

Hamlet: (a) A play of questions

☉ refers to links on www.crossref-it.info

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** This is a play of questions not answers, and we should see this as a strength rather than a weakness. It enables directors etc. to keep producing fresh versions of the play, often suited to the spirit of the age.
 - The lesson is intended to be delivered when the students have read the play.
- ❖ **Opening exercise:** Use the following anagrams to play a game of 'Countdown Conundrums'. Give students 30 seconds for each as on the TV programme (or a bit longer if this seems too difficult). The words are literary terms (tell them this):
 - REARCCATH (character);
 - SITPARTGOON (protagonist);
 - YOOQUILLS (soliloquy).
- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** The play is full of conundrums. It starts with a question, and ends with a command. Look at these:
 - What effect does the opening question have? (See ☉ [Texts in detail > Hamlet > Hamlet synopses > Act I > Act I Scene i](#))
 - And what do we make of the final line? Is it satisfactory? (For example, does the military mood suit the story of Hamlet?)
- ❖ **Textual examination:** Students open the play at random, looking to find a question on the page. (This will obviously work better with an edition which has a reasonable amount of text on a page.) Discuss the questions found (plenty!):
 - Why does the character ask this question here?
 - Does the question have an answer?
 - Does it expect one?
 - Does the character asking already know (or suspect) the answer?
 - Is its purpose evasion of some kind?
 - What does it tell us about the character speaking?

Students could record a selection of what is found.
- ❖ **Textual examination:** Look at the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy (Act III, scene i - see ☉ [Texts in detail > Hamlet > Hamlet synopses > Act III > Act III Scene i](#)):
 - Annotate the speech for an actor, showing pauses, emphasis, tone / pace / volume changes, gestures and movements.
 - If there is time, students could storyboard this, showing how they would film the speech (including camera angles, close-ups, etc.).
 - Discuss students' annotations, and read / act out some versions accordingly.
 - What impressions of Hamlet, and of the play as a whole, do these different versions give?
- ❖ **Recreative task:** Write, as a director, instructions to an actor who is about to play Hamlet, for any one of his soliloquies.
 - Include comment about the meaning of the speech and how it fits the play as a whole, as well as ideas on voice and movement.
- ❖ **Critical task:** John Dover Wilson (in *What Happens in Hamlet*), commenting on the 'to be or not to be' speech, wrote:
 - 'He believes in immortality, which means that by death he may exchange one nightmare for a worse.'
 - How far do you think that Hamlet's religious beliefs make it more difficult for him to reach decisions? (Look at ☉ [Texts in detail > Hamlet > The Context of Hamlet > Religious/philosophical background](#))
- ❖ **Extension idea:** Compare different filmed versions of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy (or other soliloquies).