

The Narcissistic Dilemma: Exploring NPD Traits in *Hamlet* from a Beauvoirian Perspective

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This research paper explores the intersection of existential philosophy and psychological disorders in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with a focus on Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as viewed through the existentialist lens of Simone de Beauvoir. Drawing upon Beauvoir's existentialist framework, the study delves into the complexities of identity, agency, and societal expectations as portrayed in the characters of Gertrude and Ophelia. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the paper examines how existential crises intertwine with narcissistic behaviors, shedding light on the psychological intricacies of Shakespeare's iconic figures. By synthesizing literary analysis with psychological insights, the study offers valuable contributions to our understanding of human psychology, societal dynamics, and the timeless themes of existential authenticity portrayed in literature.

Keywords: existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Shakespeare, Hamlet, identity, psychological complexity

Introduction

Existential philosophy, particularly as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, delves into the intricacies of human existence, emphasizing the significance of recognizing the ambiguity inherent in life. Central to Beauvoir's philosophy is the notion that individuals are not merely born into predefined roles but rather evolve into their identities through a complex interplay of freedom and societal influence. The landmark of Beauvoirian Existentialism is her phrase "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). This recognition of existential ambiguity underscores the perpetual struggle for autonomy and the negotiation of one's agency within the constraints of social structures.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir elucidates the precarious balance between immanence and transcendence, highlighting how they contain elements of ambiguity, as they involve a tension between the individual and the external world. Failure to navigate this tension can lead to the degradation of liberty into forms of oppression and frustration (Beauvoir, 1962, p. 102). Indeed, the pursuit of freedom necessitates a multifaceted approach, requiring individuals to both assert their own agency and acknowledge the freedom of others. This dialectic process is essential for fostering genuine autonomy amid the constraints of inherited norms and values.

Within the context of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, characters such as Gertrude and Ophelia serve as poignant embodiments of Beauvoirian themes, grappling with the complexities of existence within a patriarchal

society. Gertrude's character exemplifies the struggle between immanence and transcendence, as her emotional desires often clash with societal expectations and familial obligations. Her desire for companionship and comfort overwhelms her ability to think rationally about the consequences of her actions. This decision leads to her being seen as an immoral and disloyal character, both by her son Hamlet and the other characters in the play. Gertrude's immanence is also evident in her relationship with Hamlet. She is emotionally attached to him, but her desire to maintain her new marriage and status as queen causes her to distance herself from him. This creates a rift between them and contributes to Hamlet's anger and frustration.

However, at other times there are moments when she exhibits transcendence. One example is when Gertrude confronts Hamlet about his behavior towards her in Act 3, Scene 4. Instead of submitting to Hamlet's aggression, Gertrude challenges him and asserts her own agency. She tells Hamlet, "O Hamlet, speak no more; Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul; And there I see much black and grained spots As will not leave their tinct" (Shakespeare 3.4.88-91). Gertrude refuses to accept Hamlet's accusations and is not afraid to speak up for herself. Despite moments of assertiveness, her agency remains circumscribed by patriarchal norms, particularly in her marriage to Claudius.

The concept of "the look of the other," as elucidated by Beauvoir, sheds light on the ways in which societal gaze can impede women's transcendence. This pervasive patriarchal scrutiny imposes constraints on women's autonomy, relegating them to the status of objects for male pleasure and perpetuating a cycle of subjugation. It is another essential feature of existentialist philosophy as explained by Boule and Tidd about Sartre and Beauvoir; It is further developed by theorists like Jacques Lacan's influential account of the Mirror Stage, in which the infant faces its alter ego in the mirror, where he sees its reflection and in this process stares into an identity-mediating gaze. Through this process of association with the mirror-self, the ego identity of a child is formed that proves to be higher and more magnificent than the bodily experience. The problem arises when this identity is formed differently in boys and girls in a patriarchal society. Girls are asked to present themselves as an object for the pleasure of men and be denied all sorts of freedom. Women cannot have the same freedom as men. People stare at them, follow them, approach them, and even harass them if they are found alone outside (Boule & Tidd, 2012, p. 6).

