Hamlet

William Shakespeare

About the author

Although Shakespeare is one of the world's greatest writers, surprisingly little is known about his life, especially his early years in Stratford. However, we do know that: a) he was born on 23 April 1564 and died on his 52nd birthday, in 1616; b) his mother, Mary Arden, came from a higher social background than his father, who was a civil servant; c) he went to a good school but did not attend university; d) in 1582 he married Anne Hathaway and they had three children; e) wrote 37 plays, sometimes writing three plays a year! He also wrote poetry, including a number of beautiful sonnets. Some of his plays are: The Taming of the Shrew (1591), Richard III (1592), A Midsummer Night's Dream (1594), Romeo and Juliet (1595), The Merchant of Venice (1596), Henry V (1599), Much Ado About Nothing (1599), Julius Caesar (1599), Twelfth Night (1600), Hamlet (1601), Othello (1604), King Lear (1605), Macbeth (1605), Antony and Cleopatra (1606), The Tempest (1611).

Summary

The King of Denmark, is dead and has been succeeded not by his son, Hamlet, but by his brother and killer, Claudius. Soon after the funeral, Claudius marries his brother's widow, Gertrude. Hamlet, haunted by the spectre of his father and maddened by his inner ghosts seeks to avenge the death of the King.

Act I: Hamlet, still upset by his father's death, sees the ghost of his father, who tells him that he was murdered by Claudius. The Ghost asks his son to avenge his death. Hamlet pretends to go mad. Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, forbids his daughter, Ophelia, to see Hamlet.

Act II: Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet has been lurking about her room and speaking nonsense. She shows Hamlet's love letters to her father. Polonius assumes that Hamlet is madly in love with his daughter and that he has been acting strangely ever since he was forbidden to see his beloved. Polonius informs this to the King and they stage a scene to find out whether or not Hamlet is sick with love.

Act III: Spied on by Polonius and Claudius, Ophelia returns Hamlet's love letters and is violently rejected by him. This will have a terrible effect on her. A group of travelling actors arrives at the court. Hamlet asks them to perform a play in which a king is murdered by his nephew. He hopes that the story, which is similar to the murder of his father by Claudius, will force Claudius to betray his guilt. Hamlet is right: Claudius is upset by the play. Hamlet is summoned to his mother's room, where he angrily criticises her for her hasty marriage. He accidentally kills Polonius, who is hiding behind a curtain, believing him to be Claudius.

Act IV: Claudius sends Hamlet to England, planning to have him murdered. Laertes, Polonius's son, returns to Denmark from France, demanding revenge for his father's death. Ophelia, mad with grief, drowns herself.

Act V: Hamlet returns from England, having discovered Claudius's plot to have him killed. He confronts Laertes and Claudius at Ophelia's funeral. Claudius plots with Laertes to kill Hamlet with a poisoned sword in a swordfight. The plot goes wrong and Laertes dies. Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup intended for Hamlet and dies. Hamlet, wounded by the poisoned sword, kills Claudius before he, too, dies. Young Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, enters and claims the throne of Denmark for himself.

About the films

Many films have been made of the play. The most well-known were made in: 1948 – with Laurence Olivier as Hamlet. It won four Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Actor; 1969 – with Nicol Williamson as Hamlet and Anthony Hopkins as Claudius; 1996 – with Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet and Kate Winslet as Ophelia.

Background and themes

Shakespeare's plays are famous throughout the world for their poetry and their insights into the nature of life and the human condition. A large number of them are set in
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the south of Europe, particularly Italy. However, he chose gloomy northern European landscapes for three of his darkest tragedies: Macbeth, King Lear and Hamlet.

The story of Hamlet is found in the folk literature of Iceland, Ireland and Denmark. The earliest reference we have to Hamlet is in an eleventh-century Icelandic poem. Shakespeare’s play is as widely read, seen and performed today as it was four hundred years ago. One of the main reasons is that Hamlet himself is a character that people will always identify with. He is a complex character – his sense of honour and duty is in constant conflict with his inner doubts and uncertainties. This confusion leads to delay and indecision and, ultimately, to final tragedy.

Apart from the complex nature of Hamlet himself, there are other themes:

**Madness:** Hamlet pretends to be mad to conceal his indecision. But this ploy backfires, leading to, among other things, Ophelia’s genuine descent into madness over Hamlet’s unintentional murder of her father.

**Disease and poison:** ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’. Poison is the main instrument of death in the story.

**Revenge:** In a traditional revenge tragedy, the hero plans his revenge. In Hamlet, the tragedy stems from the hero’s doubt and uncertainty. Many lives would have been saved if Hamlet had just killed his uncle earlier.

**Destiny and fate:** The appearance of the Ghost is responsible for everything. Does Hamlet have a choice in what he does, or is there some great plan which makes everything inevitable?

### Discussion activities

#### Before reading

1. **Group work:** Put students into small groups. Ask them the following questions: (a) What Shakespeare plays do you know? (b) What do you know about the characters/story/setting of any of these plays? (c) What do you know about Hamlet?

   Discuss group findings as a class.

2. **Write:** Write these words on the board: castle, ghost, grave, mad, poison, secret, revenge, wicked. Ask students to write sentences using these words. Students read out their sentences and they write the best ones on the board.

#### After reading

10. **Discuss:** Put students into groups to discuss these questions: Now that you have finished Act I, discuss these questions: (a) How do these people feel about each other? Why? 1) Hamlet and Gertrude 2) Hamlet and Claudius 3) Polonius and Hamlet (b) What does the Ghost want Hamlet to do? Why?

