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**Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Play for All Ages – A
Study of Its Philosophical and Existential Themes**

Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film adaptation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores why Shakespeare's *Hamlet* continues to matter to us today through the lens of its profound philosophical ideas about life and existence. It aims to demonstrate how *Hamlet* remains a powerful and fascinating play that connects with people across all periods because it addresses enduring human concerns. By considering *Hamlet's* historical and cultural context and its engagement with essential questions about existence, purpose, morality, and the human condition, this thesis argues that the play's enduring impact is due to its everlasting exploration of universal concerns.

One of the crucial aspects of this study is to understand the historical background of existentialism, a philosophical movement that emerged in the 20th century. By historicising this school of thought and its fundamental doctrines, we will demonstrate how the concepts articulated by key figures such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus, who highlight the concrete and problematic character of human existence are vividly reflected in *Hamlet*.

Fundamentally, this paper demonstrates how the 1996 adaptation of *Hamlet* by Kenneth Branagh, a production notable for its fidelity to the original text and innovative cinematic techniques, connects the Elizabethan era with the modern world, rendering it profoundly relevant across all ages and transcending its historical origins. The analysis of Branagh's interpretation reveals how his directorial choices and performance illuminate the existential themes inherent in the play. Key scenes, such as Hamlet's soliloquies, his contemplation of life and death, and his interactions with other characters, are analysed to underscore the narrative's philosophical depth and emotional intensity.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to:

My husband, Ernest Tchenkuo, and my children: Nana Mine'va Tchenkuo, Lenya Mckayla Tchenkuo, and Limen Merviglio Tchenkuo. You are my priceless jewels. You bring me more joy for being good and collaborative throughout this journey.

My father, HRH Nfeu Nana Jacob Wandah II. You made me believe that education and knowledge are the only tools to fight the battles of life. May your soul continue to rest in peace.

My mother, Nyikam Susan. Your love, compassion, integrity, and sacrifices have left an everlasting impression on my life.

My big sister Nana Loveline. God gave you to me as the most expensive treasure. Your unconditional love, sacrifice, and patience mean a lot to me.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyses Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by offering an existential reading of the text. It examines *Hamlet*'s historical and cultural context and its engagement with questions of existence, meaning, morality, and the human condition, arguing that *Hamlet* resonates across centuries also because it explores proto-existential concerns. In A. C. Bradley's words, "It was not that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy or most perfect work of art: it was that *Hamlet* most brings home to use at once the sense of the soul's infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring" (qtd. in Bloom 2008: xvii).

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historical and cultural context of the Elizabethan era. This chapter also anticipates the main excerpts of the play that are explored in more detail through an existential lens in subsequent chapters: for instance, the emptiness of existence, death and mortality, the struggle with inaction, and the absurdity of life.

Chapter 2 contextualises the philosophical movement of existentialism, which emerged in the 20th century, tracing its origins and key doctrines, as they provide the background against which the possible existential reading of *Hamlet* is considered. This chapter offers a brief overview of the work of key figures for the development and affirmation of existentialism, such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus. By tracing the origins of existentialism and its main tenets, we better appreciate *Hamlet*'s pre-existentialist exploration of human concerns.

Chapter 3 discusses Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film adaptation of *Hamlet*, its use of the text, innovative cinematic techniques, directorial choices, and performances that contribute to bringing out the pre-existential themes that can be found in the play. Key scenes, such as Hamlet's soliloquies and his interactions with other characters, especially with the gravedigger, are analysed to show how Branagh interprets the existential themes identified above. This demonstrates how Branagh's interpretation exemplifies how different adaptations can offer specific interpretations of the text and how this play can be recontextualised across time.

The conclusion re-emphasises how *Hamlet*, “Of all poems, [...] is the most unlimited” (Bloom 2003:3) as a play that addresses some of the fundamental dimensions of human experience. Through Kenneth Branagh’s film adaptation, this study highlights how Shakespeare’s play continues to find new tone and meaning in the modern world.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

1.1 *Hamlet* as Shakespeare's famous tragedy

Hamlet is considered one of the greatest tragedies in English literature, and extensive criticism of the play has been written over the centuries; the play has also been adapted and rewritten numerous times across ages and cultural contexts. As Partovi notes,

Hamlet has been adapted in at least 30 countries, but each adaptation emphasises important different aspects of facets of the play. [As such], it does not appear to make good sense to search for any one property in *Hamlet* that accounts for its popularity as a source text for adapters. (2013:9)

At the same time, the appeal of *Hamlet* lies also in the fact that

It is a text in which the language of popular festive form is deeply embedded in the structure of action and where the meanings privileged in the culture of Carnival are fully actualised. Although the play is filled with tragedy and horror, most of the scenes are extremely funny. (Zimmerman 1998:238).

As Partovi notes, “This carnival aspect of the play means that adapters can juxtapose both ‘high’ and ‘low’, both tragic and comic moments into their plays. *Hamlet* can incorporate various forms and offer its audience light relief alongside tragedy and philosophy” (2013:21).

If “the success of a tragedy depends on its capacity to excite pity and fear, thereby affecting a catharsis of these emotions [...]” (McEarchern 2002:2), *Hamlet* “is today the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies on our stage, and yet a large number, perhaps even the majority of the spectators, though they may feel some mysterious attraction in the hero, certainly do not question themselves about his character or the cause of his delay, and would still find the play exceptionally effective, even if he were an ordinary, brave young man and the obstacles in his path were purely external” (Bloom 2008:231). Furthermore, the play is characterised by “a profoundly elegiac temper” (Bloom 1998:400), which critics,

among whom James Joyce, have sometimes associated with Shakespeare's own mourning for his son, Hamnet, who died in 1596 at 11 years of age, and Shakespeare also lost his father in 1601. Shakespeare's grief might have influenced him to create a character like Hamlet, who is so deeply affected by his father's death.

Rather than following the straightforward path of vengeance typical of the revenge tragedy genre, Shakespeare introduces philosophical and psychological depth to complicate the plot of the play, making Hamlet's journey a more reflective and morally complex one (cf. Bloom 2003:3-6). "As a meditation upon human fragility in confrontation with death", as Bloom calls it (2003:3), but also as a text that focuses on a character who, "like the writer, is a reflecting pool, a spacious mirror in which we need must see ourselves" (Bloom 1998:401), *Hamlet* is still one of the most staged of Shakespeare's works.

When it was written, the play was probably novel because it strayed from the traditionally straightforward structure typical of the revenge tragedy genre: Shakespeare introduced philosophical and psychological questions that hindered Hamlet's revenge and made his journey a more reflective and morally complex one (cf. Bloom 2003:3-6). Nonetheless, nowadays

a large number, perhaps even the majority of the spectators, though they may feel some mysterious attraction in the hero, certainly do not question themselves about his character or the cause of his delay, and would still find the play exceptionally effective, even if he were an ordinary, brave young man and the obstacles in his path were purely external. (Bloom 2008:231)

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1.2 The historical and cultural context of the Elizabethan era

The subject of *Hamlet* probably derived from earlier sources, such as Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danica*, written around 1200 (Bevington 2011:7; Winstanley 1921:48). Other scholars believe that Shakespeare's play was inspired by Thomas Kyd's revenge tragedy, *The Spanish Tragedy* (Bloom 1998:383) and from *Histoires Tragiques*, the translation of Matteo Bandello's novelle by the French writer François de Belleforest in 1570 (Winstanley 1921:48; Bloom 2008:48).

The *Historia Danica* narrates the story of a Danish prince whose father is murdered by his uncle, who then marries the prince's mother and usurps the throne. The troubled prince feigns madness to hide his intentions before getting rid of his uncle in revenge. This plot outline would have easily served the purposes of a revenge tragedy. However, Shakespeare's Hamlet is constantly delayed in taking his revenge by religious and philosophical concerns that prevent him from taking action. The Shakespearean Hamlet's doubts and interrogative mode arguably resonated with the concerns of Shakespeare's own contemporaries (Bullough 1973), such as the difficulty in differentiating between appearance and reality (Mack 1952:502), the challenges one encounters when trying to correct injustice single-handedly, the struggle of seeking answers to supernatural and metaphysical questions, the difficulty of judging people by appearances to discern innocence or guilt, and the challenge of reading one's thoughts based solely on their looks. Through all of this, Shakespeare fundamentally demonstrates that *Hamlet* is all about the difficulty of living in a complex world (Kott 1964:65).

Hamlet was written during a period in which England was facing a serious political situation. Queen Elizabeth I was about 68 years old with no heir to the English throne; as a result, there was fear and uncertainty about who would succeed her (Dover 1951). In early 1601, before *Hamlet* was written, there had been an uprising against the Queen led by the Earl of Essex, one which involved Shakespeare's playing company. Essex and his group were believed to have paid the Lord Chamberlain's company to stage Shakespeare's *Richard II*, complete with Richard's deposition and eventual assassination (usually censored in contemporary stagings), on the day before their attempted coup. Essex and his followers took to

the streets of London on Sunday, February 8, 1601, attempting to gather popular support for their insurrection, but within a few hours, the principal rebels were all captured (Frye 1984:265-6). “The attempt on the Queen’s person was made and failed, Essex, the brilliant idol of the populace, was tried and executed” (Winstanley 1921:46). *Hamlet* was written probably later that same year. It is rather uncertain whether *Hamlet* references the Essex rebellion, but there is a striking parallel between Hamlet and Essex in their intention to overthrow their respective monarchs by relying also on stage performances. In fact,

If Hamlet can be said to reflect the Earl of Essex, so can Laertes who also turns against the king, rather desperately. The efforts of Hamlet and Laertes put together can be considered as the Earl of Essex's abortive attempt against Queen Elizabeth I. Hamlet resembles Essex in staging a play, while Laertes in taking to the streets and gathering some followers. (Bernáth 2013:239-40)

Hamlet was thus written during the transition period from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean era, a period of anxieties and uncertainties about succession, legitimacy, and the moral responsibilities of rulers. At the same time, Croft argues, James’ I idea of moral and ethical leadership resonates with Hamlet’s character in his struggle with the moral implications of avenging his father’s murder. Hamlet’s introspection and ethical dilemmas reflect the broader concerns about the responsibilities and burdens of leadership (2003).

The themes of political intrigue and the legitimacy of rulers in *Hamlet* could thus be seen as reflecting the political concerns addressed by James I in his writings. Claudius’ usurpation of the throne and the subsequent moral and political chaos in Denmark echo the anxieties about rightful rule and the divine right of kings (Croft 2003).

Also, Hamlet’s quest for revenge and justice can be linked to the political and social climate of the Elizabethan era. Hamlet taking revenge into his hands is contrary to the divine right of kings, and thus the legal system established by the late Tudor monarchs and later promoted by James I, which might justify Hamlet's initial delay and hesitation in avenging his father's murder. He struggles between action and inaction, thinking of the consequences of revenge while deriving new strategies to seek truth, like the “mousetrap” scene. From a perspective theorising the monarch’s divine right, only God can judge an unjust king, and any plot against

the king was contrary to God's will and thus sacrilegious. In this perspective, Hamlet's killing of Claudius at the end of the play can be considered treason (Sommerville 1991). Burnett George, for instance, affirmed in *Specimens of English Prose Writers: From the Earliest Times to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* that

consider, I pray you, what duty his children owe to him; and whether upon any pretext whatsoever it will not be thought monstrous and unnatural to his sons to rise up against him, to control him at their appetite; and when they think good, to slay him or to cut him off and adopt to themselves any other they please in his room (Burnett 1807:493-94).

The beginning of *Hamlet* may have recalled James' own story, the murder of his father, and the immediate remarriage of his mother. Fortinbras becoming king of Denmark may also be read as an anticipation of a Scottish king succeeding the English throne (Winstanley 1921): Fortinbras succeeds the Danish throne thanks to Denmark's internal political conflicts, and he can be assumed to be the heir to the Norwegian throne too, as no other potential heir is mentioned in the play. As a result, Fortinbras becomes the king of two monarchies in the world of Shakespeare's play.

The play also attests to an interest in the supernatural. The ghost is the character that sets the play in motion, leading to the final bloodbath. Through his initial revelation, the ghost leaves Hamlet with a mission that results in disaster, one that might have been avoided if legal justice had been applied. The ghost also introduces the fundamental questions that Hamlet faces in his quest for revenge: is appearance truly reality? Is taking justice into one's own hands justifiable? What happens to our soul when we die? Is revenge moral?

1.3 Themes and Motifs

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is a play that portrays the complexities of human nature in an already complex world. *Hamlet* proves enduringly relevant to audiences because of its central themes (Bradley 2008; Bloom 1998; Kott 1964) such as the emptiness of nature of existence, characterised by Hamlet's famous soliloquy "to be, or not to be," the cornerstone of Hamlet's philosophical crisis and internal conflict that reflects on the meaninglessness and futility of life (Kott 1964). Hamlet is also obsessed with death and mortality, and the struggle with inaction is an emotional, ethical, and psychological factor that influences Hamlet's decision to avenge his father's murder. The play also revolves around Hamlet's struggle to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, which makes certainty impossible (for example, the impossibility for Hamlet to know Claudius' state of mind just by watching him or hearing him talk). Furthermore, Prince Hamlet of Denmark goes through an existential crisis in the play, which comes to its peak when the ghost of his father appears and seeks revenge. Faced with the moral imperative to avenge his father's death, Hamlet struggles with existential questions. Kenneth Branagh, in his 1996 film adaptation, brings out these themes by showing the prince's intellectual and emotional trauma.

The graveyard scene, where Hamlet reflects on Yorick's skull, brings out the theme of death. Hamlet here represents humanity pondering over life and death. Catherine Belsey argues that "Yorick's skull moves Hamlet in a way that others are not, at once he is appalled by death and drawn to it, he seems alienated from every day but in touch with the great questions of human existence" (cited by Arthur 2002:135). It is believed that Yorick raised Hamlet until the age of seven:

Hamlet: he hath bore me on his back [...] I know not how oft
(*Hamlet*, V.1.185-89).

"[...] this allows us to infer that the prince found father and mother in Yorick, the royal jester" (Bloom 2003:59).

Recurring elements such as the appearance of the ghost, the play-within-the-play, and Hamlet's soliloquies play a pivotal role in the play. The ghost is a multifaceted symbol in the play, which is also used to set the play in motion, to

strengthen the plot, and to deepen the exploration of moral questions in the play. The appearance of the ghost and its declaration that King Hamlet was murdered by Claudius prompts Hamlet to pretend to be mad and stage the mousetrap scene to confirm the ghost's claim. The appearance of the ghost at the beginning of the play highlights pending issues in Denmark that need to be solved and a quest for justice. The ghost represents the supernatural within the play. Ghosts were a common element in Elizabethan drama. They were seen in Shakespeare's time as spirits who had come back to accomplish their unfinished business. This apparition in Acts I foreshadows the dark future of Denmark (Greenblatt 2001; Dover 1951).

Ghost: [...] The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown (*Hamlet*, I.5.39-40).

This revelation by the ghost sets Hamlet's motivation to avenge his father's murder. The re-appearance in Acts 3, scene 4 reminds Hamlet to stay focused on the revenge duty rather than condemning his mother.

Ghost: Do not forget! This visitation
Is but whet thy almost blunted purpose.
But look, amazement on thy mother sits!
O step between her and her fighting soul.
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
Speak to her, Hamlet (*Hamlet*, III.4.105-110).

The play-within-the-play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, also known as "The Mousetrap", is a classic example of meta-drama in which a play is performed within the world of the play; in *Hamlet*, this contributes to a reflection on the nature of theatre and reality because it helps Hamlet discriminate truth. As Hamlet argues before this performance, theatre allows us to look at life as if through a mirror (Mack 1952). Hamlet uses the mousetrap in Act 3, Scene 2 to catch King Claudius' conscience, to make him see himself in the play-within-the-play. Claudius' disturbed reaction reveals his innermost thoughts and feelings, confirming his guilt. Hamlet's directorship of the Mousetrap scene portrays his quest for authenticity and his understanding of how theatre art can be used to reveal truth, the same way as looking through the mirror, we can see the reflection of the world or reality. The "Mousetrap" shapes the narrative structure while bringing out the thematic

structure of the play. Shakespeare uses this to advance the plot, develop characters, and portray deeper themes. For Hamlet, it is a tool to seek truth and justice; for us, the audience, it is a reflection on the nature of reality and performance and even an influence on reality or the world (Richter 1962; Jenkins 1982).

1.4 Significance and Impact

Hamlet is considered a literary masterpiece because of its themes and its influence on literature, drama, and language in general. “*Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most realistic, most modern tragedy, the play of all ages in which we seem to come closest to the spirit and life of his time, and he closest to the spirit and life of ours” (Dover 1951:52). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has greatly contributed to the English language and theatre art in general, thanks to its “metaphorical nature and its citationality, the complexity of its plot, and its widespread use of dramatic irony make the story particularly engaging” (Partovi 2013:10). Furthermore, Hamlet's contemplation throughout the play on the problems he faces connects him to the assertion of a ‘modern temper’. Hamlet’s exploration of human nature and fate marks the play as a defining work of the post-medieval world. It introduces ideas that can be identified with the modern temper (Prior 1948).

The story is mainly about political and philosophical issues. Shakespeare's use of both poetic and dramatic language in *Hamlet* is powerful in creating order and disorder: “Shakespeare's world of words truly creates the world of things”(Lacan 1980:65). Harris (2010:7) affirms that Shakespeare himself is a good wit who uses every opportunity to transform a word to create another with unexpected meanings.

Shakespeare uses his dramatic language to create ambiguity, particularly using metaphor to begin his play helps develop the play's plot, its motif, characters, and the situations of the story (Partovi 2013:12). Hamlet’s play on words in his first line in Act 1 Scene 2 shows how involved he is with language:

Claudius: [...] But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son...

Hamlet: A little more than kin, and less than kind! (*Hamlet*, I.2.64-65)

According to the Arden Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2016 revised edition, “cousin” (footnote 64) was used in the Shakespearean period to denote a more distant kinship relationship for a person who is not a parent, child, or sibling. “Characteristically, Hamlet’s first line is a play on words, indicating that the King is claiming an excess of kinship [...] while acting in a way which could be construed as ‘unkind’ or unnatural” (footnote 65). In reference to “Son,” Hamlet’s comment shows disapproval, insinuating that the King claims a relationship as both father and uncle, but his actions are abnormal. “The nearer in kin, the less in kindness” (Thompson & Taylor 2016:200).

Claudius: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet: Not so, my Lord. I am too much in the ‘son’ (*Hamlet*, I.2.66-67).

Here comes another wordplay “son/sun.” Hamlet acknowledges the ‘kinship’ relationship but disagrees with the ‘son’ relationship. Hamlet’s use of ‘son’ to respond to Claudius’ question “lead[s] Hamlet to refuse the proffered ‘sunshine’ of royal favour, the more so as this King has made an incestuous marriage with Hamlet’s own mother” (Hussy 1992:143). In addition, “‘too much in the son’ refers to Hamlet being over-fathered with Claudius making unwanted paternal claims on him” (Partovi 2013:13).

This metaphorical feature of Shakespeare’s works makes the language of his plays multilayered and multi-dimensional, and each of these layers and dimensions multiplies meaning further. His ambiguity and attentiveness to the slipperiness of language is one of the reasons for the immortality and endurance of Shakespeare’s works in which the main theme and dramatic techniques and devices are instruments to indicate the different layers of meaning in Shakespeare’s language (Kermode 2001; Partovi 2013:14). Shakespeare’s ambiguous language encourages every reader to find a new level of meaning based on their mentality, background, and culture.

