

Hamlet Study Guide

Hamlet by William Shakespeare

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Plot Summary

In the centuries since this renowned work by the legendary William Shakespeare was written, it has often been regarded by critics, scholars, and theater professionals alike as one of the greatest plays ever written. Praised and studied for its psychological accuracy and complexity, the essential story is simple, if perhaps excessively violent - a young man, urged to revenge the murder of his father, delays taking action. Several other deaths result, and the young man loses his own life in a battle with another more active, determined and vengeful young man. It is the play's contemplation and portrayal of the leading character's indecisive state of mind combined with other thematic considerations relating to human corruptibility and the transitory nature of physical life that give the play its timeless greatness.

The play is set in Elsinore Castle, the home of the royal family of Denmark. One night at midnight, as one shift of watchmen is replaced by another, a soldier named Horatio learns of the recurring appearance of a Ghost, believed to be that of the recently deceased King of Denmark, the father of Prince Hamlet. As the doubtful Horatio watches and waits, the Ghost appears. Horatio resolves to bring Hamlet, a good friend, to see the Ghost.

Soon afterward, the new king (Claudius, brother to the previous king) and his queen Gertrude (wife of the previous king, newly married to Claudius) hold court. Claudius deals with a military and political threat from an ambitious prince from nearby Norway, gives permission for a young courtier (Laertes) to return to France, and questions Hamlet as to why he's still in mourning. Hamlet responds that he has a great deal to mourn, and Gertrude (Hamlet's mother) urges him to stay at court and not return to university. Hamlet agrees, and Claudius leads the court away.

Left alone, Hamlet speaks the first of his several soliloquies, revealing his frustration and anger with his mother's actions in marrying his father's brother so soon. His thoughts are interrupted by Horatio, who tells him of the appearance of the Ghost. Hamlet quickly resolves to watch for the Ghost himself and later actually witnesses its appearance, confirming that it is, in fact, the Ghost of his father. The Ghost reveals that he was murdered by Claudius and urges Hamlet to take revenge. Hamlet reluctantly agrees, and after the Ghost disappears, he tells Horatio that he might need to appear mad in order to accomplish his goals.

Hamlet's apparent madness brings discord into the court. His relationship with Ophelia, the daughter of interfering courtier Polonius and sister of Laertes, falls apart, partly because of the courtier's meddling and partly because of Ophelia's fear. Meanwhile, Claudius brings other friends of Hamlet's to court in order to find out the truth of his madness, but Hamlet immediately realizes why and how they came to be there. At the same time, Hamlet arranges for a play to be performed, which contains references to Claudius' acts of murder. When he sees the play, the troubled Claudius withdraws to pray for forgiveness. Hamlet finds him and has an opportunity to take his revenge, but



doesn't do so, speaking of his reluctance to give Claudius a blessed death (i.e., one that takes place while Claudius is seeking redemption).

Hamlet then confronts Gertrude with his disgust at her actions. During their confrontation, Hamlet seems to mistake the eavesdropping Polonius for a rat and kills him. He also has a vision of the Ghost, who reminds him of his purpose. Gertrude sees all this and concludes that Hamlet truly is mad. Upon hearing this, Claudius arranges for Hamlet's friends to take him to England, where he is to be executed. Hamlet, however, realizes what's going on, turns the tables on his friends, escapes, and returns to Denmark. There, he learns that Ophelia, driven mad by the abandonment of her lover and the death of her father, has killed herself. As he watches the returned Laertes mourn his sister, Hamlet is moved to confront him, and the two agree to resolve their conflict with a duel. Claudius conspires with Laertes to end the duel with Hamlet's death, but when the duel takes place, Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude are all killed first. Hamlet himself dies in Horatio's arms after willing the care of the kingdom to the Norwegian prince referred to at the beginning of the play.



Act One, Scenes 1-3, Hamlet

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Scene 1 - On the ramparts of Elsinore Castle, the outgoing night watchman (Francisco) assures one of the incoming watchmen, Bernardo, that it has been a quiet night, although he (Francisco) is "sick at heart". Another of the incoming watchmen, Marcellus, arrives, accompanied by Horatio. As Francisco leaves, Marcellus and Bernardo begin explaining why they asked Horatio to join them. They are interrupted by the silent appearance of the Ghost, who leaves in spite of Horatio's demands that he stay. Conversation reveals that the Ghost has appeared twice before, and Horatio suggests that because of impending war between Denmark and Norway, the Ghost has come to warn them of danger. The Ghost reappears and seems about to speak, but disappears as the sun begins to rise. Horatio suggests that Hamlet be told of the Ghost's appearance, and the other soldiers agree.

Scene 2 - Claudius and Gertrude hold court in the company of Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, and others. Claudius speaks of how he is striving to balance personal feelings with his new responsibilities as king, commenting on how he has married Gertrude, the widow of the former king, and his efforts to deal with the threat from Norway. He sends ambassadors to conduct negotiations with the King of Norway and then turns his attention to Laertes, who requests permission to return to France. Claudius grants it, and then, as Laertes goes, turns to Hamlet, asking him what's troubling him. As Gertrude echoes his concern, Hamlet angrily responds, saying he's still grieving for his father. Claudius tells him that the death of a father is a part of the natural course of events and suggests that for Hamlet to keep grieving so intently is a rejection of nature. He also urges Hamlet, who is now the heir to the throne, to stay at court rather than return to school, the university at Wittenberg. When Gertrude echoes this wish, Hamlet agrees to stay, and Claudius and Gertrude leave, followed by the rest of the court. Hamlet then speaks the first of his several soliloquies, expressing his desire to kill himself and his fury with his mother for marrying Claudius, her husband's brother, within a month after her first husband's death.



Horatio and the soldiers appear. Hamlet recognizes Horatio from Wittenberg and listens as Horatio tells him of the appearances of the Ghost. Hamlet asks several sharp questions confirming the men's impression of the Ghost's identity, and because the Ghost has appeared in armor, also concludes that he is warning of danger. Hamlet resolves to watch with them on the ramparts that night.

Scene 3 - In another part of the castle, as Laertes prepares to leave, he warns Ophelia against taking Hamlet's professions of affection too seriously and against giving herself to him sexually, as Hamlet will be more responsible to the throne than he will ever be to her. Ophelia urges him to be sexually responsible as well, and Laertes agrees. Polonius appears, offering his son a string of rules to follow while he's away. He and Laertes say their farewells, and Laertes goes. Polonius then turns to Ophelia who, in response to his questions, reveals that she and her brother had been talking about Hamlet. Polonius warns her against taking Hamlet too seriously, saying that words of love spoken by someone so young are a tactic to get her to become sexual with him. He orders her not to talk with Hamlet again, and she agrees.

Act One, Scenes 1-3, Hamlet Analysis

In the centuries since it was first written and performed, "Hamlet" has been analyzed and commented upon from almost every conceivable angle - psychologically and academically, its language and imagery discussed in the way one might discuss poetry, its many allusions and references studied for echoes of Shakespeare's own life and circumstances. The list and the possibilities of analysis are virtually endless. For the purposes of this analysis, the work is to be regarded primarily as a play, a piece of dramatic narrative designed to engage and entertain an audience. Aspects of psychology and language certainly come into this form of analysis, as they would in analysis of any play. But for now, and as Hamlet says himself, "the play's the thing".

With that in mind, these first two scenes can therefore be looked at essentially as exposition - in other words, as establishing the circumstances of the narrative to follow. Some of these circumstances are factual (the recent death of the previous king, the more recent marriage of his widow to his brother, the ongoing grief of his son). Some are atmospheric, with the foreboding and sense of mystery of the first scene foreshadowing the psychological, moral, and emotional darkneses to which most of the main characters either descend or already have descended. Many of the play's circumstances defined in these opening scenes relate to character - Horatio is portrayed as a skeptic and realist, Claudius as a skilled politician, and Gertrude as a dutiful royal wife and conventionally worried mother. Scene 3, meanwhile, clearly defines the characters of Polonius (an interfering and domineering meddler), Laertes (an impulsive and judgmental moralist) and Ophelia (gentle and easily manipulated). All these portrayals establish the essential traits and natures of the characters who will, over the course of the narrative, come into contact and conflict with the compelling central character, Prince Hamlet.



An important point to note about the portrayal of arguably the most discussed character in the history of dramatic narrative is that the play gives Hamlet an opportunity to be observed in both public and private situations. Thus in the scene at court, he is portrayed as withdrawn, sarcastic, intelligent (perhaps the most intelligent character on the stage), barely polite to Claudius but still respectful of Gertrude and, most importantly, sunk deeply into grief for his dead father. The soliloquy (a theatrical convention in which a character alone on stage reveals his innermost thoughts) gives the audience an opportunity for insight into the feelings that lie beneath Hamlet's barely secure mask of the courtier and prince. He is seething with jealousy and rage and violent feeling, particularly directed at his mother, for marrying another man so quickly after her husband's death, and that man his father's brother, and towards Claudius, for behaving so improperly with Gertrude. Here it's important to note what he doesn't say - specifically, he doesn't refer to Claudius as taking the throne that, according to traditional laws of inheritance, should have been his. Hamlet is not interested in being king, it seems, not interested in politics or power, but is more interested in morality and justice. This, combined with the intensity of his grief for his father, makes him profoundly vulnerable to the suggestions made to him by the Ghost in the following section.

Everything about the character and situations of these first three scenes is fertile ground for potential conflict and drama, the seeds of which have in some cases already been planted (i.e., the tension between Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius) and into which more seeds are about to be sown with the appearance of his father's Ghost to Hamlet. In other words, the dramatist has done his job, establishing with his opening scenes detailed circumstances and relationships that will draw the audience into his narrative, awakening in them the desire to know what will happen next that will sustain their interest through what is one of Shakespeare's longest, and most emotionally and psychologically complex, plays.



