

## Hamlet Summary and Analysis of Act 5

### Summary

#### Scene 1

The final Act begins with a conversation between two gravediggers as they dig Ophelia's grave. They repeat a rumor that Ophelia committed suicide and wonder whether she ought to be buried in hallowed ground. We learn that the king has overridden the objections of the clergy and provided for her burial. After some witty and macabre banter on the nature of gravedigging, Hamlet and Horatio enter. The main gravedigger sends his partner off for a cup of liquor and then commences to dig, singing songs all the while. Hamlet appears fascinated by the gravedigger's indifference to the gravity of his profession. As the gravedigger throws various skulls out of the grave, Hamlet wonders whom they might have belonged to in life – whether a courtier or a lawyer.

Hamlet approaches the gravedigger and exchanges witticisms about this morbid work. The gravedigger informs Hamlet about the length of time it takes bodies to decay in the ground. He then produces a skull from the grave that he says has been lying there for twenty-three years. The gravedigger says that this is the skull of Yorick, the old king's jester. Hamlet is amazed – he knew Yorick and loved him as a child. He takes up the skull and speaks about Yorick, a topic that leads him to consider the nature of mortality more generally.

A procession interrupts Hamlet's reveries – Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes march toward the grave along with a priest and an entourage bearing a body. Hamlet notices that the burial is less elaborate than usual, signifying that the deceased was a suicide. He and Horatio stand aside while Laertes argues with the priest about the paltriness of the burial rites. In the course of his arguing with the priest, Laertes reveals to Hamlet that the dead body is that of Ophelia. Gertrude steps forward to say farewell to Ophelia. Laertes follows. In his intense grief, Laertes leaps into his sister's grave to hold her body again and orders the gravediggers to bury him alive. Provoked by this show of grief, Hamlet then reveals himself. After grappling with Laertes, Hamlet declares that he loved Ophelia more than forty thousand brothers could. The king and queen dismiss his avowal as madness. Hamlet then exits and Horatio follows him. After they have left, Claudius reminds Laertes of their plan to take care of Hamlet.

#### Scene 2

Hamlet explains to Horatio what happened on his journey to England. He says that he strongly suspected Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of foul play, and so decided to apprehend their letter to England. In the letter he found an order for his death. Hamlet then devised a substitute letter asking for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He happened to have a signet ring in the shape of the seal of Denmark, and so sealed

the letter. Hamlet then replaced the letter while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were asleep. At this point, pirates attacked the vessel, as related previously.

A courtier, Osric, interrupts Hamlet and Horatio. In very ornate and silly language, Osric declares to Hamlet that Claudius has proposed a contest of swordsmanship between Laertes and he. Hamlet and Horatio mock Osric's pompous and artificial mannerisms. Eventually Hamlet agrees to enter the contest. When Horatio worries that Laertes is better at swordplay than he, Hamlet declares that he has been in continual practice for some time.

A table is prepared and the king, queen and other figures of state gather to watch the swordfight. Hamlet begs Laertes' pardon both for his outburst at Ophelia's grave and for his rash killing of Polonius. Laertes appears to accept this apology but declares that his honor will not be satisfied until they have had their contest. Hamlet and Laertes choose their swords. Laertes nonchalantly chooses the unblunted sword with the envenomed blade. As they prepare to fight, Claudius proposes a drink to Hamlet.

The fight begins with Osric as referee. Hamlet wins the first point and the king offers him a drink to refresh himself, dropping a poisoned pearl in the wine just before he hands it over. Hamlet declines to take the drink for the time being. They play another round and Hamlet again wins a point. After this second pass, Gertrude toasts to Hamlet's health. She takes up the poisoned chalice and has a drink despite Claudius' protestations. Hamlet and Laertes have a third pass which ends in a draw.

