

Hamlet

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following paper topics are based on the entire play. Following each topic is a thesis and sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

TOPIC #1

A pivotal scene in *Hamlet* is the “play within a play,” designed to entrap Claudius. But many of the characters are “play-acting,” and many other scenes echo the dominant theme of illusion and deceit. Trace the motif of acting, seeming, illusion, and deceit as opposed to sincerity, being, reality, and honesty, as these qualities are evidenced throughout the play.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Many of the characters in Hamlet are involved in duplicity designed to deceive, betray, or destroy others. The recurring motif of acting, seeming, illusion, and deceit as opposed to sincerity, being, reality, and honesty illustrates this underlying duplicity throughout the play.*

II. Act I

- A. The sentinels debate whether the Ghost is real or “but our fantasy.”
- B. Hamlet tells Gertrude his grief is genuine: “I know not ‘seems.’”
- C. Laertes and Polonius both warn Ophelia that Hamlet’s words and “tenders of love” toward her may be false.
- D. The Ghost refers to Gertrude as “my most seeming-virtuous queen.”

III. Act II

- A. Polonius instructs Reynaldo to use indirection to learn how Laertes is comporting himself in Paris.
- B. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Polonius and Claudius are all trying to find out through devious means what is bothering Hamlet.
- C. Hamlet notes the fickle nature of the populace, who once ridiculed Claudius, but who now pay dearly for his “picture in little.”
- D. Hamlet laments that he, who has cause, cannot avenge his father, while the actor is able to convincingly portray the emotions over imaginary characters and actions.

IV. Act III

- A. Claudius and Polonius set Ophelia as bait to Hamlet, to try to learn the cause of his madness.
- B. Claudius refers to the discrepancy between his deed and “[his] most painted word.”
- C. Hamlet instructs the Players to “hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature.”
- D. Hamlet is totally honest with Horatio about the Mousetrap plot because Horatio is beyond flattering, or being beguiled by falseness.
- E. “The Mousetrap” and dumb show are “acting” or “seeming,” and Hamlet’s motive in having it performed is ulterior.
- F. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they are “playing” him like a flute, and are not being honest with him.
- G. Hamlet says his “tongue and soul in this be hypocrites” as he goes to speak with Gertrude, with whom he is very distraught.

- H. Claudius discovers that his true thoughts cannot give way to his desired action of praying; yet Hamlet is fooled by the appearance of Claudius at prayer and does not murder him.
- I. Hamlet tells Gertrude that her deeds have belied her vows; he urges her to “assume a virtue” if she does not actually have it.

V. Act IV

- A. Claudius tells Gertrude of the necessity of making themselves appear blameless in Polonius’ death.
- B. Hamlet continues the pretense of madness as he teases Claudius about Polonius’ corpse and his own departure for England.
- C. Claudius reveals the fencing plot to Laertes, and says even Hamlet’s mother will be convinced his death is an accident.
- D. Claudius asks Laertes if he loved Polonius, “Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart what would you undertake / To show yourself in deed your father’s son More than in words?”
- E. Claudius says they would be better off not to attempt the plot against Hamlet, since if it fails “And . . . our drift look through our bad performance.”

VI. Act V

- A. Hamlet and Horatio, discussing the similarity of all skulls despite the owner’s station in life, says not even makeup can keep a lady from looking just like Yorick’s skull.
- B. Hamlet criticizes Laertes’ show of grief as inferior to his own grief and love for Ophelia, and leaps into the grave also, so that his actions match his feelings.
- C. Hamlet’s use of his father’s signet made the letters appear to be legitimate.
- D. The sword fight appears to be legitimate, but is rigged against Hamlet’s success.

TOPIC #2

Characters who parallel yet contrast one another are said to be *foils*. Authors often use foils to clarify character traits as well as issues in stories and plays. Discuss Shakespeare’s use of foils, focusing on the parallels and contrasts of any one of these pairs of characters: Hamlet and Laertes; Hamlet and Horatio; Hamlet and Fortinbras; Laertes and Horatio; Claudius and Hamlet’s father; Gertrude and Ophelia; Polonius and Claudius; Polonius and Hamlet.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Shakespeare clarifies character traits as well as central issues in Hamlet by the use of foils, characters who parallel yet contrast one another. One such pair is _____.*

II. Hamlet and Laertes

- A. Both men seek to avenge a father’s death.
- B. Both love Ophelia and mourn her death.
- C. Laertes moves to seek immediate redress, while Hamlet hesitates.
- D. Laertes is fooled by Claudius’ duplicity, and endures Polonius’ pomposity; Hamlet sees Claudius’ treachery, and mocks Polonius.

III. Hamlet and Horatio

- A. Hamlet praises Horatio as a just and temperate man, who “is not passion’s slave,” who suffers life’s ups and downs with equanimity.
- B. Hamlet is tormented, confused, and appears insane to nearly everyone who witnesses his behavior or hears him speak.
- C. Although Horatio does not have the elements to contend with that Hamlet does, the suggestion is that Horatio would have responded very differently and more effectively, had he faced them.

