

Hamlet

Background Info

Author Bio

Full Name: William Shakespeare

Date of Birth: 1564

Place of Birth: Stratford-upon-Avon, England

Date of Death: 1616

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

Key Facts

Full Title: *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Genre: Tragic drama; Revenge tragedy

Setting: Denmark during the late middle ages (circa 1200), though characters in the play occasionally reference things or events from the Elizabethan Age (circa 1500).

Climax: The climax of *Hamlet* is a subject of debate. Some say it occurs when Hamlet kills Claudius, others when Hamlet

hesitates to kill Claudius while Claudius is praying, others when Hamlet kills Polonius, and still others when Hamlet vows to focus on revenge at the end of Act 4.

Protagonist: Hamlet

Antagonists: Claudius

Historical and Literary Context

When Written: Between 1599-1601

Where Written: England

When Published: 1603 (First Quarto), 1604 (Second Quarto).

Literary Period: The Renaissance (1500-1660)

Related Literary Works: Hamlet falls into the tradition of revenge tragedy, in which the central character's quest for revenge usually results in general tragedy. This tradition existed from Roman times (the Roman playwright Seneca was well known for writing revenge tragedies). The most famous revenge tragedy of Shakespeare's day before Hamlet was Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and some believe that Kyd wrote an earlier play of Hamlet, now lost, which scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet*. The story of Hamlet is based on a Danish revenge story first recorded by Saxo Grammaticus in the 1100s. In these stories, a Danish prince fakes madness in order to take revenge on his uncle, who had killed the prince's father and married his mother. But Shakespeare modified this rather straightforward story and filled it with dread and

uncertainty—Hamlet doesn't just feign madness; he seems at times to actually be crazy.

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

Extra Credit

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

Plot Summary

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

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

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

Claiming that he wants to protect Hamlet from punishment for killing Polonius, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But Claudius sends with the three men a letter asking the King of England to execute Hamlet. Meanwhile, Polonius' son, **Laertes**, returns to Denmark from France to get revenge for his father's death. Claudius convinces Laertes the death is Hamlet's fault. When a pirate attack allows Hamlet to escape back to Denmark, Claudius comes up with a new plot in which a supposedly friendly duel between

Hamlet and Laertes will actually be a trap, because Laertes's blade will be poisoned. As a backup, Claudius will also poison some wine that he'll give to Hamlet if he wins.

Meanwhile, grief drives Ophelia insane, and she drowns in what seems to be a suicide. Hamlet arrives just as the funeral is taking place. He claims to love Ophelia and scuffles with Laertes. Back at the castle, Hamlet tells Horatio he switched the letter sent to England: now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be executed. He also says he is ready to die, and agrees to participate in the fencing match.

During the match, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet's success from the poisoned glass of wine before Claudius can stop her. Laertes then wounds Hamlet with the poisoned blade, but in the scuffle they exchange swords and Hamlet wounds Laertes. Gertrude falls, saying the wine was poisoned, and dies. Laertes reveals Claudius's treachery. Hamlet kills Claudius, and exchanges forgiveness with Laertes. Laertes dies. As Hamlet dies, he hears the drums of Fortinbras's army marching through Denmark after a battle with the Polish, and says Fortinbras should be the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras enters with the Ambassadors from England, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio tells Hamlet's story as Hamlet's body is taken offstage with the honors due a soldier.

Characters

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

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

Gertrude — **Hamlet's** mother. After Hamlet's father dies, Gertrude quickly marries Hamlet's uncle, **Claudius**. Though she is a good woman and loving mother, she is weak-willed and unable to control her personal passions. Whether because of

lust, love, or a desire to maintain her status as queen, she marries **Claudius**, though this is clearly a breach of proper morals. Though some critics have argued that Gertrude might have been involved in Claudius's plot to kill Old Hamlet, evidence in the text suggests that she is unaware of and uninvolved in the plot.

Polonius — The Lord Chamberlain of Denmark, and the father of **Laertes** and **Ophelia**, whom he loves deeply and wishes to protect, even to the point of spying on them. Polonius is pompous and long-winded, and has a propensity to scheme, but without **Hamlet's** or **Claudius's** skill. He is very aware of his position and role, and is always careful to try to be on the good side of power.

Laertes — Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother. Laertes is hotheaded and passionate, and loves his family deeply. As a man prone to action rather than thought who also seeks to revenge the death of his father, he serves as a "double" to **Hamlet**, providing numerous points of comparison.

