

# Study Guide: Hamlet, William Shakespeare. (2026 DBE Gr 12 Setwork)

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**Target Audience:** Grade 12 Learners

**Created by:** beachy South Africa

**Level:** 9-12

## Overview

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Provide an introduction to Hamlet, Allocate 1 module per act, allocate 1 module for the main characters, Allocate 1 module for the underlying themes in the story, allocate 1 module to important speeches in the story. And finally - provide a summary of the book

## Learning Objectives

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Every piece of content must tie back to a specific outcome to prevent "mass ingestion" and ensure retention

## Course Resources

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- Hamlet - William Shakespeare
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## Module 1: Introduction to Hamlet: Context and Characters

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This module introduces the historical and literary context of Hamlet, its sources, and the key characters. It sets the stage for the entire play and ensures learners understand the background before diving into the text.

### Learning Outcomes:

- Explain the historical and cultural context of Elizabethan England and its influence on Hamlet.
- Identify William Shakespeare as the playwright and understand his significance.
- Analyze the primary sources Shakespeare used for Hamlet.
- List and describe the main characters and their relationships to one another.



## Lesson 1: Welcome to Elsinore: Setting the Stage

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 1: Welcome to Elsinore: Setting the Stage

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Introduction to *Hamlet*: Context and Characters

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## Lesson Overview

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Welcome to the world of *Hamlet*! Before we meet the prince or encounter the ghost, we need to understand the world Shakespeare created and the world Shakespeare lived in. This lesson will transport you to the royal court of Elsinore in Denmark and explore the Elizabethan mindset that shaped this timeless tragedy. By understanding the setting and the concept of tragedy, you'll be better equipped to understand the characters' motivations and the play's enduring power.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the play's setting in Elsinore, Denmark, and explain its significance
  - Describe the political situation at the start of the play
  - Define the term "tragedy" as understood in Shakespeare's time
  - Explain key elements of the Elizabethan worldview, including the Great Chain of Being
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## 1. Introduction: The World of the Play

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Imagine a cold, windswept castle in Denmark. It's midnight. The guards are nervous, jumpy. Something is wrong. For two nights in a row, a ghost wearing the armor of the late king has appeared on the

battlements, then vanished without a word. The watchmen are terrified, and the kingdom is on edge.

This is the world of *Hamlet*: a place of political tension, spiritual uncertainty, and moral darkness. The play opens not just with a story, but with an atmosphere—one of dread, suspicion, and impending doom.

**Think About It:** *Why do you think Shakespeare chose to set his play in Denmark rather than in England? What effect does a cold, northern setting have on the mood of a story?*

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## 2. Core Concept 1: Elsinore – More Than Just a Castle

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### 2.1 The Setting: Kronborg Castle

While Shakespeare never visited Denmark, he based Elsinore on the real Kronborg Castle in Helsingør (which sounds like "Elsinore" in English). This was an important stronghold controlling trade in the Øresund strait. For Shakespeare's audience, Denmark would have evoked ideas of:

- **A foreign, Protestant nation** with strong trading ties to England
- **A warrior culture** with Viking roots (hence the frequent references to battle armor)
- **A place of cold, hard reason** (contrasted with the more "passionate" southern European settings of plays like *Romeo and Juliet*)

### 2.2 The Political Situation: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

When the play opens, Denmark is in a state of crisis. The beloved King Hamlet is suddenly dead, and his brother Claudius has not only taken the throne but has also married the dead king's wife, Gertrude—all within two months of the funeral. This creates:

- **Succession Tension:** Prince Hamlet, the rightful heir, has been passed over.
- **Moral Uncertainty:** The marriage of Claudius and Gertrude was considered incestuous by the church (marrying your brother's wife was forbidden).
- **External Threat:** We learn in Act I, Scene i that young Fortinbras of Norway is gathering an army, believing Denmark to be weak and disorganized after the old king's death. Denmark is preparing for a possible invasion.

This combination of internal corruption and external threat creates the perfect conditions for tragedy.

**Quick Check:** *List three reasons why Denmark is unstable at the beginning of the play.*

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## 3. Core Concept 2: The Elizabethan Worldview

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To understand *Hamlet*, we must understand how Shakespeare's original audience saw the world. Their beliefs shaped every aspect of the play.

### 3.1 The Great Chain of Being

Elizabethans believed in a strict hierarchy ordained by God. Everything in the universe had its place:

| Level | Examples |

|-----|-----|

| God | At the very top |

| Angels | Spiritual beings |

| Humans | Kings → Nobles → Commoners → Peasants |

| Animals | Lions (king of beasts) → Domestic animals → Wild beasts |

| Plants | Oaks → Flowers → Weeds |

| Inanimate | Gold → Stones → Earth |

### Why this matters for *Hamlet*:

- The king was God's representative on Earth. To attack or kill a king was to disrupt God's order.
- When the natural order is disturbed (like when a king is murdered), the whole universe feels it. This explains why the ghost appears, why the weather is strange, and why "something is rotten."
- Hamlet's crisis is partly about his place in this chain. He is a prince (high on the human level), but his inaction and grief make him feel lower than beasts.

## 3.2 Order and Disorder

For Elizabethans, order was everything. In a well-ordered state:

- The rightful king rules
- Subjects obey their sovereign
- Children honor their parents
- Men are rational, women are chaste

In *Hamlet*, **every single one** of these expectations is violated:

- A usurper (Claudius) sits on the throne
- Subjects (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) spy on their prince
- A son (Hamlet) is commanded to murder his king/uncle
- A queen (Gertrude) marries too quickly and is suspected of adultery

**Discussion Point:** How might an Elizabethan audience have reacted to Gertrude's "o'erhasty marriage"? What does it suggest about the state of Denmark?

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## 4. Core Concept 3: Understanding Tragedy

### 4.1 What is a Tragedy?

Today, we use "tragedy" to mean any sad event. But for Shakespeare and his audience, tragedy was a specific type of play with rules and conventions derived from the ancient Greeks and Romans.

#### Key Elements of Shakespearean Tragedy:

1. **A Noble Protagonist:** The hero must be a person of high status (a king, prince, or general) because their fall will be greater and affect more people.
2. **A Tragic Flaw (Hamartia):** The hero has a character weakness—pride (hubris), ambition, jealousy, or in Hamlet's case, perhaps indecision or excessive thought—that leads to their downfall.
3. **The Fall:** The hero experiences a reversal of fortune (peripeteia), usually from happiness to misery.
4. **Death:** Almost everyone dies at the end. Tragedy cleanses the community (catharsis), but at a terrible cost.
5. **Supernatural Elements:** Ghosts, witches, or omens often appear, suggesting that cosmic forces are involved.

### 4.2 How *Hamlet* Fits the Tragedy Mold

| Element | How It Appears in *Hamlet* |

|-----|-----|

| Noble Protagonist | Prince Hamlet, son of the late king |

| Tragic Flaw | To be debated! (Is it indecision? Is it too much thinking? Is it his inability to act without certainty?) |

| The Fall | Hamlet goes from grieving son to hunted fugitive to dying prince |

| Death | The final scene leaves nearly all major characters dead |

| Supernatural | The Ghost of old Hamlet appears and demands revenge |

**Journal Prompt:** Based on what you know about Hamlet so far (even if it's just from this lesson), what do you predict will be his tragic flaw? Why?

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## 5. Practical Application: Connecting Context to Character

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Now that we understand the setting and worldview, let's see how this applies to the play's opening.

Read the following excerpt from **Act I, Scene i** (just the first 20 lines or so if you have the text). As you read, look for evidence of:

1. **Political tension** (references to war, preparation, threats)
2. **Supernatural disturbance** (the ghost, the atmosphere)
3. **Disorder** (nervousness, fear, uncertainty)

### Activity (5 minutes):

With a partner or on your own, find two quotations from the opening scene that show the unsettled state of Denmark. Write them down and explain what they reveal.

*Example:*

**Quote:** "Who's there?" (Bernardo, Line 1)

**Explanation:** The play opens not with a confident statement, but with a challenge. Even the guards don't trust each other. This shows the paranoia and fear in Elsinore.

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## 6. Summary: Key Takeaways

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Let's review what we've learned in this lesson:

| Concept | Key Point |

|-----|-----|

| **Setting** | Elsinore, Denmark – a cold, fortified castle; a nation preparing for war |

| **Political Situation** | King is dead, usurper king on throne, rushed royal marriage, external threat from Norway |

| **Great Chain of Being** | Elizabethan belief in universal hierarchy; disrupting it causes chaos |

| **Tragedy** | A play about a noble person with a flaw who falls from grace, often involving death and supernatural elements |

| **Connection to Play** | *Hamlet* contains all elements of tragedy and reflects Elizabethan fears about order, authority, and morality |

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## 7. Looking Ahead

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In our next lesson, we'll explore the man behind the play: William Shakespeare himself. We'll look at his life, his theatre, and why he remains the world's most famous playwright. Then, we'll begin meeting the characters who will drive this tragedy forward.

**To prepare:** Think about what you already know about Shakespeare. What questions do you have about the man or his times?

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## References

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
  - Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W.W. Norton, 2004.
  - Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Vintage, 1959.
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### Lesson 1 Complete

*Next Lesson: Shakespeare and His World*

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## Lesson 2: Shakespeare and His World

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 2: Shakespeare and His World

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Introduction to *Hamlet*: Context and Characters

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## Lesson Overview

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Who was the man who created Hamlet, the ghost, and the doomed court of Elsinore? William Shakespeare is often called the greatest writer in the English language, yet he remains something of a mystery. In this lesson, we'll explore the man, his theatre, and the world that shaped his plays. Understanding Shakespeare's London—its excitement, its dangers, and its audiences—will help you appreciate *why Hamlet* is written the way it is and why it continues to speak to us today.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe key events in Shakespeare's life and career
  - Explain the features of the Globe Theatre and how they influenced playwriting
  - Identify the social classes that made up Shakespeare's audience
  - Recognize popular themes in Elizabethan drama and connect them to *Hamlet*
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## 1. Introduction: The Man Behind the Myth

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He is the most famous writer in history, yet we have no diaries, no personal letters, and only a handful of signatures in his own hand. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) has been called an "upstart crow" by jealous

rivals and a "sweet swan of Avon" by admirers. What we do know paints a picture of a man who was simultaneously of his time and far ahead of it.

**Think About It:** *Why do you think we know so little about Shakespeare's personal life? Does it matter that the man is a mystery if his plays are so well-known?*

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## 2. Core Concept 1: The Life of William Shakespeare

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### 2.1 The Stratford Years (1564–1585)

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a market town about 100 miles northwest of London. Key facts about his early life:

- **Birth:** Baptized April 26, 1564 (his actual birthdate is unknown, but traditionally celebrated on April 23)
- **Family:** Father, John Shakespeare, was a glove-maker and town official; mother, Mary Arden, came from a wealthy farming family
- **Education:** Likely attended the King's New School in Stratford, where he would have studied Latin, grammar, rhetoric, and classical literature—the foundation for his later work
- **Marriage:** At age 18, married Anne Hathaway, who was 26 and pregnant with their first child. They had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith

**Connection to *Hamlet*:** Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died in 1596 at age 11. Some scholars believe the grief of losing a child influenced the deep exploration of loss, grief, and mortality in *Hamlet*, written around 1599–1601. The names "Hamnet" and "Hamlet" were considered interchangeable in Stratford records.

### 2.2 The London Years (1585–1613)

Sometime in the late 1580s, Shakespeare left his family in Stratford and went to London. This period is often called his "lost years" because records are scarce. By 1592, however, he was already known as an actor and playwright in London.

| Year (approx.) | Event |

|-----|-----|

| 1592 | First mentioned as a London playwright (rival Robert Greene calls him an "upstart crow") |

| 1594 | Becomes a founding member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (acting company) |

| 1599 | The Globe Theatre is built; Shakespeare is a part-owner |

| 1603 | King James I becomes patron; company renamed the King's Men |

| 1608 | Company acquires the Blackfriars indoor theatre |

| 1613 | Retires to Stratford after the Globe burns down during a performance |

**Why This Matters:** Shakespeare was not just a writer—he was a businessman, actor, and shareholder. He wrote plays that would draw audiences, make money, and showcase his company's talents. Richard Burbage, the company's leading actor, likely created the role of Hamlet.

### 2.3 The Final Years (1613–1616)

Shakespeare returned to Stratford a wealthy man. He purchased New Place, one of the largest houses in town, and lived as a respected gentleman. He died on April 23, 1616 (his 52nd birthday) and was buried in Holy Trinity Church, where he lies to this day.

**Quick Check:** *What do the names "Hamnet" and "Hamlet" have in common, and why might this be significant?*

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## 3. Core Concept 2: The Globe Theatre

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### 3.1 A New Kind of Theatre

When Shakespeare began writing, permanent theatres were a new idea in London. Before 1576, players performed in inn yards, noble houses, or open spaces. The first purpose-built theatres—The Theatre and The Curtain—changed everything.

**The Globe Theatre (built 1599) was:**

| Feature | Description |

|-----|-----|

| **Shape** | A wooden, open-air amphitheater (16-sided polygon) |

| **Size** | Held up to 3,000 people |

| **Stage** | Raised platform that jutted into the yard ("thrust stage") |

| **Roof** | Open in the middle; wealthy patrons sat in covered galleries |

| **Audience** | "Groundlings" stood in the open yard for a penny; nobles sat in galleries for more |

### 3.2 How the Globe Shaped the Plays

The physical structure of the Globe directly influenced how Shakespeare wrote:

#### 1. No Scenery, Lots of Words

Without elaborate sets, Shakespeare had to create locations through language. When characters say "This is Elsinore" or "Here is the castle wall," the audience must imagine it.

#### 2. The Soliloquy

Because the stage jutted into the audience, an actor could step forward and speak directly to the crowd. This intimacy allowed for soliloquies—characters thinking aloud, sharing their innermost thoughts. *Hamlet* contains seven major soliloquies, more than any other Shakespeare play.

#### 3. The "Wooden O"

The circular shape meant actors could be surrounded on three sides. Important scenes were often staged in the center; intimate moments might be played at the edge. The ghost in *Hamlet* likely used the trapdoor in the stage ("hell") to create a supernatural effect.

#### 4. All-Male Casts

Women's roles were played by boys with unbroken voices. This influenced how female characters were written—there are fewer of them, and they rarely appear alone on stage.

**Visualize This:** *Imagine standing in the open yard, packed in with hundreds of other people, watching Hamlet pace the stage and deliver "To be or not to be" just a few feet away from you. How would that experience differ from watching a film version?*

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## 4. Core Concept 3: The Audience

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### 4.1 A Cross-Section of Society

One of Shakespeare's greatest achievements was writing plays that appealed to everyone. His audience included:

| Social Class | Where They Sat | What They Wanted |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Groundlings** (workers, servants, apprentices) | Standing in the yard | Action, comedy, violence, spectacle |

| **Middle Class** (merchants, professionals) | Lower galleries | Wit, wordplay, romance |

| **Nobility/Gentry** | Upper galleries/onstage seats | Politics, philosophy, poetry |

## 4.2 What the Audience Expected

Elizabethan audiences were not silent, reverent observers like modern theatre-goers. They talked, ate, drank, and cheered or booed. Playwrights had to hold their attention. Popular elements included:

- **Ghosts and Revenge:** Audiences loved supernatural elements and bloody justice
- **Madness:** Feigned or real, insanity fascinated them
- **Philosophy:** A speech about life and death could silence even the rowdiest groundlings
- **Wordplay:** Puns, jokes, and clever dialogue were highly prized

**Connection to *Hamlet*:** Notice how the play contains ALL of these elements:

- Ghost (Act I)
- Revenge (the entire plot)
- Madness (feigned by Hamlet, real for Ophelia)
- Philosophy (the soliloquies)
- Wordplay (Hamlet's conversations with Polonius)

**Discussion Point:** *Why do you think Shakespeare included so many different elements? What does this tell you about his relationship with his audience?*

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## 5. Core Concept 4: Popular Themes in Elizabethan Drama

### 5.1 The Themes of the Age

Every age has its obsessions. For Elizabethans, certain themes dominated literature and drama:

#### 1. Order vs. Chaos

In a time of religious upheaval (Protestant vs. Catholic) and political uncertainty (the aging Queen Elizabeth had no heir), plays explored what happens when order breaks down.

#### 2. Appearance vs. Reality

"All the world's a stage," Shakespeare wrote. Elizabethans were fascinated by role-playing, disguise, and the gap between how things seem and how they are.

#### 3. Revenge and Justice

With no police force, revenge was a real part of life. Revenge tragedies asked: When the law fails, is it right to take justice into your own hands?

#### 4. Death and Mortality

Life expectancy was short (35–40 years), plague was common, and public executions were entertainment. Plays confronted death constantly.

#### 5. Madness

Melancholy (what we might call depression) was a recognized condition. Madness—real or pretended—allowed characters to speak truth that would otherwise be dangerous.

### 5.2 How *Hamlet* Reflects Its Time

| Theme | How It Appears in *Hamlet* |

|-----|-----|

| Order vs. Chaos | A murdered king, a usurper on the throne, an impending invasion |

Appearance vs. Reality	Everyone spies on everyone; Claudius plays the good king; Hamlet plays mad
Revenge	Hamlet must avenge his father but struggles with the morality of it
Death and Mortality	The graveyard scene, Yorick's skull, constant talk of "dust" and decay
Madness	Is Hamlet mad? Is Ophelia? What is real?

**Think About It:** Which of these themes do you think speaks most strongly to modern audiences? Why?

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## 6. Practical Application: Reading Through Elizabethan Eyes

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### Activity: Two Readings (10 minutes)

Let's practice thinking like an Elizabethan audience member.

Read this famous passage from *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene i), which you'll study in depth later:

**Hamlet:** "To be, or not to be—that is the question:

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer*

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*

*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,*

*And by opposing end them."*

**Task:** Answer these questions from two perspectives:

| Modern Reader | Elizabethan Groundling |

|-----|-----|

| What does this say about depression or suicide? | Is Hamlet considering killing himself? (Suicide was considered a mortal sin) |

| Is this philosophical or dramatic? | Is this exciting to watch? Can I understand it? |

| What does it reveal about character? | What's going to happen next? Will there be a fight? |

**Reflection:** After considering both perspectives, write one sentence about how your understanding of the passage has changed.

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## 7. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Concept | Key Point |

|-----|-----|

| **Shakespeare's Life** | Born in Stratford, lost a son named Hamnet, became actor-playwright in London, retired wealthy |

| **The Globe Theatre** | Open-air, 3,000 capacity, thrust stage, no scenery—shaped how plays were written |

| **The Audience** | Diverse—groundlings to nobles—demanded action, wit, philosophy, and spectacle |

| **Popular Themes** | Order vs. chaos, appearance vs. reality, revenge, mortality, madness |

| **Connection to *Hamlet*** | The play contains all these themes and was designed for this audience and theatre |

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## 8. Looking Ahead

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Now that we understand Shakespeare and his world, we're ready to meet the characters who inhabit Elsinore. In our next lesson, we'll explore "The Character Web: Who's Who in Elsinore," where we'll map the relationships and motivations of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, and the rest.

**To prepare:** Think about a story (book, movie, play) that deals with revenge. What made the revenge justified or unjustified? Bring your thoughts to the next lesson.

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## References

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
  - Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W.W. Norton, 2004.
  - Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
  - Shapiro, James. *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. Faber & Faber, 2005.
  - Thomson, Peter. *Shakespeare's Theatre*. Routledge, 1992.
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### Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Character Web: Who's Who in Elsinore*

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### Lesson 3: The Character Web: Who's Who in Elsinore

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 3: The Character Web: Who's Who in Elsinore

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Introduction to *Hamlet*: Context and Characters

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### Lesson Overview

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Every great story lives through its characters. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare created a web of relationships so complex that one change—a secret revealed, a choice made, a word spoken—ripples through the entire court of Elsinore and leads to tragedy. In this lesson, we'll meet the players in this drama: the grieving prince, the guilty king, the loyal friend, the doomed girl, and the ghost who sets everything in motion. By understanding who these characters are and how they connect, you'll be prepared to follow their journeys through the play.

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### Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the eight major characters in *Hamlet*
- Describe each character's role, motivation, and key relationships
- Create a visual "character web" showing how the characters connect
- Predict potential conflicts based on character relationships

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## 1. Introduction: A House Divided

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Imagine a family photograph. Everyone is smiling, but you know the secrets beneath the surface: the uncle who married his brother's wife too quickly, the mother who seems to have forgotten her late husband, the daughter whose father controls every aspect of her life, and the prince who wears black while everyone else has moved on.

This is Elsinore. On the surface, it's a royal court. Beneath the surface, it's a powder keg of secrets, lies, and hidden motivations. Let's meet the people who will light the fuse.

**Think About It:** *In any family or group of friends, relationships create tension—love, jealousy, loyalty, betrayal. Based on what you know so far, what relationships in Elsinore seem most likely to cause conflict?*

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## 2. Core Concept 1: The Royal Family of Denmark

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### 2.1 The Late King Hamlet (The Ghost)

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Deceased former king, now a ghost |

| **Key Relationships** | Father of Prince Hamlet, brother of Claudius, husband of Gertrude |

| **Motivation** | To be avenged; to have his murder exposed |

#### Who He Is:

Before the play begins, King Hamlet was a powerful warrior-king. We learn from others that he defeated the old king of Norway in single combat and was, in the words of his son, "so excellent a king." He appears on the battlements of Elsinore wearing full armor, suggesting he is still a soldier even in death.

#### His Situation:

The Ghost claims he was murdered by his own brother—poured poison in his ear while he slept in his orchard. He is doomed to walk the earth until his "foul and most unnatural murder" is avenged.

**Key Quote (Act I, Scene v):**

"I am thy father's spirit,

Doomed 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."*

**Question to Consider:** Is the Ghost real, or could it be a demon tempting Hamlet to sin? (Elizabethans believed ghosts could be either restless spirits or devils in disguise.)

## 2.2 Claudius, King of Denmark

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Current king, Hamlet's uncle, now stepfather |

| **Key Relationships** | Brother of late King Hamlet, husband of Gertrude, uncle of Prince Hamlet |

| **Motivation** | To keep his throne, his queen, and his power—at any cost |

### Who He Is:

Claudius is one of Shakespeare's most complex villains. He is not a monster who cackles about his evil deeds. He is a politician—charming, intelligent, and skilled at manipulating people. He speaks beautifully, acts kindly in public, and seems to genuinely love Gertrude. But beneath the polished surface is a man who murdered his own brother to take his crown and his wife.

### His Situation:

At the play's opening, Claudius has everything he wanted. But he also has a problem: his nephew Hamlet, the rightful heir to the throne, is a constant reminder of his crime. Claudius must manage Hamlet, deal with the Norwegian threat, and maintain the appearance of a legitimate king—all while carrying the weight of murder.

### Key Quote (Act I, Scene ii):

*"Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death*

*The memory be green, and that it us befitted*

*To bear our hearts in grief... we with wisest sorrow think on him,*

*Together with remembrance of ourselves."*

**Notice:** In his first speech, Claudius acknowledges grief but immediately pivots to "remembrance of ourselves"—a revealing choice of words.

## 2.3 Gertrude, Queen of Denmark

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Queen, Hamlet's mother, Claudius's wife |

| **Key Relationships** | Mother of Hamlet, wife of Claudius, former wife of King Hamlet |

| **Motivation** | To maintain peace and happiness; to avoid conflict |

### Who She Is:

Gertrude is the most mysterious major character. We never learn exactly what she knew about the murder, whether she was complicit, or how much she truly understands. What we see is a woman who loves her son but has chosen to remain queen by marrying her husband's brother—a marriage the church considered incestuous.

### Her Situation:

Gertrude exists between two men: her son Hamlet, who is disgusted by her "o'erhasty marriage," and her new husband Claudius, who may have married her to solidify his claim to the throne. She seems to want everyone to be happy, but in Elsinore, that's impossible.

#### Key Quote (Act I, Scene ii):

*"Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,*

*And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.*

*Do not forever with thy vailèd lids*

*Seek for thy noble father in the dust."*

**Question to Consider:** Is Gertrude weak? Ignorant? Complicit? Or just trying to survive in a world where women have little power?

## 2.4 Prince Hamlet

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Prince of Denmark, son of the late king, nephew of Claudius |

| **Key Relationships** | Son of Gertrude, son of the Ghost, in love with Ophelia, friend of Horatio |

| **Motivation** | To avenge his father—but also to find truth, meaning, and justice |

### Who He Is:

Hamlet is the most written-about character in Western literature because he is so human. He is intelligent (a university student at Wittenberg), witty (his wordplay is brilliant), and deeply feeling (his grief is overwhelming). But he is also indecisive, cruel at times, and possibly unstable. He is not a simple hero—he is a person.

### His Situation:

When the play opens, Hamlet is grieving his father and disgusted by his mother's remarriage. Then the Ghost reveals that his father was murdered—by Claudius—and demands revenge. Hamlet must now determine if the Ghost is telling the truth, and if so, how to kill a king without damning his own soul.

#### Key Quote (Act I, Scene ii):

*"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,*

*Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!*

*Or that the Everlasting had not fixed*

*His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!*

*How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable*

*Seem to me all the uses of this world!"*

**Notice:** Even in his first speech, Hamlet reveals his depth—his grief, his thoughts of suicide, his sense that the world has lost all meaning.

**Quick Check:** *What is the central conflict facing Hamlet at the start of the play?*

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## 3. Core Concept 2: The Court of Elsinore

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### 3.1 Polonius, Lord Chamberlain

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Chief advisor to the king, father of Ophelia and Laertes |

| **Key Relationships** | Father of Laertes and Ophelia, servant of Claudius, antagonist to Hamlet |

| **Motivation** | To prove his loyalty and importance; to control his children |

#### Who He Is:

Polonius is a talkative, meddling old man who believes he is wise but is often foolish. He sends a servant to spy on his own son, uses his daughter as bait to test Hamlet, and hides behind curtains to eavesdrop. He is simultaneously comic and dangerous—his meddling leads directly to tragedy.

#### His Situation:

As the king's chief advisor, Polonius must prove his usefulness. He thinks he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's madness (love for Ophelia) and eagerly presents this theory to Claudius. His desire to be involved in everything ultimately leads to his death.

#### Key Quote (Act I, Scene iii):

*"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."*

**Irony Alert:** Polonius gives excellent advice to his son Laertes—then immediately sends a spy to follow him and report on his behavior. He doesn't follow his own wisdom.

### 3.2 Ophelia

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Daughter of Polonius, sister of Laertes, Hamlet's love interest |

| **Key Relationships** | Daughter of Polonius, beloved of Hamlet, obeying her father and brother |

| **Motivation** | To please the men who control her—father, brother, and possibly Hamlet |

#### Who She Is:

Ophelia is young, innocent, and completely controlled by the men around her. Her father tells her what to think about Hamlet; her brother tells her how to behave; Hamlet, when he turns cruel, tells her to go to a nunnery. She has almost no agency of her own—and it destroys her.

**Her Situation:**

Ophelia loves Hamlet, but her father and brother convince her that his intentions are not honorable. She obeys them and rejects his letters and visits. Later, Hamlet—possibly aware he is being watched—treats her with shocking cruelty. When her father is killed by Hamlet, Ophelia loses her mind and eventually drowns.

**Key Quote (Act I, Scene iii):**

*"I shall obey, my lord."*

**Significance:** These four words, spoken to her father, summarize Ophelia's entire existence. She obeys—and it leads to her death.

### 3.3 Laertes

| Quick Facts ||

|-----|

| **Role** | Son of Polonius, brother of Ophelia |

| **Key Relationships** | Son of Polonius, brother of Ophelia, foil to Hamlet |

| **Motivation** | To protect his family's honor and avenge their deaths |

**Who He Is:**

Laertes is what Hamlet might have been in another play: a young man whose father is murdered, who returns home, and who acts immediately and violently to avenge the death. He is passionate, impulsive, and does not hesitate.

**His Situation:**

Laertes leaves for France at the play's beginning, warned by his father to behave. He returns to find his father dead, his sister mad, and Hamlet responsible. Unlike Hamlet, who agonizes over revenge, Laertes bursts into the castle with a mob, ready to kill Claudius (whom he initially blames). Claudius redirects his anger toward Hamlet, and Laertes agrees to a treacherous plot to kill the prince.

**Key Quote (Act IV, Scene v):**

*"That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,*

*Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot*

*Even here between the chaste unsmirch'd brow*

*Of my true mother."*

**Notice:** Laertes equates calmness with illegitimacy. For him, revenge is not a choice—it's proof of his identity.

**Comparison Point:** *How is Laertes's response to his father's death different from Hamlet's? What does this contrast reveal about both characters?*

---

## 4. Core Concept 3: The Loyal Friend

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### 4.1 Horatio

| Quick Facts | |

|-----|

| **Role** | Hamlet's trusted friend, fellow student from Wittenberg |

| **Key Relationships** | Best friend of Hamlet, confidant, witness |

| **Motivation** | To support Hamlet and seek truth |

#### Who He Is:

In a court full of spies and deceivers, Horatio is the one truly honest person. He is poor, scholarly, and completely loyal to Hamlet. He does not seek power or favor. He simply wants to help his friend.

#### His Situation:

Horatio is the first person Hamlet trusts with the ghost's revelation. He stays by Hamlet's side throughout the play, tries to protect him, and offers to drink poison at the end so he can die with his friend. Hamlet's final request is that Horatio live to tell his story—to set the record straight.

#### Key Quote (Act III, Scene ii):

Hamlet: "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."

**Significance:** Hamlet's praise of Horatio reveals what he values: a person who is steady, rational, and not ruled by emotion—everything Hamlet struggles to be.

---

## 5. Practical Application: Mapping the Character Web

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### Activity: Create Your Character Web (15 minutes)

Now that you've met the characters, let's visualize their relationships. Draw a diagram (on paper or in your notes) with the following steps:

**Step 1:** Place the eight characters on your page:

- The Ghost
- Claudius
- Gertrude
- Hamlet
- Polonius
- Ophelia
- Laertes
- Horatio

**Step 2:** Draw lines connecting them and label each line with the nature of the relationship:

| Relationship | Example Label |

|-----|-----|

| Family | "brothers," "father/son," "mother/son" |

| Romantic | "loves" (Hamlet → Ophelia) |

| Loyalty | "trusts" (Hamlet → Horatio) |

| Authority | "serves" (Polonius → Claudius) |

| Conflict | "suspects" (Hamlet → Claudius) |

**Step 3:** Add color coding if you like:

- Red = conflict/enmity
- Blue = love/trust
- Green = family
- Black = professional/political

**Step 4:** Look at your completed web. Answer these questions:

1. Which character has the most connections? What does that suggest?
2. Which character has the fewest connections? Why?
3. Where do you see potential for conflict?
4. Who is isolated? Who is at the center?

**Teacher Note:** This visual activity helps students grasp the complex relationships before reading, making the play's conflicts more understandable.

---

## 6. Summary: Key Takeaways

| Character | Role | Key Motivation |

|-----|-----|

| **The Ghost** | Hamlet's murdered father | To be avenged |

| **Claudius** | The usurper king | To keep his power |

| **Gertrude** | The queen, Hamlet's mother | To avoid conflict |

| **Hamlet** | The prince, son of the murdered king | To find truth and justice |

| **Polonius** | Chief advisor | To prove his importance |

| **Ophelia** | Polonius's daughter | To obey the men who control her |

| **Laertes** | Polonius's son | To avenge his family |

| **Horatio** | Hamlet's friend | To support Hamlet |

**Key Relationships to Remember:**

- Hamlet ↔ Claudius: Uncle/nephew, but also victim/villain
- Hamlet ↔ Gertrude: Mother/son, but also disappointed son/possibly complicit mother
- Hamlet ↔ Ophelia: Lovers, but torn apart by politics and family
- Hamlet ↔ Laertes: Parallel figures whose paths will collide
- Claudius ↔ The Ghost: Brothers, but murderer and victim

---

## 7. Looking Ahead

Now that you know the characters and how they connect, you're ready to begin reading the play. In Module 2, we'll dive into Act I, where we meet the ghost, hear his terrible revelation, and watch Hamlet begin his journey toward revenge.

**To prepare:** Review your character web. As you read Act I, notice which characters appear, what they reveal about themselves, and how your initial impressions might change.

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### Lesson 3 Complete

*Next Module: Act I: The Ghost and the Call to Action*

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### Module 1 Summary Sheet

## Module 1: Introduction to Hamlet: Context and Characters — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **Elizabethan Worldview:** The belief in a divinely ordered universe (the Great Chain of Being) where disrupting the natural order, especially killing a king, causes universal chaos.
- **Tragedy:** A dramatic genre featuring a noble protagonist with a tragic flaw who experiences a fall from grace, often involving supernatural elements and multiple deaths.
- **The Globe Theatre:** An open-air playhouse where Shakespeare's company performed; its thrust stage and lack of scenery meant language created the world of the play.
- **Shakespeare's Life:** Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, lost his son Hamnet (whose name echoes "Hamlet"), became an actor and playwright in London, and retired wealthy.
- **Elizabethan Audience:** Diverse social classes (groundlings to nobles) who expected a mix of action, philosophy, comedy, and spectacle in plays.
- **Setting of Elsinore:** The play is set in Kronborg Castle, Denmark—a cold, militaristic court on edge due to a recent death, a rushed royal marriage, and an external threat from Norway.
- **Appearance vs. Reality:** A central theme introduced immediately, as characters hide their true selves and the ghost's nature is questioned.
- **The Character Web:** The play revolves around the royal family (the Ghost, Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet), the court of Elsinore (Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes), and loyal friends (Horatio).

### Core Takeaways

This module establishes the foundational knowledge needed to understand *Hamlet*. Students learned about the Elizabethan worldview, particularly the Great Chain of Being, which explains why Claudius's crime causes such profound disorder. They explored Shakespeare's life and the physical theatre for which he wrote, understanding how the Globe's structure influenced the play's language and soliloquies. Finally, they were introduced to the key characters and their complex relationships, creating a "character web" that will help them track conflicts as the play unfolds.

### Terms to Know

- **Great Chain of Being** — A strict, God-ordained hierarchy in the universe; disrupting it (e.g., by killing a king) causes chaos in nature and society.
- **Tragedy** — A serious drama in which a noble character suffers a downfall due to a tragic flaw, often ending in death.
- **Soliloquy** — A speech delivered by a character alone on stage, revealing their inner thoughts and feelings directly to the audience.
- **Groundlings** — Audience members who stood in the open yard of the Globe Theatre for the cheapest admission price.
- **Antic Disposition** — The "mad" or strange behavior Hamlet decides to put on to disguise his true intentions.
- **Foils** — Characters whose qualities contrast with the protagonist's, highlighting specific traits (e.g., Laertes's impulsiveness contrasts with Hamlet's hesitation).
- **Usurper** — One who seizes power illegally, like Claudius taking the throne that rightfully belonged to Hamlet.

### Review Questions

1. How did the physical structure of the Globe Theatre influence the way Shakespeare wrote his plays, particularly the use of soliloquies?
2. Explain the concept of the Great Chain of Being. Why would an Elizabethan audience see Claudius's crime as a disruption of this divine order?
3. Describe the political situation in Denmark at the beginning of the play. What external and internal threats does the kingdom face?
4. Draw a simple character web showing the relationships between Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, and Horatio. What potential conflicts does this web suggest?
5. What is a "foil" in literature? Give two examples of characters who might serve as foils to Hamlet and explain what each one highlights about him.

### Further Thinking

- Consider the role of women in the play's world. Based on what you know of Gertrude and Ophelia so far, what limitations do they face, and how might those limitations shape their actions?
- Shakespeare's only son was named Hamnet and died at age eleven. How might this personal loss have influenced the play's exploration of grief, fathers and sons, and mortality?

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### Module 1 Quiz

**Q1.** At the start of the play, Denmark is in a state of political tension primarily because:

- A) The peasants are revolting against the high taxes.
- B) Young Fortinbras of Norway is gathering an army, believing Denmark to be weak.
- C) The country is suffering from a severe plague.
- D) The royal treasury has been discovered empty.

**Q2.** The Elizabethan concept of the 'Great Chain of Being' suggested that:

- A) All humans are equal in the eyes of God.
- B) The king is God's representative on Earth and disrupting his rule creates cosmic chaos.
- C) Revenge is a sacred duty that must be carried out.
- D) Madness is a punishment from God for sinful behavior.

**Q3.** A key characteristic of a Shakespearean tragedy is that the protagonist must be:

- A) A person of high status, like a king or prince.
- B) A common person who rises to greatness.

- C) A purely evil character with no redeeming qualities.
- D) A young person who dies for love.

**Q4.** William Shakespeare's only son, who died at the age of 11 and whose name is sometimes linked to the play's title, was called:

- A) Harold
- B) Hamnet
- C) Henry
- D) Horatio

**Q5.** The physical structure of the Globe Theatre, with its thrust stage and lack of scenery, meant that Shakespeare had to:

- A) Use elaborate props to indicate the setting.
- B) Rely on his characters' language to create the world of the play.
- C) Limit the number of characters in each scene.
- D) Perform only during the winter months when the light was dim.

**Q6.** In Act I, Scene iii, Ophelia promises her father Polonius that she will:

- A) Confront Hamlet about his strange behavior.
- B) Obey him and reject Hamlet's letters and visits.
- C) Secretly continue to see Hamlet.
- D) Tell Claudius everything she knows.

**Q7.** Hamlet's first line in the play, 'A little more than kin, and less than kind,' is a pun that reveals:

- A) His happiness at seeing his mother.
- B) His bitterness about Claudius being both his uncle and stepfather.
- C) His desire to return to university in Wittenberg.
- D) His fear of the ghost that has been appearing.

**Q8.** The Globe Theatre had a roof over the entire structure, protecting all audience members from the rain.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** Polonius's advice, 'This above all: to thine own self be true,' is considered ironic because he immediately sends a spy to follow his own son.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** The character Horatio is a spy sent by Claudius to report on Hamlet's activities.

*(True / False)*

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** B — Horatio and the guards discuss the military preparations for a possible invasion by Fortinbras, who seeks to reclaim lands lost by his father.

**Q2:** B — The Great Chain of Being was a strict hierarchy. The king was at the top of the human level, so regicide was seen as a crime against the divine order of the universe.

**Q3:** A — Tragedy focuses on the fall of the great. The protagonist's high status means their downfall has significant consequences for the entire kingdom.

**Q4:** B — Shakespeare's son was named Hamnet. The names 'Hamnet' and 'Hamlet' were considered interchangeable in records at the time, and his death may have influenced the play's themes of grief and loss.

**Q5:** B — Without sets, Shakespeare used powerful descriptive language to paint a picture for the audience, allowing them to imagine the location.

**Q6:** B — Ophelia's line, 'I shall obey, my lord,' shows her complete submission to her father's authority, a decision that sets her tragic trajectory in motion.

**Q7:** B — The pun expresses his disgust. Claudius is now more than 'kin' (family) but is not 'kind' (natural or benevolent). It shows Hamlet's intelligence and his hidden animosity.

**Q8:** False — The Globe was an open-air amphitheater. The stage and the galleries were covered, but the yard where the 'groundlings' stood was open to the sky.

**Q9:** True — The advice is wise, but Polonius is a hypocrite. He preaches honesty while secretly plotting to deceive his son, revealing that he doesn't follow his own teachings.

**Q10:** False — Horatio is Hamlet's only true and loyal friend. He is a scholar from Wittenberg who is trusted completely by Hamlet and serves as his confidant throughout the play.

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## Module 2: Act I: The Ghost and the Call to Action

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We delve into Act I, where the ghost of Hamlet's father reveals the truth about his murder and sets Hamlet on a path of revenge. This module focuses on establishing the central conflict.

### Learning Outcomes:

- Summarize the key events of Act I.
- Analyze the ghost's revelation and its impact on Hamlet.
- Examine Hamlet's first soliloquy ('O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt') to understand his initial state of mind.
- Discuss the theme of appearance versus reality as it emerges in Act I.



## Lesson 1: Scene by Scene: Act I, Scenes i-iii

Duration: 45 minutes

# Lesson 1: Scene by Scene - Act I, Scenes i-iii

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act I: The Ghost and the Call to Action

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## Lesson Overview

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The curtain rises on a cold night in Elsinore. Guards shift nervously in the darkness, whispering about a ghost they've seen twice before—a figure in armor that looks like the dead king. This opening scene establishes the mood of the entire play: fear, uncertainty, and the sense that something is terribly wrong. In this lesson, we'll work through Act I, Scenes i-iii, examining how Shakespeare introduces the world of Elsinore, its royal family, and the first hints of the conflicts to come.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the key events of Act I, Scenes i-iii
  - Analyze how Shakespeare creates atmosphere and suspense in the opening scene
  - Explain the political situation in Denmark as revealed in Scene i
  - Examine the contrasting speeches of Claudius and Hamlet in Scene ii
  - Analyze the advice given by Laertes and Polonius to Ophelia in Scene iii
- 

## 1. Introduction: Opening Night in Elsinore

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Imagine you're standing in the yard of the Globe Theatre in 1601. The afternoon light is fading. The flag flying above the theatre announces a performance. You've paid your penny, and you're packed in with hundreds of others. The actors step onto the stage.

The first line you hear is: **"Who's there?"**

It's a simple question, but it sets the tone for everything that follows. In a world of ghosts, spies, and hidden truths, the question "Who's there?"—who can you trust? what is real?—will echo through every scene of the play.

**Think About It:** Why do you think Shakespeare opens the play with a challenge—a guard demanding to know who approaches? What does this immediately tell us about the world of Elsinore?

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## 2. Scene i: Elsinore. A Platform Before the Castle.

---

### 2.1 Summary of Events

| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **The Changing of the Guard** | Francisco is relieved by Bernardo and Marcellus. Horatio, a scholar and Hamlet's friend, joins them because they've told him about the ghost. |

| **The Ghost Appears** | The ghost, dressed in the armor of the late King Hamlet, appears before the men. Horatio speaks to it, but it vanishes without answering. |

| **Discussion of the Ghost** | The men discuss why the ghost might be walking: they connect it to Denmark's preparations for war with Norway under the young Fortinbras. |

| **The Ghost Returns** | The ghost appears again, and Horatio tries again to speak to it. A cock crows, and the ghost vanishes. They decide to tell young Hamlet what they've seen. |

## 2.2 Key Quotations and Analysis

**"Who's there?"** (*Bernardo, Line 1*)

This opening line is more than a simple challenge. It introduces the theme of **appearance versus reality**—the difficulty of knowing what is real and who can be trusted. Throughout the play, characters will constantly ask variations of this question: Who is mad? Who is guilty? Who is telling the truth?

**"What, has this thing appeared again tonight?"** (*Marcellus, Line 21*)

Notice the word "thing." The guards don't even know what to call the apparition. Is it a ghost? A demon? An omen? Their uncertainty mirrors our own as an audience.

**"In the same figure like the king that's dead."** (*Marcellus, Line 41*)

The ghost wears the armor King Hamlet wore when he defeated the Norwegians. This detail matters: it suggests the ghost comes as a warrior, not a victim—a figure of authority and power, not weakness.

**"A little ere the mightiest Julius fell, / The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets."** (*Horatio, Lines 114-116*)

Horatio compares the ghost to omens that appeared before the assassination of Julius Caesar. This classical reference tells the Elizabethan audience that the ghost signals **disorder**—that something is wrong in the state of Denmark.

## 2.3 The Political Context

Horatio explains the military preparations: young Fortinbras of Norway is gathering an army to reclaim lands lost by his father to King Hamlet. Denmark is preparing for war. This external threat combines with the supernatural visitation to create an atmosphere of **crisis on every level**—political, military, and spiritual.

**"This bodes some strange eruption to our state."** (*Horatio, Line 69*)

**Question:** What "strange eruption" might Horatio mean? Consider all three levels: political, natural, and supernatural.

## 2.4 Themes Introduced in Scene i

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Is the ghost real? Is it really the dead king? |

| **Order vs. Chaos** | The guards are nervous; Denmark is preparing for war; the supernatural intrudes on the natural world |

| **The Supernatural** | The ghost bridges the gap between the living world and whatever lies beyond |

| **Mortality** | The ghost of a dead man walks among the living—death is not an ending |

**Quick Check:** List three reasons the ghost's appearance terrifies the guards beyond just seeing a spirit.

### 3. Scene ii: A Room of State in the Castle

#### 3.1 Summary of Events

| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius's Court Speech** | Claudius addresses the court, acknowledging the recent death of his brother but justifying his hasty marriage to Gertrude. He deals with the Norwegian threat by sending ambassadors to old Norway. |

| **Laertes Requests Permission** | Laertes asks Claudius for permission to return to France. Claudius grants it after Polonius confirms his consent. |

| **Hamlet's First Soliloquy** | Left alone, Hamlet expresses his grief, disgust at his mother's marriage, and thoughts of suicide. |

| **Horatio's News** | Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo enter and tell Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet decides to watch with them that night. |

#### 3.2 Key Quotations and Analysis

**"Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death / The memory be green... / ...we with wisest sorrow think on him, / Together with remembrance of ourselves."** (*Claudius, Lines 1-7*)

Claudius's opening speech is a masterpiece of political rhetoric. Notice how quickly he moves from grief ("our dear brother's death") to self-interest ("remembrance of ourselves"). He presents himself as a balanced, wise ruler while revealing his priority: maintaining power.

**"A little more than kin, and less than kind."** (*Hamlet, Line 65*)

This is Hamlet's first line in the play—a pun that the court doesn't catch. "Kin" acknowledges Claudius is now both uncle and stepfather. "Less than kind" means both "not natural" and "not kindly." Even his first words show his intelligence, his bitterness, and his ability to speak truth while seeming to say nothing.

**"Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'"** (*Hamlet, Line 76*)

When Gertrude asks why Hamlet's grief "seems" so particular, he explodes. His mourning is not an act—it is real. This introduces the contrast between those who **perform** roles (Claudius the "kind" king, Gertrude the "happy" queen) and Hamlet, who refuses to pretend.

**"Frailty, thy name is woman!"** (*Hamlet, Line 146*)

In his soliloquy, Hamlet generalizes his mother's weakness to all women. This line reveals his deep hurt and foreshadows his later treatment of Ophelia. His grief has curdled into misogyny.

**"O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer!"** (*Hamlet, Lines 150-151*)

Hamlet contrasts his mother's quick remarriage with the behavior of animals—even beasts would mourn longer. His mother has sunk below the level of beasts in his eyes.

#### 3.3 Comparing Claudius and Hamlet

This scene presents a direct contrast between the two central characters:

| Claudius | Hamlet |

|-----|-----|

| Speaks in public, to the court | Speaks alone, in soliloquy |

| Uses polished rhetoric | Uses raw emotion |

| Presents himself as balanced | Reveals himself as shattered |

| Denies grief ("wisest sorrow") | Dwells in grief |

| Acts quickly (marriage, embassies) | Frozen by his feelings |

**Discussion Point:** *Who seems more sympathetic at this point? Does Shakespeare want us to sympathize with Hamlet's grief, or do we see warning signs in his extreme reactions?*

---

## 4. Scene iii: A Room in Polonius's House

### 4.1 Summary of Events

| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Laertes Says Goodbye to Ophelia** | Before leaving for France, Laertes warns Ophelia that Hamlet's affections are not to be trusted—he's a prince whose choices will be made for political reasons. |

| **Polonius's Advice to Laertes** | Polonius gives Laertes a long list of proverbial advice before he departs. |

| **Polonius Confronts Ophelia** | Polonius demands to know what passed between Ophelia and Hamlet. When she tells him Hamlet has professed love, Polonius forbids her from seeing him again. |

### 4.2 Key Quotations and Analysis

**"For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor, / Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood."** (*Laertes, Lines 5-6*)

Laertes warns Ophelia that Hamlet's affections are temporary—a youthful fling, not true love. He's not entirely wrong: princes do marry for politics. But his warning also reveals that he sees his sister as naive and in need of protection.

**"But, good my brother, / Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven / While, like a puffed and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads."** (*Ophelia, Lines 46-50*)

This is a crucial moment for Ophelia. She shows wit and intelligence here, warning Laertes not to preach virtue while living loosely himself. She is not simply passive—she can speak back. This makes her later complete submission to her father all the more tragic.

**"Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act."** (*Polonius, Lines 59-60*)

Polonius's advice to Laertes is full of such wisdom: be careful what you say, think before you act, keep your friends close. The irony? Polonius follows none of this advice himself. He talks constantly, meddles in everything, and spies on his own children.

**"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, Lines 78-80)

These are the most famous lines from this scene—and perhaps the most ironic. Polonius speaks of being true to oneself while sending a spy to follow his son. He speaks of honesty while plotting to use his daughter as bait. The advice is good; the adviser is a hypocrite.

***"I shall obey, my lord."*** (Ophelia, Line 136)

After Polonius forbids her from seeing Hamlet, Ophelia's response is simple submission. She who could speak back to her brother cannot resist her father. These four words seal her fate.

### 4.3 Themes in Scene iii

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Polonius gives good advice but is a hypocrite; Laertes warns against appearances while preparing to leave |

| **Family and Duty** | Both Laertes and Polonius feel entitled to control Ophelia |

| **Gender and Power** | Ophelia is told what to do by every man in her life |

| **Love and Politics** | Laertes argues that Hamlet cannot love freely because he is a prince |

**Quick Check:** How does Ophelia's response to her father differ from her response to her brother? What might this suggest about her situation?

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## 5. Practical Application: Analyzing Character Through Dialogue

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### Activity: Double-Entry Journal (10 minutes)

Choose one of the following passages from today's scenes. Create a two-column chart:

| Quotation | What It Reveals |

|-----|-----|

| (Copy the quotation here) | (Analyze what it shows about character, theme, or situation) |

**Option A:** Claudius's opening speech (Act I, Scene ii, lines 1-16)

**Option B:** Hamlet's first soliloquy (Act I, Scene ii, lines 129-159)

**Option C:** Polonius's advice to Laertes (Act I, Scene iii, lines 55-81)

#### Example:

| Quotation | What It Reveals |

|-----|-----|

| "With one auspicious and one dropping eye, / With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" (Claudius, Scene ii) | Claudius admits he has mixed feelings—celebrating marriage while mourning death. But he presents this as balance; actually, it shows how quickly he moved from one to the other. The image is jarring—mirth and dirge don't belong together. |

**Extension Question:** Based on these three scenes, which character do you find most interesting so far? Why?

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## 6. Summary: Key Takeaways from Act I, Scenes i-iii

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| Scene | Key Events | Key Themes |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Scene i** | Ghost appears to guards; Horatio sees it; they decide to tell Hamlet | Supernatural, political crisis, fear, uncertainty |

| **Scene ii** | Claudius addresses court; Hamlet's first soliloquy; news of the ghost | Appearance vs. reality, grief, performance, truth |

| **Scene iii** | Laertes warns Ophelia; Polonius advises Laertes; Ophelia is forbidden to see Hamlet | Family control, gender, appearance vs. reality, obedience |

### Key Takeaways:

- The ghost establishes an atmosphere of supernatural dread and hints at hidden crimes
  - Claudius speaks smoothly but reveals his self-interest
  - Hamlet is consumed by grief and disgust, alienated from the court
  - Ophelia is caught between her love for Hamlet and her duty to her father
  - The theme of appearance versus reality runs through every scene
- 

## 7. Looking Ahead

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In our next lesson, we'll complete Act I with Scenes iv and v—the ghost's revelation to Hamlet. We'll witness Hamlet learning the truth about his father's murder and making his first critical decision: to feign madness as he plots his revenge.

**To prepare:** Reread Act I, Scenes iv-v if you have the text. Consider: How does Hamlet react to the ghost's news? What does he pledge? What burdens does he now carry?

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## References

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### Lesson 1 Complete

*Next Lesson: Scene by Scene: Act I, Scenes iv-v*

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### Lesson 2: Scene by Scene: Act I, Scenes iv-v

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 2: Scene by Scene - Act I, Scenes iv-v

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act I: The Ghost and the Call to Action

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## Lesson Overview

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The night has come. Hamlet stands on the cold battlements of Elsinore, waiting for a ghost. When it appears, everything changes. In these two climactic scenes, Shakespeare delivers the play's central revelation: King Hamlet was murdered by his own brother. Hamlet receives his call to action—and makes a decision that will shape the rest of the tragedy. This lesson examines the ghost's disclosure, Hamlet's response, and the burden of revenge that now falls upon the prince.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the key events of Act I, Scenes iv-v
  - Analyze Hamlet's response to the ghost and his acceptance of the revenge mission
  - Examine the ghost's description of his murder and its significance
  - Explain Hamlet's decision to feign madness and its implications
  - Discuss the theme of appearance versus reality as it culminates in Act I
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Threshold of the Unknown

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The castle platform at midnight. Cold air. The distant sound of Claudius's revelry—cannons and trumpets celebrating another night of drinking. Hamlet waits, his mind already dark with thoughts of his father's death and his mother's "o'erhasty" marriage. Then, suddenly, the ghost appears.

For Elizabethan audiences, this moment would have been terrifying and electrifying. Ghosts were real possibilities—but were they spirits of the dead or demons in disguise? Hamlet himself will wrestle with this question. For now, he must decide: follow the ghost or hold back?

**Think About It:** *If a figure claiming to be your dead loved one appeared and demanded you do something dangerous, would you trust it? What would you need to be certain of?*

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## 2. Scene iv: The Platform

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### 2.1 Summary of Events

| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus Wait** | They hear Claudius's cannon fire celebrating his drinking. Hamlet comments bitterly on how this Danish custom makes them look bad to other nations. |

| **The Ghost Appears** | The ghost enters. Hamlet is shocked but determined to speak to it. |

| **Hamlet Confronts the Ghost** | Hamlet demands the ghost speak, calling it "King, father, royal Dane." The ghost beckons Hamlet to follow it alone. |

| **Horatio's Warning** | Horatio and Marcellus beg Hamlet not to follow, fearing the ghost might be a demon that will lure him to his death or madness. |

| **Hamlet Breaks Free** | Hamlet threatens them, breaks free, and follows the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus decide to follow, fearing what will happen. |

### 2.2 Key Quotations and Analysis

**"The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse, / Keeps wassail, and the swaggering upspring reels." (Hamlet, Lines 8-9)**

Hamlet describes Claudius's heavy drinking. This is our first glimpse of the new king's character: he parties while the kingdom prepares for war. Hamlet notes that this "heavy-headed revel" makes Denmark a joke to other nations.

**"So, oft it chances in particular men, / That for some vicious mole of nature in them... / ...their virtues else—be they as pure as grace— / Shall in the general censure take corruption / From that particular fault." (Hamlet, Lines 23-36)**

Hamlet reflects on how one flaw can corrupt an otherwise good person. This is both a comment on Danish drinking culture and an **unconscious self-reflection**. What will be Hamlet's "vicious mole of nature"—the flaw that brings him down?

**"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (Hamlet, Line 39)**

When Hamlet first sees the ghost, he calls on angels for protection. He doesn't know yet whether this is his father's spirit or a demon. This line shows his awareness of the spiritual danger.

**"Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, / Be thy intents wicked or charitable, / Thou com'st in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee." (Hamlet, Lines 40-44)**

Hamlet's decision: he will speak, regardless of whether the ghost is good or evil. This is both brave and reckless. He admits the ghost is "questionable" (meaning both "doubtful" and "inviting questions") but his desire for answers overrides his caution.

**"It waves me forth again. I'll follow it." (Hamlet, repeated twice, Lines 58, 63)**

Hamlet's repetition emphasizes his determination. Horatio's warning—"What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord?"—voices the audience's fear. But Hamlet cannot be stopped.

**"Unhand me, gentlemen. / By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!" (Hamlet, Lines 84-85)**

When Horatio and Marcellus physically restrain him, Hamlet threatens to kill them. His language is striking: he'll make a "ghost" of anyone who holds him back. He is already becoming like the spirit he follows.

**"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (Marcellus, Line 90)**

This famous line concludes the scene. Marcellus, the common soldier, speaks the truth that everyone feels: Denmark is corrupt, diseased, decaying. The ghost is both symptom and proof of this rotteness.

**"Heaven will direct it." (Marcellus, Line 91)**

**"Nay, let's follow." (Horatio, Line 92)**

The scene ends with these two lines. Marcellus trusts heaven; Horatio trusts action. Both will follow, but neither knows what awaits.

**Quick Check:** What reasons do Horatio and Marcellus give for not wanting Hamlet to follow the ghost? Are these reasonable concerns?

