
Year 10
English
Shakespeare: Hamlet

Lesson 5
The Director's Vision

Overview of Lesson

L	Content	Skills
5	<p>Students learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How different productions of <i>Hamlet</i> have focused on different themes ▪ How setting can add meaning to productions of <i>Hamlet</i> ▪ The role of costuming in bring out different qualities in Hamlet’s character 	<p>Students learn to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify how different productions of <i>Hamlet</i> encourage different interpretations from audiences ▪ Build their own interpretation of the staging of <i>Hamlet</i> by critically considering other productions
<p>Evidence of Learning: Class discussions; critical analysis exercises; visualisation tasks</p> <p>Assessment: Homework Five (draft Director’s Vision statement in preparation for Major Work)</p>		

2. Major Work: Page to Stage

Your Major Work task this term is to develop your own creative adaptation of a key soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Through this adaptation you will demonstrate both your understanding of the plot, characters, and major themes of the play and your ability to interpret these elements into your own creative vision for performance.

Below are the instructions for the Major Work:

Major Work

30 Marks

In theatre, the director uses an annotated copy of the script to transform a written text into a piece of performance. This annotation includes notes on staging, set, costume, and overall performance.

If you were directing a soliloquy from *Hamlet*, how would your adaptation translate from page to stage?

Annotate one of the soliloquies listed below with notes on how you would like to see this scene performed.

Once you have completed this, provide a 500-600 word rationale that explains what your director's vision is for this scene, and how you have demonstrated this vision through your annotations.

The soliloquies are:

- Act One Scene Two, Lines 129-159. 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt'
- Act Two Scene Two, Lines 485-540. 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!'
- Act Three Scene One, Lines 55-89. 'To be, or not to be'

Due Date

Your Major Work is due for final submission by **Lesson Eight**.

The homework tasks set for Lessons One to Five are important stepping stones in the process of creating your final Major Work.

Note: The soliloquies and a sample Major Work are provided at the end of Lesson One

3. The Director's Vision

For your Major Work, you are required to submit an annotated script with a 500-600 word rationale that explains your director's vision for the scene that you have adapted. This lesson we will consider what is meant by the term 'director's vision'. We will look at three different directorial visions for Hamlet and consider which interpretation resonates with your own. At the end of the lesson, you will have time to start brainstorming ideas for your own adaptation.

□ What is the Director's Vision?

First of all, what is a 'director's vision' and how does one gain one? Let's consider the words of Louis E. Catron and Scott Shattuck in their book *The Director's Vision: Play Direction from Analysis to Production*:

Catron, L. E. & Shattuck, S. 2016. The Director's Vision: Play Direction from Analysis to Production - Extract

"Vision," writes Jonathan Swift, "is the art of seeing things invisible." In art, vision creates life and meaning. For example, a sculptor faces a block of granite and "sees" in it a shape that must be set free. Equally, the director's imaginative powers create a vision of what Alan Schneider calls "the life of the play" – in a manner of speaking, the full iceberg – and from that vision fashions the entire theatrical production that will transform the script from the inanimate page to the living stage. Directorial vision breathes life into the unified production.

Class Discussion

According to Catron and Shattuck, the role of the director is to breathe "life" into the written script. What are some of the ways that a director can do this?

The director’s vision is essentially the answer to the question: *how should this story be told?* It requires a strong personal understanding of the main message of the play as well as a keen idea of how to communicate this message to a contemporary audience. Each director has their own unique perspective on the world, and their own distinctive artistic style, therefore, no two visions are exactly the same. This is what allows Shakespeare’s plays to be continually reimagined, year after year.

Focus Questions

List some of the films, television shows, books, songs, or games that appeal to you at the moment, and note their composers. What is it about that composer’s vision that appeals to you? (Is it something about the setting, time period, emotional tone, themes or message?)

Choose one of the composers from the list above and imagine how they would adapt Hamlet. What would it look / sound / feel like?

4. Three Interpretations of Hamlet

So far you have conducted a close analysis of your chosen scene and started to think about the images, themes, and emotions that are present in the text. The next step is to draw these elements together into a cohesive vision for performance. This will require some time, but a good starting point is to hear other interpretations of the play. Hearing other interpretations will allow you to test what does and doesn't fit your own interpretation.

The following three visions of *Hamlet* emphasise a different element of the play: the political context, the family drama, and the generational divide. As you go through each version, consider which version resonates the most with your own interpretation of the play.

□ **Hamlet: The Political Thriller**

Hamlet depicts sixteenth century Denmark as a world riddled with political deception and hyper-vigilance. In the opening scene of the play, we learn that King Claudius is preparing an army to defend Denmark from invasion by Norway. This climate of impending war creates a stifling sense of fear and paranoia throughout the play. Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius are desperate to keep up appearances of normality in the court and yet, this is revealed to be a show, as their paranoia forces them to keep a watchful eye over everyone, including their own children.



