

Hamlet's Hesitation to Revenge: A Critical Examination

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ABSTRACT

Hamlet by William Shakespeare is one of the greatest tragedies in world literature. Though it is fundamentally a revenge play, it differs from conventional revenge tragedies because the hero's downfall is caused not merely by external circumstances but also by his own complex character. This research work attempts to understand Shakespeare's artistic craftsmanship and his sublime ability to depict the psychological depth, moral standards, and social complexities of the titular Prince with remarkable vividness, a quality that distinguished him from his predecessors and contemporaries, including Thomas Kyd and other playwrights of the age.

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INTRODUCTION

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the question of why Hamlet delays (M., HAMLET'S STOIC DELAY: SHAKESPEAREAN APPROACH TO SENECA'S PHILOSOPHY, 2025) in avenging his father's murder (Baviera, 2026) is one of the most debated issues (R., Justice for Hamlet, 2025) in English literature. Although Hamlet possesses the motive (Brennan, 2025), intelligence, courage, and opportunity to kill Claudius (J. C. R., 2021), he repeatedly postpones action (J. L., 2023). His delay is not the result of simple cowardice or indecisiveness; rather, it arises from a complex interaction (Tatu, 2026) of moral sensitivity, philosophical reflection, emotional disturbance, and psychological conflict (Impact, March 9, 2026). Shakespeare presents Hamlet as a deeply thoughtful and morally conscious character whose nature is unsuited to the crude demands of revenge (G., 2025). **Hamlet's inability to take immediate revenge (S., 2023) against King Claudius forms the central problem of the play.** *Millicent Bell reveals the persistent strain of philosophical skepticism that runs throughout Shakespeare's plays. Like his contemporary Montaigne, Shakespeare repeatedly calls attention to the essential unknowability of our world.* (Wians, Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism, 2004) Though Hamlet possessed all the requisites to avenge his father's murder by killing his uncle—such as physical strength, strong determination,

and a sharp intellect capable of careful planning (A., 2021)—he nevertheless delayed taking revenge because of his reflective nature, moral sensitivity, and deep psychological conflict.

Hamlet differs from a conventional revenge tragedy in several important ways. While it follows the basic revenge plot, Hamlet transforms the genre by emphasizing psychological conflict, moral complexity, and philosophical reflection rather than immediate violent action (M., 2025).

1. Delay in Revenge: Unlike the typical revenge hero, Hamlet does not act immediately after learning of his father's murder. He spends much of the play questioning the Ghost's truthfulness, seeking proof of Claudius's guilt, and reflecting on the moral consequences of revenge.

2. Psychological Depth: Conventional revenge heroes are driven primarily by the desire for vengeance. Hamlet, however, is an intellectual and a philosopher whose inner conflicts, self-doubt, and emotional struggles dominate the play. His famous soliloquies reveal his complex state of mind.

3. Moral and Religious Concerns: Hamlet does not view revenge merely as killing Claudius. He worries about justice, sin, the afterlife, and the fate of the soul. He refuses to kill Claudius while he is praying because he

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believes this would send him to heaven instead of punishing him.

4. Questioning the Ghost: In traditional revenge tragedies, the avenger usually accepts the Ghost's command without hesitation. Hamlet, however, doubts whether the Ghost is truly his father's spirit or an evil spirit attempting to deceive him. He therefore stages The Mousetrap to confirm Claudius's guilt.

5. Emphasis on Thought over Action: Conventional revenge tragedies focus on action, violence, and bloodshed. In Hamlet, Shakespeare shifts the focus to introspection, philosophical debate, and psychological analysis. The play explores themes such as mortality, justice, appearance versus reality, and human existence.

6. Complex Characterization: Hamlet is not a one-dimensional avenger. He is sensitive, educated, idealistic, and deeply moral. His character possesses emotional and intellectual complexity that is uncommon in earlier revenge heroes.

7. Tragic Vision: The play is not only about revenge but also about corruption, betrayal, mortality, and the collapse of moral order in Denmark. Revenge becomes one element of a much broader tragic vision.

8. Philosophical Soliloquies: Shakespeare enriches the play with Hamlet's soliloquies, especially "To be, or not to be," which examine life, death, suffering, and human existence. Such philosophical depth is largely absent from conventional revenge tragedies.

The plot of Hamlet is simple. A son is called upon to avenge his father's murder by killing the murderer, who is none other than his uncle Claudius. Claudius has not only murdered his own brother but has also married the widowed queen and seized the throne of Denmark. When Hamlet learns the truth from his father's Ghost, he resolves to take revenge swiftly:

"Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift

As meditation or the thoughts of love,

May sweep to my revenge."