Act 1, Scenes 4 and 5, Hamlet

Act 1, Scenes 4 and 5, Hamlet Summary

Scene 4 - Later that night, as Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus wait on the battlements for the reappearance of the Ghost, they listen to the sounds of revelry in the castle below. Hamlet comments that Claudius has revived a long-dormant tradition of such revelry, adding that the festivities have become so extreme that the country's reputation is suffering. At that moment, the Ghost reappears. Hamlet recognizes it as his father, and cries out for an explanation as to why he's there. The Ghost beckons for Hamlet to follow him, and against the urgings of Horatio and Marcellus, Hamlet does, with Horatio and Marcellus not far behind.

Scene 5 - The Ghost confirms that he is Hamlet's father, saying that he has been consigned to hell because he was murdered without a chance to confess his sins. When he demands that Hamlet avenge his "foul, strange and unnatural" death, Hamlet agrees, listening with increasing shock as the Ghost tells him that Claudius murdered him while he slept, pouring poison into his ear. As the dawn begins, the Ghost urges Hamlet to take revenge on Claudius but to leave Gertrude alone. The Ghost then disappears, urging Hamlet to remember him.

Hamlet reacts with an eruption of words and anger against his uncle and his mother, vowing to do as his father asks. Marcellus and Horatio arrive, and Hamlet tells them that the Ghost is to be trusted, insisting that they keep secret what they saw. With the Ghost crying out in the background, Hamlet then instructs them that no matter what they see him do, if they see him "put an antic disposition on", that they are to say they know nothing of his plans and purposes. They swear to do as asked, and Hamlet leads them back into the castle.

Act 1, Scenes 4 and 5, Hamlet Analysis

The first point to note about these two brief scenes is Hamlet's reference to Claudius, essentially defining an important sub-plot, or secondary narrative line - specifically, Claudius' political and military relationships, as king and ruler, with the world outside of Denmark. On one level, Hamlet's comments reveal another aspect of his distaste for the man who took his father's place - there is an unspoken implication here that Hamlet's father would never have behaved in this way. On another level, the comments suggest that Claudius, as careful and controlling as he seems to want to be, doesn't have the kind of control or insight that he thinks he does, an aspect of his character and nature that can be seen as defining his later actions - specifically, his attempts to take control of the situation with Hamlet. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the comments are those of a bitter young man and as such might necessarily be regarded as being not entirely objective.



In the same way as the Ghost draws Hamlet into shocked understanding, his appearance draws the audience further into the story, setting up an objective and a purpose for Hamlet that the audience immediately becomes interested in. At this point, the playwright has constructed the circumstances in such a way that the audience knows that Hamlet is full of intense emotion because of his father's death and that Hamlet has no respect at all for Claudius (the comments about the parties in the moments before the Ghost's appearance reinforce this idea). As a result of the playwright's work, with the Ghost's words and Hamlet's decision (i.e., to at times pretend to be insane), the audience no doubt becomes both eager to see what form Hamlet's revenge will take and arguably convinced, at least to some degree, that that revenge will come sooner rather than later. In other words, the playwright has already created a sense of narrative and emotional momentum, triggering the audience's interest in character and story. What he does with that interest, and how he does it through character, is what has made this play the classic that it has become. The first act ends with the audience, along with the characters, drawn into the forthcoming events of the second.



Act 2, Hamlet

Act 2, Hamlet Summary

Scene 1 - Polonius issues a complex, confusing set of instructions to a servant being sent to France to learn how Laertes is behaving. After the servant goes, Ophelia appears, upset and confused. She tells Polonius that Hamlet has visited her, dressed and behaving strangely. Polonius is convinced that Hamlet is behaving like a man in love. When Ophelia says she has done what Polonius instructed and rejected Hamlet's advances, Polonius concludes that Hamlet has been driven mad by that rejection and takes her to see Claudius.

Scene 2 - Claudius and Gertrude welcome two friends of Hamlet's from Wittenberg, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Conversation reveals that Claudius sent for them to come to Elsinore and find out what's troubling Hamlet, and that they will be rewarded. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to do as they've been asked, and go to find Hamlet. Polonius then comes, with two pieces of news - that he has discovered what is troubling Hamlet and that the ambassadors from Norway have returned. The latter tell Claudius that the King of Norway has called off Fortinbras' attack on Denmark and will agree to keep him under control if Claudius allows his armies safe passage through Denmark in order to attack Poland. Claudius agrees, and the Ambassadors go. Once they've gone, Polonius then ramblingly tells Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet has gone mad because of Ophelia's rejection. To Claudius and Gertrude, this explanation seems to make sense, but they want further proof. Polonius plots to send Ophelia to Hamlet and listen to their conversation. Claudius and Gertrude agree, quickly leaving when they see Hamlet approaching. As Hamlet arrives, he is confronted by Polonius, providing answers both sensible and nonsensical to his many questions. Polonius goes, still resolved to bring Ophelia and Hamlet together. Once he's gone, Hamlet comments on how "tedious" Polonius is.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come in and are greeted warmly by Hamlet who, after some bantering but pointed dialogue, bullies them into confessing that they are there on Claudius' business. Hamlet then explains that he has gone a bit mad, and learns that that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have brought a troupe of players (actors) with them. Hamlet says that they and the players are all welcome ... but then comments that his "uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived".

Polonius returns, announcing the arrival of the actors. He is then taunted by Hamlet about Ophelia. The players themselves enter, and Hamlet welcomes them warmly. He asks the First Player for an example of his work, citing a particular speech he wants to hear (about the death of King Priam of Troy) and then beginning to recite it himself. The First Player joins in, evoking the distraught grief of Priam's wife Queen Hecuba and finishing with tears in his eyes. Hamlet speaks approvingly of the performance, telling Polonius to compensate the actors well. As Polonius leads the players out, Hamlet has a private word with the First Player, asking him to perform a particular play and to insert



a few lines which he (Hamlet) will write. The First Player agrees, then goes. Hamlet then dismisses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and is left alone.

Hamlet then speaks the second of his soliloquies, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I", moved and angered by the intensity of the First Player's emotions associated with a fictional character (Hecuba) when he (Hamlet) feels only cowardice and fear. He recalls hearing how guilty persons attending a play have been forced into confession by the action of the play, and he resolves to have the players perform something similar to the murder of his father. "The play's the thing," he concludes, "wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king".

Act 2, Hamlet Analysis

An important and effective element in any form of writing, particularly dramatic writing, is the idea and application of contrast, defining the characteristics of one character and/or situation by portraying another character or situation with the opposite characteristics. Another often equally effective element is the idea of the parallel, in which the main narrative line is defined by an echoing, or parallel, secondary line. In "Hamlet", both these elements come into play in the characters and relationship of Polonius and Laertes. In the case of contrast, Laertes is portrayed throughout the narrative as being a contrast to Hamlet in almost every way - passionate where Hamlet is thoughtful, decisive where Hamlet is hesitant. In the case of parallel, Polonius' meddling curiosity about how his son is behaving parallels Claudius' more destructive and self-interested interest in how Hamlet is behaving. In other words, Polonius' investigation of Laertes foreshadows Claudius' investigation of Hamlet, even down to getting someone else to do the dirty work (see the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the following scene). Meanwhile, Ophelia's story of Hamlet's appearance suggests that Hamlet has, at least to some degree, put his plan of appearing to have an "antic disposition" on (i.e., madness) into action. The question in the mind of the audience, at this point, is whether Hamlet has actually taken his revenge on Claudius. The second scene in the act clearly answers both that question and a second one arising from Ophelia's comments - how, exactly, does Hamlet's madness manifest?

The answer to that question surfaces in Hamlet's conversations with Polonius and, later in the scene, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In both conversations, Hamlet's "madness" takes the form of teasing, taunting, and wordplay, all of which effectively disguise the fact (at least to the other characters) that while Hamlet is taunting those around him, he is still in full possession of his faculties, and is thinking all the time. This is particularly apparent in his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in which he clearly suspects both their agenda and the guiding hand behind it (Claudius). Hamlet's calculating intelligence is also apparent in his quick thinking about how to make use of the traveling players in assuring himself of Claudius' guilt, an action which raises an interesting question - did Hamlet not fully and truly believe the Ghost's story? Does Hamlet need additional proof of Claudius' guilt? Add to this the logic of the circumstances: the Ambassadors to Norway have left Denmark, traveled to Norway, conducted their negotiations (which probably, like most diplomatic scenarios, took a



substantial amount of time), and traveled back to Denmark, all in a historical period in which travel and communication both took place very slowly. In other words, substantial time has passed between Hamlet's conversation with the Ghost and the arrival of the players. The question in the audience's mind, therefore, is this - what's taking so long? Why is Hamlet delaying? What's going to happen next?

The answer to this question is revealed in the second of Hamlet's great soliloquies which, like the first, gives public voice (i.e., communicates to the audience) to the character's private thoughts and feelings. Here again, the dramatic convention or technique draws the audience into character and action, triggering insight and understanding that an audience would otherwise not have had, or at the least had to intuit. This revelation of character and situation, combined with Hamlet's plotting with the Players, again draws the audience further into the narrative, but now there's a new wrinkle - perhaps this will not be as straightforward or as immediate as the audience thought.



Act 3, Scene 1, Hamlet

Act 3, Scene 1, Hamlet Summary

Scene 1 - When questioned by Claudius and Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say they have noticed Hamlet's occasional strange behavior and have tried to find out what's causing it, but add that he's not giving them any explanations. They also say that he was happy when he learned of the arrival of the players and that he hoped Claudius and Gertrude would watch the performance with him. They agree to do so, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go. Claudius and Gertrude then turn to Polonius and Ophelia, who are also in the room, and finalize their plans to bring Hamlet and Ophelia together so that Claudius and Polonius, concealed, can watch Hamlet's behavior. Gertrude goes, saying that she hopes it's true that Ophelia's beauty is the cause of Hamlet's madness. Meanwhile, Polonius gives Ophelia a book to read, commenting that "with devotion's visage / And pious action we do sugar o'er the devil himself". This comment strikes Claudius particularly sharply, feeling that it applies to the mask of politeness he is wearing over his guilty conscience. He and Polonius hide and Hamlet arrives.

