

## The Art of Madness in Literature: Exploration of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Mosharaf Hossain\*  
M A at University of Rajshahi  
University of Rajshahi, Dhaka.

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I will examine the significance of madness in world literature. There are both positive and negative impact of madness in literature, but Shakespeare does not share his own view in the text or in the interview outside of text. Hamlet, in his instance, constructed an other universe for himself, refusing to acknowledge the actual truth that confronted him. Hamlet maintains his connection to the tangible and pragmatic world throughout, with the exception of a brief and fleeting episode of hallucination. His strategic presentation of the play to validate his scepticism, clever evasion from the acts of murder and utilising Ophelia as a tool for vengeance are executed in a highly distorted manner. Apparently, one may consider Hamlet as a foolish man, but in reality, he is an intelligent person having his personal philosophy of life. In Western culture, lunacy has consistently emerged from many sources, creating a pattern that gradually transforms from one manifestation to another, potentially concealing a mysterious reality. The meaning here is consistently fragmented, and Shakespeare shows his creativity and his mastery in using psychological analysis in his depictions of madness.

**Keywords:** *Madness, death, consciousness, murder, intellectual.*

### Introduction

Shakespeare's classic tragedies, including *Hamlet*, portrays eternal characters and inspirational tales that lend their topics a global context and a philosophical quality that makes them indisputable masterpieces. These tragedies highlight the evil that exists in the world and highlight the conflicts that exist inside each individual man. They also expose political crimes carried out by blindness and hubris, acts of personal retaliation, intrigue plays, and romantic delusions. Shakespeare talks about human soul and uses madness as a literary device. Ingrid Daemmrich discusses "two different conceptions of madness in Antiquity which are also reflected. The first conception, that madness is a punishment for crime and sin, is established

---

\* Author: Mosharaf Hossain

Email: [mosharafedru175@gmail.com](mailto:mosharafedru175@gmail.com)

Received 01 Sep. 2024; Accepted 17 Sep. 2024. Available online: 25 Sep. 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



from Antiquity until the 19th century. In the second conception, the madman is also seen as a wise man who, unlike the ordinary man, understands the deeper meaning of human suffering” (Daemmrich 333). According to Ingrid Daemmrich, “literary representations of madness in antiquity are marked primarily by the alternation between reason and lack of judgment, between clairvoyance and demonic possession. Erotic ecstasy, untamed wildness and Dionysian drunkenness contrast sharply with Apollonian clarity and the desire for moral perfection” ( 335 ).

Matthew Arnold, a renowned Victorian critic, succinctly characterised the purpose of literary criticism as facilitating the reader’s understanding and interpretation “to see the thing in itself as it really is” ( 1). The main aim of this dissertation is to examine mental state of Hamlet, with a specific emphasis on Victorian culture and literature. Besides, we read other texts of Shakespeare like *King Lear* , *Mackbeth* , *As You like It* , and so on. In 1985 McGann and Belsey say “In the following discussion, I aim to explore how knowledge of certain historical events and phenomena might assist us in comprehending our text. Studying could enhance the technique I have just described”(11). Researchers globally have conducted extensive studies on the portrayal of the psychological analysis of Hamlet.

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet plays the role of central character throughout the novel, and he shows his intellectual approach to search for real murderer of King Hamlet. When he knows his uncle kills his father and marry his mother, he suffers from the disease of will that causes delay to take action. In this novel, we see Hamlet does not behave in the same manner with all as he is a philosopher who has to maintain the situation intellectually. In appearance, to some character, he seems to be mad, but, at the end, we see his real intellect, and the way of managing difficult situation. As we can see, the text of Hamlet is lacking in important details regarding the staging and the plot itself is known for having unresolved issues. There are certain facts that cannot be determined as Shakespeare did not provide clear explanations. There are two ways to interpret these gaps: maybe Shakespeare missed enough revision or he did not share his own standpoint , allowing for a variety of performance possibilities. This makes it a ‘interrogative’ text, meaning that readers will interpret the text in their own way. In *King Lear*, King Lear is trapped in a hopeless predicament. His lack of awareness of the events happening around him, along with the malevolent and menacing behaviours of his adversaries, resulted in the development of insanity. Following the act of partitioning his realm among his daughters the king is subsequently stripped of his kingdom and exiled himself. From this

action, his devastating decline in moral integrity commences. He is deeply affected by the lack of thanks from his daughters. Furthermore, he has the distressing realization that, when confronted with the deceitfulness and brutality of the self-centred society, a man without influence or riches is reduced to being a helpless and abandoned creature. He has come to understand the misguided nature of his self-perception and his perception of power. He now recognises the unfairness of his behaviour towards honesty, and the oppressed.

