**Hamlet – Themes and Issues**

**The Role of Women in Hamlet**

It is frequently argued that the women characters in *Hamlet* are drawn in fainter lines than their male counterparts.

Of all the pivotal characters in Hamlet, Ophelia is the most static and one-dimensional.

She has the potential to become a tragic heroine -- to overcome the adversities inflicted upon her - but she instead crumbles into insanity, becoming merely tragic.

This is because Ophelia herself is not as important as her representation of the dual nature of women in the play.

Ophelia's distinct purpose is to show at once Hamlet's warped view of women as callous sexual predators, and the innocence and virtue of women.

The extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by Gertrude is far more apparent with the addition of Ophelia to the play.

Hamlet's feelings of rage against his mother can be directed toward Ophelia, who is, in his estimation, hiding her base nature behind a guise of impeccability.

Through Ophelia we witness Hamlet's evolution, or de-evolution into a man convinced that all women are whores; that the women who seem most pure are inside black with corruption and sexual desire. And if women are harlots, then they must have their procurers.

Gertrude has been made a whore by Claudius, and Ophelia has been made a whore by her father.

**Ophelia,** it would seem, wholly at the mercy of the male figures within her life, is certainly a victim figure.

Although it has been claimed by critics that Hamlet is unique amongst Shakespeare's tragic heroes for not being to blame for the tragedy of the play, if we are to consider the death of the heroine as part of this tragedy then surely we must question Hamlet's innocence.

In his treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet oscillates between protests of undying love and cruelty such as his cold and accusing speech in the 'nunnery scene'. In short, Hamlet throughout the play uses Ophelia as a tool in his revenge plan.

To examine this culpability more deeply however, it could be suggested that it is Queen Gertrude's behaviour that has instigated Hamlet's unforgivable treatment of Ophelia: She transgresses the patriarchal bounds of femininity by marrying so soon after her husband's death and not remaining in passive grief and obedient devotion to his memory.

This provides Hamlet with a model of women's inconstancy. His bitterness leads him to believe that all women are untrustworthy - 'Frailty thy name is woman'.

Hamlet projects upon Ophelia the 'guilt and pollution' he believes exist in Gertrude's behaviour. However we view his culpability, Ophelia suffers as a result of Hamlet's patriarchal values of womanhood.

With regard to her father and brother, the two direct ruling male forces in her life, Ophelia is also very much a victim. Unquestioningly obeying their remonstrances against pursuing a relationship with Hamlet, she rejects his advances - which of course she believes to be genuine - and thus when he pretends to be mad she believes it to be her fault. Her speech reflects her deep and genuine sorrow:

And I of ladies, most deject and wretched  
That sucked honey of his music vows ...   
O woe is me.

Ophelia's feeling of guilt is reinforced by Polonius's insistence to King Claudius:

But Yet I do believe  
The origin and commencement of this grief  
Sprung from neglected love

Polonius's conviction, in which one can't help believing, stems from a mercenary desire to marry his daughter off to such an eligible husband as the prince of Denmark, rather than a genuine belief in his daughter's role in causing Hamlet's madness.

Thus when Hamlet murders her father, Ophelia enters a double realm of guilt, believing herself to be to blame for both Hamlet's madness and her father's death. As a result she becomes mad. Although at one level this decline into madness sets Ophelia up indisputably as a victim figure, on a deeper level perhaps her madness itself can be seen as Ophelia's active rejection of patriarchal restraint.

To those who are not blinded by hurt and rage, Ophelia is the epitome of goodness.

Very much like Gertrude, young Ophelia is childlike and naive. Unlike Queen Gertrude, Ophelia has good reason to be unaware of the harsh realities of life.

She is very young, and has lost her mother, possibly at birth. Her father, Polonius, and brother, Laertes, love Ophelia tremendously, and have taken great pains to shelter her.

She is not involved with matters of state; she spends her days no doubt engaged in needlepoint and flower gathering. She returns the love shown to her by Polonius and Laertes tenfold, and couples it with complete and unwavering loyalty.

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.

Ophelia clings to the memory of Hamlet treating her with respect and tenderness, and she defends him and loves him to the very end despite his brutality. She is incapable of defending herself, but through her timid responses we see clearly her intense suffering:

*Hamlet*: ...I did love you once.  
*Ophelia*: Indeed, my, lord, you made me believe so.  
*Hamlet*: You should not have believed me...I loved you not.  
*Ophelia*: I was the more deceived.

