

Dilemma and Desire in *Hamlet*

Md. Kawsar Uddin, M.A. in English

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Abstract

This paper provides a psychoanalytic reading of the unconscious of the central character of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with a view to understanding if and how Hamlet's procrastination is contrived from his mother's desire. According to Freud, Hamlet delays to take the revenge as Claudius did the same thing what Hamlet in his unconscious wanted to do. It means the oedipal conflict operates at the bottom of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. On the other hand, Lacan does not identify Hamlet's delay with Claudius's crime, rather he reads the subversion of Hamlet's subjectivity in the play's dialectic of mother's desire. This paper analyses Lacan's interpretation of Hamlet's desire and explores that Hamlet's hesitation in avenging his father's death by murdering his uncle is not because of his suffering from Oedipus complex rather because of his narcissistic attachment with the desire of his mother.

Key words: Hamlet, Claudius, Oedipus complex

Why This Delay?

One of the most discussed issues regarding Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is why Hamlet does not kill Claudius at the very first hand and why he delays in taking revenge of his father's death. Critics explain it in various ways and amongst them psychoanalysis is the most acceptable one. Psychoanalyst, Freud in 1897, analyzed Hamlet's problem and identified that his problem resembled to that of Oedipus'. According to him, Hamlet in his unconscious had an incestuous desire for his mother and had a murderous desire towards his father. Later, the predecessors of Freud explained this issue in various ways. Lacan, however, after analyzing Hamlet's unconscious, didn't find any incestuous desire for his mother rather he explored and analyzed Hamlet's desire in the dialectic of mother's desire.

Focus of This Paper

This paper analyzes both Freudian and Lacanian interpretation of Hamlet's problem, his dilemma in taking revenge and his identification with mother's desire; and, if and how his dilemma is contrived from his narcissistic attachment with his mother's desire.

Dealing with the unconscious of Hamlet this paper forwards its analysis relying on the psychoanalysis of Freud, Jones and Lacan. The literary text this paper has covered is basically Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This is an entire library research. As a secondary resources, the paper uses different scholarly articles both offline and online. The paper begins with a short introduction followed by the sketch of the design and extent of the paper. The paper then rewinds some of the psychoanalytic terms that are essential to elaborate the major issue. Then there is a discussion of Freudian analysis of Hamlet's unconscious. After that it deals with the analysis of Jacques Lacan regarding Hamlet's action. Finally the paper ends with a conclusion that summarizes the findings of the analysis as well as presents the scope for further studies.

Metalanguage

Psychoanalytic reading focuses on a meta-language in which the reader seeks out 'what's really going on' in the text. It, in fact, explores the unsaid text. In order to understand the operation of psychoanalytic theories through Freud and Lacan, it would be useful to be familiar with certain concepts and psychoanalytic terms.

Dilemma: Dilemma is a situation that requires a choice between options that are available or seem equally unfavorable or mutually exclusive. Many earlier critics tried to explain Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius in terms of socio-political issues of Denmark. Later, a closer analysis of Hamlet's unconscious reveals that he delays because of his suffering from dilemma – a dilemma between killing Claudius and not killing him. It seems that for Hamlet, taking the revenge of his father's death and not killing Claudius both are of equal importance and ultimately he is in a maze of making a very difficult choice.

Need and Desire: Need is to require something or somebody because they are very essential or very important, not just because we would like to have them but it's a part of our

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basic demand. On the other hand, desire is a strong wish to have or do something that may not be mandatory for us. Needs are amenable to biological satisfaction, but desire is implacable, eccentric, and insatiable. Desire is something that is constructed in language and is never fulfilled. Lacan interpreted the term desire as ‘an endless quest in search of an imagined moment of plenitude’. (Storey 2001:75).

