



Introduction to the Play

Background to *Hamlet*

Hamlet has long been thought to be one of the most important plays ever written in English. The story of Hamlet comes from Norse legend. The story is based on a Danish nobleman who took revenge after his uncle killed his father and married his mother. The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus wrote the story in the 12th century, but it is believed to be much older. In Saxo's version, Amleth (Hamlet) pretends to be crazy after his father is murdered. He is upset by his mother's attachment to his uncle, and he confronts her in private, during which he kills a hidden spy. He is then sent away to England, and returns to Denmark, called Jutland, by switching the order for his death with those of his escorts, so that they are killed instead of Amleth. The story of Amleth was also retold by the French writer François Belleforest in 1580. In Belleforest's retelling of this tragedy, he names the main character Hamblet, Prince of Danemarke. In this version, Hamblet is cunning and decisive in his revenge.

In addition to these sources, Shakespeare is said to have been influenced by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, a revenge play. The revenge play was a popular type of drama in Shakespeare's era. In this kind of drama, the main character carries out a bloody revenge, which usually costs his own life. Like Hamlet, the main character in Kyd's revenge play is upset with himself for his inability to carry out the revenge right away. Also, like *Hamlet*, *The Spanish Tragedy* contains a play within a play,

a woman who becomes insane and commits suicide, and a ghost who demands that the main character avenge a murder. However, Kyd's version is more graphic and sensational than Shakespeare's play as the focus is on the revenge and its bloody consequences rather than on the character's thoughts and characterization.

In order to understand Shakespeare's characterization of Hamlet, one must know something of the psychology and philosophy of his day. A typical Englishman of Shakespeare's time believed that reality consisted of a combination of four main elements: air, water, fire, and earth. Each human being was also composed of these four elements, and to be physically and psychologically healthy meant that these elements were in balance. Imbalances of the elements resulted in imbalanced personalities. A person over-balanced by air was said to be of a sanguine temperament—light, happy, and carefree. If a person was overbalanced by water, it was said that person was phlegmatic—slow of movement and speech and often seen as lazy and self-indulgent. If a person was overbalanced by fire, the person was choleric—easily angered but quick to end any conflict. In Hamlet's case, because he was overbalanced by earth, he was melancholy. It was a temperament of thoughtful sadness, often resulting in someone who was stubborn and suspicious. It is easy to see how Shakespeare gave Hamlet actions to show his melancholy temperament.

Act three, Scene 4

Polonius hides behind the curtains as soon as he hears Hamlet coming to Gertrude's room. Hamlet arrives and begins to reprove his mother's behavior in a way that makes her afraid. She cries for help, and when Polonius seeks to help her, Hamlet stabs at the curtains because he thinks the figure is Claudius. Hamlet is unfazed that he has killed Polonius and continues to harangue his mother for marrying Claudius. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears and tells Hamlet to focus on the revenge and not to focus on his mother. Seeing Hamlet speak with an invisible ghost, Gertrude is even more convinced that Hamlet is insane. He asks his mother to stop sleeping with Claudius. Hamlet leaves the room, dragging the body of Polonius with him.

Act four, Scene 1

Now convinced that Hamlet is mad, Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius. Claudius is upset by this news and asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet.

Act four, Scene 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to discover where Hamlet has hidden the body of Polonius. They speak to Hamlet, and he answers them in crazy riddles but manages to call them the sponges of the King, soaking up the favor of Claudius.

Act four, Scene 3

Hamlet refuses to tell his uncle where the body of Polonius is. He speaks to Claudius as if he were mad. Claudius tells Hamlet that he will have to go into exile to England for his own safety. Hamlet agrees to go. After Hamlet leaves, Claudius reveals that he will ask the king of England to kill Hamlet.

Act four, Scene 4

Hamlet finds Fortinbras on his way to attack Poland. Hamlet realizes that the land Fortinbras is seeking has no value and that the army of Fortinbras is ready to die for "an eggshell." In contrast, he is unable to complete the revenge that the ghost of his father has asked him to carry out. Upset with himself, he vows to carry out his task.

Act four, Scene 5

Ophelia enters, insane because of the death of her father and the exile of Hamlet. Ophelia distractedly sings love songs and then exits the stage. Laertes enters and is angry about the death of his father and that he was buried quickly without any honors. When Ophelia enters, obviously mad, Laertes vows to punish whoever caused his father's death.

