

The Search for Symmetry: The Conflict between Humanism and Existentialism in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of a wholesome character who will be the embodiment of humanistic and existentialist ideals appears to be the preoccupation of William Shakespeare in his play, *Hamlet*. Whereas Humanism promotes limited freedom in the affairs of man, existentialism sees human freedom as limitless and absolute. In the play under consideration, Shakespeare creates a character who strives to resolve the pulls of the conflicting tendencies in his life. The struggle by Hamlet, the character, to strike a balance between the opposing world views eventually leaves him fractured. This paper examines the differing concepts of Humanism and Existentialism and the way they shape the character of Hamlet. It inquires into whether Shakespeare achieved success or not in his depiction of a character who is expected to harmonize the contradictions inherent in the differing world views. The paper delves into the search for symmetry by Hamlet in the bid to give meaning to his existence. On one hand, Hamlet as a humanist creation tries to think and exercise himself but the limited sense of freedom which Humanism imposes on him constrains him. On the other hand, the frightening and limitless freedom which Existentialism thrusts upon him propels him into toeing a certain course of action. But he fails because he is incapable of taking those actions. The paper underlines the fact that the burden imposed on Hamlet by Shakespeare is an uneasy one and too strenuous to resolve. Thus, in trying to resolve them, Hamlet lapses occasionally into acts of futility and absurdity. In the end, he fails both as a humanist and as an existentialist. The study concludes that even though Hamlet fails to attain selfhood, Shakespeare succeeds in giving us a character whose portraiture opens for us fresh insights into his creative ingenuity.

Key Words: Humanism, Existentialism, conflicting, struggle, symmetry, futility

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, English playwright and poet, is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English Language. His body of works in the field of drama remains inimitable, making him, unarguably, the world's preeminent dramatist. Regardless of his monumental contributions to dramatic art, one of his plays, *Hamlet*, presents an intriguing study.

The play is believed to be, probably, the most celebrated tragedy in the English language. This is because it is difficult, if not impossible, to attempt a definitive or precise interpretation of the play. This complexity largely derives from the contradictions inherent in the character of *Hamlet* as well as in Shakespeare's portrayal of this main character. The play, far from being just a living, breathing tragic play with all the accompaniment of empathy or pity, does more in tasking the mental imagination of the reader. Both *Hamlet* the play and *Hamlet* the character are so intriguing so much so that the layers of cloud that make a straightforward reading of the play difficult assume a life of their own. In fact, in Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* is the dramatic character that has, perhaps, more than any other, attracted possessive empathies and passionate appropriations. This is because even though critics of different persuasions have given differing interpretations to the play in the effort to define who *Hamlet* is, the entire effort remains fluid.

As a revenge tragedy, the play embodies all the conventions that define this dramatic art. For a character like *Hamlet* who is obsessed with the idea of revenge, he needs the right atmosphere that will motivate him into

carrying out his plans. This explains the introduction of ghosts in the play by Shakespeare. This is part of the motivation that Hamlet needs to build up his courage. But rather than swing into action, Shakespeare, in line with the conventions of a revenge play, makes Hamlet to lapse into procrastination. He takes so much time to work out his course of action. Yet, his plan hardly materializes. Instead, he is weighed down by rationalizations as to whether to carry on or not.

The inaction or the prolongation of action by Hamlet is masterfully exploited by Shakespeare. At a certain stage in the play, we are presented with a Hamlet who feigns madness or insanity. This dramatic sleight of hand is infused into the play to find justification for Hamlet's plan to murder his uncle, Claudius. Yet, Hamlet could not go beyond contemplation.

In his bid to hold on to a consistent course of action, Hamlet, at some point in the play, creates a new world where he can find a new meaning to his life. Here, he engages with courtiers and other less important characters to see if he could find a leeway out of his life of indecision. This is the dramatic device of play within play. But, just like other indulgences, Hamlet could not decide on a definite course of action. That is why the flips and flops that define the life of Hamlet and the way Shakespeare portrays them have tempted some critics to dismiss the play as an artistic failure.