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

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

The Ghost — The spirit that claims to be Hamlet's dead

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marcellus — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Barnardo — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Francisco — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Voltemand — A Danish ambassador to Norway.

Cornelius — A Danish ambassador to Norway.

Reynaldo — A servant of **Polonius**.

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

Captain — An officer in Fortinbras's army.

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary and Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

Action and Inaction

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

Appearance vs. Reality

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

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

Women

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

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

Religion, Honor, and Revenge

Every society is defined by its codes of conduct—its rules about how to act and behave. There are many scenes in *Hamlet* when one person tells another how to act: **Claudius**

lectures **Hamlet** on the proper show of grief; **Polonius** advises **Laertes** on practical rules for getting by at university in France; Hamlet constantly lectures himself on what he should be doing. In *Hamlet*, the codes of conduct are largely defined by religion and an aristocratic code that demands honor and revenge if honor has been soiled.

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

Poison, Corruption, Death

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

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

Symbols


Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.

Yorick's Skull

Hamlet is not a very symbolic play. In fact, the only object that one can easily pick out as a symbol in the play is the skull of Yorick, a former court jester, which Hamlet finds with Horatio in the graveyard near Elsinore in Act 5, scene 1. As Hamlet picks up the skull and both talks to the deceased Yorick and to Horatio about the skull, it becomes clear that the skull


represents the inevitability of death. But what is perhaps most interesting about the skull as a symbol is that, while in most plays, a symbol means one thing to the audience and another to the characters in the novel or play, in *Hamlet* it is Hamlet himself who recognizes and explains the symbolism of Yorick's skull. Even this symbol serves to emphasize Hamlet's power as a character: he is as sophisticated as his audience.

Summary and Analysis


The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

Act 1, scene 1


On the ramparts of the Danish castle Elsinore, the guardsman **Barnardo** relieves **Francisco**. The men are nervous, calling out “Who’s there?” **Marcellus**, another guard, and **Horatio**, a nobleman, arrive.

The nervous cries of “who’s there?” builds a sense of dread and develops the theme of uncertain reality. 


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

The appearance of the ghost confirms that something is not right in Denmark. 

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


The ghost is connected immediately to the theme of revenge—Fortinbras’s revenge. 

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


Every father/son relationship in the play leads to revenge. 

Act 1, scene 2


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

Claudius uses language as a tool to smooth over actions that are immoral. He uses language to create the appearance of propriety. 


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

Fortinbras is a son looking to revenge his father. 


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

Laertes/Polonius is another father/son relationship. 


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

By emphasizing that how he “is” is more important than how he “seems,” Hamlet implies that his interior reality is more powerful than any appearance. 


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

Claudius lectures Hamlet on what’s natural, but Claudius murdered his own brother! Appearance vs. reality. Also, Wittenberg was where the Reformation, a schism in religion, started. 


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

But, tellingly, he doesn’t promise to obey Claudius. 


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

It’s important to note that Hamlet’s death wish exists even before he learns of his father’s murder. Fury at his mother’s marriage to Claudius is enough to make him contemplate suicide. 

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


Horatio proves he is willing to speak honestly about reality by noting the speed of the wedding. 

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


Hamlet learns his internal feelings of unease are mirrored by spiritual unease in Denmark. 

Act 1, scene 3


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

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


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

Inequality between men and women. 

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

Father/son talk here mirrors Claudius’s with Hamlet—except Polonius isn’t just trying to hide a secret. 

Polonius asks **Ophelia** what she was talking about with **Laertes**. Ophelia answers: **Hamlet**. After Polonius asks her to explain, she says that Hamlet has expressed his love for her. Polonius tells her that Hamlet is pretending to love her in order to sleep with her, and forbids her to talk to him.


Polonius gave Laertes advice, but gives Ophelia orders: women in Denmark are expected to obey. 

Ophelia promises to obey.


Just as Hamlet promised Gertrude. 

Act 1, scene 4


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

Hamlet connects indulgence of desires to corruption. What looks like enjoyment only hides internal corruption. 


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

Religion provides no answers: what looks good could be evil. 

Hamlet breaks free of them and follows after the Ghost.


Hamlet takes decisive action. 

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


The nation suffers for the immorality of its leaders. 

Act 1, scene 5


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

The Ghost reveals reality. Also note that the way Claudius murdered Old Hamlet, by pouring poison into Old Hamlet’s ear, is actually a wonderful metaphor for lying, for using language to hide reality. 


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

Another command from a father. Another promise to obey. 


