There are a couple of things to go over before getting into the play itself. First, you need to understand how an Elizabethan viewed the world and how it was organized.

The British explained life and existence as a “Chain of Being”, on which every component of the Earth was positioned. At the very top of this “chain” was God. On God, all things depended. Next was the King, God's chosen representative on Earth. Because God had chosen the King, the King himself was seen as almost immortal. Under the King were the Nobility, then the working class professionals, then the commoners, then the peasants. After people, came the animals. The top of the chain, after God, the King, and other people, was the lion. Etc., etc. Then came plants. The top of the plant part of the chain was the oak tree, etc. etc. On the very bottom of the chain was dust, considered the lowest element on the Earth.

Hence, the killing of a King was seen as an assault on God, himself. In fact, in several plays, there are references to the ire (anger) shown by God (or the gods, depending on the setting / time of the play). In Julius Caesar the “sheeted dead did jibber in the streets” after the murder of Caesar, and in Macbeth, after Macbeth murders his King, the horses break out of their stalls and eat each other, the “graves stood tenantless”, and a storm of incredible ferociousness knocked down church steeples. Yes, killing a King had its consequences in the minds of most people. Few would dare such an outrage.

Hamlet takes place in medieval Denmark. The castle of Elsinore exists today as a town on the ocean shores of Denmark. The people of the day were very superstitious, and the thought of ghosts, for instance, was very believable.

SOURCEs

Hamlet is based on a Norse legend composed by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin around 1200. The sixteen books that comprise the Gesta Danorum or History of the Danes, tell of the rise and fall of the great rulers of Denmark, and the tale of Amleth, Saxo's Hamlet, is recounted in books three and four. In Saxo's version, King Rorik of the Danes places his trust in two brothers, Orvendil and Fengi. The brothers are appointed to rule over Jutland, and Orvendil weds the King's beautiful daughter, Geruth. They have a son, Amleth. But Fengi, lusting after Orvendil's new bride and longing to become the sole ruler of Jutland, kills his brother, marries Geruth, and declares himself King over the land. Amleth is desperately afraid, and feigns madness to keep from getting murdered. He plans revenge against his uncle and becomes the new and rightful King of Jutland. Saxo's story was first printed in Paris in 1514, and Francois de Belleforest translated it into French in 1570, as part of his collection of tragic legends, Histoires Tragiques. Saxo's text did not appear in English until 1608, so either Shakespeare was fluent in French or he used another English source based on the French translation. It is generally accepted that Shakespeare used the earlier play based on this Norse legend by Thomas Kyd, called the Ur-Hamlet. There is no surviving copy of the Ur-Hamlet and the only information known about the play is that it was performed on the London stage, that it was a tragedy, and that there was a character in the play named Hamlet, and a ghost who cried "Hamlet, revenge!"
**SETTING**

*Hamlet* is set in Denmark, in the castle of Elsinore. Norway figures prominently in the play, as well.

![Map of Scandinavia](image)

**WHO'S WHO IN HAMLET**

(Refer to “Dramatis Personae” - cast of characters - that precedes the first Act. It will present the full cast, as the list below contains only the major players.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hamlet's Family</th>
<th>Polonius' Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Hamlet &lt;&gt; Queen Gertrude</td>
<td>Polonius&lt;&gt;Unnamed Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(married over 30 years)</td>
<td>(two children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laertes</td>
<td>Ophelia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that Hamlet (Jr.) And Ophelia have been sort of “courting” the past while and they feel rather serious about their future together.

Claudius - brother to Hamlet, Sr., newly married (considered incestuously in the day) to Queen Gertrude, and “father-uncle” to Hamlet, Jr.

Horatio - Hamlet's university friend, and confidant

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern - Two old schoolmates of Hamlet's. They are sort of a reversible jacket,

Fortinbras - Prince of Norway
SYNOPSIS
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has multiple woes. The ghost of his father haunts Elsinore; his uncle, Claudius, has married Queen Gertrude, his mother, and assumed the throne; and Fortinbras of Norway threatens Denmark with an invading army. When Hamlet meets the ghost, his dead father reveals that Claudius poisoned him—and the ghost demands that Hamlet exact revenge. In order to carry this out, Hamlet feigns madness; as part of his insanity, he scorns the affections of Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, to whom he had made romantic overtures. Polonius grows concerned over the apparent insanity that has beset Hamlet and reveals it to the King and Queen. Meanwhile, Hamlet struggles to convince himself that Claudius is the murderer of his father, and in an attempt to "catch the king's conscience," Hamlet convinces a traveling troupe of actors to perform a play in which the action closely resembles the events related to him by the ghost.

