Hamlet

Directions: You are to complete the following questions with each Act, Scene. The questions will be due upon the completion of the scene. For example, if we start Act I, Scene I in class on Monday you will be responsible for completing Act I, Scene I for homework as well as the corresponding questions. The completed responses would be due in class the next day.

All answers are to be written (on binder paper) or typed and in MLA format.

All answers MUST include textual evidence / citations.

All answers must be in complete sentences.

All questions are worth two points, one point for the response (in a complete sentence(s)) and one point for textual evidence or citation.

Citations will vary – therefore they are not included in the answers.

Act I, Scene I

1. How does Shakespeare begin the play with an immediate sense of suspense?
The appearance of the ghost creates an immediate sense of suspense.

2. What probably important exposition is revealed in this scene?
The ghost of the late King Hamlet has appeared at least once to the guards. Norway is threatening to invade Denmark, and this might explain the increased guard at Elsinore.

3. Why has Horatio been asked to join the soldiers in the night watch? What has he decided to do?
Horatio is educated and skeptical. He proves the ghost is real, not a hallucination. Horatio is a scholar capable of communication with a ghost. He decided to tell Hamlet, who is his friend, about the ghost.

4. How does the reader/audience know this ghost is not a hallucination?
The reader/audience sees the ghost as well. Thus, it cannot be merely a hallucination.

Act I, Scene II

1. What important exposition is revealed at the beginning of this scene.
The former king, Hamlet, whose ghost appeared in the previous scene, has been dead only a very short time. The new king is the former king's brother, and the widow of the former king has married her brother-in-law, the new king.

2. What evidence of wrongdoing or corruption is evident in Claudius' opening speech?
Claudius admits that it would be appropriate for the country to be in a period of official mourning for his brother's death, but they have forgone that. He acknowledges that everything
he has done – marrying Gertrude and allowing himself to be crowned king – he has done with the advice and consent of the court’s chief advisors. He also admits that his marriage to Gertrude came at a time when, perhaps, she should have been a grieving widow instead of a blushing bride.

   He grants Laertes permission to return to France while he denies Hamlet permission to return to school at Wittenberg.

4. Why did Hamlet not become King when his father died?
   Claudius identifies Gertrude as the “imperial jointress,” which indicates that she actually inherited the throne from her deceased husband. Claudius, saying he acted with the advice and consent of the court, somehow convinced the advisors that it was in Denmark’s best interest for him to marry Gertrude and assume the throne. We never learn why Hamlet was not named heir to his father’s throne.

5. How is Hamlet physically and emotionally conspicuous in the public portion of this scene?
   Claudius and Gertrude’s speeches indicate that Hamlet is dressing mourning black. Most staging of this scene depict everyone dressed gaily as if for a festival to contrast with Hamlet’s black. Also, Hamlet is the only one expressing any grief over his father’s recent death. Claudius and Gertrude chastise him for this.

6. What is the significance of Claudius’ denying Hamlet permission to return to Wittenberg?
   First of all, it contrasts with the permission Claudius gave to Laertes to return to Paris. Secondly, it essentially places Hamlet under “house arrest.”

7. What aspect of Hamlet’s concept of death/desire for death is revealed in Hamlet’s first soliloquy?
   Hamlet desires death. He wishes he could just pass into not-being or that he could kill himself without sinning.

8. What aspect of Hamlet’s problem seems to bother him the most?
   More than the death of his father and his not inheriting the throne, Hamlet is most upset about the marriage of his mother, the speed with which she remarried (less than two months), and the physical-lustful nature of her relationship with her new husband, his uncle.

9. What important metaphor is introduced in Hamlet’s soliloquy that will be developed later in the play?
   The idea of Denmark as a garden—an unweeded garden—will be echoed by the ghost’s explanation that he was allegedly bitten by a “serpent” (reminiscent of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Adam and Eve) while sleeping in his garden.