## 3. Scene v: Another Part of the Platform

---

### 3.1 Summary of Events

| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **The Ghost Speaks** | The ghost identifies itself as Hamlet's father's spirit. It reveals that it is doomed to suffer in purgatory until its sins are burned away. |

| **The Revelation** | The ghost tells Hamlet he was not stung by a serpent as officially reported—he was murdered by Claudius, who poured poison in his ear while he slept. |

| **The Command** | The ghost commands Hamlet to avenge his "foul and most unnatural murder." |

| **The Warning** | The ghost warns Hamlet not to harm Gertrude; heaven will judge her, and her own conscience will torment her. |

| **The Ghost Departs** | The ghost exits, crying "Remember me." |

| **Hamlet's Response** | Alone, Hamlet swears to remember and to wipe all other thoughts from his mind. He writes this down—literally. |

| **The Vow** | Horatio and Marcellus catch up. Hamlet makes them swear on his sword not to reveal what they've seen. The ghost cries "Swear" from beneath the stage. |

| **Hamlet's Decision** | Hamlet tells them he may "put an antic disposition on"—pretend to be mad. They swear again, and Hamlet ends the scene with dark words: "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" |

### 3.2 The Ghost's Revelation

***"I am thy father's spirit, / Doomed 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."*** (Lines 9-13)

This is crucial information. The ghost comes from **purgatory**—the Catholic concept of a place where souls are purified before entering heaven. This suggests the ghost is not a demon but a genuine spirit, though still suffering. It also explains why the ghost cannot stay: it has limited time on earth.

***"If thou didst ever thy dear father love— / ...Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."*** (Lines 23, 25)

The ghost's appeal is personal and emotional. It calls on the bond between father and son. The word "unnatural" is key: Claudius's crime violates the natural order—brother killing brother, subject killing king.

***"Murder most foul, as in the best it is, / But this most foul, strange, and unnatural."*** (Lines 27-28)

The ghost emphasizes the horror of the crime. Not just murder, but **brother killing brother**—a violation of family, loyalty, and divine law.

### 3.3 The Method of Murder

***"Sleeping within my orchard, / My custom always of the afternoon, / Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole / With juice of cursèd hebenon in a vial, / And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leprous distilment."*** (Lines 59-64)

The ghost describes the murder in vivid, disturbing detail:

- **"Sleeping"** —King Hamlet was vulnerable, trusting
- **"Secure hour"** —his regular nap time; Claudius knew his schedule

- **"Stole"** —Claudius acted secretly, like a thief
- **"Juice of cursèd hebenon"** —a poisonous plant (henbane)
- **"Porches of my ears"** —poison poured in the ear while sleeping

This method is symbolic: Claudius poisoned his brother through **deception**—whispering lies, appearing loyal while destroying him. The ear will remain important throughout the play (think of Polonius behind the arras, Hamlet's "words, words, words").

**"Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand / Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched."** (Lines 74-75)

The ghost summarizes what Claudius stole: life, crown, and queen—all three at once. This triple loss fuels Hamlet's rage.

**"Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her."** (Lines 86-88)

The ghost's final instruction: do not punish Gertrude. Leave her to her conscience and to God. This complicates Hamlet's mission—he must kill Claudius but spare his mother.

**"Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me."** (Line 91)

The ghost's last words echo through the play. "Remember me" is both a plea and a command. Hamlet will spend the rest of the play trying to fulfill this charge—and wrestling with what it means.

### 3.4 Hamlet's Response

**"O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? / And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart."** (Lines 92-93)

Hamlet calls on heaven and earth—but hesitates to include hell. He still isn't certain the ghost is good. His heart feels like it might burst.

**"Remember thee? / Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe."** (Lines 95-97)

Hamlet swears to remember. "This distracted globe" means both his head (his mind) and the world (the theatre). It's a brilliant pun: Hamlet's mind is the globe where this drama will play out.

**"Yea, from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past, / That youth and observation copied there, / And thy commandment all alone shall live."** (Lines 98-102)

This is extraordinary. Hamlet says he will **erase his memory**—everything he learned, everything he was—and replace it all with the ghost's command. This is both devotion and danger. A person cannot simply wipe themselves clean.

**"My tables—meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!"** (Lines 107-108)

Hamlet literally takes out his writing tablet and writes this down. The image is striking: the intellectual prince, recording his discovery like a scholar. But he's not writing philosophy—he's writing a warning about Claudius. The villain smiles. Appearances lie.

### 3.5 The "Antic Disposition"

**"As I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on."** (Lines 172-173)

When Horatio and Marcellus catch up, Hamlet tells them he may pretend to be mad. The phrase "antic disposition" means strange or bizarre behavior—a performance of madness.

#### Why feign madness?

| Reason | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Safety** | If Hamlet appears mad, Claudius may see him as less of a threat |

| **Freedom** | A madman can speak truths that would be dangerous for a sane person |

| **Investigation** | Hamlet can observe others while they think he's incapable of understanding |

| **Delay** | Feigning madness gives him time to verify the ghost's story and plan his revenge |

But there's a danger: how long can someone pretend to be mad before the pretense becomes real?

**"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."**  
(Lines 166-167)

Hamlet speaks this truth after the ghost has cried "Swear" from underground. Horatio, the rational scholar, is confronted with something beyond his understanding. The play suggests that some truths cannot be reached through reason alone.

**"The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!"** (Lines 188-189)

Hamlet's final words in Act I are a cry of despair. The world is broken—and he, unwillingly, has been chosen to fix it. This is not a hero eager for adventure. This is a scholar and philosopher forced into a role he never wanted.

**Discussion Point:** Why does Hamlet end the act with complaint rather than determination? What does this reveal about his character?

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## 4. The Ghost: Questions and Interpretations

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### 4.1 Is the Ghost Real?

The ghost raises fundamental questions that the play never fully answers:

| Question | Evidence For | Evidence Against |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Is it really King Hamlet? | Multiple witnesses see it; it wears his armor; it knows details of his life | Demons could disguise themselves |

| Is it a spirit of health (good) or goblin damned (evil)? | It comes from purgatory, not hell; it warns against harming Gertrude | It demands revenge, which Christianity forbids |

| Is Hamlet right to trust it? | His doubts are reasonable; he seeks confirmation later | He acts on its word immediately |

### 4.2 The Ghost's Function in the Play

| Function | How It Works |

|-----|-----|

- | **Catalyst** | The ghost sets the plot in motion |
- | **Revealer** | It exposes the hidden crime at Denmark's heart |
- | **Tempter** | It tempts Hamlet toward violence and revenge |
- | **Symbol** | It represents the past that will not stay buried |
- | **Conscience** | It reminds Hamlet (and us) of what has been lost |

**Quick Check:** *If the ghost were removed from the play, what would be lost? Could the story work without it?*

## 5. Hamlet's Transformation in Act I

Trace Hamlet's emotional journey through Act I:

| Scene | Hamlet's State | Key Line |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Scene ii** | Grief-stricken, suicidal, angry | "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt" |

| **Scene iv** | Determined, reckless, defiant | "I'll follow it." |

| **Scene v (before revelation)** | Awestruck, fearful | "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" |

| **Scene v (after revelation)** | Shocked, vowed, burdened | "Remember thee? / Ay, thou poor ghost" |

| **Scene v (end)** | Resigned, burdened, complaining | "The time is out of joint... cursèd spite" |

By the end of Act I, Hamlet has moved from passive grief to active mission—but he carries that mission like a weight, not a calling.

## 6. Practical Application: Analyzing the Ghost's Rhetoric

### Activity: Persuasion Analysis (10 minutes)

The ghost's speech is designed to convince Hamlet to act. Analyze how the ghost persuades using **ethos**, **pathos**, and **logos**:

| Appeal | Definition | Example from Ghost's Speech |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Ethos** (credibility) | Establishing trust and authority | "I am thy father's spirit" |

| **Pathos** (emotion) | Appealing to feelings | "If thou didst ever thy dear father love" |

| **Logos** (logic) | Using reason and evidence | The detailed account of the murder |

**Task:** Find at least two examples of each appeal in the ghost's speech (Lines 1-91). Create a chart like this:

| Appeal | Quotation | Effect |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Pathos | "Remember me" | Creates emotional bond; makes it personal |

**Reflection Question:** Which appeal do you find most powerful? Why might Shakespeare have included all three?

## 7. Summary: Key Takeaways from Act I, Scenes iv-v

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **The Ghost's Revelation** | Claudius murdered King Hamlet by pouring poison in his ear; Hamlet must avenge the murder but leave Gertrude to heaven |

| **Hamlet's Response** | He vows to remember, erases other thoughts, and decides to feign madness |

| **The "Antic Disposition"** | Hamlet will pretend to be mad to investigate and protect himself |

| **Key Themes** | Appearance vs. reality (the smiling villain), memory, revenge, burden |

| **Hamlet's State** | Transformed from grief to mission, but burdened and unwilling |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Murder most foul, as in the best it is, but this most foul, strange, and unnatural."
- "Remember me."
- "One may smile, and smile, and be a villain!"
- "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!"

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## 8. Looking Ahead

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Act I has established the central conflict: Hamlet knows the truth and must act. But how will he act? Will he trust the ghost completely? Can he pretend madness without losing himself? And what will Claudius do when he senses danger?

In Module 3, we'll explore Act II, where Hamlet puts his "antic disposition" into practice and begins testing those around him.

**To prepare:** Think about how you might act if you had to pretend to be someone else for an extended period. What would be the challenges? What would be the risks?

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Act I, Scenes iv-v. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
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### Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: Hamlet's First Soliloquy: A Window into Despair*

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### Lesson 3: Hamlet's First Soliloquy: A Window into Despair

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 3: Hamlet's First Soliloquy: A Window into Despair

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act I: The Ghost and the Call to Action

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## Lesson Overview

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Before the ghost speaks, before the mission of revenge is given, we meet Hamlet alone. For the first time in the play, the prince steps forward and speaks directly to the audience, revealing what lies beneath the surface of his "nighted color." This soliloquy—"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt"—is our first true glimpse into Hamlet's soul. In this lesson, we will conduct a close reading of this extraordinary speech, exploring Hamlet's grief, his disgust at his mother's marriage, his thoughts of suicide, and the worldview that will shape his actions throughout the play.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the three main sections of Hamlet's first soliloquy
  - Analyze Hamlet's language and imagery to understand his emotional state
  - Explain the causes of Hamlet's despair: his father's death and his mother's remarriage
  - Discuss the theme of appearance versus reality as it appears in the soliloquy
  - Connect the soliloquy to Hamlet's character and the play's central conflicts
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## 1. Introduction: The Private Voice

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In Elizabethan drama, the soliloquy was a powerful tool. When other characters leave the stage and a character speaks alone, we are granted access to their private thoughts—the truths they cannot speak in public. Hamlet's first soliloquy comes immediately after Claudius's court speech, after his mother has urged him to stop grieving, after Claudius has denied him permission to return to university. The court exits, and suddenly we are alone with Hamlet.

What we hear is shocking. This is not a prince composed and ready for action. This is a young man in profound despair—contemplating suicide, disgusted with the world, and furious at his mother's betrayal.

**Think About It:** *Why might Shakespeare have chosen to introduce us to Hamlet's inner world only after we've seen him in public? What does the contrast between public Hamlet and private Hamlet reveal?*

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## 2. The Full Text of the Soliloquy

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Before we analyze, read the soliloquy in its entirety. As you read, mark any words or images that stand out to you.

**HAMLET:**

*O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,*

*Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!*

*Or that the Everlasting had not fixed*

*His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!*

*How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable*

*Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

*Fie on't! O fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden*

*That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature*

*Possess it merely. That it should come to this!*

*But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.*

*So excellent a king, that was to this*

*Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother*

*That he might not beteem the winds of heaven*

*Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!*

*Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him*

*As if increase of appetite had grown*

*By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—*

*Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman!—*

*A little month, or ere those shoes were old*

*With which she followed my poor father's body,*

*Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she—*

*O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason*

*Would have mourned longer!—married with my uncle,*

*My father's brother, but no more like my father*

*Than I to Hercules. Within a month,*

*Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears*

*Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,*

*She married. O, most wicked speed, to post*

*With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!*

*It is not, nor it cannot come to good.*

*But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.*

(Act I, Scene ii, Lines 129-159)

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### 3. Core Concept 1: Structure of the Soliloquy

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The soliloquy divides naturally into three movements:

| Section | Lines | Subject |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Part 1** | 129-137 | Hamlet's wish for death and his despair at the world |

| **Part 2** | 137-149 | The contrast between his father (the ideal king) and Claudius (the satyr) |

| **Part 3** | 149-159 | His mother's betrayal—her "o'erhasty" marriage and its meaning |

This structure moves from **general despair** (the world is meaningless) to **specific causes** (his father's death and mother's marriage). The general grows from the specific: Hamlet's worldview is shaped by these personal wounds.

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### 4. Core Concept 2: Part 1 - The Wish for Death (Lines 129-137)

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*"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,*

*Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!*

*Or that the Everlasting had not fixed*

*His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!"*

#### 4.1 Analysis of Language

| Phrase | Meaning | Effect |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **"too, too solid"** | Some editions read "sullied" (stained) rather than "solid." Both work: "solid" suggests flesh as a prison; "sullied" suggests moral stain. | Either way, Hamlet wants to escape his physical existence. |

| **"melt, / Thaw"** | Images of dissolution, disappearance without violence | He doesn't want to die fighting—he wants to simply stop existing |

| **"resolve itself into a dew"** | Become nothing, evaporate | A gentle death, passive, natural—but impossible |

| **"the Everlasting"** | A name for God | Hamlet knows suicide is a sin; he is trapped |

| **"his canon 'gainst self-slaughter"** | God's law forbids suicide | Religion itself prevents his escape |

Hamlet's first words are a death wish. He does not want to kill himself violently—he wants to simply dissolve, to cease to be. But he cannot even do that because God forbids it. He is trapped in existence.

## 4.2 The World as "Weary, Stale, Flat, and Unprofitable"

*"How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable*

*Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

*Fie on't! O fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden*

*That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature*

*Possess it merely."*

Notice the accumulation of adjectives: **weary** (tiring), **stale** (old, rotten), **flat** (without depth or meaning), **unprofitable** (worthless). Four words, each adding to the sense of total emptiness.

Then the metaphor: the world is an **"unweeded garden."** A garden should be cultivated, ordered, beautiful. But this garden is wild—"rank and gross" things have taken over. This is Hamlet's view of Denmark: what should be beautiful (the kingdom, the court) has been overrun by corruption (Claudius, the hasty marriage, the politics of deceit).

**Quick Check:** *What does the "unweeded garden" metaphor suggest about Hamlet's view of Denmark? Who or what are the "rank and gross" things that "possess it merely"?*

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Part 2 - The Two Kings (Lines 137-149)

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*"That it should come to this!*

*But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.*

*So excellent a king, that was to this*

*Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother*

*That he might not beteem the winds of heaven*

***Visit her face too roughly."***

### 5.1 The Contrast: Hyperion vs. Satyr

Hamlet compares his father to Claudius using mythology:

| Figure | Meaning | Represents |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Hyperion** | One of the Titans, often associated with the sun; a god of beauty and light | King Hamlet—divine, radiant, perfect |

| **Satyr** | A half-man, half-goat creature known for lust and wildness | Claudius—bestial, crude, immoral |

The contrast could not be more extreme: god versus goat. This reveals how Hamlet sees his uncle—not just as inferior, but as subhuman.

### 5.2 The Ideal Father

Hamlet describes his father's love for Gertrude with tenderness: he "might not betwixt the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly." He wouldn't even let the wind blow too hard on her. This is protective, gentle love—the love of a true husband.

***"Heaven and earth!***

***Must I remember?"***

This cry reveals the pain of memory. Hamlet cannot escape these images—his father's goodness, his parents' love. And that makes the present even more unbearable.

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Part 3 - The Betrayal (Lines 149-159)

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***"Why, she would hang on him***

***As if increase of appetite had grown***

***By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—***

***Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman!—"***

### 6.1 Gertrude's Love for King Hamlet

Hamlet remembers his mother's devotion: she "would hang on him" as if her love grew stronger the more she loved. The image is of clinging, adoring, insatiable love. This makes what comes next unbearable.

### 6.2 The Speed of Remarriage

The phrase "within a month" appears three times in this section. Hamlet cannot get over the speed:

- **"within a month"** (Line 149)
- **"A little month"** (Line 151)
- **"Within a month"** (Line 155)

The repetition hammers home his disbelief. His mother's tears for her dead husband were still fresh—"ere those shoes were old" that she wore at the funeral—and she married again.

### 6.3 The Animal Comparison

*"O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason*

*Would have mourned longer!"*

Even animals, which lack human reason, mourn longer than Gertrude. She has sunk below the level of beasts. This is the deepest cut: his mother is less than human in her speed to remarry.

### 6.4 The Horror of the Marriage

*"married with my uncle,*

*My father's brother, but no more like my father*

*Than I to Hercules."*

Three betrayals in one:

1. She married **at all**—too soon
2. She married **her husband's brother**—considered incest
3. She married a man who is nothing like her first husband—a satyr, not a god

### 6.5 "Incestuous Sheets"

*"O, most wicked speed, to post*

*With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!"*

The language is visceral: "post" suggests hurrying, rushing; "dexterity" suggests skill, even eagerness. She was **good** at this betrayal. And "incestuous sheets" names the sin directly: this marriage violates divine and human law.

### 6.6 The Final Lines

*"It is not, nor it cannot come to good.*

*But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."*

Hamlet concludes with certainty: this cannot end well. And then the devastating final line: his heart may break, but he cannot speak. In public, he must be silent. The soliloquy has given us access to his truth, but in the world of Elsinore, that truth must remain hidden.

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Hamlet blame his mother so much more than Claudius in this soliloquy? He doesn't yet know about the murder—but still, his fury seems focused on Gertrude's sexuality. What might this reveal about him?*

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## 7. Core Concept 5: Themes in the Soliloquy

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|-----|-----|

| **Death and Suicide** | Hamlet wishes to die but is restrained by religious law |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Public grief is expected; private despair is overwhelming; his mother's tears were fake |

| **Corruption and Decay** | The "unweeded garden" image; "rank and gross" things taking over |

| **Gender and Misogyny** | "Frailty, thy name is woman"—Hamlet generalizes from his mother to all women |

| **Memory and Forgetfulness** | He cannot forget his father; his mother forgot too quickly |

| **Family and Betrayal** | The deepest wounds come from those closest to him |

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## 8. Practical Application: Close Reading Practice

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### Activity: Analyzing Language (15 minutes)

Choose one of the following passages from the soliloquy. In a paragraph, analyze the language and explain what it reveals about Hamlet's state of mind.

#### Option A:

*"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,*

*Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!*

*Or that the Everlasting had not fixed*

*His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!"*

#### Option B:

*"How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable*

*Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

*Fie on't! O fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden*

*That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature*

*Possess it merely."*

#### Option C:

*"Why, she would hang on him*

*As if increase of appetite had grown*

*By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—*

*Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman!—*

*A little month, or ere those shoes were old*

*With which she followed my poor father's body,*

*Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she—*

*O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason*

*Would have mourned longer!"*

#### Guiding Questions:

- What specific words stand out? Why?
- What imagery does Shakespeare use?
- What emotions are being expressed?
- How does this passage connect to the play's larger themes?

#### Example Response (Option C):

In this passage, Hamlet's grief curdles into misogyny. The image of Gertrude hanging on his father "as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on" suggests a love that was almost greedy—and makes her swift remarriage even more shocking. The repeated emphasis on time ("within a month," "a little month") shows Hamlet's obsessive counting. When he compares his mother unfavorably to a "beast that wants discourse of reason," he places her below animals—the ultimate degradation. The line "Frailty, thy name is woman" moves from specific accusation to general condemnation, revealing how this personal betrayal has poisoned Hamlet's view of all women. The passage ends with silence: he must "hold his tongue," but the audience has heard everything.

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## 9. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Structure** | Three parts: death wish → father vs. uncle → mother's betrayal |

| **Hamlet's State** | Suicidal, despairing, disgusted, trapped by religious law |

| **The Two Kings** | Father = Hyperion (god); Claudius = satyr (beast) |

| **Gertrude's Crime** | Speed of remarriage; incest; forgetting his father |

| **Key Images** | Melting flesh, unweeded garden, satyr, incestuous sheets |

| **Themes** | Death, appearance vs. reality, corruption, gender, memory |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!"
- "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!"
- "Frailty, thy name is woman!"
- "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

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## 10. Connecting to the Play

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This soliloquy establishes the emotional foundation for everything that follows. When the ghost appears and demands revenge, Hamlet is already primed for action by his grief and rage. But note: his anger is directed mostly at his mother, not yet at Claudius. He doesn't yet know about the murder. When he learns the truth, his mission becomes more focused—but his despair remains.

The "unweeded garden" will continue to grow wild. The "rank and gross" things will multiply. And Hamlet will continue to hold his tongue in public while revealing his truth to us alone.

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## 11. Looking Ahead

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Now that we've explored Hamlet's inner world, we're ready to see how he responds to the ghost's revelation. In the next lesson, we'll complete our study of Act I by examining the theme of appearance versus reality as it emerges across all five scenes.

**To prepare:** Reread Act I, Scene v, focusing on how Hamlet's encounter with the ghost changes (or doesn't change) the state of mind revealed in this soliloquy.

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### Lesson 3 Complete

*Next Lesson: Act I Review: The Theme of Appearance Versus Reality*

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### Module 2 Summary Sheet

## Module 2: Act I: The Ghost and the Call to Action — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **Opening Atmosphere:** Act I establishes a mood of fear and uncertainty. The play opens with a challenge—"Who's there?"—on a cold night, introducing the theme of appearance versus reality.
- **The Ghost's Revelation:** The ghost of King Hamlet reveals he was murdered by his brother Claudius, who poured poison in his ear while he slept in his orchard.
- **The Ghost's Nature:** The ghost claims to be from purgatory, but its true nature is left ambiguous—it could be a spirit of health or a goblin damned.
- **Hamlet's First Soliloquy:** "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt" reveals Hamlet's profound grief, disgust at his mother's "o'erhasty" marriage, and wish for suicide, forbidden by religious law.
- **Claudius's Public Persona:** Claudius's first court speech shows him as a skilled politician, balancing grief for his brother with the celebration of his marriage, while hiding his guilt.
- **Polonius's Family:** In Scene iii, Laertes warns Ophelia about Hamlet, and Polonius gives worldly advice to his son before commanding Ophelia to reject Hamlet's advances.
- **Hamlet's Vow:** After the ghost's revelation, Hamlet swears to remember only the ghost's command and decides to "put an antic disposition on"—to feign madness.

- **The Rotten State:** Marcellus's line, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," summarizes the moral and political corruption at the heart of the kingdom.

### Core Takeaways

Act I establishes the central conflict of the play. Hamlet, already grieving his father and disgusted by his mother's hasty remarriage, learns from the ghost that Claudius is a murderer. He accepts the mission of revenge but immediately complicates it by deciding to feign madness. The act introduces key themes: appearance versus reality (the smiling villain), mortality (the ghost, Hamlet's death wish), and the burden of duty. By the end, Hamlet is transformed from a passive mourner into an active, though troubled, agent of revenge.

### Terms to Know

- **Purgatory** — In Catholic theology, a place where souls are purified before entering heaven; the ghost claims to be from here.
- **Antic Disposition** — A strange or bizarre behavior; Hamlet's plan to pretend madness.
- **Satyr** — A half-man, half-goat creature associated with lust; Hamlet uses this image to describe Claudius in contrast to his god-like father (Hyperion).
- **Hyperion** — A Titan god associated with the sun; Hamlet compares his father to this radiant figure.
- **Niobe** — A figure from Greek mythology who wept endlessly for her children; Hamlet compares his mother's brief grief to Niobe, then mocks her for moving on so quickly.
- **"Frailty, thy name is woman!"** — Hamlet's bitter generalization about women, triggered by his mother's quick remarriage.
- **Unweeded Garden** — Hamlet's metaphor for the world: a garden overrun by "things rank and gross in nature," symbolizing the corruption in Denmark.
- **"The time is out of joint"** — Hamlet's final words in Act I, expressing his sense that the world is broken and he has been cursed to fix it.

### Review Questions

1. What is the political situation in Denmark at the start of Act I, and how does it connect to the appearance of the ghost?
2. Describe the ghost's account of his murder. Why is the method of poisoning significant?
3. What does Hamlet's first soliloquy reveal about his state of mind? List three specific emotions or desires he expresses.
4. How does Claudius present himself in his first speech to the court, and what might his language reveal about his true character?
5. What is Hamlet's "antic disposition," and why does he decide to adopt it?

### Further Thinking

- The ghost commands Hamlet to revenge but also to leave Gertrude to heaven. How might this dual command complicate Hamlet's mission from the very beginning?
- Consider the contrast between public and private selves in Act I. How do characters (Claudius, Hamlet, Polonius) present themselves differently when alone versus when observed by others? What does this reveal about the world of Elsinore?

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### Module 2 Quiz

**Q1.** What news do Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo bring to Hamlet at the end of Act I, Scene ii?

- A) That Claudius has planned a hunting trip.
- B) That they have seen the ghost of his father on the battlements.
- C) That Ophelia has agreed to meet him.
- D) That Fortinbras's army has been defeated.

**Q2.** According to the ghost, how was King Hamlet murdered?

- A) He was stabbed in his sleep.
- B) He was poisoned by venom poured into his ear.
- C) He was pushed from the castle walls.
- D) He died in a duel with Fortinbras.

**Q3.** What is the 'primal eldest curse' that Claudius's murder bears, according to the ghost?

- A) The curse of Oedipus.
- B) The curse of Cain for killing his brother Abel.
- C) The curse of Prometheus.
- D) The curse of the House of Atreus.

**Q4.** After hearing the ghost's command, what specific promise does Hamlet make?

- A) To immediately kill Claudius.
- B) To forget everything else and only remember the ghost's command.
- C) To tell Ophelia the truth about his madness.
- D) To leave Denmark and never return.

**Q5.** In his first soliloquy, why does Hamlet say he cannot commit suicide?

- A) He is afraid of the pain.
- B) He does not have a weapon.
- C) God's law ('his canon') forbids self-slaughter.
- D) He wants to see Claudius suffer first.

**Q6.** What does the ghost tell Hamlet to do regarding his mother, Gertrude?

- A) To avenge his death by killing her as well.
- B) To confront her but leave her to heaven and her own conscience.
- C) To protect her from Claudius.
- D) To convince her to leave Claudius immediately.

**Q7.** In Act I, Scene i, Marcellus famously states, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' This line refers to:

- A) The literal smell of the castle sewers.
- B) The general sense of moral and political corruption that the ghost's appearance signifies.
- C) Gertrude's hasty marriage.
- D) The stale food in the royal kitchen.

**Q8.** In his first soliloquy, Hamlet compares his late father to the Greek god Hyperion and his uncle Claudius to a satyr, a half-man, half-goat figure.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** The ghost of King Hamlet appears to the guards wearing a nightgown, which signifies a peaceful and domestic spirit.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** At the end of Act I, Hamlet decides to 'put an antic disposition on,' which means he plans to feign madness.

(True / False)

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** B — They come to Hamlet to tell him about their sightings of the ghost, which prompts Hamlet to join them on the watch that night.

**Q2:** B — The ghost reveals that Claudius poured poison, 'juice of cursèd hebona,' into the ear of the sleeping king, a method that symbolizes the deceptive way Claudius stole his life, crown, and queen.

**Q3:** B — The ghost refers to the biblical story of Cain and Abel, the first instance of a brother murdering his brother, highlighting the unnatural and heinous nature of Claudius's crime.

**Q4:** B — Hamlet vows to wipe all trivial records and past impressions from his mind, leaving only the ghost's commandment to live there.

**Q5:** C — Hamlet laments that 'the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter,' meaning he is trapped in his suffering because suicide is considered a sin against God.

**Q6:** B — The ghost instructs Hamlet not to contrive against his mother, but to 'leave her to heaven' and to her own guilt, which will be its own punishment.

**Q7:** B — The line is a metaphor for the deep-seated corruption and decay at the heart of the Danish court, caused by Claudius's secret murder of his brother.

**Q8:** True — This stark contrast emphasizes how Hamlet views his father as divine and perfect, while seeing Claudius as a crude, bestial, and inferior replacement.

**Q9:** False — The ghost first appears in the armor he wore when he fought the king of Norway, signifying that he is still a warrior and that his purpose is martial, not peaceful.

**Q10:** True — After swearing his friends to secrecy, Hamlet tells them he may find it necessary to act strangely, which is the beginning of his plan to investigate the murder.

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## Module 3: Act II: The Antic Disposition

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Act II sees Hamlet putting on his 'antic disposition' as he tests the king and those around him. The arrival of the players provides a new opportunity to uncover the truth.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Summarize the key events of Act II.
- Analyze Hamlet's interactions with Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern.
- Explain Hamlet's plan to use the players to 'catch the conscience of the king.'
- Interpret Hamlet's second major soliloquy ('O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!') and its demonstration of his self-criticism and renewed purpose.



## Lesson 1: Scene by Scene: Act II, Scene i

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 1: Scene by Scene - Act II, Scene i

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act II: The Antic Disposition

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## Lesson Overview

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Act I ended with Hamlet receiving a ghostly command to revenge—and deciding to put on an "antic disposition." Act II opens not with Hamlet, but with Polonius. As we return to Elsinore, we find that the theme of spying and surveillance has intensified. Polonius sends a servant to spy on his own son in Paris, then intercepts Hamlet's love letters to Ophelia and leaps to a conclusion: Hamlet is mad because Ophelia has rejected him. This scene establishes the comic yet dangerous foolishness of Polonius, the vulnerability of Ophelia, and the first (mis)interpretation of Hamlet's madness.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of Act II, Scene i
  - Analyze Polonius's character through his treatment of Reynaldo and Ophelia
  - Examine Ophelia's report of Hamlet's strange behavior
  - Explain why Polonius misinterprets Hamlet's madness as lovesickness
  - Discuss the theme of appearance versus reality as it develops in this scene
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Web of Spies

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Elsinore has become a place where no one can be trusted—and where everyone is watching everyone else. In Act I, we saw guards watching for ghosts, Claudius watching Hamlet, and Polonius watching Ophelia. In Act II, Scene i, the surveillance intensifies. Polonius sends a spy to watch his own son in Paris. He then uses Ophelia as bait to spy on Hamlet. The web of deceit grows tighter, and the innocent—especially Ophelia—will be caught in it.

**Think About It:** *Why might Shakespeare open Act II with Polonius rather than Hamlet? What does this choice suggest about where the focus of the play is shifting?*

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## 2. Summary of Events

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius Instructs Reynaldo** | Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to Paris with money and letters for Laertes—but also with instructions to spy on him by spreading false rumors and seeing how people react. |

| **Reynaldo Departs** | Reynaldo leaves to carry out his mission. |

| **Ophelia Enters, Frightened** | Ophelia rushes in, visibly upset. She describes a terrifying visit from Hamlet, who appeared before her disheveled and acting strangely. |

| **Polonius Interprets** | Polonius immediately concludes that Hamlet is mad because Ophelia has rejected his letters and visits, as Polonius commanded. He decides to tell Claudius. |

| **They Go to the King** | Polonius and Ophelia leave to inform Claudius of Hamlet's condition. |

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## 3. Core Concept 1: Polonius and Reynaldo (Lines 1-74)

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### 3.1 The Instructions

The scene opens with Polonius giving Reynaldo money and letters to deliver to Laertes in Paris. But the delivery is not the main purpose. Polonius wants Reynaldo to spy.

*"Marry, well said, very well said. Look you, sir,*

*Enquire me first what Danskers are in Paris,*

*And how, and who, what means, and where they keep,*

*What company, at what expense; and finding*

*By this encompassment and drift of question*

*That they do know my son, come you more nearer*

*Than your particular demands will touch it."*

*(Lines 6-12)*

Polonius's language is convoluted and wordy—he takes fifty lines to say what could be said in five. This verbosity is a key part of his character. He loves to hear himself speak, and he believes his long-winded advice demonstrates his wisdom.

**Key phrase:** "By this encompassment and drift of question" — Polonius advises Reynaldo to use indirect methods, to circle around the truth rather than asking directly. This "encompassment" (indirection) characterizes Polonius's entire approach to life.

### 3.2 The Dirty Trick

***"And then, sir, does he this—he does—what was I about to say?"***

***By the mass, I was about to say something. Where did I leave?"***

*(Lines 50-51)*

Polonius loses his train of thought mid-sentence—a comic moment that reveals his mind is not as sharp as he believes. But what follows is darker:

***"Thus: ... you, laying these slight sullies on my son***

***As 'twere a thing a little soiled i' th' working—***

***Mark you, your party in converse, him you would sound,***

***Having ever seen in the prenominate crimes***

***The youth you breathe of guilty, be assured***

***He closes with you in this consequence:***

***'Good sir,' or so, or 'friend,' or 'gentleman'—***

***... 'I saw him enter such a house of sale'—***

***Videlicet, a brothel—or so forth."***

*(Lines 39-63, paraphrased for clarity)*

Polonius instructs Reynaldo to spread mild lies about Laertes—to suggest he's been seen in brothels, gambling, drinking—and then see if people confirm or deny. His reasoning: if Laertes is actually doing these things, people will admit it when they think Reynaldo already knows.

**The irony is staggering:** Polonius tells Reynaldo to "by indirections find directions out"—but he will later fall victim to Hamlet's own indirections. The man who lives by spying will die by it.

### 3.3 What This Reveals About Polonius

| Trait | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| **Controlling** | He cannot trust his son to behave without surveillance |

| **Hypocritical** | He gave Laertes noble advice ("to thine own self be true") while planning to spy on him |

| **Devious** | He is comfortable with lies and manipulation |

| **Verbose** | His speech is tangled, repetitive, and self-important |

| **Insecure** | He needs to control others because he trusts no one |

**Quick Check:** *Why doesn't Polonius simply trust Laertes? What does his need to spy on his own son suggest about his character and about the world of Elsinore?*

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## 4. Core Concept 2: Ophelia's Terrifying Report (Lines 75-100)

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### 4.1 The Entrance

**"O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted!"** (Line 75)

Ophelia bursts in, and her first words signal terror. Something has happened to Hamlet—something that has left her shaken.

### 4.2 The Description

**"My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,**

**Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,**

**No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,**

**Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,**

**Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,**

**And with a look so piteous in purport**

**As if he had been loosèd out of hell**

**To speak of horrors—he comes before me."**

(Lines 76-83)

Ophelia paints a vivid picture of Hamlet's appearance:

| Detail | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| **"doublet all unbraced"** | His jacket was undone—he was disheveled, not properly dressed |

| **"No hat upon his head"** | A gentleman would never appear without a hat in public; this is shocking |

| **"stockings fouled, ungartered, down-gyvèd"** | His stockings were dirty, untied, falling down like shackles ("gyves") |

| **"Pale as his shirt"** | Extreme pallor suggests fear, illness, or ghostly encounter |

| **"knees knocking each other"** | He was trembling uncontrollably |

| **"look so piteous... as if he had been loosèd out of hell"** | He looked like a damned soul |

This is Hamlet's "antic disposition" in action. He has chosen to appear mad, and this is his first performance. But notice: Ophelia doesn't describe madness. She describes terror. Hamlet looks like someone who has seen a ghost—which, of course, he has.

### 4.3 The Encounter

*"He took me by the wrist and held me hard.*

*Then goes he to the length of all his arm,*

*And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,*

*He falls to such perusal of my face*

*As he would draw it. Long stayed he so.*

*At last, a little shaking of mine arm*

*And thrice his head thus waving up and down,*

*He raised a sigh so piteous and profound*

*As it did seem to shatter all his bulk*

*And end his being. That done, he lets me go,*

*And, with his head over his shoulder turned,*

*He seemed to find his way without his eyes,*

*For out o' doors he went without their helps*

*And to the last bended their light on me."*

*(Lines 87-100)*

#### Analyze the movement:

1. **Grip:** He holds her wrist tightly—physically restraining her
2. **Distance:** He holds her at arm's length, studying her face

3. **Intensity:** He stares as if memorizing her features
4. **Sigh:** A sigh so deep it seems to shake his entire body
5. **Release:** He lets go but keeps looking back
6. **Exit:** He walks backward, unable to stop looking at her

This is not the behavior of a conventional madman. There is method here: Hamlet is saying goodbye. He knows that his "antic disposition" will change everything. He may never be able to love Ophelia openly again. This silent encounter is his farewell—and Ophelia doesn't understand.

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Hamlet visit Ophelia if he knows he must push her away? Is this cruel, or is it his only way of saying goodbye?*

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Polonius's Interpretation (Lines 101-117)

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### 5.1 The Leap to Conclusion

**"Mad for thy love?"** (Line 101)

Polonius's immediate question reveals his fixed idea. He asked Ophelia earlier if Hamlet's affections were genuine; she confirmed they were; he ordered her to reject him. Now, confronted with Hamlet's strange behavior, he jumps to the conclusion he expected: lovesickness.

**"What, have you given him any hard words of late?"** (Line 106)

When Ophelia explains she followed his orders and rejected Hamlet's letters, Polonius is certain:

**"That hath made him mad."** (Line 109)

### 5.2 The Self-Congratulation

**"I am sorry that with better heed and judgment**

**I had not quoted him. I feared he did but trifle**

**And meant to wreck thee. But beshrew my jealousy!**

**... Come, go we to the king.**

**This must be known, which, being kept close, might move**

**More grief to hide than hate to utter love."**

(Lines 110-117)

Polonius manages to turn this into a story about his own wisdom:

- He was right to be suspicious ("I feared he did but trifle")
- He regrets his "jealousy" (suspicion) now that he sees he was wrong

- They must tell the king—not out of concern for Hamlet, but because keeping secrets might cause more problems

**The irony:** Polonius is completely wrong. Hamlet is not mad for love. But Polonius's confidence in his own judgment blinds him to the truth.

### 5.3 Why Polonius Misreads Hamlet

| Reason | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **He projects his own values** | Polonius assumes everyone acts from simple motives because he does |

| **He needs to be right** | His entire identity depends on being the wise advisor |

| **He cannot imagine complexity** | Hamlet's real situation (murder, ghost, revenge) is beyond Polonius's comprehension |

| **He sees what he expects** | Confirmation bias: he told Ophelia Hamlet would prove false; now he sees "proof" of lovesickness |

**Quick Check:** What does Polonius get wrong about Hamlet? Why is he so confident in his incorrect interpretation?

## 6. Core Concept 4: Themes in Act II, Scene i

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Polonius advises Reynaldo to use false appearances to find truth; Hamlet performs madness; everyone misreads everyone |

| **Spying and Surveillance** | Polonius spies on Laertes; he will use Ophelia to spy on Hamlet; Elsinore is a police state |

| **Madness** | Hamlet's "antic disposition" begins; is he performing, or is some of this real? |

| **Love and Rejection** | Ophelia obeyed her father and rejected Hamlet; the consequences may be tragic |

| **Family and Control** | Polonius controls both his children completely; neither Laertes nor Ophelia has autonomy |

## 7. Practical Application: Analyzing Ophelia's Report

### Activity: Close Reading and Performance (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Visual Analysis

Reread Ophelia's description of Hamlet's visit (Lines 76-100). Draw a simple storyboard showing the sequence of actions Hamlet performs. Label each frame with a quotation from the text.

**Frame 1:** "He took me by the wrist and held me hard"

**Frame 2:** "Then goes he to the length of all his arm"

**Frame 3:** "with his other hand thus o'er his brow / He falls to such perusal of my face"

**Frame 4:** "a little shaking of mine arm / And thrice his head thus waving up and down"

**Frame 5:** "He raised a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk"

**Frame 6:** "He lets me go, / And, with his head over his shoulder turned... out o' doors he went"

### Part B: Interpretation

After completing your storyboard, answer these questions:

1. What emotions does Hamlet seem to be experiencing during this encounter?
2. Why does he study Ophelia's face so intensely?
3. What might the sigh "that did seem to shatter all his bulk" represent?
4. Why does Hamlet exit looking backward rather than forward?

### Part C: Polonius's Misreading

Write a short paragraph from Polonius's perspective explaining to the king why Hamlet has gone mad. Then write a second paragraph explaining what you, as the audience, know that Polonius doesn't.

| Polonius's Explanation | What We Know |

|-----|-----|

| "Hamlet is mad for love of my daughter, whom I wisely commanded to reject him." | Hamlet has seen a ghost, learned of murder, and is pretending madness while planning revenge. |

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## 8. Summary: Key Takeaways from Act II, Scene i

| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius and Reynaldo** | Polonius sends a spy to watch Laertes, revealing his controlling nature and hypocrisy |

| **Ophelia's Report** | Hamlet appears disheveled and acts strangely; he seems to be saying goodbye |

| **Polonius's Interpretation** | He confidently (and wrongly) concludes Hamlet is mad for love |

| **Hamlet's "Antic Disposition"** | This is our first glimpse of Hamlet's performance of madness |

| **Key Themes** | Appearance vs. reality, spying, control, misreading |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "By indirections find directions out." (Polonius, Line 66)
- "Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, / No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled." (Ophelia, Lines 77-78)
- "He seemed to find his way without his eyes, / For out o' doors he went without their helps / And to the last bended their light on me." (Ophelia, Lines 98-100)
- "Mad for thy love?" / "My lord, I do not know, / But truly I do fear it." (Polonius and Ophelia, Lines 101-102)

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## 9. Looking Ahead

Polonius is now convinced he understands Hamlet's madness. He will go to Claudius with his theory, setting up a series of encounters designed to test Hamlet—encounters that Hamlet will turn back on the spies themselves.

In our next lesson, we'll explore Act II, Scene ii, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, the players come to Elsinore, and Hamlet reveals his plan to "catch the conscience of the king."

**To prepare:** Think about the difference between what Polonius believes and what we know. How might this dramatic irony affect the way we watch the rest of the play?

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### Lesson 1 Complete

Next Lesson: *Scene by Scene: Act II, Scene ii (Part 1)*

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### Lesson 2: Scene by Scene: Act II, Scene ii (Part 1)

Duration: 45 minutes

## Lesson 2: Scene by Scene - Act II, Scene ii (Part 1)

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act II: The Antic Disposition

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### Lesson Overview

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Act II, Scene ii is the longest scene in the play—over 600 lines—and it is here that the central conflicts of Act II unfold. In this first part of our study, we will examine the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's old friends who have been summoned by Claudius to spy on him. We will watch Hamlet test them, expose their betrayal, and then pivot with dazzling speed when the players arrive. This scene showcases Hamlet's intelligence, his wit, and his growing isolation as he realizes that even his friends are not to be trusted.

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### Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of Act II, Scene ii up to the arrival of the players
  - Analyze Claudius's commission of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as spies
  - Examine Hamlet's interactions with Polonius and his "mad" wordplay
  - Analyze Hamlet's confrontation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his revelation that they were sent for
  - Explain the significance of the players' arrival at Elsinore
- 

### 1. Introduction: The Net Closes

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Act II, Scene i ended with Polonius convinced he had solved the mystery of Hamlet's madness. Scene ii opens with Claudius and Gertrude putting their own plan into motion: they have summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's childhood friends, to spy on him. The net around Hamlet is tightening. But what Claudius and Polonius don't realize is that Hamlet is not a passive victim—he is watching them as closely as they watch him.

**Think About It:** Why might Claudius prefer to use Hamlet's friends rather than his own courtiers to spy on the prince? What makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern useful tools?

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## 2. Summary of Events (Part 1: Through the Arrival of the Players)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius Welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern** | Claudius and Gertrude greet Hamlet's friends and commission them to spy on Hamlet, to discover the cause of his "transformation." |

| **Polonius Arrives with News** | Polonius enters, announcing that the ambassadors have returned from Norway and that he has discovered the "cause" of Hamlet's madness. |

| **Ambassadors Report** | Voltmand reports that old Norway has stopped Fortinbras's invasion; Fortinbras will instead attack Poland, requesting passage through Denmark. |

| **Polonius Presents His Theory** | Polonius delivers a long-winded explanation: Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia. He proposes to test this by arranging an encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia while he and Claudius spy. |

| **Hamlet Enters Reading** | Hamlet enters, reading a book. Polonius attempts to engage him and is met with witty, "mad" wordplay. |

| **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Arrive** | Hamlet greets his old friends warmly—then quickly realizes they were sent for. He confronts them until they admit the truth. |

| **The Players Arrive** | A troupe of actors arrives. Hamlet welcomes them and requests a speech about the fall of Troy. The First Player delivers it with powerful emotion. |

| **Hamlet Alone** | The court leaves, and Hamlet delivers his second soliloquy, berating himself for his inaction and revealing his plan: the players will perform a play resembling his father's murder to "catch the conscience of the king." |

*Note: This lesson covers events through the arrival of the players. The soliloquy will be examined in detail in Lesson 4.*

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## 3. Core Concept 1: The King's Commission (Lines 1-39)

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### 3.1 Claudius's Welcome

***"Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.***

***Moreover that we much did long to see you,***

***The need we have to use you did provoke***

***Our hasty sending."***

*(Lines 1-4)*

Claudius's opening is smooth and politic: he claims they were "longed for" even as he admits they were "hastily sent for." The contradiction reveals the truth: this is not a social visit but a mission.

### 3.2 The Commission

*"Something have you heard*

*Of Hamlet's transformation—so call it,*

*Sith nor th' exterior nor the inward man*

*Resembles that it was. What it should be,*

*More than his father's death, that thus hath put him*

*So much from th' understanding of himself,*

*I cannot dream of."*

*(Lines 4-10)*

Claudius claims ignorance: he "cannot dream" what causes Hamlet's transformation. But we know he has reason to suspect—and to fear. He needs information.

*"I entreat you both*

*That, being of so young days brought up with him,*

*And since so neighbored to his youth and humor,*

*That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court*

*Some little time, so by your companies*

*To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather*

*So much as from occasion you may glean,*

*Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus*

*That, opened, lies within our remedy."*

*(Lines 9-17)*

Notice the language: "gather," "glean," "opened." Claudius wants information extracted and reported back. Gertrude adds:

*"And I beseech you instantly to visit*

***My too much changed son."***

*(Lines 35-36)*

**The irony:** Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree enthusiastically:

***"Heaven make our presence and our practices***

***Pleasant and helpful to him!"***

*(Rosencrantz, Lines 37-38)*

The word "practices" is telling—it can mean "actions" but also "schemes" or "plots." They are here to practice upon Hamlet, not to help him.

### 3.3 What This Reveals

| Element | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius's fear** | He needs to understand Hamlet's condition because he fears what Hamlet might know or do |

| **The isolation of Hamlet** | His oldest friends are now his enemies |

| **The theme of appearance** | Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear as friends but are spies |

| **Gertrude's complicity** | She joins in the plot to spy on her son |

**Quick Check:** *Why do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to spy on their friend? What does their willingness suggest about their characters?*

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## 4. Core Concept 2: Polonius's Theory (Lines 40-167)

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### 4.1 The Ambassador's Report (Briefly)

Voltemand returns from Norway with good news: old Norway, believing Fortinbras was attacking Poland, has stopped his nephew and given him funds to attack Poland instead. He requests passage through Denmark. This subplot will return later.

### 4.2 Polonius's Big Announcement

***"Bring me to the king."***

...

***"I have found***

***The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy."***

(Lines 48-49)

Polonius is bursting with self-importance. He has solved the mystery. But he cannot simply state his conclusion—he must perform.

### 4.3 Polonius's Rhetorical Performance

Polonius's speech to Claudius is a masterpiece of self-indulgent wordplay:

**"My liege, and madam, to expostulate**

**What majesty should be, what duty is,**

**Why day is day, night night, and time is time,**

**Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.**

**Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,**

**And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,**

**I will be brief."**

(Lines 85-91)

The joke is that he is anything but brief. He spends forty lines saying he will be brief, then delivers his theory in the most roundabout way possible.

Gertrude's impatience breaks through:

**"More matter, with less art." (Line 94)**

She wants substance, not performance.

**"That he is mad, 'tis true: 'tis true 'tis pity,**

**And pity 'tis 'tis true—a foolish figure,**

**But farewell it, for I will use no art."**

(Lines 96-98)

Even as he claims to abandon "art" (rhetorical tricks), he cannot stop himself from playing with words.

### 4.4 The "Proof"

Polonius produces Hamlet's love letters to Ophelia—including a short poem:

**"Doubt thou the stars are fire;**

***Doubt that the sun doth move;***

***Doubt truth to be a liar;***

***But never doubt I love."***

*(Lines 115-118)*

The poem is simple, direct, and genuine—in stark contrast to Polonius's wordiness. Hamlet's love was real.

Polonius then reconstructs his investigation:

***"I went round to work,***

***And my young mistress thus I did bespeak:***

***'Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star.***

***This must not be.' And then I prescripts gave her,***

***That she should lock herself from his resort,***

***Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.***

***Which done, she took the fruits of my advice;***

***And he, repulsed—a short tale to make—***

***Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,***

***Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,***

***Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,***

***Into the madness wherein now he raves."***

*(Lines 137-149)*

#### **Analysis of Polonius's "Method":**

| Step | Polonius's Version | What We Know |

|-----|-----|-----|

| He forbade Ophelia to see Hamlet | He claims he was protecting her | He was interfering in something that wasn't his business |

| Ophelia obeyed | She was a dutiful daughter | She had no choice |

| Hamlet was repulsed | This caused his madness | Hamlet has seen a ghost and learned of murder |

**The key word:** "declension"—a grammatical term meaning the inflection of nouns. Polonius sees human emotion as a predictable pattern, like grammar. He cannot grasp the complexity of Hamlet's situation.

***"If circumstances lead me, I will find***

***Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed***

***Within the center."***

*(Lines 155-157)*

His confidence is absolute—and completely misplaced.

**Quick Check:** *Why is Polonius so certain he is right? What does his confidence reveal about his character?*

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Hamlet and Polonius (Lines 168-218)

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### 5.1 The Entrance

Hamlet enters reading a book. This is our first extended view of his "antic disposition" in action.

***"How does my good Lord Hamlet?"*** *(Polonius, Line 171)*

***"Well, God-a-mercy."*** *(Hamlet, Line 172)*

So far, normal. But then:

***"Do you know me, my lord?"*** *(Polonius, Line 174)*

***"Excellent well. You are a fishmonger."*** *(Hamlet, Line 175)*

### 5.2 The "Fishmonger" Exchange

This is the first of Hamlet's "mad" replies. A fishmonger sells fish—but the word also had a slang meaning: a pimp, one who sells flesh. Hamlet may be accusing Polonius of prostituting his daughter (using her as bait).

Polonius misses the insult:

***"Not I, my lord."*** *(Line 176)*

Hamlet continues:

***"Then I would you were so honest a man."*** *(Line 177)*

The implication: you are not even as honest as a pimp.

### 5.3 The "Jephthah" Reference

Later, Hamlet calls Polonius "Jephthah, judge of Israel" (Line 395). This biblical reference would have been known to Elizabethan audiences: Jephthah made a vow to God that if he won a battle, he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house—which turned out to be his daughter. He killed her to keep his vow.

The relevance: Polonius is willing to sacrifice his daughter (use her as bait) for his own purposes.

## 5.4 Polonius's Misreading

**"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."** (Polonius, Line 201)

This is the great irony of the scene. Polonius senses that Hamlet's words are not random—there is "method" (meaning both "purpose" and "order") in them. But he cannot grasp what that method is. He hears truth but cannot recognize it.

**"How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of."** (Lines 206-208)

Polonius attributes Hamlet's wit to madness itself—mad people sometimes stumble on truth by accident. He never considers that Hamlet might be **intentionally** speaking truth while pretending madness.

**Discussion Point:** Why does Hamlet mock Polonius so mercilessly? Is it just part of his "antic disposition," or is there genuine contempt here?

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Lines 219-384)

### 6.1 The Warm Welcome

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first arrive, Hamlet is genuinely glad:

**"My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both?"** (Lines 221-222)

This is the real Hamlet—warm, affectionate, happy to see his childhood friends.

### 6.2 The Turn

But almost immediately, suspicion creeps in:

**"What news?"** (Line 230)

When they have no real news, Hamlet presses:

**"Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation?"** (Lines 265-266)

He asks directly: are you here because you want to be, or because you were sent?

### 6.3 The Confession

Hamlet's famous "prison" speech comes here:

**"Denmark's a prison."** (Line 239)

When Rosencrantz objects, Hamlet elaborates:

**"Why, then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison."** (Lines 245-247)

This is Hamlet the philosopher. Reality is subjective—Denmark is a prison **to him** because of what he knows and feels.

Eventually, he forces the truth:

**"I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the king and queen molt no feather. I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth."** (Lines 285-288)

He pretends to confide in them, describing his melancholy—but he tells them nothing real. Then, abruptly:

**"But what is your affair in Elsinore? We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart."** (Line 289)

When they still hesitate:

**"Nay, then, I have an eye of you. If you love me, hold not off."** (Line 292)

Finally, Guildenstern admits:

**"My lord, we were sent for."** (Line 275)

#### 6.4 Hamlet's Reaction

**"I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent your discovery..."** (Line 285)

He already knew. His "confession" about losing his mirth is a performance—he gives them what they came for while revealing nothing.

#### 6.5 The Recorder Lesson

Later, when Guildenstern tries to "play" Hamlet like an instrument:

**"You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me."** (Lines 352-358)

This is a direct accusation: you think you can manipulate me like a musical instrument. You cannot.

#### 6.6 What This Reveals

| Character | What We Learn |

|-----|-----|

| **Rosencrantz & Guildenstern** | They are willing tools of the king; they value their positions over their friendship |

| **Hamlet** | He is isolated—even his oldest friends are spies; but he is also brilliantly perceptive, seeing through their act immediately |

**Quick Check:** Why does Hamlet continue to engage with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern after he knows they are spies? What does he gain from their presence?

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## 7. Core Concept 5: The Players Arrive (Lines 385-520)

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### 7.1 The Welcome

**"He that plays the king shall be welcome... the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target..."** (Lines 307-311)

Hamlet's excitement is genuine. The players represent something real—art, emotion, truth—in a world of lies.

### 7.2 The Request for a Speech

**"We'll have a speech straight. Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech."** (Lines 317-318)

Hamlet asks for a specific speech: Aeneas's tale to Dido of the death of Priam. This is a story of a king's murder—and a queen's grief.

### 7.3 The First Player's Speech

The speech describes Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, hesitating before killing Priam, the old king of Troy. The parallels to Hamlet are striking:

- A son avenging a father
- A king murdered
- A queen's grief (Hecuba)

When the First Player reaches Hecuba's grief:

**"But who, O who had seen the moblèd queen..."**

**When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport**

**In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs,**

**The instant burst of clamor that she made—**

**Unless things mortal move them not at all—**

**Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven**

**And passion in the gods."**

(Lines 488-494, paraphrased)

The Player is so moved he weeps:

**"Look where he has not turned his color, and has tears in's eyes."** (Polonius, Lines 499-500)

### 7.4 Why This Matters

An actor can weep for a fictional queen who died thousands of years ago. Hamlet, who has real cause for grief and rage, has done nothing. This contrast will fuel his soliloquy.

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## 8. Practical Application: Analyzing Hamlet's Wordplay

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### Activity: Decoding the "Mad" Language (10 minutes)

Hamlet's "mad" speeches are full of hidden meanings. Analyze one of the following exchanges and explain both the surface meaning (what the other character hears) and the subtext (what Hamlet is really saying).

#### Option A: The Fishmonger

**Hamlet:** *Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.*

**Polonius:** *Not I, my lord.*

**Hamlet:** *Then I would you were so honest a man.*

| Surface (Polonius hears) | Subtext (Hamlet means) |

|-----|-----|

| "You sell fish" (nonsense) | "You pimp out your daughter" |

#### Option B: The Jephthah Reference

**Hamlet:** *O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!*

**Polonius:** *What a treasure had he, my lord?*

**Hamlet:** *Why, 'One fair daughter, and no more, the which he loved passing well.'*

| Surface (Polonius hears) | Subtext (Hamlet means) |

|-----|-----|

| A biblical reference | "You, like Jephthah, are sacrificing your daughter" |

#### Option C: The Camel/Weasel/Whale

**Polonius:** *My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.*

**Hamlet:** *Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?*

**Polonius:** *By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.*

**Hamlet:** *Methinks it is like a weasel.*

**Polonius:** *It is backed like a weasel.*

**Hamlet:** *Or like a whale.*

**Polonius:** *Very like a whale.*

| Surface (Polonius hears) | Subtext (Hamlet means) |

|-----|-----|

| Hamlet sees shapes in clouds | Hamlet demonstrates Polonius's utter spinelessness—he'll agree to anything |

**Extension:** Why does Hamlet speak in riddles? What does he gain by making Polonius work to understand him?

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## 9. Summary: Key Takeaways from Act II, Scene ii (Part 1)

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| Section | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius and R&G** | Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are commissioned as spies; they agree willingly |

| **Polonius's Theory** | He believes Hamlet is mad for love; his confidence is absolute but wrong |

| **Hamlet and Polonius** | Hamlet mocks Polonius with "mad" wordplay that contains hidden truths |

| **Hamlet and R&G** | Hamlet quickly sees through them and confronts them; he is isolated but perceptive |

| **The Players** | Their arrival brings art and emotion into Elsinore; the Hecuba speech will haunt Hamlet |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Denmark's a prison." (Hamlet, Line 239)
- "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." (Hamlet, Line 246)
- "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (Polonius, Line 201)
- "What a piece of work is a man!" (Hamlet, Line 293)
- "You cannot play upon me." (Hamlet, Line 357)

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## 10. Looking Ahead

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The players have arrived, and Hamlet has heard an actor weep for Hecuba. In the next lesson, we will examine the second half of this scene—Hamlet's second soliloquy—where he compares himself to that actor, berates his own inaction, and reveals his plan: the players will perform a play "wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

**To prepare:** Reread Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of Act II, Scene ii (Lines 521-580). Consider: Why does Hamlet compare himself to an actor? What does this comparison reveal about his view of himself?

