

## A Psychoanalytic Reading of Hamlet

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is different from other Elizabethan revenge plays in the sense that the playwright did put much effort in depicting the psychological make-up of his hero Hamlet. The way Shakespeare portrays the psychological complexities of Hamlet, the play has become a lucrative text to the critics to see through the psychoanalytic lens. Analysis of *Hamlet* using psychoanalytic criticism reveals the inward states of Hamlet's mind. Among the various aspects of Hamlet's character, the thing that instantly draws our attention is his relation with his mother Gertrude. It is here the psychoanalytic critics opine that Hamlet has an Oedipus Complex to his mother. Freud developed the theory of *Oedipus complex*, whereby, says Freud, the male infant conceives the desire of eliminate the father and become the sexual partner of the mother. Hamlet, too, has several symptoms to suffer from Oedipus Complex.

### Hamlet's Oedipus Complex:

A fundamental basis for all of Freudian psychology resides in the Oedipal feelings which Freud believed are common to all male children. The major psychological distinction between one person and another was said to come from the way the person handled those feelings and the way that handling was represented in everyday life (how the hell do you write such nonsense sentences?). Freud is categorical about the existence of the Oedipal impulse

"It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfillment of our own childhood wishes..

Here is one in whom these primeval wishes of our childhood have been fulfilled. While the poet, as he unravels the past, brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found".  
-Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. James Strachey, Avon, N.Y. 1965. p.296.

Freud also explains the difference between what he takes to be an innate universal psychological mechanism and the accepted range of expression of civilization with the notion of repression. For example, Hamlet has fundamental urges which are not visible in the course of the play is a tribute to the energy he has invested in repressing them. Freud allies advances in civilization itself with the increase of repression.

*Hamlet* and *Oedipus* from *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles, have striking similarities which augment Hamlet's Oedipus complex. 'The Oedipus complex' is a psychoanalytic theory which encompasses the idea of unconsciously desiring the parent of the opposite sex, while desiring to eliminate the parent of the same sex. Hamlet does hold these feeling for his mother, Gertrude, but Hamlet's situation contrasts greatly to that of Oedipus; Hamlet never fulfills his oedipal desires. Despite this fact, Hamlet is said to have one of the greatest Oedipus complexes.

Now, in analyzing *Hamlet*, 'the Oedipus Complex' is clearly apparent to the reader. As a child, Hamlet always expressed the warmest fondness and affection for his mother. This adoration contained elements of disguised erotic quality, especially seen in the bed chamber scene with his mother. The Queen's sensual nature and her passionate fondness of her son are two traits that show her relationship with Hamlet goes

beyond the normal mother-son relationship. Nonetheless though, Hamlet finds a love interest in Ophelia. His feelings for Ophelia are never discussed fully in the play, but it is evident to the reader that at one time he loved her because of the hurt he feels when she lies to him. At this part in the play, Hamlet insults Ophelia by telling her, "***Or if/ thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know/ well enough what monsters you make of them. To a /nunn'ry, go, and quickly too***" (3.1.136-139). At this part in the play, it is extremely difficult for Hamlet to differentiate between his mother and Ophelia. Therefore, making his true feelings for his mother become more obscure. Another thing is that, when Hamlet's father dies and his mother remarries, the independency of the idea of sexuality with his mother, concealed since infancy, can no longer be hid from his consciousness. Emotions which were favorable and pleasing at infancy are now emotions of abhorrence and disgust because of his repressions. In the beginning of the play he becomes extremely derisive and contemptuous to his mother. "***Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not "seems."***" (1.2.76). When Hamlet says this, he is mocking his mother's question about why he is still mourning his father's death. Ironically, out of the love he still has for his mother, he yields her request to remain at the court. The long "repressed" need to take his father's place, by gaining his mother's devotion is first stimulated to unconscious activity by the marriage of his mother to Claudius. Claudius has usurped the position of husband to Gertrude, a position that Hamlet had once longed for. Their incestuous marriage thus resembles Hamlet's imaginary idea of having a sexual relationship with his mother. These unconscious desires are struggling to find conscious expression, without Hamlet being the least aware of them.

As the play goes on, Hamlet comes to know that Claudius is the murderer of his father. Knowing the truth makes Hamlet's subconscious realize that killing Claudius would be similar to killing himself. This is so because Hamlet recognizes that Claudius' actions of murdering his brother and marrying Hamlet's mother, mimicked Hamlet's inner unconscious desires. Hamlet's unconscious fantasies have always been closely related to Claudius' conduct. All of Hamlet's once hidden feelings seem to surface in spite of all of the "**repressing forces,**" when he cries out, "**Oh my prophetic soul!/ My uncle!**" (1.5.40-41). From here, Hamlet's consciousness must deal with the frightful truth. Therefore, when dealing with Claudius, Hamlet's attitude is extremely complex and intricate. The concepts of death and sexuality are interchangeable in this play. To the reader, it is evident that Hamlet hates his uncle, but his despise of Claudius comes more from his jealousy than from anything else. The more Hamlet criticizes Claudius, the more his unconscious feelings start to unravel. Hence, Hamlet is faced with a dilemma by acknowledging the same feelings his uncle has towards his mother, even though he detests Claudius, and yet on the other hand, he feels the need to avenge his father's death. It takes Hamlet a month to decide to finally take action against Claudius. Hamlet is convinced of Claudius' guilt, but his own guilt prevents him from completely eliminating his uncle. Hamlet is still trying to "repress" his own sexual desires. It could be construed that Claudius manifests all of Hamlet's passions and emotions. If Claudius is killed, then Hamlet must also be killed. The course of action that Hamlet pursues can only lead to his ruin. In the end of the play, Hamlet is finally willing to make the ultimate sacrifice: to avenge his father's death and to kill his uncle, as well as part of himself.

