Hamlet's first great soliloquy (lines 729-759)

O, that this too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead, nay! not so much, not two...
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month...
Let me not think on't ... Fraelity, thy name is woman.
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she
(O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer) married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules, within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes.
She married. O, most wicked speed... to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good...
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

1. Hamlet feels stained; he expresses a feeling of contamination.
2. Suicide is condemned by the Church, as expressed in the Sixth Commandment in Exodus. He feels trapped by religious law (canon).
3. He is completely despondent, and feels the world's affairs are entirely loathsome.
4. The metaphor of a neglected garden that is overgrown and festering suggests decay in the natural world.
5. He is overwhelmed by how quickly his mother remarried after his father's death. It obsesses him.
6. By comparing Gertrude to a goatlike half-man, half-beast, Hamlet points to the enormous unworthiness he perceives in Claudius.
7. Hamlet cannot understand why his father's adoration of Gertrude can be so quickly forgotten.
8. He refers to the sexual attraction (appetite) Gertrude showed for Claudius; so her hasty remarriage disturbs him hugely.
9. These famous words depict how Gertrude's conduct has skewed his entire attitude to women.
10. Niobe is a symbol of a grieving mother who wept so much for her slain children that she was turned into stone. Gertrude's tears, in contrast, are hypocritical and have led to no lasting change.
11. Beasts lack reason, so Hamlet implies that his mother has turned into an animal.
12. Hercules, a legendary hero, had enormous strength, a quality Hamlet says he himself lacks.
13. Hamlet's disgust at the overhasty marriage (the redness left by Gertrude's tears of grief had barely gone) is once more apparent.
14. The theme of incest cannot be over-emphasised. Hamlet is totally appalled.
15. This line coincides with the feelings expressed on the battlements that something is abnormally wrong. This is a prophetic statement - a tragedy does result.
In this soliloquy, we have the first indication of Hamlet's inner feelings. He pours out his emotions and disgust at his mother's marriage. He perceives his uncle as a beast, in no way comparable to his father who, in his opinion, was a demi-god. His speech - full of exclamations, highly emotional questions, and commands to himself, ellipses and broken lines - also contrasts markedly with the controlled, but totally insincere, speech of Claudius. The entire mood conveyed by Hamlet is one of despair and distrust.
But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.

"O That This Too Solid Flesh Would Melt" Soliloquy Translation:

He wished that his body would just melt, turn to water and become like the dew. Or that the Almighty hadn't made a law forbidding suicide. Oh God! God! How weary, stale, flat and useless everything about life seemed! He moaned. It was terrible. The whole world was like an unweeded garden that had gone to seed – only ugly disgusting things thrived. He couldn't believe what had happened. Only two months dead; no, not even two. Such an excellent king he had been, compared with this one. It was like Hyperion, the sun god, compared to a lecherous satyr. He'd been so loving to his mother that he wouldn't even allow the gentle breeze of heaven to blow too roughly on her face. He lifted his hands and blocked his ears as though to shut his father's memory out. She had loved him so much, adored him, as though the more she had of him the more she wanted him. And yet, within a month! He couldn't bear to think about it. Women were so inconsistent! Only a month, even before the shoes with which she had followed his father's body were old, all flowing with tears, she, even she... Oh God! Even an animal that doesn't have reason, would have mourned longer – ...she married his uncle! His father's brother, but no more like his father than he was like Hercules. Even
before the salt of those hypocritical tears had left her swollen eyes, she married. Oh, most wicked speed, to hurry so enthusiastically to incestuous sheets! It couldn't end happily. But he would just have to break his heart, because he had to hold his tongue.
Question Two
Act 1 Scene 2 lines 129 - 159 ('O, that this too too sullied flesh ...I must hold my tongue.
"

2.1.1. What is the dramatic purpose of a soliloquy? (2)

2.1.2. What is the dramatic purpose of this particular soliloquy? (3)

2.2. What is Hamlet's state of mind in this soliloquy? By referring closely to the passage, explain the reasons for this state of mind. (5)

2.3.1. What is Hamlet's tone in lines 133-4? (1)

2.3.2. How does the language itself contribute to this tone? (2)

2.4. Explain the image of the 'unweeded garden' (line 135) and show how it contributes to one of the major themes of the play. (3)

2.5. 'Hyperion to a satyr' (line 140)
Explain this reference and show what this comparison reveals of Hamlet's attitude to his father and his uncle. (5)

2.6. What prevents Hamlet from committing suicide? (Refer to this extract.) (2)

2.7. Re-read the lines in which the word 'month' occurs (lines 138, 145, 147). Why does Hamlet repeat this word so often? (3)

2.8.1 What do lines 156-7 ('O most ... sheets') reveal of Hamlet's attitude to his mother and her marriage? (2)

2.8.2 Comment on the use of alliteration in these lines. (2)

/30 marks/
QUESTION TWO

2.1.  
2.1.1. In a soliloquy, the actor, alone on stage, reveals his or her thoughts so that the audience can see what motivates the character.

