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LESSON NOTES

School: Ba Sangam College

Year/Level: 13

Name: _____

Subject: English

Worksheet 22

Year: _____

Strand	Reading and Viewing
Sub Strand	Communication Text Types – media, everyday communication, literary texts
Content Learning Outcome	Read and demonstrate understanding of a variety of complex texts.

LITERATURE

GENRE: DRAMA

TITLE: HAMLET

PLAYWRIGHT: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

THEMES

REVENGE

There are two young men bent on avenging their father's death in this play. Hamlet and Laertes are both on the same mission, and while Hamlet is pondering his approach to the problem Laertes is hot on his heels, determined to kill him as Hamlet has killed his father, Polonius. This is, therefore, a double revenge story. Shakespeare examines the practice of revenge by having two entirely different approaches to it – the hot-headed abandon of Laertes and the philosophical, cautious approach by Hamlet. The two strands run parallel – invoking comparisons, each one throwing light on the other – until the young men's duel and both their deaths. The revenge theme feeds into the religious element of the play as Hamlet is conflicted by his Christian aversion to killing someone and his duty to avenge his father's death, whereas it is not a consideration for Laertes, whose duty is clear to him, and he acts on it immediately.

CORRUPTION

Corruption is a major concern in this play. The text is saturated with images of corruption, in several forms – decay, death, poison. From the very first moments of the play the images start and set the atmosphere of corruption which is going to grow as Shakespeare explores this theme. The tone is set when Marcellus says, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,' after seeing the ghost of Hamlet's father. What Shakespeare is doing here, and in using the image structure of corruption, is addressing the broadly held view that a nation's health is connected to the legitimacy of its king. Here we have the ghost of a murdered king, and his murderer – a decidedly illegitimate king – is sitting on his throne. All through the play, Hamlet is preoccupied with rot and corruption – both of the body and the soul, reflecting the way in which society is destroyed by the corruption of its inner institutions – in this case, the court, which is the government.

Decay, rot and mould are always in Hamlet's mind, and his language is full of those images – 'an unweeded garden that grows to seed – things rank and gross possess it,' and countless images of death and disease. He hides Polonius' body in a place where it will decay rapidly and stink out

the castle. It's an image of the corruption in secret places that is going to contaminate the whole country.

POLITICS

Hamlet is a political drama. Hamlet's uncle has murdered his father, the king. He has subsequently done Hamlet out of his right of succession and become king. Hamlet's mother has married the king while the rest of the palace is engaged in palatial intrigues, leading to wider conspiracies and murders. The king, Claudius, determined to safeguard his position in the face of the threat Hamlet presents, plots in several ways to kill Hamlet. Polonius plots against Hamlet to ingratiate himself with Claudius. Characters, including Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, spy on each other. This is all to do with power and the quest to achieve and hold it.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

This is a major theme in every one of Shakespeare's plays. The text of *Hamlet* is saturated with references to the gap that exists between how things seem to be and how they really are. Very little in this play is really as it seems. That is bound to be so in a play in which there are so many murderous plots and schemes by those who, on the surface, strive to appear innocent, like Claudius, who, behind his charismatic smile, is a damned villain. He is, as Hamlet puts it, a 'smiling villain.' Although Ophelia loves Hamlet she pretends to spurn his affections. Hamlet pretends to be mad so that he can explore the ghost's assertion that Claudius killed him. All the characters, in one way or another, are hiding their true intentions.

What makes this theme particularly interesting and different in this play is that as the play develops the gap between appearance and reality narrows by the characters becoming more like the masks they are using than any reality that may lie behind that so the identities they have assumed eventually become their realities.

WOMEN

For much of the play, Hamlet is in a state of agitation. It is when he is talking to either of the two female characters that he is most agitated – so much so that he is driven to violence against them. He cares about both but does not trust either. He feels his mother, Gertrude, has let him down by her 'o'er hasty marriage' to Claudius. To him, it means that she didn't really love his father. In the case of Ophelia, he is suspicious that she is part of the palace plot against him.

Both women die in this play. Ophelia is driven mad by the treatment she receives from the three men – Claudius, Polonius and Hamlet – and takes her own life. Gertrude's death is more complex because it raises the question: how far is she responsible for the corruption that Hamlet has to deal with?

QUESTIONS

1. Discuss a theme from the play and relate this to your own society supporting examples from the play.
