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The Uncanny: Hamlet as a Psychoanalytic Tragedy

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-FIGURES REPRESENTED-

-MAJOR CHARACTERS-

HAMLET, Son to the former, and Nephew to the present King of Denmark

GHOST, Spirit to the former King of Denmark

CLAUDIUS, King of Denmark

KANT, A perturbed onlooker

NATURE, A mystifying sort which tends to wild

SCHELLING, Kant with a little more bling, roommate to Hegel at Tübingen seminary

FREUD, Father to two sons

JENTSCH, First Son to Freud and/or Grandfather (depending on how you look at it)

TODOROV, Second Son to Freud

-MINOR CHARACTERS-

CHORUS, Porters, attendants, ladies, lords, & men – with the voice of reason, what doors might they open?

WORD, The protagonist, also known as the ask & the answer, the sometimes exotic dancer

MEMORY (she/her), Love's chosen drag name

IMAGINATION, A sweet fantasy

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, A delight twice as nice as Imagination's vice

PLAY, Everything – alternatively, and sometimes at the same time – Nothing

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-ACT I-

-SCENE 1-

[A thumb uncorks some crystalline vessel, and out rises aromas that twinkle as they ripple. An incense of a different kind, the scents know not “seems” but “is,”¹ they jog the mind to ponder and defy what had formerly seemed merely didactic.]

MEMORY at her post, reclining on the couch, extravagantly dressed in full drag attire to the hue of bright orange. If you squint a little, she seems to blend into the couch—or the couch into her—no one’s ever been quite sure. Behind lurks the practitioner chair.

Enter FREUD, alone, cigar dangling in his left hand—always in his left hand. It’s closer to the heart that way, and home is where he goes on psychoanalytic holiday.

You’re reminded of the time he said, “[Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar](#),” but alas you can’t quite remember if he said it exactly that way. It’s his ‘weapon in the combat of life’—you roll your eyes—but the word to be heard leaves you alert in surprise—

FREUD

Who’s there?

MEMORY

Me. Rise, and unfold yourself.

¹ Hamlet, in Act I, Scene 2, famously says to his mother Gertrude: “Seems,” madam, nay it is, I know not “seems.”

FREUD

Lo, but *you* ought to unfold *yourself*, in all your sumptuous glory.

MEMORY

Quite right, but hesitate not, for decisiveness is merry.

MEMORY slowly, tastefully, sits upright, shifts a little, loosens her kimono, and unfolds.

FREUD's gaze voraciously imbibes. He enters, and is transported home.

And of all the words which encircle him in wonder, the lone one he remembers is thus:
"uncanny."

When he returns he makes note of his most recent word-association exercise, writing atop in letters big and bold, cigar enthroned:

DAS UNHEIMLICHE.

'THE UNCANNY.'

And what ensues is an etymological ruse; it expounds a concept terrible and alive.

He's dictionary-diligent, seeks translations across alphabets, catalogues all mentions, and ruminates without pretension.

He thinks to the time he read his first Son, JENTSCH, [The Sandman by ETA Hoffman](#) and how his Son reacted with fearful delight and how he himself was left in bewilderment² alike.

But the more entangled he grows in MEMORY the more his Son assumes the form of his Grandfather. The [Oedipus complex](#) turns and sets its sights on him and with great chagrin he remembers JENTSCH fixated on children even before him.

He pages through JENTSCH's work, "[On the Psychology of the Uncanny](#)," yet the same devouring desire decides he must criticize what he, left alone, would have himself surmised.

So he does. With a nasty bite on his cigar—it is just a cigar, after all—he pours himself over the parchment and pants and snuffs and smokes and groans—and with a flourish writes an [essay](#) the whole world would come to know.

FREUD

"Das Unheimliche."

² Freud and 'bewilderment' part

The Uncanny.

In it, he criticizes JENTSCH, peruses etymological evidence, before directing this same erotic energy toward [his new favorite philosopher](#): SCHELLING.

FREUD

What a limited substrate is Jentsch! And with observations so infertile in function. To think the “uncanny” as synonymous with what is merely frightening is *such* a gross reduction! That to achieve the uncanny, hesitation be the lone condition—what folly it would be if e’er I weren’t here to spare *real* erudition.

Enter SCHELLING as an illusory figment of FREUD’s love-tossed imagination, a Ghost or a Geist or a spirit unsure, that uncertainty occludes the very eye you’ve been looking for.

SCHELLING

Alas! Feast thy eyes upon my erudition exercise:

“Unheimlich” is the name for everything

That ought to have remained secret and

Hidden but has *instead* come to light.³

What thinks you of this dignified delight?

