Hamlet

BACKGROUND INFO

AUTHOR BIO

Full Name: William Shakespeare
Date of Birth: 1564
Place of Birth: Stratford-upon-Avon, England
Date of Death: 1616

Brief Life Story: Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

KEY FACTS

Full Title: The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark
Genre: Tragic drama; Revenge tragedy
Setting: Denmark during the late middle ages (circa 1200), though characters in the play occasionally reference things or events from the Elizabethan Age (circa 1500).

Climax: The climax of Hamlet is a subject of debate. Some say it occurs when Hamlet kills Claudius, others when Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius while Claudius is praying, others when Hamlet kills Polonius, and still others when Hamlet vows to focus on revenge at the end of Act 4.

Protagonist: Hamlet
Antagonists: Claudius

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

When Written: Between 1599 - 1601
Where Written: England
When Published: 1603 (First Quarto), 1604 (Second Quarto).
Literary Period: The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)

Related Literary Works: Hamlet falls into the tradition of revenge tragedy, in which the central character’s quest for revenge usually results in general tragedy. This tradition existed from Roman times (the Roman playwright Seneca was well known for writing revenge tragedies). The most famous revenge tragedy of Shakespeare’s day before Hamlet was Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and some believe that Kyd wrote an earlier play of Hamlet, now lost, which scholars call the Ur-Hamlet. The story of Hamlet is based on a Danish revenge story first recorded by Saxo Grammaticus in the 1100s. In these stories, a Danish prince fakes madness in order to take revenge on his uncle, who had killed the prince’s father and married his mother. But Shakespeare modified this rather straightforward story and filled it with dread and uncertainty—Hamlet doesn’t just feign madness; he seems at times to actually be crazy.

Related Historical Events: Hamlet is in many ways a product of the Reformation, in which Protestants broke away from the until-then dominant Catholic Church, as well as the skeptical humanism of late Renaissance Northern Europe, which held that there were limits on human knowledge. Hamlet’s constant anxiety about the difference between appearance and reality, as well as his concerns about and difficulties with religion (the sinfulness of suicide, the unfairness that killing a murderer while the murderer is praying would result in sending the murder to heaven) can be seen as directly emerging from the breaks in religion and thought brought on by the Reformation and Renaissance humanist thought.

EXTRA CREDIT

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn’t educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare’s authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.

PLOT SUMMARY

A ghost resembling the recently deceased King of Denmark stalks the ramparts of Elsinore, the royal castle. Terrified guardsmen convince a skeptical nobleman, Horatio, to watch with them. When he sees the ghost, he decides they should tell Hamlet, the dead King’s son. Hamlet is also the nephew of the present King, Claudius, who not only assumed his dead brother’s crown but also married his widow, Gertrude. Claudius seems an able King, easily handling the threat of the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras. But Hamlet is furious about Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius. Hamlet meets the ghost, which claims to be the spirit of his father, murdered by Claudius. Hamlet quickly accepts the ghost’s command to seek revenge.

Yet Hamlet is uncertain if what the ghost said is true. He delays his revenge and begins to act half-mad, contemplate suicide, and becomes furious at all women. The Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, concludes that Hamlet’s behavior comes from lovesickness for Ophelia, Polonius’s daughter. Claudius and Gertrude summon two of Hamlet’s old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to find out what’s wrong with him. As Polonius develops a plot to spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, Hamlet develops a plot of his own: to have a recently arrived troupe of actors put on a play that resembles Claudius’s alleged murder of Old Hamlet, and watch Claudius’s reaction.

Polonius and Claudius spy on the meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, during which Hamlet flies into a rage against women and marriage. Claudius concludes Hamlet neither loves Ophelia nor is mad. Seeing Hamlet as a threat, he decides to send him away. At the play that night, Claudius runs from the room during the scene of the murder, proving his guilt. Hamlet gets his chance for revenge when, on the way to see Gertrude, he comes upon Claudius, alone and praying. But Hamlet holds off—if Claudius is praying as he dies then his soul might go to heaven. In Gertrude’s room, Hamlet berates his mother for marrying Claudius so aggressively that she thinks he might kill her. Polonius, who is spying on the meeting from behind a tapestry, calls for help. Hamlet thinks Polonius is Claudius, and kills him.

Claiming that he wants to protect Hamlet from punishment for killing Polonius, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But Claudius sends with the three men a letter asking the King of England to execute Hamlet. Meanwhile, Polonius’ son, Laertes, returns to Denmark from France to get revenge for his father’s death. Claudius convinces Laertes the death is Hamlet’s fault. When a pirate attack allows Hamlet to escape back to Denmark, Claudius comes up with a new plot in which a supposedly friendly duel between Hamlet and Laertes will actually be a trap, because Laertes’s blade will be poisoned. As a backup, Claudius will also poison some wine that he’ll give to Hamlet if he wins.

Meanwhile, grief drives Ophelia insane, and she drowns in what seems to be a suicide. Hamlet arrives just as the funeral is taking place. He claims to love Ophelia and scuffles with Laertes. Back at the castle, Hamlet tells Horatio he switched the letter sent to England: now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be executed. He also says he is ready to die, and agrees to participate in the fencing match.
During the match, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet’s success from the poisoned glass of wine before Claudius can stop her. Laertes then wounds Hamlet with the poisoned blade, but in the scuffle they exchange swords and Hamlet wounds Laertes. Gertrude falls, saying the wine was poisoned, and dies. Laertes reveals Claudius’s treachery, Hamlet kills Claudius, and exchanges forgiveness with Laertes. Laertes dies. As Hamlet dies, he hears the drums of Fortinbras’s army marching through Denmark after a battle with the Polish, and says Fortinbras should be the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras enters with the ambassadors from England, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio tells Hamlet’s story as Hamlet’s body is taken offstage with the honors due a soldier.

