



THE TRAGIC HERO IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET: A STUDY OF INTERNAL CONFLICT AND MORAL DILEMMA

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Abstract

This study investigates the character of Prince Hamlet in William Shakespeare's renowned tragedy *Hamlet*, focusing on his portrayal as a tragic hero through the lens of internal conflict and moral dilemma. The article employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining Aristotelian definitions of tragedy with modern psychological and philosophical frameworks to analyze Hamlet's character development. By examining soliloquies, key dialogues, and turning points in the play, the paper highlights how Hamlet's introspection, ethical reasoning, and existential inquiries contribute to his downfall. It concludes that Hamlet's tragedy lies in his inability to reconcile thought with action in a morally ambiguous world.

Keywords: Hamlet, Shakespeare, tragic hero, moral dilemma, internal conflict, Aristotelian tragedy, soliloquy.

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written at the turn of the 17th century, remains one of the most influential and psychologically intricate works in English literature. At its core lies the story of Prince Hamlet, a noble character thrust into a corrupt and deceitful world, struggling with questions of duty, revenge, mortality, and moral integrity. The concept of the tragic hero—rooted in Aristotle's *Poetics* as a noble figure with a tragic flaw (*hamartia*) who falls from grace—finds profound expression in Hamlet.

What distinguishes Hamlet from other tragic heroes like Othello or Macbeth is not the scale of his external actions but the depth of his internal conflict. Hamlet thinks more than he acts; he reflects more than he responds. This makes him a modern, even existential, tragic figure whose inner moral struggles are as central as the dramatic events around him. This paper aims to explore Hamlet's internal conflict



and moral dilemmas in detail, examining how they shape his identity and determine his fate.

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated the nature of Hamlet's tragedy. A.C. Bradley (1904) emphasizes Hamlet's intellectualism and melancholia as key aspects of his downfall, contrasting him with more impulsive tragic figures. Harold Bloom (1998) considers Hamlet the invention of the modern human, arguing that his self-consciousness and introspection elevate him above classical tragic archetypes.

Ernest Jones (1949), using Freudian analysis, identifies Oedipal desires as a subconscious cause of Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's death. Stephen Greenblatt (2004) situates Hamlet within the Renaissance context of humanism and identity crisis, suggesting that Hamlet's moral dilemma is emblematic of a broader cultural transition.

Contemporary scholarship, including feminist and post-structuralist interpretations, also considers Hamlet's treatment of women, especially Ophelia and Gertrude, as indicative of broader societal anxieties. However, the most consistent theme across analyses remains Hamlet's psychological fragmentation and the ethical complexity of revenge.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, focusing on close readings of key scenes and soliloquies. It integrates classical Aristotelian definitions of tragedy with modern psychoanalytic and existentialist frameworks to assess Hamlet's character development. Emphasis is placed on Hamlet's internal monologues, moral reflections, and his interaction with other characters.

Analysis and Discussion

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must be of noble birth, possess a tragic flaw, and experience a reversal of fortune that elicits pity and fear. Hamlet fulfills these conditions. As the Prince of Denmark, he belongs to the aristocracy. His flaw is not impulsive rage, but overthinking and moral hesitation. This excessive reflection



delays action, resulting in the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and himself.

His nobility is not just hereditary but intellectual and moral. He is deeply committed to ethical reasoning, even when it paralyzes him. The result is a tragic fall brought about not by villainy or weakness, but by the hero's own internal conflicts and philosophical nature.

Hamlet's internal conflict centers around the question of revenge: is it justifiable to kill Claudius, his uncle and the murderer of his father? Complicating this is the fact that Claudius is now the king and married to Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. Hamlet's sense of betrayal, disgust, and loss is compounded by his moral hesitancy.

His famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be" (Act III, Scene 1), reveals his existential turmoil. He contemplates suicide, weighing the pain of life against the fear of the unknown in death. His internal conflict is not just ethical but metaphysical - he seeks truth, justice, and spiritual resolution in a morally corrupted world. Revenge in *Hamlet* is not portrayed as a clear moral imperative. The ghost of Hamlet's father demands vengeance, but Hamlet questions the legitimacy of this command. Is the ghost a divine messenger or a demonic trickster? Hamlet's Christian beliefs and Renaissance humanist education make him wary of killing without certainty.

In Act III, Scene 3, Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius while he is praying, fearing that he might send his soul to heaven. This moment exemplifies the depth of Hamlet's moral reasoning. He is not driven by bloodlust but by an acute awareness of eternal consequences.

Hamlet's soliloquies serve as windows into his psyche. Each soliloquy captures a phase in his psychological evolution:

- "O that this too too solid flesh would melt" (Act I, Scene 2) reveals grief and disgust.
- "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (Act II, Scene 2) conveys guilt and self-loathing.
- "To be or not to be" explores existential doubt.
- "How all occasions do inform against me" (Act IV, Scene 4) shows recognition of his inaction.

These monologues offer unparalleled access to Hamlet's internal world, transforming him from a mere character into a fully realized human being.



In Act V, Hamlet finally reaches a moment of tragic insight (*anagnorisis*). He accepts the inevitability of death and recognizes that readiness, not control, is essential: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.” His acceptance of fate marks his spiritual maturity.

The duel with Laertes becomes the climax of his moral journey. Hamlet acts decisively, kills Claudius, and exposes the corruption of the Danish court. His death, though tragic, is redemptive. He achieves moral clarity and fulfills his duty, offering the audience *catharsis*.

Conclusion

Prince Hamlet is one of literature’s most enduring tragic heroes, precisely because his tragedy lies not just in external events but in the internal drama of the human soul. Shakespeare crafts a hero who embodies the conflict between action and thought, duty and conscience, life and death.

Hamlet’s journey from uncertainty to acceptance, from philosophical paralysis to moral clarity, captures the essence of Renaissance humanism and anticipates modern existential thought. He is a tragic hero for all ages—flawed, reflective, noble, and profoundly human.

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