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Hamlet – Act Three: Text Analysis

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The Nunnery Scene, The Mousetrap, Claudius's Guilt, and the Death of Polonius

These scenes from **Act Three** represent the dramatic turning point of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Up to this point, Prince Hamlet has struggled with uncertainty about the Ghost's story and has delayed taking revenge against King Claudius. In Act Three, however, several decisive events occur. Hamlet rejects Ophelia, stages the famous play **The Mousetrap**, confirms Claudius's guilt, misses an opportunity to kill the king, and accidentally kills Polonius. These episodes deepen the play's central themes of revenge, appearance versus reality, deception, madness, morality, and the consequences of delayed action. Hamlet's conflict is no longer based on uncertainty. He now knows Claudius is guilty. The tragedy shifts from the search for truth to the devastating consequences of Hamlet's choices.

King Claudius and Polonius remain determined to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. Polonius continues to believe that Hamlet has gone mad because Ophelia rejected his love. To test this theory, they arrange a carefully planned encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia. They instruct Ophelia to walk through the palace while pretending to read a book. Meanwhile, Claudius and Polonius hide nearby so they can secretly observe Hamlet's reaction. This scene continues Shakespeare's recurring pattern of spying and deception. Throughout the play, characters rarely communicate honestly. Instead, they watch one another from behind curtains, doors, and hidden corners. Before Hamlet notices Ophelia, he delivers one of the most famous soliloquies in world literature.

"To be, or not to be: that is the question."

This speech is not simply about suicide. Instead, it explores one of humanity's greatest philosophical questions: **Is it better to continue suffering life's hardships or to end one's life and escape them?** Hamlet compares life to a battle filled with pain, injustice, betrayal, disappointment, and emotional suffering. He considers death as a possible escape from these troubles. However, he ultimately rejects suicide because no one knows what happens after death. The fear of the unknown makes people continue living despite their suffering.

This soliloquy reveals Hamlet's deeply reflective personality. Unlike traditional revenge heroes who act quickly, Hamlet constantly analyzes every decision before acting. His intelligence becomes both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness.

Shakespeare introduces several important themes through this speech:

- The meaning of life.
- Fear of death.
- Human suffering.
- Moral responsibility.
- The conflict between thought and action.

The soliloquy demonstrates that Hamlet's greatest enemy is often his own mind.

After finishing his meditation, Hamlet notices Ophelia. She politely attempts to return the gifts and love tokens that Hamlet previously gave her. Instead of accepting them, Hamlet denies ever giving them. He then claims that he never loved her at all. These harsh words shock Ophelia. Readers continue to debate Hamlet's motives during this scene. Several interpretations are possible.

- One possibility is that Hamlet truly wishes to protect Ophelia from the dangerous world of the Danish court. By rejecting her publicly, he may hope to distance her from the revenge plot.
- Another interpretation is that Hamlet suspects Ophelia is helping Polonius spy on him. Since he knows that many people around him are dishonest, he may no longer trust her.
- A third possibility is that Hamlet's anger toward his mother has damaged his faith in all women. Earlier he declared, "**Frailty, thy name is woman.**" His disappointment with Gertrude influences his treatment of Ophelia.

The conversation becomes increasingly hostile. Hamlet repeatedly tells Ophelia:

"Get thee to a nunnery."

The word "**nunnery**" carries two meanings in Shakespeare's language. It can refer to a convent where women devote themselves to religious life, but it was also commonly used as slang for a brothel. Shakespeare intentionally leaves the meaning ambiguous.

Hamlet's cruel rejection leaves Ophelia emotionally devastated. She mourns the loss of the noble prince she once admired and believes that madness has completely destroyed his mind. As Hamlet leaves, Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding. Polonius stubbornly maintains his original theory that Hamlet's strange behavior results from disappointed love. Claudius, however, reaches a different conclusion. He realizes that Hamlet's actions are too controlled and purposeful to be explained simply by love. Claudius begins to fear that Hamlet knows something dangerous. This marks a turning point in Claudius's attitude. Until now, he has tried to understand Hamlet's behavior. Now he decides that Hamlet himself has become a political threat.

Claudius therefore plans to send Hamlet to England immediately. Officially, the journey appears diplomatic, but secretly Claudius hopes to remove Hamlet from Denmark before he can become dangerous. Polonius suggests one final attempt to uncover Hamlet's secret. He proposes that Queen Gertrude should privately question her son while he hides behind a curtain to listen. Claudius agrees. Ironically, this decision will soon lead directly to Polonius's death.

