Shakespeare

Third year- Second semester

Hamlet

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We have finished Hamlet. ‘Hamlet’ is the most difficult tragedy of William Shakespeare because it has different points of view and because it has lots of modern elements. It has some classical features but it has lots of modern elements which make this play in particular different from the other Shakespearean plays.

I am going to answer the questions from my own point of view. We are going to discuss quotations and the essay questions and finish up with ‘Hamlet’.

**Essay questions:**

In a quotation or in an essay question, you should answer in an essay form (the introduction, the body, the conclusion).

**1-The effect of the three Renaissance humanist philosophers:**

- **Niccolò Machiavelli**

**- Sir Francis Bacon**

**- Desiderius Erasmus**

\****The effect of Niccolò Machiavelli:*** a Machiavellian character gives promises and never fulfills them.

**The Machiavellian characters in the play:**

***1-Claudius*** uses all the means to keep his power and his crown. He is lair; He laughs at people. He proves that he loves the crown more than the queen. He leaves her to drink from the poisonous cup. He is a lair; he used to laugh at his people and to laugh at Hamlet. He tells Hamlet that he will be his crown prince. He laughs at Gertrude and Laertes also.

(Notice: you say that he laughs at somebody, you should say how).

Claudius laughs at Hamlet by showing that he cares about him and he wants to treat him in England but actually he wants to kill him.

And he laughs at [Laertes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laertes_(Hamlet)) when [Laertes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laertes_(Hamlet)) goes to him with a group of people to topple or depose him. So, he laughs at him and tells him he will resign the throne to him if he discovered that his father is murdered and after he left, he never does.

I expect you to say that this is related to the theme of artifice. You have to relate things together. So, you say that this has to be related to the theme of artifice which is extended in the play. And you have to say what artifice is. It is this idea that appearance is against reality; appearance versus reality, so people show something and act the other way round.

***2-Polonius:*** How is he a Machiavellian character?

He was using his daughter and breaking her heart to show the king and the queen that he knows that she does not suit Prince Hamlet. He wants to please them by showing that he considers the hierarchy. He knows that his daughter is inferior to Prince Hamlet. He spies on Hamlet to pass the information to King Claudius. He was doing lots of wrong deeds to please the king and the queen. He is a sort of a social climber. So, he does wrong things to please the authority.

***3-The Late King Hamlet:***

He is a Machiavellian character because he usurped the throne of Denmark from the rightful king of Norway; the Late King Fortinbras.

***4-The Queen Gertrude:***

She is a Machiavellian character because she is evil; she is not a good mother. She does not believe Hamlet because she prefers her husband to Hamlet. She does not listen to his advice. She is committing sins but she does not repent.

***5-***[***Rosencrantz and Guildenstern***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosencrantz_and_Guildenstern)***:***

They are Machiavellian because they sell their friendship to Hamlet for the sake of the king. They are still like Polonius; they want to please the king and the queen. They are sort of social climbers.

\****The effect of Sir Francis Bacon:***

Horatio was the only one influenced by Sir Francis Bacon. He uses the inductive way of thinking. He suspects the given reality and keeps on questioning facts to make sure whether they are true or false.

***Notice:*** Hamlet is **not** influenced by Sir Francis Bacon. Hamlet is looking for pretexts, not evidences. He is looking for pretexts to delay killing the king. He does not want really to kill the king. He had Oedipus complex.

Also, we have two ways of thinking; the classical way of thinking and the inductive one. Hamlet is following the classical way of thinking (Aristotle’s way of thinking). He used to take everything for granted. He takes what the ghost tells him for granted.

\****The effect of Desiderius Erasmus:***

Desiderius Erasmus was catholic but he rejects the idea of predestination in Catholicism. He said that man has a free will and is not controlled by fate.

Hamlet commits sins not because of fate, but because of his free will. So, he chooses to do what is wrong and he is to blame. The effect of Desiderius Erasmus is clear on some of the Elizabethan audiences who are catholic. Some of the Elizabethan audiences do not believe in the idea of predestination like Desiderius Erasmus and they believe that Hamlet is to blame because fate does not control him and he has made mistakes by his own free will, so killing Polonius was not an act of fate. Hamlet says that it is fate, but the Elizabethan audiences will not believe that. They say that Hamlet is to blame. In the play, the divine justice is realized at the end because Hamlet makes mistakes. He is punished at the end by his murder. From the Christian point of view, he is purged at the end and he will reach salvation. So, the audiences sympathize with him at the end.

