

additional short speeches that he will write himself. Hamlet leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and now stands alone in the room.

He immediately begins cursing himself, bitterly commenting that the player who gave the speech was able to a depth of feeling and expression for figures who mean nothing to him, while Hamlet is unable to take action even with his far more powerful motives. He resolves to a for Claudius, forcing the king to watch a play whose intrigue closely resembles the murder of Hamlet's father; if the king is guilty, he thinks, he will surely show some visible sign of guilt when he sees his son on stage. Then, Hamlet reasons, he will obtain definitive proof of Claudius's guilt. "The play's the thing," he declares, "wherein I'll catch the of the king" (II.ii.581-582).

The arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the development of the most

### Analysis

If Hamlet is merely pretending to be mad, as he suggests, he does an astounding job. His is so convincing that many critics contend that his already shatters at the sight of his dead father's ghost. However, the acute and cutting observations he makes while being supposedly mad support the view that he is only pretending. Importantly, he declares, "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.361-362). That is, he is only "mad" at certain calculated times, and the rest of the time he knows what is what. But he is certainly confused and upset, and his confusion translates into an extraordinarily state of mind of madness.

This scene, by far the longest in the play, includes several important and furthers the development of some of the play's main themes. The scene contains four main parts: Polonius's conversation with Claudius and Gertrude, which includes the discussion with the; Hamlet's conversation with Polonius, in which we see Hamlet consciously shaming madness for the first time; Hamlet's reunion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and the scene with the players, followed by Hamlet's concluding on the theme of action. These separate intrigue developments take place in the same location and occur in rapid succession, allowing the audience to compare and contrast their thematic elements.

We have already seen the developing contrast between Hamlet and Laertes. The section involving the Norwegian ambassadors develops another important contrast, this time between Hamlet and Fortinbras. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras is the grieving son of a dead king, a prince whose uncle inherited the throne in his place. But where Hamlet has sunk into and indecision, Fortinbras has devoted himself to the pursuit

of. This contrast will be explored much more thoroughly later in the play. Here, it is important mainly to note that Fortinbras' uncle has forbidden him to attack Denmark but has given him permission to ride through Denmark on his way to attack Poland. This at least suggests the possibility that the King of Norway is trying to trick Claudius into allowing a army into his country. It is notable that Claudius appears indifferent to the fact that a powerful enemy will be riding through his country with a large army in tow. Claudius seems much more worried about Hamlet's madness, indicating that where King Hamlet was a powerful warrior who sought to expand Denmark's power abroad, Claudius is a politician who is more concerned about from within his state.

The arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of the most mystifying figures in Hamlet, is another important development. These two characters are explored by all of the members of the royal family and seem to exist in a state of fear that they will go astray, the wrong person, or give away the wrong secret at the wrong time. One of the strangest qualities of the two men is their extraordinary similarity. In fact, Shakespeare leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern almost entirely undifferentiated from one another. "Thanks, Rosencrantz, and gentle Guildenstern," Claudius says, and Gertrude replies, "Thanks, Guildenstern, and gentle Rosencrantz," almost as though it does not matter which is which (II.ii.33-34). The two men's questioning of Hamlet is a satirical skit of a Socratic dialogue. They propose possibilities, develop ideas according to impartial argument, and find their attempts to understand Hamlet's behavior entirely baffled by his disobliging replies.

"What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how unbounded in aptitudes in form, and moving, how express and praiseworthy in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the perfect example of animals! And yet to me, what is this expectance of dust?"

The other important event in this scene is the arrival of the players. The presence of players and play-acting within the play points to an important theme: that real life is in certain ways like play-acting.

Hamlet to be by the player king's ability to engage with the story, he is telling even though it is only an imaginative recreation. Hamlet is prevented from responding to his own situation because he doesn't have certain knowledge about it, but the player king, and theater audiences in general, can respond feelingly even to things they know to be untrue. In fact, most of the time people respond to their real-life situations with

feelings and actions that are not based on certain knowledge. This is what Hamlet refuses to do. His to act like he knows what he's doing when he really doesn't may be as heroic and/or quixotic and impossible. In either case, Hamlet's plan to trap the king by eliciting an emotional response is highly unsound: Claudius's feelings about a play could never be construed as an index of its truth.

## Act 11, Scene I Summary

Claudius and Gertrude discuss Hamlet's behavior with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who say they have been unable to learn the cause of his. They tell the king and queen about Hamlet's for the players. Gertrude and Claudius agree that they will see the play that evening.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, and Claudius orders Gertrude to leave as well, saying that he and Polonius intend to on Hamlet's with Ophelia. Gertrude exits, and Polonius directs Ophelia to walk around the lobby. Polonius hears Hamlet coming, and he and the king hide.

Hamlet enters, speaking thoughtfully and to himself about the question of whether to commit suicide to end the pain of experience.

"To be, or not to be: that is the question" (III.i.58). He says that the of life are such that no one would willingly bear them, except that they are afraid of "something after death" (III.i.80). Because we do not know what to expect in the afterlife, we would rather "bear those ills we have," Hamlet says, "than fly to others that we know not of (III.i.83-84). In mid-thought, Hamlet sees Ophelia approaching. Having received her orders from Polonius, she tells him that she wishes to return the tokens of love he has given her. Angrily, Hamlet denies having given her anything; he the dishonesty of beauty, and claims both to have loved Ophelia once and never to have loved her at all. Bitterly commenting on the wretchedness of humankind, he urges Ophelia to enter a rather than become a "breeder of sinners" (III.i.122-123). He criticizes women for making men behave like monsters and for contributing to the world's dishonesty by painting their faces to appear more beautiful than they are. Working himself into a rage, Hamlet denounces Ophelia, women, and humankind in general, saying that he wishes to end all marriages. As he storms out, Ophelia mourns the "noble mind" that has now into madness (III.i.149).

The king and Polonius from behind the Claudius says that Hamlet's strange behavior has clearly not been caused by love for Ophelia and that his speech does not seem like the speech of. He says that he fears that sits on something dangerous in Hamlet's soul like a bird sits on her egg, and that he fears what will happen when it hatches. He declares

that he will send Hamlet to England, in the hope that a change of scenery might help him get over his troubles. Polonius agrees that this is a good idea, but he still believes that Hamlet's agitation comes from loving Ophelia. He asks Claudius to send Hamlet to Gertrude's chamber, after the play, where Polonius can hide again and watch unseen; he hopes to learn whether Hamlet is really mad with love. Claudius agrees, saying that "[n]adness in great ones" must be carefully watched (III.i.187).

**Analysis**

"To be, or not to be" is the most famous line in English literature. What does it mean? Why are these words and what follows special?

One reason is that they are an example of Shakespeare's ability to make his characters seem three-dimensional. The audience senses that there is more to Hamlet's words than meets the ear—that there is something behind his words that is never spoken. Or, to put it another way, the audience witnesses signs of something within Hamlet's mind that even he isn't aware of. Hamlet is a fictitious character who seems to possess a mind. How does Shakespeare manage to accomplish this?

In the first place, Hamlet doesn't talk directly about what he's really talking about. When he questions whether it is better "to be, or not to be," the obvious, "Should I kill myself?" The entire strongly suggests that he is toying with suicide and perhaps trying to work up his courage to do it. But at no point does he say that he is in pain or discuss why he wants to kill himself. In fact, he never says "I" or "me" in the entire speech. He's not trying to "express" himself at all; instead he poses the question as a matter of debate. When he claims that everybody would commit suicide if they weren't uncertain about the afterlife, it sounds as if he's making an argument to convince an imaginary listener about an abstract point rather than directly addressing how the question applies to him. Now, it's perfectly ordinary for characters in plays to say something other than what they mean to other characters (this suggests that they are consciously hiding their true motives), but Hamlet does it when he's talking to himself. This creates the general impression that there are things going on in Hamlet's mind that he can't think about directly.

While we're on the subject of what's going on inside Hamlet's mind, consider his encounter with Ophelia. This conversation, closely watched by Claudius and Polonius, is, in fact, a test. It's supposed to establish whether Hamlet's madness stems from his lovesickness over Ophelia. Before we, the audience, see this encounter, we already think

we know more than Claudius does: we know that Hamlet is only acting crazy, and that he's doing it us to hide the fact that he's plotting against (or at least investigating) his uncle. Therefore, it can't be true that he's acting mad because of his love for Ophelia. But witnessing Hamlet's encounter with her throws everything we think we know into question.

Does Hamlet mean what he says to Ophelia? He says that he did love her once but that he doesn't love her now. There are several problems with concluding that Hamlet says the opposite of what he means in order to appear crazy. For one thing, if he really does love her, this is unnecessarily self-destructive behavior. It's unnecessary because it doesn't very much; that is, it doesn't make Claudius suspect him less. His professions of love make him appear fickle, or emotionally withdrawn, rather than crazy.

Is Hamlet really crazy or just pretending? He announced ahead of time that he was going to act crazy, so it's hard to that he (coincidentally) really went mad right after saying so. But his behavior toward Ophelia is both self-destructive and with emotional intensity. It doesn't obviously further his plans. Moreover, his bitterness against Ophelia, and against women in general, with his general discontentedness about the state of the world, the same discontentedness that he expresses when he thinks no one is watching. There is a passionate intensity to his unstable behavior that keeps us from viewing it as fake.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to ask this question: if a person in a rational state of mind decides to act as if he is crazy, to abuse the people around him regardless of whether he loves those people or hates them, and to give free expression to all of his most thoughts, when he starts to carry those actions out, will it even be possible to say at what point he stops pretending to be crazy and starts actually being crazy?

### Act III, Scene II Summary

That evening, in the castle hall now doubling as a theater, Hamlet anxiously lectures the players on how to act the parts he has written for them. Polonius shuffles by with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet dispatches them to hurry the players in their preparations. Horatio enters, and Hamlet, pleased to see him, praises him heartily, expressing his affection for and high opinion of Horatio's mind and manner, especially Horatio's qualities of self-control and reserve. Having told Horatio what he learned from the ghost—that Claudius murdered his father—he now asks him to watch Claudius carefully during the play so that they might compare their impressions of his

behavior afterward. Horatio agrees, saying that if Claudius shows any signs of guilt, he will detect them.

