

# Existentialism in hamlet

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Existentialism is a Twentieth-Century philosophical belief which focuses on the idea that existence precedes essence, and the freedom of choice one has. This idea argues that in the process of man's existence, people define themselves and the world within their own thoughts, and wander between choice, freedom, and existential angst.

In reading William Shakespeare's, Hamlet, one can observe that although this play predates the coining of Existentialism, it features key characteristics of this philosophical movement. Hamlet experiences heavy spells of existential thought, and these bouts of human reflection catalyze Hamlet's eccentric actions throughout the story.

Human consciousness is the entirety of human meaning if one has the competency to think, therefore, one exists. Existentialism focuses on the belief that individuals find their true selves throughout the progression of their life based on personal experiences, beliefs, and outlooks that are cultivated during one's existence.

Shakespeare ahead of his time, predates this philosophical movement whilst displaying the fundamental characteristics of Existentialism.

Hamlet is notably overwhelmed and consumed by his own thoughts combined with his inability to effectively make concrete decisions, provides the audience/readers an indication of his existential tendencies. Hamlet's first soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 2, features him contemplating the absurdity of the world.

“ How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world” (Hamlet. Act 1, Scene 2. 136-137). Here, Hamlet contemplates for the first time the ramifications of suicide as it seems to be an alluring alternative in comparison to enduring anymore suffering from this world. Hamlet’s free-flowing consideration of suicide highlights his internal conflict and his freedom of choice.

Christine Gomez notes that Hamlet can “ be seen as an anticipation of the existential hero” because he is “ an individual who reflects on human existence and his own predicament in the universe and becomes aware of his alienation from the human condition” (Gomez 27). Hamlet’s confrontation with complex and profound issues accentuates his curiosity with the meaning and limits of human life.

Assessing how Hamlet implements characteristics of Existentialism reveals the impactful philosophical insights acquired when he is confronted with complex existential issues and dilemmas. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Hamlet gains an “ insight into the horrific truth” as he further delves into existential ways of thinking (Nietzsche 46).

In Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet speaks with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz and alludes to the existential creation of self. “ For there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (Hamlet. Act 2, Scene 2. 257). Here, the audience/readers are presented with a glimpse into Hamlet’s way of thinking, detailing his existential thoughts.

In this excerpt, Hamlet tells Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that nothing is intrinsically 'good or bad' it is how one chooses to perceive the situation at hand that gives it a negative or positive connotation. This idea that humans can decide what defines a concept or question values is a distinguishable characteristic of Existentialism. Within this same scene, Hamlet reflects upon the essence of humanity albeit sarcastically.

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty!  
In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an  
angel, inapprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon  
of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights  
not me. (Hamlet. Act 2, Scene 2. 308-313)

In the eyes of Hamlet, people are deemed as frivolous and leaves him dissatisfied. This is a fundamental attribute of Existentialism, as audience/readers can observe that Hamlet is consumed with thoughts concerning an abstract evaluation of human life.

Hamlet is an individual whose ego is molded by his immediate perception of the world, his corrosive lucidity aides in his examination of the self. Hamlet is deeply concerned with how his consciousness effects the inner meaning of the world a key characteristic of the Existentialist ideology.

## **Works Cited**