Hamlet's Soliloquies

Introduction: Readings of these soliloquies are varied and diverse. However, three remarks are in order:

1. The density of Hamlet's thought is extraordinary. Not a word is wasted; every syllable and each sound expresses the depth of his reflection and the intensity of his emotion. The spectator cannot help but be hypnotized.
2. The language is extremely beautiful. Shakespeare was in love with words. His soliloquies are pieces of pure poetry, written in blank verse, sustained by a rhythm now smooth, now rugged, by a fast or a slow pace, offering us surprises in every line.
3. The soliloquies are in effect the hidden plot of the play because, if one puts them side by side, one notices that the character of Hamlet goes through a development which, in substance, is nothing other than the history of human thinking from the Renaissance to the existentialism of the twentieth century.

Directions: For each of the soliloquies, answer the following, along with diction, syntax and tone analysis: Annotate and write responses in margins.

1. Dramatic context: Why is it where it is? What just happened or is about to happen? Should it be located somewhere else?
2. Speaker Intent: What is the intention of the speaker—go beyond the “being alone on the stage revealing inner thoughts to the audience” idea. What else is involved?
3. Meaning: What is the meaning—such a question is almost impossible to answer due to its vagueness, so refine it—meaning in what sense, on what level, etc. Henry James made the comment that characters are not interesting unless they are placed in dramatic situations that allow consciousness to grow. How do the soliloquies contribute to that process?
4. Style: Look for motifs and themes in the soliloquies. Can you determine the way Hamlet thinks? Is one critic’s claim of “excessive reflection” justified? Can we determine a pattern to Hamlet’s thinking? (Note the something called the “dialectic” [Plato] might be of help here.)

1. Act I, scene ii

HAMLET: O that this too 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 betwixt the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she should 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! Frailty, 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.
2. Act I, scene v

HAMLET: O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie, Hold, hold, my heart,
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.

Writing
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;
It is “Adieu, adieu! remember me.”
I have sworn 't.

POLONIUS: Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame!
The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,
And you are stay'd for. There, my blessing with thee!
And these few precepts in thy memory
See thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion’d thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatch’d, unfledg’d comrade. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
Bear’rt that th’ opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice,
Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment.
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express’d in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulleth th’ edge of husbandry.
This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell, my blessing season this in thee!
Analysis of Hamlet’s Soliloquies (Act II, scene ii)

Directions: For each of the soliloquies, answer the following, along with diction, syntax and tone analysis: Annotate and write responses in margins.

1. Dramatic context: Why is it where it is? What just happened or is about to happen? Should it be located somewhere else?
2. Speaker Intent: What is the intention of the speaker—go beyond the “being alone on the stage revealing inner thoughts to the audience” idea. What else is involved?
3. Meaning: What is the meaning—such a question is almost impossible to answer due to its vagueness, so refine it—meaning in what sense, on what level, etc. Henry James made the comment that characters are not interesting unless they are placed in dramatic situations that allow consciousness to grow. How do the soliloquies contribute to that process?
4. Style: Look for motifs and themes in the soliloquies. Can you determine the way Hamlet thinks? Is one critic’s claim of “excessive reflection” justified? Can we determine a pattern to Hamlet’s thinking? (Note the something called the “dialectic” [Plato] might be of help here.)

HAMLET:

Now I am alone.
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 appall 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’ th’ 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 stallion! ‘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 proclaimed 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,
Or be the devil, and the devil hath power
T’ 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.
Analysis of Hamlet’s Soliloquies (Act III, scene i)

Directions: Annotate and write responses in margins.
1. Briefly summarize the content of the soliloquy.
2. Is this is simply a very pompous, long-winded way of saying that death is to be avoided because we fear what may come after it or is there something else at work? Explain.
3. Does this soliloquy move the play forward in any way (e.g. give us a new insight into the prince’s thinking)?
4. Considering that Hamlet is a “Renaissance Man” of sorts, how does the soliloquy echo the philosophical worries of that time period (much like existentialists did at the turn of the 19th Century)? Some movers and shakers to consider: Henry VIII, Martin Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, Drake, Megellan, Machiavelli, Thomas More, Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon, etc.
5. Find the following: an allusion, a metaphor

I. Act III, scene I

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 despised love, the law’s delay,
II. Act III, scene ii

HAMLET: Then I will come to my mother by and by. [Aside.] They fool me to the top of my bent. -- I will come by and by.

POLONIUS: I will say so.

Exit.

HAMLET: “By and by” is easily said. Leave me, friends.

Exeunt all but Hamlet.

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature! let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites --
How in my words soever she be shent,
To give them seals never my soul consent!

Analysis Activities:
1. A short speech, but for once what does Hamlet believe he can do?

2. What does Hamlet intend to do in regard Gertrude?

III. Other Important Discourses (Kennedy/Gioia line numbers):

Hamlet: Act III, scene ii, 41-59 (on friendship)

R & G: Act III, iii, 8-23 (on the effects of royal madness/illness on the nation)

Claudius: Act III, iii, 36-72 (on guilt, repentance, and prayer)
Analysis of Hamlet’s Soliloquies (Act III, scene iii)

Directions: Annotate and write responses in margins.
1. Explain the context of the soliloquy in relation to the act and play as a whole. What private dialogue has Hamlet just partially overheard?
2. This is Hamlet and Claudius -- “mano a mano” – so to speak. What’s the hold up for Hamlet?
3. According to Hamlet, when would be better times to exact his revenge?
4. Highlight all diction that relates to economics and explain the significance.
5. As always, what does Hamlet choose to do? Explain why this time.

HAMLET

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying; To take him in the purging of his soul,

And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven; When he is fit and season'd for his passage?

And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd: No!

A villain kills my father; and for that, Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:

I, his sole son, do this same villain send When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,

To heaven. Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;

O, this is hire and salary, not revenge. At gaming, swearing, or about some act

He took my father grossly, full of bread; That has no relish of salvation in't;

With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May; Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,

And how his audit stands who knows save heaven? And that his soul may be as damn'd and black

But in our circumstance and course of thought, As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:

'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged, This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.
I. Act IV, scene iv

HAMLET  I'll be with you straight go a little before.  

[Exeunt all except HAMLET]

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 godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd. 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!

II. Other Discourses: Claudius, Act IV, scene vii, 110-126 (the nature of revenge and action)