***Hamlet* by William Shakespeare**

**Shakespeare’s Sources**

Shakespeare wrote Hamlet in 1600 – 1601, and based his play on stories which had been published when he was only six years old in 1570. These stories had in turn been based on the legend (not history) of the Danish prince named Amleth, which was first recorded in the twelfth century. Amleth’s father, the King of Denmark, is killed by his brother who then marries Amleth’s mother and subsequently gains the throne. Amleth secretly vows revenge for his father’s murder and pretends to be mad as he plots this revenge so that his uncle/step-father does not become suspicious of him. Other similarities to Shakespeare’s play include:

* the uncle/step-father sending a young woman to wile Amleth’s secrets from him,
* a scene with his mother in her bedchamber, during which Amleth mistakes one of the king’s hiding advisors for his uncle and kills him in error,
* Amleth being sent to England, presumably for his own protection after committing the murder, but actually to have him killed by the King of England,
* Amleth altering the notes from the King of Denmark to the King of England so that his escorts, not himself, are executed,
* his return to Denmark, and finally,
* Amleth’s success in avenging his father’s death by killing his uncle

**Shakespeare’s Language**

In Shakespeare’s time, writers were expected to follow the Doctrine of Decorum, a formula that had to do with the accepted hierarchical view of society. Characters with high rank such as kings, nobles, and bishops spoke in verse, while those with low rank such as clowns, laborers, and mad people, spoke in prose.

Shakespeare’s use of blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, is an important element of his plays. Iambic pentameter was the standard format, used primarily in English drama both before and after the Elizabethan Period, during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558 – 1603).

**Elizabethan Theatre**

Shakespeare’s theatre was called the Globe Theatre, which was built in 1599. It was octagonal, with each side about 36 feet long. Three sides were backstage. The stage jutted into the audience and had no curtain. No real scenery was used and only a few major props. On either side of the stage were doors, and set in the stage was a trapdoor. Behind the main stage was an inner stage which had a curtain. There was a chamber on the second level with windows and a balcony. The third level was used for sound effects and musicians. Shakespeare’s audience was expected to imagine the setting based on details provided in the dialogue.

Only males were permitted to act, and boys who had not yet entered puberty played the role of females. Costumes were extremely elaborate and this was an area of contention with the upper class as some members were concerned that the costumes could be used to impersonate the wealthy and thereby improve one’s status unnaturally.

**Revenge Tragedies**

Three families are ultimately involved with revenge in Hamlet:

1. Fortinbras for his father who was killed in battle by Hamlet’s father prior to his own murder
2. Hamlet for his father’s murder by his brother Claudius’ hand
3. Laertes for his father’s murder and his sister’s madness resulting in suicide

The audience knew that a revenge play would have a tragic and bloody ending. Much like horror movies of today, revenge plays were very well attended because of, rather than in spite of, their violence. The tragic endings of revenge plays were required by the church and state. Plays were often censored if the authorities considered them to have a negative message for the public. As such, revenge plays were considered morally acceptable only if the protagonist (the person seeking revenge) died at the end of the play. Only in death could the protagonist be forgiven for the immoral and illegal act of revenge.

**The Nature of Tragedies**

In Shakespeare’s time, the ideal tragedy would deal with the career of a great and admirable hero. He should be important enough that his actions would affect many people and involved in an urgent situation that threatens his community’s security, which will only be resolved when he dies.

The hero will make choices throughout the play and the results of these choices will affect events in a particular way the hero could not foresee. This will bring about his downfall. When it is too late, the hero will realize what has happened to him and will die.

Hamlet does not fit this pattern perfectly. Hamlet’s greatness is an inner greatness, and his outer power is limited. During the play, Hamlet seems to avoid, rather than struggle toward his goal. Sometimes he seems unsure as to what his goal is. His most important characteristics are those that limit his ability for action. Hamlet does, in the end, succeed in setting Denmark right and is killed for his troubles.

**Play Structure**

There tend to be three main types of scenes in Hamlet:

1. big ceremonial scenes
2. domestic scenes involving parents & children (Hamlet, Fortinbras, & Polonius families)
3. Hamlet’s generalized comments on life

**Prior Events**

The audience understands the following before the play opens:

* The play is set in seventh century Denmark.
* King Hamlet killed Fortinbras, King of Norway in battle. As a result of losing the battle, Norway has relinquished a portion of land to Denmark. Fortinbras had a brother, Old Norway, and a son, also named Fortinbras.
* King Hamlet is killed by his brother, Claudius.
* Polonius is chief advisor to Claudius. Polonius has a son, Laertes, and a daughter, Ophelia.
* Ophelia is in love with and being courted by Prince Hamlet
* Horatio is a young nobleman of Denmark and Prince Hamlet’s best friend. They attend Wittenberg University together. He is the only person Hamlet trusts.
* Prince Hamlet will be a tragic hero (a nobleman who has character flaws that bring about his downfall)
* The turning point in the play will be in Act III

**Motifs -** These recurring thoughts or ideas act as a unifying device. They often enhance the meaning of a drama, become symbolic, and blend together near the end to form a statement about the play.

