



Hamlet

Study Guide by Course Hero



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Book Basics

AUTHOR

William Shakespeare

YEARS WRITTEN

1599–1601

GENRE

Drama, Tragedy

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Hamlet is written in objective third-person point of view. To give audiences some insight into characters' inner thoughts, Shakespeare uses short speeches (asides) and longer speeches (soliloquies) in which characters speak their thoughts aloud.

TENSE

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the present tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Hamlet is a tale of mourning, madness, and revenge. The play's title refers to its central character, Prince Hamlet of Denmark, and to his murdered father, King Hamlet, whose death he must avenge.

In Context

Shakespeare's plays are timeless, with a universality to which anyone can relate. *Hamlet*, for example, has a modern militaristic feel to its set and costuming, while at the same time it maintains a very medieval sensibility. The same can be said of Shakespeare's other plays: the stories, characters, and conflicts all have 21st-century analogues.

Some of the timelessness of Shakespeare's work has to do with the source material for his plays. The tragedy in *Hamlet* may, in part, stem from the deaths of Shakespeare's son and father. In addition, however, the play is said to have come from ancient stories that developed from some common ideas: killing a brother for personal gain, committing adultery, and faking madness as a method for hiding in plain sight. Stories based on the idea of fratricide—the killing of one's brother—for personal gain easily bring to mind the biblical tale of Cain and Abel: these themes have been incorporated into tales for thousands of years. Shakespeare, however, masterfully captured these universal tales and put his unique spin on them.

Beyond the Cain and Abel story, the oldest-known source for *Hamlet* is historian Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* ("Deeds of the Danes"; translated into English as *The Danish History*; c. 1185–1202). In this tale, Grammaticus documents long-standing oral legends. And though this is most likely the earliest written source material, scholars speculate that Shakespeare may have relied on a more contemporary work,

such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, dating from the 1580s or early 1590s.

In addition to the universality of his plays, Shakespeare often draws audiences in and holds their attention through the use of dramatic and situational irony. Dramatic irony happens when audience members are aware of a situation that the play's characters know nothing about. Situational irony involves a situation whose outcome is different from what is expected.

Author Biography

William Shakespeare's birthday is traditionally celebrated on April 23, although there are no records of his birth. The closest researchers have is a baptismal record from Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, dated April 26, 1564. His 38 plays were likely written between the late 1580s and 1613.

Marriage records show that 18-year-old William married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway in November 1582. The following year, Anne gave birth to the first of their children, Susanna. Twins Judith and Hamnet were born in 1585. Tragically, Hamnet—Shakespeare's only son—died in 1596 at age 11.

Critics such as Edward Dowden and Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that events in Shakespeare's life influenced the writing of *Hamlet*. In particular, they point to the deaths of his father in 1601 and of his son, whose name some intimate is an alternate spelling of Hamlet.

Whether Shakespeare's grief for his dead father and son found an outlet in the writing of *Hamlet*, one pivotal piece of the drama is very likely based on a historical incident. Claudius's poisoning of King Hamlet by pouring a vial of "cursed hebona" into his ear and Hamlet's rewrite of *The Murder of Gonzago* both echo the 1538 murder of Italy's Francesco Maria Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino. Marquis Luigi Gonzaga, jealous of the duke's social status, persuaded the duke's barber to kill his employer by dripping poison into his ear. The dramatic nature of the crime helped the story spread throughout Europe and years later gave Shakespeare inspiration for *Hamlet's* plot.

Much of Shakespeare's life was spent in either Stratford or London. His childhood, early married life, and later years were centered in Stratford, but his theatrical life was based in London.

By 1592 he had established himself in London and found success as both actor and playwright with the company Lord Strange's Men. During the plague outbreaks that shut down many public theaters, Shakespeare joined a new company, Lord Chamberlain's Men (later called the King's Men). This company was one of two well-known London companies. The group performed primarily at the Globe Theater—often for Queen Elizabeth I and later for King James I. Eventually, Shakespeare would own a share of the theater and would remain with both the company and the theater for the rest of his career.

Shakespeare died in April 1616. Some sources list the date as April 23, but others consider that date a guess, romanticized by the idea that he was born and died on the same day. More than four centuries later, his writing remains one of literature's greatest influences—read, performed, referenced, and enjoyed by people of all ages in countries all over the world.

Characters

Hamlet

Prince Hamlet is a gentle, deep-thinking, loving, and loyal man. He is not only intelligent but also quick-witted, appreciative of his standing, and self-aware. He is a decent soul, well-liked by those close to him. As an only child, he is consumed with grief after the death of his father, King Hamlet. Audiences get as tangled in his thinking as he is, especially those who get stuck, as Polonius does, in wondering whether the prince is mad.

Polonius

Polonius is counselor to the king and father to Laertes and Ophelia, although his children seem to have more heart and more integrity. That he loves his children is a strength, but it also seems that he might sacrifice their best interests for what is the most politically correct decision. And while Polonius is in a profession that may demand that type of submissiveness, one could argue that his tendency toward action without thought—a tendency that some audiences might say is in a proportion inverse to that of Hamlet's—is a contributing factor to both Ophelia's and his own demise.

Claudius

Claudius is the king of Denmark. As the tale opens, Claudius has recently ascended to the throne, taking his deceased brother's (and Hamlet's father's) position; to the chagrin of many, he has also married his brother's widow, Gertrude. Claudius is a deceitful, corrupt, jealous, and controlling man—characteristics exhibited again and again throughout the play. Claudius carries himself well at the outset of the play; his nature is cordial and reserved as one might expect of well-bred royalty—but this feels forced, or "played." Little by little, we see Claudius's true nature: cold, calculating, and self-seeking, in contrast to Hamlet's gentle, introspective nature.

Horatio

Loyal friend to Prince Hamlet, Horatio is also a student at Wittenberg in Germany. He is the person the sentries Barnardo and Francisco alert after they have twice seen a ghostly version of the recently deceased king. His role, which he performs well, is trusted ally and logical thinker. In a sense, it is the calm and collected Horatio who represents a halfway point between the introspective Hamlet and those who act without thinking, such as Fortinbras (the young prince of Norway), Polonius, and, at times, Claudius. Horatio, by virtue of having Hamlet's trust and company, is often privy to the prince's more private thoughts and plans. Through Horatio, Shakespeare often gives the audience insight into Hamlet, too. And, ultimately, because Horatio is so close to all that transpires—and yet not immediately involved—he is able to be a witness to the events in Denmark and, as Hamlet requested of him, communicate that tale to the world.

Laertes

Adventurous yet obedient, Laertes, whose name comes from Homer's *The Odyssey*, is Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother. Early in the play, Laertes, who has most recently been living in France, comes across as a young man eager to begin his life. When introduced to the audience, he has come to the royal court, seeking permission from Claudius to return to France. He is a bit hesitant, maybe even tongue-tied in that setting. But in a scene shortly after this, with Ophelia in the family home, his character becomes a bit clearer. In that setting, Laertes is the

gentle, loving, older brother. He shows his loyalty, affection, concern—and a bit of wisdom—when he speaks with his sister about Hamlet. Especially telling is Laertes's explanation to Ophelia that for persons of state, such as Hamlet, the good of the country often trumps individual desire—especially with regard to choice of partner.

Ophelia

The daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes, Ophelia is also Hamlet's love interest. She is a young, bright, and gentle woman, comfortable even with those above her in rank, like Gertrude. Although the depth of her relationship with Hamlet is difficult to discern, she is undoubtedly devoted to him. Her unbridled devotion, along with her obvious inexperience in love—as well as Hamlet's determination to drive her away from him—all figure into her misery and, ultimately, her heartbreaking death.

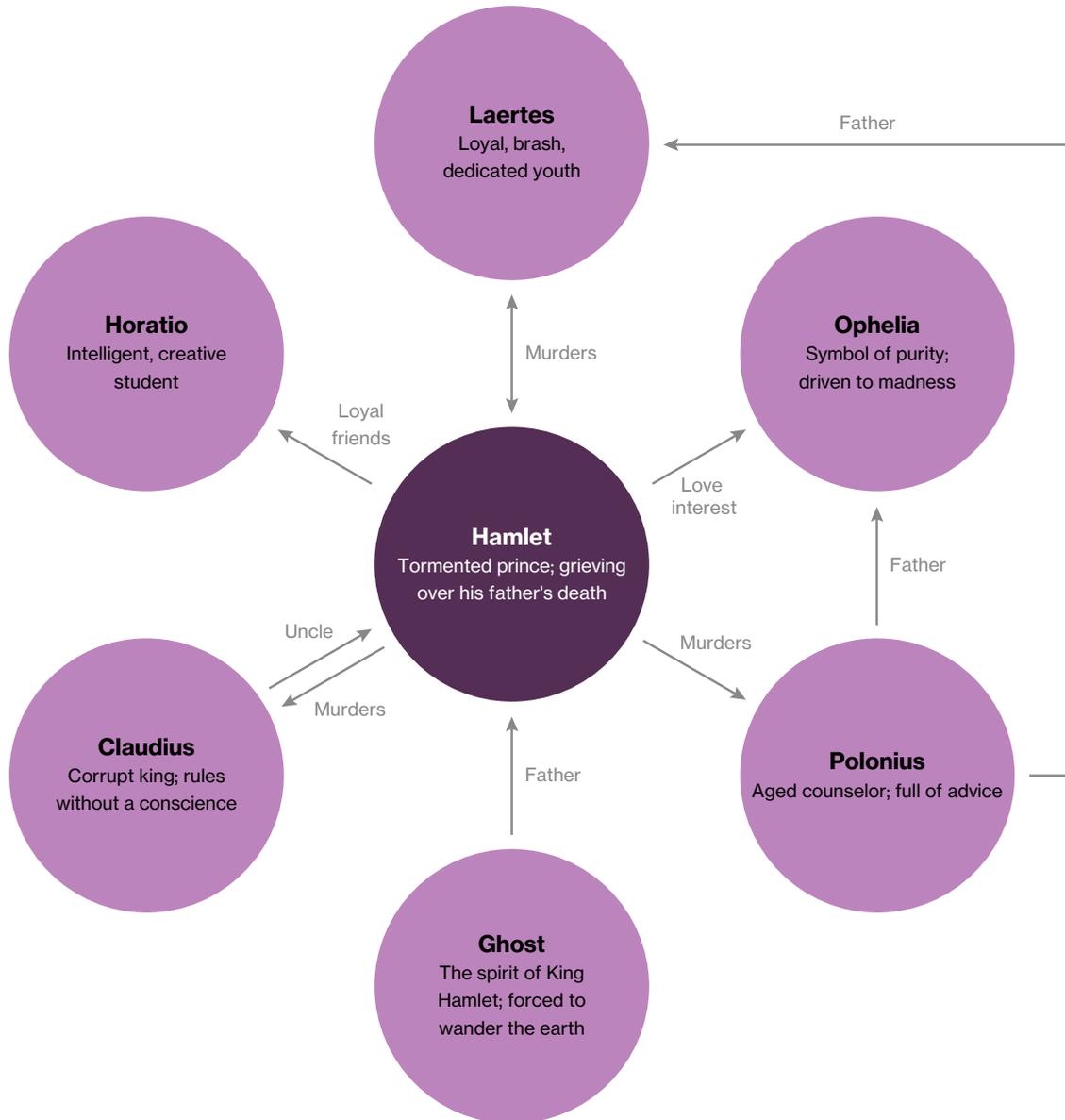
Gertrude

Gertrude is queen to Claudius, the current king of Denmark, and the widow of his brother, the elder King Hamlet. She is also mother to Prince Hamlet, the main character in this tragedy. A central quality of Gertrude's character is that she loves her son; it is apparent from the outset and is a driving force for her.