CHARACTERS

Hamlet — The prince of Denmark, son of Gertrude, nephew of Claudius, and heir to the throne. Hamlet is a deep thinker, focusing on impossible to answer questions about religion, death, truth, reality, and the motivations of others. He even obsessively contemplates the fact that he obsessively contemplates. He loves Ophelia and his mother, but his mother’s marriage to Claudius makes him mistrust and even hate all women. He detests all forms of deception, yet plots and pretends to be insane. At times he even seems to be insane. Despite his obsessive thinking, he can act impulsively; as when he kills Polonius. Hamlet is an enigma, a man so complex even he doesn’t completely know himself. In other words, he seems like a real person—which has made Hamlet the most well known character in English literature.

Claudius — Hamlet’s uncle, and Gertrude’s second husband. Power-hungry and lustful, Claudius murders his brother in order to take the throne of Denmark and marry his wife. Claudius is a great talker and schemer. He easily charms the royal court into accepting his hasty marriage to his brother’s widow, and comes up with plot after plot to protect his ill-gained power. He is the consummate politician, yet his hold on power is always slightly tenuous. At various times he does show guilt for killing his brother, and his love of Gertrude seems genuine.

Gertrude — Hamlet’s mother. After Hamlet’s father dies, Gertrude quickly marries Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius. Though she is a good woman and loving mother, she is weak-willed and unable to control her personal passions. Whether because of lust, love, or a desire to maintain her status as queen, she marries Claudius, though this is clearly a breach of proper morals. Though some critics have argued that Gertrude might have been involved in Claudius’s plot to kill Old Hamlet, evidence in the text suggests that she is unaware of and uninvolved in the plot.

Polonius — The Lord Chamberlain of Denmark, and the father of Laertes and Ophelia, whom he loves deeply and wishes to protect, even to the point of spying on them. Polonius is pompous and long-winded, and has a propensity to scheme, but without Hamlet’s or Claudius’s skill. He is very aware of his position and role, and is always careful to try to be on the good side of power. Laertes — Polonius’s son and Ophelia’s brother. Laertes is hotheaded and passionate, and loves his family deeply. As a man prone to action rather than thought who also seeks to revenge the death of his father, he serves as a “double” to Hamlet, providing numerous points of comparison.

Ophelia — Polonius’s daughter, Laertes’s sister, and Hamlet’s love. As a woman, Ophelia must obey the men around her and is forced by her father first to stop speaking to Hamlet and then to help spy on him. Ophelia’s loyalty to her father and resulting estrangement from Hamlet ultimately causes her to lose her mind. Though Laertes and Fortinbras are the characters usually seen as Hamlet’s “doubles,” Ophelia functions as a kind of female double of Hamlet—mirroring Hamlet’s half-madness with her own full-blown insanity, and takes his obsession with suicide a step further and actually commits it.

Horatio — A university friend of Hamlet’s at Wittenberg. Horatio becomes Hamlet’s confidante in his effort to take revenge against Claudius. Hamlet values Horatio’s self-restraint: Horatio is the character in Hamlet least moved by passion.

The Ghost — The spirit that claims to be Hamlet’s dead father, forced to endure the fires of Purgatory because he was murdered by Claudius in his sleep without being able to ask forgiveness for his sins. The Ghost orders Hamlet to get revenge against Claudius, but spare Gertrude. Evidence in the play suggests that the Ghost really is the spirit of Hamlet’s father, though Hamlet himself wonders at times if the Ghost might be a demon in disguise.

Fortinbras — A prince of Norway, whose father, Old Fortinbras, died in battle with Old Hamlet and lost lands to Denmark. Fortinbras seeks to revenge his father’s death and retake the lost lands. As another son seeking revenge for his father, Fortinbras offers another “double” of Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — Friends of Hamlet’s from Wittenberg who help Claudius and Gertrude try and figure out the source of Hamlet’s melancholy. Hamlet sees that the two are, essentially, spying on him, and turns on them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aren’t the smartest fellows, but they do seem to mean well, and the announcement of their deaths at the end of the play helps to drive home the absurd and bloody lengths to which vengeance can extend once it is unleashed.

Osric — A foppish nobleman who flatters everyone more powerful than him and speaks in very flowery language.

First Player — The leader of the troupe of actors who come to Elsinore.

Gravediggers — Two commoners employed to dig the graves in the local churchyard.

Marcellus — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Barnardo — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Francisco — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Voltemand — A Danish ambassador to Norway.

Cornelius — A Danish ambassador to Norway.

Reynaldo — A servant of Polonius.

Yorick — A jester at Elsinore in Hamlet’s youth.

Captain — An officer in Fortinbras’s army.

THEMES

ACTION AND INACTION

Hamlet fits in a literary tradition called the revenge play, in which a man must take revenge against those who have in some way wronged him. Yet Hamlet turns the revenge play on its head in an ingeniously way. Hamlet, the man seeking revenge, can’t actually bring himself to take revenge. For reason after reason, some clear to the audience, some not, he delays. Hamlet’s delay has been a subject of debate from the day the play was first performed, and he is often held up as an example of the classic “indecisive” person, who thinks to much and acts too little. But Hamlet is more complicated and interesting than such simplistic analysis would indicate. Because while it’s true that Hamlet fails to act while many other people do act, it’s not as if the actions of the other characters in the play work out. Claudius’s plots backfire. Gertrude marries her husband’s murderer and dies for it, Laertes is manipulated and killed by his own treachery, and on, and on, and on. In the end, Hamlet does not provide a conclusion about the merits of action versus inaction. Instead, the play makes the deeply cynical suggestion that there is only one result of both action and inaction—death.

APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

In Act 1, scene 2 of Hamlet, Gertrude asks why Hamlet is still in mourning two months after his father died: “Why seems it so particular with thee?” Hamlet responds: “Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not ‘seems.’” (1.2.75-76). The difference between “seems” (appearance) and “is” (reality) is crucial in Hamlet. Every character is constantly trying to figure out what the other characters think, as opposed to what those characters are pretending to think. The characters try to figure each other out by using deception of their own, such as spying and plotting.

But Hamlet takes it a step further. He not only investigates other people, he also peeks into his own soul and asks philosophical and religious questions about life and death. Hamlet’s obsession with what’s real has three main effects: 1) he becomes so caught up in the search for reality that he ceases to be able to act; 2) in order to prove what’s real and what isn’t Hamlet himself must hide his “reality” behind an “appearance” of madness; 3) the more closely
Hamlet looks, the less real and coherent everything seems to be. Many analyses of Hamlet focus only on the first effect, Hamlet's indecisiveness. But the second two effects are just as important. The second shows that the relationship between appearance and reality is indistinct. The third suggests that the world is founded on fundamental inconsistencies that most people overlook, and that it is this failure to recognize inconsistencies that allows them to act. Hamlet's fatal flaw isn't that he's wrong to see uncertainty in everything; but that he's right.

**WOMEN**

There are two important issues regarding women in Hamlet: how Hamlet sees women and women's social position. Hamlet's view of women is decidedly dark. In fact, the few times that Hamlet that Hamlet's pretend madness seems to veer into actual madness occur when he gets furious at women. Gertrude's marriage to Claudius has convinced Hamlet that women are untrustworthy; that their beauty is a cover for deceit and sexual desire. For Hamlet, women are living embodiments of appearance's corrupt effort to eclipse reality.

As for women's social position, its defining characteristic is powerlessness. Gertrude's quick marriage to Claudius, though immoral, is also her only way to maintain her status. Ophelia has even fewer options. While Hamlet waits to seek revenge for his father's death, Ophelia, as a woman, can't act— all she can do is wait for Laertes to return and take his revenge. Ophelia's predicament is symbolic of women's position in general in Hamlet: they are completely dependent on men.

**RELIGION, HONOR, AND REVENGE**

Every society is defined by its codes of conduct—its rules about how to act and behave. There are many scenes in Hamlet when one person tells another how to act: Claudius lectures Hamlet on the proper show of grief; Polonius advises Laertes on practical rules for getting by at university in France; Hamlet constantly lectures himself on what he should be doing. In Hamlet, the codes of conduct are largely defined by religion and an aristocratic code that demands honor and revenge if honor has been soiled.

But as Hamlet actually begins to pursue revenge against Claudius, he discovers that the codes of conduct themselves don't fit together. Religion actually opposes revenge, which would mean that taking revenge could endanger Hamlet's own soul. In other words, Hamlet discovers that the codes of conduct on which society is founded are contradictory. In such a world, Hamlet suggests, the reasons for revenge become muddy, and the idea of justice confused.

**POISON, CORRUPTION, DEATH**

In medieval times people believed that the health of a nation was connected to the legitimacy of its king. In Hamlet, Denmark is often described as poisoned, diseased, or corrupt under Claudius's leadership. As visible in the nervous soldiers on the ramparts in the first scene and the commoners outside the castle who Claudius fears might rise up in rebellion, even those who don't know that Claudius murdered Old Hamlet sense the corruption of Denmark and are disturbed. It is as if the poison Claudius poured into Old Hamlet's ear has spread through Denmark itself.

Hamlet also speaks in terms of rot and corruption, describing the world as an "unweeded garden" and constantly referring to decomposing bodies. But Hamlet does not limit himself to Denmark; he talks about all of life in these disgusting images. In fact, Hamlet only seems comfortable with things that are dead: he reveres his father, claims to love Ophelia once she's dead, and handles Yorick's skull with tender care. No, what disgusts him is life; his mother's sexuality, women wearing makeup to hide their age, worms feeding on a corpse, people lying to get their way. By the end of the play, Hamlet argues that death is the one true reality, and he seems to view all of life as "appearance" doing everything it can—from seeking power, to lying, to committing murder, to engaging in passionate and illegitimate sex—to hide from that reality.

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**YORICK'S SKULL**

Hamlet is not a very symbolic play. In fact, the only object that one can easily pick out as a symbol in the play is the skull of Yorick, a former court jester, which Hamlet finds with Horatio in the graveyard near Elsinore in Act 5, scene 1. As Hamlet picks up the skull and both talks to the deceased Yorick and to Horatio about the skull, it becomes clear that the skull represents the inevitability of death. But what is perhaps most interesting about the skull as a symbol is that, while in most plays, a symbol means one thing to the audience and another to the characters in the novel or play, in Hamlet it is Hamlet himself who recognizes and explains the symbolism of Yorick's skull. Even this symbol serves to emphasize Hamlet's power as a character: he is as sophisticated as his audience.

