



## Character Explorer:

# Hamlet from *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Who is Hamlet?

One of Shakespeare's most famous characters, Hamlet has a lot to deal with:

- Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, has recently died.
- Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, has since married her dead husband's brother, Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who is now King.
- The ghost of King Hamlet appears, telling Hamlet that he was murdered by his brother Claudius and telling young Hamlet to avenge his death.
- Hamlet is in a close but troubled relationship with Ophelia, the child of one of Claudius' counsellors.
- Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, arrive for a visit at the request of Claudius, who wants them to spy on Hamlet and report back.

### What happens with Hamlet

We first see Hamlet at the edge of a big, public scene at the Danish court. After addressing other matters, both Claudius and Gertrude try to persuade Hamlet to stay in Denmark and to stop mourning King Hamlet's death. Hamlet agrees to stay in Denmark.

That night, the ghost of King Hamlet tells Hamlet something big: while everyone believes he was killed by a poisonous serpent, he was murdered when his brother Claudius poured a lethal poison into his ear. The ghost tells Hamlet to take revenge.

Hamlet isn't sure if the ghost is real, so decides that more evidence of the new King's guilt is needed before taking any action. Meanwhile, Claudius and various courtiers try to figure out what's going on with Hamlet, whose behaviour is starting to worry them.

A troupe of players (actors) arrives at court, and Hamlet asks them to perform a play that reenacts King Hamlet's murder. Upon seeing this scene, Claudius storms out. Hamlet believes this proves that Claudius is guilty of murder. However, Hamlet next encounters Claudius at prayer, and decides to delay killing him until he's in a different situation, to avoid the risk of sending his soul to heaven.

In a confrontation with Gertrude, Hamlet hears a noise behind a tapestry. Believing it to be Claudius, Hamlet stabs through the fabric, only to have killed Ophelia's father, Polonius, instead. Hamlet is immediately sent to England, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

*But wait, there's more!* ➡

## What happens with Hamlet (continued)

Hamlet returns and tells Horatio about a surprising turn of events: after discovering that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying letters requesting Hamlet's immediate execution, Hamlet secretly changed the documents to request Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's execution. Hamlet then escaped with pirates and returned to Denmark. While Hamlet shares this story with Horatio, a funeral procession arrives. Upon hearing that it's Ophelia who has died, Hamlet gets into a fight with Ophelia's brother Laertes.

To make amends with Laertes, Hamlet accepts a challenge to a fencing match. It is meant to be a friendly sporting event. However, Laertes' sword draws blood after simple touching Hamlet, and Hamlet realizes that Laertes is fencing with a sharp, instead of a blunted weapon. Hamlet and Laertes fight in earnest, and Hamlet stabs Laertes with the sharpened sword. Gertrude, who has been watching the fencing, suddenly falls, the unsuspecting victim of a fatal poison added to a cup that Claudius had prepared for Hamlet. Laertes reveals to Hamlet that it was all part of a plot and that they're both about to die thanks to a lethal poison placed on the sharpened sword. Before dying, Laertes asks for forgiveness and tells Hamlet that Claudius is to blame. Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and pours the remaining poisoned wine down his throat. Hamlet then dies, telling Horatio, "The rest is silence."

## Some words used to describe Hamlet

It can be illuminating to see what other characters say about Hamlet, but remember, it might reveal as much about them as it does about Hamlet.

sweet	desperate	changed	muddy-mettled	proud	unkind
good	ambitious	most dear	pigeon-liver'd	dull	merry
apt	mad	revengeful	distracted	noble	dead

## Some things Hamlet says throughout the play

Lines that a character speaks can reveal details about their personality and relationships with other characters. The lines below are listed in the order that they appear in the play.

- 1 How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world.
- 2 Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
- 3 O wonderful!
- 4 When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk  
from a handsaw.
- 5 I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all  
my mirth.
- 6 O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
- 7 To be or not to be, that is the question.  
Now could I drink hot blood  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on.
- 8 Give me your pardon, sir.
- 9 The rest is silence.

## Challenging assumptions about Hamlet

Many people describe Hamlet as indecisive and criticize the character for delaying revenge. However, consider Hamlet's dilemma from your own perspective: do you believe in ghosts? what would you do if a ghost appeared and told you to murder someone? You might doubt your perceptions, especially if you're experiencing deep grief. What do you think of Hamlet's behaviour and choices? Would yours be different?

Another common topic of debate is Hamlet's "madness". Some people suggest that it's all an act, citing places in the text where Hamlet shares plans to pretend. Other's point out Hamlet's extreme emotions and actions as evidence of a genuine mental health crisis. What do you think? Can we talk about Hamlet's mental and emotional state with compassion? Does Hamlet's state change over the course of the play?

## Your interpretation of Hamlet

Now it's your turn! Read through the information about Hamlet on the previous pages. Then, using these words, lines, and the story, choose activities from the list below to explore your own interpretation.

### MOVE

**How would your Hamlet move?** How would you express the thoughts with your body? How could you use your voice and/or body to create this character? Based on what you now know of Hamlet, create your own movement-based interpretation of the text.

**Create a sculpture or statue** using your body to express what Hamlet's lines mean to you. Create a gesture or sculpture for each line. You could also speak the line as you hold each pose. Try it many different ways and notice how each version feels to you.

### LISTEN

**What would your Hamlet's soundtrack be?** What types of instruments, ambient sounds, or music would accompany your Hamlet? Make a Hamlet playlist, or create a soundscape: if you like, you could include recordings of the descriptive words and/or the Hamlet's lines.

### WRITE

**Create a poem, story, or monologue** inspired by the list of words that describe Hamlet. Then, create another piece using the lines that Hamlet speaks. How are the two different?

### MAKE

**Create a costume design.** What would your Hamlet wear? Think about all aspects of the character: where do they live? what's the climate like? how do they spend their time? how do they move? what do they want others to think about them? what do they enjoy wearing?

**Gather objects** that your Hamlet might use or care about. (Just remember to ask before borrowing anything!) Use these props in your other explorations, or create a still life of the objects by drawing or photographing them.

**Create an art project** inspired by the words used to describe Hamlet and by the lines that Hamlet speaks.

## Reflect

- What discoveries did you make as you explored the text?
- Why did you make the creative choices that you made?
- What did you learn about Hamlet? About the play? About yourself?