

# LOOK BACK AT ACT 1 SCENE 1



## Comprehension

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1. How would you describe the mood of the watchmen, Francisco and Barnardo?
2. What is the weather like on the platform? What time is it?
3. How many times have the watchmen seen the Ghost?
4. Why has Marcellus invited Horatio to keep watch with them?
5. What does Horatio ask the Ghost and how does it respond?
6. Horatio says that he recognises the Ghost's armour. Where has he seen it before?
7. Horatio believes that the Ghost's appearance is an omen. What does he think it means?
8. What activities does Marcellus demand to know more about?
9. What is young Fortinbras doing in 'the skirts of Norway', according to Horatio?
10. Horatio refers to strange occurrences in Rome before the death of Julius Caesar. Describe these events in your own words.
11. How do the watchmen try to stop the Ghost leaving the second time?
12. Both Horatio and Marcellus have theories about why the Ghost disappeared when the cock crew. Briefly describe them.
13. What do the watchmen decide to do based on what they have seen?

## Character Development

### Horatio

1. Horatio is the first major character to appear in the play. What is your initial impression of him? Explain your answer.
2. Horatio is initially sceptical about the Ghost, but quickly changes his mind upon seeing it. What does this tell you about his personality?
3. Do you think it is brave or arrogant of Horatio to address the Ghost so boldly?

### Fortinbras

4. Fortinbras remains off-stage for much of the play, but he is often discussed by the other characters and remains a strong presence throughout. What impression do you get of Fortinbras from this scene?

## Think About Themes

### Politics

- Denmark is secretly preparing for war, while young Fortinbras of Norway is gathering troops. Why might Fortinbras want to attack Denmark?
- What connection does the Ghost – the late king – have to the current tensions between the two countries?
- Based on the discussion between Horatio and the guards, what kind of king do you think Old Hamlet was?

## Imagery Corner

### Sickness and Disease

How many references to sickness can you find in this scene?

## You are the Director

How would you handle the Ghost's entrances and exits in this scene? What effects would you use to convey its supernatural origins? How fearful should the other characters be in the Ghost's presence?

# SCENE ANALYSIS

## ACT 3 SCENE 1



### SCENE SUMMARY

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius on their meeting with Hamlet. Claudius and Polonius arrange for Hamlet to meet Ophelia, and prepare to spy on their conversation. Hamlet gives a moving soliloquy in which he ponders the trials of life and the attractions of suicide. He pretends to be mad during his meeting with Ophelia. He verbally abuses her and reveals an extremely negative attitude toward women. Ophelia is distraught at the prince's behaviour.

### A CLOSER LOOK

#### ► LINES 1–28: ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN REPORT TO CLAUDIUS

Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern if they have been able to learn the cause of Hamlet's apparently mad behaviour. (1–4) They report that although Hamlet confessed to being out of sorts, he would not tell them why. (5–6) Every time they broached the subject with him, the prince would dodge the issue with a 'crafty madness'. (8)

Gertrude asks if they persuaded Hamlet to distract himself with some pastime or other. Rosencrantz tells her of the arrival of the players, and how Hamlet reacted with a 'kind of joy'. (19) Polonius confirms this. He adds that the prince wishes the royal couple to attend the players' performance that night.

Claudius is glad to hear this news, probably believing it a sign that his stepson is returning to normality. He promises that he and Gertrude will attend: 'With all my heart, and it doth much content me / To hear him so inclined'. (25–6)

#### ► LINES 29–50: CLAUDIUS AND POLONIUS PREPARE TO SPY ON HAMLET

Claudius and Polonius prepare to spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. The prince's reaction to Ophelia will tell them if frustrated love for her is the cause of his strange behaviour. (36–8) Gertrude departs, telling Ophelia she hopes it is indeed Hamlet's love for her that has made him mad. She hopes a successful romance between them might bring Hamlet back to his usual self: 'so shall I hope

your virtues/ Will bring him to his wonted way again,/ To both your honours'. (41–3)

### ► LINES 50–55: CLAUDIUS DESCRIBES HIS GUILT

Polonius instructs his daughter to walk up and down the hall, with the appearance of intently reading a book. This will make her seem pious and holy. (45–7) Polonius remarks how a devoted and religious appearance often disguises a sinister intent: 'with devotion's visage,/ And pious action, we do sugar o'er/ The devil himself'. (48–50)

