

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Hamlet

by

William Shakespeare

Book Information

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In this classic play about royal murder, Hamlet is caught in a web of family intrigue.

Topics: Behavior, Revenge; Mysteries, Hauntings/Ghosts; Mysteries, Murder; People, Royalty; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Series, Folger Library Shakespeare

Main Characters

Claudius King of Denmark, brother of Hamlet's father
Fortinbras Prince of Norway
Gertrude Hamlet's mother, Queen of Denmark
Hamlet Prince of Denmark
Horatio Hamlet's good friend and confidant
Laertes a young man, Ophelia's brother
Ophelia a young woman who loved Hamlet
Polonius father of Ophelia and Laertes
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern boyhood friends of Hamlet, now working for the King
the Ghost Hamlet's father, the former King Hamlet

Vocabulary

bulwark a wall-like defensive structure
calumny false and malicious accusation
paragon a model of perfection
pernicious very destructive
pestilent dangerous to life
promontory a point of land jutting into the sea

Synopsis

Hamlet has been grieving over his father's death. Some friends tell Hamlet they have seen his father's

ghost while they are on watch late at night. Hamlet waits for the ghost, and when it speaks, he discovers that his uncle, Claudius, had murdered his father, King Hamlet. Claudius then married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, after a period of about two months. Hamlet vows to avenge his father's death.

Ophelia and Hamlet have been developing a relationship, but her brother, Laertes, tells her Hamlet is not being truthful with her. Their father, Polonius, concurs. She and others think Hamlet has gone mad because she has turned away from him, but he is livid after learning the truth about his father's death.

To let Claudius know that he knows the truth, Hamlet stages a play in which the players act out the scene of deception between Claudius and his brother.

Thinking Hamlet is mad because of Ophelia's rejection, Gertrude agrees to let Polonius listen to her conversation with Hamlet from behind a screen. Hamlet detects the listener and, thinking it is Claudius, stabs him through the screen.

Claudius sends Hamlet to England, where he is to be killed. Ophelia has become mad, and after a time, she throws herself into the river and drowns. Hamlet discovers the King's plot, escapes from the ship bound for England, and returns in time to witness Ophelia's burial. He mourns her death and claims he loved her very much.

The King sets up a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, arranging to have a poison-tipped rapier for Laertes. In case that doesn't kill Hamlet, the King also has a cup of poisoned wine for him. During the match, Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine, Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier, and Hamlet gets hold of the poisoned rapier and wounds Laertes. Laertes, dying, reveals Claudius's plot to kill Hamlet, so Hamlet kills Claudius and then dies, too.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How did the pursuit of revenge affect Hamlet in the story?

Hamlet was single-mindedly focused on revenge. He seemed to lose compassion and reason during periods in the story. He appeared to be mad; he didn't trust his friends; he felt melancholy; he contemplated suicide.

Literary Analysis

Was Hamlet mad?

Yes, because other people see him acting erratically. He had experienced the loss of his father and his mother's very quick marriage to her brother-in-law. He treats Ophelia rudely and makes insulting remarks to her. He sees and talks to the Ghost. No, because he told his mother he wasn't mad. He thinks things through logically. He plays Polonius for a fool and gets back at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a clever way. He made a logical, well-thought-out decision against killing Claudius when he was praying.

Inferential Comprehension

Why might Hamlet have treated Ophelia rudely?

He was angry with his mother for marrying Claudius, and his anger grew to include all women. He believed women were at the root of all his problems.

Constructing Meaning

Hamlet called Rosencrantz a sponge "that soaks up the King's countenance" and gives him a veiled warning. What did he mean by this?

Hamlet was implying that Rosencrantz was nothing more than a yes-man or a lackey for the King. When the King had taken from Rosencrantz what he could, the King would have no more use for him, and his loyalty would do him no good.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The main theme in Hamlet is revenge. Hamlet wants desperately to avenge his father's murder. Have students think of a modern incident that warrants revenge. It doesn't have to be something serious like murder. It could be something innocuous, like a car spraying them with water as they waited on the curb, or a driver nabbing a parking space that was rightfully theirs. It could be something that actually happened to them, or purely fictitious. Have them write about the incident and how they were able to exact revenge.

Understanding Literary Features Many incidences of comic relief are provided in this play. Much of it is through Hamlet's observations or conversations. Have students find passages in the play where he is making fun of people without their knowing it, and explain how he does it. Find incidences where he makes humorous observations about his situation, and comment on them.

Understanding Characterization Ophelia goes mad with grief after Hamlet rejects her and her father is killed. She walks around singing strange songs, and then drowns herself. Have students write a few journal entries from Ophelia's point of view to show why she chose to end her life. Make the entries chronological and include her deepest thoughts that were revealed only to the pages of her journal.

Understanding the Author's Craft Hamlet lets the reader know his feelings through a number of soliloquies, or long narratives. Have students

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choose one of the soliloquies and rewrite it in modern language. Use proper grammar and language, or write it using slang and everyday speech. Be sure to keep the meaning the same.