

## Hamlet Summary and Analysis of Act 1

### Summary

#### Scene 1

The play opens during a bitterly cold night watch outside of the royal Danish palace. There is a changing of the guards: Bernardo replaces Francisco. Soon two more characters arrive, Horatio and Marcellus. We learn that Bernardo and Marcellus, two soldiers, have witnessed an extraordinary sight on both of the previous nights' watches: the ghost of the former King of Denmark, Old Hamlet, has appeared before them in full armor. On this third night, they've welcomed Horatio, a scholar and a skeptic who has just arrived in Denmark, to verify their ghost sighting. Horatio initially expresses doubt that the ghost will appear. Suddenly, it does. The two soldiers charge Horatio to speak to the ghost but he does not. The ghost disappears just as suddenly as it arrived.

Soon after the ghost's disappearance, Marcellus asks the other two why there has been such a massive mobilization of Danish war forces recently. Horatio answers, saying that the Danish army is preparing for a possible invasion by Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. We learn that Fortinbras' father (also named Fortinbras), was killed many years before in single combat with Old Hamlet, the now-deceased king whose ghost we have just seen. Now that Old Hamlet has died, presumably weakening the Danes, there is a rumor that Fortinbras plans to invade Denmark and claim that lands that were forfeit after his father's death.

After Horatio has finished explaining this political backstory, the ghost of Old Hamlet appears once more. This time Horatio does try to speak to the ghost. When the ghost remains silent, Horatio tells Marcellus and Bernardo to try to detain it; they strike at the ghost with their spears but jab only air. A rooster crows just as the ghost appears ready to reply to Horatio at last. This sound startles the ghost away. Horatio decides to tell Prince Hamlet, Old Hamlet's son, about the apparition, and the others agree.

#### Scene 2

This scene begins at the court of Claudius and Gertrude, the King and Queen of Denmark. They have just been married. This marriage has followed quickly after the death of the former King of Denmark, Old Hamlet, Claudius' brother. Claudius addresses the quickness of the marriage, representing himself as in mourning for a lost brother even as he is joyful for a new wife, his one-time sister. Claudius also addresses the question of the young Fortinbras' proposed invasion. He says that he has spoken to Fortinbras' uncle, the King of Norway, who has made Fortinbras promise to halt any plans to invade Denmark. Claudius sends Cornelius and Voltemand, two courtiers, to Norway to settle this business. Finally, Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of his trusted counselor, Polonius. Laertes expresses a wish to return to France and Claudius grants permission.

At this point, Prince Hamlet, who has been standing apart from the king's audience this whole time, speaks the first of his many lines. Claudius asks Hamlet why he is still so gloomy. Hamlet's replies are evasive, cynical, and punning. He declares that his grief upon losing his father still deeply affects him. Claudius goes into a speech about the unnaturalness of prolonged grief; to lose one's father is painful but common, he says, and Hamlet should accept this as nature's course. He expresses a wish that Hamlet remain with them in Denmark instead of returning to Wittenberg, where he is a student, and when Gertrude seconds this wish, Hamlet agrees. The king, queen, and all their retinue then exit the stage, leaving Hamlet alone.

In his first soliloquy, Hamlet expresses the depths of his melancholy and his disgust at his mother's hastily marrying Claudius after the death of his father. He declares his father to be many times Claudius' superior as a man. After this soliloquy, Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo enter. At first, Hamlet is too aggrieved to recognize Horatio, his old school friend, but finally he welcomes Horatio warmly. After chatting about the state, Horatio tells Hamlet that he has seen his dead father recently – the night before. Hamlet asks him to explain, and Horatio tells the story of the appearance of the ghost. Hamlet decides to attend the watch that very night in hopes of seeing the ghost himself.

### **Scene 3**

As the scene opens, Laertes is taking his leave of his sister, Ophelia. In the course of their farewells, Laertes advises her about her relationship with Hamlet, with whom she has been spending much of her time lately. He tells her to forget him because he, as Prince of Denmark, is too much to hope for as a husband. He adds that she should vigilantly guard her chastity, her most prized treasure as a woman. Ophelia agrees to attend to his lesson. As Laertes is about to leave, his father, Polonius, arrives. Polonius gives Laertes a blessing and a battery of advice before sending his son on his way.

With Laertes gone, Polonius asks Ophelia what they had been talking about as he arrived. Ophelia confesses that they had been talking about her relationship with Hamlet. She tells Polonius that Hamlet has made many honorable declarations of love to her. Polonius pooh-poohs these declarations, saying, much as Laertes did, that Hamlet wants nothing more than to assail her chastity and then leave her. He makes his daughter promise that she will spend no more time alone with Hamlet. Ophelia says that she will obey.

