

Hamlet – Topics and Questions

ONE: Authorial Intent

Shakespeare's main intention with *Hamlet* as with all his tragedies, is to mock and defame a foreign nation, its nobles and its religion. Collect nine pieces of evidence of intention from *Hamlet* and organize it with a thesis and three body paragraphs with citations.

TWO: Trust and Distrust

Two major themes in the play are trust and distrust. Explain the following with proofs:

1. Hamlet briefly distrusts the ghost then trusts it.
2. Laertes and Polonius distrust Hamlet's love for Ophelia.
3. Polonius distrusts Laertes.
4. King Claudius distrusts Hamlet.
5. Hamlet distrusts everyone – especially Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

THREE: Communication

A major pattern is miscommunication, either by intent or accident. Polonius's love of spying rather than direct communication, and his insistence that romantic love is troubling Hamlet, causes Gertrude and Claudius to misunderstand Hamlet. Secondly, Hamlet's bitter reticence about his true feelings, and his sarcasm, similes, metaphors, insults and deliberate nonsense(?) keep everyone from understanding him. Explain the following with proofs:

1. How does Hamlet deceive his parents about his true feelings, and what are those feelings?
2. Ophelia, at her father's request, tries to test Hamlet's true feelings, but Hamlet sees what's she's trying to do and rebuffs her.
3. About what do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deceive Hamlet? Why does Hamlet see through their deception?

Or,

1. Polonius -- Secrecy and spying, lying
2. Hamlet – Obscurity and intentional confusion, insults
3. Claudius – oxymorons in 1.2

FOUR: Conspiracies

The theme of conspiracies is introduced by Queen Gertrude in Act Four, as she claims that Ophelia has started to speak of conspiracies that are dangerous to the country. What conspiracies

might she be speaking about? What kind of dangers or problems might happen if people learn about these conspiracies?

Here is a list of the conspiracies in *Hamlet*;

- Polonius conspires with Reynaldo to spy on his son, Laertes.
- Polonius conspires with the royal couple and his daughter to spy on Hamlet.
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern conspire with Claudius to spy on Hamlet
- Claudius heads a conspiracy to have Hamlet killed in England.
- Claudius conspires with Laertes to kill Hamlet.
- In the end, Gertrude feels guilty – why? Was she involved in a secret plot to kill her first husband? That would be another conspiracy.

Discuss some of these conspiracies and provide proof from the play.

Write about any other modern-day conspiracies you know about. If you know of none, you can search for information about one on the web.

FIVE: Hamlet's Death Wish

Because his religion forbids suicide, Hamlet appears intent on giving people excuses to kill him. Explore this topic with evidence and reference to some of the following. You may add your own.

1. He openly wishes to be educated in a city famous for Protestantism – this makes him a traitor to his Catholic country.
2. He severely insults Polonius
3. He threatens to impregnate Ophelia
4. His reckless and unnecessary murder of Polonius.
5. The disgusting night-time incident with Ophelia, which might be construed to mean he intended to rape her.
6. The staging of the plays is intended to reveal the truth about Claudius, but it is more likely to reveal to Claudius that Hamlet is obsessed with catching him, and what would be the result of that?
7. In 3.2.324 he tells the spies that he is upset about lacking “advancement” – meaning he is upset about not being king and wishes to be king.
8. He hides Polonius' body.
9. He gives the Norwegian army permission to march through his country. Think about Fortinbras' true intention and the unlikelihood that he's really interested in a piece of Poland.
10. His provoking of Ophelia's brother, Laertes.

Fact Digging Questions

1. Provide evidence that Hamlet is wrong to seek to avenge his father. The evidence is in the words spoken by the ghost.

2. Provide evidence that Claudius is an awful king. Do not refer to the murder and marriage. Discuss his treatment of Laertes and Hamlet in Act 1, and consider the imminent war with Fortinbras.