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# The Paradigm Examples of Polar Concept In Shakespeare's Hamlet

By Nasser Maleki

*University, English Department*

*Abstract* - The present article tries to make a fresh analysis of Shakespeare's touchstone Hamlet taking into consideration the term polar concept argument. Polar concept is a postmodern hermeneutical form of reading and analyzing texts which sprung from the mind of the British philosopher and critic Gilbert Ryle. Polar concept, as a reading strategy, is a kind of argument that affirms the understanding of one concept, from the mere understanding of its polar opposite. English literature is replete with write-ups that tackle readers in a dilemmatic situation, and this has always caused the dualistic concepts to come to the fore; however in a polar concept strategy understanding occurs because the existence of one concept paves the way for its contrary and consequently leads to a dialectical monism. The polar concept as a literary term has played a very crucial role in Shakespeare's Hamlet, therefore, this study is an attempt to highlight the polarity of different concepts in this tragedy. The author believes that by drawing a paradigm of polar concepts throughout Hamlet, or any other text, readers would be able to enjoy different levels of meanings without being petered out by the dexterity of literary devices and tropes.

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# The Paradigm Examples of Polar Concept In Shakespeare's Hamlet

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**Keywords :** *Hamlet; Polar concept; Meaning; Balance.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present article is divided into two parts: it first introduces Gilbert Ryle's Polar concept as a postmodern reading strategy in analyzing literary texts, which is then followed by utilizing the term polar concept in achieving meaning in *Hamlet* that is one of the most frequented tragedies among literature students in Iranian universities. The author therefore starts analyzing the text of the play to foreground the possible traces of polar concepts of dualisms, ambiguities, and simultaneous encounter of concepts. The article ends, conclusively, by briefly monitoring on the polar concept as a philosophical doctrine that views reality as a unified whole, and the extracts cited in the main body of the article serve mainly to contextualize and support such a manifestation.

## II. DISCUSSION

### a) *What is Polar Concept?*

A polar concept argument is a kind of reading technique which posits the understanding of one concept, from the mere understanding of its polar opposite. In some more cunning way, one can say that

in this kind of research the polar or as its postmodern counterpart stands the binary oppositions supplement each other in a Derridian way. However, Anthony Grayling's crusade against Scepticism or metaphysical reading of tests and fixity of meaning provides the foundation for this kind of reading strategy and forms the subject matter of one of the landmark terms in which he propounds the theory of duality in the form of a present being in a text drawing chiefly on the linguistic model, and this term was polar concept. In the words of Blackburn, "the term is used to suggest both Saussurean emphasis on meaning as the function of differences or contrast within a network of terms, meaning determining relationship with the extra-linguistic world" (2005, p. 100).

This kind of reading like that of any eschatology is an accomplice of the reduction of structurality of structure that is conceived on the basis of polarity of different concepts. Put differently, in this strategy, in reading any text when one grasps the essence of one polar concept, one also grasps immediately the essence of its polar opposite. Ryle's highly controversial discussion on the polar concept argument runs as the following:

A country which had no coinage would offer no scope to counterfeiters. There would be nothing for them to manufacture or pass counterfeits of. They could, if they wished, manufacture and give away decorated disks of brass or lead, which the public might be pleased to get. But these would not be false coins. There can be false coins only where there are coins made of the proper materials by the proper authorities. In a country where there is a coinage, false coins can be manufactured and passed; and the counterfeiting might be so efficient that an ordinary citizen, unable to tell which were false and which were genuine coins, might become suspicious of the genuineness of any particular coin that he received (1960: 73).

This, I believe, might implicitly occur in different areas of knowledge even science and technology, and the result it has always propounded has been an unconscious dialectical monism. Somehow referring to the monism created by the polar concept in literary text, Norman Fruman says that "Unity as an aesthetic category is not something that exists objectively in the work of art. It is projected by the beholder" (qtd. In Swanepoel, 2010, p. 191). This further can highlight the

*Author :* Assistant Professor, Razi University, English Department, Kermanshah – Iran. E-mail : maleki\_n5@yahoo.com  
Phone No : 0918 339 7616

postmodern notion of the reconciliation of the opposites in literary criticism, which shows the overall tendency of the researchers to direct their notion toward discovering the polarity of concepts in reading and analyzing literary texts, even when they are lost in no centrality in any text (Ibid).

