

Théâtre Classique Anglais : Case Studies

Hamlet by William Shakespeare

Full Summary of the play

On a dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the king's widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father's spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father's death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince's erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of traveling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle's guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately

dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father's death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius's son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father's and sister's deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes' desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes' blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match. Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia's funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius's orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king's proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword's blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen's death, he dies from the blade's poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet's last request, tells him Hamlet's tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier.

Some important themes of the play

The Impossibility of Certainty

What separates Hamlet from other revenge plays (and maybe from every play written before it) is that the action we expect to see, particularly from Hamlet himself, is continually postponed while Hamlet tries to obtain more certain knowledge about what he is doing. This play poses many questions that other plays would simply take for granted. Can we have certain knowledge about ghosts? Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it really a misleading fiend? Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded? Moving to more earthly matters: How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses? Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius's soul by watching his behavior? If so, can he know the facts of what Claudius did by observing the state of his soul? Can Claudius (or the audience) know the state of Hamlet's mind by observing his behavior and listening to his speech? Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have? Can we know anything about the afterlife? Many people have seen Hamlet as a play about indecisiveness, and thus about Hamlet's failure to act appropriately. It might be more interesting to consider that the play shows us how many uncertainties our lives are built upon, and how many unknown quantities are taken for granted when people act or when they evaluate one another's actions.

The Complexity of Action

Directly related to the theme of certainty is the theme of action. How is it possible to take reasonable, effective, purposeful action? In Hamlet, the question of how to act is affected not only by rational considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, ethical, and psychological factors. Hamlet himself appears to distrust the idea that it's even possible to act in a controlled, purposeful way. When he does act, he prefers to do it blindly, recklessly, and violently. The other characters obviously think much less about "action" in the abstract than Hamlet does, and are therefore less troubled about the possibility of acting effectively. They simply act as they feel is appropriate. But in some sense they prove that Hamlet is right, because all of their actions miscarry. Claudius possesses himself of queen and crown through bold action, but his conscience torments him, and he is beset by threats to his authority (and, of course, he dies). Laertes resolves that nothing will distract him from acting out his revenge, but he is easily influenced and manipulated into serving Claudius's ends, and his poisoned rapier is turned back upon himself.

The Mystery of Death

In the aftermath of his father's murder, Hamlet is obsessed with the idea of death, and over the course of the play he considers death from a great many perspectives. He ponders both the spiritual aftermath of death, embodied in the ghost, and the physical remainders of the dead, such as by Yorick's skull and the decaying corpses in the cemetery. Throughout, the idea of death is closely tied to the themes of spirituality, truth, and uncertainty in that death may bring the answers to Hamlet's deepest questions, ending once and for all the problem of trying to determine truth in an ambiguous world. And, since death is both the cause and the consequence of revenge, it is intimately tied to the theme of revenge and justice—Claudius's murder of King Hamlet initiates Hamlet's quest for revenge, and Claudius's death is the end of that quest. The question of his own death plagues Hamlet as well, as he repeatedly contemplates whether or not suicide is a morally legitimate action in an unbearably painful world. Hamlet's grief and misery is such that he frequently longs for death to end his suffering, but he fears that if he commits suicide, he will be consigned to eternal suffering in hell because of the Christian religion's prohibition of suicide. In his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy (III.i), Hamlet philosophically concludes that no one would choose to endure the pain of life if he or she were not afraid of what will come after death, and that it is this fear which causes complex moral considerations to interfere with the capacity for action.

The Nation as a Diseased Body

Everything is connected in Hamlet, including the welfare of the royal family and the health of the state as a whole. The play's early scenes explore the sense of anxiety and dread that surrounds the transfer of power from one ruler to the next. Throughout the play, characters draw explicit connections between the moral legitimacy of a ruler and the health of the nation. Denmark is frequently described as a physical body made ill by the moral corruption of Claudius and Gertrude, and many observers interpret the presence of the ghost as a supernatural omen indicating that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.67). The dead King Hamlet is portrayed as a strong, forthright ruler under whose guard the state was in good health, while Claudius, a wicked politician, has corrupted and compromised Denmark to satisfy his own appetites. At the end of the play, the rise to power of the upright Fortinbras suggests that Denmark will be strengthened once again.

Performance

Hamlet includes many references to performance of all kinds – both theatrical performance and the way people perform in daily life. In his first appearance, Hamlet draws a distinction between outward behavior—“actions that a man might play”—and real feelings: “that within which passeth show” (I.ii.). However, the more time we spend with Hamlet, the harder it becomes to tell what he is really feeling and what he is performing. He announces in Act One, scene five that he is going to pretend to be mad (“put an antic disposition on”). In Act Two, scene one, Ophelia describes Hamlet’s mad behavior as a comical performance. However, when Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “I have lost all my mirth,” he seems genuinely depressed.

Generations of readers have argued about whether Hamlet is really mad or just performing madness. It’s impossible to know for sure – by the end of the play, even Hamlet himself doesn’t seem to know the difference between performance and reality. Hamlet further explores the idea of performance by regularly reminding the audience that we are watching a play. When Polonius says that at university he “did enact Julius Caesar” (III.ii), contemporary audiences would have thought of Shakespeare’s own *Julius Caesar*, which was written around the same time as *Hamlet*. The actor who played Polonius may have played *Julius Caesar* as well. The device of the play within the play gives Hamlet further opportunities to comment on the nature of theater. By constantly reminding the audience that what we’re watching is a performance, Hamlet invites us to think about the fact that something fake can feel real, and vice versa. Hamlet himself points out that acting is powerful because it’s indistinguishable from reality: “The purpose of playing [...] is to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to Nature” (III.ii.). That’s why he believes that the Players can “catch the conscience of the King” (II.ii.). By repeatedly showing us that performance can feel real, Hamlet makes us question what “reality” actually is.

Madness

One of the central questions of *Hamlet* is whether the main character has lost his mind or is only pretending to be mad. Hamlet’s erratic behavior and nonsensical speech can be interpreted as a ruse to get the other characters to believe he’s gone mad. On the other hand, his behavior may be a logical response to the “mad” situation he finds himself in – his father has been murdered by his uncle, who is now his stepfather. Initially, Hamlet himself seems to believe he’s sane – he describes his plans to “put an antic disposition on” and tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he is only

mad when the wind blows “north-north-west” – in other words, his madness is something he can turn on and off at will. By the end of the play, however, Hamlet seems to doubt his own sanity. Referring to himself in the third person, he says “And when he’s not himself does harm Laertes,” suggesting Hamlet has become estranged from his former, sane self. Referring to his murder of Polonius, he says, “Who does it then? His madness.” At the same time, Hamlet’s excuse of madness absolves him of murder, so it can also be read as the workings of a sane and cunning mind.

Doubt

In Hamlet, the main character’s doubt creates a world where very little is known for sure. Hamlet thinks, but isn’t entirely sure, that his uncle killed his father. He believes he sees his father’s Ghost, but he isn’t sure he should believe in the Ghost or listen to what the Ghost tells him: “I’ll have grounds / More relative than this.” In his “to be or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet suspects he should probably just kill himself, but doubt about what lies beyond the grave prevents him from acting. Hamlet is so wracked with doubt, he even works to infect other characters with his lack of certainty, as when he tells Ophelia “you should not have believed me” when he told her he loved her. As a result, the audience doubts Hamlet’s reliability as a protagonist. We are left with many doubts about the action – whether Gertrude was having an affair with Claudius before he killed Hamlet’s father; whether Hamlet is sane or mad; what Hamlet’s true feelings are for Ophelia.

Characters of the play

Hamlet

The Prince of Denmark, the title character, and the protagonist. About thirty years old at the start of the play, Hamlet is the son of Queen Gertrude and the late King Hamlet, and the nephew of the present king, Claudius. Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle’s scheming and disgust for his mother’s sexuality. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is often indecisive and hesitant, but at other times prone to rash and impulsive acts.

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don’t know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells

other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there's something important he's not saying, maybe something even he is not aware of. The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of Shakespeare's most impressive achievements.

A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father's death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, evidence that any other character in a play would believe, Hamlet becomes obsessed with proving his uncle's guilt before trying to act. The standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt" is simply unacceptable to him. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die—the list is extensive.

But even though he is thoughtful to the point of obsession, Hamlet also behaves rashly and impulsively. When he does act, it is with surprising swiftness and little or no premeditation, as when he stabs Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who he is. He seems to step very easily into the role of a madman, behaving erratically and upsetting the other characters with his wild speech and pointed innuendos.

