

Hamlet's Hesitation From the Perspective of Existentialism: Humanity, Choice, and Dilemma

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In the mid-20th century, existentialism rose in Europe. *Hamlet*, one of the masterpieces of the literary giant Shakespeare, contains profound existentialist thoughts. Hamlet's hesitation in avenging his father is thought-provoking. Based on the existentialist perspective, this paper deeply analyzes the phenomenon and causes of Hamlet's hesitation.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, existentialism, hesitation

Introduction

Existentialism, an influential 20th-century philosophy, emerged in the West following the disillusionment caused by the World Wars. The collapse of traditional moral, religious, and political systems prompted profound questioning of existence. Existentialism interrogates the human condition within an absurd and alienating world, advocating individual freedom of choice and the responsibility to bear its consequences (Mou, 2016, pp. 72-93).

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has sustained centuries of critical analysis. The protagonist's hesitation in avenging his father remains a central interpretive challenge, explored through diverse lenses including psychology, sociology, and literary criticism.

Existentialism offers a significant framework for understanding Hamlet. The corrupt Danish court mirrors the absurd world depicted by existentialism. Hamlet's protracted deliberation over revenge resonates with existentialist tenets of radical choice and responsibility. Analyzing his hesitation existentially facilitates deeper understanding of the character and the play's philosophical depth, revealing its transhistorical relevance to human struggle and decision-making.

Overview of Existentialist Theory

Existence Precedes Essence

"Existence precedes essence" is a fundamental proposition of existentialist philosophy put forward by the French philosopher Sartre. This view completely overturns the traditional philosophical presupposition of human essence, emphasizing that humans are not initially limited by a fixed and innate essence. Instead, they first exist in the world as pure individuals and gradually shape their essence through later experiences, choices, and actions. Sartre once gave an example that humans are like being thrown onto the stage of the world. Initially, there is no

predetermined script or role. It is through collisions and interactions with the surrounding environment and a series of autonomous choices that they write their own life stories and define their unique essences. There is a distinction between the “existence” of a person’s “substance” and the “existence” of their “essence”. Only when a person acts driven by their own will can they acquire the “existence” of their “essence”. Facing the absurd world and constantly making choices, these different choices are the means by which a person “molds” themselves (Mou, 2016, pp. 92-93). This view provides a crucial point for understanding Hamlet. Initially, Hamlet was the Prince of Denmark, with a noble status and humanist ideals. However, a series of events, such as his father’s death, his mother’s remarriage, and his uncle’s usurpation of the throne threw him into a chaotic and absurd life situation. At this time, his “existence” faced a huge challenge. He was no longer a simple and carefree prince but needed to rediscover and reshape himself among choices, such as revenge, escape, and resistance. Meaning takes shape through action, because existential philosophy holds that the world has no intrinsic meaning, and there is no essence before existence. And this is the reason behind that world-famous hesitation of Hamlet. He wants to choose authentically, to act authentically and not in bad faith. After all, “man’s deepest concern is to realize his authentic self” (Jaeger, 1952, p. 660).

Absurdity of the World

In the field of existentialism, the absurdity of the world is an essential element that cannot be ignored. Camus (2013) once profoundly pointed out: “In a world suddenly deprived of illusions and light, man feels like *L’Étranger*” (p. 10). This sense of absurdity stems from the meaninglessness, illogicality, and unpredictability of the world. Just as in *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps wait day after day by the roadside in the wilderness for Godot who has never shown up and whose existence is even unknown. Their waiting is fruitless, their lives have no goals, and the world around them turns a blind eye to their plight, all sinking into inexplicable chaos and nothingness. For Hamlet, the Danish court, which should have been a symbol of power and justice, has degenerated into an ugly stage where his uncle murdered his brother and usurped the throne and everyone flattered. Family affection, love, and friendship have all been distorted and deteriorated under the power struggle. The humanist order he once firmly believed in has collapsed in an instant. He can only struggle alone in the vortex of absurdity, sinking into deep confusion and perplexity.

