

## 2010 Suggestions for Teaching *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare

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### Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the life and times of William Shakespeare. These and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/biography/shakespeare\\_biography.htm](http://www.absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/biography/shakespeare_biography.htm)  
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/homepage>  
<http://www.rsc.org.uk/learning/11.aspx>  
<http://www.springfield.k12.il.us/schools/springfield/eliz/elizabethanengland.html>  
<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>
2. Research the history of theatrical productions of *Hamlet*. Who have been the great Hamlets, and what has distinguished their performances? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.shakespearecomplete.com/index.php?&sID=107>  
[http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/hamlet/guide\\_1980.htm](http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/hamlet/guide_1980.htm)  
<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hamlet>
3. Define hero. What makes a person heroic? Define tragic hero. What is a fatal flaw? What is the difference between a hero and a tragic hero? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/HERO>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic\\_hero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic_hero)  
<http://shakespeare.learnhub.com/lesson/4435-elements-of-a-tragic-hero-in-literature>
4. *Hamlet* is a classic revenge play. Research the revenge play. What are the elements of a revenge play? These and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revenge\\_play](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revenge_play)  
[http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Revenge\\_play](http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Revenge_play)

5. One of the elements in a revenge play is the appearance of a ghost. Research the attitude in Shakespeare's time toward ghosts and the supernatural. These and other websites provide information:  
<http://cruisegurlo.tripod.com/id4.html>  
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-ghosts.htm>  
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-witchcraft-and-witches.htm>
6. What is revenge? When is if ever is revenge justified? What needs are satisfied by revenge? Whom does revenge hurt? Why?
7. The first scene in a Shakespeare play provides clues to the rest of the play; major themes are introduced, imagery is established and a tone is set. Read Act I, scene i. What does the first scene reveal about the rest of the play? What do we learn about the story in this first scene? Where does the scene take place? When does it take place? What is the situation? What seems to be the mood? What do you expect the rest of the play to be about?
8. When a King dies, how is the next king chosen? Research kingly succession and the various the ways that kings are chosen, paying particular attention to election. If a monarch is elected – how does the election work? Who elects the king? What role in that scenario does the late king's son play? These and other websites provide information:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order\\_of\\_succession](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_succession)  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monarch>  
<http://dictionary.die.net/primogeniture>
9. In *Hamlet*, Claudius marries his late brother's wife. Hamlet refers to the union as "incestuous." What was the attitude in Shakespeare's day toward this kind of marriage? What resonances to Henry VIII's reign – paying special attention to King Henry's first and fourth wives – might this have had for the Elizabethan audience? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://tudorhistory.org/aragon/>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne\\_of\\_Cleves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_of_Cleves)
10. In the play, the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, gives this advice to his son, Laertes: "To thine own self be true". What does it mean to be true to one's self? What might be some of the

challenges to being true to one's self? What are some of the consequences of *not* being true to one's self?

11. What is metatheatre? What is a dumb show? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Metatheatre>  
<http://www.answers.com/topic/dumb-show>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumbshow>
  
12. Research the story of the final confrontation between Priam and Pyrrhus during the Trojan War. This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.philipresheph.com/demodokos/troy/troy4.htm>
  
13. Research rapier fencing in Elizabethan England. These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-fencing.htm>  
<http://www.chicagoswordplayguild.com/c/theTradition/17thCenturyRapier.asp>
  
14. Research the traditional meaning of the following flowers: daisies, rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbine, rue, and violets. This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.iflorist.com/en/gifts/meaning/>
  
15. What is melancholy? What is madness? What is the difference between melancholy and madness? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.wordreference.com/definition/melancholy>  
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/madness>

