

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“Hamlet”

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CONTENTS

Areas of Study	Chapter	Topics Covered
Area of study 1 – Reading and the study of texts	Chapter 1- Genre	-
	Chapter 2- Structure	-
	Chapter 3- Historical Issues	-
	Chapter 4- Style	-
	Chapter 5- Background Notes	-
	Chapter 6- Scene Summaries	6.1 Act 1, Scene i 6.2 Act 1, Scene ii 6.3 Act 1, Scene iii 6.4 Act 1, Scene iv 6.5 Act 1, Scene v 6.6 Act 2, Scene i 6.7 Act 2, Scene ii 6.8 Act 3, Scene i 6.9 Act 3, Scene ii 6.10 Act 3, Scene iii 6.11 Act 3, Scene iv 6.12 Act 4, Scene i 6.13 Act 4, Scene ii 6.14 Act 4, Scene iii 6.15 Act 4, Scene iv 6.16 Act 4, Scene v 6.17 Act 4, Scene vi 6.18 Act 4, Scene vii 6.19 Act 5, Scene i 6.20 Act 5, Scene ii
	Chapter 7- Character Profiles	7.1 Hamlet 7.2 Claudius 7.3 Gertrude 7.4 Polonius 7.5 Ophelia 7.6 Laertes 7.7 Hamlet’s Friends

	Chapter 8- Themes	8.1 Revenge 8.2 Deception 8.3 Destiny
	Chapter 9- Sample Examination Questions	9.1 Sample Part 1 Questions 9.2 Sample Part 2 Questions
	Chapter 10- Final Examination Tips	

SAMPLE

AREA 1:

READING & THE STUDY OF TEXTS:

HAMLET

Chapter 1

GENRE

Hamlet is based on earlier versions of revenge tragedy. The conventions of the classic revenge tragedy genre include ghosts, suicide, insanity, murder, carnage and adultery. *Hamlet* follows some conventional elements of the genre by incorporating these elements. Also, in the conventional form of a revenge genre the murderer destroys himself in public and the avenger dies after he achieves his aim. The many violent and consequential deaths in *Hamlet* characterize it as a tragedy.

However, Shakespeare's work reflects the changing nature of the times and he challenges the traditional genre by creating a reluctant revenge hero, which adds layers of complexity to the play. Hamlet's delay in punishing Claudius adds to the suspense and the subplots provide variety for the entertainment of the audience. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also diverges from the themes of classical plays by offering more challenging notions regarding revenge.

Chapter 2

STRUCTURE

Shakespeare structured his tragedies in five acts, which follow a traditional plot pattern of exposition, conflict, crisis, counterstroke, and then catastrophe. The events in *Hamlet* are performed in chronological order. However, Shakespeare makes use of the convention of stage time, which is elastic and adds to the clarity of the play as a performance, which is not 'real'.

Shakespeare strengthens his messages about death and revenge by including subplots which mirror the main plot. Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras are three sons who have lost their fathers and all seek revenge, but they each approach their duty differently.

Shakespeare juxtaposes characters and themes to draw attention to the crucial complexity of human existence. Laertes, who is willing to avenge his father's death in any way, does not display the same moral strength as Hamlet, who takes a more ethical approach. Hamlet and Ophelia both display madness, but Hamlet's madness is an act while Ophelia's madness, which eventually consumes her, is real. The contrasts between characters highlight Hamlet's behaviour for the audience to judge.

Chapter 3

HISTORICAL ISSUES

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* during the Elizabethan period, when the English monarchy played a central role in the lives of its people. The hierarchy, with the King being second to God, was well established and upheld. The socially accepted Divine Right of Kings kept people obedient and reverent to the leader, who was seen as representative of God, and whose authority must be maintained to ensure social order in the kingdom. Thus, treason equated with a crime against God and was justifiably punishable by death.

Elizabethan England was characterized by wealth and prosperity, which Queen Elizabeth I brought during her reign. At the same time, Elizabeth enforced Protestantism, which led to religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, and challenged the church structure. Spain made a failed attempt to invade England, which is reflected in *Hamlet* in the subplot of the imminent vengeful attack by the prince of Norway, Fortinbras.

Nonetheless, the people of England enjoyed peace and became more educated as they discovered new ideas and opportunities, which had not been available in medieval days. Shakespeare's pieces of theatre raised familiar issues for the audiences of the era, who related to his plots and themes as their society evolved. Theatre was one of the most popular forms of entertainment, especially after the construction of The Globe theatre in London.

The Renaissance was richly characterised by an alliance of elements of both classical and Christian worlds. *Hamlet* is in some ways a traditional tragic hero but also embodies the contradictions of the era, divided between his moral duty to avenge his father's death and his personal morality, which causes him to delay his revenge. The moral questions raised by revenge tragedy plays made it a popular Renaissance genre.