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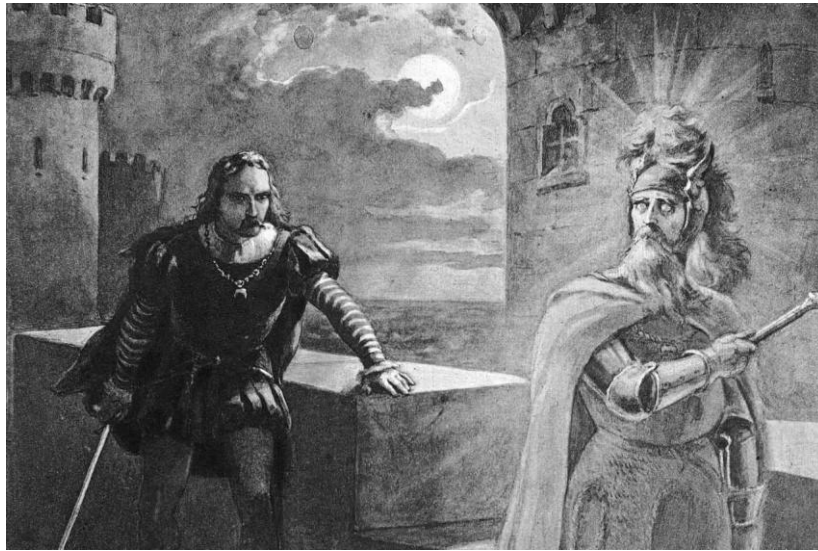
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Study guide of *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* by William Shakespeare



William Shakespeare

The most influential writer in all of English literature, Often, he is referred as England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King's Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. (Phillips, 2002)

Shakespeare was extremely impressed by Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe was the first dramatist to use unrhymed iambic pentameter in his plays, which Shakespeare would also make use of. That's why most of Shakespeare's plays are written in blank verse. It echoes the patterns of natural speech, in a more patterned way. Sometimes pairs of rhyming lines known as rhyming couplets are used – to mark an important occasion, or to finish a scene with a flourish. Occasionally a very noble character. Some other characters use prose – not speaking in any kind of rhythm at all – they are usually the funny characters. (*About Shakespeare - Language and Relevance - BBC Bitesize*, 2023)

Shakespeare didn't come up with his amazing plays and poems all by himself. He was inspired by many things; first of them is **Ancient Stories**; Shakespeare studied classic Greek and Roman books. He loved authors like Ovid and Virgil. This helped him write about timeless themes like love, betrayal, and how things change, just like in stories we tell today. Second, is

Real-Life History, Shakespeare wrote plays about real English kings and queens, like “Henry IV” and “Richard III.” Third, **Everyday Life**, Shakespeare was brilliant at understanding how people really feel. His characters, like the jealous Othello and the ambitious Macbeth, feel real because they have the same emotions we all experience. (Chartrand, 2025)

Finally, his writing style is characterized by:

A masterful language, employing a rich vocabulary, striking imagery, and a variety of literary devices that contribute to the enduring power of his plays and sonnets.

His works feature **deeply complex, flawed, and relatable characters** who grapple with **universal themes like love, ambition, revenge, mortality, and identity**, making his stories timeless and resonant.

Shakespeare effectively used **dramatic techniques, such as soliloquies (inner thoughts spoken aloud), monologues (speeches to other characters), and varied tones and moods** to engage audiences and explore the inner lives of his characters. (Chartrand, 2025)

Hamlet Prince of Denmark: a study guide

Written during the first part of the seventeenth century (probably in 1600 or 1601), *Hamlet* was probably first performed in July 1602. Shakespeare’s telling of the story of Prince Hamlet was derived from several sources, notably from Books III and IV of Saxo Grammaticus’s 12th-century *Gesta Danorum* (“*The Deeds of the Danes*”; Eng. trans. *The History of the Danes or The Danish History*) and from volume 5 (1570) of *Histoires tragiques*, a free translation of Saxo by François de Belleforest. (Bevington, 2026)

Hamlet is widely regarded as the playwright’s masterpiece and, perhaps, the most famous tragedy in the English language. It tells the story of a Prince of Denmark who is tasked with avenging his father’s murder, only to be paralyzed by the intellectual and moral weight of the task. While the plot appears to be a standard "revenge tragedy" (a popular genre of the time), Shakespeare subverts expectations. The central conflict is not just Hamlet against Claudius; it is Hamlet against himself.