And FREUD, overwhelmed, enraptured, breathless and wan, races ‘cross catalytic vortex spaces where grey matter is long foregone. And he thinks and sees and feels and hears and, caught by a dripping in his left ear, Second Son TODOROV spawns.

Little JENTSCH is all grown up now—how time flies in your maelstrom of a mind—but Father FREUD’s hot on the burner; he’s got plenty of thermo to seed one’s inner inferno—and all the vectors seem somehow more phallic now, sharp-tipped swords sweet as little’s TODOROV’s even littler toes with a hint of something acrid you’ll probably never come to know. And maybe you’re better off for it; the interpretation of dreams is a livid nightmare. Reread, relive, retreat, remember: no leering succubus on thy chest can compare, to sand in your sleepy eyes and vanitas warfare!

SCHELLING has likely exited by now, FREUD is unaware how, where’s our MEMORY now?—Half-lucid and half-lunacy, cigar in tow, he’s living through Hoffman’s little scene—he used to read the story to JENTSCH and now that there’s another he might as well read “The Sandman” to the newest brother; the second Son or something to FREUD yet strangely filial to JENTSCH, an essay niggles in thy brain and hesitation’s the lone due pain...

³ Direct quote of Schelling written by Freud in “The Uncanny” translated by James Strachey (ellipses emitted for clarity reasons); in the German original: „Unh. [Das Unheimliche] nennt man Alles, was im Geheimnis, im Verborgnen... bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist.“

Family lineages are tricky these days, but no matter, for in these incestuous sheets a direct mention of Shakespeare's HAMLET leaves us writhing in our seats.

So we writhe—or do we hesitate?—JENTSCH and FREUD and TODOROV... or maybe all or none? The uncanny's pregnant with Herculean fun, FREUD's essay is all but done, and though the rest is unclear one thing's for sure: something is rotten in the state of Denmark and "Das Unheimliche" receives the page earmark.

And who better to carry on our psychoanalytic method than sweet HAMLET in mourning garments? Hard pressed to find a more introspective, turbulent, and troubled young lad, one with literary sensitivities who treats words as all he's ever had, FREUD scours the dictionary for all entries on the "unheimlich"—the 'uncanny'—yet he misses the most obvious one, little starling dove Prince of Denmark brooding in his angsty melancholy.

FREUD notes the relation of "unheimlich" and "heimlich"—literally, "unhomely" and "homely" though the former is usually translated to "uncanny"—and believes the uncanny be a subspecies of the homely, something estranged from what was familiar formerly.

FREUD

[*aside*] So enter English etymologies, literature,
 Maketh one comprehensive picture!
 Woe not! When vision eludes dictation
 And introduces strange psychological friction
 Enter studies and pontificated follies,
 The subject of the uncanny has just begun
 'Til the substance of Jentsch can nev'r be outdone!

And he reads that the etymology of "heim"—"home" in English—directly relates to words like "haunt," "settle," "dwell,"—and "hamlet."

So enter HAMLET and his words.

FREUD

... Something that ought to have remained hidden but instead has come to light...

HAMLET

Muttering under his breath, suddenly exclaims
 That time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
 That ever I was born to set it right!

FREUD

... come to light...

And like an apparition, enter the GHOST into—

HAMLET

What a sight!

A visage before my eyes!

My father!—methinks I see my father.

Such was the very armour he had on

When he the ambitious Norway combated.

Exeunt all but Hamlet

My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;

I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!

Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise,

Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

Exit.

-SCENE 2-

Enter GHOST and HAMLET

GHOST

I am thy father's spirit

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,

And brood, think, and introspect with thee alike

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are pacified as idle embers of the doleful deed

I could to thee unfold whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

Make thy two ears, like stars, start from their spheres

A dizzying madness most foul and unnatural

A murder from that incestuous, that adulterate beast,

Whose wicked flesh haunts me by day and by night

Stings my heart as a serpent spawned from Denmark's

Unweeded garden. His poison-dart sword caught my

Unsuspecting ear with surprise, a complacent nature

Confident and fair, I didn't hear who was there,

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand

Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd:

The serpent that did sting thy father's life

Now wears his crown. Hamlet, remember me:

Revenge upon him your most ecstatic strife

Dip thy pen in a well of virtuous venom

To be kind you must be cruel, and use your

Gifts well to press into wicked flesh

Words that cut deeper than a knife
 Conjure ideas strange and true
 Which no living conscience can deny.
Exit.

HAMLET

[Shaking with quivering speech]
 O God! By heavens 'tis true, 'tis true, a
 Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
 But this most foul, strange and unnatural
 Affair to perchance befall my quiet days
[Louder, with conviction]
 Dispatch myself with haste, I will
 With wings as swift as meditation or the
 Thoughts of love, put what is uncanny in its home
 And restore the order of the crown!
Exit.

-SCENE 3-

Enter FREUD and MEMORY

FREUD

Poor boy, if what Memory serves is true
 And noble, in form enthroned by virtue
 Mischief most brutish, not the least unkind
 'Tis good: what was hidden has now come to light.

MEMORY

Memory intones a faithful verse, trickles
 Down thy ear to remind of a curse
 Some say I sting, but others yet I save,
 Inducing visions and visages alike
 Which worm into thy brain, burrow
 In the mind, open up thy eyes, echo
 In thy ear with paranoia paradise. But
 I have that within which passeth show;
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
 Long permeated King Claudius,
 'Tis time I plot my own, his wheels
 Are but stagnant, it's time for him to know
 A vision seeded shall continue to grow:
 Hamlet will revenge his father's serpent foe.

Exeunt.

Enter CLAUDIUS and HAMLET, followed at a distance by NATURE and MEMORY.

CLAUDIUS

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father:
But, you must know, your father lost a father;
That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow, but pray,
Do not for ever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

NATURE

[aside to Hamlet]

That may be true, but something lies truer thus
That underneath certain sheets a serpent lurks
In the dusk. 'Tis rare and of unnatural crime
To pass to eternity before one's chosen time.

MEMORY

[Beneath]

The seed has set. Weeds grow from rank things
But what's fair bears fruit fine and true.
Hamlet must venture into the centre
And seeth through Claudius' kingly ruse.

Exeunt all but HAMLET.

HAMLET

My father lost a father but whatfore did
I lose mine? Approached by my father's Ghost,
He haunteth the inner gears of my mind,
Let it stand: I must avenge the man I love most
Yet I plot and I write, inflicting imaginings
Of must wicked spite. What more ought I do,
A fire burns in my mind and I must let it through!
Exit.

-ACT II-

*Later that evening, before the peal of midnight, HAMLET sleeps in his dressing room.
Enter a PORTER. Unnoticed, WORD silently slips in behind.*

The PORTER knocks, waking HAMLET.

He enters before a response is given, is disheveled, dirty, perhaps belonging to the GHOST night-watch party. A craze glints in his left eye but the right is duly focused on the stirring young lad in front of him. This is his regular post; he knows HAMLET's been a bit more of a fitful sleeper, after his father's death, than perhaps usual.

Whatever mad, uncanny behavior others may have noticed in HAMLET lay unmatched to his current disposition and its volatile message for which he's dispatched.

PORTER

[Speaks as though suddenly possessed]

A play within a play like a poison-tipped knife,
The word is scant heard lest one puncture into life.

*And what's a knife, after all, but a scaled-down kin of sword, tragedy lurks in indelible works
when pen hits the drawing board.*

So

Enter the WORD

WORD

Draw your sword, advance forward,
All's fair in love and war
And Denmark's the mortal cord!

*A fully lucid HAMLET leaps out of bed, draws his sword, for what has he heard but the
galvanizing proselytizing of some ambient WORD?*

HAMLET

Who's there?

WORD

Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

Enter MEMORY, swiftly and stealthily.

MEMORY

Long live the king!

Retreats into the shadows.

HAMLET

I am my father's son; long live his dynasty!
What sayeth you of a king when another
Lives on in purgatory! Truer and valiant,
The very image of moral and confident,
What serpent's sting, him to dust brings,
And mourning colours donned for but a
Moment lay inert, and now to naught cling!

MEMORY

Our sight converges on the same king
We speak of when Denmark we think of
But your father lost a father too, now he's
The one gone. Your name is, too, fair Hamlet,
Lest it rest on some seducing clown's head,
The crown is yours to wear, you need only
Weed out the bed. So draw your sword,
Advance forward, dress in armour like
Your father's Norway battle-score.

HAMLET

The Ghost, you see him too?

MEMORY

What do you think?

For you are me and I am you.

Enter SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS.

HAMLET, unaware of the entrance, returns to sleep, spent and exhausted. Turbulent dreams ensue.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Get thee to a nunnery, hide in incestuous sheets,
Spark rivals in thine mind, imaginative ecstasies
Crueler yet kinder thus, they atone for caprice,
Feed on the pith of Life stung by an adulterate beast,
An antic disposition beckons you to make peace,

For some must watch, while some must sleep.

HAMLET wakes again.

[SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS continues, but treads more lightly now]

Some cruelty lay in innocence, but in being cruel
One must not jeopardize future holiness.
You are your father's son; his face of righteousness
So imitate with care under the guise of true madness.

HAMLET

What am I to think, what am I to do?
How mighty might this pen become if I expand
What lay in my purview? There are more things in heaven
And earth, Memory, than exist in your abstract philosophy.
I know who I am, ratiocinating man,
My Imagination sets me free.

And yet: am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? Am I naïve?
When I know of things more wondrous and strange
Than e'er common sense would let me believe.
What form to rectify my father ought I to arrange:
A play within a play might a poisoned knife be
So that crimes laid to bed may well haunt from their sleep.

Exeunt.

-ACT III-

-SCENE 1-

Enter WORD and IMAGINATION, trailing behind.

WORD

Have you interpreted your dreams yet?
Associated with things like me, things like
Yourself, things like counting sheep?
To be or not to be – that is the question –
Now mine: are you open to this suggestion?

IMAGINATION

I open for you at once, always, dwell in
 These contemplative lingerings. With words
 I erect my home, bound to thought but not to
 Action, thus spake I alone: In the beginning
 Was the word, and the word was with one,
 And the word was one – and one must take
 Arms against a sea of troubles, for in that
 Sleep of death what dreams may come?

WORD

Yes, good, continue association,
 The word is heard but actions speak louder
 So speak louder, friend, articulate [transference](#)
 Ask: O sweet fantasy dream, does there loom
 An illusion-cloaking childhood doom,
 One which stings and shatters innocence
 And appears as haunted unconsciousness?

Enter FREUD with a stalk, walk, cigar-stained baulk. He's a moody one, that chap, and as he puffs the ashes settle over parchment into a Rorschach ink-blot map. And this map he ponders, studies, gropes for opaque meanings. He wonders, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, what may be left of our labor and toil?

FREUD

A play within a play like a dream within a dream,
 Heed the fair word because imagination is key.

So he takes his key, his imagination set alight, and—fondling whore, serpentine bore—he penetrates the night! Opium eyes opened to a perfume gaze, he dreams of the WORD and its awful, throbbing veins.

And he lands on transference, a thing wretched, rending, identity-bending, but alas productive as it indicates repressed trauma may be yet surfacing.

So he adds to his manifesto of curiosities:

Doppelgänger, repetition, evil eye, superstition, animastic enterprise, and what magic thickly-laced with maddening precision.⁴

FREUD

Hamlet! He's done it! Begun acting like his father
 Assumed the face of shiny, opportune armor
 Generational transference with a crown to entrust

⁴ A list of major topics sequentially discussed in Freud's "Das Unheimliche."

But Hamlet's no warrior without Imagination's pixie dust.
 Imitation binds his bust, two I's to see for the blind
 And contemplation's e'er dwelling on the mind.

HAMLET

[This quintessence of dust!](#) All the best of mankind!

Lifts a skull from the soil

Rotten vegetables among weeds and Alexander's

Food for the trees. Imperious Caesar,

Dead and turn'd to clay

Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:

O, that the earth, which kept the world in awe,

Should patch a wall to expel the winter flaw

And what will I be, wicked etymology, when

Imagination traces the noble dust of birth

Yet the skull quips: Imitation got there first.

Enter the GHOST in limbo, in hesitation, on a threshold.

And HAMLET wonders where his own demons lie. Thresholds are fickle creatures, for they blot out an uncanny sort of dye.

Exeunt all, but what little remains manages to haunt such fair noetic strains.

-SCENE 2-

Enter CLAUDIUS, who kneels, prostrates, and pretends. Enter HAMLET, a stealth little spirit, seeing, thinking, and self-vacillating.

HAMLET

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

And now I'll do't. Courage is thick in the air

And offers a concession, an easy confession

One quick dispatch, and it'll soon be done

No blood left on my hands as I watch

My father's injustice idly over-run.

Nay, this fruit will disappear if just

I let blood flow from my lawless foe.

Incestuous sheets can be washed anew,

Rung by hands bent kind and cruel

Yet do I now start, he goes to heaven;

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

A villain kills my father; and for that,

I, his sole son, do the same villain send
 To heaven. No, I cannot, it would be a
 Crime at twice the price for which no
 Amount of repentance could e'er suffice.
 I must patient be, which, to be honest,
 Finds me not entirely unfavorably.
 Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
 Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
 At gaming, swearing, or about some act
 That has no relish of salvation in't;
 Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
 And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
 As hell, whereto it goes. And I, righteous,
 Emerge clean and true, and nature, victorious.

CLAUDIUS

[*Kneeling*]

O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
 Though my inclination be as sharp as will:
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent still
 'Tis of no use, what's done is done,
 Fair is foul, and O was the foul such fun
 But alas, consequence is in the air
 If it be that way, no criminal will be set fair!
 My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
 Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
Exeunt.

In a state of perpetual in-betweens, CLAUDIUS, his familial GHOST, and son-in-law HAMLET are not so different as they may seem. Haunted by prior actions or pure words or presumed misdeeds, we dwell in a threshold hell and hesitation reigns supreme.

-SCENE 3-

Enter TODOROV, all grown up, the big man on the block. KANT follows behind, readjusting his watch clock.⁵

⁵ Joke reference; legend has it that Kant was so punctual that his neighbors would recalibrate their watches to the moment he left his house for his daily walk at precisely the strike of 4pm.

TODOROV

[Pontificating, gesticulating wildly]

Kant, we've been over this before, dear,
For such a man of categories, you'd do well to hearken near,
I present thee: marvelous, uncanny, and hesitation's fear.

KANT, miffed, reclines in the armchair, arms staunchly folded, lips pressed, eyes unconvinced, and sits in silence, a hesitation of his own stark volition.

TODOROV, unphased, dictates:

Fear and perplexity, in a situation strange,
Oft warrant the conditions to, themselves, rearrange
Cognitive structures and a genre's specific station
The fantastic lasts only as long as a reader's hesitation.⁶
Firm resolution, when word punctures into reality,
When madness is utilized to create a necessary ambiguity⁷,
Only then could the Ghost be explained or accepted
Into categories 'uncanny' or the 'marvelous' perfected.

Such an awful, fantastic snare might entail
Poison in an ear and a hasty wedding veil
Opaque to the truth of Denmark's duplicity
Unsure, he hesitates in dark shades of dour
When Hamlet dwells in moments uncertain
Knows not who may be yet hiding behind the curtain
And draws his sword with a firm resolution
And punctures a foe alike⁸, but not his intention,
Feel he the same anguish as in his lethargy?
When he dare not act, always instead conspiring?
What alibi hath the criminal made for craft
And can it escape Hamlet's noble-true tact?
What serpentine digits hug his mother's thighs
With kisses of innocence, e'er laced with sharp lies?
And who to trust, who to condemn
When your uncle was once your father's dearest friend?
What of your own friends, and what of your lover, too,

⁶ "The fantastic, as we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from 'reality' as it exists in the common opinion" (Todorov, 1973).

⁷ Todorov, 1973, p. 37.

⁸ Hamlet, steeled in determination to kill Claudius, unintentionally murders Polonius behind the arras, yet Hamlet feels almost no remorse from the dispatch of this other, lesser foe.

Could she be pregnant with the same weed planted anew?⁹
 And what of the flowers, whose beauty delights,
 Perfumes banquet dinners and later, incestuous nights?
 The meat hath not yet grown cold
 But funerary rites are over and told
 What of my own flesh, my sinews and bones
 Could dust be the conclusion of my rightful throne?
 Must I mingle I with Alexander
 To know but little of the truth of my good father?

The state of nature is out of tune
 But vengeance promises, alas, the urgent boon
 When wrongs are set right,
 Only then might my nation delight
 I need only ensure a certain damnation
 Make the fantastic uncanny and

Exit HESITATION.

KANT

Son, you wax poetic, in this tasteful analysis
 I think you've got it right: [hesitation is paralysis](#)
 Ruminant you must, but champion dynamism
 For stalled limbs restrict agile mental mechanism
 In the face of the grand and numerous alike
 When e'er overwhelmed by an experience sublime
 One awful, brutish, nasty, or blithe and mellifluous
 Confronting harsh truths of the self like Oedipus
 We realize our cognitive faculties are but limited
 The imagination must become, with intellect, assimilated.
 Like young Jentsch, we are finite substrates
 Shuffling on and off mortal coils, fixating to imitate.
 But let our faculties bear fruit and expression,
 A venom sweeter than any self-confession.
 Let them intertwine, refine, imagination unconstrained
 By cognitive categories and concepts feigned; nay!
 I challenge the two: harmonize in a game of free play¹⁰

⁹ Pregnancy rumors and motifs abound, Hamlet was long unsure whether his lover Ophelia was faithful to him or to Claudius' scheme—if she were rich with the same weed that seeded his mother's bed.

¹⁰ One tenet Kantian aesthetics famously rests on is the concept of “free play,” the free and undogmatic association of the cognitive faculties, by which Kant is referring to reason [*Vernunft*], understanding [*Verstand*], and imagination [*Einbildungskraft*]. Expounded in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant believes aesthetic judgements and such ‘phenomenal,’ emotional experiences may only arise from “free play.” A harmonious and productive interaction, one might however press the extent to which cognitive faculties ‘warring’—at odds with each other—may also

That incestuous nights might break into day!