Act four, Scene 6

Horatio reads a letter from Hamlet about his voyage to England. The ship was taken over by pirates, but Hamlet was spared because he was the Prince of Denmark and could offer them some favors when he returns to Denmark.

Selected Glossary of Stage Directions in Shakespeare's Plays

Above: an indication that the actor speaking from above is on a higher balcony or other scaffold that is higher than the other actors

Alarum: a stage signal, which calls the soldiers to battle; usually trumpets, drums, and shouts

Aside: words spoken by the actor so the audience overhears but the other actors on the stage do not. An aside may also be spoken to one other actor so that the others on stage do not overhear.

Calls within: a voice offstage that calls to a character on the stage

Curtains: Curtains were fabrics draped around a bed that could be opened or closed for privacy.

Draw: Actors pull their swords from their sheathes.

Enter: a direction for a character to enter the stage. This can be from the audience's right (stage right) or the audience's left (stage left).

Enter Chorus: a direction for an actor to come to the center of the stage and offer some introductory comments, usually in blank verse or

rhyiming couplets. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus delivers a sonnet, a form of poetry associated with love.

Exeunt: All characters leave the stage, or those characters named leave the stage.

Exit: One character leaves the stage.

Flourish: A group of trumpets or other horn instruments play a brief melody.

Have at: Characters begin to fight, usually with swords.

Pageant: a show or spectacle of actors in unusual costumes, usually without words

Prologue: an introduction spoken by the Chorus that gives an overview to the audience and invites them into the play or scene

Retires: A character slips away.

Sennet: a series of notes sounded on brass instruments to announce the approach or departure of a procession

Singing: a signal for the actor to sing the following lines as a tune

Within: voices or sounds occurring offstage but heard by the audience

Clothing in Shakespeare's time was very expensive. Of course, servants and other lower-class people wore simple garb, often a basic blue. But if a person wanted to display his wealth, his clothing was elaborate and colorful, sewn with rich velvet, lace, and gold braid. An average worker might earn seven or eight English pounds in a year, and a very nice outfit for a nobleman might cost as much as 50 or 60 pounds. In other words, if seven or eight healthy workers pooled their money for the entire year, spending nothing else, they could buy only one respectable nobleman's outfit.

Entertainment was an important part of life in Shakespeare's England. Popular sports were bear-baiting, cockfighting, and an early form of bowling. Bear-baiting, in which a dog was set loose to fight with up to three chained bears in the center of an amphitheater, and cockfighting, in which roosters pecked each other to death, were popular then but would be absolutely unacceptable entertainment today.

Bowling, however, has maintained its popularity in our current culture.

In London, a main source of entertainment was the theater. Some theaters were very large and could hold more than two thousand people. Even poor people could attend the theater since entrance cost only one penny (equivalent to 60 cents today), and they could stand around the stage. For a bit more money, a person could sit in an actual seat during the performance. However, some thought that going to the theater could be dangerous to your body or your soul. The theaters were closed twice during the plagues to reduce the spread of the disease. The Puritans disapproved of the theater as an unwholesome leisure time activity. And the Puritans also disliked the theater because the theaters were located in an area of London surrounded by brothels and bars. Nevertheless, the theater became respectable enough by 1603 to be supported by James I—and he was the monarch who directed the King James Version of the Bible to be translated.



ACTIVITY 2

What Ghosts Do

Act one, Scene 1

Background As Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus confront and then discuss the ghost that has appeared to them, they demonstrate some superstitions and beliefs that they have about ghosts.

Directions Reread the following lines and describe what assumptions the speakers are making about the ghost and ghosts in general. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

Lines 79–81: “In what particular thought to work I know not, but in the gross and scope of my opinion, this [seeing the ghost] bodes some strange eruption to our state.”

Assumption(s):

Lines 144–153: “If there be any good thing to be done that may to thee do ease, and grace to me, speak to me; if thou are privy to thy country’s fate, which, happily, foreknowing may avoid, oh speak! Or if thou has uphoarded in thy life extorted treasure in the womb of earth, for which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death, speak of it.”

Assumption(s):

Lines 160–163: “We do it wrong, being so majestical, to offer it the show of violence, for it is as the air, invulnerable, and our vain blows malicious mockery.”

