The Tragedy of Prince Hamlet

William Shakespeare

Act I Scenes I and II

1. When and where does this scene take place?

**Marcellus.** What, has this thing appear'd again to-night? 30

**Bernardo**. I have seen nothing.

**Marcellus.** Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,

And will not let belief take hold of him

Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us.

***Therefore I have entreated him along, 35***

***With us to watch the minutes of this night,***

***That, if again this apparition come,***

***He may approve our eyes and speak to it.***

**Horatio.** Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.

**Bernardo.** Sit down awhile, 40

***And let us once again assail your ears,***

***That are so fortified against our story,***

What we two nights have seen.

2. Why has Marcellus invited Horatio to the battlements? Be specific. “To see the ghost” is not sufficient.

3. Analyze Bernardo’s metaphor in lines 41 and 42. What is being compared to what, and why?

**Horatio.** What art thou that usurp'st this time of night

Together with that fair and warlike form 60

In which the majesty of buried Denmark

Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee speak!

4. To whom is Horatio speaking?

5. Rewrite his question in your own words. (Be sure to paraphrase all parts of the question. “Who are you?” is not a sufficient answer.)

**Marcellus.** Is it not like the King?

**Horatio.** As thou art to thyself. 75

Such was the very armour he had on

When he th' ambitious Norway combated.

So frown'd he once when, in an angry parle,

He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.

'Tis strange.

6. What two specific facts about the king does Horatio reveal to Marcellus? And why might these be significant?

**Marcellus.** Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour,

With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch.

**Horatio.** In what particular thought to work I know not;

But, in the gross and scope of my opinion,

This bodes some strange eruption to our state.

7. What does Horatio conclude?

**Marcellus.** Good now, sit down, and tell me he that knows,

Why this same strict and most observant watch

So nightly toils the subject of the land,

And why such daily cast of brazen cannon

And foreign mart for implements of war; 90

Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task

Does not divide the Sunday from the week.

What might be toward, that this sweaty haste

Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day?

Who is't that can inform me?

8. Marcellus asks six questions. Please list them below. Don’t forget to be as specific as possible.

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

f)

9. What is the significance of the details revealed by the questions?

**Horatio:** Our last king,

Whose image even but now appear'd to us,

Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway …

… Dar'd to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet

Did slay this Fortinbras; who…

…Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands ….

…Now, sir, young Fortinbras,

Of unimproved mettle hot and full,

Hath in the skirts of Norway, here and there,

Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes, …

… which is no other …

But to recover of us, by strong hand

those foresaid lands

So by his father lost; and this, I take it,

Is the main motive of our preparations,

The source of this our watch, and the chief head

Of this post-haste and romage in the land.

10. Please paraphrase Horatio’s answers to Marcellus’ questions. A great answer will include much glorious detail.

1.

2.

3.

11. What are two or three themes that Horatio may be introducing at this time?

a) b) c)

**Horatio.** A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.

In the most high and palmy state of Rome, REQUIRED LINES 130

A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,

The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead

Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;

12. Analyze Horatio’s metaphor (line 129). What is being compared to what and why?

13. Horatio is a scholar, and therefore his mind’s eye is troubled. Why?

**Horatio.**Break we our watch up; and by my advice,

Let us impart what we have seen to-night

Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,

This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.

14. What does Horatio suggest? And why does he suggest it?

Act I Scene II

1. When and where does this scene take place?

**Claudius:** Though yet of Hamlet ***our*** dear brother's death

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

To bear ***our*** hearts in grief, and ***our*** whole kingdom

To be contracted in one brow of woe,

Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature 205

That ***we*** with wisest sorrow think on him

Together with remembrance of ***ourselves***.

15. Analyze Claudius’ syntax and his use of the royal “we”.

**Claudius:** Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,

Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,

Have we, as 'twere with a **defeated joy**, 210



With **an auspicious**, and **a dropping eye**,

With **mirth in funeral**, and with **dirge in marriage**,

**In equal scale weighing delight and dole**,

Taken to wife;

16. How does Claudius characterize his attitude toward his marriage? Analyze his diction and imagery.

**Laertes:** My **dread** lord,

Your leave and favour to return to France;

From whence **though willingly** I came to Denmark

To show **my duty in your coronation**, 255

Yet now I must confess, that **duty** done,

My thoughts and wishes bend again toward France

And **bow** them to **your gracious** leave and **pardon**.

17. What does the tone and substance of Laertes’ request reveal about his relationship with Claudius? Analyze specific diction and syntax.

