

## Hamlet's soliloquy

**Topic:** Hamlet

**Aims:**

- To learn more about Hamlet and his soliloquy
- To practise speaking through discussion
- To practise writing advice

**Level:** Intermediate

**Introduction**

This lesson looks at a very well known Shakespeare text, Hamlet's soliloquy, which begins 'To be or not to be'. Its main objectives are for learners to enjoy working with a

Shakespearean text (which can be very motivating) and improve their confidence with language which is at first glance beyond them. It does this by identifying common and relevant themes, and inviting learners to comment on what is going on in the mind of the character, Hamlet

**Procedure**

**Pre – reading stage**

- To introduce the lesson, ask students if they are familiar with any quotations from Shakespeare. You will probably hear 'to be or not to be', at the very least. Write this on the board.
- Then ask learners to discuss the following questions. Monitor closely for any potentially sensitive discussions. Ask for feedback from the open group but again be sensitive to what learners say.

**Hamlet's soliloquy**

Think about the last few days.

- What successes have you had? Can you name three? Share them.
- Now think about the things that were not successful for you, the things that made you angry, frustrated, sad. Can you name three? Share them.

- Read through the following introduction to the text together then ask learners to look at the question. If your class is familiar with the play, elicit some of Hamlet's problems from them first.

Hamlet has some serious problems.

- His father has been murdered. His mother has married the man who murdered his father. The girl he was going to marry has drowned. His father's ghost visits him every night. He must take revenge but he cannot act – something stops him.
- As he thinks about the situation, he asks himself many questions. The first: "To be, or not to be: that is the question."  
"
- What do you think he means? What is 'not to be'?

**Answer: (In simple terms – no one has really agreed on a definite answer)**

**Hamlet is asking 'shall I continue living or shall I kill myself?'**

### Reading stage

- Now group learners and distribute the first set of cards **Worksheet A**. Explain these are more of Hamlet's thoughts in modern language.

### Worksheet A

**A** But what is there after death? This is a difficult question and maybe there are more problems afterwards! So we prefer to tolerate the problems we have now.

**B** Who wants to fight against so many problems? We could find peace by killing ourselves.

**C** This is one great way of avoiding these problems – then we can sleep.

**D** Is it better to tolerate problems and difficulties, or to fight them?

**E** But there is another problem: if we die, we sleep, and if we sleep, we might dream.

But what kind of dreams would we have?

- Then ask learners to match these with original text **Worksheet B**. Emphasise the objective of the exercise and avoid discussing vocabulary problems at this stage.

**Worksheet B**

1. The dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all

2. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin?

3. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?

4. To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd.

5. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause

**Answers: a-1 b-2 c-4 d-3 and e-5**

**Vocabulary stage**

- The next exercise focuses a little more closely on the language and invites the learners to personalise the exercise with some of their own problems. Look at **Worksheet C** first with the class.
- Then ask learners to match the problems Hamlet describes with the other examples. Encourage them to guess and not to worry too much about vocabulary.

**Worksheet C**

Hamlet talks about various things that make life difficult. For example, he mentions 'the oppressor's wrong'. Can you give a modern example of this?

Can you match these to the following examples with Hamlet's descriptions?

A - Your arrogant friend never treats you with respect

B - You feel old

C - The flowers you send to someone you like are returned

D - Your legal case takes years to be decided

E - You are always nice to someone who treats you badly

F - Your boss is rude to you all the time

**1. The whips and scorns of time**

**2. The proud man's contumely**

**3. The pangs of despised love**

**4. The law's delay**

**5. The insolence of office**

**6. The spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes**

Have you experienced any of these problems? Can you add some more examples?

**Answers: 1 – B, 2 – A, 3 – C, 4 – D, 5 – F, 6 – E ,**

- Invite learners to add their own examples from their own experience under each heading. Let this go on as long as there are interesting ideas.

### Discussion stage

- Now ask learners to discuss the questions in **Worksheet D**, which are slightly closer to the central themes of the play. Discuss questions 1 and 2 open class, then give learners time to prepare answers for questions 3 and 4. Monitor and be ready to clarify doubts as to the meaning of question 3.

**Tip:** All answers are subjective here but you could prompt students for question 2, e.g. is he afraid? Confused? Tired? Etc. Remember that the central points in question 3 are a) tolerate your problems or fight against them? b) Kill yourself? c) Fear death or what comes after it? Welcome all suggestions for question 4.

### Useful vocabulary:

Quietus – death,  
Take arms – fight,  
Bodkin – knife

### Worksheet D

- Can you remember a time when you had to do something but couldn't? What stopped you?
- Why does Hamlet hesitate so much? Why can't he act?

### Writing stage

- Now ask learners to think about what advice they would give Hamlet and to prepare written answers. Hand out **Worksheet E**.

**Tip:** Encourage them to use structures such as 'You should' and 'If I were you' but don't over-emphasise this, as it is not the focus of the task. This is a chance for learners to practice giving advice and opinions but in a controlled form. You could display their work with the original text.

### Worksheet E

We are going to write some advice for Hamlet. Look at the questions below. What would you say to him?

- Is it better to **'to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?'**
- Is it better to **'quietus make  
With a bare bodkin?'** than to **'bear the whips and scorns of time?'**
- Is it right to feel **'The dread of something after death?'**
- Do you think Hamlet gets over this crisis? What does he do next?

**Follow-up**

- This last exercise **Worksheet F** gives the lesson text some context and it may interest learners to know how the play ends. In groups, it should generate some discussion. It could also be done as a jigsaw reading activity by giving individual sentences to complete then match together.

The task is to complete the summary with the names of the characters.

**Worksheet F**

Here is a summary of how the story ends. Can you complete it with the names of the characters?

- **Hamlet**
- **Claudius**, (who murdered Hamlet's father)
- **Gertrude**, (Hamlet's mother and Claudius' new wife)
- **Laertes**, (The brother of the girl Hamlet was going to marry, who drowned. He is also the son of a man killed by Hamlet)

An example: 1. Hamlet kills several other people...

1. \_\_\_\_\_ kills several other people but not \_\_\_\_\_, the man who killed his father.
2. In turn, \_\_\_\_\_ tries to kill him several times but he is not successful
3. \_\_\_\_\_ tries to kill \_\_\_\_\_ one last time by arranging a sword duel between him and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. There is a trap for \_\_\_\_\_ : the tip of \_\_\_\_\_' sword is poisoned.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ also poisons the victory cup in case \_\_\_\_\_ wins.
6. The poisoned drink is offered to \_\_\_\_\_ but he turns it down, and instead \_\_\_\_\_ drinks it.
7. \_\_\_\_\_, losing to \_\_\_\_\_, scratches him with the poisoned sword to ensure his death.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ then changes swords with \_\_\_\_\_, and cuts and poisons him.
9. \_\_\_\_\_'s mother dies, screaming that she has been poisoned.
10. As \_\_\_\_\_ gets weaker, he stabs \_\_\_\_\_, who dies, and so finally has his revenge. As he dies, his last words are 'The rest is silence'.

Finally, here is the complete text for learners to read if you think it useful and appropriate. You may like to read it aloud to them, or find a recording.

### **Hamlet's soliloquy**

- Now read the complete text again. This is a special kind of text, called a soliloquy.

It is used when a character talks to himself – or thinks aloud.

To be or not to be--that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
 And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep--  
 No more--and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to--'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep--  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. There's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life.  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
 The insolence of office, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry  
 And lose the name of action.