

“To muddy death”: The Link Between Sexual Deviancy and Suicide in *Hamlet*, *The Waves*, and
Looking for Alaska

A Thesis Presented
to the Department of English Faculty and Staff
in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English

Primary Reader: Dr. Holly Pickett
Secondary Reader: Dr. Taylor Walle

Maya Lora
Washington and Lee University
May 2020
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
II.	INTRODUCTION.....	5
III.	CHAPTER ONE	15
IV.	CHAPTER TWO.....	51
V.	CHAPTER THREE.....	88
VI.	CONCLUSION.....	106
VII.	WORKS CITED.....	110

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Holly Pickett for her boundless support, knowledge, and mentorship throughout this process both as my individual advisor and in her role in leading the thesis group, as well as her passion for all things William Shakespeare.

Dr. Taylor Walle for continuing to be a mentor and reader even while on sabbatical and for her influence on my pursuit of the English major through three powerful classes, all of which, in one way or another, inspired this honors thesis.

My family for supporting my decision to attend Washington and Lee University in pursuit of journalism and English and for showering me with love and consideration as I completed this thesis at home.

My friends for their support throughout their year and for allowing me to speak about my thesis at many intervals in replacement of normal conversation.

The other eight student candidates for their camaraderie that kept me writing on even the hardest days throughout this year. I will treasure our “bopping hours” as one of the many benefits of my Washington and Lee education.

The entire faculty of the Department of English who I had the pleasure of taking classes with or even simply meeting; your work and wisdom in many ways inspired portions of this thesis, whether or not is reflected by the specific subject matter.

Virginia Woolf for her work in carving out a space for female fiction writers and her dedication to experimental form that often reminded me of why I chose to be an English major.

Ophelia for existing in such a way in my mind and the minds of many others that made you impossible to get out of my head. This thesis, in many ways, is owed to your fictional existence.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* do not seem texts ripe for a new, deep examination of their themes. Both stories, penned by two geniuses from two different eras, have been poked and prodded at length by literary critics hoping to tear their linguistic meat limb from limb to discover the creative muscle lurking underneath. However, this essay will approach both texts and expose a link between them that will help explain a modern obsession with a certain kind of woman, who I would describe as the manic pixie dream girl in modern fiction – such a woman makes a vivid appearance in John Green's *Looking for Alaska*. In essence, these stories present differing yet intimately connected versions of a woman both too innocent and too sexual for her own good, a risky combination that results in sexual deviance and a tragic death: suicide. The authorial use of suicide as a way to punish and control female characters stifles those characters' ability to use sexuality as a means of breaking female gender role expectations under rigidly enforced heteropatriarchy present in the novels. This literary tradition of punishing women on the cusp of revolution stems, I argue, from Ophelia, a tragic character who continues to inspire literature, songs, and other popular culture to this day.

Throughout this paper, I will establish a concrete link between deviant sexuality and death for female characters, present in the form of an ambiguous suicide, which robs these female characters of autonomy even in an act centered around self-control. In each of Ophelia's reincarnations, the focus of "deviance" in her sexuality changes slightly, but her narrow characterization and resulting suicide remain the same. The suicide is necessary for the author, who can appear both as the literal author and as a male narrator in the novel as I will expand upon later, to regain their rigid control over the female character in question. To articulate this

central thesis, I will primarily consider two authors, considered giants in their fields: Shakespeare and Woolf. Shakespeare must be considered because Ophelia spurs this archetype and Woolf is essential to critique because she reveals how even one of literature's most influential feminist writers could play into the Ophelia narrative; whether she does so subconsciously or as a form of critique is up for debate. The juxtaposition between these two authors will demonstrate how both male and female authors fall prey to internalizing and then projecting the link between female sexuality and punishment, which comes in the form of death. I will also consider John Green's *Looking for Alaska* as a modern incarnation of the Ophelia archetype, one that is arguably more insidious because of its romanticized use in a novel aimed at young adults, primarily young women. This case study will demonstrate how even attempts to empower the Ophelia figure can result in further sexualization and damnation.

I will dedicate the first chapter to an exploration of Ophelia in limited scenes throughout Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I will analyze the rigid expectations placed on Ophelia's sexuality in Act I, Scene 3 and then trace their tragic effect on her mental state and fate in the madness scene, Act IV, Scene 5. I will establish expectations for her sexuality as communicated by her father and brother, her subversion of those expectations, the gruesome fate of suicide as communicated by the ghost early in the play, and finally, the feminization and even overt sexualization of her insanity and death. I will also explore how the Ophelia archetype is notable for reasons beyond this simple pattern. For example, although I argue Ophelia commits suicide, her off-screen death is difficult to analyze because Ophelia doesn't necessarily drown herself, she simply stops fighting. This characterization of Ophelia's death robs her of full autonomy even when she decides to end her own life, reinforcing the futility of any attempt to exist beyond prescribed

female gender roles. While her arc will be replicated imperfectly in other stories, including *The Waves* and *Looking for Alaska* which I will analyze explicitly in this thesis, three things will always remain the same despite what details change: the establishment of deviant sexuality, a sense of guilt or personal shame, and an ambiguous suicide scene.

In the second chapter, I will follow similar conventions present for Rhoda in Woolf's complicated masterpiece, *The Waves*. In that novel, considered a feat of experimental form, the reader follows characters from children to adults and watches them progress from innocent relationships to eroticism to more concrete forms and expressions of sexuality in adulthood. Intermingled with themes of sexuality and evolution is an overt focus on consciousness, especially in the context of processing grief. Among the characters is Rhoda, who poses a similar sexual complication to Ophelia with an essential, significant difference: Rhoda is a queer character who uses her sexuality as a way to subvert feminine gender roles and separate herself from the male gaze. Her refusal to participate in heterosexual eroticism as a woman, as well as her inability to internalize and then replicate proper feminine behavior, is a grievance worthy of punishment, according to this convention and the era Woolf writes within. *The Waves* advances beyond simple engagement in sexuality as a form of deviance, graduating to one that would have been considered more thoroughly "other" by a 20th-century audience. I will follow the complicated arc of Rhoda's life, which also ends in a water-based suicide, to compound my analysis of the connection between female sexual deviance and death.

Finally, in the third chapter, I will conclude my examination of the Ophelia archetype by close reading her latest reincarnation: the manic pixie dream girl, as seen prominently in John Green's award-winning young adult novel *Looking for Alaska*. The subject of this analysis, the

teenage Alaska Young, maintains many aspects of the Ophelia archetype. Most prominently, she demonstrates deviant sexuality through an overindulgence in sexuality that leads to infidelity, demonstrating another reimagining of what it means to be “deviant” that matches the setting of the novel – in this case, the early 2000s. Her life also ends in an ambiguous suicide which is further complicated by the presence of a flawed male narrator, a feature that is also present in *The Waves*. While Green deviates from the traditional archetype by centering his novel around Alaska rather than casting her to the side, this explicit focus does not give Alaska any extra power over her story. She is just as robbed of autonomy and purpose as her predecessors, she is simply further romanticized by the image the male protagonist crafts of her in his head.

However, before I dive into the close reading and further analysis present in this essay, I must establish that the link between Ophelia, Rhoda, and modern incarnations of their trope is not simply coincidental. As mentioned previously, women who are deviant in their sexuality are perceived as deserving punishment, which comes in the form of suicide under the Ophelia archetype. Suicide serves both as a punishment and as a means of control. Throughout history, the question of female sexuality is one left to be answered by men, who often control the sexual lives of women through marriage and pregnancy. However, women who fall into the stereotypes established by Ophelia are unfit for marriage. For example, Ophelia has been openly seeing Hamlet, but her brother and father determine that their relationship is not suitable and warn her to stay away; as I argue in my analysis of Act I Scene 3, the instability of the relationship stems from Hamlet’s promiscuity and Ophelia’s fleeting youth and beauty. Since Ophelia does not successfully secure an engagement to Hamlet but is suggested to be sexually involved with him in some capacity, she is presented as damaged goods, unsuitable for further prospects. Therefore,

her deviant sexuality must be squashed by suicide rather than marriage. Rhoda faces a similar dilemma. Rhoda's queerness, both in terms of her sexual attraction to women and her inability to properly emulate feminine attributes, makes her an unsuitable marriage partner; the confines of *The Waves* are strict, considering only Susan, who is defined by her alignment with conservative womanhood and motherhood, finds a husband. Furthermore, the only heterosexual relationship Rhoda pursues is a causal one, and it collapses. Rhoda's deviance can also not be curbed by marriage, leaving death as the remaining alternative. Alaska's predicament is quite simple by comparison. Alaska is a minor in high school and unable to maintain proper romantic relationships because of her consistent infidelity, which means marriage is not a reasonable solution to her deviance. Furthermore, the use of death and the ambiguity of her suicide expands upon Alaska's mysterious aura, which is what makes her sexually appealing to the male protagonist.

Silencing these women through death only accomplishes one of the author's goals – control over sexual deviance as revolutionary behavior – which is why the use of suicide is of particular importance. Women who refuse to be complacent with expectations of female sexuality and choose to openly defy them, which naturally involves demanding autonomy over their own bodies, are exerting a sense of power that I argue is revolutionary. Therefore, they must be read as complacent in their resulting downfall to fully emphasize the inability of women to break from gendered expectations of their behavior, especially as it relates to expression of sexuality. Plenty of deviant or revolutionary characters are punished simply by death; Shakespeare in particular has never shown any shyness when it comes to killing off prominent if controversial characters. However, the use of suicide is incredibly important to this particular

form of punishment for two primary reasons. First, whenever a person commits suicide, at some level, that person believes they deserve to die. While that feeling can stem from a multitude of reasons, each perhaps more tragic than the last, for the characters under this archetype, the reason is guilt. Both Ophelia and Alaska feel guilt over the death of a parent and Rhoda feels guilt over her inability to mold herself into what is expected of her as compared to the other women in the novel. The guilt and shame these women feel is key because their decision to end their lives implicates them as guilty for the act they're being punished for: deviance. Whether or not the characters actually feel guilty for their sexuality is irrelevant because any feeling of guilt is all that needs to be present to render them responsible for their act of suicide. If they were simply murdered, the character who murdered them would be to blame, and if it was an accident, it may be the fault of the author or narrator. By framing their deaths as suicide, the author sends a clear message: this was their fault, and they knew it.

Secondly, as I alluded to earlier, these suicides in particular all contain some aspect of ambiguity. While the gray area varies from woman to woman, they all serve to emphasize the lack of autonomy these characters have over their bodies and by extension, their stories. The suicides are never concretely understood acts but rather are muddled by some sort of hesitation, an indication that the suicide in a way happens to the characters in question rather than them being fully invested in that end for themselves. This method of punishment robs these women of full autonomy even in the one act that should give them full power over their bodies and fate. Suicide is engineered as a way to further communicate to the women it takes that the disobedience communicated in an attempt to reclaim bodily autonomy is not only an act worthy of punishment, it's an act that would never succeed. These women lack control in such an

extreme manner that the one thing in their power, the act of ending their own lives, is taken from them. They are still framed as guilty for their suicides; for example, part of a scene in *Hamlet*, which I will expand upon further in the first chapter, is dedicated to determining whether Ophelia has revoked her right to a Christian burial because she sinned by committing suicide. However, the guilt does not even come with the reward of finally achieving a sense of autonomy. The ambiguity of these suicides – they appear out of the reader’s direct view, they are never clearly labeled as suicides, and they involve something acting on the character, such as the water acting on Ophelia, rather than the character taking direct action – leads the acts themselves to feel deliberately placed, rather than flowing out naturally from the characters’ path. The outside hand of the author can be felt in these suicides, reinforcing the theory that the author deliberately kills these characters as an act of punishment. The lack of autonomy these women experience in their deaths underscores the power of the Ophelia trope as it applies to the real lives of women under heteropatriarchy.

