

# HAMLET'S MADNESS : PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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## **Abstract**

*Hamlet is a play by Shakespeare, who is considered the greatest playwright of all time. The paper revolves around the all-time conflict of the madness of Hamlet. The paper deals with Hamlet's madness in the light of the psychological analysis of his real and absolute need for madness with regard to the theories of Psychosis and Neurosis. Psychosis and neurosis are two theories that revolve around the idea of illusion and reality respectively. The theory of neurosis is much suited to the conflicted madness of Hamlet. With the deception of madness, both real and pretended, the tragedy shows how sick and twisted such a world actually is, because only madness seems to be truthful and adhere to the ideals of the society but that often results in insanity or death.*

**Keywords:** *Psychosis, Neurosis, Madness, Tragedy, Conflict*

## **Introduction**

"Let a man mimic madness as perfectly as Hamlet, and be summoned to court on the trial of his sanity."

The conflict between readers and critics about the idea of Hamlet's madness being real or feigned has been one of the major reasons why this old tragedy is still relevant and fascinating even after more than 400 years. Apart from revenge being the major theme in Shakespeare's plays madness has never failed to be part of the list of themes easily noticeable by the readers and one of the conventional plot elements that Shakespeare uses so skillfully.

This paper deals with how Shakespeare portrays his protagonist in an: "antic disposition" to fool his adversaries which later on was turned into a real demonstration of unpretentious madness.

## **Madness**

To define true madness--

"what is it?"

To be nothing else than mad"

When being mad one can be nothing else. This corresponds to the definition of what is called psychosis. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, psychosis is a serious mental disorder in which a person loses contact with reality and experiences hallucinations or delusions. When one loses contact with

reality it is not possible to function normally in any area of life at the same time. This obviously is not an adequate description of Hamlet, in modern terms: 'Neurosis' is a - mental or emotional disorder that may involve anxiety or phobias but does not involve losing touch with reality.

It is also important to look at how madness was regarded in Shakespeare's time. In Shakespearean times unlike recently the mad were not locked up instead they were secluded and still viewed as part of society. They were offered communion as a token of God's appreciation, after all, their state of mind was seen not as a fault of their own but as a result of divine will. The same could be observed in Shakespeare's Hamlet, that Hamlet in spite of showing evidence of having not a stable state of mind, neither was secluded nor looked down upon but was only pitied. This was partly because of the fact that he was the only heir to the dead King Old Hamlet and partly because of the fact, how mad men were treated in 16th century England as discussed above.

### **Hamlet & Madness**

Apart from the themes, of madness and revenge being prominent in the play, the writer skillfully plays with the sub-theme of doubt, that surrounded everybody & everything in Denmark. The very first line of the play by Bernardo "Who's there?" reflexes upon the uncertainty, deceitfulness and the difference between what seems and what really is, i.e., the truth and the illusion is seen throughout the play, especially in the character of Hamlet.

Neurosis and Psychosis are used to define the conditions or illness that affects mental health. Both of these occur from repression, depression and hallucination. But the latter is the extreme stage of Neurosis. It happens because either the sexual instinct or unacceptable elements and ideas are not at rest in the unconscious mind. They always attempt to invade the conscious and this is repressed by the Ego. Thus, a conflict occurs and it results in the clash of Id and Ego, termed Neurosis. A neurotic person suffers from the inability to reconcile his thoughts with his action. In Psychosis, its later stage, the unconscious takes over altogether by expressing itself directly and, many a time by being violent and rude. Both of these take the person away from reality, but the difference lies in their mode of acting, one acts in the mind of the person and the other is exhibited through the actions that follow.

Neurosis and Psychosis can both be applied to the personality of Hamlet and his actions at one or the other level. Hamlet is obviously suffering from a neurotic disorder which is a result of his repression and the trauma of his father's sudden unnatural death along with the changing circumstances after it. Hamlet's Oedipus Complex proves the existence of his repression. He has to repress his unlawful and unacceptable desires for his mother. As a result, his Id gets into conflict with his Ego. Along with it, Hamlet's father's unnatural demise and his ghostly orders to avenge his death create a traumatic experience within him. His incapability in believing the ghost adds to the trauma. Here, one thing needs to be mentioned Hamlet was not a traditional warrior. Rather, he was a scholar and philosopher. The incident thus becomes a reason for his conflict. These two major conflicts, along with some minor ones result in Hamlet's neurotic disorder.

