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Madness of Hamlet

One of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies was *Hamlet*. This play leaves many viewers questioning Hamlet’s sanity. Can emotion and tragedy cause one to lose their sanity? Many critics are divided about the sanity of Hamlet, was it caused by the death of his father, his mother’s marriage to his uncle, or the rejection from Ophelia. One of the many inventions of drama adopted by the Renaissance dram was the use of insanity. To better understand Hamlet, we must get an understanding on why insanity was used in Shakespeare’s play and reveal the truth about Hamlet’s sanity.

Insanity whether real or obfuscated was the integral fiber for many of Shakespeare’s plays. Apart from reflecting the political turmoil, madness adds to the atmosphere of pathos, misfortune and self-destruction of the protagonists in Shakespeare’s plays (Bali). A pathological condition, widely prevalent in the Elizabethan times, lunacy manifested itself in multifarious forms, such as paranoia, hallucinations, delusions, suspicion, secrecy, confinement and isolation in the society(Bali). Madness is a pathological condition of the mind which eliminates all rational thoughts. Unable to perceive and accept reality, the afflicted individual tries to avoid or negate the harsh reality(Bali). The Renaissance was a time which sought to define or rather redefine madness as a separate entity(Bali). Many theologians and physicians regarded madness as a form of irrational behavior, which ironically provided an insight into the deeper and lesser known recessed of the human mind(Bali). A range of theories and opinions regarding lunacy were prevalent during Elizabethan age. Shakespeare did not follow any single medical theory to describe the madness of any of his characters, in fact, he chose to endow his characters with popular traits of madness(Bali). Literary and figurative madness intersperses the action of the Shakespearean plays, especially the tragedies(Bali).

The plays of Shakespeare identify madness as produced by the self-contradictions of the dominant ideology(Bali). A master craftsman, Shakespeare uses madness as a tool not only to delineate realistic of life-like characters but also to underscore the intricacies of human life and the intriguing working of human mind (Bali 83). Hamlet’s sanity or lack of it has been an issue of much deliberation ever since the play was written. Hamlet’s character is perhaps the most complex to explain in terms of Shakespeare’s delineations of insanity primarily because he displays the duality of a single mind-madness and mental stability at the same time. (Bali). Bali states, “he is an apt example of the complexities of human psyche which are often beyond comprehension.” Although Hamlet begins faking insanity in order to punish the guilty, the thin line between sanity and lunacy is soon crossed over, leading Hamlet to an ambiguous and apparently schizophrenic state of mind(Bali).

As a rational animal, a man is one who thinks. The play problematizes the proper exercise of thought by which man sustains this identity (Levy 219). In *Hamlet*, the “nutshell” of the mind is itself the ultimate prison. For here the individual is confined within his or her own “course of thought”, and rendered vulnerable to the products of his or her own mentality(Levy). Hamlet is intermittently aware of this influence, as when halting his own self-castigation for action: “About, my brains” (2.2.584). From this point of view, man is the rational animal whose identity is problematized by recourse to thought(Levy). In *Hamlet*, the result of life is to modify the operation of reason by directing its focus to specific concerns (Levy 220). Hamlet emphasizes awareness of how he thinks when halting his rememoration of his mother’s uxorial devotion prior to his father’s death, observing the effect of his melancholy, and adopting the disguise of madness(Levy). The play emphasizes that the mind is characterized by unexpected progeny of its thought, resulting from conceptual gestation (Levy 224). The nature of the mind is to incubate thought whose content will emerge or become evident later(Levy). The most profound implication of the rethinking of thought in *Hamlet* concerns not the content of thought, but the relation of thought to its thinker(Levy). Man thinks not because of what he is, but in virtue of what he is becoming(Levy). Thought does not make Hamlet’s identity, but instead is the consequence of it. The play alters the relation between thought and thinker, such that thought is the means by which the thinker forges or “shapes” Hamlet’s identity as a rational being (Levy 230). Hamlet’s use of thought is the means by which he fulfils his own identity (Levy 231).

William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* arises superior to others in its craft, complexity, and continuing relevance in discussions about the mystery of self-hood (Price 32). By implementing binary juxtapositions between concepts such as madness and sanity, acting and play-acting, and hiding versus revealing one’s true self, Shakespeare both adheres to and breaks many of the standard conventions within the tradition of English revenge drama(Price). Shakespeare seems to offer the conclusion that adopting false characteristics in order to promote unnatural change can result in the loss of one’s unique personal identity, and that the theatre is crucible through which personhood is refined(Price 33). Many works of literature explore the concept of opposing ideas, and those oppositions help interpreters draw meaning from individual texts(Price). *Hamlet* is a journey from real action to play-action, sanity to madness, and from the true self to the false or hidden self (Price). As Hamlet’s identity is increasingly threatened, his primary transitions from life to death becomes catalyzed by his encounters with these other philosophical quandaries introduced to Hamlet at different points in the play(Price). *Hamlet* contains a plot with obstacles that are not encountered in other tragedies, as Hamlet is fully aware of what repercussions may follow his revenge (Price). This recognition causes the play to take a turn for the philosophical and ensures that the significance of the binary juxtapositions within the text are at the forefront of the reader’s or viewer’s mind (Price 34). In doing so, both the character, Hamlet, and the viewers of the drama face the metaphysical acceptance that becoming an avenger comes at the cost of losing one’s soul (Price). Arguably, the most obvious duality present in *Hamlet* is that of madness and sanity (Price 35).

Madness has long been an object of fascination in the Western cultural, literary, medical, and philosophical consciousness (Head 173). The human mind is the incredibly powerful, profoundly dynamic lens through which we inevitably perceive reality(Head). Head states, “our literary relationship to madness has been inconsistent as the phenomenon of insanity itself.” Michael Foucault writes about a newer literary relationship to madness in his book, *Madness and Civilization*, he states,” If madness is the truth of knowledge, it is because knowledge itself is absurd, learning becomes madness through the very excess of false learning” (185). Hamlet’s symbolic predicament does, after all, speak poignantly to the thematic concerns of twentieth-century literature, particularly in its concern with madness at the societal level (Head 176). Hamlet attempts to reconstruct reality on his own terms, and finds himself unable to believe in any available version of it(Head). Long before Hamlet imports madness into the text as a motif, however, Shakespeare signals its inevitability by depriving his audience of an exposition (Head 177). The linkage between Hamlet’s “madness” and his unique grasp of a higher truth marks a crucial split in the development of madness as a literary trope(Head). Hamlet has been called “the most intelligent figure ever represented in literature,”. The great irony of Hamlet’s “madness” is that he is by far the sanest character in the play. Hamlet’s madness is a façade that Hamlet develops to sustain survival in a lunatic world (Head 179).

Shakespeare’s use of theatre imagery truly draws the interest of the viewer. Shakespeare use of insanity in *Hamlet* has many pondering the question, “Was Hamlet mad”? One of Shakespeare’s strengths was how the plays tells absorbing stories and the complexity of his characters. Actors Orson Wells and Peter O Toole stated, “Hamlet was not mad, it’s the world the surrounds him that’s mad.” *Hamlet* is a fascinating play, whose character still today fascinates the audience with his ambivalent about revenge. It also leaves the audience with uncertainty about how much of Hamlet’ madness is feigned and how much genuine.

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