Hamlet speaks the third of his soliloquies, "To be, or not to be: that is the question", speaking of whether it's better to deal with one's troubles by killing oneself or by facing them down. He imagines the fate that awaits those on either side of each particular death, commenting that "conscience does make cowards of us all / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought", leading inevitably to inaction.

Hamlet's thoughts are interrupted by the return of Ophelia, who gives him back love letters that he gave her. After initially commenting that he sent her no letters and after bantering about the relationship between beauty and honesty, he then confesses that he no longer loves her. Speaking with what seems to be increasing madness, he tells her to get to a "nunnery" where she will not be able or allowed to breed "sinners". After referring to the deceptive nature of women, he storms out, leaving Ophelia to comment on "what a noble mind is here o'erthrown".

Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding, Claudius commenting that Hamlet does not sound like a man in love but more like there is something seriously wrong emotionally. He resolves to send Hamlet away to England and Polonius agrees, but maintains that Hamlet is still mad for Ophelia, adding that it should be Gertrude who sends him away and that he (Polonius) will again listen to make sure no harm comes to her while she tells Hamlet. Claudius agrees, and they go out with Ophelia.



Act 3, Scene 1, Hamlet Analysis

An effective element in building dramatic tension, in triggering and engaging interest in what's going to happen next, is giving the audience information that the characters don't have. This particular narrative technique is effectively employed in the first part of this scene, in which Claudius and Gertrude think they're simply going to be watching a play, while the audience knows full well that something else is going on. Anticipation in the audience builds here, going even further when Claudius and Polonius make their plans to eavesdrop on the conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. Where Claudius and Gertrude are in the dark about the play, Hamlet is in the dark about who is listening to his conversation. In other words, the dramatist has built layer upon layer of narrative suspense into this first scene and into the scenes that follow.

Meanwhile, the audience is given greater insight into Hamlet's situation in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, arguably one of the most famous pieces of writing in dramatic literature. Here again, the audience sees Hamlet drawn into thought and introspection rather than action, can now see more clearly why Claudius is not yet dead, and are perhaps beginning to get a sense of danger - not to Claudius or Gertrude, but to Hamlet. Here again, the audience has more knowledge than the character - the audience knows that Claudius is manipulating events in order to get Hamlet out of the picture, meaning that Hamlet, by not taking Claudius out of the picture, is potentially increasing the danger to himself. The dramatist is shaping events and character to draw the audience further and further into curiosity and emotional engagement in what is going to happen next.

The sense of narrative danger, of impending emotional explosion, builds even more as the result of Hamlet's confrontation with Ophelia - which the audience and Ophelia know is being observed by Claudius and Polonius. The actual emotional content of the scene depends on several decisions, made by the actors and director. Is Hamlet's love genuine, and if it is, how deep is it? How deep is Ophelia's love? Does Hamlet become aware that he is being watched? How much of what he does is a performance for Polonius and how much of it is genuine disgust for Ophelia at letting herself be manipulated?

All those questions aside, the essential dramatic content of the scene is clear and actually fairly straightforward. As the result of what he says to Ophelia, and of how he says it, Hamlet is perceived as being both insane and dangerous; thus, he unwittingly draws Claudius' dangerous net more tightly around himself, and in doing so, draws the audience's interest and attention even more tightly towards the inevitable confrontations to come. Meanwhile, Ophelia's comments on Hamlet's state of mind add a layer of insight into just what kind of man he was and what kind of mind he had before the appearance of the Ghost, also adding to the increasing sense that while he is essentially both admirable and honorable (not to mention intelligent), he is profoundly flawed. In other words, he is, in the classical sense, a tragic hero.



Act 3, Scene 2, Hamlet

Act 3, Scene 2, Hamlet Summary

In another part of the castle, Hamlet speaks at length to the Players about how they should present their performance. When he hears that Claudius and Gertrude are coming to see the play, Hamlet hurries the actors out and then calls for Horatio, calling him a good friend and then revealing his plan to trap Claudius, through the performance, into revealing his guilt. He asks Horatio to watch Claudius closely and, as Claudius, Gertrude, and other members of the court (including Polonius and Ophelia) approach, Horatio agrees.

Claudius greets Hamlet warmly, but Hamlet speaks confusingly, joking with Polonius about Polonius having once played Julius Caesar and being "stabbed" by Brutus. Hamlet also refuses an invitation to sit next to Gertrude, choosing instead to lie at Ophelia's feet. The Players enter, and after a mimed prologue (which includes action of a King being poisoned by a man who is later embraced by a Queen), the play itself begins. The King and Queen proclaim their love for, and trust in, each other as the King prepares to leave on a trip. The Queen says that if the King should die, she would never take a second husband. The King suggests that she may say so now, but things may change. She insists that what she says is true, and finally the King believes her. The Queen leaves, and the King lies down to sleep.

Hamlet asks Gertrude what she thinks, and she comments that "the lady doth protest too much". Claudius asks what Hamlet calls the play, and Hamlet says "The Mousetrap". An actor then comes in as the King's nephew and pours poison into his ear. This causes Claudius to rise and hurry out, followed by all others but Hamlet and Horatio, who quickly agree that Claudius' exit was triggered by the poisoning.

Hamlet calls for music, but before the players can return, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hurry in, with a message that Claudius is very upset and that Gertrude wants to see Hamlet. Hamlet speaks wildly to them and then, seeing the actors return with their instruments, demands that Guildenstern play. When Guildenstern says he can't, Hamlet angrily berates him and Rosencrantz for thinking that he could be "played" more easily than an instrument. Polonius arrives with a repetition of the request for Hamlet to speak with Gertrude. After bantering with him, Hamlet agrees to see his mother, dismissing them all. After they're gone, Hamlet vows to himself to be firm with her, and angry and honest, but not violent.

Act 3, Scene 2, Hamlet Analysis

The dramatic tension in this scene escalates to an intensely high level, as does the audience's identification with Hamlet (audience empathy with a central character is a key component of effectively engaging viewers in a dramatic narrative). Specifically,



Hamlet and the audience both know what is coming (i.e., the performance of the players referring to Claudius' actions in killing Hamlet's father), but neither knows what Claudius' reaction is going to be. Hamlet's instructions to Horatio are, in many ways, instructions to the audience - watch the king, and then you'll know the truth. Claudius' reaction, which can be acted in many ways (and has been), communicates that at least to some degree, the shot taken by Hamlet has hit home, but the depths of how seriously Claudius has been injured, as it were, are not yet apparent. That is revealed in the following scene.

A couple of comments made by various characters deserve particular note. Gertrude's comment in response to the actions of the Player Queen, like many other comments and lines in the play, have been regarded as significantly perceptive in terms of their psychological insight. The comment here, spoken by someone who under the circumstances arguably knows a great deal about the subject she's referring to, suggests that overemphasis of one perspective actually suggests the presence of the other. In other words, Gertrude is saying that because the Player Queen speaks her denials so insistently, she's actually planning to do what she's denying. The comment, in turn, suggests that Gertrude was, at least to some degree, aware of what was going on or perhaps what went on between her first and second husband. The second comment of note is Hamlet's reference to the title of the play. On one level, this is clearly a reference to the trap being set for Claudius (a reference the audience will clearly and easily understand) and, on another level, an ironic comment on the traps being set for Hamlet (in which the audience, in all likelihood, will see both irony and foreshadowing).

The scene concludes with heightened emotions all round, some overt (such as Hamlet's), and those more hidden (Claudius' and Gertrude's), said emotions giving rise to the sense that the conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude promised by the action of the end of the scene will, in all likelihood, heighten those emotions and, by extension, the dramatic tension, even more. In other words, the scene ends with an irresistible hook, drawing the audience forward into the story and downward into the darkness of Hamlet's experiences, perhaps more irresistibly than ever.



Act 3, Scenes 3 and 4, Hamlet

Act 3, Scenes 3 and 4, Hamlet Summary

Scene 3 - Claudius orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England and make sure he does as he's told. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to their orders, and go. Polonius hurries in to say that Hamlet is on his way to see Gertrude, and that he (Polonius) will hide behind an arras (tapestry) to hear what he says. After Polonius goes, Claudius tries to pray, but finds he can't - guilt is overwhelming his desire to repent. He realizes he can't ask for forgiveness for the killing, since he still has and values what he gained from it - his crown, his power, and his queen. He cries out his frustration at feeling so trapped and then forces himself to his knees.

Hamlet appears, and contemplates taking his revenge then and there, killing Claudius while he's at prayer. But then he realizes that to do so gives Claudius a better death (i.e., repentant and redeemed) than his father had. He resolves to wait until Claudius can be caught in the middle of an act of sin and goes out to keep his appointment with Gertrude. After he's gone, Claudius rises from prayer, still uneasy.

Scene 4 - Polonius urges Gertrude to be firm with Hamlet, adding that he (Polonius) will be hiding behind the arras in case anything happens. Gertrude agrees, and Polonius hides. When Hamlet comes in, Gertrude attempts to lead the conversation, but Hamlet speaks sharply to her, leading her to try and leave. He blocks her, she calls for help, and Polonius cries out as well. Hamlet mistakes his calls for the noise of a rat, swipes through the arras with his sword, and kills Polonius. As Gertrude reacts in horror, Hamlet realizes what he's done, speaks briefly to the body in apology, and then turns on Gertrude, taking her to task for what he perceives as her immoral actions. Referring to portraits of both men, he compares his father to Claudius, saying the former has all the attributes of the gods while the latter is a much lesser man. He asks Gertrude what "devil" it was that made her so blind as to not see the vice in what she did, and Gertrude begs him to stop.

