

Shakespeare's Hamlet –Background Information

Hamlet is one of the most compelling pieces of literature in our language. It's a tragedy, a mystery, a revenge story, a ghost story, and a political thriller—with some good jokes thrown in, as well. The central character is ambiguous – we can never really know the answers to questions about what Hamlet wants, what he really cares about, and why he does what he does. We form opinions about these issues and then try to support them with our interpretations of the text.

Shakespeare's Language:

The language of this play challenges and haunts us: after Jesus, Hamlet is the most quoted character in Western culture. Furthermore, he is the most original fictional character ever created: complex, brilliant, fatally attractive and ironically doomed. It's not hard to understand why so many actors (and some actresses) have longed to play Prince Hamlet. Many scholars regard Hamlet as the first “modern” character in literature.

In his thirty-eight plays, Shakespeare coined (originated) more than 1700 words and phrases (bump, dwindle, leap frog, luggage, negotiate, obscene, rent, skim milk, watch dog, academy, etc.) and a fair percentage of that number occur in *Hamlet*.

Reader's encountering Shakespeare for the first time usually find early Modern English difficult to comprehend. Yet, rather than serving as a barrier, the richness of this language should form part of our appreciation.

Pronoun usage: thou, thee and ye = you thy and thine = you and yours

Worldplay:

Shakespeare's language is also verbally rich as he, along with many other dramatists of his period, had a fondness for wordplay. This wordplay often takes the forms of double meanings, called puns, where a word can mean more than one thing in a given context. Shakespeare often employs these puns as a way of illustrating the distance between what is on the surface—apparent meanings—and what meanings lie underneath.

The Story of Hamlet:

Hamlet is considered a great tragedy. This genre was developed in Ancient Greek and Roman theater during the 5th century B.C. During the Renaissance there was a rebirth of classical knowledge throughout Europe. Writers looked to the Classical theater and modeled their tragedies on these earlier forms. Classic tragedies hinged on the downfall of a hero or heroine. The hero or heroine had to be someone of importance whose life began in prosperity and ended in adversity. The Greek scholar and philosopher Aristotle said that a tragic hero or heroine had to suffer from a tragic flaw, which would eventually lead to his or her demise.

Many literary critics argue about what Hamlet's tragic flaw is, and I encourage you to formulate your own ideas as we read and analyze this play.

Themes:

- **Appearance vs. Reality:** Are things as they seem? Can we trust our own friends? Are loyalty and honesty real or are they merely words? How do I know whether what I see is real, true, or the mere projection of my own imagination?
- **Theatre vs. Life:** Hamlet is a play about acting; virtually all of the actors are caught up in some kind of make-believe: Does she really mean this or is she just saying these things because her father is telling her to do so? Is he mad, or merely acting that way for his own reasons? Is this madness, or is there a method to his weird behavior?
- **“There’s something rotten in the state of Denmark.”** – Corruption of the individual and the state; public virtue vs. private loyalties and sorrows. Poison, poison, poison – a sickness of the soul that permeates into society.
- **Family relationships,** particularly those between fathers and sons. Unique to this conflict are Ophelia and Gertrude, who will represent a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship as well.
- **Revenge:** A popular genre in Renaissance theatre. Pay careful attention to how revenge affects three particular characters: Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras
- **Thought vs. Action:** Shall one act without thinking? Does thinking too much vitiate or negate necessary action? How does one find a balance between these elements in one’s own nature? Also pay attention to the relationship between madness and sanity, particularly in relationship to Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet as a Revenge Play

- Follows traditional pattern of a revenge play
- The criminal is too powerful for any authority to intercede
 - Victim – Hamlet Sr.
 - Villain – Claudius
 - Avenger – Hamlet Jr.
 - Claudius is the brother of Hamlet Sr., the uncle of Hamlet Jr., and marries the queen (his victim’s widow, his avenger’s mother).

What is a traditional pattern of a revenge play?

“In Elizabethan London, competition between rival theatres was frantic. Theatre managers put on whatever shows they thought would pull in the crowds, whether that involved fencing displays, wrestling matches, bear baiting, or interspersing the high literary tragedies of renaissance drama with Morris dancing. Catching the attention of the notoriously fickle theater audiences meant providing them with continually new and thrilling spectacles, and playwrights quickly learnt that if they wanted to be paid, they needed to come up with crowd-pleasers.