2.1.2 Hamlet alone emphasises his isolation in Denmark. This soliloquy allows us to see why Hamlet is brooding and melancholy and what his views are on recent events.

2.2. Hamlet is depressed and despairing. He sees the world and man as corrupt. The reasons are the death of his father, his mother's hasty remarriage, and his loathing of his uncle.

2.3.  
2.3.1. His tone is one of despair and weariness.

2.3.2 There is a string of negatively loaded adjectives, and all the words with long vowel sounds make it slow to say and therefore tired-sounding.

2.4. Hamlet sees the world as an unredeed garden, i.e. in disarray and overrun with corrupting influences. It contributes to the theme of corruption in the play.

2.5. Hamlet compares his father to Hyperion, the sun-god, and Claudius to a satyr, half man - half beast. This shows that he sees his father as superior to Claudius, who is associated with drinking and lechery and is an inferior being whom he despises.
2.6. It goes against God's law (lines 131-2).

2.7. The repetition emphasises Hamlet's disgust at the shortness of time between his father's death and his mother's remarriage. It is almost an obsession, and it keeps coming back into his thoughts.

2.8. 2.8.1. He sees her haste in remarrying as 'wicked' and the marriage to his uncle as 'incestuous'.

2.8.2. The repetition of the 's' sounds in particular makes the words sound as if they are being spat out. This emphasises Hamlet's disgust at the idea.
2. Spoken by Hamlet, Hamlet Act 2 Scene 2:
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann’d,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in’s aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn’d defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i’ the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
Ha!
‘Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver’d and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave’s offal: bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!
Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder’d,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore; unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!
Fie upon’t! foh! About, my brain! I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim’d their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle: I’ll observe his looks;
I’ll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me: I’ll have grounds
More relative than this: the play ‘s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.

“O, What A Rogue And Peasant Slave Am I” Soliloquy Translation:
What a deceitful fellow – a rogue, a peasant slave – he was! It was monstrous that this actor
had only to imagine grief for his face to go pale and his eyes to stream. In a fiction! A made-
up script of passion! He was able to effect a broken voice, a desperation in his body language,
and everything he felt necessary to the situation he was imagining. And it was all for nothing!
For Hecuba, dead for a thousand years! What was Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he
should weep for her? What would that actor do if he had the motive and the reason for grief
that he had? He would flood the stage with tears and split the ears of the audience with the
language he would find, terrifying the innocent and making the guilty mad. He would
bewilder the ignorant and amaze the eyes and ears of all.

He stood up and paced. He was the opposite of the actor: he was a rascal, the mettle of whose
character had become tarnished and dull. He was shrinking away from his duty like a John-o-
dreams, slow to translate his purpose into action, unable to say a word, no, not even on behalf
of a king who had been robbed of his property and most precious life. Was he a coward? The
victim of bullies? Would he let them call him names, strike him on his head, pull his beard
out and throw it in his face, assassinate his character? Ha! God, yes, he would just take it
because it was impossible that he could be anything but pigeon-livered, lacking the gall to
summon up enough bitterness to do anything about his father’s murder. Otherwise he would
have fed this slave’s intestines to the local kites. The villain! Bloody, filthy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, cruel villain! Oh vengeance! His heart was beating fast
and he was almost breathless from the thoughts that were plaguing him. He sat down again.
What an ass he was! What a brave man! That he, the son of a beloved father who had been
murdered, with every reason between heaven and hell to act, should unburden his heart with
words and descend to cursing, like a whore – a servant. Curse it!

