Hamlet

by William Shakespeare · Language: EN

Summary by booksummaryai.com — https://booksummaryai.com/country/en/hamlet

Overview

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is a tragedy that explores themes of revenge, madness, moral corruption, and the complexities of human existence. The play opens with Hamlet grappling with the recent death of his father, King Hamlet, and the hasty marriage of his mother, Queen Gertrude, to his uncle, Claudius, who has now usurped the throne. The ghost of his father appears to Hamlet, revealing that he was murdered by Claudius and demanding that Hamlet avenge his death.

Consumed by grief and a profound sense of disillusionment, Hamlet struggles with the moral implications of revenge and the burden of action. He feigns madness to conceal his intentions and observe Claudius, leading to a series of events that spiral into chaos and destruction. His indecision, philosophical introspection, and the pervasive corruption within the Danish court ultimately lead to a tragic climax where nearly all the main characters perish, leaving a lasting legacy on literature and the study of the human psyche.

Key Takeaways

- Indecision and overthinking can lead to catastrophic delays and unintended consequences.
- Revenge, even when seemingly justified, often consumes the avenger and those around them.
- The line between genuine madness and feigned insanity can become dangerously blurred.
- Corruption within leadership can poison an entire society, leading to widespread suffering.
- Grief, when unaddressed or suppressed, can manifest in destructive and unpredictable ways.
- Appearances can be deeply deceptive, making it difficult to discern truth from manipulation.
- The contemplation of mortality and the afterlife profoundly influences human action and inaction.

Chapter Summaries

Act 1: The Ghost's Revelation

The play opens on the ramparts of Elsinore Castle, where guards and Horatio witness the apparition of King Hamlet's ghost. Young Hamlet, still mourning his father's recent death and his

mother Gertrude's hasty marriage to his uncle Claudius, expresses his deep melancholy. Claudius, now King, addresses the court, sending ambassadors to Norway and granting Laertes permission to return to France. Hamlet delivers his first soliloquy, lamenting his mother's quick remarriage. Horatio informs Hamlet about the Ghost, and Hamlet resolves to see it. The Ghost appears to Hamlet, revealing that he was murdered by Claudius, who poured poison into his ear while he slept. The Ghost demands Hamlet seek revenge but spare his mother. Hamlet, shocked and enraged, vows to avenge his father and decides to feign madness to conceal his intentions.

Act 2: Hamlet's Feigned Madness and the Players

Polonius dispatches Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris. Ophelia reports to her father, Polonius, that Hamlet has visited her in a disheveled state, behaving erratically. Polonius concludes that Hamlet's madness is a result of unrequited love for Ophelia. King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, concerned by Hamlet's transformation, summon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's childhood friends, to discover the cause of his distress. Hamlet quickly perceives their true mission as spies. A troupe of traveling actors arrives at Elsinore. Hamlet, inspired, devises a plan to use the players to confirm Claudius's guilt: he will have them perform a play, 'The Murder of Gonzago,' which closely mirrors the circumstances of his father's assassination, hoping to observe Claudius's reaction. Hamlet delivers his 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' soliloquy, chastising himself for his inaction.

Act 3: The Mousetrap and Confrontations

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report their failure to Claudius and Gertrude. Polonius and Claudius arrange for Ophelia to encounter Hamlet while they secretly observe. Hamlet delivers his famous 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy, contemplating suicide and the fear of the unknown. He then harshly rejects Ophelia, telling her to 'get thee to a nunnery.' The players perform 'The Mousetrap.' During the depiction of the murder, Claudius reacts violently, rising and demanding lights, confirming his guilt to Hamlet and Horatio. Hamlet is summoned to his mother's chamber. On his way, he finds Claudius attempting to pray and refrains from killing him, fearing Claudius's soul would go to heaven. In Gertrude's closet, Hamlet confronts her, and accidentally kills Polonius, who was hiding behind an arras. The Ghost reappears, reminding Hamlet of his mission.