The primary inquiry revolved around the veracity of Hamlet's madness, and multiple factors contributed to our inclination to believe that he was. There were additional attributes that prompted us to reconsider this belief. He exhibited anger exclusively towards some individuals, for instance, the characters include Claudius, Ophelia, Polonius, and Gertrude. Shakespeare believed that lunacy had a crucial role in this play as it reflects a significant aspect of its tragic nature. He has experienced a decline in self-assurance, and his contemplation of the world is also indicative of profound introspection. Hamlet experienced romantic affection and developed strong feelings for an exquisite yet delicate woman. Ophelia was the source of his joy and contentment. If this statement is indeed accurate, then why did he display such intense anger in her presence? Was the purpose to safeguard her? Or was it merely due to his fear of experiencing love? Hamlet may have chosen not to pursue a relationship with Ophelia because he wanted to avoid the potential pain and disappointment that love and heartbreak could bring in the future. His life was filled with happiness while his father was living. However, when his uncle arrived and disrupted this happiness, his perception of happiness may have been altered. All of them could be contributing factors to his insanity.

Examining the perception of madness throughout Shakespeare's era is equally significant. In the era of Shakespeare, those who have mental illness were not only present in institutions as they are now. Instead, they were isolated from the general population while still being considered members of society. They accept communion as a symbol of God's gratitude, considering that their mental state is not due to any personal wrongdoing but rather a consequence of divine providence. We, as a reader, can notice in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, that despite displaying signs of mental instability, audiences cannot scorn Hamlet, but rather share pity. This showcases his status as the sole successor to the deceased King Old Hamlet, as well as the prevailing treatment of mentally ill individuals in 16th century England, as previously mentioned. Eliot depicts "Hamlet is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it is in excess of the facts as they appear". Shakespeare could not graft these emotions

onto the old play” (20). “Hamlet is dominated by an awareness of the contradictions of his position, that he is confronted by what the Renaissance termed a ‘case of conscience’” (Rose 21). “he may be damned if he allows Claudius to remain on the throne and damned if he swoops to murder him. If we accept this argument we may be inclined to think that the problem of Hamlet’s delay - considered as a symptom of his melancholy” (Bradley 21 ).

### **Conscience of Hamlet**

The resolution of his moral problem is further complicated by Hamlet’s struggle to accept the significant impact of the shift in his circumstances on “the symbolic order or economic system of his psyche” ( Lacan 12 ) . Later on , he lost his father , and his mother marriage his uncle , in this case , Lacan depicts that , “ he lost the way of his desire”( 14 ). However, he has been removed from his position as the expected successor. After a long time , in act 5, scene 2 he told Horatio “Claudius hath killed the king and whored my mother, Popped in between the election and my hopes”. As we can see, the second paragraph implies the use of musical beds. In the play, Hamlet is unable to distinguish between his personal life and his public role, as well as between his actual experiences and abstract concepts. Here, Hamlet plays the role of his father, and he is the leader of the state. During his father’s rule, Hamlet’s responsibility was to keep discipline in the state. Additionally, he is far away from Elsinore. Now, he could not re-establish peace, but his identity has also been completely disrupted. Following the encounter with a vengeful Ghost, Hamlet, as a discontented avenger, is intermittently conscious that he is about to disrupt the entire structure of the royal court, even if he is not yet prepared to fully understand himself. Hamlet, undoubtedly, does not retain his innocence for a significant period of time.