Act 1, Scene 5, line no.29-31

This delay has puzzled critics for centuries. Various explanations have been given for Hamlet's procrastination.

"I will be addressing the famous question of delay. My argument in this paper is that Hamlet's delay is not a mystery as has been always claimed. ..I will be arguing that the hero's delay, if it can be termed so, is political action per se." (ALOUI, The Politics of Delay in Shakespeare's Hamlet: Artistic or Political Failure?., 2021)

Hamlet's delay has traditionally been explained either as a moral problem of conscience or as a psychological condition of melancholy and over thinking (Mueller, 1997). According to T.S. Eliot, Hamlet's delay and emotional conflict arise not only from the duty of revenge

but also from his profound disgust at the corruption he sees in his family and the world around him. (Mercer, 1987)

However, these interpretations are usually studied separately. This research addresses the gap by examining how moral scruple, psychological paralysis (BENASIR B.M.S., 2023), and Shakespeare's dramatic structure work together to produce Hamlet's hesitation. Through close textual analysis and critical perspectives, the study aims to show that Hamlet's delay is not a single flaw, but a complex tension between ethics, psychology, and dramaturgy.

1. To what extent does Hamlet's psychological melancholy contribute to his hesitation in taking revenge?

2. How does Shakespeare present Hamlet's delay as a conflict between moral conscience and the duty of revenge?

3. How does Hamlet's reflective and intellectual temperament distinguish him from traditional revenge heroes?

4. How does Shakespeare use Hamlet's delay to explore the complexity of human psychology, morality, and tragic responsibility in Hamlet?

There are others who maintain that the hero of this play is a sentimental fool, a man of weak nerves, a mere daydreamer, and they therefore suggest that the tragic content of the play lies contained exclusively in sentimentality or nervous collapse. This view also is untenable. Hamlet, then, is neither a tragedy of delay nor of inaction, nor is it a tragedy of sentimental deviation; it is, really speaking, a tragedy of moral idealism. Hamlet is a character who may in all respects be called a moral idealist. (Singh, 2023)

He, thusly, determines to have all things set right. Therefore, the kind of struggle which arises in the play is one that is psychological; the struggle is between two forces—nobleness, the high moral virtue, and ignobility, the lack of honor and nobility—the one employs conscientiously all legal and moral methods to defend itself and obtain its rights, the other employs all illegal and evil means to bring about illegal results. Wrongs breed wrongs, for the unethical actions, mistakes, or negative situations create more of the same, often escalating problems through cycles of poor choices. (Adnan Jabar Hamid, 2026) In line with those representations, Lott remarks that there is Hamlet's own nature. Noble of mind in an evil world, he alternates as any human being does between reason and emotion. His soliloquies are the fruits of reason; in them we find him relying on deliberation to settle for him the right course of action to follow. But they contain also impassioned outbursts sometimes immediately recognizable as such, but at other times veiled by the 'antic disposition' he puts on.

This research aims to examine the reasons behind Hamlet's delay in taking revenge. It explores how Shakespeare

presents this delay through Hamlet's moral concerns, psychological conflicts, and the dramatic requirements of the play. It also studies how different critical approaches, such as Romantic criticism, psychoanalysis, and modern theories of subjectivity, have interpreted Hamlet's hesitation over time.

The study will closely analyze important scenes, including the Ghost's command, the play-within-the-play, the prayer scene, and Hamlet's soliloquies (Lughu, 2019). By combining textual analysis with a review of major critical interpretations, the research seeks to show that Hamlet's delay results from the interaction of ethical dilemmas, inner psychological struggle, and dramatic design. Thus, Hamlet becomes a powerful exploration of revenge, self-conflict, and the passage of time in tragedy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Among Shakespeare's tragedies, Hamlet has generated one of the most extensive bodies of critical scholarship (Thorndike, 2020), with the problem of Hamlet's delay (Wians, 2004) in avenging his father's murder (Bell, 1998) remaining a central concern. Critics have repeatedly attempted to explain (Mussil, 2001) why a prince who possesses intelligence, courage, and a clear motive (Skulsky, 2020) for revenge (ALOU, 2021) postpones the act he is duty-bound to perform (ROSE, 1971).

