

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Hamlet



Year 12: English

THE ELIZABETHAN AGE - ENGLAND

SHAKESPEARE

He first wrote plays according to the habits of his rivals.

Very quickly though he began experimenting with his own technique which included:

- \* tricks of language
- \* clever use or non-use of rhyme
- \* power over the tension of thought in his easy movement through scenes of comedy, pathos, tragedy.
- \* the use of masses of images piled on one another to convey shades and intensities of emotions.
- \* tricks of realistic staging
- \* trying to express the inexpressible!

In fact he is thought to have written thirty-seven plays

COMEDIES

designed for the sophisticated audience of the court and presented with lavish dances and decorative effects. For example - "The Tempest"

The whole range of human life is bordered by these two  
- great types -

TRAGEDIES

developed because of the Elizabethan audiences' like of spectacular scenes and great relish for scenes of sheer horror. For example - "Macbeth"

Whatever genius Shakespeare may have possessed as a psychologist, philosopher, or a poet, he was first of all a man of the theatre, who knew it from the inside and who wrote plays so well-plotted for performance that from his day up to the present, no great actor has been able to resist them.

# Who was Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is generally regarded as the greatest playwright and poet of the English language. His plays and poems were written nearly 400 years ago, and are being produced and read today all over the world. Apart from writing his own plays and poems, Shakespeare was also an actor, a producer, and eventually a theatre-owner and manager. We know very little about his life because no letters or diaries of his survive.

## Shakespeare's Life

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in England, the son of a Stratford glove maker. At about the age of 7, William went to Stratford Grammar School, where he studied Latin, the Bible, Latin literature and English history. The next thing we know is that he married Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was 18. By the time he was 21, they had three children – a daughter called Susanna and then twins, a boy and a girl called Hamnet and Judith. Some years later, William went to London where he became an actor and playwright. He was successful, and he bought a share in the Globe Theatre, the most famous of Elizabethan theatres. Other dramatists resented William because he was successful without ever having had a university education. In about 1613, William retired to Stratford to stay with his family. His son had died when very young, but his daughters were grown up and married. He died aged 52 in 1616.

## The First Folio

Seven years after Shakespeare's death, his fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell published a book containing 36 of his plays. Half of them had never been published before; the other half had been published only in inaccurate copies. So it is largely thanks to this book, called The First Folio, that Shakespeare's plays have been preserved.

## Comedies

A Midsummer Night's Dream  
The Taming of the Shrew  
Twelfth Night

## Tragedies

Hamlet  
Othello  
King Lear  
Macbeth

## Histories

Julius Caesar  
Antony and Cleopatra  
Richard III  
Henry V

## Conventions

There are two conventions or customs which Shakespeare used a lot in his plays. One is the "aside". This is where an actor mutters something which he wants the audience to hear, but which he doesn't want the other actors on stage to hear.

The other convention is the "soliloquy". This is where an actor who is alone on the stage makes a long speech to the audience as though he is talking to himself. This is done so that the audience can see what the character is thinking or feeling. Shakespeare's soliloquies are very famous, and parts of them are often quoted.



Bruce Robinson  
Acting Dean, Faculty of Medicine  
University of Sydney

### Muse behind the headlines

SHAKESPEARE doesn't rate among the most essential elements of a school English curriculum, according to an expert group of academics, teachers and professionals ("Web words weightier than Bard's", 8/2).

Happily, he still rates highly in the media, where newspaper headlines continue to borrow heavily from the Bard's infinite variety. Recent examples include: "All the world's a blog", "Comedy of terrors", "The taming of the shrewd", "The world is their cloister", "Woods by any other name would swing as sweet" and "To plan or not to plan: a dilemma for accountants". Whatever the experts think, Shakespeare remains essential to everyday communication.

Matthew Gibbs  
Leichhardt, NSW

The Weekend Australian 10-11 Feb  
PIX

## The Music of the Spheres

Another popular belief was that the universe was made up of a number of spheres contained within one another. All these spheres were believed to be made of a transparent crystal-like substance called aether.

The outermost sphere, in which all the stars were embedded, was called the firmament. Inside this outer sphere were a number of smaller spheres. They carried the sun, moon and planets. The earth was the centre of the universe.

The spheres were said to make musical sounds as they moved. These sounds were in harmony and showed the harmonious working together of the whole of creation. They were known as the Music of the Spheres.

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings.  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims.

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

## The Divine Right of Kings

As God's chosen representative on earth, the king was the supreme upholder of order on earth. If his position was violated it would destroy the perfect order in the universe and bring chaos to the world. For example, in *Macbeth*, after Duncan is murdered, we are told by the Old Man and Ross that the day became as dark as night, a falcon was killed by an owl and Duncan's horses turned wild and ate each other.

Any act of treason or treachery against the king was considered indirectly to be a mortal sin against God. The penalty was death.

It was believed that:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash the balm from an anointed King.  
The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The deputy elected by the Lord.

