

Hamlet Study Questions

Study Questions: Act One

Scene 2

- 1) What effect has Hamlet's personal tragedy had on his view of life and human nature?
- 2) How do Claudius and Gertrude respond to Hamlet's grief?
- 3) What impression do we get of Claudius?
- 4) Which upsets him more: his mother's marriage or his father's death?

Scene 3

- 1) What is the nature of Laertes' advice?
- 2) What do we learn about Polonius? Ophelia?

Scene 4

- 1) While waiting for the ghost, Hamlet muses on the nature of evil. What are his thoughts?

Scene 5

- 1) How does the ghost describe his murder? What language does he choose? What motive does he attach to Gertrude?
- 2) What is Hamlet's response to the command? What line suggests he is formulating a plan? How does he feel about his assigned task?

Study Questions: Act Two

Scene 1

- 1) How does Polonius respond to Ophelia's report of Hamlet's madness? How is the audience inclined to interpret his madness?

Scene 2

- 2) What plan do the King and Queen propose to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What do we learn about these two characters in this scene?
- 3) On the political front, how and why has Fortinbras altered his plan to attack Denmark?
- 4) What do Polonius's remarks to the King and Queen reveal about his character?
- 5) How does Hamlet's dialogue with Polonius reveal his preoccupation with dishonesty and corruption? Why do you think Hamlet would want Polonius, the King, and others in the court to think he is mad?
- 6) Hamlet describes his state of mind to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (lines 309-25). What can we infer about Hamlet's view of human nature *before* his father's murder and his mother's remarriage? How has his view changed?

- 7) Describe Hamlet's reaction to the player's speech about Hecuba. Why does he call himself a coward after hearing this speech?
- 8) How will Hamlet's plan involving the players help him to "catch the conscience of the King?" What doubt does Hamlet express at the end of this scene?

Study Questions: Act Three

Scene 1

- 1) How is Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia in this scene related to his earlier statement concerning Gertrude, "Frailty, thy name is woman"?
- 2) In what way is Ophelia already corrupted by the world at Elsinore?
- 3) What do we learn from Ophelia about Hamlet's character before his "madness" attacked him?

Scene 2

- 4) Why does Hamlet admire Horatio?
- 5) How much time has passed since King Hamlet's death?
- 6) How do Hamlet's jesting remarks to Ophelia before and during the play reflect his growing cynicism about human nature?
- 7) The play-within-a-play serves as an important function in the plot because it allows Hamlet to obtain evidence of Claudius's guilt. How might the play also be related to the motif of false appearances?
- 8) What is the significance of Hamlet's remark to Guildenstern, "Cal me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play me."

Scene 3

- 9) What reason does Hamlet give for not killing Claudius when he spies on him at prayer? What is ironic about the assumption Hamlet makes? Do you think Hamlet may have another reason for not seizing this opportunity? Explain.

Scene 4

- 10) What actions and words suggest that Hamlet in this scene is behaving like "passion's slave"? How does Hamlet's frame of mind change after the appearance of the ghost?
- 11) What are Gertrude's emotions in this scene? Do you think she is an evil character? Explain.

Act Four

Scene 1

- 1) What action does the King take after Hamlet slays Polonius?

Scene 2

- 2) How does Hamlet receive Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in this scene? How has his attitude toward them changed?

Scene 3

- 3) What order has Claudius sent to England concerning Hamlet? How do Claudius's inner thoughts contrast with his outward appearance in this scene?

Scene 4

- 4) In his soliloquy how does Hamlet compare himself to Fortinbras? What does Hamlet say about honor? What vow does he make?

Scene 5

- 5) How does Laertes respond to the news of his father's death? What does his reaction suggest about his character?
- 6) What do you think is the significance of Ophelia's madness?

Scene 6

- 7) According to Hamlet's letter, what unexpected event occurs on his trip to England?

Scene 7

- 8) What plan involving Laertes does Claudius develop? How does this plan reveal Claudius's cunning? Why does Laertes agree to this plan?

Act Five

Scene 1

- 1) Relate Hamlet's musings on the skulls to his earlier reference to man as a "quintessence of dust" (Act 2, Scene 2). How is Hamlet's attitude toward death in this scene different from that in his earlier speeches?
- 2) Why do you think Hamlet is offended by Laertes's expression of grief for Ophelia?

Scene 2

- 3) What does Hamlet mean when he tells Horatio, at the beginning of this scene, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will"? What recent events have lead him to this conclusion?
- 4) What is Hamlet's state of mind just before he goes to fence with Laertes? In answering, consider these questions: Is Hamlet still troubled by his conscience? Does he still seem to want revenge? Does he still fear death?
- 5) What is Hamlet's attitude toward Laertes in this scene?

- 6) How do the deaths of the King and Queen and Laertes and Hamlet come about? What do you think is the significance of the slaughter in this scene?
- 7) At the end of Act Three, Hamlet's statement, "'Tis sport to have the engineer hoist by his own petar," seems to foreshadow the destruction of his enemies. What does this expression mean? How are each of Hamlet's antagonists- Claudius, Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern- "hoist by his own petar?"
- 8) As Hamlet dies, what does Horatio agree to do? Why do you think Hamlet is given a soldier's burial?