International Journal of History and Philosophical Research
Vol.8, No.3, pp.21-33, November, 2020
Published by ECRTD- UK
ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049 (Online)

"AFTER JESUS, HAMLET IS THE MOST CITED FIGURE IN WESTERN CONSCIOUSNESS"[1]: PHILOSOPHICAL READINGS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

Dr. Oumeima Mouelhi
Department of Foreign Languages
College of Arts and Human Sciences
University of Al Baha (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

ABSTRACT: *Shakespeare's Hamlet is regarded as one of the greatest mysteries of world literature to be unfolded ever since it was first written. For centuries, Hamlet the play and Hamlet the character have bewildered readers and critics alike. The play is embedded with meanings and laden in philosophical thoughts and interrogations producing an endless width of readings and controversies throughout different ages and generations. However deeply rooted in time, Hamlet has always meant something for everyone ever since it was released. The play has transcended its spatial and temporal framework to embrace the universal, making it a good reference and landmark to return to according to the needs of the time. Hamlet breaks the thematic stereotyping cycle of the time during which it was penned in ways that provide meaningful discursive interpretations re-contextualized to resonate with contemporary audience and modern readers. This paper reinterprets the tragedy of Hamlet whose inner dilemma becomes that of the Modern Man worldwide. Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, is a call to hold a mirror to our most profound conflicts and anxieties, to the bulk of our darkest torments. Any discussion of the play should acknowledge the weight of its philosophical dimensions on which hinge the works of great existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard (among others), which this paper will try to elucidate. A central concern in this paper is the disconcerting issue of Hamlet's "nothingness" which becomes, in the long run, our own. Peering into the abyss of Hamlet's psyche allows for a self-reflection, an outcry for the modern self to survive along with the fight with our consciousness to stabilize it.*

KEYWORDS: hamlet, alienation, anxiety, trauma, philosophical insights.

INTRODUCTION

Among all of Shakespeare's works, *Hamlet* the play and Hamlet the 'melancholic character' have captured the attention of critics, readers, and theatre-goers alike for centuries. Probably more has been written about this "mystery" play than any other literary work in the Western canon. Hamlet the lover, Hamlet the dreamer, Hamlet whose consciousness has made a "coward", and above all Hamlet the philosopher are nothing but different facets of the same personae. The play has produced an endless array of meanings across the different continents of the world and according to the socio-historical context in which it was placed in. In Eastern Europe, Hamlet was perceived as a liberator playing a paramount role in allying the former East and West

[1] Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhood Brooks, 1998), P. XIX

spheres of Germany. While in France, the image of Hamlet was perceived as that of the ideal romantic lover, trapped in a deep love that he could not get out from sane. Hamlet's loss of his beloved Ophelia, ultimately, dragged him into losing himself to madness.

By examining the long lasting debate over Hamlet's multi-faceted character, this paper seeks to interpret the question of the 'philosophical' Hamlet by reappraising his meditative motives and inner hubbub. A central emphasis in this paper will be on the examination of the profound and unsettling philosophical insights that govern Hamlet's mind, lying bare of their ontological concern.

Hamlet is an especially attractive figure to all men throughout different times. During the nineteenth century, he was perceived as the prototype of the introspective Man looking into his inner recess to come to terms with the exterior world. The disenchanted prince of Denmark is also the meditative hero who, once sick of life, reverts to himself in a desperate search to an array of unanswerable questions. To use Sartre's word, 'void', the whole world around Hamlet becomes an empty space, a 'neant' that can hardly satisfy his thirst for any plausible understanding. "The character of Hamlet, as I take it, represents the profound philosopher,"[2] wrote Shelly. For the French, Hamlet was also the emblem of the existentialist man. Victor Hugo exclaimed that, "Hamlet expresses a permanent condition of man. He represents the discomfort of the soul in a life unsuited to it".[3] In the Twentieth century, Hamlet is thought to make the modern culture. *Hamlet* remains a play that readers have loved for centuries because it speaks for men and the hardships they endure. As it is noted in *Shakespeare without Fear*:

