

Hamlet Summary

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Summary

Act 1

The Appearance of King Hamlet's Ghost at Elsinore Castle

At Elsinore Castle in Denmark, sentinels Barnardo and Francisco are keeping watch through the night. Francisco is about to finish his shift when Marcellus, another guard, arrives along with Horatio. Horatio is a close friend of the young Prince Hamlet. Marcellus and Barnardo eagerly talk about the ghost they have seen twice during their night duties. This ghost looks like the late King Hamlet, the father of Prince Hamlet. Horatio, however, is skeptical of their claims. While the sentinels try to convince Horatio that the ghost is real, the ghost suddenly appears before them. Encouraged by the others, Horatio tells the ghost to speak. The ghost remains silent and vanishes. Disturbed by the encounter, Horatio suggests that the ghost's presence may foreshadow something ominous for Denmark. He notes that the ghost is wearing the same armor King Hamlet wore when he fought Fortinbras of Norway. Horatio shares the story of how King Hamlet had once fought old Fortinbras over a small piece of land, killed him, and reclaimed the territory. Fortinbras's son, Prince Fortinbras, now aims to regain the territory. Horatio advises that they must inform Prince Hamlet about the ghost.

The Current King Claudius Holds Court and Hamlet's Sorrow

The next day, King Claudius holds court. He thanks the people of Denmark for their support after his brother King Hamlet's death and his subsequent marriage to Queen Gertrude. Claudius then talks about Prince Fortinbras of Norway. He informs the court about his aggressive intentions and military actions. Claudius reveals that he has sent a letter to Fortinbras's uncle, the current but ailing king of Norway, alerting him to Fortinbras's plans. Afterward, Claudius turns his attention to Laertes, the son of his counselor Polonius. Laertes asks for permission to return to France, where he studies.

Claudius and Gertrude then speak to Hamlet. They criticize him for his prolonged mourning of his father. Claudius urges Hamlet to stop displaying his grief so openly. He calls it a sign of weakness. He suggests that Hamlet consider staying in Denmark rather than returning to study

in Wittenberg. Hamlet reluctantly agrees to stay.

Left alone, Hamlet expresses his deep sorrow. He laments that if it were not against God's law, he would consider suicide. He is not only mourning his father's death but also tormented by his mother's quick remarriage to Claudius. Then, Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo arrive and tell him about the ghost. Shocked and intrigued, Hamlet decides to join them on their night watch.

Advice to Ophelia about Hamlet

Meanwhile, as Laertes prepares to depart for France, he has a conversation with his sister Ophelia. He warns her to be cautious in her relationship with Hamlet. He reminds her that Hamlet, as a prince, cannot freely choose whom to marry. Ophelia promises to heed her brother's advice. Polonius (the father of Ophelia and Laertes) enters. After Laertes departs, Polonius also tells her to be careful about Hamlet. Ophelia tells her father that Hamlet's love for her is genuine. But Polonius dismisses her feelings and tells her not to see Hamlet.

Hamlet's Meeting with the Ghost

Later, Hamlet and Horatio join Marcellus on his night watch. Suddenly, the ghost reappears. Hamlet is stunned to see that the ghost looks like his father. He tells the ghost to speak and explain why it has returned. The ghost reveals a shocking truth to Hamlet: King Hamlet was not killed by a snake bite as the people of Denmark believe. King Hamlet was murdered by his own brother, Claudius, who poured poison into his ears while he slept. The ghost tells Hamlet to take revenge. He also tells him not to harm his mother, Gertrude. As the sun begins to rise, the ghost disappears. Hamlet feels very sad and angry. He then tells Horatio and Marcellus not to tell anyone about the ghost.

Act 2

Hamlet's Madness

Ophelia informs Polonius that Hamlet came to her in a state of confusion and madness. Polonius believes Hamlet's madness is caused by his love for Ophelia. He thinks Hamlet has gone mad because Ophelia has been avoiding him. Polonius decides to inform King Claudius and Queen Gertrude of Hamlet's condition.

Claudius and Gertrude want to understand Hamlet's strange behavior. They call Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's childhood friends, to spend time with him and observe his actions. Polonius informs Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet's madness is due to his love for Ophelia. To confirm this theory, they stage a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia while secretly observing them from a distance. Later, Hamlet meets Polonius in the hall and speaks to him in

a bewildering (puzzling) manner. For this, Polonius believes that Hamlet's madness is due to Ophelia's indifference to Hamlet's love.

Arrival of a Group of Players (Actors) and Hamlet's Plan

Hamlet is soon approached by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Although they try to hide the true reason for their visit, Hamlet quickly realizes they have been sent to spy on him. They inform him that a group of actors has arrived at Elsinore. This news excites Hamlet. Hamlet greets the actors and arranges for them to perform "*The Murder of Gonzago*" in the court the next night. However, Hamlet wants to write some additional lines to be performed.

