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

Plot Summary
A ghost resembling the recently deceased King of Denmark stalks the ramparts of Elsinore, the royal castle. Terrified guardsmen convince a skeptical noblemen, 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.

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 mariage to Claudius makes him mistrust and even hate all women. He detests all forms of deception, yet plots and marriage to Claudius. Hamlet makes him mistrust and even hate all women. He detests all forms of deception, yet plots and 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 flings 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’s 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

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 marry Claudius, though this is clearly a breach of proper morals.

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.

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.
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 avenge 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.

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.

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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 too 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 so 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.

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.

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 with 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 disgustning images. In fact, Hamlet only seems comfortable with things that are dead: he reveres his father, claims to love his mother 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.

Themes
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Symbol

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

Laertes’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.

Ophelia — A foolish 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.

Cornellius — 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.
Act 1, scene 1

On the ramparts of the Danish castle Elsinore, the guardsman Barnardo recognizes Francisco. The men are nervous, calling out “Who’s there?” Marcellus, another guard, and Horatio, a nobleman, arrive. A ghost appears. It looks like the recently deceased Old Hamlet, King of Denmark. Horatio tries to speak to it, but it disappears.

Horatio says the ghost might be warning of an attack. After all, the prince of Norway, Fortinbras, is raising an army to retake lands that Old Hamlet won in battle from Fortinbras’ father. The ghost reappears but disappears again without speaking when the cock crows to greet the dawn. Horatio decides they should tell Hamlet, the dead king’s son, about the ghost.

Act 1, scene 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Act 1, scene 3

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

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

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

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

Ophelia promises to obey.

Act 1, scene 4

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

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

Hamlet breaks free of them and follows after the ghost.

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

Act 1, scene 5

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

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

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

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

Hamlet 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).
Act 2, scene 1

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

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

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

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.

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 2, scene 2

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

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

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

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

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

Polonius agrees that lovesickness may be causing Hamlet’s behavior. Polonius proposes that the King of Norway rebuked Fortinbras, who promised not to attack the Danes. Norway then warned 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.

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

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

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet greets his old friends warmly, and tells them that Denmark is a prison. They disagree. Hamlet responds, “then tis none to you; there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (2.2.245-246). He launches into a long speech about the beauty of the “slings and arrows” (3.1.57) of experience, except that they fear what might happen in the afterlife. He observes that such thinking turns people into cowards, and action into inaction. Suddenly Ophelia enters and tries to return the gifts Hamlet gave her. He denies having ever given them.

Hamlet asks Ophelia if she’s honest, then says beauty corrupts honesty. Becoming angry, he tells Ophelia she loved his once, then says he never loved her. He commands her to go to a nunnery rather than to marry him. Claudius agrees that lovesickness may be causing Hamlet’s behavior. Claudius proposes that they stage a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia and spy on it to test his theory. Claudius agrees.

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.

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

Hamlet attempts to make his way into the court, but is stopped by a sentry. He uses his relationship with Claudius to get in. Once inside, he is confronted by the King and Queen. Claudius accuses Hamlet of being a “brood 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.

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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.

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

Claudius, struck by Polonius’s words, musers on an aside about a “deed” that his “painted words” (3.1.52) can’t hide from his conscience. They hear Hamlet coming and hide.

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.

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Hamlet invokes the Ghost to confirm his theory about Hamlet. He asks how the Ghost harmed Hamlet’s father. The Ghost says, “I am thy father’s spirit, murdered most unnatural by thine own son” (3.4.64). Hamlet then proceeds to explain the events that led to his father’s death and the circumstances of his own madness.

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

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 plans to use the “appearance” of the play to simulate “reality” in order to prove that reality is really real. Then, he says, he’ll take revenge.

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Hamlet instructs actors how to bridge the gap between appearance and reality!
Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, and others arrive to watch the play. Hamlet tells Horatio he’s now going to act insane.

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

The players enter and first act out a dumbshow (a short silent play that shows what the longer play is about). The players then begin to act the full play. As the plot becomes 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.”

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

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

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

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

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

**Act 3, scene 3**

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

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

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

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

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

**Act 3, scene 4**

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

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

Once again, Hamlet’s anger at women pushes hispretend madness toward something less pretended.

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

Claudius’ reaction reveals that he really is guilty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gertrude shouts, “What a rash and bloody deed!” (3.4.27). Hamlet responds, “As bad…as to 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 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.

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

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

Hamlet exits, dragging Polonius’ body after him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Act 4, scene 1**

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

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

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

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

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

**Act 4, scene 2**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet. They ask where Polonia’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.

Claudius is always thinking about politics, about appearances.

**Act 4, scene 3**

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

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

Hamlet doesn’t mourn for Polonia, instead worrying about himself and how to manage the murder politically.
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.

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.

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.

Act 4, scene 4

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Act 4, scene 5

Claudius says that if she had not been a noblewoman she would not receive a Christian burial. The first grave digger argues that if dead people 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.

In a cemetery, two grave diggers 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.

Hamlet and Horatio enter. The second grave digger exists. The first grave digger 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 and Horatio enter. The second grave digger exists. The first grave digger 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.

Laertes is overthinking things. By pointing out that nobles receive different treatment from organized religion than poor people do, the grave diggers 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.

