Pre-Reading Notes:

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the late 1590s and published it in about 1601. In the list of the Shakespeare Canon, it comes after *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* and before the other three great tragedies: *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. I find it interesting to note that after Shakespeare wrote his four great tragedies, he turned to writing romances (not the “I’m so in love with you” kind, Silly, the imaginative, fantasy-filled kind). The professor who taught the graduate courses in Shakespeare at Utah State said that he thought that once Shakespeare had plumbed the depths of the human psyche in his tragedies, he preferred to fill his life with fantasy. I think he may have been right. As you read and watch *Hamlet*, you must remember that a lot of what you are seeing is the interpretation of one director. Shakespeare gave us very few stage directions, so we are left to compare our own ideas of how lines are delivered to how the director of any one production might have lines delivered.

*Hamlet* is a dark and serious tragedy with dark and serious characters who face the horror of their own weaknesses and evils in the five acts that traipse across the Shakespearean stage. One critic of the play wrote that Hamlet (the character) is much bigger than *Hamlet* (the play). I think you may agree. He is the one character actors long to play because it is in the character of Hamlet that we are asked to ponder the deepest emotions of human existence. I hope you enjoy it.

Act I Notes:
Scene 1

Shakespeare does not start us off in *Hamlet* with the main characters. Instead, he has us meet the sentries on duty at the castle before we get inside the castle at all. These guys are hanging out watching the gates, and they are nervous. Francisco, who is the one on duty at the opening, is being relieved by his friend, Bernardo. But when they meet, Bernardo, who should be challenged by the sentry on duty, is the one who challenges Francisco. And they are both awfully quick to become defensive. We should probably wonder why...

Anyway, Francisco says that he is “sick at heart” which translates into being nervous or anxious or in some way saddened. And we should probably wonder why...Bernardo tells Francisco, as Francisco is leaving, that he is expecting some “rivals” to his watch. The word rival just means partner in this context. Bernardo is not planning on having some sort of contest with his fellow sentries. Anyway, Bernardo is waiting for Marcellus and Horatio to join him, and it doesn’t take us long to find out why. As it turns out, Marcellus is one of the sentries, while Horatio, who should be challenged by the sentry on duty, is the one who challenges Francisco. And they are both awfully quick to become defensive. We should probably wonder why...

But he is about to become a believer. The Ghost appears, and the two sentries want Horatio to talk to it. The idea was that since he could speak Latin, he could talk to the dead.
(The line is actually, “Thou art a scholar,” as they try to get the Ghost to tell them what's up. Kinda makes you want to keep studying, right? Don't you want to be the one who speaks to the ghosts?) After the Ghost disappears, the two sentries ask Horatio why the kingdom seems to be on high alert and preparing for war. Horatio recounts for them the story of their old king, who bore a remarkable resemblance to the apparition which has just appeared to them, and the old king of Norway who fought over some land. The King of Norway was called Fortinbras, and Norway's son is Young Fortinbras. (Shakespeare uses the Elizabethan way of referring to the country and the monarch with the same name. So “Norway” means the King of Norway, and “Denmark” means the King of Denmark.) Young Fortinbras wants to get back his father's lands, and he has made some threats that he is going to raise an army and get back what his father lost. Now, this dueling to the death over land might seem a little unfair, but it was a perfectly acceptable way to make a living. Anyway, since the lands were won in combat, and since the dead king (King Hamlet) was a great warrior, the sentries and the now-believing Horatio wonder if the Ghost has appeared to warn his country about the threat that Fortinbras poses...As if...

The Ghost reappears after Horatio's story, and the three men try to stop it from leaving. But it disappears when the morning cock crows, and they decide that they should go and tell the son of the dead king, Young Hamlet, about the ghost.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? First, why don’t the sentries go to the new king and tell him about the ghost? Don’t you think that a king would want to know that his predecessor is running around in the spirit world causing all this anxiety and depression? Hmmm.

? Second, what kind of a world does the Ghost inhabit now? We know that he appears to the sentries in his full armor, not in his burial clothes. That would seem to indicate that a ghost in Shakespeare’s theology could appear in any manner he or she chooses. And why can’t the Ghost stay once the morning light breaks? What is it about morning that protects the living from the ghostly world of the dead?

Scene 2:

In this scene we are going to get to meet the big players in the drama. We have, first of all, Claudius, the King of Denmark. Second, we have his lovely wife, Gertrude. And, finally, we have “their” son, Hamlet, the Prince. But what fun would it be to have such a happy family? As we find out, Claudius is actually the brother of the dead former king, King Hamlet. Gertrude was once King Hamlet's wife, and now she is married to her onetime brother-in-law. And Hamlet, Jr. is the son of Gertrude and King Hamlet, and he is none too happy that his mother has married his uncle. (In the next few lines, we will find out that Gertrude waited less than two months to marry her brother-in-law.) But at the beginning of the scene, no one is saying anything about it all. Claudius and Gertrude are entering the great reception room in the castle as newlyweds, and the whole Danish council is with them.

This all might seem a little strange since we don’t really know how Denmark chose its kings or even if Shakespeare knew how Denmark chose its kings. Let’s assume, though, that it is not unheard of for a brother of a king to take the throne, even though a son should be the preferable heir. And let's assume that Claudius would need some sort of tacit
approval from the nobles of the Danish Court to take on this new role. And let’s also assume that although the people might think to raise an eyebrow or two over Gertrude’s replacing one brother/husband with another, they will accept it. At any rate, Claudius has taken over, and while he may need the support of the nobility, he doesn’t need their permission. (But since we are wondering, let’s allow ourselves to wonder why Hamlet the son is not taking over his father’s throne. Is he being pushed aside? Is there something wrong with him?)

In his first speech, we get a glimpse of why Claudius might be the one who takes over. He is really quite a good speech-maker, and he explains away a few of the eyebrow-raising controversies in one fell swoop. His country, remember, is in mourning for his brother, the dead king. Also, they are being threatened by the actions of Fortinbras, the nephew of the King of Norway. He has requests to handle from members of the Danish court. Finally, his nephew/stepson is quite melancholy and bothering everyone with his grieving. So, Claudius starts out with explaining to the court about how he is mourning his brother as they all are. No one could be sadder, as a matter of fact. So it is with both sadness (“dirge in marriage”) and happiness (“mirth in funeral”) that he has taken both the crown and the queen for himself. He then moves on to Fortinbras and shows that he is a decisive king who will keep his country out of war. He is going to take care of the Fortinbras problem by getting the uncle of the young warrior involved. So, he sends his ambassadors off to take care of this little problem, admonishing them that they have no more power to negotiate with Norway than he has given them in this order. He is then ready to hear the petitions of the courtiers such as Laertes and grant their requests. And he is ready to party. Yes, indeed, things are really going Claudius’s way...

Well, except for that pesky stepson/nephew: Hamlet. Hamlet is hanging around the court, looking all sad and weepy for his father (who, let us remember, has been dead only about two months). Claudius tries to perk him up by bringing him out to explain his sadness to the whole noble court. But Claudius doesn’t really “get” Hamlet’s speech. Hamlet makes two puns in his first lines of dialogue that are insults to Claudius. First, he tells us that he is “A little more than kin and less than kind” and second, he says that he is “too much [in] the sun.” In the first pun, he points out that he is too close as “kin” to the king now that he is both nephew and son. In the second, he states that he is too close to the “sun,” or, as the Elizabethan audience would have known, the king. He could also be referring to the idea that he is too much of a “son” to his dead father to join in the festivities of his mother’s remarriage. As we read on in the play, we will often hear Hamlet using language that baffles others around him. This is just one example.

Gertrude jumps in then to try and salvage this family get-together. She asks Hamlet to “cast...off” his “nighted color” and see that her new husband could be a friend to him. In other words, she doesn’t want Hamlet to walk around the court wearing black and feeling miserable. She doesn’t want him to be “forever” looking for his father “in the dust,” meaning that Hamlet has been walking around with his eyes cast down to the ground. (Really, though, let us remember that Hamlet’s father has only been dead for TWO MONTHS!) Claudius adds to this discussion by telling Hamlet that his grief is “unmanly,” a “fault to heaven,” and a “fault against the dead.” Hamlet is, therefore, a bad son and a bad person and, frankly, a little unmanly by mourning his father. Wow. That’s a lot of bad.

Both Gertrude and Claudius are anxious for Hamlet to stay in Denmark and not return to school in Wittenberg (a famous German university). Hamlet agrees to his
mother’s request that he stay in Denmark, and Claudius just chooses to pass this off as unimportant. He just doesn’t want to fight with his stepson/nephew any more. He wants to go off and party. So he does.

And we get the first of the great soliloquies in Hamlet: “too, too sullied flesh.” Hamlet wishes that he could just melt and disappear. He wishes that he could kill himself, that God had not made it against the rules. He knows that everyone else is happy, and he alone is the mourning one. But at this point, he seems to believe that he is in the wrong, that if everyone else can just get over the death of the previous king, he should be able to do that as well. He laments his mother’s choice to marry someone who is like a “satyr” when she had been married to “Hyperion.” (For those of you not up on the Greek mythology, Hyperion was a sun god and a satyr was a half man, half goat creature with a reputation for being ugly and lecherous.) He is angry with her and calls her “frailty,” and he goes on and on about the speed with which she exchanged one husband for another. (And he frankly shows what I think is an unhealthy interest in his mother’s “sheets.”) But at the end of his speech, he resolves that he will hold his tongue.

