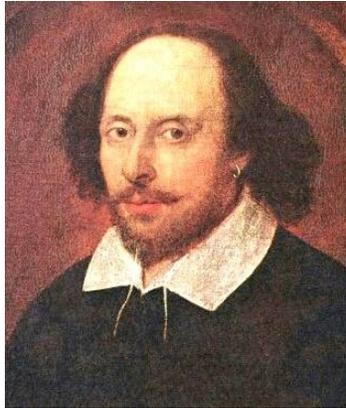


# HAMLET

by William Shakespeare



## THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

*Hamlet* was first performed in 1601, which makes it the first of Shakespeare's great tragedies. Critics still debate whether this play or *King Lear* is the greatest of his dramatic efforts, though *Hamlet* is unquestionably the most popular. The plot of the play appeared originally in a twelfth-century document called *Historica Danica*, but Shakespeare got the idea from Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*, a French collection of short stories published in the 1570's. Beginning with Shakespeare's colleague Richard Burbage, most of the great actors (and a few great actresses) since Shakespeare's time have assayed the role of the Prince of Denmark. Critics and philosophers have had a field day attempting to interpret the play and psychoanalyze its main character, and no play in

the English language has contributed more familiar phrases to literature and everyday speech. As one inexperienced theater-goer was heard to say, “I saw *Hamlet* last night and enjoyed it well enough, but I was disappointed that Shakespeare used so many clichés in the script!”

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Hamlet - The Prince of Denmark and heir to the throne, he returns from the university to find his father murdered and his uncle not only wearing his crown, but also married to his mother. His attempt to respond appropriately to his uncle’s perfidy provides the central action of the play.
- The Ghost - Hamlet’s dead father, murdered by his brother Claudius, who demands that Hamlet avenge his death.
- Gertrude - Hamlet’s mother, who marries Claudius shortly after he kills his brother. She dies in the last scene when she drinks from a poisoned goblet.
- Polonius - Claudius’ counselor, a foolish old man who is accidentally killed by Hamlet while spying on him.
- Laertes - Polonius’ son, he kills Hamlet in a fencing match with a poisoned rapier.
- Ophelia - Polonius’ daughter, she and Hamlet are in love, but Hamlet alienates her by feigning madness. She then goes mad following the death of her father, falls into a brook, and drowns.
- Horatio - Hamlet’s best friend and confidant, he survives the carnage at the end to tell Hamlet’s story to the world.
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern - Friends of Hamlet who are suborned by Claudius to spy on him and take him to his death in England; they are executed when Hamlet turns the tables on them by substituting a different letter for the one sent by Claudius.
- Osric - A foppish gentleman.
- Fortinbras - Nephew of the King of Norway, he inherits the throne of Denmark after all the other heirs are dead.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.” (Francisco, Ii, 8-9)

“A little more than kin, and less than kind.” (Hamlet, Iii, 68-69)

“O that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Hamlet, Iii, 135-140)

"Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Hamlet, Iii, 152)

"Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral baked meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." (Hamlet, Iii, 189-190)

"He was a man, take him for all in all.  
I shall not look upon his like again." (Hamlet, Iii, 197-198)

"Give thy thoughts no tongue,  
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.  
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar:  
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;  
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment  
Of each new-hatched, unfledged comrade. Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,  
Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.  
Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.  
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy;  
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
And they in France of the best rank and station  
Are most select and generous, chief in that.  
Neither a borrower or a lender be;  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.  
This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, a the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man." (Polonius, Iiii, 63-84)

"It is a custom  
More honored in the breach than in the observance." (Hamlet, Iiv, 18-19)

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (Hamlet, Iiv, 43)

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (Marcellus, Iiv, 100)

"The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown." (Ghost, Iv, 45-46)

“Leave her to heaven ...” (Ghost, Iv, 93)

“O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!  
My tables, my tables! Meet it is U set it down  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.” (Hamlet, Iv, 113-115)