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### Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Mousetrap Plan: 'The Play's the Thing'*

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## Lesson 3: The Mousetrap Plan: 'The play's the thing'

Duration: 45 minutes

# Lesson 3: The Mousetrap Plan: 'The play's the thing'

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act II: The Antic Disposition

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## Lesson Overview

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The court has exited. The players have departed. Hamlet is alone on stage—and for the first time since the ghost's revelation, he speaks directly to us. What follows is one of the most important speeches in the play: Hamlet's second soliloquy, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" In this lesson, we will analyze this extraordinary speech line by line, exploring Hamlet's self-loathing, his admiration for the player's emotion, and his brilliant plan to use the players to "catch the conscience of the king." By the end, we will understand how Hamlet moves from self-criticism to action—and why that action takes the form of a play.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Analyze Hamlet's second soliloquy in detail, understanding its structure and arguments
  - Explain why Hamlet compares himself unfavorably to the First Player
  - Identify the different targets of Hamlet's anger throughout the speech
  - Explain Hamlet's plan to use the play to test Claudius's guilt
  - Analyze the famous line "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king"
- 

## 1. Introduction: Alone with His Thoughts

---

The stage empties. Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the players have all gone. For the second time in the play, we are alone with Hamlet. But this Hamlet is different from the grieving prince of Act I. He has seen a ghost, learned of murder, and spent days (perhaps weeks) pretending madness. Now, fresh from watching an actor weep for a fictional queen, he turns his rage inward.

This soliloquy marks a turning point. Hamlet moves from passive grief to active plotting. But the path is not smooth—it runs through self-loathing, fury, and a desperate need for certainty.

**Think About It:** *Why does watching an actor cry about someone who never existed affect Hamlet so deeply? What does this reveal about Hamlet's priorities and his sense of himself?*

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## 2. The Full Text of the Soliloquy

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Before we analyze, read the soliloquy in its entirety. As you read, mark any words or images that stand out to you.

**HAMLET:**

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*O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!*

*Is it not monstrous that this player here,*

*But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,*

*Could force his soul so to his own conceit*

*That from her working all his visage waned,*

*Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,*

*A broken voice, and his whole function suiting*

*With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!*

*For Hecuba!*

*What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,*

*That he should weep for her? What would he do*

*Had he the motive and the cue for passion*

*That I have? He would drown the stage with tears*

*And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,*

*Make mad the guilty and appall the free,*

*Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed*

*The very faculties of eyes and ears.*

*Yet I,*

*A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak*

*Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,*

*And can say nothing—no, not for a king*

*Upon whose property and most dear life*

*A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?*

*Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,*

*Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,*

*Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat*

*As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?*

*Ha, 'swounds, I should take it! For it cannot be*

*But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall*

*To make oppression bitter, or ere this*

*I should have fatted all the region kites*

*With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!*

*Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!*

*O, vengeance!*

*Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,*

*That I, the son of a dear father murdered,*

*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!*

*Fie upon't, foh! About, my brains. Hum—I have heard*

*That guilty creatures sitting at a play*

*Have by the very cunning of the scene*

*Been struck so to the soul that presently*

*They have proclaimed their malefactions;*

*For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak*

*With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players*

*Play something like the murder of my father*

*Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;*

*I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench,*

*I know my course. The spirit that I have seen*

*May be a devil, and the devil hath power*

*T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps*

*Out of my weakness and my melancholy,*

*As he is very potent with such spirits,*

*Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds*

*More relative than this. The play's the thing*

*Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*

*(Act II, Scene ii, Lines 521-580)*

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### 3. Core Concept 1: Structure of the Soliloquy

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The soliloquy divides into four clear movements:

| Section | Lines | Subject |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Part 1** | 521-535 | The player's emotion vs. Hamlet's inaction |

| **Part 2** | 536-549 | Self-loathing and the fantasy of being challenged |

| **Part 3** | 550-560 | The curse against Claudius and self-mockery |

This structure moves from **admiration of another** (the player) to **self-hatred**, then to **fantasy violence**, then finally to **practical action**. It is a journey through Hamlet's mind in real time.

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## 4. Core Concept 2: Part 1 - The Player's Emotion (Lines 521-535)

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### 4.1 The Opening Self-Accusation

**"O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"** (Line 521)

The soliloquy opens with a burst of self-loathing. Let's unpack each word:

| Word | Meaning | Implication |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **"rogue"** | A dishonest, worthless person | Hamlet sees himself as morally contemptible |

| **"peasant"** | Low-born, common | He is a prince but feels like a serf |

| **"slave"** | One without freedom or will | He is bound by his own inaction |

Three words, each worse than the last. This is not gentle self-criticism—it is savage.

### 4.2 The Player's Power

**"Is it not monstrous that this player here,**

**But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,**

**Could force his soul so to his own conceit**

**That from her working all his visage waned,**

**Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,**

**A broken voice, and his whole function suiting**

**With forms to his conceit?"**

(Lines 522-528)

Hamlet lists the physical manifestations of the player's emotion:

- Face went pale ("visage waned")
- Tears in his eyes
- Look of distraction
- Broken voice
- Entire body matching the emotion

All this for **"a fiction"** —a made-up story about someone who never existed.

**"And all for nothing!"**

***For Hecuba!"***

*(Lines 528-529)*

Hecuba, the queen of Troy, wife of Priam. She existed only in myth. The player weeps for a phantom.

#### 4.3 The Rhetorical Question

***"What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,***

***That he should weep for her?"***

*(Lines 530-531)*

The answer: nothing. No connection, no loss, no grief—just imagination and skill.

***"What would he do***

***Had he the motive and the cue for passion***

***That I have?"***

*(Lines 531-533)*

Hamlet imagines the player in his situation: with a murdered father, a usurping uncle, a command from a ghost. The player would:

***"He would drown the stage with tears***

***And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,***

***Make mad the guilty and appall the free,***

***Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed***

***The very faculties of eyes and ears."***

*(Lines 533-537)*

The contrast is devastating. An actor, with no real grief, can summon passion. Hamlet, with every reason to act, does nothing.

**Quick Check:** *Why is the player's ability to cry for Hecuba "monstrous" to Hamlet? What does this comparison reveal about Hamlet's view of himself?*

---

## 5. Core Concept 3: Part 2 - Self-Loathing and Fantasy (Lines 536-549)

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### 5.1 The Contrast Continues

*"Yet I,*

*A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak*

*Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,*

*And can say nothing—no, not for a king*

*Upon whose property and most dear life*

*A damned defeat was made."*

*(Lines 536-541)*

Hamlet piles on the self-insults:

| Insult | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **"dull"** | Slow, stupid |

| **"muddy-mettled"** | Made of muddy spirit; lacking metal (courage) |

| **"rascal"** | Worthless person |

| **"peak"** | Mope, waste away |

| **"John-a-dreams"** | A dreamy, inactive person (like a folk character) |

| **"unpregnant of my cause"** | Not quickened to action by his cause (like an unborn child) |

He cannot even speak—"can say nothing"—for a father who was murdered.

### 5.2 The Fantasy of Challenge

*"Am I a coward?*

*Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,*

*Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,*

*Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat*

*As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?"*

*(Lines 541-545)*

Hamlet imagines someone challenging him directly—accusing him of cowardice, beating him, humiliating him. His response?

**"Ha, 'swounds, I should take it!" (Line 546)**

He would accept it—because he deserves it.

### 5.3 The Animal Comparison

**"For it cannot be**

**But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall**

**To make oppression bitter."**

*(Lines 546-548)*

Elizabethan physiology believed that the liver produced courage. A "pigeon-livered" person was gentle, cowardly. "Gall" produced bitterness and anger. Hamlet claims he lacks both the courage to act and the anger to fuel action.

**"or ere this**

**I should have fattened all the region kites**

**With this slave's offal."**

*(Lines 548-549)*

If he had courage, he would have killed Claudius already and left his body for the kites (scavenger birds) to eat. The image is violent and bloody—a fantasy of revenge that remains only fantasy.

**Discussion Point:** Why does Hamlet imagine being challenged by an anonymous accuser? What does this reveal about his psychological state?

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Part 3 - The Curse and Self-Mockery (Lines 550-560)

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### 6.1 The Burst of Rage

**"Bloody, bawdy villain!**

**Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"**

*(Lines 550-551)*

Suddenly, Hamlet's rage turns outward. He unleashes a string of curses against Claudius:

| Accusation | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **"Bloody"** | Guilty of murder |

| **"bawdy"** | Lustful, incestuous |

| **"remorseless"** | Without guilt or pity |

| **"treacherous"** | Betrayed his brother |

| **"lecherous"** | Lustful (for Gertrude) |

| **"kindless"** | Without natural feeling; unnatural; without family (kin) |

Six adjectives, piling on top of each other, showing the intensity of Hamlet's hatred.

**"O, vengeance!"** (Line 552)

But the cry for revenge is immediately undercut.

## 6.2 The Self-Mockery

***"Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,***

***That I, the son of a dear father murdered,***

***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!"***

(Lines 552-557)

Hamlet turns on himself again. His curses are just words—"unpacking his heart" like a prostitute ("whore," "drab") reveals his emotions. A "scullion" is a low kitchen servant. He has reduced himself to the lowest level.

***"Fie upon't, foh!"*** (Line 558)

An exclamation of disgust—at himself, at his situation, at everything.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Hamlet mock himself immediately after cursing Claudius? What does this rapid shift in tone reveal about his state of mind?*

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## 7. Core Concept 5: Part 4 - The Plan (Lines 561-580)

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### 7.1 The Turn

**"About, my brains. Hum—" (Line 561)**

This is the turning point. Hamlet commands his brain to work. The "Hum" suggests thinking, planning, shifting from emotion to calculation.

## 7.2 The Precedent

**"I have heard**

**That guilty creatures sitting at a play**

**Have by the very cunning of the scene**

**Been struck so to the soul that presently**

**They have proclaimed their malefactions;**

**For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak**

**With most miraculous organ."**

*(Lines 561-567)*

Hamlet recalls stories of criminals who, watching a play that mirrored their crime, were so moved that they confessed. This is the kernel of his plan.

**The idea:** Art has power. A fictional representation of a real crime can force the truth into the open.

## 7.3 The Plan Itself

**"I'll have these players**

**Play something like the murder of my father**

**Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;**

**I'll tent him to the quick."**

*(Lines 567-570)*

Three steps:

1. **Stage a play** that resembles the murder the ghost described
2. **Watch Claudius** closely during the performance
3. **Interpret his reaction**—if he flinches ("blench"), Hamlet will know he's guilty

"Tent him to the quick" is a medical metaphor. A "tent" was a probe used to examine a wound. Hamlet will probe Claudius's conscience and see if it's infected.

## 7.4 The Need for Certainty

*"If he but blench,*

*I know my course. The spirit that I have seen*

*May be a devil, and the devil hath power*

*T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps*

*Out of my weakness and my melancholy,*

*As he is very potent with such spirits,*

*Abuses me to damn me."*

*(Lines 570-576)*

This is crucial. Hamlet reveals that he still doubts the ghost. Elizabethan theology taught that demons could disguise themselves as dead loved ones to tempt people into sin—especially revenge, which Christianity forbids. If the ghost is a devil, killing Claudius would damn Hamlet.

### **The ghost might be:**

- A true spirit from purgatory (as it claims)
- A demon tempting Hamlet to sin
- A hallucination born of Hamlet's "melancholy" (depression)

Hamlet needs "grounds more relative" (more certain evidence) than a single supernatural encounter.

## 7.5 The Famous Conclusion

*"I'll have grounds*

*More relative than this. The play's the thing*

*Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."*

*(Lines 578-580)*

The couplet summarizes the plan:

- "The play's the thing" — the performance is the tool
- "catch the conscience of the king" — the target is Claudius's guilt

Note the word "conscience." Hamlet hopes to trap not just Claudius's behavior but his inner self—his soul.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Hamlet's plan clever, or is it another form of delay? Does he genuinely need more evidence, or is he finding another reason to postpone action?*

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## 8. Core Concept 6: The Transformation

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Trace Hamlet's emotional journey through this soliloquy:

| Stage | Lines | Emotion | Function |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Admiration** | 521-535 | Envy, shame | The player feels more than Hamlet does |

| **Self-loathing** | 536-549 | Rage at self | He catalogues his failures |

| **Curse** | 550-552 | Outward rage | Brief发泄 against Claudius |

| **Self-mockery** | 552-560 | Contempt | Even his rage is just words |

| **Planning** | 561-580 | Calculation, hope | He finds a way forward |

By the end, Hamlet has moved from paralysis to action. But note: the action is not revenge itself—it's a test. He is still delaying, still seeking certainty.

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## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing Rhetoric

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### Activity: Persuasion and Self-Persuasion (15 minutes)

Hamlet's soliloquy is an attempt to persuade himself to act. Analyze how he uses language to move himself from despair to determination.

#### Part A: Tracking Pronouns

Go through the soliloquy and mark every use of "I," "me," and "my." What pattern do you notice?

| Section | Pronoun Frequency | Effect |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Player section | Lower | Focus on other |

| Self-loathing | High | Focus on self |

| Plan section | Moderate | Balanced |

#### Part B: Rhetorical Questions

Hamlet uses many rhetorical questions. Find three and explain their effect:

| Question | Line | Effect |

|-----|-----|-----|

| "What's Hecuba to him...?" | 530-531 | Emphasizes the contrast |

| "Am I a coward?" | 541 | Forces himself to confront the accusation |

| "Who does me this?" | 545 | Imagines external challenge |

#### Part C: The Final Couplet

Analyze the final two lines as a piece of rhetoric:

***"The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."***

| Element | Analysis |

|-----|-----|

| **Rhythm** | Iambic pentameter, strong stresses on key words |

| **Word choice** | "catch" suggests trapping; "conscience" suggests the soul |

| **Sound** | "play's" and "thing" are short, decisive; "king" ends with finality |

| **Effect** | Certainty after doubt; action after paralysis |

**Extension:** Write a paragraph explaining how Hamlet persuades himself (and us) that the play is a valid course of action. Use evidence from the soliloquy.

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## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **The Player** | An actor feels more for fictional Hecuba than Hamlet feels for his real father |

| **Self-Loathing** | Hamlet calls himself "rogue," "peasant slave," "dull," "muddy-mettled," "pigeon-livered" |

| **The Fantasy** | He imagines being challenged and admits he would accept the insult |

| **The Curse** | He unleashes rage on Claudius ("bloody, bawdy villain") then mocks himself for words alone |

| **The Plan** | The players will perform a murder resembling Claudius's crime; Hamlet will watch his reaction |

| **The Doubt** | Hamlet still isn't certain about the ghost—it could be a devil |

| **The Conclusion** | "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"
  - "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?"
  - "Am I a coward?"
  - "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"
  - "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."
- 

## 11. Connecting to the Play

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This soliloquy marks a crucial transition. Hamlet now has a plan. But note what the plan reveals about him:

| Quality | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Intellectual** | He uses a play, not a sword—his weapon is art, not violence |

| **Cautious** | He needs certainty before acting |

| **Self-aware** | He knows he has been delaying |

| **Creative** | His solution is ingenious, using the tools he has (players, performance) |

The question remains: will the plan work? And if it does, will Hamlet finally act?

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## 12. Looking Ahead

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The trap is set. In Act III, the players will perform, and Claudius will react. We will watch Hamlet watch the king—and finally receive the confirmation he needs.

**To prepare:** Think about what you expect to happen during the play-within-a-play. How will Claudius react? What will Hamlet do when he knows for certain?

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### Lesson 3 Complete

Next Module: Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point

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### Module 3 Summary Sheet

## Module 3: Act II: The Antic Disposition — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **Spying and Surveillance:** Act II intensifies the theme of watching. Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes, uses Ophelia as bait to spy on Hamlet, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are commissioned by Claudius to spy on their old friend.
- **Polonius's Foolishness:** Polonius confidently misinterprets Hamlet's strange behavior as lovesickness, demonstrating his arrogance and lack of true insight. His line "though this be madness, yet there is method in't" is ironically true.
- **Ophelia's Report:** Ophelia's terrified description of Hamlet's disheveled appearance and silent, intense scrutiny provides the first view of his "antic disposition" in action.
- **The Sponge Metaphor:** Hamlet brilliantly insults Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, calling them "sponges" who soak up the king's favors only to be squeezed dry when no longer useful.
- **Denmark as Prison:** Hamlet's philosophical statement—"Denmark's a prison"—reflects his sense of entrapment in a corrupt and watched world.
- **The Players Arrive:** The arrival of a travelling acting troupe provides Hamlet with a new opportunity. Their ability to evoke genuine emotion sparks his second soliloquy.
- **The Second Soliloquy:** "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" is a burst of self-loathing. Hamlet compares himself unfavorably to an actor who can weep for a fictional character (Hecuba) while he, with real cause, remains paralyzed.
- **The Mousetrap Plan:** From this self-criticism, a plan emerges. Hamlet will have the players perform a play resembling his father's murder, watch Claudius's reaction, and "catch the conscience of the king." The plan also reflects his lingering doubt about the ghost, which "may be a devil."

### Core Takeaways

Act II shows Hamlet putting his plan into motion. His "antic disposition" allows him to observe and mock the spies surrounding him, particularly Polonius and his former friends. The arrival of the players is the catalyst for the act's climax: Hamlet's second soliloquy, where his self-hatred for his inaction finally gives way to a decisive, if indirect, course of action. By the end of the act, he is no longer just reacting but plotting, setting the stage for the play's pivotal third act.

### Terms to Know

- **Fishmonger** — Hamlet's insult to Polonius; Elizabethan slang for a pimp, suggesting Polonius is using his daughter Ophelia as bait.
- **Sponge** — Hamlet's metaphor for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who soak up the king's favor and will eventually be squeezed dry.
- **Jephthah** — A biblical figure who sacrificed his daughter; Hamlet alludes to him to criticize Polonius for sacrificing Ophelia.

- **Hecuba** — The legendary queen of Troy, whose grief for her murdered husband Priam is the subject of the First Player's moving speech.
- **Rogue and Peasant Slave** — Hamlet's self-deprecating terms in his second soliloquy, expressing his feelings of worthlessness and lowliness for failing to act.
- **Motive and Cue for Passion** — Terms from acting; Hamlet has the real-life motivation, while the actor has only a fictional "cue."
- **Mousetrap** — The name Hamlet gives to the play-within-a-play, indicating its purpose: to trap a guilty creature (Claudius).

### Review Questions

1. Describe Ophelia's report of Hamlet's visit. What does his silent, intense behavior suggest about his state of mind?
2. What is Polonius's theory about the cause of Hamlet's madness, and why is he so confident in his incorrect interpretation?
3. How does Hamlet immediately see through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and what does the "sponge" metaphor reveal about their fate?
4. In his second soliloquy, why does Hamlet compare himself to the First Player? What does this comparison reveal about his self-perception?
5. What two purposes does Hamlet's plan for the play serve? How does it address both his need for proof and his lingering doubt about the ghost?

### Further Thinking

- Hamlet's "antic disposition" allows him to speak truth to power while appearing harmless. Is this a form of strength, or does it further trap him in a world of deception? What is the cost of constantly performing a role?
- The players arrive and immediately have a profound effect on Hamlet. What does the play suggest about the power of art (theatre) to reveal truth, evoke emotion, and even incite action?

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### Module 3 Quiz

**Q1.** At the beginning of Act II, Scene i, Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to Paris. What is the main purpose of this mission?

- A) To deliver a large sum of money to Laertes.
- B) To spy on Laertes by spreading false rumors about him and gauging people's reactions.
- C) To bring Laertes back home to Denmark immediately.
- D) To deliver a letter of apology to the French king.

**Q2.** When Ophelia describes Hamlet's visit to her (with his doublet unbraced, stockings fouled, and pale as his shirt), Polonius immediately concludes that:

- A) Hamlet has seen the ghost again.
- B) Hamlet is planning to leave Denmark.
- C) Hamlet is mad for her love because she has rejected him.
- D) Hamlet is suffering from a physical illness.

**Q3.** Why have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern been summoned to Elsinore?

- A) To participate in a festival celebrating the new king.
- B) To spy on Hamlet and discover the cause of his 'transformation'.
- C) To escort Hamlet on a diplomatic mission to Norway.
- D) To serve as new advisors to the king.

**Q4.** When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first arrive, how does Hamlet quickly figure out that they were sent for?

- A) They confess immediately upon seeing him.
- B) Claudius tells him beforehand.
- C) Hamlet questions them intensely, and they give evasive answers until they finally admit the truth.
- D) Horatio warns Hamlet before they arrive.

**Q5.** What is the famous metaphor Hamlet uses to accuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of being easily manipulated by the king?

- A) He calls them 'lapdogs' who follow the king.
- B) He calls them 'sponges' that soak up the king's favors and will be squeezed dry.
- C) He calls them 'weathervanes' that turn with the wind.
- D) He calls them 'echoes' that only repeat what they hear.

**Q6.** In his 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' soliloquy, what about the First Player prompts Hamlet to bitterly criticize himself?

- A) The Player's ability to remember his lines perfectly.
- B) The Player's deep, genuine emotion for a fictional character (Hecuba).
- C) The Player's skill with a sword.
- D) The Player's loyalty to the king.

**Q7.** At the end of Act II, what specific plan does Hamlet devise to determine Claudius's guilt?

- A) To challenge Claudius to a duel.
- B) To have the players perform a play that mirrors the murder of his father.
- C) To ask Ophelia to spy on Claudius for him.
- D) To confess his suspicions to the court.

**Q8.** When Polonius interacts with the 'mad' Hamlet, Hamlet's cryptic replies are full of hidden insults that Polonius completely misses.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prove to be loyal friends to Hamlet by refusing the king's request to spy on him.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** In his second soliloquy, Hamlet expresses complete confidence that the ghost was his father and has no doubts about the mission of revenge.

*(True / False)*

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** B — Polonius instructs Reynaldo to use 'indirections' to spy on Laertes, revealing his controlling and hypocritical nature. He wants to know how his son is behaving, but does so through deception.

**Q2:** C — Polonius, full of self-importance, believes his theory is correct. He is completely wrong, but his confidence is unshakable, demonstrating his foolishness.

**Q3:** B — Claudius and Gertrude commission Hamlet's old friends to 'glean' what afflicts him, making them willing tools of the king's surveillance.

**Q4:** C — Hamlet's perceptiveness shines through. He directly asks if they were sent for and, through clever questioning, forces them to admit they are spies.

**Q5:** B — Hamlet's 'sponge' metaphor is a sharp insult, predicting that they will be used up and discarded by Claudius once they are no longer useful.

**Q6:** B — Hamlet is stunned that an actor can summon such powerful feeling for a made-up story, while he, with a real motive for passion, remains passive and has done nothing.

**Q7:** B — This is 'The Mousetrap' plan. Hamlet hopes that by seeing his crime re-enacted, Claudius's guilt will be visibly revealed.

**Q8:** True — For example, when Hamlet calls Polonius a 'fishmonger' (a slang term for a pimp), he is subtly accusing Polonius of prostituting his daughter, Ophelia, for information.

**Q9:** False — They immediately agree to spy on their old friend in exchange for the king's favor, showing that their loyalty is to power, not to Hamlet.

**Q10:** False — While he plans the play, he also reveals his doubt, stating the spirit he saw 'may be a devil' and that he needs 'grounds more relative' (more certain evidence) before acting.

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## Module 4: Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point

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Act III contains the play's pivotal scenes: the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, the play-within-a-play, the prayer scene, and the confrontation with Gertrude, which leads to Polonius's death.

### Learning Outcomes:

- Summarize the key events of Act III.
- Conduct a detailed analysis of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy.
- Analyze the play-within-a-play and its success in revealing Claudius's guilt.
- Discuss the dramatic irony and tension in the prayer scene.
- Examine the closet scene and its consequences, including the death of Polonius.



### Lesson 1: 'To be, or not to be': The Ultimate Question

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 1: 'To be, or not to be': The Ultimate

# Question

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point

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## Lesson Overview

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It is the most famous speech in the English language. Spoken by the most famous character in literature. "To be, or not to be" has become so embedded in our culture that even people who have never read Hamlet recognize the words. But what does the speech actually mean? In this lesson, we will conduct a line-by-line analysis of Hamlet's third soliloquy, exploring its meditation on existence, suffering, death, and the fear that keeps us all from ending our pain. This is not a speech about revenge—it is a speech about being human.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Explain the central question Hamlet poses in the soliloquy
  - Analyze the speech's structure and logical progression
  - Interpret the famous "sleep" metaphor and its implications
  - Identify the "whips and scorns" Hamlet lists as reasons to live or die
  - Explain the role of "conscience" and the "dread of something after death" in human inaction
  - Connect the soliloquy to Hamlet's character and the play's themes
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Question Itself

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Hamlet enters, alone. He has been pretending madness, sparring with Polonius, exposing his old friends as spies. He has a plan: the play will test Claudius's guilt. But before that plan unfolds, Shakespeare gives us one more moment alone with the prince. And what we hear is not about Claudius, or revenge, or the ghost. It is about the most fundamental question a human being can ask: **Is existence worth the pain?**

The speech is philosophical, not personal. Hamlet does not mention his father, his mother, or his uncle. He speaks in general terms—about the human condition, not his own situation. And yet, everything we know about Hamlet's despair makes this speech deeply personal.

**Think About It:** *Why might Shakespeare place this philosophical meditation here, just before the play that will finally give Hamlet proof of Claudius's guilt? What does the placement suggest about Hamlet's state of mind?*

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## 2. The Full Text of the Soliloquy

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Before we analyze, read the soliloquy in its entirety. As you read, mark any words or images that stand out to you.

**HAMLET:**

*To be, or not to be—that is the question:*

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer*

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*

*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,*

*And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—*

*No more—and by a sleep to say we end*

*The heartache and the thousand natural shocks*

*That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation*

*Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—*

*To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,*

*For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,*

*When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,*

*Must give us pause. There's the respect*

*That makes calamity of so long life.*

*For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,*

*Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,*

*The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,*

*The insolence of office, and the spurns*

*That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,*

*When he himself might his quietus make*

*With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,*

*To grunt and sweat under a weary life,*

*But that the dread of something after death,*

*The undiscovered country from whose bourn*

*No traveler returns, puzzles the will*

*And makes us rather bear those ills we have*

*Than fly to others that we know not of?*

*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,*

*And thus the native hue of resolution*

*Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,*

*And enterprises of great pitch and moment*

*With this regard their currents turn awry*

*And lose the name of action.*

*(Act III, Scene i, Lines 55-87)*

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### 3. Core Concept 1: Structure of the Soliloquy

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The soliloquy follows a clear logical progression:

| Section | Lines | Subject |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Part 1** | 55-60 | The central question: to exist or not to exist? |

| **Part 2** | 60-66 | Death as sleep—and the problem of dreams |

| **Part 3** | 66-76 | The catalog of sufferings that make life unbearable |

| **Part 4** | 76-82 | The fear of death's mystery that prevents action |

| **Part 5** | 82-87 | The conclusion: thought makes cowards of us all |

This is a philosophical argument, structured like a logical proof. Hamlet is thinking through the question systematically.

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### 4. Core Concept 2: Part 1 - The Question (Lines 55-60)

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**"To be, or not to be—that is the question:"** (Line 55)

The opening line is deceptively simple. "To be" means to exist, to live. "Not to be" means to cease existing, to die. But the line also carries philosophical weight: it is the question of existence itself.

***"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer***

***The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,***

***Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,***

***And by opposing end them."***

*(Lines 56-60)*

Hamlet frames the question as a choice between two options:

| Option | Meaning | Metaphor |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Passive endurance** | Suffer what life sends | "slings and arrows" (weapons shot at you) |

| **Active opposition** | Fight back against troubles | "take arms against a sea of troubles" |

Notice the mixed metaphor: you can't literally fight a "sea" with weapons. The image is deliberately impossible—suggesting that fighting against life's troubles is as futile as fighting the ocean.

**Key word:** "nobler." Hamlet asks not which choice is easier, but which is more honorable. This is a moral question, not just a practical one.

***"and by opposing end them."***

This phrase is ambiguous. Does ending "them" mean ending the troubles—or ending oneself? The ambiguity is intentional: in fighting against life, one might end life itself.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Hamlet frame the question in terms of nobility rather than simply in terms of pain and pleasure? What does this reveal about his values?*

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Part 2 - Death as Sleep (Lines 60-66)

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### 5.1 The Equation

***"To die, to sleep—***

***No more—"***

*(Lines 60-61)*

Hamlet makes an equation: death = sleep. If death is simply sleep, then it is "no more" than that—an end to consciousness, an end to suffering.

***"and by a sleep to say we end***

***The heartache and the thousand natural shocks***

***That flesh is heir to."***

*(Lines 61-63)*

This is the appeal of death: it ends "heartache" (emotional pain) and "the thousand natural shocks" (physical and psychological sufferings that come with being human).

***"'Tis a consummation***

***Devoutly to be wished."***

*(Lines 63-64)*

"Consummation" means completion, fulfillment, an ending. The word also has religious overtones—a consummation is the completion of a divine plan. Hamlet says this ending is something to be wished for "devoutly"—with religious fervor.

## 5.2 The Problem

***"To die, to sleep—***

***To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,"***

*(Lines 64-65)*

The repetition of "to die, to sleep" builds expectation—then the turn: "perchance to dream." Sleep brings dreams. What if death brings dreams too?

***"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,***

***When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,***

***Must give us pause."***

*(Lines 66-68)*

### Key phrases:

- **"shuffled off this mortal coil"** — "Coil" means turmoil, disturbance, but also the flesh itself (the "coil" of the body). To die is to shed the body like a garment.
- **"what dreams may come"** — The content of death is unknown. If death is like sleep, it may bring nightmares.
- **"must give us pause"** — This uncertainty stops us.

***"There's the respect***

***That makes calamity of so long life."***

(Lines 68-69)

"Respect" here means consideration, reason. This uncertainty is what makes life last so long—we endure calamity because we fear what might come after.

**Discussion Point:** Why is the shift from "sleep" to "dreams" so crucial? How does it change the meaning of death as an escape?

---

## 6. Core Concept 4: Part 3 - The Catalog of Sufferings (Lines 70-76)

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Hamlet now lists the reasons someone would want to die—the "whips and scorns" of life:

**"For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,**

**Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,**

**The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,**

**The insolence of office, and the spurns**

**That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,"**

(Lines 70-74)

Let's unpack each suffering:

| Suffering | Meaning | Modern Equivalent |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **"whips and scorns of time"** | The punishments and mockeries life inflicts | Life's constant humiliations |

| **"th' oppressor's wrong"** | Injustice from those in power | Tyranny, abuse of authority |

| **"the proud man's contumely"** | Insults from the arrogant | Being looked down on |

| **"the pangs of despised love"** | Pain of rejected love | Heartbreak, unrequited love |

| **"the law's delay"** | Justice that never comes | Bureaucracy, corruption |

| **"the insolence of office"** | Arrogance of officials | Abuse of position |

| **"the spurns that patient merit of th' unworthy takes"** | The insults that worthy people endure from the unworthy | Good people pushed around by bad |

This is a catalog of every reason to be tired of life. Notably, Hamlet does not mention his own specific sufferings—he speaks universally. These are the "thousand natural shocks" that all humans endure.

**"When he himself might his quietus make**

**With a bare bodkin?"**

(Lines 75-76)

"Quietus" means settlement, discharge—ending one's account. A "bodkin" is a dagger. The question: why endure all this when you could end it with a single blade?

**Quick Check:** *Why does Hamlet speak in general terms rather than listing his own specific griefs? What effect does this universality create?*

---

## 7. Core Concept 5: Part 4 - The Fear of Death (Lines 76-82)

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### 5.1 The Turning Point

*"Who would fardels bear,*

*To grunt and sweat under a weary life,*

*But that the dread of something after death,*

*The undiscovered country from whose bourn*

*No traveler returns, puzzles the will"*

*(Lines 76-80)*

"Fardels" are burdens. Who would carry life's burdens, sweating and groaning under the weight, except that we fear what comes after death?

#### Key metaphors:

- **"The undiscovered country"** — Death is a place no one has mapped, a territory unexplored
- **"from whose bourn no traveler returns"** — "Bourn" means boundary; once you cross into death, you cannot come back (the ghost's existence complicates this, but Hamlet is speaking philosophically)

*"puzzles the will"*

The uncertainty paralyzes us. We cannot choose because we cannot know.

### 5.2 The Conclusion of the Argument

*"And makes us rather bear those ills we have*

*Than fly to others that we know not of?"*

*(Lines 81-82)*

This is the heart of the speech. We choose to endure known suffering rather than risk unknown suffering. The devil we know is better than the devil we don't.

**Discussion Point:** *Is this rational? Is it better to endure certain pain than to risk possible but unknown pain? What would you choose?*

---

## 8. Core Concept 6: Part 5 - The Conclusion (Lines 82-87)

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### 6.1 Conscience and Cowardice

*"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," (Line 82)*

"Conscience" here has two meanings:

1. **Moral awareness** — the sense of right and wrong that might forbid suicide
2. **Consciousness** — thought, reflection, the ability to consider consequences

Both meanings apply. Our ability to think—to imagine what might come after death—paralyzes us.

*"And thus the native hue of resolution*

*is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,"*

*(Lines 83-84)*

"Native hue of resolution" means the natural color of determination—healthy, robust, ready to act. But thought ("the pale cast of thought") makes it sickly, pale. Thinking too much kills action.

### 6.2 The Final Lines

*"And enterprises of great pitch and moment*

*With this regard their currents turn awry*

*And lose the name of action."*

*(Lines 85-87)*

"Enterprises of great pitch and moment" are important, significant undertakings. But because of this ("with this regard"), they turn aside ("turn awry") and never become action.

**The final phrase is devastating:** they "lose the name of action." They aren't just delayed—they cease to be actions at all. They become nothing.

---

## 9. Core Concept 7: The Speech in Context

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### 9.1 What the Speech Is Not About

This soliloquy is often misread as being specifically about Hamlet's revenge. But notice:

| Not Mentioned | Implication |

|-----|-----|

| Claudius | The speech is philosophical, not personal |

| The ghost | No reference to the supernatural encounter |

| The murder | No mention of the crime |

| Ophelia | No personal relationships |

Hamlet is thinking about **the human condition**, not his specific situation.

## 9.2 What the Speech Reveals About Hamlet

| Quality | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Intellectual** | He thinks in abstract, philosophical terms |

| **Depressed** | The catalog of sufferings reflects his worldview |

| **Suicidal** | He contemplates death as release |

| **Indecisive** | The speech explains why he (and all humans) cannot act |

| **Universal** | He sees his own pain as part of the human condition |

## 9.3 The Dramatic Irony

The speech is interrupted—by Ophelia. Hamlet has been speaking aloud, perhaps unaware that others are near. When Ophelia enters, the philosophical mood shatters, and Hamlet becomes cruel. The contrast between the meditative prince and the harsh one is jarring.

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# 10. Practical Application: Close Reading Exercise

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## Activity: Tracking Key Words (15 minutes)

### Part A: Word Frequency

Go through the soliloquy and count how many times certain concepts appear:

| Word/Concept | Tally | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Death/die | | |

| Sleep | | |

| Suffer/endure | | |

| Fear/dread | | |

| Thought/conscience | | |

### Part B: The Argument in Your Own Words

Summarize Hamlet's argument in three sentences:

1. The question is whether to exist or not exist.

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

### Example:

1. The question is whether to exist or not exist.

2. Death would end suffering, like sleep ends a painful day.

3. But we fear that death might bring dreams worse than life, so we endure.

### Part C: Personal Connection

Write a brief response to one of these questions:

- Do you agree with Hamlet that "conscience does make cowards of us all"? Is thinking too much a barrier to action?
  - Can you relate to the idea of enduring known suffering rather than risking unknown suffering?
  - Why do you think this speech has become so famous? What speaks to people across centuries?
- 

## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **The Question** | To be (exist, endure) or not to be (die, escape) |

| **Death as Sleep** | Death would end suffering—but what if it brings dreams? |

| **The Sufferings** | A catalog of human pain: oppression, rejection, injustice |

| **The Fear** | We fear the "undiscovered country" of death |

| **The Conclusion** | Thought ("conscience") makes us cowards; we endure known ills |

| **The Speech's Role** | Philosophical, not personal—but reveals Hamlet's despair |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "To be, or not to be—that is the question."
  - "To die, to sleep— / To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub."
  - "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns."
  - "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."
  - "And enterprises of great pitch and moment... / lose the name of action."
- 

## 12. Connecting to the Play

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This soliloquy is often seen as the philosophical heart of *Hamlet*. It explains, in universal terms, why humans struggle to act—especially when action involves risk and the unknown. Hamlet's delay is not just personal; it is human.

But notice the dramatic irony: even as Hamlet speaks of the paralysis of thought, he has already planned the play that will test Claudius. He is not entirely paralyzed. The speech may reflect his deepest fears, but it does not describe his actual behavior.

The question remains: will thought prevent action when the moment comes?

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## 13. Looking Ahead

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The philosophical meditation ends. Ophelia enters, and the mood shifts. In our next lesson, we will examine the play-within-a-play—"The Mousetrap"—and watch as Hamlet finally gets the proof he needs.

**To prepare:** Think about what you expect Claudius's reaction to be. Will he betray his guilt? How will Hamlet respond?

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### Lesson 1 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Mousetrap Succeeds: Claudius's Reaction*

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## Lesson 2: The Mousetrap Succeeds: Claudius's Reaction

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 2: The Mousetrap Succeeds: Claudius's Reaction

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point

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## Lesson Overview

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The moment of truth has arrived. Hamlet has prepared the players, added his own lines, and arranged for the court to witness a play that mirrors the murder of his father. Now, in front of Claudius, Gertrude, and the entire court, the "Mousetrap" is sprung. In this lesson, we will analyze the play-within-a-play scene (Act III, Scene ii), examining how Hamlet orchestrates the performance, how Claudius reacts, and what the king's response confirms. This is the climax of Hamlet's investigation—and the turning point of the entire tragedy.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the key events of the play-within-a-play scene
  - Analyze Hamlet's behavior before and during the performance
  - Explain the significance of the dumb show and the spoken play
  - Examine Claudius's rising guilt and his abrupt exit
  - Discuss what the scene confirms for Hamlet and how he responds
  - Analyze the theme of appearance versus reality as it culminates in this scene
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Trap Is Sprung

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All of Act II built toward this moment. Hamlet's "antic disposition," his testing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his excitement at the players' arrival—everything has been leading to the stage in Elsinore. Now the court assembles. The players take their places. And Hamlet, the ultimate director, watches not the play but the audience. He is looking for one thing: a reaction.

**Think About It:** *Why does Hamlet choose a public performance rather than a private confrontation? What does he gain by exposing Claudius in front of the court?*

---

## 2. Summary of Events (Act III, Scene ii)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet Instructs the Players** | Before the play, Hamlet gives the actors detailed advice on how to perform—neither too much nor too little. |

| **Hamlet and Horatio** | Hamlet tells Horatio about the plan and asks him to watch Claudius's reactions alongside him. |

| **The Court Arrives** | Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, and the entire court enter. Hamlet lies down at Ophelia's feet, speaking wildly. |

| **The Dumb Show** | The players perform a silent version of the murder: a king is poisoned in his garden by his nephew, who then woos the queen. |

| **The Spoken Play** | The player king and queen discuss their love; the player king is murdered; the player queen protests too much. |

| **Claudius's Reaction** | At the moment of poisoning, Claudius rises, calls for light, and storms out. The play is stopped. |

| **Hamlet's Triumph** | Hamlet is ecstatic—he now has proof. He tells Horatio they will wager on it. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to summon him to his mother. |

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## 3. Core Concept 1: Preparation (Lines 1-50)

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### 3.1 Hamlet's Advice to the Players

The scene opens with Hamlet giving the players detailed instructions on how to act. This is the only time in Shakespeare we see a character directing a play—and Hamlet's advice is excellent:

*"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines."* (Lines 1-4)

He warns against:

- **Overacting:** "do not saw the air too much with your hand"
- **Ham-acting:** "though it make the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve"
- **Clowning:** "let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them"

**Why this matters:** Hamlet cares about art. He wants the play to be **真实** enough to affect its audience—specifically, one member of the audience.

### 3.2 The Irony

Hamlet, who has been performing madness for the court, now lectures on the importance of natural acting. He knows the difference between **真实** performance and empty spectacle—and he knows that Claudius must see something **真实** enough to penetrate his guilt.

**Quick Check:** Why might Shakespeare include such detailed instructions about acting? What does this reveal about Hamlet's character and his relationship to performance?

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## 4. Core Concept 2: The Partnership with Horatio (Lines 50-85)

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### 4.1 The Trust

***"Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man***

***As e'er my conversation coped withal."***

*(Lines 50-51)*

Hamlet begins with praise for the one person he trusts completely. In a court of spies, Horatio is the only true friend.

#### **4.2 The Task**

***"There is a play tonight before the king.***

***One scene of it comes near the circumstance***

***Which I have told thee of my father's death.***

***I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,***

***Even with the very comment of thy soul***

***Observe mine uncle. If his occulted guilt***

***Do not itself unkennel in one speech,***

***It is a damned ghost that we have seen,***

***And my imaginations are as foul***

***As Vulcan's stithy."***

*(Lines 70-79)*

Hamlet enlists Horatio as a second pair of eyes. Two witnesses are better than one. If they both see Claudius react, the evidence is stronger.

***"Give him heedful note;***

***For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,***

***And after we will both our judgments join***

***In censure of his seeming."***

(Lines 79-82)

**Key word:** "seeming." Appearance versus reality is the theme. Hamlet will watch Claudius's "seeming"—his outward appearance—to judge his inner reality.

**Discussion Point:** Why does Hamlet need Horatio's confirmation? Doesn't he trust his own judgment?

---

## 5. Core Concept 3: The Court Assembled (Lines 85-135)

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### 5.1 The Entrance

The court enters in procession. Claudius asks after Hamlet's welfare; Hamlet responds with "mad" wordplay:

**Claudius:** *How fares our cousin Hamlet?*

**Hamlet:** *Excellent, i' faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so. (Lines 88-90)*

Hamlet puns on "fare" (food) and claims he lives on air and promises—a dig at Claudius's empty assurances.

### 5.2 Hamlet and Ophelia

Hamlet lies at Ophelia's feet, continuing his "mad" performance:

**Hamlet:** *Lady, shall I lie in your lap?*

**Ophelia:** *No, my lord.*

**Hamlet:** *I mean, my head upon your lap?*

**Ophelia:** *Ay, my lord.*

**Hamlet:** *Do you think I meant country matters?*

(Lines 104-109)

The pun is sexual ("country matters" sounds like "cunt-ry matters"). Ophelia is embarrassed; Hamlet is cruel. This is not the lover who wrote "never doubt I love." The "antic disposition" has hardened him.

**Hamlet:** *That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.*

**Ophelia:** *What is, my lord?*

**Hamlet:** *Nothing.*

(Lines 112-114)

"Nothing" was slang for the female anatomy. Hamlet's language has become crude and dismissive.

### 5.3 The Dumb Show

Before the spoken play begins, the players perform a "dumb show"—a silent pantomime of the entire plot:

1. A king and queen enter and embrace
2. The queen protests her love and departs
3. The king sleeps
4. Another man poisons the king's ear and exits
5. The queen returns, finds the body, and mourns
6. The poisoner returns and woos the queen with gifts

**The crucial question:** Why does the dumb show not cause Claudius to react immediately?

| Possibility | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius is composed** | He might be controlling himself, not wanting to react to a mere pantomime |

| **Claudius is distracted** | He might be talking to Gertrude or watching Hamlet |

| **Dramatic convention** | Elizabethan audiences accepted that dumb shows were prologues, not part of the main action |

| **Shakespeare's choice** | The tension builds slowly—Claudius's reaction comes later |

Ophelia notices:

**Ophelia:** *What means this, my lord?*

**Hamlet:** *Marry, this is miching mallecho; it means mischief.*

*(Lines 129-130)*

"Miching mallecho" means sneaky mischief. Hamlet acknowledges the dumb show's purpose without revealing the plan.

**Quick Check:** *Why doesn't Claudius react to the dumb show? What might be going through his mind?*

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## 6. Core Concept 4: The Play Within the Play (Lines 135-255)

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### 6.1 The Player King and Queen

The spoken play begins. The Player Queen protests her love extravagantly:

**"In second husband let me be accursed!**

**None wed the second but who killed the first."**

*(Lines 165-166)*

The irony is sharp—and aimed directly at Gertrude. Hamlet comments:

**"That's wormwood, wormwood."** (Line 168)

"Wormwood" is a bitter herb. The line is bitter medicine for his mother.

The Player Queen continues:

**"A second time I kill my husband dead**

**When second husband kisses me in bed."**

(Lines 169-170)

Gertrude, sitting beside the man who killed her first husband, must feel the sting.

## 6.2 Hamlet's Commentary

Throughout the play, Hamlet provides a running commentary—ostensibly for Ophelia, but really for the court:

**"Begin, murderer. Leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge."** (Lines 233-234)

He is no longer pretending madness. He is openly accusing.

## 6.3 The Murder

Lucianus, the murderer, enters and pours poison in the Player King's ear:

**"Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,**

**Confederate season, else no creature seeing.**

**Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,**

**With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,**

**Thy natural magic and dire property**

**On wholesome life usurps immediately."**

(Lines 240-245)

**The poison is poured in the ear**—exactly as the ghost described. This is no general murder; it is specific, detailed, unmistakable.

## 6.4 The Reaction

**Claudius:** Give me some light. Away!

**All:** Lights, lights, lights!

(Lines 251-252)

Claudius rises. He calls for light. He leaves—abruptly, urgently. The court follows in confusion.

The play has worked.

---

## 7. Core Concept 5: The Aftermath (Lines 255-300)

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### 7.1 Hamlet's Triumph

**Hamlet:** *Why, let the stricken deer go weep,*

*The hart ungallèd play.*

*For some must watch while some must sleep;*

*Thus runs the world away.*

(Lines 256-259)

Hamlet breaks into song—almost giddy with relief. He has his proof.

**"Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players?"** (Lines 260-262)

He jokes about becoming an actor. He is euphoric.

### 7.2 Horatio's Confirmation

**Horatio:** *I did very well note him.*

**Hamlet:** *Upon the talk of the poisoning?*

**Horatio:** *I did very well note him.*

(Lines 269-271)

Two witnesses. Both saw. The ghost is vindicated.

### 7.3 The Arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

The celebration is interrupted. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive with a message: Hamlet's mother wants to see him.

**Rosencrantz:** *The queen, your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you.*

**Hamlet:** *You are welcome.*

**Rosencrantz:** *Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother's commandment; if not, your pardon and my return shall be the end of my business.*

**Hamlet:** *Sir, I cannot.*

*(Lines 292-298)*

Hamlet toys with them, refusing to give a straight answer. He knows they are spies.

## 7.4 The Recorder Lesson

When Guildenstern admits he cannot play the recorder, Hamlet seizes the opportunity:

**"Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me."** *(Lines 338-345)*

This is the clearest statement yet: Hamlet knows they are trying to manipulate him—and they will fail.

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Hamlet delay going to his mother? What might he be afraid of?*

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## 8. Core Concept 6: What Has Been Confirmed?

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### 8.1 For Hamlet

| Before the Play | After the Play |

|-----|-----|

| The ghost might be a devil | The ghost told the truth |

| Claudius might be innocent | Claudius is guilty |

| Revenge might be wrong | Revenge is justified |

| Hamlet might be mad | Hamlet has been right all along |

### 8.2 For Claudius

| Before the Play | After the Play |

|-----|-----|

| Hamlet might be mad for love | Hamlet knows something |

| The court is under control | Hamlet is dangerous |

| The secret is safe | The secret is exposed |

### 8.3 For the Audience

We now know what every character knows—and what they don't know. The dramatic irony shifts:

| Character | What They Know |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | Claudius killed his father; he must act |

| **Claudius** | Hamlet knows; he must act to protect himself |

| **Gertrude** | ? (Still unclear what she knows) |

| **Polonius** | Nothing—still thinks it's lovesickness |

| **R&G** | Nothing—still think they're helping |

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## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing the Scene

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### Activity: Tracking Reactions (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Dumb Show vs. The Spoken Play

Compare Claudius's reaction (or lack thereof) to the dumb show and the spoken play. What might explain the difference?

| Factor | Dumb Show | Spoken Play |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Audience attention** | May be distracted | Focused on performance |

| **Specificity** | General murder | Poison in ear, nephew kills king |

| **Hamlet's commentary** | None | Constant, pointed |

| **Claudius's state** | Composed? | Increasingly agitated |

#### Part B: Hamlet's Behavior

Track Hamlet's behavior throughout the scene. How does he change?

| Moment | Behavior | Purpose |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Before play | Instructing actors | Ensuring quality |

| Court assembles | Crude to Ophelia | Maintaining "antic disposition" |

| During play | Commentary | Provoking Claudius |

| After play | Euphoric, singing | Release of tension |

| With R&G | Icy, mocking | Exposing their betrayal |

#### Part C: The Recorder Speech

Analyze Hamlet's recorder speech as a piece of rhetoric:

***"You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?"***

| Element | Analysis |

|-----|-----|

| **Metaphor** | Human as musical instrument |

| **Repetition** | "You would... you would... you would" builds accusation |

| **Rhetorical question** | Challenges them directly |

| **Effect** | Exposes their manipulation while asserting his control |

**Extension Question:** Why does Hamlet tell them they cannot "play upon him" even though he knows they will report everything to Claudius? What does he gain by this admission?

---

## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Preparation** | Hamlet instructs the players and enlists Horatio as a witness |

| **The Dumb Show** | Silent pantomime of the murder—Claudius does not react |

| **The Spoken Play** | Lucianus pours poison in the ear—specific to the ghost's account |

| **Claudius's Reaction** | He rises, calls for light, and storms out—guilt confirmed |

| **Hamlet's Triumph** | Euphoric, singing, certain—the ghost was real |

| **The Recorder Lesson** | Hamlet exposes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as manipulators |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle." (from Act II)
- "Give him heedful note; / For I mine eyes will rivet to his face."
- "He poisons him i' the garden for his estate."
- "Give me some light. Away!"
- "You cannot play upon me."

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## 11. Looking Ahead

---

The trap has worked. Hamlet has his proof. But instead of acting immediately, he is summoned to his mother's chamber. In the next lesson, we will examine the prayer scene—where Hamlet has the perfect opportunity to kill Claudius and does not—and the closet scene, where he confronts his mother and kills Polonius by mistake.

**To prepare:** Think about why Hamlet might hesitate now that he has proof. What reasons might he have for not killing Claudius immediately?

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### Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Prayer Scene: A Missed Opportunity*

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### Lesson 3: The Prayer Scene: A Missed Opportunity

*Duration: 45 minutes*

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## Lesson 3: The Prayer Scene: A Missed Opportunity

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point

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## Lesson Overview

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The play has succeeded. Claudius fled the court, his guilt exposed for all to see—or so Hamlet believes. Now, in one of the most dramatically intense scenes in the play, Hamlet comes upon Claudius alone, kneeling in apparent prayer. It is the perfect moment for revenge. Claudius is vulnerable, unguarded, and apparently confessing his sins. Hamlet draws his sword. And then—he stops. In this lesson, we will examine this crucial scene from two perspectives: Claudius's soliloquy, which reveals his inner torment, and Hamlet's decision not to kill him, which reveals the complexity of his morality and the tragic consequences of delay.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of the prayer scene (Act III, Scene iii)
  - Analyze Claudius's soliloquy and what it reveals about his character
  - Explain Hamlet's reasons for not killing Claudius at prayer
  - Discuss the dramatic irony of the scene—what Claudius reveals vs. what Hamlet believes
  - Evaluate whether Hamlet's decision is justified or another form of delay
- 

## 1. Introduction: Two Men Alone

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The play is over. The court has scattered. Claudius, shaken by what he has witnessed, retreats to his private chamber. He knows now that Hamlet knows. He must act—but first, he must confront himself. For the only time in the play, we see Claudius alone, and what we hear is the voice of a guilty man trying to pray.

At the same moment, Hamlet passes by. He sees Claudius kneeling. His sword is in his hand. Everything he has waited for is right in front of him. And yet, he does not strike.

This scene is the moral and dramatic heart of the play. It reveals the inner lives of both men—and it contains the moment that will haunt the rest of the tragedy.

**Think About It:** *If you had the chance to kill someone who had wronged you, and no one would know, would you do it? What would stop you?*

---

## 2. Summary of Events (Act III, Scene iii)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius Instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern** | Claudius tells them they must take Hamlet to England immediately; he is too dangerous to remain. |

| **Polonius Arrives** | Polonius announces that Hamlet is going to his mother's chamber and that he will hide behind the arras to eavesdrop. |

| **Claudius Alone** | Left alone, Claudius attempts to pray, revealing his guilt and his inability to repent. |

| **Hamlet Enters** | Hamlet sees Claudius kneeling and draws his sword—but stops himself, reasoning that killing Claudius at prayer would send him to heaven. |

| **Hamlet Exits** | Hamlet leaves; Claudius rises, admitting that his prayer was unsuccessful—"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below." |

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### 3. Core Concept 1: Claudius's Instructions (Lines 1-26)

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#### 3.1 The Decision

*"I like him not, nor stands it safe with us*

*To let his madness range."*

*(Lines 1-2)*

Claudius drops all pretense. He no longer speaks of Hamlet's "transformation" as something to understand—he speaks of it as a threat. Hamlet must go.

*"Therefore prepare you.*

*I your commission will forthwith dispatch,*

*And he to England shall along with you."*

*(Lines 2-4)*

The decision is made. England will be Hamlet's destination—and his possible death, as Claudius's later soliloquy in Act IV reveals.

#### 3.2 The Irony

Claudius speaks of Hamlet's "madness" as the problem. But we know—and Claudius now suspects—that Hamlet is not mad at all. The danger is not madness but knowledge.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Claudius send Hamlet to England rather than simply imprisoning or executing him? What political considerations might be at work?*

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### 4. Core Concept 2: Polonius's Plan (Lines 27-35)

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#### 4.1 The Eavesdropper

*"My lord, he's going to his mother's closet.*

*Behind the arras I'll convey myself*

*To hear the process."*

*(Lines 27-29)*

Polonius, true to form, will hide behind the tapestry ("arras") to spy on Hamlet's conversation with Gertrude. His need to know everything will prove fatal.

## 4.2 The Mistake

Polonius believes Hamlet is still mad and that the cause is still lovesickness. He has learned nothing from the play. His certainty blinds him to the danger.

***"I'll silence me even here.***

***Pray you, be round with him."***

*(Lines 29-30)*

"Round" means blunt, direct. Polonius advises Gertrude to be harsh with Hamlet. He has no idea what is about to happen.

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Claudius's Soliloquy (Lines 36-72)

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For the first and only time, Claudius speaks alone. What we hear is the voice of a man trapped by his own crime.

### 5.1 The Opening

***"O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven.***

***It hath the primal eldest curse upon't—***

***A brother's murder!"***

*(Lines 36-38)*

#### Key words:

- **"rank"** — foul, rotten, overgrown (like the "unweeded garden" Hamlet described)
- **"smells to heaven"** — so terrible that God cannot miss it
- **"primal eldest curse"** — the curse of Cain, who murdered his brother Abel

Claudius names his crime directly: he killed his brother. This is the first time we hear him admit it.

### 5.2 The Inability to Pray

***"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."***

*(Lines 38-43)*

Claudius wants to pray—"inclination" and "will" are both present. But guilt paralyzes him. He is "to double business bound"—torn between seeking forgiveness and keeping what he gained by sin.

***"What if this cursèd hand***

***Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,***

***Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens***

***To wash it white as snow?"***

*(Lines 43-46)*

The image is powerful: even if his hand were caked with blood, God's mercy ("rain") could cleanse it. The problem is not God's willingness but his own.

### 5.3 The Paradox of Forgiveness

***"But O, what form of prayer***

***Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?***

***That cannot be, since I am still possessed***

***Of those effects for which I did the murder—***

***My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.***

***May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?"***

*(Lines 51-56)*

This is the central paradox: Claudius wants forgiveness, but he refuses to give up what he gained by sinning. Can you be forgiven while keeping the fruits of your crime?

| Sin | Fruit of Sin |

|-----|

| Murder | The crown |

| Ambition | Power |

| Adultery/Incest | Gertrude |

He still has all three. True repentance would require giving them up—and he cannot.