The use of metaphor in *Hamlet* has contributed to the idioms of the English language because they often describe basic and even archetypal situations, for instance: “To be, or not to be” can invoke the making of important decisions. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” might be uttered when something suspicious or corrupt is sniffed out, “he undiscovered country”,

“Hold a mirror up to nature”, “Murder most foul” “Cruel to be kind”, “To the manner born”, “Good night sweet Prince”, “Alas, poor Yorick”, “Neither a borrower nor a lender be”, “To thin own self be true”, all these quotes are commonly used to describe new situations at all time in conversations around the world. (Partovi 2013:14-15)

The dramatic ironies in *Hamlet* make the play the most complicated. Most characters struggle with a public and private face, struggling to hide their feelings and intentions to face the external world. This is a situation that goes beyond cultural boundaries. “Every nation beholds its visage in Shakespeare's mirror, and *Hamlet* is a mirror in which every man has seen his own face” (Litvin 2011: XI). This is attested by the fact that *Hamlet* has been adapted into diverse cultures and eras.

Hamlet’s notion of the theatre has been spectacularly proven by the various *Hamlet* productions and their audiences over the past four centuries. As we have seen, ever since the Restoration, Shakespeare’s work has been constantly adapted, to suit the moral and political preferences of the given historical eras of the productions; the play has also been adapted to reflect the new artistic and psychological concepts, the different stage conventions, or the different medium of the opera or film (Bernáth 2013:215).

The multi-dimensional nature of the play enables adapters to retell the story to serve their own purposes. “Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all time [...]” (Bloom 2008: IX).

His works are invoked to guarantee the richness of the resources of the English language, to anchor English national pride, and as touchstones for the power of literature itself. They are read, performed, and studied to a degree that makes him outstanding even among the select band of national poets (Kinney 2011:12).

Bloom claims that Shakespeare marked the beginning of a new era in literature by creating characters like Falstaff and Hamlet, characters that he portrayed with a depth and complexity that may now be associated with real-life human personalities. “Certainly, Hamlet continues to attract attention inside and outside the scholarly community. Since 1990, the average number of publications on the play listed in the *Shakespeare Quarterly Annual Bibliography*, including works in a wide range of categories [...] is 423” (Bloom 1998; Kinney 2002:196).

George Henry Lewes, an English literary critic, philosopher, and biographer, in his *Life and Works of Goethe*, affirms that *Hamlet* had a broad theatrical appeal, and has become the most popular play in [...] [the English] language” (Lewes 1908: 463). This emphasises the historical popularity of *Hamlet* in the English-speaking world and its enduring relevance from a 19th-century perspective. Looking at Bloom's claim about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*'s character's complexity, to the play's continuous publication rate, and its historical recognition by a critic like Lewes as the “most popular play in our language”, collectively highlight the unique impact and lasting significance *Hamlet* has as a literary work, and as an introductory text in understanding human psychology and how it remains relevant with varied audiences across centuries.

In summary, Lewes notes that the universal appeal of *Hamlet* captivates audiences across all social classes with its profound themes and dramatic complexity. The play is characterized by its philosophical depth, where even those who may not fully grasp its meaning can still appreciate its grandeur. The tragic narrative unfolds through a series of compelling elements, including supernatural encounters, murder, betrayal, madness, and striking theatrical effects such as the play within a play and the graveyard scene. *Hamlet* is portrayed as a unique blend of refined poetry and disturbing horror, where reflection and action intertwine, maintaining relentless dramatic momentum. Ultimately, it stands as a philosophical tragedy, merging intellectual contemplation with theatrical intensity, ensuring uninterrupted engagement for its audience (Lewes 1908: 463-4).

It is believed that, among the several tales that have been adapted for the screen, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the second most frequently filmed. According to Kinney, “*Hamlet* is the world's most filmed story after Cinderella” (2002:62). “Just as Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* when the succession of Elizabeth I was a prominent issue, Branagh uses his *Hamlet* in a parallel way to inquire into the political society of the present day” (Kinney 2002:65). Each of the various adaptations of *Hamlet* over the years brings out its own interpretation of the play, highlighting the versatility of this text (Garber 2008).

The ever-expanding horizons of *Hamlet* today can be sampled in many ways: by the role of the play in shaping cultural experience, by its success on film and in television and Shakespeare's

festivals worldwide, by the proliferation of spin-offs, parodies, and multitudinous borrowings, by literary quotations, and by the impact *Hamlet* has had on the very language that we speak. [...] As we continue to reinvent *Hamlet*, the play enters ever more remarkably into the way we see ourselves (Bevington 2011:6).

Mack Maynard in *The World of Hamlet* suggests that while Hamlet's world shares some similarities with our own, it differs in its near-perfect sense of meaning and coherence, making it distinct from reality (Mack 1952). Today, we probably stage and adapt *Hamlet* even more frequently than was the case in the Shakespearean era.

Hamlet's dying wish highlights another dimension of the play that has to do with oral tradition, with the passing down of a story from person to another, and from one generation to the next:

Hamlet: [...] But let it be. Horatio, I am dead.

Thou livest: report me and my cause aright

To the unsatisfied.

[...]

To tell my story. (*Hamlet*, V.2.322-333)

Before Hamlet finally succumbs to Laertes' poisoned sword, he instructs Horatio to narrate his story, wishing to have a narrative legacy. Horatio, who is responsible for narrating and interpreting Hamlet's story, recalls readers or scholars who struggle to understand and interpret both Hamlet, the protagonist, and *Hamlet*, the play in general.

Kott emphasises in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* that the themes of Shakespeare's plays are not limited to the Elizabethan era but are relevant today in politics, business, and even personal relationships. Shakespeare's characters are faced with moral dilemmas, offering an understanding of the human condition, transcending historical and cultural boundaries (Kott 1965). Existential problems in Shakespeare's works reflect human uncertainty and the search for meaning that remains relevant in modern philosophical and psychological discourse (Kott 1965, Bloom 1998).

In the following chapters of this thesis, I outline existentialism and analyse those that we can identify as pre-existential elements in *Hamlet*. I then focus on Branagh's film adaptation to highlight how an existentialist reading of the play is conveyed through directorial choices in a film adaptation. Hamlet's internal struggle, his contemplation of existence and the absurdity of life, and mortality are seen through Branagh's performative choices. Branagh's innovative cinematic techniques connect the Elizabethan era and the modern world, making the play relevant across different eras and cultures.

CHAPTER 2

EXISTENTIALISM

2.1. Overview of Existentialism

Existentialism has proven to be a difficult term to define, and it is difficult to determine which existentialist's definition or idea is more accurate than the others. Several reasons contribute to this difficulty. Firstly, by emphasising subjectivity and prioritising individual experience and interpretation makes it challenging to establish a universal definition. What one existentialist considers essential, another might deem secondary. Secondly, existential thinkers come from different backgrounds each with their unique perspectives and ideologies, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir. While they share some common themes, their approaches and conclusions can differ significantly. Thirdly, existentialists focus on "Existence Over Essence". "The questions are only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians, amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and on the other, the existential atheists, among whom we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself" (Sartre 1948: 26). What they (theist and atheist) have in common is the believe that "existence precedes essence" and they reject the idea of a fixed human nature or essence (Sartre 1975:24), meaning that individuals define themselves through their choices and actions. This makes it difficult to establish an unchanged definition. In addition, as existentialism is engaged with human existence, such as freedom and responsibility, meaning and absurdity, and life and death, it makes it difficult to create clear-cut definitions.

Existentialist ideas have been applied to various fields of study such as psychology, sociology, literature, art, and politics. This diversity leads to diverse interpretations and applications. Based on research, there is no definitive text that establishes a single "correct" definition of existentialism; as such, each philosopher and scholar brings their own perspective to the table. Moreover, as existentialism is particularly concerned with lived experience, which is inherently personal and

subjective makes it challenging to give a universally acceptable definition because what resonates with one person may not resonate with another. Finally, it is a movement that evolves over time, like most philosophical movements, existentialism has had many different contributors, thus many different views, that change over time. As a result of this, it is rather fruitful to understand existentialism as a collection of related themes and concerns instead of focusing to find a unique fixed definition (Kaufman 1956). By focusing on the themes that will be seen in the following paragraphs, we can gain a deeper understanding of existentialism, even if we cannot arrive at a single, universally accepted definition. Philosopher Steven Crowell emphasises that existentialism should be understood as a general approach that rejects specific systematic philosophies rather than being a systematic philosophy on its own because of the difficulties in defining the term (Crowell 2020).

“Existentialism is a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual’s existence” (Earnshaw 2006:1). According to Macquarrie; “They do not believe in abstract speculation but rather they are interested in concrete human existence. Their philosophising begins from man rather than from nature (1983:14). Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, is part of a larger tradition that emphasises a personal and lived understanding of ‘truth’. Unlike more detached and scientific interpretations, existentialists focus on a truth that is experienced and embodied by individuals, highlighting the importance of personal experience and authenticity (Flynn 2006:2-3). Existentialism emphasises the subjective experience of time, urging us to consider how our personal decisions shape our perception and use of time. This focuses on individual agency and responsibility in how we engage with time underscores the existentialist commitment to living authentically and meaningfully (Flynn 2006:5).

Existentialist philosophy addresses psychological considerations and has deep ontological significance, meaning it pertains to the nature of being and existence. Emotions and feelings, which many philosophers often dismiss, are given great importance by existentialists because they help articulate our ways of existing and provide insights into the meaning and direction of our lives. For example, Kierkegaard viewed ‘anguish’ as a reflection of our awareness of freedom, while Sartre described ‘nausea’ as the experience of the contingency of

existence, a realisation of the randomness and lack of inherent meaning in life. These emotions are seen as vital in understanding our existence and the choices we make (Flynn 2006:7).

This philosophical school of thought gained prominence during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It places great value on the individual's own lived experiences, and the human drive to find meaning within their own existence (Stewart 2018). The philosophical ideas of existentialism have proven to be relevant and engaging to academics working within a variety of fields including psychology, sociology, literature, arts, and philosophy itself (Sasan 2023:41).

Existentialism has significantly shaped psychology resulting in the development of existential psychology which centres on the individual's personal experiences and the search for purpose. This form of psychology, informed by the philosophies of figures like Nietzsche, has been used in areas like psychotherapy, personality studies, and positive psychology (May 1958).

Regarding the field of sociology, sociologists use existential ideas to study social phenomena, arguing that knowledge and identity are socially constructed (Melnikov & Kotarba 2015; Sasan 2023:42). In addition, Berger and Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* demonstrate existentialism's influence on sociology by showing how knowledge and social identity are shaped by social interaction and individual choice (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

Existentialism has greatly shaped literary works, with writers being inspired by the search for purpose, the fight for freedom, and the difficulties of finding one's way and identity in a complex world; like what is happening in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre's literature and others who have explored these existential themes in their works as such contributing to the development of existential literature (Mays 2009).

Artists have also found inspiration in existentialist ideas, using their art to investigate the human condition and the search for meaning. For instance, the works of Vincent Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and Jackson Pollock are often interpreted as artistic expressions of existentialist themes, including the pursuit of authenticity and the search for meaning (Friedman 1990).

Existential thought has left a lasting mark in the realm of education. Educators apply its principles to cultivate the development of the whole person and encourage the exploration of meaning and purpose. This pedagogical approach advocates that education should transcend the mere acquisition of knowledge and instead incorporate the examination of personal values and beliefs as well as the practicing of critical thinking skills (Parker 2013).

According to Flynn, Existentialism is characterised by five fundamental themes, each approached uniquely by different existentialist philosophers. These themes exhibit a family resemblance, crisscrossing among the thinkers: 1. Existence Precedes Essence: Individuals define their essence through their choices and actions, rather than having a predetermined nature. “Essence is not destiny,” you create your own identity; 2. Time is of the essence: Human beings are inherently tied to time. Unlike the measurable “clock” time, lived time is qualitative, with the past (already), present, and future (not yet) having different meanings and values; 3. Humanism: Existentialism focuses on the individual and their quest for identity and meaning in the face of societal pressures and superficiality. Instead of focusing on scientific analysis, it values human lived experiences as essential to understanding reality; 4. Freedom and Responsibility: Existentialism emphasises the freedom to make choices and the responsibility that accompanies this freedom. Individuals can reflect on their lives and actions, acknowledging their ability to shape their existence; 5. Ethical Considerations: Ethics are central to existentialist thought, with a focus on examining the authenticity of one’s life and society. Each existentialist philosopher approaches ethics differently, but the underlying concern is to live authentically and responsibly (Flynn 2006:5).

These themes highlight the existentialist commitment to exploring the human condition, personal freedom, and the search for meaning. In essence, existentialists believe that emotions play a crucial role in revealing the nature of our being and guiding us in our journey to find personal meaning and purpose in life. Existentialists consider human beings to have a state of ‘existence involving choice and self-awareness, while other things have a state of simple ‘being’. This is why Martin Heidegger asserts that “the being that exists is man. Man alone exists. Trees

are but they do not exist. Angels are but they do not exist [...]" (Heidegger 1956:215).

Authenticity is central to the existentialist project of becoming an individual. For existentialists, to be an authentic individual means to live by one's true self and values, rather than conforming to external pressures and societal expectations. Instead, individuals should make conscious choices that reflect their inner self and take responsibility for those choices that shape their identity rather than agreeing to societal expectations. Existential individuality is rooted in authenticity, as the process of becoming a true individual, one must be authentic by living a life that truly reflects their values. This involves a continuous journey of self-discovery, personal freedom, and the creation of meaning through one's actions and decisions (Flynn 2006:74-75).

2.2. History of Existentialism

Existentialism originates in Western philosophy and can be traced back to Socrates. It emphasises "care of the self", focusing on how we act rather than just on theoretical truths. Socrates lived in harmony with his teachings and encouraged others to prioritise self-care. Philosophers like the Stoics and Epicureans during the Hellenistic period focused on ethical questions and the proper way to live. They aimed to shape how people should live their lives, acting as doctors for the soul by offering guidance on attitudes and practices to achieve health and happiness. So, existentialism continues this tradition by concentrating on individual existence, freedom, and choice, while prioritising the authentic and ethical way to live (Flynn 2006:1).

Existentialism, as understood today, did not just appear out of nowhere. It has a historical starting point. Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th-century Danish thinker is regarded as the founding father of modern existentialist thought (Nauman 1972:46). He is considered the starting point of modern Existentialism whose writings and ideas were crucial in shaping the core concepts of existentialism (Earnshaw 2006:2). Though Kierkegaard never used the word 'existentialism', his writings and ideas made him to be considered the first modern existentialist philosopher (Crowell 2020; Marino 2004: ix; McDonald, Lippit & Evans 2017).

The term existentialism was popularised in the mid-20th century after the Second World War in France with popular French writers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gabriel Marcel. After World War II, existentialism gained immense traction as both a philosophical framework and a cultural phenomenon. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, two towering figures of the movement, played a pivotal role in bringing existentialist ideas into the public spotlight. Sartre wrote extensively on existentialist philosophy in works like *Being and Nothingness*, but he also reached wider audiences through his novels (*Nausea*), plays (*No Exit*), and journalistic essays. Similarly, Camus addressed existentialist themes in his celebrated novels (*The Stranger*, *The Plague*), philosophical essays (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), and plays. Both writers explored concepts like freedom, absurdity, and the search for meaning in a post-war world that was grappling with destruction and moral uncertainty. Their ability to merge dense philosophical ideas with accessible and gripping storytelling made existentialism resonate deeply with a generation that was seeking answers to profound existential questions (Baert 2015).

Philosophy has long been the pursuit of fundamental truths about human nature and the universe, a practice deeply embedded in Ancient Greek culture. This theoretical approach to understanding the self and the world eventually laid the foundation for the rise of science and became a dominant aspect of philosophical education throughout the medieval and modern periods. Today, the term ‘theory’ is often synonymous with ‘philosophy’, as seen in expressions like ‘political theory’ and ‘literary theory’ (Flynn 2006:2).

How is this connected to existentialism? The connection can be observed from the ideas of existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus’ focus on human existence, freedom, and the search for meaning within an often indifferent or absurd universe. Just as ancient philosophers sought to understand human nature and the cosmos, existentialists delve into the individual's experience and the concrete circumstances that shape their lives. In line with the aforementioned theory, existentialism can be seen as a continuation of the philosophical tradition of exploring fundamental truths, but with a more personal and immediate focus on individual existence and the lived experience. As such, it

bridges the theoretical pursuits of ancient philosophy with the practical concerns of modern life (Kaufman 1974; Sartre 1948).

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are considered the ‘fathers of existentialism’ (Nauman 1972:46; Flynn 2006:3); however, they did not use the term ‘existentialism’, but they anticipated some of the existential concerns, and their philosophies later influenced the 20th-century existentialists. They had mixed feelings about Socrates. They both acknowledged his move from conventional values to universal moral norms, with Kierkegaard praising him and Nietzsche criticising him. However, they respected Socrates’ personal commitment to his beliefs, particularly his acceptance of the death sentence from the Athenian court despite the lack of logical proof of personal immortality. Kierkegaard saw Socrates’ decision as an example of “truth as subjectivity”, meaning a deeply personal conviction worth risking one’s life for. This highlighted the fact that living fully sometimes requires stepping beyond rational boundaries (Flynn 2006:3).

In the early 20th century, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset proposed in 1914 that human existence should be understood as the individual intertwined with their specific life circumstances, famously stating, “I am myself and my circumstances” (“*Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*”). Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre believed that human existence is inherently connected to the context in which it occurs, emphasising that it is always situated (“*en situation*”) (Pitari 2020). Both thinkers emphasised the importance of considering the existing circumstances that surround individuals when defining their existence.

Gabriel Marcel, an important French philosopher and dramatist in the 20th century is credited with coining the term “existentialist” before the term was popularised. He introduced key existential themes to the French audience well before the term existentialism was popularised. He explored fundamental existentialist ideas in his early works (*Existence and Objectivity* 1925, and *The Metaphysical Journey*, 1927) (Keen 1967). He later used the term to describe Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical approach during a conference in 1945 (Cooper 1990:1; Flynn 2006:89; Daigle 2006:5). Interestingly, Sartre initially rejected the label, as he felt it implied a rigid philosophical system, which was contrary to his ideas. However, Sartre later embraced the term and helped popularise existentialism as a significant intellectual and cultural movement (Fulton 1999). Sartre later revised

his stance on the existentialist label, officially embracing it during a lecture at the *Club Maintenant* in Paris on October 29, 1945. This lecture was later published as *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, a concise work that played a significant role in introducing and popularising existentialist ideas to a broader audience (Sartre 1948).

Philosophical scholars who have studied Marcel's works documented that he himself eventually distanced his own philosophy from existentialism, preferring terms like "philosophy of Existenz" or "neo-Socratic" to describe his work (Flynn 2006:89; Marcel 1966; Treanor 2024). Essentially, Marcel saw his philosophical approach as a continuation of Socrates' emphasis on dialogue, questioning, and the exploration of fundamental existential and ethical concerns. He saw himself as carrying on the tradition of philosophical inquiry that began with Socrates (Flynn 2006:89).