Ghost

The ghost is the spirit of Hamlet's father, who has recently died. The ghost tells Hamlet that his was not a natural death. He says he was murdered by Claudius, his brother, and he urges Hamlet to avenge his death by killing Claudius. The ghost's message unnerves Hamlet. He does not know whether to believe the ghost, or to think it some sort of demon there to trick him into committing murder.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Hamlet	Hamlet is the grief-stricken protagonist of the play.
Polonius	Polonius is the king's chief counselor and father of Laertes and Ophelia.
Claudius	Claudius is the corrupt brother of King Hamlet who takes the throne after the king's death and marries his former sister-in-law.
Horatio	Horatio is Hamlet's school friend who remains a loyal companion.
Laertes	Laertes is Polonius's son—a strong, active, and noble confidant for Hamlet.
Ophelia	Ophelia is Hamlet's love interest.
Gertrude	Gertrude is Hamlet's mother.
Ghost	The ghost is the spirit of King Hamlet.
Barnardo	Barnardo is a castle guard.
Captain	The captain is a member of Fortinbras's troops; Hamlet shares a conversation with him about thoughts and actions.
Cornelius	Cornelius is a courtier sent as ambassador to Norway.
First Player	First Player, a member of the company of players, agrees with Hamlet that they will perform his edited version of <i>The Murder of Gonzago</i> .
Fortinbras	Fortinbras, prince of Norway, is the quick-thinking and passionate foil to Hamlet.
Gravedigger	The gravedigger and sexton are responsible for digging Ophelia's grave.

Guildenstern	Guildenstern, a friend of Hamlet, is hired by Claudius to spy on Hamlet.
Marcellus	Marcellus is a castle guard.
Osric	Osric is the king's pretentious messenger.
Reynaldo	Reynaldo is a spy sent to monitor Laertes's activities in France.
Rosencrantz	Rosencrantz, a friend of Hamlet, is hired by Claudius to spy on Hamlet.
Sailor	The sailor delivers letters from Hamlet to Horatio and Claudius.
Sexton	The sexton and gravedigger are responsible for digging Ophelia's grave. A sexton is a church official who looks after church property.
Voltemand	Voltemand is a courtier sent as ambassador to Norway.

Plot Summary

The play opens soon after the death of the king of Denmark. Claudius, the king's brother, has claimed the throne and taken his sister-in-law—Hamlet's mother, Gertrude—as his queen. These events have left Prince Hamlet distraught and grieving. As the story begins, the ghost of King Hamlet appears in Elsinore, Denmark's royal castle. Sentinels who witness the ghost alert Horatio, who, upon seeing the ghost himself, goes to tell his dear friend Hamlet.

Hamlet's world is shaken anew when Horatio tells him that he has seen a ghost resembling his father. When Hamlet joins Horatio (Act 1, Scene 4) and sees the ghost himself, he is terrified. The ghost tells Hamlet that he has been murdered and that Claudius poisoned him. He commands Hamlet to avenge his death but insists that he not harm his mother. Hamlet questions whether the ghost is real, but his mourning is now compounded by rage.

Earlier, Hamlet had returned from his studies in Germany after learning of his father's death. Already in mourning, Hamlet is

pushed deeper into despair by his mother's hasty second marriage. It is clear from his soliloquy in Act 2 that he is confused that his mother could disregard the sorrow of losing her husband and enter into marriage with his brother.

Meanwhile, Claudius seeks some semblance of normalcy for Denmark. Holding court one afternoon, Claudius draws attention to young Prince Fortinbras of Norway, who is raising an army against Denmark. Fortinbras seeks to avenge the death of his father, who had died in battle against King Hamlet some years before. Claudius does not see the parallel between that young prince and his nephew, nor does he take a note of caution from the situation.

Claudius casts a more fatherly eye on Laertes, son of his counselor Polonius, who seeks the king's blessing for his return to France, which Claudius approves. Claudius next chastises Hamlet for the unseemly way in which he mourns for his father, after which he and Hamlet's mother deny his desire to return to Germany, insisting he stay in Elsinore.

As Laertes prepares to leave for France, he confronts his sister, Ophelia, about her relationship with Prince Hamlet. He warns her not to take Hamlet's affection seriously. Her father, Polonius, overhears; when Laertes has gone, he agrees with his son's advice and orders Ophelia to avoid Hamlet. Heartbroken, Ophelia says she will obey.

Sometime later, Ophelia tells Polonius of a distressing encounter with Prince Hamlet. She says Hamlet came to her looking bewildered. Polonius thinks Hamlet's love for Ophelia is driving him mad and decides he must tell the king and queen of this occurrence.

When Polonius visits the king and queen, they are already meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's childhood friends, in an attempt to figure out Hamlet's strange behavior. Also at hand are Voltmand and Cornelius, the ambassadors Claudius sent to Norway, who are reporting that "Old Norway" has commanded Fortinbras to abandon aggression against Denmark. Fortinbras vows obedience and will turn his attention to Poland. Finally, Polonius relates the story of Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia; he tells the king and queen that he believes Hamlet's love for Ophelia has driven him mad.

Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and becomes suspicious of their presence in Elsinore. When they tell him that a company of players (actors) has arrived, he is excited.

Hamlet seeks out the actors and asks them to perform a version of the play *The Murder of Gonzago*. By inserting a scene depicting his father's murder, Hamlet hopes his revised play, *The Mousetrap*, will catch the king in his guilt.

Claudius and Polonius plan to eavesdrop on Ophelia and Hamlet. As they hide nearby, Hamlet comes upon Ophelia and they chat. However, he quickly becomes suspicious of Ophelia's motives when she tries to return gifts he gave her. He rages wildly with sorrow and disappointment and tells Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" before leaving her.

Ophelia is devastated; Claudius and Polonius are shocked. Claudius realizes Hamlet poses a threat to him. He decides to send Hamlet to England to be rid of him. Polonius agrees but suggests one last try: have Gertrude talk with him after the play that evening, and he, Polonius, will eavesdrop on the conversation.

That evening the theater company performs for Claudius's court. As the players reenact the scene of the king being poisoned in the garden—as the ghost told Prince Hamlet—Claudius flies into a panicked rage, halting the play and fleeing the room. Hamlet, with Horatio beside him, takes this as an admission of guilt.

After the play, Claudius meets with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and tasks them with taking Hamlet to England. When they leave to find Hamlet, Claudius admits to King Hamlet's murder in a soliloquy. He attempts to pray, but finds he cannot repent, because he is unwilling to give up the rewards gained from the murder: the throne and his wife. Hamlet passes and sees Claudius on his knees. He thinks how easy it would be to kill his uncle then and there, but decides not to. Hamlet believes that to kill Claudius while he is in prayer would grant him entry to Heaven, which Hamlet does not want.

Hamlet meets with Gertrude in her chambers; Polonius hides nearby. Hamlet confronts Gertrude about her part in King Hamlet's death. When she cries out, Polonius shouts, revealing his presence, but not his identity. Believing that Claudius is hiding there, Hamlet stabs Polonius through the tapestry and kills him. Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius's body with him. The encounter convinces Gertrude that her son is indeed mad.

Gertrude goes to tell Claudius of her meeting with Hamlet and of Polonius's death. Once he is alone, Claudius reveals that Hamlet is also soon to die; the documents he is sending with the ship call for Hamlet's execution.

As Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern head to the boat, they spy Fortinbras and his army en route to Poland. Hamlet is struck by the contrast between himself and young Fortinbras. He sees Fortinbras's ability to act—instead of think—as a mark of greatness. When contrasting himself with Fortinbras, Hamlet finds himself wanting.

Ophelia asks to meet with Gertrude and Claudius, and they realize that she has gone mad with grief. Laertes, back from France, storms in to see the king and queen and is heartbroken to find Ophelia in such a confused condition. Claudius convinces Laertes they had nothing to do with Polonius's death or Ophelia's madness. He counsels Laertes to be patient and encourages him to follow his counsel to exact his revenge. Laertes consents.

A messenger finds Horatio, bearing letters from Hamlet to Horatio and to Claudius. Hamlet's letter informs Horatio that he is back in Denmark and has much to tell him about his failed trip to England. He asks that Horatio lead the messenger to the king to deliver his letters to him. After that, the messenger will lead Horatio to him.

Claudius and Laertes are together when the king receives word of Hamlet's return. They plot a fencing duel between Hamlet and Laertes, with Laertes using a poison-tipped foil (sword). As a backup, they plan to have a poisoned cup of wine ready for Hamlet to drink. They intend to give Laertes his revenge without putting either of them in harm's way. As they conclude their meeting, Gertrude brings word that Ophelia has drowned.

Hamlet and Horatio meet in the graveyard where Ophelia is about to be buried. As the funeral procession gathers around her grave, the grief-stricken Laertes jumps into her grave and proclaims his love. Hamlet, overcome in the moment, follows, and they fight. Horatio and the other mourners separate the two as Hamlet boldly proclaims his love for Ophelia.

When Horatio and Hamlet leave the graveyard and enter the castle, Osric, one of Claudius's courtiers, tells Hamlet that Claudius has wagered on Hamlet to win a fencing match against Laertes. Hamlet accepts the challenge and says he will strive to win on the king's behalf.

The duel begins. Hamlet strikes Laertes twice and Gertrude drinks to Hamlet's health, unknowingly drinking the poisoned wine. Alarmed by the way the competition is going, Laertes finally strikes Hamlet, they scuffle, and the foils are exchanged.

