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Sample MonkeyNotes

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Hamlet

Prince of Denmark

by

William Shakespeare



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The play is set at Elsinore, the royal court of the King of Denmark. The play begins in the open battlements of the castle on a bitterly cold night, then shifts inside the castle to the formality and.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Hamlet - the Prince of Denmark. Hamlet is the central character and protagonist of the play. His father, the King, has recently died, and his mother has remarried within weeks of his death, causing

Claudius - the present King of Denmark and Hamlet's uncle. He succeeds to the throne by.....

Gertrude - Hamlet's mother and the foolish, weak-willed Queen of Denmark. She is

Ophelia - Polonius' daughter. She loves Hamlet but is forbidden to see him at the request of her.....

Polonius - Ophelia's father and the Lord Chamberlain of Elsinore. He has an annoying habit of.....

Minor Characters

Horatio - Hamlet's loyal friend and confidante. He is a scholar and philosopher, as well as the first character to speak to the Ghost. He is the only person on whom Hamlet can rely in times of adversity. At the

Laertes - the hot-headed son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia. He is a man of action and represents a distinct contrast to Hamlet. He orders Ophelia not to reciprocate Hamlet's love. Near the end of.....

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern - former friends of Prince Hamlet. They conspire with(Many other characters listed).....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of the play is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. When the play opens, Hamlet has been summoned from the University at Wittenberg on account of the sudden death of his father, who supposedly died from snakebite. He returns to find that his mother has already wed his

Antagonist - Claudius is Hamlet's antagonist and the villain of the play. He begins his evil deeds by murdering his own brother (Hamlet's father), then marrying his widowed wife (Hamlet's mother). Hamlet learns from the ghost of his father that Claudius is the murderer; as a result, he spends the.....

Climax - The climax of the play is the Hamlet-Laertes duel. Claudius has fixed the outcome of the duel in such a way that Hamlet will perish no matter what. But there are also several events related to.....

Outcome - The play ends in tragedy for Hamlet, for he is overcome by Claudius, his antagonist, and.....

PLOT (Synopsis)

The King of Denmark is killed by an apparent snakebite while sleeping in the garden. His brother Claudius assumes the throne and marries the widowed Queen, Gertrude, within weeks of the King's death. Hamlet, the

Prince of Denmark and the dead King's son, mourns for his father and anguishes over his mother's hasty remarriage, considering it as unnatural as incest.

The play opens outside the castle grounds, where three guards have been witnessing the appearance of a Ghost who looks like the dead King. They ask the Prince and his friend Horatio to come see the Ghost. Prince Hamlet speaks to the apparition, who claims to be the spirit of his dead father. In a private conversation, the Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius, in fact, murdered him. The Ghost asks Hamlet to

THEMES

The major theme of the novel is revenge. Several of the characters are entrusted with the duty of restoring family honor by exacting vengeance. Young Fortinbras reclaims his father's lost honor by gaining territory. Hamlet must avenge his father's murder by killing Claudius. And Laertes must avenge his father and.....

MOOD

An atmosphere of evil darkness pervades the play right from the beginning, for "something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Hamlet feels that he is living in a world of deceit and corruption where no.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

William Shakespeare is usually considered the greatest dramatist and finest poet the world has ever known. No other writer's plays and poetry have been produced so many times or in so many countries or translated into so many languages. One of the major reasons for Shakespeare's popularity is the variety of rich characters that he successfully creates, from drunkards and paid murderers to princes and kings and from inane fools and court jesters to wise and noble generals. Each character springs vividly to life upon the stage and, as they speak their beautiful verse or prose, the characters remind the viewers of their own personalities, traits, and flaws. Shakespeare also made his characters very realistic. The dramatist had an amazing knowledge of a wide variety of subjects, and his well-developed characters reflect this knowledge, whether it be about.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Probably written in 1601 or 1602, *Hamlet* is probably one of Shakespeare's most studied and popular plays. Loosely based on Danish history, the play most likely has its origins in *Histoires Tragiques*, written by Belle-Forest in 1570; much of Belle-Forest's information is drawn from the *Historica Danica*, written by Saxo Grammaticus in 1208. In Belle-Forest's version of Hamlet, it is a known fact that Claudius, the King's brother, murders him and takes the throne. Claudius then tries to find reason to.....