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

Hamlet promises to act, yet he curses his mother before Claudius. A “smiling villain” is an example of appearance vs. reality. 

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

As soon as reality is revealed, Hamlet hides behind mask of madness. But at times already he seems actually to be mad. 

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

A few lines after promising to seek revenge, Hamlet is already cursing his fate. 

Act 2, scene 1

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

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



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

Is Hamlet pretending, or is he actually mad? The answer isn't clear.



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

Polonius decides Hamlet really did love Ophelia after all, but does not apologize to his daughter.



Act 2, scene 2

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

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



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

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



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

Fortinbras agrees to give up his effort to revenge his father and seek honor in another way. Is his promise reality, or appearance? Has Claudius just allowed a hostile army to march into his country?



After a long-winded ramble about **Hamlet's** madness, **Polonius** reads love letters Hamlet sent to **Ophelia**. **Claudius** and **Gertrude** agree that lovesickness may be causing Hamlet's behavior. Polonius proposes that they stage a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia and spy on it to test his theory. Claudius agrees.

Polonius comes up with another plot to try to find out what's really bothering Hamlet. Polonius once again is willing to use Ophelia in that plot.



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

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



Rosencrantz and **Guildenstern** enter. **Hamlet** greets his old friends warmly, and tells them that Denmark is a prison. They disagree. Hamlet responds, "then tis none to you; there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.245-246). He launches into a long speech about the beauty of the world and nobility of man, all of which looks to him like dust and fails to delight him.

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



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

R and G are dupes, acting without any understanding—they're the opposite of Hamlet, who understands too much.



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

Actors make appearance seem like reality for a living.



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

Priam was killed by the Greek Pyrrhus, who was getting revenge because Priam's son, Hector, killed Pyrrhus's son.



Hamlet tells **Polonius** to treat the players well and give them good lodgings, and privately asks the **First Player** to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* on the following night, with some extra lines Hamlet will insert himself. The Player agrees.

It's interesting that Hamlet, who is so obsessed with what is real, feels so comfortable with actors, whose job is to make the unreal seem real.



Alone, **Hamlet** is furious that the **Player** could get so emotional over long-dead Hecuba, while he can't even bring himself to revenge his murdered father. Hamlet muses on a plan he's come up with: he'll have the players show a scene similar to **Claudius's** murder of his father: "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.582).

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



Act 3, scene 1

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

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



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

Polonius muses on appearance vs. reality, and is sure he can tell one from the other.



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

Claudius privately admits his guilt, proving that in fact Polonius can't tell appearance from reality.



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

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



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

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



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

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



Polonius still thinks **Hamlet** loves **Ophelia**. He requests that after the play Hamlet be sent to talk with **Gertrude**, where Polonius will once again spy.

Polonius cares more about confirming his theory than comforting Ophelia.



Act 3, scene 2

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

Hamlet instructs actors how to bridge the gap between appearance and reality!



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

Hamlet plans to use the "appearance" of the play to simulate "reality" in order to prove if that reality is really real. Then, he says, he'll take revenge.



Claudius, **Gertrude**, **Polonius**, **Ophelia**, and others arrive to watch the play. **Hamlet** tells **Horatio** he's now going to act insane.

Hamlet puts on a "play" of his own—he pretends to be insane.



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

Once again, Hamlet's anger at women pushes his pretend madness toward something less pretend.



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

If Hamlet is using madness only to try to protect himself from suspicion, why does he mock the King and Queen so obviously? And why mock Ophelia at all?



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

Claudius' reaction reveals that he really is guilty.



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

Hamlet's fear that Ghost was lying delayed his revenge.



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

R and G try to use the guise of friendship to learn Hamlet's thoughts. Such dishonesty angers Hamlet.



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

Hamlet shows that Polonius will lie to flatter those who are more powerful than he.



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

Hamlet knows he has no reason to delay revenge now, and shows that he knows his anger at women is out of control.



Act 3, scene 3

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

R and G echo belief that health of a country is tied to the legitimacy of the King. They don't know that Claudius isn't legitimate.



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

Polonius is still stuck in the old plot, while new plots are afoot.



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

Now audience knows that Claudius both guilty and unable to repent. In other words, he deserves to be killed by Hamlet...



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

Why does Hamlet delay again? Because he realizes that Christianity is arbitrary. Getting to heaven is based on when you pray rather than who you are. Religion itself seems to have been duped by appearance. Hamlet waits to get true revenge.



