



INSIDE OUT

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Hamlet

By **William Shakespeare**
Directed by **Chris Coleman**

SEP 13 – OCT 6

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PLAYWRIGHT BIO

Although he is one of the world's most famous playwrights, poets, and actors, much of William Shakespeare's personal history remains a mystery. The only primary sources of information we have about him are his works and various legal and church documents that have survived since the Elizabethan era. The many gaps in information have led to much speculation about his life and the authorship of his plays.

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, on or around April 23, 1564. Records from the Holy Trinity Church show that he was baptized there on April 26, 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glover and leather merchant, and his mother, Mary Arden, was a landed heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children, three of whom died in childhood. John Shakespeare experienced fluctuations in his prosperity but had success at times as a merchant and later as an alderman and high bailiff of Stratford.

There is much speculation about Shakespeare's childhood years, especially regarding his education. While there are no surviving records about Shakespeare's education, his knowledge of Latin and Classical Greek suggests that he most likely attended the good quality, free grammar school in Stratford.

The next documented event in Shakespeare's life is his marriage to Anne Hathaway on November 28, 1582. William was 18 at the time and Anne was 26. Their first daughter, Susanna, was baptized six months later on May 26, 1583. Almost two years later, the couple had twins, Hamnet and Judith, baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11.

Very little is known about the following seven years of Shakespeare's life, until his name turns up in London Theatre records in 1592. That same year, writer Robert Greene famously attacked Shakespeare in a pamphlet that was published posthumously:

There is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers heart wrapt in a Players hide* supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and, being an absolute *Johannes Factotum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.

Regardless of Greene's critique, Shakespeare established a successful career in London. By 1594, he was acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain's Men (renamed the King's Men after the ascension of James I in 1603) and was a managing partner in the operation as well. With Shakespeare's plays and Will Kempe and Richard Burbage, two of the best actors of that time, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the leading theatre troupe in London, patronized by royalty and popular with the public. In 1599, a partnership of company members built the Globe Theatre on the south bank of the River Thames. Some of his plays were printed in quartos (a book or pamphlet formed from folding each printed sheet into four leaves) as early as 1594, and his name appears as an actor in playbills for Ben Johnson's plays as well. In total, Shakespeare's works include 38 plays, 2 narrative poems, 154 sonnets, and a variety of other poems. No original manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays are known to exist today, but a group of actors from Shakespeare's company collected them for publication after Shakespeare died, in what is known as the First Folio.

Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, 1616, at the age of 52 and was buried in the chancel of the Holy Trinity Church two days later. He willed his properties to his daughter Susanna, 300 pounds to his daughter Judith, and to his wife Anne he left "my second best bed."

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Hamlet – son of the late king and Gertrude and nephew of the present king, Claudius

Claudius – King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle and brother to the former king

Gertrude – Queen of Denmark and Hamlet's mother

Polonius – chief counsellor to the king

Ophelia – Polonius's daughter

Horatio – friend of Hamlet

Laertes – Polonius's son

Voltimand and Cornelius – courtiers

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – courtiers, friends of Hamlet

Osrice – a courtier

Marcellus – an officer

Barnardo – an officer

Francisco – a soldier

Reynaldo – Polonius's servant

Ghost – the ghost of Hamlet's father

Fortinbras – prince of Norway

Gravediggers – a pair of sextons

Player King, Player Queen, Lucianus, etc. – the players in a traveling theatre troupe

PLAY SYNOPSIS

Act I

Prince Hamlet of Denmark is the son of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude. The King died while Hamlet was away at university in Wittenberg, Germany. Before Prince Hamlet returned to Denmark, his uncle (father's brother), Claudius, hastily married the widowed Queen Gertrude (Prince Hamlet's mother), and took the throne for himself. Denmark has a long-standing feud with neighboring Norway, in which King Hamlet slew King Fortinbras of Norway in a battle some years ago. Although Denmark defeated Norway and the Norwegian throne fell to King Fortinbras's infirm brother, Denmark fears that an invasion led by the dead Norwegian king's son, Prince Fortinbras, is imminent.

