

# HAMLET

## Close Reading Worksheet One Act, I, Scenes I and II

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Answer these questions in the necessary detail in your workbook.

### Act I, Scene I

1. At what time does this scene begin? At what time does it end?
2. What mood does this first scene suggest?
3. Shakespeare often uses his opening scenes to provide important background information. What do you learn in this scene about current conditions in Denmark?
4. Give at least two adjectives that describe Horatio.

### Act I, Scene II

5. What does Claudius accomplish in his opening speech? What sort of a leader does Claudius appear to be?
6. How does Claudius treat Hamlet differently from Laertes? Why does he treat Hamlet in this way?
7. Drawing from his first three lines in the play (69, 71, 78), give one initial impression of Hamlet.
8. What theme is introduced by Hamlet's line, "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.' "
9. In each of his soliloquies, Hamlet reveals himself in a personal way to the audience. What do you learn about him from the soliloquy beginning, "O that this too too solid flesh"?
10. What is the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio?
11. At the end of the scene, what does Hamlet resolve to do?

### Application

In the opening scene Shakespeare creates a mood of darkness and foreboding on the castle walls. Write a short essay describing a specific place with a similar or different mood. First, jot down in a few words the dominant impression you plan to create. Then, list words or phrases that will help you create the mood or impression. Finally, write your essay using these materials.

# • TEACHER'S GUIDE

## Hamlet

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### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Although we have less information about his personal life than we would wish to, we know enough to be sure that he did indeed write the plays that made him known as the greatest of the world's dramatists. The son of John Shakespeare, a businessman and active citizen, Shakespeare presumably went to the town school, where he probably received a good education at the hands of a university-trained master. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway; they had three children. Aside from these facts, all we know is that he reached London in the late 1580's and soon became well-known as a playwright and poet. In 1594 he helped form a theatre company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which in 1603 became the King's Men, and became a partner in the Globe Theatre, where the company performed. He supposedly acted small parts in his own plays, including the Ghost in *Hamlet*. His success in the theatre allowed him to purchase a family coat of arms, as well as one of the best houses in Stratford. He retired to his home town around 1611 and lived there until his death on April 23, 1616.

### MAJOR WORKS

Shakespeare wrote over three dozen plays, as well as sonnets and long narrative poems. His plays are generally classified as histories, comedies, tragedies, and romances. Principal examples of each type are:

- Histories: *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (Parts I and II), *Richard III*. About the struggles for power in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
- Comedies: *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*. About young lovers overcoming obstacles; full of clowning and cases of mistaken identity.
- Tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. About the deaths of kings and other high people, whether through error or crime.
- Romances: *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*. About the reuniting of separated lovers and families; full of magic and mystery.

See Related Reading for works by Shakespeare specifically connected to *Hamlet*.

### CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

*Hamlet* displays many of the principal qualities on which Shakespeare's fame rests; among these are the diversity and vitality of his characters, the richness of his language, and his concern with universal human questions. Hamlet the prince may well be the most famous of all literary characters. The greatest actors (and even the actress Sarah Bernhardt), have eagerly sought the part, and critics have studied Hamlet's character for centuries. Polonius is the archetype of the wordy old counselor, Ophelia, of the lovelorn maiden. Even such minor figures as Osric and the Gravedigger are made memorable in their brief appearances.

Shakespeare is also the master of blank verse, the (usually) unrhymed iambic pentameter that was the accepted poetic form for Elizabethan drama. (Important stretches of the play, particularly when Hamlet is mad or talks to a lesser character, are in prose.) Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* devotes twenty columns to passages from *Hamlet*; many of these, from Horatio's words about the Christmas season (1,2) to Polonius's advice on borrowing and lending (1,3) to Hamlet's great soliloquies, are familiar even to those who have never read the play.

These artistic qualities would be unimportant, however, if Shakespeare did not deal with topics of universal significance. In *Hamlet*, for example, he examines the effects of loss and betrayal on a sensitive person, while raising fundamental questions about the value of life and the ethics of revenge. Because Shakespeare is such a serious student of the human condition, he does not offer any simple answers to these questions. Whether Hamlet is mad, whether he is a delayer, whether he is responsible for the wrongful death of Ophelia, and whether he dies content with his actions are all questions the reader must decide personally. The fact that we return again and again to the play in quest of these answers is the true proof of Shakespeare's genius.

### RELATED READING

- Shakespeare's *Sonnets* treat the problems of death and mortality and of friendship in a manner very different from that of *Hamlet*. *Troilus and Cressida*, a play written at about the same time as *Hamlet*, deals with another young man stunned by a betrayal. The character of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* may be compared to that of Hamlet and that of Macbeth in *Macbeth* to Claudius. All are available in Washington Square Press Folger Library editions.