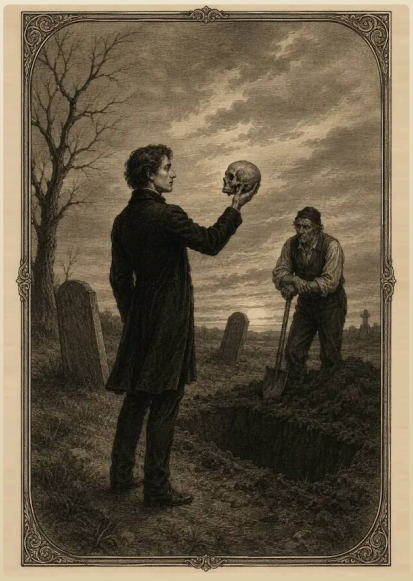
Daily Bard

QUOTATION SHEET

Hamlet: key quotes and analysis

The 10 Hamlet quotations worth knowing by heart, each with a plain-English reading, an analysis of its language, space for your notes, and a fill-the-gap test.



How to use this sheet

These are the 10 key quotations from the **Hamlet study guide**, set out for revision. Part one gives each quotation with a plain-English reading, a short analysis of what the language is doing, and space for your own notes. Part two prints them again with a word missing from each line, so that you can test yourself.

- [ ] Read the quotation aloud twice. Sound helps memory more than staring does.
- [ ] In the note space, name one method (a device, a word choice, a feature of the verse) and the effect it has.
- [ ] Add one link: to a theme, to another moment in the text, or to a point of context.
- [ ] A day later, cover part one and complete part two from memory.

Part one: the quotations

> But I have that within which passes show,
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
>
> HAMLET · ACT 1, SCENE 2 · 1.2.88-89

Plain English: What I feel inside is beyond any outward display; black clothes are only the costume of grief.

The vocabulary is theatrical: “show”, “trappings”, “suits”. Hamlet separates inner truth from outward performance in a rhyming couplet that is itself a polished piece of public speaking. The irony is structural: the man who refuses to “seem” will soon adopt a disguise of madness.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
>
> HAMLET · ACT 1, SCENE 2 · 1.2.133-134

Plain English: I wish my stained body would simply dissolve into water and vanish.

The first soliloquy opens with a wish not to exist, before Hamlet knows of any murder. Three verbs, "melt", "Thaw", "resolve", imagine a death without violence or sin. "sullied" (the early texts differ, and some editors print "solid") makes the body a contaminated thing. This supports reading his paralysis as grief and disgust that predate the Ghost.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
>
> MARCELLUS · ACT 1, SCENE 4 · 1.4.100

Plain English: There is a deep corruption in this country.

A soldier, not a prince, says it, so unease has spread beyond the royal family. "rotten" is organic decay: hidden, spreading, smelt before it is seen. "state" means both the nation and its condition. The line plants the play's disease imagery and links private crime to public health.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!
>
> HAMLET · ACT 1, SCENE 5 · 1.5.210-211

Plain English: The age is dislocated like a bone, and it is my bad luck to be the one who has to reset it.

The metaphor is surgical. Hamlet sees his task as repairing a whole era, far larger than killing one man, and he resents it. The rhyme of "spite" and "right" binds duty to bitterness. Minutes after swearing vengeance he already calls it a curse.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> The play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.
>
> HAMLET · ACT 2, SCENE 2 · 2.2.633-634

Plain English: I will use the performance as a trap to expose the King's guilt.

A confident couplet ends a soliloquy full of self-contempt. "catch" is a hunting word; the play is bait. Hamlet chooses evidence over the Ghost's word, a rational move that also postpones the killing.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> 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,
>
> HAMLET · ACT 3, SCENE 1 · 3.1.64-66

Plain English: To live or not to live: is it nobler to endure what fortune throws at us?

The infinitives make this general, not personal: Hamlet never says "I". The first line runs to eleven syllables, ending on an unstressed beat (a feminine ending) that leaves the question hanging. The speech concludes "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all": thought stops action. See the **full essay on this soliloquy**.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
> Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
>
> CLAUDIUS · ACT 3, SCENE 3 · 3.3.102-103

Plain English: I said the prayer but did not mean it, and empty words do not reach heaven.

Antithesis (opposed ideas in balanced phrasing) splits the line: "up" against "below", words against thoughts. The couplet delivers bitter dramatic irony. Hamlet spared Claudius because he seemed to be in a state of grace; we now learn he was not.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio - a fellow of infinite jest,

HAMLET · ACT 5, SCENE 1 · 5.1.190-192

Plain English: Poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio: a man of endless humour.

Often misquoted as “I knew him well”. The passage is prose, plain and intimate. Death has been an idea for four acts; now it is a particular person Hamlet knew as a child. “infinite” sits against the finite object in his hand. The skull is a memento mori (a reminder of death) and prepares the acceptance of the final scene.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. ... The readiness is all.

HAMLET · ACT 5, SCENE 2 · 5.2.233-237

Plain English: Even a sparrow’s death is part of God’s design. What matters is to be ready.

The allusion is biblical: not a sparrow falls without God’s knowledge. Hamlet’s sentences become short, balanced and calm; the anguished questions are gone. Whether this is faith, fatalism or exhaustion, he no longer tries to script events, only to meet them.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
> And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.
>
> HORATIO · ACT 5, SCENE 2 · 5.2.397-398

Plain English: A noble heart breaks. Good night, dear prince; may angels sing you to your rest.

After Hamlet's last words, "the rest is silence", Horatio answers with sound: singing angels. The tenderness of "sweet prince" offers a blessing the play cannot confirm, since Hamlet dies with several deaths on his hands. "rest" echoes Hamlet's final pun.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

Part two: test yourself

Fill each gap from memory, then check against part one. Mark the ones you missed and come back to them tomorrow.

> But I have that _____ which passes show,
> These but the _____ and the suits of woe.
>
> HAMLET · ACT 1, SCENE 2

> O, that this too, too _____ flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and _____ itself into a dew,
>
> HAMLET · ACT 1, SCENE 2

> _____ is rotten in the state of Denmark.
>
> MARCELLUS · ACT 1, SCENE 4

> The time is out of joint. O _____ spite
> That ever I was born to set it _____!
>
> HAMLET · ACT 1, SCENE 5

> The _____ the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the _____ of the King.
>
> HAMLET · ACT 2, SCENE 2

> To be or not to be - that is the _____:
> _____ 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of _____ fortune,
>
> HAMLET · ACT 3, SCENE 1

> My words fly up, my _____ remain below;
> Words without _____ never to heaven go.
>
> CLAUDIUS · ACT 3, SCENE 3

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio - a fellow of _____ jest,
>
> HAMLET · ACT 5, SCENE 1

There is a special _____ in the fall of a sparrow. ... The readiness is all.

HAMLET · ACT 5, SCENE 2

Now _____ a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And _____ of angels sing thee to thy rest.

HORATIO · ACT 5, SCENE 2

Next steps

For more quotations, sorted by theme and analysed: **madness**, **death**, **revenge**, **appearance and reality**. Turn three of these quotations into full paragraphs with the **essay planner**, and check your method against the **close reading toolkit**. For a small daily dose of the language, **Daily Bard** shows one passage each morning with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf.



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