He sat for a moment and an idea that had occurred to him while talking to the actors began to
take shape. He had to concentrate on it now. Hmmm. He had heard about guilty people who,
while watching a play, had been so affected by the contents of the scene, that they had
confessed to their crimes, because murder will always find a way to proclaim itself, even
though it has no voice of its own.
The idea crystallized. He would get the players to perform something like the murder of his father in front of his uncle. He would watch his uncle’s reactions. He would probe his very thoughts. If his uncle so much as flinched he would know what to do. The ghost may have been the devil for all he knew, and the devil had the power to take on a pleasing shape. Yes, and perhaps the devil was taking advantage of his weakness and his grief to damn him. He was therefore going to get proof. The play was the thing in which he would catch the conscience of the king.
7. Hamlet's longest soliloquy (lines 331-548)
Read Hamlet's soliloquy (491-548) and answer the questions below:

1. Two months have passed since Hamlet saw the Ghost. What is the tone of his speech, and why does he call himself a villain and a worthless wretch (line 492)? (3)
2. What contrast makes Hamlet feel ashamed? (2)
3. Explain the meaning of What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba/That he should weep for her? (These lines are very important.) (3)
4. Of what does Hamlet accuse himself in lines 513-522? Why does he do this? (4)
5. How does Hamlet's passionate outburst, Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain, aptly summarise the qualities of Claudius? (4)
6. In a sexual image, Hamlet compares himself to a whore. Why does he do this? (2)
7. Where does Hamlet express doubt about the authenticity of the Ghost? (2)

(20 marks)

In this soliloquy, Hamlet shows his disgust at his inaction, but in the last 18 lines he becomes self-controlled, calmer and purposeful. He has berated himself vigorously and so acknowledged his faults. This enables him to make a plan with a twofold purpose: not only will he establish whether the Ghost is genuine, he will also expose Claudius's guilty secret:

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.
Act 2, Scene 2 - Hamlet's longest soliloquy (page 37)

1. Angry and frustrated. He has not acted upon the Ghost's command.  
2. The Player's real emotion, displayed in an imaginary scene, contrasts with Hamlet's inability to act in real circumstances.  
3. Hecuba meant nothing to the actor and vice versa, yet the Player could still convey genuine emotion and passion.  
4. Of cowardice. He does this to spur on his blunted revenge.
5. His description is accurate - it deals with each of his crimes. He feels no regret for the murder, his lust for Gertrude or his betrayal of his family bonds (kindless).

6. A whore is not genuine - her words are as false as Hamlet's.

7. The spirit that I have seen/May be a devil.
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 heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. 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,
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? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that 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;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.—Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.

'To Be Or Not To Be': Translation
"The question for him was whether to continue to exist or not — whether it was more noble to suffer the slings and arrows of an unbearable situation, or to declare war on the sea of troubles that afflict one, and by opposing them, end them. To die. He pondered the prospect. To sleep — as simple as that. And with that sleep we end the heartaches and the thousand natural miseries that human beings have to endure. It's an end that we would all ardently hope for. To die. To sleep. To sleep. Perhaps to dream. Yes, that was the problem, because in that sleep of death the dreams we might have when we have shed this mortal body must make us pause. That's the consideration that creates the calamity of such a long life. Because, who would tolerate the whips and scorns of time; the tyrant's offences against us; the contempt of proud men; the pain of rejected love; the insolence of officious authority; and the advantage that the worst people take of the best, when one could just release oneself with a naked blade? Who would carry this load, sweating and grunting under the burden of a weary life if it weren't for the dread of the after life — that unexplored country from whose border no traveller returns? That's the thing that confounds us and makes us put up with those evils that we know rather than hurry to others that we don't know about. So thinking about it makes cowards of us all, and it follows that the first impulse to end our life is obscured by reflecting on it. And great and important plans are diluted to the point where we don't do anything."

What do you think of the modern translation of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy above? Let us know in the comments below.

'To Be Or Not To Be' An Analysis of Shakespeare's Most Famous Soliloquy

The first six words of the soliloquy establish a balance. There is a direct opposition — to be, or not to be. Hamlet is thinking about life and death and pondering a state of being versus a state of not being — being alive and being dead.

The balance continues with a consideration of the way one deals with life and death. Life is a lack of power: the living are at the mercy of the blows of outrageous fortune. The only action one can take against the things he lists among those blows is to end one's life. That's the only way of opposing them. Death is therefore empowering: killing oneself is a way of taking action, taking up arms, opposing and defeating the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Living is a passive state; dying is an active state. But in order to reach the condition of death one has to take action in life — charge fully armed against Fortune — so the whole proposition is circular and hopeless because one does not really have the power of action in life.

