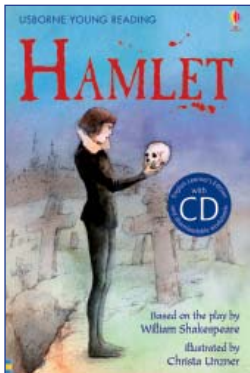


Hamlet • Teacher's notes



Author: William Shakespeare, adapted by Louie Stowell

Reader level: Advanced

Word count: 2481

Lexile level: 480L

Text type: Adapted classic

About the story

This atmospheric adaptation of Shakespeare's most often-performed tragedy opens, like the play, on the castle battlements where frightened guards wait for the nightly visit of the dead King's ghost. With them is Horatio, friend to the King's son, Hamlet. Hamlet is suspicious about his father's death, and appalled that his mother has now married his father's brother. The ghost won't speak to Horatio, but the next night confirms Hamlet's suspicions: he was murdered by his brother, and Hamlet must take revenge.

Hamlet tells Horatio that he will pretend to be mad, so that his uncle won't suspect his true intentions. The courtier Polonius believes Hamlet is mad with love for his daughter Ophelia, and he and King Claudius hide to watch Hamlet ranting and raving, although Claudius isn't convinced that love is the cause. Hamlet agonizes over when to kill Claudius, plagued with doubt and self-loathing. Polonius and Claudius spy on him once again, but Hamlet sees movement behind a curtain and fatally stabs Polonius. Claudius takes the opportunity to send him away to England, but Hamlet escapes and returns.

Distraught at Hamlet's cruelty and her father's death, Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself. Her brother, Laertes, swears revenge on Hamlet, and Claudius proposes that he challenge Hamlet to a duel, fighting with a poisoned sword. Watching the duel, the Queen takes a poisoned drink, also intended for Hamlet, and Hamlet finally seizes the moment and stabs the King; but both he and Laertes are fatally wounded, and only Horatio lives to tell the terrible tale.

About the author

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, and became famous as an actor and writer when he moved to London. He wrote hundreds of poems and almost 40 plays, celebrated worldwide for their dramatic range, dazzling use of language, complex characters and enduring stories. It's estimated that every minute of the day, Hamlet is being staged somewhere in the world.

Words and phrases of interest, and unfamiliar words

Help your students to develop strategies for unfamiliar words, so that you don't have to interrupt the flow of the story often to explain vocabulary. You might suggest they make a quick note of words as they read, or mark their place on the page with removable sticky notes or index tabs. Encourage them to deduce meanings: are they familiar with any part of the word (e.g. "honest" in "dishonest")? Can they guess from the context (e.g. "stabbing" in "stabbing him with the poisoned sword")? You could look at different strategies for learning new vocabulary, such as making word clouds or thematic lists.

p3	battlements	p11	revenge	p22	cursing	offended	p48	drowned	
p4	gasped	p13	forgiveness		himself	p34	shrugged	p51	skull
p6	utterly		avenge	p23	disguise	p39	pounding	p52	chanting
	miserable	p17	ranted and	p24	script	p41	withered	p58	wound
	to make		raved	p25	villain	p42	grief		weapon
	someone's	p18	smugly		snored	p46	challenge	p60	traitor
	blood boil		lost his wits	p30	lunatic		duel	p61	stabbing
p10	beckoned	p20	betray	p31	summoned	p47	dishonest	p62	ebbing



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Before reading

There have been many celebrated stage and film productions of Hamlet. If you can search for images online in advance, you should find plenty, often showing Hamlet holding the jester's skull. Try and find one which shows Hamlet looking moody and haunted, or draw your own picture of a frowning young man, dressed in black. Then draw a big black cloud above the Hamlet figure. Search also for a portrait of Shakespeare, to be used later in the session.

Ask students to describe the figure in the picture: you are looking for words such as "depressed" or "gloomy". Ask what kind of things might make the character depressed, and write them around the image on the board. Feed in a few of your own, too, so that you have: father dead; father murdered; mother married someone you don't like; girlfriend trouble; feel like killing yourself. Underline or highlight the relevant phrases. Ask if students know who this character is, and write the name HAMLET.

Show them the picture of Shakespeare, and see if they can identify him. What do they know about Shakespeare? Can they give the names of any Shakespeare plays are? Depending on the titles they give you, ask what kind of plays are [e.g.] Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet? [Tragedies.] What typically happens in a tragedy, or at the end of a tragedy?

Reading or listening

You can listen to the story on CD or read it aloud to the students, take turns to read or read together silently. Each double page spread in the book is one track on the CD, so that you can pause between tracks or repeat tracks if your students need it. The first reading is in a British English accent, and it is followed by an American English reading. The words are exactly the same.

During reading: you might like to ask some of these questions.

- p5 Why do you think the ghost disappears as the sun rises?
- p6 What does dressing in black usually show? Is a month long to wait before marrying again?
- p13 Why was begging forgiveness for his sins important? [People believed that if they died without confessing their sins, they wouldn't be able to go straight to heaven.]
- p20 Do you think Hamlet really is mad, or is he pretending? Do you think he knows he's being spied on?
- p23 Note that Shakespeare was an actor himself, and included mini-plays within several of his plays.
- p29 Remember that Hamlet's father didn't have a chance to confess *his* sins before he died.
- p31 Do you think Hamlet's mother is an innocent character in this story? Does she deserve for Hamlet to be so angry with her?
- p33 Does Hamlet really think there's a rat?
- p42 Is it only grief for her father's death that's made Ophelia mad? Could she have been in love with Hamlet?
- p45 Does Hamlet sound mad in this letter?
- p49 Why doesn't Laertes care about the duel being dishonest now?
- p52 How do you think Hamlet feels about Ophelia's death?
- p60 Why do you think the Queen calls out to Hamlet, not to her husband? Is she beginning to suspect him?
- p62 What characteristics does Horatio show in this last scene?

After reading

Ask the class how they feel at the end. How do they think audiences feel after seeing the play? Can there be anything positive about seeing terrible things happen in a play or a film? For example: they can teach us about people's characters and behaviour; they help us to appreciate our not-so tragic lives.

The play is based on a medieval Norse legend, but the story is best known now through Shakespeare's version. Ask students why they think Hamlet is still so popular today. Encourage the class to pick out the main themes and perhaps write them on the board. [Death, Revenge, Madness, Grief, Love, Guilt, etc.] Are these themes still relevant for us?