



**ORLANDO SHAKESPEARE THEATER**  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH UCF

## **Study Guide**

# **HAMLET**

*by William Shakespeare*

## The Story of the Play

Prince Hamlet of Denmark has been hastily summoned from his studies at Wittenberg to the Danish courts at Elsinore where he deeply mourns the recent death of his father, the king. Adding to his despair is the hasty remarriage of his mother, Gertrude, to his Uncle Claudius, who has seized the Danish throne. Norwegian Prince Fortinbras poses yet another threat to the general peace as he prepares to invade Denmark.

Hamlet is informed by his trusted friend Horatio, as well as by soldiers who keep watch during the night, that his father's ghost has appeared on the battlements of Elsinore castle. Hamlet attends the watch with them and the ghost appears, informing Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius, who then set about winning Gertrude's affections. The ghost implores Hamlet to take revenge against Claudius. At first, Hamlet is filled with murderous resolve, but soon vacillates between action and inaction, between sanity, madness and feigned madness. In his soliloquies, he expresses his disgust at his own inaction, also considering the possibilities, good and bad, of suicide. Feeling that Ophelia, whom he loves, is being used against him by her father, he repulses her.

Hamlet conceives a plot wherein he can satisfy himself of Claudius's guilt. He has a band of traveling players perform a play, graphically representing the crimes of his uncle. Claudius's violent reaction to the play convinces Hamlet of his guilt. Claudius's violent reaction to the play convinces Hamlet of his guilt. Claudius storms from the play and enters a chapel, where he kneels in private prayer. Hamlet discovers him and resolves to kill him then and there, only to change his mind, fearing that Claudius would be sent to heaven if he were killed while in the act of repentance. Hamlet bolts into his mother's bedroom where, it seems to her, he is about to kill her. Instead, he accidentally kills Polonius, the father of Ophelia and Laertes, while eavesdropping behind the draperies. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him again, but not to the queen, who becomes convinced of Hamlet's insanity as he carries on an animated conversation with a ghost that is invisible to her.

Claudius exiles Hamlet to England, seemingly for killing Polonius. He also sends secret orders with Hamlet's guards that Hamlet be executed when he arrives in England. Confused and grief stricken by Hamlet's seeming indifference and the death of her father, Ophelia goes mad and drowns in a brook, even as word arrives that Hamlet has outwitted his guards, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, by replacing his name with theirs on the execution orders, and is back in Denmark. Meanwhile, Laertes, who like Hamlet must avenge his father's death, attempts to invade the castle. Claudius, however, succeeds in turning Laertes's wrath against Hamlet. They then plot to kill Hamlet with a poisoned sword in a supposedly friendly fencing match. In case that fails, Claudius will provide a poisoned drink.

The challenge arrives, and Hamlet accepts, supposing it to be a friendly contest. The two arrive in court, and Hamlet has scored two hits when his mother drinks to his health from the poisoned cup. Laertes, now desperate, catches Hamlet off guard and cuts him with the poisoned rapier. Hamlet's anger is aroused, and he manages to exchange swords with Laertes and to wound him in return. The queen dies, and Laertes confesses his treachery, revealing the entire plot. Hamlet runs Claudius through and forces him to drink the remaining poisoned wine. As he dies Hamlet names Fortinbras, whose army is heard in the distance, as successor to the Danish throne.

PRE-SHOW Quiz:

Fill in the correct character names:

1. Hamlet's mother is:
2. Hamlet's stepfather is
3. Hamlet's father is
4. Gertrude's first husband was
5. Hamlet's girlfriend is
6. Old Hamlet was killed by
7. Ophelia's brother is
8. Ophelia's father is
9. Gertrude's present husband is
10. Polonius' daughter is
11. Claudius' wife is
12. Laertes' sister is
13. Laertes' father is
14. Claudius' stepson is
15. Old Hamlet's wife is

This play takes place in the Country of :

*A thought before seeing the play:*

A great part of the pleasure in this play comes from the prince himself and the dilemma he faces. Hamlet expounds his problem in what is perhaps the most famous of Shakespeare's soliloquies, beginning with the words "to be or not to be." If there is one place that holds the heart of Hamlet's mystery, the music in his soul that he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern they can never sound or even hear, it is in these words. Is the speech about suicide as it seems to be or about a larger and equally dangerous issue? Has Hamlet's despair pushed him to the verge of self slaughter or is he about to face that most formidable of tasks, a dangerous action that leads to a transformation of a situation.