However, it can be argued that whatever may be seen as the drawbacks of the work can, indeed, pass for artistic strength on the part of Shakespeare, for it takes a uniquely talented writer to invent and sustain such an intriguing character as we see in Hamlet.

In the play and from the character of Hamlet, we learn, according to Simon Palfrey, that there are reasons that cannot be told; that no action can ever satisfy or truly express the team of stuff within us; that cruelty comes from weakness rather than malice; that the weakness is not our fault, and that we make victims because we are made one; and that there are more thoughts in the world than moments to act. These complexities define the personality of the principal character as portrayed by Shakespeare in the play.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to underline the fact that the play under study deals with a protagonist with an unstable personality. That explains the flurry of efforts by critics to put the personality of Hamlet in a straitjacket. But such efforts cannot be said to have given the principal character the much needed wholeness that will help in the appreciation and elucidation of the work. The situation compels a deeper inquest into the intriguing personality of Hamlet. The effort of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, is considered seminal in this regard. His interjection remains the most enduring in the effort by critics to pigeonhole the character of Hamlet.

For the purpose of this study therefore, we shall adopt the critical approach that will be most suited to the subject matter under consideration. This tool is Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism.

As a literary theory, psychoanalytic criticism, in method, concept or form is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis begun by Freud. In fact, psychoanalytical reading of texts has been practised since the early development of psychoanalysis itself. Psychoanalytic literary criticism views artists and authors as neurotic. However, the artist escapes many of the outward manifestations and end results of neurosis by finding in the act of creating his or her art a pathway back to sanity and wholeness.

For Celine Surprenant, "psychoanalytic literary criticism does not constitute a unified field. However, all variants endorse, at least to a certain degree, the idea that literature is fundamentally entwined with the psyche" (Surprenant 200).

The object of psychoanalytic literary criticism is usually the psychoanalysis of the author or of a particularly interesting character in a given work. Such criticism is taken to be similar to psychoanalysis itself. In this way, it follows closely the analytic interpretative process discussed by Freud in his works. Critics view the fictional characters as case studies attempting to identify such Freudian concepts such as Oedipus complex, Freudian

slips, Id, ego and superego, among others, and demonstrate how they influence the thoughts and behaviours of fictional characters.

Indeed, psychoanalytic literary criticism often treats the text as if it were a kind of dream. This means that the text represses its real or latent content behind obvious, manifest content. The critic analyses the language and symbolism of a text to reverse the process of the dream work and arrive at the underlying, latent thoughts.

However, Childers and Hentzi point out that “such critics must tend to be reductive, explaining away the ambiguities of works of literature by reference to established psychoanalytic doctrine” (Childers and Hentzi 247).

Our choice of this critical approach in this study is informed by the point we have earlier noted, that is that a psychoanalytic reading of the play remains central in the appreciation of the character of Hamlet. The tool will therefore not only be our springboard; it will play the role of the symphony in a musical performance to which the melody will always return.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hamlet as a revenge tragedy is a complex work of art. To this end, the play has received a wide range of critical interventions and interpretations. The perspectives have not only helped in the explication and elucidation of the play, they have also deepened the complexity associated with it. In order to put the study into proper perspective therefore, it is important to take a look at some of the views that some critics have offered on both *Hamlet*, the play, and on Hamlet, the character.

One of the most enduring reviews that the play has received is that of T.S Eliot. In his epochal essay, “*Hamlet and His Problems*”, Eliot posits that both *Hamlet*, the play and Hamlet, the character are problematic. While the former is the primary problem, the latter constitutes the secondary problem. For Eliot, the play, far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, is most certainly an artistic failure. He points out that the play, in several ways, is puzzling and disquieting like no other play of the author. It is the longest of Shakespeare’s plays and, perhaps, the one he spent more pains to put together. In spite of all this, Eliot holds that Shakespeare left in it superfluous scenes which even a hasty revision should have noticed.

For Eliot, both workmanship and thought are in an unstable condition in the play. He holds further: “Probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the ‘Mona Lisa’ of literature” (Eliot 91).

Also, according to Eliot, *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate or manipulate into art.

“And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize” (Eliot 91).