The trumpets play a Danish march as the audience of lords and ladies begins streaming into the room. Hamlet warns Horatio that he will begin to act strangely. Sure enough, when Claudius asks how he is, his response seems quite insane: "Excellent, I'faith; of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise" (III.ii:84-86); Hamlet asks Polonius about his history as an actor and Ophelia with a string of puns.

The players enter and act out a brief, silent version of the play to come called a "dumbshow." In the dumbshow, a king and queen display their love. The queen leaves the king to sleep, and while he is sleeping, a man murders him by pouring poison into his ear. The murderer tries to seduce the queen, who gradually accepts his advances.

The players begin to enact the play in full, and we learn that the man who kills the king is the king's nephew. Throughout Hamlet keeps up a running commentary on the characters and their actions, and continues to Ophelia with sexual references. When the murderer pours the poison into the sleeping king's ear, Claudius rises and cries out for light. Chaos ensues as the play comes to a sudden, the torches are lit, and the king flees the room, followed by the audience. When the scene quiets, Hamlet is left alone with Horatio.

Hamlet and Horatio agree that the king's behavior was telling. Now extremely excited, Hamlet continues to act and, speaking glibly and inventing little poems. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to tell Hamlet that he is wanted in his mother's chambers. Rosencrantz asks again about the cause of Hamlet's "distemper," and Hamlet angrily accuses the pair of trying to play him as if he were a musical pipe. Polonius enters to escort Hamlet to the queen. Hamlet says he will go to her in a moment and asks for a moment alone. He steels himself to speak to his mother, resolving to be brutally honest with her but not to lose control of himself: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (III.ii:366).

**Analysis**

In the first two scenes of Act III, Hamlet and Claudius both traps to catch one another's secrets: Claudius spies on Hamlet to discover the true nature of his madness, and Hamlet attempts to "catch the of the king" in the theater (III.i.582). The play-within-a-play tells the story of Gonzago, the Duke of Vienna, and his wife, Baptista, who marries his murdering nephew, Lucianus. Hamlet believes that the play is an

opportunity to establish a more reliable basis for Claudius's guilt than the claims of the ghost. Since he has no way of knowing whether to believe a member of the spirit world, he tries to determine whether Claudius is guilty by reading his behavior for signs of a psychological state of guilt.

Although Hamlet at the success of his interpreting Claudius's interruption isn't as simple as it seems. In the first place, Claudius does not react to the dumbshow, which exactly mimics the actions of which the ghost accuses Claudius. Claudius reacts to the play itself, which, unlike the dumbshow, makes it clear that the king is murdered by his nephew. Does Claudius react to being confronted with his own crimes, or to a play about uncle-killing sponsored by his crazy nephew? Or does he simply have indigestion?

Hamlet appears more in control of his own behavior in this scene than in the one before, as shown by his effortless manipulations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his frank conversation with Horatio. He even expresses admiration and affection for Horatio's calm level-headedness, the lack of which is his own weakest point: "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" (III.ii. 64-67). In this scene he seems to prove that he is not insane after all, given the effortlessness with which he alternates between wild, erratic behavior and focused, sane behavior. He is excited but coherent during his conversation with Horatio before the play, but as soon as the king and queen enter, he begins to act, a sign that he is, only pretending. His only questionable behavior in this scene arises in his crude comments to Ophelia, which show him capable of real cruelty. His has crossed rational bounds, and his every comment is laced with sexual. For instance, she comments, "You are keen, my lord, you are keen," complimenting him on his sharp intellect, and he replies, "It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge" (III.ii.227-228). His interchange with Ophelia is a mere to the passionate rage he will unleash on Gertrude in the next scene.

### Act III, Scene III Summary

Elsewhere in the castle, King Claudius speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Badly shaken by the play and now considering Hamlet's madness to be dangerous, Claudius asks the pair to escort Hamlet on a voyage to England and to depart immediately. They agree and leave to make preparations. Polonius enters and reminds the king of his plan to hide in Gertrude's room and observe Hamlet's confrontation with her.

He promises to tell Claudius all that he learns. When Polonius leaves, the king is alone, and he immediately expresses his guilt and grief over his sin. A brother's murder, he says, is the oldest sin and "hath the primal eldest curse upon't" (III.iii.37). He longs to ask for forgiveness, but says that he is unprepared to give up that which he gained by committing the murder, namely, the crown and the queen. He falls to his knees and begins to pray.

Hamlet slips quietly into the room and steels himself to kill the unseeing Claudius. But suddenly it occurs to him that if he kills Claudius while he is praying, he will end the king's life at the moment when he was seeking forgiveness for his sins, sending Claudius's soul to heaven. This is hardly an adequate revenge, Hamlet thinks, especially since Claudius, by killing Hamlet's father before he had time to make his last confession, ensured that his brother would not go to heaven. Hamlet decides to wait, resolving to kill Claudius when the king is sinning—when he is either drunk, angry, or lustful. He leaves. Claudius rises and declares that he has been unable to pray sincerely: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below" (III.iii.96).

### Analysis

Thus ethics does make cowards of us all; And thus the native tinge of aspiration, is frailed o'er with the pale cast of thought; And enterprises of great pith and moment, With this regard, their currents turn awry, And lose the name of action.

In Act III, scene iii, Hamlet finally seems ready to put his desire for revenge into action. He is satisfied that the play has proven his uncle's guilt. When Claudius prays, the audience is given real certainty that Claudius murdered his brother: a full, spontaneous confession, even though nobody else hears it. This only heightens our sense that the climax of the play is due to arrive. But Hamlet waits.

On the surface, it seems that he waits because he wants a more radical revenge. Critics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge have been horrified by Hamlet's words here—he completely oversteps the bounds of Christian morality in trying to damn his opponent's soul as well as kill him. But apart from this ultraviolent posturing, Hamlet has once again avoided the imperative to act by involving himself in a problem of knowledge. Now that he's satisfied that he knows Claudius's guilt, he wants to know that his punishment will be sufficient. It may have been difficult to prove the former, but how can Hamlet ever hope to know the fate of Claudius's immortal soul?



Hamlet poses his desire to damn Claudius as a matter of fairness: his own father was killed without having cleansed his soul by praying or confessing, so why should his murderer be given that chance? But Hamlet is forced to admit that he doesn't really know what happened to his father, remarking "how his audit stands, who knows, save heaven?" (III.iv.82). The most he can say is that "in our circumstance and course of thought / 'Tis heavy with him" (III.iv.83-84). The Norton Shakespeare paraphrases "in our circumstance and course of thought" as "in our indirect and limited way of knowing on earth." Having proven his uncle's guilt to himself, against all odds, Hamlet suddenly finds something else to be uncertain about.

At this point, Hamlet has gone beyond his earlier need to know the facts about the crime, and he now craves metaphysical knowledge, knowledge of the afterlife and of God, before he is willing to act. The audience has had plenty of opportunity to see that Hamlet is fascinated with philosophical questions. In the case of the "to be, or not to be" monologue, we saw that his philosophizing can be a way for him to avoid thinking about or acknowledging "something" more immediately important (in that case, his urge to kill himself). Is Hamlet using his speculations about Claudius's soul to avoid thinking about something in this case? Perhaps the task he has set for himself—killing another human being in cold blood—is too much for him to face. Whatever it is, the audience may once again get the sense that there is something more to Hamlet's behavior than meets the eye. That Shakespeare is able to convey this sense is a remarkable achievement in itself, quite apart from how we try to explain what Hamlet's unacknowledged motives might be.

### Act III, Scene IV Summary

In Gertrude's chamber, the queen and Polonius wait for Hamlet's arrival. Polonius plans to hide in order to shoop on Gertrude's skirmish with her son, in the hope that doing so will enable him to determine the cause of Hamlet's bizarre and threatening behavior. Polonius urges the queen to be harsh with Hamlet when he arrives, saying that she should berate him for his recent behavior. Gertrude agrees, and Polonius hides behind an drapery, or dossier.

Hamlet storms into the room and asks his mother why she has sent for him. She says that he has offended his father, meaning his stepfather, Claudius. He interrupts her and says that she has offended his father, meaning the dead King Hamlet, by marrying Claudius. Hamlet accosts her with an almost violent intensity and declares his

intention to make her fully aware of the profundity of her sin. Fearing for her life, Gertrude cries out. From behind the drapery, Polonius calls out for help. Hamlet, realizing that someone is behind the drapery and suspecting that it might be Claudius, cries, "How now! a rat?" (III.iv.22). He draws his sword and stabs it through the dossier, killing the unseen Polonius. Gertrude asks what Hamlet has done, and he replies, "Nay, I know not: / Is it the king?" (III.iv.24). The queen says his action was a "rash and bloody" deed, and Hamlet replies that it was almost as rash and bloody as murdering a king and marrying his brother (III.iv.26-28). Disbelieving, the queen exclaims, "As kill a king!" and Hamlet replies that she heard him correctly (III.iv.29).

Hamlet lifts the drapery and discovers Polonius's body: he has not

killed the king and achieved his revenge but has murdered the relatively innocent Polonius. He bids the old man farewell, calling him an "intruding fool" (III.iv.30). He turns to his mother, declaring that he will wring her heart. He shows her a picture of the dead king and a picture of the current king, bitterly comments on the superiority of his father to his uncle, and asks her furiously what has driven her to marry a rotten man such as Claudius. She pleads with him to stop, saying that he has turned her eyes onto her soul and that she does not like what she sees there. Hamlet continues to boycott her and rail against Claudius, until, suddenly, the ghost of his father again appears before him.

Hamlet speaks to the ghost, but Gertrude is unable to see it and believes him to be mad. The ghost intones that it has come to remind Hamlet of his purpose, that Hamlet has not yet killed Claudius and must achieve his revenge. Noting that Gertrude is amazed and unable to see him, the ghost asks Hamlet to utter monotonously and repetitively with her. Hamlet describes the ghost, but Gertrude sees nothing, and in a moment the ghost disappears. Hamlet tries desperately to convince Gertrude that he is not mad but has merely counterfeited madness all along, and he urges her to forsake Claudius and regain her good moral sense. He urges her, as well, not to reveal to Claudius that his madness has been an act. Gertrude, still, shaken from Hamlet's furious exhortation of her, agrees to keep his secret. He bids her goodnight, but, before he leaves, he points to Polonius's corpse and declares that heaven has "punished me with this, and this with me" (III.iv.158).