Death is something desirable — devoutly to be wished, a consummation — a perfect closure. It's nothing more than a sleep. But there's a catch, which Hamlet calls a rub. A 'rub' is a bowls term meaning an obstacle on the bowls lawn that diverts the bowl, so the fear of the life hereafter is the obstacle that makes us pause and perhaps change the direction of our thinking. We don't control our dreams so what dreams may come in that sleep in which we have shuffled off all the fuss and bother of life? He uses the word 'coil,' which is an Elizabethan word for a big fuss, such as there may be in the preparations for a party or a wedding — a lot of things going on and a lot of rushing about. With that thought Hamlet stops to reconsider. What will happen when we have discarded all the hustle and bustle of life? The problem with the proposition is that life after death is unknown and could be worse than life. It's a very frightening thought. That's the obstacle on the lawn and it diverts his thoughts to another direction.
And now Hamlet reflects on a final end. A ‘quietus’ is a legal word meaning a final definitive end to an argument. He opposes this Latin word against the Celtic ‘sweating’ and ‘grunting’ of a living person as an Arab beneath an overwhelmingly heavy load - a fardel, the load carried by a camel. Who would bear that when he could just draw a line under life with something as simple as a knitting needle - a bodkin? It’s quite a big thought and it’s fascinating that this enormous act - drawing a line under life - can be done with something as simple as a knitting needle. And how easy that seems.

Hamlet now lets his imagination wander on the subject of the voyages of discovery and the exploratory expeditions. Dying is like crossing the border between known and unknown geography. One is likely to be lost in that unmapped place, from which one would never return. The implication is that there may be unimagined horrors in that land.

Hamlet now seems to make a decision. He makes the profound judgment that ‘conscience does make cowards of us all,’ This sentence is probably the most important one in the soliloquy. There is a religious dimension to it as it is a sin to take one’s life. So with that added dimension the fear of the unknown after death is intensified.

But there is more to it than that. It is not just about killing himself but also about the mission he is on - to avenge his father's death by killing his father’s murderer. Throughout the action of the play he makes excuses for not killing him and turns away when he has the chance. ‘Conscience does make cowards of us all.’ Convention demands that he kill Claudius but murder is a sin and that conflict is the core of the play.

At the end of the soliloquy he pulls himself out of this reflective mode by deciding that too much thinking about it is the thing that will prevent the action he has to rise to.

This is not entirely a moment of possible suicide. It’s not that he’s contemplating suicide as much as reflecting on life, and we find that theme all through the text. In this soliloquy life is burdensome and devoid of power. In another it’s ‘weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,’ like a garden overrun with weeds. In this soliloquy Hamlet gives a list of all the things that annoy him about life: 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. But there’s a sense of agonised frustration in this soliloquy that however bad life is we’re prevented from doing anything about it by fear of the unknown.
The most famous soliloquy in English literature

By this stage, we are aware of the background to Hamlet's soliloquy. He sees the world as weary, stale, flat and unprofitable (Act 1, Scene 2, line 133); his admired father is dead, murdered by his uncle; and his uncle is in possession of his mother and the throne.

However, the speech is not concerned with his personal dilemma but is general in scope, for it deals with the subject of whether life is worth living. Here is a modern paraphrase of his famous speech.

Is it better to die or go on living? Is it nobler to accept the miseries that cruel fate deals, or to fight against them and so die? But to die is very similar to sleeping, and this state makes us forget the pain and sorrow men have to endure. Dying is also a problem for we do not know what happens after death. If it is like sleep, then it may have dreams that haunt men. The thought of what man might experience after death makes a person hesitate to end his life, and rather tolerate suffering for so long. Who would bear the miseries of life - ill treatment, tyranny, contempt, spurned love, the delays of legal procedure - when he could end everything with a bare dagger? But we are prevented by the fear of death, of the unknown, of the hereafter from which no person returns. So we prefer to choose the troubles we have rather than fly to others we know nothing of. Thus knowledge and consciousness (conscience) make us cowards, and our determination to end our lives takes on a sickly colour because of thinking too much. This process causes important enterprises to turn aside and come to nothing.
The crux of this soliloquy

And enterprises of great pitch and moment ... lose the name of action

Hamlet is unable to carry out the Ghost's instruction - the enterprise - because of his introspective nature. Thinking too much about right and wrong negates all action, including the one to which he has committed himself. He has consequently delayed, so the second part of his soliloquy is an attempt to rationalise and explain his delay in general terms as though all men are subject to the same fault - thinking too much rather than acting.
Examining a soliloquy

A soliloquy is a speech that a character makes when he / she is alone on the stage, as though the character is talking to himself or herself, or his / her thoughts are being spoken aloud for the audience. This means that soliloquies reveal the secret thoughts, plans and emotions of the characters, so they are important and you should pay particular attention to them when preparing for your exams.

