

THE DUBUQUE SHAKESPEARE PROJECT

at the Carnegie Stout Library, Dubuque, IA

Winter 2026

INVENTION OF THE HUMAN CHARACTER

Hamlet

Synopsis: An old-fashioned revenge plot overlaid with existential angst. Something is certainly rotten in Denmark as a murderous uncle seizes power and the sensitive prince is both the observer and the observed. Dense philosophy mixed with mordant wit, plays within plays with uncertain loyalties everywhere. A poem unlimited indeed.

Discussion Topics:

- The character of Hamlet: What drives Hamlet? What explains his indecision and often rash actions? How do we understand his misogyny?
- The world of *Hamlet* is claustrophobic with political maneuvering within as threatening as military threats from Norway. The tyranny Julius Ceasar threatened seems to have become real in Elsinore. How does this inform our understanding of Hamlet's character?
- Fathers (Hamlet Sr, Claudius, Polonius, even poor Yorick) drive much of the narrative with paternal guidance having outsize effects on multiple characters, notably Hamlet and Ophelia.
- Gertrude and Ophelia are not given any agency in the play, their speech severely curtailed. As the only two women in the narrative, they do not share any lines until Ophelia's madness. Yet, Ophelia gets one of Shakespeare's most beautiful deaths.
- Theatre and actors become one of the major devices by which truth is interrogated ('The play is the thing..') The artificiality and illusory qualities of theatre are used throughout, most notably in the staging of 'The Mousetrap'.

Folger Text Link: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/>

Kanopy Film link: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/dubuque/video/705705>

Other resources to consider:

As the most popular of plays, there are 50+ film versions. Here are a few

Director-actors 1948 (Laurence Olivier) 1996 (Kenneth Branagh)

1990 (Dir: Zeffirelli with Mel Gibson) 2000 (Dir: Almereyda with Ethan Hawke)

Numerous plays and novels have been inspired by and engage with Hamlet. Maggie O'Farrell's book *Hamnet* and Chloe Zhao's Oscar nominated film *Hamnet* are recommended.

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