Certainly, the question that follows when these two authors are being considered is one of consciousness: are these authors regurgitating ideas about female sexuality they’ve internalized subconsciously or are they actively punishing these characters either as an endorsement or a criticism? I think the argument is stronger for the latter. Shakespeare, for example, wrote plenty of confident, revolutionary women. And Woolf took her place as one of the few women in the male-dominated literary canon despite her dedication to the importance of feminism and its impact on literature. Additionally, if Shakespeare did not intend for the treatment of Ophelia to read as some sort of criticism, he may not have made her as highly sympathetic, which has contributed to her popularity in modern culture. In the first act of the play, Shakespeare dedicates

an entire scene to establishing the mounting and stringent expectations of Ophelia and her sexuality from her father and brother. She's verbally abused by both them and her lover, Hamlet, who she was rebuked in the first act for defending. Her madness scene is often depicted as demented yet hauntingly beautiful, and everyone present feels deeply for Ophelia's struggle, forcing the audience to draw a similar sympathy for her plight. Furthermore, Ophelia is buried in a Christian graveyard, an honor usually revoked for those who die by suicide, a subject I will explore further in the first chapter. Ophelia's death seems to serve as an example of what happens to women who are so thoroughly controlled and sexually starved that they lose everything, including a concrete sense of self, a theme I find reinforced in the flower scene, which I will also explore in the first chapter. When Shakespeare wants to make a villain out of a woman, he does so: just turn to the stark contrast between the treatment of Lavinia and Titania in his first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, for a persuasive example. Shakespeare's treatment of Ophelia is meant to be sympathetic and therefore a criticism of her grizzly end, not an endorsement.

If Shakespeare would be inclined to defend the sexual autonomy of a female character, Woolf is certainly inclined to do so, by tenfold, indicated by her consistent feminist approach to fiction and literary analysis. Woolf may even be more overt in her use of Rhoda as criticism, considering she crafts a male author within her novel that may be acting upon Rhoda in Woolf's place. As I will expand upon in the second chapter, the conclusion of *The Waves* consists of Bernard, the male author in question, attempting to synthesize the six independent voices of the other characters into a central voice, which he uses to round out their stories and expand upon those stories' themes. Within this synthezation, Rhoda is disposed of; her suicide is casually mentioned by Bernard and is not invested with nearly the amount of emotion considered for

Percival's death, which provides the opportunity for the six primary characters to learn to process grief. As I will argue, the novel's content and form queers Rhoda, making her unsuitable for such a synthesis – she is rendered incapable of emulating the typical female behavior that would allow her to exist within the mold of an acceptable woman within the uniform society Bernard strives to create. Therefore, while the ambiguity of Rhoda's suicide and the offhand nature of its report still robs Rhoda of full autonomy, Woolf crafts a scenario in which the "author" punishing Rhoda may in fact be Bernard, rather than Woolf herself. As a result, the question of who the author is when it comes to the question of punishment is flexible, but the point remains the same: the suicide is a punishment for sexual deviancy and it is performed by someone other than the female character who falls victim to its finality.

However, as I move into the first chapter of this thesis, I want to establish that the central analysis I wish to pursue is not whether these authors are critics or reinforcers of the feminine tropes that lead to their characters' deaths. Rather, I want to establish a link between two sophisticated yet incredibly different authors to note the prevalent and insidious nature of the trope of the sexually deviant woman and her death in suicide as a form of silence. Ultimately, we cannot definitively determine the purpose of an author's works, even in the case of Virginia Woolf, who wrote enlightening and often intimate essays on her feminist framework. However, what we can examine is the way this trope connects these authors and authors after them, culminating in a modern audience that has internalized the Ophelia tragedy and seeks to save her, which often results in them romanticizing her rather than avenging her, a failure I will further examine in the third chapter with *Looking for Alaska*. In the essay, we will follow through close reading how any form of sexual deviancy must be corrected through punishment, which takes the

form of suicide. While the trope of the sexually deviant woman who brings ruin to her world is far from unfamiliar – the chapter of Genesis in the Christian Bible offers up Eve as a persuasive starting point – the use of suicide to elevate feelings of guilt and shame make the Ophelia trope unique in its effectiveness for stifling female revolution. I will begin my investigation of this trope with its origin, Ophelia, whose attempts to take control of her life via control of her body are all made in vain. The progression of this thesis through six centuries will reveal that although literature may seem to be progressing forward, in many ways, authors and readers alike may have tunnel vision when it comes to appropriate expressions of female sexuality, especially as it relates to female subservience.

Chapter One: The Drowned Deviant

Ophelia in Shakespeare's masterful ghost tale of revenge, *Hamlet*, is best known for her suicide. Centuries after Shakespeare wrote the play for an Elizabethan audience, her madness scene and suicide continues to capture artistic minds who reimagine her life, end, and motivations in endless possible iterations. However, as we begin to think about Ophelia in a modern context and the part of her story we may be cheated out of as an audience, we should also begin to reexamine traditional presentations of Ophelia's madness and suicide. The cruel way in which Ophelia is treated by Hamlet in the middle of the play coupled with the loss of her father are often seen as the main drivers of Ophelia's psychotic break, which results in her now iconic drowning. I agree that Hamlet's attitude towards Ophelia as well as guilt she feels over Polonius's death do indeed contribute to Ophelia's grizzly end. However, I want to further argue that her suicide is not primarily the result of this dual heartbreak. Rather, Ophelia's suicide is a punishment for her indulgence in sexuality and disobedience of her brother and father's orders to create distance between herself and Hamlet's sexual advances, for the sake of her purity. Ophelia's punishment by death sets long-standing conventions for how we treat the connection between the mad woman and desire, especially as desire relates to explicit sexuality. This is a thread we can follow all the way to Virginia Woolf, one of the world's most renowned feminists, and her writings on insanity.

In the following chapter, I will interweave my own close reading of Ophelia with scholarly criticism of her to paint a simple picture of her limited theatrical existence: warnings against her sexuality, her indulgence in sexuality despite those warnings, and her suicide, which is both feminized and sexualized. Specifically, I will analyze Ophelia's introduction in Act I,

Scene 3, the infamous madness scene in Act IV, Scene 5, and Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death in Act V, Scene 1. In Act I, Scene 3, I will analyze the strict restrictions placed on Ophelia's sexuality by her father and brother. Understanding the expectations of Ophelia's sexuality will aid in analyzing how her breaking those expectations, knowingly and willingly, triggers her punishment, which she actively participates in. While the audience does not see Ophelia actively participate in sexual activity, she continues to interact with Hamlet, against her brother and father's wishes. Additionally, the sexualization of Ophelia implies she may have been sexually active before the start of the play, which would mean she was condemned before the warnings she receives in her first on-stage appearance. However, Laertes subtly argues in his warnings to Ophelia that her engagement in sexuality may not be needed to condemn her as sexually deviant. I will explore how the dichotomous nature of Ophelia as both too sexual and too innocent for her own good crafts a sexuality that is deviant for merely existing. And in Act IV, Scene 5, I will demonstrate through analysis of Ophelia's flowers the feminization of her death that completes a full-circle understanding of how sexuality leads to death via the sinful act of suicide. At the end of this chapter, I will have established a clear connection between Ophelia's forbidden sexuality with Hamlet and her death, brought about by the playwright as a condemnation of her disobedience. However, I will begin my analysis with arguing that the answer to an essential question, is Ophelia's death a suicide, is a resounding yes, as established by Gertrude's description of her death and analysis provided by critic Barbara Smith.

I. Ruling Ophelia's death a suicide

The first point I must establish to expand upon this thesis is that Ophelia's ambiguous death by drowning is indeed a suicide, not simply an accident. While a woman dying in a play

centered on a male protagonist that happens to be her lover would still suggest a heavy deal of misogyny, my thesis rests on the fact that Ophelia is a key player in her own demise. Since her death is framed as a suicide rather than an accident or murder, Ophelia is implicated as believing in her own guilt, which further serves to demonize her for daring to have any sense of sexual autonomy. While Gertrude implies in her explanation of Ophelia's death to Laertes that it was an accident, characterized by Ophelia falling rather than jumping to a watery death, the circumstances surrounding Ophelia's drowning and the conversation concerning her burial point to a suicide. This distinction is essential to understanding her death and damnation as a form of punishment, rendered by the author.

Barbara Smith makes a compelling argument against Ophelia's death being an accidental drowning based upon several factors, including the doctor's conclusion about her death and the gravediggers' conversation about Ophelia's funeral, which Smith interprets as an example of the all-seeing yet comedic clown figure that Shakespeare often uses to bring clarity to issues he raises in the text. The doctor says that Ophelia's death was "doubtful," which Smith takes to mean as an implication that she was responsible for taking her own life. Additionally, in her analysis, Smith notes that there's a question of which burial Ophelia is entitled to, since suicide was considered a grave sin: "We should profane the service of the dead/To sing a requiem and such rest to her/As to peace-parted souls" (5.1.214-216). The doctor says that it would be sacrilegious, or "profane," to honor Ophelia with the "service of the dead" when she has committed an act against God. He contrasts Ophelia's soul to "peace-parted souls" which serves both to demonize her in death and to remind the audience of Ophelia's damnation as a result of this ultimate sin. While Laertes fights against the doctor's conclusion that Ophelia is undeserving

of a Christian funeral, he cannot ultimately disprove that her death was a suicide, and in fact makes no attempt to. I argue that Laertes feels guilty for his role in Ophelia's death, which she reminds him of in the flower scene, which I will analyze further in this chapter.

The gravediggers come to the same conclusion and decide that the only reason Ophelia receives the Christian burial she should be excluded from is because she is a "gentlewoman," according to Smith's analysis of Act 5, Scene 1. But Smith notes that even though Laertes ultimately succeeds in getting Ophelia buried on consecrated Christian ground, her soul is not truly saved from her fate because she receives abridged funeral rites in her burial. Smith argues that Ophelia is damned rather than being excused for her suicide due to her madness because "despite the legal requirement of pre-meditation and sanity for a *felo de se* verdict, suicide was so repugnant, that the legalities were ignored" (Smith 107). A *felo de se* verdict was a self-murder verdict under the law, according to Smith; in other words, pre-meditation and sanity was usually required to rule that a suicide had occurred, but the "diabolical" nature of suicide often meant inquiries into the literal nature of a person's mental state before suicide was overlooked. And when it came to religion, this fact rang truer still, because "In the sixteenth century, even when insanity was considered in relation to suicide, it was no excuse" (Smith 107). Therefore, under religious conviction at the time, the madness Ophelia is driven to is not a suitable reason for her to take her own life. She will still be punished to the fullest extent of God's law, which means she will awake for the last time in Hell.

Smith further argues that Ophelia's death was neither intentional nor accidental, sticking her in a sort of purgatory between the two, which certainly keeps with the themes of the overall text. Smith analyzes previous scenes in which Ophelia seems to consider her death but comes to

the conclusion that Ophelia chooses not to save herself rather than purposefully drowning herself, hence the lack of premeditation. However, I argue that the reason Ophelia is seen as still responsible despite her madness is not because of legal loopholes in Shakespeare's era but because we are seeing her exclusion from a Christian burial as a further extension of her punishment and a guarantee that she will be sent to Hell rather than Purgatory. As I argued earlier, Ophelia is held fully responsible for her decisions, independent of the grief and mistreatment that leads to her madness and suicide, which I will cover more fully later in this chapter. Her sin as a matter of law which precludes her from the treatment that could save her soul posthumously is an extension of the punishment she is being served via her suicide.

