

## The Ophelia Syndrome

As a mature student at art collage I began a series of drawings based on Ophelia, having always admired the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites who were inspired by the romance and tragedy surrounding Shakespeare's Ophelia. It dawned on me, only gradually, that the subject was very pertinent to me personally: I went on to portray Ophelia in pencil, charcoal, paint, collage and later in wood, metal, glass and fabric. It became, and remained, the major theme in my work.

It was not until I undertook therapy as a survivor of sexual abuse and rape that the psychological significance of the images I was creating hit me with full force. Later still I learned that Ophelia is a well-worn metaphor in psychology – in fact one of the three "icons" of women's madness, along with Crazy Jane and the violent Lucia of Lammermoor.

The idea that art and mental distress are in some way connected originated from Greece; in particular from Plato's idea of inspired madness and from Aristotle's explanation of creative genius in terms of connection with the melancholy.

Carl Jung (1875 – 1961) stressed the vital importance of interpreting visual imagery in order to help his patients to rid themselves of psychoses and neuroses. He had been very impressed by Freud but later felt there were weaknesses in Freud's position and began to develop his own line of research. He published his results in "The Psychology of the Unconscious" in 1912. He believed that there is a "collective unconscious" in which archetypal images are common to everyone. "He came to the conclusion that there are certain recurring universal types, or motifs, which are expressed in a multitude of historical forms, varying from ancient and primitive myths to the dreams of modern individuals, but present in all of them."<sup>1</sup> These archetypes can be described as innate models of perception, linked to the instincts, charged with emotion and functioning autonomously from the unconscious.

In "Hamlet" Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself in the brook after hearing of her father's murder at the hands of Hamlet whom she loves. She is rendered helpless against the forces of other people's desires and wills. She loves Hamlet but is told by her father and brother to act coolly towards him and to repel his advances. Hamlet tells her first that he loves her, then that he loves her not, and he uses crude sexual innuendoes when conversing with her (Act III scene 2). When Hamlet kills her father she is psychologically torn apart. She has no emotional resources to fight back or to protect herself. We may struggle to keep our heads above water but Shakespeare's Ophelia does not struggle, she has given up.

"When down her weedy trophies and herself,  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And mermaid-like, a while they bore her up:

Which time, she chanted snatches of old tunes:

As one incapable of her own distress." (Act IV Sc.7)

Drowning typifies impotence, being at the mercy of events and of others. We use many watery metaphors for being unable to cope, for not being able to function properly. We talk about being "out of our depth". We may be "swamped" by difficulties, or fear "going under" or feel forced to "sink or swim". As a teenager, amid crises and looking back on a traumatic childhood, I had recurring nightmares about world floods, of water rising rapidly mile after mile above my head. I might make it to the surface and find a piece of wood to cling on to, only to be hit by the sickening realisation that there was nowhere left to land.

Ophelia symbolises, for me, femininity, sexuality, subjection and madness. We can observe these qualities in paintings depicting her.

## **The Ophelia Tradition in Art**

We see the rise of Ophelia in art in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Millais' Ophelia was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1852. She looks calm but abstracted, detached from the real world, unheeding that her clothes are just about to pull her under the water. The model for this painting was Elizabeth Siddal, who was Rossetti's model then mistress. Rossetti married her in 1860. Ironically, two years after their marriage she committed suicide, partly, it seems, because of Rossetti's infidelities. She had, in fact, been a confirmed invalid from 1855 when she had contracted pneumonia while posing for "Ophelia". Millais had her posing in a bath of water kept warm with lamps beneath the bath. Engrossed in his painting, the artist did not notice that the lamps had gone out, and Lizzie said nothing, continuing to lie there as the water got colder and colder. Gay Daly in her book "Pre-Raphaelites in Love" says of Millais' Ophelia:

"The image is one of utter passivity. One wonders whether Millais chose Lizzie for his model because he saw in her the capacity for such complete surrender."<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Hughes' painting of 1852 depicts a sweet, elfin Ophelia whose head garland is reminiscent of a crown of thorns.

