

Hamlet Study Guide

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. Look for details in the opening passage that suggests Francisco's fear and the disquiet of the others in the scene.
4. How does the reader/audience know this ghost is not a hallucination?
5. Why has Horatio been asked to come there at that time? What early indications do we gain of Horatio's character and the role he will play?
6. Look at Barnardo's lines 42-46. How is this description dramatically effective?
7. What three reasons might you give for the Ghost being offended and leaving?
8. What is the first indication in Horatio's speech on page 13 that there is a general feeling of insecurity in Denmark? What has happened between Hamlet, Claudius and Fortinbras?
9. Discuss the setting in terms of place and time. How do these contribute to the scene's mood?
10. How is time flexible in this scene?
11. Sometimes what happens off stage or has happened before the play begins is as important as what takes place during the course of the visible action in the present. How have previous events been given importance in this opening scene of the play?
12. What are the most important lines of this scene?

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? What are the political and personal aims in Claudius's speech? What is he trying to do?
3. How does Claudius' language switch from the public to the personal? How has the style of his language changed?
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. Are there any differences to be observed in the language used to and by Laertes and Hamlet?
7. Why do both Laertes and Hamlet wish to study abroad? What reasons do Polonius and Claudius give for desiring the boys to stay home? What is the significance of Claudius' denying Hamlet permission to return to Wittenberg?
8. Examine Hamlet's opening line on page 25: A little more than kin and less than kind. List the features of Hamlet's speech to his mother that make it powerful. Look at style and structure, obviously, but also balance and argument. How do his words mirror his mother's?
9. What aspect of Hamlet's concept of death / desire for death is revealed in Hamlet's first soliloquy?
10. What aspect of Hamlet's problem seems to bother him the most?
11. What important metaphor is introduced in Hamlet's soliloquy that will be developed later in the play?
12. What aspects of Hamlet's monologue on page 29 convey the sense that he is in a disturbed state of mind? How far is it possible to say what exactly has caused it? Does his mourning go beyond what is 'normal' for a mourning period? Is this mood justified by what has happened and what he knows?
13. What is Hamlet's view of the relationship between his mother and Claudius? How does he make a contrast between his father and Claudius? What unspoken accusations does Hamlet make?
14. How far do you sympathize and understand Hamlet in this scene? How does the language and structure of his speech convey the intensity of his feelings?
15. Why does this entire scene take place in one of the state rooms of the castle?
16. What are some memorable lines from this scene?

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?
3. What is Laertes' principal concern in the advice he gives to Ophelia? What does their exchange tell us about the relationship between Laertes and Ophelia?
4. Examine the diction and imagery of Laertes' speech.
5. What kind of portrait does Laertes paint of Hamlet? Have you seen evidence in the play to support this opinion? What does Polonius tell Ophelia to do about Hamlet?
6. Compare and contrast Polonius's lecture with Laertes with his lecture to Ophelia. Why does this conversation take place? How do Ophelia's responses reveal her character?
7. What is your intuitive reaction to where the truth lies when you read this conversation between Polonius and his children?
8. What are three of the things Polonius advises Laertes against in this scene?
9. How has the setting changed in this scene? To what effect?
10. What is the point of this scene? What are some memorable lines from this scene?

Act I, Scenes 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?
3. Note any indications of what Hamlet might have been like as king.
4. Why does Shakespeare make the Ghost lead Hamlet off to an isolated spot?
5. How does Hamlet's determination to leave increase with every attempt his friends make to prevent him from going?
6. How does this scene have a climax of its own?
7. What are some memorable lines from this scene?

