

Guide to Hamlet

About Hamlet

The story of the play originates in the legend of Hamlet (Amleth) as recounted in the twelfth-century Danish History, a Latin text by Saxo the Grammatian. This version was later adapted into French by Francois de Belleforest in 1570. In it, the unscrupulous Feng kills his brother Horwendil and marries his brother's wife Gerutha. Horwendil's and Gerutha's son Amleth, although still young, decides to avenge his father's murder. He acts the fool in order to avoid suspicion, a strategy which succeeds in making the others think him harmless. With his mother's active support, Amleth succeeds in killing Feng. He is then proclaimed King of Denmark. This story is on the whole more straightforward than Shakespeare's adaptation. Shakespeare was likely aware of Saxo's version, along with another play performed in 1589 in which a ghost apparently calls out, "Hamlet, revenge!" The 1589 play is lost, leading to much scholarly speculation as to who might have authored it. Most scholars attribute it to Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy* of 1587. The Spanish Tragedy shares many elements with Hamlet, such as a ghost seeking revenge, a secret crime, a play-within-a-play, a tortured hero who feigns madness, and a heroine who goes mad and commits suicide.

The Spanish Tragedy was one of the first and most popular Elizabethan "revenge tragedies," a genre that Hamlet both epitomizes and complicates. Revenge tragedies typically share a few plot points. In all of them, some grievous insult or wrong requires vengeance. Often in these plays the conventional means of retribution (the courts of law, generally speaking) are unavailable because of the power of the guilty person or persons, who is often noble if not royal. Revenge tragedies also emphasize the subjective struggle of the avenger, who often fights (or feigns) madness and generally wallows in the moral difficulties of his situation. Finally, revenge tragedies end up with a dramatic bloodbath in which the guilty party is horribly and often ritualistically killed. Hamlet is not Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy - that distinction belongs to *Titus Andronicus*, a Marlovian horror-show containing all of the elements just mentioned. But Hamlet is generally considered the greatest revenge tragedy, if not the greatest tragedy, if not the greatest play, ever written.

The central reason for the play's eminence is the character of Hamlet. His brooding, erratic nature has been analyzed by many of the most famous thinkers and artists of the past four centuries. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described him as a poet - a sensitive man who is too weak to deal with the political pressures of Denmark. Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud viewed Hamlet in terms of an "Oedipus complex," an overwhelming sexual desire for his mother. This complex is usually associated with the wish to kill one's father and sleep with one's mother. Freud points out that Hamlet's uncle has usurped his father's rightful place, and therefore has replaced his father as the man who must die. However, Freud is careful to note that Hamlet represents modern man precisely because he does not kill Claudius in order to sleep with his mother, but rather kills him to revenge his father's death. Political interpretations of Hamlet also abound, in which Hamlet stands for the spirit of political resistance, or represents a challenge to a corrupt regime. Stephen Greenblatt, the editor of the Norton Edition of Shakespeare, views these interpretive attempts of Hamlet as mirrors for the interpretation within the play itself - many of the characters who have to deal with Hamlet, including Polonius, Claudius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, also develop theories to explain his behavior, none of which really succeeds in doing so. Indeed, nothing sure can be said about Hamlet except that it has been a perennial occasion for brilliant minds to explore some of the unanswerable questions of human existence.

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An article on Hamlet:

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In "Hamlet", the tragedy by William Shakespeare, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark withholds a great internal conflict throughout the play. As a result, Hamlet contradicts himself many times throughout the play, which caused the unnecessary death of many others. As well as trying to be true to himself, Hamlet is an expert at acting out roles and making people falsely believe him. The roles he plays are ones in which he fakes madness to accomplish his goals. While one second Hamlet pretends to be under a strange spell of madness, seconds later he may become perfectly calm. He struggles with the issue of avenging his father's death. He vows to kill Claudius but then backs out several times. Hamlet's actions throughout the play support this deceitful nature. His dual personalities are the foundation of his madness. There are many examples that illustrate how Hamlet's deceitful nature results in a tragedy because of his inability to choose which role to play.

In Act One, Hamlet appears to be very straightforward in his actions and his role. When his mother questions him, Hamlet says, "Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not seems" (1.2.76). By saying this, Hamlet lets Gertrude know that he is what she sees, torn over hi

Those soldiers fight and die for an insignificant plot of land, and they do it because they are soldiers, for no other reason. This convinces Hamlet to follow through and do his duty.

Act 2, scene 2 is a great example of Hamlet's tremendous problem. Hamlet makes this big buildup of what he should have done and how he will seek revenge, but then contradicts himself in his next statement. After all of the swearing and support, he backs out again. He can't decide whether to play the role or not. Being caught in the middle, Hamlet decides that he needs more proof of the King's guilt. He keeps going back on his resolve when he says, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.559-560). Hamlet believes that acting will transform one's inner self to match the exterior.

These two acts show Hamlet's insincerity and how tragedy results. With certain people, Hamlet is resolved to get revenge for his father's death. With other people, this thought is the last thought in his mind. If he had any of the resolve he had showed earlier, his act of revenge would have already been completed. Instead of playing the part of the vengeful son, or dropping the issue entirely, he spends the entire act "slacking off". He avoids the decision he has to make and pretends to be mad. This is shown when he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "I know not-lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises" (2.2.280-281). Later Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is just faking his

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madness when he says, "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (2.2.347-348). By Hamlet admitting that he is faking, he is truly saying that he is comfortable with it. It is strange that Hamlet is comfortable with playing at this point, but the main concept is that he is not acting out the role that he established in act one.

Hamlet realizes that he should do what his role dictates strictly because it is his role. He does not hesitate and fully embraces the act. In reaction to Ophelia's death, he is again behaving as he should have. She was his love and he should have loved her more than her brother. This is shown when Hamlet says, "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with their quantity of love make up my sum" (5.1.243-245). Hamlet should have loved her, but he did not. Had he loved her he would not have treated her so poorly earlier. He is now committed to acting, and loving Ophelia fits the role. In the rest of the play Hamlet sticks to his resolve. He barely has time to tell his story of escape to Horatio before he is challenged. He does not refuse the challenge because as nobility, he cannot refuse he has to keep his honor. Hamlet goes to the match and because he has now accepted the role, he does not hesitate to kill the King when prompted to do so.

However, when the players come around, the resolved Hamlet returns. Hamlet is prompted

Character List:

1

Character List

Hamlet

The son of Old Hamlet and Gertrude, thus Prince of Denmark. The ghost of Old Hamlet charges him with the task of killing his uncle, Claudius, for killing him and usurping the throne of Denmark. Hamlet is a moody, theatrical, witty, brilliant young man, perpetually fascinated and tormented by doubts and introspection. It is famously difficult to pin down his true thoughts and feelings -- does he love Ophelia, and does he really intend to kill Claudius? In fact, it often seems as though Hamlet pursues lines of thought and emotion merely for their experimental value, testing this or that idea without any interest in applying his resolutions in the practical world. The variety of his moods, from manic to somber, seems to cover much of the range of human possibility.

Old Hamlet

The former King of Denmark. Old Hamlet appears as a ghost and exhorts his son to kill Claudius, whom he claims has killed him in order to secure the throne and the queen of Denmark. Hamlet fears (or at least says he fears) that the ghost is an imposter, an evil spirit sent to lure him to hell. Old Hamlet's ghost reappears in Act Three of the play when Hamlet goes too far in berating his mother. After this second appearance, we hear and see no more of him.

Claudius

Old Hamlet's brother, Hamlet's uncle, and Gertrude's newlywed husband. He murdered his brother in order to seize the throne and subsequently married Gertrude, his erstwhile sister-in-law. Claudius appears to be a rather dull man who is fond of the pleasures of the flesh, sex and drinking. Only as the play goes on do we become certain that he is indeed guilty of murder and usurpation. Claudius is the only character aside from Hamlet to have a soliloquy in the play. When he is convinced that Hamlet has found him out, Claudius eventually schemes to have his nephew-cum-son murdered.

Gertrude

Old Hamlet's widow and Claudius' wife. She seems unaware that Claudius killed her former husband. Gertrude loves Hamlet tremendously, while Hamlet has very mixed feelings about her for marrying the (in his eyes) inferior Claudius after her first husband's death. Hamlet attributes this need for a husband to her lustiness. Gertrude figures prominently in many of the major scenes in the play, including the killing of Polonius and the death of Ophelia.

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Horatio

Hamlet's closest friend. They know each other from the University of Wittenberg, where they are both students. Horatio is presented as a studious, skeptical young man, perhaps more serious and less ingenious than Hamlet but more than capable of trading witticisms with his good friend. In a moving tribute just before the play-within-the-play begins, in Act Two scene two, Hamlet praises Horatio as his soul's choice and declares that he loves Horatio because he is "not passion's slave" but is rather goodhumored

and philosophical through all of life's buffets. At the end of the play, Hamlet charges Horatio with the task of explaining the pile of bodies to the confused onlookers in court.

Polonius

The father of Ophelia and Laertes and the chief adviser to the throne of Denmark. Polonius is a windy, pedantic, interfering, suspicious, silly old man, a "rash, intruding fool," in Hamlet's phrase. Polonius is forever fomenting intrigue and hiding behind tapestries to spy. He hatches the theory that Ophelia caused Hamlet to go mad by rejecting him. Polonius' demise is fitting to his flaws. Hamlet accidentally kills the old man while he eavesdrops behind an arras in Gertrude's bedroom. Polonius' death causes his

daughter to go mad.

Ophelia

The daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes. Ophelia has received several tributes of love from Hamlet but rejects him after her father orders her to do so. In general, Ophelia is controlled by the men in her life, moved around like a pawn in their scheme to discover Hamlet's distemper. Moreover, Ophelia is regularly mocked by Hamlet and lectured by her father and brother about her sexuality. She goes mad after Hamlet murders Polonius. She later drowns.

Laertes

Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother. Laertes is an impetuous young man who lives primarily in Paris, France. We see him at the beginning of the play at the celebration of Claudius and Gertrude's wedding. He then returns to Paris, only to return in Act Four with an angry entourage after his father's death at Hamlet's hands. He and Claudius conspire to kill Hamlet in the course of a duel between Laertes and the prince.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

3

Friends of Hamlet's from the University of Wittenberg. Claudius invites them to court in order to spy on Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often treated as comic relief; they are sycophantic, vaguely absurd fellows. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are assigned to accompany Hamlet to England. They carry a letter from Claudius asking the English king to kill Hamlet upon his arrival. Hamlet discovers this plot and alters the letter so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are put to death instead. We learn that they have indeed been executed at the very close of the play.

Fortinbras

The Prince of Norway. In many ways his story is parallel to Hamlet's: he too has lost his father by violence (Old Hamlet killed Old Fortinbras in single combat); he too is impeded from ascending the throne by an interfering uncle. But despite their biographical similarities, Fortinbras and Hamlet are constitutional opposites. Where Hamlet is pensive and mercurial, Fortinbras is all action. He leads an army through Denmark in order to attack disputed territory in Poland. At the end of the play, and with Hamlet's dying assent, Fortinbras assumes the crown of Denmark.

Osric

The ludicrous, flowery, stupid courtier who invites Hamlet to fence with Laertes, then serves as referee during the contest.

The gravediggers

Two "clowns" (roles played by comic actors), a principal gravedigger and his assistant. They figure only in one scene -- Act Five scene one -- yet never fail to make a big impression on readers and audience members. The primary gravedigger is a very witty man, macabre and intelligent, who is the only character in the play capable of trading barbs with Hamlet. They are the only speaking representatives of the lower classes in the play and their perspective is a remarkable contrast to that of the nobles.

The players

A group of (presumably English) actors who arrive in Denmark. Hamlet knows this company well and listens, enraptured, while the chief player recites a long speech about the death of Priam and the wrath of Hecuba. Hamlet uses the players to stage an adaptation of "The Death of Gonzago" which he calls "The Mousetrap" -- a play that reprises almost perfectly the account of Old Hamlet's death as told by the ghost -- in order to be sure of Claudius' guilt.

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A Priest

Charged with performing the rites at Ophelia's funeral. Because of the doubtful circumstances of Ophelia's death, the priest refuses to do more than the bare minimum as she is interred.

Reynaldo

Polonius' servant, sent to check on Laertes in Paris. He receives absurdly detailed instructions in espionage from his master.

Bernardo

A soldier who is among the first to see the ghost of Old Hamlet.

Marcellus

A soldier who is among the first to see the ghost of Old Hamlet.

Francisco

A soldier.

Voltemand

A courtier.

Cornelius

A courtier.

A Captain

A captain in Fortinbras' army who speaks briefly with Hamlet.

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Ambassadors

Ambassadors from England who arrive at the play's close to announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

Character Sketch Of Hamlet

1

Character Sketch Of Hamlet

Hamlet is an enigma. No matter how many ways critics examine him, no absolute truth emerges. Hamlet breathes with the multiple dimensions of a living human being, and everyone understands him in a personal way. Hamlet's challenge to Guildenstern rings true for everyone who seeks to know him: "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery." None of us ever really does.

The conundrum that is Hamlet stems from the fact that every time we look at him, he is different. In understanding literary characters, just as in understanding real people, our perceptions depend on what we bring to the investigation. Hamlet is so complete a character that, like an old friend or relative, our relationship to him changes each time we visit him, and he never ceases to surprise us. Therein lies the secret to the enduring love affair audiences have with him. They never tire of the intrigue.

The paradox of Hamlet's nature draws people to the character. He is at once the consummate iconoclast, in self-imposed exile from Elsinore Society, while, at the same time, he is the adulated champion of Denmark — the people's hero. He has no friends left, but Horatio loves him unconditionally. He is angry, dejected, depressed, and brooding; he is manic, elated, enthusiastic, and energetic. He is dark and suicidal, a man who loathes himself and his fate. Yet, at the same time, he is an existential thinker who accepts that he must deal with life on its own terms, that he must choose to meet it head on. "We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

Hamlet not only participates in his life, but astutely observes it as well. He recognizes the decay of the Danish society (represented by his Uncle Claudius), but also understands that he can blame no social ills on just one person. He remains aware of the ironies that constitute human endeavor, and he savors them. Though he says, "Man delights not me," the contradictions that characterize us all intrigue him. "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!"

As astutely as he observes the world around him, Hamlet also keenly critiques himself. In his soliloquys he upbraids himself for his failure to act as well as for his propensity for words.

2

Hamlet is infuriatingly adept at twisting and manipulating words. He confuses his so-called friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — whom he trusts as he "would adders fang'd" — with his dissertations on ambition, turning their observations around so that they seem to admire beggars more than their King. And he leads them on a merry chase in search of Polonius' body. He openly mocks the dottering Polonius with his word plays, which elude the old man's understanding. He continually spars with Claudius, who recognizes the danger of Hamlet's wit but is never smart enough to defend himself against it.

Words are Hamlet's constant companions, his weapons, and his defenses. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a play that was later adapted into a film, playwright and screen play wright Tom Stoppard imagines the various wordplays in Hamlet as games. In one scene, his characters play a set of tennis where words serve as balls and rackets. Hamlet is certainly the Pete Sampras of wordplay. And yet, words also serve as Hamlet's prison. He analyzes and examines every nuance of his situation until he has exhausted every angle. They cause him to be indecisive. He dallies in his own wit, intoxicated by the mix of words he can concoct; he frustrates his own burning desire to be more like his father, the Hyperion. When he says that Claudius is ". . .no more like my father than I to Hercules" he recognizes his enslavement to words, his inability to thrust home his sword of truth. No mythic character is Hamlet. He is stuck, unable to avenge his father's death because words control him.