**2-Metatheater:**

First, you have to write the definition of Metatheater.

1-The definition: It is a non-traditional modern technique used excessively by William Shakespeare in ‘Hamlet’.

2-The description of the Metatheatrical technique: (how it is there in the play)

It is shown in the play through two ways. **The first thing is that the characters in the play discuss theatrical affairs.** For example, Hamlet says the life is a big stage and people are like actors and then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern extend the metaphor saying that they are also players because the king and the queen sent them to act the role that they have ordered them to play. We notice the theme of artifice. So, they were still laughing at Hamlet pretending to be true friends, but after that Hamlet discovers that they are not true friends and Hamlet turns against them.

**The second thing is that William Shakespeare involves a play-within- a play technique**. For example, first he mentions Virgil’s ***‘***[***The Aeneid***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgil#The_Aeneid)***’.*** It is a play-within- a play. The best actors in the world came to cheer Hamlet up from his melancholic situation. And Hamlet asks them to perform the scene of murder from Virgil’s ‘[The Aeneid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgil#The_Aeneid)’.

The second example of a play within-a play is **‘The Murder of Gonzago'.** Hamlet aside tells the first player that he will write a scene and he orders him to add it to the play they will perform to him the following night. Hamlet tells Claudius that the play is called the mouse trap.

The third example of a play-within-a play is the interlude. It is like a very short comedy and it is farcical; the characters in it are clownish or they behave as clowns. This interlude is for the sake of comic relief. It makes comic relief in the tragedy.

3-The effect of this technique:

\*William Shakespeare is challenging Aristotle and he is violating the Aristotelian claim of dramatic illusion. Aristotle has said that the playwright should observe dramatic illusion to make the audience believe that what they watch is real life, not acting.

\*This technique will affect the idea of catharsis. Shakespeare violated the effect of the catharsis. Catharsis usually happens when the audiences believe that what they watch is real life. So, they pity the tragic hero; they cry for the tragic hero when he falls, and they are scared lest they should have the same fate. But when they know that the tragic hero is an actor acting a play and what they watch is not a real life, they do not sympathize with him.

**3- Discuss Hamlet as a tragic hero:**

(I will tell my point of view and it is up to you if you take it or not.)

Hamlet is not a classical tragic hero. **Although Shakespeare uses classical elements in the play (like the unities, the classical allusions, the classical structure of the play; the play is divided into five acts), he does not follow the classical concept of the tragic hero**. According to Aristotle, the classical tragic hero should be a superman or a semi-god, but Hamlet is a human being. Although Hamlet is influenced by Seneca; the ancient Roman tragedian, in making his tragedy full of murder and of blood and has a supernatural figure like the ghost, Shakespeare does not make Hamlet victim of fate. Shakespeare is influenced by the humanist Desiderius Erasmus who rejects the idea of predestination and believes that man has a free will of his own. So, Hamlet makes mistakes when he kills Polonius, he causes the death of Ophelia, he leads [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosencrantz_and_Guildenstern) to their death, he causes the madness of Ophelia and he causes her death. So, Hamlet is to blame. He has chosen to be evil; he has become a scourge. He is not a minister of goodness. The audiences do not sympathize with him and they do not feel catharsis, however, at the end of the play Hamlet has become a minister of goodness. When [Laertes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laertes_(Hamlet)) kills him, Hamlet purges his soul from his sins and God forgives him and Laertes forgives him for killing him. Hamlet changes and becomes a good Christian at the end. The audience sympathizes with him in his downfall. It is believed that he will reach salvation (you should mention the last scene). His murdering of Claudius is not considered a private act of revenge, but it is considered public vengeance because Laertes disgraces the king and tells all the people about his crimes, so the audiences supports Hamlet when Hamlet kills the corrupt king Claudius. They support him and sympathize with him. So, I believe that the play does not end in pity and fear, but in pity and admiration. The classical catharsis is not realized because the Metatheatrical technique has violated the catharsis. So, catharsis is not realized because William Shakespeare has used excessively the Metatheatrical technique (you have to explain how the metatheatrical technique violated the catharsis). But the play ends in pity and admiration. The Elizabethan audiences sympathize with Hamlet when he proves to become a good Christian at the end. He dies but he is saved by God. He will go to heaven because he has purged his soul. The Elizabethans admires Hamlet very much when he sublimates; he feels spiritually high, and he says a prophecy about [Fortinbras](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortinbras) (you should mention the prophecy).