However, even though I conclude that Ophelia's death is appropriately ruled a suicide, it is worth noting that the manner in which she commits suicide is particularly relevant to larger themes surrounding her autonomy. Queen Gertrude tells Laertes that Ophelia was walking along a brook when a branch she was on snapped and broke and Ophelia fell into the water below. From there, Gertrude asserts that Ophelia chooses to not fight to free herself:

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 endued
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. (5.1.174-182).

Ophelia doesn't jump into the water and drown herself, which would require a prior decision-making process and autonomy over her own body. She simply doesn't fight once she falls.

Gertrude characterizes her as "incapable of her own distress," implying that Ophelia was so overwhelmed by her own sadness that she was rendered literally incapable of fighting to stay alive. However, directly after calling Ophelia "incapable," Gertrude suggests she could be "a creature native and endued/unto that element," presumably meaning water. The language suggests that Ophelia was either too depressed to fight for her life or she had finally found the place where she belonged, under the water. There's a sort of peace to the second sentiment, as if that's where Ophelia always belonged, where she deserved to be. The second sentiment would fit with a larger understanding of Ophelia's drowning being earned by her deviant behavior. Either way, Gertrude's description of Ophelia's fate fits the description of a suicide, because Ophelia didn't fight to save herself, which robs Ophelia of autonomy even over her own death. The description fits a larger understanding of Ophelia as simultaneously completely in control of her actions and completely helpless, which means her sexually dichotomous nature carries over into her suicide.

Furthermore, despite the fact that I've established Ophelia committed suicide because she refuses to fight for her life, there's a complete lack of direct action on Ophelia's part on all counts. The only elements endued with action, according to Gertrude's description, are Ophelia's clothes, which "heavy with their drink/Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay/To muddy death" (5.1.180-182). The clothes, which are inanimate, still have more power than Ophelia, because they are assigned the verb "pulled," rendering the clothes responsible for pulling

Ophelia deep into the water, drowning her. However, it should be noted that the text clarifies that the clothes do not act of their own account; Gertrude says they are “heavy with their drink,” meaning they have filled with water. The characterization Gertrude assigns the clothes by saying “their drink” is not just poetic but highly significant, suggesting that the clothes themselves pull water in, eager to drown their wearer. Still, it is the way the clothes are soaked that enable them to pull Ophelia down and drown her, which means the only direct action mentioned in Ophelia’s death is clarified by pointing to an outside force at play. This further muddies the circumstances of who is to answer for Ophelia’s death: the clothes? The water? Herself? This deep-rooted ambiguity leaves room for an outside force that is ultimately responsible for this suicide, and that gap is filled by the author.

I argue that Ophelia committing suicide is a stronger punishment to serve than to simply be killed over the course of the play, a fate that befalls several other characters, including Hamlet himself. We can see the special punishment communicated through damnation by looking closely at the ghost’s description of Purgatory and applying its consequences to Hell, where Ophelia is destined to go for the sin of suicide, according to Christian doctrine at the time. Critic Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Hamlet in Purgatory* examines the difference between Purgatory and Hell in the context of an Elizabethan audience in an attempt to discern the religious origins of Old Hamlet’s ghost. Greenblatt establishes that we can infer Ophelia’s fate from Old Hamlet’s because “In church teachings, the excruciating pains of Purgatory and of Hell were, as we have seen, identical: the only difference was that the former were only for a certain term” (Miola 299). Therefore, upon death, most mortals went to Purgatory to have their sins “burnt and purged away” (1.5.9-13), as Old Hamlet states, so that they can eventually ascend into Heaven.

However, those who commit mortal transgressions, such as the act of suicide, instead descend to an eternity in Hell, where they will suffer the grotesque conditions of Purgatory, as described by Old Hamlet, indefinitely. Although Greenblatt poses the possibility that Old Hamlet is actually a ghost from Hell because he seeks to commit a further sin by encouraging Hamlet to avenge his murder, an act that is not possible for the saved souls in Purgatory, I argue that it is irrelevant to Ophelia whether the ghost comes Purgatory or Hell. Since under Catholic doctrine – Greenblatt notes that prior to the publication of *Hamlet*, the Church of England “explicitly rejected the Roman Catholic conception of Purgatory,” which may contribute to the confused theological and physical state of Old Hamlet (Miola 304) – Purgatory and Hell shared everything but Purgatory’s time constraint, Old Hamlet’s description of his suffering is applicable to Ophelia.

As noted, Ophelia’s sin was a one-way ticket to Hell, exempting her from the possibility of instead going to Purgatory. Smith captured the theological understanding of suicide in the 1500s and 1600s: “Christian theologians and preachers agreed that those who take their own lives are damned, and for many, suicide was literally diabolical” (Smith 101). Smith uses the word “diabolical,” aligning the practice with the Devil, which would certainly make suicide a sin more closely aligned with Hell, Satan’s domain, than Purgatory. By this understanding of the consequences of suicide, we can see Ophelia’s punishment for sexuality as being not just death but suffering from beyond the grave via an eternity in Hell. Additionally, as Smith points out, “suicides suffer the far worse fate of eternal damnation” as opposed to those who die without last rites and serve time in Purgatory, i.e. Old Hamlet. And since Old Hamlet suffers so gravely in just Purgatory, we can multiply the consequences substantially for Ophelia’s fate. Greenblatt notes that “the Catholic church laid a heavy emphasis upon the horrors of purgatorial torments,

so that the faithful would be as anxious as possible to reduce the term they would have to endure” (Miola 300). Greenblatt notes that these reductions would at times occur via payments to the Catholic Church in the form of indulgences and pardons, which would allow those on Earth to alleviate the suffering of their loved ones in Purgatory. The Catholic Church’s ability to exploit Purgatory as a means of extracting money from faithful followers (Greenblatt 13-14) means that the perceived tortures of that realm were nearly unbearable, saved only by the notion that the time one would have to spend in that realm was limited. Therefore, although *Hamlet* blends Protestant and Catholic overtones, we can still infer that the eternal torture Ophelia would face would be felt deeply by Shakespeare’s audience.

Old Hamlet outlines these real, painful tortures for his son in his description of Purgatory: “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night/And for the day confined to fast in fires/Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purged away” (1.5.9-12). If a reader was under the impression that Purgatory is a realm where sinners can reflect on past wrongdoings until they readily pass into Heaven, Old Hamlet quickly dashes those misconceptions. He says he is “doomed” to the conditions he suffers in Purgatory, implying that he is gaining nothing from this mandated penance and is instead simply waiting for it to end. The ghost says he is “confined to fast in fires”; the word confined mirrors the entrapment conveyed in doom, suggesting an inability to move out of Purgatory as well as a lack of reward for the Purgatory dweller. And the fact that the ghost is confined to “fast in fires” means that torture in this realm is often multiplied: he is both starved and burned, experiencing two fatal punishments simultaneously in a hell world that has no end in sight. However, it’s worth noting that despite the obvious pain Old Hamlet is in, he never dismisses his term in purgatory as senseless or something borne out of

pure cruelty. He says he will be entrapped until he pays fully for the “foul crimes done in my time of nature.” His admittance of “foul crimes” communicates that although his treatment in Purgatory is ghastly, he earned his fate, at least to a certain extent. His taste of damnation is not unearned but fits the crimes of his mortal existence. While he demands vengeance from Hamlet for his murder, he does not demand additional vengeance for the fact that he is in Purgatory because he did not receive his last rites. He owns up to the actions that brought on his torment. Old Hamlet informs the play’s tying of damnation to some degree of personal responsibility, which places the blame for Ophelia’s damnation at least partially on her shoulders.

The ghost’s understanding of the duration and purpose of Purgatory can inform our understanding of the application of “eternal damnation” to Ophelia’s suicide. For one, we can infer that Ophelia endures a great amount of suffering after her suicide, and that is not inconsequential in the context of this particular play. The inclusion of Old Hamlet’s ghost and his description of his horrors beyond the grave imply that this play does apply meaning to what happens to a person once they die; in fact, the feelings of those beyond this Earth are so important to this play that the ghost’s wishes spur the entire plot. Therefore, any reading of Ophelia’s suicide as a compassionate relief from her suffering on Earth is proven amiss by the account of Purgatory provided by Old Hamlet. Even if one were to argue that Ophelia did not commit suicide, she still died without receiving last rites to relieve her sins and therefore must at least serve time in Purgatory. Secondly, the ghost’s admittance of his “foul crimes” incriminate Ophelia in her damnation. By Old Hamlet’s own definition, those who suffer in Purgatory do so because they have sins that must be purged. Therefore, Ophelia is at least partly at fault for her damnation, through her suicide. This is troubling for our play’s most prominent female character:

she is punished once in death and secondly in the afterlife. And what is more, she is to blame for her extended punishment. I argue that the necessity of guilt in damnation implies that Ophelia is not simply being punished by her brother and father but by the playwright himself, who “corrects” a rebelliously sexual female character through the means of suicide.

The irony of the situation serves to further damn Ophelia as some sort of sexual deviant. When Old Hamlet introduces himself to his son and describes the conditions in Purgatory, he tells Hamlet:

But that I am forbid
 To tell the secrets of my prison house,
 I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy eyes like stars start from their spheres,
 Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
 And each particular hair to stand on end
 Like quills upon the fearful porpentine.
 But this eternal blazon must not be
 To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, oh, list! (1.5.13-22).

The ghost says that he is “forbid” to disclose any horrors beyond what he has already said, which tells the audience two important things. One, we’ve already covered the tortuous nature that the ghost is experiencing and that awaits Ophelia, and yet here the ghost says that he isn’t even able to touch on the worst of his experiences. Two, the ghost implies that Hamlet’s mortal nature makes him too innocent or weak to be able to handle the realities of the ghost’s hellish existence,

despite the fact that the ghost is asking Hamlet to commit murder, an act that will likely earn him a similar fate. The ghost says the “lightest” word, which is presumably what he has already disclosed, would undo Hamlet because it would “harrow” up the soul, “freeze thy young blood,” and “make thy eyes like stars start from their spheres,” among other somatic responses he lists that are strongly correlated with fear. He says the horrors are so extreme that Hamlet’s mortal body would be unable to even hear his account (“to ears of flesh and blood”), much less see the universe in which he dwells or, God forbid, experience it himself.

The dramatic irony of this scene when we incorporate the knowledge that Ophelia ends up eternally damned is that Hamlet is not treated as the most innocent mortal in the play, Ophelia is. As I will explore further in this chapter as I examine the treatment of Ophelia by her brother and father, Ophelia is treated as both a sexual nymph and as an innocent girl who can’t possibly understand the lustful things Hamlet wishes to do with her before discarding her. Her alleged innocence is used in a consistently condescending manner that serves to humiliate her for the choices she makes. More importantly, her innocence is used as a means of control. For example, in discussions about Hamlet’s recent displays of affection for Ophelia, Polonius tells her, “Marry, I will teach you. Think yourself a baby” (1.3.104). Ophelia’s sexual innocence is compared to literal infancy when Polonius compares her to a baby. She’s so innocent that she must be taught how to think about romantic (which Polonius says are actually sexual) advances. And yet, she eventually ends up in an afterlife that is worse than what Old Hamlet describes as being too hellish for mortal ears. The play’s most powerful example of innocence, who is naive to the point of childishness, ends up damned to a world Old Hamlet deems too terrible to curse innocent, mortal ears with its details. This dramatic irony strips Ophelia of one half of her virgin-Madonna

dichotomy, her naiveté, and leaves her simply with the uncontrollable sexual deviance perceived by Laertes and Polonius. We can use this dramatic irony to understand that in the end, that's what Ophelia is reduced to: a sexual creature who is ultimately responsible for her own damnation. Such behavior is punishable and Ophelia more than suffers the consequences.

