
PSYCHOANALYSIS OF OPHELIA IN HAMLET

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Abstract:

There is a predominant emotional mood of the individual that is depression and there may be variety of psychological and behavioral symptoms which are appropriate to the prevailing mood. Ophelia in Hamlet can be studied as the case study of a person victim of emotional disturbances which falls under the category of depression and suicide. Ophelia in the play is seen as the one achieving what she did not intend. Her thoughts translated into action are the cause of tragedy.

Keywords: depressive reactions, interpersonal crises, theory of repression and suicide.

Shakespeare's plays can be studied to deepen our understanding of life. The beauty of his works seems to have reached its apex in the literary creations of his characters. If we focus on one of his plays HAMLET, then it can be said that individuals who are torn into pieces easily when confronted with a difficult or trying situation and exhibit variety of symptoms that torment the character for several weeks are neurotic characters. Hamlet can be a study of interest for the students of psychology in this light.

After Hamlet, Ophelia is the only character who leaves a strong impact on our hearts and minds. She is a simpleton and suffers because of that simplicity of a child. Ophelia yields to everyone. At the first she yields to Hamlet, she receives gladly the tokens of his love and makes no concealment of her readiness to love him in return. And when the fact of their relationship is revealed to Polonius and laertes she again yields so easily to her father and brother when they tell her that Hamlet must be given up. Arden Shakespeare describes her name meaning in these words:

The name from the Greek meaning succour,
is usually thought inappropriate, although
Ruskin connects it with Ophelia as a ministering angel.
But the choice perhaps confused Ophelia with simplicity,
innocence...¹.

This soft simplicity, which should be pleasing and lovely here is a draw back and is an irreparable defect which leads to her own madness. She loves her brother and her love

for her father is deep though mingled with fear. For Hamlet perhaps she had no deep love, but we see that it has a strongest hold and the love she gives to Hamlet is the love her nature is capable of. Her life moves around only three persons who are the cause of her existence.

Because of this child like nature and inexperience, the events in the play are somehow affected. The knowledge that “*there are tricks in the world*” has reached her as a report. Her father and brother are anxious for her because of her innocence. She is unable to understand Hamlet’s mind though she can feel its beauty. One of the meanings, which Shakespeare wanted to convey, could be that simplicity is virtue, but it becomes a defect when other or the person holding is negatively affected by that nature.

Simpleton should be coloured by a tinge of shrewdness, but its limits should end from where it starts harming others. In Ophelia’s case her father uses her as a decoy to test Hamlet. In the closet scene she could have assured Hamlet of her sympathies in his most needed time, but she is so overpowered by the hidden presence of Polonius and Claudius that she answers Hamlet’s questions under their influence and pressure. For Hamlet her maiden should be a bit stronger like Miranda and Juliet, then the story would have taken a different shape. She does more than obey.

She told a lie. Hamlet asked her where her father was, and she said he was at home when he was really hiding and listening behind a curtain. Still Ophelia continues to be sweet and lovable. We hardly realize and put ourselves in the place of a girl like her whose lover leaves her, goes mad and kills her father. She might have believed that these calamities were only because of her, she might be very lonely. What support she can gain from anyone in the drama, queen we suppose, but even she shrinks from the very sight of her when she is most helpless:

Queen : I will not speak to her
Gentleman : She is importunate, indeed distract;
Her mood will needs be pitied.
Queen : What would she have?
Gentleman :in doubt, that carry
but half sense: her speech is nothing, yet the
unshaped use of it doth move the hearers...².

In her wanderings we hear from time to time an undertone of the deepest sorrow. Her pitiable distract speaks things that carry half sense. To her only three persons were close and who gave her a reason to live; her father, brother and lover. When Hamlet killed her father and shipped away from Denmark; there was little left for Ophelia. So inter-personal crisis works clearly on Ophelia, she was in need for emotional support and meaning in her life, their departure results in severe stress and suicidal behaviour. Three kinds of emotions of feeling sad, unhappiness and disappointment are part of human

being's normal existence and are experienced by everyone almost on daily basis. Such emotions may be associated with failure in academics, set back in a relationship, loss in a financial investment, and break up of a love affair or with the death of a loved one. In such a situation it is a case of depression to be considered.

In the modern era, Robert Burton's text *Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621 was entirely devoted to depression. He categorized various forms of melancholy and grief. He also described "causeless melancholia" the term meant that it was possible to suffer from melancholia without having any apparent cause but it is not so in Ophelia's case. She has a reason to behave in such a manner. Loss of meaning and hope is responsible for Ophelia's tragic end. She "*cannot choose but weep.*" Ophelia's songs are the only examples of her distracted mental condition. Commentators have always linked Ophelia's song especially with her grief for her father. Even gentleman's preliminary comment, "*she speaks much of her father*" supports this view. King visualizes the cause of her derailment:

O Gertrude, Gertrude When sorrow comes they
come not in single spies But in battalions! First,
her father slain: Next, your son gone, he... Last and
as much containing as all these Her brother is in
secret come from France; Feeds on his wonder,
keep himself in clouds³.