So, Hamlet is a tragic hero, but is not a classical tragic hero. (This is my opinion).

**4-The theme of Revenge:**

**-The effect of Seneca:** how William Shakespeare is affected by Seneca? He took from Seneca the theme of revenge and he involved murders and blood in the play and he took from him this idea of the supernatural element which is the ghost.

Did he use the concept of the classical tragic hero from Seneca? No. He does not follow the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero…. (You should say the same idea which we have mentioned above but in brief).

Has he divided his play into five acts like the classical Seneca? Yes.

Is the structure classical? Yes. He imitates Seneca in having classical structure for his tragedy (five acts, classical allusions, the unity of action and place). Shakespeare doe not observe the unity of time.

The effect of Seneca in brief: - murders and blood.

- structure.

-unities of place and action.

- No tragic hero. (Shakespeare did not use the

concept of the tragic hero from Seneca.)

-supernatural element ‘ghost’.

**-The avengers** are Hamlet, Prince Fortinbras and [Laertes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laertes_(Hamlet)). (You have to think of them: are they scourges or ministers? And who was a scourge and then turns to be a minister? The scourge performs private revenge and the minister of goodness is the one who seeks public vengeance. People support the avenger while taking revenge as what Hamlet does at the end of the play. At the beginning, Hamlet seeks private revenge and this is not accepted by religion. He started committing sins.

**-And we can mention Desiderius Erasmus** because the crimes were the act of free will, not of fate.

**-The audience:** (the point of view of the 16th century and modern audience)

We have two types of audiences; the 16th century audience and modern audience.

**The 16th century audience:**

\*some of them have medieval beliefs; they believe that fate is in control.

\*And some of them are influenced by Desiderius Erasmus. They are humanists. They believe that man acts of his free will. So, they say that Hamlet has made crimes by his own free will and he should be punished. They want divine justice to be realized and they will be happy when [Laertes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laertes_(Hamlet)) kills Hamlet at the end and then they say that he has purged his soul. So, Hamlet has to be died because ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’, this is according to the holy book ( in the Old Testament).

**5-Shakespeare’s language in Hamlet:**

-**Hamlet’s speech when he feigns madness is subtle**. The Elizabethan audiences expect to watch explicit drama, so they do not understand what Hamlet means. So, they consider this irrational talk and an act of madness. But the modern audiences are cultured and they can interpret what Hamlet says. For example, when Hamlet called Polonius fishmonger, he means to satirize him. Also, when Hamlet likens him to Jephthah, he means that he has sacrificed his own daughter and broken her heart in order to please the king and the queen.

-**Hamlet as a philosopher:**

Hamlet was philosophizing sometimes, for example, when he talks about life as a big stage and people as actors.

**-The play is highly metaphorical**. Hamlet is influenced by the classical writers in using poetic diction. (You should mention examples of the classical allusions. there are a lot of classical allusions in a play- within- a play. There is a reference to the gods and the goddesses; the god of the moon, the god of love,…..).

**-William Shakespeare likes to mix prose and verse in his play.**

Classical writers always write in blank verse, but Shakespeare always like to mix blank verse with prose.

He uses prose for the common people and the blank verse for the high-ranking people. The people, who has high ranks, like to talk in verse. And when there is a serious situation, the characters talk in verse.

Blank verse: it is one line of verse divided into five feet and every foot starts with an unstressed sound and ends with a stressed sound.

**6- Classical feature:**

What are the classical features in the play?

1-He observes the unities of action and place.

2-The structure is classical. He uses five acts, soliloquies and asides which make his the play explicit, and the play starts with exposition and goes to a climax and ends in a denouement. (You should talk about the exposition: there was the appearance of the ghost and the soldiers whom were walking and there was an atmosphere of tension. And you should talk about the climax: {I never say where the climax of the play is; it is your point of view} it could be Polonius’s death. And the denouement: the events are revealed and the tragic hero has his downfall at the end.

3-Catharsis is not realized. There is no catharsis and instead of pity and fears, it ends with pity and admiration.

