatic tension. Hamlet set the context for the tension to be created in Act 1 Scene 2, and Shakespeare allows it to progress through the Ghost. The Ghost specifically mentions the betrayal of his brother Claudius, referring to his death as “most unnatural murder” and calling him an “adulterate beast” adds to building up the animosity towards the king by the audience. This betrayal of king is an extremely potent source for the play’s dramatic tension, and as it is Hamlet’s duty to revenge his father, situations surrounding the death or loss of characters only builds up an atmosphere to be one of great tension. The death of Polonius drives Ophelia mad, “I would give you some violets, but they withered when my father died”, and by Ophelia’s death, Hamlet faces another mindless and reasonless death on top of his fathers. This sense of death and loss in Hamlet’s life, which he describes as filled with nightmarish elements “such bugs and goblins in my life”, creates such high dramatic tension between Hamlet and Claudius. By Claudius’ death, the audience can see a reasoned death, as his death had been alluded to throughout the entire play. The dramatic tension was built up so much by the loss of old Hamlet, Polonius and Ophelia that by the final scene, the impact of that tension was an anti-climax. It didn’t have the same strength as Ophelia’s sudden funeral as the audience had been aware constantly of the event to come. As tension purpose is to give eventual events greater audience impact, in this case, it didn’t.

Tension, however, is not only successful if the resulting build up has a great impact, in some cases the tension is built up through unresolved issues and just adds to the entertainment. For instance, Polonius’ discussion with Reynolds would have created great controversy in the audience; the line “Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth, with assays of bias” shows Polonius and the deception of his own son. Shakespeare is emphasising the lying aspect through the word bias to show the audience the dishonesty and betrayal, not just diegetically, but in reality. This issue is left unresolved and some could say that it was unnecessary but Shakespeare continually feeds the thematic concern of betrayal and dishonesty so that the entire Mise en scene is one of complete chaos and disorder.

Shakespeare does try and force the dramatic tension to create powerful audience reactions and believability to the certain events in the play which are constantly alluded to. It is more often than not, a success in that the thematic concerns of betrayal and loss, as well as dishonesty, are extremely helpful in developing the dramatic tension. It allows the audience to believe the actors on stage, as their emotional states are conducive to their contextual experiences, which all have some form of dishonesty. Ultimately, the tension is advanced by betrayal and loss but not on its own, and it is not always ideally profitable.

**Hamlet is a character who is filled with a complexity that emerges from the constant battle between the philosophical, mad, and spiritual issues he possesses. The exasperation Hamlet embodies is caused by many internal contradictions that are provoked as he confronts events. The plot takes second place to the focus Shakespeare gives his protagonist. Audiences continue to be intrigued by the character that is Hamlet. He is unique among revenge heroes, doubting himself and his mission of vengeance adding to his perplexity. Hamlet (1599-1601) is an enigma who struggles to reality through deception and confronts the burden of mortality, which still resonates with a modern audience.

Hamlet’s paradoxical character suffers internal and external issues provoked by the death of King Hamlet that portray his intricacy. The modern audiences do not completely comprehend his character which becomes a
stimulating aspect of the play, as the audience attempts to decipher Hamlet’s mentality. Hamlet is a frustrated individual, due to his lack of action which he cannot explain. In his soliloquy he therefore becomes a man of words; “Why what an ass am I! This is most brave, that I, the son of a dear father murdered, prompted to my revenge, by heaven and hell, must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words. A scullion!” – The hyperbole of revenge by heaven and hell in his soliloquy, engage audiences to the moral and intellectual intricacies of the protagonist, which constitutes to Hamlet’s elaborate character.

Yet, it is equally argued that Hamlet’s soliloquy in fact, creates a universal bond which is achieved through Hamlet’s sarcasm and melancholy for his own lack of action that many often experience. In terms of the Elizabethan audience, their expectation of a resolution from a tragedy, and the soliloquy, thus, provides a passage for a plan of action in the later course of the play. Nevertheless, for all audiences it continues to be a unique tragedy to appreciate despite its resolution. The verse thus, exemplifies Hamlet’s complex character further in the philosophical realm, provoking audiences to seek answers to Hamlet’s contradictions of character.

Hamlet’s philosophic disposition further exemplifies in his second soliloquy. “Like a John of dreams, unpregnant of my cause, and can say nothing...A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?” Hamlet employs a self directed rhetorical question, comparing himself to a day dreamer, sterile in his lack of action. In reference to his question “Am I a coward?” Hamlet alludes to the ghost of King Hamlet, pondering whether his father perceives him acting as a coward. As Alex Newell states “…His self-condemnation takes several bizarre forms, including histrionic imaginings of a series of demeaning insults that he absorbs like a coward...” Through Hamlet’s bizarre character, he forms bizarre traits of his self-description. “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindles villain! O vengeance!” – This adjectival series portrays Hamlet’s rage toward Claudius that Hamlet does not continue actively to take revenge immediately after his infuriation. The protagonist engages an audience through his lack of confidence in seeking revenge, consistently searching for reasons for his inaction.

The conflict with King Hamlet’s ghost and Hamlet himself terrifies an audience as sustained communication with a ghost is unconventional. Hamlet is in a constant battle with betrayal, lechery and murder. The order of King Hamlet to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”, ties Hamlet to this conflict due to the Elizabethan belief that purgatorial spirits did command the conscience’s of the living. The modern audience questions this more readily and we seek therefore more justification for Hamlet’s action and inaction. Hamlet justifies his delay of revenge in various ways; his Christian faith, being one of many reasons. “Oh that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, or that the everlasting had not fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter.” – Hamlet is in a moral and religious dilemma, metaphorically expressing his desire to commit suicide, which his Christian faith is dictating. During Hamlet’s later encounter with the gravedigger, he questions the ease and comfort which the gravediggers have towards the deceased. – “That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to the ground as if it were Cains jaw bone, that did the first murder!” – The Biblical allusion to Cain emphasises the contrast between the grave digger’s acceptance of mortality and Hamlet’s troubled speculation of death. The protagonist constantly ponders his life and its significance, challenging the audience not only to find motivation for Hamlet’s actions but to question their own purpose.