> Out of all Shakespeare's works, *Hamlet* strikes the deepest chord within me. I'm not usually attracted to tragedies. I tend to steer clear of anything that reminds me of my own fragile existence. But *Hamlet* speaks to me in a way that (Shakespeare's other) tragedies don't […] Not only do I sympathize with his despair, I find in him a reflection of my own most painful moments.[4]

Upon first encountering Hamlet, we squarely notice that he is a refined man endowed with notable speculative talents. Hamlet has a taste for reading and philosophic meditation. He rejoices in reading for long hours. He is the image of the young charming and spoiled prince who is driven by his delicate emotions and edification. Yet, his emotional and sensitive concerns were not enough for a vigorous king to lay his hands on a powerful kingdom and run its affairs. Hamlet's speculations and transcendentalism, in the long run, blurred his sight to take actions leaving him and the whole castle of Elsinore in an utter state of disarray.

William Hazlitt maintains that Hamlet's character,

> is not a character marked by strength of will or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment. Hamlet is as little of a hero as a

[2] Quoted in Charles H. Williamson, *Readings on the Character of Hamlet, 1661-1997* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1950), P. 54.
[3] Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, trans. Melville B. Anderson *(Honolulu*, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), P. 233.
[4] Mary Janell Metzger, *Shakespeare without Fear* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), P. 14.

> man can well be […]. The character of Hamlet is made up of undulating lines; it has the yielding of flexibility of a 'wave o'th'sea' He is full of weakness and melancholy, but there is no harshness in his nature. He is the most amiable of misanthropes.[5]

Hamlet's tragedy is the tragedy of mankind worldwide. The play is a call to hold a mirror to our pulses, anguish, inner thoughts, and metaphysical questions. Life mystery and the magnitude of its perplexing dimensions have raised multiple interrogations about its meaning and worth. Philosophical questions of selfhood, existence, and death are striking issues that are displayed in Shakespeare's play from the outset. The play opens with an obvious strain paving the way for a troubled mood which we can feel across the tumultuous incidents of Elsinore castle as the play's events move forward. Interrogations are the starting and startling essence of the play. In Act 1, scene 1, the first line reads, "Who's there?", Bernardo asks. A further line stressing the overall's mood of enigma comes following by the castle's guardsman, Francisco, "Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself". Francisco means to ask the question, "Who are you?" which was later asked to two other female characters that Hamlet despised the most and loved the least at a given stage in the play. This question of the ontology of Manhood and the meaning of life will become the core of Hamlet's intense metaphysical thoughts in the long run. Existential anxiety, estrangement, the question of consciousness, and the dismay of who 'you' might be and by inference that of who 'I really am' constitutes one of the main themes of this immortal tragedy. Philosophers from Kierkegaaard to Camus going through Heidegger and Sartre have all attempted to answer the confounding question Hamlet was asking centuries ago. The invigorating question of self-understanding has been marked as a privileged site of all the existentialist enterprise and its main concern. Hamlet and 20th c existentialism share a common philosophical bond: both are linked by the human plight of what it means to be alive, what is the rationale from our being 'thrown' into this world if we are to die sooner or later? What is the purpose of living if death is waiting on the other edge of the route? It is significant to notice that at various points at which the eye may stop in the play, the character of Hamlet leaves one with the puzzling sense that Shakespeare has portrayed a type of humanity which belongs, first and foremost, not to his age but most probably to our own.[6]

> *Hamlet* is the most famous of the four greatest tragedies of Shakespeare and the image of Prince Hamlet is known to people all over the world. What makes this masterpiece so popular and so often performed is not only its projection as a drama, but also the fact that the hero, as a symbol of adolescent crises, fascinates us regardless of age. We can find in Hamlet a youth struggling to find himself […] a youth forced to choose between challenge and compromise. Hamlet is in fact nobody but ourselves.[7]

[5] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2008), P.103.
[6] Paul Landau, *The Meanings of Hamlet* (New York: Routledge: 2003), P. 62.
[7] Yasunari Takahasi, "Hamlet and The Anxiety of Modern Japan," *Shakespeare Survey 48* (*1995*): 99.