Similarly, Ophelia's character embodies the struggles of navigating immanence and transcendence within a patriarchal framework. Initially depicted as submissive and obedient, Ophelia's descent into madness represents a radical departure from societal expectations, symbolizing her rejection of patriarchal constraints and reclaiming of agency.

By examining the complexities of these characters through a Beauvoirian lens, this study aims to elucidate the nuances of existential dilemmas within Shakespeare's masterpiece. Through an exploration of immanence, transcendence, and the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures, we can gain deeper insights into the timeless themes of autonomy, agency, and the inherent ambiguity of human existence as portrayed in *Hamlet*.

Literature Review

In this pivotal section of the study, we delve into a comprehensive review of existing literature, illuminating the enduring struggle for existential authenticity and the complexities of identity within Shakespearean characters.

Through an exploration of previous research, we uncover a longstanding narrative of human beings grappling with their existence across various societal contexts.

Günenç's analysis in "Ophelia and Gertrude: Victimized Women in Hamlet" (2015) sheds light on the poignant portrayal of female characters in Shakespeare's masterpiece. Günenç exposes the societal pressures and emotional turmoil experienced by characters like Ophelia, whose descent into madness serves as a catalyst for rebellion against oppressive traditions and gender norms. Her memory was damaged due to social and emotional pressure. The social, moral, and religious teachings have taught her that she is valuable only in the presence of a strong man in the form of a father and husband. It is her identity disorientation that leads her towards hysterical condition and madness due to the loss of her father and her lover Hamlet (Günenç 2015, p. 167). De Beauvoir describes that myths are developed for behavior orientation. Myths preach that women are identified with the status of their men. Ophelia feels insecure in the absence of his father and the enmity of her brother with Hamlet crushes her hopes of a good family life with Hamlet.

Baruah's examination in "The Female Voice in the Novels of Mamoni Roisom Goswami" (2016) offers further insight into the plight of women in literature. Baruah underscores the intricate dynamics of the identity crisis faced by women in Indian society, echoing themes of existential ambiguity and societal constraints depicted in *Hamlet*. Women become victims of an identity muddle in a society where women are identified with their male relation of father, brother, and husband having no choice of freedom and equality on social and political grounds. Role coherence needs a stable form in the emotional and outer world but when this coherence is lost it brings disaster. Goswami brings forth several facts that show identity disturbance is related to the helplessness of women.

Hunter's seminal work, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism" (1983), emerges as a product of the second wave of feminism, resonating with Beauvoir's advocacy for women's rights and existential exploration of identity. Hunter's analysis highlights the cultural and ideological underpinnings of gender discrimination, drawing parallels to Beauvoir's critique of patriarchal norms.

Friedan draws significant inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex*, often regarded as the female bible for its fervent advocacy of women's rights and its exploration of their identity crises amidst various social, ideological, and cultural influences. Friedan contends that these crises stem from deeply ingrained cultural norms and religious dictates, which perpetuate the subjugation of women within society. Indeed, culture, shaped by religion, frequently relegates women to domestic roles and familial responsibilities, further reinforcing their identification with male relatives who wield authority over their lives. The resulting social inequality and gender discrimination engender profound stress and conflict.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature underscores the enduring relevance of existential themes and gender dynamics within literary discourse. From Günenç's poignant portrayal of Ophelia's rebellion against societal norms to Baruah's exploration of women's identity crises in Indian society, each study contributes valuable insights into the complexities of human existence. Moreover, Hunter's analysis of feminism and Friedan's engagement with Beauvoir's philosophy highlight the intersectionality of gender discrimination and the perpetuation of societal constraints. As we move forward, these diverse perspectives serve as critical touchstones for understanding the nuanced portrayal of existential authenticity and gender dynamics within Shakespearean characters, laying the groundwork for the subsequent analysis in this study.

Beauvoir's Existential Lens: Redefining Identity and Agency

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy challenges conventional notions of identity and gender, emphasizing the individual's responsibility for shaping their own existence. In the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir extends upon Sartre's slogan "existence precedes essence", rejecting predetermined roles and emphasizing personal agency in defining one's identity. She famously argued that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283), highlighting the existentialist rejection of any objective or universal meaning or purpose, and instead focusing on the individual's subjective experience of existence.

