

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR HAMLET

Introduction

1. Hamlet was probably written around what date? How do we know?
2. What are the main connections between Julius Caesar and Hamlet?
3. What two personal events in Shakespeare's life may have influenced the composition of the play?
4. What pending major political event did England face and how did that affect the composition of the play?
5. Summarize the major differences between the First Quarto, Second Quarto and the Folio versions of Hamlet.
6. Where did the original story of Hamlet come from? What are some of the major differences between that version and what Shakespeare wrote?
7. Name the six elements usually found in the *revenge tragedy*? From what source did the Elizabethan playwrights take the idea of the revenge tragedy?

Act I, Scene 1

8. What are some of the things that indicate to us the sentries in the opening scene are not very high in the hierarchy of the army?
9. Why did the soldiers ask Horatio to accompany them on sentry duty?
10. Why does Horatio come to the conclusion that the Ghost has returned to warn of some looming crisis facing Denmark?
11. What political event does Horatio relate the appearance of the Ghost to?
12. What were the *five* traditional reasons for the appearance of ghosts?
13. In the film what is the origin of the Ghost? Why, according to me?

Act I, Scene 2

14. What are *ten* political purposes of Claudius in the first 132 lines of this scene?
15. What rhetorical device does Claudius use to drive home the point that he gets no personal satisfaction from his marriage to Gertrude?
16. What two things does Claudius do to try and control the diplomatic mission to the King of Norway?
17. Why does Claudius ask Laertes four times what the King can do for him?
18. What word does Claudius use to signal the change he hopes in his relationship with Hamlet?
19. Describe where Hamlet is in the film and how he is dressed when we first see him.
20. What word does Hamlet use to insult his mother?
21. What are the *11* arguments Claudius uses to try and convince Hamlet to cease mourning his dead father?
22. What is the real reason Claudius does not want Hamlet to return to Wittenberg?
23. How does Hamlet insult Claudius at line 124? What does the King do about it?
24. How does the syntax of Hamlet's language at lines 149 – 157 reflect the state of his mind?
25. What about Horatio's answer at line 183 is a signal to Hamlet that he may have found a friend?

26. What are the **reasons** for Hamlet's questions at lines 206 – 261?
27. What is Hamlet's immediate assumption about the reason for the appearance of the Ghost?

Act I, Scene 3

28. What is ironic about Polonius' final advice to his son, "To thy own self be true"?
29. What assumption does Polonius make about the Hamlet's declaration of love to Ophelia? Why?

Act I, Scene 4

30. What is the significance of lines 26 – 41?
31. Why do Horatio and Marcellus try to stop Hamlet from following the Ghost?

Act I, Scene 5

32. Describe the landscape in which Hamlet's conversation with the Ghost takes place.
33. Explain the significance of the word "rank" in the play.
34. In light of the dominant Protestant theology of the day, what is unusual about the Ghost's explanation of where he has returned from?
35. What exactly does the Ghost accuse Gertrude of?
36. According to me what are two reasons why Hamlet does not tell Marcellus and Horatio what the Ghost revealed to him?
37. What does Hamlet ask them to swear? On what does he ask them to swear? Why?
38. What, according to me, is the "most problematic line in the play"? Why does it pose such a challenge?

Act II, Scene 1

39. What is ironic about the scene in the film where Polonius gives Reynoldo instructions on how to spy on Laertes?
40. What do Ophelia and Polonius assume about Hamlet when he appears wordless in her closet? What evidence do they cite to support their assumption?
41. Why does Polonius rush off to tell the King what he suspects about Hamlet's condition?

Act II, Scene 2

42. What is it the King and Queen ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do for them? How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern handle the moral implications of their actions?
43. Why does Polonius take particular objection to being told by Gertrude "More matter with less art"?
44. What is the primary piece of evidence that Polonius uses to bolster his assertion of Hamlet being crazy for love of Ophelia? How does the film present this?
45. What does Branagh make clear about the relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia?
46. Give two reasons why Hamlet calls Polonius a "fishmonger."
47. How does Shakespeare signal the audience when Hamlet is "putting on his antic disposition"?

