

Existential Anguish and Moral Dilemmas in Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's tragedy, "Hamlet," explores profound themes of existential anguish and moral dilemmas through the tumultuous journey of its titular protagonist. This critical analysis delves into Hamlet's inner turmoil, examining how his existential crisis and ethical quandaries shape the narrative and resonate with timeless philosophical questions. At the heart of "Hamlet" lies the existential anguish of the protagonist, Prince Hamlet, who grapples with the meaning of life, death, and the afterlife. The sudden death of his father, King Hamlet, and the hasty remarriage of his mother, Queen Gertrude, to his uncle Claudius, catalyze Hamlet's existential crisis. His famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," encapsulates his contemplation of mortality and the human condition, reflecting his profound sense of despair and uncertainty. By closely scrutinizing Hamlet's soliloquies, actions, and interactions with other characters, the paper delves into the depths of his existential turmoil. Drawing inspiration from existentialist philosophy, ethical theories, and literary criticism, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities woven into Hamlet's existential journey. The exploration of moral dilemmas, catalyzed by the ghostly command and Hamlet's relationships, serves as a focal point for assessing the ethical dimensions of his decisions and their broader implications. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on Shakespearean studies, existentialist thought, and the enduring relevance of Hamlet's internal struggles. Central to the narrative are Hamlet's moral dilemmas, particularly his quest for justice and revenge. Upon learning from the ghost of his father that Claudius murdered King Hamlet, Hamlet faces a moral quandary: whether to act on his desire for vengeance or to uphold moral integrity. This dilemma drives much of the plot as Hamlet navigates treachery, deception, and betrayal within the Danish court. Through an analysis of key scenes and characters, including Ophelia, Polonius, and Laertes, this study explores how existential themes intersect with moral ambiguity and the consequences of Hamlet's actions. The portrayal of characters grappling with their own existential crises and moral choices underscores Shakespeare's

exploration of human complexity and the blurred lines between right and wrong. "Hamlet" continues to resonate with audiences and scholars alike due to its exploration of universal themes and timeless questions about existence, morality, and the human psyche. By critically examining these elements, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's enduring insights into existential anguish and the complexities of moral decision-making in "Hamlet."

I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's Hamlet stands as an enduring testament to the depth and complexity of human experience, captivating audiences across centuries with its exploration of existential anguish and moral dilemmas. At the heart of this iconic tragedy is Prince Hamlet, a character whose internal turmoil and ethical quandaries transcend the confines of time and cultural context. This research paper embarks on a rigorous critical analysis, peeling back the layers of Hamlet's psyche to illuminate the profound existential questions that define his character. Hamlet's soliloquies, actions, and interactions with other characters serve as portals into the labyrinth of his existential turmoil. Each word spoken and every choice made by Hamlet reflects a profound engagement with the fundamental questions of life, death, purpose, and the human condition. Through a meticulous examination of these elements, this study seeks to unravel the intricate threads of Hamlet's inner world, unveiling the existential anguish that permeates his being.

Drawing inspiration from existentialist philosophy, ethical theories, and literary criticism, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities interwoven into Hamlet's existential journey. As we traverse the landscape of Hamlet's consciousness, we will explore the echoes of existentialist thought, considering the resonance of figures like Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre in the character's philosophical struggles. The paper also delves into the moral dilemmas that shape Hamlet's decisions, catalyzed by the ghostly command and his intricate relationships. These dilemmas become a focal point for assessing the ethical dimensions of Hamlet's choices and understanding their broader

implications on both the individual characters within the play and the overarching narrative. In contributing to the ongoing discourse on Shakespearean studies and existentialist thought, this research endeavors to shed light on the enduring relevance of Hamlet's internal struggles. As we navigate the labyrinth of existential anguish and moral complexity within Shakespeare's masterpiece, we embark on a journey that transcends the boundaries of time, inviting readers and scholars to grapple with the perennial questions that define the human experience.

