

# Hamlet

## Act I, Scene I

1. How does Shakespeare begin the play with an immediate sense of suspense?

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2. What probably important exposition is revealed in this scene?

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3. Why has Horatio been asked to join the soldiers in the night watch? What has he decided to do?

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4. How does the reader/audience know this ghost is not a hallucination?

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**Act I, Scene II**

1. What important exposition is revealed at the beginning of this scene?

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2. What evidence of wrongdoing or corruption is evident in Claudius' opening speech?

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3. Compare Claudius' treatment of Laertes with his treatment of Hamlet.

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4. Why did Hamlet not become King when his father died?

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5. How is Hamlet physically and emotionally conspicuous in the public portion of this scene?

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6. What is the significance of Claudius' denying Hamlet permission to return to Wittenberg?

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7. What aspect of Hamlet's concept of death / desire for death is revealed in Hamlet's first soliloquy?

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8. What aspect of Hamlet's problem seems to bother him the most?

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9. What important metaphor is introduced in Hamlet's soliloquy that will be developed later in the play?

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10. Contrast Claudius' and Laertes' reasons for being in Denmark.

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**Act I, Scene III**

1. Explain the reasons that Laertes and Polonius give Ophelia to convince her not to trust Hamlet's love.

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2. What is comical about Polonius?

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**Act I, Scene IV**

1. Other than the fact of the ghost itself, why is this Ghost thought to be an evil omen?

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2. Marcellus states, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What does he mean?

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**Act I, Scene V**

1. In what region of the universe does the Ghost reside?

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2. What possible theme is introduced by the Ghost's afterlife?

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3. What does the Ghost warn Hamlet about his mother? Why?

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4. What does Hamlet mean when he says, "The time is out of joint"?

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**Act II, Scene I**

1. What is ironic about Polonius' attempt to learn about Laertes' life in Paris?

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2. Why would Polonius immediately jump to the conclusion that Hamlet is mad for Ophelia's love?

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3. Consider how the episode of Hamlet in Ophelia's closet promises to contribute to the overall calamity of the tragic plot?

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**Act II, Scene II**

1. Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *willing* spies for Claudius and Gertrude?

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2. What effect is created by the scenes between Hamlet and Polonius being in prose?

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3. What are some of the slang expressions and puns Hamlet uses in his first exchange with Polonius? Why are they significant?

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4. What is Hamlet's initial reaction to the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

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5. Why are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hesitant to admit that they are in Elsinore because the king and queen sent for them?

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6. How does Hamlet’s famous “What a piece of work is a man!” passage depart from typical Renaissance humanism?

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7. Why does Shakespeare introduce a troupe of traveling players into the action of the play?

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8. What does Hamlet’s expression of concern about the child actors used in the city contribute to the plot or to the development of his character?

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9. What is unusual about the player’s monologue about the Fall of Troy?

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**Act III, Scene I**

1. What does Claudius admit to himself (and to the audience) about his crime?  
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2. List the personal grievances Hamlet expresses in his “To be or not to be” soliloquy and explain what specific events in Hamlet’s life they refer to.  
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3. What metaphor does Hamlet use in his “To be or not to be” speech to express his developing understanding of death? How does he further develop this metaphor?  
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4. What information does Ophelia provide about Hamlet’s character before the beginning of the play?  
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5. Explain the ambiguity of the nunnery scene.  
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6. What is the main thrust of Hamlet’s diatribe against Ophelia?  
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**Act III, Scene II**

1. Why does Shakespeare begin this scene with Hamlet offering acting lessons to the players? How does this advance the plot, develop character, or help to establish theme?

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2. Why does Hamlet trust and admire Horatio?

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3. What does Hamlet admit to Horatio and the audience just before the company arrives to view the play?

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4. How does Hamlet's speech pattern change when the others enter the room to view the play? Why?

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5. Why does Hamlet speak to Ophelia in such vulgar terms?

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6. What does Gertrude's reaction to the play indicate?

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7. Explain the metaphor of the recorder.

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8. Explain the allusion to Nero in Hamlet's closing speech.

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**Act III, Scene III**

1. How has the play-within-the-play changed Hamlet's situation and influenced the action of the play?

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2. How does Polonius' spying on the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude indicate a change in Gertrude's status?

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3. In what paradox of salvation does Claudius feel trapped?

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4. Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius when he has the opportunity?

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**Act III, Scene IV**

1. Explain the ambiguity and wordplay Hamlet and his mother exchange at the beginning of this scene.

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2. What is Hamlet's reaction to the killing of Polonius?

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3. What does this scene reveal about Gertrude's guilt?

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4. What aspect of Gertrude and Claudius' marriage still clearly bothers Hamlet the most?

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5. What is the significance of this second appearance of the ghost?

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**Act IV, Scene I**

1. How is this scene ambiguous regarding Gertrude's "conversion" from the previous scene?

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**Act IV, Scene II**

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

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**Act IV, Scene III**

1. Why can't Claudius simply deal with Hamlet swiftly and harshly as allowed by law?

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2. How does this scene advance Hamlet's developing awareness of death?

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3. Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know the true purpose of their journey to England?

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**Act IV, Scene IV**

1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

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**Act IV, Scene V**

1. What important information does Claudius reveal?

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2. What do they assume is the cause of Ophelia's apparent madness?

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3. Why do you suppose Ophelia's madness takes on the form it does?

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4. Describe Laertes' response to his father's death. How is he a foil for Hamlet?

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5. How do the flowers Ophelia distributes relate to the characters and their actions?

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**Act IV, Scenes VI – VII**

1. What news is revealed in Hamlet's letter to Horatio? What does this show about Hamlet?

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2. What will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

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3. How does this episode illustrate the role of coincidence in Shakespearean tragedy?

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4. Why does Claudius tell Laertes he will not kill Hamlet himself?

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5. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia committed suicide?

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6. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia's death was an accident?

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**Act V, Scene I**

1. What is the significance of the various skulls the gravedigger digs up during this scene? How do they contribute to the evolution of Hamlet's understanding of death?

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2. How does the entrance of Ophelia's funeral procession continue this evolution?

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3. What does Laertes and Hamlet's fight in Ophelia's grave foreshadow?

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4. Why is this scene in prose?

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5. How do Hamlet and the gravedigger view the sociological implications of death differently?

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**Act V, Scene II**

1. What does Horatio learn about the real purpose for the trip to England?

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2. What is ironic about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's approaching deaths?

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3. How does Shakespeare establish that Hamlet is indeed a noble gentleman?

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4. How does the impending duel with Laertes complete Hamlet's concept of death that has been developing through the play?

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5. Why does Hamlet apologize to Laertes?

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6. Explain how each character dies in the end.

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7. Why does the play end with such bloodshed and death?

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8. What is significant about the fact that Fortinbras delivers the last lines of the play?

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