Hamlet - Learning Resources

Truth and performance in the play within the play (up to 60 mins)

This learning resource is designed to help students explore the themes of truth and performance in *Hamlet*, through a close analysis of the play within the play in Act III, Scene 2.

Students of Literature will be able to discuss different interpretations of key scenes and themes, and also analyse Shakespeare's use of language, form, and structure in particular. Students of Drama and Theatre will be able to make connections between dramatic theory and practice, in considering the role of the scene.

Who is it for?

This resource is designed for A-Level students of English Literature and Drama who are studying Hamlet.

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- Be introduced to the significance of truth and performance in *Hamlet*.
- Discuss how these themes are present in Act III, Scene 2.
- Examine the text for evidence of each character's truthfulness.
- Take part in a debate about each character's truthfulness.
- Write a short essay about the roles truth and performance play in Hamlet as a whole.

You will need

- Access to the film Truth and performance in 'Hamlet' in the 'On Demand' player.
- Access to the clip 'The play within the play' in the 'On Demand' player.
- Copies of the full text of Hamlet.

Activities

1.

Show the film *Truth and performance in 'Hamlet'* using the 'On Demand' player. The film features Nicholas Hytner, the director of the NT's 2010 production of *Hamlet*, explaining the thematic significance of theatre and performance in Shakespeare's play.

2.

Hand out copies of the synopsis for Act III, Scene 2 (provided below), and read through it with the class. It explains the context and significance of the scene within the play. You can skip this step with groups who are more familiar with the story.

3.

Show the clip 'The play within the play' using the 'On Demand' player. Ask the class to make notes about who is pretending, and how, in this scene.

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4.

Ask the class to share their responses to the following questions:

- What effect does a play within a play have on the audience?
- Who is pretending in this scene?
- What different kinds of pretending are there, and where do we see it?
- Why is each character pretending?

5.

Divide the class into six groups. Assign five of these groups one of the following characters: **Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius,** and **The Players**. The last group will be called **The Jury**.

6.

Give each group five to ten minutes to prepare an argument for why their character is the most truthful in this scene, referring the script for *Hamlet*. The Jury should use this time to come up with questions to ask each of the characters.

7.

Invite each group to share a short explanation of why their character is more truthful than the others. Then invite the Jury to ask one question of each character, before deciding amongst themselves which character they think is the least truthful. That character's team is disbanded, and now becomes part of the Jury.

8.

Give the four remaining teams the chance to challenge one other team with a question, and give that team a chance to respond. After each team has asked a question, the Jury should again vote to eliminate the least truthful character. That character's team is disbanded, and now becomes part of the Jury.

9.

Ask each of the remaining teams a question of your choice – or invite them to sum up their case in their own words. Give all members of the Jury the chance to cast their final vote on which character is the most truthful. That team is the winner.

10.

Lead a discussion with the whole class about how this scene fits into the themes of truth and performance throughout the rest of the play.

11.

As a follow-up: each student should write a short essay about the role truth plays in Hamlet, through the eyes of a character of their choice.



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Synopsis of Act III, Scene 2

This scene takes place about halfway through the play, and appears just before the interval in the National Theatre's production.

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. His father, the King, recently died, apparently killed by a snake in his orchard. After his death, his brother Claudius took over the throne, and married the old King's wife, Gertrude. Hamlet, grieving for his father, and confused and upset by his mother's decision to remarry so quickly, is making the rest of the court uncomfortable – they would much rather he stay quiet and accept the new regime.

One night, Hamlet's father appears to him as a ghost. He tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius, and he commands Hamlet to revenge his murder by killing him. Hamlet is unsure whether he should believe the ghost – he worries it might be an evil spirit trying to trick him into killing someone. To cope with the stress of this situation, Hamlet pretends to be mad – which he thinks will also allow him some freedom to say and do things Claudius' regime would otherwise think too dangerous to allow.

Hamlet hatches a plan to determine whether or not the ghost was telling the truth about Claudius. He asks a group of actors to perform a play in front of Claudius and the rest of the court – a play which portrays a murder very similar to the supposed murder of Hamlet's father. Hamlet hopes that by watching Claudius during the play, he will see some sign of his guilt.

This scene, Act III, Scene 2, begins just as the actors are preparing to perform the play for the court.