Hamlet, in essence, is a thinker, a meditator whose speculations are often revengeful, tormenting, and self-ruinous. He ascertains that life becomes worthwhile only when you think about it and impart a meaning to it. The meaning that we assign it makes life what we believe it to be. He points out that, "there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it (Denmark) is a prison" (II.2.250). The first glimpses of Hamlet thinking about the world surrounding him raising his consciousness, is reflected in the ghost scene. The play should be read in terms of its rich existential theory of consciousness. Hamlet's demise throughout the whole play is constructed upon the enterprise of his consciousness. Hamlet is, desperately, searching for means to grasp the hidden secrets of the caste as well as the people surrounding him. Thus, come his feelings of estrangement and inward trauma. Consciousness and self- thought laying at the heart of the existential paradigm shape a good deal of the plot. Right from the beginning of the play, Shakespeare refers to the notion of the socially conscious and constructed self through the character of Hamlet. When the latter informs Horatio that he believes that he already saw the ghost of his father, King Hamlet, Horatio hastens to know where, Hamlet answers: "In my mind's eye, Horatio" (I.ii.183-5). The quasi duality of the ghost's presence and absence is engraved in Sartre's doctrine of "Being and Nothingness".[8] Hamlet has simply been, as Heidegger; a 20th century existentialist and Sartre put it, "thrown"

into the world.[9] Heidegger considers the human condition to be living a kind of cold state mentally and psychologically claiming that the human existence has come under fire by affiliating itself with "anxiety", without a leap of hope. Suffering becomes the "perpetual climate" of modern man who stands on the verge of an absurd world attempting to find his way "among these ruins".[10] Certainly such absurdity and meaninglessness is what the existentialists have long emphasized, pointing out that the key to life's meaning is not aliveness itself, but what we attach to being alive, what people make of their existence. "Living is keeping the absurd alive," Albert Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus.*[11]

The existential enterprise champions the cause of consciousness that lies, paradoxically, at the center of nothingness. Contradictory as it may seem, the existentialists believe that the human mind is perpetually in a state of existential restlessness in a world of 'void', an empty space that they try to constantly question and challenge. In their inability to understand its beginning and end, secrets and puzzling questions, the existentialist becomes tormented living in a nihilistic nausea that accentuates their alienation and which they cannot change. Hamlet, in this regard, becomes a prototype of the existential man attempting to cope with the external world in vain.
Nietzsche writes,

[8] This term belongs to Jean Paul Sartre in his book, *Being and Nothingness.* Trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).
[9] Quoted in David Farrell Krell, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1978), P. 93.
[10] Ibid., P. 85.
[11] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), PP. 36-37.

International Journal of History and Philosophical Research
Vol.8, No.3, pp.21-33, November, 2020
Published by ECRTD- UK
ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049 (Online)

> Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and it disgusts them to act, for their action could not change anything in the eternal essence of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is so out of joint. Knowledge kills action.[12]

Hamlet catches sight of his dead father's ghost passing and yet still feels skeptical about it. He asks himself endless questions about what if the spirit was a mere product of his imagination, what if the spirit was a devil disguised in the appearance of his dead father. All these interrogations enhance the intertwining relationship between being and nothingness, having the latter reside at the heart of being. Sartre constructs his whole project on the very close intimacy between two apparently opposite entities. When Horatio asks Bernardo if the ghost appeared again that night, Barnardo replies: "I have seen nothing" (I.i.20-1). Bernardo's answer implies that there was something that previously showed up. Therefore, the ghost's absence entails its very presence and by extension, its 'nothing'/ nothingness enhances its being. Being torn between being and non-being, seeing and imagining, existing and thinking gives birth to Hamlet's 'nausea' and gives the play a philosophical premise. Hamlet's mind wonders and wanders to and fro feeling imprisoned in a cage (the castle) without any glimpse of hope. Hamlet's by trying to be conscious of the course of events around him only gets things worse and more complicated for him. Hamlet's mind and soul forever remain restless and devastated paving the way towards an ultimate psychological bankruptcy.