But one view is that what happens to the maiden in the valentine song must happen to Ophelia herself. The songs must connect with the fancies, which arise in Ophelia's mind released from rational control. If we study Ophelia according to Freud and find the cause of her behaviour by understanding the meaning of her songs. Then we find an explanation given by Freud that there are purposes in a human being of which he knows nothing. They are involuntary purposes or in more technical Freudian terms "unconscious ideas"⁴. To a human being these ideas are incapable of becoming conscious to him in the ordinary way because the conscious self resists them. This unconscious idea is established in an individual when he refuses to admit into his conscious life a desire and in doing so establishes a psychic force to reject those ideas. This is only called repression. In Ophelia's case it is to be supposed that her father and brother suppress her love and feelings towards Hamlet by their heavy advise. She would thrust them aside and suppress them. Then as a result of the shock and overstrain, her mind had given way to her true feelings of heart. The bent of inner nature is often best disclosed when power of self-control is lost. The absorbing interest is the pathetic appearance of Ophelia in the scene v of Act IV.

Upon her first entrance, the presence of her lover's mother keeps her poor wandering mind fixed for the moment upon her lover and her first song tells of the

lady who lost her pilgrim lover. She sings:

How should I your love know
From another one?

.....5

Like the lady in the song she too has lost her lover though not by death yet the feeling in her heart is the same as the feeling of loss through death, her disturbed mind cannot clearly distinguish the two losses. The element of complexity is introduced by mingling of things in an insane mind. The death of father and lover's loss is mingled and therefore it appears to her that the lover has died. She traces the resemblance for the song. This song gave expression to one of her moods in her reflections upon Hamlet. In that mood she found an explanation of the melancholy and eccentricity which cause so much anxiety.

Her second song is also about disappointed love. She starts:

.....Let in
the maid that out a maid Never
departed more.⁶

Its theme is that of the lover who takes a maiden's honour and then abandons her. Her brother and father have impressed Ophelia. A brother who began his story with a warning not to yield Hamlet her chaste treasure:

Then weigh what loss your
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmaster'd importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia; fear it, my dear sister.⁷

Her tragedy of course is that Hamlet has left her treasure with her. She is buried in her maiden purity with her true love unfulfilled. The song presents a variation on what she was warned against. Yet the irony is not that the singer of the song has suffered what they (Polonius and laertes) feared but it narrates that she has not because Hamlet has rejected her. The lover in the song proved unworthy of confidence and Ophelia's own lover has proved so, too. Her distracted mind passes at once from the wrong done by the lover. About this song Irving and Marshall presents their explanations thus:

The notorious fact that in the dreadful visitation of mental derangement, delicate and refined will use language so coarse that it is difficult to guess where they can ever have even heard they would have always lain, unknown of an innocuous in the mind unless the hot bed of mental fever had quickened them for the first time into life.⁸

She reacts to the situation and says before her first departure, “*I cannot choose but weep*” and the king is right in saying that this is the poison of deep grief. Without father and lover now she turns to Laertes. Upon her second entrance, the presence of Laertes causes her poor wandering fancies resolve around thoughts of home and the loss of their father. In this scene Ophelia’s madness shows itself not in gesturing with flowers which are not existing but in awareness of her surroundings and of the identity of those to whom she gives her flowers. Even her brother, whom she bade affectionate farewell in Act I, receives neither greeting nor any sign of recognition on his return. As previously she merged a lover’s with a father’s loss, now she confuses her brother with her lover: rosemary was for remembrance and given as a token of remembrance between lovers. Ophelia says, “*there is rosemary that’s for remembrance – pray / you, love, remember.*”⁹In her words there is mingling of pain and pleasure of the memories remembered to be forgotten – all broken, all astray in her speech. Here is one instance, “*I hope all will be well, we must be / patient: but I Cannot choose but weep*”¹⁰

The last utterance that we hear from her is the prayer for the mercy of God upon her father’s soul and upon the soul of all Christian dead. We are never to see Ophelia again. In the next scene Laertes is informed that *she was seen to clamber into the willow. Upon a branch which broke and she thence fell into the stream*, some watched her float a while and heard her singing melodies, at last she drowned. In loneliness she died and the world next went on. The beautifully imagined and wrought sub plot of Ophelia’s constant and forsaken love is of the most poignant things in Shakespeare. And the final irony of her fate lies after her death. The love, for which she craved all through the play, Hamlet now asserts after her death:

I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers could
not with all their quantity of love make up my sum.
What will thou do for her?

Now for the fulfillment of love and marriage it is tragically too late for both of them. She refuses access to Hamlet and as we know she even returns his gifts, not because she judges it to be right but simply because she has been told to do so. Her treatment of her lover contributes powerfully to his ruin and does much to work out her own. In categories related to depression women are more prone by a rate of two to one. Women are so often depressed because of their condition in life: A continuous state of mourning for what they never had or had too briefly and for what they cannot have in the present, be it prince charming or directly worldly powers.¹¹

If disease were the leading motive of Hamlet as a whole, then its finale is death. Hamlet and Ophelia both suffer from frustration, futility and human inadequacy and

Shakespeare suggests that it is the burden of the whole symphony. The pain or burden is so much on both the souls that death can only provide them peace.

We may add Hamlet's own words to one already dead, "*Rest, rest perturbed spirit*". In the end we are left with an idea that Shakespeare's plays exhibit much of the principles on which our world proceeds. The reading of his plays helps us better to understand the environment and adapt more fully to it. There is always a law by which the system of things is governed and to live life to its fullest, it will be better to understand these laws. It is fundamental among such laws that a life which is not inspired and controlled by the impulse to secure what is right, is life that can come to no good end, a life that must be ineffectual and wasted. To conclude it can be said that symptoms of depressive reactions in Ophelia can be traced. She is sweet and innocent but suffers due to depression. Her songs are the best examples of her inner feelings and state of mind. We can also study her songs as an example given by *Freud* about theory of repression. Ophelia can be a case study of emotional disturbances where her depression is followed with suicide.

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