

*Hamlet***Play Basics**

AUTHOR	Shakespeare
YEARS WRITTEN	1599–1601CE
GENRE	Drama, Tragedy
PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR	Hamlet is written in objective third-person point of view. To give audiences some insight into characters' inner thoughts, Shakespeare uses short speeches (asides) and longer speeches (soliloquies) in which characters speak their thoughts aloud.
TENSE	Shakespeare wrote Hamlet in the present tense
ABOUT THE TITLE	Hamlet is a tale of mourning, madness, and revenge. The play's title refers to its central character, Prince Hamlet of Denmark, and to his murdered father, King Hamlet, whose death he must avenge.

1) In Context

Shakespeare's plays are timeless, with a universality to which anyone can relate. *Hamlet*, for example, has a modern militaristic feel to its set and costuming, while at the same time it maintains a very medieval sensibility. The same can be said of Shakespeare's other plays: the stories, characters, and conflicts all have 21st-century analogues. Some of the timelessness of Shakespeare's work has to do with the source material for his plays. The tragedy in *Hamlet* may, in part, stem from the deaths of Shakespeare's son and father. In addition, however, the play is said to have come from ancient stories that developed from some common ideas: killing a brother for personal gain, committing adultery, and faking madness as a method for hiding in plain sight. Stories based on the idea of fratricide—the killing of one's brother—for personal gain easily bring to mind the biblical tale of Cain and Abel: these themes have been incorporated into tales for thousands of years. Shakespeare, however, masterfully captured these universal tales and put his unique spin on them. Beyond the Cain and Abel story, the oldest-known source for *Hamlet* is historian Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* ("Deeds of the Danes"; translated into English as *The Danish History*; c. 1185–1202). In this tale, Grammaticus documents long-standing oral legends. And though this is most likely the earliest written source material, scholars speculate that Shakespeare may have relied on a more contemporary work, such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, dating from the 1580s or early 1590s. In addition to the universality of his plays, Shakespeare often draws audiences in and holds their attention through the use of dramatic and situational irony. Dramatic irony happens when audience members are aware of a situation that the play's characters know nothing about. Situational irony involves a situation whose outcome is different from what is expected.

2) Author Biography

William Shakespeare's birthday is traditionally celebrated on April 23, although there are no records of his birth. The closest researchers have is a baptismal record from Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, dated April 26, 1564. His 38 plays were likely written between the late 1580s and 1613. Marriage records show that 18-year-old William married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway in November 1582. The following year, Anne gave birth to the first of their children, Susanna. Twins Judith and Hamnet were born in 1585. Tragically, Hamnet—Shakespeare's only son—died in 1596 at age 11. Critics such as Edward Dowden and Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that events in Shakespeare's life influenced the writing of *Hamlet*. In particular, they point to the deaths of his father in 1601 and of his son, whose name some intimate is an alternate spelling of Hamlet. Whether Shakespeare's grief for his dead father and son found an outlet in the writing of *Hamlet*, one pivotal piece of the drama is very likely based on a historical incident. Claudius's poisoning of King Hamlet by pouring a vial of "cursed hebona" into his ear and

Hamlet's rewrite of *The Murder of Gonzago* both echo the 1538 murder of Italy's Francesco Maria Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino. Marquis Luigi Gonzaga, jealous of the duke's social status, persuaded the duke's barber to kill his employer by dripping poison into his ear. The dramatic nature of the crime helped the story spread throughout Europe and years later gave Shakespeare inspiration for Hamlet's plot. Much of Shakespeare's life was spent in either Stratford or London. His childhood, early married life, and later years were centered in Stratford, but his theatrical life was based in London. By 1592 he had established himself in London and found success as both actor and playwright with the company Lord Strange's Men. During the plague outbreaks that shut down many public theaters, Shakespeare joined a new company, Lord Chamberlain's Men (later called the King's Men). This company was one of two well-known London companies. The group performed primarily at the Globe Theater—often for Queen Elizabeth I and later for King James I. Eventually, Shakespeare would own a share of the theater and would remain with both the company and the theater for the rest of his career. Shakespeare died in April 1616. Some sources list the date as April 23, but others consider that date a guess, romanticized by the idea that he was born and died on the same day. More than four centuries later, his writing remains one of literature's greatest influences—read, performed, referenced, and enjoyed by people of all ages in countries all over the world.