Caught between the dualities of presence and absence, being and nothingness, reality vs dream, certainties and misgivings, these ambivalences become a disconcerting issue for Hamlet and entice him to demystify the castle's riddle and its dwellers. Being and nothingness, a vital part generating the intensity of the existentialist dilemma, is vividly felt in Hamlet's demeanor throughout the play. The supernatural presence/absence of Hamlet's father's ghost show how inextricably linked being and non-being are. When Barnardo asks: 'Say, what, is Horatio there?', and Horatio replies: 'A piece of him' (referring to the ghost of the king) (I.i.18), the mere singularity of being and non-being is instantly dissolved. Instead, we have a joint body of two opposing entities which are reconciled. The existentialist Man, according to Sartre, is trapped between these two worlds: 'Being' and 'Nothingness'. In the same way, Hamlet broods amply over the shadow of his dead father. In the beginning of the play, he wonders if what he saw is the 'real' ghost of King Hamlet, or if it is nothing but allusions caused by his deep grief over his loss and the wrath triggered by the hasty marriage of his mother to his uncle, Claudius, who usurped the throne shortly after his brother's death.

Driven by what he sees 'present' and saddened by what he feels 'absent', Hamlet devises a scheme with his friends to stage a play in front of the King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. The play within the play which Hamlet called "The Murder of

[12] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Ed. Michael Tanner (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), P.23.

Gozago" will be "The Mousetrap" that helps reveal the real murder of his father and unveil the masque that Elsinore castle is wearing, "A speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I [Hamlet] would set down and insert in't…" (II, ii). Hamlet intentionally self-distances himself and plays the fool to rise the mask over the faces of all he believed were his kins and friends. Hamlet needed to cut himself off the whole circle of those he suspects to be 'double-faced'.

The play-within-the play is at the heart of the theatrical tragedy and central to the understanding of the intense inner dilemma cutting Hamlet into pieces at every moment of his life. The mousetrap has no other meaning but to unravel the king's 'real self' and by expectation all those who conspire against him. Hamlet's feigned madness puzzles first his mother who could no more recognize her son. The queen calls him "my too-much-changed son" (II, ii, 36). Polonius believes Hamlet to brew a scheme behind his apparent lunatic being, a 'method' meant to reach a specific end. In the same way, Polonius embarks on a new plot plan to rid himself off Hamlet believing that he is not what he truly is. He sends Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to kill Hamlet on their way to England, a plan that Hamlet quickly outplayed to rather dispose of both of them.

> Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the "heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass. And there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak, 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe'? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me- (III, ii, 339-347)

Not only did Polonius attempt to kill Hamlet, but also made a lasting vain trial to spy upon his conversation with his daughter, Ophelia, in the Queen's closet having already exhorted his daughter that he is not 'authentic' and that he has been merely playing with her heart. This act finally cost Polonius his life when Hamlet observing Polonius's slight moves behind the curtain took his sword out and put him to death. Neither Hamlet nor his presumably 'beloved' Ophelia could no more entice each other because of the change both felt reciprocally. Hamlet accuses Ophelia of being fraudulent, morally unchaste, while Ophelia herself blasted at the discovery that Hamlet is devious and illusive.

> Hamlet: ... I did love you once.
> Ophelia: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
> Hamlet: you should not have believed me,... I loved you not. Ophelia:

I was the more deceived. (III, i, 115-121)

Hamlet's 'fake' persona along with Ophelia's father's murder brought her to become insane and end her life in an act of suicide by drowning into the river while singing a sad song. Overnight, all the dwellers of the castle immersed in wicked conspiracies against each other to know the real 'selves' of one another. Hamlet has misgivings about those surrounding him. He realizes that the closest to him are wearing masks and hiding their true faces. To come to terms with the practical constraints of the situation, he threw all into disarray by wearing he, himself, a mask thinking that he is "too much i'the sun" (I, ii, 67). Hamlet's first and foremost target to be deciphered and unmasked remains his uncle, Claudius. Both Hamlet and Claudius seek to unfold each other's self. Claudius is startled in front of Hamlet's many masks and varied selves. Yet Hamlet never gives up and goes on his strife till the very end of the play. For Hamlet, only a 'fake' play like his uncle's 'fake' self will finally bring him nearer to light. Hamlet's 'Mousetrap' turns out to be a real mask-destroyer. Claudius's inauthentic self is disclosed through his fallen mask when he starts shouting for the lights to be turned on, feeling about to collapse.
The existential man is a truth seeker longing, in his thirst to reach the truth to look into himself and into the world and try to grasp the essence of things and not their shallow appearances. This state of self-awareness and self-thought cause Hamlet much agony, a state leading to existential anxiety. He tells his mother,

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'. 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother, Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye, nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief, that can denote me truly. These, indeed, seem, for they are actions that a man might play.
But I have that within which passeth show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I, ii, 76-86).