This remark strikes a chord with Claudius, who draws aside to express his guilty conscience: 'How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience'. (51) He conceals his guilt with elegant words and phrases just as a prostitute might conceal her ugliness with make-up: 'The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,/ Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it/ Than is my deed to my most painted word'. (52–4)

### ► LINES 57–89: TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Hamlet wonders if it's better to be dead than alive: 'To be, or not to be, that is the question'. (57) He says that death is like sleep, an easeful rest after life's sufferings and difficulties: 'To die, to sleep –/ No more; and by a sleep to say we end/ The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/ That flesh is heir to'. (61–4) He finds the thought of death's eternal sleep an attractive one: "'tis a consummation/ Devoutly to be wished'. (64–5)

Hamlet says we are put off dying by the fear of the unknown. We are uncertain what the sleep of death might bring, fearing it might be filled with terrible dreams:

*Ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause. There's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life* (66–70)

Hamlet then lists some of the ills we must endure on our journey through life: the evildoing of oppressors, the scorn and abuse of the proud, the pain of unrequited love, the arrogance of bureaucracy, and the insults that worthy people have to endure from the unworthy.

He wonders why we endure the pain of living when it is so easy for us to kill ourselves: 'When he himself might his quietus make/ With a bare

bodkin?' (76–7) He suggests that we go on living only because we are afraid of what might await us after death. We would rather suffer the pains of this world than face something worse in the afterlife. (82–3)

Hamlet says that thinking too much about the consequences of our actions prevents us from taking any action at all. Once we have an urge to do something, we should act straightaway. If we stop and think, our resolve will falter and we will fail to act: 'And thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,/ And enterprises of great pitch and moment/ With this regard their currents turn awry/ And lose the name of action'. (85–9)

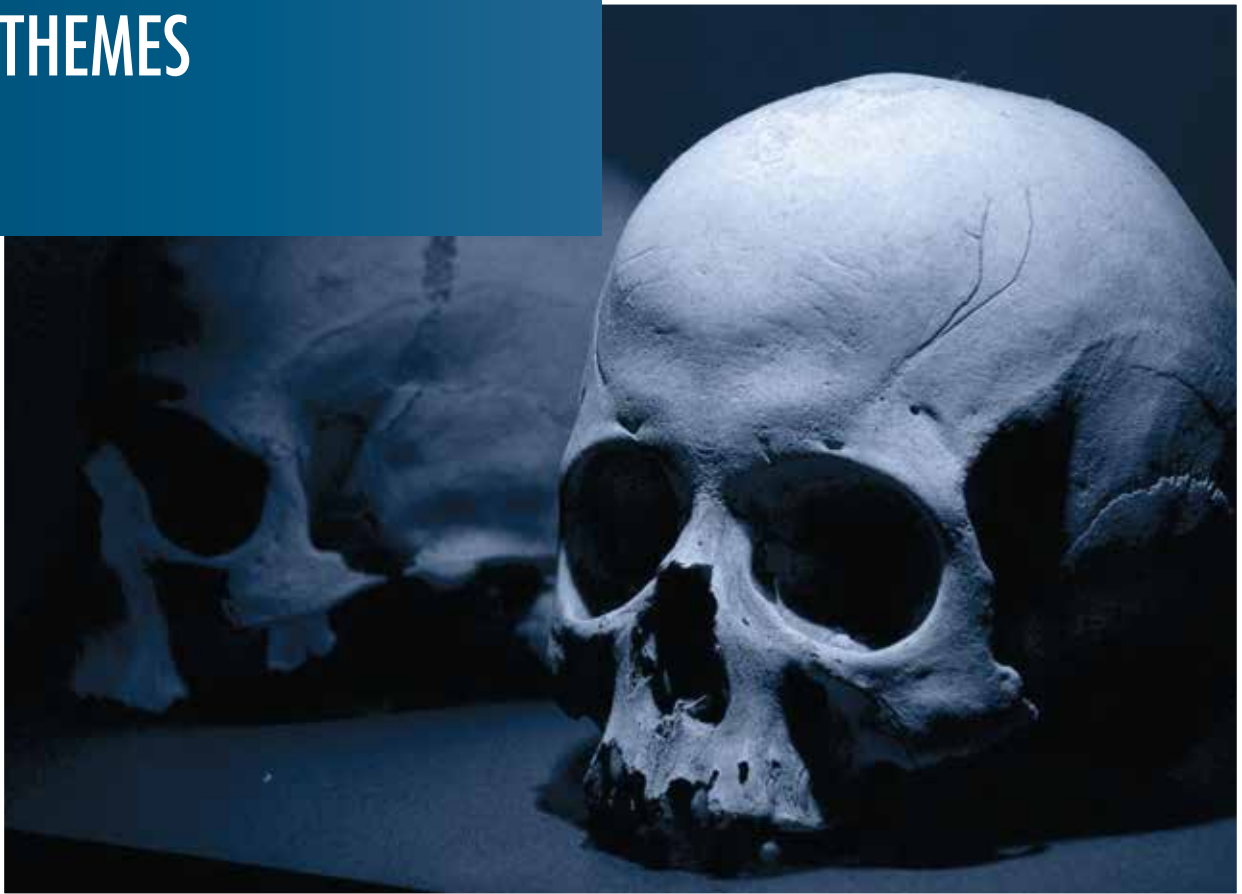
### ► LINES 90–150: HAMLET TORTMENTS OPHELIA