Act I, Scene v

1. In what region of the universe does the Ghost reside? What possible theme is introduced by the Ghost's afterlife?
2. What are the effective features of the Ghost's speech? Examine language, alliteration, repetition, rhythm, structure, etc. Identify single words in the Ghost's narrative which contribute to the sense of horror which would have been felt by any hearer (in the play and the audience), but particularly by Hamlet. Which words would have a particular impact on Hamlet? How is the Ghost's language, syntax and diction simple and clear, never awkward nor obscure?
3. What does the Ghost warn Hamlet about his mother? Why? What does the Ghost command Hamlet to do . . . not to do?
4. What does Hamlet mean when he says, "The time is out of joint"?
5. Why does Hamlet make his friends swear an oath not to reveal what they have seen or heard?
6. How does a new Hamlet begin to emerge in this scene?
7. How is the castle battlements an appropriate setting for this scene?
8. When the Ghost speaks like and man and not a spirit, why is this compelling to Hamlet, and to us?
9. What are some memorable lines in this scene?

Act II, Scene i

1. What do we learn about Hamlet in this scene from Ophelia's words?
2. How does this scene show that time has passed?

Act II, Scene ii

1. Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern willing spies for Claudius and Gertrude?
2. What different types of madness do we see in Hamlet during this act? What do each of the main characters feel to be the cause of Hamlet's madness?
3. What effect is created by the scenes between Hamlet and Polonius being in prose?
4. What are some of the slang expressions and puns Hamlet uses in his first exchange with Polonius? Why are they significant?
5. What is Hamlet's initial reaction to the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (R&G)?
6. Why are R & G hesitant to admit that they are in Elsinore because the king and queen sent for them?
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?
10. In what ways is the Pyrrhus character similar to Hamlet? and to Claudius? Is Hamlet capable of acting like Pyrrhus? Do you want him to be like Pyrrhus?
11. How might we connect the content of Hamlet's supposedly crazy remarks to Polonius to what the prince is actually feeling?
12. Name FIVE different characteristics of Polonius that can be proven on the basis of this act.
13. What reasons for not acting are suggested by Hamlet himself?

Imagery and Symbolism

1. Find TWO references to disease or decay.
2. Find THREE references to remembering or forgetting our feelings.
3. Examine the imagery in Ophelia's description of Hamlet in scene 1. Is Hamlet mad at this point in the play? Why do you feel the way you do?

Themes

1. Who is acting a part in this act? In what ways? Discuss the theme of play-acting as it appears in Act 2.
2. One of the play's major themes, illusion versus reality, begins to take center stage in Act 2. Where do you find evidence of this theme being explored? What possible messages could Shakespeare be trying to convey?
3. When the players arrive, at Hamlet's request they reenact a selection from Aeneas and Dido. Why this play? How does it echo Hamlet's main storyline.
4. Look closely at the second soliloquy. It will definitely show up as a commentary piece. Are Hamlet's doubts genuine? Or are they a rationalization of his failure to take action?

Overview:

1. 'Act Two of Hamlet seems to be all alone the place: it moves in contrary directions and lacks cohesion; then at the end it all comes together, and everything which has gone before shows itself to be relevant.' Discuss the above account of the play's second act.
2. It has been said that this act is overly long. Does too much -of too great a variety- happen in it?
3. Examine these key elements: a) Ophelia's description of the 'antic disposition'; b) Hamlet's exchange with R&G; c) the Players' speech; d) Hamlet's second soliloquy.