Look carefully at this soliloquy from Act 3, Scene 1 of Hamlet, in which the audience sees the confusion, chaos and depression within Hamlet. Because this is a soliloquy, we can trust that these are Hamlet’s true feelings, and not Hamlet pretending to be mad for the other characters.

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HAMLET
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 heart-ache 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 despri’t love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurts
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 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,
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. Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember’d.
Home Language

1. In what tone would Hamlet be making his speech? Why does he feel this way?  (3)
2. What makes Hamlet afraid of suicide?  (2)
3. Refer to lines 71–74. List four things that Hamlet does not like about life. (4)
4. Refer to lines 83–88.
   a) How are these lines related to Hamlet’s situation at this point in the play? (3)
   b) “The native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er”. What theme is being referred to here? (1)
   c) How does this line suggest that Hamlet feels about his hesitation, or lack of resolution? (2)
5. What does this soliloquy reveal about Hamlet as a character? [18]
1. His tone is despairing or bitter. ✓ He feels this way because his father has been murdered and his mother has married his uncle, the murderer, ✓ so he is becoming disillusioned with the world and with people. ✓

2. He is afraid because he does not know what happens to people after they die, ✓ and he thinks that when he dies he might go to hell or some other terrible place. ✓

3. People who oppress others, ✓ proud or arrogant people being rude, ✓ the pain of love that is not returned, ✓ legal justice being too slow or not good enough, ✓ people in authority being rude, ✓ that good people have to put up with contempt from bad people ✓

4. a) Hamlet suggests that it is bad to be a coward ✓ and that it is good to take action, ✓ but this is ironic because he realises that he himself is frightened and hesitating about killing Claudius. ✓

b) Disease and corruption ✓

c) Hamlet feels that he lacks resolution because he is weak, like someone with a disease. ✓ This suggests that he despises his hesitation. ✓

5. He is a deep thinker ✓ who agonises over the meaning of life and death. ✓ He is a philosopher. ✓
He is intelligent. ✓ He is suicidally depressed. ✓ He respects action. ✓

[18]
Spoken by Hamlet, Hamlet Act 3 Scene
Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I’ll do’t. And so he goes to heaven;
And so am I revenged. That would be scann’d:
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
He took my father grossly, full of bread;
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No!
Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

“Now Might I Do It Pat” Soliloquy Translation:
As Hamlet passed the chapel on his way to his mother’s room he saw the light in the chapel. He paused and stood silently at the door. He saw the still form of his uncle kneeling before the altar. He drew his sword and tiptoed into the chapel and stood at the back. He could do it, right now, easily, while he was praying. And he would. Right now. He took a step forward then stopped. And so he would go to heaven, and what kind of revenge would that be? That was something to think about. A villain kills his father; and for that his son sends that villain to heaven. Oh, that would be a service he was giving that villain, not revenge. He killed his father most grossly, full of unresolved sins himself, with all his crimes in blossom, like the flowers of May. And no-one knew how his father’s audit stood in heaven. As far as he knew it stood seriously. So would he be revenged if he took his uncle while he was purging his soul, when he was fit and ready for his death? No! He put his sword back. He would find a more suitable occasion, when he was drunk, or asleep, or in a rage, or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed, or gambling, swearing, or some other act that had no taste of salvation in it. Then he would trip him so that his heels would kick out at heaven. His soul would then be damned as black as the hell it was destined for. His mother was waiting, but this delay would only prolong his uncle’s last sickly days. He turned and went out quietly.
Hamlet's sixth soliloquy

In this scene, Hamlet delivers his sixth soliloquy. Read Hamlet's soliloquy (lines 73-96) and answer the questions below.

Looking at the text
1. What does might reveal about Hamlet's decisiveness?
2. How does your answer link with the theme of reason and passion?
3. Show how Hamlet's reasoning has led him to a false conclusion.
4. Why can Hamlet's reasons be construed as overstepping the limits of Christian morality?
5. Discuss the irony of the king's closing admission (lines 97-98).