Until…Horatio comes in and they talk about the Ghost. Hamlet is most amazed, as any one of us would be, that his father’s spirit is walking around, and he resolves that he will watch with Horatio and the sentries to see what is up.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? What qualities make Claudius a good king? I mean, he is a little creepy and all, but he is not like his brother as a king. He doesn’t immediately decide to go to war with Norway; instead he is going to send ambassadors to negotiate with the uncle of Young Fortinbras. Maybe keeping his country out of an expensive war is a good thing?

? Going along with this, what is wrong with a kingdom getting over their grief and moving on to party with their new king? Should they really mourn forever? What is the appropriate time period for mourning?

? I’m always wondering what kind of a relationship Hamlet had with his uncle before his father died. Claudius would have been an institution around the court. He married the Queen pretty quickly. Was he always in love with her? Did he hang out with his nephew and teach him how to party? to fence? to talk to women? Hamlet seems to hate Claudius a lot in this scene. Is it just because of the marriage or was there some bad blood in the family before?

? And speaking of families, what is up with Polonius’s son? (More on him in the next scene.)

Scene 3

This scene opens on the family of Polonius, specifically his two children, Ophelia and Laertes. It seems that Ophelia has been keeping company lately with the prince, Hamlet. Now, here is a bit of a mystery to me. Laertes tells Ophelia that she should avoid Hamlet and not take him at his word. Why would he say that? If his sister marries the future King of Denmark, he would be set. Why would he discourage her from pursuing this match?

Well, I can’t answer that, but I have a couple of theoretical points. Hamlet would have grown up with people like Laertes, possibly even Laertes. Polonius is a courtier, a
councilor to the king, and his children would have grown up at court. Laertes and Hamlet are close in age. They were probably educated by the same tutors. Later in the play, Hamlet refers to Laertes as a “brother,” seeming to indicate that the two men were raised to be close. So, why aren’t they? Could it be that Laertes doesn’t like that spoiled little prince? Could it be that Laertes, who as we will see in future acts has some ambitions, doesn’t want to get too close to a man he might want to depose in the future? Maybe Laertes is just jealous that Hamlet seems to have everything, while he has had to work for all that he has.

In any event, Laertes wants his sister to stay away from Hamlet, and she says that she will. She does, though, admonish him not to be hypocritical, telling her to mind her manners and her behavior all while engaging in bad behavior of his own. What does Ophelia know that the rest of Denmark might not know? And while the two of them are obviously very close, Laertes can’t get out of Denmark fast enough. When his father arrives to bid him a second farewell, we get the idea that Laertes tires easily of his father and his father’s propensity to complicate everything and to meddle in the affairs of everyone around him.

Polonius gives Laertes some advice that has been quoted often as an example of Shakespeare’s inspirational language. But really, that long speech is a series of self-serving pieces of advice. Polonius tells his son that he should:

- Keep his thoughts to himself and think before he acts
- Be familiar with his friends but not vulgar, meaning that he should have controlled fun with them.
- Hold on to the friends whose loyalty he has already tried. (The implications of that are sinister. Does Polonius want his son to deliberately test his friends to make sure that they are loyal? What is Polonius afraid of?)
- Be careful of his new friends.
- Be careful of getting into fights. However, if Laertes should get into a fight with someone, he should make sure that the other guy looks worse than he does.
- Dress as nicely as he can with his limited funds because appearances are everything.
- Avoid borrowing or lending his money. Of course, one would want to be careful not to need to borrow money, but lending money is another matter. Polonius seems to be telling his son that he should be careful not to give his money away to someone who needs it.
- Finally, be true to himself.

So, Polonius isn’t giving his son advice on how to be a better person; he is teaching him how to watch out for himself first, foremost, and always.

Once Laertes has extricated himself from his father and gone on his way, Polonius turns to his daughter and gives her a piece of his mind as well. He tells her that she is making a fool of him by chasing after Hamlet, and he wants her to remember that he has a position to maintain at court. She shouldn’t be embarrassing him. Now, isn’t that interesting? Shouldn’t Polonius want his daughter to marry into the royal family? Does he know something that the rest of us don’t?
In any event, Ophelia comes across in this scene as being unsure of what she should believe. She tells both her brother and her father that she doesn’t know what to make of Hamlet’s behavior, and at the end of the scene, she tells her father that she will stay away from Hamlet in obedience to him.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Does Hamlet really have feelings for Ophelia or is he just playing with her emotions?
? How far has the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet gone? Both her father and her brother warn her about engaging in a sexual relationship with the young prince because she has only one real quality—her virginity—to bargain with for a good match. Is it possible that she is already in too far? (In Kenneth Branagh’s version of Hamlet, the relationship has already gone past this point. But I find only scanty evidence that such a thing was Shakespeare’s intention.)
? Why can’t Ophelia stand up for herself?
? Just what is the twisted relationship between the two families? (Trust me. It is gonna get a lot messier.)

Scene 4

In this scene, Hamlet is off to see the Ghost with the sentries and his pal, Horatio. As they are walking out of the castle, though, Horatio asks Hamlet about the cannon fire that they are hearing. Hamlet explains that this is one of Claudius’s parties, where he drinks and every time he drains his glass, the cannon goes off as a tribute to his party. Everyone cheers, and the king has shown them that he can be as fun as anyone else. Horatio asks Hamlet if this is the custom in Denmark, and Hamlet replies that it is. But then he says something very interesting. He tells Horatio that it is a custom that would be more “honored in the breach than the observance.” He means that it is a custom that should be ignored rather than perpetuated. Hamlet tells Horatio that Denmark is getting a reputation among other nations of being a place for parties. They are “traduced and taxed” by other nations, meaning that other nations are defaming them and looking down on their accomplishments. Now, one might wonder, why isn’t the king more concerned about this? Does this show that Hamlet is a more capable king than his uncle is?

Anyway, this conversation is shut down because the Ghost shows up and, as ghosts are wont to do, interrupts all other thoughts. The Ghost wants to talk to Hamlet alone, but his friends don’t want him to go. They fear for his health and his sanity. Ghosts probably couldn’t directly attack a human being, but they indicate that a ghost might make him mad enough that he will jump off a cliff somewhere. But Hamlet tells them that he is not going to miss this opportunity, that he is not afraid for his soul because a ghost can’t hurt that, and he surely is not afraid of death. And he goes.

Scene 5

And the Ghost tells him the story of the murder of King Hamlet by his pesky little brother, Claudius. And, of course, then Hamlet is called to revenge, and if he is a good son, he will follow the Ghost’s commands.
The Ghost has some pretty interesting things to say about his current condition. He tells Hamlet that because he died with all of his sins “full blown,” he is now being punished. This
would seem to imply that King Hamlet was not above reproach as a person. However, his sins could be small, and since he was unable to repent of them while living, he must now do penance in the afterlife. Note, though, that he calls this “horrible.”

The story of the murder of Hamlet’s father is pretty sad. There was King Hamlet, having a little nap in his orchard, when Claudius came in and poisoned him. He calls this murder “most foul, strange, and unnatural.” Certainly, it is all of those things. Claudius killed a brother, the closest family he has, but he has also killed his king, to whom he owed fidelity. (Remember that to the Elizabethans, the king was chosen by God, and therefore paying one’s duty to the king was akin to paying one’s duty to God.) The murder of a king would necessarily put the natural order of life out of whack, which it has, and this makes it “unnatural.” The murder, of course, opened up the possibility for Claudius to win Gertrude now. Since she is his brother’s widow, that makes the marriage somewhat incestuous, again “unnatural.”

The Ghost, though, is not angry with Gertrude. Another point he makes is that Gertrude is not to be touched by Hamlet’s revenge. Even in death, the old king seems to love and to want to protect his wife. He tells Hamlet that Gertrude was “won” by Claudius, not that she acted against her former husband. King Hamlet’s spirit, though, does think quite a lot of himself, or at least of his living self. He says that Gertrude has debased herself pretty far from one whose love was so elevated to one who is so far beneath him. (Makes you wonder about the relationship between King Hamlet and his brother in life. Did King Hamlet remind his brother often about how much lower a person he was than his brother? Or did he just start to pick on him when he was murdered by him?)

One of my favorite lines in this play happens after Hamlet listens to the Ghost. He says that it is possible to “smile and smile and be a villain.” In this play, we have a number of references to what “seems” to be vs. what actually “is.” Hamlet, here, comments on the fact that someone can look perfectly innocent and pleasant but be hiding a dark heart under that exterior.

