***Hamlet*: Study Questions**

1) To what extent does *Hamlet* correspond to [**classical**](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/tragedy.html#aristotle) **or** [**medieval**](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/tragedy.html#medieval) **notions of tragedy**?  What (if anything) is Hamlet's [fatal flaw](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/tragedy.html#bradley)?  Why does he hesitate to act after promising his father's ghost that he will avenge his murder?  Compare/contrast the protagonist's decisiveness and will to act in [*Macbeth*](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/macbeth.html).

2) Note the various **familial relationships** in *Hamlet*.  Compare and contrast the family unit of Polonius / Laertes / Ophelia with Hamlet's relationships to the Ghost of Hamlet Sr., to Gertrude and to Claudius.  Like Hamlet, **Laertes** and **Fortinbras** are sons confronted with a father's death.  To what extent do they function as [**foils**](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/ayli.html#foil) to Hamlet?  What do they have in common?  How do they differ?

3)  Why does Hamlet wait so long to kill Claudius?  What are the reasons for his **hesitation**?  How valid are they?  How many times does he have the opportunity to attack Claudius?  What are his reasons for not doing so?

4) *Hamlet* is a play in which nothing can be taken at face value:  appearances are frequently deceptive, and many characters engage in play-acting, spying and pretense.  What deliberate attempts are made at **deception**?  Are the intended audiences deceived?  While some deceptions are perpetrated in order to conceal secrets, others aim to uncover hidden truths.  Which are which?  To what extent are they successful?  Note references to appearances, disguises, pretense, seeming, masks, acting, etc.

5) Pay attention to the treatment of the women characters **Gertrude** and **Ophelia**.  Is there any basis for the Freudian interpretation of an **Oedipal attraction** between Hamlet and his mother?  Hamlet does seem obsessed with his mother's sexuality.  How old is Hamlet?  How old do you think Gertrude is?  Is Hamlet's disgust at Gertrude's sexuality justified?  To what extent is Gertrude guilty?  Was she "in on" her husband's murder?  Has Claudius confided in her since the murder?  How does Hamlet's perception of his mother affect his behavior or attitude toward Ophelia?  Why does he tell Ophelia to go to a nunnery?  Does Hamlet really love Ophelia?  If so, why is he cruel to her?

6) Hamlet claims that his madness is feigned, an "antic disposition" which he puts on for his own purposes (I.v.172).  Why would Hamlet want to feign **madness**?  How can an **appearance of insanity** help him achieve his ends?  (Compare the role of Touchstone, the "fool" in AYLI.)  Is he really sane throughout the play, or does he ever cross the line into madness?  What about Ophelia's mad scene?  Is it real or feigned?  Is there "method in her madness" as well, or is she entirely irrational?  Why has she gone mad?  (What two reasons do her songs suggest?)

7) Hamlet famously declares that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark."  What other **natural imagery** is used to describe the corruption of the Danish court?  What "**unnatural**" events or behaviors preceded the events recounted in the play?  What "unnatural" events or behaviors occur during the play?  Compare/contrast with [AYLI](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/ayli.html#nature), [HV](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/hv.html#appearance) and [MAC](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/macbeth.html#unnatural).

8)  **Moral ambiguity**?  *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* recount similar stories (the usurping of a throne) from differing perspectives -- those of perpetrator and avenger.  Just as Macbeth was not ALL bad, Hamlet is not ALL good.  What are some of his faults or short-comings?  Do these constitute a "**fatal flaw**" (to use the concept and terminology of [Aristotle](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/tragedy.html#aristotle) or [Bradley](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/tragedy.html#bradley))? Why might Shakespeare have chosen to remain in the "grey area" rather than a more "black and white" depiction of Good and Evil?  Compare with Shakespeare's depiction of the protagonists in [*Henry V*](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/hv.html#political) and in [Macbeth](http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/macbeth.html#moralambiguity).