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Study Guide

for

Hamlet

by William Shakespeare



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Meet William Shakespeare



*As I declare our Poet, him
Whose insight makes all others dim.
A thousand poets pried at life
And only one amid the strife
Rose to be Shakespeare.*

—Robert Browning, nineteenth-century English poet

For more than 400 years, the work of poet, playwright, and actor William Shakespeare has fascinated people from all walks of life, all over the world. In fact, many people consider him to be the greatest dramatist ever.

Altogether, Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays, including comedies, tragedies, and histories. He also wrote more than 150 sonnets, establishing himself as one of the greatest lyric poets of his era. Shakespeare's many plays and poems reveal his talents as a writer and his keen understanding of human nature. The personalities of his main characters are often complex, revealing the ambiguities and personal conflicts found in all of us.

Little is known, however, about Shakespeare's own personal life, because he left no diaries or letters. Records indicate that Shakespeare spent his youth in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small English village. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove maker and local political figure. His mother, Mary Arden, came from a family of wealthy land owners. It is believed that

young Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, where he probably studied literature and Latin. Unlike many other writers of his time, he did not receive a formal education at a university.

In 1582 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. In a poem expressing her love for Shakespeare, Hathaway wrote:

*For queens themselves might envy me,
Who scarce in palaces can find
My Willie's form, with Willie's mind.*

Hathaway and Shakespeare had three children, Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith. Scholars believe that Shakespeare might have worked as a school teacher during the early years of his marriage.

In the late 1580s, Shakespeare moved to London and quickly became prominent in the theater. He joined Lord Chamberlain's Men, the most popular troupe of actors in London. With this troupe, he acted in productions throughout the 1590s and gave two special performances for Queen Elizabeth I. While acting, Shakespeare was also writing plays and earning recognition as one of the greatest playwrights in England. He wrote in the language of ordinary people during his time, and the characters and situations in his plays appealed to a variety of people in English society—from kings and queens to peasants who could not read or write.

In the late 1590s and early 1600s, Shakespeare devoted more time to writing and produced many of his greatest tragedies, including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. In 1610 he retired and returned to Stratford, where his family had lived throughout his career. Despite the popularity of his work, Shakespeare never created a collection of his own plays for publication.

Shakespeare died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two and was buried under the floor of Stratford Church. Knowing that burial space in the church was limited and that graves were often moved after someone died, Shakespeare used his epitaph as a warning:

*Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.*

Introducing the Play

Hamlet has onstage action in . . . plenty. A ghost walks the stage; people are killed by stabbing and poisoning; a young woman runs mad, is drowned offstage, and is buried on stage; two skeletons are dug up and scattered over the stage; armies march, and there is a fencing match that ends up in a general slaughter.

—Edward Hubler, “Introduction to *Hamlet*”

As Hubler indicates, *Hamlet* is filled with action. It has long been one of Shakespeare’s most popular and frequently performed dramas, and part of its appeal undoubtedly lies in the dramatic action that takes place on stage. Yet Hubler also points out that one can hardly think of *Hamlet* as an action play. At the heart of *Hamlet* are profound questions about the nature of good and evil, and the play contains some of Shakespeare’s most psychologically complex characters. They are people driven to dramatic action by anger, grief, love, and despair.

Hamlet is a tragedy, a type of drama that presents a heroic or noble character with conflicts that are difficult or impossible to resolve. Maurice Charney, in *How to Read Shakespeare*, comments that in a tragedy

The characters involve themselves inextricably in that web of circumstances that will constitute their doom. Things change in tragedy, usually for the worse, and there is a sense that no one can resist the tragic momentum.

The greatness of Shakespeare’s technique lies in the way he constructs this momentum through intense action, rich language, and layer upon layer of metaphor and symbols. Like many of Shakespeare’s tragic characters, Hamlet has an intensity that is revealed in his complex range of emotions. The climax occurs not only in the outward events on stage, but also, and perhaps more importantly, within the character of Hamlet himself.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* corresponds to a legendary figure in Denmark’s history called Amleth.

The saga of Amleth was pieced together in the twelfth century by Saxo Grammaticus. He tells the story of young Prince Amleth, whose father is murdered by a brother. The story was retold in the sixteenth century in a collection of tragic tales by French writer Francois de Belleforest. Some scholars say that Belleforest’s version of the story, which was translated into English, was very likely the inspiration for Shakespeare’s tragedy.

What causes Shakespeare’s play to stand out from the other stories about Hamlet, or Amleth, is his in-depth characterization of the troubled prince and those around him. In the original legend, Amleth is clearly out for revenge. What distracts him from his purpose are external circumstances, not feelings of doubt or reluctance, or reflections on right and wrong.

In Shakespeare’s play, indecision is a major theme. Hamlet is haunted—literally—by his father’s murder and a desperate need to avenge the crime. But something holds him back from acting on this desire for revenge. What that “something” is has been debated for centuries. Scholars at the University of Liège in Belgium have commented that, “For Hamlet nothing is simple, everything raises questions.”

Despite the debate—or perhaps because of it—*Hamlet* remains popular to this day. Since the advent of film, more than twenty-five movies have been made based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Laurence Olivier, a famous British actor who performed the role of Hamlet in a 1948 film, declared

You can play it and play it as many times as the opportunity occurs and still not get to the bottom of its box of wonders. It can trick you round false corners and into cul-de-sacs, or take you by the seat of your pants and hurl you across the stars. It can give you moments of unknown joy, or cast you into the depths of despair. Once you have played it, it will devour you and obsess you for the rest of your life.

Not everyone thought of *Hamlet* as a raving success. Writer T. S. Eliot proclaimed it “most

certainly an artistic failure,” saying that the emotion found in the character of Hamlet is too intense for the amount of action that actually occurs. Conflicting opinions about the play abound, and controversy will, no doubt, continue. The key is to read the play and form one’s own opinion.

