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ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY – A KEY TO THE HAMLETS OF THIS WORLD & THEIR  
THEATRICAL BEHAVIOUR

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**Abstract**

Respected and presented in theaters around the world in different languages and cultures, Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* illustrates how the road to hell is paved with what looks like good intentions, when the very smart and creative young prince, who proves himself to be detached from his feelings, is unexpectedly confronted by his dead father's ghost demanding Hamlet act to revenge his murder. Consistent with Adler's view that emotions serve a definite goal, Hamlet's wild, creative, theatrical behaviour is seen as a delaying tactic, a side show, since he cannot find the will to act. His highly entertaining dithering results in deceit, abuse, and blatant murder. As a young university student returning to the Danish court, he lacks personal experience of the meaning of life, and is also without any apparent religious or social creed. Post-traumatic growth cannot be his as he fights with himself in reaction to this unwanted and unexpected life test. Adlerian Psychology's lifestyle assessment tool (The World is... I am.... ∴ I shall), which is not so easy to see clearly when the individual is in a favorable situation), is used here to clarify Hamlet's personal psychology and growing awareness of his inner self. The universal popularity of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* across time and different cultures is a recognition of the prevalence of this character in human societies, and to Adler's greatness in understanding the theatrics.

**Keywords:** *Shakespeare, Hamlet, Alfred Adler, Individual Psychology, Cognitive Lifestyle, Will Power.*

*"Emotions express themselves in a sudden flow under the pressure of some conscious or unconscious necessity. Like character traits they have a definite goal and direction."*

*"O Cursed Spite that Ever I was Born to Set It Right"*

**Hamlet At a Threshold – The Will to Act, or Not to Act – "The Readiness is All"**

Hamlet is the young student prince of the realm before his father's death and was likely betrothed to a sweet courtly lady. He is extremely creative, intellectually gifted, a talented orator, and given to having fun with his friends, being not

overburdened with emotions and feelings which he considers a sign of woman's frailty.

The play begins with Hamlet in a dramatic, overpowering encounter with the ghost of his dead father, the old king, who bellows out to his son to take revenge, telling him that he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle Claudius to take the throne. The ensuing play is all about young Hamlet not being up to this life test, and the murderous consequences that fall out from his protracted thinking. The play's events show themselves to be side effects of Hamlet's struggle to do anything of consequence within his own growing awareness of himself. (Bloom, 2000, 201-217)

Having returned from university for his father's funeral, young Hamlet has no life experience regarding the meaning of life to help him and seems devoid of any social or religious credo. He cannot find the will power to act and castigates himself for being overly thoughtful and for not being able to find the emotion he deems he should have to revenge the murder of his father.

*...Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,  
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,  
A scullion! ....*

(Act 2 Scene 2)

In Melancholia as Aggression, Adler (1964) explains that melancholia presents itself as an attempt and device to achieve the goal of superiority through detours and side shows.

*The melancholic with hesitating yet aggressive attitude will use his weakness as a weapon to achieve significance and avoid responsibility. (319-321)*

Hamlet does just this, and as Adler explains, he is hypnotised by the goal of looking superior since he can cover up his own inferiority feelings. Shakespeare's **The Rape of Lucrece, (633) speaks to this human trait.**

***Men's faults do seldom to themselves appear. Their own transgressions partially they smother.***

Adler adds:

*Anxiety serves its normal purpose as safeguard, weapon, and proof of illness; violent attacks of rage at times break through as expressions of the fanaticism of weakness and as signs of the hidden activity...it may go so far as annihilation. (321)*

It does go this far when the whole court, (excepting his true friend Horatio who lives to tell us the tale) dies at the end, including Hamlet himself. Without having resolved the struggle in his creative mind, Shakespeare portrays Hamlet's issue ending through murder and death of the court.

The ghost has warned Hamlet not to contrive something or do anything against his mother:

*But howsoever thou pursuest this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once. (Act 1, scene 5)*

Hamlet does not listen. The goal of being superior to his mother the Queen is alluring. He attacks his mother viciously for jumping so quickly into his uncle Claudius' marriage bed. He tells her to put on virtue and "act as if" she is virtuous, since the habit may stick to her through use!

