

Hamlet Study Guide

ACT 1

1. Scene 1 establishes that there is something wrong (rotten) in Denmark; what tells us that things aren't right?
2. Who is Horatio? What is he like? How is he different from Barnardo and Marcellus?
3. What is your first impression of the court? What is the first impression of Claudius as king and speaker?
4. Explain the problem with Fortinbras. How does Claudius deal with it?
5. What business does Laertes raise and how does Claudius deal with it?
6. What is wrong with Hamlet? What sets him apart? How is his clothing different?
7. How do Gertrude and Claudius try to deal with Hamlet's problem?
8. Explain what Hamlet's first soliloquy tells us about Hamlet in scene 2 lines 129-159.
9. What does Horatio tell Hamlet? What does Hamlet decide to do?
10. Explain Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia. What is Laertes's attitude toward the two?
11. What advice does Polonius give Laertes? Is it good? Original? What does it show us about Polonius?
12. How does Polonius feel about Ophelia's feelings toward Hamlet? What are his reasons? Is he more concerned with himself? What does he tell Ophelia regarding Hamlet?
13. What is Ophelia like? How does she respond to Laertes and Polonius? Does she behave according to her own will?
14. What kind of ghost does Hamlet face? (2 possibilities) Why is this important?
15. What does the ghost tell Hamlet?
16. What does Hamlet do? What is his reaction?

ACT 2

1. What does Polonius want Reynaldo to do in Paris? What does this tell us about him?
2. What does Ophelia report about Hamlet?
3. What conclusions about Hamlet does Polonius draw? What will he do with the info.?
4. Why did Claudius send for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (R and G)?
5. What happened with the Fortinbras problem?
6. Describe Polonius's explanation of Hamlet's madness? How does Claudius react?
7. What plan does Polonius come up with?
8. How is there a method to Hamlet's madness? Explain his reaction to Polonius.
9. Explain the interaction with R and G and Hamlet. What does each want? Who succeeds in getting what they want?
10. When dealing with the actors, Hamlet wants to hear the speech about Hecuba and the Fall of Troy. How is this relevant to the problems of Hamlet?
11. Of what does Hamlet accuse himself in the soliloquy (scene 2 lines 523-62)? What point does he repeat about the ghost?

ACT 3

1. How successful are R and G as spies? What do they report to Claudius?
2. How do Claudius and Polonius involve Ophelia in their plan?
3. How does Ophelia's role in the plan confirm or change our opinion of her?
4. Explain Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy. What is he contemplating?
5. How does Hamlet react to Ophelia's test? What does he say?
6. How does Hamlet treat Ophelia? Why?
7. What does Hamlet stress in his tirade against Ophelia? Why is this relevant?
8. How do Claudius, Polonius and Ophelia react to this speech?
9. How does Claudius plan to deal with Hamlet? What is Polonius's suggestion?
10. How does Hamlet prepare for the play within a play?
11. What is the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio like?
12. What happens in the dumb show? How is this relevant?
13. How is "Gonzago" relevant?

14. How does Claudius react?
15. How is this the crisis of the play? What do Hamlet and Claudius learn from the play?
16. How does Hamlet's position change?
17. What do R and G report? How does Hamlet treat them? Explain the metaphor of the recorder.
18. Explain Hamlet's frame of mind and his attitude towards his mother in his soliloquy in scene 3 lines 365-407.
19. What has Claudius planned for Hamlet?
20. What does Claudius reveal in his soliloquy?
21. Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius? Are they convincing? Ironic? Is Hamlet's tragic flaw an inability to act?
22. What happens to Polonius in Gertrude's chamber? Why? How does Hamlet react? What does it show us about Hamlet? Is Polonius a "wretched, rash, intruding fool"?
23. Hamlet lectures Gertrude by comparing what two men? What points does he make Claudius and Gertrude? What bothers him the most? What effect does this have on Gertrude?
24. Why does the ghost return?
25. What does Gertrude promise Hamlet?
26. What does Hamlet know about R and G and his trip to England? How does he plan to solve the problem?