4-The effect of Seneca

5-Shakespeare likes the Roman poet Virgil very much and he refers to him when he makes Hamlet saying lines from Virgil’s ***‘***[***The Aeneid***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgil#The_Aeneid)***’.***

Virgil was his favorite poet.

6-Hamlet used to play the chorus. Ophelia tells him that he used to play the chorus in the play because he was commenting on the play **‘The Murder of Gonzago'.**

7-Deductive way of thinking (Aristotle’s idea).

**7-The medieval features:** (references from the Middle Ages)

1-the fencing match (deulling) between Hamlet and [Laertes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laertes_(Hamlet)). This is a bad habit inherited from the Middle-Ages. According to the ethics of this game, the rapiers should not be sharp. People used to fight for the sake of honor. Laertes was dishonorable when he sharpened the point of the rapier and poisoned it. Claudius has promised Laertes to escape punishment after killing Hamlet because at this time the killer in fencing was not to be punished.

2-Theory of humor. When they talk about Hamlet as melancholic at the beginning of the play and they talk about him as a melancholic person. (You should say what melancholia means and explain the theory of humor {I gave you a paper in which you have the explanation} ).

2-The idea of fate that fate dominates man’s action. Hamlet was a person living in the Middle Ages. He always talks as if fate is beyond his crimes; fate has put Polonius in his way. He also thinks that he is innocence; he talks about himself as victim of fate.

3-The idea of order and disorder (the idea of the Great Chain of Being).

**Quotations**

How to answer the questions of quotations:

Write it in an essay form (introduction, body, and conclusion).

**The introduction:**

1-Who says it? when?

2- Paraphrasal (explain the quotation in your own words, you mention what is the speaker is talking about?)

**The body:**

1-**Is the quotation related to a theme.** (the theme of artifice, revenge, order, medieval idea---).

**2-Is it related to a certain technique?** (For example, the technique of Metatheater, or soliloquy)

And if it was a soliloquy; **if it was subtle drama**, so you say: all the 16th century drama is an explicit drama, but William Shakespeare makes Hamlet’s speech subtle and implicit like the modern drama. He was a head of his time.

But if **the drama is explicit**, you say: it represents the 16th century drama. It is explicit. It shows the audience everything. The audience is not cultured…. .

**3-comment on the language:**

**\*Is it prose or verse?** And you should say Shakespeare likes to mix between prose and verse in the play and when he uses prose and when he uses verse.

\*William **Shakespeare’s language in the play is highly metaphorical**. (You say this if it is metaphorical). And you should say this is classical influence because the Classicals used to write poetic diction. William Shakespeare was highly metaphorical. He is known not for his themes. He was admired by all people around the world not for his themes, but for his language because it is highly metaphorical.

\***Memorable line.**

If you find a memorable line, say this is one of the most important memorable lines all over the world. (For example, To be, or not to be: that is the question/ the world is a big stage).

**\*Classical allusions.**

If you find a classical allusion, you should mention them.

**\*the language subtle or not.**

If it was subtle, you say this is a modern element. William Shakespeare is a head of his time. He likes to insert some modern elements in his play although it belongs to the 16th century.

**4-Characterization**

-You talk only about the characters that are involved in the quotation.

-is there an influence of a philosopher. (For example Shakespeare was influenced by Niccolò Machiavelli while portraying the character of Claudius,…. .

Also, he was influenced by Desiderius Erasmus, Sir Francis Bacon, or Aristotle. Hamlet’s way of thinking is deductive; he takes everything for granted. He takes facts for granted (this is Aristotle’s idea).

**5-Modern elements** that William Shakespeare used it:

-Subtle language which he uses in Hamlet’s speeches when Hamlet feigns madness.

-He portrays Hamlet as psycho patient. The science of psychology appears at the end of the 19th century. It is modern science.

-Metatheatrical technique.

-He violates the unity of time (this is non-classical element). He does not follow Aristotle. The modern playwrights like to violate the unities.

**The conclusion:**

1-the result/ effect of this quotation.

Why is it important? Mention the effect of this quotation in the following event, not till the end of the play.

2-How the audience receives the play. How the audience thinks of the quotation.

We have two kinds of audience: the Elizabethan audience and the modern audience.

The Elizabethan audiences:

\*some of them believe in the medieval ideas such as Hamlet. He was representing people who were living in the Middle Ages. He always says I am a victim of fate.

And some of them are influenced by Desiderius Erasmus.

(You can put this point in the characterization).