

## Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Plot Summary

#### ACT I

Bernardo and Marcellus stand guard outside the castle, fearful of seeing a ghost who has appeared to them twice before. They bring a skeptical Horatio, a scholar who has friends in the royal court, to vouch for them and their vision, but Horatio remains doubtful until the ghost appears once again. The ghost looks exactly like the King of Denmark, who died three months earlier. Scared, the three resolve to tell the prince Hamlet what they have seen.

Meanwhile, in the royal chamber the new King Claudius holds court. He is Hamlet's uncle, making him the former king's brother. Hamlet is depressed and still sad over his father's death, not to mention upset about the fact that his mother Gertrude remarried so soon (and to her brother-in-law!). He wants to return to school in Wittenberg, but Claudius forbids it. Hamlet is so sad that he wishes he could kill himself, but suicide is forbidden by his religion. Horatio comes to tell him that he saw a ghost that looked like his father. Hamlet agrees to meet it at night.

In another part of the castle, Laertes prepares to leave for France. His father, Polonius, is a trusted advisor to the King and his sister, Ophelia, has been falling in love with young Hamlet. Laertes and Polonius tell Ophelia that she shouldn't stay with Hamlet because he won't always care for her. As the prince, they tell her, he will someday have to choose a more appropriate bride.

That night, while Hamlet waits outside the castle with the guards, the ghost appears once again. Hamlet follows the ghost into the woods, where it reveals that he is indeed the spiritual remains of his father, and that he was killed by Claudius while he lie sleeping. Hamlet swears revenge, but doesn't yet know if he can fully trust the ghost. He thinks it might be a spirit sent from Hell to trick him. He decides to act strangely so that he can uncover the truth. This way, he thinks, nobody will suspect he is searching for answers.

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#### ACT II

The King and Queen welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the royal court. The two men are old friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, and Claudius and Gertrude have invited them to Denmark to figure out why Hamlet is so melancholy. Just then Polonius enters and tells the King that Hamlet is acting strangely because he is madly in love with Ophelia. The King and Queen doubt this, but Polonius offers a test to prove whether or not it is true.

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet, he guesses instantly that they are in Denmark to check up on him. Though they've been caught, the news that they passed a group of actors on the road outside cheers up Hamlet. Shortly after, some of the actors arrive, and Hamlet greets the lead with great joy. He asks the Player King (the head of the group) whether they can perform a special show that he will write. When he says yes, Hamlet decides to write some lines that will prove once and for all whether the ghost was telling the truth, and whether Claudius did indeed kill him.

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### Plot Summary

#### ACT III

The King and Queen question Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet, but are unable to figure anything out. Polonius meets up with the foursome and announces that Hamlet has requested that all be present for a special play the following evening. Polonius suggests that now would be a good time to prove whether Hamlet is truly madly in love with Ophelia, so he and the King wait in hiding while Ophelia sits in the middle of the room for Hamlet to come and see her. When he spots Ophelia, Hamlet grows angry and hateful, telling her that he never loved her. Ophelia rushes off in tears.

That evening the play begins, with all the characters around watching it. Just as Hamlet had asked them to do, the actors re-enact the events of history exactly as the ghost said they happened. When Claudius sees this he grows afraid and leaps out of his chair, ending the entertainment for the evening. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this behavior proves he was guilty and that the ghost was telling the truth.

After the play, Claudius informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is sending Hamlet to England for his own protection. After the two leave, Claudius begins to confess his sins and begs for forgiveness. Hamlet walks in on him confessing, and decides to kill him right then only to back off because of self-doubt. He realizes that if he kills Claudius, the king will go to Heaven. Hamlet wants to kill Claudius when his soul is rank with sin so that he will go to Hell.

The Queen Gertrude expects Hamlet to visit her in her chamber, but is worried he is too crazy and might hurt her. Polonius agrees to hide behind a curtain so that he can listen to the conversation. When Hamlet arrives he is full of anger, and tells his mother that she offended his father by marrying Claudius. They get into a loud verbal argument, and Hamlet even grabs her and throws her onto the bed. Fearing for her life, the Queen cries out in horror, and Polonius answers from behind the curtain. Hamlet thinks that the voice is actually Claudius, and quickly stabs and kills Polonius by mistake.

