

Existential Nihilism in Shakespeare's Soliloquies of his Tragic Plays

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Abstract

Shakespeare's soliloquies are one of the greatest treasures of wisdom and philosophical ruminations. And so no critic or writer could resist the temptation of scrapping their minds over this vast treasure-house. However, as Shakespeare is known as a great philosopher and seer, his philosophical mind many times slipped down to nihilism and existential dilemma. This is particularly perceivable in his soliloquies in tragic plays, for tragic incidents always result in philosophical ponderings about life and miserable lot and soliloquy- which is one of the most useful psychological expository device in the hands of a playwright- becomes inevitable medium of giving vent to one's dormant emotions of rage, anguish or passion. Accordingly, Shakespeare has manipulated soliloquies in his tragic plays, especially in Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear, as a device through which he could highlight his ponderings over the questions of nihilistic existentialism. Nihilism holds that all meaning and values are without foundation. Existential nihilism, thus, came out to be "the philosophical theory that life has no intrinsic meaning or value. With respect to the universe, existential nihilism posits that a single human or even the entire human species is insignificant, without purpose and unlikely to change in the totality of existence.

Key Words: Existential Nihilism, Anguish, Absurdity, Responsibility, Time and Death.

Shakespeare's soliloquies are one of the greatest treasures of wisdom and philosophical ruminations. And so no critic or writer could resist the temptation of scrapping their minds over this vast treasure-house. This expository device of Shakespeare which we call soliloquy has already been amply analyzed, explained and interpreted in myriad ways that it would be only a matter of arrogance to say anything now about them. However, as Shakespeare is known as a great philosopher and seer, his philosophical mind many times slipped down to nihilism and existential dilemma. This is particularly perceivable in his soliloquies in tragic plays, for tragic incidents always result in philosophical ponderings about life and miserable lot and soliloquy- which is one of the most useful psychological expository device in the hands of a playwright- becomes inevitable medium of giving vent to one's dormant emotions of rage, anguish or passion. Accordingly, Shakespeare has manipulated soliloquies in his tragic plays, especially in Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear, as a device through which he could highlight his ponderings over the questions of nihilistic existentialism. So, an attempt will be made here to analyze this nihilistic attitude of Shakespeare as exposed in his soliloquies in the above mentioned tragic plays.

While Existentialism is a philosophy that holds that every person exists first and his nature, or essence he defines later through his actions and choice of life, Nihilism holds that all meaning and values are without foundation. Existential nihilism, thus, came out to be "the

philosophical theory that life has no intrinsic meaning or value. With respect to the universe, existential nihilism posits that a single human or even the entire human species is insignificant, without purpose and unlikely to change in the totality of existence” (Wikipedia). This "the existential attitude" also involves a sense of distress and confusion as one is faced with an apparently absurd or meaningless world. In short, Existential nihilism emphasizes a sense of isolated being, the inherent meaninglessness of life, anguish, confusion, responsibility and a sense of absurdity. All these elements of Existentialism are experienced in a tragic confusion of one’s life and are articulated in the anguished moments when one is alone. Soliloquy is the only such medium through which a playwright can make his characters to utter or give vent to their psychological anguishes and philosophical ruminations, and so has been dexterously manipulated by Shakespeare for the same purpose. Charlotte Keys holds in her thesis, “Shakespeare’s plays – and his tragedies in particular – are full of existentially painful and intense moments. Time and again, Shakespeare shows his interest in complex ontological and existential issues by presenting characters who experience themselves as divided, damaged, and even dissolved”(Keys, 7).

Kaufmann holds that like an existentialist philosophers, Shakespeare is deliberately criticizing the systematic philosophies as superficial and removed from the actual human experience. In his nihilistic attitude, Shakespeare in his tragic plays discards the prevalent philosophical trends of Naturalism and Humanism and exhibits his existentialistic deliberations of “to be or not to be”. In the anguished moments of his characters when they articulated their confusion in soliloquies, Shakespeare finds an opportunity to pen down his existentialistic and nihilistic reflections. In his greatest tragic plays like Hamlet, King Lear and Macbeth, the Bard has given expression to the same through soliloquies to which my intention is to study and analyze.

Chronologically, of the four greatest tragic plays of Shakespeare, Hamlet dates in 1599, King Lear in 1605 and then comes Macbeth in 1606. At that time the Bard was just ten years away from his demise that means he was hoary headed wise man when these great works got conceived. This mature age is notorious to make man nihilistic contemplative about the meaning and significance of life and death. What we find in these great plays of Shakespeare is not the revenge and retribution or the betrayal, but an expression of the profoundly existentialistic scrapings of his vastly experienced head.

As Kaufmann says, “Existentialist philosophy often focuses on the experience of anguish, as well as other commonly shared emotions, such as love and hate. Anguish is experienced in difficult decisions or choices, but anguish, existentially, is defined as one’s feeling in the face of existence as a whole.” In no other plays of Shakespeare has his nihilistic attitude more explicit and overt than Hamlet, which chronologically comes first among the other tragedies. At every point, Hamlet expresses how he ranks human life as absurd, but it is in his soliloquies that he articulates his nihilism outspokenly. In the very second scene of the first act, he soliloquizes,

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.(Hamlet,1.2.33)

This attitude is known in the view of “the existentialist as “the existential attitude”, or a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world” (Wikipedia). Hamlet here wishes that either his body should get melt down or the God should permit him for suicide. He feels the whole world and everything about life is weary, stale, flat and useless. The whole world is like an unweeded garden that had gone to seed – only ugly disgusting things thrived. This extremity in thinking of whole world as an absurd and meaningless place is one of the chief features of existential nihilism.