On a dark night on the ramparts of Elsinore, the Danish royal castle, the sentries Bernardo and Marcellus discuss a ghost resembling the late King Hamlet, which they and others have seen roaming the castle grounds at night. Prince Hamlet's friend Horatio meets them, they see the ghost, and the three vow to tell Prince Hamlet what they have witnessed.

The court gathers the next day, and King Claudius and Queen Gertrude discuss affairs of state with their elderly adviser Polonius. Claudius grants permission for Polonius's son Laertes to return to school in France, and he sends envoys to inform the King of Norway about Fortinbras. Claudius also talks to Hamlet about his continued mourning of his father, assures that Hamlet will inherit the throne after his rule, and tells Hamlet to stay in Denmark rather than return to university in Wittenberg. After the court exits, Hamlet expresses grief over his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. Learning of the ghost from Horatio, Hamlet resolves to see it himself.

As Polonius's son Laertes prepares to depart for France, Polonius offers him advice that culminates in the maxim about how to behave in France. Polonius's daughter, Ophelia, admits her interest in Hamlet, but Laertes warns her that Hamlet may not be able to honor his interests in her, and Polonius orders her to reject his advances.

That night on the rampart, the ghost appears to Hamlet. The ghost says he is the soul of Hamlet's father, trapped in Purgatory, and that he was murdered by Claudius. The ghost demands that Hamlet avenge the murder. Hamlet agrees, and the ghost vanishes. The prince confides to Horatio and the sentries that from now on he plans to "put an antic disposition on," or act as though he has gone mad. Hamlet forces them to swear to keep his plans for revenge secret; however, he remains uncertain of the ghost's reliability.

Act II

Polonius employs a spy to travel to Paris and report on his son, Laertes. Polonius then learns that Hamlet visited Ophelia and was behaving erratically. Polonius blames love sickness for Hamlet's madness and resolves to inform Claudius and Gertrude. Polonius finds the king and queen as they are welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two student acquaintances of Hamlet, to Elsinore. The royal couple has requested that the two students investigate the cause of Hamlet's mood and behavior. Additional news arrives from messengers. They inform Claudius that the king of Norway has rebuked Prince Fortinbras for attempting to avenge his father's death, that Fortinbras has been commanded not to march against Denmark, and he will instead be sent against Poland, passing through Danish territory to get there.

Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude his love sickness theory regarding Hamlet's recent behavior, and then speaks to Hamlet in a hall of the castle to try to learn more. Hamlet feigns madness and subtly insults Polonius all the while. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, Hamlet greets his "friends" warmly but quickly discerns that they are there to spy on him for Claudius. Hamlet admits that he is upset at his situation but doesn't reveal the truth to them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that they have brought along a troupe of actors that they met while travelling to Elsinore. Hamlet welcomes the actors and tells them to perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play featuring a death in the style of his father's murder. Hamlet intends to study Claudius's reaction to the play, and thereby determine the truth of the ghost's story of Claudius's guilt.

Act III

Polonius forces Ophelia to return Hamlet's love letters to the prince while he and Claudius secretly observe and assess Hamlet's reaction. While Hamlet is walking alone in the hall ruminating on thoughts of life versus death, Ophelia enters and tries to return Hamlet's love tokens. Hamlet accuses her of immodesty and cries "get thee to a nunnery," although it's unclear whether this, too, is a show of madness or genuine distress. His reaction convinces Claudius that Hamlet is not mad for love. Later, the court assembles to watch the play Hamlet has requested. After seeing the Player King murdered by his rival pouring poison in his ear, Claudius abruptly rises and runs from the room; for Hamlet, this is proof of his uncle's guilt.