48. Explain how the principal characters project their own fears or guilt as an explanation for Hamlet's madness?
49. What is "mock profundity" and give two examples of Hamlet using it in this scene.
50. Give one reason why the "I have of late...." speech at lines 318 – 332 is a serious statement of Hamlet's core beliefs. Give two reasons why it isn't a serious statement.
51. Why did Shakespeare include the description of the "War of the Theaters" at lines 343 – 385?
52. Why does Hamlet select the speech about the death of Priam for the actor to recite?
53. According to me, what was the point that Shakespeare was trying to make to his audience about how drama had changed in recent years?
54. At what point does Hamlet come up with his plan to use "The Murder of Gonzago" to test the King's guilt? Why does he use this approach?
55. What are the six parts of the "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" soliloquy? How does Hamlet's attitude toward himself change in the course of the soliloquy?
56. How does Hamlet display a sense of self-awareness in the last few lines of the soliloquy?
57. How does Branagh illustrate the line "Catch the conscience of the King"?

Act III, Scene 1

58. How does the analysis of Hamlet's mental condition by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern differ from that of Polonius? Why?
59. How does Gertrude react to the possibility of Hamlet marrying Ophelia?
60. Why does Shakespeare choose this moment for Claudius to confess his guilt to the audience?
61. What, according to me, are the three dramatic contexts in which the "To be or not to be" speech can be placed?
62. What, according to me, is the origin of the question "To be or not to be"?
63. List three phrases in the "To be or not to be" speech which seem to undercut the solemnity of the topic.
64. Explain how Hamlet mixes his metaphors in the final sentence of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Why might he do this?
65. According to me how does this soliloquy connect with the couplet at the end of Act I – "The time is out of joint, o cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right"? What is the apparent emotional disconnect between this soliloquy and the last pronouncement Hamlet made – "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King"?
66. According to me what three messages does Hamlet seem to be conveying in the "nunnery" speech?
67. What are two indications in the opening lines of the exchange with Ophelia that Hamlet is playing his "antic disposition" game with her?
68. How does Ophelia try to revise the history of their romance? Why? How does she reveal herself Polonius' daughter by her choice of words?

69. How, according to me, does Hamlet turn Ophelia's question – "Can beauty have better commerce than with honesty?" – into an insult?
70. What changes in Hamlet's attitude toward Ophelia after line 126? Why?
71. Give three possible reasons why Hamlet tells Ophelia he never loved her at line 129?
72. Why does Hamlet tell Ophelia to go to a nunnery? How does that command become ironic after line 141, according to me? What causes the change in the meaning "nunnery"?
73. What in the film makes Hamlet suspicious that he is being spied upon?
74. How many times does Hamlet start to leave Ophelia and then come back to yell at her some more? Why does Shakespeare do this?
75. What is the implicit threat in Hamlet's speech at lines 159 – 162? For whom is it intended?
76. How does Ophelia explain Hamlet's behavior in the nunnery speech? According to me why does she reach this conclusion?
77. Why does Claudius reach a conclusion different from Ophelia's about the reasons for Hamlet's behavior? What conclusion does Polonius reach and why?
78. Why did Branagh choose to stage "To be or not to be" in this particular room?
79. How does Branagh stage Hamlet's actions at the end of the "Nunnery" speech?

Act III, Scene 2

80. Why were "Termagant and "Herod" used as examples of overacting?
81. Why does Hamlet object to clowns who ad lib their parts to get more laughs?
82. Why is it so important to Hamlet that Horatio be the one to watch Claudius during the performance of the play?
83. How does Hamlet use his comic "antic disposition" to mislead/ insult Polonius, Claudius and Gertrude?
84. How is Hamlet particularly discourteous to Ophelia? Why?
85. How is the language of the play-within-the-play different from the language of Hamlet itself? Why?
86. What is the real origin of the play *The Murder of Gonzago*? What are the parts of the play in performance that Hamlet probably added?
87. What is Hamlet's reaction when Claudius stops the performance of the play? Why might others interpret Hamlet's behavior as insanity?
88. What is the point of Hamlet's analogy of the recorders? What word signals us that Hamlet is serious in his message to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
89. How does Hamlet's treatment of Polonius in this scene differ from the way he treats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Why the difference?
90. At the end of the scene, how does Hamlet indicate he is ready to kill the King? What does he say he will do when he meets with his mother? Explain his conflicted feelings about his mother.
91. In the film in what room does Hamlet speak to Horatio about his feelings before they go to the performance of the play?
92. Describe the theater in the film.
93. Describe the expressions that pass between Hamlet and Claudius when the King leaves the theater.