**Claudius:** ….But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son-

**Hamlet.** [aside] A little more than **kin**, and less than **kind**!

18. Paraphrase Hamlet’s aside in reaction to Claudius’ greeting.

**Claudius:** How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

**Hamlet:** No, my Lord, I’m too much in the sun.

19. What literary device is Hamlet using when he replies to Claudius. What is he saying?

**Gertrude:** Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, 270

And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Do not forever with thy vailed lids

Seek for thy noble father in the dust.

Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,

Passing through nature to eternity.

20. Why should Hamlet end his mourning, according to his mother?

**Hamlet**: Ay, madam, it is common.

**Gertrude.** If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee?

**Hamlet:** **Seems, madam, Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'**

**'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother, 280**

**Nor customary suits of solemn black,**

Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,

No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

Nor the dejected havior of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, **285**

**'That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,**

**For they are actions that a man might play;**

**But I have that within which passeth show-**

**These but the trappings and the suits of woe.**

21. What does Hamlet’s response to his mother’s plea reveal about the contrast between his feelings and those of Claudius, Gertrude, and the courtiers?

**Claudius:** Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, 290

To give these mourning duties to your father;

But you must know, **your father lost a father;**

**That father lost, lost his**, and the survivor bound

In filial obligation for some term

To do obsequious sorrow. But to persever 295

In obstinate condolement is **a course**

**Of impious stubbornness. 'Tis unmanly grief;**

It shows **a will most incorrect to heaven**,

**A heart unfortified**, **a mind impatient**,

**An understanding simple and unschool'd**; 300

For what we know must be, and is as common

As any the most vulgar thing to sense,

Why should we in our **peevish opposition**

Take it to heart?

22. List five reasons why Hamlet should end his mourning for his father, according to Claudius.

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

23. Although his argument seems rational and balanced, what does Claudius imply about Hamlet’s character?

**Claudius**: …think of us 310

As of a father; for let the world take note

You are the most immediate to our throne,

And with no less nobility of love

Than that which dearest father bears his son

Do I impart toward you. For your intent 315

In going back to school in Wittenberg,

It is most retrograde to our desire;

And we beseech you, bend you to remain

Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,

Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

24. Claudius announces: “…let the world take note…” of what? Quote the lines that reveal the essence of Claudius’ announcement.

25. Why does Claudius ask Hamlet to stay in Denmark? What might be his ulterior motive?

**Gertrude:** Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.

I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.

**Hamlet.** I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

26. What is significant about this exchange?

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

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd 335

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! ah, fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature 340

Possess it merely.

27. Paraphrase lines 333 and 334 using “solid”, “sullied”, and “sallied.”

a)

b)

c)

28. Analyze Hamlet’s garden metaphor. What is being compared to what and why?

**Hamlet:** 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;

29. How does Hamlet characterize the contrast between his father and Claudius?

**Hamlet:** [My father] so loving to my mother

That he might not beteem the winds of heaven 345

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!- 350

**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 mourn'd longer) married with my uncle; 355

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 galled eyes,**

**she married**. O, most wicked speed, to post 360

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!

30. What image does Hamlet use to describe how soon Gertrude married Claudius?

31. Niobe, Queen of Thebes, boasted that her fourteen children were more lovely than Diana and Apollo. Because of her arrogance, her children were slain and Zeus turned Niobe to stone - yet still her tears flowed from the rock. Analyze the allusion to Niobe. Why is it ironic?

32. Why do you think Hamlet compares himself unfavorably to Hercules?

33. Analyze the effect of Hamlet’s repetition of “month”.

**Horatio:**My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

**Hamlet.** I prithee do not mock me, fellow student.

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

**Horatio.** Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon. 385

**Hamlet.** Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak'd meats

Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

34. Paraphrase lines 386 and 387. What does this reveal about Hamlet’s attitude toward the wedding and his relationship with Horatio?

**Hamlet:** If it assume my noble father's person,

I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape (open)

And bid me hold my peace….

…My father's spirit- in arms? All is not well.

**I doubt some foul play.** Would the night were come!

Till then sit still, my soul. **Foul deeds will rise,**

**Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.**

35. Hamlet’s suspicions are aroused. Why is he anxious to speak to the ghost?

36. Paraphrase the last two lines. What does this reveal about Hamlet’s moral understanding?

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Act I Scene III Study Guide

1. When and where does this scene take place?

**Laertes.** For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour, [group #1]

Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood;

A violet in the youth of primy nature,

Forward, not permanent- sweet, not lasting; 490

The perfume and suppliance of a minute;

No more.

