

# Hamlet

Introduction	8
Scene-by-Scene Summary and Commentary	9
Guidelines for Answering Exam Questions	31
Exam Topics & Themes	32
The Characters	64
Hamlet. ....	65
Claudius . ....	67
Gertrude . ....	69
Ophelia . ....	72
Polonius . ....	73
Laertes . ....	75
Horatio . ....	76
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. ....	78
Fortinbras . ....	80

## Introduction

*Hamlet* is a tragedy believed to have been written by William Shakespeare between 1599 and 1601. This play is located in Denmark after a new king – Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius – has begun his reign following his killing of his own brother and Hamlet’s father, King Hamlet. Claudius’ twin goals in this unnatural act were to usurp his brother’s crown and claim his wife for himself. In essence, this play is based on Hamlet’s obligation to avenge the death of his father, killed in an act of regicide.

This play engages and holds the interest of the audience from the outset through to the conclusion, offering us a combination of such enduringly relevant themes as treachery, revenge, madness (real and feigned), the role of women, corruption, the struggle between good and evil and the contrast between appearance and reality. The complexity of Hamlet’s character adds to the play’s appeal. All of Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists are flawed by one major weakness in particular and this generalisation clearly applies to Hamlet who, flawed by indecision, tends towards procrastination. It is very difficult to predict how Hamlet will act in certain contexts in Acts 1-4, but he ultimately develops into a composed, calm and decisive character following his return from England towards the close of the play.

The struggle between Hamlet and Claudius proves to be one of the most interesting aspects of the play, with them proving to be closely matched adversaries possessed of contrasting personalities.

Another fascinating feature of *Hamlet* is its portrayal of women. Women’s inequality is patently clear from the outset of the play set in the patriarchal Danish court that is Elsinore. Hamlet’s profoundly sceptical view of his mother’s relationship with Claudius colours his attitude towards Ophelia in a very significant manner (‘Frailty, thy name is woman.’).

The struggle between good and evil and the contrast between appearance and reality lie at the heart of this, and indeed every Shakespearian tragedy, with such themes being timeless and universal. The supernatural aspect of the play (represented by the ghost of Hamlet’s father) further enhances its appeal, as does its richness in dramatic incident. It is difficult to imagine the closing scene of any play being more compelling or dramatic with its many twists and turns, or imagine a protagonist more complex than Hamlet who delivers some of the most philosophical soliloquys in any Shakespearian tragedy.

# Scene-by-Scene Summary and Commentary

## Act 1 Scene 1

The opening scene is full of dramatic tension. Two sentries, Marcellus and Barnardo, are on duty at the royal castle of Elsinore. It is midnight and bitterly cold. The sentries are nervous and filled with foreboding (apprehension / misgiving / dread) because they have twice seen a ghost, to whom they refer to as 'this dreaded sight' and 'this apparition'. They have asked Horatio, a respected scholar, to join their watch in the hope that he may be able to explain this strange happening. The fact that the ghost resembles the dead king is especially intriguing.

When the ghost appears again, the initially sceptical Horatio admits to being filled 'with fear and wonder'. The sentries encourage Horatio to speak with the apparition, but the ghost quickly disappears. It is apparent that the dead king was highly respected by his subjects as the three friends remember his reign with obvious nostalgia. King Hamlet is remembered as a strong and brave leader: 'our valiant Hamlet'.

The dramatic appearance of the ghost is regarded as an event of some significance. Horatio sees the apparition as a sign of some national disaster to come: 'But in the gross and scope of my opinion, this bodes

some strange eruption to our state'. He also refers to the ghost as a 'harbinger' and 'omen' (a sign pointing to the future). Barnardo also sees the ghost as a sign pointing to the future, referring to the ghost as 'this portentous figure'. Both men wrongly conclude that the appearance of the ghost is connected with the threat to Denmark posed by young Fortinbras of Norway.

The opening scene provides the audience with important background information necessary for the development of the plot. Horatio speaks of the strained relations between Denmark and Norway. We learn that King Hamlet killed King Fortinbras of Norway, and that, as a consequence, Norway lost territory to Denmark. Horatio describes young Fortinbras as a fiery young man ('of unimproved mettle hot and full'), bent on reversing this defeat and on regaining these lost lands. Treaties and international agreements seem to mean little to the impulsive Fortinbras, who now seems poised to attack Denmark. With this attack seemingly imminent, the dramatic tension increases. The theme of revenge that is so central to the play is, in this way, introduced in the opening scene.