10. Contrast Horatio’s and Laertes’ reasons for being in Denmark.
    Laertes told Claudius that Laertes came to Denmark to attend the king’s coronation. There does not seem to be anything wrong with this until Horatio tells Hamlet he came for Hamlet’s father’s funeral. That is when we realize that the son of an advisor the head of Polonius should also have attended the funeral of his dead king. This highlights the corruption, the lack of “rightness,” in the court of Denmark. It also identifies Horatio as a loyal friend of Hamlet’s—even though Hamlet does not seem to recognize him at first.
Act I, Scene III

1. Explain the reasons that Laertes and Polonius give Ophelia to convince her not to trust Hamlet’s love.
   They do not believe that Hamlet is serious with honest intentions toward Ophelia. Besides, Hamlet would not be able to marry her because he is royal and must marry for political motives as well as for love.

2. What is comical about Polonius?
   He is a pompous man of show, with little substance. His speeches are wordy and self-contradictory. On many occasions, he changes his opinion to please the person with whom he is speaking.

Act I, Scene IV

1. Other than the fact of the ghost itself, why is this Ghost thought to be an evil omen?
   The Ghost is wearing armor, indicating that there is danger. Also, the country had denounced the Catholic Church during this time period due to King Henry VIII wanting a divorce. The kingdom would have been practicing Protestants. Protestants do not believe in Purgatory. They believed in Heaven and Hell. Therefore, the ghost would have been considered a demon not of a soul suffering in Purgatory.

2. Marcellus states, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” What does he mean?
   This is a reference to the overall condition of the state. The king has died. The brother, instead of the son, is on the throne and maintains and incestuous relationship with the Queen. There is a threatened invasion from Norway, yet the king spends his nights drinking and carousing, thus earning for himself and his country the reputation of a drunkard. Finally, the armed ghost of the dead king has appeared at least three times, indicating that something is wrong and there is danger.

Act I, Scene V

1. In what region of the universe does the Ghost reside?
   The Ghost is in Purgatory. It tells Hamlet that he is “Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night, /And for the day confined to fast in fires, /Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature /Are burnt and purged away.” Hell is eternal, not “for a certain term.” The region where sins are “purged ways” is Purgatory.

2. What possible theme is introduced by the Ghost’s afterlife?
   In Act I, Scene II, we learned that Hamlet attends the University at Wittenberg, which is where Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation by nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Thus, Hamlet could be seen as receiving a Protestant education while his father is doing penance in Purgatory – a purely Catholic concept for the afterlife.

3. What does the Ghost warn Hamlet about his mother? Why?
The Ghost warns Hamlet not to do anything to his mother, but to “leave her to Heaven.” He suggests that for Hamlet to worry about his mother’s role in the murder or to try to avenge it will drive him mad.

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

There are a few possible interpretations of this line. Firstly, we have already learned of much of Denmark’s problems, the corruption at court, the lack of proper mourning for a dead king, the permitting of an incestuous marriage much too soon after the death of the widow’s first husband, the assumption to the throne of a man who was not the heir. We have learned of the threatened Norwegian invasion and of Claudius’ carousing that damages Denmark’s reputation in the eyes of the rest of the world. We have learned of the old king’s murder at the hands of his brother, the new king. We suspect the Queen and the Court may have had something to do with this. So there is much wrong with Denmark that Hamlet is charged to fix. Also, however, there is the Protestant / Catholic disparity hinted at by the fact that Hamlet is in school in the seat of the Protestant Reformation while his father resided in the Catholic concept of the afterlife. One both levels, there is a need for vast change in Denmark. Things are not right, and somehow, it is Hamlet’s role to fix them.

Act II, Scene I

1. What is ironic about Polonius’ attempt to learn about Laertes’ life in Paris?
2. Why would Polonius immediately jump to the conclusion that Hamlet is mad for Ophelia’s love?
3. Consider how the episode of Hamlet in Ophelia’s closet promises to contribute to the overall calamity of the tragic plot?