The earliest significant interpretations (Sosnowska, 2018) emerged during the Romantic period (Wilson, 2025). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, portrayed Hamlet as a sensitive and refined soul (Foakes, 2002) burdened with a task (Zhao, 2022) beyond his capacity (SINGH, 2023). For Goethe, Hamlet's delay arises from the incompatibility between his contemplative nature (Lee, 2009) and the violent demands of revenge (N. Watson). Samuel Taylor Coleridge further developed this view by arguing that Hamlet suffers from an excess of reflection (Sanyal, 2022). According to Coleridge, the prince's intellectual activity continually displaces action, resulting in paralysis and procrastination.

The psychological approach reached its most influential formulation in A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). Bradley attributed Hamlet's delay to melancholy, a condition intensified by grief, disgust, and disappointment. He argued that Hamlet's emotional suffering undermines his capacity for decisive action. Bradley's interpretation (Schulte Herbruggen, 1996) established the tendency to treat Hamlet's hesitation primarily as a psychological problem rooted in individual character.

A major challenge to this tradition appeared in T. S. Eliot's essay "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919). Rejecting character-based explanations, Eliot argued that Hamlet's emotions exceed the dramatic facts presented in the play. He famously described the tragedy as an "artistic failure," claiming that Shakespeare could not adequately objectify Hamlet's emotional state. Although controversial, Eliot's critique redirected attention from Hamlet's personality to the relationship between emotion and dramatic structure.

Psychoanalytic criticism introduced a new dimension (Steinnes, 2012) to the debate. Ernest Jones, drawing upon Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex (Zachrisson, 2016), argued that Hamlet unconsciously identifies with Claudius because Claudius has fulfilled Hamlet's repressed desires toward Gertrude. Revenge is therefore delayed because Hamlet cannot easily condemn in another what exists unconsciously within himself (Flaherty, 2014). While later critics questioned the universality of Freudian assumptions, Jones's work demonstrated the importance of unconscious motivation in understanding Hamlet's behaviour.

Mid-twentieth-century criticism increasingly shifted from individual psychology to broader philosophical and cultural concerns (Herbruggen, 1996). Maynard Mack's influential essay "The World of Hamlet" emphasized the atmosphere of uncertainty, deception, and moral ambiguity that surrounds the protagonist (Mahfouz, 2020). Hamlet's delay, in this view, reflects the difficulty of achieving certainty in a world where appearances constantly conceal reality. Similarly, G. Wilson Knight challenged the tendency to regard Hamlet as a heroic figure, suggesting instead that he contributes to the corruption he condemns.

The emergence of New Historicism further transformed Hamlet studies by situating the play within the intellectual and political tensions of the Renaissance (Barry, 1971). Critics such as Stephen Greenblatt explored the influence of religious change, particularly the conflict between Catholic beliefs about purgatory and Protestant skepticism. The Ghost's demand for revenge places Hamlet within competing ideological systems, making action ethically and spiritually problematic. Such readings reveal that Hamlet's hesitation cannot be understood solely as a personal weakness but must be viewed within the larger cultural framework of early modern England (HAMILTON, 1991).

More recent scholarship has sought to integrate ethical, psychoanalytic, and theatrical perspectives. Rather than searching for a single cause of Hamlet's delay, contemporary critics increasingly regard hesitation as the product of multiple and intersecting forces (Alam, 2023-2024). Hamlet's procrastination emerges from conflicts between revenge and morality, action and reflection, certainty and doubt, selfhood and performance. The play thus becomes a dramatic exploration of divided consciousness rather than a simple revenge narrative.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, much criticism remains confined to particular explanatory models—Romantic, psychological, psychoanalytic, ethical, or historical. Relatively little attention has been paid to how these approaches collectively illuminate the dynamic relationship between moral scruple, psychological paralysis, and dramaturgical necessity (Kumar, 2019). The present study seeks to address this gap by examining Hamlet's delay as a multidimensional phenomenon in which ethical conflict, divided subjectivity, and the temporal demands of tragedy

converge. Through close readings of key scenes and engagement with major critical traditions, this research aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare's representation of hesitation and revenge. Therefore, our focus will be on the following gaps:-

- Hamlet's psychological melancholy
- Hamlet's delay as a conflict between moral conscience and the duty of revenge
- Hamlet's reflective and intellectual temperament
- Hamlet's delay to explore the complexity of human psychology, morality, and tragic responsibility

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this research is qualitative in nature, based on textual and critical analysis. The study begins with a close and critical analysis of the character of Hamlet in the primary text, *Hamlet*, with the objective of identifying and examining the reasons behind his delay in avenging his father's murder. This character-centred analysis forms the foundation of the study. Subsequently, an extensive review of secondary sources—including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and critical essays—is undertaken using national and international academic platforms such as Google Scholar, Mendeley Reference Manager, and ResearchGate. The findings from both the primary and secondary sources are critically compared and synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, moral, philosophical, and religious factors responsible for Hamlet's procrastination.

