Here is an example of a band 6 Hamlet essay. You may notice some imperfections as you read it, but remember that you are not expected to write a ‘perfect’ essay during the exam. As you read it, consider whether you think it contains a clear thesis and directly answers the question.

***2012 HSC Question:***

***An inherent tension between confrontation and resolution is revealed through characterisation in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.***

***To what extent does your interpretation align with this view?***

A philosophical rendering of the everyday leads to a tension between reflection and action. In Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy play Hamlet, this is highlighted through the characterisation of Hamlet himself, and his engagement with the philosophical and academic concerns of Elizabethan England through his interactions with Horatio. By drawing on elements of this, and contrasting them with contextual concerns about religion and spirituality, Hamlet is constructed as a deeply meditative play, which finds itself continuously delayed and stunted in its attempts to reach fruition.

The use of delay to create a play which happens outside of ‘reality’ and thus remains internalised and wrought with anaphasia is most evident in the characterisation of Hamlet. Hamlet’s diction is littered with binary oppositions, such as in his opening line “a little more than kin and less than kind”, indicating that he inhabits and speaks within a space where the constant state of flux has rendered ideas without opposition unpalatable. Hamlet’s inability to speak without binary oppositions is directly related to his inability to act, and this is shown in his soliloquy, “to be or not to be, that is the question”, where the binary oppositions of existence and selfhood are placed in the sphere of movement, only to cause further inaction, adding to the overall delay of the play. It is this delay in the action which causes Act 5 Scene 2 to erupt with such bloodshed, as shown through the repetitious stage directions: “He dies”, and “dies” are repeated four times in the scene. And yet, even in the single scene of action in this play, these deaths, too, are delayed. Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet all speak between receiving their final wounds and dying, indicating that it is the loss of speech, rather than loss of life, that is the most crucial part of mankind, and will be lost in death. In addition to this, despite the question of whether or not to kill Claudius functioning within the play as a metaphor for the question of whether or not existence is worthwhile, it is Claudius who is the last to die (barring Hamlet), delaying resolution even in a moment of confrontation. This delay and its cause has been widely attributed to the Elizabethan guilt complex, and obsession with “the functions of conscience and especially its morbid preoccupation with past sins and omissions” (Reed, 1958). By obsessing over the dangers of inaction, Hamlet creates further delay for himself, ultimately halting any action or resolution that the play could come to.

The power of academic and philosophical engagement with issues of morality and political structure is an undeniable force in the conclusion of Hamlet. The relationship between Hamlet and Horatio is one of academic engagement, as shown through Horatio’s continual allusions to the rendering of Caesar’s death in the Shakespearian version of the story, which was written concurrently with Hamlet, such as in his description of the ghost’s appearance “in the most high and palmy state of Rome/a little ere the mightiest Julius fell”. This dialogue with history and politics is emphasised through the vehicle of this friendship, and, in using this, Shakespeare questions the virility of the Danish political system and the role of the monarchy.  This parallel between Rome after the assassination of Caesar and the rapidly-declining political system of Denmark is furthered by Horatio’s return to this metaphor in the final scene “I am more antique Roman than a Dane”. Through this juxtaposition the audience is forced to call into question Hamlet’s role in the Julius Caesar parallel, creating yet another layer of separation between Hamlet and the audience. It is in Hamlet’s conversations with Horatio that his philosophical musings are most prominent, and through this we can see Horatio as an agent both of Hamlet’s conscience, and of the play’s delay. In John Quincy Adam’s analysis of the play, he points at the friendship between Hamlet and Horatio as being crucial to the development of Hamlet’s moral code which is only the result of “a mind cultivated by the learning acquirable at a university, combining intelligence and sensibility” (Adams, 1839). By characterising Horatio as the intellectual force within the play, and subsequently the source of socio-political commentary, Shakespeare adds to the moral and cultural instability of the play in a manner which results in further delay of confrontation or resolution.

Fatalism plays an important role in understanding the tension between action and inaction in Hamlet. From the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet’s course of action is inevitable within the tropes of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy and the Greek tragedy roots that it is drawn from. However, he resists this role by delaying taking action, and as a result, the play can be read as being in perpetual tension between the restoration of natural order and the resistance of that restoration. The apostrophe of “out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune!” shows Hamlet’s resistance of what he perceives to be the only path available to him. In Act 5 Scene 2, when Hamlet finally takes action, he begins to refer to himself in the third person, a bizarre subversion of a play which previously obsessed with the use of “I”. This switching of mode of speech indicates that it is only though the abandonment of his self-identity, and thus moral code, that he is able to complete the actions which divine providence demands of him. This is supported by Dwery’s reading of the play’s resolution, where he argues that “Hamlet recognizes the inevitability of death, accepting his father’s death and recognising his own unavoidable fate.” (Dwery, 2004) By understanding the contextual concerns with the nature and role of fate and divinity in the everyday, a deeper understanding of the character of Hamlet emerges.

The tension between action and inaction in Hamlet stem from the contextual role of fate, which forces Hamlet into a position where he repeatedly delays himself, until his self-identity is erased, and he performs the actions which fate requires of him. My interpretation of the delay highlights the contribution of socio-political forces to the delay, and ultimately the tension which permeates the play, which is depicted through the characterisation of Hamlet and Horatio.