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William Shakespeare



Prestwick House

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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Hamlet

Act 1, Scene 1

1. In the first scene of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare creates an eerie atmosphere with the presence of a ghost. Although people in the twenty-first century generally do not believe in ghosts, most people in Elizabethan times did, including the characters in this play. Look up Elizabethan ghost-lore, and write a paragraph explaining what people believed about ghosts during that time.
2. Because Horatio is a scholar, the guards rely on his opinion of the ghostly apparition.
 - A. Explain Horatio's various opinions of this apparition throughout the scene.
 - B. Why has Horatio's opinion changed much from the time that he first heard of the ghost's appearance?
 - C. What does he think the appearance of this ghost means to the state of Denmark?
3. Marcellus asks Horatio to explain why the people of Denmark are involved in preparations for war. Horatio answers him, explaining the relations between Norway and Denmark. In your own words, explain why these countries are fighting.
4. Horatio also tells the guards frightening things about Rome before the fall of the "mightiest Julius."
 - A. What does he tell them that is frightening?
 - B. We often hear about the fall of Rome and the great Julius Caesar. Do some research on Julius Caesar. Who was he? When did he rule? Why is he famous? Why did Rome decline in power during his reign?

Act I, Scene IV

13. In this scene, Hamlet is pondering what causes that “vicious mole of nature” in people, which leads to their downfall. It could be, he says, something they were born with or the result of “Fortune’s star.” Alternatively, it could be caused by the “o’ergrowth of some complexion/ Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason.” In this context, “complexion” means humor or trait. In the Renaissance, one’s personality was often attributed to an overabundance or a particular body fluid, which was referred to as a “humour.” Research the Renaissance theory of the four humours and briefly define each one.
14. In this scene, the ghost finally appears to Hamlet. Why do you think Hamlet insists on following the ghost despite Horatio’s fear that it will “draw [him] into madness.
15. Examine your own thoughts about lunacy, loss of reason, and madness. Make a list of things that might cause someone’s mental abilities to become distorted. Compare them with Shakespeare’s and the general Elizabethan reasons for an onset of madness. In a short letter, explain to a classmate, who doesn’t quite understand, how Shakespeare must have viewed mental illness.

Hamlet

36. On the last page of this scene, Hamlet identifies Claudius with certain animals. What animals are they, and what do they tell you about Hamlet's feelings towards Claudius? Try to determine what qualities the animals have in common. First, make a list of each animal and across from each one write a word or phrase that the Elizabethans might have associated with that animal.

Example:

- | | |
|--------|----------------------|
| 1. Bat | 1. lives in the dark |
|--------|----------------------|

37. In the final speech, Hamlet talks to his mother about his two ex-friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. What would you say to Hamlet if you were Gertrude and wanted to give him some advice?
38. Assume the king has been told of Hamlet's killing of Polonius. As Horatio, advise Hamlet on his next course of action.

Act IV, Scene I

39. Act IV, Scene I begins with the king and the queen discussing the death of Polonius. In a short paragraph, explain the major concerns of the king and the queen. Are they similar or different?

Act IV, Scene II

40. As directed by King Claudius in the previous scene, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask Hamlet what he has done with the body of Polonius. Hamlet first avoids answering them but then calls Rosencrantz a sponge. What characteristics do a sponge and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have in common?

Hamlet

51. What other types of characters does Hamlet name after mentioning Cain? What does he suggest their flaws might be? Using the chart below, list the character type and the flaw, using the words of the text to support your conclusions. The first one has been done for you.

CHARACTER TYPE

FLAW

1. politician

proud and arrogant/"one that would circumvent God"

2.

3.

4.

5.

52. Hamlet asks the clown, "Whose grave's this, sirrah?" The clown answers, "Mine, Sir." The conversation that follows is a play on words. Explain the fun they are having with the word "lie."
53. Hamlet speaks of the death of Yorick, the king's jester, and several times mentions Alexander the Great several times.
- A. What point is Hamlet making?
- B. Look up Alexander the Great, and write a brief summary of his life.
54. A huge fight occurs at Ophelia's grave. Pretend you are a reporter and you are writing about the occurrence for *People* magazine. Make sure you cover all the basics: who, what, when, where, and why. Quote any of the characters, if it will help you make your article more vivid to your readers.