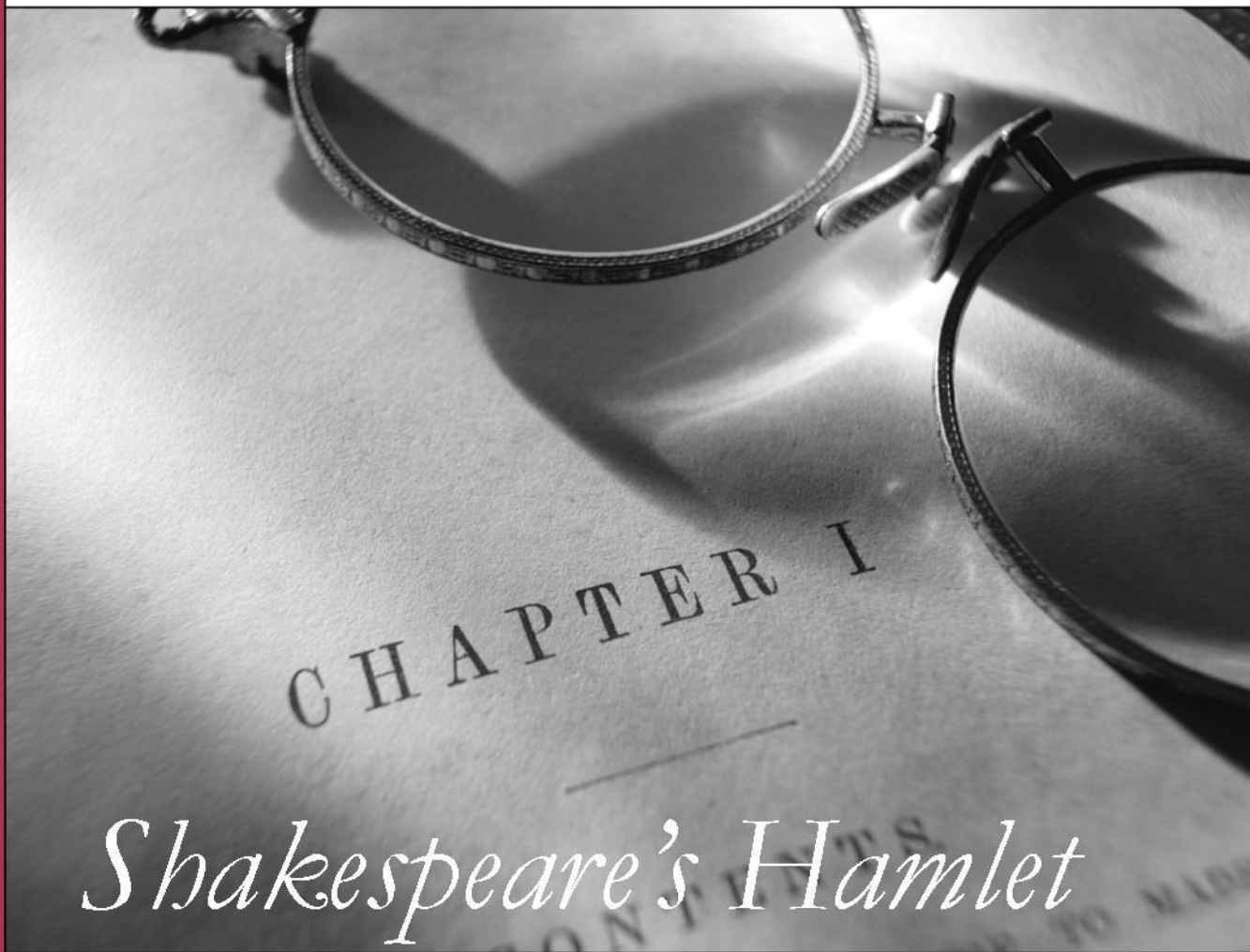


The Classics Club

Lit Courses on DVD

with Adam Andrews



 *The Center for*
Literary Education

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William Shakespeare Biography

William Shakespeare (baptized 26 April 1564, died 23 April 1616) was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and one of the greatest playwrights in any language. His surviving works consist of 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language, and are performed more often than those of any other playwright who ever lived.

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. He was one of eight children born to John Shakespeare, a merchant of some standing in his community. He could have attended King's New School in Stratford, since his father was an alderman and bailiff in the town, but we have no record that he did. At the age of 18 he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior, who bore him three children: a daughter Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith. The twins were baptized in 1585.