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” (Hamlet, Iv, 191-192)

“The time is out of joint. O cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right!” (Hamlet, Iv, 215-216)

“Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,  
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,  
I will be brief.” (Polonius, Iiii, 95-97)

“More matter, with less art.” (Gertrude, Iiii, 102)

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.” (Polonius, Iiii, 222-223)

“There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” (Hamlet, Iiii, 265-266)

“What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me - no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.” (Hamlet, Iiii, 319-325)

“I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.” (Hamlet, Iiii, 388-389)

“Use every man his desert, and who could scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.” (Hamlet, Iiii, 536-539)

“The play’s the thing  
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.” (Hamlet, Iiii, 612-613)

“To be or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them. To die - to sleep.  
To sleep - perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub!  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause. There’s the respect

That makes calamity of so long life.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death -  
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
No traveler returns - puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action." (Hamlet, IIIi, 64-96)

"Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind." (Ophelia, IIIi, 111)

"O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
the observed of all observers - quite, quite down!" (Ophelia, IIIi, 160-164)

"Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee." (Hamlet, IIIi, 72-75)

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks." (Gertrude, IIIi, 243)

"Let me be cruel, but not unnatural;  
I will speak daggers to her, but use none." (Hamlet, IIIi, 402-403)

"O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven." (Claudius, IIIiii, 39)

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;  
Words without thought never to heaven go." (Claudius, IIIiii, 100-101)

"I must be cruel, only to be kind." (Hamlet, IIIiv, 199)

“For ‘tis the sport to have the enginer  
Hoist with his own petar.” (Hamlet, IIIiv, 229-230)

“Lay her i’ the earth,  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring!” (Laertes, Vi, 233-235)

“Sweets to the sweet! Farewell.” (Gertrude, Vi, 239)

“Let Hercules himself do what he may,  
The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.” (Hamlet, Vi, 294-295)

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.” (Hamlet, Vii, 11-12)

“If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain,  
To tell my story.” (Hamlet, Vii, 369-372)

“Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” (Horatio, Vii, 385-386)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - The first scene takes place on the battlements of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. At midnight, two guards discuss the appearance of a ghost on previous nights with Horatio, who refuses to believe them. The Ghost then appears, looking very much like the recently-deceased king. Horatio attempts to speak with it, but it moves on wordlessly. Horatio fears the appearance of the Ghost bodes ill for the kingdom, then reviews recent history - the victory of the elder Hamlet over the elder Fortinbras, thus gaining Norway’s lands for Denmark, followed by preparations for war by the young Fortinbras, who desires to regain his father’s lost lands. The Ghost then reappears, and Horatio again desired of it some prophecy, but the Ghost remains silent, disappearing as the cock crows. Horatio then proposes that young Hamlet be told of the Ghost’s appearance, thinking that the Ghost might be willing to speak to him.

**Act I, scene 2** - In Elsinore Castle, King Claudius is holding an audience. He thanks his courtiers for their cooperation in the recent funeral of his brother Hamlet and his ensuing marriage to Gertrude, his brother’s widow. He tells them of Fortinbras’ attempts to regain the land lost by his father, and indicates that he is writing to the aged king of Norway, Fortinbras’ uncle, asking him to curb his nephew’s activities. Laertes, the son of Claudius’ advisor Polonius, begs leave to return to France to continue his education, and Claudius grants his request. He then turns to young Hamlet, who is obviously continuing to mourn his father’s untimely demise. He tells Hamlet that, because all must eventually die, he should bear his father’s death with more equanimity; he then encourages Hamlet to remain in Elsinore and serve as his chief courtier and son, despite his desire to return to the University of Wittenberg. Hamlet agrees to stay, and, after the rest leave, delivers his first

soliloquy, in which he bemoans his mother's marriage to his despised uncle within a month of his father's death. Horatio and the others then arrive and tell Hamlet of the appearance of his father's ghost. Hamlet agrees to watch with them that night.

**Act I, scene 3** - In Polonius' house, Laertes is preparing to embark for France. Before he goes, he warns his sister Ophelia to beware of Hamlet's attentions to her; he fears Hamlet is looking for no more than a brief dalliance and will do nothing but take advantage of her. Polonius then enters, and gives his son his parting advice. After Laertes leaves, he warns Ophelia not to trust Hamlet's intentions, and orders her to keep away from him.

**Act I, scene 4** - Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus have arrived on the battlements and await the Ghost. They hear Claudius and his guests reveling in the castle, and then the Ghost appears. It does not speak, but beckons Hamlet to follow it, which he does, despite the pleadings of his friends.

**Act I, scene 5** - The Ghost leads Hamlet out of earshot of his friends, and tells him that he was murdered by Claudius, who, after seducing his wife Gertrude, poured poison in his ear while he was sleeping in the garden, thus sending him into eternity unshriven. He makes Hamlet swear to avenge his murder, though insists that he should not take vengeance on Gertrude. Hamlet vows to act, but refuses to tell Horatio and Marcellus what the Ghost said. He then makes them swear to say nothing of what they have seen, even should he begin to act in a peculiar fashion.

**Act II, scene 1** - In the home of Polonius, the old man sends his servant to Paris to find out how Laertes is doing, and in particular whether he is living respectably or being profligate. After the servant leaves, Ophelia enters and tells her father that Hamlet had visited her in her chamber and behaved like a madman. Polonius, knowing that Ophelia had refused to see him in obedience to his command, believes that Hamlet is mad with love for his daughter, and goes to report the incident to Claudius.

**Act II, scene 2** - In the castle, Claudius and Gertrude receive a visit from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two old friends of Hamlet. Claudius asks them to try to ascertain the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior, and they readily agree to help. The ambassadors to Norway then tell Claudius that the king of Norway has put a stop to Fortinbras' preparations for war against Denmark and sent him to fight the Poles instead. After they leave, Polonius comes in and reports the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia and shows Claudius a letter she received from the distraught young prince. Polonius and Claudius agree to hide and observe Hamlet and Ophelia when they meet within the castle. Before they can do so, Hamlet arrives, reading a book, and Polonius approaches him. As the old man tries to initiate a conversation, Hamlet rambles madly. After Polonius leaves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive and Hamlet greets them gladly, but realizes they have been sent to spy on him by Claudius. He speaks to them of his despair and disillusionment with mankind and life in general. They then tell them of the arrival of a troupe of traveling actors, known to Hamlet (this gives Shakespeare an opportunity to rail against the latest fashion of acting troupes of children, who have been cutting into his business). Polonius enters to announce the arrival of the players, and Hamlet again begins to act like a madman before him. The players then arrive, and Hamlet greets them. The leader of the players then declaims a passage from one of the plays in their repertoire. Hamlet then orders them led to appropriate quarters. As all leave, Hamlet pulls the leader of the players aside and asks if they can perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, to which Hamlet intends to add

a brief speech. He then delivers a soliloquy in which he bemoans his passivity, comparing himself unfavorably to the lead player, who can stir up sweeping emotions for Hecuba. He then indicates that he intends to use the play to uncover the guilt of Claudius.

**Act III, scene 1** - Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius, but they can shed no light on Hamlet's feigned madness. They do tell him of Hamlet's plan to have the players perform that night, and he encourages the idea. Claudius and Polonius then hide, telling Ophelia to wait for Hamlet's arrival and begin a conversation. Hamlet arrives and delivers his famous soliloquy in which he contemplates suicide. Ophelia then enters and tries to return the gifts he had sent her. He refuses to take them back, and lashes out at her madly, telling her to enter a nunnery rather than marry and propagate sinners. After he leaves, Ophelia mourns his fall from sanity; then Claudius and Polonius emerge. Claudius is convinced that Hamlet's madness has nothing to do with Ophelia; he considers him dangerous, and wants to send him to England, hoping that the change of scenery will do him good (he secretly plans to have him murdered on the trip). Polonius still thinks love is the problem, and encourages Claudius to have Gertrude speak to her son after the play that evening.

**Act III, scene 2** - Before the play is performed, Hamlet instructs the players how to act (Shakespeare here gives his own view of how actors should comport themselves). Hamlet assigns Horatio the task of watching the king's reaction during the play. He sits next to Ophelia, and begins to make crude and witless comments. The players enact a scene very similar to the murder of Hamlet's father and the wooing of his mother by Claudius. At the moment of the poisoning, Claudius gets up and leaves and the play is halted. Hamlet and Horatio, now convinced of the king's guilt, are approached by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who tell them that the king is angry, and the queen wishes to see Hamlet in her chamber. After they leave, Hamlet prepares to visit his mother, and seems determined to kill Claudius.

**Act III, scene 3** - The scene begins with Claudius telling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England. Polonius then arrives and informs the king that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude's chamber, and says that he will hide behind a curtain and listen to their conversation. Claudius tries to pray, but is unable to do so - how can he truly repent when he still enjoys the crown and the queen, the fruits of his evil deed? As he kneels, Hamlet passes by, ready to strike a mortal blow, but he hesitates, fearing that to kill him while at prayer would send his soul to heaven. He decides to wait until he can catch him in the midst of some sin.

**Act III, scene 4** - As Hamlet approaches Gertrude's chamber, Polonius hides behind the arras. Hamlet speaks in riddles to his mother, making her fear for her safety so that she cries out. Polonius, behind the arras, calls for help, and Hamlet stabs him through the curtain, thinking he is Claudius. He then accuses his mother of complicity in his father's murder, and is disappointed to find that Polonius rather than Claudius is dead behind the curtain. As Hamlet reproves his mother, the Ghost enters and reminds him of the vengeful deed that lies ahead. Gertrude cannot see the Ghost, so she is more convinced than ever that Hamlet is mad when he converses with the air. He repents of having killed Polonius, but believes the old man deserved what he got for his meddling. Hamlet warns Gertrude not to tell Claudius of their exchange, expresses his suspicions that Claudius intends to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do him mischief on the trip to England and states his intention to turn the tables on them, and finally drags Polonius' body from the room.

**Act IV, scene 1** - Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet has murdered Polonius, and Claudius tells her that he is worried that Hamlet has become a threat to the safety of all, and reiterates his intention to send him to England.

**Act IV, scene 2** - When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask him the whereabouts of Polonius' body, he taunts them and runs away.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Claudius fears to punish Hamlet for killing Polonius because of his popularity with the people, and decides that the trip to England will be the most appropriate response. He summons Hamlet, who, after some banter, tells him the location of the body. Claudius tells him he must set sail for England that night, but after he leaves tells the audience that the letters he sent with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decree Hamlet's death.

**Act IV, scene 4** - On his way to the ship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet encounters the army of Fortinbras, which is passing through Denmark on the way to Poland. After they leave, he rebukes himself for his inaction when these noble men go to their deaths for a worthless plot of land in Poland.

**Act IV, scene 5** - Ophelia has been driven mad by her father's murder, and enters the queen's presence raving and singing. Claudius pities her, and tells Gertrude that Laertes has returned from France, bent on avenging his father's murder. Laertes then bursts into the chamber, but Claudius calms him, insisting that he will tell him the whole truth about Polonius' demise. Ophelia then enters, singing madly and distributing flowers, increasing Laertes' grief. Claudius promises to satisfy Laertes by answering all his questions.

**Act IV, scene 6** - Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet, informing him that he was captured by pirates on the way to England, and has escaped and returned to Denmark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue on their trip to England, not realizing that they bear a message sealing the doom of those who carry it. Horatio then leaves to meet Hamlet.

