

Hamlet Reading Guide, Act V

Name _____

- Use these questions to guide you in taking notes on the play. Also write down your own notes as you read, paying particular attention to anything that strikes you as interesting, confusing, surprising, funny or beautiful. Label your notes with the act and scene numbers and keep them in order in your notebook or binder. Record line numbers and short quotations as evidence for your ideas.
- Define the literary terms in your notes. They are in **boldface** on this handout. Use the dictionary of literary terms, available in the cabinet, to help you.
- Feel free to read a summary of each act before you read the act itself. These are readily available online. Story versions of *Hamlet* are available in the library.
- A note on the text notes: use them to help you understand vocabulary and cultural details that we, a twenty-first century audience, probably won't understand on our own. You are not required to read them, but you should look to them first when lines are confusing.

1. In Act IV, we saw the **reversal**, or the change of fortune for Hamlet. Reversal is a loss of power or a fall of the protagonist. How does Hamlet lose power or "fall" in Act IV? Has his fortune (or luck) changed?

Scene 1

2. As Hamlet returns to his country and family, what changes are there in his character?
3. Notice the morbid bits of comedy in the speeches with the gravediggers (often called the clowns) in this scene. What could be the function of the humor here?
4. Notice that the only one in the play to match Hamlet's wit and word play is the gravedigger. Or, perhaps, the gravedigger is so dull that he doesn't understand Hamlet's questions and takes everything too literally. Write down two examples of the wit or word play that Shakespeare includes in their conversation. What do you think of this connection between the gravedigger and Hamlet?
5. When Hamlet regards Yorick's skull (a famous scene), what conclusion does he come to about death of great people and common people?
6. What does Hamlet say about Laertes when he sees him?
7. Ophelia's funeral rites are "maimed" or incomplete because she is not allowed a Christian burial, for her death is considered a suicide. Claudius has convinced the priest to give her *some* of the burial rites because she was mad.

8. Why does Hamlet fight with Laertes over Ophelia's grave? This is his last rash action in the play, and it foreshadows a more serious fight.

Scene 2

9. What does Hamlet say here about rash action? How has the balance of thinking and acting in his character changed?

10. What could lines 10-11 mean (the end of Hamlet's speech)?

11. What had Hamlet discovered on his sea journey? What has he done to his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

12. Why will Hamlet and Laertes fight if they are not fighting to kill or hurt each other? What's the purpose of the duel?

13. Horatio suggests that they cancel the duel because Hamlet is not as fit as Laertes. Read Hamlet's response (lines 215-220) and the notes that go with it. Can you summarize what he says about death here?

14. (lines 222-239) Hamlet apologizes to Laertes here. What does he say? How does Laertes accept his apology?

15. Why does Claudius tell Gertrude not to drink from the cup?

16. Summarize the action in lines 295-365. This is the **catastrophe** of the play.

17. Horatio tries to drink from the poisoned cup, but Hamlet stops him. What does Hamlet ask Horatio to do (lines 347-354)?

18. At the end, who does Hamlet suggest will be the next king of Denmark? What are his last words about Hamlet?

19. Define the elements of tragedy: **pathos** and **catharsis**. At which point in this scene do you think the audience would feel pathos? Is there a catharsis in the scene?

20. In what ways is Hamlet a **tragic hero**?