II. HAMLET'S EXISTENTIAL ANGUISH: A DESCENT INTO THE ABYSS OF SELF

The character of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's renowned tragedy is an intricate tapestry of profound existential questioning and inner turmoil. Throughout the play, Hamlet grapples with the weight of existence, contemplating the very essence of being in a world fraught with deception, treachery, and moral ambiguity. One of the primary conduits for Hamlet's existential exploration is his series of soliloquies, each a poignant reflection on the nature of life, death, and the human condition. The most iconic of these, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, encapsulates Hamlet's existential angst. In this introspective moment, he contemplates the pros and cons of enduring the harsh realities of life versus embracing the unknown of death. The language, poetic and resonant, becomes a vessel for the expression of Hamlet's profound inner conflict, capturing the essence of his existential despair.

Hamlet's existential anguish is further intensified by the web of deceit and political machinations surrounding him. The untimely

death of his father, coupled with the hasty remarriage of his mother to his uncle Claudius, serves as the catalyst for Hamlet's descent into existential questioning. The dissonance between appearances and reality fuels his skepticism and mistrust, pushing him to grapple with the fundamental uncertainty of human existence.

Existentialist philosophy, notably championed by thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre, finds resonance in Hamlet's inner struggles. Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual responsibility and the quest for authenticity mirrors Hamlet's journey, where he must navigate a world filled with moral ambiguity and the burdens of personal agency. Sartre's concept of radical freedom, the idea that individuals are condemned to be free, aligns with Hamlet's predicament as he confronts the consequences of his choices. The ghostly apparition of Hamlet's father, commanding him to avenge his murder, introduces an existential dilemma that propels the narrative forward. Hamlet is thrust into a world where moral absolutes blur, and the line between justice and revenge becomes increasingly ambiguous. This existential burden weighs heavily on him, forcing him to confront the complexities of morality and the consequences of his actions.

As Hamlet's existential journey unfolds, his internal conflicts manifest in strained relationships, particularly with Ophelia, Gertrude, and Claudius. The breakdown of these connections amplifies his sense of isolation, contributing to his existential despair. The juxtaposition of familial bonds and betrayals becomes a crucible for Hamlet's moral dilemmas, further complicating his quest for meaning in a world that appears devoid of genuine connection. In unraveling Hamlet's existential anguish, this critical analysis navigates the intricate terrain of his consciousness, probing the depths of his philosophical questioning and moral quandaries. Through a lens that combines literary analysis and existentialist thought, we aim to shed light on the timeless relevance of Hamlet's internal struggles, inviting readers to contemplate the universality of the human experience encapsulated within Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece.

III. MORAL DILEMMAS FACED BY HAMLET: NAVIGATING THE ABYSS OF ETHICAL AMBIGUITY

Central to the tragic narrative of Shakespeare's Hamlet are the profound moral dilemmas that confront the titular character, Prince Hamlet. These moral quandaries serve as crucibles that test the very fabric of his character, pushing him to grapple with questions of justice, duty, and the ambiguous nature of right and wrong. The ghostly command from Hamlet's father to avenge his murder serves as the linchpin for the moral complexities that unfold. Hamlet is tasked with a duty that transcends familial loyalty—it demands retribution, vengeance, and a confrontation with the moral gray areas that shroud the realm of justice. This existential burden weighs heavily on Hamlet, compelling him to confront the ethical implications of his actions. Hamlet's internal struggle intensifies as he contemplates the consequences of the revenge he is called upon to execute. The moral dimensions of killing his uncle, Claudius, are layered with complexity. Hamlet grapples not only with the act of murder but also with the spiritual consequences for his own soul. The ethical landscape becomes a treacherous terrain where duty clashes with the moral imperatives that govern a just and righteous existence.

The play's exploration of relationships becomes a fertile ground for moral dilemmas. Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia, whom he loves, and Gertrude, his mother, adds intricate layers to his ethical predicament. His treatment of Ophelia, influenced by his disillusionment with the world around him, raises questions about the morality of sacrificing personal relationships in the pursuit of a higher cause. The complexity of Hamlet's moral dilemmas is further heightened by the blurred lines between justice and revenge. The ethical underpinnings of his actions are constantly tested, mirroring the broader moral ambiguity that characterizes the play. The clash between the medieval sense of divine justice and the emerging Renaissance humanism reflects a society in transition, and Hamlet becomes the embodiment of this moral liminality. Additionally, Hamlet's hesitancy and prolonged contemplation before taking decisive action contribute to the ethical tension in the play. The delay in avenging his father's murder raises

questions about the morality of inaction in the face of injustice. Hamlet's internal struggle with his own agency and the consequences of his choices mirrors the broader existentialist themes embedded in the play.

