

Characters in hamlet and ophelia

Literature, William Shakespeare



In William Shakespeare's plays, the characters and plot are often categorized as complex and arduous to understand. Ophelia, a minor character in The Tragedy of Hamlet represents one of two women captured in the chaos of revenge. Though Ophelia and Gertrude were placed in the scenery where those they love were avenging their father's death, both handled it differently. Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia as an innocent, obedient and naïve child demonstrates the consequence of living under an oppressed society. Ophelia was forced to hold back who she was as she played the role of a child. Ophelia, one of the two women that are apparent throughout the play is the daughter of Polonius and love interest of Prince Hamlet. She represents the archetype of the innocent child as she is controlled by those around her. The role of Ophelia serves as a bridge that links the play together and acts as the "surveillance" to the lives of those around her as well. We are able to gain a better understanding of the male characters through the actions of Ophelia. From the beginning of the play, Ophelia has been controlled by her father and brother, which led to her indecisiveness and reliance upon others. The men in her life try to control her actions, directing her to make decisions that they agree upon. Polonius, her father, directs by telling her, "In few, Ophelia, / Do not believe his vows. For they are brokers/... As to give words or talk with Lord Hamlet. Look to 't. I charge you. Come your ways." 2 He doesn't wish to see Ophelia with Hamlet and tries to persuade her that Hamlet was lying to her, and her heart would be scattered by him. Being controlled by a superior authority, Ophelia, like many women during that time, have no other response but to obey. In the same scene in Hamlet(1948), Lawrence Olivier portrayed Ophelia's as

submissive to Polonius' authority and doesn't argue back with him. Even as an audience, we could see the eye movement and gesture of her hands to know that she believed otherwise. ³ Although the readers sporadically see Ophelia's interaction with Hamlet, his will power over her degrades her to a lower status. Being in love with the man of their dream, women resist the hatred that they are placed in. Ophelia resisted the comments the Hamlet told her by keeping it in, rather than speaking out against it. Hamlet, in his madness proclaims, " Get thee [to] a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be/ a breeder of sinners?" (Hamlet. III. I. 131-132) Even with the slander voice of making Ophelia feel smaller than a person, she does not retaliate back with harsh words. She simply act the same way as she would in front of her father. Though Ophelia is a young maiden, her response and blindness to the action taking place in the palace contributes to others taking advantage of her innocence. Similarly, Gertrude's blindness gives her a child's personality as well. Both these women were taken advantage by the men they loved. A father and a husband. Neill puts it best when he wrote " How readily first Ophelia and then Gertrude allow themselves to become passive instruments of Polonius's and Claudius's spying upon the Prince." (Neill, 312) Although Ophelia was taken advantage of and she knew it, she did not put a stop to it. Her naïve mind did not allow her to go against the higher authority, and in return, she was placed in a position where she had to choose between two people that she loved, her father and Hamlet. Ophelia's inner child came out most with the realization that her father, Polonius, was murdered by the man that she loves. With her father's death and brother Laertes sent away to France, there were no male figures in her family to take over the authority.

Having no one to control her, Ophelia was lost in her own world. Neill describes her as "accustomed to speak only in the voice that others allow her... she is left with no language other than the disconnected fragments of her madness to conceal outrage at a murder which authority seems determined to conceal." (Neill, 318) Neill's use of "madness" shows that Ophelia was a child, and her madness was an attempt to have a voice. With no communication, a child finds alternate ways to express their feeling, and for Ophelia, it meant becoming mad. In return, the men in the court paid attention but disregarded her grieving for Polonius' death. Far from Ophelia's response, when Hamlet pretended to be "mad," the courts officials took it seriously and wanted to find out the true reason behind it. After the death of her father, Ophelia's child-like manner erupted and consumed her personality. In her delusional state of mind, Ophelia said "There's a fennel for you, and columbines... I would give you some violets, but they are withered all when my father died/ They say he made a good end." (Hamlet. IV. V. 204-210) Ophelia took comfort in her madness by hiding behind her child image. In Zeffirelli's interpretation of Hamlet (1990), he portrayed Ophelia in this scene as a child by making the actress pass out sticks rather than the types of flowers described in the lines. 4 To Ophelia, she used her imagination to make the stick resemble flowers. Being portrayed as a child, men in society looked at Ophelia as ignorant and too weak to deal with the overwhelming grief. In the play, though Ophelia represents a minor character, her role was important to help us better understand Denmark's society during their time. Through her actions and remarks, she revealed the characteristics of other characters. Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia as a

innocent, naïve child allowed him to bring the idea of women being submissive to the male to the readers.