

## Critical Assessment of Love between Hamlet and Ophelia with Reference to Ophelia's Situation and Hamlet's State of Mind

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### Abstract:

*Shakespeare's Hamlet is undoubtedly the most popular and the most discussed works of art in the world literature. It is undoubtedly one of the most influential tragedies in English literature for the reason that it offers something fresh and new to the reader in every reading of the text. The play has been challenging scholars across the world for the sheer number of problems that the play brings forth. The beauty of the play lies in the craftsmanship with which Shakespeare has imbued problems in character of Hamlet: his proverbial procrastination and perplexing dynamics of Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. The present paper critically examines the love between Hamlet and Ophelia. The paper primarily focuses on love between Hamlet and Ophelia with reference to Ophelia's situation and Hamlet's state of mind. Finally, the paper tries to pass a value judgment by substantiating it with critical opinion of the removed critics on Shakespeare like A.C. Bradley, Wilson Knight, Edward Dowden, Dover J. Wilson and Kenneth Muir among others.*

**Key words:** Love between Hamlet and Ophelia, Ophelia's meek submissions to the father and the brother, Hamlet's circumstances, Ophelia's indifference and ignorance of Hamlet's state of Mind

T.S. Eliot has estimated Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' as 'the Monalisa of English Literature', and if it implies the inscrutable aspect of the play, it is pertaining mostly to the unique and

inaccessible portrait of Hamlet, his procrastination in action and his much debated relationship with Ophelia- the relationship which is to be guessed on the basis of hypothesis and supposition in absence of clarifying clue for the sound judgment.

Hamlet himself and his love to Ophelia, together with some other aspects, add to the controversy and confusion and make the play a problem play. The love-affair between Hamlet and Ophelia leads to no convincing conclusion as do the other love-affairs represented in the entire range of literature.

Let us make possible attempt to make out 'What, How and Why' of the issue at our best out of the available textual evidences and the critical comments on the issue by the eminent critics of Shakespeare like A.C. Bradley, Wilson Knight, Dover Wilson, Dowden and Kenneth Muir. In reference to Hamlet-Ophelia relationship, A. C. Bradley states, "I question whether from the mere text of the play a sure interpretation of them can be drawn. (153)"

Dover Wilson too, regards this issue as a puzzle- the puzzle which is greater even than the puzzle of Hamlet's procrastination. And we find the validation of those critical statements after the study of the play. Despite the deep and discriminating study of the text, one remains in dilemma for the judgment on the matter and thinks that whether Hamlet really loved Ophelia at any stage, and if so, why and at which stage he stopped loving her.

In context of drama, it has been pointed out that interactions and relationship of characters can be judged mostly either by the dialogues (of the character pertaining the other characters, or by the monologue, if any, of the character) or by the actions, provided they are sufficient to supply the required content for clear understanding. But so far as Hamlet is concerned, we get compromising conviction rather than clear concept of Hamlet's love to Ophelia from Hamlet's words and actions.

Some of the striking dialogues and seemingly mono-dimensional actions lead us to more than one interpretation. In this respect we may again quote A.C. Bradley who points out "In regard to Hamlet's love for Ophelia, I am unable to arrive at a conviction as to meaning of some of his (Hamlet's) words and deeds." (153).

Let us examine what the text supplies in regard to this vital aspect, viewing Ophelia's estimation of Hamlet's love and, in turn, of Hamlet's estimation to Ophelia's love. And in doing so let us scrutinize the validity and consistency of A.C. Bradley's below- cited statement. Bradley states, "Hamlet's love was not only mingled with bitterness, it was also weakened and deadened by his melancholy" (153).

### **Justification of Ophelia's response:-**

Some of the critics consider Hamlet's love to Ophelia to be, as Laertes says, "a fashion and a toy in blood forward not permanent, sweet not lasting". In response to this, Ophelia raises an enquiring question, "No more but so?" (Act I, Scene III, Line 10). The critics have made various judgments and we have to study the textual matters in reference to those judgments in order to arrive at conclusion.

The conversation between Polonius and Ophelia in the Act I scene III, makes us believe that Hamlet's love to Ophelia is not merely, 'a violet in youth of primy nature'. Ophelia in the below cited trinity of her dialogues to her father says,

"He hath of late made many tender of his affections to me; and  
"hath importuned me with love in honourable fashion" ; and  
hath given countenance to his speech.....

with almost all the holy vows of heaven". (Act I scene III, Line 99-114)

All these utterances and Hamlet's love letter read by Polonius before the king in Act-I provide validation to the fact that Hamlet was at one time sincerely and ardently in love with

Ophelia. And though innocently submissive to her father and brother, Ophelia too, had the same tender feelings of love for Hamlet. Ophelia displays her love to Hamlet very touchingly in the Nunnery scene Act III.

