



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts Hamlet by William Shakespeare

Please note: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare is a drama included as part of the List of Texts prescribed for comparative study, for examination in the year 2028. The study of a Shakespearean drama is a requirement at Higher Level.



Image courtesy of Mentor Books

Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons or as part of a unit of learning
- Students may wish to complete some tasks individually or in pairs/groups
- Tasks might be completed orally and/or in written format
- Students may also wish to engage in a Think-Pair-Share activity for some tasks.

Making connections with the continuum of learning



Students should be able to:

Develop an awareness of their own response to texts and analyse and justify that response.

Develop an awareness of their own responses, affective, imaginative, and intellectual, to aesthetic texts. Explore these responses relative to the texts read, generate and justify meanings and build coherent interpretations.

(Leaving Certificate Syllabus, p.13)

Pre-reading discussion:

Facilitate a class discussion using the following prompt:

“What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty!”

— Hamlet (Act 2, Scene 2)

Do you agree that human beings are fundamentally noble and capable of great things, or do our flaws and weaknesses often prevent us from reaching our full potential? Invite students to explain and justify their views.





ACT III Scene II

Enter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

GUILDENSTERN Good my lord, vouchsafe me a word with you.

HAMLET Sir, a whole history.

GUILDENSTERN The King, sir—

HAMLET Ay, sir, what of him?

GUILDENSTERN Is in his retirement marvelous distempered.

HAMLET With drink, sir?

GUILDENSTERN No, my lord, with choler.

HAMLET Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to the doctor, for for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more choler.

GUILDENSTERN Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame and start not so wildly from my affair.

HAMLET I am tame, sir. Pronounce.

GUILDENSTERN The Queen your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you.

HAMLET You are welcome.

GUILDENSTERN Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother's commandment. If not, your pardon and my return shall be the end of my business.

HAMLET Sir, I cannot.

ROSENCRANTZ What, my lord?

HAMLET Make you a wholesome answer. My wit's diseased. But, sir, such answer as I can make, you shall command—or, rather, as you say, my mother. Therefore no more but to the matter. My mother, you say—

ROSENCRANTZ Then thus she says: your behavior hath struck her into amazement and admiration.

HAMLET O wonderful son that can so 'stonish a mother! But is there no sequel at the heels of this mother's admiration? Impart.

ROSENCRANTZ She desires to speak with you in her closet ere you go to bed.

HAMLET We shall obey, were she ten times our mother. Have you any further trade with us?

ROSENCRANTZ My lord, you once did love me.

HAMLET And do still, by these pickers and stealers.



ACT III Scene II

ROSENCRANTZ Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend.

HAMLET Sir, I lack advancement.

ROSENCRANTZ How can that be, when you have the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark?

HAMLET Ay, sir, but “While the grass grows”—the proverb is something musty.

Enter the Players with recorders.

O, the recorders! Let me see one. *He takes a recorder and turns to Guildenstern.* To withdraw with you: why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

GUILDENSTERN O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly.

HAMLET I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?

GUILDENSTERN My lord, I cannot.

HAMLET I pray you.

GUILDENSTERN Believe me, I cannot.

HAMLET I do beseech you.

GUILDENSTERN I know no touch of it, my lord.

HAMLET It is as easy as lying. Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

GUILDENSTERN But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony. I have not the skill.

HAMLET Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

Enter Polonius.

God bless you, sir.



Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidance)

**The following may be completed in written or oral format,
as individuals or as part of a group activity.**

1. Hot Seating

Organise students into pairs. Invite one student to take the role of Hamlet and the other to take the role of a journalist or interviewer. The interviewer might ask questions such as:

- Why are you angry with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
- Why do you refuse to explain yourself?
- Do you trust your mother?
- What do you intend to do next?

Encourage the student playing Hamlet to respond in character and support their answers with evidence from the extract.

2. Theme Investigation

Organise students into groups and invite them to explore how the following themes are developed in the extract:

- appearance versus reality
- friendship and betrayal
- power and control
- manipulation
- trust

Ask each group to select a relevant quotation, explain its meaning and discuss how it contributes to the extract. Groups may then present their findings to the class.

3. Performance Task

Organise students into groups of three or four and invite them to rehearse the conversation between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Encourage them to consider:

- how Hamlet should speak;
- the emotions he might display;
- how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might react.

Invite each group to perform the scene for the class. Afterwards, facilitate a discussion exploring which interpretation of Hamlet was most convincing and how body language influenced the audience's understanding.

4. Debate

Organise a class debate on the following motion:

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are victims rather than villains.”

Divide the class into two teams and invite students to use evidence from the extract to support their arguments.

Reflect and Respond

The following activities may draw on the extract provided or be used to support students' extended study of the play.

1. Critical Thinking

Invite students to respond to the following statement:

“This extract demonstrates Hamlet’s intelligence and his distrust of those around him.” Discuss.

Encourage students to refer closely to the extract, support their points with quotations and consider both Hamlet’s language and his actions.

2. Character on Trial

Invite students to place one character on trial. Possible choices include Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia.

Support students in preparing prosecution and defence arguments by considering:

- whether the character is morally responsible for the tragedy;
- whether their actions are understandable in the circumstances;
- whether they could have acted differently.