3) Full Characters' List

Hamlet	Hamlet is the grief-stricken protagonist of the play.
Polonius	Polonius is the king's chief counselor and father of Laertes and Ophelia.
Claudius	Claudius is the corrupt brother of King Hamlet who takes the throne after the king's death and marries his former sister-in-law.
Horatio	Horatio is Hamlet's school friend who remains a loyal companion.
Laertes	Laertes is Polonius's son—a strong, active, and noble confidant for Hamlet.
Ophelia	Ophelia is Hamlet's love interest
Gertrude	Gertrude is Hamlet's mother.
The ghost	The ghost is the spirit of King Hamlet.
Barnardo	Barnardo is a castle guard.
The captain	The captain is a member of Fortinbras's troops; Hamlet shares a conversation with him about thoughts and actions.
Cornelius	Cornelius is a courtier sent as ambassador to Norway.
First Player	First Player, a member of the company of players, agrees with Hamlet that they will perform his edited version of <i>The Murder of Gonzago</i> .
Fortinbras	Fortinbras, prince of Norway, is the quick-thinking and passionate foil to Hamlet.
The gravedigger and sexton	The gravedigger and sexton are responsible for digging Ophelia's grave.
Guildestern	Guildestern, a friend of Hamlet, is hired by Claudius to spy on Hamlet.
Marcellus	Marcellus is a castle guard
Osric	Osric is the king's pretentious messenger.
Reynaldo	Reynaldo is a spy sent to monitor Laertes's activities in France.
Rosencrantz	Rosencrantz, a friend of Hamlet, is hired by Claudius to spy on Hamlet.
The sailor	The sailor delivers letters from Hamlet to Horatio and Claudius.
The sexton and gravedigger	The sexton and gravedigger are responsible for digging Ophelia's grave. A sexton is a church official who looks after church property
Voltmand	Voltmand is a courtier sent as ambassador to Norway.

3) Plot Summary

The play opens soon after the death of the king of Denmark. Claudius, the king's brother, has claimed the throne and taken his sister-in-law—Hamlet's mother, Gertrude—as his queen. These events have left Prince Hamlet distraught and grieving. As the story begins, the ghost of King Hamlet appears in Elsinore, Denmark's royal castle. Sentinels who witness the ghost alert Horatio, who, upon seeing the ghost himself, goes to tell his dear friend Hamlet.

Hamlet's world is shaken anew when Horatio tells him that he has seen a ghost resembling his father. When Hamlet joins Horatio (Act 1, Scene 4) and sees the ghost himself, he is terrified. The ghost tells Hamlet that he has been murdered and that Claudius poisoned him. He commands Hamlet to avenge his death but insists that he not harm his mother. Hamlet questions whether the ghost is real, but his mourning is now compounded by rage. Earlier, Hamlet had returned from his studies in Germany after learning of his father's death. Already in mourning, Hamlet is pushed deeper into despair by his mother's hasty second marriage. It is clear from his soliloquy in Act 2 that he is confused that his mother could disregard the sorrow of losing her husband and enter into marriage with his brother.

Meanwhile, Claudius seeks some semblance of normalcy for Denmark. Holding court one afternoon, Claudius draws attention to young Prince Fortinbras of Norway, who is raising an army against Denmark. Fortinbras seeks to avenge the death of his father, who had died in battle against King Hamlet some years before. Claudius does not see the parallel between that young prince and his nephew, nor does he take a note of caution from the situation. Claudius casts a more fatherly eye on Laertes, son of his counselor Polonius, who seeks the king's blessing for his to return to France, which Claudius approves. Claudius next chastises Hamlet for the unseemly way in which he mourns for his father, after which he and Hamlet's mother deny his desire to return to Germany, insisting he stay in Elsinore.

