

## William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: An Existential Study

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the proposition that Hamlet, the protagonist of Shakespeare's Hamlet, conforms to the modern philosophical ideas of Existentialism. When Hamlet comes to know about the murder of his father by his uncle Claudius, he is immediately gripped by doubts and procrastination. As a result, he fails to avenge his father's murder. He desperately tries to examine, in his constant procrastination, his position on the complex world he suddenly finds himself trapped in and delays his action. I have examined the complex mindset of Hamlet through analyzing his soliloquies and argued that the confused persona of Hamlet undergoes significant changes as it develops and finally leads him to a firm inner resolution that finds a meaning of his existence only in his death. In the light of Hamlet's changes, I have argued that Hamlet bears out Sartre's view that "existence precedes essence." Shakespeare's Hamlet can be called an Existentialist.*

**Key Words:** Existentialism, Existence, Essence, Surge, Hamlet, Sartre's Existential View, Existential angst.

### Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a drama of the Elizabethan period in England is one of the most thought-provoking dramas in the history of English literature with its inexhaustible appeal for the readers of all times. The protagonist Hamlet, with his larger-than-life stature and an enormous imaginative faculty, and piercing insight into the human psyche has had an all-consuming impact upon the readers of modern times. Hamlet's over-brooding, constant speculative frame of mind, his hazardous journey towards exploring the truth along with endless procrastination in carrying out his revenge – slaying off his father's murderer Claudius, suggests to the readers of this century to term him as an existentialist, as some of his famous soliloquies reveal the "the sense of anguish, a generalized uneasiness" (Lavine, 1989, p. 330). Hamlet's all-pervasive crises conform to the most important existential themes: the emptiness of existence, suicide, death, suffering, action, a fear of death and the fear of the beyond, the sense of nothingness or void and alienation or

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estrangement. Hamlet struggles in acting under the enormous weight of thought as he relates, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (Shakespeare, 1599/ 2000, 3.1.84).

### **Existential Views of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche**

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Danish philosopher and writer, one of the forerunners of Existentialism, comes up with the view that human existence is meaningless and this very sense of nothingness fills human life with an acute sense of anxiety and depression. Anxiety pervades all the works of Kierkegaard. He further thinks that human life is not meant for pleasure as well. Though man strives for a kind of happiness, in his existence, attaching the sense of duty and responsibility, and makes something of his own in the process, to escape that anxiety and depression, he ultimately turns back to that anxiety and depression in more dreadful ways. Kierkegaard believes this sense of anxiety and depression is not objective, it is rather subjective. A universal human condition, he believes. It is the fear of nothingness of human existence, he insists. Kierkegaard's questions reveal anxiety and despair:

I stick my fingers into existence---it smells of nothing.  
Where am I? what is this thing called the world?  
Who is it who has lured me into the thing, and now leaves me here?  
Who am I? how did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted?  
(Lavine, 1989, p. 322)

Kierkegaard, however, provides a religious solution to the crisis. He believes that man can escape this fatal doom only by surrendering to God. He thinks absolute faith and a leap to God can offer humans room for an escape from this ultimate doom and destruction overcoming the meaninglessness of his existence. He propagates Orthodox Christianity.

While Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), another forerunner of Existentialism, rejects Kierkegaard's religious solution to the meaninglessness of human existence outright. For, Nietzsche finds that God is dead:

We have killed him---you and I! we are all his murderers...Whither are we  
Moving now?...Do we not now wander through an endless nothingness?  
Does not space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder?  
Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? (Lavine, 1989, p. 324)

By the death of God, however, Nietzsche means the death of our belief in God. Nietzsche comes up with the view that by losing faith in God people have lost their dependency on God. He further thinks that as human beings have lost God, they must have the courage to become gods themselves. The prime need

of human civilization is to develop a new kind of individual, a superman who will be hard, strong, and courageous, and will be intellectually and morally independent, he propagates. They will free themselves from the confines of existing moral laws. They will propagate the only morality of being joyous, creative, powerful, and free. They will affirm life itself.

Kierkegaard propagates despair so that people can gather their faith and make a leap to God, while Nietzsche propagates life, independence, strength, joy, and freedom.