THE CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF HAMLET

In *Hamlet*, the Prince's "delay" in exacting revenge for his father's murder is one of the most debated aspects of the play. On the surface, Hamlet has the motive, the opportunity, and even the will to kill Claudius; yet he repeatedly postpones decisive action. Far from being mere indecisiveness, this delay is the result of a complex (Taylor, 1971) interplay between morality, depression, philosophical doubt, and the very nature of revenge itself.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare is one of the greatest tragedies in world literature. Though it is fundamentally a revenge play, it differs from conventional revenge tragedies because the hero's downfall is caused not merely by external circumstances but also by his own complex character (Welsh, 2001). Hamlet's inability to take immediate revenge against King Claudius forms the central problem of the play.

Following Characteristics of Hamlet which shall be considered for the delay:-

1. Hamlet's Melancholy and Depression

When we first meet Hamlet, he is already in deep grief after his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. He appears dressed in black, withdrawn from society, and disgusted with life itself. His famous words reveal his mental condition:

"How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!",

Act1, Scene 2, Line no.133-134

Hamlet's melancholy makes him passive and indecisive. His mind is so burdened with sorrow that he even contemplates suicide. Such a disturbed mental state weakens his ability to act quickly. As Hamlet laments, mentioned above. This expression of profound despair reveals his emotional exhaustion and loss of purpose, which contribute significantly to his delay in taking revenge (Poser, 1981).

2. Hamlet as a Man of Thought

Hamlet is essentially a philosopher and thinker. He thinks too deeply before taking action. His excessive reflection paralyzes his will. This idea is clearly expressed in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy(3,1,56-88), where he admits that excessive thinking turns courage into cowardice. Hamlet constantly analyzes every situation from different angles. Instead of acting immediately, he debates moral, religious, and philosophical questions within himself. His intellectual nature delays revenge. This tendency is evident when he reflects, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.83). The line suggests that excessive thought and moral reflection weaken the resolve to act, making introspection a major cause of Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder.

3. Hamlet's Idealism and Moral Sensibility

Hamlet possesses a highly sensitive and moral nature. His mother's hasty marriage to Claudius shatters his ideal view of womanhood and family values. In bitterness, he exclaims, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.146). Hamlet is deeply disturbed by corruption and moral impurity. Unlike Claudius, he cannot become a cold-blooded killer. His strong ethical conscience compels him to seek justice rather than commit an act of impulsive revenge. This moral sensitivity significantly contributes to his hesitation and delay in avenging his father's murder.

4. Over-Scrupulous Nature

Hamlet is over-conscientious and refuses to act without moral and factual certainty. Even after hearing the Ghost's accusation, he questions whether the apparition is truly his father's spirit or an evil force leading him into sin. He admits, "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.627–628). Consequently, Hamlet devises The Mousetrap to test Claudius's conscience and verify the Ghost's story. Only after witnessing Claudius's guilty reaction does he accept the truth of the king's crime. This careful, scrupulous, and morally responsible nature significantly contributes to his delay in taking revenge.

5. Religious and Philosophical Reasons

Hamlet's delay is also closely linked to his religious beliefs and moral philosophy. After staging The Mousetrap, he finds Claudius alone in prayer, presenting an ideal opportunity for revenge. Yet Hamlet deliberately refrains from killing him, reasoning, "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 believes that killing Claudius during prayer would send his soul to heaven, thereby failing to achieve true revenge. In contrast, his father died suddenly without confession and is condemned to suffer in purgatory. Consequently, Hamlet resolves to wait until Claudius is engaged in a sinful act so that his soul will be eternally damned. This episode demonstrates that Hamlet's hesitation is not merely a result of indecision but is rooted in his religious convictions, moral conscience, and desire for absolute justice, all of which significantly contribute to the delay in avenging his father's murder.

6. Hamlet's Feigned or Partial Madness

Some critics argue that Hamlet's strange behavior suggests madness. However, Hamlet himself informs his trusted friends that he intends to feign insanity, declaring that he may "put an antic disposition on" (Hamlet, 1.5.172). Although his madness begins as a deliberate strategy, the prolonged pretence, combined with grief, betrayal, and emotional suffering, appears to affect his psychological stability. This inner conflict becomes evident in his final speech to Laertes, where he pleads, "Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet. / If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away... / His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy" (Hamlet, 5.2.230–235, line numbering may vary by edition). By separating himself from his "madness," Hamlet acknowledges the destructive influence of his disturbed mental state. Although he is not wholly insane, his pessimism, cynicism, emotional instability, and obsession with death create intense psychological conflict that weakens his capacity for decisive action and contributes significantly to his delay in taking revenge.