Freedom of Choice and Responsibility

Existentialism suggests that in an absurd world, humans have the right to choose freely and must also bear the corresponding responsibilities. The two are closely linked and inseparable. Sartre (1943) said in *Being and Nothingness*: “Man is born to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (p. 52). That is to say, in Sartre’s philosophical view, it is not simply freedom for the sake of freedom. His real purpose is to fulfill the consequences brought about by freedom, that is, a person should be responsible for their own freedom. Hamlet’s long significance for Western culture has a simple cause. The play is committed to individual freedom (Holbrook, 2010, p. 68). Hamlet holds the blade of revenge and has the freedom to strike a fatal blow at his uncle at any time. However, behind this choice are involved the fate of Denmark, the stability of the court, the bottom line of humanity, and the interrogation of his own soul. Once, he chooses revenge, bloodshed is inevitable, and he may lose his humanity in the flames of revenge. If he abandons revenge, he will bear the guilt of being disloyal to his father and indifferent to justice. No matter what choice he makes, the heavy responsibility follows him like a shadow, making him linger on the edge of action and unable to take a decisive step.

Manifestations of Hamlet's Hesitation

Hesitation in Revenge Actions

Missing the opportunity. Hamlet repeatedly faced dilemmas in choosing to take revenge. A typical scene occurred when he encountered Claudius praying alone: Claudius was confessing and in an unprepared state, and Hamlet approached with a sword in hand, making it an excellent opportunity for revenge. However, Christian doctrine holds that a person's soul is pure during confession, and killing them at this moment would allow their soul to ascend to heaven, evading the deserved punishment in hell. Constrained by his religious beliefs, Hamlet feared that his revenge would degenerate into an unjust murder, abhorrent to God. After an inner struggle, he put away his sword and missed the opportunity.

Repeated probing. Hamlet's hesitation is also reflected in his repeated probing of the revenge action. To verify the truth of his father's ghost's words and confirm whether his uncle Claudius was the real culprit, he elaborately staged a "play-within-a-play", requiring the actors to accurately reproduce the crime scene. During the performance, he observed Claudius' violent reaction to the key plot, thereby confirming his guilt. However, even after obtaining confirmation, Hamlet still did not take immediate action, but instead re-evaluated the timing and methods of the revenge strategy.

Contemplation on the Meaning of Life

The soliloquy of "to be or not to be". Camus points out in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the question "Why do I live?" is "the only truly serious philosophical problem". Shakespeare's Hamlet embodies this dilemma in his soliloquy on "to be or not to be". Hamlet's self-consciousness arises from the examination of existence: "Returning to consciousness and breaking away from daily unconsciousness is the first step toward absurd freedom". His situation is completely transformed by his uncle's regicide and usurpation of the throne, along with his mother's hasty remarriage, forcing him to profoundly reflect on his state of existence and the meaning of life. In despair, existence becomes a heavy burden: He must navigate court struggles, feign madness to deal with Claudius, remain vigilant against threats, and endure constant suffering. For him, the world is filled with "the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely".

Hamlet abandoned love, yet hesitated in the face of the great responsibility of revenge, constantly pondering the meaning of "existence" (Liu, 2012, pp. 71-73). Death, however, holds a different allure: It signifies the end of all suffering, a "sleep" in which "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" can vanish. But Hamlet regards death as a cowardly escape. He recognizes that enduring fate may allow temporary survival, yet it implies acquiescence to the continuation of injustice and Denmark's persistent darkness. Conversely, revenge entails enormous risks: Bloody vengeance might lead to the loss of humanity; even if successful, it cannot guarantee the restoration of order in Denmark.

Doubt about human nature. Hamlet's hesitation stems more fundamentally from his profound doubt regarding human nature. Initially, he held the Renaissance humanist belief in the inherent goodness of humanity. However, Claudius's moral depravity—manifested in fratricide, usurpation, and the appropriation of his brother's wife—Gertrude's disregard for ethics in her hasty remarriage, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's betrayal of friendship for gain collectively shattered his ideals.

Witnessing these acts led to Hamlet's complete disillusionment with human nature. His famous soliloquy ("What a piece of work is a man!... this quintessence of dust") marks his shift from humanist praise to existentialist negation. Consequently, he became lost in the complexity of human nature, questioning whether

revenge could truly punish evil or restore moral order, as his adversary symbolized the abyss of corrupted humanity. This fundamental doubt about the essence of humanity caused his persistent hesitation in pursuing vengeance, rooted in a fear of sinking into deeper existential void.