The philosophical aspect of Hamlet is one of deep contemplation and is equally as intricate as his moral and spiritual reflections. Hamlet’s reflections have an introverted character. “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba? Thath should weep for her... what would he do had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?” – The intense emotional introspection portrays his lack of equilibrium and his emotions being in a constant struggle. He experiences a universal emotional and intellectual dilemma that ensures the audience stays engaged, through the view of a complex situation. His recognition of the reality of death is a belief Hamlet continually faces – “You cannot take away anything that will more willingly part withal – except my life, except my life, except my life.” – The epizeuxis emphasises his constant attention to death and the melancholy he possesses, captivating audiences from his deep contemplation of life’s meaning in the face of mortality.
This philosophic disposition is revealed in Hamlet’s discussion with Polonius is tortuous as he is speaking from the frustration of one who sees and feels more deeply than others around him. Polonius says aside “How pregnant sometimes his replies are. A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” – Hamlet’s battle over his own state being, either sane, insane or both, provokes the confusion of Polonius as well as the audience. The protagonist’s philosophical attention to death is prominent in his character, featuring in much of his dialogue as well as the soliloquies; as Hamlet replies to Polonius stepping “into his grave” which also foreshadows his fate. Hamlet’s philosophy captivates the mind of the audience in attempts to come to conclusions on his character.

Madness is a strong element of Hamlet’s character that is paradoxical. Certainty of madness is a factor that is made ambiguous, significantly during his admitting to ‘acting mad’ – “How strange or odd soe’er I bear myself, As I perchance hereafter shall think meet, To put an antic disposition on”. His “madness” is not completely justified and the tension between reality and acting, interests an audience. In Act 2, he states, “For by my fay, I cannot reason.”, yet ironically, he is the most rational in this scene, thus indicating his madness is a device intended both to assist him to enact revenge and as a means for Hamlet to resolve or express emotion and insights that overwhelm him. Yet, in certain aspects of the play, the legitimacy of his ‘lunacy’ is clear and we empathise with the wrongs done him.

With his encounter with Ophelia, Hamlet’s state is both bewildering and disturbing. “Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other... As if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors...” ’Pale as his shirt’ is a metaphorical device that is a sign of his “madness”, which the audience perceive to interpret through her description of his physical state. Ophelia’s shocking account is credible and the audience is persuaded that despite Hamlet’s description of madness as pretence, he is driven to some type of madness because of his personal suffering. Those of the Elizabethan audience would often believe Hamlet’s state to be ‘love melancholy’, which was their interpretation in comprehending Hamlet’s madness due the opinion of the protagonist having gone mad due to Ophelia’s rejection. Later audiences have reached their own conclusions. “I am but mad north north west.” – This metaphor summarises the complex madness that is an intriguing aspect of the play that perpetuates in the engagement of an audience.

Consequently, Hamlet’s character is in a constant battle between the philosophical, mad and spiritual issues he encounters publically and within his psyche. His complexity of his internal contradictions and confronting these events become the focus of Hamlet wherein audiences attempt to comprehend his character making the plot of second concern. Being so distinct to the norm, audiences continue to be engaged by Hamlet from the many paradoxical aspects of his character.

ESSAY 19

How does the play Hamlet reflect its historical, literary and social context?

At the end of the 16th century in Elizabethan England, revenge tragedies were transcendentally popular, the trend of these plays being ‘the bloodier, the better’. At the turn of the century, the theatres of England became less substandard and a lot more proficient. During this time, Hamlet was written. It can be seen how important the influence of the theater was in Hamlet itself. In act II, scene ii Hamlet plans to hold a play re-enacting the murder of King Hamlet, as “the play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.”

Shakespeare’s Hamlet not only had to entertain the masses of audience he had, but it also had to gain favor with the queen or king of the time. Hamlet was written at a time of insecurity for Queen Elizabeth I because of a failed assassination attempt, uprising and invasion attempt. As a result, Shakespeare included themes such as a murdered king and a country in crisis to arouse empathy for her highness. Act I, scene ii displays both of these themes; the speech Claudius gives to his courtiers explaining the mourning cycle of his brother, the ex king’s, death as well as letter received from Young Fortinbras rashly demanding the surrender of Denmark.
The Renaissance movement heavily influenced Hamlet; an average revenge story was made resonate with fundamental themes and problems of the renaissance. Hamlet himself can be seen as a personification of the revolution because of his delay to get revenge on the king. He seeks proof of the kings ‘foul and most unnatural murder’ and does not take the feudal option of revenge until he is certain that Claudius killed his father.

The religious hold over Denmark, in Hamlet, and England, at the time of writing, encourages repressed grief, which in Act I, scene ii both Claudius, and Gertrude embrace however Hamlet does not. The church believes that once people die there is no way to connect to them, as they are completely dead, Hamlet still shows grief by wearing an ‘inky cloak’ and ‘suits of solemn black’ by his ‘suspiration of forced breath’ and his ‘fruitful river in the eye’.

ESSAY 20

For more than three centuries, critical studies of Hamlet have challenged us with a range of perspectives from which we can read and understand issues which are at the core of Hamlet. What have you come to understand about Hamlet and how has this understanding been affected by the perspectives of others?

William Shakespeare’s play Hamlet is one of the most celebrated and analyzed pieces of literature in the English language. For over three centuries critics have been giving us their interpretation of the core themes in Hamlet and have been showing us new perspectives through which to understand the action of the play. Through my study of the play I have been able to gain an understanding of it’s core themes for myself, and this has been influenced by the reading of critical interpretations and articles written by others about the themes explored in Hamlet. The crux of Hamlet’s action is the character Hamlet’s indecision and inability to act, and the way that Shakespeare does not give Hamlet a clear, convincing his motive or origin of this trait. Many critics have written hypothesized on this very matter, and in this essay I will explain those of the critics: T.S Elliot, William Hazlet, Earnest Jones and Johann Goethe with the aid of their insights I now have a much firmer and deeper understanding of he character Hamlet, and have been able to from my own opinion on the matter.

The majority of critiques of Hamlet focus on the character Hamlet, and his motives. They are able to do this because Hamlet’s character is very inconsistent and his motives for his actions are left for the audience to decide. TS. Elliot wrote a critique titled ‘Hamlet And His Problems’ in which he states that “So far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others.” The core argument he makes in his paper relates to the Hamlet’s lack of “objective correlative.” That is, the idea that to elicit a certain emotional response from the audience or in a character, a play must logically end up at that emotion due to the previous sequence of events. Elliot believes that the actions of Hamlet’s mother are not justly equivalent to the complete and utter disgust it brings about in him, as seen in his quote from act 3 scene 4: “O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell, If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones, To flaming youth let virtue be as wax.” This quote demonstrates that Hamlet’s view of his mother’s actions as evil and his disgust at the lack of shame show shows. Elliot argues that Hamlet’s failure to provide a valid explanation for his disgust and anger towards his mother represents a failure of Shakespeare’s to graft these themes onto an a pre-existing plot (Hamlet was written several different times and revised before Shakespeare wrote his version). Reading this critique has influenced my understanding of the play by posing to me questions about the play that I had not previously examined, and helping me to realise that this play is not a perfect piece of literature handed down to us mortals from god, but the interpretation of another’s work by Shakespeare with the addition of new themes and questions, and that it may contain inconsistencies and textual problems that had not previously occurred to me.