Observations & Findings

Thus we can say that Hamlet's procrastination arises from several interconnected causes—melancholy, excessive thinking, moral sensitivity, idealism, religious beliefs, doubt, and emotional conflict. Hamlet is not a coward; rather, he is too intellectual and too conscientious to act rashly. Unlike a typical revenge hero, he seeks not only revenge but moral justice. His delay is also dramatically necessary (R., Justice for Hamlet, 2025). If Hamlet had killed Claudius immediately after meeting the Ghost, the play would have ended at once. Shakespeare therefore creates a deeply thoughtful and complex hero whose inner conflict becomes the real tragedy of the play. Hamlet remains one of the most fascinating tragic characters in literature because his struggle is not merely against Claudius, but against his own mind and nature.

A critical analysis of the primary source, *Hamlet*, reveals several significant observations regarding the causes of Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder. These observations form the basis of the following detailed discussion

- **Hamlet's psychological melancholy**

From the beginning, Hamlet is plunged into a state of profound depression. His father's death, his mother's

remarriage, and the corruption of the Danish court together destroy his sense of meaning in the world. The "good things of life," both material and spiritual, are blotted out by his sorrow. This inner darkness clouds his judgment and weakens his will. In such a state of emotional paralysis, even when he intellectually knows what he ought to do, he finds it difficult to act. His constant self-questioning ("To be, or not to be,"(3,1,56) "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I"(2,2,577)) reveals a mind torn between reflection and action, between thought and resolution.

Hamlet's disillusionment with women originates primarily from his mother's hasty marriage to Claudius. Deeply wounded by Queen Gertrude's perceived moral failure, Hamlet extends his personal disappointment into the sweeping generalization, "Frailty, thy name is woman."(1,2,146) Although his experience is limited to only two significant women—Gertrude and Ophelia—he allows his mother's actions to shape his judgment of all women. This demonstrates how grief and emotional trauma distort his perception of reality, leading him to universalize an individual betrayal.

To critiques the Freudian interpretation that attributes Hamlet's delay to an Oedipal or sexual fixation on his mother. Instead, it argues that Hamlet's attachment to Gertrude is best understood as profound filial love rather than unconscious desire. Her remarriage destroys the ideal moral order upon which Hamlet has built his understanding of the world, leaving him spiritually isolated and emotionally devastated (Leverenz, 1978). Consequently, Hamlet begins to view women with suspicion, even projecting his disillusionment onto the innocent Ophelia. His command, "Get thee to a nunnery,"(3,1,121) reflects not hatred of Ophelia herself but a broader loss of faith in human purity and virtue. Thus, Shakespeare presents Hamlet's misogyny as the tragic outcome of moral disillusionment rather than psychological abnormality, highlighting the collapse of his idealistic vision of humanity (Frattaroli, 1990).

Shakespeare further contrasts Hamlet's two major soliloquies on suicide—"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt"(1,2,129) and "To be, or not to be." Although both contemplate death as an escape from suffering, they emerge from different psychological states. The first soliloquy is spoken before Hamlet learns of his father's murder. At this stage, his despair stems primarily from the natural death of King Hamlet and the emotional devastation caused by Queen Gertrude's hasty remarriage. These events shatter Hamlet's idealistic vision of family, morality, and social order, leaving him emotionally overwhelmed but not yet driven by the burden of revenge (Mr. Ahmed Mabkhoot, 2022). By contrast, the later soliloquy reflects a much deeper existential crisis. Having discovered that his father was murdered by Claudius, Hamlet's grief expands into a philosophical meditation on the meaning of life, suffering, and death. His thoughts move beyond personal sorrow to universal questions concerning human existence, moral responsibility, and the

uncertainty of the afterlife (Rashid, 2019). Shakespeare thus portrays Hamlet's contemplation of suicide as an expression of intellectual and spiritual conflict rather than cowardice. His reflections reveal a tragic hero whose sensitive and philosophical temperament transforms personal loss into a profound exploration of the human condition.

- **Hamlet's delay as a conflict between moral conscience and the duty of revenge**

Hamlet is presented as a man of unusually fine moral sensibility. He is shocked by his mother's hasty second marriage and feels a deep horror at what he sees as sexual and moral corruption at court. This moral intensity makes it difficult for him to accept murder as a simple or acceptable solution. When he has Claudius at prayer and decides not to strike, he reasons that killing a man in such state of penitence would send him to heaven, which would be a gift rather than true revenge.