A twentieth-century Brotherhood, the Ruralists, held an exhibition at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1977. Peter Blake's Ophelia is more dramatic than Millais' or Hughes' – not beautiful, obviously disturbed. She is standing in the water, staring directly out of the picture. Nicholas Usherwood writes that the painting is "sombre and dark, comparatively sketchily painted apart from the hypnotic eyes, it is an image of suffering and anguish that reflects the crisis in his own family life at this time."<sup>3</sup>

In Millais' depiction and in some of my own Ophelia drawings there is an element of confinement. The body is confined by the river banks. Compare,

too, the photograph of Rebecca Caine as Ophelia in Opera North's "Hamlet", where she lies in a rectangular tank with a bar across.<sup>4</sup>

It evokes a feeling of imprisonment or being trapped in a different element – water – perhaps as an insect might be trapped in amber. This suggests, too, the idea of psychological 'paralysis' – being stuck in the past, unable to move on and develop. Deep depression caused by abuse brings with it the feeling of being separated from everyone and everything, as if you are behind glass and cannot contact the outside world, like the bell jar described by Esther in "The Bell Jar" – Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel, describing a young girl's slide into breakdown and attempted suicide; or like the glass coffin in which the seven dwarfs laid Snow White when the poisoned apple stuck in her throat. She remained there many months, neither dead nor alive, until the prince came by. In my sculptures glass became a favourite medium.

This confining, or imprisoning, is sometimes self-imposed because of the crushing guilt that survivors of abuse feel. They might imprison themselves by developing agoraphobia, effectively putting themselves under house-arrest. It may also manifest itself in self-deprivation. Survivors may deprive themselves physically – never buying themselves new clothes, cosmetics, adequate food – or psychologically, by fearing success or avoiding close relationships.

Fragmentation and distortion of the body, due to water moving over it, is an important element in my work. I feel that this is analogous with the psychological fragmentation of those who have suffered sexual and emotional abuse in childhood. Some parts of the personality become hidden, others may be shown only to certain people. Some traits become extreme or obsessive, and a multiple personality could be formed. It is particularly damaging when you have to keep secrets, perhaps under threat. In a group therapy session, comprising myself and three other ladies, we discussed the sexual secrets that we had carried for years. One lady, Jean, had been sexually abused by her step-father from the age of five, for a period of seven years. He said that if she told anyone he would murder her mother. To show that he meant it he killed her puppy in front of her. Many of us have spent years masking our hurt and rage, sometimes numbing all our emotions, to the detriment of our psyche. Emotional abuse – being used, blamed manipulated by adults, made to feel dirty and unworthy – is equally as damaging as sexual abuse, and sometimes more so. It is not surprising that personality can become distorted and dislocated.

The fragmentation of the personality causes serious problems. It becomes difficult to achieve coherence in your life. You cannot "get it all together" or even "pull yourself together". It is hard to use your drive and energy in a directed way, as you are emotionally debilitated. There may be massive problems with making relationships because you cannot show your real self or even know what your real self is, because your identity has been shattered. You find that you do not make appropriate responses to people. You crave love but trust no-one. You feel total isolation but are incapable of communicating.

At one point in my work I moved away from the figure and did several abstract paintings based on maps and landscape, but a friend pointed out to me that they were still images of fracture and dislocation. I also completed a series of paintings where the figure was reduced to a torso, distorted by water or partly veiled by flimsy fabric or seaweed (the absence of head and limbs further depersonalising the woman).

I feel, then, that the fragmentation of the form and the distortion of the figure beneath the water are metaphors for the damage caused by abuse. The many serious and long-term effects include self-destructive behaviour, anxiety, isolation and stigma, poor self esteem, alcohol and drug abuse, and agoraphobia. Our relationships suffer because of the difficulty in trusting others, or because of sexual maladjustment or a tendency to re-victimisation. In short it distorts and disfigures the lives of those who have suffered it.

## **Ophelia and the Asylum**

Ophelia's brother, Laertes, calls her "a document in madness" (Hamlet, Act IV scene 5). Showalter writes (p.90), "Ophelia was a compelling figure for many Victorian artists, writers and doctors seeking to represent the madwoman." Sometimes medical textbooks illustrated their discourses on female insanity with drawings of Ophelia-like girls, or with photographs showing young women patients with abstracted expressions and garlands of flowers in their hair.

J.C. Bucknill,<sup>5</sup> the first president of the Medico-Psychological Association, commented in 1859, "Ophelia is the very type of a class of cases by no means uncommon. Every mental physician of moderately extensive experience must have seen many Ophelias."<sup>6</sup> The great reformer of asylums, John Connolly, produced a "Study of Hamlet" in 1863 and drew the same parallel.<sup>7</sup> He even suggested that actresses who were to play Ophelia should come to the asylum to study real madwomen. In this tradition Ophelia symbolises the passive child-woman struggling with sexuality and used by others. Helpless against her fate, she is the delicate, ultra-feminine woman, obedient to her father and at the mercy of her love for Hamlet, who plays upon her emotions and arouses her sexuality, only to confuse and reject her.