ACT 4

1. What does Claudius realize about what happened to Polonius?
2. How does Hamlet act while he is questioned by Claudius? Is he convincing?
3. What does Claudius have planned in England? Why?
4. What does Hamlet learn about Fortinbras and his army? How does it influence his thinking? Explain soliloquy in scene 4 lines 32-66. Of what does Hamlet accuse himself?
5. What is Ophelia's condition? How is it revealed through her language? How does her condition differ from Hamlet's?
6. Is her condition consistent with her character?
7. Why is Laertes returning to Denmark? Compare his situation to Hamlet's. Who is more justified?
8. How does Laertes react to Ophelia? What does Claudius offer Laertes?
9. What does Hamlet's letter reveal? What do Laertes and Claudius plan? What does their plan reveal about each of them?
10. What happened to Ophelia?

ACT 5

1. Explain the clown's conversation. How is it relevant to the play?
2. How is the clown scene comic? Relevant to Hamlet's earlier thoughts? Does it relate to the theme?
3. Describe how Laertes acts at Ophelia's ceremony (don't want to give away anything until you've read it). How does Hamlet act?
4. What happened to R and G? Is this just?
5. What is Osric like? How is he like Polonius? How does Hamlet react to Osric and his business?
6. What has Hamlet learned by this point of the play? How has he grown from the beginning?
7. What happens at the fencing match? Is there any irony here?
8. Why does Hamlet need Horatio at the end of the play?
9. Explain the resolution. Is everything resolved? Is restoration achieved?

Hamlet Questions

(Complete the book questions and the questions below
Use the study guide to help you with your reading-not required)

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the political situation in Denmark as the play begins? What information does Horatio provide beginning in line 79 of the opening scene? What further information do we learn from Claudius's speech that begins scene ii?

2. How does Shakespeare characterize Horatio in the opening scenes? What are some of his chief qualities? How does Hamlet characterize Claudius? How does Hamlet compare Horatio and Claudius?
3. What does Hamlet's first soliloquy (I.ii.129–59) reveal about his state of mind? What is the source of his discontent?
4. What is the basis for both Laertes's and Polonius's objections to Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet? Which of their arguments seem most (and least) persuasive or fair? What does their treatment of Ophelia in act I, scene iii, reveal about their motivations? What does it suggest about their attitude toward Ophelia and toward women in general? How does class or station function in their arguments?
5. What do we learn from the Ghost in act I, scene v? If what he says is true, how does that reinforce what we have learned about the political situation in Denmark? How does Hamlet respond to the Ghost's instructions? What does he mean by saying, "O my prophetic soul!" (I.v.40)?
6. After listening to the Ghost speak, Hamlet wants to write about it, as indicated in act I, scene v, lines 107 and 108. How does this contrast with his remarks earlier in this speech? What does it suggest about his state of mind?
7. Why do you think Hamlet tells his companions he is likely to put on an "antic disposition" (I.v.172)? Is his behavior a deliberate strategy or a natural reaction to his anger and grief? Explain.
8. Compare the way Hamlet responds to Polonius in act II, scene ii, lines 171–210, with how he responds to his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in lines 215–90. What do you learn about Hamlet from these responses?
9. In act III, scene i, lines 56–90, Hamlet delivers his famous "To be, or not to be" speech, arguably the most recognized passage in English literature. What is he contemplating? What inner conflict is he pondering? What conclusions does he reach?
10. Following his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (III.i.56–90), why does Hamlet treat Ophelia so harshly? How does Ophelia describe Hamlet in lines 141–52? What does this description suggest about Hamlet before the time of the play? What does it suggest about the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia?
11. What does the scene with the players (II.ii.367–472) reveal about Hamlet? How does the First Player's speech (II.ii.404–33) parallel Hamlet's situation?
12. Hamlet's speech to the players at the beginning of act III, scene ii, has often been interpreted as a sort of aside from Shakespeare containing his philosophy of acting. How else can it be interpreted? How do Hamlet's instructions tie in to some of the themes of the play?
13. In act III, scene iii, lines 73–96, Hamlet has a perfect opportunity to kill his uncle and avenge his murdered father. Instead, he makes a speech. Why does he hesitate in killing Claudius? Do you think we are meant to respect his piety or despise his cowardice? If you combine this incident with Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of act II, does it reveal something about Hamlet? about a theme of the play?
14. In act II, scene ii, lines 236–37, Hamlet says, "Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." What assumptions underline Hamlet's response? What does he mean? Do you agree with what he says? He then says to his old friends, "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.330–31). What does this remark suggest about Hamlet's madness, about his "antic disposition"?
15. Why do you think the Ghost is visible to Horatio and the guards in act I, scenes i and iv, but not to Gertrude in act III, scene iv? Does the murder of Polonius in this scene make you reassess whether the Ghost is in fact a demon, and not the ghost of Hamlet's father?
16. What has driven Ophelia mad in act IV, scene v? What does her behavior suggest about the relationship between her and Hamlet? Cite specific lines to support your answer.
17. How does Laertes respond to his father's death? to Ophelia's? How do his responses compare to Hamlet's reaction to the death of *his* father?
- 18. Hamlet seems preoccupied with death for much of the play; what new insight does the graveyard scene (V.i.) reveal regarding his attitude toward mortality? toward life, fame, and accomplishment? How does this attitude connect to his central conflict in the play?**
19. Why does Hamlet give his dying support to Fortinbras (V.ii.316–22)?

