

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Hamlet

by William Shakespeare

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ISBN 978-1-60389-560-6

Item No. 201153

Hamlet

Act 1, Scene 1

1. In the first scene of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare creates an eerie atmosphere with the presence of a ghost. Although people in the twenty-first century generally do not believe in ghosts, most people in Elizabethan times did, including the characters in this play. Look up Elizabethan ghost-lore, and write a paragraph explaining what people believed about ghosts during that time.
2. Because Horatio is a scholar, the guards rely on his opinion of the ghostly apparition.
 - A. Explain Horatio's various opinions of this apparition throughout the scene.
 - B. Why has Horatio's opinion changed much from the time that he first heard of the ghost's appearance?
 - C. What does he think the appearance of this ghost means to the state of Denmark?
3. Marcellus asks Horatio to explain why the people of Denmark are involved in preparations for war. Horatio answers him, explaining the relations between Norway and Denmark. In your own words, explain why these countries are fighting.
4. Horatio also tells the guards frightening things about Rome before the fall of the "mightiest Julius."
 - A. What does he tell them that is frightening?
 - B. We often hear about the fall of Rome and the great Julius Caesar. Do some research on Julius Caesar. Who was he? When did he rule? Why is he famous? Why did Rome decline in power during his reign?

Response Journal

Act I, Scene II

5. With scene II, the plot begins to move forward. It opens with the King Claudius and Queen Gertrude entering, accompanied by Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, Voltimand, and Cornelius, along with various lords and attendants of the court. The king addresses them all formally.
 - A. Make a list of the points King Claudius makes in his opening statement.
 - B. What does Laertes ask of the king?
 - C. What does the king ask of Hamlet?
 - D. What is Hamlet's answer, and what do you think Hamlet means by that?
6. Queen Gertrude tells Hamlet that she is upset with him because he continues to wear black. How does Hamlet answer her?
7. Afterwards, the king lectures Hamlet about his appearance and behavior. Pretend you are Hamlet and have just been reprimanded. Write an email to a friend telling him everything the king has just said to you. Include your feelings about being scolded and your feelings towards the king.
8. After everyone exits, Hamlet delivers his first soliloquy. Rephrase it in modern English. If you were his friend and he were telling this to you, what would you say to him?
9. In this soliloquy, Hamlet mentions Hyperion and, a satyr, Niobe, and Hercules. Research these figures in Greek mythology, and explain what they are. How do each of these figures relate to what Hamlet is saying?

Hamlet

Act I, Scene III

10. Scene III introduces a new dramatic element. Hamlet loves Ophelia; however, Laertes has some reservations, which he expresses to his sister. In your own words, tell Ophelia how Laertes feels and how she answers him.

11. As we know, Laertes will be leaving for France. In this scene, Polonius gives his son advice.
 - A. Make a list of the points Polonius makes.
 - B. Make a list of the points that your own parent or guardian might make to you.
 - C. Are the points similar or different?
 - D. What do you think of Polonius' advice?
 - E. What do you think of your parent's or guardian's advice?

12. Polonius then gives Ophelia advice. Her response is, "I shall obey, my lord." Pretend your own parent or guardian gave you similar advice and that you answered as Ophelia did. Write an email to a friend expressing your true feelings about what you have just been told.

Act I, Scene IV

13. In this scene, Hamlet is pondering what causes that “vicious mole of nature” in people, which leads to their downfall. It could be, he says, something they were born with or the result of “Fortune’s star.” Alternatively, it could be caused by the “o’ergrowth of some complexion/ Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason.” In this context, “complexion” means humor or trait. In the Renaissance, one’s personality was often attributed to an overabundance or a particular body fluid, which was referred to as a “humour.” Research the Renaissance theory of the four humours and briefly define each one.
14. In this scene, the ghost finally appears to Hamlet. Why do you think Hamlet insists on following the ghost despite Horatio’s fear that it will “draw [him] into madness.
15. Examine your own thoughts about lunacy, loss of reason, and madness. Make a list of things that might cause someone’s mental abilities to become distorted. Compare them with Shakespeare’s and the general Elizabethan reasons for an onset of madness. In a short letter, explain to a classmate, who doesn’t quite understand, how Shakespeare must have viewed mental illness.

Hamlet

Act I, Scene V

16. Imagine you are Hamlet. In a journal entry, record your feelings about what the ghost has just told you. Use the ghost's and/or Hamlet's own words to help you express your feelings. End your journal entry with the two lines of Hamlet's dialogue that best express his intense frustration.

Act II, Scene I

17. As Act II begins, Polonius tells Renaldo to inquire about Laertes in Paris. Is this a good way for a father to check up on a son? Pretend you are Laertes and you have somehow found out what your father has told Renaldo to do. Write a letter to Polonius telling him how you feel about it.
18. In this scene, Ophelia tells her father how Hamlet has frightened her. Suppose you are a psychologist, and you have just been told the same story. Write a report you might share with the chief counselor of your clinic, giving your assessment of Hamlet's actions, related by Ophelia.