One genre which quickly became popular with Elizabethan audiences was revenge tragedy. The playwright Thomas Kyd pioneered the style, which was influenced by the gory tragedies of Seneca

and usually involved plots about intrigue at Continental courts, with his *Spanish Tragedy* (1587). This frankly sensational play included several murders, a mad hero, a letter written in blood, a ghost returning from the Underworld and the Spirit of Revenge, and it became an instant hit. Kyd cashed in by writing a sequel, and several authors followed suit, producing plays with titles like *Antonio's Revenge*, *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

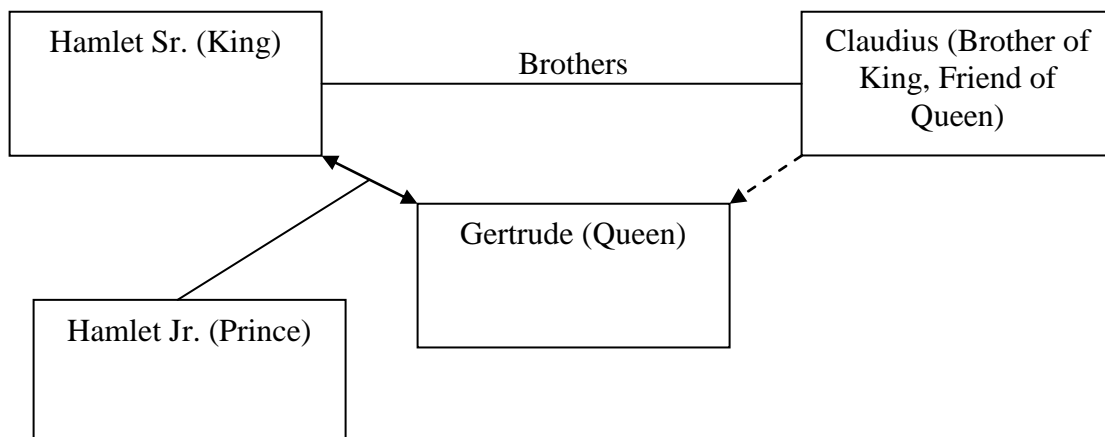
Like modern horror movies, each revenge tragedy attempted to top the last in gruesome ingenuity. Characters were variously killed by poisoned candles, poisoned helmets, red-hot crowns, hanging, disembowelling, and two were tricked into kissing a poisoned skull and a poisoned Bible (poison was something of an obsession.) The earliest Shakespeare tragedy was a revenge tragedy which attempted to out-do all his predecessors with the horror of *Titus Andronicus* (1590s). This tour-de-force contains two human sacrifices, three severed hands, one severed head, one severed tongue, and a pie baked from the flesh of murder victims. The later and considerably subtler *Hamlet* (1601) draws on the conventions of revenge tragedy, which can still be seen in the ghost of Hamlet's father, the poisoned wine and swords, and the machinations of Claudius."