To put it in a different stylistic feature, it is conceived that when an event in a text emerges itself, it becomes a structure, or the structurality of structure which has always been neutralized or reduced. And this is a process which gives it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin, but this law of the central presence is never itself, and has always already been transported outside itself for anything which has somehow pre-existed it (Maleki & Navidi, 2011, 310). From then on it is probably necessary to assume that there is no center in the text under the study, that its center has no natural locus, therefore the concept of sign, and the relation between signifier and the signified is very fluid and enables a free play of the latter, hence there might happen to be a chain of signifiers and nothing is signified. When it is applied to literature or literary texts like *Hamlet* it becomes a revolutionary activity. Consequently, it is transparently sensible to assume that, Hamlet's, or any other text's, opposite statements, in one way or the other is connected to Grayling's polar concept argument, which ultimately leads to the interpretation or meaning of that text. According to him, "there cannot be counterfeit coins, unless there are genuine ones, nor crooked paths unless there are straight paths, nor tall men unless there are short men" (1995, p. 54). Embroidering in the same sense, Franceschi (2003) suggests that

Paradigm examples of polar opposites are positive/negative, small/large, static/ dynamic, internal/external, and so on. But let us provide an explicit definition. To begin with, polar opposites are polar concepts, i.e. concepts which intuitively come in pairs, and are such that each one is defined as the opposite of the other. For example, internal can be defined as the opposite of external, while symmetrically external can also be defined as the opposite of internal. Both poles are the contrary of one another. In a sense, there is no primitive notion: neither pole of the  $A/\bar{A}$  duality can be regarded as the primitive notion (1 of 7).

Such duality is consistent with trends in meanings and language, because meaning is not present outside, words and language, and inside objects, thoughts, mind, ideas, or mental images; rather it is a function of the system of signs, of the language itself. Sign as what Soames (1999) believes is viewed as "a structure whose structurality has always offered a fixed position which limits its freedom, and is the disruption of presence" (67). The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement at a chain. Freeplay as depicted by Maleki & Navidi "is

always an interplay of absence and presence" (p.31). And in the same token, Levi-Strauss high lighting the freeplay of repetition and repetition of freeplay says, "turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilty" (1963, p. 57).

Here, it is significant to note that many of Derrida's encounters with the tradition of Western thought attempt to reveal and undermine what he sees as the fundamental binaries which betrays Western metaphysics of presence that of speech over writing. He claimed that

Western thought had been structured in terms of hierarchical oppositions where one of the terms had been given a qualitative and/ or temporal priority over a supposedly derivative, inferior, or undesirable other (1982, p. 84).

Derrida turns language into an experience, which exemplifies that signs are independent of the signified. He says,

by decentering the structure, by freeing ourselves of the notion of a non-representative ground of our signs (representations). As long as the absolute signified retains authority, signs are restricted to accurate representations of it. Only by erasing this centre can genuinely free interpretation occur, by which we mean that all propositions and signs are conventionally meaningful as relations, differences, and functions of other propositions and signs (1978, p. 62).

#### b) *Polar Concept in Hamlet*

Such a postmodern manifestation, that is, polar concept in a literary text like *Hamlet* written more than half century ago, at first glance, seem difficult and even impossible. However, after reading the main body of the text, it becomes interesting to know that the author has consciously or unconsciously extrapolated the term polar concept in his write ups from the beginning till the end of the play. After reading the main text of the play, one is amused by detecting several instances of polarities which are dominating or captaining the tragedy. It is interesting to discover that Shakespeare who has lived in the sixteen century has applied this post-modern term. He is so intelligent that his thoughts were out of the limitations of his time and place. His approaches to the main context of the play reside in the reality of the dual opposites and dichotomies either in the concepts, or ideas.

For Derrida such dichotomies tend to privilege identity, immediacy, and presence over difference, deferral, and absence in a text. The difference is one of the two forces of each sign in words. The other force of the sign is its power of deferment, the capacity to postpone. Therefore Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "to be or not to be, that is the question", reveals meaning referring to absences, that which is not there, something to be discovered. Hence, half of the sign is what it is not,

and the other half is not there. These two forces inhabit each sign. Then, no sign is fully adequate, it is written 'under erasure', which expresses the inadequacy of the sign. Shedding more light on Derrida's argument, Grant believes:

A particularly important type of discrimination is that where one concept, so to speak, includes by exclusion. Concepts related in this way constitute the most important concepts of our thinking, we denoted as polar concepts (1955: 48).