The neurotic disorder in Hamlet is accompanied by his mental state. He suffers from anxiety and depression. The main cause of his depression is the sudden death of his father under mysterious

circumstances and the untimely as well as the hasty marriage of his mother, Gertrude with his uncle, Claudius. Thereafter, the events of his close and trusted friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, being employed to spy upon him by his uncle by telling him a lie and lastly kill Hamlet, further increases his depression.

Thus, he falls into being psychotic and he remains so throughout the play. His mentally disturbed mind once says, "The time is out of joint! O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right" (Act I, Scene V)

Hamlet experiences hallucinations which is a sign of being neurotic. He met the ghost more than two times in the play whereas only one of his accounts with ghosts can be termed as real. Especially, the second encounter of Hamlet with the ghost is hallucinatory as only he can see it. This hallucination is not because of some problem that's external, but because of the trouble going on in his mind and soul. He suffers terribly from mental confusion and frustration. He cannot make clear decisions about whether he should believe in the ghost and its sayings or not. His soliloquies are clear indications that he is gripped tightly by indecisiveness and that his capability to take action is negligible contrasting to his strong ability to think. This gap between forming and framing an idea to taking a decision and acting on it makes Hamlet fall under the category of neuroticism. Hamlet's sense of self-worth is really low. He himself is not sure of himself. Through his soliloquy,

"To be or not to be? That is the question", not only his incapability to act is visible, but the loss of confidence is also seen in Hamlet. He has lost confidence in himself and his consideration of the world is also a sign from the very deep of his mind. The way Shakespeare portrays the psychotic complexities of Hamlet, this play has become a lucrative text to the critics, "How weary, stale, flate and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!"(Act I, Scene III)

The sadness and melancholy expressed in the above lines can only come from a psychotic mind. But Hamlet is by no means insane. Insanity, in simplest terms, is the state of being seriously, or mentally ill, i.e., madness. Hamlet, throughout the play, shows some signs of being insane but it is proved at the end that he was sane. Insanity is nearest to Psychosis because it is like a psychotic that an insane loses its connection with the reality.

In the case of Hamlet, he was forming a parallel world reality for himself and was not able to accept the actual reality that confronted him. Hamlet never loses his touch with the real and practical world, except in his very temporary hallucination. His staging of the drama to prove his doubt right, smart escape from being killed and using Ophelia as a weapon to take revenge are all performed in a very twisted way. Therefore, the signs of being psychotic are not clearly visible and he does not suffer from a psychotic complexity.

So, Hamlet is not psychotic. Rather, he is a neurotic, who is cut off from the reality in his unconscious mind but is not as mad as he portrays to the world. He pretends and at last, succeeds in doing so.

### **Social Reasons**

In Elizabethan times, social reforms were such that when the king died due to unnatural reasons, it was the duty of his rightful heir to avenge the old king's death and gain the power to the throne.

Considering this, we can observe in the play that Hamlet was trying to avenge the death of his father. Similarly, Laertes wanted to achieve the same for the cruel death of his father and sister.

What can be depicted in Hamlet's trial of avenging his father's death is the conflict between paganism and his formal education. Being a man of noble lineage and educated, he was taught to be sophisticated, ethical and civilized. His father's ghost apparition led him back to the pagan way of plotting and revenge. He was taught to be ethical and civilized but when he was confronted with the present scenario, it led him to go back to the ideals of paganism, belonging to the wilderness and giving in to the temptation of desires, leading him to murder his uncle.

### **Political reasons**

Aristotle quoted that "Art is an imitation of life" and Shakespeare unknowingly became an avid follower of the sayings of the great Greek dramatist. Aristotle's beliefs are aptly displayed in the play.

At the time of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, first of all, the whole state of England was as rotten as the state of Denmark.

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark"(I, iv).

As madness in some sense is an illness and decay of the mind, the imagery also serves to connect the theme of madness with the theme of deceit in the play. Gambling, drinking and celebrations lead to the decay of the country and thus, it is called a rotten state was clearly reflected in the play, Hamlet.

The play Hamlet has varied similarities with the history of Elizabethan times. There were several murders planned for the killing of Queen Elizabeth and the same was reflected in the text. The murder of old Hamlet by Claudius, Laertes's plan of killing Hamlet to avenge his father's and sister's death and the killing of King Claudius by Hamlet were a time representation of 1600 England.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Hamlet's madness is questioned by the reaction of others and his feigned madness. William Shakespeare leaves us with Hamlet's words, actions and others' reactions to interpret his madness with our own perception. In a crazy world, sometimes one has to be insane to oneself in order to achieve their goals, which in this case is revenge. He played his antic disposition perfectly, not only fooling King Claudius but the readers too.

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