**Act IV, scene 7** - Claudius receives word that Hamlet has returned. Having told Laertes that Hamlet was responsible for Polonius' death, he now conspires with the young hothead to murder Hamlet. They will stage a fencing match, but Laertes will leave the point of his sword unprotected, and also dip the tip of the sword in deadly poison. Claudius will provide a backup plan by bringing a poisoned chalice to the match in case Hamlet gets thirsty. Gertrude then enters and announces that Ophelia has fallen in the brook and drowned.

**Act V, scene 1** - The scene takes place in a graveyard, where two grave-diggers are discussing whether or not Ophelia deserves Christian burial. They continue to banter about various subjects until Hamlet and Horatio arrive. As the grave-digger digs, he throws skulls he uncovers out on the ground, and Hamlet muses about mortality. He then banters with the grave-digger, who tells him that the next skull he unearths was that of Yorick, the court jester. Hamlet, who knew Yorick as a child, again considers the final plight of man. The funeral procession then arrives, and Hamlet and Horatio hide themselves. Laertes wonders why the ceremony is so simple, but the priest tells him that, because Ophelia's death was questionable, she can have only the simplest of rites. Laertes leaps into the grave to embrace his sister one last time, and Hamlet leaps in after him. The two fight, and

are separated by Gertrude. Hamlet insists that he loved Ophelia, and cannot understand why Laertes would attack him. As they leave, Claudius reminds Laertes of their revenge plot.

**Act V, scene 2** - Hamlet tells Horatio the details of his escape from death on the trip to England; he opened the letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and found they called for his death. He replaced the offending letter with one calling for the death of the bearers of the missive. Hamlet regrets having offended Laertes, however, whom he considers to be a good man. The dandified Osric then arrives to tell Hamlet of Laertes' challenge to a fencing match. After bantering with Osric, Hamlet agrees to the match, though he suspects Claudius' motives for arranging it. Horatio tries to talk him out of it, but Hamlet is fatalistic about the outcome. Before the match begins, Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for anything he has done to offend him, claiming that his madness was to blame. Laertes forgives him, and they begin to fence. Hamlet makes the first two hits, and Claudius offers him a drink, but he refuses it. Gertrude then drinks from the poisoned cup, despite Claudius' protestations. They fight again, and Laertes pricks Hamlet; in the ensuing struggle they change swords, and Hamlet then wounds Laertes, so that both are poisoned. The queen succumbs to the poison in the cup, then Laertes tells Hamlet about the entire plot, and that they are both dead beyond any hope of recovery. Hamlet then runs the king through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink from the poisoned chalice. As Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet succumb to their fates, Hamlet and Laertes forgive one another, and Hamlet prevent Horatio from joining them in death and tells him to proclaim his story to the world. Hamlet, with his dying breath, proclaims Fortinbras as his successor. Fortinbras and the English ambassador enter, the former from his success in the Polish wars, the latter proclaiming the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio prepares to tell the sad story of his dead friend, while Fortinbras closes the play by ordering full military honors for Hamlet in his burial.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the extent to which the protagonist may be considered a Renaissance Man in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Consider his skills, his education, his character, and the breadth of his interests.
2. Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* was very popular at the time when William Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*. Would you describe King Claudius as a Machiavellian? Would the author of *The Prince* have approved of the way Claudius gained and sought to hold power? Why or why not?
3. The protagonist in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a clear example of a person who suffers paralysis by analysis. Discuss the extent to which Hamlet demonstrates why good thinkers are rarely good politicians. If a good politician must be a pragmatist, what character in the play is the best politician? Why?
4. In addition to the play performed by the traveling players, the concept of acting a part plays a central role in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Who is acting, and why? To what extent is the plot of the play driven by the success or failure of these "actors"? Be sure to use specifics from the play in building your arguments.