Suddenly the Ghost appears, reminding Hamlet of the revenge he was intended to take and telling him to speak comfortingly to Gertrude. As Hamlet responds, Gertrude asks why Hamlet he's speaking to empty space - apparently the Ghost is only visible to Hamlet. Hamlet tries to get her to see it but she is unable to, and the Ghost leaves. Gertrude suggests that Hamlet is seeing things, but Hamlet protests that he is not mad, again urging her to think of what she's done, pray for forgiveness, and above all not return to Claudius' bed. He then says he repents of what he did to Polonius and is prepared to face the consequences. Finally, he tells Gertrude to allow Claudius to seduce her into telling him the truth about Hamlet - that he "essentially am not in madness / But mad in craft". Gertrude says she lacks the breath and the will to do that. Hamlet then reminds her that he knows he is to be sent to England, and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have sealed letters that will accompany them, but that he



(Hamlet) has plans for turning the plans in those letters around and destroying Claudius. Finally, he takes Polonius out of the room, commenting on how foolish Polonius was.

Act 3, Scenes 3 and 4, Hamlet Analysis

The dramatic tension between Hamlet and Gertrude, growing over the first two and a half acts of the play, reaches a climax in this section, as Hamlet finally confronts his mother directly over what he sees as her spiritual and emotional betrayal of his father. The word "climax" is used advisedly - the term is used to identify a point of highest emotion, and most often refers to a moment close to the end of a play when its main narrative line reaches its highest point of intensity. But in any play that follows a number of secondary plots and explores a number of relationships over the course of its narrative, there are opportunities for a number of climaxes in each narrative line, or in each relationship. Each of those secondary climaxes, in turn, increases the work's dramatic energy and emotional intensity so that when the main narrative does reach its own climax, it does so with maximum emotional and narrative impact. What the climax of the Hamlet/Gertrude relationship does, occurring as it does at approximately the halfway point of the narrative, is up the emotional intensity of not only the play but also of the central character, whose experiences and fate are so entwined with the narrative. The audience is exposed to new sides of both Hamlet and Gertrude, and afforded glimpses of how deeply and intensely feelings in both characters are running as the audience is drawn, perhaps more empathetically than ever, even more deeply into Hamlet's tortured situation.

Before all of that, however, there is an even more important aspect - Hamlet's decision to not kill Claudius while the latter is at prayer. In terms of the dramatic narrative, what the audience sees at this point is essentially a turning point for the character, a point at which his choices reveal his true nature. He's either vindictive, for wanting Claudius to suffer the same sort of un-blessed death as his father, or profoundly indecisive and ultimately hypocritical, unable to fully and finally commit to that which he has promised to do and has felt so strongly, at least up to now, that he should do.

Again, as has been previously discussed and is the case in almost every work of dramatic narrative, the choice of how to play and/or interpret a particular moment is up to the actors and director, following the guidance of the text. Here, the evidence of Hamlet's character, what he has revealed in dialogue but mostly in the soliloquies, suggests that his indecisiveness, his essentially contemplative nature, is what stays his hand here. This is not to say that he feels happy with his decision. On the contrary, in terms of the "cause-and-effect" principle that drives every successful dramatic narrative, there is the clear sense that Hamlet's frustration with his inability to kill Claudius is a trigger for his loss of temper with Gertrude in the scene that immediately follows.

At this point, it's interesting to consider the line of dramatic action. Consider the series of events. All in one day, Hamlet realizes he's being betrayed by his friends, has an inspiration about how to trap Claudius, has his love letters returned, uncovers evidence that suggests Claudius is guilty of his father's murder, has an opportunity to take his



revenge and fails, is driven to confront his mother, and kills a man. The day ends, in the following scene, with his being essentially banished. This is the personal truth at the core of this dramatic narrative - an individual in challenging circumstances faces stress after intensifying stress and is forced to confront those stresses in order to preserve at least some sense of identity, self, and truth. This, in turn, is the essential premise of any character in any dramatic narrative.



Act 4, Scenes 1 through 4, Hamlet

Act 4, Scenes 1 through 4, Hamlet Summary

Scene 1 - Gertrude tells Claudius what happened between her and Hamlet, saying Hamlet is mad and that he is responsible for the death of Polonius. Claudius says they should have locked Hamlet away at the first sign of his madness, but they loved him too much to do it. Gertrude tells him Hamlet is hiding Polonius' body and grieving over what he has done. Claudius promises her that soon Hamlet will be sent from court and calls for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Polonius. After they've gone, Claudius plans to communicate what has happened to his "wisest friends", letting them know what's happened so that the rumors and truth of what Hamlet did will leave him, his country, his crown and his reputation undamaged.

Scene 2 - When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet, he speaks to them tauntingly about their service to Claudius and about Claudius himself, saying Claudius is a thing "of nothing". When they ask where the body is, he refuses to tell them but does accompany them when they return to Claudius.

Scene 3 - Claudius tells his courtiers that he has to be careful about how he deals with Hamlet, saying that Hamlet is loved by the people and that in situations like this, the punishment has more attention paid to it than the crime. Rosencrantz comes on, saying that Hamlet will not reveal where the body is. Hamlet and Guildenstern soon follow, and Claudius demands to know where Hamlet has hidden the body. Hamlet jokes about Polonius being eaten by worms and his soul being either in heaven or in hell ... but adds that Polonius can be found in a cupboard at the top of the stairs. As attendants go out, Claudius tells Hamlet that he is to be sent to England. Hamlet leaves, but not before he makes a pointed comment about Claudius' marriage to Gertrude. After he goes, Claudius speaks in a brief soliloquy about his belief that because of Denmark's military power, England will do as he asks, not only accept Hamlet but kill him as per the letters he is sending with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Scene 4 - On an open plain in Denmark, young Norwegian prince Fortinbras dispatches an Officer to tell Claudius that the Norwegian army is camped there on their safe passage through Denmark on their way to Poland (Act 2, Scene 2, Part 1). After Fortinbras leaves, Hamlet and his entourage encounter both the army and the Officer, conversation revealing that the invasion is intended to reclaim a small piece of land the Officer holds worthless, but which is important for sustaining Norwegian honor. After the Officer goes, Hamlet tells his entourage to go on ahead and that he'll follow shortly. After they go, he speaks his next soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me ...", in which he relates Norway's pursuit of worthless land in the name of honor to his own failure to pursue revenge when there is, for him, real honor at stake. He resolves to pursue his revenge more intently than ever.



Act 4, Scenes 1 through 4, Hamlet Analysis

At this point in discussing "Hamlet" primarily in terms of its being a piece of dramatic narrative (i.e., a play), it might be useful to discuss the concept of "stakes", or what a character has to lose or to gain at any given point in such a story. Traditionally, and perhaps most effectively, characters fighting with high stakes, with a great deal to win and/or to lose, are the ones who make the most effective and engaging characters in drama. The characters in this play are no exception, with the stakes faced by Claudius perhaps being the most apparent - as his actions throughout this sequence of scenes suggest, he stands to lose his international reputation, his good relationship with his wife, and perhaps even his life. Gertrude, for her part, is fighting for a positive stake - peace of mind. At the same time, however, she also stands to lose something profoundly important - the love of her son, not to mention their relationship in general.

While he was alive, Polonius stood to gain favor with the king and went to extreme measures (i.e., playing with high stakes) to achieve it. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fighting for similar stakes, while standing to lose their friendship with Hamlet. Given their actions, it's clear what choice they make. Ophelia, like Gertrude, is caught between two opposing demands, two contradictory relationships, with high stakes in each. On the one hand she stands to either gain or lose the respect of her father; on the other, she stands to gain or lose the affections and respect of the man she loves, and who seems to genuinely love her.

Which leaves us with Hamlet. At the beginning of the play, he has everything to gain - peace of mind, respect, affection, security. Once he sees the Ghost, however, and is given his mission of revenge, the allure of one gain in particular, peace of mind, becomes predominant. In other words, he becomes more determined than ever, apparently willing to do anything, even kill the king, to achieve his goal. The further he drifts from that goal, however, the further he withdraws from action, the more he has to lose - in particular, self respect and integrity.

The thing about stakes is that the higher they are, in fighting for either a positive or negative goal, the more desperate the character is going to fight to realize that goal. An effective dramatic construction, such as is at work throughout "Hamlet", continually raises the stakes for all the characters. In these four brief scenes, the stakes are raised for all the characters who remain alive. Claudius, more desperate than ever to keep his throne, takes more desperate action than ever - he arranges for Hamlet to be killed. Gertrude, now convinced her son is insane and having witnessed a murder is more desperate than ever for peace of mind, so she agrees to Claudius' plan to send Hamlet away. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern see their opportunity for reward slipping away, so they agree to Claudius' ever-more desperate plans. What happens to Ophelia as the result of being caught in these impossible stakes is about to be revealed.

Which, once again, leaves us with Hamlet. The interesting thing here is that Hamlet, unlike everyone else in the play, seems to have given up, to have stopped fighting - that is, through Scenes 1, 2 and 3 in this act. But after the encounter with the Norwegian



Army in Scene 4, and as Hamlet's soliloquy here makes clear, he is reminded of just how much he has to both lose and gain. He is reminded of just how high the stakes are, and at the conclusion of Scene 4, he resolves with more apparent determination than ever to take action. As the following scenes make clear, Hamlet, like the other characters, has reached a point of profound desperation, once again through his own inaction (i.e., the giving up in Scenes 1, 2 and 3) and now, out of that desperation, is about to take extreme action.