Existentialism, as Beauvoir sees it, grapples with the existential angst and identity predicament inherent in the human condition. Human beings, she posits, lack absolute knowledge and control over their lives, navigating a world fraught with anxiety and inner conflict. They are unable to understand the reason for their existence in the world which leads them to the verge of destruction. Human beings have no control over their lives due to the powerful forces of nature and society that aim to form humans according to their ideologies. Society, bound by traditional values, imposes identity norms that often lead to existential crises. Hamlet's journey mirrors this existential struggle, particularly evident in his increasing mental pressure following the murder of Polonius.

Beauvoir emphasizes the fundamental ambiguity of human existence, where individuals are in a constant state of becoming, characterized by uncertainty and flux. This ambiguity underscores the existentialist view that human beings are not fixed entities but rather dynamic beings shaped by their choices and actions. Existentialism, Beauvoir argues, has profound implications for ethics, as it underscores the individual's responsibility for their choices and actions, rejecting notions of predetermined fate or destiny. Drawing upon existentialist philosophies such as facticity, existential ambiguity, and being-for-others, Beauvoir analyzes how women become the 'absolute Other' in patriarchal societies. By recognizing the interrelatedness of independence and freedom, Beauvoir unveils the mechanisms by which societal norms constrain women's agency and identity, perpetuating their marginalized status. Through Beauvoir's existential lens, we gain insight into the complex interplay of identity, agency, and societal expectations in shaping individual existence.

Intersection of Existential Crisis and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Exploring Inner Turmoil and External Facades

To establish a connection between existential crisis and Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), it's essential to recognize that individuals experiencing existential crises often grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and meaning in their lives. These crises can stem from a profound sense of uncertainty, alienation, and anxiety about one's existence and place in the world.

In the context of NPD, individuals may exhibit traits such as grandiosity, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and a lack of empathy for others. These traits can emerge as coping mechanisms in response to deep-seated insecurities and existential fears. For some individuals, the need to assert superiority and control over others becomes a way to validate their existence and alleviate feelings of inadequacy or emptiness. Furthermore, individuals with NPD may struggle with forming authentic connections and meaningful relationships, as their focus tends to be inward, centered around maintaining their self-image and seeking admiration from others. This internal preoccupation can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation, contributing to the existential angst experienced by those with NPD.

By exploring the intersection of existential crisis and NPD, we can gain insight into how individuals navigate the complexities of their inner worlds while grappling with external pressures and societal expectations. In the subsequent analysis of characters from *Hamlet*, we will delve into how these existential themes intertwine with narcissistic behaviors, shedding light on the psychological intricacies of Shakespeare's iconic figures.

Exploring Narcissistic Traits in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: An Existentialist Perspective

In exploring the characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we delve into a complex web of human psychology, where existential crises intersect with manifestations of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Employing Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy and her insights into NPD, we dissect the behaviors of key characters, shedding light on their struggles and motivations.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized by grandiosity, a sense of self-importance, and a lack of empathy. People with NPD often have a preoccupation with their own success, beauty, power, or intelligence and are often described as arrogant or self-centered. NPD can cause significant distress and dysfunction in personal and professional relationships, as well as impair social and occupational functioning.

Gertrude: The Queen's Narcissistic Traits

In *Hamlet*, characters such as Gertrude exhibit traits indicative of NPD, driven by a desire to preserve their social status and protect themselves in a volatile world. Gertrude's hasty remarriage to Claudius shortly after her husband's death reflects a self-centeredness and a disregard for the emotional turmoil experienced by her son, Hamlet. This decision, driven by a need for security and power, showcases the distorted priorities inherent in NPD. Her preoccupation with her own pleasure and comfort, her disregard for the feelings and opinions of others, and her willingness to use her power to maintain her position are examples of NPD.

She is also quick to dismiss Hamlet's concerns about his father's death and seems to value her own reputation and comfort above her son's well-being. She knows that kingship is right of her son Hamlet but she behaves strangely in that she accepts Claudius as a husband and king instantly within a week of the death of her husband. It is an abnormality of behavior that is not expected from a normal person. Her fear of losing her identity and self-importance as a queen forces her to accept the proposal of Claudius. She meets Hamlet as the wife of Claudius in her royal robe and she expects Hamlet to accept Claudius as a father without little care for the deep grief and stress.