HAMLET

I challenge you to a—

Enter HESITATION, arm looped through a certain TODOROV, smug and emboldened by KANT's resounding endorsement, he sits up straighter, sniffs, reclines, and almost appears like his father FREUD, sated. He squints into HAMLET's swan-like sclera as the young sapling freezes, fated, forever passive in a game of play, no player is he when the sun dawns on the day, and old CLAUDIUS still lives! We just can't get rid of him!¹¹

—Everyone in this damned facility
Is but damned by my own damned ability!
I ruminate and resist
Hesitate and desist,
For purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth but poor validity,
And am I those players my crown's courts abuse?
Who twirl for the devil; 'tis time they refuse –
AND I SHALL TOO, the most damned of them all,
They feel they are saved but I know they shall fall
And should I fall too, in this judicious haste
A noble heart may crack but it won't go to waste,
It is but enough, I know my given station
The fruits of which must live on in my nation
To be or not to be? I'll throw to the wind: LET BE!
Life oft' gives twice-chances, but for me
I am the second chance, second in command¹², e'er unlucky,
I AM MY FATHER'S SON; whether I do or I die
I must show my hand and pen this second play sly.¹³

Enter PLAY who exists hesitation¹⁴, escorts our dear HAMLET, calms his wild gesticulations. He is to enter a poisoned-tipped squall, oxygen cold like the smoke on his pall¹⁵. Vengeance is a tender subject, that's for sure, but only by a garden-clean slate will one be the cure.

resemble some type of play, and if the frequent word play, mind games, and final tragic scene of battle in *Hamlet* share features with Kant's abstracted notion of 'play.'

¹¹ This is a literal hesitation, an interruption to Hamlet's speech and his course of action.

¹² Dualities, Doppelgängers, and the psychoanalytic feature of transference between Hamlet, Sr., the former King of Denmark, and Hamlet, Jr., the Prince, is emphasized by highlighting the parallel between the two figures.

¹³ This "second play" refers not to the one penned and performed by the traveling actors, but to the active, life-or-death play in battle which unfolds in the final scene of *Hamlet*.

¹⁴ It is only with active play that hesitation—a stasis—is overcome.

¹⁵ Note the phrases appearing in rapid-succession which foreshadow a tragic downfall for all involved figures.

And HAMLET, with certainty alas, proclaims to his handsome prowess, awakes to his mind and his heart's unity, his imagination and intellect wed to eternity.

[continues] I challenge you to a—

PLAY

— duel of the duals, from the second to one,
 One against one, soon the court will be none,
 Two is a dual engaged in a duel; three is a company
 But four is a crowd, what's a few more worth in this
 Serpentine rain-cloud? And what might rain down but
 A cold chalice in despair, e'er the bashful, playful,
To banal dancing pairs! If you die for your father then
 Why did he live for you? If you cry for your mother, ask
 What she can really do? She swooned for a brother
 But you swooned for a snitch, played as a lover but was our
 Denmark's finest bitch! And this King serves his schemes
 With a side of hell-bent morphine;
 Though justice may be served, you must still die.
 The play remains and the birds still chirp in the sky.

HESITATION stirs, satisfied with his interruption.
KANT watches from afar, pitying HAMLET.

KANT

And am I satisfied? Hamlet played the game,
 Washed hesitation from his noble father's name
 Yet his pool of blood so deep waded into
 Left him in a limbo less fortunate than his kin's fare,
 True state of being, of imagination and of thinking,
 His second play of swords knew itself like
 His first play of words which cut Claudius' life-cord.
 They shuffled off it in a battle brutish and cruel,
 My eye for free play has been set and achieved,
 But where is the heart in the midst of tragedy?

Where is my mind now that

HAMLET

My consciousness has left me!

Dies.

KANT

— No! My sapling! My soft, tender fern!
 So verdant with life and yet dour with mourn.
 Misfortune glitters with a capillary sting
 Pierces through like a poisoned beetle-wing
 Stitched across dissonance, a continental divide
 When cognition sears conscience with bright eyes wide
 Shut to the chore like lacunae in the truth
 He still graduates to a rank in his youth¹⁶
 Yet one more hasty but less brash and less stately,
 Noble fires do haunt the ashes of fury.

Exeunt.

