

Hamlet Essay Questions

Select ONE of the following prompts to address in order to write a complete, well-organized essay.

1. The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, "Nobody, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguesome thing it is to have a man's mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time." From *Hamlet* choose a character (not necessarily the protagonist) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict within one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.
2. Explain Hamlet's supernatural uncertainties and their ultimate resolution (if any). How do these supernatural considerations propel the plot? In a well-organized essay, describe the supernatural component of *Hamlet* and explain how these considerations affect plot, character, and the theme of revenge.
3. In a well-organized essay, compare and contrast the three pairs of fathers and sons in *Hamlet*.
4. Death is a constant presence in this play. Does Hamlet's speech to Yorick's skull represent a philosophy of death? How does his attitude toward death differ from that of the gravediggers? In a well-organized essay, explain death's role in the play and both Hamlet's and the gravediggers' "philosophy" of death.
5. In great literature, no scene of violence exists for its own sake. Choose a scene or scenes from *Hamlet* and explain how Shakespeare confronts the reader or audience with violence. In a well-organized essay, explain how the scene or scenes contribute to the meaning of the play.
6. In *Hamlet*, some of the most significant events are mental or psychological; for example, awakenings, discoveries, changes in consciousness. In a well-organized essay, describe how Shakespeare manages to give these internal events the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action.

7. In *Hamlet*, a character who appears briefly can be a significant presence. In a well-organized essay, show how such a character functions in the work. You may wish to discuss how the character affects action, theme, or the development of other characters.
8. The British novelist Fay Weldon offers this observation about happy endings: “The writers, I do believe, who get the best and most lasting response from the readers are the writers [like Shakespeare] who offer a happy ending through moral development. By a happy ending, I do not mean mere fortunate events—a marriage or a last minute rescue from death—but some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with the self, even at death.

[*Hamlet*] has the kind of ending Weldon describes. In a well-written essay, identify the “spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation” evident in the ending and explain its significance in the work as a whole.

9. One definition of madness is “mental delusion or the eccentric behavior arising from it.” But Emily Dickinson wrote:

Much madness is divinest Sense—

To a discerning Eye—

Novelists and playwrights have often seen madness with a “discerning Eye.” In *Hamlet*, show how a character’s apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain what this delusion or eccentric behavior consist of and how it might be judged reasonable. Explain the significance of the “madness” to the work as a whole.