Then in act third, there is another world famous soliloquy which is known to be one of the best quintessential of nihilism. Hamlet ruminates here the most important existentialistic question “to be or not to be”. Hamlet poses the question on the most metaphysical level – not “shall I kill myself?”, nor “can I live like this?” but “to be or not to be”. It is existence itself that is up for debate in this speech. The topic of Hamlet’s soliloquy is his consideration of committing suicide. He thinks that the human flesh is heir to “the heart-ache and thousand natural shocks” which makes human life as absurd as that of the “dream”. He seems here to put life the same plane as death to which he calls ‘dream’. And this sameness of life and death compels him to pose a question before himself whether or not to continue to live, for it is absurd to drag on such a life.

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,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; (Hamlet, 3.1,82)

Throughout the soliloquy, it is obvious that Hamlet is over thinking and wavering between two different extremes: life and death. This philosophical dilemma which is the result of Hamlet’s inward strife is explained by Charlotte Keys as, “In Shakespearean tragedy, the idea that human beings have an intimate, inward self-experience broadens into a wider consideration of the ethics and politics of human existence”(Keys,9). First he thinks “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”, calls himself “a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak”(Hamlet,2.2), and then chastises himself for being such a coward. And when feels despaired by his own passivity, he expresses his wish to commit suicide in these words. This suicide factor takes Hamlet very close to Absurd characters in the Theatre of Absurd which also poses such nihilistic question of existence.

Then in act four, scene four, Hamlet soliloquizes about the insignificance of lazy human life in a truly nihilistic way,

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.

Thus, Hamlet proves the existentialist point here that existence is nothing without essence that is achieved through pointed action. As Jean-Paul Sarter, the author of ‘Being and Nothingness’, wrote in his essay ‘Existentialism and Humanism’, “What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.” So does Hamlet resolute to act first because without action he will fail to define his “self”. He also authentically implies the need of action in this speech and speaks in self-despising tone. This authenticity or resolution for the need of action is described by the existentialists as responsibility. “Authenticity is the greatest existential virtue. To be an authentic person is to be one who faces the human condition, resolutely accepts his

finitude and his death, creatively responds to life, and assumes responsibility for all his decisions” (Kaufman, p. 308).

Another play of Shakespeare that promulgates the existentialist attitude and nihilistic point of view is *King Lear*. Alan Bery puts it as, “As Shakespeare sets his vision of *King Lear* in opposition to the naturalism of Francis Bacon, the philosophy implied in the play’s tragedy comes closer to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre three centuries later.” As has been discussed above, in the vein of existentialism, Lear expresses his anguish for what has been snatched from him in his soliloquy in scene four of act first,

Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s . . . (King Lear,2.4.269-271).

Central to the existentialist attitude is the extreme manifestation of the passionate love or hatred. Here too, hatred pervades the play, for example, in Lear’s terrible curse on Goneril, “Into her womb convey sterility” (1.4.271), and his calling Goneril and Regan “unnatural hags” in the same soliloquy (2.4.278). Hatred and the sense of the futility of life one experiences at the moments of destitute or miseries are inevitable parts of the existential anguish. This results in a nihilistic attitude and one begins to abhor the unwanted life and this loathsome world. This is what happens to Lear when he curses his daughters as “you unnatural hags” and the heaven,

If it be you that stir these daughters’ hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women’s weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, (King Lear,2.4.278).

This anguish also generates the degenerated view of human life and Lear wails to the “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! Blow” in his soliloquy in act third, scene two.

Here I stand your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man.(King Lear, 3.2)

Lear cannot bear the betrayal given by his own daughters and has now harbored such an undignified view of himself. It is noteworthy here that the man who calls himself a slave was earlier a king of a kingdom. This degenerated view of himself produces a sense of nearness to death and derision for life. At such a point, one wills very much to throw his breath at winds and cease his life’s journey.

The same abhorrence of human life has been displayed in *Macbeth*, when the protagonist ponders over the absurdity and futility of life when he begins his murderous descent believing his acts according to his fate, only to find out that his conscience will not let him escape responsibility for his actions as he begins to have guilty hallucinations and mentally break down.

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.(Macbeth,5.5)

This is again a parallel discordance with life as in the case of Lear. For Macbeth, life is nothing but an insignificant and meaningless shadow or like a “brief candle” which he wants to “out, out!” The human life which going on through its routine “from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time” will inevitably meet its end on “the way to dusty death!” “ Existential nihilists claim that, to be honest, one must face the absurdity of existence, that he/she will eventually die, and that both religion and metaphysics are simply results of the fear of death” (Wikipedia). This fear of death makes Macbeth, too, like Hamlet, face the absurdity of life.

Conclusion

M. L. Arnold points out that Shakespeare’s “soliloquies are quantitatively more conspicuous at the beginning than at the close of Shakespeare's career”(Arnold,9). During older days of him, having experienced all the odds and ends of life, Shakespeare’s mind was more obsessed with the philosophical thoughts of life and death than the romantic elements which he handled in earlier plays. His mind had inclined towards the nihilistic ruminations inevitably in his waning days, as it happens to an average person too. But a genius like Shakespeare is above the other average men in giving sound and articulation to his philosophical pondering in a way that became a source of learning and wisdom for the entire world. It would not be exaggeration to endorse here that Shakespeare’s soliloquies teach and preach more intensely than the holy texts of religion.

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