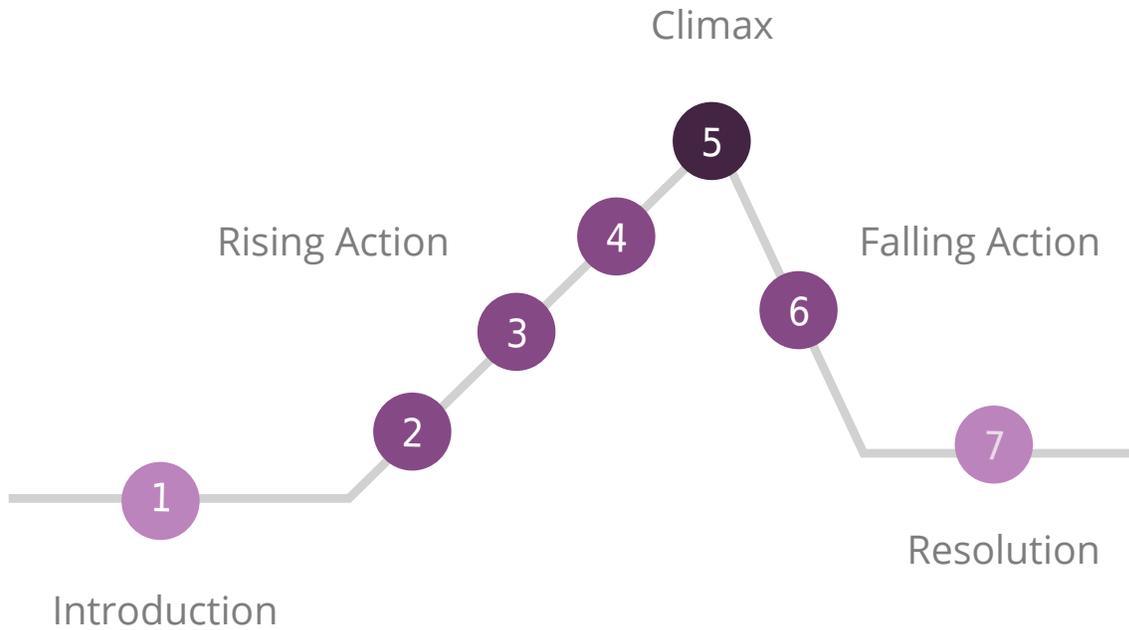
Hamlet's next hit on Laertes poisons him.

Suddenly, the queen collapses. As she dies, Laertes reveals to Hamlet that both of them have also been poisoned by the foil now in Hamlet's hands. Laertes reveals the plot to everyone, proclaiming that the king is to blame. Before he closes his eyes for the last time, he and Hamlet exchange forgiveness.

Enraged, Hamlet kills Claudius—stabbing him with the poisoned foil and forcing him to drink the rest of the poisoned wine. Hamlet watches him die, but he himself is soon to follow. As the prince approaches death, he begs Horatio to carry his story to the world.

Young Fortinbras, returning from Poland, arrives to find the gruesome scene—Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius all dead—and to hear Horatio's explanation.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. King Hamlet dies; Claudius takes crown and marries Gertrude.

Rising Action

- 2.** Hamlet is visited by his father's ghost.
- 3.** Laertes and Polonius warn Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet.
- 4.** *The Mousetrap* is staged.

Climax

5. Hamlet kills Polonius and is banished to England.

Falling Action

6. Claudius and Laertes conspire to kill Hamlet; Ophelia dies.

Resolution

7. Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet die.

Timeline of Events

Four weeks later

Claudius marries Gertrude, King Hamlet's widow.

Two months later

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent to spy on Hamlet.

Later that evening

Hamlet kills Polonius.

Eight weeks later

Claudius and Laertes plot to kill Hamlet.

One day later

Hamlet returns—he, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes die.

Before action begins

Claudius kills King Hamlet.

Four weeks later

Hamlet sees the ghost.

One day later

Hamlet stages *The Mousetrap*.

Later that evening

Claudius banishes Hamlet to England.

Later that day

Ophelia dies.

Scene Summaries

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

Sentinels Barnardo and Francisco stand the night watch at Denmark's Elsinore castle. Francisco is about to go off duty when Marcellus, another sentinel, appears with Horatio, a friend of young Prince Hamlet. As soon as Francisco leaves, Marcellus and Barnardo eagerly discuss two appearances of a ghost during their watch. The spirit resembles the late King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet's father. Horatio is unconvinced.

As they attempt to convince him that the apparition is more than their imaginations, the ghost appears to the three of them. At the others' urging, Horatio begs the ghost to speak, but it refuses and slips away.

Horatio is terrified and suggests that the ghost's presence signifies something terrible for Denmark. Noting that the ghost is wearing the very armor he had on when he fought old Fortinbras of Norway, Horatio recounts the story of King Hamlet, who was drawn into battle with Fortinbras over a small piece of land. Fortinbras is killed in the battle, and, as victor, King Hamlet wins back the land—land that Fortinbras's son, also named Fortinbras, now seeks to reclaim.

As Horatio's story concludes, the ghost appears again and seems about to speak. Suddenly, however, the rooster crows with the rising sun and the ghost slips away. Horatio suggests they inform Hamlet of what they've seen.

Analysis

Shakespeare kicks off the play with an intriguing scene that pulls the audience right into the story: a recently deceased king shows up in ghostly form, military tensions lie ahead, and Denmark is in a state of general unrest. The playwright imparts a wealth of information in a short scene, including—by reference to what the ghost is wearing—some backstory that informs about the tension between Denmark and Norway.

Horatio develops from a skeptic into a concerned, even fearful,

believer, curious about what this ghostly omen foreshadows for Hamlet and the country. Horatio is able to introduce the audience to the Fortinbras subplot, which will gain importance as the story progresses. In particular, Horatio relates that Fortinbras is "Of unimproved mettle hot and full" and is raising an army to march on Denmark to avenge his father's loss. This information explains that the young Fortinbras is a man more about action than thought. His character stands in contrast to Hamlet—a realization that the prince himself eventually will come to. Having Fortinbras as a foil helps the audience understand Hamlet's conflicted self and makes his story all the more tragic.

Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Claudius holds court at Elsinore and thanks everyone for their support through the kingdom's recent events: the death and funeral of his brother, King Hamlet, and Claudius's subsequent marriage to Gertrude. Claudius then turns to the matter of young Fortinbras of Norway, giving everyone the latest information on the warlike young man's actions.

Claudius speculates that Fortinbras thinks Denmark may be in chaos and that this environment may offer him an advantage. Claudius relates that he has written to Fortinbras's uncle, the present king of Norway who is gravely ill. The letter informs the older man of his nephew's actions.

Claudius then turns his attention to Laertes, son of the counselor Polonius. With a show of fatherly affection for Laertes, Claudius presses to know what he has to ask. Laertes, having come from France for Claudius's coronation, now asks permission to return to France. Ascertaining that Laertes has his father's blessing to depart, Claudius agrees that Laertes may go.

Claudius and Gertrude then chide Hamlet about his continued mourning for his father. Claudius tells Hamlet that while it is commendable to honor one's father, to so prolong a display shows a weakness of character. He then invites Hamlet to look upon him as a father and wishes Hamlet to reconsider going back to school in Wittenberg and instead stay in Denmark with them. Gertrude echoes his words. As Hamlet vows to obey, Claudius and Gertrude leave.

Alone, Hamlet reveals the depth of his despair, saying that were it not against God's law, he would contemplate suicide. He speaks of how weary he is of life, and we come to understand that it is not just his father's death that has Hamlet in such sorrow but also the quick marriage of his mother to his uncle.

Hamlet's grief is interrupted by the entrance of Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo, who have come to tell him of the ghost they've seen. Wildly shocked and interested, Hamlet peppers them with questions and makes plans to stand watch with them that night. As the men part, Hamlet asks them to tell no one else what they have seen. The others, swearing their loyalty to him, give their word.

Analysis

Shakespeare again packs a lot of information into a single scene, some of it played out here and some previous action communicated in the dialogue. This scene gives a firsthand look at the new king and queen, as well as some understanding of their strained relationship with Prince Hamlet. Hamlet's emotional disturbance is readily visible. His unease is shown in an aside about the added level to which he and Claudius are now related: they are now both uncle/nephew and stepfather/stepson. His declaration that he and Claudius are not at all alike gives the audience insight into Hamlet's feelings about his uncle—that he is hesitant to trust him. His remarks foreshadow what will become ever clearer: the two men truly are not alike.

This scene also provides the first real view of Claudius's character in the fatherly way he behaves toward Laertes, contrasted with the harsher manner in which he deals with his stepson Hamlet.

Shakespeare provides a brief but instructive view into the relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet. Her plea for Hamlet to stay in Denmark suggests she truly values her only child. And because Hamlet obeys, it shows he is devoted to both his mother and father. In his soliloquy, however, he expresses disappointment in his mother because of her ability to move on so quickly after her husband's death. Hamlet believes his parents' relationship was strong—full of love, affection, and commitment—so he finds it incomprehensible and even disloyal that she could so easily enter into a relationship with Claudius, who Hamlet says is "no more like my

father [t]han I to Hercules."

He ends his soliloquy saying that while his heart is breaking, he must hold his tongue. The reason for his resolve is not made clear. Perhaps he does not wish to emotionally wound his mother, or perhaps he feels threatened by Claudius—or perhaps he wants to hide his anger until he is ready to strike at Claudius. At this moment, Shakespeare ushers in Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo with their startling news. It is an intense moment for Hamlet to hear that the ghost of his father walks Elsinore Castle, and such cliff-hanging moments keep both the tension and the sense of tragedy ramped through the course of the play.

Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

As Laertes prepares to head back to France, he and Ophelia talk about his trip and promise to write to each other, but Laertes quickly steers the conversation to the topic of Ophelia and Hamlet's relationship. Showing the concern of a thoughtful older brother, Laertes warns Ophelia not to take Hamlet's attention too seriously. Laertes tells her that a person of Hamlet's stature does not have the liberty to choose a mate, and reminds Ophelia that the welfare of a prince's country may depend upon that choice. Reciprocating Hamlet's affection, he adds, could damage her reputation.

While Ophelia promises to take Laertes's counsel to heart, their conversation is interrupted by their father, Polonius, who is surprised to find Laertes still in residence. Once Laertes leaves, Polonius echoes much of his warnings about Hamlet, dismissing Ophelia's claims that Hamlet's expressions of love are sincere. As the scene closes, Polonius forbids her to spend any more time with Hamlet, and Ophelia submits.