For Eliot as well, the play is lacking in objective correlative. By objective correlative, Eliot refers to a set of objects, a situation or a chain of events that can be used to express a specific emotion. He felt that *Hamlet* lacked this, as the external events do not adequately represent the character’s intense inner anguish. Eliot then holds that Hamlet, the man, is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it is in excess of the facts as they appear.

Another critic whose review of the play remains even more enduring is Sigmund Freud. In his psychoanalysis, Freud interpreted *Hamlet* through the lens of the Oedipus complex. However, some say it is the other way round. *Hamlet* helped Freud to understand and, perhaps, even invent psychoanalysis; and that the Oedipus complex is a misnomer. That it should be called the Hamlet complex.

(Wikipedia)

This notwithstanding, Freud's psychoanalytic reading of *Hamlet*, the character, posits that Hamlet's inability to act was based on his repressed desire for his mother, Gertrude, and his unconscious hostility towards his father. This unconscious conflict leads to his indecision and psychological torment throughout the play. This internal, unconscious struggle prevents Hamlet from taking action. He is caught between his love for his mother and his repressed aggression towards his father, thus making revenge a psychologically strenuous task for him.

For Freud as well, Hamlet's inaction or indecisiveness is not a psychological or moral issue, it is the direct result of his repressed desires and the guilt he feels over them.

(Seneca)

<https://senecalearning.com>

Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud's colleague, stretches Freud's psychoanalytic argument further with his position that Hamlet's inexplicable behaviors can only be understood when subjected to investigation along psychoanalytic lines. For Jones, Hamlet's mysterious procrastination is a consequence of the Oedipus complex. Hamlet, he says, continually postpones the act of revenge because of the impossibly complicated psychodynamic situation in which he finds himself. Though Hamlet hates his fratricidal uncle, he nevertheless identifies with him- for having killed Hamlet's father and married his mother, Claudius has carried out Hamlet's subconscious wishes.

Jones had theorized that "Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because the latter had acted out Hamlet's own subconscious desire to murder his father and then marry his mother" (Cousins 160).

In the view of Jane Kingsley-Smith, Hamlet is probably the most celebrated tragedy in the English language. The fame of the play, she says, is "attributable to a thrilling mix of ghost story and murder mystery; powerful stage images (not least a man contemplating a skull in a graveyard); and an abundance of memorable lines- 'To be or not to be' 'Alas, poor Yorick'-but above all to the enigmatic nature of the protagonist himself "(Cousins 156).

According to her, a recurring theme in Shakespeare's tragedies is the pressure on sons to live up to the reputation of their fathers. This is a pressure that Hamlet keenly feels. For Kingsley-Smith, though Hamlet shares his father's name, he doubts that he inherited the former king's virtues. In fact, he seems to identify more strongly with his father's flawed brother, Claudius. Kingsley-Smith holds that it was partly on this basis that British psychoanalyst, Ernest Jones, developed his Oedipal theory of *Hamlet* based on Sigmund Freud's book, "The Interpretation of Dreams".

For Simon Palfrey, Hamlet is a key model of the three-dimensional character: "someone whose troubles appear both to live in the moment and to have a past; who is unique in isolation and existentially self-accounting" (Palfrey 332). His role is that of the stock stage of the revenger. But he ends up as the non-revenger in a revenge play.

Palfrey also presents him as the most talkative of Shakespeare's characters. Hamlet, he says, "dominates his play like no one else. No character seems more present in or defined by soliloquy" (Palfrey 336). He therefore submits that if *Hamlet* has an essence, it is defined by separateness and exclusion: from the audience and from himself.

Between Humanism and Existentialism

We have earlier noted that Shakespeare set out in the play to create a character who will combine both humanistic and existentialist ideals. It is therefore important for us to understand these concepts so as to know the extent to which this unstated objective of the author is achieved.

Humanism is a philosophical as well as a literary movement. It is a philosophy which recognises the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things. For humanism, man is the best creation. Its theme

focuses on the limits and interests of human nature. Another way of putting it is to say that it is a philosophical standpoint which maintains that the philosophic problem concerns human beings trying to comprehend a world of human experience by the resources of human minds.