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

ACT I, SCENE 1

Summary

The scene opens with the changing of the guard outside Elsinore, the royal residence and court of the King of Denmark. Francisco is on guard, but is very happy to be relieved by Bernardo and Marcellus. All three guards discuss the ghost that they have seen on previous nights. Bernardo and Marcellus have brought along a friend, Horatio. Horatio is skeptical and believes the so-called ghost is a figment of the guards' imaginations.

The ghost soon appears and looks like the recently deceased king. Horatio is struck with fear and wonder. When he tries to question the ghost, the apparition flees. The once skeptical Horatio is now convinced of the ghost's existence and believes it is a "fair and warlike form" of the late Danish King Hamlet. The fact that the ghost is wearing the King's armor, used in the defeat of the King of Norway, makes Horatio think that the

ghost must mean something bad for the entire state of Denmark. Marcellus tells Horatio that the ghost has appeared in the same manner for the past two nights.

Marcellus asks Horatio to explain why Claudius, the new king, has been mustering the military resources of the country with such haste. He also remarks that a general spirit of unease and unrest pervades the kingdom, especially in the wake of King Hamlet's death. Horatio seizes the moment to narrate some important information about the present state of Denmark. The dead King Hamlet had defeated and slain Fortinbras, King of Norway, in battle. In accordance with the victory, all the lands belonging to Norway were ceded to Denmark. King Hamlet's sudden death gave young Fortinbras, the late Norwegian king's son, the opportunity for revenge against Denmark. The Nordic prince has raised an army of "lawless resolute" who are willing to fight only for food and water; their explicit purpose in attacking Denmark is to recover the lands lost by Fortinbras. For this reason, Denmark has been put on alert, including night watches of which all three men are now a part. Bernardo remarks that the appearance of the ghost is probably a warning about the military threat looming over the country. Horatio, however, sees the ghost as an omen of bad times ahead for Denmark; he reminds the others of the unnatural phenomena that preceded Julius Caesar's assassination.

In the meantime, the ghost appears again, and Horatio calls on the apparition to answer his questions for the sake of the fate of Denmark. The ghost, however, remains silent and then departs. Horatio then tries to restrain the ghost from leaving by striking it; still, it vanishes. Marcellus thinks that they have committed a grievous error in striking the ghost of the late king. Horatio remarks that the ghost had "started like a guilty thing/ Upon a fearful summons" at the crowing of the cock. He recalls that traditionally the crowing of the cock is believed to awake the god of day and serve as a warning to all preternatural and erring spirits that the time has come to return to their confines. As dawn breaks, Horatio and the two officers decide to share the events of the night with Prince Hamlet, the late king's son.

Notes

In the first scene, an atmosphere of darkness and foreboding is immediately established. The castle battlements, the eerie midnight darkness, and the "bitter cold" all create a sense of dread as the change of guard takes place and the soldiers talk in fearful tones about the ghostly figure that they have seen. The soldier on duty, Francisco, feels "sick at heart" and eagerly welcomes Bernardo, even though he admits that his has been a "quiet guard." Francisco's sickness cannot be attributed merely to the coldness of the winter night and gloom of the castle ramparts. Rather it gives imaginative expression to the rottenness in the state of Denmark. It is significant that the play does not open with the introduction of the protagonist but with the evocation of the atmosphere of evil into which he will come. That *Hamlet* is or will quickly become a tragedy is clear from the first moments. In fact, Shakespeare marvelously establishes the place and mood within the first twenty lines of the play.

The changing of the guard creates tension. As control is shifted from one guard to another, security is momentarily compromised; therefore, the play begins on a tenuous note of vulnerability that is filled with symbolism. The changing of the guard is a representation of the recent change to a new government in the state of Denmark. The ghost then appears to heighten the tension, especially since he is dressed in the armor of the dead king. Horatio is struck with fear and awe at the sight. He appropriately questions the ghost by asking, "What art thou that usurp'st this time of night, / Together with that fair and warlike form/ In which the majesty of buried Denmark/ Did sometime March?" Horatio's choice of words is intentional and foreshadows the fact that Claudius has usurped the throne from Hamlet. The play will be filled with the theme of usurpation and wrongful rule.