After this pass, while Hamlet is unguarded, Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier. They scuffle and Hamlet ends up with Laertes' poisoned sword. He wounds Laertes with it. Just then, the queen collapses. She declares that she has been poisoned by the drink and then dies. Hamlet asks for the treachery to be found out and Laertes confesses the plan hatched by the king and he. He says that they are both inevitably going to die, having been wounded by the poisoned blade. Hamlet takes the envenomed sword and wounds Claudius, then forces the king to drink from his poisoned cup. Claudius dies. Laertes asks Hamlet's forgiveness and then also dies. Hamlet, knowing that he is about to die also, asks Horatio to explain this bloody spectacle to the confused onlookers. Horatio, on the contrary, wishes to die with his friend, but Hamlet convinces him to live a while and clear his name. Hamlet declares that Fortinbras should become King of Denmark. He then dies – "the rest is silence."

A flourish is heard and Osric brings news that Fortinbras has arrived from his victory in Poland with ambassadors from England. Fortinbras enters the court only to find four noble bodies sprawled out on the floor. The ambassadors from England enter with news that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been killed. Horatio explains that Claudius would not have welcomed this news even if he had been living to receive it. He orders that the royal bodies be taken up. Horatio further promises to explain the story behind the deaths, a story full of "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts; / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters; / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced

cause.” In short, he promises to tell the story of *Hamlet*. Fortinbras agrees to hear it. He adds that, given the death of the Danish royalty, he will now pursue his own claims to the throne. Finally, Fortinbras declares that Hamlet shall receive a soldier’s burial. Some soldiers take up his body and bear it from the stage.

### **Analysis**

No surprise, this final Act of *Hamlet* is as mysterious, ambiguous, and controversial as those that precede it. The play begins rather straightforwardly, if ironically, as a revenge tragedy – Old Hamlet’s ghost spurs his son to revenge – and it would seem that Act Five, like the Act Fives of all major revenge tragedies preceding *Hamlet*, should fulfill this initial plotline. Indeed, in Act Five Hamlet kills Claudius – finally. But he does so in such a roundabout, half-cocked, off-hand way, we wonder whether this really counts as revenge. The death of Claudius certainly lacks the poetic justice that vengeance seems to require. What on earth is Shakespeare trying to do with this strange play – why doesn’t he give it a proper ending?

Many of the earliest extant critics of the play, those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, found the strange and abrupt manner of Hamlet’s revenge to be as puzzling as we might. These critics often found fault with the play’s lack of moral meaning. After all, if Claudius was wrong to kill his brother and marry his brother’s wife (and surely he was), shouldn’t the lethal correction of these crimes feel more satisfying, more “right,” than it does in this play? Samuel Johnson, writing in 1765, voices critical dissatisfaction quite clearly: “The poet is accused of having shown little regard to poetical justice, and may be charged with equal neglect of poetical probability. The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose; the revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him that was required to take it; and the gratification which would arise from the destruction of an usurper and a murderer, is abated by the untimely death of Ophelia.” In other words, Johnson charges that the ending of *Hamlet* is both unjust and improbable. The earlier part of the play, including the role of the ghost in giving the death of Claudius a moral shape, seems to have been forgotten. Hamlet seems to bring the drama to a close almost accidentally, and Johnson accuses Shakespeare on these grounds of dramatic clumsiness and moral ineptitude.

Later critics have been much less quick to fault Shakespeare’s dramatic instincts. Indeed, some of them have found the ending of *Hamlet* to signal a shift to a “higher,” more self-aware theater, a purposeful rejection of the simple morality of revenge in favor of a richer, deeper investigation of the nature of performance itself. The critic Harold Bloom, for instance, has written at length about Act Five as Hamlet’s rejection of his own dramatic role. He seems to have grown bored with his own play, in other words, and shrugs off its generic requirements. Bloom writes: “Any Fortinbras or Laertes could chop Claudius down; Hamlet knows he deserves the prime role in a cosmological drama, which Shakespeare was not quite ready to compose.” In this view, *Hamlet*’s final Act transcends the play itself. The plot, the action, has only been

an occasion for Hamlet's own tremendously powerful self-exploration, and the culmination of the requirements of "revenge tragedy" appropriately occurs almost despite the play itself.

Shakespeare's abandonment of the central focus on revenge, then, perhaps amounts to his finally agreeing with his protagonist, so to speak. Hamlet has been, from the very first moments of the play, reluctant to carry out the absurd and generic task that is his as a character in a revenge tragedy – "The time is out of joint. Oh cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" Shakespeare has purposefully miscast his hero and given us a character whose accomplishments are intellectual and verbal, not violent and physical. By the final Act, it seems as though the playwright has finally given up trying to tie his hero down to conventions. Hamlet has forced *Hamlet* off the rails, taken it from a simple and predictable genre play to something inscrutable, massively significant, and, for lack of a better term, *post-theatrical*.

