

The Existential idea of Self in Shakespeare's *Hamlet**
**A justification for the Renaissance convention of play-
within-the-play**

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Abstract

The major theme of Shakespeare's Hamlet is not parricide, incest, or even revenge. If it is hesitation, as generally believed, it may be argued that the play is intensely existentialist. Its major theme is then the existential anguish or dread; the anguish of being (why do I exist, and how), the anguish of death (philosophizing, according to Plato, is to learn how to die, and thinking, according to Tolstoy, is only to think of death), the anguish of here-and-now (why am I born here and now, within this particular time and place, and why not at other possibilities), and the anguish of freedom (man is free to choose and this causes hesitation). The core of existentialism, which is the precedence of existence over essence, contains all these existentialist themes. Indeed, the idea of Self, a central existential idea, is derived from the view that there is no fixed essence within man and man is to create himself (his self) through ceaseless choosing of actions.

Key words: Existentialism, anguish, self, play-within-the-play, *Theatrum Mundi*, revenge tragedy

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*What is our life? a play of passion;
Our mirth the music of division;
Our mothers' wombs the tiring-houses be
Where we are dressed for this short comedy.
Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is,
That sits and marks still who doth act amiss;
Our graves that hide us from the searching Sun
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.
Thus march we, playing, to our latest rest,
Only we die in earnest__ that's no jest.*

Sir Walter Raleigh

Existentialism is a man-centered philosophy which is preoccupied most in human condition. It is often defined briefly as regarding the precedence of (human) existence to essence. The terms "existence" and "essence," however, are exclusively related to human being, as in fact the so-called slogan *existence precedes essence* is just applied to man, and not for other things whose essences precedes their existences.

According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, existentialism "focuse[s] on the uniqueness of each human individual as distinguished from abstract universal human qualities." (*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, "Existentialism, 1999" p.296) This simple definition of the term is the most helpful and to the point here. "Kierkegaard describes human existence as unfinished process, in which 'the individual' (a key concept in his thought) must take responsibility for achieving an identity as a self through free choices." (Ibid, "Kierkegaard" p.468) Likewise, "Heidegger holds that there is no pre-given human essence. Instead, humans, as self-interpreting beings, just are what they make of themselves in the course of their active lives." (Ibid, "Heidegger" p.371)

The central concern of Hamlet the player is also the question of man: "What a piece of work is a man!" (II, ii, 296), and the existential quest for "being" is equally central for Hamlet. He is "the man obsessed with the pursuit of 'being'." (*A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* 1966, p.111) For him, "the question" is "To be, or not to be" (III, I, 56).

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been a much-debated play in the history of literature. As Frank Kermode states in the opening of his introduction to *Hamlet*, "no brief introduction can take account of centuries of debate and disagreement concerning *Hamlet* ... Certainly no play before *Hamlet* could have accommodated so much and so diverse metaphysical and psychological speculation."(Kermode, 1973, p 1183)

Any discussion of *Hamlet* should acknowledge the enormous body of excellent commentary that sees the play as valuable primarily its moral and philosophical insights.... Some explain Hamlet as an idealist temperamentally unsuited for life in a world peopled by fallible creatures... Other critics see Hamlet's plight as that of the essentially moral and virtuous intellectual man... Related to this is the view of Hamlet as a kind of transitional figure, torn between the demands and values of the Middle Ages and those of the modern world. (A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, p. 47)

In his "Hamlet and His Problems", however, T. S. Eliot regarded the play as "most certainly an artistic failure." Eliot's criticism was based on his well-known concept of "objective correlative,"¹ which is, according to Eliot, "deficient in *Hamlet*."(www.Bartleby .com.200, 1920)

From a psychoanalytic point of view, Ernest Jones saw Hamlet, in his highly influential article "Hamlet and Oedipus" as a "psychoneurotic suffering from manic-depressive hysteria combined with an *abula* (an inability to exercise will power and come to decisions)___ all of which may be traced to the hero's severely repressed Oedipal feelings." Thus, his argument was based "on the thesis that Hamlet's much-debated delay in killing his uncle, Claudius, is to be explained in terms of internal rather than external circumstances..."(A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, 1966, p. 131)

Moreover, Gilbert Murray observed a "mythic content" in *Hamlet*. In his "Hamlet and Orestes" (1914), he indicated some "parallels

between the mythic elements" of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Aeschylus' *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon*. All the three heroes are thus "haunted, sacrificial figures," derived from "the Golden Bough Kings." Also, Murray traced Hamlet, this "archetypal character," back to "the legendary Icelandic Amlodhi to Oriental mythology." (Ibid, p.169)

Similarly, another myth critic, Philip Wheelwright related *Hamlet* to the "motif of the sacrificial scapegoat." (Ibid, p.172)

However, as containing the most philosophical-minded Shakespearean hero, *Hamlet* can be approached better by a philosophical interpretation. Indeed, this approach may explain and justify some of the confusing, controversial, or paradoxical points or "problems" of the play.

