

Hamlet Reading Guide

Answer all questions on a separate sheet of paper in your notebook.

ACT I

Scene 1

1. The first speaker in the play in Barnardo. What is he doing when the play begins?
2. In brief, why is Denmark in a state of military alert as the play opens?
3. What do we learn of Horatio's character from the guards' attitude towards him?
4. What have Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo decided they should do about the ghost?

Scene 2

1. In Claudius' first speech, what impression is he trying to give to his audience?
2. What do Hamlet's first two speeches reveal about his attitude towards his uncle, the new King?
3. Paraphrase briefly Hamlet's speech which begins, "Seems, Madam..." and ends with "suits of woe." What metaphor dominates the speech and touches on the theme of appearance and reality?
4. In Hamlet's first soliloquy, which begins "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt," what specific details reveal his attitude towards his mother?
5. How does Hamlet react to the story of the ghost? What is he going to do?

Scene 3

1. What advice does Laertes offer to Ophelia about Hamlet at the beginning of Scene 3?
2. From the advice that Polonius gives Laertes, analyze Polonius' values and characters.
3. What command does Polonius give to Ophelia? What does her reaction reveal about their relationship?

Scene 4

1. What opinion do other nations have about the people of Denmark? Why?
2. When Hamlet sees the Ghost, how does he react?

Scene 5

1. Summarize the Ghost's description of the murder.
2. What 3 things does the ghost ask of Hamlet?
3. To what does Hamlet (and the Ghost) make the others swear?
4. What does Hamlet tell the others he may do/how he may act if necessary?
5. How do Hamlet's last sentences serve to diminish the sense of resolve with which he seems to approach the obligations he has assumed in the rest of the act?

ACT II

Scene 1

1. Act II opens after the passage of some time (critics suggest two months). What do we learn about Polonius from his discussion with Reynaldo which opens the act?
2. What was unusual about Hamlet's appearance when he visited Ophelia in her closet?
3. What is Polonius' diagnosis of the illness that caused Hamlet to behave so strangely when he came to see Ophelia?

Scene 2

1. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, the King says to them, "What it should be, more than his father's death that hath put him so much from th' understanding of himself, I cannot dream of." Is this true? Why?
2. What news do Cornelius and Voltmand bring back from Norway?
3. When Polonius says, "Brevity is the soul of wit," what does the Queen's reaction tell us about his adherence to his philosophy?

4. Discuss the tone of Hamlet's letter to Ophelia
5. What is Hamlet's purpose in talking to Polonius about the Sun's breeding maggots in a dead dog? What does Polonius' reaction (in asides) reveal?
6. How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern analyze Hamlet's madness?
7. Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about their coming to see him, "I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent your discovery." What does this last phrase mean?
8. What does Hamlet tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is the cause of his problem?
9. Hamlet tells Polonius that he ought not to treat the players according to their desserts but much better; that is, according to what?
10. What does "catch" mean in the last line of the act? What is Hamlet planning on doing?

ACT III

Scene 1

1. What reasons do Claudius and Polonius give for becoming "lawful espials" to the meeting of Hamlet and Ophelia?
2. Hamlet's most famous soliloquy (and perhaps Shakespeare's most famous lines) begins, "To be or not to be..." Paraphrase the speech. In summary, why does Hamlet decide that to kill himself would be too risky? In what ways does the speech reflect Hamlet's central problem in the play?
3. Why does Hamlet urge Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery"? What are the two possible meanings?
4. What lines suggest to you that Hamlet is aware that his conversation with Ophelia is being heard by eavesdroppers? If he senses their presence, what purpose might he have in what he says to Ophelia?
5. How does Ophelia react to this interview with Hamlet?
6. What conclusions does the King draw from what he overheard?

Scene 2

1. What is the purpose of drama, according to Hamlet?
2. What does Hamlet most admire about Horatio's character?
3. How long has Hamlet's father been dead when Hamlet and Ophelia discuss the matter before the play begins?
4. What does Gertrude mean when she says "the lady doth protest too much, methinks"? What does her reaction tell us about her degree of complicity in the events that led up to her marriage to Claudius?
5. Why is the play named as it is?
6. What is the general tone of the comments that Hamlet makes to Ophelia before and during the play?
7. How does the King react to the play?

Scene 3

1. Why does Hamlet not kill the King when he finds him praying? What is ironic about this inaction?

Scene 4

1. Why did Hamlet strike instantly at the figure behind the arras in his mother's room?
2. When Hamlet confronts his mother, how does her reaction underscore her innocence and guilt?
3. What reasons does the ghost give for his second appearance?
4. What does the Queen resolve to do at the end of Act III?

ACT IV

Scene 1

1. In scene 1 of Act IV, what is the King's major concern? In what line does he express it?
2. What is the "foul disease" that the King is referring to?

Scene 2

1. In scene 2, Hamlet compares Rosencrantz to a sponge. How does he justify this metaphor?

Scene 3

1. In considering what to do about Hamlet's murdering Polonius, the King sees himself as restricted. How?
2. Explain Hamlet's comment to the King in response to the question, "Where is Polonius?"

Scene 4

1. When Hamlet is on the way to the ship that is going to bear him to England, he meets a captain in Fortinbras' army. Where is the army going?
2. In Hamlet's soliloquy which begins, "How all occasions do inform against me..." how does Hamlet evaluate his own actions and those of Fortinbras?

Scene 5

1. Describe Ophelia's state of mind in scene five. Apart from having been driven to distraction or madness by the murder of her father, what is the significance to the content of her ramblings?
2. In Act IV, both Laertes and Fortinbras can be seen as foils to Hamlet. How?
3. Explain the meaning for each of the "flowers" that Ophelia is handing out.

Scene 6

1. How is it that Hamlet is the only man captured by the pirates when they attack the ship that is carrying him to England?

Scene 7

1. What is the King's plan to murder Hamlet?
2. What is ironic about the King's advice to Laertes?
3. Describe how Ophelia died.

ACT V

Scene 1

1. What function do the first 55 lines of the Act serve?
2. Hamlet's reflections on the skull of a lawyer are characteristic of his mode of thought. How?
3. How is the issue of Hamlet's age confused or clarified?
4. Who is Yorick, whose skull the gravedigger shows to Hamlet?
5. Why is Ophelia's funeral so brief and unceremonious?
6. What might be Shakespeare's purpose in having Hamlet jump into a grave with Ophelia and Laertes?

Scene 2

1. Interpret Hamlet's line, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."
2. What finally happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
3. What is Hamlet's attitude toward Orsic?
4. How does each of the following die: Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, Hamlet? What is appropriate about each death?
5. What does Horatio plan to do when he knows that Hamlet is dying?
6. What is the impact of Fortinbras' appearance on stage at the end of the play?