

# *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

By William Shakespeare

**Instructions:** You will keep the pages of the study guide in your notebook under “Prose.” Please answer all questions ON YOUR OWN PAPER (word process or handwrite). Each act’s questions will be *due* the day AFTER we finish reading that particular act in class. These are worth substantial points, and should be completed thoughtfully, seriously, and comprehensively.

## Before You Read

### *Hamlet Act 5*

#### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Do you think an act of revenge is ever justified? Why or why not?

##### **Make a List**

Revenge is a common theme in movies today. With a partner, make a list of movies that feature a revenge theme. Discuss the motives for revenge and the conclusion of each movie.

##### **Setting a Purpose**

Read to find out the conclusion to Shakespeare’s tale of revenge.

#### BACKGROUND

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##### **Did You Know?**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, minor characters in *Hamlet*, take center stage in Tom Stoppard’s play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. First performed in 1966, Stoppard’s play is a humorous look behind the scenes of *Hamlet* through the eyes of these two off-the-wall characters. Summoned to Denmark by the Danish king and queen, they encounter various amusing adventures along the way. Filled with witty dialogue, Stoppard’s play uses the absurd to highlight the futility of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s actions and their inability to change their destiny. The play was later made into an award-winning movie.

##### **Shakespeare’s Comic Characters**

Shakespeare’s tragedies frequently include characters that provide comic relief in the midst of seriousness. Their role is to relieve the emotional intensity generated by the other events of the play. At the same time, the presence of these characters can increase audience awareness of the seriousness of the surrounding events by providing contrast. Because they are on the outside of the main action of the play and have a different perspective from that of the main characters, the commentary of comic characters can also be a source of new insight for the audience and for other characters. The gravediggers in act 5, identified as “Clown” and “Other” in earlier editions of the play, serve this purpose. Think about how these two characters provide contrast to the serious events of act 5 and help Hamlet to gain new insight into life and death.

#### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**churlish** [chur’lish] *adj.* ill-mannered

**conjure** [kon’jər] *v.* call up

**equivocation** [i kwiv’ə kā’shən] *n.* a statement with two possible interpretations

**potent** [pōt’ənt] *adj.* strong; effective

**treachery** [treach’ə rē] *n.* act of disloyalty

**umbrage** [um’brij] *n.* displeasure; resentment

Study Guide Questions for Act V—Complete on your own paper (word process or handwrite)

Scene i

1. What complaint do the grave diggers have about Ophelia's "Christian burial"?
2. What is the grave digger doing when Hamlet joins him? What are the plays on words and jokes which Hamlet and the clown (grave digger) make? Is this an appropriate conversation at this point in the play? During such a scene? What attitude toward human existence does it reflect in Hamlet and in the grave digger? What does Hamlet not yet know?
3. What information is revealed about Hamlet's age?
4. Describe the character of Yorick and Hamlet's relation to him. Consider this passage in relation to the scene in Act I when Hamlet meets Horatio and declares him a friend and not a servant.
5. What philosophy toward human decay does Horatio express?
6. As the funeral procession approaches, why is Laertes arguing with the Doctor?
7. What does Gertrude reveal about her hopes for Ophelia? Does she mean it?
8. How does Laertes express his grief? What is Hamlet's reaction? What do they both symbolize by their actions?
9. Is Hamlet sincere in his expression of devotion to Ophelia? Is this change in his verbalization about his feelings toward her paralleled by any other changes in his character in Act IV? Has his separation from and return to the kingdom and his journey at sea affected his character?

Scene ii

1. What event does Hamlet recount to Horatio? What horrible revelation does he share with Horatio (about R&G)?
2. How does Hamlet feel about what will happen to R & G?
3. Describe Hamlet's understanding of his circumstances as he explains them to Horatio. Do you agree with his judgment?
4. What does Hamlet mean when he says "the interim is mine"?
5. Explain the reference to Laertes as a "foil."
6. To what other characters in the play is Osric like? Whom does he replace? What is Hamlet's attitude toward Osric? Why is Osric such an easy victim of Hamlet's wit? What is Osric's villainy?
7. What does Hamlet reveal about his skill in sword fighting? Does his account of his practicing help explain his delay in taking action?
8. What does Hamlet mean when he says "we defy augury" and "the readiness is all."
9. When Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, is it the work of double talk, sarcasm, or sincerity?
10. Does Laertes lie?
11. Why is it ironic for Hamlet to say, "I'll be your foil, Laertes?"
12. What crucial action does the king permit that reveals his own treachery? What is symbolized by the cup of wine and poison as instrument(s) of murder?
13. Why does Laertes suddenly confess to Hamlet and blame the king? In his final speech is Laertes expressing a fact or a hope?
14. Earlier Hamlet implies the time is his—"the interim is mine"—or that time does not matter—"the readiness is all." Why then does he declare "Had I but time..."? Whose words does this sentiment echo?
15. Why does Hamlet ask Horatio not to act like an "antique Roman"?
16. What view of Hamlet's character and of their relationship does Horatio express in his "sweet prince" speech?
17. What news comes from England? What significance is there in the paralleling of this announcement with the arrival of Fortinbras?
18. What orders does Horatio give to the soldiers?
19. Why is the last speech of the play given by Fortinbras? If tragedy is the death of an era, what is the contrast between the Denmark that is under Claudius' rule, the Denmark that could have been under young Hamlet's rule, and the Denmark that will be under Fortinbras' rule?
20. What is Fortinbras capable of understanding about Hamlet? What can he not understand?

## Act V, scene i

### Summary

In the churchyard, two gravediggers shovel out a grave for Ophelia. They argue whether Ophelia should be buried in the churchyard, since her death looks like a suicide. According to religious doctrine, suicides may not receive Christian burial. The first gravedigger, who speaks cleverly and mischievously, asks the second gravedigger a riddle: "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?" (V.i.46–47). The second gravedigger answers that it must be the gallows-maker, for his frame outlasts a thousand tenants. The first gravedigger corrects him, saying that it is the gravedigger, for his "houses" will last until Doomsday.

Hamlet and Horatio enter at a distance and watch the gravediggers work. Hamlet looks with wonder at the skulls they excavate to make room for the fresh grave and speculates darkly about what occupations the owners of these skulls served in life: "Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now . . . ?" (V.i.90–91). Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose grave he digs, and the gravedigger spars with him verbally, first claiming that the grave is his own, since he is digging it, then that the grave belongs to no man and no woman, because men and women are living things and the occupant of the grave will be dead. At last he admits that it belongs to one "that was a woman sir; but, rest her soul, she's dead" (V.i.146). The gravedigger, who does not recognize Hamlet as the prince, tells him that he has been a gravedigger since King Hamlet defeated the elder Fortinbras in battle, the very day on which young Prince Hamlet was born. Hamlet picks up a skull, and the gravedigger tells him that the skull belonged to Yorick, King Hamlet's jester. Hamlet tells Horatio that as a child he knew Yorick and is appalled at the sight of the skull. He realizes forcefully that all men will eventually become dust, even great men like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Hamlet imagines that Julius Caesar has disintegrated and is now part of the dust used to patch up a wall.

Suddenly, the funeral procession for Ophelia enters the churchyard, including Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and many mourning courtiers. Hamlet, wondering who has died, notices that the funeral rites seem "maimed," indicating that the dead man or woman took his or her own life (V.i.242). He and Horatio hide as the procession approaches the grave. As Ophelia is laid in the earth, Hamlet realizes it is she who has died. At the same moment, Laertes becomes infuriated with the priest, who says that to give Ophelia a proper Christian burial would profane the dead. Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave to hold her once again in his arms. Grief-stricken and outraged, Hamlet bursts upon the company, declaring in agonized fury his own love for Ophelia. He leaps into the grave and fights with Laertes, saying that "forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love, / make up my sum" (V.i.254–256). Hamlet cries that he would do things for Ophelia that Laertes could not dream of—he would eat a crocodile for her, he would be buried alive with her. The combatants are pulled apart by the funeral company. Gertrude and Claudius declare that Hamlet is mad. Hamlet storms off, and Horatio follows. The king urges Laertes to be patient, and to remember their plan for revenge.