When the sentries and Horatio catch up with Hamlet, he acts very strangely, leading up to the question of whether Hamlet actually goes mad or if he just acts mad to throw Claudius off the scent of his trail to revenge. Hamlet tells Horatio and Marcellus that no matter what “antic disposition” he puts on, they are not to tell about what they have seen. He tells them that there is much more to the universe than they thought there was from their narrow experiences. And the Ghost chimes in with his demands that they swear on his sword the oath that they are making to keep his secrets.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Why does the Ghost make a distinction between being Hamlet’s father and being Hamlet’s father’s spirit? What does this suggest about the nature of the Ghost vs. the nature of a human being?

? Is the Ghost real? Hamlet certainly asks that as we continue on with the play. To an Elizabethan audience, this would be a good question. Perhaps the spirit that Hamlet has seen has come to tempt him to evil. Can you really trust a ghost?

? Before hearing the story of the Ghost, Hamlet dislikes his uncle’s behavior, but as soon as he hears the story of the murder, he says, “Oh my prophetic soul.” What does this indicate about Hamlet’s fears of his mother and her new husband?
Why did Claudius kill his brother? Can you find any empathy in your heart for the poor younger brother growing up in his brother's shadow?

**Act II Notes:**

**Scene 1**

When Act I closes, Laertes has just left for France, and when Act II opens up, Polonius is discussing the fact that his son is back in France. This tells us that at least a little bit of time has passed from the final scene in Act I and the first scene in Act II. (Later, Ophelia will say that King Hamlet has been dead “twice two months” or four months. Thus, from the end of Act I to the opening of Act II, two months have passed.)

Act II opens on a pretty disturbing scene between Polonius and his servant Reynaldo. In reading this play, we can often wonder about the motives of the people around Hamlet, and, indeed, in the Danish Court. Do these people really care about what is right or wrong? Or do they just think of themselves all the time? (When I was in AP English in high school, my *Hamlet* paper was titled “Polonius is a Futile Busybody.” Even then, I was disturbed by the way that Polonius meddled in the lives of his children, of the Danish royal family, and in Denmark in general. If I were writing this paper today, I would still bash on Polonius, but I would not ascribe to him the label of “innocuous” as I did in high school. I now think that Polonius is dangerous. He meddles for his own advancement, and people are hurt by it. It’s selfish; it’s cold-hearted. I don’t like him. But I shouldn’t worry too much; he’ll get what is coming to him...)

Anyway, Polonius is sending Reynaldo to France with letters and money for his son, Laertes, who is a student there. However, he gives Reynaldo some directions about what he should do when he gets to France. First, he tells him to inquire about what “Danskers” are in Paris, meaning that he should find out what other Danes are there. Now, why would Polonius want to know all of that? The only reason that I can come up with is that he is so concerned about his own reputation, and he wants to know who is hanging out with his son and hearing stories of himself and his role at court. Remember in Act I when Polonius gave his son advice about how to conduct himself in France? Well, in that speech, though it is good advice, Polonius showed his own true, self-serving colors. In this act, he is going to go even further than just telling his son how to act.

Polonius tells Reynaldo that he should ask around about Laertes and his behavior, but then he tells him to “put on him/What forgeries you please.” He does warn him not to say anything so “rank/As may dishonor him,” but he does want Reynaldo to make up stories about his son to gain the confidence of his friends in France. If Reynaldo goes to someone in France and says, “So, does Laertes still chase women?” the person he is questioning might be more forthcoming about Laertes’ true behavior. Now, I don’t know about you, but this seems a little on the nefarious side of checking up on one’s son. But this is the situation that Polonius creates for his son.

Polonius reveals his true character in this scene, I think. He shows that while he may love his children, he doesn’t really trust them. He is primarily concerned about his own position at court, and if he hurts his children in protecting it, then he doesn’t really feel any concern about that. They are only the extension of himself, and whatever he needs to do, he will.

In the aftermath of this scene, though, Ophelia comes in and tells her father about the “wild” Hamlet moment she has just experienced. Hamlet has appeared to her all
unkempt and undone and looking “loosed out of hell.” Ophelia has been “so affrighted” by this sight that she immediately runs to her father for protection. In Act I, she promised her father that she would stay away from Hamlet, and now it seems that he has gone around the bend because he loves her so much. Polonius tries to find out what Ophelia has been saying to Hamlet, and she tells him that she has kept Hamlet at arm’s length.

So, what has Hamlet been up to since seeing the Ghost? Has he been trying to get to Ophelia? Has he been so self-absorbed that he really doesn’t notice that Ophelia has given him the cold shoulder? And what is Ophelia so afraid of here? Is she afraid that she is responsible for Hamlet’s wild behavior? Does she think that she is in danger from him? Is she just afraid that she is going to get in trouble with her father? Or is she just a skittish little thing all the time?

Polonius’s response is that they need to go to the King with this information. We, the audience, know then some of what Hamlet has been up to during the two months since he saw the Ghost. He has been behaving strangely at court, and the King and Queen are concerned about what is up with him. Moreover, Polonius knows that this is one of the main concerns of the royal couple, and he sees an opportunity to advance his own position by giving them the information that they most want to have. More disturbing to me is Polonius’s willingness to put Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet out there for the whole court to see and dissect. Okay, so, he wants to help Claudius and Gertrude; doesn’t he also want to respect his daughter? The answer, of course, is “No.” He really would use anything within his power for his own advancement.

So, here is the big point to ponder...

? Is Hamlet’s appearance before Ophelia looking all unkempt a part of his “antic” act? or is he, as he seems, mad for her love? (The reason that this is so important is that it has huge implications for character development in this story. We know that before his conversation with the Ghost, he was melancholy and contemplating suicide. That sounds a little crazy to me, and I do see that in this scene, he could just be continuing with that behavior. On the other hand, he did tell his friends that he might be putting on an “antic disposition,” so he could just be pretending to be crazy to throw all the court off his trail. But if he is acting crazy, he is really using Ophelia, manipulating her for his own ends with no regard for her well-being. That adds a nefarious element to his personality that we don’t normally associate with a heroic protagonist.)

Scene 2

In this scene, which is really, really long, we have a number of important plot and character development interactions, and most of the interactions in this scene are about how people are all trying to figure out what is going on with Hamlet. The King and Queen have sent for some of his friends to ferret out what is going on; Polonius thinks he has it figured out when he reads Hamlet’s love letters to Ophelia. But let’s be fair. The Queen comes closest when she tells Claudius that it is most likely the recent death of his father and the hasty marriage of his mother. Still, wouldn’t it be nice if Hamlet were mad for love of Ophelia?

Hamlet’s first confrontation is with Polonius, the man who most wants to reveal what is going on with Hamlet to the King. Hamlet, of course, does not trust him at all, and
he mocks him incessantly throughout this scene. Polonius, who doesn’t seem to understand this mocking, keeps trying to make sense of it all. He does have a great line when he says, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in ‘t.” Polonius recognizes that Hamlet seems mad, but there seems to be some “method” or purpose to this madness, presumably indicating to us that Hamlet is not really mad, but is only dissembling.

Hamlet’s friends are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two school friends, and the Queen says that there is no one that Hamlet feels closer to than these two men. However, there are a few undercurrents running through this scene that we can use to evaluate how important these two men are. First of all, notice that they are almost always together in every scene. The King interchanges their names, and Gertrude has to correct him. They fawn all over the King and tell him that they are there to be commanded by him.

Now, I suppose that they are acting correctly in this situation. Remember that they do now know that there is a Ghost running (or floating) around the castle, and they have no reason to suspect that the former king was murdered. As good Danes, they are there to serve the King of Denmark, no matter what he commands of them. As friends of Hamlet, they have no reason to suspect that his mother doesn’t have his best interests in mind in asking them to spy on her son. And certainly, if any good subject were summoned home by a king, he or she would want to remind the monarch of the debt that must be paid for services rendered. So, maybe Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aren’t all that bad after all. (Nope. I just re-read the whole thing, and they are fawning toadies, and I wouldn’t trust them.)

Hamlet, of course, is suspicious of their arrival. In his speeches in this scene, he develops one of the themes of the play: secrets. In this play, we have a lot of secrets. Hamlet and Ophelia have a secret “fling” going on. (To be fair, it isn’t that “secret.”) Claudius has secrets about how he became King. Gertrude hides her feelings for her former husband. Laertes hides his animosity towards Hamlet. Hamlet hides the Ghost’s message from everyone. So, secrets...Now, here is the question: are secrets okay? On one hand, we have the philosophy that there are people in our lives who can help us to sort through our troubles and concerns; that’s what therapists are for, right? In our modern society, we acknowledge the importance of sharing our secrets, and we protect ourselves from having our secrets revealed beyond those we trust. (Husbands and wives, for example, cannot testify in court about private communications. Religious figures—like priests or other confessors—cannot be compelled to break the seal of the confessional. Therapists and doctors cannot testify about what they hear in the course of treatment.) We encourage the telling of secrets so that they don’t fester. But, does that mean that we shouldn’t keep any secrets? Hamlet has these two friends in Denmark, and they want him to confide in them. Shouldn’t he do that? Why would he be so hesitant? What if he is planning a palace coup and the people in Denmark are going to be hurt? Doesn’t the King have a right to know? He recognizes immediately that they are spying for the King and Queen. He plans on keeping his secrets around them.