What an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear murderèd
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
And fall-a-cursing like a very drab,
A scallion!

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Hamlet's paradoxical relationship with words has held audiences in his thrall since he debuted in 1603 or so. But the controversy of his sexual identity equally charms and repels people.

Is Hamlet in love with his mother? The psychoanalytic profile of the character supports Freud's theory that Hamlet has an unnatural love for his mother. Hamlet unequivocally hates his stepfather and abhors the incestuous relationship between Claudius and Gertrude. But whether jealousy prompts his hatred, whether his fixation on his mother causes his inability to love Ophelia, and whether he lusts after Gertrude all depend on interpretation. And no interpretation is flawless.

Hamlet's love life could result from his Puritanical nature. Like the Puritans whose presence was growing in England of the time, Hamlet is severely puritanical about love and sex. He is appalled by Gertrude's show of her pleasure at Claudius' touch, and he clearly loathes women. His anger over Claudius' and Gertrude's relationship could as easily result from a general distaste for sexual activity as from desire to be with his mother.

Hamlet could be, at heart, a brutal misogynist, terrified of love because he is terrified of women. He verbally abuses Ophelia, using sexual innuendo and derision, and he encourages her to get to a nunnery. Another play on words, nunnery, in this instance, symbolizes both sexual abstinence and sexual perversity. In a cloister, Ophelia would take a vow of chastity, and in a brothel, she would serve as the basest sexual object.

Can concluding whether Hamlet is mad or merely pretending madness determine all the questions about Hamlet's nature? Could a madman manipulate his destiny as adeptly as Hamlet turns the tables on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Perhaps he is crazy like a fox . . . calculated and criminal. Or perhaps his own portrayal of madness — his "antic disposition" — that he dons like a mask or a costume actually drives him.

Could Hamlet's madness be his tragic flaw? Or is his flaw that he believes he is pretending to be mad? Are words his tragic flaw? Or could his tragic flaw be that he possesses the same hubris that kills all the

great tragic heroes — that he believes he can decide who should live and who should die, who should be forgiven and who should be punished? Then, perhaps, is the ghost a manifestation of his own conscience and not a real presence at all?

Which leads to the question students must ultimately consider: Is Hamlet a tragic hero at all? The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined the tragic hero with Oedipus as the archetype a great man at the pinnacle

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of his power who, through a flaw in his own character, topples, taking everyone in his jurisdiction with him. Hamlet has no great power, though it is clear from Claudius' fears and from Claudius' assessment of Hamlet's popularity that he might have power were he to curry it among the people. His topple results as much from external factors as from his own flaws. Nevertheless, he certainly does take everyone with him when he falls.

Perhaps, like Arthur Miller, who redefined tragedy in an essay called "Tragedy and the Common Man," Shakespeare modified Aristotle's definition for his own age and created a tragic hero who can appeal to a larger, more enduring segment of the population. Hamlet fulfills the Aristotelian requirement that the tragic hero invoke in us a deep sense of pity and fear, that we learn from him how not to conduct our lives. Hamlet is our hero because he is, as we are, at once both confused and enticed by endless dilemmas that come from being, after all, merely human.

Claudius

1

Claudius

Shakespeare's villains are complex. Unlike the earlier antiheroes of the revenge or morality plays that were popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, Shakespearean criminals lack the simple clarity of absolute evil. Claudius is a perfect example of a quintessential Shakespearean antagonist.

Claudius is socially adept, and his charm is genuine. He can exhibit deep distress over his "dear brother's death" and admiration for his wife, "Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state." He knows the value of a great funeral, but quickly turns mourning into celebration and moves on "With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" to whatever lies ahead. He is a decisive man, fair in his politics and commanding — if Gertrude's allegiance is any indication — in his bedroom.

The Queen has chosen to marry Claudius, and she defends him even to her son. In fact, she never opposes Claudius in anything. Were he dark and sinister in all things, she would fear and despise him; she follows him willingly even when he arranges to send her beloved son into the jaws of death. He must be sincere in his love for her. He explains his feelings for her at the end of Act IV, but he has proven these feelings consistently throughout the play

The Queen his mother

Lives almost by his looks, and for myself,
My virtue or my plague, be it either which,
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul
That as the star moves not but in his sphere,

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I could not by her.

A character who loves is not merely a cold-blooded killer. Like Hamlet, his conflicting imperatives tear him apart. Whereas he recognizes that he his "offense is rank" and "smells to heaven," he also admits that he will not make amends with God because he refuses to give up what his crime has bought him. He is willing to take the consequences of his actions.

In some ways, Claudius exhibits more heroism than Hamlet. He manipulates fortune and takes what is not rightfully his, but remains unapologetic for his actions; he possesses enough strength to admit that

he would do the same again. Hamlet, torn by conscience to smite the morally deficient Claudius, causes the death of six innocent people before he accomplishes his goal. By taking full responsibility for his actions, Claudius mitigates his evil nature.

The mark of a great Shakespearean antagonist is how completely he mirrors the protagonist. Claudius is no more Machiavellian than Hamlet; both ultimately believe that the end justifies the means, and both ultimately sacrifice humanity and humaneness in the acquisition of their goals.

What makes Claudius a villain is that he is wrong, and Hamlet is right. Claudius is a sneak who murdered and lied. Hamlet commits his murders in the open and suffers the pangs of his own conscience. Claudius subverts his conscience and refuses to ask for divine forgiveness. Hamlet seeks contrition and absolves himself of guilt before he dies; Claudius receives no absolution and seeks none. Hamlet will spend eternity in Heaven; Claudius will burn in Hell.

Context

The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558–1603) and James I (ruled 1603–1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King's Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life, but the dearth of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare's plays were really written by someone else—Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates—but the support for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars. In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to profoundly affect the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

Written during the first part of the seventeenth century (probably in

1600 or 1601), Hamlet was probably first performed in July 1602. It was first published in printed form in 1603 and appeared in an enlarged edition in 1604. As was common practice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Shakespeare borrowed for his plays ideas and stories from earlier literary works. He could have taken the story of Hamlet from several possible sources, including a twelfth-century Latin history of Denmark compiled by Saxo Grammaticus and a prose work by the French writer François de Belleforest, entitled *Histoires Tragiques*. The raw material that Shakespeare appropriated in writing Hamlet is the story of a Danish prince whose uncle murders the prince's father, marries his mother, and claims the throne. The prince pretends to be feeble-minded to throw his uncle off guard, then manages to kill his uncle in revenge. Shakespeare changed the emphasis of this story entirely, making his Hamlet a philosophically minded prince who delays taking action because his knowledge of his uncle's crime is so uncertain. Shakespeare went far beyond making uncertainty a personal quirk of Hamlet's, introducing a number of important ambiguities into the play that even the audience cannot resolve with certainty. For instance, whether Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, shares in Claudius's guilt; whether Hamlet continues to love Ophelia even as he spurns her, in Act III; whether Ophelia's death is suicide or accident; whether the ghost offers reliable knowledge, or seeks to deceive and tempt Hamlet; and, perhaps most importantly, whether Hamlet would be morally justified in taking revenge on his uncle. Shakespeare makes it clear that the stakes riding on some of these questions are enormous—the actions of these characters bring disaster upon an entire kingdom. At the play's end it is not even clear whether justice has been achieved.

By modifying his source materials in this way, Shakespeare was able to take an unremarkable revenge story and make it resonate with the most fundamental themes and problems of the Renaissance. The Renaissance is a vast cultural phenomenon that began in fifteenth-century Italy with the recovery of classical Greek and Latin texts that had been lost to the Middle Ages. The scholars who enthusiastically rediscovered these classical texts were motivated by an educational and political ideal called (in Latin) *humanitas*—the idea that all of the capabilities and virtues peculiar to human beings should be studied and developed to their furthest extent. Renaissance humanism, as this movement is now called, generated a new interest in human experience, and also an enormous optimism about the potential scope of human understanding. Hamlet's famous speech in Act II, "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!" (II.ii.293–297) is directly based upon one of the major texts of the Italian humanists, Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. For the humanists, the purpose of cultivating reason was to lead to a better understanding of how to act, and their fondest hope was that the coordination of action and understanding

would lead to great benefits for society as a whole.

As the Renaissance spread to other countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a more skeptical strain of humanism developed, stressing the limitations of human understanding. For example, the sixteenth-century French humanist, Michel de Montaigne, was no less interested in studying human experiences than the earlier humanists were, but he maintained that the world of experience was a world of appearances, and that human beings could never hope to see past those appearances into the "realities" that lie behind them. This is the world in which Shakespeare places his characters. Hamlet is faced with the difficult task of correcting an injustice that he can never have sufficient knowledge of—a dilemma that is by no means unique, or even uncommon. And while Hamlet is fond of pointing out questions that cannot be answered because they concern supernatural and metaphysical matters, the play as a whole chiefly demonstrates the difficulty of knowing the truth about other people—their guilt or innocence, their motivations, their feelings, their relative states of sanity or insanity. The world of other people is a world of appearances, and Hamlet is, fundamentally, a play about the difficulty of living in that world.

Gertrude

1

Gertrude

Gertrude is a shadowy character with little substance on which to hang a characterization. We can examine her through what others say about her more than through what she says.

That she is "th'imperial jointress" to the throne of Denmark indicates that she wields some power and suggests that Claudius' decision to marry her had political implications. Yet Hamlet indicts all women by calling her fickle — "frailty, thy name is woman." We see through Hamlet the picture of a woman who one day lived obediently and in the shadow of one king to whom she was devoted. The next day she allies herself in love and politics with the polar opposite of the man she formerly called husband.

The most haunting questions about Gertrude's character revolve around whether she knows that Claudius is a criminal. Is she merely a dependent woman who needs to live through her man? Is she a conniving temptress who used her power to conspire with Claudius to kill King Hamlet and usurp Prince Hamlet's ascendancy?

No textual references are conclusive. The ghost of King Hamlet calls her his "most seeming virtuous queen." He entreats Hamlet to "Leave her to Heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her." These words could imply that she has reason to be guilty, that she is not blameless. Later, the ghost implores Hamlet to comfort her. "But look, amazement on thy mother sits. / Oh step between her and her fighting soul." Again, he waxes protective of her but implies that she has some reason to be spiritually conflicted. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive at Elsinore, she tells them that they have been sent for because of the way Hamlet "hath talked of you," and she promises them compensation fit for "a king's remembrance." She exhibits apparent sincerity in her concern for Hamlet, and yet, even after Hamlet has told her what he knows about Claudius, even after he has shared his fears of the trip to England, even after Hamlet has clearly proven that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, she never opposes Claudius to protect Hamlet. Unless, as some critics believe, she drinks the

poisoned wine as an act of maternal protectiveness. Does she know the wine is poisoned? When "the Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" is she deliberately drinking to prevent Hamlet's death? If Gertrude has overheard Claudius and Laertes plotting, she would know all. If she is in Claudius' confidence, she would be complicit with all his conspiracies. Though Claudius professes love and

2 admiration for Gertrude, he never confides to anyone the extent of their relationship. Gertrude describes her love for Hamlet when she asks him not to return to Wittenberg. When she shares with Ophelia her hope that the young woman would have married her Hamlet, she divulges her wish for his happiness. However, she never declares any kind of emotion for Claudius, either positive or negative. Ultimately, Gertrude's character remains malleable. In the hands of an astute actor and a clever director, she can come across as either Claudius' co-conspirator or Hamlet's defender. Either interpretation works, if built substantially

Hamlet as a comment on humanity

1

Hamlet as a comment on humanity

The Elizabethan play The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark is one of William Shakespeare's most popular works. One of the possible reasons for this play's popularity is the way Shakespeare uses the character Hamlet to exemplify the complex workings of the human mind. The approach taken by Shakespeare in Hamlet has generated countless different interpretations of meaning, but it is through Hamlet's struggle to confront his internal dilemma, deciding when to revenge his father's death, that the reader becomes aware of one of the more common interpretations in Hamlet; the idea that Shakespeare is attempting to comment on the influence that one's state of mind can have on the decisions they make in life.

As the play unfolds, Shakespeare uses the encounters that Hamlet must face to demonstrate the effect that one's perspective can have on the way the mind works. In his book Some Shakespeare Themes & An Approach to Hamlet, L.C. Knight takes notice of Shakespeare's use of these encounters to journey into the workings of the human mind when he writes:

What we have in Hamlet is the exploration and implicit criticism of a particular state of mind or consciousness. In Hamlet, Shakespeare uses a series of encounters to reveal the

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complex state of the human mind, made up of reason, emotion, and attitude towards the self, to allow the reader to make a judgment or form an opinion about fundamental aspects of human life. (192)

Shakespeare sets the stage for Hamlet's internal dilemma in Act 1, Scene 5 of Hamlet when the ghost of Hamlet's father appears and calls upon Hamlet to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.24). It is from this point forward that Hamlet must struggle

with the dilemma of whether or not to kill Claudius, his uncle, and if so when to actually do it. As the play progresses, Hamlet does not seek his revenge when the opportunity presents itself, and it is the reasoning that Hamlet uses to justify his delay that becomes paramount to the reader's understanding of the effect that Hamlet's mental perspective has on his situation.

In order to fully understand how Hamlet's perspective plays an important role in this play, the reader must attempt to answer the fundamental question: Why does Hamlet procrastinate in taking revenge on Claudius? Although the answer to this question is at best somewhat complicated, Mark W. Scott attempts to offer some possible explanations for Hamlet's delay in his book, *Shakespeare for Students: Critics who find the cause of Hamlet's delay in his internal*

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meditations typically view the prince as a man of great moral integrity who is forced to commit an act which goes against his deepest principles. On numerous occasions, the prince tries to make sense of his moral dilemma through personal meditations, which Shakespeare presents as soliloquies. Another perspective of Hamlet's internal struggle suggests that the prince has become so disenchanted with life since his father's death that he has neither the desire nor the will to exact revenge. (74)

Mr. Scott points out morality and disenchantment, both of which belong solely to an individual's own conscious, as two potential causes of Hamlet's procrastination, and therefore he offers support to the idea that Shakespeare is placing important emphasis on the role of individual perspective in this play. The importance that Mr. Scott's comment places on Hamlet's use of personal meditations to "make sense of his moral dilemma" (74), also helps to support L.C. Knight's contention that Shakespeare is attempting to use these dilemmas to illustrate the inner workings of the human mind.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare gives the reader an opportunity to evaluate the way the title character handles a very complicated dilemma and the problems that are generated because of it. These problems that face Hamlet are perhaps best viewed as overstatements of the very types of problems that all people must face as they live

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their lives each day. The magnitude of these "everyday" problems are almost always a matter of individual perspective. Each person will perceive a given situation based on his own state of mind. The one, perhaps universal, dilemma that faces all of mankind is the problem of identity. As Victor L. Cahn writes, "Hamlet's primary dilemma is that of every human being: given this time and place and these circumstances, How is he to respond? What is his responsibility?" (69). This dilemma defined by Mr. Cahn fits in well with the comments of both L.C. Knight and Mark Scott, because it too requires some serious introspection on the part of Hamlet to resolve,

and also supports the idea that Shakespeare is using Hamlet's dilemma to illustrate the effect that perspective, or state of mind, can have on a given situation.