Later, Hamlet thinks about his inaction regarding the ghost's command to take revenge. He decides that he will use the play "*The Murder of Gonzago*" to observe Claudius's reaction and test his guilt. The next day, Claudius and Gertrude question Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about their conversation with Hamlet. They have little to report, other than Hamlet's excitement about the arrival of the actors and his plans for a play that evening. Claudius sends them back to Hamlet to keep an eye on him.

Act 3

Hamlet's Meeting with Ophelia and Suspicious Claudius

Claudius and Polonius proceed with their plan to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. They instruct Ophelia to walk into the hall, appearing to read a book, while they hide nearby to observe Hamlet's reaction.

When Hamlet appears, he is lost in his thoughts. He speaks a soliloquy about life, death, and contemplating suicide. However, upon seeing Ophelia, he approaches her. Ophelia tries to return some gifts that Hamlet had given her, but he denies having ever given them. He goes further by declaring that he never loved her. This deeply confuses and hurts Ophelia. Their conversation grows more heated. Hamlet becomes angry and tells her to go to a nunnery (in the context of this play, nunnery means brothel). Hamlet storms off, leaving Ophelia heartbroken.

Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding. They are shocked by what they have witnessed. Polonius remains convinced that Hamlet's madness is due to his love for Ophelia. Claudius, however, believes Hamlet's erratic behavior signals something more dangerous—something that could threaten his rule. Claudius decides Hamlet must be sent to England for his own safety and the safety of the kingdom. Polonius agrees but suggests one final plan. He suggests, after the play, Gertrude should speak to Hamlet privately while Polonius listens from behind a

curtain. Claudius agrees to the plan.

***The Mousetrap*/Hamlet's Plan to Catch the King's Conscience**

That evening, Hamlet prepares the actors for their performance. The play will be presented before Claudius, Gertrude, and the entire court. As the actors leave to get ready, Hamlet is joined by his friend Horatio. He tells him about his plan to use the play to observe Claudius's reaction. Hamlet believes that if Claudius reacts guiltily during a scene that mirrors the murder of King Hamlet, it will confirm the ghost's accusation.

Claudius asks Hamlet what the play's name is. Hamlet says the play's name is *The Mousetrap*. When the performance begins, the royal court gathers to watch it. The play shows a scene where a man pours poison into the ear of a sleeping king. Claudius cannot bear to watch. He suddenly stands and shouts to clear his path. He leaves the room in great confusion. This dramatic reaction is enough proof for Hamlet. It confirms that the ghost was telling the truth. For the first time, Hamlet's doubt turns into certainty.

After the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that his mother wishes to speak with him. They tell him to visit her immediately. Alone again, Hamlet decides to take revenge this time.

Hamlet's Indecision: To Kill Claudius or Not

Meanwhile, Claudius meets with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells them that Hamlet is too dangerous and must be sent away to England immediately. The pair agrees to escort Hamlet to England. Polonius then informs Claudius that Hamlet is on his way to speak with Gertrude. Polonius hurries off to hide behind a curtain in Gertrude's room, eager to overhear their conversation.

Left alone, Claudius begins to think about his guilt. In a soliloquy, he reveals his remorse over King Hamlet's murder but admits that he is unwilling to give up the rewards of his crime—his crown and queen. He kneels to pray to God for forgiveness, but as he does, Hamlet enters the room. Hamlet thinks about killing him there. But he thinks and decides not to. He thinks that if Claudius dies while praying, he may go to heaven. Hamlet decides to wait for another opportunity.

Hamlet's Meeting with Gertrude and Killing Polonius

Hamlet goes to Gertrude's chamber. There, he confronts her about her marriage to Claudius. Hamlet becomes very angry. He accuses her of betraying his father. Gertrude becomes terrified. She calls for help, and Polonius, hiding behind the curtain, cries out in response.

Thinking it might be Claudius, Hamlet draws his sword and stabs through the curtain. It kills Polonius. When Hamlet realizes he has killed Polonius, he shows little remorse.

As the tension mounts, the ghost reappears. The ghost reminds Hamlet of the revenge. However, Gertrude cannot see or hear the ghost. She becomes convinced that Hamlet has truly gone mad. Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius's body with him.

Act 4

Plan to Send Hamlet to England and Execute Him

Gertrude tells Claudius about her encounter with Hamlet. She tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius. Claudius, now more determined than ever, orders Hamlet to be sent to England immediately. He calls upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and bring Polonius's body to the chapel.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet. Hamlet refuses to reveal where he has hidden Polonius's body. After a confusing back-and-forth, Hamlet finally agrees to see Claudius. When questioned by Claudius, Hamlet continues to speak in riddles. Finally, he tells the king about the location of Polonius's corpse. Claudius seizes the opportunity to tell Hamlet that he must leave for England immediately for his own safety. Hamlet agrees and departs.