Analysis

The scene—basically just conversations between two siblings and then between a father and his two children—does a lot of work, both in developing character and in building the plot.

The audience gains insight into Laertes and Ophelia's characters. For example, as Laertes questions Ophelia about

her relationship with Prince Hamlet, he appears as the caring older brother. Laertes also comes across as confident and practical, with straightforward reasoning and a gentle style. Being older—and no doubt because he is a male and has been beyond the gates of Elsinore and the borders of Denmark—he is more worldly than his sister and aware of the trouble that a young man's attention can cause a young woman's reputation.

Ophelia, for her part, shows herself to be young and inexperienced, but also earnest and without guile. She is sincere in her love for Hamlet and believes he is equally sincere, but she appears oblivious to the potential darker side of a young man's intentions. Both Ophelia and Laertes seem thoughtful, which stands in contrast to what we learn of Polonius in both the following conversation and in the unfolding play.

Polonius then talks first with Laertes and then with Ophelia. The audience gets an initial glimpse into Polonius's character. Whereas his children seem to be straightforward and sincere, Polonius appears somewhat self-absorbed and politically minded—even in situations where his children are concerned. This scene also captures Polonius's tendency to use many words when one would do.

The scene communicates backstory while moving the plot forward. The scene provides more information about Laertes, Ophelia, and Polonius, and a sense of the society and hierarchy in Denmark. Hamlet is observed through others' eyes and the scene gives enough information about Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship to show that it's a matter to watch as the play unfolds.

Reality versus appearance is a key theme that runs through the play and is central to this scene. "What are Hamlet's true intentions?" both Laertes and Polonius are asking. "Is he what he seems?" or "is he deceiving Ophelia?" Even as Polonius cautions Ophelia that Hamlet's intentions might not be what they seem, he is actually more concerned with how her actions might affect his reputation. Those same motivations underlie his advice to Laertes. So much of what Polonius counsels has to do with outward appearance and with little regard for an inner self.

Act 1, Scene 4

Summary

Hamlet and Horatio accompany Marcellus on his watch. Near midnight they hear much revelry from within the castle, and Hamlet remarks that the king is drinking and partying again. He talks at length about how such wild behavior has given Denmark a riotous reputation, taking away from the country's strengths and positive qualities.

Hamlet carries the thought further, talking about how one's faults can overwhelm all the positive attributes one has. Hamlet is then stunned by the ghost's appearance and that it indeed appears to be his father. He begs the ghost to speak to him and to tell him why he has come.

In response, the ghost beckons Hamlet to come away with him, which Hamlet is eager to do. Horatio cautions Hamlet not to follow the spirit, fearing it is dangerous. Both Horatio and Marcellus try to stop Hamlet from following, but the prince is determined. He breaks free and follows the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus, in turn, follow Hamlet.

Analysis

This short, powerful scene at last confronts Hamlet with the ghost. As the scene opens, Hamlet sits in watch with Horatio and Marcellus, listening to boisterous revelry from within the castle that further taints Claudius's character: he is more interested in raucous celebration than in honoring the memory of his dead brother.

Hamlet remarks that this kind of behavior damages Denmark's image with other countries and although Claudius is not the first ruler to indulge in such revelry, he seems to believe that Claudius takes part in it excessively. If nothing else, this sidebar tells us about Claudius and Hamlet's view of his uncle/stepfather.

The scene shifts sharply with the appearance of the ghost. It sets a stark contrast between Hamlet's relationship with his uncle versus his father. He is distant and has a negative view of his uncle, while he is so aligned with his father he will follow him, even in death.

Shakespeare uses this exciting, tension-filled moment to introduce a few important ideas. The first is the depth of Hamlet's sadness. When Horatio cautions him about following the ghost, Hamlet scoffs: "I do not set my life at a pin's fee." This notion of "to be or not to be" will grow louder with each scene, although whether or not Hamlet has the fortitude for action also becomes a point of contention.

The theme of madness is also introduced when Horatio—trying to dissuade Hamlet from following the ghost—suggests it might "deprive your sovereignty of reason [and] draw you into madness." Whether real or feigned, madness becomes central to the play—particularly around Hamlet—and particularly because much of what transpires between the ghost and Hamlet takes place out of sight and earshot of others.

Act 1, Scene 5

Summary

Hamlet follows the ghost to another part of the castle wall, where the ghost tells Hamlet he must avenge his murder. The ghost explains that the citizens of Denmark believe the king died after being bitten by a snake while napping in his orchard. In reality, the only "serpent" he encountered was his brother Claudius, who now wears the crown.

The ghost tells Hamlet how Claudius poured poison into his ears as he slept, thus stealing his life, crown, and wife. Even as he reiterates his demand that Hamlet take revenge on Claudius, the ghost tells the prince not to touch his mother, Queen Gertrude. Insisting Hamlet to leave his mother to heaven, the ghost disappears as dawn arrives.

Hamlet, overwhelmed by what he has seen and heard, is a mixture of grief, anger, and confusion. He flies from one thought to another in a soliloquy that is both sorrowful and raging. He closes with a commitment to the ghost's entreaty just before Horatio and Marcellus find him.

Horatio and Marcellus are eager to know what transpired between Hamlet and the ghost, but Hamlet responds to their questions by talking in confusing circles. He asks them to promise that they will tell no one of what they have seen and heard that night. He presses them to swear on his sword, and adds that they must hold to their promise no matter how

strangely he acts in the future. Three times, before they can swear, the ghost cries out "Swear!" Horatio and Marcellus promise, and as the three men leave, his final words capture both his rage and sorrow.

Analysis

Each scene in which the ghost of King Hamlet appears adds tremendous complexity to the plot. With King Hamlet's ghost now present and speaking, he is revealing actions and even motivation—particularly around his own death—that the characters and audiences would not otherwise know. For Hamlet, he is a catalyst, capable of turning the course of the play's action. He is also a pivotal element when considering themes such as madness or revenge.

The ghost's order for Hamlet to avenge his death increases the play's tension and furthers Hamlet's development. Because he knows the details of his own death—details no one other than Claudius would otherwise be able to impart—he changes the course of the play's action. The information he conveys takes the play from a simple drama to a story of revenge. Even at this point, Hamlet's life parallels Fortinbras's. There are two princes, two dead king fathers, and although they died under different circumstances, the sons are left to consider revenge.

On a more personal level for the title character, the ghost's appearance moves Hamlet from being simply a grieving son to an aggrieved one. Hamlet was filled with sorrow before the ghost made himself known, and he was already unsettled by Claudius and Gertrude's hasty marriage. Once the ghost appears to Prince Hamlet bearing information that Hamlet feels must be the truth—that Claudius murdered his father—Hamlet is still sorrowful but a huge wave of rage has swept in. In light of the obvious friction between him and Claudius in Act 1, Scene 2, there is no doubt that this new information warns of potential violence.

Act 2, Scene 1

Summary

Polonius sends his servant, Reynaldo, to France to bring Laertes money and snoop into his son's life. Polonius suggests Reynaldo should ask around about Laertes to discover how he

is living. In directing Reynaldo, Polonius urges his servant to suggest some negative qualities about Laertes—gaming, drinking, fencing, and swearing—when he talks with people. Polonius is confident this method will yield the truth about Laertes's behavior abroad.

In the second half of the scene, Ophelia enters distraught. She relates to Polonius that Hamlet came to her in her chamber disheveled and confused. Believing Hamlet to be mad with lust for Ophelia, Polonius asks if she has said anything upsetting to him. Ophelia answers that she has not spoken with him but has simply refused his letters and denied him any contact, as Polonius instructed.

Polonius is convinced that by telling Ophelia to avoid Hamlet, he has inadvertently fanned the flames of the prince's love. He tells Ophelia that they must tell the king and queen about the romantic connection between Hamlet and her, adding that concealing it might cause more grief than the knowledge that Hamlet has fallen for someone "beneath him."

Analysis

The theme of truth versus deception is rampant in this scene. As it opens, Polonius is sending his servant to France to bring Laertes money and check up on him, even though Laertes has proven himself to be responsible, obedient, and thoughtful. Although Polonius treats Laertes as trustworthy when they are face to face, he feels the need to check up on him, which in itself may be innocent enough, but he goes so far as to suggest that Reynaldo "lay slight sullies" against Laertes to dredge information out of various sources. Further, it's an example of dramatic irony that Polonius, ever mindful of his reputation, is so casual about the idea of damaging his son's—and uses deception to find the truth. In Act 1, Scene 3, Polonius had warned Ophelia about maintaining her reputation. He is concerned that if her reputation is damaged, it will also harm his status.

The second event in this scene—Ophelia relaying to Polonius the strange encounter she had with Hamlet—also plays on truth versus deception, or appearance versus reality. The audience knows from what Hamlet tells Horatio and the soldiers in Act 1, Scene 5 that he may need to appear mad. If we assume that Hamlet's odd behavior in the remainder of the play is the result of cunning intelligence and not madness, then he is appearing in a way that is untruthful. Ophelia, for her part,

is being forced to appear uninterested in Hamlet—a man she obviously loves.

In this scene and as the play progresses, the audience sees the harm that such deceit causes or potentially causes. For example, Polonius's lack of honesty damages the faith that Reynaldo, much less Laertes or Ophelia, can place in him. He relies on deceit in his treatment of his children, expects others to also act deceitfully, and has no qualms about using deceit to achieve his goals. The layers of deceit also contribute to Hamlet's sorrow, disillusionment—and rage—regarding his father's death.

Act 2, Scene 2

Summary

Claudius and Gertrude hire Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's childhood friends, to spend time with Hamlet, hoping they will be able to determine the cause of his strange behavior.

After attendants take the friends to visit Hamlet, Polonius, followed closely by ambassadors Voltmand and Cornelius, join the royal pair. The ambassadors, who have returned from speaking with the king of Norway about Fortinbras, are happy to report their visit as successful.

"Old Norway," they say, has commanded Fortinbras to abandon any acts of force against Denmark. Fortinbras has vowed obedience to his uncle and has turned his attention to Poland, where he originally told his uncle he was going. Voltmand notes that Fortinbras has asked permission for him and his men to pass through Denmark en route to Poland.

As the ambassadors exit, Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude he thinks Hamlet's love for Ophelia is driving him mad. Polonius then reads them a letter sent from Hamlet to Ophelia, in which he proclaims his love for her. Together, Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude decide to lay a trap, orchestrating a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia and watching from afar.

