

# The yellow wallpaper and hamlet essay



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To Be Or Not To Be In The Wallpaper: Insanity in The Yellow Wallpaper And Hamlet Madness, psychopathology, craziness, derangement, and lunacy are all terms that have a definition that is similar to that of insanity. This theme of insanity is compellingly common between Hamlet by William Shakespeare and The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Insanity, also referred to in the vernacular as madness, is defined as “ the condition of being insane; a derangement of the mind; such unsoundness of mind as frees one from legal responsibility ...” (insanity).

This concept of insanity is illustrated in both stories as the characters parallel one another and are both to some degree deranged. From the onset of the story, the main character in The Yellow Wallpaper is portrayed as genuinely mad, with the grandeur of her insanity increasing as the story progressed. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, some people believe that Hamlet succumbed to true madness after seeing his father’s ghost. On the other hand, many people believe, from different observations, that Hamlet was just feigning madness throughout the story.

Furthermore, in Hamlet, Ophelia (Hamlet’s lover) becomes genuinely mad once her father is killed and she is shunned by Hamlet. Clearly, the concept of insanity is a theme demonstrated through numerous characters in both of these stories. Feigned madness is actually seen throughout both stories as well. In the beginning of The Yellow Wallpaper, the woman, who is never given a name, appears to have a madness which is attributed to a post-pregnancy mental breakdown, yet as the story progresses it becomes clearer that she is moving toward genuine insanity.

By the end of the story, she becomes completely schizophrenic. Although the end result is pure insanity, the reader is not fully aware if during the story if she is genuinely mad, or if she simply appears insane because of her bizarre situation. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet's madness has been viewed from two different perspectives. One is that he really became insane after seeing his father's ghost and the second, that he just simulates his madness throughout the plot.

More evidence throughout the play and other Shakespearean plays, point more toward the probability of Hamlet just feigning his madness. An article by Simon Augustine Blackmore states, " This objection [of true insanity] is rather an argument to the contrary; for insane persons are never known to plead insanity in self-exculpation. " Hamlet pled insane in front of the court in order to seek pardon for his violence against Laertes, and this could prove that he was just pretending madness for self-preservation; as the quote says, a true madman does not admit to his insanity, as Hamlet did.

However, true insanity is clearly demonstrated in both stories as well. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the main character, in the end, is clearly driven insane. An article written by Nash Kevanyu says that the source of the madness, the wallpaper, may have been a representation of the ideal woman's characteristics. In the beginning of the story, the woman is disturbed by the wallpaper, but as the story progressed, she slowly and disturbingly absorbs the characteristics of the wallpaper onto herself.

This could also be somewhat similar to the situation in *Hamlet*. Hamlet starts the story with being sane, but after seeing his father's ghost, he is portrayed

as mad. This may have been a protection mechanism against his step-father, the new king, or may have been a result of true madness. Shakespeare never outrightly states whether Hamlet was faking his madness, or if he was in fact truly mad. Shakespeare's Ophelia is somewhat similar to the main character in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. They are both most definitely insane.

This insanity appears to have stemmed from a major life event in each of these women's lives. Ophelia's father was murdered and then Hamlet rejects her; these events all contribute to her insanity. The woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* progresses toward insanity after giving birth and moving into a new house. The way in which her husband treats her could be yet another factor that contributed to her insanity. Both characters are younger females which may be attributed to the common view held of women during the time period when these writings were published.

In some senses, females were still considered "lower" than males and this may be seen in the theme that the males had a part in the progression of the insanity in each female character. Insanity is a theme that is developed in both *Hamlet* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

The woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* becomes more insane as the story advances, Ophelia in *Hamlet* becomes insane in the middle of the story because of the situations that led up to that point, and Hamlet is uncertain as to whether he was actually insane or simply pretending throughout the play. Although both stories were written during different time periods, they both have similar and parallel themes which portray characters afflicted with insanity. Although, the occurrence of insanity in each of the stories occurs as

the result of different events in the plot, the concept of insanity appears to be the golden thread through both of these stories.