5. Discuss the feigned madness of the protagonist in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Why does Hamlet pretend to be mad? What does he hope to accomplish? Does he succeed in accomplishing his goals? Why or why not? Be sure to use details from the play to support your arguments.
6. If the protagonist in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a tragic hero in the classical sense - a noble figure who is brought down by a flaw in his character, what is his tragic flaw? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
7. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist spends the play seeking to avenge his father's murder. Is his desire for revenge biblically justifiable? If not, what should Hamlet have done, especially given that the criminal whose life he sought was beyond the reach of the law?
8. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist spends the play seeking to avenge his father's murder. What opinion does Shakespeare have of revenge? Is it a task to be undertaken as a sacred trust by the family of one wrongfully murdered, or is it a dead-end street that can lead to nothing but disaster? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
9. Francis Bacon, a contemporary of Shakespeare, wrote that "Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which, the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out." Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a revenge play. Is the revenge sought by the protagonist justifiable, or would Hamlet have been better off heeding Bacon's warnings? Support your conclusion from the play and from Scripture.
10. Assess the credibility of the Ghost in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When he first appears, Hamlet and his friends wonder whether he is really the spirit of Hamlet's father or whether he is a demon. Which conclusion does the text support, or does it leave the question open? Defend your conclusion with specifics from the play.
11. In Mel Gibson's version of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist is pictured as suffering from an Oedipus complex - the desire to kill his father and sleep with his mother. To what extent is this Freudian interpretation of the play justified? Support your conclusions with details from the script.
12. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist's father is killed by having poison poured into his ear. Metaphorically, many characters in the play are destroyed by the poison that is poured into their ears. Discuss the power of words and how they destroy people in the course of the play.
13. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, great importance is placed on the ability to know oneself. Does Hamlet truly know himself? Does he grow in self-awareness as the play progresses? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.

14. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, great importance is placed on the ability to know oneself. Choose three characters other than Hamlet himself and discuss the extent to which they do or do not possess self-knowledge. Which characters are self-aware, and which are self-deceived? Support your conclusions with details from the play.
15. Suicide, or thoughts of suicide, play a central role in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Suicide at the time was considered a mortal sin that condemned a person to Hell. Choose three characters, including Hamlet, and discuss why they consider or commit suicide. How does their desperation communicate the specific themes of the play?
16. Early in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we are told that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," and later Hamlet complains that "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" Is the world of the play hopelessly corrupt, or is there hope for change? To what extent does Shakespeare argue that the world may look toward a hopeful future? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
17. Discuss the critiques of the theater found in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In what ways does Shakespeare criticize theater practices of his own day? What positive advice does he give for how a play ought to be performed? Use specifics from the script to support your arguments.
18. In Kenneth Branagh's version of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the director pictures Hamlet and Ophelia as having an affair. Do you think this is a correct interpretation of their relationship? Why or why not? Use details from the script to support your assessment of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia.
19. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to what extent are Hamlet and Fortinbras foils? Be sure to discuss both the parallels and differences between the two characters, and use specifics from the play to support your analysis.
20. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to what extent are Hamlet and Laertes foils? Be sure to discuss both the parallels and differences between the two characters, and use specifics from the play to support your analysis.
21. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to what extent are Old Hamlet and Claudius foils? Be sure to discuss both the parallels and differences between the two characters, and use specifics from the play to support your analysis.
22. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist, responding to what he sees as his mother's disloyalty toward his father, says, "Frailty, thy name is woman." To what extent is this an accurate description of Gertrude? of Ophelia? Support your conclusions with specifics from the play.
23. Analyze the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Are they deceitful villains, or are they merely clueless dupes? Support your conclusion with details from the play.

24. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is Polonius a clever schemer or a foolish old man (actors over the years have played him both ways)? Assess the true nature of his character by citing specific quotations from the play.
25. Near the beginning of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Laertes and Polonius advise Ophelia to stop seeing Hamlet. Is their advice wise? Why or why not? What are the consequences of Ophelia's willingness to submit to her father and brother's orders in this matter?
26. Discuss the view of God found in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. To what extent does the God of the play correspond to the God of the Bible? Use specifics to support your assessment.
27. Assess the extent to which the protagonist speaks the truth when he is feigning madness in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Is Polonius right when he says, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't"? Analyze specific speeches and indicate the ways in which Hamlet is able to speak the truth with impunity while pretending to be mad.
28. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist spends most of the play trying to convince himself to take action. How do you explain his failure to act on his vow given to the Ghost? Is he exercising justifiable caution, or does his inactivity indicate a flaw in his character? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
29. One critic of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has suggested that Claudius is "a bad man, but a good king." Do you agree? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the script.
30. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, some have suggested that the line "The king rises," at the end of the players' presentation of *The Mousetrap*, is the climax of the play. Do you agree? Why or why not? Remember that the climax is the point that signals the transition from rising action to falling action in the course of a drama.
31. Assess the character of the protagonist in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. To what extent is Hamlet a moral man? Choose three immoral acts committed by the Prince of Denmark and explain why these are central or peripheral to an assessment of his character.
32. Choose a character other than the protagonist from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and describe the changes that character undergoes in the course of the play. Do the changes represent growth or decline? Why do you think so? Do these changes make the character more or less credible? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
33. Does the ending of the play in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* represent justice or injustice? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play and from Scripture.

34. In Act III, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we find Claudius attempting to repent of his evil deed and unable to pray. At the same time, Hamlet is seeking revenge, desiring to kill his uncle and torment his mother for her disloyalty. Which at this point in the story is the more moral man? Support your conclusions both from the script and from Scripture.
35. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, would Hamlet have made a good king had he survived? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
36. T.S. Eliot, in his criticism of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, argues that "the play is most certainly an artistic failure." His main reason for making this assertion is that Shakespeare fails to provide adequate justification for Hamlet's emotional responses. Do you agree with Eliot's assessment? Use specifics from the play to support your argument in response to Eliot's thesis.
37. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist is often criticized for his hesitancy and inaction. What, however, would have been the consequences had he not acted at all? Describe how Hamlet's and the other characters' future lives might have developed had he ignored the Ghost and done nothing.
38. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," what is his point? Is he advocating moral relativism? If not, what is he saying? Is his point a valid one or not?
39. Discuss the attitude of the protagonist toward women in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Is Hamlet a misogynist? Has the marriage of his mother to his father's murderer turned him against women as a whole? If not, how else would you explain his behavior toward Gertrude and Ophelia in the play?
40. Does the ending of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* represent the achievement of poetic justice? Do you find the ending satisfying because the characters get what they deserve? Why or why not? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
41. At various points in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist gives reasons for not carrying out his intended revenge against the murderer of his father. Are these legitimate reasons, or are they simply excuses to rationalize Hamlet's inactivity? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
42. Evaluate the character of Polonius in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Is he a doddering old fool or a Machiavellian politician? Support your conclusion with details from the script and from Machiavelli's book.
43. William Shakespeare lived in an era during which Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* had become a subject of much popular discussion. Using *Hamlet* as a model, discuss the extent to which Shakespeare supported a Machiavellian approach to politics. Which character in the play is most like the ideal prince described by Machiavelli? Why do you think so? Be sure to incorporate specifics from both books in your discussion.