While performing the play, one of the actors burst into tears having felt the role so vividly that he could not retain his emotions anymore. Upon observing him, Hamlet retorts, "Thus, conscience does make cowards of us all" (III.1.90). The actor's demeanor facing a quasi-realistic scene caused Hamlet to throw himself again into an endless array of meditations. Hamlet is persuaded that a "coward" person also includes someone whose overstated reflections might propel him to stay indifferent to a murdered father. The Mousetrap scheme accentuated the Young prince's dogma that the more you are aware of a definite truth, the more you withdraw from it. Hamlet feels caught within complex issues that seem to define him. He believes that all individuals should be guided by a 'master-self' to conduct life. He is convinced of the bifurcation existing between the inner truth the apparent one. Preaching Descartes's doctrine of Dubitio ergo sum: "I doubt, therefore, I am", Hamlet was ahead of his time and a precursor of Descartian modern scientific mind deploying both his mind and his

skepticism to reach the truth. In so doing, Hamlet anticipated the 'dualism' of René Descartes which is such an essential part of modern understandings of the self. Hamlet dies paving the way for Descartes' theory of "dubitio",

> So it is with Hamlet Descartes, however, starts from the assumption that he knows nothing whatsoever until he can discover a presuppositionless first principle on which all else can be founded […]. Descartes' doubt […] is to be a countless doubt. Hence, also that tradition of philosophical teaching arises which presupposes that Cartesian doubts can be entertained by anyone at anyplace or time.[13]

Therefore, the burgeoning modern self as conceived by Hamlet is seen to be autonomous, wild and free, responsible for its fate, a maker of its decisions and actions. Through the character of Hamlet and the deep philosophical meanings embedded within the play, it has become evident why *Hamlet*, among all Shakespeare's plays, strikes a chord within its readers worldwide. The trauma and the metaphysical meditations of the young prince become reflective of the sorrows of the whole humankind. "It is *we* who are Hamlet",[14] Hazlitt says. This play has a prophetic truth which is above that of history.

> Whatever happens to him (Hamlet) we apply to ourselves, because he applies it to himself as a means of general reasoning. He is a great moralizer […]. Hamlet is the most remarkable for the ingenuity, originality […].[15]

Just like time which is "out of joint", Hamlet also seems to be distanced from himself and the exterior world. This feeling of estrangement is, further, aggravated by the queen's hasty marriage to the usurper of the throne and the murderer of his father, King Claudius. His mother's 'treacherous' marriage broke his heart into pieces and enhanced his traumatic feelings. Overtaken by his anxiety, he turns his mother into a prototype of all 'low' characters generalizing it as a truth about life and the world.

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world
> Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely (I.2.133-137).

Feeling an inner turmoil, after all the events that came to shake his life: his father's murder, his uncle's usurpation of the throne, his mother's swift marriage, and his

[13] Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair Maclntyre: Relativism, Tomism, and Philosophy* (Oxford: The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2004), P. 86.
[14] William Hazlitt, *William Hazlitt*: *Essayist and Critic, Selections from His Writings* (California: Read Books, 2008), P. 73.
[15] Raymond MacDonald Alden, *Readings in English Prose of the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), P. 114.

friends' treachery, Hamlet resorts to calling back into question all world issues feeling "There is something rotten" not only "in Denmark", (I.4.104) but in every detail of his life. Mentally and emotionally bankrupt, failing to find truth in everything he perceives as "Untruth," Nietzsche says, is "a condition of life", he finds shelter into his meditations about life, suicide, and death, a question regarded as the axe of the existential thinkers. Hamlet shrinks into himself overburdened by grief and despair. Of Hamlet's psychological breakdown, Charles Nodier wrote:

> It is the heart of man in all its sadness […] One of those feelings proper to modern societies, which have lately been expressed forcefully by Goethe, Schiller, and especially Chateaubriand but which Shakespeare was discovering, so to speak, and in the portrayal of which, no one has surpassed him.[16]