Act 4, Scenes 5, 6 and 7, Hamlet

Act 4, Scenes 5, 6 and 7, Hamlet Summary

Scene 5 - Gertrude comes, refusing to see Ophelia who, the dialogue implies, has gone mad. Gertrude is convinced to change her mind and Horatio brings in Ophelia, who is singing a strange song of grief. As she sings, Claudius comes in, immediately concluding that losing both her father and Hamlet has driven Ophelia mad. Ophelia goes out, and Claudius comforts Gertrude, at the same time warning her that Laertes has suddenly returned from France and is determined to accuse Claudius of responsibility for Polonius' death. At that moment, a courtier comes and warns them that Laertes is in the palace.

Laertes bursts in, demanding justice for his father. Claudius and Gertrude attempt to calm him, saying that Claudius is not responsible for Polonius' death. Conversation is interrupted by Ophelia, coming in and singing a song about spring flowers. Laertes is shocked by what has happened to her, and after she goes out, Claudius suggests that Laertes go find his wisest friends who will hear and judge the truth of what happened to Polonius. Laertes agrees, but comments again on the strange circumstances of his father's death.

Scene 6 - Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet, which states that while en route for England, the ship he was on was boarded by pirates, that he was taken prisoner, and that he bargained for his life by promising to arrange for their safety with Claudius. He adds that he has sent letters for Horatio to give Claudius, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are safely en route for England, and that he (Hamlet) has much more to tell. Horatio resolves to deliver the letters and make his way to Hamlet as quickly as possible.

Scene 7 - Conversation between Claudius and Laertes reveals that Claudius has convinced Laertes of his innocence in Polonius' death and of Hamlet's guilt. When asked why he hasn't acted more decisively against Hamlet, Claudius says it's because both Hamlet's mother and the people love Hamlet so much that to hurt him in any way would hurt Claudius in ways he values most. Claudius then begins to tell Laertes of a plan he has for revenge, but he is interrupted by the arrival of a servant with the letters from Hamlet which state that Hamlet is returning to court. As Laertes vows revenge, Claudius suggests that Laertes follow his Claudius' plan - to capitalize on Hamlet's jealousy of Laertes' good reputation, as a man and as a swordsman. Arrangements are to be made for a fencing match between the two of them, Claudius says, adding that Hamlet is too trusting to check the swords beforehand and will not notice that one of them, the one Laertes is to use, has not been dulled like swords in exhibition combat usually are. Laertes then says he has access to a powerful poison that he will put on the tip of his sword in order to ensure Hamlet's death. Claudius then goes even further, saying that a cup of wine will also be poisoned and will be given to Hamlet to drink.



At that moment Gertrude comes in with news that Ophelia is dead - while trying to hang her flowers on a willow tree, she fell into the brook where, instead of trying to escape, she sang quietly as her water-soaked clothes pulled her down and drowned her. Laertes resolves to pursue his revenge even more intently. After he goes out, Claudius and Gertrude follow, Claudius determined to keep him calm and rational.

Act 4, Scenes 5, 6 and 7, Hamlet Analysis

There are several dramatically important and relevant elements in this section. The first is the time factor - specifically, the time that passes between Scenes 4 and 5. There has to have been enough time (at least a few days) for Laertes to get the news about his father and to travel to England. Likewise, there has to have been a few days for Hamlet to get to the coast, get on the ship to England, go through the pirate attack, and make his way back to shore. The dramatic question here is what has happened to Gertrude and Claudius in all this time? The answer to this question, like so many others raised here, is up to the interpretation of actors and a director, but will have a significant impact on how this section is dramatized.

Also in this section, the narrative revisits the concepts of contrast and parallel, illustrating Laertes more clearly than ever as a character defined by both contrast and similarity to Hamlet. Specifically, both Hamlet and Laertes lose their fathers to violent death, but where Hamlet essentially mopes and grieves, even after he learns who is responsible for his father's death, Laertes immediately and impulsively takes action. In other words, the situation and lack of actions of the play's central character, Hamlet, is thrown into even greater relief by the situation and actions of a secondary character.

Another application of these important concepts can be found in Ophelia, who also embodies both contrast and parallel. Like the other characters, Ophelia has been driven to extremes by the circumstances into which she has been forced. Unlike the other characters, however, the intensity of her reaction and her emotions has driven her insane. The other characters are able to retain control of their mental faculties - barely, but they're doing it. Ophelia, on the other hand, has disassociated herself from her suffering. The others are, to put it plainly, completely caught up in it.

Meanwhile, the concept of stakes is also revisited, with Claudius raising the stakes in his conflict with Hamlet by plotting his death. Also revisited in his conversation with Laertes is the concept of giving the audience information that the characters do not have, only this time, instead of Claudius not knowing Hamlet's plans (i.e., the use of the Players), the reverse is true - Hamlet doesn't know Claudius' plans (i.e., the poisoning of the swords). The audience, however, knows, and will no doubt become even more caught up in the building narrative energy.

Finally, there is Gertrude's story of Ophelia's death. This dramatic device, of a character bringing in bad news, is one of the oldest devices in dramatic narrative, having been developed, practiced, and applied frequently in Classical Greek theatre. The purpose of the device was, at that time, twofold - to spare the audience the sight of gore, and to



allow the audience's imagination to create the image of the scene themselves. Aside from fulfilling the latter purpose effectively, Gertrude's story raises a very intriguing question - how does she know? Did she see it happen? And if she did, why didn't she do anything to stop it? Surely she would have said something if she had tried, or maybe Gertrude isn't quite as innocent about dark deeds in general, and about the death of Hamlet's father in particular, as some scholars would have audiences believe, and as she would seem to want Hamlet to believe.



Act 5, Scene 1, Hamlet

Act 5, Scene 1, Hamlet Summary

As they dig a grave in a churchyard, two Gravediggers make blackly humorous comments about what constitutes a suicide and about whether a church or a gallows or a grave is the more strongly built and more lasting construction. As Hamlet and Horatio appear, one of the Gravediggers goes and the second Gravedigger sings quietly as he works, throwing up skulls. Hamlet watches, commenting on the lives that once inhabited the skulls and the casual disdain with which the Gravedigger treats them. During bantering conversation with the Gravedigger, he learns that another skull, brought up by the Gravedigger, is that of Yorick, Hamlet's father's jester. Hamlet contemplates the skull and the life that its owner used to have, leading him to further contemplation of how even great men must die.

His thoughts are interrupted by Ophelia's funeral procession, attended by Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude and others. Hamlet and Horatio watch as Laertes struggles to convince a Priest that Ophelia should not be buried as though she was a suicide. The Priest, however, is not convinced that she wasn't and refuses to bury her in consecrated ground. After the body is placed in the grave, Laertes jumps in after it, desperate to hold his sister one last time. This triggers Hamlet to come forward and confront him, saying that no one loved Ophelia more than he did. He too jumps into the grave and the two men fight. Hamlet is eventually convinced to withdraw and he goes, followed by Horatio. Claudius reminds Laertes of their plan and reminds both Laertes and Gertrude that "an hour of quiet shortly shall we see".

Act 5, Scene 1, Hamlet Analysis

The dramatic device at work in this section is something called "comic relief", in which the high emotional intensity of the rest of the story is broken, at least for a moment or two, by jokes and humor, however black. Audiences tend to welcome a release of narrative tension, which is essentially a chance for them to rest and regain energy following intense emotional investment in a character or story. Here the jokes of the Gravediggers function as comic relief, triggering a few dark laughs at the expense of the bodies they're digging up and the body they are about to inter.

Meanwhile, Hamlet's seemingly casual, apparently thoughtful, conversation with Horatio about Yorick shows the audience again the sort of man he really is, one of contemplation and insight. By contrast, his fight with Laertes shows the audience the man he is becoming - frustrated, volatile, and violent both mentally and physically.

The conclusion of the scene reminds the audience of what Hamlet doesn't know, but other characters (Claudius and Laertes) do know - that Hamlet's doom has been



plotted, and that the moment approaches when that doom will be presented him. Thus, after the comic relief of the Gravediggers, the dramatic tension becomes even higher.

A word about the burial - in traditional Christian teaching and practice, victims of suicide were considered to have committed a mortal sin, and it was forbidden to bury them in ground that had been consecrated, or blessed. The argument between the Priest and Laertes is over whether Ophelia committed suicide or died accidentally, with Gertrude's story of her death suggesting it was an accident. The priest, however, thinks otherwise, leaving Ophelia to be buried with those that religious authorities have decreed to be sinners - people like Yorick.



Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet

Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet Summary

Hamlet tells Horatio how he learned of Claudius' plans to have him killed by stealing and reading the letters Claudius gave Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that he substituted letters of his own telling the English king that the bearers of the letters (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) should be put to death as soon as they arrive. He justifies his actions by saying they were allied with Claudius and therefore with his crimes, and as such deserved their deaths. He admits, however, that he feels badly about his confrontation with Laertes, explaining that the intensity of the latter's grief triggered a release of his own.

The courtier Osric appears, and speaking in flowery language, tells Hamlet that Claudius has placed a wager on the outcome of a fencing match between him and Laertes. After thoroughly mocking Osric, Hamlet agrees to the match and sends him to tell Claudius, who quickly sends word back that the match is to take place right away. Again, Hamlet agrees, in spite of Horatio's attempts to talk him out of it.

Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, Osric, and other courtiers arrive, carrying swords, drinking cups, and wine. Hamlet publicly apologizes to Laertes, saying his madness made him do what he did. Laertes accepts the apology but adds that honor will not allow him to back off the need for revenge. The two choose their swords as Claudius orders that wine be poured and then drinks their health. As the two begin the match, Hamlet scores the first point. Claudius suggests that he drink, but Hamlet refuses. Gertrude, however, drinks from the cup intended for Hamlet which, as Claudius comments in an aside, is the poisoned cup. Meanwhile, Laertes is beginning to wonder whether he should keep fighting. As the match continues, Hamlet is wounded by Laertes' sword (which, it must be remembered, has also been poisoned), but then, during a close scuffle, the swords are exchanged and Laertes is in turn wounded by the same sword.

