

Hamlet-Act 1

Scene 1.

The play opens at night with two watchmen standing on the battlements of Elsinore castle in Denmark. Two other men, Marcellus and Horatio, arrive. Marcellus tells the watchmen that he has brought Horatio to show him the 'apparition' that visited them on the last two nights. The ghost then appears, and they recognise it as their recently deceased king. The men are afraid and they try to speak to the ghost, but it will not answer. It disappears and Horatio claims that the ghost's appearance 'bodes some strange eruption to our state'. This implies that there will be chaos in Denmark as the visitation of a spirit means that something is wrong.

The three men begin to talk about the possible threats to Denmark. The young prince of Norway, Fortinbras, has threatened to invade Denmark because the late king had killed his father and captured some Norwegian land. Fortinbras now wants revenge. Horatio explains that this is the reason they need men to keep watch on the battlements.

The ghost appears again. Horatio begs it to stop and speak, but as the cock crows, it disappears. Horatio decides that the spirit will speak to the young Prince Hamlet, who was the son of the dead king. The other men agree to help find him.

The first scene of the play introduces the audience to the dark and threatening world of Denmark. It also prepares them for the trouble that will follow.

- In what ways does Shakespeare create tension in this opening scene?
- Do you think that this scene successfully involves the audience in the play from the very beginning? If so, in what ways?
- What themes are introduced in this scene that are likely to crop up throughout?

Scene 2.

Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, has married his mother and become heir to the throne. Hamlet is unhappy that his mother has remarried so soon after his father's death. He is especially not happy that she has married his father's brother. We are introduced to Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, and his son, Laertes. Laertes is to go back to France because he only came to Denmark for the coronation of the new king.

It is obvious in this scene that Hamlet dislikes his uncle. He does not accept their marriage and thinks that his mother and uncle are only pretending to mourn for his father. They wear black clothes and act sorrowfully, but Hamlet thinks they are not actually upset, because they have married each other so quickly after his father's death. The King asks Hamlet to stay at Elsinore instead of going back to Wittenburg to be a student. Hamlet agrees, but only when his mother asks him to stay; 'I shall do my best to obey you, madam.'

Hamlet is left alone on stage and gives his first soliloquy (a speech made only to the audience, that none of the other characters are able to hear). This speech shows that he is distressed by his mother's 'incestuous' relationship with his uncle and that he finds the world 'weary, stale, flat and unprofitable.' Hamlet toys with the idea of suicide but decides against it because God does not allow it. Horatio and Marcellus find him and tell him about the ghost. They decide to meet later on the battlements, in order to catch sight of the apparition again. The scene ends with a premonition of chaos; 'foul deeds will rise, though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.'

- What can you tell about Hamlet's relationship with his uncle from this scene?
- What can you tell about Hamlet's relationship with his mother? Are they close?
- What do you think of Claudius as a king? Is he good at his job?
- What is your first impression of Hamlet? Do you sympathise with him after hearing his first soliloquy or do you agree with Claudius and Gertrude and think that he should get over his father's death and accept their marriage?