After the abrupt departure of Hamlet, Ophelia's pain intensifies. The steams of sorrow overflow in her heart and we find the expression of helpless tenderness and profound grief in her utterance. She thinks that Hamlet, who was the observed of all observers, is now hopeless lunatic. She cries pathetically;

“O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!

The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword, the expectancy

and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion

and mould of form the observ’d of all observers, quite, quite down !

.... O, woe is me- have seen what I have seen, see what I see”.

(Act III Scene I, Line 150-161)

Again in the Act III Scene II, during the play within play scene, Ophelia displays her innocent devotion to Hamlet by enduring his sharp and obscene language. Thus so far as Ophelia's love to Hamlet is concerned, it is deep and full of devotion. But yet it is true indeed that it is that part of her behavior which partly compels Hamlet to reach on the verge of neurotic despair and profound melancholy. It is one of the causes of what Hamlet is after the revelation of the murder of the father.

Thus despite being innocent, Ophelia, too, is partly responsible for her own pathetic madness and death as well as for her beloved's extreme pain. In this respect we may quote Prof. Dowden;

“Ophelia is decorous and timid, with no initiative in her own heart; Unimaginative, choosing her phrases with a sense of maidenly propriety:

“He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders  
Of his affection to me.”

When her father directs her to distrust the man she loves, to deny him her presence, to repel his letters, she has only her meek, little submission to utter: "I shall obey my lord."(140)

And she obeys. She repels Hamlet's letter ignoring the possible disaster in his being. Yet Hamlet, after his meeting with the ghost comes to her in the garb of distracted lover, perhaps to seek solace and repose from her. But Ophelia has no such things to offer Hamlet. And therefore Ophelia says to Polonius after the scene, "Oh my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted." (Act II Scene I, Line 72)

Instead of consoling response and soothing tender affection, Hamlet gets negation-negation in the form of fear in her eyes. Thus there are two opposite extremes in two lovers. One craves for solace other responds to reverse. "Such is piteously inadequate response of Ophelia to Hamlet's silent confession of sorrow" states Professor Dowden. (145)

And the result is the shattering of a noble soul. Hamlet feels that all is over. Perhaps the rejection syndromes begin to hover his mind. And this shall be justified in the later part of the essay. Here we maybe contented to note that for the intensification of Hamlet's imminent melancholy and cynicism. Ophelia's repelling of the letters and then her indifference and indifferent negation to Hamlet's poignant pain after the ghost scene play indirect but very vital and crucial part.

### **Study in Hamlet's response:**

Though many striking contradictions can be found in Hamlet's behavior regarding the authenticity of his love to Ophelia before the grave-yard scene, he must have spoken as A.C. Bradley states, sincerely when at Ophelia's grave he declared;

"I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers could not,  
With all their quantities of love make up my sum." (Act V Scene I, Line 269-270)

And again as Bradley points out, here the word “loved” does not imply that Hamlet had once loved Ophelia and no longer did so, he used past tense because Ophelia was no more in the world. But the debate is of what happens to Hamlet's otherwise genuine love to Ophelia in the other parts of the play. Let us probe into the issue part by part viewing Hamlet's approach in various parts of the play and the critical estimation regarding his approach.

### **Before his meeting with the Ghost**

No doubt, Hamlet does not refer to Ophelia his first soliloquy, nor does he make any mark of his love anywhere else before his meeting with the ghost nor even in speaking to Horatio; and at his death also says nothing of her. But we find assurance that Hamlet was at one time sincerely and ardently in love with Ophelia, as Bradley has pointed out. And as we have discussed earlier in this paper, Ophelia speaks to Polonius;

“He hath, of late, made many tender  
Of his affection to me.” (Act I Scene III, Line 99-100)

Moreover, the love-letter of Hamlet read by Polonius to the King is also the evidence of his genuine love to Ophelia. But as Wilson knight points out, “This was before Hamlet saw the ghost: Perhaps before his father's death (21).” Let us see what happens to Hamlet after the revelation of the murder of the father of the ghost.

### **After the Revelation of the murder by the Ghost**

We know that Hamlet's soul was already sick to death before his meeting with the ghost because of the death of the father and the hasty marriage of the mother. He had lost all sense of life's significance. We have heard his cry in the Act I.