Questions on Style and Structure

1. The opening scene presents a great number of questions. How do these contribute to the mood of the scene and, ultimately, of the play itself?
2. Hamlet's first three lines (I.ii.65, 67, 74) are evasive answers using puns or other wordplay. What does this behavior reveal about his character and his state of mind?
3. How would you describe Claudius's opening speech (I.ii.1-39) and his reply to Hamlet (I.ii.87-117)? What does his use of imagery and juxtaposition in the first speech reveal about his purpose? What is the nature of his argument in the second?
4. How does the diction and imagery in the Ghost's speech to Hamlet (I.v.42-91) create a comparison between the two "gardens" before and after the entrance of the "serpents"?
5. In lines 270-82 of act II, scene ii, Hamlet delivers a lengthy explanation to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ending with a rhetorical question. What is the substance of this speech? How does the imagery that Hamlet uses transition his speech from an assessment of himself to that of mankind as a whole?
6. The king's aside in act III, scene i, lines 49-54, is the first definitive evidence of his guilt. Structurally, why do you think this revelation takes place halfway through the play as opposed to earlier (or later)?
7. Notice Hamlet's behavior toward Ophelia in act III, scene i. Why do you think—in dramatic, structural, and thematic terms—we have not observed a scene between Hamlet and Ophelia until this point?
8. In act II, scene i, Polonius says, "By indirections find directions out" (l. 64). What does he mean by that? How does such a comment reveal his character? Find another such witty or clever remark by another character, and explain how it reveals the character of its speaker.
9. Hamlet's four soliloquies (I.ii.129-59; II.ii.474-533; III.i.56-90; IV.iv.32-66) are remarkable for their style as well as their substance. Choose one of these monologues and discuss how its diction, figurative language, and imagery contribute to Hamlet's meaning and purpose.
10. Shakespeare occasionally gives two characters very similar lines or phrasings, the second instance reminding the reader or viewer of the first. In act IV, scene iv, for example, Hamlet wonders if he might be "thinking too precisely on th' event" (l. 41). In act V, scene i, Horatio says to Hamlet, "'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so" (l. 155). What is the effect of these types of echoes throughout the play?
11. Do a close reading of one of Ophelia's songs in act IV, scene v, exploring how its form and content relate and respond to the action of the play (both actual and implied) and to Ophelia's state of mind. In your response, consider what has occurred offstage, as well as the possible or implied events to which she alludes. Why is she given song, as opposed to speech, in this instance?

HAMLET Book Questions