It is also important to note that Hamlet is extremely melancholy and discontented with the state of affairs in Denmark and in his own family—indeed, in the world at large. He is extremely disappointed with his mother for marrying his uncle so quickly, and he repudiates Ophelia, a woman he once claimed to love, in the harshest terms. His words often indicate his disgust with and distrust of women in general. At a number of points in the play, he contemplates his own death and even the option of suicide.

But, despite all of the things with which Hamlet professes dissatisfaction, it is remarkable that the prince and heir apparent of Denmark should think about these problems only in personal and philosophical terms. He spends relatively little time thinking about the threats to Denmark's national security from without or the threats to its stability from within (some of which he helps to create through his own carelessness).

Claudius

The King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle, and the play's antagonist. The villain of the play, Claudius is a calculating, ambitious politician, driven by his sexual appetites and his lust for power, but he occasionally shows

signs of guilt and human feeling—his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

Gertrude

The Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother, recently married to Claudius. Gertrude loves Hamlet deeply, but she is a shallow, weak woman who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral rectitude or truth.

Polonius

The Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court, a pompous, conniving old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Ophelia

Polonius's daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. Dependent on men to tell her how to behave, she gives in to Polonius's schemes to spy on Hamlet. Even in her lapse into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river amid the flower garlands she had gathered.

Laertes

Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is clearly a foil for the reflective Hamlet.

The Ghost

The specter of Hamlet's recently deceased father. The Ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the Ghost is what it appears to be, or whether it is something else. Hamlet speculates that the Ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt him into murder, and the question of what the Ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.

Horatio

Hamlet's close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play. After Hamlet's death, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet's story.

Fortinbras

By E-learning.

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The young Prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet's father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father's honor, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.

Osric

The foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes.

Voltimand and Cornelius

Courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

Marcellus and Bernardo

The officers who first see the ghost walking the ramparts of Elsinore and who summon Horatio to witness it. Marcellus is present when Hamlet first encounters the ghost.

Francisco

A soldier and guardsman at Elsinore.

Reynaldo

Polonius's servant, who is sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes.

Question

Is the Ghost real?

Answer

The Ghost is one of the great mysteries of Hamlet. The play begins by showing us the Ghost appearing in front of several witnesses, who see it and discuss it among themselves, so we know from the outset that the Ghost is not simply a figment of Hamlet's imagination. We also learn later in the play that the Ghost is telling the truth about being murdered by Claudius, because Claudius admits to the murder when he's talking alone in Act 3, scene 3. However, the basic nature and intention of the Ghost remain mysterious. The Ghost claims that it is the spirit of Hamlet's father, and that it currently spends most of its time in purgatory being purified before it can enter heaven, and that it has been released for a

short time to deliver its message to Hamlet. This explanation doesn't make a lot of sense, because the Ghost is a very dark and frightening creature, and it urges Hamlet toward vengeance, sending him down a path that leads to murder and his own destruction. Vengeance is not a heavenly virtue or Christian value, and heavenly beings don't normally appear to tempt characters toward violent and tragic paths. (The Ghost is in purgatory not heaven, but presumably only a heavenly being would have the authority to release it. The Ghost may be unique in literature in claiming to be returning specifically from purgatory.)

Hamlet himself raises the possibility that the Ghost is actually a demon impersonating his father, which certainly seems possible, though we never see any further evidence to support this idea. In Act 3, scene 4, when the Ghost appears to Hamlet (and the audience) but not to Gertrude, Gertrude sees the Ghost as a sign of Hamlet's madness. Because we've already seen that the Ghost can appear to other people and that it was right about Claudius, on a first viewing we would probably conclude that the Ghost simply chose to appear only to Hamlet and that Gertrude is mistaken about his being mad (even more so since Hamlet announced his intention to appear mad). However, in the context of Hamlet's increasingly distraught emotional state, the Ghost's appearance only to Hamlet seems more ambiguous. It may be a demon trying to make Hamlet insane, or a manifestation of Hamlet's inner demons.

Question

Did Hamlet and Ophelia have sex?

Answer

It would have been risky for Shakespeare directly to portray pre-marital sex between aristocratic characters, but Hamlet gives us reasons to suspect that at some point before the beginning of the play, Hamlet and Ophelia have had sex. Laertes and Polonius both warn Ophelia against having sex with Hamlet, which suggests that Ophelia's father and brother, at least, are concerned about the possibility. Later in the play Hamlet also teases Ophelia with explicitly sexual puns, further suggesting that they may have shared intimacy. For instance, just before the play scene, he asks: "Shall I lie in your lap, my lady?" . . . Do you think I meant country matters?" (III.ii.).

