



The Plays of William Shakespeare



Hamlet

Study Guide

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|---------------|
| Note to Instructor | 4 |
| A Special Note on Shakespeare's Plays | 5 |
| Synopsis | 6 |
| Background Information | 8 |
| About the Author | 9 |
| Ideas for Pre-reading Activities | 10 |
| Act I | 11 |
| Act II | 22 |
| Act III | 27 |
| Act IV | 35 |
| Act V | 42 |
| Summary Questions | 49 |
| After-you-read Activities | 56 |
| Additional Resources | 57 |
| Answer Key | Separate File |

Special Note on Shakespeare's Plays

A first encounter with Shakespeare can be a challenging experience for high school students. The spelling is often nonstandard, the vocabulary is difficult and archaic, and the cadence and structure are unfamiliar. These barriers to understanding the story could cause a student to become frustrated with the literature and give up. To enhance the students' appreciation and understanding of *Hamlet*, we urge instructors to carefully consider the edition your students will read. We suggest selecting an annotated edition that uses standard spelling but retains the original sentence structure. We recommend *The New Folger Library Shakespeare* editions, and our line references will be to the Folger edition. Other editions may have slightly different line numbering due to differences in formatting and typesetting, particularly in prose text, so the reader may have to search around somewhat for the exact text referred to in the study guide. In most instances we have included the words at the beginning of the referred to lines to make the passage easier to find [e.g., Act 3, scene 1, lines 280–301 (“O pardon me”)].

In addition, since Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed and not merely read, we recommend the use of video or audio recordings of *Hamlet* as part of the learning process. These may be available through your local library. We advise letting students watch or listen to the play before actually reading it. This helps familiarize the students with the story and the language and makes in-depth study of the text easier. Note that every performance is an interpretation, however, and so may not match perfectly with the text. Some versions of the play are recommended at the end of this study guide, but our recommendations are not meant to be an exhaustive list.

Synopsis

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. Two night watchmen at the castle at Elsinore have seen a ghost they believe to be the former king of Denmark, the father of Prince Hamlet. The soldiers entreat Horatio, Hamlet's confidant, to wait with them for the ghost's appearance during the night watch. Horatio is horrified by its resemblance to the dead king. The men ask Hamlet to join the watch, and when the ghost appears, it reveals to Hamlet that it is, indeed, the spirit of his father. The ghost informs Hamlet that his father was murdered by Claudius, the current king of Denmark. Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and brother of the former king, has not only usurped the throne of Denmark, but has also taken Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, as his wife. Hamlet vows to avenge the death of his father and says he will put on an "antic disposition" to distract others from his genuine purpose.

Meanwhile, Claudius and Gertrude try desperately to help cure Hamlet's melancholy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's classmates from Wittenberg, are invited to the palace by the king and queen to see if they can discover why Hamlet is depressed. Lord Chamberlain Polonius suggests the cause of Hamlet's increasingly bizarre behavior is Hamlet's love for Ophelia, his daughter.

Traveling actors arrive at the castle and Hamlet employs them to perform an Italian play that he adapts to depict the murder of his own father. During the performance of the play, Hamlet and Horatio watch Claudius's response to the play to judge if he is truly guilty or not. As the scene of the murder is played out the king runs from the room, and Hamlet believes the ghost's words are confirmed.

The queen calls Hamlet to her chambers. As Hamlet goes, he happens upon Claudius in confession. Hamlet considers killing Claudius at that moment, but he hesitates to kill the king while he is in confession because then, he reasons, Claudius would go to heaven. Hamlet confronts his mother for her weak-willed behavior and hasty marriage to Claudius. Polonius, who is hiding behind an arras in the queen's chamber, stirs and Hamlet, perhaps thinking it is Claudius, runs his sword through the screen and kills Polonius.

Hamlet Study Guide

7. Laertes asks Claudius why he hasn't done anything to have Hamlet punished for the murder of Polonius. What reason does Claudius give?
8. When the king learns that Hamlet is returning to Elsinore, he and Laertes form a plan. What is their plan?
9. What terrible news does the queen deliver at the end of scene vii?

Analysis:

10. Hamlet has hidden Polonius's body, upsetting everyone. His responses to questions about the body are humorous and grotesque. Read the following passages:

King Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet At supper.

King At supper? Where?

Hamlet Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. (scene iii)

King Where is Polonius?

Hamlet In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i' the other place yourself. But indeed, if you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

King Go seek him there. [To some attendants]

Hamlet He will stay till you come. (scene iii)

Hamlet Study Guide

What do these passages tell you about Hamlet's character? Do you think Hamlet feels any guilt concerning Polonius's death? How would Hamlet's attitude toward Polonius's death support the theory that he is crazy?