Gertrude summons Hamlet to her chamber to demand an explanation. Meanwhile, Claudius prays about the impossibility of repenting. Hamlet sees him but chooses not to kill him in that moment. In the queen's bedchamber, Hamlet and Gertrude argue. Polonius is spying on the conversation from behind a tapestry, and Hamlet mistakes him for Claudius and stabs him, killing Polonius. Hamlet vents his anger and disgust at his mother's recent marriage. The ghost of his father appears and tells him not to be so harsh on Gertrude. Gertrude either can't see the spirit or pretends not to. Hamlet demands that his mother change her ways and that she should not tell Claudius about their meeting. He also reveals that he knows about the plan for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take him to England and tells her he has to go. Hamlet takes Polonius' body with him to hide it. Gertrude then tells Claudius that Hamlet is mad and has killed Polonius.

Act IV

Hamlet jokes with Claudius about where he has hidden Polonius's body, and the king, fearing for his life, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England with a sealed letter to the English king requesting that Hamlet be executed immediately. Fortinbras talks to a captain in his army and orders him to go and see the Danish king and claim their right to march across Denmark.

Ophelia visits the queen, who eventually agrees to see her. Ophelia sings songs and when Claudius comes in, he and Gertrude agree that Ophelia has gone mad with grief. Laertes arrives back from France, enraged by his father's death and his sister's madness. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely responsible, but a letter soon arrives indicating that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, foiling Claudius's plan. Claudius switches tactics, proposing a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet to settle their differences. Laertes will be given a poison-tipped foil, and, if that fails, Claudius will offer Hamlet poisoned wine as a congratulation. Gertrude interrupts to report that Ophelia has drowned, though it is unclear whether it was an accident or self-inflicted.

Act V

Horatio has received a letter from Hamlet, explaining that the prince escaped by negotiating with pirates who attempted to attack his England-bound ship, and the friends reunite offstage. Two gravediggers discuss Ophelia's apparent suicide while digging her grave. Hamlet arrives with Horatio and banters with one of the gravediggers, who unearths the skull of a jester from Hamlet's childhood, Yorick. Hamlet picks up the skull and contemplates mortality and the futility of life. Ophelia's funeral procession approaches, led by Laertes. Hamlet and Horatio initially hide, but when Hamlet realizes that Ophelia is the one being buried, he is overcome with emotion and reveals his presence. Laertes and Hamlet argue by Ophelia's graveside, but the brawl is broken up.

Back at Elsinore, Hamlet explains to Horatio that he had discovered Claudius's letter among Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's belongings and replaced it with a forged copy indicating that his former friends should be killed instead. A foppish courtier, Osric, interrupts the conversation to deliver the fencing challenge to Hamlet. Despite Horatio's objections, Hamlet accepts Laertes' challenge. Hamlet does well at first, leading the match by two hits to none, and Gertrude raises a toast to him using the poisoned glass of wine Claudius had set aside for Hamlet. Claudius tries to stop her but is too late. Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine, and realizing the plot will be revealed, Laertes slashes Hamlet with his poisoned blade. In the ensuing scuffle, they switch weapons, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with his own poisoned sword. Gertrude collapses and, claiming she has been poisoned, dies. In his dying moments, Laertes reconciles with Hamlet and reveals Claudius's plan. Hamlet rushes at Claudius and kills him. As the poison takes effect, Hamlet, hearing that Fortinbras is marching through the area, names the Norwegian prince as his successor. Horatio agrees to tell the truth of what has just occurred, and Hamlet dies in his arms. Fortinbras arrives, sees the entire Danish royal family dead, takes the crown for himself, and orders a military funeral to honor Hamlet.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Potential Inspirations for *Hamlet*

Rather than being wholly original works created purely from Shakespeare's imagination, most of his plays were based on existing literature or histories. Although Shakespeare's true inspiration or source for *Hamlet* remains uncertain, there are several theories that seem plausible. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, often shortened to simply *Hamlet*, is thought to have been written sometime between 1599 and 1601 by William Shakespeare. Most scholars agree that *Hamlet* is based on the Norse legend of Amleth, which was first written down in *Gesta Danorum* by Danish cleric and historian Saxo Grammaticus in the early 1200s AD. Of the sixteen books that comprise *Gesta Danorum*, only the last seven are purely historical, with the earlier books being Danish legends compiled from ancient sagas and poems. Books three and four contain the story of Amleth, whose uncle, Feng, murders Amleth's father, Horvendile. Feng takes the throne and marries Amleth's mother, and Amleth feigns madness while plotting to avenge his father's murder. The story even contains prototypes for Ophelia and Polonius, as well as other parallels to Hamlet's tale.

