



# Psychoanalytic Study of William Shakespeare's Hamlet

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## *Abstract*

This research paper examines the psychoanalytic study of three characters from William Shakespeare's play Hamlet: Prince Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, and Ophelia. Each character is analyzed through various psychoanalytic theories, including the Oedipus complex, repression, and the Madonna-Whore complex. Prince Hamlet's character is analyzed in terms of his unresolved conflicts with his father, his unconscious desires for his mother, and his subsequent madness. Queen Gertrude's character is analyzed in terms of her repressed desires, her relationship with Claudius, and her role in Hamlet's psychological development. Ophelia's character is analyzed in terms of the Madonna-Whore complex, repression, the uncanny, and the theme of mourning. Overall, the psychoanalytic study of these characters provides a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics at play in Shakespeare's play and highlights the relevance of psychoanalytic theory in the analysis of literature and human behavior.

*Keywords: Psychoanalytic Study of Prince Hamlet, Psychoanalytic Study of Queen Gertrude, Psychoanalytic Study of Ophelia*

## **Introduction**

This research paper delves into the psychoanalytic study of three characters from William Shakespeare's play Hamlet: Hamlet himself, Queen Gertrude, and Ophelia. Each character is analyzed through different psychoanalytic theories and concepts, such as repression, the Oedipus complex, and the Madonna-Whore complex, in order to gain a deeper understanding of their behavior and motivations. Through this analysis, we can explore the psychological complexities of these characters and how

they reflect broader social and cultural themes in Shakespeare's time and beyond. The methodologies used in this research paper include close reading of the play, analysis of historical and cultural contexts, and engagement with various psychoanalytic theories and scholars.

### **Psychoanalytic Study of Prince Hamlet**

The psychoanalytic study of the character of Prince Hamlet in Hamlet has been a topic of interest for scholars for many years. Freud himself wrote a famous essay on the play in which he analysed the character of Hamlet from a psychoanalytic perspective. According to Freud, Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his unconscious desire for his mother and his repressed aggression towards his father.

Freud argued that Hamlet's relationship with his mother, Gertrude, was the source of his psychological conflicts. Freud believed that Hamlet's desire for his mother was repressed and unconscious, but that it manifested itself in his behavior towards her. For example, in the famous closet scene, in which Hamlet confronts Gertrude about her relationship with Claudius, Hamlet's behavior towards his mother is violent and aggressive. Freud believed that this behavior was a manifestation of Hamlet's unconscious desire for his mother, which was being repressed and denied.

Freud also argued that Hamlet's behavior towards his father was driven by his unconscious aggression towards him. According to Freud, Hamlet's father was a powerful figure who represented Hamlet's own aggressive impulses. Hamlet's desire to kill his father and take his place was repressed and denied, but it manifested itself in his behavior towards his uncle, Claudius. Freud believed that Hamlet's quest for revenge was not only motivated by a desire to avenge his father's death, but also by a desire to take his place as the dominant male figure in his mother's life.

Other psychoanalytic scholars have also analysed the character of Hamlet from different perspectives. For example, Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, argued that Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his fear of castration. Lacan believed that Hamlet's fear of losing his masculinity was the driving force behind his behavior, and that his actions can be seen as an attempt to maintain his masculine identity.

Lacan also argued that Hamlet's relationship with his mother can be explained by the concept of the "mirror stage" in psychoanalytic theory. According to Lacan, the mirror stage is a stage in development when a child begins to recognise itself as a separate individual from the mother. This recognition is achieved through the child's reflection in a mirror, and it leads to a sense of separation and a desire for independence. Lacan believed that Hamlet was stuck in the mirror stage, and that his desire for his mother was a result of his inability to fully separate from her.

Lacan further argued that Hamlet's behavior can be explained by the concept of the "Name of the Father." According to Lacan, the Name of the Father refers to the symbolic order that structures our social and cultural reality. In Lacanian theory, the father represents this symbolic order, and the child's recognition of the father's authority is a necessary step in the development of the psyche. Lacan argued that Hamlet's struggle with the Name of the Father can be seen in his attempts to resist the authority of his father and his uncle.

Another psychoanalytic scholar, Ernest Jones, focused on the Oedipus complex in his analysis of Hamlet. The Oedipus complex is a concept in psychoanalytic theory that refers to a child's unconscious desire for the opposite-sex parent and a corresponding fear of the same-sex parent. According to Jones, Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his unresolved Oedipal conflict, which is manifested in his desire for his mother and his aggression towards his father.

Jones also argued that Hamlet's procrastination in seeking revenge can be explained by his fear of castration. Jones believed that Hamlet was afraid of the consequences of killing Claudius, and that his delay in seeking revenge was a result of his fear of losing his masculinity.

