



Hamlet by William Shakespeare: Summary

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Introduction : Prince Hamlet has been summoned home to Denmark to attend his father's funeral. One night, a Ghost reveals itself to Hamlet, claiming to be the ghost of Hamlet's father, the former king. The Ghost claims that the old king was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who has since married Hamlet's mother and assumed the throne.

Hamlet decides to uncover the truth for himself. He makes himself appear crazy, mistreating his girlfriend Ophelia to deflect Claudius' suspicion. He later convinces a troupe of players to perform The Murder of Gonzago, a play that reenacts King Hamlet's death by poisoning. Claudius' response to the play is suspicious.

Hamlet spies on Claudius, listening to him pray. Enraged, Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius, Ophelia's father. Claudius sends Hamlet to England on the pretense of a diplomatic mission, having secretly arranged for the prince to be executed on arrival. Hamlet cleverly escapes, returning in time to witness Ophelia's funeral. She may have killed herself.

Claudius arranges a duel between Hamlet and Ophelia's brother Laertes. During the duel, Gertrude drinks from a poisoned goblet intended for Hamlet. Laertes and Hamlet scuffle, wounding each other with a poisoned rapier. In his last moments, Hamlet kills Claudius, at last avenging his father.

Summery : There is little debate that Shakespeare is the greatest Renaissance tragedian, and that King Lear (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608) and Hamlet, Prince of Denmark are the best examples of his work in that genre. Since its first production at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Hamlet has been the subject of intense critical inquiry, and the figure of Hamlet has been among the most intensely studied of any of Shakespeare's creations. Intellectual, self-reflective, alienated, and seemingly paralyzed by doubts about both himself and the circumstance in which he is called upon to act as an agent of revenge, Hamlet has come to be considered the quintessential modern hero.

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For the subject of his drama, Shakespeare turned to a story already popular in English theaters; at least two earlier productions of the sad tale of the Danish prince had appeared in London playhouses. In many ways, Hamlet is typical of a subgenre immensely popular in Shakespeare's time: the revenge play. Most of these were bloody spectacles in which almost every character dies in the final act. The body-strewn stage in act 5 of Hamlet continues this tradition, as does the central action of the drama: the need for the young Hamlet to avenge the death of his father, the king, whose ghost informs Hamlet early in the play that he (the king) had been poisoned by Hamlet's Uncle Claudius so Claudius could become king and marry Hamlet's mother, the queen Gertrude.

The central dramatic interest in the play is the character of its hero. Hamlet sees himself as the "scourge and minister" of some higher order, returned from school in Germany to set right the disorder in his realm caused by his uncle's murderous action. Unfortunately, the sensitive prince is not callous enough to ignore the doubts he has about the exact cause of his father's death. He has been told by his father's ghost that Claudius committed murder; other hints to that effect abound. The prince feels he must delay his revenge, however, until he is certain Claudius is guilty.

Compounding Hamlet's problem is the fact that his mother, whom he loves dearly, has married his uncle soon after the old king has died. It is not at all clear to Hamlet whether his mother has had a hand in the murder, whether she is simply unaware of Claudius's treachery, or whether she believes Claudius is innocent. Much is made of the mother-son relationship; Hamlet spends considerable time trying to convince his mother that she has made a mistake in marrying Claudius. Only when she finally comes to accept his view that the new king is somehow guilty does Hamlet decide to act. His decision is precipitated by several other actions as well, most notably the efforts of his supposed friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have him killed.

Many critics have observed that Hamlet is really too sensitive to effect the revenge that he intends. He is by nature melancholic, possessing a fatalistic disposition that borders on the suicidal. His most famous soliloquy focuses on the virtue of ending his life. "To be, or not to be," he begins his musings; that is, indeed, a central question for him, since he sees little benefit in continuing to live in a world where injustice reigns. Nevertheless, he decides to act to avenge his



father's murder—once he is certain he knows who has been involved in the plot to kill him. Viewing the world as a place where things are seldom as they seem, he spends a good portion of his time trying to sort appearance from reality. He invents various devices to help illuminate the truth, such as his elaborate arrangement for a dumb show that will re-create the murder of his father in the presence of Claudius to try to make the king reveal his guilt. Hamlet is not satisfied simply to take vengeance on his uncle clandestinely; he wants Claudius to admit his guilt.

For centuries, scholars have debated Hamlet's inability to act even when he has the opportunity to do so. Early in the play, his inactivity can be attributed to his lack of assurance that Claudius is guilty. Were he to kill the new king without justification, he would be seen as no better than a murderer himself, and no good would come of his action. Nevertheless, when he does appear to have sufficient evidence of Claudius's role in his father's murder, the prince still seems paralyzed. In a crucial scene after Claudius has seen the dumb show and left the room visibly upset, Hamlet finds his uncle praying in the castle's chapel. It is a perfect chance to slay the king, but Hamlet refrains because he says he does not want to send his uncle's soul to heaven. Such casuistry has been reason for several critics to claim that Shakespeare is simply drawing out the drama until the final catastrophe. By the final act, Hamlet has become totally fatalistic. Having killed Polonius accidentally, he has already bloodied his hands; he accepts the challenge of Polonius's son, Laertes, with resignation, knowing that he will probably be killed himself. In the final scene, all of the principals meet their end—and almost all by some mischance of fate. Despite the resounding encomium pronounced over the body of the slain prince, the bleak ending offers little encouragement for an audience who has witnessed this great tragedy. Surprisingly, however, the ending seems justified, in that order has been restored to the Danish kingdom, although won at a terrible price. Such is the lesson of most great tragedies, and Hamlet ranks with the very best examples of the genre.

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