IV. Hamlet and Fortinbras

- A. Like Laertes, Fortinbras seeks immediate redress for his father's death, and is curbed only by the intervention of his uncle, King of Norway.
- B. Hamlet must be prompted and later reminded by his father's Ghost to get on with the task of avenging the murder.
- C. Hamlet's endorsement of Fortinbras as the new king of Denmark indicates Hamlet's approval of Fortinbras' character and demeanor.

V. Laertes and Horatio

- A. Laertes is a lesser version of Horatio, made so because of Laertes' gullibility in the face of Claudius' manipulative flattery.
- B. Hamlet notes that Horatio is above flattery, and thus unable to be manipulated.
- C. Both young men are basically good and decent, and genuinely care for Hamlet and for the kingdom.

VI. Claudius and King Hamlet

- A. Hamlet draws many invidious comparisons between these brothers, noting that Claudius is not one fraction the man he murdered.
- B. Claudius attempts to manipulate everyone through deceit, which is apparently how he wooed Gertrude, who seems unaware of the fratricide until Hamlet reveals it to her.
- C. Claudius enlists the help of the British, under threat of retaliation if they do not kill Hamlet upon his arrival in England.
- D. Claudius ends up being directly or indirectly responsible for all of the deaths in the play: the King, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, Hamlet—and his own.

VII. Gertrude and Ophelia

- A. Both women are obedient to their men, Ophelia naively so.
- B. Both are knowing participants in plots to deceive Hamlet and learn the cause of his "transformation."
- C. Neither is fully aware of the evil directing her actions.
- D. Both try to humor Hamlet in his madness, seeking to gentle him out of his torment.
- E. Hamlet's rough treatment of them both results in Ophelia's eventual madness and Gertrude's repentance.
- F. Gertrude's characterization revolves around her sexuality; Ophelia's revolves around her chastity.

VIII. Polonius and Claudius

- A. Both men are arrogant and manipulative.
- B. Polonius is consistently shown to be a foolish old man who misjudges his abilities and popularity.
- C. Claudius is keenly aware of how he appears to others, and is at great pains to shore up public opinion to protect his regency.
- D. Hamlet says, when he mistakenly stabs Polonius, "I took thee for thy better" [Claudius].

IX. Polonius and Hamlet

- A. Polonius errs by acting too soon and too frequently in matters which are really not his concern.
- B. Hamlet errs by delaying action in matters which are of central importance in his life and well-being.
- C. Whereas Hamlet is perceived by nearly everyone as being insane, Polonius is widely regarded as a fool.
- D. Hamlet's insanity is feigned; Polonius' foolishness is genuine.

TOPIC #3

Just as foils can help show similarities and differences between characters, parallel events can help clarify likenesses and contrasts between issues and characters' responses to them. Discuss Shakespeare's use of parallel plots and scenes throughout the play, showing their effects on characterization and thematic development.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Shakespeare uses parallel plots and scenes in Hamlet to clarify and heighten similarities and differences between issues and the characters' responses to them.*
- II. **Sons avenging murdered fathers**
 - A. Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras are all sons seeking revenge for murdered fathers.
 - B. The Player recites a scene at Hamlet's request depicting Pyrrhus' murder of Priam for the murder of Achilles, Pyrrhus' father.
- III. **Characters spying on one another**
 - A. Polonius arranges for Reynaldo to spy on Laertes.
 - B. Claudius and Gertrude solicit the help of Horatio, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then Ophelia, to spy on Hamlet.
 - C. Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia.
 - D. Polonius eavesdrops on Hamlet and Gertrude.
- IV. **Characters advising one another**
 - A. Polonius advises both Laertes and Ophelia.
 - B. Both Laertes and Hamlet advise Ophelia.
 - C. Claudius advises Laertes.
 - D. Hamlet advises Gertrude.
- V. **The dumb show and Play re-enact the murder of the King by Claudius**
- VI. **Ghost speaks only to Hamlet**
 - A. Act I: visible to the sentinels, but calls Hamlet aside to speak to him alone.
 - B. Act III: invisible to Gertrude, still reserving speech only for Hamlet.
- VII. **Hamlet asks characters not to reveal information**
 - A. Hamlet makes the soldiers (Act I) swear not to tell what they have seen.
 - B. Hamlet confides in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is not really insane.
 - C. Hamlet makes Gertrude promise not to reveal his pretended insanity.

TOPIC #4

Hamlet is often regarded as a play about an indecisive man, unable to take action. Explore the textual evidence for the various theories which attempt to explain Hamlet's inaction or delay in seeking revenge for his father's murder: lack of opportunity; too much thought and analysis; melancholy; Oedipus complex; doubt about the honesty of the Ghost; and doubts about his own ambitious motives.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *For many readers, Hamlet's seeming inability to avenge his father's death is the central issue of the play. His indecision is often cited as the "tragic flaw" which ultimately causes his death. Critics generally support one of six theories*

to explain Hamlet's inaction: lack of opportunity; too much thought and analysis; his melancholy; an Oedipus complex; his doubt about the honesty of the Ghost; and his doubts about his own ambitious motives.