This meaning of humanism is a basic aspect of the Renaissance through which Renaissance thinkers sought to reintegrate man into the world of nature and history and to interpret him in this perspective. Humanism, in its concern for human nature maintains that man's integral nature should be used as the whole premise from which philosophy must argue. In other words, man should be the take-off point of philosophy and philosophical conclusions should aim at satisfying man.

Freedom is a major theme of humanism. Humanists therefore exalt it. It is freedom that gives meaning to an action taken by a human being. Freedom gives rise to choice. Choice presupposes that man is in a situation and has to handle it in the best way he can. In freedom, man confronts situations in which he deliberately entered and accepts all his responsibilities.

According to Friday Ndubuisi, freedom and consciousness are interchangeable. "They both have power to evaluate things either as they are or as they are not, to imagine situation which is different from the actual situation obtaining in the world and in the process change what there is. (Ndubuisi 58).

For humanists, freedom is not conceived in the Christian sense. The freedom they emphasise is that which man can and should exercise in nature and in society. For them, man has to be free to project his life in the world in an autonomous way. In freedom, man is able to form his world, to vary it and to better it absolutely. This ability of man to think and exercise himself is the whole business of critical rationality which humanism emphasises. It is a philosophy developed by Karl Popper that emphasizes criticism over justification as the core of rational thought. As a non-justificationist approach, it rejects the idea that beliefs can be proven true. Instead, it focuses on the process of eliminating error through rigorous testing and criticism. (Wikipedia)

Critical rationality can also be broadly viewed as the willingness to correct mistakes by being open to criticism. When this is the case, knowledge grows by proposing theories, trying to falsify them, and then correcting errors when they are proven to be false. In critical rationality, human freedom is brought to the fore. (Wikipedia).

<https://en.wikipedia.org>

There is naturalism in humanism. By naturalism is meant the conviction that man is a part of nature, and that nature is his realm. It also means that the features which tie him to nature (his body, his needs, his sensations) are essential to him to the point that he cannot ignore them. This points to the fact that although the humanists exalted the soul of man for its powers of freedom, they did not forget the body and that which pertains to it. This explains why the humanists recognised the value of pleasure and rejected the asceticism of the medieval age. Pleasure, for the humanists, is the sole end of human activities.

Another salient feature of humanism is moral wisdom. For humanists, this wisdom resides in the spiritual essence of man. This is why they put essence over and above existence. The full meaning of man is his essence. Existence is just physical. They believe that it is through this spiritual essence that man attains equilibrium, order, harmony, perfection and other virtues.

Like humanism, Existentialism is a philosophical outlook. But unlike humanism, it is not interested in man's essence but in his existence. Its focus is on concrete human existence. Existentialism proceeds on a famous dictum put forward by Jean-Paul Sartre to the effect that "existence proceeds essence" (Simonson 799). This is the article of faith of existentialism. What this means is that man first of all appears on the scene, turns up and only afterwards defines himself. Man for them is not a finished article. He is a self-transcending being.

So, while both philosophical outlooks have man as their focus, their areas of interest vary. While humanism is interested in essence, existentialism embraces existence.

To the existentialists, only man exists. God and other living things simply are. For them, to exist means to be faced with all the problems of human life and to be able to make one's own choice as to the kind of life one wants to live. Since man makes his choice, man is free and therefore responsible for the life he lives.

Like humanism, existentialism emphasizes freedom. Man is essentially an individual with his own life to live and his own death to die. There is no heaven of values which must guide his choices. Man is therefore condemned to freedom. For this reason, he cannot start making excuses for himself. Existentialists believe that the freedom which man enjoys is too frightening that he has no choice than to relapse into anguish, despair, aloneness and forlornness. Martin Heidegger calls this "factual thrownness"(Wikipedia).

<https://en.wikipedia.org>

For Heidegger, facticity refers to the "thrownness" of human existence, meaning that man is born into a world with predetermined situations like our birth, time and culture. This is not just a list of facts, but a fundamental condition that shapes our being and our possibilities for the future. It is from this premise that existentialism considers the question of God's existence as irrelevant to human existence.

