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| **Act 1**1. HORATIONow, sir, young Fortinbras,Of unimproved mettle hot and full,Hath in the skirts of Norway here and thereShark'd up a list of lawless resolutes,For food and diet, to some enterpriseThat hath a stomach in't; which is no other—As it doth well appear unto our state—But to recover of us, by strong handAnd terms compulsatory, those foresaid landsSo by his father lost(1.1.11)
 |

Unlike Hamlet, Fortinbras has "mettle hot and full," and his actions have "stomach," i.e. guts. Hm. Is it just us, or does Horatio sound awfully interested in Mr. Fortinbras?

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| 1. GHOSTRevenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

HAMLETMurder!GHOSTMurder most foul, as in the best it is;But this most foul, strange and unnatural.HAMLETHaste me to know't, that I, with wings as swiftAs meditation or the thoughts of love,May sweep to my revenge. (1.5.7) |
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Okay, Hamlet sure seems eager enough for revenge here—but this is before he knows who he has to kill (Claudius). Is there something about Claudius that makes Hamlet hesitate? Is he reluctant to kill a king?

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| 1. GHOSTI am thy father's spirit,Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,And for the day confined to fast in fires,Till the foul crimes done in my days of natureAre burnt and purged away. But that I am forbidTo tell the secrets of my prison-house,I could a tale unfold whose lightest wordWould harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,Thy knotted and combined locks to partAnd each particular hair to stand on end,Like quills upon the fretful porpentine:But this eternal blazon must not beTo ears of flesh and blood. (1.5.5)
 |

Here, the Ghost claims that he's doomed to suffer in Purgatory (often imagined as a fiery place where souls had to "purge" their sins before they could move on to heaven), until young Hamlet avenges his "foul and most unnatural murder" by killing Claudius. Uh-oh. Major problem alert: First, the doctrine of Purgatory doesn't say anything about murder helping Purgatorial souls get to heaven —prayers, sure, but not vengeance. Second, after the Reformation, Protestants rejected the idea of Purgatory as a "Catholic superstition." You can check out our discussion of "[Religion](http://www.shmoop.com/hamlet/religion-theme.html)" for more on the play's religious crisis, but here's the point: as a Protestant, Hamlet might see the ghost as just a wee bit suspicious.

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| 1. GHOSTO, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;Let not the royal bed of Denmark beA couch for luxury and damned incest.But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contriveAgainst thy mother aught: leave her to heavenAnd to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,To prick and sting her.(1.5.9)
 |

The Ghost isn't too happy about Gertrude's "damned incest," but he tells Hamlet to keep her out of things anyway. Surprise! Hamlet can't seem to keep this promise, either. In fact, his obsession with Gertrude is so problematic that the Ghost returns in Act III, scene iv, to tell Hamlet to lay off his mom.

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| 1. HAMLETO, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!Is it not monstrous that this player here,But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,Could force his soul so to his own conceitThat from her working all his visage wann'd,Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,A broken voice, and his whole function suitingWith forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!(2.2.58)
 |

After watching one of the traveling players (actors) deliver a moving speech, Hamlet berates himself for his inability to avenge his father's murder. If an actor can weep for a fictional character, why can't Hamlet get himself moving for his actual dad? (If you've ever cried over a movie romance while remaining stony-hearted during an actual fight, you know this feeling.)

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| **Act 2**1. The spirit that I have seenMay be the devil: and the devil hath powerTo assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhapsOut of my weakness and my melancholy,As he is very potent with such spirits,Abuses me to damn me: I'll have groundsMore relative than this: the play 's the thingWherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.(2.2.58)
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Here, Hamlet is worried that the ghost might be lying about Old Hamlet's death in order to lead young Hamlet astray. Hamlet wants to be sure that Claudius is guilty so he devises a plan to test the ghost's story. Sounds pretty logical—i.e. not crazy—to us. We'd want confirmation of our spirit visitations, too.

