

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HAMLET'S BEHAVIOUR TO OPHELIA IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

Dr. Yatharth N. Vaidya,

Senior Lecturer in English, Government Polytechnic, Rajkot. (Gujarat)

Email. yatharthvaidya@gmail.com

Paper Received On: 21 DEC 2021

Peer Reviewed On: 31 DEC 2021

Published On: 1 JAN 2022

Abstract

There is no doubt that Hamlet loves Ophelia deeply and intensely but it is also true that he behaves cruelly with her throughout the play. The researcher in current research paper tries to examine Hamlet-Ophelia relationship and makes a humble attempt to find out the reasons about Hamlet's cruel behaviour with Ophelia. Much has been discussed about Hamlet and his behaviour by many learned critics. The aim of the researcher is to throw a fresh light and give logical reasons about hamlet's behaviour. The researcher also tries to study whether Hamlet really loves Ophelia after she returns all gifts to Hamlet under the instructions of her father or he really hates her.

Key Words: Hamlet, Ophelia, Love, Behaviour, Cruel, relationship

Like all the women of Shakespearean tragedy, Ophelia is a weak beautiful woman. Hamlet once called her a nymph, and the Queen's description of Ophelia, floating like a beautiful flower in the stream in which she was drowned, shows that Ophelia is very beautiful indeed. Ophelia has her friends as well as here severe critics. There are some who look upon Ophelia as an unfortunate victim of Hamlet's cruelty. On the other hand, there are others who say Ophelia is much to blame for being weak-willed. Though there are some critics who suspect Ophelia's innocence, there is perhaps no doubt that the relation between Ophelia and Hamlet are pure and free from any taint of sexuality. Although Ophelia is child-like in her innocence and purity of character, she has little power of understanding. Amanda Millibard in her essay, Ophelia writes:

Even though her love for Hamlet is

strong, she obeys her father when he tells her not to see Hamlet again or accept any letters that Hamlet writes. Her heart is pure, and when she does do something dishonest, such as tell Hamlet that her father has gone home when he is really behind the curtain; it is out of genuine fear...

Hamlet loved Ophelia deeply and intensely. The only direct evidence of Hamlet's love for Ophelia that we observe in the play is Hamlet's own words to Laertes,

I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum. (Hamlet,201)

These words show the extent and intensity of Hamlet's love to Ophelia. Again, when Ophelia under the instructions of her father and brother, returns to Hamlet all his letters and tokens and gifts given to her, we infer that the love between Hamlet and Ophelia must have been deep and of a longer duration. But as the play goes, there is no love-scene between these two lovers. Their love is almost a matter of past history when the play opens. However, there is no doubt about the fact that Hamlet was at one time deeply and sincerely in love with Ophelia. We learn it from Ophelia that Hamlet once wooed her honourably. Ophelia also reveals the genuineness of her love and gives us the best picture of what Hamlet once used to be: **"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown."** (Hamlet,105)

To sum up, in the words of Land Green,

Both Hamlet and Ophelia loved each other but after her death all his old love returns to him in a flood when he finds Laertes making a splendour show of his brotherly feeling. (Land, Green)

The tragic situation in which he was placed and the deep disgust he felt as a result of his mother's indecent conduct must have affected Hamlet's love for Ophelia. Hamlet's view **"Frailty, thy name woman"** (Hamlet,22) was unfortunately confirmed by Ophelia's playing in the hands of her father. His mother's unholy marriage with his uncle within two months of his father's death had disillusioned Hamlet about woman in general. Ophelia's returning of his old letters and gifts without any provocation from him made Hamlet suspicious that Ophelia was playing in the hands of her father. He, therefore, pretended not to care for her and to be indifferent to her. He told a white lie that he never loved her. Offended by Ophelia's unjust behaviour with him, Hamlet behaved with her very harshly, even cruelly.

Hamlet behaved harshly and cruelly with Ophelia not, as some critics say, because he was mad, but because he was so bitterly offended with her unjust rejection of his love, Hamlet had the same love for Ophelia; his love for her never changed. But Hamlet had to change his behaviour to her when he found her changed under the pressure of her father. All his hopes in Ophelia were shattered. She could have stood by Hamlet in the hour of his crisis, but she turned out to be of so weak will that she left her lover to his fate and sided with her father. Hamlet's love for her continued silently even after their parting is shown by the words he used when, during the play-scene, his mother asked Hamlet to sit by her side. Hamlet pointed to Ophelia and remarked,

Queen. Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me.