However, the best evidence that Hamlet and Ophelia have had sex comes from Ophelia. When Hamlet kills Ophelia's father, she goes mad. In her madness, she sings songs that seem to dwell on the causes of her grief. Some of her songs are about old men or fathers dying. The rest are about

pre-marital sex: "Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me / You promised me to wed'" (IV.v.). Although none of this evidence offers definitive proof, Shakespeare strongly suggests that Hamlet and Ophelia have at least considered consummating their desire.

Question

Did Gertrude have an affair with Claudius before he killed Hamlet's father?

Answer

We can't know for sure if Gertrude was sleeping with Claudius while still married to Hamlet's father, though Hamlet and the Ghost imply that she was. Both Hamlet and the Ghost call Claudius "adulterate," which means "corrupted by adultery." The Ghost also calls Gertrude "seeming-virtuous" (I.iv.), which suggests he believes he was wrong to trust her when he was alive. However, when Claudius confesses to the murder of his brother, he counts Gertrude among the "effects for which I did the murder" (III.iii.), suggesting he did not "possess" her before his brother's death—although in this context "possess" might refer to marriage rather than to sexual intimacy. Furthermore, when Hamlet accuses Gertrude of "an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty" (III.iv.), Gertrude at first seems to have no idea what he's talking about: "what act / That roars so loud[?]" (III.iv.). Later, however, she confesses that Hamlet's words have made her see "black and grieved spots" (III.iv.) on her soul, which indicates that she feels guilty about something, although she doesn't specify the source of her guilt. Once again, Shakespeare leaves the matter of sex ambiguous.

Question

Who is Fortinbras?

Answer

Fortinbras is the nephew of the King of Norway. Although we hear his name mentioned in the play's first and second acts, Fortinbras doesn't appear onstage until the final moments of the play. Early on we learn that Fortinbras's father, the previous King of Norway, was killed by King Hamlet in battle some years before the events of the play. But instead of inheriting the throne, the kingdom went to Fortinbras's uncle.

Thus, Fortinbras and Hamlet are in similar situations—that is, both are sons of murdered kings, whose thrones have been usurped by their uncles. However, Fortinbras's response to his situation is very different from Hamlet's. In order to avenge his father's death, Fortinbras invades Denmark and ends up taking the Danish crown for himself, thereby living up to his name, which means "strong-armed." Fortinbras demonstrates how the son of a murdered king is supposed to behave. Whereas Hamlet finds his situation unbearable and resorts to ineffectual and melancholy contemplation, Fortinbras is a man of action who effectively takes advantage of his situation. In this regard Fortinbras resembles Laertes, another worthy son who takes action on his murdered father's behalf.

Question

Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius right away?

Answer

Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius represents another of Hamlet's great mysteries. Hamlet himself offers several reasons throughout the play. At first, he doesn't want to kill Claudius because he doesn't feel as angry or determined to act as he thinks he should, referring to himself as "unpregnant of my cause" (II.ii). Later Hamlet wonders whether he can trust the Ghost: "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil" (III.i.). If the Ghost is a devil rather than the spirit of his father, then the possibility exists that the Ghost aims to manipulate him into committing a sin. Hence he wonders whether the Ghost "abuses me to damn me" (III.i.). In another moment of hesitation in Act Three, Hamlet aborts the killing of Claudius because the man's praying, and Hamlet worries that his uncle will go to Heaven if he dies while praying. Finally, at the end of the play, Hamlet remains unable to decide whether killing Claudius is morally justifiable, asking himself: "Is 't not perfect conscience?" (V.ii.). Hamlet consistently reasons his way out of committing violence, suggesting that he is conditioned to be a thinker rather than a man of action.

Question

Why does Marcellus say, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.94)?

Answer

Marcellus is speaking figuratively. He means that something—as yet unknown—is wrong in the country. He believes this to be true because the

ghost of Hamlet's father, armed from head to foot, has appeared several times around midnight, and the ghost has now summoned Hamlet to come with it alone to speak privately.

Question

Was Hamlet really in love with Ophelia?

