

## HAMLET | STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

*Directions: Use complete sentences, using support from the text when possible (with citations).*

**Act I: The first act serves to introduce the conflict(s), set the scene and mood, introduce the principal players, and set the plot in motion.**

### **ACT I, SCENE 1**

1. What is the mood of the opening scene? How is it established?
2. How are we informed of the elder Hamlet's death? Why must we learn this information early?
3. Why is a strict watch being maintained outside the castle of Elsinore?
4. Why is Horatio being included in the next watch?
5. What was the outcome of the conflict between King Hamlet and King Fortinbras of Norway?

### **ACT I, SCENE 2**

1. In this scene, we meet the major players. In his inaugural address to his court, what does Claudius reveal about how his fortunes have changed with the death of his brother?
2. How does Claudius respond to Hamlet in this scene? Why do you think he refuses Hamlet's request to return to school in Europe?
3. What hint do we get that Claudius may be under obligation to Polonius?
4. What actual facts do we learn from Hamlet's first soliloquy?

### **ACT I, SCENE 3**

1. Who is Polonius? Laertes? Ophelia?
2. What advice does Laertes give Ophelia about Hamlet? What reason does he give?
3. What order does Polonius give Ophelia?
4. In view of Hamlet's state of mind right now, how is Ophelia's obedience to her father's command likely to affect him?
5. List in your own words at least four things Polonius advises his son?

### **ACT 1, SCENE 4**

1. Read carefully Hamlet's passage beginning "aye, marry, is 't."
  - a. What does Hamlet seem to be saying about the behavior at court?
  - b. What point does he make about men in general and how they are judged?
2. Why do you think Hamlet refers to the ghost as "it" in line 68 (maybe)?
3. Why do Hamlet's friends try to prevent him from following the ghost?
4. What does Marcellus's line 99 mean in context? What universal meaning has it taken on?

### **ACT 1, SCENE 5**

1. What important information does this scene provide about the crime?
2. What terrible responsibility does the ghost lay on Hamlet?
3. What is his immediate response to this responsibility?
4. Why do you think Hamlet swears his friends to secrecy?
5. What do you think Hamlet means when he announces to his friends that he may "put an antic disposition on"?
6. Explain what you believe Hamlet's dilemma is at the end of Act I.
7. What conflicts do you see set up in the play? What different plot lines?

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**Act II: The second act serves to add complications to the conflict(s) and to develop both characters and plotlines.**

### **ACT II, SCENE 1**

1. Note the description of Hamlet's behavior. What is the dramatic value of having Hamlet tell us he may "put on an antic disposition" and doing so come close together?
2. How does Polonius react to the news of Hamlet's strange behavior?
3. What evidence of Hamlet's affections for Ophelia exists?
4. What trait of Polonius is revealed by his plans to spy on his son? What does it reveal about Laertes?

### **ACT II, SCENE 2**

(This scene is by far the longest of the play. It contains several episodes: the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the episode with the ambassadors to Norway, Polonius's interpretation of Hamlet's madness, the meeting of Hamlet with his two school friends, and the arrival of the players. Consider why Shakespeare would put them all in the same scene.)

1. How is the problem of young Fortinbras solved?  
What concession has Norway made to quiet young Fortinbras? (While seemingly insignificant, you will need to remember some of this for the end of the play.)
2. What explanation does Polonius give for Hamlet's apparent insanity? Why would the King prefer this explanation to be true?
3. Why has the King summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
4. What plan does Polonius concoct to prove that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia?
5. In Act I, Scene 5, Hamlet said, "It is an honest ghost." Yet in this scene he says, "The spirit that I have seen may be the devil." What has evidently happened as Hamlet has thought about the strange events?
6. Why does Hamlet want to hear the passage about Hecuba?

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**Act III: The third act should continue the building of complications until the action comes to a climax. The action following the climax serves as falling action.**

### **ACT III, SCENE 1**

1. What information does the King seek as he questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
2. What is your attitude towards Ophelia? How does she impact the plot and characterization?
3. There are two significant plot outcomes of this scene. Claudius makes an important decision regarding Hamlet, and Polonius has a plan for a meeting that involves Hamlet. What are these two plans?

### **ACT III, SCENE 2**

(This scene is crucial to the plot because it contains the play scene. Additionally, it brings Hamlet face to face with his antagonist.)

1. Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern enter together after the advice to the players. Hamlet considers all three his antagonists. Are they likewise bitterly opposed to him? (As you continue to read, consider how each one plays a crucial role in the plot and how Hamlet suffers for it.)
2. Why is Hamlet presenting this particular play?
3. Hamlet makes the murderer in the play the nephew, not the brother. Why? Why mistaken message may the court get from the play?
4. How similar to the actual murder (as revealed by the ghost) is the murder in the play? How is it different?

### **ACT III, SCENE 3**

1. Both Hamlet and Claudius are in a bind (a moral and ethical dilemma). What is it for each? Which predicament seems more difficult to face and solve?

### **ACT III, SCENE 4**

(This is the Queen's great scene.)

1. What do you learn about the Queen in the course of this scene?
2. How has this scene helped and hurt Hamlet?
3. The climax of the play is the turning point. At the climax, events become irreversible. At the climax the audience begins to sense the conclusion or denouement. Identification of the climax cannot always be settled without dispute. There are three different points within this Act that may be justifiably explained as the climax of Hamlet. Can you identify any of them and give a rationale for it?
4. Where do you see the play going?
5. What is your current perception of Hamlet?

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**Act IV: The climax has occurred. Now, Hamlet is being forced into a course of action. Things begin to unravel.**

**ACT IV, SCENE 1:** The King learns that he is truly in danger. He must find a way to protect himself but not alienate Gertrude.

1. Why does Hamlet's departure have special urgency?
2. How does the Queen try to protect Hamlet?
3. How does the King use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

**ACT IV, SCENE 2:** This scene prepares us for a confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius. It also builds suspense.

1. What is it Hamlet refuses to do?
2. How is suspense built in this scene?

**ACT IV, SCENE 3:** This scene is important because the King reveals to the audience that he intends to have Hamlet killed.

1. What is the King's plan to get rid of Hamlet?
2. What examples of irony do you note in this scene?

**ACT IV, SCENE 4:** This scene provides time for Hamlet's soliloquy and reminds us about Fortinbras.

1. What information do we learn about Fortinbras?
2. Look at Hamlet's speech. What range of emotions does he seem to go through in this speech? Where do you see each?

**ACT IV, SCENE 5:** This short scene serves one major purpose: to clue us into what has happened to Ophelia and prepare us for her appearance. This scene also serves to provide us with more insight into the King and his ability to manipulate people around him.

1. What is wrong with Ophelia? What is the cause? How does she behave?
2. Laertes returns. How does he react? Does this seem consistent with his character from our earlier view of him? How does it make him vulnerable to the King?

**ACT IV, SCENE 6:** This scene serves the purpose of building suspense and preparing us for Hamlet's return.

1. What news of Hamlet is received at Court?

**ACT IV, SCENE 7:** This scene sets up the final plot against Hamlet. The King initially feels secure, but then he hears of Hamlet's escape.

1. What plan does the King advance after he hears of Hamlet's escape?
2. How is Laertes a more formidable foe to use against Hamlet than the King's previous choices?
3. How does he win Laertes over to his side?
4. Laertes makes the perfect foil for Hamlet in a number of ways. How?
5. You get the story of what happened to Ophelia here. Be sure you understand it.

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**ACT V: This act forces Hamlet and Claudius into a final confrontation. The first scene is a preparation for the second. The first scene is a comic jest – two common gravediggers trading barbs until Horatio and Hamlet come along. The seriousness of it prepares Hamlet for the finality of death. Scene 2 brings all forces to bear against each other. The play seems to end with Hamlet’s death. What do the remaining lines serve to do?**

### **ACT V, SCENE 1**

1. How does Hamlet happen to be at the graveyard at this time?
2. Who has just died?
3. Two sides of Hamlet are revealed in this scene – the philosopher and the doer? How is each side shown?
4. Hamlet describes Laertes as a “very noble youth.” How is this ironic?
5. How do Hamlet’s actions at the grave support the depth of his feelings for Ophelia?
6. How old are you led to believe Hamlet is? What do you think?

### **ACT V, SCENE 2**

1. Why does Hamlet tell Horatio everything at the start of this scene?
2. How does Hamlet’s willingness to fight Laertes help solidify him as a tragic hero?
3. How is suspense raised in this scene?
4. Where does Gertrude finally realize Claudius’s treachery?
5. After Hamlet’s death, the rest seems superfluous. Why is the rest important?