

Hamlet discussion questions

1. Marcellus famously declares that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What other natural imagery is used to describe the corruption of the Danish court? What "unnatural" events or behaviors preceded the events recounted in the play? What "unnatural" events or behaviors occur during the play?
2. One of the great paradoxes of this play is that Hamlet, the hero of one plot, is the villain of the other. This realization reflects directly the duality of human nature. What other characters does Shakespeare use to advance similar notions? How?
3. Hamlet deals a great deal with plotting and scheming. Who in *Hamlet* sets plans in motion? To what ends?
4. Shakespeare fills this play with an abundance of juxtapositions (dark/light, reality/fiction, Laertes/Hamlet). List and explain at least ten contrasts in the play.
5. Compare and contrast Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. What do you find out?
6. Hamlet seems to find a great deal of fault with Gertrude. Why? Is his criticism justified?
7. Like Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras are sons confronted with a father's death. To what extent do they function as foils to Hamlet? What do they have in common? How do they differ?
8. How well does Hamlet fulfill his role as revenger?
9. Does Hamlet undergo any developmental changes throughout the play? Does he grow psychologically? Morally? Spiritually?
10. Is Hamlet prudent or foolish? Is his inability to act decisively his downfall or is it what makes him a hero?
11. Hamlet claims that his madness is feigned, an "antic disposition" which he puts on for his own purposes (1.5.172). Why would Hamlet want to feign madness? How can an appearance of insanity help him achieve his ends? Is he really sane throughout the play, or does he ever cross the line into madness? What about Ophelia's mad scene? Is it real or feigned? Is there "method in her madness" as well, or is she entirely irrational? Why has she gone mad?
12. What is the role of Ophelia? Gertrude? How do they compare and contrast?
13. Describe Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia. What is her purpose in the play? Does Hamlet ever really love her? Be sure to back your claims up with textual details.
14. How much did Gertrude know about King Hamlet's murder? What evidence can you find that she might have known? Evidence of her innocence? Which is more feasible?
15. How are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern characterized? How are we supposed to feel about them? Compare their roles with that of Horatio.
16. What purpose does Osric serve? How does this affected courtier contribute to the play's themes?