

# HAMLET

## Shakespeare

**Overview** *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest and most popular play. It was first staged in London sometime between 1599-1602, but its history as a theme is old. We first hear the story in a Danish historian of the 13th century, can then track it to a French story written in Paris in 1576, and then to more than one Elizabethan effort to bring the tale to life. With Shakespeare the full implications of the revenge plot, with philosophical ruminations on the meaning of life, and on the melancholy of personality, have been extricated from the original text. The play has been freed into its universal meaning.

**Story** The play, *Hamlet*, is set in a Denmark which, to Shakespeare's late 16th century English audience, seemed distant and menacing. Appropriately, then, the drama opens on the battlements of the King of Denmark, and with the appearance of a ghost to the night watchmen on guard. The ghost is the specter of the father of Hamlet, current prince of Denmark; the ghost is calling on Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, whom the new king Claudius—with Hamlet's mother as his spouse—has usurped.

Informed of this apparition, and its command, Hamlet sets about the process of revenge. From the start, though, we realize that this young man will have difficulty meeting his challenge. He is one in whom 'the native hue of resolution is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought'; he has trouble finding the resolution to act. His mind turns over the means at his disposal for carrying out his revenge, and comes on the idea of staging a play, at court, in which he will be able to catch the 'conscience of the King,' that is to watch the reactions of the usurper king, Claudius, and to determine from how he reacts whether or not he is guilty of killing Hamlet's father. When the 'play within a play' comes to the issue of a plot to kill the king, the usurper King Claudius jumps up in agitation and leaves the hall. Hamlet's experiment has been a success, and proved his point. Yet Hamlet is still Hamlet, and still faces the need to put hard steel to his resolve. Not surprisingly, given Hamlet's introspective and reflective nature, the further development of the play will simply underline Hamlet's inability to act.

There follow, consequently, scenes in which Hamlet decides to confront his mother in her bedroom, and to force an admission of guilt from her. All such efforts, on Hamlet's part, only go to prove that in the end he too is fatally wound into the destiny network. In the instance of the bedroom, just as Hamlet is about to demand the full truth from his mother, he hears a noise behind the arras, and mistakenly assumes that it is King Claudius, eavesdropping on the pair. Running his sword through the arras, in an effort to dispatch his stepfather, Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius, the father of Laertes and Ophelia. From this point on Hamlet's fate is sealed. He is viewed as a madman and a murderer, and Claudius has him shipped off to England. Ophelia, who is in love with him, drowns herself, the establishment digs in deeper, and we know that Hamlet's own death is not far on the horizon.

Approaching Elsinore, back in Denmark, Hamlet learns that Ophelia has drowned herself. Blaming Laertes, Hamlet lets himself get drawn into a nefariously planned duel with Laertes, in which Hamlet scores the first blood against his opponent, subsequently refusing to accept the poisoned goblet which has been prepared for him. His victory is short lived: Laertes inflicts a fatal wound on Hamlet, though not before Hamlet hears Laertes confess his knowledge of the whole initial regicide. Not much later, the 'sweet prince,' Hamlet, goes to meet his own Creator.

### Themes

**Indecisiveness.** From the start of the play, Hamlet is faced with a serious challenge, to avenge the murder of his father by Claudius. The play concerns the inner struggle of Hamlet to decide to commit murder, and the outward consequences of his indecisiveness.

**Feigning.** Hamlet feigns madness, in order to buy time and freedom, to observe what is going on at court. In the end, though, he loses not only his own sanity but his life. He has pushed his experiment too far.

## Characters

**Hamlet**, the prince of Denmark, is trapped by destiny in a sonship which leaves him little wiggle room. He is under pressure, from the start, to avenge his father's death, and his own death is exactly thereby foretold.

**Ophelia**, the daughter of Polonius, and sister of Laertes, is from the beginning of the play discussed as a prospective bride for Hamlet. In the end, however, the love between these two becomes dreadfully counterproductive, and Ophelia drowns herself.