Hamlet's delay in seeking revenge for his father's death plays an important role in allowing Shakespeare's look into the human mind to manifest itself. If Hamlet had killed Claudius at first opportunity, there would have been little chance for Shakespeare to develop the internal dilemma which all three critics, L.C. Knight, Mark Scott, and Victor Cahn, mention in support of the widely held view that, in Hamlet, Shakespeare is attempting to make a comment about the complexity of the human mind, and the power that a person's mental perspective can have on the events of his life.

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Hamlet Characters Analysis features noted Shakespeare scholar William Hazlitt:

Hamlet Characters Analysis features noted Shakespeare scholar William Hazlitt's famous

critical essay about the characters of *Hamlet*.

THIS is that Hamlet the Dane, whom we read of in our youth, and whom we may be said almost

to remember in our after-years; he who made that famous soliloquy on life, who gave the advice

to the players, who thought "this goodly frame, the earth, a steril promontory, and this brave o'erhanging

firmament, the air, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours"; whom "man delighted not, nor woman neither"; he who talked with

the grave-diggers, and moralised on Yorick's skull; the school-fellow of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Wittenberg; the friend of Horatio; the lover of Ophelia; he that was mad and sent

to England; the slow avenger of his father's death; who lived at the court of Horwendillus five

hundred years before we were born, but all whose thoughts we seem to know as well as we do our own, because we have read them in Shakespeare. Hamlet is a name; his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history. Whoever has become thoughtful and melancholy through his own mishaps or those of others; whoever has borne about with him the clouded brow of reflection, and thought himself "too much i' the sun"; whoever has seen the golden lamp of day dimmed by envious mists rising in his own breast, and could find in the world before him only a dull blank with nothing left remarkable in it; whoever has known "the pangs of despised love, the insolence of office, or the spurns which patient merit of the unworthy takes"; he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady, who has had his hopes blighted and his youth staggered by the apparitions of strange things; who cannot be well at ease, while he sees evil hovering near him like a spectre; whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought, he to whom the universe seems infinite, and himself nothing; whose bitterness of soul makes him careless of consequences, and who goes to a play as his best resource to shove off, to a second remove, the evils of life by a mock representation of them—this is the true Hamlet. We have been so used to this tragedy that we hardly know how to criticise it any more than we should know how to describe our own faces.' But we must make such observations as we can. It is the one of Shakespear's plays that we think of the oftenest, because it abounds most in striking reflections on human life, and because the distresses of Hamlet are transferred, by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity. Whatever happens to him we apply to ourselves, because he applies it so himself as a means of general reasoning. He is a great moraliser; and what makes him worth attending to is, that he moralises on his own feelings and experience. He

is not a commonplace pedant. If Lear is distinguished by the greatest depth of passion,
HAMLET

is the most remarkable for the ingenuity, originality, and unstudied development of character.

Shakespear had more magnanimity than any other poet, and he has shewn more of it in this play

than in any other. There is no attempt to force an interest: everything is left for time and circumstances to unfold. The attention is excited without effort, the incidents succeed each other

as matters of course, the characters think and speak and act just as they might do, if left entirely

'to themselves. There is no set purpose, no straining at a point. The observations are suggested by

the passing scene—the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind.

The whole play is an exact transcript of what might be supposed to have taken place at the court

of Denmark, at the remote period of time fixed upon, before the modern refinements in morals

and manners were heard of. It would have been inter-esting enough to have been admitted as a

bystander in such a scene, at such a time, to have heard and witnessed something of what was

going on. But here we are more than spectators. We have not only "the outward pageants and the

signs of grief"; but "we have that within which passes shew." We read the thoughts of the heart,

we catch the passions living as they rise. Other dramatic writers give us very fine versions and

paraphrases of nature; but Shakespear, together with his own comments, gives us the original

text, that we may judge for ourselves. This is a very great advantage.

The character of Hamlet stands quite by itself. It is not a character marked by strength of will or

even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment. Hamlet is as little of the hero as a

man can well be: but he is a young and princely novice, full of high enthusiasm and quick

sensibility—the sport of circumstances, questioning with fortune and refining on his own feelings, and forced from the natural bias of his disposition by the strangeness of his situation.

He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the

occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again,

where he alters the letters which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death. At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his players, and by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act "that has no relish of salvation in it."

"He kneels and prays,
And now I'll do't, and so he goes to heaven,
And so am I reveng'd: that would be scann'd.
He kill'd my father, and for that,
I, his sole son, send him to heaven.
Why this is reward, not revenge.
Up sword and know thou a more horrid time,
When he is drunk, asleep, or in a rage."
He is the prince of philosophical speculators; and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether. So he scruples to trust the suggestions of the ghost, contrives the scene of the play to have surer proof of his uncle's guilt, and then rests satisfied with this confirmation of his suspicions, and the success of his experiment, instead of acting upon it. Yet he is sensible of his own weakness, taxes himself with it, and tries to reason himself out of it.

"How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast; no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To rust in us unus'd. Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event,—
A thought which quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom,
And ever three parts coward;—I do not know
Why yet I live to say, this thing's to do;
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do it. Examples gross as earth exhort me:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. 'Tis not to be great Never to stir without great argument;
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw, When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd, Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame, Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause, Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain?—O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth."
Still he does nothing; and this very speculation on his own infirmity only affords him
another occasion for indulging it. It is not from any want of attachment to his father or of
abhorrence of his murder that Hamlet is thus dilatory, but it is more to his taste to
indulge his imagination in reflecting upon the enormity of the crime and refining on his
schemes of vengeance, than to put them into immediate practice. His ruling passion is
to think, not to act: and any vague pretext that flatters this propensity instantly diverts,
him from his previous purposes.

The moral perfection of this character has been called in question, we think, by those
who did not understand it. It is more interesting than according to rules; amiable, though
not faultless.

The ethical delineations of "that noble and liberal casuist" (as Shakespear has been well
called) do not exhibit the drab-coloured quakerism of morality. His plays are not copied
either from *The Whole Duty of Man*, or from *The Academy of Compliments*! We confess
we are a little shocked at the want of refinement in those who are shocked at the want
of refinement in Hamlet. The neglect of punctilious exactness in his behaviour either
partakes of the "licence of the time," or else belongs to the very excess of intellectual
refinement in the character, which makes the common rules of life, as well as his own
purposes, sit loose upon him. He may be said to be amenable only to the tribunal of his
own thoughts, and is too much taken up with the airy world of contemplation to lay as
much stress as he ought on the practical consequences of things. His habitual
principles of action are unhinged and out of joint with the time. His conduct to Ophelia
is quite natural in his circumstances. It is that of assumed severity only. It is the effect of
disappointed hope, of bitter regrets, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the
distractions of the scene around him! Amidst the natural and preternatural horrors of his
situation, he might be excused in delicacy from carrying on a regular courtship. When
"his father's spirit was in arms," it was not a time for the son to make love in. He could
neither marry Ophelia, nor wound her mind by explaining the cause of his alienation,
which he durst hardly trust himself to think of. It would have taken him years to have
come to a direct explanation on the point. In the harassed state of his mind, he could
not have done much otherwise than he did. His conduct does not contradict what he
says when he sees her funeral, "I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers Could not with
all their quantity of love Make up my sum." Nothing can be more affecting or beautiful

than the Queen's apostrophe to Ophelia on throwing the flowers into the grave. — "Sweets to the sweet, farewell. I hop'd thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife: I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid, And not have strew'd thy grave." Shakespear was thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of human character, and he here shews us the Queen, who was so criminal in some respects, not without sensibility and affection in other relations of life.—Ophelia is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon. Oh rose of May, oh flower too soon faded! Her love, her madness, her death, are described with the truest touches of tenderness and pathos. It is a character which nobody but Shakespear could have drawn in the way that he has done, and to the conception of which there is not even the smallest approach, except in some of the old romantic ballads.¹ Her brother, Laertes, is a character we do not find in the account of her death, a friend has pointed out an instance of the poet's exact observation of nature:—

"There is a willow growing o'er a brook,
That shews its hoary leaves i' th' glassy stream."

The inside of the leaves of the willow, next the water, is of a whitish colour, and the reflection would therefore be "hoary."

Polonius does not like so well: he is too hot and choleric, and somewhat rhodomontade. Polonius is a perfect character in its kind; nor is there any foundation for the objections which have been made to the consistency of this part. It is said that he acts very foolishly and talks very sensibly. There is no inconsistency in that. Again, that he talks wisely at one time and foolishly at another; that his advice to Laertes is very excellent, and his advice to the King and Queen on the subject of Hamlet's madness very ridiculous. But he gives the one as a father, and is sincere in it; he gives the other as a mere courtier, a busy-body, and is accordingly officious, garrulous, and impertinent. In short, Shakespear has been accused of inconsistency in this and other characters, only because he has kept up the distinction which there is in nature, between the understandings and the moral habits of men, between the absurdity of their ideas and the absurdity of their motives. Polonius is not a fool, but he makes himself so. His folly, whether in his actions or speeches, comes under the head of impropriety of intention. We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all, HAMLET. There is no play that suffers so much in being transferred to the stage. Hamlet himself seems hardly capable of being acted. Mr. Kemble unavoidably fails in this character from a want of ease and variety.' The character of Hamlet is made up of undulating lines; it has the yielding flexibility of "a wave o' th' sea." Mr. Kemble plays it like a man in armour, with a determined inveteracy of purpose, in one undeviating straight line, which is as remote from the natural grace and refined susceptibility of the character, as the sharp angles and abrupt starts which Mr. Kean introduces into the part. Mr. Kean's Hamlet is as much too splenetic and rash as Mr. Kemble's is too deliberate and formal. His manner is too strong and pointed. He throws a severity, approaching to virulence, into the common observations and answers. There is nothing of this in Hamlet. He is, as it were, wrapped up in his reflections, and only thinks aloud. There should therefore be no attempt to impress what he says upon others by a studied exaggeration of emphasis or manner; no talking at his hearers.

There should be as much of the gentleman and scholar as possible infused into the part, and as little of the actor. A pensive air of sadness should sit reluctantly upon his

brow, but no appearance of fixed and sullen gloom. He is full of weakness and melancholy, but there is no harshness in his nature. He is the most amiable of misanthropes.

Hamlet Characters guide studies each character:

1

Hamlet Characters guide studies each character's role and motivation in this play.

Hamlet: Son of the late King Hamlet of Denmark and nephew to the present King. Famous for

the graveyard scene where holding the skull of deceased jester Yorick, Hamlet realizes man has

little lasting control over his fate and also for describing man as the "paragon of animals!"

Educated in Wittenburg and introduced to us in Act I, Scene II, Hamlet resents his mother Queen

Gertrude marrying King Claudius within two months of his father King Hamlet's death to which

she was previously married.

Distrustful of King Claudius, Hamlet is equally weary of the King's spies, Guildenstern and

Rosencrantz who attempt to know his true intentions. When Hamlet meets King Hamlet's Ghost

and learns that King Claudius murdered his father, Hamlet changes from a distrustful, disillusioned young man to one driven to avenge his father's death. To this end, Hamlet distrusts

and rejects all those around him whom he believes are spying on him for King Claudius.

Fearing that his intentions could be revealed, Hamlet invents a madness to distract and hide his

true intentions from King Claudius' many spies. This includes Ophelia, the woman he loves

whom he bitterly rejects when he learns she has betrayed him.

Cunning and inventive, Hamlet changes the lines of a play performed before King Claudius to

divine whether King Hamlet's Ghost told him the truth about his father's death. At the end of the

play, Hamlet kills both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (indirectly), Laertes and finally King

Claudius before dying himself from a wound inflicted by Laertes.

Horatio: Friend to Hamlet and the one person Hamlet truly trusts. Witnesses King Hamlet's

Ghost in Act I. At the end of the play, Horatio wishes to commit suicide to join Hamlet in death

but Hamlet convinces him to live so he can tell his story, restoring Hamlet's name.

Claudius: The present King of Denmark, King Claudius took Queen Gertrude whom he loves as

his queen and wife, much to the consternation of Hamlet who believes his mother has betrayed him and his father's memory by doing so. Cautious and suspicious, Claudius has courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet's love interest Ophelia spying on Hamlet for him since as he says, the great ones must be watched. Distrustful of Hamlet and his "madness", King Claudius has Hamlet deported to England to be killed when he fears he has become a threat. Instead, Hamlet returns to Denmark, and King Claudius manipulates Laertes into killing Hamlet for him. Unfortunately, King Claudius' plan to poison Hamlet backfires, killing his beloved Queen Gertrude instead. In Act III, Scene III, King Claudius reveals his inner guilt and the knowledge that he cannot avoid God's judgment of him... Dies at the end of the play to the poison tipped sword of Hamlet.

Gertrude: Queen of Denmark and mother to Hamlet, Queen Gertrude is resented deeply by Hamlet for marrying King Claudius within two months of his father, King Hamlet's death. Hamlet makes this bitterly clear throughout the play especially in his first soliloquy in Act I, Scene II. Queen Gertrude loves her son but when she sees a play mocking her actions, she famously says of the female character who vows never to forget her husband, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks [I think]", (Act III, Scene II, Line 242) in an attempt to justify her own actions in remarrying so quickly. Clearly loving of Hamlet, she realizes her wrong when Hamlet scolds her mercilessly in Act III, Scene V. She agrees to no longer share King Claudius' bed, and aids her son by hiding Hamlet's true mental state from King Claudius. Dies in Act V, Scene II, to a poisoned cup of wine meant for Hamlet.

Polonius: Lord Chamberlain. The father of Laertes and Ophelia, Lord Chamberlain Polonius dutifully serves King Claudius. When news of Hamlet's madness circulate, Polonius is certain that his daughter Ophelia is responsible, having made Hamlet lovesick. Worried that Hamlet's intentions for his daughter are dishonorable, Polonius orders Ophelia to keep her distance. Later

when King Claudius needs information, Polonius uses his daughter to spy on Hamlet. He even has Reynaldo, a servant spy on his own son Laertes in Paris. An enthusiastic spy for King Claudius, Polonius is killed by Hamlet when he attempts to listen in on a conversation between Hamlet and Queen Gertrude in Act III, Scene IV. His death leads to Ophelia's madness and later drowning brought on by grief and also to Laertes' alliance with King Claudius to kill Hamlet, to avenge Polonius, his father's death.

Reynaldo: Servant to Polonius, Reynaldo is instructed to spy on his Laertes in Paris in Act II, Scene I.

Laertes: Polonius' son, Laertes is held in high esteem for his fencing skills. Famous for the advise, "to thine own self be true," (be true to yourself) and the advise to "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be;" in Act I, Scene III. Laertes' role in this play is minor until the death of his father

Polonius. From this point on, Laertes emerges as rather more assertive, confronting King

Claudius personally to know his father's whereabouts, arguing with a Priest for being disrespectful to his sister, fighting Hamlet above his sister's grave and ultimately conspiring to

and killing Hamlet with the help of King Claudius. We see little of Laertes' inner character

however since he responds to events continuously. Loving of his sister Ophelia, he must watch

his sister's cruel decay into madness helplessly following his father's death. Dies in Act V, Scene

II, the victim of a wound inflicted upon him by Hamlet with his own poison tipped sword.

Ophelia: The daughter to Polonius, Ophelia is loved by Hamlet. Unfortunately as Queen

Gertrude laments at Ophelia's funeral, Ophelia never marries Hamlet. Dutiful to her father, she

ignores Hamlet's romantic overtures when instructed to ignore them by her father Polonius.