II. The confines of Ophelia's sexuality in Act I, Scene 3

In order to examine how Ophelia's sexuality impacts her eventual descent into madness and suicide, we must first establish the specific concerns surrounding her sexuality and virginity. One of the most troubling aspects of Ophelia's characterization in *Hamlet* is that although she is one of Shakespeare's most popular tragic female characters – and arguably the most famous over time – she is nearly inconsequential for the plot of the play. While the play is certainly duller without its iconic flower scene, the plot can survive with a Hamlet but no Ophelia while Ophelia's story has no substance without Hamlet. Indeed, we meet Ophelia in the context of Hamlet and his apparent affections for her. Regardless, due to our limited exposure to Ophelia throughout the play, we must derive a careful reading of her actions and motivations by close reading her most important scenes: her entrance to the play and her de-facto exit, since her actual death occurs off-stage. Examining Ophelia's sexuality and its connection to her fatal punishment is essential to expanding upon a central thesis of suicide as punishment.

The language surrounding Ophelia's sexuality, which first appears in her introduction, produces a concrete understanding of the purity expected of Ophelia which she later violates. Moments after meeting Ophelia on stage, audience members at *Hamlet* productions are forced to actively think about her virginity. Understanding Ophelia's introduction in Act I, Scene 3 and the way she is treated by the commanding men in her life – her brother, Laertes and her father,

Polonius – is essential to unpacking Ophelia’s relationship to her sexuality and the expectations she chooses to break by desiring Hamlet; it is on this scene that we must first focus our analysis. In the scene, Ophelia appears on stage alongside Laertes, who is packing to leave Denmark and imparting his last few words of wisdom upon his sister before departing. Laertes’s first few words are a command to his sister: “My necessities are embarked. Farewell/And, sister, as the winds give benefit/And convey is assistant, do not sleep/But let me hear from you” (1.3.1-4). The command sets up the rest of the scene, in which Ophelia is belittled and ordered around by both her brother and father. The control extends beyond the domestic sphere as Laertes tells Ophelia, “let me hear from you”; even when he’s away, Laertes insists on having insight into and input in Ophelia’s choices. The control is further exacerbated by the fact that it is not the case that Ophelia is simply expected to respond to Laertes when he reaches out. Rather, he tells her that he should hear “from you”; the order of his words makes it clear that Ophelia is expected to put in effort into maintaining open communication lines with Laertes. Not only is she obliged to keep her older brother informed of her every move, she must also initiate such continuing communication. The exertion of such power subjects Ophelia to a consistent male gaze, one that colors the rest of her actions. The gaze can be applied to the rest of Ophelia’s existence, which often seems robbed of autonomy; as I established earlier, even Ophelia’s suicide is brought about by circumstances not entirely within her control.

But Ophelia pushes back against her brother’s initial command with “Do you doubt that?” (1.3.5). The comment is playful, implying that not only will Ophelia be obedient but there was no reason for Laertes to even ask. Her obedience and consistency should be assumed. The word doubt is particularly luminating for this reading, as one only doubts things they are not sure

of. The phrasing of Ophelia's question paints Laertes's doubt of her intentions as ridiculous, likely because obedience has been so ingrained into her behavior that she would never dream of changing behavioral patterns now. She also plays into her own lack of autonomy through the manner by which she asks the question. Ophelia doesn't just reassure Laertes that she will of course be in contact; she asks him whether he has any doubts, ones that she would presumably clear up should he respond with any. She lets him be the judge of whether or not her character alone is enough to reassure him that she will be true and keep submitting herself under his watch. Even the subtlest of Ophelia's interactions with her brother, and truly any male figure in her life, betray the extreme lack of autonomy she experiences under their control.

Laertes, unconvinced by Ophelia's response, calls attention to Hamlet, the subject which he entered the conversation intending to draw upon:

For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,
 Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
 A violet in the youth of primy nature,
 Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting;
 The perfume and suppliance of a minute -
 No more. (1.3.6-11).

At first glance, it may appear that this passage is just as condescending towards Hamlet as it is towards Ophelia and her judgment, considering his favor is called "trifling." Laertes is essentially casting Hamlet as a flirtatious child with no real desires, who entertains himself by entertaining the thought of Ophelia. Indeed, a first reading of this passage may suggest that Laertes's entire speech is in relation to the way Hamlet goes about love, independent of the

woman on the other side of his affection, who just so happens to be Ophelia at this junction.

However, a reader can infer that Laertes is really talking about Ophelia based on one word:

“violet.” Ophelia’s most prominent scene later in the play is tied to her use of flowers. Therefore, the reference to a flower is not incidental but purposefully invokes the image of Ophelia.

Additionally, flower imagery is often tied to female virginity, which further reinforces such a connection. Indeed, Robert Painter and Brian Parker argue in “Ophelia’s Flowers Again” that the audience Shakespeare wrote for would have understood the sexual overtones of Ophelia’s affiliation with flowers. Ophelia mentions violets in the madness scene, tying her to Laertes’s use of “violet” in this first scene.

Laertes’s reference to the flower allows his words to take on a more condescending tone towards his sister. The “violet in the youth of primy nature” refers both to Ophelia’s emotional capabilities and her sexual maturity. Since Ophelia and Hamlet are young, her affections are blooming and flourishing as she experiences first love. But since she is now “flourishing,” there will be a time when her flower will no longer bloom and she will start to wilt, a reference to Ophelia’s fleeting youth. In that context, Hamlet’s inability to hold his affections for long speaks not just to his character but to Ophelia’s worth, implying that once she’s no longer a blooming flower she will not be worth Hamlet’s sustained affection. But the flower also refers to Ophelia’s sexuality, another source of Ophelia’s perceived worth. The word “primy,” which is glossed in the text as “flourishing,” could refer to both Ophelia’s youth and beauty and a budding sexuality.

In this scene, the reference to Ophelia as this withering violet communicates her sexually dichotomous nature. Ophelia is experiencing a blossoming sexuality, which presumably makes her more attractive and enticing, and yet she’s too innocent to recognize that Hamlet only wants

her to take advantage of this novel womanhood. Understanding this dichotomy allows us to comprehend the importance of Laertes's warnings, however playfully some directors choose to have them delivered on stage. While I argue Ophelia's virginity is not inconsequential, I would additionally argue that to Laertes, it almost is. For Laertes, what is most important are the efforts Ophelia does or doesn't put in to keep Hamlet from ruining her while she is still "sweet," because her virginal appeal is "not lasting." Whether or not Ophelia engages in any sexual acts with Hamlet, if she doesn't remove herself from any situation with him in which she may be taken advantage of, it is her fault for not recognizing the mounting sexual maturity that Hamlet finds desirable. Ophelia does not need to engage in a sexual act to be considered a sexual deviant; the simple act of existing makes her sexual, vulnerable, and ultimately, guilty. Ophelia must take steps to minimize Hamlet's sexual desire for her by recognizing her sexual dichotomy or she will be responsible for any steps he takes to possess her. By this logic, Ophelia's failure to take steps to correct her sexual dichotomous nature makes her a sexual deviant, and we do not have to point to specific sexual engagement to prove this analysis. Certainly, the sexual nature of Ophelia's mere existence is a thread we can follow through centuries of literature across genres, as this interpretation of the inherently sexual nature of the female body after puberty affects the perception of real women and their sexual innocence.

Returning to Laertes's suggestive speech, "primy" is a poetic word which appears infrequently in most literature and only once throughout all of Shakespeare's plays; however, its root, "prime," appears more frequently. Support for the word's connection to sexual innuendo can be seen in its use in *Othello*. While Iago is trying to convince Othello that Desdemona is being unfaithful, he says, "Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys/As salt as wolves in

pride, and fools as gross/As ignorance made drunk” (3.3.400-403). In these lines, Iago tells Othello that he wouldn’t be able to recognize Desdemona’s infidelity were her actions as obviously lustful as the mating rituals of animals. In these lines, both “prime” and “hot” substitute the word “lust,” as Iago draws a direct comparison between the irresistible sexual urges of animals with a fake affair between Desdemona and Cassio. The animalistic nature of Iago’s comparison coupled with the word “prime” also helps analyze the use of the word “primy” in its only appearance in *Hamlet*. The way Laertes discusses Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet casts her as not only naive but unable to resist Hamlet’s disingenuous advances. With this animalistic, lustful reading of the word “primy” in mind, Ophelia’s urges can be read as primal in their immaturity. Her sexual urges need to be curbed by her older brother because of their instinctual nature, which draws her towards a man she knows is bad for her — at least by the standards imposed on her by her brother and father. This painting of Ophelia as simultaneously too young and immature to control her actions while also filled with irresistible, primal sexual urges creates a picture of her as a disobedient and inappropriate child. If the other characters can successfully portray Ophelia in this manner, they can communicate their reasoning for needing to control her; they are concerned about her virginity because she cannot be trusted to protect it from Hamlet herself. The ability for the other characters to establish Ophelia as impulse-driven and untrustworthy invokes a sense of anger when she ultimately disobeys her male guardians. This allows the audience to sympathize with Ophelia’s oppressors rather than with her and her yearning for Hamlet.

The question may be raised concerning how Ophelia can be simultaneously perceived as overtly sexual and dangerously innocent, a dichotomy that will be reproduced by authors for

centuries after Shakespeare published his works. Laertes actually gives us a hint in the same “primy” speech: “Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood” (1.3.7). While I established Laertes is talking about Ophelia in this speech, given away plainly by his use of violet, let us not forget that he is describing her in relation to how she can be used by Hamlet. In that context, Laertes says Hamlet may use her as a “toy in blood.” The first part of this phrase is obvious: Ophelia, worthy only because she is a virgin who can be seduced in her beauty and then discarded, is nothing more than a “toy” to be used by Hamlet’s childish nature. But what is more significant is that Ophelia is a toy “in blood.” In context of the next line’s use of “primy,” and with the knowledge of the highly sexual nature of this speech, we can infer that “blood” refers to Ophelia’s first blood, or first period, which would signify her shift from girl to woman. Now that Ophelia bleeds, she is a full woman ripe for the taking. This physical transition from girl to woman signifies the larger implications of the shifting of Ophelia’s actions as she enters womanhood. But because she is merely a “toy in blood,” Laertes communicates that Ophelia has the ability to engage in sexuality but not the wisdom to do so carefully or within appropriate social bounds. Her innocence and sexuality are presented together in this phrase, which is a stand-in for the purpose of Ophelia’s entire existence, according to Laertes’s worldview.

Were this phrase situated in a different play, we may be able to leave the analysis at that conclusion. However, considering the blood shed throughout *Hamlet*, we should pursue this matter further, especially as this line can help us begin to understand Ophelia’s own guilt throughout the play. *Hamlet*, like many of Shakespeare’s plays, is one steeped in layers upon layers of foreshadowing. And here, the line “a toy in blood” foreshadows Ophelia’s later peripheral involvement in the bloodshed that consumes the penultimate and ultimate acts of the

play. I have already established that the use of the word “toy” alludes to the manner in which Hamlet intends to use Ophelia to fulfill his own sexual desires while she is still young and desirable. Additionally, I’ve analyzed some of the ways, and will continue to analyze further, expectations surrounding Ophelia’s sexuality are rigidly set on preserving her virginity, despite her “blood” now enabling her to engage in a number of womanly activities. Since Ophelia is aware of the expectation that she remain pure in specific relation to her affair with Hamlet, when she subverts that expectation in Act III by conversing with Hamlet, she justifies her later punishment with her disobedience. That point is important not just for understanding the justification of Ophelia’s suicide as a means of controlling her deviant behavior, but it also serves to explain Ophelia’s own guilt surrounding her actions. When she speaks to Hamlet and enrages him in direct opposition to the orders given to her by her male guardians, she becomes implicated in the “blood” most significant to Ophelia: her father’s death. Ophelia knowingly engaging in deviant sexuality that is at least loosely connected with the death of her father shows that not only does the playwright find Ophelia guilty of sin, she finds herself guilty; the loss of her father partly drives Ophelia to suicide, as demonstrated in the madness scene. Laertes’s use of the word “blood” in the first scene is critical to understanding both Ophelia’s blossoming sexuality and her intense guilt, both essential to Ophelia’s punishment in Act IV.

