ABSTRACT: This paper examines the role of guilt and its relationship to leadership qualities in an individual. We use the Shakespearean character of Hamlet to analyze the types of guilt that the play manifests. By analyzing Hamlet’s response to this guilt, we make the connection between guilt and how it affects a leader. Hamlet’s reluctance to handle the instructions given by his father’s ghost reflects the lack of motivation that should be a key hallmark of a leader. In the final analysis, Hamlet did not have the mental strength required of a leader to cope with the circumstance in which he found himself.

KEYWORDS: guilt, ethics, leadership, management

"Look here, upon this picture, and on this, The counterfeit presentment of two brothers. See, what a grace was seated on this brow; Hyperion’s curls; the front of Jove himself; An eye like Mars, to threaten and command; A station like the herald Mercury New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill; ..."

Hamlet 3.4. 53-62

0. BACKGROUND

The reason we wrote this paper was that we were fascinated by the links that Shakespearean characters have with modern day leadership issues. The chronological span, from the date Shakespeare wrote his plays to the present, is over 400 years but the logic and validity of the leadership lessons in them remain fresh. We initially tried using some Shakespearean scenes in our

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1 All references to the play in this paper are from G. L. Kittredge’s *The Kittredge Shakespeare’s Hamlet* (1967), 2nd edition, Blaisdell Publishing Co, USA.
classes on leadership and found that, once the lines were explained to them, students related to them very closely. The quote from Julius Caesar – ‘there is a tide in the affairs of men’ – was the first one we tried out in class and we were pleasantly surprised at the positive response. The point we made was that leaders of companies have to/need to know instinctively when events in the external environment are in their favour and be able to capitalize on them. The lectures thus alternated between Shakespeare and modern day leadership theories, and it was an unusual but exhilarating experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of guilt is as old as the hills and may have been in existence since men and women first started committing crimes or performing acts not in line with societal norms. Guilt is uncanny in terms of the way it presents itself and unique in terms of the devastation and havoc it can play on the emotional well-being of a person. It is insidious and can wash into the minds of a person who has committed a reprehensible act at the most unusual and awkward of times rending him or her incapable of carrying on positively with life. At its worst it can completely and virtually bring to an end the life of an individual who can be pushed to a state of ‘non-being.’ At its best it can slow down the positive energy in a person and make him or her perform at half steam.

Guilt can be of various types and its intensity is directly linked to the sensitivity of the experiencer and the nature of the event which caused the feeling. As we shall see, the guilt felt by Hamlet is different from that felt by his uncle Claudius, which is different from that of his mother Gertrude. There are many other types of guilt manifest in the play, but these will be our main foci for analysis. The lines quoted at the beginning of this paper are spoken by Hamlet to his mother while showing his father’s portrait to her. They are an attempt to make her aware that in marrying her husband’s brother she is guilty of choosing an inferior person as her husband. The ghost of Hamlet’s father

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This theme is taken further in Gopinath et al. (2014), which explains more fully the links between Shakespeare’s characters and the concept of contextual leadership we have developed.
should also feel guilty as in his quest for revenge he causes the death of eight people – Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is worthy of mention that while much has been written about the issue of guilt in the play, in our view the concept of guilt with regard to the leadership role of the protagonist Hamlet has not been adequately covered by critics.

Incidentally, the meaning usually given to the word ‘guilt’ in Christian circles today bears little relation to the biblical meaning. Recent interest in the subject focuses on its psychological dimension, analyzing the causes (and cures) of the sense of guilt. It would seem to be easy to distinguish between this subjective sense of debt, which may be fed by groundless fears, and the objective guilt of sinners before God, with which the Bible is concerned.

Guilt can be caused by the most trivial of reasons. A child stealing from a friend can feel guilt. A person killing another can again be tormented by guilt. The wide spectrum or shades of feelings of guilt between these two incidents is almost impossible to imagine. The guilty person is imprisoned, sometimes physically and more often mentally by his feelings. As Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner (The Rime of the Ancient Mariner 1798) so beautifully put it:

> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
>    That agony returns;
>    And till my ghastly tale is told,
>    This heart within me burns.
>
> I pass, like night, from land to land;
>    I have strange power of speech;
>    That moment that his face I see,
>    I know the man that must hear me:
>    To him my tale I teach.

This brings us to the concept of cleansing the soul and obtaining salvation through expiation. If expiation is the goal then narration is the process. The compulsive narration of the Ancient Mariner lowers the pain of the sin committed: the killing of the albatross. Conan Doyle’s ‘A Study in Scarlet’ has John Ferrier confessing to murder at the end by narrating the reasons
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behind his crime to Sherlock Holmes and company. The release of long pent up feelings by narration can thus provide relief.