Hamlet is not only surrounded by individuals who have roles similar to his own, but he is “in a certain position of dependence upon the signifier” (Lacan 11). Additionally, he is constantly faced with the dilemma of whether or not to trust the Ghost. Additionally, it explores Hamlet’s limited understanding of the entirety of events in Elsinore, symbolized by the ‘glimpses of the moon’. This is a single transition, specifically from personal knowledge to a conceptual thought. Another aspect to consider is that Hamlet’s obligation to seek revenge is not just prompted by a supernatural apparition, but specifically by the apparition of his deceased father. The contested power of the Ghost symbolizes his father: “ it is a figure consumed by torments of hatred” (Scofield 141). In portraying Hamlet thus, he can stand against Dr Johnson, and he

states “Of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity” ( 112.) He may not act others who can “give up themselves in the full bent ... To be commanded” (30- 2).

### **Hamlet’s Reputation and Praise**

Hamlet’s cognizance of Denmark’s reputation among other nations is commendable. His readiness to accept international criticism of his fellow citizens demonstrates the autonomy and honesty of his intellect. However, this also implies that when Hamlet is tasked with cleansing Denmark, he will be more skeptical of the feasibility or value of the mission. These initial sentences establish the major theme of Hamlet’s character: he consistently demonstrates a unique focus on the eternal rather than the temporary throughout the play. His orientation prevents him from seeing actions through the lens of a traditional hero. Unlike Achilles, he must contemplate if his acts will result in salvation or damnation. Knowing that the outcome of his actions could impact eternity, he has a strong incentive to reflect on their repercussions carefully. However, the complexities arising from Hamlet’s conviction in the hereafter go beyond this. His Christian beliefs provide insight into eternity, however the perspective is bleak. Hamlet’s most notable realization regarding the hereafter is his inability to comprehend its nature definitively. The complexity of his universe surpasses that of Achilles. His conviction in the soul’s immortality significantly heightens the risks associated with heroic deeds. However, the uncertainty regarding the hereafter also complicates the ability to predict the outcomes of such actions.

It’s evident that Hamlet is an idealistic and sensitive young man. He is a thinker, a scholar, and a romantic as well. He possesses every attribute needed to be a gentleman, and his intelligence has brought him recognition from all quarters. In the words of Ophelia, his beloved, Hamlet is : “The expecting and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion, and the mould of form.” However, once his mother marries his uncle too soon and his father passed away, the same Hamlet becomes insane in Act 1, Sc 2, where he first appears in the play, is where some critics believe he becomes somewhat weird due to the combination of these two occurrences throwing off his mental equilibrium. It is supposed that Hamlet is insane, yet he is not. He is not your typical man; he is skilled at hiding the truth behind his words and deeds. He is determined to exact retribution for the murder because he is a deserving son of a worthy parent. Since the murderer is the sovereign monarch, Hamlet is not a pompous guy and knows when and how to

confront him. He must consider all of the options before acting. Furthermore, he is not a man of action all the time because he is knowledgeable about both philosophy and religion. Totaro asserts that “in every single instance in which Hamlet’s madness is manifested, he has good reason for assuming that madness: while, on the other hand, whenever there was no need to hoodwink anyone, his thought, language, and action, bear no resemblance to unsoundness of intellect” (407-426).

### **Is *Hamlet* a Story of Amleth?**

The primary, but not the direct, inspiration for Hamlet can be traced back to a twelfth-century tale of Amleth found in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Historiae Danicae*, which was first published in 1514. The extent to which the original legend has been preserved in Shakespeare’s masterpiece is astonishing. Amleth’s father, who stands against the king of Norway, and Feng killed him. Later on, Feng marries his deceased brother’s widow, Gerutha. The murder is not concealed. In order to safeguard himself and avoid arousing suspicion about his intentions, Amleth adopts the guise of a fool, however, his remarks exhibit a bewildering combination of astuteness and madness, leading to the creation of several tests to assess his true nature. An assessment can be conducted to observe his response to encountering a ‘fair woman’ in a typical manner. He acknowledges it, but he makes her promise to keep it confidential. Subsequently, Feng’s companion proposes the idea of orchestrating a meeting between Amleth and his mother while he hides in the chamber to eavesdrop on their conversation. He confronts the grieving mother and harshly criticises her for neglecting her deceased husband and marrying Feng. Feng now dispatches Amleth to Britain, accompanied by two attendants who bear a clandestine missive to the king and are beseeching the execution of Amleth. Amleth receives the letter and replaces his comrades’ name with his own, while also suggesting that the king should marry his daughter to Amleth. Following a period of time spent in Britain, Amleth comes back to his homeland and discovers that his own funeral rites are being conducted. He defeats the courtiers, ignites the palace, and murders Feng while he is in bed, thus seeking long-awaited revenge for his father’s killing. Saxo praises him as a brave and deserving individual who will be remembered forever. Amleth currently remains in a state of concealment, unsure of how the general public will react to his actions. However, he fearlessly steps forward to deliver a compelling speech to provide a rational explanation for his actions. ‘I am the one who has eradicated the disgrace of my country; I am the one who has extinguished the dishonour of my mother; I am the one who has repelled persecution. “I am the one who has freed you from slavery and given you