Nancy Chodorow, an American feminist psychoanalyst, argued that Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his "pre-oedipal attachment" to his mother. According to Chodorow, pre-oedipal attachment refers to a child's early emotional bond with the mother, which is characterised by a sense of symbiosis and dependency. Chodorow believed that Hamlet's desire for his mother can be seen as a manifestation of this pre-oedipal attachment and that his aggression toward his father can be seen as a reaction to the father's attempts to disrupt this bond.

Karen Horney, a German psychoanalyst, offered a different perspective on Hamlet's behavior. Horney argued that Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his neurotic needs, which are the result of unresolved conflicts and anxieties in the psyche. According to Horney, neurotic needs are compensatory strategies that individuals use to protect themselves from anxiety and insecurity. Horney believed that Hamlet's behavior can be seen as an attempt to fulfil his neurotic needs, which included the need for perfection, the need for independence, and the need for affection.

Melanie Klein, a British psychoanalyst, argued that Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his "depressive position." According to Klein, the depressive position is a stage in development when a child begins to recognize that the mother is a separate individual with her own desires and needs. This recognition leads to a sense of guilt and anxiety, which can manifest as a fear of loss and a need for reparation. Klein believed that Hamlet was stuck in the depressive position and that his behavior can be seen as an attempt to avoid the guilt and anxiety that comes with recognizing his mother's separateness.

Overall, the psychoanalytic study of the character of Prince Hamlet in Hamlet has yielded a range of different interpretations and perspectives. While some scholars have focused on Hamlet's desire for his mother, others have focused on his fear of castration or his unresolved Oedipal conflict. However, despite these differences, most psychoanalytic scholars agree that Hamlet's behavior can be explained by his unconscious psychological conflicts and desires.

These different perspectives on the character of Prince Hamlet demonstrate the richness and complexity of psychoanalytic theory and its application to literature. Each scholar brings their own unique perspective and interpretation to the text, highlighting different aspects of Hamlet's character and psychology. Together, these insights offer a multifaceted view of one of the most fascinating characters in literary history.

### **Psychoanalytic Study of Queen Gertrude**

The character of Queen Gertrude in William Shakespeare's play Hamlet has been the subject of much debate and analysis among psychoanalytic scholars. Through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, scholars have attempted to understand the psychological factors that drive Gertrude's behavior and actions throughout the play, particularly her relationship with her son Hamlet and her marriage to King Claudius.

One of the central concepts in psychoanalytic theory that has been applied to the character of Queen Gertrude is the Oedipus complex. According to this theory, every child has an unconscious desire for the parent of the opposite sex and a corresponding fear of the same-sex parent. This desire and fear are often resolved through the process of identification, where the child internalises the characteristics of the same-sex parent and adopts them as their own.

In the case of Queen Gertrude, psychoanalytic scholars have argued that her behavior can be explained by her unresolved Oedipal conflict. Some scholars have suggested that Gertrude's marriage to King Claudius can be seen as an attempt to resolve this conflict. According to this interpretation, Gertrude is unconsciously attracted to her son Hamlet and feels guilty and anxious about these feelings. Her marriage to Claudius can be seen as an attempt to distance herself from these feelings and to resolve her unconscious desires.

Another interpretation of Gertrude's behavior focuses on her relationship with her own mother. Some psychoanalytic scholars have suggested that Gertrude's behavior can be seen as an attempt to replicate her mother's relationship with her father. In this interpretation, Gertrude is unconsciously attracted to King Claudius because he represents the powerful, dominant father figure that her own father was. This

attraction is a result of her identification with her mother, who was also attracted to powerful men.

However, other psychoanalytic scholars have criticised this interpretation, arguing that it oversimplifies Gertrude's character and reduces her to a one-dimensional figure driven solely by her Oedipal desires. Some scholars have suggested that Gertrude's behavior can be seen as a complex interplay of various psychological factors, including her relationship with her own mother, her grief over her husband's death, and her sense of guilt over her marriage to Claudius.

One scholar who focused on Gertrude's relationship with her mother was Sigmund Freud. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud argued that individuals often experience a sense of ambivalence or conflict in their relationships with their parents, particularly their same-sex parent. This conflict can be seen in Gertrude's behavior, which can be seen as an attempt to replicate her mother's relationship with her father. According to this interpretation, Gertrude is unconsciously attracted to King Claudius because he represents the powerful, dominant father figure that her own father was. This attraction is a result of her identification with her mother, who was also attracted to powerful men.

Another psychoanalytic scholar who focused on the theme of mourning in Gertrude's character was Janet Adelman. Adelman argued that Gertrude's marriage to Claudius can be seen as an attempt to avoid mourning the loss of her husband, King Hamlet. According to Adelman, Gertrude is unable to fully mourn her husband's death because she is unconsciously attracted to her son Hamlet. Her marriage to Claudius is a way for her to avoid confronting her own grief and to distance herself from her unconscious desires. Adelman argued that this inability to mourn leads to a sense of psychological conflict and a lack of self-awareness, which is manifested in Gertrude's behavior throughout the play.