Horatio has been brought to Elsinore because he is a “scholar;” the guards hope that he will be able to communicate with the apparition when it appears. The ghost, however, remains silent, refusing to answer Horatio’s questions; its mysterious silence and quick departure further darken the atmosphere of the opening scene of the play. Horatio’s education and intelligence, though not helpful in communicating with the ghost, are useful in explaining some relevant background about Norway and Denmark that are necessary for understanding the play. After Horatio’s brief exposition, the ghost returns.

There has been much discussion about the nature and significance of the ghost, especially since it appears in the opening scene of the play. It is essential to understand the Elizabethan theological position regarding the spirit-world in order to appreciate the playwright’s choice of an apparition to introduce his work. The most prominent theory of Elizabethan society was that a ghost was simply an illusion or hallucination. Accordingly, Horatio at first refuses to believe there is a ghost and accuses the guards of fantasizing; however, when the ghost appears, this theory is immediately cast aside.

Additional Elizabethan theories were that ghosts return to fulfill some deed left unperformed in life and to make predictions about the future. Appropriately, Horatio charges the ghost to reveal if there is “any good thing to be done” by his presence and asks the ghost whether it is “privy to thy country’s fate.” When Horatio explains to Marcellus and Bernardo that the current mobilization of the military in Denmark is due to the threat of a Norwegian attack, it seems to them a convincing reason for the ghost’s nocturnal wandering on the streets of Denmark. They believe that the ghost is attempting to bear warnings, even though he does not speak.

There are other still other Elizabethan explanations about ghosts. Supposedly spirits return from the grave because of sins committed in life. Hence, Horatio exhorts the ghost to reveal if it has hidden “treasure in the womb of earth, / For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death.” Still another explanation was that a ghost is just the devil in disguise. Appropriately, Horatio and the other soldiers at once think the ghost is diabolical in nature; it seems to prove its devilish origin when it stalks away as Horatio charges it to speak in the name of heaven. In the course of the play, even Hamlet expresses doubt about the veracity of the Ghost and considers the possibility that the Ghost is simply a devil setting about to cause trouble.

Dawn is traditionally a symbol of hope and renewal, of light replacing darkness. In Christian tradition, Jesus is called the Light of the World, who is brought forward to disperse the evil ways of man. The Christian references to heaven and Marcellus’ speech about the bird of dawn that sings all night during Christmas reinforces the idea that there is hope for Denmark. The disappearance of the apparition at dawn emphasizes the idea that the ghost is dark and malevolent, driven out by brightness. The light of dawn at the end of a dark and frightening night also gives hope that things will get better in the state of Denmark after a dark and frightening period of history. Unfortunately, there will be much tragedy before normalcy returns.

One final note in this first scene concerns the Prince of Norway, son of the defeated Fortinbras. Young Fortinbras aspires to recover the lands and power lost by his father, but he has yet to prove his “mettle.” Claudius, the new King of Denmark, however, takes young Fortinbras seriously and activates the Danish military and places night guards to watch for the enemy. Hamlet also has a respect for Fortinbras, and during the course of the play, he praises Fortinbras as his ideal. While Hamlet procrastinates about avenging his father’s murder, Fortinbras determinedly marches forth to reclaim his father’s kingdom. Fortinbras’ character is driven by chivalric heroism and spurs Hamlet onward in his quest for revenge.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTERS

Hamlet - Hamlet's character dominates the play, lending the tragedy its greatest philosophical and metaphysical dimensions. Shakespeare has brilliantly raised Hamlet above a stock figure of an avenger; as he answers the call of revenge, he also proves he is an intellectual aristocrat. As a scholar and a thinker, Hamlet often reveals the high quality of his mind, pondering many weighty matters. He is also a perceptive student of drama and obviously well read in the classics.

Hamlet is a noble and sensitive hero, an ideal Renaissance gentleman with a fair "mould of form." His refinement of spirit is evident when he criticizes Claudius for his drunkenness. His sensitivity is seen in his horror over his mother's too rapid remarriage to the new king. His humility is seen in.....