Answer

It is likely that Hamlet really was in love with Ophelia. Readers know Hamlet wrote love letters to Ophelia because she shows them to Polonius. In addition, Hamlet tells Ophelia, "I did love you once" (3.1.117). He professes his love for Ophelia again to Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius after Ophelia has died, saying, "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.247–249).

Question

Why does Hamlet encourage the actor to recite the speech about Pyrrhus and Priam?

Answer

Hamlet wants everyone to hear the speech about Pyrrhus and Priam because it involves a son viciously avenging his father's death. The tale parallels what Hamlet would like to do himself and feels he should do—kill Claudius for murdering his father. Hamlet dwells on this idea throughout the play, though he keeps hesitating and can't bring himself to commit the act until the end.

Question

Does Hamlet consider suicide?

Answer

When Hamlet asks "To be or not to be?", he is asking himself whether it is better to be alive—and suffer what life offers—or to be dead by one's own hand and end the suffering. His father's murder and his mother's marriage to his villainous uncle have caused Hamlet to contemplate the merits of suicide. Throughout the rest of his soliloquy, he wonders why people

choose life's suffering over death and concludes that it is their fear of the unknown—of not knowing what death will bring.

Question

Why is Hamlet so cruel to Ophelia?

Answer

Hamlet is cruel to Ophelia because he has transferred his anger at Gertrude's marriage to Claudius onto Ophelia. In fact, Hamlet's words suggest that he transfers his rage and disgust for his mother onto all women. He says to Ophelia, "God has given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on 't'" (3.1.143–146). Hamlet may also know that Ophelia is helping Claudius and Polonius spy on him and talks to her with this betrayal in mind.

Question

Why does Laertes break into Claudius's chamber?

Answer

Laertes breaks into Claudius's chamber because he is angry that his father is dead and demands to know how he was killed, where his body is, and why Polonius was not afforded the burial ceremony he deserved. In fact, Laertes seems to think that Claudius himself is responsible for his father's murder. Laertes is shown to be a hot-headed, vengeful young man, which helps explain why he later conspires with Claudius to kill Hamlet.

Question

Why does Ophelia go mad?

Answer

Ophelia goes mad because her father, Polonius, whom she deeply loved, has been killed by Hamlet. In addition, Hamlet, whom she also loved, has cruelly rejected her. The fact that this grief drives Ophelia to madness reveals her overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, and the power that the men in Ophelia's life wield over her.

Question

Does Ophelia actually kill herself?

Answer

One may view Ophelia's death as an accident because she drowns after the tree branch she is sitting on breaks, causing her to fall into the brook. However, one may also view her death as a suicide because she makes no attempt to save herself. This lack of effort can be interpreted as her desire to die or the inability to recognize the mortal danger she is in. Committing suicide was considered a mortal sin in Shakespeare's day; he leaves the answer uncertain.

Question

What is the significance of the gravediggers?

Answer

The graveyard is a setting of death, which foreshadows events to come. At first the gravediggers add to the somber atmosphere, arguing over whether Ophelia deserves a Christian burial since her death may have been a suicide. But then their behavior becomes inane as they tell bad jokes about death and grave-digging, sing irreverent songs, and act like buffoons. The scene creates some comic relief before the tragic end of the play.

Question

How does Hamlet's view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern change?

Answer

In the beginning of the play, Hamlet greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as old friends. But on the ship journey to England, he discovers that they are working with Claudius and that they carry a request from Claudius for the king of England to behead Hamlet. Hamlet replaces the request with his own order, asking that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be executed. He has his "old friends" murdered because he believes they deserve to die for betraying him: "Their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow."
(5.2.62-63)

Much Ado About Nothing by William Shakespeare

Full summary of the play

Leonato, a kindly, respectable nobleman, lives in the idyllic Italian town of Messina. Leonato shares his house with his lovely young daughter, Hero, his playful, clever niece, Beatrice, and his elderly brother, Antonio (who is Beatrice's father). As the play begins, Leonato prepares to welcome some friends home from a war. The friends include Don Pedro, a prince who is a close friend of Leonato, and two fellow soldiers: Claudio, a well-respected young nobleman, and Benedick, a clever man who constantly makes witty jokes, often at the expense of his friends. Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, is part of the crowd as well. Don John is sullen and bitter, and makes trouble for the others.