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. Why does Hamlet behave so strangely toward Ophelia in scene one? Pay close attention to his questions, "Are you honest . . . are you fair?" Why does he attack Ophelia so cruelly? What makes his attack so painful? In Ophelia's sad reaction, we have the chance to see Hamlet as he was observed by her before the dramatic changes brought about by his father's murder. Be aware of similar suggestions elsewhere in the play.
4. 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?
5. What information does Ophelia provide about Hamlet's character before the beginning of the play?
6. Explain the ambiguity of the nunnery scene.
7. What is the main thrust of Hamlet's diatribe against Ophelia?
8. How do we respond as the audience to both Hamlet and Ophelia in this passage?
9. What do you find most interesting about the language in the passage between Hamlet and Ophelia?
10. It is NOT clear whether Hamlet knows he is being overheard. Do you think it makes a difference to the dramatic effect? Can you find any evidence to suggest that he knows Polonius and Claudius are listening?
11. Is there a method in Hamlet's madness here? If so, what is he trying to accomplish? What does Claudius believe now?
12. Read Ophelia's soliloquy. Do Ophelia's words, which describe Hamlet so vividly as she now sees him, match the Hamlet that we see?
13. How is Hamlet: (a) an enigma (to those around him) of his own creation; (b) (to the audience) created and maintained by Shakespeare; and (c) (to himself) an inevitable part of the human condition?
14. Look at Hamlet's soliloquy: 1) How do the language and the imagery convey his feelings about life? 2) How does he describe death in these lines? 3) How do the language and imagery convey his feelings about death? 4) In which direction is his argument leading? 5) Why do we choose to go on living according to Hamlet? 5) Is it possible that 'thought' and 'conscience' mean much the same thing to Hamlet? 6) What is troubling him here?
15. Compare the three soliloquies. What is Hamlet grappling with? What connections can you find between the three speeches? Taken together, what do they reveal about Hamlet? How do you react to Hamlet at this point in the play?
16. What is Polonius suggesting when he says that 'with devotion's visage' we 'sugar o'er the devil himself?' (lines 47-49) How does Claudius react to this comment and what is revealed about him there?

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 feel the need to involve Horatio in scene two? Why does Shakespeare involve Horatio at this point? Hamlet gives Horatio an assessment of what true friendship is. Is it possible for a man in his position to have a friend with whom he can be completely open? Is he completely open with Horatio?
4. How does Hamlet's speech pattern change when the others enter the room to view the play? Why?
5. Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia consists of very broad sexual innuendo. What do you think is the point of this? Why does he continue his attack? What is his mood and how do you 'read' him here?
6. After Claudius and Gertrude arrive with great pomp and circumstance, Claudius hopes to find Hamlet behaving more normally. Hamlet has other plans. How does he quickly turn from one of the four principal characters to the next, unsettling each in a different way?
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.
9. Examine the play critically, focusing on the reaction of Gertrude and Claudius. The way the actors play this scene is critical. Think deeply about it.
10. Lucianus's speech on page 153 (the Murder of Gonzago) has been pointed to by critics as the one most likely to have been inserted by Hamlet. Why do you think that is? How do Hamlet's remarks after the speech support this assertion?
11. Discuss Hamlet's state of mind in scene two. By what methods does Shakespeare convey his changing state of mind?
12. Discuss the many roles Hamlet plays in scene two. How is this comparable to the theme of the play within a play?
13. Examine the language in the interaction between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. How does Hamlet *play* them, even as he claims that they are trying to *play* him?

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. As Claudius begins to pray, Hamlet considers killing him. How is the reason why he chooses not to kill his step-father ironic? Is Claudius the only target of his bloody thoughts? Is he the main target? If Hamlet really doesn't want to act against Claudius, why does he try so hard to get proof against him?
5. Taking Claudius's speech which opens the scene and this soliloquy together, what do you make of the man? What chiefly stands in the way of forgiveness and repentance for Claudius?
6. Hamlet does not hesitate to kill the man behind the arras. What are the differences between the situations where he fails to kill Claudius, yet whips out his sword and kills whoever is hiding?

Act III, Scene iv

1. We see Hamlet's pent-up frustration and anger being vented directly at one of the guilty parties—not at his own inadequacy. Are you convinced that this is the first time that Gertrude has confronted her own dubious behavior? Explain the ambiguity and word play 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?
6. Make a list of the things Hamlet is accusing his mother of, precisely (there are 3) and less precisely (there are 4).
7. Gertrude says "O, Hamlet, Speak no more. Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul." She clearly feels guilt- but for what? There are five possible answers; list as many as you can and then choose one or two that might bring her the greatest sense of guilt.
8. Does the power of Hamlet's imagery in his conversation with his mother, particularly lines 102-106, indicate that his revulsion is driven by his mother's sexuality more than anything else? What does Hamlet advise his mother to do?
9. What are some reasons why Gertrude does not see the Ghost? Why dramatic effect does Gertrude's inability to see the Ghost contribute to the play? Why does Shakespeare deny her the ability to participate in the scene as anything but an outsider?) How does she change in this scene?