*"Assume a virtue, if you have it not. That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat, Of habits devil, is angel yet in this, That to the use of actions fair and good He likewise gives a frock or livery That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight, And that shall lend a kind of easiness To the next abstinence; the next more easy; For use almost can change the stamp of nature." (Act 3, scene 4)*

In his dithering but purposeful behaviour, Hamlet is equally cruel to Ophelia to whom he likely was betrothed, several times telling

her to "get thee to a nunnery".

Hamlet:.....I did love you once.

Ophelia: Indeed, my Lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet: You should not have believed me.

For virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock.

But we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

Ophelia: I was the more deceived.

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?

I am myself indifferent honest..... (Act 3, scene 1)

Ophelia's father Polonius and the king do not initially see through Hamlet's feigning madness and theatrics and wonder if this could be about his love for his daughter Ophelia. They plan to uncover the truth by listening in on Hamlet behind a curtain.

This costs Polonius his life when Hamlet unintentionally runs him through the curtain with his sword and kills him. Hamlet shows no emotion or remorse for this murderous act, referring to Polonius as a foolish, prating knave (Act 3, scene 4) and saying:

*I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.*

Ophelia goes mad and drowns, possibly as a suicide and revenge. Her father Polonius, whom she deeply loved, has been killed by Hamlet. In addition, Hamlet, whom she also loved, has cruelly rejected her which she has taken to heart as though it's her fault and woman's frailty.

#### Adler's Cognitive Lifestyle Assessment

Adler (1964, p.329) writes that up until the modern era it was chiefly the poets who best succeeded in getting the clue to a person's cognitive lifestyle that is developed early in childhood.

William Wordsworth (2008) gives testimony to this in his 1802 poem "My heart leaps up" which catches a glimpse of what Adler unveils as cognitive style of life, and this before the onset of psychology as a separate discipline. Wordsworth writes:

*The child is father of the Man.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson (Kazan, & Aaron, 1958) writes on the importance of an individual's personal thinking:

*The key to every man is his thought. Sturdy and defying though he look, he has a helm which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified. He can only be reformed by showing him a new idea which commands his own.*

Adler (1964) is comprehensive in his description of the cognitive plan which he calls style of life and which he says is developed early in a child's life:

*By the time a child is five years old his attitude to his environment is usually so fixed and mechanized that it proceeds in more or less the same direction for the rest of his life. His apperception of the external world remains the same. (p. 189)*

*The style of life is the more general concept, comprising, in addition to the goal, the individual's opinion of himself and the world and his unique way of striving for the goal in his particular situation. (p. 172)*

Dreikurs (1953, 43) adds:

*Character is therefore simply the manifestation of a certain plan which the child has evolved and to which he/she will adhere throughout the rest of his or her life.*

In Adlerian psychology, an individual's lifestyle assessment is often shared with the client as: The World is... I am.... ∴ I shall. This is a practical tool that is used to help individuals understand themselves better; an ongoing task that Shakespeare clearly knew well. (Belangee, 2019; Dillman Taylor & Mullen, 2019; Eriksson, 2018;).

Applied to the character of Hamlet as can be gleaned from Shakespeare's play, the following may be ventured:

**Hamlet's World:** *The world is pure theatre. There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. Women are frail and emotional.*

**Hamlet's Self-Image:** *I am a really smart, well educated prince. That says it all.*

**Hamlet's Goal:** *I shall be vigilant and sure before I act. I shall protect my genius and superior mind.*

Once the goal of superiority has been made concrete, Adler says there are no mistakes made in the cognitive style of life. (Adler, 1964, p.188). This fits Hamlet.

In line with his hesitating, aggressive, rational mind, Hamlet's closing words before the last murderous scene are (Act 5, Scene 2):

*If it be now, '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...*

And then before he dies:

*The rest is silence.*

Hamlet is still getting ready at the end.

### Conclusion

There are many modern Hamlets in the world with differing names.

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