Shakespeare, *Richard II*

## Heaven, Earth and Hell

In Shakespeare's day, people believed that heaven was 'up there' and that hell was 'down below'. Theatre buildings of the period reflected this belief. Above the acting area was a canopy decorated with the moon, sun and stars. This was known as the 'Heavens', and down from a trapdoor in the Heavens, gods and angels were lowered to the stage by means of a machine with a winch. The stage itself represented earth. Below the stage was 'Hell', and a trapdoor in the stage floor enabled creatures from hell, such as the witches in *Macbeth* or the ghost in *Hamlet*, to make their appearance.

The Elizabethans believed that life proceeded in an ordered way as long as the laws of nature prevailed.

If something 'unnatural' happened on earth, then this would be reflected both in heaven and hell. Murder was considered unnatural, and therefore in Shakespeare's plays, whenever a murder took place, the heavens would spew forth terrible storms and fearful flashes of lightning, and hell would render up bearded women, ghosts or other 'unnatural' creatures.

The Elizabethans believed that the human body was a microcosm of the world. The same rules applied. A murderer, therefore, would find himself or herself the victim of many kinds of 'unnatural' behaviour. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, after their killing of Duncan, were unable to sleep, make love, eat or drink. Lady Macbeth walked in her sleep, and both of them, in their different ways, went mad. All these things were considered 'unnatural' by the Elizabethan audience.

## Human Nature

In Shakespeare's day, it was popularly believed that the fortunes of everyone and everything were affected by events in heaven. The signs of the Zodiac were important to everyone. What star you were born under would determine what kind of person you were and what sort of life you could expect.

Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare tells us, were 'star-crossed lovers', meaning that they were unable to escape their fate, which was to die young.

There was also a strong belief that everything on earth was made from a combination of the four elements: Earth, Air, Water and Fire. The four elements had their counterparts in the four humours in the human body: Melancholy (making one sad), Blood (making one optimistic), Phlegm (making one quiet) and Choler (making one angry). If any of these humours predominated in the body, they determined the mood of the person. Hence the expressions: *melancholic*, *sanguine*, *phlegmatic* and *choleric*. A balance of the four made for a 'good humour', an imbalance made for an 'ill humour'.

When about to die, Cleopatra says: 'I am fire and air; my other elements I give to baser life'.

