

HAMLET

PLOT SUMMARY

Hamlet is a tragedy set in ancient Denmark. The main protagonist is Prince Hamlet, the son of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude.

When the play opens, King Hamlet has recently died. Claudius, King Hamlet's brother, has been crowned the new King and has married Gertrude. Shortly after his mother's marriage, Prince Hamlet meets his father's spirit.

The Ghost appears to Hamlet

People believe that King Hamlet was killed by a poisonous snake bite. However, the Ghost tells Hamlet that he was **murdered by Claudius**. Claudius killed the king by pouring poison into his ear while he slept. He says that Claudius has seduced Gertrude and stolen the throne. The Ghost tells Hamlet that "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown".

The spirit implores Hamlet to seek **revenge**: "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest".

Hamlet needs proof that this is an "honest ghost" and not a "goblin damn'd".

- Hamlet contemplates suicide
He feigns madness to allow him to observe Claudius and plot his revenge. Horatio is the only person who knows that Hamlet is pretending to be mad. Hamlet often talks to himself and questions his own plans and existence.

At one point he **contemplates suicide**: "To be or not to be that is the question. Whether tis nobler in mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles..."

Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, but pretends to be angry with her. He tells her he doesn't love her - "Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell." She is **shocked and upset**.

Polonius and Claudius see Hamlet shouting at Ophelia and are worried. Seeing Hamlet's irrational behaviour, Claudius decides to watch Hamlet closely: "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go."

Hamlet puts on such a good act of being mad that it can be questioned whether Hamlet really has been driven mad.

Hamlet puts on a play for Claudius in which a king is poisoned in his sleep. If Claudius really did murder the old King, Hamlet thinks that his reaction will prove his guilt: "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." On seeing the play, Claudius is shocked and angry, which convinces Hamlet that **the Ghost was telling the truth**. Claudius realises that Hamlet knows who murdered the old King and that his stepson is a threat.

- Hamlet watches Claudius as he prays
Finding Claudius alone and apparently praying, Hamlet plans to kill him: "And now I'll do't"! However, he hesitates because Claudius' prayer may save his soul from being "damn'd and black as hell". He decides to kill him when Claudius is "about some act / That has no relish of salvation in't".

Against the wishes of the Ghost, Hamlet **turns his anger on his mother** and her incestuous relationship with Claudius. He declares, "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest".

In Gertrude's bedroom, he hears a noise behind a tapestry and thinks it must be Claudius. Hamlet is furious and stabs violently through the curtain, "How now! A rat?". However, Polonius is behind the curtain, spying on Hamlet to find out the cause of his madness. Hamlet has now killed Ophelia's father.

Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet's insanity caused him to kill Polonius. Claudius decides not to have him tried for murder but convinces Hamlet to leave for England with two of his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius convinces Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take a secret letter to the King of England. The letter asks for Hamlet to be **sentenced to death** for murder.

Ophelia, already struggling to cope with Hamlet's madness, learns of her father's death and is driven insane.

While collecting flowers, she **drowns** in a stream.

While sailing to England, Hamlet's ship is attacked by pirates. Hamlet survives and returns to Denmark to meet Horatio. They see a grave being dug (a grave that will be Ophelia's).

Hamlet picks up an unearthened skull which he learns is that of the court jester, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy". Hamlet sees Laertes and Gertrude in the cemetery. Hamlet hides and when he overhears that the grave is Ophelia's, he is upset.

Ophelia's brother Laertes has returned home from Paris for the funeral. He has learnt of Hamlet's part in his father and sister's deaths and when he sees Hamlet in the cemetery, he challenges him to a **duel** - a fencing match. Claudius sees this as a chance to get rid of Hamlet.

He convinces Laertes to switch from the traditionally blunted sword to one sharpened and tipped with deadly poison, also adding poison to Hamlet's drink for extra security.

The duel begins but things quickly go wrong. Both Laertes and Hamlet become **wounded by the same poisoned blade.**

Gertrude, thinking her son is approaching victory, accidentally **drinks from the poisoned cup.** Seeing his mother dying, Hamlet kills Claudius saying "follow my mother" and dies.