Hamlet brooding over suicide is seen as the ultimate phase of modern man's quest for a satisfying answer over the existence's worth; a depiction of his sickness of life. "Existence seems to us ever more screened and distanced," Critchley and Webster write, "an empty empathy for a suffering that we do nothing to stop and everything to abet in our passivity, dispersal, and narcissism. None of us is free of this".[17] For Sartre, a true existentialist believes in his loneliness in an alien world in which he was thrown, with no one to rely on, but himself an existential man becomes the only source of his own decision-making that defines his existence. "Man," Sartre writes:

> has first understood that he must count on no one but himself, that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth.[18]

For existentialists, Man's ultimate shelter, death, is an 'atrocious' image because it is their last station. Paradoxically, death is a relief for them as it represents the end of all their unanswered questionings. Being absurd and inextricably mysterious, the only truth existing on earth is that of death. In Act I Scene 5, Hamlet tells Horatio: "There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I.5.79). Hamlet looms as a man who lost the center and connectedness of his own life. This drives us to consider Hamlet's speculations in the graveyard scene when he contemplates the man he endeared the most: Yorick. Yorick, the jester, was King Hamlet's clown, a devoted man Hamlet fondly remembers and regrets his passing away. In the graveyard, Hamlet comes face-to-face with death in one of the most moving scenes of the entire play. The graveyard scene mirrors Hamlet's ultimate consciousness about life's truth for the first time. The jester's death enables Hamlet to reflect upon

[16] Quoted in Helen Phelps Bailey, *Hamlet in France: From Voltaire to Lafrogue* (Genève: Droze, 1964), P. 178.
[17] Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster, *The Hamlet Doctrine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013), P. 36.
[18] Quoted in James L. Christian, *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering* (California: Belmont, 2008), P. 67.

life's mortality and its futility. All men are equal in the grave, no matter their social standings in life. Speculating over Yorick's skull, Hamlet's imagination flew into history's great men who left it all behind and turned into mere dust. Hamlet painfully recollects Alexander the Great, "Dost thou think Alexander look'd o' this fashion i' th' earth?" (5.1.191-92). He retorts, "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?" (5.1.201-05). Hamlet's calamitous insight into the human condition seeing the skull and deriding Man's accomplishments lay bare of his consciousness, of his realization of life's morbidity and gives full vent to his most moving and immortal soliloquy in world literature, "To be, or not to be".

> 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 take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them; to die; to sleep;
> No more, and by a sleep to say we end […]
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give up pause: there's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life (III.1.63-76)

Hamlet's profuse speech is emotionally and philosophically laden. In it, Hamlet falls prey to life's void as lived by the modern subject generating only a pale and tiresome living adding to his sense of waste and deprivation. In his soliloquy, Hamlet thinks out loud brooding over larger-than-life questions. The world of Hamlet is impregnated with "deep anxiety and the philosophical basis of the play more closely resembles *modern existentialism".*[19]

Hamlet's philosophical mediations are anchored in in a lacerated soul, depicted as, "a sea of troubles". Hamlet puts into question Man taking actions in the face of a "sea of troubles". He wonders if he should react or bury his pains within him. Hamlet wonders about the "nobler" action to carry considering questions of life and death, which gives the play a magnitude of the greatest existential works of modern times. In a weak moment of bafflement, he contemplated making a suicide:

> […] To die: to sleep;
> No more, and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished-to die: to sleep (V.1.5-9).

For Hamlet, 'expiration' turns into the most promising remedy to put an end to self-torture. Death, in part, can bring solace and comfort from life's tumult and unrest. Life

[19] Quoted in John Lewis Walker, *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography, 1961-19991* (New York: Routledge, 2002), P. 24.

has not always been smiling to Hamlet despite all the prerogatives he had as a young well-educated prince. In the long run, Hamlet came to know something about the slings and arrows of royal life. Living a 'pampered' life in a kingly castle with all the meanings associated to royalty living is not always revealed to be soothing. Hamlet learned a lot about the conspiracies lying behind the castle's doors. He knew, for sure, now that even walls were eavesdropping on him. The keenest to him may happen to betray, and the loved ones could turn the page over a once thought long-lasting friendship or kinship. Hamlet's situation, in Schopenhauer's eyes, is:

> One of the best exemplars of how the body as a manifestation of will mirrors itself in words and reaction. In the course of his misfortune, Hamlet meditates not only on his own life but on the lot of mankind itself […]. It is this aspect of Hamlet as a knower of the nature of the world rather than only as its victim, which seems to appeal to Durrell in his own investigation of self.[20]

Hamlet's revulsion of the messy world surrounding him gives rise to Sartre's nausea"[21], brought about an eagerness to grasp things beyond their apparent status. This stand fosters the existential condition of Man. "Existential philosophy", Jaspers says, "would be lost immediately if it started believing again that it knew what man is".[22]

CONCLUSION

In what seems to be a 'bankrupt world' through an intricate network of philosophical meditations and metaphysical interrogations, Hamlet has become a precursor to modern existentialism that came to be established in the twentieth century. Above all, the play Hamlet in general, and Hamlet the character in particular are the best testimony that history might repeat its self regardless of the spatial-temporal restraints. Man has always been overwhelmed with questions that go beyond his capacities of understanding. This situation results in a state of malaise that existentialists expressed in their writings; the idea of being weary from life not because life itself, is sickening but rather because of its mysteries that remain yet unfolded. One of these potential mysteries is the ever-occurring question of 'why are we there if we are to die sooner or later'. Hamlet has known something of the strings and arrows overshadowing his life. He rebels against what he perceives as a chaotic life and tries desperately to make it right. "The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite, /That ever I was born to set it right" (I.5.189-190). Through reflecting upon Hamlet's dilemma, Shakespeare was reading the psychological turmoil of the modern man. In fact it is him who read us rather than the opposite. Bloom highlights this point stating that, "We need to assert ourselves and

[20] Cited in Ray Morrison, *A Smile in His Mind's Eye: A Study of the Early Works of Lawrence Durrell* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), P.267.
[21] Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), P. 9.
[22] Quoted in Jerry H. Gill, *Philosophy and Religion: Some Contemporary Perspectives* (Michigan: Burgess Pub Co, 1968), P. 221.

read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively"[23]

References

Alden, R. M. (2005) *Readings in English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York.

Bailey, H. P. (1964) *Hamlet in France: From Voltaire to Lafrogue*, Droze, Geneve.

Bloom, H. (1998) *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Riverhood Brooks, New York.

Camus, A. (1955) *The Myth of Sisyphus.* Trans. Justin O' Brien, Random House, New York.

Catalano, J. (1985) *A Commentary on John Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness*, Chicago University Press, Chicago.

Christian, J.L. (2008) *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering*, Belmont, California.

Critchley, S and Webster, J (2013) T*he Hamlet Doctrine*, Pantheon Books, New York.

Gill, J.H. (1968) *Philosophy and Religion: Some Contemporary Perspectives*, Burgess Pub CO, Michigan.

Hazlitt, W. (2008) *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, Kessinger Publishing LLC, Montana.

----------. (2008) *William Hazlitt: Essayist and Critic, Selections from His Writings*, Reed Books, California.

Hugo, V. (2001) *William Shakespeare*, trans. Melville B. Anderson, University Press of the Pacific, Hawaii.

Krell, D.F. *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, Routledge, London.

Landau, P. (2003) *The Meanings of Hamlet*, Routledge, New York.

Lutz, C.S. (2004) *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair Maclntyre: Relativism, Tomism, and Philosophy,* The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, Oxford.

Metzger, M.J. (2004) *Shakespeare without Fear,* NH: Heinemann, Portsmouth.

Morrison, R. (2005) *A Smile in His Mind's Eye: A Study of the Early Works of Lawrence Durrell*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Nietzsche, F.W. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Ed. Michael Tanner, Vintage Books, New York.

Sartre, J. P. (1992) *Being and Nothingness.* Trans. Hazel E. Barnes, Washington Square Press, New York.

Takahasi, Y. (1995) Hamlet and The Anxiety of Modern Japan, *Shakespeare Survey 48* 99-105.

Walker, J.L. (2002) *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography, 1961-1991,* Routledge, New York.

[23] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhood Brooks, 1998), P. 20.

Williamson, C.H. *Readings on the Character of Hamlet 1661-1967,* University of Michigan, Michigan.