Oedipus complex: The theory of Oedipus complex analyses how all of us develop an adult identity. In this theory, Freud argues that an infant is a mere mass of impulses without any sense of its own separate self. It only harbors deep feelings of pleasure principles and for the male infant the main source of pleasure is his mother who naturally becomes also the object of his sexual desire. The child possesses a murderous thought about any person who comes between him and his mother. This causes him to see his father as a rival in his ruthless search for pleasure. The father also embodies the threat of castration for him. The father represents what Freud calls the reality principles. The emergence of pre-oedipal phase marks the young boy’s transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principles. The child consequently represses his incestuous desire for his mother and identifies with his father. It gradually transforms himself from an anarchical state to a cultured one in which he is acceptable to the society at large. During this transition he develops an ego or conscious sense of identity that is separate from his unconscious self and its desires and fantasies.

However, to the boy child, who fails to overcome his incestuous desire for his mother, that reality principle embodied by his father fails to replace the pleasure principle. He continues to see his mother as an object of his desire and his father remains the rival for his mother’s affections.

Phallus: It is a term frequently used in psychoanalysis for the ‘authority invested in male.’ Freud employs this term to mean the penis. On the other hand, Lacan, instead of using it as a biological feature, makes an association of sexual identity and the unconscious with the symbolic system of language. The child, after having negotiated the Oedipal phase, becomes the subject to ‘the law of the father’. “The phallus is the symbol of this power, an imaginary object,

associated with the father but not identical with the male penis. It is rather the signifier of sexual difference in general". (Brooker 190).

Confused Hamlet

In Act III, scene 3, Hamlet enters and sees Claudius in prayer. The king kneels with his back toward Hamlet. Hamlet reaches for his sword, and ambiguity shifts to him. He recognizes his perfect opportunity to kill Claudius, but confused Hamlet stops himself. He remembers that Claudius killed King Hamlet without allowing him any opportunity to make amends for his sin. Believing that Claudius is playing for forgiveness, Hamlet knows that by killing Claudius now, he would send the king straight to heaven. Claudius would escape the eternal punishment that is his due. Some critics believe that Hamlet vacillates yet again in yet another self-deception of word play. In fact, this moment represents the pivotal point in the play- the moment of truth. Hamlet seems confused, terrified, conflicted; he imprisons himself more deeply in words and avoids having to kill Claudius.

Oedipal Conflict at the Bottom of *Hamlet*

Freud, in 1897, discovered that the Oedipal conflict dramatized in Sophocle's *Tyrannic Oedipus* might as well be at the bottom of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. For the central character Hamlet, mother remains the object of his sexual pleasure. Freud argued that Hamlet delays in avenging his father's death by murdering his uncle as he must have been tormented by an obscure memory of having infantile pleasure principle and murderous wishes against his father. For this reason, though Hamlet without any hesitation kills his friends, Polonius and Laertes, yet he hesitates in avenging his father's death by killing Claudius. Freud explains Hamlet's inaction or hesitation by claiming that Hamlet delays to take the revenge as Claudius did the same thing what Hamlet himself in his unconscious wanted to do.

Freud on Shakespeare's Unconscious

Freud also analyzed Shakespeare's unconscious along with that of Hamlet's. According to him, a real event stimulated the writer to his portrayal, in that the unconscious in him is understood from the unconscious of the hero. The unsaid portrayal of Hamlet's incestuous desire

for his mother is harbored because of Shakespeare's own obscure memory of infantile pleasure principle.

Plenty of Dissimilarities

Though Freud tries to find some similarities between the tragedy of Oedipus and the tragedy of Hamlet, yet a lot of dissimilarities between them can also be identified. In Oedipus, the crime takes place at the level of hero's own generation; in Hamlet, it has already taken place at the level of the preceding generation. In Oedipus, the hero, not knowing what he's doing, is in some way guided by fate; in Hamlet, the crime is carried out deliberately. The crime in Hamlet is the result of betrayal. The drama of Hamlet, unlike that of Oedipus, does not start off with the question 'what's going on?' 'Where is the crime?' 'Where is the criminal?' It begins with the denunciation of the crime, with the crime as it is brought to light in the ear of the subject.

