

Hamlet

Act I, Scene I

1. How does Shakespeare begin the play with an immediate sense of suspense?

2. What probably important exposition is revealed in this scene?

3. Why has Horatio been asked to join the soldiers in the night watch? What has he decided to do?

4. How does the reader/audience know this ghost is not a hallucination?

Act I, Scene II

1. What important exposition is revealed at the beginning of this scene?

2. What evidence of wrongdoing or corruption is evident in Claudius' opening speech?

3. Compare Claudius' treatment of Laertes with his treatment of Hamlet.

4. Why did Hamlet not become King when his father died?

5. How is Hamlet physically and emotionally conspicuous in the public portion of this scene?

6. What is the significance of Claudius' denying Hamlet permission to return to Wittenberg?

7. What aspect of Hamlet's concept of death / desire for death is revealed in Hamlet's first soliloquy?

8. What aspect of Hamlet's problem seems to bother him the most?

9. What important metaphor is introduced in Hamlet's soliloquy that will be developed later in the play?

10. Contrast Claudius' and Laertes' reasons for being in Denmark.

Act I, Scene III

1. Explain the reasons that Laertes and Polonius give Ophelia to convince her not to trust Hamlet's love.

2. What is comical about Polonius?

Act I, Scene IV

1. Other than the fact of the ghost itself, why is this Ghost thought to be an evil omen?

2. Marcellus states, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What does he mean?

Act I, Scene V

1. In what region of the universe does the Ghost reside?

2. What possible theme is introduced by the Ghost's afterlife?

3. What does the Ghost warn Hamlet about his mother? Why?

4. What does Hamlet mean when he says, "The time is out of joint"?

Act II, Scene I

1. What is ironic about Polonius' attempt to learn about Laertes' life in Paris?

2. Why would Polonius immediately jump to the conclusion that Hamlet is mad for Ophelia's love?

3. Consider how the episode of Hamlet in Ophelia's closet promises to contribute to the overall calamity of the tragic plot?

Act II, Scene II

1. Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *willing* spies for Claudius and Gertrude?

2. What effect is created by the scenes between Hamlet and Polonius being in prose?

3. What are some of the slang expressions and puns Hamlet uses in his first exchange with Polonius? Why are they significant?

4. What is Hamlet's initial reaction to the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

5. Why are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hesitant to admit that they are in Elsinore because the king and queen sent for them?

6. How does Hamlet's famous "What a piece of work is a man!" passage depart from typical Renaissance humanism?

7. Why does Shakespeare introduce a troupe of traveling players into the action of the play?

8. What does Hamlet's expression of concern about the child actors used in the city contribute to the plot or to the development of his character?

9. What is unusual about the player's monologue about the Fall of Troy?

Act III, Scene I

1. What does Claudius admit to himself (and to the audience) about his crime?

2. List the personal grievances Hamlet expresses in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy and explain what specific events in Hamlet's life they refer to.

3. What metaphor does Hamlet use in his "To be or not to be" speech to express his developing understanding of death? How does he further develop this metaphor?

4. What information does Ophelia provide about Hamlet's character before the beginning of the play?

5. Explain the ambiguity of the nunnery scene.

6. What is the main thrust of Hamlet's diatribe against Ophelia?

Act III, Scene II

1. Why does Shakespeare begin this scene with Hamlet offering acting lessons to the players? How does this advance the plot, develop character, or help to establish theme?

2. Why does Hamlet trust and admire Horatio?

3. What does Hamlet admit to Horatio and the audience just before the company arrives to view the play?

4. How does Hamlet's speech pattern change when the others enter the room to view the play? Why?

5. Why does Hamlet speak to Ophelia in such vulgar terms?

6. What does Gertrude's reaction to the play indicate?

7. Explain the metaphor of the recorder.

8. Explain the allusion to Nero in Hamlet's closing speech.

Act III, Scene III

1. How has the play-within-the-play changed Hamlet's situation and influenced the action of the play?

2. How does Polonius' spying on the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude indicate a change in Gertrude's status?

3. In what paradox of salvation does Claudius feel trapped?

4. Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius when he has the opportunity?

Act III, Scene IV

1. Explain the ambiguity and wordplay Hamlet and his mother exchange at the beginning of this scene.

2. What is Hamlet's reaction to the killing of Polonius?

3. What does this scene reveal about Gertrude's guilt?

4. What aspect of Gertrude and Claudius' marriage still clearly bothers Hamlet the most?

5. What is the significance of this second appearance of the ghost?

Act IV, Scene I

1. How is this scene ambiguous regarding Gertrude's "conversion" from the previous scene?

Act IV, Scene II

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

Act IV, Scene III

1. Why can't Claudius simply deal with Hamlet swiftly and harshly as allowed by law?

2. How does this scene advance Hamlet's developing awareness of death?

3. Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know the true purpose of their journey to England?

Act IV, Scene IV

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

Act IV, Scene V

1. What important information does Claudius reveal?

2. What do they assume is the cause of Ophelia's apparent madness?

3. Why do you suppose Ophelia's madness takes on the form it does?

4. Describe Laertes' response to his father's death. How is he a foil for Hamlet?

5. How do the flowers Ophelia distributes relate to the characters and their actions?

Act IV, Scenes VI-VII

1. What news is revealed in Hamlet's letter to Horatio? What does this show about Hamlet?
2. What will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
3. How does this episode illustrate the role of coincidence in Shakespearean tragedy?
4. Why does Claudius tell Laertes he will not kill Hamlet himself?
5. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia committed suicide?
6. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia's death was an accident?

Act V, Scene I

1. What is the significance of the various skulls the gravedigger digs up during this scene? How do they contribute to the evolution of Hamlet's understanding of death?
2. How does the entrance of Ophelia's funeral procession continue this evolution?
3. What does Laertes and Hamlet's fight in Ophelia's grave foreshadow?
4. Why is this scene in prose?
5. How do Hamlet and the grave digger view the sociological implications of death differently?

Act V, Scene II

1. What does Horatio learn about the real purpose for the trip to England?
2. What is ironic about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's approaching deaths?
3. How does Shakespeare establish that Hamlet is indeed a noble gentleman?
4. How does the impending duel with Laertes complete Hamlet's concept of death that has been developing through the play?
5. Why does Hamlet apologize to Laertes?
6. Explain how each character dies in the end.
7. Why does the play end with such bloodshed and death?
8. What is significant about the fact that Fortinbras delivers the last lines of the play?