

AP English Notes
November 19, 2004

Here are two excellent sites with information on madness in Shakespeare.

[A Short Course on Hamlet](http://www.netcomuk.co.uk/~iandel/answ2.html#what3) by Ian Delaney
<http://www.netcomuk.co.uk/~iandel/answ2.html#what3>

1. Who is acting a part in this act? In what ways?

Appearances being at odds with reality is a major Shakespearean theme appearing in nearly all of the plays. The answer to the question is, of course, nearly everyone.

Claudius is obviously covering up the fact that he's a murderer and is pretending to be the concerned uncle. Polonius pretends that he stopped the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia out of respect for the King and because Hamlet was out of his daughter's social class. Then he humours Hamlet, pretending the prince makes sense to him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pretend to be Hamlet's loyal friends anxious for his health. Finally, Hamlet is pretending (variously) to be mad.

Interestingly, the only other major character in Act Two, the player, is a professional pretender. And he doesn't act at all. His speech is a narrative rather than a dramatic monologue and his feelings for Hecuba are, as the prince realises, quite genuine.

This play has more to say on the subject of Acting and Truth in Act Three. Suffice to say here, that only the professional player's performance is truthful. Acting might hide the truth in the hands of amateurs. But in the hands of professionals, **it enlightens and creates truth.**

7. What different types of madness do we see in Hamlet during this act?

When he visits Ophelia shortly before II.i., Hamlet's madness is supposedly that of melancholy unrequited lover. He is pale, mournful and silent, seemingly **driven to distraction** by the loss of Ophelia, according to Polonius.

Then, when he meets Polonius in the lobby in II.ii., Hamlet plays the lunatic clown. Satirical and irreverent, incapable of ordered speech or understanding the most straightforward questions, Hamlet's madness has completely changed.

On meeting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet drops the clown act and switches to the melancholic. He tells them of his misery and jadedness, but says that he is unable to understand its cause.

Three different acts of madness within the course of a few hours would suggest that Hamlet is either very bad at acting or doesn't really care whether anyone believes it. I think that Hamlet's inability to sustain a performance of madness is very curious. Perhaps he is **unable to control himself**, being madder than he imagines. Perhaps he is simply using the appearance of madness

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in order to be able to express his contempt for everyone he sees.

8. What do each of the main characters feel to be the cause of Hamlet's madness?

When the King greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the start of the act, he says he isn't sure of the reason for the prince's madness. What he is sure of, however, is that there is something more than his father's death. Typically, he suspects a **secret cause** and wants to know what it is as soon as possible.

Gertrude suspects that the cause is 'his father's death and [her] o'erhasty marriage' to Claudius. This is interesting on two counts.

First, she is very close to the truth. Of course, she does not know that Hamlet is acting, but she does recognise the causes of his melancholy with complete accuracy.

Second, it signals some guilt on Gertrude's part at her quick remarriage. Gertrude is not completely immoral or insensitive, I would suggest, though she still might be viewed as weak-willed for having married when she knew it was wrong. The critic A.C. Bradley said Gertrude was "sheep-like". A.C. Bradley is very out-of-date in many respects, but this remains a very provocative observation.

Polonius, like the King and Queen, has also come up with a theory about Hamlet's madness. Unlike theirs, however, his theory is miles away from the truth. He has decided that Hamlet is 'mad for [Ophelia's] love' (II.i.). This reflects his jealousy of his daughter's chastity and **intellectual arrogance**. Hamlet, divining Polonius' ideas, is happy to play along.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are determined that Hamlet is mad because his ambitions have been foiled. In their discussion of dreams with the prince, they continually try to force Hamlet to admit to ambition, a point he flatly denies. Their theory reflects their own cutthroat ambition, which has allowed them to sell their schoolfriend for the price of royal favour.

In each case, the theory of madness suggested by a character tells us more about that character than it tells us about Hamlet. As the gentleman in Act Four, scene five says, mad speech is 'nothing'. But in its nothingness, **it acts as a kind of mirror**, reflecting on the observers' temperaments and concerns.

Hamlet and Madness by Michel Delville
<http://www.littanam.ulg.ac.be/hamletenglish.html#themes>

The third act of *Hamlet* opens with a remark by the king, Claudius, who instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, old school-friends of his nephew, to discover why the latter "puts on this confusion,/ Grating so harshly all his days of quiet/ With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?" For over three centuries hundreds of experts have turned their attention to the problem of Hamlet's

