Hamlet Act I Theme Analysis
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12 IBHL2 English

Directions: For each section, identify and analyze the themes in your IN.

Hamlet Act I Scene I:
The first scene in Hamlet provides us with an atmospheric and dramatic start to the play. The Watch is nervous, having seen the Ghost twice already. There is a tense political situation – Denmark is in dispute with Norway over lands, which were awarded to Hamlet, following the killing of the king of Norway by King Hamlet. The Ghost’s appearance seems to foreshadow a number of disturbing themes.

A. Note down as many themes as you can identify in the opening scene. Remember that a ‘theme’ can be captured by more than one word. So, as well as ‘fear’, ‘anxiety’, and ‘politics’, for instance, can characterize a theme in a more complex way: ‘the relationship between reason and the imagination.

B. Arrange the themes you identified in a diagram showing how they relate to each other.

Hamlet Act I Scene II:
Old Norway is Fortinbras’ uncle, and present ruler of Norway. Cornelius and Voltemand are dispatched to Norway to deliver the ‘dilated articles’ (clear, full statements) which no doubt concern the matters raised in the first scene: Hamlet and Denmark’s right to appropriate lands formerly belonging to Norway.

A. Compare and contrast the first scene with the opening of this second scene. How could they be linked?
B. Hamlet is King Hamlet’s son; Claudius is his uncle and the former king’s brother. What parallels can you see with the situation in Norway, and why do you think Shakespeare is setting up a comparison here?
C. Add to the list of themes you began compiling in scene I.
D. Look at Laertes’ speech (near beginning of scene): “My dread lord, Your leave and favour to return to France,…” What impression do you get of his character, and of his position in the Danish court?

Hamlet Act I Scene III:
We have already seen the beginning of a relationship between son and father (Hamlet and his father’s ghost); and a very different father/son relationship in Polonius and Laertes. Here, we see the beginnings of a father/daughter relationship – and we already saw Hamlet’s response to his mother (one which will develop further in the play).

A. Compare and contrast any two of these inter-generational relationships. Follow them through the play. This particular theme might develop into a large writing later.
B. Discuss the nature of parental relationships. Are sons closer to their mothers and daughters to their fathers? Or do gender divides rule more strongly within families? How do your conclusions apply to the play? How are these dynamics different in today’s US society?

Hamlet Act I Scene V:
There is much debate as to whether Hamlet is really mad, or feigning madness in order to disguise his true intent to revenge his father’s death. Although most of the evidence points towards his pretending to be mad, there are strong arguments the encounter with King Hamlet’s Ghost seriously disturbed him.

A. Look at the opening lines of Hamlet’s interplay with Horatio and Marcellus in the middle of Scene V (H: “My lord, my lord!”). What evidence can you find for the real onset of madness on the one hand, and feigned madness on the other?

B. Research ‘madness’ in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. In particular, look up Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy.
C. Begin a sent of notes on madness in the play. You will be able to draw from these notes both in discussion of themes, and in relation to Hamlet’s character.

D. Look further into the pattern of behavior by heroes. How many of these contemporary heroes show signs of madness in their words and actions? What do your conclusions suggest about Hamlet and revenge?
E. Does the fact Hamlet appears to be keeping a record (‘table’) add to the sense he is truly mad?