

# Sin and salvation in hamlet

Literature



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The paper " Hamlet and Free Will" is an excellent example of an essay on literature. In Hamlet, Shakespeare reveals the Elizabethan attitude to sin and salvation.

Hamlet, is, in essence, a revenge play, where the main characters are avenging the wrongs done to them, be it Hamlet who wants to take revenge on Claudius for having murdered his father, Laertes who wants to avenge his father's death at the hands of Hamlet, or Young Fortinbras who wants to avenge the king of Denmark for having killed his father. The mainstay or theme around which the play revolves is the act of murder which is a cardinal sin and one committing such a horrific deed cannot hope for salvation. Looking at the play in the context of its obsession with sin and salvation, its religious overtones cannot be denied. The play also highlights the confusion that existed in those times concerning Purgatory, because the Reformation was sweeping through the country and the new ideas it brought were not completely assimilated. O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon ' t,

A brother's murder. (3. 3. 42 - 44)

This is the confession of murder made by Claudius at his private altar in a moment of tormented anguish. Claudius' apparent sin is the murder of his brother Old Hamlet to gain the throne of Denmark, and he likens himself to Cain, the primal murderer, and knows that his sin cannot be forgiven for he still cannot let go " Of those effects for which I did the murder, / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. . ." (3. 3. 60-61). His prayers are futile because though his " words fly up, my thoughts remain below: Words without thoughts never to heaven go.' (3. 3) Salvation, for which Claudius is praying, is denied to him at that moment, when Hamlet backs down from <https://assignbuster.com/sin-and-salvation-in-hamlet/>

killing him, in spite of them being alone, because, in keeping with religious tenets, a man who dies while confessing his crime is absolved of the sins. He is thus cursed to live a life of torment.

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,

Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,

No reckoning made but sent to my account

With all my imperfections on my head. ( 1. 5. 81-84)

The Ghost has sinned and also been sinned against and this puts a double burden on his soul. In this interaction with Hamlet, he knows that the only way in which his soul can be redeemed is when Claudius is killed, for only this would give him freedom from the eternal doom of purgatory. One of the reasons the Ghost ascribes for his lack of redemption is that his death by murder denied him the benefit of extreme-unction, and having been killed at a young age, he could not repent for his sins. It is the Ghost's impassioned plea for revenge and salvation that pushes Hamlet towards the murder of his uncle since in the Second Act Hamlet confesses that he may have been deceived by some evil spirit who " Abuses me to damn me." (2. 2. 433 - 438) so that he could give his soul to Satan. In Shakespearean days, it was a common belief that ghosts were devils pursuing the dictates of Satan.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (65)

The most famous of Hamlet's soliloquies, indeed of all of English literature, is replete with nuances, but here we see it is as one where once again sin and the question of salvation are portrayed. Hamlet is grappling with the morality of the course of action which he has chalked out and killing himself or his

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uncle would bar him from the salvation which is so important to all. The only thing holding him back is his religion which forbids a man from taking his or another's life, and since he does not want to be party to this sin he is willing to bear " the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" Hamlet becomes the Everyman of the times whose main concern with earthly existence is to lead a life free of sin and ultimately reach the portals of salvation.

The theme of sin and salvation which dominates the play makes it a Christian manifesto for life and living. The play resonates with the Calvinist view that " sin was innate and unavoidable" but the salvation of Hamlet and his ilk remains unclear till the end (Mallette, Richard)