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When it comes to damning the soul of his father's murderer, Hamlet ends up stumbling in his efforts and potentially damning his own soul in the process. At the play's beginning, Hamlet's deceased father appears to him as a ghost and tells him that not only has he been murdered, but that it was his brother, Hamlet's uncle, who committed the crime. This is revealed when his father says, "'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,/A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark/Is by a forgèd process of my death rankly abused" and when he refers to his brother by saying, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life/Now wears his crown" (1.5.34-36; 39-40). Because he was murdered, the late King Hamlet did not have the chance to repent his sins before death, leading him to languish in his "prison house" likely a reference to the prevailing belief of the time in Purgatory (1.5.14). Following this revelation, Hamlet vows that he will do whatever it takes to exact revenge against his uncle, Claudius, and make him suffer as his father had to suffer. As time goes on, Hamlet is afforded multiple opportunities to kill Claudius but decides against it, knowing that the timing has to be perfect in order to send his uncle's soul to the proper place—the fiery pits of Hell. Because of his father's situation, one would think that Hamlet knew perfectly well how to safeguard one's soul from eternal doom. Nevertheless, Hamlet becomes singularly focused on the condemnation of Claudius' soul which ultimately causes him to disregard his own.

In Shakespeare's time, there was considerable controversy on where a man's soul would end up if he died without repentance. The religious upbringing in his family caused Shakespeare to know about the purported trials of Purgatory and this caused the subject of death and life after death to sit heavy on his mind (Greenblatt 249).

Because of this, it seems fitting that he chose to make the question of a soul's placement after death an important theme in Hamlet. Because of Hamlet's immoral pathway taken in the process of avenging his father's death, Hamlet ends up forfeiting his own hope of eternal salvation which leads to one of the main questions to be resolved by the play—what will be the final destination of his soul.

In the 16th century, there was much speculation and uncertainty about the afterlife for unfortunate souls who died without having the chance to repent. Christianity had long been able to offer two main places for souls in the afterlife—Heaven and Hell. As time went on, there were many paintings and excerpts of literature that surfaced suggesting there was in fact a third realm in the afterlife. This space was referred to as Purgatory. Purgatory served as the place where venial sins could be burned and purged over a certain number of years depending on the severity of the sins. It was often thought to be a middle ground for souls that did not deserve Hell but had not yet deserved Heaven. Although the idea seemed plausible to many, the religious authorities, such as the Church of England, were hesitant to accept it without more solid proof. Some were violently against the idea of Purgatory due to the lack of evidence in the Bible, while others saw it as a different sort of link between the dead and the living. Many people would offer suffrages in hopes of shortening a loved one's time in the heated tortures of Purgatory. This is a way that they could accept the idea of the third realm while feeling more control over the situation. In many cases, suffrages can be defined as the masses, prayers, or acts of duty offered towards the departed in hope of gaining a quicker salvation for the deceased. In the play, this is what Hamlet spends his time doing for his father. He carries out an act of supposed civil duty towards Claudius by murdering him, hoping that it may be able to aid the late King Hamlet's situation.
Many people believe that ghosts return to earth in order to “instruct the living, that is, to issue warnings, disclose hidden wrongs, or urge the restitution of ill-gotten gains” (Donne 18). This scenario has an uncanny resemblance to Act One, scene five. Hamlet’s father comes to him and tells him to “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25). Even though all of this ferment was going on with the church, the reason that Shakespeare was so involved with the thought of the afterlife and Purgatory may have been closer to the playwright’s home. In 1601, his father John passed away. Later, a document was found that had been written by John acknowledging that, because it was entirely possible for him to die a sudden death without having the opportunity to repent his sins, he wished for God to pardon him in hopes of escaping Purgatory (Greenblatt 249). It was believed that John did not write this letter to anyone in particular. With something as grim as this surfacing, it is no wonder that Shakespeare might have spent a fair amount of time pondering the afterlife and the sins one needs to commit in order to end up in Purgatory or even Hell.