## 5.4 The Attempt

***"Try what repentance can. What can it not?"***

***Yet what can it when one cannot repent?***

***O wretched state! O bosom black as death!***

***O limèd soul, that, struggling to be free,***

***Art more engaged!"***

*(Lines 64-68)*

"Limèd soul" refers to birdlime, a sticky substance used to trap birds. The more the bird struggles, the more trapped it becomes. Claudius's attempts to pray only show him how trapped he is.

***"Help, angels! Make assay.***

***Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel,***

***Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!***

***All may be well."***

*(Lines 68-71)*

He commands his body to pray—but the command comes from the same will that refuses to repent. The attempt is doomed.

***He kneels.***

***Discussion Point:*** *Is Claudius's attempt at prayer genuine? Does he truly want forgiveness, or does he just want relief from guilt?*

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Hamlet's Entrance and Decision (Lines 73-96)

### 6.1 The Opportunity

***"Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.***

***And now I'll do it."***

(Lines 73-74)

Hamlet enters, sees Claudius kneeling, and recognizes the perfect moment. "Pat" means exactly, conveniently. He draws his sword.

**"And so he goes to heaven,**

**And so am I revenged. That would be scanned:**

**A villain kills my father, and for that,**

**I, his sole son, do this same villain send**

**To heaven."**

(Lines 74-78)

He stops. The thought that follows is crucial: if he kills Claudius at prayer, Claudius will go to heaven. His father, killed without chance to confess, is in purgatory. That is not revenge—that is a reward.

## 6.2 The Reasoning

**"O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.**

**He took my father grossly, full of bread,**

**With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;**

**And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?**

**But in our circumstance and course of thought,**

**'Tis heavy with him."**

(Lines 79-84)

Hamlet contrasts the two deaths:

| King Hamlet | Claudius |

|-----|-----|

| Killed without warning | Would be killed at prayer |

| "grossly, full of bread" (in the middle of life, unconfessed) | "in the purging of his soul" (confessing) |

| His "audit" (account with God) is likely "heavy" (damning) | Would go to heaven |

**"And am I then revenged,**

*To take him in the purging of his soul,*

*When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?*

**No."**

*(Lines 84-86)*

### 6.3 The Decision

*"Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.*

*When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,*

*Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,*

*At game a-swearing, or about some act*

*That has no relish of salvation in't—*

*Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,*

*And that his soul may be as damned and black*

*As hell, whereto it goes."*

*(Lines 86-94)*

Hamlet decides to wait for a moment when Claudius is sinning—drunk, angry, in bed with Gertrude, gambling, swearing—so that he will die unconfessed and go to hell.

*"My mother stays.*

*This physic but prolongs thy sickly days."*

*(Lines 94-96)*

He leaves. Claudius remains alive—for now.

**Quick Check:** *Is Hamlet's reasoning sound? Does he truly want to damn Claudius, or is this another excuse for delay?*

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## 7. Core Concept 5: The Dramatic Irony

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## 7.1 What Hamlet Doesn't Know

The scene is thick with dramatic irony. While Hamlet believes Claudius is praying and repenting, we have just heard Claudius admit that his prayer is worthless:

**"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.**

**Words without thoughts never to heaven go."**

*(Claudius, Lines 97-98, immediately after Hamlet exits)*

Claudius rises, acknowledging that his attempt at prayer failed. If Hamlet had killed him at that moment, Claudius would have died in a state of sin—his soul as "damned and black" as Hamlet could wish.

**The irony:** Hamlet spares Claudius to damn him, but Claudius was already damned. The perfect moment was perfect—and Hamlet missed it.

## 7.2 The Tragedy of Delay

| What Hamlet Believes | What We Know |

|-----|-----|

| Claudius is praying and may be forgiven | Claudius cannot repent and keep his gains |

| Killing him now would send him to heaven | Killing him now would send him to hell |

| He will find a better moment later | This was the best moment—and it's gone |

## 7.3 The Question of Motivation

Scholars debate why Hamlet really stops:

| Interpretation | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| **Genuine religious motive** | He believes killing a man at prayer would damn himself, not Claudius |

| **Excuse for delay** | He has been looking for reasons not to act |

| **Moral scruple** | He wants justice, not mere killing |

| **Fear of consequences** | Killing the king publicly is dangerous |

The text supports multiple readings. What matters is the result: Claudius lives, and Hamlet's delay will have consequences.

**Discussion Point:** *If you were directing this scene, how would you have Hamlet deliver these lines? With certainty? With hesitation? With self-deception?*

---

## 8. Core Concept 6: Claudius's Final Words (Lines 97-98)

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**"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.**

**Words without thoughts never to heaven go."**

These lines conclude the scene and summarize Claudius's condition. He can speak the words of prayer, but his heart is not in them. He is divided—and therefore unforgiven.

The couplet also serves as an epigram for the entire play. Throughout *Hamlet*, characters speak words that do not match their thoughts. Claudius, the smoothest speaker of all, is finally exposed—not to Hamlet, but to us.

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## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing the Scene

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### Activity: Two Perspectives (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Claudius's Soliloquy

Reread Claudius's soliloquy (Lines 36-72) and answer:

1. What images does Claudius use to describe his guilt? ("rank," "smells to heaven," "cursèd hand," "limèd soul") What do these images suggest?
2. Claudius asks: "May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?" What is the answer according to the play? Can he be forgiven while keeping the crown and queen?
3. Is Claudius a sympathetic figure in this scene? Do you feel any pity for him? Why or why not?

#### Part B: Hamlet's Decision

Reread Hamlet's soliloquy (Lines 73-96) and answer:

1. Hamlet's reasoning depends on a specific theology: dying at prayer sends you to heaven; dying in sin sends you to hell. Is this belief sincere, or is it a convenient excuse?
2. What does Hamlet mean by "hire and salary"? Why would killing Claudius at prayer be payment rather than revenge?
3. Hamlet imagines killing Claudius in the middle of sin—"drunk asleep, or in his rage, / Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed." What does this fantasy reveal about Hamlet's state of mind?

#### Part C: The Irony

Write a paragraph explaining the dramatic irony of this scene. Use this structure:

- What Hamlet believes about Claudius's prayer
- What we know about Claudius's prayer
- The consequences of Hamlet's mistake

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## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius's Guilt** | He admits the murder but cannot repent because he won't give up its fruits |

| **Claudius's Attempt** | He tries to pray but fails—"words without thoughts never to heaven go" |

| **Hamlet's Opportunity** | He finds Claudius kneeling and draws his sword |

| **Hamlet's Reasoning** | Killing Claudius at prayer would send him to heaven—that's "hire and salary," not revenge |

| **Hamlet's Decision** | He waits for a moment when Claudius is sinning, so he can damn him |

| **Dramatic Irony** | Claudius's prayer failed—killing him now would have damned him; Hamlet misses his chance |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven."
- "May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?"

- "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go."
  - "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying."
  - "Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent."
  - "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days."
- 

## 11. Connecting to the Play

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This scene is the turning point—but not the turning point Hamlet expects. He believes he is choosing the right moment for revenge. In fact, he is choosing delay, and that delay will have catastrophic consequences.

Immediately after this scene, Hamlet goes to his mother's chamber, where he will kill Polonius by mistake—an act that will set in motion the final tragedy: Ophelia's madness, Laertes's revenge, and the bloody conclusion.

The prayer scene asks us to judge Hamlet's decision. Was he right to wait? Or did his conscience (or his hesitation) doom everyone?

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## 12. Looking Ahead

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Hamlet leaves Claudius alive and goes to confront his mother. In the next lesson, we will examine the closet scene—the confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude, the murder of Polonius, and the ghost's final appearance.

**To prepare:** Think about what Hamlet hopes to accomplish with his mother. What does he want from her? What does he need?

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### Lesson 3 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Closet Scene: Confrontation and Death*

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### Lesson 4: The Closet Scene: Confrontation and Death

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 4: The Closet Scene: Confrontation and Death

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point

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## Lesson Overview

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Hamlet leaves Claudius at prayer and proceeds to his mother's chamber—the "closet." What follows is one of the most intense and psychologically complex scenes in the play. Hamlet confronts Gertrude about her marriage, her sexuality, and her betrayal of his father's memory. In the midst of this emotional explosion, he hears a noise behind the arras, stabs blindly—and kills Polonius. The ghost appears once more, visible only to Hamlet, adding another layer of mystery. By the end of the scene, Hamlet has committed murder, alienated his mother, and set in motion the final tragedies: Ophelia's madness and Laertes's revenge.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the key events of the closet scene (Act III, Scene iv)
  - Analyze Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude and his accusations
  - Explain the significance of Polonius's death and its consequences
  - Examine the ghost's final appearance and its meaning
  - Discuss Gertrude's response and the question of her guilt or innocence
  - Connect the scene to the play's themes of appearance, reality, and consequence
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## 1. Introduction: The Reckoning

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Hamlet has spared Claudius—for now. But the rage that he could not unleash on the king must go somewhere. He enters his mother's chamber, and what follows is not a calm conversation but an explosion of pent-up fury, disgust, and grief. Gertrude, who has avoided confrontation throughout the play, can no longer hide. And behind the arras, Polonius—the ultimate spy—listens to his own death approaching.

**Think About It:** *Why does Hamlet confront his mother so violently? What does he hope to achieve? What does he need from her?*

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## 2. Summary of Events (Act III, Scene iv)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius Hides** | Polonius conceals himself behind the arras, telling Gertrude to be "round" with Hamlet. |

| **Hamlet Enters** | Hamlet is aggressive from the start; Gertrude tries to admonish him, but he turns the tables. |

| **The Killing** | Hearing a noise behind the arras, Hamlet stabs through the tapestry, killing Polonius. |

| **The Confrontation** | Hamlet turns on Gertrude, comparing his father and Claudius in brutal detail. |

| **The Ghost Appears** | The ghost enters, visible only to Hamlet, reminding him of his mission and urging him to comfort Gertrude. |

| **Gertrude's Response** | Gertrude sees nothing and believes Hamlet is mad; Hamlet tries to convince her of his sanity. |

| **The Departure** | Hamlet drags Polonius's body away, accepting that his fate now includes murder. |

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## 3. Core Concept 1: The Setup (Lines 1-11)

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### 3.1 Polonius in Hiding

**"He will come straight. Look you lay home to him.**

**Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,**

**And that your grace hath screened and stood between**

**Much heat and him."**

(Lines 1-4)

Polonius instructs Gertrude to be harsh with Hamlet—to lay into him, to stop protecting him. He believes this is about Hamlet's "pranks" (his mad behavior), not about murder and revenge.

**"I'll silence me even here.**

**Pray you, be round with him."**

(Lines 5-6)

The irony is devastating: Polonius silences himself forever. His final act is spying.

**"Mother, mother, mother!"** (Gertrude, Line 7)

Gertrude calls out, perhaps to warn Hamlet that she is not alone—or simply to summon him. Polonius's last words are a whispered instruction:

**"I hear him coming. Let's withdraw, my lord."** (Line 8, Polonius to himself)

**Quick Check:** Why does Polonius hide rather than simply leaving? What does this decision reveal about his character?

---

## 4. Core Concept 2: The Confrontation Begins (Lines 12-28)

### 4.1 The Opening Exchange

**Hamlet:** Now, mother, what's the matter?

**Gertrude:** Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

**Hamlet:** Mother, you have my father much offended.

(Lines 12-14)

The parallel structure is deliberate and devastating. Gertrude accuses Hamlet of offending Claudius ("thy father"—she now calls Claudius Hamlet's father). Hamlet immediately turns the accusation back on her: she has offended the real King Hamlet.

**Gertrude:** *Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.*

**Hamlet:** *Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.*

*(Lines 15-16)*

The repetition continues. Hamlet matches her phrase for phrase, accusation for accusation.

#### 4.2 The Threat

**Gertrude:** *Why, how now, Hamlet?*

**Hamlet:** *What's the matter now?*

**Gertrude:** *Have you forgot me?*

**Hamlet:** *No, by the rood, not so.*

*You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife,*

*And—would it were not so—you are my mother.*

*(Lines 17-21)*

Hamlet acknowledges her identity—queen, uncle's wife, mother—but the acknowledgment is laced with disgust. He knows who she is; that's the problem.

**Gertrude:** *Nay, then, I'll set those to you that can speak.*

**Hamlet:** *Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.*

*You go not till I set you up a glass*

*Where you may see the inmost part of you.*

*(Lines 23-26)*

Hamlet physically restrains her. He will not let her escape. He will hold up a mirror ("glass") to her soul.

**Gertrude:** *What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?*

*Help, ho!*

(Lines 27-28)

Her cry for help is genuine—she fears for her life. And that cry triggers the death behind the arras.

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## 5. Core Concept 3: The Death of Polonius (Lines 28-38)

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### 5.1 The Stabbing

**Polonius:** *[Behind the arras] What ho! Help, help, help!*

(Line 28)

Polonius, hearing Gertrude's cry, breaks his silence. It is his final mistake.

**Hamlet:** *[Drawing] How now? A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!*

(Line 29)

Hamlet's response is immediate. He doesn't check who is behind the arras. He doesn't hesitate. The man who could not kill Claudius at prayer kills blindly, impulsively.

**He thrusts his sword through the arras and kills Polonius.**

**Polonius:** *[Behind the arras] O, I am slain!*

(Line 30)

### 5.2 The Discovery

**Gertrude:** *O me, what hast thou done?*

**Hamlet:** *Nay, I know not. Is it the king?*

(Lines 31-32)

This is crucial. Hamlet thought—hoped?—it might be Claudius. He killed hoping to finally complete his revenge. Instead, he has killed the wrong man.

**Hamlet:** *[Lifts the arras and pulls forth Polonius]*

*Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!*

*I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune.*

*Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.*

(Lines 33-35)

Hamlet's words to Polonius's corpse are contemptuous:

- **"wretched, rash, intruding fool"** — three insults that describe Polonius perfectly
- **"I took thee for thy better"** — Polonius was not worth killing; Claudius was the target
- **"too busy is some danger"** — his meddling finally killed him

### 5.3 The Irony

| Polonius's Life | Polonius's Death |

|-----|-----|

| Lived by spying | Died while spying |

| Gave advice ceaselessly | Killed mid-sentence |

| Thought himself wise | Died a "fool" |

| Controlled others | Could not control this moment |

**Discussion Point:** *Is Polonius's death comic or tragic? Both? How should an audience react?*

---

## 6. Core Concept 4: The Confrontation Intensifies (Lines 38-85)

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### 6.1 The Shift

***"Leave wringing of your hands. Peace. Sit you down***

***And let me wring your heart."***

(Lines 38-39)

Polonius's death does not stop Hamlet's mission. If anything, it intensifies it. He will still make Gertrude see herself.

### 6.2 The Comparison

***"Look here upon this picture, and on this,***

***The counterfeit presentment of two brothers."***

(Lines 53-54)

Hamlet likely gestures to two portraits—or two mental images—of his father and Claudius. The contrast is extreme:

| King Hamlet | Claudius |

|-----|-----|

| **"Hyperion's curls"** (sun-god) | **"mildewed ear"** (corrupted grain) |

| **"the front of Jove himself"** (god-like) | **"a mildew"** (rotten) |

| **"an eye like Mars"** (warlike) | No divine comparisons |

| **"a station like the herald Mercury"** (graceful) | **"a king of shreds and patches"** (a patchwork fake) |

***"This was your husband. Look you now what follows.***

***Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear,***

***Blasting his wholesome brother."***

*(Lines 62-64)*

The imagery is agricultural: a "mildewed ear" of corn destroys the healthy ones around it. Claudius has corrupted everything.

### 6.3 The Accusation

***"Have you eyes?***

***Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed***

***And batten on this moor?"***

*(Lines 65-67)*

Hamlet attacks Gertrude's perception, her judgment, her very eyesight. How could she choose a "moor" (bleak wasteland) over a "fair mountain"?

***"Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,***

***Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,***

***Or but a sickly part of one true sense***

***Could not so mope."***

*(Lines 78-81)*

Even someone with one working sense, he argues, could not make such a mistake. Her failure is total.

### 6.4 The Shame

***"O shame, where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,***

***If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,***

***To flaming youth let virtue be as wax***

***And melt in her own fire."***

*(Lines 82-85)*

If older women ("matrons") are lustful, Hamlet argues, then youth has no hope. The accusation is brutal: Gertrude's sexuality is shameful, unnatural, hellish.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Hamlet focus so obsessively on Gertrude's sexuality? What does this reveal about his own psychological state?*

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## 7. Core Concept 5: The Ghost's Final Appearance (Lines 86-115)

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### 7.1 The Entrance

***Enter Ghost in his nightgown.***

The stage direction is specific: the ghost wears a nightgown, not armor. This is a different kind of visitation—intimate, domestic, not warlike.

**Hamlet:** *Save me and hover o'er me with your wings,*

*You heavenly guards! What would your gracious figure?*

*(Lines 86-87)*

Hamlet sees the ghost immediately. Gertrude sees nothing.

### 7.2 The Ghost's Purpose

***"Do not forget. This visitation***

***is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."***

*(Lines 95-96)*

The ghost comes to remind Hamlet of his mission. "Almost blunted purpose" suggests Hamlet's edge has dulled—he has killed Polonius but not Claudius.

***"But look, amazement on thy mother sits.***

***O, step between her and her fighting soul.***

***Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.***

***Speak to her, Hamlet."***

(Lines 97-100)

The ghost shows concern for Gertrude. He sees her distress and asks Hamlet to comfort her. This is the ghost of a husband who still cares for his wife—or at least doesn't want her destroyed.

### 7.3 Gertrude's Reaction

**Gertrude:** *Alas, how is't with you,*

*That you do bend your eye on vacancy*

*And with th' incorporal air do hold discourse?*

(Lines 101-103)

Gertrude sees Hamlet talking to nothing. For her, this confirms his madness.

**"On him, on him! Look you how pale he glares!**

**His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones,**

**Would make them capable.—Do not look upon me,**

**Lest with this piteous action you convert**

**My stern effects. Then what I have to do**

**Will want true color—tears perchance for blood."**

(Lines 108-113)

Hamlet sees the ghost's pity and fears it will soften his own resolve. The ghost's sadness might make him weep instead of kill.

**"Do not look upon me."**

### 7.4 The Ghost Departs

**Ghost:** *Be thou assured, if words be made of breath*

*And breath of life, I have no life to breathe*

*What thou hast said to me.*

(These lines appear in some editions; in others, the ghost simply exits.)

The ghost leaves. Hamlet is alone with his mother and Polonius's corpse.

**Discussion Point:** Why is the ghost visible only to Hamlet? What does this suggest about his nature—and about Gertrude's state?

## 8. Core Concept 6: The Reconciliation (Lines 115-165)

### 8.1 Gertrude's Question

**Gertrude:** To whom do you speak this?

**Hamlet:** Do you see nothing there?

**Gertrude:** Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.

**Hamlet:** Nor did you nothing hear?

**Gertrude:** No, nothing but ourselves.

(Lines 115-118)

The exchange is almost comic in its repetition—but the subject is deadly serious. Gertrude's inability to see the ghost confirms for her that Hamlet is mad.

### 8.2 Hamlet's Explanation

**"My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time**

**And makes as healthful music. It is not madness**

**That I have uttered. Bring me to the test,**

**And I the matter will reword, which madness**

**Would gambol from."**

(Lines 125-129)

Hamlet insists he is sane. His pulse is steady. If she tests him, he can repeat what he said—mad people cannot do that.

**"Mother, for love of grace,**

**Lay not that flattering unction to your soul**

**That not your trespass but my madness speaks."**

(Lines 129-131)

He begs her not to blame his "madness" for what she has heard. The accusations are real. She must face them.

### 8.3 The Practical Advice

**"Go not to my uncle's bed.**

**Assume a virtue, if you have it not."**

(Lines 139-140)

Hamlet's final advice is practical: stop sleeping with Claudius. Even if she has no virtue, she should pretend—"assume a virtue"—and the pretense may become real.

**"Refrain tonight,**

**And that shall lend a kind of easiness**

**To the next abstinence; the next more easy;**

**For use almost can change the stamp of nature."**

(Lines 141-144)

Habit can change nature. If she starts abstaining, it will become easier.

### 8.4 The Confession

**"O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain."**

(Gertrude, Line 147)

This is Gertrude's moment of recognition. She admits that Hamlet's words have wounded her—and perhaps that she has been wrong.

**"Throw away the worser part of it,**

**And live the purer with the other half.**

**Good night. But go not to my uncle's bed."**

(Lines 148-150)

Hamlet's response is almost tender. He offers her a way forward: reject the "worse part" and live with the purer half.

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## 9. Core Concept 7: The Aftermath (Lines 166-185)

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### 9.1 The Body

***"I must be cruel only to be kind.***

***Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind."***

*(Lines 166-167)*

Hamlet acknowledges the paradox: his cruelty to his mother was an act of kindness. But worse is coming.

***"I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room."***

*(Line 169)*

The language is deliberately coarse. Polonius is now just "guts"—a body to be disposed of.

### 9.2 The Warning

***"Do not spread the compost on the weeds***

***To make them ranker."***

*(Lines 174-175)*

He warns Gertrude not to tell Claudius that his madness is feigned. She must let him believe the act.

### 9.3 The Departure

***"This man shall set me packing.***

***I'll lug the guts away."***

*(Lines 184-185)*

Hamlet exits, dragging Polonius's body. The image is grotesque and symbolic: he carries the consequences of his actions with him.

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## 10. Practical Application: Analyzing the Scene

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### Activity: Character Perspectives (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Gertrude's Journey

Trace Gertrude's emotional state through the scene:

| Moment | Gertrude's Reaction | Evidence |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Hamlet enters aggressive | Fear, calling for help | "What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?" |

| Polonius killed | Shock | "O me, what hast thou done?" |

| Hamlet's accusations | Defensive, then silent | (Find a line) |

| Ghost appears | Confusion, fear for Hamlet | "Alas, how is't with you?" |

| Hamlet's explanation | Possibly convinced | "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain." |

| Final exchange | Subdued, accepting | (Find a line) |

### Part B: Hamlet's State of Mind

Hamlet shifts rapidly in this scene. Track his emotions:

| Moment | Emotion | Evidence |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Entering | Rage, determination | (Find a line) |

| Killing Polonius | Impulsive, hoping for Claudius | "Is it the king?" |

| Confronting Gertrude | Furious, obsessive | The portrait speech |

| Seeing the ghost | Awe, fear, then concern | "Do not look upon me" |

| After ghost leaves | Tender, then practical | Advice to Gertrude |

| With the body | Coarse, resigned | "I'll lug the guts" |

### Part C: The Ghost's Role

Why does the ghost appear here? Consider multiple interpretations:

| Interpretation | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| To remind Hamlet of his mission | "whet thy almost blunted purpose" |

| To protect Gertrude | "Speak to her, Hamlet" |

| To show he cares for her | Concern for her "fighting soul" |

| To prove he's real (to us) | Only Hamlet sees him |

| To complicate our view | He's gentle here, not warlike |

**Extension Question:** If you were directing this scene, how would you have the ghost appear? In armor? In a nightgown? Frightening? Gentle?

---

## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius's Death** | Killed while spying; "I took thee for thy better"; ironic end |

| **Gertrude's Confrontation** | Hamlet forces her to see herself; the portrait comparison; accusations of lust |

| **The Ghost** | Appears only to Hamlet; reminds him of his mission; shows concern for Gertrude |

| **Gertrude's Response** | At first defensive, then wounded; "thou hast cleft my heart in twain" |

| **Hamlet's Advice** | "Go not to my uncle's bed"; "assume a virtue"; habit can change nature |

| **The Aftermath** | Hamlet drags the body away; "I must be cruel only to be kind" |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better."
- "Look here upon this picture, and on this."
- "O shame, where is thy blush?"
- "Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."
- "I must be cruel only to be kind."
- "Good night, mother."

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## 12. Looking Ahead

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The consequences of this scene will ripple through the rest of the play. Polonius's death means:

- Ophelia will go mad with grief
- Laertes will return seeking revenge
- Claudius will have a new reason to destroy Hamlet
- Hamlet will be sent to England—to his apparent death

In Act IV, we will watch these consequences unfold.

**To prepare:** Think about Ophelia. How might she react to her father's death at the hands of the man she loved?

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### Lesson 4 Complete

*Next Module: Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy*

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### Module 4 Summary Sheet

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## Module 4: Act III: The Climax and the Turning Point — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **"To Be, or Not to Be":** Hamlet's most famous soliloquy is a philosophical meditation on existence, suffering, death, and the fear of the unknown afterlife. It is universal, not personal, exploring why humans endure life's pains rather than risk the "undiscovered country" of death.
- **The Mousetrap Succeeds:** Hamlet stages the play-within-a-play, closely watching Claudius. When the murderer Lucianus pours poison in the Player King's ear, Claudius rises and storms out, confirming his guilt to Hamlet and Horatio.
- **Claudius's Prayer Scene:** Alone, Claudius attempts to pray but cannot. His soliloquy reveals his guilt—"O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven"—and his central paradox: he wants forgiveness but refuses to give up the crown and queen he gained through murder.

- **Hamlet's Missed Opportunity:** Hamlet finds Claudius kneeling and draws his sword, but hesitates. He reasons that killing Claudius at prayer would send his soul to heaven, which is not revenge for his father, who died without absolution.
- **Dramatic Irony:** The audience knows Claudius's prayer is hollow ("My words fly up, my thoughts remain below"). Hamlet spares him thinking he would save his soul, but killing him would have damned him.
- **The Closet Scene:** Hamlet confronts his mother in her private chamber. His rage is brutal; he compares pictures of his father and Claudius, accusing her of lust and betrayal.
- **Death of Polonius:** Hearing a noise behind the arras, Hamlet stabs blindly, killing the spying Polonius. His reaction is contemptuous: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better."
- **The Ghost's Final Appearance:** The ghost appears to Hamlet alone, visible only to him, to "whet thy almost blunted purpose" and to remind him to comfort Gertrude.

### Core Takeaways

Act III is the play's dramatic and emotional center. The "Mousetrap" succeeds in exposing Claudius's guilt, but Hamlet's subsequent delay in the prayer scene proves catastrophic. His failure to act allows the plot to spiral further. The accidental murder of Polonius sets in motion the tragedies of Act IV—Ophelia's madness and Laertes's revenge—while the ghost's final visit reminds Hamlet of his fading purpose. By the end of the act, Hamlet has proof, but he also has blood on his hands.

### Terms to Know

- **Conscience** — In the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, this word has a double meaning: moral awareness and the faculty of thought, both of which "make cowards of us all."
- **The Undiscovered Country** — Hamlet's metaphor for death, a place "from whose bourn no traveler returns."
- **Mousetrap** — The name Hamlet gives to the play-within-a-play, reflecting its purpose to trap a guilty creature (Claudius).
- **Dumb Show** — A silent pantomime of the murder performed by the players before the spoken play begins.
- **"Rank"** — Claudius's word for his crime in the prayer scene, meaning foul, rotten, and overgrown (echoing Hamlet's "unweeded garden").
- **Rub** — An obstacle or impediment; Hamlet uses this term from bowling to describe the problem of fearing what comes after death.
- **Arras** — A tapestry or curtain; Polonius hides behind it to spy on Hamlet and Gertrude, leading to his death.
- **Whet** — To sharpen or stimulate; the ghost appears to "whet thy almost blunted purpose," meaning Hamlet's edge has dulled.

### Review Questions

1. What is the central question of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy? How does Hamlet's contemplation of death differ here from his first soliloquy?
2. How does Claudius react to the play-within-a-play, and why is this reaction proof of his guilt?
3. In the prayer scene, what prevents Claudius from being able to repent? What is the "paradox" he identifies?
4. Why does Hamlet decide not to kill Claudius while he is praying? What is the dramatic irony of this decision?
5. What happens in the closet scene, and what are its immediate consequences for Polonius, Gertrude, and Hamlet?

### Further Thinking

- Hamlet spares Claudius because he wants to damn his soul. Is this a morally justifiable reason for delay, or is it simply another excuse? What does this desire for perfect revenge reveal about Hamlet's character?
  - The ghost appears only to Hamlet in the closet scene. Why might Shakespeare make the ghost invisible to Gertrude? Does this scene cast doubt on the ghost's reality, or on Gertrude's spiritual state?
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## Module 4 Quiz

- Q1.** In the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy, what is the 'rub' that, according to Hamlet, prevents people from ending their suffering?
- A) The physical pain of death itself.
  - B) The fear of what dreams may come in the sleep of death.
  - C) The legal consequences of suicide.
  - D) The hope that their situation might improve.
- Q2.** During the performance of 'The Mousetrap,' what specific action finally causes Claudius to rise and call for light, revealing his guilt?
- A) The Player Queen's protests of eternal love.
  - B) The dumb show that precedes the spoken play.
  - C) The moment when the character Lucianus pours poison into the Player King's ear.
  - D) Hamlet's constant, mocking commentary to Ophelia.
- Q3.** Why does Claudius feel he cannot be forgiven for murdering his brother, even when he tries to pray?
- A) God never forgives murder.
  - B) He is still possessed of the 'effects' of his crime: his crown, his ambition, and his queen.
  - C) He does not actually feel any remorse.
  - D) Hamlet is watching him and preventing his prayer.
- Q4.** What is Hamlet's stated reason for not killing Claudius while he is praying?
- A) He is afraid of being caught by the guards.
  - B) He wants Claudius to live longer so he can suffer more.
  - C) Killing him at prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, which is not revenge for his father, who was killed without absolution.
  - D) He is suddenly overcome with pity for his uncle.
- Q5.** In the closet scene, who is hiding behind the arras (tapestry) when Hamlet confronts his mother?
- A) Claudius
  - B) Ophelia
  - C) Polonius
  - D) Rosencrantz
- Q6.** When the Ghost appears in Gertrude's closet during Act III, what is his primary purpose?
- A) To frighten Gertrude into confessing her sins.
  - B) To 'whet' Hamlet's 'almost blunted purpose' and remind him of his mission.
  - C) To take Hamlet away to hell with him.
  - D) To reveal that Claudius has a new plot against Hamlet.
- Q7.** After killing Polonius, what is Hamlet's immediate reaction to the body?
- A) He is overcome with guilt and remorse.
  - B) He shows contempt, calling him a 'wretched, rash, intruding fool' whom he mistook for a 'better.'
  - C) He hides the body and immediately tells Claudius the truth.
  - D) He asks his mother for help in disposing of the corpse.

**Q8.** In the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy, Hamlet speaks primarily about his personal situation with Claudius and his specific plan for revenge.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** During the play-within-a-play, Hamlet treats Ophelia with tenderness and affection, proving that his love for her is still strong.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** The dramatic irony of the prayer scene is that Hamlet spares Claudius because he thinks he is praying and might go to heaven, but the audience knows Claudius's prayers are hollow and he would have gone to hell.

*(True / False)*

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** B — Hamlet argues that the uncertainty of the afterlife—the 'undiscovered country'—is what 'puzzles the will' and makes us bear our current ills rather than risk unknown ones.

**Q2:** C — The staging of the murder exactly as the ghost described it—poison poured in the ear—is too much for Claudius. This is the moment his guilt becomes undeniable to Hamlet and Horatio.

**Q3:** B — Claudius's central paradox is that he wants forgiveness, but he is unwilling to give up what he gained by sinning. True repentance would require surrendering the throne and Gertrude, which he cannot do.

**Q4:** C — Hamlet believes that killing a man in the act of confession would send him to heaven. He wants to damn Claudius's soul, so he waits for a moment when Claudius is engaged in a sinful act.

**Q5:** C — Polonius, ever the meddling spy, hides to eavesdrop on the conversation, which leads directly to his death when Hamlet, hearing a noise, stabs through the arras thinking it might be Claudius.

**Q6:** B — The ghost is concerned that Hamlet is getting distracted by his rage at his mother and is losing sight of his main goal: avenging his father's murder.

**Q7:** B — Hamlet's dismissive words show his contempt for Polonius's meddling. He feels no guilt for killing him, only regret that it wasn't Claudius.

**Q8:** False — This soliloquy is notable for its universality. Hamlet speaks in general philosophical terms about the human condition, suffering, and the fear of death, rather than his own specific circumstances.

**Q9:** False — Hamlet is cruel and crude to Ophelia during the play, making sexual puns and dismissing her, which is part of his 'antic disposition' and shows the deterioration of their relationship.

**Q10:** True — This is one of the most powerful ironies in the play. Hamlet misses the perfect chance for revenge because he misjudges Claudius's spiritual state, a state the audience knows is damned.

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## Module 5: Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy

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Act IV follows the consequences of Polonius's murder: Hamlet's exile, Claudius's plot with Laertes, and Ophelia's descent into madness and eventual death.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Summarize the key events of Act IV.
- Analyze Ophelia's madness and its symbolic meaning.
- Examine Claudius's manipulation of Laertes and their plot against Hamlet.
- Discuss the theme of death and mortality as it culminates in Ophelia's funeral.



## Lesson 1: Consequences and Exile

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 1: Consequences and Exile

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy

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## Lesson Overview

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The death of Polonius sends shockwaves through Elsinore. Hamlet has crossed a line: he is no longer a threatening prince but a killer. Claudius seizes the opportunity to neutralize his nephew, sending him to England with secret orders for his execution. But before Hamlet leaves, he encounters the army of Fortinbras—a moment that triggers one last soliloquy and a renewed commitment to revenge. In this lesson, we will examine the immediate consequences of Polonius's murder, Claudius's manipulation, and Hamlet's final soliloquy before his exile.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the key events of Act IV, Scenes i-iv
  - Analyze Claudius's response to Polonius's death and his manipulation of Gertrude
  - Explain Claudius's plan to send Hamlet to England and its true purpose
  - Examine Hamlet's encounter with Fortinbras's army and his fourth soliloquy
  - Discuss how this soliloquy shows Hamlet's changing perspective on revenge
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## 1. Introduction: The Ripple Effect

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One impulsive thrust through a tapestry has changed everything. Polonius is dead. Hamlet is now a murderer—even if his target was the wrong man. Claudius, who has been waiting for an excuse to act, now has one. And somewhere in Norway, an army marches toward Poland, oblivious to the drama unfolding in Elsinore. Act IV opens with the court in chaos and moves swiftly toward Hamlet's exile and, unexpectedly, toward a moment of clarity.

**Think About It:** How does Polonius's death change the stakes of the play? What options does Claudius now have that he didn't have before?

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## 2. Summary of Events (Act IV, Scenes i-iv)

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| Scene | Key Events |

|-----|-----|

| **Scene i** | Gertrude tells Claudius about Polonius's death; Claudius realizes he could have been the victim; he decides to send Hamlet to England immediately. |

| **Scene ii** | Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confront Hamlet about Polonius's body; Hamlet mocks them and refuses to reveal its location. |

| **Scene iii** | Claudius questions Hamlet, who finally admits Polonius is dead and reveals the body's location. Claudius announces Hamlet's immediate departure for England. Alone, Claudius reveals that he has sent orders for Hamlet to be killed upon arrival. |

| **Scene iv** | On the way to England, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army marching to Poland. He reflects on the contrast between Fortinbras's decisive action and his own delay in his fourth soliloquy. |

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## 3. Scene i: The Report (Lines 1-45)

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### 3.1 Gertrude's Account

*"Mad as the sea and wind when both contend*

*Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,*

*Behind the arras hearing something stir,*

*He whips his rapier out and cries 'A rat, a rat!'*

*And in this brainish apprehension kills*

*The unseen good old man."*

*(Lines 7-12)*

Gertrude's description is carefully crafted. She emphasizes Hamlet's madness ("mad as the sea and wind," "brainish apprehension") and presents the killing as an accident—he didn't know it was Polonius. This protects Hamlet while also justifying his removal.

### 3.2 Claudius's Response

**"O heavy deed!**

***It had been so with us, had we been there."***

*(Lines 13-14)*

Claudius's first reaction is personal: he realizes he could have been the one behind the arras. This recognition hardens his resolve.

**"Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answered?**

***It will be laid to us, whose providence***

***Should have kept short, restrained, and out of haunt***

***This mad young man."***

*(Lines 16-19)*

Claudius immediately thinks politically. He worries that the public will blame him for not controlling Hamlet. Polonius's death is a problem to be managed.

### 3.3 The Decision

**"The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch**

***But we will ship him hence."***

*(Lines 29-30)*

Hamlet must leave at dawn. Claudius presents this as protection—but we know better.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Claudius focus on political consequences rather than grief for Polonius? What does this reveal about his priorities?*

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## 4. Scene ii: The Cat and Mouse Game (Lines 1-30)

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### 4.1 The Confrontation

**Rosencrantz:** *What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?*

**Hamlet:** *Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin.*

*(Lines 4-5)*

Hamlet's answer is philosophical and evasive. He will not give a straight answer.

## 4.2 The Sponge Metaphor

**Hamlet:** *Besides, to be demanded by a sponge! What replication should be made by the son of a king?*

**Rosencrantz:** *Take you me for a sponge, my lord?*

**Hamlet:** *Ay, sir, that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the king best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again.*

*(Lines 11-19)*

The metaphor is brilliant and insulting:

- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are **sponges**—they soak up the king's favors
- When the king has used them, he will **squeeze them dry** and discard them
- They are tools, not friends; they will be used and thrown away

Hamlet sees their fate clearly—even if they don't.

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Hamlet bother to insult Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What does he gain by antagonizing them?*

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## 5. Scene iii: The King's Justice (Lines 1-70)

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### 5.1 The Interrogation

**Claudius:** *Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?*

**Hamlet:** *At supper.*

**Claudius:** *At supper? Where?*

**Hamlet:** *Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him.*

*(Lines 17-20)*

Hamlet's "mad" wit reaches new heights. Polonius is being eaten by worms—and those worms might later eat a king. The democracy of death: everyone becomes worm food.

**"Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots."** *(Lines 22-24)*

This is the philosophy of mortality: all living things are food for death.

### 5.2 The Revelation

Eventually, Hamlet reveals the location:

**"If you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby." (Lines 36-37)**

The body will smell; death announces itself.

### 5.3 The Announcement

**Claudius:** *Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety—Which we do tender as we dearly grieve For that which thou hast done—must send thee hence With fiery quickness. Therefore prepare thyself. The bark is ready and the wind at help, Th' associates tend, and everything is bent For England.*

*(Lines 43-48)*

Claudius frames exile as protection. Hamlet's response is enigmatic:

**Hamlet:** *For England?*

**Claudius:** *Ay, Hamlet.*

**Hamlet:** *Good.*

**Claudius:** *So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.*

**Hamlet:** *I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for England!*

*(Lines 48-51)*

"I see a cherub that sees them" suggests Hamlet knows—or suspects—that Claudius's purposes are not good. A cherub is an angel of knowledge; Hamlet claims divine insight.

### 5.4 The Soliloquy

Alone, Claudius reveals the truth:

**"And England, if my love thou hold'st at aught—...**

***Thou mayst not coldly set***

***Our sovereign process, which imports at full,***

***By letters congruing to that effect,***

***The present death of Hamlet."***

*(Lines 61-66)*

The letters demand Hamlet's execution. He is not going to England for safety—he is going to his death.

**Quick Check:** Why does Claudius send Hamlet to England rather than executing him in Denmark? What political considerations might be at work?

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## 6. Scene iv: The Turning Point (Lines 1-66)

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### 6.1 The Encounter

On the way to the ship, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army marching through Denmark toward Poland.

**Captain:** *We go to gain a little patch of ground That hath in it no profit but the name. To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it; Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.*

(Lines 17-21)

The army is fighting for worthless land—"a little patch of ground" not worth farming. Thousands of men will die for honor, not profit.

### 6.2 Hamlet's Reaction

**"How all occasions do inform against me**

**And spur my dull revenge!"**

(Lines 31-32)

Everything he sees—including this army—accuses him of delay.

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## 7. The Fourth Soliloquy: Close Reading (Lines 31-66)

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### 7.1 The Opening

**"What is a man,**

**If his chief good and market of his time**

**Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more."**

(Lines 32-34)

Hamlet returns to a familiar theme: humans are defined by reason and action. To do nothing is to be no better than an animal.

**"Sure he that made us with such large discourse,**

**Looking before and after, gave us not**

*That capability and godlike reason*

*To fust in us unused."*

*(Lines 35-38)*

"Fust" means to grow moldy. Godlike reason should not be left unused to rot.

## 7.2 The Contrast

*"Now, whether it be*

*Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple*

*Of thinking too precisely on th' event—*

*A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom*

*And ever three parts coward—I do not know*

*Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,'*

*Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means*

*To do't."*

*(Lines 38-45)*

Hamlet diagnoses his own problem:

- **"Bestial oblivion"** —animal-like forgetfulness
- **"craven scruple"** —cowardly hesitation
- **"thinking too precisely on th' event"** —overthinking consequences

He has cause, will, strength, and means—everything he needs. And still he hasn't acted.

## 7.3 The Example of Fortinbras

*"Examples gross as earth exhort me:*

*Witness this army of such mass and charge,*

*Led by a delicate and tender prince,*

*Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,*

*Makes mouths at the invisible event,*

***Exposing what is mortal and unsure***

***To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,***

***Even for an eggshell."***

*(Lines 45-52)*

Fortinbras risks everything—his life, his army, his future—for an "eggshell" (worthless land). Hamlet, with real cause for action, does nothing.

***"Rightly to be great***

***Is not to stir without great argument,***

***But greatly to find quarrel in a straw***

***When honor's at the stake."***

*(Lines 52-55)*

True greatness means acting even for small causes when honor is involved. Fortinbras does this. Hamlet, with the greatest of causes, remains still.

#### 7.4 The Conclusion

***"O, from this time forth,***

***My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!"***

*(Lines 65-66)*

The couplet is a vow. Hamlet commits to bloody action. But we have heard such vows before—and he is about to be sent to England, where action will be impossible.

**Discussion Point:** *Is this soliloquy different from the others? Does Hamlet seem more resolved, or is this more of the same?*

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## 8. Practical Application: Comparing Soliloquies

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### Activity: Tracking Hamlet's Resolve (15 minutes)

Complete this chart comparing Hamlet's four soliloquies:

| Soliloquy | Trigger | Self-Accusation | Resolution |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **"O that this too too solid flesh"** (I.ii) | Mother's remarriage | "Frailty, thy name is woman" | None—just despair |

| **"O what a rogue and peasant slave"** (II.ii) | Player's tears | "I am pigeon-livered" | "The play's the thing" |

| **"To be or not to be"** (III.i) | Existential reflection | "Conscience does make cowards" | None—philosophical |

| **"How all occasions"** (IV.iv) | Fortinbras's army | "Bestial oblivion" | "My thoughts be bloody" |

#### Questions:

1. Which soliloquy shows the strongest resolution? Why?
2. What pattern do you notice in what triggers Hamlet's self-criticism?
3. Why might Shakespeare include this fourth soliloquy just before Hamlet's departure? What purpose does it serve?

**Extension:** Write a paragraph comparing the "How all occasions" soliloquy to one of the earlier ones. Consider language, imagery, and tone.

---

## 9. Summary: Key Takeaways

| Scene | Key Events | Significance |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **IV.i** | Gertrude reports; Claudius decides on exile | Political manipulation; Claudius seizes opportunity |

| **IV.ii** | Hamlet mocks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern | "Sponge" metaphor; Hamlet sees their fate |

| **IV.iii** | Claudius announces exile; reveals death warrant | Dramatic irony: we know Hamlet is being sent to die |

| **IV.iv** | Hamlet meets Fortinbras's army; fourth soliloquy | Final resolution before exile; contrast with Fortinbras |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Mad as the sea and wind." (Gertrude on Hamlet)
- "Your worm is your only emperor for diet." (Hamlet)
- "I see a cherub that sees them." (Hamlet on Claudius's plot)
- "The present death of Hamlet." (Claudius's order)
- "How all occasions do inform against me." (Hamlet)
- "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!" (Hamlet)

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## 10. Looking Ahead

Hamlet leaves for England, ostensibly to his death. But the play does not follow him—it turns instead to Elsinore, where Ophelia, shattered by her father's death, descends into madness. In our next lesson, we will examine Ophelia's tragic breakdown and its symbolic meaning.

**To prepare:** Think about Ophelia's role in the play so far. How has she been treated by the men in her life? How might she respond to her father's death?

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## References

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Act IV, Scenes i-iv. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
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### Lesson 1 Complete

Next Lesson: *Ophelia's Madness: 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance'*

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### Lesson 2: Ophelia's Madness: 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance'

Duration: 45 minutes

## Lesson 2: Ophelia's Madness: 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance'

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy

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### Lesson Overview

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Of all the deaths in *Hamlet*, Ophelia's is perhaps the most heartbreaking. She is innocent—caught between her father's commands, her brother's warnings, and Hamlet's cruelty. When Polonius is killed by the man she loved, something in her snaps. In Act IV, Scene v, we witness Ophelia's descent into madness, expressed through fragments of songs, symbolic flowers, and disjointed speech. This lesson examines Ophelia's mad scenes, exploring what her breakdown reveals about her character, her relationships, and the play's themes of grief, sexuality, and the silencing of women.

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### Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of Act IV, Scene v, focusing on Ophelia's appearance
  - Analyze the content and symbolism of Ophelia's songs
  - Interpret the meaning of the flowers she distributes
  - Explain what Ophelia's madness reveals about her character and treatment
  - Discuss the political implications of her madness for Claudius
- 

### 1. Introduction: The Price of Innocence

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Ophelia has been told what to do her entire life. Her brother warned her about Hamlet; her father forbade her to see him; Hamlet himself told her "Get thee to a nunnery." She has obeyed every command, spoken little, and asked for nothing. Now, with her father dead by Hamlet's hand, the structure of obedience collapses. Without the men who controlled her, Ophelia has no self left—only fragments. And those fragments, in her madness, speak truths she could never utter when sane.

**Think About It:** *Why might madness allow Ophelia to speak more freely than sanity did? What has she been holding back?*

---

## 2. Summary of Events (Act IV, Scene v)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Gertrude Refuses to See Ophelia** | Horatio advises Gertrude to see her; Ophelia's behavior is disturbing and suggestive. |

| **Ophelia's First Entrance** | Ophelia enters "distracted," singing songs about death and betrayal. |

| **Claudius's Reaction** | Claudius observes her madness and worries about the political consequences. |

| **Laertes Returns** | Laertes storms the castle with a mob, demanding revenge for his father's death. |

| **Ophelia's Second Entrance** | Ophelia re-enters with flowers, distributing them with symbolic meanings. |

| **Ophelia Exits** | She leaves, singing, and we learn later that she drowns. |

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## 3. Core Concept 1: The Buildup (Lines 1-20)

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### 3.1 Gertrude's Refusal

**"I will not speak with her."** (*Gertrude, Line 1*)

Gertrude's first reaction is to avoid Ophelia. Perhaps she cannot face the girl whose father her son killed. Perhaps she senses that Ophelia's madness will force her to confront uncomfortable truths.

### 3.2 Horatio's Warning

**"She speaks much of her father, says she hears**

**There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart,**

**Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt**

**That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,**

**Yet the unshaped use of it doth move**

**The hearers to collection."**

(*Lines 4-9*)

Horatio describes Ophelia's state:

- She talks obsessively about her father
- She makes meaningless gestures
- Her speech is fragmented ("half sense")
- But listeners try to make meaning from it—and sometimes find truths

**"They aim at it,**

***And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts."***

*(Lines 9-10)*

People project their own interpretations onto her ravings. She becomes a blank screen onto which others project their fears.

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## 4. Core Concept 2: Ophelia's First Entrance (Lines 21-75)

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### 4.1 The First Song

***"How should I your true love know***

***From another one?***

***By his cockle hat and staff***

***And his sandal shoon."***

*(Lines 23-26)*

The song is about a woman seeking her dead lover—a pilgrim, marked by his "cockle hat" (hat with a scallop shell, sign of a pilgrim) and sandals. The connection to Hamlet is clear: he has gone (to England), and she will never see him again.

### 4.2 The Second Song

***"He is dead and gone, lady,***

***He is dead and gone;***

***At his head a grass-green turf,***

***At his heels a stone."***

*(Lines 29-32)*

This song is about a dead father. The "grass-green turf" and stone mark a grave. Ophelia mourns Polonius—but the song's simplicity makes it all the more devastating.

### 4.3 Gertrude's Response

***"Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?"*** *(Line 33)*

Gertrude tries to reach her, but Ophelia doesn't respond directly.

***"Say you? Nay, pray you, mark."*** *(Line 34)*

She insists on finishing her song.

#### 4.4 The Third Song

**"White his shroud as the mountain snow"—"**

(Line 36)

The song breaks off, then resumes with a new subject:

**"Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,**

**All in the morning betime,**

**And I a maid at your window,**

**To be your Valentine.**

**Then up he rose and donned his clothes**

**And dupp'd the chamber door,**

**Let in the maid, that out a maid**

**Never departed more."**

(Lines 48-55)

This song is explicitly sexual. It tells of a girl who goes to her lover on Valentine's morning, expecting love—but he takes her virginity and leaves her. "That out a maid / Never departed more" means she left no longer a virgin.

#### **The implications are profound:**

- Is Ophelia singing about her own experience with Hamlet?
- Is she expressing a sexuality that was never allowed expression?
- Is she accusing Hamlet of using her and abandoning her?

**"By Gis and by Saint Charity,**

**Alack, and fie for shame!**

**Young men will do't if they come to't—**

**By Cock, they are to blame.**

**Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,**

***You promised me to wed."***

*(Lines 57-62)*

The song becomes even more explicit: a man promised marriage, took the woman's virginity, and then abandoned her. The refrain "Young men will do't" suggests betrayal is inevitable.

***"So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,***

***An thou hadst not come to my bed."***

*(Lines 64-65)*

The man's response is callous: I would have married you if you hadn't slept with me first. The logic is twisted, but it blames the woman for her own seduction.

**Quick Check:** *Why do Ophelia's songs turn sexual? What might this reveal about her relationship with Hamlet—or about how she has been treated by men?*

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Claudius's Reaction (Lines 76-84)

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**Claudius:** *How do you, pretty lady?*

**Ophelia:** *Well, God dild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!*

*(Lines 76-79)*

Ophelia's response is nonsense—a folk tale about a baker's daughter turned into an owl for being stingy with bread. But the phrase "we know what we are, but know not what we may be" carries weight. It speaks to the uncertainty of identity and fate.

**Claudius:** *Conceit upon her father.*

*(Line 84)*

Claudius dismisses her words as obsessive grief for Polonius. He may be right—but he may also be missing deeper meanings.

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Laertes's Return (Lines 85-114)

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### 6.1 The Mob

***"Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!"*** *(Line 111)*

The people, angry about Polonius's death and suspicious of Claudius, have rallied behind Laertes. He storms the castle with a mob—a mirror of what Hamlet might have done if he were more like Fortinbras or Laertes.

## 6.2 The Confrontation

**Laertes:** *O thou vile king,*

*Give me my father!*

*(Lines 116-117)*

Laertes demands justice. Unlike Hamlet, he acts immediately, violently, without philosophical hesitation.

**Claudius:** *Let him go, Gertrude. Do not fear our person.*

*There's such divinity doth hedge a king*

*That treason can but peep to what it would,*

*Acts little of his will.*

*(Lines 121-124)*

Claudius remains calm, confident in his royal protection. He will manipulate Laertes as he has manipulated everyone.

---

## 7. Core Concept 5: Ophelia's Second Entrance (Lines 155-200)

### 7.1 The Flowers

Ophelia enters again, this time with flowers. She distributes them to various characters, each carrying symbolic meaning.

| Flower | Recipient | Traditional Meaning |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Rosemary** | "That's for remembrance" | Remembrance, fidelity |

| **Pansies** | "That's for thoughts" | Thoughts, love in vain |

| **Fennel** | "Give you some fennel" | Flattery, deceit |

| **Columbines** | "Give you some columbines" | Ingratitude, faithlessness |

| **Rue** | "You may wear your rue with a difference" | Regret, sorrow, repentance |

| **Daisy** | "Give you some daisies" | Innocence, purity |

| **Violets** | "withered all when my father died" | Fidelity, faithfulness |

#### Interpretation Challenges:

- Who receives which flower? The text is ambiguous.
- Ophelia may be distributing them randomly—or with pointed intent.
- The violets ("they withered all when my father died") suggest that all fidelity died with Polonius.

### 7.2 The Final Song

*"And will he not come again?"*

*And will he not come again?*

*No, no, he is dead,*

*Go to thy deathbed,*

*He never will come again.*

*His beard was as white as snow,*

*All flaxen was his poll.*

*He is gone, he is gone,*

*And we cast away moan.*

*God ha' mercy on his soul!"*

*(Lines 186-195)*

The song is about a dead father—white beard, flaxen hair. She mourns Polonias, but the repeated "And will he not come again?" speaks to all loss: fathers, lovers, happiness, sanity.

*"God ha' mercy on his soul!"*

*And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God be wi' you."*

*(Lines 195-196)*

She blesses them and exits. It is the last time we see her alive.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Ophelia's madness believable? What does it suggest about the pressure she has been under throughout the play?*

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## 8. Core Concept 6: The Meaning of Ophelia's Madness

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### 8.1 Multiple Interpretations

| Interpretation | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| **Grief for her father** | She constantly mentions her father; her final song is about an old man |

| **Grief for lost love** | The Valentine's song suggests betrayal by a lover |

| **Loss of self** | Without male direction, she has no identity |

| **Sexual repression** | Her songs express sexuality she could never voice when sane |

| **Protest** | Madness allows her to speak truth to power |

## 8.2 What Her Songs Reveal

| Song | Subject | What It Suggests |

|-----|-----|-----|

| "How should I your true love know" | Dead pilgrim lover | Loss of Hamlet |

| "He is dead and gone" | Dead father | Grief for Polonius |

| "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day" | Seduced and abandoned woman | Hamlet's betrayal? |

| "And will he not come again?" | Dead father | Final mourning |

## 8.3 The Silence of Ophelia

Throughout the play, Ophelia has been told to be silent:

- Laertes: "Think it no more"
- Polonius: "I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth / Have you so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet"
- Hamlet: "Get thee to a nunnery"

In madness, she finally speaks—and what she speaks is what she could not say before: grief, desire, accusation.

**Quick Check:** How is Ophelia's madness different from Hamlet's "antic disposition"? Is one more "real" than the other?

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## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing the Flower Speech

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### Activity: Symbolic Interpretation (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Flowers

Research the traditional meanings of these flowers in Elizabethan culture:

| Flower | Traditional Meaning | Why Ophelia Might Give It |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Rosemary | | |

| Pansies | | |

| Fennel | | |

| Columbines | | |

| Rue | | |

| Daisy | | |

| Violet | | |

#### Part B: The Recipients

The text does not specify who receives each flower. If you were directing the scene, who would you have Ophelia give each flower to? Why?

Flower	Recipient	Reason
Rosemary		
Pansies		
Fennel	Claudius?	Flattery/deceit suits him
Columbines		
Rue		
Daisy		
Violet		

### Part C: The Violets

***"I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died."***

Why are the violets withered? What does this loss of violets symbolize?

**Extension:** Write a short paragraph explaining what Ophelia's flower distribution reveals about her state of mind.

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## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

Element	Key Points
**Ophelia's State**	Mad with grief, singing fragments of songs, distributing symbolic flowers
**The Songs**	Mix of mourning for father and sexual betrayal by lover
**The Flowers**	Each carries symbolic meaning: remembrance, thoughts, deceit, regret, innocence, fidelity
**Claudius's Reaction**	Politically worried; sees her as a problem to manage
**Laertes's Return**	Parallel to Hamlet—but he acts immediately
**Ophelia's Exit**	Final blessing; we never see her alive again

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "How should I your true love know / From another one?"
- "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day... / Let in the maid, that out a maid / Never departed more."
- "Young men will do't if they come to't— / By Cock, they are to blame."
- "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember."
- "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died."
- "And will he not come again? / And will he not come again? / No, no, he is dead."

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## 11. Looking Ahead

Ophelia exits, and we will not see her alive again. In the next lesson, we will learn of her death—the beautiful, ambiguous account of her drowning—and watch Claudius manipulate Laertes into a plot to kill Hamlet.

**To prepare:** Think about how Ophelia's death is reported. Why might Shakespeare choose to have it described rather than shown?

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Act IV, Scene v. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
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  - Frye, Northrop. *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*. Yale University Press, 1986.
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### Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: Claudius and Laertes: A Treacherous Alliance*

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### Lesson 3: Claudius and Laertes: A Treacherous Alliance

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 3: Claudius and Laertes: A Treacherous Alliance

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy

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### Lesson Overview

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With Hamlet gone to England and Ophelia mad with grief, Claudius faces a new threat: Laertes, who has returned from France to find his father murdered and his sister destroyed. The grieving son storms the castle with a mob at his back, demanding justice. But Claudius, the master manipulator, does not meet Laertes's rage with force. Instead, he redirects it, channeling Laertes's desire for revenge toward Hamlet—and transforming it into something far darker. In this lesson, we will examine how Claudius bends Laertes to his will and devises a plot with multiple layers of treachery: a poisoned rapier, a poisoned chalice, and a backup plan for the backup plan.

