

HAMLET

THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE

SAMPLE SECTION

A tale of murder, madness, and revenge.

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GRADES 7–12

Hamlet

THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE FOR GRADE 12

A TALE OF MURDER, MADNESS, AND REVENGE.

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Table of contents

Foreword	5
About <i>English Experience</i>	5
Our approach to Shakespeare	6
Using this resource	7
Introduction	9
Shakespeare and his times	9
The language of <i>Hamlet</i>	10
Studying <i>Hamlet</i>	16
Background to the play	23
Fast facts	23
Synopsis	24
Short Story of <i>Hamlet</i>	26
Plot	27
Timeline of events	29
Characters	30
Themes, motifs, and symbols	51
Themes	51
Truth: <i>Appearance versus reality</i>	52
Revenge: <i>Action versus inaction</i>	54
Corruption: <i>Death, disease, and decay</i>	56
Madness: <i>Grief and fractured identity</i>	58
Motifs	60
Symbols	62
Quotations and quips	67
Essential anchor quotations	67
Supporting quotations	72
Indexes (character and theme)	76
Enrichment tasks	77

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Summaries and analyses 81

Using this section 81

Act 1 81

Act 2 85

Act 3 87

Act 4 91

Act 5 96

The literary essay 100

Guidelines 100

Planning your essay 100

Writing your essay 101

Annotated essay examples 107

Practice essay questions 111

Examination preparation 115

Reading revision quiz 116

The play 119

A note on the text 119

Act 1 120

Act 2 188

Act 3 242

Act 4 314

Act 5 368

Acknowledgements 422

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foreword

About *English Experience*

English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for high-school teachers and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth, and debate — enriching and challenging both teachers and students — without losing sight of the important goals of academic success and examination readiness.

Dedicated to bringing the subject to life, every resource *English Experience* publishes incorporates a range of features — including thought-provoking content, contextual questions, and stimulating enrichment materials — designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher-order thinking which examiners always desire.

The world-class *English Experience* team includes highly experienced educators, some with over forty years of classroom experience; passionate literary experts in various fields, such as historical fiction, poetry, and Shakespeare; historians and researchers; creative writers; skilled editors; eagle-eyed proof-readers; and obsessive fact-checkers — together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young scholars who help to ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

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Our approach to Shakespeare

Our approach is to provide students with a comprehensive, focused set of materials that support them from their first encounter with the play to their final revision, assisting them efficiently as they move from comprehension to interpretation to application. Teachers, therefore, receive an academically rigorous, ready-to-use teaching resource, tailor-made for the specific demands of the IEB curriculum and examination. What makes our approach especially effective is that literary understanding, classroom learning, and examination preparation are integrated into one coherent, streamlined resource.

1. Begins with the play itself

Our approach to Shakespeare begins with the play itself. Rather than reducing *Hamlet* to a plot summary or a collection of examination notes, we provide students with the complete, carefully annotated text in a clear and inviting format. Difficult language, references, and dramatic details are explained without oversimplifying Shakespeare's ideas, while the spacious layout places pages for students' own notes directly opposite the relevant text. This format facilitates active reading, classroom discussion, and personal engagement, helping students develop the confidence to work closely with Shakespeare's language.

2. Moves from comprehension to interpretation

Carefully structured support guides students from comprehension to interpretation. Concise scene summaries establish what happens; focused analyses explore what the events may reveal and why they matter; and contextual questions encourage students to formulate and substantiate their own responses. This combination makes the play accessible without prescribing a single 'correct' interpretation. It also gives teachers a flexible framework for lessons, while progressively developing the close-reading, critical-thinking, and evidence-based reasoning skills students need.

3. And from understanding to examination preparation

The resource then provides students with skills-focused material through which to progress from understanding and appreciating the play to demonstrating their knowledge and skills in the IEB Grade 12 examination. Essential quotations are contextualised and explained, then reinforced through memory cues, thematic connections, and active-recall activities. Practice essay questions and annotated model essays assist students to develop and refine their literary-essay writing skills and to transform their knowledge into confident, well-supported examination responses. Finally, a comprehensive revision quiz helps students to assess and consolidate their knowledge.

In the end, we have approached Shakespeare the same way we approach every author and text: with two, interrelated goals in mind. The first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and success, and the second is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the work being studied.

*'What a piece of work is a man,
how noble in reason,
how infinite in faculties,
in form and moving,
how express and admirable,
in action, how like an angel,
in apprehension, how like a god:
the beauty of the world;
the paragon of animals.'*
(Act 2, scene 2)



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Using this resource

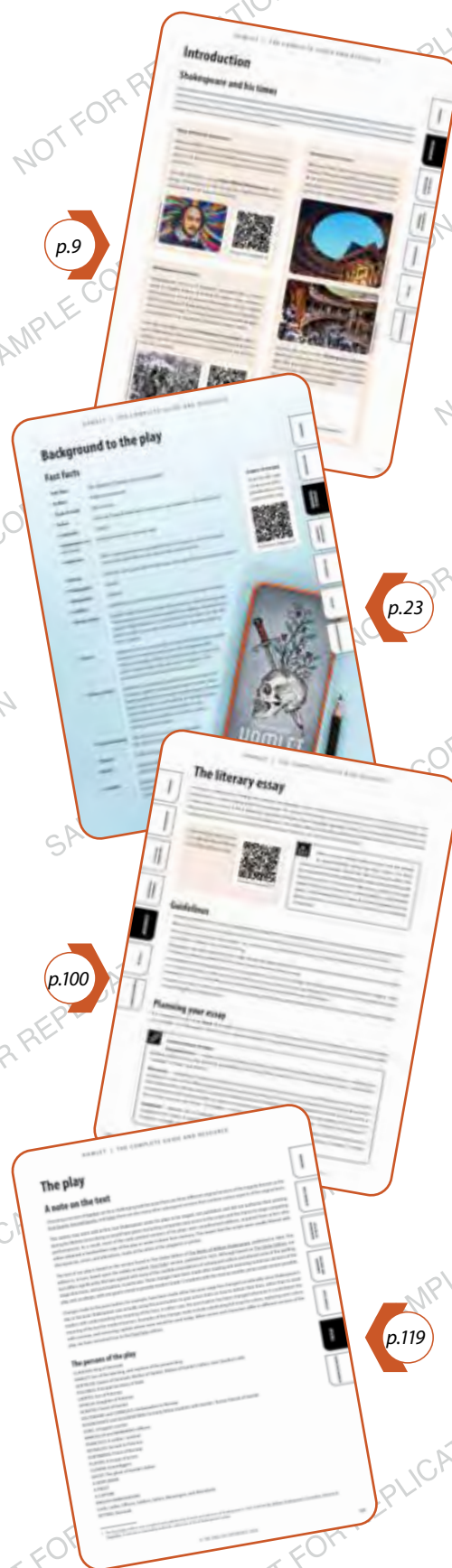
This all-inclusive resource includes: the full text of the play (rigorously annotated and footnoted); stimulating literary analyses; focused, high-impact summaries and analyses of each scene (that include sets of contextual questions); an examination-focused quotations section; a comprehensive literary-essay section; and an accompanying library of supplementary materials online. In short, everything needed to study the play intensively and to prepare the student to be examined on the text at Matric level.

By the time students reach the senior grades, they have probably encountered and read several plays by Shakespeare already, and the **Introduction** section of this resource reflects this context. The focus of the section is on reacquainting students with the key literary terms they need to know in order to analyse a work like *Hamlet* more perceptively and to write about it more effectively. These terms are also related directly to the play through examples provided from the text to illustrate the effect of each technique or device. The section concludes with suggestions on how students should approach studying a play like *Hamlet* at a senior level and how they can move beyond simply following the storyline and understanding 'what happens' to studying the play with real insight and confidence. By working through the Introduction section first, students will be prepared, engaged, and able to approach the text with the right mindset.

The **Background to the play** section of this resource is focused on providing students with a framework for connecting the events, characters, conflicts, and ideas they will encounter when studying the text. Its purpose is to help students understand what happens and why particular scenes, images, incidents, and quotations are significant. To orientate students, the section starts with a list of fast facts and a synopsis of the play. These are followed by an analysis of the plot and a timeline of events. Armed with an understanding of the events in *Hamlet*, students are provided with concise introductions to the main characters and a discussion of the major themes explored in the text, along with the motifs and symbols that relate to these themes. The section features a structured, scaffolded, contextualised selection of quotations, compiled to suit the specific requirements of students in Grade 12. The quotations are provided with explanations, organised by importance (i.e., 'essential' or 'supporting'), related to themes and characters, and supported by a set of active-recall activities as enrichment tasks. The section concludes with focused, high-impact summaries and analyses of each scene in the play. The summaries offer one-paragraph descriptions of what happens. The analyses offer concise discussions of what is revealed and why it matters, plus end with sets of contextual questions that encourage students to interpret and understand each scene fully.

As its title suggests, the **Literary essay** section of this resource prepares students for the demands of the IEB Grade-12 Literary essay. It offers students a selection of topics to practise essay writing, using questions that match the exact format and requirements of Question 1, Paper II in the final examination. It also includes two annotated example essays for students to review and from which they can learn. The section begins by offering basic guidelines on writing a literary essay and ends with some suggestions on how to prepare for the final examination properly.

Completing this resource is **The play** section, which features the full text of the play, rigorously annotated and footnoted. It has been enhanced and expanded: the font size of the text has been increased for improved readability, and every right-hand page has been left clear for student notes and classroom annotations.



FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Supplementary materials

One of the innovative aspects of this resource is its accompanying library of supplementary materials provided online. Readers can use the QR codes throughout the resource to access an expanding collection of complementary questions, descriptions, and examples. These materials are provided in a diverse range of formats to suit all learning styles, including audio (podcast-style recordings), video (clips, lessons, lectures, hosted discussions), multimedia (infographics and presentations), and interactive content (quizzes and webinars).

Icons



Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention or of which you need to be aware.



Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task or to meet a standard.



Definition / Glossary

Meanings of words and terms used in the text.



Information

Additional details or facts about a topic.



Question

Question to help you determine what to learn or revise.



Quick Tip

Helpful strategies for understanding and applying the information provided.



Quirky fact

Fun, interesting, extraneous information.

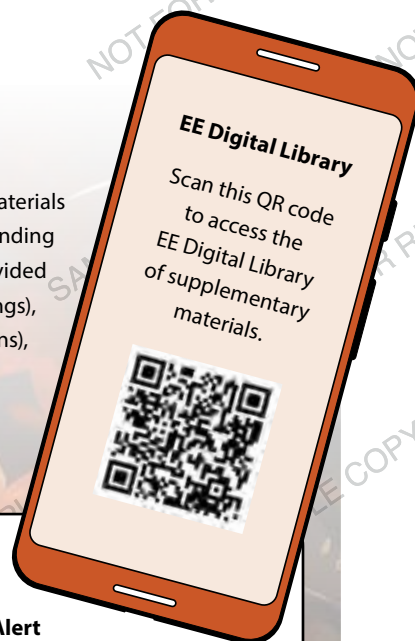
What do you think?

We hope you enjoy using this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

If you have any comments, queries, or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us by emailing

info@englishexperience.co.za

or calling our offices on (011) 786-6702.