Hamlet reminds his mother that he must sail to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he says he will regard with suspicion, as though they were poisonous snakes, since he assumes that their loyalties are with Claudius, not with him. Dragging Polonius's body behind him, Hamlet leaves his mother's room.

## Analysis

What is Hamlet trying to do in his confrontation with his mother? It is possible that he wants her to confirm her knowledge of Claudius's crime; to provide further proof of his guilt. Or it may be that Hamlet wants to know whether she was complicit in the crime. Or he may feel that he needs her on his side if he is to achieve justice. While all of these are possibilities, what Hamlet actually does is urge his mother to repent choosing Claudius over his own father. More specifically, he repeatedly demands that she avoid Claudius's bed. Actually, he's much more specific: he tells her not to let Claudius arouse her by fondling her neck, not to stay within his semen-infested sheets, and other shockingly graphic details.

This is another point in the play where audiences and readers have felt that there is more going on in Hamlet's brain than we can quite put our fingers on. Sigmund Freud wrote that Hamlet harbors an unconscious desire to sexually enjoy his mother. Freud maintained that all men unconsciously desire their mothers in this way, and he called this the Oedipus Complex, after the character in Sophocles' play who unwittingly murders his father and has several children by his own mother. Whether or not Freud was right about this is as difficult to prove as any of the problems that Hamlet worries about, but his argument in regard to Hamlet is quite remarkable. He says that while Oedipus actually enacts this fantasy, Hamlet only betrays the unconscious desire to do so. Hamlet is thus a quintessentially modern person, because he has repressed desires.

Though Gertrude's speech in this scene is largely limited to brief reactions to Hamlet's lengthy indictment of her, it is our most revealing look at her character. As the scene progresses, Gertrude goes through several states of feeling: she is haughty and accusatory at the beginning; then afraid that Hamlet will hurt her, shocked and upset when Hamlet kills Polonius; overwhelmed by fear and panic as Hamlet detains her, and disbelieving when Hamlet sees the ghost. Finally, she is apologetic toward her son and apparently willing to take his part and help him. For Gertrude, then, the scene progresses as a sequence of great shocks, each of which weakens her resistance to Hamlet's condemnation of her behavior. Of course, Gertrude is convinced mainly by Hamlet's insistence and power of feeling, illustrating what many readers have felt to be her central characteristic: her tendency to be dominated by powerful men and her need for men to show her what to think and how to feel.

This quality explains why Gertrude would have turned to Claudius so soon after her husband's death, and it also explains why she so quickly adopts Hamlet's point of view in this scene. Of course, the play does not specifically explain Gertrude's behavior. It is possible that she was complicit with Claudius in the murder of her husband, though that seems unlikely given her surprised reaction to Hamlet's reproach in this scene, and it is possible that she merely pretends to take Hamlet's side to placate him, which would explain why she immediately reports his behavior to Claudius after promising not to do so. But another interpretation of Gertrude's character seems to be that she has a powerful instinct for self-preservation and advancement that leads her to rely too deeply on men. Not only does this interpretation explain her behavior throughout much of the play, it also links her thematically to Ophelia, the play's other important female character, who is also submissive and utterly dependent on men.

Hamlet's rash, murderous action in stabbing Polonius is an important illustration of his inability to coordinate his thoughts and actions, which might be considered his tragic blemish. In this passive, thoughtful mode, Hamlet is too beset by moral considerations and uncertainties to avenge his father's death by killing Claudius, even when the opportunity is before him. But when he does choose to act, he does so blindly, stabbing his anonymous "enemy" through a curtain. It is as if Hamlet is so distrustful of the possibility of acting rationally that he believes his revenge is more likely to come about as an accident than as a willful act.

When he sees Polonius's corpse, Hamlet interprets his misdeed within the terms of reprisal, punishment, and retributive justice: "Heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this, and this with me" (III.iv, 157-158). Though Hamlet has not achieved his vengeance upon Claudius, he believes that God has used him as a tool of vengeance to punish Polonius's sins and punish Hamlet's sins by staining his soul with the murder.

### Act IV, Scenes I - II Summary: Act IV, Scene I

After her confrontation with Hamlet, Gertrude hurries to Claudius, who is deliberating with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. She asks to speak to the king alone. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit, she tells Claudius about her encounter with Hamlet. She says that he is as mad as the sea during a violent storm; she also tells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius. Aghast, the king notes that had he been concealed behind the arras, Hamlet would have killed him. Claudius

wonders aloud how he will be able to handle this public crisis without damaging his hold on Denmark. He tells Gertrude that they must ship Hamlet to England at once and find a way to explain Hamlet's misdeed to the court and to the people. He calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tells them about the murder, and sends them to find Hamlet.

### Summary: Act IV, Scene ii

Elsewhere in Elsinore, Hamlet has just finished disposing Polonius's body, commenting that the corpse has been "safely stowed" (IV.ii.1). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear and ask what he has done with the body. Hamlet refuses to give them a straight answer, instead saying, "The body is with the king, but the king is not with the

body" (IV.ii.25-26). Feigning offense at being questioned, he accuses them of being spies in the service of Claudius. He calls Rosencrantz a "sponge... that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities," and warns him that "when he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again" (IV.ii.11-19). At last he agrees to allow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort him to Claudius.

### Analysis: Act IV, Scenes i-ii

The short first scene of Act IV centers around Gertrude's treachery of her son, turning him in to the king after having promised to help him. While she does keep her promise not to reveal that Hamlet was only pretending to be insane, the immediate and frank way in which she tells Claudius about Hamlet's behavior and his murder of Polonius implies that she sees herself as cognate to the king rather than to her son. Whether Gertrude really believes Hamlet to be mad, or has simply recognized that her best interest lies in allying herself with Claudius regardless of what she believes, is impossible to determine from this scene and is largely a matter of one's personal interpretation of the events. Whatever the case, it is Gertrude's speech to Claudius that cements the king's secret plan to have Hamlet elector in England.

As brief as it is, Act IV, scene ii is a glorious example of Shakespeare's skill at developing characters, illustrated by the subtle development of Claudius. Where most of the other male characters in the play, including Hamlet, King Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras, are infatuated with themes of honor, moral balance, and chastening justice, Claudius is a selfish, ambitious king who is more concerned with maintaining his own power and staving off political danger than achieving justice through his rule. His response to Gertrude's revelation that Hamlet has killed Polonius is extremely telling. Rather than

considering that Gertrude might have been in danger, he immediately remarks that had he been in the room, he would have been in danger. Hamlet must be sent away from Denmark, he thinks, not as punishment for committing murder but because he represents a danger to Claudius. And as soon as he hears of the murder, Claudius's mind begins working to find a way to characterize the killing so that it does not seem like a political crisis to his court and to the people of Denmark. To do this, he says, will require all his "majesty and skill" (IV.i.30). In this scene and the scenes to follow, Shakespeare creates in Claudius a convincing depiction of a conniving, ambitious politician. In this way, Claudius emerges as a figure of powerful contrast to the more outspoken men in the play, including Laertes, Fortinbras, and Horatio, and the far more morally conscious Prince Hamlet.

Hamlet's murder of Polonius at the end of Act III is one of the most disturbing moments in the play. If it was previously possible to consider Hamlet a "hero" or an idealized version of a human being, it is no longer possible after he kills Polonius. His sensitive, reflective nature—the trait that constantly interfered with his ability to take revenge on Claudius—now disappears in the vigil of its violent opposite: a impetuous, murderous explosion of activity. Hamlet leaps to the conclusion that Claudius is behind the dossier, or else he simply lashes out thoughtlessly. In any case, Hamlet's moral superiority to Claudius is now thrown into question. He has killed Polonius just as Claudius killed Hamlet's father, the only differences being that Hamlet's murder was not contrived and was not committed out of jealousy or ambition. Hamlet also eases his conscience with the fact that Polonius was dishonestly spying on Hamlet at the moment when he was killed. But the result of Hamlet's deed is very similar to that of Claudius's: Laertes and Ophelia have lost a father, just as Hamlet himself did.

Now, Hamlet hides the body. But rather than being overwhelmed with contrition, as we might expect of a hero who has committed such a terrible mistake, he seems craze, desperate, and self-righteous, especially in his censure of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Throughout Act IV, scene ii, as in the play-within-a-play scene (Act III, scene ii), Hamlet's biting, ironic wit is combined with his rash, brash trace, and his feigned madness seems very close to the real thing. Though Hamlet has many admirable qualities, scenes such as this one serve as powerful reminders that we are not meant to take the prince as an unqualified hero.

**Act IV, Scenes III- IV Summary: Act IV, Scene iii**

The king speaks to a group of attendants, telling them of Polonius's death and his intention to send Hamlet to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear with Hamlet, who is under guard. Pressed by Claudius to reveal the location of Polonius's body, Hamlet is by turns insane, coy, and clever, saying that Polonius is being eaten by worms, and that the king could send a messenger to find Polonius in heaven or seek him in hell himself. Finally, Hamlet reveals that Polonius's body is under the stairs near the castle lobby, and the king dispatches his attendants to look there. The king tells Hamlet that he must leave at once for England, and Hamlet fervently agrees. He exits, and Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to ensure that he boards the ship at

once. Alone with his thoughts, Claudius states his hope that England will obey the sealed orders he has sent with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The orders call for Prince Hamlet to be put to death.

