

Shakespeare's hamlet as a renaissance man essay sample

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The Renaissance was a European intellectual and social movement beginning in the trading hub of Florence, Italy and gradually expanded to encompass the whole of Europe. People of the Renaissance age were interested in the Classical works of the ancient Greeks and Romans, they wanted to improve their lives with technology and better understand the natural world. The perfect Renaissance man was said to appreciate multiple fields of study, and examine the world with a technical and scientific mind. Leonardo (di ser Piero) da Vinci is considered by many to have been the finest example of the Renaissance man due to his extraordinary understanding of numerous subjects. Leonardo was known for his unequivocal genius in the fields of mathematics, architecture, engineering, anatomy, and art to name a few. William Shakespeare's Hamlet was written near the end of the Renaissance, and it reflects the ideals of the period in the titular character. The play shows Hamlet as a swordsman, an artist, and a scholar.

These varied traits mirror the 'essential renaissance man' Leonardo da Vinci. (Ref 3) Da Vinci's mastery of painting, sculpture, architecture, mechanical design, and even understanding of human biology are even now, considered by many, unmatched in history. By no means is Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet a pastiche of possibly the smartest man in history, (Ref 3) but the impression Leonardo left on history can be seen in the greatest writer's greatest work. Written during the first part of the seventeenth century (probably in 1600 or 1601), Hamlet was probably first performed in July 1602. (Ref one) As was common practice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Shakespeare borrowed for his plays ideas and stories

from earlier literary works. He could have taken the story of Hamlet from several possible sources, including a twelfth-century Latin history of Denmark compiled by Saxo Grammaticus and a prose work by the French writer François de Belleforest, entitled *Histoires Tragiques*. (Ref Two) Shakespeare built upon these works and provided a renaissance point of view for the main character. The first of Hamlet's renaissance attributes would be his education abroad.

In the first act, it is made clear that Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg and is hoping to return there. In those times, it would be unusual for a 30-year-old to still be a student. (Ref4) This idea of lifelong learning could parallel di Vinci's own tireless study and history of self improvement. Even in his sixties, Leonardo continued his scientific investigations, concerning himself with problems of geology, botany, hydraulics, and mechanics. At nearly seventy, his interest in anatomy quickened considerably. At the same time he was active as painter and sculptor, had pupils, and influenced the Milanese painters. (Ref 2) He was regarded as one of the greatest scientific and creative minds of the time, though many of Leonardo's achievements were far beyond the scope of the general population. He was revered by many who lived in the era including the explorer Christopher Columbus, and other Renaissance Men including Michelangelo, Botticelli, and Raffaello. The second renaissance attribute that Hamlet and di Vinci share in the arts.

Just two of da Vinci's works, the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper, occupy unique positions as the most famous, the most illustrated and most imitated portrait and religious painting of all time. His drawing of the Vitruvian Man is

also iconic. In Act two, scene 2, of Shakespeare's play, hoping to cheer Hamlet up, Guildenstern informs the Prince that a troupe of traveling actors has arrived at Elsinore castle to entertain him. Hamlet welcomes the players and immediately asks one actor to perform an impassioned monologue on the murder of the King Priam. Greatly affected, a plan for vengeance hatches in Hamlet's mind. The Prince arranges for the troupe to perform a play on the infamous murder of Gonzago the following night. The play will closely mirror the murder of King Hamlet and will include a speech written by Hamlet himself. The Prince expects that Claudius' reaction to the treacherous and too-familiar sketch will proclaim his guilt. As Hamlet plots, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

This use of plot device assumes that someone such as Hamlet would have the wit and insight to write, or at least modify, a play for the stage. In the late renaissance, this would be seen as a skill one could aspire. The final parallel between Hamlet and da Vinci lies in the purpose of the play. Prince Hamlet's play, *The Mousetrap*, is presented to the court supposedly as entertainment, but Hamlet's intent is to gather obvious evidence of Claudius's guilt for the murder of his father. In her essay on "the play within the play" in *Hamlet*, Karen S. Henry describes this scene as "watchers watching watchers." (REF) The only way Hamlet can verify what he was told by the ghost of his father, is to learn by watching. This is similar to a story about young Leonardo. Legend has it that young Leonardo was asked by his father to paint a shield. Leonardo decided to paint a terrifying face.

The young da Vinci brought in all sorts of vermin, lizards, bats, maggots, and so on. He painted a disgusting monster exhaling smoke and poison gas.

He was so engrossed in his painting that he failed to notice that his animal specimens had begun to rot. When he finally allowed his father to see it, his father was so startled by its realism, he knew his son must be an artist.

Leonardo learned by watching and took lessons from what he saw. Hamlet is a symbol of the universal man.(ref) He does not reflect the common man's actions and deeds, but what the common man could possibly do if given the chance. He represents the inner strengths of humanity and the virtues that they are capable of achieving. Yet he still remains truly human, making mistakes and being unable to escape the greater cycles and powers that exist. Hamlet may not reflect every man that exists; he reflects a part within them that does exist.(ref) Hamlet is not the common man, but this is not due to his sovereignty, education, manners or upbringing. It is due to his ability to access his inner strength and knowledge.

Sigmund Freud once wrote, " Leonardo DaVinci was like a man who awoke too early in the darkness, while others were all still asleep." Leonardo da Vinci was a Florentine artist and one of the great masters of the Renaissance. Revered as a painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, and scientist, his profound love of knowledge and research was the essence of both his artistic and scientific endeavors. His innovations in the field of painting influenced the course of art in Western civilization. The variety of his interests and the depth of his brilliance made him the quintessential Renaissance man. Hamlet's persona and character were influenced not by da

Vinci directly, but by the legacy left by a giant among men. Hyperion to a satyr perhaps, but Hamlet was a renaissance man, influenced by the pinnacle of the renaissance period.

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