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

The ultimate irony. Hamlet is himself duped by appearance: Claudius only looked like he was praying.



Act 3, scene 4

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

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



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

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



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

By stabbing Polonius (whom he thinks is Claudius) Hamlet proves it wasn't fear of killing that caused him to delay.



Gertrude shouts, "What a rash and bloody deed!" (3.4.27). **Hamlet** responds, "As bad... as kill a king, and marry with his brother" (3.4.29). Gertrude is shocked. Hamlet pulls back the tapestry and sees **Polonius**. He dismisses him as a "rash, intruding fool" (3.4.32).

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



Hamlet exits, dragging **Polonius's** body after him.

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



Act 4, scene 1

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

It's unclear if Gertrude is keeping Hamlet's secret or really does think he's mad.



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

Claudius doesn't mourn for Polonius, instead worrying about himself and how to manage the murder politically.



Act 4, scene 2

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

By calling R a "sponge," Hamlet implies that through their foolishness R & G have been taken over by Claudius. They have lost their inner reality.



Act 4, scene 3

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

Claudius is always thinking about politics, about appearances.



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

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



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

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



Act 4, scene 4

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

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



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

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



Act 4, scene 5

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

Hamlet's madness is feigned. Ophelia's is real. As a woman, Ophelia can't act, so she goes mad.



Claudius enters. **Ophelia's** madness upsets and unnerves him. Ophelia's songs change topic, and focus on maids who are seduced. She exits with the comment that her brother shall know of her father's death. **Horatio** follows her.

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



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

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



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

Ironic that Gertrude defends the man who killed her husband.



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

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



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

The flowers held symbolic meaning in Shakespeare's time. Rosemary for remembrance. Pansies for thoughts. Fennel for flattery. Columbines for infidelity. Daisies for seduction.



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

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



Act 4, scene 6

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

The pirate attack is an example of deus ex machina—a device used to further the plot and return Hamlet to Denmark. It doesn't have any real thematic meaning.



Act 4, scene 7

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

Claudius is always calculating, always careful to manipulate events and perceptions of events. He has already blunted Laertes' purpose.



A messenger enters with letters from **Hamlet**. **Claudius** is bewildered at Hamlet's return. **Laertes** is pleased: now he'll get his chance at revenge. Claudius comes up with a plot. Claudius says Laertes' skill with a sword recently aroused **Hamlet's** envy, and Claudius thinks they could lure Hamlet into a duel with Laertes. Claudius asks to what length Laertes would go to get revenge on Hamlet. Laertes says: "to cut his throat in a church" (4.7.98).

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



Claudius reveals his plan: they will poison **Laertes's** sword. The slightest scratch will kill **Hamlet**. As a backup, Claudius decides to poison a glass of wine and offer it to Hamlet during the duel.

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



Gertrude rushes in with news that **Ophelia** has drowned. While gathering flowers she fell into the river and sang songs as her clothes grew heavy and pulled her under.

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



Laertes, weeping, exits. **Claudius** fears **Ophelia's** death might reignite Laertes anger and rebellion. He and **Gertrude** follow Laertes to calm him down.

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



Act 5, scene 1

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

By pointing out that nobles receive different treatment from organized religion than poor people do, the gravediggers show religion is unfair and influenced by appearance rather than the "reality" of someone's soul. Religion, that bedrock of human life, can't be trusted, and all of Hamlet's earlier philosophizing about religion and death, all his agonizing, was pointless.



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

Hamlet's continuing fascination with death here comes in contact with the man who knows the most about it: a grave digger.



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

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




Horatio says **Hamlet** is considering "too curiously"—is overthinking things.

Horatio diagnoses Hamlet's "fatal flaw."




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

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



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


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



Act 5, scene 2

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

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




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

Hamlet identifies with Laertes.




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

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




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

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




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

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




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

The "jewel" is poison—appearance vs. reality.




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

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




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

Laertes gets his revenge, but it rebounds on himself.



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

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




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

Reality revealed.




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

Hamlet gets his revenge.




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

Hamlet and Laertes are honest before they die.




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

Through Horatio, Hamlet will reveal Claudius's lies.




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

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




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

The deaths of R and G emphasize absurd and bloody reach of revenge.



Horatio begins to tell the story of what has happened in Denmark. **Fortinbras** orders **Hamlet** be honored as a soldier, since he would have made a great king.