**Summary: Act IV, Scene iv**

On a nearby plain in Denmark, young Prince Fortinbras marches at the head of his army, traveling through Denmark on the way to attack Poland. Fortinbras orders his captain to go and ask the King of Denmark for permission to travel through his lands. On his way, the captain encounters Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern on their way to the ship bound for England. The captain informs them that the Norwegian army rides to fight the Poles. Hamlet asks about the basis of the conflict, and the man tells him that the armies will fight over "a little patch of land, / That hath in it no profit but the name." (IV.iv:98-99). Boggle by the thought that a bloody war could be fought over something so insignificant, Hamlet marvels that human beings are able to act so violently and purposefully for so little gain. By comparison, Hamlet has a great deal to gain from seeking his own bloody revenge on Claudius, and yet he still delays and fails to act toward his purpose. Loathed with himself for having failed to gain his revenge on Claudius, Hamlet declares that from this moment on, his thoughts will be bloody,

**Analysis: Act IV, Scenes iii-iv**

As we saw in Act IV, scene ii, the murder of Polonius and the subsequent atrocious encounter with his mother seem to leave Hamlet in a panic-stricken, unstable frame of mind, the mode in which his excitable nature seems very similar to actual madness. He taunts Claudius, toward whom his hostility is now barely disguised, and makes light of Polonius's murder with word games. He also pretends to

is thrilled at the idea of sailing for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

At some level he is prepared for what is to come. His farewell to his mother proved as much, when he told her that he would trust his old schoolfellows as if they were "adders fang'd," that is, poisonous snakes (III.iv.185.2). But although Hamlet suspects his friends' perfidy, he may not fully realize the maliciousness of Claudius's designs for him. Claudius's intrigue in asking the English to execute Hamlet reveals the extent to which he now fears Hamlet: whether Hamlet is sane or mad, he is a danger to Claudius, and Claudius wishes him to die. It is also revealing that one of Claudius's considerations in seeking to have

Hamlet murdered in far-off England rather than merely executing him in Denmark is that he is beloved by the common people of Denmark—"loved of the distracted horde," as Claudius says (IV.iii.4). Again, where King Hamlet was a brave warrior, King Claudius is a guileful politician, constantly working to strengthen his own power, elude threats to his throne, and manipulate those around him to his own advantage.

Act IV, scene iv restores the focus of the play to the theme of human action. Hamlet's encounter with the Norwegian captain serves to remind the reader of Fortinbras's presence in the world of the play and gives Hamlet another example of the will to action that he lacks. Earlier, he was amazed by the player's evocation of powerful feeling for Hecuba, a legendary character who meant nothing to him (II.ii). Now, he is awestruck by the willingness of Fortinbras to devote the energy of an entire army, probably wasting hundreds of lives and risking his own, to reclaim a worthless scrap of land in Poland. Hamlet considers the moral ambiguity of Fortinbras's action, but more than anything else he is impressed by the forcefulness of it, and that forcefulness becomes a kind of ideal toward which Hamlet decides at last to strive. "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" he declares (IV.iv.9:56). Of course, he fails to put this exclamation into action, as he has failed at every previous turn to achieve his revenge on Claudius. "My thoughts be bloody," Hamlet says. Tellingly, he does not say "My deeds be bloody."

**Act IV, Scenes V-VI Summary: Act IV, Scene v**

Gertrude and Horatio discuss Ophelia. Gertrude does not wish to see the melancholy girl, but Horatio says that Ophelia should be pitied, explaining that her grief has made her disordered and incongruous. Ophelia enters. Adorned with flowers and singing strange songs, she



seems to have gone mad. Claudius enters and hears Ophelia's ravings, such as, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter" (IV.v.42). He says that Ophelia's grief stems from her father's death, and that the people have been suspicious and disturbed by the death as well: "muddied, / Thick and insalubrious in their thoughts and whispers / For good Polonius' death" (IV.v.77-79). He also mentions that Laertes has secretly sailed back from France.

A loud noise echoes from somewhere in the castle. Claudius calls for his guards, and a gentleman enters to warn the king that Laertes has come with a mob of common people. The mob calls Laertes "lord," according to the gentlemen, and the people whisper that "Laertes shall be king" (IV.v.102-106). A furious Laertes storms into the hall, outraged in his desire to avenge his father's death. Claudius attempts to mitigate him by frankly acknowledging that Polonius is dead. Gertrude nervously adds that Claudius is innocent in it. When Ophelia re-enters, obviously insane, Laertes speaks again into rage. Claudius claims that he is not responsible for Polonius's death and says that Laertes' desire for revenge is a credit to him, so long as he seeks revenge upon the proper person. Claudius convinces Laertes to hear his version of events, which he says will answer all his questions. Laertes agrees, and Claudius seconds his desire to achieve justice in the aftermath of Polonius's death: "Where th' offence is, let the great axe fall" (IV.v.213).

### Summary: Act IV, Scene vi

In another part of the castle, Horatio is introduced to a pair of sailors bearing a letter for him from Hamlet. In the letter, Hamlet says that his ship was captured by pirates, who have returned him to Denmark. He asks Horatio to escort the sailors to the king and queen, for they have messages for them as well. He also says that he has much to tell of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio takes the sailors to the king and then follows them to find Hamlet, who is in the countryside near the castle.

### Analysis: Act IV, Scenes v-vi

As we have seen, one of the important themes of Hamlet is the connection between the health of a state and the moral lawfulness of its ruler. Claudius is rotten, and, as a result, Denmark is rotten too. Here, at the beginning of Act IV, scene v, things have palpably darkened for the nation: Hamlet is gone, Polonius is dead and has been buried in secret, Ophelia is raving mad, and, as Claudius tells us, the common people are disturbed and murmuring among themselves. This baleful

turn of events leads to the abridged, miniature rebellion that accompanies Laertes' return to Denmark. Acting as the wronged son operating with open fury, Laertes has all the moral lawfulness that Claudius lacks the lawfulness that Hamlet has mulet through his murder of Polonius and his delay in avenging his father's death.

Laertes is Hamlet's best foil throughout the play, and in this scene the contrast between the two, each of whom has a dead father to

avenge, reaches its peak. (A third figure with a dead father to avenge, Fortinbras, lurks on the horizon.) Whereas Hamlet is reflective and has difficulty acting, Laertes is active and has no use for thought. He has no interest in moral concerns, only in his consuming desire to avenge

Polonius. When Claudius later asks Laertes how far he would go to avenge his father, Laertes replies that he would slit Hamlet's throat in

the church (IV.vii.98). This statement, indicating his willingness to murder Hamlet even in a sacred place of worship, brings into sharp

relief the contrast between the two sons: recall that Hamlet declined to kill Claudius as the king knelt in prayer (III.iii).

As befits a scene full of anger and dark thoughts, Act IV, scene v brings a repetition of the motif of insanity, this time through the

character of Ophelia, who has truly been driven mad by the death of her father. Shakespeare has demonstrated Ophelia's chaste dependence on

the men in her life; after Polonius's sudden death and Hamlet's subsequent exile, she finds herself abruptly without any of them.

Ophelia's lunatic ravings reveal a great deal about the nature of her mind at this stage in her young life. She is obsessed with death, beauty,

and an ambiguous sexual desire, expressed in startlingly frank imagery:

"Young men will do't, if they come to't, By Cock, they are to blame. Quoth she 'Before you tumbled me, You promised me to wed.' (IV.v:59-62)

Some readers have interpreted passages such as these, combined with Hamlet's sexually crystal-clear deride of Ophelia in Act III, scene

ii, as evidence that Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet was sexual in nature. Of course, this is impossible to conclude with any certainty, but

from these lines it is apparent that Ophelia is scuffle with sexuality and that her sexual feelings, discouraged by her father, her brother, and her

society, are close to the vanguard of her mind as she slips into insanity. But, most important, Ophelia's insanity is designed to contrast strongly

with Hamlet's, differing primarily in its lawfulness: Ophelia does not dissimulate madness to achieve an end, but is truly driven mad by

external pressures. Many of the worst elements in Denmark, including madness, fear, and rebellion, so far have been kept hidden under

various disguises, such as Hamlet's falsification and Claudius's court revelry, and are now beginning to emerge into the open.

After exiling Hamlet to England in Act IV, scene iv, Shakespeare now returns him to Denmark only two scenes later through the unorthodox contrivance—an improbable or unexpected device or character introduced to resolve a situation in a work of fiction or drama—of the pirate attack. The short Act IV, scene vi is primarily devoted to plot development, as Horatio reads Hamlet's letter narrating his adventure. The story of the pirate attack has little to do with the main themes of the play, but it does provide an interesting variation on the idea of retributive justice, since instead of punishing someone for

doing something wrong, Hamlet states his intention to reward the pirates for the right they have done in returning him to Denmark. "They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy," he says, "but they knew what they did: I am to do a good turn for them" (IV, vi, 17-19). Additionally, Hamlet's letter features a return of the motif of ears and hearing, as the prince tells Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb," an open reference to the poison poured into King Hamlet's ear by the murderous Claudius (IV, vi, 21).

### Act IV, Scene VII Summary

As Horatio speaks to the sailors, Claudius and a calmer Laertes discuss Polonius's death. Claudius explains that he acted as he did, burying Polonius secretly and not punishing Hamlet for the murder, because both the common people and the queen love Hamlet very much. As a king and as a husband, he did not wish to upset either of them. A messenger enters with the letter from Hamlet to Claudius, which informs the king that Hamlet will return tomorrow. Laertes is pleased that Hamlet has come back to Denmark, since it means that his revenge will not be delayed.

Claudius agrees that Laertes deserves to be revenged upon Hamlet, and he is disposed to encourage Laertes to kill Hamlet, since Hamlet's turbulent behavior has made him a threat to Claudius's reign. The disreputable king begins to think of a way for Laertes to ensure his revenge without creating any appearance of foul play. He recalls that Hamlet has been jealous in the past of Laertes' gallantry with a sword, which was recently praised before all the court by a Frenchman who had seen him in combat. The king speculates that if Hamlet could be tempted into a duel with Laertes, it might provide Laertes with the chance to kill him. Laertes agrees, and they settle on a plan: Laertes will use a sharpened sword rather than the customary dull fencing

blade. Laertes also proposes to poison his sword; so that even a scratch from it will kill Hamlet. The king concocts a backup plan as well, proposing that if Hamlet succeeds in the duel, Claudius will offer him a poisoned cup of wine to drink from in celebration.

Gertrude enters with tragic news. Ophelia, mad with grief, has drowned in the river. Anguished to have lost his sister so soon after his father's death, Laertes flees the room. Claudius summons Gertrude to follow. He tells her it was nearly impossible to quiet Laertes' rage, and worries that the news of Ophelia's death will reawaken it.