Soon after the Ghost appears again, telling Hamlet to leave his mother alone and chiding Hamlet for not avenging his death. The Queen can't see the Ghost, however, and grows confused by Hamlet's apparent madness. Hamlet speaks with his mother once more, asking her to confess her sins and divorce herself from Claudius. With that, he drags Polonius's body out of the room.

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### Plot Summary

#### ACT IV

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet just as he is finishing hiding the body. They ask him where it is hidden, but Hamlet will give no answer. They bring him before the King but, once again, Hamlet will not answer any questions about where Polonius is hidden. Claudius tells Hamlet that he is to be sent to England right away, and hints that he may have a sinister purpose in mind.

Some time later the Queen is talking with Horatio who reveals to her that Ophelia has gone mad. The Queen agrees to see her, and Ophelia enters the room singing bizarre songs and spouting gibberish. Claudius regrets that so many tragedies have befallen his kingdom in so little time.

Just then, a loud noise outside the castle startles the Royal Court. Laertes enters with a legion of Danes demanding to see the king, and swearing vengeance on whoever killed his father. Claudius promises Laertes that he will reveal everything to him, and asks him to calm down. But Laertes demands revenge.

At this moment a messenger appears, and delivers news that Hamlet has returned to Denmark. The King pulls Laertes aside and devises a plan that will kill Hamlet, but make it look like an accident. He says Laertes should challenge Hamlet to a sword fight, and that he should use a poison-tipped foil (a slender dueling sword) to make sure Hamlet is killed. This way, it will look like a regrettable accident and not murder. If the poison-tipped sword doesn't kill Hamlet, Claudius says he will prepare a poisoned cup of wine for Hamlet to drink.

As the two are finalizing their plans, the Queen enters with distressing news that Ophelia has drowned by suicide.

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### Plot Summary

#### ACT V

Two gravediggers are shoveling up dirt for Ophelia's grave, when Hamlet walks by with Horatio. The gravediggers are tossing skulls around, and Hamlet asks who the skulls belonged to. When it is revealed that one of the skulls was a man named Yorick, Hamlet grows distressed. He used to know Yorick and quietly he muses on the nature of life and death.

Seeing a large group of people in the distance, Hamlet hides with Horatio so as not to be noticed. He then realizes that they are coming for a funeral, and that the funeral is for his beloved Ophelia. Hamlet is so sad that he jumps in her grave. When Laertes sees this he grabs Hamlet, and the two agree to have a duel.

Finally, the day of the duel arrives, and all are present for the great match. Laertes picks the foil with the poisoned tip, but Hamlet is a better swordsman and so Laertes can't wound him. During a moment of distraction, however, Laertes lashes and pricks Hamlet. Hamlet leaps at Laertes and, in the scuffle, the two switch swords by accident. With his new sword Hamlet stabs Laertes. At this point, Gertrude toasts the combatants, but drinks out of the poisoned cup. She, too, will now die.

While Hamlet and Laertes roll around on the floor, Laertes admits to Hamlet that he stabbed him with a poisoned sword, and that Hamlet will soon die. He also tells Hamlet that his mother drank from a poisoned cup. When Hamlet asks who did this, Laertes tells Hamlet it was Claudius' idea. With his last ounce of strength, Hamlet stabs Claudius and also makes him drink from the poisoned cup. At last he has had his revenge.

Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes die. Horatio, who has witnessed the whole event, tries to drink from the poisoned cup but Hamlet stops him. He wants Horatio to live on and tell their tragic story. With that last request, Hamlet dies.

## Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Famous Quotes

*But I have that within which passeth show;  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.* – Hamlet

At the beginning of the play the King and Queen demand to know why Hamlet is still so sullen. After all, the Queen says, every living thing dies; Hamlet's father was surely no different. When he admits that this is true, she accuses Hamlet of merely "seeming" to be upset. He responds that he has a true inner sadness that is very different from a pretend sadness. We can paraphrase the above quote, then, to something like, "I have sadness within me that no man could act. This is true grief."

*My father's brother, but no more like my father  
Than I to Hercules.* – Hamlet

Hamlet thinks his uncle, the new king, is not as good a king as Hamlet's father was. He says that Claudius is no more like Hamlet's father than Hamlet is like the legendary hero Hercules.

