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CLAUDIUS

WHO IS CLAUDIUS?

- Claudius is the younger brother of Old Hamlet, the previous King of Denmark.
- He is now King of Denmark and husband to Gertrude, his brother's widow. Young Hamlet is his nephew and step-son.

A DISCONTENTED YOUNGER BROTHER

Growing up in the shadow of a national hero, 'valiant Hamlet –/For so this side of our known world esteemed him' (I.1.84–5), Claudius was publically mocked whilst his brother was alive (II.2.335–6). Ambitious and in love with his brother's wife, he seduced the Queen and poisoned the King. By marrying Gertrude quickly, he secured the throne as well. Ruthless, pragmatic and decisive, he has many of the characteristics of a **Machiavellian** prince but his major **soliloquy** reveals that his Christian faith and his sense of sin are as strong in him as his villainy.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Our first impression of Claudius comes indirectly (I.1). Old Hamlet's death has encouraged Young Fortinbras, 'holding a weak supposal' (I.2.18) of Claudius as a soldier, to try his luck. The impression Hamlet's friends give us is of panic and 'sweaty haste' (I.1.77); shipwrights are forced to work on the Sabbath in an atmosphere of 'post-haste and romage in the land' (I.1.107).

PAINTED WORDS

Yet when we meet the new King, whose position is morally dubious, he exudes confidence and easy control, dealing with affairs systematically until he is stopped by Hamlet's riddles. The **image** projected by this heavy drinker who 'drains his draughts of Rehnish down' (I.4.10) is of a clear-thinking and sensible man: 'You cannot speak of reason to the Dane/And lose your voice' (I.2.44–5). For further discussion of Claudius at the beginning of the play see **Part Two: Act I Scene 2**. Unlike his heroic brother, Claudius behaves like a modern statesman, using diplomacy rather than force to deal with Young Fortinbras. Acutely aware that opinion, at court and more generally, is something which has to be managed, he is quick to gloss Hamlet's rudeness as 'a loving and a fair reply' (I.2.120), his refusal to compromise as 'gentle and unforced accord' (I.2.123). Claudius is a master of spin. The Ghost sees Claudius as a clever and persuasive talker, whose 'witchcraft of his wits' (I.5.43) seduced Gertrude; we will see him meeting every challenge with quick-thinking eloquence.

A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE

Refusing Hamlet permission to return to Wittenberg is an early sign that Claudius wants to keep a potential revenger under observation. As Hamlet's behaviour becomes increasingly problematic, the King has no hesitation in bribing the Prince's fellow students to spy on him or in eavesdropping on his intimate conversation with Ophelia. Claudius sees more to disturb him in Hamlet's 'transformation' (II.2.5) than is explained, describing as 'turbulent and dangerous lunacy' (III.1.4) behaviour which is at worst odd and aggressive. It is another indication that the smiling villain has an uneasy conscience. When Ophelia is used as a decoy, Claudius suddenly reveals his anguish and deceitfulness in a shocking **simile** (see **Analysis in Part Two: Act III Scene 1**); beneath the 'smooth and even' (IV.3.7) surface suffers a tormented soul. *The Mousetrap* stings the King into a clear eyed and desperate self-examination (see **Analysis in Part Two: Act III Scene 3**). In his agonised

soliloquy, we have a glimpse of how Shakespeare might have developed the King as a tragic **protagonist**. The God-fearing man who is simultaneously ashamed of his sins and fatally in love with the fruits of wickedness is a prototype of Macbeth.

STUDY FOCUS: SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL

A02

When Gertrude reveals that Hamlet has killed Polonius, we see the King managing public opinion: 'how shall this bloody deed be answered?' (IV.1.16). Claudius realises he is vulnerable to Rumour: 'Whose whisper o'er the world's diameter ... Transports his poisoned shot' (IV, 1. 41–3).

He dresses up his murderous plan as responsible governance: 'How dangerous is it that this man goes loose', aware that public opinion favours Hamlet (IV.3.4) and of the need to be seen 'To bear all smooth and even' (IV.3.7). He rehearses the spin he will put on the affair: 'so much was our love' (IV.1.19) he must 'with all our majesty and skill/Both countenance and excuse' it (IV.1.31–2). But after Act III Scene 4, we see Gertrude gradually distancing herself from the King (see **Extended commentary: Scene 1 in Part Two: Act IV**). For the first time, Claudius's panic botches the smooth operation and rumour abounds: we hear of suspicious 'ill-breeding minds' (IV.5.15), Claudius talks of 'the people muddled,/Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers' (IV.5.80–1). Claudius realises that burying Polonius 'hugger-mugger' (IV.5.83) was the sort of mistake a novice villain makes; the air is full of 'buzzers' (IV.5.89) and 'pestilent speeches' (IV.5.90) which threaten his grip on power. When his Switzers (Swiss guards) desert him, Claudius stands alone against the might of Laertes's rebellion.