**Act 3**

The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.
[***Hamlet* (3.2.250)**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet_3_2.html)

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| 1. HAMLETNow might I do it pat, now he is praying;And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:A villain kills my father; and for that,I, his sole son, do this same villain sendTo heaven.(3.3.1)
 |

Once again, Hamlet finds a reason to not kill Claudius. His rationale? He says he doesn't want to murder him while the man is praying because he's afraid he'll send Claudius's soul straight to "heaven." Revenge, for Hamlet, isn't simply about killing Claudius —it's about making sure he suffers in Hell, just like he thinks his father is doing.

Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At game, a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.
[***Hamlet* (3.3.77)**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet_3_3.html)

**Act 4**

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge!
[***Hamlet* (4.4.35-6)**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet_4_4.html)

O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!
[***Hamlet* (4.4.65-6)**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet_4_4.html)

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| 1. HAMLET[…] I do not knowWhy yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;'Sith I have cause and will and strength and meansTo do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:Witness this army of such mass and chargeLed by a delicate and tender prince,Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'dMakes mouths at the invisible event,Exposing what is mortal and unsureTo all that fortune, death and danger dare,Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be greatIs not to stir without great argument,But greatly to find quarrel in a strawWhen honour's at the stake. How stand I then,That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,Excitements of my reason and my blood,And let all sleep? while, to my shame, I seeThe imminent death of twenty thousand men,That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plotWhereon the numbers cannot try the cause,Which is not tomb enough and continentTo hide the slain? O, from this time forth,My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!(4.4.6)
 |

This is a major turning point for Hamlet. As he watches Fortinbras's army march across Denmark, he contemplates the fact that so many men will lose their lives fighting for an insignificant and tiny piece of territory, which is nothing more than an "eggshell." At the same time, Hamlet feels a sense of shame that he (a man who has a very good reason to fight), does nothing about the fact that his father has been "kill'd" and his mother has been "stain'd." It is in this very moment that Hamlet's thoughts turn bloody as he sets a direct course for revenge.

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| 1. LAERTESHow came he dead? I'll not be juggled with:To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!I dare damnation. To this point I stand,That both the worlds I give to negligence,Let come what comes; only I'll be revengedMost thoroughly for my father.(4.5.6)

**4.6.161****4.6.29** |

Compared to Hamlet, Laertes is like a little vengeance roadrunner: when he learns that his father's dead, he returns from France immediately, storms the Danish castle, and promises that he'll be "revenged." But Claudius eventually convinces Laertes to pursue a more roundabout path to vengeance. The intricate plot to lure Hamlet into a "friendly" duel recalls the kind of plotting (which results in more delay) that we've seen from young Hamlet. Do Claudius and Hamlet have more in common than they'd want to admit?

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| 1. CLAUDIUSHamlet comes back: what would you undertake,To show yourself your father's son in deedMore than in words?LAERTESTo cut his throat i' the church.KING CLAUDIUSNo place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize;Revenge should have no bounds.(4.7.13)
 |

Now here's a revenge hero the [groundlings](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/groundling) can get behind: revenge is a higher ideal even than church—or so Claudius tells Laertes. But, come on, would you trust the guy?

**4.7.45**

Revenge should have no bounds.
[***Hamlet* (4.7.143)**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet_4_7.html)

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| **Act 5**1. HAMLETDoes it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother, Popp'd in between the election and my hopes, Thrown out his angle for my proper life, And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience, To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd, To let this canker of our nature comeIn further evil? (5.2.9)
 |

Translation: Claudius disrupted Hamlet's succession to the throne of Denmark by taking advantage of Hamlet's absence (he was away at school) and convincing the noble councilmen to elect him king. So, is Hamlet more concerned with getting the throne than avenging his father?

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| 1. HAMLETO, I die, Horatio;The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit:I cannot live to hear the news from England;But I do prophesy the election lightsOn Fortinbras: he has my dying voice;So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,Which have solicited. The rest is silence.(5.2.48)
 |

Shakespeare's tragic heroes always die. That's just what you get for being a tragic hero. At the same time, the plays are always concerned with reestablishing a sense of political order. Hamlet's dying words and his "prophesy" that Fortinbras will win the next "election" anticipates the Norwegian prince's arrival in Denmark and likely succession to the throne. We're left with a sense that Denmark, as a collective whole, will be in capable hands. Happy ending?