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**ACT 1 QUOTES**

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not "seems." — Hamlet, 1.2.76
O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew. — Hamlet, 1.2.130
Frailty, thy name is woman! — Hamlet, 1.2.146
Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak'd meats Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. — Hamlet, 1.2.179
This above all — to thine ownself be true: And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man. — Polonius, 1.3.78
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. — Marcellus, 1.4.95
O, villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! — Hamlet, 1.5.105
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. — Hamlet, 1.5.168

**ACT 2 QUOTES**

Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit, And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief. — Polonius, 2.2.92
I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams. — Hamlet, 2.2.237
What a piece of work is a man! — Hamlet, 2.2.241
What a piece of work is a man! — Hamlet, 2.2.286
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, That should weep for her? — Hamlet, 2.2.518
The play's the thing, Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. — Hamlet, 2.2.566

**ACT 3 QUOTES**

To be, or not to be, — that is the question: — Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? — Hamlet, 3.1.56
Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. — Hamlet, 3.1.124
Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery... 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. — Hamlet, 3.2.328
ACT 4 QUOTES

Claudius: What dost thou mean by this?—Hamlet, Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (4.iii.28)

ACT 5 QUOTES

Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest:—... Where be your gibes now, your gowns, your pamphlets?—Hamlet, 1.5.202

ACT 1, SCENE 1

On the ramparts of the Danish castle Elsinore, the guardsman Barnardo reliefes Francisco. The men are nervous, calling out "Who's there?"—Hamlet. 5.1.64

A Ghost appears. It looks like the recently deceased Old Hamlet, King of Denmark. Horatio tries to speak to it, but it disappears.

Horatio says the ghost might be warning of an attack. After all, the prince of Norway, Fortinbras, is raising an army to retake lands that Old Hamlet won in battle from Fortinbras' father.

The Ghost reappears but disappears again without speaking when the crows to greet the dawn. Horatio decides they should tell Hamlet, the dead King's son, about the ghost.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

The next morning, King Claudius, the brother of the dead king, holds court. He uses pretty language to make his recent marriage to Gertrude, his brother's widow, sound perfectly normal. He says it is possible to balance "woe" and "joy."

Claudius then says he has received a message from Fortinbras demanding Denmark give up the lands Old Hamlet won from Old Fortinbras. He sends Cornelius and Voltemand with a message to Fortinbras' elderly uncle, the King of Norway.

Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Laertes asks to be allowed to return to his studies in France. Claudius agrees.

Next, Claudius turns to Hamlet, and asks why he is still dressed in mourning clothes. Gertrude wonders why he "seems" so upset. Hamlet says he is "is" upset, and that his clothes can't capture his true mourning.

Claudius chides that it's natural for fathers to die and for sons to mourn, but that mourning for too long is unnatural and unmanly. He asks Hamlet to see him as a father, since Hamlet is first in line to the thrown. He asks Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg, Germany to study.

Gertrude seconds the request. Hamlet promises to obey his mother.

All exit but Hamlet. In a soliloquy, Hamlet wishes he could die and that God had not made suicide a sin. He condemns the marriage between his mother and uncle. He says Claudius is far inferior to Old Hamlet, and, in anguish, describes Gertrude as a lustful beast.

Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter. Hamlet, who studied with Horatio at Wittenberg, is happy to see his friend, and pleased when Horatio agrees that Gertrude and Claudius's marriage was hasty.

Horatio tells Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet, troubled, decides to watch with the men that night.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

As he prepares to leave for France, Laertes warns his sister Ophelia not to fall for Hamlet, a young man whose passions will change, and a prince who must marry to preserve the "sanity and health" of the state.

Ophelia promises, but sassily tells Laertes to listen to his own advice.

Polonius enters, scolds his son for taking so long, then immediately starts giving him long-winded advice about how to act: be sociable, but not vulgar; do not lend or borrow money; to your own self be true, and on and on... Finally, he lets Laertes leave.

Laertes worries about Ophelia's honor just as Hamlet worries about Gertrude's.

Inequality between men and women.

Father/son talk here mirrors Claudius's with Hamlet—except Polonius isn't just trying to hide a secret.
Polonius asks Ophelia what she was talking about with Laertes. Ophelia answers: Hamlet. After Polonius asks her to explain, she says that Hamlet has expressed his love for her. Polonius tells her that Hamlet is pretending to love her in order to sleep with her, and forbids her to talk to him.

Ophelia promises to obey.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

On the bitter cold ramparts, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus keep watch. Meanwhile, from inside the castle they hear the roar of revelry. Hamlet condemns Claudius’s constant merry-making, saying that it makes the noble Danes look “swinish” and corrupt.

The Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it. But Horatio and Marcellus hold him back: they think the ghost may be a demon laying a trap for him.

Hamlet breaks free of them and follows after the Ghost.

Marcellus says “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90). They run after Hamlet.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

When Hamlet and the Ghost are alone, the Ghost speaks. It claims to be the spirit of Old Hamlet, murdered by Claudius. Though the official story is that Old Hamlet was napping in his garden and was stung by a serpent, in reality Claudius poured poison into the sleeping man’s ear, murdering him and sending him to Purgatory because he was not given a chance to confess his sins before he died.

The Ghost commands Hamlet to seek revenge against Claudius for murder and for corrupting Gertrude. Yet the Ghost also warns Hamlet not to harm his mother. Dawn breaks. The Ghost disappears.

Hamlet promises to do nothing but seek revenge. He curses first Gertrude, “O most pernicious woman!” (1.5.105), then Claudius. “That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!” (1.5.108).

Horatio and Marcellus rush in. Hamlet refuses to tell them what happened, saying they’ll reveal it. But he does say he may pretend to be insane, and makes them swear to silence on his sword. The Ghost’s voice echoes: Swear! They swear.

Hamlet despairing at the burden the Ghost has given him: “The time is out of joint. / O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!” (1.5.189–190).

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to Paris to give Laertes some money and letters, but also to secretly check up on him. Polonius’s instructions are so detailed and complicated that they are absurd.

Ophelia enters, upset. She tells Polonius that Hamlet burst into her room and held her wrists, studying her face and sighing. Then he left without a word.

