

ESSAY QUESTIONS ON *HAMLET*



Note:

Some of the questions are examination-type questions; others are questions for learners to answer as a means to understanding the play.

Teaching tip:

It is all too easy to deal with so many essay topics during teaching that one ends up without clear topics to set as examination questions. Solution? Choose three or four of the most suitable questions from this list, print them separately and hide them away in your exam file. You will soon forget which you have selected and so will not 'teach to the question' but, come exam time, you will have fresh questions in hand, saving you time and trouble as you set your exam paper.

1

There are two sides to Claudius - the cowardly, treacherous villain; and the tormented sinner who longs for redemption, is benevolent and loves his queen.

Discuss these two aspects of Claudius's character, showing which, in your opinion, is more dominant.

2

The predicaments that Hamlet faces are those that have always confronted mankind: the desire to take revenge; rejected love; parent /child conflicts.

Do you agree?

3

Claudius is a weak king, ruled by passion and ambition. Gertrude is a foolish woman, insensitive to the effect of her actions. They are both to blame for the corrupt kingdom in which Hamlet finds himself.

Do you agree with this assessment?

4

Had there been no women whom he loved, Hamlet would have coped perfectly well with the situation in Denmark.

Do you agree?

5

Polonius is not a major character in the sense that Hamlet and Claudius are: yet he is apparently a leading figure in the court, he is directly or indirectly involved in much of the main action, and his accidental murder at Hamlet's hands is certainly a 'major' event of considerable significance and dramatic import.

What is your view of Polonius' role in the play? Refer in particular to the dramatic importance of his death.

6

*"O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story."*

Imagine that you are Horatio and that you have been invited to write an account of your dealings with Hamlet, giving your interpretation of "his story". Decide what sort of name (reputation) you wish to have left behind for Hamlet - and then tell his story accordingly.

7

Hamlet asks of his father's ghost in Act 3 Scene 4, lines 106 - 108:

*"Do you not come your **tardy** son to chide,
That, lapsed in **time** and **passion**, lets go by
The important acting of your dread command?"*

To what extent do you agree with Hamlet's assessment of himself at this stage of the play? Pay particular attention to the highlighted words.

8

Some readers believe Hamlet procrastinates after the Ghost's direct statements, "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder," and "The serpent that did sting thy father's life/Now wears his crown." Others say he immediately puts his plans in action.

What is your view? Argue in support of your opinion, showing your understanding of Hamlet's procrastination or action throughout the play.

9

Hamlet's behaviour throughout the play has consequences (for Denmark and for the people with whom he mixes) which he would not have expected or planned.

Discuss.

10

*"Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief. Your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it; for to define true madness,
What is it but to bed nothing else but mad?" (Polonius)*

There have been many discussions about whether or not Hamlet was mad. Polonius was convinced he knew the answer. Hamlet declared that he was only mad occasionally and Fortinbras and Horatio do not raise the issue. Even Laertes, who was mad with anger as a result of his father's murder and Ophelia's insanity, does not dismiss Hamlet as a madman. With whom do you side? Why?

11

Hamlet is no "sweet prince". In pursuit of his revenge he becomes increasingly ruthless, callous and cruel.

In the light of the above statement examine Hamlet's relationships with the other characters in the play and decide whether or not you agree with the comment.

12

Daughter, sister, lover - in all these relationships Ophelia simply accepts the fact that she is being dominated.

Do you agree?

13

A man of spontaneous action rather than one who is given to contriving and plotting.

How acceptable do you find this comment on Hamlet's character? Discuss with reference to the incidents in the play.

14

What different aspects of Hamlet's character are brought out by his dealings with TWO of the following:

- (i) Horatio
- (ii) Ophelia
- (iii) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

15

Hamlet is placed by Fate in a position where his noble qualities are made ineffective by his fatal indecision.

Discuss the character of Hamlet in the light of this comment, illustrating your answer from the play itself.

16

In Hamlet Shakespeare explores the relationships between various children and their parents. He looks at the influence a parent has on a child and the value of parental guidance.

