



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Fetishizing of the Ghost in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A  
Psychoanalytic Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

Freudian investigation of the unconscious has reasonably altered the interpretation of Shakespeare's seminal work, *Hamlet*. This research paper analyses the notion of 'Fetishism' with reference to Shakespeare's eponymous play, *Hamlet*. During the course of this study, an attempt has been made to establish that the Ghost in the play is a conspicuous representation of the psychoanalytic fetish of *Hamlet*. Moreover, the unconscious motivations that underlie the development of fetishes and the way they affect the thoughts, feelings and behavior on a conscious level will also be explored. The paper first charts out the intricate patterns associated with the concept of 'Fetishism' and then makes an effort to establish *Hamlet* as a fetishist play. Hence, examining the tangled nature of *Hamlet*'s unconscious oedipal desire is the basis for this psychoanalytic study of the play.

**Keywords**

Fetishism, *Hamlet*, Madness, Oedipal Complex, Psychoanalytic

**Introduction**

*The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* (2012) describes fetishism as a 'paraphilia' (mental disorder) in which erotic interest and satisfaction are centered on an inanimate object. Psychologists have made liberal use of the term ever since 1887 when Alfred Binet first applied it to describe a certain kind of unusual male sexual desire. The term was popularized by Krafft-Ebing, a sexologist who termed it a kind of pathological condition, a deviant sexual practice, and a perversion (Winokur, 2004). 'Fetishists' as a category describes those men who develop attachments to objects or events or any external phenomenon and seek sexual gratification with or through that. In 1905, in his *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (2011) offered a theory to account for this perversion. In his view, the fetish originated with the male child's horror of female castration. Confronted with the mother's lack of a penis, the boy represses this lack and finds some object to stand for and substitute for the missing organ, thus relieving the anxiety and restoring in a displaced way the erotic attachment to the female (Wray, 1998). This substitution, Freud (cited in Livett, 2003) argued, allows the fetishist to derive sexual pleasure where normative sexual intercourse does not.

Moreover, according to Irving I. Edgar (1961), the psychoanalysts investigate a close relationship existing between myth, day-dream, dream, and creative expression: "Since myth and dream are considered wish fulfillments of the race and of the individual, respectively, then poetic creative expression also represents the

expression of deep conflicts, the solution of deep wish fulfillments" (p. 353). Arthur Wormhoudt (1949) states that "Hamlet's unconscious attachment to his mother accounts plausibly for the delay and a good many other puzzling factors in the play" (p. 2). He carries the interpretation deeper using the psychoanalytic road to the oral level and concludes that "Hamlet may be considered a very nearly perfect oedipal defense for the more deeply repressed oral conflict" (p. 14).

For Irving I. Edgar (1961), the explanation of the character of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and of the play itself, "as that of an Oedipus situation, is a logical result of the fundamental principles of psychoanalytic psychology. It is necessarily dependent on the acceptance of the presence of primitive forces and motivations in the Unconscious and of their transformation into sublimatory channels of socially-accepted activity" (p. 353). Fritz Wittels (1944) also studies *Hamlet* as "the great Oedipus tragedy of the late Renaissance" (p. 377) and argues that "Hamlet cannot love Ophelia because he has a mother fixation". He also failed to take his father's revenge, and could not fulfill the ghost's command to kill his step-father "because the murder of his father was a deed which Hamlet, himself, has long harboured as a design in his unconscious" (p. 377). All these crucial factors contributed to Hamlet's irresolution and hesitancy.

Likewise, Ernest Jones (cited in Edgar, 1961), the founder of the psychoanalytic movement in Great Britain in his essay, "A Psychoanalytic Study of Hamlet," also explored the whole subject of Shakespeare's Hamlet in all its psychoanalytic manifestations and meanings. According to Edgar (1961), Jones' essay is "indeed an expert piece of scholarship that deals elaborately and at great length with the whole problem of the psychogenesis of poetic creative expression as well as with the particular problem and interpretation of Hamlet as an Oedipus' tragedy" (p. 354). Edgar maintains that Jones comprehensively explains "the thesis that Hamlet is merely an unusually elaborated form of a vast group of legends and the main theme of which is the highly elaborated and disguised account of a boy's love of his mother and consequent jealousy and hatred toward his father" (p. 354).