### Analysis

The scheming Claudius encounters Laertes at approximately the same moment as he learns that Hamlet has survived and returned to Denmark. Claudius's behavior throughout this scene, as in Act IV, scene v, shows him at his most devious and calculating. Shakespeare shows Claudius's mind working overtime to derail Laertes' anger, which is thus far the greatest challenge his kingship has faced. In Act IV, scene v, Claudius decided that the way to appease Laertes was by appearing frank and honest. When Laertes asked furiously where his father was, Claudius replied, "Dead" (IV.v. 123). Additionally, in a masterful stroke of characterization, Shakespeare has the nervous Gertrude, unable to see Claudius's plan, follow this statement with a quick insistence on Claudius's innocence: "But not by him" (IV.v.123).

In this scene, Claudius has clearly decided that he can appease Laertes' anger and dispense with Hamlet in a single stroke: he hits upon the idea of the duel in order to use Laertes' rage to ensure Hamlet's death. The resulting plan brings both the theme of revenge and the repeated use of traps in the plot to a new height—Laertes and Claudius concoct not one but three covert mechanisms by which Hamlet may be killed.

Ophelia's tragic death occurs at the worst possible moment for Claudius. As Laertes flees the room in, Claudius follows, not to console or even to join him in mourning but because, as he tells Gertrude, it was so difficult to appease his anger in the first place. Claudius does not have time to worry about the victims of tragedy—he is too busy dealing with threats to his own power.

The image of Ophelia drowning amongst her garlands of flowers has proved to be one of the most images in the play, represented countless times by artists and poets throughout the centuries. Ophelia is associated with flower imagery from the beginning of the play. In her

first scene, Polonius presents her with a violet; after she goes mad, she sings songs about flowers; and now she drowns amongst long streams of them. The delicate beauty of the flowers resembles Ophelia's own delicate beauty, as well as her sexuality and her, doomed innocence.

### 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 remains, who speaks cleverly and mischievously, asks the second remains 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.

### Analysis

Hamlet and Horatio enter at a distance and watch the gravediggers work. Hamlet looks with wonder at the skulls they shovel 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 mannerisms 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 remains 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 aggravated with the priest, who says that to give Ophelia a proper Christian burial would lay the dead. Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave to hold her once again in his arms. Grief-stricken and writhed, Hamlet bursts upon the company, declaring in excruciate 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 antagonists 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.

## Analysis

The gravediggers are designated as "clowns" in the stage directions and cue, and it is important to note that in Shakespeare's time the word clown referred to a pastoral or peasant, and did not mean that the person in question was funny or wore a costume.

The gravediggers represent a humorous type, commonly found in Shakespeare's plays: the clever commoner who gets the better of his social superior through wit. At the Globe Theater, this type of character may have particularly appealed to the "groundlings," the members of the audience who could not afford seats and thus stood on the ground. Though they are usually figures of happiness, in this scene the gravediggers assume a rather macabre tone, since their jests and jibes are all made in a cemetery, among bones of the dead. Their conversation about Ophelia, however, furthers an important theme in the play: the question of the moral legitimacy of suicide under theological law. By giving this serious subject a darkly comic interpretation, Shakespeare essentially makes a fantastical parody of Hamlet's earlier "To be, or not to be" monologue (III.i), indicating the collapse of every lasting value in the play into uncertainty and absurdity.

Hamlet's confrontation with death, manifested primarily in his discovery of Yorick's skull, is, like Ophelia's drowning, an enduring image from the play. However, his solemn theorizing explodes in grief and rage when he sees Ophelia's funeral procession, and his assault on Laertes offers a glimpse of what his true feelings for Ophelia might

once have been! Laertes' passionate embrace of the dead Ophelia again advances the exquisite motif of oedipal love that hangs over their brother-sister relationship. Interestingly, Hamlet never expresses a sense of guilt over Ophelia's death, which he indirectly caused through his murder of Polonius. In fact, the only time he even comes close to taking responsibility for Polonius's death at all comes in the next and last scene, when he apologizes to Laertes before the duel, blaming his "madness" for Polonius's death. This seems wholly inadequate, given that Hamlet has previously claimed, repeatedly, only to be feigning madness. But by the same token, to expect moral completeness from a character as troubled as Hamlet might be unrealistic. After all, Hamlet's defining characteristics are his pain, his fear, and his self-conflict. Were

he to take full responsibility for the consequences of Polonius's death, he would probably not be able to withstand the psychological torment of the resulting guilt.

A notable minor motif that is developed in this scene is Hamlet's delusion with the physicality of death. Though many of his thoughts about death concern the spiritual consequences of dying—for instance, vex in the afterlife—he is nearly as fascinated by the physical decomposition of the body. This is nowhere more evident than in his preoccupation with Yorick's skull, when he envisions physical features such as lips and skin that have decomposed from the bone. Recall that Hamlet previously commented to Claudius that Polonius's body was at supper, because it was being eaten by worms (IV.iii). He is also fascinated by the equalizing effect of death and decomposition: great men and beggars both end as dust. In this scene, he imagines dust from the decomposed corpse of Julius Caesar being used to patch a wall; earlier, in Act IV, he noted, "A man may fish with the worm that have eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm," a metaphor by which he illustrates "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (IV.iii.26-31).

## 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 gushingly, 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 (debilitate 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. Wrangling, 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 exonerating 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.

### Analysis

In the final scene, the violence, so long delayed, erupts with confusing speed. Characters drop one after the other, poisoned, thrust, and, in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, executed, as the theme of revenge and justice reaches its conclusion in the moment when Hamlet finally kills Claudius. In the moments before the duel, Hamlet seems peaceful, though also quite sad. He says that he feels ill in his heart, but he seems reconciled to the idea of death and no longer troubled by fear of the supernatural. Exactly what has caused the change in Hamlet is unclear, but his desire to attain Laertes' forgiveness clearly represents an important shift in his mental state. Whereas Hamlet previously was obsessed almost wholly with himself and his family, he is now able to think sympathetically about others. He does not go quite so far as to take responsibility for Polonius's death, but he does seem to be acting with a broader perspective after the shock of Ophelia's death. Hamlet's death at the hands of Laertes makes his earlier declaration over Polonius's corpse, that God has chosen "to punish me with this and this with me," prophetic (III.iv.174). His murder of Polonius does punish him in the end, since it is Laertes' vengeful rage over that murder that leads to Hamlet's death.

That death is neither heroic nor shameful, according to the moral logic of the play. Hamlet achieves his father's vengeance, but only after being spurred to it by the most extreme circumstances one might consider possible: watching his mother die and knowing that he, too, will die in moments.

The arrival of Fortinbras effectively poses the question of political legitimacy once again. In marked contrast to the corrupted and weakened royal family lying dead on the floor, Fortinbras clearly represents a strong-willed, capable leader, though the play does not address the question of whether his rule will restore the moral authority of the state.

### IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS

1. O that this too solid flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't! O 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 mourn'd longer,—married with mine 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 galled 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.

The above is Hamlet's first important soliloquy, that occurs in Act I, scene ii (129-158). Hamlet speaks these lines after enduring the unpleasant scene at Claudius and Gertrude's court, then being asked by his mother and stepfather not to return to his studies at Wittenberg but to remain in Denmark, presumably against his wishes. Here, Hamlet thinks for the first time about suicide (desiring his flesh to "melt," and wishing that God had not made "self-annihilation" a sin), saying that the world is "disgusted, stale, flat, and unprofitable." In other words, suicide seems like a desirable alternative to life in a painful world, but Hamlet feels that the option of suicide is closed to him because it is prohibited by religion. Hamlet then goes on to describe the causes of his pain, specifically his intense disgust at his mother's marriage to Claudius. He describes the haste of their marriage, noting that the shoes his mother wore to his father's funeral were not worn out before her marriage to Claudius. He compares Claudius to his father (his father was "so excellent a king" while Claudius is a thyroid "satyr"). As he runs through his description of their marriage, he touches upon the

important motifs of misogyny, crying, "Frailty, thy name is woman"; incest, commenting that his mother moved "[w]ith such dexterity to incestuous sheets"; and the ominous omen the marriage represents for Denmark, that "[i]t is not nor it cannot come to good." Each of these motifs recurs throughout the play.

2. Give thy thoughts no tongue, Nor any unproportion'd thought his act. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel; But do not dull thy palm with entertainment of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade. Beware Of entrance to a quarrel; but, being in, Bear\* that the opposed may beware of thee. Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice: Take each man's censure, but reserve your judgment. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy:

For the apparel constantly proclaims the man; And they in France of the best rank and station, Are most select and generous chief in that. Neither a borrower nor a lender be: For loan oft loses both itself and friend; And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry. This above all, to thine own self be true; And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.

This famous bit of fatherly advice is spoken by Polonius to Laertes shortly before Laertes leaves for France, in Act I, scene iii (59-80). Polonius, who is bidding Laertes farewell, gives him this list of instructions about how to behave before he sends him on his way. His advice amounts to a list of truisms: Keep your thoughts to yourself; do not act fireclay treat people with familiarity but not excessively so; hold on to old friends and be slow to trust new friends; avoid fighting but fight boldly if it is unavoidable; be a good listener; accept criticism but do not be judgmental; maintain a proper appearance; do not borrow or lend money; and be true to yourself. This long list of quite normal fatherly advice emphasizes the regularity of Laertes' family life compared to Hamlet's, as well as contributing a somewhat stereotypical father-son encounter in the play's exploration of family relationships. It seems to indicate that Polonius loves his son, though that idea is complicated later in the play when he sends Reynaldo to spy on him.

### 3. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

This line is spoken by Marcellus in Act I, scene iv (67), as he and Horatio debate whether or not to follow Hamlet and the ghost into the dark night. The line refers both to the idea that the ghost is an baleful prognostic for Denmark and to the larger theme of the connection between the moral lawfulness of a ruler and the health of the state as a whole. The ghost is a visible symptom of the rottenness of Denmark created by Claudius's crime.

4:4:1 I have of late—but wherefore I know not,—lost all my merriment, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my temperament that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a arid jetty; this most excellent awring, the air, look you, this brave overhanging the heaven, this majestically roof agenized with golden fire,—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! The epitome of animals! And yet, to me, what is this apotheosis of dust?

