

Worksheet 8 – To be or not to be

Review

Answer these questions about the previous video lecture to check how much you remember.

1. Who does Hamlet compare himself to in his 3rd soliloquy?
 - a) Dido
 - b) Priam
 - c) Aeneas
 - d) Hecuba

2. Who wrote the essay called 'Of Truth' in 1625?
 - a) Christopher Marlow
 - b) William Shakespeare
 - c) Francis Bacon
 - d) James 1

3. What image does John McRae use to describe the changes that the 2nd and 3rd soliloquy have upon Hamlet's progression to action?
 - a) A shove
 - b) A kick
 - c) A leap
 - d) A push

Recall

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.

4. What does John McRae state that Hamlet is doing in his 4th soliloquy?
 - a) Wallowing in self pity
 - b) Considering the fate of his father
 - c) Structuring a clear argument about whether life is worth living
 - d) Expressing his rage and disappointment with his mother.

5. How does John McRae feel that Hamlet loses the audience's sympathy?
 - a) By discussing the nature of life
 - b) By expressing his wish to die
 - c) By moaning about the struggle of his life
 - d) By his harsh behavior to Ophelia

6. How has John McRae state that Ophelia has been made to feel confused prior to this soliloquy and encounter with Hamlet?
 - a) Her brother has left her to return to Paris and she misses him
 - b) She encounters Hamlet's pretend madness in her closet
 - c) She has argued with her father, Polonius.
 - d) She has been rejected by Hamlet and misses him.

Analysis :

7. Let's look again at the whole of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. Re-read it through carefully and then re-read looking carefully at the punctuation. Stand and as you read, walk slowly. Try to use the iambic rhythm to guide your footsteps; this will help you to see where Shakespeare is doing something different and which bits might be important. Every time there is a piece of punctuation, change your direction and again, makes notes on where you change and how often. What does this tell you about Hamlet's state of mind? How does this marry with John McRae's argument that this soliloquy is a rhetorical reasoning of life and death and purpose?

Read the following short comments about this soliloquy and decide if you agree with them or not?

Are there any words that are problematic and that you might question?

No one but Shakespeare could have interrupted an exciting dramatic intrigue with a passage like this. John Dover Wilson 1935

Entirely motivated by reason, untouched by passion. In its academic method and style, the speech carries the stamp of Hamlet's identity as a student, formally posing a 'question' or topic for debate. Alex Newell 1991

What makes 'To be or not to be' such a cryptic utterance is that the lines telegraph, and even actively elide, the full thought which Hamlet is mulling over. Should 'To be or not to be' be silently completed by us as 'To be alive or not to be alive' (the 'suicide' interpretation), or as 'To be an avenger or not to be an avenger' (bringing in the revenge plot of the play)? Dr Oliver Tearle

Then take one of these quotations and write a response to it. Make sure that your argument is grounded in the text and that you are using quotations both from this soliloquy and also from elsewhere in the text.

Extension:

There is an extensive amount of commentary written about this soliloquy as you might imagine. Spend some time on the internet researching others' views as they vary widely in interpretation. Study at A level is all about developing your own response to the text so spend some time responding to the differing interpretations.

This is also a useful activity to do with different productions. Lyndsey Turner's 2015 production with Benedict Cumberbatch controversially moved the scene to much earlier on in the play. Although the order was restored later, the controversy, raised some interesting questions about the importance of this speech. Look into this and see what people's main objection was. If we follow John McRae, overriding argument throughout these lectures, then we are seeing a progression of Hamlet and a development of his character; to move a soliloquy especially one as important as this one, would upset this progression.

Research this further and make notes as to what you think about this? Is this soliloquy untouchable or is there room for alternative interpretation?

Evaluation

8. It would be useful to investigate the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia better and I would like you to watch the following video, produced by the RSC, where the two actors playing Hamlet and Ophelia talk particularly about the use of language in establishing character relationship.

It would be wise to re-read the rest of Act 3 scene 1 before you watch as then you will be fully conversant with the issues that they are discussing.

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/hamlet/language/analysis>

- a) Having watched both actors exploring the scene, what can you say about their relationship? Who controls the conversation and how is language being used between the two characters?
- b) Click on the link below to investigate the scene further. The actors have highlighted lines that show different purposes and it is worth spending some time exploring the ways that actors approach the lines and the way they lead to relationship.
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/hamlet/language/the-nunnery-scene>
- c) Go back to your copy of the script and re-read this scene and try applying the same strategies, looking for the three techniques talked about:
Shared Language
Questions and Answers
Status

Extension:

Consider the emotions of both characters and think about the fact that they are both aware of being watched by outsiders.

Now re-write this interaction imagining that they are in a totally private space and that everything they say is not overheard.

How does it change things?

What would they honestly like to share with each other?

How would they honestly respond?

Glossary

Noble - having or showing fine personal qualities or high moral principles.

Rhetoric - Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, which along with grammar and logic, is one of the three ancient arts of discourse.

Reconciling - restore friendly relations between; make (one account) consistent with another, especially by allowing for transactions begun but not yet completed

Reason - the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgements logically

Discourse - written or spoken communication or debate.; speak or write authoritatively about a topic.

Opted - make a choice from a range of possibilities

Closet - In Elizabethan and Middle English, closet referred to a larger room in which a person could sit and read in private

Crucial - decisive or critical, especially in the success or failure of something.

Genius - an exceptionally intelligent person or one with exceptional skill in a particular area of activity.

Elide - join together; merge.

Cryptic - having a meaning that is mysterious or obscure

Telegraph - a clipped way of writing which abbreviates words and packs information into the smallest possible number of words or characters

Avenger - a person who exacts punishment or inflicts harm in return for an injury or wrong