While Hamlet, judging the reaction of Claudius, is convinced of the new king's guilt, he can't bring himself to slay him outright. Instead, Hamlet rebukes Gertrude with the news that she is sleeping with the killer of her husband. Unfortunately, - Polonius, who is hidden behind a tapestry in the Queen's chamber, eavesdropping - panics and cries for help; Hamlet stabs him, thinking it is Claudius. Of course, when this news is given to Claudius, the King sends Hamlet to England with the ostensible purpose of securing Hamlet's safety and the recovery of his senses. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two childhood friends of Hamlet's who are now little more than spies for Claudius, are to accompany him. The trick is that Hamlet will bear a letter to the King of England in which Claudius asks England to sentence Hamlet to death.

In the midst of these events, Ophelia loses her own sanity; she is driven to madness by Hamlet's condition and the death of Polonius. Laertes, her brother, returns to Elsinore from his studies and vows his vengeance upon Hamlet for what the prince has done to his family. News is brought that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, much to the surprise of Claudius, and that Ophelia has drowned herself in a river. Claudius now plots with Laertes to kill Hamlet upon his return to Elsinore. Meanwhile, Hamlet meets Horatio, his best friend, and tells how he altered the letter so that the execution order was for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of him. At the end of Hamlet's tale, Ophelia's funeral procession enters, and Laertes and Hamlet confront one another. Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel.

This is all part of Claudius' plot; instead of dull blades, Laertes will select a sharp one. In addition, Laertes is to poison the tip of his blade so that a wound will kill the prince. And, just in case the previous measures are not enough, Claudius will keep a poisoned chalice from which Hamlet will drink. The plan goes awry from the beginning; Laertes is unable to wound Hamlet during the first pass. Between rounds, Gertrude raises a toast to Hamlet with the poisoned chalice. Then, in the heat of the duel, Laertes manages to wound Hamlet but loses the poisoned rapier to him, and Laertes himself is poisoned as well. Gertrude swoons to her death; Laertes falls and reveals the plot against Hamlet, telling him he has "not a half-hour's life" in him. Enraged, Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned foil, then makes him drink from the chalice that slew Gertrude. This done, Hamlet collapses and dies in Horatio's arms as Fortinbras enters the castle. Fortinbras is left to rule Denmark, as the entire royal family is dead, and he bids his men give Hamlet and the rest a proper funeral.
THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET

The tragedy is not that Hamlet dies in the duel, for death in certain circumstances is a victory rather than a tragedy. The tragedy is that a young man of noble aspirations and great promise is thrust into a task wholly repellent to his nature and that he delays in fulfilling his solemn oath to his father. For this delay saps his will, and his mind undergoes certain changes - becomes depressed, cynical, cruel to Ophelia who loved him, crafty and vindictive towards boyhood friends. And yet much of the nobler Hamlet remains, and by these flashes of nobility we see how great the tragedy was.

What you may find in the play....

First, the man Hamlet, when presented by a good actor is a man of charm and fascination. Along with his personality is his amazing task - to take vengeance for a father poisoned and a mother dishonoured. How is a man who hates evil to fulfill such an injunction? Then there is the puzzling problem of his "insanity". To what extent is he insane? To what extent unbalanced? And his estimates upon mankind and life! Is life so great? Is mankind so mean? To be or not to be," etc. How far should we follow his reasoning? Or is he merely a man who likes to theorize and imagine himself a philosopher and martyr?

There are of course, other characters of interest: Claudius, Laertes, Polonius, Ophelia, Horatio, Rosencrantz. What motives move them to their actions? The play has much dramatic action: the scenes with the ghost, the presentation of the "Mouse-trap", the stirring scene between Hamlet and his mother, the sudden invasion of the palace by Laertes, the touching madness of Ophelia, the tense quarrel in the grave (coming at the end of the humorous grave-diggers' talk), the actual duel, and even the sight of so many "princes" lying slain.

The play is rich in wise sayings strikingly said - in proverbs. A juvenile critic is supposed to have said: "Much of the Bible is taken from Hamlet". From no other source do we get so many sayings which have crept into our speech: "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished"; "Conscience makes cowards of us all"; "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns"; "how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of the world"; "Frailty, thy name is woman"; "a truant disposition"; almost all Polonius' advice to Laertes; there are many others. Apart from these brief selections we have whole passages which are pure poetry.

The Age of Hamlet

It is something of a shock to learn in the grave-digging scene that Hamlet is thirty years of age. From the advice given to Ophelia by Laertes and Polonius we receive the impression that Hamlet is young, is in the "morn and liquid dew of youth". It must be admitted, however, that his control over his mother in the Chamber Scene does not suggest tender years, nor does his talk with his friend, Horatio. But in our present way of thinking a man of thirty is considered no youth; in fact he has left behind the claim to youth at 25. This matter of age is another little inconsistency of Shakespeare.

The Duration of the Play

The play is a long one, and the action full and heavy; so we get the impression that it covers a long period of time. But the action of the entire play need not cover a period of more than a few months.

The Cause of Hamlet's Hesitation

Many critics have expressed opinions on this matter. There can be no final answer.