

## *Hamlet* Reading Guide

### OVERVIEW:

The following packet is designed to help you understand Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. While reading the play, you will complete the Reading Packet below which consists of 4 parts:

1. Reader Response Journal
2. Character Identification
3. Theme Search
4. Act-by-Act Questions

While we will do much of the reading together in class, you are responsible for completing the Reading Guide as we move through the text. Complete each section in its entirety using complete sentences and, where applicable, correctly cited quotes. This packet will be collected at the end of our study of *Hamlet*. The directions for each section are below. Please see me if you have any questions.



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### Part I: Reader Response Journal (RRJ)

A Reader Response Journal helps students to pause and reflect, ask questions, and connect ideas based upon their reading. It is a tool to help you become a more engaged reader. It also acts as a focus for personal ideas you may want to remember for class discussions, reading quizzes, and/or final projects. Completing a Reader Response Journal epitomizes the most important aspect of reading: to learn about your own lives. Many people think of literature as something lofty, something removed, something they have to do for school. Instead literature should be engaging and thought-provoking. Literature should teach us something vital about ourselves. It should help us live better lives by giving us a richer understanding of the human condition.

Over the course of our study of *Hamlet*, you will complete a Reader Response Journal after each day's reading. Your journal should be typed in a Google doc and follow the guidelines below:

- Do not summarize the plot; rather, read and record your thoughts, reactions, and questions about situations, characters, actions, settings, symbols, plot, theme, etc. I have already read the book(s) and do not need a summary. What I do need is to see how you think about what you have read.
- Compose your ideas freely and honestly. You will be graded on the quality of your work, not on your opinions or your writing mechanics.

The purpose of a journal is not to test your knowledge of the reading but to help you reflect personally and thoughtfully as you read. As such, there are no right "answers" or uniform expectations. Writing your ideas will help you to clarify your thoughts and will allow me to observe your reading strategies. Each day's class will begin with someone sharing his/her Reader Response Journal.

### Summary of Expectations:

There are several possibilities for your *Hamlet* Reader Response Journals. I am not interested in superficial, obvious stuff; please work to make meaning, find epiphanies, and note connections between themes, symbols, motifs, not to mention Hamlet's search to understand who he really is and what he must really do. This is a very thought-provoking play, and I plan to measure your ability to deal with it. A reminder: I AM NOT INTERESTED IN A SUMMARY OF THE SCENE, but rather your insights about it.

Label all Reader Response Journals with DATE, ACT, & SCENE. Some RRJ possibilities include:

- 1) Questions: Ask questions about the text: what perplexes you? Do you wonder why the author said a particular thing, in a particular way? You might begin with "I wonder why. . ." or "I'm having trouble understanding. . ." Then, in writing, propose various possible answers.
- 2) What strikes you: Jot down ideas, images, details, connections with other parts of the text that strike you. Why are they there? What do they add? Why are they memorable? Do they have anything in common? Can you make an assertion/argument about them?
- 3) Passages: Copy passages, long or short, which strike you for any reason whatsoever. Then explain what is striking and why. How do the words and images work?
- 4) Artistic: Draw pictures in response to what you read, or make collages, adding words and quotations from the text. Then explain what you drew and why.
- 5) Purpose: Discuss the purpose of a scene.
- 6) Other? There are jillions of things to talk about in this play. Just make sure you do not summarize the text.

**Part II: Character Identification**

Identify the following characters:

<b>HAMLET</b>	<b>LAERTES</b>
<b>CLAUDIUS</b>	<b>OPHELIA</b>
<b>GERTRUDE</b>	<b>HORATIO</b>
<b>GHOST</b>	<b>ROSENCRANTZ &amp; GUILDENSTERN</b>
<b>POLONIUS</b>	<b>FORTINBRAS</b>

**Part III: Theme Search**

Provide examples – properly cited QUOTES – for each theme present in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