Discuss this aspect of the play taking into account Polonius and his children and Hamlet and his parents. (Your answer should concentrate more on Hamlet than on Polonius.)

17

Write an essay in which you discuss what the play has to say about **political power** and the **use** and **abuse** of such power.

18

In the course of the play, Hamlet grows up.

Do you agree completely, partly, or not at all? Explain your opinion.

19

'Although Hamlet sometimes disappoints loved ones, tells lies, and even murders, we are still able to sympathise with him.'

Discuss this statement in an essay of about 1½ pages, showing clearly whether you believe this to be true.

20

There are many contrasts in the play, Hamlet. For example: there is honesty but also dishonesty, faithfulness and infidelity, love and hatred, honour and dishonour, revenge and forgiveness. This suggests that nothing was simple, nothing was easy.

And for the three hours of the play we, the audience, find ourselves constantly swept from one opinion to the opposite. Sometimes we agree with what is happening on stage, at other times we find it disgusting.

This is why it is difficult to decide exactly what kind of person Hamlet is.

Discuss.

21

A 'foil' is anything that by contrast of some kind makes more apparent the quality or qualities of something else.

Three of Hamlet's foils are young men who, like Hamlet, have, or imagine they have, good cause for revenge. They are Laertes, Fortinbras and Pyrrhus (the young Greer warrior in the play-extract spoken by Hamlet and the First Player).

If you compare and contrast Hamlet with each of these characters, how does it affect your understanding of him? Deal with these three foils one by one.

22

There are only two female characters in Hamlet: Gertrude and Ophelia. What are these two? Innocent dupes? Manipulated victims of a patriarchal (male-dominated) society? Cunning self-seekers who at least partly deserve their fates? All of the above? None of the above? Is it even valid to discuss them in the same breath?

What do you think?

23

"Confused, bewildered and frightened"

"Conniving, cunning and in full control"

Consider and discuss the character of Hamlet in the light of these two extremes.

24

"There are many subjects in Hamlet. There is politics, force opposed to morality. There is the tragedy of love as well as family drama. There is everything you want, including deep psychological analysis, a bloody story, a duel, and general slaughter."

Jan Kott: Shakespeare Our Contemporary

Select one of the issues raised by Kott in the above statement and, referring to the play, show how this play has taken on universal appeal and value.

25

*"Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal: and for his passage,
The soldier's music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him."*

Fortinbras believes that if Hamlet had been faced with the responsibility of kingship, he would have been a fine king, and orders that Hamlet be accorded the funeral honours of a royal warrior.

Do you agree with this viewpoint? Discuss the idea, referring to this and other passages in the play.

26

"Hamlet, the man, represents a type of individual greatness that is not bound by time or space. He and his philosophising are as real and as topical today as they must have been in Shakespeare's time."

Discuss this statement with reference to the text.

27

*"There is a divinity which shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will."*

Hamlet utters these words in Act V scene 2 on his return to Denmark. A subtle change seems to have come over him; in what way is the above quotation indicative of this change? From your knowledge of the play as a whole, would you say that this philosophy is vindicated?

28

Why does Hamlet procrastinate in carrying out the ghost's instructions? Is Hamlet a coward or a hero? When Hamlet finally does kill Claudius, is it not perhaps the best time to have done so?

29

Consider aspects of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* that make this play a tragedy. (Besides the structure of the play, think of Hamlet's isolation - he also rises far above the other characters in the play - his betrayal, his wasted potential, his being a "victim of circumstances", et al.)

30

In many ways Hamlet is an anachronism in the play ... He represents a "new" type of independent thinking; a rational, intellectual approach to moral problems more in keeping with a much later age of intellectual enlightenment; he needs to justify his actions to himself - he has a moral conscience; and it is this sense of personal integrity that accounts for his hatred of deception.

Discuss.

31

To what extent, do you think, is Shakespeare presenting Hamlet as a type of ideal man? (Your answer must include an assessment of Hamlet's procrastination. Does this vindicate the theory of Hamlet as an ideal or is it a flaw in his character?)