Act 4: Exile, Madness, and Return

Gertrude informs Claudius of Polonius's death, and Claudius decides to send Hamlet to England immediately, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with secret orders for Hamlet's execution. Hamlet disposes of Polonius's body. Fortinbras's army marches through Denmark on its way to Poland, prompting Hamlet's 'How all occasions do inform against me' soliloquy, contrasting his inaction with Fortinbras's decisive pursuit of honor. Ophelia, driven mad by her father's death and Hamlet's departure, sings fragmented songs and distributes symbolic flowers. Laertes returns from France, enraged by his father's death and sister's madness, demanding answers from Claudius. Claudius manipulates Laertes, convincing him Hamlet is responsible and

proposing a fencing match with a poisoned foil and a poisoned drink as backup. Hamlet's letter to Horatio announces his escape from the ship to England, having been captured by pirates, and his imminent return to Denmark.

Act 5: The Tragic Climax

Hamlet and Horatio encounter two gravediggers, leading to Hamlet's contemplation of mortality and his famous interaction with Yorick's skull. Ophelia's funeral procession arrives, revealing her death by drowning. Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave, expressing his profound grief, and Hamlet reveals himself, proclaiming his love for Ophelia and fighting with Laertes. Back at the castle, Hamlet tells Horatio how he discovered Claudius's plot and replaced the execution letter with one ordering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. Osric invites Hamlet to the fencing match with Laertes. The duel begins. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup intended for Hamlet and dies. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned foil, then Hamlet wounds Laertes with the same foil. Laertes confesses Claudius's treachery. Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned foil and forces him to drink the remaining poison. Hamlet dies, asking Horatio to tell his story. Fortinbras arrives, claiming the throne of Denmark.

Themes

- Revenge and Justice
- Madness and Sanity
- Mortality and Existence
- Corruption of Power
- Appearance vs. Reality
- Indecision and Action

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Hamlet about?

Hamlet is about Prince Hamlet of Denmark, who is visited by the ghost of his deceased father. The ghost reveals that Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, murdered him and usurped the throne. Hamlet struggles with the moral dilemma of avenging his father, feigning madness to investigate, which leads to a tragic series of events involving betrayal, death, and profound philosophical introspection.

Is Hamlet worth reading?

Yes, Hamlet is widely considered one of the greatest works in the English language. It offers deep insights into human psychology, morality, and the nature of grief and revenge. Its rich language, complex characters, and timeless themes make it a profoundly rewarding and

thought-provoking read for anyone interested in literature, philosophy, or drama.

How does Hamlet end?

Spoiler: Hamlet ends with a tragic climax where almost all the main characters die. During a duel, Laertes wounds Hamlet with a poisoned rapier, but Hamlet retaliates. Queen Gertrude accidentally drinks poisoned wine. Hamlet kills Claudius before succumbing to the poison himself. Only Horatio survives to tell the story, and Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, arrives to claim the Danish throne.

Who should read Hamlet?

Hamlet is ideal for readers interested in classic literature, drama, philosophy, and psychology. Students of English literature, theater enthusiasts, and anyone who enjoys complex narratives exploring themes of revenge, madness, morality, and human nature will find it deeply engaging. It's a foundational text for understanding Western literary tradition.

How long does it take to read Hamlet?

Reading Hamlet typically takes about 2 to 3 hours for an average reader. The play is approximately 30,000 words long. However, understanding and appreciating its intricate language and themes may require a slower pace or multiple readings.

Best Quotes

“To be, or not to be, that is the question.”

Act III, Scene I

Spoken by Hamlet in his most famous soliloquy, this line encapsulates his contemplation of life, death, and the suffering inherent in existence versus the unknown terrors of the afterlife. It highlights his profound indecision and philosophical struggle.

