

# National Theatre Collection



# Hamlet

**Cross-Curricular Learning Guide**

# Contents

Introduction to the production	2
.....	
Synopsis	3
.....	
Cross-Curricular Learning	5
.....	
English	5
.....	
History	6
.....	
Geography	8
.....	
PSHE	10
.....	
Other Learning Activities	12
.....	

# Introduction to the production

## Recommended Age Group: Upper KS2

The 2022 production of *Hamlet* is designed to appeal to all KS2 audiences. The National Theatre have created a thought-provoking and accessible production by combining Shakespeare's original text with modern language, and introducing a variety of genres of music. The production flips the original text on its head by changing the gender of one of the main characters (Laertes) to allow for a strong female character to take part in a battle near the play's conclusion.

As one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, *Hamlet* stands as a true Tragedy. Ending with the death of all main characters, the audience are left with many questions about what happens next. Who will rule the country now? Will peace be restored?

The play was written at the height of the English Renaissance, between 1599 and 1602, at a time of great uncertainty in the final years of Queen Elizabeth I's reign and is set in both Denmark and England.

Whether as part of an English unit or to deepen understanding in one of the Foundation subjects, *Hamlet* offers a great number of opportunities for in class learning.

Cross-curricular areas of learning include:

- English
- History
- Geography
- PSHE

This Cross-Curricular Learning Guide illustrates how primary school teachers can use this production to support teaching across curriculum subjects such as English, History, Geography and PSHE. This guide offers sequences of activities and suggested lesson structures.

Any activity highlighted in red can be found in the Creative Learning Activity Guide, a separate document found on the [National Theatre Collection](#) and [National Theatre Learning Hub](#). That guide offers step by step instructions on how to deliver the exercises.

## Synopsis

The story begins at the funeral of Hamlet's father, the King of Denmark. Hamlet and his mother Queen Gertrude attend the funeral.

Claudius – Hamlet's uncle and brother to the dead King – proposes marriage to Queen Gertrude. Gertrude accepts. They have a party to celebrate the wedding. Hamlet is still grieving for his father and can't believe his mother has remarried so soon after his father's death.

Ophelia says that Hamlet has told her he loves her. Her father Polonius isn't pleased with the news. He tells Ophelia not to spend any more time with Hamlet.

The ghost of Hamlet's father visits him and tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him by pouring poison in his ear. Hamlet is upset and vows to take revenge. He decides to pretend to be mad so that no one suspects he knows the truth about how his father died.

Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet has started behaving strangely. Polonius believes that Hamlet's behaviour can be put down to Ophelia refusing to see him. Hamlet is aware that he is being spied on by Polonius and Claudius. He tells Ophelia that he doesn't love her and to get herself to a nunnery.

Concerned about Hamlet's behaviour, Claudius and Gertrude call Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court to help them work out why he is behaving so strangely. Rosencrantz says they have brought with them some actors from England – the audience.

Hamlet decides to stage a play The Murder of Gonzago, which shows a king being murdered in the same way that his uncle murdered his father. He wants Claudius to watch the play to see his reaction in order to prove that what his father's ghost told him was true. The plan works and Claudius is asked to play the murderer. However, Claudius cannot finish the scene and stops the play.

Polonius hides behind a curtain while Gertrude tells Hamlet off for upsetting Claudius. Hamlet becomes angry and Gertrude fears he is going to kill her. Polonius calls for help from behind the curtain and Hamlet stabs at it, killing Polonius.

As punishment for killing Polonius, Hamlet is sent by boat to England with his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius writes a letter to the English, asking for Hamlet to be killed. Hamlet reads the letter and changes its contents to read that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be killed instead. He decides to return to Denmark.

Laertes returns and is told that Hamlet is responsible for her father's death. She also sees the effect that Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia has had on her sister's mental state.

Ophelia, mentally unwell and extremely upset by Hamlet's rejection of her and the death of her father, drowns. Gertrude discovers Ophelia and tells Laertes her sister is dead. Laertes wants to take revenge on Hamlet for both her sister and her father's death.

Claudius offers to help Laertes kill Hamlet. Laertes will challenge Hamlet to a duel. The tip of Laertes' sword will be covered with poison. If Hamlet is slightly wounded, then the poison will kill him. Claudius is also going to poison a drink which will be given to Hamlet.

The duel starts and Laertes lightly wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword. Laertes and Hamlet end up swapping swords. Hamlet now wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword. Gertrude drinks some of the poisoned drink. Laertes realises what has happened. She tells Hamlet that Claudius is to blame. Hamlet stabs Claudius and makes him drink the poisoned drink. Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet all die.





# Cross- Curricular Learning

## English

- *Spoken Language: Physical; Linguistic; Cognitive; Social and Emotional*
- *Oracy (Leading to high-quality written outcomes)*
  - Whether using the play as part of an English unit of study or for the purposes of Foundation subject exploration (see Foundation subject learning suggestions), it is important to ensure that students have a full grasp of the narrative and are able to retell, discuss and question it with confidence.