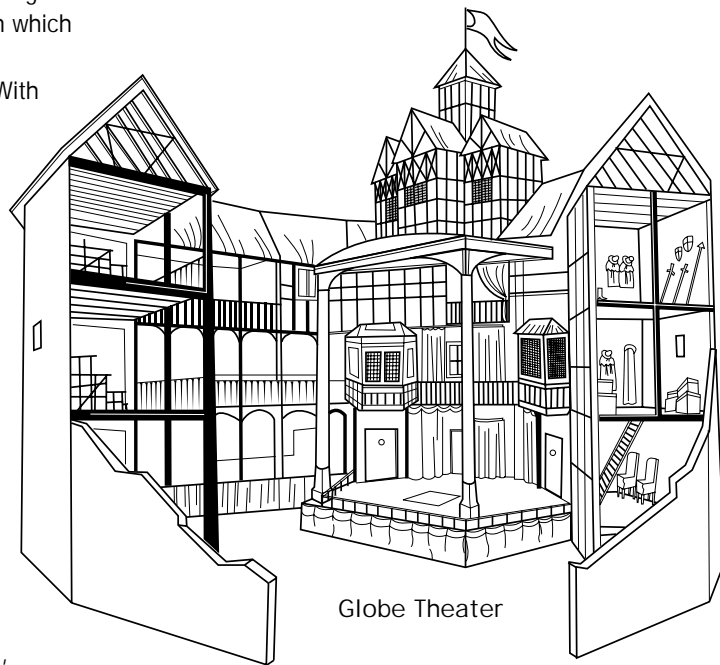
THE TIME AND PLACE

Actors in the earliest performances of *Hamlet* dressed in the elaborate clothing of Shakespeare’s England. However, the play is actually set in northern Europe several hundred years before Shakespeare was born. Most of the action takes place in and around Elsinore, Denmark’s royal castle.

Did You Know?

Shakespeare lived and wrote during the English Renaissance, a period in which many aspects of English society changed, including the theater. With the Renaissance came the first English theater building, constructed for James Burbage just outside the city of London in 1576. Other theaters soon followed. In 1598 Burbage and members of Lord Chamberlain’s Men—Shakespeare’s acting troupe—tore down the theater and used its materials to build the Globe Theater. Shakespeare was an important shareholder in this new theater.

The Globe was made of wood and was octagonal. Like other theaters of the time, it was open-air with the stage at its center. Poor theater-goers paid a penny to stand around three sides of the stage, while wealthy audience members sat in one of the three stories of seats along the theater walls. Audiences of this period were diverse and included people from all levels of English society. To capture the interests of such a varied audience, plays combined many elements, including slapstick, violence, historical satire, and vulgarity.



The Globe, like Burbage’s original theater, was built outside London. Theater owners wanted to avoid city authorities, many of whom disapproved of the theater because it drew large crowds, creating the potential for crime, the spread of disease, and the introduction of controversial ideas. Luckily for Shakespeare and other actors and playwrights of his time, Queen Elizabeth and members of the nobility supported theaters.

Before You Read

Hamlet Act 1

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What kinds of events in a person's life can cause overwhelming feelings of grief?

Sharing Experiences

With a partner, discuss different life situations that may be traumatic, such as the death of a loved one. Describe some of the characteristics of people who are grieving. Try to give reasons for their attitudes or actions.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how grief affects a young prince.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

At the time this play was written, ghosts and hauntings often appeared in literature and in theater productions. Ghosts returned to seek vengeance, reclaim property, or give warning of impending trouble. Shakespeare used ghosts in several of his works. Aside from Hamlet's father, Shakespeare's most famous ghosts include that of Julius Caesar in the tragedy *Julius Caesar* and Banquo in *Macbeth*. Both of these ghosts return from the dead to haunt the people responsible for their murders.

Dramatic Devices

Theater and drama today are much different from what they were in Shakespeare's time. In the Elizabethan era, women were not allowed on stage, so acting troupes consisted entirely of men and boys. Because of their high voices, young boys often played the parts of female characters. The stage itself had very little, if any, scenery. The play's setting was conveyed to the audience by words or actions of the actors. A nighttime setting, for example, might be signified by an actor carrying a torch on stage. Costumes, however, were anything but plain. Many were magnificent in color and style and often were used to denote the character's occupation or to serve as disguises. Sound effects, such as drum rolls and trumpet blasts, were also popular.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

apparition [əp'ə rish'ən] *n.* ghost; spirit

calumnious [kə lum'nē əs] *adj.* slanderous

canon [kan'ən] *n.* church law

countenance [koun'tə nəns] *n.* face; expression

discourse [dis'kôrs'] *n.* conversation

imminent [im'ə nənt] *adj.* ready to happen; inevitable

perilous [per'ə ləs] *adj.* dangerous

portentous [pôr ten'təs] *adj.* threatening

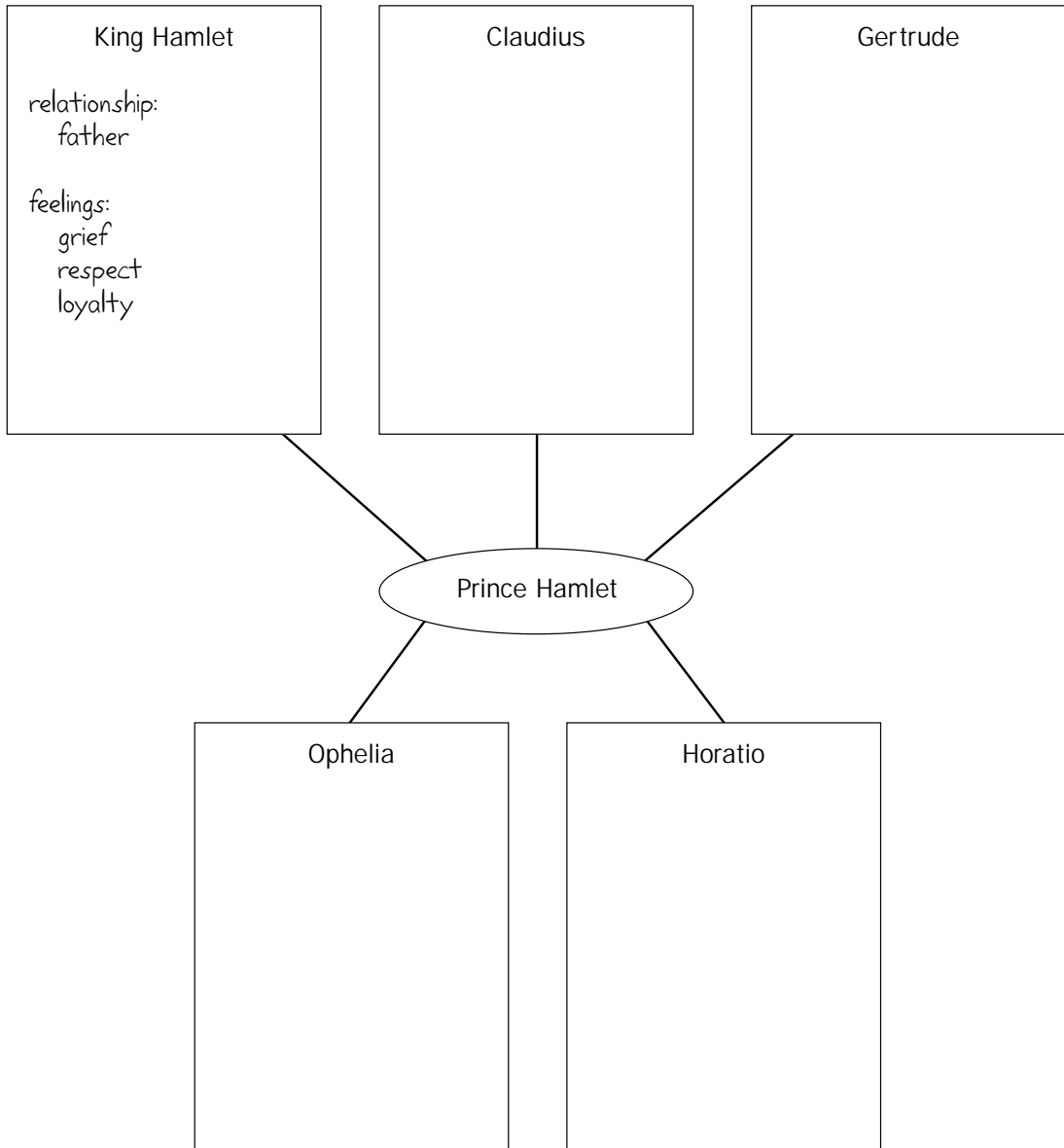
prodigal [prod'i gəl] *adj.* wasteful; extravagant

