

Hamlet

Viewing Guide

Introduction

The purpose of a curriculum guide is to provide you, as an audience member, a resource to utilize before and after attending the performance.. The guide contains background information on Shakespeare and the history of the play as well as suggestions for viewing and reflective questions. Please let us know how we can improve future viewing guides and your thoughts on this one. You may email us at amandarudolph73@gmail.com. Your thoughts and ideas would be greatly appreciated.

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His parents were John and Mary, a glover and a descendant of farmers. In 1582, Shakespeare married Ann Hathaway and by 1585 they had three children. Around 1591, Shakespeare moved to London to work as an actor. He was involved with the Lord Chamberlain's Men company. Although Shakespeare is well known for his plays, he also wrote sonnets and poems. He was successful and had many sources of income from acting, writing, directing and stock in The Kings Men company. Shakespeare died in 1616. In 1623, Shakespeare's first folio was published including 154 sonnets, 37 plays, and 2 poems.

Summary of Hamlet

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. His father was murdered by Claudius, his brother. After the murder, Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, married Claudius. At the start of the play, two months have passed since the murder. Hamlet has been away at school previously.

The play opens with two guards encountering a spirit of the dead King. Horatio, a school friend of Hamlet's, is summoned. He encounters the ghost and informs Hamlet. The following night Hamlet speaks with the ghost of his father who tells him he was murdered by Claudius and Hamlet must avenge his death. Hamlet takes the ghost seriously.

As Hamlet decides how to enact the revenge, he acts mad. School friends are summoned to keep tabs on Hamlet. He also encounters Ophelia who he had previously wooed. After reports of madness and witnessing madness from Hamlet, Claudius decides to send him away to England. Meanwhile, Hamlet has engaged a troupe of players. He arranges for them to play a scene resembling the murder of the King. Claudius reacts and Hamlet is convinced of his guilt.

Hamlet is summoned to his mother's chamber. He notices a spy behind a tapestry and stabs Polonius, Ophelia's father. Claudius sends Hamlet to England with a letter that asks the English to kill him upon arrival. Hamlet avoids death and returns to Elsinore. Laertes, Polonius's son, has returned from France during Hamlet's absence and desires revenge for his father's murder.

He and Claudius plan a duel. Laertes will duel with Hamlet with a poison tipped sword. During the duel, Claudius poisons a drink. Hamlet declines the drink and the Queen drinks it. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword and in a scuffle, Hamlet retrieves the poisoned sword and wounds Laertes. The Queen dies after warning of the poison. Laertes tells Hamlet of the poisoned sword and dies. Hamlet kills the Claudius and dies. Horatio speaks of the scene while Fortinbras enter with an army and becomes the monarch.

Essential Questions Related to Hamlet

- What is madness?
- What does a conscience do?
- Should we always obey our parents?
- Do young people act differently from older people? Why?
- Is revenge ever necessary?
- What is fate?
- What makes a tragedy?
- What is your definition of courage?

These questions may be used to guide the investigation of the play. Students should be able to answer them with some examples of support by the end of the unit. Their answers should vary.

Pre-Viewing Activities

1. Think of famous quotes from play ("To be or not to be that is the question"). Think about what that quote may mean and then listen for them in the performance. A good source of quotes is <https://www.rsc.org.uk/hamlet/about-the-play/famous-quotes>
2. Explore the essential question: Is revenge ever necessary? Think of situations you may condone revenge. Consider this as you watch the performance.

Post-Viewing Activities

1. Think of the actions of the play. What are the different themes and interpretations of the story and characters? Are there differences in the characters of Gertrude and Ophelia based on gender roles in the play?
2. Write reviews of the play through short form videos. Post your review video on social media using #tsf2026 or @texasshakes.

Useful Websites

<https://www.folger.edu/>
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning/zone/hamlet/story/plot>
<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/shakespeare-plays/hamlet/>

Useful Reference Sources

Gibson, R. (2016). *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge University Press.

Banks, F. (2014). *Creative Shakespeare: The Globe education guide to practical Shakespeare*. The Arden Shakespeare.

Dakin, M.E. (2009). *Reading Shakespeare with young adults*. National Council of Teachers of English.