## Act V, scene ii

### Summary

The next day at Elsinore Castle, Hamlet tells Horatio how he plotted to overcome Claudius's scheme to have him murdered in England. He replaced the sealed letter carried by the unsuspecting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which called for Hamlet's execution, with one calling for the execution of the bearers of the letter—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves. He tells Horatio that he has no sympathy for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who betrayed him and catered to Claudius, but that he feels sorry for having behaved with such hostility toward Laertes. In Laertes' desire to avenge his father's death, he says, he sees the mirror image of his own desire, and he promises to seek Laertes' good favor.

Their conversation is interrupted by Osric, a foolish courtier. Osric tries to flatter Hamlet by agreeing with everything Hamlet says, even when he contradicts himself; in the space of seconds, he agrees first that it is cold, then that it is hot. He has come to tell them that Claudius wants Hamlet to fence with Laertes and that the king has made a wager with Laertes that Hamlet will win. Then Osric begins to praise Laertes effusively, though Hamlet and Horatio are unable to determine what point he is trying to make with his overly elaborate proclamations. Finally, a lord enters and asks Hamlet if he is ready to come to the match, as the king and queen are expecting him. Against Horatio's advice, Hamlet agrees to

fight, saying that “all’s ill here about my heart,” but that one must be ready for death, since it will come no matter what one does (V.ii.222). The court marches into the hall, and Hamlet asks Laertes for forgiveness, claiming that it was his madness, and not his own will, that murdered Polonius. Laertes says that he will not forgive Hamlet until an elder, an expert in the fine points of honor, has advised him in the matter. But, in the meantime, he says, he will accept Hamlet’s offer of love.

They select their foils (blunted swords used in fencing), and the king says that if Hamlet wins the first or second hit, he will drink to Hamlet’s health, then throw into the cup a valuable gem (actually the poison) and give the wine to Hamlet. The duel begins. Hamlet strikes Laertes but declines to drink from the cup, saying that he will play another hit first. He hits Laertes again, and Gertrude rises to drink from the cup. The king tells her not to drink, but she does so anyway. In an aside, Claudius murmurs, “It is the poison’d cup: it is too late” (V.ii.235). Laertes remarks under his breath that to wound Hamlet with the poisoned sword is almost against his conscience. But they fight again, and Laertes scores a hit against Hamlet, drawing blood. Scuffling, they manage to exchange swords, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with Laertes’ own blade.

The queen falls. Laertes, poisoned by his own sword, declares, “I am justly kill’d with my own treachery” (V.ii.318). The queen moans that the cup must have been poisoned, calls out to Hamlet, and dies. Laertes tells Hamlet that he, too, has been slain, by his own poisoned sword, and that the king is to blame both for the poison on the sword and for the poison in the cup. Hamlet, in a fury, runs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies crying out for help. Hamlet tells Horatio that he is dying and exchanges a last forgiveness with Laertes, who dies after absolving Hamlet.

The sound of marching echoes through the hall, and a shot rings out nearby. Osric declares that Fortinbras has come in conquest from Poland and now fires a volley to the English ambassadors. Hamlet tells Horatio again that he is dying, and urges his friend not to commit suicide in light of all the tragedies, but instead to stay alive and tell his story. He says that he wishes Fortinbras to be made King of Denmark; then he dies.

Fortinbras marches into the room accompanied by the English ambassadors, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio says that he will tell everyone assembled the story that led to the gruesome scene now on display. Fortinbras orders for Hamlet to be carried away like a soldier.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_

# Active Reading

## *Hamlet Act 5*

Claudius has concocted a scheme to gain revenge against and ultimately kill Hamlet. Use this sequence chain to track the scheme as it unfolds.

