HAMLET ACT QUESTIONS – ANSWER SHEET

ACT ONE

ACT 1, SCENE 1

1. What atmosphere is created by the opening lines? What do we learn about the state of Denmark from this scene?
   
   Atmosphere
   There is a sense of unease in the opening scene of the play. The two guards speak in short, sharp quickly spoken sentences to each other:
   Barnardo: “Who’s there?”
   Francisco: “Nay answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.” (1.1.1-2)
   Francisco: “…tis’ bitter cold/ And I am sick at heart” (1.1.7-8)
   The sickness imagery implies that Francisco is uneasy and fearful.
   
   State of Denmark.
   Denmark is preparing for war, as the army of young Fontinbras is likely to invade. Young Fontinbras wishes to regain the lands his father lost in single combat to King Hamlet.
   Marcellus: “…that this sweaty haste/ Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day” (1.1.78-9)
   Horatio: “But in the gross and scope of mine opinion/ This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (1.1.68-9)

ACT 1, SCENE 2

2. Hamlet “A little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.65). How does Shakespeare employ both stagecraft and chiasmus in this quotation to explore Hamlet's feelings towards his uncle and mother?
   Hamlet is expressing his dislike at Claudius who his “kin”, as he feels that he is not like him. The chiasmus is important as it draws attention to Hamlet’s anger towards Claudius as highlighted through the echoing effect in this technique where he is “A little more than kin” but “less than kind”.

3. How does the Hamlet of this scene fit the model of a malcontent?
   • Hamlet is costumed differently from the other characters ie. Wears black throughout the play (“inky cloak”)
   • He’s very deliberately rude and ambiguous when dealing with the king.
   • Contrasted against Laertes, who is dutiful, polite and obedient to Claudius.

4. Closely read Hamlet’s soliloquy (1.2.129-158). Shakespeare often adopts the techniques of repetition, short abrupt phrases, imagery and specific word choices to communicate the intensity of a character’s innermost thoughts. Write down quotations for each technique:
   a. Repetition
      “O”, “Oh”, “month” – the constant repetition of “month” expresses his anger at the fact that his uncle and mother married so quickly after his father’s sudden death.
   b. Short abrupt phrases
      “Frailty thy name is woman!”, (1.2.146)
      “Like Niobe, fall of tears, why she, -/ O God, …” (1.2.149-50)
   c. Imagery
      Classical metaphor in which Hamlet likens his father to the Sun God, “Hyperion”:
      “So excellent a king, that was this Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother” (1.2.139-40)
      Also compares himself unfavourably to Hercules:
      “My father’s brother, but no more like my father Than I to Hercules…” (1.2.152-3)
   d. Specific word choices
      Words are negative and bitter in their connotation: “unrighteous”, “incestuous sheets”, “How weary, flat, stale and unprofitable/ seems to me the uses of the world!”
   e. Finally – How does the use of these techniques convey a sense of Hamlet’s desperation to the audience?
      The overall combinations of each of these techniques help create the impression of Hamlet as a typical malcontent in this soliloquy.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

5. This scene introduces the major sub-plot of Hamlet, as Shakespeare further develops the characters of Polonius and his children, Laertes and Ophelia. Employing quotations where necessary, create a table in your workbooks like the one below to summarise your findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Polonius</th>
<th>Laertes</th>
<th>Ophelia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality Traits</td>
<td>Royal Counsellor, Bossy, domineering</td>
<td>Domineering, elder brother</td>
<td>Submissive and obedient.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Techniques that reveal this to the | Gives a long list of advice to his children. | • Advises his sister that she must protect her “chaste treasure” (1.3.32). | • Unlike her brother and father, Ophelia says very little in this scene. |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|

hamlet question answers ACTS 1 TO 5 UPDATE
**ACT 1, SCENE 4 & 5**

6. **How does Shakespeare demonstrate Hamlet's confusion when he first sees the ghost?**

Shakespeare uses antithesis to express Hamlet’s confusion at seeing the ghost of his father:

> “Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com’st in such a questionable shape” (1.4.40-3)

The use of antithesis here demonstrates Hamlet’s concern as to whether this ghost is to be trusted as “airs to heaven” or is an agent of the devil, as in a “goblin damned”. The use of several sets of contradictory phrases draws attention to Hamlet’s confusion when faced by the Ghost as to whether it can be trusted.

