

# WORLDVIEW GUIDE

## HAMLET



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## INTRODUCTION

“What’s Shakespeare’s greatest accomplishment?” the wise old professor asked.

“His characters,” said an eager student in the front of the class, who went on to offer a list of his favorites.

“Very good. He surely did create larger-than-life characters. But actually,” said the old teacher, “his greatest achievement is his language. No one ever used the English language as creatively as did Shakespeare.”

The student nodded and said, “The greatest play then must be *Hamlet*, since in it Shakespeare created the roundest character who speaks the most eloquent, golden English.”

“You are correct,” said the professor, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.





## WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

“To be or not to be—that is the question” is no doubt the most famous line in *Hamlet*, and probably in the world. And it reminds us that the play is a play of questions. The play’s first line is a question; the play is suffused with questions. These questions are more significant than we might think. One of the greatest literary minds of the twentieth century put it this way:

There’s no other play in Shakespeare, which probably means no other play in the world that raises so many questions of the ‘problem’ type. It’s quite clear that problems, genuine or phony, *are a part of the texture of the play, and central to its meaning*. I’m not saying we get the ‘real meaning’ of the play by figuring out answers to its problems: I’m saying quite the opposite. Insoluble problems and unanswerable questions meet us everywhere we turn, and make *Hamlet* the most stifling and claustrophobic of plays. Not for

us, because we're outside it, but for the characters caught up in its action.<sup>7</sup>

If the questions are “unanswerable,” why read the play? We do so because great literature requires interpretation. A great work of art like *Hamlet* is subtle; it leaves room for the imagination. As Noah Lukeman notes, the subtle writer “will often leave things unsaid, may even employ a bit of confusion, and often allow you to come to your own conclusions.”<sup>8</sup> We the readers (or viewers) have to, in a sense, finish the story.

The thorniest problems of the play, the same problems readers of *Hamlet* have always wrestled with, include: Is Hamlet mad? Does Gertrude know of Claudius's fratricide? Is the Ghost really Hamlet's father? Should Hamlet act now on the Ghost's word or delay? All the fun is in forming our own readings of particular lines and scenes and then sharpening our own interpretative blade on the opinions of others, whether professional productions of the play, scholarly articles, or our classmate's argument across the table from us.

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7. Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 84; emphasis added.

8. *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 159.