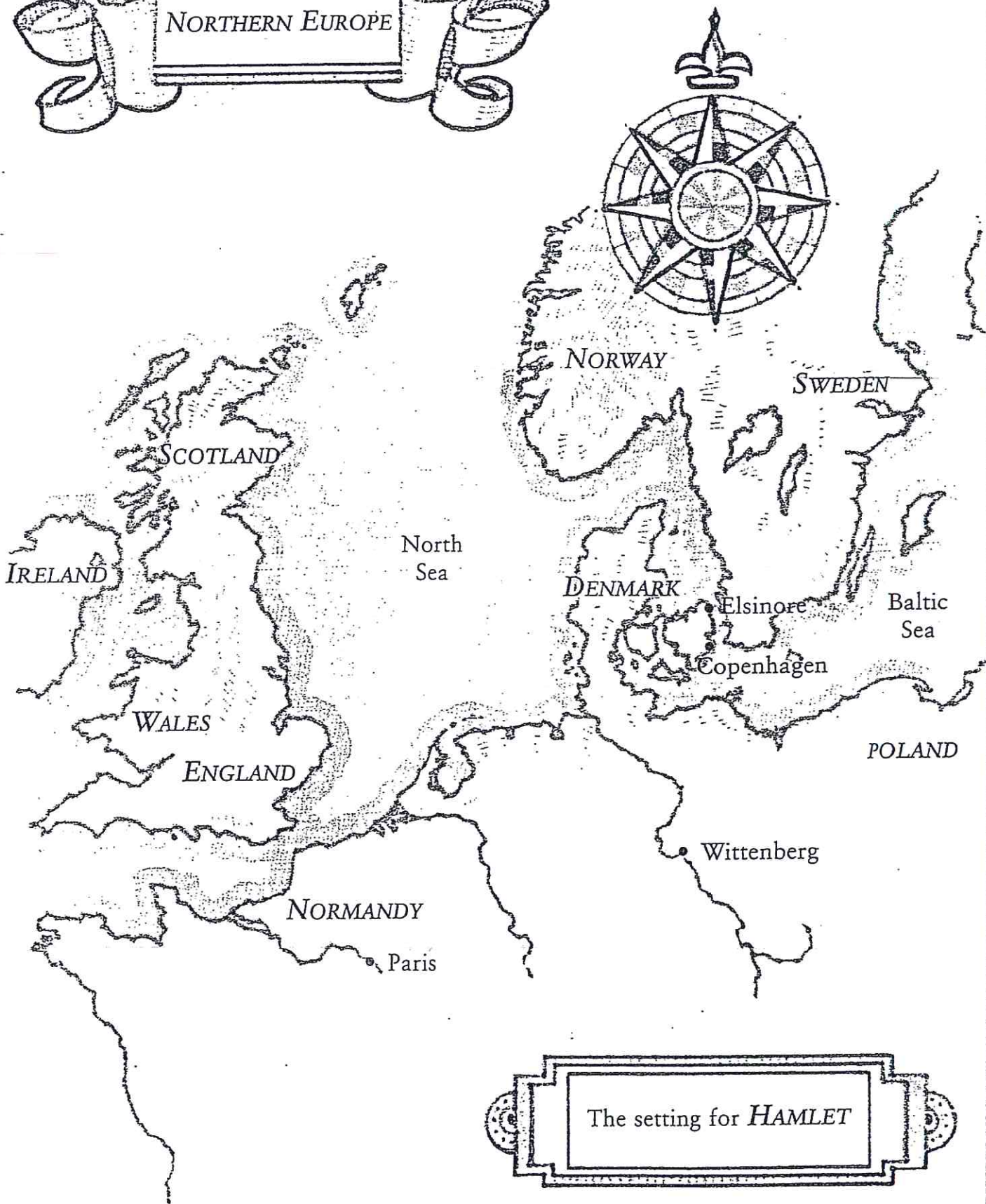


the 4 elements ; the  
4 humours and their  
relation to zodiac  
and man.

## Changes: Science

New discoveries were being made in science. Galileo was the first to study the stars with a telescope. From his observations, it was shown that the world was round.

NORTHERN EUROPE



The setting for *HAMLET*

## *Hamlet -- Plot Synopsis*

After the death of his beloved father King Hamlet, a grief-stricken Prince Hamlet returns home from his studies in Wittenburg to the Danish court at Elsinore. Hamlet senior's brother, Claudius, has assumed the old king's place in more ways than one -- as ruler of Denmark and as a second husband to Gertrude, Hamlet's mother--with less than two months having passed since the king's death. The prince, profoundly disturbed by the shocking speed of these events, struggles to find meaning in his radically altered world.

The old king's ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius and exhorts him to kill Claudius in revenge; Hamlet vows to think of nothing else, but his restless intellect soon plunges him into uncertainty about the rightness of the deed he's sworn to do. He comes up with a plan to act as if he is mad to conceal his true intentions from the new king while he seeks concrete proof of his guilt.

Hamlet had shown a romantic interest in Ophelia, but her father, Polonius, intervened, insisting she reject the prince's attentions. Hamlet's subsequent odd behaviour, especially with Ophelia, leads Polonius to conclude that he has been driven mad for want of her love. Claudius distrusts his step-son and sends to Wittenburg for two of his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoping they will get Hamlet to reveal his true state of mind.

Self-doubting and guilt-ridden about his failure to act on his vow of revenge, Hamlet seizes on the opportunity presented by the visit of a band of traveling players and has them reenact the death of the old king in front of the new. Claudius reacts violently to the play, giving Hamlet his proof and a renewed resolve to act, which he does later that night in his mother's chamber when he mistakes an eavesdropping Polonius for Claudius, killing him.

Hamlet's murderous intentions now revealed, Claudius immediately acts to eliminate him. He sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; a secret letter Hamlet's former friends carry will ensure his speedy execution by that country's king. But Hamlet outsmarts his enemies and makes his way back to Denmark, only to find that Ophelia, driven mad by his rejection and her father's murder, has drowned under circumstances that suggest suicide. Laertes, her brother, returns from university in Paris for her funeral. He vows vengeance against Hamlet for the deaths of his father and sister.

Claudius and Laertes plot together against Hamlet, making arrangements for a duel between the young men that isn't what it appears to be: both Laertes's sword and a cup of wine to be offered by the king are poisoned. Hamlet is cut by Laertes' s poisoned sword, but winds up exchanging his own sword for it as the duel progresses. Queen Gertrude accidentally drinks the poisoned wine and dies. Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword; he reveals the plot and forgives Hamlet for the death of Polonius before he dies. In his last few moments of life Hamlet kills Claudius. Fortinbras, the valiant prince of Norway, is Hamlet's chosen successor to the Danish throne.

## *Hamlet -- Characters* (page 2 of 2)

### **Major Characters: The Younger Generation** (continued)

**Ophelia:** Polonius' young, beautiful, and emotionally vulnerable daughter, sister to Laertes and Hamlet's love interest until he ruthlessly rejects her. Dutiful and obedient, Ophelia passively accepts her father's and brother's commands to reject Hamlet's advances. She allows herself to be used as bait in the trap Polonius lays to spy on Hamlet. Her madness and subsequent death fuel her brother's desire to take revenge on Hamlet.

**Laertes:** Son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia. Laertes' rash and action-oriented approach to seeking revenge against Hamlet in the last acts of the play contrasts sharply with Hamlet's brooding hesitancy over killing Claudius. In this way Laertes is a far more typical revenge tragedy figure than Hamlet.

**Fortinbras:** The young prince of Norway. His father, King Fortinbras, was slain by Hamlet's father in one-on-one combat on the day Hamlet was born. His fate is parallel to Hamlet's in that both have had their rightful place on the throne of their respective countries usurped by uncles. A military man of action whose name means "strength in arms," Fortinbras responds to his fate by raising an army and marching off to do battle. He becomes Hamlet's chosen successor to the Danish throne in the final scene of the play.\*

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:** Former university friends of Hamlet who are brought to Elsinore by Claudius to try to find out the true cause of Hamlet's apparent madness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pawns in a deadly game of political intrigue and revenge that they never fully comprehend.

