

Outreach & Education Department
Study Guide for

Hamlet

By William Shakespeare
First performed around 1600

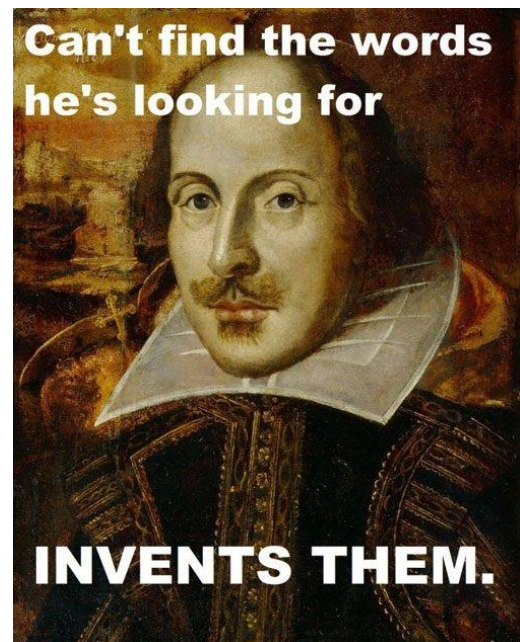
Shakespeare's Influence

William Shakespeare, the English playwright, was christened April 26, 1564, and according to an inscription on his tomb died April 23, 1616. Although the exact date of his birth is not recorded, it is traditional to celebrate his life on April 23 during the Feast of St. George, the patron saint of England. A contemporary of Galileo, the Italian astronomer, Shakespeare lived in years that spanned a fundamental change in world-view. Shakespeare experienced, or knew people who experienced, the Protestant Reformation, the exploration and colonization of a New World, the establishment of the Copernican theory, and the fundamental philosophical shift toward a human-centered universe: for as our understanding of the world changed, so did our understanding of ourselves in it. Shakespeare's drama, more than any other set of words in any language, documents, describes, and explores, some have even said *invents*, what it means to be human. It is Shakespeare's drama that gives us our conception of ourselves.

Shakespeare's Language

In Shakespeare's theater, his characters speak in ways that may seem very strange to our visually-oriented 21st century ears. Shakespeare's language sounds the way it does because it carries a burning intensity of feeling, an unfettered imagination, and a profound depth of meaning. Although very intense, Shakespeare's English is *our* English and in the mouths of skillful actors can be understood with little difficulty. It is a language to be heard, not silently read, and simply reading passages aloud can uncloak some of its mystery.

Not only was Shakespeare writing in modern English, he took liberties and had fun with language. You could imagine that this irreverence and playfulness to be very similar to the spirit in which every generation creates slang terms that define its experience. The only difference with Shakespeare is that the words he



invented stuck and actually became part of our common, everyday language. Imagine our vocabulary without word such as: *addiction; amazement; bedroom; blanket; champion; cold-blooded; dawn; elbow; eyeball; gossip; lonely; moonbeam; torture; unreal; worthless; and zany*. In all, Shakespeare added some 1700 words to our language!

Watching the Performance

NCSHakes' production of *Hamlet* features seven professional actors playing all the roles in a 60-minute version of Shakespeare's classic play. Many actors play more than one role.

- Hopefully you've had a chance to read *Hamlet* before seeing the Shakespeare To Go performance. What things do you notice that are changed in this 60-minute version of the play? Why do you think each change was made?
- If you haven't read the play, listen to and watch the actors carefully. Shakespeare can be difficult to understand for a modern audience, so don't get frustrated if you don't understand every word. Remember also that plays in *performance* offer a context for the words in the form of settings, action, gesture, and costumes. A word that may seem confusing *on the page* may be more easily understood *on the stage*. After a few minutes, you will likely begin to understand the story with more and more ease.
- Do you find watching the story easier to understand than reading the story? Why or why not?
- Actors love it when the audience reacts to what they are doing. So, if you find something truly funny or moving, laugh, gasp, answer back. React. It will make the show that much better.
- Enjoy the show!



A view of the stage of the rebuilt Globe as it stands now, London, England.

