



UNCONSCIOUS DESIRE AND THE TRAGEDY OF INACTION: A FREUDIAN STUDY OF OEDIPAL CONFLICT IN *HAMLET*

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's Hamlet has long been regarded as one of the most psychologically intricate tragedies in English literature, primarily due to the enigmatic nature of its protagonist's persistent inaction. This article offers a psychoanalytic interpretation grounded in the theories of Sigmund Freud, arguing that Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder arises from unconscious desire structured through Oedipal conflict. By examining Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude, his identification with Claudius, and his tendency toward intellectualization, the study demonstrates that his inaction is not merely philosophical hesitation but a tragic manifestation of internal psychological division. Through sustained textual analysis supported by major psychoanalytic critics, the article establishes that Hamlet's tragedy lies not in external obstacles but in the irreconcilable tension between unconscious desire and moral consciousness.

Keywords: *Hamlet, Freud, Oedipus Complex, Unconscious Desire, Inaction, Psychoanalysis*

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* continues to occupy a central position in literary discourse because of the persistent critical fascination with its protagonist's inability to act. The question of Hamlet's delay has generated an extensive body of interpretation, ranging from moral hesitation to philosophical indecision. Yet such explanations, while valuable, often fail to capture the psychological intensity that defines Hamlet's experience. His inaction is neither accidental nor circumstantial; rather, it emerges as a deeply rooted condition that shapes both his consciousness and his tragic destiny. A more compelling understanding of this condition becomes possible when the play is examined through the lens of Psychoanalysis, particularly the theoretical framework developed by Sigmund Freud. From this perspective, Hamlet's delay is not a simple failure of will but the outward expression of an inward struggle governed by unconscious desire. What further complicates the question of this delay is the absence of any single, convincing external justification. Although Hamlet repeatedly offers reasons for postponement, these explanations shift and fail to fully account for his continued inaction, suggesting that the true cause lies beyond conscious reasoning and must be sought within the unconscious structures of the mind.



Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex provides a crucial entry point into Hamlet's psychological world. According to Freud, the child unconsciously desires the mother while perceiving the father as a rival, a desire that is subsequently repressed but continues to exert influence over adult behaviour (Freud 260). When applied to *Hamlet*, this theory reveals that the prince's crisis is inseparable from his unconscious identification with Claudius. Claudius has enacted what Hamlet himself unconsciously desires: the removal of the father and the possession of the mother. This realization produces a profound internal conflict, as the act of revenge becomes psychologically indistinguishable from the fulfilment of a repressed wish. In this sense, Hamlet may be understood as a figure in whom the Oedipal impulse remains unrealized rather than fulfilled; unlike the classical figure of Oedipus, whose desires are enacted within the narrative, Hamlet's desires remain buried and can only be inferred through their psychological effects. As Ernest Jones insightfully argues, "the thought of incest and parricide combined is too intolerable to be consciously entertained," and therefore manifests as inhibition (Jones 101). Hamlet's inaction, in this sense, is not a sign of weakness but the inevitable consequence of unconscious guilt. As Jones further suggests, repression itself is shaped by cultural and moral constraints, which determine which desires are rendered unacceptable; in Hamlet's case, the taboo nature of Oedipal desire ensures its complete burial within the unconscious, making it inaccessible even to his own awareness.

The depth of this conflict is most clearly visible in Hamlet's response to Gertrude's remarriage, which exceeds the bounds of ordinary filial grief and enters the realm of psychological obsession. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet laments:

Frailty, thy name is woman!—

A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she follow'd my poor father's body...

O, most wicked speed, to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (*Hamlet* 1.2.146–151)

These lines are often read as a critique of feminine weakness, yet their emotional intensity suggests a more personal disturbance. Hamlet's language lingers obsessively on Gertrude's sexuality, particularly in the phrase "incestuous sheets," which signals not only moral condemnation but a disturbing proximity to the very act he denounces. The repetition and urgency of his expression reveal that his outrage is inseparable from an unconscious investment in his mother's intimate life. Rather than distancing himself from Gertrude's actions, Hamlet becomes psychologically entangled in them, suggesting that repression does not eliminate desire but transforms it into fixation. This disproportionate emotional response has led critics such as T. S. Eliot to argue that Gertrude herself is insufficient to account for the magnitude of Hamlet's disgust. His reaction appears to



exceed its immediate object, indicating that it is driven by deeper, unarticulated impulses that extend beyond the visible circumstances of the play.

This fixation reaches its most dramatic articulation in the closet scene, where Hamlet confronts Gertrude with a language that is both accusatory and intensely sensual. He declares:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty—(*Hamlet* 3.4.92–95)

The imagery here is striking for its excess. Hamlet does not merely condemn his mother's actions; he imagines them in vivid, almost intrusive detail. Such imagery exceeds the requirements of moral judgment and enters the domain of psychological projection. From a Freudian perspective, this moment reveals the return of repressed desire in a distorted form. Hamlet's attempt to expose Gertrude's corruption simultaneously reveals his own inability to detach himself from her sexuality. His language becomes a site where repression and desire coexist, producing a tension that cannot be resolved through moral reasoning alone. Interestingly, Hamlet's intense admiration for his father may also be understood within this framework, not as a contradiction of Oedipal theory but as a possible form of repression, where unacceptable impulses are transformed into exaggerated expressions of loyalty and reverence.

