



جامعة تكريت

كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

المرحلة الثالثة

مادة المسرحية

Hamlet – Act One: Text Analysis

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2025-2026

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the greatest tragedies in English literature. The first act introduces the major characters, establishes the atmosphere of mystery and suspense, and presents the central conflict that drives the entire play. Shakespeare carefully develops themes such as revenge, appearance versus reality, loyalty, corruption, family relationships, and political uncertainty. By the end of Act One, Prince Hamlet learns the truth about his father's death and accepts the responsibility of avenging his murder.

1. The Appearance of King Hamlet's Ghost

The play opens on a cold, dark night outside Elsinore Castle in Denmark. The setting immediately creates an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and tension. Two guards, Bernardo and Francisco, are on duty when another guard, Marcellus, arrives with Horatio, a close friend of Prince Hamlet.

Bernardo and Marcellus explain that they have seen a ghost on two previous nights. The ghost resembles the late King Hamlet, who recently died. Horatio is educated and rational, so he initially refuses to believe the guards' story. However, while they are discussing the strange appearance, the ghost suddenly appears before them. Horatio is shocked because the ghost looks exactly like the former king, dressed in the same armor he wore during his battles against Norway.

Horatio attempts to speak to the ghost, asking why it has returned and whether it has a message. The ghost remains silent and disappears without saying a word.

This mysterious event convinces Horatio that something terrible may soon happen in Denmark.

Horatio recalls the conflict between the late King Hamlet and King Fortinbras of Norway. Years earlier, King Hamlet defeated Fortinbras in battle and gained control of disputed land. Now, Fortinbras's son is gathering soldiers to recover that lost territory. The ghost's appearance, therefore, seems to symbolize political instability as well as personal tragedy.

The guards and Horatio decide that Prince Hamlet must be informed because the ghost may reveal its message only to the king's son. This opening scene introduces one of the play's most important symbols. The ghost represents the hidden truth, the unrest within Denmark, and the beginning of Hamlet's journey toward revenge.

2. King Claudius Holds Court

The following day, the setting shifts from the dark castle walls to the royal court. King Claudius addresses the nobles of Denmark. His speech demonstrates his political skill as he attempts to balance mourning and celebration. He expresses sorrow over the death of his brother, King Hamlet, but also announces his recent marriage to Queen Gertrude, the widow of the late king.

Claudius presents his marriage as a necessary decision for the stability of the kingdom. Although his words appear reasonable, the audience quickly senses that something is morally wrong about his actions. Shakespeare begins developing one of the play's major themes: **appearance versus reality**. Claudius appears to be a responsible ruler, but beneath his public image lies deception.

The king also discusses the threat posed by Prince Fortinbras of Norway. He explains that Fortinbras is preparing military action against Denmark. Instead of declaring war immediately, Claudius sends a diplomatic letter to Fortinbras's elderly uncle, the King of Norway, hoping to stop the conflict peacefully. This decision portrays Claudius as a capable politician who prefers diplomacy over violence.

During the same meeting, Laertes, the son of Polonius, asks permission to return to France, where he is studying. Claudius grants his request without hesitation, showing his willingness to satisfy the members of his court.

Finally, Claudius and Queen Gertrude turn their attention to Prince Hamlet. They criticize him for continuing to mourn his father. Claudius argues that excessive grief is unnatural and encourages Hamlet to move on with his life. He also asks Hamlet not to return to the University of Wittenberg but to remain in Denmark. Although Hamlet obeys, it is clear that he is deeply unhappy with the king's demands.

3. Hamlet's First Soliloquy

After everyone leaves, Hamlet delivers his first soliloquy, allowing the audience to understand his private thoughts and emotions. This speech reveals the depth of his sorrow and emotional suffering.

Hamlet wishes that life could simply end, but he knows that suicide is forbidden by God's law. His sadness is caused not only by the death of his father but also by his mother's quick marriage to Claudius. He believes that Queen Gertrude has forgotten her husband too quickly and has betrayed his memory.

Hamlet compares his father to the noble and honorable King Hyperion, while he compares Claudius to a satyr, a creature associated with lust and corruption. These comparisons emphasize Hamlet's admiration for his father and his complete contempt for Claudius.

This soliloquy introduces another important theme: the conflict between moral values and human weakness. Hamlet struggles with feelings of anger, disappointment, and confusion, making him one of Shakespeare's most psychologically complex characters.

Soon after, Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo arrive and tell Hamlet about the ghost. Although surprised, Hamlet becomes determined to see the ghost himself, believing it may provide answers about his father's death.

4. Laertes and Polonius Advise Ophelia

While Hamlet prepares to meet the ghost, another important subplot develops involving Ophelia, Laertes, and Polonius.

Before leaving for France, Laertes warns his sister Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet. He tells her that although Hamlet may truly love her, he is a prince whose marriage will ultimately be determined by political interests rather than personal choice. Therefore, Ophelia should protect both her reputation and her emotions.

Ophelia respectfully promises to remember her brother's advice, although she gently reminds him to follow his own advice as well.

After Laertes departs, Polonius enters. Unlike Laertes, who speaks as a caring brother, Polonius speaks as an authoritarian father. When Ophelia tells him that

Hamlet has expressed sincere love for her, Polonius immediately dismisses Hamlet's feelings. He believes that Hamlet cannot be trusted and orders Ophelia to avoid all contact with him.

This scene illustrates the limited freedom women possess in the society portrayed in the play. Ophelia is expected to obey the men in her family rather than make her own decisions. Shakespeare also presents Polonius as a controlling and somewhat self-important character whose advice often reflects practicality rather than genuine understanding.

5. Hamlet Meets the Ghost

The climax of Act One occurs when Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus during the night watch. Once again, the ghost appears. Hamlet courageously follows it despite his friends' warnings that it may lead him into danger.

When they are alone, the ghost finally speaks. It identifies itself as the spirit of Hamlet's father and reveals a shocking secret. Contrary to the official story that King Hamlet died from a snake bite while sleeping in his garden, the ghost declares that he was actually murdered by his own brother, Claudius. According to the ghost, Claudius poured poison into his ear while he slept and then seized both the throne and Queen Gertrude.

The ghost commands Hamlet to avenge this terrible crime. However, it also gives him an important instruction: he must not harm his mother. Instead, Gertrude should be left to her own conscience and to divine judgment.

This revelation transforms the entire direction of the play. Hamlet's personal grief becomes a mission for justice and revenge. At the same time, Shakespeare raises an important question: can the ghost be trusted? Is it truly the spirit of

Hamlet's father, or could it be an evil force attempting to deceive him? This uncertainty creates dramatic tension that continues throughout the play.

As dawn approaches, the ghost disappears. Hamlet is overwhelmed with grief, anger, and determination. He makes Horatio and Marcellus swear never to reveal what they have witnessed. Hamlet also hints that he may behave strangely in the future, preparing the audience for his later decision to pretend to be mad.

Conclusion

Act One establishes the foundation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It introduces the main characters, reveals the political and personal conflicts, and creates an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. The appearance of the ghost uncovers the hidden crime that lies beneath the surface of the Danish court and sets Hamlet on his difficult path toward revenge.

Several major themes emerge throughout the act, including revenge, corruption, appearance versus reality, loyalty, family conflict, and moral responsibility. Shakespeare also presents Hamlet as an intelligent, sensitive, and deeply reflective character whose emotional struggles distinguish him from the traditional revenge hero. By the end of Act One, the audience understands that Denmark is a kingdom suffering from both political disorder and moral decay, and that Hamlet's quest for truth and justice has only just begun.