The Characters

Who's Who in *Hamlet*

- **Claudius**, King of Denmark
- **Hamlet**, son of the former king, and nephew to King Claudius
- **The Ghost of Hamlet's Father**, he orders Hamlet to avenge his death
- **Claudius**, King of Denmark
- **Gertrude**, Queen of Denmark and mother of Hamlet
- **Polonius**, counselor to the king, Ophelia and Laertes' father
- **Ophelia**, daughter of Polonius, the object of Hamlet's affection
- **Laertes**, son of Polonius
- **Horatio**, Hamlet's best friend
- **Voltemand and Cornelius**, Danish ambassadors in Norway
- **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**, Hamlet's childhood friends
- **Osric**, a courtier
- **Marcellus and Bernardo**, officers
- **Francisco**, a soldier and sentinel
- **Reynaldo**, servant to Polonius
- **Fortinbras**, Prince of Norway
- **A Norwegian Captain**, informs Hamlet of Fortinbras's deployment of troops to Poland
- **Four Players**, actors hired by Hamlet to perform a play reenacting the murder of his father
- **Two Clowns**, a gravedigger and his companion
- **English Ambassadors**, they bring disturbing news from England

The Actors



Thomas Bell (Claudius, Ghost)



Joseph Bromfield (Hamlet) is a professional actor and teaching artist. A graduate of Rollins College and The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, Joseph has performed professionally with The Cumberland Theatre, The Public Theatre of Maine, and FOODPLAY Productions. Joseph's teaching experience spans from Lingue Senza Frontiere in San Remo, Italy and MaineStage Shakespeare in Kennebunk, ME to the California Theatre Center in Sunnyvale, CA, and even his alma mater, The McCallie School in Chattanooga, TN. Joseph is proud to return to NCShakes for a second tour with the Shakespeare To Go Company.

Corey Keller (Laertes, Guildenstern, Marcellus) is an actor originally from West Virginia. He attended Greensboro College in North Carolina, and was an apprentice at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.



Alexandra Leigh (Horatio, Player Queen) is an actress born and raised in Philadelphia, PA. This is her first Shakespeare tour! She received her BA in Communication Studies from Ithaca College and her classical training from the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in England. She wants to dedicate these performances to her loving family, friends, and cast!



Courtney McClellan (Gertrude) excitedly rejoins NCSHakes for her third tour with Shakespeare to Go after a run of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* in Nashville (Nurse Flinn). Other Nashville credits include *A Raisin in the Sun* (Circle Players) and *Once on this Island* (Street Theatre Company). Regional credits include: *Chicago* (Mama Morton), *Big River* (Alice), and *The Sound of Music* (Sister Berthe) with Weathervane Playhouse (Newark, OH); *Romeo and Juliet* (Lady Montague, mainstage/Lady Capulet/Benvolio, STG), *Macbeth* (Witch/Malcolm, STG), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Titania/Helena/Quince, STG) with NCSHakes. Education/training: B.A. Communications/Minor: Performance Theatre, Hampton University; McCaskill Studios, NYC.



Jeffrey Mindock (Polonius, Gravedigger, Player King) hails from Allentown, PA. Jeffrey is ecstatic to be performing this Spring with NCSHakes. Favorite roles include Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*, Dave in *The Full Monty*, Marcus Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, and the Beast in *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*. Jeffrey would like to thank his family, friends, Paige and Bowser for their constant support and laughs. "When we lose our ability to laugh, we lose our ability to think straight."



This tour marks Julie Roble's (Ophelia, Rosencratz, Osric) NCSHakes debut! A BFA Acting graduate from Pace University, Julie has performed in a variety of productions in NYC, including *Out At Sea*, *The Conduct of Life* (La MaMa ETC); *Coriolanus* (Under St. Marks), and Hudson Shakespeare Company's tours of *Othello* ("Bianca") and *The Comedy of Errors* ("Courtesan"). She is an alumni of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Apprentice Company. Julie has taken Shakespeare master classes with numerous Shakespearean masters such as Devon Allen, Philip Bird, and hand-picked by F. Murray Abraham. www.julierobles.com

The Story

On a cold night in Denmark, watchmen on the towers of Elsinore Castle and Horatio, friend to Hamlet, spy a ghost that looks like the recently deceased king. They decide to tell the king's son, the prince Hamlet, what they have seen.

