Hamlet Act 1 Study Guide Questions To Increase Understanding

**Act 1, Scene 1**

1. Who is relieving the other of his watch? Is Bernardo relieving Francisco? Is Francisco relieving Bernardo? So what’s wrong or out of place with Bernardo asking “Who’s there?” in the first line?

2. What time is it? (What time do the sentinels change places?) Notice that Francisco says he is “sick at heart,” contributing to the sense of uneasiness at the start.

3. How many times has the apparition appeared before the play starts?

4. Why has Marcellus asked Horatio to accompany him on the watch?

5. The apparition has not spoken to Marcellus or Bernardo or Francisco. Why does Marcellus think Horatio should speak to the ghost?

6. When Horatio speaks to the ghost, he says, “What art thou that usurp’st this time of night…?” What does “usurp” mean? How is the word used out of its normal context? Later we shall see why its use here is ironic.

7. In what form and dress does the apparition appear? What do we learn about the former King of Denmark from Horatio? Notice the “martial” walk and nature of the apparition.

8. Who did the valiant Hamlet slay? What did Hamlet and Denmark gain from the victory over the ambitious Fortinbras?

9. What does the young Fortinbras want? This is the first subplot mentioned in the play but it will later merge with the main plot, so it is important to keep these events in the back of your mind as the play unfolds.

10. What conclusion do the men come to for why the ghost appears?

11. What can you conclude from the apparition not answering Horatio’s question: “If thou art privy to they country’s fate/Which happily foreknowing may avoid,/O, speak!”? At what time does the ghost fade and disappear?

**Act 1, Scene 2**

12. As King Claudius’ speaks to members of his court, his introductory remarks reveal personal acts whose strangeness is apparent in the antithesis of his speech (“with mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage”) before he gets around to addressing the political issue at hand. Using the royal “we” in his first statement to the court, what does he say he has done? When has he done this? What do you think of the timing of his marriage? Does this affect your assessment of his ability to rule politically?

13. Why does Claudius think that young Fortinbras has chosen to wage war on Denmark now?

14. How does Claudius hope to avert war with young Fortinbras? What diplomatic channels is he trying to use?

15. Why did Laertes come to Denmark — for King Hamlet’s funeral or for King Claudius’ coronation? As the play develops it will become apparent that two camps develop: those who are aligned with the King in some way and those who are aligned with the memory of King Hamlet and with the Prince, the young Hamlet. Beware the reason for being in Denmark, all you characters in the play. It will be better for you to have come for the funeral than the marriage.

16. What request does Laertes make of the King?

17. Take note of the first words of Hamlet. The constant rhetorical technique of doubling in the play is apparent here, especially in the ironic puns. When Claudius addresses him, he calls Hamlet his cousin and his son, to which Hamlet replies in an aside, “A little more than kin [related as nephew] and less than kind[1. affectionate, 2.natural, lawful].” Explain Hamlet’s pun.

18. When Claudius says, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?”; what is the pun and wit in Hamlet’s response, “Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun”?

19. What advice does Queen Gertrude give Hamlet to help him overcome his grief for his father? How do you think she was able to marry so soon after her husband, King Hamlet, died?
20. What does Queen Gertrude mean by “it” when she asks Hamlet, “Why seems it so particular [personal, individual] with thee?”?

21. What does Hamlet’s response reveal he thinks about true, versus feigned, grief?

22. When Claudius speaks to Hamlet he repeats the theme of the commonness of death. Because death is common, how should Hamlet react, according to Claudius? What does he inform Hamlet of and where does he request Hamlet not do?

23. In Hamlet’s first soliloquy (1.2.129-158), Hamlet implies he wants to die. Why doesn’t he slaughter himself? How long was it, approximately, before his mother married Claudius? Does Hamlet think his mother loved King Hamlet while he was alive? What does “frailty” mean when he says, “Frailty, thy name is woman”? What does he reveal about his opinion of himself and of the world in this soliloquy? What details reveal he is very upset by the sexual aspect of his mother’s new marriage? In what ways does this soliloquy reveal Hamlet’s disturbed mind as a consequence of his perception that the memory of his father and his love for his wife are not being given their due respect by his mother? In what way does young Hamlet seem to forget himself and become someone else? If he did seem like someone else in his thoughts here, who would that someone be?

24. What is Hamlet’s first question he asks Horatio (after he identifies him)? What is Hamlet trying to find out?

25. What is Hamlet’s point when he says, “The funeral baked meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables”?