Receives advice on how to live from brother Laertes in Act I, Scene III. Though loved by Hamlet, Ophelia ultimately betrays him by spying on him for King Claudius. As a result Hamlet

mercilessly insults her virtue during the play "The Murder of Gonzago" in Act III, Scene II. A

dutiful daughter, Ophelia descends into madness from the grief of losing her father Polonius and

later drowns in circumstances that suggest a possible suicide. Her funeral is the location of a fight between Hamlet and Laertes that centers on which loved her more; Hamlet believes he did, resenting Laertes exaggerated emphasis of his sorrow...

Fortinbras: Prince of Norway. The son of King Fortinbras, who was defeated by King Hamlet,

Young Fortinbras has raised an army to reclaim the lands lost by his father to King Hamlet and

Denmark. Convinced into attacking the Polish instead, Young Fortinbras displays all the noble,

honor driven qualities, Hamlet wishes he had. At the end of the play, Young Fortinbras is

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recommended by Hamlet to be the next King of Denmark. Parallels Hamlet's character in that

like Hamlet his father was a ruler (King of Norway) and that both are now nephews to the

current rulers of their lands..

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern: Courtiers to King Claudius, both these men grew up with Hamlet.

As a result King Claudius recruits them to spy on Hamlet for him. Neither man has a problem

trading in their friendship to betray Hamlet; they serve the King. Both die when the instructions

they bear from King Claudius are altered by Hamlet to instruct King Claudius' English associates

to kill those bearing his commission immediately (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

Voltimand, Cornelius, Osric and a Gentleman: Courtiers.

A Priest: Introduces at Ophelia's funeral, the Priest insults Laertes by expressing his personal

opinion that Ophelia does not deserve a proper Christian burial for ending her life by suicide,

which was considered a sin unworthy of proper burial.

Marcellus and Bernardo: Officers who initially spot King Hamlet's Ghost in Act I, Scene I.

Francisco: A soldier. Famous for the lines "'tis [it is] bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart" which

sets the tone of this tragedy.

A Captain, English Ambassadors, Players, Two Clowns (Gravediggers), Lords, Ladies,

Officers, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers, and Attendants.

1

Hamlet Essay features Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous critique based on his legendary and influential Shakespeare notes and lectures.

HAMLET was the play, or rather Hamlet himself was the character, in the intuition and exposition of which I first made my turn for philosophical criticism, and especially for insight into the genius of Shakspeare, noticed. This happened first amongst my acquaintances, as Sir George Beaumont will bear witness; and subsequently, long before Schlegel had delivered at Vienna the lectures on Shakspeare, which he afterwards published, I had given on the same subject eighteen lectures substantially the same, proceeding from the very same point of view, and deducing the same conclusions, so far as I either then agreed, or now agree, with him. I gave these lectures at the Royal Institution, before six or seven hundred auditors of rank and eminence, in the spring of the same year, in which Sir Humphrey Davy, a fellow-lecturer, made his great revolutionary discoveries in chemistry. Even in detail the coincidence of Schlegel with my lectures was so extraordinary, that all who at a later period heard the same words, taken by me from my notes of the lectures at the Royal Institution, concluded a borrowing on my part from Schlegel. Mr. Hazlitt, whose hatred of me is in such an inverse ratio to my zealous kindness towards him, as to be defended by his warmest admirer, Charles Lamb—(who, God bless him! besides his characteristic obstinacy of adherence to old friends, as long at least as they are at all down in the world, is linked as by a charm to Hazlitt's conversation)—only as 'frantic';—Mr. Hazlitt, I say, himself replied to an assertion of my plagiarism from Schlegel in these words;—
"That is a lie; for I myself heard the very same character of Hamlet from Coleridge before he went to Germany, and when he had neither read nor could read a page of German!"
Now Hazlitt was on a visit to me at my cottage at Nether Stowey, Somerset, in the summer of the year 1798, in the September of which year I first was out of sight of the shores of Great Britain.
Recorded by me, S. T. Coleridge, 7th January, 1819.
The seeming inconsistencies in the conduct and character of Hamlet have long exercised the conjectural ingenuity of critics; and, as we are always loth to suppose that the cause of defective

apprehension is in ourselves, the mystery has been too commonly explained by the very easy process of setting it down as in fact inexplicable, and by resolving the phenomenon into a misgrowth or lusus of the capricious and irregular genius of Shakspeare. The shallow and stupid arrogance of these vulgar and indolent decisions I would fain do my best to expose. I believe the character of Hamlet may be traced to Shakspeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy. Indeed, that this character must have some connection with the common fundamental laws of our nature may be assumed from the fact, that Hamlet has been the darling of every country in which the literature of England has been fostered. In order to understand him, it is essential that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds. Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense: but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect;—for if there be an overbalance, in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action. Now one of Shakspeare's modes of creating characters is, to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakspeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, .and our meditation on the workings of our minds,—an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In

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Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the medium of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action, consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakspeare places in circumstances, under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the

moment:—Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. Thus it is

that this tragedy presents a direct contrast to that of Macbeth; the one proceeds with the utmost

slowness, the other with a crowded and breathless rapidity.

The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from its

healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world

without,—giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all common-place actualities.

It is the nature of thought to be indefinite;—definiteness belongs to external imagery alone.

Hence it is that the sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from

the beholder's reflection upon it;—not from the sensuous impression, but from the imaginative

reflex. Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something akin to disappointment: it

is only subsequently that the image comes back full into the mind, and brings with it a train of

grand or beautiful associations. Hamlet feels this; his senses are in a state of trance, and he looks

upon external things as hieroglyphics. His soliloquy—

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt, &c.

springs from that craving after the indefinite—for that which is not—which most easily besets

men of genius; and the self-delusion common to this temper of mind is finely exemplified in the

character which Hamlet gives of himself:—

—It cannot be

But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall

To make oppression bitter.

He mistakes the seeing his chains for the breaking them, delays action till action is of no use,

and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident.

There is a great significancy in the names of Shakspeare's plays. In the Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, and Winter's Tale, the total effect is produced by a

coordination of the characters as in a wreath of flowers. But in Coriolanus, Lear, Romeo and

Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, &c. the effect arises from the subordination of all to one, either as the

prominent person, or the principal object. Cymbeline is the only exception; and even that has its advantages in preparing the audience for the chaos of time, place, and costume, by throwing the date back into a fabulous king's reign.

But as of more importance, so more striking, is the judgment displayed by our truly dramatic poet, as well as poet of the drama, in the management of his first scenes. With the single

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exception of Cymbeline, they either place before us at one glance both the past and the future in some effect, which implies the continuance and full agency of its cause, as in the feuds and

party-spirit of the servants of the two houses in the first scene of Romeo and Juliet; or in the

degrading passion for shews and public spectacles, and the overwhelming attachment for the

newest successful war-chief in the Roman people, already become a populace, contrasted with

the jealousy of the nobles in Julius Caesar;—or they at once commence the action so as to excite

a curiosity for the explanation in the following scenes, as in the storm of wind and waves, and

the boatswain in the Tempest, instead of anticipating our curiosity, as in most other first scenes,

and in too many other first acts;—or they act, by contrast of diction suited to the characters, at

once to heighten the effect, and yet to give a naturalness to the language and rhythm of the

principal personages, either as that of Prospero and Miranda by the appropriate lowness of the

style,—or as in King John, by the equally appropriate stateliness of official harangues or narratives, so that the after blank verse seems to belong to the rank and quality of the speakers,

and not to the poet;—or they strike at once the keynote, and give the predominant spirit of the

play, as in the Twelfth Night and in Macbeth;—or finally, the first scene comprises all these

advantages at once, as in Hamlet.

Compare the easy language of common life, in which this drama commences, with the direful

music and wild wayward rhythm and abrupt lyrics of the opening of Macbeth. The tone is quite

familiar;—there is no poetic description of night, no elaborate information conveyed by one

speaker to another of what both had immediately before their senses—(such as the first distich in Addison's *Cato*, which is a translation into poetry of 'Past four o'clock and a dark morning!');— and yet nothing bordering on the comic on the one hand, nor any striving of the intellect on the other. It is precisely the language of sensation among men who feared no charge of effeminacy for feeling what they had no want of resolution to bear. Yet the armour, the dead silence, the watchfulness that first interrupts it, the welcome relief of the guard, the cold, the broken expressions of compelled attention to bodily feelings still under control—all excellently accord with, and prepare for, the after gradual rise into tragedy;— but, above all, into a tragedy, the interest of which is as eminently *ad et apud intra*, as that of *Macbeth* is directly *ad extra*. In all the best attested stories of ghosts and visions, as in that of Brutus, of Archbishop Cranmer, that of Benvenuto Cellini recorded by himself, and the vision of Galileo communicated by him to his favourite pupil Torricelli, the ghost-seers were in a state of cold or chilling damp from without, and of anxiety inwardly. It has been with all of them as with Francisco on his guard,— alone, in the depth and silence of the night;—"twas bitter cold, and they were sick at heart, and not a mouse stirring.' The attention to minute sounds,—naturally associated with the recollection of minute objects, and the more familiar and trifling, the more impressive from the unusualness of their producing any impression at all —gives a philosophic pertinency to this last image; but it has likewise its dramatic use and purpose. For its commonness in ordinary conversation tends to produce the sense of reality, and at once hides the poet, and yet approximates the reader or spectator to that state in which the highest poetry will appear, and in its component parts, though not in the whole composition, really is, the language of nature. If I should not speak it, I feel that I should be thinking it;—the voice only is the poet's,— the words are my own. That Shakspeare meant to put an effect in the actor's power in the very first words— "Who's there?" — is evident from the impatience expressed by the startled Francisco in the words that follow —"Nay, answer

me: stand and unfold yourself." A brave man is never so peremptory, as when he fears that he is

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afraid. Observe the gradual transition from the silence and the still recent habit of listening in

Francisco's—"I think I hear them"—to the more cheerful call out, which a good actor would

observe, in the—"Stand ho! Who is there?" Bernardo's inquiry after Horatio, and the repetition of

his name and in his own presence indicate a respect or an eagerness that implies him as one of

the persons who are in the foreground; and the scepticism attributed to him,—

Horatio says, 'tis but our fantasy;

And will not let belief take hold of him—

prepares us for Hamlet's after eulogy on him as one whose blood and judgment were happily

commingled. The actor should also be careful to distinguish the expectation and gladness of

Bernardo's 'Welcome, Horatio!' from the mere courtesy of his 'Welcome, good Marcellus!' Now

observe the admirable indefiniteness of the first opening out of the occasion of all this anxiety.

The preparation informative of the audience is just as much as was precisely necessary, and no

more;—it begins with the uncertainty appertaining to a question:—

Mar. What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?—

Even the word 'again' has its credibilizing effect. Then Horatio, the representative of the ignorance of the audience, not himself, but by Marcellus to Bernardo, anticipates the common

solution—"tis but our fantasy!' upon which Marcellus rises into

This dreaded sight, twice seen of us—

which immediately afterwards becomes 'this apparition,' and that, too, an intelligent spirit, that is,

to be spoken to! Then comes the confirmation of Horatio's disbelief;—

Tush! tush! 'twill not appear!—

and the silence, with which the scene opened, is again restored in the shivering feeling of Horatio

sitting down, at such a time, and with the two eye-witnesses, to hear a story of a ghost, and that,

too, of a ghost which had appeared twice before at the very same hour. In the deep feeling which

Bernardo has of the solemn nature of what he is about to relate, he makes an effort to master his

own imaginative terrors by an elevation of style,—itself a continuation of the effort,—and by

turning off from the apparition, as from something which would force him too deeply into

himself, to the outward objects, the realities of nature, which had accompanied it:—

*Ber. Last night of all,
When yon same star, that's westward from the pole
Had made his course to illumine that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one—*

This passage seems to contradict the critical law that what is told, makes a faint impression

compared with what is beheld; for it does indeed convey to the mind more than the eye can

see; whilst the interruption of the narrative at the very moment when we are most intensely

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listening for the sequel, and have our thoughts diverted from the dreaded sight in expectation of

the desired, yet almost dreaded, tale—this gives all the suddenness and surprise of the original

appearance;—

Mar. Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!—

Note the judgment displayed in having the two persons present, who, as having seen the Ghost

before, are naturally eager in confirming their former opinions,—whilst the sceptic is silent, and

after having been twice addressed by his friends, answers with two hasty syllables—'Most like,'

—and a confession of horror:

—It harrows me with fear and wonder.

O heaven! words are wasted on those who feel, and to those who do not feel the exquisite

judgment of Shakspeare in this scene, what can be said?—Hume himself could not but have had

faith in this Ghost dramatically, let his anti-ghostism have been as strong as Sampson against

other ghosts less powerfully raised.

Act i. sc. i.

Mar. Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,

Why this same strict and most observant watch, &c.

How delightfully natural is the transition to the retrospective narrative! And observe, upon the

Ghost's reappearance, how much Horatio's courage is increased by having translated the late

individual spectator into general thought and past experience,—and the sympathy of Marcellus

and Bernardo with his patriotic surmises in daring to strike at the Ghost; whilst in a moment,

upon its vanishing the former solemn awe-stricken feeling returns upon them:—

*We do it wrong, being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence.—*

lb. Horatio's speech:—

*I have heard,
The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day, &c.*

No Addison could be more careful to be poetical in diction than Shakspeare in providing the

grounds and sources of its propriety. But how to elevate a thing almost mean by its familiarity,

young poets may learn in this treatment of the cock-crow.

lb. Horatio's speech:—

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*And, by my advice,
Let us impart what we have seen to-night
Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.*

Note the inobtrusive and yet fully adequate mode of introducing the main character, 'young

Hamlet,' upon whom is transferred all the interest excited for the acts and concerns of the king

his father.

lb. sc. 2. The audience are now relieved by a change of scene to the royal court, in order that

Hamlet may not have to take up the leavings of exhaustion. In the king's speech, observe the set

and pedantically antithetic form of the sentences when touching that which galled the heels of

conscience,—the strain of undignified rhetoric,—and yet in what follows concerning the public

weal, a certain appropriate majesty. Indeed was he not a royal brother?—

lb. King's speech:—

And now, Laertes, what's the news with you? &c.

Thus with great art Shakspeare introduces a most important, but still subordinate character first,

Laertes, who is yet thus graciously treated in consequence of the assistance given to the election

of the late king's brother instead of his son by Polonius.

lb.

Ham. A little more than kin, and less than kind.

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Ham. Not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun.

Hamlet opens his mouth with a playing on words, the complete absence of which throughout

characterizes Macbeth. This playing on words may be attributed to many causes or motives, as either to an exuberant activity of mind, as in the higher comedy of Shakspeare generally; —or to an imitation of it as a mere fashion, as if it were said—'Is not this better than groaning?'—or to a contemptuous exultation in minds vulgarized and overset by their success, as in the poetic instance of Milton's Devils in the battle;—or it is the language of resentment, as is familiar to every one who has witnessed the quarrels of the lower orders, where there is invariably a profusion of punning invective, whence, perhaps, nicknames have in a considerable degree sprung up;—or it is the language of suppressed passion, and especially of a hardly smothered personal dislike. The first and last of these combine in Hamlet's case; and I have little doubt that Farmer is right in supposing the equivocation carried on in the expression 'too much i' the sun,' or son.

lb.

Ham. Ay, madam, it is common.

