

Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition

Hamlet Reading Questions

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Act I Questions

1. As the play opens, what is the mood? Looking closely at the text, what words or phrases can you find that Shakespeare uses to help set the tone and prepare us for what's to come?
2. Part of Horatio's job in 1.1 is to provide exposition. What has happened that might warrant a ghost stalking the castle?
3. From what you see in 1.2, what kind of a king is Claudius?
4. Hamlet is in stark contrast to the festivity of the coronation. Compare and contrast the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual differences between young Hamlet and Claudius's court.
5. What is Polonius's family like? What kind of dad is he? What kind of son/brother is Laertes? How do the two men get along with Ophelia? Are they close? Distant? Loving? Aloof? Where do you find your evidence?

Act II Questions

1. In 2.1, Ophelia is greatly concerned over Hamlet's behavior. What evidence does he give that something is wrong? What are the possible explanations given by Polonius in 2.1 and 2.2? Do you agree with his reasoning?
2. Who are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and what are they doing at court? How are we supposed to feel about them?
3. 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?
4. Take another look at Polonius. Is he the same man you thought initially? What evidence is there that he's not the man we were led to believe in Act 1?
5. 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?

Act III Questions

1. Act III, scene 1 is perhaps most well known for its "To be or not to be" speech. Using textual evidence from the soliloquy, describe Hamlet's attitude.
2. The idea of Hamlet's madness takes greater hold in this act. Is it merely an idea, though? What support can you find for Hamlet actually being mad? For him faking madness?
3. What is the significance of the inclusion of the play within the play? What function do the players serve? Beyond performing the play in which to catch the king, what themes do they underscore? How is what they're doing like or unlike what other characters in *Hamlet* are doing?
4. Act III has Hamlet saying some very harsh words to Ophelia. Why does he want her to get to a nunnery? Does he say this out of love or hate or both?
5. Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius? Should he have used his opportunity?
6. Does Hamlet really know who is hiding behind the arras? Could he possibly really believe it was Claudius? After all, he had just seen him praying.

Act IV Questions

1. As act IV unfolds, Claudius is becoming more and more uncomfortable with having Hamlet around. Can you point to places where Claudius's fear is beginning to take over? How does he try to get rid of Hamlet while continuing to look innocent?
2. Hamlet shows a great deal of wit and cleverness in this act. Where can you find examples of Hamlet's nimble brain? Or is he not a wit at all...is he something else?
3. Act IV, scene 4 has Fortinbras moving over the countryside. Where is he going? Why? What about this journey upsets Hamlet so much? What does seeing Fortinbras do to Hamlet? How is he moved by what he sees?
4. Hamlet's madness is starkly contrasted with Ophelia's madness in Act 4. What has precipitated her madness? Was it necessary for her to go insane? What elements of the story are enhanced by her madness? Could the story work without it?
5. How does Hamlet happen to get back to Denmark? It is blind luck or is it more?

Act V Questions

1. What purposes do the grave diggers' exchanges (with each other and with Hamlet) serve? How do they function in the story? What themes and issues do they introduce?
2. Why do Hamlet and Laertes fight in Ophelia's grave?
3. How did Hamlet escape being killed in England? How does he feel about having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed in his stead?
4. What does Hamlet mean by "the readiness is all" (5.2.218)? What does such a statement reflect about him? Could he have made such a statement in Act 1?
5. What are we to infer happens after all the bodies are cleared away? Does Denmark come into a time of peace and healing or are they headed for greater troubles? How do you know?

General 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?