Queer theory—which is sometimes incorrectly identified as being simply a form of homosexual and bisexual focused criticism or theory—serves to openly and frankly question and examine traditional forms and constructions of sexuality throughout literary texts. Queer theorists understand sexuality to be a highly fraught and unstable social, culture, and political structure which has produced countless textual, philosophical, political, social, and other cultural formations throughout human history. Queer theorists mainly examine the manners through which texts examine, contest, question, counter, and reject various forms of sexuality. In general, queer theorists do not assume any form or practice of sexuality to be normal, proper, or authentic. Instead, sexuality is considered to be entirely a social construction, though a changeable and rather unstable social construction at that. Queer theorists assume, then, that there is no ideal, true, or absolute form or practice of sexuality (or gender), and that the propriety of all forms and practices of sexuality are relative to various political, social, and cultural attitudes. Queer theory focuses on examining the different ways in which literary texts have understood and negotiated sexuality, as well as the ways they have possibly invented, promoted, repressed, and altered modes of sexuality. Queer theorists are not, however, interested only in textual performances of sexuality but also upon textual enactments of gender and gender relations. Queer theory does not serve to promote or repudiate any particular type of sexuality but to instead recognize sexuality—and, by extension, gender—as something which is both malleable and relative throughout different human cultures and historical time periods. Most queer theorists consider gender to be something which is performed, something not which one is born with, but, instead, something which one enacts due to cultural, political, and social pressures. A number of queer theorists also consider the ways in which not just sexual relations but also social relations between people of the same sex and gender have been controlled and repressed by various cultural, social, and political systems in order to promote a decidedly heterosexual agenda. These theorists focus on examining “homosocial” relations in literary texts.

Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

A queer theory reading of *Hamlet* would focus on Hamlet’s seemingly conflicted sexuality throughout the play. This reading would take into consideration Hamlet’s complicated and tortured romantic relationship with Ophelia and, moreover, Hamlet’s close relationship with Horatio. While there is nothing in the play that directly suggests that Horatio and Hamlet are involved in a romantic or sexual relationship—in fact, a
queer theorist would point out that the category or concept of “homosexuality” did not exist in Shakespeare’s time; while people certainly engaged in homosexual relations, the concept of “homosexuality” (as well as “heterosexuality”) as a lifestyle did not exist in Elizabethan England—a queer theorist would consider the ways in which Hamlet and Horatio’s close relationship seems to violate the standard Elizabethan concepts of masculine relations. A queer theorist might suggest that there exists an underlying homosexual tension between Hamlet and Horatio, as evidenced in the close bond that exists between the characters, Hamlet’s problematic relationship with Ophelia, and Horatio’s grief at the death of Hamlet. Another queer theory approach to the play might focus not on possible homosexual desire between Hamlet and Horatio but instead upon what might be termed homosocial desire, which refers to the desire for companionship, existing between people of the same sex or gender, a relationship which is often repressed by the behavioral gender norms of a given society. According to a homosocial/queer theory reading of the play, it might be suggested that Hamlet feels a particular desire for male companionship and socialization that is not permitted in his world, hence the extraordinary bond which appears to exist between male characters in the play and, perhaps, the nature of the problems which exist between Hamlet and Ophelia. While such a reading would not claim to offer a definitive reading or interpretation of the play, such might reveal some of the sexual and gender undercurrents that underline both the play and Shakespeare’s own attitudes toward sexuality and gender and hence allow for a richer and more complex understanding of the play and the world it both reflects and presents.

**Study Questions:**

1. What does queer theory suggest about the nature of human sexuality?

2. How do literary texts reflect, comment upon and assert sexual norms in society?