Hamlet Act 5 Discussion Questions

Act 5 Scene 1

1) At the beginning of this scene, two gravediggers are shoveling out a grave for Ophelia. What are they debating about? (Lines 1 – 32).

2) One of the purposes of the grave-diggers scene is to provide some “comic relief” in the tragedy. How is this accomplished in lines 33 – 56?

3) Hamlet and Horatio enter at a distance and watch the gravediggers work.
   A) What do the two talk about as they watch? (Lines 67 – 72)

   B) As he continues to watch the gravedigger, Hamlet says, “That skull had a tongue in it and could sing / once. How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if / it were Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder! / It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass / now o'erreaches, one that would circumvent God, / might it not?” in lines 75 – 82. What is annoying/troubling him in this scene? (lines 90 – 114).
C) Why do you think Shakespeare would include this scene with Hamlet in a graveyard speculating death? Could this foreshadow something that happens in the final scene? Might Hamlet change his mind in killing Claudius as he sees what happens after people die?

4) Hamlet decides to speak/joke with the gravedigger.
   A) When Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose grave he digs, how does the gravedigger respond? (lines 120 - 139).

   B) During this scene the gravedigger (obviously not recognizing Hamlet) reveals the public's opinion of Hamlet and what they have heard of his disappearance. Explain this. (Lines 151 – 167).

5) After Hamlet discovers the skull of Yorick, King Hamlet’s jester, Hamlet dwells on the subject of death.
   A) What is he reflecting on in lines 190 – 202?

   B) Why does Hamlet allude to Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar in lines 204 – 223?
6) Laertes thinks that Ophelia should have a better funeral service. What is the priest’s (doctor's) answer? (Lines 233 – 242).

7) What does Laertes mean when he says, “Lay her i’ th’ earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest, / A ministering angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling” to the priest/doctor performing the funeral in lines 248 – 252?

8) What prompts Laertes to jump into Ophelia’s grave? (Lines 258 – 266).

9) After Hamlet makes himself known in the graveyard, Laertes jumps out of Ophelia’s grave, and the two begin to fight.

   A) How does Hamlet warn as they begin to fight? (Lines 267 – 277).

C) In this scene Hamlet talks of his great love for Ophelia. Would you agree that Hamlet's reaction to finding out Ophelia is dead (particularly his poignant cry, "What! the fair Ophelia!" (line 253)) is further proof of his love, or is it just a gut reaction to Laertes' expression of grief?

D) Why does Hamlet profess of his love of Ophelia to Laertes? Why do you think he has something to prove?

E) What does the King say to Laertes to console him after Laertes and Hamlet are separated? (lines 312 – 319).

Act 5 Scene 2

10) In lines 1 – 62 Hamlet explains to Horatio what happened while he was on the ship.
   
   A) Explain how he found out the King’s orders (lines 1 – 31)

   B) What did Hamlet do with the King’s orders? (lines 33 – 62)
C) Throughout Hamlet's conversation with Horatio, he says things like "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" and "that was heaven ordinant." Hamlet is convinced now more than ever that divine providence governs man's life, and that things happen as they are meant to happen. Do you feel Hamlet was justified in forging the King's order? How do you feel about what he did to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

11) Horatio then remarks to Hamlet, "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't" in line 63. Hamlet defends his actions to Horatio by saying, "Why, man, they did make love to this employment; / They are not near my conscience" (5.5.57-58). What does he mean here?

12) In Act 1 the Ghost asked Hamlet to avenge his death by killing Claudius.

   A) Discuss who else has been affected by Hamlet's revenge plot since Act 1.

   B) How has Hamlet's character changed throughout the play as his revenge plot has intensified? Do you consider him to be a hero at this point?
13) Claudius' behavior horrifies Horatio who exclaims, “Why, what a king is this!” (line 70).

A) What does Hamlet remind Horatio of to show him that Claudius needs to be killed? (Lines 71 – 76)

B) Hamlet then asks Horatio: “And is ’t not to be / damned / To let this canker of our nature come / In further evil?” (lines 77 – 80). What does this mean?

