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The Double Blow to Ophelia: Love Lost and Patricide

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Abstract: As a significant female character in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, Ophelia's tragic fate reflects not only her personal emotional struggles but also the broader vulnerability and powerlessness of women in a patriarchal society. This paper examines the two major blows Ophelia suffers in the play: first, Hamlet's emotional rejection and verbal abuse driven by the burden of revenge, and second, the accidental killing of her father, Polonius, by Hamlet. These dual traumas lead Ophelia from a once-protected and joyful girl into a state of psychological collapse and eventual death. Through close textual analysis and narrative interpretation, this study argues that Ophelia's tragedy is not accidental but rather a consequence of the conflict between Renaissance humanism and feudal patriarchy. Her fate highlights the historical marginalization and instrumentalization of women under male-dominated structures of power.

Keywords: Hamlet; Ophelia; Shakespeare; female tragedy; patriarchal culture



1. Introduction

William Shakespeare, one of the most renowned poets and playwrights in the world of literature, is widely recognized as a master of Renaissance humanist literature. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the noble and humanist-illuminated male protagonists in his Four Great Tragedies, the representation of female characters has often been overlooked. Constrained by the values of his time, female characters in literature typically appear as secondary figures to their male counterparts. Nevertheless, they play an indispensable role in the narrative structure and character development of Shakespeare's plays. Influenced by the humanist ideals of the Renaissance, Shakespeare's depiction of women reflects a progressive shift from earlier periods. Though women often appear as foils to the central male figures, their personalities remain distinct and vividly portrayed. They may be naturally compassionate, intelligent, and bold enough to question social norms. Or perhaps they have strategic vision or ambition.

Nevertheless, these women almost always meet tragic ends despite their virtues. Shakespeare was born in the Elizabethan period, which was marked by systematic oppression of women. Ophelia in *Hamlet* is a product of this period. Ophelia is a supporting character in the play, but she draws attention to the tragic reality of the era. Ophelia's spiral into madness is a direct result of patriarchal oppression, whereas Hamlet's insanity is a purposeful disguise and means of retaliation. Shakespeare's depiction of women shows aspects of humanist philosophy, but these characters are still strongly influenced by the era.

Women in particular began to pursue worldly happiness and a greater understanding of their own worth during the Renaissance. Desdemona, who boldly sought love, lost herself in a patriarchal relationship; Lady Macbeth, who sought material success, was ultimately consumed by her fragile psychological state; and Ophelia, who was gentle and beautiful, became instruments of male authority due to the influence of both lingering feudal values and emerging humanist ideals. In the end, they all became inevitable sacrifices of patriarchal ideology in European feudal society.



2. Methods

2.1. Methodology

This study primarily employs textual analysis, focusing on the character Ophelia in Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* to explore her narrative experiences and psychological transformations, thereby investigating the cultural and gender-based roots of her tragic fate. By examining the two pivotal blows Ophelia endures in the play—emotional rupture and familial loss—this paper analyzes her dialogues and narrative depictions to reveal how she gradually loses subjectivity and descends into collapse within a patriarchal social structure.

The research materials center on Shakespeare's original script, supplemented by relevant scholarly studies on Ophelia's character and the status of women during the Renaissance period. The study also draws upon feminist critical perspectives to analyze the impact of gender inequality and power structures on Ophelia's destiny, aiming to demonstrate that her tragedy is not merely a personal emotional breakdown but a result of broader socio-cultural oppression.

2.2. Literature Review

The character of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, particularly regarding her tragic fate and representation of women in a patriarchal society. Many studies emphasize Ophelia as a symbol of female victimization and the oppressive gender norms of the Elizabethan era (Showalter, 1985; Jardine, 1983). According to Showalter (1985), Ophelia personifies the stereotype of "female madness," which captures societal concerns about women's obedience and sexuality. This viewpoint holds that her spiral into insanity and eventual demise emphasizes the terrible results of patriarchal restraints and male dominance.

Other academics examine Ophelia's nuanced psychological profile, highlighting her dual function in the story as an active agent and a passive victim (Neely, 1985; Greenblatt, 1997). According to Neely (1985), Ophelia's insanity has aspects of resistance that enable her to momentarily subvert the gendered power dynamics that



would otherwise constrain her. The character of Ophelia is placed within the larger political and social upheavals of Renaissance England by Greenblatt (1997), who also shows how her fate reflects conflicts between firmly established feudal patriarchy and burgeoning humanist ideals.

Gender role studies from the Renaissance offer crucial background information for comprehending Ophelia's tragedy. King (1991) draws attention to the inconsistencies in Renaissance humanism, which upheld constrictive standards for women's conduct and roles while promoting individual dignity. Shakespeare's female characters also reflect the legal, familial, and cultural mechanisms that institutionalised women's subordinate status during the Elizabethan period, according to Jardine (1983).

Furthermore, the layers of gendered power dynamics in Hamlet have been revealed thanks in large part to feminist literary criticism (Moi, 1985; Butler, 1990). Moi (1985) reads Ophelia's fate as a direct consequence of patriarchal violence and control, where her voice and identity are systematically silenced. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity further illuminates how Ophelia's madness can be interpreted as a performance shaped by cultural expectations of femininity and madness.

Collectively, these studies underscore the significance of Ophelia's character as a nexus of gender, power, and tragedy. This literature informs the present study's focus on the socio-cultural and gendered factors that shape Ophelia's narrative trajectory in *Hamlet*.

3. Ophelia's Twofold Tragedy: Emotional Abandonment and Familial Devastation

Ophelia was born into a noble family. Regardless of how her father Polonius and brother Laertes were perceived in public life, within the family, she was genuinely cherished. She also enjoyed the love of Prince Hamlet, who once declared,

“Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love” (Hamlet, Act II, Scene II).



Their deep affection for each other overflowed the confines of language and seemed to connect their hearts intimately. As children of the Danish court—Ophelia, the daughter of a statesman, and Hamlet, the crown prince—they were born into privilege: a stable kingdom, a harmonious society, and a blissful family environment. Hamlet, in particular, was raised with respect, given an excellent education, and lived a carefree life, which shaped him into a kind and idealistic young man. A student of philosophy, he praised human existence with idealistic fervor:

“What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”

(Hamlet, Act II, Scene II)

However, their idyllic world was soon shattered. Hamlet’s father suddenly died, and his mother Gertrude quickly married his uncle Claudius. This abrupt turn of events deeply troubled Hamlet and led him to question the purity of love and the integrity of women. The ghost of his father informed him that Claudius had murdered him, further destabilizing Hamlet’s worldview.

Torn between idealism and grim reality, Hamlet descended into internal conflict, his personality becoming increasingly complex, skeptical, and emotionally unstable. His growing disillusionment with society led him to mistrust even his deepest relationships, including his love for Ophelia. When Polonius, believing he understood the cause of Hamlet’s madness, used Ophelia as bait to test Hamlet’s behavior, Hamlet lashed out with cruel and bitter words:

“Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? ... I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another... Go to, I’ll no more on it. It hath made me mad.”

(Hamlet, Act III, Scene I)

This verbal assault marked the first major blow to Ophelia. She later described to her father a deeply unsettling encounter with Hamlet:

“He took me by the wrist and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And, with his other hand thus o’er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As he would draw it. Long stayed he so.
...He raised a sigh so piteous and profound



As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being.”

(Hamlet, Act II, Scene I)

Hamlet’s feigned madness—part of his elaborate revenge plan—was used to conceal his true emotions and to protect himself and his beloved. Although his words were harsh, they were not devoid of underlying affection. Ophelia, still young and inexperienced, could not grasp the depth behind his contradictory actions.

This first phase of Ophelia’s tragedy began with the loss of love. Though she obeyed her father and brother’s instructions to distance herself from Hamlet, it was ultimately Hamlet, disillusioned and emotionally devastated, who renounced their love. Ophelia mourned not only the loss of affection but also the fall of the noble man she once adored:

“O, what a noble mind is here overthrown!
...Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh;
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy.”

(Hamlet, Act III, Scene I)

As Heinrich Heine once noted, “This is the misfortune of the weak: when catastrophe strikes, they first vent their pain on that which they hold most precious.” Hamlet, in the depths of his internal torment, cast aside reason—his finest gift—and cruelly wounded the woman who loved him most.

The second and fatal blow came when Hamlet, in a fit of impulsive revenge, mistakenly killed Polonius—Ophelia’s father. Having lost her love, Ophelia now faced the death of her father, with both traumas occurring in rapid succession. These dual tragedies shattered her mental defenses and led to her psychological collapse. Unlike Hamlet’s calculated madness, Ophelia’s was genuine, marked by fragmented speech and melancholic songs:

“They say the owl was a baker’s daughter.
Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

(Hamlet, Act IV, Scene V)

Her sorrowful laments and nonsensical phrases revealed a grief too overwhelming to express rationally:

“White his shroud as the mountain snow,



Larded all with sweet flowers;
Which bewept to the grave did go
With true-love showers.”

(Hamlet, Act IV, Scene V)

When Ophelia approached the Queen singing, her fragmented melody testified to a mind unmoored:

“He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.”

(Hamlet, Act IV, Scene V)

Ophelia’s final appearance comes through Queen Gertrude’s haunting description:

“There is a willow grows aslant a brook...
She fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up...
But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.”

(Hamlet, Act IV, Scene VII)

Hamlet’s choice to abandon love and pursue vengeance directly led to Polonius’s death and Ophelia’s descent into madness. In turn, Ophelia’s death delivered a final emotional blow to Hamlet, who grieved her profoundly:

“What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane!”

(Hamlet, Act V, Scene I)

Ophelia changed from an innocent girl to a tragic figure crushed under the weight of love and loss, much like Hamlet went from being a happy prince to a melancholy avenger. Her emotional journey, which starts with joy and ends with



heartbreak, insanity, and death, reflects Hamlet's own psychological collapse and emphasizes how their destinies are entwined.

4. Conclusion

Through textual analysis and feminist criticism, this study has examined the tragic character of Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet, emphasizing how her personal suffering mirrors the larger sociocultural restrictions placed on women in a patriarchal Renaissance society. Hamlet's rejection and her father Polonius's passing are the two major setbacks she experiences, and they act as triggers for her mental breakdown and ultimate demise. These incidents highlight the persistent conflicts between espoused feudal patriarchy and Renaissance humanist ideals, as well as the frailty of female agency within male-dominated power structures.

Shakespeare's female characters embody complex intersections of gender, power, and identity, as demonstrated by Ophelia's tragic fate. This highlights the female characters' limited autonomy and systemic marginalization. Comprehending Ophelia's journey enhances modern readings of Hamlet and encourages continuous contemplation of the historical and cultural elements that continue to influence gender dynamics.

Future studies could look more closely at how Ophelia's character was received in various historical and cultural contexts or use intersectional frameworks to look at other aspects of her tragedy. By doing this, academics can enhance their critical analysis of Shakespeare's plays and their applicability to current gender discourse.

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