Revenge Plays

- Derived from the work of the Roman playwright, Seneca
- Gained great popularity in Shakespeare’s time
- Components: (a) ghost appears to hero, demanding vengeance; (b) fake or real madness; (c) scenes of violence and death; (d) plays within the play; (e) death of hero
Hamlet’s procrastination

- Clear duty: Ghost demands that Hamlet ‘revenge his foul and most unnatural murder’

- Hamlet vows that he will act ‘with wings as swift / as meditation or the thoughts of love’

- The Ghost is pleased with this: ‘I find thee apt’

- However, Hamlet does not act.

- The Ghost reappears in Act 3, reminding Hamlet not to forget: ‘This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose’
Why does Hamlet not act?

- Hamlet vows instant vengeance, but does nothing for a long time.
- His killing of Claudius at the end of the play is a sudden act: he stabs and then poisons his uncle when he learns that the king has plotted to poison him and has accidentally poisoned Gertrude.
- The killing of Claudius comes too late to save Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstten, Gertrude and Laertes.
- Hamlet’s procrastination causes a chain of tragic deaths.
The baffled prince

- Hamlet knows he should act

- He feels guilty when he sees the actor weep ‘in a fiction, in a dream of passion’ in Act 2.

- Hamlet rebukes himself for his inability to act in his soliloquy at the end of Act 2, acknowledging that he is ‘Prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell’.
Fortinbras

- Fortinbras’ actions highlight Hamlet’s inaction.

- The Norwegian prince gathers and army of ‘landless resolutes’ to attack Denmark in revenge for his father’s defeat by Old Hamlet

- Hamlet is astonished and ashamed when he sees Fortinbras’ army marching to fight for ‘a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name’
Moved by Fortinbras’ bravery and determination, Hamlet vows to act.

His soliloquy at the end of Act 4 Scene 4 expresses his confusion and disgust at his inability to exact revenge:

‘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.’

He appears determined to act: ‘Oh from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth’.
Hamlet’s own arguments do not stand up to scrutiny

- In his soliloquy at the end of Act 4 Scene 4, Hamlet claims he may be too cowardly or be guilty of ‘thinking too precisely on th’event’ to act.
- However, he is more than capable of acting bravely, decisively and mercilessly at times.
- He shows no fear of the Ghost, although he is warned it may be dangerous and is not at all sure that it is not an evil spirit.
- He cleverly arranges the play to ‘catch the conscience of a king’.
- He kills Polonius and appears unmoved when he realises his error.
- He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths.
- He stabs and poisons Claudius in the final scene.
Critics differ

- Some believe that Hamlet’s play is a result of depression: ‘I have of late - but wherefore I know not - lost all my mirth.

- Others feel the prince is marred by ‘some vicious mole of nature’ which stops him from exacting revenge in a timely manner

- Another viewpoint is that Hamlet finds the whole world so intolerable that he cannot act. This is an interesting angle and worth closer examination.
Hamlet’s world view

- The world is made up of ‘many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ th’ worst’.

- ‘the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory’; ‘the air […] no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours’.

- ‘what is this quintessence of dust?’

- If Hamlet finds the world intolerable, then his inaction and his descent into madness makes more sense.
Hamlet sees the world as ‘so weary, stale, flat and unprofitable’ that he wishes ‘the Everlasting had not fix’d / His cannon ‘gainst self-slaughter’.

It is not surprising that he should find it difficult to stir himself to act when there seems so little point in life.

Hamlet is fascinating because he is so unlike a conventional hero. Laertes and Fortinbras are straightforward: they believe they have cause to seek revenge and they act.

Hamlet has flaws, but so does the world in which he lives. His behaviour is a comment on a flawed society.
‘The time is out of joint’

- In the graveyard scene, Hamlet reflects on the transience of life.

- Would killing Claudius change the fabric of the world?

- Is there any point in playing an expected role in time which is ‘out of joint’?

- Hamlet feels trapped and paralysed by a society which disgusts him. Why should he play the role expected of him?