Jean-Paul Sartre explored existentialist ideas early in his career, particularly in his 1938 novel *Nausea* and his 1939 short story collection *The Wall*. These works delved into themes like freedom, absurdity, and the search for meaning. In 1943, Sartre expanded on these ideas in his philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness*, which became a foundational text for existentialist philosophy (Cooper 2024; Kaufmann 1974). However, it was not until after the liberation of Paris from German occupation during World War II that Sartre and his close circle including Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty achieved widespread international recognition as leading figures of existentialism. During this time, existentialism resonated deeply with people grappling with the moral and philosophical questions raised by the war and its aftermath, solidifying its place as a significant intellectual and cultural movement (Aronson 2004). This highlights both Sartre's early contributions to existentialism and the role of post-war circumstances in bringing existentialist philosophy to the forefront of global thought. Following World War II, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre quickly rose to prominence as the most influential public intellectuals in post-war France. By the end of 1945, their ideas, writings, and public engagements had earned them widespread recognition that resonated with diverse audiences, cementing their status as leading figures in both philosophy and culture during that time (Aronson

2004:44). Subsequently, existentialism became “the first media craze of the postwar era” (Aronson 2004:48).

Albert Camus consistently distanced himself from the existentialist label, despite often being associated with the movement due to shared themes in his work. Instead, Camus focused on the concept of the **absurd**, which he defined as the conflict between humanity’s desire for meaning and the indifferent, chaotic nature of the universe (Pözlner 2023). His philosophy of the absurd is most famously explored in works like *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he suggests that life’s lack of inherent meaning does not lead to despair, but rather calls for a rebellion, a commitment to live fully and authentically despite this absurdity. Camus framed his ideas in ways that were distinct from Sartre’s existentialism, and he preferred to be seen as an outsider to philosophical labels (Camus 1968).

Even though existentialist philosophers display a wide range of differing viewpoints, they all center their philosophical inquiries on the nature of human existence. They pay close attention to the conditions and quality of the individual’s experience as a human being (Stumpf 1989:475).

2.3. Purpose: Connecting Existentialists and Hamlet

Existentialism is closely linked with the fine arts due to its dramatic exploration of existence, use of powerful imagery, and appeal to personal response. Many existentialist philosophers, such as Camus and Sartre, who were both offered the Nobel Prize for Literature, also contributed significantly to literature. Kierkegaard employed pseudonyms, parables, and indirect communication, while Nietzsche’s prose, particularly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is renowned for its artistic quality. Simone de Beauvoir’s novels reflect her philosophical insights, and Gabriel Marcel’s philosophical meditations are evident in his 30 published plays. However, philosophers like Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are less associated with this artistic dimension (Flynn 2006:16).

Hamlet epitomises the existential exploration of human existence, much like the works of existentialist philosophers who use powerful imagery and personal response (Kott 1965). Hamlet’s contemplative soliloquies delve into themes of life,

mortality, the search for meaning, and the human condition, which parallel deep personal reflections found in existentialist literature. The use of vivid imagery in Hamlet's speeches, such as "To be, or not to be" (*Hamlet*, III.1.55-90), mirrors the existentialist tradition of employing strong, evocative images to convey profound philosophical ideas. Hamlet's contemplation of life and death, depicted through metaphors of sleep, dreams, and the afterlife, resonates with the existentialist focus on personal response and the subjective experience of reality (Hogan 2020).

Just as existentialist philosophers like Nietzsche and Sartre dramatised their ideas through allegory and novels, *Hamlet* serves as a dramatic exploration of philosophical themes. The play's narrative and Hamlet's inner turmoil embody existential questions about authenticity, freedom, and the nature of existence. This aligns with the existentialist method of using storytelling to engage readers or audiences in philosophical inquiry (Kaufmann 1974).

Existentialists place great significance on emotions like anguish and nausea, viewing them as central to understanding human existence. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's profound emotional struggles, grief, despair, and existential anxiety highlight the importance of emotions in shaping his perception of the world and his actions. This emphasis on emotional depth is a key feature of both existentialism and Shakespearean drama.

Kierkegaard's concept of "truth as subjectivity" and the existentialist emphasis on living authentically are reflected in Hamlet's journey. Dealing with his personal convictions, Hamlet seeks to reconcile his sense of duty with his desire for authenticity. His famous soliloquies reveal his inner conflict and struggle to find a path that defines his true self; this echoes the existentialist call for individuals to live according to their personal beliefs and values.

In summary, *Hamlet* connects with existentialist themes through its dramatic exploration of existence, powerful imagery, emphasis on emotions, and focus on personal conviction and authenticity. The play serves as a rich tapestry that resonates with existentialist ideas, offering an enduring reflection on the human condition (Kott 1964).

2.4. Existential Philosophers and Existential Themes in *Hamlet*

2.4.1. Søren Kierkegaard: Subjective experience and personal choice

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a philosopher and religious thinker from Denmark, who significantly shaped 20th-century existentialism and Protestant theology. He criticised the intellectual and religious authorities of his time for trivialising the essential human pursuit: achieving genuine selfhood through ethical and religious development. He felt they presented this difficult journey as simple and already completed, even when individuals had not even started it. (Westphal 2025; Lippitt & Stephen 2024). Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of individual subjectivity and the “single individual” facing fundamental existential choices. Since how one acts is, from the ethical perspective, more important than any matter of fact, truth is to be found in subjectivity rather than objectivity (Hong & Edna 1975:712-13).

Kierkegaard believed that human existence lacks a predetermined meaning, and conforming to this fact leads to a reflective existential concern. This realisation pushes individuals to create their own meaning in life, instead of depending on absolute truth. We try to distract ourselves from this feeling by doing things we think are important, but eventually, the anxiety comes back, and it's even worse. This anxiety is not something external but a personal, internal feeling that comes from the fear of our own lack of innate purpose. Kierkegaard believed that the meaninglessness of human existence is what leads to anxiety. Hamlet's famous “To be, or not to be” speech reveals his deep sense of meaninglessness. He questions the value of life, contemplating suicide as an escape. He is filled with anxiety about his purpose, his duty, and the uncertainty of what lies beyond death. This soliloquy echoes the existential struggle between individual experience and universal truths. He contemplates the nature of existence, suffering, and the afterlife, reflecting Kierkegaard's idea of ‘truth as subjectivity’, where personal conviction and experience are predominant. Hamlet's profound sense of despair and the constant questioning of his existence align directly with Kierkegaard's view of human life being filled with anxiety due to its inherent meaninglessness (Kott 1964; Mack 1952).

Hamlet's character development can be analysed through Kierkegaard's framework of three existential stages: the pursuit of pleasure (aesthetic), moral duty (ethical), and faith (religious). These stages exist in a state of continuous conflict, forcing individuals to make fundamental "either/or" decisions (Kierkegaard 1992:134). This passage connects Hamlet's journey to Kierkegaard's three stages of existence. Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage of existence is characterised by the pursuit of pleasure, immediate gratification, and sensory experience. This stage focuses on the "what" of experience, not the "why". This stage is driven by temporary desires and a lack of responsibility. In the ethical stage, there is devotion to moral principles, social duties, and universal values. There is a sense of responsibility and obligation at this stage, and it focuses on the "ought", on what one should do. The religious stage represents a leap of faith, a direct and personal relationship with the divine. This stage surpasses ethical obligations and embraces a higher, often contradictory, truth. This phase is driven by a passionate commitment to something beyond reason (Tekinay 2001:120-22; Flynn 2006: 29-35; Nauman 1972:4).

According to Tekinay, Hamlet's growth concerning Kierkegaard's stages of existence has a conflict between the Aesthetic and Ethical. At the beginning of the play, Hamlet is caught between the aesthetic (his desire for personal happiness and intellectual pursuits) and the ethical (his duty to avenge his father). His indecision and delay from the beginning can be seen as a struggle to settle these conflicting demands. Hamlet faces the ethical obligation to avenge his father. He wrestles with the moral implications of his actions and the consequences of violence. Nevertheless, he tries to find a rational and just way to fulfill his duty, but he is constantly troubled by doubt and uncertainty. As the play progresses, particularly in the graveyard scene and his acceptance of the duel with Laertes, Hamlet seems to move towards a more fatalistic or perhaps even religious acceptance of his fate. He begins to surrender control and embrace the unfolding events, suggesting a shift beyond the purely ethical (2001). This can be seen in his speech:

Hamlet: Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special
providence in the fall of sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to
come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not

now, yet it will come. The readiness is all, since no man
of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes.

Let be. (*Hamlet*, V.2.197-200).

This indicates a surrender to a higher power, or at least to fate itself. At this point, Hamlet is faced with Kierkegaard's "Either/Or"; there is the necessity of making decisive choices. Hamlet's journey is marked by a series of crucial choices that shape his destiny. He is constantly faced with choices, and the inability to choose causes him great distress (Tekinay 2001).

Hamlet's internal conflict reflects the tension between Kierkegaard's stages. His journey from indecision to a form of acceptance mirrors the movement from the ethical to the religious.

The play underscores the importance of individual choice and the consequences of inaction. In essence, Hamlet's trajectory can be viewed as a dramatic exploration of Kierkegaard's existential stages, highlighting the complexities of human choice and the search for meaning in a world of uncertainty (Tekinay 2001:120-22).

According to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, "[...] the choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen" (Kierkegaard 1987). He emphasises that our choices are not just actions; they essentially shape who we are, as we fully engage with and commit to our choices. Kierkegaard's philosophical perceptions of choice and identity provide a convincing lens through which to view *Hamlet*, as both explore existential themes of selfhood, responsibility, and the weight of decision-making.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist represents an existential struggle like what Kierkegaard describes. Hamlet is caught in a state of indecision, torn between avenging his father's murder and the moral and philosophical consequences of taking a life. This reflects Kierkegaard's idea that choice is deeply tied to the self, as Hamlet's inability to make a final choice leads to his inner torment and identity crisis. His famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be," captures this existential dilemma, where Hamlet wrestles with the meaning of existence and the value of action and inaction.

Much like Kierkegaard's concept of the "aesthetic" and "ethical" stages, Hamlet swings between pursuing personal desires (the aesthetic) and confronting his ethical duty (seeking justice). The weight of making a choice that would irrevocably define his role and identity immerses him in existential anguish (Tekinay 2001). This aligns with Kierkegaard's notion that the act of choosing is a defining moment for the self. The connection between Kierkegaard's philosophy and *Hamlet* lies in the shared emphasis on the existential burden of choice. Both suggest that our decisions are not just pragmatic actions but profound reflections of who we are and who we aspire to become (Kierkegaard 1987).

For Kierkegaard, "the dilemma is either to respond demoniacally to revelation (by remaining shut-up); or to respond authentically (by assuming the responsibility for it freedom" (Kierkegaard 1954:114). "In the case of the former that is the demoniacal, the revelation will out in any case, generally through an involuntary glance lapsus, or gesture: what Kierkegaard calls the 'sudden'" (Jegstrup 2004:225). This highlights Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual choice in the face of revelation (divine truth). "Demoniacally" does not necessarily mean "evil" in the traditional sense. In Kierkegaard's sense, it refers to a refusal to engage with revelation, a withdrawal into oneself, a "shut-upness" (Kierkegaard 1983). This is a form of resistance to the openness that true faith requires. "Authentically" involves embracing one's freedom and taking responsibility for the implications of revelation. It requires a leap of faith, an active engagement with the divine, rather than passive resistance. To Kierkegaard, accepting revelation also means accepting the immense freedom, and therefore responsibility, that comes with it. Kierkegaard emphasises that even when someone attempts to suppress or deny revelation, it will inevitably manifest itself. These concepts resonate with Hamlet's internal struggles. Hamlet's "shut-upness" can be seen in his periods of inaction and his difficulty in expressing his true feelings. Hamlet is constantly struggling with how to respond to the revelation of his father's murder. His inner conflict, and inability to act, could be viewed as a form of demoniacal response to revelation. Hamlet is faced with two choices: either resist the truth of his father's murder and retreat into inaction (a 'demoniacal' response), or he can embrace his freedom and take on the overwhelming responsibility of avenging his father (an 'authentic' response).

Hamlet's struggle illustrates Kierkegaard's dilemma. He is perpetually hesitant. His melancholy, feigned madness, and delays in acting can be viewed as attempts to 'remain shut-up,' to avoid the burden of his newfound knowledge. Nonetheless, his soliloquies and bursts of anger reveal an inner turmoil that he cannot fully contain. Hamlet must confront the ghost and his revelation. Hamlet's internal conflict stems from the weight of that revelation. The "to be or not to be" soliloquy is a pivotal moment where Hamlet's internal struggle with the Kierkegaardian dilemma becomes acutely visible. The soliloquy manifests Hamlet's "shut-upness," reflecting his internal withdrawal. He wrestles with the very core of his existence, contemplating suicide to escape the unbearable burden of his circumstances. He struggles to decide whether it is better to exist and suffer or to end his existence. This indecision exemplifies his "demoniacal" response. He hides within his thoughts, unable to act. The mere fact that Hamlet delivers this speech indicates his inability to fully contain his feelings. The "to be or not to be" speech, in a way, represents Hamlet's attempt to avoid the authentic response that Kierkegaard describes. He is trapped in a cycle of contemplation and indecision instead of taking decisive action. He is pondering escape rather than action. It is a moment where Hamlet's internal conflict is laid bare for the audience. Sartre affirms that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself[...] Man is, indeed, a project[...] Before that projection of the self, nothing exists[...] Man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be" (Sartre 1948:28).

2.4.2. Friedrich Nietzsche: "Will to Power"

The struggle with inaction: "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (*Hamlet*, II.2.485-540).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher, cultural critic, poet, philologist, and composer. He is considered one of the most influential modern thinkers, known for his radical critiques of traditional Western morality, religion, and philosophy (Anderson 2024).

Nietzsche aimed to ground humanity in earthly reality, rejecting transcendent illusions. To do this, he emphasises "the will to power" not just dominance, but the

fundamental drive for self-affirmation, growth, and the creation of values. He proposed this as the ultimate reality, replacing traditional metaphysical concepts and establishing human existence in biological drives (Flynn 2006:37). Flynn goes further to explain that Nietzsche believed the truest expression of “will to power” is self-control, not dominance. This self-mastery allows “free spirits” to create their own “higher morality”, transcending the conformist “heard morality” and affirming life through self-directed values (2006:38). Putting it simple, “free spirits,” according to Nietzsche, are independent thinkers who create their values and affirm life. This permits them to live authentically following their own principles.

Hamlet’s “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I” (*Hamlet*, II.2.485-540) soliloquy reveals Hamlet’s inner self’s struggle. He knows of his father’s murder, yet he is unable to act. He feels powerless and dominated by his own indecisive nature; as such, he considers himself “a rogue and peasant slave”. Nietzsche’s concept of “will to power” is highly contrasting to Hamlet’s indecision. Nietzsche fundamentally preaches on the concept of asserting oneself to create one’s own values (Flynn 2006:40), and to face and overcome whatever obstacles come across our path. At this moment in the play, Hamlet feels completely lacking in this will. He is trapped and paralysed because he knows of his father’s murder and the moral imperative to revenge, but he still cannot act. Hamlet is an intellectual, over-thinker who analyses and contemplates everything.

Nietzsche, through the Prophet Zarathustra, presents the idea of a “higher” ethic that arises with the death of God, symbolising the decline of the Judaeo-Christian moral framework. He challenges “free spirits” to embrace divine-like roles by creating life-affirming moral and aesthetic values. Nietzsche emphasises that humans are “evaluating animals” and he believes individuals should merge moral nobility with aesthetic beauty to shape their lives into meaningful works of art (Flynn 2006:40).

The state of Denmark is rotten and corrupt, Hamlet is betrayed by his mother, and his father’s murder by his uncle all contribute to Hamlet’s sense of a world without moral order and value in which he is completely lost. He is alone to decide his actions, and the weight is too much for him. Consequently, he condemns himself as “a rogue and peasant slave” due to his inability to act. Nietzsche would interpret

this as a symptom of internalised resentment, a form of self-afflicted nihilism (Flynn 2006:79).

What Hamlet is facing here is an embodiment of Nietzsche's philosophy, and a dramatic portrayal of the human condition when confronted with the abyss of meaninglessness and the burden of freedom. Hamlet is unable to exert his will to achieve his purpose. Nietzsche sees Hamlet's paralysis as a symptom of a weakened will, a failure to face life's challenges. Despite being a great supporter of intellectual honesty, Nietzsche equally understood the dangers of allowing one's consciousness to dominate the "will to power". Friedrich Nietzsche is recognised as a pivotal figure in the evolution of existentialist philosophy because he challenged established values, religious doctrines, and moral frameworks, thereby fundamentally altering our perspectives on knowledge, truth, morality, value, and religion (Crowell 2013; Kaufmann 1974).

Instead of objective truth, Nietzsche championed subjective interpretation, which has resulted in an increased acceptance of diverse viewpoints and the understanding that the world can be interpreted in numerous ways (D'Amico 2005). As a result of this challenge, people are more open to different perspectives, and it is recognised that the world can be understood through numerous interpretations (Sayers 2014).

To what extent has Nietzsche's philosophy influenced contemporary understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion? There is still a gap, while several scholars have examined his philosophical ideas, few have explored their practical applications and implications for understanding fundamental aspects of human existence (Crowell 2013; Kaufmann 1974).

According to Nietzsche's the "will to power" is not a desire to dominate others; it is rather a desire to overcome oneself and become the best version of oneself (Nietzsche 1883/2003). In simpler terms, Nietzsche's "will to power" is all about trying to flourish, expand, progress, and become a better version of oneself, pursuing excellence, not controlling and dominating others.

2.4.3. Martin Heidegger: “Being-toward-death”

Death and mortality: “Alas poor Yorick...” (*Hamlet*, V.1.175-182).

Martin Heidegger was born on September 26, 1889, in Messkirch, a small, countryside town in southwestern Germany. His father, Friedrich Heidegger, was a master barrel maker and a church caretaker. Heidegger’s philosophical views were strongly shaped by his upbringing in this rural setting, his traditional background, and his close experience with skilled labour and the routines of farming. Heidegger (1889-1976) was a major influence on 20th-century European philosophy. His most important work, “Being and Time” (1927), along with his other writings, had a significant impact on later philosophical movements. These movements included Hannah Arendt’s political theories, Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist ideas, Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist perspectives, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s studies of perception. (Wrathall 2025).

When we characterized the transition from Dasein' to no-longer Dasein as Being-no-longer-in-the-world, we showed further that Dasein's going-out-of-the-world in the sense of dying must be distinguished from the going-out-of-the-world of that which merely has life [...]. In our terminology, the ending of anything that is alive is denoted as “perishing” [...]. We can see the difference only if the kind of ending which Dasein can have is distinguished from the end of a life. Of course, “dying” may also be taken physiologically and biologically (Heidegger 1962:241).

“The ‘essence’ of ‘*Dasein*’ lies in its existence” (Heidegger 1927; 1962:42). This is the cornerstone of Heidegger’s existential philosophy that directly challenges traditional metaphysical thinking.

“*Dasein*” is a German word that is literally translated to “being-there”, or being in a particular place, referring to human existence. It is all about the unique way humans exist in the world with all their self-awareness, understanding, and being able to make choices rather than just being like physical objects (Nauman 1972:23).