Other critiques have been less harsh on the play, and have come up with explanations for Hamlet’s skewed motives and rationale. The professor at the University of Toronto, Ernest Jones, has written a paper titled The Oedipus-Complex As An Explanation of Hamlet’s Mystery: A Study in Motive, on a Freudian perspective of Hamlet. That is, that Hamlet suffers from an Oedipal complex and this subconsciously underpins his motives for almost everything that he does in the play. The Oedipan complex is a psychological disorder where one has romantic feelings towards one’s mother. Jones makes a strong case for this hypothesis by explaining the traits of the complex, and then giving examples of these traits expressed by Hamlet throughout the play. Some examples of this are: The
way that Hamlet has a strong self rapprochement, depression and finds many unconvincing poor excuses to not murder Claudius all point to some greater subconscious battle going on in Hamlet’s head. The other two most obvious examples of evidence for the complex are in hamlet’s violent reaction to his mother in act 3 scene 4 eg: when he throws her around the room reprimanding her for her supposedly over sexual and whorish conduct: “but to live In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love” Here his vivid imagery clearly demonstrates his sexual frustration and repulsion of his mother’s sexuality. Also his unfair misogynistic remarks towards Ophelia in act 3 scene 1, for example: “you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nick-name God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance.” These exaggerations show to the audience that Hamlet has something deeper in his hate of Ophelia than he is letting on. However while the oedipal hypothesis is plausible, I believe it rather far fetched to imagine that Shakespeare wrote an entire Oedipal complex into the already existing character of Hamlet, given that it was not until centuries after that Psychologist Sigmund Freud even began hypothesize about such things. This idea of Jones’ about Hamlet’s character could be implied or excluded completely depending on the way the particular production’s director takes create license with the play. Jones’ paper has given me a better understanding of the complicated inner workings of Hamlet’s mind and showed me that the motives in this play are far from straight forward, and may not only be one thing but a combination of several obvious or repressed thoughts in Hamlet’s mind.

Literary critic William Hazlet takes an entirely different angle on the topic in his Essay Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays. Hazlet does not look at Hamlet as if he were a real person, and the entire play snapshot of real life, but at Shakespeare’s creation of a character that everyone in the audience can sympathize with to some degree, and relates to so many different people on various levels. Hamlet was a renaissance man, a man of his era, and his intellectual capacity and ability to ponder questions of religion and morality would have resonated with Shakespeare’s audience. This is made obvious numerous times throughout the play, for example Hamlet’s famous soliloquy ‘to be, or not to be.’ His high level of philosophical musing intrigues myself and other audiences even today. Personally, I believe that this explanation of Hamlet’s motives is the best because it does not need to make assumptions on vague or unspoken themes within the text, but instead looks at the motives of the play write to see possibly why he would write a character so ambiguously. Reading this has affected my understanding of the play by reminding me that this play’s primary purpose was to please an audience, and all of the action and characters are there simply to serve that purpose.

Johanne Goethe, a German writer from the 18th century poses a much simpler and straight forward hypothesis in comparison to those previously mentioned, that is, that The only reason for Hamlet’s dubious commitment to his task is that he simply lacks the emotional strength to complete his task, and never had it in the first place. He likens Hamlet to a vase, that has an oak tree (revenge of his father) planted in it when it was only meant to hold flowers. The roots of the tree grow too deep and eventually shatter the vase. I believe that this analogy while simple and easy to understand does not do the situation justice, for in the fifth act of the play Hamlet loses his antic disposition and uncertainty, and commits to the murder fully. Goethe’s explanation lacks the flexibility of the others I have analyzed, and over simplifies the entire issue. Goethe references the quote “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!” as an example of Hamlet’s unhappiness that he has been given this deed to fulfill and his lack of self confidence in his ability to perform the task at hand. Personally I believe that this analysis of the issue of Hamlet’s motive is very general and simplistic, however some of the other critical interpretations of the issue I have read have in my opinion looked far too deeply into the issue and almost miss the point altogether.

In conclusion, the reading of these literary critiques of Hamlet, Hamlet and his ambiguous motives has lead me to the conclusion that Shakespeare, being the literary genius that he is, has purposely made the motives of Hamlet ambiguous, and in doing so made the story much more personal to each member of the audience. We all are able to have our own opinions as to why Hamlet fails to act, and maybe as Hazlet suggests, we see a little of ourselves in Hamlet and graft our own personality and motives onto his inaction and hesitation. This brings Hamlet closer to the audience and makes him such an intriguing character to understand and study, because while we are able to see ourselves within him, his fatal flaw of inaction leads us to become both sympathetic and frustrated with him, as we often are with ourselves.
How do the differing elements of the plot and the variety of language features and forms in the play interact to produce a work of lasting integrity?

The term integrity relates to the unity of a text; “its coherent use of form and language to produce an integrated whole in terms of meaning and value”. In the play ‘Hamlet’ by William Shakespeare, the textual features, such as: structure, form, language, content and ideas integrate to create a text that is valued and has lasting integrity. The story of the main character, Prince Hamlet, who fights the evil of a murderer as well as his internal conflicts, makes him a tragic hero and modern man within the context of the play. This plot direction will always intrigue and draw an audience however when teamed with powerful elements, language features and forms, it becomes a text that endures time and is valued by future generations, preserving the longevity and dimension of the text’s integrity.

The main elements of the play: corruption, betrayal, mistrust and revenge and its morality interact with not only each other but with the language features and forms of the play. Corruption is a main theme of the play ‘Hamlet’; corruption leading to evil and criminality is related to King Claudius and his betrayal throughout the play. The element of corruption is linked to metaphors for corruption describing the evil and sin in the world such as “…this world… ‘Tis an unweeded garden… _things rank and gross in nature passes it…” (A1.5.2 134-137) and “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The harsh words of the metaphors ‘unweeded garden’, ‘rank’ and ‘rotten’ emphasise the corrupt nature of the world in Hamlet. The powerful descriptive words in ‘Hamlet’ intrigue the audience and bring them into the world of corruption; adding another dimension to the play, helping it to stand out and give it relevance that transcends. Corruption stems from other elements of betrayal and false appearance within the play, further intriguing the audience as the links become more and more evident as the play goes on.

