

How does Shakespeare use language to explore the concept of madness in the play?

At the very core of the play 'Hamlet' by William Shakespeare there is a study of depression and the range of human emotion itself portrayed by a scared little boy who has just lost his father the King of Denmark. Hamlet is one of the most studied characters in literature this is mainly due to the many complexities of Hamlet's character, and the reasons behind his often erratic behaviour. It is first necessary to explain that the main topic which fascinates people when reading 'Hamlet' is the burning question as to why Hamlet acts how he does. At first glance it would seem that Hamlet has been driven mad by the murder of his father at his uncle now turned step-father's hands, but there are differing opinions on this consensus. Reading further into the play it would seem that Hamlet claims to be putting on an 'antic disposition'. Is Hamlet really 'mad' or is he sane, yet our notion of him tarnished by the other characters in the play?

Hamlet has obviously been hugely affected by the loss of his father and initially it appears that this has led him into a state of downward spiralling depression of which he can see no way out of. This is first made evident by the phrase 'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!' which Hamlet utters in his first soliloquy giving us an insight into his overly intelligent yet deeply troubled mind. Hamlet is, perhaps very seriously, considering suicide as a way out of his life which seems to only disappoint him. This begs the question can somebody be in a completely rational frame of mind and still think that suicide is the best option? This is a scary thought in itself and one which the majority of people would like to cast aside as not being true because if we think of the alternative then we open ourselves to believe that sometimes in life there is nothing left for us and dying is only going to profit us. The idea of suicide, in Hamlet's case, does not have to come from the mind of an insane person, but one who perhaps is most rational of all and has the ability to consider all options for his long term happiness.

These worrying ideas about suicide are enforced further when Hamlet tells of how 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, Seem to me all the uses of this world!', he has been failed and abandoned by those that he holds closest to him, his only link to the world being his romance with the fair Ophelia, although this disintegrates as he discovers she has been spying on him for her father Polonius and the new King, his uncle Claudius, no longer having any attachment to the world which he inhabits he instead retreats to the depths of his mind where ideas fester leading him to lose his way and become truly mad. Alternatively some believe that Hamlet is not mad, nor does he ever seriously consider suicide, but that he is a narcissistic, misanthropic, and misogynistic teenager who will do anything to gain the affection which he so clearly desires. This is possibly a consequence of his father's lack of involvement in his life, he idolises his father, yet we are told that King Hamlet was not present at the birth of his son and was absent for most of Hamlet's life. In a way Shakespeare is very subtly questioning religion within the themes of the play through the glorification of the father figure leading the worshipper to become

insane. King Hamlet is portrayed as a God –like figure whom the son did not know, but idolised, with the loss of such a central figure to his existence part of Hamlet's very soul has been ripped out leading him to question the point of life in his infamous 'To be or not to be' speech.

There are many elements to Hamlet's character which can be interpreted in different ways, Hamlet, after seeing the ghost of his father says that he will 'put an antic disposition on', this makes for convincing evidence that Hamlet is not mad and merely playing the part. When one couples this with the fact that at the beginning of the play when introduced to Hamlet, who is seeing the ghost of his father, surely an incident which has the power to twist any mans' mind, he appears to be confident in addressing not only his friend Horatio, but also the apparition of his late father. Furthermore we are shown that his mind is sharp as he quickly is over persistent in ensuring the silence of his friends so that he can use this information against his Uncle without him being aware that Hamlet knows what really happened the night his father died. All this evidence suggests that Hamlet was certainly sane at the start of the play, although perhaps almost too sane, many after the death of a loved one would not be thinking in such a rational way.

One view that is held by studiers of 'Hamlet' is that Hamlet is not mad but simply reacting to the situation which he has found himself in, and that his emotions and feelings are completely acceptable. As Shakespeare wrote in 'As you like it', 'all the world's a stage' and Hamlet is just playing his part. This is apparent when Hamlet tells his mother that "I essentially am not in madness, But mad in craft.", he considers himself a victim of his circumstance and that the entire situation is mad, not his behaviour. Hamlet, throughout the play is the voice of morality, when everyone has moved on he is pushed to the brink of obsession with respect for the dead. His respect for his father is so pious that he functions as a mirror and shows people the darkest corners of themselves, one problem with a mirror though is that they cannot view themselves and through his pouring his every emotion into his words he has become a slave to language, this symbolic castration has cut Hamlet off from the instinctive act of acting, language prevents him, leading him to procrastinate which only frustrates him further.

In spite of this Hamlet sees the ghost of his father on a few occasions, the first time he is with friends who also see the ghost, these friends are then absent for most of the play, leaving Hamlet to obsess over the viewing of the ghost whilst the other two appear to have been pushed aside and forgotten. When Hamlet next sees the ghost he is with his mother after he has just killed Polonius. At this time Hamlet has most embraced the 'id' side of his personality, looking at the scene from a Freudian perspective, he is not thinking clearly and his emotions are out of control which is in contrast to the beginning of the play when Hamlet is very refined around others, choosing to only lose control when alone. The mother however does not see the ghost, this leads us to believe that maybe Hamlet, through his constant obsession with his father has created the ghost with his fervent imagination, that it no longer exists but only in Hamlet's mind.

Ultimately the ambiguous nature of this text serves to reinforce the idea that this is a subject that

has no clear meaning, Shakespeare wanted Hamlet to be this way for a reason. Reading the text one can draw their own conclusions about the state of Hamlet's sanity and his reasons for acting the way he does. To conclude the human psyche is a vast and complicated place which we do not, and may not ever fully understand especially when it comes to the loss of an important figure in our lives, yet Shakespeare ahead of his time displayed groundbreaking ideas about the human mind, the way in which it functions and emotions which paved the way for physiology. Humans like to label things, for example black or white, or in Hamlet's case mad or not, when something as complex as the psyche cannot be confined within such a small box. Does being insane even really exist with the line between genius and madman being ever blurred, can any reaction be deemed 'mad' if it is how that person really feels, who is anyone to judge them and tell them that what they think, what they feel is wrong? Perhaps Hamlet is not one or the other but merely lost within the cluttered forest of his mind, an unwilling traveller of life who has lost his way.