As I’ve presented in analysis of “primy” and “blood,” Ophelia’s sexuality is introduced by Laertes in the first act as an enigma, characterized by both uncontrollable sexual energy and a dangerous naiveté. When Polonius enters the scene in Laertes’s absence, he reinforces rather than pushes back against that characterization. Here, the stakes are higher for Ophelia’s obedience, considering her father holds more tangible control over her than her brother does, even if they

are equally condescending in their treatment of Ophelia. Indeed, Polonius takes aim at the same perceived flaws in Ophelia, namely her gullibility when it comes to sexuality. When Ophelia admits that Hamlet has been showing her affection, Polonius responds: “Affection, puh! You speak like a green girl/Unsifted in such perilous circumstance” (1.3.110-111). The word I want to highlight from this selection is “green.” The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that green often indicated newness; it also meant “immature, undeveloped.” And starting in the 1600s, when green was used to describe a person in particular, the word signified “naive, gullible.” Here, Polonius says that because she believes Hamlet’s affections are sincere, that Ophelia must be a gullible girl: he is undermining her through condescension, using similar tactics to Laertes in his strategic breaking down of Ophelia’s confidence earlier in the scene.

The use of the word “green” also likely refers to green sickness, or the virgin’s disease, which was popular in the sixteenth century after being revived by revisiting Hippocratic medicine and texts, according to classicist Helen King. The affliction was assigned almost exclusively to young girls, and was characterized by a variety of physical traits that made its victim ugly as well as weak. Interestingly, two of the disease’s symptoms seem to foreshadow Ophelia’s death: “heaviness of the whole body” and “difficult respiration” (King 374). As I have already argued, the heaviness of Ophelia’s body and clothes that drag her down into the water is part of what makes her death difficult to categorize as an absolute suicide, since outside factors seem to be pulling her down. These symptoms of green sickness further compound that complication, as they would make it difficult for Ophelia to physically fight; while I would still rule Ophelia’s death a suicide due to factors already discussed, these physical symptoms do add to the many ways in which the author presents outside factors that guarantee Ophelia’s death.

Furthermore, the excess of blood trapped in the body thought to cause green sickness may be a physical explanation for Ophelia's madness: "This causes mental disturbances; in particular, seeing ghosts and desiring death as a lover, sometimes resulting in suicide by hanging or drowning" (King 379). Death by drowning was a suicide uniquely prescribed by those suffering from green sickness, meaning Ophelia's virginity, which is both essential to her social survival and apparently physically risky, is a factor in her ultimate suicide. King also frames the suicide as "desiring death as a lover"; suicide here is framed as a means for the woman suffering from green sickness to draw sexual gratification from death. Even a disease ascribed specifically to virgins is laced with sexual overtones, further sexualizing Ophelia's death.

These women taking death "as a lover" makes sense since the only known cure for green sickness was marriage, but only because marriage meant the opportunity for a pregnancy. Therefore, the true cure was likely sex; women just needed to be married to access their intended medicine. Polonius mentions green sickness in reference to Ophelia to reexamine her perilous sexuality. Ophelia's assumed virginity means she is still desirable as a marriage partner. However, her failure to pursue a suitable marriage by wasting her time being courted by Hamlet puts her in a vulnerable medical position, as she cannot be cured of her green sickness until she is properly married, pregnant, and overall, controlled. By applying green sickness to Ophelia, we can discern that part of Ophelia's sexual deviance is her refusal to pursue more eligible suitors for marriage, which would carve a path for a "healthy" expression of sexuality, i.e., sex confined within the bounds of marriage. One text describing green sickness, *On the disease of virgins*, "describes – or threatens – the medical risks faced by young girls at menarche if they do not marry, despite being 'ripe for marriage'" (King 397). Since we've established the physical

markers of green sickness foreshadow Ophelia's suicide, we can further deduce that Ophelia's refusal to seek "treatment" for her disease adds another layer of responsibility for her own death. The documents on green sickness warn that a woman who is of age and proper sexual maturity for marriage who does not settle into her prescribed marital life is putting herself at risk for further medical complications and, ultimately, suicide. While Polonius's reference to green sickness may seem a simple jest, it ultimately holds extreme weight when examining Ophelia's guilt and responsibility for her sexual deviance and death.

We can further infer the seriousness Polonius reads into the situation in the same line where green is referenced, where he says "perilous circumstance." There may be a possibility to play this line humorously, which would be highly dependent on how a director chooses to interpret the seriousness of the speeches of both Laertes and Polonius in this scene, but I argue that would be a mistaken reading of the text as a whole. We can infer that Polonius thinks Ophelia is truly in danger based on his actions throughout the rest of the play. Polonius constantly inserts himself into the king's business, taking and protecting his place among the elite. Part of the reason a reader may struggle to mourn for his death is because he is constantly not where he is supposed to be; the perception of Polonius as a relentless social climber impacts a reader's ability to fully sympathize with his actions. I argue this point not to tear down Polonius but to simply point out that he has every reason to want Hamlet to court Ophelia. As it stands now, Hamlet is the sole heir to the throne of Denmark. While it is conceivable that Claudius and Gertrude may attempt to have children and usurp Hamlet's place in line, since Gertrude is the mother of a teenage son it is highly unlikely she will bear an heir for Claudius – or at least, the possibility is less plausible than Hamlet eventually taking the throne. Therefore,

Polonius and his family name would benefit exponentially from Hamlet courting and eventually marrying Ophelia; their family would be exalted and Polonius wouldn't have to fight as hard for palace access.

I argue that since Polonius would actually reap great benefits from Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet, his decision to call such a relationship a "perilous circumstance" should be taken quite seriously, both by Ophelia and the audience. The word *perilous* signifies some sort of great danger, one that Polonius assumes Ophelia is unable to see. By connecting a relationship with Hamlet to the concept of great danger, Polonius also asserts as dangerous the idea of Ophelia losing her virginity or engaging in any type of sexual behavior with Hamlet, even before engaging in actual intercourse. Our standard of the loss of chastity as not just dishonorable or undesirable but dangerous is important in assessing the risk Ophelia takes when she disobeys her father. Since Ophelia knew that a relationship with Hamlet was not just frowned upon but dangerous she can be expected to understand the severity of consequences for pursuing such a relationship after explicit warnings from Polonius in Act I, Scene 3. Additionally, since Polonius defines a romantic relationship with Hamlet as "perilous," the stakes are also raised on Ophelia's perceived gullibility. Ophelia choosing to pursue a relationship with Hamlet is no longer just girlish naiveté or youthful gullibility; by Polonius's definition, she is putting herself at risk. This distinction between what Ophelia thinks about her own circumstances and what the men in her life think, which I have established have more control over Ophelia than she does, reinforces our concept of Ophelia as simultaneously too young and innocent to sense real danger in her sexual pursuits while also being so mature and sexual her desires need to be literally reigned in. I argue more fully in the third chapter that this particular perception of Ophelia leads to modern-day

conceptions of her in the literary Lolita and “manic pixie dream girl” tropes, which reinforces her power in the cultural realm, centuries after her debut as Hamlet’s lover.

Ophelia’s sexuality is not simply just another aspect of her personality, it is her entire being, communicated not just by the play’s intense focus on its existence, but also by the fact that Ophelia is literally introduced to the audience in the context of her purity. Her sexuality is carefully defined and constricted by her brother and father, the two male figures with the most direct control over her life, since Ophelia is unmarried. The expectations surrounding Ophelia’s sexuality are clearly introduced in the first act, which sets the scene for an understanding of Ophelia’s sexual deviance and guilt later in the play, culminating in her suicide. Act I, Scene 3 is incredibly important for the play because it assures the audience that the boundaries of Ophelia’s sexuality are not implied but directly communicated to her, repeatedly, which is why she is responsible for the consequences of her later deviant actions.

III. Ophelia’s parting flowers in Act IV, Scene 5

Ophelia’s most memorable scene in *Hamlet* occurs just before her death and it is marked by two major themes: insanity and femininity. Act IV, Scene 5 is often dubbed the “madness scene,” and has been enthusiastically taken on by some of the most famous actresses across the globe on stage and on the screen. The scene is characterized by a giving away of gifts, stated explicitly in the text of the play as flowers even if that stage direction has been reinterpreted in a variety of different ways over many adaptations. While this scene is often noted in analysis for the demonstration of Ophelia’s madness as an explanation for her later suicide, I argue this scene is also the strongest display of Ophelia’s autonomy within the confines of the play. The madness scene is Ophelia’s last word to everyone around her, which includes people, such as Laertes, who

have wronged her. This is further evidence that Ophelia's death is a suicide: there is a strong sense of intentionality within this scene, as if Ophelia is desperate to communicate her last thoughts and sins before silencing herself forever. And she makes sure everyone in the scene is aware of their own sins. For example, Ophelia gives rosemary to Laertes, and says, "that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember" (4.5.170-171). Reading Ophelia's death as a punishment for her disobedience makes this line particularly potent. Ophelia forces her brother to acknowledge what she's been driven to; she commands him, in the inverse of their established relationship, to remember *her*. She demands that he remember the role he's played in her condemnation.

Furthermore, rosemary, like many of the flowers mentioned in the scene, is highly charged with sexual meaning, according to the analysis present in "Ophelia's Flowers Again," which is heavily based within the Harold Jenkins edition of *Hamlet*. Jenkins finds an erotic connection with rosemary, which was often "given as a token of remembrance between lovers." While this can be read as an implication of incestual love between Ophelia and Laertes, the more fitting reading is to recognize the love that costs Ophelia her life and Laertes's role in setting up the stakes against her. When Ophelia gives Laertes the rosemary, she says "pray you, love," but that isn't meant to be an address towards Laertes. It's a call for him to remember the love, not lust, between Ophelia and Hamlet that drove her to this point, to her madness. She is actively dismissing Laertes's claims that what she had was not love by giving him the flower of lovers and calling his attention with her own words. Ophelia is taking Laertes's charge of her being the lusty "violet" and presenting instead a flower of love, challenging presumptions her brother had of her lust and purity. Ophelia, though defeated and condemned, takes a moment to defend

herself. Her defiance towards Laertes is pivotal for her characterization: even though she is being punished, Ophelia remains steadfast in her beliefs. She does not see herself as being complicit in loving Hamlet, even if she was told to stay away from him. She sees her disobedience of her father and brother as making her guilty, certainly, hence why the death of her father by Hamlet's hand affects her so greatly. But she doesn't think the barriers should have been placed in the first place. If Ophelia must bear the guilt of Polonius's death for her disobedience, a disobedience she will pay for her with her life, then Laertes has to shoulder some of the blame alongside her.