“O cursed spite

That ever I was born to set it right! (Act I Scene V, line 188-189).”

At this stage no act but suicide was rational for Hamlet. But as Wilson Knight states,

“Yet there was one thing left that might have saved him. In the desert of his mind, void with the utter vacuity of the knowledge of death- death of his father, death of his mother's faith- was yet one flower, his love of Ophelia. (21)”

And therefore, after receiving the command of the great act of revenge, Hamlet tries to seek healing touch in Ophelia by sending her letters and by meeting her. But he is ignored; he is rejected and is cast in dejection. And this is tragic irony of his fate that he tends to verge on that madness which he had decided earlier to adopt as feigned madness. His letters are repelled with unexpected denial to meet the beloved. We know this from indirect reference during Ophelia's talk to Polonius in the Act III Scene II after Hamlet's departure as a distracted lover.

Ophelia speaks to Polonius;

“No my Lord, but as you did command,  
I did repel his letters and denied his access to me.”  
(Act II Scene I, 105-106)

For the sick soul of Hamlet which was commanded by the Ghost to create harmony, the love of Ophelia was the last hope, but as Wilson Knight states;

“This too is taken from him. Her repelling of his letters and refusing to see him, In obedience to Polonius's command, synchronizes with terrible burden of knowledge laid by Hamlet by the revelation of the ghost.(21)”

The result is disastrous which we come to know indirectly through the most pathetic and pitiful description of Hamlet's state of mind from the mouth of Ophelia. Ophelia narrates this to Polonius;

“My Lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,  
No hat upon his head;  
....And with a look so piteous in purport.  
As if he had been loosed out of Hell to speak of horrors-  
He comes before me. (Act II Scene I, Line 74 to 81)

According to Wilson Knight,

“This is no mock madness. Hamlet would not first try the practical joke of pretended madness on Ophelia whom he loved. (22)”

The sound validation of this statement can be found in A. C. Bradley's theory too. Bradley points out thus,

“When Hamlet made his way into Ophelia's room why did he go in the....conventionally recognized garb of the distracted lover?..... if his feeling for her had been simply that of love and had not been in any degree that of suspicion and resentment would he adopted a plan which must involve her in so much suffering? (155)

But we see that Hamlet, though not deliberately, drives Ophelia to suffering. And this is because, as Wilson Knight states,

“Hamlet was in truth, ‘loosed out of hell to speak of horrors’: On top of the ghost's revelation has come Ophelia's repulsion of his last contact with life, his love for her. (22)

And therefore a piteous sigh springs from Hamlet's tormented soul and the unbearable pain compels him to behave in such a way as has never been expected from the noble soul. This again we learn from Ophelia who further narrates Hamlet's unnatural behavior to Polonius;

“He took me by the wrist and held me hard;  
then goes he to the length of all his arm.  
And, with his other hand this o'er his brow.  
He falls to such perusal of my face.



As he would draw it. Long stayed he so;  
At last,...He raised a sigh so piteous and profound.  
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being".  
(Act II Scene I, Line 84-93)

Wilson Knight puts this state as thus;

"From henceforth he must walk alone within the prison of mental death. There is surely no more pitiful thing in literature than this description. (22)"

On hearing about such a shocking state of Hamlet's mind, Polonius says;

"This is very ecstasy of love. (Act II Scene I, Line 99)"

And he is partly true, if not fully; because Hamlet's pain is complex of different themes of grief, his lost-love is one of these themes. It is a terrible result on the part of Hamlet caused by the multiplicity of the shocks, and one of these shocks has led to Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet.

As a matter of fact here lies the secret of Hamlet's broken spirit which later on changes into general contempt and self-loathing. Broken from within Hamlet might have hoped to repose in the warm lap of his beloved; and in the desert of his mind, her love might have proved to be an oasis. This one flower might have filled as it always fills the void of his mind and it overspreads the desert with a multiplicity of colours and delight. But as Claudius speaks in other context,

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies  
But in battalions." (Act IV Scene V, Line 78)

And such may be the case of our lovable tragic hero and our innocent heroine, Ophelia. The highest source of solace and consolation turns to be the highest source of dejection and depression on the part of the both. Had the love between the two been shallow and hopeless, Hamlet would not have hoped to get soothing ointment in Ophelia. Indeed, it was the summit of liveliness for the sick soul of Hamlet, which, when shivered

unfortunately, cast Hamlet and Ophelia, two, on the thorns of life to bleed.