2. To what does Laertes compare “the trifling of [Hamlet’s] favour.”

a)

b)

c)

**Laertes:** …but you must fear, 500 **[group #2]**

His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own;

For he himself is subject to his birth.

**He may not, as unvalued persons do,**

**Carve for himself, for on his choice depends**

**The safety and health of this whole state, 505**

**And therefore must his choice be circumscrib'd**

**Unto the voice and yielding of that body**

**Whereof he is the head.**

3. Why must Ophelia fear Hamlet’s attention?

**Laertes:** Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain [group #3]

If with too credent ear you list his songs,

Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open 515

To his unmast'red importunity.

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,

And keep you in the rear of your affection,

Out of the shot and danger of desire.

4. Paraphrase lines 513 to 516.

5. Analyze the metaphor in 518 and 519.

**Ophelia:** I shall th' effect of this good lesson keep [group #4]

As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother, 530

Do not as some ungracious pastors do,

Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,

Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,

Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads

And recks not his own rede.

6. Why do you think Ophelia so readily agrees to follow her brother’s advice?

7. What advice does Ophelia offer to her brother?

**Polonius:** Give thy thoughts no tongue, 545

Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar:

Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,

Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel;

But do not dull thy palm with entertainment 550

Of each new-hatch'd, unfledg'd comrade. Beware

Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,

Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee.

8. Paraphrase, in glorious detail, the fatherly advice offered by Polonius.

**Polonius:** Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice;

Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. 555

Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,

But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy; [group #5]

For the apparel oft proclaims the man.

9. Again, paraphrase, in glorious detail, the fatherly advice offered by Polonius.

**Polonius.** Neither a borrower nor a lender be; [group #6]

For loan oft loses both itself and friend,

And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

This above all- to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day, 565

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

10. Again, paraphrase, in glorious detail, the fatherly advice offered by Polonius.

**Polonius.** What is between you? Give me up the truth.

**Ophelia.** He hath, my lord, of late made many **tenders**

Of his affection to me.

**Polonius.** Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl,

Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.

Do you believe his **tenders**, as you call them?

**Ophelia.** I do not know, my lord, what I should think,

**Polonius**. Marry, I will teach you! Think yourself a **baby**

That you have ta'en these **tenders** for true pay,

Which are not sterling. **Tender** yourself more dearly,

Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase, 595

Running it thus) you'll **tender** me a **fool**.

11. Analyze the effects created by the various meanings of the words “tender” and “fool.”

**Ophelia:** My lord, he hath importun'd me with love

In honourable fashion.

**Polonius:** Ay, springes to catch woodcocks! I do know,

When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul

Lends the tongue vows. These blazes, daughter,

Giving more light than heat … 605

…You must not take for fire.

… In few, Ophelia,

Do not believe his vows; This is for all:

I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth

Have you so slander any moment leisure 620

As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.

Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways.

**Ophelia.** I shall obey, my lord.

12. Compare and contrast the advice offered to Ophelia by her father and by her brother. How does each man characterize Ophelia? Hamlet? (I’m looking for a thorough and thoughtful analysis of direct evidence.)

13. Why do you think Shakespeare introduces the possible romance between Ophelia and Hamlet in this manner?

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Act I Scenes IV and V Study Guide

1. When and where do these scenes take place?

**Hamlet:** So oft it chances in particular men

That, for some vicious mole of nature in them,

As in their birth, - wherein they are not guilty…

…that these men

Carrying, I say, ***the stamp of one defect***,

Being nature's livery, or fortune's star, 660

Their virtues else- be they as pure as grace…

Shall in the general censure take corruption

From that particular fault.

2. How does Hamlet characterize the concept of the tragic flaw?

**Hamlet.** Why, what should be the fear?

**I do not set my life at a pin's fee;**

**(And for my soul, what can it do to that,**

**Being a thing immortal as itself?)**  700

It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.

3. Why does Hamlet have the courage to follow the ghost?

**Horatio:** **What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,**

**Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff**

That beetles o'er his base into the sea,

And there assume some other, horrible form 705

Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason

And **draw you into madness?**

4. Of what two dangers does Horatio warn Hamlet?

**Hamlet:** **My fate cries out**

**And makes each petty artery in this body (Group #1)**

**As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.**

**[Ghost beckons.] 720**

**Still am I call'd. Unhand me, gentlemen.**

**By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!-**

**I say, away!** - Go on. I'll follow thee.

5. What is a second reason Hamlet has the courage to follow the ghost? What does Hamlet threaten to do to anyone who attempts to prevent him from speaking to the ghost? And what does this indicate about Hamlet’s character?