Studying Hamlet

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You will probably have read several plays by Shakespeare as you progress through high school, so you should be reasonably familiar with his work. At a senior level, nonetheless, you must study the play intensively, and this means that your approach needs to be modified accordingly. This section begins with a short discussion of why this particular play is such a great choice for you to study and concludes with some suggestions on how to get started.

Why do we study Hamlet?

Why do we care about Hamlet more than 400 years after the play was written? Why do we still watch it, read it, and study it?

Some works of art are initially rejected or overlooked and remain unappreciated until many years after their creation — like a masterpiece hidden in an attic for generations before finally being recognised for its true artistic value. Other works of art are immediately popular but soon fade away and fall into obscurity — like a catchy novelty song that dominates a summer and is all but forgotten by autumn. Few are the works of art that achieve instant popular acclaim and then sustain it for centuries afterwards. Hamlet is one of those rare works of art.



© Anashtira (Medium.com)

Why is Hamlet so popular?

Hamlet is arguably one of the most popular plays ever written. It is being performed somewhere in the world every day and continues to generate a great deal of critical argument and debate. Indeed, it is possibly one of the best-known works in world literature, with phrases such as 'To be, or not to be', 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark', and 'The lady doth protest too much' having entered ordinary cultural memory. Even people who have never read the play often know something about it, such as the skull, the ghost, or the indecisive prince. As the Folger Shakespeare Library pithily summarises, 'Hamlet is Shakespeare's most popular, and most puzzling, play'.



© Salvador Dalí (Wikimedia Commons)

Even people who have never read the play often know something about it.

Much of this acclaim is because of the arresting power and startling imagery of the language of the play (see page 10), of course. Yet it is also because the play refuses to offer easy answers to the questions it raises. It is not simply a revenge story about a prince who must punish a murderer. It is also about what happens when grief, uncertainty, corruption, and moral responsibility become almost impossible to separate. And, at its centre, is a deeply unsettling question: *How should we act when we cannot be certain what is true or right?*

Hamlet is instructed to commit murder to avenge his father, but

the command comes from a Ghost, an apparition or entity whose nature is ambiguous and unstable. As an extremely moral man, Hamlet's challenge is not simply to have the courage to act, but to reconcile himself to committing murder when the truth is uncertain. Indeed, perhaps a significant amount of the play's enduring appeal is the protagonist himself. In Hamlet, Shakespeare presents a person who is both appealing and troubling. Hamlet can be intelligent, witty, sensitive, and morally alert, but he can also be cruel, evasive, misogynistic, self-absorbed, and destructive. We may admire his mind, but we cannot fully trust him, which makes him psychologically fascinating. He is not a straightforward hero or simple villain, but a complex, unpredictable person, seemingly divided even against himself.



© Dominique Mondo

At the centre of the play is a deeply unsettling question: *How should we act when we cannot be certain what is true or right?*

Why is Hamlet so disturbing?

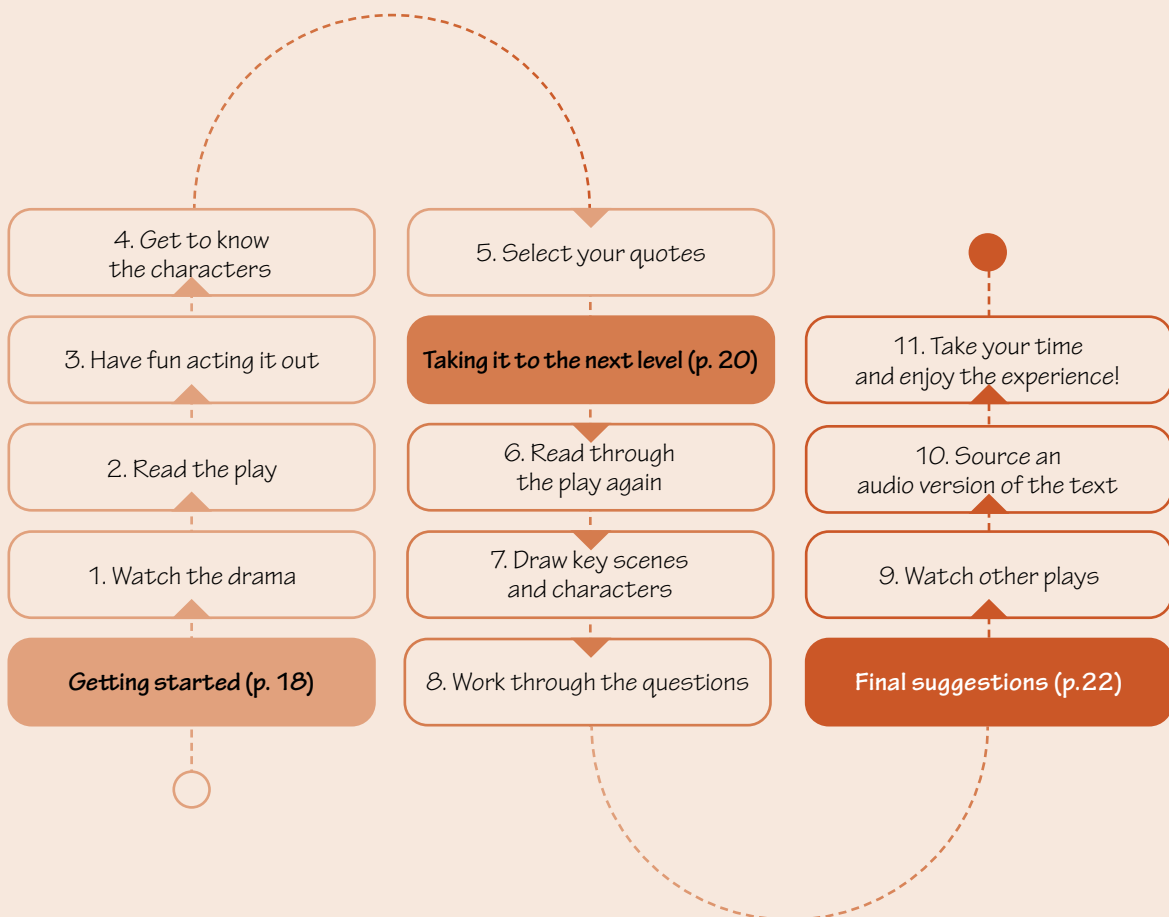
More than 400 years after it was written, Hamlet continues to disturb us because it asks questions about the human condition that are still relevant, and because it refuses to offer easy answers to the questions it raises.

Hamlet presents a world in which truth is uncertain, authority is corrupt, grief is psychologically dangerous, and moral action cannot be made with certainty. As the audience, we must tolerate many unknowns: the Ghost may be truthful or malevolent; Hamlet may be mad or sane; Gertrude may be guilty or innocent; Ophelia's death may be an accident or suicide. Even the ending is ambiguous and may be considered a restoration or collapse of order. These unknowns are disturbing because they suggest that, while 'truth' and 'certainty' may exist (e.g., Claudius is guilty), reliable knowledge may be reached too late to save anyone, and, even then, only through suffering and destruction. Perhaps the play disturbs us so greatly because it asks: *What would you do if you were unable to distinguish truth from falsehood, sincerity from performance, your desire for revenge from the need for justice?*



How to study Hamlet

How should one approach studying a play like Hamlet at a senior level? How do we move beyond simply following the storyline and understanding 'what happens' to studying the play with real insight and confidence? This section offers a few suggestions about how to get started.



FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Background to the play

Fast facts

Full Title:	<u>The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark</u>
Author:	William Shakespeare
Type of work:	Play (Drama)
Genre:	Revenge Tragedy (<i>although it questions, even condemns, the entire genre</i>)
Language:	English
Composed (time and place):	England, between 1599 and 1602
Published:	1603: condensed version published in the <i>First Quarto</i> . The full-length version was published a year later in the <i>Second Quarto</i> .
Setting:	Denmark, during the late Middle Ages, although the precise time is unclear
Protagonist:	Hamlet
Antagonist:	Claudius
Conflict:	Hamlet's duty to kill his uncle, King Claudius, to avenge his father.
Rising action:	Hamlet feigns madness to hide his intentions, while the king and Polonius plot to uncover the cause of his madness. Hamlet sets a trap for King Claudius: a re-enactment of the murder of the late king, in order to provoke a damning, guilt-revealing reaction from Claudius.
Climax:	Believing he has successfully confirmed King Claudius's guilt, Hamlet is resolved to take action. He mistakenly kills Polonius, though, which gives King Claudius a pretext to send Hamlet away to be executed in England, and prompts the return of Laertes from France.
Falling action:	Hamlet is sent away to England, but events allow him to return. Laertes's furious loathing of Hamlet helps King Claudius to orchestrate Hamlet's death. Hamlet and Laertes have an altercation at Ophelia's grave, which leads to a duel between them, and, ultimately, to the deaths of Hamlet, Laertes, the king, and the queen.
Foreshadowing:	The Ghost and his warnings regarding the state of corruption in Denmark.
Themes:	Truth; Revenge; Corruption; Madness.
Motifs:	Death, decay, and disease; Surveillance, deception, and performance; Madness.
Symbols:	Hamlet's clothing; the 'play within the play'; the Ghost; the unweeded garden and poison; Ophelia's flowers; Yorick's skull.

Origins of the play

Scan this QR code to access a short introduction to the origins of the play.



Password: *****

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Synopsis

What is the central message of *Hamlet* and how is it communicated? This synopsis offers a brief overview of the setting, atmosphere, and main conflict of the play. It investigates the central message Shakespeare wishes to explore through the play and draws attention to some of the techniques he uses to communicate this message.

Overview

Hamlet is a revenge tragedy that explores the moral, psychological, and political consequences of corruption, revenge, grief, and uncertainty. However, it is more nuanced than other examples of the genre from its time, for it questions, even condemns, the entire genre.

At the centre of the play is the grief-stricken Prince Hamlet, who is called upon to avenge the alleged murder of his father, the former King of Denmark. An honourable, principled intellectual, Hamlet desires to know the truth of his father's death so he may act with moral certainty. His search for truth becomes increasingly complicated, however, by doubt, deception, emotional turmoil, and his own philosophical nature.

Central message

The main message of the play is generally considered to be that *corruption, once allowed into the moral and political order, is like an infection or disease that spreads outward and destroys individuals, families, and, ultimately, entire nations.*

Shakespeare communicates this message through (1) the image of Denmark as a diseased and unstable kingdom, (2) the collapse of trust among characters, (3) Hamlet's inner conflict, and (4) the tragic consequences of revenge. Ultimately, the play appears to suggest that disorder becomes inevitable when truth is hidden, justice is delayed, and moral responsibility is avoided.



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Setting

The play is set in Denmark, primarily in and around Elsinore Castle, the royal court. This setting is significant because the castle should represent order, stability, and legitimate authority, but it becomes a place of secrecy, spying, manipulation, and moral decay instead.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere of the play is established immediately through the appearance of the Ghost on the battlements. The guards' anxiety, the bitterly cold night, and the threat of military conflict with Norway all create a sense of unease. This external instability reflects the deeper internal corruption within the Danish court. Marcellus's famous observation that *'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'* (Act 1, scene 4) captures this central concern: the kingdom is morally diseased because its political authority is founded on murder, betrayal, and concealment.

Main conflict

The central conflict of Hamlet is the protagonist's struggle with the Ghost's command that he avenge his father's murder. The Ghost alleges that King Hamlet was murdered by his brother, Claudius, who has since taken the throne and married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. Hamlet is, therefore, placed in a difficult moral position: he must decide whether to trust the apparition, whether revenge is justified, and how to act without becoming morally corrupted himself.