**Polonius** is the father of Ophelia and Laertes, and chief counsellor to the King of Denmark. Fatally and mistakenly stabbed by Hamlet, Polonius is best known to Shakespeare's readers as a fatherly but garrulous old man, who cannot speak without using adages and wise saws.

## MAJOR CHARACTER

HAMLET (conscientious)

**Character** The character of Hamlet has for three centuries been a major discussion point in English literary criticism. The mystery with Hamlet is that he seems unable to act, that he is introverted and 'sicklied over with the pale cast of thought,' even though the opportunity for revenge on the King and Queen, for his own father's murder, is palpably present. Is it that the young prince has lost his motivation in life, that he can't find the right moment to kill the King, or has he—by interacting with the 'evil' spirit of the ghost on the battlements--been rendered unable to clean up his moral life? Hamlet the introvert has little strength to ask these questions of himself.

**Parallels** Wherever the literary theme in question involves a young man pondering revenge on stepdad and mom, it is likely that the author is rethinking the Hamlet legend, as Shakespeare molded it. Orestes, in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 B.C.), is haunted by the need to avenge his father's death, by killing his mother and her lover; the same preoccupation is starkly modernized in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931). Among the substantial post-Shakespearean literary encounters with Hamlet, we need to include texts like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1778-96), Melville's *Pierre* (1852), or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Wilhelm Meister and Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's work, both make Hamlet—character and play—a reference point for recurrent concerns with human duty, weakness, and responsibility. Melville goes profoundly for the crippling relationship between Hamlet and his mother, the crux of the prince's difficulty with action.

## Illustrative moments

**Inwardly** Hamlet meets with the King and his mother—now the King's wife. He lets them see that he is disturbed—by their revolting murder and marriage—but refuses to let them inside his thoughts. 'I have that within which passeth show/ these but the trappings and the suits of woe.' He makes a pretence of obedience to his new parental pair, while burying his woe inside—in such a way that they can't miss either it or his fury. The oversubtle, action-wary stepson confronts his authority figures with a quiet hatred; he turns his rejection of the elders in on himself.

**Bitter** After Hamlet's parents exit, he launches into a soliloquy—'Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt...'—in which he pours out his despair about the whole human condition. He bases his despair largely on the brutality with which his step father murdered his mother, and on the speed with which his mother

then posted 'with such dexterity to incestuous sheets,' those of her new husband. Hamlet lays all his bitterness on the table, speaking to himself like a true introvert but at the same time explaining and advancing the narrative.

**Determined** Hamlet directly encounters the Ghost of his true father, the ghost who earlier terrified Horatio, and who has come to demand Hamlet's revenge for the wrongs that have been done. Hamlet swears to the ghost, that he will carry out the revenge. Although Hamlet's friends question the authenticity and motives of the Ghost, Hamlet insists on the ghost's trustworthiness. He proclaims his fidelity to his mission of revenge, and yet he does so with such rhetorical fervor that he lets us wonder whether he 'has the guts.' Is he just talking to himself, to rev up his courage?

**Crafty** Rejoined by his comrades Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet lets out his feelings about 'life,' and the nature of humanity. 'What a piece of work is a man,' he expostulates, while adding that 'man delights not me.' Hamlet is forcing us to wonder whether he is mad or whether he is finding extravagant language in order to test out his duty to avenge his Father. Hamlet finally makes it clear that he knows what's up, and is planning to get more evidence of his parents' guilt. 'I know a hawk from a handsaw.' But does he have the strength to carry out the act his inner self defines for him?

### **Discussion questions**

What is Hamlet's problem? Is he a narcissist, interested only in himself, or is he a true detective, waiting to act when all the evidence is in?

Has Hamlet any allies in the play, who can help him to penetrate his dilemma of how to act?

Hamlet is often called 'the melancholy Dane.' What is he melancholy about? Is it the actual violence done to his father, or is it his inability to do anything about that violence.