### **The Soul of Nero:**

Some critics say that Hamlet might intend to murder his mother Gertrude herself. The ghost of Hamlet's father has also expressed concern for Gertrude's safety with Hamlet, and to add to the list, Hamlet, himself seems to need some assurance on the matter.

*"Now could I drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business at the day  
Would quake to look on: soft, now to my mother -  
O heart, lose not thy nature, let not ever*

*The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,  
Let me be cruel not unnatural.  
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.” [Act III, Scene II]*

Freud's assumption is that the presence of Gertrude evokes a sense of guilt and discomfort (as a result of his Oedipal yearnings) which Hamlet is unable to tolerate. Hamlet's own allusion to Nero is based on a similar situation - although derived from quite different events. Nero was reputed to have slept with his mother, Agrippina, and then to have murdered her out of a sense of guilt. Oedipus or Orestes? In both cases, there is an argument to be made that the target of Hamlet's aggression would more appropriately have been his mother, rather than his father.

### **Psychoanalytic criticism at Hamlet's actions:.**

If we want to understand the psychological implications of *Hamlet*, the primary focus should be on the character Hamlet and how he develops and modifies throughout the play. In order to gain a true understanding of most of the detail that is implied through Hamlet's way of portraying himself to others, it is vital to look deep into the actions that are carried out, and analyze them psychoanalytically.

### **Hamlet's hesitation to kill the King :**

The play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him. The central mystery in it -- namely the meaning of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for his father's murder -- has been called **“the Sphinx of modern literature”**. Freudian critics then go on to address what they consider the heart of the matter in *Hamlet*; the reasons for Hamlet's seeming delay in killing Claudius. For them, Claudius represents, in flesh and blood, the embodiment of Hamlet's Oedipal urges. He has actually killed Hamlet's father and is sleeping with his mother. Hamlet's hesitation in killing Claudius, according to Freud, has to do with his deeper association with him. Claudius serves as a flesh and blood expression of his own **repressed childhood fantasies**, and to kill him would be to murder a part of his own inner self already associated with self-loathing. The **"clincher"** on Freud's solution to what he called "The Problem" has to do with not only Hamlet's delay in killing the king, but also with the actual murder of Claudius. The long-awaited event can only take place when Gertrude has died. Hamlet is then free to act because the cause of his repressed guilt has been eliminated, and he kills Claudius immediately.

### **Hamlet's Madness:**

In the actual play, one of the principle arguments is whether Hamlet is truly mad or not. To analyze this for validity, we would have to look at the linguistics of the play and the situations that play out within it. There is concrete evidence, as well as implied detail, which leads one to believe that Hamlet is only acting as if he were mad in or not. Throughout the play, we come across Hamlet's often strange and erratic behaviours such as—his fondness for ridiculing, his cruelty toward Ophelia, his broken sleeps and bad dreams, his melancholy, his desire for secrecy, in the scene of Ophelia's funeral. Hamlet's these attitudes are mainly outcome of his frustration and mental disturbance.

In **Act-I Scene-V** of the play, when the ghost unearths the conspiracy of his murder allegedly involving Gertrude, Hamlet pours out his frustration about both his mother and Claudius in such a manner,

*“O most pernicious woman!  
Oh villain, villain, smiling damned villain!  
That one may smile, and smile and be a villain;”*

Such psychological disorders result from Hamlet's mental disturbance. Compulsive obsessive disorder is an abnormal state of mind in which the subject is unconsciously forced to involve in an activity repeatedly. This, usually, is an outcome of some emotional turbulence and needs a clinical treatment.

### **Soliloquies:**

Soliloquies in Shakespearean tragedies display the innermost layers of human psyche. Like a tip of the iceberg, outward behavior demonstrates only tenth part of what a person is. Hamlet's following soliloquy, shows that human mind is highly erratic and volatile.

***“What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, ... and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”***

However, the most soul-searching soliloquy appears in **Act-III Scene 1** which shows the conflict of human mind that tortures almost all the human beings at one or the other stage of life, and that is,

*“To be, or not to be, that is the question;  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them; To die – to sleep,  
...  
To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub: ...”*

Soliloquies are the most authentic means to analyze the inner psyche of any character. His or her inner struggle is revealed in such a situation. In Shakespearean tragedy, there is always an element of psychomachia or the struggle within the soul; which may be externalized in many ways.

In a nutshell, we can say that Shakespeare's Hamlet has surpassed the confines of the Psychologists' capabilities and it has been a usual practice of the psychologists to treat Hamlet as a psychological patient rather than as a character.

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