The Mousetrap: Theatre Reveals the Truth

That evening, Hamlet prepares the actors for their performance. He has added several lines to **The Murder of Gonzago**, creating a story that closely resembles the Ghost's description of King Hamlet's murder. Before the play begins, Hamlet speaks privately with Horatio.

Unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Horatio has remained completely loyal throughout the play. Hamlet trusts him because Horatio is calm, rational, and honest. Hamlet asks Horatio to watch Claudius carefully during the performance. If Claudius reacts with fear or guilt, Hamlet will know that the Ghost spoke the truth. This demonstrates Hamlet's cautious intelligence. He refuses to commit murder until he has reliable evidence. When everyone gathers, Claudius asks Hamlet about the title of the performance. Hamlet replies: "**The Mousetrap.**" The title itself reveals Hamlet's intention. The play is designed to trap Claudius's conscience rather than his body. As the performance unfolds, an actor playing the villain quietly pours poison into the ear of a sleeping king—the exact method described by the Ghost. Claudius immediately loses control. Unable to continue watching, he suddenly rises and demands light before rushing out of the room. His emotional reaction provides all the proof Hamlet needs.

For the first time, Hamlet possesses certainty. The Ghost's story was true. Claudius murdered King Hamlet. This scene illustrates Shakespeare's belief that art possesses extraordinary power. A theatrical performance succeeds where direct accusation could not. The guilty conscience exposes itself.

Following the performance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inform Hamlet that Queen Gertrude wishes to see him immediately. They urge him to visit her chamber. Left alone, Hamlet reflects upon what has happened. His uncertainty has disappeared. He now believes revenge is morally justified because Claudius's own behavior has confirmed his guilt. However, Shakespeare delays the revenge once again, preparing the audience for another important moral conflict.

After the play, Claudius privately admits his guilt. In one of Shakespeare's most revealing soliloquies, Claudius openly confesses that he murdered his brother. He recognizes the terrible nature of his crime and wishes to pray for forgiveness. He admits that true repentance requires giving up the rewards gained through murder.

Those rewards include:

- the Danish crown,
- political power,
- and Queen Gertrude.

Claudius realizes he is unwilling to surrender any of them. Consequently, his prayer cannot be sincere. His words become one of the play's greatest expressions of moral hypocrisy. He desires forgiveness without accepting responsibility. While Claudius kneels in apparent prayer, Hamlet quietly enters.

This is the perfect opportunity to kill the king. Claudius is alone. He is unarmed. No witnesses are present. Yet Hamlet hesitates once again. He reasons that killing Claudius while praying might send his soul to Heaven. Since King Hamlet was murdered without time to confess his sins, Hamlet believes immediate revenge would actually reward Claudius rather than punish him. He therefore decides to wait until Claudius commits another sinful act. This decision has generated centuries of debate. Some critics believe Hamlet's reasoning is logical. Others argue that it simply provides another excuse for delaying action.

Hamlet then goes to Queen Gertrude's private chamber. He confronts her about her marriage to Claudius. He accuses her of betraying the memory of his father and abandoning moral values. Hamlet compares portraits of King Hamlet and Claudius, emphasizing the enormous difference between them. King Hamlet represents honor, courage, and nobility. Claudius represents corruption, lust, and betrayal. Gertrude becomes frightened by Hamlet's emotional intensity. Feeling threatened, she cries out for help. Hidden behind a curtain, Polonius hears Gertrude's cries. He immediately calls for assistance. Hearing another voice behind the curtain, Hamlet assumes Claudius is hiding there. Without checking, Hamlet thrusts his sword through the curtain. Instead of killing Claudius, he accidentally kills Polonius. This is Hamlet's first actual killing.

Ironically, the man who has repeatedly delayed avenging his father's murder suddenly acts without thinking. The contrast is striking. Hamlet carefully analyzes every opportunity to kill Claudius, yet impulsively kills an innocent man. His lack of remorse afterward surprises many readers. He criticizes Polonius as a foolish and intrusive old man whose habit of spying has led to his death. The incident marks a major turning point in the tragedy. From this moment onward, the violence rapidly escalates.

During Hamlet's conversation with Gertrude, the Ghost suddenly reappears. Unlike the first appearance, only Hamlet can see or hear him. The Ghost reminds Hamlet of his original mission: to avenge King Hamlet's murder. He also instructs Hamlet to comfort his mother rather than continue attacking her emotionally. Gertrude sees nothing. Watching Hamlet speak to empty air convinces her that he has completely lost his sanity. This scene raises another important question for readers. *Is the Ghost objectively present? Or is it now a vision created by Hamlet's troubled mind?*