Bucknill and Conolly both studied and wrote about the psychology of Shakespeare's works and recognised in Ophelia a wholly convincing depiction of an archetypal form of female mental illness. She displays passivity, obedience and extreme femininity, but with strong undercurrents of somehow inappropriate sexuality which breaks through in the snatches of bawdy songs she sings in her madness.

I feel that the Ophelia image is a startlingly apt visual metaphor for the effects of sexual and emotional abuse. The fragmentation and distortion of the figure caused by the water, the confinement of the form (beneath the water surface and between the river banks), and the drowning of the person

give a complete picture of the damage such abuse can cause. Her passive femininity and her struggle with repressed (and, it appears, frightening) sexuality are characteristics which can be seen in survivors of sexual abuse. She cannot assert herself – she is flotsam on the tide of other people’s desires and emotions.

It would be interesting to know from whom Shakespeare may have drawn his character who seems to embody such a potent psychological truth. Has his Ophelia, too, suffered sexual abuse?

Paulette Harrison  
Notes

1. Progoff. "Jung’s Psychology and its Social Meaning". p.33
2. Collins 1989 p.41
3. Nicholas Usherwood writing in the Tate Gallery Catalogue of Peter Blake’s Exhibition. 1983
4. Photo by Neil Libbert. Observer Review Sunday Oct. 1<sup>st</sup> 1995
5. J.C. Bucknill. "The Psychology of Shakespeare" (1859); reprinted. New York. AMS Press 1870. He was also Medical Superintendent of the Devon County Lunatic Asylum from 1844 to 1862. Editor of "Asylum Journal of Mental Science".
6. Elaine Showalter "The Female Malady" Virago 1993. p.90
7. Showalter p.54



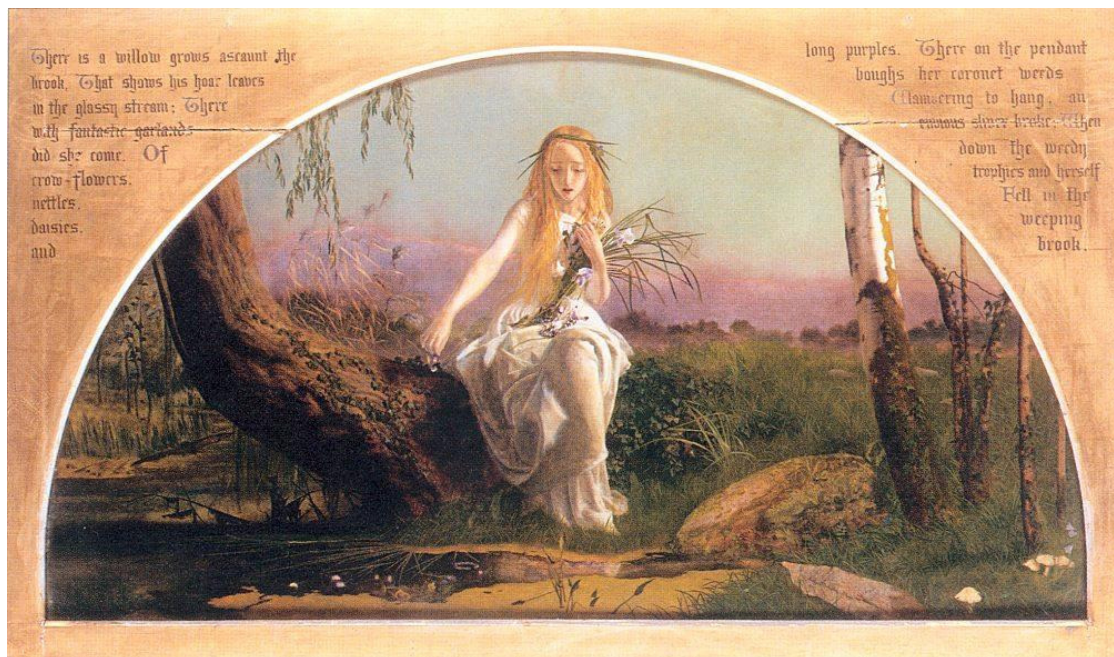
Ophelia (1977-2002). © Peter Blake



Rebecca Caine as Ophelia in Opera North's "Hamlet", photograph by Neil Libbert. Observer Review Sunday Oct. 1st 1995



Ophelia by John Everett Millais 1850



Ophelia - by Arthur Hughes (1831-1915)