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## **EXISTENTIALISM IN SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET**

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# Existentialism in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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**Abstract – Few philosophical movements have aroused as much interest as existentialism. The dictionary Merriam-Webster Online defines existentialism as a “philosophical movement...centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will.” The term ‘existentialism’ has mostly been associated with a movement that grew out of the war time intellectual atmosphere in Paris and spread through fiction and art as much as philosophy. Its impact has been felt beyond the academy, in literature, in politics and thought. William Shakespeare is the most notable and influential author of the Elizabethan period of English literature. Shakespeare’s characters and the way he presents them indicate a significant difference from his contemporaries. Some of the Shakespeare’s major characters, both in the early and the later plays, exhibit modes of feeling and perception that bring their motivations in consonance with the philosophy of existentialism. The present paper studies the existentialism in Shakespeare’s play Hamlet. The delight in Shakespeare springs from the dual vision of human littleness and of human greatness from the diverse threads of weakness and nobility which are inscrutably woven together in the mystery of human existence.**

**Key Words: Existentialism, Characters, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Human Existence.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Few philosophical movements have aroused as much interest as existentialism. The dictionary Merriam-Webster Online defines existentialism as a “philosophical movement...centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will.” The term ‘existentialism’ has mostly been associated with a movement that grew out of the war time intellectual atmosphere in Paris and spread through fiction and art as much as philosophy. Its impact has been felt beyond the academy, in literature, in politics and thought. It is concerned with the kind of existence humans have as opposed to the kind of existence had by rocks, plants and animals. The theoretical and other writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon in 1940s and 1950s are usually taken as central to this movement. Existentialism is frequently viewed as an aesthetic movement rooted in certain philosophical thoughts and supplanting surrealism at the centre of European artistic fashion. Existentialism, as Sartre defines it, is an ethical theory. It is a form of humanism, which means that it takes humanity as the central ethical value. It thus seeks the flourishing of the human individual.

William Shakespeare is the most notable and influential author of the Elizabethan period of English literature. Shakespeare’s characters and the way he presents them indicate a significant difference from his contemporaries. Shakespeare expressed his philosophy through his characters in his plays. Some of the Shakespeare’s major characters, both in the early and the later plays, exhibit modes of feeling and perception that bring their motivations in consonance with the philosophy of existentialism. The web of Shakespearian drama is of a mingled yarn. It contains not only good and bad together but also laughter and tears, romance and realism, comedy and tragedy. This web at once appears to be intricate as well as delicate. We also find variety added to the complexity against a background of unity and strength and thereby sustaining the flux and confusion which is at once visible. Paris (1960) rightly observes “no division here interrupts the thread of existence. The most hilarious interlude links the crime to the punishment. ...laments are seasoned with puns. There is no tragedy without a smile and vice versa, no pleasure without sorrow. ...if the differences among all these plays are not so great as we tend to believe, it is because there is a basic unity underlying every circumstance, every expression. ...Thus the most varied theatre becomes, paradoxically, the site of supreme identity, which is another way of saying that, beneath their trappings,

comedy, history, and tragedy all reveal a single secret, a single purpose."

The plethora of his characters is vast and extensive. Neither clowns nor villains are the inhabitants of one particular period alone, they are there always. There is the Porter in *Macbeth*, the Fool in *King Lear*; there are grave-diggers in *Hamlet*, the watchmen in *Much Ado About Nothing* and the shepherds in *The Winter's Tale*. Introducing the First Series of his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Harley Granville-Barker said: "All great drama tends to concentrate upon character; and, even so, not upon picturing men as they show themselves to the world like figures on a stage – though that is how it must ostensibly show them – but on the hidden man" (Dymkowski, 1986). More recently Ure (1961) has affirmed: "Shakespeare's plays are great images, of supreme artistic strength and brilliance, amongst the most complex and wonderful artifacts in the history of the world; but their substance is the human character".

The device which came most handy to Shakespeare in this respect is 'soliloquy' which sprang from close proximity of the actor to the audience around him. 'Soliloquy' gives us entrance into inner chamber of the speaker's heart and soul. "The whole inner history of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* is continuously revealed in their soliloquies and so is the case with *Iago* and *Edmund*, the villains, who do not wear their hearts on their sleeves but generously reveal them in all their sordid nakedness in their soliloquies. A single soliloquy changes *Claudius* from a hardened villain and sensualist into a weak human creature constant in his love for the queen, and *Prince Harry*, boon companion of *Falstaff*, into a politician as astute and unscrupulous as his own father" (Rai, 1966).

*Hamlet* displays 'the existential attitude' as he contemplates the nothingness of the world in his first soliloquy:

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

In Act II, with *Guildestern* and *Rosencrantz*, *Hamlet* reflects upon the essence of man:

What a piece of work is man! How

noble in reason!