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

Act I, Scene IV

Uttered by Marcellus, a guard, after the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears. This line foreshadows the moral and political corruption that permeates the Danish court, suggesting that the kingdom's troubles stem from a deeper, systemic decay.

“Frailty, thy name is woman!”

Act I, Scene II

Hamlet exclaims this in his first soliloquy, lamenting his mother Gertrude's hasty marriage to Claudius after his father's death. It reflects his misogynistic despair and disillusionment with

female constancy, generalizing his mother's perceived weakness to all women.

“Get thee to a nunnery!”

Act III, Scene I

Hamlet aggressively tells Ophelia this during their confrontation. It can be interpreted as a command to enter a convent to preserve her purity from the corrupting world, or as a harsh insult implying she is a prostitute, reflecting his bitter view of women.

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.”

Act II, Scene II

Polonius says this as an aside after speaking with Hamlet, who is feigning madness. It reveals Polonius's shrewd observation that Hamlet's seemingly nonsensical words contain a hidden, rational purpose, hinting at the intelligence behind Hamlet's "antic disposition."

“The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.”

Act II, Scene II

Hamlet declares this at the end of his "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" soliloquy. He plans to use a play, "The Mousetrap," to reenact his father's murder, hoping to observe Claudius's reaction and confirm his guilt.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Act I, Scene V

Hamlet tells his friend Horatio this after encountering his father's ghost. It suggests the existence of supernatural phenomena and mysteries beyond human understanding and rational explanation, challenging Horatio's more pragmatic worldview.

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be.”

Act I, Scene III

Polonius gives this advice to his son Laertes before Laertes departs for France. It's part of a longer speech of worldly wisdom, cautioning against financial entanglements that can damage both wealth and friendships.

“This above all: to thine own self be true.”

Act I, Scene III

Also from Polonius's advice to Laertes, this line is often quoted as a maxim for integrity and authenticity. Polonius suggests that by being true to oneself, one cannot be false to others, emphasizing the importance of self-knowledge and honesty.

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

Act III, Scene II

Queen Gertrude says this while watching the play-within-a-play. She comments on the Player Queen's excessive vows of fidelity, ironically highlighting her own hasty remarriage and suggesting that over-the-top declarations often mask insincerity.

“Sweets to the sweet: farewell!”

Act V, Scene I

Gertrude utters these words as she scatters flowers on Ophelia's grave. It is a poignant farewell, expressing her sorrow and regret for Ophelia's tragic death, and perhaps a wish that Ophelia could have been Hamlet's bride.

“Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!”

Act V, Scene II

Horatio speaks these tender words as Hamlet dies in his arms. It is a heartfelt eulogy for his friend, expressing deep affection and sorrow, and wishing Hamlet a peaceful passage into the afterlife.

“A little more than kin, and less than kind.”

Act I, Scene II

Hamlet speaks this as an aside about Claudius. "Kin" refers to their new relationship as uncle-father, while "kind" means both natural and affectionate. Hamlet expresses his disgust at their unnatural kinship and Claudius's lack of humanity.

“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt.”

Act I, Scene II

Hamlet's first soliloquy begins with this expression of suicidal despair. He wishes his physical body would dissolve, reflecting his profound grief over his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage, and his desire to escape his painful existence.

“The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!”

Act I, Scene V

Hamlet says this after the Ghost reveals Claudius's murder. He feels the burden of a world thrown into disorder and laments his fate as the one chosen to restore balance, highlighting his initial reluctance and sense of overwhelming responsibility.

“Words, words, words.”

Act II, Scene II

Hamlet dismissively replies with this to Polonius, who asks what he is reading. It underscores Hamlet's feigned madness and his contempt for Polonius's superficiality, suggesting that Polonius only understands the literal, not the deeper meaning.

“What a piece of work is a man!”

Act II, Scene II

Hamlet expresses this to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, reflecting on humanity's potential for greatness and beauty. However, the full quote reveals his disillusionment, as he immediately follows it by saying man delights him not, highlighting his melancholic view.

