

HAMLET

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Story. The play, *Hamlet*, is set in a Denmark which, to Shakespeare's late 16th century English audience, seemed distant and menacing. Appropriately, then, the drama opens on the battlements of the King of Denmark, and with the appearance of a ghost to the night watchmen on guard. The ghost is the specter of the father of Hamlet, current prince of Denmark; the ghost is calling on Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, whom the new king Claudius—with Hamlet's mother as his spouse—has usurped.

Informed of this apparition, and its command, Hamlet sets about the process of revenge. From the start, though, we realize that this young man will have difficulty meeting his challenge. He is one in whom 'the native hue of resolution is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought'; he has trouble finding the resolution to act. His mind turns over the means at his disposal for carrying out his revenge, and comes on the idea of staging a play, at court, in which he will be able to catch the 'conscience of the King,' that is to watch the reactions of the usurper king, Claudius, and to determine from how he reacts whether or not he is guilty of killing Hamlet's father. When the 'play within a play' comes to the issue of a plot to kill the king, the usurper King Claudius jumps up in agitation and leaves the hall. Hamlet's experiment has been a success, and proved his point. Yet Hamlet is still Hamlet, and still faces the need to put hard steel to his resolve. Not surprisingly, given Hamlet's introspective and reflective nature, the further development of the play will simply underline Hamlet's inability to act.

There follow, consequently, scenes in which Hamlet decides to confront his mother in her bedroom, and to force an admission of guilt from her. All such efforts, on Hamlet's part, only go to prove that in the end he too is fatally wound into the destiny network. In the instance of the bedroom, just as Hamlet is about to demand the full truth from his mother, he hears a noise behind the arras, and mistakenly assumes that it is King Claudius, eavesdropping on the pair. Running his sword through the arras, in an effort to dispatch his stepfather, Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius, the father of Laertes and Ophelia. From this point on Hamlet's fate is sealed. He is viewed as a madman and a murderer, and Claudius has him shipped off to England. Ophelia, who is in love with him, drowns herself, the establishment digs in deeper, and we know that Hamlet's own death is not far on the horizon.

Approaching Elsinore, back in Denmark, Hamlet learns that Ophelia has drowned herself. Blaming Laertes, Hamlet lets himself get drawn into a nefariously planned duel with Laertes, in which Hamlet scores the first blood against his opponent, subsequently refusing to accept the poisoned goblet which has been prepared for him. His victory is short lived: Laertes inflicts a fatal wound on Hamlet, though not before Hamlet hears Laertes confess his knowledge of the whole initial regicide. Not much later, the 'sweet prince,' Hamlet, goes to meet his own Creator.

Characters

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is trapped by destiny in a sonship which leaves him little wiggle room. He is under pressure, from the start, to avenge his father's death, and his own death is exactly thereby foretold.

Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, and sister of Laertes, is from the beginning of the play discussed as a prospective bride for Hamlet. In the end, however, the love between these two becomes dreadfully counterproductive, and Ophelia drowns herself.

Polonius is the father of Ophelia and Laertes, and chief counsellor to the King of Denmark. Fatally and mistakenly stabbed by Hamlet, Polonius is best known to Shakespeare's readers as a fatherly but garrulous old man, who cannot speak without using adages and wise saws.

Themes

Action vs. inaction. From the start of the play, Hamlet is faced with a serious challenge, to avenge the murder of his father by Claudius. The play concerns the inner struggle of Hamlet to decide to commit murder, and the outward consequences of his indecisiveness.

Madness versus sanity. Hamlet feigns madness, in order to buy time and freedom, to observe what is going on at court. In the end, though, he loses not only his own sanity but his life. He has pushed his experiment too far.