

# Hamlet and ophelia essay sample



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In her article "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism", Elaine Showalter states that Ophelia's tragedy "is subordinated in the play". Hamlet is an Elizabethan play written by William Shakespeare - named after the protagonist. Hamlet, feels responsible to take revenge on his father's murderer, Claudius, and during this conflict he slays Ophelia's father and rejects Ophelia, whom he had previously courted.

Whilst Hamlet is clearly the play's central character, Shakespeare allows his audience to see how the deaths of both Hamlet's and Ophelia's fathers lead to their madness, causing the audience to compare Hamlet's and Ophelia's tragedies and enabling us to examine whether Ophelia's tragedy in the play is subordinated to Hamlet's. Hamlet is an Elizabethan play and the audience would be aware that it is a play set in a patriarchal society.

This is emphasised through Ophelia, who throughout the play is dependent on men and relies on her father and brother, Laertes. This is evident when she gives in to Polonius's scheme to spy on Hamlet with no indication that she might resist and only replies "Madam, I wish it may" to Gertrude when she hopes that Ophelia is the cause of Hamlet's madness and that he will therefore return "to his wonted way again". Ophelia is therefore ordered what to do and never asked and Polonius only has to say, "Ophelia, walk you here", for her to do as she is told.

Similarly, she agrees to give back the love letters to Hamlet when Polonius says: "You do not understand yourself so clearly As it behoves my daughter and your honour" and in response we do not see much indication that she

resists her father's orders. Instead she says, " I don't know my lord, what I should think". Here, we see how she is subordinate to men (here, her father), in a way that stresses her mental and intellectual ' frailty' and that of women in Elizabethan society. This allows a modern audience to see how women were expected to be in Elizabethan times.

A modern audience might sympathise with Ophelia, as she is seen being dependent and even used by men in the play. Ophelia's representation of women as weak could shock a modern audience, adding pathos to Ophelia's tragedy because in modern society women are more independent. However, in the Elizabethan era a woman being dependent and therefore subordinate to men was expected - therefore an Elizabethan audience may not have sympathised with Ophelia, as they were used to seeing women presented as weak.

Shakespeare emphasises this in Act One Scene Two, when Hamlet states in his soliloquy, "Frailty thy name is woman" Here, Hamlet presents his perception of women, being people who are emotionally, physically and morally weak and therefore need to depend upon men. This was the typical view of women in Shakespeare's time. Roles of women in society were very limited and men were considered to be leaders and women their inferiors. However, despite Ophelia being a comparatively minor character and dependent on men, she does have significance in the play in representing Elizabethan women. Unlike Hamlet, she doesn't have long soliloquies or appear in most of the scenes.

However, Shakespeare could be representing Ophelia's absence from the majority of the play as a microcosm of the absent voice of women in society and this could be considered a tragedy in itself. Nevertheless, her absence from the play makes her a less dominant character and allows greater focus on Hamlet's tragedy. Shakespeare creates great focus on Hamlet through his soliloquies. For example, in Act One Scene Two: " O that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into dew, Or that Everlasting had not fixed

His canon ' gainst self - slaughter! O God, God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world" Here is Hamlet's first soliloquy, where he starts to contemplate suicide and explains how it is desirable for someone whose life has become so pointless. Shakespeare, through these soliloquies, allows us to sympathise with Hamlet and we can relate to his emotions and therefore relate to his tragedy more. In this way Shakespeare prioritises Hamlet's tragedy over that of Ophelia, who has far less to say.

However, we also learn that Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. Here, he contemplates suicide (" self-slaughter") but his thoughts are balanced by the fact that he realises it is forbidden by the Christian God (" the Everlasting"). Similarly, in the soliloquy in Act Three Scene One, Hamlet says, " To be or not to be"; again weighing the moral factors of suicide. Even the structure of this phrase, which has the infinitive verb ' to be' on either side, suggests the balanced nature of his mind.

Hamlet represents a Renaissance, noble man; therefore to an Elizabethan audience the tragic end of a respected and educated man would create more impact as opposed to a “ frail”, dependent Ophelia. Hamlet, in keeping with Elizabethan perceptions of male superiority, is presented as the more capable thinker, more able to stand his sadness and not end his life, more able to retain his ability to reason even when ‘ mad’. This contrasts with the presentation of Ophelia’s madness in Act Four, Scene Five: “ There’s fennel for you, and columbines.

There’s rue for you, and here’s some for me... .. There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. ” Here, Ophelia is giving flowers to Laertes, not only does it show her inability to think logically, but also shows her symbolically deflowering herself, representing her loss of virginity, which is also implied when she sings “ before you tumbled me you promised me to wed”. This suggests unfulfilled promises made by Hamlet, showing his dominance and stressing her dependence on him, therefore representing women’s sexual ‘ frailty’.

To an Elizabethan audience this might arouse less sympathy than to a modern audience, because dependence on men was something expected in the Elizabethan era, whereas to a modern audience, where men and women are considered more equal, Ophelia’s implied mistreatment by Hamlet would be more tragic. However, it could be argued that Ophelia subordinates her own tragedy. This is evident in the way she presents herself in Act 3, Scene 1, where she says: “ O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown! ”

Here Ophelia refers to Hamlet as 'noble', and is therefore somewhat subordinating herself by giving her concern and sympathy to someone she sees as higher status; more 'noble'. She also goes on to state in Act 3 Scene 1: "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, That sucked the honey of his musicked vows" Ophelia explains how she was eager to believe all of the vows Hamlet made, and therefore as a result is "deject and wretched" to see her love gone mad. Shakespeare emphasises her dependence on men because for her, her own tragedy comes from her emotional dependence on Hamlet.

She again shows her dependence to men when she says "O woe is me", showing how Hamlet's madness is a misery to herself. Therefore, Ophelia subordinates herself and presents herself as a woman who depends on Hamlet to the extent that her madness is a result of his madness. Therefore, if he is unable to secure his own welfare, she is also unable because her welfare depends on Hamlet. Ophelia subordinating herself to Hamlet may not be seen as tragic in an Elizabethan era because her subordinating herself and depending on Hamlet is something which was expected in Elizabethan times, therefore this wouldn't make her tragedy more dominant.

However, to a modern audience we would feel sympathetic towards Ophelia, because this is not expected of women in a modern society, where men and woman are more equal. Therefore, her subordinate character could heighten her tragedy to a modern audience. However, we could argue that whilst Hamlet considers moral choices and alternatives, Ophelia takes action by committing suicide without procrastinating - something which Hamlet wants to be able to do.

Therefore, it could be considered that despite her character being subordinate, her tragedy is of major relevance because it shows her as an active figure in her own fate, by drowning herself in her sorrows; she has a role in her own tragic end. An Elizabethan audience would be familiar with seeing women presented as weak and therefore Ophelia's presentation as 'frail' in the play allows her tragedy to be subordinated because it was expected, Ophelia herself seems to contribute to these expectations.

Hamlet, by contrast, represents an Elizabethan Renaissance man with the ability to reason, think logically and therefore withstand his suicide, making his eventual death at the hands of Laertes and Claudius seem the greater loss and the dominant tragedy of the play. However, to a modern audience Ophelia's dependence on men, her absence from most of the play (and, by implication, society) and her unheard female voice could create more disbelief and sympathy towards Ophelia, allowing her subordinated character to be the foremost tragedy of the play.