

## **Representation of the Ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as Hamlet's 'Alter-ego', voicing out the Mental Anxiety of the Protagonist in the Prison of Denmark**

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### **Abstract**

The representation of the Ghost or supernaturalism in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be taken as involving study of such themes as grace, regeneration and morality that is a study of element strictly supernatural. Apart from this perspective of viewing the Ghost in *Hamlet* as mere supernatural element, it can also be taken into consideration that the Ghost of Hamlet's father is the manifestation of the 'alter ego' of the protagonist's ownself. The Opening Scene of the play provides the information that the king of Denmark has died, the son of the former king has not succeeded to the throne and the incestuous marriage between Claudius and the queen, Gertrude. This is also the scene in which the Ghost is first introduced. Another striking aspect is that the Ghost of the former king is visible to the eyes of Horatio, Merellus, Barnardo and the others but does not converse with them, it only speaks to Hamlet and tells whatever Hamlet's inner mind wants to hear. From this point it can be interpreted that the Ghost is the external projection of Hamlet's own repressed desire. According to Freudian psycho analytical perspective Projection is a way of copying with one's unwanted motives by shifting them onto someone else. The anxiety arising from the internal conflict can then be lessened. In almost identical fashion Hamlet may have a desire in his Id to kill Claudius and to possess his mother. But his Superego will not allow him even to consider such a thing. Therefore the Ghost is nothing but the projection of Hamlet's 'alter ego' that unconsciously gives vent to the mental anxiety within hamlet that was previously suppressed in his Id. Also the Ghost symbolises the breakdown of the walls of the world between the natural and the supernatural as also the 'alter ego' of his ownself or the undifferentiated conscious from which Hamlet suffers in the text.

**Key Words:** Shakespeare, Hamlet, Ghost, 'alter ego', Freud, Psychoanalysis, Projection, Id, Ego, Superego.

## Representation of the Ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as Hamlet's 'Alter-ego', voicing out the Mental Anxiety of the Protagonist in the Prison of Denmark

Supernaturalism, a belief in an other worldly realm or reality that, in one way or another, is commonly associated with all forms of religion. Evidence of neither the idea of nature nor the experience of a purely natural realm is found among primitive people, who inhabit a wonderworld charged with the sacred power, spirits and deities. Primitive man associates whatever is experienced as uncanny or powerful with the presence of a sacred or numinous power; yet he constantly lives in a profane realm that is made comprehensible by a paradigmatic, mythical, sacred realm. In the higher religions a gulf usually is created between the sacred and the profane, or the here and the beyond and it is only with the appearance of this gulf that a distinction becomes drawn between the natural and the supernatural, a distinction that is not found, for example in the classical religious traditions of Greece and China. This tradition of representing the supernatural has been used as a recurrent theme in literature down the ages. In the realm of Elizabeth and James especially during the last two decades of the sixteenth century and roughly the first two of the seventeenth, English drama reached the highest pick of creative achievement.

The supernatural elements those are apparent in most of Shakespeare's plays significantly in *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup> and *Macbeth*<sup>2</sup>, have their roots in Elizabethan era. Shakespeare, the master playwright of all the times, the supernatural wordsmith used the supernatural themes and elements into his plays in order to express the concerns of the Elizabethan society on the supernaturalism and their attitude towards them. But apart from presenting the supernatural traits in his play as "the plays of the time for the people of the time", it is quite natural for a dramatist like Shakespeare to unfold another major and vital aspect of the drama through the tool of supernatural element. In both of his major tragedies *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* Shakespeare shapes the mental anxiety of the protagonist in form of the Ghost in *Hamlet* and the witches in *Macbeth*.

The aim of this paper is to cover the functioning of the Ghost in *Hamlet* as the projection of the 'alter ego'<sup>3</sup> of the protagonist that determines the course of his action. An 'alter ego' (Latin "the other I") is a second self which is believed to be distinct from a person's normal or original personality. A person who has an 'alter ego' is said to lead a double life. The term appeared in common usage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century when dissociative identity disorder was first described by psychologists. Cicero<sup>4</sup> was the first to coin the term as part of his philosophical construct in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome. Although by representing the image of the 'Ghost' Shakespeare, on the surface wanted to cater to the taste of the Plebeian audience. But this paves a broader premise for the readers to interpret the 'Ghost' as the 'alter ego' of the protagonist.

