UNIT 4: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *HAMLET* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- identify Shakespeare as one of the greatest dramatists of the world
- discuss the life and works of Shakespeare
- trace the background of his renowned tragedy *Hamlet*
- make a summary of the text of *Hamlet* on the basis of its various acts and scenes
- explain the significance of a play like *Hamlet*

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the forth unit of the course. In this unit, you will read about *Hamlet*, one of the four greatest tragedies of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) the renowned Elizabethan dramatist. This play revolves around the circumstances surrounding the death of prince Hamlet's father and the doubts regarding his killer. A ghost, supposedly that of his father, tells Hamlet that his uncle Claudius killed his father and urges Hamlet to take revenge. Since that revelation, troubled Hamlet is suffering from the traumas

associated with his father's death, his mother's re-marriage with his uncle Claudius and a sickening awareness of the vulnerability of human life. However, this unit deals mostly with the life and works of William Shakespeare and the background and the summary of the play *Hamlet.* Virtually nothing is clearly known about Shakespeare although he was an active member of a group of London actors during 1585 – 1592.

4.3 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE DRAMATIST

In the followings subsections, you will read about the life and works of William Shakespeare.

4.3.1 His Life and Works

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 toJohn and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-uponAvon, England. Today, his birthday is celebrated onApril 23. It is interesting to note that April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

He was the eldest of nine children inhis family. His father was a prosperous leather merchant who became very successful early in his career. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to collapse due to growing debt. During his school days, William had to undertake rigorous courses of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was already three months pregnant.Subsequently, she gave birth to a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins,Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name was listed as an actor in London by1592.

This was a difficult time for the theatre because measures to prevent the spread of theplague very often closed the theatres.In between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the **Chamberlain's Men** as a playwright andactor. During this time, Shakespeare also

started writing plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Even thoughShakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, he was bereaved by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, he bought an estate in Stratford called New Place.But, he also kept a home in London near the theatre.



LET US KNOW

Chamberlain's Men:

It was a acting company for whom Shakespeare composed most of his plays. It was founded during the reign of Elizabeth I of England in 1594. Richard Burbage played most of the lead roles, including Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth, while Shakespeare himself performed some of the secondary roles. The company became the **King's Men** in 1603 when King James I ascended the throne and became the company's patron. The company held exclusive rights to perform Shakespeare's plays.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V, Julius Caesar,* and *As You Like It.* **The Globe Theatre** was running, with Shakespearebeing a 10 percent owner. Following this, he wasable to earn 10 percent of any of the show's profits.This helped him to gatherhis wealth.In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned him the sponsorship of James I, whorequested one play performance per month.Their name changed to the **King's Men**. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories.

The Globe Theatre:

It was a theatre in London associated with William Shakespeare. Built in 1599 by Shakespeare's playing company, the Chamberlain's Men, it was destroyed by fire on 29 June 1613. A second Globe Theatre was built on the same site by June 1614 but again closed in 1642.

Shakespeare began writing tragedies beginning with *Hamlet* in 1600.In the following years, he finished writing his other tragedies namely *Macbeth, Othello,* and *King Lear.* Why Shakespeare turned to these darker

and more serious themes like one can find in the tragedies is widely debated by scholars today.But all agree that these plays established Shakespeare's fame and place in the English world. Towards the end of 1609 through 1610, Shakespeare began to write his problem romances like *The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* which are rich with mature themes of forgiveness, grace, and redemption.After 1611, at the age of 47, Shakespeare moved back to Stratford, settling there and enjoying the company of his daughter Susanna.

Shakespeare died at the age of 52 in 1616. However,it was not until 1623 that all his plays were collected into one manuscript, now referred toas the ***First Folio.*** Heming and Condell—the fellow **King's Men** players who compiled the manuscript, entitled it *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies.*



LET US KNOW

William Shakespeare's life in England is to be studied in connection with the reign of **Queen Elizabeth I** (1558–1603) during whose leadership,England became an important naval and economic force in Europe and beyond.English navydefeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was about 24 years old. Queen Elizabeth was also skilful in navigating through theconflicts of religion. She maintained religious independence from Rome as the Church of England became firmly rooted in Rome during her reign. Additionally, she financed the establishment of colonies in America to grow the British Empire and expand its economic opportunities.However, London was also suffering from social ills like poverty, crime, and disease. Twice in Shakespeare's lifetime, London endured the outbreak of theplague, which killed thousands of people. By the time of **James I**, the population of London increased upto more than 200,000 people as many people were attracted to London because it gave many opportunities for work and financial improvement.