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Here observe Hamlet's delicacy to his mother, and how the suppression prepares him for the overflow in the next speech, in which his" character is more developed by bringing forward his aversion to externals, and which betrays his habit of brooding over the world within him, coupled with a prodigality of beautiful words, which are the half embodyings of thought, and are more than thought, and have an outness, a reality sui generis, and yet retain their correspondence and shadowy affinity to the images and movements within. Note also Hamlet's silence to the long speech of the king which follows, and his respectful. but general, answer to his mother.

lb. Hamlet's first soliloquy:—

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! &c.

This tædium vitæ is a common oppression on minds cast in the Hamlet mould, and is caused by disproportionate mental exertion, which necessitates exhaustion of bodily feeling. Where there is a just coincidence of external and internal action, pleasure is always the result; but where the

former is deficient, and the mind's appetency of the ideal is unchecked, realities will seem cold

and unmoving. In such cases, passion combines itself with the indefinite alone. In this mood of

his mind the relation of the appearance of his father's spirit in arms is made all at once to

Hamlet:—it is—Horatio's speech, in particular—a perfect model of the 'true style of dramatic

narrative;— the purest poetry, and yet in the most natural language, equally remote from the inkhorn

and the plough.

Ib. sc. 3. This scene must be regarded as one of Shakspeare's lyric movements in the play, and

the skill with which it is interwoven with the dramatic parts is peculiarly an excellence of our

poet. You experience the sensation of a pause without the sense of a stop. You will observe in

Ophelia's short and general answer to the long speech of Laertes the natural carelessness of

innocence, which cannot think such a code of cautions and prudences necessary to its own

preservation.

Ib. Speech of Polonius:—(in Stockdale's edition.)

Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,)

Wringing it thus, you'll tender me a fool.

I suspect this 'wringing' is here used much in the same sense as 'wringing' or 'wrenching'; and

that the paren-thesis should be extended to 'thus.' 1

Ib. Speech of Polonius:—

—How prodigal the soul

Lends the tongue vows:—these blazes, daughter, &c.

A spondee has, I doubt not, dropped out of the text. Either insert 'Go to' after 'vows';—

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Lends the tongue vows: Go to, these blazes, daughter—

or read

Lends the tongue vows:—These blazes, daughter, mark you—

Shakspeare never introduces a catalectic line without intending an equivalent to the foot omitted

in the pauses, or the dwelling emphasis, or the diffused retardation. I do not, however, deny that

a good actor might by employing the last mentioned means, namely, the retardation, or solemn

knowing drawl, supply the missing spondee with good effect. But I do not believe that in this or

any other of the foregoing speeches of Polonius, Shakspeare meant to bring out the senility or

weakness of that personage's mind. In the great ever-recurring dangers and duties of life, where to distinguish the fit objects for the application of the maxims collected by the experience of a long life, requires no fineness of tact, as in the admonitions to his son and daughter, Polonius is uniformly made respectable. But if an actor were even capable of catching these shades in the character, the pit and the gallery would be malcontent at their exhibition. It is to Hamlet that Polonius is, and is meant to be, contemptible, because in inwardness and uncontrollable activity of movement, Hamlet's mind is the logical contrary to that of Polonius, and besides, as I have observed before. Hamlet dislikes the man as false to his true allegiance in the matter of the succession to the crown.

Ib. sc. 4. The unimportant conversation with which this scene opens is a proof of Shakspeare's minute knowledge of human nature. It is a well established fact, that on the brink of any serious enterprise, or event of moment, men almost invariably endeavour to elude the pressure of their own thoughts by turning aside to trivial objects and familiar circumstances: thus this dialogue on the platform begins with remarks on the coldness of the air, and inquiries, obliquely connected, indeed, with the expected hour of the visitation, but thrown out in a seeming vacuity of topics, as to the striking of the dock and so forth. The same desire to escape from the impending thought is carried on in Hamlet's account of, and moralizing on, the Danish custom of wassailing: he runs off from the particular to the universal, and, in his repugnance to personal and individual concerns, escapes, as it were, from himself in generalizations, and smothers the impatience and uneasy feelings of the moment in abstract reasoning. Besides this, another purpose is answered;—for by thus entangling the attention of the audience in the nice distinctions and parenthetical sentences of this speech of Hamlet's, Shakspeare takes them completely by surprise on the appearance of the Ghost, which comes upon them in all the suddenness of its visionary character. Indeed, no modern writer would have dared, like Shakspeare, to have preceded this

last visitation by two distinct appearances,—or could have contrived that the third should rise upon the former two in impressiveness and solemnity of interest. But in addition to all the other excellences of Hamlet's speech concerning the wassel-music—so finely revealing the predominant idealism, the ratiocinative meditateness, of his character—it has the advantage of giving nature and probability to the impassioned continuity of the speech instantly directed to the Ghost. The momentum had been given to his mental activity; the full current of the thoughts and words had set in, and the very forgetfulness, in the fervour of his argumentation, of the purpose for which he was there, aided in preventing the appearance from numbing the mind. Consequently, it acted as a new impulse,—a sudden stroke which increased the velocity of the body already in motion, whilst it altered the direction. The co-presence of Horatio, Marcellus, and Bemardo is most judiciously contrived; for it renders the courage of

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Hamlet and his impetuous eloquence perfectly intelligible. The knowledge,—the unthought of consciousness, —the sensation,—of human auditors,—of flesh and blood sympathists—acts as a support and a stimulation a. tergo, while the front of the mind, the whole consciousness of the speaker, is filled, yea, absorbed, by the apparition. Add too, that the apparition itself has by its previous appearances been brought nearer to a thing of this world. This accrescence of objectivity in a Ghost that yet retains all its ghostly attributes and fearful subjectivity, is truly wonderful.

Ib. sc. 5. Hamlet's speech:—

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?

And shall I couple hell?—

I remember-nothing equal to this burst unless it be the first speech of Prometheus in the Greek drama, after the exit of Vulcan and the two Afrites. But

Shakspeare alone could have produced the vow of Hamlet to make his memory a blank of all

maxims and generalized truths, that 'observation had copied there,'—followed immediately by

the speaker noting down the generalized fact,

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!

lb.

Mar. Hillo, ho, ho, my lord!

Ham. Hillo, ho, ho, boy I come bird, come, &c.

This part of the scene after Hamlet's interview with the Ghost has been charged with an improbable eccentricity. But the truth is, that after the mind has been stretched beyond its usual

pitch and tone, it must either sink into exhaustion and inanity, or seek relief by change. It is thus

well known, that persons conversant in deeds of cruelty contrive to escape from conscience by

connecting something of the ludicrous with them, and by inventing grotesque terms and a certain

technical phraseology to disguise the horror of their practices. Indeed, paradoxical as it may

appear, the terrible by a law of the human mind always touches on the verge of the ludicrous.

Both arise from the perception of something out of the common order of things—something, in

fact, out of its place; and if from this we can abstract danger, the uncommonness will alone

remain, and the sense of the ridiculous be excited. The close alliance of these opposites—they are

not contraries— appears from the circumstance, that laughter is equally the expression of

extreme anguish and horror as of joy: as there are tears of sorrow and tears of joy, so is there a

laugh of terror and a laugh of merriment. These complex causes will naturally have produced in

Hamlet the disposition to escape from his own feelings of the overwhelming and supernatural by

a wild transition to the ludicrous, —a sort of cunning bravado, bordering on the flights of delirium. For you may, perhaps, observe that Hamlet's wildness is but half false; he plays that

subtle trick of pretending to act only when he is very near really being what he acts."

The subterraneous speeches of the Ghost are hardly defensible:—but I would call your attention

to the characteristic difference between this Ghost, as a superstition connected with the most

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mysterious truths of revealed religion,—and Shakspeare's consequent reverence in his treatment

of it,—and the foul earthly witcheries and wild language in Macbeth.

Act ii. sc. i. Polonius and Reynaldo.

In all things dependent on, or rather made up of, fine address, the manner is no more or otherwise rememberable than the light motions, steps, and gestures of youth and health. But this

is almost everything:—no wonder, therefore if that which can be put down by rule in the memory should appear to us as mere poring, maudlin, cunning,— slyness blinking through the watery eye of superannuation. So in this admirable scene, Polonius, who is throughout the skeleton of his own former skill and statecraft, hunts the trail of policy at a dead scent, supplied by the weak fever-smell in his own nostrils.

lb. sc. 2. Speech of Polonius:—

My liege, and madam, to expostulate, &c.

Warburton's note.

Then as to the jingles, and play on words, let us but look into the sermons Of Dr. Donne (the wittiest man of that age) and we shall find them full of this vein.

I have, and that most carefully, read Dr. Donne's sermons, and find none of these jingles. The great art of an orator—to make whatever he talks of appear of importance—this, indeed, Donne has effected with consummate skill.

lb.

Ham. Excellent well;

You are a fishmonger.

That is, you are sent to fish out this secret. This is Hamlet's own meaning.

lb.

Ham. For if the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog,

Being a god, kissing carrion—

These purposely obscure lines, I rather think, refer to some thought in Hamlet's mind, contrasting the lovely daughter with such a tedious old fool, her father, as he. Hamlet, represents Polonius to himself:—'Why, fool as he is, he is some degrees in rank above a dead dog's carcass; and if the sun, being a god that kisses carrion, can raise life out of a dead dog,—why may not good fortune, that favours fools, have raised a lovely girl out of this dead-alive old fool?' Warburton is often

led astray, in his interpretations, by his attention to general positions without the due Shakspearian reference to what is probably passing in the mind of his speaker, characteristic, and expository of his particular character and present mood. The subsequent passage,—

11

O Jephtha, judge of Israel I what a treasure hadst thou!

is confirmatory of my view of these lines.

lb.

Ham. You cannot. Sir, take from me any thing that I will more willingly part withal; except my

*life, except my life, except my
life.*

This repetition strikes me as most admirable.

lb.

*Ham. Then are our beggars, bodies; and our monarchs, and ont-stretched heroes, the
beggars'
shadows.*

I do not understand this; and Shakspeare seems to have intended the meaning not to be more than

snatched at:—'By my fay, I cannot reason!'

lb.

The rugged Pyrrhus—be whose sable arms, &c.

This admirable substitution of the epic for the dramatic, giving such a reality to the impassioned

dramatic diction of Shakspeare's own dialogue, and authorized too, by the actual style of the

tragedies before his time (Porrex and Ferrex, Titus Andronicus, &c.)—is well worthy of notice.

The fancy, that a burlesque was intended, sinks below criticism: the lines, as epic narrative, are

superb.

In the thoughts, and even in the separate parts of the diction, this description is highly poetical: in

truth, taken by itself, that is its fault that it is too poetical!—the language of lyric vehemence and

epic pomp, and not of the drama. But if Shakspeare had made the diction truly dramatic, where

would have been the contrast between Hamlet and the play ia Hamlet?

lb.

— *had seen the mobled queen, &c.*

A mob-cap is still a word in common use for a morning cap, which conceals the whole head of

hair, and passes under the chin. It is nearly the same as the nightcap, that is, it is an imitation of

it, so as to answer the purpose ('I am not drest for company'), and yet reconciling it with neatness

and perfect purity.

lb. Hamlet's soliloquy:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am! I &c.

12

This is Shakspeare's own attestation to the truth of the idea of Hamlet which I have before put

forth.

lb.

The spirit that I have seen,

May be a devil: and the devil hath power

*To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and, perhaps
Out of my weakness, and my melancholy,
(As he is very potent with such spirits)
Abuses me to damn me.*

See Sir Thomas Brown:

*I believe———that those apparitions and ghosts of departed persons are not the
wandering
souls of men, but the unquiet walks of devils, prompting and suggesting us unto
mischief, blood
and villany, instilling and stealing into our hearts, that the blessed spirits are not at rest
in their*

graves, but wander solicitous of the affairs of the world. Relig. Meet. Pt. I. Sect. 37.

Act iii. sc. i. Hamlet's soliloquy:

To be, or not to be, that is the question, &c.

This speech is of absolutely universal interest,—and yet to which of all Shakspeare's characters

could it have been appropriately given but Hamlet? For Jaques it would have been too deep, and

for Iago too habitual a communion with the heart; which in every man belongs, or ought to

belong, to all mankind.

lb.

The undiscover'd country, from whose bourne

No traveller returns.—

Theobald's note in defence of the supposed contradiction of this in the apparition of the Ghost.

O miserable defender! If it be necessary to remove the apparent contradiction,—if it be not rather

a great beauty,—surely, it were easy to say, that no traveller returns to this world, as to his home,

or abiding-place.

Ham. Ha, ha! are you honest?

Oph. My lord?

Ham. Are you fair?

Here it is evident that the penetrating Hamlet perceives, from the strange and forced manner of

Ophelia, that the sweet girl was not acting a part of her own, but was a decoy; and his after

speeches are not so much directed to her as to the listeners and spies. Such a discovery in a mood

13

so anxious and 'irritable accounts for a certain harshness in him;—and yet a wild up-working of

love, sporting with opposites in a wilful self-tormenting strain of irony, is perceptible throughout.

'I did love you once!'

—'I lov'd you not:'—and particularly in his enumeration of the faults of the sex from which

Ophelia is so free, that the mere freedom therefrom constitutes her character. Note Shakspeare's

charm of composing the female character by the absence of characters, that is, marks and outjuttings.

lb. Hamlet's speech:—

I say, we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live: the

rest shall keep as they are.

Observe this dallying with the inward purpose, characteristic of one who had not brought his

mind to the steady acting point. He would fain sting the uncle's mind;

—but to stab his body!—The soliloquy of Ophelia, which follows, is the perfection of love—so

exquisitely unselfish!

lb. sc. 2. This dialogue of Hamlet with the players is one of the happiest instances of Shakspeare's power of diversifying the scene while he is carrying on the plot.

lb.

Ham. My lord, you play'd once i' the university, you say? (To Polonius.)

To have kept Hamlet's love for Ophelia before the audience in any direct form, would have made

a breach in the unity of the interest;—but yet to the thoughtful reader it is suggested by his spite

to poor Polonius, whom he cannot let rest.

lb. The style of the interlude here is distinguished from the real dialogue by rhyme, as in the first

interview with the players by epic verse.

Ros. My lord, you once did love me.

Ham. So I do still, by these pickers and stealers.

I never heard an actor give this word 'so' its proper emphasis. Shakspeare's meaning is—'lov'd

you? Hum! —so I do still, &c.' There has been no change in my opinion:—I think as ill of you as

I did. Else Hamlet tells an ignoble falsehood, and a useless one, as the last speech to Guildenstern—'Why, look you now,' &c.— proves.

lb. Hamlet's soliloquy:—

Now could I drink hot blood,

And do such bitter business as the day

Would quake to look on.

14

The utmost at which Hamlet arrives, is a disposition, a mood, to do something:—but what to do,

is still left undecided, while every word he utters tends to betray his disguise. Yet observe how

perfectly equal to any call of the moment is Hamlet, let it only not be for the future.

lb. sc. 4. Speech of Polonius. Polonius's volunteer obtrusion of himself into this business, while it is appropriate to his character, still itching after former importance, removes all likelihood that Hamlet should suspect his presence, and prevents us from making his death injure Hamlet in our opinion.

lb. The king's speech:—

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven, &c.

This speech well marks the difference between crime and guilt of habit. The conscience here is

still admitted to audience. Nay, even as an audible soliloquy, it is far less improbable than is

supposed by such as have watched men only in the beaten road of their feelings. But the final—

'all may be well!' is remarkable;—the degree of merit attributed by the self-flattering soul to its

own struggle, though baffled, and to the indefinite half-promise, half-command, to persevere in

religious duties. The solution is in the divine medium of the Christian doctrine of expiation:—not

what you have done. but what you are, must determine.

lb. Hamlet's speech:—

Now might I do it, pat, now he is praying:

And now I'll do it:—And so he goes to heaven:

And so am I revenged? That would be scann'd, &c.