Hamlet's "to be or not to be" is a scholarly construction that could be used to set up an argument regarding the truth or falsehood of any proposition. Hamlet is, in fact, debating with himself about whether it was better to take action against oppression or to suffer passively. Suicide could release one from having to act or passively participate in a world sullied at its heart.

Who then is Hamlet and what does he finally decide? Perhaps even Shakespeare did not know the answer to the huge scholarly, political, and personal question he had formulated. Perhaps ultimately such questions are about process, about living and understanding rather than about concluding (even in a drama that concludes with death). In far too many places in his plays for it to be accidental, Shakespeare raises questions he does not answer. And the questions go on echoing in the minds of the audience and the author.

Identify the speaker of each of the following quotations:

"A little more than kin, and less than kind."

"Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister. And keep you in the rear of your affection, Out of the shot and danger of desire."

"This above all: to thine own self be true."

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

"Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

. "More matter with less art."

. "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

"Good Night, sweet Prince"

**Supply the correct short answer to each of the following:**

When Hamlet hears a noise behind the curtains in his mother's room, he thinks \_\_\_\_\_ is hiding there.

When Ophelia returns, she gives \_\_\_\_\_ to Laertes and the others in the room.

Which character tells of Ophelia's death?

For whom is the grave-digger digging the grave?

Who fights with Hamlet in a grave?

Which character comes to inform Hamlet of the fencing match?

Who reveals that Claudius is the villain?

Name all those dead on stage at the end of the play.

## *Suggested activities: Hamlet*

1. Have 7 students prepare and present the following 7 monologues:

- A) I, 2 *O that this too, too, sullied flesh....*
- B) I, 5 *O all you host of heaven....*
- C) II, 2 *Now, I am alone....*
- D) III, 1 *To be or not to be...*
- E) III, 3 *Tis now the very witching time of night....*
- F) III, 3 *Now, might I do it, past.....*
- G) IV, 4 *How all occasions do inform against me....*

Have the class listen to the speeches and discuss whether or not Hamlet is a consistent or inconsistent character

2. Assign 2 students to take opposing views on each of the following statements; they should support their conclusions with references from the text.

- A) Hamlet loves Ophelia
- B) The Ghost is the most important “character “ in the play.
- C) The Ghost is evil.
- D) Polonius is a good father
- E) Gertrude is a good mother
- F) Hamlet is driven insane
- G) Claudius loves Gertrude
- H) Hamlet is justified in seeking revenge for his father’s death

3 )Pretend you are a Doctor & Psychiatrist: Write out your daily observational notes about Hamlets, in chronological order. List how he looked, behaved, related to others,

# Hamlet

M	Z	Q	H	X	O	E	L	O	I	T	A	R	O	H
X	K	H	H	D	S	N	S	U	M	J	J	L	L	A
I	E	R	U	E	C	B	T	E	L	M	A	H	Q	I
N	R	E	T	S	N	E	D	L	I	U	G	W	P	S
I	T	C	L	A	U	D	I	U	S	I	Z	Z	F	U
U	G	K	J	V	H	J	O	U	G	B	M	O	L	L
L	A	E	R	T	E	S	S	C	I	H	R	G	D	L
S	G	E	R	T	R	U	D	E	E	T	O	D	T	E
G	A	U	M	E	I	S	C	V	I	J	T	S	M	C
W	W	Z	T	N	A	R	C	N	E	S	O	R	T	R
T	K	U	O	X	M	U	B	J	V	J	Z	P	I	A
A	J	L	I	E	Z	R	P	D	K	R	A	N	A	M
U	O	C	M	Z	A	O	D	R	A	N	R	E	B	B
P	L	S	R	S	G	G	E	E	A	T	L	Z	B	V
S	V	J	H	B	B	O	P	H	E	L	I	A	L	G

HAMLET

OPHELIA

GERTRUDE

CLAUDIUS

LAERTES

POLONIUS

HORATIO

GHOST

ROSENCRANTZ

GUILDENSTERN

FORTINBRAS

MARCELLUS

BERNARDO