At the close of this scene Horatio decides to tell Hamlet what they have seen: 'Let us impart what we have seen tonight unto young Hamlet'.

### KEY POINTS



- Opening scene conveys a sense of dramatic tension.
- Horatio is portrayed as a respected scholar.
- The appearance of the ghost is seen as a very significant happening and as an omen (a warning in relation to the future).
- The theme of revenge is introduced, with Fortinbras, Prince of Norway whose father was killed by King Hamlet, young Hamlet's father, poised to attack Denmark.

## Act 1 Scene 2

This scene is set in the Danish court and there is a great sense of pomp and ceremony. Claudius,

King Hamlet's brother and successor on the throne, addresses the court. He tactfully balances expressions of grief at his brother's death with expressions of joy at his own

**recent marriage to King Hamlet's widow, Gertrude:** 'With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, in equal scale weighing delight and dole'. At this point the audience is unaware of the extent of Claudius' hypocrisy, but we are struck by the unseemly, improper haste with which the new king married his widowed sister-in-law.

**Claudius initially makes quite a positive impression. He appears to be statesmanlike in his measured response to the threat posed by Fortinbras, sending ambassadors to the old King of Norway with a request that he restrain his fiery young nephew.** While appearing to be in control of affairs of state, he also comes across as overly accommodating and eager to please. Laertes, the son of his chief courtier Polonius, is granted permission to return to France: 'What wouldst thou beg Laertes . . . What wouldst thou have Laertes?' Claudius is particularly anxious to placate Hamlet, addressing him as 'my cousin . . . and my son'. **However, it is immediately apparent that all is not well between Claudius and Hamlet, who has no desire for a closer relationship with his uncle: 'A little more than kin and less than kind'.**

**Hamlet's black clothing and equally black mood set him apart from everyone else in the Danish court. The mood of the court is one of joyful celebration, but Hamlet is in a state of melancholy. He is an isolated figure and a deeply disillusioned young man.** The king's attempts to win Hamlet's favour meet with a sharp, abrupt response from his sullen nephew. Hamlet's contempt for his uncle is expressed through bitter puns. When Claudius asks him why 'the clouds still hang' on him, Hamlet replies: 'Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun'. Claudius goes to great lengths in his efforts to win Hamlet's loyalty and affection, pointing out that he is the heir to the throne ('the most immediate to our throne'). However, none of this lessens Hamlet's deep hatred of his uncle.

**While Claudius at first appears to be an admirable, even likeable, character, there are early signs of his true self. Claudius' excessive desire to please virtually all in court hints at his own sense of insecurity.** Claudius puts on a

display of grace and exaggerated good humour because he is aware of the falsity of his position. His insensitivity and hypocrisy are apparent when he describes Hamlet's grief as 'unmanly' and as 'a fault to heaven'. Claudius' refusal to allow Hamlet to return to Wittenberg points to his cunning nature – he will keep his most dangerous enemy under his sharply watchful eye.

**From the beginning of the play we see Gertrude as a weak, dependent character. In her desire to see her son get along with her new husband, she too seems to be insensitive to Hamlet's deep grief: 'Why seems it so particular with thee?'** Hamlet's bitter response ('Seems', madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems') suggests that the Danish court is a world of false appearances, a world where people are not always what they seem to be. Here Hamlet may be hinting at his mother's artificiality. Ultimately, neither Gertrude nor Claudius succeeds in their attempts to appease (placate / pacify) Hamlet.

**Hamlet's opening soliloquy offers us a range of insights into his deeply troubled state of mind. Hamlet's disillusionment with life is total:** 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!' The image of the world as an unweeded garden reflects Hamlet's belief that he is living in a world of 'rank and gross' corruption. This soliloquy presents us with the reasons for Hamlet's intense anguish. **His beloved father is not even dead two months and his mother has already remarried. Hamlet is outraged by his mother's decision to marry a man such as Claudius. In sharp contrast to what Hamlet sees as his perfect, godlike father, Claudius is seen as a repulsive beast. In Hamlet's eyes, his father was Hyperion (the beautiful god of the sun) while Claudius is a disgusting satyr (a mythical creature that was half man, half goat).**

Hamlet is outraged by his mother's disloyalty to his father's memory. Gertrude seemed to be utterly devoted to King Hamlet ('Why, she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on'), yet she married

again within a month of his funeral. **Disgust at Gertrude's weakness dominates Hamlet's mind and soul and is the primary cause of his depression. Her weakness and disloyalty cause Hamlet to lose faith in all women: '. . . frailty, thy name is woman'.** Hamlet angrily declares that 'a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer'. He is disgusted by what he regards as the 'incestuous' relationship between Gertrude and Claudius, predicting that this relationship 'cannot come to good'.

