

❖ Introduction to Hamlet

❖ Historical Background

- ❖ Written by William Shakespeare
- ❖ 16th century Elizabethans believed in Ghosts
- ❖ Marriage to in-laws was considered incest
- ❖ Suicide was forbidden and those who killed themselves could not have a holy burial
- ❖ One would stay in purgatory to work off sins not confessed before death
- ❖ Believed God would forgive all sins one sincerely repented of

❖ Characters

- ❖ Claudius: king of Denmark, poisoned previous king – Hamlet, Sr. (his brother), married widow
- ❖ Hamlet: son of late king, very sensitive, indecisive, popular, can be cruel
- ❖ Polonius: father of Laertes and Ophelia, chief advisor, nose, often foolish
- ❖ Horatio: Hamlet's faithful friend, brave and loyal
- ❖ Laertes: Polonius' son, Ophelia's brother, tricked by Claudius, acts before thinking
- ❖ Gertrude: Widow of late king, wife of present king, quite concerned about her son
- ❖ Ophelia: Polonius' daughter, Laertes' sister – I will let you decide about her personality
- ❖ The Ghost: seeks revenge for his murder, is ghost of the murdered king
- ❖ Fortinbras: prince of Norway, takes over Denmark
- ❖ Osric: a foolish courtier Hamlet makes fun of
- ❖ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: school friends of Hamlet, betrayers

❖ **Motifs**

- ❖ **Revenge:** Hamlet is to take revenge on Claudius for Hamlet, Sr.'s murder. Will he?
- ❖ **Mortality:** what is the meaning of life?
- ❖ **Appearance versus Reality:** Claudius lies constantly, Polonius spies, Ophelia lets herself be used... Concealed disease – of body and of mind.
- ❖ **Corruption:** something is rotten in Denmark
- ❖ **Madness:** Hamlet's behavior, Ophelia's inability to cope, Gerturde's "love" for her son
- ❖ **Sexuality and incest:** Watch for the recurring inferences

❖ **Literary Elements and Structure**

- ❖ **Imagery** – word pictures of disease and decay (graveyard scene)
- ❖ **Frame story** – the theater "dumb show" within the larger story. It "mirrors" the main story.
- ❖ **Allusions** – historical, mythological, Biblical
- ❖ **Style** – blank verse. Iambic pentameter with end rhymes, relieved by passages of prose.
- ❖ **Puns and word play** – watch for these!
- ❖ **Soliloquies** – long solo speeches. (To be or not to be...)
- ❖ **A tragedy** – meaning everyone, practically, dies!

❖ **Setting**

- ❖ **Denmark** – a castle in Elsinore
- ❖ **Open plain** in Denmark
- ❖ **A churchyard**