



## A Closer Look at

# "I have, of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth ..."

**This speech is spoken by Hamlet in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*.**

### Who's Hamlet?

Hamlet's parents are the King and Queen of Denmark. While Hamlet is away at university, news arrives that Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, has died. Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, almost immediately marries Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who has become the new King.

The ghost of the dead King visits Hamlet and declares that he was murdered by Claudius, and tells Hamlet to take revenge. Hamlet doesn't know whether or not the ghost is real and can be believed, and so seeks to find out the truth before taking action.

### What's happening when this speech is spoken?

After the encounter with the ghost, Hamlet's behaviour starts to change. Gertrude and Claudius each have reasons to be concerned about this, and so they send for two of Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They want these friends to visit with Hamlet, find out what's wrong, and report back to them.

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to pretend that this is just a friendly visit, Hamlet presses them until they confess why they were sent. Hamlet answers them with this speech.

#### *HAMLET:*

I have of late — but wherefore I know not — lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

## The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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## Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- Shakespeare's plays are written mostly in verse, but this speech is written in prose. Why do you think Shakespeare made this choice? How might the speech be different if it were in verse?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening for the character?

## Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **of late** – lately
- **wherefore** – why
- **mirth** – enjoyment or happiness
- **forgone** – avoided or given up
- **custom** – habit or typical behaviour
- **exercises** – practice for the sake of training or improvement
- **heavily** – sluggishly, with really low energy
- **disposition** – we might call this mood
- **goodly** – handsome or beautiful in appearance
- **sterile** – incapable of supporting life
- **promontory** – a high point of land that juts out into the sea
- **canopy** – something that hangs above and covers a space (like fabric, or trees, for example)
- **look you** – this expression can be to literally look, or to simply consider; used for emphasis
- **brave** – for Shakespeare this could mean splendid or impressive
- **o'erhanging** – overhanging
- **firmament** – a poetic name for the sky or the heavens above us
- **majestical** – possessing dignity and power
- **fretted** – carved with decorations
- **foul** – disgusting
- **pestilent** – full of infectious disease
- **congregation** – a gathering, usually of people but here used figuratively
- **vapours** – mists or fogs
- **noble** – of a distinguished or impressive character
- **reason** – the power to think clearly
- **faculty** – ability
- **express** – well designed and well formed
- **apprehension** – understanding
- **paragon** – the most outstanding example of something
- **quintessence** – the purest and most perfect form of something



## Challenge the language

William Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. The meaning of words changes over time, as does their resonance. We encourage you to explore and interpret Shakespeare's language in your own ways, to discover how it resonates for you.

What do you do when specific words or phrases in Shakespeare's text feel hurtful or problematic? What about language that doesn't include you, or everyone you would like to include? Is there any language in this speech that you want to challenge? What possible alternatives can you imagine?



## Explore the ideas

In this speech, Hamlet lists things at which other people may marvel, but which leave Hamlet feeling indifferent.

- What might have caused this recent shift in perspective?
- Why do you think Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about this?
- Have you ever asked yourself big, existential questions?
- Who do you like to discuss big questions with?

## Explore the character

Take a moment to think about Hamlet's situation in the play: the recent death of a parent, the quick remarriage of the other parent, the visit from a ghost seeking revenge, the arrival of school friends to spy and report back.

- What do you think is happening in this speech? What might Hamlet be feeling? Why do you think Hamlet says these things? Why in this particular way?

## Make it your own

### Performance

**Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it.** Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

**Ask someone to film your performance** so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

### Art

**Create** a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

### Music

**Express what the speech means to you through music.** Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

### Creative Writing

**Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech.** Imagine someone in a similar situation, struggling to find pleasure in things that might usually bring them joy. How would you convey the feelings that would inspire?

**How would you respond to Hamlet?** If you were a close friend of Hamlet's, how might you provide support? Write a response to your friend in the form of a poem, speech or story.

## Emotional support resources

If you or someone you know would like support to deal with a feeling, emotion, issue, or concern, call one of the numbers below any time of the day or night.

- Call **310-Mental Health** at **310-6789** (no area code needed) if you:
  - need emotional support to deal with a concern or feeling, or
  - are looking for information on mental health resources or services.
- Call **Kid's Help Phone** at **1-800-668-6868** if you are under 20 years of age and need help. You can speak to a professional counsellor. It's free and confidential. Visit [kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca) for more information.