Hamlet meets Polonius while walking in the hall. They talk a little, with Hamlet verbally sparring in clever if not chaotic circles around the older man. Polonius, taking this as evidence of the prince's madness, excuses himself to go in search of

Ophelia and plan a "chance" meeting.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear, and Hamlet asks several times what brings them to Elsinore. Although they try to evade his questions, Hamlet quickly figures out that they've been sent to spy on him. The one good bit of information they give Hamlet is that a company of players has come to Elsinore.

With some excitement, Hamlet greets the players. Hamlet arranges for them to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* in the court the following night—and to incorporate some lines he will give them. Once Hamlet is alone, he speaks aloud, berating himself for his lack of action with the task the ghost has given him. He calls himself a coward and a villain, railing in his grief. Then, pulling himself together, he muses aloud about his plan to use the play—augmented with lines he will write—as a means to probe Claudius's conscience. Hamlet is convinced that if Claudius reacts guiltily, it will prove that the ghost is a noble spirit and not a devil come to trick him.

Analysis

This scene is long, rich, and loaded with action. Claudius and Gertrude try to delve more deeply into Hamlet's state of mind. While Gertrude's motives are almost certainly caring and honorable, the audience may suspect that Claudius's motives are anything but. The dubious use of spies again comes into play; they bring in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, old friends of the prince, who will rely on their long-standing relationship with Hamlet to ferret out the information the king and queen desire.

In this scene, too, we see the ambassadors return from Norway. This subplot, although it doesn't consume a significant amount of stage time, does bring Fortinbras into the play. The young man becomes a foil for Hamlet; the contrast of their styles—Fortinbras is a man of action compared to the deep-thinking Hamlet—becomes apparent, even to Hamlet. The few times we see Fortinbras or hear of him not only brings that to mind for the audience, but it also causes Hamlet to look at himself and sometimes recommit to the task the ghost has assigned him.

The company of actors comes to Elsinore in this scene, prompting the opportunity for a play within a play and for Hamlet's further development. He now is plotting a way to cause Claudius to divulge his guilt through his reaction to Hamlet's play within a play. Hamlet's revision of the play will

change the course of everything for the people of Elsinore. The presence of the players and Hamlet's familiarity with them also gives audiences another view of Hamlet. Throughout the play, the information we glean from his various interactions—with the soldiers and Horatio early on, with the players here and into Act 3, and with even the gravediggers in Act 5—gives us a well-rounded character by the end of the play.

As this scene closes, the presence of the company of actors also provides fodder for Hamlet to use against himself and his tendency to overthink. Contrasting himself with actors who can call up passion and tears out of a fictitious motivation, Hamlet condemns his lack of action in avenging his father, calling himself a "dully and muddy-mettled rascal," chiding himself for his inability to "say nothing!"

Thematically, this scene has many instances that tap into the themes of truth versus deception and madness.

- The very presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern oozes deception. They are—or were—Hamlet's friends, but from the moment they arrive in Elsinore they act as Claudius's spies, forsaking their loyalty to the prince for the favor of the king.
- Claudius's motivation in bringing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore is a far cry from Gertrude's. Although he pretends that he wants to help Hamlet, Claudius is actually looking to find out what Hamlet knows in order to stay one step ahead of him.
- The company of players—some of the only people or groups in the play who are not hiding something—are, in an example of dramatic irony, built around the idea of reality versus appearance/truth versus deception. The basis of theater is a suspension of disbelief—a willingness to believe what one is presented—and that idea, set into the middle of this play so fraught with deception, shines a light on all of the other examples of play acting around it. The final line in this scene foreshadows the importance of this company being here in Elsinore at this time, with Hamlet saying, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."
- The first evidence of Hamlet showing false signs of madness, or an "antic disposition," appears in this scene. Although in the previous scene (Act 2, Scene 1) there is indication of his strange behavior and appearance from Ophelia's account, his interaction with Polonius, and then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, gives a firsthand view. Hamlet talks in riddles, such as when he calls Polonius a

"fishmonger."

This scene also examines the theme of thought versus action, brought up by the discussion around Fortinbras and Norway, which paints young Fortinbras as a man of action to Hamlet's man of thought as well as Hamlet's comparison of himself to the players.

Act 3, Scene 1

Summary

Claudius and Gertrude interrogate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about their discussion with Hamlet. The men have little to report except that the company of players who arrived shortly after they did seemed to have interested and pleased the prince, and that he has directed them to perform for the court this evening. Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to watch the prince and encourage him in this endeavor.

When they leave, Claudius sends Gertrude off so that he, Polonius, and Ophelia can plan the "chance" meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet. Through this staged meeting, Claudius and Polonius hope to test Polonius's thought that it is Hamlet's love for Ophelia that is so distracting him. They instruct Ophelia to stroll the hall, seemingly absorbed in a book, while they hide nearby to watch and listen.

Hamlet eventually appears, lost in his thoughts and apparently contemplating suicide. Catching sight of Ophelia, he interrupts his thoughts to speak with her. Ophelia tries to return some gifts he gave her, but, suspicious of her motives, he denies they are from him. He further denies that he loved her, which serves to bewilder and wound Ophelia. The two have an impassioned discussion, reeling in confusion and a mutual feeling of betrayal. Hamlet orders her to a nunnery and leaves.

Claudius and Polonius come to Ophelia's side, shocked by what they have witnessed. Polonius insists Hamlet's love for Ophelia—love that Polonius made her refuse—is at the root of the prince's madness. Claudius, already beginning to show a guilty conscience as an earlier aside suggests, is now convinced that Hamlet is brooding on something bigger—something that could be dangerous to his position. Although he initially refutes the idea that Hamlet is mad, he

does say that madness should not go unchecked. He decides to send Hamlet to England, away from the stress of Denmark. Polonius agrees that sending him abroad is the best course, but also suggests trying one last idea: sending the queen to speak with Hamlet after the play that evening, while he (Polonius) hides nearby to witness the conversation. Claudius consents.

Analysis

This scene contains Hamlet's "to be, or not to be" soliloquy, which continues as one of literature's most-quoted lines—and it captures the essence of both this scene and the entire play. When Hamlet says those lines as part of a longer soliloquy, he is at his most sorrowful and weary. With these words, Hamlet contemplates how a person deals with what he calls a "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" world. While many audiences take this passage as giving voice to a struggle between suicide and existence, another interpretation suggests this is Hamlet's dilemma with living in a way that is true to oneself or not.

The notion of living true to oneself fits nicely into the truth versus deception theme.

From their initial appearance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doing anything but living truthfully. They have so fully aligned themselves with Claudius, it is as if they forgot the basis of what brought them here: their friendship with Hamlet.

Likewise, almost everything Claudius and Polonius do is based on deceit. The ability to act from an honest motive—to be true to themselves or to the greater good—seems to have escaped both politicians a long time ago. Although Polonius uses deceit to protect his appearance and good standing, by the end of the play, his dishonesty has contributed in a bigger way.

For instance, his meddling in the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia was primarily motivated by how Ophelia's actions might affect *his* reputation. He didn't stop to consider her reputation or Hamlet and Ophelia's feelings for each other.

While this interference doesn't seem of great consequence at first, it actually contributes to Hamlet's deepening feelings of isolation and sorrow and Ophelia's emotional breakdown. Claudius, meanwhile, has abandoned truth; it is a challenge to think of an action he takes that is honest—short of the discussion he had with himself about seeking pardon for his sin if he retains the profits of them.

Even Ophelia is coerced away from being true to herself, although if we consider the time, society, and, most especially, position that each of the sexes held—not to mention Ophelia's youth and apparent naïveté—her choices can be seen as less dishonest than compliant to men of authority around her.

Act 3, Scene 2

Summary

Hamlet coaches the actors in anticipation of the performance they are about to give for Claudius, Gertrude, and the rest of the court. As the players leave the prince to ready themselves, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern enter, announcing that the king and queen will join them shortly. Hamlet sends the three of them off to hurry the players just as Horatio arrives.

Hamlet tells Horatio of his plan to use *The Mousetrap*—his version of *The Murder of Gonzago*—to catch the king off guard. He further reports that he has amended the presentation so that one scene re-creates what the ghost told him to be the circumstances of his father's murder. Most importantly, Hamlet instructs Horatio to watch the king's reaction.

As the play unfolds, Hamlet's additions to the original piece make for a strong, disturbing performance. It becomes too much for Claudius, who leaps to his feet and leaves. In the ensuing confusion, the play is halted, and all leave but Hamlet and Horatio, who recap what they've just seen.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, telling Hamlet that the queen wishes to see him. They go around and around with Hamlet, trying to convince him to go to the queen. They are joined by Polonius, who speaks to Hamlet as if he is humoring a fool. They rouse Hamlet's anger, and he sends them off with word that he will join Gertrude soon. Left to his own thoughts, Hamlet's resolve to kill Claudius rises again, even as he plans to visit Gertrude.

Analysis

One of the significant points of this scene is Hamlet asking the theater troupe to perform a specific play with revisions he wrote for them. At the outset of this scene, Hamlet is still deliberating the ghost's motivation—whether it's a demon or an

honest ghost. With the revised play, he intends to present a scene that mimics the details of King Hamlet's death. He hopes that with art mimicking reality, he will catch Claudius in his guilt. Hamlet does not want to seek revenge until he is sure of the ghost's honesty.

Thematically, this scene is rich. The play within the play, Hamlet's antics throughout the play, the pressure on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to trick Hamlet—all of these elements support the theme of truth versus deception (or, in this case, appearance versus reality). This notion is particularly clear when the players reenact the scene of King Hamlet's death in the garden. When Claudius sees his deed played out so publicly, one can only imagine how the lines between reality and appearance blur for him.

The theme of madness—or feigned madness—is never far behind the theme of truth versus deception in *Hamlet*. The two themes are almost inseparable. Interestingly, the king's behavior as the murder scene plays out becomes frantic, and he bolts from the hall in a way that could be construed as mad. This is the beginning of a downward spiral for Claudius—one in which his deeds come to light, his cool demeanor slips, and his moves become more reactive than proactive.

Hamlet is an interesting study in this scene. At the opening of the scene directing the players, he is masterful and in control, comfortable in the direction he is giving and displaying very little antic disposition. Only when he goes into the hall where the play is to be performed does he again begin talking in the wild, witty, uncontrolled way that has caused people to think he is mad. And in the confines of the theater, Hamlet's madness gives him the freedom to sound out those around him, especially Claudius, to his advantage.