Although *Hamlet* is classified as a revenge tragedy, its major theme is not the classical or conventional revenge. If it is hesitation, as generally believed, it may be argued that the play is intensely existentialist. The major concern of the play is then the existential anguish arising from absolute freedom of choice. Hamlet has inescapably to choose and create his identity or essence or self because man, according to existentialism, has no fixed nature. This freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility, and therefore, it causes anguish.

Hamlet the Existential figure

The "central claim" of existentialism is that "we human beings exist without justification (hence 'absurdity') in a world into which we are 'thrown,' condemned to assume full responsibility for our free actions and for the very values according to which we act..." (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, "existentialism", p. 298)

According to Jean Paul Sartre, an existentialist who more than others "stressed the anguish of freedom," man has not a "given nature," as traditional Christians or Marxists believe. Instead, "man freely chooses his own goals..." (Olson, 1962, p. 53) Man is "condemned to freedom," and as there is no justification in adopting any value in this world of absolute subjectivity, "[t]he price of human existence is alienation__ from God, from nature, and from society." (Ibid, p. 57)

Hamlet suffers from perplexity in his self or selves. If nobody in the play or the audience knows what is Hamlet, it is because he himself doesn't either. He is an existentialist hero, in search of his

true, authentic self, and thus he suffers from the anguish of freedom.

Revenge tragedy

The play is traditionally classified within the genre of the revenge tragedy; however, Hamlet's character is far more than a revenger hero: "... the proverbial '*Hamlet* without the character of Hamlet has become the classic way of describing a literary vacuum. Hamlet's individuality suffuses the entire play, giving a special reality and poignancy to all the parts.'"(Baugh, 1948, p. 528)

When his revision [of *Hamlet*] was complete, as it first appears in the quarto of 1604, the theme had been altered more than it is quite easy to realize *Hamlet* was really no longer a play of revenge; it was a play of life and death and of man's ambiguous relation to them both. It was the passionate protest of a keen and honest thinker against the inescapable sophistications of thought, which make every thing *seem* and yet can give no assurance that anything is absolutely true. (Ibid, p. 528)

Unlike the typical revenge tragedies in which there are obstacles in the course of revenge, Hamlet's "problem" is that he lacks any significant obstacle for action. In fact he suffers from the anxiety of a fairly vast freedom of choice, or, as Kierkegaard described it, as "the dizziness of freedom." This anxiety "represents freedom's self-awareness; it is the psychological precondition for the individual's attempt to become autonomous, a possibility that is seen as both alluring and disturbing."(The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, "Angst", 1999, p. 29-30) Hamlet is reluctant to play his role of a revenge taker. He avoids responsibility.

Hamlet's delay

" The question of Hamlet's tragic flaw will remain a moot one. But this will not keep them from recognizing the play as one of the most searching artistic treatments of the problems and conflicts that form so

large a part of the human conditions."(A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, 1966, p. 48)

This preoccupation with the paradox of man, recurring as it does throughout the play, obviously takes precedence over the revenge ordered by the ghost. From the beginning of hamlet's inquiry into the world that surrounds him__ whether he is considering his father's death, his mother's remarriage, the real or supposed defection of his friends, or the fallen state of man__ we see a developing pattern of meaning in which man's private world of marriage bed and lust for power becomes part and parcel of the larger dimension of identity and worth." (Ibid, p. 113)

Hamlet's delay in carrying out his revenge "emphasizes [his] greater obsession with the pervasive blight within the cosmos."(Ibid, p. 113)

The Medieval theme of *Theatrum Mundi*

The theme of *theatrum Mundi*, that is, "likening reality to a play, God to the author and director, the world to a set, and people to actors, ... goes back originally to Plato..."(The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, 1973, Vol. I, p. 821) The idea was blended with the Medieval Christianity, and thus it developed into a "philosophical conception of the universe," which upholds "the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence," as Herbert Grierson stated in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," in which he associated the Metaphysical poetry with this Medieval notion.(Grierson, 1962. p, 105)

Beside in Metaphysical poetry, whose farfetched imagery is almost present in most English Renaissance poetry, including Shakespeare's lyrics as well as drama (including *Hamlet*), the theme of *Theatrum Mundi* occurs in some Renaissance or Elizabethan lyrics; such as Sir Walter Raleigh's above-mentioned poem which is composed shortly before his death, and Edmund Spenser's sonnet: "Of this worlds Theatre in which we stay, ..." (Edmond Spenser's *Amoretti*, Sonnet LIV)