### **Minor Characters**

**Reynaldo:** servant to Polonius sent by him to spy on Laertes at school in Paris

**Marcellus and Barnardo:** officers of the watch who first see the Ghost

**Francisco, Cornelius:** ambassadors to Norway who divert young Fortinbras impending attack through diplomacy and negotiation

**Osrice, Lords, Gentlemen:** courtiers at Elsinore castle

**A Troupe of Players:** actors whose performance at court Hamlet uses to prove to himself Claudius's guilt

**First Clown, a gravedigger, and Second Clown, his assistant:** men who, unbeknownst to Hamlet, are digging a grave for Ophelia

**Captain in the Norwegian army:** tells Hamlet of Fortinbras valour

**Sailor**

**Messenger**

**Priest**

**English Ambassador**

**Lords, Attendants, Sailors, Soldiers, Guards**

\*Fortinbras' appearance in the final moments of the play was cut in film versions directed by Laurence Olivier (1948) and Franco Zeffirelli (1991). This gives Horatio the last word and makes it unclear who will rule over Denmark. Why do you think a director might want to take Fortinbras out of the picture at the end of the play?



## *Hamlet* – Themes (page 2 of 2)

### **Madness and Melancholy**

*“I am but mad north-north-west.”* Hamlet, II.2.347

Elizabethans found the wild and unpredictable behaviour of the insane entertaining both onstage and off. The infamous asylum St. Mary of Bethlehem (known as Bedlam for short) opened its doors so people in search of a diverting spectacle could pay to view the inmates. Many plays written at this time feature characters whose madness makes it possible for them to say and do outlandish things not normally permitted in polite society.

Hamlet’s “antic disposition” -- his make-believe madness -- is a pose he hides behind while he contemplates his revenge. But his actual state of mind seems terribly unstable at several points throughout the play and it is difficult to know for certain whether or not he ever actually slips over the edge into genuine madness. In a production the actor and director working together would have to make a decision about the extent of Hamlet’s madness. Hamlet does display the classic symptoms of another kind of mental disorder: melancholy, a pessimistic and cynical mindset, a tendency to ruthless self-criticism, depressed mood and persistent thoughts of suicide.

Ophelia’s madness in Act IV, scene 5 is indisputable. Having been given more than she can cope with when her father is murdered by the man she loves, she really does lose touch with reality. Her mad ravings suggest the deeper preoccupations that have claimed her mind: the death of a loved one and the utter thwarting of her longing to have her love for Hamlet returned. While Hamlet merely talks about taking his own life, Ophelia actually does allow her own to slip away while in the grip of the madness to which his actions have driven her.

### **Random Fortune or Divine Master Plan?**

*“There is a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will --”* Hamlet, V.2.10-11

Overwhelmed by his own grief and the apparent triumph of good over evil in this world, Hamlet, for much of the play, feels like a victim of a random, indifferent universe ruled by the whims of fortune. All human actions seem meaningless in a world governed by the perpetual, externally imposed cycle of successes and failures symbolized by the image of the goddess Fortune’s turning wheel in II.2. But Hamlet undergoes a spiritual journey during the course of the play; in Act V he confides in Horatio his belief in the existence of a divine order underlying events in the world, even *“the fall of a sparrow”* (V.2.215). He can accept the necessity of killing Claudius, finally, when he can believe he is acting as the instrument of a divine justice at work in the world, not in senseless and brutal retaliation. Whether Shakespeare himself shared this essentially Christian vision of human destiny is the matter of ongoing critical debate.

## *Hamlet -- Scenes to Explore* (page 1 of 2)

### **1. Advice to the Players**

Divide your class into pairs or small groups and assign each a section of the text from the page herein titled **Hamlet's Advice to the Players**. This passage makes an excellent introduction to a lesson on different acting styles and techniques popular in Shakespeare's time. Have each group:

- a) put the text they have into their own words;
- b) suit actions to the words -- work out a gesture or two for their section of text; practice speaking the original text and performing the gesture in unison for in-class presentation;
- c) work out a list of the acting faults Hamlet finds particularly obnoxious and prepare a short scene in the style of an instructional video which illustrates each one;
- d) get a second opinion -- think about the different people who would have heard and responded to this passage when it was first performed onstage in 1600. Work out a scene that demonstrates the plausible reactions of each of the following potential listeners: the players to whom Hamlet is speaking onstage; the groundlings in the audience; the other actors in the show hanging out backstage, including Shakespeare himself lounging around in his ghost costume.