Perhaps most interesting to this scene is the consideration of the play within the play—and specifically Claudius's panicked reaction to the climax of the play. Claudius's reaction to the murder scene is certainly a turning point for Hamlet, who is now convinced of Claudius's guilt.

Act 3, Scene 3

Summary

This scene takes place the same evening as the production of *The Murder of Gonzago*. After everyone has dispersed from the hall where the play was performed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet with Claudius. Claudius tells them that Hamlet, being dangerous in his madness, must be taken away to England for everyone's safety. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept the assignment and leave to prepare.

Polonius comes to Claudius, reporting that Hamlet is headed to see Gertrude in her chambers. Polonius hurries off to hide somewhere in the vicinity so that he may observe the interaction between mother and son.

Left alone, Claudius contemplates the murder that audiences now know he committed. In a soliloquy, he talks about seeking forgiveness for his sin and praying over it—and he wonders about being pardoned for it if he retains all the power he gained in committing it. From his speech, it appears Claudius wants to be pardoned for his deed but not if getting pardoned means giving up crown and queen.

Hamlet, en route to see his mother, finds Claudius attempting to pray. He momentarily considers killing the king then and there but realizes—according to beliefs of the time—that if he were to kill Claudius while in prayer and seeking repentance (which he thinks Claudius is)—he would inadvertently send him straight to heaven. With that, he moves on to find his mother.

Analysis

This scene gives the audience deeper knowledge about Claudius. From his plans to have Hamlet sent to England, to his continued scheming with Polonius, to his confession of the murder when he is alone, Claudius's character inches more and more into the light of day—finally appearing as he is: guilty, scheming, and intent on retaining his newly captured position and power.

Particularly interesting is Claudius's attempt at prayer. With possibly his last bit of inner goodness, he wonders if it is possible to be forgiven for his deed if he is still in possession of the rewards gained from it. Clearly he has no intention of giving up any of it; the power that comes with the trappings is too great, and it overwhelms any goodness left inside him. "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below," he concludes at last,

realizing the futility of what he is doing.

Another fascinating moment in this scene is when Hamlet, en route to his mother's chamber, comes upon Claudius attempting prayer. Hamlet realizes this could be his moment for revenge. He hesitates, fearing that killing Claudius while he's engaged in a conversation with God will send his soul straight to heaven rather than hell. Hamlet recalls that Claudius did not give his father that benefit and so puts up his sword and continues to Gertrude's chambers. Some critics point to this as just another example of Hamlet's inability to act; Hamlet's refusal to kill Claudius in prayer is just another excuse.

Act 3, Scene 4

Summary

This scene also takes place on the night of the production of *The Murder of Gonzago* in which Hamlet has tried to prove to himself that Claudius has killed his father. In the queen's chambers, Polonius instructs Gertrude on speaking with Hamlet and hides himself behind a tapestry before Hamlet enters.

When Hamlet arrives, he and Gertrude begin talking, with Hamlet verbally sparring and growing angry with her. His behavior frightens Gertrude, and she cries out. Polonius cries out in anger from his hiding spot. In response, Hamlet shouts that he hears a rat and stabs Polonius through the tapestry, killing him.

As Hamlet pulls aside the tapestry to find Polonius, both he and Gertrude are hysterical. She is terrified and filled with sorrow for Polonius; Hamlet rages at Gertrude with all the thoughts that have been festering in his brain, including the ideas that Claudius killed King Hamlet and, worse yet, that she may have been part of the scheme to kill his father.

In the chaos of their exchange, the ghost appears. He tells Hamlet he has returned both to put him back on task and to remind him to leave his mother alone. As Hamlet responds to the ghost, it becomes clear Gertrude neither sees nor hears the spirit, and the exchange further convinces her of his madness. Hamlet reminds Gertrude he is being banished to England, and that he knows she has hired Rosencrantz and

Guildestern to spy on him. He leaves her, dragging Polonius's body with him.

Analysis

For some audiences, the killing of Polonius is arguably another point of climax. Tension and emotions certainly remain high after the play-within-a-play murder scene. Audiences are relieved to know the truth, as is Hamlet, and they're also privy to Claudius's confession in the previous scene.

In his mother's chambers, Hamlet is driven both by rage and by a poignant curiosity. He confronts Gertrude to voice his beliefs about his father's murder and question Gertrude's role in it. Before they get into the heat of their discussion, however, she cries out, frightened by Hamlet's wild and impassioned state. This causes Polonius to react—and leads Hamlet to slay him—thinking he has surprised the "rat" Claudius. This is truly a point of no return for Hamlet, and the moment sets off its own chain of events.

The exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude is enough to roust the ghost for a final time—reminding Hamlet not to harm Gertrude. Gertrude, meanwhile, is unable to see or hear the ghost, and is driven to believe that Hamlet is truly mad. This is an interesting moment as well, leaving the audience wondering about the significance of the ghost's injunction. Does it suggest Gertrude's innocence of any involvement? Is it suggestive of the ghost's (King Hamlet's) feelings for the queen? Regardless, the ghost is able to calm down Hamlet.

The scene closes with a somewhat more rational conversation between mother and son, with Gertrude even asking what she should do in light of what Hamlet has told her. Although Hamlet still cannot determine whether Gertrude bears any guilt for his father's death, he warns her away from Claudius and reminds her that he is off to England. Bidding her goodnight, he leaves, dragging Polonius's body with him. Despite their conversation and Hamlet's warnings to protect her, Gertrude still believes he is mad.

Act 4, Scene 1

Summary

King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, come together once again in Elsinore Castle. Gertrude dismisses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern so that she may tell Claudius of her meeting with Hamlet. Comparing the prince's madness with the wild power of the wind and the sea vying to see which is mightier, Gertrude tells Claudius of all that transpired between them, including how Hamlet killed Polonius.

Claudius says Hamlet must be sent away at once, and immediately summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells them Hamlet has slain Polonius, asks them to find Hamlet, and instructs them to bring Polonius's body to the chapel. Claudius and Gertrude leave to inform their closest supporters, hoping they can control the fallout.

Analysis

Gertrude's transition from the end of the last scene to the beginning of this one is notable. At the end of Act 3, she was spent, having watched in terror as Hamlet raged about her, killing Polonius, talking with a ghost that she suspects was a hallucination of his addled brain, then calmly leaving with a body in tow. Despite all that Hamlet has told her, however, she assumes him mad and we find her at the opening of this scene with Claudius, emotions under control, and reporting on it all.

Claudius forces himself to remain calm as Gertrude tells him of the death of Polonius and Hamlet's seemingly mad ramblings. He seizes on the incident as further reason to send Hamlet away. Beyond putting that plan in motion, however, Claudius's major concern is damage control. After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go in search of Hamlet, preparing to sail that night, Claudius suggests that he and Gertrude seek out their wisest friends and tell them what has happened. He is convinced that putting their spin (or interpretation) on the news will prevent Hamlet's crime from staining their reputation. As always, Claudius remains concerned with appearances just as Polonius was.

Act 4, Scene 2

Summary

In a passageway somewhere in Elsinore castle, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet. They insist he tell them where Polonius's body is so they can take it to the chapel, but he at once runs verbal circles around them and taunts them. When he won't tell them where the body is, they demand he go with them to the king. He agrees to go with them, and then sprints away, as if in a game of hide-and-seek.

Analysis

Act 4, Scene 2 is short; the action is fast-moving now and Shakespeare uses the short, quick scenes to keep the excitement rolling. Hamlet plays his madness to the frustration of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been directed to find Polonius's body.

Often, particularly in the later scenes of the play, Hamlet's fiery speech and behavior seem fueled as much by his disappointment in some of the people closest to him as by his feigned madness. And, although his path is not clear to him yet, Hamlet feels more confident in his thinking and decisions. In this scene, even as he runs off with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in pursuit, Hamlet is less about thought and more about action.

Act 4, Scene 3

Summary

Claudius, by himself, talks of his intent to send Hamlet to England—a plan made all the more reasonable because Hamlet has killed Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to the king with Hamlet in tow. When Claudius asks the whereabouts of Polonius's body, he too is answered in riddles until at last, as if tired of the game, Hamlet tells them where to find the corpse.

Claudius then tells Hamlet they must send him away—for his safety—to England. Hamlet consents, and as he exits, Claudius instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to follow, saying they

must set sail tonight.

Once alone, Claudius reveals the papers he has sent with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ordering Hamlet's death.

Analysis

The more opportunities audiences have to see Claudius on his own, the more information is provided about the inner workings of his brain. As this scene opens, Claudius expounds on Hamlet's slaying of Polonius as an excellent rationale for sending him abroad. Oddly, something about Claudius's use of the royal "we" and the points he is making to himself come across as someone desperately seeking to regain control of a situation. Shakespeare, ever in command, may certainly have intended his speech to straddle the line between sanity and madness.

Hamlet's banter with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius about Polonius's body seems to be one more example of Hamlet's having slipped into a position of control. The differences are subtle between Hamlet's behavior then and now, but it is clear: the game is turning—regardless of the ship headed for England that will soon have Hamlet aboard.

In the final moment of this scene, Claudius is again talking with himself. From his musings—said as if he is speaking to England—it is revealed he feels that Hamlet's presence is driving him mad and that he plans to have the prince executed upon his arrival.

Act 4, Scene 4

Summary

In this scene, set somewhere near Elsinore Castle, Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are headed for the ship that will carry them to England. They pass Fortinbras and his army, which is passing Elsinore en route to Poland. Hamlet stops to speak with the captain whom Fortinbras has sent to greet King Claudius and thank him for permission to pass through Denmark.

When the captain presses on, Hamlet stops a moment, alone, and compares himself to young Fortinbras. He rebukes himself

for his failure to seek revenge for his murdered father when Fortinbras, another young prince who also lost his father, goes to war for honor over a worthless piece of land. At the close of this soliloquy, he again pledges himself to the act the ghost has assigned him.

Analysis

This scene brings Fortinbras back into the picture as contrast to Hamlet. As Hamlet considers the similarities between the two (his definition of greatness and his own shortcomings), the audience may feel a shift in Hamlet's resolution. He sees the doggedness with which Fortinbras and his men pursue their goal, even though their goal is obtaining a tiny plot of soil that, at best, is "a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name." Something in that realization and in his discussion with Fortinbras's captain seems to settle in Hamlet.

The scene closes with the prince's renewed resolution that "from this time forth my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" This quote leaves the audience with the impression that something of Fortinbras—something of his quickness to action—has inspired Hamlet.