Hamlet comes in his black mourning dress while the queen and king wear colorful robes and announce to finish the grief for the late king. Claudius deals with Hamlet as if Claudius himself is his father without care for his feelings and grief for Hamlet's late father. All these things make their behavior odd because normal humans behave, talk, and act according to the requirements of time and circumstances. "Queen: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. Do not forever with thy veiled lids Seek for thy noble father in the dust: Thou know'st 'tis common; all that live must die, Passing through nature to eternity" (Shakespeare 1.2.68).

Hamlet: The Prince's Existential Crisis

Narcissistic personality disorder develops because of the self-centered and egoistic nature of people who want to control those in their relationship. Hamlet too displays narcissistic tendencies, fueled by his

disillusionment with familial relationships and societal expectations. His obsession with avenging his father's death consumes him, leading to erratic behavior and strained interactions with those around him. Hamlet's inability to empathize with others, particularly Ophelia, further underscores his narcissistic traits, as he manipulates and rejects her in pursuit of his own agenda. He behaves abnormally from the beginning of the play. When he meets the ghost of his father who tells him about his killer he creates a strong passion to avenge the murder of his father. The troubled and complicated relationship with his mother and Ophelia indicates his psychological disorder. He becomes self-centered and wants to do everything by himself. He rejects Ophelia despite his deep love for her. He loves his mother but his superego disallows him to reveal the secret of King Claudius to anyone. Generally, he can be exposed to the reality of Ophelia and can maintain his relationship with her but he takes unnecessary delay in the murder of his uncle that is indicative of his psychological confusion. He avoids killing him while he is offering prayers because he fears that it may result in Claudius' salvation. He kills Polonius abruptly without thinking of the outcome of his killing. His behavior with his mother is severe. He insults her and curses her sexuality.

All these aspects indicate that Hamlet exhibits traits of narcissistic personality disorder that leads him towards destruction because he behaves irrationally. The madness of Hamlet stems from his mental ailment that is the result of depression and loneliness. The murder of his father has worsened the pre existing situation. In the whole play, Hamlet is under the influence of pessimistic influences. Hamlet knows about the whole truth but it is his irrationality that brings deterioration to the whole family. "Ay, sir, that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the king best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw; first mouthed, to be last swallowed: when he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again" (Shakespeare 4.2. 16).

Narcissism often emerges in individuals who grapple with suppressed or marginalized identities, particularly among women facing identity crises and acute stress. This personality disorder stems from mental pressure and agitation, leading affected individuals to exhibit abnormal behavior. Victims of narcissism require specialized attention to address their stress and agitation effectively. Beauvoir's analysis highlights how women, subjected to emotional disturbance and societal pressures, often become casualties of narcissistic personality disorder. The development of this disorder can be attributed to various factors, including mysticism, loss of identity, social pressure, and lack of love. Beauvoir underscores that the pervasive social intensity and oppression experienced by women serve as central catalysts for the development of narcissism, given the complexity of their lives. Consequently, narcissism arises as a result of emotional turmoil and mental disorder, compounded by societal expectations that objectify women and constrain their ability to resist or adapt to life's challenges.

The lack of social and familial recognition has a profound and detrimental impact on women's lives, often leading to estrangement and emotional distress. Women frequently find themselves pigeonholed by their gender rather than being recognized for their abilities and talents, which confines them to a limited sphere of influence. As a result, women yearn to be valued and esteemed on par with men, but their continual disappointment in societal expectations can propel them towards developing narcissistic personality disorder. This disorder is characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, an insatiable need for attention, tumultuous relationships, a loss of identity, and a lack of empathy.

Ophelia: Descent into Narcissistic Despair

The major characters in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* exemplify the manifestations of narcissism, as they grapple with serious internal conflicts and exhibit perplexing behaviors. Ophelia, in particular, demonstrates signs of narcissistic personality disorder through her unconventional actions and troubled relationships with those close to her. For instance, it is unusual for a daughter to share intimate love letters with her father or divulge details about her romantic encounters, as Ophelia does with her father in the play. "Ophelia: No, my good lord: but, as you did command, I did repel his letters and denied His access to me" (Shakespeare 2.1.108). These interactions underscore Ophelia's strained relationship dynamics and her desperate desire to please her male relatives, which ultimately contributes to her mounting stress and mental anguish.

