



# Activity One

## The Role of the Supernatural

The engine that drives the plot of Hamlet is the belief in the supernatural or spiritual forces as realities. Though there is considerable doubt in the minds of Hamlet and others as to the motives and real identity of the ghost, none who saw him doubted that they were seeing a real manifestation of a departed spirit. Likewise, the after world: Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are real things to the characters; realities never doubted. It is because of his murder that King Hamlet languishes in Purgatory. Hamlet fears to kill Claudius while he is at prayer because he doesn't want him to go straight to Heaven when he dies. Hamlet and Laertes forgive each other as they lay dying so that neither will keep the other from heaven, etc.

The popularity of Hamlet among Shakespeare's contemporaries would have been affected by a similar certainty where the spiritual was concerned. In fact, the wars between Catholic and English Protestantism were still being fought.

In our time, such things as an afterlife and the existence of ghosts are no longer casual certainties. Despite this, the play remains popular and is still widely regarded as the greatest English language play of all time.

What if Shakespeare's audience consisted of scholars and free thinkers who openly scoffed at the idea that there was an afterlife or that ghosts were real? How might he have written the play so as not to alienate them?

Write a detailed summary of an alternate version of Hamlet that makes no references to the supernatural at all.





## Activity Two

### What's the Deal with Horatio?



Horatio is a minor character in the play; he seems most important as Hamlet's friend. Horatio gives the audience the only insight into Hamlet's thoughts apart from the soliloquies. Hamlet trusts Horatio's insights and judgement as he does no one else's in the play.

#### Consider how the play might have differed if:

1. Horatio had been less trusted by Hamlet.
2. Horatio had tried to talk Hamlet out of his revenge.
3. Horatio had been absent during the events of the play.

How might the play have differed? Pick one of the three scenarios and write an essay detailing how the play might have gone differently had it been the case.





# Activity Three

## All the World's a Satirical Stage



Gary Oldman as Rosencrantz and Tim Roth as Guildenstern in **Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead***.

Hamlet has long been fodder for satire. From **Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*** to ***Hamlet II by Sam Bobrick*** (not to be confused with *Hamlet 2*, the movie), making humor from Shakespeare's most famous tragedy a popular pastime.

Oddly, for a play that is a revenge tragedy, Hamlet has its own share of the humorous. The Gravediggers in Act 5 is only the most obvious. Most of Hamlet's dialogue with Polonius, Polonius's windy speeches, and the foppish Osric can all be appreciated as humor.

Scan through the play, looking for instances displaying Shakespeare's gift for verbal wit, and present brief explanations of the nature of the humor in an essay.





# Activity Four

## Where Did This Story come From?

Shakespeare researched stories to turn into plays; most famously his historical plays, based on the better written histories of his time. Rumors that Hamlet was based on real events were circulating even in his time.

Shakespeare did base the plot of the play on a story, though not likely a factual one. Find out what the history of the story is and write an essay comparing the original to Shakespeare's version.



*Gesta Danorum* or "Deeds of the Danes", is a work of Danish history by Saxo Grammaticus in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.



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# Activity Five

## What Does This Word Mean?



Hamlet is often called the first play written in modern English. It doesn't really read like it, though. In fact, it was written in the vernacular of its day, complete with slang and idiomatic expressions familiar to the average London resident.

Pick any section of the play, at least 100 consecutive lines in length, and translate it into modern language, complete with contemporary slang and references.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_



# Activity Six

## How the Story Should Have Gone



*Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet duels with Michael Maloney as Laertes in **Hamlet** (1996).*

Part of the fascination with Hamlet is the especially unorthodox way in which Hamlet chooses to act throughout. The play *Hamlet*, being a story of revenge, fits the modern idea of the action hero. However, the decisions of Hamlet the character do not at all fit well.

Draft a rewrite of Hamlet, changing the plot to something consistent with the way Hollywood would have had the protagonist handle the crisis in Elsinore Castle. Feel free to change the setting to a modern American or European city.