*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.* – Polonius

Laertes receives this advice from his father, Polonius, right before Laertes is to leave for France. In modern English, it would be something like, "The greatest piece of advice is to be true to yourself. If you do this, you will always be true to others." While it's a good bit of fatherly advice, Polonius doesn't follow it himself. He is *duplicitous*, meaning he says one thing and does another.

*There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.* – Hamlet

Hamlet is often called the most *pensive* character in all of literature, meaning he thinks about things a great deal before acting on them. Here he reveals to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern how he has become a prisoner of his own mind. "Nothing, in and of itself," he says, "is inherently good or inherently bad. It's my obsessive thinking about things that make them go one way or the other."

## Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Famous Quotes, 2

*I am thy father's spirit;  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.* – The Ghost

Hamlet follows the spirit into the woods, where it reveals that it is the Ghost of Hamlet's dead father. Because he died without forgiveness for his sins, the Ghost must walk the night for a time until his sins are burnt away. Catholics call this place between Heaven and Hell *Purgatory*.

*The play 's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.* – Hamlet

After the arrival of a troupe of actors, Hamlet devises that the best way to prove once and for all whether the Ghost was telling the truth is to perform a play for Claudius that mirrors his supposed actions in killing his brother. He thinks that seeing the actions performed will cause a guilty Claudius to reveal himself.

*You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass.* – Hamlet

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern approach Hamlet after he kills Polonius and demand to know what he did with the body. He says that they are trying to figure him out like one would “figure out” a musical instrument. In other words, they would “play” him like one would play a recorder. But a human being is not knowable in this way, Hamlet reminds them.

*My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.* – Claudius

Claudius confesses his sins to Heaven and begs for forgiveness. Little does he know that Hamlet is listening to him, and debating whether or not to kill Claudius right there. Ultimately, Hamlet decides not to, because he thinks Claudius will die with a clean soul. What Hamlet doesn't hear is the above quote, which comes at the end of Claudius' confession. In modern English we could say something like “I ask for forgiveness, but I know I have received none. Even though I say the words I still think what I did was good, and words alone are not enough to be cleansed.” Claudius really didn't get forgiven after all!

## Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Famous Quotes, 3

*Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!*  
*I took thee for thy better.* – Hamlet

While in his mother's chambers, Hamlet hears a noise. Thinking it is Claudius, he stabs the figure behind the curtain. He discovers too late, however, that it is in fact Polonius. He leans down to the body and says "I took thee for thy better," meaning he confused him with someone else that was more important—the King.

*When sorrows come, they come not single spies,*  
*But in battalions.* – Claudius

Ophelia has just entered the chamber and is clearly insane. Claudius bemoans the fact that so many bad things have happened recently. The King died, Polonius was stabbed, Hamlet has grown violent, and Ophelia has gone mad. He says that when bad things happen they don't happen one at a time, but all at once. Another way to say this would be "When it rains, it pours."

*Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest.* – Hamlet

Hamlet has returned to Denmark and walks through a graveyard. Seeing a skull on the ground he asks the gravedigger whom it belonged to. When the gravedigger says it was the skull of a man named Yorick, Hamlet grows sad. Yorick was the court jester when Hamlet was a child. Now he is nothing but a bunch of bones. Hamlet muses that, no matter who we are, all of us will someday die.

*I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.* – Horatio

As Hamlet lies dying from poison, his good friend Horatio sees that there is still a little left in the cup and tries to drink it. In ancient Rome, suicide was honorable. Horatio says he is more like those Romans than he is like a fellow from Denmark. Hamlet stops him, however. He has come to realize that death is not the final end, but that we must first be redeemed in life. His final words to Horatio represent a victory for Hamlet.