## Other Resources

### Film and TV Versions of the Play

*Hamlet* (1948) with Laurence Olivier

*Hamlet* (1980) BBC version with Derek Jacobi

*Hamlet* (1990) with Mel Gibson

*Hamlet* (1996) with Kenneth Branagh

*Hamlet* (2000) an adaptation of the play with Ethan Hawke

## Books/Plays/Poems Inspired by *Hamlet*

Gertrude and Claudius by John Updike

The Dead Fathers Club by Matt Haig

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle by David Wroblewski

*Fortinbras* by Lee Blessing

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard

*I Hate Hamlet* by Paul Rudnick

“They All Want to Play Hamlet” by Carl Sandburg

## After seeing/reading the play

1. What is the political situation at the beginning of the play? Read Horatio’s explanation in Act I, scene i, lines 80-107 and Claudius’ in Act I, scene ii, lines 17-39. What is Denmark’s past relationship with Norway? What happened between the former King of Norway and the former King of Denmark? What is the current situation between these two kingdoms? Who is Old Norway? Who is Fortinbras?
2. Refer to your research on kingly succession. How does kingly succession work in Denmark? How is it that Claudius becomes king upon the death of his brother rather than Hamlet? How does Hamlet feel about being passed over? About being Claudius’s heir? Find evidence in the text.
3. Review Claudius’ first speech in the play in Act I, scene ii, lines 1-16. Identify the pairs of opposites in the text. What exactly does Claudius mean by a “defeated joy?” By “mirth in funeral” and “dirge in marriage?” By “delight and dole?” What clues does this text provide about Claudius? What is he trying to accomplish with the speech? What picture is he trying to paint to the court? In what ways is he attempting to justify his actions? How is he effective? How is he ineffective? What does the language tell us about Claudius’s abilities as a politician and ruler? What does it tell us about the situation in Denmark?
4. Based on evidence from the text, what do we know about the late King Hamlet? What kind of man was he? What kind of king was he? What kind of husband? What kind of

father? Hamlet compares him to Hyperion, Jove, Mars, and Mercury; what do these references tell us about the late king, about his son and about their relationship?

5. Refer to your research on Elizabethan beliefs about ghosts and the supernatural. In what way is Hamlet justified in questioning what he hears from the ghost? How is he justified in his attempt to verify or prove the ghost's story? What potential risks, both physical and spiritual, does he run if he credits and acts on the ghost's tale? In what way, if any, is Hamlet justified in seeking revenge? In killing Claudius?
6. What symbolic elements or potent images are contained in the Ghost's story? What do the symbols and images refer to? Some of the images in the Ghost's story recur in the play. Find additional references in the text, for example, to ears and listening, to poison.
7. The ghost asks Hamlet to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." He also warns him to "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught." How successful is Hamlet in fulfilling his father's wishes? Why does he find his task difficult? What is he able to accomplish?
8. Refer to your research on the elements of the revenge play. What elements are present in *Hamlet*? How closely does *Hamlet* follow the structure of the revenge play? Shakespeare examines revenge by including four revenge plots in *Hamlet*. What are they? What are the echoes or similarities among the revenge plots? What are the differences?
9. Describe the relationship between Hamlet and his parents. Describe Hamlet's past relationship with his father. Describe Hamlet's past relationship with his mother. What does it mean to be a good son according to Queen Gertrude? What does it mean to be a good son according to the Ghost? What does it mean according to Claudius? How does Hamlet measure up as a good son according to each of these?
10. Examine the relationship between fathers and sons in this play. How does the relationship between Hamlet and his father compare with the relationship between Laertes and Polonius? Fortinbras and his father? What action does each son take on behalf of his father? Describe and compare the characters of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras. How are these characters similar to each other? How are they different from each other?

11. Images of disease and corruption thread throughout the play. Find examples in the text of disease and corruption imagery. What might these images tell us about the world of the play? What might these images tell us about the characters who use this imagery?
12. List all the instances in the play in which one character gives advice to another. Who gives advice to whom and why? What advice is given? What advice is followed? What advice is ignored? What is the result of following advice? Of ignoring it?
13. Refer to question #10 in the before seeing/reading the play section about Polonius' advice to Laertes: "To thine own self be true." Which characters remain true to themselves? Which do not? What are the consequences for those characters of *not* being true to themselves?
14. What is political intrigue? Based on your definition(s), make a list of all of the instances of political intrigue in the play. Which characters seem to be involved in secretive activities or scheming? Why? What conclusions can you draw about those characters based on these activities?
15. How does eavesdropping or spying function in this play? Who eavesdrops on whom and why? What are the consequences of each instance of eavesdropping?
16. Make a list of the "staged" or set up scenes. Who is involved in each? Compare this list with the list of characters involved in the play's political intrigues.
17. "Acting" can mean both taking action and acting (as in pretending.) When does Hamlet take action and when does he act? In Act V, scene i, lines 11-12, the First Clown says "an act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform." What are the differences between acting, doing and performing? Define each word. How does "to act, to do, to perform" reflect Hamlet's journey through the play?
18. Refer to your research on melancholy. What exactly is Hamlet's antic disposition – is it madness, is it melancholy, is it an act? What theories do various characters have about the reasons behind Hamlet's behavior? What does Polonius think is the cause? What does Gertrude think? Rosencranz and Guildenstern? Ophelia?