Theatrum Mundi and the use of stage metaphors in Shakespeare

Shakespeare uses stage metaphors in *Hamlet*, as well as his other plays such as *King Lear* (IV, i, 148-158), *As You like It* (II, vii, 139-143), *Coriolanus* (II, III, V), *Richard II*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Macbeth*. For most of his heroes

**Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more....** (*Macbeth*, V, v, 24-28)

Moreover, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as in *Hamlet*, beside the prevailing stage metaphor for life, Shakespeare utilizes the convention of play within the play

Distinctively, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, however, reveals a conflict with the Medieval idea of theatrum mundi. Indeed, Hamlet as a "transitional figure" of his age, who is torn between the Medieval thought and modern, depicts the humanistic, and rather existential idea of selflessness; the lack of a set role for man. Hamlet is torn between the Medieval idea of theatrum mundi and his illuminated existential approach to man as having no self. He is reluctant in accepting roles assigned to him.

The role of role-playings in Hamlet

Hamlet is full of direct and indirect role-playing: Hamlet is directed by his father's ghost to act the role of his revenger. Claudius directs Polonius and then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to play roles in order to discover the nature of Hamlet's behavior, and Polonius directs Ophelia for the same purpose, and finally, Hamlet directs a play within the play to discover Claudius's true nature. But while Hamlet is reluctant to play roles directed by others, the other characters of the play play roles and take it for granted that human beings have always a mask or two in their social intercourse.

The play opens by father Hamlet's ghost who frightens Hamlet because Hamlet is afraid of becoming an agent of an ambiguous director. It "troubles" him to hear of the apparition (I, ii, 222). Ironically, Hamlet who always wants to be the director and not a role-player is himself an actor and his life is directed and concluded by play-acting. Indeed, the whole play is plays-within-the-play.

Unlike the others who always wear a theatrical mask, Hamlet

believes he is "too much i'the sun" (I, ii, 67). When his mother, the superficial queen asks him, "why seems it so particular with thee!" Hamlet answers her bitterly:

**Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly. These, indeed, *seem*,
For they are actions that a man might play.
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I,
ii, 76-86)**

Claudius plays the role of a wise, conscientious, proper king. In his opening speech as an announcement of his marriage to the queen, although he regards the death of late Hamlet the king proper "to be contracted in one brow of woe," his "discretion" becomes a double mask to seemingly fight with his false "nature," which should have made him sorrowful. (I, ii, 1-6)

Polonius and Laertes, too, wear due masks. Both warn Ophelia of Hamlet's "fashion" without offering any fault of his behavior (I, iii), and this may be a projection of their own hypocrisy: Laertes tells Ophelia:

**For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood, ... (I, iii, 5-6)**

Following his remarks, Polonius, too, speaks likewise:

**Do you believe his tenders, as you call them? (I, iii,
103)**

And:

Ay, fashion you may call't, go to, go to. (I, iii, //2)

And finally:

**Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers
Not of that dye which their investments show.
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bounds,
The better to beguile. (I, iii, 127-131)**

**Read on this book,
That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness. __ We are oft to blame in this __
'Tis too much proved __ that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself. (III, I, 44-49)**

Polonius lectures Laertes, too:

**This above all: to thine own self be true; And it
must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (I, iii,
78-80)**

However, after Laertes' and Polonius' lecture on chastity and virtue to Ophelia, the following scene opens by Polonius' suspicious "inquiry" of Laertes' "behaviour." He does not trust his son, then, and he arranges Reynaldo to spy on him, that is, to play roles before him (II, i, 3).

The characters of the play try to discover the real Hamlet; to unmask him, but the fact is that there is no real, determined Hamlet. There is no real face behind the seemingly various masks they believe he wears. All their pictures of Hamlet are their own selves projected to Hamlet.

Hamlet's madness

Hamlet's madness baffles the people of the play; so does it us. The queen calls him "my too-much-changed son" (II, ii, 36). Her statement is dramatically ironic because she herself is changed too much. In her

encounter with Hamlet in her closet she admits:

**Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
And there I see such black and grained spots As
will not leave their tinct. (III, iv, 90-92)**

Hamlet's madness is believed to be a mask; a pretender self which *hides* his true self. King Claudius says:

**... Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation: So call it,
Since nor th' exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was ... (II, ii, 4-7)**

Polonius also thinks that there is "method" in Hamlet's "madness" (II, ii, 71). Both Hamlet and his counterparts then plunge into mutual plotting against each other till the very end of the play in order to discover each other's true inner selves.

Hamlet's madness, however, is not a mask, but his lack of masks. The disillusioned Hamlet suffers from lack of mask, or *Persona*, to use the Freudian term.

First, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are employed by the king to play friend with Hamlet and discover his inner world, who is already bound by his ghost-father to take revenge. Polonius, too, attempts in vain to discover the real Hamlet. Hamlet says of Polonius: "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house." (III, i, 132). Polonius has "played once i'th' university" and "was accounted a good actor." (III, ii, 93). (It is ironic that in that play he is killed as Caesar). He instructs and directs Ophelia too, in his role-playing, conscious of the blameworthiness of this stratagem:

**That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness. We are oft to blame in this
'Tis too much proved__ that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself. (III, i, 45-49)**

These words stir the king's conscience, who, together with Polonius are going to watch this play, and immediately he says:

**(Aside) O, 'tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my
conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beau tied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden! (III, i, 46)**

Polonius will finally sacrifice his life for his "playing the fool" in somebody else's house, that is, in the queen's closet, when he hides himself, symbolically enough, behind the curtain in another attempt to discover Hamlet! In the queen's closet, Hamlet mis-takes Polonius for the king, whose self has symbolically always been behind the curtain.

Even the young, loving, and honest Ophelia fails to be true to Hamlet. She makes a distinction between Hamlet's behavior and his inner self non-convincingly, when Hamlet plays with words to test her:

**Hamlet: ... I did love you once.
Ophelia: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe
so.
Hamlet: you should not have believed me, ... I
loved you not. Ophelia: I was the more
deceived. (III, i, 115-121)**

Ophelia is instructed to play roles and to discover Hamlet's self but ironically by these inquiries it is Hamlet who reveals Ophelia's self, or, rather, her confusion of selves:

**Hamlet: ... God has given you one face, and you
make your selves another ... (III, i, 142)**

Thus, Hamlet and Claudius try to discover one another's self, but while Hamlet is successful, by manipulating a "Mouse-Trap" to reveal Claudius' self, Claudius and his team are unable to discover Hamlet's because he has actually no real self behind his various masks.

Hamlet's "Mouse-Trap"

The play within the play in *Hamlet* is more than just a theatrical effect. Hamlet changes some part of the play within the play because he is not a mere imitator:

**A speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I
[Hamlet] would set down and insert in't... (II, ii)**

Hamlet manipulates, conducts, and utilizes the play-within-the-play to discover the real self of the king. This "play" occurs at the central part of the play (*III, ii*) and is thematically and structurally central to the story, too (climax of the play). Considering the theme of life as a drama, it is the king who is here the actor and it is he who is watched and judged by Hamlet and Horatio. (Hamlet the seeker of truth doesn't trust his own eyes, as he doesn't his imagination). When the king asks the name of the play, Hamlet calls it "The *Mouse-trap*" (*III, ii, 224*). Hamlet's "play" proves successful and the king betrays himself (his self) and asks for "light" to leave the scene. This request is also symbolic because he has fared his life in darkness.

After this triumph, Hamlet boasts of his management and regards himself a good actor. (*III, ii, 259*). He ridicules Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's plain planning, as Polonius, 'to discover him. He uses pipe metaphor for Guildenstern:

**Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you
make of me! You would play upon me; you
would seem to know my stops; you would pluck
out the heart of my mystery; you would sound
me from my lowest note to the top of my
compass. And there is much music, excellent
voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it
speak, 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be
played on than a pipe'? Call me what
instrument you will, though you can fret me,
you cannot play upon me- (*III, ii, 339-347*)**

Finally, when the king plans to send Hamlet to England for his doom, Hamlet outplays Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role-playing.

As usual, he uses stage metaphor:

**Being thus be-netted round with villaines
Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play... (V, ii, 29-3)]**

Conclusion

Hamlet should now be fully convinced of the rightfulness of his revenge, yet in a rarely-found opportunity he refuses to kill the king because at the time the impious king plays the role of a prayer and it would be unwise to send him to the underworld when he is not his true self. Indeed, Hamlet has not obeyed his father's ghost in taking revenge but he has just followed his impulse. (Ceaseless freedom of choice). He kills the king only when he himself is almost dead. If life is "a play of passion," as Raleigh put it, death is "no jest" and should show man's real self.

The final scene of the play is full of ironic results of the king's playacting: His queen is murdered by his own stratagem, Laertes is killed by his own sword, and the king himself is killed before Hamlet the victim. In this last play-within-the-play of the play, finally, Hamlet, being aware of his hurrying death, says to all:

**You that look pale and tremble at this chance ___
That are but *mates* or *audience* to this act... (V,
ii, 316-7) [Italics mine]**

Hamlet's last words, "The rest is silence" is uttered when he is quite conscious of his death. It may indicate that the real self is void and silent. Man is the totality of his deeds, and his actions, or his playing with "words" is just a mask which is worn to play the life's "short comedy."

Note:

1- An "objective correlative" is, in T. S. Eliot's own words, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."



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