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3. **Predict:** Ask students to look at the cover, title and content page of the book. Guide them with these instructions: Look at the title and book cover in pairs. What do they tell you about the story? Read the content page and discuss what the book will be about. Write a few lines on this.

4. **Write:** Ask students to work in groups. They should write a short paragraph about the story using at least ten of the words below: In groups, pick ten words and write a story about Hamlet.

   kill uncle curtain grief crazy death God Heaven Hell lord nephew skull sword worm

   Ask students to look up the words they do not know in the Word List at the back of the book.

5. **Discuss:** Ask students to read the Introduction in pairs. Guide them with these questions: Read the Introduction in pairs and discuss with another student: (a) What problems has Hamlet got? (b) Why Hamlet, the play, is so famous?

6. **Tie in with films:** If you have access to video or DVD, watch the first three to five scenes of any of the Hamlet film versions with the sound off. Tell students to choose one of the scenes and imagine what the characters say. Play the film again and check whose guess was closest to the original.

### Act I

#### While reading

7. **Group work:** Tell students to work in groups and fill out the following chart as they read pages 1–4:

   Write down as much as you know about what each of the characters feels and thinks after the King’s death.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hamlet</th>
<th>Polonius</th>
<th>Gertrude</th>
<th>Claudius</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

8. **Write:** Tell your students to read Scene 2, on page 4, and do the following activity: Read Scene 2 in pairs. Imagine you are Ophelia after her conversation with her father. What do you write in your diary?

9. **Read and discuss:** Ask students to do the following activity as they read pages 6–8: Work in pairs. Read Scene 4 and then look at the picture on page 7. Who is there? What are they like? What are they thinking? Continue their conversation on page 6.

### Act I

#### After reading

10. **Discuss:** Put students into groups to discuss these questions: Now that you have finished Act I, discuss these questions: (a) How do these people feel about each other? Why? 1) Hamlet and Gertrude 2) Hamlet and Claudius 3) Polonius and Hamlet (b) What does the Ghost want Hamlet to do? Why?
Teacher’s notes  LEVEL 3

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11 Role play: Put students into pairs. Ask them to act out this imaginary conversation after they finish reading the chapter: Work in pairs and imagine the following conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. 
Student A: You are Hamlet. Tell Ophelia about the Ghost and your plans for revenge.
Student B: You are Ophelia. You don’t think Hamlet should listen to the Ghost. Tell him why. Write down what they say and then act it out. Choose three pairs to role play their scene in front of the class.

12 Predict: Ask students to work in groups. Tell them to predict what will happen in Act II: In groups, discuss what you think will happen in Act II between Hamlet and Ophelia, between Hamlet and Polonius, and between Polonius and Ophelia with Hamlet and his plans for revenge.

Act II

While reading

13 Check and discuss: Ask students to work on the same groups as in activity 12 and to compare their predictions with what actually happens in the scene in Act II. They should fill out a chart that they will copy from the board: Read Act II and compare your group answers after reading Act I to what actually happens in Act II. Fill out the chart and then find out how close you were!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What we thought would happen in Act II</th>
<th>What really happens in Act II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14 Role play: Tell your students to do the following activity in pairs after reading Hamlet’s conversation with Guildenstern: In pairs, read from page 12 up to the end of Act II. The talk there ends in ‘the play is the key to the secrets of his heart’ … Continue the conversation and work on Hamlet’s plan.

After reading

15 Discuss: Put students into small groups to discuss these questions: In groups, discuss (a) What secrets do these people want to know? How do they plan to find them? 1) Hamlet 2) Claudius 3) Polonius (b) Will their plans succeed? Why (not)?

16 Write: Tell students to work in pairs and to imagine they are Gertrude. Ask them to work on the following activity: You are Gertrude at the end of Act II. Write down how you feel about your dead husband, your new husband, and the way your son is talking and behaving.

Act III

While reading

17 Write: Ask students to re-read pages 18 to the end of the scene and work on the following activity: Re-read pages 18–23 and discuss what you think each of these characters 1) Gertrude, 2) Claudius, 3) Hamlet, 4) Polonius, is thinking as they watch the actors’ play. Then write down a small paragraph on each one. Choose three groups to read their writings out loud.

After reading

18 Group work: Put students into small groups to discuss these questions: In groups, discuss what Hamlet thinks about … (a) life and death? (b) women? (c) Claudius when he is praying? (d) his mother’s marriage? (e) Polonius’s death? Do you agree with him? Why/Why not?

Act IV

While reading

19 Pair work: Tell students to work in pairs as they re-read Scenes 4 and 6 and do the following activity: Re-read Scenes 4 and 6 and imagine you are Laertes. Write down all the reasons why you have to kill Hamlet.

After reading

20 Group work: Put students into small groups to discuss these questions: In groups, discuss: (a) What news do you think Hamlet has for Horatio? (b) What is Claudius’s plan for Hamlet? Will it succeed? Why/Why not?

Act V

While reading

21 Group work: Tell students to work in groups and to change the first scene in Act V: In groups, re-read Scene 1 and then get ready to role play it. But this time have each character (the workmen, Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius) say out loud what they are really thinking.

22 Discuss: Tell students to work in pairs and to read Scene 2 in detail. They work on the following activity: In pairs, read the final scene of the play and decide what went wrong. What did not happen as planned? Discuss why.

After reading

23 Role play: Put students into groups of three. Ask them to act out this conversation: In groups of three, act out the following talk:
Student A: You think everything is Hamlet’s fault. Say why.
Student B: You think everything is Claudius’s fault. Say why.
Student C: You think everything is the Ghost’s fault. Say why.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.