In these lines, Hamlet speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II, scene ii. (287-298), explaining the melancholy that has afflicted

him since his father's death. Perhaps moved by the presence of his former university companions, Hamlet essentially engages in a rhetorical exercise, building up an elaborate and glorified picture of the earth and humanity before declaring it all merely a "apotheosis of dust." He examines the earth, the air, and the sun, and rejects them as "a sterile promontory" and "a foul and contagion gathering of vapors." He then describes human beings from several perspectives, each one adding to his extortion of them. Human beings' reason is noble, their faculties infinite, their forms and movements fast and admirable, their actions angelic, and their understanding godlike. But, to Hamlet, humankind is merely dust. This motif, an expression of his obsession with the physicality of death, recurs throughout the play, reaching its height in his speech over Yorick's skull. Finally, it is also telling that Hamlet makes humankind more impressive in "apprehension" (meaning, understanding) than in "action." Hamlet himself is more prone to apprehension than to action, which is why he delays so long before seeking his revenge on Claudius.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in the play. Why might Shakespeare have created characters like this? Are they there for comic relief, or do they serve a more serious purpose? Why does the news of their deaths come only after the deaths of the royal family in Act V, as if this news were not anticlimactic? Is it acceptable for Hamlet to treat them as he does? Why or why not?

2. Analyze the use of descriptions and images in Hamlet. How does Shakespeare use descriptive language to enhance the visual possibilities of a stage production? How does he use imagery to create a mood of tension, suspense, fear, and despair?

3. Analyze the use of comedy in Hamlet, paying particular attention to the cremains, Osric, and Polonius. Does comedy serve merely to relieve the tension of the tragedy, or do the comic scenes serve a more serious confined purpose as well?

4. Suicide is an important theme in Hamlet. Discuss how the play treats the idea of suicide morally, religiously, and beautifully, with particular attention to Hamlet's two important statements about suicide: the "O, that this too solid flesh would melt" soliloquy (I.ii:129-158) and the "To be, or not to be" monologue (III.i:56-88). Why does Hamlet believe that, although capable of suicide, most human beings choose to live, despite the cruelty, pain, and injustice of the world?

**SUGGESTED**

- 1. Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human — Harold Bloom
- 2. Shakespearean Tragedy — A.C. Bradley
- 3. "Hamlet and His Problems" In the Sacred Wood — T.S. Eliot
- 4. Hamlet in Purgatory — Stephen Greebalt

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4

the "A DOLL'S HOUSE-HENRIK IBSEN" and

**STRUCTURE**

Learning goals

**SUGGESTED**  
About the author

Synopsis of the play

Doll's house = plot

Important characters

Analysis of major characters

Important themes, motifs and symbols

Summary and analysis

Important quotations

Summary

Key words

Check your progress

Answers to check your progress

Review questions

Suggested reading

**INTRODUCTION**

A Doll's House is an 1879 play by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Written one year after The Pillars of Society, the play was the first of Ibsen's to create a sensation and is now perhaps his most famous play, and required reading in many secondary schools and universities. The play was contentious when first published, as it is sharply critical of 19th century marriage norms. It follows the formula of well-made play up until the final act, when it breaks convention by ending with a discussion, not an unravelling. It is often called the first true feminist play. The play is also an important work of the naturalist movement, in which real events and situations are delineated on stage in a departure

from previous forms such as romanticism. The influence of the play was recognized by UNESCO when Henrik Ibsen's autographed manuscripts of *A Doll's House* were inscribed in the World Register in recognition of their historical value.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

At fifteen, Ibsen was forced to leave school. He moved to the small town of Grimstad to become an apprentice pharmacist and began writing plays. In 1846, when Ibsen was age 18, a intermediary with a servant produced an illegitimate child, whose upbringing Ibsen had to pay for until the boy was in his teens, though Ibsen never saw the boy. Ibsen went to Christiania to inscribe at the university. He soon

rejected the idea, preferring to commit himself to writing. His first play, the tragedy *Catiline* (1850), was published under the pseudonym "Brynjolf Bjarme" when he was only 20, but it was not performed. His first play to be staged, *The Burial Mound* (1850), received little attention. Still, Ibsen was determined to be a playwright, although the numerous plays he wrote in the following years remained unsuccessful. Ibsen's main inspiration in the early period, right up to *Peer Gynt*, was apparently Norwegian author Henrik Wergeland and the Norwegian folk tales as collected by Peter Christen Asbjornsen and Jorgen Moë. In Ibsen's youth, Wergeland was the most extolled, and by far the most read, Norwegian poet and playwright.

### **Life and Writings**

He spent the next several years employed at Det norske Theater (Bergen), where he was involved in the production of more than 145 plays as a writer, director, and producer. During this period, he did not publish any new plays of his own. Despite Ibsen's failure to achieve success as a playwright, he gained a great deal of practical experience at the Norwegian Theater, experience that was to prove valuable when he continued writing.

Ibsen returned to Christiania in 1858 to become the creative director of the Christiania Theatre. He married Suzannah Thoresen on 18 June 1858 and she gave birth to their only child Sigurd on 23 December 1859. The couple lived in very poor financial circumstances and Ibsen became very disenchanted with life in Norway. In 1864, he left Christiania and went to Sorrento in Italy in self-imposed exile. He was not to return to his native land for the next 27 years, and when he returned it was as a noted, but contentious, playwright.

His next play, Brand (1865), was to bring him the censorious applaud he sought, along with a measure of financial success, as was the following play, Peer Gynt (1867), to which Edvard Grieg famously composed incidental music and songs. Although Ibsen read snippets of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and traces of the latter's influence are evident in Brand, it was not until after Brand that Ibsen came to take Kierkegaard seriously. Initially annoyed with his friend Georg Brandes for comparing Brand to Kierkegaard, Ibsen nevertheless read either/or and Fear and Palpitate. Ibsen's next play, Peer Gynt, was consciously informed by Kierkegaard.

With success, Ibsen became more confident and began to introduce more and more of his own beliefs and judgments into the drama, exploring what he termed the "drama of ideas". His next series of plays are often considered his Golden Age, when he entered the height of his power and influence, becoming the center of dramatic controversy across Europe.

Ibsen moved from Italy to Dresden, Germany in 1868, where he spent years writing the play he regarded as his main work, Emperor and Galilean (1873), dramatizing the life and times of the Roman emperor Julian the Heretic. Although Ibsen himself always looked back on this play as the cornerstone of his entire works, very few shared his opinion, and his next works would be much more acclaimed. Ibsen moved to Munich in 1875 and published A Doll's House in 1879. The play is a scathing criticism of the marital roles accepted by men and women which characterized Ibsen's society.

Ghosts followed in 1881, another coruscating exegesis on the morality of Ibsen's society, in which a widow reveals to her cleric that she had hidden the evils of her marriage for its duration. The pastor had advised her to marry her betrothed despite his trifle, and she did so in the belief that her love would reform him. But his trifle continued right up until his death, and his vices are passed on to their son in the form of syphilis. The mention of venereal disease alone was discreditable, but to show how it could poison a respectable family was considered intolerable.

In An Enemy of the People (1882), Ibsen went even further. In earlier plays, controversial elements were important and even crucial components of the action, but they were on the small scale of individual households. In An Enemy, dissension became the primary focus, and the antagonist was the entire community. One primary message of the play is that the individual, who stands alone, is more often "right" than the mass of people, who are delineate as ignorant and



sheeplike. Contemporary society's belief was that the community was a noble institution that could be trusted, a notion Ibsen challenged. In *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen upbraided not only the conservatism of society, but also the liberalism of the time. He illustrated how people on both sides of the social hue cycle could be equally self-serving. *An Enemy of the People* was written as a response to the people who had rejected his previous work, *Ghosts*. The plot of the play is a cloaked look at the way people reacted to the plot of *Ghosts*. The protagonist is a physician in a vacation spot whose primary draw is a public bath. The doctor discovers that the water is contaminated by the local tannery. He expects to be extolled for saving the town from the nightmare of infecting visitors with disease, but instead he is declared an 'enemy of the people' by the locals, who band against him and even throw stones through his windows. The play ends with his complete repudiation. It is obvious to the reader that disaster is in store for the town as well as for the doctor.

As audiences by now expected of him, his next play again attacked ingrained beliefs and assumptions, but this time, his attack was not against society's mores, but against overeager reformers and their idealism. Always an iconoclast, Ibsen was equally willing to tear down the ideologies of any part of the political spectrum, including his own.

*The Wild Duck* (1884) is by many considered Ibsen's finest work, and it is certainly the most complex. It tells the story of Gregers Werle, a young man who returns to his hometown after an extended exile and is reunited with his boyhood friend Hjalmar Ekdal. Over the course of the play, the many secrets that lie behind the Ekdals' apparently happy home are revealed to Gregers, who insists on pursuing the absolute truth, or the "Summons of the Ideal". Among these truths: Gregers' father permeated his servant Gina, then married her off to Hjalmar to validate the child. Another man has been disgraced and imprisoned for a crime the elder Werle committed. Furthermore, while Hjalmar spends his days working on a wholly imaginary "invention", his wife is earning the household income.

Ibsen displays masterful use of irony: despite his peremptory insistence on truth, Gregers never says what he thinks but only insinuates, and is never understood until the play reaches its climax.

Gregers hammers away at Hjalmar through implication and coded phrases until he realizes the truth; Gina's daughter, Hedvig, is not his child. Blinded by Gregers' insistence on absolute truth, he disavows the child. Seeing the damage he has wrought, Gregers determines to repair things, and suggests to Hedvig that she sacrifice the wild duck, her

wounded pet, to prove her love for Hjalmar. Hedvig, alone among the characters, recognizes that Gregers always speaks in code, and looking for the deeper meaning in the first important statement Gregers makes which does not contain one, kills herself rather than the duck in order to prove her love for him in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Only too late do Hjalmar and Gregers realize that the absolute truth of the "ideal" is sometimes too much for the human heart to bear.