### **Scene 4**

At the night watch, Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus await the reappearance of the ghost. They hear cannons from the castle and Hamlet tells them that this is a sign that Claudius is drinking pledges. Hamlet goes on a short tirade against the Danish custom of drinking heavily. His speech is no sooner over than the ghost appears again. Hamlet immediately addresses the ghost, imploring it to speak. The ghost beckons for

Hamlet to come away, apart from the others. Horatio and Marcellus attempt to keep Hamlet from following the ghost, warning him of the many evils that might befall him. Hamlet doesn't listen. He threatens to kill Horatio or Marcellus if they detain him, and when they stay back he follows the ghost offstage. Horatio and Marcellus determine to follow at a distance to make sure that no harm comes to their friend.

## **Scene 5**

Alone with Hamlet, the ghost finally speaks. He tells Hamlet that he has come on a nightly walk from Purgatory, where his soul is under continual torment for the sins of his life. The ghost then reveals that he was not killed by a viper, as officially announced, but was murdered. Moreover, he reveals that his own brother, Claudius, who now wears his crown and sleeps with his wife, was the murderer. The ghost tells of how Claudius snuck into his garden while he was taking his accustomed afternoon nap and poured poison into his ear, killing him most painfully and sending his soul unpurified into the afterlife. The ghost demands vengeance, telling Hamlet not to plot against his mother, whom he describes as merely weak and lustful, but to focus the whole of his revenge on Claudius. The ghost then disappears.

Hamlet, overwhelmed and half-raving, swears that he will kill Claudius. After he has made this vow, Horatio and Marcellus arrive. Hamlet does not tell them what the ghost has revealed, but nevertheless insists that they swear not to speak of the apparition to anyone. They agree. Hamlet then insists that they swear again on his sword. They agree again, confused at these demands. The ghost of Old Hamlet, meanwhile, can be heard under the stage, insisting along with his son that they swear themselves to secrecy. Hamlet leads his friends to several different points on stage, insisting that they swear over and over again. He then reveals, parenthetically, that they might find his behavior in the next while to be strange – he might pretend to be mad and act otherwise unusually – but that they must still keep secret what they have seen. After this final agreement, Hamlet leads the others offstage, uneasily determined to revenge his father's murder.

## **Analysis**

Even if this is your first time reading *Hamlet*, it must already seem very familiar. Countless characters, ideas, and quotations introduced in this play have become part of the cultural (and literal) vocabulary of the western world – and, indeed, the whole world. Many of the most famous critical minds of western history, from Samuel Johnson to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from Eliot to Empson, from Voltaire to Goethe to Freud, have taken a crack at the play, and together they have left very few stones unturned. Nevertheless, there is still much to be gained from an intelligent appreciation of *Hamlet*. While one should not expect to resolve any of the famous and bizarre conundrums of the play – “Is Hamlet really insane or faking insanity?” “Did Ophelia commit suicide or not?” “Is Hamlet in love with his mother?” – there is still great value in knowing what these conundrums are, how they are presented, and why

they are important. Sensitively and cleverly acknowledging a puzzle to be a puzzle is where much *Hamlet* scholarship begins – and ends.

The first scene of the play, like most every scene of the play, is very well known, and very puzzling. Without explaining his reasons in detail, T.S. Eliot once declared the first lines of the play to be the best lines in English. He and many other critics have found this scene to be a microcosm of the whole play, as it were. Shakespeare uses many deceptively simple rhetorical tricks to introduce some of the major themes and concerns that he follows through to the play's end.

For example, in a play that contains many of the most famous, most unanswerable questions ever expressed, whether literal questions (“To be or not to be”) or interpretive questions of motivation (“Why doesn't Hamlet just kill Claudius straight away?”), it is remarkable that Shakespeare begins *Hamlet* with a question, “Who's there?” Who's there, indeed.... On one level, this is a simple question, one that is asked every day in the most innocuous contexts. But on a deeper level (and everything in this play is richly rewarding on a deeper level) it is one of the basic questions of philosophy. Who is there? Who are we? What is man? Who is Hamlet? What is *Hamlet*? In this most philosophical of plays, we begin with a moment of covert philosophy, a question simple on the surface, but profound when pressed; and the first scene continues this focus on questioning, giving us question after question. Horatio, the quintessential scholar, skeptical and empirical, begins by questioning the reality of the ghost; eventually, he is exhorted to “question” the ghost in a more literal way – to ask the ghost questions. In general, then, the first scene takes us from the no-nonsense world outside the theater, the world of Horatio and his doubts, to the magical, metaphysical, ultra-theatrical world of *Hamlet*. We may bring certainties to the play, but we are encouraged almost immediately to abandon them.