26. Horatio’s description of the ghost of Hamlet’s father reveals that on his face he wore a “countenance more in sorrow than in anger.” Does this seem like the ghost is responding to the warlike state? What might the cause of that sorrow be?

Act 1, Scene 3

27. Where is Laertes going?

28. What has Ophelia been confiding to her brother?

29. What does Laertes think of Hamlet’s affection for Ophelia? Even if he does love her, why wouldn’t Hamlet marry her? If Hamlet wouldn’t marry her, then why must Ophelia not lose her heart to him?

30. Ophelia agrees to abide by her brother’s advice but she chides him good-naturedly to not do what, for his own part?

31. Polonius, Ophelia and Laertes’ father, and Lord Chamberlain to the King, gives advice to his son before he departs. Shakespeare seemed to be having fun with proverbial saying here, yet some of Polonius’ advice has become common advice followed today. Perhaps most famously he says, “This above all, to thine own self be true.” What does Polonius mean?

32. Polonius’ advice to Ophelia about Hamlet’s love is much harsher than Laertes’. How do we know Polonius thinks Hamlet is counterfeiting love for Ophelia? In what way could Ophelia make (“tender”) Polonius a fool?

33. What reasons does he give for not believing Hamlet possess true feelings for Ophelia?

34. What command does he give her to follow?

Act 1, Scene 4

1. At the beginning of this act, Hamlet and Horatio are commenting on what the King is doing. What does Hamlet mean when he says, “The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse…”? Notice that he “wakes.” What does this tell you about how he conducts his affairs of state?

2. To what is Horatio referring when he asks if it is a custom and what does Hamlet mean when he says, “It is a custom more honored in the breach [breaking the tradition] than the observance”? What is Hamlet’s criticism, then, of King Claudius? How do other nations look at Denmark? Is Claudius partially responsible for the poor reputation of Denmark?

3. Some men are born with a “vicious mole of nature in them,” according to Hamlet. What can happen as a result of this one particular defect on the whole person? Explain what Hamlet means when he says, “The dram of evil/Doth all the noble substance often doubt[obliterate]/To his own scandal.”
4. When the ghost appears before Hamlet, how is it dressed?

5. What two reasons does Hamlet give for not being afraid to follow the ghost?

6. Horatio fears that the ghost might cause Hamlet to kill himself. What else does he fear the ghost might do to Hamlet? Later in the play, you will notice that Horatio may have been justified in his fears.

7. Who says one of the most well-known lines in the play—“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”? Paraphrase this line.

8. Why, according to the ghost, has he been doomed to walk the earth for a certain amount of time?

9. What does the ghost want from Hamlet? Why does he call his murder a “most unnatural murder”?

10. How does the ghost account for the behavior (her hasty marriage and easy seduction) of his “seeming virtuous queen”?

11. Is the queen referred to as “a radiant angel”? What has the queen’s lust led to? Who is “garbage”?

12. After reading how King Hamlet was murdered, is it a pun when he says “the whole ear of Denmark” was abused? How was King Hamlet murdered by his brother?

13. The ghost says that he was cut off in the blossoms of his sins? Why does this horrify him? What is on his head; what must he be held accountable for in death?

14. Name three crimes Claudius committed with the murder of King Hamlet. How many times does the ghost exclaim, “O, horrible!”? Notice how repetition of acts and language appear throughout the play. Shakespeare’s rhetoric continues to emphasize the “unnaturalness” of the corruption in Denmark on a public and personal level.

15. The ghost says the royal bed of Denmark has become a couch for luxury and damned incest. Explain what he means by “luxury.” What evidence of this is there to support this so far in Claudius’ actions?

16. The ghost commands Hamlet to not take out his revenge on the queen. Instead he says to let “those thorns that in her bosom lodge…prick and sting her.” What does he mean?

17. Why do you think the ghost felt it necessary to tell Hamlet to remember him?

18. What does Hamlet feel may occur in Denmark? Who is the villain that may smile and be a villain?

19. Translate: “There is never a villain dwelling in all Denmark/But he’s an arrant knave.” Is Hamlet speaking gibberish or does this make sense?

20. After the ghost has left, does Hamlet decide to carry out revenge right away or go pray?

21. What does Hamlet make the others swear to?

22. Give an example of what Hamlet meant when he says, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

23. What does Hamlet mean when he says he is going to put on an antic disposition on? How is he going to act from now on from time to time?

24. Act 1 ends with these words said by Hamlet:
   
   The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
   That ever I was born to set it right
   Considering the entire first act, list several things that are out of order or “out of joint” or out of harmony—either on a personal and individual level or on a state level.