By 1592, Shakespeare became quite well known in London theatre. The first recorded works of Shakespeare are *Richard III* and the three parts of *Henry VI*, written in the first phase when historical drama was in vogue. Besides his plays, he also wrote 154 Sonnets dedicated to one Dark Lady and Mr.W.H.Shakespeare's plays are difficult to date. However, the studies of the texts suggest that plays like *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet* etc. belong to Shakespeare's earliest period till 1594 in which he found sufficient money and professional commitment to purchase a share in the newly formed **Lord Chamberlain's Men**. By that time, he had also reached a fashionable audience with his two narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1954).

Subsequently, Shakespeare continued writing two plays per year. The period 1594-98 saw the production of the middle comedies like *Love's Labour's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream,The Merchant of Venice*, tragic plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, and history plays like*Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*and *Henry V*. Shakespeare's mature comedies include *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.In the early 17thcentury, Shakespeare wrote the darker comedies, sometimes also called the problem plays, like *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *All's Well That Ends Well.*

Many critics believe that Shakespeare's greatest tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Othelo*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* represent the peak of his dramatic career. In his final period, Shakespeare turned to romance or tragicomedy, and completed three major plays: *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *TheTempest*. It is heard that Shakespeare also collaborated on two other plays, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably with John Fletcher.



LET US KNOW

Some Characteristics of Shakespearean Tragedy:

1. Prominently a story of one person.

2. The story is one of suffering resulting in the death of a man.
3. Calamities befall due to extraneous actions committed by men.
4. Tragedy emerges from an action done by a man.
5. Insanity, hallucination, madness etc. are introduced.
6. Introduction of the supernatural elements.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is Shakespeare connected to Chamberlain's Men?

Q 2: Which are the famous tragedies of Shakespeare? Why did Shakespeare write his tragedies?

Q 3: In what ways did Shakespeare receive the patronage of the rulers of England?

Q 4: Refer to the different types of plays Shakespeare had written. Give examples.

4.4 BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY *HAMLET*

Hamlet has been one of the most important plays ever written in the English language. One of the basic sources of *Hamlet* is a twelfth-century story of Amleth in Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae,* which was first put into print in 1514. Amleth's father, who has defeated the King of Norway in a duel, is murdered by his brother Feng, who takes his brother's widow, Gerutha, to wife. The murder is not secret. To protect himself and avert suspicion, Amleth starts acting as an idiot. Thus, in Saxo's version, Amleth (Hamlet) pretends to be crazy after his father is murdered. He is upset by his mother's attachment to his uncle, and he confronts her in private, during which he killsa hidden spy. Between Saxo Grammaticus and *Hamlet* also lies a French version of Saxo's story by François de Belleforest, published in his *Histoires Tragiques* (1570). But, in Belleforest's retelling of this tragedy, he names the main character as Hamblet, Prince of Denmarke. In this version, Hamlet is cunning and decisive in his revenge.

In addition to these sources, Shakespeare is also stated to have been influenced by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy,* which is a revenge play—a popular type of drama in Shakespeare's era. In this kind of drama, the main character carries out a bloody revenge, which usually costs his own life. *The Spanish Tragedy* is about the revenge of a father for his murdered son, and includes thepresence on stage of the ghost of a dead man, the hero's madness, and a crucialplay-within-the-play. The *Ur-Hamlet,* which was about the revenge of a son for hismurdered father, had a ghost urging Hamlet to take revenge, and must have includedthe assumed madness of the hero, which is among the irreducible constituents of the old story. It seems more likely that the old *Hamlet* would have preceded *The Spanish Tragedy* than vice versa. They were probably companion plays, the successor very conscious of the predecessor, whether Kyd wrote both plays or not. Like Hamlet, the main character in Kyd's revenge play is upset with himself for his inability to carry out the revenge right away. Also, like *Hamlet, The Spanish Tragedy* contains a play within a play, a woman who becomes insane and commits suicide, and a ghost who demands that the main character avenge a murder.