Her frailty and innocence work against her as she cannot cope with the unfolding of one traumatic event after another.

Ophelia's darling Hamlet causes all her emotional pain throughout the play, and when his hate is responsible for her father's death, she has endured all that she is capable of enduring and goes insane.

But even in her insanity she symbolizes, to everyone but Hamlet, in-corruption and virtue.

The bawdy songs that she sings in front of Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius are sombre reminders that the corrupt world has taken its toll on the pure Ophelia.

They show us that only in her insanity does she live up to Hamlet's false perception of her as a lascivious woman.

**Relationship Between Ophelia and Hamlet**

Of all of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Hamlet* is the one in which the sex nausea is most pervasive. The other heroes all have to be brought by the action of the play to that low moment when their pain is translated into misogyny; Hamlet compares his mother to a beast in his very first scene

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| O God, a beast that wants a discourse of reason Would have mourned longer ... O, most wicked speed to post  With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (I.ii.50-1, 156-7) |

And from the first his encounters with Ophelia are spattered with hostility and disgust:

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| I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp; you nickname God' creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. (III.i.143-7) |

In the closet scene with Gertrude, Hamlet's loathing comes to its climate.

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| ... Nay, but to live In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love Over the nasty sty.... (III.iv.92-95) |

Furthermore, there is no reconciliation with women at the end of the play... Hamlet does throw himself into Ophelia's grave, but clearly this is more an act of aggression against Laertes than of reconciliation with the dead Ophelia.

**Gertrude**

Shakespeare created an interesting problem for himself with the character of Gertrude.

As a dramatist, he needed to nourish the conflict between his characters in order to keep the heat and pressure up to the point where the action was ready to explode at any moment.

At the same time, he created a character that sits in the middle of the conflict, and seems intent in defusing it at every turn.

That character is Gertrude. She is both mother and peacemaker in a blended family that has just come into an unstable existence.

When we first see her, she takes on the unofficial task of reconciling her new husband’s enthusiasm for his recent alliance with her son’s apparent mourning for his recently deceased father.

One assumes that Claudius’ announcement in that scene that Hamlet is next in line for succession to the throne comes about as one of the terms of the agreement that created the alliance.

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| Gertrude is wholly ignorant of Caludius' successful plot against her first husband and equally oblivious of Hamlet's protectively possessive feelings towards her.  She finds his melancholic behaviour exasperating, and is unable to understand why he will not rejoice with the rest of the court at her marriage.  She seems a kindly, slowwitted, rather self-indulgent woman, in no way the emotional or intellectual equal of her son.  When Hamlet finally determines to make her see the ghastly error of her choice his cruelly-chosen words force her to feel guilty:   |  | | --- | | O Hamlet, speak no more.  Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,  And there I see such balck and grained spots As will not leave their tinct. (III,iv.88-91) |   ... He begs her not to sleep with Claudius again, but although she promises not to tell anyone what he has said, she avoids giving a direct answer.  It may be that Gertrude is attempting a practical compromise: she wants to calm Hamlet but cannot bring herself to swear to something she will not be able to do. No clue as to her subsequent sexual relationship with Claudius is given. |

It is certainly an expression of Claudius’ willingness to honour his new wife’s affection for her son.

Gertrude is thoughtful and sensitive in her attempts to intervene. She is not simply an unwitting.

What sabotages Gertrude’s attempts to contain the conflict between Claudius and Hamlet is the fact that she is not entirely in the know.

Claudius is not entirely forthcoming to Gertrude as a result of his deceit, whereas Hamlet is taciturn.

The dramatic irony that increases the poignancy of her position has to do with the fact that we are continuously aware of covert actions against Hamlet that Claudius has kept from Gertrude: the intention to have the English execute Hamlet upon his arrival there, the baiting of Laertes’ foil with poison, etc.

It is, in fact, one of these covert actions (as usual kept from Gertrude) that causes her undoing.

In effect, Gertrude does not know what she has married, and the gradual realization provides one way to chart her trajectory through the action of the play.

To begin with, there is the fact of Claudius’ role in her former husband’s demise.

While it appears clear that Gertrude was not involved in the murder of the former king, the issue still seems to generate discussion.

In particular, some argue that this was not Shakespeare’s original intention and that he waffles on the question.