This conflict is both external and internal. Externally, Hamlet is opposed to Claudius, whose crime has poisoned the kingdom. Internally, Hamlet is tormented by grief, anger, doubt, disgust, and philosophical reflection. He wants justice, but fears error, damnation, and moral contamination. His delay is, therefore, not a result of weakness of character: rather, it indicates the complexity of acting ethically in a world in which appearances are deceptive and certainty is difficult to obtain.

Conclusion

Hamlet presents a world in which corruption begins with a hidden crime but spreads through the entire social and political order. Claudius's murder of King Hamlet damages not only the royal family, but the moral health of Denmark itself. Through Hamlet's hesitation, Ophelia's suffering, Gertrude's compromise, Laertes's vengeance, and Claudius's manipulation, Shakespeare shows how secrecy, betrayal, and moral uncertainty can lead to destruction.

Hamlet remains profound and moving because it does not offer easy answers. Instead, it presents revenge, grief, conscience, and political corruption as deeply human problems, forcing the audience to consider what it means to act rightly in a world in which certainty is fragile and moral decay is everywhere.

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Timeline of events

The following timeline is offered as a brief overview of the significant events or 'plot points' that occur during the four months or so between the Ghost's first appearance and the fatal swordfight in *Hamlet*:

Act 1

- A Ghost appears on the battlements of the castle.
- The court accepts Claudius as King and his marriage to Gertrude.
- Ophelia is instructed by her brother and her father to reject Hamlet's attentions.
- The Ghost reveals to Hamlet that he is his late father and orders Hamlet to avenge his murder.

Act 2

- Ophelia is frightened by Hamlet's strange behaviour.
- Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what is wrong with Hamlet.
- Polonius, Claudius and Gertrude decide to spy on Hamlet.
- Hamlet arranges a performance of a play that reenacts the murder described by the Ghost.

Act 3

- Hamlet confuses and scolds Ophelia (as Claudius and Polonius spy on him).
- Hamlet's play is performed and Claudius reacts guiltily.
- Hamlet encounters Claudius, but decides not to kill him because the king is praying.
- Polonius spies on Hamlet and Gertrude and Hamlet mistakenly murders him.

Act 4

- Hamlet leaves for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
- Ophelia is driven insane by her grief and despair.
- Laertes returns to investigate his father's death and is shocked by his sister's condition.
- Hamlet returns to Denmark after being captured and released by pirates.
- Ophelia drowns and Laertes plans to duel Hamlet.
- The duel is rigged: Laertes's blade is tipped with poison.

Act 5

- Hamlet and Laertes fight at Ophelia's funeral.
- Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel and Hamlet accepts.
- During the swordfight, Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine and dies.
- Laertes reveals Claudius's plot and then dies.
- Hamlet kills Claudius and then he dies.
- Fortinbras honours Hamlet with a military funeral and takes the throne.

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Characters

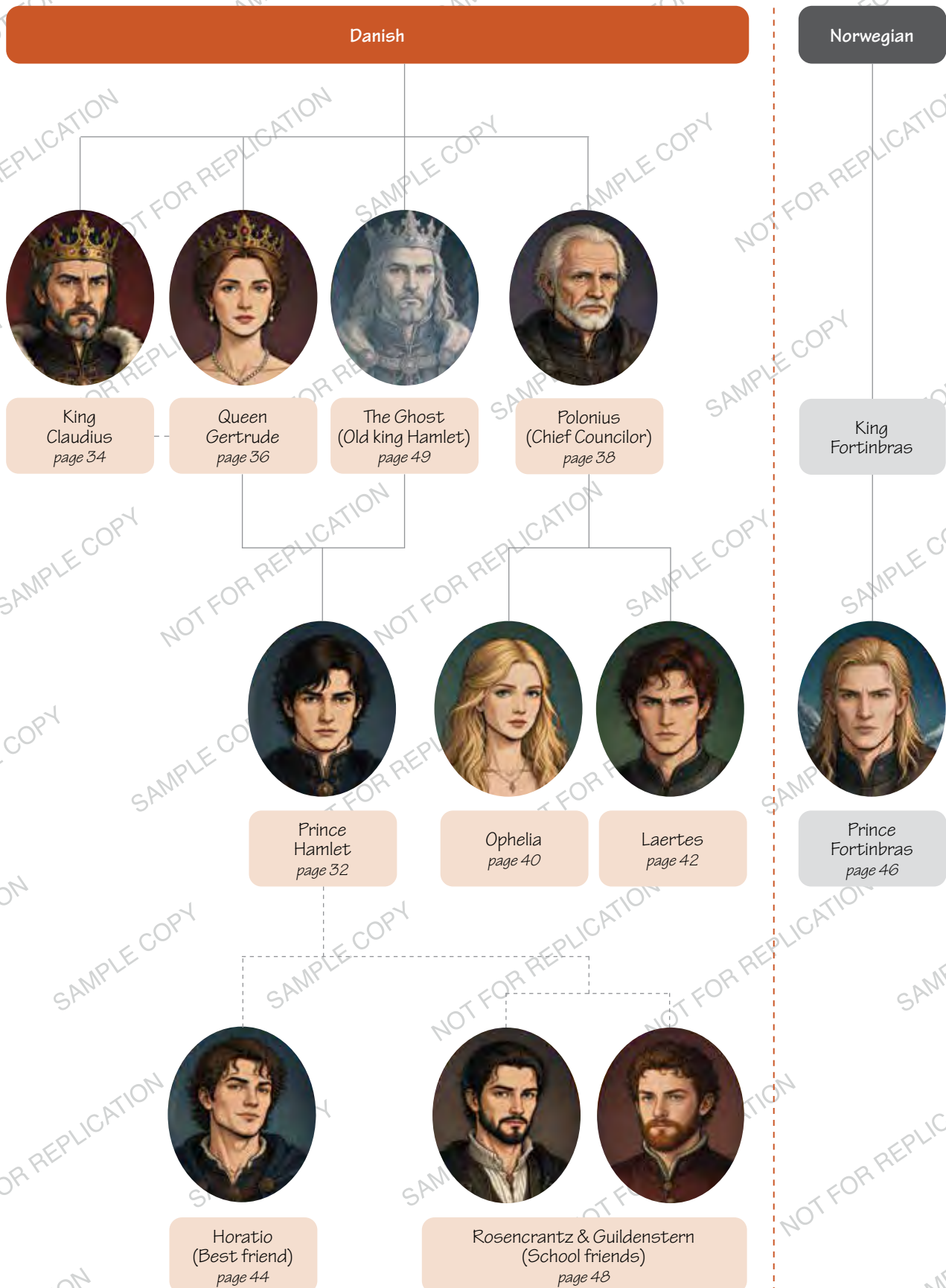
Who are the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and what are they like? This section provides a concise introduction to the main characters, focusing on their personalities, relationships, and roles in the play.



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Hamlet genealogy

The following diagram illustrates the relationships between the main characters in the play.



FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

King Claudius

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



'Claudius is marked by contradiction: he is both villain and statesman, loving husband and manipulative schemer, guilty soul and cunning pragmatist.'

— G. Wilson Knight

'Claudius is a politician: He's about power, control, and appearances. But what fascinated me most was his fear. He's constantly worried about Hamlet, about the court, about heaven. That fear corrodes him.'

— Derek Jacobi

'Claudius is a sensualist — he enjoys power, women, [and] pleasure — but he's got this kernel of guilt that he can't shake. That tension is his tragedy.'

— Alan Bates

'Claudius's struggle with conscience is framed in religious terms, mirroring the play's larger anxiety about

THE SOUL'S FATE AND DIVINE JUSTICE

— A.C. Bradley

'Claudius, though a murderer, is no villain of the deepest dye. He shows skill, affection, remorse — qualities that a lesser dramatist would not have given him. [...] He is a bad man, but a good king.'

— A.C. Bradley

King Claudius is the principal antagonist in *Hamlet*. As the younger brother of the late King Hamlet, he becomes King of Denmark after secretly murdering his brother and marrying Queen Gertrude, his brother's widow. His actions (which take place a month or so before the play begins) establish the central conflict of the tragedy as the Ghost reveals in Act 1, scene 5, that Claudius murdered King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear while he slept in his orchard. Thus, the Ghost identifies Claudius as the source of the corruption that has spread through Denmark.

Intelligent, capable, and politically astute

Although Claudius commits a terrible crime, Shakespeare presents him as a far more complex character than a conventional villain. He is an intelligent, capable, and politically astute ruler. In his opening speech, he skilfully balances public mourning for his brother with the practical needs of governing the kingdom, declaring that 'discretion fought with nature' (Act 1, scene 2);



© BBC/NBC Universal

in other words, that he had to let his practical judgement and good sense dictate his actions rather than his emotions and grief. He also demonstrates diplomatic ability by preventing Fortinbras's threatened invasion through negotiation rather than war (Act 1, scene 2). These actions suggest that he possesses qualities of leadership, even if the legitimacy of his rule is deeply compromised.

A master of persuasion

Claudius is, above all, a master of persuasion. He repeatedly uses language to influence and manipulate those around him. He persuades Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, presenting the request as a favour to both the prince and the kingdom (Act 2, scene 2). Later, he carefully channels Laertes' grief and anger after Polonius's death into a plan to kill Hamlet (Act 4, scene 7). Rather than relying primarily on force, Claudius achieves his aims through charm, diplomacy, and psychological insight.

A deadly contest

Claudius's relationship with Hamlet is central to the play. Outwardly, Claudius appears to be a caring uncle and stepfather, affectionately referring to Hamlet as 'my cousin Hamlet, and my son' (Act 1, scene 2). Behind this public image, however, he quickly recognises Hamlet as a threat to both his rule and his secret. After *The Mousetrap* confirms Hamlet's suspicions, Claudius resolves that 'Madness in great ones must not unwatched go', before arranging Hamlet's execution in England (Act 4, scene 3). Their relationship therefore becomes a deadly contest in which each seeks to expose or eliminate the other.



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Conflicted and ambiguous

Claudius's relationship with Gertrude is more ambiguous. The play provides evidence that he values her companionship and he repeatedly addresses her with warmth and respect in public. At the same time, he is ultimately willing to risk her life in pursuit of his own plans. During the final duel, he knows that the wine has been poisoned, yet his attempt to stop Gertrude from drinking it is feeble, and he lies to conceal the truth afterwards, which suggests he would rather let her die than reveal his murderous scheme (Act 5, scene 2). This moment illustrates the tension between his personal attachments and his overwhelming instinct for self-preservation.

Remorse without full repentance

One of the most revealing moments in the play occurs during Claudius's private prayer in Act 3, scene 3. Alone on stage, he openly admits his crime: 'O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven.' He acknowledges that his 'crown', his 'own ambition', and his 'queen' were the motives for the murder (Act 3, scene 3). Yet he also admits that he cannot genuinely repent while continuing to enjoy the rewards of his crime: 'May one be pardon'd and retain th'offence?' (Act 3, scene 3) This soliloquy reveals that Claudius possesses a conscience, but that his desire for power is stronger than his willingness to surrender it.