Hamlet, and we too, expected something else from Ophelia when he had no proper place for pacifying painful and pitiful position of heart and head. But the reverse comes though not by her will from Ophelia, and compels hamlet to recall his own judgment.

“Frailty thy name is woman.” (Act I Scene II, Line 146)

The broken spirit loses the last resort which could have calmed down his mind bubbling and bailing by the fierce fire of the frailty of fate. This, in turn, drives Hamlet gradually to melancholy and cynicism. Thus the cause of Hamlet's frenzied behavior in the later parts of the play lies in the facts that:

- 1) He loves Ophelia finding in her the only cause of living after the revelation of the Ghost.
- 2) She turns against him to the very moment when fortune turns against him too.

### **In the Nunnery Scene**

In the nunnery scene, we can see the evidence of Hamlet's neurotic despair. Here, at the concluding part of his famous soliloquy, “To be or not to be”, Hamlet speaks;

The fair Ophelia, Nymph in thy Orison.....

Be all my sins remembered”. (Act III Scene I, Line 90)

According to Professor Dowden, here Hamlet sees Ophelia as a lovely, innocent and child-like girl and his response is of tender feelings at the outset. But as Ophelia plays her part with a manner that betrays him, Hamlet turns to be furious. On the other hand Dover Wilson considers that this utterance should not be interpreted as gushing tenderness. The words “Nymph” and ‘Orisons” show deliberate affectation, and reference to “All my sins”, indicates a sardonic tone. Whatever the case may be, it is evident that after hearing Ophelia's words;

“My Lord, I have remembrance of yours that I have long longed to redeliver”. (Act III Scene I, Line 93-94)

Hamlet gradually turns to be ‘harsh’. It seems that he might have become aware of the spies behind the arras at this point. Now Ophelia’s picture evokes in his mind as a decoy. And then, as Wilson Knight states, “The last faint echo of the old love subsides and hatred and fury arises as a storm. (28)” The result is a furious command,

“Get thee to a nunnery, go:  
I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad”.  
(Act III Scene I, Line 137-144)

At this stage the fury increases and reaches the climax with wild and whirling words. He loses control and let the volcanic current of cynicism flow from his heart and head. This cynicism takes him almost to the border of madness. In Hamlet’s eyes “Ophelia, who was once goddess turns to be a stupid doll (28)” states Wilson Knight. And later Ophelia is treated by Hamlet with obscene and insulting words until the point to driving her mad and ultimately resulting in her death. Commenting on the scene Kenneth Muir states;

“Hamlet’s speeches in the nunnery scene although intended to give the impression of madness express to some degree his real opinion.  
They express his disgust at the frailty of women and their hypocrisy. (26)”

And though Dowden does not interpret the word “nunnery” as a brothel, he too, is of the opinion that Hamlet is now proportionately indignant. He finds Ophelia to be an imposter, a spy, incapable of truth of honour, of love. And according to Wilson Knight;

“Hamlet in this scene is cruel to Ophelia; so too he is cruel to his mother later.....They agonize him with the remembrance of what they once were to him. (30)”

Here, instead of Hamlet the ghost of Hamlet hovers pathetically over his dialogue to Ophelia. In his words we find the denial of the existence of love's romantic values. As rightly expressed in the words of Knight, "Love in his mind has become synonymous with sex; and sex with uncleanness. (27)" And this perversion of love feelings speaks itself undesirably and unexpectedly in the last meeting of hamlet with Ophelia during the play with play scene.

If love were real, there would be meaning, passion, purpose in existence for Hamlet. But these things have gone so love must go too. And therefore, there is no meaning of his life. What remains now is self-hatred that compels him to curse himself;

"What should such fellows as I do  
Crawling between earth and heaven?"(Act III Scene I, 127-128)

The word "crawling" may be taken as highly significant here. This is piteous self-loathing. Hamlet feels as that fallen arch-angel- Satan felt when he was kicked out of paradise. Here, Hamlet feels himself to be fallen from the Paradise of Ophelia's love to crawl and suffer like reptile. This self-hatred results in general contempt therefore, as per Hamlet's view, Ophelia, too, must not be, "a breeder of sinners".

Once Hamlet's love was at the highest, so too is the hatred at the highest in the reverse situation of the denial of love. And this frenzy is expressed in the doubly-obscene language used by Hamlet for Ophelia in the play scene.