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### Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of Act IV, Scenes vi-vii
  - Analyze Claudius's manipulation of Laertes
  - Explain the plot to kill Hamlet: the fencing match, the unbated sword, and the poison
  - Discuss the dramatic irony of the plan's multiple layers
  - Examine the news of Ophelia's death and its impact on Laertes
- 

### 1. Introduction: Two Sons, Two Revenge

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Laertes bursts into Elsinore as Hamlet should have: furious, surrounded by supporters, demanding blood. But where Hamlet philosophizes, Laertes acts. Where Hamlet hesitates, Laertes storms. He is everything

Hamlet might have been—and Claudius, watching this display of righteous fury, sees an opportunity. If he cannot destroy Hamlet himself, he will find someone who can.

**Think About It:** How is Laertes's situation similar to Hamlet's? How is it different? Why does Laertes act immediately while Hamlet delays?

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## 2. Summary of Events (Act IV, Scenes vi-vii)

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| Scene | Key Events |

|-----|-----|

| **Scene vi** | Sailors bring Horatio a letter from Hamlet: his ship was attacked by pirates; he has been set ashore in Denmark and asks Horatio to come to him. |

| **Scene vii** | Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is responsible for Polonius's death. A messenger brings letters revealing Hamlet's return. Claudius and Laertes devise a plot: a fencing match with a poisoned, unbated rapier. Claudius adds a poisoned chalice as backup. Gertrude enters with news of Ophelia's drowning. |

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## 3. Scene vi: The Pirate Letter (Lines 1-30)

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### 3.1 The Unexpected Return

**"Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this, give these fellows some means to the king. They have letters for him."** (From Hamlet's letter, paraphrased)

Hamlet's letter arrives unexpectedly. His ship was attacked by pirates, and in the chaos, he was taken prisoner—but treated well. He has been set ashore in Denmark and asks Horatio to come to him.

### 3.2 The Irony

Claudius sent Hamlet to England to be killed. But fortune—or Shakespeare—intervenes. Hamlet returns, and the plans for his death will now take a different form.

**Quick Check:** Why might Shakespeare bring Hamlet back this way? What does the pirate encounter suggest about fate or chance in the play?

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## 4. Scene vii: The Manipulation (Lines 1-110)

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### 4.1 Laertes's Demand

**Claudius:** Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,

And you must put me in your heart for friend,

Sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear,

That he which hath your noble father slain

*Pursued my life.*

*(Lines 1-5)*

Claudius begins by aligning himself with Laertes. They have a common enemy: Hamlet. He reminds Laertes that Hamlet tried to kill him too.

***Laertes: It well appears. But tell me***

*Why you proceeded not against these feats*

*So crimeful and so capital in nature...*

*(Lines 5-7)*

Laertes asks the obvious question: if Claudius also wanted Hamlet dead, why didn't he act?

#### 4.2 Claudius's Explanation

***"O, for two special reasons,***

***Which may to you, perhaps, seem much unsinewed,***

***But yet to me they're strong. The queen his mother***

***Lives almost by his looks, and for myself—***

***My virtue or my plague, be it either which—***

***She is so conjunctive to my life and soul***

***That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,***

***I could not but by her."***

*(Lines 9-16)*

Claudius claims he cannot move against Hamlet because of Gertrude: she adores her son, and Claudius adores her. Whether this is true or merely a convenient excuse, it positions Claudius as sympathetic—a man constrained by love.

***"The other motive***

***Why to a public count I might not go***

***Is the great love the general gender bear him."***

(Lines 17-19)

The common people love Hamlet. If Claudius punished him openly, it could cause rebellion.

### 4.3 Laertes's Grief

**"And so have I a noble father lost,**

**A sister driven into desp'rate terms,**

**Whose worth, if praises may go back again,**

**Stood challenger on mount of all the age**

**For her perfections. But my revenge will come."**

(Lines 25-29)

Laertes lists his losses: father dead, sister destroyed. His language is controlled, but the promise of revenge is clear.

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## 5. Core Concept 1: The Plot Is Born (Lines 111-160)

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### 5.1 The Catalyst

A messenger arrives with letters: Hamlet is back in Denmark. Claudius is shocked:

**"Laertes, you shall hear them. Leave us, friends."** (Line 40, paraphrased)

He reads the letter—Hamlet announces his return "naked" (without retinue) and asks to see the king tomorrow.

**Claudius:** *What should this mean? Are all the rest come back?*

*Or is it some abuse, and no such thing?*

(Lines 45-46)

### 5.2 The Challenge

**Laertes:** *Let him come.*

*It warms the very sickness in my heart*

*That I shall live and tell him to his teeth,*

*"Thus diddest thou."*

*(Lines 53-56)*

Laertes wants confrontation. Claudius sees an opportunity.

**Claudius:** *If he be now returned,*

*As checking at his voyage, and that he means*

*No more to undertake it, I will work him*

*To an exploit now ripe in my device,*

*Under the which he shall not choose but fall.*

*(Lines 60-64)*

Claudius has a plan ready. He will manipulate Hamlet into an "exploit" that will kill him.

### 5.3 The Fencing Match

**Claudius:** *He, being remiss,*

*Most generous, and free from all contriving,*

*Will not peruse the foils.*

*(Lines 67-69)*

Claudius knows Hamlet's character: he is noble, unsuspecting, and will not examine the swords closely.

**Laertes:** *I'll anoint my sword.*

*I bought an unction of a mountebank*

*So mortal that, but dip a knife in it,*

*Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare...*

*Can save the thing from death.*

*(Lines 70-74)*

Laertes goes further. He has poison so deadly that a scratch will kill. He will use an **unbated** (sharp) sword, not the blunted foil used in practice, and tip it with poison.

## 5.4 The Backup Plan

**Claudius:** *Let's further think of this,*

*Weigh what convenience both of time and means*

*May fit us to our shape. If this should fail,*

*And that our drift look through our bad performance,*

*'Twere better not assayed. Therefore this project*

*Should have a back or second that might hold*

*If this did blast in proof.*

*(Lines 74-80)*

Claudius thinks like a politician: always have a backup plan. He proposes:

***"When in your motion you are hot and dry—***

***As make your bouts more violent to that end—***

***And that he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him***

***A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,***

***If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck,***

***Our purpose may hold there."***

*(Lines 82-87)*

A poisoned chalice. If the sword fails, the drink will kill him.

## 5.5 The Layers of Treachery

| Layer | Method | If Successful | If It Fails |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Primary** | Laertes's unbated, poisoned rapier | Hamlet dies in the match | Move to backup |

| **Backup** | Claudius's poisoned chalice | Hamlet dies drinking | Nothing—but two plans make failure unlikely |

This is overkill. Claudius leaves nothing to chance.

**Discussion Point:** Why does Claudius add a backup plan? What does this reveal about his character and his fear of Hamlet?

## 6. Core Concept 2: The News of Ophelia's Death (Lines 160-190)

### 6.1 The Interruption

**Gertrude enters.**

**"One woe doth tread upon another's heel,**

**So fast they follow."**

*(Lines 160-161)*

Gertrude's language suggests disaster piling on disaster. She has come with news that will break Laertes completely.

### 6.2 The Report

**"Your sister's drowned, Laertes." (Line 164)**

The announcement is direct. Then Gertrude delivers one of the most beautiful and ambiguous speeches in the play:

**"There is a willow grows askant the brook**

**That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.**

**Therewith fantastic garlands did she make**

**Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples**

**That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,**

**But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.**

**There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds**

**Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,**

**When down her weedy trophies and herself**

**Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,**

*And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,*

*Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,*

*As one incapable of her own distress,*

*Or like a creature native and indued*

*Unto that element. But long it could not be*

*Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,*

*Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay*

*To muddy death."*

*(Lines 165-182)*

### 6.3 Analysis of the Speech

| Element | Description | Significance |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Setting** | Willow tree by a brook | Willows symbolize forsaken love |

| **Garlands** | Crowflowers, nettles, daisies, long purples | Mixture of innocence (daisies) and pain (nettles) |

| **The Fall** | Branch breaks; she falls in | Accident? Suicide? The text is ambiguous |

| **Floating** | Clothes spread; she floats "mermaid-like" | Beautiful, almost peaceful image |

| **Singing** | She sings "snatches of old tunes" | Continuing her madness even in death |

| **The End** | Clothes grow heavy; she drowns | "Muddy death"—not peaceful after all |

### 6.4 The Ambiguity

Is Ophelia's death suicide or accident? The play never answers:

| Interpretation | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| **Accident** | The branch breaks; she falls unintentionally |

| **Suicide** | She makes garlands by the water; she doesn't try to save herself |

| **Madness** | She is "incapable of her own distress"—not responsible |

| **Symbolic** | Water represents emotion; she is consumed by it |

The ambiguity matters. In Christian theology, suicide damned the soul. If Ophelia killed herself, she cannot be given proper burial rites—which becomes an issue at her funeral.

### 6.5 Laertes's Reaction

**"Alas, then she is drowned?"** (Line 183)

His question is simple, almost numb.

**"Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,**

**And therefore I forbid my tears."**

(Lines 184-185)

He tries to hold back grief—but fails:

**"But yet**

**It is our trick; nature her custom holds,**

**Let shame say what it will."**

(Lines 185-187)

He weeps. Even his rage cannot contain his sorrow.

**Claudius:** *Let's follow, Gertrude.*

*How much I had to do to calm his rage!*

*Now fear I this will give it start again;*

*Therefore let's follow.*

(Lines 187-190)

Claudius watches, calculating. He worries that grief will disrupt his plot.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Gertrude describe Ophelia's death so beautifully? What effect does this speech have on the audience?*

---

## 7. Core Concept 3: Contrasting Revengers

---

This scene offers a direct contrast between Laertes and Hamlet:

| Quality | Laertes | Hamlet |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Cause** | Father murdered, sister dead | Father murdered |

| **Response** | Immediate, violent action | Delay, thought, plotting |

| **Method** | Open rebellion, then conspiracy | Feigned madness, play-within-a-play |

| **Moral limits** | Willing to use poison, cheat in a duel | Religious scruples; won't kill at prayer |

| **Target** | Claudius at first, then Hamlet | Claudius only |

Laertes is what Hamlet might have been. But Laertes's willingness to cheat—to use poison, to deceive—makes him morally compromised. He is not a hero; he is a pawn of Claudius.

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## 8. Practical Application: Analyzing the Plot

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### Activity: The Layers of Treachery (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Plan

Complete this chart showing the plot against Hamlet:

| Element | Details |

|-----|-----|

| **The Occasion** | A fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes |

| **The Sword** | Unbated (sharp), tipped with poison |

| **The Backup** | Poisoned chalice for when Hamlet is "hot and dry" |

| **The Justification** | Revenge for Polonius's death and Ophelia's madness |

| **The Weakness** | Depends on Hamlet's trust and lack of suspicion |

#### Part B: Character Motivation

For each character, explain why they agree to the plot:

| Character | Motivation | Evidence |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Claudius** | Eliminate Hamlet without public blame | "The queen his mother lives almost by his looks" |

| **Laertes** | Revenge for father and sister | "I'll anoint my sword" |

#### Part C: Dramatic Irony

What do we know that the characters don't?

| We Know | Characters Don't Know |

|-----|-----|

| Hamlet will return the next day | Claudius must act quickly |

| Hamlet is suspicious of Claudius | Claudius thinks Hamlet is "free from all contriving" |

| The plan has multiple layers | Laertes doesn't know Claudius has a backup |

| Gertrude will drink from the chalice | No one anticipates this |

**Extension:** Write a paragraph predicting how this plan might go wrong. What could possibly fail?

---

## 9. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet's Return** | Pirates intervene; Hamlet is back in Denmark |

| **Claudius's Manipulation** | He redirects Laertes's rage toward Hamlet |

| **The Plot** | Fencing match with unbated, poisoned rapier; poisoned chalice as backup |

| **Laertes's Complicity** | He agrees to cheat—poison, deception—compromising his honor |

| **Ophelia's Death** | Gertrude's beautiful, ambiguous report of drowning |

| **Laertes's Grief** | He weeps despite trying not to; Claudius watches, calculating |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "I will work him / To an exploit now ripe in my device."
- "I'll anoint my sword."
- "If this should fail, / ... this project / Should have a back or second."
- "There is a willow grows askant the brook..."
- "Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia."

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## 10. Looking Ahead

The trap is set. Hamlet returns to Elsinore, unaware of the plot against him. In Act V, all the threads will converge: the gravediggers' meditations on mortality, Ophelia's funeral, the final duel, and the catastrophic conclusion.

**To prepare:** Think about the imagery of death in the play. How has death been discussed? How will it finally arrive?

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Act IV, Scenes vi-vii. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
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### Lesson 3 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Death of Ophelia*

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### Lesson 4: The Death of Ophelia

*Duration: 45 minutes*

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## Lesson 4: The Death of Ophelia

**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy

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## Lesson Overview

Ophelia's death is not shown on stage. Instead, it is reported by Gertrude in one of the most beautiful and haunting speeches in all of Shakespeare. The queen describes a scene of garlands, willows, and a fatal fall into a "weeping brook." But beneath the poetic language lies a profound ambiguity: Was Ophelia's death accident or suicide? Does she slip, or does she let go? In this lesson, we will conduct a close reading of Gertrude's speech, exploring its imagery, its symbolism, and its significance for the play's meditation on innocence, mortality, and the meaning of a "good" death.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Recite or closely paraphrase Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning
  - Analyze the imagery and symbolism in the speech
  - Discuss the ambiguity of Ophelia's death: accident or suicide?
  - Explain how Ophelia's death reflects the play's themes of innocence, nature, and mortality
  - Connect Ophelia's death to the larger patterns of the tragedy
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Death We Don't See

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Throughout *Hamlet*, death comes in many forms: murder (King Hamlet), stabbing (Polonius), execution (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, offstage), and eventually poison (Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, Hamlet). But Ophelia's death is different. It happens offstage, reported secondhand, wrapped in language so beautiful that it almost obscures the horror. We never see her fall. We never see her struggle. We only hear Gertrude's words—and those words have shaped how generations have imagined Ophelia's end.

**Think About It:** Why might Shakespeare choose to have Ophelia's death described rather than shown? What effect does this have on the audience?

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## 2. The Full Text of Gertrude's Speech

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Before we analyze, read the speech in its entirety. As you read, mark any words or images that stand out to you.

**GERTRUDE:**

*There is a willow grows askant the brook*

*That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.*

*Therewith fantastic garlands did she make*

*Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples*

*That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,*

*But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.*

*There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds*

*Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,*

*When down her weedy trophies and herself*

*Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,*

*And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,*

*Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,*

*As one incapable of her own distress,*

*Or like a creature native and indued*

*Unto that element. But long it could not be*

*Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,*

*Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay*

*To muddy death.*

*(Act IV, Scene vii, Lines 165-182)*

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### 3. Core Concept 1: The Setting (Lines 165-167)

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#### 3.1 The Willow

*"There is a willow grows askant the brook*

*That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream."*

#### **Willow symbolism:**

- Willows traditionally represent **forsaken love** and **grief**
- They grow near water, often associated with weeping ("weeping willow")
- The willow's leaves are "hoar"—gray or white, suggesting age, sadness, or even the white of death

The willow "shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream"—it contemplates its own reflection. This mirroring suggests Ophelia, who may also be contemplating herself, her life, her losses.

#### 3.2 The Brook

The brook is "glassy"—smooth, reflective, beautiful. But it will become her grave. The contrast between beauty and death runs throughout the speech.

**Quick Check:** Why might Shakespeare begin with the willow and the brook? What mood do these images create?

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## 4. Core Concept 2: The Garlands (Lines 167-170)

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### 4.1 The Flowers

*"fantastic garlands did she make*

*Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples"*

Ophelia creates a "crown" (a small crown) of wildflowers. Each flower carries symbolic meaning:

| Flower | Traditional Meaning | Significance |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Crowflowers** | Also called buttercups; associated with childishness, ingratitude | Her lost innocence |

| **Nettles** | Pain, suffering, stinging | The pain she has endured |

| **Daisies** | Innocence, purity, the virgin | Her former purity |

| **Long purples** | Orchids; also called "dead men's fingers" | Death, sexuality |

The mixture is striking: innocence (daisies) mixed with pain (nettles), childhood (crowflowers) mixed with death (long purples). Her garland reflects her state: a blend of purity and destruction.

### 4.2 The Name

*"That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,*

*But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them."*

The "long purples" have two names:

- Shepherds ("liberal" = coarse, free-spoken) call them something obscene (probably phallic)
- "Cold maids" (chaste young women) call them "dead men's fingers"

The double naming highlights the tension in Ophelia's life: she has been both the innocent maid and the object of sexual desire. The flower itself embodies this contradiction.

**Discussion Point:** Why include the note about the flower's two names? What does this reveal about how Ophelia is seen—and how she sees herself?

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## 5. Core Concept 3: The Fall (Lines 170-174)

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### 5.1 The Climbing

*"There on the pendent boughs her crownnet weeds*

*Clamb'ring to hang"*

Ophelia climbs the willow to hang her garlands on the overhanging branches. The image is childlike—a girl playing, decorating, making beautiful things. But there is also something ritualistic about it, as if she is preparing her own grave decoration.

## 5.2 The Breaking

***"an envious sliver broke"***

The branch that breaks is "envious"—as if nature itself were jealous of her beauty or her life. This personification makes the accident feel almost intentional, as if the world conspired against her.

## 5.3 The Fall

***"When down her weedy trophies and herself***

***Fell in the weeping brook."***

She falls with her garlands—"herself" and "her weedy trophies" together. She becomes part of the nature she was decorating. The brook is "weeping," as if it mourns her even as it receives her.

**Key question:** Does she fall, or does she let go? The text says the branch "broke"—an accident. But the word "envious" suggests something more.

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## 6. Core Concept 4: The Floating (Lines 174-178)

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### 6.1 The Mermaid

***"Her clothes spread wide,***

***And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up"***

For a moment, Ophelia is transformed. Her spread clothes make her look like a mermaid—a creature of myth, half-human, half-nature. The image is beautiful, almost magical. She does not sink immediately; she floats, suspended between life and death.

### 6.2 The Singing

***"Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,***

***As one incapable of her own distress"***

Even in the water, Ophelia sings. She continues the songs we heard in her madness—"old tunes" that she cannot stop, even as she drowns. She is "incapable of her own distress"—either unaware of her danger or beyond caring.

### 6.3 The Creature of the Water

***"Or like a creature native and indued***

***Unto that element."***

She seems to belong in the water, as if she were always meant to be there. The line suggests a kind of homecoming—the water accepts her as its own.

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## 7. Core Concept 5: The Sinking (Lines 178-182)

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### 7.1 The Inevitable End

*"But long it could not be*

*Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,*

*Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay*

*To muddy death."*

The beauty cannot last. Her clothes, soaked through, become weights. They "pull" her down—the verb suggests force, inevitability. She is dragged from her singing ("melodious lay") to "muddy death."

### 7.2 The Contrast

| Before | After |

|-----|-----|

| Floating like a mermaid | Pulled down by heavy clothes |

| Singing "old tunes" | Silence |

| "creature native" to water | Consumed by water |

| Beautiful | "muddy" |

The final phrase—"muddy death"—is deliberately ugly after the beauty that preceded it. Death is not clean or poetic. It is mud, weight, silence.

**Quick Check:** *Why does Shakespeare shift from beautiful imagery to "muddy death"? What effect does this contrast create?*

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## 8. Core Concept 6: The Ambiguity

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### 8.1 Accident or Suicide?

The speech leaves Ophelia's death deliberately ambiguous. Consider the evidence:

| For Accident | For Suicide |

|-----|-----|

| The branch "broke"—she didn't jump | She made garlands by a dangerous brook |

| She was "clamb'ring" to hang garlands—a childlike activity | She didn't try to save herself |

| She sang—unaware of danger | She was "incapable of her own distress"—maybe she didn't want to be aware |

| Gertrude calls it an accident (she says "drowned," not "killed herself") | The suspicious circumstances suggest she let go |

## 8.2 Why the Ambiguity Matters

In Elizabethan England, suicide was a mortal sin. Those who killed themselves could not be buried in consecrated ground. If Ophelia's death is suicide, her funeral will be contested—which is exactly what happens in Act V.

The ambiguity also reflects Ophelia's own ambiguity: Is she victim or agent? Innocent or complicit? Child or woman?

## 8.3 Gertrude's Perspective

Why does Gertrude tell the story this way? Consider:

| Possible Motive | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Comfort for Laertes** | Presenting it as a beautiful accident might soften the blow |

| **Guilt** | Gertrude may feel responsible for Ophelia's fate |

| **Poetic sensibility** | Gertrude sees the world through a romantic lens |

| **Avoiding blame** | If it's an accident, no one is responsible |

**Discussion Point:** Do you believe Ophelia's death was accident or suicide? What evidence from the text supports your view?

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## 9. Core Concept 7: Thematic Significance

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### 9.1 Innocence Destroyed

Ophelia is the play's purest victim. She has done nothing wrong—yet she loses her father, her lover, her mind, and her life. Her death represents the destruction of innocence by the corrupt world of Elsinore.

### 9.2 Nature and Death

Throughout the play, nature imagery has been used to describe corruption: the "unweeded garden," the "mildewed ear," the "rank" offense. Ophelia's death reverses this: she becomes part of nature, but nature itself is "weeping," "envious," and finally "muddy." Even nature cannot save her.

### 9.3 The Feminine Death

Ophelia's death is often read as specifically feminine: passive, beautiful, associated with water and flowers. Compare it to the violent, active deaths of the men:

- Polonius: stabbed behind a curtain
- Claudius: stabbed and poisoned
- Laertes: stabbed with his own poison
- Hamlet: stabbed and poisoned

Only Ophelia dies offstage, reported in poetry, her body claimed by water.

### 9.4 The Unanswered Questions

The speech leaves questions that can never be answered:

- Did she mean to die?
- Was she aware of what was happening?
- Did anyone try to save her?
- Why was she alone?

These unanswered questions mirror the play's larger uncertainties about death, justice, and meaning.

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## 10. Practical Application: Close Reading Exercise

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### Activity: Analyzing the Language (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Imagery Chart

Identify the images in each section of the speech:

| Section | Images | Effect |

|-----|-----|-----|

| The willow | "hoar leaves," "glassy stream" | Reflective, sad, beautiful |

| The garlands | "crowflowers, nettles, daisies, long purples" | Mixed innocence and pain |

| The fall | "pendent boughs," "envious sliver," "weeping brook" | Nature as both beautiful and destructive |

| The floating | "mermaid-like," "snatches of old tunes" | Magical, suspended |

| The sinking | "garments heavy," "muddy death" | Ugly, final |

#### Part B: Sound Devices

Find examples of:

- **Alliteration** (repeated consonant sounds): "weeping brook," "garments... heavy"
- **Assonance** (repeated vowel sounds): "glassy stream," "mermaid-like... awhile"
- **Rhythm** (how the lines flow): Note where the rhythm speeds up or slows down

#### Part C: Personification

The speech gives human qualities to nature:

- The willow "shows his hoar leaves"
- The sliver is "envious"
- The brook is "weeping"

What effect does this personification create? How does it make the scene feel?

#### Part D: Your Response

Write a paragraph responding to one of these prompts:

- Why do you think this speech is so famous? What makes it memorable?
- If you were directing this scene, how would you have Gertrude deliver these lines? With tears? With distance? With guilt?
- Do you find the speech beautiful, disturbing, or both? Explain.

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## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Setting** | Willow tree by a brook—symbol of forsaken love and grief |

| **Garlands** | Crowflowers, nettles, daisies, long purples—mixture of innocence and pain |

| **The Fall** | Branch breaks; she falls—accident or surrender? |

| **The Floating** | "Mermaid-like," singing—beautiful suspension between life and death |

| **The Sinking** | Garments pull her down to "muddy death"—beauty gives way to ugliness |

| **Ambiguity** | Accident or suicide? The play never answers |

| **Themes** | Innocence destroyed; nature as both beautiful and deadly; the feminine death |

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "There is a willow grows askant the brook / That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream."
- "Therewith fantastic garlands did she make / Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples."
- "Her clothes spread wide, / And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up."
- "As one incapable of her own distress, / Or like a creature native and indued / Unto that element."
- "Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death."

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## 12. Looking Ahead

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Ophelia's death sets the stage for the final act. Her funeral will bring Hamlet and Laertes together at her grave, leading to an explosive confrontation. And Claudius's plot, conceived in the previous scene, will reach its bloody conclusion.

In Act V, the themes of death and mortality reach their climax: in the graveyard, with Yorick's skull; in the duel, with poison; in the throne room, with the entire royal family dead.

**To prepare:** Think about how Ophelia's death changes Laertes. How might it affect his willingness to go through with Claudius's plot?

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## References

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Act IV, Scene vii, Lines 165-182. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
- Showalter, Elaine. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism." *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Methuen, 1985.
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- Frye, Northrop. *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*. Yale University Press, 1986.

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### Lesson 4 Complete

*Next Module: Act V: The Catastrophe*

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### Module 5 Summary Sheet

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## Module 5: Act IV: The Aftermath and Ophelia's Tragedy — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **Hamlet's Exile:** Claudius, fearing for his safety, sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, carrying secret orders for Hamlet's execution.
- **Hamlet's Escape:** Pirates attack Hamlet's ship; in the chaos, Hamlet is taken prisoner but treated honorably and returned to Denmark. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths with a rewritten commission.
- **Ophelia's Madness:** Overwhelmed by grief from her father's death and Hamlet's rejection, Ophelia descends into genuine madness. Her fragmented speech, songs, and flower distribution express truths she could not speak when sane.
- **The Songs:** Ophelia's songs reveal her preoccupations: a dead father ("He is dead and gone") and sexual betrayal ("Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day"), suggesting her grief is compounded by lost love.

- **The Flowers:** Ophelia distributes symbolic flowers—rosemary for remembrance, pansies for thoughts, fennel for flattery, columbines for ingratitude, rue for regret, daisies for innocence, and violets for fidelity (now withered).
- **Laertes's Rage:** Laertes returns from France, storms the castle with a mob, and demands revenge for his father's death. He is initially ready to kill Claudius.
- **Claudius's Manipulation:** Claudius redirects Laertes's anger toward Hamlet, flattering his honor and proposing a treacherous plot: a fencing match with a poisoned, unbated rapier, and a poisoned chalice as backup.
- **Ophelia's Death:** Gertrude reports Ophelia's drowning in a beautiful, ambiguous speech. While making flower garlands by a willow, a branch breaks, and she falls into a "weeping brook," floating and singing before her clothes become heavy and pull her to a "muddy death." The question of accident versus suicide is left open.

### Core Takeaways

Act IV traces the devastating consequences of Polonius's murder. Ophelia's descent into madness and her subsequent drowning represent the destruction of innocence by the corrupt court. Meanwhile, Claudius masterfully manipulates the grieving Laertes into a murderous plot against Hamlet, adding layers of treachery with poisoned weapons. Hamlet's return from his aborted execution sets the stage for the final confrontation. The act ends with a kingdom in mourning and a plot in motion.

### Terms to Know

- **Muddy Death** — Gertrude's final phrase describing Ophelia's drowning, contrasting the beauty of the scene with the ugly reality of death.
- **Mermaid-like** — Gertrude's image of Ophelia floating in the water, suggesting a mythical, beautiful transformation before death.
- **Sponge** — Hamlet's earlier metaphor for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; in Act IV, they are "squeezed dry" and sent to their deaths.
- **Unbated** — A sword without a button (blunted tip); in Laertes's plot, he will use a sharp, unbated rapier in what is supposed to be a friendly fencing match.
- **Envenomed** — Poisoned; Laertes will tip his unbated rapier with a deadly poison.
- **Chalice** — A cup or goblet; Claudius prepares a poisoned chalice as a backup to ensure Hamlet's death.
- **Long Purples** — A flower in Ophelia's garland, also called "dead men's fingers," symbolizing death and perhaps sexuality.
- **Crants** — Garlands or wreaths, specifically those carried at a maiden's funeral; the priest mentions Ophelia is allowed her "virgin crants" despite the questionable nature of her death.

### Review Questions

1. How does Hamlet escape the plot to have him executed in England, and what happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
2. Describe Ophelia's behavior in her mad scenes. What do her songs and flowers reveal about her inner state?
3. What is Laertes's initial reaction upon returning to Denmark, and how does Claudius manipulate him?
4. Describe the plot that Claudius and Laertes devise against Hamlet. What are the primary and backup plans?
5. Summarize Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death. What makes her description ambiguous regarding whether it was an accident or suicide?

### Further Thinking

- Ophelia's madness is her only moment of freedom from the control of men. Is her madness a form of protest, or simply a tragic breakdown? What does her fate suggest about the options available to women in Elsinore?
  - Claudius is a master manipulator. How does he use Laertes's grief, pride, and sense of honor against him? What does this reveal about Claudius's political skills—and his fundamental lack of morality?
-

## Module 5 Quiz

**Q1.** What happens to Hamlet's plan to be executed in England?

- A) He is rescued by Horatio before reaching England.
- B) The English king refuses to carry out the execution.
- C) He discovers the plot, rewrites the death warrant, and escapes after his ship is attacked by pirates.
- D) He is taken prisoner by Fortinbras's army.

**Q2.** When Ophelia first appears mad in Act IV, Scene v, what is the primary subject of her songs?

- A) Happy memories of her childhood.
- B) The beauty of the Danish court.
- C) Death, a dead father, and the betrayal of a lover.
- D) Her desire to marry Hamlet.

**Q3.** In her mad scene, Ophelia distributes flowers with symbolic meanings. What does she mean when she says, 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance'?

- A) She wants everyone to remember her father.
- B) She is reminding the court to remember her.
- C) She is asking Hamlet to remember their love.
- D) She is telling Gertrude to remember her marriage vows.

**Q4.** When Laertes storms the castle, how does Claudius manage to calm him and turn his rage toward Hamlet?

- A) By challenging Laertes to a duel.
- B) By convincing Laertes that Hamlet was responsible for Polonius's death and then proposing a plan for Laertes to kill him.
- C) By imprisoning Laertes until he agrees to cooperate.
- D) By blaming Gertrude for the murder.

**Q5.** What is the treacherous 'backup plan' that Claudius adds to Laertes's idea of using a poisoned, unbated rapier?

- A) Hiring assassins to ambush Hamlet after the duel.
- B) Poisoning Hamlet's horse.
- C) Preparing a poisoned chalice of wine for Hamlet to drink during the match.
- D) Planning to stab Hamlet himself if the sword fails.

**Q6.** In his final soliloquy of Act IV, what does Hamlet admire about Fortinbras, and what does this contrast reveal?

- A) He admires Fortinbras's wealth and uses it to justify his own inaction.
- B) He admires Fortinbras's willingness to risk everything for honor, even for a worthless cause, which shames Hamlet for his own delay.
- C) He admires Fortinbras's political skills and decides to join his army.
- D) He admires Fortinbras's mercy and decides to forgive Claudius.

**Q7.** According to Gertrude's report, how did Ophelia die?

- A) She deliberately jumped from a high cliff.
- B) She fell into a brook while trying to hang her flower garlands on a willow tree and drowned.

C) She was murdered by Claudius's agents.

D) She died of a broken heart in her bed.

**Q8.** The sailors who deliver Hamlet's letter to Horatio are actually pirates working for Claudius.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death is deliberately ambiguous, leaving it unclear whether it was an accident or a suicide.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** Upon hearing of Ophelia's death, Laertes is so overwhelmed with grief that he completely forgets his plot for revenge against Hamlet.

*(True / False)*

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** C — Hamlet tells Horatio in a letter that pirates attacked his ship, and during the chaos, he was taken prisoner but treated well and returned to Denmark, having sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths with the altered commission.

**Q2:** C — Her fragmented songs speak of a dead old man (her father) and a young woman seduced and abandoned by a lover (possibly her own experience with Hamlet), expressing grief and loss.

**Q3:** A — While the flowers have multiple possible interpretations, rosemary was traditionally associated with remembrance, and in this context, it primarily serves to mourn and remember her murdered father, Polonius.

**Q4:** B — Claudius manipulates Laertes by redirecting his anger at the right target (Hamlet) and then flatters his honor, leading him into a treacherous plot to ensure Hamlet's death.

**Q5:** C — Claudius's political mind thinks of redundancy. If Laertes fails to wound Hamlet with the poisoned sword, he will offer Hamlet a drink from a poisoned cup to ensure his death.

**Q6:** B — Hamlet is shamed by Fortinbras's example. An entire army is willing to die for a worthless patch of ground, while Hamlet, with 'cause, and will, and strength, and means' to avenge his father, has done nothing.

**Q7:** B — Gertrude's poetic account describes Ophelia climbing a willow to hang her garlands, a branch breaking, and her falling into the water, where her clothes kept her afloat for a while as she sang, before she sank to a 'muddy death.'

**Q8:** False — The pirates are presented as a random stroke of fortune. They attack Hamlet's ship, and in the ensuing battle, Hamlet is taken prisoner but is treated honorably, allowing him to return to Denmark.

**Q9:** True — The language is beautiful but vague. While it appears accidental (a branch broke), Ophelia's lack of struggle and her singing while floating suggest she may have made no attempt to save herself, leaving the question open.

**Q10:** False — Ophelia's death fuels Laertes's desire for revenge. Though he weeps, Claudius worries that this new grief will reignite his rage and make him more determined to carry out their murderous plan.

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## Module 6: Act V: The Catastrophe

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The final act brings all conflicts to a head in the tragic and bloody conclusion. From the gravedigger scene to the final duel, we see the ultimate cost of revenge.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Summarize the key events of Act V.
- Analyze the gravedigger scene and its themes of death, equality, and memory.
- Examine Hamlet's final transformation and his acceptance of fate ('The readiness is all').
- Analyze the final duel and the deaths of the main characters.

- Evaluate Horatio's role as the surviving witness and Fortinbras's restoration of order.



## Lesson 1: The Gravedigger Scene: Meditations on Mortality

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 1: The Gravedigger Scene: Meditations on Mortality

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act V: The Catastrophe

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## Lesson Overview

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After the intensity of Act IV—madness, plotting, and death—Act V opens in a graveyard. Two gravediggers joke as they dig a fresh grave, tossing skulls aside like rubbish. Into this scene walks Hamlet, returning to Elsinore unaware that the grave is for Ophelia. What follows is Shakespeare's most profound meditation on death: its inevitability, its equality, its absurdity. The famous moment with Yorick's skull forces Hamlet—and the audience—to confront the physical reality of death. But the scene also contains dark comedy, theological wordplay, and a new calm in Hamlet's demeanor. He has been to the edge of death and returned; now, in the graveyard, he seems ready for whatever comes.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of Act V, Scene i
- Analyze the gravediggers' dark humor and its thematic significance
- Explain the significance of the skulls and the Yorick speech
- Discuss Hamlet's changing attitude toward death
- Examine the confrontation between Hamlet and Laertes at Ophelia's grave

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## 1. Introduction: The Leveling Ground

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A graveyard is the great equalizer. Kings and peasants, lawyers and clowns, beautiful women and forgotten men—all end up here, their bones mingled with the earth. Shakespeare opens his final act in this most democratic of places, with the most humble of characters: two gravediggers, common laborers, who joke about death as they prepare a grave. Their dark humor prepares us for the play's bloody conclusion while also offering a new perspective on everything that has come before.

**Think About It:** *Why might Shakespeare set the final act in a graveyard? What does this setting suggest about what is to come?*

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## 2. Summary of Events (Act V, Scene i)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **The Gravediggers Argue** | Two gravediggers discuss whether Ophelia deserves a Christian burial, given the suspicious nature of her death. |

| **Hamlet and Horatio Arrive** | Hamlet and Horatio enter and observe the gravedigger at work. |

| **The Skulls** | The gravedigger throws up skulls; Hamlet meditates on who they might have been. |

| **Yorick's Skull** | The gravedigger produces the skull of Yorick, the king's former jester. Hamlet's famous speech follows. |

| **Ophelia's Funeral** | A procession enters with Ophelia's body. Laertes and Hamlet confront each other at her grave. |

| **The Leap** | Hamlet declares his love for Ophelia and fights with Laertes; they are separated. |

| **The Exit** | Claudius reminds Laertes of their plot; Hamlet leaves, suspicious but calm. |

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## 3. Core Concept 1: The Gravediggers' Debate (Lines 1-40)

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### 3.1 The Question

**"Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she willfully seeks her own salvation?"** (First Gravedigger, Lines 1-2)

The play opens with a theological question: should Ophelia receive Christian burial if she killed herself? The gravedigger's phrasing is ironic—"seeks her own salvation" means "damns herself" by suicide.

### 3.2 The Argument

The Second Gravedigger argues that she should, because she's a gentlewoman:

**"If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial."** (Lines 21-22)

The First Gravedigger corrects him with legal reasoning:

**"Why, there thou say'st. And the more pity that great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even Christian."** (Lines 22-24)

The rich can bend the rules. Even in death, privilege operates.

### 3.3 The Dark Humor

The gravediggers joke about death with the ease of men who handle corpses daily. Their humor is macabre but also philosophical:

***"If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes—mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life."*** (Lines 15-19)

This mock-legal reasoning parodies the kind of casuistry that might determine Ophelia's burial. It's nonsense—but it's also a serious point: intention matters.

**Quick Check:** *Why do the gravediggers spend so much time debating Ophelia's burial? What does their conversation reveal about class and justice?*

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## 4. Core Concept 2: The Gravedigger's Song (Lines 55-65)

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***"In youth when I did love, did love,***

***Methought it was very sweet***

***To contract—O—the time for—a—my behove,***

***O, methought there—a—was nothing—a—meet."***

*(Lines 55-58)*

The gravedigger sings while he works—a love song from his youth. The contrast is striking: he sings of love while digging a grave, throwing up skulls as he works. Death and love, the two great themes of the play, come together in this humble figure.

***"But age with his stealing steps***

***Hath clawed me in his clutch,***

***And hath shipped me into the land,***

***As if I had never been such."***

*(Lines 63-66)*

The song is about aging and loss, perfectly suited to a man who spends his days with the ultimate evidence of time's passage.

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## 5. Core Concept 3: The Skulls (Lines 70-115)

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## 5.1 Hamlet's Observations

**Hamlet:** *Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?*

**Horatio:** *Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.*

**Hamlet:** *'Tis e'en so. The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.*

*(Lines 60-64)*

Hamlet is struck by the gravedigger's indifference. But Horatio explains: custom makes death ordinary to those who handle it daily.

## 5.2 The First Skull

**Hamlet:** *That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder! This might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches, one that would circumvent God, might it not?*

*(Lines 68-72)*

Hamlet imagines the skull's former identity: a politician, a courtier, a lawyer. All their schemes and ambitions have come to this—a skull tossed aside by a gravedigger.

## 5.3 The Lawyer

**"Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery?"** *(Lines 87-91)*

The humor is sharp: all the lawyer's clever arguments cannot protect him from a shovel to the head. Death renders all human achievement meaningless.

**"Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that."** *(Lines 171-173)*

Beauty, like legal skill, cannot survive death. Cosmetics cannot hide the skull beneath the skin.

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Hamlet find humor in these meditations on death? Is he being cruel, or is this a form of coping?*

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Yorick's Skull (Lines 164-185)

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### 6.1 The Discovery

**"This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester."** *(Line 164)*

The gravedigger identifies the skull he has just thrown up. For the first time, a skull has a name—and a personal connection to Hamlet.

### 6.2 The Speech

**"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, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. 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?"** (Lines 168-174)

The speech moves through several stages:

| Stage | Emotion | Evidence |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Recognition | Nostalgia | "I knew him" |

| Memory | Affection | "bore me on his back a thousand times" |

| Physical revulsion | Disgust | "My gorge rises at it" |

| Loss | Grief | "Where be your gibes now?" |

| Universalization | Philosophy | "Now get you to my lady's chamber" |

### 6.3 The Physical Reality

Hamlet is overwhelmed by the physical reality of death. The skull he holds once had lips he kissed. Now it is just bone. The contrast between living memory and dead matter could not be starker.

**"Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen?"** (Line 175)

"Chapfallen" means both "jawless" (the skull's jaw is gone) and "dejected." The pun captures the double meaning: death has taken Yorick's jaw and his joy.

### 6.4 Alexander and Caesar

**"Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?"** (Lines 192-195)

Hamlet extends the meditation: even the greatest conquerors become dust. The dust of Alexander the Great might now be plugging a barrel of beer. The image is comic but profound: death reduces all to the same level.

**"Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,**

**Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."**

(Lines 196-197)

The rhyme gives the thought the quality of an epitaph—or a joke. The greatest emperor becomes a patch for a wall.

**Quick Check:** Why does Hamlet move from personal grief (Yorick) to universal philosophy (Alexander)? What does this shift reveal?

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## 7. Core Concept 5: Ophelia's Funeral (Lines 200-250)

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## 7.1 The Procession

**"But soft, but soft awhile. Here comes the king,**

**The queen, and courtiers."**

*(Lines 200-201)*

Hamlet and Horatio step aside to watch. They do not yet know who is being buried.

## 7.2 The Abbreviated Rites

**Laertes:** *What ceremony else?*

**Priest:** *Her obsequies have been as far enlarged*

*As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful,*

*And, but that great command o'ersways the order,*

*She should in ground unsanctified have lodged*

*Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers,*

*Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her.*

*Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,*

*Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home*

*Of bell and burial.*

*(Lines 207-215)*

The priest explains: because her death was "doubtful" (possibly suicide), she should not receive full Christian burial. Only "great command" (royal order) has allowed even this much.

**Laertes:** *Must there no more be done?*

**Priest:** *No more be done.*

*We should profane the service of the dead*

*To sing a requiem and such rest to her*

*As to peace-parted souls.*

*(Lines 216-219)*

Laertes is furious. His sister, who deserves every honor, is being buried with minimal rites.

### 7.3 Laertes's Grief

**Laertes:** *Lay her i' th' earth,*

*And from her fair and unpolluted flesh*

*May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,*

*A minist'ring angel shall my sister be*

*When thou liest howling.*

*(Lines 220-224)*

Laertes's curse is powerful: Ophelia will be an angel while the priest howls in hell. The image of violets springing from her flesh echoes the flowers of her madness and death.

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## 8. Core Concept 6: The Confrontation (Lines 250-280)

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### 8.1 Hamlet's Discovery

**"What, the fair Ophelia?"** *(Line 250)*

Hamlet realizes, with horror, whose grave this is.

### 8.2 Laertes's Leap

**Laertes:** *Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead...*

*... Till of this flat a mountain you have made*

*T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head*

*Of blue Olympus.*

*(Lines 236-239)*

Laertes leaps into the grave, demanding to be buried with his sister.

### 8.3 Hamlet's Leap

**Hamlet:** *This is I,*

*Hamlet the Dane.*

*(Lines 249-250)*

Hamlet leaps in after him. They fight in Ophelia's grave.

**"I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers**

**Could not with all their quantity of love**

**Make up my sum."**

*(Lines 254-256)*

Hamlet's declaration is excessive—"forty thousand brothers" cannot match his love. The hyperbole suggests both genuine grief and competitive one-upmanship with Laertes.

**"What wilt thou do for her?"** *(Line 258)*

Hamlet challenges Laertes to a contest of grief: will he eat a crocodile? Drink poison? Fight? His offers are absurd, but they come from real pain.

## 8.4 The Separation

**Claudius:** *This is mere madness.*

*And thus awhile the fit will work on him.*

*(Lines 271-272)*

Claudius, ever the politician, dismisses Hamlet's grief as madness. He reminds Laertes of their plot: "An hour of quiet shortly shall we see."

**Quick Check:** *Is Hamlet's grief genuine, or is he competing with Laertes? How can we tell?*

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## 9. Core Concept 7: Hamlet's Transformation

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Throughout this scene, we see a changed Hamlet:

| Earlier Hamlet | Graveyard Hamlet |

|-----|-----|

| Fears death, contemplates suicide | Handles skulls, jokes about death |

| Philosophical, abstract | Personal, physical |

| Delays, overthinks | Accepts, acts |

| Fearful of the unknown | "Let be" |

The graveyard has taught him something. Death is inevitable, universal, and not to be feared. This new acceptance will shape his behavior in the final scene.

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## 10. Practical Application: Analyzing the Yorick Speech

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### Activity: Close Reading (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Structure

Divide the Yorick speech into sections and identify the emotion in each:

| Lines | Content | Emotion |

|-----|-----|-----|

| "Alas, poor Yorick... I knew him" | Recognition | Nostalgia |

| "a fellow of infinite jest" | Memory | Affection |

| "My gorge rises at it" | Physical reaction | Disgust |

| "Where be your gibes now?" | Loss | Grief |

| "Now get you to my lady's chamber" | Universal application | Philosophy |

#### Part B: Language

Find examples of:

- **Direct address:** "Alas, poor Yorick!"
- **Rhetorical questions:** "Where be your gibes now?"
- **Contrast:** living memory vs. dead skull
- **Imagery:** "chapfallen," "grinning"

#### Part C: Interpretation

Answer one of these questions in a paragraph:

1. Why does Hamlet react so strongly to Yorick's skull specifically, rather than the anonymous skulls earlier?
2. What does the speech reveal about Hamlet's relationship to death? How has he changed?
3. The speech moves from personal to universal. Why is this movement important?

**Extension:** Memorize and perform the Yorick speech. What choices would you make as an actor?

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## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Gravediggers** | Dark humor, theological debate, class critique |

| **Skulls** | Anonymous skulls represent politicians, lawyers, all human ambition |

| **Yorick** | Personal memory makes death concrete; "Alas, poor Yorick" |

| **Alexander/Caesar** | Even the greatest become dust—"Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay" |

| **Ophelia's Funeral** | Abbreviated rites; Laertes's grief; Hamlet's discovery |

| **The Confrontation** | Hamlet leaps into the grave; "I loved Ophelia" |

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio."
- "Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs?"
- "Not one now to mock your own grinning?"
- "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."
- "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum."
- "Let be."

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## 12. Looking Ahead

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The graveyard scene ends with Hamlet's acceptance of fate. He is ready for whatever comes. In the next lesson, we will examine the final duel—the poisoned swords, the poisoned cup, and the catastrophic conclusion that leaves almost everyone dead.

**To prepare:** Think about how Hamlet's mood in the graveyard might affect his behavior in the duel. Will he be cautious? Reckless? At peace?

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## References

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### Lesson 1 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Duel: Poison, Revenge, and Death*

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### Lesson 2: Ophelia's Funeral and Laertes's Grief

*Duration: 45 minutes*

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## Lesson 2: Ophelia's Funeral and Laertes's Grief

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act V: The Catastrophe

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### Lesson Overview

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The graveyard scene reaches its emotional climax with the arrival of Ophelia's funeral procession. What should be a solemn occasion becomes a battlefield of grief, as Laertes and Hamlet confront each other over Ophelia's body. The scene forces us to consider the nature of grief itself: Is it measured by volume of tears? By extravagant declarations? By violence? Both Laertes and Hamlet claim to have loved Ophelia most, but their competition at her gravesite raises uncomfortable questions about performance, sincerity, and the ways grief can be distorted by pride and rage.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the events of Ophelia's funeral in Act V, Scene i
  - Analyze the conflict between Laertes and the priest over burial rites
  - Examine Laertes's grief and his leap into Ophelia's grave
  - Analyze Hamlet's declaration of love and his leap after Laertes
  - Discuss the theme of performative grief and its implications
  - Evaluate what this scene reveals about both characters
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### 1. Introduction: Grief as Battlefield

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Ophelia's body is carried to the grave. The prayers are cut short. The priest refuses full rites. And into this scene of truncated mourning come two men who claim to have loved her most—but who end up fighting in her grave. The funeral becomes a competition: Who loved her more? Who suffers more deeply? Who will make the grander gesture? In their struggle, Laertes and Hamlet reveal not only their grief but also their flaws, their pride, and their inability to simply let Ophelia rest in peace.

**Think About It:** *Is it possible to compare grief? Can one person's love be "greater" than another's? What would it mean to win such a competition?*

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### 2. Summary of Events (Act V, Scene i, Lines 200-280)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **The Procession Arrives** | Hamlet and Horatio witness the funeral of Ophelia, not yet knowing whose it is. |

| **The Priest's Refusal** | Laertes demands more ceremony; the priest explains that her death was "doubtful," so rites are limited. |

| **Laertes's Grief** | Laertes curses the priest and leaps into the grave, demanding to be buried with his sister. |

| **Hamlet's Discovery** | Hamlet realizes the grave is Ophelia's and steps forward. |

| **The Confrontation** | Hamlet leaps into the grave after Laertes; they fight. |

| **The Declaration** | Hamlet proclaims his love for Ophelia, claiming it exceeds "forty thousand brothers." |

| **The Separation** | They are pulled apart; Claudius reminds Laertes of their plot; Hamlet leaves, suspicious but calm. |

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### 3. Core Concept 1: The Abbreviated Rites (Lines 200-220)

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#### 3.1 The Question

**Laertes:** *What ceremony else? (Line 207)*

Laertes, seeing the truncated service, demands to know why more is not being done. His question is simple but loaded: Ophelia deserves full honors.

#### 3.2 The Priest's Explanation

**Priest:** *Her obsequies have been as far enlarged*

*As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful,*

*And, but that great command o'ersways the order,*

*She should in ground unsanctified have lodged*

*Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers,*

*Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her.*

*Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,*

*Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home*

*Of bell and burial.*

*(Lines 208-216)*

The priest outlines what Ophelia has been denied—and what she has been granted:

| Denied | Granted |

|-----|-----|

| Full Christian burial | "Virgin crants" (maiden garlands) |

| Requiem mass | "Maiden strewments" (flowers) |

| Prayers for the dead | Bell and burial (minimal rites) |

| Consecrated ground (fully) | Consecrated ground (by special dispensation) |

The reason: "Her death was doubtful." The ambiguity we discussed in the previous lesson now has concrete consequences. Because it might have been suicide, the church limits her rites.

### 3.3 Laertes's Fury

**Laertes:** *Must there no more be done?*

**Priest:** *No more be done.*

*We should profane the service of the dead*

*To sing a requiem and such rest to her*

*As to peace-parted souls.*

(Lines 216-219)

The priest's refusal is absolute. To give her full rites would be to "profane" the service—to treat a suicide like a holy death.

**Laertes:** *Lay her i' th' earth,*

*And from her fair and unpolluted flesh*

*May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,*

*A minist'ring angel shall my sister be*

*When thou liest howling.*

(Lines 220-224)

Laertes's response is powerful:

- **"Lay her i' th' earth"** —a bitter acceptance
- **"violets spring"** —the flower of faithfulness, returning to Ophelia
- **"churlish priest"** —insulting the clergyman
- **"minist'ring angel"** —Ophelia will be in heaven
- **"thou liest howling"** —the priest will be in hell

This is the language of righteous fury. Laertes asserts what the priest denies: Ophelia's innocence and salvation.

**Quick Check:** *Why does the priest refuse full rites? What does this reveal about the legal and religious attitudes toward suicide in Shakespeare's time?*

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## 4. Core Concept 2: Laertes's Leap (Lines 225-240)

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### 4.1 The Demand

**Laertes:** *Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,*

*Till of this flat a mountain you have made*

*T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head*

*Of blue Olympus.*

(Lines 236-239)

Laertes leaps into the grave, demanding to be buried alive with his sister. The classical references (Pelion, Olympus—mountains from Greek mythology) suggest a grief so vast it would create mountains.

## 4.2 The Significance

Laertes's leap is:

- **Dramatic** —a grand gesture of grief
- **Excessive** —threatening to bury himself alive
- **Physical** —he must be in the grave, with her body
- **Competitive** —he is performing his grief for all to see

Is this sincere? Almost certainly. But it is also theatrical. Laertes, like Hamlet, cannot simply grieve quietly. His grief must be seen, must be measured, must be the greatest.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Laertes's leap into the grave an expression of genuine grief, or is it performance? Can it be both?*

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## 5. Core Concept 3: Hamlet's Discovery (Lines 240-250)

### 5.1 The Realization

**Hamlet:** *What, the fair Ophelia? (Line 250)*

Hamlet, watching from hiding, finally understands whose funeral this is. The question is simple, but the emotion behind it is devastating. The woman he loved—the woman he told "Get thee to a nunnery"—is dead.

### 5.2 The Emergence

**Hamlet:** *This is I,*

*Hamlet the Dane.*

*(Lines 249-250)*

Hamlet steps forward and identifies himself. "Hamlet the Dane" is a royal title—he claims his identity as prince, as king's son, as the rightful heir. It is a challenge and a declaration.

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## 6. Core Concept 4: The Confrontation (Lines 250-270)

### 6.1 The Fight

**They grapple.**

The stage direction is simple but powerful. Two men who have lost fathers, who have lost Ophelia, who have every reason to hate each other, fight in her grave. The symbolism is grotesque: they struggle over her body, disturbing her rest even as they claim to honor her.

### 6.2 The Separation

**Claudius:** *Pluck them asunder.*

(Line 252)

The courtiers separate them. The fight ends—but the competition of grief continues.

### 6.3 Hamlet's Declaration

***"I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers***

***Could not with all their quantity of love***

***Make up my sum."***

(Lines 254-256)

Hamlet's claim is deliberately excessive. "Forty thousand brothers" is an absurd number—hyperbole that cannot be literal. He is not measuring love; he is declaring that love cannot be measured.

***"What wilt thou do for her?"*** (Line 258)

Hamlet challenges Laertes to a contest of grief:

***"Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?"***

***Woo't drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?"***

***I'll do't."***

(Lines 260-262)

The offers escalate from plausible (weep, fight, fast) to absurd (drink vinegar, eat a crocodile). Hamlet is mocking the very idea of proving love through extravagant gestures—even as he makes extravagant gestures himself.

### 6.4 The Catalogue of Excess

***"Dost thou come here to whine?"***

***To outface me with leaping in her grave?"***

***Be buried quick with her, and so will I.***

***And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw***

***Millions of acres on us, till our ground,***

***Singeing his pate against the burning zone,***

**Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,**

**I'll rant as well as thou."**

(Lines 263-270)

Hamlet matches Laertes's classical references (Ossa is another mountain) and raises the stakes: "millions of acres," mountains tall enough to reach the sun. He acknowledges that this is "rant"—performative grief—but insists he can rant as well as anyone.

**Quick Check:** *Is Hamlet sincere in this speech, or is he mocking Laertes? How can we tell?*

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## 7. Core Concept 5: The Question of Sincerity

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### 7.1 Laertes's Grief

| Evidence for Sincerity | Evidence for Performance |

|-----|-----|

| He has lost his father and sister | He leaps into the grave dramatically |

| His anger at the priest is real | He uses classical imagery (mountains) |

| He weeps | He competes with Hamlet |

### 7.2 Hamlet's Grief

| Evidence for Sincerity | Evidence for Performance |

|-----|-----|

| He loved Ophelia (letters, poems) | He told her "Get thee to a nunnery" |

| His shock at discovering her death | He matches Laertes gesture for gesture |

| He claims "forty thousand brothers" | The claim is mathematically absurd |

### 7.3 The Paradox

The scene presents a paradox: both men are genuinely grieving, but their grief expresses itself through competition and performance. They cannot simply mourn; they must mourn **more** than the other. This is both deeply human and deeply destructive.

**Discussion Point:** *Why can't Laertes and Hamlet simply grieve together? What prevents them from sharing their loss?*

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## 8. Core Concept 6: The Aftermath (Lines 270-280)

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### 8.1 Claudius's Intervention

**Claudius:** *This is mere madness.*

*And thus awhile the fit will work on him.*

*An hour of quiet shortly shall we see.*

*Till then in patience our proceeding be.*

*(Lines 271-274)*

Claudius, ever the politician, dismisses Hamlet's behavior as madness. He reminds Laertes—and us—that their plot is still in place. "An hour of quiet" means the duel is coming.

## 8.2 Hamlet's Exit

**Hamlet:** *Hear you, sir.*

*What is the reason that you use me thus?*

*I loved you ever. But it is no matter.*

*Let Hercules himself do what he may,*

*The cat will mew and dog will have his day.*

*(Lines 275-278)*

Hamlet's parting words are strange. He claims to have loved Laertes "ever"—a surprising statement given their history. Then he retreats into proverbial resignation: "The cat will mew and dog will have his day." Things will happen as they will.

## 8.3 The Final Line

**Claudius:** *I pray you, good Horatio, wait upon him.*

*(Line 279)*

Claudius sends Horatio after Hamlet—perhaps to watch him, perhaps genuinely concerned. The scene ends with the court departing, leaving Ophelia's grave behind.