CONTEXT

A04

Politicians in Shakespeare's time were well aware of the power of rumour, gossip and misinformation to unsettle a state. Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part Two*, is introduced by Rumour himself, 'painted full of tongues'. His job is 'stuffing the ears of men with false reports' (Induction, line 8).

CONTEXT

A04

Brothers in Shakespeare are often enemies. Jealous that in Elizabethan society the eldest son inherited everything, younger brothers are often portrayed by Shakespeare as devious and vicious. Duke Frederick (*As You Like It*), Edmund (*King Lear*) and Antonio (*The Tempest*) are three such villains.

CONTEXT

A04

The Fourth Commandment forbids work on the sabbath.

FATAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT

In this crisis, Claudius is at his unprincipled best. Sizing up his man, he confidently puts him down: 'What is thy cause ... That thy rebellion looks so giant-like?' (IV.5.122). Bravely, brazenly, this regicide cites the 'divinity [that] doth hedge a king' (IV.5.124) to defy him and uses his charm and wits to seduce Laertes just as he seduced his queen; we see Laertes eating out of his hand, manipulated into murdering Hamlet (see **Analysis in Part Two: Act IV Scene 7**). As we approach the tragic **denouement**, however, Claudius's devious villainy unravels, falling justly 'on th'inventors' heads' (V.2.364). It is appropriate that poison with which he won the queen 'so conjunctive to [his] life and soul' (IV.7.14) should cause her death and help send this wine-loving villain to Hell.

KEY QUOTATION: CLAUDIUS

A01

A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
And put it in his pocket (III.4.99–101)

- In the closet scene, Hamlet adds the wrongful seizing of the throne to the catalogue of Claudius's sins. He amplifies on this accusation in Act V when he tells us Claudius 'Popped in between th'election and my hopes' (V.2.63).
- These lines undercut the impression of having behaved correctly that Claudius created in Act I Scene 2. There he stated that the Council 'had freely gone with this affair along' (I.2.15–16), that he acted with political integrity in becoming the partner of the 'imperial jointress' (I.2.9), Gertrude.
- Hamlet's imagery presents Claudius as a shifty pickpocket.



HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

FIVE KEY AREAS

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR ANSWER/ESSAY

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references, which help the essay flow.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to say that adds a further dimension.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Here's an example of an opening paragraph that gets straight to the point, addressing the question: **'Hamlet is not so much a Revenge Play as a critique of revenge.'** **How do you respond to this viewpoint?**

Although "Hamlet" is an exciting Revenge Drama, it is very different from other Revenge Plays. Shakespeare deliberately contrasts the behaviour of two Revenge Heroes, presenting on the one hand Laertes as a character untroubled by ethical considerations, perfectly happy 'to cut his throat in the church', and on the other Hamlet perplexed by that very situation. Shakespeare invites us to contrast these two young men who find themselves in similar circumstances and judge between them.

Immediate focus on task and key words and example from text

2. USE OF TITLES, NAMES, ETC.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, name of authors and so on. Present them correctly, too, with double quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, 'In Act I of "Hamlet" ...'.
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the terms 'play' or 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. EFFECTIVE QUOTATIONS

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant
- Not too long
- Integrated into your argument/sentence.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Here is an example of a quotation successfully embedded in a sentence:

Claudius talks hypocritically about the 'divinity [that] doth hedge a king' in order to dupe Laertes. The audience is aware that Claudius had no scruples in murdering the king, his brother.

Remember – quotations can be a well-selected set of three or four single words or phrases. These can be easily embedded into a sentence to build a picture or explanation around your point. Or, they can be longer quotations that are explored and picked apart.

4. TECHNIQUES AND TERMINOLOGY

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions or people (for example, 'paradox' or 'parody' or 'Montaigne') but make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly.

5. GENERAL WRITING SKILLS

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid **colloquial** or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'OK' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view ('Ophelia is a typical woman character'), but analyse closely, with clear evidence and textual detail.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Note the professional approach in this example:

At various times, it suits Polonius, Gertrude, Claudius, Ophelia and Hamlet himself to claim that he is mad. But even if we agree with Bradley that Hamlet is melancholy, Hamlet's state of mind is not presented as mental illness but, sympathetically, as a response to the grief and outrage occasioned by his situation in Act I Scene 2 and made worse by the Ghost's 'commandment' in Act I Scene 5. Hamlet's 'antic disposition' is most likely a satire of the Fool, e.g. when he calls Polonius a 'fishmonger', implying that the old man is behaving like a pander in using his daughter to win favour with the King.

GRADE BOOSTER

A02

It is important to remember that *Hamlet* is a text created by Shakespeare – thinking about the way Shakespeare presents a variety of voices will alert you not only to his methods as a playwright, but also to his intentions, i.e. the effects he seeks to create.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, Claudius) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as Hamlet himself). Or, they write about one aspect from the question (for example, 'friendship betrayed') but ignore another (such as 'women as frail'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.