Betrayal is an evident theme/element in the play ‘Hamlet’; prince hamlet learns he was betrayed by his uncle Claudius when he murdered Prince Hamlet’s father, the previous King, and married his mother shortly after the funeral. Hamlet feels he is not only betrayed by his uncle but also by his mother for moving on so quickly. Hamlet reveals his disdain for ‘seeming’ (pretence and hypocrisy) when pressured by his mother “Seems,” madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.” (A1.5.2 76-77); the audience is drawn to Hamlet’s rebellion and strong character this language of false appearance (‘seems’) is consistent throughout the play evident in hamlet’s attack on makeup towards his lover Ophelia. Hamlet is against the false identity provided with the wearing of makeup he believes in honesty and believes makeup is a form of hypocrisy “God has given you one face and you make yourselves another”. Hamlet’s experience with elements of mistrust force him to express his strong views on any issue leading to deception.

Mistrust is a strong element in the play; Prince Hamlet is being deceived by his step father King Claudius, his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and possibly even the ghost of his father; therefore hamlet’s hate of deception is to be expected. Hamlet is spied on by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern numerous times in the play, to report back to the king, who has also spied on Hamlet along with Ophelia’s father Polonius. Hamlet faces tension whether or not to trust the ghost which leads him to trusting in evidence (renaissance thinking), he feels as if the spirit could be the devil taking the form of his father to trick him and play on his depressive melancholy; he resolves to use the form ‘a play within a play’ to determine Claudius’s guilt “I’ll have grounds more relative than this. The play’s the thing, wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.” (A2.5.2 551-558 Passage on assignment sheet). What separates hamlet from other plays is the lack of certainty, we expect hamlet to believe the ghost and carry out revenge however he is always questioning himself and the ghost, resulting in him creating the play within a play to gather evidence/grounds. This can be seen as hamlet’s failure to act but what gives the play lasting relevance is hamlet’s rationalised thinking, something relevant to the audiences lives as they question it taking a roll in their own.

The form ‘a play within a play’ involves the recreation of the exact way his father was murdered, as described by the ghost, to provoke a response from King Claudius determining his guilt or innocence. This form creates tension and anticipation which is widely enjoyed by audiences of different contexts. The audience becomes influenced by hamlet’s vengeance, ambition and suspicion. The mystery of the murder fascinates audiences over different contexts,
showing the plays continual relevance and lasting textual integrity. Claudius evidently is startled by the guilt he is faced with when confronted by the murder scene in the play and Hamlet resolves to trust in the ghost and carry out revenge “O good Horatio, I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” (A3.5.1 ll 260-261). This turning point in the play brings forth power thought sequences as language features that unify the play in upcoming events.

The ‘thought’ language features revolve around the contemplation of the elements revenge (medieval thinking) and morality, an issue of religious debate within Hamlet. Not only does hamlet seek revenge but laertes and prince fortinbras also seek revenge for the deaths of their own fathers. Prince Hamlet sets apart due to his excessive delay. Hamlets revenge is delayed due to his need for a perfect moment. When Claudius is praying for forgiveness in the church, hamlet reveals through the expressive form of soliloquy that he cannot murder Claudius while he prays as his father never received the chance to be forgiven of his sins and if hamlet were to kill him in that moment, his soul would go to heaven “A villain kills my father, and, for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven.”(A3.5.3 ll 80-82). Claudius reveals he was unable to pray “Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven. It hath the primal eldest curse upon it, A brother’s murder. Pray can I not.”(A3.5.3 ll 37-40). This plot twist makes the audience question if hamlet will ever carry out revenge, a memorable twist.

The seven soliloquies contribute to the strength of the elements in the play. They heighten and illuminate the themes and character insights. The soliloquies drive the characters further into their destiny and show what the character really thinks and feels, something valued by audiences when linked with themes and language techniques as they add a deeper dimension to the play and show what is underneath the character and what they keep to themselves rather than share, a valued insight that contributes to the integrity as a whole. Hamlets soliloquy in which he contemplates suicide shows a relatable human side to hamlet when grief stricken "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?” (A3. S1 ll 57-62).

William Shakespeare’s tragedy Hamlet offers a multifaceted representation of the human complexities and issues common to all, and thus allowing it to have enduring significance, able to transcend contextual constraints. Shakespeare depicts the intricacies of the human mind through the complex characterization of his protagonist, Hamlet, in his struggles to maintain his sanity, in confronting values and occurrences in conflict with his personal religious and moral standards. Shakespeare utilizes this internalized conflict to highlight the underlying frailty existing within humanity, and in doing so, presents his audience with a microcosm of the contextual issues within Elizabethan society and thus allowing us to broaden our understanding of both the play and the enduring values espoused within.

The exploration of mankind’s vulnerability towards the influences of corruption within Hamlet conveys the universal concern of human frailty, through the play’s expression of the often immoral nature of humanity, in turn reflecting the issues prevalent within contemporary society, and thus allowing it to find enduring value. The political turbulence of the Elizabethan era is initially alluded to, when we are notified that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”, foreshadowing the duplicity and treachery that unfolds throughout the play. From hereon, Denmark is used as a metaphor for the state of humanity, allinked to a physical body diseased by the moral corruption of Claudius’ literal and metaphoric poisoning through the ear, in his attempts to advance, in hierarchal status “The whole ear of Denmark is by a forced process... Rankly abus’d.” Hamlet’s unstable state of mind in response to his environment becomes symbolic of a deterioration of moral justifications for humanity’s actions. Hamlet’s internal conflict between revenge and inaction is metaphorically highlighted through the disjointed syntax in the laconic phrase “but two months dead: nay, not so much”. Hamlet rhetorically questions the state of mankind “Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not seems”, using pun to highlight the inconsistencies between reality and the various facades man creates and in doing so demonstrating the deep imperfections within humanity, challenging the extent to which honesty is valued “to be honest, as this world goes is to be one man picked out of ten thousand”. Our
timeless value of Hamlet is ultimately highlighted in the demonstration of the universality of mankind’s imperfections, reflected in “virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it”. [ANSWER QUESTION]

Shakespeare reflects the complex nature of the human mind through an embodiment of all humanity’s greater metaphysical dilemmas within the character of Hamlet, displaying his tortured comp who displays a wide array of emotions and madness. Shakespeare reveals the burden Hamlet carries, knowing that his uncle has murdered his father in the animal imagery of “the serpent ...now wears his crown”, yet contemplates the necessity to avenge his father’s death when confronted with conflicting perspectives of religious values and moral justification. In the soliloquy, “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I”, Hamlet’s self-deprecating, metaphorical contrast of his nobility with ‘peasant’, reveals a character flawed by his own self doubt and constant contemplation of action, displaying both anger and fear in his vengeful deliberations against Claudius, in “am I a coward, who calls me villain”. Shakespeare explores the uncertainty of the human mind through these emotive sentences, providing a discursive sense of self-evaluation, displaying a timeless understanding of human nature’s susceptibility to frailty.