Late in his career, Ibsen turned to a more inward-looking drama that had much less to do with denunciations of society's moral values. In such later plays as Hedda Gabler (1890) and The Master Builder (1892), Ibsen explored psychological conflicts that outstripped a simple rejection of current conventions. Many modern readers, who might regard anti-Victorian didacticism as dated, simplistic or overused, have found these later works to be of absorbing interest for their hard-edged, objective consideration of communal clash. Hedda Gabler is probably

Ibsen's most performed play, with the title role regarded as one of the most challenging and rewarding for an actress even in the present day. Hedda Gabler and A Doll's House center on female protagonists whose almost fiendish energy proves both attractive and destructive for those around them, and while Hedda has a few similarities with the character of Nora in A Doll's House, many of today's audiences and theater critics feel that Hedda's intensity and drive are much more complex and much less comfortably explained than what they view as rather routine feminism on the part of Nora.

Ibsen had completely rewritten the rules of drama with a verisimilitude which was to be adopted by Chekhov and others and which we see in the theater to this day. From Ibsen forward, challenging assumptions and directly speaking about issues has been considered one of the factors that makes a play art rather than entertainment. He had a abstruse influence on the young James Joyce who adulates him in his early autobiographical novel "Stephen Hero". Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891, but it was in many ways not the Norway he had left. Indeed, he had played a major role in the changes that had happened across society. The Victorian Age was on its last legs, to be replaced by the rise of Modernism not only in the theater, but across public life.

### Death

On 23 May 1906, Ibsen died in his home at Arbins gade 1 in Christiania after a series of strokes in March, 1900. When, on 22 May, his nurse assured a visitor that he was a little better, Ibsen spattered his

last words: "On the contrary." He died the following day at 2:30 P.M. Ibsen was buried in Var Frelsers gravlund ("The Graveyard of Our Savior") in central Oslo.

*A Doll's House-Henrik Ibsen*

**Works**

- 1850: *Catiline*
- 1850: *The Burial Mound* also known as *The Warrior's Barrow*
- 1851: *Norma*
- 1852: *St. John's Eve*
- 1854: *Lady Inger of Oestraat*
- 1855: *The Feast at Solhaug*
- 1856: *Olaf-Liljekrans*
- 1857: *The Vikings at Helgoland*
- 1862: *Digte*
- 1862: *Love's Comedy*
- 1863: *The Pretenders*
- 1866: *Brand*
- 1867: *Peer Gynt*
- 1869: *The League of Youth*
- 1873: *Emperor and Galilean*
- 1877: *Pillars of Society*
- 1879: *A Doll's House*
- 1881: *Ghosts*
- 1882: *An Enemy of the People*
- 1884: *The Wild Duck*
- 1886: *Rosmersholm*
- 1888: *The Lady from the Sea*
- 1890: *Hedda Gabler*
- 1892: *The Master Builder*
- 1894: *Little Eyolf*
- 1896: *John Gabriel Borkman*

**SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY**

**Act I**

A Doll's House opens as Nora Helmer gets back from Christmas shopping. Her husband Torvald comes out of his study to banter with her. They discuss how their finances will improve now that Torvald has a new job as a bank manager. Torvald expresses his horror of mortgage. With her husband, Torvald, Nora behaves very childish, and he enjoys treating her like a child to be enjoyed and satiated.

Soon an old friend of Nora's, Christine Lindé, arrives. She is a childless widow who is moving back to the city. Her husband left her no money, so she has tried different kinds of work, and now hopes to find some work that is not too Herculean. Nora divulges to Christine that she once secretly borrowed money from an opprobrium lawyer, Nils Krogstad, to save Torvald's life when he was very ill, but she has not told him in order to protect his pride. She told everyone that the money came from her father, who died at about the same time. She has been repaying the mortgage from her housekeeping budget, and also from some work she got copying papers by hand, which she did secretly in her room, and took pride in her ability to earn money as

- 1854 Lady Inger of Oestraat
- 1855 The Feast at Solhaug
- 1856 Olaf Liljekrans
- 1857 The Vikings at Helgoland
- 1862 Digte
- 1862 Love's Comedy
- 1863 The Pretenders
- 1866 Brand
- 1867 Peer Gynt
- 1869 The League of Youth
- 1873 Emperor and Galilean
- 1877 Pillars of Society
- 1879 A Doll's House
- 1881 Ghosts
- 1882 An Enemy of the People

• 1884 The Wild Duck

• 1886 Rosmersholm

• 1888 The Lady from the Sea

• 1890 Hedda Gabler

• 1892 The Master Builder

• 1894 Little Eyolf

• 1896 John Gabriel Borkman

• 1906 As if she were a man! Torvald's new job promises to finally

liberate her from this debt. Nora asks Torvald to give Christine a position as a secretary in the bank, and he agrees, as she has experience in bookkeeping. They leave the house together.

Krogstad arrives and tells Nora that he is worried he will be fired to create a position for Christine. He asks her to help him keep his job and says that he will fight perilously to keep it. Nora is grudging to commit to helping him, so Krogstad reveals that he knows she committed falsification on the bond she signed for her loan from him. As a woman, she needed an adult male co-signer, so she said she would have her father do so. However the signature is dated three days after his death, which suggests that it is a falsification. Nora admits that she did falsify the signature, so as to spare her dying father further worry about her (she was pregnant, poor, and had a seriously ill husband). Krogstad explains that the falsification deceives his trust and is also a serious crime. If he told others about it, her notoriety would be ruined, as was his after a similar "incaution," even though he was never arraigned. He entreats that what he did was in order to provide for his sick wife, who later died.

Krogstad leaves, and Nora tries to calm herself by decorating the Christmas tree. Torvald comes back home, having seen Krogstad, and guesses that he was there to ask Nora to negotiate on his behalf. Nora asks what Krogstad did in order to get a reputation as an immoral man. Torvald says that he committed a falsification, but was able to avoid accusation by using a "cunning trick." If Krogstad had ever admitted his guilt, Torvald would be willing to trust him, but by continuing to pretend that he never did anything wrong, Krogstad "has lost all moral character." Torvald further states that a parent who lives a lie "poisons" his or her children and causes them to become criminals. Nora is terribly agitated to learn of this notion, which she believes

credulous, and worries that she may be harming her children unknowingly.

## Act II

Christine arrives to help Nora repair a dress for a costume party she and Torvald are going to tomorrow. Then Torvald comes home from the bank and Nora entreats with him to establish Krogstad at the bank. She claims she is worried that Krogstad will publish libellous articles about Torvald and ruin his career. Torvald dismisses her fears and explains that although Krogstad is a good worker and seems to have turned his life around, he insists on firing him because Krogstad is not reverential enough to him in front of other bank crew. Torvald goes into his study to do some work and has a secretary in the bank.

Next Dr. Rank, a family friend, arrives. Nora talks about asking him for a favor. Then he reveals that he has entered the terminal stage of tuberculosis of the spine (a contemporary floridness for innate syphilis) and that he has always been secretly in love with her. Nora tries to deny the first divulgence and make light of it, but she is more disturbed by the second. tries clumsily to tell him that she is not in love with him, but loves him dearly as a friend.

Desperate after being fired by Torvald, Krogstad arrives at the house. Nora gets Dr. Rank to go in to Torvald's study, so he does not see Krogstad. When Krogstad comes in he declares he no longer cares about the remaining balance of Nora's loan, but that he will preserve the associated bond in order to blackmail Torvald into not only keeping him employed, but giving him a promotion. Nora explains that she has done her best to persuade her husband, but he refuses to change his mind. Krogstad informs Nora that he has written a letter detailing her

crime (fabricate her father's signature of guarantor on the bond) and puts it in Torvald's mailbox, which is locked.

Nora tells Christine of her imbroglio. Christine says that she and Krogstad were in love before she married, and promises that she will try to convince him to acquiesce. Torvald comes in and tries to check his mail, but Nora diverts him by begging him to help her with the dance she has been rehearsing for the costume party, as she is so anxious about performing. She dances so badly and acts so worried that Torvald agrees to spend the whole evening coaching her. When the others go in to dinner, Nora stays behind for a few minutes and envisages suicide to save her husband from the shame of the divulgence of her crime, and more importantly to pre-empt any chivalrous gesture on his part to save her sobriety.

Christine tells Krogstad that she only married her husband because she had no other means to support her sick mother and young siblings, and that she has returned to offer him her love again. She believes that he would not have descended to unscrupulous behavior if he had not been devastated by her jilting and in awful financial inlets. Krogstad is moved and offers to take back his letter to Torvald. However, Christine decides that Torvald should know the truth for the sake of his and Nora's marriage.

### Act III

After, literally dragging Nora home from the party, Torvald goes to check his mail, but is delayed by Dr. Rank, who has followed them. Dr. Rank chats for a while so as to convey diagonally to Nora that this is a final goodbye, as he has determined that his death is near, but in general terms so that Torvald does not suspect what he is referring to. Dr. Rank leaves, and Torvald recifys his letters. As he reads them Nora steels herself to take her life. Torvald tackles her with Krogstad's letter. Unfuriated, he declares that he is now completely in Krogstad's power—he must capitulate to Krogstad's demands and keep quiet about the whole affair. He rebukes Nora, calling her a fraudulent and unethical woman and telling her she is unfit to raise their children. He says that from now on their marriage will be only a matter of appearances.

A maid enters, delivering a letter to Nora. Krogstad has returned the implicating papers, saying that he contritions his actions. Torvald rejoices that he is saved as he burns the papers. He takes back his jarring words to his wife and tells her that he forgive her. Nora realizes that her husband is not the strong and chivalrous man she thought he was, and that far from loving her, Torvald only really loves himself. What has appeared to be his love for Nora is merely quenching at cognizant himself to be a wonderful husband.

Torvald explains that when a man has forgiven his wife it makes him love her all the more since it reminds him that she is totally dependent on him, like a child. He banishes Nora's excruciate choice made against her compunction for the sake of his health and her years of secret efforts to free them from the consequential obligations and danger of loss of reputation, while preserving his peace of mind, as a mere mistake that she made owing to her foolishness, one of her most captivating dainty dainty traits.