The ongoing discussion is enough to showcase that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been interpreted as an Oedipus tragedy and Hamlet's irresolution and hesitancy have been explored using a psychoanalytic perspective. But this research paper investigates the notion of 'Fetishism' with reference to Shakespeare's character, Hamlet. It is to be established that the Ghost in the play is a noticeable representation of the psychoanalytic fetish of Hamlet. In other words, how the unconscious motivations that underlie the development of fetishes and the way they affect the thoughts, feelings and behavior of Hamlet on a conscious level, are yet to be explored and interpreted.

### **Fetishizing of the Ghost in *Hamlet*: A Psychoanalytic Perspective**

Hamlet becomes a fetishist in that he has difficulties in separating from his mother with whom he unconsciously seeks union. This poses particular difficulties because to be merged with the mother risks not only his sense of 'existential annihilation', but also an experience of castration. He clings to the fantasy of the Ghost of his father as a defense against these dangers. If he is to be merged with his mother at all, she will have to be as masculine as his father in order to "ward off the threat of feminization attendant upon that merger" (Eby, 1999). The Ghost is a sign of something missing or we may say something omitted. According to Marjorie Garber (2010), "the Ghost is the concretization of a missing presence, the sign of what

is there by not being there" (p. 173). It is a symbol of the veiled phallus and a reminder of the loss that is why the guards on seeing it let out a cry which signifies both its presence and absence: "Tis here!" "Tis here!" "Tis here!" "Tis Gone!" (1.1.141-142).

Interestingly, there is also a suggestion of Hamlet's father undergoing the process of castration. The mysterious ghost of Old Hamlet, called by Hamlet the "spirit in arms" (1.2. 250) contrasts sharply with the figure who receives the poison in the ear: "Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand/ of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd, / cut off in the blossoms of my sin" (1.5. 74-76). Here 'cutting off' is suggestive of depriving Hamlet's father of his phallic pride. Therefore, the Ghost becomes more powerful as a fantasy than when it was alive. The dead man is not only an emblem of a limit but also a violation of that limit. In a way, his phallic fear is transferred to his son.

It is important to note that a fetish simultaneously tends to protect against castration and threatens the fetishist with its presence. The three "Weird Sisters" in Macbeth not only predict but also precipitate Macbeth's fondest wishes, his secret dreams of power. We see that during the course of the play he struggles against those phantoms, trying to eradicate or master his own fears. Though Hamlet also tries to do the same thing, he too finds himself caught in an inescapable bind. By endowing his mother with phallic properties, he identifies with her in order to claim those properties for himself but "this identification leads to an experience of merger and dissolution, which portends the fetishist's, (in this case Hamlet's) fear of castration and annihilation" (Eby, 1999, p. 73). Caught in an inexorable situation, Hamlet has to perform a duty that can satisfy his fetishistic tendencies. But when he actually gets an opportunity to kill Claudius, it is at the expense of his own annihilation. As he dies without lineage, so his fetish dies with him.

The castration complex is closely associated with the Oedipus complex. According to this complex when a young child comes face to face with the laws of society (including incest and murder), he tends to align prohibition with castration (Felluga). Hamlet is also facing the oedipal crises. In wanting his mother's attention, he considers his father to be his rival. With time as explained by psychoanalysts in such cases, he becomes aware of the major difference that exists between him and his female counterpart, i. e., his mother. The loss of phalli in his mother seems to him to be a personal loss as he starts fearing this phallusless state. The individual in the Freudian scenario is thrust into fetishistic behavior via the attempt to retain a sense of autonomy by maintaining the notion, that the mother has a penis.

