

*T H E*  
Tragical Historie of  
**H A M L E T,**  
*Prince of Denmarke.*

By William Shakespeare.

Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much  
again as it was, according to the true and perfect  
Coppie.



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# Hamlet Study Guide

## ACT I

### IDENTIFYING FACTS

1. Describe the political situation in Denmark, as it is revealed in the conversation between Horatio and the card in Scene i.
2. Why is the ghost of Old Hamlet denied his eternal rest?
3. What delicate issues are at the very top of Claudius's agenda for the meeting of his work?
4. Would the king rather have Hamlet stay at Elsinore were returned to Wittenberg? Why?
5. Where is Laertes going? What advice does Polonius give him?
6. How does Polonius tell Ophelia to behave toward Hamlet?
7. How did Old Hamlet die? What is the official account of his death?
8. What task does the father, from beyond the grave, set for his son Hamlet? What strategy does Hamlet decide to adopt that once, in order to reveal the truth and to set things right?

### INTERPRETING MEANINGS

9. What does Hamlet mean by his very first line, the aside, "A little more than in and less than kind"? What does Scene ii in Act I reveal about Hamlet's character - his attitudes and abilities? What does Hamlet's response in Scene ii to his mother, "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" reveal about his attitudes toward Claudius and Gertrude?
10. From one angle the play is about the relationship of fathers and sons. Compare the relationship of Hamlet, Fortinbras, and Laertes to their fathers.
11. How do you suppose Ophelia feels after listening to her brother and her father talk about her love life? Could a young woman today face Ophelia's particular problems?
12. What is "rotten" in the state of Denmark? How does this spiritual pollution affect simple truth, honesty, and plain dealing among the people?
13. What does Hamlet mean by putting on an "antic disposition"? What does he hope to accomplish? How does Hamlet's disguise relate to the subjects of appearance vs. reality and theater vs. life?
14. Compare Hamlet's soliloquies in Scenes ii and v. What do they reveal about the changes in his nature? Why does he talk to himself in the first place?
15. What do you think of Hamlet's approach to his problems? Are there other actions he could take at this point to get what he wants? If Hamlet lived today, how might he resolve his problems?

## ACT II

### IDENTIFYING FACTS

1. Who is Reynaldo, and what is his job?
2. Examine the line: "Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth" (Scene i) Who is fishing? For what? What kind of bait is being used?
3. How is Ophelia's report to her father concerning Hamlet's behavior evidence of his "antic disposition"?
4. Who are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? How is Claudius's speech to them like Polonius's speech to Reynaldo?
5. How is the attitude of the uncle to Fortinbras like that of Claudius to Hamlet?
6. How has Ophelia betrayed Hamlet's trust in the matter of his letters?
7. What trap does Polonius set to get Hamlet to reveal what may be on the young man's mind? How does Hamlet "play it"? Is he wise to the trick?
8. What is the source of the transformation of Hamlet according to Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Gertrude?
9. How does Hamlet compare himself to the actor he has auditioned? How does he propose to use the visiting actors in his conflict with Claudius?

### INTERPRETING MEANINGS

10. What does the Queen know, and when does she know it?
11. Cite three evidences of Hamlet's sense of humor in his exchanges with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In each instance, what's the joke?
12. If Hamlet is acting as one distracted and confused in the scene Ophelia reports to Polonius, why is he doing this, if he loves her?
13. By the close of Act II, we have several "fishing" parties (see question 2, above) organized by Claudius, Polonius, and Hamlet himself. Who is being used by each man to fish for information or truth under the surface of things?
14. How do these actions relate to the idea of life as theater? Which characters are **not** involved in the make-believe? Which are wearing masks of one kind or another? What kind of act are they putting on?

## ACT III

### IDENTIFYING FACTS

1. How is Ophelia being used by Claudius and Polonius in dealing with their Hamlet problem?
2. Describe Hamlet's contradictory ideas about death as expressed in the soliloquy beginning "To be or not to be"
3. What decision does the King make after observing Hamlet with Ophelia?
4. Summarize the main points of advice Hamlet gets, as a kind of director, to the visiting actors.
5. What qualities does Hamlet admire in Horatio? Compare Horatio to Hamlet's other friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
6. According to Ophelia (Act III, Scene ii), how long has it been since the death of Old Hamlet?
7. Explain the mousetrap. Does it work?
8. After the play, how does Hamlet's attitude toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Polonius change?
9. Explain why Hamlet doesn't take his revenge during Claudius's soliloquy.
10. What is the purpose of the Ghost's appearance to Hamlet, and not to Gertrude? What does he say to Hamlet? What is Gertrude's reaction to this exchange?
11. What does Hamlet want Gertrude to do?
12. How does Hamlet propose to deal with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their betrayal of him?

