

## SEVEN SOLILOQUIES—THE HEART OF HAMLET

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Synopsis and text from the Folger Shakespeare Library

Events before the start of *Hamlet* set the stage for tragedy. When the king of Denmark, Prince Hamlet's father, suddenly dies, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, marries his uncle Claudius, who becomes the new king.

A spirit who claims to be the ghost of Hamlet's father describes his murder at the hands of Claudius and demands that Hamlet avenge the killing. When the councilor Polonius learns from his daughter, Ophelia, that Hamlet has visited her in an apparently distracted state, Polonius attributes the prince's condition to lovesickness, and he sets a trap for Hamlet using Ophelia as bait.

To confirm Claudius's guilt, Hamlet arranges for a play that mimics the murder; Claudius's reaction is that of a guilty man. Hamlet, now free to act, mistakenly kills Polonius, thinking he is Claudius. Claudius sends Hamlet away as part of a deadly plot.

After Polonius's death, Ophelia goes mad and later drowns. Hamlet, who has returned safely to confront the king, agrees to a fencing match with Ophelia's brother, Laertes, who secretly poisons his own rapier. At the match, Claudius prepares poisoned wine for Hamlet, which Gertrude unknowingly drinks; as she dies, she accuses Claudius, whom Hamlet kills. Laertes and then Hamlet die, both victims of Laertes' rapier.

There are three existing versions of Hamlet. The "First Quarto" is largely discounted as being an incomplete version, perhaps written out by a player. The "Second Quarto" and "First Folio" are complete, but there are words in one that do not appear in the other. The editors of the Folger Edition indicate words found only in the Folio version by pointed parentheses and those only found in the Second Quarto by squared brackets.

1) **ACT I, SCENE 2:** In an audience chamber at the castle of Elsinore, Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and the new king of Denmark, holds court. Claudius denies Hamlet's request to return to the university at Wittenberg. Hamlet, mourning his

father's death, is left alone to vent his despair over what he regards as his mother's all too hasty marriage to his uncle.

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
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  
Possess it merely. 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; so loving to my mother  
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven  
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!),  
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 mourned longer!), married with my uncle,  
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 gallèd eyes,  
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post  
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.

2) **ACT I, SCENE 5:** Hamlet has encountered what appears to be the Ghost of his late father, the former king. The Ghost tells Hamlet how Claudius murdered him and demands that Hamlet avenge him. After the Ghost exits, Hamlet reacts to this knowledge.

O all you host of heaven! O Earth! What else?  
 And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart,  
 And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,  
 But bear me (stiffly) up. Remember thee?  
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
 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  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!  
 O most pernicious woman!  
 O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!  
 My tables—meet it is I set it down  
 That one may smile and smile and be a villain.  
 At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.  
 「 *He writes.* 」  
 So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word.  
 It is “adieu, adieu, remember me.”  
 I have sworn 't.

**3) ACT II, SCENE 2:** Hamlet feigns madness to disguise his intentions of seeking revenge, confounding members of the court. A company of players known to Hamlet enter, and he convinces the lead player to deliver a speech about the death of a king from Greek legends. When he is alone, Hamlet recognizes to his shame that he has shown less intensity in avenging his father's death than the actor has done in performance. He decides to stage a play that mirrors the events told to him by the Ghost to determine whether Claudius is responsible for the former king's death.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all (his) visage waned,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,

A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit—and all for nothing!  
 For Hecuba!  
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to (Hecuba,)  
 That he should weep for her? What would he do  
 Had he the motive and (the cue) for passion  
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears  
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
 Make mad the guilty and appall the free,  
 Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed  
 The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,  
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
 And can say nothing—no, not for a king  
 Upon whose property and most dear life  
 A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?  
 Who calls me “villain”? breaks my pate across?  
 Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?  
 Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' th' throat  
 As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?  
 Ha! 'Swounds, I should take it! For it cannot be  
 But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
 I should (have) fatted all the region kites  
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!  
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
 (O vengeance!)  
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
 That I, the son of a dear 「 father 」 murdered,  
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
 Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words  
 And fall a-cursing like a very drab,  
 A stallion! Fie upon 't! Foh!  
 About, my brains!—Hum, I have heard  
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 Have, by the very cunning of the scene,  
 Been struck so to the soul that presently  
 They have proclaimed their malefactions;  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
 Play something like the murder of my father

Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick. If he do blench,  
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
May be a (devil,) and the (devil) hath power  
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
More relative than this. The play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

**4) ACT III, SCENE 1:** Hamlet muses on the value of life.

To be or not to be—that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—  
No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—  
To sleep, perchance to dream. 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.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveler returns, puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards (of us all,)

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.

**5) ACT III, SCENE 2:** Hamlet is exuberant that the play portraying the king's murder has had the desired effect on Claudius. His mother has called him to her sitting room, and he promises himself he will only harm her with words.

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn and hell itself (breathes) out  
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood  
And do such (bitter) business as the day  
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.  
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.  
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.  
I will speak (daggers) to her, but use none.  
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:  
How in my words somever she be shent,  
To give them seals never, my soul, consent.

**6) ACT III, SCENE 3:** Claudius, in a soliloquy of his own, expresses remorse for killing his brother and kneels to pray for forgiveness. Hamlet encounters him in this vulnerable state but ultimately decides to kill him later, when he is committing a sin.

Now might I do it (pat,) now he is a-praying,  
And now I'll do 't. <sup>†</sup> *He draws his sword.* <sup>‡</sup>  
And so he goes to heaven,  
And so am I (revenged.) That would be scanned:  
A villain kills my father, and for that,  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
Why, this is (hire) and (salary,) not revenge.  
He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven.

But in our circumstance and course of thought  
'Tis heavy with him. And am I then revenged  
To take him in the purging of his soul,  
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?  
No.

Up sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.

⌈ *He sheathes his sword.* ⌋

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At game, a-swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in 't—  
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be as damned and black  
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.  
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

**7) ACT IV, SCENE 4:** As he is escorted to his conveyance to England, Hamlet comes across soldiers of Fortinbras of Norway's army, who have been given permission to march across Denmark to invade Poland. He sees in them a model for himself in avenging his father's murder and resolves upon bloody action.

How all occasions do inform against me  
And spur my dull revenge. What is a man  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.  
Sure He that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and godlike reason  
To fust in us unused. Now whether it be  
Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on th' event  
(A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward), I do not know  
Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do,"  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do 't. Examples gross as Earth exhort me:  
Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed

Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honor's at the stake. How stand I, then,  
That have a father killed, a mother stained,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth  
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!

**BONUS - ACT V, SCENE 2:** Hamlet comes to terms with his fate, understanding that the fencing match to which he has been invited is no doubt a trap.

HORATIO

If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will  
forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.

HAMLET

Not a whit. We defy augury. There is (a)  
special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be  
(now,) 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be  
now; if it be not now, yet it (will) come. The  
readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves  
knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be.