

## ENGLISH ADVANCED: *HAMLET*

### Character Profile

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#### OPHELIA

Young, gentle, respectful and loyal, Ophelia is the epitome of goodness. Daughter to King's councilor, Polonius, and sister to the young Laertes, Ophelia is well raised and obedient, coupling her love for her family with unwavering and dutiful respect. Her heart is pure and her love for Hamlet is strong, despite his brutality and her forced detachment from him, she still clings to the precious memory of his loving tenderness.

However, Ophelia's goodness is her downfall, with her naivety the weakness leading to her tragic end. It is her gentle and innocent countenance that subjects her to the emotional pain inflicted by the unfolding of each traumatic event. Ultimately, Hamlet's mental upheaval can be identified as the catalyst behind Ophelia's eventual insanity and self-sacrifice. The mental strain she endures intensifies as she remains conflicted with the slights from her estranged lover, Hamlet, conflicting with her genuine love for him and the vow of obedience taken before her father to distance herself. As Hamlet becomes increasingly consumed with desire to seek retribution, he begins to further taunt Ophelia's mental state beyond its limits. Hamlet's brutality clearly warps Ophelia's mind, with his bitter abuse consuming her innocence and trampling her spirit. He causes her to believe that of those who "sucked the honey of his musicked vows" she was "most deject and wretched" The subsequent murder of her father becomes the detonator of her emotional implosion.

Like Hamlet, Ophelia's passion hinders her ability to reason, contributing to her insanity and subsequent death. Ophelia finds herself in the same personal realm as Hamlet, facing the eradication of everything sustaining her defences. Her bawdy songs in Act 4, Scene 5 reflect the rawness of her emotions, further illustrating her exploitation and misuse by the men in her life, namely Hamlet and Polonius, "...for shame! Young men will do't, if they come to 't...they are to blame." Later described by Gertrude "as one incapable of her own distress," her insanity is thus a product of her inability to endure any more emotional suffering.

Ophelia too explores mystery of death. She can be somewhat contrasted as an intensified female parallel to Hamlet, in that she matches his quasi-insanity with her own excessive madness, mimicking his fixation on self-sacrifice. Ophelia's death by water is possibly one of the most tragic and haunting images in Shakespeare's play, with the imagery of its description vivid and expressive, with her "clothes spread wide; and mermaid-like", it is as if she died seeking redemption for those who lost their lives too revenges.

Ophelia's importance is significant in communicating the two fundamental concepts of the play; that is the dimensions of madness and exploration of death's mystery. Not only does she depict the profound emotional impact suffered by those who become collateral damage in a revenge tragedy, but her intermittent psychotic babble further illustrates Shakespeare's distinction between true and feigned madness, strengthening our perceptions on Hamlet's dubious behaviour within the play.