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| **Act 1**   1. HORATIO Now, sir, young Fortinbras, Of unimproved mettle hot and full, Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes, For food and diet, to some enterprise That hath a stomach in't; which is no other— As it doth well appear unto our state— But to recover of us, by strong hand And terms compulsatory, those foresaid lands So 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. GHOST Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.   HAMLET Murder!  GHOST Murder most foul, as in the best it is; But this most foul, strange and unnatural.  HAMLET Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift As 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. GHOST I 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 nature Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid To tell the secrets of my prison-house, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, Thy knotted and combined locks to part And each particular hair to stand on end, Like quills upon the fretful porpentine: But this eternal blazon must not be To 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. GHOST O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible! If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not; Let not the royal bed of Denmark be A couch for luxury and damned incest. But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven And 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. HAMLET O, 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 conceit That from her working all his visage wann'd, Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect, A broken voice, and his whole function suiting With 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 seen May be the devil: and the devil hath power To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps Out of my weakness and my melancholy, As he is very potent with such spirits, Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds More relative than this: the play 's the thing Wherein 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. HAMLET Now 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 send To 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 know Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;' Sith I have cause and will and strength and means To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me: Witness this army of such mass and charge Led by a delicate and tender prince, Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd Makes mouths at the invisible event, Exposing what is mortal and unsure To all that fortune, death and danger dare, Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great Is not to stir without great argument, But greatly to find quarrel in a straw When 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 see The imminent death of twenty thousand men, That, for a fantasy and trick of fame, Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause, Which is not tomb enough and continent To 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. LAERTES How 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 revenged Most 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. CLAUDIUS Hamlet comes back: what would you undertake, To show yourself your father's son in deed More than in words? LAERTES To cut his throat i' the church. KING CLAUDIUS No 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. HAMLET Does 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 come In 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. HAMLET O, 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 lights On 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?