When the soldiers arrive at Leonato's home, Claudio quickly falls in love with Hero. Meanwhile, Benedick and Beatrice resume the war of witty insults that they have carried on with each other in the past. Claudio and Hero pledge their love to one another and decide to be married. To pass the time in the week before the wedding, the lovers and their friends decide to play a game. They want to get Beatrice and Benedick, who are clearly meant for each other, to stop arguing and fall in love. Their tricks prove successful, and Beatrice and Benedick soon fall secretly in love with each other.

But Don John has decided to disrupt everyone's happiness. He has his companion Borachio make love to Margaret, Hero's serving woman, at Hero's window in the darkness of the night, and he brings Don Pedro and Claudio to watch. Believing that he has seen Hero being unfaithful to him, the enraged Claudio humiliates Hero by suddenly accusing her of lechery on the day of their wedding and abandoning her at the altar. Hero's stricken family members decide to pretend that she died suddenly of shock and grief and to hide her away while they wait for the truth about her innocence to come to light. In the aftermath of the rejection, Benedick and Beatrice finally confess their love to one another. Fortunately, the night watchmen overhear Borachio bragging about his crime. Dogberry and Verges, the heads of the local police, ultimately arrest both Borachio and Conrad, another of Don John's followers. Everyone learns that Hero is really innocent, and Claudio, who believes she is dead, grieves for her.

Leonato tells Claudio that, as punishment, he wants Claudio to tell everybody in the city how innocent Hero was. He also wants Claudio to marry Leonato's "niece"—a girl who, he says, looks much like the dead Hero. Claudio goes to church with the others, preparing to marry the

mysterious, masked woman he thinks is Hero's cousin. When Hero reveals herself as the masked woman, Claudio is overwhelmed with joy. Benedick then asks Beatrice if she will marry him, and after some arguing they agree. The joyful lovers all have a merry dance before they celebrate their double wedding.

Some important themes of the play

The Ideal of Social Grace

The characters' dense, colorful manner of speaking represents the ideal that Renaissance courtiers strove for in their social interactions. The play's language is heavily laden with metaphor and ornamented by rhetoric. Benedick, Claudio, and Don Pedro all produce the kind of witty banter that courtiers used to attract attention and approval in noble households. Courtiers were expected to speak in highly contrived language but to make their clever performances seem effortless. The most famous model for this kind of behavior is Baldassare Castiglione's sixteenth-century manual *The Courtier*, translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561. According to this work, the ideal courtier masks his effort and appears to project elegance and natural grace by means of what Castiglione calls *sprezzatura*, the illusion of effortlessness. Benedick and his companions try to display their polished social graces both in their behavior and in their speech.

The play pokes fun at the fanciful language of love that courtiers used. When Claudio falls in love, he tries to be the perfect courtier by using intricate language. As Benedick notes: "His words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes" (II.iii.18–19). Although the young gallants in the play seem casual in their displays of wit, they constantly struggle to maintain their social positions. Benedick and Claudio must constantly strive to remain in Don Pedro's favor. When Claudio silently agrees to let Don Pedro take his place to woo Hero, it is quite possible that he does so not because he is too shy to woo the woman himself, but because he must accede to Don Pedro's authority in order to stay in Don Pedro's good favor. When Claudio believes that Don Pedro has deceived him and wooed Hero not for Claudio but for himself, he cannot drop his polite civility, even though he is full of despair. Beatrice jokes that Claudio is "civil as an orange," punning on the Seville orange, a bitter fruit (II.i.256). Claudio remains polite and nearly silent even though he is upset, telling Benedick of Don Pedro and Hero: "I wish him joy of her" (II.i.170). Clearly, Claudio chooses his obedience to Don Pedro over his love for Hero.

Claudio displays social grace, but his strict adherence to social propriety eventually leads him into a trap. He abandons Hero at the wedding

because Don John leads him to believe that she is unchaste (marriage to an unchaste woman would be socially unacceptable). But Don John's plan to unseat Claudio does not succeed, of course, as Claudio remains Don Pedro's favorite, and it is Hero who has to suffer until her good reputation is restored.

Deception as a Means to an End

The plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* is based upon deliberate deceptions, some malevolent and others benign. The duping of Claudio and Don Pedro results in Hero's disgrace, while the ruse of her death prepares the way for her redemption and reconciliation with Claudio. In a more lighthearted vein, Beatrice and Benedick are fooled into thinking that each loves the other, and they actually do fall in love as a result. *Much Ado About Nothing* shows that deceit is not inherently evil, but something that can be used as a means to good or bad ends.