**When Hamlet meets Horatio, he sarcastically remarks that 'the funeral baked meats did**

**coldly furnish forth the marriage table', underlying his feelings of disillusionment and anger.** Horatio is Hamlet's trusted friend and the one person in whom he confides. Hamlet idealises his dead father, believing him to have been an excellent king, a perfect husband and a complete man: 'He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again'. When Horatio tells him about the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet is determined to speak with the apparition. He immediately suspects 'some foul play', but believes that evil deeds will eventually come to light: 'Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth overwhelm them, to men's eyes'.

### KEY POINTS



- While Claudius at first seems to be an admirable character and an able king, his exaggerated politeness and excessive desire to please suggest his insincerity and sense of insecurity.
- Hamlet is a deeply disillusioned young man whose black clothing and dark disposition set him apart from a Danish court celebrating Claudius' accession to the throne.
- Hamlet's opening soliloquy helps us to see why he feels so angry and bitter – he thoroughly resents Claudius and is disgusted by Gertrude's betrayal of his father.
- Gertrude's decision to re-marry so soon after King Hamlet's death suggests that she is a fundamentally weak, dependent character.
- Horatio is the one person in whom Hamlet can confide.
- Hamlet is determined to speak with the ghost, sensing that something is fundamentally wrong in Denmark.

## Act 1 Scene 3

This scene is concerned with the family affairs of Polonius, his son Laertes and his daughter Ophelia. As the play unfolds, we see that the lives of all three members of this family become closely intertwined with that of Hamlet. All three ultimately die, with Hamlet incontrovertibly (unarguably / undeniably / indisputably) bearing some responsibility for all three deaths. Polonius becomes Hamlet's enemy because he epitomises (personifies /

embodies) the falseness of the Danish court. Ophelia is driven to insanity and suicide by Hamlet's rejection of her and by her father's death at the hands of the man she loves. Laertes becomes Hamlet's implacable enemy when he dedicates himself to avenging the deaths of his father and sister.

**Before Laertes returns to France, he speaks to Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet. He sounds rather pompous as he delivers a moral lecture to do with the importance of virtue and honour.** Laertes advises his sister

to be very cautious in her dealings with Hamlet because, as heir to the throne, Hamlet will not be free to choose his own wife: ‘. . . his will is not his own, for he himself is subject to his birth’. Laertes suggests that Hamlet’s apparent affection for her will not last. He urges Ophelia not to be too trusting (‘too credent’) and to guard her virtue: ‘Be wary then, best safety lies in fear’. Ophelia listens respectfully to Laertes’ lecture but shows a degree of independence and spirit when she expresses the hope that her brother will follow his own advice.

**No sooner has Laertes finished sermonising Ophelia than he himself is forced to listen to a typically lengthy lecture from Polonius.**

Of course, Polonius never tires of listening to the sound of his own voice. Polonius offers Laertes shrewd and practical advice rather than moral instruction. Essentially, he urges his son to be very cautious in his dealings with others: ‘Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice . . . Neither a borrower nor a lender be’. Polonius sounds rather idealistic when he tells Laertes that the most important thing is to be true to himself (‘This above all, to thine own

self be true’), but he is basically telling him to put his own self-interest before everything else. **We soon see that, far from being idealistic, Polonius is in fact a deeply cynical character.**

**We see the unattractive side to Polonius in the advice that he gives to Ophelia.** Like Laertes, Polonius disapproves of the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet. He dismisses any possibility that Hamlet’s feelings for Ophelia might be genuine, telling his daughter that she is naïve to believe Hamlet’s declarations of love: ‘You speak like a green girl!’ Using the cold language of commerce, he tells her: ‘. . . you have taken his tenders for true love which are not sterling’. Polonius’ cynical view of love is reflected in the animal imagery that he uses to suggest the greater freedom that Hamlet enjoys: ‘. . . with a larger tether may he walk than may be given you’. **Polonius sees young people as farm animals that need to be controlled. He does not believe in Hamlet’s sincerity or decency: ‘Do not believe his vows’. Ophelia agrees to be guided by her father: ‘I shall obey, my Lord’.**

### KEY POINTS



- Laertes advises Ophelia not to be too trusting of Hamlet because, in his view, their relationship will not last.
- Polonius offers Laertes shrewd and practical advice, in essence telling his son that his actions should at all times be guided by the principle of self-interest.
- Polonius’ advice to Ophelia reveals his deeply cynical view of life and of human relationships – he never considers the possibility that Hamlet may genuinely love Ophelia.
- Ophelia is young and easily manipulated – she unhesitatingly agrees to be guided by her father.