While Amleth's story most closely resembles that of *Hamlet*, it's safe to say that the archetypes that exist in the play also resemble the myths and history of other cultures and time periods. The "hero-as-fool," fratricide, reclaiming of usurped throne, marriage to a recently widowed queen, revenge narratives, and other common themes have invited countless comparisons to Shakespeare's play and the character of Hamlet. There are Old Icelandic poems and 12th Century Anglo-Norman and English tales that feature a protagonist that feigns madness. Some even draw parallels to ancient Egyptian myths and Persian epics, which have heroes that reclaim the throne after their father's murder. Some say that *Hamlet* and the story of Amleth resemble the classic tale of Lucius Junius Brutus, another nephew figure who reclaims the throne from a usurping uncle, made legendary in works by ancient Roman and Greek writers (although their historical accuracy is dubious) and referenced in two of Shakespeare's earlier works. Lucius Junius Brutus is a character in Shakespeare's narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* and referenced in his play *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, often simply called *Julius Caesar* (not to be confused with the character Marcus Junius Brutus, who is one of Caesar's most famous assassins and said to be a descendant of Lucius).

Because of the numerous comparisons to *Hamlet*, it's important to note that Amleth's tale was rediscovered by many Renaissance readers when *Gesta Danorum* was reprinted in Paris in 1514. While Saxo's elevated style of Latin was appealing to discerning readers, it's more likely that the 1570 adaptation

by François de Belleforest in his *Histoires Tragiques* introduced many Renaissance readers to Amleth's tale. *Histoires Tragiques* was a seven-volume collection of Belleforest's adaptations of stories from various countries, written in the French vernacular. Belleforest's version was not only more accessible in the contemporary French language, it also greatly embellished Saxo's telling of the Amleth story. While Belleforest's version differs from Shakespeare's in that the queen commits adultery with the king's brother before the king is murdered, Belleforest does introduce the protagonist's melancholy into the story.

Another often cited inspiration for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the lost play *Ur-Hamlet*. There are some theories debating the authorship of *Ur-Hamlet*, but most scholars believe that it was written by Thomas Kyd, who is most famous for his play *The Spanish Tragedy*. While no copy of this script exists today, Thomas Lodge notes in his 1596 publication *Wits Misery and the Worlds Madnesse* that "a ghost cries like an oysterwife, 'Hamlet, revenge!'" (Asimov 101). A fan of melodramas and Seneca's tragedies, Kyd's version might have introduced the ghost into Hamlet's tale.

Medieval Denmark

Even when Shakespeare's plays are set in real locations and time periods, most do not interpret them to be strict historical representations of their settings. We know these plays refer to actual times and places (like Medieval Denmark), and we also understand that they were written for an Elizabethan audience, thus they express Elizabethan values, concerns, and understanding of the world. Because the plays hold both realities at once, they contain contradictions, and some liberties are taken with historical details of their literal time and place. This doesn't mean that we should completely dismiss the setting – we instead might hold both thoughts in mind, much like an Elizabethan audience would. As modern audiences, we're quite used to this, since productions of Shakespeare's plays are often conceptually set in a time and place other than where the play indicates. For instance, the concept and design elements might suggest that the production is set during a significant moment in American history, causing a modern audience to consider the circumstances of the play through the lens of that moment in time.