C) When Horatio worries that Claudius will learn the outcome of events in England soon, Hamlet assures Horatio that he will soon eliminate the King. However, what is bothering Hamlet? (lines 85 – 90).

D) In the next scene that we read, we are going to be introduced to a new character: Osric, a foolish courtier who believes that he is extremely charming and loves to show his appreciation for the charm of others. When Hamlet is annoyed or angry at characters, how does he seem to interact with them? What sort of language does he use? Give a few examples.
14) Osric arrives on the scene to bring Hamlet a letter.

A) Hamlet does not respect Osric, but he explains to Horatio why Osric is welcomed at Claudius’ court. What is this reason? (Lines 97 – 101)

B) How does Hamlet make fun of Osric and what is amusing about the way that Osric responds to Hamlet during their conversation? (Lines 102 – 114).

15) Osric has come to tell Hamlet that Claudius wants Hamlet to fence with Laertes and that the king has made a wager with Laertes that Hamlet will win in lines 114 – 116.

A) What does Osric also say about Laertes? (lines 118 – 124).

B) Why would Claudius make the wager in Hamlet’s favor when everyone knows that Laertes is more skilled at fencing?

C) Osric then explains to Hamlet that Laertes his two weapons: a rapier and a dagger. He then goes on to explain the details of Claudius’ wager. What are these details? (Lines 160 – 181)
16) When Hamlet first saw Osric coming, he asks Horatio “Dost know this water-fly?” in line 95. A “water-fly” in Shakespeare’s time was the same as in our time: a tiny little creature that flits aimlessly over the surface of the water. Why do you think that Shakespeare would have a rather comedic figure such as Osric be the one who invites Hamlet to his death?

17) Hamlet agrees to the duel arranged by the very man who has already tried to kill him and succeeded in killing Hamlet’s father. Hamlet seems to think that if he loses the match, he will only suffer from embarrassment and not lose his life. Why do you think that Hamlet does not seem to suspicious of Claudius and the reasons for the fencing match?

18) Horatio warns Hamlet by saying, “You will lose this wager, my lord” in line 223 and also when he says “If your mind dislike anything, obey it” in line 231.

A) How does Hamlet respond? Does he feel confident about his choice to take part in the match?

B) Hamlet then tells Horatio: “Not a whit. We defy augury. There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is ’t to leave betimes? Let be.” (Lines 233 – 238). What does he mean by this?
19) The King calls Hamlet and Laertes together and has them begin the duel by clasping hands. They then speak a few words to one another before beginning the duel.

A) What does Hamlet first say to Laertes? (Lines 240 – 258)

B) What is Laertes’ response? (Lines 259 – 267).

C) Hamlet’s desire to attain Laertes’ forgiveness clearly represents an important shift in his mental state. Describe this.

20) The duel begins, and Hamlet strikes Laertes but declines to drink from the cup, saying that he will play another hit first. However, when he hits Laertes again, and Gertrude rises to drink from the cup.

A) Why do you think Gertrude disobeys her husband and drinks the wine?

B) Is Gertrude’s death an accident or suicide?
C) Why doesn’t the King do more to stop Gertrude from drinking the poisoned wine?

D) What happens after Laertes tells Hamlet that he will also die and that the king is responsible for the set-up? (Lines 344 – 363)

21) Describe the final exchange between Hamlet and Horatio in lines 364 – 385.

22) Osric announces the sound of an approaching army, which means that Fortinbras is returning from his victory over Poland. As Hamlet dies, he tells Horatio to ensure that the Danish crown passes to Fortinbras, as Hamlet believes he is the best choice. Why do you think Hamlet feels this way?

23) Fortinbras enters the castle, saying “Where is this sight?” How does the play end? (lines 400 – 449)
24) The final scene of the play completes the revenge triangle. Describe how all the sons of the murdered fathers (King Hamlet, King Fortinbras, and Polonius) have seen vengeance served.