John McConville as Hamlet (centre) in the 2015 Bell Shakespeare production of the play

The political climate of *Hamlet* has particular relevance to our twenty-first century context, a period marked by terrorism, paranoia, and increasingly sophisticated forms of surveillance technology. Read through director Damien Ryan's vision for the 2015 Bell Shakespeare production of the play.

Ryan, D. 2015. From the Director: Hamlet's 'unweeded garden' – Extract

Our world today is living in the post nuclear age, in the age of climate change, of futile world wars that have given way to futile ideological wars of terror and revenge, of people scattering across an unwelcoming globe to find asylum to preserve their families and their ways of life, and of popular uprisings such as those of the Arab Spring that see a new cycle of violence and nihilistic hatred emerge. At its bleakest, for many people living on the planet earth, it is such a 'Denmark', such a 'prison' – rapidly losing the very thing we are fighting for – freedom essentially.

... Tragedy teaches us that we spend our lives arming ourselves 'without', providing our defences and protecting our interests from external fears while the true threat lies within. We are the greatest danger to ourselves – our own immoralities, our own excesses, our pride and vanity, our struggle for moral courage and our fragile sanity. Denmark's real enemy sits on its own throne and the only individual who can smell the corruption is too much an enemy to himself to find a solution. But while the play centres on an individual, it is not about one man. It concerns a whole ecology of consequence, actions past and present that have brought that individual, and therefore his entire state, to the very brink of chaos. The play is about things ending – lives, families, ideals, the dying of a great consciousness – both in Hamlet himself and his state.

Focus Questions

What parallels does Damien Ryan draw between Elsinore and our own context?

Does this interpretation resonate with your own ideas about the play? Why/Why not?

□ Hamlet: The Family Drama



For some directors, *Hamlet* is a story of familial loss, betrayal, and duty. In particular, Hamlet's familial duty to revenge his father's death raises intriguing questions about the connection between violence and masculinity.

In Lesson One we discussed that private justice was considered to be a man's honour in order to uphold the reputation of his family line. Hamlet's father was a soldier, and appears to the prince as a ghost in military armour. Hamlet, on the other hand, is a student – he is much more comfortable holding a book than a sword! Hamlet's duty as revenger therefore requires that he perform a form of masculinity that conflicts with his true personality. He is humiliated by the contrast between his inaction and the confident and assertive actions of other sons such as Laertes and Fortinbras.

A 2013 Australian film adaptation of *Hamlet* called *Around the Block* explores this relationship between violence, masculinity, and revenge. The film depicts the story of Liam, an Aboriginal Year 11 student who has been assigned the role of Hamlet in his high school's production of the play. Prince Hamlet's life mirrors Liam's, as he learns during a visit to his father in jail that his father was 'dobbed in'. While Liam's brother, Steven (representing Laertes/Fortinbras), is eager to revenge his father, Liam grapples with his desire to break free from the cycle of violence and, instead, pursue his love of acting.

Let's watch a clip from the film that depicts Liam and Steven's visit to their father in prison.
Be aware that this scene contains some coarse language.

Media Viewing: Around The Block Jail Scene

Note to Students: Around the Block

It is important to note that *Around the Block* is not a strict adaptation of the play, but draws heavily from its narrative.

Focus Questions

How would you describe the different masculinities of Liam (Hamlet), Steven (Laertes/Fortinbras), and their father (King Hamlet)?

Does this interpretation resonate with your own ideas about the play? Why/Why not?

□ Hamlet: The New Generation

Finally, *Hamlet* could be interpreted as a play about a new generation exposing the flaws and hypocrisies of the older generation. *Hamlet* was written during a period of religious and philosophical upheaval in Western Europe. The 'old order' of Medieval superstition and corruption had been challenged by a rise in literacy, and a revival of classical as well as individualistic ways of thinking. As a student at Wittenberg, Prince Hamlet represented a new generation of Europeans who were influenced by Protestantism (which focuses on the relationship of an individual with god), and Humanism (which celebrates the achievements and potential of humankind and within that the potential of the individual). These ideas characterise the period that we now call the Renaissance. This individualistic perspective proves incompatible with the violent and immoral world of the Danish court.

Simon Godwin's 2016 adaptation of *Hamlet* for the Royal Shakespeare Company emphasises this generational divide by depicting Hamlet as a vibrant and rebellious young student whose values clash with the traditions of his home in Elsinore.

Read through the following summary and then watch the two trailers for the production.

Royal Shakespeare Company Website. 2016. About the Play - Extract

Hamlet has the world at his feet. Young, wealthy and living a hedonistic life studying abroad. Then word reaches him that his father is dead.