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**Further Reading**

**Ptolemaic System**

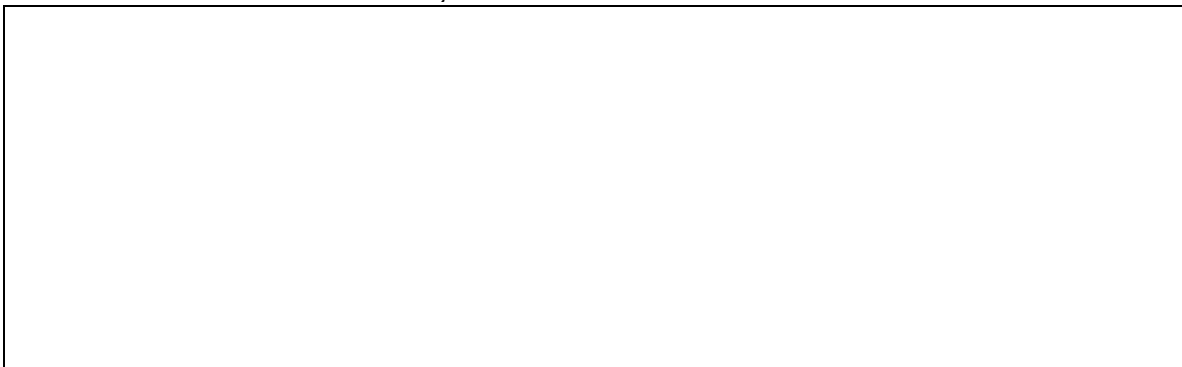
Hamlet writes a letter to Ophelia in which he says:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;  
Doubt truth to be a liar;  
But never doubt I love.

In modern English we can translate this to say something like: “You can sooner think that the sun stands still, or that people who tell the truth are really liars, before you can think that I don’t love you.”

Of course, today we know that the sun DOES stand still, while the Earth rotates around it. But that doesn’t make what Hamlet says a lie, because he was using a different picture of the solar system than we are used to. For over 1,000 years the accepted model was known as the Ptolemaic, or geocentric, system.

1. Research the Ptolemaic System and draw the model below:



2. Why was that model called the “Ptolemaic system”?

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3. What does “geocentric” mean?

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**Further Reading**

**Catholicism**

Hamlet doesn't know whether to trust the ghost at first or not, because he doesn't know whether it's a spirit sent from Heaven or a demon sent from Hell. The issue of "sinning against God" comes up often in the play. For instance, Hamlet thinks about killing himself, but is afraid to because it is forbidden by his religion. Later on, Hamlet finds Claudius confessing and chooses not to kill him then because he has cleansed his soul, and therefore will go to Heaven. Hamlet sees this as a reward.

Find at least one reference (direct or indirect) in *Hamlet* to the words below. Look up the definitions in a religious encyclopedia or online, and discuss how they relate to the story of Hamlet:

**CHRISTIANITY:**

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**SIN:**

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**CONFESSION:**

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**SUICIDE:**

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**PURGATORY:**

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Further Reading

European Geography

In order to properly appreciate *Hamlet*, it is necessary to have a grasp of the geography of Europe. Write in the names of the countries as they appear today on the map below:



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**Multiple Choice Questions**

- 1.) Whose Ghost appears to Hamlet to say that he was murdered by Claudius?
  - A. The King, Hamlet's father.
  - B. The Queen, Hamlet's mother.
  - C. Horatio, Hamlet's friend.
  
- 2.) What does Hamlet swear to do after the Ghost tells him what happened?
  - A. Approach Claudius and ask him.
  - B. Nothing.
  - C. Kill Claudius.
  
- 3.) Match Polonius with his two children:
  - A. Bernardo and Marcellus.
  - B. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
  - C. Laertes and Ophelia.
  
- 4.) Hamlet thinks he will trick Claudius into revealing the truth by...
  - A. By forcing him to see the Ghost.
  - B. By performing a play that mirrors his supposed actions.
  - C. By pretending to be a priest and listening to his confession.
  
- 5.) Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius while he is praying because...
  - A. Claudius will die with a clean soul.
  - B. Hamlet doesn't have a weapon handy.
  - C. Hamlet is still unsure Claudius killed his father.
  
- 6.) Hamlet kills all of the following except...
  - A. Laertes
  - B. Ophelia.
  - C. Polonius.
  
- 7.) Who is the sole member of the court to live through the play?
  - A. Hamlet.
  - B. Gertrude.
  - C. Horatio.

## Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Character Match

Match the character to his or her action.

Hamlet	Claudius	Gertrude
Ophelia	Laertes	Polonius
Horatio	Marcellus	The Ghost

1. \_\_\_\_\_ tells Hamlet about the appearance of the Ghost.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ challenges Hamlet to a duel.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ hides in the Queen's chambers to spy on Hamlet.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ stands watch outside the castle.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ kills the king and marries his sister-in-law.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ tells Hamlet he must avenge his death.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ drowns herself after her father is killed at the hands of her lover.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ is banished to England.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ drinks from a poisoned cup.