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;

And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;

And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:

A villain kills my father; and for that,

I, his sole son, do this same villain send

To heaven.

O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.

(Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 3, L N. 76-82)

Here the delay is not caused by weakness, but by a scrupulous concern for the moral and spiritual consequences of his act. Hamlet wants not just to kill Claudius, but to ensure that his punishment is complete and just. Hamlet decides to wait for a moment when Claudius is drunk, asleep, or committing some sin, so he'll be damned: "To take him in the purging of his soul, When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?" — no, he'll kill him in a "more horrid hent" (more horrid moment)(3,3,88).

Hamlet's contemplation of suicide develops from emotional sorrow into profound existential despair. In the first soliloquy, Hamlet rejects suicide primarily because Christian doctrine condemns self-destruction, acknowledging that "the Everlasting hath fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter"(1,2,131-132). His restraint at this stage is rooted in religious obedience. However, in the later soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," Hamlet's hesitation arises from a far deeper source—the fear of the unknown after death. His reflections reveal a universal human anxiety about what lies beyond life rather than simple adherence to theological doctrine (HAUGHEY, 2021). This shift demonstrates the increasing intensity of Hamlet's psychological and spiritual crisis following the revelation of his father's murder.

The central cause of Hamlet's delay is neither cowardice nor moral weakness but his deeply reflective temperament.

Shakespeare himself provides this explanation through Hamlet's admission that "conscience does make cowards of us all"(3,1,83). Here, "conscience" signifies not merely moral awareness but persistent self-examination and intellectual rumination. Hamlet habitually analyzes every possible consequence of his actions, allowing thought to overwhelm decisive action. His philosophical nature compels him to seek certainty and justice before acting, yet this very habit of reflection repeatedly postpones revenge. Shakespeare thus presents Hamlet as a tragic hero, whose exceptional intellect becomes both his greatest strength and his fatal weakness, illustrating the conflict between contemplation and action that lies at the heart of the tragedy.

- **Hamlet's reflective and intellectual temperament**

Hamlet's intellectual temperament also contributes to his delay. He is a thinker, not a natural warrior. Before acting, he demands proof: he stages 'the play-within-a-play' to confirm Claudius's guilt; he hesitates at the moment of prayer because of theological doubt; and he ponders the consequences of his actions in ways that many ordinary revengers would not. His famous soliloquies show a mind that unpacks every motive, every possibility, every ethical complication. In this sense, his delay is partly the product of a reflective, modern consciousness that cannot rest content with simple, blood-soaked vengeance.

It is true that Hamlet initially accepts the Ghost's revelation without hesitation. He immediately recognizes the apparition as the spirit of his father, and the Ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder aligns with Hamlet's long-standing suspicion of Claudius's corrupt nature. His exclamation, "Oh, my prophetic soul! My uncle!"(1,5,40) reflects not prior knowledge of the murder but an instinctive conviction that Claudius is morally depraved. Thus, Hamlet's belief in the Ghost is immediate and complete, as further demonstrated when he later describes it as "an honest ghost"(2,2,255).

However, as time passes and Claudius remains alive, Hamlet begins to question his own delay. His growing self-reproach gives rise to doubts about the Ghost's reliability, not because he genuinely distrusts it, but because he seeks a rational justification for his inaction (Langley, 2026). The arrival of the travelling players provides Hamlet with an opportunity to resolve this uncertainty. By staging *The Murder of Gonzago* and adding lines that closely resemble his father's murder, Hamlet devises "The Mousetrap" to observe Claudius's reaction. This strategy reflects Hamlet's intellectual caution and desire for irrefutable evidence before committing himself to revenge. Shakespeare thus portrays Hamlet's delay not as simple indecision but as a thoughtful process of verifying truth and ensuring that justice is based on certainty rather than impulse (Brucher, 1981)

Hamlet's decision to stage *The Mousetrap* is less a genuine attempt to verify the Ghost's story than a psychological justification for postponing action. Although Hamlet claims that "the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the

conscience of the king," (2,2,633-634) this explanation is presented as a rationalization rather than the true cause of his delay. Having already accepted the Ghost as "an honest ghost" and recognized Claudius's guilt, Hamlet has little real need for further confirmation. Instead, the play serves to ease his conscience and provide an excuse for his continued inaction.