“I must be cruel, only to be kind.”

Act III, Scene IV

Hamlet tells his mother, Gertrude, this after confronting her about her marriage to Claudius and accidentally killing Polonius. He believes his harshness is necessary to force her to see the error of her ways and save her soul.

“Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio.”

Act V, Scene I

Hamlet speaks this while holding the skull of the former court jester, Yorick, in the graveyard. It is a meditation on mortality, the fleeting nature of life, and the inevitability of death, even for those once full of life and humor.

“The rest is silence.”

Act V, Scene II

These are Hamlet's dying words. They signify his acceptance of death and the end of his tumultuous journey. It suggests a final peace after a life filled with noise, conflict, and existential questioning.

“Give me that man that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him in my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, as I do thee.”

Act III, Scene II

Hamlet says this to Horatio, praising his friend's stoicism and emotional control. It expresses Hamlet's deep admiration for Horatio's steady temperament, contrasting it with his own volatile emotions, and solidifying their bond of true friendship.

“Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love.”

Act II, Scene II

These lines are from a letter Hamlet wrote to Ophelia, which Polonius reads aloud. They express Hamlet's passionate and unwavering love for Ophelia, using hyperbolic comparisons to emphasize the certainty of his affection, despite his later cruel treatment.

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions.”

Act IV, Scene V

Claudius speaks this to Gertrude, observing the rapid succession of tragedies befalling the royal family—Polonius's death, Ophelia's madness, and Laertes's return. It highlights the overwhelming and compounding nature of misfortune.

“There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.”

Act V, Scene II

Hamlet tells Horatio this before the final duel. He expresses a belief in divine providence and fate, suggesting that despite human efforts and plans, a higher power ultimately guides and determines outcomes, offering a sense of resignation and trust.

“To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub.”

Act III, Scene I

From Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, this line reveals his fear of what lies beyond death. While sleep offers an escape from suffering, the uncertainty of dreams (the afterlife) makes him hesitate, highlighting his existential dread.

“Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.”

Act III, Scene I

Claudius says this after observing Hamlet's erratic behavior during the "nunnery" scene with Ophelia. It reveals his suspicion and fear that Hamlet's madness, whether real or feigned, poses a significant threat to his reign and must be monitored closely.

“The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown.”

Act I, Scene V

The Ghost of Hamlet's father reveals this to Hamlet, identifying Claudius as the murderer. This metaphor clearly names Claudius as the treacherous villain, setting the stage for Hamlet's quest for revenge and exposing the deep corruption at court.

“Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.”

Act I, Scene V

The Ghost commands Hamlet with these words, laying upon him the solemn duty to avenge his father's death. This imperative drives much of the play's plot, initiating Hamlet's internal and external conflicts regarding justice and retribution.

“O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven.”

Act III, Scene III

Claudius speaks this in a soliloquy while attempting to pray. He acknowledges the gravity of his sin—fratricide—and expresses his profound guilt. This moment reveals his inner torment and the moral corruption underlying his kingship.

“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.”

Act III, Scene I

From Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, this line suggests that overthinking and moral considerations (conscience) prevent decisive action. It explains why people endure suffering rather than facing the unknown of death, highlighting Hamlet's own inaction.

Questions & Answers

What is the central conflict of Hamlet?

The central conflict in "Hamlet" is primarily internal, revolving around Prince Hamlet's struggle to avenge his father's murder while grappling with moral dilemmas, existential doubts, and his own melancholic nature. Externally, it involves his conflict with his uncle Claudius, who usurped the throne and married Hamlet's mother, and the broader corruption within the Danish court. Hamlet's indecision and philosophical ponderings delay his revenge, leading to tragic consequences for nearly all characters involved.

Why does Hamlet delay his revenge?