Suddenly Gertrude realizes what has happened and falls dead. As Hamlet is crying out, Laertes reveals Claudius' plan, telling Hamlet he has been poisoned. Hamlet turns the poisoned sword on Claudius and pours what's left of the poisoned wine down his throat. Laertes says Claudius has gotten what he deserved, asks for Hamlet's forgiveness, and dies. Hamlet collapses, and Horatio makes as if to poison himself, but Hamlet convinces him not to, saying that someone has to remain alive to tell his story.

In the distance, there is the sound of cannon fire. Osric announces that Prince Fortinbras has saluted the returning English ambassadors. As he dies, Hamlet wills his crown to Fortinbras. Horatio mourns his death, and greets the arriving Fortinbras, who is amazed at what he sees (i.e., the number of dead bodies). The English Ambassador, arriving with Fortinbras, reveals that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio orders the bodies of Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius and Laertes to be put on public display in order that the people may understand the story he has to tell more fully, a story "of



carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause". Fortinbras orders that Horatio's requests be followed, grieving the death of Hamlet who, he suggests, would have been a good king. The soldiers bear off the bodies, and the play ends.

Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet Analysis

This long and complex scene is profoundly intense, both dramatically and emotionally, building suspense and audience engagement to the overall narrative's point of climax (as opposed to the previously discussed smaller climaxes in the work's secondary narratives). The attention, and the tension, of the audience is held tight, first by the audience's knowledge of the poisonous fate awaiting Hamlet, and then by Hamlet's shocking revelation that he arranged for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, an act of deceptive manipulation similar to that perpetrated by Claudius.

Here again, the concept of parallel comes into play, with Hamlet's actions suggesting that he has, to some degree and as the result of the desperately high stakes he is feeling, gotten to be no better than the man he despises and intends to kill. Meanwhile, the concept of contrast also returns, this time manifesting in the character of Osric, whose flouncy superficiality and evident lack of intelligence contrasts vividly with Hamlet's obviously powerful mind and profound experience of feeling. Contrast also shows up in the difference in attitudes between Hamlet and Laertes, with Laertes once again referring to his choice to act out of honor, a reminder to both Hamlet and the audience that honor, in spite of his claims to the contrary, has not been one of Hamlet's guiding principles or attributes.

Once the fight between Laertes and Hamlet actually begins, the narrative and dramatic tension increases exponentially. Audiences would, in all likelihood, be caught up in the high stakes, in the knowledge of the poison that they have but Hamlet doesn't, and in the plain, straightforward excitement of witnessing a swordfight. They would, in all likelihood, also be caught up, at one point or another by several important questions. When will Hamlet get stabbed? Why doesn't Claudius try harder to stop Gertrude drinking the poisoned wine? And why, exactly, does Laertes start to feel guilty about his role in the plot to kill Hamlet? On the other hand, audiences might also find themselves taken out of the emotional and narrative effectiveness of the drama by the simple fact that there are so many deaths in such a short period of time. It's important to note, however, that an important component of successful theatre, of successful dramatic narrative from the Classical Greeks to the present day, is the concept of catharsis, a release of emotion in the audience arising from a release of emotion onstage, emotions that the audience may feel, but not act on. In other words, the deaths at the end of "Hamlet" are all, to one degree or another, a result of, or perhaps even punishment for, a lack of personal and/or moral integrity. The catharsis here is of guilt - I may have behaved badly, audience members might well say to themselves, but I didn't behave as badly as those characters did, and I certainly won't receive that kind of punishment. Other emotions that might be cathartically released include the desire for revenge, the urge to violence, and the paralysis of indecision.



The death of Hamlet, as many scholars and critics have observed, is the eventual or perhaps inevitable result of Hamlet's own actions and inactions. His choices, or non-choices, set in motion a chain of events that seem inevitably destined to end in his destruction. A dramatically effective and engaging presentation of this play, however, must fight that inevitability, must keep the audience engaged with the struggles of the characters so that the endings of their stories, not to mention the beginnings and the middles, feel spontaneous and immediate. In other words, a well structured and well written dramatic narrative such as "Hamlet" is shaped by the writer to create a sense of life lived, and/or of life as lived by audiences. Not that we all have murdered fathers whose ghosts appear to us to demand revenge, but we all have the desire for revenge, we all have moments of indecision, and we all have moments of profound, desperate vulnerability. We see ourselves in good plays, and we see ourselves in Hamlet. We come out of a dramatically effective presentation of this, or any other good play, a little more self aware, a little more aware of the ways of the world, and a little more aware that there are indeed, as Hamlet says, "more things in heaven and earth ... Than are dreamt of in our philosophy."



Characters

Hamlet

Hamlet is the play's central character and protagonist, widely regarded as one of the most psychologically complex and enigmatic characters in the history of dramatic narrative. He is also what is often referred to as a "tragic hero", an essentially noble human being with exceptionally fine moral character or emotional sensitivity and intelligence, whose qualities are undermined by a single, overwhelming character flaw, and who, as a result of that flaw, loses his/her life. The personal journeys of transformation, or character arcs, of such tragic heroes over the course of a dramatic narrative traditionally follow a similar pattern, or template. This pattern consists specifically of the following: the establishment of the essentially admirable qualities of the hero and the circumstances in which he or she finds himself, definition of those circumstances as challenging to the hero's basic integrity, struggles of the hero to overcome those circumstances and maintain that integrity, defeat of the tragic hero, ending in disgrace, or death, or both. Hamlet, as the central character in a dramatic narrative, fits this template almost exactly.

In the early stages of the narrative, Hamlet's admirable qualities are clearly in focus - his loyalty, his moral integrity, his intellect, and his sense of self. At the same time, the circumstances within which he finds himself are equally clear, surrounded by morally corrupt and personally ambitious manipulators (Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), self-deluders (Gertrude), weaklings (Ophelia), and the intellectually limited (Horatio and just about all the other characters - only Claudius comes close to being an intellectual match). Over the course of the narrative, Hamlet struggles with increasing intensity to hold on to his values while facing choices that directly challenge those values, eventually finding himself corrupted (i.e., becoming as morally bankrupt as those around him) and ultimately destroyed. His flaw? That he is indecisive. That he delays. That he is too thoughtful. That he is a man of intellect and contemplation rather than a man of action. The point is not made to suggest that Hamlet should have done as the Ghost asks and killed Claudius immediately, but rather that the tension between Hamlet's character and his circumstances created a situation in which it was impossible, perhaps right from the beginning, for him to safely and healthily accommodate both. He, like other tragic heroes (Oedipus, Antigone, Macbeth, Willy Loman) is possessed of a soul and personal integrity that, in many ways, the oft-corrupt ways of the world and of humanity can simply not accommodate, or, in society's darkest moments and darkest aspects, cannot allow to survive.

The Ghost of Hamlet's Father

The Ghost of Hamlet's father serves three key functions. First, it is a trigger or catalyst for both the narrative action and for the journey of transformation undertaken by Hamlet. Second, it is a source of important information, or exposition, revealing the darkest



truths of Hamlet's situation. Third, it serves as an externalization of Hamlet's conscience or guilt, manifesting late in the play as Hamlet has become distracted from his purpose by his anger at Gertrude. The Ghost appears to remind him of what he should be focused on, rather than on the feelings of disgust and anger that are overwhelming him.

Claudius

Claudius is the new King of Denmark, apparently having usurped the title and the throne from its rightful heir - Hamlet, son of the dead king. Claudius is a clever politician and manipulator, self-serving and cynically aware, in ways that Hamlet is not, of how the world works. He is temporarily stricken with an attack of conscience after the appearance of the Players, but shortly afterwards returns his focus to his intention - solidify and maintain his status as king and authority. His death at the end of the play, unlike Hamlet's, is not to be viewed as tragic - his manipulations throughout the play seem to manifest the playwright's clear intention that he be perceived as getting what he deserves.

Gertrude

Gertrude is Hamlet's mother, wife of both his father (the previous king) and his uncle (Claudius, brother to the new king and usurper of the throne). Gertrude is one of the most enigmatic characters in the play, in that the narrative never explicitly defines several important aspects of her personality and her role in the action. It's never made clear what she knows (i.e., about the death of her first husband, about Claudius' plans for Hamlet's banishment), why she did what she did (i.e., marry her husband's brother within a month of her first husband's death), and whether her professed affection for her son is genuine. What is clear is that she has a degree or two of genuine emotional sensitivity to those around her, particularly Hamlet and Ophelia, and that she does have a certain degree of genuine conscience, which seems to emerge only after being violently reminded by Hamlet that she should actually listen to it. Her death at the end of the play is not nearly as tragic as that of her son, in that she seems nowhere near as noble as he is. At the same time, however, there is also the sense that it is less deserved than that of Claudius, in that the play does seem to be suggesting that, at least to some degree, she has been manipulated as much by him as the other characters.

Polonius

Polonius is a senior courtier and advisor to Claudius and Gertrude. He is portrayed as being somewhat absent minded, domineering and manipulative of his children, ambitious and unscrupulous. He is an eavesdropper, self-interested and eager to use whatever circumstances he can, in whatever way he can, to curry favor with those in power, particularly the King and Queen. His death is, it seems, intended to be viewed in



the same light as that of Claudius - that is, as the justified end to a corrupt and destructive life.

Laertes and Ophelia

Laertes is Polonius' son and Ophelia is his daughter. Laertes is moralistic and opinionated, hot-tempered and impulsive. Ophelia is loving and easily led, gentle and submissive. Both are manipulated by their father, both have an essential moral integrity, and both have that integrity essentially eroded and destroyed, albeit indirectly, as the result of their father's manipulations. In other words, both children become pawns in their father's quest for power and influence, Polonius' influence continuing after his death as the result of his pre-death conspiracies with Claudius.