“Essence”, on the other hand, refers to a defined set of characteristics of something; that is, a fixed, never-changing quality that precedes existence. According to Heidegger, “existence” (existenz) is all about the activeness, dynamic, and continuous process of “being-in-the-world”. This has to do with our

relationships, projects, and choices, and being aware of our own ultimate end(death). Heidegger makes us understand that our essence is not predefined, but we form our essence through our existence (Crowell 2023). As long as we live, we take actions and make choices that constantly define us, we do not have a fixed nature or purpose. By creating our essence through life, we are free to choose who we become and take responsibility for our actions and choices. He emphasises the idea of “being-towards-death” thereby making us face the reality of the limited time we have on earth, and the awareness of our mortality will shape how we live. Our lives and choices are unlimited stories that we keep on writing and editing to suit our natures as long as we breath. Death gives life more meaning as it urges individuals to create values and face what really matters. Karl Jaspers adds that “death is throwing us back upon the fulfilment of *Existenz*” (Jaspers 1969:200).

“Ending does not necessarily mean fulfilling oneself. It thus becomes more urgent to ask in what sense, if any, death must be conceived as the ending of *Dasein*” (Heidegger 1962:289). Heidegger in *Being and Time* deals with the unique nature of death as it pertains to “*Dasein*” (human existence). To him, death is not like the end of a car breaking down or a project being done. Humans are not objects or tools. Death is a unique event that fundamentally changes *Dasein*’s being, but it cannot be understood using the same concepts we use for the end of things that are not humans. Death is a very special kind of ending. Death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is. As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die. (Heidegger 1962:289).

“The ‘essence’ of ‘*Dasein*’ lies in its existence” (Heidegger 1927; 1962:42), is highly connected to Hamlet's graveyard scene. Hamlet encounters the skulls of individuals, especially Yorick’s. Hamlet reflects on the actions and experiences he had with Yorick during his existence. In death, our remains are empty, representing lives lived, but they offer no fixed “essence” to what we were as individuals. On the contrary, those we leave behind will reflect on the actions and decisions we made in life and the experiences that constituted our existence. This is what happens to Hamlet at the graveyard with Yorick’s skull. Facing Yorick’s skull, Hamlet reflects on his existence and the choices he has made so far. Considering the limited time he has on earth, he is forced to reflect more on the choices he will make for the rest of his life.

Death was a central theme to Heidegger's thought throughout his entire philosophical career. The immense popularity of *Being and Time* owed much to his emphasis that 'preparedness for death' is a fundamental key to authentic existence; that the disclosure of authentic Being only occurs when Dasein confronts its own finitude by resolutely accepting that it is always and inescapably on a journey towards its own death (Watts 2011).

Heidegger argues that true authentic existence is achieved when individuals confront their mortality. This "moment before-death" is not necessarily the literal moment of dying, but the moment of fully realising one's finite nature. The graveyard scene in *Hamlet* serves as a powerful dramatic representation of Heidegger's philosophical ideas about authentic and inauthentic existence. Hamlet's encounter with the skulls is a direct confrontation with his own "being-towards-death". He actively contemplates the reality of death; as such, he aligns with Heidegger's concept of authentic existence. While the gravedigger is an embodiment of an inauthentic existence due to his humorous approach to death as a day-to-day routine, a thing that happens every day. The graveyard scene is a powerful meditation on mortality, and it encourages Hamlet to consider the authenticity of his own life (Du Verger 2024). This is an example of "Being-towards-death"; hence, "*Dasein's*" existence will end. This serves as a dramatic representation of Heidegger's philosophical ideas of the absence of fixed human essence, the importance of making one's choices through existence, and the deep impact of death on our understanding of being. Hamlet's engagement with bones and skulls are reminder of lived experience, it brings the past to the present. By examining Yorick's skull and flashing back to his childhood experience with Yorick's role in his life, one can conclude that one dies, but their memories live on. Hamlet confronts death as a concrete reality by observing Yorick's skull. In addition, Ophelia's funeral procession further emphasises the social and emotional impact of death. To Heidegger, "being-towards-death is essentially anguish"(Heidegger 1962:266).

Hamlet's confrontation with death becomes literal as he speaks with the gravedigger and reflects on the skull of Yorick, the court jester. This encounter forces Hamlet to confront the physical reality of death and the inevitability of mortality for all people, regardless of their status in life.

In the final act, Hamlet comes to terms with the inevitability of death and the futility of attempting to control his fate. His acceptance of mortality and his readiness to face the consequences of his actions illustrate his growth and his ultimate confrontation with existential themes:

Hamlet: Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes. Let be. (*Hamlet*, V.2.195-200).

Hamlet's statement reflects Heidegger's notion of "Being-toward-death," a theme central to *Being and Time*. By confronting mortality and ceasing to fear the unknown, Hamlet achieves a kind of authentic existence (Ghose 2010). Heidegger's *Being-Toward-Death* underlines that individuals live more authentically when they confront and accept their own mortality, by acceptance, they are free from the distractions and inauthenticity of everyday life. He argues that acknowledging the inevitability of death allows individuals to break free from the anonymous societal norms and face life with clarity and purpose. "Death is a possibility of Being which my own *Dasein* itself has to take over in every case. With death *Dasein* stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (Heidegger 1962:294; Mark 2013).

In this scene, Hamlet reaches a state of acceptance about life and death. His words, "Let be," indicate his realisation that death is inevitable and beyond his control. This marks his transition to an authentic existence, as he no longer obsesses over avoiding or anticipating death but instead embraces the present moment with readiness. At this point, Hamlet is ready to embrace death, to let go of fear and the world of indecision, and fully ready to live authentically in Heidegger's perspective. The readiness-to-hand of our existence is most complete when we confront our own finitude (Heidegger 1962:435). Hamlet's "The readiness is all", parallels Heidegger's idea of the "readiness-to-hand". He lets go of his previous procrastination and anxiety, embracing the uncertainties of life and death with

dignity. His readiness reflects a profound existential insight that aligns with Heidegger's notion of authenticity.

“the readiness is all” might be regarded as Hamlet’s motto throughout Act V. “To be or not to be” is answered now by “let be,” which is a sort of heroic quietism, and clearly is the prince’s final advice to the audience. There is an ultimate skepticism in Hamlet’s assurance that none of us knows anything of what we will leave behind us when we die, and yet this skepticism does not dominate the prince as he dies (Bloom 2008:401).

Finally, Heidegger asserts that confronting mortality inspires individuals to act authentically, making choices that reflect their true selves rather than succumbing to societal pressures or existential distractions (Heidegger 1962). Hamlet’s acceptance of death in the last scene demonstrates an authentic action. His previous hesitation and philosophical reflections give way to decisive action; he steps into his final confrontation with Claudius without fear, fully embodying Heidegger’s Being-toward-death. Heidegger’s philosophy finds a perfect reflection in Hamlet’s words in this climactic scene. By embracing the inevitability of death and the mystery of existence, Hamlet transcends his earlier paralysis and achieves an authenticity that aligns with Heidegger’s notion of living authentically. The prince’s transformation in Act V, Scene 2, serves as a powerful existential moment that illustrates the ability to confront mortality.

At the very end, aware that the potent poison is quite overcoming his spirit, Hamlet says,

Hamlet: I am dead, Horatio [...]

Thou livest: report me and my cause aright [...]

And in the harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story. (*Hamlet*, V.2.315-334).

He thus reenacts the ghost’s commanding him, now taking the imposing role, from beyond death saying, “Remember me.” He thus dies restating his identification with Father, yet also again opposing him, for his last words are, “The rest is silence.” This is ambiguous. “Rest” may mean “freedom from activity.” If “rest” means “what remains,” however, then Hamlet departs stating, in effect, to die is “not to be.” This is yet another repudiation of his father: Being dead, how could he even

exist? Here, to say the least, is a fatal challenge to the ghost's command (Goldberg 2006).

Death has always been rightly or wrongly considered as the final boundary of human life. As such, it was natural that a philosophy which was primarily concerned to make precise the human position in relation to the non-human which surrounded it, would first consider death as a door opening upon the nothingness of human reality, and that this nothingness would be absolute cessation of being or else existence in a non-human form(Sartre 1992: 532).

According to Bradley, "Hamlet is not left in the utter defeat. Not only is his task at last accomplished but Shakespeare seems to have determined that his hero should exhibit in his latest hour all glorious and all the nobility and sweetness of his nature" (1904: 117; 1905:147). This highlights Hamlet's victory even in death, a moment of fulfilment, of dignified death of Shakespeare's hero who finally achieves authenticity and true self-definition. Hamlet faces his inevitable end in all his nobility and gloriousness; he finally fulfills the difficult task of not only avenging his father's murder but also his own death too (Bradley 1904).

2.4.4. Jean-Paul Sartre : "Existence Precedes Essence" (Sartre 1975 :24).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a prominent French intellectual, known for his contributions as a philosopher, writer, and political activist. He was a central figure in existentialism and phenomenology, philosophies that explored human existence and experience (Onof). His ideas significantly impacted various fields, including sociology and literary analysis. Though he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature, he declined it, maintaining that writers should remain independent and not become official figures (Sartre 1964; Desan 2025).

On 29 October 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre delivered a landmark lecture titled "Is Existentialism a Humanism?" This lecture quickly became the manifesto of the existentialist movement. It was a significant intellectual event that energised the movement, which was gaining traction in Left-Bank cafes and music halls in Paris and spreading across Europe and the world. The lecture, delivered to an overflowing audience, succinctly presented the core tenet of Sartrean existentialism: the assertion that "existence precedes essence" (Flynn 2006:45).

According to Sartre, individuals first exist and then define their essence through their actions and choices. It emphasises the importance of personal freedom, responsibility, and the creation of one's identity through lived experiences (Sartre 1948:28).

The connection between Sartre's existentialism, particularly the idea that "existence precedes essence", and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* lies in the exploration of personal identity, freedom, and the responsibility of choice. Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" means that individuals first exist and then define their essence through actions and choices. This resonates with Hamlet's journey in his struggles to define his identity when faced with existential problems. Hamlet's most famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy reflects his struggle to understand his purpose and make meaningful choices; this represents the existentialist idea of creating one's essence through decisions.

Sartre emphasises that humans are free to make choices and are responsible for the consequences. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's indecision and contemplation highlight the weight of this freedom and responsibility. Hamlet must decide whether to avenge his father's murder, a choice that carries significant moral and existential implications. His internal conflict and eventual actions demonstrate the existential burden of freedom and the consequences of one's choices.

Sartre's existentialism encourages individuals to live authentically, true to their own values and beliefs rather than conforming to societal expectations (Sartre 1992, 1948). Hamlet's soliloquies reveal his quest for authenticity as he questions the superficiality and corruption around him. His struggle to remain true to himself while navigating the demands of revenge, loyalty, and justice reflects the existentialist emphasis on authentic living (Rana & Adnan 2023).

Both Sartre and Hamlet are faced with the absurdity of existence. Sartre's existentialism recognises the meaninglessness of life, urging individuals to create their own purpose. Similarly, Hamlet deals with the seemingly meaningless suffering and death around him, contemplating the meaning of life and the inevitability of death. His reflections on mortality and the human condition resonate with existentialist themes of confronting and finding meaning in an absurd world.

In brief, Sartre's existentialism and *Hamlet* are linked through themes of personal identity, freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the confrontation with absurdity. Both explore the profound questions of human existence and the individual's role in shaping their own life and meaning. Sartre argues that existentialism is a humanistic philosophy because it centers on the human being and places individual freedom at the highest value. Although he acknowledges theistic existentialists like Jaspers and Marcel, his focus is on promoting the freedom of individuals by expanding their concrete possibilities of choice (Flynn 2006:47).

This encapsulates the existentialist principle that continuous choices define our lives and that even the decision not to choose is itself a choice, carrying its own responsibility. Sartre emphasises this starkly by stating that for human beings, existence is inseparable from the act of choosing; to stop choosing is to cease existing. In addition, Sartre echoes Kierkegaard's notion that self-identity is forged through our choices, asserting that to exist as a human is to choose oneself (Flynn 2006:33). In essence, this existentialist lesson underscores the importance of personal freedom, responsibility, and the ongoing process of self-definition through our decisions.

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1, closely aligns with the existentialist lesson about the nature of choice and responsibility. In this soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates the fundamental choices he must make, whether to endure the suffering of life or to take action to end it, and the consequences of both options. His reflections highlight the existentialist idea that existence involves continuous decision-making and that even the choice to do nothing carries its own weight and responsibility. This famous soliloquy is perhaps the most explicit exploration of existential themes in the play. Here, Hamlet contemplates the nature of existence and the appeal of death as a release from the suffering and uncertainty of life. He weighs the pain and struggles of living against the fear of the unknown in death, ultimately questioning whether enduring life's hardships is worthwhile. (Bradley 1904; Kott 1964).

Hamlet's internal struggle with these existential choices reflects Sartre's assertion that "to exist is to choose", and the burden of responsibility that comes with making choices. The soliloquy captures the essence of existentialist thought, emphasising

the importance of personal freedom, decision-making, and the impact of those choices on one's existence.

2.4.5.I. Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Existentialism

Simone de Beauvoir (January 9, 1908, Paris, France – April 14, 1986, Paris, France), was a French writer and feminist philosopher, and a key figure in expressing existentialist ideas through literature. Her most significant work, “*The Second Sex*” (1949), is a powerful and well-researched argument against the concept of the “eternal feminine” and is now considered a fundamental text in feminist studies (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025).

The key concept of de Beauvoir's existential philosophy is captured in her famous phrase: “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 2011:283). This emphasises the fact that gender identity is not an innate quality but rather a result of social and cultural conditioning. Beauvoir underlines the ongoing struggle individuals face to assert their independence and make autonomous choices within the limitations placed upon them by society, or external social structures.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir illustrates how women internalise the dominant male-centered worldview, leading them to perceive themselves as subordinate, weak, and inferior. She argues that women become the “Second Sex” not because of their biological bodies, but because they embody and enact the oppressive meanings and practices imposed by a patriarchal society (Aho 2023). In her most famous phrase, she writes, one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman because the body is not a thing; it is a situation [...] subject to taboos [and] laws[...]. It is a reference to certain values from which [she] evaluates [herself]” (de Beauvoir 1949; 1952:34,36; Aho 2023). In the *Second Sex*, she develops the concept of ‘situation’ by underscoring the role played by gender and its social construction. In effect, sex is not gender; the former is a biological fact, the latter a social construction. She devotes a large part of her study to the historical genesis of ‘woman’ and the secondary role assigned to the female in ‘patriarchal’ societies throughout history. Her basic question is “How did a woman become Other” in the human race? How did hers become the “second” sex? (Flynn 2006:99-100).

Beauvoir's idea of *The Second Sex* about the internalisation of androcentric worldviews (where men or masculinity is at the center of understanding and evaluating the world) and the resulting perception of women as subordinate, weak, and inferior can be applied to the female characters in *Hamlet*, like Ophelia and Gertrude. Both characters reflect how patriarchal norms, and societal expectations shape their identities and roles. Ophelia, for instance, is a person of relationship: a daughter to Polonius, and sister to Laertes, and a friend to Hamlet. She is a vulnerable character because she always appears in connection with another character. Ophelia's character, actions, and sense of self are highly influenced by the men around her, highlighting how she becomes the "second sex" through the oppressive meanings and practices of her patriarchal situation. She is an obedient character to the men in her life and around her, she loses her identity and sense of choice due to her father's and brother's demands; consequently, she is seen as a weak and inferior character. Her madness and eventual death can be attributed to the pressures she gets from her environment. Due to the influence of men around her, she cannot make autonomous choices, highlighting the devastating effects of internalising patriarchal norms.

From Ophelia's soliloquy,

Ophelia: O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th' expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down.
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,
Now see what noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh-
That unmatched form and stature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me

T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see (*Hamlet*, III.1.150-160).

We can see how the themes of internalised oppression and the impact of societal expectations discussed in *The Second Sex* are reflected in this soliloquy. Ophelia laments Hamlet's apparent madness. How his character and mind have been

transformed due to the influence of external pressures and the crisis around him. Hamlet loses his identity and inheritance as the heir apparent to the throne of Denmark. Ophelia sees Hamlet's downfall as a parallel to her losing her identity under the heavy load of societal expectations and patriarchal control. Hamlet is seen as a noble mind overtaken by external forces, same as Ophelia's identity is controlled by the men around her.

Through the monologue, Ophelia expresses her sense of helplessness regarding Hamlet's transformation. This can be seen as a direct reflection of her own subordination within a patriarchal society in which her character and actions are dictated by her father, brother, and Hamlet. This highlights her deep emotional struggle caused by internalised oppression and societal expectations of her. She mourns Hamlet's loss of nobility, mirroring her own struggle to navigate her identity and autonomy within a repressive environment and society.

In Gertrude, the impact of patriarchal norms on women's identities is equally highlighted. Her quick remarriage to Claudius can be seen as a means to survive in a patriarchal society. Her action can be interpreted as a means to maintain security and power in a society dominated by men. Her role is shaped to fit into the expectations of a society in which only the fittest survive. Hamlet's criticism of Gertrude's character and actions reduce her to a secondary and inferior position.

The men around them dominate both Ophelia and Gertrude to meet up to their expectations. Their experiences illustrate the ideas discussed by de Beauvoir, where women are reduced to secondary roles and defined as the "other". Ophelia and Gertrude's struggle for identity and autonomy reflects the challenge women face in achieving authenticity in the patriarchal society. Gertrude's character shows the tension between staying grounded in her immediate desires(immanence) and striving for the highest ideals(transcendence). Her emotional need for companionship and comfort often conflicts with the expectations society and her family place on her. As a result, she makes choices without considering the consequences; consequently, she appears immoral and disloyal to Hamlet and the other characters in the play. Her close relationship with Hamlet is affected by her desire to keep her new marriage and queenly status. This is the cause of her distancing herself from Hamlet, creating a gap between them that adds to Hamlet's anger and frustration (Ul Zafar 2024:266).

Based on Günenç's analysis, Ophelia's descent into madness symbolises her rebellion against oppressive traditions and gender norms. She faces immense social and emotional pressure, leading to her identity confusion and hysteria after losing her father and love, Hamlet. De Beauvoir explains that societal myths teach women that their value is tied to the status of men in their lives, contributing to Ophelia's insecurity and breakdown when her father dies and her brother opposes Hamlet (Günenç 2015:167). "As Polonius speaks his truisms to Laertes, so Laertes gives his platitudinous wisdom to Ophelia, establishing a chain of cultural dissemination and control" (Fischer 1990: 4).

Laertes: Farewell, Ophelia, and remember well
what I have said to you.

Ophelia: 'Tis in my memory locked
And you yourself shall keep the key of it (*Hamlet*, I.3.83-86)

Simone de Beauvoir highlights the inherent uncertainty of human existence, stressing that individuals are constantly evolving and shaped by their choices and actions. This idea aligns with the existentialist belief that humans are dynamic beings, not fixed entities. Existentialism has significant ethical implications as it emphasises individual responsibility for one's actions and rejects the notion of predetermined fate. She uses existentialists' concepts of facticity, existential ambiguity, and being-for-others to explore how women become the absolute other in patriarchal societies, showing how societal norms limit their freedom and agency. Through her existential perspective, we gain insights into the complex relationship between identity and agency and societal expectations (Ul Zafar 2024:268).

2.4.5. II. *Hamlet's* Female Characters and de Beauvoir

1. Ophelia

Ophelia's character is deeply influenced by the men in her life: her father, Polonius, her brother, Laertes, and Hamlet. Her identity and actions are largely determined by their expectations and directives, demonstrating how she becomes "a woman" through societal pressures rather than her own choices. Ophelia is expected to obey her father and brother, both of whom dictate her behavior and

decisions. Her relationship with Hamlet is also heavily influenced by their control. Ophelia loses herself and descends into madness as a result of the intense pressure to conform to these external expectations. Her identity is so intertwined with the roles imposed on her that when they collapse, so does her sense of self.