94. Where does Branagh stage Hamlet's speech, "'Tis now the very witching time of night"? Why?

Act III, Scene 3

95. What are three images used in the opening lines here to describe the reliance of the people on the fortunes of the ruler?
96. According to me what do Hamlet and Claudius have in common that is revealed in this scene?
97. Why does Hamlet decide not to kill Claudius at this point? Why is his assumption incorrect?
98. In the film in what part of Claudius' body does Hamlet intend to stab the King? Why here?

Act III, Scene 4

99. How does Hamlet use repetition and differences in pronouns to attack his mother in the opening lines of this scene?
100. What is the significance of what Hamlet cries when he stabs Polonius behind the arras?
101. Why does Hamlet accuse his mother of having "killed a king"? How does Gertrude respond to this charge? Why does she respond this way?
102. Cite three different ways by which Hamlet shows disrespect for the dead Polonius.
103. Why does Hamlet deny that his mother could have chosen Claudius for romantic reasons?
104. What are three major bases upon which Hamlet attacks his mother's choice?
105. Explain the significance of the phrase "a king of shreds and patches."
106. Why does the Ghost reappear? How is his appearance different from the last time we saw him? What accounts for this difference?
107. What are two ways Hamlet offers to prove to his mother that he is not insane?
108. How is Hamlet's obsession with his mother's sexuality revealed in this scene? What are the five acts of physical intimacy he asks her to refrain from doing?
109. What are some of the reasons Hamlet suspects Rosencrantz and Guildenstern intend to "marshal me to knavery"?
110. Explain the meaning of "hoist the engineer on his own petard and blow him to the moon."
111. Explain the joke behind the line, "Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you."
112. Over the course of this scene in the film, how has Hamlet's attitude toward his mother changed? What are some of the ways this change is communicated?

Act IV, Scene 1

113. How does Gertrude honor her son's request to hide his real intention?
114. What are Claudius political concerns about Hamlet's murder of Polonius?
115. In this scene in the film at what point does Claudius first try to physically comfort his wife? What is its significance?

Act IV, Scene 2

116. Why does Hamlet call Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “sponges”?
117. In the film of this scene, where is the first place Claudius’ guards first look for Hamlet? Why do you think Branagh staged it this way?

Act IV, Scene 3

118. Why is Claudius unable to act directly against Hamlet?
119. Explain the significance of images involving disease and physical corruption found throughout the play. Find at least three examples.
120. Explain the three ways Hamlet insults Claudius using his antic disposition in this scene.
121. Why does Hamlet refer to Claudius as his “dear mother”?
122. Who besides Hamlet in the film of this scene is seized and brought before the King? Why does Branagh stage it this way?
123. In the film how does Ophelia learn of the death of her father? Why do you think Branagh staged it this way?

Act IV, Scene 4

124. Explain the attitude of Fortinbras’ captain toward the intended object of conquest in Poland.
125. Explain Hamlet’s ambivalent attitude in the soliloquy “How all occasions do inform against me.”
126. What does Hamlet believe has kept him from acting decisively against Claudius?
127. What is the disconnect I mentioned between what Hamlet says at the end of this scene and what he does?
128. What does Branagh have the camera do during the “How all occasions” soliloquy?

Act IV, Scene 5

129. What is the danger of allowing Ophelia to wander around in public raving, according to Horatio?
130. According to me, what are the four signs of Ophelia’s insanity in this scene?
131. According to me, what is particularly poignant about Ophelia’s lines, “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be”?
132. How many “sorrows” does Claudius outline in his speech at line 80 – 103? What is the base cause of all these “sorrows”?
133. Who were the King’s “Switzers” and what was their job?
134. Who is the sole protector of Claudius in this scene, and how does the protector perform this service?
135. How does Laertes’ reaction to his father’s death differ from that of Hamlet to his father’s death?
136. How does Claudius show courage in confronting Laertes in this scene in the film? How does Claudius subtly signal his control over Laertes at lines 170 – 175?
137. What is the significance of the flowers that Ophelia hands out to members of the court?