Dr. Johnson's mistaking of the marks of reluctance and procrastination for impetuous, horrorstriking,

fiendishness! — Of such importance is it, to understand the germ of a character. But the interval taken by Hamlet's [speech is truly awful! And then—

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:

Words, without thoughts, never to heaven go,—

O what a lesson concerning the essential difference [between wishing and willing, and the, folly

of all motive-mongering, while the individual self remains!

lb. sc. 4.

Ham. A bloody deed;—almost as bad, good mother,

As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

Queen. As kill a king?

I confess that Shakspeare has left the character of the Queen in an unpleasant perplexity. Was she, or was she not, conscious of the fratricide?

15

Act iv. sc. 2.

Ros. Take you me for a sponge, my lord?

Ham. Ay, Sir; that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities, &c.

Hamlet's madness is made to consist in the free utterance of all the thoughts that had passed through his mind before;—in fact, in telling home-truths.

Act iv. sc. 5. Ophelia's singing. O, note the conjunction here of these two thoughts that had never

subsisted in disjunction, the love for Hamlet, and her filial love, with. the guileless floating on

the surface of her pure imagination of the cautions so lately expressed, and the fears not too

delicately avowed, by her father and brother, concerning the dangers to which her honour lay

exposed. Thought, affliction, passion, murder itself—she turns to favour and prettiness. This play

of association is instanced in the close:—

My brother shall know of it, and so I thank you for your good counsel.

lb. Gentleman's speech:—

And as the world were now bent to begin

Antiquity forgot, custom not known,

The ratifiers and props of every word—

They cry, &c.

Fearful and self-suspicious as I always feel, when I seem to see an error of Judgment in Shakspeare, yet I cannot reconcile the cool, and, as Warburton calls it, 'rational and consequential,' reflection in these lines with the anonymousness, or the alarm, of this Gentleman

or Messenger, as he is called in other editions.

lb. King's speech:—

There's such divinity doth hedge a king,

That treason can but peep to what it would,

Acts little of his will.

Proof, as indeed all else is, that Shakspeare never intended us to see the King with Hamlet's eyes;

though, I suspect, the managers have long done so.

lb. Speech of Laertes:—

To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!

Laertes is a good character, but, &c. WARBURTON.

Mercy on Warburton's notion of goodness! Please to refer to the seventh scene of this act;—

16

I will do it;

And for that purpose I'll anoint my sword, &c.

uttered by Laertes after the King's description of Hamlet;—

He being remiss,

Most generous, and free from all contriving,

Will not peruse the foils.

Yet I acknowledge that Shakspeare evidently wishes, as much as possible, to spare the character

of Laertes,—to break the extreme turpitude of his consent to become an agent and accomplice of the King's treachery;—and to this end he reintroduces Ophelia at the close of this scene to afford

a probable stimulus of passion in her brother.

lb. sc. 6. Hamlet's capture by the pirates. This is almost the only play of Shakspeare, in which

mere accidents, independent of all will, form an essential part of the plot;

—but here how judiciously in keeping with the character of the over-meditative Hamlet, ever at

last determined by accident or by a fit of passion!

lb. sc. 7. Note how the King first awakens Laertes's vanity by praising the reporter, and then

gratifies it by the report itself, and finally points it by—

Sir, this report of his

Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy!—

lb. King's speech:

For goodness, growing to a pleurisy,

Dies in his own too much.

Theobald's note from Warburton, who conjectures 'plethory.'

I rather think that Shakspeare meant 'pleurisy,' but involved in it the thought of plethora, as

supposing pleurisy to arise from too much blood; otherwise I cannot explain the following line—

And then this should is like a spendthrift sigh,

That hurts by easing.

In a stitch in the side every one must have heaved a sigh that 'hurt by easing.'

Since writing the above I feel confirmed that 'pleurisy' is the right word; for I find that in the old

medical dictionaries the pleurisy is often called the 'plethory.'

lb.

17

Queen. Your sister's drown'd, Laertes.

Laer. Drown'd! O, where?

That Laertes might be excused in some degree for not cooling, the Act concludes with the

affecting death of Ophelia,—who in the beginning lay like a little projection of land into a lake

or stream, covered with spray-flowers, quietly reflected in the quiet waters, but at length is

under-mined or loosened, and becomes a faery isle, and after a brief vagrancy sinks almost

without an eddy!

Act v. sc. i. O, the rich contrast between the Clowns and Hamlet, as two extremes! You see in the

former the mockery of logic, and a traditional wit valued, like truth, for its antiquity, and

treasured up, like a tune, for use.

1b. sc. i and 2. Shakspeare seems to mean all Hamlet's character to be brought together before his

final disappearance from the scene;—his meditative excess in the grave-digging, his yielding to

passion with Laertes, his love for Ophelia blazing out, his tendency to generalize on all occasions

in the dialogue with Horatio, his fine gentlemanly manners with Osrick, and his and Shakspeare's

own fondness for presentiment:

But thou would'st not think, how ill all's here about my heart;

but it is no matter.

1 It is so pointed in the modern editions.—Ed.

Hamlet key facts

1

Hamlet

Key Facts

Full title · The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Author · William Shakespeare

Type of work · Play

Genre · Tragedy, revenge tragedy

Language · English

Time and place written · London, England, early seventeenth century (probably 1600–1602)

Date of first publication · 1603, in a pirated quarto edition titled *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*; 1604 in a superior quarto edition

Protagonist · Hamlet

Major conflict · Hamlet feels a responsibility to avenge his father's murder by his uncle Claudius, but Claudius is now the king and thus well protected. Moreover,

2

Hamlet struggles with his doubts about whether he can trust the ghost and whether killing Claudius is the appropriate thing to do.

Rising action · The ghost appears to Hamlet and tells Hamlet to revenge his murder; Hamlet feigns madness to his intentions; Hamlet stages the mousetrap play; Hamlet passes up the opportunity to kill Claudius while he is praying.

Climax · When Hamlet stabs Polonius through the arras in Act III, scene iv, he commits himself to overtly violent action and brings himself into unavoidable conflict with the king. Another possible climax comes at the end of Act IV, scene iv, when Hamlet resolves to commit himself fully to violent revenge.

Falling action · Hamlet is sent to England to be killed; Hamlet returns to Denmark and confronts Laertes at Ophelia's funeral; the fencing match; the deaths of the royal family

Setting (time) · The late medieval period, though the play's chronological setting is notoriously imprecise

Settings (place) · Denmark

Foreshadowing · The ghost, which is taken to foreshadow an ominous future for Denmark

Tone · Dark, ironic, melancholy, passionate, contemplative, desperate, violent

3

Themes · The impossibility of certainty; the complexity of action; the mystery of death; the nation as a diseased body

Motifs · Incest and incestuous desire; ears and hearing; death and suicide; darkness and the supernatural; misogyny

Symbols · The ghost (the spiritual consequences of death); Yorick's skull (the physical consequences of death)

Hamlet Summary provides a quick review of the play

1

Hamlet Summary provides a quick review of the play's plot including every important action in the play. Hamlet Summary is divided by the five acts of the play and is an ideal introduction before reading the original text.

Act I.

Shakespeare's longest play and the play responsible for the immortal lines "To be or not to be:

that is the question:" and the advise "to thine own self be true," begins in Denmark with the news

that King Hamlet of Denmark has recently died.

Denmark is now in a state of high alert and preparing for possible war with Young Fortinbras of

Norway. A ghost resembling the late King Hamlet is spotted on a platform before Elsinore Castle

in Denmark. King Claudius, who now rules Denmark, has taken King Hamlet's wife, Queen

Gertrude as his new wife and Queen of Denmark.

King Claudius fearing Young Fortinbras of Norway may invade, has sent ambassadors to

Norway to urge the King of Norway to restrain Young Fortinbras. Young Hamlet distrusts King

Claudius. The King and Queen do not understand why Hamlet still mourns his father's death over two months ago. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet explains that he does not like his mother marrying the next King of Denmark so quickly within a month of his father's death... Laertes, the son of Lord Chamberlain Polonius, gives his sister Ophelia some brotherly advice. He warns Ophelia not to fall in love with Young Hamlet; she will only be hurt. Polonius tells his daughter Ophelia not to return Hamlet's affections for her since he fears Hamlet is only using her... Hamlet meets the Ghost of his father, King Hamlet and follows it to learn more... Hamlet learns from King Hamlet's Ghost that he was poisoned by King Claudius, the current ruler of Denmark. The Ghost tells Hamlet to avenge his death but not to punish Queen Gertrude for remarrying; it is not Hamlet's place and her conscience and heaven will judge her... Hamlet swears Horatio and Marcellus to silence over Hamlet meeting the Ghost.

Act II.

Polonius tells Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes in Paris. Polonius learns from his daughter Ophelia that a badly dressed Hamlet met her, studied her face and promptly left. Polonius believes that Hamlet's odd behavior is because Ophelia has rejected him. Polonius decides to tell King Claudius the reason for Hamlet's recently odd behavior. King Claudius instructs courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what is causing Hamlet's strange "transformation," or change of character. Queen Gertrude reveals that only King Hamlet's death and her recent remarriage could be upsetting Hamlet. We learn more of Young Fortinbras' movements and Polonius has his own theory about Hamlet's transformation; it is caused by Hamlet's love for his daughter Ophelia. Hamlet makes his famous
2
speech about the greatness of man. Hamlet plans to use a play to test if King Claudius really did kill his father as King Hamlet's Ghost told him...

Act III.

The King's spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to King Claudius on Hamlet's behavior. Hamlet is eager for King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to watch a play tonight which Hamlet has

added lines to.

King Claudius and Polonius listen in on Hamlet's and Ophelia's private conversation. Hamlet

suspects Ophelia is spying on him and is increasingly hostile to her before leaving.

King Claudius decides to send Hamlet to England, fearing danger in Hamlet since he no longer

believes Hamlet is merely lovesick. The King agrees to Polonius' plan to eavesdrop on Hamlet's

conversation with his mother after the play to hopefully learn more from Hamlet. The play

Hamlet had added lines to is performed. The mime preceding the play which mimics the Ghost's

description of King Hamlet's death goes unnoticed.

The main play called "The Murder of Gonzago" is performed, causing King Claudius to react in

a way which convinces Hamlet that his uncle did indeed poison his father King Hamlet as the

Ghost previously had told him... Hamlet pretends not to know that the play has offended King

Claudius. Hamlet agrees to speak with his mother in private...

King Claudius admits his growing fear of Hamlet and decides to send him overseas to England

with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in order to protect himself. Alone, King Claudius reveals in

soliloquy his own knowledge of the crime he has committed (poisoning King Hamlet) and

realizes that he cannot escape divine justice...

Queen Gertrude attempts to scold her son but Hamlet instead scolds his mother for her actions.

Queen Gertrude cries out in fear, and Polonius echoes it and is stabbed through the arras

(subdivision of a room created by a hanging tapestry) where he was listening in. Hamlet continues scolding his mother but the Ghost reappears, telling Hamlet to be gentle with the

Queen. For her part, Queen Gertrude agrees to stop living with King Claudius, beginning her redemption....

Act IV.

King Claudius speaks with his wife, Queen Gertrude. He learns of Polonius' murder which

shocks him; it could easily have been him. Queen Gertrude lies for her son, saying that Hamlet is

as mad as a tempestuous sea. King Claudius, now scared of Hamlet, decides to have Hamlet sent

away to England immediately... He also sends courtiers and spies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

to speak with Hamlet to find out where Hamlet has hidden Polonius' body so they can take it to the chapel.

3

Hamlet refuses to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where Polonius' dead body is hidden. He

calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lapdogs revealing his true awareness that they are not his

friends. Hamlet agrees to see King Claudius.

Hamlet continues to refuse to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where Polonius' body is. Hamlet

is brought before the King. The two exchange words, clearly circling each other, each aware that

the other is a threat. Hamlet tells King Claudius where Polonius body is. King Claudius ominously tells Hamlet to leave for England supposedly for Hamlet's own safety. With Hamlet

gone, King Claudius reveals his plans for Hamlet to be killed in England, freeing King Claudius

from further worry from this threat...

Young Fortinbras marches his army across Denmark to fight the Polish. Hamlet laments that he

does not have in him the strength of Young Fortinbras, who will lead an army into pointless

fighting, if only to maintain honor. Hamlet asks himself how he cannot fight for honor when his

father has been killed and his mother made a whore in his eyes by becoming King Claudius' wife.

The death of Polonius leaves its mark on Ophelia who becomes mad from the grief of losing her

father. Laertes storms King Claudius' castle, demanding to see his father and wanting justice

when he learns that his father, Polonius has been killed. King Claudius remains calm, telling

Laertes that he too mourned his father's loss...

Horatio is greeted by sailors who have news from Hamlet. Horatio follows the sailors to learn

more... King Claudius explains to Laertes that Hamlet killed his father, Polonius. Deciding they

have a common enemy, they plot Hamlet's death at a fencing match to be arranged between

Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes learns of his sister Ophelia's death by drowning...

Act V.

Hamlet and Horatio speak with a cheerful Clown or gravedigger. Hamlet famously realizes that

man's accomplishments are transitory (fleeting) and holding the skull of Yorick, a childhood

jester he remembered, creates a famous scene about man's insignificance and inability to control

his fate following death.

At Ophelia's burial, the Priest reveals a widely held belief that Ophelia committed suicide,

angering Laertes. Hamlet fights Laertes over Ophelia's grave, angered by Laertes exaggerated

emphasis of his sorrow and because he believes he loved Ophelia much more than her brother.

Hamlet explains to Horatio how he avoided the death planned for him in England and had

courtiers' Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put to death instead. Hamlet reveals his desire to kill

King Claudius.

Summoned by Osric to fence against Laertes, Hamlet arrives at a hall in the castle and fights

Laertes. Queen Gertrude drinks a poisoned cup meant for Hamlet, dying but not before telling all

that she has been poisoned.

4

Hamlet wins the first two rounds against Laertes but is stabbed and poisoned fatally in the third

round. Exchanging swords whilst fighting, Hamlet wounds and poisons Laertes who explains

that his sword is poison tipped.

Now dying, Hamlet stabs King Claudius with this same sword, killing him.

Hamlet, dying, tells Horatio to tell his story and not to commit suicide. Hamlet recommends

Young Fortinbras as the next King of Denmark. Young Fortinbras arrives, cleaning up the

massacre. Horatio promises to tell all the story we have just witnessed, ending the play.