*NB: Heckling, mimicry, and the throwing of small soft objects may be called for.*

### **2. "Get Thee to a Nunnery"**

The true nature of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is a riddle each successive generation of actors, directors, and critics who work with the play must answer. An in-depth study of the nunnery scene (III.3.8-155) will go a long way to helping your students understand the complexity of the choices that need to be made before a solid interpretation of the relationship can be developed. Approaches to consider include:

- a) **Staging.** Claudius and Polonius have intentionally thrown Ophelia into Hamlet's path in this scene and are spying on them as they interact throughout. While there is no indication of it in the text, many directors and actors have played the scene so that it is clear to the audience that Hamlet realizes he is being spied upon at some point. At what point would it make sense for this to occur? What effect would it have on your understanding of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia? What happens if the scene is played in a way that makes it obvious that Ophelia knows that Hamlet knows?
- b) **Motivation.** Why do the characters behave as they do in this scene? Is Ophelia a willing accomplice of her father and Claudius, concerned for Hamlet's sanity and the safety of those around him? Or is she the reluctant betrayer of the man she passionately loves, driven to act against her own wishes by her own fear and sense of duty? And what about Hamlet? Does he love the woman he so cruelly berates in this scene? What motivates his behaviour?

HAMLET

ACT I Scene I

- 1. Write a paragraph on Act I Scene I explaining its total impact and what is learned by the audience.

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- 2. Horatio is a rather down-to-earth and practical man. Which words indicate this?

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ACT I Scene II

- 3. How does Shakespeare emphasise the difference between the moods of Hamlet and the rest of the court? Note the pun made by Hamlet. He is very bitter here but he also enjoys playing with words.

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- 4. How is it shown that Claudius has some of the qualities of kingship?

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9. What is your impression of Ophelia in Act I Scene III?

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**ACT I Scene IV and V**

10. Study Hamlet's words in Scene IV from line 23 to line 38. Summarise the main idea. This is the first of his reflections on the nature of man.

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11. Write a short paragraph describing the total affect on Hamlet of his father's ghost (and what he says).

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12. What is Hamlet's predicament at this stage of the play?

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Scene II

4. The themes of deception and suspicion are further developed but Claudius's purpose is deeply serious as he is possibly feeling guilty and he surely fears that Hamlet may constitute a danger to him.

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5. Explain the irony of Polonius's lines: "Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit" and the irony of lines ~~90 to 100~~ - 90 to 100.

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6. What evidence is there that Hamlet is only pretending to be mad? Why has he chosen to behave in this manner?

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7. Re-read Hamlet's speech beginning: "I will tell you why" (Line 287) He seems deeply sincere here. What does this speech indicate of his real state of mind?

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# HAMLET'S FOURTH SOLILOQUY

16

HAMLET

To be, or not to be<sup>18</sup> - that is the  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and            of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms<sup>19</sup> against a            of troubles,  
60 And by opposing end them? - To die - to sleep -  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The            and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to;<sup>20</sup> 'tis a consummation<sup>21</sup>  
Devoutly to be wished. To die - to sleep -  
65 To sleep! perchance to            . Ay, there's the rub;<sup>22</sup>  
For in that sleep of death what            may come,  
When we have shuffled<sup>23</sup> off this mortal  
Must give us pause.<sup>24</sup> There's the respect<sup>25</sup>  
That makes calamity of so long  
70 For who would bear the whips and scorns<sup>26</sup> of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,<sup>27</sup>  
The pangs of déspised            the law's delay,  
The insolence of office,<sup>28</sup> and the spurns<sup>29</sup>  
The patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
75 When he himself might his quietus<sup>30</sup> make  
With a bare bodkin?<sup>31</sup> Who would fardels<sup>32</sup> bear,  
To grunt and            under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn<sup>33</sup>  
No traveller returns - puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those            we have  
Than to fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus            does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue<sup>35</sup> of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment,  
With this regard,<sup>36</sup> their currents turn  
And lost the name of action. (*He sees Ophelia praying*) -  
Soft you now!  
The fair            -  
(*To Ophelia*) Nymph, in thy orisons<sup>38</sup>  
Be all my sins remembered.

1. What the dominant feelings in this soliloquy?
2. Essentially, what is Hamlet contemplating?
3. What does Hamlet suggest are the reasons for not committing suicide?
4. What are the very real problems causing Hamlet such anguish?

## ACT TWO CONSIDERATIONS

### ACT TWO Scene 1

- Imagine you are Reynaldo, in Paris, and conversing with a Dane about Laertes' activities. Write a dialogue in which you follow Polonius' instructions.
- Ophelia describes in detail Hamlet's appearance and actions. The details in this description would convince an Elizabethan audience that Hamlet is mad. Reword Ophelia's description in such a way as to convince a modern audience that Hamlet is mad.

### ACT TWO Scene 2

- Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius all have differing opinions on the source of Hamlet's madness. What are they?
- Assume you were present when Polonius presented his theory to the King. How would you describe Polonius' character to a friend or family member?
- Read the First Player's speech carefully. Outline what it has in common in terms of characters and situations with what has transpired in the Danish court.

## ACT III

1. In his famous soliloquy in Scene 2, Hamlet contemplates suicide. Why do you think he rejects the idea?
2. Is it ever acceptable to commit an act that might be thought of as "wrong" or "evil" to correct or prevent a larger evil? Explain.
3. Do you think that Gertrude is innocent of any involvement in her husband's murderous plot? Explain.
4. Do you think the "play within the play" involves Hamlet in the same kind of intrigue and falseness that he condemns in others? Explain.