44. Evaluate the character of Claudius in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. To what extent is he an example of the political theory expounded in Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*? Does Shakespeare approve or disapprove of Claudius' political tactics? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
45. The Elsinore of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a place where nothing is what it seems. People are constantly engaged in spying, hiding, and eavesdropping. To what extent does the difference between appearance and reality drive the action of the play? To what extent can we believe what the characters say about themselves or about others? How is one to tell what information is credible and what is not?
46. Compare and contrast the musings on death found in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Consider the attitudes toward death expressed in the two works as well as the worldviews of the characters that generate their respective understandings of death.
47. Many critics have suggested that William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* may be viewed as a warm-up for the playwright's greater tragedy, *Hamlet*, written two years later. Support this assertion by locating similar themes, events, or characters that tie the two plays together. How does *Hamlet* show progress in Shakespeare's skill as a playwright when compared to the earlier tragedy?
48. Compare and contrast the roles played by the ghosts in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. In what ways do they serve similar functions? With whom do they interact? For what purpose? Which plays a more central role in the plot? Support your conclusions with specifics from the plays.
49. Ancient Stoics viewed suicide as a noble denouement to one's life, while Christians viewed it as a mortal sin. Compare and contrast these views of suicide as they appear in Shakespeare's pagan plays, such as *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, and his Christian plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*.
50. Compare and contrast the scene in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in which Starbuck considers killing Ahab, but eventually decides not to do so, with the similar scene in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius, but does not. Consider the characters and motives of the people involved, as well as the overall nature of the two plots, in building your arguments.
51. The Turks are as much an unseen presence in William Shakespeare's *Othello* as the Norwegian armies of Fortinbras are in *Hamlet*. Compare and contrast the roles played by these threatening armies in the respective atmospheres and plots of the two great tragedies.

52. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, we first meet Perdita as the lovely shepherdess distributing flowers to all she meets. Compare this scene with the one in *Hamlet* where the mad Ophelia passes out flowers to the members of Claudius' court. In your analysis, consider the symbolic significance of the flowers, noting that in both cases they are intended to communicate certain meanings to the recipients.
53. William Shakespeare often incorporates ghosts into his plays. Compare the appearance of the ghostly Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* with that of Hamlet's father in *Hamlet*. How are the two similar and how are they different, especially with regard to the nature of the communication and its impact on the characters to whom they speak?
54. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist says, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." After the performance of the players, we find Claudius indeed struggling mightily with his conscience, though to no avail. Consider what events and characters "catch the conscience of the king" in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do these events represent the climax or turning point of the play? How is Shakespeare's use of this device different here than it is in *Hamlet*? What might account for the differences?
55. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist, speaking of his uncle Claudius, says, "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." Compare the villain of Shakespeare's famous tragedy to the antagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Judge Pyncheon, particularly with regard to the false front they use to deceive those around them regarding their true selves. What role do these smiles play in the successes of the characters in question?
56. Both Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* use a play as a key turning point in the story. Compare and contrast the Christmas mummery and "The Murder of Gonzago" in the ways in which they function in the two narratives and the extent to which they bring out the leading themes of the works in which they are found.
57. Compare and contrast the relationships that exist between mother and son in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. To what extent does the nature of these relationships contribute to the tragedies toward which both stories inexorably move?
58. The advice given to Bertram by his mother in Act I, scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* bears some resemblance to Polonius' advice to his son Laertes in Act I, scene 3 of *Hamlet*. Compare and contrast the two, not only in content, but also in their settings in the play and the nature of the characters who give and receive the advice in question.
59. Compare and contrast the closing scene of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* with that of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In what ways are the two similar, beyond the obvious fact that bodies lie strewn all over the stage? Do the endings bring effective resolutions to the tragedies? Do the elevations of Malcolm and Antonio's son promise a hopeful future for the kingdoms in question? Why or why not?

60. Compare and contrast the ways in which Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and its parent play, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, use acting to comment on the realities of life. Do both playwrights make the same points when they use actors to shed light on life, or do they have different things in mind? Support your conclusions with details from both plays, being sure to include relevant quotations.
61. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the title character objects, not only to his father's murder, but also to the way in which it occurred, allowing him no opportunity to repent of his sins and thus dooming him to an eternity of wandering the earth as a ghost. Similarly, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the title character insists that her brother receive a proper burial so that he can enter the afterlife rather than his soul being left to roam the earth. Compare and contrast the ways that Hamlet and Antigone pursue justice for their dead relatives. Be sure to consider not only their actions, but also the theological principles underlying them.