Hamlet

Main Characters

Hamlet

After Jesus Christ, Napoleon and Shakespeare himself, Hamlet is the most written about personality of all time. A student at the university in Wittenberg, Germany, Hamlet is typically thought to be between 23 and 30 years old. He is the Prince of Denmark, son to the former King named Hamlet Senior and his wife, Gertrude. Hamlet does not automatically become King upon his father's death because Denmark was an elective (not hereditary) monarchy; his uncle, Claudius, assumes the throne (although apparently there was never a vote on the matter), perhaps in Hamlet's absence. From the very beginning of the play Hamlet is troubled by his mother's decision to marry Claudius - he thinks it is a bit too hasty, not to mention incestuous - but soon he learns even more troubling news: a ghost informs him, in the guise of

his father, that the former King was murdered by Claudius. The ghost charges Hamlet to revenge his father. Thus begins the greatest revenge story of all time, as Hamlet first must seek confirmation of the ghost's tale, and then as he tries - now certain of Claudius' guilt - to find the perfect timing to commit murder. Hamlet struggles at times with suicidal thoughts, but in the end he decides it is more honorable to live a difficult life and see his father avenged than to give up. Throughout much of the play, Hamlet plays the madman - putting on an "antic disposition" - so that he can work out his plan for revenge undetected. He is quite often ruthless and suffers from a severe case of "paralysis of analysis" - the inability to act because he spends so much time thinking about how and when to act. Nonetheless, the reader or playgoer has a difficult time resisting Hamlet's charisma, for he is no less courageous than committed and contemplative. We enthusiastically cheer Hamlet on when he murders Polonius, Laertes and Claudius, and we weep uncontrollably when he meets his own end. The famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, had this to say about Hamlet's character in 1872: "Dionysiac man might be said to resemble Hamlet; both have looked into the true nature of things; they have understood and are now loathe to act. They realize that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things, and they regard the imputation as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is now out of joint."

Ghost

The ghost appears in four scenes throughout the play (I.i, I.iv, I.v and III.iv), only speaking with Hamlet. At first it is not known whether the ghost is from heaven or hell, and thus Hamlet and his friends are uncertain if they should trust what it says. In the course of the play, it becomes clear that the ghost is

indeed that of Hamlet Senior, who during the night manages to escape what are most likely purgatorial fires in order to communicate with Hamlet. He relates to his son the story of his murder at the hands of his own brother, Claudius. The ghost is rather explicit in his demands to Hamlet: his son is to revenge his "foul and most unnatural murder," and he is to leave Gertrude alone, ultimately to be handled by heaven.

Horatio

Like Hamlet, Horatio is a student at the university in Wittenberg. He is Hamlet's confidant, his closest friend; in fact, Horatio is the only person Hamlet trusts throughout the entire play. Hamlet admires him for his stoicism, for his indifference to things good and bad - he is not a slave to passion, as Hamlet fears he himself might be. Horatio is not one to believe in ghosts or providence, though he learns a thing or two in the play: namely, that there is more between heaven and earth than he suspects, as Hamlet quite bluntly informs him. In the end, Horatio is the one hand-picked by Hamlet to tell the story of Denmark's rottenness, for he is the only survivor among the major characters at the play's end. Horatio would much prefer to commit suicide, as Roman servants routinely did when their masters were killed, but Hamlet convinces him to live on and act as witness to the world.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

They are two (former) friends of Hamlet brought in from abroad by Claudius and Gertrude, in the hopes that they can play the informer on Hamlet for Claudius and Gertrude. Neither one has a distinct personality and it is nearly impossible to tell the two apart, an effect no doubt intended by Shakespeare. Claudius has the pair accompany Hamlet to England, bearing letters (unbeknownst to them) to the King of England sanctioning Hamlet's execution. Ever clever, Hamlet escapes from their custody, but not before changing the death warrant: the not-so-dynamic-duo thus meet their deaths in England, as the King thinks he is doing Denmark a favor. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern owe much of their modern-day fame to Tom Stoppard, a famous British playwright who co-authored the screenplay for Shakespeare in Love. He penned a highly-acclaimed drama entitled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1996) in which these two ill-fated Shakespearean figures come to life and assume center-stage.

Ophelia

Ophelia is daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes, most likely a teenager. Her biggest claim to fame, however, is that she is the beloved of Hamlet. Until, of course, he advises her to hurry herself along to a nunnery. She becomes melancholic and mad as the play progresses, eventually drowning in a stream. It is not entirely clear whether she was committing suicide or not - the text suggests that it wasn't a mere accident. Some critics, desperate in their search for the cause of Ophelia's demise, have hypothesized that she was pregnant (by Hamlet) and thus took her own life. The textual support for this theory is, however, scant and unpersuasive at best.

Fortinbras

Fortinbras is the nephew of the old and ailing ruler of Norway, also called Fortinbras. Fortinbras Senior was defeated in battle by Hamlet Senior, thereby losing significant lands to Denmark. The young and ambitious nephew thus sets out to recover the territories, only to be redirected to Poland by his uncle. He wins Hamlet's awe and respect because of his ability to act so decisively - and to defend his family's and nation's honor at any price - qualities Hamlet certainly envies. Hamlet is so impressed, in fact, that he recommends Fortinbras as next King of Denmark shortly before breathing his last. Though the play doesn't explicitly say so, it seems fair enough to assume Fortinbras becomes the next ruler of the Danish kingdom.

Laertes

The son of Polonius, Laertes is roughly Hamlet's age and studies at a university in France. He is intended to be a character foil to Hamlet, so their personalities and actions are almost always diametrically opposed. While Hamlet is slow to act and contemplative, Laertes is instead hot-headed, impulsive and anything but pensive. He is, among other things, a good fencer and an even better carouser: we have reason enough to suspect he is a regular at both brothels and bars. From his father Laertes has inherited a bad case of hypocrisy, always ready to give sound advice but never to follow it. Outraged at the deaths of his father and sister, Laertes sets himself on a collision-course with Hamlet. The two end up killing each other in the final act, but not before reconciling and redirecting their hatred at Claudius.

Polonius

Father to Laertes and Ophelia, Polonius is also Lord Chamberlain (a high-ranking counselor) to the King of Denmark. Despite his praise of brevity, Polonius' mouth runs uncontrollably. His speech, moreover, is little more than an uninteresting collection of trite phrases - be true to yourself and others, don't borrow or lend money and so forth. Unfortunately Polonius is neither as bright nor as witty as he fancies himself, but he does make a good butt for many of Hamlet's jokes. He proves himself a wonderful hypocrite, especially in his proclivity for espionage despite his advocacy of candor. Spying on his son, his daughter, Hamlet and the Queen, Polonius ultimately pays with his own life for this depthless deviousness.

Gertrude

The Queen of Denmark, Gertrude is first married to Hamlet Senior and then to his brother, Claudius. She doesn't see much wrong with marrying again so shortly after her husband's death, nor does she apparently think twice about the dubiousness of tying the knot with her former brother-in-law. All of this, of course, terribly irks her son, Hamlet. While Gertrude no doubt loves her son, she also has desires - sexual, emotional and otherwise - which she thinks will best be fulfilled in marrying Claudius. She is unaware of his crime and thus repeatedly sides with him against Hamlet for most of the play, even agreeing to send her son off to England (though oblivious to Claudius' intentions). When Hamlet finally informs her of Claudius' wrongs, Gertrude is no longer in a position to be of much help to him, for Claudius increasingly keeps his schemes from her. Unsurprisingly, the Queen herself eventually falls victim to Claudius' concoctions, as she accidentally imbibes the poisonous drink designed to kill Hamlet.

Claudius

Claudius is the present King of Denmark who, not long before the play begins, commits fratricide by killing his older brother, the former King Hamlet (Senior). He is amazingly ambitious and conniving, no less talented than Hamlet at studying to seem the thing he is not. In the spirit of Machiavelli, Claudius is a genius at spinning words and managing the public's sentiments. Having gained the crown and the Queen by murdering his brother, Claudius is quite content with himself, though the precariousness of his position is never far from his mind. Once he realizes Hamlet is hot on his trail, directly after the play-within-the-play, Claudius must take any and all steps to protect himself from possible exposure. He deceives everyone - his wife foremost of all - and it soon becomes only a matter of time before the center can no longer hold and mere anarchy is loosed upon Denmark. His brilliant plan to rid himself of Hamlet - with the unsuspecting Laertes as his personal pawn - backfires in the final scene and brings about his own death.

Major Themes

1

Major Themes

Death

Death has been considered the primary theme of Hamlet by many eminent critics through the years. G. Wilson Knight, for instance, writes at length about death in the play: "Death is over the whole play. Polonius and Ophelia die during the action, and Ophelia is buried before our eyes. Hamlet arranges the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The plot is set in motion by the murder of Hamlet's father, and the play opens with the apparition of the Ghost." And so on and so forth. The play is really death-obsessed, as is Hamlet himself. As A.C. Bradley has pointed out, in his very first long speech of the play, "Oh that this too solid flesh," Hamlet seems on the verge of total despair, kept from suicide by the simple fact of spiritual awe. He is in the strange position of both wishing for death and fearing it intensely, and this double

pressure gives the play much of its drama.

One of the aspects of death which Hamlet finds most fascinating is its bodily facticity. We are, in the end, so much meat and bone. This strange intellectual being, which Hamlet values so highly and possesses so mightily, is but tenuously connected to an unruly and decomposing machine. In the graveyard scene, especially, we can see Hamlet's fascination with dead bodies. How can Yorick's skull be Yorick's skull? Does a piece of dead earth, a skull, really have a connection to a person, a personality?

Hamlet is unprecedented for the depth and variety of its meditations on death. Mortality is the shadow that darkens every scene of the play. Not that the play resolves anything, or settles any of our species-old doubts and anxieties. As with most things, we can expect to find very difficult and stimulating questions in Hamlet, but very few satisfying answers.

Intrigue

Elsinore is full of political intrigue. The murder of Old Hamlet, of course, is the primary instance of such sinister workings, but it is hardly the only one. Polonius, especially, spends nearly every

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waking moment (it seems) spying on this or that person, checking up on his son in Paris, instructing Ophelia in every detail of her behavior, hiding behind tapestries to eavesdrop. He is the parody of a politician, convinced that the truth can only be known through the most roundabout and sneaking ways. This is never clearer than in his appearances in Act Two. First, he instructs Reynaldo in the most incredibly convoluted espionage methods; second, he hatches and pursues his misguided theory that Hamlet is mad because his heart has been broken by Ophelia.

Claudius, too, is quite the inept Machiavellian. He naively invites Fortinbras to march across his country with a full army; he stupidly enlists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as his chief spies; his attempt to poison Hamlet ends in total tragedy. He is little better than Polonius. This political ineptitude goes a long way toward revealing how weak Denmark has become under Claudius' rule. He is not a natural king, to be sure; he is more interested in drinking and sex than in war, reconnaissance, or political plotting. This is partly why his one successful political move, the murder of his brother, is so ironic and foul. He has somehow done away with much the better ruler, the Hyperion to his satyr (as Hamlet puts it).

It's worth noting that there is one extremely capable politician in the play -- Hamlet himself. He is always on top of everyone's motives, everyone's doings and goings. He plays Polonius like a pipe and evades every effort of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do the same to him. He sniffs out Claudius' plot to have him killed in England and sends his erstwhile friends off to die instead. Hamlet is a true Machiavellian when he wants to be. He certainly wouldn't have been as warlike as his father, but had he gotten the chance he might have been his father's equal as a ruler, simply due to his penetration and acumen.

Language

In Act Two scene two Polonius asks Hamlet, "What do you read, my lord?" Hamlet replies, "Words, words, words." Of course every book is made of words, every play is a world of words, so to speak, and Hamlet is no different. Hamlet is distinguished, however, in its attentiveness to language within the play. Not only does it contain extremely rich language, not only did the play greatly expand the English vocabulary, Hamlet also contains several characters who show an interest in language and meaning in themselves.

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Polonius, for instance, is often distracted by his manner of expressing himself. In Act Two scene two, for example, he says, "Madam, I swear I use no art at all. / That he is mad, 'tis true: 'tis true 'tis pity, / And pity 'tis 'tis true. A foolish figure, / But farewell to it, for I will use no art." Of course this is typical Polonius -- absurdly hypocritical, self-enamored, dull-witted. Just as he is extremely windy in recommending brevity, here he is fussy and "artful" (or affectedly artificial) in declaring that he is neither of those things. Polonius' grasp of language, like his political instinct, is quite shallow -- he gestures toward the mastery of rhetoric that seems like a statesman's primary craft, but he is too distracted by surfaces to achieve any real depth. Another angle from which to consider language in the play -- Hamlet explores the traditional dichotomy between words and deeds. In Act Four, when talking to Laertes, Claudius makes this distinction explicit: "what would you undertake, / To show yourself your father's son in deed / More than in words?" Here deeds are associated with noble acts, specifically the fulfillment of revenge, and words with empty bluffing. The passage resonates well beyond its immediate context. Hamlet himself is a master of language, an explorer of its possibilities; he is also a man who has trouble performing actual deeds. For him, reality seems to exist more in thoughts and sentences than in acts. Thus his trouble fulfilling revenge seems to stem from his overemphasis on reasoning and formulating -- a fault of over-precision that he acknowledges himself in the speech beginning, "How all occasions do inform against me."

Hamlet is the man of language, of words, of the magic of thought. He is not fit for a play that so emphasizes the value of action, and he knows it. But then, the action itself is contained within words, formed and contained by Shakespeare's pen. The action of the play is much more an illusion than the words are. Hamlet invites us to consider whether this isn't the case more often than we might think, whether the world of words doesn't enjoy a great deal of power in framing and describing the world of actions, on stage or not.

Madness

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By the time Hamlet was written, madness was already a well-established element in many revenge tragedies. The most popular revenge tragedy of the Elizabethan period, *The Spanish Tragedy*, also features a main character, Hieronimo, who goes mad in the build-up to his revenge, as does the title character in Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. But Hamlet is unique among revenge tragedies in its treatment of madness because Hamlet's madness is deeply ambiguous. Whereas previous revenge tragedy protagonists are unambiguously insane, Hamlet plays with the idea of insanity, putting on "an antic disposition," as he says, for some not-perfectly-clear reason.

Of course, there is a practical advantage to appearing mad. In Shakespeare's source for the plot of Hamlet, "Amneth" (as the legendary hero is known) feigns madness in order to avoid the suspicion of the fratricidal king as he plots his revenge. But Hamlet's feigned madness is not so simple as this. His performance of madness, rather than aiding his revenge, almost distracts him from it, as he spends the great majority of the play exhibiting very little interest in pursuing the ghost's mission even after he has proven, via "The Mouse Trap," that Claudius is indeed guilty as sin.

No wonder, then, that Hamlet's madness has been a resilient point of critical controversy since the seventeenth century. The traditional question is perhaps the least interesting one to ask of

his madness -- is he really insane or is he faking it? It seems clear from the text that he is, indeed, playing the role of the madman (he says he will do just that) and using his veneer of lunacy to have a great deal of fun with the many fools who populate Elsinore, especially Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Perhaps this feigned madness does at times edge into actual madness, in the same way that all acted emotions come very close to their genuine models, but, as he says, he is but mad north-northwest, and knows a hawk from a handsaw. When he is alone, or with Horatio, and free from the need to act the lunatic, Hamlet is incredibly lucid and self-aware, perhaps a bit manic but hardly insane.

So what should we make of his feigned insanity? Hamlet, in keeping with the play in general, seems almost to act the madman because he knows in some bizarre way that he is playing a role in a revenge tragedy. He knows that he is expected to act mad, because he thinks that that is what one does when seeking revenge -- perhaps because he has seen *The Spanish Tragedy*. I'm joking, of course, on one level, but he does exhibit self-aware theatricality throughout the play, and if he hasn't seen *The Spanish Tragedy*, he has certainly seen *The Death of Gonzago*, and many more plays besides. He knows his role, or what his role should be, even as he is

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unable to play it satisfactorily. Hamlet is beautifully miscast as the revenger -- he is constitutionally unfitted for so vulgar and unintelligent a fate -- and likewise his attempt to play the madman, while a valiant effort, is forced, insincere, anxious, ambiguous, and full of doubts. Perhaps Hamlet himself, if we could ask him, would not know why he chooses to feign madness any more than we do.