Returning home he finds his world is utterly changed, his certainties smashed and his home a foreign land. Struggling to understand his place in a new world order he faces a stark choice. Submit, or rage against the injustice of his new reality.

Media Viewing: Hamlet Trailer #1 and #2

Focus Questions

How would you describe the character of Hamlet as imagined in this production?



Left: Paapa Essiedu as Hamlet in the 2016 RSC Production Right: Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Loin* (1982)

The costuming and set design of Godwin's production of *Hamlet* deliberately evokes the work of American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988). Basquiat was a New York street artist and painter, and a vocal critic of the racist elitism of the American art world. His work is celebrated within New York's hip-hop community.

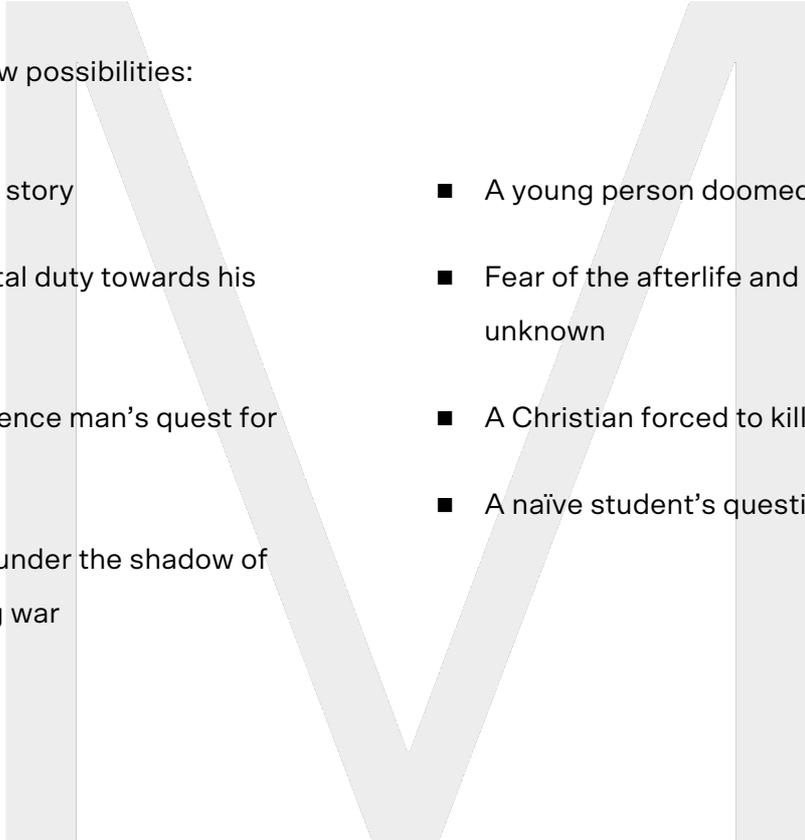
How do the visual references to Basquiat in Godwin's production reflect his broader directorial vision for the play?

5. Your Vision

For the remainder of the lesson, you will have time to brainstorm your own director's vision for *Hamlet*. You have seen three very different interpretations of the play, and hopefully this has sparked some ideas of your own. There is space on this page to compose a mind-map. This can consist of words, visuals, or lines of dialogue that spring to mind.

If you are still stuck for ideas, use this time to think about which aspects of the play stand out to you the most. You may need to refer back to your translation from last lesson to gather your ideas.

Below are just a few possibilities:

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- A revenge story
 - A son's fatal duty towards his father
 - An intelligence man's quest for truth
 - A society under the shadow of impending war
 - A young person doomed to death
 - Fear of the afterlife and the unknown
 - A Christian forced to kill
 - A naïve student's question for truth

Mind Map

□ Set Design

Once you have gathered some ideas for your adaptation, the next step is to think about where you would like your adaptation to be set. Most of the adaptations that you have seen so far have transported *Hamlet* into a contemporary setting; however, it is just as acceptable to set *Hamlet* in another time period, or even in an abstract space without any specific time or place!

The video below will give you some ideas of how other directors have approached the setting of *Hamlet*. The first adaptation by director Richard Eyre, explores the theme of **appearances and reality** by depicting Elsinore as a police state and a prison. The second adaptation by John Caird, explores the religious issue of **fate and free will** by setting Elsinore in a cathedral-like building, representing a limbo between Heaven and Hell.

Media Viewing: Creating Elsinore

In the space below draw a sketch of the set in which your soliloquy will be performed.

