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*Hamlet* – Act Five: Text Analysis

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## ***Hamlet*** – Act Five: Text Analysis

The final act opens in a graveyard, where two gravediggers prepare a grave for Ophelia. Unlike the tense political scenes that dominate much of the play, Shakespeare begins with humorous conversation. The gravediggers joke about death, burial, and social class while carrying out their ordinary work.

Their discussion provides comic relief, but it also introduces one of the play's central philosophical themes: **death is the great equalizer**. Kings, queens, nobles, and ordinary workers all eventually return to the earth. In death, social differences disappear. As Hamlet and Horatio arrive at the graveyard, Hamlet is fascinated by the gravedigger's calm attitude toward death. He begins questioning the man about the grave he is digging.

When Hamlet asks whose grave it is, the gravedigger jokingly replies that it belongs to him because he is standing inside it. Hamlet answers the joke with another witty remark, pointing out that the statement must be true. Their exchange is humorous, yet it also demonstrates Shakespeare's remarkable ability to combine comedy with serious philosophical reflection. When Hamlet insists on a serious answer, the gravedigger responds with another clever paradox. He claims that the grave belongs neither to a man nor to a woman but to someone who once was a woman until she died. The conversation illustrates Shakespeare's use of wordplay while encouraging the audience to think about the relationship between language and truth.

The gravedigger unknowingly speaks to Prince Hamlet as if he were an ordinary traveler. This emphasizes another important theme of the play: appearances can be misleading. The gravedigger also jokes that Hamlet has gone to England to recover his sanity and humorously comments that everyone in England is a little

mad. Although intended as comic relief, the remark reflects the play's ongoing concern with the nature of madness.

During their conversation, the gravedigger uncovers a human skull and hands it to Hamlet. The skull once belonged to Yorick, the king's court jester. Hamlet immediately recognizes the name. As a child, Yorick had entertained him, carried him on his shoulders, and filled his early years with laughter. Holding the skull, Hamlet delivers one of the most famous reflections in English literature. He remembers Yorick as a lively, humorous, and energetic man. Now nothing remains except a lifeless skull buried beneath the earth. This discovery leads Hamlet to meditate on the inevitability of death. He realizes that beauty, intelligence, wealth, and political power cannot prevent human mortality. Even great historical figures such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar eventually became dust. Shakespeare uses this moment to emphasize the theme of **universal mortality**. Regardless of status or achievement, every person ultimately shares the same fate.

Unlike his earlier soliloquies, which focused on revenge and uncertainty, Hamlet's reflections in the graveyard reveal greater maturity and acceptance. He no longer fears death in the same way. Instead, he understands it as a natural and unavoidable part of human existence.

The peaceful atmosphere changes when a funeral procession enters the graveyard. King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, Laertes, priests, and mourners accompany Ophelia's coffin. Hidden nearby, Hamlet and Horatio soon realize that the funeral is for Ophelia. Hamlet is shocked by the news of her death. He had been unaware of what happened during his absence from Denmark.

The funeral itself reflects the uncertainty surrounding Ophelia's death. Because there are suspicions that she may have taken her own life, the Church refuses to

grant her full Christian burial. Only limited funeral rites are permitted. Laertes is overwhelmed with grief. Unable to control his emotions, he jumps into Ophelia's grave and declares that he wishes to be buried beside his beloved sister. Seeing this display of sorrow, Hamlet suddenly reveals himself. He leaps into the grave and proclaims that his love for Ophelia was greater than the love of forty thousand brothers. An emotional struggle immediately breaks out between Hamlet and Laertes. The two men wrestle inside the grave before the mourners pull them apart. This confrontation highlights the similarities between the two young men. Both have lost their fathers. Both seek revenge. Both have experienced the loss of Ophelia. However, while Laertes expresses his emotions openly and impulsively, Hamlet often conceals his feelings beneath reflection and irony. After Hamlet leaves the cemetery, Claudius quietly reassures Laertes that the plan to kill Hamlet will soon be carried out.