LET US KNOW

It is important for you to note that *Hamlet* is a tragedy. The marks of Shakespeare an tragedy are that the tragic figure must be a person of great stature who falls from a high position. The audience feels empathy for the hero and experiences pity and terror at his death at the end of the play. The tragic protagonist usually follows the six-step tragic pattern:

"Dilemma" (should Hamlet believe the ghost?);

"Wrong Choice" (killing Polonius,delaying action);

"Suffering" (estrangement and the death of Ophelia);

"Perception"("There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will");

"Death"(the final fencing scene); and

"Restorationto Order"(the establishment of Fortinbras as successor in Denmark).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What are basic sources of the play *Hamlet*?

Q 6: Briefly mention the different steps of the tragic pattern of the play *Hamlet*.

4.5 ACT-WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

(Adapted from *Hamlet* by Tanya Grosz & Linda Wendler)

You will note that the play was first performed in 1601, although a pirated quarto version was published in 1603.However, a second quarto edition was published in 1604 which is significantly different from the text of the First Folio of 1623. In this section of the unit, attempts have been made to make an act wise summary of the text of *Hamlet.*

Act I, Scene I

The scene opens at Elsinor Castle in Denmark. The guards have asked Horatio to help them deal with a ghost that appeared during night. When the ghost re-appears, Horatiothinks that it looks like King Hamlet, the lateking of Denmark. He tries to talk to the ghost,but it disappears. After they talk about King Hamlet's victory over Norway's Fortinbras, the ghost appears again. It seems as if it wanted to say something, but the coming of the dawn forces it to vanish. Horatio decides to tell Prince Hamlet everything about the appearance of the ghost of his father.

Act I, Scene II

Inside Elsinor Castle, the newly crowned King Claudius tells the members of his court that it is time to stop mourning the death of their former King, and to celebrate his union with Gertrude Prince Hamlet's mother. He also says that Denmark is being threatened by young Fortinbras of Norway, whowishes to win back the land that was lost by his father to King Hamlet. But, he is unhappy finding that Hamlet is still mourning his father's death, to which Gertrude agrees. They ask Hamlet to stay with them and not return to Wittenberg for studies, and Hamlet agrees.After everyone leaves

to celebrate the marriageof Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet utters his **first soliloquy**, which shows his disgust for Gertrude and her new husband Claudius. Horatio and the other soldiers enter to tell Hamlet about the appearance of his father's ghost. They decide that Hamlet should talk to the ghost that night.

Act I, Scene III

Laertes, the son of Poloniu—King Claudius's confidante, is getting ready for his return to Paris. He says good-bye to his sister, Ophelia, and tells her that Hamlet is not really in love with her,as Hamlet is a Prince and isnot free to marry her. Their father, Polonius,enters and gives Laertes advice about his life in France. Then, Polonius tells Ophelia thatshe should not allow Hamlet to spend time with her. Ophelia says she will do what Polonius says.

Act I, Scene IV

Horatio and Hamlet wait for the ghost to appear. They still can hear the celebration of the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude going on inside the castle.The ghost arrives, and Hamlettries to speak to it. The ghost waives his hand for Hamlet to follow, and Hamlet pursues theghost even though his friends warn him notto go. To protect Hamlet, they decide tofollow him.

Act I, Scene V

The ghost tells Hamlet that he is the ghost of King Hamlet, and demands that Hamletavenge his death. Hamlet's Uncle Claudius murdered him when he was sleeping in the garden of the castle. The murder was even more despicable as hewas killed before he could confess his sins, and now he is in purgatory. The ghost tells Hamlet to kill King Claudius but not to harm his mother. When the ghost disappears, Hamlet is met by Marcellus and Horatio. The ghost echoes Hamlet and says, "Swear," from under neath them. Hamlet says that they should never say what they have seen even if Hamlet acts strangely at times.

Act II, Scene I

Polonius asks Reynaldo to go to Paris to reporton the behaviour of his son Laertes because he thinks that Laertes may be making inappropriate choices. However, Polonius warns Reynaldo not to harm the honour of his

son. His daughter Ophelia enters and is upset by Hamlet's actions to ward her, because the former approached her with his clothing entirely messy, grabbed her hand and kept staring at her for a long time. Polonius thinks that Hamlet is acting crazy because Opheliahas refused to see him. He decides to tell the King about Hamlet's strange manners.

