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Discussion Questions Shakespeare's Hamlet Acts 1 & 2

Q1: Consider Claudius' court speech at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 2. What does his actions reveal about his character?

At the beginning of Act 1, Scene 2 while addressing the court about the unfortunate passing of his brother, King Hamlet, in a sorrowful yet hopeful way so the community can heal and move forward, but the speech quickly turns sour. Claudius boasts about marrying Queen Gertrude, in the same breath reminding the community that the kingdom belongs to him now. From the moment the reader is introduced to Claudius, the supposed grief for King Hamlet seems insincere, ultimately a front. Examining closer into his words, Claudius often speaks in oxymorons, which in some contexts can be used for comedic relief or for describing something absurd, but to me, Claudius carefully used his phrases to manipulate the emotions of the audience. Claudius has the audience wrapped around his finger the moment he talks about the haste marriage full of "defeated joy," having "mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" (Shakespeare, 1.2.10) In both examples Claudius the feeling of happiness and sorrow, letting the listener choose what emotion they want to focus on. If someone is really sad about the death of former King Hamlet, they could see Claudius as using humor to cope with the great tragedy, while someone else could see the oxymorons as Claudius attempting to use humor to lift spirits and move on. Either way, Claudius does this on purpose to seem relatable and ultimately sincere so no one suspects that he was the real reason King Hamlet is no longer in office. The speech truly revealed to the reader that Claudius is a master manipulator, which foreshadows that many ways Claudius manipulates others for his desires later in the play.

Q2: Consider Hamlet's first soliloquy and the context of his situation. Does this reveal anything about his character?

In plays soliloquies are whenever a character speak their internal thoughts out loud to themselves, alone so the audience can get a grasp on what's going through the characters mind.

Hamlet has 7 very powerful soliloquies throughout the entire play, but the first truly shows the audience his deepest internal conflict. The soliloquy was initiated after Hamlet and Claudius got into an argument over Hamlet's prolonged grief for his dead dad. Claudius is eerily very persistent that Hamlet gets over his grief, arguing that being sad is normal, but persistent grieving is "a course of impious stubbornness" (Shakespeare, 1.2.97-98). Hamlet begins with considering if suicide is a viable option to cast off the insurmountable anger and grief he is feeling. He reveals that he is grappling with his mother's decision to marry his uncle who, to him, feels "no more like [his] father than [him] to Hercules within a month" of her husband's death (Shakespeare, 1.2.157). Ultimately, Hamlet is deeply hurt by his mother's decision and miserable over his father's death, and while his heart is breaking, he feels he must hold his tongue from showing how he really feels because to him everyone else has already moved on. The soliloquy shows the audience that Hamlet is holding onto an overflowing bucket of anger that will slowly untangle throughout the play.