Claudius - Claudius is the present King of Denmark, Hamlet's paternal uncle, and Gertrude's new husband. By nature, he is coarse and vulgar, a man who enjoys drinking and debauchery. The stark contrast between his vulgarity and his dead brother's goodness is emphasized repeatedly throughout the play. Portrayed as a completely corrupt and power-hungry villain, he murdered the king, his own brother, then took his

Ophelia - Ophelia is a simply depicted character whose main plot functions are to be Hamlet's long-standing girlfriend and to suffer greatly and eventually die because of the corruption in Denmark. The daughter of Polonius and brother of Laertes, she is a soft-spoken and beautiful female. She is also an

Queen Gertrude - Although the Queen is a devoted mother to Hamlet, she is a weak-willed woman who seems to walk blindly through life. She marries Claudius too hastily, but has no idea that she is a.....

Polonius - Polonius is the elderly Lord Chamberlain of Denmark and Claudius' loyal accessory and trusted advisor. An outstanding aspect of his character is his ceremonious verbosity; he obviously.....

PLOT (Structure)

The basic structure of the plot of *Hamlet* is remarkably simple; a wrong occurs and the hero seeks revenge to make it right. In the process, everyone is destroyed. Shakespeare develops the plot of his "revenge" tragedy in classical form. Act I is largely expository in nature, introducing the main characters and the conflict. Acts II, III, and IV contain the rising action of the plot as the conflict develops, largely in Hamlet's mind. Act V contains the climax, a short period of falling action, and the denouement, or conclusion, in which Fortinbras takes control of Denmark to bring order to the country once again.

The genre of "revenge tragedy" or "tragedy of blood" was immensely popular among English Elizabethan dramatists. In typical revenge tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, the plot arises largely out of a situation for which the hero is not responsible. Additionally, even though the hero may have a tragic flaw that contributes to his downfall, he is usually undone by circumstances over which he has no control. Accordingly in *Hamlet*, the crime that calls for vengeance has already been committed before the play begins. The real cause.....

THEMES

The Theme of Vengeance - The main theme in *Hamlet* is one of vengeance and family honor. Initially Fortinbras is the representation of vengeance. Hamlet's father, the late King, has defeated Fortinbras' father in battle. As a result, young Fortinbras aspires to recover the lands and power lost by his.....

Appearance vs. Reality - Shakespeare also examines his favorite theme of the discrepancy between appearance and reality. The dilemma of what is “real” is established at the very beginning of the play. The dead King *appears* to have been bitten by a snake. In reality, he has been poisoned. The Ghost *appears* as

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF HAMLET

The Approach of Wilson Knight:

Until the 1930s, the evaluation of *Hamlet* was mostly a continuation of the nineteenth century approach to the character of its tragic hero. After Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* was published in 1904, an entire generation of critics remained obsessed with Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius. They blamed the.....

Hamlet Seen Solely as the Victim of External Difficulties:

To see Hamlet solely as the victim of external problems is the simplest approach to the play. Many critics argue, however, that Hamlet’s tragedy is not a result of the supposed weaknesses/flaws in his character or even mistakes in his judgement/action, but from the evil and intolerable situation into.....

The Romantic Interpretation of Hamlet:

The Romantic critics of the nineteenth century, led by Coleridge, were more interested in the character of Hamlet than in the plot construction of the play. For them, Hamlet was one of the.....

The Psychoanalytical Approach:

The psychoanalytical approach focuses on the neurotic tendencies of Hamlet and judges him to suffer from an Oedipus Complex. In ancient Greek mythology, Oedipus is the unconscious instrument of

The Historical Approach:

The historical approach holds that only those theories prevalent in Shakespeare’s time should be utilized to interpret his texts. Supporters of this school of thought argue that the clue to Hamlet’s madness and his hesitancy in killing Claudius lies in his melancholic disposition. Indeed, Shakespeare.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Hamlet has been described as a sentimentalist, a procrastinator, an egocentric, and a semi-lunatic? What can be said for and against each one of these assessments?
2. Do you believe that Hamlet is an instrument or an agent? Fully, explain your answer.....

End of Sample MonkeyNotes for Hamlet