One of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare is Hamlet. The plot centers round prince Hamlet's inability to take action against his uncle who has killed his father and married his mother. Before I take an eagle's-eye view of the paradigm instances of the polarity of concepts in this tragedy, I must say that these instances might not be attributed to Shakespeare the man. The reason behind this goes to the collaborative nature of the Renaissance drama (such as the original *Hamlet* being written by Kyd, or Saxo Grammaticus) or its being refashioned by Shakespeare. However, of the play I shall mention that Shakespeare is certainly the author, either wholly or mostly. The first outstanding clash of the opposites occurs in the beginning of the play, the time when Hamlet has changed into a permanent mourner and a dissembler of lunacy. In an occasional encounter with his uncle, King Claudius makes a fictitious question from the prince, as he says:

*How is it that clouds still hang on you?*

And Hamlet answers:

*Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun.*

[Act I, Sc. II]

These lines show how impossible it is to escape the differential nature of language, or the undecidable flow and counterflow of all significations. Speaking subjects are caught up in the interminable wearing, unwearing and reweaving of the fabric of discourse. The pairs of terms like clouds accompanying shadow/ sun are assumed to form a hierarchy of value or truth. In some other parts of the same act Horatio says:

*My Lord, I came to see your father's funeral.*

And Hamlet replies:

*I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student;*

*I think it was to see my mother's wedding.*

.

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*Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven.*

[Act I, Sc. II]

'Funeral' is a ceremony of burying or burning a dead person, and 'wedding' is also a ceremony though the marriage ceremony, hence the newly asserted hierarchy is itself displaced and is not allowed to install a new truth or structural fixity; such polarity of oppositions creates a state of unstable disequilibrium. The brief formulation of polar concepts is encapsulated in the

phrase 'my dearest foe'. The word 'dear' means loved precious one, and 'foe' implies enmity or strangeness. To the phrase 'my dearest foe' involves in performing another purpose, which takes on a different meaning or function. This example provides the ambivalence evidence of difference entity. In some other parts of the tragedy or the play in the play scene, I found Polonius saying:

*Hither, my lord.*

*Hamlet: Buzz, buzz.*

*Polonius: Upon my honour*

*Ham: Then came each actor on his ass [Act III, Sc. II]*

Hamlet's statement supplies a rejoinder to the phrase 'upon my honour', in order to degrade Polonius, to maintain the balanced vision of truth. The most outstanding example of polarity of concept can be witnessed in Hamlet's important paradox:

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:*

[Act III, Sc. I]

Here the play of difference makes an unanswerable question. The metaphysical question raised by this sentence concerns Being and Non being. Does the thought (exist)? It is a thing; on the other hand, its origin, destination, meaning, nature, and very existence are in doubt. The snow white doubt, in the phrase, is the very presence of the thought, and this discourse is subject to the play of difference. This includes the meanings to differ, to dispense and to defer. The signifiers (including spoken or written words) can never have settled the signified (concepts of things); that is language cannot capture presence. Language is a system of differences and not a collection of units of meaning. Signifiers disperse meaning and defer presence.

There is a sense that none being and being are one, that the thought, though nonexistent has the force of being. This being is really the non-being; that there is something which is determined by the repetition. It returns, not to be repeated, but marks its existence. It implies that, every movement towards determinate meaning is blocked, and the concept of indeterminacy and difference erode all notions of knowledge, objectivity, and identity. Extrapolating on the same issue, another example of the polar concepts is implicitly revealed in Hamlet's sentence to Ophelia:

*You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not. [Act III, Sc. I]*

And in the final act, Hamlet speaking to his mother about Ophelia says:

*I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love  
Make up my sum [Act V, Sc. I].*



The comparison of the two statements by Hamlet implies the polarity of concepts. This sense is repeatedly implied in Hamlet's conversation on marriage with Ophelia, he says:

*Or if thou wilt needs, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. [Act III, Sc. I]*

Here Hamlet toys with the words 'fool' and 'wise', just opposing them as if one causes the other to exist in both lingual and conceptual polarity and the consequence, I think, is a sense of unification in the unconscious part of the reader's mind. In the proceeding lines of the same act, Hamlet says:

*I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. [Act III, Sc. I]*

Here again the ambivalence words such as 'one face' and 'another' can possibly be considered as another example of polarity. In fact, the way Hamlet shapes and moulds the words in reader's mind and thought is transparently determined by a preexisting system of differences which operates through language. Later, Hamlet speaking to his mother says:

*Look here, upon this picture, and on this, [He shows her pictures of his father and his uncle],  
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,  
A combination and a form indeed  
Where every god did seem to set his seal,  
To give the world assurance of a man.  
This was your husband.-look you now, what follows:  
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear,  
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?  
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,  
And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?  
You cannot call it love; for at your age  
The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble .....  
but sure that sense  
Is apoplex'd; for madness would not err,  
Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrall'd  
But it reserved some quantity of choice  
To serve in such a difference .....  
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,  
Since frost itself actively doth burn  
And reason panders will. [Act III, Sc. IV]*

In the above extract, and given this definition, we are in a position to distinguish the polar concepts revealed in the delicate balance of the Queen's previous husband (Hamlet's father), and her present husband (king Claudius). He compares the previous king to Hyperion, Jove, Mars, Mercury. By these comparisons,