A complex villain

Ultimately, Claudius embodies one of the play's central concerns: the contrast between appearance and reality. He presents himself as a capable king, devoted husband, and concerned stepfather, while concealing murder, deception, and political manipulation under this respectable exterior. Thus, Shakespeare invites audiences to consider Claudius not simply as an evil ruler, but as a complex individual whose intelligence, ambition, guilt, and moral failure lie at the heart of the tragedy.

*'O Gertrude, Gertrude, when sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions.'*

(Act 4, scene 5)



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FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fortinbras

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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'Fortinbras is
a head-basher,
like his late father.'

— Harold Bloom

'Fortinbras, a sufficiently
practical man, considered
that [Hamlet] was likely,
had he been put on, to have
'prov'd most royally'.
He has Hamlet borne by
four captains 'like a soldier'
to his grave.'

— A.C. Bradley

'Fortinbras serves as a

VITAL PSYCHOLOGICAL MIRROR AND THE ULTIMATE FOIL TO HAMLET

Both are young princes named after their slain fathers, and both are tasked with avenging their fathers. However, where Hamlet is paralysed by philosophical doubt and hesitation, Fortinbras is a creature of pure, unadulterated action. He does not overthink the moral implications of war; he simply acts.'

— James Anthony

Fortinbras is the young Prince of Norway and the son of the late King Fortinbras, who was killed by old king Hamlet in single combat. Although Fortinbras appears on stage only briefly, Shakespeare presents him as an important parallel to Hamlet. Like Hamlet and Laertes, Fortinbras is a son whose father has died and who seeks to restore his family's honour. However, his response to loss differs significantly from Hamlet's, making him an important foil whose actions invite comparison with those of the Danish prince.

Determined man of action

Before the Norwegian prince appears in person, the audience learns from Horatio that 'young Fortinbras' has gathered an army of 'lawless resolute' (Act 1, scene 1) to recover the lands his father lost to Denmark. When the present King of Norway, Fortinbras's uncle, forbids an attack on Denmark, Fortinbras accepts his uncle's authority and redirects his campaign towards Poland. These actions portray him as determined and ambitious, but also capable of adapting his plans when circumstances change.



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A 'spirit of divine ambition'

Fortinbras's chief dramatic function is to highlight Hamlet's hesitation. Both princes have lost their fathers, and both have reason to seek revenge, yet their responses are very different. While Fortinbras raises an army and pursues action, Hamlet spends much of the play questioning, reflecting, and delaying. Shakespeare repeatedly reminds the audience of Fortinbras's progress, even though the Norwegian prince remains offstage for most of the play. Hamlet himself recognises this contrast when he admires Fortinbras's 'divine ambition' and resolves, 'O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (Act 4, scene 4).

However, Fortinbras's host of armed warriors eager to gain a 'little patch of ground' (Act 4, scene 4) from Poland are also presented as somewhat ridiculous. Much blood will be shed for a profitless piece of territory, which even one of Fortinbras's captains does not regard as worth any losses. So, while Hamlet expresses shamed admiration for Fortinbras's determination to brave danger and death '[e]ven for an eggshell' (act 4, scene 4), the limited gains of Fortinbras's campaign cause the audience to question the hot-headed, bellicose Fortinbras's commitment to martial feats.



Responsible and practical

Although Fortinbras is presented as a capable military leader, he is not portrayed simply as a warrior. He obeys his uncle's command to avoid war with Denmark and ultimately enters the Danish court only after the royal family has destroyed itself. His final actions are measured rather than vengeful. Accepting Hamlet's dying endorsement, Fortinbras assumes responsibility for Denmark and orders that Hamlet be honoured with a soldier's funeral, declaring that Hamlet would probably have 'prov'd [himself] most royally' had he become king (Act 5, scene 2).

'Let four captains

Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage.

For he was likely, had he been put on,

To have prov'd most royally.'

(Act 5, scene 2)



Framing the action of the play

Through Fortinbras, Shakespeare explores ideas of leadership, honour, and revenge. Fortinbras's determination, military discipline, and willingness to act provide an important contrast to Hamlet's reflective nature, while his accession to the Danish throne restores political order after the tragedy. Rather than dominating the action, Fortinbras frames it, helping the audience compare different responses to loss, duty, and the pursuit of honour.

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ghost (Old king Hamlet)

The Ghost claims to be the spirit of old king Hamlet, the former King of Denmark and Hamlet's father. Although he appears only a few times during the play, his arrival sets the entire plot in motion. He reveals that he was murdered by his brother, Claudius, who, 'with juice of cursed hebona', poisoned him while he slept, and he commands Hamlet to '[r]evenge his foul and most unnatural murder' (Act 1, scene 5). In doing so, the Ghost transforms Hamlet's private grief into a quest for justice and revenge.

Appearance and atmosphere

Before the Ghost speaks, Horatio and the guards describe old king Hamlet as a courageous warrior and respected king. When he first appears, the Ghost is dressed in armour, suggesting that he remains a soldier even in death. His military appearance, together with reports of Fortinbras's preparations for war, creates an atmosphere of political uncertainty and the threat of violence, and hints that Denmark itself is unsettled.



© Geoff Kramer

Purposeful and direct

The Ghost is purposeful and direct. He carefully identifies himself to Hamlet before recounting the circumstances of his death, explaining that Claudius murdered him in order to gain both the throne and Queen Gertrude. At the same time, he instructs Hamlet not to harm Gertrude, urging him instead to 'leave her to heaven' (Act 1, scene 5). When the Ghost appears again in Gertrude's chamber, he does not demand further revenge but reminds Hamlet of his 'almost blunted purpose' (Act 3, scene 4) and encourages him to show compassion towards his mother. 'Speak to her, Hamlet', he commands, with apparent sympathy for the bewildered and shocked Gertrude (who cannot see the apparition seen by her son). These actions might suggest that, although the Ghost seeks justice, he also wishes to prevent unnecessary cruelty. His words suggest that he still loves and pities the erring Gertrude.

*'Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.'*
(Act 1, scene 5)

An uncertain identity

One of the Ghost's most significant features is his ambiguity. Horatio and the guards see him, lending credibility to his existence, yet Hamlet wonders whether he is 'a spirit of health or goblin damn'd' (Act 1, scene 4). Later, Gertrude cannot see the Ghost when it reappears, raising further questions about its true nature. It is suggested that the Ghost does not appear to Gertrude for such a visitation would torment the queen too much.

The Ghost performs several important dramatic functions. He initiates the action, exposes the corruption at the heart of the Danish court, and introduces the play's central concerns with revenge, justice, truth, religion, and the uncertainty of appearances. At the same time, his uncertain identity encourages both Hamlet and the audience to question whether appearances can always be trusted, making him one of Shakespeare's most intriguing and mysterious characters.



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FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ghost's commands to Hamlet are demanding, even contradictory, too. Hamlet must retain his own virtue — he must not taint his soul or intellect — yet he must take upon himself the role of avenger. In Christian theology, revenge is the prerogative of God alone. How can Hamlet remain virtuous if he commits an act of violent revenge, no matter how justified it may be? Thus, the Ghost places his tormented son in an especially tormenting dilemma.



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Romans 12:19

‘Do not take revenge, my dear friends,
but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written:
“It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.’

Themes, motifs, and symbols

Being conscious of the themes, motifs, and symbols in a literary work can be extremely useful when we are studying it. Themes provide a framework for connecting the events, characters, conflicts, and ideas we encounter, and symbols and motifs help us to recognise patterns and interpret implied meanings, which may not be stated directly. Overall, we can use these elements to make different and stronger links between events, characters, and language, using them to understand why particular scenes, images, and incidents are significant, and to connect quotations to larger ideas rather than memorising them in isolation. This section provides an introductory discussion of the major themes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, along with the motifs and symbols that relate to these.



Theme: the central subject or topic in a work of literature. A sophisticated work will usually explore several, often interrelated, themes.

Motif: a recurring idea or abstract concept that is examined in a work of literature. Again, a sophisticated work will typically explore several motifs, and these will normally relate closely to its themes.

Symbol: an object that is used to represent something else in a work of literature. Once again, a sophisticated work will usually employ many symbols.



The distinction between a motif and a symbol is that a motif is typically an intangible idea or concept, while a symbol is usually a tangible object, and, importantly, a motif recurs throughout a work, while a symbol need only appear once.

Themes

Studying the themes explored by Shakespeare in the play is most useful when these are treated not as fixed or 'correct' messages to be memorised, but as recurring questions connecting character, relationships, action, language, and consequence. The theme of Truth (Appearance versus reality) matters not simply *because the characters deceive one another*, but because Shakespeare repeatedly tests whether outward behaviour can ever reveal inward truth. The theme of Revenge (Action versus inaction) matters not simply because *Hamlet has been commanded to kill his uncle*, but because the play explores the moral, psychological, and political consequences of pursuing justice through violence. Themes, therefore, provide us with interpretive patterns through which we can connect different parts of the play, recognise tensions and contradictions, and consider ideas that Shakespeare deliberately leaves unresolved.



Truth:
Appearance
versus reality



Revenge:
Action
versus inaction



Corruption:
Death, disease,
and decay



Madness:
Grief and fractured
identity

Shakespeare's revenge on the revenge genre!

Scan this QR code to listen to a lecture on the **central ideas in *Hamlet***, which highlights some of the main concepts being explored in the text and with which we must engage.



Password: *****

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Truth: Appearance versus reality

The play presents a world in which behaviour, language, and performance conceal inner motives, so truth must be tested, but can never be known with complete certainty.

	Name	Timing	Significance
Key scenes:	The royal court	Act 1, scene 2	Claudius uses polished, political language to present his marriage and accession as orderly and legitimate. Hamlet's mourning disrupts this appearance of order and harmony. Hamlet acknowledges that clothing and outward behaviour cannot fully reveal what he feels within.
	The Ghost's revelation	Act 1, scene 5	The Ghost claims that the official account of King Hamlet's death is false and identifies Claudius as the murderer. However, because the information comes from a supernatural being, Hamlet must still determine whether it can be trusted.
	The nunnery scene	Act 3, scene 1	Claudius and Polonius secretly observe Hamlet and Ophelia, while Ophelia participates in their deception. Hamlet may also be pretending to be mad, making it difficult to distinguish sincere emotion from calculated behaviour.
	<u>The Mousetrap</u>	Act 3, scene 2	Hamlet uses a fictional performance to expose an actual crime. Claudius's disturbed reaction appears to confirm the Ghost's story, showing that theatrical illusion can, paradoxically, reveal truth.

	Quotation	Timing	Significance
Key quotations:	'Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'	Act 1, scene 2	Hamlet rejects the idea that his display of grief is merely an outward performance, but does concede that his visible appearance cannot fully reveal his inner reality.
	'The serpent that did sting thy father's life/ Now wears his crown.'	Act 1, scene 5	The Ghost claims that Claudius's respectable appearance as king conceals his identity as a murderer and usurper.
	'That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.'	Act 1, scene 5	Hamlet recognises that outward appearances, especially charm and civility, can disguise evil behaviour and intentions.
	'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.'	Act 2, scene 2	Hamlet uses the theatrical performance (i.e., appearances) as a way of exposing (thus, making visible) Claudius's hidden guilt (i.e., reality).

Discussion:

Central to the play is the problem of knowledge and truth: the difficulty of deciding what is real. The play repeatedly questions whether outward behaviour reveals inward truth. The Ghost claims that Claudius murdered him, old king Hamlet, but Hamlet cannot immediately know whether the apparition is truthful. 'The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil', he admits, and he therefore seeks 'grounds / More relative than this' (Act 2, scene 2). His delay is connected to the impossibility of certainty: how can someone act justly when the evidence comes from a supernatural figure whose nature cannot be verified?