Why is Hamlet's decision a mistake?
1. Hamlet believes he knows what is in the king's mind. However, it is not possible for him to be certain.
2. He commits the error that he has so long fiercely condemned. He believes the king is sincerely praying, so he trusts appearance before reality. In reality, the king is preoccupied with worldly matters, and is not in a state of contrition (full of remorse or regret).
Act 3, Scene 3 - Looking at the text (page 44)

1. Possible, not definite intent
2. Hamlet's thinking impedes his actions. Because he reasons that Claudius at prayer gives him immunity, he decides not to kill him.
3. Hamlet reasons that if he kills Claudius at prayer, the king will go to heaven. But Claudius cannot pray, and this false impression leads to Hamlet's delay.
4. Christians should believe that punishment is God's, not man's, territory.
5. Hamlet is scornful of how appearance misleads, yet falsely believes the king is praying.
Spoken by Hamlet, Hamlet Act 4 Scene 4
How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward, I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do’t. Examples gross as earth exhort me:
Witness this army of such mass and charge
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff’d
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? while, to my shame, I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

“How All Occasions Do Inform Against Me” Soliloquy Translation:
How the examples provided by everything around him denounced him and reminded him of his inability to sweep to his revenge! What was a man if his most profitable employment was to eat and sleep? Nothing more than an animal. He who made us with that vast capacity for understanding, that ability to reflect on experience and learn from it, didn’t give us that god-like reason just to let it go mouldy from disuse. He didn’t know what it was that was stopping him. Whether it was animal-like inability to understand or some cowardly nit-picking — thinking too precisely about it, analysing his thoughts, which were one quarter wisdom and always three quarters cowardice. He didn’t know why he was saying, ‘this still has to be done’ since he had the reason and the desire and the strength and the means to do it.
Examples as weighty as the earth keep urging him. Look at the way this inexperienced young prince, puffed with divine ambition and scorning everything that fortune, death and danger could throw at him, was leading this huge expensive army on a campaign to gain a piece of land that was nothing more than an eggshell. True greatness wasn’t a matter of rushing into action for any trivial cause but when honour was at stake it was noble to act, no matter how trivial the cause was. Where did he stand, then, his father murdered, his mother stained — two huge incentives — and not do anything? It was to his shame that he was watching the imminent death of twenty thousand men who were going to their deaths as easily as one would go to bed, for almost no reason, fighting for a plot of land that was so small that they wouldn’t even fit on it, that wasn’t even big enough for the fallen to be buried on.

Oh, from now on his thoughts would be bloody, or not worth having!
ACT 4, SCENE 4

The ‘Fortinbras goad’

Character and plot

Fortinbras’ forceful, misguided action is in strong contrast with Hamlet. It spurs him on to strive towards an ideal that he admits he lacks. Here Hamlet is calm and noble.

Hamlet’s seventh soliloquy

Hamlet’s encounter with a Norwegian captain reminds us of the important role Fortinbras plays. Hamlet shows his amazement and dismay that an entire army is deployed to reclaim a worthless piece of land (possibly with huge loss of life).

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th’ event
(A thought which quartered hath but one part wisdom,
And ever three parts coward) I do not know
Why yet I live to say ‘This thing’s to do,’
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
To do’t ... Examples gross as earth exhort me,
Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell ... Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? While to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

1. This speech is similar to The time is out of joint speech. Here Hamlet notes how all matters conspire in preventing him from carrying out his blunted revenge.
2. He philosophically questions the existence of man who is inert and inactive, merely sleeping and feeding.
3. The Elizabethans believed that the possession of reason separated man from the animals, and its wide powers came to him from God.
4. Hamlet pinpoints his weakness: his delay is caused by reflective self-examination, which has led to him becoming disgusted and self-contemptuous.
5. Hamlet unjustly accuses himself of being a coward. It is more likely that his prudence (wisdom) has interfered with his ability to act.
6. Again Hamlet insightfully criticises his delay, especially considering he has a reason, the will, the power and the means to act.
7. The Norwegian army of such size and costliness is an example that should spur him on.
8. The fortright and decisive Fortinbras is intended to contrast strongly with the indecisive Hamlet. He is portrayed as noble, driven by honour (ambition), and contemptuous of the outcome even when it centres on a matter of trifling importance (egg-shell).
9. Hamlet stresses the concept of honour, which should motivate a man to act even when the issue is unimportant. Thus he implies that he lacks honour.
10. He repeats the argument that he knows well — delay despite every reason. He points to passion, which should be sufficient cause for him to act.
11. He is spurred on by an example on a grand scale: huge numbers of men deployed in battle, possibly going to their death as though they were going to bed, in pursuit of a false dream of glory. Moreover, the plot of ground is not big enough for them to fight on, nor to bury the dead.
12. Hamlet falsely believes he has motivated himself. In practice, he remains inert. Note that he does not cry out, My actions be bloody.