Ophelia enters, interrupting Hamlet's reflections. Ophelia tells Hamlet that she has gifts and tokens ('remembrances') from him that she wishes to return. (94–6) She remarks on the eloquence of his love letters: 'words of so sweet breath composed'. (99) She states that his gifts have now lost their charm because Hamlet has apparently changed his mind about her: 'For to the noble mind/ Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind'. (101–2)

Hamlet denies that he ever gave her anything and then becomes quite aggressive:

- He tells her that he loves her and then quickly changes his mind. Ophelia says that she was deceived by his declarations of love.
- He tells her repeatedly that she should enter a 'nunnery', or convent. He tells her not to have any children, saying that by doing so she will only be bringing more sinners into the world: 'Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' (122–3)
- He asks Ophelia if she is honest and beautiful, a question that confuses her. (104–6) He suggests that it is impossible for beautiful people to be honest.
- He describes himself as an evil person, saying he has more evil intentions than he can possibly carry out: 'more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in'. (126–8)
- He says that if she ever marries, she should marry a fool, because intelligent men know the degrading effects women have upon their characters: 'marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them'. (139–40)
- He says that women are false and deceitful, making special mention of the way they use make-up to disguise their true appearance: 'God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another'. (143–4)
- He attacks the way women dance, walk and speak; the way they use fashionable names instead of natural ones; and how they are sexually forward, then act as if they don't know any better. (144–6)

## THEMES



## THE MEANING OF LIFE

### ► SIN AND THE AFTERLIFE

The world of *Hamlet* is one where people are haunted by a concern with the afterlife. For the medieval Danes portrayed in the play, life after death is a very real thing. After all, this is a play where the ghost of a dead person appears in the very first scene. Particularly pronounced is their awareness of hell and purgatory; their fear that dying in a state of sin will send their souls to unspeakable torments in the afterlife. This awareness of sin and the afterlife occurs again and again throughout the play:

- The ghost of Hamlet's father describes how he died in a state of sin: 'No reckoning made, but sent to my account/ With all my imperfections on my head'. (1.5.78–9) He therefore suffers unbearable and unmentionable tortures in purgatory. (1.5.10–22)
- The Ghost makes the point that Gertrude, too, will have to answer for her wrong-doings in the next life. (1.5.86–88)
- Hamlet laments that his father died 'full of bread', without the chance to fast or do penance, and therefore entered the next life in a sinful state. (3.3.81–3)
- Hamlet worries that the Ghost is in reality the devil trying to trick him into murdering an innocent man, thereby damning his soul to hell for eternity: 'The spirit that I have seen/ May be a devil ... [that] abuses me to damn me'. (2.2.569–74)
- Hamlet declares that only a fear of suffering in the next life prevents us ending the torments of this one. We postpone the tempting 'sleep of death' because we fear the terrible dreams it may contain. (3.1.67) According to the prince only the 'dread of something after death' stops us taking our own lives. (3.1.79)
- Claudius is deeply aware of the sins he committed in killing his brother and stealing the throne: 'Oh my offence is rank, it smells to heaven'. (3.3.37) He worries that he will suffer in the afterlife for these offences. (3.3.61–5)
- Laertes, too, is conscious of the possibility of damnation. But he is so enraged by his father's death that he will risk this fate in order to avenge the crime: 'Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!/ I dare damnation'. (4.5.132–3)
- The priest suggests that because Ophelia is a (possible) suicide she died in a state of terrible sin and cannot enter heaven. (5.1.207–10)