In Hamlet, there are passages where Shakespeare suggests that Hamlet’s soul may have been able to escape Purgatory and even Hell. Even though Hamlet spends most of the play plotting against the well-being of another human being and ultimately ends up hurting many others along the way, there are a few instances where he seems to regret his decisions. In the Bible, it states that if one finds himself to be riddled with sins and hopes to be saved from the fiery pits of afterlife, the answer is simple: ask for forgiveness. Hamlet does do this, but it is not clear whether or not that is enough to get Hamlet out of Purgatory’s temporary or Hell’s eternal doom. One of the moments in the play where this happens is in Act Three, scene four in his mother’s dressing room. In a rage, Hamlet storms in and begins to chastise Gertrude about marrying her late husband’s brother in a matter of weeks. He even goes so far as criticizing her inner sinfulness when he says, “You shall not budge./You go not till I set you up a glass/Where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.18-20). Fury takes over, and after a short amount of time, Hamlet becomes irrational and starts to become overly aggressive with his mother. Because Polonius is hiding behind an arras he is able to see the situation up closely. This causes him to become alarmed and call for help. Upon hearing the calls, Hamlet immediately stabs the figure behind the curtain assuming it is Claudius. Once he learns that it was not Claudius but Ophelia’s father Polonius, he realizes he has made a mistake and seems to snap out of his trance long enough to request forgiveness for what he has done. Hamlet says:

For this same lord,
I do repent. But heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister (3.4.175-178).

Because murder is a cardinal sin in the eyes of the church, it is imperative that Hamlet requests forgiveness like he does. While thinking to himself, there is even a moment where Hamlet verbally admits that he has many transgressions. He says, “I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in” (3.1.126-128). This shows that even though his actions usually do not display it, Hamlet is at least aware that the final placement of his soul may be in jeopardy. One of the major instances where Hamlet’s actions resemble repentance is when he seems to have a slight change in heart by the end of the play and regrets the way he has treated Laertes, the son of Polonius. In Laertes’s desire to avenge his father’s death, Hamlet says
that he sees the same image of his own aspiration, and he promises to try to gain Laertes’s good favor. When they are getting ready to have a sword fight, Hamlet asks Laertes for forgiveness and claims that it was his madness that murdered Polonius, not his intentions. He says, “Give me your pardon, sir. I’ve done you wrong./But pardon ’t, as you are a gentleman... Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it./Who does it, then? His madness”(5.2.212-225). Laertes says that he will not forgive Hamlet until an elder has advised him to do so, but in the meantime, he claims, he will accept Hamlet’s offer of love. A little later, Laertes is about to die when Hamlet offers one last plea for forgiveness. Laertes responds by saying, “Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet./Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee,/Nor thine on me”(5.2.324-326). As soon as he absolves Hamlet, he dies. Even though Hamlet repents some of his major transgressions, he never repents all of them. The number of sins Hamlet commits over the span of the play that go unaccounted for greatly outweighs the number of sins that were supposedly forgiven.