**Father’s Ghost:** I am thy father's spirit, 745

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,

And for the day confin'd to fast in fires, (Group #2)

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are burnt and purg'd away.

List, list, O, list!

If thou didst ever thy dear father love-

6. Why is the ghost doomed to walk the night? Analyze the ghost’s appeals to pathos.

**Father’s Ghost:** But that I am forbid

To tell the secrets of my prison house, 750

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,

Thy knotted and combined locks to part,

And each particular hair to stand on end 755

Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.

But this eternal blazon must not be

To ears of flesh and blood.

7. If the ghost were free to describe the torments of his “prison house”, what effect would the description have on Hamlet?

a)

b)

c)

d)

**Father’s Ghost:** Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

**Hamlet.** Murder?

**Father's Ghost.** Murder most foul, as in ***the best*** it is;

But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.

**Hamlet.** Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift 765

As meditation or the thoughts of love,

May sweep to my revenge.

8. Hamlet promises to sweep to his revenge. How quickly does he imagine doing this?

**Father’s Ghost:** Now, Hamlet, hear.

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,

A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark (Group #3)

Is by a forged process of my death

Rankly abus'd. But know, thou noble youth, 775

The serpent that did sting thy father's life

Now wears his crown.

**Hamlet.** ***O my prophetic soul!*** My uncle?

9. What is the significance of Hamlet’s exclamation?

**Father’s Ghost:** Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast, 780

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-

O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power

So to seduce!- won to his shameful lust

The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.

10. How does the ghost characterize Claudius’ seduction of Gertrude?

**Father’s Ghost:** O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there, 785

From me, whose love was of that dignity

That it went hand in hand even with the vow (Group #4)

I made to her in marriage, and to decline

Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor

To those of mine!

11. In what way does the ghost’s characterization of Claudius echo Hamlet’s?

**Father’s Ghost:** Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand

Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd;

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,

Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd, 815

No reckoning made, but sent to my account

With all my imperfections on my head.

12. In what four ways has Claudius betrayed Hamlet’s father?

**Father’s Ghost:** If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not.

**Let not the royal bed of Denmark be 820**

**A couch for luxury and damned incest.**

**But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, (Group #5)**

**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 825**

**To prick and sting her.** Fare thee well at once….

…Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me. Exit.

13. What motive for revenge does the ghost offer to Hamlet? Why is it a powerful motive?

14. Analyze the metaphor in lines 824-826.

15. And why do you think the ghost asks Hamlet to spare Gertrude from “this act” of revenge?

**Hamlet:** O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? 830

And shall I couple [add] hell? Hold, hold, my heart!

And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,

But bear me stiffly up. ***Remember thee?***

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. ***Remember thee?*** 835

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 840

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmix'd with baser matter.

16. Analyze the metaphor in lines 836 to 842.

**Hamlet:** **Yes, by heaven! (Group #6)**

**O most pernicious woman!**

**O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!**

**My tables! Meet it is I set it down 845**

**That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;**

**At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.** [Writes.]

So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:

It is 'Adieu, adieu! Remember me.'

I have sworn't.

17. Why do you think Hamlet thinks it “meet” (necessary) to note that “one may smile, and smile, and be a villain”?

18. Hamlet doesn’t seem as inclined to forgive Gertrude as his father’s ghost is. Why is that?

**Horatio:** These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

**Hamlet.** I am sorry they offend you, heartily; 880

Yes, faith, heartily.

**Horatio.** There's no offence, my lord.

**Hamlet.** Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,

And much offence too. Touching this vision here,

**It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you…** 885

And now, good friends,

As you are friends, scholars, and soldiers,

Give me one poor request…

**… Never make known what you have seen to-night.**

19. Why does Hamlet insist that there is “much offence”?

20. Why do you think Hamlet is so insistent upon secrecy?

**Hamlet:** Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,

How strange or odd … I bear myself

***(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet [necessary]***

***To put an antic disposition on),***  925

That you, at such times seeing me, never shall, …note

That you know aught of me- …Swear.

20. Hamlet hints at a tactic he may employ to accomplish his revenge. What is it?

**Hamlet:** Rest, rest, perturbed spirit! So, gentlemen,

Let us go in together; (Group #7)

And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.

**The time is out of joint. O cursed spite**

**That ever I was born to set it right!**

Nay, come, let's go together.

21. Analyze the concluding couplet. What is Hamlet’s attitude about his task?