

Ophelia's descent into madness

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Shakespeare, through his intricate uses of symbolism and dramatic irony, arranges a brilliantly detailed account of how Hamlet's mental upheaval served as the driving force of Ophelia's swelling insanity and imminent suicide. He floods the early acts with an impending sense of confusion within Ophelia, for her feelings toward Hamlet greatly contrast those of her brother and father. Ophelia begins to willingly take heed of her family's advice as the prince finds himself removed from a lucid pattern of thought.

However, because her feelings for him are genuine, this serves only to exalt her mental strain. In the height of Hamlet's incoherent rage, he provides Ophelia with the ultimate medium for her ensuing madness. The murder of Polonius is the greatest among many factors that were contributed by Hamlet to the somber fate of Ophelia. A prelude, composed of warnings from Polonius and Laertes, is tactfully set up by Shakespeare during Ophelia's inertial appearances in the play, aiding in the preparation for her subsequent mental deterioration.

-Pol. What is between you? Give me up the truth.

-Oph. He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders of his affection to me.

-Pol. Affection, puh! You speak like a green girl Unsifted in such perilous circumstance. Do you believe his "tenders" as you call them?

-Oph. I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

(I, iii, ln. 107-113)

Ophelia openly professes her confusion. Polonius' response is presented in a manner which is clearly intended to sincerely disdain Hamlet before his

daughter, making obvious his opinion of their involvement. His intent for her actions, however, will merely magnify her confusion. Ophelia concedes that she is not aware of a solution with which to halt or even improve this situation. For this reason, no preventive measures are taken, only allowing the situation to worsen.

Hamlet's mind grows more and more clouded as his goal becomes clear, and in the midst of his pervading preoccupation, he pushes Ophelia to the point of mental breakdown. This notion appears in the second act, after Ophelia first sees a deranged Hamlet.

-Oph.

Lord Hamlet ...with a look so piteous in purport as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors -he comes before me

-Pol. Mad for thy love?

-Oph. My lord I do not know but, I truly do fear it.

(II, I, ln. 87-97) Her confusion has evolved into a state of dread, and this dread will begin to penetrate her consciousness as it grows more and more intense. Polonius suggests that Hamlet may have fallen victim to “the very ecstasy of love”. Yet, Ophelia's response is peculiar in its morbid tone, for if love is the liable force, she displays no form of satisfaction for its effect on Hamlet. During an encounter later in the story, he tells Ophelia,

-Ham. “...I did love you once

-Oph. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so

-Ham.

You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so (inoculate) our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

-Oph. I was the more deceived ...And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his musicked vows..."

(III, I, ln. 125-130, 169-170)

Again, her mind is twisted by Hamlet's involuntary fraudulence. His apathy attacks and consumes her innocence, takes grip of her mind and ultimately destroys her spirit. In the above quote, she describes her opinion of Hamlet's present character, that of an untruthful user. Moreover, however, she feels naïve, placing undue blame on herself and enlarging the gap between herself and reality.

As the impending tragedy becomes increasingly apparent, Ophelia is finally and completely consumed by the delirium of her sick mind. The most significant factor in this event is Polonius' murder. Her condition is explained by the king after she makes it obvious.

-King.

Thick, and unwholesome in thoughts and whispers. For good Polonius' death, and we have done but greenly poor Ophelia divided from herself and her fair judgment.

(IV, v, ln. 81-85)

Ophelia, who was once nearly flawless, now moments from suicide, has been completely mentally shattered by Hamlet and has made it quite obvious. He was the fate of her father, and had apparently manipulated her quite

ruthlessly. Her demise is inevitable, for her only love had hone mad and methodically destroyed all that was her reality. Shakespeare is distinct in his portrayal of this downfall.

The obvious becomes just that when the aim of the author is discerned through the symbolic congruencies and events which precisely outlined the tragic decline of Ophelia's character. The author provides a vast amount of foreshadowing in the early acts. The tragic hero then drags her into the same hell that is his personal realm. He accomplishes this by eliminating everything that had sustained her. Eventually, a the factors developed, she was overwhelmed by these acts, a reality becomes nothing more than an illusion, and she falls victim to the limits of her own mind.