The tragic dimension of Hamlet's condition lies in the way this unconscious desire translates into inaction. Unlike traditional revenge figures, Hamlet is not prevented from acting by external circumstances; rather, he is immobilized by internal conflict. This condition is articulated in his reflection that:

thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought(*Hamlet* 3.1.83–85).

While "conscience" is often understood as ethical hesitation, within a psychoanalytic framework it signifies the clash between unconscious desire and conscious duty. Hamlet's awareness of what must be done is continually undermined by forces he cannot fully acknowledge. His inaction thus becomes tragic, not because he lacks knowledge or opportunity, but because he cannot reconcile the divided impulses within himself. This conflict also results in a redirection of emotion, where the hatred that should be directed toward Claudius is partially internalized, emerging instead as self-reproach. Hamlet's moral disgust is therefore divided, as he condemns Claudius while simultaneously recognizing, at an unconscious level, a troubling resemblance to him.

Freud's structural model of the psyche further illuminates this division. The id, which contains instinctual desires, draws Hamlet toward impulses that remain unconscious; the



superego, representing moral law, demands the fulfilment of filial duty; and the ego attempts to mediate between these opposing forces (Freud 301). In Hamlet's case, this mediation fails, resulting in a state of psychological paralysis. This failure is vividly dramatized in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy:

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... (*Hamlet* 3.1.56–59)

This soliloquy has often been interpreted as a philosophical meditation on existence, yet it also reflects a deeper inability to choose between action and inaction. Hamlet's dilemma is not merely existential but psychological; he is caught between competing demands that render decision impossible. His thought does not lead to clarity but to further fragmentation, reinforcing the tragic nature of his inaction.

Hamlet's intellectual disposition plays a crucial role in sustaining this condition. His tendency to analyse and reflect transforms immediate impulses into prolonged contemplation, a process that can be understood as intellectualization—a defence mechanism that allows him to avoid confronting unconscious conflict. By converting emotional turmoil into philosophical inquiry, Hamlet creates a distance between himself and his own desires. However, this strategy ultimately intensifies his paralysis, as each act of reflection produces new doubts and hesitations. His delay in killing Claudius at prayer exemplifies this pattern:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do't—and so he goes to heaven... (*Hamlet* 3.3.73–74)

Hamlet's reasoning appears excessively elaborate, suggesting that it functions less as a genuine ethical concern and more as a rationalization for inaction. The deeper cause lies in his unconscious identification with Claudius, which renders the act of killing psychologically intolerable. Claudius thus becomes more than an external enemy; he represents a part of Hamlet's own repressed self.

This interpretation is further supported by Jacques Lacan, who reconfigures the Freudian model by emphasizing the role of language and symbolic structures in shaping desire. Lacan suggests that Hamlet's desire is mediated through the figure of the Other, meaning that his identity is constructed in relation to Claudius (Lacan 12). This perspective deepens the understanding of Hamlet's inaction by revealing that his struggle is not only psychological but also symbolic. Claudius embodies the position that Hamlet unconsciously desires yet consciously rejects, creating a tension that destabilizes his sense of self.

The tragic consequences of this unresolved conflict unfold progressively throughout the play. Hamlet's inability to act initiates a chain of events that leads to widespread



destruction, including the madness and death of Ophelia, the fatal duel with Laertes, and the deaths of both Gertrude and Claudius. Significantly, Hamlet achieves decisive action only after Gertrude's death, a moment that symbolically removes the central figure around whom his unconscious desire is organized. With this psychological barrier dissolved, the conflict that had previously inhibited him is no longer operative, allowing him to act with a clarity that had been absent throughout the play. When Hamlet finally achieves decisive action, it occurs under circumstances that leave no room for reflection, suggesting that his earlier inaction has already determined the tragic outcome. His final words, "the rest is silence" (*Hamlet* 5.2.358), resonate with a sense of exhaustion rather than resolution, underscoring the irreversible consequences of prolonged internal conflict. In this light, Hamlet's tragedy emerges as the tragedy of inaction, rooted in unconscious desire and structured through Oedipal conflict. His inability to act is not merely a narrative device but the central expression of his psychological condition. The interplay between desire and repression, thought and action, self and other, produces a form of paralysis that defines both his character and the trajectory of the play. By situating Hamlet within a Freudian framework, this analysis reveals the extent to which his inaction is shaped by forces beyond conscious control, transforming the play into a profound exploration of the divided self. Ultimately, Hamlet stands as a figure whose tragedy lies not in the external obstacles he faces but in the internal contradictions he cannot resolve, making him one of the most enduring and complex representations of human consciousness in literature.

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