Both Laertes and Ophelia are clear and defining contrasts and parallels to Hamlet. Laertes' decisiveness (which, at times, is impulsive) is a clear contrast with Hamlet's indecisiveness, while Laertes' unshakable loyalty to his father, his sister, and the family's honor is a contrast to Hamlet's more frail, distracted loyalty. Ophelia too is unquestioningly loyal to her father and brother, again a contrast to Hamlet. Ophelia also contrasts Hamlet in her simple, limpid love and affection for him, but there is also a parallel here - the love Hamlet and Ophelia have for each other becomes corrupt as the result of the manipulative circumstances in which they find themselves. Then there is the question of their parallel madneses, with Hamlet's being feigned and Ophelia's apparently being genuine. Finally, there are the deaths of all three characters, which in each case are essentially tragic, the basically sound characters of all three becoming corrupted by circumstances out of their control and their lives physically, morally, and emotionally destroyed as the result of being caught up in that corruption.

Horatio

Horatio is a friend of Hamlet's from university, a soldier and something of a skeptic. He needs to see things and experience things before he believes in them, and in this he is a contrast and balance to Hamlet, whose imagination often runs away with him. Horatio is also stolidly loyal, remaining faithful to both his friend and his friend's mission even though both become increasingly difficult to understand and accept. Again, he is a contrast to Hamlet, whose loyalty to his father (i.e., the Ghost) and to his purposes weakens and eventually falls away. He is one of the few characters to live through the carnage of the play's second half, a circumstance suggesting that on some level the playwright is suggesting that the values embodied in Horatio - loyalty, patience, trust, consistency - are positive and enable the maintenance of both physical and moral survival of the often unexpectedly corruptions of this world.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two courtiers, friends of Hamlet's from school, who, unlike Horatio, become as corrupt as those (Claudius and Gertrude) who manipulate



them. They are flatterers and manipulators, not particularly clever, and essentially evocative of the suggestion that manipulators like Claudius, and like Hamlet becomes, will stop at nothing in order to achieve their goals and ends.

Osric

Osric is another courtier, appearing briefly as a kind of referee or umpire in the climactic swordfight between Laertes and Hamlet. Portrayed as superficial and a bit of a fool, flashily dressed and out of his intellectual depth, he is a contrast in shallowness and foolishness to Hamlet's intellectual and moral depth, accessible to Hamlet even in the final phases of his life.

The Players

Brought to court by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Players are traveling actors, going from place to place and presenting different performances at each one. They are utilized by Hamlet as a tool for triggering revelations from Claudius about his Claudius' involvement in the death of the previous king. Scholarship and research have suggested that Shakespeare based the Players on a troupe of similarly itinerant actors with which he was involved in the early stages of his career.

Fortinbras

Fortinbras is a prince of neighboring Norway, portrayed in both conversation about him and in his own appearances as decisive, ambitious, moral and firm. In this he is a clear contrast to Hamlet, seemingly much more suited to being a king than he (Hamlet) is. Hamlet seems to know it, which is why he, at the point of death, gives Fortinbras the right to govern Denmark.

The Gravediggers

The diggers of Ophelia's grave serve as comic relief, their black humor and jokes about death serving to both lighten the increasingly oppressive emotional and moral atmosphere of the play and to raise the issues Hamlet is about to encounter in a lighter, more engaging way. The wit and banter of the Second Gravedigger fits well with what the narrative has shown to be Hamlet's style of conversation, with the conversation between the two eventually making the thematically relevant point that death is essentially the great leveler. In other words, once death comes, all souls and bodies are exactly the same.



Objects/Places

Denmark

This small Scandinavian country is the kingdom in which the action of the play is set.

Norway

Another Scandinavian country, in actuality larger geographically and in the play, more powerful militarily. One of Claudius' intentions throughout the play is to maintain peace with Norway.

England

England is presented by Claudius as an ally of Denmark - or, at least, as a country he believes will be an ally after he promises to assist them in case of an attack by Norway. England is also the country to which Claudius sends Hamlet to be executed.

The Castle of Elsinore

Elsinore is the name of the castle in Denmark that houses the royal family (Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet) and its court (including Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia and Osric). It is the setting for much of the play's action. The real life Elsinore Castle was the venue for a famous production of Hamlet starring Laurence Olivier as Hamlet and Vivien Leigh as Ophelia.

The Ramparts

A rampart is another name for battlement, the walkway atop a castle wall linking towers. Two of the play's first three scenes take place on the ramparts of Elsinore, where first the night watchmen and eventually Hamlet catch sight of the Ghost of Hamlet's father.

Wittenberg

Wittenberg is the name of the university that Hamlet, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all attend.

Letters

Various letters play important roles throughout the narrative. They include Hamlet's love letters to Ophelia (which she returns, signifying the end of their relationship, an action



which, at least in the mind of Polonius, triggers Hamlet's madness). Then there are Claudius' letters to England, which contain the request for the English authorities to execute Hamlet, letters that Hamlet intercepts, and Hamlet's substitutes for these letters. The substitutes request that England execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The Skulls

During Hamlet's conversation with the Gravediggers, the latter pull several skulls out of the ground into which the bodies they used to belong to were buried. One of these skulls famously belongs to Yorick, a jester in the court of Hamlet's father when Hamlet was a child. The presence of the skulls, and the reactions/comments they trigger, can be seen as a manifestation of the narrative's thematic emphasis on the transitory nature of physical life.

Weapons and Poisons

An important component of the narrative's continuous, and increasingly oppressive, atmosphere of violence is the regular presence (in the latter half, almost constant) of instruments of destruction - weapons, particularly swords, and poisons. The presence of these elements gives a strong sense of impending, inescapable death.

The Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a form of dramatic narrative in which a character, alone onstage, speaks aloud his or her innermost thoughts. Shakespeare used this device frequently, and to great effect, particularly in "Hamlet", which contains four soliloquies for the title character and one major soliloquy for one of the secondary characters (Claudius, Act Three Scene Three). In terms of dramatic function, soliloquies serve to draw the audience further into the experience of a character.



Themes

The Dangers of Indecision

The Dangers of Indecision is the narrative's primary theme and the issue at the core of both the main narrative line and the journey of transformation undertaken by the central character, Hamlet, a journey that simultaneously both motivates and defines that narrative. The thoughtful and introspective prince is given a mission by the Ghost of his murdered father and, at first, fully intends to complete it. But as time passes and circumstances conspire to trigger in Hamlet more thought (his natural inclination) than action, his inability to follow through on his purpose leads to moral self-corruption, to the point where, as previously discussed, he behaves as badly and destructively as those whose behavior he initially condemns. Eventually, inaction and indecision also lead to a physical destruction that echoes the moral destruction that has gone before.

It could be argued that taking impulsive action is just as self-destructive. Characters who do so seem to end up dead, or mad, or both. This is certainly true of Laertes, Claudius, and Polonius, probably true of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (whose choice to side with Claudius doesn't seem to have been considered to any degree at all), and possibly true of Gertrude and Ophelia. The two women seem to take action based on their desires to accommodate the stronger wills and impulses of the dominant men in their lives - in Gertrude's case of Claudius, in Ophelia's case of Polonius. Ultimately, though, the work's consideration of the dangers of indecision has to be considered more significant, simply because none of the characters whose lives are destroyed by decision rather than indecision are portrayed as starting from such a clearly defined place of moral integrity as Hamlet. In this context, then, the real danger of indecision can be seen as emerging from the processes of thinking and feeling that give rise to indecision. The real issue, it seems, is finding the balance between consideration, moral integrity and action, a balance that none of the main characters, with the exception of Horatio, seem able to find.

The Transitory Nature of Physical Life

Thematic consideration of this theme becomes overt relatively late in the narrative, manifesting as it does in the conversation of the Gravediggers and in the conversation Hamlet has with the Second Gravedigger. Their words, their ideas, and their actions suggest an understanding of and insight into the circumstances of life's evolution into death, and of what relatively little lasting value and/or worth the body has. In other words, they know that the physical life is only a passing thing, a temporary event or circumstance. Hamlet, as the result of the conversation with the Gravediggers, seems to come to a new awareness and acceptance of this fact, which perhaps explains why he doesn't appear to resist or grieve all that much when he discovers he has been poisoned. As the result of his conversation with the Gravediggers, which itself is a reiteration of several thematically relevant incidents throughout the play, Hamlet has



come to know and understand that, to quote another Shakespearean play ("Macbeth"), "man is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

The "thematically relevant" incidents referred to above are those incidents, during the play and before, in which human life is portrayed as disposable, or at the very least easy to bring to an end. Examples include the death of Hamlet's father (Claudius disposes of his life in order to take his power and, presumably, his queen) and the sudden death of Polonius and the drowning of Ophelia (both are accidents, and both suggest that the life so cherished by so many can disappear in an instant). Other examples include the callous, dismissive plans made by Claudius, and later by Hamlet, to dispose of Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, respectively. Both Hamlet and Claudius essentially see the characters they intend to have killed as disposable, meaning that they value human life, or at least those particular lives, as transitory.

Integrity Versus Corruptibility

The tension between these two states of being is a driving force within many of the characters and relationships in the play. To begin with, the protagonist, Hamlet is viewed by many of the characters, at least at the beginning of the play, as being a prince of both intelligence and integrity. He sees himself in a similar light, judging the actions of others (particularly his mother) by his personal standard of what is morally correct. Also in these early phases of the narrative, Hamlet's integrity is vividly contrasted with the lack of integrity (i.e, moral corruptibility) in Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius. A similar high standard of integrity is evident in Laertes, although his veers dangerously close to being judgmental.