Mother's Desire at the Bottom of *Hamlet*

However, Lacan reads the subversion of Hamlet's subjectivity in the play's dialectic of mother's desire. According to Lacan, "we are born into a condition of 'lack' and subsequently spend the rest of our lives trying to overcome this condition". (Storey 2001:75). Lack is always a non-representable expression of the fundamental condition of human being. Throughout our life, lack is experienced in different ways and as different things. As we move forward through the narrative of our lives, we are driven by the desire to overcome this lack. This lack can only be overcome by getting back to the moment of plenitude. Lacan believes that the union with the mother was a moment of plenitude. When we get separated from our mother, we lost that moment of perpetual joy and fall into a condition of lack. The result is an endless quest in search of an imagined moment of plenitude. Lacan figures this search as 'desire' which is forever out of reach; a lost object, signifying an imaginary moment in time.

According to Lacan, in the real stage, a child lives in the world of same where it can not differentiate its identity from the mother. In this stage, the child experiences itself to be its mother's satisfaction and alienates itself in the object of the mother's desire. And, mother desires for the phallus which is owned by the father. From the point of view of a narcissistic child, cultural differences do not exist in any meaningful way until language as a symbolic father

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introduces a world of mediating difference. The child living in the world of 'same', mistakes itself for the phallus because phallus is the object of mother's desire.

Narcissist Attachment

In *Hamlet*, the symbolic mother's desire provides Hamlet's desire. As he was narcissistically attached with his mother, Lacan explicitly notes that it isn't Hamlet's desire for his mother rather it is the desire of his mother that drives the narrative encounter in the closet scene as well as the plot of the play. Hamlet cannot act because he cannot act against Gertrude's desire.

Mother's desire and mother being desired consequently define two 'lacks'. Freud's Oedipal child knows what he wants; he wants to take the position of his father and also wants to get his mother's body. On the other hand, Lacan's oedipal child doesn't know what it desires. Here the lack in the child has a relation to the lack in the mother. The mother's symbolic 'lack' initiates the awareness of lack in the child.

Significance of the Killing of Claudius for Hamlet

In order to understand why Hamlet delays, we must ask what significance the killing of Claudius has for him. Killing Claudius means killing the object of Gertrude's desire. Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because the killing encounters the obstacle of mother's desire.

In fact, the child's options in relation to phallus are two: to deny alienation by 'being' the phallus, or to remedy separation by having it. Hamlet could not act if he could believe that he had the phallus, if he could occupy the symbolic position of his father, but Claudius has 'cut off' the old Hamlet. Conversely, Hamlet could not act if he could be the phallus, if he could see himself in the mirror of a rival, but he does not see him in Claudius.

Claudius's elusive position accounts for Hamlet's failure to strike in the prayer scene where he has the clear opportunity to carry out the dead father's command. According to Lacan, Hamlet does not strike because he knows that he must strike his mother's something other than

what's there. He can strike his mother's desire, but he cannot do so until he abandons his narcissistic attachment, until he assumes his own desire.

Therefore, Hamlet's procrastination in taking the revenge of his father's death is contrived from his mother's desire. Hamlet delays to kill Claudius not because of his having an incestuous desire for his mother or having the thought of doing the same crime that Claudius did but because of his narcissistic attachment with the desire of his mother. After investigating and analyzing the concept of dilemma and desire in Hamlet, finally it can be stated that Hamlet did not have the desire for his mother rather he was tormented because of the 'desire' of his mother and which was ultimately the root of his hesitation in avenging his father's death.

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Md. Kawsar Uddin, M.A. in English
Faculty
Department of Languages
International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT)
4 Embankment Drive Road, Sector-10, Uttara, 4 Abdullahpur Hwy, Dhaka 1230
Bangladesh
ukawsar@gmail.com