Act 4, Scene 5

Summary

Back at Elsinore Castle, Ophelia has requested an audience with Gertrude. Having heard that Ophelia has been acting strangely since her father's death, the queen does not want to speak with her. But Horatio and other advisers suggest it might be better to speak with her than to let her wild talk and accusations fall on fertile ears. Gertrude submits.

Ophelia enters and is obviously in a disturbed state, singing and talking in a disconnected way. Claudius joins them and both king and queen are shocked by Ophelia's behavior.

When Ophelia leaves, Claudius informs Gertrude that Laertes has secretly returned from France after hearing of his father's death. As they speak, there is noise beyond their door, and a messenger enters to warn king and queen that Laertes, leading a riotous group of people, has come to see them.

Laertes enters; though angry, he convinces his followers to wait outside. He confronts Claudius and Gertrude, demanding answers and his father's body. As the king and queen try to calm him, Ophelia returns, still singing, offering flowers, and wandering in her distraction. Laertes's anger is nearly overwhelmed by his grief at the sight of his sister. Claudius seizes Laertes's moment of weakness and, with comforting words and gestures, convinces Laertes to come with him so that he may explain the circumstances of Polonius's death. Claudius promises Laertes that he will give his crown and kingdom if they find him—or Gertrude—at fault, but otherwise they will stand beside Laertes and help him through this tragedy.

Analysis

Madness once again is central in this scene; this time the madness—real as opposed to feigned—is Ophelia's. It comes to the foreground as Gertrude and Claudius realize that Ophelia has lost control of her senses at her father's death (and the loss of Hamlet's affection). Her songs, though they may seem nonsensical, point to her concern with her dead father and the loss of Hamlet's affection.

On the heels of this revelation, Laertes storms Elsinore. He has evolved into a man of action—perhaps more like Fortinbras than before. Whereas he had seemed more in alignment with Hamlet in the past, his time away may have changed that. However, Laertes now appears to lack balance, and his taste for revenge will be his undoing—and the undoing of several others. By the play's end, both Fortinbras and Hamlet will have achieved their independence, although only Fortinbras will live to carry it into his maturity. Laertes, though he initially seems to be of strong character, is batted about by Polonius and Claudius, and never comes into his own.

Act 4, Scene 6

Summary

Horatio is approached by sailors bearing letters from Hamlet. One of the letters is for him; the others are for the king. In the letter to Horatio, Hamlet explains that en route to England their ship was overtaken by pirates, and he alone was taken

prisoner. He explains the pirates are "thieves of mercy," and he is to do something for them. He asks that Horatio help the sailors get the other letters to the king and then have the sailors deliver Horatio to Hamlet. Having read his letter, Horatio departs with the sailors to find Hamlet.

Analysis

Through the continued quick scenes, audiences learn of a sudden turn of events: Hamlet has returned to Denmark. In letters that he has delivered to Horatio and Claudius, Hamlet acquaints everyone with his situation. Having been taken by pirates who treated him well, he has since returned to Denmark. (Undoubtedly, the sailors who present the letters are the pirates, but that is not addressed.) A growing sense of boldness radiates from Hamlet's actions. Instead of overthinking, Hamlet seems to be finding his footing and striking a better balance between thought and action.

Interestingly, the plot seems to be shedding some of the focus on truth versus deceit. As is true of Hamlet himself, there appears to be a greater focus on the action. Claudius and Laertes are perhaps the last characters to still display the deceit that was so prevalent in Elsinore during the early acts.

Act 4, Scene 7

Summary

Claudius and Laertes are together in Elsinore. As promised, Claudius explains the circumstances of Polonius's death to Laertes, as well as his reasoning for sending Hamlet abroad. Just as they touch on the subject of Laertes's revenge for his father and sister, a messenger enters with letters for the king from Hamlet.

Hamlet informs Claudius that he is back in Denmark and wishes to meet with him the next day. Hamlet writes that he will explain everything when they meet. Knowing that Hamlet has returned, Claudius and Laertes devise a plan for a fencing match where Laertes will use a poisoned foil. As a backup plan, Claudius will also have a poisoned drink waiting for him.

Just as the plan is settled, the queen enters with news that Ophelia has drowned.

Analysis

The action in this scene speeds along, giving audiences a feeling of certainty that a collision of some sort is imminent but that the *who*, *when*, and *where* are yet mysteries. Shakespeare, the master storyteller, is at his best here, giving detail and maintaining excitement and tension.

As the scene begins, we find Claudius and Laertes together when Hamlet's letter arrives; Claudius has cunningly managed to convince Laertes of his innocence with regard to Polonius's death. Now his deception evolves even further, as he persuades Laertes to follow his lead in a plot to kill Hamlet. Laertes is so driven by revenge that he agrees, as long as he himself can be the one who deals a death blow to the prince.

Hamlet's return to Denmark creates the opportunity. Claudius is now so certain that Hamlet must die that his ego tells him they can murder Hamlet in front of Gertrude and have her be none the wiser. The plan that Claudius and Laertes devise is simple. He flatters Laertes regarding his fencing skill and Laertes becomes so eager to kill Hamlet that he devises a plan to poison his sword; the slightest cut will kill the prince. Claudius devises a backup plan; he will have a poisoned drink standing by for Hamlet in case Laertes fails to wound him. As usual, Claudius has concocted the plan so that even if it fails, it should not touch him.

Act 5, Scene 1

Summary

In a churchyard, a sexton and a gravedigger prepare a grave. As they go about their business, they are wrapped in their own discussions. Some of what they say is banter; some of what they say has cultural and religious aspects to it.

As one of the men ambles off for liquor, Hamlet and Horatio converge. They speak to the gravedigger, asking about his work, and he tells them he has been a gravedigger since King Hamlet defeated Fortinbras. When Hamlet asks how long that has been, the gravedigger notes that it's been 30 years, having taken place on the day that young Hamlet was born. As they talk, the gravedigger hands Hamlet a skull; it turns out to be the skull of the former king's jester, Yorick. Hamlet, examining the

skull, is struck by the information; he tells Horatio that he had known Yorick well.

A procession appears. Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes lead, followed by a coffin and various other courtiers and attendants. By what people begin to say, it dawns on Hamlet that this is Ophelia's funeral. With Horatio beside him, he watches in disbelief.

Overcome by grief, Laertes jumps into Ophelia's grave, shouting to be buried with her. Hamlet, also overcome, reveals himself and jumps in after Laertes, also proclaiming his sorrow. The two fight, but Horatio and others in attendance separate them and pull them from the grave. Hamlet professes his love for Ophelia—as well as his admiration for Laertes—and runs off. Claudius sends Horatio after Hamlet and steadies Laertes's resolve, telling him his opportunity for revenge will be here soon.

Analysis

Act 5, Scene 1 is iconic. As the various plots and themes converge, the characters themselves also converge—all in the graveyard. That one of the final scenes is set in a graveyard is reminiscent of the play's opening scene with the ghost on the wall—both reflecting on the idea of man's mortality.

Here Hamlet is presented from two vantage points. Early on, with Horatio, he talks with gravediggers, one of whom hands him the skull of King Hamlet's former jester, Yorick. Yorick, as it happens, was a friend to Hamlet in childhood, and the moment releases all sorts of good memories for Hamlet. There, Hamlet is perhaps seen closest to his former self—before his father's death set him on a collision course with his uncle. He is warm, funny, thoughtful, and beloved, just as audiences have been told he was.

Hamlet is also shown as reacting rather than thinking, as he jumps into Ophelia's grave in a moment of unchecked action. He does not think it through; he does not examine the many ramifications. Like Fortinbras, he is *in the moment*, and in that moment he declares himself with more power and certainty than at any other moment in the play. And though his actions are unchecked, they are not uncontrolled. Rather, everything about Hamlet has come together at last.

Laertes and Hamlet's clash in Ophelia's grave foreshadows the final clash to come. That it takes place in a grave suggests that

one or both might not make it out alive.

Act 5, Scene 2

Summary

In the final scene, all are back at Elsinore Castle. Hamlet gives Horatio the details of the failed journey to England. He describes discovering that the papers carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern called for Hamlet's death. Hamlet tells Horatio that he replaced the original documents with forgeries that called for the bearers to be put to death—and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying them when the pirates captured Hamlet.

A courtier, Osric, approaches Horatio and Hamlet with a message for Hamlet from the king. Osric tells Hamlet that he has been invited to test his skills in a friendly duel with Laertes. Claudius wagers against Hamlet's abilities and wishes to know if Hamlet will accept the challenge. Hamlet does.

People gather for the duel: Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, Hamlet, Horatio, and a number of lords and attendants. Hamlet and Laertes shake hands, and Hamlet asks for Laertes's forgiveness.

The duel begins, and Hamlet hits Laertes. The king cheers on Hamlet and, with a false display of affection, drops a poisoned pearl into Hamlet's cup of wine. An attendant offers the cup to Hamlet, who waves him off. After Hamlet hits Laertes a second time, Gertrude reaches for the drink. Claudius attempts to stop her, but she insists and unknowingly drinks the poison. Yet again, Shakespeare uses dramatic irony to great effect, as Claudius accidentally murders his wife.

Laertes, becoming desperate, finally scores a hit on Hamlet. A scuffle ensues, the foils are exchanged, and, as the duel resumes, Hamlet makes his third hit on Laertes—this time with the poisoned foil. Before anything more can occur, the queen succumbs to the poison she has drunk and collapses. Laertes, realizing that he has been hit by his own poisoned foil, cries out that he has been killed by his own treachery. On the heels of his words, the queen realizes what is happening, exclaims that the drink has been poisoned, and dies.

Hamlet calls for the doors of the hall to be locked at once and

demands they get to the cause of the treachery. Laertes speaks up in his final moments, informing everyone that he and Hamlet have been poisoned by the foil, that Gertrude has also been poisoned, and that the king is to blame. In a fury, Hamlet hits the king with the tainted foil and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup. Claudius soon dies. Laertes calls out, begging Hamlet's forgiveness and saying that if they forgive each other, neither his nor his father's death will be on Hamlet and Hamlet's death will not be on him. They agree as Laertes closes his eyes.

Hamlet, now failing, bids his dead mother goodbye and collapses. Horatio comforts him and attempts to drink the last of the wine, but Hamlet stops him. Hamlet implores Horatio to live on and, if he loved him, to take his story to the world.

Sounds in the castle announce the return of Fortinbras from Poland and the arrival of the English ambassadors. Hamlet prophesizes that Fortinbras will become king of Denmark. As he dies, Fortinbras and the ambassadors enter, shocked at the carnage around them. Horatio tells the arrivals what has occurred, and Fortinbras asks that Hamlet be borne away with the honor of a soldier.