**ACTION versus INACTION**

**MADNESS**

**DISEASE and DECAY**

**APPEARANCE versus REALITY**

**HONOR and REVENGE**

## Part IV: Act-by-Act Reading Questions

### ACT I –

- 1) What is the significance of the play's opening, "Who's there?"? How does this set up some of the tone for the play?
- 2) The only place we learn the name of Claudius is in the preliminary stage directions. Thereafter he is exclusively referred to as "the King," not only in stage directions, but by all characters. How is this significant?
- 3) How do Claudius and Gertrude react to Hamlet's grief? Consider the following: (a) Notice that this conversation is before all of the court; it is a public discussion. (b) What kind of language and imagery does Hamlet use? (c) Who has the better argument regarding grief, Claudius and Gertrude, or Hamlet?
- 4) In scene ii, the King and Queen ask Hamlet to abandon his plan to return to Wittenberg for school. Consider these other names associated with that location:
  - *Doctor Faustus*: a play by Christopher Marlowe, another famous Elizabethan playwright. Based on the German story *Faust* in which a man sells his soul to the devil for power, experience, pleasure, and knowledge. Set in Wittenberg.
  - Martin Luther: seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation who was excommunicated from the Catholic church for his critiques of that establishment, particularly the practice of "purchasing" the forgiveness of sins with money. Taught theology at University of Wittenberg.

Are there parallels here?

- 5) Comment on Laertes' speech to Ophelia and her response (I.iii.5-51). What does it illustrate about their relationship, and about each of these characters?
- 6) What is Polonius' view on Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship? Consider both his role as political advisory to Claudius, as well as his role as father to Ophelia.
- 7) In Act I, scenes iv and v, the Ghost reappears. Analyze how the Ghost tells of his murder. The Ghost ends by saying, "Remember me." Is avenging his murder the same as remembering the father/Ghost? Why or why not?
- 8) Is Hamlet sane or insane in these scenes? Explain.

### ACT II –

- 1) Why does this act open with Polonius and Reynaldo? What does this tell us about Polonius' character? What theme does this scene introduce in the play?
- 2) In lines 223-224, Polonius says of Hamlet's ranting, "Though this be madness, yet there is / method in 't." Discuss the method in Hamlet's madness in Act II. Why is it necessary for him to put on an "antic disposition"?
- 3) What function do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to play as characters?
- 4) Hamlet takes delight in learning the players have come to Elsinore to perform, requesting that the First Player recite a few speeches from Aeneas' tale to Dido. How do these speeches mirror the action of the play so far? This speech is often cut in performances of the play. Explain why it is important and why it should not be cut.
- 5) What do you know about Hamlet's relationship with other characters? Pick one relationship to examine (Hamlet and Gertrude; Hamlet and Horatio, Hamlet and Ophelia, etc.). Describe this relationship.
- 6) What motifs and themes do you notice emerging? Look at the dialogue from these two acts closely.

### ACT III –

- 1) Gertrude and Claudius interrogate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. What is their "interpretation" of Hamlet now? Do Gertrude and Claudius see Hamlet and his situation in the same way?
- 2) There are many scenes staged or overheard in this play – the Ophelia and Hamlet scene is of particular interest.
  - Note that Polonius and Claudius will overhear it. How does this approach square with how Polonius operates? Also, note Claudius' aside—it is the first proof external to the Ghost that Claudius is, indeed, guilty.
  - Hamlet enters with his third soliloquy, "To be or not to be." Ostensibly, no other character hears this speech. How does this speech compare to his previous soliloquies? Is he focused on revenge or on suicide, or both? How does he describe death here? Follow his developing logic closely.
  - How do Hamlet and Ophelia interact with one another?
  - Do you think Hamlet rejects Ophelia because she's already been forced to reject him, or does he reject her because he wishes to protect her?
  - "Get thee to a nunnery" (III.i.148). What is Hamlet saying here? How does Hamlet perceive women and sexuality?