Assumption(s):

Lines 166–172: “I have heard the cock, that is the trumpet to the morn, doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat awake the god of day, and at his warning, whether in sea or fire, in earth or air, th’extravagant and erring spirit hies to his confine.”

Assumption(s):



ACTIVITY 5

Review (continued)

- ___ 7. What is Hamlet's mother's name?
- Cornelia
 - Portia
 - Calpurnia
 - Gertrude
- ___ 8. When speaking of his mother, Hamlet remarks, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" Why is he upset with her?
- for marrying so quickly after his father's death
 - for not letting him return to school
 - for scolding him about mourning for his father
 - for not giving him money due to him after his father's death
- ___ 9. Why is there so much military activity as of late?
- They are preparing for war with Italy.
 - They are trying to revitalize the forces that were depleted by the late King Hamlet.
 - They are preparing for war with Fortinbras.
 - none of the above
- ___ 10. True or false: Marcellus, Horatio, and Barnardo want to tell Hamlet that they've seen his father's ghost.
- ___ 11. True or false: The ghost disappears when the cock crows.
- ___ 12. True or false: Ophelia stubbornly refuses to listen to advice from her brother and father concerning Hamlet's intentions toward her.
- ___ 13. What is young Hamlet's station in life?
- king
 - prince
 - courtier
 - statesman
- ___ 14. Who is Fortinbras?
- Prince of Norway
 - Hamlet's friend
 - Hamlet's cousin
 - Ophelia's father
- ___ 15. When Horatio tells Hamlet that he, Marcellus, and Barnardo have seen the ghost, Hamlet's reaction is
- amused disbelief
 - a desire to see the ghost for himself
 - anger
 - absolute terror



ACTIVITY 10

Review

Directions Test your understanding of the characters thus far by matching each character with the correct description of him or her. Write the letter of the correct character in the space provided. All letters will be used at least once, and some letters will be used more than once.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| a. Fortinbras | d. Laertes | f. Gertrude | h. Horatio |
| b. Claudius | e. Polonius | g. The ghost | i. Hamlet |
| c. Ophelia | | | |

- _____ 1. wants to return to France
- _____ 2. married her deceased husband's brother
- _____ 3. wishes to gain back land lost to Denmark
- _____ 4. tells how he was murdered by the use of poison
- _____ 5. Ophelia's father
- _____ 6. friend of Hamlet; saw the ghost
- _____ 7. current King of Denmark
- _____ 8. courted by Hamlet
- _____ 9. Prince of Denmark
- _____ 10. Hamlet's stepfather
- _____ 11. wants his son to avenge his unnatural death
- _____ 12. politely listens to the advice of her brother and father
- _____ 13. wishes that her son would not return to the university
- _____ 14. plans on pretending to be insane
- _____ 15. tells Hamlet that to continue grieving his father is "unmanly"



ACTIVITY 12

The Power of a Play Questionnaire

Act two, Scene 2

Background Hamlet believes that he will be able to tell whether or not his uncle is guilty of murdering his father based on Claudius's reaction to a play showing a similar murder.

Directions Answer the following questions in complete sentences, and be prepared to share your answers with the class. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Hamlet is convinced that his uncle's reaction to the play will betray whether Claudius did indeed commit the murder that the ghost said he did. Do you think that a play can have this type of powerful emotional effect upon a person? Why or why not?
2. What do you think makes plays sometimes more powerful and captivating for the audience than movies?
3. Describe your favorite play, and explain why it is your favorite. If you could choose to see your favorite play again or to see your favorite movie in the theater, which would you choose and why?
4. Hamlet has been criticized by readers and scholars because he can't decide what action to take and is unable to act quickly. Based on what you have read so far, do you think the critics are right or not? Do think Hamlet is taking too long to exact revenge upon his uncle? Why or why not?



ACTIVITY 14

One Scene, Many Events (continued)

Event 4: “At such a time I’ll loose my daughter to him. Be you and I behind an arras then.” (lines 173–174, spoken by Polonius)

Your sentence:

Event 5: “Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me.” (lines 275–276, spoken by Hamlet)

Your sentence:

Event 6: “The actors are come hither, my lord.” (line 385, spoken by Polonius)

Your sentence:

Event 7: “I’ll have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks; I’ll tent him to the quick.” (lines 584–586, spoken by Hamlet)

Your sentence: