

Hamlet

Week 1

Hamlet, at its core, is a play about loss, grief, and revenge. Hamlet loses his father, and when a ghost appears and tells him that his father was murdered by his uncle, he must decide what he is going to do.

Things to think about:

- Does taking revenge on someone fix the problem? Does it make you feel better? Why?
- Hamlet begins the play having been completely consumed by his grief. Have you ever felt completely hopeless? How did you move past it? How does Hamlet go about moving past his own grief?

Characters:

Hamlet – Prince of Denmark. He has just returned from university in Wittenberg after his father’s death and arrives home to learn that his father is marrying his uncle. He is appalled that his mother would marry his uncle only two months after his father’s passing. When the ghost of his father informs Hamlet that he was murdered by Hamlet’s uncle, he makes Hamlet promise to avenge his death.



Claudius – The new king of Denmark. He murdered his own brother so that he could take his brother’s throne and wife. Initially, he suspects Hamlet’s madness is caused by his father’s death, but later believes that something more sinister is afoot.

Getrude – Hamlet’s mother and Claudius’ new wife. She is very much in love with Claudius but is worried about her son’s melancholy.

Polonius – Father to Ophelia and Laertes, and chief counselor to the King. He is verbose and a little silly at times but cares deeply for his children.

Ophelia – Daughter to Polonius and the love interest of Hamlet. At the beginning of the play, the audience learns that Hamlet has been trying to court Ophelia and has written her many letters. However, both Ophelia’s brother Laertes and her father warn her against

accepting Hamlet's offers. Hamlet, as the Prince of Denmark, will have to marry for political strength, not for love. When Polonius is killed, Ophelia loses her mind and is placed under the care of Claudius and Gertrude.

Laertes – Ophelia's brother and son to Polonius. He is a strong citizen to the crown and cares deeply about receiving Claudius' blessing to return to France. However, when his father is murdered, he does not hesitate to seek justice against those that have wronged him. He, as another "son of a dear father murdered," serves as a foil to Hamlet's vacillation.

Horatio – Hamlet's best friend from the University of Wittenberg. He serves as Hamlet's sounding board and companion throughout the play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – Other friends of Hamlet's from university.

Fortinbras – the crown prince of Norway whose father was killed by Hamlet's father many years before. Fortinbras, a prince who is not afraid of taking action, also serves as foil to Hamlet. He is everything that Hamlet is supposed to be.

Exercise 1:

Take a look at Hamlet's soliloquy from Act 1, Scene 2. Why is Hamlet upset? Is it because of his father's death, as Gertrude and Claudius seem to think? Or is it because his mother has married his uncle? Which parts of the passage support your decision? Underline them.

HAMLET

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this:
But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and Earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on. And yet, within a month
(Let me not think on 't; frailty, thy name is woman!),
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she
(O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer!), married with my
uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

Exercise 2:

Watch this [scene](#) from Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 adaptation of *Hamlet*.

How does Hamlet behave before he sees the ghost? Do you think he expects to find the ghost of his father there? How does the ghost's story affect him?



Shakespeare and Social Justice:

- *Hamlet* features a kingdom in which the current king only attained his position through regicide. In a society in which the leader is corrupt, who is responsible for righting wrongs? Why?
- Do the personal lives of politicians and monarchs affect their ability to lead their government?