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



Important Quotes

Act 1 Quotes

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not "seems." — *Hamlet*, 1.2.76

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew. — *Hamlet*, 1.2.130

Frailty, thy name is woman! — *Hamlet*, 1.2.146

Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak'd meats Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. — *Hamlet*, 1.2.179

This above all — to thine ownself be true; And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man. — *Polonius*, 1.3.78

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. — *Marcellus*, 1.4.95

O, villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! — *Hamlet*, 1.5.105

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. — *Hamlet*, 1.5.168

Act 2 Quotes

Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit, And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief. — *Polonius*, 2.2.92

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. — *Hamlet*, 2.2.237

I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams. — *Hamlet*, 2.2. 241

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? — *Hamlet*, 2.2.286

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her? — *Hamlet*, 2.2.518

The play's the thing, Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. — *Hamlet*, 2.2.566

Act 3 Quotes

To be, or not to be, —that is the question:— Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? — *Hamlet*, 3.1.58

Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. — *Hamlet*, 3.1.124

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery ... 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. — *Hamlet*, 3.2.328

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below; Words without thoughts never to heaven go. — *Claudius*, 3.3.98

Act 4 Quotes

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

Act V Quotes

Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest... Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? — *Hamlet*, 5.1.160

We defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. — *Hamlet*, 5.2.206

Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet prince; And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. — *Horatio*, 5.2.358

ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Scene
	<p>1.1 – The Ghost of Old Hamlet, appears on the ramparts of Elsinore. Horatio and the watchmen decide that they should tell Hamlet.</p>
	<p>1.2 – Claudius explains away his recent marriage to Gertrude, then sends messengers to Old Fortinbras to stop Fortinbras from invading Denmark.</p> <p>– Claudius gives Laertes leave to return to university, but chides Hamlet for still wearing mourning clothes over the death of his father.</p> <p>– In a soliloquy, Hamlet wishes that suicide weren't a sin. He then rants about Claudius and Gertrude's marriage, and calls women in general weak and lustful. Horatio and the watchmen enter and tell him about the Ghost.</p>
	<p>1.3 – Laertes warns Ophelia not to trust Hamlet's declarations of love.</p> <p>– Polonius gives Laertes some long-winded advice about how to behave at university before sending him off. Polonius, suspecting that Hamlet just wants sex from Ophelia, forbids Ophelia to talk to Hamlet.</p>
	<p>1.4 – Hamlet joins the watchmen on the ramparts. The Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it. Hamlet does.</p> <p>– Marcellus says "something is rotten in the state of Denmark."</p>
	<p>1.5 – The Ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius. He makes Hamlet promise to seek revenge, but not to harm Gertrude.</p> <p>– When Horatio and Marcellus find Hamlet, he refuses to tell them what he learned, but does say that he may pretend to act insane and swears them to silence. When they leave, Hamlet despairs at the task that has been given to him.</p>
	<p>2.1 – An upset Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet burst into her room and acted strangely, staring at her and sighing.</p> <p>– Polonius decides that Hamlet must be lovesick.</p>
	<p>2.2 – Claudius and Gertrude ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out why Hamlet has been so melancholy.</p> <p>– Polonius enters with news that Old Fortinbras has rebuked Fortinbras for threatening to invade Denmark. He also states his suspicions that Hamlet is lovesick over Ophelia.</p> <p>– Hamlet quickly figures out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spies for Claudius and Gertrude.</p> <p>– The players arrive. Hamlet privately asks the lead player to have his troupe perform <i>The Murder of Gonzago</i>, and says he will add a few lines to the play himself.</p>
	<p>3.1 – Hamlet muses on death and suicide in the "To be or not to be speech."</p> <p>– Claudius and Polonius engineer a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia to determine if Hamlet is lovesick over her. During the meeting, Hamlet denies ever loving Ophelia and condemns women and marriage. He also says that one person who is already married will die. Ophelia is distraught.</p> <p>– Claudius decides Hamlet isn't in love or insane, and is a danger. Polonius still thinks Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, and wants to spy on him some more.</p>
	<p>3.2 – The players perform the <i>Murder of Gonzago</i> for the entire royal court.</p> <p>– In the play, the players enact a scene identical to the Ghost's description of how he was murdered by Claudius. During this scene, Claudius calls for light and runs from the room.</p> <p>– Hamlet is overjoyed because now he knows the Ghost was telling the truth.</p> <p>– Polonius tells Hamlet that his behavior has upset Gertrude, who wants to see him in her chamber. Hamlet agrees to go see her.</p>
	<p>3.3 – On the way to his mother's chamber, Hamlet sees Claudius praying alone in a little chapel. He draws his sword to kill Claudius and get revenge... but realizes that because Claudius is praying, he'll only end up sending Claudius to heaven.</p> <p>– Hamlet decides to wait in order to kill Claudius when he can send him to hell.</p>
	<p>3.4 – Polonius hides behind a tapestry in Gertrude's chamber to spy on the meeting.</p> <p>– Hamlet enters, and he and Gertrude argue. Gertrude thinks Hamlet means to kill her.</p> <p>– From behind the tapestry, Polonius calls for help. Hamlet, thinking that it's Claudius behind the tapestry, stabs Polonius through the fabric.</p> <p>– Hamlet continues to berate his mother for marrying Claudius, until the Ghost appears and tells him to stop.</p>
	<p>4.1 – Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet is mad and killed Polonius. Claudius muses about how to explain the murder of Polonius' to the public.</p>
	<p>4.2 – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that Claudius wants to see him. Hamlet mocks them, but agrees to see Claudius.</p>