In the play, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between good and bad deception. When Claudio announces his desire to woo Hero, Don Pedro takes it upon himself to woo her for Claudio. Then, at the instigation of Don John, Claudio begins to mistrust Don Pedro, thinking he has been deceived. Just as the play's audience comes to believe, temporarily, in the illusions of the theater, so the play's characters become caught up in the illusions that they help to create for one another. Benedick and Beatrice flirt caustically at the masked ball, each possibly aware of the other's presence yet pretending not to know the person hiding behind the mask. Likewise, when Claudio has shamed and rejected Hero, Leonato and his household "publish" that Hero has died in order to punish Claudio for his mistake. When Claudio returns, penitent, to accept the hand of Leonato's "niece" (actually Hero), a group of masked women enters and Claudio must wed blindly. The masking of Hero and the other women reveals that the social institution of marriage has little to do with love. When Claudio flounders and asks, "Which is the lady I must seize upon?" he is ready and willing to commit the rest of his life to one of a group of unknowns (V.iv.53). His willingness stems not only from his guilt about slandering an innocent woman but also from the fact that he may care more about rising in Leonato's favor than in marrying for love. In the end, deceit is neither purely positive nor purely negative: it is a means to an end, a way to create an illusion that helps one succeed socially.

The Importance of Honor

The aborted wedding ceremony, in which Claudio rejects Hero, accusing her of infidelity and violated chastity and publicly shaming her in front of her father, is the climax of the play. In Shakespeare's time, a woman's honor was based upon her virginity and chaste behavior. For a woman to lose her honor by having sexual relations before marriage meant that she would lose all social standing, a disaster from which she could never recover. Moreover, this loss of honor would poison the woman's whole family. Thus, when Leonato rashly believes Claudio's shaming of Hero at the wedding ceremony, he tries to obliterate her entirely: "Hence from her, let her die" (IV.i.153). Furthermore, he speaks of her loss of honor as an indelible stain from which he cannot distance himself, no matter how hard he tries: "O she is fallen / Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea / Hath drops too few to wash her clean again" (IV.i.138–140). For women in that era, the loss of honor was a form of annihilation.

For men, on the other hand, honor depended on male friendship alliances and was more military in nature. Unlike a woman, a man could defend his honor, and that of his family, by fighting in a battle or a duel. Beatrice urges Benedick to avenge Hero's honor by dueling to the death with Claudio. As a woman, Hero cannot seize back her honor, but Benedick can do it for her via physical combat.

Characters of the play

Beatrice

Leonato's niece and Hero's cousin. Beatrice is "a pleasant-spirited lady" with a very sharp tongue. She is generous and loving, but, like Benedick, continually mocks other people with elaborately tooled jokes and puns. She wages a war of wits against Benedick and often wins the battles. At the outset of the play, she appears content never to marry.

Benedick

An aristocratic soldier who has recently been fighting under Don Pedro, and a friend of Don Pedro and Claudio. Benedick is very witty, always making jokes and puns. He carries on a "merry war" of wits with Beatrice, but at the beginning of the play he swears he will never fall in love or marry.

Claudio

A young soldier who has won great acclaim fighting under Don Pedro during the recent wars. Claudio falls in love with Hero upon his return to

Messina. His unfortunately suspicious nature makes him quick to believe evil rumors and hasty to despair and take revenge.

Hero

The beautiful young daughter of Leonato and the cousin of Beatrice. Hero is lovely, gentle, and kind. She falls in love with Claudio when he falls for her, but when Don John slanders her and Claudio rashly takes revenge, she suffers terribly.

Don Pedro

An important nobleman from Aragon, sometimes referred to as "Prince." Don Pedro is a longtime friend of Leonato, Hero's father, and is also close to the soldiers who have been fighting under him—the younger Benedick and the very young Claudio. Don Pedro is generous, courteous, intelligent, and loving to his friends, but he is also quick to believe evil of others and hasty to take revenge. He is the most politically and socially powerful character in the play.

Leonato

A respected, well-to-do, elderly noble at whose home, in Messina, Italy, the action is set. Leonato is the father of Hero and the uncle of Beatrice. As governor of Messina, he is second in social power only to Don Pedro.