19. Examine the role of acting in the play. What are some different forms of acting in the play? Who is acting and for what purpose? What are some of the results of acting?
20. Refer to your research on metatheatres and dumb shows. Make a list of all the dumb shows in *Hamlet*; include the instances of described action such as the Ghost's story. What is the significance of the use of metatheatrical elements in the play? What do you think Shakespeare intends by drawing our attention to the fact that we are in a theatre watching actors in a play?
21. Considering only the passages dealing with the players, what do we learn about theatrical troupes of Elizabethan England? What do we learn about traveling companies, the composition of the troupes, the welcome they receive, what they put up with, what's expected of them, what kind of plays they do, theatrical politics in London (i.e.: why are they traveling), acting styles, the power of the patron? Review Hamlet's "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" speech. What is Shakespeare telling us in the speech about the power of actors and the power of theatre?
22. What is the nature of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship? Examine the scenes they have together. What evidence in the text can you find about their feelings for one another? What does Laertes say? Polonius? Gertrude?
23. Make the case that Queen Gertrude was in on the plot to murder the late King. Make the case that Queen Gertrude was *not* in on the plot. Find evidence in the text to support your case.
24. How are the following pairs similar and different: Hamlet and Laertes, Hamlet and Fortinbras, Polonius and Claudius, Claudius and Old Norway, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern and Horatio, the Ghost and Yorick, Gertrude and Ophelia, Ophelia's madness and Hamlet's madness?
25. Refer to your research on the meaning of flowers. In Act IV, scene v, Ophelia says, "There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me; we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. You (must) wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died." Knowing what

you do about the meaning of the flowers she refers to in this scene, how would you translate Ophelia's seemingly mad words? Whom does she refer to when? What specifically is she saying to Gertrude and to Claudius?

26. Consider Hamlet's relationships with his friends: Horatio, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. What kind of friend is each? Who supports him? Who helps him? Who betrays him? What qualities does Horatio possess that make him an ideal friend for Hamlet? In Act III, scene ii, lines 54-75, Hamlet describes Horatio's qualities. What in Hamlet's experience causes him to value each quality?
27. There are a number of references in the play to "the Dane." The first reference appears in Act I, scene i, line 15, when Marcellus explains to the night watch that he and Horatio are "liegemen to the Dane," in other words, loyal followers of the King of Denmark. In the Act I, scene ii, line 44, Claudius refers to himself as the Dane. When Hamlet sees the ghost in Act I, scene iv, line 45, he calls him "royal Dane." In Act V, scene i, line 225, Hamlet declares himself to Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes at Ophelia's grave as "I, Hamlet the Dane." Why does Hamlet refer to himself as the Dane? What statement is he making? How do each of the other characters react to his statement? Find evidence in the text.
28. How many deaths in the play is Hamlet responsible for? Which of the deaths caused by Hamlet are justified? Which are unjustified? Explain your answers.
29. Refer to your definitions of hero and tragic hero. Make the case that Hamlet is a hero. Make the case that Hamlet is a tragic hero. If Hamlet is a tragic hero, what is his fatal flaw?
30. Hamlet says, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will." What do you make of this statement? In what way is Hamlet a victim of fate? In what way does he have free will throughout the course of the play? Make the case that Hamlet is a victim of fate. Make the case that Hamlet is not a victim of fate.
31. The Laurence Olivier film of *Hamlet* (which includes the famous but unsupported statement "This is the tragedy of a man who couldn't make up his mind") has influenced the way many people view the play. Chart Hamlet's deeds through the play: What is his dilemma as the play begins? What is he told and by whom? How does he go about

obtaining evidence to confirm or refute the hearsay? What actions are required of him? What obstacles stand in his way? When and why does he fail to take action? When does he act decisively? To what extent is this play “the tragedy of a man who couldn’t make up his mind”?

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Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s Education and Publications departments – Amina Henry, Joan Langley and Hilary Tate – created the “Suggestions for Teaching *Hamlet*.”

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