As Laertes prepares to leave for France, he confronts his sister, Ophelia, about her relationship with Prince Hamlet. He warns her not to take Hamlet's affection seriously. Her father, Polonius, overhears; when Laertes has gone, he agrees with his son's advice and orders Ophelia to avoid Hamlet. Heartbroken, Ophelia says she will obey.

Sometime later, Ophelia tells Polonius of a distressing encounter with Prince Hamlet. She says Hamlet came to her looking bewildered. Polonius thinks Hamlet's love for Ophelia is driving him mad and decides he must tell the king and queen of this occurrence.

When Polonius visits the king and queen, they are already meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's childhood friends, in an attempt to figure out Hamlet's strange behavior. Also at hand are Voltmand and Cornelius, the ambassadors Claudius sent to Norway, who are reporting that "Old Norway" has commanded Fortinbras to abandon aggression against Denmark. Fortinbras vows obedience and will turn his attention to Poland. Finally, Polonius relates the story of Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia; he tells the king and queen that he believes Hamlet's love for Ophelia has driven him mad.

Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and becomes suspicious of their presence in Elsinore. When they tell him that a company of players (actors) has arrived, he is excited. Hamlet seeks out the actors and asks them to perform a version of the play *The Murder of Gonzago*. By inserting a scene depicting his father's murder, Hamlet hopes his revised play, *The Mousetrap*, will catch the king in his guilt.

Claudius and Polonius plan to eavesdrop on Ophelia and Hamlet. As they hide nearby, Hamlet comes upon Ophelia and they chat. However, he quickly becomes suspicious of Ophelia's motives when she tries to return gifts he gave her. He rages wildly with sorrow and disappointment and tells Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" before leaving her.

Ophelia is devastated; Claudius and Polonius are shocked. Claudius realizes Hamlet poses a threat to him. He decides to send Hamlet to England to be rid of him. Polonius agrees but suggests one last try: have Gertrude talk with him after the play that evening, and he, Polonius, will eavesdrop on the conversation.

That evening the theater company performs for Claudius's court. As the players reenact the scene of the king being poisoned in the garden—as the ghost told Prince Hamlet—Claudius flies into a panicked rage, halting the play and fleeing the room. Hamlet, with Horatio beside him, takes this as an admission of guilt.

After the play, Claudius meets with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and tasks them with taking Hamlet to England. When they leave to find Hamlet, Claudius admits to King Hamlet's murder in a soliloquy. He attempts to pray, but finds he cannot repent, because he is unwilling to give up the rewards gained from the murder: the throne and his wife. Hamlet passes and sees Claudius on his knees. He thinks how easy it would be to kill his uncle then and there, but decides not to. Hamlet believes that to kill Claudius while he is in prayer would grant him entry to Heaven, which Hamlet does not want.

Hamlet meets with Gertrude in her chambers; Polonius hides nearby. Hamlet confronts Gertrude about her part in King Hamlet's death. When she cries out, Polonius shouts, revealing his presence, but not his identity. Believing that Claudius is hiding there, Hamlet stabs Polonius through the tapestry and kills him. Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius's body with him. The encounter convinces Gertrude that her son is indeed mad.

Gertrude goes to tell Claudius of her meeting with Hamlet and of Polonius's death. Once he is alone, Claudius reveals that Hamlet is also soon to die; the documents he is sending with the ship call for Hamlet's execution.

4) Plot Diagram

Introduction:

1. King Hamlet dies; Claudius takes crown and marries Gertrude.

Rising Action:

2. Hamlet is visited by his father's ghost.
3. Laertes and Polonius warn Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet.
4. The Mousetrap is staged.

Climax:

5. Hamlet kills Polonius and is banished to England.

Falling Action:

6. Claudius and Laertes conspire to kill Hamlet; Ophelia dies.

Resolution:

7. Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet die.

