

Sample 6.1

The first sample response summarizes the trajectory of Hamlet's relationship with his mother: from disappointment at her remarriage in the beginning to callous dismissal of her soul at the end. And it explores the triple pun in the prince's final words to Claudius.

Hamlet began the play in despair at his mother's within "A little month" (1.2) marriage to Claudius: "It is not nor it cannot come to good, / But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2). But the prince ends it, in his own mind at least, by extending forever into an eternity of "sulfurous and tormenting flames" (1.5) the incestuous union of his "uncle-father and aunt-mother" (2.2).

Distressed and confused in 1.5 by his encounter with his ghost-father, Hamlet used the triple pun of "this distracted globe", meaning at once his mind, the world, and Shakespeare's London stage. His final words to his uncle-father in 5.2 are another example of such wordplay. As he forces the goblet of poisoned wine down the king's throat, Hamlet rhetorically asks: "Is thy union here?"

For the term 'union' has three meanings. Firstly, it refers to the pearl with its secret poison which Claudius added to the wine goblet ("And in the cup an union"). Secondly, it describes the earthly marriage of Claudius and Gertrude ("Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh", 4.3). And thirdly, it anticipates the prospect of Denmark's royal couple remaining forever united in an afterlife of punishment to which old King Hamlet was condemned for only "a certain term" (1.5).

Whatever the actual nature and extent of Gertrude's guilt, Prince Hamlet's parting words to her ("Wretched Queen, adieu") reveal that the prince is unwilling to extend to his mother the forgiveness a repentant Laertes granted to him ("Mine and my father's death come not upon thee").