Although this is the state of man, existentialists are however not oblivious of the fact of man's sociality. They realise the social dimensions of existence. To Jean-Paul Satre, to be able to get the truth about your own existence, you must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to your existence and to your knowledge of yourself. In this sense, in discovering your inner being, you discover the other person as well (Simonson 799).

It is important to note that both humanism and existentialism share the view that man cannot escape his condition, no matter the choice he makes. However, while existentialism does not urge man to capitulate but to strive to make his life meaningful through total involvement and commitment to a consistent course of action, humanism toes the path of shameful resignation and of ignoble ease by maintaining that there is nothing man can do about his condition. This tendency towards determinism runs counter to the hold humanism has on freedom.

The Conflict in Hamlet

Having taken a broad look at the concepts of humanism and existentialism, let us see how they meet in the character of Hamlet and their overall effect on the artistic strength of the play.

Hamlet is a study in self-destruction. In it, we see Hamlet the hero, thrown into a wide wanton universe of destruction, and of revenge. Action is the watchword in the scheme of things in the play. The entire scenario revolves around whether Hamlet is able to rise above quietude which is an act of existentialist exaltation as well as of spiritual triumph.

Hamlet is an individual. In other words, he bears the cross of his existence all alone. He is an essential hero. He is responsible for whatever action he takes. This is his dilemma. What does he do? The search for an answer to this nagging question accounts for his occasional forays into soliloquies. His "To be or not to be"? is indeed the heart of the matter. He is bogged down by a wiremesh of indecision. Like the existential hero that he is, he has no heaven of values to fall back on in taking decisions. His rationalisation and ratiocination lead to nowhere. They only kill the individual man in him.

Having observed the false fire in Hamlet, Rosencrantz, one of the courtiers, asks him:

"What is your cause of distemper?"

You surely bar the door upon your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend" (Shakespeare 391).

Hamlet admits the courtier's observation thus:

"Sir, I lack advancement" (Shakespeare 391).

Hamlet's state of mind raises a lot of philosophical questions some of which include: Why this abandonment? Why the condemnation? Can Hamlet be forgiven for inaction? Must he act against the dictates of his conscience to lighten the burden thrust on him? There is hardly any clear-cut answer to these questions. The questions point to the absurdity of the human condition. But to attain authentic selfhood which is one of the cardinal goals of existentialism, Hamlet is expected to act, for man, according to Sartre, is defined in terms of his actions. It is in action that man can bring meaning to bear on a seemingly meaningless and absurd existence.

The humanistic elements in the play readily come to the fore when we consider the fact that Hamlet is haunted from within, rather than from without. This brings about self-rendition and internal suffering. The burden thrust on Hamlet is that man, according to the doctrine of humanism, has to achieve symmetry, order and harmony (all the elements of critical rationality) to realise his spiritual essence (critical wisdom). Can Hamlet take action which existentialism expects of him and at the same time achieve this inner equilibrium which humanism demands? The conflict between these opposing forces make Hamlet a split personality. He is caught between two stools. Hamlet's inaction is borne out of his intellectualism. He rationalises a lot.

Hamlet is haunted by horrendous imaginings. It is not the murder of his father that worries him so much as his mother's marriage to Claudius. He intellectualizes on the action to take against Claudius. Should he revenge against his father's murder, and how? In this confused state of mind, he blurts out:

"And so am I revenged? That would be scanned.

A villain kills my father; and for that, I, his sole son, do this villain send

To heaven.

Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.

He took my father grossly, full of bread;

With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May" (Shakespeare 392).

He rationalizes further on the most auspicious time to act.

"To take him in the purging of his soul,

When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?

No.

Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hint.

When he is drunk asleep or in his rage;

Or in the incestuous pleasures of his bed" (Shakespeare 392).

Hamlet is obsessed with the thought of murder and incest. The whole suffering of Hamlet stems from the fact that his mother, Gertrude, who should identify with him at his father's death chooses instead to embrace Claudius, the suspected murderer. Hamlet sees Claudius as an intruder. This gives him psychological worry.