Note that Hamlet starts speaking in prose, instead of in blank verse in this scene. I’m not sure why. I do think, though, that he doesn’t use the same level of thought and philosophy that he does when he speaks to people he respects. With Polonius, and then with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he seems to be speaking down to them all the time, and it is with them that he goes into speaking prose. But that’s just a theory. He and his friends start out with some pretty bawdy talk about the “strumpet Fortune” and being her
“privates.” I’m sure that’s the kind of talk you would hear in any boy’s locker room, right? The image of Fortune, though, as a fickle, and somewhat slutty, woman is telling, though. We are going to see Hamlet’s disdain for “Fortune” or fate throughout this play. He acknowledges the power of fate, but he doesn’t really like what hand he is dealt.

He also tells his friends that Denmark is a prison, that he has “lost all [his] mirth,” and that his “wit” is “diseased.” He gives one of the great examples of Renaissance humanism in his “What a piece of work is man” speech. Clearly, he is one of the people who thinks deeply about the world around him and the nature of being human, but he comments at the end that he finds no delight in the humanity around him (though he makes clear that both men and women are out of his favor at this particular time). So, it does seem that he will confide in his friends somewhat, but he is not happy about seeing them, and he doesn’t trust them, not even a little.

The Players are also introduced in this scene, and we get a bit of Shakespeare’s insights into the profession that he has chosen: the theater. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell him that there is a plethora of child acting companies in the city, and these players who have arrived at Elsinore are looking for work outside of this city. They lament the sorry state of entertainment when people are hiring these child acting companies instead of paying more for seasoned and talented actors.

Hamlet, himself, is a bit of a connoisseur of fine theater. Throughout this scene and the scene in the next act, he almost falls over himself to get close to the actors (Danish Entourage?) and to talk about their work. He insists on a private first performance from the main actor, and he asks him to do the speech about the fall of Troy and the death of Priam. Priam, if you will remember your Greek mythology, was the king of Troy, the father of Paris and Hector, the great Trojan warriors. In a bit of goddess chicanery, three Greek goddesses, Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena demanded that a Trojan prince, Paris, choose which one of them was the fairest. He didn’t choose based on who was really the “fairest.” He chose based on the bribe that each goddess offered, and he chose Aphrodite, who promised him the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately for Paris and the rest of his Trojan friends, the fairest woman was already married to a Greek, and claiming her for himself brought opprobrium down on the whole city of Troy.

The Greeks brought a great army and camped outside the gates of the city for about twelve years, but they couldn’t accomplish the destruction of Troy because they couldn’t get behind the walls. Finally, after the deaths of the great warriors—Hector and Achilles, mainly—the Greeks had enough, and they plotted a great trick to defeat Troy. They built a wooden horse, hid soldiers in it, left it outside the gates of Troy, and feigned retreat. The Trojans, in joy, took the horse into the gates and began their celebration. But when night fell, the horse opened, and the soldiers were free to roam through Troy, destroying everything in their path. It is this scene that Hamlet asks the Player to enact. As Troy was burning, Priam has a final conflict with Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles. Priam’s wife, Hecuba, wanders through the streets looking for her husband, and she must watch in horror as he dies.

Why do you think Hamlet wants to hear this speech given? Could he be lamenting that his mother, also a queen, could not be so devastated by the loss of her first husband? Could he be looking for some tragedy to purge his own pent up emotions? Why is this speech on his mind when he sees the players?
During the performance, Polonius reveals his own philistinism about the theater. He comments that the speech is too long, and he receives a rebuke from Hamlet because of his comment. Hamlet, then, must be taken up completely with the performance. He is drawn into his own little world, and the speech makes him think about the job which has been given to him by the Ghost. He hurriedly gets rid of the players, the courtiers, and Polonius, so that he can be alone.

The second of Hamlet's great soliloquies happens at the end of this scene. The "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy happens after Hamlet gets rid of all the people around him and has a moment to reflect on the actions of the player he has just watched. This player was able to enact the end of Priam while at the same time, showing deep emotion over his death. Hamlet envies him. He is angry with himself that he is not able to come up with as much emotion and as much passionate action as this player who is, after all, just acting. He recounts for the audience all of the reasons that he has for being ready to exact his revenge for the death of his father, but as he does it, he takes on the responsibility of hating himself for not getting right to work on following through on the Ghost’s request.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? One of the great mysteries of Hamlet is why Hamlet takes so long to act on the instructions of the Ghost. So, why doesn’t he just get right to the job that he has been given? Is it a character flaw? Does he have some greater purpose?

? Why doesn’t Hamlet respond to his friends? He recognizes immediately that they are there because the King and Queen have sent for them. Why is he so suspicious?

? Hamlet is angry with himself for not acting. Is this a sign of his madness? Is it a sign of his melancholy? If you were told by a ghost that you had a job to do, wouldn’t you get right on that? Why doesn’t Hamlet?

? How does his love of theater and of acting fit into Hamlet’s philosophizing about seeing things as they “are” and not as they “seem”? Isn’t it interesting that he hates the acting of people at court, but he loves watching a play enacted on stage?

? If you had to encapsulate Shakespeare’s theory of the importance of a play, how would you do it? What do you hear of Shakespeare’s voice regarding the value of art and drama in the social functions at Elsinore (and, therefore, in the world)?

Act III Notes:
Scene 1

It seems to me that a lot of the action in Act III is focused on people trying to figure out what others are thinking and doing. We know that the King and Queen sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet and that they got very little information from him. They start out Act III telling them about their discussion. (Did you notice their use of the word “niggard”? They used it to mean that he was stingy with them as they questioned him. He gave them answers, but he didn’t volunteer a lot of information.) Hamlet has seen right through his two friends and knows where their loyalties lie, so we need a new spying plan, and we can always count on Polonius to have just such a plan up his sleeve.

This plan puts his daughter into harm’s way, though. She is going to walk around the lobby of the castle, and Hamlet will see her there and approach her. Polonius and the
King will spy on them, and hopefully realize that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia and can be easily cured. And they will all live happily ever after. As if...

By the way, did you pay attention to Claudius’s statement that “The harlot’s cheek beautified with plast’ring art/Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it/Than is [his] deed to [his] most painted word./O heavy burden.” In other words, keeping this secret about his murder of his brother and playing the part of innocent and bereaved husband, brother, and king is really starting to wear him down.

Back in the lobby, Polonius and Claudius hear him coming, and they hide, and Hamlet comes in and delivers probably the most famous lines in English: “To be or not to be...”

The choice for a director is to play it so that the King and Polonius hear the speech or to play it so that Hamlet speaks these lines to himself. If the King and Polonius can hear, does Hamlet know that they are spying on him? Does he say all of this with the idea that they will wonder more about what is going on in his head? Again, the interpretation can be open to the director and the actor.

As he finishes, he sees Ophelia, and they do indeed have a meeting there in the hall. We have to ask ourselves about Ophelia’s actions in this scene. What do we think of her? On one hand, she is a dutiful daughter, doing what her father has ordered her to do. That’s good, right? Well, Hamlet has, no matter what else we may think of him, importuned her with love letters. He sent her his most private thoughts, showed his vulnerabilities, trusted her with his heart, and she shared all of this with her father. During this scene, he asks her about her father, and she lies to him. At the beginning, his behavior and motivations might be a little muddied, but by the end of this scene, he has to have realized that she is lying to him. She has betrayed him.

He tells her (probably, though, he shouts at her) that she should be in a nunnery. We have another interpretive question here: if the director wants these lines played out so that Ophelia is the victim of Hamlet’s madness, then that will happen. If the director wants to play it out so that Hamlet is genuinely trying to get rid of Ophelia because he doesn’t want her to get hurt in the coming conflict between him and the King, that can also be played. His speech, though, is pretty harsh about women and how they trap men with their wiles and painted faces. I can’t help but think that there is a lot of vitriol aimed at his mother, not necessarily at Ophelia, in this speech. He may just want her locked away from all society, rather than in the world where corruption and love are meaningless. Ophelia is, understandably, freaked out by this, but she does have enough self-possession to think that it is Hamlet who is crazy, not her.

The King does not fall for the whole “Hamlet is crazy for love” scene, though. He is starting to think that maybe Hamlet is a little too close to the truth of the matter, that he killed his brother to get the crown, and he plans on getting rid of that pesky nephew of his in a nefarious scheme of sending him to England.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Is Hamlet truly suicidal? Would he really hurt himself?

? Whom do you blame most for the breakdown of relationships in this scene? Do you blame Hamlet for not protecting Ophelia from his mad schemes? Do you blame Polonius for throwing his daughter (metaphorically) under the bus? Do you blame
the King for bringing shame and depredation down on the whole kingdom? Do you blame Ophelia for being faithless?

Can you find anywhere in that cold, cold heart of yours a little empathy for poor Claudius who is really suffering with this secret that he must bear?