Ophelia's use of rosemary to communicate her view of her relationship to Hamlet as being one of genuine love, as well as her aim to make Laertes feels guilty, is further proved by rosemary's use in weddings. According to "Shakespeare's Flowers" by Jessica Kerr and other authors, rosemary "was handed to the bridegroom on his wedding day by the friends of the bride at an Elizabethan marriage feast" (Kerr). Rosemary is not simply a flower for lovers – rosemary symbolizes the ever-lasting bond of marriage. The significance of this point can be interpreted in two major ways. One, this flower is Ophelia explicitly pushing against Laertes's criticism in Act I, Scene 3 that Hamlet saw her only as a "toy"; Ophelia asserts her relationship could have blossomed into a proper engagement and marriage. The flower represents the relationship maturity that is the inverse of Laertes's assessment of it, making the use of rosemary as the first presented flower a targeted jab at Laertes's reckless assessment of Hamlet and Ophelia's love as one based only in fleeting lust. Secondly, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, female characters of age can survive only through two means: marriage and death. By giving Laertes rosemary, Ophelia frames him as the reason she could not have marriage as her salvation. Instead, she must marry the water and die for the sin of improper womanhood. Had Laertes and

Polonius allowed Ophelia to pursue Hamlet, according to her use of this flower, she would have been a bride. Instead, she will be punished with death. The usual representation of Ophelia in a white dress, which could be likened to the same purity desired in wedding dresses, further reinforces the tragic irony of her suicide's alignment with a wedding.

Ophelia's highly intentional choices in this scene, reflected in her flowers and words, pushes against the notion that Ophelia is truly "mad" in this scene at all. The play uses Ophelia's alleged madness to explain her suicide, rather than forcing principal character such as Laertes and Hamlet to question their own role in driving her towards that end. However, I argue that framing suicide within the confines of madness is simply another extension of the Ophelia trope; both Rhoda in *The Waves* and Alaska in *Looking for Alaska* suffer from mental illnesses that could be categorized as "madness" in keeping with Ophelia's apparent psychotic break. The use of madness robs the female characters of even more autonomy; besides the questionable natures of their suicide, audiences can question whether their madness means they were ever really in control of their fates at all. While Ophelia is certainly racked with guilt after her father's death, which she references explicitly later in the scene, that does not mean she has fully broken with reality. Rather, this madness that is imposed upon her is a shield Ophelia can use to communicate her true grievances to Laertes, forcing him to acknowledge the pain he has inflicted before she commits suicide. This is similar to the use of guilt against Ophelia. While Ophelia feels she played some role in Polonius's death, her guilt is not explicitly related to her sexuality, which is what the play is punishing her for. The play uses circumstances that resemble, but do not replicate, Ophelia's inner feelings to push its own narrative of the guilty, mad, sexual deviant

who ends her own life. The madness scene is performance art, used cleverly by Ophelia to punish the consciousness of her torturers even if she cannot ultimately escape her prescribed fate.

Ophelia further challenges her brother's actions with her next gift: "And there is pansies, that's for thoughts" (4.5.171). Jenkins pointed in his edition to a possible erotic interpretation of the pansies: "the popular name for pansies was 'love-in-idleness', so the thoughts they were used to represent were often erotic ones" (Painter). Again, this erotic connection is ripe with incestuous suggestions but the proper interpretation is to recognize Ophelia's continued blaming of Laertes for her fate. A persuasive reading of the madness scene suggests that Ophelia is giving away parts of herself before her suicide. This reading is reinforced by the long-standing theatrical decision of dressing Ophelia in white for the madness scene, making strong connections between her literal death and her virginity. The white dress is often interpreted in one of two ways: as a reinforcement of Ophelia's place as the pure, innocent woman or as an ironic final humiliation of her, forcing her to represent the purity she has arguably lost. However, I offer a third reason for the virginal representation of Ophelia in the madness scene: she displays her virginity through her clothing in order to give it away. She takes the subject of her condemnation, her damaged purity, and gives it away to her audience, in a sense allowing the characters gathered to "deflower" her before she leaves the mortal realm. That is why the gifts are represented in the text by flowers: Ophelia is giving her flowers away as a literal representation of her deflowering. She is making a subtle yet powerful argument that the loss of virginity, if she indeed gave it to Hamlet, is not what rendered the loss of her purity. Rather, the position she's been put in, which will result in her suicide, is what robs her of innocence and purity. Everyone who receives a flower, but especially Laertes, has deflowered her, which is why she chooses flowers with such

erotic subtexts. Ophelia's deflowering also matches the earlier discussion of green sickness; Ophelia is signaling to the audience her intention to take death as a lover and cure her virgin's disease, once and for all.

Returning to the significance of the pansies, Ophelia gives this third flower to her brother to continue to reinforce the guilt she wants him to feel for condemning her. In his initial speech to Ophelia in the first act, analyzed earlier in this chapter, Laertes presumes to know what Ophelia is thinking and is condescending towards her for the lustful thoughts he presumes she has. His treatment of her for her imagined lust or promiscuity speaks to a larger narrative of control and abstinent pressure exerted upon Ophelia before the beginning of the play. Since Laertes sets up these expectations of Ophelia, which as she points out in their first scene he does not impose upon himself, he is partially responsible when she ultimately breaks these expectations. If Laertes had not set up such rigid rules for Ophelia's autonomy and expression of sexuality, her presumed breaking of them would not necessitate her suicide or the mental breakdown that precedes it. Therefore, when Ophelia gives Laertes the pansies, she is presenting a morbid and ironic apology. She is giving him a gift in exchange for the impure, sexual thoughts that once occupied her mind, that he so graciously reprimanded her for. The pansies are both the thoughts Ophelia is stepping away from and offering as a gift and a sarcastic, sorrowful apology for the disobedience that has landed her in this position in the first place. Both the rosemary and pansies are key to building the thesis that Ophelia is being punished for disobedience and lust. Those flowers are also essential to understanding the complicated nature of Ophelia's guilt: she understands the consequences she's responsible for, namely her father's death, but she also

resents the rigidity that unfairly surrounded her sexuality. During what Ophelia knows to be her last day on Earth, she ensures that Laertes is unable to avoid what he's done to her.

Due to the somewhat ambiguous nature of the stage directions in the madness scene, there is some scholarly debate concerning who are the actual recipients of the different flowers presented by Ophelia. However, Laertes confirms that he is the recipient at least of the rosemary and pansies, which I've established are purposefully prescribed to him as a symbol of both guilt and sexuality. The chronology of events confirms Laertes is the rightful recipient of rosemary and pansies: a comment from Laertes, which breaks up Ophelia's bumbling words and song, immediately precedes Ophelia beginning to pass out the flowers and he comments again immediately after they are received. And his comments are directly tied to his specific flowers: "document in madness: thoughts and remembrance fitted" (4.5.202-203). Here, by repeating the words Ophelia uses when she hands out the flowers, Laertes indicates that he is the rightful recipient of those particular gifts. One may read his comment as both an acknowledgement of the flowers he's been handed and an observation to the rest of the characters in the scene that Ophelia is clearly mad, based on her erratic behavior and the giving away of gifts. However, in following a reading in which Ophelia is condemned to die for her sexuality partially because of her brother's disapproval, this line may be more sinister yet. Laertes may be signifying that the very things Ophelia is calling his attention to with her flowers, remembrance of her deeds and thoughts that have led to this maddened state, are indeed what justify this descent. He says the thoughts and remembrances are "fitted" for this "document in madness": in other words, that what she has done is "fitted" to the subsequent punishment, or worthy of such a reaction. While this reading may be hard to reconcile with Laertes's devastation throughout this scene and after

Ophelia's death, I argue that he can feel remorse for his loss while maintaining the moral superiority that led him to condemn Ophelia in the first place.

A second reference to the suicide Ophelia is being driven to being her true deflowering comes up in her giving away of violets: "I would/give you some violets, but they withered all when/my father died. They say he made a good end" (4.5.207-209). As noted earlier in this chapter, Laertes calls Ophelia a violet in Act I, Scene 3, as a way to reference her fleeting youth and beauty and those traits' relevance to Hamlet's affection for her. As Kerr et. al. mention, the violet is actually a symbol of modesty rather than one of lust. Therefore, Ophelia's alliance with violets, which have an "early flowering," is yet another reinforcement of the play's view of her as a simultaneous symbol of sexual maturity and actual naiveté, an unholy and unacceptable combination. The violet has a short lifespan and is therefore associated with death, which means Ophelia's early sexual blossoming was marked by death from her very introduction to the play (Kerr et. al.). When Ophelia is unable to produce violets to an unspecified member of the assembled party in her madness scene, she says that all of hers "withered away" after Polonius's death, which likely drove Ophelia to her madness in the first place. Since violets are associated with modesty, Ophelia says that she lost all innocence and modesty when Polonius was killed. Her modesty is being erased in the moment as she presents herself a final time to be deflowered, which triggers her suicide as a way to redeem her purity. She almost apologizes to the gathered party that she does not have her modest flowers to present, but they have died because her purity is now in jeopardy. The failure of Ophelia to produce violets, which she was tied to from the beginning, signals the death of Ophelia even before she drowns.

The sense of Ophelia's madness scene being a deflowering is not just relevant metaphorically but signals to a Shakespearean audience that suicide can be the only reasonable next step. The tie between loss of virginity against one's will and death presents itself in Shakespeare's first tragedy: *Titus Andronicus*. In Shakespeare's most bloody take on revenge, the titular patriarch, Titus Andronicus, kills his daughter Lavinia, who earlier in the play is brutally raped, has her tongue cut out, and has both of her arms reduced to painful stumps (Act II, Scene 4). Before killing one of his enemies, Saturninus, Titus asks him if it is just for a father to murder a daughter who has been raped; Saturninus responds that it is, giving this reason: "Because the girl should not survive her shame/And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (5.3.41-42). Although Lavinia, who unlike Ophelia was married, is raped against her protests to just be killed instead, her ravishment is presented as a "shame" worthy of death. Although the plot of *Titus Andronicus* is much more morally ambiguous than *Hamlet's*, Titus and his family is generally aligned with goodness and old Rome, framing Titus to be the closest thing the play has to a hero. Therefore, in this final murderous scene, all of the kills Titus makes, including the murder of his daughter, are seen as justified remedies for the wrongdoings throughout the play. In adaptations, Lavinia can be seen smiling before she is killed, welcoming the murder as if it some sort of relief. However, it is not Lavinia's pain that is emphasized in this scene but her shame, presenting the argument that a loss of a woman's purity outside the traditional confines of marriage, regardless of context, is punishable by death. Lavinia cannot carry on as a woman with such shame and therefore must be murdered by one more worthy than she is: her father. This alignment of loss of virtue with both shame and death highlights the need for Ophelia's death

after the deflowering scene. Furthermore, Lavinia's acceptance of her fate can be read as its own sort of suicide, further aligning her with Ophelia's end.

The second part of Saturninus's answer is also relevant to Ophelia's suicide. Saturninus says that a raped girl should not just be killed to bury her shame, but because her presence as a disgraced woman will "renew his sorrows," in reference to the father. Lavinia is held accountable not just for her rape but for the pain it causes her father, whose pain is centered even though he was not the one who suffered the physical and emotional agony Lavinia was put through. In the same manner, Laertes's inability to deal with his sister's madness and his grief over her death is centered in the play as an attempt at redemption for the way Laertes treated Ophelia in life. Even in Ophelia's final showing of strength, where she holds Laertes accountable for the grief he caused her and his role in her suicide, she is somewhat overshadowed by the other characters' sadness over her insanity, especially Laertes. The tragic irony in Ophelia's inability to command complete attention even when on the brink of death is further underscored by the show of male power over her in this focus on male pain. For both Lavinia and Ophelia, their losses of virtue and death are seen to be even more tragic because of the pain caused to the male figures in their life; this pattern will be replicated in Ophelia's reincarnation as the manic pixie dream girl, as demonstrated in *Looking for Alaska*. Male loss of control over the featured female characters is mourned in the same way the actual women are. The extent of male control over Ophelia's sexuality and entire life means that even her pain is overshadowed by the pain Laertes feels in losing her, both in the sense of her losing her virtue and her losing her life. For Lavinia and Ophelia, the concepts of life and virginity are essentially one and the same.