Ethically, ends are never separable from means. A process that commences with a wrong will often conclude with one. This is exactly what happens in Hamlet: the conclusion is morally right but ethically and legally wrong. One murder cannot be justified by another murder. By killing his uncle, Hamlet avenges his father’s murder, but only after a now-famous delay. The procrastination of action is of course the most striking form in which this tension of Hamlet is seen. Unfortunately for Hamlet, the pale cast of thought which we feel has a strong element of guilt mixed in it, prevents him from moving forward at the opportune time.

We try to analyze the reasons for the delay with a view to considering whether Hamlet can be termed a leader of any sort. Guilt felt by leaders often leads them into making interesting maneuvers in the course of their work leading to equally interesting outcomes. Enterprises of great pith and moment have thus lost the name of action.

1.1 Approaches to guilt
The concept of guilt can be approached from many angles. Bruckner (2010) approaches guilt through the perspectives of fascism, communism, genocide, slavery, racism, imperialism – the West has no shortage of reasons for guilt. And, indeed, since the Holocaust and the end of World War II, Europeans in particular have been consumed by remorse. But Bruckner argues that guilt has now gone too far. It has become pathological, and an obstacle to fighting today’s atrocities. This obsessive guilt has obscured important realities. The West has no monopoly on evil. It has destroyed monsters as well as created them – leading in the abolition of slavery, renouncing colonialism, building peaceful and prosperous communities, and establishing rules and institutions that are models for the world.

Curran (1960), contributing to a symposium on the concept of sin and guilt in psychotherapy, gives the view of the theologian. Relations are drawn between sin and a failure to love, feelings of worthlessness, exaggerated self-condemnation, self-awareness, and responsibility. Robertson (1994) indicates that guilt results from the commission or contemplation of a specific act
contrary to one's internalized standards of conduct; it requires reparative action for the harm done to another to alleviate the uncomfortable feeling of distress. Velayutham (2007) seeks to highlight the contribution of the Catholic practice of confession and the Protestant Reformation to the development of the modern concept of accountability.

The terms *guilt* and *shame* often are used interchangeably, but psychological theory and phenomenological studies clearly indicate that these are distinctly different affective experiences. Shame arises from the self’s negative evaluation of the self (that may or may not have been instigated by actual public exposure); guilt arises from the self’s negative evaluation of specific behaviors or transgressions.

Anderson (2005) argues that Nietzsche’s and Freud’s views of guilt provide a useful theoretical context for understanding the relationship between guilt and Utopia. Both of them speak of guilt as the internalization of cruelty or the instinct of aggression, and see it as an inward turn that reflects a historical context. Nietzsche views guilt and ‘bad conscience’ as a kind of illness. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887/trans. 1989) he writes, “[I] regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced – that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the wall of society and of peace” (Nietzsche 1989: 84). In Nietzsche’s view, when faced with peace (the absence of an enemy upon whom one might inflict cruelty) and social mores (proscriptions against being cruel to one’s fellow citizen) a civilized human is left with only one subject upon whom he may express his aggression and satisfy his appetite for cruelty: himself.

For Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek (2007), moral emotions represent a key element of our human moral apparatus, influencing the link between moral standards and moral behavior. They first focus on a triad of negatively valenced ‘self-conscious’ emotions—shame, guilt, and embarrassment. They then review current thinking on the distinction between shame and guilt, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of these two moral emotions. Several new areas of research are highlighted: research on the domain-specific phenomenon of body shame, styles of coping with shame, psychobiological aspects of shame, the link between childhood abuse and later proneness to
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shame, and the phenomena of vicarious or ‘collective’ experiences of shame and guilt.

2. GUILT IN HAMLET

This study focuses on the guilt of the Prince, Claudius and Gertrude in Hamlet, keeping in mind the statement made earlier that a process that commences with a wrong will always conclude with one. The guilt felt by Hamlet is strong but is not the strongest we see in the play. The credit for that goes to Claudius, as we will see. The reasons for Hamlet’s guilt stem from the fact that he has not been able to obey his father’s ghost’s exhortation to take revenge on his uncle. To his credit, he is perhaps subconsciously aware that one murder does not justify another. Initially, Hamlet doubts the ghost’s veracity. But the young Hamlet cannot bring himself to take action even after he has proven to himself that the words of the ghost are true, by the machination of the staging of the play within the play, wherein the reaction of Claudius convinces Hamlet of the former’s guilt.

We attribute Hamlet’s guilt to four sources:
   (a) his failure to obey his father’s ghost
   (b) the way he has treated Ophelia
   (c) the way he has to treat his mother.
   (d) the change in his feelings for his mother (after her “o’erhasty marriage”).