## **The Play Scene**

Hamlet's unnatural and perverted response to Ophelia is at the climax here. Here, Ophelia has to endure Hamlet's bitter sexual language. His first reply to Ophelia is doubly obscene. He says,  
"I could interpret between you and your

Love, if I could see the puppets dallying." (Act III Scene II, Line 247)

Implying that he can add a commentary like a puppet master, to her and her lover's flirting, or their "puppets". There are critics who have seen sexual overtone in these words.

To reduce his desire he would make Ophelia pregnant and so groan in child-birth. In concluding part of the talk, Hamlet twists the words, "Better and worse" of Ophelia implying that wives betray (mistake) their husbands.

Thus Hamlet uses the words that can never be expected from a man with full possession of five senses. His behavior cannot be taken as a part of his feigned madness. And if it is not a part of his melancholy and neurotic despair which might have driven him mad if Hamlet had not been a man of a lot of noble qualities and high reason which Ophelia was lacking.

## **Conclusion**

Considering all these points, we may arrive at conclusion that love between Hamlet and Ophelia is not a mere "fashion and a toy of blood", it is "forward" as well as "permanent", "sweet" as well as "lasting". Then why is the perversion and frenzied behavior in Hamlet's treatment to Ophelia and why is Ophelia's indifference and unforgivable ignorance to Hamlet's most painful state of mind?

In reference to Ophelia's inadequate and unexpected response, we have already quoted that the critics including Dover Wilson and Dowden consider her to be docile, meek and submissive to the brother and the father without her individualistic thoughts. And it is natural that the readers and the critics are driven to think like this because of at least three facts-

- 1) Her abrupt repulsion and breaking off the intercourse between her and Hamlet.

- 2) Her failure to meet Hamlet's last appeal and her after the revelation of the murder.
- 3) Her willing participation in the plot to find out the secret of Hamlet's despair.  
But as a matter of fact, without putting themselves in the place and situation of Ophelia, we may do injustice to her through a chain of misconceptions. Let us see how A.C. Bradley provides discriminating study to remove the misjudgment.
- 4) Ophelia's love for her father is deep, though mingled with fear and she is so near childhood that old affections to the parent have still the strongest hold upon her. No doubt, she has given to Hamlet all the love of which her nature is as yet capable, but naturally she is incapable of understanding Hamlet's mind, though she can feel its beauty. Thus her love is based on emotional ground and not on the ground of understanding. She is much below Hamlet in station as well as mental level too.
- 5) The standard of obedience to a father was in Shakespeare's day higher than in ours.

According to Bradley, Ophelia's repelling of letters is due to these reasons. Moreover, on this child-like nature and her inexperience depends everything else. Again Bradley explains her undue response to Hamlet in scene where Hamlet comes in the garb of distracted lover in this way Ophelia knows nothing about the Ghost and its discourse with Hamlet and so does not know about the terrible burden of her beloved.

She has been undergoing the pain of repelling Hamlet. She hears the question constantly discussed among the King, the Queen and Polonius what is the cause of Hamlet's sad change can be. And her heart tells her that nothing but her own unkindness is the chief cause of his pain. She might be reproaching herself as silently as she follows the father and brother. At such a crucial point, suddenly Hamlet rushes as a

storm into her chamber and his appearance and behavior is of a crazy lover. She gets frightened and endures Hamlet's inscrutable and unnatural treatment and then rushes to the father. Is it not natural to be frightened for a quite young and childlike girl like Ophelia in such a situation when her room is invaded by a lunatic, especially when the lunatic is none but her lover who was hither too healthy enough in mental state and suddenly has gone lunatic? And she rushes to Polonius to report. But as Bradley states, "To whom else should she go?" For her Polonius is loving father. She has seen him with the eyes of a daughter and not with ours or with Shakespeare. Moreover, she has seen that her father is very much worried and concerned about Hamlet's changing mental state.

Thus, here, her intention is to help Hamlet genuinely through her father. Commenting on her willing participation in the 'plot' of spying by the King and Polonius, Bradley gives his interpretation in this way; If she gets ready to become 'decoy' her genuine intention is to help Hamlet and to settle the question as to why Hamlet is undergoing unnatural mental disease. It is all important for her to settle this dilemma; in order that Hamlet might be cured of the disease and she might be fortunate enough to restore his mental state.

And it is the time when all her seniors apparently anxious for Hamlet's welfare, then how such an innocent girl can suspect anyone? She may have hope that all otherwise would permit her to restore and invigorate her darling. Thus the painful task of becoming decoy is accepted by Ophelia for the sake of her unchanged love. Finally it can be said that they loved each other immensely but could not give their full expression and therefore fruition because of their psycho-sociological and geo-political reality of their life.

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