2. Gertrude

Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, also exemplifies the complexities of gender roles within a male-controlled society. Her actions and decisions are often viewed through the lens of her relationships with the men around her, such as Claudius and Hamlet. Gertrude's quick remarriage to Claudius can be interpreted as a survival tactic of power and dependency within a male-dominated society, highlighting the limited options available to women for maintaining power and security. Gertrude's interactions with Hamlet are coloured by his expectations of her as a mother. He condemns her for her perceived moral weaknesses, demonstrating how her identity is judged and constrained by her son's expectations.

Both Ophelia and Gertrude illustrate how their roles and identities as women are socially constructed by the expectations and demands of the male-dominated society in which they live. Their experiences reflect the historical and cultural processes that de Beauvoir discusses, where women are demoted to secondary roles and defined in opposition to men. The struggles of Ophelia and Gertrude serve as a broader commentary on the difficulty of achieving authenticity and individual identity within the confines of a patriarchal society. They represent the themes discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Their identities and roles are shaped by societal expectations and patriarchal norms, underscoring the challenges women face in defining themselves authentically within a male-dominated world. Simone de Beauvoir's exploration of the social construction of gender in *The Second Sex*, along with her famous phrase, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one," is reflected in Ophelia and Gertrude. Both characters demonstrate how societal expectations, and patriarchal norms shape their identities and roles.

2.4.6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “*Phenomenology of Perception*”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was a prominent French philosopher and intellectual who championed existentialism and phenomenology in France after World War II. He is most recognised for his unique and impactful theories on the body, perception, and the nature of being. Additionally, he significantly contributed to philosophical discussions on art, history, language, the natural world, and politics. While initially connected to existentialism through his relationships with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty was instrumental in popularising phenomenology, which he aimed to blend with ideas from Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, Marxist thought, and the linguistic theories of Saussure (Toadvine 2023).

The body is an embodiment of our being.

Merleau-Ponty states that the choices of our actions are not created from nothing but are already contained within our social and historical settings before we make any individual decisions (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 1962:449). Our ability to form our identities is constrained by the inherent meanings of our situation. We are in a constant state of mutual influence, both creating ourselves and being created by our surroundings. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “We choose the world, and the world chooses us” (Aho 2023; Merleau-Ponty 1945, 1962:453-54). So, there is a reciprocal relationship between us and the world.

Merleau-Ponty in “*Phenomenology of Perception*” argues that our options for action are not created from nothing but are already contained within our social and historical contexts before we make any individual decisions. His idea resonates deeply with the complexities of *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s choices are not made from nothing; they are constrained by pre-existing circumstances, such as the political intrigue of Elsinore, familial betrayal, and the ghost’s quest for revenge. This keeps Hamlet in a continuous struggle to find meaning in his situation. These circumstances shape his potential actions and impose limitations on his freedom. Hamlet is bound by the weight of history and familial duty stemming from the ghost’s revelation of his murder. This brings the past to the present, influencing Hamlet’s current situation. Hamlet’s decisions are largely predetermined by the actions of his father, uncle, and mother, in line with Merleau-Ponty’s idea that our

choices are fixed in a sociohistorical context before any personal decision is made (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Merleau-Ponty's philosophy enhances our understanding of Hamlet's struggle through the fundamental tension between individual choice and the pre-existing forces that shape our lives.

Hamlet's last moment in Act V, Scene 2 can be interpreted from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, especially with his concept of embodiment, perception, and the intertwining of self and the world. Hamlet's embodied actions at the end of the scene, that is, his encounter with Laertes, the physical exchange of poisoned blades, and his final confrontation with Claudius by forcing the poisoned drink down his throat, are all physical and intense actions. These actions highlight our understanding of Merleau-Ponty's idea that our embodied experiences make us act, perceive, and feel through our bodies. In the end, Hamlet is faced with tragedy beyond his control, demonstrating that our embodied actions are always situated within a larger pre-existing context.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the self and the world are not separate entities, but are complexly intertwined. We are always "being-in-the-world", and our experience of the world shapes our sense of self (Merleau-Ponty 1962). This parallels Hamlet's fate in the final scene, his fate is linked to the fate of the court. By examining the concept of the lived body (*corps propre*, *corps vécu*, *corps vivant*, *Leib*), existentialists demonstrate that our emotions, perceptions, and experiences are inherently tied to worldly meanings. They show how we internalise these meanings and how this internalisation influences our daily lives, including how we use everyday tools, navigate our environments, interact with others, and understand and express our identities (Aho 2023). In simpler terms, our bodies are how we live. The world around us has meanings, and we learn those meanings through our bodies. This learning changes how we feel, what we see, and how we act every day. This perspective underlines the interconnectedness of our bodies, consciousness, and the world around us, offering a rich and varied understanding of human existence.

The corrupting and rotten nature of Elsinore, the violence of the revenge plot, and the tragic deaths of other characters all influence Hamlet's death. As a result, his death is not an isolated event, but the accumulation of a series of events that has gradually shaped his world and sense of self, and his final actions contribute equally

to reshaping that world. He is killed by the world that he lives in. (The body-subject, or subjective body, is the body-as-it-is-lived. I do not simply possess a body; I am my body. My lived body is an embodied consciousness which fluidly and pre-reflectively engages the world) (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 [1945]).

In opposition to “spiritualists”, particularly the religious Right, existentialists emphasise our “situatedness”, starting with our “embodiedness”, which provides perspective and prevents us from existing as free-floating spirits detached from the world. Merleau-Ponty, supported by Marcel, insisted, “I do not have a body, I am my body”. Existentialists navigate between these extremes to make sense of their existence. Merleau-Ponty highlights the importance of our physical embodiment in shaping our experiences and perspectives, countering the notion of a purely disembodied existence (Flynn 2006:61). Merleau-Ponty explains that the value of this emerging philosophy lies in its effort to use the concept of existence as a means of understanding human nature. In a modern sense, ‘existence’ refers to the dynamic process through which individuals engage with the world, immerse themselves in both physical and social contexts, and ultimately shape their perspective based on these experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

The body is the vehicle of being in the world, says the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]: 82). “It is integral to our perceptions and any understanding of human experience. It is the ‘horizon latent in all our experience [...] and anterior to every determining thought’” (Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]: 92). Our body connects us to the world and if we tap into our bodily experience offers us the way to understand that world (including ourselves and others). Two key ideas are highlighted in phenomenological accounts of the body, such as bodily consciousness, which refers to the awareness of our bodies as the subjects of experience. It involves a sense of our bodies as living, feeling, and acting beings. This is not just intellectual knowledge, but a lived, felt understanding. The second idea is the body–world interconnection, which emphasises the inseparable relationship between our bodies and the world (Moya 2014). We are not separate from the world but are actively engaged in a continuous exchange with it. Our bodies are the mediators of this relationship. He shows that our bodies are not simply objects but the very foundation of our existence, shaping our perceptions, experiences, and understanding of the world (Švec 2023).

By paying attention to our bodily sensations and experiences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the world and our place within it. This includes understanding others, as we perceive others through our own embodied experience. The ghost's appearance is a powerful example of how embodied perception can challenge rational understanding. Hamlet's encounter with the ghost is a visceral, embodied experience that shatters his sense of reality (Goldberg 2006).

Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech shows his deep awareness of his body and the suffering that his body must endure. His interactions with Yorick's skull are also an example of bodily consciousness, as he is confronted with the physical remains of a former person. Hamlet's struggle to act reflects his disturbed body-world interconnection. He is unable to fully engage with the world around him, to translate his thoughts into action. His delayed revenge is a manifestation of this disconnection, a failure to integrate his embodied experience with his ethical obligations. His body is unable to fully commit to any course of action. The play within a play, "The Mousetrap," is an example of Hamlet attempting to touch his inner world by using the outside world.

Hamlet's emotional states are expressed through his body language, his tone of voice, and his physical actions. His feigned madness is a deliberate manipulation of his embodied expressions, a way to conceal his true feelings while also revealing them. His actions toward Ophelia and his mother are also examples of his emotional state being expressed through his body.

In essence, by applying Merleau-Ponty's concepts, we can see *Hamlet* as a play that explores the profound impact of embodied experience on human existence. Hamlet's struggles are not just abstract philosophical dilemmas; they are deeply rooted in his lived body, his perceptions, his emotions, and his interactions with the world. The play shows how trauma and emotional distress can affect the lived body, and how that affected body can then impact the world around it.

Existentialism has had a significant influence on contemporary philosophy by challenging traditional views and emphasising the individual's experience, freedom, and responsibility. Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir emphasised the importance of individual experience and subjectivity. This focus has influenced contemporary philosophy by highlighting

the role of personal perspective and lived experiences in understanding human existence (Toadvine 2023). It has encouraged philosophers to consider the unique and diverse ways individuals interact with the world.

2.4.7. Albert Camus “The Absurd”

The absurdity of life: “What a piece of work is man” (*Hamlet*, II.2.270-75).

Albert Camus was born in Algeria in 1913 and tragically killed in a car accident in 1960, he was a significant French author and political activist. He is remembered for his powerful novels, including “*The Stranger*”, “*The Plague*”, and “*The Fall*,” and was honoured with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957 (Cruickshank 2025).

Albert Camus, agreeing with Sartre and Nietzsche that individuals create meaning in the world, sees this as the source of human anguish: we seek meaning from a caring universe but find only emptiness. Camus addresses this “absurdity” through the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is condemned to eternally push a stone up a mountain, only to watch it roll back down. Camus argues that Sisyphus is happy because he rises above his fate by making a deliberate choice, showing his superiority over the rock. In Nietzsche’s terms, he transforms his past into “thus I willed it”. Camus suggests that in the face of life’s futility; our only hope is to acknowledge that there is no ultimate hope. Like the Ancient Stoics, we should limit our expectations considering our mortality (Flynn 2006:47-48).

Camus’ concept of “The Absurd” and Hamlet’s exploration of the absurdity of life share significant connections. Both delve into the themes of life’s inherent meaninglessness and the human struggle to find purpose in an indifferent universe.

Albert Camus’ philosophy of “The Absurd” revolves around the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the indifferent, chaotic nature of the universe. He posits that life is inherently meaningless, and this realisation leads to a sense of absurdity. Camus explores this idea in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he likens human existence to Sisyphus’ eternal task of rolling a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down (Mammadova 2024). Despite the futility, Camus

suggests that individuals can find solace by embracing the absurdity and living authentically. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, emphasizes that the recognition of life's absurdity should not inevitably result in nihilism or hopelessness. Instead, he proposes that humans should actively respond to this absurdity by making deliberate choices and taking action (Camus 2005)

Hamlet's soliloquy "What a piece of work is man" in Act II, Scene 2, reflects existential themes that resonate with Camus' idea of "The Absurd" and his exploration of the inherent meaninglessness of life. In context, Hamlet marvels at the nobility, reason, and potential of humanity while simultaneously expressing his disillusionment and despair at the human condition. He questions the purpose and value of human existence, revealing his deep existential crisis. Hamlet's juxtaposition of admiration for human potential with his sense of futility mirrors Camus' exploration of the absurdity of human existence. Camus acknowledges the desire for meaning and the realisation of the universe's indifference, leading to a sense of absurdity. Hamlet refers to humanity as the "quintessence of dust" echoing Camus' assertion that life lacks inherent meaning. Both reflect the existential realisation that human existence, despite its potential, is ultimately transient and insignificant in the grand scheme. Like Camus' characters who grapple with the absurdity of life, Hamlet searches for meaning and purpose in a world that seems devoid of them. This existential quest is central to both Hamlet's soliloquy and Camus' philosophical writings.

Hamlet's disillusionment with humanity and his own role in the world is akin to Camus' depiction of individuals confronting the absurdity of existence. Both highlight the struggle to find solace and meaning in an indifferent universe. In summary, Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man" connects with Camus' concept of "The Absurd" through its exploration of the tension between human potential and the inherent meaninglessness of life. Both Hamlet and Camus' characters grapple with the existential realisation of absurdity and the quest for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world. Hamlet muses on the paradoxes of human existence, celebrating humanity's capacity for greatness while lamenting its weaknesses and failings. This speech highlights his disillusionment with the world and his struggle to reconcile the nobility of human potential with the harsh realities of life (Bradley 1904).

2.5. Existentialism: A Catalyst for Reflection

Besides its historical and philosophical significance, existentialism permits readers and viewers to reflect on what it means to exist by highlighting situations that lack logical explanation. Existentialism has influenced literature greatly by urging readers to reflect on human existence and present challenging situations that are beyond mere assumptions.

As a channel for reflection, existentialism does not provide clear-cut answers to the questions of existence; rather, it encourages individuals to pause, contemplate, and reflect on how to confront challenging truths about human freedom, responsibility, and meaning. It urges us to deeply reconsider our lives and choices. Existentialists explore questions of human freedom and choice, the search for purpose and meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, authenticity in one's own choices and values, and the awareness of our mortality and how it shapes our actions and decisions in life.

As a medium for reflection on human existence and the human condition, the ideologies of existentialists resonate with Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of *Hamlet*. Existentialists question everything, seeking answers that enable them to live dignified and authentic lives. Hamlet is a perfect example of a questioner; he contemplates everything, including the ghost's story, Claudius' guilt, his mother's character, and his reflections on life and the afterlife as portrayed in his soliloquies. Hamlet struggles to live authentically; he cares about his honour and integrity while seeking ways to avenge his father's murder, methods that align with existentialist authenticity rather than merely acting as a revenger. Hamlet exists in a world where moral and traditional values are corrupted. He strives for justice, but the pre-existing societal values are undermined. His contemplation of death in the "To be or not to be" monologue, his graveyard scene, and his interactions with the grave diggers and the skulls of individuals, especially Yorick's, all highlight the meaninglessness and absurdity of human existence. Branagh's Hamlet is constantly seen reflecting on the choices and actions to undertake. Hamlet fights with his internal conflict; he contemplates on difficult existential questions that lack answers. This parallels the existentialists' belief in the uncertainty and ambiguity

of life. Hamlet is an existential hero who struggles against a world that has lost its values, forcing him to navigate through uncertainties (Kott 1964).

Sartre's idea of an individual's responsibility for their actions reflects Hamlet's dilemma. Branagh's adaptation often highlights Hamlet's isolation due to the weight of his decisions and his internal struggle to live an authentic way.

Beauvoir's concept of the "other" and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and embodiment emphasise how understanding oneself relates to our relationships with others. Branagh portrays Hamlet's relationship with Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Laertes, and the others as a complex one that enables Hamlet to understand himself and his surroundings.

Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death" resonates with Hamlet's contemplation of death. Branagh uses skulls, skeletons, and funeral sounds to highlight the inevitability of death, as Heidegger affirms that every human, once born, is a being-towards-death (Heidegger 1962; Watts 2011).

Existentialists' ideas of individual freedom, responsibility, the search for meaning, authenticity, and mortality enhance our understanding of the characters and themes portrayed by Kenneth Branagh.

Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power", that is, the drive for self-growth, mirrors Hamlet's intellectual ability, but his journey of self-growth and overcoming is filled with obstacles. In Branagh's Hamlet delay in acting and his final decision to act at the end of the play leads to a tragic end.

Kierkegaard's belief in subjective experience and personal choice mirrors Hamlet's quest to navigate a world where appearances are often misleading (Crowell 2023). Branagh's film employs mirrors to underscore Hamlet's internal struggles during his soliloquies. These reflections emphasise Hamlet's subjective world, his experiences, and uncertainties.

One of the key philosophies that influenced the literary movement in the 20th century was existentialism. This philosophical school of thought explored themes of the absurdity of life, freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning. These themes go far beyond the literary and academic worlds; their ideas are captured in films and cinemas (Aho 2023; Flynn 2006; Guignon & Derk 2001: xiii). This theory, rooted in the works of thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, gained prominence through representatives such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul

Sartre (Crowell 2020; Kaufmann 1956). For instance, Camus portrayed existentialism powerfully in his book *The Stranger*. A book that focuses on the struggle of Meursault, the protagonist, with the absurdity of his existence in an indifferent world (Roubhia 2024). Meursault's detachment from societal expectations, his seemingly emotionless response to his mother's death, and his eventual confrontation with mortality all highlight the existentialist concept that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 1975:24), that individuals are born into a meaningless world and must create their own meaning through their choices (Hossain & Homayra 2020). The work stresses one of the main themes in existentialism, the constant search for the meaning of life, or lack thereof, in the face of an indifferent universe (Bora 2020). "Existentialism gave life and a new interpretation of absurdist literature and existentialist theatre (Rouabhia 2024).

Contemporary thinkers continue to use existentialist philosophy today to examine modern challenges like globalisation and technological advancements. Basing their examination upon the groundwork laid by earlier philosophers, they apply concepts like freedom and responsibility to analyse these advancing societal trends. Notably, Simone de Beauvoir, through the feminist perspective, analyses how women navigate identity formation in a male-dominated world (Silverio 2019). The adaptability of existentialism to modern problems is highlighted in de Beauvoir's ideologies that encourage individuals to pursue authenticity in the face of societal obstacles. This influence extends to contemporary literature, with authors incorporating existentialist ideas into their works, examining life's complexities through their unique storytelling (Falconer 2019). "Through these authors and philosophers, people are still able to connect with existentialism even today as it was able to expand a person's view on meaningfulness and authentic creation of oneself amidst the changes that are modern living" (Rouabhia 2024).

The literary depiction of existentialism centres on the intertwined themes of authenticity and the search for meaning, both of which are fundamental to understanding human existence and purpose (Nikiel 2023).

CHAPTER 3

KENNETH BRANAGH'S *HAMLET*

3.1. *Hamlet*: An Existentialist Perspective on the play

Existentialist ideas have greatly impacted literature, film, and theater from the 19th century to date. Existentialism is frequently seen as a historically specific phenomenon that arose in the context of World War II, the Nazi death camps, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Aho 2023). These events together set the stage for what is known as “the existentialist moment”. An entire generation had to face the realities of the human condition and grapple with the anxiety-inducing aspects of death, freedom, and meaninglessness (Baert 2015). “The existentialists’ view of human life is very much coloured by their view of mortality, that to be human is to be a being-towards-death engaged in an unavoidably finite life project” (Cox 2012:2).

While the most prominent figures of the existentialist movement were French, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the conceptual foundations were established much earlier. Nineteenth-century pioneers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, along with twentieth-century German philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers, as well as influential Spanish intellectuals José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, laid the groundwork for the movement (Aho 2023).

Existentialism is a complicated term to define due to the various views of great existential philosophers. The diverse field of existentialism encompasses numerous philosophers from various backgrounds, all of whom viewed the human condition as the central philosophical issue to be explored (Burnham & Papandreopoulos 2011).

Several scholars affirm that existentialism is a philosophical movement that originated in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A focus on fundamental questions about human existence, such as the meaning of life, the nature of freedom, and the experience of anxiety and isolation, characterises it. For

example: Am I free? Am I responsible for my actions? Is life meaningful, or absurd? Are ethical and aesthetic values discovered or invented? Is an authentic life possible? What sort of political, religious, or sexual commitment should there be? What is existence? How should I face death? (Kaufmann 1975; Crowell 2023). Despite being a diverse movement with various thinkers and ideas, it is loosely united by its exploration of these core existential themes. This movement includes philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, among others, who each contributed to the development of existentialist thought.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defined existentialism as:

a chiefly 20th-century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad (Merriam-Webster).