## ACT THREE CONSIDERATIONS

### ACT THREE Scene 1

- Do you think Claudius and Polonius overhear Hamlet's famous soliloquy? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having them hear his speech?
- The "To be, or not to be" speech is often parodied. Write your own version of the speech. It can be either a parody or a modern-day translation. Read Prince Charles' attempt at modernising the speech before starting this activity.

### ACT THREE Scene 2

- It has been said that "Hamlet is the only one of Shakespeare's characters who could have written the plays of his creator." What evidence is there in this scene that Hamlet deserves this praise?
- According to Hamlet, what are the characteristics of a true friend? To what extent do you agree with him?
- Read the short story *At the Court of King Claudius*. What new insights does this story offer in regard to this scene?

### ACT THREE Scene 3

- Rosencrantz uses a metaphor to express a subject's duty to one's king. Explain the metaphor. Can you think of another metaphor that would work as well in explaining the importance of the king's well-being?
- Why exactly does Claudius believe that he cannot be forgiven for his crimes? If you were a counsellor, what advice would you give Claudius?

**ACT FOUR Scene 7**

- ▶ We learn the contents of the letter Hamlet sends to the King but not of the letter he sends to the Queen. Write the letter that Hamlet would send his mother. It need not be much longer than the one he sends Claudius.
- ▶ This scene continues to develop a contrast between Hamlet and Laertes. What positive characteristics of Hamlet's are indirectly emphasised in this scene?
- ▶ Gertrude, in describing Ophelia's death, provides some very specific details. It is as if there were an eyewitness to the event. How would she have been able to acquire this information?

**ACT V**

1. How has Hamlet's mood changed in Act V? What do you think has caused this change?
2. Do you believe that the major characters get what they deserve? Are they the victims of fate, or do they bring their fates on themselves? Explain.
3. Should this play end with Hamlet's death? Why or why not?

**ACT FIVE CONSIDERATIONS****ACT FIVE Scene 1**

- ▶ Why does Shakespeare include the Grave-digger scene? What effect does it have on the reader/audience?
- ▶ We are told that Hamlet was born on the same day that his father defeated the King of Norway. Write a newspaper account dealing with the events of this auspicious day.
- ▶ Write an appropriate eulogy for Ophelia's funeral. In doing so, adopt the point of view of a specific character such as Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, or Claudius.
- ▶ Why does Hamlet jump into the grave with Laertes? Write the dialogue for a scene in which Hamlet explains to Horatio his actions at the gravesite.

**ACT FIVE Scene 2**

- ▶ Does Hamlet, as he claimed in the previous scene, love Ophelia? What evidence is there in this scene that perhaps he doesn't?
- ▶ Why is Hamlet so willing to win for Claudius? Why does he trust Claudius and Laertes when he was so careful about not trusting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
- ▶ Write a news report of the events in the second half of this scene.
- ▶ Write an obituary for at least one of the characters who dies at the end of this scene.



## HAMLET

by William Shakespeare

### CHARACTER OF HAMLET

#### Hamlet's Inability to Act

Hamlet is a procrastinator; he cannot carry out his 'cause' to avenge his father's death.

We can discover Hamlet's irresolution in two ways:

- (a) study the action of the play
- (b) look carefully at his soliloquies (his psychological analysis of himself)

#### A. How Hamlet's irresolution is exhibited in the action of the play:

- (i) He does not act immediately after receiving the Ghost's commands. His madness was not assumed with any view to furthering his revenge but seems to have been assumed with a view to concealing the intensity of his thoughts (of revenge) after seeing the Ghost.
- (ii) He allows two months to pass without taking any steps to compass his object.
- (iii) He neglects his opportunity of killing the king while at prayer. His excuse that he would merely be doing the king a favour by despatching him to heaven is obviously rationalisation on Hamlet's part.
- (iv) He trusts rather to the firmer character of Horatio than to his own to watch the effect of the play upon the king. Of course, he congratulates himself on the success of his strategem, but then takes **no action**.
- (v) He allows himself to be sent to England away from the object of his revenge.
- (vi) The promptings of his heart bid him refuse to fight with Laertes (V. 11, 21) but he will not listen to the advice of Horatio and postpone the duel.
- (vii) The play within the play seems nothing more than rationalisation on Hamlet's part. He seems merely to be deluding himself that he needs further proof of the king's guilt to excuse his own lack of action.

**NOTE:** Hamlet, however, is capable of action when he is heated. eg.

- i) he kills Polonius
- ii) he can make a rash promise to the Ghost
- iii) he chides his mother ruthlessly
- iv) he abuses Ophelia after he discovers Claudius and Polonius spying on his conversation with her
- v) he attacks Laertes at Ophelia's funeral
- vi) he kills Laertes and the king in the last Act
- vii) he coldly despatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in England after the Pirate incident.

(A) His intelligence -Evidence -

- (i) he is a university student when his father dies.
- (ii) he seems capable of deep thinking – eg. the self-analysis in his soliloquies
- (iii) he is capable of tremendous sarcasm. eg.
  - (a) towards Polonius
  - (b) towards Claudius and Gertrude
  - (c) towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
  - (d) towards Ophelia
  - (e) towards king's messenger
  - (f) towards himself (soliloquies)

Cutting sarcasm usually infers that the user is intelligent.