While *Hamlet* doesn't depict specific historical figures in the same way that his history plays reference English monarchs, we can still assume its general time period is Medieval Denmark. The dialogue refers to the play's location as Elsinore (known to the Danes as the town of Helsingør). Kronborg Castle in Elsinore was only built about 20 years before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* (one of those contradictions), but the rest of the historical circumstances of the play suggest it's set in the medieval period. The Viking Age is defined by the history of Scandinavian maritime conquests between the 8th-11th centuries. The Denmark of the play is a Catholic country, so we know it's set after the pagan era of the early Viking Age, since Roman Catholicism was established in Denmark in 965 AD by the Danish king Harald Bluetooth (yes, this is the namesake of the wireless technology). The Viking Age overlaps with Denmark's Christian history. We can assume that *Hamlet* is set in Medieval Denmark, because the kingdom of the play more closely resembles Denmark after the end of Viking Age (which is generally marked around 1050 AD), but before Denmark became a Protestant country in the mid-16th Century.

Despite not being a history play, some of the circumstances of the play resemble parts of Danish history during the latter part of the Viking Age. Bluetooth's son, Sweyn Forkbeard (sometimes spelled Sven), seized control of the Danish throne from his father and also conquered Norway and England. During his invasion of England, Sweyn was accompanied by his son Canute (sometimes spelled Cnut). When England fell to the Vikings in 1013, Sweyn was accepted as king of England, and the former English king, Ethelred, fled to Normandy. Sweyn soon after died in February 1014. The English nobility invited Ethelred to return to the throne, despite Canute's claim to it.

Canute's maternal grandfather, Mieszko I, had ruled Poland from 960-992. Mieszko was succeeded by Boleslav I, who expanded Poland's conquests, claiming eastern Pomerania. During Boleslav's reign, Poland was a Danish ally. Boleslav provided Polish troops to Canute's efforts to reclaim the English throne. In 1015, Canute returned to England and began a long struggle for the throne with Ethelred's son, Edmund II Ironside. After Ethelred died in April 1016, the English council elected Canute king at Southampton, but councilors and citizens in London elected Edmund. The kingdom was briefly divided until Edmund died on November 30, and Canute succeeded to rule the whole of England.

Canute was quick and ruthless in eliminating those that he felt threatened his position as king. To create security in his claim to the throne, he married Ethelred's widow, Emma. This weakened the claim Emma's sons with Ethelred might have to the throne and made them a potential threat to Canute and the sons he would have with Emma. Emma sent her sons from her previous marriage to live with her brother in Normandy. Canute also became King of Denmark in 1018 and King of Norway in 1028. The three kingdoms are often referred to as the North Sea Empire. A few years after Boleslav died, Canute would also take eastern Pomerania from Poland in 1031. Canute ruled until his death in 1035.

Canute's sons then briefly ruled England. They lost the Norwegian throne to a Norwegian named Magnus Olafsson. In 1042, one of Emma's sons from Ethelred would claim the English throne from his half-brothers and become known as Edward the Confessor. Magnus then claimed the Danish throne as well, similar to Fortinbras in Shakespeare's play. At first Edward took away his mother's title and lands, but eventually restored them. Edward married the daughter of an earl, but when Edward had a falling out with the earl and his sons, he sent his wife to a nunnery.

In this complicated history at the end of the Viking Age, we can see echoes of Hamlet's world: kings that rule both Denmark and Norway, a marriage to the widow of a recently deceased king, sending a lover to a nunnery. This doesn't necessarily mean that Shakespeare was trying to depict this exact history in *Hamlet*, but both Shakespeare and his audience would have been familiar with the idea that these types of situations were a part of both English and Danish history. Imperial conquest often disrupted assumed lines of succession, there were often power grabs for the throne by many of the king's relatives, and transitions between monarchs could be tumultuous.

Similarly, an Elizabethan audience would have known that during the medieval period, the title of king was not guaranteed to the previous ruler's eldest son or closest relative. Denmark had long been an elective monarchy. The ruling king often arranged for his son to ascend to the throne, so their succession was assumed, but technically the next king had to be elected by the nobility.