7. **Briefly summarise the ghost's story. What is Hamlet's response? What plans does he make? Why is it important that Hamlet force Horatio and Marcellus to keep silent at the end of this scene?**

- The Ghost recounts to Hamlet the story of the murder. He describes how King Hamlet was asleep in his orchard when Claudius poured a fast acting poison in his ear.
- Hamlet forces Marcellus and Horatio to swear an oath not to let anyone know about the ghost’s visitation. This is important as Hamlet plans to feign madness, “an antic disposition”, in an attempt to uncover the truth behind his father’s death.

8. **Summarise the purpose of this speech.**

In this speech to his old school friends, Hamlet talks of an overpowering melancholy that springs from his ultimate concern as to whether life is really worth living. Part of the purpose of this speech is for Prince Hamlet to convince Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is mad, as he knows that they will report his comments to Claudius. However, Shakespeare also uses the speech to reveal more of Hamlet’s melancholic and reflective nature as evidenced in the line “What a piece of work is man! (2.2.286), as has already been seen in his previous soliloquies.

9. **What poetic devices does Hamlet employ here?**

Imagery, contrast and connotative language is used to describe Hamlet’s melancholy:

> “...it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory;  this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o’verhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appeareth no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours” (2.2.281-6).

Hamlet employs the metaphor of “majestical roof fretted with golden fire” to describe the sky, which contrasts with the negative language he uses to depict his own state where the world is full of “foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”

10. **Given what you know of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, how is this speech, while genuine, nevertheless ironic?**

Hamlet’s speech is genuine as it builds on the audience’s understanding of Prince Hamlet as a melancholic malcontent who reflects and ruminates on the Renaissance philosophical problem of whether life is really worth living, when “the beauty of the world” is really just the “quintessence of dust”. However, the speech also has a doubly ironic meaning, as Hamlet has realised that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been ordered to find the source of his “madness” by his uncle, the King, so he truthfully recounts his melancholy for this purpose.

11. **How does Shakespeare indicate Hamlet's “feigned” state of madness through his choice of verse form?**

Hamlet as befits his state of feigned madness employs prose rather than iambic pentameter (also known as blank verse). Often when characters of noble rank employ prose in Shakespeare’s plays it can be a sign of madness, as traditionally it is the peasants and servants who speak in prose.

12. **Hamlet’s mood significantly changes upon hearing about the players? Why is Hamlet so attracted to the players? What might they reflect about his situation? (Remember: Shakespeare often employs the technique of doubling to reinforce certain points in the play.)**

Hamlet’s mood significantly changes from that of a melancholic, depressed Prince recounting his woes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to that of excited and welcoming Prince to the players. Consequently his language also becomes more positive with use of words like the constantly repeated “welcome”, as well as “entertainment” and “I am glad to see you”. Hamlet sees the Players as bringing life and vitality to the Royal Court that has become a “prison” for him. The Players are symbolic of Hamlet’s position as they actors like him. Shakespeare is using this technique of doubling to reinforce the central idea of appearance versus reality.
ACT 3 SCENE 1

10. The “To be or not to be” soliloquy 3.1.56-89) is considered one of the most famous speeches by Shakespeare. Closely read this speech again and then complete these activities.
   a. Why might this speech be considered the musings of a malcontent? What quotations allow this reading?
   b. How does Shakespeare use a variety of techniques (eg. antithesis, imagery etc) to communicate Hamlet’s melancholy to the audience?
   c. What features of this speech differentiate from the other soliloquies by Hamlet so far in this play?

ACT 3 SCENE 2

12. Summarise the story of the play and Claudius’s reaction.

ACT 3 SCENE 3

14. Closely read Claudius’ speech (3.3.35-72)
   a. What does Claudius mean when he asks, “Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens/ to wash it white as snow?”
   b. For what reason, does Hamlet choose not to kill Claudius at this stage?

ACT 3 SCENE 4

15. Find three examples of imagery that features disease or corruption in this scene. For each example explain the reason why Shakespeare has chosen that image?

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In this quotation, Hamlet likens his uncle to a diseased ear of corn that corrupts the image of the more “wholesome” brother, the murdered King Hamlet.

- “Nay, but to live”

In the rank sweat of an ensainted bed, Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love Over the nasty sty.” (3.4.91-3)

Hamlet describes the marriage bed of Claudius and Gertrude as a place of vice and “stewed in corruption”, likening them to the base animal of a pig that lives in a “nasty sty”.

16. How does the character of Gertrude change throughout this scene?
The character of Gertrude significantly changes throughout this scene from being a willing accomplice to Polonius’s deception and lover of Claudius, to a believer in Hamlet’s story. She is shocked to discover from Hamlet that Claudius murdered her previous husband, King Hamlet, and is overwhelmed by “These words like daggers enter in my ears” (3.4.95). Ultimately by the end of the scene, Gertrude is willing to support Hamlet in his plan and work against Claudius despite the fact that Hamlet “has cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.156).