### Vocabulary Match

Purgatory	Melancholy	Poison
Foil	Wittenberg	Shakespeare
Confession	Players	Suicide

Match the word to its definition.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ A sword used in fencing.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ An act of contrition in Catholic faith.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Where Hamlet goes to school.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Place between Heaven and Hell.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Author of *Hamlet*.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ To kill oneself.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Actors
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Depression.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ A deadly drink.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Quote Matching

Write which character said the line, and then briefly restate the quotation in your own words.

*But I have that within which passeth show;  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

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*My father's brother, but no more like my father  
Than I to Hercules. -*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

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*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
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*There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Quote Matching, 2

Write which character said the line, and then briefly restate the quotation in your own words.

*I am thy father's spirit;  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*The play 's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Quote Matching, 3

Write which character said the line, and then briefly restate the quotation in your own words.

*Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!*

*I took thee for thy better.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

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*When sorrows come, they come not single spies,*

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Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

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*Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

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*I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.*

Who said it? \_\_\_\_\_

Re-state it:

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Short Answer Questions

1. Why does Hamlet initially doubt the Ghost, and how does he prove the truth of what the Ghost is saying?

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2. Why does Claudius end the Players' show? What can we deduce from this behavior?

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3. Why do Laertes and Polonius tell Ophelia to end her affair with Hamlet? Do you think this advice is given with her best interests in mind? Why or why not?

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4. Why do the King and Queen call Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Denmark?

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5. Why does Hamlet strike and kill Polonius while he is in his mother's chambers?

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6. Why does Claudius send Hamlet away to England?

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### Short Essay Questions

1. While fighting at the end of Act V, Laertes says to Hamlet, "I'll be your foil." We know that a *foil* is a type of sword, but in literature, *foil* also means "a character who opposes and contrasts another character". There are many such pairs in *Hamlet*. Choose one pair and briefly discuss their contrasting relationship.

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2. Many scholars have argued over the centuries that Hamlet is actually crazy, and not just pretending to be. Using examples from the play, briefly show that Hamlet is not crazy, but is just acting.

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3. The *climax* of a play or novel is the moment of greatest tension, when the main character (called the *protagonist*) has to make a final and irreversible decision. Name the climax of *Hamlet*, and briefly explain why you think this is so.

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Answer Key

- Page 9:**
1. The Ptolemaic system has the Earth at the center of the Universe, with celestial bodies contained in “spheres” that orbit around it.
  2. accept any reasonable answer along the lines of “it was named after the work of Claudius Ptolemy [who presented a complete system of mathematical constructions that accounted successfully for the observed motion of each heavenly body].”
  3. “earth-centered”

**Page 10:** Accept all reasonable answers.

- Page 12:**
1. A
  2. C
  3. C
  4. B
  5. A
  6. B
  7. C

**Page 13:**

**Character Match**

1. Horatio
2. Laertes
3. Polonius
4. Marcellus
5. Claudius
6. Ghost
7. Ophelia
8. Hamlet
9. Gertrude

**Vocabulary Match**

1. foil
2. confession
3. Wittenberg
4. purgatory
5. Shakespeare
6. suicide
7. players
8. melancholy
9. poison

**Pages 14-16:** See “Famous Quotes”

## Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

### Answer Key

- Page 17:**
1. Hamlet doubts the ghost because he doesn't know if it is a demon from Hell or a spirit from Heaven. He has the players enact a play to decide.
  2. He ends the show because he is afraid, which shows guilt.
  3. They tell her to end the affair because Hamlet will not always love her since he is Prince. As such, he will have to choose a more appropriate bride. Second part: accept all reasonable answers.
  4. They call the two to Denmark to figure out why Hamlet is acting strangely.
  5. He thinks it is Claudius.
  6. Claudius is afraid Hamlet knows, and sends him to England to be killed.

- Page 18:**
1. Acceptable pairs: Hamlet and Ophelia (in relation to their madness), Hamlet and Laertes, Horatio and Polonius, Claudius and the Ghost.
  2. Other people see the ghost, he only acts strangely around certain people, and he says from the beginning that he is just going to pretend.
  3. Accept all reasonable answers.

**Page 19 Essay:** Accept all reasonable answers.