The following activities can be used time and again for any narrative, ensuring your class possess a deep understanding of all events in the story:

### WHY NOT:

- Follow a viewing of the production with **And Then** (see Creative Learning Activities)
- Building on from And Then, invite students to use **Group Speeds** (see Creative Learning Activities), to form partners and to carry out **3-2-1** (see Creative Learning Activities)
- Gather outcomes from **3-2-1** and consolidate thinking by establishing a shared set of six story beats before inviting students to carry out **Six-Part Story Method** (see Creative Learning Activities)
- Invite students to work in small groups or partners and to carry out **Story Stones** (see Creative Learning Activities), illustrating stones they have gathered as part of home learning or a class trip to a local outdoor area.

They will now be ready to carry out a written English activity with confidence and/or to apply their thinking to any of the following Foundation subject areas.

## History

- *Life in Denmark and England in the Middle Ages 14th/15th CE;*
- *Life in England at the end of the Elizabethan Era 1599–1602;*
- *The English Renaissance Period*

### Introduction to *Hamlet* and History:

Please find some prompts and starting points for exploring *Hamlet* in History:

- *Hamlet* is based in Denmark and is thought to have been set in the Middle Ages, 14th or 15th century CE. The play includes communication with the King of England and travel by boat to England. Who was the King of England at the time? What would life have been like for people in Denmark and/or England during this time? Were the King of Denmark and the King of England allies during this time or has Shakespeare used creative licence?
- Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* between 1599 and 1602. In England, Queen Elizabeth I was approximately 68 years old and had no children. With no clear heir to the throne, life had an air of uncertainty. How did people feel at this time? What had life under Queen Elizabeth I's reign been like? Would all people in England have shared the same views about Queen Elizabeth I? If not, why not? Did anyone have any thoughts about who the next King or Queen might be? How did they feel about this?
- *Hamlet* was written at the peak of the English Renaissance period. What was this period like? What happened during the Renaissance? How did this period define or change the perception of what it meant to be English? How did it reposition England on a global scale? What was Shakespeare's role during this time?

### WHY NOT:

- Use ICT and information texts to gather information on the lives and lifestyles of people during either the Middle Ages in Denmark and England or at the end of Queen Elizabeth I's reign. Create a list showing a variety of different people to ensure you have a diverse selection of those living during those times, from royalty to lower classes, old to young

- Use the above list to carry out **Role on the Wall** with **Statues and Thought Tapping** (see Creative Learning Activities) to bring characters from these times to life
- Using the above characters, think about what activities they might have carried out each day. Invite each group to make a list for their character and to create actions for each activity. Now carry out **Stop Go with Actions** (see Creative Learning Activities) to bring daily life in the chosen period to life
- You could also invite characters to share their thoughts and feelings about life using **Paired Hot-seating** (see Creative Learning Activities)
- Your students will now be able to write diary entries or news articles with interviews, writing with confidence about life in the time period you have explored.





## Geography

- *Location Knowledge;*
- *Place Knowledge;*
- *Physical and Human Geography;*
- *Geographical Skills*

### Introduction to Hamlet and Geography

Please find some prompts and starting points for exploring *Hamlet* in Geography:

- The minimal staging leaves the audience to imagine the world of the story. What was Elsinore like? How grand was the castle? What were the gardens like? What about the surrounding areas? What was the landscape in Denmark like in 14th or 15th century CE? Has the landscape changed?
- How long would the journey have taken between Denmark and England? What route would Hamlet's boat have taken? Which other countries would the boat have sailed past? Do they still have the same country names today?
- What was England like in 14th or 15th century CE? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are taken to see the King of England: where do you think they would have sailed to and how would they have travelled to meet the King? What would their route have been? What would the English landscape have been like?

### WHY NOT:

- Use World of the Story Mindmaps (see Creative Learning Activities) to bring Elsinore to life. You could use these to make exciting, multi-sensory displays and/or to create a large scale 3D version of one of the mindmaps
- Use Masking Tape World (see Creative Learning Activities) to map out one location of interest i.e. Elsinore Castle, the gardens and the surrounding areas. Then use Dioramas (see Creative Learning Activities) to create 3D versions of areas of particular interest to life
- Use the above activities to create information guides to the location(s) you have focused on

- Use ICT, maps, globes and information texts to plan routes for travel between Denmark and England, exploring human and physical features, time zones and other geographical elements. Students could explore changes that have occurred over time – between the Middle Ages, 17th century and modern day. They could create maps for the Hamlet to use to ensure he gets back from England to Denmark, including notes to inform him of key landmarks to look out for on his way, etc.



