THEMES AND MOTIFS IN HAMLET

Corruption spreads from character to character
Claudius’ method to gain the throne
Killed brother
Married sister

Eavesdropping/Spying
Claudius and Polonius spy on Hamlet and Ophelia
Polonius spies on Hamlet and Gertrude
Polonius sends Reynaldo to France to spy on Laertes
Claudius calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the castle to spy on Hamlet

Prince Hamlet spies on Claudius while he prays
Prince Hamlet and Horatio spy on Claudius @ play w/in play

Death Plots
Claudius plotted and killed King Hamlet
Claudius plots to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern escort Hamlet to his death in England
Claudius plots with Laertes to kill Hamlet

Cheating
Claudius cheated Prince Hamlet out of the throne
Laertes cheats during the fencing match

Incest

Lying
Claudius lied about how his brother died
Hamlet lives a lie by pretending to act crazy
Hamlet lies (?) when he says he never loved Ophelia
Gertrude lies about loving one of the husbands

Manipulation
King Hamlet uses Prince Hamlet to get revenge on his brother
Claudius attempts to use the King of England to kill Prince Hamlet
Claudius uses Laertes to kill Prince Hamlet
Polonius attempts to use Ophelia to get a spot in the royal family
Claudius attempts to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to get rid of Prince Hamlet
Claudius used Gertrude to become king
Prince Hamlet uses the visiting actors and the play within the play to find out the truth about Claudius and the murder
The pirates use Prince Hamlet to get money
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to Claudius’ plot against Hamlet to get a reward
Prince Fortinbras uses his men to get land and glory
Polonius uses Reynaldo to spy on Laertes
Claudius manipulates Gertrude to marry him, making him king
Prince Hamlet uses the king of England to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Death affects us all

Murder
Prince Hamlet’s mission is to murder Claudius
King Hamlet’s murder
Plots to murder Hamlet

Death in general
King Hamlet’s death
King Fortinbras’ death
Polonius’ death
Ophelia’s death
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deaths
Gertrude's death
Laertes’ death
Hamlet’s death
Claudius’ death
Hamlet talks to the gravedigger
Hamlet talks to Horatio in a graveyard
Hamlet returns to Elsinore because his father died
Hamlet returns to Elsinore the second time on the day of Ophelia’s funeral
Fortinbras’ men are willing to die in battle

Suicide
Hamlet meditates on it
Horatio tries to commit it
One of the gravediggers is convinced that Ophelia committed it

Accidental Deaths
Prince Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius
Gertrude accidentally kills herself
Ophelia accidentally kills herself
Ros & Guild accidentally kill themselves

Afterlife
The ghost returns from the afterlife twice
Hamlet wonders what happens to the human body and the human soul after death
Hamlet looks at Yorick’s skull

Poison
The original story was that King Hamlet was killed by the bite of a poisonous snake
The play w/i the play reenacts the poison in the ear
Claudius poisons King Hamlet
Gertrude drinks poison
Prince Hamlet is killed with Laertes' poisoned sword
Laertes is killed with his own poisoned sword

Disease - Immoral behavior is like a disease
Some related words mentioned in the play:
Tumor – Abnormal growth
Ulcer – An open sore
Fester – an infection that generates pus

Doubles - What you see is not always what you get - man has a duplicitous nature

Double Meanings
Gravediggers' puns
Hamlet calls Polonius a fishmonger (fish seller/pimp)
Hamlet tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery (convent/brothel)

Double Dealing
King Claudius pretended to love his brother
while secretly sleeping with his wife and plotting to take his throne
King Claudius pretends to care for Prince Hamlet,
yet tries to have him killed twice
Gertrude pretended to love King Hamlet,
yet married his brother less than two months after his death
Polonius pretends to love Ophelia,
yet manipulates her relationship with Hamlet for selfish purposes
Laertes pretends to forgive Hamlet and play fairly at the fencing match,
but then kills him
Ros & Guild pretend to be Hamlet’s friends,
but then agree to escort him to his death

Double Characters
Characters that seem always to be together
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
Marcellus and Bernardo
Voltemand and Cornelius
The Gravediggers
Characters with the same name
  King Hamlet and Prince Hamlet (another double: both killed by poison)
  King Fortinbras and Prince Fortinbras
Characters that do similar things/are in similar circumstances
  Hamlet and Horatio are thinkers
  Laertes and Fortinbras are doers
  Hamlet and Laertes are students
  Hamlet and Laertes both seek revenge for their fathers’ deaths
  Hamlet and Fortinbras are both princes who are named after their fathers
  Hamlet and Fortinbras both have uncles on the throne
  Hamlet forces Gertrude to look at the juxtaposed portraits of King Hamlet and King Claudius
Characters that have double relationships
  Claudius is Hamlet’s stepfather and uncle
  Gertrude is Hamlet’s mother and aunt
  King Hamlet is Hamlet’s father and uncle
  Gertrude married Hamlet and his brother Claudius
  Hamlet and Claudius had the same wife
  Gertrude and Claudius are siblings and spouses

Insanity
  Hamlet pretends to be insane
  Ophelia goes insane
  Hamlet and Laertes go temporarily insane when they leap into Ophelia’s grave

Revenge is a useless goal
  King Hamlet wants revenge on Claudius
  Prince Hamlet wants revenge on Claudius
  Laertes wants revenge on Prince Hamlet
  Prince Hamlet gets revenge on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
  Prince Fortinbras wants revenge on Denmark

Some related words mentioned in the play:
  Justice  Duty  Honor  Murder

More Notes: