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,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
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 undiscovered 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 current turn awry
And lose the name of action.
Hamlet Notes and Activities created by the RSC

Act: Three  Scene: One
Character: Hamlet

About the speech
Hamlet is a story of murder and revenge. The ghost of dead King Hamlet visits his young son to tell him that his brother Claudius murdered him. He orders his son, Prince Hamlet, to avenge his murder. Prince Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, has not only killed his brother, he has also claimed the throne of Denmark and shortly after his brother’s death married Hamlet’s mother.

In this speech, Hamlet struggles with suicidal thoughts and considers the arguments for and against taking his own life as a way out of his unhappiness, “To be, or not to be”. First he considers which is the more honourable course of action – to commit suicide, “to take arms against a sea of troubles/And by opposing end them”, or to struggle on “to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”. He then imagines what it might be like after death: “To die, to sleep”, but then worries that if he kills himself, his Christian faith damns his soul. Hamlet is torn between wanting to end his hard life on earth, and worrying that by doing so he might end up in hell.

How actors work
During rehearsals, directors and actors often investigate the background of the play and character they are bringing to life. Shakespeare often highlights events happening in Elizabethan England through the language, characters and plots of his plays. Understanding the context in which these plays were written will help you make interesting choices about how to perform a particular speech. Actors also connect the character they are playing with their own experiences and the world around them.

Performance Suggestions
There are many ways that you can perform the speech. During rehearsals, actors and directors will make choices about who a character is speaking to. The stage directions for this scene suggest that Hamlet’s lover, Ophelia, is present onstage, but in most productions Hamlet is alone.

Who is Hamlet speaking to in your version of the speech? To Ophelia? To himself? To the audience? If he is speaking to the audience, what does he want to get from them?

One of the reasons actors like playing Hamlet is that the character is very complicated. Because of this, actors have a huge variety of choices when approaching how to play him. Try this speech as if Hamlet is:

- impatient and angry
- calm and clear-headed
- confused and frightened
- depressed

Actors and directors will look for clues in the text to show how a character is feeling. In the second part of the speech, beginning ‘For who would bear the whips and scorns of time’, Hamlet lists the drawbacks to being alive. Try delivering this list as if Hamlet is:

- building up momentum while saying it, getting himself worked up
- tiredly listing off all the reasons he hates life, becoming more depressed as he says each one

Take a look at the language of the speech and try mixing these different choices to see which ones work best for specific moments.