Nietzsche creates his philosophy of strong and life-affirming superman:

...out of my will to be in good health, out of my will to live  
... self-preservation forbade me to practice a philosophy of  
wretchedness and discouragement. (Lavine, 1989, p. 325)

### **Sartre's Existential Ideas**

Jean-Paul Sartre defines existentialism, arguing, "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1975, p. 24), which means there is no fixed way a man will behave and respond to his surroundings. Sartre illustrates his concept adding, "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards." (Sartre, 1975, p. 24)

### **Existentialism and Absurdity**

Lavine, in his seminal book *From Socrates to Sartre: the Philosophical Quest* has summed up the key themes of existentialism thus:

(1) First, there is the basic existentialist standpoint: ... it is the standpoint that existence precedes essence, has primacy over essence. Man is conscious subject, rather than a thing to be predicted or manipulated; he exists as a conscious being, and not in accordance with any definition, essence, generalization, or system. Existentialism says I am nothing else but my own conscious existence. (2) ... second existentialist theme is that of anxiety, or the sense of anguish, a generalized uneasiness, a fear or dread which is not directed to any specific object. Anguish is the dread of the nothingness of human existence... (3) ... third existentialist theme is that of absurdity. (4) ... fourth one is that of nothingness or void. (5) ...theme of death. Nothingness, in the form of death ... (6) Alienation or estrangement is a sixth theme which characterizes existentialism. (Lavine, 1989, p. 330-332)

Albert Camus poignantly defines absurdity and the absurd man in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Here it is to be noted that the point of absurdity or the absurd man has a similar relation to the theme of Existentialism and the existentialist: "the absurd does not liberate, it binds... Everything is not

forbidden" (Camus, 1981, p. 67). His hero of *The Outsider* Meursault lives exclusively in the present and is not at all concerned about his past or future, and waits to accept what is to come to him with a resolved mind. Sartre comments:

... the day after his mother's death, went swimming, started a liaison with a girl, and went to see a comic film," who killed an Arab "because of the sun," who claimed, on the eve of his execution, that he "had been happy and still was" and hoped there would be a lot of spectators at the scaffold "to welcome him with cries of hate. ( Sartre, 1962, p. 108)

Meursault lives in the present; it is the existence that matters most to him. Sartre clarifies the point further:

I am not constantly thinking about the people I love, but I claim to love them even when I am not thinking about them – and I am capable of compromising my well-being in the name of an abstract feeling, in the absence of any real and immediate emotion. Meursault thinks and acts in a different way; he has desire to know these noble, continuous, completely identical feelings. For him, neither love nor individual loves exist. All that counts is the present and the concrete. He goes to see his mother when he feels like it, and that's that. (Sartre, 1962, p. 113)

Meursault has nothing to justify which bears further testimony to his position as an absurd man. He confronts the quantitative ethic that pervades society, which brings about the total collapse of all values for him and thus finds his existence wholly absurd, and he has "nothing to justify" (Sartre, 1962, p. 111).

Hamlet, on the contrary, has everything to justify, his point of existence in an "unweeded garden" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2.135), his long-held Christian morals, philosophical perception of good and bad, and his role in the world. Hamlet lives in a life full of meaningful past, calamitous present, and the subsequent uncertain and voided future. At this point, his existential crisis begins; being submerged in the void of nothingness his noble and virtuous mind goes away. He is trapped in the state of emptiness between an acute sense of his moral obligation and his existence to set things right. His tormented and confused consciousness of his responsibility and the subsequent inability to act accordingly exemplify the existential idea that only when a man thinks and invests meaning into life does life become worth something, "For there is nothing either good or bad, / But thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 2.2.239-40).

### **Hamlet's Predicament**

Hamlet's whole mental composure gets shattered when he for the first time

comes to know from the ghost about his father's death and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle Claudius; he refuses to accept the marriage as natural. Hamlet utters in disgust and horror:

That it should come to this!  
But two months dead – nay not so much, not two—  
So excellent a king, that was to this  
Hyperion to a satyr... (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2.137-40)

Hamlet loses the equilibrium and logic of his existence and gets shattered and alienated, and struggles hard to come to terms with the long-held beliefs and understanding of the world, which very strongly marks the beginning of the existential crisis in him. He finds all the "uses of the world" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2.134) appear as "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2.133); his inner world is torn apart and there is nothing substantial left in him. Hamlet encounters his shattered existence. The familiarity that Hamlet had known in the earlier part of his life has fallen all apart around him. After the first appearance of the ghost that informs him of his father's death and urges him to take revenge, he finds himself trapped in a cobweb of calamities and his reactions reveal his acute sense of nothingness, "The time is out of joint / O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right." (Shakespeare, 2000, 1.5. 188-89) This very crisis reflects the existential viewpoint that is summarized by Lavine, "A third existentialist theme is that of absurdity. Granted, says the existentialist, I am my own existence, but this existence is absurd." (Lavine, 1989, p. 331)