Analysis

As with all Shakespearean tragedies, the final scene ends with a number of dead people. That it includes Hamlet and Laertes moves us; that it includes Gertrude, who fell an unwitting victim to her husband's schemes—as she has been from the outset—adds to that sorrow. That Claudius is dead leaves the audience with the feeling that the "something rotten in Denmark" may have been cleaned up at last.

This scene touches on a number of the major themes:

- **Truth versus deception:** The entire play rests on Claudius's original act of deception: murdering his brother and taking his crown and his queen. That it ends here in this scene, with Claudius having put together yet another plot to secure his power, gives the play a feeling of having come full circle. That this particular scheme has gone bad, costing Claudius and Gertrude their lives, are instances of situational and dramatic irony.
- **Thought versus action:** Hamlet, in this final scene, may finally have struck a balance between thought and action. It is as if the idealistic intellectual finally woke up, realizing

thinking alone is not enough. That he won't be able to take that new-found skill into maturity contributes to the tragedy.

Thought versus action is also evident in Fortinbras. This Fortinbras is different from the character the audience heard about when he was initially passing through Denmark. Time and experience—and now the stunning scene he finds at Elsinore—seem to help Fortinbras become a more tempered person. He shows himself bold but thoughtful when he stumbles into the death-filled hall; clearly someone needs to take charge, and Fortinbras does.

But the feeling communicated here is that, unlike the Fortinbras who at the beginning was all action and no thought, *this* Fortinbras thinks as he acts. In a sense, it is as if Fortinbras and Hamlet, originally representing two ends of a continuum, have now moved to the middle—to the point that they may have more in common with each other than not. Sadly, the world Shakespeare has created within this play will never know what might have been.

- **Madness:** Madness has permeated the play. In Act 1, Scene 1, the soldiers on the watch do *not* want people to know they think they saw a ghost. By Scenes 4 and 5 of Act 1, Hamlet and Horatio wonder if they have actually seen King Hamlet's ghost, prompting Hamlet to assume an "antic disposition." In Act 2, others begin to question Hamlet's sanity; close to the end of Act 4, everyone agrees Ophelia truly is mad; and audiences must certainly wonder about Claudius's sanity. But by the end of this scene, it is only Claudius's madness—spurred by a need to secure his position—that the play contends with.
- **Mortality:** Musings on mortality abound throughout the play. The ghost, Hamlet's dress in the beginning of the play, the grave and the graveyard, Yorick's skull, the many deaths in the play (and the various ways by which characters die) all underscore that we all must eventually face death. In the final scene, Laertes, Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius all die. There is situational irony in that Laertes and Claudius die by the scheme they've hatched. Gertrude's death shows dramatic irony, as she is caught up in a trap set by her husband to catch her son. And Hamlet, who is just coming into his own, suggests that death is inevitable and truly waits for no man.

“” Quotes

*"O ... that the Everlasting had not
fix'd/His canon 'gainst self-
slaughter!"*

— Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2

Hamlet has just discovered his mother's remarriage to her brother-in-law, a relationship Hamlet believes is incestuous and a betrayal of his father. This is the first time of many that Hamlet considers suicide, but notes that religion forbids it.

*"Something is rotten in the state of
Denmark."*

— Marcellus, Act 1, Scene 4

After seeing King Hamlet's ghost, Marcellus notes that something terrible must be happening if the king's ghost has come back to haunt the land. It's unclear at this point whether the king's ghost (which is dressed in full armor) has come back for personal or political reasons.

*"One may smile, and smile, and be
a villain."*

— Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5

In this soliloquy, Hamlet places blame for his current situation on both Claudius (for killing his father) and his mother (for betraying King Hamlet by marrying so soon).

*"How strange or odd some'er I
bear myself."*

— Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5

In this line, Hamlet plans to pretend to have gone mad so he won't be suspected of killing his uncle. This line raises one of the play's main questions: Has Hamlet *actually* gone mad, or is he just pretending?

*"Why, what an ass am I. ... That I/ ...
must like a whore unpack my heart
with words."*

— Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

Hamlet's fatal flaw is his inability to act decisively to avenge his father's death. He would rather analyze and theorize than act boldly. He recognizes this flaw and chastises himself for it, but it will take him the entire play to reconcile it into action.

*"The spirit that I have seen may be
a devil."*

— Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

Hamlet describes the reasoning behind his inaction—he is not sure whether the ghost he's seen is actually his father, or if he is being tricked. Hamlet enjoys analysis and is always looking for reasons to sit and think rather than to act.

*"To be or not to be, that is the
question."*

— Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1

In this, the most famous line from the play, Hamlet questions whether it would be better to live in suffering or simply die. This gives the audience great insight into his emotional struggles in the play.

"You go not till I set you up a

*glass/Where you may see the
inmost part of you."*

— Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 4

During an altercation with his mother, Hamlet wants Gertrude to look at herself in the mirror and account for her sins, but Gertrude misinterprets his outburst and believes he is going to kill her. Immediately after this, Polonius reacts to save her, and Hamlet (mistakenly believing he is Claudius) kills him. This is the point of no return for Hamlet's character.

*"Sith, I have cause, and will, and
strength, and means to do't."*

— Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 4

After being banished to England, Hamlet undergoes the transformation he has been waiting for. He recognizes that a man's purpose in life is to act—and he is finally filled with enough motivation to stop dithering and avenge his father's death.

"The rest is silence."

— Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2

These are Hamlet's last words before death. He has just explained all to his friend, Horatio, and accepts the inevitability of his death, which he has mused about being the great equalizer. For a man as wavering and introspective as Hamlet, his final words are particularly astute.

Symbols

Yorick's Skull

The most obvious symbol in the play—and perhaps in Shakespeare's entire body of work—Yorick's skull represents mortality. Should the audience have any question about this symbolism, Hamlet explains it to them (and Horatio) when he says, "No matter one's stance in life, we all must face our own mortality." Hamlet has learned that death is inevitable and, given the "haunting" by his father's ghost, that the physical body is only temporary (Act 5, Scene 1).

The Mousetrap

Hamlet, in asking the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* with a few revisions, suggests that he has an understanding and appreciation for the idea of life imitating art. In this particular case, Hamlet is hoping to put that idea to use to catch the conscience of the king. In *The Mousetrap*, the edited version of the play, nearly everything is a symbol for the truth Hamlet hopes to uncover, with the most obvious symbols in the casting: "I'll have these players play something like the murder of my father." The King in *The Mousetrap* symbolizes King Hamlet and The Poisoner obviously symbolizes Claudius.

The Ghost

While the ghost symbolizes decay or evil—"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (Act 1, Scene 4)—it is an ambiguous character. It is not clear whether the ghost is truly the spirit of Hamlet's father, a demon that wants to mislead the prince, or a figment of Hamlet's imagination. Hamlet tries to find out by asking it, "Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned/... Be thy intents wicked, or charitable?" The ghost appears with the purpose of seeking revenge for his death. He comes dressed in armor, prepared for battle, but because he is a spirit, he needs Hamlet's physical strength to exact revenge. Vengeance is a dangerous emotion, however, and it nearly drives both Hamlet and Laertes mad through obsession: "O, from this time

forth my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

Themes

Mortality

For a play that is often depicted by the image of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull in the graveyard scene, it is not surprising that Shakespeare uses mortality as a central theme. It comes across in a number of ways: the ghost of Hamlet's father; Hamlet's contemplation of suicide and Ophelia's suicide; Hamlet's tendency for black dress (at least in the early scenes); the players' performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*; the gravediggers, the grave, and the funeral as well as the skull in the graveyard scene; and the numerous deaths in the play's final scene.

But what does Shakespeare say about mortality in his presentation? Primarily, he explores the concept as part of the cycle of life, looking at it from both religious and secular perspectives.

Truth versus Deception

The idea of truth versus deception, which at times is expressed more as reality versus appearance, is prevalent in *Hamlet*. This theme plays out in major ways; the deceitful way by which Claudius came to power underpins the entire play. And it is also developed in smaller ways; the fact that Polonius is willing to spread rumors about Laertes to investigate his behavior in France tells us something about the nature of Polonius's relationships with his children.

The play presents many characters who thrive on deceit (Polonius, Claudius), and many situations that evolve out of deceit (Polonius's death when he tries to eavesdrop on Gertrude and Hamlet).

Every scene and act contain examples, such as:

- The presence of the ghost—as a witness to the truth, or as a figment of Hamlet's imagination
- The presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—and their true mission—in Elsinore
- Claudius's motivation in bringing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore
- Claudius's very existence
- The company of players
- Hamlet putting on an "antic disposition"

Thought versus Action

A life of thought versus a life of action is a theme woven throughout the play. Although Hamlet seems like a man of thought through much of the play, by the end he finds balance between the two. This suggests that Shakespeare's final idea on the topic is that the best approach to life strikes a balance between thought and action.

From the outset, both Laertes and Fortinbras are foils for Hamlet. Whereas Hamlet initially thinks deeply before any action, Fortinbras seems prone to action before thought. Laertes, like Fortinbras, wants to take immediate steps to avenge his father's death and has none of the doubt that causes Hamlet to delay his revenge against Claudius.

Madness

Madness is a theme explored in *Hamlet*, particularly as it relates to Hamlet, Ophelia, and maybe even Claudius (if one considers egomania a form of madness). Interestingly, too, madness goes hand-in-hand with truth versus deception because whether Hamlet's madness is real or feigned remains an open question throughout the play.

Revenge

Revenge is a prominent theme in *Hamlet* and a catalyst to

many events in the plot. Several characters seek revenge:

- The ghost of Hamlet's father wants Hamlet to avenge his death.
- Laertes wants to avenge both Polonius's and Ophelia's deaths.
- Fortinbras wants revenge for his father's death and for military losses.

Of the characters prominently involved in vengeful action, Fortinbras is the only one who does not die as a direct result. It might be said that Hamlet's death was less a result of his own action (or attempted action) and unavoidable because Claudius and his need to protect his position was the force behind that string of events. It could be argued that Claudius's actions might have resulted in Hamlet's demise regardless of whatever Hamlet decided to do about the ghost's entreaty.

Both Hamlet and Fortinbras grow in spite of—or perhaps because of—the vengeful actions they undertake or attempt to undertake. The same might not be said about Laertes, however, unless the last-minute wisdom by which he asks for and extends forgiveness counts. And, ultimately, with the carnage of the final scene so poignant, Shakespeare could be making a case for the uselessness of revenge, but that could also be a 21st-century viewpoint overlaid on a 17th-century drama.

Suggested Reading

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