The madness scene is the last time the audience sees Ophelia, as her death happens off-stage. In this scene, we see Ophelia literally and metaphorically “deflowered,” signaling the complete break of Ophelia’s innocence, which is strongly correlated with purity and virginity. Her descent into madness marks several conflicting emotions for Ophelia, namely: her guilt over her father’s death, the sadness she feels for her impending fate, and her anger at her brother, represented by her defiant presentation of her erotic flowers. This iconic scene is one often read simply for the sympathy it draws for Ophelia, but I argue this scene is more aligned with frustration over a female character who refuses to reign in her sexuality to approved measures, a transgression that is punished with death. The fact that Ophelia is “mad” in the scene also reinforces her lack of autonomy; her suicide, which I argue is clearly pre-meditated, is marked by this madness in a way that almost seeks to absolve Ophelia of insanity. The complete lack of control Ophelia has over her life is brought to a head in her final scene. This lack of control will be even more present for Rhoda in *The Waves*, who I will analyze in the next chapter, whose lack of autonomy presents itself as a literal lack of self.

While Ophelia is far from the most important character to *Hamlet’s* plot, she is marked as one of Shakespeare’s most iconic characters, and her legacy continues on in multiple artistic mediums as new audiences attempt to breathe new life into her tragic end. As I have established in this chapter, the fascination with Ophelia may arise from a sense that she is being unfairly punished for her indulgence in sexuality, while the male characters, such as Laertes and Hamlet, are not held to the same standards. They are even more protected in death than Ophelia is, because her suicide results in hellish condemnation. Ophelia is aligned with both sexual deviance and dangerous naiveté, a trope that will be picked up by authors over the centuries, most notably

for this thesis by Virginia Woolf and John Green, who I will analyze in the following two chapters. Ophelia's deviant sexuality is punished by suicide, but she defies her end in her departing scene, showing an additional string of disobedience masked by her madness. I will continue to analyze the tropes Shakespeare establishes with Ophelia and examine the way in which sexually deviant female characters are punished with suicide as a way of correcting their rebellion against traditional gender expectations.

Chapter Two: The Faceless Victim

Virginia Woolf's experimental masterpiece *The Waves* gives the reader unprecedented access into the mind of her Ophelia, named Rhoda. Woolf's obsession with consciousness opens the novel to endless possibilities with form, which Woolf manipulates to present the disjointed mind of Rhoda who nearly perfectly mirrors Ophelia's story arc. Woolf distinguishes the sexual boundaries of her novel from the stringent ones in *Hamlet*; simple engagement in sexuality does not qualify as deviant, as seen in her production of the character Jinny who is quite proud of her sexual prowess. *The Waves* frames the essential act of revolution at play in this thesis, the breaking away from gendered expectations, as a refusal to participate in heteropatriarchy. To demonstrate this revolution, she deliberately queers Rhoda, who demonstrates both a sexual interest in women and an inability to properly perform either as a promiscuous or conservative woman, unlike the other two principal female characters, Jinny and Susan. Since Woolf is writing in the 20th century, Rhoda's apparent desire for women – and more importantly, her lack of sexual urgency when it comes to pursuing men – is cast as sexually deviant. Although Rhoda theoretically has more sexual freedom than Ophelia did, as she can engage in sex outside of wedlock, she is still trapped by expectations that demand she either submit her body to the male gaze or be disposed of. Ultimately, Rhoda is also punished by suicide, but her death is even less memorialized and sympathized than Ophelia's; she is cast aside with only a sentence spared.

In order to examine the way the novel queers Rhoda through its content and form, I must establish the experimental format of *The Waves*. The novel is told through a collection of thoughts from its six main characters, broken up by short prose pieces on the rising and setting of the sun against the novel's central motif, retreating and crashing waves. The novel explores both

connected and individual consciousness through thoughts from the characters framed as if they are speaking aloud. When the characters are together, the thoughts come in quick spurts and seem often unrelated or disjointed; when the characters are apart, they often reflect for longer periods of time and include more concrete descriptions of their movements and emotions to demonstrate the different stages of their lives. In their reflections, the characters grapple with both what others perceive of them and what they know to be true of themselves. Rhoda, however, is defined by her constant struggle to find any existence at all: she proclaims several times throughout the novel that she is nothing, that she has no face, no being. She exists in a liminal space that has yet to be brought to life by any concrete meaning; she is not defined by marriage, motherhood, or even ambition, but instead seems lost in time and space. This spurs an ongoing existential crisis that culminates in her suicide, mirroring Ophelia's tragic arc.

As established, *The Waves* explores the individual and group consciousness of its central characters, three men and three women. Bernard serves as the storyteller of the group, growing into a self-important man who seeks to wrap the individual thoughts of his friends into one centralized consciousness; I will argue later in the chapter that it might be Bernard, rather than Woolf, who punishes Rhoda. Louis embodies colonialism and the British empire and is marked by his wish to bring the rest of the chorus "to order"; his alignment with social order, and by extension heteropatriarchy, explains his sexual relationship to Rhoda which I will further explore later in this chapter. Neville, like Rhoda, is a queered character, as his consciousness is marked most prominently by his romantic and erotic obsession with another male character, Percival; Neville is also the quietest, most nurturing male character, slightly aligned with more feminine qualities. Percival is essential to the plot of the novel but does not supply his innermost thoughts

as a member of the chorus. His death in the middle of the novel is the introduction into adult grief for the main characters.

Unlike Rhoda, Susan and Jinny fit neatly into stereotypically feminine qualities, perhaps best perceived as the opposite sides of the Madonna-whore dichotomy. Critic Patricia Cramer defines the pair as “stuck in the degrading female archetypes embodied by the Olympian versions of, for example, Hera (Susan) and Aphrodite (Jinny)” (Cramer 450). Susan, like Hera in Greek mythology, is aligned with the more modest version of womanhood, defined by motherhood. As a child, she is looked to as the mature, properly-behaved young lady, and as an adult, her thoughts become consumed by her children. Jinny, in occupying the role of Aphrodite, is the most attractive of the three female friends, even in childhood. She boldly kisses Louis during a school recess, signifying a tendency towards inappropriate expressions of sexual energy even when she is young. In adulthood, she is often seen surrounded by many strange men, and is implied to be continuously engaging sexually with unknown partners. She fully embraces her alignment with sexual energy and often enjoys the extreme amounts of male attention she receives. By this description, it may seem that Jinny is the more appropriate character to be deemed sexually deviant in terms of early twentieth century sexual conventions. However, Jinny is never explicitly discouraged by someone else from her behavior, as Ophelia is, and she at least engages sexually with men, occupying a stereotypical subservient role. Rhoda’s sexuality, however, exists completely outside the realm of men, which casts her as sexually deviant.

Cramer states that Rhoda is a “lesbian outsider” and “seeks a life outside existing female paradigms” (Cramer 450). Rhoda’s determination to stray from the behavior prescribed to her by her gender, which is exemplified instead by Susan and Jinny’s opposite existences, creates a

world in which she literally doesn't exist. Rhoda's queerness impacts her ability to perform femininity and forms the basis of her perceived failure and resulting guilt, which will provide the direct line to her eventual suicide, in keeping with Ophelia's pattern. While several critics have attempted to wade through the maze Woolf lays out in *The Waves*, much of the criticism focuses on the manner in which consciousness is represented, especially as it relates to selfhood, empire, and eroticism, rather than focusing specifically on Rhoda's unique consciousness. Indeed, critic Myk Malgorzata describes scholarship of Rhoda as "reductive, if not entirely dismissive"; she names the culprits as Rhoda's relative marginalization and her suicide (Malgorzata 110-111). While literature on Rhoda and her implied lesbianism exist, Cramer captures the way Rhoda's queerness alienates her from the accepted heterosexual world established by Susan and Jinny's behavior. Cramer asserts Rhoda is a lesbian but I will instead refer to her as queer. The novel's othering of Rhoda goes beyond describing her explicit sexual desires for women, as even her mind is affected by the perception of deviance; she is queered in contrast to the other characters who align themselves with heteronormativity. While Cramer argues Rhoda's death frees her from the heterosexual expectations of Earth and represents Woolf's desire to create a utopian lesbian existence via Rhoda's suicide, I will argue that Rhoda presents as queer to trigger the punishment for sexual deviance established under the Ophelia archetype. While Woolf's own sexuality may point to a critique, authorial intent is not needed to confirm the fate Rhoda suffers for perceived deviance.

The disjointed nature of Rhoda's mind is the primary piece of evidence for her queerness. Later in this chapter, I will explore a scholarly concept that asserts Rhoda has a "world-to-mind" misfit, which the author uses to explain Rhoda's ongoing struggle with existence. At several

points throughout the novel, Rhoda states she has no face or physical self, which results in extreme amounts of fear and anxiety whenever she is surrounded by others, especially her friends. I argue that part of the reason Rhoda experiences a separation from consciousness and literal existence is because her deviant sexuality prevents her from existing in a way that is recognizable to patriarchal society and therefore to the other characters, who are revealed in the end to be somewhat controlled by Bernard's consciousness. The combination of Rhoda's queer identity, which at the time Woolf was writing would still be considered thoroughly deviant, and Rhoda using her sexual interest in women as a way to seek a life without male ties creates a deviant female existence. As a result, Rhoda must be punished as Ophelia was, and she meets her end in a strikingly similar fashion: suicide by water. Rhoda fits the stereotype of the guilty, female sexual deviant established by Shakespeare's Ophelia, which proves that the archetype endures several centuries after *Hamlet's* production and is even reproduced by one of literature's leading feminist writers.

In this chapter, I will further examine evidence of Rhoda's deviant sexuality, including: her alignment with Neville, her existence in between the gender dichotomy established by Susan and Jinny, and a homoerotic scene where Rhoda expresses desire for a woman she watches while drinking tea. In discussing her deviant sexuality, I will explore the main failed attempt to "correct" that sexuality: Rhoda's brief affair with Louis. Rhoda's story arc matches Ophelia's in more ways than one would imagine; she even experiences a sort of "madness," described as a world-to-mind misfit, which I will delve into in this chapter. On that topic, I will explain how that misfit helps the audience understand Rhoda's disconnect from her own consciousness and selfhood, which becomes a defining characteristic for Rhoda's painful insecurities within the

physical world. I will establish how Rhoda's disconnect from herself and from the larger group started in childhood and endured into adulthood by close reading some of the language in the childhood scenes, where Rhoda is distinct from the mindsets of the other characters from the beginning. All of these explorations will ultimately lead to Rhoda's suicide, which like Ophelia's occurs off-screen and is described by Bernard. Rhoda's extreme differences from the other characters, captured best in her deviant gender and sexuality, means she cannot be synthesized into the group consciousness Bernard creates in the last chapter. Therefore, Rhoda's rebellious nature must be dealt with by death, which is the only way to permanently silence her.

I. Establishing Rhoda's sexual deviancy

Like Ophelia, Rhoda's implied sexuality in the text is outside the confines of patriarchal expectations, but their dilemmas differ significantly. Rhoda suffers from two main departures from traditional gendered expectations of her sexuality. For one, Rhoda is an unmarried woman and from childhood does not fit within the heterosexual pairing of the characters. Besides a brief affair with Louis, which I will explore more fully in this chapter, Rhoda is not tethered to men in any romantic, sexual, or familial sense. She does not even engage with frequent casual sex, which would place her within the Madonna-whore complex, aligned with Jinny. Secondly, Rhoda's queerness means she subverts the novel through content and form. Contextually, Rhoda refuses to participate in social heteropatriarchy, and formally, she subverts the patriarchal novel grounded by Louis and Bernard through her differing consciousness that resists synthesis; for both subversions she must be punished. While Rhoda is not nearly as explicit in her sexual desire for women as Neville in his expression of erotic and romantic obsession with Percival, several subliminal details throughout this text direct the audience to this conclusion. These details

include her alignment with Neville, her existence in between the tropes inhabited by Susan and Jinny, and an erotic scene where Rhoda watches a woman while drinking tea.