sullied [sul'ēd] *adj.* tarnished

Active Reading

Hamlet Act 1

All the major characters of *Hamlet* emerge in the first act. As you read act 1, focus on Hamlet's developing relationships with the characters listed below. In each box state the relationship between Prince Hamlet and the character named and then describe the feelings that the prince has toward that character.



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Responding

Hamlet Act 1

Personal Response

After reading this act, what questions would you like to ask Hamlet?

Write what Hamlet's answers might be to the questions you wrote above.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Describe the mood that Shakespeare creates in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, when the ghost first appears. What specific words and actions create this mood?

2. Who is Polonius? What is his relationship to Claudius and to Hamlet? Explain his feelings about Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet and the reasons behind those feelings.

3. Based on Hamlet's comments in act 1, what would you say are his feelings toward his mother's marriage? Cite specific lines to support your answer. Why do you think Hamlet keeps these feelings to himself?

Responding

Hamlet Act 1

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do the events of act 1 suggest to you that the ghost of Hamlet's father is real or just a product of Hamlet's imagination? Explain.

5. Based on Hamlet's relationships with his mother, Claudius, and Horatio, do you think he will be successful in carrying out the wishes of his father's spirit? Why or why not?

Literature and Writing

Character Analysis

Does Hamlet appear to be someone who is grieving or someone who is insane? Looking back at your notes from the **Focus Activity** on page 12, write a brief analysis of Hamlet's character in act 1. Include quotations from the play to support your analysis.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Recall a time when you experienced something unexpected that startled or frightened you. How did you feel? Discuss your reaction in your group. Then talk about how Shakespeare stages the ghost scene in *Hamlet*. What stage directions indicate the presence of a ghost? How do the characters react when they see it? How does Shakespeare try to blur the line between reality and the supernatural?

Performing

In small groups, take turns acting out the parts of Hamlet and his father in the ghost scene in act 1. What emotions do you think Hamlet feels in this scene? How should the ghost look and sound? Discuss these questions before the performances. After the performances, evaluate each person's portrayal.

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Before You Read

Hamlet Act 2

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How would you feel if a friend betrayed you? What if the friend acted out of concern for your well-being?

Quickwrite

Describe on paper an occasion when you thought a friend was not totally honest with you. How did it make you feel? Was your friend's behavior justified?

Setting a Purpose

Read about Hamlet and his relationships with his friends during a time of crisis.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

When Hamlet meets with the acting troupe that visits Elsinore Castle, he asks a player to give a speech about the death of King Priam, a figure in Greek mythology. In this speech the player describes the brutal murder of King Priam at the hands of Pyrrhus, witnessed by Priam's wife, Hecuba. Priam was the last ruler of Troy, a city conquered by forces from mainland Greece at the end of the legendary Trojan War. Pyrrhus led the final attack on Troy to avenge the death of his father, Achilles, who was killed by one of Priam's sons.

Appearance and Reality

The troupe of actors in act 2 will play an important role in Hamlet's pursuit of revenge. Shakespeare's use of the actors reflects one of the play's important themes—appearance versus reality. Like the actors, Shakespeare's main characters do not always present honest images of themselves to the world. This includes Hamlet, who is obsessed with finding truth but who hides his own true feelings and intentions.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