Shakespeare and existentialists share a focus on human existence, self-awareness, and social interactions. His works especially tragedies and comedies are filled with intense existential moments and depict characters grappling with existential issues like feeling divided and damaged. How then does this relate to *Hamlet*? In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare portrays the nature of humans in an already complex world. Through his soliloquies, Prince Hamlet expresses his inner struggle by questioning the nature of existence and his place in the world. The portrayal of his relationship with other characters, such as Gertrude, his mother, Claudius, his uncle, Horatio, his friend and Ophelia, highlights his internal struggles and a sense of social detachment. These feelings make him see the world and people around him as deceitful, as such, creating a deep sense of isolation and his struggle to find genuine connections. From his soliloquies, one can say that Hamlet's world is absurd; he lives in a senseless and disordered environment, and events occur in a disordered manner and are very unpredictable. For instance, the 'mouse-trap' and the death of major characters. This absurdity of life connects with Albert Camus' idea of the absurd, in which individuals struggle to make sense out of a senseless and disorganised world (Crowell 2023).

Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy brings out his intense existential pain in his contemplation on the nature of existence, the sufferings of humans, and whether non-existence could be a solution to end human suffering and the troubles of life. Hamlet swinging between action and inaction, whether and how to avenge his father's murder, his moral and philosophical beliefs show him as a fragmented character divided between a sense of moral uprightness and the role of the avenger or murderer. Subsequently, he contemplates his actions and their moral consequences. Existentialist philosophy stipulates that individuals are free to act and take responsibility for their actions. Shakespeare's masterful integration of existential themes into *Hamlet* through his protagonist, Prince Hamlet, and his internal crisis continues to make the play a challenging work of art with its in-depth concern for human existence which is the core of existentialism.

Charles I. Glicksberg affirms that "The Existentialist novelist is the philosophical Hamlet of our age, suffering from spells of nihilistic madness, metaphysical nausea, and ontological dolour" (Glicksberg 1997:39). Glicksberg simply portrays the existentialist novelist as a modern-day Hamlet who both suffer from existential crisis of the purposelessness of life. Both the existentialist novelist and modern-day Hamlet are involved in the philosophical exploration of human existence and the challenges that accompany it. Gomez emphasises that Hamlet can be seen as a predecessor of the existential hero because he deeply contemplates human existence and his own dilemma. Hamlet's thoughtful nature and his reflections on the meaning of life, death, and his place in the universe align with the characteristics of an existential hero. His awareness of his own alienation and the absurdity of the human condition further solidifies this connection (Gomez 1983:27). Hamlet's experience and character reflect the universal human experience, a reminder of the difficulties we all encounter in search of meaning and understanding of an unpredictable world. To Hazlitt, there is a profound connection between Hamlet's speech and the readers' own thoughts and experiences. The reality of Hamlet's words lies in the readers' minds, as they evoke a sense of recognition and familiarity; "it is we who are Hamlet" (Hazlitt 1817: 115).

Boyer's essay, "*Hamlet and Absurd Freedom*," examines Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* as an existentialist critique of *Hamlet*. Boyer interprets Camus' work to analyse themes of absurdity and the human struggle for meaning within

Shakespeare's play, offering insights into Hamlet's existential dilemma and the broader implications of Camus' philosophy (Boyer 1975). Shakespeare understood the human condition and faced reality with self-sufficiency, without relying on illusions or the belief in immortality (Kaufmann 1980:3). Northrop Frye, in his 1967 publication *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, argues that existentialist concepts are central to Shakespeare's tragic vision. He argues that Shakespeare's tragedies delve into themes of human existence, exploring the inherent struggles and uncertainties that define the human condition. Frye's analysis suggests that Shakespeare's works resonate with existentialist ideas, revealing the profound and often bleak realities of life. Existential concepts like care, dread, and absurdity are relevant to tragedy. Tragedy also has a broader existential aspect, as its experience challenges moralisation and conceptual containment (Frye 1967:4). Frye maintains that, in tragedy, the hero is a great individual, seemingly on the verge of being overpowered by immense forces beyond their control (Frye 1967:5). As Bradley emphasises that Shakespearean tragedy involves the protagonist's internal and external conflicts, that always lead to a catastrophic end. He highlights how Hamlet's internal struggle with his conscience and moral dilemmas is central to the play's tragic nature (Bradley 1904).

It is essential to understand the connection between existentialism and tragedy. Existentialists find tragedy compelling, and both fields often illuminate each other. Existentialist themes like individual suffering, self-society conflict, freedom and necessity, and the ethics of action are central to discussions about tragedy. Steiner argues that tragedy suggests human existence is doomed, which negates any potential for political or social change (Steiner 1996:8). Existentialists viewed life as inherently tragic, believing that humans could never escape this harsh reality. They adopted a pessimistic and nihilistic perspective, considering humans as inherently alone in the world, responsible for everything themselves. According to them, humans have no refuge and are constantly moving towards death from the moment they are born. This realisation is frightening and causes a sense of crisis. This situation is what they describe as an 'existential tragedy' (Sepehran & Ezzati 2019).

In his first soliloquy, when Hamlet is alone with the audience, he reveals a deep sense of despair and a wish for his physical form to disintegrate. He expresses this desire with the lines:

“O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” (*Hamlet*, I.2.129-130).

At this moment, Hamlet is alone with the audience, and he opens up about his profound inner turmoil and longing to escape from the burdens of his existence. This moment occurs early in the play, right after King Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle, has taken the throne and married Hamlet’s mother, Queen Gertrude. Hamlet feels disgusted and betrayed by his mother who hastily remarries his uncle just a few weeks after his father’s death. Hamlet wishes his physical body could dissolve; the repetition of “too too” emphasises how strongly he feels this longing for his physical existence to disintegrate. He imagines his body “melting,” “thawing,” and “resolving itself into a dew.” A desire for the body to transcend into liquid state. Hamlet uses the image of an “unweeded garden” overrun with gross and rank things to express his disgust with the natural world, human nature, and specifically his mother's new marriage. This image leads Hamlet to reflect on his deceased father and the offensiveness he perceives in his uncle's marriage to his mother. Hamlet criticises his mother, Gertrude, for her quick remarriage after his father’s death. He is baffled by how she could have been so grief-stricken initially, only to recover and remarry so quickly. Hamlet views her haste as irrational and thoughtless, comparing her to a beast without true emotional capacity. By doing so, he expresses his deep revulsion towards her physical and sexual nature, remembering her previous affection for his father and recoiling from her current behaviour (Bloom 2008:20-21).

This soliloquy reveals Hamlet’s profound existential despair. He feels trapped in a world that seems unjust and meaningless, where his grief and anger are combined with feelings of betrayal and powerlessness. His longing for breakdown is a manifestation of his desire to escape his suffering and the harsh realities of his existence. The monologue introduces key existential themes that will reappear throughout the play. Hamlet’s meditative nature leads him to question the nature of existence, the meaning of life, and the inevitability of death. His desire for bodily

disintegration reflects his inner turmoil and his struggle to find meaning in a world that feels chaotic and cruel. This moment sets the tone for his journey throughout the play as he deals with profound questions about life, death, and his own place in the universe. Hamlet feels sorrow for his father's murder, shame for his mother's fast remarriage, and resentment for his own exclusion from the succession confirms the sorrow around Hamlet's soul (Arthur 2002:31).

In the context of a society undergoing change as a result of recent and entwined political and familial events, foreign affairs are underlined as being conducted through paperwork based on the production, reproduction, and transmission of documents, while the effects of this activity on the lives of the characters are observed throughout the entire play (Kiséry 2016:91-92). Similar to how Claudius and Polonius frequently create metaphorical scripts to be performed by various actors in order to further their goals, internal affairs are also shaped by the materiality of writing (as it happens in the scene between Hamlet and Ophelia in Act III scene 1, in the closet scene between Hamlet and the queen in III.4, and in the dialogue between Claudius and Laertes in IV.7). Additionally, Hamlet transforms *The Murder of Gonzago*, an old Italian play, into his Mousetrap for a public performance of (self-)knowledge. This is why the piece exudes a profound vitality that comes from its perpetual state of 'in progress'. In fact, Hamlet's arrival upends the setting and its very foundations, giving the text and his own character a profoundly metafictional depth. According to Cook, "Shakespeare stages a play that self-deconstructs; scene after scene reminds us that things are rarely as they seem" (2010:85).

3.2. Introduction to Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

Kenneth Branagh's 1996 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a remarkable piece of art; though lengthy, it is however enjoyable to watch the famous and popular *Hamlet* as a movie. Branagh's dedication in bringing every detail of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to our screens makes it possible for those who have never read *Hamlet* to see and understand every passage and dialogue from the text. Branagh brings to life a masterful interpretation of human emotion and existential contemplation emphasising Prince Hamlet's complicated journey of profound sorrow that reflects the complexities of our own lives. The production is a lavish colour filmed in the epic 70 mm format, it is a *Hamlet* for the approaching millennium. It pays homage to living actors and actresses who have shaped our perception of Shakespeare on the stage and screen in the 20th century (Jackson 2000: 122). By bringing the unabridged version of *Hamlet* to our screen, with every line well-articulated and placed in the right place, Branagh leaves every viewer with a quest for truth and the true meaning of life.

The screenplay is based on the text of *Hamlet* as it appears in the First Folio – the edition of Shakespeare's plays collected by his theatrical associate Heminges and Condell and published in 1623 by a syndicate of booksellers. Nothing has been cut from this text, and some passages absent from it (including the soliloquy 'How all occasions do inform against me...') have been supplied from the Second Quarto (an edition of the play which exists in copies dated 1604 and 1605). We have also incorporated some readings of words and phrases from this source and from other early printed texts, and in a few cases emendations from modern editors of the play. Thus, in I, 4, in the passage (from the Second Quarto) about the 'dram of eale', we use an emendation from the Oxford edition of the Complete Works (edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 1988): 'doth all the noble substance over-daub' - rather than the original's 'of a doubt (Branagh 1996:174).

This adaptation dives into the rich world of Shakespearean drama. His skilful portrayal emphasises the intense emotions, deep philosophical and existential reflections, and the effortless quest for justice in the play. Branagh, with all his faithfulness to Shakespeare's text, brings to light the classic tale of Prince Hamlet's tumultuous path that echoes the complexities of our times. His insightful direction highlights the power of the iconic soliloquies and passionate exchanges and also reimagines the epic story for today's audience. "*Hamlet* resembles life in that its

improvisations are just as frightening as its inevitabilities. The way the play reflects life, and vice-versa, is dizzying like regressive mirrors” (Cohen 1989:160). “It is we who are Hamlet” (Hazlitt 1817:115). When we watch the play or the protagonist, we see ourselves through him, his problems become our problems. “But in Hamlet’s person, we do more than hear the tale, we play it again and again. As we play it, we change our minds about what it means. What happens in *Hamlet* is that the play trains us to take its parts of protagonist and audience both. The training is rigorous, and it never ends (Cohen 1989: 164).

The screenplay of this adaptation is based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* First Folio. No part of the text is cut out; some missing passages have been added here from the Second Quarto (Branagh 1996:174). The screenplay can be termed a ‘verbal storyboard’ with a subjective point of view that pays attention to the intimate relationships between characters (Branagh 1996: xiv-xv). “[...] the style is a speaking style that is as realistic as a proper adherence to the structure of the language will allow; a period setting that attempts to set the story in a historical context that is resonant for a modern audience but allows a heightened language to sit comfortably” (Branagh 1996: xv).

“Branagh’s use of flashbacks adds to the effect: they bring many elements of Hamlet’s story into the *Hamlet* plot; they undertake, through flashbacks, to explain what the play leaves unsettled (such as Hamlet’s affair with Ophelia) and make elements of exposition explicit (Hamlet’s affection for Yorick)”. Blenheim provides a lavish setting for the action. The addition of luxurious exteriors and props such as the miniature train that brings Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore is quite impressive. Branagh suggests the practical needs of a nation threatened by invasion by showing soldiers training and providing other signs of a functioning bureaucracy (Jackson 2000:79).

The play opens with a threatened invasion and ends in military occupation. Framed by territorial conflict, it stages one contest over land after another. Fortinbras I and Hamlet I clash over crown lands, Hamlet I and Claudius over the garden kingdom, Gonzago and Lucianus over the ‘bank of flowers’ or ‘estate’, Norway and Poland over a garrisoned ‘patch of ground’, the boy and adult companies over the commercial stage, the crown and the church over the churchyard, Laertes and Hamlet over the flower-strewn grave pit of Ophelia, and the actor who plays

Hamlet and any other actor who challenges him over the performative arena of the stage (De Grazia 2007: 2-3).

De Grazia focuses her argument on Shakespeare by pointing out the political and existential dimensions. She argues that Hamlet's struggle is rather about the political disinheritance he faces after losing his father; as such, Hamlet's existential anguish lies in the broader context of identity and disinheritance. She stresses that Hamlet's loss of the kingdom affects what he has within. "A prince bereft of his prospective kingdom, like any man deprived of his expected estate, must feel the injury" (de Grazia 2007:2). Many critics have focused their arguments only on the protagonist, Prince Hamlet's character ignoring his dispossession and disinheritance, *Hamlet Without Hamlet* by de Grazia has brought to light the aspects of the play that has been neglected; aspects that are highly connected to modern times and contemporary issues. Hamlet facing political disinheritance and his struggle with legitimacy is what modern politics is dealing with. Power, legitimacy, and succession are the order of the day, power struggles within governments and organisations, rigging of elections, and others. "Elsinore's disease is anywhere's, anytime's. Something is rotten in every state, [...]" (Bloom 1998:431).

Hamlet's existential worries can reflect the ongoing questions of identity. Our identities tell who we are and where we belong being it personal, cultural, and national identities in a globalised world. The question of belonging and identity is essential to fit into any changing societal norms.

De Grazia's focus on the political dimension of Hamlet can be linked to Branagh's film in his portrayal of the theme of political disinheritance. He portrays Hamlet as a character whose existential questions stemmed from the fact of his loss of the throne to his uncle, and he cannot contest because any form of contestation will be considered treason. By adapting the full version of the play, he gives a more comprehensive approach to the exploration of the political and existential aspects that de Grazia accentuates. Branagh's interpretation of the character Hamlet, focusing on his internal conflict and existential struggle aligns with de Grazia's affirmation that Hamlet's overall struggles are beyond mere personal problems (de Grazia 2007). Branagh's film adaptation can be seen as a visual and narrative representation of the themes that de Grazia highlights.

“Hamlet is a play of choices. [...] every production of Hamlet is another interpretation” (Cohen 1989: 1). As such, “A director must choose one reading of an individual line, and his choices for readings of all lines must be as consistent as possible for a unified and coherent interpretation of the play” (Cohen 1989: 2).

In Branagh's *Hamlet*, Hamlet is summoned to the court during the celebration of Claudius's ascension to the throne following his marriage to Gertrude. The setting is visually framed by a close-up of the crown on old Hamlet's statue, transitioning into the state hall's balcony. This architectural element symbolises the court and the courtiers, representing the passage of power in Denmark's elective monarchy. Claudius establishes himself as king with the support of the court's legal body, represented by Polonius, and shapes the court into his body politic, which serves as the foundation of his power and legitimacy as a ruler (Fiorato 2017: 48). Claudius's initial actions as king are focused on diplomacy. He first defends his rise to power by addressing the external threat posed by Fortinbras, who believes the state is unstable:

Claudius: [...] Now follows that you know: young Fortinbras,
Holding a weak supposal of our worth
Or thinking by our late dear brother's death
Our state to be disjoint and out of frame
Co-leagued with this dream of his advantage-
He hath not failed to pester us with message
Importing the surrender of those lands
Lost by his father with all bands of law
To our most valiant brother[...] (*Hamlet*, I.2.18-25).

Claudius seeks to restore this stability through official written communications with Norway. Internally, he strengthens his position by aligning himself with his late brother and naming Hamlet as his heir, thus incorporating Hamlet into both his natural and political lineage:

Claudius: think of us / as of a father, for let the world take note!
You are the most immediate to our throne (*Hamlet*, I.2.108-109).

Claudius publicly acknowledges Hamlet as the future king, supporting his succession through a formal speech. In the film, the crown-shaped balcony symbolises the court and the new body politic. Hamlet tries to stay unnoticed, dressed in dark clothing, but is encouraged to join the celebration and scene. His initial response to Claudius's overtures reveals his use of language to uncover deeper truths, as seen in his remarks:

“A little more than kin and less than kind” and “too much in the sun” (*Hamlet*, I.2.65-66) demonstrate his speculative nature and rejection of Claudius's political and familial actions. From Hamlet's response, one can deduce that he separates himself from the formal court setting by creating a private space within a public event (Cook 2011: 113), using visual and verbal expressions to challenge the current state of affairs. When his mother urges him to let go of his mourning and melancholic disposition to engage in the present, asking him to view the political spectacle favorably:

Gertrude: “let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark,” (*Hamlet*, I.2.69)

Hamlet contrasts appearance and reality, which becomes a central theme of his journey. He explains that his visible signs of grief, such as his “inky cloak,” only seem to represent his true feelings, but they are merely actions anyone might display. Hamlet's words criticise the court for its superficial emotions, highlighting Claudius's earlier statement about self-awareness “remembrance of ourselves,” (*Hamlet*, I.2.7). This critique extends to the entire political context, pointing to the false nature of the king's behavior, which consequently corrupts the new body politic.

Expressions of grief can be faked and become part of theatrical performance: “Clothes can be changed, gestures can be rehearsed, and even tears are not signs of true emotion but rather tests of a great actor” (Assmann 2012: 41). From this critical perspective, there is no way to prove the authenticity of a feeling since all its outward signs can be performed and manipulated. Hamlet criticises the inadequacy of language and visual symbols, as well as acting, in expressing the inner self, while also acknowledging the unavoidable mediation of his condition. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the embodiment of a performative play since it focuses on

acting, staging, and creating a dramatic coherence between action and word (Aasand 2003).

In Branagh's *Hamlet*, the protagonist passively participates in the royal celebration and then delivers his first soliloquy in the state hall, a place that mirrors his inner struggles. Alone, Hamlet vents his emotions, leaning over the empty throne, symbolising his current lack of progress. as he later reveals to Rosencrantz:

Hamlet: "I lack advancement," (*Hamlet*, III.2.331).

Hamlet collapses over the throne, releasing the tension from his forced performance. His reflection is briefly seen in a mirror, though he seems unaware. As he walks and vents his frustrations, he expresses a desire to escape his corrupted physical body.

Hamlet: O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter (*Hamlet*, I.2.129-132).

Hamlet rejects the experience of his own body in the world, viewing it as tainted. He particularly criticizes his mother, whom he believes has perverted love into mere eroticism by marrying his uncle, an act he and his father's ghost consider incestuous (*Hamlet*, I.2.155-157). In his first soliloquy, Hamlet is already introspective, trying to look inward to examine his feelings about his mother's marriage and to reflect on societal issues ("the uses of this world"). Hamlet's soliloquy ends with him briefly renouncing both speech and action, expressing his inner turmoil with the line:

Hamlet: "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (*Hamlet*, I.2.159).

Rather than shifting his attention back to public life, Hamlet's introspection intensifies when Branagh's Hamlet takes the group to his study to discuss the ghost's appearance. The study, situated behind one of the mirrored doors leading to the state hall, can symbolise a journey into Hamlet's mind.

