

Hamlet

Act One Study Questions

What? Why? How?

1. What reasons do Laertes and Polonius give for their command to Ophelia to stop seeing Hamlet? Are they reasonable?
2. What country is Horatio from? What makes it difficult to decide?
3. What similarities are there in the thoughts contained in each of the soliloquies in this act? (In I.ii. actor Claudius and the court leave and in I.v. after the ghost leaves)
4. The first scene could be (and has been) cut without damaging the plot. For what reasons would you wish to include it in a performance?
5. In what ways is the language spoken by the apparition different to the normal language of the play?
6. What signs are we given of a potential for madness on Hamlet's part?
7. How does Claudius attempt to establish his popularity in the second scene?
8. How can we tell Denmark is a Catholic country? Find TWO references which help to suggest this.
9. How did Old Hamlet tackle foreign policy, and how does this contrast with Claudius?
10. What does Hamlet believe about his father's death before he meets the apparition?

Stagecraft

11. How does Shakespeare create tension in the first scene? How does he surprise us? How does he mislead us?
12. How does Shakespeare invite us to compare and contrast Hamlet with Laertes and Fortinbras?
13. How does Shakespeare create tension in the second scene?

Imagery and Symbolism

14. Find TWO references to disease or decay.

Themes

15. The ghost comes in "questionable shape." Find THREE references to the idea that it may not be what it seems.
16. Find THREE other references to characters not being what they seem.
17. The prince must decide whether and how to act according to his dead father's wishes. Find THREE references to remembering or forgetting.
18. The play suggests that our lives may be controlled by a divine power. Find THREE references to Fate or Providence.

Scene 1

Focus on the character of Horatio. What evidence do you find of his sense of humor, learning, daring, loyalty, and other desirous qualities?

Scene 2

Critics have often pointed out that, except for Hamlet, and later Horatio, the King seems to be popular with the members of the court. What evidence do we find that the court fully accepts Claudius as king?

Claudius allows Laertes to leave the court, but he refuses to allow Hamlet to go? What motive can you suggest for this refusal?

Find evidence in the scene that Hamlet, although greatly affected by the Ghost, is still uncertain about it.

Scene 3

In view of Hamlet's state of mind as it has resulted from his mother's marriage and Claudius's kingship, how is Ophelia's obedience to her father's command likely to affect him?

Polonius's famous speech, given to his son Laertes, has been interpreted in many ways – for example, as the chatter of a talkative old man or as the weighty advice of a sage old counselor. Much depends upon how the lines are delivered. How would you read the portion beginning “to thine own self be true”?

Some actors have delivered the last farewell of Laertes with obvious impatience. What does such an interpretation add to the scene?

Scene 4

Lines 48-49 are often debated. There are at least two possible readings. Different editors of the play punctuate the play differently to suggest the two readings. In one reading, “Hamlet, King, father” are grouped together; then “royal Dane” goes with “O, answer me!” In the second reading, the four labels are grouped together: “Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane.” The first possibility has the word “father” as the climax. The second has “royal Dane” as the climax. Read the lines aloud both ways. Which do you prefer? Why?

Scene 5

Why does Hamlet swear Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy? Why doesn't he tell the two men what the Ghost has told him?

By the end of the Act, Hamlet faces a complex dilemma. What makes it so complex?