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# 9. Core Concept 7: Thematic Significance

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## 9.1 Grief and Performance

The scene raises uncomfortable questions about grief:

- Is grief that is expressed less intensely felt less deeply?
- Does performing grief diminish its sincerity?
- Can grief ever be purely private, or is it always, in some sense, performed?

## 9.2 Love and Loss

Both men claim to have loved Ophelia. But what kind of love did they offer?

- **Laertes's love:** protective, controlling, fraternal
- **Hamlet's love:** passionate, erratic, ultimately destructive

Neither could save her. Their love, whatever its intensity, could not prevent her death.

### 9.3 The Failure of Ritual

The funeral rites are abbreviated, contested, interrupted. The usual structures for processing death—religious ceremony, communal mourning—fail completely. Ophelia's death cannot be properly mourned because her life was never properly valued.

### 9.4 The Shadow of the Plot

Throughout the scene, Claudius watches and calculates. Even in this moment of grief, he is plotting. The duel approaches.

---

## 10. Practical Application: Analyzing the Confrontation

---

### Activity: Comparing Grief (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Laertes's Grief

Find quotations that show Laertes's grief. What do they reveal?

| Quotation | What It Reveals |

|-----|-----|

| "A minist'ring angel shall my sister be" | He believes in her innocence and salvation |

| "Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead" | His grief is vast, cosmic |

| (Find another) | |

#### Part B: Hamlet's Grief

Find quotations that show Hamlet's grief. What do they reveal?

| Quotation | What It Reveals |

|-----|-----|

| "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers..." | He claims his love is immeasurable |

| "What wilt thou do for her?" | He challenges Laertes to prove his love |

| (Find another) | |

#### Part C: The Competition

Create a T-chart showing how each man tries to "out-grieve" the other:

| Laertes's Gesture | Hamlet's Response |

|-----|-----|

| Leaps into the grave | Leaps in after him |

| Speaks of mountains (Pelion, Olympus) | Adds Ossa, millions of acres |

| (Find another) | |

#### Part D: Reflection

Write a paragraph answering one of these questions:

1. Who do you think loved Ophelia more, Laertes or Hamlet? Why?
  2. Is the competition at the grave a sign of genuine grief or something else? Explain.
  3. Why does Hamlet claim to have loved Laertes "ever"? Is this believable?
- 

## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

---

| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **The Priest** | Denies full rites because Ophelia's death was "doubtful" |

| **Laertes's Grief** | Furious, dramatic, leaps into grave; curses the priest |

| **Hamlet's Discovery** | Realizes the grave is Ophelia's; steps forward |

| **The Fight** | They grapple in the grave—grief becomes violence |

| **The Declaration** | "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers..." |

| **The Challenge** | "What wilt thou do for her?"—a contest of grief |

| **The Separation** | Claudius intervenes; reminds Laertes of their plot |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "A minist'ring angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling."
  - "Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead..."
  - "What, the fair Ophelia?"
  - "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum."
  - "What wilt thou do for her?"
  - "The cat will mew and dog will have his day."
- 

## 12. Looking Ahead

---

The funeral ends, but its consequences continue. Laertes's grief has been intensified by his confrontation with Hamlet. Claudius's plot moves forward. And Hamlet, despite his declaration of love for Laertes, is walking toward a duel that will kill them both.

In the next lesson, we will examine the final duel—the poisoned swords, the poisoned cup, and the catastrophic conclusion.

**To prepare:** Think about how the events of the funeral might affect the duel. Will Laertes hesitate? Will Hamlet suspect anything?

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### Lesson 3: The Duel: Poison, Revenge, and Death

Duration: 45 minutes

## Lesson 3: The Duel: Poison, Revenge, and Death

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act V: The Catastrophe

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### Lesson Overview

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The final scene of *Hamlet* is a masterpiece of dramatic tension. Everything converges: Claudius's plot, Laertes's revenge, Hamlet's acceptance of fate, and the catastrophic conclusion that leaves nearly every major character dead. The fencing match becomes a microcosm of the entire play—a contest where appearance and reality blur, where intentions go awry, and where poison, both literal and figurative, destroys everyone it touches. In this lesson, we will analyze the final duel step by step, examining how Shakespeare brings his tragedy to its bloody but inevitable conclusion.

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### Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the key events of Act V, Scene ii
  - Analyze Hamlet's account of his escape and his acceptance of fate
  - Examine the structure of the duel and the sequence of deaths
  - Explain the significance of the poisoned cup and the poisoned rapier
  - Discuss the themes of justice, revenge, and Providence in the final scene
  - Evaluate Horatio's role as the surviving witness and Fortinbras's restoration of order
- 

### 1. Introduction: The Appointment in Elsinore

---

The final scene opens with Hamlet telling Horatio how he escaped the plot against his life. He is calm, almost philosophical—a different man from the frantic prince of earlier acts. But calm does not mean safe. The court assembles for a fencing match, but the weapons are sharp, the swords are poisoned, and the cup that waits for Hamlet contains death. What follows is a chain reaction of violence, accident, and revelation that will leave four more bodies on the stage.

**Think About It:** *Why does Hamlet agree to the fencing match? Is he naive, or does he simply not care anymore?*

---

### 2. Summary of Events (Act V, Scene ii)

---

| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet's Report** | Hamlet tells Horatio how he discovered Claudius's plot, rewrote the death warrant, and sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. |

| **The Acceptance** | Hamlet reflects on his willingness to fight Laertes, despite a misgiving, and concludes "The readiness is all." |

| **The Court Arrives** | Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and the court enter. Claudius orchestrates the wager. |

| **The First Hit** | Hamlet scores the first hit; Claudius drops poison in the cup and offers it to Hamlet, who refuses. |

| **Gertrude Drinks** | Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup, despite Claudius's weak warning. |

| **The Second Hit** | Hamlet scores again; Laertes, provoked, makes the foul play. |

| **Laertes Wounds Hamlet** | Laertes scratches Hamlet with the poisoned rapier. |

| **The Exchange** | In the scuffle, they exchange rapiers; Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned weapon. |

| **Gertrude Falls** | Gertrude collapses, warning Hamlet that the drink was poisoned. |

| **Laertes Confesses** | Laertes, dying, reveals the plot and names Claudius. |

| **Hamlet Kills Claudius** | Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned rapier and forces him to drink the rest of the poisoned wine. |

| **The Deaths** | Laertes dies, Hamlet dies, and Horatio prepares to follow—but Hamlet stops him. |

| **Fortinbras Arrives** | Fortinbras enters, claims the throne, and orders Hamlet buried with honors. |

---

### 3. Core Concept 1: Hamlet's Report (Lines 1-80)

---

#### 3.1 The Escape

*"Up from my cabin,*

*My sea-gown scarfed about me, in the dark*

*Groped I to find out them, had my desire,*

*Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew*

*To mine own room again, making so bold—*

*My fears forgetting manners—to unseal*

*Their grand commission."*

*(Lines 12-18)*

Hamlet describes stealing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's commission and discovering Claudius's order for his death. The language is casual, almost playful—"fingered their packet" suggests a thief's ease.

#### 3.2 The Rewrite

*"I sat me down,*

***Devised a new commission, wrote it fair.***

***I once did hold it, as our statist do,***

***A baseness to write fair, and labored much***

***How to forget that learning, but, sir, now***

***It did me yeoman's service."***

*(Lines 31-36)*

Hamlet, who once thought good handwriting was beneath a prince, now thanks his boyhood lessons. The irony is sharp: the skill he despised saved his life.

### 3.3 The Contents

***"An earnest conjuration from the king—***

***As England was his faithful tributary—***

***That, on the view and knowing of these contents,***

***Without debatement further more or less,***

***He should those bearers put to sudden death,***

***Not shriving time allowed."***

*(Lines 44-49)*

The original order demanded Hamlet's death without even time for confession. Hamlet's rewritten order demands the same for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

### 3.4 The Question of Guilt

***Horatio:*** *So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to't.*

***Hamlet:*** *Why, man, they did make love to this employment.*

*They are not near my conscience. Their defeat*

*Does by their own insinuation grow.*

*(Lines 56-59)*

Horatio seems troubled; Hamlet does not. He argues that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern chose their role—they "made love to this employment"—and therefore deserve their fate. The audience may judge differently.

**Quick Check:** *Is Hamlet right to feel no guilt about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Were they innocent tools or willing participants?*

---

## 4. Core Concept 2: The Acceptance (Lines 160-200)

---

### 4.1 The Misgiving

**"But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. But it is no matter."** (Lines 184-185)

Hamlet admits to Horatio that he has a strange feeling—a premonition of disaster. Horatio urges him to listen to it:

**"If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit."** (Lines 186-187)

### 4.2 The Refusal

**"Not a whit, we defy augury. There is 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."** (Lines 190-193)

This is the philosophical climax of Hamlet's journey:

| Phrase | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **"defy augury"** | Reject superstition, fortune-telling |

| **"special providence"** | God's hand in even small events |

| **"fall of a sparrow"** | Biblical reference (Matthew 10:29)—God notes even a sparrow's death |

| **"If it be now..."** | Death comes when it comes; we cannot control the timing |

| **"The readiness is all"** | Be prepared—that's all that matters |

Hamlet has moved from fear of death (Act I), to contemplation of suicide (Act III), to acceptance. He is ready for whatever comes.

### 4.3 The Final Line

**"Let be."** (Line 194)

Two words. Complete acceptance. No more struggle.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Hamlet's acceptance heroic? Foolish? Both? What would you do in his position?*

---

## 5. Core Concept 3: The Setup (Lines 200-250)

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## 5.1 The Apology

***"Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong.***

***But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman."***

*(Lines 200-201)*

Hamlet apologizes to Laertes publicly, blaming his "madness" for the wrongs he has done. It is a genuine attempt at reconciliation—but Laertes cannot accept.

## 5.2 Laertes's Response

***"I am satisfied in nature,***

***... But in my terms of honor***

***I stand aloof, and will no reconcilment***

***Till by some elder masters of known honor***

***I have a voice and precedent of peace***

***To keep my name ungor'd."***

*(Lines 215-220)*

Laertes accepts Hamlet's apology "in nature" (personally) but cannot accept it publicly without risking his honor. This is the code of the dueling culture: reputation must be protected.

## 5.3 The Wager

Claudius orchestrates the match:

- They will bet on Hamlet vs. Laertes
- If Hamlet wins the first three hits, Claudius will drink to his health and drop a pearl in the cup
- The "pearl" is poison

***"The king shall drink to Hamlet's better breath,***

***And in the cup an union shall he throw***

***Richer than that which four successive kings***

***In Denmark's crown have worn."***

*(Lines 240-243)*

The "union" is a pearl—but also a word meaning "poison." The double meaning is lost on everyone but us.

---

## 6. Core Concept 4: The Duel (Lines 250-300)

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### 6.1 The First Hit

**Hamlet:** *One.*

**Laertes:** *No.*

**Hamlet:** *Judgment.*

**Osric:** *A hit, a very palpable hit.*

*(Lines 252-254)*

Hamlet scores first. The crowd acknowledges it. Claudius follows his plan:

**"Stay, give me drink. Hamlet, this pearl is thine.**

**Here's to thy health."**

*(Lines 255-256)*

He drops the poison in the cup. But Hamlet, focused on the match, refuses:

**"I'll play this bout first. Set it by awhile."**

*(Line 257)*

The cup waits.

### 6.2 The Second Hit

**"Another hit. What say you?"** *(Hamlet, Line 260)*

Hamlet scores again. Laertes acknowledges it: "A touch, a touch, I do confess."

### 6.3 Gertrude Drinks

**Gertrude:** *The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.*

**Claudius:** *Gertrude, do not drink.*

**Gertrude:** *I will, my lord. I pray you pardon me.*

*(Lines 263-265)*

Claudius's warning is weak—he cannot explain why without revealing the plot. Gertrude drinks. The poison begins its work.

## 6.4 Laertes's Strike

**Laertes:** *Have at you now!*

*(Line 275)*

In anger and desperation, Laertes forgets the plan and wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier.

**They scuffle, and in the scuffle they exchange rapiers.**

This moment—the exchange of weapons—is the turning point. Now both hold poisoned swords.

**Hamlet wounds Laertes.**

Laertes is cut with his own poison.

---

## 7. Core Concept 5: The Revelations (Lines 300-350)

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### 7.1 Gertrude Falls

**Gertrude:** *O my dear Hamlet! The drink, the drink! I am poisoned.*

*(Line 288)*

Her last words are a warning. She dies knowing she has been killed by her husband's plot.

### 7.2 Laertes Confesses

**Laertes:** *Hamlet, thou art slain.*

*No medicine in the world can do thee good.*

*In thee there is not half an hour's life.*

*The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,*

*Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice*

*Hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie,*

*Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned.*

*I can no more. The king, the king's to blame.*

(Lines 289-296)

In his dying moments, Laertes tells the truth. He names Claudius. He asks for and gives forgiveness:

***"Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.***

***Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,***

***Nor thine on me."***

(Lines 307-309)

### 7.3 Hamlet Kills Claudius

***Hamlet:*** *The point envenomed too?*

*Then, venom, to thy work.*

(Lines 297-298)

Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned rapier. Then, as Claudius calls for help, Hamlet forces him to drink:

***"Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane,***

***Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?***

***Follow my mother."***

(Lines 302-304)

Claudius dies by both poison and sword—the deaths he planned for others.

---

## 8. Core Concept 6: The Deaths (Lines 350-370)

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### 8.1 Laertes Dies

***"He makes his mother with sad exchange.***

***I can no more. The king, the king's to blame."***

(Lines 295-296)

Laertes dies, having confessed and sought forgiveness.

### 8.2 Hamlet Dies

**"I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu."**

(Line 311)

Hamlet accepts his death. His final concern is his legacy:

**"O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,**

**Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!**

**If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,**

**Absent thee from felicity awhile,**

**And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain**

**To tell my story."**

(Lines 318-323)

He begs Horatio to live—to be the witness, to tell the truth.

### 8.3 The Final Words

**"The rest is silence."** (Line 334)

Hamlet's last words. He dies.

**Horatio:** *Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,*

*And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.*

(Lines 335-336)

Horatio's tribute is one of the most famous farewells in literature. He wishes Hamlet peace in death.

---

## 9. Core Concept 7: The Aftermath (Lines 370-400)

### 9.1 Fortinbras Arrives

**"Where is this sight?"** (Fortinbras, Line 343)

Fortinbras enters, having conquered Poland, to find the entire Danish royal family dead.

### 9.2 The Report

**Horatio:** *Let me speak to th' yet unknowing world*

*How these things came about. So shall you hear*

*Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,*

*Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,*

*Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,*

*And, in this upshot, purposes mistook*

*Fall'n on th' inventors' heads.*

*(Lines 352-358)*

Horatio promises to tell the full story—the truth that would otherwise be lost.

### 9.3 The Succession

**Fortinbras:** *I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,*

*Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.*

*(Lines 365-366)*

Fortinbras claims the throne. He was mentioned in Act I as a threat; now he inherits the kingdom the Danish court has destroyed.

### 9.4 The Orders

**"Let four captains**

***Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,***

***For he was likely, had he been put on,***

***To have proved most royal. And for his passage,***

***The soldiers' music and the rite of war***

***Speak loudly for him."***

*(Lines 371-376)*

Fortinbras orders Hamlet buried with military honors. The play ends with a dead march and the departure of the bodies.

---

## 10. Practical Application: Analyzing the Final Scene

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### Activity: The Chain of Death (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Sequence

Number the deaths in order:

| Order | Character | How They Die | Who Is Responsible |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| 1 | Gertrude | Poisoned wine | Claudius |

| 2 | Laertes | Poisoned rapier | Himself (his own poison) |

| 3 | Claudius | Poisoned rapier and wine | Hamlet |

| 4 | Hamlet | Poisoned rapier | Claudius and Laertes |

#### Part B: The Ironies

Identify the ironies in each death:

| Death | Irony |

|-----|-----|

| Gertrude | Drinks to Hamlet's health, but the toast kills her |

| Laertes | Killed by his own poison |

| Claudius | Dies by both his planned methods—sword and cup |

| Hamlet | Finally acts, but too late to save himself |

#### Part C: Justice

Does justice prevail in the final scene? Consider:

| Character | Deserved Fate? | Received? |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Claudius | Yes—murderer | Yes—poison and sword |

| Gertrude | ? | ? |

| Laertes | ? | ? |

| Rosencrantz/Guildenstern | ? | ? |

| Hamlet | ? | ? |

#### Part D: Horatio's Role

Why must Horatio live? What does his survival mean for the story?

---

## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet's Report** | He escaped, rewrote the commission, sent R&G to death |

| **The Acceptance** | "The readiness is all"—Hamlet accepts fate |

| **The Duel** | Three hits, poisoned sword, poisoned cup |

| **The Deaths** | Gertrude (cup), Laertes (sword), Claudius (both), Hamlet (sword) |

| **The Confessions** | Laertes reveals the plot; Hamlet kills Claudius |

| **The Legacy** | Horatio must tell the story; Fortinbras claims the throne |

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "The readiness is all."
- "Let be."
- "The drink, the drink! I am poisoned."
- "The king, the king's to blame."
- "Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane, / Drink off this potion."
- "The rest is silence."
- "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

---

## 12. Looking Ahead

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The play is over. Four bodies lie on stage. Fortinbras inherits a kingdom emptied of its rulers. And Horatio is left to tell the story—the story we have just witnessed.

In our final lesson, we will examine Hamlet's legacy, the themes that have emerged, and the questions the play leaves us with.

**To prepare:** Think about what you will take away from *Hamlet*. What questions does the play raise that it does not answer?

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## References

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Act V, Scene ii. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
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### Lesson 3 Complete

*Next Lesson: The Fallen Prince: Hamlet's Death and Legacy*

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### Lesson 4: The Fallen Prince: Hamlet's Death and Legacy

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 4: The Fallen Prince: Hamlet's Death and Legacy

---

**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Act V: The Catastrophe

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## Lesson Overview

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The stage is littered with bodies. Gertrude, Laertes, and Claudius have fallen. Now only Hamlet remains—poisoned, dying, but not yet silent. In his final moments, Hamlet speaks his last words, names his successor, and charges Horatio with the task that gives the play its enduring power: to tell his story. Then, silence. Horatio's farewell—"Good night, sweet prince"—and Fortinbras's arrival to claim the throne bring the tragedy to its close. In this lesson, we will examine Hamlet's death, its meaning, and the legacy he leaves behind.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Analyze Hamlet's final words and their significance
  - Evaluate Horatio's role as the surviving witness
  - Discuss the meaning of Horatio's tribute: "Good night, sweet prince"
  - Examine Fortinbras's arrival and the restoration of order
  - Reflect on Hamlet's legacy and the play's enduring questions
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Silence After the Storm

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The violence is over. Laertes has confessed. Claudius is dead. Gertrude lies poisoned. Only Hamlet remains standing—but the poison is in his blood, and he has "but half an hour's life." In these final moments, Shakespeare gives his hero one last chance to speak, to explain, to shape how he will be remembered. What Hamlet says—and what he leaves unsaid—has haunted audiences for four centuries.

**Think About It:** *If you had only moments to live, what would you want your last words to be? What would you want people to remember about you?*

---

## 2. Summary of Events (Act V, Scene ii, Lines 310-400)

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| Event | Key Details |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet's Last Words to Horatio** | Hamlet begs Horatio to live and tell his story. |

| **The Final Silence** | Hamlet speaks his last words: "The rest is silence." |

| **Horatio's Tribute** | Horatio bids farewell: "Good night, sweet prince." |

| **Fortinbras Arrives** | Fortinbras enters, having conquered Poland, to find the royal family dead. |

| **The Report** | Horatio promises to tell the truth about what happened. |

| **The Succession** | Fortinbras claims the throne and orders Hamlet buried with military honors. |

---

## 3. Core Concept 1: Hamlet's Final Words (Lines 310-334)

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### 3.1 The Charge to Horatio

**"I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu."** (Line 311)

Hamlet acknowledges his own death and bids farewell to his mother. Then he turns to the one person he trusts completely:

***"You that look pale and tremble at this chance,***

***That are but mutes or audience to this act,***

***Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,***

***Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—***

***But let it be."***

*(Lines 312-316)*

Death is a "fell sergeant"—a cruel officer making an arrest. Hamlet wishes he had time to explain everything, but he doesn't.

***"Horatio, I am dead;***

***Thou livest; report me and my cause aright***

***To the unsatisfied."***

*(Lines 316-318)*

This is Hamlet's final command: tell my story correctly. Not to the court, not to the victors, but to "the unsatisfied"—those who will want to know the truth.

### 3.2 The Fear of Misrepresentation

***"O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,***

***Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!***

***If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,***

***Absent thee from felicity awhile,***

***And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain***

***To tell my story."***

*(Lines 318-323)*

Hamlet's deepest fear is not death—it is that his story will be told wrong. He imagines a "wounded name"—a reputation damaged by false accounts. He begs Horatio to postpone even the bliss of death ("felicity") to

stay in the "harsh world" and be the witness.

### 3.3 The Final Words

**"O, I die, Horatio!**

***The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit.***

***I cannot live to hear the news from England,***

***But I do prophesy th' election lights***

***On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.***

***So tell him, with th' occurrents, more and less,***

***Which have solicited—the rest is silence."***

*(Lines 328-334)*

#### Key elements:

| Phrase | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **"o'ercrows my spirit"** | Triumphs over me like a crowing cock |

| **"th' election lights on Fortinbras"** | The next king should be Fortinbras |

| **"my dying voice"** | My vote, my support |

| **"the rest is silence"** | His final words—then nothing |

Hamlet names his successor. In his last political act, he ensures that Denmark will have a ruler. Then—silence.

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Hamlet name Fortinbras? What makes the Norwegian prince a suitable successor?*

---

## 4. Core Concept 2: The Meaning of "The Rest Is Silence"

### 4.1 Multiple Interpretations

| Interpretation | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **Literal** | He stops speaking; death ends speech |

| **Philosophical** | Death is unknowable—silence is all that follows |

| **Theological** | Is there anything after death? Silence suggests uncertainty |

| **Dramatic** | The character is gone; the actor stops speaking |

## 4.2 The Ambiguity

Hamlet, who has spoken more than any other character in literature, ends with silence. The man who could not stop thinking, questioning, delaying—finally stops. The silence is both peaceful and terrifying.

## 4.3 The Echo

"The rest is silence" echoes the play's preoccupation with what cannot be known. The ghost came from beyond to speak; Hamlet goes into silence. We are left with questions, not answers.

**Quick Check:** *Why is it appropriate that Hamlet's last words are about silence? What does this ending suggest about his journey?*

---

## 5. Core Concept 3: Horatio's Tribute (Lines 334-336)

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### 5.1 The Immediate Response

***"Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,***

***And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."***

*(Lines 335-336)*

Horatio's words are among the most famous in the play. Let's analyze them:

| Phrase | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **"cracks a noble heart"** | His heart breaks; a noble man dies |

| **"Good night"** | A farewell, as to one going to sleep |

| **"sweet prince"** | Affectionate, tender—not "great" but "sweet" |

| **"flights of angels"** | A Christian image of heavenly welcome |

| **"sing thee to thy rest"** | Peace after struggle |

### 5.2 The Contrast

Horatio's blessing contrasts sharply with the play's violence. After all the poison, betrayal, and death, Horatio imagines angels and peace. It is a wish—perhaps a prayer—that Hamlet finds what he could not find in life.

### 5.3 Why Horatio?

Horatio is the only one who can speak this eulogy. He alone:

- Knew Hamlet truly
- Was not a spy or manipulator
- Remained loyal throughout
- Will survive to tell the story

**Discussion Point:** *Why does Shakespeare give these beautiful lines to Horatio rather than to a priest or a king? What makes Horatio the right voice for this farewell?*

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## 6. Core Concept 4: Fortinbras's Arrival (Lines 340-380)

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### 6.1 The Entrance

**Fortinbras:** *Where is this sight?*

*(Line 343)*

Fortinbras enters with his ambassadors and soldiers. He has conquered Poland and now returns to find the Danish royal family dead.

**"This quarry cries on havoc. O proud Death,**

**What feast is toward in thine eternal cell**

**That thou so many princes at a shot**

**So bloodily hast struck?"**

*(Lines 344-347)*

Fortinbras's language is striking: Death has made a "feast" of princes. The carnage is almost incomprehensible.

### 6.2 The Ambassadors' Report

**Ambassador:** *The ears are senseless that should give us hearing*

*To tell him his commandment is fulfilled,*

*That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.*

*Where should we have our thanks?*

*(Lines 348-351)*

The ambassadors arrive with news from England: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. But the intended audience—Claudius—lies dead before them. The irony is sharp: the plot has outlived its plotters.

### 6.3 Horatio's Promise

**Horatio:** *Let me speak to th' yet unknowing world*

*How these things came about. So shall you hear*

*Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,*

*Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,*

*Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,*

*And, in this upshot, purposes mistook*

*Fall'n on th' inventors' heads.*

*(Lines 352-358)*

Horatio steps forward as the official witness. His summary captures the play's themes:

- **"carnal, bloody, unnatural"** —the crimes
- **"accidental judgments, casual slaughters"** —the unintended deaths
- **"purposes mistook fall'n on th' inventors' heads"** —poetic justice

## 6.4 The Succession

**Fortinbras:** *I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,*

*Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.*

*(Lines 365-366)*

Fortinbras reminds us of what we learned in Act I: his father was defeated by Hamlet's father, and lands were lost. Now he claims them back—and the whole kingdom.

**Horatio:** *Of that I shall have also cause to speak,*

*And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more.*

*But let this same be presently performed,*

*Even while men's minds are wild, lest more mischance*

*On plots and errors happen.*

*(Lines 367-370)*

Horatio supports Fortinbras's claim and urges immediate action to prevent further chaos.

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## 7. Core Concept 5: Hamlet's Burial (Lines 371-380)

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### 7.1 The Order

**Fortinbras:** *Let four captains*

*Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,*

*For he was likely, had he been put on,*

*To have proved most royal. And for his passage,*

*The soldiers' music and the rite of war*

*Speak loudly for him.*

*(Lines 371-376)*

Fortinbras orders a military funeral. This is significant:

| Element | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **"like a soldier"** | Honored as a warrior, not a scholar |

| **"to the stage"** | Carried high, visible to all |

| **"likely... to have proved most royal"** | Potential unfulfilled |

| **"soldiers' music and the rite of war"** | Full military honors |

## 7.2 The Potential Unrealized

Fortinbras's phrase—"had he been put on" (had he been tested, had he come to the throne)—captures the tragedy. Hamlet might have been a great king. We will never know.

## 7.3 The Final Stage Direction

***Exeunt marching, after the which a peal of ordnance are shot off.***

The play ends with the sounds of war—drums and cannons. The soldier's farewell replaces the angel's song. Denmark has a new king, and order is restored, but at what cost?

**Quick Check:** *Why does Fortinbras order military honors for Hamlet? What does this choice suggest about how Hamlet should be remembered?*

---

# 8. Core Concept 6: The Restoration of Order

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## 8.1 What Is Restored?

| Element | Before | After |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Throne** | Usurper (Claudius) | Foreign conqueror (Fortinbras) |

| **Court** | Corrupt, scheming | Empty—but new |

| **Succession** | Uncertain | Clear |

| **Truth** | Hidden | Horatio will tell |

## 8.2 What Is Lost?

| Loss | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | The prince, the philosopher, the friend |

| **Gertrude** | The queen, for all her flaws |

| **Ophelia** | Innocence destroyed |

| **Polonius, Laertes** | The entire family |

| **The old Denmark** | Everything is new—or foreign |

## 8.3 The Cost of Justice

Claudius is dead. The murderer is punished. But so is everyone else. This is not the clean justice of a comedy; it is the bloody justice of tragedy. The guilty die, but so do the innocent, the conflicted, the loving.

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# 9. Core Concept 7: Hamlet's Legacy

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## 9.1 The Story

Horatio will tell the story. That story is the play we have just watched. In a sense, the entire *Hamlet* is Horatio's report to "the unsatisfied." We are the audience he speaks to.

## 9.2 The Questions

Hamlet leaves us with questions, not answers:

- Did he do the right thing?
- Was his delay weakness or wisdom?
- Could anything have been different?
- What happens after "the rest is silence"?

## 9.3 The Man

What do we remember about Hamlet?

- His wit and wordplay
- His love for Horatio
- His grief for Ophelia
- His struggle with doubt
- His final acceptance

He is not a hero in the simple sense. He is too conflicted, too human. But that is why we remember him.

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# 10. Practical Application: Reflecting on the Ending

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## Activity: Final Reflections (15 minutes)

### Part A: Hamlet's Last Words

Reread Hamlet's final speech (Lines 310-334). Answer:

1. Why is Hamlet more concerned about his "wounded name" than about death itself?
2. What does he achieve by naming Fortinbras as his successor?
3. Why do you think "The rest is silence" has become so famous?

### Part B: Horatio's Role

Why must Horatio live? What does his survival add to the play?

| Without Horatio | With Horatio |

|-----|-----|

| No one to tell the truth | The truth will be told |

| Hamlet's story might be lost | Hamlet's story is preserved |

| Ambassadors have no witness | Horatio can explain |

### Part C: Fortinbras

Is Fortinbras a satisfactory successor? Consider:

| Quality | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| Strength | He conquered Poland |

| Legitimacy | "Some rights of memory" |

| Character | He honors Hamlet |

| Future | Unknown |

### Part D: Your Response

Write a paragraph answering one of these questions:

1. Does the ending feel satisfying? Why or why not?
2. What do you think Hamlet would want us to remember about him?
3. If you were Horatio, what would you say in your report?

---

## 11. Summary: Key Takeaways

| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet's Last Words** | Names Fortinbras as successor; charges Horatio to tell his story; "The rest is silence" |

| **Horatio's Tribute** | "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" |

| **Fortinbras's Arrival** | Claims the throne; orders military honors for Hamlet |

| **The Restoration** | Order returns, but at enormous cost |

| **The Legacy** | Hamlet's story will be told; questions remain |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied."
- "The rest is silence."
- "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."
- "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage."
- "For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal."

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## 12. The Play's Enduring Questions

As you leave *Hamlet*, consider the questions the play raises but does not answer:

1. **Was Hamlet's delay a flaw or a strength?** Would killing Claudius earlier have been better—or would it have made Hamlet no different from the murderers he condemned?
2. **Is there justice in the ending?** The guilty die, but so do the innocent. Is that justice, or just chaos?
3. **What happens after "the rest is silence"?** The play offers no answers—only questions.
4. **How should we remember Hamlet?** As a hero? A failure? A thinker? A lover? A friend? All of these?
5. **What does it mean to be human?** The play suggests it means to think, to doubt, to grieve, to love, to fail, and finally to die. And perhaps, if we are lucky, to be remembered.

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### Lesson 4 Complete

*Course Complete*

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## Module 6 Summary Sheet

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### Module 6: Act V: The Catastrophe — Summary Sheet

#### Key Concepts

- **The Gravedigger Scene:** Act V opens in a graveyard with two gravediggers digging Ophelia's grave. Their dark humor and debate about whether she deserves a Christian burial introduce the theme of death as the great leveler.
- **Yorick's Skull:** Hamlet's meditation on the skull of Yorick, the court jester he knew as a child, confronts him with the physical reality of death. "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio" moves from personal memory to universal philosophy about mortality.
- **The Democracy of Death:** Hamlet reflects that even great men like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar end up as dust, perhaps stopping a hole in a beer barrel. Death levels all, regardless of status.
- **Ophelia's Funeral:** At her grave, Laertes and Hamlet confront each other. Hamlet leaps into the grave and declares his love for Ophelia was greater than "forty thousand brothers," leading to a physical fight.
- **Hamlet's Transformation:** Before the duel, Hamlet tells Horatio of his misgiving but concludes, "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. The readiness is all." He has moved from fear of death to acceptance of fate.
- **The Duel:** Laertes and Hamlet fence. The plot involves three layers of treachery: an unbated (sharp) rapier, poisoned tip, and a poisoned chalice as backup.
- **The Catastrophe:** Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup meant for Hamlet. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier; in the scuffle, they exchange weapons, and Hamlet wounds Laertes. Laertes confesses the plot, naming Claudius. Hamlet kills Claudius with the poisoned rapier and forces him to drink the remaining poison.
- **The Deaths:** Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet all die. Laertes and Hamlet exchange forgiveness before dying.
- **Horatio's Role:** Horatio attempts to drink the remaining poison to die with Hamlet, but Hamlet stops him, charging him to live and tell his story: "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied."

- **Fortinbras's Arrival:** Fortinbras enters, having conquered Poland, to find the entire Danish royal family dead. He claims the throne and orders Hamlet buried with military honors: "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage."

### Core Takeaways

Act V brings the tragedy to its bloody conclusion. The graveyard scene forces Hamlet to confront mortality directly, leading to his philosophical acceptance of fate: "The readiness is all." The duel unleashes the accumulated treachery of the play—poisoned sword, poisoned cup—resulting in the deaths of Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet. In the aftermath, Horatio is left to tell the true story, and Fortinbras arrives to restore order to a kingdom emptied of its rulers. The play ends with a sense of waste and loss, but also with the promise that Hamlet's story will be remembered.

### Terms to Know

- **Yorick** — The king's former jester, whose skull Hamlet holds; a symbol of mortality and the obliteration of memory and joy by death.
- **"The readiness is all"** — Hamlet's final philosophical statement, expressing his acceptance that one cannot control death, only be prepared for it.
- **Providence** — Divine guidance or care; Hamlet speaks of "special providence in the fall of a sparrow," suggesting God's hand in even the smallest events.
- **Unbated** — A sword without a protective button on the tip; Laertes uses an unbated rapier in the duel, making it a lethal weapon.
- **Envenomed** — Poisoned; Laertes tips his rapier with deadly poison, ensuring that even a scratch will kill.
- **Union** — A pearl; Claudius claims he will drop a "union" into Hamlet's cup, but it is actually the poison.
- **"The rest is silence"** — Hamlet's final words, leaving the question of an afterlife completely open.
- **"Good night, sweet prince"** — Horatio's farewell to Hamlet, a blessing wishing him peace in death.

### Review Questions

1. What does the gravedigger scene reveal about Hamlet's attitude toward death? How does his meditation on Yorick's skull differ from his earlier contemplations of mortality?
2. What is the meaning of Hamlet's statement, "The readiness is all"? How does this reflect his psychological transformation since Act I?
3. Describe the three layers of treachery in the plot against Hamlet. Who is responsible for each layer?
4. Trace the chain of deaths in the final scene. Who dies, how, and by whose hand?
5. Why does Hamlet insist that Horatio live rather than die with him? What role does Horatio play after Hamlet's death?

### Further Thinking

- Hamlet finally acts in the duel, killing Claudius. Is this a satisfying conclusion to his revenge? Why or why not? Consider whether he achieves what he set out to do.
- Fortinbras arrives at the end to claim the throne. Is this a restoration of order, or a foreign conquest? What might Shakespeare be suggesting about the future of Denmark?

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### Module 6 Quiz

**Q1.** In the gravedigger scene, what is the theological question the gravediggers are debating about Ophelia's burial?

- A) Whether she should be buried in the royal tomb.
- B) Whether she deserves a Christian burial if she might have committed suicide.
- C) Whether Laertes should be allowed to attend the funeral.
- D) Whether the grave is deep enough.

**Q2.** When Hamlet holds the skull of Yorick, the court jester, his famous speech ('Alas, poor Yorick!') moves from personal memory to a universal meditation on:

- A) The importance of laughter in the court.
- B) The physical reality of death and how it reduces everyone, regardless of status, to dust.
- C) His own childhood and how much he misses it.
- D) The cruelty of the church for denying Ophelia proper rites.

**Q3.** At Ophelia's funeral, Laertes and Hamlet fight in her grave. What does Hamlet claim to justify his grief?

- A) That he was her lawful husband.
- B) That his love for her was greater than 'forty thousand brothers' could match.
- C) That he killed her father by accident and deserves to mourn her.
- D) That the king forced him to pretend not to love her.

**Q4.** Before the duel, Hamlet tells Horatio he feels ill about it but then dismisses his misgiving. What is his famous philosophical conclusion about fate and death?

- A) 'To be, or not to be, that is the question.'
- B) 'The play's the thing.'
- C) 'The readiness is all.'
- D) 'Frailty, thy name is woman.'

**Q5.** During the final duel, how is Gertrude killed?

- A) Laertes accidentally stabs her with the poisoned rapier.
- B) Claudius stabs her to prevent her from revealing the plot.
- C) She drinks from a poisoned cup that Claudius had prepared for Hamlet.
- D) She dies from grief upon seeing Hamlet wounded.

**Q6.** After being wounded by the poisoned rapier, what does Laertes do in his dying moments?

- A) He curses Hamlet and dies in anger.
- B) He confesses the plot to Hamlet, revealing that Claudius is to blame, and asks for and gives forgiveness.
- C) He tries to kill Claudius but fails.
- D) He begs Hamlet to save him.

**Q7.** What is Hamlet's final act of revenge against Claudius?

- A) He delivers a long speech condemning him before he dies.
- B) He forces him to drink the rest of the poisoned wine and stabs him with the poisoned rapier.
- C) He forgives him, leaving his fate to God.
- D) He orders Horatio to kill him after he is gone.

**Q8.** At the end of the play, Horatio attempts to commit suicide by drinking the remaining poison so he can die with Hamlet, but Hamlet stops him, begging him to live and tell his story.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** Fortinbras arrives to find the Danish royal family dead and, after hearing Horatio's account, claims the throne for himself and orders Hamlet buried with military honors.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** The final words of the play, spoken by Horatio, are 'The rest is silence,' which Hamlet says just before he dies.

(True / False)

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** B — The gravediggers' dark humor centers on the legal and religious question of whether Ophelia's death was a suicide ('self-slaughter'), which would traditionally deny her a Christian burial in consecrated ground.

**Q2:** B — The speech begins with fond memories but quickly turns to the grim reality of the skull, leading Hamlet to contemplate how even the greatest (like Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar) end up as common dust, perhaps plugging a hole to keep the wind away.

**Q3:** B — Hamlet's declaration, 'I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum,' is a hyperbolic, competitive claim of grief, attempting to outdo Laertes's sorrow.

**Q4:** C — Hamlet concludes that there is 'special providence in the fall of a sparrow' and that since death will come when it comes, the only thing that matters is being prepared for it: 'The readiness is all.'

**Q5:** C — In a moment of tragic irony, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet's success from the poisoned chalice. Claudius's weak warning, 'Gertrude, do not drink,' comes too late, and she dies by the plot meant for her son.

**Q6:** B — Dying, Laertes has a moment of clarity and honor. He tells Hamlet the truth about the poisoned sword, names Claudius as the architect of the plot, and asks for mutual forgiveness before he dies.

**Q7:** B — Hamlet, already dying, finally acts decisively. He stabs Claudius with the poisoned rapier and then forces him to drink the remaining poisoned wine, saying, 'Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane, / Drink off this potion.'

**Q8:** True — Horatio, in a gesture of Roman honor, tries to take his own life. Hamlet wrestles the cup from him and charges him with the vital task of remaining alive to clear his 'wounded name' and report the truth of what happened.

**Q9:** True — Fortinbras, who has 'some rights of memory in this kingdom,' is the last man standing. He recognizes Hamlet's potential greatness, ordering that he be borne 'like a soldier to the stage' with full honors.

**Q10:** False — 'The rest is silence' are Hamlet's own final words. Horatio's famous tribute is, 'Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.'

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## Module 7: Character Analysis: The Players of Elsinore

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This module provides a deep dive into the psychology, motivations, and development of the play's major characters, moving beyond plot summary to critical analysis.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Analyze the complexity of Hamlet's character, including his intellect, indecision, and feigned madness.
- Evaluate Claudius's role as a Machiavellian villain and his moments of conscience.
- Assess Gertrude's character and the ambiguity surrounding her knowledge and guilt.
- Analyze Ophelia's function in the play and her tragic trajectory.
- Examine the roles of Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio as foils to Hamlet.



## Lesson 1: Prince Hamlet: The Melancholy Dane

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 1: Prince Hamlet: The Melancholy Dane

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Character Analysis: The Players of Elsinore

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## Lesson Overview

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Hamlet is the most written-about character in Western literature. He has been called many things: a hero, a villain, a procrastinator, a philosopher, a madman, a man ahead of his time. But perhaps the most striking thing about Hamlet is that after four centuries, he still feels real—contradictory, unpredictable, and deeply human. In this lesson, we will move beyond plot summary to analyze Hamlet's character in depth: his grief, his intellect, his famous delay, his "antic disposition," and his philosophical nature. By understanding the complexity of Hamlet, we understand why this play continues to speak to us.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the key components of Hamlet's character: intellect, emotion, morality, and action
  - Analyze Hamlet's grief and its effect on his worldview
  - Evaluate the various interpretations of Hamlet's delay
  - Explain Hamlet's "antic disposition" and its purpose
  - Discuss Hamlet's philosophical nature and his famous soliloquies
  - Assess Hamlet's development from Act I to Act V
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Man Who Defines Humanity

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When Hamlet tells Horatio that there are "more things in heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy," he could be describing himself. He is a character of infinite complexity: a scholar who becomes a killer, a lover who destroys his beloved, a prince who cannot act until it is too late. He is, as Ophelia says, "the glass of fashion and the mould of form"—the ideal Renaissance man—and he is also a man who contemplates suicide, treats his girlfriend cruelly, and sends his former friends to their deaths without remorse.

**Think About It:** What makes a character feel "real" to you? Is it consistency, or is it the capacity to surprise?

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## 2. Core Concept 1: Hamlet's Grief

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### 2.1 The Mourning Prince

When we first meet Hamlet, he is dressed in black. The court has moved on; he has not. His first lines are puns that the court doesn't understand:

**"A little more than kin, and less than kind."** (I.ii.65)

He is "kin" to Claudius (nephew and now stepson) but not "kind" (natural, loving). The wordplay reveals his intelligence and his bitterness.

### 2.2 The First Soliloquy

**"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,**

**Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!"** (I.ii.129-130)

Hamlet's grief is so profound that he wishes to cease existing. He contemplates suicide but is restrained by religious law. His grief is not just sadness—it is a total rejection of life itself.

### 2.3 The Cause of Grief

Hamlet's grief has multiple sources:

| Source | Evidence |

|-----|-----|

| **Father's death** | "So excellent a king" |

| **Mother's remarriage** | "Frailty, thy name is woman" |

| **Loss of the throne** | Claudius usurped him |

| **Loss of meaning** | The world is "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" |

### 2.4 The Transformation of Grief

Over the course of the play, Hamlet's grief transforms:

- **Act I:** Raw, suicidal, overwhelming
- **Act II:** Channeled into performance (antic disposition)
- **Act III:** Mixed with rage and self-loathing
- **Act IV:** Philosophical acceptance
- **Act V:** Calm readiness

**Quick Check:** How does Hamlet's grief differ from "normal" grief? What makes it excessive—or is it appropriate to his situation?

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## 3. Core Concept 2: Hamlet's Intellect

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### 3.1 The Scholar-Prince

Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg—the university where Martin Luther studied. He is educated, philosophical, and intellectual. His speech is filled with:

- **Classical references** (Hyperion, Niobe, Hercules)
- **Philosophical concepts** (the nature of death, the afterlife)
- **Wordplay and puns** (often missed by other characters)

### 3.2 The Philosopher

Hamlet thinks about everything:

- **Death:** "To be, or not to be"
- **Human nature:** "What a piece of work is a man!"
- **Appearance and reality:** "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'"
- **Fate and providence:** "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

### 3.3 The Critic

Hamlet is also a literary and dramatic critic. His advice to the players (III.ii) shows deep understanding of acting and theater. He knows the difference between genuine emotion and empty performance—which makes his own performance of madness all the more ironic.

### 3.4 The Problem of Thinking

But Hamlet's intellect is also his burden. As he says:

*"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,*

*And thus the native hue of resolution*

*Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." (III.i.82-84)*

Thinking too much prevents action. Every possibility, every consequence, every moral question must be examined—and while he examines, time passes.

**Discussion Point:** *Is thinking too much a flaw? Would Hamlet be better if he were less intelligent?*

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## 4. Core Concept 3: The Problem of Delay

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### 4.1 The Question

Why doesn't Hamlet act immediately after the ghost's revelation? This question has generated centuries of debate.

### 4.2 Possible Explanations

| Theory | Explanation | Evidence |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **External obstacles** | Claudius is guarded; the court is watching; Hamlet cannot act openly | Claudius never goes alone; the court is full of spies |

| **Moral scruple** | Hamlet needs certainty before killing a king | "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil" |

| **Psychological** | Hamlet is melancholic, depressed, incapable of action | His suicidal thoughts, his self-loathing |

| **Philosophical** | He questions the value of revenge itself | "To be, or not to be" is about action vs. endurance |

| **Dramatic necessity** | If he acted immediately, there would be no play | The plot requires delay |

### 4.3 The Ghost's Accusation

The ghost returns in Act III specifically to "whet thy almost blunted purpose." Even the supernatural visitor recognizes that Hamlet has lost focus.

### 4.4 The Self-Accusations

Hamlet constantly berates himself for delaying:

- "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II.ii)
- "I do not know / Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do'" (IV.iv)
- "How all occasions do inform against me" (IV.iv)

### 4.5 The Irony

When Hamlet finally acts—killing Polonius, sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death, killing Claudius—he acts impulsively, without thinking. The thinker becomes a killer only when he stops thinking.

**Quick Check:** Which explanation for Hamlet's delay do you find most convincing? Why?

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## 5. Core Concept 4: The "Antic Disposition"

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### 5.1 The Decision

After the ghost's revelation, Hamlet tells his friends:

***"I perchance hereafter shall think meet***

***To put an antic disposition on."*** (I.v.172-173)

He will pretend to be mad. This decision shapes everything that follows.

### 5.2 The Purpose

| Purpose | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Protection** | If Claudius thinks Hamlet is mad, he may not see him as a threat |

| **Freedom** | A madman can speak truths that would be dangerous for a sane person |

| **Investigation** | Hamlet can observe others while they think he's incapable |

| **Delay** | It gives him time to verify the ghost's story |

## 5.3 The Performance

Hamlet's madness is inconsistent:

- With Polonius: wordplay, insults, feigned nonsense
- With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: sharp intelligence mixed with evasion
- With Ophelia: cruelty and rejection
- With Claudius: threats disguised as riddles

## 5.4 The Blur

Is Hamlet ever really mad? The question is deliberately unanswerable. He tells Gertrude:

*"I essentially am not in madness,*

*But mad in craft." (III.iv.165-166)*

But by then, he has killed a man, seen a ghost, and been under enormous stress. The performance may have affected the performer.

**Discussion Point:** *Can someone pretend to be mad without becoming a little mad? Where is the line?*

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## 6. Core Concept 5: Hamlet's Relationships

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### 6.1 With Claudius

Hamlet's relationship with his uncle is built on:

- **Suspicion:** He distrusts Claudius from the beginning
- **Hatred:** After the ghost's revelation, he has cause for murder
- **Competition:** Claudius has what Hamlet should have (throne, mother)

### 6.2 With Gertrude

Hamlet's feelings for his mother are deeply conflicted:

- **Love:** He cares about her welfare
- **Disgust:** Her sexuality horrifies him
- **Accusation:** He blames her for the marriage
- **Protection:** The ghost tells him not to harm her

His confrontation with her in the closet scene (III.iv) is brutal—but also an attempt to save her.

### 6.3 With Ophelia

Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia is the play's great tragedy of love:

- **Before the play:** He loved her genuinely (letters, poems)
- **During the play:** He rejects her, insults her, kills her father
- **At her grave:** He claims to have loved her more than "forty thousand brothers"

Is his cruelty to her part of his "antic disposition," or is it real? The text leaves it ambiguous.

### 6.4 With Horatio

Horatio is the one pure relationship in Hamlet's life. He trusts Horatio completely, confides in him, and charges him with telling his story. Horatio is everything others pretend to be: loyal, honest, true.

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## 7. Core Concept 6: Hamlet's Development

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### 7.1 Act I: Grief and Duty

Hamlet begins in grief, then receives a call to action. He accepts the mission but immediately begins to question it.

### 7.2 Act II: Performance and Plan

He adopts his "antic disposition" and devises the play to test Claudius. He is active, clever, in control.

### 7.3 Act III: Crisis and Missed Opportunity

The play succeeds—but Hamlet spares Claudius at prayer, then kills Polonius by mistake. He has proof but no resolution.

### 7.4 Act IV: Exile and Reflection

Sent to England, he escapes and returns. His encounter with Fortinbras's army triggers his final soliloquy and renewed resolve.

### 7.5 Act V: Acceptance

In the graveyard, he confronts death directly. By the time of the duel, he has reached a state of calm acceptance: "The readiness is all."

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## 8. Core Concept 7: The Philosophical Hamlet

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### 8.1 Key Philosophical Ideas

| Idea | Expression |

|-----|-----|

| **The meaning of life** | "To be, or not to be" |

| **The nature of humanity** | "What a piece of work is a man!" |

| **Appearance vs. reality** | "Seems, madam? Nay, it is" |

| **Death and the afterlife** | "The undiscovered country" |

| **Fate and providence** | "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" |

### 8.2 The Transformation of Thought

Hamlet's thinking changes over time:

- **Early:** Intense, agonized, self-focused
- **Middle:** Strategic, calculating, manipulative
- **Late:** Accepting, philosophical, calm

### 8.3 The Unanswered Questions

Hamlet leaves us with questions:

- Is there life after death?
  - Is revenge justified?
  - Can we ever know the truth?
  - What makes life worth living?
-

## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing Hamlet's Complexity

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### Activity: Character Chart (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Contradictions

Complete this chart showing Hamlet's contradictory qualities:

| Quality | Evidence | Opposite Quality | Evidence |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| Intellectual | Soliloquies, wordplay | Impulsive | Kills Polonius without looking |

| Loving | Letters to Ophelia | Cruel | "Get thee to a nunnery" |

| Moral | Won't kill Claudius at prayer | Ruthless | Sends R&G to death |

| Delaying | "To be or not to be" | Action | Kills Claudius finally |

#### Part B: Defining Moments

Identify a key moment for each aspect of Hamlet's character:

| Aspect | Key Moment | What It Reveals |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Grief | First soliloquy | Overwhelming despair |

| Intellect | "The play's the thing" | Strategic thinking |

| Delay | Prayer scene | Moral scruple or excuse? |

| Madness | With Polonius (fishmonger) | Wordplay as weapon |

| Love | At Ophelia's grave | "Forty thousand brothers" |

| Acceptance | "The readiness is all" | Philosophical calm |

#### Part C: Your Hamlet

Write a paragraph answering one of these questions:

1. If you were to direct a production of *Hamlet*, how would you want your actor to play the title role? What qualities would you emphasize?
2. Do you find Hamlet sympathetic? Why or why not?
3. What do you think is Hamlet's most important speech? Why?

---

## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Grief** | Profound, world-rejecting, shapes his worldview |

| **Intellect** | Philosophical, critical, witty—but also a source of delay |

| **Delay** | Multiple interpretations: external, moral, psychological, philosophical |

| **Antic Disposition** | Feigned madness with multiple purposes—and unclear boundaries |

| **Relationships** | Complex with Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia; pure with Horatio |

| **Development** | From grief to performance to crisis to acceptance |

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt."
- "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'"
- "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."
- "To be, or not to be—that is the question."
- "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"
- "I must be cruel only to be kind."
- "The readiness is all."
- "The rest is silence."

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## 11. Looking Ahead

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Hamlet is the center of the play, but he does not exist alone. In our next lesson, we will examine the other characters who surround him—Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio—and explore how they function as foils, mirrors, and contrasts to the prince.

**To prepare:** Think about which secondary character interests you most. What questions do you have about them?

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## References

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
- Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. Riverhead Books, 2003.
- Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan, 1904.
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### Lesson 1 Complete

*Next Lesson: King Claudius: The Smiling, Damned Villain*

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### Lesson 2: King Claudius: The Smiling, Damned Villain

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 2: King Claudius: The Smiling, Damned Villain

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Character Analysis: The Players of Elsinore

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### Lesson Overview

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Claudius is easy to hate. He murdered his brother, married his sister-in-law, stole the throne, and tried to kill his nephew. But Shakespeare does not give us a simple monster. Claudius is also a capable king, a loving husband (in his way), and a man tormented by guilt. His prayer scene reveals a soul in agony—yet he

cannot bring himself to repent because he refuses to give up what he gained by sin. In this lesson, we will examine Claudius in all his complexity: the politician, the villain, the husband, the guilt-ridden sinner, and the man whose final moments are a study in poetic justice.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Analyze Claudius's political skills and his effectiveness as king
- Examine his manipulation of Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and others
- Evaluate his relationship with Gertrude and its complexity
- Analyze his prayer scene soliloquy and what it reveals about his guilt
- Discuss whether Claudius is a one-dimensional villain or a complex character
- Assess his final moments and their thematic significance

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## 1. Introduction: The Man in the Middle

---

When we think of *Hamlet*, we think of the prince. But Claudius drives the plot almost as much as Hamlet does. It is his crime that sets everything in motion. His guilt that Hamlet seeks to expose. His plots that lead to the final catastrophe. And yet, Claudius is not *lago*—he is not evil for evil's sake. He is a man who did a terrible thing and then spent the rest of his life trying to manage the consequences. In another play, he might have been a tragic figure himself.

**Think About It:** *Is it possible to sympathize with Claudius at any point in the play? Should we?*

---

## 2. Core Concept 1: The Politician

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### 2.1 The Opening Speech

Claudius's first speech (I.ii.1-39) is a masterpiece of political rhetoric. Let's examine its structure:

| Section | Content | Purpose |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Lines 1-4** | Acknowledges death of King Hamlet | Shows respect, appears grief-stricken |

| **Lines 5-8** | Announces his marriage | Justifies the "o'erhasty" wedding |

| **Lines 8-14** | Deals with Fortinbras threat | Shows he's in control, decisive |

| **Lines 15-39** | Grants Laertes's request | Appears gracious, fatherly |

Notice how Claudius balances:

- **Grief and joy:** "With one auspicious and one dropping eye"
- **Past and present:** Honoring the dead while celebrating the new
- **Public and private:** Addressing the court while managing personal relationships

### 2.2 The Effective Ruler

Despite his crime, Claudius is a capable king:

- He handles the Norwegian threat diplomatically (sending ambassadors)
- He maintains order in the court
- He manages the transition of power smoothly
- He responds quickly to crises (Polonius's death, Laertes's rebellion)

***"There's such divinity doth hedge a king***

***That treason can but peep to what it would."*** (IV.v.121-122)

Claudius believes in the divine right of kings—ironic, given how he became king.

## 2.3 The Manipulator

Claudius's greatest political skill is manipulation:

| Target | Method | Purpose |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Rosencrantz & Guildenstern** | Flattery, appeal to friendship | Spy on Hamlet |

| **Polonius** | Allows him to feel important | Uses his eagerness |

| **Laertes** | Redirects his rage toward Hamlet | Eliminates Hamlet without direct blame |

| **Gertrude** | Genuine affection? Control? | Keeps her loyal |

| **The court** | Public speeches, appearances | Maintains legitimacy |

**Quick Check:** *Is Claudius a good king despite his crime, or does his method of obtaining the throne corrupt everything he does afterward?*

---

## 3. Core Concept 2: The Villain

### 3.1 The Crime

We never see Claudius murder his brother—we only hear about it from the ghost. But the ghost's description is vivid:

***"Sleeping within my orchard,***

***My custom always of the afternoon,***

***Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole***

***With juice of cursèd hebenon in a vial,***

***And in the porches of my ears did pour***

***The leprous distilment."*** (I.v.59-64)

The murder is:

- **Premeditated:** He knew the king's schedule
- **Treacherous:** He killed a sleeping, trusting man
- **Secret:** Made to look like natural death
- **Familial:** Brother killed brother

### 3.2 The Motive

What drove Claudius to murder?

**"My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen." (III.iii.55)**

Three things: power, ambition, and love (or lust) for Gertrude. He wanted what his brother had—and took it.

### 3.3 The Cover-Up

Claudius maintains the fiction of the innocent king throughout the play. Only in private does he admit his guilt. In public, he:

- Mourns his brother (I.ii)
- Expresses concern for Hamlet (passim)
- Acts as if Polonius's death is a tragedy (not a consequence of his own sin)

### 3.4 The Escalation

As the play progresses, Claudius's villainy deepens:

- **Act I:** Secret murderer, guilty but hidden
- **Act II:** Sends for spies, begins plotting
- **Act III:** Tries to pray, fails, orders Hamlet to England
- **Act IV:** Plots with Laertes, prepares poison
- **Act V:** Willing to let Gertrude drink poison rather than reveal his plot

**Discussion Point:** Does Claudius become more evil as the play progresses, or is he simply revealed?

---

## 4. Core Concept 3: The Prayer Scene (III.iii)

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### 4.1 The Context

Claudius is alone for the only time in the play. The play-within-a-play has exposed his guilt—to himself, if not to the court. He kneels to pray.