Meanwhile, in between the two major events of Act Five (the burial of Ophelia and the duel between Hamlet and Laertes), Shakespeare includes several very famous setpieces. The range of Hamlet's verbal and philosophical variety becomes clear as he goes from trading macabre jokes with the gravedigger, to his moving rumination on the dead court jester, Yorick, to his declaration of love for Ophelia and his attendant mockery of Laertes' over-the-top mourning display, to a scathing parody of Osric's ludicrous courtly mannerisms. As noted before, Hamlet's mind seems to work as an intense magnifying glass of sorts. He looks at one subject – say, the gravedigger's macabre humor – and scrutinizes it to exhaustion before turning to another – say, the nature of mortality as occasioned by the discovery of Yorick's skull – and treating it with a similar thoroughness. The variety of his curiosity is matched by depth of penetration. He is both wide-ranging and profound – truly a Renaissance mind.

In this final Act, Hamlet seems no longer to curse this tendency of his to become distracted by thought in favor of action, as he does for instance in his soliloquies on Hecuba and on Fortinbras' army, but to celebrate it. He says to Horatio, for instance, when his friend seems concerned that he is walking into the trap set by Claudius and Laertes, "[W]e defy augury. [...] 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." Hamlet rejects "augury" – that is, he rejects any predictive phenomena, or any future-oriented thinking at all. In a way, he rejects the ghost's order to fulfill a set goal. (By the way, we might ask what Hamlet means by "it" in the above sentence. Does "it" refer to his plan to kill Claudius? – "If I will kill him now, so be it." Does "it" rather refer to death itself? – "If I am to die now, so be it." Or is "it" a placeholder for anything, any event?) At any rate, Hamlet has achieved a point of philosophical "quietus," an acceptance of the world with all of its flaws and absurdities, which he has made not with "a bare bodkin" but with his own mental powers. His gaze is focused on some spiritual realm beyond the pettiness of Danish political intrigue.

Of the four deaths that occur in the final scene of the play, only one – Hamlet’s – is planned. The other three are, if not senseless, at least spontaneous and chaotic. The entire gory episode seems to be a playing-out of Hamlet’s new understanding of the world – death strikes randomly, senselessly, absurdly. The only meaning that matters must be made out of apparent meaninglessness. Hamlet’s dying words, in fact, are a plea to his friend, Horatio, to help the court audience sort out the carnage that they have seen: “[I]n this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story.” Hamlet emphasizes that significance comes only in retrospect, with storytelling, with sense making, not in prospective action. His death thus demonstrates the value of introspection over action, and the triumph of thought over fate, against the uncertainty and confusion of death.

With the arrival of Fortinbras, the tone shifts dramatically in the other direction. Fortinbras, whose own barely-limned plot is extremely similar to Hamlet’s (his identically-named father dead, his rise in Norway impeded by his uncle, etc.), is nonetheless Hamlet’s opposite. He is a man of action, a man like Laertes, or Old Hamlet. As Hamlet predicts, he hardly wastes a moment in declaring his intention to take the throne of Denmark for his own. And, as a final irony, Fortinbras misunderstands the dead prince, and gives him a soldier’s funeral. Though we know very little of him, it seems that Fortinbras is the anti-Hamlet – a man who can only understand others in light of his own simple and straight-forward mind. Hamlet, because he was a prince, was probably a soldier, so he is given a soldier’s burial. In an exact opposite way, Hamlet finds a universe of variety within his own mind; he explores the world from many perspectives, searches many questions, revolves all but resolves nothing. Fortinbras’ arrival marks the end of the true reign of *Hamlet*, not Claudius’ petty and incompetent rule, but Hamlet’s regime of the mind and the possibilities of subjectivity.

PS. ALL LECTURES WERE TAKEN FROM THE FOLLOWING WEBSITE:

<https://www.gradesaver.com/hamlet/study-guide/>