

Bard Blitz *Hamlet* Discussion Table

This table is provided to help you prepare to run the Bard Blitz. It is meant as an aid to provoke thinking about the selected *Hamlet* extracts. The ideas here should not be considered either exhaustive or definitive; this would go against the creative principle of the Bard Blitz. Ideally, you and your students should generate a wide range of original questions, observations and ideas, many of which are not in the table and could lie beyond the four categories implied in the column headings.

Extract	Discussion Ideas			
	Characterisation	Language	Stagecraft	Concepts
1. 1.2.129-143	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Hamlet feeling here? • What triggers this outburst? • Is he overreacting? • What does he want? • What does this speech contribute to our view of Hamlet's character? • How would the play change without Hamlet's soliloquies? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are emotion and state of mind expressed? (repetition, exclamation, oaths, apostrophes, rhetorical self-questioning, hyperbole) • Natural images of excessive growth, decay, illness, corruption; • Myths ('Hyperion to a satyr'). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you stage this? • Is this a predominantly active rhetorical display or introspectively passive, or both? • Is Hamlet talking to the audience or to himself? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral illness and corruption; • Roleplaying, doing one's duty, and mythologising; • Grief and memory; • The burden of revenge and Shakespeare's problematising of the (Senecan) revenge story model; • Simple story with profound implications; • The function and reliability of soliloquy.

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<p>2. 2.2.278-292</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Hamlet's view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? • What is revealed about Hamlet's character here? • What is Hamlet's main point in this passage? • To what degree is this passage a genuine expression of Hamlet's thoughts? • Does Hamlet really 'know not'? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confessional tone and truth telling; • Contrasts, antitheses; • Images and comparisons; • How does the language talk about the human and the cosmic? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How emotionally intense or intellectually distanced is Hamlet in speaking these lines? • What are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern doing while Hamlet speaks? • How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern react to key remarks by Hamlet ('your secrecy,' 'I know not,' 'my disposition,' 'what is this quintessence of dust?,' 'Man delights not me—nor woman neither'). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective perception and external reality; • Knowledge and lack of knowledge about truth and human purpose; • Spying and plotting to find the truth; • Hamlet's sense of isolation and aloneness; • Disruption of the revenge genre.
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<p>3. 3.1.170-181</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Polonius doing here and how important is it to the play? • How does Polonius treat Ophelia, the King, the Queen, and Hamlet? • What does he think is wrong with Hamlet? • What words would you use to sum up Polonius' key character traits? • How would he describe himself? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hendiadys ('origin and commencement') • Voice of respectful counsel using minimal imagery; • Variation of voice towards Ophelia, Claudius, and Hamlet; • Words relating to truth v appearance: 'believe,' 'show,' 'be round,' 'in the ear,' 'find him'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where is Ophelia and how do Polonius and the King encounter her? • How does Ophelia behave while Polonius addresses her? • How does Ophelia behave while Polonius and the King confer? • How much does she hear of the conversation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secrecy, spying, plotting and counterplotting; • Seeking and knowing the truth about things; • Politics, counsel and politicking; • Control over knowledge, people, situations; • What is grief in the play? How is it expressed by different characters? • How do grief, love and madness relate to one another in the play?
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<p>4. 3.3.36-46, 67-72</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Claudius' problem? • In what ways is he morally good and in what ways is he morally bad? • How does this passage affect or change the audience's understanding of and emotive response to Claudius? • Is he praying or not praying: does he actually commence praying after his speech? • How is he like Hamlet? • Considering this passage and others in the play, what is Shakespeare's overall portrait of Claudius? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What natural metaphors does he use and what effect do they have? (rank smell, rain, birdlime, heart, new-born babe) • What biblical allusions, parallels, and imagery does he use and what are their effects? (Cain and Abel, 'curse,' 'mercy,' 'white as snow,' 'O wretched state' alludes to Paul in Romans 7). • Language of guilt and entrapment but also of rationalisation and self-justification. • Logical processing. • Insoluble questions. • Emotive apostrophes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is Claudius positioned throughout? • How active, submissive, emotive or rationally distanced is his body language? • At what point does Hamlet enter and how much has he heard or seen? • Does Claudius see Hamlet? • How would you stage the similarities and the differences between Claudius and Hamlet in this scene? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claudius and Hamlet as similar and yet different; • Fate versus free will; • The role and purpose of the king in Renaissance society; • Inactivity and disempowerment (of Claudius and Hamlet); • Misunderstanding and misrecognition (by Claudius and Hamlet); • Human weakness and sin and the moral imperative.
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<p>5. 4.7.166-183</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what state of mind does Gertrude deliver her account? • How is her voice her own and yet also chorus-like? • What representation do we get of Ophelia? (natural, maidenly, insane, victim); • What is the effect of this description on our view of Ophelia and Hamlet? • How important is this moment to Laertes and his later actions? • Compare this account with the conversation between Laertes and the Priest in 5.1.219-34 ('Her death was doubtful')? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the naturalistic imagery and its function; • Note the affective representation of nature; • Consider the tone, pace and lyricism of the passage. • How do the words convey moral judgments? • What is the special effect of this as 'reportage' of an off stage event? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would Gertrude deliver this speech in terms of movement, posture, gesture and voice? • How would Laertes and also Claudius respond during and after the speech? • What effect would you seek to have on the audience in staging this scene? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characterisation and disempowerment of Ophelia, and female characters, and all the characters; • The playwright's blend of characters' points of view and more omniscient knowledge; • The relationship of the natural imagery here and the play's imagery of natural corruption, illness and decay; • The scope and detail of Hamlet's guiltiness in the play; • The overall tragic (or emotive or affective) impact of the play on the audience; • The moral and intellectual issue and value of horrible things being depicted beautifully or artistically.
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