### 4.2 The Soliloquy

**"O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven.**

**It hath the primal eldest curse upon't—**

**A brother's murder!" (III.iii.36-38)**

#### Key elements:

| Element | Analysis |

|-----|-----|

| **"rank"** | Foul, rotten—the language of corruption |

| **"smells to heaven"** | So terrible God cannot miss it |

| **"primal eldest curse"** | The curse of Cain, first murderer |

### 4.3 The Paradox

**"May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?" (III.iii.56)**

This is the central question of Claudius's soul. He wants forgiveness, but he refuses to give up what he gained by sinning:

| Sin | Fruit of Sin |

|----|-----|

| Murder | The crown |

| Ambition | Power |

| Incest/adultery | Gertrude |

True repentance would require giving them up—and he cannot.

#### 4.4 The Failure

***"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.***

***Words without thoughts never to heaven go." (III.iii.97-98)***

He speaks the words of prayer, but his heart is not in it. He is divided—and therefore unforgiven.

#### 4.5 The Complexity

This scene complicates our view of Claudius:

- He feels guilt (unlike a pure villain)
- He recognizes his sin
- He wants to be forgiven
- But he cannot change

He is not a monster who delights in evil. He is a man trapped by his own choices.

***Quick Check:*** Does this scene make you feel any sympathy for Claudius? Why or why not?

---

## 5. Core Concept 4: The Relationship with Gertrude

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### 5.1 The Question

What does Claudius feel for Gertrude? The play offers conflicting evidence:

| Evidence of Love | Evidence of Use |

|-----|-----|

| He defends her from Laertes's mob | Marrying her helped secure the throne |

| He warns her not to drink the poison | He doesn't stop her forcibly |

| He speaks of her as "conjunctive to my life" | He never confesses to her |

### 5.2 The Ambiguity

***"The queen his mother***

***Lives almost by his looks, and for myself—***

*My virtue or my plague, be it either which—*

*She is so conjunctive to my life and soul*

*That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,*

*I could not but by her." (IV.vii.11-16)*

Claudius tells Laertes that he cannot move against Hamlet openly because of Gertrude. Whether this is genuine love or political convenience is left ambiguous.

### 5.3 The Final Moment

When Gertrude drinks the poison, Claudius warns her—but weakly:

*"Gertrude, do not drink." (V.ii.264)*

He does not knock the cup from her hand. He does not confess. He lets her die rather than reveal his plot. This suggests that, whatever his feelings, his self-preservation matters more.

---

## 6. Core Concept 5: The Manipulation of Laertes

### 6.1 The Opportunity

When Laertes storms the castle, Claudius faces a crisis. But he turns it to his advantage.

### 6.2 The Strategy

Claudius's manipulation of Laertes is masterful:

| Step | Method | Result |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **1. Calm him** | Doesn't fight, speaks reasonably | Laertes listens |

| **2. Redirect his anger** | Blames Hamlet | Laertes focuses on the right target |

| **3. Flatter his honor** | Questions his love for his father | Laertes feels challenged |

| **4. Propose a plan** | Offers the fencing match | Laertes agrees |

| **5. Let him escalate** | Allows Laertes to suggest poison | Laertes feels invested |

### 6.3 The Irony

Claudius uses Laertes's grief and honor against him. Laertes, who wants revenge for his father's death, becomes a tool of the man who killed his father's brother—and whose plot will lead to Laertes's own death.

---

## 7. Core Concept 6: The Death of Claudius

### 7.1 The Justice

Claudius dies by the very means he planned for others:

| Planned for Hamlet | Happens to Claudius |

|-----|-----|

| Poisoned rapier | Stabbed with poisoned rapier |

| Poisoned chalice | Forced to drink poisoned wine |

The poetic justice is complete. As Horatio says, "purposes mistook fall'n on th' inventors' heads."

## 7.2 The Final Moments

**"He is justly served.**

**It is a poison tempered by himself."** (*Laertes, V.ii.299-300*)

Even Laertes, who participated in the plot, acknowledges that Claudius deserves his fate.

## 7.3 The Judgment

What do we make of Claudius's death?

- **Justice:** He killed; he is killed
- **Irony:** His own plots destroy him
- **Necessity:** Denmark cannot heal while he rules
- **Tragedy:** Even a complex villain must fall

---

## 8. Core Concept 7: Claudius as Foil

### 8.1 Claudius vs. Hamlet

| Quality | Claudius | Hamlet |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Action** | Acts immediately, decisively | Delays, thinks |

| **Speech** | Polished, public, manipulative | Private, philosophical, honest (with us) |

| **Guilt** | Feels it, cannot change | Feels it, acts on it |

| **Relationship to Gertrude** | Husband (?) | Son |

| **Death** | By his own plots | By others' plots |

### 8.2 Claudius as Mirror

Claudius shows us what Hamlet might become if he acted without thinking—or what he might have been if he were more like his uncle. The contrast defines both characters.

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## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing Claudius

### Activity: The Complexity of Claudius (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Villain

List Claudius's evil actions and rank them:

| Action | Victim | How Evil? (1-10) |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Murder of King Hamlet | King Hamlet | |

Marriage to Gertrude	?	
Spying on Hamlet	Hamlet	
Sending Hamlet to England	Hamlet	
Plot with Laertes	Hamlet	
Poisoning the cup	Hamlet	
Letting Gertrude drink	Gertrude	

### Part B: The Human

List moments where Claudius seems human, even sympathetic:

Moment	What It Reveals
Prayer scene	Guilt, desire for forgiveness
Concern for Gertrude?	?
Handling of Laertes	Political skill, not just evil
(Find another)	

### Part C: The Prayer Scene

Reread Claudius's soliloquy (III.iii.36-72) and answer:

1. What images does Claudius use to describe his guilt?
2. What is the central paradox he identifies?
3. Why can't he repent?
4. Does this speech make you feel any sympathy for him? Explain.

### Part D: Your Judgment

Write a paragraph answering one of these questions:

1. Is Claudius a villain, a tragic figure, or something in between?
2. How would you want an actor to play Claudius? As openly evil? As charming? As tormented?
3. Do you think Claudius loves Gertrude? Support your answer with evidence.

---

## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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Element	Key Points
**The Politician**	Skilled ruler, manipulative, effective
**The Villain**	Murdered his brother, covers it up, escalates his crimes
**The Prayer Scene**	Reveals guilt, desire for forgiveness, and inability to repent
**The Husband**	Ambiguous feelings for Gertrude—love or control?
**The Manipulator**	Uses Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern for his purposes
**The Death**	Poetic justice: killed by his own plots
**The Foil**	Contrasts with Hamlet in action, speech, and guilt

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven."
  - "May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?"
  - "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go."
  - "The queen his mother lives almost by his looks."
  - "He is justly served. / It is a poison tempered by himself."
- 

## 11. Looking Ahead

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Claudius is dead, and with him dies the corruption he brought to Denmark. But what of the other characters? In our next lesson, we will examine Gertrude—the queen caught between her son and her husband, whose knowledge and guilt remain ambiguous to the end.

**To prepare:** Think about Gertrude. What does she know? When does she know it? How much is she complicit in the crimes of the play?

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
  - Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998.
  - Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan, 1904.
  - Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
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### Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: Gertrude and Ophelia: The Women of Elsinore*

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### Lesson 3: Gertrude and Ophelia: The Women of Elsinore

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 3: Gertrude and Ophelia: The Women of Elsinore

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Character Analysis: The Players of Elsinore

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### Lesson Overview

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In a play dominated by men—Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, Laertes—the two female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, are often overlooked or reduced to types: the guilty queen, the innocent victim. But Shakespeare gives both women more complexity than such labels suggest. Gertrude is a puzzle: How much does she know? Is she complicit in her first husband's murder? Why does she marry Claudius so quickly? Ophelia is caught between her father, her brother, and her lover—each demanding obedience, each using her for their purposes. Together, they represent the limited options available to women in Elsinore: marry, obey, go mad, or die.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Analyze Gertrude's character and the ambiguity surrounding her knowledge and guilt
  - Evaluate Gertrude's relationships with Claudius and Hamlet
  - Examine Ophelia's role as a pawn of the men around her
  - Analyze Ophelia's madness and its significance
  - Discuss the limited agency of women in the play
  - Compare and contrast the two female characters and their fates
- 

## 1. Introduction: Silent Voices

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Gertrude and Ophelia speak far fewer lines than the male characters. They are often acted upon rather than acting. Yet they are central to the play's emotional power. Ophelia's madness and death are among the most moving scenes in Shakespeare. Gertrude's final moments—drinking poison meant for her son—carry a tragic irony that haunts the ending. These women deserve our attention, not as symbols, but as characters struggling to survive in a world that offers them no good choices.

**Think About It:** *Why does Shakespeare give so little voice to the female characters? Is this a reflection of their society, or a limitation of the play?*

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## 2. Core Concept 1: Gertrude—The Ambiguous Queen

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### 2.1 The Questions

Gertrude is the play's greatest mystery. We never learn:

| Question | Possible Answers |

|-----|-----|

| Did she know about the murder? | Yes / No / Suspected but didn't ask |

| Was she having an affair with Claudius before King Hamlet died? | The ghost implies it |

| Why did she marry so quickly? | Love / Politics / Survival |

| Does she love Hamlet? | Yes—but she stays with Claudius |

| Does she love Claudius? | She seems to—but what does she know? |

### 2.2 The First Impression

When we first meet Gertrude, she is urging Hamlet to stop grieving:

***"Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,***

***And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.***

***Do not forever with thy vailèd lids***

***Seek for thy noble father in the dust."*** (1.ii.68-71)

---

She seems well-meaning but insensitive. She wants Hamlet to be happy—or at least to stop disrupting the court.

## 2.3 The Ghost's Accusation

The ghost tells Hamlet:

***"But howsoever thou pursues this act,***

***Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive***

***Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,***

***And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge***

***To prick and sting her."*** (I.v.84-88)

The ghost implies Gertrude will be punished by her own conscience—but does not accuse her of complicity in the murder. She is guilty of something, but perhaps not of knowing about the crime.

***"O Hamlet, what a falling off was there,***

***From me, whose love was of that dignity...***

***... to decline***

***Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor***

***To those of mine."*** (I.v.47-51)

The ghost focuses on her "falling off"—her descent from his love to Claudius's. This suggests the betrayal is sexual and emotional, not criminal.

## 2.4 The Closet Scene (III.iv)

The confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude is the key to understanding her:

***Hamlet:*** *Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.*

*You go not till I set you up a glass*

*Where you may see the inmost part of you.*

***Gertrude:*** *What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?*

*Help, ho!*

(III.iv.23-27)

Gertrude's first reaction is fear—she thinks Hamlet might kill her. This suggests she knows she has done something to deserve his anger.

As Hamlet rages, Gertrude's responses shift:

| Stage | Response |

|-----|-----|

| **Fear** | Calls for help |

| **Guilt** | "O Hamlet, speak no more!" |

| **Recognition** | "Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul" |

| **Confession** | "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain" |

By the end, she seems to accept his accusations. But what exactly is she accepting? The speed of her remarriage? Her choice of Claudius? Or something worse?

## 2.5 The Question of Complicity

Consider the evidence for and against Gertrude's knowledge:

| Evidence She Knew | Evidence She Didn't |

|-----|-----|

| The ghost says her lust led her to Claudius | The ghost tells Hamlet not to punish her |

| She married Claudius immediately | She may have been manipulated |

| She never questions Claudius about anything | She seems genuinely shocked by the play |

| She drinks to Hamlet's health at the duel | She doesn't know the cup is poisoned |

Most scholars conclude that Gertrude is guilty of poor judgment and excessive lust, but not of complicity in murder. She chose the wrong man, married too quickly, and closed her eyes to what she didn't want to see.

**Quick Check:** What do you think Gertrude knows? When does she know it?

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## 3. Core Concept 2: Gertrude's Relationships

### 3.1 With Hamlet

Gertrude loves her son—but her love is compromised:

- She sides with Claudius against him
- She lets Polonius spy on their conversation
- She sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to him
- She reports his behavior to Claudius

Yet in the end, she dies trying to honor him:

**"The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet."** (V.ii.263)

Her last act is a toast to her son. It kills her.

### 3.2 With Claudius

Gertrude's relationship with Claudius is ambiguous:

- She seems genuinely affectionate toward him
- She defends him to Hamlet

- She obeys him
- But she never learns the full truth about him

When Claudius weakly warns her not to drink, she ignores him. Is this defiance, or does she simply not hear the warning?

### 3.3 With Ophelia

Gertrude's treatment of Ophelia is complex:

- She hopes Ophelia will cure Hamlet's madness
- She refuses to see Ophelia when she first goes mad
- She delivers the beautiful report of Ophelia's death

Is she avoiding Ophelia out of guilt? Or simply overwhelmed?

## 4. Core Concept 3: Ophelia—The Obedient Daughter

### 4.1 The Introduction

When we first meet Ophelia, she is being told what to do by two men:

**Laertes:** *For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,*

*Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood.*

*(1.iii.5-6)*

**Polonius:** *I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,*

*Have you so slander any moment leisure*

*As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.*

*(1.iii.132-134)*

Ophelia's response to her father:

**"I shall obey, my lord."** *(1.iii.136)*

These four words define her role: she obeys. She will obey her father, her brother, and later Hamlet—and it will destroy her.

### 4.2 The Lover

Before the play begins, Ophelia and Hamlet were in love. We see evidence:

**Polonius:** *He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders*

*Of his affection to me.*

(I.iii.99-100)

And Hamlet's letter:

**"Doubt thou the stars are fire;**

**Doubt that the sun doth move;**

**Doubt truth to be a liar;**

**But never doubt I love."** (II.ii.115-118)

The poem is simple, direct, genuine. Hamlet loved her—or at least believed he did.

### 4.3 The Rejection

When Hamlet adopts his "antic disposition," Ophelia becomes a victim:

**"Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?"** (III.i.120-121)

The "nunnery" speech is brutal. Hamlet may be:

- Protecting her by pushing her away
- Genuinely disgusted by all women (after his mother)
- Aware that she is being used as bait
- Lashing out in his own pain

Whatever the reason, Ophelia is crushed:

**"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!"** (III.i.150)

### 4.4 The Bait

Polonius uses Ophelia as bait to test Hamlet's madness. He stages their encounter, telling her to walk "reading on this book" while he and Claudius spy. She is a tool, not a person.

---

## 5. Core Concept 4: Ophelia's Madness

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### 5.1 The Cause

Ophelia's madness has multiple causes:

| Cause | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Father's death** | Killed by the man she loved |

| **Hamlet's rejection** | The man she loved told her to go to a nunnery |

| **Loss of agency** | Every man who controlled her is gone (father dead, brother absent, Hamlet cruel) |

| **No outlet for grief** | Women cannot rage or seek revenge |

### 5.2 The Symptoms

Ophelia's madness expresses what she could not say when sane:

| Symptom | Meaning |

|-----|-----|

| **Songs about dead fathers** | Grief for Polonius |

| **Songs about seduced maids** | Sexual experience or fear |

| **Flower distribution** | Symbolic accusations |

| **Fragmented speech** | Loss of coherent self |

### 5.3 The Flowers

**"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts." (IV.v.173-175)**

Each flower carries meaning:

- **Rosemary:** remembrance (for Hamlet?)
- **Pansies:** thoughts (for her father?)
- **Fennel:** flattery (for Claudius?)
- **Columbines:** ingratitude (for Gertrude?)
- **Rue:** regret (for herself)
- **Daisy:** innocence (her lost innocence)
- **Violets:** fidelity (withered when her father died)

### 5.4 The Significance

Ophelia's madness is the only time she speaks freely. No longer bound by obedience, she says what she feels—and it is grief, loss, and accusation.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Ophelia's madness a form of protest, or simply a breakdown?*

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## 6. Core Concept 5: Ophelia's Death

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### 6.1 The Report

Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning (IV.vii.165-182) is one of the most beautiful speeches in the play. But it raises questions:

| Question | Implication |

|-----|-----|

| Was Ophelia there alone? | Yes—no one witnessed the death |

| Did she fall or let go? | The branch "broke"—accident or suicide? |

| Did she try to save herself? | She sang, didn't struggle |

| Why is the report so beautiful? | Gertrude's poetry transforms horror into art |

### 6.2 The Ambiguity

As with so much in the play, Ophelia's death is left ambiguous:

- If accident: She is a victim of circumstance
- If suicide: She finally chooses something for herself—even if that choice is death

### 6.3 The Funeral

At her funeral, the priest denies full rites because her death was "doubtful." Even in death, she is judged by men. But Laertes's curse—"A minist'ring angel shall my sister be"—asserts what the church denies: her innocence and salvation.

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## 7. Core Concept 6: Limited Agency

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### 7.1 The Options for Women

In Elsinore, women have few choices:

| Option | Gertrude | Ophelia |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Marry** | Yes—twice | Expected to |

| **Obey** | To Claudius | To father, brother, king |

| **Speak** | Limited, private | Almost never |

| **Act** | Little | None |

| **Die** | Yes—poisoned | Yes—drowned |

### 7.2 The Men Who Control Them

| Woman | Controlled By |

|-----|-----|

| **Gertrude** | Claudius (husband), Hamlet (son), society |

| **Ophelia** | Polonius (father), Laertes (brother), Hamlet (lover), Claudius (king) |

### 7.3 The Tragedy

The tragedy of Gertrude and Ophelia is that they are acted upon, not acting. Their fates are determined by the choices of men—choices over which they have no control.

---

## 8. Core Concept 7: Comparing the Women

---

### 8.1 Similarities

| Aspect | Gertrude | Ophelia |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Limited voice** | Few lines | Fewer lines |

| **Defined by men** | Wife, mother | Daughter, lover |

| **Sexualized** | "Frailty, thy name is woman" | Songs suggest seduction |

| **Tragic death** | Poisoned | Drowned |

| **Mourned** | Briefly | Elaborately |

### 8.2 Differences

| Aspect | Gertrude | Ophelia |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Age** | Middle-aged | Young |

| **Status** | Queen | Daughter of counselor |

| **Agency** | Some (chooses to marry) | Almost none |

| **Guilt** | Ambiguous | None |

| **Madness** | No | Yes |

| **Death** | Onstage | Offstage, reported |

### 8.3 The Feminist Reading

Many feminist critics argue that Ophelia represents the destruction of female innocence by patriarchal control, while Gertrude represents the compromise and complicity that survival requires. Neither escapes.

## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing the Women

### Activity: Gertrude and Ophelia (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Gertrude's Knowledge

Create a timeline of the play and mark moments that might reveal what Gertrude knows:

Moment	What Happens	What Gertrude Might Know
----- ----- -----		
Act I, ii	She urges Hamlet to stop grieving	She knows she married quickly
Act III, ii	The play scene	She is disturbed but doesn't react like Claudius
Act III, iv	Closet scene	She seems to recognize her guilt
Act V, ii	She drinks the poison	She dies without knowing the full truth

#### Part B: Ophelia's Songs

Analyze one of Ophelia's songs. What does it reveal?

Song	Lines	What It Expresses
----- ----- -----		
"How should I your true love know"	IV.v.23-26	Loss of lover
"He is dead and gone"	IV.v.29-32	Grief for father
"Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day"	IV.v.48-65	Sexual betrayal

#### Part C: The Flower Speech

If you were directing the flower scene, who would you have Ophelia give each flower to? Why?

Flower	Recipient	Meaning
----- ----- -----		
Rosemary		Remembrance
Pansies		Thoughts
Fennel		Flattery
Columbines		Ingratitude
Rue		Regret
Daisy		Innocence
Violet		Fidelity

## Part D: Your Response

Write a paragraph answering one of these questions:

1. Do you find Gertrude sympathetic? Why or why not?
  2. Is Ophelia a passive victim, or does her madness give her a kind of power?
  3. Why do you think Shakespeare gave these women such different fates?
- 

## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Character | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Gertrude** | Ambiguous knowledge; loves Hamlet but stays with Claudius; may be guilty of poor judgment but not murder; dies accidentally drinking poison meant for her son |

| **Ophelia** | Obedient daughter and lover; used as bait by her father; rejected by Hamlet; goes mad with grief; dies by drowning—accident or suicide? |

| **Both** | Limited agency; defined by relationships with men; tragic fates; their voices are silenced or fragmented |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "I shall obey, my lord." (Ophelia)
  - "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Hamlet, about Gertrude—and all women)
  - "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain." (Gertrude)
  - "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance." (Ophelia)
  - "And will he not come again?" (Ophelia's final song)
  - "The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet." (Gertrude's last words)
- 

## 11. Looking Ahead

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The women of Elsinore are gone. Gertrude poisoned, Ophelia drowned. Their absence leaves the final act to the men—and to the violence they have been preparing. In our next lesson, we will examine the male foils to Hamlet: Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio.

**To prepare:** Think about how these male characters contrast with Hamlet. What does each one reveal about the prince?

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### Lesson 3 Complete

*Next Lesson: Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio: Foils to the Prince*

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## Lesson 4: Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio: Foils to the Prince

Duration: 45 minutes

# Lesson 4: Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio: Foils to the Prince

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Character Analysis: The Players of Elsinore

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## Lesson Overview

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Hamlet does not exist in isolation. Shakespeare surrounds him with characters who, in different ways, reflect, contrast, and illuminate aspects of the prince's personality. Polonius, the meddling counselor, shows us what Hamlet might become if he were foolish rather than wise. Laertes, the vengeful son, shows us what Hamlet might be if he acted without thinking. And Horatio, the loyal friend, shows us what Hamlet values most: steadfastness, honesty, and quiet strength. By examining these foils, we understand Hamlet more deeply—not only who he is, but who he might have been.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Define the term "foil" and explain its function in drama
  - Analyze Polonius as a foil to Hamlet: foolish wisdom vs. wise foolishness
  - Examine Laertes as a foil: impulsive revenge vs. thoughtful delay
  - Evaluate Horatio as a foil: steadiness vs. Hamlet's volatility
  - Explain how each foil illuminates different aspects of Hamlet's character
- 

## 1. Introduction: Mirrors and Contrasts

---

A foil is a character whose qualities contrast with those of the protagonist, highlighting specific traits. Think of them as mirrors—but mirrors that show not what the protagonist is, but what he is not. In *Hamlet*, the prince is surrounded by such mirrors: Polonius, who talks endlessly but says little; Laertes, who acts without thinking; and Horatio, who is steady where Hamlet is turbulent. Each one helps us see Hamlet more clearly.

**Think About It:** Why might a playwright use foils? What do we learn about a character by seeing who they are not?

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## 2. Core Concept 1: What Is a Foil?

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### 2.1 Definition

A **foil** is a character who contrasts with another character—usually the protagonist—to highlight particular qualities. The term comes from jewelers, who place a foil behind a gem to make it shine more brightly.

### 2.2 Functions of Foils

| Function | How It Works |

|-----|-----|

| **Highlight traits** | Showing opposite qualities makes each more visible |

| **Offer alternatives** | Shows paths not taken by the protagonist |

| **Create conflict** | Foils often oppose the protagonist |

| **Deepen themes** | Contrasting responses to similar situations reveal theme |

### 2.3 The Foils in *Hamlet*

| Character | Foils Hamlet's... |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius** | Wisdom vs. foolishness; genuine vs. pretended madness |

| **Laertes** | Delay vs. impulsive action; thought vs. reaction |

| **Horatio** | Volatility vs. steadiness; passion vs. reason |

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## 3. Core Concept 2: Polonius—The Foolish Counselor

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### 3.1 Who Is Polonius?

Polonius is the Lord Chamberlain, chief advisor to the king. He is:

- **Talkative:** He never uses one word when ten will do
- **Meddling:** He spies on his own children and the prince
- **Self-important:** He believes his wisdom is indispensable
- **Foolish:** His "wisdom" is often wrong

### 3.2 Polonius's "Wisdom"

Polonius is famous for giving advice—most of it good in theory, none of it followed in practice:

*"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." (I.iii.78-80)*

The advice is excellent. But immediately after giving it, Polonius sends a spy to follow his son. He is false to his own advice.

### 3.3 Polonius as Foil to Hamlet

| Quality | Hamlet | Polonius |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Speech** | Meaningful, layered, philosophical | Wordy, empty, self-indulgent |

| **Wisdom** | Genuine insight | Pretends to wisdom |

| **Madness** | Feigned, purposeful | Real foolishness |

| **Relationships** | Deeply feels | Uses people |

| **Death** | Tragic, mourned | Ironic, barely noted |

### 3.4 The Irony

Polonius thinks he is wise; Hamlet knows he is not. When Polonius says of Hamlet, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't," he speaks more truly than he knows. Hamlet's madness has method; Polonius's wisdom has none.

### 3.5 The Death

Polonius dies because he cannot stop meddling:

***"Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!"***

***I took thee for thy better." (III.iv.33-34)***

Hamlet's words are harsh—but accurate. Polonius was in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, and paid for it. His death is both tragic and ironically fitting.

**Quick Check:** *In what ways is Polonius a warning about what Hamlet might become?*

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## 4. Core Concept 3: Laertes—The Impulsive Avenger

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### 4.1 Who Is Laertes?

Laertes is Polonius's son, Ophelia's brother, and a young man of action. He:

- **Leaves for France** at the play's beginning
- **Returns** when he hears of his father's death
- **Storms the castle** with a mob at his back
- **Agrees to murder** Hamlet in a dishonorable plot
- **Dies** by his own poison

### 4.2 Laertes's Revenge

When Laertes learns of his father's death, he acts immediately:

***"How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with.***

***To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!***

***Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!***

***I dare damnation. To this point I stand,***

***That both the worlds I give to negligence,***

***Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged***

***Most thoroughly for my father." (IV.v.128-134)***

Contrast this with Hamlet:

- Laertes: "I dare damnation"

- Hamlet: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all"

### 4.3 Laertes as Foil to Hamlet

| Quality | Hamlet | Laertes |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Response to father's death** | Delays, thinks, plans | Acts immediately, storms castle |

| **Method** | Feigned madness, play | Open rebellion, then plot |

| **Morality** | Won't kill at prayer | Will use poison, cheat in duel |

| **Relationship to Ophelia** | Loved her, rejected her | Loved her, protected her |

| **Death** | Accepting, philosophical | Confessing, seeking forgiveness |

### 4.4 The Contrast in Action

Both lose fathers. Both seek revenge. But:

| Hamlet | Laertes |

|-----|-----|

| Has proof (ghost) but needs more | Has no proof but acts anyway |

| Spares Claudius at prayer | Would kill anywhere, anytime |

| Kills Claudius only at the end | Plots to kill Hamlet |

| Dies having achieved his revenge | Dies having failed (his plot killed him) |

### 4.5 The Lesson

Laertes shows us what Hamlet might be if he acted without thinking. But Laertes's impulsiveness leads him into dishonor—he agrees to cheat, to use poison, to kill in a way that violates the code of honor he claims to defend. Quick action is not necessarily moral action.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Laertes's approach to revenge better than Hamlet's? Is it more effective? More honorable?*

## 5. Core Concept 4: Horatio—The Loyal Friend

### 5.1 Who Is Horatio?

Horatio is Hamlet's friend from Wittenberg. He is:

- **Scholarly:** A student, like Hamlet
- **Poor:** He has no position or wealth
- **Loyal:** The only character who never betrays Hamlet
- **Steady:** He provides stability amid chaos
- **Survivor:** He lives to tell the story

### 5.2 Horatio's Role

Horatio appears throughout the play as:

- **Witness:** Sees the ghost with the guards
- **Confidant:** Hamlet trusts him completely
- **Advisor:** Warns Hamlet against following the ghost
- **Observer:** Watches Claudius during the play
- **Friend:** Offers to die with Hamlet

- **Storyteller:** Lives to tell the truth

### 5.3 Horatio as Foil to Hamlet

| Quality | Hamlet | Horatio |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Emotion** | Passionate, volatile | Steady, controlled |

| **Action** | Delays, overthinks | Acts when needed |

| **Speech** | Eloquent, philosophical | Quiet, measured |

| **Status** | Prince | Commoner |

| **Fate** | Dies | Lives |

### 5.4 Hamlet's Praise

Hamlet's tribute to Horatio is one of the most revealing passages about what Hamlet values:

**"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."** (III.ii.64-67)

Hamlet, who is "passion's slave," admires in Horatio what he lacks: steadiness, control, the ability to suffer without being overwhelmed.

### 5.5 The Final Act

At the end, Horatio wants to die with Hamlet:

**"I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.**

**Here's yet some liquor left."** (V.ii.321-322)

He would rather commit suicide than live without his friend. But Hamlet stops him:

**"If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,**

**Absent thee from felicity awhile,**

**And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain**

**To tell my story."** (V.ii.320-323)

Horatio lives—not for himself, but for Hamlet. His loyalty extends beyond death.

**Quick Check:** Why does Hamlet value Horatio's steadiness so highly? What does this reveal about Hamlet's self-awareness?

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## 6. Core Concept 5: Comparing the Foils

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### 6.1 The Three Foils Side by Side

| Aspect | Polonius | Laertes | Horatio |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Relationship to Hamlet** | Antagonist | Temporary ally, then enemy | Friend |

| **Response to crisis** | Spies, meddles | Acts violently | Observes, supports |

| **Wisdom** | Foolish | Reckless | Wise |

| **Loyalty** | To Claudius | To family name | To Hamlet |

| **Death** | Accidental | By his own plot | Lives |

| **What they show about Hamlet** | His intelligence, his contempt for fools | His delay, his moral complexity | His ideal self |

### 6.2 What Each Foil Illuminates

| Foil | Illuminates Hamlet's... |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius** | Genuine wisdom vs. pretended wisdom; meaningful speech vs. empty words |

| **Laertes** | Thoughtful delay vs. reckless action; moral scruple vs. any-means-necessary |

| **Horatio** | What Hamlet aspires to be: steady, controlled, loyal |

### 6.3 The Ideal vs. The Real

Horatio represents the ideal Hamlet cannot achieve. Polonius represents the fool Hamlet despises. Laertes represents the avenger Hamlet might have become. Together, they define the range of possibilities—and show us the unique space Hamlet occupies.

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## 7. Core Concept 6: Minor Foils

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### 7.1 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

These "friends" are foils to Horatio:

- They betray Hamlet for advancement
- They spy rather than support
- They die because they chose the wrong side

They show what happens when friendship is sacrificed for ambition.

### 7.2 Fortinbras

The Norwegian prince appears briefly but significantly:

- He acts decisively, even for worthless land
- He becomes king at the end
- He represents what Hamlet might have been as a ruler

Hamlet admires Fortinbras's willingness to risk everything for honor—even while recognizing the cause is trivial.

### 7.3 Osric

The foppish courtier who delivers the fencing challenge is a comic foil:

- His empty, elaborate speech parodies courtly language
- Hamlet mocks him mercilessly
- He represents everything Hamlet despises about court life

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## 8. Practical Application: Analyzing Foils

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### Activity: Foil Chart (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Complete the Chart

For each foil, identify how they contrast with Hamlet:

| Aspect | Polonius | Laertes | Horatio |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Response to father's death** | N/A (he is the father who dies) | Acts immediately, storms castle | N/A (no father in play) |

| **Method of achieving goals** | Spying, manipulation | Open rebellion, then plot | Loyalty, patience |

| **Relationship to truth** | Hides, manipulates | Seeks revenge, not truth | Seeks truth |

| **Death** | Accidental, ironic | By his own poison | Lives |

#### Part B: Key Quotations

Match each quotation to the character who speaks it:

| Quotation | Character |

|-----|-----|

| "To thine own self be true..." | Polonius |

| "I dare damnation. To this point I stand..." | Laertes |

| "Give me that man that is not passion's slave..." | Hamlet (about Horatio) |

| "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane." | Horatio |

| "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!" | Hamlet (to Polonius) |

#### Part C: Writing

Choose one foil and write a paragraph answering this question:

**How does [Polonius / Laertes / Horatio] help us understand Hamlet better?**

Your paragraph should:

- Identify the foil's key qualities
- Explain how they contrast with Hamlet
- Discuss what this contrast reveals about the prince

**Extension:** If you could add another foil to the play—a character who would highlight something not already shown—what kind of character would you create? Why?

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## 9. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Foil | Key Qualities | What They Reveal About Hamlet |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Polonius** | Foolish, meddling, verbose | Hamlet's genuine wisdom; his contempt for empty speech |

| **Laertes** | Impulsive, vengeful, dishonorable | Hamlet's thoughtful delay; his moral complexity |

| **Horatio** | Steady, loyal, wise | Hamlet's ideal self; what he values most |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (Polonius on Hamlet)
- "I dare damnation. To this point I stand." (Laertes)
- "Give me that man that is not passion's slave." (Hamlet on Horatio)
- "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane." (Horatio)
- "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!" (Hamlet to Polonius)

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## 10. Looking Ahead

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We have now examined the major characters of *Hamlet*—the prince himself, his uncle, his mother, his love, and his foils. Each one contributes to the rich tapestry of the play. In the next module, we will step back to examine the underlying themes that connect them all: revenge, appearance versus reality, madness, and mortality.

**To prepare:** Think about the themes you've noticed recurring throughout the play. Which one interests you most?

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### Lesson 4 Complete

*Next Module: Underlying Themes and Important Speeches*

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## Module 7 Summary Sheet

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## Module 7: Character Analysis: The Players of Elsinore — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **Hamlet's Complexity:** Hamlet is defined by his contradictions—intellectual yet impulsive, loving yet cruel, deeply moral yet capable of ruthlessness. His grief, philosophical nature, and famous "delay" make him psychologically real.
- **Hamlet's Grief:** His sorrow is profound and world-rejecting. From his first soliloquy ("O that this too, too solid flesh would melt") to his graveyard meditation, grief shapes his worldview.
- **Hamlet's Antic Disposition:** His feigned madness is a strategic performance, but the line between performance and reality blurs, raising the question of whether he becomes a little mad.
- **Claudius as Complex Villain:** Claudius is not a one-dimensional monster. He is a skilled politician, genuinely loves Gertrude (in his way), and feels profound guilt in the prayer scene. His central paradox is wanting forgiveness while refusing to give up what he gained by sin.

- **Gertrude's Ambiguity:** The play never clarifies how much Gertrude knew about the murder. She may be complicit, willfully blind, or completely innocent. Her love for Hamlet is genuine, but her choices are constrained by her position.
- **Ophelia's Tragedy:** Ophelia is defined by obedience—to her father, brother, and Hamlet. She has no agency of her own, and when the men who control her are gone, she collapses into madness and death. Her madness allows her to speak truths she could not utter when sane.
- **Polonius as Foil:** Polonius believes himself wise but is foolish, verbose, and meddling. He contrasts with Hamlet's genuine wisdom and meaningful speech.
- **Laertes as Foil:** Laertes acts immediately and impulsively upon his father's death, willing to "dare damnation" for revenge. He contrasts with Hamlet's thoughtful delay and moral scruples.
- **Horatio as Foil:** Horatio is steady, loyal, and not "passion's slave." He represents the ideal of self-control that Hamlet admires but cannot achieve. His survival ensures Hamlet's story will be told.

### Core Takeaways

This module moves beyond plot to examine the psychological depth of *Hamlet's* characters. Hamlet himself is a study in contradictions—a thinker who cannot act until it is too late, a lover who destroys his beloved. Claudius is a villain with a conscience, making him more complex than a simple monster. Gertrude and Ophelia represent the limited agency of women in Elsinore, their fates determined by the choices of men. Finally, characters like Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio serve as foils, their contrasting qualities illuminating different aspects of the prince's personality. Together, they create a rich tapestry of human motivation and tragedy.

### Terms to Know

- **Foil** — A character whose qualities contrast with the protagonist's, highlighting specific traits (e.g., Laertes's impulsiveness highlights Hamlet's delay).
- **Machiavellian** — A term derived from Niccolò Machiavelli, describing a character who is cunning, manipulative, and prioritizes power over morality; Claudius fits this description.
- **Tragic Flaw (Hamartia)** — The character defect that leads to the protagonist's downfall; for Hamlet, this may be his delay, his overthinking, or his moral scruples.
- **Melancholy** — A profound, persistent sadness; Hamlet's condition in the early acts, which affects his ability to act.
- **Antic Disposition** — Hamlet's feigned madness; a strategic performance whose boundaries blur over time.
- **Passion's Slave** — Hamlet's phrase describing someone ruled by emotion; he admires Horatio for not being this.
- **Pigeon-livered** — Hamlet's self-description in his second soliloquy, meaning gentle and cowardly, lacking the gall (courage/anger) to act.
- **Satyr vs. Hyperion** — The contrast Hamlet draws between Claudius (a half-goat creature of lust) and his father (a sun-god), emphasizing the magnitude of Gertrude's fall.

### Review Questions

1. What are the main contradictions in Hamlet's character? Give examples from the play where he displays opposing qualities.
2. How does Claudius's prayer scene complicate our view of him as a simple villain? What does his inability to repent reveal about his character?
3. What is the central ambiguity surrounding Gertrude? What evidence suggests she might be guilty, and what evidence suggests she might be innocent?
4. Why is Ophelia described as a "tragic victim"? How do the men in her life contribute to her downfall?
5. Explain how each of the following characters serves as a foil to Hamlet: Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio. What does each one highlight about the prince?

### Further Thinking

- Hamlet tells Ophelia "Get thee to a nunnery" and treats her cruelly, yet at her grave he claims to have loved her more than "forty thousand brothers." Is his cruelty to Ophelia part of his "antic disposition," or does it reveal something darker about his character? Can both be true?

- Claudius is a murderer, yet he is also an effective king who handles the Norwegian crisis and maintains order. Does his political skill make him more or less culpable? Is a competent villain worse than an incompetent one?
- 

### Module 7 Quiz

**Q1.** One of the most enduring critical questions about Hamlet's character is the reason for his delay in avenging his father. Which of the following is a valid interpretation supported by the text?

- A) He is a coward who is physically afraid of Claudius.
- B) He is a philosopher whose intellectual nature and moral scruples cause him to overthink the consequences.
- C) He simply forgets about the ghost's command until reminded.
- D) He is waiting for Ophelia to give him permission to act.

**Q2.** What makes Claudius a more complex villain than a simple, one-dimensional evil character?

- A) His genuine love for and skill in ruling Denmark.
- B) His capacity for guilt and his failed attempt at repentance in the prayer scene.
- C) His witty sense of humor.
- D) His loyalty to his friends.

**Q3.** The central ambiguity surrounding Gertrude's character is:

- A) Whether she truly loves Hamlet.
- B) Whether she knew about Claudius's murder of her first husband.
- C) Whether she wants Hamlet to be king.
- D) Whether she prefers living in Elsinore.

**Q4.** Ophelia's function in the play is often described as that of a tragic victim. Which statement best explains this?

- A) She is the only character who remains loyal to Claudius.
- B) She is caught between the conflicting demands of the men in her life (father, brother, lover) and has no real agency of her own.
- C) She refuses to obey anyone and is punished for it.
- D) She successfully manipulates Hamlet for political gain.

**Q5.** In what way does Polonius serve as a foil to Hamlet?

- A) He is young where Hamlet is old, highlighting the difference in their energy.
- B) He believes himself to be wise and profound, but his wordy and foolish speech contrasts with Hamlet's meaningful and philosophical language.
- C) He is a loyal friend, while Hamlet is a traitor to the king.
- D) He acts impulsively, while Hamlet is always slow to act.

**Q6.** How does Laertes function as a foil to Hamlet, particularly in the context of revenge?

- A) He is a coward who refuses to avenge his father.
- B) He is a thinker who delays like Hamlet, showing that delay is universal.
- C) He acts immediately and impulsively upon hearing of his father's death, contrasting with Hamlet's famous hesitation.

D) He seeks revenge against Claudius, while Hamlet seeks revenge against Laertes.

**Q7.** What specific quality of Horatio does Hamlet most admire and wish he himself possessed?

A) His wealth and social status.

B) His ability to control his emotions and not be 'passion's slave.'

C) His skill in sword fighting.

D) His loyalty to the king.

**Q8.** Gertrude is clearly shown to be complicit in the murder of her first husband, as she confesses her guilt to Hamlet in the closet scene.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** As a Machiavellian villain, Claudius is purely evil and shows no moments of human conscience or guilt throughout the entire play.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** Hamlet's 'antic disposition' is a simple, straightforward act of madness that he maintains consistently with every character.

*(True / False)*

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** B — While many interpretations exist, Hamlet's philosophical nature is a key aspect of his character. His soliloquies reveal a mind that questions everything, and this 'thinking too precisely on the event' contributes to his inability to act decisively.

**Q2:** B — Claudius's soliloquy reveals his inner torment. He acknowledges his 'rank' offense and tries to pray, showing he has a conscience, even if he is ultimately unable to truly repent because he refuses to give up what he gained by sin.

**Q3:** B — The play never clarifies how much Gertrude knew about the murder. This ambiguity is key to her character, leaving audiences to question if she is complicit, willfully blind, or completely innocent.

**Q4:** B — Ophelia is defined by her obedience: she obeys her father, her brother, and even Hamlet's cruel commands. This lack of agency, combined with the loss of all the men who controlled her, leads directly to her mental breakdown and death.

**Q5:** B — Polonius's verbosity and self-importance are a perfect contrast to Hamlet's depth. Where Polonius speaks much but says little, Hamlet's words (especially his soliloquies) are layered with meaning and insight.

**Q6:** C — Laertes storms the castle with a mob and declares he would 'dare damnation' for revenge. His immediate, thoughtless action highlights by contrast the depth of Hamlet's complex, philosophical delay.

**Q7:** B — In Act III, Hamlet praises Horatio for being a man who is not ruled by his passions, someone who can take both fortune's buffets and rewards with equal thanks. This steadiness is exactly what the volatile Hamlet lacks.

**Q8:** False — While Gertrude is shaken by Hamlet's accusations in the closet scene and admits her soul is stained ('thou hast cleft my heart in twain'), she never confesses to knowing about the murder, and her guilt remains ambiguous.

**Q9:** False — Claudius's prayer scene is a crucial moment of human conscience. He is tortured by guilt and tries to repent, proving he is not a pure monster but a complex, tormented human being.

**Q10:** False — Hamlet's feigned madness is inconsistent. He is playfully cruel with Polonius, sharp and accusing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and momentarily tender with Horatio, showing it is a calculated performance, not a constant state.

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## Module 8: Underlying Themes and Important Speeches

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The final module synthesizes the play's major themes and revisits its most significant speeches, providing a comprehensive review before pulling everything together in a final summary.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Identify and analyze the major themes of the play: revenge, appearance vs. reality, madness, mortality, and action vs. inaction.
- Critically analyze the key soliloquies and speeches for their thematic and dramatic significance.
- Synthesize the plot, characters, and themes into a coherent summary of the play as a whole.



**Lesson 1: Theme Exploration: Revenge and Its Consequences**

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 1: Theme Exploration: Revenge and Its Consequences

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Underlying Themes and Important Speeches

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### Lesson Overview

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*Hamlet* is, at its core, a revenge tragedy. The ghost's command—"Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder"—sets the plot in motion and drives Hamlet toward his bloody conclusion. But Shakespeare does not present revenge as simple justice. Through the parallel stories of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras—three sons seeking to avenge their fathers—the play examines the moral complexity of revenge, its psychological toll, and its devastating consequences. By the final scene, revenge has destroyed everyone it touched. In this lesson, we will trace the theme of revenge through the play and ask: Is revenge ever justified? And what does it cost those who pursue it?

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### Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Trace the revenge plots of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras
- Compare and contrast the three revengers and their approaches
- Analyze the moral questions the play raises about revenge
- Examine the consequences of revenge for each character
- Evaluate what the play suggests about revenge as a response to injustice

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## 1. Introduction: Three Sons, Three Revenge

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The play opens with a kingdom preparing for war. Young Fortinbras of Norway is gathering an army to reclaim lands lost by his father. By Act I, Scene v, Hamlet has been commanded by his father's ghost to seek revenge. By Act IV, Laertes returns from France to find his father dead and his sister mad, and he too demands vengeance. Three sons, three dead fathers, three paths to revenge. Only one of them survives—and he inherits a kingdom littered with corpses.

**Think About It:** *Why might Shakespeare include three separate revenge plots? What does each one add to our understanding of the theme?*

---

## 2. Core Concept 1: The Tradition of Revenge Tragedy

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### 2.1 The Genre

Before *Hamlet*, revenge tragedy was a popular genre with established conventions:

| Convention | Example |

|-----|-----|

| Ghost of the murdered victim appears | King Hamlet's ghost |

| Protagonist must avenge the death | Hamlet is commanded |

| Delay complicates the revenge | Hamlet's famous delay |

| Play-within-a-play | "The Mousetrap" |

| Madness (real or feigned) | Hamlet's "antic disposition" |

| Multiple deaths in final scene | The catastrophic ending |

Shakespeare follows these conventions—but also complicates them. His revenger is not a straightforward hero but a thinker, a philosopher, a man tormented by doubt.

### 2.2 The Moral Problem

Revenge poses moral questions for Elizabethan audiences:

- **Biblical command:** "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19)
- **Legal system:** Revenge was illegal; justice belonged to the state
- **Honor code:** A man's honor demanded response to injury

Hamlet is caught between these competing claims. The ghost commands revenge from beyond; God forbids it; the state (now headed by the murderer) offers no justice.

**Quick Check:** *Why might revenge be morally complicated? What makes it different from justice?*

---

## 3. Core Concept 2: Hamlet's Revenge

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### 3.1 The Call

The ghost's command is unambiguous:

***"If thou didst ever thy dear father love—***

***... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."*** (I.v.23, 25)

Hamlet accepts immediately:

***"Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift***

***As meditation or the thoughts of love,***

***May sweep to my revenge."*** (I.v.29-31)

But "haste" is not what follows.

### 3.2 The Delay

Hamlet's revenge is marked by delay:

| Act | Opportunity | Result |

|----|-----|-----|

| **II** | Player's speech moves him | Plans the play, doesn't act |

| **III** | Play confirms Claudius's guilt | Still doesn't act |

| **III** | Claudius at prayer | Spares him |

| **III** | Could kill Claudius? | Kills Polonius instead |

| **IV** | Sent to England | Escapes, returns |

| **V** | Finally acts | Kills Claudius—but too late |

### 3.3 The Reasons

Why does Hamlet delay? The question has generated centuries of debate:

| Theory | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **External obstacles** | Claudius is guarded; the court watches |

| **Moral scruple** | Needs certainty; ghost might be a devil |

| **Psychological** | Melancholy, depression, inability to act |

| **Philosophical** | Questions the value of revenge itself |

| **Dramatic** | No play if he acts immediately |

### 3.4 The Cost

Hamlet's delay has consequences:

- Polonius dies (mistaken for Claudius)

- Ophelia goes mad and drowns
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die
- Laertes seeks revenge against Hamlet
- Gertrude drinks poison
- Hamlet himself dies

### 3.5 The Achievement

When Hamlet finally kills Claudius, it is almost an afterthought—in the chaos of the duel, after he is already poisoned:

***"Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane,***

***Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?***

***Follow my mother."*** (V.ii.302-304)

He achieves his revenge—but at the cost of his own life and nearly everyone else's.

**Discussion Point:** *Is Hamlet's revenge satisfying? Does he succeed, or does he fail?*

## 4. Core Concept 3: Laertes's Revenge

### 4.1 The Call

Laertes returns from France to find his father dead and his sister mad. His response is immediate:

***"How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with.***

***To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!***

***Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!***

***I dare damnation."*** (IV.v.128-131)

Unlike Hamlet, Laertes has no doubts. He will sacrifice his soul if necessary.

### 4.2 The Method

Laertes's approach contrasts sharply with Hamlet's:

| Hamlet | Laertes |

|-----|-----|

| Needs proof | Acts on suspicion |

| Delays | Acts immediately |

| Moral scruples | "I dare damnation" |

| Feigned madness | Open rebellion |

| Public exposure (play) | Private plot |

| Wants to damn Claudius | Wants to kill Hamlet |

### 4.3 The Dishonor

Claudius manipulates Laertes into a dishonorable plot:

- Uses an unbated (sharp) sword
- Tips it with poison
- Plans murder under guise of sport

Laertes agrees to all of it. His desire for revenge overcomes his honor.

### 4.4 The Cost

Laertes's revenge also backfires:

- He is killed by his own poison
- He dies confessing, seeking forgiveness
- His family line ends

***"I am justly killed with mine own treachery."*** (V.ii.286)

### 4.5 The Contrast

Laertes shows what Hamlet might have been: quick to act, willing to do anything, unconcerned with morality. But his approach leads to dishonor and death—and accomplishes nothing that Hamlet's delay did not also accomplish.

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## 5. Core Concept 4: Fortinbras's Revenge

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### 5.1 The Background

Fortinbras's father, old King Norway, was killed by Hamlet's father in single combat. Lands were lost. Young Fortinbras seeks to reclaim them.

### 5.2 The Method

Fortinbras's approach is different from both Hamlet and Laertes:

| Aspect | Fortinbras |

|-----|-----|

| **Target** | Lands, not blood |

| **Method** | Open warfare, legal means |

| **Timing** | Patient, strategic |

| **Outcome** | Success—becomes king |

### 5.3 The Commentary

Hamlet reflects on Fortinbras in his fourth soliloquy:

***"Witness this army of such mass and charge,***

***Led by a delicate and tender prince,***

***Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,***

*Makes mouths at the invisible event,*

*Exposing what is mortal and unsure*

*To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,*

*Even for an eggshell." (IV.iv.47-53)*

Fortinbras risks everything for "an eggshell"—worthless land. Hamlet, with real cause, does nothing.

#### 5.4 The Success

Fortinbras achieves his revenge through:

- **Patience:** He waits, plans, gathers forces
- **Legitimacy:** He works through proper channels
- **Opportunism:** He arrives just as the Danish throne empties

He ends the play as king—the only revenger who survives.

**Quick Check:** *Is Fortinbras's approach "better" than Hamlet's or Laertes's? What does his success suggest about revenge?*

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## 6. Core Concept 5: Comparing the Revengers

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### 6.1 The Three Sons

| Aspect | Hamlet | Laertes | Fortinbras |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Father killed by** | Claudius | Hamlet | King Hamlet |

| **Response** | Delay, thought | Immediate action | Strategic patience |

| **Method** | Feigned madness, play | Open rebellion, then plot | Army, diplomacy |

| **Morality** | Scruples, hesitation | "I dare damnation" | Honor, legitimacy |

| **Target** | Claudius | Hamlet | Lands, throne |

| **Outcome** | Dies, kills Claudius | Dies, killed by own plot | Lives, becomes king |

### 6.2 What Each Represents

| Revenger | Represents |

|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | The thinker—revenge complicated by conscience |

| **Laertes** | The reactor—revenge without thought |

| **Fortinbras** | The strategist—revenge channeled into politics |

### 6.3 The Irony

Fortinbras, whose cause is weakest (land, not murder), succeeds. Hamlet and Laertes, whose causes are strongest (fathers murdered), destroy themselves and everyone around them. The play offers no easy moral.

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## 7. Core Concept 6: The Consequences of Revenge

---

### 7.1 The Body Count

Revenge kills nearly everyone:

| Character | How They Die |

|-----|-----|

| Polonius | Stabbed (mistaken for Claudius) |

| Ophelia | Drowns (suicide? accident?) |

| Rosencrantz | Executed in England |

| Guildenstern | Executed in England |

| Gertrude | Poisoned (drinks from Hamlet's cup) |

| Laertes | Poisoned (his own sword) |

| Claudius | Poisoned and stabbed |

| Hamlet | Poisoned |

### 7.2 The Psychological Cost

Revenge also destroys lives without killing:

- Hamlet's mind is tormented
- Ophelia's sanity breaks
- Laertes's honor is compromised
- Gertrude's last moments are horror

### 7.3 The Question of Justice

Is revenge justice? The play suggests not:

- The guilty die, but so do the innocent
- The revenge itself creates new victims
- No one is satisfied by the outcome

### 7.4 The Final Image

The stage littered with bodies. Fortinbras inherits a kingdom of corpses. Horatio is left to tell the story—a story of revenge and its consequences.

**Discussion Point:** *What does the play suggest about revenge? Is it ever justified?*

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## 8. Core Concept 7: Shakespeare's Critique of Revenge

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### 8.1 The Moral

*Hamlet* does not offer a simple moral, but it does raise questions:

- Is revenge compatible with justice?
- Can revenge ever be "clean"?
- What does revenge do to the revenger?
- Is there an alternative?

## 8.2 The Alternative

Fortinbras suggests an alternative: channel revenge into legitimate action. He does not seek blood for blood; he seeks what is rightfully his through proper channels. But even he arrives to find destruction.

## 8.3 The Unanswered Question

The play ends without answering whether Hamlet was right or wrong. He is given a soldier's funeral—honor, but not salvation. The question lingers.

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# 9. Practical Application: Analyzing the Revengers

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### Activity: Three Revengers (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Complete the Chart

Question	Hamlet	Laertes	Fortinbras
What was done to his father?	Murdered	Murdered	Killed in combat
Who is his target?	Claudius	Hamlet	Denmark (land, throne)
How does he respond?			
Does he succeed?			
What does it cost him?			

#### Part B: Key Quotations

Match each quotation to the speaker:

Quotation	Speaker
"I dare damnation. To this point I stand."	Laertes
"Haste me to know't, that I... may sweep to my revenge."	Hamlet
"Even for an eggshell."	Hamlet (about Fortinbras)
"I am justly killed with mine own treachery."	Laertes
"He has my dying voice."	Hamlet (about Fortinbras)

#### Part C: Writing

Choose one of these prompts and write a paragraph:

1. Compare Hamlet's and Laertes's approaches to revenge. Which is more justified? Which is more effective?
2. Why does Fortinbras succeed where Hamlet and Laertes fail? What does his success suggest about revenge?
3. Does the play condemn revenge, or does it show it as necessary but tragic?

#### Part D: Reflection

Do you think revenge is ever justified? Why or why not? Use examples from the play to support your answer.

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## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Revenger | Approach | Outcome |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | Delay, thought, moral scruple | Dies, kills Claudius, destroys everyone |

| **Laertes** | Immediate action, dishonorable means | Dies by his own poison |

| **Fortinbras** | Strategic patience, legitimate means | Lives, becomes king |

### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." (Ghost)
  - "Haste me to know't, that I... may sweep to my revenge." (Hamlet)
  - "I dare damnation." (Laertes)
  - "Even for an eggshell." (Hamlet on Fortinbras)
  - "I am justly killed with mine own treachery." (Laertes)
  - "He has my dying voice." (Hamlet on Fortinbras)
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## 11. Looking Ahead

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Revenge is only one of the play's major themes. In our next lesson, we will explore another: appearance versus reality. From the ghost's true nature to Hamlet's feigned madness to Claudius's smiling villainy, the play constantly asks: What is real? What can we trust?

**To prepare:** Think about moments in the play where characters are not what they seem. How many can you list?

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- 

### Lesson 1 Complete

*Next Lesson: Theme Exploration: Appearance vs. Reality*

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### Lesson 2: Theme Exploration: Appearance vs. Reality

*Duration: 45 minutes*

## Lesson 2: Theme Exploration: Appearance vs. Reality

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Underlying Themes and Important Speeches

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## Lesson Overview

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From its first line—"Who's there?"—*Hamlet* is a play about the difficulty of knowing what is real. Characters constantly spy on one another, disguise their true intentions, and question whether what they see can be trusted. The ghost may be a spirit or a demon. Hamlet's madness may be real or feigned. Claudius appears a loving king but is a murderer. Even Polonius, who claims to be wise, is a fool. In this lesson, we will explore the theme of appearance versus reality, examining how Shakespeare uses deception, performance, and uncertainty to create a world where nothing is quite what it seems.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the central question of appearance vs. reality in the play
  - Analyze the various forms of deception used by characters
  - Examine the role of spying and surveillance in creating uncertainty
  - Discuss the ambiguity of the ghost, Hamlet's madness, and other mysteries
  - Connect the theme to the play's larger philosophical questions
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Unanswerable Question

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The play opens with a challenge: "Who's there?" It is a simple question, asked by a guard in the dark. But it echoes throughout the play. Who is the ghost—father or demon? Who is Hamlet—mad or sane? Who is Claudius—loving king or murderous villain? Who is Polonius—wise counselor or foolish meddler? In Elsinore, these questions have no easy answers. Everyone wears a mask, and the audience, like the characters, must try to see what lies beneath.

**Think About It:** *Why might a play set in a royal court be particularly concerned with appearance and reality? What pressures do courtiers face?*

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## 2. Core Concept 1: The Central Question

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### 2.1 The Opening Line

**"Who's there?"** (I.i.1)

Bernardo's challenge establishes the play's central concern: identity and trust. In the darkness of Elsinore, no one can be sure who approaches.

