

# THEME: REVENGE

**"NOW COULD I DRINK HOT BLOOD"**

**(LSV.01, LSV.02, LS1.01, LS1.02, LS1.04, LS2.01, LS3.01, WRV.02, LA2.02, LA2.03)**

From Hamlet's earliest suspicions to its bloody conclusion, Hamlet is a play that revolves around vengeance and the settling of scores.

"Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand/Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch'd./If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not..."

- The Ghost

The Ghost of Hamlet's father tells him that he was murdered by his own brother, and urges Hamlet to avenge that violation.

Discuss:

What do you think the Ghost means when he says, "if thou hast nature in thee, bear it not"? Are there times when we are bound to get even, when circumstances leave us no choice? Is it natural to seek revenge? What do we gain in getting revenge? Is there anything we lose? Are there times when getting revenge in person is necessary, or preferable to letting the law take its course?

"To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!/Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!/I dare damnation.../Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged/Most thoroughly for my father."

- Laertes

Laertes returns to Elsinore upon hearing of the murder of his father, and storms into the presence of the king to demand an explanation.

Discuss:

Compare Laertes' reaction when he hears of his father's death to Hamlet's reaction earlier in the play. How are their responses different? How can circumstance account for those differences?

"No place indeed should murder sanctuarize;/Revenge should have no bounds."

- Claudius

Laertes has sworn that he will kill Hamlet to avenge Polonius, even if he has to "cut his throat in the church." Claudius approves of Laertes' determination, agreeing that no place should be a safe place (or sanctuary) when it comes to revenge.

Discuss:

Is it right to answer violence with violence? Imagine potential consequences for a revenge that has "no bounds". Would the revenge be worth the consequences? Can you think of an instance in which someone went too far to gain revenge? In what case? At what cost?

**WATCH:** For moments in the play where the characters use their language and actions to escalate heated situations. Watch for the moments where they choose to put on the brakes, and cool things.

# THEME: SECRETS, LIES & DECEPTION

**"I WOULD YOU WERE SO HONEST A MAN."**

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***Director Charles Roy describes the world of Hamlet as one in which, "Everybody is wearing a mask, and everybody is trying to get away with something." Concealing the truth, the hiding of emotions, and the telling of lies keeps the characters and the audience guessing what is fact and what is fiction in the world of Elsinore.***

"But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

- Hamlet

Early in the play, Hamlet laments the circumstances of his mother's remarriage, saying "it is not, nor it cannot come to good." He is filled with sadness and anger, but he must not give voice to his feelings.

Discuss:

Why must Hamlet keep his feelings secret? What prevents him from speaking his mind? Is there a kind of dishonesty in not revealing your true feelings? (Compare this to Claudius' question to Laertes: "are you like the painting of a sorrow/A face without a heart?") Hamlet cannot share his thoughts with anyone on stage here, but he shares them with the audience. What effect does this have on your understanding of the character? Of the play?

"... at such times seeing me, never note/That you know aught of me: this not to do,/So grace and mercy at your most need help you, Swear."

- Hamlet

After meeting the Ghost and hearing of the murder, Hamlet decides to "go undercover"; he will pretend to be crazy in order to investigate the circumstances of the alleged murder. In telling of the plan, he swears Horatio to secrecy.

Discuss:

Why is an "antic disposition" the first plan that comes to Hamlet? Do you think it is an effective tactic? Hamlet essentially plans to lie in order to uncover a lie. Is he justified in deceiving those around him?

"Come, go we to the king:/This must be known; which, being kept close, might move/More grief to hide than hate to utter love."

- Polonius

After a disturbing event in which Hamlet approached her in his "madness", a shaken Ophelia tells her father of their strange encounter. His first reaction is not to comfort her, but to take the news she has shared to the king.

Discuss:

What is the meaning of Polonius' final line in the scene? Have you ever known a situation where a supposed secret HAD to be told? Have you ever known a situation where keeping a secret turned out to be worse than telling the truth?

**WATCH:** For moments in the show when characters have a secret moment, when they are spied upon, when they listen while unseen, or pretend to be something they are not.

# THEME: REFLECTIONS, OPPOSITES & DOUBLES

When speaking of the world of Hamlet, director Charles Roy notes that "Everyone is adrift, almost in limbo, there's barely a floor underneath their feet anymore." Shakespeare's language reflects and reinforces that uncertainty. Words carry unexpected and twisted meanings. Nothing is simple, certain or plain; uncles are also fathers, mothers are also aunts, and a nephew becomes a son.

**"Therefore our sometime sister, now our Queen,/Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,/With an auspicious and a dropping eye,/With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,/Taken to wife."**

- Claudius

The first time we see Claudius, the new king of Denmark, he uses highly anti-thetical language to recount the circumstances of his marriage to his dead brother's wife.

Discuss:

What do you make of Claudius' language in this scene? Why is he so careful to cover both sides of the situation? Does covering all the bases make Claudius a good politician, or just a hypocrite?

**HAMLET: Farewell, dear mother.**

**CLAUDIUS: Thy loving father, Hamlet.**

**HAMLET: My mother: father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother.**

As Claudius sends Hamlet to England, Hamlet bids farewell. By a neat trick of language, Hamlet proves that Claudius is actually Gertrude, Hamlet's mother.

Discuss:

What does Hamlet demonstrate with this "proof"? What are the implications and insinuations within his words? To what end does Hamlet employ this verbal sleight-of-hand in this moment? To what effect? What potential responses can you imagine from Claudius?

**"For this same lord,/I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so, /To punish me with this and this with me..."**

- Hamlet

After his mistaken murder of Polonius, Hamlet reflects that he is both victim and villain in this situation; the wrong that he has done is punishment in itself.

Discuss:

In trying to avenge his father's death, Hamlet ends up killing Laertes' father, so becoming the villain on whom Laertes will seek revenge. Do you sympathize more with Hamlet, or with Laertes in this situation? As they enter their final duel, which do you root for? Claudius and Hamlet are both guilty of murder. Are their crimes equivalent? Why, or why not?

**WATCH: For moments in the play where images are reflected or mirrored, or fractured. Listen for moments when the language of the play has unexpected or evasive meanings, when characters are not what they seem to be or say they are. Are any of the characters absolutely honest in everything they say and do?**