freedom... I am the one who has removed the tyrant from power and achieved victory over the oppressor” (1). Amleth ascends to the throne and embarks on several exploits before ultimately meeting his demise in a fight.

### **Ophelia’s Madness**

Ophelia is another character in Hamlet who might be seen as being mentally unstable. Ophelia is shown as a feeble figure lacking the ability to engage in independent thinking. In act 1, Scene 2 Ophelia asserts that , “I do not know, my lord, what I should think”. But, she has no position in the society now as she has no male guardian, and she seems to be unknown in the society. The loss of her father’s identity has driven her further into lunacy, as her own identity is closely intertwined with his. The absence of male figures makes Ophelia’ life difficult, and she wants help of others. Heather Brown asserts that Ophelia serves as a tool for Polonius, is a virtuous sister to Laertes, and is involved romantically with Hamlet. When Ophelia loses her guardian in her life, she descends into madness. When she lost her father, she struggled for her identity in the society. Hamlet’s rejection intensifies Ophelia’s descent into lunacy driven by physical deprivation. Here, Brown portrays, “The context of her disease, like that of hysteria later, is sexual frustration, social helplessness, and enforced control over women’s bodies. Because she has no agency over her own life and body, she is driven further into madness”. Religious aspirations interfere Ophelia’s lunacy in the universe. Alison A. Chapman argues that Ophelia’s delusional speeches demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of England’s historical Catholic era. As she experiences deep sorrow with the loss of the men in her life, Religious beliefs determine Ophelia’s role towards her parents as a woman in the society. Due to her insanity, she cannot perceive herself as an autonomous individual without the presence of these authoritative masculine individuals (Brown). Hamlet was responsible for a significant amount of Ophelia’s sorrow. In the midst of an argument, he unintentionally caused the death of her father, Polonius. Additionally, he ended their engagement in a relatively insensitive manner.

### **Shakespeare’s View on Madness**

Firstly, the topic at hand is Hamlet’s state of madness. Ultimately, we cannot definitively determine whether Shakespeare intended for Hamlet to be mad. The phrase “antic disposition” was used by the prince to describe his behaviour, which he knew his acquaintances might interpret as that of a madman, even though he was actually sane. It is impossible to determine

if Shakespeare intended for Hamlet's actions is effective or not. Critics share diverse interpretation about the personality of Hamlet, and some regard him as a melancholic character of his time. (However, sadness was not a simple affliction.) Frances Yates raises the question of whether Hamlet's melancholy is a form of inspired melancholy that grants him a prophetic understanding of a wicked circumstance and guides him in acting appropriately and prophetically in that scenario. Alternatively, may it be regarded as a manifestation of vulnerability, analogous to the sorrow experienced by witches, rendering him susceptible to demonic influence and the manipulation of malevolent entities? The second instance of a 'Hamlet dilemma' that I would like to discuss is based on my recollections of a remarkable theatrical innovation in Robertson's Prospect production. After singing, Ophelia spoke the lines "Before you tumbled me, You promised me to wed" (19) to Gertrude, which greatly embarrassed the Queen.