- **Hamlet's delay to explore the complexity of human psychology, morality, and tragic responsibility**

There is a common assumption that Hamlet delays avenging his father's murder because of moral weakness or an unwillingness to kill. It argues that, in the context of Elizabethan England, where harsh punishments such as execution for minor crimes were common, Hamlet's actions do not reflect excessive moral sensitivity. Throughout the play, Hamlet demonstrates that he is neither afraid of bloodshed nor opposed to violence in principle. His impulsive killing of Polonius, his declaration that he could "drink hot blood"(3,2,380), and his calculated arrangement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's execution, all reveal his capacity for decisive and ruthless action. Therefore, the reasons for Hamlet's delay cannot be attributed to a fear of violence or ethical hesitation alone. Instead, Shakespeare presents Hamlet's procrastination as a consequence of deeper psychological, philosophical, and existential conflicts that complicate the act of revenge.

Various critics have interpreted Hamlet as a man who is continually on the verge of madness, sometimes appearing genuinely insane but repeatedly recovering his mental balance. Dr. A. W. Dove Wilson, for instance, describes Hamlet after his encounter with the Ghost as being in a state of extreme emotional instability, with "an intellect tottering in its seat." Modern psychologists have also attempted to explain Hamlet's mental anguish by attributing it to his deep emotional attachment to his mother rather than merely to his horror at her incestuous marriage to Claudius. Psychological theories further classify individuals as either extroverts, who are naturally inclined toward action, or introverts, who are introspective and contemplative. Hamlet clearly belongs to the latter category. His reflective and speculative temperament, coupled with his tendency to analyze every situation before acting, has often been mistaken for madness. After a thorough analysis of Hamlet's character, it becomes evident that the primary reason for his delay is not insanity but his intellectual and philosophical nature. As a student of the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is portrayed as a scholar deeply influenced by philosophy and metaphysical inquiry. He rarely makes a decision without carefully examining every possible consequence. His idealistic outlook intensifies his suffering over his mother's hasty remarriage and Ophelia's rejection, leaving him profoundly disillusioned with those he loves. Consequently, Hamlet's procrastination arises not from madness but from his excessive intellectualism, moral sensitivity, and idealistic temperament, which repeatedly hinder decisive action.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder cannot be explained simply by the common belief that he "thinks too much." The author questions this interpretation by suggesting that thought itself is a virtue rather than a weakness, as critical thinking is essential for human progress. Hamlet's problem, therefore, is not the quantity of his thinking but the nature of it. His thoughts are marked by doubt, moral reflection, and excessive self-analysis, which repeatedly frustrate decisive action. Instead of leading him toward a clear course of action, his reasoning traps him in a cycle of hesitation and uncertainty. The passage also rejects practical explanations for his delay, such as political difficulties or fear of public opinion. Hamlet enjoyed the support of the people, and no elaborate plan was required to kill Claudius; a single decisive act would have been sufficient. Indeed, whenever Hamlet finally resolves to act, he does so without hesitation. Thus, we can conclude that Hamlet's delay arises primarily from his psychological and philosophical conflict rather than from external circumstances or mere intellectual excess.

Hamlet's idealistic and deeply moral nature is another significant reason for his delay in taking revenge. As an idealist, he expects the highest standards of loyalty and virtue from those around him and is therefore profoundly disappointed by his mother's hasty remarriage and the betrayal of his uncle. Hamlet is also portrayed as an exceptionally conscientious and intellectually honest individual. As Schücking observes, he is "mercilessly honest," refusing to act without absolute certainty. Although he initially believes the Ghost's account, his skeptical nature compels him to question whether it is truly his father's spirit or an evil force attempting to deceive him. To resolve this doubt, Hamlet arranges for the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* so that he can observe Claudius's reaction and confirm his guilt. Even after obtaining proof, Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius while he is at prayer because he believes that such a death would send his uncle's soul to heaven rather than to the eternal punishment he deserves. For Hamlet, revenge is not merely the physical act of killing Claudius but ensuring that justice is complete by condemning his soul to hell. This highly emotional and moral interpretation of revenge reflects his idealistic temperament and explains his hesitation. Had Hamlet been less scrupulous and more pragmatic, he would have killed Claudius immediately after discovering his guilt. Ultimately, however, Hamlet resists any single, definitive interpretation. As a timeless work of art, it invites each generation to ask new questions and discover fresh meanings. Consequently, the reasons for Hamlet's delay continue to be debated, with every age interpreting his character in the light of its own intellectual and cultural perspectives.