Polonius concludes that Hamlet has gone mad with love because, on Polonius’s orders, Ophelia stopped speaking with him.

Polonius is established here as a meddler; he instructs Reynaldo in using appearance to hide reality.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Claudius and Gertrude greet Hamlet’s old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom they summoned to Elsinore to figure out why Hamlet is so melancholy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern happily agree to help.

Polonius enters and says that he has figured out the cause of Hamlet’s lunacy. But, first, the ambassadors have returned from Norway. He goes to get them. While Polonius is gone, Gertrude remarks that Hamlet’s mania probably comes from his father’s death and her too-hasty marriage to Claudius.

Polonius returns with the ambassadors. They report that the King of Norway rebuked Fortinbras, who promised not to attack the Danes. Norway then rewarded Fortinbras by letting him attack the Poles. Now Norway asks that Claudius give Fortinbras’ army free passage through Denmark on the way to Poland. Claudius agrees. The ambassadors leave.

R and G are introduced. They never see through the various plots and are manipulated by everyone.

Some critics wonder at whether Gertrude was complicit in Old Hamlet’s murder. But her comment here indicates she’s unaware that Claudius murdered Old Hamlet.

Fortinbras agrees to give up his effort to revenge his father and seek honor in another way. Is his promise reality, or appearance? Has Claudius just allowed a hostile army to march into his country?
After a long-winded ramble about Hamlet's madness, Polonius reads love letters Hamlet sent to Ophelia. Claudius and Gertrude agree that lovesickness may be causing Hamlet's behavior. Polonius proposes that they stage a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia and spy on it to test his theory. Claudius agrees.

Hamlet enters, reading. The King and Queen leave Polonius alone to talk with him. Polonius speaks with Hamlet, who responds with statements about pregnancy, death, and rot that, though nonsensical, also seem to refer to Denmark. Ophelia, and Polonius, Polonius, perplexed, exits.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet greets his old friends warmly, and tells them that Denmark is a prison. They disagree. Hamlet responds, "then tis none to you; there is nothing either good or bad but that thinking makes it so" (2.2.245-246).

He launches into a long speech about the beauty of the world and nobility of man, all of which looks to him like dust and fails to delight him.

Hamlet asks why they've come. They say to visit him, but Hamlet angrily demands whether they were summoned by the King and Queen. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern admit they were.

Hamlet cheers up a little when Rosencrantz mentions the arrival of a troupe of players (actors). Hamlet says his "uncle-father and aunt-mother" are wrong: he's only insane some of the time (2.2.359).

Polonius enters with the players. Hamlet mocks Polonius, but greets the players warmly. He asks the First player to act a speech about the Trojan queen Hecuba's grief at the death of her husband, Priam. The Player does, with great feeling.

Hamlet speaks in prose here, representing his "madness." But Hamlet uses madness only to mock Polonius, not to seek revenge.

Hamlet wants the world to delight him, but he knows things (such as the fact that his father was murdered) that make its beauty meaningless, a lie. And if life is pointless, what's the point of seeking revenge?

In a soliloquy, Hamlet agonizes over whether to kill himself: "To be or not to be" (3.1.55). He thinks men would almost always choose suicide over the "slings and arrows" (3.1.57) of experience, except that they fear what might happen in the afterlife. He observes that such thinking turns people into cowards, and action into inaction. Suddenly Ophelia enters and tries to return the gifts Hamlet gave her. He denies having ever given them.

Hamlet asks Ophelia if she's honest, then says beauty corrupts honesty. Becoming angry, he tells Ophelia he loved her once, then says he never loved her. He commands her to go to a nunnery rather than become a "breeder of sinners" (3.1.120), and says all men, including himself, are "arrant knaves" (3.1.127). He condemns women for hiding their faces behind makeup. Then states that there will be no more marriages—and that one person who's married already will die. Hamlet storms off.

Ophelia is heartbroken.

Claudius, from his hiding place, decides that Hamlet neither loves Ophelia nor is he mad. Instead, he thinks Hamlet is "brooding" on something, and that this brooding will lead to danger. He decides to send Hamlet to England.

Hamlet's hatred of women seems to have made him self-destructively crazy. (Here he reveals his plans to kill someone!) In particular, Hamlet hates that women hide the reality of their faces behind makeup; it makes beauty dishonest, hiding age (and death) behind a pleasant mask.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can't figure out what's behind Hamlet's odd behavior, but tell Claudius and Gertrude that he was excited by the arrival of the players. The King and Queen, hopeful that Hamlet is improving, agree to watch the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit. Gertrude leaves as well, since Claudius and Polonius have chosen this moment to set up the "accidental" meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Polonius tells Ophelia to walk in the courtyard as if reading a book. He muses that people often use appearances to "sugar o'er the devil" (3.1.47).

Claudius, struck by Polonius's words, mutters an aside about a "deed" that his "painted words" (3.1.52) can't hide from his conscience. They hear Hamlet coming and hide.

While Hamlet is searching for evidence about whether Claudius killed Old Hamlet, Claudius is seeking evidence about what's bothering Hamlet.

Hamlet tries to think through his wish for death, his fears about the likely unfairness of the afterlife, and his inability to act. But before he can find a solution he sees Ophelia—a woman.

By condemning himself for not acting and then plotting to use the play to determine Claudius's guilt, Hamlet reveals his fear that Claudius might not be guilty, that the Ghost might be lying. Hamlet has a reason for his inaction: lack of evidence.

Does Claudius suspect Hamlet knows something about the murder? Whether yes or no, he wastes no time in acting.