11. Notice that both Hamlet and Laertes have lost a father through violence, and have been told about the deaths by questionable messengers (the ghost and Claudius). Compare and contrast these events and Hamlet's and Laertes' reactions.
12. Many critics think Hamlet feels a special kinship with Fortinbras because of the similarities in their circumstances. What are these similarities? How does Hamlet contrast himself with Fortinbras in the soliloquy that begins, "How all occasions do inform against me . . ." (scene iv, lines 34–69)?
13. In this soliloquy, Hamlet speaks about reason and honor. How does Hamlet view reason? How does he judge Fortinbras' honor? Do you agree with Hamlet's statements? Why or why not?

Hamlet Study Guide

14. At the end of Hamlet's soliloquy he says, "O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" Hamlet has finally resolved to act on the ghost's command to avenge his death. How has Hamlet been inspired to make up his mind at last?

Dig Deeper:

15. Hamlet says,

We fat all creatures to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.
Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two
dishes, but to one table. That's the end.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:18–21, Psalm 39:4–7, and Psalm 103:11–18. What do Hamlet and these verses tell us about the *physical* fate of people? Read Matthew 16:24–27 and 1 John 2:15–17. What do these verses tell us about the *spiritual* fate of people? What can people do that will have the greatest effect after death?

16. Read the following passages from the play:

Hamlet . . . What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
to fust in us unused.
(scene iv, lines 35–41)

Hamlet Study Guide Answer Key

Church bases its doctrine of Purgatory on scripture such as 1 Corinthians 3:15 and 1 Peter 1:7 which speak of a cleansing fire. Other denominations do not find enough evidence in these verses to support the idea of an interim judgment or purification. *Hamlet*, then, reflects a viewpoint which includes Purgatory in its theology.

3. Answers will vary. In this short section, Jesus tells his disciples of the following signs of the end times: the destruction of the temple (v. 6); wars and rumors of wars and revolutions (v. 9, 10); “earthquakes, famines and pestilences,” “fearful events,” and “great signs from heaven” (v. 11); persecution of Christians (v. 12–19); Jerusalem surrounded by armies (v. 20); “signs in the sun, moon and stars,” and the “roaring and tossing of the sea” (v. 25); “heavenly bodies will be shaken” (v. 26); and finally “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27).

Act II

Vocabulary:

Part 1:

1. n; 2. e; 3. i; 4. c; 5. d; 6. b; 7. a; 8. f; 9. m; 10. g; 11. h; 12. j; 13. k; 14. l.

Part 2:

Jephthah—A judge of Israel who sacrificed his daughter in fulfillment of a vow. (See Judges 11:30–40)
Dido—(Roman Mythology) The queen of Carthage who fell in love with Aeneas and killed herself when Aeneas abandoned her.

Priam—(Greek Mythology) The king of Troy who was killed when the city was conquered by the Greeks.

Cyclops—(Greek Mythology) A one-eyed giant supposedly inhabiting the island of Sicily.

Pyrrhus—The King of Epirus (319–272 B.C.) who, against great odds, defeated the Romans at Asculum and Heraclea.

Mars—(Roman Mythology) The god of war.

Hecuba—(Greek Mythology) The wife of Priam.

Questions:

1. Reynaldo was sent to France to bring a package to Laertes from Polonius. Polonius also wanted Reynaldo to spy on Laertes and find out how he has been behaving. He instructs Reynaldo to hint at indiscretions or liberties Laertes might take. Polonius hopes that this will encourage someone to talk about Laertes' bad behavior, if there is any. It may be effective, but it might also encourage one to think of Laertes in a more negative light than is justified. As Reynaldo points out, it could taint a person's perception of Laertes.

2. Polonius thinks Hamlet is acting strange because of his love for Ophelia. Polonius suggests that he and Claudius could spy on Hamlet and Ophelia while they talk together to see if his theory is correct.

3. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to Elsinore at the request of the king and queen. The king and queen hope Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can find out what is wrong with Hamlet. They tell Hamlet they have come to Elsinore only to visit him. Hamlet does not believe it is the only reason. When they admit they were sent for, Hamlet tells them exactly why they were sent for.

4. Voltmand and Cornelius tell Claudius that the king of Norway has commanded Fortinbras to stop his preparations for war against Denmark. Fortinbras has obeyed the king. The king of Norway then asks if Fortinbras can cross Danish territory to go to war against Poland.