Characters Analysis

Hamlet: A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father’s death, Hamlet is a complex character, he is smart, well-educated, master in playing with words. He is fit to be a decent king. Opposite to his father, who died drowning in his sins, and his uncle, who is a criminal; Hamlet is a man of morals who is loved by the Danishes.

He is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die. Because of being thoughtful to the point of obsession, throughout the play, he was never able to take decisive action, which lead to his tragic end. (Phillips, 2002)

Claudius: Hamlet's major antagonist is a shrewd, scheming king who contrasts sharply with the other male characters in the play. Whereas most of the other important men in *Hamlet* are preoccupied with ideas of justice, revenge, and moral balance, Claudius is bent upon maintaining his own power. The old King Hamlet was apparently a stern warrior, but Claudius is a corrupt politician whose main weapon is his ability to manipulate others through his skillful use of language. (Phillips, 2002)

Gertrude: Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret? In spite of that, The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as well as by her tendency to use men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. (Phillips, 2002)

Gertrude, throughout the drama, is perhaps most representative of the theme of women. Gertrude marries her brother-in-law, Claudius, very shortly after the death of her husband—an action perceived as cruel, lustful, and opportunistic by her son, Hamlet. In reality, this choice is one of the few options available to a woman of Gertrude's time: a woman whose political safety and social standing is entirely dependent on her connection to and protection from a powerful man. Gertrude, then, is one of the play's most complex characters, and one whose motives and truest nature are often obscured. (*LitCharts*, 2019)

Ophelia: Ophelia's role in the play revolves around her relationships with three men. She is the daughter of Polonius, the sister of Laertes, and she has also been romantically involved with Hamlet. Given the deeply rooted patriarchal values that define the royal court, Ophelia's ongoing relationships with these men inherently restrict her personal agency. Ophelia lacks the power to determine who she is as an individual because the men in her life dictate how she must behave. She readily accepts her father and brother's instructions, an act which reflects her submissive nature, but the pressure she faces grows as Hamlet's madness grows. The weight of the royal court's impossible expectations drives her to go mad herself, leading to her tragic end. (Phillips, 2002)

Major Themes

Action and Inaction: *Hamlet* is part of a literary tradition called the revenge play, in which a person—most often a man—must take revenge against those who have wronged him. *Hamlet*, however, turns the genre on its head in an ingenious way: **Hamlet**, the person seeking vengeance, can't actually bring himself to take his revenge. As Hamlet struggles throughout the play with the logistical difficulties and moral burdens of vengeance, waffling between

whether he should kill **Claudius** and avenge his father once and for all, or whether to do so would be pointless, cruel, or even self-destructive. (LitCharts, 2019)

Appearance vs. Reality: Hamlet is full of references to how things appear and how they really are. From Hamlet's own fake madness to Claudius's many schemes and plots involving Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern to the very foundation of Denmark's political stability, things within Elsinore castle are hardly ever as they seem. *Hamlet's* characters' collective desire to make sense of the difference between what's real and what's not drives them to deception, cruelty, and indeed even madness. In acting mad, Hamlet succeeds in driving himself mad; in pretending to reject Hamlet's affections, Ophelia actually creates an intense gap between them; in trying to ignore the fact that her new husband murdered her old one, Gertrude forgets the truth and abandons her morality. Ultimately, Shakespeare makes an argument that the desire to determine which aspects of a person's character or actions are real or intentional actually serves to expose the fact that there is, perhaps, sometimes no difference between what is real and what is perceived. (LitCharts, 2019)

Revenge: Revenge is a central theme in Hamlet, driving much of the play's plot and character development. The main character, Hamlet, seeks revenge against his uncle Claudius for killing his father and taking the throne. Other characters, such as Laertes, also seek revenge for personal reasons, leading to a tragic ending for many of the characters. Shakespeare portrays revenge in Hamlet as a complex and often destructive emotion. While it drives much of the play's action, it also leads to the downfall of many of the characters. Through Hamlet's internal conflict and the actions of other characters, Shakespeare highlights the moral ambiguity of revenge and the negative consequences that can arise from seeking it. (Study Mind, 2023)

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