"*Hamlet's* disillusionment," says *Theodore Spencer*, "is a partial expression of a general predicament...His discovery of the difference between appearance and reality which produced in his mind an effect so disillusioning that it paralysed the sources of deliberate action, was a symptom that the Renaissance in general had brought with it a new set of problems, had opened new psychological vistas, which the earlier views of man had not so completely explored. As we look back on the period, it appears that the contrast between outward seeming and inner truth had begun,

at the beginning of the seventeenth century, to seem the most easily available example of a more protentious awareness, which could by no other means be so readily described. It is one of the keys to the understanding of Shakespearean tragedy, to that stretching into hitherto inarticulate reaches of experience, which is one of the chief emotional legacies of the Renaissance" (*Spencer*, 1969).

Life for *Hamlet* was full of promise and the noble love between his father and mother a sure guarantee of the goodness of human nature and beauty of human existence:

So excellent a king

... .. so loving to my mother

That he might not between the winds of heaven

Visit her face too roughly

And... she would hang on him

As of increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on.

Yet just a little month after the death of such a husband 'ere those shoes were old:

With which she followed my poor father's body

Like *Niobe*, all tears, why she, even she

... .. married with my uncle.

The event produces a shock which shatters his faith in womanhood – 'frailty thy name is woman'; taints his very nature and blasts the beauty and bloom of the world around him. The frailty of his mother is a sin which affects the world as a whole:

heaven's face doth glow,

Yea this solidity and compound mass,

With trustful visage, as against the doom,

Is thought- sick at the act.

The play is an existential tragedy and it is most clearly revealed by the central soliloquy, 'to be or not to be' where he contemplates the very meaning of existence. *Hamlet's* 'native hue of resolution is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought' because of his 'conscience', his brooding mind which peels off the appearances, layer after layer, till nothing remains but dust and ashes. "It is only in the heat of the moment, when danger comes close to him and seems to threaten his life, that he acts promptly, violently and even cold-heartedly, whether it is the stabbing of poor *Polonius* who is insulted and mocked at even in his death or the

remorseless dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their certain death, or the final slaughter of his enemies, Claudius and Laertes, who had cleverly planned to encompass the end of the dangerous 'mad' prince" (Rai, 1966).

In the words of Knight (1966), "In the universe of this play –whatever may have happened in the past – he (Hamlet) is the only discordant element, the only hindrance to happiness, health, and prosperity: a living death in the midst of life... Hamlet has been forced into a state of evil: Claudius, whose crime originally placed him there, is in a state of healthy and robust spiritual life". Knight has tried to build up the thesis that the play *Hamlet* is centered round the radical proposition of consciousness and self-identity. For him the main source of hamlet's trouble is that being highly conscious, he has to live in an unconscious world. "Hamlet fails to break out of the closed circle of loathing and self-disgust and his endeavour to shuffle off and evade the complexities of his predicament is a continuous one though it ends in ultimate failure. Whatever the cogency of this argument, Hamlet's utterance that 'there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so' contains in essence the germs of the moral choice which he in fact potentially possesses and which ought to be given due weight. The very fact that Hamlet is habitually inclined to evaluate the pros and of the obligation laid upon him implies that the freedom of choice is a motif that operates in the play all along. His power of action is undoubtedly diminished by the incubus of digest, boredom and nausea lying on him. But towards the very end, he does display that kind of bold initiative and self-assertiveness which we associate with a powerful and heroic temper. The energy, the earnestness and the pathos with which he persuades himself to crush his opponents eventually is rather significant" (Ansari, 1966).

*Hamlet* of course is a profound tragedy. "Tragedy reveals simultaneously", says Sewall (1959), "man's total possibilities and his most grievous limitations – all that he should and can do as a creator of good, all that he does or fails to do or cannot do as a creature of fate"; yet "no tragedy can tell the whole truth".

To sum up, the existentialist categories like alienation, dread, nothingness are reflected in the being of the Shakespearean characters in the exceptional moments of their life. The concern with 'appearance' and 'illusion', the device of mask, transcendence, absurdity and nausea as employed by Shakespeare in his characters acquires a special significance. The delight in Shakespeare springs from the dual vision of human littleness and of human greatness from the diverse threads of weakness and nobility which are inscrutably woven together in the mystery of human existence. He successfully exposes the problems of human relationships, meaningless of man's life, socio-

economic condition and solution for those problems of all ages.

Shakespeare puts life on stage. Human existence can be at times messy and anguished, at others gloriously full of potential, sometimes even strangely and inexplicably both. In the words of Jaspers (1953), in Shakespeare's plays, 'Human life understands itself in terms of its potentialities and perils, its greatness and nothingness, its human and diabolical strains, its nobleness and meanness, its sheer joy at being alive and its bewildered terror at failure and destruction, its love, dedication, and openness of heart, and then again its hatred, narrowness and blindness.' An existential vitality comes through in the darkest moments of Shakespeare's plays.

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