Hamlet delays his revenge for several complex reasons. Initially, he seeks absolute proof of Claudius's guilt, which he gains through "The Mousetrap" play. However, even after confirmation, he struggles with the moral implications of murder, fears the consequences for his own soul, and questions the validity of the Ghost's command. His melancholic temperament, philosophical nature, and tendency towards introspection over action also contribute to his prolonged indecision, leading to a cycle of overthinking.

What is the significance of the ghost of Hamlet's father?

The Ghost of Hamlet's father is crucial as it initiates the play's central plot: Hamlet's quest for revenge. It reveals the truth of King Hamlet's murder by Claudius, exposing the corruption at the heart of the Danish court. The Ghost also serves as a catalyst for Hamlet's "antic disposition" and fuels his internal conflict, constantly reminding him of his duty while also raising questions about its own nature—is it a genuine spirit or a demonic delusion?

Who is Ophelia and what is her role in the play?

Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes, and Hamlet's love interest. Her role is tragic; she becomes a pawn in the political machinations of the court. Her father and brother warn her against Hamlet, and Hamlet himself, in his feigned madness, treats her cruelly. Her innocence and vulnerability are exploited, leading to her mental breakdown after her father's death and Hamlet's rejection, ultimately culminating in her accidental drowning.

How does Ophelia die?

Ophelia dies by drowning. After her father, Polonius, is killed by Hamlet, and Hamlet rejects her, she descends into madness. She wanders by a brook, singing and making garlands of flowers. While attempting to hang a garland on a willow tree, a branch breaks, and she falls into the water. She does not struggle but rather floats for a while, singing, until her clothes become waterlogged and pull her down to her death.

What is "The Mousetrap" and why does Hamlet stage it?

"The Mousetrap" is the informal name Hamlet gives to the play-within-a-play, formally titled "The Murder of Gonzago," which he asks a troupe of actors to perform. Hamlet stages it to "catch the conscience of the King." He modifies the play to closely mimic the circumstances of his father's murder, hoping to observe Claudius's reaction and confirm his guilt, as the Ghost's testimony alone was not enough for him to act.

What is the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio?

Hamlet and Horatio share a deep and unwavering friendship, representing a bond of loyalty and trust amidst the pervasive deceit in the court. Horatio is Hamlet's confidant, a rational and stoic scholar whom Hamlet admires for his emotional control. He remains by Hamlet's side throughout the play, witnessing his struggles and ultimately becoming the sole survivor tasked with telling Hamlet's tragic story truthfully to the world.

What advice does Polonius give Laertes?

Before Laertes departs for France, Polonius gives him a lengthy series of maxims. Key advice includes: be true to yourself ("to thine own self be true"), do not borrow or lend money, listen more than you speak, dress well but not ostentatiously, and be careful in choosing friends. This advice, while well-intentioned and often quoted, is somewhat ironic given Polonius's own meddling and duplicity throughout the play.

Why does Hamlet pretend to be mad?

Hamlet pretends to be mad, adopting an "antic disposition," primarily as a strategic maneuver. It allows him to observe the court, particularly Claudius, without arousing direct suspicion about his true intentions. His madness also provides a cover for his erratic behavior and allows him to speak uncomfortable truths and criticisms under the guise of insanity, giving him a degree of freedom and protection in a dangerous environment.

What happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's former school friends, are sent by Claudius to accompany Hamlet to England, carrying a letter that orders Hamlet's execution. Hamlet discovers the plot, cleverly alters the letter to instead order the execution of the bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and escapes back to Denmark. They are thus executed in England, unwitting victims of their loyalty to Claudius and their betrayal of Hamlet.

What is the significance of the gravedigger scene?

The gravedigger scene (Act V, Scene I) is significant for several reasons. It provides comic relief amidst the tragedy, but more importantly, it offers a profound meditation on mortality and the universality of death. Hamlet's encounter with Yorick's skull and his philosophical discussion with Horatio underscore the ephemeral nature of life, the leveling power of death, and the ultimate futility of worldly achievements, preparing the audience for the play's tragic climax.