138. What is remarkable about the political deal Claudius offers Laertes at the end of his scene?
139. List some of the similarities and differences between Hamlet's feigned madness and Ophelia's real insanity.
140. In the film how is mental illness shown as being treated?

Act IV, Scene 6

141. What is comic about the exchange between the pirate and Horatio in this scene?

Act IV, Scene 7

142. What are four ways Claudius psychologically manipulates Laertes in this scene?
143. In what ways does Hamlet's letter upset Claudius?
144. How does Claudius flatter Laertes? Why does he flatter him?
145. According to me what is the purpose of the story of the French gentleman Lamond whom Claudius brings up?
146. How do Claudius' lines at 134 –138 relate to Hamlet?
147. Why do Laertes and the King come up with three different plans to kill Hamlet?
148. What are some of the ways Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death is particularly poetic?
149. What is the "serious pun" Laertes uses to describe his grief?
150. In the film what is Gertrude's reaction when her husband says at the end of this scene, "Let's follow"?

Act V, Scene 1

151. According to me, what is the purpose of "comic relief" in a tragedy? How does this particular example provide relief? How does it provide a different perspective on the events of the play?
152. What is the legal question posed by the burial of Ophelia?
153. What is a "malapropism" and how did Shakespeare use it to establish social distinction? Cite two examples of malapropisms in this scene.
154. Explain the joke behind "There is no/ ancient gentleman but gardeners..."
155. What exactly is the Gravedigger doing to prepare a grave for Ophelia?
156. Who are the three fictional people Hamlet imagines represented by the skulls the Gravedigger throws out of the grave? Why does Shakespeare go into so much detail about the third person?
157. Explain the connection between "indentures" and a human skull, according to me.
158. Explain how we find out how old Hamlet is.
159. Throughout the play Hamlet has been speculating on what happens after death. What new insights does the Gravedigger provide?
160. Why is the line "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio" so famous, according to me? How does the film establish the link between Yorick in life and his skull?
161. How does Hamlet know the funeral is for someone who committed suicide?
162. Why does Laertes get so angry at the priest officiating at the funeral?
163. Why are Gertrude's words over Ophelia's grave ironic, according to me?

164. Explain how Hamlet one-ups Laertes when it comes to mountains of ancient Greece?
165. According to me, what is so odd about Hamlet's outburst at the funeral?
166. At line 290 how does Hamlet signal he is serious in his challenge to Laertes?
167. In the film how can we tell if Hamlet is serious when he declares his love for Ophelia?

Act V, Scene 2

168. Of all the things that happen to Hamlet on his sea voyage, what most impressed him and how do we know?
169. What has convinced Hamlet "there is a divinity that shapes our ends"?
170. List three ways by which Hamlet made the revised commission as convincing as the original.
171. According to me, why can we say Hamlet's moral sensitivity about taking a human life is "selective"?
172. What are the five justifications Hamlet offers for killing Claudius?
173. Why is Osric welcomed at Claudius' court, according to Hamlet?
174. What are the three aspects of Osric's courtly affectation that Hamlet mocks?
175. How does Shakespeare show us at line 209 that the King is really anxious for the fencing match to go ahead?
176. According to me why is the passage at lines 233 –239 one of the key points in the play? How does it represent a major change in Hamlet?
177. Why, according to me, is Laertes' deception in the passage 239 – 270 the most morally reprehensible of the three men involved?
178. How does Laertes in the film pick the fatal sword? How does he get the poison on it?
179. What is the connection between the first hit in the fencing match and line 84 of this scene?
180. How does Claudius show Hamlet that the drink he offers is safe?
181. What is the echo in Laertes' line about being "a woodcock to his own spring"?
182. Why does Gertrude disobey her husband and go ahead and drink the wine?
183. What is the "serious pun," according to me, at the moment of Claudius' death?
184. How many times does Hamlet announce he is dying?
185. What does Hamlet ask Horatio to go at the end of his life and why does he ask him to do it?
186. In the film, what finally happens to Osric?
187. Hamlet's final words in the text concern what? Why?
188. According to me, what makes Fortinbras' final gesture to the dead Hamlet so ironic?
189. Describe what Hamlet's body resembles as it is carried out?
190. What is the final image in the film and why is it significant?