□ Costuming



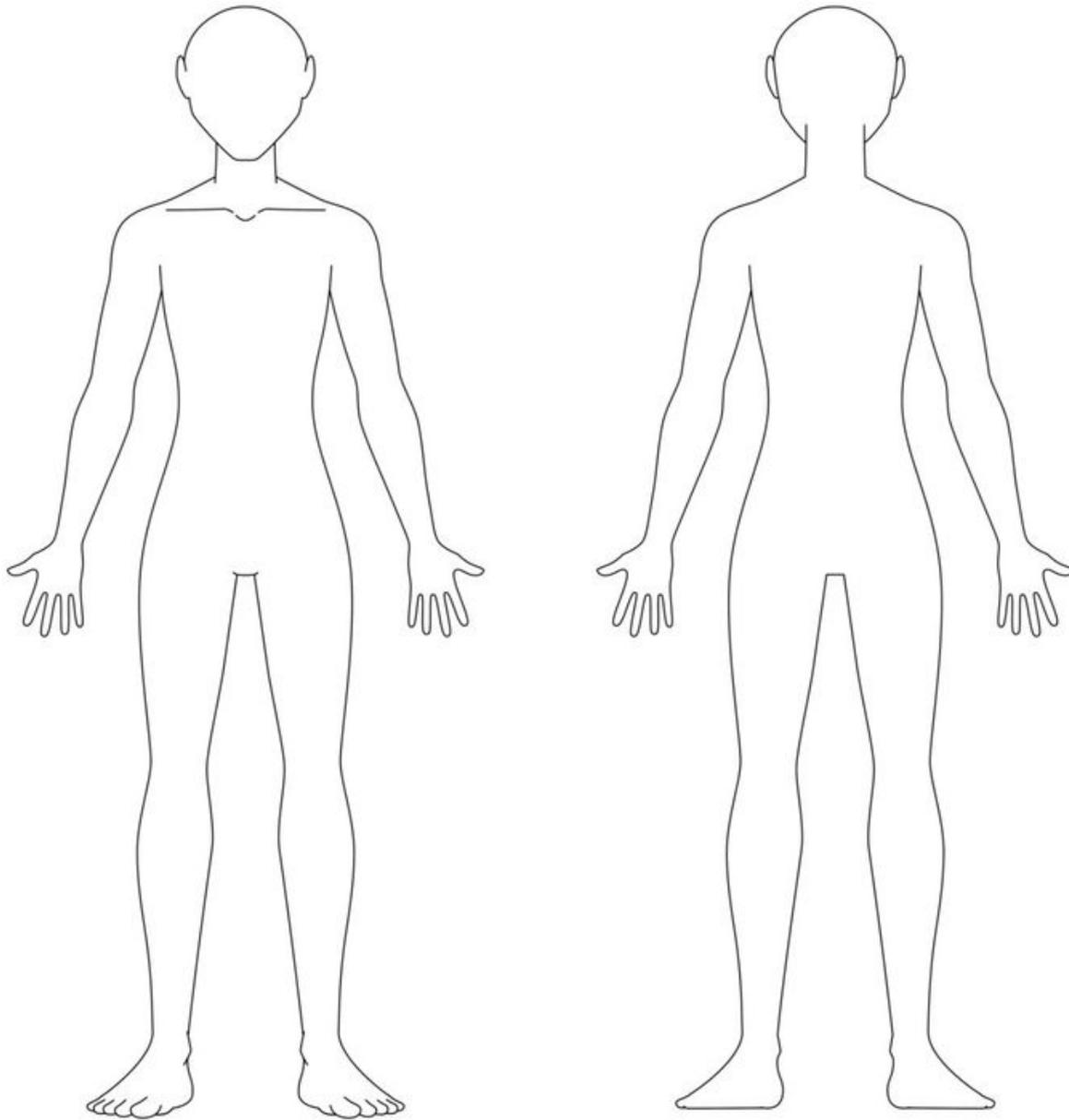
Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* set in the majority Muslim region of Kashmir in the 1990s.

Another important factor to consider for your director's vision is costuming. Costuming entails not only the clothes that your Hamlet will be wearing, but also any props that he carries or uses. These small details can tell the audience a lot about who Hamlet is and how he interacts with his world.

Costuming can also have a highly symbolic meaning. Colour symbolism is incredibly important to consider. For example, if your Hamlet wears a red shirt (as David Tennant's Hamlet does in the 2009 BBC film of the play) then this symbolises that he is a passionate and powerful person. If he wears black, then this shows that he is a more introverted and depressed person. You can also signal class, occupation, and religious persuasion through the clothes that your character wears. These are all important factors to consider when considering props and clothing in your adaptation.

The following page contains a sketch of Hamlet's costuming for the Phoenix Theatre's 2012 adaptation of *Hamlet*. It's worth considering what this costume symbolises in terms of Hamlet's character. On the following page, a blank outline of a person has been included for you to fill out with your own costuming ideas.





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