

CliffsNotes.com® At a Glance for HAMLET

William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* follows the young prince Hamlet. Exact dates are unknown, but scholars agree that Shakespeare published *Hamlet* between 1601 and 1603. Many believe that *Hamlet* is the best of Shakespeare's work, and the perfect play.

The play opens with young prince Hamlet returning home to Denmark to attend his father's funeral. Hamlet is shocked to find his mother already remarried to his Uncle Claudius. Hamlet is even more surprised when he is visited by the ghost of his father, who was King before he died. The ghost instructs Hamlet to kill his own uncle, Claudius. Claudius became king and married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, following the death of Hamlet's father. Before disappearing, the ghost explains to Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius.

Hamlet is unsure whether to believe his father's ghost or not and decides to act crazy in order to investigate. He has a girlfriend named Ophelia, who is the daughter of Claudius's advisor, Polonius. Hamlet spurns Ophelia's love and passes up an opportunity to kill Claudius. When a company of actors visits the castle, Hamlet directs them in a play that features a murder; when Claudius sees the play he panics, giving away his guilt in Hamlet's father's death.

While Hamlet is accusing his mother Gertrude of complicity in the murder of her former husband, Hamlet hears a noise behind a tapestry in his mother's bedroom and stabs the person in hiding, thinking it's Claudius; it turns out to be Polonius that Hamlet has killed. Hamlet is exiled to England with his college friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom Claudius has instructed to kill Hamlet — but Hamlet finds out, and arranges for their deaths.

When Hamlet returns to Denmark, Ophelia has killed herself, distraught over Hamlet's rejection of her and her own father's death. Back from France, Ophelia's brother Laertes vows revenge against Hamlet for Hamlet's killing Ophelia's and his father. In a final duel between Hamlet and Laertes that Claudius has arranged, Claudius's plan to poison Hamlet backfires and Claudius, Laertes, Gertrude, and Hamlet all die. Hamlet's best friend Horatio lives to tell Hamlet's story, and Prince Fortinbras of Norway arrives to restore order.

Written by: William Shakespeare

Type of Work: play

Genres: tragedy

First Published: between 1601 and 1603

Setting: Denmark

Main Characters: Hamlet; King Claudius; Queen Gertrude; Polonius; Ophelia; Laertes; Horatio; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Major Thematic Topics: fate; free will; revenge; political instability; mortality; madness

Motifs: incest; hearing/ears

Major Symbols: Yorick's skull

Movie Versions: *Hamlet* (1948); *Hamlet* (1990); *William Shakespeare's Hamlet* (1996); *Hamlet* (2000)

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The three most important aspects of *Hamlet*:

- The most famous of the five soliloquies delivered by Hamlet over the course of the play begins “To be, or not to be? That is the question.” Here, Hamlet is considering suicide. He *finally* decides against doing so, however, reasoning that as difficult as life can sometimes be, it is preferable to death, which might be even worse.
- *Hamlet's* central characters are Hamlet himself, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Horatio. But only Horatio survives when the curtain falls at the end of Shakespeare’s play. Another central character, Hamlet’s father King Hamlet, appears only as a ghost — he has been dead since before the play began.
- If the character of Hamlet has a tragic flaw, it may be his inability to act decisively. On the other hand, his occasional impulsiveness — for example, in rejecting Ophelia and stabbing Polonius — results in death and destruction as well.