Shakespeare explores the fear of death and our subsequent need to accept the inevitabilities of mortality found within reality and the uncertainty it brings through Hamlet’s continual procrastination against immediate revenge. Through a dramatic discussion of issues, that carry continual relevance within contemporary society, Shakespeare’s Hamlet retains its integrity and value as a text. Influenced by Elizabethan religious views and moral justifications, Shakespeare’s contemplation between Hamlet’s actions of suicide or avengement, both sinful and religiously consequential in action, conveys the innate fear of uncertainty that death brings. This is conveyed through the representation of Hamlet Senior’s ghost, and an initial doubting of his intentions “be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned?” reflecting the questioning of religious truths within Shakespeare’s context. This contemplation of the afterlife is conveyed further in Hamlet’s Humanist soliloquy “to be or not to be...” through the metaphoric statement “the undiscovered country, from whose bourn, not travellers returns” describing the discomposure of death. Hamlet contemplation of suicide as a way to nullify the moralistic tortures of mortality are met with the contextual influence of religious debate, presenting him with a metaphysical dilemma between corruption on earth and purgatory.

[Conclusion]

A play, a performance, is a mirror to the human condition; a reflection of its flaws and struggles. In this sense, William Shakespeare’s Hamlet uses acting as a practical vessel to explore the human tendency to conceal these insecurities. Specifically, Shakespeare has Hamlet suffer from the shackles of emasculation, leading him to an avenue of self-slaughter. This insecurity not only paralyses him to commit the dreadful deed of revenge but transcends to taint his perception on women and the world.

Hamlet is a chameleon; an enigma who changes the colours of his exterior to deal with his deep struggle of upholding his masculinity and avenging the death of his father. Upon Hamlet’s entry to the first scene, he is symbolically costumed, dressed in black connoting an instant insight to the audience of his mental state; he is depressed and grief stricken from the death of his father and his mother’s quick marriage to his uncle. He pleads his mother to understand that his exterior cannot “show” his emotions as he continues with an extended metaphor stating that his “inky cloak...Nor[his] customary suits of solemn black” cannot denote him truly but alternately, ends the passage with “But I have within which passes show; These but the trappings of suits and woe”. He is confined; unable to express his ‘unmanly grief’ which leads him into his first soliloquy, constructing a great distinction between his private and public persona; he is unable to confess his true emotions and releases them privately. It is no surprise that Hamlet subsequently adopts an “antic disposition” to veil his emasculate nature by immersing himself in a pool of madness as the Elizabethan society pressured men to be strong, physical and domineering over all; a persona Hamlet doesn’t fit. It is much more bearable for him to be seen as mad than to endure brutal castigations for being a “coward” and unmanly by not committing to revenge. Hamlet is crippled by his self-doubt of murdering Claudius in order to avenge his father’s death, leading him to an avenue of “self-
slaughter” as he juxtaposes himself to Hercules. In alluding to Greek Mythology, Hamlet draws a parallel to the pressures of men in both society but makes it obvious that he, unlike Hercules is not suited for these contexts; he is not a masculine man of action and impulse, but a man of thought, intellect and “words, words, words” as he repetitively exclaims to Polonius. He is agitated, and almost disgusted at his gift of words which is encompassed in Branagh’s 1996 film performance where vocal emphasis of angst is placed on the phrase ‘words’ specifically in the simile, “Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words”. Although Hamlet does eventually kill Claudius, it was at the expense of the lives of Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes and Gertrude suggesting that he is unfit to commit revenge due to his male insecurities; he is a man of words, not action which he conceals with a facade of madness.

Hamlet is stricken with his unmanly obsession for words and aims shield this by maintaining a dominant status over women. To begin, it is important to consider Phyllis Rackin’s statement where he suggests that in Shakespearean or Elizabethan time, ‘a man’s desire for a woman, now coded as a mark of masculinity, is repeatedly associated with effeminacy’. With this, Hamlet’s treatment towards women, particularly Ophelia and Gertrude is no surprise; it sheds light on his insecurities of being a man and his desperate nature to rid himself of them. Act 3 Scene 1 best encompasses the tension between Hamlet and Ophelia where Ophelia opens with a 10 beat line, and Hamlet responds by remotely teasing her with 8, ‘I humbly thank you well, well, well.’ essentially not only symbolising their complex and unbalanced relationship, but Hamlet’s struggle to treat women so harshly; it is against his nature but imperative of him to do so for his manliness. Moreover, this is crystallised through Hamlet’s paradoxical language of “I did love you once” and “I loved you not” encapsulates how he is torn between his natural self and societal expectations. However, it is soon shown that these expectations have engulfed his view towards not only Ophelia but to all women as he metaphorically states ‘God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another’. Although, this is directed to Ophelia, in pluralising ‘yourselves’, it symbolises his view on women as a whole; they are fake and unvirtuous as he also states ‘Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst though be a breeder of sinners?’ Initially, it seems odd that Hamlet would direct such an insult to Ophelia, but is soon understood that his mistreatment to Ophelia and his misogynistic outlook on women stems from his anguish towards his mother. In this sense, it is important to consider Freud’s theory of an Oedipal relationship as Laurence Olivier’s 1948 film is a vivid representation of this theory, suggesting that Hamlet has an unconscious desire to sleep with Gertrude, as she is lying on the bed in satin and they kiss passionately filling the atmosphere with sexual tension. Although this interpretation is deemed outrageous and extreme in modern context, it draws on one’s subconscious nature to seek a partner with similarities to their parent. The parallels between Gertrude and Ophelia encapsulate this notion as they are both characterised as subservient women who are easily manipulated by men. These women, specifically Gertrude, are weak and fragile, providing the perfect opportunity for Hamlet to consolidate his masculinity as he metaphorically states in his fifth soliloquy ‘I shall speak daggers but use none’ to Gertrude. However, Act 3 Scene 4, depicts his paradoxical actions as he tells her to ‘throw away the worser part’ of her heart and live with the purer part. He is unable to entirely succumb to manly expectations and still cares for his mother’s chastity and virtue, exemplifying his inner turmoil. Ultimately Hamlet conceals his insecurity of being emasculatory by mistreating women to establish a sense of power and control in his life.

