**Themes: *some* thematic suggestions in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

**impossibility of certainty and indecisiveness**

What separates *Hamlet* from other revenge plays, and maybe from every play written before it, is that the action we expect to see, particularly from Hamlet himself, is continually postponed while Hamlet tries to obtain more certain knowledge about what he is doing. This play poses many questions that other plays would simply take for granted. Can we have certain knowledge about ghosts? Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it really a misleading fiend? Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded? Moving to more earthly matters: How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses? Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius’s soul by watching his behavior? If so, can he know the facts of what Claudius did by observing the state of his soul? Can Claudius, or the audience, know the state of Hamlet’s mind by observing his behavior and listening to his speech? Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have? Can we know anything about the afterlife?

**revenge and the complexity of taking revengeful action**

Some related scenes:

Act 1 Scene 5: Hamlet promises his father to revenge his murder but laments the responsibility he now bears.

Act 2 Scene 2: Hamlet berates his own passivity and contrasts it with the passion of the first actor for long-dead, legendary figures.

Act 3 Scene 3: Coming upon Claudius confessing the murder while trying to pray, Hamlet thinks the better of killing the king when he is penitent .

Act 3 Scene 4: The ghost visits Hamlet while he is with his mother and reminds him he has not yet revenged his murder.

Act 4 Scene 4: After his encounter with Fortinbras, Hamlet marvels that people kill one another over so slight a gain as 'a little patch of land' and resolves that from now on all his thoughts will be 'bloody.'

Act 4 Scene 5: In contrast to Hamlet's reflectiveness, Laertes determines on revenge without hesitation.

Act 5 Scene 2: Claudius's plot results in the death of most of the major characters. Before he dies Hamlet kills Claudius.

**appearance vs. reality and the difficulty of discovering and exposing the truth in a corrupt society**

Some related scenes:

Act 1 Scene 3: Polonius instructs Ophelia to disassociate herself from Hamlet who he insists does not love her whatever he says.

Act 2 Scene 1: Ophelia, distraught, tells her father of Hamlet's recent bizarre behaviour and Polonius speculates that Hamlet is mad with love.

Act 2 Scene 2: Polonius tells Gertrude and Claudius of Hamlet's strange behaviour and they agree to watch him secretly. Polonius talks with Hamlet who appears to be mad. Later in the scene Hamlet concocts his plan to trick the king with the Mousetrap scene, performed by the travelling players.

Act 3 Scene 1: In the 'nunnery scene' Ophelia is bewildered by Hamlet's contradictory assertions and his anger and mourns the 'noble mind' that has been 'o'erthrown.'

Act 3 Scene 2: The performance of the Mousetrap play appears to reveal Claudius's guilt.

Act 3 Scene 4: Hamlet demands his mother face the truth of her disloyalty and says he will trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern no more than he would 'adders fanged', knowing they have been dishonest in their dealings with him.

Act 4 Scene 7: Claudius concocts a plot with Laertes to kill Hamlet.

**mortality and the mystery of death**

Some related scenes:

Act 1 Scene 1: Marcellus and Bernardo tell Horatio that they have seen the ghost of old Hamlet. Horatio is skeptical until the ghost appears.

Act 1 Scene 4: Horatio, Marcellus and Hamlet meet the ghost. Hamlet is unsure whether this is truly his father or an evil spirit, but insists that either way it cannot harm his immortal soul.

Act 3 Scene 1: Hamlet debates the question of whether suicide is an effective solution to the pain he is experiencing: the difficulty is that we do not know what to expect in an afterlife.

Act 5 Scene 1: Hamlet talks with the gravediggers and considers that even great men become dust.