

Hamlet is based on an old story that Shakespeare adapted. It belongs to a tradition of revenge tragedies that were familiar to Elizabethan audiences. Tales of revenge have always been popular, and Shakespeare enriched this story with many other themes and sub-plots that still have relevance today.

Four story outlines are given below. All these stories are found in *Hamlet*. As you read through the outlines, consider whether any of these situations are familiar to you from your own experience, or from books, television, or movies.

1. **Revenge**

The main character is a sensitive young man who is recovering from the death of his father when he learns that someone in his own family murdered his father. There is no conclusive proof, but the main character decides to take revenge on the murderer.

2. **Rejected Love**

The main character is in love. His girlfriend's father has forbidden her to see the young man again. She rejects the main character's advances and returns his gifts. The girlfriend and the young man are both very upset, but cope with the separation differently.

3. **Madness**

The main character is a young man whose comfortable life has suddenly been shattered by a violent event. He reacts to the shock by isolating himself from family and friends and either goes mad or pretends to go mad. All his relationships, including a love relationship, change as a result.

4. **Family Pressures**

After a young man's father dies, his mother quickly remarries someone the young man hates. The young man is disgusted by the changes he observes in his mother's behaviour. He would like to escape, but his stepfather wants him to remain at home and live with them.

- from *HBJ Shakespeare*

Hamlet raises many questions that you may recognize from your own life. Thinking beforehand about some of these issues will make your experience of the play more interesting and rewarding.

1. **Procrastination**

We have all procrastinated about something important that we had to do, sometimes disappointing other people and often disappointing ourselves. Why do we procrastinate?

2. **“Playing the Fool”**

Most people have purposely “played the fool” at some time. Why do people do this? If a person for some reason plays the fool or pretends to be disturbed for a long time, do you think the person eventually can become truly disturbed?

3. **Isolation and Loneliness**

Isolation and loneliness are feelings common to most people at one time or another. Sometimes external circumstances create this situation, and sometimes people deliberately withdraw from those around them. What can friends or relatives do when someone has purposely withdrawn and chosen to be alone with his or her problems?

4. **Disillusion**

Disillusion is a common experience of growing up. We find that people in the adult world whom we once idealized are less than ideal, and that situations we considered innocent are actually corrupt. How do young people encountering the “real world” for the first time handle these discoveries?

5. **Mental Illness**

In Shakespeare’s time, insane people were regarded as sources of entertainment. What is our society’s attitude toward mental illness?

6. **Revenge and Justice**

What is the difference between “taking revenge” and “getting justice”?

7. **Privacy**

Privacy is highly valued in our society. How would you feel if you found out that you were “under surveillance” at school, at your job, at home, or among friends because of some change in your behaviour?

- from *HBJ Shakespeare*