

Hamlet: A-Level (KS5) Knowledge Organiser

I. Historical & Literary Context

- **Era:** Jacobean (King James I reign), early 17th Century.
- **Worldview:** Dominated by the "Great Chain of Being" (strict social hierarchy ordained by God) and the "Divine Right of Kings" (monarchs answered only to God).
- **Revenge Tragedy:** A popular genre featuring a wronged protagonist, a vengeful ghost, madness (feigned or real), horrific murders, and a bloody conclusion.
- **Setting:** Elsinore Castle, Denmark.

II. Character Overview & Motivations

Character	Role & Motivation	Key Traits
Hamlet	Prince of Denmark; seeks to avenge his father’s murder as instructed by the Ghost.	Melancholy, intellectual, indecisive, prone to existentialism.
Claudius	King of Denmark (Hamlet’s uncle); murdered his brother to seize the throne and marry Gertrude.	Ambitious, manipulative, conscience-stricken (briefly), politically adept.
Gertrude	Queen of Denmark (Hamlet’s mother); marries Claudius shortly after her first husband’s death.	Affectionate, weak-willed, perhaps naive or complicit; prioritises stability.
Polonius	Lord Chamberlain, advisor to Claudius, father to Ophelia and Laertes.	Pompous, meddling, verbose, a spy; his interference leads to tragedy.
Ophelia	Polonius’ daughter, Hamlet's love interest.	Obedient, vulnerable; driven mad by her father's death and Hamlet's rejection.
Horatio	Hamlet’s loyal friend.	Scholarly, stoic, trustworthy; the sole survivor tasked with telling Hamlet's story.
Laertes	Polonius’ son; seeks immediate and decisive revenge for his father and sister.	Passionate, hot-headed; a foil (contrast) to Hamlet’s procrastination.

III. Plot Summary (Five Acts)

- **Act I:** Ghost of King Hamlet appears to Hamlet, revealing he was murdered by Claudius and demanding revenge. Hamlet resolves to feign madness.
- **Act II:** Hamlet's "antic disposition" begins; Polonius believes love for Ophelia is the cause. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to spy on Hamlet. Players arrive.
- **Act III:** "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Hamlet is cruel to Ophelia ("Get thee to a nunnery"). "The Mousetrap" play confirms Claudius's guilt. Hamlet kills Polonius through an arras.
- **Act IV:** Claudius sends Hamlet to England to be executed. Ophelia goes mad and drowns. Laertes returns, seeking revenge. Claudius and Laertes plot to kill Hamlet.
- **Act V:** Hamlet returns. Attends Ophelia’s funeral. The final duel: the poisoned foil and poisoned drink kill Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet. Horatio is left to tell the story. Fortinbras arrives to take the throne.

IV. Key Themes & Interpretations

Theme	Key Ideas
Death & Existentialism	The uncertainty of the afterlife, the decay of the body (Yorick’s skull), the meaning of life in the face of death.
Revenge & Justice	The morality of revenge, cycle of violence; Hamlet delays while Laertes acts immediately. Is personal vengeance true justice?
Madness	Is Hamlet truly mad or merely pretending? Ophelia's genuine madness is a tragic contrast.
Appearance vs. Reality	Spying, deceit, and masks (Claudius's public persona vs. private guilt; Hamlet’s disguise). "Seems, madam? Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’."
Corruption	Denmark is a "prison"; the court is a political swamp infected by Claudius's original sin (regicide/incest).

V. Key Quotations

- "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (Marcellus, 1.4)
- "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Hamlet, 1.2)
- "To be or not to be, that is the question." (Hamlet, 3.1)
- "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." (Gertrude, 3.2)
- "I must be cruel, only to be kind." (Hamlet, 3.4)
- "Sweets to the sweet: farewell!" (Gertrude, 5.1)

VI. Literary Techniques

- **Soliloquy:** Used extensively by Hamlet to explore his inner thoughts and moral dilemmas directly with the audience (e.g., "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!", "To be or not to be").
- **Iambic Pentameter:** The standard meter of the play (blank verse), used by nobility. Prose is often used for madness, comedy, or lower-status characters.
- **Foil:** Characters who contrast with Hamlet to highlight his traits (e.g., Laertes' swift action vs. Hamlet's delay; Fortinbras' honourable pursuit of glory).
- **Metatheatre:** The play within a play ("The Mousetrap") that draws attention to the nature of theatre and reality.

Key Critical Theorists & Summarised Theories

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Focuses on the unconscious mind, repressed desires, and psychological conflicts.

- **Sigmund Freud:**
 - **Oedipus Complex:** Argued that Hamlet delays killing Claudius because Claudius has acted upon Hamlet's own repressed desire: to kill the father (King Hamlet) and sleep with the mother (Gertrude). Hamlet is thus confronted by a figure who has committed the very crime he unconsciously wished to commit.
 - **Id, Ego, Superego:** The id (instinctual desires), ego (reality principle), and superego (moral conscience/censor) can be applied to characters' internal conflicts. Hamlet's moral objections and overthinking can be seen as the superego repressing the id's desire for violent revenge.
 - **Madness:** Madness (feigned or real) is a way for the unconscious truth to surface, much like dreams or slips of the tongue.
- **Ernest Jones:**
 - A disciple of Freud, he reinforced the Oedipus complex interpretation, suggesting that Hamlet's "incestuous fantasy" is the root of his inaction.

Feminist Criticism

Examines the representation of women and the patriarchal structures that limit their roles and voices.

- **Elaine Showalter:**
 - Focuses on Ophelia's character, arguing that she is a victim of a patriarchal society. Showalter suggests Ophelia is "deprived of thought, sexuality and language" and represents the historical stereotype of the hysterical or mad woman in literature. Her madness is a result of the overwhelming male manipulation and loss of male figures in her life (father, brother, lover).
- **Marilyn French:**
 - Explores how female characters are often defined by their relationships to men and their adherence to or subversion of traditional gender roles. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for instance, sacrifice friendship for "social propriety".

New Historicism / Cultural Materialism

Views the play as a product of its historical context, examining power, politics, and social structures of the Elizabethan/Jacobean era.

- **Stephen Greenblatt:**
 - A key figure in New Historicism, his approach considers how literature and historical documents "circulate" and influence each other. A New Historicist reading of *Hamlet* would look at anxieties surrounding royal succession, the Protestant Reformation, and the nature of authority.
 - The political corruption of the Danish court is seen as a reflection of anxieties about power in England at the time. The play explores the "rottenness" at the heart of the state.
- **Jonathan Dollimore:**
 - Associated with Cultural Materialism (a related Marxist approach), he argues that the play "articulates a crisis in the decay of a traditional social order". The characters grapple with a changing world where old certainties (like the Divine Right of Kings) are being challenged.

Earlier Interpretations (Romantic/Early 20th Century)

- **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Romantic):**
 - Argued that Hamlet "thinks too much" and is an intellectual unable to act. His deep thought and philosophical nature paralyse his ability to take decisive action, a reflection of the Romantic focus on individualism and inner struggle.
- **A.C. Bradley:**
 - Approached characters as real people, seeking to understand their internal psychology. He attributed Hamlet's delay to a profound "melancholy" and disappointment in his mother.
- **T.S. Eliot:**
 - Famously called *Hamlet* an "artistic failure" because Hamlet's strong emotions were not adequately explained by the plot, lacking an "objective correlative".