Over the course of the narrative, however, as Hamlet drifts further and further from his purpose (revenge), he also drifts further from the moral integrity that made him believe that such revenge was both appropriate and morally correct. In other words, his moral and personal integrity become compromised the further involved he becomes in actions and attitudes similar to those practiced by the corrupted people around him who, by the middle of the play, include in their number Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Eventually, the most corrupt characters in the play, those whose integrity has been most thoroughly compromised, end up dead - Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Hamlet, Laertes (corrupted by his willingness to go along with Claudius' desperate plot to protect himself and his reputation from Hamlet's madness) and poor Ophelia. She, the gentlest and most well meaning character in the play, allows the integrity of her love for Hamlet to be manipulated and ultimately destroyed by her father. By contrast, the touchstone of integrity throughout the narrative is Horatio, who behaves with honesty, consistency of purpose, and unshakeable loyalty right from his first appearance.



Style

Point of View

On one level, and as is the case with most, if not all, dramatic narratives, the point of view of "Hamlet" is essentially objective but limited, focused on the actions and experiences of the central character in relationship with, and reacting to, the characters and circumstances around him. On another level, the play's point of view is tied in with its themes, making the essential suggestion that, as Hamlet himself says, that "conscience does make cowards of us all". On yet another level, there is the play's psychological point of view, its perspective on character as being defined both by inner and outer states of being. Finally, there is the play's moral point of view, its suggestion that even the noblest of souls (i.e., Hamlet) or the gentlest of souls (i.e., Ophelia) or the most responsive of souls (i.e., Laertes) can be, and perhaps inevitably will be, destroyed by surrounding forces of self interest and manipulation.

It's important to note, at least briefly, the perspective of analysts and commentators on the place of "Hamlet" within the perspective and world view of the playwright and his work in general. For many such individuals, William Shakespeare was a profoundly humanist artist, with a broad and compassionate awareness of human frailties, human strengths, and the complex relationship between the two. "Hamlet" is generally regarded as the pinnacle of his compassion and of his skill at giving that compassion voice in a theatrically, narratively, and dramatically engaging way. In other words, the overall authorial point of view from which "Hamlet" seems to have been written is one recognizing that human beings ultimately live within and define themselves within moral, emotional and intellectual shades of gray, rather than black and white.

Setting

There are two perhaps contradictory main points to note about the play's setting. The first relates to its literal setting in time and place - medieval Denmark, at a time when being royal meant being set apart, morally as well as socially, from other human beings. It was, in many ways, a violent and unsophisticated time, circumstances reflected in the theater of the era which, particularly in drama but also in comedy, tended to express and manifest that violence and, over time, became increasingly geared towards feeding the hunger of audiences for that violence. This means that the style and content in which "Hamlet" functions is a product of both the world in which it was written and the theater written about, and commenting on, that world.

The second noteworthy point about setting, however, is that ultimately, the specifics of setting in time and place don't matter. The narrative of the play, the emotional and moral dilemmas in which Hamlet finds himself, and the fundamental thematic truths (relating to the ideas of indecision, revenge and death) the play explores, are basically universal. They apply to the human experience of any time, in any place. This is why Hamlet, like



many of Shakespeare's other plays, can be presented or produced with settings in other time periods, in other places, in other countries or cities or castles or towns or homes. The human truths that "Hamlet" and his other plays embody and dramatize function effectively within any circumstance, any setting in which a well-intentioned but fallible human being finds himself overwhelmed, corrupted, and eventually destroyed by the self-serving manipulations of people more concerned with status and power. Shakespeare truly speaks a universal language - the language of what it means to be a human being.

Language and Meaning

In terms of literal language, in terms of words and how they're used, there are several points to note here. The first is that Shakespeare was, in practice and by inclination, a poet as well as a dramatist. Thus, the language used by the characters is rich in imagery and metaphor, both of which evoke feeling and circumstance indirectly as often as the dramatist part of him evokes them directly. The second point to note is related, in that meaning is often implied or suggested, rather than stated directly. The audience member has to not only listen, but listen with the mind and spirit engaged, so that the meaning of character, moment and relationship can be perceived beneath the often overwhelming density of language and imagery.

The third and final point to note about the play's language is that is arguably the second richest single source, after the Bible, of quotes and aphorisms that have made their way into common usage and awareness. "To be or not to be", "To thine own self be true", "Methinks the lady doth protest too much", "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio" are only a few of the more well known bits of text, and bits of profound spiritual and psychological truth, that have emerged as widely, if not universally, recognizable. Here is another way in which the fundamental human truths at work in the writer in general and this play in particular show both their accessibility and their universality.

Structure

As previously discussed, the play is structured along traditional, and traditionally effective, narrative lines - beginning, middle, end, and set-up, complication, resolution. Event follows upon event, revelation upon revelation, cause upon effect upon cause, the emotional energy, the intentions and the stakes building in intensity with each moment until a point of climax - in this case, the swordfight between Hamlet and Laertes in Act 5.

Also, and again as previously discussed, there are smaller climaxes along the way, the energy and intensity of each also building and increasing the audience's involvement in the action until the climax arrives as a powerfully effective point of catharsis, or emotional release.

Finally, it's important to note that every point of increased narrative and dramatic tension is clearly tied to an important incident in the life and experience of the central character, again a traditionally employed, traditionally successful narrative technique. The work is



structured to exploit, for maximum dramatic and suspense-building effect, every discovery Hamlet makes, every obstacle he encounters, every decision he takes (or, in Hamlet's case, doesn't take). In other words, here and in other effective dramas, whatever the era in which they're written and produced, structure is effectively tied to character and vice versa. On a more technical or esoteric level, it's important to note that no one definitive version of the text exists - in other words, there is no absolute certainty as to which scenes belong to which act, particularly when it comes to the later half of the play. It is left, as so many decisions about interpretation are, to directors to determine which order of scenic presentation is most effective in terms of building narrative momentum and engaging audiences in narrative suspense.



Quotes

"Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death / The memory be green, and that it us befitted / To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom / To be contracted in one brow of woe / Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature / That we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves."

Claudius, Act 1, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 1-7

"Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'"

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2, Hamlet line 76

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd his canon 'gainst self-slaughter!"

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 129-132

"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, Scene 3, Hamlet lines 78-80

"I am thy father's spirit / Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away."

Ghost, Scene 5, Hamlet lines 9-13

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

Hamlet, Scene 5, Hamlet lines 166-167

"... for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so ..."

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 256-257

"What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so."

Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2, Hamlet lines 315-323



"I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw."

Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2, Hamlet lines 396-397

"This is most brave / That I, the son of a dear father murder'd / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell / Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing, like a very drab / A scullion!"

Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2, Hamlet lines 611-616

"... the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness."

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 111-114

"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! / The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword; / The expectancy and rose of the fair state / The glass of fashion and the mold of form / The observed of all observers, quite, quite down! / ... / Now see that noble and most sovereign reason / ... / That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth / Blasted with ecstasy ..."

Ophelia, Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 158-164

"Give me that man / That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him / In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart / As I do thee."

Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 2, Hamlet lines 76-79

"Pray can I not / Though inclination be as sharp as will / My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent / And like a man to double business bound / I stand in pause where I shall first begin / And both neglect."

Claudius, Act 3, Scene 3, Hamlet lines 38-43

"O Hamlet, speak no more: Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct. O' speak to me no more; these words like daggers, enter in mine ears; no more, sweet Hamlet!"

Gertrude, Act 3, Scene 3, Hamlet lines 38-43

"How stand I then / That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd / Excitements of my reason and my blood / And let all sleep?"

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 4, Hamlet Lines 56-59

"There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would /



Acts little of his will."

Claudius, Act 4, Scene 5, Hamlet lines 123-125

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies, that's for thoughts ... There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue for you; and here's some for me ... o, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died: they say he made a good end ..."

Ophelia, Act 4, Scene 5, Hamlet lines 175-186

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times ... here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?"

Hamlet, Act 5 Scene 1, Hamlet lines 202-210

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will ..."

Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 10-11

"...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: since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?"

Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2, lines 230-235

"Good night, sweet prince: and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!"

Horatio, Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 369-370

"Take up the bodies: such a sight as this / Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss."

Fortinbras, Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet lines 412-413

Topics for Discussion

What is your experience of danger and/or difficulty triggered by indecision? What have been the consequences of delaying action - have they been positive? Have they been negative? How do you view and/or practice the balance between effective thought, integrity and action/inaction?

What is your experience of the relationship between life and death? How do you view the experience of living as compared with the experience of dying? Do you agree with the Gravediggers that the human body is essentially disposable? Why or why not?

What is your experience of the tension between integrity and corruptibility? Have you seen and/or experienced an essentially good person's values eroded, perhaps even destroyed by desire? By mistaken priorities? How does one stay true to one's intention and integrity when surrounded by opportunities for, and/or invitations to, corruption through the fulfillment of ambition and desire?

Discuss the moral quality of Hamlet's two main conscious decisions - to not kill Claudius while at prayer and to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed. Define first his reasons for making those decisions. Do you think he is justified in making them? Why or why not?

Discuss the concept of revenge. How universal a feeling is it to at least want to take revenge? What are the motivating feelings at its heart? Is it ever justified? Have you ever taken revenge? How did it feel before, during, and afterwards?

What do you think Gertrude knew? How involved was she, do you think, in the death of her first husband?

"Hamlet" as a play is famous for, among other things, its many soliloquies. What do you think is the relationship between this particular dramatic technique and the circumstances/personality of the central character?

Many of Hamlet's actions could be perceived as manifestations of insanity - his treatment of Ophelia, the killing of Polonius, the arrangements for the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the leaping into Ophelia's grave. Many critics have argued, as the result of these actions, that Hamlet has, at least to some degree, become as mad as he at first pretends to be. Do you agree?