This uncertainty develops into the theme of appearance and reality. Hamlet's first rejection of the court's assumptions, 'Seems, madam? Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'' (Act 1, scene 2), asserts that his grief is deeper than its outward signs. Yet, he soon adopts an 'antic disposition' (Act 1, scene 5) and deliberately creates a false appearance. Likewise, Claudius presents himself as a capable ruler, while concealing murder; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive as friends but act as spies and royal agents; Polonius advises Laertes, 'To thine own self be true' (Act 1, scene 3), but then plots and schemes with Claudius and others, such as Reynaldo, while feigning innocence. Indeed, Elsinore becomes a place in which almost everyone is watching, testing, or performing for someone else.



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The play-within-the-play gathers these ideas into one significant incident. Hamlet uses fiction to test reality: 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (Act 2, scene 2). Claudius's reaction appears to confirm the Ghost's account, yet even this evidence depends on Hamlet's interpretation of behaviour. Theatre is described as holding 'the mirror up to nature' (Act 3, scene 2), but it also shapes events rather than merely reflecting them. Does Claudius's reaction prove his guilt, or does Hamlet decide that it does because he already suspects him? The scene produces apparently strong evidence of guilt without entirely removing doubt. It is worth noting, however, that objective, rational Horatio does confirm Hamlet's reaction to Claudius's guilt-stricken departure, so the veracity of the Ghost's account can be said to have been confirmed.

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Motifs

Studying the motifs Shakespeare uses in the play is most useful when they are treated not as repeated details with one fixed meaning, but as developing patterns of language, imagery, action, or behaviour that connect different parts of the play. References to disease and decay matter not simply because *they suggest that Denmark is corrupt*, but because they trace how Claudius's hidden crime spreads through individuals, relationships, and the state. Similarly, repeated acts of spying and eavesdropping matter not simply because *characters watch one another*, but because they reveal the distrust that is shaping relationships and making the truth difficult to establish. When examining a motif, consider where it recurs, who uses it, how its meaning changes, and what it reveals about the characters, conflicts, and ideas in the play.

Death, decay, and disease

Images of death, decay, and disease suggest that Denmark is being corrupted from within. They also highlight the physical reality of death and its power to reduce all people to the same condition.

The motif is introduced when Hamlet describes the world as 'an unweeded garden' overwhelmed by '[t]hings rank and gross in nature' (Act 1, scene 2). Marcellus later declares that 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (Act 1, scene 4), connecting physical decay with the country's political condition. The Ghost's description of poison corrupting his 'thin and wholesome blood' and covering his body with a 'vile and loathsome crust' gives Claudius's crime a horrifying physical form (Act 1, scene 5). Claudius himself uses similar language when he admits, 'O, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven' (Act 3, scene 3).



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The motif gradually expands from Denmark's moral corruption to the decay awaiting every human body. Hamlet explains that people 'fat [them]selves for maggots' and that a 'fat king' and 'lean beggar' eventually become two dishes served at the same table (Act 4, scene 3). In the graveyard, Yorick's skull and Hamlet's reflections on Alexander the Great and '[t]o what base uses we may return' (Act 5, scene 1) demonstrate that death finally removes all distinctions of wealth, status, and achievement.

Thus, the motif of death, decay, and disease can support your discussions of Claudius's corruption, the deterioration of Denmark, the consequences of concealed wrongdoing, human mortality, and Hamlet's changing attitude towards death.

Surveillance, deception, and performance

Repeated acts of watching, listening, and performing present Elsinore as a place in which people hide their motives and attempt to discover the truth indirectly. The recurring references to ears also suggest that people can be influenced or corrupted by what they hear.

Polonius uses spying as a normal method of gathering information, instructing Reynaldo to observe Laertes because 'by indirections' he can 'find directions out' (Act 2, scene 1). Polonius and Claudius secretly watch Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia, and Claudius and Gertrude recruit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. Hamlet quickly recognises that his former friends have been summoned and asks them, 'Were you not sent for?' (Act 2, scene 2). These acts of surveillance reveal the lack of trust within the court and help explain why characters struggle to communicate openly.



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Symbols

Studying the symbols employed by Shakespeare in the play is most useful when these are treated not as objects with fixed or 'correct' meanings (i.e., attaching labels to isolated objects), but as recurring clues connecting character, relationships, action, and idea (i.e., patterns of ideas and language). Hamlet's clothes matter not simply because *black means grief*, but because the idea of whether outward displays and behaviour can reveal inward truth is interrogated by Shakespeare throughout the play. The flowers Ophelia dispenses matter not simply because *they allow her to express her thoughts indirectly*, but because they reveal attitudes and relationships that Shakespeare does not state or explain directly.

Hamlet's clothing

Hamlet's dark, and later dishevelled, clothing symbolises his grief and troubled state of mind. It also reflects the difficulty of distinguishing genuine emotion from performed behaviour.

Hamlet's black clothing symbolises his genuine sense of bereavement at the loss of his father. His clothes also help to reveal the tension between him and the new royal couple. King Claudius and Queen Gertrude want the mourning to end, while Hamlet uses his attire to keep his father's absence visible. Yet Hamlet is also quick to insist that any visible sign can be performed and that his 'suits of woe' (Act 1, scene 2) are merely an external display. When Gertrude asks Hamlet to 'cast thy nighted colour off', he replies that neither his 'inky cloak' nor his 'customary suits of solemn black' can 'denote [him] truly', because he has 'that within which passeth show' (Act 1, scene 2).

The connection between outward appearance and inner psychological condition is explored further when Hamlet chooses to 'put an antic disposition on' (Act 1, scene 5). Ophelia subsequently describes seeing him in a dishevelled state, with his 'doublet all unbraced' and his stockings 'fouled' and 'down-gyved' (Act 2, scene 1). We are left to consider whether his disordered costume is evidence of genuine mental collapse, a calculated disguise and message, or both. Thus, Hamlet's clothing can support your discussions of his grief, and his possible madness, but his clothing also warns against assuming that appearances provide transparent access to motives.



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The play-within-the-play

The Mousetrap symbolises art's ability to uncover concealed truths. It reveals Claudius's guilt while highlighting the difficulty of interpreting outward reactions accurately.

The staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*, which Hamlet nicknames *The Mousetrap* (also known as 'the play-within-the-play'), allows Shakespeare to use performance to explore the tension between appearance and reality. Hamlet orders the actors to 'play something like the murder of [his] father' so that he can observe and interpret Claudius's reaction: 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' (Act 2, scene 2). Thus, the performance becomes a symbolic mirror in which a previously concealed crime is reflected and made visible. The performance also reverses the established pattern of surveillance: Claudius and Polonius have been watching Hamlet, but now Hamlet is the watcher.

Quotations and quips

When you are writing literary essays on a text like *Hamlet*, it is essential to develop a manageable bank of short, versatile quotations that can be recalled accurately and used to construct arguments. This section provides: a compilation of suggested essential 'anchor' quotations; a selection of 'supporting' quotations organised by theme; character and theme indexes, which link the quotations to their speakers and the themes; and concludes with a set of active-recall activities as an enrichment task.

Guidelines for creating a quotation bank

Typically, a quotation bank consists of around 25-30 quotations: 10-15 'anchor' quotations that encompass the entire dramatic arc of the play and are useful for several possible essay topics, and around 10-15 'supporting' quotations that show how different ideas evolve or develop during the play. Approximately half the bank should consist of words spoken by Hamlet himself and half should be words spoken by other characters.



Tips for using quotations:

- connect each quotation to more than one theme or character
- memorise short, distinctive phrases rather than entire speeches
- embed quotations grammatically within their own sentences
- use quotations as evidence for an argument, not as a substitute for analysis



Essential anchor quotations

Act 1

Q01:	<i>'Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems".'</i>
Speaker:	Hamlet
Timing:	Act 1, scene 2
Context:	Gertrude asks Hamlet why his father's death still 'seems' so particularly painful to him.
What it reveals:	Hamlet distinguishes his genuine inner grief from outward displays that can be performed. His response introduces his suspicion of appearances and insincerity.
Themes:	Truth
Useful argument:	Hamlet's distrust of appearances begins before he learns about his father's murder and develops from his belief that the court's behaviour is expedient and emotionally dishonest.
Memory cue:	<i>seems → is → truth</i>

Q02:	<i>'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.'</i>
Speaker:	Marcellus
Timing:	Act 1, scene 4
Context:	Marcellus says this after the Ghost has led Hamlet away from his companions.
What it reveals:	The Ghost's appearance suggests that Denmark is suffering from concealed moral and political corruption. The disorder within the royal family has begun to infect the entire country.
Themes:	Corruption
Useful argument:	Shakespeare presents Claudius's crime not as a private act but as a source of corruption that destabilises the whole state.
Memory cue:	<i>rotten → Denmark → corruption</i>

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAYSUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1

Q03:	<i>'Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.'</i>
Speaker:	The Ghost
Timing:	Act 1, scene 5
Context:	The Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him and commands his son to take revenge.
What it reveals:	The Ghost presents revenge as Hamlet's duty as a son. The murder is 'unnatural' because it violates the bonds of brotherhood, family, monarchy, and the divinely established social order.
Themes:	Revenge; Corruption
Useful argument:	Hamlet does not freely choose his revenge mission; it is imposed upon him by a supernatural figure. The, as yet unproven, claims and subsequent command of the Ghost create a conflict within Hamlet between his sense of filial duty and his sense of morality.
Memory cue:	<i>command → unnatural murder → revenge</i>

Q04:	<i>'One may smile, and smile, and be a villain.'</i>
Speaker:	Hamlet
Timing:	Act 1, scene 5
Context:	After the Ghost identifies Claudius as his murderer, Hamlet reflects on Claudius's ability to conceal his guilt beneath a gracious, charming appearance.
What it reveals:	Hamlet recognises that an attractive or reassuring outward manner may conceal moral corruption. The discovery intensifies his distrust of the people around him.
Themes:	Truth; Corruption
Useful argument:	Claudius's effectiveness as a villain depends on his ability to perform the roles of loving husband, concerned stepfather, and capable king.
Memory cue:	<i>smile → conceal → villain</i>

Q05:	<i>'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!'</i>
Speaker:	Hamlet
Timing:	Act 1, scene 5
Context:	Left alone after accepting the Ghost's command, Hamlet considers the task of avenging his father and restoring order to Denmark.
What it reveals:	Hamlet sees the world as fundamentally disordered but regards his responsibility to correct it as a burden rather than a heroic opportunity.
Themes:	Revenge; Corruption
Useful argument:	Hamlet's delay begins in his troubled attitude towards revenge itself: he feels compelled to act, but resents the role imposed upon him.
Memory cue:	<i>time → dislocated → set right</i>

Act 2

Q06:	<i>'Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.'</i>
Speaker:	Polonius
Timing:	Act 2, scene 2
Context:	After speaking to Hamlet, Polonius notices that Hamlet's apparently irrational remarks contain recognisable logic.
What it reveals:	Hamlet's behaviour cannot easily be classified as either genuine madness or deliberate performance. Polonius detects part of the truth, but remains confident in his mistaken explanation of its cause.
Themes:	Madness; Truth
Useful argument:	Shakespeare deliberately makes his protagonist's madness ambiguous: Hamlet's behaviour is strategically controlled, but also reflects genuine emotional disturbance.
Memory cue:	<i>madness → method → ambiguity</i>