Act II, Scene II

King Claudius summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two university friends of Hamlet, to discover why Hamlet is acting mad. Polonius arrives to inform that the King of Norway has Asked Fortinbras to attack Denmark. Then, Polonius opines that Hamlet is acting crazy because Ophelia has rejected him. The King and Queen, however, do not think that Hamlet's madness is only due to his relationship with Ophelia.Hamlet enters, dressed strangely and acting mad. Polonius tries to talk with Hamlet, but Hamlet acts as if he does not know Polonius and calls him a "fishmonger."

After Polonius leaves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern greet Hamlet. Hamlet refers tothe upcoming visit of an acting company. When Polonius brings in most of the actors to their rooms,Hamlet asks one actor if the troupe is willing to perform a play, *The Murder of Gonzago*.They agree to help Hamlet. Then Hamlet utters another **soliloquy** as he is disturbed to find that he cannot act more swiftly to accomplish the revenge. Hamlet hopes that by observing Claudius's reactions to the play, he will be able to tell whether or not Claudius murdered his father.

ACT III, SCENE I

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Claudiusand Gertrude that they do not know exactly why Hamlet is acting mad. Polonius tells them that they are all invited to that evening's performance,and Claudius readily accepts. Then Ophelia is asked to wait for Hamlet to come by while the King and Polonius wait behind the curtains. Hamlet enters, speaking his famous **"To be or not to be"** soliloquy. He sees Ophelia and states that he does not love her. After Hamlet leaves, Claudius and Polonius speak with Ophelia. Polonius thinks that Hamlet's troubles center on Ophelia, but Claudius thinks that Hamlet might be upset with his being the King. He decides to send Hamlet to England as soon as possible.



LET US KNOW

Hamlet's most poignant third soliloquy in Act III, Scene I of the play *Hamlet*

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?—To die,—to sleep,—
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to,—'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die,—to sleep;—
To sleep: perchance to dream:—ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,—
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns,—puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

Act III, Scene II

Hamlet tells the actors how to perform the scene from *The Murder of Gonzago*. Hamlet requests that Horatio observe the King's response to the play.Everyone in the court arrives for the performance,and Hamlet sits close to Ophelia,making bawdy comments to her. The actors come out onstage and first perform a dumbscene that shows the murder of a king in agarden. Then the actual play begins. When the play shows the murder of the king, Claudius is upset, asking for light and he leaves the room.Hamlet is now convinced that Claudius murdered his father. After the play is over, Hamlet becomes upset that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep probing him about his madness. Then Polonius tells Hamlet that Gertrude wishes to speak with him in her chamber. When everyone leaves,Hamlet decides that he will avenge his father's death by killing Claudius.



LET US KNOW

You will note that in no other play does Shakespeare provide a detailed scrutiny of the whole art of theatre itself. You will note that the play-within-a-play, i.e. Murder of Gonzago, holds an important position in the pattern of the drama, as all the characters are affected by the compulsion to act a part.

Act III, Scene III

The King orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet to England.The King, thinking he is alone, expresses hisremorse for killing his brother. He tries to prayto confess his sins. Hamlet sees the King kneeling

in prayer and realises that he could kill theKing and complete his goal of avenging his father's murder. However, he decides to wait for a time when King Claudius is not spiritually prepared for death.

Act III, Scene IV

Polonius hides behind the curtains and hears Hamlet coming to Gertrude's room.Hamlet arrives and begins to criticise his mother's behaviour in a way that makes her afraid. She cries for help, and when Polonius comes forward for her help, Hamlet stabs at the curtains mistaking the figure to be Claudius.The ghost of Hamlet's father reappears to tell Hamlet to focus on the revenge and not on his mother. Seeing Hamlet speaking to an invisible ghost, Gertrude is even more convinced that Hamlet is insane.He asks his mother to stop sleeping with Claudius and leaves the room dragging the body of Polonius with him.

Act IV, Scene I

Now convinced that Hamlet is mad, Gertrudetells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius.Claudius is upset by this news and asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet.

Act IV, Scene II

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to discover where Hamlet has hidden the body of Polonius.They speak to Hamlet. Instead he answers themin crazy riddles and calls them the sponges of the King.