Scene 2

This scene is the play within a play, and it is just flat-out confusing if you don’t get to see it on stage or on screen. Hamlet starts out with telling the actors how to act—again, Shakespeare is talking through one of his characters about the art of drama. He comments that the purpose of a drama is to “hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” In other words, it is the role of drama to make us see ourselves, so that we can better evaluate who we are and what we’re about. I think that is Shakespeare talking to us. And then, of course, Hamlet narrates the action in the theater for all of us. This is again a scene in which the director is going to determine most of our interpretation of events by the directions she or he will give the actors about how they are to play their roles. Should Hamlet be crazy and volatile? Should he be serene and sad?

Hamlet takes a few moments in this scene to celebrate his good friend, Horatio. We have seen Hamlet’s other friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his love interest, Ophelia, be awfully willing to tell the King and Queen what he is up to. He has no one at court whom he can trust...except Horatio, and he tells Horatio what he admires in a friend. Horatio, it seems, is not “passion’s slave,” meaning that he is not a victim of his own emotion, but is able to see things clearly and logically. Hamlet admires him for that, and we are then set up to see Horatio as a foil character for the other false friends that surround Hamlet.

The play, of course, was chosen by Hamlet to mimic the story that the Ghost told him about the murder of his father, and Hamlet hopes to catch the King in a moment of unguarded guilt and thereby prove that the Ghost is telling the truth. And he gets what he wants. No surprise there... I would note that it is interesting that Shakespeare did give this scene of such power to a play being done on stage. He truly believed in the power of drama to effect a change on a person.

During the play, there are a few interesting conversations. Hamlet makes several lewd suggestions to Ophelia, further befuddling her. He points out to his mother that the Player Queen is making protestations of love, similar to what Hamlet had heard from her mother when she was married to his father, and the Queen attempts to defend herself. The King asks Hamlet if there is “offense” in the play, as if Hamlet should be afraid to offend him, but Hamlet brushes that off.

It is after the play that things really get interesting. The King has stormed out of the hall, with the phrase “Give me some light!” (Get the symbolism?) (Play “Director.” How would you have the King say that line?) It’s all chaotic and frantic because the King is angry and displeased. Only Hamlet seems all pleased with the turn of events. His friends and his mother are all concerned that he has gone too far, and they approach him. First Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try, but he gives them a great answer by pointing out that they would “play upon [him]” like “a pipe.” He will not allow them to get at his “mystery” when they clearly will not understand him. Then Polonius comes by and tells him that his mother wants to see him. She’ll straighten him out. He tells them all that he will get
around to doing what they want. But right now, he just has to dance around, flouting the King’s displeasure.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? What must the people in the Danish court be thinking after the play within the play? What are they thinking about Hamlet’s strange behavior?

? Does the King know that Hamlet knows the truth? What must he be thinking about what has just happened? (If you were Claudius, wouldn’t you be freaking out at this point?)

Scene 3

Scene 3 has little action, only a few characters, but is one of the most important scenes in character development and theme. We start out with the fawning toadies: Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ingratiate themselves to the King and tell him that since the whole kingdom is dependent upon his good health and favor, they feel a responsibility to sell out their friend. And while this may seem duplicitous to us, remember that to Elizabethans, the monarch was the representative of the people in God’s eyes, and to serve the monarch, therefore, was to serve God. Maybe Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aren’t all that bad, eh?

Polonius comes in, then, to remind the King that Hamlet and Gertrude are going to have a private conversation and that he will be there to keep an eye on things. That Polonius; he does prove himself useful.

Then Claudius is left alone after all the madness at the play, and he tries to pray. Hamlet comes along and thinks about killing the king at this very moment, but he sees that the King is praying, and he doesn’t want to send him to heaven at the moment when he will be saved, so he delays. But that’s just the action. In order to get at the real thematic moment here, understanding Claudius’s words are essential.

Claudius begins by admitting that he did indeed murder his brother, an offense that is “rank” and “smells to heaven.” He knows that what he did was wrong, and he feels guilt for it, but he then begins to wonder if there isn’t some way that he can be forgiven. Has he done something so odious that it cannot be repented of? The problem, and Claudius knows it, is that he is not willing to give up all the gains for which he did the murder. He is not willing to give up his ambition to be king and the love of the Queen, so how can he be forgiven? He asks, “May one be pardoned and retain th’ offense?”

And then Hamlet comes in and sees him praying, and he pontificates about when he the best time to take his revenge would be. He decides that it is not this moment, and he leaves Claudius to pray while he goes off to meet with his mother. Hamlet does describe some of the activities that the King regularly participates in, and it isn’t a pretty picture. Claudius drinks, gambles, carouses with the Queen, goes off in his temper, etc. Hamlet thinks that any one of those activities would guarantee that Claudius would go to Hell rather than to heaven. He also points out that the Ghost has indicated that his [the Ghost’s] life is hard. Taking revenge at the wrong time would not be true revenge.

But here’s the irony. Hamlet prides himself on being the one who does not “seem” to be acting, but when he sees the King, he assumes that he is praying. However, the King tells us that “[His] words fly up, [his] thoughts remain below;/Words without thoughts
never to heaven go.” In other words, he is not really praying because he is not reaching God or heaven or whoever or whatever can forgive him. His heart is not in it. So what does this tell us about the nature of repentance and forgiveness?

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Do you have any sympathy for Claudius in this scene? Why is it that Shakespeare does not set us up to forgive Claudius, but when we read *Crime and Punishment*, we all wanted to forgive Raskolnikov?

? Is what Claudius has done as bad or worse than what Raskolnikov did? Really? Claudius committed murder for similar reasons as Raskolnikov. Claudius’s victim did not die as violently or miserably as Raskolnikov’s victims did. And Claudius does care about others, unlike Raskolnikov did. So why did we want to forgive one man but not the other?

? What is the essence of prayer that the words and actions are not enough? What would Claudius need to be truly assured of reaching his Creator?

**Scene 4**

I like Scene 4 if for no other reason than Polonius is going to die within a few lines of the beginning. Hamlet kills him. And he deserves it. So, farewell.

Hamlet and his mother have had a bad relationship since his father’s death. He is disgusted by her lustful and very physical relationship with her new husband, and he is equally disgusted that she has been so quick to forget her former husband. This confrontation has been coming for a long time, and it is dramatic and violent. He shows her pictures of her two husbands and makes her face that she once was the wife of a great and powerful man, but now she is the wife of a weak and ridiculous man. And she turns. She tells him that he has turned her eyes into her soul and she has seen the ugliness and blackness that is there. She knows that she has been wicked.

(In one of Shakespeare’s greatest lines, Gertrude says to Hamlet, “Thou has cleft my heart in twain.” It means that he has broken her heart. Doesn’t Shakespeare say everything better than anyone else?)

Gertrude is a pretty interesting character, don’t you think? She is not “good” necessarily, and Hamlet certainly wants her to know every flaw she has. But she is also not bad. She was Queen of Denmark with her first husband, and she had lots of attendants and courtiers, gowns and good food, power and a castle to live in. When her husband died, she could have been forced out of that nice comfortable life, but she wasn’t because the new king, her former brother-in-law, offers her the same position she had with her first husband. Can we really blame her for taking on the job? Hamlet, of course, does blame her. He thinks she is wicked and lustful and should know better. But, then, Hamlet has not demonstrated that he is a big fan of the fairer sex all along. Maybe he was before his mother married Claudius, but from the beginning of this play, he has been pretty misogynistic.

In this scene, the only thing that stops him from smacking his mother around is the Ghost returning and reminding him that his purpose is revenge on Claudius, not revenge on his mother. King Hamlet, even in death, cannot stand for Gertrude to suffer, so she must
have been a good wife to him and he must have truly loved her. (But maybe that makes Gertrude’s perfidy worse.)

After their big fight, though, Hamlet and his mother part friendly. He tells her that she should keep his secret: that he is not really mad. He doesn’t want the King to know it yet. And, really, she isn’t entirely sure that he isn’t mad as mad can be. If she tells people that Hamlet is mad, then the killing of Polonius would be considered just the ravings of a madman, not a real murder. On the other hand, the rash deed of stabbing through an arras (a tapestry) might be the mark of a madman, so maybe Hamlet is really mad. Hmmm…

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Why doesn’t the Ghost want Gertrude to suffer? She has been wicked; she has been faithless. Why does the Ghost still protect her?
? Is Hamlet truly mad? Should Hamlet be punished for killing Polonius?
? Here’s a good question: What is going to happen to that fragile Ophelia now that her father has been murdered by her true love?

Act IV Notes:
Scene 1, Scene 2, and Scene 3

I’m combining these three scenes because in an ideal play, they would run together pretty quickly. The action and the dialogue through these three scenes should come at the audience fast and furious, creating the image of a King losing control of his court and the stepson/nephew running amok with a dead body. Claudius would have to play these scenes very carefully. He can’t appear to be too nervous in front of the rest of the court; as far as he knows, the only person who is sure that he killed his brother is Hamlet. On the other hand, he has to be wondering how Hamlet found out and was able to put it in a play that the whole court has just seen.

We start out with Gertrude reporting the results of her conversation with Hamlet to Claudius, but she doesn’t tell the whole truth, does she? When it comes right down to it, she defends her son.