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madness. Hundreds of articles have been written, and dozens of controversial theories have been put forward and countered. The characters of Shakespeare's play are themselves desperate to discover the origins of the affliction which mars the prince of Denmark. Whilst Polonius sees Hamlet's conduct as the result of disappointed love, Ophelia can only see the symptoms of pure madness. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is ambition and frustration which are gnawing away at the young heir to the throne. Finally, for Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, who in this joins most critics, at the root of it is a warped reaction, including rejection, to the death of his father and her own hasty remarriage. This interpretation does indeed play an essential role in the play. Hamlet himself never ceases speculating not only about the overt or covert motivations of other characters but also about the uses and abuses of power, the faults of passion, action and inaction, the significance of ancestral customs as well as the question of suicide. Most of the characters observing Hamlet's behaviour can't agree whether it is fake and calculating or whether the prince really is suffering from a mental illness threatening the "noble, sovereign reason" which separates men from beasts (Claudius). Claudius himself is conscious of the fact that the conduct and words of his nephew are at one and the same time completely irrational and absolutely coherent. Basing his judgement on the theories of ancient medicine, he attributes the ambiguities of the deranged speeches to the workings of a harmful temperament provoking a state of deep melancholia. "[W]hat he (Hamlet) spake" he concludes, "though it lack'd form a little/ Was not like madness. There's something in his soul/ O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,/ And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose/ Will be some danger" (Shakespeare 3.1). In this respect a parallel can be traced between the "methodical madness" of Hamlet and that of Ophelia. In effect, whilst everyone agrees that "their words have no sense", their words and actions are still the object of an exceptional curiosity on the part of their entourage. "Her speech is nothing" the unnamed gentleman who opens Act 4, Scene 5 tells us, "Yet the unshaped use of it doth move/ The hearers to collection. They aim at it,/ And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,/ Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,/ Indeed would make one think there might be thought,/ Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily."

"What education in madness!" finally exclaims Laertes, meditating on a nothingness which "is worth more than all thought". It is to be noticed that, in the context of Shakespeare's work, Laertes' perplexed state echoes that of Edgar in *King Lear* when he—captivated by the logic and rigour latent in the madness of his king—declares "what reason in this madness" Each character tries to decipher the madness of Ophelia and Hamlet because the ambiguities of their deranged discourses seem to reveal a terrible sickness capable not only of threatening the psychological equilibrium of the individual but of infecting the kingdom as well as the world beyond: "it goes so heavily with my disposition" says Hamlet, "that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours." (Shakespeare 2.2)

However, Hamlet's madness has not only the effect of disturbing those around him, it also allows him the freedom to transgress the court's rules of etiquette and obedience without incurring immediate punishment. Hamlet, under cover of madness, takes on the role of a critical and sardonic commentator on the schemes of other characters, and in this he succeeds Yorick, the

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king's late fool, whose fate is the subject of a full discussion in the fifth and final act. Amongst Hamlet's principal targets are his mother's infidelity, Rosencrantz's servitude and the devouring ambition of his uncle whom he reminds, by means of a riddle, that all are equal before death:

HAMLET: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that 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 4, Scene 3)

Forced to play a role which brings him nothing but misfortune and alienation, Hamlet envies those who, unlike him, do not allow themselves to be tormented by "the scruples of conscience". For this reason he admires the equanimity of his friend Horatio, whom he includes amongst those fortunate people "Whose blood and judgement are so well comeddled/ That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger/ To sound what stop she please". In other words, whilst Horatio "no revenue hast but [his] good spirits/ To feed and clothe [him]", it is precisely his ability to be someone "that Fortune's buffets and rewards/ Hast ta'en with equal thanks"(Shakespeare 3.3) that allows him to escape suffering. The stoic Horatio, who admits to being "more an antique Roman than a Dane"(Shakespeare 5.2), does not succumb to destructive passions. He does not nourish ill-considered hopes and in this avoids frustrations and disappointments. It is because all these qualities are united in Horatio that Hamlet implores him, before his own death, not to give in to the temptation to commit suicide and to stay alive in order to tell the whole truth.

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

So, what is the answer to the central question: is Hamlet mad? Is he mad partly because his pain and metaphysical doubt are beyond him? Is his madness a strategy for better observing and manipulating others, and furthermore to protect himself? Or does he take cover under an artificial madness which absolves him from all responsibility and allows him to find comfort in inaction, to split himself in some way, to be at once an actor in *and* a spectator of the staging of life, of *his* life? Or is he, all things considered, just insane? Each of us has to decide, according to taste and temperament.

Argumentative Paper

Thesis statement is your proposition.

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Proposition is the conclusion reached about a subject, a suggestion or recommendation.

Argumentative Paper follows the pattern:

Establish a rapport with the reader--Introduction

Proof paragraphs

Subject--Restriction--Illustrated Arguments

Proofs: Critical and/or Text

Conclusion with a clincher statement

Jewell Worley, a family therapist, suggests that Hamlet's "dysfunctional family" has fostered a deep "depression." Later, the Prince exhibits diminished mental ability that requires making notes to remember that villains can smile as they destroy a life: "My tables,--meet it is I set it down" (Shakespeare 1.5.102).

"Short Course on Hamlet" by Ian Delaney

The nunnery scene vividly displays Hamlet's misogyny, apparently genuine madness ("It hath made me mad") and his new and rather bizarre plan to bring an end to suffering by preventing women from having children starting with Ophelia ("Why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners"). Fortunately, this is quickly forgotten.

Oddly, Hamlet turns up in Claudius' private chapel on his way to see his mother. Here the parallelism between the two "mighty opposites" is made obvious. Who is the villain here? The man who is trying to seek heaven's aid in repenting, or the man who wants to send him to eternal damnation? Revenge is in excess of justice: it wants more, and Hamlet makes this distinction clear when he says that to kill Claudius would be "hire and salary, not revenge".

"Hamlet stabs Polonius through the arras and displays no remorse whatsoever. Surely, his belief that he is heaven's 'scourge and minister' (whipper) suggests madness?" (Delaney, Introduction 3.2).