### **Madness as Weapon**

Hamlet resides in a realm where the truth is obscured by multiple layers, requiring individuals to employ cunning tactics to uncover it. In "What happens in Hamlet", Dover Wilson depicts that "The attitude of Hamlet towards Ophelia is without doubt the greatest of all the puzzles in the play, greater even than that of the delay itself"(101). In "Looking for Hamlet", Marvin W. Hunt asserts, "If Hamlet plays the fool for strategic and tactical purposes, however, at other times he exhibits genuine mental and emotional distress" (124). There is no denying the significance of Shakespeare's sources in the hunt for Hamlet. We need to understand the source material Shakespeare was rewriting or what was on his desk when he wrote to understand the play in anything approaching its entirety. Indeed, Hamlet adopts a feigned madness, deceiving others and engaging in nonsensical conversations with the elderly Polonius, thereby portraying him as a fool. After unintentionally causing the death of the older adult, he assumes the role of a crazy. However, the true nature of his erratic behavior, whether it is deliberate or genuine, remains uncertain until the failed journey to England. He demonstrates his extraordinary intellectual prowess in his dialogue with Horatio and the players. Even at his most critical moments, he gives the players advice on how to play their parts with an insight that a madman would not have been able to muster. When the time comes, he never fails to speak life's realities with flawless purity. In return for his amorous dealing, he asks his mother not to inform the king. Polonius also discovers a technique in his insanity that is completely at odds with actual insanity. An insane person is incapable of acting or speaking



logically. The King, ever the shrew, doesn't think his insanity is real, so he asks Polonius to allow him to witness. Levy depicts that "a careful study on the character and features of these mads can bring out some deeper understanding and even reflect hidden truth" (Levy 2008).

Richardson believes that the young Prince wants to be freed from a harsh existence due to his sufferings caused by his perception of moral attractiveness and ugliness, as well as his awareness of immorality in a parent. The son is experiencing excruciating pain, both physically and emotionally, as he realises that he is unable to fix the disordered state of the world. Hamlet recognises the increasing understanding of the existence of evil in the universe and acknowledges that it is unrealistic to eliminate evil by seeking revenge through the execution of one individual, Claudius. This is because evil surpasses the power of God. Despite Hamlet's potential act of killing Claudius, the lasting shame of his mother's adultery will persist in his consciousness, with no known method to eradicate it. Committing suicide may not end his agonizing awareness of the presence of malevolence, specifically his mother's betrayal.

### **Conclusion**

Shakespeare used the theme of lunacy in Hamlet to serve as a mirror of the depraved and chaotic condition of society. The presence of dishonesty, treachery, and political scheming leads to the characters' psychological anguish and declining mental well-being. While reading the text, we can't understand whether Hamlet is mad or not to see the use of language. Madness serves as a symbolic portrayal of the disorder and ethical deterioration that exists in the cosmos of the drama. Shakespeare's examination of insanity in Hamlet enhances the intricacy and profundity of the characters and the overarching concepts of the play. The pretense of lunacy displayed by Hamlet, the tragic decline of Ophelia, the ambiguous boundaries between sanity and insanity, and the depiction of madness as a reflection of the world's condition all combine to create a complex representation of this issue. Shakespeare explores the human condition by investigating the fragility of the mind, the influence of societal pressures, and the repercussions of a corrupt world, all through the perspective of madness.

### **Works Cited:**

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. London, 1957.

Brown, Heather. "Gender and Identity in Hamlet: A Modern Interpretation of Ophelia." *The Myriad*, Westminster College, n.d. Web. 20 May 2016. <https://www.westminstercollege.edu/myriad/?parent=2514&detail=2679&content=2680>.

Cantor, Paul A. *Shakespeare, Hamlet*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Daemmrich, Horst S., and Ingrid Daemmrich. *Themen und Motive in der Literatur: Ein Handbuch*. Tübingen, Editura Francke, 1987.

Drîmba, Ovidiu. *Istoria Culturii și Civilizației*, vol. 1, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1984.

Hatway, Michael. *Hamlet: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism*. Macmillan, 1987.

Levy, Eric P. *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man*. Associated University Presses, 2008.

Marvin, W. *Looking for Hamlet*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Rose, Elliot. *Cases of Conscience*. Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Shakespeare, William, and Philip Edwards, editors. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Totaro, Robert. "Securing Sleep in Hamlet." *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2010, pp. 407-426.

Wilson, John Dover. *What Happens in Hamlet*. Cambridge University Press, 1935.