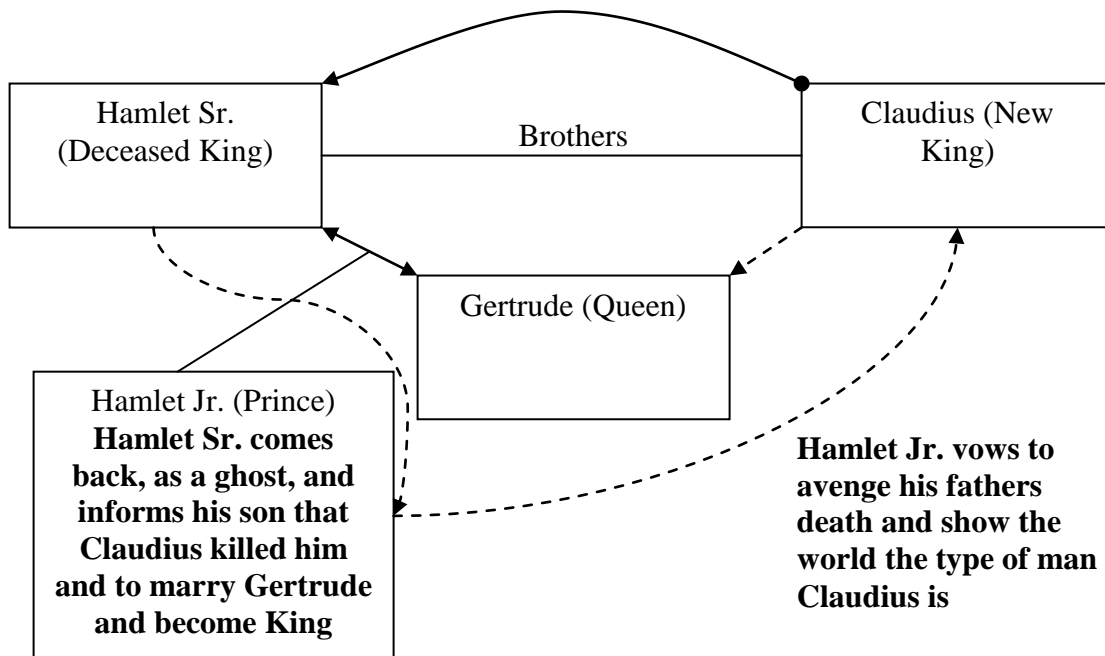
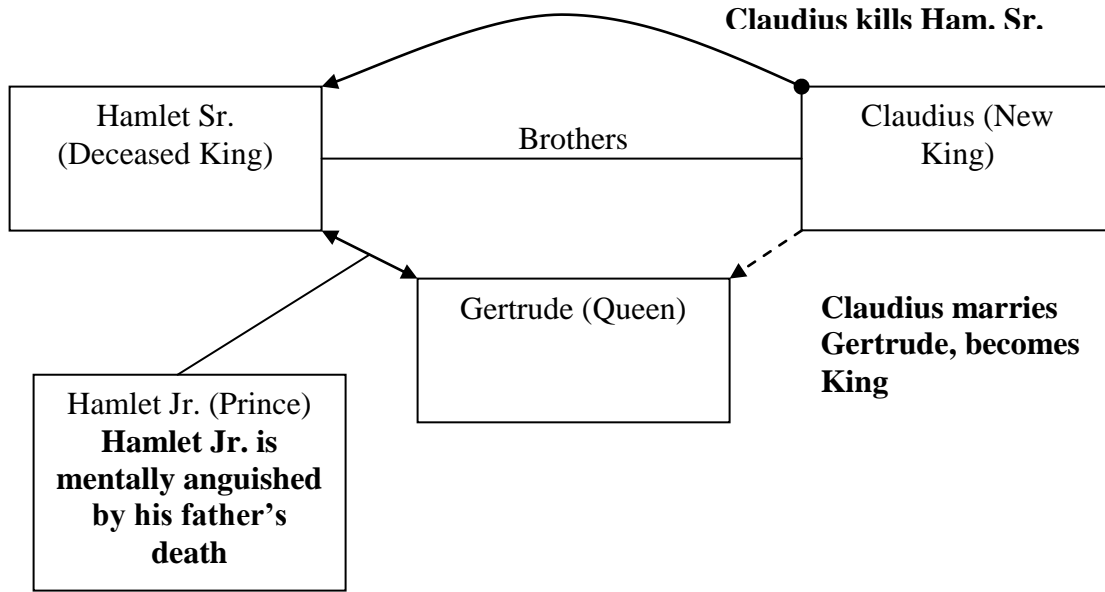
Bloomfield, Jem. "Revenge Tragedies: Gory Renaissance Horror Plays." Suite101.com. June 22, 2007. February 24, 2008 < http://renaissance-theatre.suite101.com/article.cfm/revenge_tragedies>.

How to tell the difference between Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies:

When there can be change, then it is a comedy.

When there cannot be change then it is a tragedy. However, there is some sort of resolution in the acceptance of reality (usually it is admitting defeat).





Hamlet Plot Overview

“On a dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the king’s widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father’s spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father’s death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince’s erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet’s friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of traveling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle’s guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius’s soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet’s madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius’s plan for Hamlet includes

more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father's death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river.

Polonius's son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father's and sister's deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes' desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes' blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match. Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia's funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius's orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king's proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword's blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen's death, he dies from the blade's poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet's last request, tells him Hamlet's tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier."

"SparkNotes: Hamlet: Plot Overview." SparkNotes.com. 24 February 2008

<<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet/summary.html>>.