commission [kə mish'ən] *n.* order

firmament [fur'mə mənt] *n.* sky

malefaction [mal'ə fak'shən] *n.* evil deed; crime

pestilent [pes'tə lənt] *adj.* destructive; deadly

promontory [prom'ən tōr'ē] *n.* high land jutting into the sea

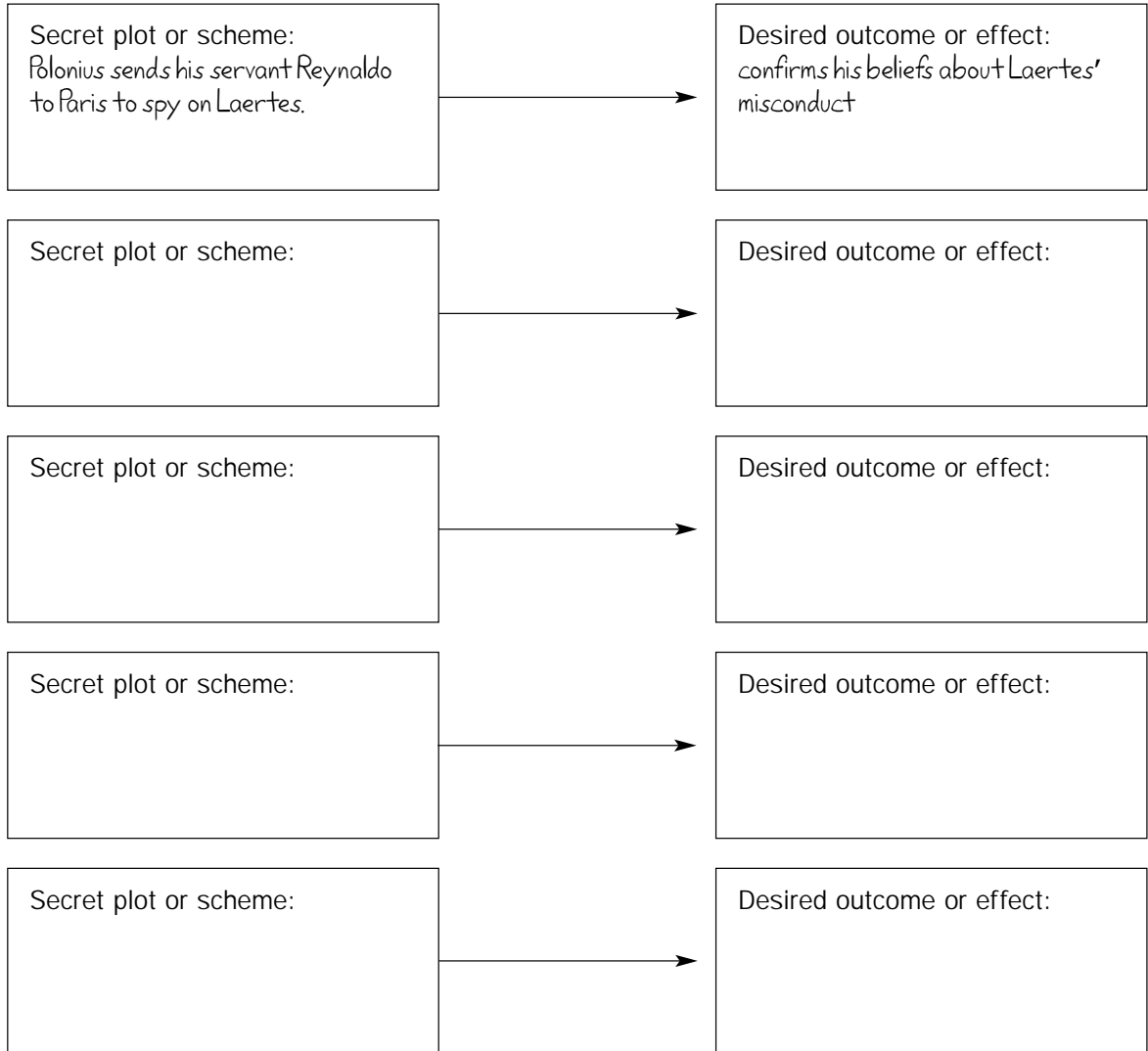
sovereign [sov'rən] *adj.* supreme in power

tedious [tē'dē əs] *adj.* dull and lifeless

Active Reading

Hamlet Act 2

In act 2 many of Shakespeare's characters are hatching secret plots to expose the motives and true feelings of other characters. As you read, complete the chart below by filling in a description of each scheme or plot and its desired effect. Use as many boxes as you need.



Responding

Hamlet Act 2

Personal Response

If Hamlet were your friend, what advice would you give him about his relationship with Ophelia?

Using your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 16, evaluate Hamlet's friends and associates. Does Hamlet seem to be surrounded by people he can trust?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Describe Hamlet's behavior when he visits Ophelia in scene 1. Do you think his actions provide evidence of his insanity or are his actions motivated by something else? Explain.

2. Who are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Why have they been invited to the castle? What motives do they have for carrying out the king's request?

3. Why is Hamlet bothered by the fact that one of the actors is able to read about the death of King Priam with such passion? How does Hamlet think he is different from the actor?

Responding

Hamlet Act 2

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you think Hamlet's hesitation in approaching his task of revenge is a sign of cowardice, or is his thoughtfulness admirable and understandable? Explain your answer.

5. The level of suspense escalates in act 2. How does Shakespeare accomplish this?

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Tone

The tone of a work of literature reflects a writer's attitude toward his or her subject. How does the tone of act 2 compare to the tone of act 1? Write at least two paragraphs to compare the tones. Use specific examples to support your ideas.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In scene 2, Hamlet says to Polonius, "You are a fishmonger." Hamlet continues to ridicule Polonius, but much of what he says is hidden in double meanings or attributed to his "madness." With your group, search for details in the dialogue that have double meanings. Then reenact this dialogue in your own words, making Hamlet's meaning clear. Compare your dialogue with that of other groups.

Sketch It

On a separate sheet of paper, make a drawing illustrating Hamlet's visit to Ophelia. Convey the characters' feelings in their facial expressions and body posture. Compare drawings with those your classmates have created, making note of the different emotions each person has chosen to emphasize.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Hamlet Act 3

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Have you ever felt uncertain about how to act or what action to take in response to a situation? What caused your feelings of uncertainty?

Discuss

In a small group, discuss different situations in which you or someone you know had difficulty choosing a particular course of action. Describe what the circumstances were and why it was hard to make the decision.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Hamlet grapples with difficult decisions.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In act 3, scene 2, Hamlet's play is preceded by a scene without dialogue, called a "dumb show." A dumb show was a common feature of pre-Shakespearean tragedies. Its purpose was to preview what was to happen in the upcoming play to provide audience members with background information and enhance their understanding of the play.

Sanity Versus Madness

Hamlet's sanity is a point of discussion throughout the play. Today, readers, theatergoers, and literary critics continue to debate this topic. Some critics believe that Hamlet's actions in act 3 support the idea that he has slipped into insanity. As you read, judge Hamlet's state of mind for yourself.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

paradox [par'ə doks'] *n.* something that seems absurd or against reason, but may nonetheless be true