Hamlet lays bare his father's grace and dignity in contrast to the present king calling him 'a mildewed ear blasting his wholesome brother'. In addition, he steps forth to declare another pair of opposites by comparing 'frost' and 'burn' accompanying the young love, and the old one. Hamlet even confesses these differences in the line, 'But it reserved some quantity of choice/ to serve in such a difference'. These and many other instances of polarities implanted in the text of this tragedy, as spoken by the hero, now seem to have been anachronistic for the literary context of the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and it is, I believe, a tangible testimony to the existence of postmodern facts in Hamlet the tragedy. Embroidering in the same token and content, the following example can be of great use in which the queen is addressing his son Hamlet:

*O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.*

And Hamlet replies to her:

*O, throw away the worser part of it and live the purer with the other half.*

*[Act III, Sc. IV]*

This line is structured throughout by an underlying dualism of thought which moves between 'the worser part', and 'the pure one'. Hamlet holds the object of thought in a dynamic tension between the poles of dualistic visions. He, consciously or unconsciously moves between the two halves of destroying the concept of transcendental signified. Knitting to the forgoing notion, one can't stop monitoring the conceptual oppositions prevailing the atmosphere when Rosencrantz inquires Hamlet for Polonius's corpse, he asks:

*Rosencrantz: My Lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the king.*

*Hamlet: The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing-*

*Guildestern: A thing, my Lord?*

*Hamlet: Of nothing-Bring me to him [Act IV, Sc. III]*

These retorts imply that the two commands are one; the body should be in the place where the king is. The body of Polonius is here in the palace 'with the king', but the king, not being, as it is, dead, is 'not with the body'. On the other hand, the other illustration suggests that, the body of the king is necessarily where the king is, but his kinship, that which makes him king, is no more in the body. The other part of the sentence implies that, this particular king is a thing of no importance. Thus a metaphysical profundity is turned in to a deliberate anti climax. Therefore, it is conceived that, these lines serve the balance of probabilities. Here, it is worth highlighting some of the king's and Hamlet's statements, as they speak:

*King: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?*

*Hamlet: At supper.*

*King: At supper? Where?*

*Hamlet: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That's the end.*

*King: Alas, alas!*

*Hamlet: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of a fish that hath fed of the worm.*

*King: What dost thou mean by this?*

*Hamlet: nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.*

*[Act IV, Sc. III]*

Here, he fiddles with the ambivalent phrase 'at supper' in which either Polonius eats supper, or he is eaten at supper; in other words he provides a delicate monism which appears in the sentence 'your worm is your only emperor for diet .....', however, this implies that the emperor is the food of worms, and the heart and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but the breakfast of a eely little worm. The other line provides the same notion, 'a man fish with the worm that eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm', here Hamlet implicitly hint to the cyclic operation of food, that is, the fish, the worm, and the man who simultaneously eat one another, indeed here he compares the king to beggar like two opposite poles, hence, he says. '..... how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar', therefore he provides polar concepts again. Last but not the least, it is worth considering the term, polar concepts, when Hamlet in response to Osric's comment on whether says:

*Hamlet: No, believe me, tis very cold, the wind is northerly.*

*Os: It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.*

*Hamlet: But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion. [Act IV, Sc. II]*

Here, Hamlet provides ambivalence for the readers, the weather condition is not signified, since on one hand Hamlet believes that weather is cold against Osric's sentence, and on the other hand, while Osric believes him, Hamlet nullifies him. It seems, while the truth comes to the fore Hamlet nullifies it to assure the non-existence (non-being), he intends to make a delicate balance between signifiers being and non-being, though nothing is signified.

### III. CONCLUSION

The present argument aims at reinforcing that polar concepts exist in the artistic vocations of Hamlet who is the most philosophic man among the characters of Shakespeare's plays; as it was seen, those instances by him approve the existence of duality in this play, more than other characters. The dual concepts

intuitively come in pairs, and are such that each one is defined as the opposite of the other, for example 'sun' can be defined as the opposite of 'clouds', while symmetrically 'clouds' can also be defined as the opposite of 'sun', or the others concerning 'funeral' and 'wedding', or Hamlet's oft-sighted cliché 'to be, or not to be that the question', and may other hidden ones. These evidences provide some grounds in the support of the postmodern hypothesis, that polar concepts have been applied in Shakespeare's Hamlet. In the finality of the discussion, one can transparently come to the point that a polar concept argument in any literary text bears on some more or less strong version of dialectical monism, a philosophical doctrine that views reality as a unified whole, due to the complementarity of polar concepts.

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