How does Gertrude die?

Gertrude dies by accidentally drinking poisoned wine intended for Hamlet. During the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, Claudius prepares a poisoned cup for Hamlet, in case Laertes's poisoned sword fails. Gertrude, unaware of the poison, drinks from the cup to toast Hamlet's success. She collapses and dies, realizing in her final moments that she has been poisoned.

Spoiler: What is the final outcome for the main characters?

Spoiler: Almost all main characters die. Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude all die in the final scene. Hamlet kills Claudius, but is himself fatally wounded by Laertes's poisoned sword. Laertes also dies from his own poisoned sword, after being wounded by Hamlet. Gertrude dies from accidentally drinking poisoned wine meant for Hamlet. Ophelia drowns earlier in the play.

Polonius is killed by Hamlet. Only Horatio survives to tell Hamlet's story, and Fortinbras arrives to claim the Danish throne.

What themes are explored in Hamlet?

"Hamlet" explores numerous profound themes. Key among them are revenge versus justice, the nature of madness (both feigned and real), mortality and the inevitability of death, the corrupting influence of power, the complexities of family relationships, and the struggle between action and inaction. It also delves into themes of deception, appearance versus reality, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world.

How does Fortinbras become king of Denmark?

Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway, becomes king of Denmark through a combination of inheritance and circumstance. His father, King Fortinbras, was killed by King Hamlet (Hamlet's father). After the entire Danish royal family is wiped out in the final scene, Fortinbras arrives with his army, having just returned from a successful campaign in Poland. With no direct heir to the Danish throne, and having a legitimate claim from his lineage, Horatio supports his succession, and Fortinbras takes control, promising order.

What is Hamlet's view on death?

Hamlet's view on death is complex and evolving. Initially, he yearns for death as an escape from suffering ("O, that this too too solid flesh would melt"). He contemplates suicide but is restrained by religious prohibitions. Later, in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy, he fears the unknown of the afterlife. By the end of the play, after the gravedigger scene, he seems to accept death's inevitability and the role of divine providence, viewing it with a more resigned and fatalistic perspective.

What is the role of women in Hamlet?

Women in "Hamlet" are largely portrayed as victims or objects of male manipulation and judgment, reflecting the patriarchal society of the time. Gertrude is seen as weak and lustful by Hamlet, while Ophelia is a pawn, manipulated by her father, brother, and Hamlet. Both women ultimately meet tragic ends, highlighting their limited agency and the destructive consequences of the male-dominated conflicts surrounding them. Their roles underscore themes of misogyny and vulnerability.

Why does Laertes seek revenge against Hamlet?

Laertes seeks revenge against Hamlet for two primary reasons: the murder of his father, Polonius, and the madness and subsequent death of his sister, Ophelia, which he attributes to Hamlet's actions. Overwhelmed by grief and manipulated by Claudius, Laertes becomes a foil to Hamlet, acting decisively and passionately in his quest for vengeance, contrasting sharply with Hamlet's earlier hesitation.

What is the meaning of the title "Hamlet"?

The title "Hamlet" refers directly to the protagonist, Prince Hamlet of Denmark, and signifies that the play is fundamentally a character study. It delves deeply into his psyche, his moral and philosophical struggles, and his journey of grief, revenge, and self-discovery. The title emphasizes that the play's core is not just a plot of murder and revenge, but an exploration of the complex inner world and tragic fate of its central figure.

What can readers learn from Hamlet about human nature?

Readers can learn much about human nature from "Hamlet," including the complexities of grief, the paralysis of indecision, the corrupting nature of power, and the struggle between moral duty and personal desire. The play exposes humanity's capacity for both profound thought and brutal action, highlighting the internal conflicts between reason and emotion, and the universal search for meaning in a world often filled with injustice and suffering.