## PSHE

- *Health and Wellbeing;*
- *Relationships;*
- *Living in the Wider World*

Please find some prompts and starting points for exploring *Hamlet* in PSHE:

- *Hamlet* contains many strong themes: love; betrayal; deceit; death; greed; sadness; depression; fear; identity; mental illness. Events within the play bring these themes to the fore and create an abundance of opportunities for discussion and exploration of key areas of the PSHE curriculum
- How could Claudius murder his own brother, become the new King AND marry his deceased brother's wife without getting caught? What would happen if someone had stepped in and held him accountable for his actions?
- Why did Hamlet's mother agree to marry Claudius? Does she act in the way that we think a recently bereaved woman should? Does she behave correctly towards her son as he shows clear signs of emotional distress following the death of his father?
- Is Claudius the only character who should have been held to account? Should any other characters be put on trial for their crimes? If so, who and why?
- How could other people have helped Hamlet with his grief and feelings of betrayal?
- Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern good friends to Hamlet during the play? What does it mean to be a good and true friend? Do you think they were ever true friends? Could Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have done anything differently? Should Hamlet have recognised their character flaws earlier? Was Hamlet right to add their names to the letter for the King of England? Could he have acted differently? Anything have been done to prevent Ophelia from taking her own life?
- Several relationships in the play involve moments when at least one party feels uncomfortable or unsafe. When are these moments? Who do they involve? Is there anything that the character could have done at this time? How might different actions have changed the final, tragic outcome of the play?

**WHY NOT:**

- Use **Hamlet Story Points** (see Resources) to carry out **Freeze frames with Reporter and Line Ghost** (see Creative Learning Activities and Resources for script lines). Interrogate each scene, challenging characters to give answers to some of the above questions
- Use **Cardiogram** (see Creative Learning Activities) to map out levels of contentment of characters during the narrative, using the story points as a scaffold. What do we notice?
- Use key areas of interest from the above activities as a basis to select key characters to focus on
- Use **Role on the Wall** for each of the characters you have chosen, adding adjectives for each story point and using a different colour each time OR create a new Role on the Wall for each character whenever they experience a major shift in their levels of contentment, adding justification statements or lines of dialogue that reflect the emotions felt
- Explore the 'To be, or not to be...' speech (see Resources). What does Hamlet mean in this speech? What is he saying? What are the 'slings and arrows' in Hamlet's life? Physicalize them by inviting the class to call them out collectively whilst either letting go of a slingshot or shooting an arrow. What does his 'sea of troubles' consist of. Again, physicalise suggestions by inviting the class to collectively state the 'troubles' whilst either forming and collapsing as waves or by raising and dropping sheets of blue material with each trouble stated
- Referring to the characters and events in the play, are there any moments when a helpful word, a supportive friend or a warning against doing wrong would have helped? Use **Balanced Argument Sentence Starters** (see Resources) to support your students in creating advice or words of caution for a selected character. Carry out **Conscience Alley**
- Do your students feel any of the characters should be put on trial? Divide your class into prosecution, defence, witness and jury teams. Invite the prosecution and defence teams to gather evidence and then to create their arguments, using Balanced Argument Sentence Starters (see Resources), whilst witnesses and jury consider evidence to support them in their roles. Carry out a trial in class
- What would happen if Hamlet and Ophelia had spoken about their feelings, their worries, their fears, their hurt and turmoil? You could use **Paired Hot-seating** (see Creative Learning Activities) to allow this moment to happen. How might talking have changed the events in the play?

# Other Learning Activities

## Linked Texts

Whether you're looking to populate your reading corner, find a new class text, link your Guided Reading to the production, there are a range of fantastic texts that will either allow students to deepen their connection with Shakespeare and wider learning around the play.

### Texts include:

#### Shakespeare Texts

Mr William Shakespeare's Plays by Marcia Williams

A Stage Full of Shakespeare Stories by Angela McAllister and Alice Lindstrom

Michael Morpurgo's Tales from Shakespeare by Michael Morpurgo

Terry Deary's Best Ever Shakespeare Tales by Terry Deary & Mike Phillips, Michael Tickner

To Wee or Not to Wee by Pamela Butchart and Thomas Flintham

#### Modern Day Texts with Similar Themes

*Boy Underwater* by Adam Baron

*Michael Rosen's Sad Book* by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake

*The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers

*Small Things* by Mel Tregonning

*Night Shift* by Debi Gliori

*Cloud Boy* by Marcia Williams

*Why Do I Feel Like This?* by Shinsuke Yoshitake

## Reading Corner Themes

### WHY NOT:

Adapt your reading corner to represent one of the locations from the play? If exploring other Shakespearean texts, a castle or a ship would make great choices as they could tie in very nicely with other plays such as Macbeth or The Tempest.

You could combine the Geography creative learning activities, [World of the Story Mindmaps](#) and 3D World, with the creation of your reading corner, enabling your students to create and label their own reading corner.



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**Thank you**