## Act 1 Scene 4

**We are now brought back to the dark, cold battlements as Hamlet and his companions wait for the ghost to appear again. As they watch, they hear the sounds of a late-night party within the castle. Hamlet, a man of high**

**moral standards, is disgusted by the heavy drinking that, in his view, has tarnished the Danes’ reputation among other nations:** ‘This heavy-headed revel east and west makes us traduced and taxed of other nations. They clepe us drunkards . . .’ The king’s fondness for this drunken revelry is an indication of his moral



weakness in Hamlet's eyes.

When the ghost finally appears, Hamlet immediately wants to know why this spirit is walking the earth: '... tell why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death, have burst their cerements?' The ghost beckons Hamlet to follow it and, ignoring the advice of Horatio and

Marcellus, Hamlet does not hesitate to follow the ghost's instructions.

**Marcellus is convinced that the appearance of the ghost is a sign that 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark'.** Horatio believes that Heaven will control the outcome of events: 'Heaven will direct it'.

### KEY POINTS



- Hamlet has high moral standards and is disgusted by the king's late night partying and heavy drinking.
- Hamlet is fiercely determined to speak with the ghost, following the beckoning spirit – against the advice of Horatio.
- Marcellus restates the idea that the appearance of the ghost is a sign that something is fundamentally wrong in the Danish state.

### Act 1 Scene 5

**The climax of Act 1 occurs when Hamlet comes face to face with his father's ghost. In this scene Claudius' crime is revealed and the duty of avenging his father's death is laid squarely on Hamlet's shoulders.**

The ghost's reference to 'sulphurous and tormenting flames' suggests that he is now paying for his sins in life. King Hamlet was obviously not as perfect as his son imagines him to have been and must remain in Purgatory until, in his own words, 'the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away.' The vivid account of the ghost's sufferings evokes feelings of pity in the audience. Claudius had poured poison into one of King Hamlet's ears as he slept. **The ghost's dramatic command that Hamlet 'revenge his foul and most unnatural murder' meets with a passionate response: 'Haste me to know it, that I with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge'.** The ghost reveals that King Hamlet was not killed by a serpent, but by his own brother: 'The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown'. The serpent image suggests that Claudius is devious (sly) and evil. Hamlet's response to this dramatic

revelation indicates that he had always suspected Claudius of involvement in his father's death: 'O my prophetic soul!' His natural instincts are now shown to have been correct.

In describing Claudius as 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast', the ghost echoes the feelings of disgust so powerfully expressed by Hamlet in his opening soliloquy. While the reference to adultery points to additional wrongdoing on the part of Gertrude and Claudius, there is no conclusive proof that they were involved in an illicit relationship before King Hamlet died (although, in the Closet Scene, Gertrude refers to 'black and grained spots' on her soul). Their relationship was 'incestuous' in that the Church regarded it as incest for a man to marry his brother's widow. **By repeatedly describing the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius as 'incestuous', both Hamlet and the ghost give powerful expression to their shared sense of revulsion.**

**The ghost feels betrayed by Gertrude and is bitterly disappointed by her weakness of character: 'O Hamlet! What a falling off was there'.** When he speaks of 'my most seeming-virtuous queen', the ghost touches on one of the central themes of the play: the contrast

**between appearance and reality.** He believes that Gertrude's relationship with Claudius is based on lust rather than love. Once again, the imagery underscores the ghost's sense of deep disgust: 'So lust, though to a radiant angel linked, will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage'.

**The ghost underlines the enormity of Claudius' crime when he points out that, in killing him, Claudius took his life, his crown and his queen. Furthermore, by killing him when he was in a state of sin, Claudius condemned him to the torment of Purgatory: 'Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched, cut off even in the blossoms of my sin . . .'** Claudius' crime was utterly 'unnatural' and the ghost expects Hamlet to set things right if he has 'nature' in him: 'If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not'. While Hamlet is expected to avenge his father's death, the ghost does not want him to take any action against his mother – Gertrude is to be left to heaven and to her own conscience ('those thorns that in her bosom lodge to prick and sting her').

**Hamlet immediately dedicates himself to the business of gaining revenge, telling the ghost: 'And thy commandment all alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain . . .'** He now sees his mother as 'most pernicious woman' and Claudius as a 'smiling, damned villain'. Hamlet is forcibly struck by the king's falseness and by the contrast between appearance and reality: 'That one may smile and smile and be a villain'.

