

The death and madness of ophelia



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In Hamlet, Shakespeare makes it clear that Prince Hamlet is insane or at least on the verge of “madness.” However, Ophelia (daughter of Polonius, King of Denmark) begins to go mad, as well, after Hamlet kills her father, and the other numerous tragedies that plague her like a black cloud hovering about until her untimely death. In this literary analysis I will ask, and attempt to explain the symbolism behind the riddles, mad songs, rhymes, and death of Ophelia.

Also, Queen Gertrude’s announcement of Ophelia’s death has been seen as one of the most influentially poetic death announcements in literature. Whether Ophelia killed herself, was victim of a tragic plot, or was just another tragic death may never be known. However, the symbolism of Queen Gertrude’s monologue announcement concerning the tragically departed Ophelia, and Ophelia’s own madness that ended with her death is worthy of analysis. Was it the abuse suffered by the hands of Hamlet, himself, or was it the death of her father, also at the hands of her lover, the leading factor of her maddening?

Or, was it that Ophelia had no control over her body, her relationships, or her choices the catalyst? Her father, Polonius, forbade any union between Ophelia and Hamlet. However, he later uses Ophelia to spy on Hamlet for King Claudius, and because of the times in which she lived Ophelia has to be the obedient daughter, a role demanded of all young women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. “Her whole character is that of simple unselfish affection” (Bradley 130). Was this the point in which the seams of sanity start to fray?

Ophelia's whole world is shattered after her father dies, because of her conflicting loyalties to her father (who had never approved of Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia), and Hamlet now having killed him. After her father's murder, she talks a lot of death, and her madness becomes noticeable when she begins to sing in a crazed way. In Act 4, she is mourning her father's death and is singing: " He is dead and gone, lady, He is dead and gone; At his head a grass-green turf, At his heels a stone White his shroud as the mountain snow Landed all with sweet flowers;

Which bewept to the ground did not go With true-love showers. " (Hamlet) She's put in a horrible situation. What do you do when your boyfriend kills your father? One would think that the conflicting emotions and irrational behavior leading up to her death would suggest that she committed suicide. With Ophelia's father murdered by her lover, it is likely that anyone in that situation would have thoughts of suicide. Ophelia's actions in the scenes before her death suggest it, but in truth, it was caused by a terrible accident.

If Ophelia's intentions were to commit suicide, she would probably either poison or stab herself, because they are both quick and easy. Drowning is not usually the preferred method of suicide among women, because it is long and painful. Now we have Ophelia's death, which was witnessed by Queen Gertrude. Ophelia's death, like just about everything else in the play, is mysterious. Her drowning occurs off-stage, and we're given an account by Gertrude, who may or may not have been present at the time.

" When down her weedy trophies and herself Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide; And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up: Which time

she chanted snatches of old tunes; As one incapable of her own distress, Or like a creature native and indued Unto that element: but long it could not be Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay To muddy death. " (Hamlet) Regardless of whether or not Gertrude was an eyewitness, the story of Ophelia's death is striking in a number of ways.

First, her death seems to be passive: rather than straight-up committing suicide, as Gertrude tells us, she accidentally falls in the water and then simply neglects to save herself from sinking. This seems to be a metaphor for the way Ophelia lives her life towards the end of the play, going with the flow, doing what her father tells her to do, rather than making decisions for herself. " In her wanderings we hear from time to time an undertone of the deepest sorrow, but never the agonized cry of fear or horror which makes madness dreadful or shocking.

And the picture of her death, if our eyes grow dim in watching it, is still purely beautiful" (Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy). Even when Ophelia's garments " pull" her down, as if they had a mind of their own, while she is drowning, we find this beautiful. We also notice that Ophelia is described as being " mermaid-like" with her " clothes spread wide. " Even in death, Ophelia is figured as an erotic creature. Gertrude also suggests that Ophelia's drowning was natural when she describes Ophelia as being like a " native" creature in the water.

This seems like a pretty dangerous and destructive way to describe a young woman's tragic death, don't you think? Although Ophelia was not the main

character in Shakespeare's Hamlet, we see her influence on the characters through her tragedies, madness, and then death. As tragic as the story is we cannot obsess over one character, we have to see, as a play, how each element acts upon each other. Although I would have wished for a different outcome for Ophelia, the play could not have been the same without her.

Burnett, along with many other literary critics see Ophelia's madness as a result of patriarchal pressure and abuse. When in a time where men held all the power in society and abused women without fear of persecution from the law, or the people, it is easy to see why Ophelia became so convoluted. Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia is incredibly sympathetic and seems to register the unfairness of the way Ophelia is treated. It also seems that Ophelia's very real mental breakdown, which results in her drowning, serves as a " point of contrast to Hamlet's feigned insanity or " antic disposition," which we talk about in " Madness." (Burnett, Mark. New Essays on Hamlet)

Many critics believe that it is the role of Ophelia that shows us even entitled women are held with nothing more than just that of a role to be played. Ophelia is the quintessential obedient daughter, a role demanded of all young women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. When her father orders her to quit seeing Hamlet, she complies " I shall obey my Lord" (Hamlet). Later, when Polonius uses her as bait to spy on Hamlet for King Claudius, she has no choice but to do as she's told.

As long as she's unmarried, she must live by her father's rules. Of course, if she were to marry, she'd then have to live by her husband's rules.

Essentially, Ophelia has no control over her body, her relationships, or her

choices. With having no control of anything but her thoughts we can see, and agree with other critics, that it was these social pressures and the abuse of power from even those closest to her that drove her mad leaving Ophelia to be a very necessary character in Shakespeare's play.