Fetishism is an always-failing attempt at denying the existence of the gendered other (Winokur, 2004). This is the beginning of castration anxiety. Consequently, Hamlet displaces his sexual impulses from his mother to his fetish, the Ghost, who becomes an ideal for him. This ideal, derived from the paternal figure but exalted, is his protection in the struggle against parricidal impulses and against submission to the king (Kris, 1952), whose dictates if followed can make him strong enough to counter his desires. As he himself states that he will "wipe away all fond records/ ...And thy (Ghost's) commandment alone shall live" (1.5.95-96). Freud (1997) in "The Passing of The Oedipus Complex" has therefore stated that in such a case, the authority of the father or of the parents is interjected into the ego and there forms the kernel of the superego, which takes its severity from the father, perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so ensures the ego against a recurrence of object-cathexis.

Notably, in the course of a discussion of the differences between *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*, Freud (2010) in *The Interpretations of Dreams* indicates that the latter play represents a secular advance in the emotional life of mankind. What Oedipus does (kills his father and marries his mother), Hamlet fantasizes but represses, so that “we only learn of this fantasy’s existence from its inhibiting consequences” (Garber, 2010, p. 226). The cause of fetishistic behavior as a pattern of sexual gratification involves doubts about one’s own masculinity and potency and a fear of rejection and humiliation. Through his fetishistic practices and an association with an external object, which comes to symbolize for him the desired sexual object, the individual apparently safeguards himself and also compensates somewhat for his feelings of inadequacy. This, Hamlet, does by arranging a play in order to catch his uncle’s conscience. Though he succeeds in doing so this confirmation brings him face to face with the shadow that he sees in his mother’s second husband: “You are the queen/ your husband’s brother’s wife” (3.4.14-15). Claudius has the power to act what Hamlet can only nurture in the innermost recesses of his mind.

The Ghost as a fetish becomes the site of tightly-wound defense against the reappearance of a wish which is found to be unacceptable to conscious thought. According to Lacan and Freud, if a child forecloses the idea of castration, he rejects the Name-of-the-Father in favor of the Desire-of-the-Mother. Rather than accepting the loss of the phallus, “the child wishes to be the mother’s phallus, the completion of her desire, thus rejecting the limits implied by castration” (cited in Garber, 2010, p. 177). However, Hamlet is unable to cope with the presence of such a desire so he goes to his mother to condemn her actions. In the closet scene, Hamlet appears to lose his emotional control and dwells upon the sexual details of his mother’s relations with his uncle with an “obsessiveness that borders on pathological” (Cantor, 2004, p. 21). He compares his father with “Hyperion”, “Mars” and “Jove” in order to assert the masculinity, he is in danger to lose and which his mother lacks: “but to live/ In a rank sweat of an enseamed bed/ stewed in corruption, honeying and making love/ over nasty sty” (3.4.110-113).

At this moment, the Ghost, which we have established is Hamlet’s fetish, appears to remind him of his previous commands. But it has a slightly different function to perform here. The Ghost though seeking revenge through Hamlet’s agency is at the same time apprehensive about Gertrude’s safety. Here its position as Hamlet’s fetish becomes rather obvious as how can he inflict pain on the object of his desire. That is why the Ghost asks Hamlet not to “Taint (his) mind, nor let (his) soul contrive/ Against (his) mother aught” (1.5.85-86). Hence, it is Hamlet’s fantasy, not Gertrude’s actions that are to be blamed. Or if no blame is to be attached, at least there is no accusation against her. Freud (1927) came to realize in his essay on “Fetishism” that the fetishist is able at one and the same time to believe in his fantasy and to recognize that it is nothing but a fantasy. And yet, the fact of recognizing fantasy as fantasy in no way reduces its power over the individual. Gertrude is nurturing no fantasy so she does not share Hamlet’s fetish. For her, his devotion to the Ghost seems completely weird: “you bend your eye on vacancy, / And with the incorporeal air to hold discourse” (3.4.138-139).

