Hamlet Discussion Topics

Although Hamlet ultimately rejects it at the end of the play, suicide is an ever present solution to the problems in the drama. Discuss the play's suggestion of suicide and imagery of death, with particular attention to Hamlet's two important statements about suicide: the "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" soliloquy and the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. Why did Ophelia commit suicide? What was the reason behind this deed?

Analyze the use of descriptions and images in Hamlet. How does Shakespeare use descriptive language to enhance the visual possibilities of a stage production? How does he use imagery to create a mood of tension, suspense, fear, and despair?

Analyze the use of comedy in Hamlet, paying particular attention to the gravediggers, Osric, and Polonius. Does comedy serve merely to relieve the tension of the tragedy, or do the comic scenes serve a more serious thematic purpose as well? Explain, using textual evidence.

Analyze Hamlet’s "To be or not to be" soliloquy (or any of his other soliloquies in the play).

Aristotle said that consistency and probability are the two most important elements in the drama. Does Shakespeare, in creating the characters in Hamlet, follow or ignore this idea? You may consider both major and minor characters.

Choose a woman in the play and explain her significance in the story.

Compare and contrast the characters of Hamlet and Horatio. How are they alike and unlike each other and why?

Conflict is essential to drama. Show that Hamlet presents both an outward and inward conflict.

Consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in Hamlet. Why might Shakespeare have created characters like this? Are they there for comic relief, or do they serve a more serious purpose? Why does the news of their deaths come only after the deaths of the royal family in Act V, as if this news were not anticlimactic? Is it acceptable for Hamlet to treat them as he does? Why or why not?

Did Hamlet obtain justice or revenge at the end of the play?

Discuss the importance of appearance and reality in Hamlet (strong hint: Why is Hamlet so interested in the players?).

Discuss Hamlet's treatment of and ideas about women. How might these help to clarify some of the interpretative issues of the play? You might want to consider carefully the way he talks about sexuality.

Discuss the importance in Hamlet of one of the following: (a) Ophelia, (b) Rozencrantz and Guildenstern, (c) the ghost of Hamlet senior, (d) Polonius, (e) Fortinbras, (f) Gertrude. Do not just write about what these people do. Discuss how an attention to them illuminates issues of central importance to the play as a whole (i.e., deal with matters of importance to the thematic or character development in the play, not with matters of the plot).

Does Hamlet live and die by making free choices, or are his choices all controlled by forces larger than himself?

Does Hamlet act in accordance with Polonius's advice to Laertes? (Hamlet didn't necessarily hear the advice, but he may share this courtly value system anyway, having been raised to defend himself against plots and conniving so he could rule after his father.)

Examine the conflict between planning to do something and actually doing it in Hamlet.

Discuss Hamlet's treatment of and ideas about women. How might these help to clarify some of the interpretative issues of the play? You might want to consider carefully the way he talks about sexuality.

Explain the effect Hamlet's ideas of sin and salvation has on the development of his character and the movement of the plot.

Find examples of Hamlet's voices as he speaks as:
- The avenger
- The philosopher, unemotional reasoner
- The actor, self critical and self directed
- The ironic observer
- The disgusted observer, bemoaning the hopelessness of the human condition
- The indecisive man desperate to be decisive

How do Hamlet's seven soliloquies reveal his character? Provide evidence to support your claims from EACH of his soliloquies.

Identify the three revenge plots in Hamlet, and explain why each is important to the development of the play.
Hamlet Discussion Topics

Is something rotten in the state of Denmark? If so, what precisely is it? Is anyone in particular responsible or is the rottenness simply a condition of life?

Is Hamlet primarily a tragedy of revenge?

Look through the text and find five questions that drive the theme, characters, or plot of the play. Explain why the questions are important and why Shakespeare poses them as questions and not as answers.

Many critics take a deterministic view of Hamlet’s plot, arguing that the prince’s inability to act and tendency toward melancholy reflection is a “tragic flaw” that leads inevitably to his demise. Is this an accurate way of understanding the play? Why or why not? Given Hamlet’s character and situation, would another outcome of the play have been possible?

Mel Gibson (who also plays Hamlet in a film version of the play) says that all of the deaths during the play result from Hamlet’s decision not to kill Claudius while he is praying. Agree or disagree and explain why.

Polonius is an interesting character in Hamlet. Discuss.

Reveal the philosophy of Hamlet by his affectionate love of the theater.

Select a particular scene in Hamlet (preferably a short one) and discuss its importance in the play. How does this particular part of the action contribute significantly to our response to what is going on? What might be missing if a director decided to cut this scene (e.g., Claudius at prayer, the scene between Polonius and Reynaldo, the gravedigger scene).

Select one of Hamlet’s soliloquies and by a detailed attention to the poetry discuss the nature of Hamlet’s feelings as they reveal themselves in this speech. What insights might this speech provide into the prince’s elusive character? Confine your attention strictly to the soliloquy you have selected.

Shakespeare includes characters in Hamlet who are obvious foils for Hamlet, including, most obviously, Horatio, Fortinbras, Claudius, and Laertes. Compare and contrast Hamlet with each of these characters. How are they alike? How are they different? How does each respond to the crises with which he is faced? When necessary - and it will be - provide textual evidence to support claims.

Suicide is an important theme in Hamlet. Discuss how the play treats the idea of suicide morally, religiously, and aesthetically, with particular attention to Hamlet’s two important statements about suicide: the “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt” soliloquy (I.ii.129–158) and the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy (III.i.56–88). Why does Hamlet believe that, although capable of suicide, most human beings choose to live, despite the cruelty, pain, and injustice of the world?

Think about Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia. Does he love her? Does he stop loving her? Did he ever love her? What evidence can you find in the play to support your opinion?

Throughout the play, Hamlet claims to be feigning madness, but his portrayal of a madman is so intense and so convincing that many readers believe that Hamlet actually slips into insanity at certain moments in the play. Do you think this is true, or is Hamlet merely playing insanity? What evidence can you cite for either claim?

To what extent are the female characters in this drama pivotal to the story’s structure? (That is, try defending or modifying this thesis statement: Everything that happens in this play occurs because of a woman.) [Hint: What are Claudius’s motives for killing his brother? What finally moves Hamlet to kill Claudius?]

Weigh each of Hamlet’s soliloquies to consider whether he seems willful, purposeful, or driven by madness or fate. Here a list by act, scene, and lines:

I, ii, 129 59
I, iii, 254 258
I, v, 92 132
II, ii, 525 580
III, I, 56 69
III, ii, 365 370
IV, iv, 32 66