We argue that it is these feelings of guilt that cause the delay in his moving forward. As an intelligent man, he knows that getting rid of his uncle will not automatically wash away the feelings of guilt. In fact, it may paradoxically worsen the feelings of guilt, because it is not easy to kill a fellow human being, especially a close relation, whatever be the justification. In short, Hamlet’s feelings of guilt are linked to people close to him whom he now has to treat differently. The guilt can therefore be labeled ‘relationship oriented.’ Killing his uncle would avenge his father’s murder but it could not be a legal act.
We now turn to Claudius. It is a mistake to see him as a melodramatic villain which is how most people view him. This part was often given to an inferior actor who portrayed him as a base figure who struts about the stage as a two dimensional villain. As Kittredge (1967) puts it, however, “King Claudius is a superb figure – ... almost as great a dramatic creation as Hamlet himself. ... Claudius is often regarded as a moral monster ... From such an error we are rescued by one of the supreme passages in all Shakespeare – the King’s soliloquy after ‘The Mousetrap’ has caught his conscience:

O, my offence is rank,
       it smells to heaven;
It has the primal eldest curse upon’t.
       A brother’s murder!”

This soliloquy reveals Claudius not only as passionately remorseful – with a heart in no way cauterized by crime – but as so clear-sighted, so pitiless in the analysis of his own offences and of the motives that actuated them that he cannot juggle with his conscience. The play is thus a contest between two tremendous opponents.

What then would be the motivators for Claudius’s guilt? They could be twofold: (a) killing his brother, and (b) marrying his brother’s wife without any delay.

If Claudius is the intelligent and moral man that critics portray him to be, both these motivators should weigh heavily upon him. His guilt can be labeled the guilt of ambition, backed by carnal desire.

Finally, we come to Gertrude and her guilt. She is intellectually not very strong, content to let events take their own course as long as they do not unduly upset her. Her marriage to Claudius is a pointer to her character. As Bradley (1905:167) so succinctly put it, “Like other faulty characters in Shakespeare's tragedies, she dies a better woman than she had lived.”

These words sum up her character. Her reaction to Hamlet, i.e. the lines quoted at the beginning of this paper, shows that she has realized her folly.
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Oh, Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

And at the end of the scene with her son:

Be thou assur’d,
if words be made of breath,
And breath of life,
I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me.

She has married too soon, forgiven her new husband sitting on the throne which should have gone to Hamlet and chided her son for being rude to Claudius. Her feelings of guilt would therefore be complex. We can label it the ‘guilt of delayed understanding.’ And this understanding only comes to her after Hamlet forcefully and bluntly brings it to her notice.

2.1 The three types of guilt in the play

We are therefore dealing in the play with three types of guilt:

(a) Relationship oriented guilt in Hamlet
(b) The guilt of ambition backed by carnal desire in Claudius.
(c) The guilt of delayed understanding in Gertrude.

Though the play explores other types of guilt, for example in Ophelia, we feel that Shakespeare has covered the three main facets of guilt through these three characters. It is in the interplay of these three types of guilt that the depth of the play and its complexities come through. The trigger to all these types of guilt is Claudius’ act of killing his brother. His guilt is therefore the strongest, which comes to haunt him later on. Hamlet and Gertrude are only sub-acts in this theme; metaphorically the gun has been cold bloodedly fired by Claudius. It is the lack of leadership qualities in Hamlet which unwittingly ends in the death of eight people.

If we analyze Hamlet’s actions in terms of response, whether it is reflective and radical, we come to a rather unusual phenomenon. Hamlet’s responses in all cases are reflective, but they are reflective to the extent that they slows down the momentum of the action. The ‘mind forged manacles’ of Shelley have him tightly sequestered. The element of radicalism is there but it is not the type of radicalism which will help Hamlet. He is radical only in terms of
not behaving as a normal person should. It is not ‘positive radicalism’ which he displays but a type of radicalism which pulls him deeper into the mire.

Hamlet in the final analysis is a leader who unfortunately did not have the supporting circumstances in the court to pull him up to a greater level. Neither were his friends and acquaintances of much help to him. We would have expected Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have been of mental support, but they were not. Most of all, Ophelia did not realize what he was going through but perhaps allowed her own feelings about herself to overcome the sensitivities she should have felt for what Hamlet was going through. Even if no one else but Ophelia had come to his support, he would have been a different person who would have analyzed the contexts much more directly and correctly. Ophelia should have shown him the way forward and made him read contexts correctly thought she herself would not have been aware that she was consciously doing so. Perhaps Hamlet realized that he did have the support he needed from Ophelia which will explain the reasons for the way he sometimes treated her.

To sum up, Hamlet is according to us, a play in which guilt plays a predominant role. It is the inability to overcome this feeling while at the same time knowing that he should do something to in fact overcome it, that causes the emotional tension in the Prince and leads him to behave as he does. It is the reaction of a sensitive and intelligent person. But it is not the reaction of a leader. A leader should by definition have suppressed the nuances of moral and ethical dilemmas and moved forward with resolution. As Axelrod (2009: 88) says, “(T)he ethical decisions you take as a leader have to be more than personal. Yet this does not mean you abandon your personal values. They should inform – not necessarily determine – the ethical and policy lines you draw. Your leadership task is to reconcile them. The folly of appeasement is agreeing to a relatively little evil for the purpose of averting a great evil.”
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REFERENCES


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