Don John

The illegitimate brother of Don Pedro; sometimes called "the Bastard." Don John is melancholy and sullen by nature, and he creates a dark scheme to ruin the happiness of Hero and Claudio. He is the villain of the play; his evil actions are motivated by his envy of his brother's social authority.

Margaret

Hero's serving woman, who unwittingly helps Borachio and Don John deceive Claudio into thinking that Hero is unfaithful. Unlike Ursula, Hero's other lady-in-waiting, Margaret is lower class. Though she is honest, she does have some dealings with the villainous world of Don John: her lover is the mistrustful and easily bribed Borachio. Also unlike Ursula, Margaret loves to break decorum, especially with bawdy jokes and teases.

Borachio

An associate of Don John. Borachio is the lover of Margaret, Hero's serving woman. He conspires with Don John to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio. His name means "drunkard" in Italian, which might serve as a subtle direction to the actor playing him.

Conrad

One of Don John's more intimate associates, entirely devoted to Don John. Several recent productions have staged Conrad as Don John's potential male lover, possibly to intensify Don John's feelings of being a social outcast and therefore motivate his desire for revenge.

Dogberry

The constable in charge of the Watch, or chief policeman, of Messina. Dogberry is very sincere and takes his job seriously, but he has a habit of using exactly the wrong word to convey his meaning. Dogberry is one of the few "middling sort," or middle-class characters, in the play, though his desire to speak formally and elaborately like the noblemen becomes an occasion for parody.

Verges

The deputy to Dogberry, chief policeman of Messina.

Antonio

Leonato's elderly brother and Hero's uncle. He is Beatrice's father.

Balthasar

A waiting man in Leonato's household and a musician. Balthasar flirts with Margaret at the masked party and helps Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro trick Benedick into falling in love with Beatrice. Balthasar sings the song, "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more" about accepting men's infidelity as natural.

Ursula

One of Hero's waiting women.

Question

Why are both Benedick and Beatrice opposed to marriage?

Answer

From the outset, Beatrice and Benedick stand firmly opposed to the idea of marriage. Ostensibly, this is because Beatrice wants a partner who is her equal, and does not wish to submit herself to a husband's controlling ways, and Benedick claims that that not only does marriage limit a man's liberty, but he doesn't trust women in general. It's possible, however, that such declarations are made in part due to their feelings for one another; Beatrice and Benedick have known each other for a long time and it

appears there was previously a romance between them that ended badly. Beatrice says in Act 2, "Marry, once before he won it [her heart] of me, with false dice."

Question

Why does Don John sabotage the wedding between Claudio and Hero?

Answer

Don John feels threatened by and perhaps jealous of the social status that his brother Don Pedro enjoys, and he is bitter about his failure to overcome Don Pedro in battle prior to the events of the play. Thus, he directs his ire toward Claudio and Hero not necessarily for personal reasons, but because they are happy while he is not, and he finds joy in making them miserable.

Question

Why does Claudio call off the wedding?

Answer

Claudio believes that Hero has been unfaithful to him, owing to Don John's deception involving Margaret and Borachio, and chooses to publicly humiliate her in front of her family and friends. At the wedding, Claudio announces to everyone in his company that Hero is unchaste, thereby destroying her reputation.

Question

How does Hero fake her death?

Answer

When accusations are made against Hero at the wedding, she faints, at which point Leonato declares it would be better if she died than live in shame. Based on her expressions of pure shock, the friar recognizes that Hero is telling the truth. He suggests they exacerbate Hero's condition and tell everyone she actually died of shock and grief when she fainted. Hero herself will be hidden away, and the reactions to her death throughout Messina will help smoke out the truth. Worst-case scenario, Hero could be secretly sent off to become a nun in a convent.

Question

Why does Claudio agree to marry Leonato's "niece"?

Answer

After Claudio realizes he was duped, he comes to Leonato begging for forgiveness. Leonato asks Claudio to preserve Hero's reputation by telling everyone in town that she was innocent, and to write an epitaph to read at her grave. He then suggests Claudio marry his niece, Antonio's daughter, who purportedly looks very much like Hero. Claudio, believing himself to be indebted to Leonato for the harm he has caused, is overjoyed by such generosity. His willingness to marry a total stranger so quickly after Hero's supposed death speaks to his gratefulness for Leonato's forgiveness but also his penchant for being swayed by others. Ultimately this works to Leonato's advantage (and Claudio's too!), as there is no niece, and the woman Claudio will be marrying is in fact Hero, not dead at all.