The King of Denmark has died very unexpectedly, and soon after, his widow Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, married her husband's brother Claudius. Claudius is now king, and we first meet Claudius as he gives Laertes, son of the king's advisor, Polonius, permission to return to France. Claudius asks Hamlet not to be so depressed and his mother Gertrude echoes the request.

When everyone departs, Hamlet speaks to us about his heartbreak over the loss of his father, and his anger with his mother for betraying his father's memory by marrying Claudius. His thoughts are interrupted when Horatio comes to tell him about the ghost. Hamlet decides to see the ghost for himself.

Fun Fact

In Shakespeare's theatre, there were no electric lights, and the sun shone on actors and audience, lighting both equally. Characters spoke directly to the audience, and actors never pretended that the audience was not present.

As Laertes packs to return to France, he tells his sister, Ophelia, not to pursue her romance with Hamlet. Polonius joins his children to say goodbye to Laertes. When his son leaves, Polonius tells Ophelia not to speak to Hamlet at all. Ophelia agrees to do so.

Later on the castle's towers, the ghost beckons for Hamlet to follow it and says he is Hamlet's father's

spirit – and then reveals that he was killed by his brother Claudius. The ghost claims Claudius poured poison in his ear while he was sleeping, and begs Hamlet to avenge his death. The ghost also warns that Hamlet is not to punish his mother for her deeds. Hamlet tells Horatio that he might pretend to act crazy in the coming days. He makes him swear not to tell anyone what he has seen.

The next day, Claudius welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, friends of Hamlet's from school, whom he and Gertrude hope will spy on Hamlet and tell them why he is acting so crazy. Polonius tells Gertrude and Claudius that he thinks Hamlet is mad because Ophelia has been avoiding him. They all agree that Ophelia should speak to Hamlet while Polonius and Claudius hide nearby and watch.

A group of tragedians come into town and Hamlet speaks with them about staging a play, *The Mousetrap*, that includes something similar to Hamlet's father's death, and observe Claudius to see if he looks guilty at the sight of it. Meanwhile, according to their plan, Claudius and Polonius hide themselves so they can observe Ophelia talking to Hamlet. When Hamlet arrives, Ophelia gives him back the letters he has sent her. He responds angrily and tells her he never loved her.

That night, Claudius appears to be very upset by the play. Left alone, he confesses the murder and his desire to be free of his guilt, but still remain king and Gertrude's husband. He bows to pray as Hamlet passes by and sees him. Hamlet starts to strike him from behind, but then decides that if he kills Claudius while he is praying, Claudius will go to heaven. Since that would not be true revenge, Hamlet leaves.

In Gertrude's room, Hamlet confronts his mother about marrying her husband's brother so quickly after her husband's death. When he hears a noise behind the curtain, he strikes his sword into it, killing Polonius, who was eavesdropping. Hamlet goes on to accuse Gertrude of adultery and begs her not to go to Claudius' bed anymore. While they are talking, the ghost enters the bedroom and Hamlet speaks to it, frightening Gertrude, who sees nothing.

Claudius sends Hamlet back to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – and discloses to the audience that he has sent with them a letter ordering that Hamlet be killed.

When Laertes returns from France enraged at his father's murder, he also finds his sister Ophelia has been driven mad by Hamlet's rejection and Polonius' death. Laertes is ready to kill Hamlet for the murder of his father, and Claudius convinces him to challenge Hamlet to a duel and pretend it is for fun. Claudius tells Laertes to use a poisoned rapier and kill Hamlet in the duel. To make sure Hamlet is killed, Claudius also plans to poison a drink and offer it to Hamlet during the fight. As they plot, Gertrude enters to tell them that Ophelia has just drowned.

Fun Fact

There were no actresses during Shakespeare's day. It was illegal for women to be onstage. Teenage boys performed the female roles. Male teenagers first performed roles such as Ophelia and Gertrude.