Polonius cares more about confirming his theory than comforting Ophelia.
ACT 3, SCENE 2

Hamlet lectures three of the players on how to act. His lecture focuses on how to avoid overacting, suiting action to word and word to action. They exit.

Hamlet has already told Horatio what the Ghost said, and now reveals his plan: the play to be put on will mirror the Ghosts’ description of Claudius’s murder of Old Hamlet. If Claudius looks guilty while watching it, then he is.

Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and other arrivals arrive to watch the play. Hamlet tells Horatio he’s now going to act insane.

Claudius asks how Hamlet is faring. Hamlet responds as if Claudius were using the word “fear” to mean food, and says he’s eating the air. Hamlet mocks Polonius’s attempts to act at university, harasses Ophelia with sexual puns, then makes bitter remarks about Gertrude for marrying Claudius.

The players enter and first act out a dumbshow (a short silent play that shows what the longer play is about). The players then begin to act the full play. As the plot becomes clearer, Gertrude and Claudius become uncomfortable. Hamlet mocks them, while continuing to launch sexual puns at Ophelia. Claudius asks the name of the play. Hamlet says, “The Mouse-trap.”

When the villain in the play pours poison into the king’s ear, Claudius jumps from his seat, calls for light, and rushes from the room.

Hamlet is triumphant. He tells Horatio that this proves the Ghost was telling the truth.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and say that his mother wants to see him. Hamlet agrees to go, but furiously tells them they cannot “pluck out the heart of his mystery” or play him like a flute (3.2.336).

Polonius enters, repeating Gertrude’s request to see him. Hamlet pretends to see odd shapes in a non-existent cloud. Polonius also pretends to see the shapes.

All exit but Hamlet, who says to himself that he could “drink hot blood” (3.2.360), but forces himself to remember not to hurt his mother.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Claudius says Hamlet is a danger, and orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to prepare to leave for England. They agree that if the King were to die it would be a tragedy for the country, and exit.

Polonius enters with news: Hamlet is headed to Gertrude’s room, where Polonius will hide behind a tapestry.

Finally alone, Claudius cries out that his “offense is rank!” (3.3.36). He wants to pray, but doesn’t see how he can ask forgiveness when he possesses the spoils of the murder, neither of which he wants to give up: Gertrude and the throne. Yet he kneels to pray.

Hamlet enters. He draws his sword to kill Claudius and be revenged. But it occurs to him that if he kills Claudius as Claudius prays, then Claudius will go to heaven. That isn’t real revenge, especially when Claudius murdered Hamlet’s father before he could pray, sentencing Old Hamlet to torment in purgatory. Hamlet decides to wait until Claudius is sinning to kill him. Hamlet exits.

Claudius stops praying. The attempt was useless: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.97-87).

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Polonius and Gertrude wait for Hamlet in Gertrude’s chamber. Polonius advises her to be tough with Hamlet. Just then they hear Hamlet coming. Polonius hides behind a tapestry.

Hamlet enters. Gertrude says he has offended his father (i.e. Claudius). Hamlet says she’s offended his father (i.e. Old Hamlet). Hamlet then furiously says he’ll show her the “inmost part” of herself. Gertrude thinks he means he’s going to kill her and cries out.

From his hiding place behind the tapestry Polonius hears Gertrude’s cry and calls for help. Hamlet, mistaking Polonius for Claudius, stabs Polonius through the tapestry.

Polonius has no idea that his spying is now pointless since Claudius already knows Hamlet has found him out.

Hamlet suggests his mother is hiding from the truth she knows in her heart.

By stabbing Polonius (whom he thinks is Claudius) Hamlet proves it wasn’t fear of killing that caused him to delay.
Gertrude shouts, “What a rash and bloody deed!” (3.4.27). Hamlet responds, “As bad... as kill a king, and marry with his brother” (3.4.29). Gertrude is shocked. Hamlet pulls back the tapestry and sees Polonius. He dismisses him as a “lash, intruding fool” (3.4.32).

Hamlet forces Gertrude to look at a picture of his father and compare it to one of Claudius, whom he describes as a “mildewed ear” (3.4.64). Gertrude can’t: “but to live in the rank sweat of an enameled bed, stew’d in corruption... honeying and making love over the nasty sty” (3.4.82-84). She again begs him to stop.

The Ghost appears in order, it says, to refocus Hamlet on his duty—revenge against Claudius. Hamlet speaks to it. Gertrude can’t see the ghost and thinks Hamlet’s mad. The Ghost tells Hamlet to calm her.

Hamlet tries to convince Gertrude that he’s sane, and begs her to confess her sins, to be pure and avoid sleeping with Claudius, and to keep secret that he, Hamlet, is not actually mad. Gertrude promises.

Hamlet exits, dragging Polonius’s body after him.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Claudius sees that Gertrude is upset. She says Hamlet was acting insane, and in his madness killed Polonius.

Claudius exclaims that if he had been behind the tapestry, he would now be dead. He thinks of how best to explain the murder to the public, and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet. They ask where Polonius’s body is. Hamlet responds in riddles and insults—he calls Rosencrantz a “sponge” soaking up the king’s favor. Hamlet agrees to see Claudius, but then dashes off.

Hamlet links Claudius’s crime of murder with Gertrude’s “crime” of marrying Claudius! Is he testing to see if Gertrude was in on the plot?

Hamlet’s graphic description of Gertrude’s lovemaking with Claudius makes it sound dirty and corrupt. Once more his anger at his mother’s betrayal takes precedence over his goal of revenge.

The Ghost’s visit is ambiguous. Why can’t Gertrude see it? Why would it risk making Hamlet look insane? Many directors cut this scene.

