HAMLET: Study Questions & Essay Topics

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Shakespeare includes characters in Hamlet who are obvious foils for Hamlet, including, most obviously, Horatio, Fortinbras, Claudius, and Laertes. Compare and contrast Hamlet with each of these characters. How are they alike? How are they different? How does each respond to the crises with which he is faced?

2. Many critics take a deterministic view of Hamlet’s plot, arguing that the prince’s inability to act and tendency toward melancholy reflection is a “tragic flaw” that leads inevitably to his demise. Is this an accurate way of understanding the play? Why or why not? Given Hamlet’s character and situation, would another outcome of the play have been possible?

3. Throughout the play, Hamlet claims to be feigning madness, but given that his portrayal of a madman is so intense and so convincing, many readers believe that Hamlet actually slips into insanity at certain moments in the play. Do you think this is true, or is Hamlet merely play-acting insanity? What evidence can you cite for either claim?

POSSIBLE ESSAY TOPICS

1. Think about Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia. Does he love her? Does he stop loving her? Did he ever love her? What evidence can you find in the play to support your opinion?

2. Consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s role in the play. Why might Shakespeare have created characters like this? Are they there for comic relief, or do they serve a more serious purpose? Why does the news of their deaths come only after the deaths of the royal family in Act V, as if this news were not anticlimactic? Is it acceptable for Hamlet to treat them as he does? Why or why not?

3. Analyze the use of descriptions and images in Hamlet. How does Shakespeare use descriptive language to enhance the visual possibilities of a stage production? How does he use imagery to create a mood of tension, suspense, fear, and despair?

4. Analyze the use of comedy in Hamlet, paying particular attention to the gravediggers, Osric, and Polonius. Does comedy serve merely to relieve the tension of the tragedy, or do the comic scenes serve a more serious thematic purpose as well?

5. Suicide is an important theme in Hamlet. Discuss how the play treats the idea of suicide morally, religiously, and aesthetically, with particular attention to Hamlet’s two important statements about suicide: the “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt” soliloquy (I.ii.129–158) and the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy (III.i.56–88). Why does Hamlet believe that, although capable of suicide, most human beings choose to live, despite the cruelty, pain, and injustice of the world?
Beyond these five possible topics for a critical analysis research essay on *Hamlet*, here are 25 more possible topics for your research essay:

1. Think about Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia. Does he love her? Does he stop loving her? Did he ever love her? What evidence can you find in the play to support your opinion? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
2. Consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s role in the play. Why might Shakespeare have created characters like this? Are they there for comic relief, or do they serve a more serious purpose? Why does the news of their deaths come only after the deaths of the royal family in Act V, as if this news were not anticlimactic? Is it acceptable for Hamlet to treat them as he does? Why or why not? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
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6. Discuss Hamlet’s treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In what way are they part of a pattern that includes Polonius, Osric, and Gertrude? How do they help to point the difference between the followers of fortune and the searchers for wisdom? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
7. In what way is Hamlet a typical Renaissance prince? How do his problems and his character serve as a document and introduction to the changes that occurred during the Renaissance? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
8. Ophelia falls into the water accidentally and passively drowns. Discuss her death as a symbol of her life, her honor, and her relationship with Hamlet. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
9. Discuss Hamlet’s supernatural uncertainties and their ultimate resolution (if any). Does the play contradict or support any of the theories about the ghost? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
10. Discuss Claudius as the “poisoner” of Denmark; does he use the same poison in the goblet at the end of the play as he used on Hamlet’s father before the play began? Does it matter? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
11. Discuss Hamlet as the savior of Denmark. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.
12. It is possible to say that the other characters in the play are mirrors held up to Hamlet's nature? Discuss the three-part harmony of approval (Laertes, Horatio, Fortinbras) at the end of the play in this context. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

13. Why is Hamlet's tragedy more profound if he does not have a tragic flaw but is, in fact, a superb example of the Renaissance man? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

14. Discuss the strategy which Hamlet pursues in his play-long duel with his "mighty opposite," Claudius. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

15. Compare and contrast the three pairs of fathers and sons in Hamlet. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

16. Discuss the concept of honor as it is presented and attacked in the play. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

17. The Renaissance view of death was essentially different from the modern one; compare and contrast the two visions, using examples from Hamlet. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

18. Once Hamlet has determined that the King is guilty, he must then decide whether or not he has a right to kill him. Discuss the various Renaissance responses to this complex question. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

19. Conflict is essential to drama. Explore how Hamlet presents both an outward and inward conflict.

20. How do Hamlet's seven soliloquies reveal his character?


22. Discuss Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

23. How important is the general setting of Denmark to the overall play. Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

24. Compare and contrast the characters of Hamlet and Horatio. How alike or dislike are they and why? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.

25. Compare and contrast the characters of Hamlet and Fortinbras. Is Fortinbras a valuable character in his own right or does he serve only to highlight aspects of Hamlet's personality? Make a claim, support and substantiate it.