Hamlet is galvanised into activity by the news of the appearance of a Ghost that resembles his dead father. On the platform that night he sees it and is determined to it whatever happens. It is explanation he wants; explanation and a course of action. "Let me not burst in ignorance", (Act I, scene iv) he cries "What should we do?". Though it is specific explanation – why the Ghost has come – and a specific course of action – what the Ghost wants him to do – that he seeks, his words have a wider perspective. The Ghost may have

some secret, some unimaginable truth to bring relief from those ‘thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls’ (Act I, scene iv) an explanation why things are as they are and a directive for meaningful action. To his demands in both their specific and their general senses he receives, a more than sufficient response.

Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s Ghost has multiple implications besides morality and each of these is related somehow to hallucination. Seeing the spirit or communicating with them can be interpreted as Hallucination. Also the Ghost symbolises the breakdown of the walls of the world between natural and supernatural as also the undifferentiated consciousness from which Hamlet suffers in the text. Psychoanalytic criticism<sup>5</sup> perceives the Ghost to be the external manifestation of Hamlet’s own repressed desire for his mother-which Ernest Jones<sup>6</sup>, a psycho analyst and Freud’s biographer observes as “Hamlet’s phallic authority has been challenged by a kin.”

A ‘Situational Monomaniac’ Hamlet is too obsessed with his mother’s incestuous remarriage to look beyond it- so poisoned and shaken is his ‘single state of mind’ that he fails to acknowledge ‘the milk of human kindness’<sup>7</sup>. The appearance of the father’s Ghost can be interpreted as a result of Gertrude’s over hasty marriage with Claudius, instigating Hamlet to take revenge. This incident may be read through the Freudian lense as Hamlet’s Oedipal complex for his mother. Hamlet’s heat oppressed brain after his father’s death, failing to possess Gertrude completely, gives birth to his ‘alter ego’ in the shape of a Ghost.

According to Freudian psychoanalysis<sup>8</sup> people use defence mechanism to reduce their anxiety and guilt. Psychoanalytic theory holds that because the Id’s<sup>9</sup> unconscious demands are instinctual, infantile and amoral, they must often been blocked by the Ego<sup>10</sup> and Superego<sup>11</sup>. Because of this conflict and persistence of unsatisfied demands, anxiety and guilt are aroused. The person then seeks way to protect the Ego from his anxiety and guilt by setting up defences. This is what happens to Hamlet. His anxiety for his mother simultaneously his guilt find way out and therefore set up their defences through the form of a Ghost. In Freud’s theory, repression is the fundamental technique people use to alley anxiety caused by conflicts. In the case of his father’s death and mother’s second marriage according to Ernest Jones the association of the idea of sexuality with his mother buried since infancy can no longer be concealed from his consciousness. As A.C Bradley<sup>12</sup> well says: “Her son was forced to see in her action not only an astounding shallowness of feeling but an eruption of coarse sensuality ‘rank and gross’, speeding posthaste to its horrible delight”. Feeling which once in the infancy of long ago, were pleasurable desires can now because of his repressions only fill him with repulsion. The long “repressed” desire to take his father’s place in his mother’s affection is stimulated to unconscious activity by the sight of someone usurping this place exactly as he himself had once longed to do. More, this someone was a member of the same family, so that the actual usurpation further resembled the imaginary one in being incestuous. Without his being in the least aware of it these ancient desires are ringing in his mind are once more struggling to find conscious expression and need such an expenditure of energy again to “repress” them that he is reduced to the deplorable mental state. In terms of psychic energy repression is an expensive defence mechanism. The unconscious memories or urges continue to seek expression and may emerge in form of the repressed ‘other’ of the personality. In almost identical fashion the Ghost in *Hamlet* reveals the projection of the unconscious ‘alter ego’ of the protagonist. This kind of Projection in Freud’s theory is a way of copying with one’s unwanted motives by shifting them onto someone else. The anxiety arising from the internal conflict can then be lessened and the

problem dealt with as though it were in the external world. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist may have a strong desire to kill Claudius and possess his mother, but his conscience will not allow him even to consider such a thing. He then suspects that the Ghost of his dead father appears in front of him and instigates him to take revenge. It is this desire that Hamlet so long had cherished and lulled in his unconscious, that takes its shape in the form of a ghost. Carried to the extreme, projection is the mark of a behaviour disorder. People with this disorder project their own unacceptable hostile feeling about others into the form of their ‘other self’ that Hamlet himself has done.

