***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?