Another explanation frequently offered for Hamlet's delay is that he is genuinely insane. However, the passage rejects this interpretation by distinguishing between real madness

and Hamlet's deliberate assumption of it. As Professor Nicoll defines, madness is a state in which a person loses control over reason and behaves irrationally. Although Hamlet appears mentally disturbed in several scenes—such as after encountering the Ghost, during the play-within-the-play, and in the graveyard scene with Laertes—he consistently regains his composure within a short time. Following the Ghost's revelation, Hamlet consciously decides to "put an antic disposition on" in order to conceal his true intentions from King Claudius. By pretending to be mad, he hopes that his unusual words and actions will be dismissed as the ravings of an unstable mind, thereby protecting the secret of his revenge. Hamlet realizes that he needs time to devise and perfect his plan while avoiding suspicion or the accidental disclosure of his purpose. Furthermore, his failure to kill Claudius during prayer is not due to fear or indecision but to his belief that killing him in a state of prayer would send his soul to heaven rather than to the punishment he deserves. Thus, Hamlet's apparent madness is a calculated strategy rather than a symptom of genuine mental illness, and it cannot adequately explain his delay in taking revenge.

CONCLUSION

Although Hamlet retains the essential framework of a revenge tragedy—a murdered king, a Ghost demanding vengeance, and the eventual punishment of the murderer—Shakespeare elevates the genre by introducing psychological realism, moral ambiguity, philosophical inquiry, and profound character development. As a result, Hamlet is regarded as the greatest and most innovative revenge tragedy in English literature.

Hamlet's delay is not a flaw in Shakespeare's characterization but a deliberate expression of the prince's complex personality. Echoing A. C. Bradley's assertion that "the whole story turns on the peculiar character of the hero," the argument suggests that Hamlet's actions are inseparable from his reflective and morally conscious nature. Unlike Claudius, who plots with calculated efficiency, or Laertes, who pursues revenge with reckless determination, Hamlet is driven by conscience, intellect, and ethical reflection. His refusal to kill Claudius while the king is apparently at prayer is not mere procrastination but a morally and psychologically significant decision. Hamlet believes that killing Claudius in a state of repentance would allow his soul to attain salvation, thereby failing to deliver true revenge. The soliloquy in this scene exposes Hamlet's intense hatred, frustration, and inner conflict while foreshadowing the moment when a more fitting opportunity for vengeance will arise. Thus, Shakespeare presents Hamlet's delay as an essential feature of his tragic character, illustrating the tension between moral judgment, emotional turmoil, and the demands of revenge.

Hamlet's profound psychological despair and demonstrates how his repeated reflections on suicide arise from the collapse of his moral and emotional world. His instruction to Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery," symbolizes not merely a rejection of love but a desire to prevent the continuation

of a corrupt human race. This represents the tragic negation of life itself, revealing the depth of Hamlet's disillusionment with humanity.

Similarly, Hamlet's later suggestion that the Ghost might be a devil "that hath power to assume a pleasing shape" reflects his internal struggle rather than genuine skepticism. These doubts emerge only after a considerable lapse of time, when Hamlet becomes increasingly conscious of his failure to fulfill the duty of revenge. His philosophical reasoning is therefore interpreted as an attempt to reconcile his moral responsibility with his inability to act decisively. The passage further connects this hesitation to Hamlet's profound emotional suffering, particularly the trauma caused by his mother's hasty marriage to Claudius. His grief, disillusionment, and moral sensitivity combine to create a psychological conflict that delays revenge. Thus, Shakespeare portrays Hamlet's procrastination not as cowardice or disbelief but as the tragic consequence of a deeply reflective and emotionally wounded mind.

The delay in Hamlet's revenge may be understood in two distinct stages. The first stage arises from his uncertainty regarding the Ghost's revelation. Although the Ghost accuses Claudius of murder, Hamlet's skeptical and rational mind refuses to accept the accusation without proof. To verify the Ghost's honesty, he stages *The Mousetrap*, a play that reenacts the circumstances of King Hamlet's murder. Claudius's agitated reaction and abrupt departure from the performance confirm his guilt, thereby removing Hamlet's initial doubt. The second stage occurs when Hamlet finds Claudius alone at prayer. Despite having the perfect opportunity to kill him, Hamlet refrains because he believes that a man who dies while confessing his sins may attain salvation. In contrast, Hamlet's father died suddenly without the opportunity for repentance and, according to the play, remains in purgatory. Hamlet therefore concludes that killing Claudius during prayer would not constitute true revenge, as it would send his uncle's soul to heaven rather than to the eternal punishment he deserves. Thus, Hamlet's delay is motivated not by cowardice or indecision but by his desire to achieve complete moral and spiritual justice.

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