One of the most interesting lines in Scene 1 is when Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet is mad and has killed Polonius and Claudius replies, “It had been so with us, had we been there” meaning that if he had been the one spying, he would now be dead. Why isn’t he concerned with Polonius’s death? Well, he isn’t. He is most concerned with himself at that moment, and it is kind of pathetic. He is just afraid that Hamlet is going to come after him and kill him next.

It’s actually fortunate for Claudius that Hamlet has just offed Polonius. He had put on a rather emotional display at the play, and the courtiers might be wondering why Claudius was so freaked out by a little drama. But Hamlet’s action, because most of the people at court would recognize this action as going over the line a little too far, has taken some of the heat off of Claudius. Claudius can let people speculate that he is behaving strangely because he is trying to protect his step-son and the heir to the throne. Hamlet has effectively kept this little conflict between himself and his uncle.

The courtiers try to get him under control. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are particularly helpful to the King in this scene. They chase Hamlet down and try to get him to give them Polonius’s body, but he is recalcitrant, and they are unsuccessful. He finally tells
Claudius that Polonius is stowed in the “lobby,” and they will find him when he starts to smell. Claudius would probably be played in this scene as outraged and out of control of the situation. He reiterates his plan to send Hamlet to England to have him killed.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet is mad. She has just had a quasi-reasonable conversation with him about her sins, and while he was a little emotional, he clearly wasn’t mad. So, is Gertrude keeping his secret? Or was she just placating him to get him out of her chamber and off her back about her marriage when she told him that she would try to live righteously in the future?

? What do you think this exchange between Hamlet and Claudius reveals about their previous relationship? Hamlet is downright insubordinate with his uncle. Might that be because he knows that Claudius is living on borrowed time now?

? Do you think that Claudius still thinks he can get away with all this? Seriously?

Scene 4

This is a pretty short little scene here. Hamlet, being taken under guard to England, comes upon the forces of Fortinbras, and it brings on another long speech from him. Basically, that’s about it.

Or so it seems... Remember that one of the themes of this play is that there is a difference between the external threats to a state and the internal threats. Fortinbras is on the march against the Poles, and he is going through Denmark, ostensibly peacefully. If the situation in Denmark were normal, this marching army might be seen as the biggest security threat there could be. But the poison in the royal family of Denmark is so much worse than the threat the Fortinbras brings. And, of course, it is ironic that Hamlet is the only Dane who can see the problem, and he is being sent away to be killed.

Seeing Fortinbras’s army brings Hamlet to yet another soliloquy about “How all occasions do inform against me/And spur my dull revenge.” In this speech, Hamlet asks one of the central questions of human existence. “What is a man/If his chief good and market of his time/Be but to sleep and feed?” His answer is that if that is humanity’s only purpose, we are “beast[s], no more.” In other words, if we don’t fight for what is right or try to rectify wrongs or in some way respond to the world around us, we are not using our humanity, our ability to reason, our moral sense. Hamlet makes the comment that “He that made us with such large discourse...gave us not/That capability and godlike reason/To fust in us unused.” In other words, God did not give us our brains and our ability to reason and communicate if we are not meant to use them. This, of course, is a Renaissance idea—humanity is God’s greatest creation and good humans should not waste the gifts bestowed by God.

Then Hamlet goes on to question why he doesn’t act on his mission to avenge his father’s murder. He compares himself to Fortinbras who is able to gather an army to go and fight for a small piece of land when he is unable to even fight one man. Hamlet seems to see that Fortinbras, even though he is marching for a useless piece of land, is superior because he is capable of doing SOMETHING, while Hamlet does NOTHING. Surely he, with a murdered father and a dishonored mother, has more to fight about than this little upstart Fortinbras. And yet, he still just talks and talks and does nothing.
And at the end, Hamlet makes the commitment that he will have bloody thoughts of revenge from that time forth.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Do you think that Fortinbras is a superior person because he can take an army into battle, some of whom will die, while Hamlet is useless because he would rather think things through? What do you think Shakespeare thought?

? Do you think that Fortinbras really just wants safe passage through Denmark? Might he really be hiding his true intentions and getting ready to mount a fight to regain the lands that his father lost to King Hamlet? In the previous scenes, Claudius thinks that he has managed Fortinbras by talking to his uncle, but we have seen in the parallel plot of Hamlet and his revenge against his uncle that what a nephew says is not necessarily what the nephew thinks. Maybe Fortinbras is planning an invasion, and this march against the Polack is just a cover.

? Why do you think Shakespeare does not put Hamlet and Fortinbras together on the stage in this scene? They are both princes; they both have had their crowns usurped by their uncles. They are both trying to make names for themselves. Wouldn’t they have a lot to talk about? Hmmm...

Scene 5

Poor Gertrude. As this scene opens, she is trying to avoid talking to Ophelia, the crazy daughter of Polonius and the former girlfriend of her son. But one of the courtiers tells her that Ophelia’s crazy talk is raising eyebrows around court, and the people are starting to piece together what she is saying and ask questions about what is really going on in Denmark. Gertrude finally agrees to speak with her, and then she says, quite cryptically, “So full of artless jealousy is guilt/It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.” The word “artless” means “without art” or, more simply, without thought or plan. Jealousy, in this context, seems to mean “suspicion.” And finally, in that line we hear the word “guilt.” If we take this line and revise it so that we can understand it, then, she is saying that “Guilt is full of mindless or artless suspicion. And this guilt tries to protect itself by ‘spilling’ or revealing what it is trying to hide.” So, in her circumstance, she feels guilty about something—could it be her hasty marriage that has brought the court to such a state? Could it be that her son has behaved quite badly toward Ophelia? Maybe this is all about the murder of Polonius that she is trying to cover over in order to protect her son? In any event, this guilt is spilling over into other areas, and in trying to keep it to herself, she has made it more visible to the surrounding people. Gertrude seems to be acknowledging her own culpability in the events that are bringing down the Danish court, but she doesn’t really want to be reminded of them by coming face to face with Ophelia.

Ophelia’s first line in coming into the presence of the Queen is to ask, “Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?” This line could be interpreted as Ophelia merely asking where the Queen is so that she can talk to her. But Shakespeare doesn’t really do these things so haphazardly. In a number of his plays, he has the tradition of giving the most truthful statements to the fools and crazy folks. (In King Lear, for example, the main character, King Lear, is making some very bad judgments about his daughters. Several people try to stop him from being foolish, but he refuses to listen and banishes them from
his presence. Only his Fool, the court clown, is able to tell him what a fool he is being and get away with it. We hear the truth from the Fool.) In Hamlet, we hear this question from an insane Ophelia who is not afraid to ask what has happened to the country that was once great. What has happened to the majesty that was Denmark? Where has it gone?

Ophelia then proceeds to sing a few lines from some fairly bawdy songs about young men and the virginal maids that they claim to love but merely deflower. Some might argue that this is proof that Ophelia herself has been disgraced by Hamlet. Feel free to interpret these lines as you see fit. Certainly one fact can be discerned from these songs: Ophelia has lost all of her inhibitions. Where she had the role of being fair and reserved in the court, she now openly addresses the most uncomfortable of subjects that others would like to see remain hidden.

When she goes off, Claudius makes an interesting speech. Keep in mind that on stage, this play has been going on for some time, and the audience might need a little recap of where we are, so Claudius recounts for us the “battalion” of sorrows that is attacking Denmark: Hamlet gone to England, the people “muddied” or uncertain of Hamlet’s crime and the necessary punishment for it, Ophelia separated from her good sense, and Laertes coming back from France with evil intentions. Claudius laments that all of these troubles give him “superfluous death.” And right after that, the court is attacked by Laertes and a group of Danes who have joined him and are demanding that the King be removed and Laertes be crowned.

Now, maybe it is just me, but I think that Laertes is a little hypocritical in this scene. He couldn’t get away from Denmark fast enough in the earlier scene, and his father irritated him with all of the unsolicited advice. Now, though, that his father has died, he comes tearing back to Denmark with vengeance on his mind. Now he plans on showing himself to be a good son. So, he races back and gets on Claudius’s nerves by demanding that he answer for Polonius’s death.

It is also telling that the people of Denmark are so ready to support Laertes as he goes up against the King. This might indicate that while Claudius thinks that everyone loves him and he is offering Denmark the chance to forget all their other troubles, he is only the frosting on a sunken and doughy cake. We can see from this scene that Laertes is noble enough to have a following of people who are ready to crown him king and be done with that whole Hamlet family. (Maybe this is why Laertes has been so reluctant to support his sister’s liaison with Hamlet; he wants the crown for himself and he didn’t want the waters muddied by a love affair between his sister and Hamlet. But that would be awfully calculating...) Note that Gertrude is outraged with Laertes thinking that he is good enough to be king. Might that indicate some of the back story between the two families? Maybe Gertrude has also never fully accepted the nobility of this family with children raised with her own. She certainly jumps to defend her husband’s claim to the throne in this scene.

