

# Gertrude and ophelia in hamlet essay sample

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Shakespeare's characterization of Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet* is paradoxical as it challenges as well as complements the contemporary social traditions and norms. Gertrude is the best example of this paradox that is manifested through her extraordinary supremacy over all the major characters of *Hamlet*, *her influence in the court matters and state affairs and her blind obedience to Claudius. Ophelia is also active in her domestic domain but her interest are restricted to amorous and matrimonial matters only and they are further directed by his father Polonius and brother Laertes.* She is an epitome of traditional feminist expressions of the age that require chastity, compliance and acceptance of male dominancy from women.

*Gertrude influence is wide ranging as it encompasses the domestic as well as the state affairs. Simultaneously she manifests the behaviour that is in consonance with the contemporary traditional view. She has the ability to captivate, fend off, or manipulate all important male characters for her own interests. Act 2, scene 2, clearly manifests how Gertrude behaves authoritatively with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and with Polonius. This scene further depicts her interaction with Claudius and influence she possesses over Claudius. But she further exhibit the behaviour that is an embodiment of Elizabethan socio-cultural milieu and its values. She is subservient to Claudius when she agrees to Claudius' plan to trap Hamlet, " I shall obey you," (3. 1. 37). Again in the closet scene, she is in compliance to Hamlet's orders; " What should I do?" she asks (3. 4. 181).*

Furthermore, despite Gertrude's conformist female acquiescent behaviour, her excessive sexuality and lust makes her a non-traditional woman. This portrayal of Gertrude clearly challenges the social and ethical norm of

Elizabethan society. Her sexuality is intimidating for both Hamlets, father and son, who considers it brutal, extreme, tainted:

“ Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,

Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty” (3. 4. 92-95);

Again it is said;

“ So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,

Will sate itself in a celestial bed

And prey on garbage” (1. 5. 55-57).

These lines are not in conformity with the woman image of contemporary society where woman’s chastity was the first condition for her social recognition.

Gabrielle Dane writes, “ Motherless and completely circumscribed by the men around her, Ophelia has been shaped to conform to external demands, to reflect others’ desires” (406). Contrary to this psychologically realistic criticism, this characterization of Ophelia is influenced by the cultural tradition of the male-dominant Elizabethan society.

Ophelia remains passive in the domestic and emotional domain. Ophelia has no identity of her own and all her domestic and amorous matters are

directed by her father. Polonius endeavours to fashion the life and attitude of Ophelia according to his own wishes. He considers his desires as her desires and try ti tailor her approach by various means.

Ophelia is further guarded by his brother against any potential threat to her chastity and virginity. At Ophelia's entry into *Hamlet* , her brother, Laertes escorts Ophelia advising her on her relationship with Hamlet.

“ For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour,

Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,

[...]

The perfume and suppliance of a minute; No more,” (1. 3. 6-10)

So right from the very start, Ophelia is under the sway of Laertes and Polonius. So her character is in complete conformity with the traditional values of that time. Polonius always responds from a position of authority over Ophelia, emphasizing his power as the decision-maker for her. Both her father and brother have a self assigned task of directing Ophelia how to act properly in every domain of her life.

Although Shakespeare has characterized Ophelia as inferior to male characters, but characterization of Gertrude has dual characteristic. Sometime it challenges the traditions of the conformist society and sometime it itself become conforms to the values of the society by acting passively.

## References

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