In the intricate web of moral dilemmas, Shakespeare invites the audience to reflect on the fluidity of ethics, the consequences of revenge, and the moral compromises inherent in navigating a world rife with deception and corruption. Through a critical analysis that dissects Hamlet's ethical struggles, this research paper seeks to illuminate the profound moral ambiguities that underpin the tragedy, inviting readers to confront the enduring relevance of these dilemmas in the broader human experience.

IV. ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF HAMLET: NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH OF VIRTUE AND VICE

The ethical dimensions of Hamlet's character in Shakespeare's eponymous tragedy emerge as a complex tapestry woven with threads of duty, morality, and the inexorable pull of existential angst. As Prince Hamlet grapples with moral dilemmas and confronts the blurred lines between right and wrong, the ethical undercurrents of the play become a compelling lens through which to scrutinize the very essence of human virtue. Hamlet's ethical journey is most prominently marked by his obligation to avenge his father's murder—a duty bestowed upon him by the spectral figure of King Hamlet. This duty, rooted in the medieval concept of divine justice, propels Hamlet into a moral quagmire where filial loyalty collides with the morality of revenge. The ethical dilemma surrounding the act of regicide becomes a central preoccupation, as Hamlet contemplates the spiritual and moral consequences of his actions.

The play's exploration of existentialist philosophy introduces an additional layer to Hamlet's ethical dimensions. Søren Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual responsibility and authenticity finds resonance in Hamlet's internal struggle to navigate the complexities of his moral landscape. Hamlet's existential anguish becomes inseparable from his ethical dilemma, as he grapples with the tension between conforming to

societal expectations and forging an authentic path driven by personal conviction. Hamlet's relationships serve as ethical crucibles that test the bounds of virtue and vice. His interactions with Ophelia, Gertrude, and Claudius become moral battlegrounds where love, loyalty, and betrayal intersect. The ethical implications of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia, shaped by his disillusionment with the world, prompt reflection on the morality of sacrificing personal relationships in the pursuit of a higher cause. The inherent tension between justice and revenge further underscores the ethical complexity of Hamlet's predicament. The ghost's command challenges Hamlet to reconcile the traditional notions of divine justice with the emerging Renaissance humanism that questions the morality of revenge. Hamlet's internal struggle becomes emblematic of a society in transition, torn between ethical paradigms.

Moreover, Hamlet's prolonged contemplation and apparent hesitation before taking decisive action invite ethical scrutiny. The moral consequences of Hamlet's inaction, as well as the toll it takes on his psyche, provoke questions about the ethics of agency and the responsibilities that come with it. The ethical dimensions of Hamlet's choices are inextricably tied to the broader existentialist themes of freedom and individual responsibility. As we navigate the ethical dimensions of Hamlet's character, this critical analysis aims to illuminate the intricate interplay between duty, morality, and existential angst. Through a lens that combines literary analysis and ethical inquiry, we embark on a journey into the heart of Hamlet's ethical quandaries, inviting readers to contemplate the timeless relevance of these ethical dimensions in the overarching narrative of human experience.

V. PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS: HAMLET'S PHILOSOPHICAL ODYSSEY

In the realm of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the existential anguish that pervades the protagonist's psyche finds resonance with profound philosophical underpinnings. This critical analysis delves into the philosophical currents that shape Hamlet's internal landscape, drawing inspiration from existentialist thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul

Sartre. Through an exploration of Hamlet's existential odyssey, we unravel the threads that connect the character's inner turmoil to the broader philosophical discourse of the time. Søren Kierkegaard, often considered the father of existentialism, introduced the concept of 'angst' or existential dread—a profound sense of disquiet rooted in the awareness of one's individual freedom and responsibility. Hamlet's existential angst mirrors Kierkegaard's philosophical exploration as he grapples with the weight of his choices and the consequences of his actions. The prince's internal struggle to reconcile his duty with his own sense of self reflects the essence of Kierkegaardian existentialism.