Claudius successfully defuses Laertes, and then in walks Ophelia. Her madness is so obvious to her brother that he is stopped in his tracks. She wanders around the court passing out flowers with symbolic meanings that the Elizabethan audience would probably have understood. First she gives rosemary, “for remembrance.” In Elizabethan times, it would have been used both at weddings and at funerals. Then she gives pansies, “for thoughts.” Pansies probably get their name from the French word for “to think,” penser or pensées, “thoughts.” They were emblems of love and courtship. She gives fennel (an emblem of flattery), columbines (a possible emblem of the loss of one’s virtue or, perhaps,
of ingratitude), and rue (an emblem of repentance or regret), though she cautions the person she gives the rue to that he or she must “wear [the] rue with a difference.” She gives out daisies (an emblem of dissembling or faithlessness) and says that she would have given out violets (an emblem of faithfulness), but they all died with her father. This scene can be played according to the director’s vision. Maybe she has actual flowers in her hands. In the productions I’ve seen, she has had weeds or imaginary flowers. In one movie, she hands out kitchen garbage. She might give the flowers all to one person, or she might single out Claudius for some, Gertrude for others, and Laertes for still others. Note that again with the flowers that she is giving out, she is the only one who can speak the truth. There are people at the court who should be carrying emblems of faithlessness or regret. The reference to flattery is a blatant attack on the toadies who are sucking up to Claudius for their own advancement. The columbine reference brings back the question of sexual faithfulness or faithlessness, whether from Gertrude and Claudius or from herself and Hamlet.

However the scene is played, though, Laertes is set aside from his plan to attack the King, and the King has retained control, at least for the time being, over the court.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Has Ophelia gone mad because of her father’s death? because of her brother’s abandonment? because of her boyfriend’s perfidy? Or all three?

? What do you think Shakespeare meant to say about the role of the little people in the battle between the two most powerful men in the kingdom—Hamlet and his uncle? Some would argue that Ophelia represents the fallout of such a battle and the inclusion of the less noble in the outcome. What do you think?

? Would Laertes make a good king? Why do you think the people of Denmark seem so willing to follow him? Would Laertes make a better king than that over-thinker Hamlet?

Scene 6

This is a very brief scene with the sole purpose of explaining that Hamlet is on his way back to Denmark after being captured by pirates. He wants Horatio to come and meet him and bring the ransom that the pirates are demanding. He has some things to tell Horatio that only Horatio can hear. So, it is all very brief and uneventful...or is it?

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Why would the pirates only take Hamlet? Might he have planned this as a means to get away from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

? What is this going to do to Claudius? He thought that he was finished with that rotten step-son/nephew of his, and now Hamlet is on his way home. Poor Claudius.

Scene 7

In the opening lines of this scene, Claudius assuages Laertes’ anger with him and makes sure that Laertes knows that Claudius had nothing to do with Polonius’s death. But Laertes wants to know why Claudius did not proceed against Hamlet, and Claudius gives him the two reasons he has ready. First, the Queen loves her son, and Claudius loves the Queen, and he couldn’t hurt her by hurting her son. Second, the public loves their Prince,
and he has been afraid to turn them against him by proceeding against Hamlet. Laertes is still angry and wants to know how Claudius is going to satisfy his need for revenge.

I find it interesting that Claudius is so determined to make friends with Laertes. But, then, he has sent the heir to his crown to England to be killed, so maybe he is looking around for someone he can bond with, and, certainly, Laertes might be that person.

And with that, the letters arrive that tell Claudius that Hamlet is on his way back to Denmark. Claudius may be a little disappointed that Hamlet is going to be a problem again, but he is a little like the Grinch. He thinks up a plan and he thinks it up quick, and he gets Laertes on his side. He convinces Laertes that a true son would revenge his father by killing his father's killer (oh, the irony). And he promises to help Laertes, provide that Laertes does not reveal his part in things. Their plan is to challenge Hamlet to a duel but for Laertes to poison the end of his sword so that if Hamlet is just hurt in the fight, he will die from the poison. As a safeguard against Hamlet surviving this game, Claudius plans on poisoning the drink that Hamlet is going to use for refreshment during the fight. In some way, Hamlet is going to die. Both Claudius and Laertes seem to know that Laertes is a better swordsman than Hamlet is. That should be advantage enough, but these two seem determined to make sure that Hamlet is good and dead at the end of the fight.

Claudius says something kind of intriguing in his speeches to Laertes. He asks Laertes if he truly loved his father or if he is just the picture of the good son and not the real thing. Then he says, "I see, in passages of proof, /Time qualifies the spark and fire of [love]. /[There lives within the very flame of love/A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it, /And nothing is at a like goodness still." It sounds a little like Claudius is speaking from experience here. He had a powerful love with his wife, Gertrude, but she was told by her son of Claudius's crimes. Furthermore, Hamlet cautioned his mother that she should stay away from the passion that she shared with Claudius. Maybe she listened. It sounds a little here like Claudius and Gertrude have already felt the flames of their love going out a little. I think that Shakespeare is pointing out to them and to his audience that a love which was begun in a sin has a short life. The guilt that they would feel would overwhelm them at some point and kill the love that they should have for each other.

And then, of course, Gertrude comes in and tells them that Ophelia has died. It is all so tragic, but Laertes doesn't really give his sister much thought. He makes the comment that she has had "too much of water" and he, therefore, will not shed tears for her. Hmmm. To me, that seems kind of cold. I think he is too preoccupied with the revenge plot against his enemy.

Ophelia is sort of a sad character in all of this. She has been manipulated by her father, her brother, her boyfriend, and, of course, the King and Queen. She really is just a pawn in a game of power between these power players, and no one has taken care of her. I think that Hamlet kind of tried by telling her father and then her that she should get out of the way. Laertes told her that she should avoid Hamlet because he was out of her sphere. But no one has ever really talked to Ophelia and found out what she wants. It did seem, for a little bit of time, that Hamlet did love her and did want her, but he was so mercurial that she just couldn't cope with it all, and it drove her mad. She has been used by any number of critics as a figure of feminist criticism. Critics argue that she represents every young woman whose voice is stifled as she is prepared to marry and, hopefully, marry well. I think her best line is the one she delivers to her father back in the first act, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think." She expects others to do her thinking for her, and by the
time she finally speaks up for herself, it is only as a mad woman who sings nonsensical songs and hands out weeds as flowers. Alas...

Now, here are some points to ponder...

- Did Ophelia die because of an accident or did she kill herself? It makes a big difference in terms of where she can be buried and what sort of funeral service she will get.
- Is Laertes stupid? Why is Claudius able to manipulate him so easily?
- Is true love possible in a world where so much political intrigue distracts lovers from thoughts of each other? Is true love possible at all? (Maybe I'm a bit jaded by this point in the play.)

Act V Notes:
Scene 1

It is all set up for the big showdown at Elsinore Castle. Hamlet is on his way home; Laertes has plotted with Claudius to get rid of him. Ophelia is dead. Tension reigns all over Denmark. Interestingly, Shakespeare uses this moment of high drama and suspense to introduce one of the most humorous scenes he ever wrote: the Gravedigger scene.

In Shakespeare’s original folio of his plays, the stage directions call for “two clowns” to enter as gravediggers. This appellation means that the two actors who play the gravedigger and his friend are comedic actors. They bring a level of jocularity to the scene that would provide a good contrast to the previous dramatic scene, and they build nicely into the next dramatic scene of the showdown between Hamlet and Laertes.

The grave diggers are there to dig Ophelia’s grave, and they begin by speculating as to whether or not she killed herself. If she did kill herself, she really should not be buried on hallowed ground, but since she is a noble woman and because she was too mad to appreciate the consequences of her actions, she is deemed as an accidental death, not a suicide.

The two clowns joke a little about things that show a disconnect and a disrespect for the things that the nobility hold sacred. They joke that Adam was the first gentleman because he “bore arms.” The pun here on “arms” makes this a joke. To the nobility, “arms” were the mark of a noble man who could lead an army into a noble battle with a standard and an insignia that showed his noble commitment to might and right. To the grave-digging clowns, “arms” means having the literal appendages that allow a man to dig up the earth, and since Adam is described in the Bible as “digging,” he clearly had “arms.” That he was able to perform such a necessary task is what makes him a “gentleman” to them.

Hamlet and Horatio come into this scene as the grave-digger is tossing up skulls from the hole he is digging in the ground. In this play where we have listened to speeches and soliloquies about the meaning of life and death, this scene, where dead people are literally flying out of the earth, brings it all very much back. Hamlet may wax poetic about that “undiscovered country,” but the grave-digger sees the rotting flesh of the dead that he has put in the ground. It is a powerful contrasting image, don’t you think? Hamlet certainly sees how powerful the contrast is. He goes on and on about the usefulness of a person’s life when all that remains is a little bit of bone that a grave-digger later has to move so that
someone else can be buried. It brings the importance of life into perspective, don’t you think?

Hamlet’s witty repartee with the grave-digger goes on until he gives him the skull of Yorick, the former courtier who took care of the young Hamlet.