Supporting quotations



Truth: Appearance versus reality

Act 2

Q19:	<i>'By indirections find directions out.'</i>
Speaker:	Polonius
Timing:	Act 2, scene 1
Context:	Polonius instructs Reynaldo to spread slanderous rumours about Laertes in Paris so that other people's reactions will reveal the truth about Laertes's behaviour.
What it reveals:	Polonius believes that truth is best discovered through deception. His approach reflects the morality of a court in which indirect spying and surveillance have replaced honest communication and truth-seeking.
Useful argument:	In Denmark, deception is used not only to conceal the truth; characters repeatedly employ lies and performances in their attempts to discover the truth and to retain power.
Memory cue:	<i>indirect lies → direct truth</i>

Q20:	<i>'The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil, and the devil hath power / To assume a pleasing shape.'</i>
Speaker:	Hamlet
Timing:	Act 2, scene 2
Context:	Hamlet considers the possibility that the Ghost may be a devil, exploiting his grief and melancholy, rather than the truthful spirit of his father.
What it reveals:	Hamlet cannot safely distinguish truth from appearance, even when the figure resembles his father. His uncertainty explains why he seeks further evidence before killing Claudius.
Useful argument:	Hamlet's delay originates partly in a legitimate problem of knowledge: he must determine whether the Ghost is truthful before committing an irreversible act of revenge.
Memory cue:	<i>spirit → possible devil → pleasing shape</i>

Act 3

Q21:	<i>'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.'</i>
Speaker:	Gertrude
Timing:	Act 3, scene 2
Context:	While watching <i>The Mousetrap</i> , Gertrude comments on the Player Queen's extravagant promise that she will never remarry after her husband's death. (In this instance, 'protest' means to declare or promise solemnly.)
What it reveals:	Gertrude considers the Player Queen's exaggerated declarations unconvincing. Her response is ironic because the Player Queen's hyperbolic outbursts echo her own short-lived grief over her first husband's death, which was followed by a too hasty remarriage.
Useful argument:	Gertrude's comment exposes the gap between idealised declarations of loyalty and actual human behaviour, but it should not be treated as proof that she knows about Claudius's crime.
Memory cue:	<i>Player Queen promises → Gertrude doubts → irony → remarriage</i>

Summaries and analyses

Using this section

Working through the play scene by scene ensures that solid foundations of knowledge are laid and then gradually and effectively built on. In this section, each act is broken down into its constituent scenes, each of which is summarised and analysed separately. Between reading the summary and the analysis of a scene, you are encouraged to follow the page references provided and to read the actual text of the scene. Once you have become familiar with each scene, you are urged to engage with that scene directly through scene-specific contextual questions that require you to refer to the text closely. Suggested answers/potential responses to the scene-specific contextual questions are provided in the companion *Suggested Answers* booklet.



In the section devoted to the **literary essay** (page 100 of this resource) that follows these summaries, there is also a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students tackle the play in its entirety.



Recommended process:

1. Read the scene summary (as a primer).
2. Read the actual text of the scene (making notes).
3. Read the scene analysis (formulate your own opinions).
4. Answer scene-specific contextual questions (express your own opinions).



Questions to ask when analysing a scene:

1. What happens?
2. What does the action reveal?
3. Why does it matter?

Act 1

Act 1, scene 1

Summary

On the battlements of Elsinore, the royal castle of Denmark, shortly after midnight, Barnardo relieves Francisco on the night watch. They are joined by Marcellus and Horatio. Marcellus and Barnardo report that an apparition resembling the late King Hamlet has appeared to them on two previous nights. Horatio, a sceptical intellectual, initially doubts their account. The Ghost then appears, again, in the armour worn by the dead king, but it does not answer Horatio when he challenges it, and disappears. Horatio explains that Prince Fortinbras of Norway is preparing to recover territory lost by his father to the late King Hamlet, which accounts for Denmark's military preparations. When the Ghost returns, Horatio asks whether it has come to warn Denmark or to request assistance, but the crowing of a cockerel to herald the dawn interrupts the encounter. At daybreak, the men resolve to tell Prince Hamlet about it, believing that the Ghost may speak to him.



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- Turn to page 120 and read the text of Act 1, scene 1.

Analysis

The scene may be read as establishing uncertainty before it supplies explanation. Barnardo's mistaken opening challenge, 'Who's there?', places identity and knowledge under immediate pressure, while darkness, cold, and interrupted speech make reliable perception difficult. Horatio's movement from scepticism to alarm gives the audience a rational witness, yet his confirmation does not settle what the apparition is or what it wants. The Ghost's resemblance to the dead king may authenticate it, but its silence and armour also permit less reassuring interpretations.

The supernatural disturbance is placed alongside a political one: Fortinbras is mobilising, and Denmark is hastily preparing for defensive war. This parallel could suggest that private wrongdoing and public instability are connected, or it may simply show a state made vulnerable by a disputed succession and unresolved history. The scene matters because it introduces the theme of revenge through Fortinbras, even before Hamlet receives his own instructions from the Ghost to become an avenger, and because it establishes a dramatic world in which evidence must be interpreted, rather than merely accepted.

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Questions

1. Describe Horatio's initial response to the reports of the Ghost and explain how his response changes. (2)
2. Explain two ways in which the Ghost's military appearance is connected to Denmark's political situation. (3)
3. How does Shakespeare establish a sense of uncertainty in the opening scene? (5)

[10]

Act 1, scene 2

Summary

At court, Claudius expresses public grief over his brother's death, and announces his own recent marriage to Gertrude, before sending Cornelius and Voltmendant to ask the King of Norway to restrain his nephew, young Fortinbras. He grants Laertes permission to return to France, then urges Hamlet to end his prolonged mourning and commands him to remain at Elsinore rather than to return to Wittenberg. Gertrude repeats the request, and Hamlet agrees to stay. Once alone, Hamlet laments his father's death, his mother's rapid remarriage, and the religious prohibition against suicide. Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo arrive and tell Hamlet that they have seen an armed apparition resembling his father. After questioning them closely, Hamlet decides to join the night watch and speak to the Ghost, if it appears again.



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► Turn to page 134 and read the text of Act 1, scene 2.

Analysis

Claudius's opening address may display genuine political competence: he balances mourning with celebration, acts diplomatically against young Fortinbras, and attends to Laertes's request. However, the juxtaposition of grief and joy, funeral and marriage, suggests a shallow, insincere response to the nation's great loss. The same control of language can also be viewed as strategic self-legitimation, since the use of antithesis and collective pronouns make a rapid and controversial succession appear orderly. Shakespeare does not require an audience to choose immediately between Claudius as an effective ruler and a calculating usurper; the tension between these impressions becomes central to Claudius's dramatic impact.



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Hamlet's first exchanges distinguish external signs from inward experience. His insistence that he has 'that within which passes show' challenges the court's attempt to regulate grief, while his soliloquy reveals thoughts he cannot express publicly. His idealisation of his father and his condemnation of Gertrude communicate authentic bereavement, but the extremity of his comparisons could also reveal how grief narrows his judgement, particularly his views of women and their sexuality. The 'unweeded garden' image expands personal disgust into a perception of general moral decay.

The scene matters because it places two versions of Denmark beside each other: Claudius celebrates his supposedly stable government, whereas Hamlet sees only contamination, loss, and false appearances. News of the Ghost converts Hamlet's private grief into a need to investigate and gives the play a new direction.



Questions

1. How does Claudius attempt to establish authority in his opening address? Refer to both the royal marriage and the threat from Norway. (4)
2. Contrast Hamlet's public conduct in the court with the thoughts he expresses in his first soliloquy. (4)
3. Why is Hamlet's distinction between what 'seems' and what 'is' significant? (3)
4. Explain how Horatio's news changes the direction of the scene and the play. (4)

[15]

The literary essay

An essay is a short piece of writing that presents and develops an idea. The purpose of writing an essay is two-fold. The first reason is to demonstrate an understanding of the text in question. The second is to show that you can write about a topic in a focused and sustained way. In other words, an essay is not a rambling, disjointed collection of your thoughts regarding a topic, but an integrated and interconnected discussion that develops a clear, convincing argument. This section offers some basic guidelines on writing a literary essay, two annotated examples from which to learn, and a selection of essay topics that you can use to practise essay writing.

Scan this QR code to access a 15-minute focused lesson on **writing a literary essay**.



Password: *****



When you are writing a literary essay, you are writing an argumentative, analytical essay. Topics are often provocative comments about the text you have studied. You are required to demonstrate that you understand the topic fully, and then explore its relevance to the text as a whole. You must adopt a clear stance of your own, and present it in substantiated detail. Acknowledgement of explicit counter-arguments is not always necessary, but an awareness of nuance and complexity is essential.

Guidelines

- Keep your writing direct, lucid, and unpretentious: avoid over-complicated sentence structures and unnecessarily wordy descriptions.
- Write in the present tense using the active voice as this helps to ensure your argument is more immediate and convincing.
- Write using a formal tone and register (i.e., avoiding slang, colloquialisms, jargon, and abbreviations), as a literary essay is a piece of academic analysis, not creative writing.
- Remember that any statements you make should be supported with concrete, plausible examples and evidence from the text. Concise, accurate quotations from the text always enhance a literary essay.
- Pay attention to the required length, if it is stipulated. (In Grade 12, your essay should be approximately 600 words in length.) There is no need to include a word-count at the end of your essay unless you are specifically instructed to do so. You should keep your response as concise as possible, as you will be penalised if your argument strays off the topic.
- Present your essay in a neat and tidy manner as sloppy work makes a poor impression and could cost you marks, particularly if your essay is illegible or difficult to read.

Planning your essay

It is important to plan your **essay** thoroughly before you start writing your response. Doing so will improve your marks by helping you to clarify your ideas and to structure your argument logically. If you plan your essay properly, it can feel as if it almost writes itself.



Common types of essay:

Argumentative — requires you to formulate an opinion or perspective regarding a topic, explain your reasoning and provide evidence from the text(s) to substantiate your stance. Task words for such an essay include: 'argue', 'comment on', 'motivate', 'criticise', and 'justify'.

Discursive — requires you to present a balanced or objective discussion of an issue or topic by identifying the information that is relevant to each of the different perspectives or opinions regarding the issue (e.g., both arguments and counter-arguments), and exploring the relevant views in a logical, organised manner. Note that you may be asked to conclude your essay with an evaluation of the information and offer an opinion or required to provide a neutral summary of the most salient points. Task words for such an essay include: 'report', 'investigate', 'describe', 'discuss', 'explore', 'summarise', 'explain', 'illustrate' and 'distinguish'.

Analytical — requires you to evaluate an issue or subject by identifying the relevant information from the text(s) and re-organising it to create an appropriate response. Task words for such an essay include: 'analyse', 'assess', 'compare', 'contrast', 'examine', 'evaluate' and 'identify'.

Annotated essay examples

The following section features two example essays that have been written to meet the format and requirements of the IEB Grade 12 Literary essay. The essays have been annotated to emphasise the structural elements that have been used. These examples are provided for students to review and from which to learn. Please note that these example essays are offered as guidelines to the recommended formatting and structure of essays only, and that students are encouraged to develop their written 'voice' (vocabulary, tone, point of view, and use of syntax) by practising the skill of essay writing.