- Is Hamlet feigning madness, being sane, or might he genuinely be mad in this scene?
  - When Hamlet asks, “Where’s your father?”, does he suspect Polonius is overhearing them? What do you think? Notice that Hamlet’s approach to Ophelia gets much harsher at this point.
  - Consider Polonius’ response to Ophelia. Is he tender or not? What is Claudius’ interpretation of the scene between Hamlet and Ophelia?
- 3) Consider Shakespeare’s employment of the “play within a play” – The Mousetrap. How might this contribute to the themes of the play thus far?
  - 4) In Act III, scene iii, Claudius gets his own soliloquy. Analyze his thoughts here. Sometimes, vice characters (villains) get soliloquies to pull in the audience. Does Claudius pull you in here?
  - 5) Compare Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia in scene i to that of his mother in scene iv. Consider:
    - Hamlet’s use of imagery, his attitude toward the two women he loves most in the world, and the advice/instruction he gives them
    - Both Ophelia and Gertrude voice their certainty of Hamlet’s madness, Ophelia after Hamlet has exited (III.i.163-175), and Gertrude after she observes Hamlet speaking to his father’s ghost (III.iv.121, 133-141, 157-159). How does this factor into the audience’s perception about Hamlet’s sanity and his intentions?
  - 6) Comment on Polonius’ death. Why is this event significant, and what might it represent?

#### ACT IV –

- 1) Having hidden Polonius’ body, Hamlet says some interesting things about death. What kinds of views on life, death, power, and social hierarchy come out of his talk about a worm, a king, and a beggar?
- 2) Hamlet just misses Fortinbras, but learns from the Captain what Norway is fighting for—a measly piece of land. How does this information about Fortinbras spur Hamlet’s thinking? Does Hamlet admire Fortinbras? Why or why not? Does this even matter? Notice that Hamlet is using external events and characters to prompt his own call to action (just as he did with, “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”). Action does not come from inside, it seems. Thoughts on this?
- 3) Compare Ophelia’s madness in scene v to Hamlet’s. What specific events contribute to each character’s madness? What purpose does each character’s madness serve? That is, how does Shakespeare develop each and why? Is there any “method” in Ophelia’s rantings? If so, what? Support your answer with specific references to the text.
- 4) Compare Laertes’ reaction to his father’s death with Hamlet’s reaction to his own father’s death. (Note that at the time, neither knows the identity of the killer.) Comment on Laertes’ return to Denmark and on his general behavior in scene v. Discuss his use of language and how it contrasts with Hamlet’s indecisiveness. In what ways is Laertes a foil to Hamlet? How is Fortinbras a foil to Hamlet? How are Fortinbras and Laertes alike/different?
- 5) Discuss the theme of “putting on” in scenes i and iii. How do Gertrude and Claudius hide what is really on their minds in scene i? What plans for Hamlet is Claudius hiding from Gertrude, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern? How do Claudius and Hamlet disguise their true thoughts from each other in scene iii? Be sure to discuss the references to madness, the poison imagery and the black humor.
- 6) Do a thorough analysis of scene iv. In what ways is this scene an ironic parallel to Act I, scene v? How does Claudius convince Laertes to murder Hamlet? Why is an elaborate plot necessary? Discuss the irony of Claudius’ imagery in his attempt to persuade Laertes to act quickly.
- 7) Comment on the pace of Act IV. How does it feel compared to the first three acts? What choices did Shakespeare make for this act and why?

#### ACT V –

- 1) In what ways does the Gravedigger evoke wisdom in scene i? Why does Shakespeare give this character so much time in the play?
- 2) Compare and contrast Laertes’ and Hamlet’s behavior at Ophelia’s grave. Did Hamlet really love Ophelia? Why does he get so angry at Laertes for leaping into Ophelia’s grave?
- 3) Analyze the first part of scene ii, up to the entrance of Osric. How do Hamlet’s speeches continue the same kind of thinking he exhibited in the graveyard scene? What does he mean by, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (V.ii.11-12)?
- 4) Why does Hamlet disregard Horatio’s warning that Laertes will beat him? What does Hamlet mean by “the readiness is all…Let be” (V.ii.236-238). How do these lines echo similar sentiments which Hamlet has expressed earlier in this act?
- 5) Suicide thwarted. Hamlet says to Horatio, “Absent thee from felicity a while, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story” (V.ii.382-384).
  - What does this request/command tell you about Hamlet’s views on memory and reputation?
  - Is Hamlet bequeathing Horatio an injunction similar to the one the Ghost gave Hamlet (“remember me”)?

- How does revenge relate to telling a story as a kind of memorializing the dead?
- 6) Why is it fitting that Laertes, Hamlet, Horatio, and Fortinbras are brought together at the end of the play? Why does Fortinbras get the last word as opposed to Horatio?
  - 7) Did Hamlet have a tragic flaw or flaws? What is/are his flaws?