Claudius reveals his true plan: he has sent a letter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for Hamlet to be executed upon his arrival in England. On their way to board the ship, Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern see Fortinbras's army. The army marches through Denmark on its way to Poland. Hamlet speaks with one of Fortinbras's captains. He learns that they are fighting against Poland over a small, insignificant piece of land. Hamlet thinks about Fortinbras's determination to fight. He compares Fortinbras's courage to his own hesitance to take action. This fuels Hamlet's resolve once more to finish his mission of taking revenge.

Ophelia's Losing Sanity, Laertes's Return to Denmark, and Hamlet's Return

Back at Elsinore, Ophelia has lost her sanity in sadness and shock after learning of her father's death. Laertes returns from France. He storms into the castle, leading an angry mob. He demands answers from Claudius and Gertrude about his father's death. Claudius calms Laertes by explaining Polonius's death. He promises that Laertes will have justice.

Meanwhile, Horatio receives letters from Hamlet. He asks Horatio to meet him and help him. He also sends a letter to Claudius, demanding a meeting.

Claudius and Laertes Plan to Kill Hamlet

Claudius receives a letter from Hamlet. It informs Claudius that Hamlet has returned to Denmark and wants a meeting. Claudius and Laertes take this opportunity to devise a plan and kill Hamlet. They plan a fencing match where Laertes and Hamlet will fight. But Laertes will use a poisoned sword. If he can strike Hamlet with the sword, Hamlet will die. They also devise an alternative plan. If Hamlet wins, Claudius will offer him a poisoned drink. At that moment, Gertrude enters with tragic news: Ophelia has drowned.

Act 5

Gravediggers' Scene

In the final act, the scene shifts to a graveyard where two gravediggers prepare a grave for Ophelia. As they work, they engage in funny talks about life and death. Hamlet and Horatio arrive at the graveyard. Hamlet starts a conversation with a gravedigger.

Hamlet asks whose grave the man is digging. The gravedigger jokingly says that it is his own grave. Hamlet jokes that it must be true, since the man is standing inside it. Hamlet then asks him to answer seriously and say whose grave it really is. The gravedigger gives a funny but deep answer. He says the grave belongs to no man or woman, but to someone who used to be a woman before she died. Hamlet finds this joke both funny and annoying at the same time. The gravedigger does not know that he is talking to Prince Hamlet. He says that the young prince has gone to England to get back his sanity. Then he adds a joke that in England, being mad does not matter much because everyone there is a little mad.

As they talk, the gravedigger hands Hamlet a skull, which Hamlet discovers belonged to Yorick. Yorick was the court jester whom Hamlet knew and loved as a child. Hamlet becomes sad and thinks about the inevitability of death.

Ophelia's Funeral

A funeral procession soon approaches, led by Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes, followed by a coffin. Hamlet and Horatio watch from a distance. They realize the funeral is for Ophelia. Laertes is overcome with grief. He leaps into the grave. He declares that he wants to be buried with his sister. Hamlet also reveals himself and jumps into the grave as well. He claims that he loved Ophelia more than anyone. The two men begin to fight. Those in attendance pull them apart. Hamlet leaves the scene. Claudius calms Laertes, telling him that the time for his revenge is near.

Back at Elsinore Castle, Hamlet tells Horatio about the events that occurred during his journey to England. He explains that he discovered the king's letter carried by Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern. The letter ordered his execution upon arrival in England. In response, Hamlet rewrote the letter, instructing the English king to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. Hamlet expresses no remorse for their fate.

Fencing Match/Duel

Osric, a courtier, arrives with a message from Claudius. He tells Hamlet that the king has arranged a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Hamlet agrees to participate in the duel.

The day of the duel arrives, and the court gathers to watch. Hamlet and Laertes exchange formal pleasantries. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for his earlier actions. Laertes accepts the apology but remains determined to carry out his plan. The duel begins. Hamlet strikes Laertes in the first round. Claudius, in a display of false encouragement, offers Hamlet the drink from the poisonous cup of wine. But Hamlet declines. In the next round, Hamlet strikes Laertes again. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup to celebrate her son's success.

Laertes, now desperate, wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword. During the scuffle, the swords are exchanged. Hamlet unwittingly wounds Laertes with the poisoned blade. As the duel continues, Gertrude suddenly collapses because of the poison. In her final moments, she declares that she has been poisoned. Laertes, realizing that both he and Hamlet have been mortally wounded by the poisoned sword, confesses the entire plot. He reveals that Claudius is responsible for the poison and the treachery. Hamlet becomes very angry. He stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup. Claudius dies quickly. Laertes forgives Hamlet before dying, and the two reconcile. As Hamlet feels his own death approaching, he bids farewell to his mother and asks Horatio to live on and tell his story to the world.

At that moment, the sound of drums and trumpets signals the arrival of Fortinbras. Fortinbras and the English ambassadors enter. They are shocked at the sight of the carnage in the hall. Horatio explains what has happened. Fortinbras expresses his admiration for Hamlet, declaring that Hamlet would have made a great king. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be given a soldier's funeral. The play ends with the fall of the Danish royal family and the rise of Fortinbras as the new ruler.