

Themes in *Hamlet*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *Hamlet* and provided examples of scene where you can study them.

Themes

- Moral corruption
- Revenge
- Appearance and reality
- Mortality

Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *Hamlet* which support the play's themes)

- Disease, rotting, decay
- Actors and the theatre
- Ears and hearing

Themes

Moral corruption and the consequent dysfunction of family and state.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 2: King Claudius and Queen Gertrude urge Hamlet to raise his spirits; alone on stage he expresses his outrage at his mother's speedy remarriage to his uncle.
- Act 1 Scene 5: The ghost of Hamlet Senior tells his son how he was murdered by his brother.
- Act 3 Scene 2: The performance of the Mousetrap play appears to reveal Claudius's guilt.
- Act 3 Scene 4: Hamlet confronts his mother with her disloyalty and mistakenly kills Polonius.
- Act 4 Scene 3: Claudius sends orders to England that Hamlet be put to death.
- Act 4 Scene 5: Laertes, furious at the death of his father and his sister's madness, swears vengeance.
- Act 5 Scene 2: Claudius's plotting results in the death of most of the major characters. Fortinbras, returning in triumph from Poland, will assume the throne of Denmark.

Revenge and the complexity of taking revengeful action.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 5: Hamlet promises his father to revenge his murder but laments the responsibility he now bears.
- Act 2 Scene 2: Hamlet berates his own passivity and contrasts it with the passion of the first actor for long-dead, legendary figures.
- Act 3 Scene 3: Coming upon Claudius confessing the murder while trying to pray, Hamlet thinks the better of killing the king when he is penitent .
- Act 3 Scene 4: The ghost visits Hamlet while he is with his mother and reminds him he has not yet avenged his murder.
- Act 4 Scene 4: After his encounter with Fortinbras, Hamlet marvels that people kill one another over so slight a gain as 'a little patch of land' and resolves that from now on all his thoughts will be 'bloody.'
- Act 4 Scene 5: In contrast to Hamlet's reflectiveness, Laertes determines on revenge without hesitation.
- Act 5 Scene 2: Claudius's plot results in the death of most of the major characters. Before he dies Hamlet kills Claudius.

Appearance and reality and the difficulty of discovering and exposing the truth in a corrupt society.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Polonius instructs Ophelia to disassociate herself from Hamlet who he insists does not love her whatever he says.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Ophelia, distraught, tells her father of Hamlet's recent bizarre behaviour and Polonius speculates that Hamlet is mad with love.
- Act 2 Scene 2: Polonius tells Gertrude and Claudius of Hamlet's strange behaviour and they agree to watch him secretly. Polonius talks with Hamlet who appears to be mad. Later in the scene Hamlet concocts his plan to trick the king with the Mousetrap scene, performed by the travelling players.
- Act 3 Scene 1: In the 'nunnery scene' Ophelia is bewildered by Hamlet's contradictory assertions and his anger and mourns the 'noble mind' that has been 'o'erthrown.'
- Act 3 Scene 2: The performance of the Mousetrap play appears to reveal Claudius's guilt.
- Act 3 Scene 4: Hamlet demands his mother face the truth of her disloyalty and says he will trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern no more than he would 'adders fanged', knowing they have been dishonest in their dealings with him.
- Act 4 Scene 7: Claudius concocts a plot with Laertes to kill Hamlet.

Mortality and the mystery of death.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: Marcellus and Bernardo tell Horatio that they have seen the ghost of old Hamlet. Horatio is skeptical until the ghost appears.
- Act 1 Scene 4: Horatio, Marcellus and Hamlet meet the ghost. Hamlet is unsure whether this is truly his father or an evil spirit, but insists that either way it cannot harm his immortal soul.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Hamlet debates the question of whether suicide is an effective solution to the pain he is experiencing: the difficulty is that we do not know what to expect in an afterlife.
- Act 5 Scene 1: Hamlet talks with the gravediggers and considers that even great men become dust.

Motifs

Disease, rotting, decay as the manifestation and consequence of moral corruption.
For example:

- 'Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'
Act 1 Scene 4
- 'So the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death/Rankly abus'd'
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'Thou misture rank, of midnight weeds collected, / With Hecate's ban trice blasted, thrice infected'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven'
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love/Over the nasty sty'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, Infects unseen'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'It warms the very sickness in my heart / That I shall live and tell him to his teeth, / "Thus didest thou"
Act 4 Scene 7
- 'Faith, if 'a be not rotten before'a die (as we have many pocky corses now-a-days that will scarce hold the laying in...'
Act 5 Scene 1

Actors and the theatre as highlighting the deception, illusion and role-playing of major characters in the play; also as holding a mirror up to nature, exposing the corruption of the court.

For example:

- 'These indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show - / These but the trappings and the suits of woe'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'He that plays the king shall be welcome'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Is it not monstrous that this player here, / but in a fiction, in a dream of passion...'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Suit the action to the word, the word to the action...for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing...to hold...the mirror up to nature'
Act 3 Scene 2
- "The Mousetrap"...This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna'
Act 3 Scene 2

Ears and hearing as needed to discover the truth in such a corrupt and dangerous world; also as vehicles for murder and for distortion of the truth

For example:

- 'I think I hear them. Stand ho! Who is there?'
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'Sit down awhile, / And let us once again assail your ears'
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'So I have heard and do in part believe it'
Act 1 Scene
- 'List, list, O, list! / If thou didst ever thy dear father love'
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'Speak. I am bound to hear'
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distilment'
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'Will the King hear this piece of work?'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'We beg your hearing patiently'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Withdraw; I hear him coming'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'What devil was't / That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears with out hands or eyes...'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'O, speak to me no more! / These words like daggers enter in mine ears'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'The ears are senseless that should give us hearing'
Act 5 Scene 2