

<b>HAMLET – Original Text</b>	<b>HAMLET – Modern Text</b>
<p>To be, or not to be? That is the question—  Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep—  No more—and by a sleep to say we end  The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation  Devoutly to be wished! To die, to sleep.  To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the  rub,  For in that sleep of death what dreams may  come  When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  Must give us pause. There's the respect  That makes calamity of so long life.  For who would bear the whips and scorns of  time,  Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's  contumely,  The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  The insolence of office, and the spurns  That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  When he himself might his quietus make  With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  But that the dread of something after death,  The undiscovered country from whose bourn  No traveler returns, puzzles the will  And makes us rather bear those ills we have  Than fly to others that we know not of?  Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  And thus the native hue of resolution  Is sicklied 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.</p>	<p>The question is: is it better to be alive or dead?  Is it nobler to put up with all the nasty things  that luck throws your way, or to fight against all  those troubles by simply putting an end to them  once and for all? Dying, sleeping—that's all  dying is—a sleep that ends all the heartache and  shocks that life on earth gives us—that's an  achievement to wish for. To die, to sleep—to  sleep, maybe to dream. Ah, but there's the  catch: in death's sleep who knows what kind of  dreams might come, after we've put the noise  and commotion of life behind us. That's  certainly something to worry about. That's the  consideration that makes us stretch out our  sufferings so long.  After all, who would put up with all life's  humiliations—the abuse from superiors, the  insults of arrogant men, the pangs of unrequited  love, the inefficiency of the legal system, the  rudeness of people in office, and the  mistreatment good people have to take from  bad—when you could simply take out your  knife and call it quits? Who would choose to  grunt and sweat through an exhausting life,  unless they were afraid of something dreadful  after death, the undiscovered country from  which no visitor returns, which we wonder  about without getting any answers from and  which makes us stick to the evils we know  rather than rush off to seek the ones we don't?  Fear of death makes us all cowards, and our  natural boldness becomes weak with too much  thinking. Actions that should be carried out at  once get misdirected, and stop being actions at  all.</p>
(Act III, scene i)	

## Hamlet

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).

## **Act III, 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 melancholy. They tell the king and queen about Hamlet’s enthusiasm for the players. Encouraged, 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 spy on Hamlet’s confrontation 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 agonizingly 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 miseries 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 laments 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 nunnery 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 lapsed into apparent madness (III.i.149).

The king and Polonius emerge from behind the tapestry. 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 insanity. He says that he fears that melancholy 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 “[m]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 a stunning 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 fictional character who seems to possess a subconscious 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 implication is, “Should I kill myself?” The entire soliloquy 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 philosophical 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 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 accomplish very much; that is, it doesn't make Claudius suspect him less. His professions of former 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 conclude that he (coincidentally) really went mad right after saying so. But his behavior toward Ophelia is both self-destructive and fraught with emotional intensity. It doesn't obviously further his plans. Moreover, his bitterness against Ophelia, and against women in general, resonates 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 antisocial 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?

## **The soliloquy**

his soliloquy, probably the most famous speech in the English language, is spoken by Hamlet in Act III, scene i (58–90). His most logical and powerful examination of the theme of the moral legitimacy of suicide in an unbearably painful world, it touches on several of the other important themes of the play. Hamlet poses the problem of whether to commit suicide as a logical question: "To be, or not to be," that is, to live or not to live. He then weighs the moral ramifications of living and dying. Is it nobler to suffer life, "[t]he slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," passively or to actively seek to end one's suffering? He compares death to sleep and thinks of the end to suffering, pain, and uncertainty it might bring, "[t]he heartache, and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to." Based on this metaphor, he decides that suicide is a desirable course of action, "a consummation / Devoutly to be wished." But, as the religious word "devoutly" signifies, there is more to the question, namely, what will happen in the afterlife. Hamlet immediately realizes as much, and he reconfigures his metaphor of sleep to include the possibility of dreaming; he says that the dreams that may come in the sleep of death are daunting, that they "must give us pause."

He then decides that the uncertainty of the afterlife, which is intimately related to the theme of the difficulty of attaining truth in a spiritually ambiguous world, is essentially what prevents all of humanity from committing suicide to end the pain of life. He outlines a long list of the miseries of experience, ranging from lovesickness to hard work to political oppression, and asks who would choose to bear those miseries if he could bring himself peace with a knife, "[w]hen he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin?" He answers himself again, saying no one would choose to live, except that "the dread of something after death" makes people submit to the suffering of their lives rather than go to another state of existence which might be even more miserable. The dread of the afterlife, Hamlet concludes, leads to excessive moral sensitivity that

makes action impossible: “conscience does make cowards of us all . . . thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.”

In this way, this speech connects many of the play’s main themes, including the idea of suicide and death, the difficulty of knowing the truth in a spiritually ambiguous universe, and the connection between thought and action. In addition to its crucial thematic content, this speech is important for what it reveals about the quality of Hamlet’s mind. His deeply passionate nature is complemented by a relentlessly logical intellect, which works furiously to find a solution to his misery. He has turned to religion and found it inadequate to help him either kill himself or resolve to kill Claudius. Here, he turns to a logical philosophical inquiry and finds it equally frustrating.

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