* Action versus inaction
* Stability versus instability
* Reality versus appearance
* Revenge versus justice
* Corruption versus common good

**Figures of Speech/Literary Devices**

**Act** One of the main divisions of a play. Shakespeare's plays each have five acts. Each act is subdivided into [scenes](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xLitTerms.html#Scene). An act generally focuses on one major aspect of the plot or theme. Between acts, stagehands may change scenery, and the setting may shift to another locale.

**Aside** Words an actor speaks to the audience which other actors on the stage cannot hear. An aside serves to reveal a character's thoughts or concerns to the audience without revealing them to other characters in a play. Near the end of *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude raises a cup of wine to her lips during the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. King Claudius had poisoned the wine and intended it for Hamlet. In an aside, Claudius–unwilling to warn Gertrude in an effort to preserve his innocence–says, "It is the poison'd cup: it is too late." 

**Dramatic Irony** The reader or audience understands something of significance that the other characters are not privy to; a common purpose or reason behind soliloquies.

**Foil** (1) A secondary or minor character in a literary work who contrasts or clashes with the main character; (2) a secondary or minor character with personal qualities that are the opposite of, or markedly different from, those of another character; (3) the antagonist in a play or another literary work. A foil sometimes resembles his or her contrasting character in many respects, such as age, dress, social class, and educational background. But he or she is different in other respects, including personality, moral outlook, and decisiveness

**Irony** (1) Saying the opposite of what is meant, or verbal irony; (2) result or ending that is the opposite of what is expected, or situational irony

**Metaphor** Comparing one thing to an unlike thing without using *like, as* or *than.* Examples*:* (1) The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve.–Shakespeare. (The striker or clapper of the bell is being compared to the tongue of a speaking human being.) (2) The sea being smooth, how many shallow bauble boats dare sail upon her patient breast .–Shakespeare. (The sea is being compared to a woman with a "patient breast.") (3) I am a man whom Fortune hath cruelly scratched.–Shakespeare. (Fortune is being compared to an entity that can be cruel.) (4) In battle, the soldier is a tiger. (5) Michael Casey's face is a map of Ireland.

**Personification** Giving humanlike qualities or human form to objects and abstractions. Personification is a form of metaphor. Examples: (1) Thou has done a deed whereat *valor will weep*.–Shakespeare. (Notice that *valor*, an abstraction, weeps.) (2) *Fortune brings* in some boats that are not steered–Shakespeare. (3) Because I could not stop for *Death, He* kindly stopped for me. –Emily Dickinson. (4) The *house pleaded* for a new coat of paint.

**Prose** Language of everyday speech and writing.

**Pun** Play on words; using a word that sounds like another word but has a different meaning. Examples: (1) Marriage is a wife sentence.

**Scene** Part of an [act](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xLitTerms.html#act) of a play. Shakespeare's plays each have five acts. Each act is subdivided into scenes. An act generally focuses on one major aspect of the plot or theme. Between acts, stagehands may change scenery, and the setting may shift to another locale.

**Simile** Comparing one thing to an unlike thing by using *like*, *as*, or *than.* Examples: (1)The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, burned on the water.–Shakespeare. (2) And the muscles of his brawny arms are strong as iron bands–Longfellow. (3) His hand was small and cold; it felt like wax.–Margaret Truman. (4) In the morning the dust hung like fog, and the sun was as red as ripe new blood–John Steinbeck.

**Soliloquy** Recitation in a play in which a character is alone on stage and reveals his thoughts to the audience but not to other characters in the play.

**Symbol** In a literary work or film, a person, place, thing or idea that represents something else. Writers often use a snake as a symbol for evil. Other commonly used symbols include the eagle (strength), a flag (patriotism), and the sea (life).

**Tragedy** Basic plot structure:

1. Tragic hero’s experiences are positive until the climax, which occurs in the middle of the play.
2. At the climax a short series of events or one single event leads to the tragic hero’s downfall which will occur in the last half of the play.
3. At the end of the play the tragic hero fails or dies because of his character flaw(s)

**Tragic Hero**

1. Usually of noble birth
2. Has a tragic character flaw that eventually leads to his downfall.
3. Character’s actions eventually result in an increase of self- awareness and self-knowledge
4. The audience must feel pity and fear, at some level, for this character.