The Existentialist Roots of Hamlet's Hesitation

The Collapse of Family Ethics

In Hamlet's world, the family became the first and worst victim of absurdity. His father's sudden death was like a bolt from the blue. His mother Gertrude's remarriage was the salt in the wound. Before the old king's body was even cold, she eagerly threw herself into the arms of his uncle Claudius, disregarding all ethical norms. This behavior not only violated the loyalty between husband and wife, but also seemed like a desecration of kinship, shattering Hamlet's beautiful expectations of family. After his uncle Claudius murdered his brother and usurped the throne, his union with Gertrude was an incestuous farce. This act against human ethics completely disrupted the family order in Hamlet's eyes, distorting kinship with power and desire, and leaving the family bonds he cherished riddled with holes.

The Chaos of Social Order

The Danish court was in chaos. Power struggles ran rampant within the court. After Claudius murdered his brother to seize the throne, he appointed treacherous officials and formed cliques to consolidate his rule. The court was filled with flattery and sycophancy, while upright individuals were suppressed. The palace became a breeding ground for conspiracies, with fairness and justice nowhere to be found.

Externally, Denmark faced threats from foreign countries, such as Norway, and the nation was in turmoil. Hamlet bore the heavy responsibility of saving Denmark but could not find a direction. Every attempt at resistance was fraught with difficulties. Revenge was intertwined with Denmark's national fate, which made him cautious and plunged him into hesitation.

The Conflict of Self-Cognition

Hamlet grew up during the Renaissance and was influenced by humanism. While studying at the University of Wittenberg, he embraced humanist ideas and looked forward to a world where human nature shines, order prevails, and love and justice abound. But reality shattered his ideals. His father died suddenly, his mother hastily remarried, his uncle committed fratricide and incest to seize power, the court was filled with ministers vying for power and favor, with a foul atmosphere, innocent emotions were exploited, friends betrayed for their own interests, and his uncle plotted for the throne. Abroad, there were ambitious coveters eyeing the country, and the nation was in a state of bloodshed and turmoil (Yang, 2009, pp. 132-133). At this time, Hamlet seemed to be standing on the ruins of his ideals, surrounded by endless darkness and desolation. The world in his eyes was far from his former ideals, and the huge gap plunged him into deep pain and confusion. However, in act V, we see a different Hamlet: He is not feigning madness anymore, nor does he show any sign of frustration or anger. "He has become himself. His task was never to imitate his father or act as his father's instrument. This is a profound liberation and it is why Hamlet, notwithstanding the waste it portrays, is a great drama of individuality" (Farahmandfar & Samigorganroodi, 2015, pp. 25-31).

Conclusion

Existentialist analysis reveals that Hamlet's hesitation stems from the absurdity of the world, conflicts in self-perception, and the dilemma of free choice. The collapse of familial ethics and social order led him to witness

the degradation of humanity and question the rationality of the world. The gap between ideals and reality rendered him unable to choose between the duty of revenge and humanist ideals, between princely responsibility and the instinct for vengeance. Confronted with action, he vacillated between violence and justice, avoidance and resistance; each instance of hesitation involved careful consideration of morality, responsibility, and consequences. His tragic end was the inevitable result of these multiple contradictions and unbalanced choices.

Hamlet's characteristic hesitation transcends time and space, reflecting a universal human condition and manifesting his exploration of self-identity. The inquiry "To be, or not to be" concerns not merely revenge but constitutes a profound reflection on the meaning of life and individual responsibility. Existentialism posits that humans possess absolute freedom to define themselves, yet this freedom entails a heavy burden. Hamlet's fear that revenge would trap him in a cycle of violence and violate his moral principles exemplifies this dilemma inherent in free choice.

Ultimately, Hamlet undergoes a transformation, evolving from a state of confusion into an individual capable of synthesizing his observations of life with newly formed convictions. Resolved, he entrusts Horatio to tell his story and accepts death with composure ("... the rest is silence"). This transformation enables him to authenticate his existence through death, resolve his existential crisis, and emerge as an existentialist hero.

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