5) Themes

Mortality

For a play that is often depicted by the image of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull in the graveyard scene, it is not surprising that Shakespeare uses mortality as a central theme. It comes across in a number of ways: the ghost of Hamlet's father; Hamlet's contemplation of suicide and Ophelia's suicide; Hamlet's tendency for black dress (at least in the early scenes); the players' performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*; the gravediggers, the grave, and the funeral as well as the skull in the graveyard scene; and the numerous deaths in the play's final scene. But what does Shakespeare say about mortality in his presentation? Primarily, he explores the concept as part of the cycle of life, looking at it from both religious and secular perspectives.

Truth versus Deception

The idea of truth versus deception, which at times is expressed more as reality versus appearance, is prevalent in *Hamlet*. This theme plays out in major ways; the deceitful way by which Claudius came to power underpins the entire play. And it is also developed in smaller ways; the fact that Polonius is willing to spread rumors about Laertes to investigate his behavior in France tells us something about the nature of Polonius's relationships with his children. The play presents many characters who thrive on deceit (Polonius, Claudius), and many situations that evolve out of deceit (Polonius's death when he tries to eavesdrop on Gertrude and Hamlet). Every scene and act contain examples, such as: The presence of the ghost—as a witness to the truth, or as a figment of Hamlet's imagination The presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—and their true mission—in Elsinore Claudius's motivation in bringing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore Claudius's very existence The company of players Hamlet putting on an "antic disposition" .

Thought versus

Action A life of thought versus a life of action is a theme woven throughout the play. Although Hamlet seems like a man of thought through much of the play, by the end he finds balance between the two. This suggests that Shakespeare's final idea on the topic is that the best approach to life strikes a balance between thought and action. From the outset, both Laertes and Fortinbras are foils for Hamlet. Whereas Hamlet initially thinks deeply before any action, Fortinbras seems prone to action before thought. Laertes, like Fortinbras, wants to take immediate steps to avenge his father's death and has none of the doubt that causes Hamlet to delay his revenge against Claudius.

Madness

Madness is a theme explored in Hamlet, particularly as it relates to Hamlet, Ophelia, and maybe even Claudius (if one considers egomania a form of madness). Interestingly, too, madness goes hand-in-hand with truth versus deception because whether Hamlet's madness is real or feigned remains an open question throughout the play.

Revenge

Revenge is a prominent theme in Hamlet and a catalyst to many events in the plot. Several characters seek revenge: The ghost of Hamlet's father wants Hamlet to avenge his death. Laertes wants to avenge both Polonius's and Ophelia's deaths. Fortinbras wants revenge for his father's death and for military losses. Of the characters prominently involved in vengeful action, Fortinbras is the only one who does not die as a direct result. It might be said that Hamlet's death was less a result of his own action (or attempted action) and unavoidable because Claudius and his need to protect his position was the force behind that string of events. It could be argued that Claudius's actions might have resulted in Hamlet's demise regardless of whatever Hamlet decided to do about the ghost's entreaty.

6) Symbols

Yorick's Skull

The most obvious symbol in the play—and perhaps in Shakespeare's entire body of work—Yorick's skull represents mortality. Should the audience have any question about this symbolism, Hamlet explains it to them (and Horatio) when he says, "No matter one's stance in life, we all must face our own mortality."

The Mousetrap

Hamlet, in asking the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* with a few revisions, suggests that he has an understanding and appreciation for the idea of life imitating art. In this particular case, Hamlet is hoping to put that idea to use to catch the conscience of the king.

The Ghost

While the ghost symbolizes decay or evil—"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (Act 1, Scene 4)—it is an ambiguous character. It is not clear whether the ghost is truly the spirit of Hamlet's father, a demon that wants to mislead the prince, or a figment of Hamlet's imagination.

7) Analyse and criticise the following quotations

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

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"To be or not to be, that is the question." — Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1

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"Sith, I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do't." — Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 4

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"The rest is silence." — Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2