

## 2b. Final Exam Essay Discussion Questions

### Introduction

Who am I? Why should I strive to be good? What is goodness? What is justice? Why do people do the things they do? Why do I think the way I think? What is the meaning of life? Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* raises questions like these and many more. These fundamental questions have perplexed philosophers and artists since time immemorial. Why is it important to ask such questions?

Socrates once remarked that the unexamined life is not worth living. Jesus said as much when he observed "Man does not live on bread alone" (*Matthew* 4:4). For both teachers the purpose of life was to grow in our understanding of self and others. We cannot grow in that understanding unless we take the time to examine and reflect upon life. By consciously examining ourselves we make ourselves aware of how our subconscious programming shapes our decision-making. If we do not do this, that is, increase our awareness of the powerful mental software running our lives which we call mind, we are little more than robots; living day to day in unconscious and automatic repetition; an existence where people surrender to the illusion of fate or the weight of circumstances and wonder why they are unhappy; they live life as though they are living on an assembly line—unaware, mechanistic, assembling, persisting in constructing the same things over and over while vainly expecting different results. I recall when my first son was born feeling something like I was living out the life-cycle of a moth. My son's birth was of course tremendously meaningful and important to me; nonetheless, I couldn't help feeling as though I was walking someone else's path or living out some sort of pre-decided reality. A conscious examination of life helps us not only deal better with what life throws at us but it helps us perceive our existence less as a prison and more as a garden full of possibility.

**Objective:** there are several reasons why it is important to discuss questions like those found in the introduction: firstly, the simple process of questioning opens us up to the possibility for change through the exchange of ideas; secondly, this process gives us opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation for ourselves as meaning-constructing creatures, and lastly, and perhaps most relevantly to the classroom, such exchanges enable us develop a better appreciation for the themes and characters found in *Hamlet*.

**Procedure:**

- 1). Get in to groups of three. Every group *must* contain one boy. Do not form the typical friend-groups. I want a greater mix of people so group members aren't simply sitting in seats of agreement or parroting one another (which can be the case when people hang around one another a lot).
- 2). Appoint a recorder for your group. The recorder will write down important points as they emerge during discussion. Be prepared to share these answers and insights to the whole class.
- 3). Begin activity by discussing the corresponding "primer" question.
- 4). Then discuss all of the corresponding focus questions.
- 5). Be prepared to share your answers and insights to the whole class.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

**1). *Hamlet* presents a series of philosophical and existential questions to the audience. In an essay, elaborate on the significance of three of these philosophical questions and explain how these relate to the play's theme. In your essay incorporate three direct references to the text of the play.**

**PRIMER QUESTION:** do you agree or disagree with Socrates when he says a life unexamined is not worth living?

- a). What happens to "you" after death?
- b). Why do people fear death?
- c). What is "nothingness"?
- c). Do any of our actions ultimately matter?
- d). Why should we strive to be good people? Should we strive to be good?
- e). Read and respond to the following quote: "When people rely on surface appearances and false racial stereotypes, rather than in-depth knowledge of others at the level of the heart, mind and spirit, their ability to assess and understand people accurately is compromised."

**2). One of the major themes in *Hamlet* is the difference between appearances (what something *appears* to be) and reality (what something *actually is*). In an essay, do two things: firstly, describe how the various characters hide behind masks to conceal their true intentions; and secondly, describe what the characters do to try and figure out what the others are thinking. In your essay include at least three direct quotes from the play.**

**PRIMER QUESTION:** why should we be cautious when it comes to trusting first impressions of people?

- a). Why do people hide their true selves from others?
- b). What qualities do you value in other people the most?
- c). What qualities do you dislike in other people the most?
- d). Does every person possess a "tragic flaw"?

- e). What would a world look like where everyone was perfectly honest with one another all of the time?
- f). What would a world look like where everyone wore a “mask” all the time?
- g). Read and respond to the following quote: “The work of science is to substitute facts for appearances, and demonstrations for impressions.”

**3). Although Hamlet has a bleak view of humanity in general he is particularly critical of women. Why is this so? In an essay, identify and then elaborate on the causes of Hamlet’s misogyny. In your answer make direct reference to both the text and events of the play. Pay specific attention to Hamlet’s relationship and interactions with Ophelia and Queen Gertrude.**

**PRIMER QUESTION:** in what ways are men and women different and in what ways are they the same?

- a). Given what you know about the problems confronting us, what are humankind’s prospects for the future? Why do you think this way?
- b). Most people think living with hope is a good thing. Hope arguably can also be viewed as a not-so-good thing, i.e. it can cause people to cling to a false view of reality or life preventing a person from making necessary changes in their life. Do you agree or disagree that hope hinders as much as helps?
- c). Read and respond to the following quote: “I felt cheated by the way grown-ups told me that the future of the world was bleak when I became a teenager in the 1970s. The pollution explosion was unstoppable. Global famine was inevitable. I genuinely want the next generation, my own kids, to know that actually it's possible that the future might be better than the past.”
- d). What are the root causes of misogyny and misandry?
- e). Read and respond to the following quote: “Misogynist: a man who hates women as much as women hate one another.”
- f). Read and respond to the following quote: “I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.”

**4). What was Hamlet’s greatest character flaw? Some experts say it was his inability to act while others claim it was his idealism. In an essay, identify and elaborate on what you believe Hamlet’s greatest character flaw was. In your essay incorporate at least three quotes from the play.**

**PRIMER QUESTION:** why is it important that dramatic personae (characters) possess flaws?

- a). What does it mean to be idealistic?
- b). What is one problem associated with being an idealist?
- c). Are you an idealist or a realist or a combination of the two?
- d). What is the difference between idealism and realism?
- e). Realism is used as an excuse by people to justify acting selfishly. Agree or disagree?
- f). Brainstorm two or three historical, biblical and/or literary personalities who were idealists. Were they ultimately successful? Why or why not?
- g). Brainstorm two or three historical, biblical and/or literary personalities who were realists. Were they ultimately successful? Why or why not?
- h). Read and respond to the following quotation: "Idealism is like a castle in the air if it is not based on a solid foundation of social and political realism."
- i). Read and respond to the following quotation: "No period of history has ever been great or ever can be [great] that does not act on some sort of high, idealistic motives, and idealism in our time has been shoved aside, and we are paying the penalty for it."