Act IV, Scene III

Hamlet refuses to tell his uncle where the bodyof Polonius is. Claudius tells Hamlet that he willhave to go to exile to England for his own safety. Hamlet agrees to go. As Hamletleaves, Claudius reveals that he will ask the King of England to kill Hamlet once he arrives in England.

Act IV, Scene IV

Hamlet finds Fortinbras on his way to attack Poland. Hamlet realises that the land Fortinbras is seeking has no value and that the army of Fortinbras is ready to die for "an eggshell." In contrast to Fortinbras, Hamlet is unable to complete the revenge that the ghost of his father had asked him to carry out. Upset with himself, he vows to carry out his task.

Act IV, Scene V

Ophelia enters, insane following the deathof her father and the exile of Hamlet. She sings love songs and exits thestage. Laertes enters and is angry about thedeath of his father and that he was buriedquickly without any honour. When Ophelia enters, Laertes vows to punish whoever caused his father's death.

Act IV, Scene VI

Horatio reads a letter from Hamlet about his voyage to England. In the letter Hamlet tells that their ship was taken over by pirates, but Hamlet was spared because he was the Prince of Denmark and could offer themsome favours when he returns to Denmark.Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, are still on their way to England.

Act IV, Scene VII

Laertes learns that Hamlet was not punished forkilling Polonius because of his mother's affection and the people's support of Hamlet. A messenger brings the King letters from Hamlet who is coming back to Denmark. The King prepares for a dual between Laertes and Hamlet that will kill Hamlet because Laertes's sword will not have a guard on its tip.Also, Laertes says he will put poison on his sword to ensure that Hamlet dies. Claudius will prepare a poisonous drink for Hamlet in case the sword does not kill Hamlet.Gertrude enters to announce the death of Ophelia who drowned herself in a river.

Act V, Scene I

Two gravediggers, working on Ophelia's grave,philosophise on death with humour and wit. Hamlet and Horatio enter and speak about thepower of death. Hamlet finds the skull of Yorick, the Jester, who took care of him when he was young. The funeral procession arrives,and all mourn the death of Ophelia. Laertes is so upset that he jumps into her grave and asks to be buried with her. Hamlet approaches the grave and jumps in also,declaring that he loved Ophelia more than forty thousand brothers. They fight. After they are separated, the King reminds Laertes that hewill be able to avenge his sister's death during the duel.

Act V, Scene II

Hamlet reveals to Horatio how he switchedletters during their trip to England so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were killed instead of Hamlet. Hamlet speaks of his respect for Laertes. Osric, a courtier speaks to Hamlet about the duel he needs tofight against Laertes, and Hamlet agrees to the match. At the duel, Laertes and Hamlet shake hands, and Hamlet expresses his remorse forkilling Polonius. The King tries to make Hamlet take a drink ofpoisoned wine, but instead Gertrude drinksfrom the poisoned cup. Then Laertes woundsHamlet with the poisoned sword. Hamlet charges at Laertes, and during the fight, Laertes loses control of his rapier. Hamlet picks it upand stabs Laertes with the poisoned blade.Gertrude falls to the ground and dies.

As Laertes is dying, he tells Hamlet that theKing is to be blamed for everything. Enraged, Hamlet stabs King Claudius who dies instantly. Then Laertes asks Hamlet's forgiveness, and he also dies.Horatio wants to die with Hamlet by drinking from the poisoned cup, but Hamlet asks him to live in order to tell his story. A noise is heard outside as Fortinbras is approaching. As he dies, Hamlet requests Fortinbras to be the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras announces that Hamlet should have a soldier's honourable burial.

This is how the play comes to an end. It should be clear to you that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appears to be a rewriting of a well-known earlier play of unknown authorship. But, you should note that the ambiguities in the meaning of the play are closely connected with its lack of a clear and settled text.



LET US KNOW

By now, you must have understood that *Hamlet* is a tragedy. Please try to read what Aristotle stated about tragedy in his famous *Poetics*. In the play *Hamlet* too, you will find that a hero of high standing dies at the end. Throughout the play, a tragic hero like Hamlet is dominated by a 'hamartia', also known as tragic flaw, which finally leads to his downfall. Similarly, like one can find in Aristotle's *Poetics* the action of the play *Hamlet* appears real to the audience, so that its