**Hamlet is profoundly shocked by what he has learned; indeed in the immediate aftermath of his dramatic encounter with the ghost he struggles to retain his mental and emotional stability.** Horatio can make little sense of Hamlet's 'wild and whirling words'. Of course

when we consider the series of traumatic events that Hamlet has experienced, we should not be surprised that he struggles to maintain the balance of his mind. He has lost his beloved father to murder, his mother has married his uncle with unseemly haste, he has just learned that his father was murdered by his own brother (who is now Hamlet's step-father) and, finally, he has been told that he must avenge his father's death and set everything right.

**At the close of this dramatic scene, Hamlet tells Horatio of his intention of wearing a mask of madness: 'As I perchance hereafter shall think meet to put an antic disposition on'. Hamlet's act of madness is a tactic designed to confuse Claudius and so give him an advantage over his arch-enemy.** The battle of wits between Hamlet and his uncle is now underway. **Of course, in the light of his earlier incoherence, the audience may well question whether Hamlet's madness is pretended or real.** Hamlet's adoption of a mask of madness must also be viewed in the context of the falseness of the Danish court. Hamlet knows that he is living in a world of false appearances where people are rarely what they seem to be. By pretending to be mad, Hamlet is equipping himself to survive in a world of deception.

**Hamlet's remarks at the close of this scene suggest that he is a reluctant avenger: 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right'.** Hamlet had earlier promised the ghost that he would 'sweep' to his revenge but, once his passion subsides and he has time to reflect, he draws back from the idea of revenge. **The audience is now aware of the complexity of Hamlet's character. While Hamlet has a passionate side, he is a thinker rather than a man of action and the more he thinks, the less likely he is to act.** In this sense Hamlet seems to be temperamentally unsuited to the role of avenger.





## KEY POINTS

- This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the play – Hamlet speaks with his father's ghost and learns the horrifying truth about his death.
- The ghost's dramatic revelations confirm Hamlet's suspicions regarding Claudius and reinforce the disgust he feels towards his mother.
- By ordering Hamlet to 'revenge his foul and most unnatural murder', the ghost sets the main action of the play in motion.
- The theme of false appearances is to the fore in this scene. Gertrude seemed to be devoted to King Hamlet, yet she betrayed his memory by marrying so soon after his death, and is also accused of betraying him in life by committing adultery. Claudius, apparently the lawful king, is a usurper (an illegal king) and a 'smiling damned villain'.
- Hamlet is profoundly affected by his encounter with the ghost and is quite incoherent when he meets Horatio immediately afterwards.
- Hamlet will pretend to be mad in order to gain an advantage on Claudius.
- We become aware of the complexity of Hamlet's character when he initially declares that he will 'sweep' to his revenge before cursing the heavy duty with which he has been burdened.
- Hamlet is more a thinker than a man of action, and consequently is temperamentally unsuited to gaining revenge.

## Act 2 Scene 1

**This scene throws some light on the character of Polonius. While he had earlier lectured Laertes about his behaviour, it is apparent that his own moral standards are not very high. While his final piece of advice to his son ('This above all, to thine own self be true') is high-sounding, we quickly realise that, far from being noble, Polonius is in fact an utterly cynical and unscrupulous character who does not even trust his own children.** Laertes is in Paris and Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to spy on him. He even tells Reynaldo to make false accusations about Laertes so that others might be encouraged to speak openly about any vices or weaknesses that Laertes may have. Polonius is a Machiavellian character who believes that the end justifies the means: 'And I believe it is a fetch of warrant you laying these slight sullies on my son . . . Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth'. The idea of a father instructing someone to tell lies about his own son is reprehensible, but Polonius sees nothing

wrong with tarnishing his son's reputation. He is a devious and thoroughly unpleasant character whose falseness renders him perfectly suited to the role of adviser to the equally false king.

**Ophelia is very upset by her encounter with Hamlet. She is troubled by Hamlet's disordered appearance** ('his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled . . .'), **and is particularly disturbed by the strange look on his face** ('And with a look so piteous in purport as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors . . .'). While this may be an early example of Hamlet's 'antic disposition' (acting madness), it is more likely that he is genuinely disturbed by recent experiences, notably his encounter with the ghost. Hamlet has to deal with his feelings of grief and betrayal and come to terms with the weighty responsibility that has been laid on his shoulders. It may also be the case that Hamlet is upset by Ophelia's rejection of him. **Her refusal to meet with him heightens Hamlet's sense of isolation in the Danish court. Ophelia is**