

Giselle is a frail, young village girl who is courted by a handsome stranger known to her only as Loys. In reality, Loys is a young Duke named Albrecht in disguise. Albrecht is engaged to be married to Bathilde, unbeknownst to Giselle.

Act I

The curtain rises on a cheerful pastoral scene in a quaint Rhineland village during grape harvest. It is early morning as the villagers and Hilarion, a game keeper in love with Giselle, pass the cottage where Giselle lives with her mother. Duke Albrecht, Giselle's lover, disguised as a peasant, enters and knocks on the door. Giselle, who has a passion for dancing, comes out and there follows a shy and charming love scene. Hilarion interrupts their flirtations, but Albrecht forces him to depart. Giselle's friends appear and they dance in celebration of the harvest.

Albrecht is secretly alerted that the Prince of Courland and Albrecht's fiancée, Bathilde, will soon arrive in the hunting party. Albrecht hides. Hilarion, after hearing this, resolves to expose Loys' true identity. Horns sound in the distance, and soon the Prince of Courland and his daughter Bathilde appear. Bathilde is charmed by Giselle and each tells the other of their loves. Bathilde gives Giselle a beautiful necklace for her engagement and in the ensuing excitement, two of Giselle's friends dance for the Prince and his court. The hunting party leaves. Soon the villagers return from work to call for Giselle. Hilarion finds Albrecht's sword and compares it with the Prince of Courland's horn. The crests are the same. Hilarion reveals the true identity of Albrecht/Loys to the villagers. Bathilde at once recognizes Albrecht, her betrothed. Giselle, overwhelmed by grief and shock goes mad and dies.

Act II

In a forest glade near a lake, the moonlight gleams on a solitary cross engraved with the name "Giselle." The spirit of Giselle has been admitted to the Wilis, a group of vengeful female spirits who were scorned by their lovers and have died before their wedding day. At midnight the Wilis rise up and gather in bands to lure any young man they meet to dance until he falls dead.

Hilarion, who is keeping vigil at Giselle's grave, leaves in fear of remaining past midnight in the haunted glen. Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, summons her followers and then calls forth Giselle from the grave and commands her to dance. Giselle begins, and then all disappear to the forest. Albrecht approaches to lay flowers at Giselle's grave. In wild haste, the Wilis enter with Hilarion and force him to join in a frenzied dance which causes him to take his last breath as he reaches for Giselle's grave, then ultimately disappearing into the lake.

The Wilis exit but soon return with Albrecht, swiftly followed by Giselle. A bitter struggle ensues between the cruel and inexorable power of the Queen and the pure love that still flickers in Giselle's heart. Distant bells chime the hours of sunrise when all the Wilis must return to the shadows. At the very brink of exhaustion and death, Albrecht's life is spared by the break of day. Giving her love one last knowing glance, Giselle offers Albrecht a daisy in remembrance of their love and disappears forever beneath her flowery grave.