Hamlet's words to Rosencrantz bear testimony to his perception of life as an absurd one; he loses his faith in humanity after his mother's prompt marriage to Claudius. He finds her act to be an immoral act displaying utter perversion of human values, which enhances his existential crisis. He utters:

What a piece of work is a man!  
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,  
In form and moving how express and admirable,  
In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!  
The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet to me,  
What is this quintessence of dust!  
Man delights not me—no, nor woman neither. (Shakespeare, 1599/2000,  
2.2.286-93)

At this point, Hamlet, encountering the new and harsh realities, is all alienated; the realities he confronts are foreign to his philosophy about a man and society. He gradually surges up; he is unable to come to terms with his self that brings

in him the feelings and the urgency to rise above his existing position to set things right that have fallen apart; a sense of his existential vacuity prevails in him and from that very sense of the void stems his existential point of view. But the fact remains that Hamlet, who is already above average – the Prince of Denmark, finds it difficult to execute his mission in the face of "the sea of troubles" (Shakespeare, 2000, 3.1.59); the cumulative crisis strangles him further and he sinks to the point of nothingness of his existence, which readily manifests one of the all-pervasive themes of Existentialism of nothingness or void. Now, Hamlet in his outrageous state of mind, repulsed by his "sullied flesh," (Shakespeare, 1599/2000) finds no meaning of existence; he must put an end to his life to free himself from the grasp of his flesh. He now meditates death:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2. 129-32)

#### **Hamlet's Surging up and the Gradual Changes**

Hamlet, in his continuous encounter with realities and his attempt to surge up with new consciousness, struggles with his fear of the uncertainty of the afterlife - the point is akin to existentialism. Hamlet's nausea continues as he utters:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office... (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 3.1.70-73)

Hamlet keeps on wriggling in his philosophical perception of the world and men, and constantly tries to justify his action, but his inaction keeps him self-detesting. Hamlet utters in disgust:

How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast no more. (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 4.4. 32-35)

Ophelia's lamentations manifest Hamlet's position further as she cries out:

Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,  
The' expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
The' observed of all observers, quite, quite down... (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 3.1.144-48)



Man exists with "capability and god-like reason" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 4.4.38) that separates man from animals. And Hamlet strongly feels a sense of exigency to restore the disjointed frames of things to their true shapes; he utters: "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That I was born to set it right." (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.5.188-89). This sense of urgency stems from Hamlet's moral obligation to the world; it is the entirely self-imposed burden of cleansing the world that he now finds himself trapped in. Though Hamlet is utterly disgusted about life, he is afraid to die as well. He has turned gloomy and pessimistic, alienates himself from all around him, and lives in a symbolic exile - he turns out to be the model of the existential man. Hamlet loathes her, "We are arrant knave all/ believe none of us/ Go thy ways to a nunnery." (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 3.1.125-26)

Hamlet's tragic flaw is his procrastination, but it is not his tragedy that he cannot kill the murderer, Claudius; a tragedy for him lies deep in the fact that he is a sensitive and conscious man. He could avenge his father's death like a conventional hero immediately after his knowledge about the mystery behind the death, but he delays his action to define his position and actions as a conscious man. Now he, in his attempt to define himself, weighs up death. However, Hamlet is not yet ready to accept death despite all his life disappointments. At this point he gets more confused, for the sensitive mind of Hamlet offers twofold meanings of sleep: it can be sleep without any troubling thoughts and problems, "To die, to sleep - No more;" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 3.1.61) or death, which can be even worse than life. What confuses and frightens him most is the thought that there is no coming back from death, which will prevent him from taking any action and changing anything. This crucial predicament cripples him and he is utterly puzzled. He utters:

Who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveler returns, puzzles the will. (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 3.1. 76-80)

To examine further the point of absurdity or the absurd man, which has a similar relation to the theme of Existentialism and the existentialist, we get back to Camus's grappling with the issue. Camus demonstrates his idea of the 'absurd man' in *The Outsider* through Meursault. To Camus, "... in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity." ( Camus, 1981, p.13)

Meursault, the protagonist of *The Outsider* has no specific goal or aim in life not because of his being undirected or unsure of himself but because of his understanding that life is meaningless. He is an outsider not only to the world but also to his own life. One of the most striking examples of Meursault's indifference towards life is the way he accepts his mother's death without any shock, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegraph from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday." (Camus, 1982, p. 9)

