

# Hamlet's Complicated Journey



George Cruikshank. Caricature of Charles Kemble as Hamlet confronting the Ghost. 1835. Folger Shakespeare Library.

Hamlet's journey through the play goes from one complication to another. What is going on in his mind? To examine Hamlet up close, audience members should listen carefully to his soliloquies (discourses in which characters reveal their thoughts without addressing a specific listener). As he moves through the play, Hamlet's soliloquies provide the audience with a glimpse of Hamlet's innermost thoughts.

**“O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew...” – 1.2.133-164.**

Hamlet is faced with his feelings towards his mother concerning his father's death and Gertrude's marriage to his uncle. He laments the current state of things at court. He is troubled by the contradiction between his sense that his parents were very much in love and his mother's hasty marriage only one month after his father's death.

**“O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I...” – 2.2.577-634.**

By 2.2, Hamlet has seen his father's ghost, who has told him of his murder and has charged Hamlet to kill Claudius in revenge. Hamlet admonishes himself for not acting on the news. He observes that an actor can summon up a depth of feeling for something he barely knows about, while Hamlet has such a powerful motive to act and yet has done nothing. By the end of the soliloquy Hamlet has worked out his first step towards action: he will plot a trap for Claudius that will expose him as a murderer.

**“To be or not to be – that is the question...” – 3.1.64-98.**

By this point, Hamlet's inner-conflict is almost too much to bear. Here, Hamlet contemplates suicide in order to bring an end to the pain of life, particularly the pain he is experiencing. Yet he ultimately reasons it is better to live than face the fear of the unknown: death.

**“How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge...” – 4.4.34-69.**

By 4.4, Hamlet has found the courage to avenge his father by killing Claudius, no matter the consequences. On observing the reckless abandon in which Fortinbras pursues his goals for honor's sake, Hamlet is ready to do what must be done. He resolutely concludes, “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!”

Watch and listen to Hamlet. Is he avoiding taking any action to avenge the murder of his father until the very last moment possible? Or is he working through all of the questions and inner-conflicts he has before taking his revenge?

## **Why doesn't Hamlet automatically become King of Denmark?**

There are many arguments as to the nature of Hamlet's succession. It was typical in an elective monarchy, such as Denmark's was at the time, that the eldest son of the former king would be elected to the throne by a counsel of nobleman. However, in this case the counsel may have believed Hamlet unfit to rule, either under the manipulative influence of Claudius or based on their own assessment. Some say that Shakespeare may not have been aware of Denmark's elective monarchy, therefore intending to imply that Hamlet's right to the throne was unfairly seized by Claudius. In a hereditary monarchy this would have been the case, as by right of male primogeniture (the eldest son automatically taking the crown) Hamlet should have been king. In either case, Shakespeare makes it clear that Hamlet feels slighted and has all the more reason to plot his revenge.