The ghost's appearance brings a metafictional dimension to Hamlet's role as an avenger. Shakespeare frames his work within an ancient story structure,

modeled after Seneca and Kyd's "*ur-Hamlet*" (Bell 1998: 311). This scene highlights Hamlet's struggle with the pressure to conform to an established model, which he is expected to follow passively. His deceased father calls upon him not as an individual, but as part of the family, serving as an "epistemic fragment in a collective message" (Howard 1998:2). The focus is not solely on the act of revenge, but on establishing the generational bond that it represents (Kottman 2009: 56-57). The ghost imposes a specific role on Hamlet, unfolding it like a script:

Ghost: "Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing

To what I shall unfold" (*Hamlet*, I.5.5-6).

He binds Hamlet to the duty of avenging his murder:

Ghost: "So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear" (*Hamlet*, I.5.8).

After describing his "murder most foul" (*Hamlet*, I.5.27), and finding Hamlet "apt" (I.5.32), he urges him to take action by saying that Hamlet should remember him. The ghost imposes the role of avenger on Hamlet, urging him to seek revenge for his murder. Hamlet's first move is to take on an "antic disposition", adopting a self-created form to disrupt appearances. In Elizabethan English, "antic" refers to fantastical and absurd behavior, similar to the role of the fool, who sees through appearances (King 2011: 38).

3.3. Cinematic Techniques

3.3.I. Directing Choices

Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* respects traditional elements and brings a fresh perspective to this unfading tragedy. With a deep appreciation for Shakespeare, Branagh skillfully navigates the play's complex emotional and thematic layers, as such, acknowledging the original text that remains accessible and engaging for contemporary audiences. Branagh's artistic choices play a significant role in the film. The setting is luxurious, capturing the grandeur and decay of Elsinore Castle, with a Victorian-era backdrop that is both spectacular and symbolically rich. A real location like Blenheim Palace adds authenticity and visual splendor, taking the dramatic tension to another level.

The cast is critical to the film's success. Branagh himself plays Hamlet, blending intensity, vulnerability, and intellect. Veteran actors such as Derek Jacobi playing Claudius, and Julie Christie interpreting Gertrude, bring depth to their roles, while Kate Winslet portrays Ophelia with a distressing blend of fragility and strength.

Branagh's direction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a pivotal element in the success of this film. According to Cook, his dynamic and thoughtful approach to staging scenes and guiding performances ensures that each moment carries significant emotional and narrative weight. By breaking the fourth wall, Branagh engages directly with the audience, offering a more intimate and immediate experience of Hamlet's psychological struggles (2011).

From the thematic aspect, Branagh's *Hamlet* emphasises political intrigue, enhancing the play's exploration of power, corruption, and the human condition. The use of mirrors and hidden rooms symbolises the constant observation and deceit among the characters, creating an atmosphere of distrust and paranoia. This focus on the duality of human nature highlights the ageless relevance of Shakespeare's themes in a modern context. "At Elsinore Castle, someone is hidden behind every curtain" (Kott 1965:49).

The introduction of the flashback technique to characters like Old Norway, Yorick, and historical figures from the player King's speech makes the play more

cinematic. The lengthy film makes the text accessible thanks to Branagh's creativity in keeping the narrative moving. For example, the flying sword, Laertes falling from the balcony when he dies, etc. make everything dramatic. Branagh portrays Fortinbras' arrival as a violent political takeover, with Norwegian troops storming the castle during Hamlet's final duel. The arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on a small steam train adds a layer of fun to their characters.

Branagh's decision to present a full-length version of the play running for four hours enhances a comprehensive exploration of subplots and characters, enabling viewers to experience a rich texture of the play. Moreover, cinematic techniques of sweeping camera movements, continuous shots, and intricate set designs enhance the storytelling, creating a usually remarkable and dramatically compelling film. Branagh uses a high visual approach to incorporate flashbacks to illustrate events that Shakespeare's original text only mentions. For instance, the film visually represents Hamlet's childhood friendship with Yorick, which is merely described in the play. Additionally, it includes scenes that suggest Hamlet's romantic and sexual relationship with Ophelia, an aspect that is only subtly implied in the text. By doing so, Branagh adds depth and context to the characters' backgrounds and relationships, enhancing the audience's understanding of their motivations and emotions. This cinematic technique helps to bring the play's implied narratives to life, making the story more vivid and engaging for viewers. Branagh masterfully innovates *Hamlet* to honour Shakespeare's genius while bringing new vitality and insight to the play. With a thoughtful blend of artistic choices in the setting, casting, and direction, Branagh creates a version of *Hamlet* that resonates deeply with both Shakespeare's lovers and new audiences. This production ensures that the tragedy remains as impactful today as it was in the Elizabethan era.

3.3. II. Cinematography

Kenneth Branagh's cinematographic technique plays a vital role in his *Hamlet* adaptation. His cinematography visually conveys emotions, themes, and narrative elements. He blends technical expertise with his artistic and creative ideas to create memorable and impactful cinematic experiences in his film. In Branagh's *Hamlet*, the audience is highly engaged thanks to the cinematography that enhances the narrative. Branagh uses a fresh and dynamic visual technique and experience to capture the audiences' concentration to the original play.

The set design, the technique of sweeping camera movements, and the setting, mirroring, give this adaptation an outstanding status. The use of mirrors and reflective surfaces, the detailed setting serves as a metaphor for the characters' moral and psychological complexities. The mirrors highlight the duplicity and dual nature of the characters. Hamlet delivering his "To be or not to be" soliloquy (*Hamlet*, III.1.55-90) in front of a mirror invites the audience to navigate through his internal conflict and see the duality of his nature, highlighting the existential struggle and the quest for truth in the play; as such, making the audience feel Hamlet's inner conflict more strongly.

The use of close-ups and rapid cuts in the play-within-the-play scene enhances the tension and suspense of the narrative and characters. This is particularly seen in the tension and discomfort of Claudius. The viewers observe the subtle changes in Claudia's expression through the close camera work. The tension of this scene effectively draws the viewer deeper into the film.

3.4. Character Analysis

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* offers an innovative and intense exploration of the play's characters, providing new dimensions to their complexities. At the core of the play, we have major figures such as Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, and Gertrude, who keep the intricate and multifaceted narrative flowing.

- Hamlet: Portrayed by Branagh as a profoundly philosophical character, grappling with grief after the death of his father and the sudden remarriage of his mother to his uncle, Claudius. Branagh portrays Hamlet's motivation through a

profound existential anguish. Hamlet's intellectual struggles and moral dilemmas are depicted, presenting him as a figure torn between action and inaction, with a quest to discover the truth and revenge, but the moral implications of his potential actions hold him back. He moves from a character mourning his father to a contemplative character determined to uncover and punish his father's killer. According to Bradley and Bloom, Shakespeare's Hamlet is a character whose existential reflections are driven by his moral and spiritual concerns (Bradley 1904:100; Bloom 2008:235).

- Ophelia: This character is interpreted by Kate Winslet, with significant emotional depth. Ophelia's internal conflict is highlighted, she is torn between being a loyal and obedient daughter to her father Polonius, and her love for Hamlet. Winslet's portrayal brings out Ophelia's innocence and vulnerability, vividly depicting her descent into madness after her father's death.

- Claudius: Played by Derek Jacobi, characterised by a blend of authority and deceitfulness. Claudius is a manipulative and deceitful politician, yet troubled by his own guilt. Jacobi's portrayal of Claudius as a villain who physically appears as a just and compassionate ruler while he is battling internally with the moral consequences of his deeds. This duality is seen during the soliloquy scenes in which Claudius's vulnerability is brought to light:

King: O, my offence is rank: it smells to heaven; [...]

My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent [...]

Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe.

All may be well. (*Hamlet*, III.3.35-70).

This monologue comes after Hamlet's plan to "catch the conscience of the King" by staging a play called "The Mousetrap", which reenacts the murder of Hamlet's father. The scene where poison is poured into King Gonzalo's ear shocks Claudius, prompting him to leave in distress and call for light. Claudius then decides to send Hamlet to England for execution. Left alone, Claudius confesses his guilt to the audience. This moment reveals Claudius's internal conflict.

Branagh portrays Claudius in this scene as a tormented character who conflicts with himself, struggling with his inner problems of guilt for his hideous

crimes. Claudius's conscience is highlighted; the weight of his sins on his shoulders prevents him from praying in peace. Claudius is seen here as someone aware of his sins and in need of repentance, but he is not ready to give up his power. Claudius is portrayed here as a human who is aware of his crimes and the moral decay of his actions.

- Gertrude: Julie Christie's depiction of Gertrude is seen as a complex and tragic character in a way. Her motivations are more complex than mere desire and ambition. Her sudden remarriage to Claudius can be interpreted as a means of 'survival of the fittest' in an already complex patriarchal society. Gertrude's relationship with Hamlet is portrayed with deep emotional concern for her son amid all the chaos.

Other characters like Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio are also meticulously developed. Polonius, portrayed by Richard Briers, is always seen as a pompous clown, very cunning, whose actions contribute to the play's tragic path. Michael Maloney, interpreting Laertes, is seen as a figure driven by a desire for revenge that reflects Hamlet's. Nicholas Farrell's portrayal of Horatio as Hamlet's trusted friend provides a stabilising presence. Each character's interpretation is connected to the narrative, showcasing their struggles against their circumstances and each other; as such, bringing out an innovative Shakespeare's exploration of human ambitions, betrayal, and redemption.

3.5. Themes and Motifs

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* brings new life to Shakespeare's classic with his skilful portrayal of existential and philosophical concerns. This chapter will focus on the existential and philosophical dimensions of Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet* adaptation.

Modern readers call Hamlet an existentialist because of his overthinking nature, always trying to figure out the truth. This aspect delays him from avenging his father's murder. Most of his famous soliloquies are based on existential questions too. Hamlet's crisis is seen in existential themes such as the emptiness or nature of existence, death and mortality, the struggle with inaction, and the

absurdity of life, among others. Hamlet's delay in acting is because he thinks about the moral implications of his actions. "[...] he was considering among other things, the question of how he could avenge his father without sacrificing his own life or freedom" (Bloom 2008:235).

Let us dive into the philosophical and existential themes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and how Branagh's production portrays them.

3.5.1. The Emptiness or Nature of Existence

Hamlet: To be, or not to be, that is the question; [...]

The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons

Be all my sins remembered. (*Hamlet*, III.1.55-90).

This speech is among the most famous passages of Western literature (Bloom 2008: 27), interpreted in several ways. Some critics interpret this as Hamlet considering suicide, (Bloom 2008: 27; Cybulska 2016:28) while others see it as Hamlet reflecting on the consequences that will befall him if he kills Claudius (Cybulska 2016:28). According to *Hamlet Poem Unlimited*, "[...] this is not a meditation seriously contemplating suicide" (Bloom 2003: 33). This speech alerts us of Hamlet's suffering and vulnerability, by referring to the frustrations of life in general (Clemen 1987:138). Hamlet's thoughts are directed toward the ultimate questions of man's existence (Clemen 1987: 135). Matthias, on the other hand, says: "The speech [...] conveys Hamlet's obsession with the concepts of life ("to be") and death ("not to be"). At first, Hamlet considers that death may be merely "a sleep" that could end "the heart-ache" inherent in being human, but then frets over "what dreams may come" in "that sleep of death" (Matthias 2024). According to Wilson Knight, Shakespeare uses words like "to be or not to be" instead of "to live or not to live" which are two different phrases with different meanings. He emphasises that "being" is different from just "living." "To be" means to exist as a complete and whole person. In this state, one is beyond action and passivity, and beyond fear of death because life and death are no longer opposites" (Knight 1989:349).

This soliloquy ponders on a series of existential questions, whether life is worth living for, the nature of existence, and if death can relieve one from the sufferings of life. But there is great doubt about what the afterlife will look like.

Hamlet has the huge responsibility of avenging his father's murder, but he is rather a thinker than a killer. Thinking is a way of staying true to himself like an existentialist, he does not focus on abstract ideas like "what can be known" or "how many categories exist". He rather thinks about life and death and what it means to be human (Cybulska 2016:28).

This soliloquy by Prince Hamlet stands as one of Shakespeare's most celebrated speeches. From the time it was first heard on Elizabethan stages, it has been imitated, translated, venerated, and parodied. In the process, it has become a symbol for theatricality, the Shakespearean, philosophy, and even literature itself. The speech has been set to music many times, and each of its phrases has been borrowed for the title of a subsequent creative work. Hamlet's speech is recited on stage and in classrooms worldwide daily. Actors and audiences alike recognize it as a masterpiece of dramatic writing (Bruster 2007:5; Bloom 2008:27).

Branagh's "to be or not to be" soliloquy is staged in a huge hall of mirrors that reflect the paranoia of an opulent, narcissistic world and echoes the many doppelganger figures in the play (Hatchuel 2022). Delivering this speech in front of a large mirror symbolises self-reflection. The close-up shots highlight what Hamlet is dealing with internally, reflecting an existential self-examination.

It is uncertain whether Hamlet is aware if he is being watched by Claudius and Polonius. The two-way mirrors create a suspenseful atmosphere. The tone of his voice shows the intensity of what he feels. The pulling out of the sword and the camera immediately focusing on Claudius's reaction might be interpreted as a threat or menace to Claudius. The setting of this scene and cinematic techniques all make this film iconic and a great achievement. Branagh's interpretation of Hamlet's character in all its philosophical and existential depth makes him one of the best performers of the play.

William Hazlitt noted that Hamlet's words resonate with us because they reflect our own thoughts. Their true meaning exists in the readers' minds, making us feel connected to Hamlet. As such, "we are Hamlet" (Hazlitt 1906:79).

In Branagh's *Hamlet*, the "to be or not to be" soliloquy is recited while Hamlet watches himself in a two-way mirror, with Polonius and Claudius observing him from the other side. This is the same mirror in which Hamlet sees his reflection upon entering the scene and is drawn to it. As he walks toward his

reflection, he resumes his contemplation of death, previously introduced in his first soliloquy. The camera focuses on Hamlet's reflection, gradually excluding his physical presence, creating an immersive visual effect. Branagh emphasises the power of the visual image, generating what Sherwin describes as the Medusa, Narcissus, and Pygmalion effects (Sherwin 2011:45). In this scene, Hamlet's reflection becomes his reality, even when he draws a dagger while contemplating suicide. The focus remains on the reflection, plunging the viewer into Hamlet's inner world (Cook 2011:129-130). This scene demonstrates the overcoming of the concept of fashioning one's own identity to reach the underlying self (Greenblatt 2012: 2), in line with Arnold's view that Elizabethan soliloquies are "dialogues of the mind with itself" (Arnold 1965:591).

"Now Hamlet's reflection takes the scene; Hamlet is watched as well as enacted by his own reflection, and he thereby becomes conscious of his mind. The mirror, central both as artifact and metaphor in Elizabethan times, in this specific scene, refracts many cultural aspects" (Fiorato 2017:54). In Branagh's Hamlet, the character is frequently seen in a hall of mirrors, focusing on one reflection. The mirror in the film symbolises the uncertainties of self-formation, with Hamlet using it to search beyond appearances. The contrast is between the mirror as a presenter of ideal images and the perceiving eye as a sign of emerging self-reflection (Shuger 2014:26). In early modern times, selfhood was viewed as more relational. Hamlet's reflection shifts this relational aspect inward and towards his world, leading to psychological turmoil as he rejects a stereotypical role in favour of becoming a tragic figure (Belsey 1985). The mirror motif in this scene challenges performative principles by presenting the self as both the actor and the audience of its own actions. It is based on the threshold nature of dramatic performance, which exposes the limits of defining the staged object, whether it's the community or, in this case, the self (Fiorato 2016:10; Mullaney 1988:31). In this context, the soliloquy, a key form for expressing the character's inner thoughts, is troubled by hidden inconsistencies in the accepted image of a unified self, prompting the emerging individual to reflect on its own existence (Belsey 1985:44).

The arrival of Ophelia on the scene during the "to be or not to be" speech makes Hamlet end the speech more tenderly and pleasantly, as such, a change in language and tone. Her arrival interrupts Hamlet's self-reflection and brings both

him and the viewer back to reality. As Hamlet turns to Ophelia, the camera shifts from the mirror image to the real man, restoring Hamlet's troubled self to the scene. Until this point, we were inside Hamlet's mind, caught in his reflections. Ophelia's entrance, like Macbeth's porter's scene, brings both Hamlet and the viewers back to reality (De Quincey 2006).

Hamlet's pretend madness functions as a metatheatrical device, a typical element of the revenge tragedy, instrumental to divert suspicion and increase suspense. In *Hamlet*, it problematizes this function as it arouses suspicion and merges with the protagonist's melancholic expression of his anguish, his "antic disposition" (Fiorato 2017:55). These elements that disrupt the standard revenge plot in Branagh's *Hamlet* create space for tragedy and explore larger themes of human identity and destiny.

3.5.2. Death and Mortality

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow
of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath
bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how
abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it.
Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.
Where be your gibes now – your gambols, your songs,
your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?
Not one now to mock your own grinning, quite chapfallen. (*Hamlet*,
V.1.175-182).

This is a reminder that man is answerable to death and decay. Hamlet's encounter with the court's fool in the gravedigger's scene prompts further self-reflection and deeper insights (Bell 1998: 314). The gravedigger acts as Hamlet's alter ego, using clever puns and discussing the shades of acting. His reflection on the performance of will echoes Hamlet's soliloquies. He emphasises that performance bridges acting and doing and is subject to public interpretation and judgment (Rayner 1994:32). Confronting human mortality without being affected, the gravedigger

serves as a prop for Hamlet's final reflections. The gravedigger's role of digging and handling bones and skulls at random while discussing mortality heightens the acceptance of death as a normal routine of life.

Hamlet: Whose grave's this, sirrah?

Gravedigger: Mine, sir. [Sings] O, a pit of clay for to be made -

Hamlet: I think it be thine, indeed; for thou liest in't.

Gravedigger: You lie out on't, sir, and therefore it is not yours: for my part, I do not lie in't, and yet it is mine.

Hamlet: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine: 'tis for the dead, not for the quick. Therefore thou liest.

Gravedigger: Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again, from me to you.
(*Hamlet*, V.1.110-120).

The gravedigger uses humour and wordplay in his interaction with Hamlet and presents the topic of mortality more pragmatically and realistically. Hamlet pauses at the edge of the rectangular grave, which serves as a negative reflection of the mirror from his "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Here, he contemplates Yorick's skull, the court jester he knew in his childhood. The camera focuses on Hamlet as he gazes at the skull, holding it at eye level. During Hamlet's monologue, the perspective shifts twice to focus on Hamlet's eyes, creating the effect of the dead staring back at the living (Cook 2011:150). Yorick symbolises the mirror, almost hypnotising Hamlet as he gazes into the empty eye sockets, which once held mirrors but now represent their absence. This negative construction mirrors Hamlet's initial quest for his true self by rejecting outer appearances. "Through deceased Yorick's eyes, we contemplate a Hamlet whose conflicted Shakespearean psychology has been entered through images no less than words" (Cook 2011:159).

Through Yorick's skull, Hamlet comes into direct contact with the embodiment of dust into which man returns after death, representing the final destiny of humankind. He experiences a disconnect between form and substance as the people who once lived are brought to life through his words and imagination. The stark and grotesque reality of the bones surpasses their stories and ambitions, revealing the grotesque nature of human joys and aspirations (Fiorato 2017:59).

