

# Example of essay on paper due date

Literature, William Shakespeare



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## **He's Mad, She's Mad, but by Whose Standards?**

### A Brief Look at Two Very Different Kinds of Madness in Hamlet

In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, the main characters, Hamlet and Ophelia, each appear as being mad at different times. But each is a different kind of mad. The kind of madness depends upon which critic is analyzing the play. Some critics give Hamlet a controlled madness, a worldly kind of madness "linked with culture" (Showalter 239) and carefully created to fool the people out to get him. They say that Shakespeare hints that Hamlet is in control of all his faculties, that he is aware of the plotting and the side missions (like visits from his friends really visiting to spy on him), and that Hamlet is cleverly devising his madness to take the evil new king off guard. The same critics say Shakespeare gives Ophelia a much different madness that has little power because her madness is typical of a woman (Showalter).

Ophelia's madness is full of silly songs symbolizing her mental decline; she is treated as a typical woman who thinks nothing (has an empty head), who is worth " nothing" more than her female body parts (Showalter 238). Other critics say Ophelia's madness should not be underestimated (Camden); and they argue that the men (and the women acting in favor of a male world) are

to blame as they drive Ophelia mad (Camden; Lorenz). Some of these critics add that Hamlet's madness is just as silly at times as Ophelia's madness is; and they add that like Ophelia, Hamlet is driven mad by the contradicting messages he gets from the others. In a careful reading, I agree that this is the case: that both Hamlet and Ophelia ultimately go mad because of the people in their lives giving them mixed messages (and lying to them). And although Hamlet does at first build a plan to " feign" madness, he too caves under the pressures of other people out to do harm for greedy reasons.

The first time Hamlet appears to be mad is in Act I, Scene IV, when his father's ghost " beckons" him. But he cannot be mad in this scene just because he sees a ghost: others, like Horatio, see the ghost, too. Maybe when it is mentioned, madness is a hint of what is to come. Hamlet starts to follow his father's ghost; friends and footmen try to keep him away from danger. For example, Horatio urges,

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord, Or to the dreadful summit of the cliffThat beetles o'er his base into the sea, And there assume some other horrible form, Which might deprive your sovereignty of reasonAnd draw you into madness? think of it: The very place puts toys of desperation, Without more motive, into every brainThat looks so many fathoms to the seaAnd hears it roar beneath (1. 4. 76-85).

Hamlet says he doubts he will fall off the cliff, and he yells at his friends to leave him alone, and as Horatio leaves he mutters that Hamlet " waxes desperate with imagination" (1. 4. 93).

The second time Hamlet's madness is mentioned, Polonius has spied on the prince and has reported to Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet is mad.

Polonius gives reasons to the king and queen: he says Hamlet got depressed, stopped eating, was unusually alert, grew weak and lightheaded, and, therefore is completely mad. Polonius says Hamlet, Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension, Into the madness wherein now he raves, And all we mourn for (2. 2. 152-156).

And for a third time, madness is the theme for Hamlet when the king calls for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and asks them to verify Hamlet's "turbulent and dangerous lunacy" (3. 1. 4). But the two men have visited Hamlet when he was aware his friends were probably spying; so Rosencrantz can only add that Hamlet claims to be "distracted" and that Hamlet would not say why; and Guildenstern only rightly hints that Hamlet appears to be shaky, but "with a crafty madness, keeps aloof" (3. 1. 8). This is Shakespeare hinting that Hamlet is in control of himself and is just faking. He is aware of the plotting and the side missions (such as the visit from his friends, the footmen, who he knows are really just there to spy), and he is creating this trick to take the king off guard—so he can catch the king in his lie and prove Claudius killed his father.

However, Hamlet's feigned madness soon also decays into hints of real madness, caused by the others who are actually out to get him. In Act I, Scene V, Hamlet is faking madness as a "method", as Polonius claimed. He even lets Horatio in on the plan, in a way, so when Horatio exclaims how "wondrous strange" this whole thing is, Hamlet explains, And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. But come;

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy, How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself, As I perchance hereafter shall think meet To put an antic disposition on, That you, at such times seeing me, never shall, With arms encumber'd thus, or this headshake, Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, As 'Well, well, we know,' or 'We could, an if we would,' Or 'If we list to speak,' or 'There be, an if they might,' Or such ambiguous giving out, to note That you know aught of me: this not to do, So grace and mercy at your most need help you, Swear (1. 5. 166-180).

Horatio is a true friend (Leverenz); but no one else, not even Ophelia, is as faithful, and Hamlet's real madness will start to show, due to the disloyalty of others.