In his lonely state, Hamlet ruminates on what to do to his mother. He soliloquies:

"Tis now the very witching time of night,

When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out

Contagion to this world: now I drink hot blood

And do such bitter business as the day

Would quake to look on. Soft! now to my mother -

Oh heart! lose not thy nature; ...

Let me be cruel, it unnatural.

I will speak daggers to her, but use none;

My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites" (Shakespeare 392).

The blossoming relationship between Claudius and Gertrude later becomes for Hamlet an intolerable strain. This intolerable strain weakens the man in him. He is therefore incapable of action. This is paralysis of will. This is where Hamlet fails both as a humanist and as an existentialist. Because he is unable to resolve this contradiction, he is unable to achieve symmetry, harmony and spiritual perfection which are handmaidens of humanism. His life revolves around the absurd because of his inability to bring meaning to it through a consistent course of action – a path which existentialism would have him toe. He only sits on the fence and contemplates.

Here, there is an apparent meeting point between humanism and existentialism. They stand as two sides of the same coin, holding essentially the same view, but only from two different perspectives. On the contrary, it is possible to argue that the desirability of critical rationality from the humanistic point of view can, at times, incapacitate. Indeed, how can man achieve meaningful action so much valued by existentialists without sense or critical thinking?

In the play, Hamlet spends much of the time bemoaning the fact that he is being asked to play roles that he can never quite believe in. He can therefore be seen and understood as an actor never at one with his part. "He knowingly puts on roles that allow him an ironic gap wherein he can hide or brood" (Palfrey 333). More profoundly, the play presents him as always non-identical to any part that is supposed to define him." Pg.333. Even though Hamlet assumes differing roles- fool, comedian, assassin, philosopher, knight, and more, Palfrey says, he is and is not each such type. "He is the aggregate of them all and none of them at all" (Palfrey 333). That is why, Palfrey says, he ends up expiring in disgust at the contrast between his scripted role - the son of a dear father murdered - and the role he finds himself improvising.

In Hamlet, the series of contemplation leads to hysteric self – disgust which finally culminates in uncontrollable outbursts. All this eventuate in a sense of futility. There is human waste because there is no solution to the problems in the play. Hamlet therefore succeeds neither as a humanist nor as an existentialist. His critical rationality is botched, and no meaningful action is accomplished. The play therefore does not have symmetry. Little wonder that T.S Eliot dismissed the play as an artistic failure for, according to him, "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (Eliot 92).

In the character, Hamlet, it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action. In the dramatist, it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. Eliot then submits that Shakespeare, in the play, "tackled a problem which proved too much for him" (Eliot 94).

It is for this reason that Eliot famously called Hamlet "an artistic failure", arguing that Shakespeare's emotions for his characters were too great for the play's plot, resulting in a lack of an "objective correlative" to express the inner turmoil.

CONCLUSION

From our analysis, it can be seen that Shakespeare's dramaturgy in Hamlet has so much packed into it. These range from the intriguing to the outrightly complex. But that is not to say that the play has nothing to commend it. Shakespeare's complexity in the play is in itself an art. It takes dexterity to weave contraries into an organic whole. That is why Cousins in his position tries to rescue Shakespeare's art in the play. He sees Hamlet's incompleteness as a measure of the nature of Shakespeare's art. Shakespeare's aim in his plays is to speak to as many of his diverse audience as he could, so his plays shift in tone and manner. For Cousins therefore, Shakespeare's plays

"reveal his awareness of how close to each other incongruous aspects of experience can be: how the ludicrous, for example, may cohabit with the tragic, or how the comic may walk alongside grief. Their varying of tone and manner, moreover, points to Shakespeare's fascination with how inconsistencies pattern individual human behavior" (Cousins 9).

It can further be argued, despite the afore stated misgivings from some critics, that Shakespeare is only being realistic in a way. He approached his work from the humanistic point of view, relying on the premise that an artist has to impose pattern or order on the chaotic universe. The expectation is that life will learn from it. In other words, life can imitate art, and that is the other side of mimesis.

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