A culmination of these mad and masculine facades sprouts Hamlet’s disillusionment with the world. Shakespeare surrounds Hamlet by immoral and impure characters in a form of juxtaposition; Hamlet is unlike them. He does not murder for power, like Claudius and is not obsequious to those of power like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but instead is seen as the moral compass of a diseased and “rotten state” of Denmark, able to see the phoniness of each character as he ironically states “To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand”. This motif of decay and diseased is weaved throughout the play to hint at Hamlet’s now crumbled mental state showing traits of existentialism as he comments that “this most excellent canopy, the air...majestic roof...nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation.” Hamlet is able to identify the beauty of the world but sees it as dust and a disease that has infected him to a deadly state where he rhetorically questions “To be or not to be...suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...take arms against a sea of troubles”. This flow of metaphors intensifies his mental anguish of the world; he cannot be himself and is forced to play personas; to be fake; to be like those he despises. This is almost too much for him to fathom and begins to contemplate suicide, “to be or not to be” and although the Elizabethan era deemed this a sin and unthinkable on Catholic grounds, Shakespeare, however, allows
us of modern context to empathise and almost support him in his thoughts as hindsight illuminates the harshness of his time. Essentially, Hamlet’s enduring battle with his masculinity leads him to a detrimental avenue that galvanises his disillusionment with the world.

In summation, Hamlet serves to accentuate the human tendency to conceal one’s flaws and struggles as Shakespeare uses Hamlet to tunnel into the repercussions of the societal pressure to being masculine. As Hamlet struggles through this pressure, he uses madness to veil this insecurity as he is unable to commit revenge and be his true; tainting his relationship with women and the world. Through a critical study, I believe that Shakespeare’s essential message lies subtly within Polonius “to thine own self be true”. He suggests that failing to live by this will lead you to your own demise as each character that didn’t, like Hamlet, died.

1409 words.

In society, it is important for individual’s to understand and adhere to their individual roles, as a lack of abiding to this often leads to downfall. Although relevant during the time period of Shakespeare’s tragedy, Hamlet, this idea has held enduring relevance up until modern time. The characters of Hamlet and Ophelia demonstrate this concept through their struggles with gender, religion and afflictions that shattered their comprehension of their places amongst their world, leading to ultimate downfalls.

The enduring need for individuals to understand and obey their gender roles in society demonstrates how a lack of understanding leads to an eventual downfall. Hamlet is witnessed as a man met with melancholy over the sudden loss of his father. This is a step away from his role as a male during the context of his society, portrayed more as an existential thinker than an active man, symbolic of Medieval ways against the new Renaissance ways of thinking. Claudius and Gertrude try to persuade their son to leave behind his sad thoughts, not only from their personal worry, but for his poor example of masculinity, “Thou know’st ’tis common. All that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity” (Act 1, Sc 2). Although Claudius’ words utilise a direct tone, they illustrate to the responder a universal idea of mourning and grief. This lack of understanding of his male role in society is further continued in Hamlet’s first soliloquy. Hamlet’s melancholic and seemingly feminine views are again demonstrated through, “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” The imagery portrays his lack of understanding of his role as a man in the society in which he lives. His passive attitude towards his life and the world around him is a step out of the Medieval ways of acting upon one’s issues, resonating with the responder the changing views Hamlet is facing. Hamlet’s lack of understanding of his gender role in society portrays the downfall that would ensue as there is an enduring need to obey one’s own position, demonstrative of any context through Hamlet.

Similarly, the enduring need for individuals to understand their gender roles in society is even more prevalent for women. The character of Ophelia in Hamlet is left with little choice but to conform to her feminine roles amongst the court, ultimately leading to her downfall. As a female in a highly patriarchal society, Ophelia has little freedom and is at the discretion of all the men in her life. Initially, her lack of freedom due to her societal role is pivotal. Her brother Laertes explains through metaphor the dangers of Hamlet, “Perhaps he loves you now, / … but you must fear… And therefore must his choice be circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head.” (Act 1, Sc 3), warning Ophelia of Hamlet’s royal standings and need to take care of the state over her. However, he takes on a rather fatherly and authoritative manner in which is expected in the Elizabethan era, but would be seen as inappropriate to a modern responder. Further along in the plan, Ophelia’s father, Polonius, instructs her to spy on Hamlet. This instruction is presented through the high modality in, “Ophelia, walk you here… Read on this book / That show of such an exercise may colour / Your loneliness” (Act 3, Sc 1). Due to Ophelia’s low position as a female, her only option is to obey the men in her life and what they instruct her to do. This portrays to the responder Ophelia’s inability to stray from her gender role. From doing so though, she falls into madness, relieving herself of her duties. This oppression of the female character is demonstrative of how gender affects an individual’s role in
society, especially during the Elizabethan era, but has also in a modern context.

On the other hand, changing religious beliefs affect how people view and adjust to their individual roles in society. During the Elizabethan era there was great uncertainty and debate over leadership and religion. The character of Hamlet is a depiction of this division between religious faiths; Paganism and Christianity. Hamlet is first presented with an issue centred around religion and sin when the Ghost asks him to kill Claudius, “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/ A couch for luxury and damned incest” (Act 1, Sc 5). The emotive language illustrates a pivotal moment for Hamlet as he faces the decision of avenging his murdered father and committing to a Christian belief. The responder understands this conflict, as Maurice Francis Egan states, “In Hamlet, the pagan man bursts through the habits of a Christian mind”. Hamlet’s internal struggle is further developed through the numerous murder plots in which he is the perpetrator or planner. Hamlet finds himself torn when he finds Claudius praying, leading him to delay the avenge killing, “Now he is a-praying. / And now I’ll do ‘t... / Oh, this is hire and salary, not revenge” (Act 3, Sc 3). The imperative tone demonstrates how his Christian belief deters him from killing Claudius as he would be sent to Heaven while praying, rather than the Hell Hamlet wishes he would go to. This further illustrates Hamlet’s motives for avenging his father. This is juxtaposed though to the ease at which Hamlet kills Polonius behind the arrays, further illustrating an internal conflict between Christian values and Pagan beliefs. Changing religious beliefs had a great impact on Hamlet in Shakespeare’s Hamlet as he struggled to abide by his individual role in society, especially during the Elizabethan era, but remains relevant to a modern society.