- (iv) he has an abundant knowledge of WORDS. eg. scene with Polonius in which he makes a fool of him; his constant use of bawdy and bestial metaphors; his rehashing of the script of the play within the play.
- (v) he is an avid reader
- (vi) he has a good knowledge of plays and of acting
- (vii) his formulation of the play within the play idea

Effect of Intelligence – As he says repeatedly in the play (and especially in his soliloquies), he is too prone to think rather than act. He subjugates his passion to his rationale constantly (c.f. the prayer scene) and this is the main contributory factor to his procrastination.

(B) His Religious BeliefsEvidence

- (i) Hamlet's unqualified acceptance of the Ghost's story that he is confined to purgatory until his murder is revenged.
- (ii) Hamlet's acceptance of his mother's marriage to her dead husband's brother as INCEST.
- (iii) Hamlet's concern that if Ophelia has committed suicide, her soul would not pass on to Heaven.
- (iv) Hamlet spares Claudius in the Prayer scene because he believes he would merely do the king the favour of despatching his soul straight to heaven. (doctrine of ablution by confession.)
- (v) Hamlet's disdain for the 'wild life' carried on by fellow students at Wittenberg and by Laertes. He seems to accept the doctrine of pre-marital chastity.

Conclusion

Hamlet seems to accept without question the doctrines of the Catholic Church at that time. The Church taught that –

- (i) Murdered souls would not go to heaven until their murder was avenged.
- (ii) The marriage of a woman and her brother-in-law constituted incest.
- (iii) That confession of sins before death would ensure ablution of the soul. Therefore a favourable credit-balance would mean everlasting life in heaven.
- (iv) Chastity before marriage was not only desirable but a necessity.

Note: Although Hamlet was capable of a deep love for his father (and presumably, mother, before his father's murder) yet his relationship with Ophelia seems far from passionate. His love for her seems quite restrained at least.

### Conclusion

Hamlet's intellect does not, in his personality, seem to have been any more important than his emotional depth. Yet, when it came to acting out his designated role (that of the avenger) his intelligence seems to have predominated.

Subsequently, I think we must ask ourselves two questions –

- (i) Was Hamlet really two people? Did he have a dual personality?
- (ii) Is Hamlet really so unusual?

Hamlet seems not to have been able to act because of his tendency to think too much and because of his very definite religious scruples. Yet, when he got heated, when the passionate side of his nature took the upper hand, he could act swiftly and effectively. In fact, he showed no remorse for what had been the result.

I think Hamlet's predicament evolved from the problem of compromising the three significant strains of his personality (his religious attitudes, his intelligence, and his passion). Because of conditioning, probably in early childhood, it had been natural for him to allow the intellectual and ethical side of his nature to predominate; and the passionate side only expressed itself in times of great stress. This, to me, makes Hamlet a very human tragic hero.

### WHO IS HAMLET CONTRASTED WITH?

Shakespeare, in his plays, gives us pointers to help formulate some viable character analysis of the hero –

- (a) What he says about himself (especially soliloquies).
- (b) The action of the play – how he reacts in certain situations.
- (c) What other actors say about him.
- (d) How his character compares with those of others in the play.

We can see Hamlet better through contrasting him, especially with –

- (a) Laertes
  - (i) determined in the attainment of his object
  - (ii) impetuous
  - (iii) addicted to pleasure and wildness
  - (iv) passionate love of sister
  - (v) choleric rather than melancholy
- (b) Horatio
  - (i) perfect calmness of mind and equanimity of temperament
- (c) Claudius
  - (i) hypocritical
  - (ii) a crafty double-minded schemer
  - (iii) coarse minded
  - (iv) vicious

### Other features –

- (i) Usually a complicated group of characters all in some way related (through marriage, family, or political ties).
- (ii) Tremendous amount of political intrigue – results in intensity.
- (iii) Tremendous amount of good old bloodshed.
- (iv) Tremendous audience sympathy for hero (the avenger).
- (v) bawdiness, bestial references and poison predominate in imagery used.
- (vi) usually set in city-states of Renaissance Italy.

You should be able to see quite easily parallels with 'Hamlet'.

### IMAGERY IN 'HAMLET'

In general, the types of imagery which pervade 'Hamlet' textually are:

- (i) supernatural
- (ii) bawdy or sexual
- (iii) bestial
- (iv) to do with poison (including references to 'snakes' 'weeds' etc.)
- (v) disease

Early in the play, remarks that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark.

The imagery tends, throughout the play, to relate back to this thematic promise ie. the images tend to lend strength to the statement, to prove that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark.

- (i) Supernatural Imagery
  - (a) An unusually quiet night when the play opens and the reference to the fact that some mysterious things have been happening since the death of Hamlet's father. This is supposed to highlight the fact that the natural balance of things (according to Elizabethan philosophy) has been upset by the murder of the king.
  - (b) The Ghost (who stands, of course, for the interference of the supernatural with ordinary human affairs).
- (ii) Bawdiness in Imagery  
Seems to be used to highlight the disgusting circumstances of the murder and the hasty marriage. Hamlet makes constant references to whores and the aesthetic repulsiveness of copulation.