perceive [pərsēv'] *v.* notice; see

pious [pi'əs] *adj.* devout

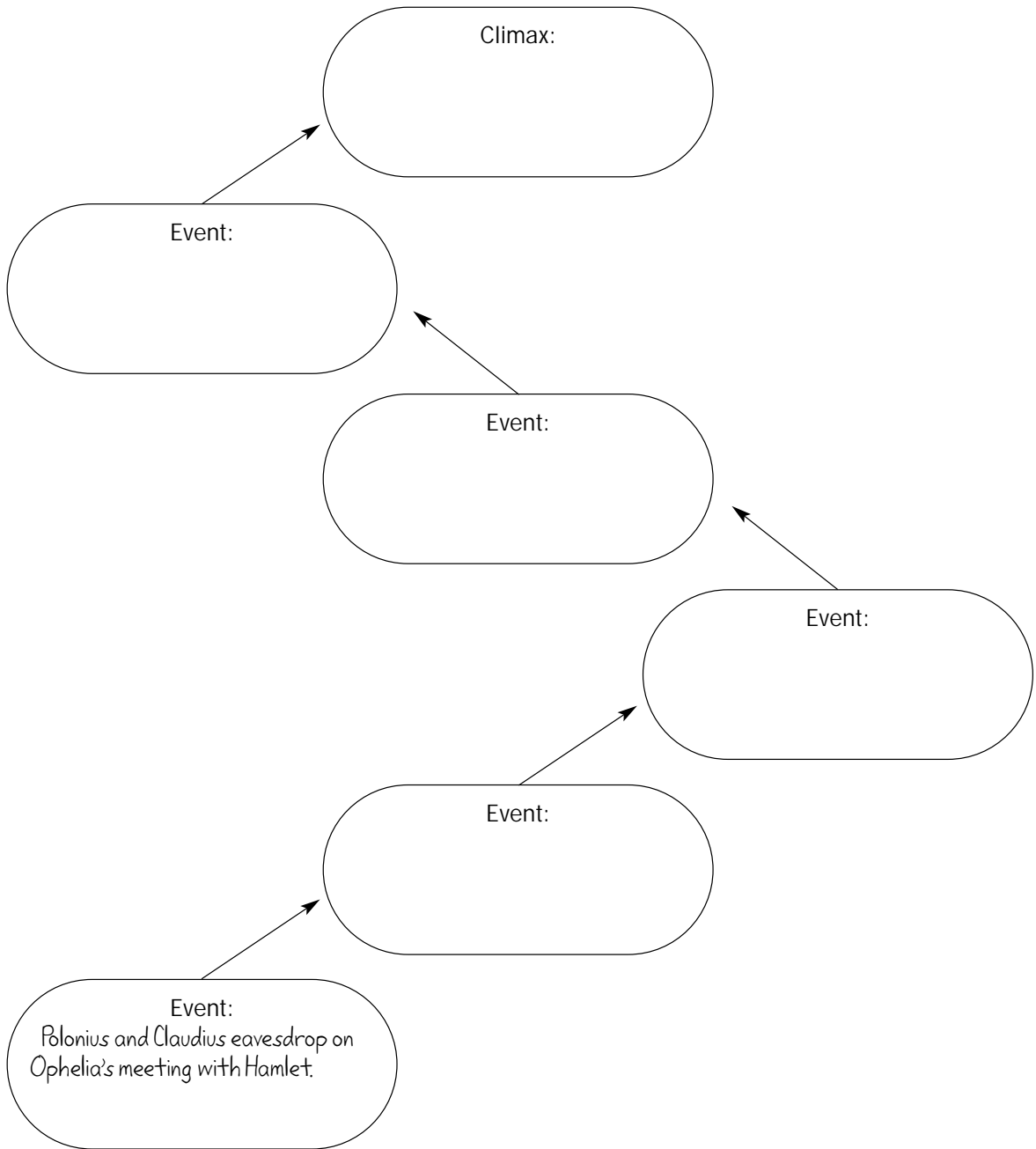
resolution [rez'ə lōʃshən] *n.* firmness; resolve

visage [viz'ij] *n.* face or facial expression

Active Reading

Hamlet Act 3

The play reaches its climax, or turning point, in act 3. As you read this act, use the ovals below to record the events leading up to the climax. Use as many ovals as you need.



Responding

Hamlet Act 3

Personal Response

Were you surprised when Hamlet decided not to kill Claudius while he was praying? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Do Claudius and Polonius have the same reason for spying on Hamlet and Ophelia? How are their goals similar? How are they different?

2. What do Hamlet and his mother discuss in her private chamber? What mixed feelings does Gertrude experience as she listens to her son?

3. Why, do you think, is Hamlet able to kill Polonius so easily, after he has been so hesitant to act in other situations? What does this reveal about Hamlet's state of mind?

Responding

Hamlet Act 3

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In act 3 King Claudius reveals his guilt and shows that he has a conscience. Do you feel differently about Claudius after hearing him express remorse? Why or why not?

5. What events in act 3 might be considered turning points?

Literature and Writing

Relaying a Message

Hamlet uses a play to reenact circumstances surrounding his father's death and to reveal Claudius's guilt. Think of someone to whom you would like to convey a message. Select a movie or television show that you think would convey your message. In two or three paragraphs, describe your message, the movie or television show you would select, and the reasons for your choice.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

What do you think of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia? How did you respond to his command, "Get thee to a nunnery"? Imagine that you are Ophelia's best friend and that you overheard her conversation with Hamlet. Advise her on how she should respond to Hamlet in the future.

Music Connection

In a small group, work together to design a sound track for act 3. Discuss what songs you might play for different scenes, such as Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia or his dialogue with his mother. Focus on conveying the mood of the scene. Then explain your selections to the rest of the class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Hamlet Act 4

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Think about the word *conflict* and what it means. What is a conflict that you or someone you know has experienced?

Web It

Create a word web for the word *conflict*. In circles attached to the word, list feelings or emotions that may be associated with conflict.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out more about Hamlet's internal conflicts and his conflicts with others.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

How many times have you heard the line "To be, or not to be—that is the question"? Many of the lines that Shakespeare wrote have become a part of our everyday language and culture. Here are some of the often-quoted lines you've read so far. How many of them have you heard before?

- "This above all, to thine own self be true" (act 1, scene 3)
- "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (act 1, scene 4)
- "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (act 2, scene 2)
- "Get thee to a nunnery" (act 3, scene 1)

Tragic Heroes

The central character of a tragedy is a tragic hero, or a noble character who meets his or her death typically because of a character defect or an error in judgment. The problem that causes a character's downfall is called a fatal flaw. This concept was first introduced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Aristotle referred to the flaw or error in judgment that causes a hero's suffering as *hamartia*, a Greek word meaning error or fault. Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. As the play draws to a close, try to identify Hamlet's tragic flaw.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

