

Hamlet—Reading Guide

The following commentary and outline are taken **directly** from the following source:

McCallum, Alistair. *Hamlet: A Guide*. The Shakespeare Handbooks. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001.

Setting the scene.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in or around 1600. He was in his mid-thirties, a successful dramatist and actor, and a member—and shareholder—of the most prestigious theatre company in London.

This was a prolific time in Shakespeare's career, particularly in the production of comedies; *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* all date from this period. What prompted Shakespeare at this point in his life to turn to tragedy, a form he had so far handled lightly and infrequently, we can only guess. Whatever the motivation the result was staggering; a vast, complex, disturbing drama, wildly imaginative in its plot and ravishing in its language. The play, which draws on ancient Norse legend for its central events, was an immediate and enduring success.

Hamlet occupies a central position in world literature. It has been translated into most of the world's languages, and over the centuries has provoked more comment, analysis and argument than any other single work of drama. It has been staged, filmed and televised more than any other Shakespearean play: in the first three decades of the twentieth century, the age of the silent movie, no fewer than seventeen film versions of *Hamlet* were made. The role of the Prince is regarded by many actors—and, for the last two hundred years, many actresses—as the greatest challenge of their careers.

And yet this play, Shakespeare's longest, so many of whose phrases have become a familiar part of the English language, remains, at heart, a mystery:

“Hamlet is Shakespeare's most frequently performed play. Over the past four centuries of its rich and uninterrupted stage history, every generation has attempted to reinterpret the tragedy in terms of its own values and concerns. Audiences have been attracted to the drama not only because of the interpretive opportunities afforded by Shakespeare's provocatively ambiguous hero, but also because of the sheer beauty and insight of the poet's sublime verse . . . while most critics have acknowledged the impossibility of reconciling Hamlet's disparate, often conflicting traits into a coherent whole, performers and audiences continue to embrace the endeavour.”

Joseph C. Tardiff, *Shakespearean Criticism*, 1993

A death brings disquiet to Elsinore

Hamlet, King of Denmark, is dead. His brother Claudius has succeeded to the throne. Shortly after becoming King, Claudius married his brother's widow, Gertrude.

Prince Hamlet, son of the dead King, has returned from his studies at Wittenberg university to be present at the funeral of his father, and the coronation of his uncle; and, to his dismay, the unexpected remarriage of his mother.

At the royal court in Elsinore, Prince Hamlet's sullen unpredictable behaviour is giving cause for concern. Meanwhile, a far more sinister development has been witnessed by the King's watchmen: in the depths of the night, the ghost of the old King, stern and warlike, has been seen marching in somber silence outside the castle walls.

(Use the following "headlines" created by McCallum to take notes as you read. For example: What is the vision? Who sees it? What does the vision "do"? How does Denmark prepare for conflict? Who is preparing? What is the conflict? Take notes on this sheet as you read. SD)

Act I

I, i

A disturbing vision

Denmark prepares for conflict

I, ii

The new King addresses his subjects

The Prince remains in mourning

Horatio brings alarming news

I, iii

Some stern words for Ophelia

I, iv

The ghost summons Hamlet

I, v

The truth emerges

The witnesses are sworn to secrecy

Act II

II, i

A secret mission for Reynaldo

Hamlet is behaving strangely

II, ii

Good news from Norway

Polonius puts forward his theory

Hamlet's melancholy is revealed

A new development in the theatre

Hamlet welcomes the players

A plan to reveal the King's guilt

Act III

III, i

A meeting is staged

Action and inaction: a meditation

Hamlet's behaviour continues to disturb

III, ii

A lecture on stagecraft for the players

The audience assembles

A murder is enacted

Hamlet is resolved

III, iii

An opportunity for revenge

III, iv

A deadly error

Hamlet warns the Queen against corruption

Act IV

IV, i

Claudius is shaken

IV, ii-iii

Hamlet's fate is sealed

IV, iv

Fortinbras leads his army to battle

IV, v

Another casualty

Laertes demands revenge

IV, vi
An unexpected message

IV, vii
Claudius enlists the help of Laertes

Act V

V, i
A controversial verdict

A pause for thought

Hamlet and Laertes clash

V, ii

An assassination attempt comes to light

A competition is staged

The plotting ends in catastrophe

Hamlet puts his trust in Horatio

Fortinbras reclaims his kingdom