

Sample Character Analysis Essay - "Hamlet"

Shakespeare's Hamlet and Existentialism

What is mankind? Who am I? What is the meaning of life? These are multifaceted existential questions that ancient and modern philosophies have yet to adequately answer. Countless philosophers have spent their lifetimes in search of answers to these questions but died before finding a suitable answer. Certainly, the philosophy of existentialism is an interesting phenomenon. The dictionary defines existentialism as a "philosophical movement . . . centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will" ("Existentialism"). The character Hamlet from Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet explores these existential questions, seeking truth and understanding as he tries to come to grips with his father's death. In the end, Hamlet proves to be an exceedingly existential character.

Prince Hamlet is a university student who enjoys contemplating difficult philosophical questions. When his father, king of Denmark, dies, he returns home to find evidence of foul play in his father's death. The Ghost of Hamlet (the dead king) tells Prince Hamlet that his uncle Claudius is the murderer. Throughout the rest of the play, Hamlet seeks to prove Claudius' guilt before he takes action against Claudius. However, Hamlet is pensive ad extremum, at times even brooding; he constantly overuses his intellect while ignoring his emotions and ignoring what "feels right." His extreme logic causes him to delay his revenge against Claudius until the final scene of the play where he kills Claudius and proves that he has progressed into a truly existential character.

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet acts out of pure intellect and processed logic. He suppresses his natural instincts, his emotions, and trusts only in the power of his intelligence. For instance, when Hamlet encounters his father's ghost, he does not believe it is his father—even though he has an emotional reaction upon seeing it. Hamlet says "Let me not burst in ignorance;

but tell / Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death, / Have burst their cerements . . . Say, why is this? wherefore? what should we do?" (I.iv.46-48,57). Hamlet is so confused by the sight of his father's ghost that he is unsure of how to act. His intellect tells him that the sight is not possible, however his emotions tell him otherwise. However, he stifles his emotion and retains his doubts about the ghost. Later, Hamlet plans a play where actors re-enact the king's murder in an effort to prove the validity of what the ghost has told him.

Although Hamlet appears to be the epitome of an anti-existentialist from the outset of the story, Hamlet's logic slowly begins to unravel scene by scene, like a blood-soaked bandage, with layer after layer revealing snippets of Hamlet's emotion and feeling. When Hamlet utters the famous lines " 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 " he is contemplating the thought of suicide and wishing that God had not made suicide a sin (III.i.58-61). Hamlet's anxiety, uncertainty, and tensions cause him to doubt the power of reason alone to solve his problems. Hamlet begins to realize that reason is impotent to deal with the depths of human life—one of the central assertions of existentialism (Bigelow, paragraph 6). Perhaps this is why Hamlet feigns madness; he realizes that he lacks the emotions to avenge his father's death. Indeed, Hamlet does go temporarily insane in Act I, scene ii, and it is during this time when he is able to act out of pure sensation, with no thoughts about the consequences of what he says or does (e.g. when he undeservingly criticizes Ophelia). However, in uniting his emotions and reason, Hamlet is careful to avoid the temptation to commit suicide because if one commits suicide to escape life's pain, then one is damned to eternal suffering in hell. To Hamlet (and most other people of the 1600s), suicide is morally wrong. By making the decision to stay alive and fight Claudius' corruption, Hamlet demonstrates existential qualities. However, this is not the only scene where Hamlet acts existentially.

In Act IV, Hamlet encounters alienation and nothingness when he meets a Norwegian

captain under the command of Fortinbras. When Hamlet asks the captain about the cause and purpose of the conflict, he is shocked to learn that the countries' armies will go to war over "a little patch of land / That hath in it no profit but the name" (IV.iv.98-99). After Hamlet recovers from the shock of the captain's honesty, he is dumbstruck by the thought that Fortinbras would sacrifice the lives of thousands of men for an admittedly inferior "patch of land." At this point in the play, Hamlet is still struggling with his own inaction, unable to kill Claudius even though he knows of his guilt. Hamlet has a good reason to kill Claudius, yet he fails to do it. How can Fortinbras sacrifice so much for such a futile purpose? In this scene, Hamlet realizes the brutality of humanity and first ponders the idea that no one is safe—another central pillar of existentialism.

From this point on, Hamlet declares that he will have bloody thoughts. "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV.iv.9.56). Hamlet is impressed by the forcefulness of characters like Fortinbras and Laertes, who turn thought into action quickly (Phillips). Laertes, who, like Hamlet, has a father to avenge, does not hesitate for a moment when seeking vengeance on his father's murderer. As Hamlet decides to strive for this personal quality, he begins to act increasingly existential and decreasingly reflective.

When Hamlet finally does achieve his father's vengeance, he was not spurred to it on his own, but by watching his mother and Ophelia die in front of his own eyes. Furthermore, as Hamlet realized that he had only two minutes to survive, he really had nothing to lose; this is when he made his move to stab and poison Claudius.

Prince Hamlet is introduced as a reflective, slow-to-act character. While he stays true to this characterization for almost the entire play, he does undergo a transformation by the end of the play. By the end, Hamlet decides that he is no longer going to deprive himself of the revenge he so badly desires against Claudius, so he kills him. At this point, Hamlet is existential. He is the only character who fights back against Claudius's usurpation of the throne, and he accepts

the consequences of his actions (i.e. death) without a flinch. This final existential act is what qualifies Hamlet as an existential character in an existential drama at a time when existentialism did not exist in literature.

Works Cited

Bigelow, Gordon E. "A Primer of Existentialism." The Practical Stylist with Readings.
N.p.: n.p., n.d.

"Existentialism." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Merriam-Webster, Incorporated .
4 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/existentialism>>.

Phillips, Brian. SparkNote on Hamlet. 4 Mar. 2008
<<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet/>>