Now the question arises about the reality of the Ghost. The Ghost in *Hamlet* appears four times and is seen by four people including Hamlet. According to John Russel Brown (2001), the Ghost of *Hamlet* is of mixed pedigree and has a varying reality. It calls for revenge in the manner of the Senecan revenge plays of the Elizabethan times but its “martial stalk” and “majestical presence” (1.1.66, 143) differentiate it from a common lot of ghosts. As is the case with the Ghost in *Julius*

*Caesar*, seen only by Brutus, Hamlet is suspicious about his father's ghost being an "emanation" of his own melancholy and not a supernatural being. Horatio, a skeptic also calls it an "illusion" (1.1.127) on his first encounter with it. The Ghost is though, an objective reality, quite acceptable to the Elizabethan audience, is also a creation of Hamlet's mind. It emerges from his subconscious and he at first feels uneasy to accept its uncanny appearance:

Why the sepulcher,  
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,  
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws  
To cast thee up again (1.4.48-51)

According to Alison Ferris (2003), paranormal exists deeper in the suburban unconscious than anybody might have imagined" (p. 45). Obviously, it is really difficult for Hamlet to acknowledge the presence of those lurking thoughts which are now oozing out from his subconscious and becoming a part of his conscious. Horatio is sure that "this spirit dumb to us, will speak to (Hamlet)" (1.1.171-172). It is Hamlet who is influenced the most by the appearance of the Ghost and during the course of the play he develops an unremitting demand of the Ghost.

Moreover, a person with a fetish often spends a significant amount of time thinking about the object of the fetish, therefore, Hamlet continuously cogitates about the appearance of the Ghost and the disturbing revelation it has made. From the "devil" it becomes a "gracious" (3.4.104-105) figure for him. While the Ghost speaks to him, he mostly remains silent as if gripped by its omniscient presence. It is interesting that when the Ghost tells Hamlet that his uncle has killed it, Hamlet ejaculates "O my prophetic soul"! as if he already knows what the reality is and it is just being confirmed. With this reality reappears all his hidden oedipal tendencies that are thwarted by his Uncle. The Ghost does not appear after the closet scene, rather it becomes a part of Hamlet's consciousness "which supplies all the Ghost had stood for" (Brown, 1992). The Ghost, as discussed by Rebecca Ferguson (1998) with reference to Toni Morrison's uncanny Ghost of *Beloved*, is something supposedly dead returning to life, yet in reality, nothing new or alien, but familiar and old established in mind (p. 158-159). Such fetishes are a natural manifestation of an unconscious attempt to reach a higher state of consciousness, fill an emotional need, resolve a disturbance or finish something unfinished.

The contents of the collective unconscious are called archetypes. He regards mother-archetype to be very significant in a young man's life. In *Hamlet*, the unavailability of this archetype forces him to personify it and turn it into something else i.e., the Ghost. In a way, it becomes his fixation. 'Fixation' as a generic term "encompasses all types of repetitive thought patterns and fantasies" involving sexual and spiritual fetishes. It is clear that the Ghost will like to speak to Hamlet alone and he is disregarding the advice of his companions and is prepared to follow it at any cost. Hamlet who after the death of his father has disengaged himself from the normal activities of life now finds a purpose i.e., to avenge his father's murder. However, his fixation deprives him of natural relationships. Neither does he deals with his mother as a son should nor does he remain loyal to Ophelia's love.

