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English 10: World Literature
4 September 2018

Guided Reading Questions for "Hamlet" and Annotations

*These guided reading questions are designed to help students follow the plot, decode the text, and interpret actions and characters. Answer the questions in your notebook. Make sure to write down any questions you have pertaining to the text. **Annotations:** Be able to locate your answers in the text. Also, annotate important passages that relate characters, setting, decisions Hamlet makes, theme, and important moments.*

Act I

1. Which characters first see the Ghost? What do they think the sighting means?
2. Horatio speaks at some length about Rome and the time "A little ere mightiest Julius fell. Which supernatural phenomenon is he trying to understand? Which human one?"
3. Hamlet agrees to stay in Elsinore and not to return to Wittenburg. Why?
4. Hamlet states confidently that "Foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes."
What is he talking about?
5. Laertes warns Ophelia not to give in to the advances of Prince Hamlet. What are the reasons? (Hint: the word "canker" and "contagious blastments" have both a literal and a symbolic meaning). List at least two of the reasons.
6. In their conversation immediately following the departure of Laertes, Polonius tells Ophelia that she must not spend any more time with Hamlet. Why not?
7. What is Hamlet's state of mind when we first see the ghost? Why does he feel he is "too much i' the sun"?
8. How does Hamlet react to his new suspicions? Why can he not be sure his suspicions are true? What does he make his friends swear?
9. Hamlet's father's ghost tells him not to take any revenge upon Gertrude. Why?
10. Why does Hamlet tell Horatio that "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, that are dreamt of in your [our] philosophy?"

Act II

11. Polonius gives instructions to Reynaldo; in a few words, describe what Polonius wants Reynaldo to do, and why?
12. After Reynaldo leaves Polonius's room, Ophelia enters distraught. She tells her father that Hamlet had appeared before her in a confused state and acted strangely. What cause does Polonius see for Hamlet's apparent madness? What are the two meanings of "mad" here? Is Polonius only referring to Hamlet?
13. Gertrude says to Polonius, "More matter, with less art." What does she mean, and why does she say it?

14. What tasks do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take on for the King and Queen?
15. Hamlet comments on the troupe of actors: "'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out." What, specifically, does "more than natural" refer to here?
16. When Polonius complains that the actor's speech ". . . is too long" Hamlet reacts angrily. Aside from the obvious rudeness of Polonius's interruption, why does Hamlet get in his face (by speaking threateningly of his "beard")?
17. What special arrangement does Hamlet make with the Players?
18. In his final speech of Act II, Hamlet curses his situation at length, then compares himself to "a whore, . . . a very drab, a scullion!" (ll.614-615). Why this comparison? What does he then think of as an antidote to such powerlessness, after the "Hum---" he pronounces in line 617?

Act III

19. Claudius states "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go." What does he mean?
20. When Hamlet is talking of Horatio to Horatio he says, "Give me that man that is not passion's slave," he says, "and I will wear him in my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, as I do thee." Name two "friends" that Hamlet does not trust?
21. At the end of III, 2, Hamlet prepares to speak to Gertrude by vowing: "Let me be cruel, not unnatural; I will speak daggers to her, but use none." What meaning does "unnatural" suggest?
22. What is the subject of Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy?
23. How does Hamlet treat Ophelia when he meets her in III, 1? How does Ophelia react?
24. Does Claudius believe Hamlet is in love? Does he believe he is mad?
25. What happens in the pantomime and the play, which the Players present? Is there any hint in the "play within the play" that Gertrude is guilty of either murder or adultery? How does Claudius react?
26. What does Gertrude do after the play?
27. What plans do the King and Polonius make? What does Claudius do and say when Polonius leaves him?
28. In the final lines of III, 3, Claudius states: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go." Why are these lines ironic?
29. Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius at this point?
30. When Hamlet shows Gertrude the two portraits (of Hamlet Sr. and of Claudius) in III, 4, he tells her that she cannot have fallen madly in love with Claudius. Why not?
31. How does Hamlet kill Polonius?

Act IV

32. Why does Claudius claim he wants to send Hamlet to England? What is his real reason?
33. Claudius informs Hamlet that he is sending him to England. Hamlet, feigning instant agreement, then calls the King "Mother." Aside from the reasons he gives Claudius, why does he do so, in your opinion? What effect does this have on Claudius?
34. How does Ophelia react to her father's death? Whom does the King ask to watch over her?
35. When Claudius witnesses Ophelia's sadly distracted mental state, he says: "O, this is the poison of a deep grief; it springs all from her fathers death." To whom does he say this, and why? Is he being truthful? Explain.
36. What does Laertes do when he hears of his father's death?
37. When Laertes witnesses Ophelia's state and tries to understand her sentences, he says: "This nothing's more the matter." Explain what he means.
38. How does Claudius quiet Laertes? What do they plan to do?
39. What happens to Ophelia? How do we hear about it?
40. Claudius tells Laertes that his revenge will be taken care of in due time (IV, 7, ll. 29-34). The last two lines of this speech (36-37) are interrupted when a messenger appears: "I loved your father, and we love ourself, and that, I hope, will teach you to imagine" Keeping in mind the thought he has just expressed, complete his sentence for him:
41. When the news arrives of Ophelia's death at the end of Act IV, the King's reaction proves he doesn't really care about Gertrude's feelings. How so?

Act V

42. What is the first topic the two clowns discuss? What do they decide?
43. What does Hamlet talk about while he and Horatio watch the clowns dig the grave?
44. Who was Yorick?
45. Why do you think Shakespeare places the scene between the clown/gravedigger and Hamlet precisely in the first scene of the final act? How does this conversation tell us about Hamlet's feelings for the "lower classes" (indeed, gravedigger is about as "low" as you can get!) Why does such a noble prince bother to match wits with a dirt-covered clown?
46. What does Laertes do as Ophelia's funeral ends? What does Hamlet do then? (Remember that Hamlet has just returned from sea.)
47. How has Hamlet escaped Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What will happen to them? Why?
48. What does Hamlet say to Laertes before they begin to spar? Is he serious? Why or why not?
49. How does Gertrude die?
50. How are Hamlet and Laertes both killed?

51. What does Laertes do before he dies?
52. How does Claudius die?
53. What does Hamlet persuade Horatio to do?
54. As Hamlet lies dying V, 2, (ll.374-375), Horatio exclaims that he [Horatio] is "more an antique Roman than a Dane." What does he mean by that? Why does Hamlet object? 14. Who will restore order in Denmark? How has his arrival been prepared for? (You may need to review some of the earlier scenes, particularly I, ii, II, ii, and IV, iv.)