Theme Key

- Action and Inaction
- Appearance vs. Reality
- Women
- Religion, Honor, and Revenge
- Poison, Corruption, Death



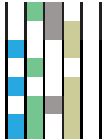
4.3

- **Claudius** says that to protect **Hamlet** he's going to send Hamlet to England with **Rosencrantz** and **Guildenstern**.
- Secretly, **Claudius** writes to the English king asking him to execute **Hamlet**.



4.4

- On the way to the Danish coast, **Hamlet** sees **Fortinbras'** army on its way to fight in Poland. He bitterly compares his own inaction to their action, and vows to focus on revenge.



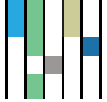
4.5

- In Elsinore, **Ophelia** has gone mad, and **Claudius** is worried about the commoners, who are angry about **Polonius'** death. **Laertes** has also returned to Denmark to seek revenge for his father's death.
- **Laertes** bursts into Elsinore, bent on killing **Claudius**. But before he can act, the insane **Ophelia** wanders into the room and Laertes is stopped in his tracks by her madness.
- **Claudius** convinces **Laertes** to let him explain what happened.



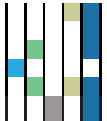
4.6

- **Horatio** learns that **Hamlet** was captured by pirates and returned for a ransom to Denmark. **Rosencrantz** and **Guildenstern** continue to England without him.



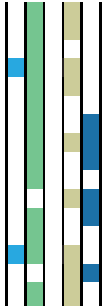
4.7

- **Claudius** receives word that **Hamlet** has returned to Denmark.
- **Laertes** and **Claudius** come up with a scheme to challenge **Hamlet** to a duel and to kill him with either a poisoned sword or a poisoned goblet of wine.
- **Ophelia** drowns.



5.1

- In a graveyard near Elsinore, **Hamlet** banters with a **gravedigger**, then muses about death when he discovers **Yorick's skull**.
- **Claudius**, **Gertrude**, **Laertes** and others enter the graveyard in a funeral procession for **Ophelia**. **Hamlet** announces that he loved Ophelia, and Hamlet and Laertes grapple in Ophelia's grave.



5.2

- **Hamlet** tells **Horatio** that he switched the letter that **Rosencrantz** and **Guildenstern** were carrying. The new letter asks the King of England to kill *them*.
- **Osric** enters, and says that **Claudius** has wagered that **Hamlet** can beat **Laertes** in a duel. Hamlet agrees to fight, though he tells **Horatio** that he doesn't think it will be a fair fight. When Horatio asks him not to fight, but Hamlet says that there's no use trying to escape death.
- At the duel, **Hamlet** apologizes to **Laertes**, who does not accept. They fight. **Claudius** offers Hamlet the poisoned wine to drink, but he refuses. **Gertrude**, however, drinks the poisoned wine to Hamlet's health, and Claudius can't stop her. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword, but in the scuffle Hamlet winds up with the poisoned sword and wounds Laertes. Gertrude dies from the poisoned wine. Laertes, also dying, reveals Claudius' treachery. Hamlet kills Claudius, then forgives Laertes. Laertes dies. Hamlet tells Horatio to tell his story and says the throne should be given to **Fortinbras**, then dies.
- **Fortinbras** and ambassadors from England arrive. The ambassadors announce that **Rosencrantz** and **Guildenstern** are dead.
- **Horatio** begins to tell **Hamlet's** story. **Fortinbras** says that Hamlet deserves a soldier's honors since he would have made a great king.