**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Ophelia**

Character studies of Ophelia are liable to sound rather tame, and can easily lapse into sentimentality.

There is a charming innocence about her activities during life and a pathetic beauty about her death.

She is, as her father says, “a green girl”, childlike, inexperienced, frightened by Hamlet’s odd behaviour, totally obedient to her father.

She is, of course, one of the classic examples of the innocent sufferer in tragedy, the pathetic victim of a process set in motion by forces beyond her control and over those whose course she has no influence.

She pays the penalty for the crimes of others.

In many tragedies there is an appalling disproportion between the offences committed by the participants and the sufferings they endure.

In Ophelia’s case one might go even further, since she is the guiltless victim of evil that surrounds her, and must endure bereavement and die in madness as a consequence.

(In the cases of Polonius and Laertes there is at least the satisfaction of being able to rationalise their deaths as there is the outcome of crime or rashness.

Laertes sees some justice in his own fate, and Hamlet finds an absurd appropriateness in that of Polonius. But no such ‘meaning’ can be extracted from what happens to Ophelia.

**A Symbol of Rejected Love**

The comparative poverty of Ophelia’s role is generally accounted for in terms of the nature of Shakespeare’s plot: it was necessary that she should be very much a subordinate and subdued character because SP could not allow a love-interest to develop which might unduly distract attention from the main themes of the play.

However, there is another way of interpreting Ophelia’s role, and particularly SP’s restriction of the love interest.

In the Nunnery Scene (3:1) Hamlet makes clear to her his revulsion, not so much for her, as from love and marriage.

This scene makes it clear that he is rejecting womankind in general, with his mother’s sin in mind.

Ophelia is the innocent victim of Gertrude’s behaviour, which has caused Hamlet to fear and loathe love and marriage as being likely to perpetuate life, whose evils he finds intolerable.

It is important to note that it is Hamlet who rejects Ophelia’s love; his insulting behaviour to her is not the result of her refusal to accept his love letters.

In the Nunnery Scene, she stands before him as an image of the frailty of all women.

He fears that she may have valued the love he felt for her before his mother’s infidelity tainted all human love.

When she confesses that she believed the sincerity of his love he poses the horrified question, “wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?”

To Hamlet’s mind at this point, that is what love and marriage result in. Ophelia becomes the unwitting, perplexed focus of his disgust with love, marriage and procreation.