

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Stt. _____

Prereading Activity
for
Hamlet
Plot Summaries
Act I

Directions: To help you better understand and follow *Hamlet*, read the summary of a specific scene before you begin to read it. If you get lost during the scene, you can refer to the summary.

Act I,
scene i

Guards on the battlements of Elsinore Castle claim to have seen a ghost appear at night. Although Horatio has suggested to them that it is only their imaginations, they ask him to wait for it again. While they wait, they tell Horatio what they've seen. Suddenly the ghost of Hamlet, former king of Denmark, appears, and they urge Horatio to speak to it, but it vanishes without answering. Horatio, shaken by what he's seen, interprets the ghost's presence as a bad omen for the country.

Marcellus then asks for information about Denmark's recent preparations for war. Horatio reports that Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, is again raising an army to retake the territory that his father, King Fortinbras, lost in an earlier war to King Hamlet.

Horatio reminds the group that Julius Caesar's ghost had appeared as a warning to the Romans, and when the ghost of Hamlet returns and gestures to the group, Horatio again addresses it, hoping that it will speak, asking whether it has unfinished business or brings a warning. Before the ghost can speak, the rooster crows and the ghost vanishes. All decide to tell Prince Hamlet what they've seen, to see if the ghost will speak to him.

Act I,
scene ii

The next morning, Claudius and Gertrude hold court officially as the new King and Queen of Denmark. In the opening speech, Claudius refers to his brother's death and explains his marriage to Gertrude, his brother's widow. Claudius then explains how he plans to deal with Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. Fortinbras, hoping to take advantage of King Hamlet's death and the subsequent disorder that might follow it, has requested the Danes surrender the lands that King Hamlet had taken from the Norwegians. Instead, Claudius writes to Fortinbras' uncle, the King of Norway, informing him of his nephew's quest for power and asking that the King curtail Fortinbras' power for the present.

Hamlet: Act I Plot Summaries (continued)

Claudius then turns to Laertes. Laertes wishes to return to France, but needs the King's permission to leave the court. Because Polonius, Laertes' father, has reluctantly granted permission for him to go, Claudius also grants his permission.

Claudius now turns to Hamlet. Both Gertrude and Claudius urge Hamlet to accept his father's death as part of the natural cycle of life. Hamlet's reply is that he is not playing but actually continuing to mourn his father's death. Gertrude then asks Hamlet to remain at court rather than return to his studies at Wittenberg.

Once Hamlet is alone, he reveals in soliloquy that he is discouraged and weary of the recent events in his world: his father's death and his mother's marriage to his uncle less than two months later.

Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo tell Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet vows to go see it for himself and to talk with it.

*Act I,
scene iii*

In Polonius' house a short while later, Laertes prepares to return to France. After he says goodbye to his sister Ophelia, he advises her on her relationship with Hamlet. He tells her that Hamlet's attentions may be just a passing phase, and she should be careful not to fall in love with him. Laertes also reminds his sister that because Hamlet is heir to the throne of Denmark he is not always free to choose his life and how he will live it.

Polonius enters and encourages his son to be off, for the winds won't wait. Before Laertes leaves, Polonius offers him advice about how to conduct himself. Look at a person's character. Be friendly but not common. Be loyal to your friends. Don't live only for entertainment. Don't get drawn into quarrels. Listen to another's opinions and problems, but give few of your opinions or confidences. Dress as well as you can afford but not unnecessarily showy, and don't lend or borrow money from friends.

As Laertes leaves, he reminds Ophelia of his advice. When Polonius asks his daughter to explain what Laertes means, Ophelia tells him that the advice was about Hamlet. Polonius shares that he has heard that she and Hamlet have been spending a lot of time together recently. He suggests that she should spend less time with him. When Ophelia tries to convince her father of Hamlet's sincerity, Polonius replies that she should be all the more skeptical about his motives. Hamlet, as a young man, may have more experience than she does. He may only be trying to seduce her. He asks that she not see Hamlet for the present. Ophelia promises to obey.

*Act I,
scene iv*

About midnight, Hamlet keeps watch with his friends Horatio and Marcellus on the battlements, hoping to see the ghost. While they

wait, they hear the noise of Claudius and the court partying below. The noise causes Hamlet to reflect that a single flaw can ruin the reputation of a person, and the character of an entire nation.

When the ghost appears, Hamlet insists upon speaking to it directly and referring to it as the ghost of his father. The ghost beckons Hamlet to come with it, as though to speak in private. Although Horatio urges Hamlet not to go, for the ghost may be an evil spirit that could lure Hamlet to his death, Hamlet and the ghost retire to another part of the battlement.

After Hamlet goes, Horatio interprets the presence of the ghost as an omen that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

*Act I,
scene v*

Once Hamlet is alone with the ghost, he demands that it speak.

The ghost identifies itself as his father, and tells Hamlet of his fate and the truth about how he died. The ghost explains that he is doomed to wander the night while he spends the day burning away the crimes he had committed in life. Although the ghost could tell Hamlet frightening stories, he doesn't have time. The ghost asks Hamlet to take revenge upon his murderer.

The ghost informs Hamlet that the story that Claudius has told about how King Hamlet died is a lie. According to Claudius' account, the King, while taking a nap in his orchard, was bitten on the ear by a poisonous snake. In reality, Claudius, who lusted after Gertrude, sneaked up on his sleeping brother and poured poison into the king's ear, killing him. With the king dead, Claudius could marry Gertrude and take the throne for himself.

Once Hamlet hears the ghost's story, it confirms his suspicions about Claudius and Gertrude. He promises the ghost that he will avenge the murder. The ghost then vanishes.

When Horatio and Marcellus find Hamlet, they want to know what happened. Hamlet makes his friends vow the secrets that he has learned. He also tells them that no matter how strange his behavior becomes, that he will only pretend to be insane. In the future, they should not reveal that he has talked with the ghost of his father that night. They swear on Hamlet's sword not to tell what they have seen.