abatement [ə bāt' mənt] *n.* decline; end

convocation [kən' və kǎ' shən] *n.* gathering

cunning [kən' ɪŋ] *adj.* skill in deception

impetuous [ɪm pech' ō əs] *adj.* hasty; impulsive

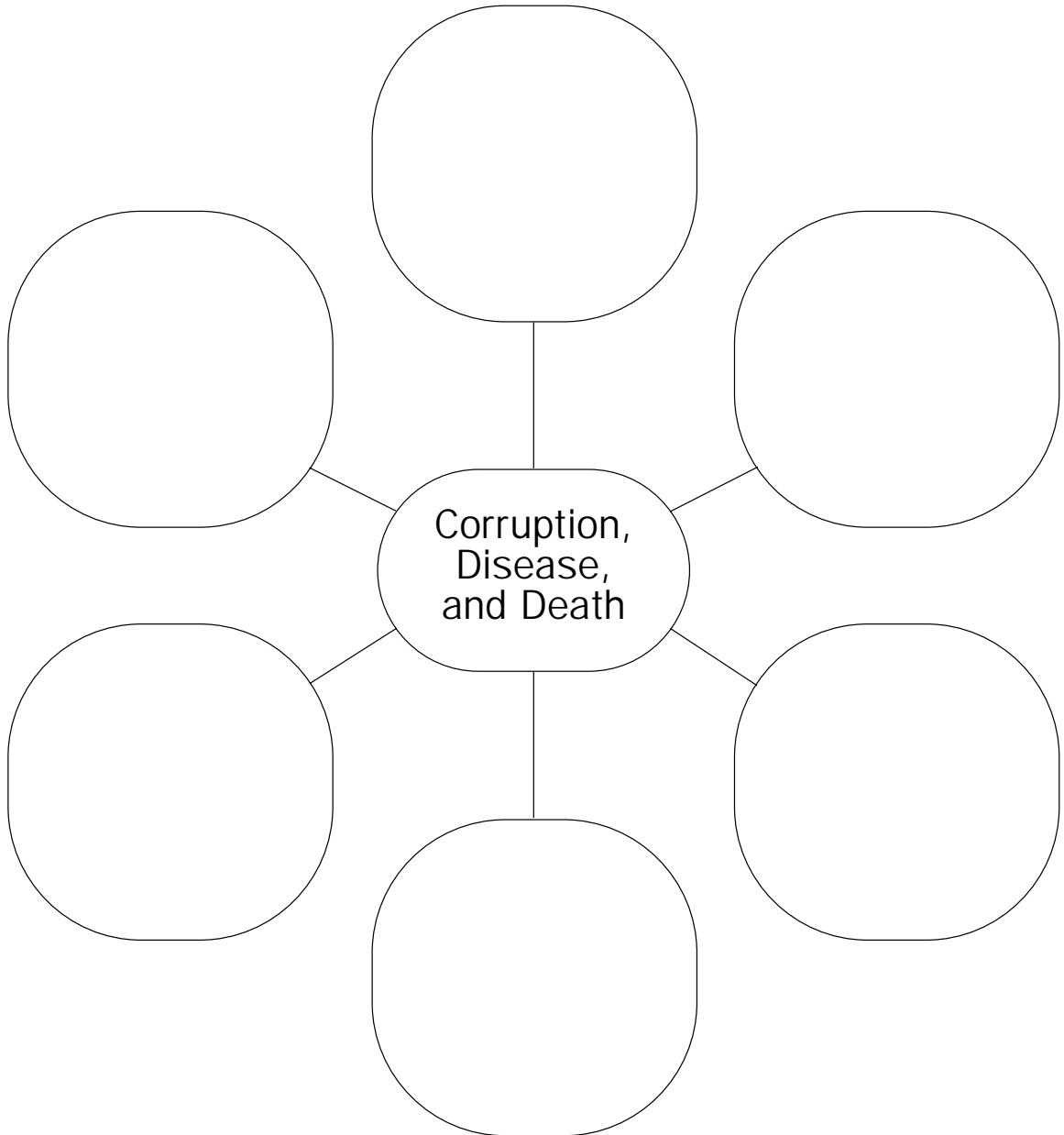
profound [prə found'] *adj.* having intellectual depth; intensely felt

rendezvous [rən' də vō ə] *n.* meeting; encounter

Active Reading

Hamlet Act 4

Images of corruption, disease, and death appear throughout this act to help convey the theme that a corrupt head of state corrupts the state itself. As you read, use this cluster diagram to record words and phrases used to create this type of imagery.



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Responding

Hamlet Act 4

Personal Response

What images from this act linger in your mind? Explain why these images made an impression on you.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Who is Fortinbras, and why is he entering Denmark? What function might Fortinbras serve in the play?

2. According to Hamlet, Fortinbras is an admirable man. How does the sight of Fortinbras and his troops change Hamlet's attitude?

3. Laertes responds in a variety of ways to the tragic events in his family. What do these responses reveal about his character? In what ways is he both similar to and different from Hamlet?

Responding

Hamlet Act 4

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you believe that Hamlet's attitude toward his task of revenge has changed in act 4? Why or why not?

5. How does the theme of deceit continue in act 4?

Literature and Writing

Hamlet's Soliloquies

Compare Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of act 4, scene 4, with the one in act 2, scene 2. Based on the sentiments and themes in these two passages, what assessment could you provide of Hamlet's image of himself? Write your assessment on a separate sheet of paper.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Does Claudius have redeeming values that Hamlet is ignoring? Is there some sense of honor in Claudius's actions? Discuss what Shakespeare could have done differently in *Hamlet* to evoke sympathy for Claudius.

Creative Writing

For each of the emotions you listed during the **Focus Activity** on page 24, identify an external or internal conflict in the play that might generate the emotion. Then write a poem about one conflict and the emotion that conflict generates.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Hamlet Act 5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Do you think an act of revenge is ever justified? Why or why not?

Make a List

Revenge is a common theme in movies today. With a partner, make a list of movies that feature a revenge theme. Discuss the motives for revenge and the conclusion of each movie.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out the conclusion to Shakespeare's tale of revenge.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, minor characters in *Hamlet*, take center stage in Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. First performed in 1966, Stoppard's play is a humorous look behind the scenes of *Hamlet* through the eyes of these two off-the-wall characters. Summoned to Denmark by the Danish king and queen, they encounter various amusing adventures along the way. Filled with witty dialogue, Stoppard's play uses the absurd to highlight the futility of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's actions and their inability to change their destiny. The play was later made into an award-winning movie.

Shakespeare's Comic Characters

Shakespeare's tragedies frequently include characters that provide comic relief in the midst of seriousness. Their role is to relieve the emotional intensity generated by the other events of the play. At the same time, the presence of these characters can increase audience awareness of the seriousness of the surrounding events by providing contrast. Because they are on the outside of the main action of the play and have a different perspective from that of the main characters, the commentary of comic characters can also be a source of new insight for the audience and for other characters. The gravediggers in act 5, identified as "Clown" and "Other" in earlier editions of the play, serve this purpose. Think about how these two characters provide contrast to the serious events of act 5 and help Hamlet to gain new insight into life and death.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

churlish [chur'lish] *adj.* ill-mannered

conjure [kon'jər] *v.* call up

equivocation [i kwiv'ə kā'shən] *n.* a statement with two possible interpretations