In contrast, an affliction of madness plagues individual’s and impairs their ability to abide by their social roles, leading to an eventual downfall. Ophelia’s descent into madness begins after she is chastised by her lover Hamlet, leading to insecurity and a shaken idea of her position amongst the royal court. The dramatic language in, “Oh, woe is me, / T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see!”, illustrates to the responder her initial worries. This fall into madness is greatly catalysed by the murder of her father, Polonius. Ophelia speaks with Gertrude about this briefly, “Good night ladies. Good night, sweet ladies. Good night, good night”, but the repetition of her words signify to the responder her overcoming hysteria over the harsh realities she is facing at the hands of Hamlet. Due to her madness though, Ophelia finds an exemption from abiding to her normal role in society as a woman and a part of the court. This is due to the context of the Elizabethan era, as women afflicted by a disease of madness no longer were pushed to pursue their normal roles in society. An affliction, such as madness, greatly affects one’s ability to adhere to one’s individual role in society, as Ophelia was subject to in Hamlet which ultimately led to her untimely downfall. This statement though has held enduring relevance through time, allowing for any audience’s understanding of the concept.

Overall, the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia struggled with issues such as gender roles, religion and afflictions in a way in which it affected their ability to understand and abide by their individual roles in society. This ultimately leads to each of their tragic downfalls. It is seen that in both the context of the Elizabethan era and a modern society, the importance of adhering to one’s own individual roles in the world is imperative to deter hardship.

Module B: Hamlet

What do you consider to be the important ideas in the text?

William Shakespeare’s classic revenge tragedy, Hamlet, is the story of a man battling his desire for vengeance against his villainous uncle with his indecisive, overly contemplative nature. It is through the internal conflict of the eponymous character that the playwright presents the recurring theme of duality, discussing the conflict between the many binary opposites which exist in life. A study of the character of Hamlet brings out the important ideas in Shakespeare’s play, which discusses the conflict between reason and emotion, and the uncertainty of life and death. Shakespeare’s integration of these ideas with the central character create a unified text, rich in meaning.
Through the protagonist’s emotional complexity, Shakespeare explores the intricacies of the duality between reason and emotion, and the internal conflict between the two which exists at the heart of humanity. Hamlet’s suspicious and contemplative nature is evident when he questions the intentions of his father’s ghost:

“Be thy intents wicked or charitable”.

Yet, the ghost’s revelations regarding the king’s murder elicit a strong emotional response from him, as he cries,

“O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!” His repetition of ‘villain’ and the exclamation in his delivery convey an exasperation which, juxtaposed against his earlier reasoning, highlight Hamlet’s strong emotional and intellectual faculties. However, reason eventually prevents action, as despite obtaining ocular proof of Claudius’ treachery, he is unable to kill him whilst the two are alone, by the logic that if he is praying,

“I his sole son do this same villain send

To heaven.” Shakespeare creates dramatic irony in this scene by revealing in Claudius’ previous soliloquy that he is not, in fact, praying, conveying how Hamlet’s obsession with rationality leads to inaction. This suggests the precariousness of the balance between rationality and irrationality.

However, Hamlet demonstrates a self-awareness of his own character fault by highlighting his passivity in his soliloquy following a meeting with Fortinbras:

“What is a man If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.”

His rhetorical question argues that the persistent inaction resulting from his extreme ambivalence renders his existence meaningless, reflecting the pessimistic worldview he develops throughout the play. His metaphor portraying himself as merely an animal is self-dehumanising, reflecting the Elizabethan notion of the great chain of being which distinguishes humans as a superior entity. However, Hamlet subsequently argues the importance of human reason as a God-given gift “not to fust in us unused”, hence demonstrating the tension between passion and reason. His introspection is the vehicle with which Shakespeare conveys the necessity for emotional balance, as his overly meditative nature renders him passive until it is too late to seek revenge, which Shakespeare highlights through the tragic device of the protagonist’s death. Upon reviewing Hamlet’s self-examining nature, it is clear that his inaction, although often perceived as mere procrastination, is truly an example of intellectual hyperactivity. The hyperactivity of his mind prevents the activity of his body and as a result, the character of Hamlet embodies the conflict between emotion and reason.

Hamlet poses the notion of the duality of life and death, questioning the certainty of human existence and thereby reflecting a scepticism which subverts the protestant values that dominate Shakespeare’s context. Through soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates suicide, wondering whether “to be, or not to be”. His question emphasises his tormented emotional state and reflects the pain that is universally experienced in life. Hamlet, in a state of immense depression, asks whether it is nobler to suffer the “slings and arrows” of life, or to “take arms” and fight them. He views the implications of death as ending

“The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to”,

suggesting through the imagery of the physical torment our bodies endure in life the relief that death brings. And yet, it is the uncertainty of what lies beyond that creates Hamlet’s hesitation over suicide,

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come...”

Must give us pause.” The metaphor of sleep representing death conveys the emptiness and darkness of our eternal rest, posing the question to the audience of what truly lies beyond. By using a first person plural, Shakespeare makes Hamlet an icon of everyone’s fears and uncertainties about the afterlife, making us ask the question ourselves: what
dreams may come? After all, it is the “undiscovered country” from which “no traveller returns”. Examining the play as a whole reveals a long-term conflict between the physical world and the afterlife, set in motion by the killing of King Fortinbras by King Hamlet the day Prince Hamlet is born. Reflecting the notion of the divine right of kings, Fortinbras’ death upsets the balance of nature, creating a series of events which culminates in the murder of King Hamlet and the war between Denmark and Norway. As the balance between the two forces is lost, treachery plagues the nation, reflected through Marcellus’ observation that

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The balance of nature is restored, however, at the end of the play through the death of Claudius and Hamlet, and Fortinbras’ subsequent claiming of the throne. Through this plot device, Shakespeare portrays the character of Hamlet as a martyr, sent to restore order to the world and reclaim the balance between life and death. It is death which ultimately pays for death, suggesting that in the precarious conflict of human existence, our demise is always the victor.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet takes us on a journey through the downward spiral of a man undone by his own intelligence, exploring and frequently questioning the values of his Elizabethan context, notably its Christianity. It is the protagonist himself who is Shakespeare’s canvas for his portrayal of dualism, as his introspection highlights the important notion of the conflict between emotion and reason, and life and death. Ultimately, Hamlet’s tragic downfall tells us about the necessity of a balance between the opposing forces in life. It is Hamlet’s lack of emotional balance which eventually sees him succumb to fate and fade into the unexplored country of the afterlife.