Following her father's demise, Ophelia's narcissistic tendencies intensify, exacerbated by feelings of isolation and a notable lack of empathy. Struggling with an acute identity crisis, Ophelia finds herself adrift in a world where she feels unable to stand independently. Previously, her identity was closely intertwined with her father's, and his sudden passing leaves her grappling with a profound loss of self. Bereft of anyone to confide in or share her sorrow, Ophelia's abnormal behavior further isolates her from those around her. Rebuffed by Hamlet and abandoned by her support network, Ophelia's sense of loneliness and desolation becomes overwhelming. In her despair, she seeks solace through drastic measures, ultimately succumbing to the depths of her sorrow in a tragic act of self-destruction. Through her poignant words and actions, Ophelia's narrative reflects the profound anguish and despair that accompany her journey into the abyss of narcissistic despair.

The existential anguish experienced by the characters in *Hamlet* is deeply rooted in the existentialist philosophy that posits the inherent absurdity and meaninglessness of existence. Life, as portrayed in the play, is a tumultuous journey fraught with oppression, tension, trauma, and existential dread. The characters grapple with the burdens of their actions and the overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the face of societal expectations and personal conflicts. Society, governed by rigid traditional values, imposes a restrictive framework upon individuals, exacerbating identity crises and inner turmoil.

Gertrude, in particular, serves as a poignant example of the existential predicament faced by the characters. Initially portrayed as a virtuous and noble figure, Gertrude's life takes a tragic turn following her marriage to Claudius. Her desire for happiness and familial harmony is shattered as she unwittingly becomes embroiled in a web of deceit and moral corruption. Her relationship with Hamlet becomes strained, marked by mutual misunderstanding and resentment. Hamlet's bitter confrontation with Gertrude underscores the profound psychological pressures that affect both mother and son. Gertrude, once a symbol of strength and authority as queen, is reduced to a state of shock and helplessness in the face of Hamlet's harsh words, emblematic of the existential anguish that permeates the play. "Hamlet: you question with a wicked tongue. Queen: Why, how now, Hamlet! Hamlet: What's the matter now? Queen: Have you forgot me? Hamlet: No, by the rood, not so: You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife; And,—would it were not so!—you are my mother" (Shakespeare 3.4.13).

It is visualized that Shakespeare is deliberately presenting women with their sexuality. Hamlet treats them without any discrimination or relationship between his mother and beloved. Her conversation with Ophelia points out his narrow thinking about the seduction of women who seduce men. Hamlet calls his mother to be polluted on

the dirty bed which points out the gender prejudices in the mentality of men and the women who are called only a way of lust and seduction for getting sexual relaxation. Gertrude's love for her son is everlasting and she wants to save him from the coming danger but the wording of Hamlet. She is a representation of the strong impact of the ego of men who consider them the center of the world while women remain in the marginalization of their lives.

Conclusion

In culmination, the analysis conducted in this research paper elucidates the intricate interplay between Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) traits and existential dilemmas as portrayed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, examined through the existentialist framework of Simone de Beauvoir. The existential struggles faced by characters like Gertrude and Ophelia serve as poignant reflections of the broader societal expectations and patriarchal structures prevalent in the Elizabethan era, intertwining with their internal turmoil and psychological distress.

Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy serves as a guiding lens, highlighting the inherent contradictions and pressures embedded within societal structures. Gertrude's tragic fate, driven by her pursuit of happiness and familial harmony, underscores the complexities inherent in navigating societal norms and familial obligations. Similarly, Ophelia's descent into madness, rooted in societal expectations and familial betrayal, underscores the profound impact of existential crises on individual lives.

Looking ahead, the insights gleaned from this research open avenues for further inquiry into the intricate nuances of human behavior and societal structures. Future research endeavors could delve deeper into the complexities of NPD and existential dilemmas in literature, offering valuable contributions to our understanding of the human condition across different contexts and time periods. By continuing to explore these themes, we can enrich our comprehension of literature, psychology, and society, fostering a more holistic understanding of the complexities inherent in the human experience.

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