Overall response:

1. By the end of Act Three, Hamlet has fulfilled the Ghost's demands as far as Gertrude is concerned and he has proved beyond any doubt that Claudius is a murderer. However, he is still entangled in the intellectual and moral complexities of revenge and the King is still alive and dangerous. Act Three of a five-act play often includes a point around which the whole action turns — a pivot. In what ways could we describe Act Three of Hamlet as a pivot?

Act IV, Scene i

1. How is this scene ambiguous regarding Gertrude's "conversion" from the previous scene?
2. How and why, according to Claudius, has he failed to fulfill his responsibilities as king?
3. In what ways is Gertrude protecting Hamlet? What conclusions can you draw about her behavior here?
4. At the end of the scene, how has Claudius lost some of his political self-assurance? Why is he anxious to remove Hamlet?
5. Is there evidence to show that Gertrude is on Hamlet's side more than she is on Claudius's?
6. Is anyone sorry that Polonius is dead?

Act IV, Scene ii

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?
2. The fun in scene 2 for the audience lies in watching how Hamlet deals with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Analyze his methods.
3. Why do both Rosencrantz & Guildenstern apparently refuse to understand Hamlet's potentially dangerous dislike of them?
4. Hamlet cannot resist the urge to philosophize, satirize and riddle. How is his pretend madness also an indulgence?
5. Hamlet and Ophelia each, in one way or another, lose a sense of reality. How can this be a chilling experience for the audience?
6. This short scene has a narrative function in that we see Hamlet being summoned to Claudius. How does this allow us to see his thoughts and feelings?

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?
4. Describe Claudius's mood in the scene. What are his reasons, both given and real, for sending Hamlet away?
5. What does Hamlet mean when he says he is a "king of infinite space"?
6. Should Claudius sense a threat to himself in Hamlet's wordplay concerning maggots, kings and beggars?
7. When Hamlet enters he has slipped once more into his "antic disposition"; why?

Act IV, Scene iv

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?
2. What difference do you see between Hamlet and Fortinbras in this scene? What is Hamlet's conclusion about Fortinbras?
3. Think back to the episode in which the first player wept so convincingly over the death of Hecuba. What parallels can you see between that "occasion" and this? What is the point of Hamlet's soliloquy in this scene?
4. Hamlet obviously fears "the event." What does he mean by this phrase and what possible outcomes does he see for himself?
5. How does Hamlet convey the strength of the forces driving him toward revenge?
6. In this scene, we have a glimpse of what Hamlet might have been like as a king. Would he have refused to fight pointless battles or would he have been pushed into it by reasons of state, need to keep the army employed, etc.? Can a crown prince afford to think too much, to plan either his love life or his statecraft? Think of Prince William and Harry, in modern times.

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?
6. As a reader, you MUST have a clear picture from the text of the change that has come over Ophelia BEFORE she enters. How does Shakespeare do this? To what effect?
7. What patterns exist in the snatches of songs Ophelia sings and in the flowers she strews around? Examine the pathos of the songs.
8. How is Ophelia's madness quite different than the one Hamlet has been affecting? What might Shakespeare be saying here about madness?
9. How does Shakespeare use her speeches and the other characters' references to her as part of the whole scene?
10. Examine how each of the other characters: Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius respond to Ophelia. What does his say about each character?
11. Examine the discussion between Laertes and Claudius. How does Claudius deflate Laertes' anger and diffuse the situation?

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. How does Hamlet's letter show his quick thinking? How does it also show a sense of urgency?
5. What does Hamlet mean by "compelled valor"? What kind of bravery is that? Is it the kind of bravery Hamlet shows at his own death?
6. When a dramatist takes the audience, however briefly, into the world outside the immediate zone of the play, we see events and characters from a larger perspective and understand them more when we zoom back into the stage again. How does this scene attempt to do this?
7. Laertes is coming closer and closer to siding with Claudius. What does this tell you about Claudius?