In the study of perversions, the patients become fixated on a single type of object or occurrence, which severely impedes sexual excitation. The patient loses all charms and interest in the erotic activity. This particular impulse greatly diminishes, insofar as the required object is found not in its place. Fetishistic arousal is a problem when it interferes with normal sexual behavior. In the play, having once loved Ophelia, Hamlet ceases to do so. The apparent reason behind this can be his preoccupation with his mother's conduct which has poisoned his whole imagination. Hamlet is haunted by the horrible idea that he has been deceived in Ophelia as he has been in his mother. When Hamlet goes to Ophelia he is in a garb of a distracted lover. In fact, the garb serves a fetishistic purpose as it shows how engrossed he is in his madness. His disgust with sex becomes obvious when he condemns Ophelia's behavior: "you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance" (3.1.143). His sexual alienation in his conversation with Ophelia is typically hysterical. Even, in the play within the play scene, Hamlet insults Ophelia with his bawdy touches of sarcasm. In fact, as is the case with fetishists, Hamlet seeks sexual gratification through the presence of his fetish while renouncing all other existing relationships in his life.

Accordingly, when Hamlet first appears on the stage, he is in mourning. His attire reflects his grief-stricken state of mind but after his meeting with the Ghost he pretends to appear to others as an insane person by putting on "an antic disposition" (1.5.325) and wears his costume in the corresponding disarray,

Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbraced,

No hat upon his head; his stocking fouled

Ungartered and down gyved to his ankle (2.1.135-136)

We argue that to read Hamlet's madness only in terms of mental illness will completely ignore the peculiar psychosomatic pressures he is burdened with. Hamlet is obsessed with the loss of both his mother and father and he has to learn to live with it. Freud in "Mourning Beyond Melancholia" describes such obsession, when it reaches the state of melancholia, as a kind of fetishism, a privatizing and husbanding of grief, a refusal to let go. In Hamlet, this condition is exemplified by his first soliloquy: "O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt (1.2.129-150). Fetishism generates melancholy and while talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet without feigning madness truthfully states his condition: "lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise" (2.2.329-330). Gertrude also talks about Hamlet's "black and grained spot" (3.4.88) which is definitely "a sign of mourning, of negation, of absence, of the impossible desire" (Garber, 2010, p. 184). Though he continually represses his formative drives, but they determine his behaviors and beliefs.

Hamlet is pained by the memory of his mother's passionate attachment to his father: "Heaven and earth, /Must I remember? Why she would hang on him/ As if increase of appetite had grown/ By what it fed on" (1.2.142-145). Remembering in the play becomes an obsessive concern, in effect "fetishizing the remembered persons, events or commands so that they become virtually impossible to renounce or relinquish" (Garber, 2010, p. 206). The Ghost also commands Hamlet not to "let the royal bed of Denmark be/ A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.82-83). It forces Hamlet to take the relationship between his mother and uncle as incestuous. In fact, it is like giving voice to Hamlet's own covert longing which is fulfilled by Claudius. Ernest Jones (cited in Cantor, 2004), Freud's biographer and disciple, in his

*Hamlet and Oedipus*, also claims that the “Prince hesitates to kill Claudius because he identifies too closely with his uncle as a man who has acted out Hamlet’s secret desire, to kill his father and marry his mother” (p. 21). Interestingly, when the task is carried out by someone else, he is no more afraid of his father and transfers his desires to his fetish.

### **Conclusion**

It has been established that the Ghost serves as Hamlet’s fetish, we should not be misled into thinking that it becomes an object of worship for him as fetishes are commonly considered to be. The object i.e., the Ghost is being used as a conduit to reach an altered state or a higher state of consciousness; at least that is what is being attempted by the fetishist, whether he realizes it on a conscious level or not. From a mere student of theology, teeming with intellectual jargon, he becomes a wise philosopher who acknowledges that divinity shapes our ends. Hamlet has two goals to achieve through his fetish: to gain an understanding of his hidden fears about his own sexual impulses and after validating his suspicions about his uncle, to avenge him. He is successful in achieving both. But as the play proceeds his fetish becomes a permanent part of his psyche and thus the need for it to appear in an external form diminishes. The Ghost turns out to be an inevitable psychological desire which ultimately leads him toward his death.

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