Back at Elsinore Castle, Hamlet tells Horatio what happened during his journey to England. While aboard the ship, Hamlet secretly examined the sealed letter carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. To his surprise, he discovered that Claudius had ordered the English king to execute him immediately upon arrival. Realizing he had been betrayed once again, Hamlet secretly replaced the original letter with a new one. The rewritten message instructed the English authorities to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. Hamlet explains his actions without expressing guilt or regret. From his perspective, the two men willingly betrayed their friendship by assisting Claudius's conspiracy. This episode demonstrates Hamlet's growing decisiveness. Earlier in the play, he struggled to act. Now he responds quickly and intelligently to danger, showing that his character has changed significantly.

Soon afterward, Osric, a courtier known for his exaggerated politeness and concern with appearances, arrives with a message from King Claudius. He announces that the king has organized a friendly fencing match between Hamlet

and Laertes. Although Horatio senses that something may be wrong, Hamlet accepts the challenge. By this point, Hamlet appears to have reached a new understanding of fate. He believes that human beings cannot completely control their destinies and that they must accept whatever God has prepared for them. Hamlet enters the duel no longer consumed by fear or uncertainty but prepared to face whatever outcome awaits him.

The royal court gathers to watch the contest. Before the duel begins, Hamlet politely apologizes to Laertes for killing Polonius. He explains that his madness, rather than his true character, caused his earlier actions. Laertes formally accepts the apology but secretly intends to carry out Claudius's murderous plan. The duel begins. Hamlet wins the first exchange by striking Laertes. To celebrate, Claudius offers Hamlet a cup of wine that has been secretly poisoned. Hamlet declines the drink because he wishes to continue fencing. During the next exchange, Hamlet scores another successful hit. Believing the cup harmless, Queen Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine to celebrate her son's success. Claudius realizes the terrible mistake but remains silent, allowing Gertrude to drink the poison rather than reveal his conspiracy. This moment exposes the depth of Claudius's moral corruption.

As the duel continues, Laertes finally wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword. Moments later, during a struggle, the two men accidentally exchange weapons. Without realizing it, Hamlet strikes Laertes with the same poisoned blade. The poison now affects both fighters. At the same time, Gertrude suddenly collapses. With her dying words, she cries out that the wine has been poisoned. Faced with certain death, Laertes finally confesses the truth. He reveals that the duel was a trap arranged by Claudius and admits that both swords and the poisoned cup were part of the king's plot. The confession removes any remaining doubt. Hamlet immediately turns his anger toward Claudius.

He stabs the king with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink the poisoned wine that he had prepared for Hamlet. Claudius dies almost instantly. Justice is finally achieved, although it comes at an enormous cost. Before dying, Laertes asks Hamlet for forgiveness. Hamlet forgives him, and the two young men are reconciled. Their reconciliation contrasts sharply with the hatred and violence that have dominated the play.

The poison gradually overcomes Hamlet. Knowing that death is near, he asks Horatio not to commit suicide but to remain alive. Hamlet understands that future generations must know the truth about what happened in Denmark. He therefore entrusts Horatio with the responsibility of telling his story honestly. This request highlights the importance of memory and historical truth. Hamlet also refuses to claim the Danish throne for himself. Instead, he expresses support for Fortinbras, recognizing that the Norwegian prince possesses the leadership qualities necessary to restore order. Hamlet dies with dignity, completing the tragic journey that began when the Ghost first demanded revenge.

As Hamlet dies, drums and trumpets announce the arrival of Prince Fortinbras. He enters the royal hall accompanied by English ambassadors. The scene before them is shocking. King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, Hamlet, and Laertes all lie dead. Horatio carefully explains the tragic sequence of events. After hearing the story, Fortinbras pays tribute to Hamlet. He declares that Hamlet would have become an excellent king had he lived. As a sign of respect, Fortinbras orders that Hamlet receive a military funeral with full honors. This final decision symbolizes the restoration of political order after a period of corruption and violence. Fortinbras, who has consistently acted decisively throughout the play, now assumes leadership of Denmark.