Does Gertrude agree to keep silent because Hamlet has convinced her he’s right, or because he frightens her?

Quests for vengeance often result in more than the intended death.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Claudius mulls how to deal with Hamlet. The killing of Polonius has convinced him that Hamlet is too dangerous to remain nearby, but at the same time he is unsure how to send Hamlet away because the people of Denmark love Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter with Hamlet. Claudius asks where Polonius is. Hamlet answers that Polonius is feeding worms. He explains that a dead king will do the same, and, through the processes of nature, might end up in the “guts of a beggar.” Hamlet then says Claudius could send someone to check for Polonius in heaven or go down to check in hell himself. Finally, Hamlet tells them that in a month they may smell Polonius’s body rotting beneath the stairs to the castle lobby.

Claudius sends Rosencrantz to get the body, then tells Hamlet that to protect him he will send him immediately to England. Hamlet agrees, though he continues to insult Claudius. Claudius sends Guildenstern to make sure Hamlet gets on the ship immediately. Finally alone, Claudius writes a letter for the three men to give to the King of England—a letter that asks the King to execute Hamlet.

Claudius is always thinking about politics, about appearances.

Hamlet’s mockery and word play begins to focus on death. He describes how life devours itself in order to live, and explicitly links this idea to the image of worms devouring a king. In doing so, Hamlet is indirectly threatening Claudius.

Claudius doesn’t feel the need for evidence to act against Hamlet. As soon as Hamlet seems like a threat, Claudius plots to have him killed, and uses the unknown R and G to make it happen.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Near the coast of Denmark, Fortinbras’s army marches toward Poland. He sends a captain to Elsinore with a message of greeting for the King of Denmark.

By sending the captain to greet Claudius, Fortinbras shows he means to keep his word not to attack Denmark.

The captain runs into Hamlet. Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, and happily tells them the land about to be fought over is worthless. Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to go on ahead. In a soliloquy, he bitterly compares himself to Fortinbras and his soldiers. They go to die just for a chance at honor, while he, with much greater reason to act, has failed to revenge himself on Claudius. Hamlet vows “from this day forward may all my thoughts be bloody,” and promises to focus only on revenge.

Fortsing is willing to act to gain honor. Though Hamlet, as you’d expect, sees such thoughtless action as ridiculous, he also sees the nobility in it.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Gertrude and Horatio sadly discuss the madness that has taken over Ophelia since Polonius was killed. Ophelia enters, singing mournful songs about her father.

Hamlet’s madness is feigned. Ophelia’s is real. As a woman, Ophelia can’t act, so she goes mad.
Claudius enters. Ophelia’s madness upsets and unnerves him. Ophelia’s songs change topic, and focus on maids who are seduced. She exits with the comment that her brother shall know of her father’s death. Horatio follows her.

Claudius mentions that the commoners are also angry about Polonius’s death, and that Laertes has secretly sailed back to Denmark. A messenger rushes in with news that Laertes is actually marching toward the castle at the head of a mob chanting “Laertes king!”

Gertrude exclaims that the mob and Laertes are blaming the wrong person for the death of Polonius.

Laertes bursts into the room. Claudius asks for calm. Laertes retorts that to be calm would make him a bastard, that he would dare damnation just to get revenge for the death of his father. Claudius admits that Polonius is dead. Gertrude adds that Claudius did not kill him.

Ophelia enters. She is clearly insane, singing songs, speaking in riddles, and handing out flowers (perhaps imaginary): rosemary and pansies to Laertes; fennel and columbines to Gertrude; rue and daisies to Claudius. Laertes demands vengeance for her madness. Ophelia exits, wishing God’s blessing on everyone.

Claudius asks Laertes to let him explain what happened to Polonius, and promises to hand over the crown to Laertes if, after the explanation, his actions still strike Laertes as unjust.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

A sailor gives Horatio letters from Hamlet. The letter says that a pirate attacked Hamlet’s ship. Hamlet was taken prisoner and returned to Denmark for a ransom, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue on to England. Horatio is to send the sailors to Claudius, and then to find Hamlet.

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Alone with Claudius, Laertes asks why Claudius didn’t punish Hamlet for killing Polonius. Claudius answers: First, he loves Gertrude and she’s Hamlet’s mother; second, Hamlet is loved by the people, so punishing him might have caused a revolt.

Do Ophelia’s songs about seduced maids indicate that she had a sexual relationship with Hamlet? This is an unresolved question in the play.

Contrast with Hamlet: as soon as Laertes hears of his father’s murder, he returns to Denmark and nearly starts a revolution!

Ironic that Gertrude defends the man who killed her husband.

Another point of comparison with Hamlet in terms of willingness to act to get revenge.


Laertes acts without thinking. Claudius can manipulate those who don’t think and turn their actions to his own advantage.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

In a cemetery, two gravediggers discuss whether the body to be put in the grave they’re digging should receive a Christian burial. The first gravedigger argues that because the dead woman did not try to escape the water her death was a suicide. The second says that if she had not been a noblewoman she would not have received a Christian burial. The first gravedigger asks a riddle: who builds stronger than the mason, shipbuilder, or carpenter? Answer: The grave-maker, whose “houses” last until doomsday.

Hamlet and Horatio enter. The second gravedigger exits. The first gravedigger throws up a skull he has found in the grave he’s digging, then another. Hamlet wonders what sort of people the skulls belonged to when alive, and comments that their earthly possessions mean nothing to them now. The gravedigger says that he became a gravedigger on the day that Old Hamlet defeated Old Fortinbras in battle, which was also the same day that Hamlet was born.

