

# The significance of suicide in hamlet

Literature, British Literature



The Significance of Suicide in Hamlet The concept of suicide is one that is greatly contemplated and discussed by Hamlet and other characters in William Shakespeare's play. It can be seen through two of Hamlet's soliloquies and his overall demeanor throughout the play. Hamlet has many issues that he must deal with such as the death of his father and the marriage of his uncle and mother. These two incidents led Hamlet to consider the extreme act of suicide to escape the fate that he had been bestowed. Although Hamlet did not commit suicide, in the end the path that he took inevitably led to his suicidal intentions and his eventual downfall.

The contemplation of suicide threatens Hamlet and various characters in the play leading to the demise of the characters and the kingdom of Denmark. The sudden and tragic death of King Hamlet left the kingdom of Denmark and more importantly his son, Prince Hamlet, in a state of distress; as a quick fix to this problem Claudius married Gertrude. In the beginning of the play, after Hamlet's confrontation with Claudius, he states in his soliloquy that, " O, that this too too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God! "(Act I, Sc. 2) Hamlet clearly expresses his Christian beliefs and his fear of being punished for " self-slaughter. " He believes that it is better to live in his current state than be damned to hell in the afterlife. One may view this outburst as his method of venting or an over exaggerated teenage rant. For it seems that Hamlet is not capable of dealing with the death of his father or the marriage, however incestuous it may be, in a reasonable and non-destructive way.

The appearance of his father's ghost sparked a fire inside of Hamlet; he took it upon himself to avenge his father's death; a deed that he would not be able to complete if he committed suicide. Hamlet's Christian beliefs may have held him back from an untimely death at first but his craving for revenge overpowered everything else, driving him to live on. Hamlet was not the only person that struggled with his life and developed a disturbed psyche, the most notable character being Ophelia.

Many factors led to Ophelia's death, one of the reasons being Hamlet's so-called fake craziness which drove him to ruin his relationship with Ophelia, but it wasn't the only factor that led to her downfall. Ophelia's father and brother, warned her against Hamlet, and even though she heeded their warning it led to her ultimate demise. Some people speculate that Ophelia was pregnant and in the Elizabethan era that this play takes place; suicide was the preferred method of "abortion" or a solution to premarital sex.

Preceding Ophelia's death, she was in a mental state of distress and disturbance; this may have been a reason that led to her death. She may have viewed suicide as the only escape from her cruel, harsh life after Hamlet denied her and after the death of her father; taking into account that her death may have been an accident. She was given a very forced funeral, the priest even stating that, "As we have warrantise: her death was doubtful." (Act V, Sc. 1) Had her death been truly recognized as a suicide she would not have received a burial and her body most likely would have been left in the river to rot.

The death of Ophelia was devastating to Hamlet, for when he heard of her death and saw her pale body in the casket, he admitted to Laertes and the

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clown that he did in fact love Ophelia. This deepened his depression, but strengthened his need to avenge his father. The controversy behind her death and the mock funeral that was held for her only further led Hamlet to lose faith in humanity and his own life. One of the greatest obstacles Hamlet faced was how he was going to avenge a murder without committing a crime.

Although he wanted to avenge his father's death, he did not want to do so under circumstantial evidence, he wanted to be completely sure that Claudius was the culprit. He underwent his plan by persuading the troupe to perform a play reenacting the killing of King Hamlet. Claudius' sudden departure from the room proved to Hamlet that his suspicions were true. This incident pushed Hamlet closer to death. His thoughts and conscience were clouded by the need to kill his father's murderer. Hamlet believed that if he committed this act he would find his resolve.

He believed that he could not leave the world without finishing this task, but once he had done this, there would be nothing more except his questionable Christian faith and fear of the unknown to keep him in the light and away from the darkness; which in the end might not have been enough. Hamlet's iconic quote, "To be, or not to be: that is the question," (Act III, Sc. 1) is the greatest example of his suicidal debate. Hamlet questions why it is not a common act for people to commit suicide, for individuals to escape reality and their current problems.

He cannot fathom why a person would endure the tragedies of life throughout the years and whether it is nobler to do so or nobler to end it all. Albeit his Christian beliefs, Hamlet believes that the real reason is fear of the

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unknown. Death is an intangible force that cannot and will not be explained. Humans fear concepts they do not understand, so they would not willfully venture into unknown territory. One cannot foresee what lies beyond death, heaven, hell or nothingness and Hamlet realizes this, posing the question, "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come." (Act III, Sc. ) Individuals feel they must attain truth and sanctity from their lives and ultimately our consciences get the better of us. "...conscience does make cowards of us all... thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." (Act III, Sc. 1) The events that occurred around Hamlet may have pushed him towards the brink of death, but they also allowed him to realize that life was worth living. Avenging his father's death was Hamlet's prime purpose in the play. He believed that if he in fact did commit "self-slaughter" that his father would have died in vain.

His duty in life from then on was to investigate Claudius and avenge his father. During his return to Denmark, after being forced to leave, Hamlet witnesses Fortinbras and his army on their way to defeat King Claudius and reclaim their pride and power. Despite Fortinbras being an enemy of his country, Hamlet sees how ambitious and driven the man is. This allows Hamlet to realize that life is precious and that if Fortinbras can have that amount of motivation, so can he. "Witness this army of such mass and charge / Led by a delicate and tender prince / Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd." (Act IV, Sc. ) He now possesses a new goal that he feels he must complete; warn his country of the Norwegians attack. Death overtook the entire kingdom of Denmark and Hamlet's entire family. The final scene of the play when Hamlet fights Laertes shows the internal corruption of the

family and the kingdom. In a sense every person that died in the play committed suicide. Laertes' scheme with Claudius backfired on him and his death was caused by being slashed with his own poisonous blade. Gertrude drank the poisonous drink and although she was not aware of the poison she drank the drink willfully, even after being told by Claudius not to.

Claudius died from his own poisonous sword, albeit it was forcefully thrust into his chest by Hamlet, he was without a doubt murdered by his own plan. Hamlet delayed his quest for vengeance and almost ran away from his mission; this delay led to his battle with Laertes and ultimately his demise. The sight of Hamlet dying made Horatio consider following him, he wanted to drink the poison and follow his friend into the afterlife, even if he did commit "self-slaughter", the death of his friend was too much to bear, but Hamlet convinced him otherwise, so he may tell his story for years to come. But let it be. Horatio, I am dead / Thou livest; report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied. "(Act V, Sc. 2) These deaths left a bad taste in the mouth of the kingdom of Denmark and displayed the true colors of the royal family. From the beginning Hamlet and his family were on the path that would eventually lead them to their end. With the death of King Hamlet and the incestuous marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet's life and the fate of the kingdom spiraled into madness. The play ended in various deaths and tragedies representing the true significance of suicide in the play of Hamlet.