

Ophelia and Melancholia

Ophelia displays all the signs of a classic Melancholic as a result of the combined loss of her former lover Hamlet, and the loss of her father at the hands of Hamlet himself. Ophelia is forced away from Hamlet by several means, including Hamlet's own rejection of her and her brother and father's warnings about Hamlet's unworthiness. The result of these losses is Ophelia reaching a pathological stage of mourning, what Freud would call Melancholia, and, in the end, her suicide. While it is possible that Ophelia would have gone into a state of Melancholia following her father's death regardless of the circumstances preceding it, it isn't far fetched to assume that she was pushed to Melancholia by the actions of Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes.

There is a nuanced difference between the concept of mourning and the concept of melancholia as defined by Freud's theories, which are discussed in his work, *Mourning and Melancholia*. According to Sigmund Freud, mourning is a normal and healthy reaction to the loss of a loved one, whether by death or having broken up. Melancholia, on the other hand, is described by Freud as an atypical and unhealthy extension of mourning, and as a pathological condition that requires treatment (Freud, 243). He characterizes the symptoms of Melancholia as "a profoundly painful dejection", a loss of interest in the world as a whole, the loss of one's ability to love or express love, a decrease or complete inability to be active, and a significant decrease in one's self esteem. (Freud, 244) This is because the melancholic individual attaches their identity and self worth to the person they have lost, and as a result, lose their self regard. In Freud's own words, the person who has experienced a loss may "establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object". (Freud, 249) In some cases, a person experiencing melancholia

can become so disconnected from the ego that they no longer care about preserving their life. As Freud says, “the ego can kill itself only if...it can treat itself as an object”. (Freud, 252). This is because of the narcissism that is inherently present in a melancholic who identifies themselves with the world around them. While mourning shares many of these features, it does not affect one's self esteem the way that melancholia does.

Throughout the play, Ophelia is a remarkably passive character, who simply allows things to happen to her rather than taking charge of her life. Ophelia has several sources that appear to drive her from Mourning to Melancholia through their actions. Hamlet is repeatedly rude to her, and when her father and brother order that she no longer see Hamlet, she submits and obeys without defending herself or protesting. This suggests she has lost interest in what is happening around her, another symptom of Melancholia.

It can be argued that Hamlet's behavior toward Ophelia is largely responsible for her descent into Melancholia and for her eventual death. He sends mixed messages throughout the play, outright rejecting her in one scene and laying his head on her lap in an underhanded, cruel reject a few scenes later. In Act Three, Scene One, Hamlet pushes Ophelia away in the following conversation,

“Hamlet: ...I did love you once.

Ophelia: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet: You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.” (3.1.113-118)

In these lines, Hamlet contradicts himself by first confirming, then denying his former love for Ophelia. He also expresses quite a dreary view of human nature, saying no one is good, no matter how hard we might try to be virtuous. This is an indirect attack on Ophelia, as she is shown to be virtuous and good. Essentially, Hamlet is saying that, while Ophelia acts pure and virtuous, there is no such thing. Ophelia's quiet, submissive remark is telling both of her mood and of her position in relation to Hamlet. While Hamlet pushes her around, the only way she can respond as a member of the court who ranks below him is by acting like she was wrong and being submissive to Hamlet's whims.

During the play, Ophelia exhibits a number of behaviors and signs that might indicate that she has moved beyond mourning and is suffering from melancholia. . After a series of losses, including Hamlet's cruel and harsh rejection of her, and Polonius's death at Hamlet's hands, Ophelia begins to sing songs in an context that is highly unusual and worries those around her. She also throws flowers, sings sad songs about lost love, and ultimately, commits suicide, drowning herself. Those around her have little doubt that she has lost her grip on sanity. When her brother Laertes sees her, he exclaims,

Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!

O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits

Should be as mortal as an old man's life?

Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine,

It sends some precious instance of itself

After the thing it loves. (4.5.158-163)

In these lines, Laertes laments his sister's condition and wonders to himself why the mind is so easily breakable, as Ophelia's was. Ophelia seems forever changed by the death of her father, Polonius. Importantly, Laertes notes that Polonius' death seems to have destroyed a part of Ophelia, just as Freud states that Melancholia wreaks havoc on one's self regard. A part of Ophelia, or her ego, as Freud might argue, has been sent to the grave along with her father.

Tragically, Ophelia's Melancholia ends with her death, which occurs in a manner that suggests either accident or suicide. Freud argues that suicide is the result of Melancholia when the condition turns to sadism, and the individual experiencing it loses the will to live. This is the most extreme stage of the loss of self regard that accompanies Melancholia. Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, recounts the whole ordeal to Laertes and Claudius in the following lines;

“Her clothes spread wide,

And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,

Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds

As one incapable of her own distress,

Or like a creature native and indued

Unto that element. But long it could not be

Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,

Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay

To muddy death.” (4.7.175-183)

In these lines, Gertrude states that in the moments before her death Ophelia showed no signs of fear or attempts to save herself. While falling into the water may have been an accident, once she was floating in it, she made no attempts at self-preservation. Gertrude says it was as if Ophelia was used to the dangerous circumstances that she had found herself in, or as if she simply did not care that her life was at risk. By Gertrude’s account, it seems that, regardless of whether Ophelia fell into the water on accident or on purpose, she resigned herself to her fate and simply allowed herself to sink and drown. This situation shows many of the signs of a Melancholic who has chosen suicide, no longer caring about the destruction of their ego that will take place in the process.

It is clear that the cause of Ophelia’s melancholia and eventual suicide was a combination of factors, not only Polonius’ death. Her father’s death on it’s own would not have been enough to drive her into melancholy, it was Hamlet’s rejection of her and his killing of her father that led to that state and her death. Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet broke her down to pieces, leaving her susceptible to melancholia, and the following death of her father at Hamlet’s hands was the ultimate tipping point.

Works Cited

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