

Religion in Hamlet

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Introduction

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (commonly referred to just as “Hamlet”) is a world-famous play written by William Shakespeare in England around the year 1600. This play was written during the Renaissance and has gained attention ever since for its thrilling plot and developed characters. The play was seen by thousands of people over the years in London at the Globe Theatre (to the right). Throughout the play we see a lot of common themes, but one that stands out to most readers is religion. This tragedy ends similar to other Shakespeare tragedies, and we learn valuable lessons about family, friendship, and love.



Background Information

Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was a famous poet and playwright in the late 1500's and early 1600's. His birthdate remains unknown, but it is assumed he was born on 23 April 1564, and that is when it is celebrated worldwide. Documents show he was baptized on 26 April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, UK. Some of his most famous plays are Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, and Othello. It is believed that Shakespeare died on his birthday in 1616 but experts say that may just be a myth. (Biography, online)



Family

Shakespeare was married to Anne Hathaway on 28 November 1582. They had three children (a daughter, Susanna, 26 May 1583; and two twins, Hamnet and Judith, 2 February 1585). Hamnet died when she was only 11 years old due to unknown causes. (Biography, online)

Education

King's New School, England (Biography, online)

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Genre

The genre of Hamlet is a *tragic drama*.

Setting

Denmark, around 1200 AC - 1500 AC.
(LitCharts, online)



Religion in Hamlet

Religion is a major theme in Hamlet. The characters make most of their decisions through the influence of religion. We see characters have moments on-stage to themselves where they pray out loud to the audience, showing they do believe in a god.

The Catholic Education Resource Center talked about Shakespeare and Christianity in an article online. They believe he was Catholic based off of the way he writes his plays and from his family history. Shakespeare learned to speak and read Latin at a young age, which would have affected the way he wrote plays as an adult. We have no written proof that he was catholic, but we know that both of his parents became Catholic in the late 1500's (Voss, online). Another reason why we believe Shakespeare was Catholic is because, at Shakespeare's death, an Ang-li-can minister wrote he "dyed a Pay-pist" (papist), which means, he died as a loyal Catholic. (Jamieson, online).

In the first act of the play, Prince Hamlet sees the spirit of his father outside the castle only days after his death. The Ghost claims he was murdered by his brother (or Prince Hamlet's uncle), who is now the new King of Denmark. He says it was a "Murder most foul". We can tell that Hamlet believed in some sort of afterlife because he soon believed the Ghost was truly his father. Also, we can see that King Hamlet and Prince Hamlet both believe in sins and forgiveness, two major Catholic ideas. It is understood that Hamlet was Catholic, but some people say he also shows signs of being protestant. The way he reacts to the ghost and the fact that he prays for forgiveness can mean that he was, after all, Catholic (Alsaif, online).

Quote 1

"To be or not to be — that is the question. ... But that the dread of something after death, ... Be all my sins remembered." - *Hamlet*, 3.1.57-91, pp. 57-58 (Shakespeare, print).

How this quote relates to religion in Hamlet: Throughout the play Hamlet continues to talk about his feelings. "To be or not to be" is one of Shakespeare's most famous and recognizable soliloquies from all of his plays, and this is where Hamlet is contemplating whether or not to commit suicide. The only thing that keeps Hamlet from wanting to die during this scene is that he is scared of what will come after life. Since

Hamlet has Catholic values, he knows that he would go to purgatory if dies now and never confesses his sins.

Quote 2

“A villain kills my father and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven. Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge. ... And that his soul may be as damned and black as hell, whereto it goes.” - Hamlet, 3.4.76-78, 94-95, pp. 76-77 (Shakespeare, print).

How this quote relates to religion in Hamlet: Another example of religion in Shakespeare’s play is when he decides not to kill King Claudius as he is praying in the chapel. In scene four of act three, Hamlet again talks to himself out loud and says: “A villain kills my father and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven. Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.” Right here is when Hamlet decides that he shouldn’t kill Claudius yet because, since Claudius is in prayer and begging for forgiveness, he will just go to heaven. Hamlet decides King Claudius doesn’t deserve to go to heaven after committing murder, so Hamlet continues, “...And that his soul may be as damned and black as hell, whereto it goes.” Hamlet realizes he should kill King Claudius in the near future, as soon as he sins again, so he knows that King Claudius will indefinitely go to hell.

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