Act Four, scene 7:

1. What reasons does Claudius give Laertes for his actions? How do these reasons not satisfy Laertes?
2. Claudius has brought matters so far, that instead of blaming him for Polonius's death, Laertes is now his eager accomplice and instrument for revenge on Hamlet. What has precipitated Claudius's plans for vengeance?
3. Do you find anything interesting in Hamlet's letter to Claudius other than the news it brings? What is interesting about Claudius's immediate response?
4. Claudius's explanation of how Hamlet should die is very long. Why has Claudius taken such pains to explain this to Laertes? What methods does Claudius employ in his argument?
5. Examine the style of Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death. If all these details are known about Ophelia's death, why didn't anybody rescue her?
6. Why does Claudius tell Laertes he will not kill Hamlet himself?
7. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia committed suicide? What suggests that the death was an accident?
8. What are some significant lines in this act?

Act V, Scene i

1. Ordinary people in Shakespeare's play are often credited with producing 'comic relief' to lighten tragic proceedings. Look carefully at what the two grave-diggers say and do. What kind of people are they? What effect do they seem to have? 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. What do you notice about Hamlet's duel of words with the grave-digger, compared with those he tries to start at court?
3. The "Alas, poor Yorick" scene is famous for its introspection. Why does the knowledge that he is handling Yorick's skull provoke more horror in Hamlet than the other deaths?
4. How does the entrance of Ophelia's funeral procession continue this evolution?
5. What does Laertes and Hamlet's fight in Ophelia's grave foreshadow?
6. Why is this scene in prose?
7. How do Hamlet and the gravedigger view the sociological implications of death differently?
8. Laertes has cursed a priest; a lover and a brother fight each other physically and verbally at Ophelia's funeral. What atmosphere might we expect this to project over the rest of the play?
9. How did Hamlet treat Ophelia the last time he was with her? How can you square this with his declarations of love now?
10. Why does Hamlet leap into the grave? How does everyone react to this sacrilegious act? How do you feel?
11. What is the dramatic significance of this scene?

Act V, Scene ii

1. What does Horatio learn about the real purpose for the trip to England?
2. Hamlet answers Horatio's implied reproach (line 56) with "They are not near my conscience." Why not?
3. What is ironic about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's approaching deaths?
4. How does Shakespeare establish that Hamlet is indeed a noble gentleman?
5. Hamlet seems to have reasoned himself into an acceptance that his conscience should also approve the killing of Claudius (lines 63-70). He is relying on Horatio for a reassuring answer. Does he get it?

6. How does the impending duel with Laertes complete Hamlet's concept of death that has been developing through the play? How does Shakespeare increase the tensions before the duel?
7. Hamlet says "There's a divinity that shapes our ends." Is this an important line? Some critics have observed that Hamlet is a changed man in Act 5. Has Hamlet changed?
8. What has happened to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and how does Hamlet feel about it?
9. How does Hamlet treat Osric when he arrives, and why does he behave like this?
10. With the deaths of the main characters achieved or imminent, a different concern enters the play, triggered by the bystanders' cry of "treason!". What is it?
11. What persuades Horatio not to follow Hamlet immediately into death? Contemplate Horatio's love for Hamlet. Is it more than friendly? Why, in spite of all his previous reservations about death, does Hamlet call it "felicity"?
12. Why does Hamlet apologize to Laertes?
13. Compare Hamlet's and Laertes's public reconciliation. Who is the more honest?
14. Explain how each character dies in the end. Why does the play end with such bloodshed and death?
15. Estimate the importance of Horatio's role in the play.
16. Fortinbras makes a judgement about Hamlet's potential as king. What is yours?
In the duel scene, Hamlet achieves his revenge, but it is at a terrible cost and it is the result of unpremeditated action. It is perhaps worth asking: when Hamlet does finally kill Claudius, whom exactly is he avenging?
17. Consider the line: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Has this rottenness been purged, in preparation for a fresh start? What might Hamlet's dying hopes for Denmark have been in his choice of Fortinbras for king? What is significant about the fact that Fortinbras delivers the last lines of the play?