-ACT IV-**-SCENE 1-**

And glorious ashes they may be, silvery with a scant smell of the salty serpentine, for CLAUDIUS lives on under rusty nails and bindings. A reminder of the delicacy of truth, he departs with the question if it's more fragile than you. Humans are the most fickle of material things, we sparkle and we glitter and flame out as ravishing kings, we create and we cry, defecate and then die, but somewhere in the prison of strife a star is born to the chorus of life, it weaves and it woes, it bleeds for its foes, and one may sing to it in soft lullabies, pouring sweet love-wax in the ear of a charmer in disguise. For all predators are to someone else prey, CLAUDIUS waits for his coronation as he waits to be slain, for he did upon others as will be done upon himself, and memories of former misdeeds haunt above all grave things else. Pray, try he might, but at the end he must set his conscience back right, must cleanse the evil serpentine hands from clouding his ambitious sight, for what's to say he won't succumb to the chimera of a poison-tipped knife? HAMLET's first play caused him quite a disruption; action, decision, cognitive tunnel-vision—could not escape hesitation, rumination, guilty trepidation—and at the end HAMLET pays with his own nation. FREUD looks on with pity and keen interest, for it was his father's image that ignited the very first transference, young Hamlet crowned with battle-worn attire, yet hesitation won again as it jostled him a liar. An antic disposition could not compare, to the aurora borealis dawning on FREUD's reclining chair.

Alas, enter CHORUS.

CHORUS

An action demands an equal and opposite reaction,
 Vengeance atones injustice's scaly faction.

¹⁶ In other words, Hamlet 'graduates'—proceeds—to Heaven, whereupon he is reunited with his father.

When all wrongs grow right with the first morning's dawn,
 The garden has been weeded but our sapling still lives on.
 For mortal coils are never simple nor fair,
 They slink with sure eyes and they squeeze as they stare
 From their silver-sweet tooth, hot venom glistens and drips
 Opalescent from some lucky charmer's serpentine lips.
 Claudius is not alone in turning friend into foe
 For Hamlet, too, has his own inner demon and ghost,
'Who's there?'

'Son, I am'

Haunted by his father's form
 As by certain social decorum that governs traitorous norm¹⁷,
 Haunted by his inaction as he planned an inert-stained reaction,
 He thought his enemy were mortal when really its name is 'abstraction.'¹⁸

So Hamlet joins purgatory and there he meets his old man
 Who opens his mouth and utters,

'Son, I'm glad to see you again'

*You were valiant and fierce, yet nature found her way to pierce
 Your play within a play with a poison-tipped knife,
 Your word was scant heard 'til you punctured into life
 So you sprang and you sparred, battled foes near and far,
 But the inner workings of your mind were your fated love-crossed star.*

Hesitation preyed on him when he prayed it away,
 Kneeled before the altar hoping duty would save the day
 But found that he, like Claudius, his lesser enemy
 Alas dare not pray, and stalled and hesitated with that final fear:

Tragedy lurks in indelible works

Which percolate one's consciousness by way of ear.

So the GHOST had a message to deliver brisk and true
 Haunted his son with emphatic requests to do
 Upon Claudius as was done upon him
 But the conflict of the faculties¹⁹ let no one win.

CHORUS stills, then continues with heightened feverishness.

¹⁷ Namely, that Hamlet could not commit suicide without relinquishing a hold on heaven.

¹⁸ Hamlet's enemy is not, in fact, Claudius, but his own ratiocination which stalls, hesitates, contends, but cannot alas his father defend.

¹⁹ Reference to Kant's work *Der Streit der Fakultäten* ["The Conflict of the Faculties"] (1798), which is mostly a treatise concerning the conflict of *university departments* ("faculties") such as theology, medicine, law, etc., but also contains resounding echoes of the "free play" of such *cognitive* faculties in Kant's earlier work, *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

Jentsch felt this same conflict, studied the childhood tales²⁰
 That wormed into his adulthood, whose inner child left assailed,
 Dissatisfied, traumatized, and e'er frightened to sleep at night,
 Who lay awake and aware for poison in his ear or sand in his eye.
 Self-awareness, he says, is a catalytic force, for

A feeling of latent animation

Lingers in the skull in thy hand or the still-life-sized altercation
 Of chalices and swords, of scruple and pens,
 Of serpentine poison poured among families and friends
 When the familiar is abandoned for complete disorientation
 Which eludes all clarity for the favored, uncanny station
 Of the e'er searching mind, for in moments of hesitation
 The question looms grand of our life's orientation:
 Toward heaven or hell or another round on this mortal spell
 Pontificate, shuffle, joust as you might, only time will tell
 If decisiveness should set you free or if play will take the lead,
 If the uncanny curse of hesitation shall haunt you 'til you bleed.