As a gravedigger jokes about death, Hamlet comes across him in a graveyard. Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes enter bearing Ophelia's dead body. Hamlet and Laertes begin to fight over who loved Ophelia more, until finally Hamlet leaves. Osric, a courtier, arrives to inform Hamlet that Laertes has challenged him to a duel. Hamlet agrees, and everyone prepares for the entertainment.

Before they begin, Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for his father's and sister's deaths. They start the duel, and right away Hamlet wins two points. Claudius offers him a drink from the poisoned cup, but Hamlet refuses. Not knowing it is poisoned, Gertrude takes the cup to toast Hamlet. Claudius tries to stop her, but she drinks from the poisoned cup anyway. Then as Hamlet and Laertes continue to fight, both are wounded by the poisoned rapier tip. Gertrude faints as the poison begins to take effect, and as she dies, she realizes it was the drink that killed her. Hamlet is stunned, and Laertes tells him about the poisoned cup and the poisoned rapier tip, and says that Claudius is to blame. Hamlet strikes Claudius with the poisoned rapier, then forces him to drink the remaining poison, and Claudius dies. Laertes then dies from the poisoned weapon. Hamlet also dies.

Post-Show Lesson Plan

Hamlet – CSI Investigation

Grades: 6 – 12

Goal: to promote understanding of the plot of Hamlet and the sequence of events that lead to the final scene; to explore characters through the investigation of motivation and intention.

Preparation: Students need to have either read or seen Hamlet and know basics of the story

Materials Needed: *Hamlet* text

Activity:

1. Students will be put in groups of 4 or 5 to form a CSI Team.
2. Each group will investigate one of the deaths in Hamlet.

3. Students will list at least 5 events that lead to the death.
4. Students will look at motives and actions and determine who they think to be most guilty for the death of their character.
5. If students have access to the script, they will find at least 3 lines or passages that support their decision of the guilty party.
6. Each group will present their findings to the class.

Deaths to investigate:

Polonius: stabbed

Ophelia: drowned

Gertrude: drinks poison wine

Claudius: stabbed with a sword tipped in poison

Laertes: cut with sword tipped in poison

Hamlet: cut with sword tipped in poison

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: sent off to their deaths

Extending the Lesson - Further Exploration of the Text:

Give each group one act or scene from the play. Have them form a tableau to symbolize one of the most powerful moments in the section they are assigned. Choose a passage from the text to support the tableau.

Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL 9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RL 11- 12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Online Resources

It is easy to search the internet for information about William Shakespeare. Just type "Shakespeare" into your search engine and tens of thousands of sites come up. Here are a few sites that we find particularly helpful:

- www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org
- www.shakespeares-globe.org
The website of the newly reconstructed Globe Theatre in London
- www.shakespeare.nit.edu

The complete works of Shakespeare in a format that you can copy and paste for your own use

- www.shakespeare.palomar.edu
A guide to many websites about Shakespeare and his times
- www.shakespeare.com
A basic collection of Shakespearean facts presented in an easy, non-scholarly format.
- www.shakespeare.org.uk
This is the site run by the Shakespeare Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon in the UK. Lots of stuff about the real estate associated with Shakespeare.
- www.bardweb.net
A good site for homework help. Lots of general information, plot summaries, and so on.
- www.folger.edu
- The website of the famous Folger Library in Washington DC. Lots of primary source material and lesson plans for teachers.

Here are some old-fashioned books that are good, too:

- Marchette Chute's *Shakespeare of London* is a sort of scholarly novel that interpolates from the primary resources a probable narrative of the man's life.
- *The Arden Shakespeare* is an edition of all of Shakespeare's works. You can buy paperback copies of every play with all the Arden scholarship included. It's a good edition to read because the footnotes are plentiful and helpful.
- *The Shakespeare Miscellany* by David Crystal and Ben Crystal is a fun little book with all sorts of facts about Shakespeare and his plays. It was published by the Overlook Press in 2005.

There are other very helpful editions available as well and are easy to find in the Drama Section of your book store. The Folger Library has an edition. There is no need to buy a "Complete Works" when you can buy the works one play at a time in paperback, but if you want a big hardback for your bookshelf, *The Riverside Shakespeare* is a handsome volume with lots of great scholarship and a very conservatively edited presentation of all of Shakespeare's known works.