In Hamlet's soliloquies, particularly the famed "To be or not to be" monologue, echoes of Kierkegaard's introspective philosophy reverberate. Hamlet contemplates the nature of existence, the pains of life, and the uncertainty of what comes after death. The existential dread that permeates these reflections aligns with Kierkegaard's exploration of the individual's confrontation with the infinite possibilities and responsibilities of existence. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism emphasizes radical freedom and the inherent responsibility that comes with it. Hamlet's moral and existential dilemmas epitomize the Sartrean struggle to navigate the boundless freedom of choice. The prince's hesitation, contemplation, and ultimate decision-making process encapsulate the tension between individual freedom and the responsibility to act authentically.

As Hamlet grapples with avenging his father's murder, the existential burden of radical freedom becomes palpable. Sartre's notion that individuals are "condemned to be free" finds a corollary in Hamlet's predicament, where the weight of his decisions extends beyond personal consequence to the broader fabric of the play's moral universe.

Both Kierkegaard and Sartre underscore the importance of authenticity in navigating the existential journey. Hamlet's quest for authenticity becomes a recurrent motif as he seeks to align his actions with his internal convictions. The internal conflict between conforming to external expectations and forging

an authentic path reflects the overarching existential struggle for self-realization. In examining Hamlet's existential odyssey through the lens of Kierkegaardian angst and Sartrean freedom, this critical analysis illuminates the profound philosophical undercurrents that shape the character's inner turmoil. The synthesis of Shakespeare's masterful narrative and existentialist thought offers a unique vantage point to explore the enduring relevance of Hamlet's existential anguish, adding a layer of philosophical richness to the broader discourse on Shakespearean studies and existentialist philosophy.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the profound tapestry of William Shakespeare's Hamlet, the critical analysis of existential anguish and moral dilemmas reveals a multifaceted exploration of the human condition. As we traverse the intricate corridors of Prince Hamlet's psyche, the convergence of existentialist philosophy, ethical quandaries, and literary craftsmanship unveils a narrative that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. Hamlet's existential anguish, a leitmotif echoing the philosophical underpinnings of thinkers like Kierkegaard and Sartre, resonates as a timeless exploration of the human struggle for meaning and authenticity. The soliloquies, particularly the haunting "To be or not to be," encapsulate the very essence of existential dread, inviting readers to confront the perennial questions that have lingered in the human consciousness across centuries.

The moral dilemmas faced by Hamlet emerge as crucibles of ethical inquiry, challenging conventional notions of justice, duty, and the morality of revenge. The ghostly command, intertwined with Hamlet's relationships and the blurred lines between right and wrong, becomes a narrative force that propels the play forward, testing the boundaries of virtue and vice. The ethical dimensions of Hamlet's choices mirror the societal shifts of his time, capturing the transitional period between medieval moral certainties and the burgeoning complexities of Renaissance humanism. As Hamlet grapples with the burdens of individual freedom and the quest for authenticity, his existential odyssey

becomes emblematic of the broader human experience. The play's denouement, marked by tragedy and contemplation, prompts reflection on the enduring relevance of Hamlet's internal struggles. The ethical implications of his decisions reverberate beyond the confines of Elsinore, challenging readers to confront the inexorable link between personal agency and the complexities of morality.

The critical analysis of existential anguish and moral dilemmas in Hamlet serves as a profound exploration into the layers of human consciousness. Through the lens of literature, philosophy, and ethics, we unravel the intricate threads that bind Hamlet's existential odyssey to the broader tapestry of Shakespearean studies. Hamlet's enduring relevance lies not only in the eloquence of his soliloquies or the intricacy of his relationships but in the universality of his internal struggles—an exploration that beckons readers to confront the perennial questions that define the enigmatic journey of existence. The critical analysis presented herein seeks not only to shed light on Hamlet's existential anguish and moral dilemmas but also to invite continued discourse on the timeless intersections of literature, philosophy, and the human experience.

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