Needless to say, Hamlet is not the only person who goes insane in the play. Ophelia's madness serves as a clear foil to his own strange antics. She is truly, unambiguously, innocently, simply mad. Whereas Hamlet's madness seems to increase his self-awareness, Ophelia loses every vestige of composure and self-knowledge, just as the truly insane tend to do.

Subjectivity

Harold Bloom, speaking about Hamlet at the Library of Congress, said, "The play's subject massively is neither mourning for the dead or revenge on the living. ... All that matters is Hamlet's consciousness of his own consciousness, infinite, unlimited, and at war with itself." He added, "Hamlet discovers that his life has been a quest with no object except his own endlessly burgeoning subjectivity." Bloom is not the only reader of Hamlet to see such an emphasis on the self.

Hamlet's soliloquies, to take only the most obvious feature, are strong and sustained investigations of the self -- not only as a thinking being, but as emotional, bodily, and paradoxically multiple. Hamlet, fascinated by his own character, his turmoil, his inconsistency, spends line after line wondering at himself. Why can't I carry out revenge? Why can't I carry out suicide? He questions himself, and in so doing questions the nature of the self.

Aside from these massive speeches, Hamlet shows a sustained interest in philosophical problems of the subject. Among these problems is the mediating role of thought in all human life. "For there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so," he says. We can never know the truth, he suggests, nor the good, nor the evil of the world, except through the means of our thoughts. Certainty is not an option. And the great realm of uncertainty, the realm of dreams,

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fears, thoughts, is the realm of subjectivity.

Suicide

Like madness, suicide is a theme that links Hamlet and Ophelia and shapes the concerns of the play more generally. Hamlet thinks deeply about it, and perhaps "contemplates" it in the more popular sense; Ophelia perhaps commits it. In both cases, the major upshot of suicide is religious. In his two "suicide soliloquies," Hamlet segues into meditations on religious laws and mysteries -- "that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter"; "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come." And Ophelia's burial is greatly limited by the clergy's suspicions that she might have taken her own life. In short, Hamlet appears to suggest that were it not for, first, the social stigma attached to suicide by religious authorities, and second, the legitimately "unknown" nature of whatever happens after death, there would be a lot more self-slaughter in this difficult and bitter world. In a play so obsessed with the self, and the nature of the self, it's only natural to see this emphasis on self-murder.

It's worth mentioning one of the major interpretive issues of Hamlet: was Ophelia's death accidental or a suicide? According to Gertrude's narration of the event, Ophelia's drowning was entirely accidental. However, some have suggested that Gertrude's long story may be a fabrication invented to protect the young woman from the social stigma of suicide. Indeed, in Act Five the priest and the gravediggers are fairly certain that Ophelia took her own life. One might ask oneself -- why does it make such a difference to us whether she died by her own hand or not? Shakespeare seems, in fact, to inspire this very sort of self-interrogation. Are we, like the characters in the play, so invested in protecting Ophelia from the stigma of suicide?

Theater

Which is the star of this play, Hamlet or Hamlet? T.S. Eliot, for one, unequivocally endorses the latter: "Few critics have ever admitted that Hamlet the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary." In effect, Hamlet is a play about plays, about theater. Most obviously, it contains a play within a play, detailed instructions on acting technique, an

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extended conversation about London theater companies and their fondness for boy troupes, several references to other theater (including to Christian mystery plays, and to Shakespeare's own Julius Caesar), and still more references to the stage on which it is being performed, in the globe theater with its ghost "in the cellarage."

But what is the point of this constant metatheatrical winking? Hamlet, among other things, is an extended meditation on the nature of acting and the relationship between acting and "genuine" life. It refuses to obey the conventional restrictions of theater and constantly spills out into the audience, as it were, pointing out the "real" surroundings of the "fictional" play, and thus incorporating them into the larger theatrical experience.

Most specifically, Hamlet is an exploration of a specific genre and its specific generic conventions. It is the revenge tragedy to end all revenge tragedies, both containing and commenting on the elements that define the genre. Modern audiences are quite comfortable with this sort of "meta-generic" approach. Think of modern westerns, heist movies, or martial arts movies. All of these genres have become almost obligatorily self-aware; they contain references to past milestones in their respective genres, they gleefully and ironically embrace (or alternatively reject) the conventions that past films treated with sincerity. Hamlet, in its relationship to revenge tragedy and to theater more generally, is one of the first dramas of this kind and perhaps still the most profound example of such post-modern concerns.

To put it cutely, Hamlet itself is the main character of the play, and Hamlet merely the means by which it explores its own place in the history of theater. To make things yet dizzier, Hamlet seems, deep down, to know that he is in a play, to know that he is miscast, to understand the theatrical nature of his being. And who's to say that we aren't all merely actors in our own lives? Surely, from a philosophical perspective, this is one of the basic truths of modern human life.

Quotes and Analysis

1

Quotes and Analysis

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God, / How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Act One scene two, ll. 129-34

Hamlet's first soliloquy finds him more melancholic, more desperate, than at any other point in the play. In the beginning, his motives and feelings are clear in a way that they never are after his encounter with the ghost. Hamlet is simply disgusted that his mother, who had appeared to be so much in love with his father, has married Claudius, her vastly inferior former brother-in-law. For Hamlet as the play opens, existence itself is a burden; he wishes that the body could simply melt away and free him from his torment. Although sometimes his rhetoric in the ensuing Acts resonates with this first declaration of misery, Hamlet's sincerity becomes much more difficult to judge once he has received his supernatural charge. His moods become more manic, his language more explosive and punning, and his motivation becomes infinitely mysterious. Here, though, freed from the need to act on his thoughts and feelings (he even says, at the end of the speech, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue"), he is truly in his miserable element.

By the way, the first line of this speech reads differently in different editions. Some editors follow the second quarto and admit "sallied flesh" (or even "sullied flesh"). Others follow the first folio and put "solid flesh." The emphasis is either on the flesh's innate depravity or on its frustrating solidity. Because Hamlet expresses a desire that the flesh go from a firm and resilient to something like a liquid or gaseous state, I have opted for "solid" as more consistent with the elemental imagery of the passage. There, my blessing with thee, / And these few precepts in thy memory / Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. / Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, / Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel, / But do not dull thy palm with entertainment / Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. [...] Neither a borrower nor a lender be, / For loan oft loses both itself and friend, / And borrowing dulls th' edge of husbandry. / This above all, to thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man. Act One scene three, ll. 55-80

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Beloved of refrigerator magnet and bumper sticker companies everywhere, Polonius' advice to Laertes puts the critic in a double bind. On the one hand, there is no denying that his advice is often sound, if generally cliched and obvious, and very memorably expressed. On the other, the speech must be read in context, and when done so it becomes deeply ironic. One phrase in particular is very rich coming from Polonius -- "to thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man." Polonius is, of course, the quintessential false man. He is forever plotting strategems

and eavesdropping behind the arras. That he nevertheless feels comfortable positing that one should be true to oneself (whatever that means) and thereby never false to any man is a testament to his shallow disregard for the deeper import and meaning of his language. Polonius mouths words without meaning them. He is windy and empty. And this speech in particular, with its smug certainties, serves as a stark contrast to Hamlet's searching, questioning, endless attempts at self-exploration.

I have of late -- but wherefore I know not -- lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'er-hanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Act Two scene two, ll. 282-92

Speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet here sums up the central paradox of the "quintessence of dust," mankind -- at once the most sublime of creatures, and no better than the lowest. Paradoxically, Hamlet uses his angel-like apprehension to determine the worthlessness of man. He at once places his species in a standard Renaissance cosmos, rising hierarchically from the earth to the heavens, and denies this hierarchy. This speech is often cited as a statement of Hamlet's deep melancholy -- similar to the soliloquy in Act One -- but here his melancholy is far larger than his present circumstances. His melancholy is metaphysical in nature and cosmic in scope. Already, he has outgrown the generic task before him, to kill his uncle, and has used the occasion of revenge and madness to explore much larger questions about the place of humanity in the universe.

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O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! / Is it not monstrous that this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit / That from her working all his visage waned; / Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect, / A broken voice, and his whole function suiting / With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing, / For Hecuba!

Act Two scene two, ll. 506-14 ff.

Hamlet's second soliloquy, given after the player has recited the woeful story of Priam's death and Hecuba's grief, explores the nature of performance. How can it be, he asks, that this player can summon up such apparently genuine feeling for a fiction, for a dream, while I (Hamlet) cannot manage to rally my spirits to action in a just cause? Hamlet's speech is very carefully constructed, with reason prevailing for the first long stretch of rhetoric until Hamlet's passion ironically overwhelms him and he explodes, "Fie upon't! foh! / About, my brains." (Hamlet does have a kind of passion after all -- not for revenge, but for expanding upon the lust and depravity of Claudius and Gertrude.) Notice how questions dominate the soliloquy. "Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across, / Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face, / Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i'th'throat / As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?" Hamlet is completely incapable of explaining or changing his character; he can merely eloquently wonder at it. Again, his apprehension is god-like, but what good does it do him?

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. To die, to sleep -- / No more. And by a sleep to say we end / The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that Flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep -- / To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub. / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil / Must give us pause.

Act Three scene one, ll. 56-68 ff.

Here are the most famous words in the play, and likely in all of western literature. Many have taken the speech to be a contemplation of suicide. "To be or not to be" -- that is, "to live or to kill myself." There

are some features of the speech that seem to shore this reading up. The speech does suggest that death is a highly attractive destination, and that the only thing that keeps us miserable mortals from seeking it out is the fear of "what dreams may come" in the hereafter. But certainly the speech is more than a simple suicide note. If he is thinking about suicide, he is most definitely contemplating it in the abstract, as a topic of interest more than as an actual option for his own life.

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Some critics have decided that the speech is not about suicide at all. To take one example, the eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson suggested that the soliloquy is more generally about death, and about the risk of death in a moment of decisive action, than about suicide. He writes, "Hamlet, knowing himself injured in the most enormous and atrocious degree, and seeing no means of redress, but such as must expose him to the extremity of hazard, meditates on his situation in this manner: Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress, it is necessary to decide, whether, after our present state, we are to be or not to be." In other words, Johnson thinks that the speech is really very consistent with the mounting action in the play. Hamlet, in his view, has come to a point where he must decide whether he is willing to put his life on the line, as he surely must, in order to attack the king. The linchpin of this question is -- after we die, do we continue to exist, or do we stop existing? To be, or not to be. If we simply stop existing, certainly the risk is worth the comfort of oblivion. But if, in the hereafter, we retain our minds, our sensibilities, we must pause before leaping into so uncertain, so potentially horrific a fate.

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. [...] Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

Act Three scene two, ll. 1-20 ff.

Hamlet's advice to the players may well be taken for Shakespeare's own theory of theater. Indeed, Hamlet is filled with such metatheatrical moments, from the play-within-a-play to the gossip about the London stage; it's not a stretch at all to here the bard's voice behind Hamlet's. The speech's most significant moment, in terms of aesthetic theory, is the passage that begins, "for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing." Hamlet reveals the primeval roots of theater as he understands them -- to act as a mirror on both the universal and the particular levels, reflecting both human nature across centuries and the peculiar habits of a given time in history. Overacting, clowning, and mugging might gain a moment's applause, but these things are not valuable beyond immediate gratification. Indeed, they run counter to the deepest nature of theater, which is to depict humanity not in a grotesque form, but as it actually is.

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Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murder. Pray can I not, / Though inclination be as sharp as will. / My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent, / And like a man to double business bound, / I stand in pause where I shall first begin, / And both neglect. What if this cursed hand / Were thicker than itself with brother's blood, / Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow?

Act Three scene three, ll. 36-46 ff.

This is the only soliloquy in Hamlet that does not belong to the title character. In it we finally learn for certain that Claudius is guilty of the murder charged to him. We also learn, perhaps, a little bit of sympathy for this simple, murderous and lustful man. He is, briefly at least, capable of looking into his

soul with the same questioning, searching self-examination that Hamlet displays elsewhere. And he does admit the impossible logic of his situation. He cannot truly repent while he still possesses the fruits of his sin, his brother's crown and wife. His situation, then, becomes at least somewhat pitiful, and his motivations much clearer.

Hamlet, in this scene, is not nearly so sympathetic. He comes upon Claudius in his attempt to pray and decides not to murder him for fear that his soul, being in a state of repentance, might ascend to heaven. Speaking of his cruel reasoning in this moment, Samuel Johnson wrote, "This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered."

How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge! What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. / Sure he that made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused. Now whether it be / Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th' event -- / A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward -- I do not know / Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do', / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means, / To do't.

Act Four scene four, ll. 32-46 ff.

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This, Hamlet's final soliloquy, is much like "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I." It is another meditation on the inscrutability of his failure to act when he has so much reason to do so. Whereas in the earlier soliloquy, the passion of an actor for an imaginary griever, Hecuba, occasioned Hamlet's selfreproaches,

here the sight of Fortinbras' army marching to contest a worthless piece of land fixes his mind and leads him to wonder at himself. With Hecuba, the emphasis is on feeling; with Fortinbras, the emphasis is on honor. In both cases, though, Hamlet sees men who have petty or fictional objects, and who nevertheless rise to great things; whereas he, with his very palpable reasons for action and feeling, cannot manage to summon any such accomplishment. Of course, as always, he is not sure why this is the case (and nor are we, not really), but he shows the uncertain searching of modern subjectivity in his attempt to formulate this very confusion.

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio -- a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know now how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that.

Act Five scene one, ll. 159-67

Harold Bloom has suggested that despite his protestations of his dead father's greatness, Hamlet did not really have a very happy household growing up. His father was, indeed, a great military ruler, off conquering and governing conquered lands. Bloom suggests that the closest thing Hamlet had to an affectionate father was likely Yorick, the court jester, from whom he likely learned his excellent wit, his macabre sense of humor, and many more of his most Hamlet-esque characteristics. We need not go so far to see the strange mixture of affection and disgust that Yorick's skull give rise to in Hamlet. This is a moment of pure and deep contemplation of death. The fact of mortality is, so to speak, staring Hamlet in the face. Yorick's skull is a very powerful memento mori, a reminder of death -- no matter how much you try to stave off aging, Hamlet says, you're inevitably doomed to be like Yorick, a dirty and lipless skull buried in the ground, forgotten by all but the gravediggers. This sort of reminder was quite common in the Renaissance, with its plagues and its widespread starvation. Death was much more familiar to them than it is to us. Nevertheless, despite our modern dreams of scientific immortality, the

universal truth of this final destination still holds.

HOR. If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

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HAM. Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

Act Five scene two, ll. 192-8

This exchange seems to capture in its essence the changed Hamlet that we see in Act Five scene two. No longer is Hamlet his old questioning, searching, tormented, macabre self. Now he has almost a zen-like acceptance of things as they are. What will be will be. All the world, at this point, seems to exist within a greater order -- perhaps an unknowable order, but an order nonetheless. The speech, while short, contains several rich paradoxes. First, Hamlet claims that there is rhyme and reason to the slightest events of the universe -- there is "special providence in the fall of the sparrow." At the same time, he asserts that we know nothing of the world -- "no man of aught he leaves knows." So all things are rich with meaning, yet we know not what such meaning might be. Thus Hamlet closes the play in a quiet and mysterious counter-poise with fate. He no longer attempts to understand the unknowable, but accepts it as such; indeed, he accepts unknowability as an inescapable condition of all existence. What good is it, then, to roil one's guts over future plans? On the contrary, not the action, but the readiness, is all.