**Verse** Collection of lines (as in a Shakespeare play) that follow a regular, rhythmic pattern.

**Everyday Expressions… Courtesy of Shakespeare**

A fool's paradise.–*Romeo and Juliet.*   
A foregone conclusion.–*Othello.*   
A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!–*Richard III.*   
Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him.–*Hamlet.*   
A little pot and soon hot.–*The Taming of the Shrew.*   
All the world's a stage.–*As You Like It.*   
**All's well that ends well.–*All's Well That Ends Well.*   
As . . . luck would have it.–*The Merry Wives of Windsor.***    
As white as driven snow.–*The Winter's Tale.*    
Beware the ides of March.–*Julius Caesar.*    
Blow, blow, thou winter wind.–*As You Like It.*   
Brave new world.–*The Tempest.*   
Brevity is the soul of wit.–*Hamlet.*   
Cold comfort.–*King John.*   
**Come full circle.–*King Lear.*   
Come what may.–*Macbeth.***Conscience does make cowards of us all.–*Hamlet.*   
Cowards die many times before their deaths.–*Julius Caesar.*   
Crack of doom.–*Macbeth.*   
Death by inches.–*Coriolanus.*   
**Dish fit for the gods.–*Julius Caesar.***   
Dog will have its day.–*Hamlet.*   
Done to death.–*Much Ado About Nothing.*   
Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burn, and cauldron bubble.–*Macbeth.*   
**Eaten me out of house and home.–*Henry IV.***Elbow room.–*King John.*   
Et tu, Brute! [Latin: And you, Brutus!]–*Julius Caesar.*   
Every inch a king.–*King Lear.*   
Fatal vision.–*Macbeth.*   
Flaming youth.–*Hamlet.*   
Frailty, thy name is woman*.*–*Hamlet.*   
Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.–*Julius Caesar.*   
**Give the devil his due.–*Henry IV****.*   
Green-eyed monster.–*Othello.*   
Halcyon days.–*Henry VI.*   
Hearts of gold.–*Henry VI Part I.*   
Her infinite variety.–*Antony and Cleopatra.*   
**Hold a candle to.–*The Merchant of Venice.***   
I am fortune's fool.–*Romeo and Juliet.*   
**I cannot tell what the dickens his name is.–*Merry Wives of Windsor.*   
I have not slept one wink.–*Cymbeline.***I must be cruel, only to be kind*--Hamlet.*   
In my mind's eye.–*Hamlet.*   
It's a wise father that knows his own child.–*The Merchant of Venice.*   
**It smells to heaven.–*Hamlet.***   
It was Greek to me.–*Julius Caesar.*   
**Kill . . . with kindness.–*The Taming of the Shrew.*   
Lend me your ears.–*Julius Caesar.***Let slip the dogs of war.–*Julius Caesar*   
Lord, what fools these mortals be!–*A Midsummer Night's Dream.*   
**Love is blind**.–*The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare appears to have copied this line from Chaucer's *Love Is Blynd*).   
Lov'd not wisely, but too well.–*Othello.*   
Merry as the day is long.–*Much Ado About Nothing.*   
More sinned against than sinning.--*King Lear*   
**My own flesh and blood.–*The Merchant of Venice.***   
My salad days, when I was green in judgement.–*Antony and Cleopatra.*   
**Neither a borrower nor a lender be.–*Hamlet.*   
Neither rhyme nor reason.–*As You Like It.***Now is the winter of our discontent.–*Richard III.*   
Once more unto the breach.–*Henry V.*   
One fell swoop.–*Macbeth.*   
Out, damned spot!–*Macbeth.*   
**Out of the question.–*Love's Labour's Lost.***Paint the lily.–*King John.*   
**Parting is such sweet sorrow.–*Romeo and Juliet.***Play fast and loose.–*Love's Labour's Lost.*   
Primrose path.–*Hamlet.*   
Put out the light.–*Othello.*   
Seamy Side.–*Othello*.   
Short and the Long of It.–*Merry Wives of Windsor.*   
Smooth runs the water where the brook is deep.–*Henry VI, Part II.*   
**Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.–*Hamlet.***Something wicked this way comes.–*Macbeth.*   
Something in the wind.–*The Comedy of Errors.*   
Sorry sight.–*Macbeth.*   
Sound and the Fury*.*–*Macbeth.*   
Spotless reputation.–*Richard III.*   
Star-cross'd lovers.–*Romeo and Juliet.*   
Strange bedfellows.–*The Tempest.*   
Sweets to the sweet.–*Hamlet,*   
What's in a name?–*Romeo and Juliet.*   
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.–*The Merchant of Venice.*   
The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.–*Henry VI.*   
The lady doth protest too much.–*Hamlet.*   
The play's the thing.–*Hamlet.*   
The quality of mercy is not strained.–*The Merchant of Venice.*   
**The short and the long of it.–*The Merry Wives of Windsor.***The working day world.–*As You Like It.*   
The world's mine oyster.–*The Merry Wives of Windsor.*   
There is a tide in the affairs of men.–*Julius Caesar.*   
They say an old man is twice a child.–*Hamlet.*   
This was the noblest Roman of them all.–*Julius Caesar.*   
**Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.–*Hamlet.***   
Throw cold water on it.–*The Merry Wives of Windsor.*   
'Tis neither here nor there.–*Othello.*   
To be, or not to be: that is the question.–*Hamlet.*   
**Too much of a good thing.–*As You Like It.*   
To thine own self be true.–*Hamlet.***Unkindest cut of all.–*Julius Caesar.*   
**We are such stuff as dreams are made of.–*The Tempest.***What's past is prologue.–*The Tempest.*   
Woe is me.–*Hamlet.*   
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**Shakespeare Insult Kit**