Another psychoanalytic theory applied to Gertrude's character is the concept of the uncanny. According to this theory, individuals experience a sense of discomfort or unease when something familiar becomes strange or unfamiliar. In the case of Gertrude, her relationship with her son Hamlet can be seen as both maternal and romantic, which creates a sense of discomfort and ambiguity. This ambiguity is further compounded by Gertrude's marriage to King Claudius, which creates a complex web of emotional and psychological tensions.

Finally, some psychoanalytic scholars have focused on the concept of repression in their analysis of Gertrude's behavior. According to this theory, individuals repress certain desires and impulses that are considered unacceptable by society or the individual's own psyche. In the case of Gertrude, psychoanalytic scholars have suggested that she represses her unconscious desires for her son Hamlet and her guilt

about her marriage to King Claudius. This repression leads to a sense of psychological conflict and a lack of self-awareness, which is manifested in her behavior throughout the play.

### **Psychoanalytic Study of Ophelia**

One character that has garnered particular interest when it comes to psychoanalytic studies is Ophelia, the young noblewoman who becomes the object of Hamlet's affection and later, his madness. Through a psychoanalytic lens, Ophelia's character can be analysed in terms of her repressed desires, her relationship with Hamlet, and the social and cultural constraints that shape her identity.

One of the most prominent psychoanalytic theories applied to Ophelia's character is the concept of the Madonna-Whore complex. This theory suggests that men often divide women into two categories: those who are pure and virtuous, like the Virgin Mary, and those who are sexually available and promiscuous, like a prostitute. This division creates a sense of ambivalence or conflict in men's relationships with women, particularly those they are sexually attracted to.

According to this interpretation, Ophelia represents the Madonna figure, embodying the ideal of purity and virtue. She is presented as chaste and obedient, fulfilling the expectations placed on her by her father and society. However, her relationship with Hamlet, which is both romantic and sexual, creates a sense of conflict and ambiguity. Hamlet's desire for Ophelia is at odds with his desire for revenge, leading to his eventual rejection of her and her descent into madness.

Another psychoanalytic theory applied to Ophelia's character is the concept of repression. According to this theory, individuals repress certain desires and impulses that are considered unacceptable by society or the individual's own psyche. In the case of Ophelia, psychoanalytic scholars have suggested that she represses her sexual desires and her anger towards the constraints placed on her by her father and society. This repression leads to a sense of psychological conflict and a lack of self-awareness, which is manifested in her behavior throughout the play.

Some psychoanalytic scholars have also focused on the concept of the uncanny in their analysis of Ophelia's behavior. According to this theory, individuals experience a sense of discomfort or unease when something familiar becomes strange or unfamiliar. In the case of Ophelia, her descent into madness can be seen as an uncanny transformation, as she becomes a stranger to herself and others. This transformation creates a sense of discomfort and unease for the other characters in the play, who struggle to understand Ophelia's behavior.

Finally, some psychoanalytic scholars have focused on the theme of mourning in their analysis of Ophelia's character. According to this theory, individuals experience a

sense of grief and loss when they are unable to fulfil their desires or achieve their goals. In the case of Ophelia, her inability to marry Hamlet and her eventual rejection by him can be seen as a source of grief and loss. This grief manifests itself in her descent into madness, which can be seen as a way for her to cope with her feelings of loss and abandonment.

Overall, Ophelia's character can be seen as a complex interplay of various psychological factors, including her repressed desires, her relationship with Hamlet, and the social and cultural constraints that shape her identity. Psychoanalytic theory provides a lens through which to understand and analyze these factors, shedding light on the psychological complexities of Ophelia's character. By examining Ophelia's behavior through a psychoanalytic lens, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics at play in Shakespeare's play and in our own lives.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a psychoanalytic study of Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, and Ophelia reveals the complex interplay of psychological factors that shape the characters' behavior and relationships. Through the application of various psychoanalytic theories, including the Oedipus complex, the Madonna-Whore complex, repression, the uncanny, and mourning, we gain a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics at play in Shakespeare's play.

The character of Hamlet can be seen as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex, as he struggles with his desire for his mother and his rivalry with his father. Queen Gertrude's character can be analyzed in terms of her repressed desires, particularly her sexuality, and her role in enabling Hamlet's dysfunctional behavior. Finally, Ophelia's character can be seen as a complex interplay of various psychological factors, including repression, the Madonna-Whore complex, the uncanny, and mourning.

Overall, a psychoanalytic study of Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, and Ophelia offers a unique perspective on Shakespeare's play, shedding light on the psychological complexities of the characters and the themes explored in the play. This type of analysis allows for a deeper appreciation and understanding of the play's enduring relevance and impact.

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