There are no records for the next seven years of Shakespeare's life. By the year 1592, however, he had moved to London, where he worked as an actor and a playwright. He became the principal shareholder of a successful theatre troupe called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. He appears to have retired to Stratford some time between 1611 and 1613. He died there in 1616 at the age of 52, leaving a 1300-word will and testament that survives as the only document in which he wrote in the first person.

Besides these details, very little else is known about Shakespeare's private life. As a result, there has been considerable speculation about such matters as his sexuality, religious beliefs, relationships with members of the English court and even the authorship of the works attributed to him.

Shakespeare produced comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the sixteenth century. He also wrote tragedies, including Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, considered some of the finest examples in the English language. Many of his plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy during his lifetime, and in 1623, two of his former theatrical colleagues published the First Folio, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognized as Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare was a respected poet and playwright in his own day, but his reputation did not rise to its present heights until the nineteenth century. Authors of the Romantic Movement, in particular, acclaimed Shakespeare's genius, and the Victorians hero-worshipped Shakespeare with a reverence that playwright George Bernard Shaw called "bardolatry" (a pun on

Shakespeare's popular handle as "The Bard of Avon"). In the twentieth century, his work was repeatedly adopted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance.

Shakespeare's plays remain highly popular today and are consistently performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world.

For more information on the life and times of William Shakespeare, consult the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which will direct you to dozens of texts on Shakespeare, Elizabethan theatre and late 16th century England.

Shakespeare's most famous plays include:

Tragedies

Hamlet
Macbeth
King Lear
Othello
Romeo and Juliet
Julius Caesar
Coriolanus
Antony and Cleopatra

Histories

King John
Richard II
Richard III
Henry IV, part 1
Henry IV, part 2
Henry V
Henry VI, part 1
Henry VI, part 2
Henry VI, part 3

Comedies

As You Like It
Much Ado About Nothing
Twelfth Night
A Midsummer Night's Dream
The Merchant of Venice
All's Well That Ends Well
The Taming of the Shrew
Love's Labours Lost
The Merry Wives of Windsor

Notes on the Discussion

Context

What few details are known about the life of William Shakespeare?

What controversies have ensued as the result of the fact that relatively few details of Shakespeare's life are known?

When was *Hamlet* written? What monarch ruled England during this time? What relationship did this monarch have with Shakespeare and his dramatic company?

What political issues may have been important for Shakespeare as a result of the issues discussed so far? How are these issues taken up in *Hamlet*? (Hint: What is "legitimacy"?)

Setting

In what country does the story take place? When does it happen?

How would you describe the *local* setting? What is the atmosphere in which the story takes place? What is the weather like?

Why is this significant? Can you think of other examples from Shakespeare where this technique (that is, using weather to describe tumultuous events) is important?

Characters

List the main characters in the story. Describe them by answering some questions from the Socratic List.

Hamlet:

Gertrude:

Claudius:

Fortinbras:

Horatio:

Polonius:

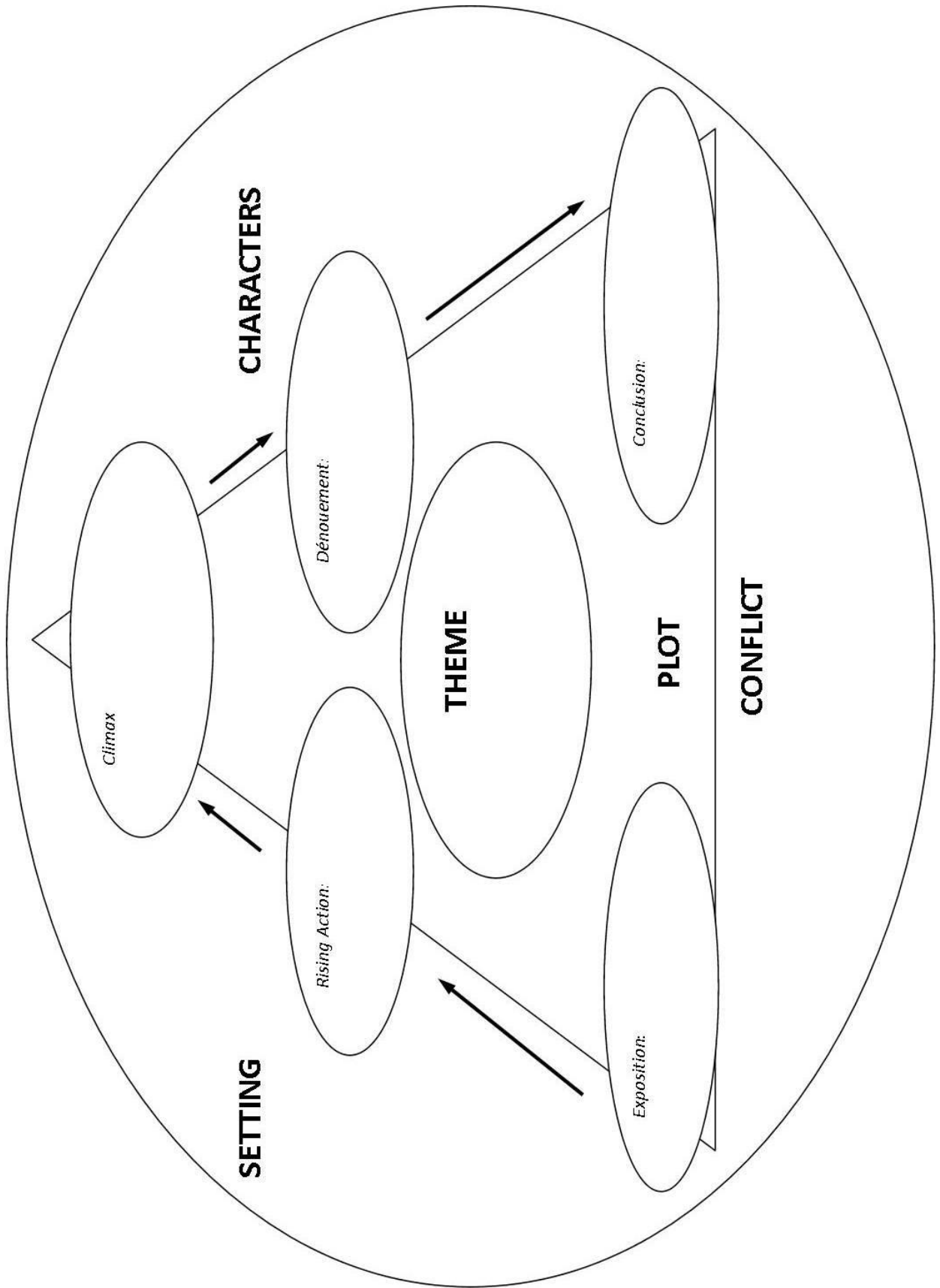
Ophelia:

Laertes:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

The Ghost of Old Hamlet:

Hamlet by William Shakespeare: Story Chart



Conflict

What types of conflict are present in this story? Man v. Man? Man v. Nature? Man v. Society? Man v. God/Fate? Man v. Himself?

What climactic moment in the story would you associate with the major conflict you have identified?

How might you put the conflicts of the story into the form of questions? What questions describe the main conflicts here?

Theme

What are the major themes of this story? How does the story deal with them? How important is the theme of REVENGE in this story? Does the author use this idea to talk about other themes as well? What are they?

What clues to Hamlet's nature do we learn from his soliloquies? What similarities between us and Hamlet appear there?

Suggested Essay Assignments

1. Describe Shakespeare's use of setting in Hamlet. How do the historical and local settings help him discuss his major themes?
2. Discuss the theme of REVENGE in Hamlet. How does Shakespeare use this theme to explore and comment on human nature? What suggestions does he seem to make on this subject? From the evidence of this play, what is a human being?
3. Compare the characters of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras. How are they similar? How are they different? How does Shakespeare use this comparison to emphasize his themes?
4. Discuss the theme of INSANITY in Hamlet. How is this theme used in the play to push the action forward? Is Hamlet insane? Is Ophelia insane? Why do you think Shakespeare has his characters go mad, or appear to do so? What role does insanity play in the story?
5. Scholars routinely place Hamlet alongside epic figures like Achilles and Oedipus as TRAGIC HEROES – that is, characters whose greatness is eventually destroyed due to a single character flaw or twist of fate. Does Hamlet belong in this category? Is he a tragic hero? Explain your answer.
6. Audiences have loved Hamlet for more than 400 years. What explains this amazing longevity? Even though the story has little in common with our lives today, we read it and watch it again and again. What explains this phenomenon? Why does this play still move us four centuries later?

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