



## To be, or not to be

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### **Hamlet:**

*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,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
*To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:*  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off *this mortal coil*,  
Must give us pause—there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
When he himself might *his quietus make*  
*With a bare bodkin?* Who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
*The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn*  
*No traveller returns*, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,*  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.

[Hamlet Act 3, scene 1, 55–87 \[Italics mine\]](#)

Probably the best-known lines in English literature, Hamlet's greatest soliloquy is the source of more than a dozen everyday (or everymonth) expressions—the stuff that newspaper editorials and florid speeches are made on. Rather than address every one of these gems, I've selected a few of the richer ones for comment. But rest assured that you can quote any line and people will recognize your erudition.

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Hamlet, in contemplating the nature of action, characteristically waxes existential, and it is this quality—the sense that here we have Shakespeare's own ideas on the meaning of life and death—that has made the speech so quotable. Whether or not Shakespeare endorsed Hamlet's sentiments, he rose to the occasion with a very great speech on the very great topic of human "being."

The subtle twists and turns of the prince's language I shall leave to the critics. My focus will be on the isolated images Hamlet invokes, the forgotten pictures behind the words, the parts we ignore when we quote the sum.

### TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION

If you follow Hamlet's speech carefully, you'll notice that his notions of "being" and "not being" are rather complex. He doesn't simply ask whether life or death is preferable; it's hard to clearly distinguish the two—"being" comes to look a lot like "not being," and vice versa. To be, in Hamlet's eyes, is a passive state, to "suffer" outrageous fortune's blows, while not being is the action of opposing those blows. Living is, in effect, a kind of slow death, a submission to fortune's power. On the other hand, death is initiated by a life of action, rushing armed against a sea of troubles—a pretty hopeless project, if you think about it.

### TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Hamlet tries to take comfort in the idea that death is really "no more" than a kind of sleep, with the advantage of one's never having to get up in the morning. This is a "consummation"—a completion or perfection—"devoutly to be wish'd," or piously prayed for. What disturbs Hamlet, however, is that if death is a kind of sleep, then it might entail its own dreams, which would become a new life—these dreams are the hereafter, and the hereafter is a frightening unknown. Hamlet's hesitation is akin to that of the condemned hero Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, written a few years after [Hamlet](#). "Ay, but to die," he considers, "and go we know not where;/ To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot . . ." (Act 3, scene 1). Hamlet's fear is less clearly visualized, but is of the same type. No matter how miserable life is, both heroes suppose, people prefer it to death because there's always a chance that the life after death will be worse.

### THERE'S THE RUB

We say "there's the rub" and think we communicate perfectly well—but do we? I mean "there's the catch" while you might think "there's the essence"—the meanings can be close, yet they're not identical. Shakespeare implies both senses, but calls up a concrete picture which would have been familiar to his audience. "Rub" is the sportsman's name for an obstacle which, in the game of bowls, diverts a ball from its true course. The Bard was obviously fond of the sport (he played on lawns, not lanes): he uses bowling analogies frequently and expertly. This is the most famous of such analogies, though not as elaborate as "Like to a bowl upon a subtle ground,/ I have tumbled past the throw" ([Coriolanus](#), Act 5, scene 2). Although "rub" is used figuratively here, the image that leaps to Hamlet's mind is vivid and homely. Hamlet is often homely at odd moments, especially when the topic is death. "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room" is another good example.

### THIS MORTAL COIL

Shakespeare is really twisting syntax with this one. "Coil" generally means a "fuss" or a "to-do"—as in the line, "for the wedding being here to-morrow, there is a great coil tonight" (*Much Ado about Nothing*, Act 3, scene 3). But a to-do can't be "mortal," so what Hamlet must mean is "this tumultuous world of mortals."

### HIS QUIETUS MAKE WITH A BARE BODKIN

This phrase succinctly illustrates the power Shakespeare can achieve by employing words with radically different origins and uses. "Quietus" is Latinate and legalistic; "bodkin" is concrete and probably Celtic in

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origin. Here, "his quietus make" means something like "even the balance" or "settle his accounts for good." That he might do this with a "bodkin"—elsewhere in Shakespeare a kind of knitting-needle, here a dagger—puts more menace in the abstract, almost clinical "quietus." "Fardels," "grunt," and "sweat" pick up on the grunting and sweating sound of "bodkin." "Fardel," a pack or bundle, is derived from the Arabic *fardah* (package): "grunt" and "sweat" are rooted in good old Anglo-Saxon. Hamlet's "fardels" are the wearying burdens of a weary life.

### THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY, FROM WHOSE BOURN NO TRAVELLER RETURNS

Comfortably back in the high diction appropriate to a noble soliloquizer, Hamlet pulls out all the stops. He may be likening the unimaginable "something after death" to the New World, from which, in this Age of Exploration, some travelers were returning and some weren't. "Bourn" literally means "limit" or "boundary"; to cross the border into the country of death, he says, is an irreversible act. But Hamlet forgets that he has had a personal conversation with one traveler who *has* returned—his father, whose ghost has disclosed the details of his own murder [see [THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH. HORATIO](#)].

### THUS CONSCIENCE DOES MAKE COWARDS OF US ALL

Hamlet's phrase is certainly the most famous judgment on fear of the unknown. But he was not the first of Shakespeare's characters to utter such words: King Richard III, on the verge of his downfall, had said that "Conscience is but a word that cowards use,/ Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe" (Richard III, Act 5, scene 3). The difference is that Machiavellian Richard professes not to believe in (or even have) a conscience, though his bad dreams ought to have convinced him otherwise. Hamlet believes in conscience; he just questions whether it's always appropriate [see [THINKING TOO PRECISELY ON THE EVENT](#)].

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