Act II, Scene II

1. Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern willing spies for Claudius and Gertrude?
2. What effect is created by the scenes between Hamlet and Polonius being in prose?
3. What are some of the slang expressions and puns Hamlet uses in his first exchange with Polonius? What are they significant?
4. What is Hamlet’s initial reaction to the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
5. Why are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hesitant to admit that they are in Elsinore because the king and queen sent for them?
6. How does Hamlet’s famous “What a piece of work is a man!” passage depart from typical Renaissance humanism?
7. Why does Shakespeare introduce a troupe of traveling players into the action of the play?
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?
9. What is unusual about the player’s monologue about the Fall of Troy?
Act II, Scene III

1. What does Claudius admit to himself (and to the audience) about his crime?
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.
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?
4. What information does Ophelia provide about Hamlet's character before the beginning of the play?
5. Explain the ambiguity of the nunnery scene.
6. What is the main thrust of Hamlet's diatribe against Ophelia?

Act III, Scene II

1. Why does Shakespeare begin this scene with...
2. Why does Hamlet trust and admire Horatio?
3. What does Hamlet admit to Horatio and the audience just before the company arrives to view the play?
4. How does Hamlet's speech pattern change when the others enter the room to view the play? Why?
5. Why does Hamlet speak to Ophelia in such vulgar terms?
6. What does Gertrude's reaction to the play indicate?
7. Explain the metaphor of the recorder.
8. Explain the allusion to Nero in Hamlet's closing speech.

Act III, Scene III

1. How has the play-within-the-play changed Hamlet's situation and influenced the action of the play?
2. How does Polonius' spying on the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude indicate a change in Gertrude's status?
3. In what paradox of salvation does Claudius feel trapped?
4. Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius when he has the opportunity?

Act III, Scene IV
1. Explain the ambiguity and wordplay Hamlet and his mother exchange at the beginning of this scene.
2. What is Hamlet's reaction to the killing of Polonius?
3. What does this scene reveal about Gertrude's guilt?
4. What aspect of Gertrude and Claudius' marriage still clearly bothers Hamlet the most?
5. What is the significance of this second appearance of the ghost?

**Act IV, Scene I**
1. How is this scene ambiguous regarding Gertrude's "conversion" from the previous scene?

**Act IV, Scene II**
1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

**Act IV, Scene III**
1. Why can't Claudius simple deal with Hamlet swiftly and harshly as allowed by law?
2. How does this scene advance Hamlet's developing awareness of death?
3. Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know the true purpose of their journey to England?

**Act IV, Scene IV**
1. What is the apparent purpose of this brief scene?

**Act IV, Scene V**
1. What important information does Claudius reveal?
2. What do they assume is the cause of Ophelia's apparent madness?
3. Why do you suppose Ophelia's madness takes on the form it does?
4. Describe Laertes' response to his father's death. How is he a foil for Hamlet?
5. How do the flowers Ophelia distributes relate to the characters and their actions?

**Act IV, Scenes VI – VII**
1. What news is revealed in Hamlet's letter to Horatio? What does this show about Hamlet?
2. What will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
3. How does this episode illustrate the role of coincidence in Shakespearean tragedy?
4. Why does Claudius tell Laertes he will not kill Hamlet himself?
5. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia committed suicide?
6. In Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, what suggests that Ophelia's death was an accident?

Act V, Scene I

1. What is the significance of the various skills the gravedigger digs up during this scene? How do they contribute to the evolution of Hamlet's understanding of death?
2. How does the entrance of Ophelia's funeral procession continue this evolution?
3. What does Laertes and Hamlet's fight in Ophelia's grave foreshadow?
4. Why is this scene in prose?
5. How do Hamlet and the gravedigger view the sociological implications of death differently?

Act V, Scene II

1. What does Horatio learn about the real purpose for the trip to England?
2. What is ironic about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's approaching deaths?
3. How does Shakespeare establish that Hamlet is indeed a noble gentleman?
4. How does the impending duel with Laertes complete Hamlet's concept of death that has been developing through the play?
5. Why does Hamlet apologize to Laertes?
6. Explain how each character dies in the end.
7. Why does the play end with such bloodshed and death?
8. What is significant about the fact that Forinbras delivers the last lines of the play?