ACT 4 QUESTIONS

ACT 4 SCENE 4

17. Closely read Hamlet’s final soliloquy (4.4.32-66). How does Shakespeare employ a range of techniques to explore Hamlet's confused and contradictory mental state? For each technique, find an appropriate quotation to substantiate your points.

a. analogy (parallel/doubling)

“…How stand I then, That have a father killed, a mother stained, Excitements of my reason and blood, And let all sleep, while to my shame I see The imminent death of twenty thousand men That for a fantasy and trick of fame Go to their graves like beds” (4.4.56-61)

Shakespeare includes Hamlet’s encounter with Fontinbras’s army to prompt him to reflect on his own inaction in avenging his father’s murder. Hamlet’s inaction is juxtaposed against the willingness of Fontinbras’s men to die for so little in comparison to Hamlet who has many reasons to be angry.

b. imagery

“How all do occasions do inform against me, And spur my dull revenge!”

Through this choice of image by Hamlet, Shakespeare establishes that his protagonist Hamlet feels that he is on trial for his inaction in not avenging his father’s murder.

c. contradictions

“Examples gross as earth exhort me” (4.4.30)

This statement by Hamlet is illogical as “gross” means “foul, disgusting, savage, bad” whereas “exhort” means “encourage, persuade”.

“Led by a delicate and tender prince./ Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed” (4.4.49)

Hamlet’s description of ambition as “divine” is again contradictory as Christianity traditionally sees humility as a divine quality not ambition. The use of such contradictory statements allows the audience to see further evidence of Hamlet’s confused state, but unlike the other soliloquies he finally resolves to act: “Oh from this time forth/ My thoughts be bloody or by nothing worth.” (4.4.65-6)

ACT 4 SCENE 5

18. What has caused Ophelia’s condition? How does Shakespeare convey this change in her personality to the audience?

Ophelia has become mad in response to the murder of her father, Polonius, by Prince Hamlet, with whom she used to have a relationship. Shakespeare conveys this change in Ophelia by having her adopt prose when she speaks, as well as singing inappropriate songs of a sexual nature in front of the King and Queen.

19. What is the cause of Laertes’ anger? Look closely how at Laertes’ use of language particularly early in this scene? How does this writing technique and active approach offer a contrast to Hamlet?

Laertes is angry as he wishes to avenge the death of his father, Polonius. Unlike Hamlet, Shakespeare reveals Laertes to be a man of action who speaks in direct easy to understand short phrases. For instance, he yells at Claudius, “O thou vile king, Give me my father!” and later “That drop of blood that’s calm proclaims me bastard” (4.5.116-8)

ACT 4 SCENE 7 (no questions for Scene 6)

20. What is Claudius’ and Laertes’ plan for Hamlet? (list the three steps)

(i) Hamlet and Laertes will duel. Claudius will ensure that there swords are sharp not blunted as is the practise.

(ii) Laertes will poison the tip of his sword.

(iii) Claudius will trick Hamlet into drinking a cup of poisoned wine during the duel.

ACT 5 QUESTIONS

ACT 5 SCENE 1

21. Why do you think Shakespeare has chosen to include the scene with the gravediggers (ie. the clown) at this stage of the play? How does it affect the tone of the play?
Shakespeare often employs scenes with the common people such as peasants, porters and gravediggers in his play to lighten the tone through comedy at a specific point in his play, as well as offering an alternative viewpoint on events in the play. This scene occurs after the tragic death of Ophelia, and the two anonymous gravediggers are laughing and joking while they clear a new grave of old bones.

22. In this scene, Hamlet makes reference to the death and decay of the human body even if it is that of a great warrior and leader like Alexander and Julius Caesar, as well as contemplating the skull of the court jester, Yorick. How does Shakespeare employ a variety of techniques both written and through stagecraft to reveal Hamlet's attitude towards death?

This scene is usually staged with Hamlet holding the skull of the court jester, Yorick. The tableau of the young Prince holding the skull adds emphasis to his musings on death and mortality. Hamlet realises that all must return to “base uses” as dust whether they are great warriors like Alexander or Julius Caesar, or even his own father.

ACT 5 SCENE 2

23. Does Hamlet need to apologise to Laertes? How might this demonstrate a change in his character?

Hamlet’s apology to Laertes, demonstrates a change in his character as he is willing to acknowledge some responsibility for his actions including the murder of Polonius.

24. What does the arrival of young Fontinbras signal at the end of the play?

The arrival of young Fontinbras signals the return of order to Denmark as Hamlet has declared him heir to the throne.