## AT A GLANCE: THEATRE IN HAMLET

### ▶ HAMLET'S LOVE OF THEATRE

The arrival of the players in Act 2 Scene 2 allows Hamlet to display his love of theatre. In fact it could be argued that their appearance brings him the only moment of genuine happiness he enjoys throughout the entire play. For a moment we sense his melancholy and self-disgust drop away – or at least recede – as his simple enthusiasm for the players and their art comes to the fore.

He immediately remarks how the players will be given great hospitality in Elsinore, insisting that they must be 'well bestowed' during their stay. (2.2.307–13, 495–6) It is obvious that he is familiar with this particular troupe and has seen them perform before. (2.2.399–405) He welcomes them warmly, calling them 'masters' and 'good friends'. (2.2.398–9)

His enthusiasm for and knowledge of drama is evident in how he immediately asks to hear a particular speech, and one from an obscure work at that. He knows entire passages of theatrical verse by heart, and is seemingly a good performer, earning Polonius's praise for his recital. (2.2.440–1) He is deeply moved by the player's speech regarding the tale of Pyrrhus, Polonius remarking how he has tears in his eyes, though of course we might expect a speech about a son avenging his father's murder to affect Hamlet deeply in his current state of mind.

### ▶ REFERENCES TO CONTEMPORARY EVENTS IN THE WORLD OF THEATRE

Shakespeare made his living in the world of London theatre, a competitive and cutthroat industry. The scene with the players features several 'shout-outs' or references to contemporary events in London's theatrical world, events that would have been familiar to his London audiences.

Hamlet is surprised to see that such a first-rate troupe of performers has been reduced to wandering the countryside looking for work when their base in the city offered them so much in terms of 'profit' and 'reputation'. (2.2.316-7) Rosencrantz explains

how the players have been driven from the city by a 'late innovation', a recent craze for child performers that is 'now the fashion'. (2.2.319, 327)

This reflects an actual trend in Shakespeare's time that threatened to drive the established theatre companies out of business. These new child-based troupes had child actors playing even the adult roles of kings, queens and soldiers. Hamlet's questions about this new trend – most obviously what will the child performers themselves do when they grow up now there's no room for adult players – no doubt reflects the worry and frustration this trend caused Shakespeare and others associated with the established acting companies.

Rosencrantz's reference to great 'to do' and 'controversy' in the theatrical world would have reminded Shakespeare's audience of the 'War of the Theatres', a conflict between rival theatre companies that was ongoing for several years when *Hamlet* was performed. The playwrights associated with each group mocked each other most bitterly in play after play – a kind of 17th century rap battle – and there were occasions when the rivalry spilled over into violence. We don't know what involvement – if any – Shakespeare had in the controversy but we can be sure this sly reference to contemporary events would have won knowing laughter from his audience.

We might also note the prince's reference to an obscure play, one that was performed on only one occasion because it was considered too deep and complex to gain popularity with the general public. (2.2.510–2) Can we detect here a complaint from Shakespeare himself about the difficulty of staging challenging plays, about the need to 'dumb down' his ideas for the general audience?

### ▶ THE PLAY WITHIN A PLAY

The 'play within a play' was a favourite device of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. This layering of one story inside another gave the dramatist the opportunity to showcase his skill and subtlety, showing how one layer of the story comments on and influences another. When done correctly it can produce a thrillingly disorientating effect in an audience: we lose ourselves in one narrative layer only to be pulled back into another. It also gave the playwright the chance to discuss and opine about elements of his own theatrical profession.