While there are multiple accounts of Hamlet asking for forgiveness of his sins, there are even more instances where he doesn’t. Hamlet lies about his sanity, tricks Claudius into revealing his guilt in front of an audience, uses Ophelia, disrespects his mother, and is largely responsible for the deaths of Gertrude, Ophelia, Claudius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius. Any one item from this list would be means enough to send a soul into a torturous afterlife but all of these together are an excess of unforgiven sins unlike any other. In the Bible, there is a list of Ten Commandments which the church uses to demonstrate what the most hideous and punishable sins are believed to be. When these commandments are compared to the list of Hamlet’s unrepented sins, quite a few of them match up. The first and second commandment states, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image”(The Holy Bible, Deut. 5.1-21). When Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius while he is praying in order to avoid sending his soul to Heaven rather than Hell, he is playing God. Hamlet is taking the issue of fate into his own hands and ultimately choosing his hubristic solutions over the true God’s design. The fifth commandment says, “Honour thy father and thy mother” (The Holy Bible, Deut. 5.1-21). Even though it could be argued that the play is about Hamlet honoring his father, it is his mother who receives a ton of disrespect. Throughout the play, it seems like Hamlet is criticizing his mother, seemingly whenever he has a chance. He is constantly commenting on her whore-like qualities that resulted in her marrying her dead husband’s brother mere weeks after the funeral. The six and eighth commandments seem to fit Hamlet the best, warning “Thou shalt not kill” and “Thou shalt not steal” (The Holy Bible, Deut. 5.1-21). There is not a person in the play whose death was not caused by Hamlet’s escapades. These commandments teach that taking another’s life is not a human’s right to decide, but God’s alone. Hamlet is stealing God’s right to dictate when life ends and using that power for himself. The ninth commandment states that, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour” (The Holy Bible, Deut. 5.1-21). This is another rule that Hamlet breaks frequently. His entire plan for vengeance relies on lying to people about his sanity and various other deceptions. The tenth and final commandment states that “Thou shalt not covet.” Hamlet’s violation of this rule occurs when Hamlet seemingly envies death. This happens throughout the play, but specifically during his infamous speech given on whether or not he should commit suicide and escape the troubles of life. Hamlet says: “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”(3.1.57-65). As the
evidence supplied by the text suggests, there are far too many sins committed by Hamlet without repentance. It is not likely that these sins could miraculously be washed away by the time Hamlet dies at the end of the play, leading to the inescapable conclusion that his soul was condemned to Hell by his own actions, and no amount of suffrage could hope to ransom him.

Because the textual evidence suggests that Hamlet’s soul had the same fate intended for Claudius, it begs the question of whether or not Hamlet knew what he was doing to himself all along. It is no secret that he wanted to die, but did he really want to end up in Hell or Purgatory? In response to this, one could argue that Hamlet was subconsciously damning his soul throughout the play. Even though he knew right from wrong, he seems to gravitate towards the same inevitable doom that awaits his uncle. When he elects not to kill Claudius, during prayer, Hamlet bitterly points out that if he were to act now, he would be sending his uncle’s soul to Heaven rather than Hell or Purgatory where he belongs. Hamlet then decides that he will wait until Claudius is in the midst of sinning, catching him before a possible repentance. Hamlet obviously knows enough about what would condemn a soul, as he is taking it upon himself to manipulate Claudius’ fate. This makes it rather odd that Hamlet continues to commit the same sins that he is trying to trap others into committing. Perhaps Hamlet sees himself as resembling Claudius in a way. Hamlet often comments on how despicable and his uncle are. In Act Three, scene one, Hamlet is talking to Ophelia about the prospect of her having children. To show how disgusted he is with himself and the human race he says:

Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?
I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could
Accuse me of such things that it were better my mother

Had not borne me… What should such fellows as I
do crawling between earth
And heaven? We are arrant knaves, all (3.1.123-130).

This shows that Hamlet has some pretty bleak thoughts about himself. If he is able to lower himself to Claudius’s level, then maybe Hamlet’s subconscious sees Hamlet’s soul fit to reside where he believes his uncle’s belongs.

Because of the themes in Hamlet, the play suggests that Shakespeare wanted the story to revolve around questions concerning life and death. There is the question of Purgatory, afterlife, salvation, damnation, existential purpose and, ultimately, the question of Hamlet’s soul. Instead of giving the audience answers, Shakespeare weaved hints and insinuations into the dialogue in a way that would allow people to speculate for themselves. Because Shakespeare is not alive today, it is impossible to know for sure the meaning of everything in the play. Despite this, each act can be carefully analyzed and serve as the foundation for many theories supported by textual evidence. As the play comes to a close, so does the question of Hamlet’s final destination. Because of his long list of sins that went unrepented, Hamlet likely ended up in the same place Claudius did.

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