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

By pointing out that nobles receive different treatment from organized religion than poor people do, the grave diggers 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’s continuing fascination with death here comes in contact with the man who knows the most about it: a grave digger.

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

Claudius is always calculating, always careful to manipulate events and perceptions of events. He has already hinted Laertes’s purpose.

Claudius uses flattery of Laertes swainmanship to convince Laertes to join his plot. Claudius doesn’t care about Laertes’s 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 only cares about how Ophelia’s death might affect him and his power.

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

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

Laertes, weeping, exits. Claudius fears Ophelia’s death might reignite Laertes anger and rebellion. He and Gertrude follow Laertes to calm him down.
Hamlet and Horatio hear a noise and hide. Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, a priest, and other lords enter in a funeral procession with a coffin. The priest refuses to provide further religious services because Ophelia's death seemed like suicide. Laertes says his sister will be an angel while the priest howls in hell.

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

**Important Quotes**

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**Act 1 Quotes**

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

O, that this 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 own self 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

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**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

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**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

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**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)

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below; What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! — Hamlet, 2.2.240

What a piece of work is a man! — Hamlet, 2.2.241

Why, look you now, how unhallowed 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... "Blood, 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

Words without thoughts never to heaven go. — Claudius, 3.3.98

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**Act 5 Quotes**

A far-off voice: Halloo! — Fortinbras, 5.2.158

Afar off: ‘Tis Fortinbras. — Fortinbras, 5.2.158

Filial gratitude. — Horatio, 5.2.32

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

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The priest is unwilling to provide further ceremony because it seemed like suicide. The priest can’t tell the difference between appearance and reality, so he plays it safe. Interesting that Hamlet claims to love Ophelia only after she dies.

Hamlet identifies with Laertes.

Horatio must tell Hamlet’s story to the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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.

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

Why, look you now, how unhallowed 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... "Blood, 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

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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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Scene</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The Ghost of Old Hamlet, appears on the ramparts of Elsinore. <strong>Horatio</strong> and the watchmen decide that they should tell Hamlet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Claudius</strong> explains away his recent marriage to <strong>Gertrude</strong>, then sends messengers to Old Fortinbras to stop <strong>Fortinbras</strong> from invading Denmark.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Claudius</strong> gives <strong>Laertes</strong> leave to return to university but chides <strong>Hamlet</strong> for still wearing mourning clothes over the death of his father.</td>
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<td>- In a soliloquy, <strong>Hamlet</strong> wishes that suicide weren’t a sin. He then rants about <strong>Claudius</strong> and Gertrude’s marriage, and calls women in general weak and lustful. <strong>Horatio</strong> and the watchmen enter and tell him about the Ghost.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Laertes</strong> warns <strong>Ophelia</strong> not to trust Hamlet’s declarations of love.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Polonius</strong> gives <strong>Laertes</strong> some long-winded advice about how to behave at university before sending him off. Polonius, suspecting that <strong>Hamlet</strong> just wants sex from <strong>Ophelia</strong>, forbids Ophelia to talk to Hamlet.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hamlet</strong> joins the watchmen on the ramparts. The Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it. Hamlet does.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Marcellus</strong> says “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”</td>
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<td>- The Ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius. He makes Hamlet promise to seek revenge, but not to harm Gertrude.</td>
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<td>- 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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- An upset Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet burst into her room and acted strangely, staring at her and sighing.</td>
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<td>- Polonius decides that Hamlet must be lovesick.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Claudius and Gertrude ask <strong>Rosencrantz</strong> and <strong>Guildenstern</strong> to find out why Hamlet has been so melancholy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Polonius</strong> enters with news that Old Fortinbras has rebuked <strong>Fortinbras</strong> for threatening to invade Denmark. He also states his suspicions that <strong>Hamlet</strong> is lovesick over Ophelia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Hamlet</strong> quickly figures out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spies for Claudius and Gertrude.</td>
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<td>- The players arrive. Hamlet privately asks the lead player to have his troupe perform The Murder of Gonzago, and says he will add a few lines to the play himself.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hamlet</strong> muses on death and suicide in the “To be or not to be” speech.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Claudius</strong> 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.</td>
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<td>- 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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The players perform the Murder of Gonzago for the entire royal court.</td>
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<td>- 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.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hamlet</strong> is overjoyed because now he knows the Ghost was telling the truth.</td>
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<td>- Polonius tells Hamlet that his behavior has upset Gertrude, who wants to see him in her chamber. Hamlet agrees to go see her.</td>
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<td>- 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.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Hamlet</strong> decides to wait in order to kill Claudius when he can send him to hell.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Polonius hides behind a tapestry in Gertrude’s chamber to spy on the meeting.</td>
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<td>- Hamlet enters, and he and Gertrude argue. Gertrude thinks Hamlet means to kill her.</td>
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<td>- From behind the tapestry, Polonius calls for help. Hamlet, thinking that it’s Claudius behind the tapestry, stabs Polonius through the fabric.</td>
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<td>- Hamlet continues to berate his mother for marrying Claudius, until the Ghost appears and tells him to stop.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <strong>Gertrude</strong> tells Claudius that Hamlet is mad and killed Polonius. Claudius muses about how to explain the murder of Polonius’ to the public.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Rosencrantz</strong> and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that Claudius wants to see him. Hamlet mocks them, but agrees to see Claudius.</td>
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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.

- 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.

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

- Claudius and Laertes 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.