

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Hamlet

by William Shakespeare

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Hamlet

Objectives

All page references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press edition of *Hamlet*, copyright 2005.

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define by example the terms *tragedy* and *tragic hero*.
2. compare the Aristotelian and Renaissance models of tragedy.
3. show Hamlet to be an example of a Renaissance tragic hero.
4. identify and discuss the characteristics of this play that mark it as a Shakespearean tragedy.
5. trace Hamlet's evolving psychological and emotional state and how his condition is reflected in his soliloquies.
6. analyze the characters of Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia and their relationships to each other.
7. discuss the techniques Shakespeare uses to convey character and character relationships to his audience.
8. identify and analyze the use of comic relief.
9. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
11. offer a close reading of *Hamlet* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

Hamlet

Lecture

Shakespeare and His Times

When William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England, Queen Elizabeth I was the ruling monarch. It was a time of national strength and wealth, and the prevailing attitude was that life was exciting. It was an age of exploration, not only of the world, but also of man's nature and the English language. Shakespeare's time was also considered the English Renaissance of 1500 – 1650. Some ideas that characterized this period that are important to this play are:

- Humans had potential for development.
- The idea of medieval Christianity, that this world is a preparation for eternal life, was questioned. Instead, people began to see everyday life as meaningful and an opportunity for noble activity.
- This was a time for heroes. The ideal Elizabethan man was a talented courtier, adventurer, fencer, poet, and conversationalist. He was a witty and eloquent gentleman who examined his own nature and the causes of his actions.
- Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth.
- Women had a lower social status than men.
- People were concerned over the order of things. They felt there was “a great chain of being.” This concept originated with Plato and expressed the idea that there is a proper order within all things, and among all things, based on complexity, from the tiniest grains of sand to heaven and God. When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony. When the order was broken, everything was upset and everyone suffered.
- People felt that their rulers were God's agents. To kill a King was a heinous crime; the heavens would show ominous signs when such evil was present.

Hamlet

Act I, Scene I

1. How does Shakespeare begin the play with an immediate sense of suspense?

2. What probably important exposition is revealed in this scene?

3. Why has Horatio been asked to join the soldiers in the night watch? What has he decided to do?

4. How does the reader/audience know this ghost is not a hallucination?

Act II, Scene I

1. What is ironic about Polonius' attempt to learn about Laertes' life in Paris?

2. Why would Polonius immediately jump to the conclusion that Hamlet is mad for Ophelia's love?

3. Consider how the episode of Hamlet in Ophelia's closet promises to contribute to the overall calamity of the tragic plot?

Act III, Scene I

1. What does Claudius admit to himself (and to the audience) about his crime?

2. List the personal grievances Hamlet expresses in his “To be or not to be” soliloquy and explain what specific events in Hamlet’s life they refer to.

3. What metaphor does Hamlet use in his “To be or not to be” speech to express his developing understanding of death? How does he further develop this metaphor?

4. What information does Ophelia provide about Hamlet’s character before the beginning of the play?

5. Explain the ambiguity of the nunnery scene.

6. What is the main thrust of Hamlet’s diatribe against Ophelia?

Act IV, Scene I

1. How is this scene ambiguous regarding Gertrude's "conversion" from the previous scene?

Act IV, Scene II

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

Act IV, Scene III

1. Why can't Claudius simply deal with Hamlet swiftly and harshly as allowed by law?

2. How does this scene advance Hamlet's developing awareness of death?

3. Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know the true purpose of their journey to England?

Act V, Scene I

1. What is the significance of the various skulls the gravedigger digs up during this scene? How do they contribute to the evolution of Hamlet's understanding of death?

2. How does the entrance of Ophelia's funeral procession continue this evolution?

3. What does Laertes and Hamlet's fight in Ophelia's grave foreshadow?

4. Why is this scene in prose?

5. How do Hamlet and the gravedigger view the sociological implications of death differently?