Hamlet uses flattery of Laertes swordsmanship to convince Laertes to join his plot. Claudius doesn’t care about Laertes’ honor. He just wants to get rid of Hamlet. Compare Laertes willingness to kill Hamlet in church; this is exactly what Hamlet refused to do to Claudius.

Laertes, who prides himself on honor, has been corrupted. He’s joined an ignoble plot using deception and poison.

The male response to tragedy is to seek revenge. Ophelia, who cannot “act” because she’s a woman, opts for suicide.

Claudius only cares about how Ophelia’s death might affect him and his power.

Summary & Analysis
Hamlet asks the gravedigger how long it takes a body to decompose. The gravedigger points to a skull that was once Yorick, a court jester. Hamlet is shocked: he knew Yorick. Hamlet examines the skull. He realizes that death will claim everyone, and says no amount of makeup can hold off the inevitable. Hamlet then wonders if the bodies of great kings like Alexander and Caesar now are dust used to plug holes.

Horatio says Hamlet is considering “too curiously”—is overthinking things.

Hamlet and Horatio hear a noise and hide. Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, a priest, and other lords enter in a funeral procession with a coffin. The priest refuses to provide further religious services because Ophelia's death seemed like suicide. Laertes says his sister will be an angel while the priest howls in hell.

Laertes jumps into Ophelia’s grave to embrace her once more. Hamlet, shocked and distraught at Ophelia’s death, follows Laertes into Ophelia’s grave and claims to have loved Ophelia more than forty-thousand brothers could. They grapple until Hamlet exits in a rage.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

In Elsinore, Hamlet tells Horatio that he discovered that the letters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bore to England asked that Hamlet be executed. Hamlet switched the letter with one that requested Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be executed.

Hamlet says he has no sympathy for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who gave up their honor to curry favor with the king. But he is sorry he fought with Laertes, who only wanted to revenge his own father.

A dandyish nobleman, Osric, enters. Hamlet gets him to agree first that it’s cold, then that it’s actually hot. Osric announces that Claudius has wagered Hamlet can defeat Laertes in a duel. Hamlet agrees to fight.

Horatio says that Hamlet will lose the wager. Hamlet says he’ll win a fair fight, but he has a bad foreboding. Horatio urges him to call off the duel. But Hamlet says there’s no use trying to escape death: it will come no matter what.

There is one reality that awaits all men: death and decomposition. No matter whether you’re Caesar or a beggar, that’s your fate. While Horatio says that Hamlet is still thinking too much, Hamlet seems to find the idea freeing.

Horatio diagnoses Hamlet’s “fatal flaw.”

The priest is unwilling to provide further ceremony because it seemed like suicide. The priest can’t tell the difference between appearance and reality, so he plays it safe.

Interesting that Hamlet claims to love Ophelia only after she dies.

R and G are duped again. Their sad fate shows the way plots and deception tend to widen and take the lives of those on the periphery too.

Hamlet identifies with Laertes.

Osric is what Hamlet most hates—a man who values appearance over reality.

Hamlet is finally at peace. He accepts death. Death comes for everyone, so why not face it now? Note that Hamlet has ceased to plot: he’s chosen reality over appearance.

Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and the entire court enter to watch the duel. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes. Laertes won’t accept the apology until he can consult an expert on honor. The two men select their foils (swords). Laertes picks the poisoned foil.

Claudius announces that if Hamlet gets one of the first three hits he will drink to Hamlet’s health and then drop a jewel into the cup and give it to Hamlet. The duel starts. Hamlet scores the first hit. Claudius drops the jewel into the wine. Hamlet, concentrating on the duel, says he’ll drink the wine later.

Hamlet scores the second hit. Gertrude lifts the poisoned cup to drink in Hamlet’s honor. Claudius tries to stop her, but can’t tell her why without revealing his plot. She drinks.

They duel. Laertes wounds Hamlet, drawing blood. They scuffle, and in the scuffle end up exchanging swords. Hamlet wounds Laertes.

Gertrude falls. Claudius claims Gertrude fainted because she saw Hamlet and Laertes bleeding, but Gertrude says the wine was poisoned. She dies.

Laertes, who knows he’s dying of his wound from the poisoned sword, reveals Claudius’s treachery.

Hamlet stabs Claudius and then forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Claudius dies.

Laertes forgives Hamlet and asks for forgiveness. Laertes dies. Hamlet forgives him.

Horatio wants to kill himself, but Hamlet forbids it: Horatio must tell Hamlet’s story to the world.

In the distance a cannon sounds. Fortinbras is returning victorious from Poland, and fired the blast to honor English ambassadors arriving to Denmark. Hamlet says that Fortinbras should be made King of Denmark, then dies.

Fortinbras and the English ambassadors enter. Amazed at the carnage, the ambassadors announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

Laertes speaks of honor while plotting against Hamlet. He’s sold his soul for vengeance.

The “jewel” is poison—appearance vs. reality.

Claudius is in so deep that he can’t admit reality even to save his wife.

Laertes gets his revenge, but it rebounds on himself.

Claudius lies right up until the end. But death is a reality that appearance can’t hide.

Reality revealed.

Hamlet gets his revenge.

Hamlet and Laertes are honest before they die.

Through Horatio, Hamlet will reveal Claudius’s lies.

Fortinbras achieves “vengeance” by not pursuing it. He’s the only character who never plots—he always chooses reality over appearance.

The deaths of R and G emphasize absurd and bloody reach of revenge.
Horatio begins to tell the story of what has happened in Denmark.

Fortinbras orders Hamlet be honored as a soldier, since he would have made a great king.

Claudius’s lies are swept away, and Denmark is "healed" by a legitimate succession from Hamlet to Fortinbras.