Act One, Scenes 1

On the ramparts of Elsinore Castle, the outgoing night watchman (Francisco) assures one of the incoming watchmen, Bernardo, that it has been a quiet night, although he (Francisco) is "sick at heart". Another of the incoming watchmen, Marcellus, arrives, accompanied by Horatio. As Francisco leaves, Marcellus and Bernardo begin explaining why they asked Horatio to join them. They are interrupted by the silent appearance of the Ghost, who leaves in spite of Horatio's demands that he stay. Conversation reveals that the Ghost has appeared twice before, and Horatio suggests that because of impending war between Denmark and Norway, the Ghost has come to warn them of danger. The Ghost reappears and seems about to speak, but disappears as the sun begins to rise. Horatio suggests that Hamlet be told of the Ghost's appearance, and the other soldiers agree.

Scene 2 –

Claudius and Gertrude hold court in the company of Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, and others. Claudius speaks of how he is striving to balance personal feelings with his new responsibilities as king, commenting on how he has married Gertrude, the widow of the former king, and his efforts to deal with the threat from Norway. He sends ambassadors to conduct negotiations with the King of Norway and then turns his attention to Laertes, who requests permission to return to France. Claudius grants it, and then, as Laertes goes, turns to Hamlet, asking him what's troubling him. As Gertrude echoes
his concern, Hamlet angrily responds, saying he's still grieving for his father. Claudius tells him that the death of a father is a part of the natural course of events and suggests that for Hamlet to keep grieving so intently is a rejection of nature. He also urges Hamlet, who is now the heir to the throne, to stay at court rather than return to school, the university at Wittenberg. When Gertrude echoes this wish, Hamlet agrees to stay, and Claudius and Gertrude leave, followed by the rest of the court. Hamlet then speaks the first of his several soliloquies, expressing his desire to kill himself and his fury with his mother for marrying Claudius, her husband's brother, within a month after her first husband's death.

Horatio and the soldiers appear. Hamlet recognizes Horatio from Wittenberg and listens as Horatio tells him of the appearances of the Ghost. Hamlet asks several sharp questions confirming the men's impression of the Ghost's identity, and because the Ghost has appeared in armor, also concludes that he is warning of danger. Hamlet resolves to watch with them on the ramparts that night.

Scene 3 –

In another part of the castle, as Laertes prepares to leave, he warns Ophelia against taking Hamlet's professions of affection too seriously and against giving herself to him sexually, as Hamlet will be more responsible to the throne than he will ever be to her. Ophelia urges him to be sexually responsible as well, and Laertes agrees. Polonius appears, offering his son a string of rules to follow while he's away. He and Laertes say their farewells, and Laertes goes. Polonius then turns to Ophelia who, in response to his questions, reveals that she and her brother had been talking about Hamlet. Polonius warns her against taking Hamlet too seriously, saying that words of love spoken by someone so young are a tactic to take advantage of her. He orders her not to talk with Hamlet again, and she agrees.

**Act One, Scenes 1-3, Hamlet Analysis**

In the centuries since it was first written and performed, "Hamlet" has been analyzed and commented upon from almost
every conceivable angle - psychologically and academically, its language and imagery discussed in the way one might discuss poetry, its many allusions and references studied for echoes of Shakespeare's own life and circumstances. The list and the possibilities of analysis are virtually endless. For the purposes of this analysis, the work is to be regarded primarily as a play, a piece of dramatic narrative designed to engage and entertain an audience. Aspects of psychology and language certainly come into this form of analysis, as they would in analysis of any play. But for now, and as Hamlet says himself, "the play's the thing".

With that in mind, these first two scenes can therefore be looked at essentially as exposition - in other words, as establishing the circumstances of the narrative to follow. Some of these circumstances are factual (the recent death of the previous king, the more recent marriage of his widow to his brother, the ongoing grief of his son). Some are atmospheric, with the foreboding and sense of mystery of the first scene foreshadowing the psychological, moral, and emotional darkness to which most of the main characters either descend or already have descended. Many of the play's circumstances defined in these opening scenes relate to character - Horatio is portrayed as a skeptic and realist, Claudius as a skilled politician, and Gertrude as a dutiful royal wife and conventionally worried mother. Scene 3, meanwhile, clearly defines the characters of Polonius (an interfering and domineering meddler), Laertes (an impulsive and judgmental moralist) and Ophelia (gentle and easily manipulated). All these portrayals establish the essential traits and natures of the characters who will, over the course of the narrative, come into contact and conflict with the compelling central character, Prince Hamlet.

An important point to note about the portrayal of arguably the most discussed character in the history of dramatic narrative is that the play gives Hamlet an opportunity to be observed in both public and private situations. Thus in the scene at court, he is portrayed as withdrawn, sarcastic, intelligent (perhaps the most intelligent character on the stage), barely polite to Claudius but
still respectful of Gertrude and, most importantly, sunk deeply into grief for his dead father. The soliloquy (a theatrical convention in which a character alone on stage reveals his innermost thoughts) gives the audience an opportunity for insight into the feelings that lie beneath Hamlet's barely secure mask of the courtier and prince. He is seething with jealousy and rage and violent feeling, particularly directed at his mother, for marrying another man so quickly after her husband's death, and that man his father's brother, and towards Claudius, for behaving so improperly with Gertrude. Here it’s important to note what he doesn't say - specifically, he doesn't refer to Claudius as taking the throne that, according to traditional laws of inheritance, should have been his. Hamlet is not interested in being king, it seems, not interested in politics or power, but is more interested in morality and justice. This, combined with the intensity of his grief for his father, makes him profoundly vulnerable to the suggestions made to him by the Ghost in the following section.

Everything about the character and situations of these first three scenes is fertile ground for potential conflict and drama, the seeds of which have in some cases already been planted (i.e., the tension between Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius) and into which more seeds are about to be sown with the appearance of his father's Ghost to Hamlet. In other words, the dramatist has done his job, establishing with his opening scenes detailed circumstances and relationships that will draw the audience into his narrative, awakening in them the desire to know what will happen next that will sustain their interest through what is one of Shakespeare's longest, and most emotionally and psychologically complex, plays.