As the critic David Leverenz sees it, Hamlet is more of a brotherly figure, to Horatio, for example; and Hamlet's sense of duty to his brothers is one of the first things that adds to his version of madness. Leverenz adds that sometimes Hamlet can be seen as a father figure, too, to the point that he is more a Claudius-type and he doesn't know it or he is an Oedipus-type and he is truly going mad because of a "fickle" mother (292) who is so confusing it adds to his mental decline. In fact, Leverenz believes that because Hamlet is so friendly, brotherly, and fatherly, when he gets many conflicting messages thrown at him by people who should be brother, son, or friend in return, he cannot untangle the conflicts this is what makes Hamlet actually go mad. For example, including Hamlet's mother, the women in his life make him crazy: Gertrude's "inconstancy not only brings on disgust and incestuous feelings, it is also the sign of diseased doubleness in everyone who has accommodated to his or her social role" (293). And Ophelia is "the girl who

supposedly loves him [but] refuses his attentions” (293). And to add to the mixed messages he receives are the so-called “ brothers” who lie to him and trick him by pretending to be his best friend, but taking information back to the King they have essentially turned on him.

These contradictions and more are what make Hamlet as mad as the contradictory messages that make Ophelia mad. As Leverenz explains her, “ there are many voices in Ophelia's madness speaking through her, all making sense, and none of them her own” (294). Like Hamlet will, Ophelia “ becomes the mirror for a madness-inducing world” (294). Ophelia obeys and gives in to those who have the power to make her go mad with their conflicting information and action. The critic Elaine Showalter says we can read her character as just that—a woman in a restricted role: her words and actions are inferior, and even her madness is of female origins, all the way down to meaning “ nothing” like what nothing meant in Shakespeare’s time to mean women’s sexual parts (238). Compared to Hamlet’s madness, Showalter concludes, which is more worldly and not restricted to his sex, Ophelia’s madness is reduced to being a woman thing. But Showalter also emphasizes Ophelia’s feminine but also feminist strengths, and argues that these strengths are the ones the males (male critics) ignore because like the men of the Victorian era, and other male-dominated eras, they see the strengths of Ophelia as more becoming of men. The critic Carroll Camden also maintains that Ophelia is strong, but the many blows to her psyche all add up. It is not Hamlet alone saying he does not love her anymore; it is Polonius her father forbidding her to see Hamlet anymore; it is her brother, Laertes being shallow and jealous and warning her that she is too young to

deal with a man like Hamlet; and then it is her own opinions about Hamlet when they get contradicted and when they get replaced by her father and brother's advice turning out to maybe be right: because Hamlet jumps in and starts acting more like they said he acts. These things altogether make Ophelia crazy enough to kill herself the author says.

When Ophelia is hit with the news of Polonius' sudden death might be the final push into full madness (Leverenz). As a woman who has always said, "I shall obey" (Shakespeare 1. 3. 136) even to those she should be suspicious of, when they turn out to be actually unworthy of her trust, might be the final push to madness for Ophelia. But maybe it is when Hamlet, as he is showing crazy thinking, and when he turns on her, that she goes completely mad. Not only does he tell her to go away from him forever, to get herself "to a nunnery" (Shakespeare 3. 1. 105), but he swears he has no love for her, after he has written her the very poem that swears he loves her. Critic Robert Bozanich argues this point further: the "controversial poem" (90) is a piece of evidence for Polonius to use to prove to Claudius that Hamlet is mad, because there is something odd, something missing in the poem. There is logic gone wrong, but, as Bozanich also says, it is more than that. The four lines of the poem contradict each other:

**" Doubt thou the stars are fire,**

Doubt that the sun doth move,

Doubt truth to be a liar,

But never doubt I love." (2. 2. 109-124)

As Bovanich says, line one is true, line two is true, but line three is false. So according to the author, this poem proves for readers and other characters

that Hamlet is either crazy or toying with Ophelia's heart with his contradictions. Either one is enough to send Ophelia over the edge. The truth and the lie plus the "pretense" of the poem are parts of Hamlet's madness which are promised Ophelia, who obeys and believes, then are taken back when Hamlet says he does not love her, that her father is a fool, and that he curses her future, Ophelia is finally at her wit's end.

Hamlet is convinced others are out to get him, and his fears are confirmed by Polonius, Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude, and even Ophelia. Ophelia absorbs the others' contradictions, taking in the words of her father, her brother, Gertrude, and especially Hamlet. And while it is obvious that Ophelia's madness ends when she takes her own life, it could be said that Hamlet takes his own life, too, even though he is killed by he entered into the fight, because of the madness caused by the contradictions of word and actions of those most of whom he loved. Perhaps, then, it could be said that both Ophelia and Hamlet died for the love that drove them mad in the end.

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