Nora tells Torvald that she is leaving him to live alone so she can find out who she is and what she believes and decide what to do with

her life. She says she has been treated like a doll to play with, first by her father, and then by him. Concerned for the family reputation, Torvald insists that she fulfill her duty as a wife and mother, but Nora says that her first duties are to herself, and she cannot be a good mother or wife without learning to be more than a plaything. She affirms that she had expected that he would want to sacrifice his esteem for hers, and that she had planned to kill herself to prevent him from doing so. She now realizes that Torvald is not at all the kind of person she had believed him to be, and that their marriage has been based on mutual delusion and misunderstanding.

III to A

Torvald is unable to grasp Nora's point of view, since it so contradicts his own ideas about her mind. Furthermore, he is so egotistical that it would be impossible for him to bear to understand how he appears to her, as egocentric, sanctimonious, and more concerned with public esteem than with actual morality. As Nora lets herself out, leaving behind her wedding ring and keys, Torvald remains utterly perplexed by what has happened.

### Alternative Ending

It was felt by Ibsen's German agent that the original ending would not play well in German theatres; therefore, for the play's German debut, Ibsen was forced to write an alternative ending for it to be considered acceptable. In this ending, Nora is led to her children after having argued with Torvald. Seeing them, she slumps, and the curtain is brought down. Ibsen later called the ending a discredit to the original play and referred to it as a 'unsophisticated outrage'.

## DOLL'S HOUSE - PLOT

### A Doll's House-Henrik Ibsen

A Doll's House opens on Christmas Eve. Nora Helmer enters her well-furnished living room—the setting of the entire play—carrying several packages. Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband, comes out of his study when he hears her arrive. He greets her playfully and tenderly, but then upbraids her for spending so much money on Christmas gifts. Their conversation affirms that the Helmers have had to be careful with money for many years, but that Torvald has recently obtained a new position at the bank where he works that will afford them a more comfortable lifestyle.

Helene, the maid, announces that the Helmers' dear friend Dr. Rank has come to visit. At the same time, another unknown visitor has



arrived. To Nora's great surprise, Kristine Linde, a former school friend, comes into the room. The two have not seen each other for years, but Nora mentions having read that Mrs. Linde's husband passed away a few years earlier. Mrs. Linde tells Nora that when her husband died, she was left with no money and no children. Nora tells Mrs. Linde about her first year of marriage to Torvald. She explains that they were very poor and both had to work long hours. Torvald became sick, she adds, and the couple had to travel to Italy so that Torvald could recover.

Nora probes further about Mrs. Linde's life, and Mrs. Linde explains that for years she had to care for her sick mother and her two

younger brothers. She states that her mother has passed away, though, and that the brothers are too old to need her. Instead of feeling relief, Mrs. Linde says she feels empty because she has no occupation; she hopes that Torvald may be able to help her prevail employment. Nora promises to speak to Torvald and then affirms a great secret to Mrs. Linde—without Torvald's knowledge, Nora illegally borrowed money for the trip that she and Torvald took to Italy; she told Torvald that the money had come from her father. For years, Nora reveals, she has worked and saved in secret, slowly repaying the mortgage and soon it will be fully repaid.

Krogstad, a low-level employee at the bank where Torvald works, arrives and proceeds into Torvald's study. Nora reacts uneasily to Krogstad's presence, and Dr. Rank, coming out of the study, says Krogstad is "morally sick." Once he has finished meeting with Krogstad, Torvald comes into the living room and says that he can probably employ Mrs. Linde at the bank. Dr. Rank, Torvald, and Mrs. Linde then depart, leaving Nora by herself. Nora's children return with their nanny, Anne-Marie, and Nora plays with them until she notices Krogstad's presence in the room. The two antipodes and Krogstad is divulged to be the source of Nora's secret loan.

Krogstad states that Torvald wants to fire him from his position at the bank and implies to his own poor notoriety. He asks Nora to use her influence to assure that his position remains secure. When she refuses, Krogstad points out that he has in his possession a contract that contains Nora's falsification of her father's signature. Krogstad blackmails Nora, threatening to reveal her crime and to bring shame and disgrace on both Nora and her husband if she does not prevent Torvald from firing him. Krogstad leaves, and when Torvald returns, Nora tries to persuade him not to fire Krogstad, but Torvald will hear

nothing of it. He declares Krogstad an immoral man and states that he feels physically ill in the presence of such people.

Act Two opens on the following day, Christmas. Alone, Nora paces her living room, filled with anxiety. Mrs. Linde arrives and helps sew Nora's costume for the ball that Nora will be attending at her neighbors' home the following evening. Nora tells Mrs. Linde that Dr. Rank has a mortal illness that he inherited from his father. Nora's sceptical behavior leads Mrs. Linde to guess that Dr. Rank is the source of Nora's loan. Nora denies Mrs. Linde's charge but refuses to affirm the source of her distress. Torvald arrives, and Nora again begs him to keep Krogstad employed at the bank, but again, Torvald refuses. When Nora presses him, he admits that Krogstad's immoral behavior isn't all that bothers him—he dislikes Krogstad's overly familiar attitude. Torvald and Nora argue until Torvald sends the maid to deliver Krogstad's letter of dismissal.

Torvald leaves. Dr. Rank arrives and tells Nora that he knows he is close to death. She attempts to cheer him up and begins to coquette with him. She seems to be preparing to ask him to intercede on her behalf in her struggle with Torvald. Suddenly, Dr. Rank reveals to Nora that he is in love with her. In light of this revelation, Nora refuses to ask Dr. Rank for anything.

Once Dr. Rank leaves, Krogstad arrives and demands an explanation for his redundancy. He wants respectability and has changed the terms of the extortion: he now insists to Nora that not only that he be recruited at the bank but that he be recruited in a higher position. He then puts a letter detailing Nora's mortgage and falsification in the Helmers' letterbox. In a panic, Nora tells Mrs. Linde everything, and Mrs. Linde instructs Nora to detain Torvald from opening the letter as long as possible while she goes to speak with Krogstad. In order to distract Torvald from the letterbox, Nora begins to practice the tarantella she will perform at that evening's costume party. In her agitated emotional state, she dances wildly and violently, displeasing Torvald. Nora manages to make Torvald promise not to open his mail until after she performs at the party. Mrs. Linde soon returns and says that she has left Krogstad a note but that he will be gone until the following evening.

The next night, as the costume party takes place upstairs, Krogstad meets Mrs. Linde in the Helmers' living room. Their conversation affirms that the two had once deeply in love, but Mrs. Linde left Krogstad for a affluentier man who would enable her to support her family. She tells Krogstad that now that she is free of her own part

constraints and wishes to be with Krogstad and care for his children. Krogstad is overjoyed and says he will demand his letter back before Torvald can read it and learn Nora's secret. Mrs. Linde, however, insists he leave the letter, because she believes both Torvald and Nora will be better off once the truth has been divulged.

Soon after Krogstad's evacuation, Nora and Torvald enter, back from the costume ball. After saying goodnight to Mrs. Linde, Torvald tells Nora how desirable she looked as she danced. Dr. Rank, who was also at the party and has come to say goodnight, promptly interrupts Torvald's advances on Nora. After Dr. Rank leaves, Torvald finds in his letterbox two of Dr. Rank's visiting cards, each with a black cross above the name. Nora knows Dr. Rank's cards constitute his announcement that he will soon die, and she informs Torvald of this fact. She then insists that Torvald read Krogstad's letter.

Torvald reads the letter and is infuriated. He calls Nora a impostor and a falsifier and complains that she has ruined his happiness. He declares that she will not be allowed to raise their children. Helene then brings in a letter. Torvald opens it and discovers that Krogstad has returned Nora's contract (which contains the feign signature). Overjoyed, Torvald attempts to dismiss his past insults, but his despotic words have spark something in Nora. She declares that despite their eight years of marriage, they do not understand one another. Torvald, Nora propounds, has evaluate her like a "doll", to be played with and admired. She decides to leave Torvald, declaring that she must "make sense of herself and everything around her." She walks out, denouncing the door behind her.

## IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

### Nora

Nora is the protagonist of the play and the wife of Torvald Helmer. Nora initially seems like a playful, naive child who lacks knowledge of the world outside her home. She does have some worldly experience, however, and the small acts of nutiny in which she seizes stipulate that she is not as innocent or happy as she appears. She comes to see her position in her marriage with increasing lucidity and finds the strength to free herself from her muggy situation.

### Torvald Helmer

Torvald Helmer is the Nora's husband. Torvald delights in his new position at the bank, just as he delights in his position of authority, as a

husband. He treats Nora like a child, in a manner that is both kind and condescension. He does not view Nora as an equal but rather as a plaything or doll to be chaffed and admired. In general, Torvald is overly concerned with his place and status in society, and he allows his emotions to be undulated heavily by the anticipation of society's respect and the fear of society's derision.

**Krogstad**

Krogstad is a lawyer who went to school with Torvald and holds a auxiliary position at Torvald's bank. Krogstad's character is antithetical: though his bad deeds seem to stem from a desire to protect his children from derision, he is perfectly willing to use unscrupulous man oevres to achieve his goals. His willingness to allow Nora to suffer is loathsome, but his claims to feel sympathy for her and the hard circumstances of his own life impel us to sympathize with him to some degree.

**Mrs. Linde**

Mrs. Linde is Nora's childhood friend. Kristine Linde is a practical, down-to-earth woman, and her sensible worldview highlights Nora's somewhat childlike outlook on life. Mrs. Linde's account of her life of poverty underscores the prerogative nature of the life that Nora leads. Also, we learn that Mrs. Linde took responsibility for her sick parent, whereas Nora relinquished her father when he was ill.

**Dr. Rank**

Dr. Rank is Torvald's best friend. Dr. Rank stands out as the one character in the play who is by and large unconcerned with what others think of him. He is also notable for his phlegmatic acceptance of nemesis fate. Unlike Torvald and Nora, Dr. Rank admits to the diseased nature (literally, in his case) of his life. For the most part, he avoids talking to Torvald about his impending death out of respect for Torvald's repugnance for ugliness.

**Bob, Emmy, and Ivar**

Bob, Emmy and Ivar are Nora and Torvald's three small children. In her brief interaction with her children, Nora shows herself to be a loving mother. When she later refuses to spend time with her children because she fears she may morally suborn them, Nora acts on her belief that the quality of parenting strongly impacts a child's development.

**Anne-Marie**