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Hamlet – Act Four: Text Analysis

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After the death of Polonius, Queen Gertrude reports the incident to King Claudius. She explains that Hamlet killed Polonius while confronting her in her private chamber. Although Gertrude presents Hamlet as emotionally disturbed rather than deliberately cruel, Claudius immediately recognizes the danger of the situation.

Claudius realizes that if Hamlet remains in Denmark, his own secret crime may eventually be exposed. Therefore, he decides that Hamlet must leave the country immediately. Publicly, Claudius claims that the journey to England is for Hamlet's safety and well-being. In reality, however, he has already planned Hamlet's death. This decision demonstrates Claudius's political cunning. Instead of openly confronting Hamlet, he disguises his intentions behind an appearance of concern. Shakespeare continues to develop the theme of "appearance versus reality", showing that Claudius consistently hides evil intentions beneath respectable actions. Before Hamlet departs, Claudius orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to locate him and recover Polonius's body. Once again, these two former friends serve the king rather than Hamlet, highlighting the growing atmosphere of mistrust within the Danish court.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eventually find Hamlet and ask where he has hidden Polonius's body. Hamlet refuses to answer directly. Instead, he responds with riddles, irony, and sarcastic remarks that confuse his companions. His playful language demonstrates that, despite appearances, he has not lost his intelligence.

Eventually, Hamlet agrees to appear before King Claudius. Even in the king's presence, he continues speaking in indirect and symbolic language before finally revealing the location of Polonius's body.

Claudius then announces that Hamlet must leave for England immediately. Although Hamlet accepts the order without resistance, Claudius privately reveals his true intentions to the audience. He has written a sealed letter to the English king instructing that Hamlet be executed as soon as he arrives in England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unknowingly carry this death warrant with them. This episode reveals the extent of Claudius's corruption. Instead of administering justice through lawful means, he secretly arranges the murder of his own nephew. Shakespeare portrays Claudius as a ruler who values political survival above morality, justice, or family loyalty. As Hamlet travels toward England, he encounters the army of Prince Fortinbras of Norway. Curious about their destination, Hamlet speaks with one of Fortinbras's captains. He learns that the soldiers are marching to fight Poland over a small and almost worthless piece of land.

This conversation deeply affects Hamlet. He is astonished that thousands of soldiers are willing to risk their lives for territory of little practical value. In contrast, he has delayed avenging the murder of his own father despite having a far greater reason to act. Hamlet reflects upon his own hesitation in one of his important soliloquies. He admires Fortinbras's courage, discipline, and determination. Fortinbras becomes a powerful contrast to Hamlet's thoughtful but hesitant personality.

At the end of his reflection, Hamlet resolves to change his attitude. He declares that from this moment onward, his thoughts will be focused entirely on revenge. This marks an important stage in Hamlet's psychological development. His uncertainty begins to disappear, replaced by a stronger commitment to fulfilling

his father's command. Shakespeare uses Fortinbras as a foil to Hamlet. While Fortinbras represents decisive action, Hamlet represents careful reflection. Through this comparison, Shakespeare explores the balance between wisdom and action, suggesting that excessive hesitation may have tragic consequences.

Meanwhile, tragedy continues to unfold at Elsinore Castle. The death of Polonius has a devastating effect on his daughter, Ophelia. Already heartbroken by Hamlet's rejection, she is unable to cope with the sudden loss of her father. When Ophelia appears before the court, her speech is fragmented and her songs are filled with images of love, death, betrayal, and grief. Although her words often seem meaningless, they reveal the deep emotional pain she is experiencing. Unlike Hamlet, whose madness appears largely deliberate, Ophelia's madness is genuine. She has no political power, no opportunity to seek justice, and no one to protect her. Shakespeare presents her as one of the play's most tragic victims, destroyed by events beyond her control. Her condition also symbolizes the moral collapse of the Danish court. The corruption that began with King Hamlet's murder now affects innocent individuals who played no role in the original crime.

News of Polonius's death quickly reaches France, where Laertes has been studying. Filled with anger and grief, he immediately returns to Denmark. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes acts without hesitation. He storms into Elsinore Castle accompanied by an angry crowd demanding justice for his father's death. Laertes openly challenges King Claudius and demands an explanation. At first, Claudius appears to be in danger of losing control over the kingdom. However, instead of responding with force, he calmly explains the circumstances surrounding Polonius's death and convinces Laertes that Hamlet is responsible. Claudius skillfully redirects Laertes's anger toward Hamlet while presenting himself as an ally. He promises that justice will be done and that Laertes will have an opportunity to avenge his father.

This scene further highlights the differences between Hamlet and Laertes. Both young men seek revenge for their fathers, yet they approach the task very differently. Hamlet carefully questions every action before making a decision, while Laertes is driven primarily by emotion and immediate action.

While events unfold at the royal court, Horatio receives an unexpected letter from Hamlet. In the letter, Hamlet explains that he has returned safely to Denmark after escaping from the voyage to England. He asks Horatio to meet him as soon as possible and assist him. Hamlet also sends a letter to King Claudius requesting a meeting. Although the details of his escape are revealed later in the play, the letters demonstrate Hamlet's growing confidence. He is no longer fleeing danger but instead returns willingly to confront both Claudius and his destiny. Horatio's continued loyalty stands in sharp contrast to the betrayal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Throughout the play, Horatio remains Hamlet's most trusted friend, representing honesty, reason, and unwavering friendship.

Claudius receives Hamlet's letter announcing his return. Rather than expressing surprise, he quickly recognizes another opportunity to eliminate his nephew. Together with Laertes, Claudius devises a carefully planned assassination disguised as a friendly fencing competition. Since Laertes is an expert swordsman, he agrees to use a sword with a sharpened and poisoned tip. Even a minor wound will be enough to kill Hamlet.

To ensure success, Claudius prepares a second method of murder. If Hamlet survives the duel, he plans to offer him a cup of poisoned wine during the celebration. This double plot reveals Claudius's determination to remove Hamlet at any cost.

The conspiracy also demonstrates how completely Claudius has manipulated Laertes. Although Laertes believes he is seeking justice for his father's death, he allows his desire for revenge to override his sense of honor. Shakespeare suggests that revenge, when pursued without moral restraint, can corrupt even otherwise honorable individuals.

As Claudius and Laertes finalize their deadly plan, Queen Gertrude enters with tragic news. She announces that Ophelia has drowned. Gertrude describes Ophelia's death in poetic language. While gathering flowers beside a stream, Ophelia fell into the water when a tree branch broke beneath her. For a short time, her clothes kept her floating as she continued singing, seemingly unaware of her danger. Eventually, the heavy garments pulled her beneath the water, and she drowned. Shakespeare deliberately leaves uncertain whether Ophelia's death was an accident or an act of suicide. This ambiguity reflects one of the play's recurring themes: the difficulty of discovering the complete truth. For Laertes, the news is devastating. Having already lost his father, he must now mourn his sister as well. His grief strengthens his determination to take revenge against Hamlet, setting the stage for the final confrontation of the tragedy.