“Death puts the question ‘what is real?’ in its irreducible form and in the end uncovers all appearances” (Mack 1968:63). In fact, “Yorick’s skull gives us not information, but spectacle, not knowledge but acknowledgment, the mirror held up to nature” (Cartwright 1991:130; Wilson 2003:327). “Hamlet does not gain insight, but a state of suspension between the grasped and the ungrasped in his experience of the self, akin to his “to be and not to be”. Hamlet seems to remain distracted here, his mind pulled between his inquiry into “what a piece of work is man!” (King 2011: 56), and the “quintessence of dust” he visually confronts in the graveyard” (Fiorato 2017:59).

Branagh skillfully highlights the theme of death and mortality in his adaptation. The play's constant reflection on death, from Yorick’s skull to thoughts about the afterlife and the soul. The use of shadows, haunting music, and sad imagery shows how death is always present and roaming about. Hamlet’s obsession with mortality is shown as a never-ending search for meaning in the face of inevitable decay. This theme is also seen in the deaths of characters like Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, and Claudius; this emphasises the unavoidable and tragic nature of human weakness. Portraying this theme with his directorial skills and thought-provoking performances, and the use of visual elements, Branagh’s *Hamlet* goes beyond a mere narration and explores how the human condition and emotions are complex, making it immediately relatable and relevant to today’s audiences.

Death is inevitable, everyone will die and return to dust. Hamlet’s reflection highlights death as the great equaliser of every human. Everyone ends up the same way in death, be it kings, Queens, servants, etc, every corpse is subject to decay and food for worms. Hamlet uses examples of great rulers of the world like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar to remind us of the step-by-step end of every human being; despite their powers and great conquests, they ended up in the same humble state as everyone else.

Hamlet: 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?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe

Should patch a wall t'expel the water's flaw. (*Hamlet*, V.1.198-205).

After death, we are buried in the dust, the body decomposes over time, and becomes nothing like the dirt in which it was buried. Overall, from the play, one can see how much Hamlet is fascinated with death and the afterlife. He ponders over the inevitability of death, the physical reality of mortality, and what comes after life. By capturing the solemnity of the graveyard scene with a sombre atmosphere, Hamlet's close-up interaction with Yorick's skull, the visual contrasts between light and shadow highlight the passing of human life into eternity through death. "He muses in the graveyard on the nothingness of life and fame, and the base uses to which our dust returns, whether it be a court-jester's or a world-conqueror's" (Bradley 1904: 145).

In Branagh's *Hamlet*, the protagonist dies in the state hall. His final words have two purposes: he supports Fortinbras's rise to power by making an important political statement in Denmark's elective monarchy, merging his private and public roles. Additionally, by asking Horatio to accurately recount the events, Hamlet requests that his story be told. This reveals the human aspect of the revenge tragedy and appeals to tragic art to demonstrate the clash between ideals and reality (Wilson 2003:305;317). In his concluding words, Horatio reveals revenge for what it is, he tells Fortinbras:

Horatio: And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and for no cause,
And in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors' heads. All this can I truly deliver (*Hamlet*,
V.2.364-370).

He therefore overcomes the tradition of the revenge tragedy and leaves the scene to the perspective of subsequent authors, such as Shakespeare and Branagh, who will actually present Hamlet correctly. The story concludes with Fortinbras paying tribute to Hamlet by giving him military honors and a solemn funeral. “In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that to understand freedom, we must confront the realities of death and human finitude” (Bhuvaneswari 2021:56).

3.5.3. The Struggle with Inaction

Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!

Is it not monstrous that this player here,

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

[...] The play's the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (*Hamlet*, II.2.485-540).

In *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2, Lines 485-540, Hamlet laments his inaction and compares himself to a passionate actor who can display deep emotions. He criticises himself for not taking revenge on Claudius for his father's murder and questions his own determination. Hamlet decides to use the play performed by the actors, which mirrors his father's murder, to observe Claudius's reaction and confirm his guilt. “[...] what Hamlet wanted was not a private revenge to be followed by his own imprisonment or execution, it was a public justice”; (Bradley 1904:94) “At the very close, Hamlet fears a wounded name”(Bloom 2003:11). As a result, Hamlet decides to stage the ‘Mousetrap’ to catch King Claudius’ guilt in court before everyone. “Hamlet the character, as well as *Hamlet* the play, is obsessed with acting, its concealment of reality, its moving expression of emotion, the skills it requires, its ability to bring forth something so seemingly genuine in the absence of actual interior motivation” (Bloom 2008:24).

This soliloquy displays Hamlet's internal struggle, self-reproach, and strategic thinking. Hamlet's struggle connects with existentialist ideas. Hamlet feels stuck because of his inability to make decisions and take action when faced with tough choices in an absurd world; his fear leads to his hesitation. Hamlet battles with his inner self about the fear and difficulty of making meaningful choices in

life. He decides to stage a play that resembles the murder of his father to catch Claudius' conscience. Hamlet considers avenging his father without sacrificing his own life or freedom; he wanted his act of vengeance to be well constructed to avoid leaving a stain on his name (Bradley 1904:94, 97; Bloom 2008:235).

Hamlet's sense of duty to avenge his father's death becomes a heavy burden that immobilises him. He wrestles with the moral consequences of his actions, leading to his hesitation. There is a conflict between thinking and doing, Hamlet spends so much time overthinking and contemplating the consequences of his actions that he becomes unable to act at all. His deep philosophical thoughts and moral considerations make him hesitant and unsure, stopping him from translating his thoughts into actions. "He is a prince of philosophical speculations, and because he cannot have his revenge perfectly according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether" (Bloom 2008:152; Hazlitt 1817). Bradley concludes that: "the cause of the hero's delay is irresolution, and the cause of this irresolution is excess of the reflective or speculative habit of mind. He has the general intention to obey the ghost, but the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (Bradley 1904:104).

Branagh employs close-up shots cinematic techniques and dramatic lighting to depict Hamlet's internal struggle. Branagh rushing into the setting and closing the door, breathing heavily and tiredly, highlights how exhausted he is already from the troubles of life, and his internal conflict that keeps delaying him from avenging his father's murder. This reveals his self-reproach and frustration over his inability to act. His body movements, his reactions, hitting of objects, and the change in his voice, both high and low tones highlight the intensity of his thoughts. He delivers the speech with genuine bewilderment while pacing through the apartment. The camera zooms in on Hamlet's face, showcasing his emotional turmoil and self-criticism. The use of mirrors and reflections symbolises Hamlet's self-examination. The mirror's reflective surface highlights his existential self-doubt and theme of inaction. Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Hamlet in this soliloquy is filled with intense emotion and raw vulnerability. His delivery illustrates the depth of Hamlet's self-loathing and frustration over his inability to act. Branagh's body language, tightened hands, pacing, and expressive facial movements convey Hamlet's inner conflict and existential paralysis. "The foreground of Shakespeare's tragedy is

Hamlet's consciousness of his own consciousness, unlimited yet at war with itself" (Bloom 2003:86).

The dim lighting and isolated setting enhance the sense of Hamlet's solitude and internal struggle. Shadows and contrasts create a visually striking representation of his existential crisis. The haunting music and sound effects heighten the emotional impact of the soliloquy, emphasising the theme of inaction and the existential questions it raises. "Hamlet deserves the title 'tragedy of moral idealism, quite as much as the title 'tragedy of reflection'" (Bradley 1904:113).

3.5.4. The Absurdity of Life

Hamlet: [...] What a piece of work is man how noble in reason;
how infinite in faculties, in form and moving;
how express and admirable in action;
how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god;
the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals.

And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (*Hamlet*, II.2.270-75).

Hamlet is talking to his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the deep sadness he has felt since his father's death. He creates a grand picture of the earth and humanity but dismisses it all as mere 'dust'. Hamlet criticises the earth, air, and sun and praises humans' reasons, faculties, actions, and understanding. However, he concludes that humans are nothing but dust, reflecting his obsession with death, a motif that runs throughout the play. Hamlet sees humans as more impressive in understanding than in action. This speech highlights Hamlet's overthinking and hesitant nature, which leads to his delay in avenging his father's murder. This soliloquy highlights how human nature is filled with contrasting forces. On one hand, humans have incredible abilities, such as reason, creativity, and the power to achieve remarkable things. On the other hand, no matter how extraordinary these capabilities are, humans are still mortal and vulnerable to pain, suffering, and eventually death. This highlights the irony that even with all our remarkable

potential, we cannot escape the fundamental limitations and hardships of being human.

This speech emphasises Hamlet's inner struggle and increasing disappointment with life. He is torn between his duties, emotions, and the harsh realities he faces, leading to deep reflection and conflict within himself. Despite human capacities and achievements, life ultimately feels meaningless and valueless. This soliloquy aligns with Søren Kierkegaard's concept of "the sickness unto death", wherein individuals struggle with the obvious meaninglessness of existence. Comparing humans to mere dust serves as a reflection of deep existential fear and the quest for purpose in an indifferent world.

Branagh uses intense lighting and close-up shot techniques to highlight Hamlet's emotional struggle. The often dark and solemn setting mirrors Hamlet's internal despair. Mirrors are used to represent Hamlet's self-reflection and examination. The reflections emphasise his struggle with his own identity and purpose. Branagh interprets this soliloquy with intense emotion and vulnerability. His delivery effectively communicates Hamlet's self-loathing and existential dread. Branagh's movements, pacing, and facial expression depict Hamlet's internal conflict and disillusionment. Dim lighting and an isolated setting enhance the sense of Hamlet's solitude and internal struggle. Shadows and contrasts create a visually striking representation of his despair. The haunting background music and sound effects add to the emotional weight of the soliloquy, reinforcing disillusionment.

3.6. Branagh's directorial choices in portraying the philosophical and existential themes

Branagh's directorial and performance choices have a great influence on the overall interpretation and reception of the film. Kenneth Branagh playing the lead role with a combination of intellectual sharpness and raw vulnerability helps connect viewers with Hamlet's complicated psychological state. Branagh's decision to portray Hamlet as a thinker and a person of action adds more layers of intensity and emotional depth to the character, making his internal struggles even more evident.

In addition to the main character, Branagh, other supporting characters' performances greatly enhance the adaptation. Derek Jacobi, as King Claudius, seems calm on the outside but is deceitful and sneaky on the inside. Jacobi is seen as smart and manipulative, perfectly portraying the traits of a corrupt ruler whose guilt and ambition cause a lot of problems and tensions in the play.

Winslet's interpretation of Ophelia, its deep exploration of the character's innocence and subsequent madness, is also remarkable. Winslet/Ophelia is seen here as a vulnerable, tender lady who is a victim of circumstance and of her environment. Her performance is heartbreaking, especially the madness scene.

Gertrude's character, portrayed by Julie Christie, is seen as an elegant and conflicted queen, with divided attention between her son Hamlet and her new husband, Claudius. However, Christie's interpretation adds depth and complexity to Gertrude. Despite all, her encounters with Branagh still highlight an affectionate relationship between mother and son.

Both Branagh, the lead character, and the supporting actors' performances in this version of *Hamlet* add new layers of meaning and emotion to the play, making it both true to the original and emotionally engaging for modern audiences. The decisions made by Branagh play a pivotal role in how audiences understand and interpret the film. The energy Branagh and his team put into portraying Shakespeare's characters combines traditional interpretations with contemporary emotional authenticity. This blend respects the original play as well as encourages modern viewers to connect with the enduring human struggles central to *Hamlet*.

Hamlet's philosophical contemplation revolves around the questions of existence and the human condition. His famous "To be or not to be" speech is spoken thoughtfully, showing the prince's deep inner conflict about whether to act. From Branagh's interpretation, we can see how the idea of revenge deeply affects the prince; he knows that revenge is harmful and leads to sorrow and disaster.

Hamlet's contact with Yorick's skull at the graveyard serves as a constant reminder of life and death, the uncertainty of life after death, and how death is inevitable. The use of shadows, funeral music, and dark imagery highlights death as the finality of humanity; and the inevitability of decay. Branagh's directorial

choices display Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a retelling of the story to contemporary audiences.

Unlike most productions, Branagh's film presents a complete version of *Hamlet*, making it more comprehensive than the original editions. Critics and the American Film Academy praised this effort, earning Branagh an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay, and other nominations for Best Art Direction, Costume Design, and Original Score. Despite the acclaim, the film was not a commercial success, primarily due to its limited release. Another factor was its length; at over four hours, it might have been too long for average moviegoers, even with numerous Hollywood stars in minor roles (Wikipedia.org). "Branagh's *Hamlet* lacks the narcissistic intensity of Laurence Olivier's, but the film as a whole is better, placing Hamlet in the larger context of royal politics, and making him less a subject for pity" (Ebert 1997).

The intention of this thesis is not to criticise nor explain Branagh's adaptation of *Hamlet*, nor is it to explain its authenticity over other adaptations. I intend to analyse the adaptation from an existential point of view and to show how Branagh's *Hamlet* has greatly popularised Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in its entirety, bringing Shakespearean language to modern viewers in an entertaining manner. Branagh's *Hamlet* "serves as a mirror. An ideal *Hamlet* would be one most true to Shakespeare, and most modern at the same time" (Kott 1965:48).

Branagh has fashioned not only a *Hamlet* for the common man, but a commonsense *Hamlet* stripped of the interpretive layers successive generations imposed. This is a *Hamlet* that has returned to its essential meaning, as discovered in Shakespeare's words, which proves less ambiguous than scholars and directors have suggested (Brode 2001:147).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Human life Understands itself in terms of its potentialities and perils, its greatness and nothingness, Its human and diabolical strains, its nobleness and meanness, its sheer joy at being alive and its bewildered terror at failure and destruction, its love, dedication, and openness of Heart, and then again its hatred, narrowness and blindness (Karl 1953: 29-30).

Hamlet is aware of his potential to act, but the moral rottenness of Elsinore, Claudius are all hindrances to him; as such, his intellectual and moral uprightness influences him to seek justice differently. Throughout the play, human morality differs and conflicts, for instance, Horatio in his loyalty, Ophelia's initial innocence contrast with the diabolic acts of Claudius, such as the murder of his brother, and his act of manipulation.

According to David Ruiter, a comprehensive understanding of selfhood extends beyond the factual realities of one's existence and encompasses both the potential for future development and the internal drive to meet certain standards (Ruiter 2005: 51).

“What existentialists say about the structure of existence is existentially relevant only if we choose to see it in relation to our own life, incorporate it into our life, and become involved in an intensely personal act of self-transformation as a consequence of it” (Oaklander 1992: 9). To Oaklander, the perception of existentialism become meaningful and purposeful to human condition when the individual concerned decides to adopt its perception actively and apply them to their own lives to create their own essence, growth and a room for change towards self-discovery and authenticity.

The play *Hamlet* serves as a compelling reminder of the fundamental instability and vulnerability of human existence. This is underscored by Hazlitt's observation that Hamlet's speeches and thoughts resonate as deeply as our own internal reflections, suggesting that the play's reality lies within the reader's own consciousness, leading to an identification with Hamlet himself. “It is we who are Hamlet” (Hazlitt 1817: 115). Bloom echoes this sentiment by asserting that we

need to assert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively (Bloom 1998).

The compelling and massive adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by Kenneth Branagh testifies to the persistent human interest in fundamental questions of existence, morality, and meaning. This paper has explored the complexity of the philosophical and existential themes of the play; how relevant these themes have been across historical periods and cultural contexts.

Chapter one established the rich context and background to the play, *Hamlet*, highlighting the play as Shakespeare's famous tragedy; by exploring the universal concerns such as the nature of existence or the emptiness of life, death and mortality, the struggle with inaction, and the absurdity of life. At the beginning of the play, we immediately dived into Hamlet's world (a multifaceted world of betrayal, deception and moral corruption, surrounded by unfamiliar situations at Elsinore) wrestling with uncertainty, as he laments, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Hamlet, I.2.132-138). This opening disappointment sets the stage for his subsequent existential crisis. Hamlet's experience according to Sartre's idea serves as the basis for his evolving identity, as such affirming Sartre's concept of "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 1948; 1975:24).

Chapter two provided a general overview and the historical context of existentialism, tracing its roots and outlining its core principles. While Shakespeare precedes the formal philosophical movement, the play unquestionably tackles pre-existentialist concerns involving the absence of fundamental meaning and the problems that come with individual choice. The historical roots of existentialism and key doctrines of existential philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus provided a deeper understanding of the existential themes that are reflected in *Hamlet*. These enabled us to appreciate how *Hamlet* engages with similar fundamental human concerns in a pre-existentialist context, highlighting the specific and repeatedly challenging nature of human existence.

Chapter three delved into Branagh's *Hamlet* adaptation, as an unabridged version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It demonstrated how Branagh's cinematic techniques and directorial vision, and the performances he stimulates, effectively translate the play as a theoretical perception into a visually and emotionally significant experience that resonates with every viewer. Branagh's portrayal of Hamlet, particularly in his delivery of the iconic "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1, vividly captures the character's agonising contemplation of life and death, a foundation stone of existential thought.

Even though we live in a technologically advanced world, existentialism serves as a crucial reminder of the need to safeguard individual authenticity and identity from the pressures of the digital realm. By focusing on human experience and the challenges of modernity, existentialism demonstrates its continued philosophical significance (Rhouabhia 2024).

In the end, the constant confrontation with the complexities of the human condition is where *Hamlet's* enduring power lies. The play does not offer easy answers but instead forces audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about mortality, the fragility of truth, and the weight of individual responsibility. Hamlet's struggle is not merely a personal tragedy but a microcosm of the human struggle to find meaning and authenticity in a world often perceived as chaotic and absurd. As he reflects on the skull of Yorick, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio" (Act V, Scene 1), the stark reality of death and the transient nature of life are brought into the spotlight, which is a central theme in existentialist thought.

Branagh's film, by embracing the play's length and complexity, amplifies these philosophical and existential dimensions, allowing contemporary audiences to engage with Hamlet's enduring questions in an intuitive and impactful way. The film serves as a powerful reminder that the anxieties and uncertainties faced by Hamlet are not confined to a specific historical period but remain deeply relevant to the human experience across ages.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, particularly as brought to life by Kenneth Branagh, remains a profound and enduring work of art precisely because of its steady exploration of philosophical and existential themes. Its examination of the human search for meaning, the burden of choice, and the confrontation with

mortality continues to resonate with audiences, solidifying its place as a play for all ages, prompting reflection and dialogue on the fundamental questions that define our existence. The echoes of Hamlet's internal struggles and his tender questioning of life and death will continue to echo through literature and thought for generations to come. "Even if Hamlet is a hero-villain, he remains the Western hero of consciousness" (Bloom 1998:409; Bloom 2009: 1).

To Hazlitt in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, Hamlet the Dane is described as a great moralizer, the prince of philosophical speculators, thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of the human character, and as little of a hero as a man can well be (Hazlitt 1817; 1983).

This is that Hamlet the Dane, whom we read of in our youth, and whom we may be said almost to remember in our after-years; he who made that famous soliloquy on life, who gave the advice to the players, who thought 'this goodly frame, the earth, a steril promontory, and this brave o'er-hanging firmament, the air, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours'; whom 'man delighted not, nor woman neither'; he who talked with the grave-diggers, and moralised on Yorick's skull; the school-fellow of Rosencrans and Guildenstern at Wittenberg; the friend of Horatio; the lover of Ophelia; he that was mad and sent to england; the slow avenger of his father's death; who lived at the court of Horwendillus five hundred years before we were born, but all whose thoughts we seem to know as well as we do our own, because we have read them in Shakespear(cited by Bloom 2008:150).

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