References are also made to homosexuality and bestiality, and Hamlet seems to compare bestiality (surely the lowest form of sexual behaviour) with incest (the relationship of his mother and uncle).

# TRAGEDY

Several of Shakespeare's plays are called 'Tragedies', and *Macbeth* is one of them. The notion of a tragedy began with the plays of Ancient Greece and has been used and re-interpreted throughout the history of literature. In Shakespeare's day, there were particular elements common to each of these plays.

## A TRAGEDY

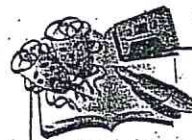
- A play that ends with the death of the central character
- A play that deals with universal and serious themes
- A play which signals to the audience that the final outcome is inevitable

## A HERO

- A central character
- A character with admirable qualities
- A person with whom the audience can identify, who is human
- A person who influences others and has power



- Discuss in what ways the play *Macbeth* fits the definition of 'Tragedy'.



- In groups of three, prepare ideas to support the argument that Banquo and Lady Macbeth could also be called 'heroes', as well as Macbeth. Each of you will put forward the argument for one character.

## A TRAGIC HERO

- A hero whose status means that his downfall will be significant, affecting many people
- A hero whose suffering reveals essential truths about humanity
- A hero whose greatness of character and talent are tragically wasted through circumstance
- A hero whose personality contains a 'tragic flaw': a fatal weakness which leads to destruction
- A hero who finds some degree of release and resignation when facing death



- Use these characteristics to assess the character and role of Macbeth in the play. Write them in the centre of a large piece of paper and surround them with examples from the text that support his role as tragic hero.

- Who would you name as the tragic heroes of the 20th century? You might think about people in: the news, sport, politics or religion... or fictional characters from books, plays, films, television, soap operas...

Now you have studied the way Macbeth's character is revealed, could he, in your opinion, be called a 'tragic hero'?

SUBSTANCE OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

1. Though tragedy presents a considerable number of people, it is eminently the story of one person, the "hero", or at most of two the hero and the heroine.
2. The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero. Tragedy is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity leading to death.
3. The suffering and calamity are, moreover, exceptional. They befall a conspicuous person. They are themselves of some striking kind. They are also, as a rule, unexpected and contrasted with previous happiness and glory.
4. Such exceptional suffering and calamity, affecting the hero and generally extending far and wide beyond him, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe, are essential ingredients in tragedy, and the chief source of the tragic emotions, especially of pity.
5. Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of high degree, often with kings or princes; if not, with leaders in the state. The story of the prince, the triumvir or the general has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height or earthly greatness, to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, or the powerlessness of a man, and of the omnipotence of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival.
6. The calamity of tragedy does not simply happen (chance) nor is it sent (supernatural); it proceeds mainly from actions, and these actions of men. This series of interconnected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe. The effect of such series on the imagination is to make us regard the sufferings accompany it, and the catastrophe in which it ends, not only or chiefly as something, which happens to the persons concerned, but equally as something which is caused by them. This may at least be said of the principal persons, and, among them, of the hero, who always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes. the centre of tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action. Saying that character is destiny is therefore an exaggeration, but the exaggeration of a vital truth.
7. Additional factors to characteristics, deeds, etc.
  - (a) Shakespeare occasionally represented abnormal conditions of mind-insanity, connambulism, hallucinations. And deeds issuing from these are certainly not deeds in the fullest sense, ie. deeds expressive of character. But these abnormal conditions are never introduced as the origin of deeds of any dramatic moment.
  - (b) Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural into some of his tragedies - ghosts, witches. This supernatural element certainly cannot, in most cases, if in any, be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. Furthermore, it does contribute to the action and is, in more than one instance, an indispensable part of it. But the supernatural is always placed in closest relation with character. It gives confirmation and distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence, eg. a sense of failure in Brutus. Moreover, its influence is never of a compulsive kind. It forms no more than an element, however important, in the problem which the hero has to face, and we are never allowed to feel that it has removed his capacity or responsibility for dealing with the problem.
  - (c) Shakespeare, lastly, in most of his tragedies, allows to 'chance' or 'accident' appreciable influence at some point in the action. Chance or accident here means any occurrence (not supernatural) which enters the dramatic sequence neither from the agency of a character nor from the

# HAMLET'S SOLILOQUIES

	First Soliloquy	Second Soliloquy	Third Soliloquy	Fourth Soliloquy	Fifth Soliloquy	Sixth Soliloquy
Comparison						
Act and Scene						
Setting						
Preceding Event/s prompting outburst						
Subject Include quotations						

# HAMLET CHARACTER TABLE

Criteria	Ophelia	Getrude
Age, Physical Appearance, Status in Denmark, Education		
Relationships with family and key scenes for revelation		
Qualities of character and key scenes for revelation		
Development/Change as response to key events		
Role in play - foil, themes, tragedy		