The examination of the Ghost in the first scene is enough to show that the projection of the ghost is not merely a formalization or an added decoration but it also intensifies the issue of ‘alter ego’ or the ‘other self’ of the protagonist. It should indicate the unconscious effect of the thoughts and desire upon Hamlet that provokes the main action of the play. Lastly Shakespeare’s treatment of the Ghost has been described as the “dreaded sight” (Act I, scene i), an “illusion” a “spirit of health or goblin damn’d” (Act I, scene iv). Thus the opening scene of *Hamlet* creates the concept of Ghost to portray the duality within Hamlet to almost any degree.

After the first scene the appearance of the Ghost is made prominent again in Act III, scene iv, namely the closet scene, when Hamlet confronts his mother in her closet. The sudden presence of the Ghost, a dramatic shock, swings attention back to the revenge plot. Its ‘gracious figure’ (Act III, scene iv) reminds Hamlet of his duty to his father and his courtesy to his mother, obscured by his vehement obsession with sexuality. Therefore it can be perceived through the critical lense that this scene revives Hamlet’s repressed desire or his ‘alter ego’ again through the image of the Ghost. In this strange family reunion the ghost measures different levels of perception. Ghost could choose who should and should not see them and Gertrude’s blindness is necessary to the plot. Directors who banish the Ghost from the stage, destroy the contrast and leave us, like the Queen supposing it is a figment of Hamlet’s distracted imagination or ‘alter ego’ as Mephistopheles<sup>14</sup> by Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus*<sup>13</sup>

In the 1940’s Ernest Jones developed Freud’s ideas into a series of essays that culminated in his book *Hamlet and Oedipus*<sup>15</sup> (1949). Influenced by Jones’ psychoanalytic approach several productions have portrayed the ‘closet scene’ when Hamlet confronts his mother in her private quarter can be interpreted from the psycho-sexual perspective. In this reading Hamlet is disgusted by his mother’s incestuous relationship with Claudius while simultaneously feared of killing him as this would clear in Hamlet’s path to satisfy his repressed in the achievement of ‘mother-fixation’. The reappearance of the Ghost in this scene makes it clear that the desires that Hamlet so long repressed in his Id has now come to the fore front. This gives ample scope to interpret the Ghost as the ‘alter ego’ of the protagonist.

Before Ernest Jones during the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Sigmund Freud analyzed *Hamlet* in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>16</sup> (1900). Freud’s analysis starts from the premise that “the play is built upon Hamlet’s hesitation over fulfilling the task of revenge, that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for this hesitation”. After reviewing various literary theory Freud concludes that Hamlet suffers from an “Oedipal complex or the desire for the mother and the subsequent guilt is preventing him from murdering the man (Claudius) – who has done what he unconsciously wanted to do”. It can therefore be

suggested that Hamlet's apparent disgust for his mother and his intense desire to kill Claudius as articulated in the shape of a Ghost in subsequent scenes is the greatest clue to interpret the Ghost as the 'other self' of the protagonist.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Hamlet" is a tragedy, written by William Shakespeare, at an uncertain date between 1599 and 1602.

<sup>2</sup>"Macbeth" is a tragedy, written by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1599 and 1606.

<sup>3</sup>'alter ego' is a second self, which is believed to be distinct from a person's normal or original personality.

<sup>4</sup>Cicero was a Roman philosopher, politician, lawyer, orator, political theorist, consul and constitutionalist.

<sup>5</sup>Psychoanalytic Criticism is a literary criticism or literary theory, which in method concept or form is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis.

<sup>6</sup>Ernest Jones was a British neurologist and psychoanalyst and Freud's biographer.

<sup>7</sup>Shakespeare, "Macbeth", Act I, scene v.

<sup>8</sup>Freudian Psycho analyses, is a set of psychological and psychotherapeutic theories created by Sigmund Freud.

<sup>9</sup>Id is the set of a un-coordinated instinctual trends.

<sup>10</sup>Ego is the organised realistic part that mediates between Id and Super ego.

<sup>11</sup>Super ego plays the critical and moralising role.

<sup>12</sup>A.C Bradley was an English literary scholar and critic best remember for his works on Shakespeare.

<sup>13</sup>"Doctor Faustus" is a play by Christopher Marlowe, based on German story "Faust".

<sup>14</sup>Mephistopheles is a demon, featured in German folklore, used by Marlowe in "Doctor Faustus".

<sup>15</sup>"Hamlet and Oedipus" is a book by Ernest Jones on psychoanalyses.

<sup>16</sup>"The Interpretations of Dreams" is a book by psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud.

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