### 2.2 Hamlet's Response

When Gertrude asks why his grief "seems" so particular, Hamlet explodes:

**"Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'**

**'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,**

**... That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,**

*For they are actions that a man might play;*

*But I have that within which passes show—*

*These but the trappings and the suits of woe."* (I.ii.76-86)

Hamlet insists that his grief is real, not performed. But the irony is that he will spend much of the play performing—pretending madness, hiding his thoughts, playing roles.

### 2.3 The Ubiquity of Deception

Nearly every character engages in deception:

| Character | Deception |

|-----|-----|

| **Claudius** | Appears loving king, is murderer |

| **Gertrude** | Appears happy queen, may hide guilt |

| **Polonius** | Appears wise, is foolish |

| **Rosencrantz & Guildenstern** | Appear friends, are spies |

| **Ophelia** | Is used as bait while appearing innocent |

| **Hamlet** | Feigns madness |

| **The Ghost** | May be real spirit or demon |

**Quick Check:** *Why might a court setting encourage deception? What is at stake for these characters?*

---

## 3. Core Concept 2: Spying and Surveillance

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### 3.1 A Court of Spies

Elsinore is a place where everyone watches everyone:

| Spy | Target | Method |

|----|-----|-----|

| **Claudius** | Hamlet | Uses Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius |

| **Polonius** | Laertes | Sends Reynaldo to spy |

| **Polonius** | Hamlet | Uses Ophelia as bait; hides behind arras |

| **Claudius & Polonius** | Hamlet & Gertrude | Hide behind arras in closet scene |

| **Claudius** | Laertes | Uses him to spy on Hamlet's intentions |

### 3.2 Polonius's Philosophy

Polonius articulates the spy's method:

**"By indirections find directions out."** (II.i.66)

He teaches Reynaldo to use lies to discover truth—to spread false rumors about Laertes and see how people react. This "indirection" characterizes the entire court.

### 3.3 The Irony

Polonius, the great spy, dies while spying:

***"Behind the arras I'll convey myself***

***To hear the process."*** (III.iii.28-29)

His need to know everything leads directly to his death.

### 3.4 The Effect

Constant surveillance creates:

- **Paranoia:** No one can be trusted
- **Performance:** Everyone acts for watchers
- **Isolation:** True selves remain hidden
- **Tragedy:** Misunderstandings multiply

**Discussion Point:** *How does being watched change behavior? Do the characters in Elsinore act differently because they are always being observed?*

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## 4. Core Concept 3: Hamlet's "Antic Disposition"

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### 4.1 The Decision

After the ghost's revelation, Hamlet tells his friends:

***"I perchance hereafter shall think meet***

***To put an antic disposition on."*** (I.v.172-173)

He will pretend to be mad. This decision is itself a commentary on appearance and reality: he will deliberately create a false appearance.

### 4.2 The Performance

Hamlet's madness takes different forms with different audiences:

| Audience | Performance |

|-----|-----|

| **Polonius** | Wordplay, non sequiturs, insults |

| **Rosencrantz & Guildenstern** | Wit, evasion, then accusation |

| **Ophelia** | Cruelty, rejection, then silence |

| **Claudius** | Threats disguised as riddles |

| **Gertrude** | Rage, then revelation |

### 4.3 The Blur

Is Hamlet ever truly mad? The question is deliberately unanswerable:

- He tells Gertrude he is "mad in craft" (III.iv.166)
- But he behaves erratically even when alone

- His grief and stress might push him toward genuine instability
- The performance may affect the performer

#### 4.4 The Irony

Hamlet, who insisted he knew not "seems," becomes the play's greatest performer. The man who wanted truth now lives in falsehood.

---

### 5. Core Concept 4: Claudius's Mask

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#### 5.1 The Smiling Villain

Hamlet identifies Claudius's essential quality:

***"That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!" (I.v.108)***

Claudius's villainy is invisible. He appears:

- A loving husband to Gertrude
- A concerned stepfather to Hamlet
- A capable king to the court
- A grieving brother to the public

#### 5.2 The Private Truth

Only in private does Claudius reveal himself:

***"O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven." (III.iii.36)***

The contrast between public performance and private guilt could not be starker.

#### 5.3 The Prayer Scene

In the prayer scene, Claudius tries to pray but cannot:

***"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.***

***Words without thoughts never to heaven go." (III.iii.97-98)***

Even his prayer is a performance—words without true feeling.

#### 5.4 The Exposure

The play-within-a-play exposes Claudius to himself, if not to the court. He sees his crime reenacted and cannot hide his reaction. The mask slips—briefly.

**Quick Check:** *Why is Claudius's ability to appear virtuous so dangerous? What makes him different from a villain who looks like a villain?*

---

### 5. Core Concept 5: The Ghost—Spirit or Demon?

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#### 5.1 The Uncertainty

The ghost's true nature is never resolved:

| Evidence It's King Hamlet | Evidence It's a Demon |

|-----|-----|

| Looks like the dead king | Demons can assume shapes |

| Wears his armor | Could be deceptive |

| Tells truth about murder | Wants Hamlet to commit murder (sin) |

| Comes from purgatory | Could be lying about origin |

## 5.2 Hamlet's Doubt

Hamlet himself is uncertain:

***"The spirit that I have seen***

***May be a devil, and the devil hath power***

***T' assume a pleasing shape." (II.ii.570-572)***

He needs "grounds more relative" (more certain evidence) than a single supernatural encounter. This uncertainty drives the play-within-a-play.

## 5.3 The Ambiguity

Shakespeare never resolves the question. The ghost may be:

- A true spirit from purgatory
- A demon tempting Hamlet to sin
- A hallucination born of Hamlet's melancholy
- A dramatic device that needs no explanation

The ambiguity itself is the point: in Elsinore, even the supernatural cannot be trusted.

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## 6. Core Concept 6: Ophelia—The Innocent Pawn

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### 6.1 The Used

Ophelia is used by nearly everyone:

- **Polonius** uses her to test Hamlet
- **Claudius** uses her as bait
- **Hamlet** uses her as an outlet for his cruelty
- **Laertes** uses her as a reason for revenge

### 6.2 The Performance

Ophelia is told to perform innocence while being anything but innocent in purpose:

***"Read on this book,***

***That show of such an exercise may color***

***Your loneliness." (III.i.44-46)***

Polonius instructs her to pretend to pray while they spy. Her appearance is false, even if her nature is true.

## 6.3 The Breaking

When Ophelia goes mad, she stops performing. Her madness is the only time she is genuine:

*"She speaks much of her father, says she hears*

*There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart."* (IV.v.4-5)

Madness strips away the masks. In madness, she tells truths she could never speak when sane.

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## 7. Core Concept 7: The Play-Within-a-Play

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### 7.1 Art as Truth

The play-within-a-play is Hamlet's attempt to use appearance to reveal reality:

*"I'll have these players*

*Play something like the murder of my father*

*Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;*

*I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench,*

*I know my course."* (II.ii.567-571)

A fictional representation of a real crime will, Hamlet hopes, force Claudius to reveal his guilt.

### 7.2 The Success

It works. Claudius's reaction confirms his guilt—to Hamlet and Horatio, if not to the court.

### 7.3 The Irony

The play reveals truth through fiction. Appearance (the performance) leads to reality (knowledge of guilt). Art, which is itself a kind of lie, becomes the vehicle for truth.

---

## 8. Core Concept 8: The Failure of Appearances

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### 8.1 Polonius's Mistake

Polonius is certain he knows the cause of Hamlet's madness:

*"I have found*

*The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy."* (II.ii.48-49)

He is completely wrong. His confidence in his judgment blinds him to the truth.

### 8.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's Mistake

They think they can manipulate Hamlet:

**Hamlet:** *You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? (III.ii.338-343)*

They cannot. Their appearance of friendship fails to deceive him.

### 8.3 Claudius's Mistake

Claudius thinks he can control events through manipulation. But his plots backfire, killing Gertrude, Laertes, and himself.

### 8.4 The Lesson

Appearances fail. Those who rely on deception are eventually deceived themselves. As Horatio says:

**"purposes mistook**

**Fall'n on th' inventors' heads." (V.ii.357-358)**

---

## 9. Practical Application: Analyzing Appearance vs. Reality

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### Activity: Masks and Truths (15 minutes)

#### Part A: The Mask Chart

For each character, identify the mask they wear and the truth beneath:

| Character | Public Appearance | Private Reality |

|-----|-----|-----|

| Claudius | Loving king, grieving brother | Murderer, usurper |

| Hamlet | Mad prince | Feigning, planning |

| Polonius | Wise counselor | Foolish meddler |

| Rosencrantz | Loyal friend | Willing spy |

| Guildenstern | Loyal friend | Willing spy |

| Ophelia | Innocent maid | Used as bait |

| Gertrude | Happy queen | ? |

#### Part B: Key Quotations

Match each quotation to the idea it expresses:

| Quotation | Idea |

|-----|-----|

| "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'" | Rejection of performance |

| "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!" | Hidden evil |

| "By indirections find directions out." | Spying as method |

| "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." | Art reveals truth |

| "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below." | Failed performance |

### Part C: Writing

Choose one of these prompts and write a paragraph:

1. Why is it so difficult to know the truth in Elsinore? What prevents characters from seeing clearly?
2. Which character's mask is most convincing? Why?
3. Does the play suggest that truth can ever be known, or are we always left with uncertainty?

### Part D: Reflection

Think about a time when you discovered that someone—or something—was not what it appeared to be. How did that affect you? Does the play reflect that experience?

---

## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Element | Key Points |

|-----|-----|

| **Central Question** | "Who's there?"—identity and trust are uncertain |

| **Spying** | Everyone watches everyone; paranoia reigns |

| **Hamlet's Madness** | Feigned, but maybe not entirely—the line blurs |

| **Claudius's Mask** | Appears virtuous, is villainous |

| **The Ghost** | Real or demon? Unresolved |

| **Ophelia** | Used as bait; only in madness is she real |

| **The Play** | Art reveals truth through fiction |

| **The Failure** | Appearances deceive, but deceivers are also deceived |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "Who's there?"
  - "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'"
  - "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!"
  - "By indirections find directions out."
  - "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."
  - "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below."
  - "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventors' heads."
- 

## 11. Looking Ahead

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Appearance versus reality is one of the play's central themes, but it is not the only one. In our next lesson, we will explore the theme of madness—both real and feigned—and its connection to mortality.

**To prepare:** Think about the different kinds of madness in the play. How is Hamlet's madness different from Ophelia's? What does each reveal?

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
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  - Thompson, Ann, and Neil Taylor, editors. *Hamlet: The Arden Shakespeare*. Bloomsbury, 2016.
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## Lesson 2 Complete

*Next Lesson: Theme Exploration: Madness and Mortality*

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## Lesson 3: Theme Exploration: Madness and Mortality

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 5: Important Speeches: A Closer Look

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Underlying Themes and Important Speeches

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## Lesson Overview

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*Hamlet* is a play built on words. Its soliloquies have become part of our cultural vocabulary, quoted by people who have never read the play. But these speeches are more than famous phrases—they are windows into Hamlet's soul, explorations of the play's deepest themes, and moments of extraordinary dramatic power. In this lesson, we will revisit the most important speeches of the play, examining how they develop character, advance theme, and create the unique texture of Shakespeare's greatest tragedy.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the key speeches of the play and their contexts
  - Analyze each speech's contribution to character development
  - Connect each speech to the play's major themes
  - Compare the speeches to trace Hamlet's emotional and philosophical journey
  - Evaluate the dramatic and thematic significance of each speech
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Voice of Hamlet

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Hamlet speaks more lines than any other character in Shakespeare—over 1,500. His soliloquies give us direct access to his thoughts, unfiltered by other characters. They are the closest we come to knowing who Hamlet really is. In this lesson, we will listen to his voice across the play, tracing how it changes, what it reveals, and why it continues to speak to us across centuries.

**Think About It:** *Why do soliloquies matter? What can a character say when alone that they cannot say in company?*

---

## 2. Core Concept 1: What Makes a Speech Important

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### 2.1 Criteria for Selection

The speeches we will examine share certain qualities:

| Quality | Why It Matters |

|-----|-----|

| **Reveal character** | Show us Hamlet's inner life |

| **Advance theme** | Develop the play's central ideas |

| **Dramatic power** | Create memorable theatrical moments |

| **Language** | Exemplify Shakespeare's poetic genius |

| **Cultural impact** | Have become famous beyond the play |

## 2.2 The Speeches

| Speech | Act/Scene | Context |

|-----|-----|-----|

| "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" | I.ii | After Claudius's court, alone |

| "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" | II.ii | After the player's speech |

| "To be, or not to be" | III.i | Before the nunnery scene |

| "Speak the speech, I pray you" | III.ii | Instructing the players |

| "Now might I do it pat" | III.iii | Watching Claudius at prayer |

| "How all occasions do inform against me" | IV.iv | Watching Fortinbras's army |

| "Alas, poor Yorick" | V.i | In the graveyard |

| "The readiness is all" | V.ii | Before the duel |

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## 3. Speech 1: "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" (I.ii.129-159)

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### 3.1 Context

Hamlet's first soliloquy comes immediately after Claudius's court speech. His mother has urged him to stop grieving; Claudius has denied him permission to return to Wittenberg. Alone, he explodes.

### 3.2 Key Passages

**"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,**

**Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!**

**Or that the Everlasting had not fixed**

**His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (129-132)**

Hamlet wishes for death—but suicide is forbidden.

**"How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable**

***Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (133-134)***

The accumulation of adjectives conveys total despair.

***"Frailty, thy name is woman!" (146)***

His mother's betrayal becomes a condemnation of all women.

***"But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue." (159)***

He cannot speak his truth in public. The soliloquy ends with enforced silence.

### 3.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Mortality** | Wish for death, contemplation of suicide |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Public silence vs. private truth |

| **Gender** | "Frailty, thy name is woman" |

| **Grief** | Overwhelming, world-rejecting |

### 3.4 Significance

This speech establishes Hamlet's emotional state at the play's opening: grieving, disgusted, trapped. It also introduces the motif of suicide that will recur throughout.

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## 4. Speech 2: "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (II.ii.521-580)

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### 4.1 Context

After watching the First Player weep for Hecuba, Hamlet compares himself unfavorably to an actor who feels more for a fictional character than Hamlet feels for his real father.

### 4.2 Key Passages

***"O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (521)***

Self-loathing from the opening line.

***"What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,***

***That he should weep for her?" (530-531)***

The actor feels for a fiction; Hamlet feels nothing for reality.

***"Yet I,***

***A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak***

***Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause.*** (536-538)

He catalogues his failures.

***"Bloody, bawdy villain!***

***Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!*** (550-551)

His rage turns outward—briefly.

***"The play's the thing***

***Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*** (579-580)

The plan emerges from self-loathing.

### 4.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Action vs. Inaction** | Self-criticism for delay |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Actor feels what Hamlet should |

| **Revenge** | The plan takes shape |

### 4.4 Significance

This speech marks the transition from paralysis to planning. Hamlet moves from self-hatred to action—though the action is still indirect.

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## 5. Speech 3: "To be, or not to be" (III.i.55-87)

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### 5.1 Context

Hamlet enters alone, before his confrontation with Ophelia. This is the most famous speech in English literature.

### 5.2 Key Passages

***"To be, or not to be—that is the question:***

***Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer***

***The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,***

***Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,***

***And by opposing end them.*** (55-59)

The choice between endurance and action—framed philosophically, not personally.

**"To die, to sleep—**

**To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,**

**For in that sleep of death what dreams may come..." (63-65)**

Death might be sleep—but what if the dreams are nightmares?

**"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,**

**And thus the native hue of resolution**

**Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." (82-84)**

Thought paralyzes action.

### 5.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Mortality** | Contemplation of death and what follows |

| **Action vs. Inaction** | Thought as paralysis |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | What lies beyond? We cannot know |

### 5.4 Significance

This is Hamlet the philosopher. The speech is universal, not personal—it could be spoken by anyone. It reveals Hamlet's intellectual nature and his deep uncertainty about what lies beyond death.

---

## 6. Speech 4: "Speak the speech, I pray you" (III.ii.1-45)

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### 6.1 Context

Hamlet instructs the players on how to act. It is the only time we see him as a director.

### 6.2 Key Passages

**"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines." (1-4)**

Naturalism in acting—don't overdo it.

**"Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently." (4-5)**

Restraint, control.

**"To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." (20-23)**

The purpose of theater: to reflect reality.

## 6.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Theater mirrors life |

| **Performance** | Hamlet, the great performer, advises performers |

## 6.4 Significance

This speech reveals Hamlet's sophistication about art and performance—and the irony that he himself is performing madness.

---

## 7. Speech 5: "Now might I do it pat" (III.iii.73-96)

---

### 7.1 Context

Hamlet finds Claudius at prayer. It is the perfect moment to kill him—but he stops.

### 7.2 Key Passages

***"Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.***

***And now I'll do it."*** (73-74)

He draws his sword—then stops.

***"And so he goes to heaven,***

***And so am I revenged? That would be scanned:***

***A villain kills my father, and for that,***

***I, his sole son, do this same villain send***

***To heaven."*** (74-78)

His reasoning: killing Claudius at prayer would send him to heaven. That's not revenge—it's a reward.

***"When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,***

***Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,***

***... Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,***

***And that his soul may be as damned and black***

***As hell, whereto it goes."*** (89-94)

He wants to damn Claudius, not save him.

### 7.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Revenge** | What constitutes true revenge? |

| **Action vs. Inaction** | Delay rationalized |

| **Religion** | Concerns about damnation and salvation |

### 7.4 Significance

This speech is the turning point. Hamlet spares Claudius—and we never learn if this was wisdom or fatal error.

---

## 8. Speech 6: "How all occasions do inform against me" (IV.iv.31-66)

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### 8.1 Context

On his way to England, Hamlet sees Fortinbras's army marching to Poland for worthless land.

### 8.2 Key Passages

***"How all occasions do inform against me***

***And spur my dull revenge!"*** (31-32)

Everything he sees accuses him of delay.

***"What is a man,***

***If his chief good and market of his time***

***Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more."*** (32-34)

Humans are defined by action.

***"Examples gross as earth exhort me:***

***Witness this army of such mass and charge,***

***Led by a delicate and tender prince,***

***... Exposing what is mortal and unsure***

***To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,***

***Even for an eggshell.*** " (45-52)

Fortinbras risks everything for nothing. Hamlet, with real cause, does nothing.

***"O, from this time forth,***

***My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!***" (65-66)

The final vow.

### 8.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Action vs. Inaction** | Shame at delay |

| **Revenge** | Comparison with Fortinbras |

| **Mortality** | "what is mortal and unsure" |

### 8.4 Significance

This is Hamlet's last soliloquy. He seems resolved—but he is about to be sent to England, where action is impossible.

---

## 9. Speech 7: "Alas, poor Yorick" (V.i.168-197)

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### 9.1 Context

In the graveyard, the gravedigger throws up a skull—Yorick's, the former court jester.

### 9.2 Key Passages

***"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy."*** (168-169)

Personal memory makes death concrete.

***"He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it."*** (169-171)

Physical revulsion at the reality of death.

***"Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?"*** (171-173)

All gone. Death silences everything.

***"Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that."*** (173-175)

Beauty cannot escape death.

**"Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust... Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, Might stop a hole to keep the wind away." (192-197)**

The greatest become dust.

### 9.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Mortality** | Death is universal, inevitable |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | The skull beneath the skin |

### 9.4 Significance

This speech marks Hamlet's acceptance of death. He moves from fear to philosophical acceptance—preparing for "the readiness is all."

---

## 10. Speech 8: "The readiness is all" (V.ii.190-194)

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### 10.1 Context

Before the duel, Hamlet tells Horatio of his misgiving—then dismisses it.

### 10.2 Key Passages

**"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow." (190-191)**

God notes even a sparrow's death. Human life is in God's hands.

**"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." (191-193)**

Death comes when it comes. We cannot control the timing.

**"The readiness is all." (193)**

The only thing that matters is being prepared.

**"Let be." (194)**

Complete acceptance.

### 10.3 Themes

| Theme | How It Appears |

|-----|-----|

| **Mortality** | Acceptance of death |

| **Action vs. Inaction** | Action is less important than readiness |

| **Religion** | Providence, divine plan |

### 10.4 Significance

This is Hamlet's final philosophical statement. He has moved from fear to acceptance. He is ready.

---

## 11. Practical Application: Analyzing the Speeches

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### Activity: Speech Comparison (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Tracing Themes

Complete this chart showing how a theme develops across speeches:

| Theme | First Speech | Middle Speech | Final Speech |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Mortality** | "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" | "To be, or not to be" | "The readiness is all" |

| **Action** | "I must hold my tongue" | "O what a rogue" | "My thoughts be bloody" |

| **Appearance** | "I know not 'seems'" | "The play's the thing" | "Let her paint an inch thick" |

#### Part B: Key Quotations

Match each quotation to its speech:

| Quotation | Speech |

|-----|-----|

| "Frailty, thy name is woman!" | First soliloquy |

| "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." | Second soliloquy |

| "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all." | "To be, or not to be" |

| "Now might I do it pat." | Prayer scene |

| "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!" | Fourth soliloquy |

| "Alas, poor Yorick!" | Graveyard |

| "The readiness is all." | Before the duel |

#### Part C: Writing

Choose one of these prompts and write a paragraph:

1. Trace Hamlet's attitude toward death from the first soliloquy to "The readiness is all." How does he change?
2. Which speech do you find most powerful? Why?
3. How do the speeches reveal Hamlet's character in ways that his interactions with others do not?

#### Part D: Reflection

If you could speak one of these speeches aloud, which would you choose? What would you want to convey in your performance?

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## 12. Summary: Key Takeaways

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| Speech | Key Idea |

|-----|-----|

| **First Soliloquy** | Grief, despair, wish for death |

| **Second Soliloquy** | Self-loathing, plan for the play |

| **"To be, or not to be"** | Philosophical contemplation of death |

| **"Speak the speech"** | Art reflects life |

| **Prayer scene** | Delay rationalized—wants to damn Claudius |

| **Fourth Soliloquy** | Shame, resolution to act |

| **Yorick** | Physical reality of death |

| **"The readiness is all"** | Acceptance of fate |

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt."
- "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."
- "To be, or not to be—that is the question."
- "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."
- "Now might I do it pat."
- "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!"
- "Alas, poor Yorick!"
- "The readiness is all."

---

## 13. Looking Ahead

We have now examined the major speeches of *Hamlet*. In our final lesson, we will synthesize everything—plot, characters, and themes—into a comprehensive summary of the play as a whole.

**To prepare:** Think about the play as a complete work. What will you remember most? What questions remain?

---

## References

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
- Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. Riverhead Books, 2003.
- Mack, Maynard. "The World of Hamlet." *The Yale Review*, 1952.
- Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan, 1904.

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### Lesson 5 Complete

*Next Lesson: Course Summary: The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

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### Lesson 4: Important Speeches: A Closer Look

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 6: Course Summary: The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Underlying Themes and Important Speeches

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## Lesson Overview

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We have journeyed through Elsinore together—watched ghosts walk, princes ponder, and poison flow. We have examined characters, traced themes, and listened to some of the most famous speeches in the English language. Now it is time to bring everything together. This final lesson synthesizes the plot, characters, and themes of *Hamlet* into a coherent whole, reminding us of where we have been and what it all means. By the end, you will have a comprehensive understanding of the play—not just as a story, but as a work of art that continues to speak to the human condition.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the complete plot of *Hamlet* in a coherent narrative
  - Connect the major characters to the play's central conflicts
  - Synthesize the key themes and their development throughout the play
  - Evaluate the play's enduring significance and relevance
  - Prepare for exams and essays with a comprehensive overview
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Story We Have Lived

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For five acts, we have inhabited the world of Elsinore—a world of ghosts and spies, of love and betrayal, of philosophy and violence. We have watched a prince struggle with the weight of revenge, a king smile while hiding murder, a girl go mad with grief, and a court destroy itself from within. Now, as we leave Elsinore, we carry with us the questions the play raises but does not answer: What is justice? Can we ever know the truth? What makes life worth living? And what happens when the rest is silence?

**Think About It:** *What will you remember most about Hamlet? What questions will stay with you?*

---

## 2. Core Concept 1: The Plot in Brief

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### 2.1 Act I: The Ghost

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Guards see ghost of King Hamlet | Establishes supernatural atmosphere |

| Claudius's court speech | Introduces the new king and his marriage |

| Hamlet's first soliloquy | Reveals his grief and disgust |

| Ghost reveals murder | Commands Hamlet to revenge |

| Hamlet decides to feign madness | The "antic disposition" begins |

### 2.2 Act II: The Antic Disposition

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Polonius spies on Laertes | Establishes theme of surveillance |

| Ophelia reports Hamlet's strange behavior | First view of his "madness" |

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive	Sent by Claudius to spy
Players arrive	Hamlet plans to use them
"O what a rogue" soliloquy	Self-loathing and plan for the play

### 2.3 Act III: The Turning Point

Event	Significance
"To be, or not to be"	Philosophical meditation on death
Nunnery scene	Hamlet rejects Ophelia
The Mousetrap play	Claudius reacts; guilt confirmed
Prayer scene	Hamlet spares Claudius
Closet scene	Hamlet kills Polonius; ghost appears

### 2.4 Act IV: The Aftermath

Event	Significance
Claudius sends Hamlet to England	With orders for his death
Ophelia's madness	Grief destroys her
Laertes returns	Demands revenge for Polonius
Ophelia's death	Reported by Gertrude
Claudius and Laertes plot	Poisoned rapier and cup

### 2.5 Act V: The Catastrophe

Event	Significance
Gravedigger scene	Hamlet confronts mortality
Ophelia's funeral	Hamlet and Laertes fight
The duel	Poisoned weapons
Deaths of Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, Hamlet	Catastrophic ending
Fortinbras arrives	Claims the throne

---

## 3. Core Concept 2: The Characters

---

### 3.1 The Royal Family

Character	Role	Key Traits	Fate
**King Hamlet**	Ghost, murdered father	Warrior, demanding	Dead before play; walks as ghost
**Claudius**	Usurper king	Intelligent, guilty, manipulative	Poisoned and stabbed
**Gertrude**	Queen, mother	Ambiguous, loving, perhaps guilty	Poisoned
**Hamlet**	Prince, son	Intellectual, grieving, delayed	Poisoned

### 3.2 The Court of Elsinore

| Character | Role | Key Traits | Fate |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Polonius** | Lord Chamberlain | Foolish, meddling, verbose | Stabbed |

| **Ophelia** | Polonius's daughter | Innocent, obedient, broken | Drowned |

| **Laertes** | Polonius's son | Impulsive, vengeful | Poisoned |

| **Horatio** | Hamlet's friend | Loyal, steady, wise | Survives |

| **Rosencrantz** | Former friend | Willing spy | Executed |

| **Guildenstern** | Former friend | Willing spy | Executed |

### 3.3 The External Forces

| Character | Role | Key Traits | Fate |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Fortinbras** | Norwegian prince | Strategic, patient | Becomes king |

| **The Players** | Actors | Artistic, expressive | Survive |

---

## 4. Core Concept 3: The Major Themes

---

### 4.1 Revenge

| Revenger | Target | Approach | Outcome |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | Claudius | Delay, thought, moral scruple | Dies, kills Claudius |

| **Laertes** | Hamlet | Immediate action, dishonor | Dies by own poison |

| **Fortinbras** | Denmark (land) | Strategic patience | Lives, becomes king |

**Key insight:** Revenge destroys everyone it touches. The only "successful" revenger is Fortinbras, who seeks land, not blood.

### 4.2 Appearance vs. Reality

| Character | Appearance | Reality |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Claudius** | Loving king | Murderer |

| **Hamlet** | Mad | Feigning |

| **Polonius** | Wise | Foolish |

| **Rosencrantz/Guildenstern** | Friends | Spies |

| **Ghost** | Father's spirit | Possibly demon |

**Key insight:** In Elsinore, nothing can be trusted. The only way to truth is indirect—through plays, madness, or death.

### 4.3 Madness

| Type | Character | Cause | Expression |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Feigned** | Hamlet | Strategic choice | Wordplay, erratic behavior |

| **Real** | Ophelia | Grief, loss | Songs, flowers, fragmentation |

**Key insight:** Madness allows truth-telling that sanity forbids. Both Hamlets and Ophelia speak truths in madness that they cannot speak when "sane."

#### 4.4 Mortality

| Stage | Expression |

|-----|-----|

| **Act I** | Wish for death: "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" |

| **Act III** | Contemplation: "To be, or not to be" |

| **Act V** | Acceptance: "The readiness is all" |

**Key insight:** Hamlet moves from fear of death to philosophical contemplation to final acceptance. The graveyard scene is the turning point.

#### 4.5 Action vs. Inaction

| Character | Approach | Result |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | Thinks before acting | Delay, then death |

| **Laertes** | Acts without thinking | Death |

| **Fortinbras** | Thinks strategically, acts | Success |

**Key insight:** The play does not resolve whether thought or action is better. It presents the problem and leaves it open.

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## 5. Core Concept 4: The Key Speeches

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### 5.1 Hamlet's Soliloquies

| Speech | Location | Key Idea |

|-----|-----|-----|

| "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" | I.ii | Grief, wish for death |

| "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" | II.ii | Self-loathing, plan for play |

| "To be, or not to be" | III.i | Philosophical contemplation of death |

| "Now might I do it pat" | III.iii | Delay rationalized |

| "How all occasions do inform against me" | IV.iv | Shame, resolution |

| "The readiness is all" | V.ii | Acceptance |

### 5.2 Other Key Speeches

| Speech | Speaker | Location | Key Idea |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| "O, my offense is rank" | Claudius | III.iii | Guilt, inability to repent |

| "Alas, poor Yorick" | Hamlet | V.i | Physical reality of death |

| "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance" | Ophelia | IV.v | Madness as truth-telling |

| "Good night, sweet prince" | Horatio | V.ii | Farewell, tribute |

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## 6. Core Concept 5: The Structure of Tragedy

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### 6.1 The Tragic Arc

| Stage | Act | Events |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Exposition** | I | Ghost reveals murder; Hamlet tasked with revenge |

| **Rising Action** | II-III | Play confirms guilt; Hamlet delays; Polonius killed |

| **Climax** | III | Prayer scene—Hamlet spares Claudius |

| **Falling Action** | IV | Ophelia's madness and death; Hamlet returns |

| **Catastrophe** | V | Duel; deaths; Fortinbras arrives |

### 6.2 The Tragic Hero

| Element | How Hamlet Fulfills It |

|-----|-----|

| **Noble birth** | Prince of Denmark |

| **Tragic flaw** | Delay? Overthinking? Moral scruple? |

| **Reversal of fortune** | From prince to fugitive to dying |

| **Recognition** | "The readiness is all"—acceptance |

| **Catharsis** | Audience feels pity and fear |

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## 7. Core Concept 6: The Unanswered Questions

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### 7.1 Did Gertrude know?

The play never answers. She may be guilty, innocent, or willfully blind.

### 7.2 Was the ghost real?

It could be spirit, demon, or hallucination. Shakespeare leaves it ambiguous.

### 7.3 Was Hamlet mad?

His madness is feigned—but the performance may have affected him.

### 7.4 Why did Hamlet delay?

Multiple explanations exist; the play supports all and none.

### 7.5 What happens after "the rest is silence"?

The play offers no answer. That is the point.

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## 8. Core Concept 7: The Play's Enduring Significance

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### 8.1 Why *Hamlet* Matters

| Reason | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Psychological depth** | Hamlet feels real—contradictory, complex |

| **Philosophical questions** | Life, death, meaning, action |

| **Language** | Some of the most beautiful English ever written |

| **Themes** | Universal: revenge, grief, truth, mortality |

| **Characters** | Memorable, complex, human |

### 8.2 *Hamlet* Today

The play continues to be performed, adapted, and studied because it speaks to us. We still wonder about truth, still struggle with difficult choices, still grieve, still die. Hamlet's questions are our questions.

---

## 9. Practical Application: Synthesis

---

### Activity: Bringing It Together (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Complete the Chart

Fill in the key elements for each act:

| Act | Key Events | Character Development | Themes |

|----|-----|-----|-----|

| I | | | |

| II | | | |

| III | | | |

| IV | | | |

| V | | | |

#### Part B: Character Map

Draw a quick character web showing relationships and conflicts:

- Who is connected to whom?
- Who conflicts with whom?
- Who loves whom?
- Who betrays whom?

#### Part C: Theme Connections

Choose one theme and trace it through the play:

| Theme | Act I | Act II | Act III | Act IV | Act V |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Revenge** | | | | |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | | | | |

| **Madness** | | | | |

| **Mortality** | | | | |

| **Action vs. Inaction** | | | | |

#### Part D: Writing

Choose one of these prompts and write a paragraph:

1. What is the most important theme in *Hamlet*? Why?
  2. Which character do you find most interesting, and why?
  3. Does the ending feel satisfying? Why or why not?
  4. What question will you carry with you after studying the play?
- 

## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

---

| Element | Summary |

|-----|-----|

| **Plot** | Ghost reveals murder; Hamlet delays; play confirms guilt; Polonius killed; Ophelia dies; duel; everyone dies |

| **Characters** | Complex, ambiguous, human |

| **Themes** | Revenge, appearance vs. reality, madness, mortality, action vs. inaction |

| **Speeches** | Reveal inner life, advance themes |

| **Questions** | Many unanswered—that's the point |

| **Significance** | Enduring because it speaks to universal human experience |

#### Key Quotations to Remember:

- "To be, or not to be—that is the question."
  - "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."
  - "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."
  - "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio."
  - "The readiness is all."
  - "The rest is silence."
  - "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."
- 

## 11. Final Reflection

---

You have studied *Hamlet*—one of the greatest works of literature ever created. You have traced its plot, analyzed its characters, explored its themes, and listened to its speeches. What you take from it now is yours.

Perhaps you will remember Hamlet's struggle with doubt. Perhaps Ophelia's tragic innocence. Perhaps the graveyard, where death levels all. Perhaps the final silence.

Whatever you carry with you, know that you are part of a long tradition. For four centuries, readers and audiences have wrestled with this play. Its questions are our questions. Its mysteries remain mysteries.

And that is why we keep returning to Elsinore.

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## References

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- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (Any authoritative edition, such as the Arden Shakespeare or Folger Shakespeare Library)
  - Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. Riverhead Books, 2003.
  - Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan, 1904.
  - Mack, Maynard. "The World of Hamlet." *The Yale Review*, 1952.
  - Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
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**Lesson 6 Complete**

**Course Complete**

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## Lesson 5: Course Summary: The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

*Duration: 45 minutes*

# Lesson 6: Course Summary: The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

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**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Module:** Underlying Themes and Important Speeches

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## Lesson Overview

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We have journeyed through Elsinore together—watched ghosts walk, princes ponder, and poison flow. We have examined characters, traced themes, and listened to some of the most famous speeches in the English language. Now it is time to bring everything together. This final lesson synthesizes the plot, characters, and themes of *Hamlet* into a coherent whole, reminding us of where we have been and what it all means. By the end, you will have a comprehensive understanding of the play—not just as a story, but as a work of art that continues to speak to the human condition.

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## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this 45-minute lesson, you will be able to:

- Summarize the complete plot of *Hamlet* in a coherent narrative
  - Connect the major characters to the play's central conflicts
  - Synthesize the key themes and their development throughout the play
  - Evaluate the play's enduring significance and relevance
  - Prepare for exams and essays with a comprehensive overview
- 

## 1. Introduction: The Story We Have Lived

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For five acts, we have inhabited the world of Elsinore—a world of ghosts and spies, of love and betrayal, of philosophy and violence. We have watched a prince struggle with the weight of revenge, a king smile while hiding murder, a girl go mad with grief, and a court destroy itself from within. Now, as we leave Elsinore, we carry with us the questions the play raises but does not answer: What is justice? Can we ever know the truth? What makes life worth living? And what happens when the rest is silence?

**Think About It:** *What will you remember most about Hamlet? What questions will stay with you?*

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## 2. Core Concept 1: The Plot in Brief

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### 2.1 Act I: The Ghost

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Guards see ghost of King Hamlet | Establishes supernatural atmosphere |

| Claudius's court speech | Introduces the new king and his marriage |

| Hamlet's first soliloquy | Reveals his grief and disgust |

| Ghost reveals murder | Commands Hamlet to revenge |

| Hamlet decides to feign madness | The "antic disposition" begins |

### 2.2 Act II: The Antic Disposition

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Polonius spies on Laertes | Establishes theme of surveillance |

| Ophelia reports Hamlet's strange behavior | First view of his "madness" |

| Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive | Sent by Claudius to spy |

| Players arrive | Hamlet plans to use them |

| "O what a rogue" soliloquy | Self-loathing and plan for the play |

### 2.3 Act III: The Turning Point

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| "To be, or not to be" | Philosophical meditation on death |

| Nunnery scene | Hamlet rejects Ophelia |

| The Mousetrap play | Claudius reacts; guilt confirmed |

| Prayer scene | Hamlet spares Claudius |

| Closet scene | Hamlet kills Polonius; ghost appears |

### 2.4 Act IV: The Aftermath

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Claudius sends Hamlet to England | With orders for his death |

| Ophelia's madness | Grief destroys her |

| Laertes returns | Demands revenge for Polonius |

| Ophelia's death | Reported by Gertrude |

| Claudius and Laertes plot | Poisoned rapier and cup |

### 2.5 Act V: The Catastrophe

| Event | Significance |

|-----|-----|

| Gravedigger scene | Hamlet confronts mortality |

| Ophelia's funeral | Hamlet and Laertes fight |

| The duel | Poisoned weapons |

| Deaths of Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, Hamlet | Catastrophic ending |

| Fortinbras arrives | Claims the throne |

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## 3. Core Concept 2: The Characters

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### 3.1 The Royal Family

| Character | Role | Key Traits | Fate |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **King Hamlet** | Ghost, murdered father | Warrior, demanding | Dead before play; walks as ghost |

| **Claudius** | Usurper king | Intelligent, guilty, manipulative | Poisoned and stabbed |

| **Gertrude** | Queen, mother | Ambiguous, loving, perhaps guilty | Poisoned |

| **Hamlet** | Prince, son | Intellectual, grieving, delayed | Poisoned |

### 3.2 The Court of Elsinore

| Character | Role | Key Traits | Fate |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Polonius** | Lord Chamberlain | Foolish, meddling, verbose | Stabbed |

| **Ophelia** | Polonius's daughter | Innocent, obedient, broken | Drowned |

| **Laertes** | Polonius's son | Impulsive, vengeful | Poisoned |

| **Horatio** | Hamlet's friend | Loyal, steady, wise | Survives |

| **Rosencrantz** | Former friend | Willing spy | Executed |

| **Guildenstern** | Former friend | Willing spy | Executed |

### 3.3 The External Forces

| Character | Role | Key Traits | Fate |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Fortinbras** | Norwegian prince | Strategic, patient | Becomes king |

| **The Players** | Actors | Artistic, expressive | Survive |

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## 4. Core Concept 3: The Major Themes

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### 4.1 Revenge

| Revenger | Target | Approach | Outcome |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | Claudius | Delay, thought, moral scruple | Dies, kills Claudius |

| **Laertes** | Hamlet | Immediate action, dishonor | Dies by own poison |

| **Fortinbras** | Denmark (land) | Strategic patience | Lives, becomes king |

**Key insight:** Revenge destroys everyone it touches. The only "successful" revenger is Fortinbras, who seeks land, not blood.

#### 4.2 Appearance vs. Reality

| Character | Appearance | Reality |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Claudius** | Loving king | Murderer |

| **Hamlet** | Mad | Feigning |

| **Polonius** | Wise | Foolish |

| **Rosencrantz/Guildenstern** | Friends | Spies |

| **Ghost** | Father's spirit | Possibly demon |

**Key insight:** In Elsinore, nothing can be trusted. The only way to truth is indirect—through plays, madness, or death.

#### 4.3 Madness

| Type | Character | Cause | Expression |

|----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Feigned** | Hamlet | Strategic choice | Wordplay, erratic behavior |

| **Real** | Ophelia | Grief, loss | Songs, flowers, fragmentation |

**Key insight:** Madness allows truth-telling that sanity forbids. Both Hamlet and Ophelia speak truths in madness that they cannot speak when "sane."

#### 4.4 Mortality

| Stage | Expression |

|-----|-----|

| **Act I** | Wish for death: "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" |

| **Act III** | Contemplation: "To be, or not to be" |

| **Act V** | Acceptance: "The readiness is all" |

**Key insight:** Hamlet moves from fear of death to philosophical contemplation to final acceptance. The graveyard scene is the turning point.

#### 4.5 Action vs. Inaction

| Character | Approach | Result |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Hamlet** | Thinks before acting | Delay, then death |

| **Laertes** | Acts without thinking | Death |

| **Fortinbras** | Thinks strategically, acts | Success |

**Key insight:** The play does not resolve whether thought or action is better. It presents the problem and leaves it open.

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## 5. Core Concept 4: The Key Speeches

---

### 5.1 Hamlet's Soliloquies

| Speech | Location | Key Idea |

|-----|-----|-----|

| "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" | I.ii | Grief, wish for death |

| "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" | II.ii | Self-loathing, plan for play |

| "To be, or not to be" | III.i | Philosophical contemplation of death |

| "Now might I do it pat" | III.iii | Delay rationalized |

| "How all occasions do inform against me" | IV.iv | Shame, resolution |

| "The readiness is all" | V.ii | Acceptance |

### 5.2 Other Key Speeches

| Speech | Speaker | Location | Key Idea |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| "O, my offense is rank" | Claudius | III.iii | Guilt, inability to repent |

| "Alas, poor Yorick" | Hamlet | V.i | Physical reality of death |

| "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance" | Ophelia | IV.v | Madness as truth-telling |

| "Good night, sweet prince" | Horatio | V.ii | Farewell, tribute |

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## 6. Core Concept 5: The Structure of Tragedy

---

### 6.1 The Tragic Arc

| Stage | Act | Events |

|-----|-----|-----|

| **Exposition** | I | Ghost reveals murder; Hamlet tasked with revenge |

| **Rising Action** | II-III | Play confirms guilt; Hamlet delays; Polonius killed |

| **Climax** | III | Prayer scene—Hamlet spares Claudius |

| **Falling Action** | IV | Ophelia's madness and death; Hamlet returns |

| **Catastrophe** | V | Duel; deaths; Fortinbras arrives |

### 6.2 The Tragic Hero

| Element | How Hamlet Fulfills It |

|-----|-----|

| **Noble birth** | Prince of Denmark |

| **Tragic flaw** | Delay? Overthinking? Moral scruple? |

| **Reversal of fortune** | From prince to fugitive to dying |

| **Recognition** | "The readiness is all"—acceptance |

| **Catharsis** | Audience feels pity and fear |

---

## 7. Core Concept 6: The Unanswered Questions

---

### 7.1 Did Gertrude know?

The play never answers. She may be guilty, innocent, or willfully blind.

### 7.2 Was the ghost real?

It could be spirit, demon, or hallucination. Shakespeare leaves it ambiguous.

### 7.3 Was Hamlet mad?

His madness is feigned—but the performance may have affected him.

### 7.4 Why did Hamlet delay?

Multiple explanations exist; the play supports all and none.

### 7.5 What happens after "the rest is silence"?

The play offers no answer. That is the point.

---

## 8. Core Concept 7: The Play's Enduring Significance

---

### 8.1 Why *Hamlet* Matters

| Reason | Explanation |

|-----|-----|

| **Psychological depth** | Hamlet feels real—contradictory, complex |

| **Philosophical questions** | Life, death, meaning, action |

| **Language** | Some of the most beautiful English ever written |

| **Themes** | Universal: revenge, grief, truth, mortality |

| **Characters** | Memorable, complex, human |

### 8.2 *Hamlet* Today

The play continues to be performed, adapted, and studied because it speaks to us. We still wonder about truth, still struggle with difficult choices, still grieve, still die. Hamlet's questions are our questions.

---

## 9. Practical Application: Synthesis

---

### Activity: Bringing It Together (15 minutes)

#### Part A: Complete the Chart

Fill in the key elements for each act:

| Act | Key Events | Character Development | Themes |

|----|-----|-----|-----|

| I | Ghost appears; Hamlet learns truth | Grief, shock, vow | Mortality, revenge |

| II | Spying; players arrive; plan made | Performance, strategy | Appearance vs. reality |

| **III** | Play confirms guilt; prayer scene; Polonius killed | Crisis, missed opportunity | Action vs. inaction |

| **IV** | Ophelia's madness; Laertes returns; Ophelia dies | Consequences, grief | Madness, mortality |

| **V** | Graveyard; duel; deaths; Fortinbras arrives | Acceptance, catastrophe | All themes |

### Part B: Character Map

Draw a quick mental character web showing relationships and conflicts:

- **Hamlet** connected to: Ghost (command), Claudius (enemy), Gertrude (mother), Ophelia (love), Horatio (friend), Laertes (foil)
- **Claudius** connected to: Gertrude (wife), Hamlet (nephew/threat), Polonius (advisor), Laertes (tool)
- **Polonius** connected to: Ophelia (daughter), Laertes (son), Claudius (master), Hamlet (target)

### Part C: Theme Connections

Choose one theme and trace it through the play:

| Theme | Act I | Act II | Act III | Act IV | Act V |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| **Revenge** | Command given | Plan devised | Play confirms guilt; delay | Laertes seeks revenge | All revengers die |

| **Appearance vs. Reality** | Ghost appears; Hamlet vows to seem | Madness performed; spies everywhere | Play reveals truth; Claudius prays falsely | Ophelia's madness speaks truth | Skulls reveal reality of death |

| **Madness** | Hamlet decides to feign | Performance begins | Blur between real and feigned | Ophelia's real madness | Ophelia dead |

| **Mortality** | "O that this flesh would melt" | — | "To be, or not to be" | Ophelia's death | Graveyard; all die |

| **Action vs. Inaction** | Vows action | Plans, doesn't act | Spares Claudius; kills Polonius | "My thoughts be bloody" | Finally acts—too late |

### Part D: Writing

Choose one of these prompts and write a paragraph:

1. What is the most important theme in *Hamlet*? Why?
2. Which character do you find most interesting, and why?
3. Does the ending feel satisfying? Why or why not?
4. What question will you carry with you after studying the play?

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## 10. Summary: Key Takeaways

---

| Element | Summary |

|-----|-----|

| **Plot** | Ghost reveals murder; Hamlet delays; play confirms guilt; Polonius killed; Ophelia dies; duel; everyone dies |

| **Characters** | Complex, ambiguous, human |

| **Themes** | Revenge, appearance vs. reality, madness, mortality, action vs. inaction |

| **Speeches** | Reveal inner life, advance themes |

| **Questions** | Many unanswered—that's the point |

| **Significance** | Enduring because it speaks to universal human experience |

**Key Quotations to Remember:**

- "To be, or not to be—that is the question."
- "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."
- "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."
- "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio."
- "The readiness is all."
- "The rest is silence."
- "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

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## 11. Final Reflection

---

You have studied *Hamlet*—one of the greatest works of literature ever created. You have traced its plot, analyzed its characters, explored its themes, and listened to its speeches. What you take from it now is yours.

Perhaps you will remember Hamlet's struggle with doubt. Perhaps Ophelia's tragic innocence. Perhaps the graveyard, where death levels all. Perhaps the final silence.

Whatever you carry with you, know that you are part of a long tradition. For four centuries, readers and audiences have wrestled with this play. Its questions are our questions. Its mysteries remain mysteries.

And that is why we keep returning to Elsinore.

**"The rest is silence."**

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## References

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- Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan, 1904.
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- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

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**Lesson 6 Complete**

**Course Complete**

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 **Module 8 Summary Sheet**

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## Module 8: Underlying Themes and Important Speeches — Summary Sheet

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### Key Concepts

- **Revenge:** The play presents three revengers—Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras—each with different approaches and outcomes. Hamlet's delay and moral scruple, Laertes's impulsive action, and Fortinbras's strategic patience suggest revenge is complex and often self-destructive.
- **Appearance vs. Reality:** From the first line ("Who's there?") to the final scene, characters are not what they seem. Claudius smiles while hiding murder; Hamlet feigns madness; Polonius appears wise but is foolish; the ghost may be spirit or demon.
- **Madness:** Two kinds of madness appear—Hamlet's feigned "antic disposition" and Ophelia's genuine breakdown. Both allow truth-telling that sanity forbids. The line between performance and reality blurs.

- **Mortality:** The play is saturated with death. Hamlet's journey moves from wishing for death ("O that this too, too solid flesh would melt") to contemplating it philosophically ("To be, or not to be") to accepting it ("The readiness is all").
- **Action vs. Inaction:** Hamlet's famous delay is the play's central puzzle. His soliloquies trace his struggle: self-loathing ("O what a rogue"), philosophical paralysis ("Thus conscience does make cowards"), and eventual resolution ("My thoughts be bloody").
- **The Soliloquies:** Hamlet's major speeches chart his emotional and philosophical journey, revealing his inner life and advancing the play's themes.
- **Claudius's Prayer:** His only soliloquy reveals a guilty conscience and his inability to repent, making him a complex villain.
- **Ophelia's Mad Speech:** Her fragmented songs and flower distribution express grief and accusation, giving voice to what she could not say when sane.
- **The Graveyard Scene:** Hamlet's meditation on Yorick's skull and the dust of Alexander the Great confronts him with death's physical reality and ultimate equality.
- **The Final Scene:** The catastrophe brings all themes together—revenge (Claudius killed by his own plots), appearance (masks fall), mortality (four more deaths), and action (Hamlet finally acts, too late).

### Core Takeaways

This module synthesizes the major themes and speeches of *Hamlet*. Revenge is shown as a destructive force that consumes everyone it touches. Appearance versus reality permeates the play, making truth elusive and trust impossible. Madness, both real and feigned, becomes a vehicle for truth-telling. Mortality is confronted directly in the graveyard, leading Hamlet to his final acceptance: "The readiness is all." The key speeches—from Hamlet's soliloquies to Claudius's prayer to Ophelia's mad songs—reveal character and develop these themes. Together, they create a tragedy that continues to speak to the human condition.

### Terms to Know

- **Catharsis** — The emotional release audiences experience at the end of a tragedy, feeling pity and fear.
- **Poetic Justice** — The idea that virtue is rewarded and vice punished; in *Hamlet*, Claudius dies by his own plots, but the innocent also perish.
- **Memento Mori** — A reminder of death; the graveyard scene and Yorick's skull serve this function.
- **Providence** — Divine guidance; Hamlet's belief that "there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" reflects his acceptance of fate.
- **Conscience** — In the play, this word means both moral awareness and the faculty of thought, both of which can paralyze action.
- **The Undiscovered Country** — Hamlet's metaphor for death, the place "from whose bourn no traveler returns."
- **Hyperion to a Satyr** — Hamlet's contrast between his god-like father and his bestial uncle, illustrating the theme of appearance versus reality.
- **Unweeded Garden** — Hamlet's metaphor for the world, overrun by "things rank and gross in nature," symbolizing corruption.
- **The Mousetrap** — The play-within-a-play, an example of art used to reveal truth and "catch the conscience of the king."

### Review Questions

1. Compare the three revengers in the play—Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. How do their approaches differ, and what does each outcome suggest about revenge?
2. Give three examples of the theme of appearance versus reality from different acts of the play. What does each example reveal about the characters involved?
3. How do the two types of madness (Hamlet's feigned, Ophelia's real) function differently in the play? What truths does each form of madness allow to be expressed?
4. Trace Hamlet's attitude toward death from his first soliloquy to his final acceptance. What key moments mark this journey?
5. What is the central question of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, and how does it connect to the theme of action versus inaction?

### Further Thinking

- The play raises the question of whether thought prevents action or is necessary for right action. Does *Hamlet* ultimately suggest a resolution to this dilemma, or does it leave the question open?
  - Consider the play's final image: a stage littered with bodies, a foreign prince claiming the throne, and one loyal friend left to tell the story. What is the emotional effect of this ending? Is it despairing, hopeful, or something in between?
- 

## Module 8 Quiz

**Q1.** The play presents three young men seeking to avenge their fathers: Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. What is the most significant difference in their approaches and outcomes?

- A) Hamlet and Laertes both die, while Fortinbras lives and becomes king because he channels his revenge into legitimate political action.
- B) Laertes is the most successful because he kills Hamlet.
- C) Fortinbras fails completely and returns to Norway in disgrace.
- D) All three achieve their revenge and survive.

**Q2.** The theme of 'appearance vs. reality' is established from the play's first line, 'Who's there?' Which of the following is the best example of this theme?

- A) The beautiful weather in Denmark.
- B) Claudius's public image as a loving king versus his private reality as a murderer.
- C) The solid stone walls of Elsinore castle.
- D) The soldiers' loyalty to the king.

**Q3.** How do the two types of madness in the play—Hamlet's feigned madness and Ophelia's real madness—connect to the theme of truth-telling?

- A) Both characters use madness to lie and manipulate others.
- B) Both characters, whether performing or genuinely insane, speak truths that they could not express while conforming to social norms.
- C) Madness prevents both characters from understanding the truth.
- D) Only Ophelia's madness reveals truth; Hamlet's madness is purely deceptive.

**Q4.** Hamlet's famous line, 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,' from the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, most directly relates to which theme?

- A) Appearance vs. Reality
- B) Revenge
- C) Action vs. Inaction
- D) Madness

**Q5.** In the graveyard scene, Hamlet's meditation on the skull of Yorick and the dust of Alexander the Great emphasizes which aspect of the theme of mortality?

- A) That death is a mystery that should be feared.
- B) That death is the great leveler, reducing everyone, from court jester to emperor, to the same common dust.
- C) That only great leaders are remembered after death.
- D) That the soul lives on after the body dies.

**Q6.** Which of Hamlet's soliloquies marks the turning point where he moves from self-loathing to a specific plan to verify Claudius's guilt?

- A) 'O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt'

- B) 'To be, or not to be'
- C) 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!'
- D) 'How all occasions do inform against me'

**Q7.** What is the dramatic significance of Claudius's soliloquy ('O, my offense is rank') in Act III, Scene iii?

- A) It shows his political ambition.
- B) It reveals his inner guilt and his inability to truly repent, which creates dramatic irony when Hamlet spares him.
- C) It explains his plan to send Hamlet to England.
- D) It shows his love for Gertrude.

**Q8.** The theme of 'action vs. inaction' is resolved by the play's end, suggesting that thoughtful delay is always superior to rash behavior.

*(True / False)*

**Q9.** Ophelia's distribution of flowers ('There's rosemary, that's for remembrance') is an example of how the theme of madness allows for symbolic truth-telling.

*(True / False)*

**Q10.** Horatio's final tribute, 'Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,' serves as the play's definitive statement that Hamlet's soul is certainly saved and in heaven.

*(True / False)*

**Answer Key:**

**Q1:** A — Hamlet's revenge is delayed and comes at the cost of his life. Laertes's impulsive revenge is dishonorable and also kills him. Fortinbras, who seeks land rather than blood through patient, legal means, is the only one who survives and prospers.

**Q2:** B — Claudius is the embodiment of this theme. He smiles and plays the role of a gracious monarch while hiding the 'rank' crime of fratricide, a point Hamlet makes when he notes, 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.'

**Q3:** B — Hamlet's 'antic disposition' allows him to speak uncomfortable truths to Polonius and others under the guise of nonsense. Ophelia's real madness allows her to express her grief and sexual trauma through songs that would have been forbidden to her as a sane, obedient woman.

**Q4:** C — In this speech, 'conscience' refers to both moral scruples and the faculty of thought. Hamlet argues that the very act of thinking—contemplating consequences—paralyzes us and prevents us from taking action, directly addressing the theme of action versus inaction.

**Q5:** B — The speech powerfully conveys the democracy of death. The 'imperious Caesar' who conquered the world can end up as common clay stopping a hole to keep the wind away, just as the beloved jester Yorick becomes a grinning skull.

**Q6:** C — In this soliloquy, after shaming himself for his inaction compared to the passionate Player, Hamlet's mind pivots. He recalls that guilty people watching a play have been known to confess, leading him to the idea of staging 'The Mousetrap' to 'catch the conscience of the king.'

**Q7:** B — This speech is crucial because it gives the audience direct access to Claudius's conscience. We know his prayer is hollow ('My words fly up, my thoughts remain below'), creating powerful dramatic irony when Hamlet decides not to kill him, fearing he would send his soul to heaven.

**Q8:** False — The play offers no easy resolution. Hamlet's delay leads to catastrophe, but Laertes's rash action is also destructive. Fortinbras's balanced, strategic approach succeeds, but the final image is one of a stage littered with bodies, leaving the theme's question open.

**Q9:** True — In her madness, Ophelia uses flowers as a symbolic language to comment on the characters around her, expressing grief, accusation, and loss in a way her sane, obedient self never could.

**Q10:** False — Horatio's beautiful farewell is a wish and a prayer, not a statement of fact. The play famously ends with ambiguity, and Hamlet's own final words, 'The rest is silence,' leave the question of an afterlife completely

open.

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