Example 1

Study the quotation below and then write a literary essay in response to the topic that follows it:

'Madness in Hamlet is never merely a private disorder of the mind; it is also a language through which the disorders of the court become visible. Whether assumed, suspected, or suffered, it exposes truths that ordinary speech is either unable to express or is forbidden to do so.'

— Kenneth Burke

TOPIC:

Critically discuss the **role played by madness** in Shakespeare's Hamlet and the extent to which **it reveals the wider moral, emotional, and political disorder** affecting the members of the Danish court.

Your response must refer to a minimum of **TWO** characters.

What does this quotation suggest about the role of madness in the play? What thoughts or ideas come to mind as you read it? How might it provide a structure to guide your response?

Note topic.

You are being reminded that your essay must have depth.

You will earn marks for making a thesis statement, and for signposting and linking the points you make.

Please note:

- Your response must be in the form of a well-structured literary essay.
- The length of your response must be **approximately 600 words**.
- Your knowledge of Shakespeare's text, Hamlet, and your ability to structure and substantiate your stance in order to develop a **tightly constructed argument** will be assessed.
- **Close** and **relevant** reference to the play is **essential**.
- Do **NOT** provide a word-count at the end of your essay.

You are being reminded to substantiate your opinion by including quotations and evidence from the text.

	Essay:	Comments:
Introduction	Madness in <u>Hamlet</u> operates not simply as an individual affliction, but as a means of exposing the corruption concealed beneath the apparent order of the Danish court. Hamlet's assumed madness gives him licence to challenge political authority, while Ophelia's genuine breakdown expresses grief and anger that she has previously been compelled to suppress. Claudius's responses to both characters further reveal his dependence upon surveillance, manipulation, and dictatorial control. <u>Shakespeare, therefore, presents madness principally as a symptom and revelation of the wider moral and political disorder in Denmark: through Hamlet's use of an 'antic disposition', madness exposes political and moral corruption, while through Ophelia's genuine psychological collapse, it reveals the destructive emotional consequences of repression, betrayal, and the misuse of power, both familial and political.</u>	Note the thesis statement (<u>underlined</u>), summarising the argument that is to follow.

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Practice essay questions

Consider the following essay topics carefully. Some are likely to trigger a strong emotional response, and others to make you think, reflect, and want to argue the point in question. Choose a topic to which you can relate, or about which you feel passionate, and write a well-planned essay of approximately 600 words in length. Refer to the accompanying literary essay marking rubric in the companion *Suggested Answers* booklet to ensure that you are familiar with the marking criteria.



Although it is not compulsory, **planning your essay** is highly recommended. Use your essay plan to outline the intended structure of your argument, the links among your ideas, and the evidence you will offer to substantiate your argument. Indeed, being able to plan a literary essay efficiently is a crucial skill that will make the process of writing literary essays, particularly under examination conditions, a great deal more manageable and enjoyable! Practice this skill by planning responses to each of the following essay topics. Doing so will also help you assess (1) to which topics you are comfortable responding, and (2) which topics you would benefit from revising further.

Essay topics

Question 1

Read the following:

'It is we who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history.'

— William Hazlitt

TOPIC:

Critically discuss to what extent Shakespeare's *Hamlet* invites readers and viewers to **identify with the protagonist**, while also requiring them to **judge his conduct**.

Your response must refer to a minimum of **TWO** characters.

[30]

Question 2

Read the following:

'Great works may present and explain something about their own context and time, but also observe something larger and more lasting about the human condition.'

— John Freeman

TOPIC:

Critically discuss to what extent Shakespeare's *Hamlet* observes something **larger** and **more lasting** about the **human condition**.

Your response must refer to a minimum of **TWO** characters.

[30]

Question 3

Read the following:

'A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him: the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him,—not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him.'

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

TOPIC:

Argue to what extent Hamlet should be regarded as a **morally principled hero** overwhelmed by an intolerable task, or as a **hesitant, destructive figure** who fails to meet his responsibilities in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Your response must refer to a minimum of **TWO** characters.

[30]

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The play

A note on the text

Choosing a version of Hamlet can be a challenging task because there are three different original versions of the tragedy (known as the First Quarto, Second Quarto, and Folio); there are also many other subsequent versions that combine various aspects of the original texts.

This variety may seem odd at first, but Shakespeare wrote his plays to be staged, not published, and did not authorise their printing during his lifetime (since doing so would have given rival acting companies easy access to the scripts and the opportunity to stage competing performances). As a result, most of the early printed versions of his plays were unauthorised editions, acquired from actors who either obtained a handwritten copy of the play or wrote it down from memory. This meant that the scripts were usually littered with discrepancies, errors, and alterations, made at the whim of the plagiarist or printer.

The text of our play is based on the version found in The Globe Edition of The Works of William Shakespeare, published in 1864. This edition is, in turn, based upon the widely accepted First Folio¹ version, published in 1623. Although based on The Globe Edition, our text differs significantly. We have agreed with many of the credible emendations of subsequent editors and altered some of the spelling, stage directions, and punctuation, in particular. These changes have been made after reading and assessing numerous versions of the play, and, as always, with one goal in mind; to provide modern Grade 12 students with the most accessible, yet accurate version possible.

Changes made to the punctuation, for example, have been made either because usage has changed considerably since Shakespeare's day or because Shakespeare was actually using the punctuation to give actors hints on how to deliver their lines, rather than to assist readers with understanding the meaning of the lines. In either case, the punctuation has been changed whenever it could distort the meaning of the text for modern learners. Examples of the changes made include substituting full stops for colons, replacing semi-colons with commas, and removing capitals where none would be used today. When scenes and characters differ in different versions of the play, we have remained true to the First Folio edition.

The persons of the play

CLAUDIUS: King of Denmark

HAMLET: Son of the late king, and nephew of the present king

GERTRUDE: Queen of Denmark. Mother of Hamlet. Widow of Hamlet's father, now Claudius's wife

POLONIUS: Principal Secretary of State

LAERTES: Son of Polonius

OPHELIA: Daughter of Polonius

HORATIO: Friend of Hamlet

VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS: Ambassadors to Norway

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN: Formerly fellow students with Hamlet / former friends of Hamlet

OSRIC: A foppish courtier

MARCELLUS and BARNARDO: Officers

FRANCISCO: A soldier / sentinel

REYNALDO: Servant to Polonius

FORTINBRAS: Prince of Norway

PLAYERS: A troupe of actors

CLOWNS: Gravediggers

GHOST: The ghost of Hamlet's father

A GENTLEMAN

A PRIEST

A CAPTAIN

ENGLISH AMBASSADORS

Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers, and Attendants

SETTING: Denmark

¹ The First Folio edition was compiled and published by friends and admirers of Shakespeare in 1623. Entitled Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies, it contains a reasonably authentic collection of 36 of Shakespeare's plays.

ACT 1

Act 1, scene 1

		<i>[Denmark. A narrow platform in front of the castle at Elsinore. A cold, star-lit night. The bell tolls twelve.]</i> <i>[FRANCISCO, a sentry, is at his post. Enter BARNARDO]</i>	
	BARNARDO	Who's there?	
	FRANCISCO	Nay, answer me. Stand and <i>unfold</i> yourself.	<i>reveal who you are</i>
	BARNARDO	Long live the King!	
	FRANCISCO	Barnardo?	
5	BARNARDO	He.	
	FRANCISCO	You come <i>most carefully upon your hour</i> .	<i>very punctually; on time</i>
	BARNARDO	'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.	
	FRANCISCO	For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold, And I am <i>sick at heart</i> ² .	<i>scared / depressed / deeply trouble</i>
10	BARNARDO	Have you had quiet guard?	
	FRANCISCO	Not a mouse stirring.	
	BARNARDO	Well, good night. If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus, The <i>rivals of my watch</i> , bid them make haste.	<i>those that guard with me</i>
		<i>[Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS]</i>	
	FRANCISCO	<i>[Listens]</i>	
15		I think I hear them. Stand ho! Who is there?	
	HORATIO	<i>Friends to this ground</i> .	<i>Your friends; Danish patriots</i>
	MARCELLUS	And <i>liegemen</i> to the Dane.	<i>loyal subjects of the Danish king</i>
	FRANCISCO	Give you good night.	
	MARCELLUS	O farewell, honest soldier.	
20		Who hath <i>relieved</i> you?	<i>replaced</i>
	FRANCISCO	Barnardo hath my place. Give you good night. <i>[FRANCISCO off]</i>	
	MARCELLUS	<i>Holla</i> , Barnardo.	<i>Hey!</i>
	BARNARDO	Say,	
25		What, is Horatio there?	

² Francisco's exclamation anticipates Marcellus's later statement of 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (Act 1, scene 4), indicating all is not well, and introduces the imagery of disease.

Student Annotations

5	
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15	
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25	

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1, scene 1

	HORATIO	A piece of him ³ .	
	BARNARDO	Welcome Horatio, welcome good Marcellus.	
	HORATIO	What, has this thing appeared again to-night?	
	BARNARDO	I have seen nothing.	
30	MARCELLUS	Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy And will not let belief take hold of him <i>Touching</i> this dreaded sight twice seen of us.	<i>Regarding</i>
		Therefore I have <i>entreated</i> him along	<i>asked him earnestly / begged</i>
		With us to watch the minutes of this night,	
35		That, if again this <i>apparition</i> come,	<i>ghost or ghostlike image / phantom</i>
		He may <i>approve</i> our eyes and <i>speak</i> to it.	<i>confirm what we have seen; Horatio would be able to speak to the ghost in Latin</i>
	HORATIO	<i>Tush, tush</i> , 'twill not appear.	<i>Nonsense (a dismissive exclamation)</i>
	BARNARDO	Sit down awhile, And let us once again <i>assail</i> your ears,	<i>attack / demand your attention</i>
40		That are so <i>fortified</i> against our story, What we have two nights seen.	<i>strengthened defensively⁴ / prejudiced against</i>
	HORATIO	Well, sit we down, And let us hear Barnardo speak of this.	
	BARNARDO	Last night of all,	
45		When <i>yond</i> same star that's westward from the <i>pole</i> Had made his course to <i>illumine</i> that part of heaven Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself, The bell then beating one . . .	<i>that⁵; Pole star</i> <i>illuminate / light up</i>
		[Enter GHOST clad in armour and carrying a truncheon]	
	MARCELLUS	Peace! Break thee off. Look where it comes again!	
50	BARNARDO	In the same figure like the king that's dead.	
	MARCELLUS	Thou art a scholar ⁶ ; speak to it, Horatio.	
	BARNARDO	Looks it not like the king? <i>Mark it</i> , Horatio.	<i>Look closely at it / Take note of it</i>

3 He jests with them. It is so cold his whole body is numb.

4 By refusing to listen without prejudice and doubt, Horatio has essentially stopped listening to, or taking note of, the repeated stories of the other guards about this apparition. Note the imagery of battle in both 'assail' and 'fortify'. The sceptical Horatio uses his rationality as a 'fortress' (powerful defence) against the onslaught of what he sees as an incredible tale.

