



Hamlet

by William Shakespeare

In a Nutshell

Hamlet, a tragedy written by [William Shakespeare](#) between 1599 and 1601, is the story of Prince Hamlet, whose father, the King of Denmark, is murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who has also married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. The play centers around Hamlet's angst and indecision about how to avenge his father's death. The question of *why* Hamlet delays taking revenge has puzzled critics for centuries.

Hamlet has a lot of "most famous" things in it. It's Shakespeare's most famous play about Shakespeare's most famous character (that would be Hamlet), and it contains Shakespeare's most famous line: "To be or not to be, that is the question." But really, you might wonder what's the big deal?

Many scholars celebrate *Hamlet* because it marks the emergence of a new kind of literature that focuses on the struggles and conflicts *within* a single individual, rather than the external conflicts between individuals. Hamlet was one of the first characters *ever* to have a developed and mysterious inner life, to which audiences are given access by way of his elaborate speeches (soliloquies). In other words, watching (or reading) *Hamlet* is like going for a roller coaster ride in the mind of one of the most psychologically complex figures in Western Literature. Kind of a big deal, wouldn't you say? The form of literature now known as the novel would later take this idea and run with it.

Though the play is without a doubt innovative, the story line of *Hamlet* is not original. (Most of the plotlines Shakespeare works with are borrowed.) The story of Hamlet, which dates back to at least the 9th century, centers around "Amleth," a young man who feigns madness in order to avenge his father's murder. Saxo the Grammarian included the tale in a late 12th century text and later, François de Belleforest translated the story from Latin into French in *Histoires Traquiques* (1570), which is where Shakespeare may have encountered the tale.

There seems to have been an earlier play about the story of Hamlet that was staged some time before 1589. Literary scholars call this play the Ur (original) *Hamlet* but, we know nothing about the author and very little about the play since no copy seems to exist.

Why Should I Care?

Hamlet can be considered something of a mirror. OK, a weird, funhouse mirror held at an [Elizabethan](#) angle, but a mirror nonetheless. Sure, Hamlet may be around 30-years-old, but the guy is really having a teenage crisis. Imagine Hamlet on a reality show.

Can you picture him in that little room where the cast has to talk into the camera? He'd say, "Let's go, Claudius, just wait, I'm going to bring it so hard you'll BEEP BEEP!" and then the rest of his speech is lost to censorship.

Which is really what *Hamlet* is, when you think about it: the talking to the camera bit. When there's no real action, in life or in reality TV, we turn to people to narrate their feelings and it entertains us.

If you think about the actual action of *Hamlet*, well, that doesn't come until Act V when everyone dies.

The rest of the play is soliloquies, asides, conversations, and mullings over which, far from being boring, are the real meat of the play.

They're also the real meat of people, as those of you living and breathing well know.

Hamlet's amazing because it's the first play to really do that.

So even though Hamlet talks the talk without bringing the vengeance, at least for 30 pages or so, it's the talk that we're interested in anyway.