The noble, virtuous and idealistic mind of Hamlet struggles to bear the weight of the evil that is all-pervasive, which leads him to a state of delusion, a maze of complete disgust and distortion of the moral basis of the mind, and he utters:

... O God, God,  
How weary, stale and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of the world!  
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2.132-137)

A reflective attitude to life does not signify cowardice; Hamlet's inaction is active. His attitude towards the outer world clearly manifests his position as an existentialist. Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is important too to measure his position that is already exposed to the existential layers, he finds his beliefs to be shattered; his frustration takes a grave turn in his encounter with Ophelia and his mother he expresses his hatred toward women in a sweeping generalization, "frailty thy name is woman" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 1.2.146). His existential angst is unambiguous in his rude treatment of Ophelia, "Hamlet has been said to reach the bottom of his misanthropy; his alienation from the rest of the world seems complete". (Boklund, 1965, p. 127)

Hamlet, in his surge, turns out to be an existentialist as he is ready to execute his plan with self-esteem and respect; he now lives in the present and is ready to exploit it in full. He points out:

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.  
If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now;  
If it be not now, yet it will come the readiness is all.  
Since no man of aught he leaves knows,  
What is't to leave betime? Let be.  
(Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2 192-95)

Hamlet significantly changes after the graveyard scene in Act V; his consciousness gets "drastically purged of self" (French, 2003). His resolved self,



through a sequence of inner conflicts makes us recall Camus's hero Meursault's resolved mind in *The Outsider*. Meursault accepts the verdict brought against him as he finds everything to be absurd; and he, at the dawn when he is to be executed, readily accepts the cruelties of the world and declares he had been happy and is still happy and now he wishes to be greeted by the spectators "with cries of hatred" (Camus, 1982, p. 117) at the execution.

Now Hamlet is firm on his existential outlook and drastically changes in his surge, which is evident in his handling of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He sends them to death in a clinically precise meditation of his action, which is completely a new and opposite face of Hamlet that we see now. When a horrified Horatio says to Hamlet, "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2. 56) he counters Horatio and establishes a firm conviction about his position, "Why man, they did make love to this employment / They are not near my conscience. Their defeat / Does by their insinuation grow" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2. 57-59). At this point, we see a new Hamlet, a transformed Hamlet who is no more struggling in self-accusation rather is now capable of justifying others' betrayal in cold-blooded murder. More importantly, transformed Hamlet is now ready to kill his evil uncle Claudius and reclaim the throne to right the wrongs around. Hamlet's duel with Laertes at the end of the play is very significant as it offers him an opportunity to come to terms with his shattered self, to free himself from the grip of the flesh to carry out his unresolved tasks. Hamlet defines his position and actions; readiness in him is ripe now. Hamlet's resolve is further spurred by Laertes's death and his dying words. Laertes speaks for Hamlet, "Why, as a woodchuck to mine own springe, Osric/ I am justly killed with mine own treachery." (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2. 286-7)

Hamlet has still not performed his final duty; Claudius still lives. But when Laertes exposes the truth Hamlet wades past the dead bodies to reach and kill Claudius. Laertes utters:

It is here Hamlet. Hamlet, thou art slain,  
No medicine in the world can do thee good,  
In thee there is not half an hour of life-  
The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,  
Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice  
Hath turned itself on me; lo, here I lie,  
Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned-  
I can no more –the king, the king's to blame.  
(Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2.293-300)

Now Hamlet's sense of moral retaliation strengthens him further and makes him ready to meet his death only to make peace with his torn selves.

### Conclusion

At the beginning of the play, we find that Hamlet exists in a new and complex world, encounters the alien surroundings, and then 'surges up' (Sartre, 1948/1975, p. 24) with his new conviction through which he defines himself in the process. The very process validates Sartre's concept of Existentialism "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1948/1975, p. 24).

In the end, Hamlet undergoes significant changes throughout his surge and emerges from a confused persona as one who reconciles his observations of life with his newfound beliefs on a firm conviction. Resolved and redefined Hamlet firmly asks his friend Horatio to transmit his tale to others, "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/ To tell my story" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2.327-8). Horatio carries the "dying voice" (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2.335) to Fortinbras. And Hamlet embraces death: "... the rest is silence." (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 5.2.337) This massive transformation in Hamlet allows him to justify his existence in death at the end of the play, and thus to resolve the existential crises in him. Hamlet emerges as an existential hero in the true sense of the term.

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