5 Referring specifically to something in the distance.

6 Because Horatio was a scholar, he would be able to speak Latin and so exorcise any evil spirits.

Student Annotations

30	
35	
40	
45	
50	

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1, scene 1

	HORATIO	Most like; it <i>harrows</i> me with fear and wonder.	<i>causes me to feel distress / makes me feel pain and fear</i>
	BARNARDO	<i>It would be spoke to.</i>	<i>It wishes to be spoken to.</i>
55	MARCELLUS	Question it, Horatio.	
	HORATIO	What art thou that <i>usurp'st</i> this time of night, Together with that fair and warlike form In which the <i>majesty of buried Denmark</i> Did sometimes march? By heaven, I charge thee speak.	<i>seizes' / invades / takes over</i> <i>the late king of Denmark</i>
60	MARCELLUS	It is offended.	
	BARNARDO	See, it stalks away.	
	HORATIO	Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak! <i>[The GHOST vanishes]</i>	
	MARCELLUS	'Tis gone and will not answer.	
	BARNARDO	How now Horatio? You tremble and look pale!	
65		Is not this something more than fantasy? What think you <i>on't</i> ?	<i>of it</i>
	HORATIO	Before my God, I might not this believe Without the sensible and true <i>avouch</i> ⁸ Of mine own eyes.	<i>affirmation</i>
70	MARCELLUS	Is it not like the king?	
	HORATIO	As thou art to thyself. Such was the very armour he had on, When he the ambitious <i>Norway</i> combated.	<i>King of Norway</i>
		So frowned he once, when in an angry <i>parle</i> He smote the <i>sledded Polacks</i> on the ice. 'Tis strange.	<i>disagreement / confrontation of</i> <i>using sleds or sledges; Poles</i>
75		'Tis strange.	
	MARCELLUS	Thus twice before, and <i>jump</i> at this dead hour, With <i>martial stalk</i> hath he gone by our watch.	<i>precisely</i> <i>imposing walk of a warrior</i>
	HORATIO	In what particular thought to work I know not,	
80		But in the gross and scope of my opinion, This bodes some strange <i>eruption</i> ⁹ to our state.	<i>upheaval in</i>
	MARCELLUS	Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,	

7 To *usurp* is to take a place that belongs to another, illegally or by force.

8 I would not have believed this if I had not just seen it.

9 I don't quite know what the reason for this is, but my own view is that this foretells an upheaval in our state.

Student Annotations

55

60

65

70

75

80

FOREWORD
INTRODUCTION
BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY
SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES
LITERARY ESSAY
THE PLAY ACT 1 SCENE 1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1, scene 1

	Why this same strict and most observant watch	
	So nightly toils the subject of the land,	causes the people of the land to work hard
85	And why such daily cast of brazen cannon	brass
	And foreign mart for implements of war,	market - i.e., the buying of weapons from aboard
	Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task	forced service
	Does not divide the Sunday from the week.	
	What might be toward that this sweaty haste	imminent / about to happen
90	Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day?	
	Who is't that can inform me ¹⁰ ?	
HORATIO	That can I,	
	At least the whisper goes so. Our last king,	rumour
	Whose image even but now appeared to us,	
95	Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,	
	Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,	incited; a determined envy and rivalry
	Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet	
	(For so this side of our known world esteemed him)	judged / praised
	Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a sealed compact,	agreement
100	Well ratified by law and heraldy,	formally confirmed; rules for single combat
	Did forfeit (with his life) all those his lands	gave up his lands, on his death
	Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror;	possessed
	Against the which a moiety competent	an equivalent amount
	Was gagéd by our king, which had returned	pledged; would have
105	To the inheritance of Fortinbras,	
	Had he been vanquisher; as by the same covenant,	agreement
	And carriage of the article designed,	in terms of the agreement
	His fell to Hamlet. Now sir, young Fortinbras,	
	Of unimprovéd mettle hot and full,	untested courage and military prowess
110	Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there	outskirts
	Sharked up a list of lawless resolute ¹¹ ,	gathered indiscriminately

¹⁰ Marcellus, now that his claims about the ghost have been confirmed, is asking about the war preparations in Denmark. He mentions the increased work of the people of the land, the casting of cannons, the buying of weapons, and the ship workers slaving day and night.

¹¹ Reckless outlaws.

Student Annotations

85	
90	
95	
100	
105	
110	

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1, scene 1

		For food and diet to some enterprise	
		That hath a <i>stomach in't</i> , which is no other	<i>seems to promise adventure</i>
		(As it doth well appear unto our state)	
115		But to recover of us by <i>strong hand</i>	<i>by force</i>
		And <i>terms compulsatory</i> , those foresaid lands	<i>conditions involving compulsion</i>
		So by his father lost. And this, I take it,	
		Is the main motive of our preparations,	
		The source of this our watch, and the <i>chief head</i>	<i>origin</i>
120		Of this post-haste and <i>romage</i> in the land.	<i>commotion / uproar</i>
	BARNARDO	I think it be no other but e'en so.	
		Well may it sort that this <i>portentous</i> figure	<i>ominous; profoundly meaningful</i>
		Comes arméd through our watch so like the king	
		That was and is the question of these wars.	
125	HORATIO	A <i>mote</i> it is to trouble the mind's eye ¹² .	<i>speck of dust</i>
		In the most high and <i>palmy</i> state of Rome,	<i>flourishing</i>
		A little <i>ere</i> the mightiest <i>Julius</i> fell,	<i>before; Julius Caesar</i>
		The graves stood <i>tenantless</i> and the sheeted dead	<i>empty</i>
		Did <i>squeak and gibber</i> in the Roman streets;	<i>speak inarticulately and rapidly</i>
130		As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,	
		<i>Disasters in the sun</i> ; and the <i>moist star</i> ,	<i>sunspots; the moon</i>
		Upon whose influence Neptune's ¹³ empire stands,	
		Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse ¹⁴ .	
		And even the like <i>precurse</i> of fierce events,	<i>foreshadowing</i>
135		As <i>harbingers</i> ¹⁵ preceding <i>still</i> the fates	<i>forerunners; always</i>
		And prologue to the omen coming on,	
		Have heaven and earth together demonstrated	
		Unto our <i>climatures</i> and countrymen.	<i>regions</i>
		[Enter GHOST]	
		But soft, behold! Lo where it comes again!	
140		I'll <i>cross it though it blast me</i> . Stay, illusion!	<i>confront and challenge it, even if it kills me</i>

12 This is an allusion to *Matthew 7:3*: 'And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?'; also a cause of irritation.

13 Neptune is the god of the seas; following on from the previous line, the sea is dependent on the moon, because the moon governs the tides.

14 The moon did not give light, as if doomsday had come.

15 A harbinger is one who announces the arrival or approach of someone; an advance messenger.

Student Annotations

115	
120	
125	
130	
135	
140	

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1, scene 1

		[The GHOST spreads his arms]	
		If thou hast any sound or use of voice,	
		Speak to me!	
		If there be any good thing to be done	
		That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,	
145		Speak to me!	
		If thou art <i>privy</i> to thy country's fate	have knowledge of
		Which <i>happily</i> foreknowing may avoid, O, speak!	perchance / by fortunate chance
		Or if thou hast <i>uphoarded</i> in thy life	gathered up
		<i>Extorted</i> treasure in the womb of earth ¹⁶ ,	Obtained illegally, by force
150		For which they say you spirits oft walk in death,	
		[Cock crows]	
		Speak of it; stay and speak! Stop it, Marcellus!	
	MARCELLUS	Shall I strike at it with my <i>partisan</i> ?	type of spear with a broad head; an axe-headed spear
	HORATIO	Do, if it will not stand.	
	BARNARDO	'Tis here!	
155	HORATIO	'Tis here!	
		[GHOST off]	
	MARCELLUS	'Tis gone!	
		We do it wrong being so majestic	
		To offer it the show of violence,	
		For it is as the air, invulnerable,	
160		And our vain blows malicious mockery.	
	BARNARDO	It was about to speak when the cock crew.	
	HORATIO	And then it started like a guilty thing,	
		Upon a fearful summons. I have heard	
		The cock that is the trumpet to the morn	rooster
165		Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat	
		Awake the god of day, and at his warning,	
		Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,	

¹⁶ If you have hoarded treasure and buried it in the earth.

Student Annotations

145	
150	
155	
160	
165	

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Act 1, scene 1

	Th' extravagant and erring spirit hies ¹⁷	
	To his confine, and of the truth herein	
170	This present object made <i>probation</i> ¹⁸ .	<i>offered proof / evidence</i>
MARCELLUS	It faded on the crowing of the cock.	
	Some say that ever ' <i>gainst</i> that season comes	<i>always just before</i>
	Wherein our <i>Saviour's birth is celebrated</i> ,	<i>Christmas</i>
	This <i>bird of dawning</i> singeth all night long,	<i>rooster</i>
175	And then they say no spirit dares stir abroad;	
	The nights are wholesome, then no planets <i>strike</i> ,	<i>exert an evil influence</i>
	No fairy <i>takes</i> , nor witch hath power to charm,	<i>enchants / bewitches</i>
	So <i>hallowed</i> and so gracious is the time.	<i>holy</i>
HORATIO	So have I heard and do in part believe it.	
180	But look, the morn in <i>russet</i> ¹⁹ mantle clad	<i>a reddish-brown cloak</i>
	Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.	
	Break we our watch up and by my advice	
	Let us impart what we have seen to-night	
	Unto young Hamlet, for upon my life	
185	This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.	
	Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it,	
	As needful in our loves, fitting our duty ²⁰ ?	
MARCELLUS	Let's do't, I pray, and I this morning know	
	Where we shall find him most conveniently.	
	[Off]	

17 The straying and wandering ghost hastens back.

18 The truth of the statement has been proved by what we have just witnessed.

19 The morning is breaking, casting a red glow in the sky.

20 Should we tell him (Hamlet), out of both love and duty?

Student Annotations

170	
175	
180	
185	

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND
TO THE PLAY

SUMMARIES
AND ANALYSES

LITERARY ESSAY

THE PLAY
ACT 1 | SCENE 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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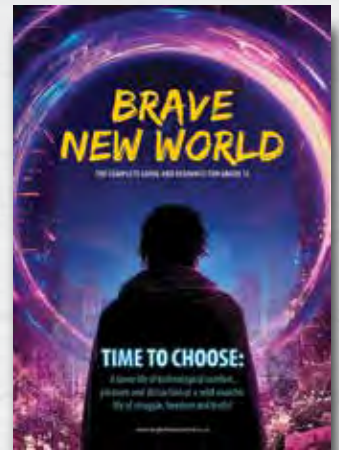
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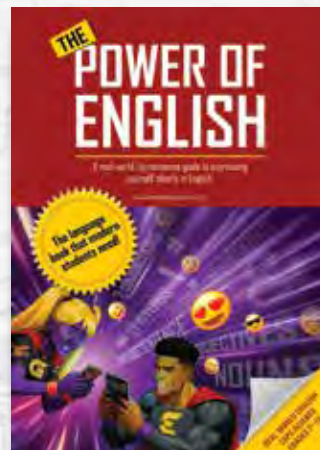
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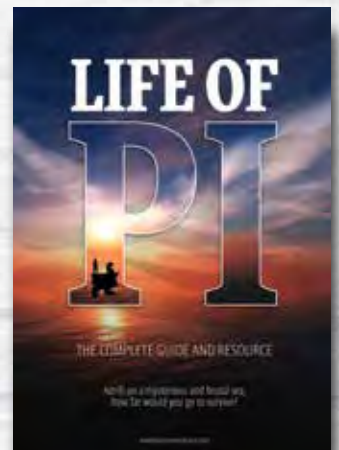
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