

## 1. Study Guide for *Hamlet*

Studying a play is an intimidating process for many students (especially when it comes to Shakespeare). Part of the difficulty is due to the fact plays are meant to be *performed* as opposed to *read* like a book. Plays are easier to study when you have the benefit of the actors' body language, inflection and stage direction. Perhaps the most daunting task—when it comes to studying Shakespeare in particular—is grasping and understanding the language itself. Take heart! The more you read and work with Shakespeare the easier it becomes to make sense of things (mostly).

This study guide was designed to help students prepare for tasks related to the completion of the unit end exam. For instance, on the exam students will be required to both identify and elaborate on the importance of theme, motifs, format, and figurative language, etc. The questions in this study guide provide students opportunities to approach these things *generally*. All of the questions below must be completed before the exam.

*This is a required assignment; it must be handed in.*

### A. CHARACTER<sup>1</sup>

1. Who is the protagonist or main character? Are they a “flat character” or are they a “round character”?
2. What are their two or three the protagonist's most important character traits?
3. What are their chief weaknesses and virtues?
4. What are some of the functions of the play's other characters? For example, do any of the other characters help develop various aspects of the main character?
5. Who is the antagonist? Are they a flat or round character?
6. The main character in all of Shakespeare's tragedies possesses a fatal or “tragic” flaw. What is the character Hamlet's tragic flaw, weakness or defect?

#### Outcome: CR B 30.4

Read and demonstrate comprehension of a range of contemporary and classical grade-appropriate informational and literary (including novels) texts from various international, including indigenous, cultures and analyze the philosophical, ethical, and social influences that have shaped information, issues, characters, plots and themes.

**Protagonist:** the main character; the story revolves around this character's experiences; the protagonist is not necessarily the “good guy.”

**Antagonist:** usually a villain of some sort (but not always); it's the main character's most significant opponent; the antagonist is not a “foil character”.

**Flat Character:** two-dimensional characters who are relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of the play.

**Round Character:** a complex character who undergoes change (sometimes much to the surprise of the audience).

<sup>1</sup> The following guide was modeled in part from *Literature in Critical Perspectives*.

7. What part does chance or fortune or luck play in the main character's downfall?

8. Does Hamlet have a strong enough or interesting enough character to win our admiration or sympathy?

9. Identify one "stock character" and one "foil character" in *Hamlet*. Explain why these characters fall into either the stock or foil category.

**B. PLOT: the main events of the play.**

1. Describe the precipitating incident?

2. Describe the play's rising action by drawing upon examples from the play.

3. Describe the play's climax?

4. Is there dramatic irony present? To what degree? What does it achieve?

**C. SETTING: the place or type of surroundings where something takes place.**

1. What is the setting? Does it change? If so, does the change weaken the play? Is the change necessary and natural?

2. How does the setting contribute to the theme and characterization? Is the particular setting important to the play?

**D. THEME: the play's central or main idea (there could be multiple themes).**

1. Any work of literature can have multiple themes. In your opinion, what is the most significant or important theme of the play? Explain.

2. What does this theme reveal about the purpose or meaning of life?

3. Based on your understanding of this theme, was Shakespeare being sentimental, cynical, religious, romantic or humanistic?

**Stock Character:** a character who lacks importance as an individual; they represent a class or category of people; they are stereotype, e.g. the crazy uncle, the hysterical woman, or the dumb blonde.

**Foil Character:** a character that contrasts with the main character, i.e. there's usually tension between the foil and the protagonist creating a "story within the story."

**Precipitating Incident:** this event happens destroying the *status-quo*; it is the event which makes the story happen, e.g. the plotline before the precipitating event is flat and after this event the plot line immediately moves upwards.

**Climax:** the point at which the central conflict reaches the highest point of intensity. The main character's path is now set; they can follow no other plot line or direction.

**Dramatic Irony:** a situation where the audience knows something characters in the play do not themselves know (either through an action, situation or something said in the play).

**Setting:** is the time and place (or when and where) of the play. The setting may also include the environment of the story, which can be made up of the physical location, climate, weather, or social and cultural surroundings.

### E. MOTIF

1. What are the recurring motifs in the play?
2. How do the motifs help develop character, plot *and* theme?

### F. LANGUAGE & FORMAT

1. What kind of verse or special format did the playwright use?
2. Is the language elevated/formal or close to that spoken by people in real life?
3. Does the language contribute significantly to the enjoyment of the play? Explain.
4. Is the language used by each character especially adapted to him? Provide an example where the playwright uses different approaches to format or language for various characters.

### G. GENERAL

1. What is the genre of the play (comedy, tragedy, melodrama, etc.)? How well does this play fit the definition of the genre you've selected? Explain citing events and interactions from the play.

**Motif:** symbolic images or ideas appearing frequently in a story. Motifs can be symbols, sounds, actions, ideas or words. Motifs strengthen a story by adding images and ideas to the play's theme.

**Verse:** a collection of metrical lines of poetry (contributing to the differences between poetry and prose).

**Tragedy:** a genre in which a hero is brought down by their personal flaws like greed, ambition, an excess of idealism, honor, loyalty or passion.

**Melodrama:** a genre in which the plot, which is typically sensational and designed to appeal strongly to the emotions, takes precedence over detailed character development.