Combine one word from each of the three columns below, and preface with "Thou"

**Column 1 Column 2 Column 3**

artless base-court apple-john

bawdy bat-fowling baggage

beslubbering beef-witted barnacle

bootless beetle-headed bladder

churlish boil-brained boar-pig

cockered clapper-clawed bugbear

clouted clay-brained bum-bailey

craven common-kissing canker-blossom

currish crook-pated clack-dish

dankish dismal-dreaming clotpole

dissembling dizzy-eyed coxcomb

droning doghearted codpiece

errant dread-bolted death-token

fawning earth-vexing dewberry

fobbing elf-skinned flap-dragon

froward fat-kidneyed flax-wench

frothy fen-sucked flirt-gill

gleeking flap-mouthed foot-licker

goatish fly-bitten fustilarian

gorbellied folly-fallen giglet

impertinent fool-born gudgeon

infectious full-gorged haggard

jarring guts-griping harpy

loggerheaded half-faced hedge-pig

lumpish hasty-witted horn-beast

mammering hedge-born hugger-mugger

mangled hell-hated joithead

mewling idle-headed lewdster

paunchy ill-breeding lout

pribbling ill-nurtured maggot-pie

puking knotty-pated malt-worm

puny milk-livered mammet

qualling motley-minded measle

rank onion-eyed minnow

reeky plume-plucked miscreant

roguish pottle-deep moldwarp

ruttish pox-marked mumble-news

saucy reeling-ripe nut-hook

spleeny rough-hewn pigeon-egg

spongy rude-growing pignut

surly rump-fed puttock

tottering shard-borne pumpion

unmuzzled sheep-biting ratsbane

vain spur-galled scut

venomed swag-bellied skainsmate

villainous tardy-gaited strumpet

warped tickle-brained varlot

wayward toad-spotted vassal

weedy unchin-snouted whey-face

yeasty weather-bitten wagtail

**Hamlet Introduction**

The audience understands the following before the play begins:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **7th Century Denmark** | | **Norway** |
| **Old King Hamlet** killed Norway’s Old Fortinbras in battle before he himself was murdered by his own brother | | **Old Fortinbras** was killed in battle and Norway had to give some land up to Denmark as a result of the lost battle |
| Old Fortinbras' brother, **Old Norway**, has taken the throne. |
| Old Fortinbras' son, **Young Fortinbras** wants revenge against Denmark for his father’s "murder" |
| Old King Hamlet is murdered by his brother, **Claudius**, but everyone believes he actually died by snakebite. | |  |
| Claudius takes the throne after his brother’s death/murder and also marries his brother’s widow, **Gertrude**. This was viewed as a form of incest in Shakespeare’s England. | |  |
| Claudius has a chief advisor, **Polonius**, who is an old busybody - has his nose in everyone's business and is extremely self-important; feeling an almost compulsive need to meddle in his 2 children's lives | | Young Fortinbras will attempt to avenge his father’s death. Young Fortinbras serves as a foil to Hamlet. |
| **Laertes** - a son attending school in France. He will act as a foil to Hamlet | **Ophelia** – a daughter being courted by and in love with Hamlet |
| **Hamlet** has one trustworthy friend, **Horatio**. They attend Wittenberg University together. Anachronism - Wittenberg University didn’t exist in the 7th century – it was established in 1502 near Berlin, Germany & still exists today. | |
| Hamlet will be a **tragic hero** – a man of noble birth who struggles to avenge his father’s murder but whose character flaws ultimately bring about his own downfall | |
| The first **climax** (turning point) in the play will be in Act III and the second in Act V | |