STUDY QUESTIONS FOR HAMLET

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?

   Horatio’s steadfastness and loyalty contrasts with Hamlet’s variability and excitability, though both share a love of learning, reason, and thought. Claudius’s willingness to disregard all moral law and act decisively to fulfill his appetites and lust for power contrasts powerfully with Hamlet’s concern for morality and indecisive inability to act. Fortinbras’s willingness to go to great lengths to avenge his father’s death, even to the point of waging war, contrasts sharply with Hamlet’s inactivity, even though both of them are concerned with avenging their fathers. Laertes’ single-minded, furious desire to avenge Polonius stands in stark opposition to Hamlet’s inactivity with regard to his own father’s death. Finally, Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras are all in a position to seek revenge for the murders of their fathers, and their situations are deeply intertwined. Hamlet’s father killed Fortinbras’s father, and Hamlet killed Laertes’ father, meaning that Hamlet occupies the same role for Laertes as Claudius does for Hamlet.

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?

   The idea of the “tragic flaw” is a problematic one in Hamlet. It is true that Hamlet possesses definable characteristics that, by shaping his behavior, contribute to his tragic fate. But to argue that his tragedy is inevitable because he possesses these characteristics is difficult to prove. Given a scenario and a description of the characters involved, it is highly unlikely that anyone who had not read or seen Hamlet would be able to predict its ending based solely on the character of its hero. In fact, the play’s chaotic train of events suggests that human beings are forced to make choices whose consequences are unforeseeable as well as unavoidable. To argue that the play’s outcome is intended to appear inevitable seems incompatible with the thematic claims made by the play itself.

3. Throughout the play, Hamlet claims to be feigning madness, but his portrayal of a madman is so intense and so convincing that 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?
At any given moment during the play, the most accurate assessment of Hamlet’s state of mind probably lies somewhere between sanity and insanity. Hamlet certainly displays a high degree of mania and instability throughout much of the play, but his “madness” is perhaps too purposeful and pointed for us to conclude that he actually loses his mind. His language is erratic and wild, but beneath his mad-sounding words often lie acute observations that show the sane mind working bitterly beneath the surface. Most likely, Hamlet’s decision to feign madness is a sane one, taken to confuse his enemies and hide his intentions.

On the other hand, Hamlet finds himself in a unique and traumatic situation, one which calls into question the basic truths and ideals of his life. He can no longer believe in religion, which has failed his father and doomed him to life amid miserable experience. He can no longer trust society, which is full of hypocrisy and violence, nor love, which has been poisoned by his mother’s betrayal of his father’s memory. And, finally, he cannot turn to philosophy, which cannot explain ghosts or answer his moral questions and lead him to action.

With this much discord in his mind, and already under the extraordinary pressure of grief from his father’s death, his mother’s marriage, and the responsibility bequeathed to him by the ghost, Hamlet is understandably distraught. He may not be mad, but he likely is close to the edge of sanity during many of the most intense moments in the play, such as during the performance of the play-within-a-play (III.ii), his confrontation with Ophelia (III.i), and his long confrontation with his mother (III.iv).