Will you converge on the 'marvelous' or the 'uncanny,' or will you dwell in the fantastic's ripe uncertainty?

*When skeletons don your pantsuit and tie, and calcium smothers your cravat's starchy cry,
 When the cigar blinks out at the clock's coo of night, whose legacy lives on and whose must die?*

*Where will you make a home for all the things you'll never know?
 What will you sacrifice for the prodigies you promote?*

CHORUS shuffles, reaches, retracts, and orders, winks in synchronization, then takes two steps forward.

The audience is afraid now, as if they're watching their own world.

And they know it.

For self-awareness is key and this play is potent.

-SCENE 2-

GHOST

[Emphatically]

²⁰ ETA Hoffman's "The Sandman" (1816).

A play within a play like a poison-tipped knife,
The word is scant heard lest one puncture into life.

And what's a knife, after all, but a scaled-down kin of sword, tragedy haunts in grotesque little jaunts when one deceives the high and mighty lord.

So

Enter the WORD

WORD

Draw your sword, advance forward,
All's fair in love and war
And hesitation's the umbilical cord!

KANT, currently reclining, sits up with a start, profusely sweating, heart pounding, dissonance sounding, haunted by the fruits of his creation, his tree of knowledge and what forbidden delights bloomed from its deceitful uncanny-coloured frights.

KANT

Who's there?

PLAY

Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.
I'll speak in your tongue like your kind does when young.
Quite simply, your mind games offend the rules of my name,
You think play productive when it explodes thy brain.
Why may your cognition play when others must fight
When Hamlet alone braves the horrors of the night?
You stepped up with your word, I'll commend you for that
But you took it too far when hesitation became tact
In the process of uniting the intellect and imagination
To conveniently serve your self-assured aesthetic function,
You search for a cause but you forget of intention
A mistake exhibited by Hamlet's wry reputation
One like your own as though our sapling were a child
To a father and messenger unlike the brazen, warrior-profile
Who haunts you to this day, who dwells in your mind?
Your creations are monsters with soft-fur made to find
Every pore of insecurity, uncertainty, superstition, and lore
And exploit with a smirk everything come to light,
What ought to have remained hidden—that's what Schelling would have said—and he'll
articulate it later in a letter to a friend, and

FREUD looks upon the scene, sees destruction of all shades cruel and mean, but his intrigue ignites his inner child who to this day haunts him and he feels something vaguely incestuous is the true uncanny's origin.

So he dictates this tale to his kin, presents hesitation as the true human condition. Between two blips of unexistence, it is the grey matter, pneuma, and the kind, loving memory. It is the mirror-image, kindred lineage of our figures before and all those yet unborn that will inextricably weave into the fabric of life's lore. But like dear HAMLET, hesitation has been mischaracterized. 'Tis dispatched, decried, overlooked, minimized. What if it is not a cessation, an abandonment of station, but a high and mighty force with echoes of play in its sanguine voice? An intermediate of vicissitudinous period, is it a possibility, that PLAY, evil as can be, might actually raise the Id's cognitive faculty? Might resonate with one's conscience to set oneself free? Might make a home for the uncanny latched by haunting's gleaming key?

FREUD remembers when HAMLET exclaimed:

HAMLET

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!
How infinite in faculty! 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?
[Examines a skull and sees his father winking back at him]

Visage of HAMLET vanishes. CHORUS resumes.

CHORUS

Freud, bless him, believes in the paragon of animals,
Knows he is a piece of work, that he must therefore toil
For reason to ennoble and cognitive faculties to extend
For imagination express and admirable to apprehend
Like a god. For he *is* a god. We are *all* gods to him,
From infants to kings to every measure of this fragile kin.

*So he draws his sword
Advances forward
Becomes the poet and
Enters the word.*

[FINIS]

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), translated from the French by Richard Howard, The Press of Case Western Reserve University.

Todorov is unsure what to do—he hesitates still (somebody get this guy a cigar)

Yet the eve has not yet dawned upon...

[feels guilty about Hamlet, feels haunted by his concept of play like Freud and Hamlet are haunted by their memories and thoughts □ Shakespeare's tragedies need to cleanse the imaginative palate to prevent the past from haunting the future □ Derrida □ return to Freud/Todorov/Jentsch and the still-life painting □ reference skull scene and impermanence □ consciousness of the play and crisis of theatre]

Enter EXPRESSION, mirror-image like kindred lineage, we wonder

*

Cloak thee in ...
Dark and unsure

MEMORY

And what worm-like analytic inheres
As synthetic concubine oft appears

*

Kinetic, frenetic, and psychoanalytic

Further Reading:

- Freud and Couch: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33079041>
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