Thus before we have even seen Hamlet (the younger Hamlet, that is) we are deeply mired in the play's dubious, spectral atmosphere. In the second scene, after several long speeches by Claudius giving us political background, we come to Hamlet's first soliloquy. A “soliloquy” is a speech given by a speaker alone on stage, exploring his or her own thoughts and feelings. Both Hamlet and *Hamlet* are practically synonymous with such speeches; in this play, Shakespeare exhausts the possibilities of such on-stage introspection. Hamlet's soliloquies are not to be thought of as “actually happening” in any realistic way. Rather, they are moments of suspended time, in which the overwhelming pressure of a single thought, or group of thoughts, forces its way out of a speaker's mind by way of his mouth. They are moments where we, as audience members, can enter intimately into Hamlet's mind, exploring the patterns of his thought even as he does so himself.

We might notice right away, in this first soliloquy, how difficult Hamlet can be to follow – how much his speech jumps and roils around, allowing interjections, playing with allusions and puns, becoming frequently side-tracked by this or that image. This tendency of Hamlet's, to become sidetracked by his own train of thoughts, is crucial

to the play, and crucial to the central motivational mystery of *Hamlet* – the delay of the revenge. But we will see much more of that to come.

We might also note that in his first soliloquy Hamlet appears deeply “depressed,” as we would put it today, or “melancholic,” as the people of the early seventeenth century would have put it. The audience of *Hamlet*’s own day would have expected as much. The play belongs to a genre known as “revenge tragedy.” Such plays occupied many of the greatest playwrights of the generation directly preceding Shakespeare’s, including Thomas Kyd, but by the time *Hamlet* was written they had come to be seen as rather old-fashioned. Like any genre, revenge tragedy has certain predictable conventions, one of which is that the protagonist of the play is melancholic – dominated by saturnine, sluggish, pensive “humors,” or bodily spirits. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, rather than simply repeating this convention, explores it *as* a convention. That is, he gives us the archetypal revenge hero, the most introspective, most melancholic, most pensive hero ever seen on the English stage.

At the same time, Hamlet seems somewhat aware that he is, in fact, playing a role on stage. He notices his own costume and makeup (“’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother [...]” (I.ii.77 ff.)); he refers to specific areas in the theater (as when he notes that the ghost is “in the cellarage” (I.v.150)); in short, he seems at once to be the most typical of types, and to be an audience to his own typecasting – and furthermore, he seems to be distressed about being so typecast, and anxious to prove that there is something genuine behind his theatrical veneer. In general, critics have long noticed that *Hamlet* is a play about plays, most specifically a revenge tragedy about revenge tragedy, and the pretzel-like self-referentiality of the protagonist is the main reason why.

As a relatively light-hearted accompaniment to such ghastliness and introspective misery, Act One features two appearances by Polonius and his family. Nearly every Elizabethan play has at least one so-called “subplot,” and this family occupies the primary subplot of *Hamlet* – the question of Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia. Polonius, you might have noticed already, is long-winded, pedantic, and meddlesome, even while he is somewhat loveable in his fussy way. He is always interested in being “in the know,” whatever the occasion. Notice, for instance, how eagerly he questions Ophelia about her earlier conversation with Laertes.

Act One contains Polonius’ most famous speech in the play, and one of the most quoted speeches of Shakespeare, the advice speech to Laertes that ends, “to thine own self be true” (I.iii.55 ff.). One can weigh the various maxims here offered on the basis of their individual merits. However, it is a common mistake of new readers of Shakespeare to take this speech simply at face value – to think, in effect, that Shakespeare, not Polonius, is giving this advice. This is never the case in Shakespeare – he never simply speaks “through” a character – and most certainly not the case here. Notice, for instance, that Polonius’ speech begins by telling Laertes to rush off to catch his boat, and then detains him from doing just that. Notice also, that Polonius

begins by declaring that he will offer Laertes a “few precepts,” then goes on to ramble for thirty lines. Polonius, in short, never misses an occasion for a speech, and follows his own advice creatively if at all. His meddlesome, didactic character leads to his undoing, as we shall see