These factors heavily influence the circumstances in *Hamlet*. Since Hamlet was not in Denmark when his father was murdered, this left an open opportunity for Claudius to marry Gertrude and the noble council to agree to elect him as king. Furthermore, Hamlet couldn't simply enact his revenge and kill Claudius immediately, especially without evidence of Claudius' crime, without upsetting the nobility. Had the play been set during the Viking Age prior to the time of Christian morality, Hamlet could have more easily taken the throne. Within the context of a Catholic ideology, killing an innocent king would have been an unforgivable sin in the eyes of the nobility. However, if Hamlet had proof that Claudius murdered Hamlet's father, Hamlet could potentially appease the noble class, and the Protestant Elizabethan audience would have potentially seen Hamlet as having a divine right to the throne.

INTERPRETATIONS OF HAMLET

Hamlet is the Mona Lisa of literature.

— T. S. Eliot

There are countless interpretations of *Hamlet*. Literary criticism from each century has highlighted different aspects of the play and provided various interpretations of the story, characters, and its themes. Writers from Ben Jonson to Sigmund Freud to T. S. Eliot to Oscar Wilde have put their spin on Shakespeare's most enigmatic character.

Isaac Asimov and the editors of *The Cambridge School Shakespeare: Hamlet*, Richard Andrews and Rex Gibson, feel the play depicts a political struggle. Asimov says, "What bothers Hamlet most is the loss of the crown" (Asimov 130). Hamlet's anger mounts and he says of Claudius:

A murderer and a villain—
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule
That from the precious diadem stole
And put it in his pocket

— (*Hamlet* Act III, Scene iv)

Claudius has stolen the succession that rightfully belongs to Hamlet. In addition, Andrews and Gibson write that Hamlet's "personal vendetta against Claudius is in reality a struggle for political power, just as Claudius' murder of old Hamlet was a political assassination" (Andrews and Gibson 245). These political tussles reflected the anxieties of Shakespeare's England. Queen Elizabeth's reign might have seemed stable, but there were always threats from other powerful factions of the nobility. She also didn't have an heir, so the issue of succession was an important question of the time.

In Peter Alexander's essay entitled "The Complete Man," he writes that the play dramatizes "the perpetual struggle to which all civilization that is genuine is doomed" (Bevington 114). In order to live up to his ideals, Hamlet has to place himself at a disadvantage with the cunning and treacherous Claudius; he must be humane, but still retain toughness. ("I must be cruel only to be kind," Act III, scene iv).

Although *Hamlet* is set in Medieval Denmark, the Elizabethan worldview deeply informs Shakespeare's play. During the medieval period, Latin scholars were mostly interested in the ancient Greek, Roman, and Arabic works on natural science, mathematics, and philosophy. Renaissance humanism shifted the interests of scholars more towards endeavors of understanding humanity through the study of Classical literature, history, and dramatic and oratorical texts. We see this exemplified in the visual artwork of the Italian Renaissance, but more so in the literary and dramatic works of the English Renaissance. It's reflected throughout Shakespeare's body of work in the countless references within the language and his retellings of myths and history.

We can also see this in the Elizabethan fascination with revenge tragedies. This genre was heavily influenced by the dramatic works of Seneca, but these narratives can also be found throughout Greek and Roman mythology. Seneca's work contained three major themes: the inconsistency of fortune, tales about crime and the evils of murder, and the value of poverty, chastity, and simplicity. Murder, the ghost of murdered victims urging revenge, cannibalism, madness, and meta-theatricality are all conventions frequently found in Elizabethan tragedies and revenge narratives. In these plays, the revenge is personal, so in the story the protagonist often keeps their plans secret in order to preserve the opportunity to enact the revenge. While innocent or deceived accomplices might be used to help the character seeking revenge,

the innocent party never actively participates in its consummation. There's a basic contradiction that exists in the revenge tragedy for Elizabethans: it doesn't fit into a Christian code of morality. Because of this, an unjustified revenge would certainly be punished in these stories, and it's understood that the person who committed the original crime is wholly guilty of having committed a great evil. The pagan beliefs of Seneca's time didn't have this problem, but it goes against the ethics of Elizabethan morality, so there might also be hesitation within the character enacting the revenge. However, the revenger is often morally obligated to see it through, so it was thought to be better to display the courage to combat misfortune than to submit to it without a struggle.