### INTERPRETING MEANINGS

13. Act III always marks the **turning point** in a Shakespearean tragedy, that event or moment that determines that hero's fate. What would you say is the turning point in this act? Why is this moment so crucial to the plot?
14. Compare Hamlet's dialogues with the two women in his life, Ophelia and Gertrude, in Act III.
15. Show how Hamlet's frustration and disgust becomes generalized in the **soliloquy** "To be or not to be" (scene i). What makes life itself so miserable, as he now sees it? Do you think he is suicidal, or is he just sounding off? Or is he just meditating on a common problem?
16. Describe Hamlet's state of mind as he moves from talking to himself to talking to Ophelia (scene i). Are there points at which he may be out of control? Explain.
17. In the scene with Gertrude, Hamlet appears to overdo it at times. Where?
18. Has Hamlet changed in **character** or behavior in this act? Explain.

19. What do you think of the way Ophelia is being used?

## **ACT IV**

### IDENTIFYING FACTS

1. Explain why the king, after the death of Polonius, doesn't confront Hamlet directly and "but the strong law on him" (Scene iii).
2. In his apparent madness, how does Hamlet use humor as a kind of weapon when he faces Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Claudius directly?
3. What does Hamlet resolve after his chance encounter with a captain in the Army of Fortinbras?
4. What does Ophelia sing about? What do her songs tell you about her mental and emotional state?
5. How is the political situation changed by the death of Polonius and the removal of Hamlet from the scene?
6. Who becomes Claudius's new ally in the plot against Hamlet? How does he suggest that they are both threatened by Hamlet?
7. Describe the fate of Ophelia, as reported by Gertrude at the end of Act IV.
8. What kind of mail has Horatio received unexpectedly from Hamlet?

### INTERPRETING MEANINGS

9. Compare the man scenes of Hamlet and Ophelia in Act IV. What do the scenes reveal about the nature of each character, and his or her vulnerability?
10. How much does Horatio have to do in Act IV? Why is his part in the action so small?
11. Look at Act IV, Scene iv and describe Hamlet's failings at this point about the relationship of thought to action, and about the idea of honor.
12. Consider Ophelia's thought, "We know what we are but know not what we may be." Discuss how it relates to herself, to Hamlet, and to Gertrude.
13. Examine Hamlet's use of humor in his confrontation with the King (Scene iii). How much of Hamlet's jokes and puns could be considered as treason if he were not, supposedly, insane?
14. What problems exist in the play at the end of Act IV? In what different ways might they be resolved? Can the play end happily?

## ACT V

### IDENTIFYING FACTS

1. What do the Gravediggers/Clowns talk about as they go about their work?
2. Why is Ophelia denied the complete rites of the church?
3. How do Hamlet and Laertes behave in their meeting at Ophelia's funeral?
4. Who is Yorick? How does Hamlet speak of him?
5. How has Hamlet taken care of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What is Horatio's reaction to Hamlet's story?
6. How does Hamlet feel about Laertes now as expressed in his conversation with Horatio?
7. How does the King propose to rid himself of Hamlet at last? Describe what happens to his plan.
8. What does Horatio mean when he declares, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane" (Scene ii)?
9. What is Hamlet's last request, as expressed to Horatio? Whom does Hamlet designate to set the kingdom in order once again?

### INTERPRETING MEANINGS

10. Why do you think Shakespeare wrote the Gravediggers scene the way he did? What effect does the scene in the conversation have on the **tone** of the play at this point?
11. Look at Hamlet's remarks to Horatio in Scene ii beginning, "Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well" How do these remarks reflect significant changes in his attitude towards his problems and towards life itself?
12. Compare Hamlet's ideas about life and death at the beginning of Act V, as expressed in his remarks about Yorick, and later, in his remarks to Horatio moments before the duel with Laertes. In what ways is his sense of resignation now religious?
13. How do you explain the Queen's final actions in the duel scene?
14. Why do you suppose there are no soliloquies in Act V? How do we learn Hamlet's deepest thoughts now?
15. What is ironic about Fortinbras becoming the new head of government? Think about the report Horatio will give to Fortinbras. Explain some of the ironies Fortinbras will find in the stories of "accidental judgments" and of "purposes mistook / Fall on th' inventors' heads."