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?

This soliloquy by Hamlet can be easily considered the musings of a malcontent, because in it he adopts a deliberate melancholic tone

as he explores the philosophical question of whether life is really worth living. Hamlet explores this dilemma of a painful and

troubled life that is best ended, when he states that:

“…To die, to sleep -/

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heart ache and thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to -…” (3.1. 60-3)

b. How does Shakespeare use a variety of techniques (eg. antithesis, imagery etc) to communicate Hamlet’s melancholy to the

audience?

 Antithesis of “To be or not to be, that is the question – “ (3.1.55)

Shakespeare powerfully employs anti-thesis in this speech to explore the conflict experienced by Hamlet, as he questions whether he

should live (“To be”) or “not to be”. The placing of these two conflicting notions together at the opening of this soliloquy allows the

audience to understand Hamlet’s dilemma.

 Imagery – Shakespeare employs a deliberately confused metaphor to highlight Hamlet’s emotionally confused state.

“Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,” (3.156-8)

The metaphoric imagery is deliberately mixed in this quotation as Hamlet talks of suffering “the slings and arrows of outrageous

fortune” but then talks of bearing “arms” himself “against a sea of troubles”. The inconsistent use of weaponry imagery in this

quotations draws attention to Hamlet’ s troubled state.

There also a number of other more straightforward images that Hamlet employs such as his description of death as “The undiscovered

country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns” (3.1.79-80)

c. What features of this speech differentiate from the other soliloquies by Hamlet so far in this play?

Unlike the other soliloquies delivered by Hamlet, he does not discuss his father’s apparent murder by his uncle, and his mother’s hasty

marriage to the new King; instead he deliberates over bigger philosophical problems like the meaning of life. Significantly the style

and tone of this speech is different, as the iambic pentameter maintains a regular rhythm and is not interrupted by the short, abrupt

phrases or repetition of words like “O” or “I” that feature in his other soliloquies.

11. Ophelia describes the sudden shocking change in Hamlet’s behaviour in this speech (3.1.144-55). Considering the Renaissance

belief in the Chain of Being, why is she particularly horrified?

Ophelia is particularly horrified as Hamlet is heir to the throne of Denmark and should represent the embodiment of the state, “th’

expectancy and rose of the fair state” (3.1.144). If he is mad, then this means chaos and disorder for Denmark.

ACT 3 SCENE 2

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

The story of the play performed by the Players, mirrors the murder of King Hamlet by Claudius. The old king is asleep and the

would-be murderer creeps in and pours a fast acting poison in his ear. After the old king is buried, the murderer promptly marries the

widowed queen and becomes king. Claudius is clearly upset by this retelling of his crime, abruptly interrupting the performance and

leaving.

13. Throughout this scene Hamlet speaks in both blank verse (iambic pentameter) and prose depending on who he is speaking too.

Explain in your own words why Shakespeare chooses to make such distinctions.

Hamlet employs iambic pentameter when he speaks to his close friend and trusted confidante Horatio, as befits his noble status.

However, when he is behaving inappropriately and insulting Ophelia during the performance, he deliberately chooses prose as befits

his supposedly ‘mad’ status. Prose was often employed by Shakespeare to show madness in noble characters, because by speaking

this verse form instead of blank verse, it highlighted that they had lost an understanding of their position in society.

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?”

Claudius has already described his “offence” as “rank” employing the imagery of disease and decay as “it smells to heaven” (3.3.36).

He wishes that God would be able to wash his “rank” crime clean and “white as snow” (3.346), in other words, absolve him from his

guilt.

b. For what reason, does Hamlet choose not to kill Claudius at this stage?

Hamlet chooses not to kill Claudius at this point as he fears that by killing Claudius while he is praying will allow him to go to

heaven, as opposed to the purgatory the ghost of his father inhabits as he was unable to confess his sins before he died.

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?

 “From the fair forehead of an innocent love/ And sets a blister there” (3.4.43-4)

Hamlet describes his mother’s actions in marrying his uncle through his metaphoric description of an “innocent love” as a “fair

forehead” as being contaminated by a “blister”

 “Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear/ Blasting his wholesome brother” (3.4. 64-5)

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 enseamed 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).