A psychoanalytic interpretation of the play might support the view that "the entire play (is) a study in grief: Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras each provide variations on the central theme of the loss of fathers" (Gottschalk 43). Elizabethan England inherited the medieval belief that man maintained an equal distance from the angels and the beasts. Man's reason was angelic, his passions bestial. In Christian doctrine, the prime moral rule was the domination of reason over passion. The student of Elizabethan psychology, therefore, would view Hamlet as a tragedy in which the hero succumbed to his passion—grief. This, in the age-old phrase, is Hamlet's tragic flaw.

Hamlet could also be seen as a play about morality. Hamlet is not a weak individual, but he does represent the weakness of humanity. "He rebukes himself, not for his own faults, but for those of humankind" (Gottschalk 50). The psychological problems of several characters (Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet) demonstrate that the individuals who meet their doom are overruled by their passions and the survivors are those who temper passion with reason, thus carrying the message that one must be of strong moral character.

Yet another psychoanalytic view could suggest that, "Hamlet is the tragedy of the intellectual, of the impotence of the over-cultivated imagination and the over-subsidized reasoning powers to meet the call of everyday life" (Gottschalk 70). In this interpretation, Hamlet is an idealist. The series of blows he encounters in the death of his father and remarriage of his mother, shatters his idealism and plunges him into a severe depression, symptomized by suicidal impulses, a desire for solitude, irritability and brooding.

Then there is the Freudian interpretation, that "Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother—the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized" (Freud vol 7). This explanation derives from the Oedipus Complex, which emphasizes the small boy's attachment to his mother and antagonism for his father who is the rival for his mother's affection. Thus, in Hamlet's eyes, he feels less sorrow for his father's death than for his mother's hasty remarriage.

This brief overview shows just a glimpse of the many interpretations of *Hamlet*. The play contains questions and contradictions that audiences and scholars have not been able to answer definitively, and it's complexity continues to invite ever-evolving approaches to interpretation. Some have used this to dismiss the play's worth, while others see it as one of the reasons for its greatness and longevity. Regardless of this debate, it's undeniable that *Hamlet* remains one of Shakespeare's most produced and written about plays.

HAMLET

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Pre-Performance Questions

1. Have you ever had to make a decision but did not know what to do? How did you go about making the decision?
2. Is revenge ever justified? Have you ever had vengeful thoughts?
3. Why is this play considered Shakespeare's masterpiece? Why does the play, Hamlet, stand the test of time?

Post-Performance Questions

1. How do the design elements of lighting, sound, costume and set help to tell the story?
2. How does Hamlet react to the charge by the ghost? How does he seek his revenge?
3. How is family portrayed in the play? What do we know about Hamlet's relationship with his real father? How would you describe the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude?
4. Compare the relationships between Polonius and Laertes and Hamlet and Claudius.
5. How would you describe Claudius? Does he get what he deserves?
6. How are friendships portrayed in this play? Is Horatio Hamlet's friend? Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern considered his friends? What happens to their friendship through the play?
7. Throughout the play, there are many memorable soliloquies. Why does Shakespeare use these monologues and what do we learn from them?
8. How are women portrayed in Hamlet?
9. Why does Hamlet treat Ophelia the way that he does? Does Ophelia deserve this treatment?
10. Do you think Hamlet is mad or feigning madness? What examples can you give for both sides of this argument?
11. Why does it take so long for Hamlet to make a decision? What else is at play?
12. What is the purpose of the play-within-the play? How does Hamlet utilize this group of actors for his benefit?
13. What does Hamlet learn in the famous gravedigger scene? What do we learn about him?
14. Who is Fortinbras at the end of the play? Why is he included at the end of the play?

ACTIVITIES

Personal Narratives Reflected in Different Mediums

Hamlet uses the traveling acting troupe to make Claudius uncomfortable by having them portray a similar moment from his life.