Ham. No, good mother, here's metal more attractive. (Hamlet, 114)

Outwardly Hamlet tried to convince Ophelia that he had lost all his love for her and always addressed her in bitter and offending manner. In the Nunnery scene Hamlet used very cruel and violent words. Outwardly this would show him as hard-hearted and cruel, but in fact, Hamlet was acting a part that was extremely painful to him. Most of his harshness to her is assumed, the rest of it is due to his bitter disillusionment about her when he found her dancing to the tune of her father.

Hamlet's love for Ophelia may have been weakened by his melancholy in which he was plunged on his arrival at Elsinor after the death of his father and the marriage of his mother. The thoughts of revenge and the thoughts of his mother's frailty occupied him so much that it is likely that thoughts of his love for Ophelia receded into the background of his mind, if not altogether lost. This is the reason why we do not find any single reference to her in any of the soliloquies of Hamlet, where he reveals the innermost secrets of his mind to us. Though Hamlet did not kill Polonius intentionally, he never tried to realise what the death of her father meant to Ophelia. Her death due to drowning also comes as a news to him.

According to some critics, Ophelia is not so innocent as she appears. She has already been seduced by Hamlet. To the possibility that she is pregnant when she is drowned. But this evidence is not convincing. She drowned herself in order to escape the stigma of an illicit pregnancy. But the strongest argument against such an interpretation is afforded by Hamlet's references to her. (Land, Green)

It is difficult to forgive Ophelia for working as the tool and instrument of her father in trapping Hamlet into a confession of his love for her; it is equally difficult to forgive Hamlet for his cruelty to her in the Nunnery scene. However, much we disapprove of Hamlet's

behaviour with Ophelia, we cannot but wish that it would have been better if Ophelia also was less her father's daughter and more herself. Hamlet's view of women had been poisoned by the example of his mother; Ophelia had no such excuse. If Hamlet was blind, Ophelia is weak. We have no means of knowing how much Ophelia loved Hamlet. In her madness, she sings songs, which contain a few lines which are taken as expressing her love for Hamlet.

How should I your true love know

From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff

And his sandal shoon. (Hamlet, 25)

A.C. Bradley says that the play Hamlet depends upon her 'childlike nature' and 'inexperience'. Further Bradley says,

Ophelia, therefore, was made a character who could not help Hamlet, and for whom on the other hand he would not naturally feel a passion so vehement or profound as to interfere with the main motive of the play. And in the love and the fate of Ophelia herself there was introduced an element not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty.... (129).

There is, however, nothing positively evil about Ophelia. We pity Ophelia and her death is pathetic, if not tragic. It is very clear that Hamlet loved Ophelia deeply but the double shock of his father's marriage and his mother's unholy marriage had rattled him so much that he had to put away all thoughts of love and love-making and think only of the duty of revenge that had fallen on him. In the beginning, Hamlet was expecting Ophelia's moral support but he was disappointed by her behaviour. Had Ophelia supported Hamlet morally and emotionally and motivated Hamlet for the duty of revenge, Hamlet would have already killed Claudius. Ophelia was not bold enough like Desdemona who in the presence of her father and duke publicly admitted her love for Othello and respectfully told her father that now Othello was her husband and she must perform the duty as a wife as my mother performed for you. All that we can say is that a woman with a stronger passion of love would have behaved differently from Ophelia.

REFERENCES:

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedies*. Calcutta: Radha Publishing House. 1992. Print.

Copyright © 2021, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1905. Print

Dowden, Edward. *Shakespearean: A critical Study of His Mind and Art*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print

Muir, Kenneth. *Shakespeare: Hamlet*. London: Edward Arnold. 1963. Web

Knight, G. Wilson. *Wheel of Fire*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print

Wilson, Dover. J. *What Happens in Hamlet*. UK: Cambridge University Press. 1990. Print

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Delhi: Surjeet Publications. 1999. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Philip Edwards. New Delhi: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print

Web Sources:

Land, Green, <https://www.literaturemini.com/2020/04/comment-on-hamlets-relations-with-ophelia.html>

Mabillard, Amanda. *Ophelia*. *Shakespeare Online*. 20 Aug. 2000. Web. 12 Jul. 2013

< <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/opheliacharacter.html> >.