The anguished outpourings of Hamlet’s soliloquies reveal psychological insights which chart the reluctant avenger’s increasingly disturbed and alienated outlook of the world.

With close reference to soliloquies, demonstrate how the text’s value is enhanced through the dramatically compelling protagonist.

The success of Shakespeare’s Hamlet can be attributed to the dramatically compelling protagonist who deals with key human issues that have universal significance. Through the exploration of universal issues, responders become aware of Hamlet’s alienated outlook of the world, caused by his struggle with verisimilitude amidst the corruption the surrounds him. As well as this, Hamlet is bound by filial duty that stems from contemporary Elizabethan values to exact revenge, however, his search for a truth to morally justify revenge reveals his reluctance and humanist desire to defy his pre-determined destiny. Even though many of Shakespeare’s authorial decisions are guided by contemporary Elizabethan values, his treatment of universal issues enhances the text’s value, allowing it to resonate with audiences across time. Shakespeare reveals these universal issues, primarily through Hamlet’s soliloquies as well as a range of other dramatic techniques, and in doing so achieves textual integrity.

The corruption that surrounds Hamlet causes him to question the veracity of those around him, forcing him to delay in taking revenge. Through the characterisation of those around Hamlet, Shakespeare reveals to the audience the ease of concealing the truth, and the overwhelming deceit that Hamlet must decipher in order to find the truth. Claudius’ characterisation as a deceptive Machiavellian catalyses Hamlet’s disturbed and alienated outlook of the world, enhancing the text’s value through the universal applicability of Hamlet’s search for truth. “Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death … to bear our hearts in grief” depicts Claudius’ mendacious court address; revealed to responders as false through dramatic irony and biblical allusion of “the ghost that did sting thy father’s life now wears his crown.” Due to Claudius’ deceit, Hamlet’s outlook on the world becomes alienated and confused, exemplified through biblical allusion of “the primal elder’s curse.” Metaphor of “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” foreshadows Hamlet’s increasingly disturbed outlook of the world as he is constantly confronted with deception in his search for a morally justifiable truth. Thus, audiences across time realise the catalyst for Hamlet’s confusion and disillusion; enhancing the text’s value through the dramatically compelling protagonist.

Due to Hamlet’s alienated outlook of the world, he expresses his discontent in his anguished outpourings of his soliloquies which appeal to audiences across contexts due to the universally applicable search for truth that Hamlet
endures. It is evident that Claudius’ manipulation and deception has caused Hamlet’s confusion between appearance and reality and as such, through Shakespeare’s use of soliloquy “O that this too too sullied flesh” (1,2) Hamlet is able to express his malcontent and anger; creating a dramatically compelling protagonist that resonates within responders of across all contexts. “An unweeded garden that grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature” foreshadows the corruption that ensues under Claudius’ reign, engaging Elizabethan audiences through the Divine Right of Kings whilst depicting the power of the King over Denmark. This extended metaphor exemplifies Hamlet’s anger and confusion towards Claudius who he describes through classical allusions as “No more like my father, than I to Hercules.” Due to the corruption and deceit surrounding Hamlet, he feels as if there is no use in life; revealed in the existentialist tone and rhetorical question within “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world.” The texts value is enhanced through the exploration of the humanist and existentialist notions that challenged Christian beliefs of a “canon against self slaughter.” However, due to the overwhelming surveillance and scrutiny that Hamlet endures, he must express these thoughts only in soliloquies making him dramatically compelling and appealing to responders; epitomised through the metaphor “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.” Ultimately, the dramatically compelling protagonist is created and enhanced through these soliloquies which express his alienated outlook of the world, thus enhancing the texts value through the treatment of universal issues.

Through Shakespeare’s parallel construction charting the paths of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, Shakespeare is able to explore universal issues of revenge and filial obligation, enhancing the texts value through his evaluation of the quest for revenge. The filial obligation of the son to avenge his father is established through the ghost’s commanding tone in “Avenge his most foul and unnatural murder.” This same obligation that stems from Elizabethan expectations is also placed on Laertes who declares through biblical allusions and colour symbolism “To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil ... I’ll be revenged most thoroughly for my father.” Shakespeare uses this construction to appeal to responders across all contexts to convey his message that condemns revenge as it leads to moral degradation. Hamlet’s intentional murder of his once friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern highlights Shakespeare’s condemnation, “they are not near my conscience, their defeat does by their own insinuation grow.” Moral corruption due to revenge is exemplified through stage directions of Hamlet “Stabs King” in conjunction with his cumulation of insults “Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane.” This characterisation of the dramatically compelling protagonist resonates within responders, reinforced through the contrasting characterisation of Fortinbras who does not exact revenge against his filial duty and is rewarded with rule over Denmark, Norway and Poland. Thus the reluctant avengers journey is enhanced through the parallel construction that enhances the text’s value with Shakespeare’s message that condemns revenge.

Hamlet’s reluctance to avenge his father and fulfil his filial obligation is evident through his anguished outpourings, which heighten the texts value due to its universal applicability. This is particularly exemplified through the soliloquy “How all occasions do inform against me, and spur my dull revenge” expressing how the truth evades Hamlet, creating his disturbed outlook of the world. However, his quest for the truth causes Hamlet to delay in taking revenge until he finds a truth to morally justify his actions. Within this soliloquy, Hamlet explores notions of humanity and existence, contemplating existentialist views that resonate within responders due to universal applicability, “What is a mean ... be but to sleep and feed? A beast no more?” The texts value is enhanced due to it’s universal exploration of humanity in his procrastination and inaction which he compares to soldiers who lack motivation but “go to their grave like beds” exemplified through the simile. Through Hamlet’s anguished outpourings, he comes to the conclusion of action and to carry out his revenge, illustrated through the rhyming couplet and declarative tone of “O from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.” Therefore, the exploration of humanity and existence through Shakespeare’s use of soliloquies, resonates within responders across all contexts, thus enhancing the texts value through the dramatically compelling protagonist.

Ultimately, Shakespeare’s utilisation of soliloquies reveals the anguished outpourings of Hamlet’s innermost thoughts, in addition, his use of other literary and dramatic techniques enhances the texts value. The exploration of key universal concerns of verisimilitude, revenge, filial obligation and humanity’s existence; resonates within responders across all contexts, proving the enduring value of the text that is heightened through Hamlet’s
characterisation. In this way, Hamlet’s concerns appeal to a wide range of audiences who can create individual informed personal understandings, thus demonstrating the text’s value that transcends time and context.