15. Create a list of five important experiences from your life. Prioritize your experiences and select three that are important to you.
16. For these experiences, write a paragraph (or two) describing each moment from your perspective. Be sure to include as many details as needed to paint a vibrant picture.
17. Make sure the moment is appropriate for school and that you are willing to share with the rest of the class.
18. Once you have selected these experiences, find a movie, a play or a novel, that best reflects the experience that you had. Is there a piece of visual art or a popular song that also might reflect the experience?
19. Discuss why you chose a movie, a novel, an art piece or a song that best tells your story. What from the story leads you to believe that it is similar to your experience? Was it a certain

character that reminded you of yourself or of another person? Was it a song lyric that summed up a feeling?

20. Discuss how effective or ineffective the use of the art is used to convey your memory or experience. Discuss if one artistic medium seems to convey the attitude and experience better than others. What are the limitations of only using the art to convey how you feel?

Colorado Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.

Colorado Visual Art PG: Explain, demonstrate, and interpret a range of purposes of art and design, recognizing that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives.

Contemporizing Shakespeare

The director of the Denver Center Theatre Company's *Hamlet* chose to set the play in Medieval Denmark, but sometimes Shakespeare's plays are set in a more contemporary time period than what is indicated in the script. This is a common practice in the production of Shakespeare because the language and stories are universal to any time period.

1. Do you think *Hamlet* would translate into the United States in 2024?

Try setting the characters in Elsinore High School, a modern high school in the United States. What type of student, teacher or administrator would each character be? Who would be a cheerleader? A football player? A computer wizard? Class president? History teacher? Principal?

2. Where would you set each scene? A locker room? The cafeteria? The office?
3. Create a short scene with two of your modern-day characters. How does the situation stay the same but mannerisms and language differ?
4. What other settings would adapt well to the play? Create a list of potential settings. Are there some settings that are more adaptable than others? Why are some settings more adaptable than others?

Colorado Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.

Colorado Drama and Theatre Arts PG: Employ drama and theatre skills, and articulate the aesthetics of a variety of characters and roles.

Character Mapping

1. This activity looks at the internal and external characteristics of a certain character. Start with a circle in the middle of a piece of paper. As there will be writing inside and outside the circle, be careful to leave space. At the top of the page, place the name of a character from the play.
2. Inside the circle, write descriptive words, phrases, or draw pictures that describe the characters' perceptions of themselves. These descriptions are traits that we know and are the essential characteristics and also those that cannot be changed. For example, Hamlet is male, the son of Gertrude and nephew/stepson of Claudius and the Prince of Denmark.
3. Outside the circle, write descriptive words to describe how the characters are perceived by the other characters. These would be immediate qualities that are obvious or those traits that characterize the character.
4. After seeing the production or reading the text, create another circle for a specific character. For example, if the character is Hamlet, in the circle, write quotes that Hamlet uses to describe himself. On the outside of the circle, write quotes that the other characters use to describe him.

Colorado Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Colorado Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

Colorado Drama and Theatre Arts PG: Employ drama and theatre skills, and articulate the aesthetics of a variety of characters and roles.

Character Shield

Pick a character from *Hamlet* and create a character shield or coat of arms. Each shield should be divided into four sections and a picture drawn for each of the following:

- a. The character's desire
- b. The character's worst fear
- c. The character's essential nature in symbolic form, preferably as an animal
- d. A quote representing the character

Use the template above to create a character shield for yourself. After you have created a shield, distill the information to create a logo that best represents your family or an icon that best represents yourself. Make the logo or icon as striking as possible, but make sure that it conveys your personal values.

Colorado Visual Art PG: Make informed critical evaluations of visual and material culture, information, and technologies.

Colorado Visual Art PG: Explain, demonstrate, and interpret a range of purposes of art and design, recognizing that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives.

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Potential Inspirations for Hamlet

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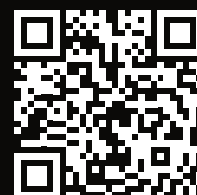


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