II. Lack of opportunity

- A. Hamlet is alone with virtually every other character except Laertes.
- B. When Hamlet is alone with Claudius, the King is at prayer, and Hamlet desists rather than send him to Heaven.

III. Too much thought

- A. Act II, Scene 2: Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”
- B. Act III, Scene 1: Hamlet says, “conscience does make cowards of us all, / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pitch and moment, with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action.”
- C. Act IV, Scene 4: Hamlet debates whether his inaction is caused by “Bestial oblivion” or by “some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th’ event . . .”

IV. Melancholy

- A. Claudius urges Hamlet to snap out of his mourning, which he terms “obstinate condolment,” and “unmanly.”
- B. Hamlet soliloquizes, “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”
- C. Hamlet’s apparent mood swings, which appear to onlookers as madness, would have been in keeping with symptoms of the ailment known as *melancholia*.

V. Oedipus complex

- A. Hamlet makes frequent references to how little time has passed between King Hamlet’s death and Gertrude’s remarriage.
- B. Hamlet refers to Claudius as “dear mother,” since “man and wife is one flesh.”
- C. Claudius now functions as Hamlet’s father; in Oedipal terms, to kill Claudius would clear the path to Gertrude’s bed.
- D. Following Polonius’ murder, Hamlet seems obsessed with the physical aspects of Gertrude’s remarriage, and extracts her promise to abstain from Claudius’ bed.

VI. Doubt about the honesty of the Ghost

- A. Act I: Hamlet asserts that “this vision here, / It is an honest Ghost.”
- B. Act II: He is uncertain—“The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil [who] abuses me to damn me.”
- C. Act III: He tells Horatio that Claudius’ reaction to the Mousetrap will reveal if “It is a damned Ghost that we have seen.”
- D. Act III: When Claudius bolts, Hamlet confidently tells Horatio, “I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound.”

VII. Doubts about his own ambitious motives

- A. Act III: Hamlet tells Ophelia that although he is moderately virtuous, “yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious. . . .”
- B. Act III: Hamlet tells Rosencrantz that his “distemper” is because “I lack advancement,” meaning that while Claudius occupies the throne, Hamlet cannot.
- C. Hamlet tells Horatio that Claudius had “Popped in between th’ election and my hopes, . . .” indicating that the Prince had anticipated being chosen by the people to succeed his father.

TOPIC #5

Authors often use physical weakness, disease, or deformity to symbolize or suggest mental, emotional, or spiritual illness or decay. Beneath the surface action of *Hamlet* runs an undercurrent of imagery of disease as opposed to healthfulness. Trace the motif of health and physical well-being as opposed to disease, illness, and weakness throughout the play. Show how Shakespeare links the physical symptoms with spiritual and political conditions.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Shakespeare uses imagery of disease, illness, and weakness to suggest physical, spiritual, or political illness or decay in Hamlet.*
- II. **The idea of Hamlet's madness being caused by external events pervades the whole play.**
- III. **Act I: When Hamlet follows the Ghost apart, Marcellus remarks that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."**
- IV. **Act III**
 - A. In his "To be, or not to be" speech, Hamlet notes that sleep/death would end the "heartache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to!"
 - B. Claudius tells Polonius that Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia did not seem to show either love or madness: "There's something in his soul O'er which his melancholy sits on brood, And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose Will be some danger;..."
 - C. When, after the Dumb Show and aborted Play, Guildenstern tells Hamlet that Claudius is in "Marvelous [distemper]," Hamlet says it would make more sense to send for a doctor than for him, "for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more choler."
 - D. He tells Rosencrantz that he cannot "Make you a wholesome answer; my wit's diseased."
 - E. When Claudius explains his plan to ship Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz agrees: "The cress of majesty dies not alone, ... Never alone did the King sigh, but with a general groan."
 - F. When Hamlet is unable or unwilling to kill the praying Claudius, opting for a time when Claudius' soul will be "damned and black As hell," he says, "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days."
 - G. As he chides Gertrude, Hamlet tells her that her unacknowledged, unconfessed "trespass... will but skin and film the ulcerous place / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, Infects unseen."
 - H. Claudius, informed by Gertrude that Hamlet has murdered Polonius, says he erred in allowing Hamlet to remain at large, and "like the owner of a foul disease, to keep it from divulging, let it feed / Even on the pith of life"—thus reversing the image of insidious infection to apply to Hamlet's crime rather than to Gertrude's offense.
- V. **Act IV**
 - A. In regard to the letter which Claudius sends to England, ordering Hamlet's murder, the King soliloquizes, "Do it, England, / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me."
 - B. When Gertrude unwillingly agrees to meet with "importunate, indeed distract" Ophelia, the Queen remarks on her own "sick soul (as sin's true nature is)..."
- VI. **Act V**
 - A. As the sword fight is set to begin, Claudius explains how he will drink to Hamlet's health, which is the ultimate irony—having arranged for Hamlet's murder either by the sword or the cup.