potent [pōt'ənt] *adj.* strong; effective

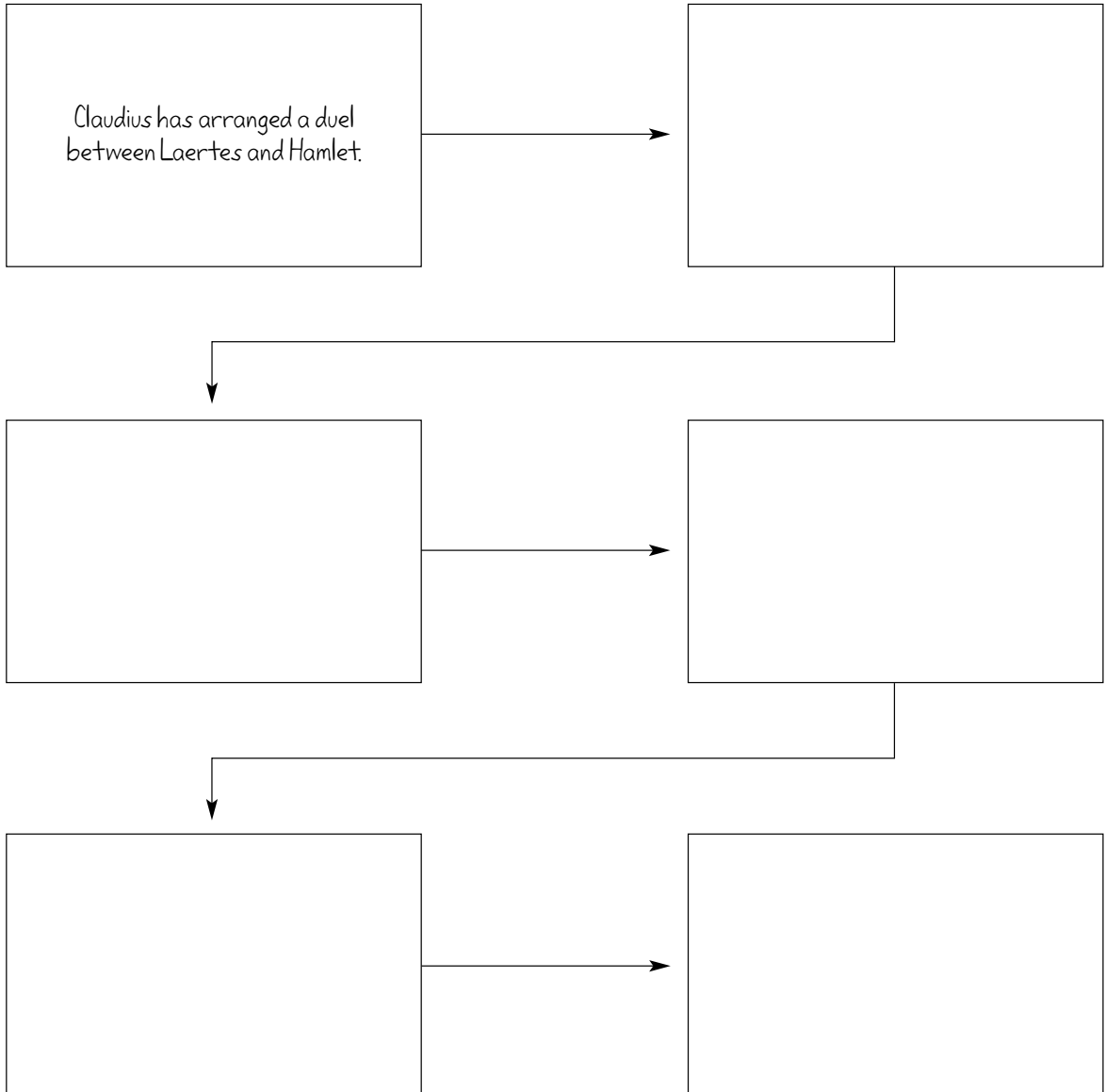
treachery [treach'ə rē] *n.* act of disloyalty

umbrage [um'brij] *n.* displeasure; resentment

Active Reading

Hamlet Act 5

Claudius has concocted a scheme to gain revenge against and ultimately kill Hamlet. Use this sequence chain to track the scheme as it unfolds.



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Responding

Hamlet Act 5

Personal Response

Did the end of the play surprise you? If you were the playwright, how would you end the play?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. For whom are the gravediggers preparing a grave? Why might Hamlet have decided to throw off his disguise at the gravesite?

2. When Hamlet realizes who the person being buried is, how does he react? Is his reaction what you would expect based on his earlier actions? Explain.

3. In what way does Hamlet's harsh treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern indicate a change in his attitude?

Responding

Hamlet Act 5

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In act 1 Hamlet states, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right.” Do you think he succeeded in setting things right? Why or why not?

5. Why do you think Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his story? How does Horatio’s role in Hamlet’s life differ from that of other characters in the play?

Literature and Writing

Obituary

Write a newspaper obituary for Hamlet. Include information about his place of birth, parents, education, employment, and hobbies, and the cause of his death. Draw upon details from the play as well as from your imagination to create the obituary.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Together, go back to the list of movies you created in the **Focus Activity** on page 28. Compare the conclusions of those movies with the conclusion of *Hamlet*. How do they differ? How are they similar?

Internet Connection

Use the Internet to find out more about the Globe Theater and how *Hamlet* was performed in Elizabethan times.

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Responding

Hamlet

Personal Response

When you began reading this play, you listed questions you might want to ask Hamlet. What questions would you ask him now that you have read the final act?

Has your opinion of Hamlet changed? In what way?

Writing About the Play

Hamlet is generally considered to be the hero of Shakespeare's play, although the nature of his heroism has been a much-debated topic. On a separate sheet of paper, define your own standards of heroism. Then analyze Hamlet's character according to your standards.

Draw on his relationships with other people as well as his goals in life and the ways in which he accomplishes them to support your analysis. Draw your own conclusion about Hamlet's status as a hero or non-hero.



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The Management of Grief

Bharati Mukherjee

Before You Read

Focus Question

Has someone you know ever lost a loved one? Did you find yourself at a loss for words? What did you do?

Background

Fiction-writer Bharati Mukherjee was born in India and now lives in the United States. This short story is one of a series that focuses on immigrants and the adjustments they must make in a new country. As in *Hamlet*, one of the main themes is grief.

Responding to the Reading

1. To what hope does Shaila cling after her tragedy?

2. At the end of the reading, Shaila hears the voices of her family telling her “Your time has come. Go, be brave.” What do you think this means?

3. **Making Connections** Using examples from the reading, describe which stages of grief Shaila experiences. How are her experiences and Hamlet’s experiences similar? different? Use lines from the play to support your answers.

Learning for Life

If you had a friend who was having a problem at home or at school, what could you do to support her or him? Make a list of six suggestions. Three of your suggestions should begin with “Do” and three should begin with “Don’t.” Compare your list with those of other students.

Of Revenge Francis Bacon

The Embassy of Death George Wilson Knight

Before You Read

Focus Question

How would you define the word *revenge*? Have you ever known anyone who sought revenge? What was the outcome?

Background

These two readings focus on revenge. Francis Bacon, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, defines and analyzes revenge. George Wilson Knight, a critic and a former Shakespearean actor, examines how revenge defines Hamlet’s character and his relationship with Claudius.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to Bacon, is it more honorable to seek or avoid revenge? What line in his essay confirms your answer?