(In this scene, we have what I think is a Shakespearean error. I know, I know... how could Shakespeare err? Well, he has the grave-digger say that Yorick has been dead for 23 years. Then, Hamlet tells Horatio that as a boy, he played games with Yorick. That would make Hamlet between five and ten years old when Yorick died and he would, therefore, be somewhere between 28 years old and about 35 years old during the events of the play. The Gravedigger makes it even more precise when he says that he came to his job when Hamlet was born, 30 years ago. That would make Hamlet 30. But that just doesn’t make sense. It works for the actors who want to play Hamlet when they are 35, but it doesn’t work for the character. Hamlet can’t be that old. He is still a student at Wittenberg, and he is clearly young enough that he is confused about life and love. If he were in his 30s, he would definitely be old enough to be King, and Claudius’s usurpation of the throne would be much more heinous. He has to be young enough that he still needs parental guidance as he prepares to be king at some point in the future. And let’s look for a moment at what that would do to Gertrude. Let’s say that she married young, about 15 or 16 years old. If her son is 30, she would be about 45 or 46 years old or—gasp!—even older. That’s way too old for the behavior she shows in the play. If, however, Hamlet is about 22 years old, she would only be in her late 30s or early 40s, and she would be at about the age that she is trying to decide if she is young, middle-aged, or getting up there in years. Anyway, I think that Shakespeare needed to go back through his play and edit out that little error, but he probably didn’t remember or he didn’t have time or, frankly, it didn’t catch his attention at the time. Who knows?)

Anyway, Yorick’s skull reminds Hamlet of the contrast between life and death, and he pontificates about it for a moment. He wonders about the difference between the live Yorick who entertained him and the dead Yorick whose skull is making him a little sick.

And then the funeral comes in. The King and Queen are there, as is Laertes. Hamlet and Horatio hide until they can see who is lying on the bier, and when Hamlet sees that it is Ophelia, he comes out of hiding to challenge her brother who has jumped into the grave to grandstand his love for his sister. The two men go at each other for a moment; Laertes is grief-stricken at his sister’s death, and Hamlet is in shock. In the middle of all of this, we would be able to see Ophelia’s dead body. In her death, these two men are still fighting over what is best for her without really considering what she was all about or what she might have wanted. Both Laertes and Hamlet claim that they loved Ophelia more than the other, but these claims seem a little hollow to me. Ophelia is just another casualty in the war between Hamlet and his destiny.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? Do Hamlet and Laertes really hate each other that much?
? Did Hamlet truly love Ophelia more than 40,000 brothers could have loved her?
? Should Ophelia get a church burial? Should she be buried on hallowed ground? Is there a different standard for the nobility and the common folk when it comes to life and death?
Gertrude tells Ophelia’s corpse that she had wanted Ophelia to be Hamlet's wife. Do you think she meant it? Does it change how you feel about the earlier relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia and the way that Laertes and Polonius tried to keep them apart?

Scene 2

This scene starts out with Hamlet and Horatio having a man-to-man talk about the things that have been going on in Denmark and on board the ship that was to take Hamlet to England and to his death. Hamlet tells Horatio how he replaced the letter that his two friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, were carrying with another. In the first letter, Claudius had written that Hamlet was to be killed in England, but the second told England to kill the bearers of the letter. So, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern went off to England carrying their own death warrant, and Hamlet knew it.

Horatio wonders if Hamlet doesn’t feel a little bit guilty about being the agent of the deaths of his friends, but Hamlet tells him that “they are not near [his] conscience” because they “did make love to this employment.” In other words, they wanted the King’s favor so much that they were willing to help him kill their friend, and since they were so willing to blindly follow Claudius and be his “sponges,” Hamlet does not feel any regret for what happens to them. They brought it on themselves. This speech prompts Horatio to express “Why, what a king is this!” Depending on how the director has the actor deliver this line, we can interpret it a couple of ways. Horatio could be commenting on the current nefarious prevaricator on the throne. Or, more likely, he is commenting on Hamlet himself. Hamlet has shown that he can be calculating and ruthless in his treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and this shows Horatio what kind of a king Hamlet would be. So, he is making a statement about what he sees in his friend’s behavior, not on Claudius’s bad deeds.

In the middle of this, another minor clownish character comes on stage: Osric. He is one of the courtiers, and he has come to advance the plot and let Hamlet know about the contest that he is facing with Laertes. Hamlet, as a noble young man, would know that Laertes has a right to challenge him to a duel to decide the question of honor about both the death of Polonius and the rejection of Ophelia that led to her death. Hamlet has already told Horatio that although he does not regret sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, he does regret that he has fought with Laertes, and he seems almost relieved that Laertes has challenged him to a duel. In this way, he can perhaps apologize for the wrongs he has committed. Of course, he doesn’t know about the perfidy planned by Laertes and Claudius.

Osric, Hamlet tells us, is a “waterfly.” Horatio doesn’t know him, and Hamlet explains that Osric has a lot of good land, and is, therefore, an important member of the court. However, Hamlet shows him nothing but contempt in their conversation. He makes fun of Osric’s inability to comprehend his speech, and he plays with Osric’s understanding of Hamlet’s continued, but possibly feigned, madness. In the end, Osric leaves, and Hamlet must prepare himself for his battle with Laertes. Horatio says that Hamlet does not have to have this duel, but Hamlet is determined. He makes his speech about the “readiness” for the battle. He tells Horatio that there is no denying his fate. “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.” In other words, he cannot avoid this fated battle. He must be ready for it whenever it comes.
The battle itself is much better when it is watched than when I pontificate on it. Let me just say that it should be a lot longer than the few pages of dialogue it commands in the text. Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius must all face what they have done and reap the harvest of the deeds they have sown.

For Laertes, he must acknowledge that he has been used by the King and that his vengeance against Hamlet was misdirected. He must also acknowledge that poisoning his sword was a treacherous act, and he rightly diagnoses that he gets what he deserves. Gertrude doesn’t realize, until she is dying, just how rotten her husband is. She realizes that he has poisoned her and that he plans on poisoning her son. But it is too late for her. Claudius’s plans are those that go most awry. He has planned all of this so that he can be married to Gertrude and be the King of Denmark, but when it comes right down to it, he would rather be king than husband to Gertrude. He doesn’t stop her from drinking the poisoned wine. At the end, he calls for his friends, but no one comes to help him, and he dies from a double dose of poison.

Hamlet, of course, dies last…and best. He won’t let Horatio die with him because he wants the tale told of what happened to the royal house of Denmark. He says to Horatio “I am dead,” as though he is surprised by the impending act. I find that interesting because he has been talking all through the play about death and what it all means, and now that he is facing it, he seems reluctant to embrace it. Perhaps Hamlet has learned, as all people should learn, that life is precious and we should not waste it postulating about whether or not we should act on our ghostly visitors’ demands for vengeance or cleansing of one’s kingdom. Maybe, though, I’m reading too much into it.

We have only, then, to turn things over to Fortinbras who arrives to visit Denmark and finds that he has been appointed King by the dying Prince. And Hamlet, who in life was a scholar, is given a soldier’s funeral. Horatio, good to the end, will be the one to deliver the eulogy and tell all of what has happened in Denmark that has brought them all to this bad end.

Now, here are some points to ponder...

? What kind of a king do you think Hamlet would have been if he had been able to come to the throne? We know that he was concerned about Denmark and its reputation in the world. That might be a plus. But we also know that he was indecisive for a long time when he was told to seek revenge against his father’s killer. That contemplative nature might be good for a scholar, but don’t we want a little more from a monarch? We know that he was capable of being careless with the feelings of others, but he seemed to genuinely care about the people were demonstrably loyal to him. Would that make him a good king?

? Did you find any sympathy for Claudius at the end? How about for Gertrude? Did they get what they deserved? Was there justice for all at the end of this play?

? Isn’t Laertes awful in this last part of the play? Notice that he wants to exchange forgiveness with Hamlet at the end and not have the guilt of Hamlet’s death on his hands; yet isn’t it? Isn’t Laertes and his treachery responsible for Hamlet’s death? Sure, Claudius is responsible for manipulating Laertes, but Laertes has to take some of the responsibility for being so ready to be manipulated, doesn’t he?
Did Hamlet have to die? What would the difference in the end of the play have been if Hamlet had escaped his injury, set things right in Denmark, and found a pleasant girl with whom he could settle down and raise a few little kids? Would this still be a popular and fabulous play?

Is Denmark going to be better off now that the Hamlet family is gone? Is Fortinbras, a notable warrior, a better choice as a king than either Hamlet or his uncle?

Okay, now that you’ve read the whole play, was Hamlet mad? (Mad=crazy, not mad=angry) Was he just acting mad? Did he ever cross over into actual madness? Where was that line?

In the definition of classical tragedy, the protagonist has to be brought down to his destruction through a flaw, a tragic flaw, also known as *hamartia*. The word can be translated as a flaw, but it can also be translated as a “mistake.” In Hamlet, we have several tragic characters, and each is brought down by this tragic flaw or mistake of his or her own making. So, what are the flaws in Hamlet? Claudius? Gertrude? Laertes? Polonius? Ophelia? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? even King Hamlet?