

Hamlet study questions for English 2 (derived from Lori Newcomb's study questions for her English 117 class at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus):

Act 1

1. What atmosphere is established by scene 1's references to the ghost and the impending war?
2. Why does the play begin with a question, "Who's there"? What do Francisco, Marcellus, Barnardo tell Horatio and the audience about the ghost?
3. What does Horatio tell the audience about the late King (old Hamlet)?
4. How does Hamlet describe his uncle in comparison with his father? How does he describe the relationship of Claudius and Gertrude?
5. Why does the world look "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" to Hamlet? Is his attitude youthful rebellion, or a deeper wisdom?
6. What does Laertes tell his sister, Ophelia, about Hamlet? How does Ophelia respond?
7. What story does the ghost tell and what does the ghost ask Hamlet to do?
8. Is there anything unreliable or troubling in the ghost's story?
9. What kind of mood does the mysterious omnipresence of the ghost help to create throughout the act? How and why is the time "out of joint" and what can Hamlet do "to set it right"?

Act 2

1. Why does Polonius send Reynaldo after Laertes? Why do parents spy in this play?
2. How does Polonius explain Hamlet's madness? Are Claudius and Gertrude persuaded?
3. Why does Claudius send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Hamlet? What does Hamlet tell them about his apparent madness? Can we believe him?
4. Why is Hamlet so moved by Hecuba's story given by a traveling player? How does Hamlet describe himself as a revenger in the soliloquy at the end of scene 2?
5. Why and how does Hamlet plan to "catch the conscience of the King"?

Act 3

1. Why and how is Ophelia made bait by her father and Claudius as they spy on Hamlet, and delve into Hamlet's madness?
2. What does Hamlet's soliloquy in scene 1 ("To be, or not to be") reveal about his attitude toward revenge? What specific misgivings does he voice about seeking revenge for his father's death?
3. Hamlet's scene with Ophelia is often called the "nunnery" scene. What are two different meanings of "get thee to a nunnery"? What does each meaning tell us about Hamlet's attitude toward Ophelia, Gertrude, and/or women in general?
4. Can we tell who hears Hamlet's scene 1 soliloquy? Can we tell whether Hamlet is aware he's being spied on?
5. What qualities does Hamlet reveal in scene 2 while talking to the players?

6. What is the role of the play within the play (“The Murder of Gonzago”) in the course of Hamlet? What, if anything, does Claudius admit by his reaction?
7. Why does Hamlet decide not to kill Claudius at his prayer?
8. What does Hamlet tell his mother about his feigned madness? What does Hamlet reveal in his treatment of Gertrude in the closet scene? What, if anything, does she admit?
9. Why doesn’t Gertrude see the ghost in this scene? Does she believe Hamlet? What does she promise to him, and why?
10. How does Hamlet react when he murders Polonius? How does this further complicate Hamlet’s revenge?

Act 4

1. Why does Claudius dispatch Hamlet to England, instead of “putting the strong law on him” for the murder of Polonius? What does that decision tell about the prince’s relationship to the Danish people as well as about Claudius as a scheming villain?
2. Why is Young Fortinbras presented as a foil (contrasting twin) for Hamlet in scene 4?
3. Why and how might Ophelia’s transformation – her madness and subsequent death – be relevant to Hamlet’s role?
4. Why does Ophelia’s madness lead her to sing bawdy songs? Do they tell us anything about how she has experienced the events in Elsinore?
5. How does Laertes, as another revenger, become another foil for Hamlet? How is he similar to, and/or different from, Hamlet?

Act 5

1. Why does this act start with a grave scene? What attitude toward death does Hamlet reveal as he speaks of Yorick’s skull and of Alexander as a plug of earth “to stop a beer barrel”?
2. How does Hamlet react when he learns of Ophelia’s death? What does he claim for the first time?
3. Hamlet mentions a “special providence in the fall of a sparrow.” “Providence” is God’s guidance over earthly events. How would a belief in providence affect Hamlet’s seeking of revenge?
4. Talking to Horatio, Hamlet refers to “th’election.” What difference does it make that the crown of Denmark passes by election, not heredity?
5. What do Laertes and Claudius do to manipulate the outcome of the duel?
6. Why does Gertrude drink from the cup?
7. What is Hamlet’s last word? Why does it matter who tells his story after he dies?
8. Why should Hamlet give his “dying voice” to Young Fortinbras, who is an invading foreign enemy? How are the stories of Hamlet, Fortinbras, and Laertes similar? Has the Danish monarchy been saved, and if so, from what?