2. Wilson contends that Claudius exhibits character traits that make him more of a hero than Hamlet. What are those traits?

3. Do you agree with Wilson’s interpretation? Why or why not?

4. **Making Connections** In your opinion, what does Bacon mean when he says, “Vindicative persons live the life of witches; who as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate.” Give an example from *Hamlet* that supports this statement.

Creative Writing

As king, Claudius is the highest authority in his realm. He is the supreme lawmaker and enforcer in Hamlet’s world. He is also the villain, because he murdered Hamlet’s father. Hamlet, therefore, has no legal recourse to address his father’s murder. Revenge is his solution. Considering that Claudius is “above the law,” develop a plot that portrays him as a hero and Hamlet as a villain. Use the same events, scenes, and characters as in *Hamlet*. Write a synopsis of your plot in the space below. Use a separate sheet of paper if you need more space.

from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Tom Stoppard

Before You Read

Focus Question

How do writers make a character in a book or movie seem humorous or foolish?

Background

English playwright Tom Stoppard transforms Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—two minor characters in *Hamlet*—into the two principal characters in his comic play written in the 1960s. In this scene, Stoppard copies the first fifty lines of dialogue from act 2, scene 2 in *Hamlet*. The similarity ends there, however, as this famous tragedy is recast as a comedy.

Responding to the Reading

1. How does Stoppard elevate the importance of the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and diminish the importance of other characters, such as Claudius and Hamlet?

2. What is the purpose of the game played by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

3. **Making Connections** Stoppard's play is considered a farce. A farce is a type of comedy that provokes laughter by placing one-dimensional characters in ridiculous situations. Give examples from the dialogue to show how Stoppard portrays Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as one-dimensional characters. Discovering the cause of Hamlet's insanity was not considered a "ridiculous" request in *Hamlet*. How does Stoppard make it seem ridiculous here?

Art Connection

Draw a caricature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern based on Stoppard's depiction of them in his play.

The Elizabethan Approach Martin Holmes

“To be, or not to be” soliloquy Prince Charles

Before You Read

Focus Question

Do you think the spoken word or the written word is more powerful? Why?

Background

Shakespeare wrote in the vernacular, or the language used by the common people of his time. Today, however, his language bears little resemblance to common speech. These two readings focus on Shakespeare’s language. Martin Holmes examines the power of the live performance versus the written word. Prince Charles has chosen another vehicle to relay a message about the power of the written word.

Responding to the Reading

1. How does Holmes compare the theater with the written text? What are some of the advantages of performing a play as opposed to reading it, according to Holmes?

2. Describe your first impression of Prince Charles’s translation of Hamlet’s soliloquy.

3. By translating Hamlet’s soliloquy, Prince Charles is making a statement about the evolution of modern language. What, in your opinion, is his message?

4. **Making Connections** What do you think Hamlet’s reaction might be to the modern-language translation by Prince Charles?

Performing

In small groups, take turns portraying Hamlet’s dialogue with the gravediggers. Then rewrite the dialogue by translating Shakespeare’s lines into modern clichés and slang. Perform this version in front of the class. Discuss the effectiveness of each performance.

The Character of Hamlet's Mother

Carolyn Heilbrun

Before You Read

Focus Question

Is there a woman whom you particularly admire? What strengths does she have?

Background

Critic Carolyn Heilbrun disagrees with other scholars on the subject of Gertrude's character in *Hamlet*. Heilbrun thinks that Gertrude has many positive character traits that have been overlooked.

Responding to the Reading

1. Explain how Heilbrun refutes other arguments in defense of her own theory.

2. In your opinion, is her argument effective? Explain.

3. **Making Connections** When you consider Heilbrun's analysis, does it change your opinion of Gertrude? Why? Does it change your opinion of Hamlet? Why?

Analyzing Quotations

Select quotations from the play to illustrate Gertrude's strengths and weaknesses. Present them in chart form below.

TEST: *Hamlet***Recall and Interpret (40 points total; 5 points each)****Write the letter of the best answer.**

- _____ 1. The ghost of King Hamlet returns to
a. seek revenge on Claudius. c. ask Hamlet’s forgiveness.
b. appeal to Hamlet to seek revenge on Claudius. d. warn Hamlet of a secret plot.
- _____ 2. In the first part of the play, Polonius attributes Hamlet’s strange behavior to
a. grief for his father. c. loss of sanity.
b. love for Ophelia. d. bitterness toward his mother.
- _____ 3. Hamlet has an opportunity to kill Claudius, but he does not follow through, because
a. he fears he will be discovered. c. he knows Polonius is hiding in the room.
b. his mother is still grieving for his father. d. Claudius is in prayer.
- _____ 4. In his “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet decides against suicide
a. to spare his mother grief. c. because he thinks it is wrong.
b. so that he can focus his efforts on revenge. d. because he cannot predict the outcome.
- _____ 5. Hamlet’s purpose in staging “Mousetrap” is to
a. discover if Claudius killed King Hamlet. c. seek revenge on Laertes and Ophelia.
b. frame Claudius for the murder of Polonius. d. entertain the royal court.
- _____ 6. Claudius sends Hamlet to England so that
a. Hamlet will join forces with Fortinbras. c. Hamlet will be murdered.
b. Laertes will side with him against Hamlet. d. Hamlet will be punished for Polonius’s death.
- _____ 7. Which of the following is NOT a theme developed in *Hamlet*?
a. Revenge is sweet. c. Things are not always as they appear to be.
b. The past comes back to haunt us. d. A corrupt leader corrupts the entire state.
- _____ 8. Which of the following best illustrates an internal conflict suffered by Hamlet?
a. Hamlet’s duel with Laertes c. Hamlet’s “play within a play”
b. Claudius’s plot to kill Hamlet d. Hamlet’s indecision about how to avenge his father’s death

Evaluate and Connect (60 points total; 30 points each)**Answer two of the following essay questions on a separate sheet of paper.**

1. Throughout the play, Hamlet is perceived by others as being insane or out of control. Describe three situations in which he presents himself in this fashion. What words and actions convey this perception? Do you think Hamlet is truly insane or only pretending to be insane? Why?
2. Compare and contrast the characters of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. What do their lives have in common? In what ways are they different from one another in their responses to similar situations? Who would make the best king? Why?
3. Discuss Hamlet’s relationships with each of the two women in the play—his mother and Ophelia. Why is Hamlet’s anger toward his mother so strong? What feelings are behind his changing attitude toward Ophelia? In what way might Hamlet’s relationship with his mother affect his relationship with Ophelia?