Since *The Waves* is so thoroughly obsessed with understanding consciousness, a significant amount of its characterization relies on setting characters up either beside or against each other; therefore, one can understand different qualities of Rhoda simply by observing the ways in which she mirrors or inverts Bernard, Louis, Neville, Susan, and Jinny. I argue the most significant alignment is between Neville and Rhoda, as her queerness is evidenced partly with Neville's explicit homosexual desires. *The Waves* relies in part on form to communicate symbolism, and is set up with long "chapters" of the characters speaking in dialogue, broken up by "interludes" describing nature which sets the rising and falling action of the novel. In all but two of the "chapters" out of nine, either Neville or Rhoda close the chapter with its final word, setting their two minds apart as ones significant enough to anchor chapters. The only chapters where this differs is the second-to-last and the last, both closed by Bernard; this is explained by the fact that at this point in the novel, Bernard takes almost full narrative control of the other minds present to create a group consciousness, which Rhoda is ultimately removed from since she differs from it so thoroughly. While *The Waves* certainly aims wide in its attempt to change up form, it relies on some patterns to establish plot and keep the reader secure, such as the fact that Rhoda and Neville close alternating chapters. This alternation suggests that their minds mirror one another; to hear one close a chapter is to hear another, as they are aligned in their most significant struggle: the way their sexualities separate them from the rest of the group and put their social existence at risk.

The novel essentially separates into three characters who feel secure in their roles (Bernard, Susan, and Jinny) and three who struggle with feeling like an outsider (Louis, Neville, and Rhoda). The seventh, unheard character, Percival, is perceived as secure in his role; Cramer aligns him with all normalcy: “Percival is described as “conventional,” “a hero” (123), “judge” (155), “mediaeval commander” (37), and “admiral church warden” (36; see also Joplin 96)” (Cramer 448). Cramer pulls these adjectives to build the thesis that Percival represents the ultimate patriarchal figure. For Woolf, patriarchy is usually rigidly set in line with empire, as seen in the characterization of Louis; in Percival’s case, he is aligned with empire through his career and travels to India. Even Percival’s death aligns him with empire: “Percival has died; (he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death)” (Woolf 170). In this description, delivered by Louis, the narrative explicitly states that the purpose of Percival’s death is highly symbolic rather than logistic. His death is just like any other as long as it aligns with societies traditionally tied to strong senses of both empire and conquest, as Egypt and Greece both are. Percival brings the rest of the ensemble together not because of a particular attachment to him, with the exception of Neville, but because he signifies a world order to which they all aspire. When Percival dies, Bernard steps in to recreate the social order and ultimately decides, as I will examine more closely later in this chapter, that Rhoda doesn’t fit that worldview. Percival’s temporary embodiment of patriarchy reveals that although Neville, like Rhoda, may be perceived as sexually deviant because he expresses homosexual desires, he receives reprieve due to both his maleness and his desire for a man who represents proper social order.

Neville’s erotic attachment to Percival stems from a strong desire for normalcy within social structures, despite his sexuality. While Neville attempts to balance his sexuality and social

confines, Rhoda suppresses her sexuality and draws further into herself, which damages any attempts she makes as emulating feminine behavior. As a result, Neville survives Bernard's synthesis at the end of the novel rather than being discarded as Rhoda is. Neville's ability to emulate expected male behaviors while expressing queerness reveals a particular deviance about female homosexuality in the novel's context. The more accepted nature of male homosexuality explains why Neville expresses far more explicit desires for Percival than Rhoda ever does for a woman, which signifies a comfort with his sexuality that Rhoda is unable to replicate, even in adulthood. This is further signified by the other characters' observation of Neville's feelings for Percival, which does not happen for Rhoda. Neville doesn't even feel shame, as Rhoda does, about his feelings; he considers revealing them to Bernard: "Hence I cannot talk to him of Percival. I cannot express my absurd and violent passion to his sympathetic understanding. It, too, would make a 'story'" (Woolf 51). Neville isn't concerned about Bernard's reaction; rather, he doesn't tell him about Percival because he knows his affections will be reduced to a "story." However, he does know that Bernard will accept him, because he says Bernard would meet him with "sympathetic understanding." Neville calls his passions "violent," making it clear that they are stronger than a simple crush, too strong to be fought off. While he also calls them "absurd," I argue that the word is more a reference to the degree of Neville's obsession, rather than a dismissal of their relation to another man; if Neville was truly embarrassed, he would never consider telling another soul. Neville's attempts to fit his perceived deviance within the social order grants him a degree of forgiveness not available to Rhoda, who uses her sexuality to cut ties with men and exist outside of rigid gender expectations.

Arguably, Neville even accepts that despite his feelings for Percival, the realization of those emotions is not a goal he will ever be able to reach. He describes a stereotypical existence, complete with a “high-minded wife,” and concludes “That, however, will be my fate. I shall suffer” (Woolf 71). Neville realizes that the type of life he’s destined for requires a wife, and he includes that as an aspect that will make him “suffer.” But more importantly, he calls this perception of future “fate.” He makes no attempt to argue against it; fitting into gender and class expectations feels natural for Neville, inevitable. Despite the fact that both Neville and Rhoda are gay, Neville is prepared to live the type of life expected of him, which includes a traditional heterosexual marriage, which further demonstrates his willingness to aspire to social “normalcy” rather than rebelling against gender norms as Rhoda does. When Percival, the only man to truly capture Neville’s affection, dies, Neville has nothing left to hold onto, and the homoeroticism that shapes his childhood somewhat fades into the background. Inversely, Rhoda’s sexuality becomes more prominent in adulthood, as does her existence on the outside of traditional gender. Rhoda continues to display rebellious behavior in her expression of gender and sexuality that must be corrected so that she can be narrowly tailored to the rest of the group’s consciousness. When no correction is available, she is punished with death.

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia has distinct male ties, namely to Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet. While Ophelia certainly exhibits deviant sexuality, her expression of gender is more accepted, especially because she is tethered to male oversight and control. Rhoda’s only real tie to male control, however, is through Louis. Louis briefly mentions a sexual relationship with Rhoda in adulthood and later mentions her leaving him. This relationship may seem to signify a romantic or sexual attraction between the two characters, but I argue that any reading of this affair that

implies genuine connection between the two would be misguided. The relationship is thoroughly one-sided, reflecting Louis's desire to be with someone who isn't even sexually attracted to him. This is actually an inverse from one of the first interactions the reader has with Louis, in which he is tackled and kissed by Jinny; his reaction to the kiss, in which he describes everything as "shattered," makes it clear he does not reciprocate her affection (Woolf 13). However, even with Louis being more attached to the relationship, it seems to hold little weight for either character; Rhoda does not delve into it and Louis states it in passing, matter-of-factly: "there Rhoda sometimes comes. For we are lovers" (Woolf 170). The casual rather than invested nature of this affair is captured in the word "sometimes." Rhoda only exists in a sexual context for Louis "sometimes," which mirrors the overall temporal nature of her existence, in which she floats in and out planes of existence, unable fully settle in reality. Furthermore, Louis and Rhoda are "lovers" rather than partners; the word signifies a low-pressure, likely strictly sexual relationship. Since the relationship is casual, there is a question of why Woolf chose to include it at all. As I alluded to earlier in this chapter, Louis is strongly aligned with empire, personified most directly through his desire to bring others "to order." Bringing Rhoda's nonconventional existence and consciousness "to order" is exactly what is desired of her throughout the novel but especially in adulthood, as the characters slowly start to converge into Bernard's overarching narrative. Louis occupies one of the strangest dichotomies in the text because he is both strongly aligned with traditional social order, which includes patriarchy, and alternate social orders; at several points throughout the novel, Louis becomes preoccupied with the aspects of his upbringing that set him apart from his peers, which breeds a sort of insecurity. Since Louis feels disconnected from the rest of the group, it follows that he would feel a kinship with Rhoda, who is notably different

from the rest of the characters. Therefore, Louis presents the perfect solution to the Rhoda problem: he can connect with her emotionally, since they both exist on the fringes of their friend group and therefore of traditional, accepted society, but he can also use his commandeering personality and alignments to bring Rhoda “to order.” If Louis can successfully dominate and then subdue Rhoda’s queerness, her deviant sexuality will be compressed into at least perceived social normalcy, which would make Rhoda pliable enough to align with the group consciousness. Cramer frames group consciousness in context of the way the group rallies around Percival, arguing that this is evidence that “Woolf continues in *The Waves* her lifelong preoccupation with group psychology. In her diary, she explains her fascination with how groups bond and exclude others” (Cramer 448). Throughout the novel, both Louis and Rhoda are painfully aware of their inability to completely fit within the group, despite their peripheral inclusion. Louis overcomes his anxiety by developing a superiority complex, morphing further and further into a personification of empire. Rhoda, however, is unable to morph; submitting to Louis’s patriarchal power was her last chance to do so, and she chooses to walk away. Therefore, Rhoda is ultimately excluded through the group consciousness and disposed of via her suicide.

I established in chapter one that any understanding of Ophelia’s madness scene in *Hamlet* is incomplete without a consideration of the subtle acts of rebellion Ophelia packs into her flower presentation. Ophelia’s decision to engage with Hamlet despite warnings not to do so was an act of rebellion Ophelia used in attempt to break rigid, gendered expectations of her sexuality, an act of rebellion expanded upon in the madness scene. Similarly, while Rhoda’s sexuality is important on its own, it is best understood when contextualized as being a tool Rhoda uses to break from the rigidity of feminine gender roles. It is the revolutionary act of

daring to exist outside of traditional confines of womanhood that must be suppressed to keep the patriarchal harmony of novels. Therefore, it is pertinent in establishing the perceived deviant nature of Rhoda's sexuality to explore the way it impacts her gender expression, which causes the primary tension between Rhoda and the rest of the traditionally aligned characters, both male and female. Rhoda uses sexual deviancy to rise above patriarchal expectations, which is best metaphorically contained in her decision to leave Louis.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Susan and Jinny fulfill traditional expectations of women, although they occupy opposite sides of the spectrum. Rhoda, however, fails to align with either maternal monogamy or sexual promiscuity, separating her completely from the spectrum of accepted female behavior. Rhoda is aware of this difference, even in childhood, and makes an active choice to keep it that way: “‘As I fold up my frock and my chemise,’ said Rhoda, ‘so I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny’” (Woolf 27). The frock and the chemise are both obviously aligned with stereotypical femininity, since they are traditional female clothing items. Here, Rhoda is seen packing those items up, which is symbolic of her overall desire to pack gender away entirely. Additionally, Rhoda says she is going to stop trying to be Susan and Jinny – she no longer wants to replicate their behavior in an attempt to better fulfill her proper gender role. She describes the task as “hopeless,” which mirrors the fatalism Neville expressed when discussing his future within a heterosexual relationship, despite his passion for Percival. It is worth noting that Rhoda marks the imitation of Susan and Jinny as a “desire.” Rhoda wishes to exist within normal social confines because of the severe detachment and anxiety she experiences in groups, where she presents as markedly different from her peers. However, unlike Neville, Rhoda gives up this desire early, when she's still a child. Rhoda spends her life existing

outside of the norms she yearns for, deciding before she's even hit puberty that her imitation of Susan and Jinny would never be convincing enough to be worth pursuing. As she holds the clothes that could transform her into a "proper" woman in this scene, she comes to terms with the fact that it's the body occupying them, and that body's desires, that is truly the problem.

Returning to Rhoda's deviant sexuality, which encourages the rebellious gender presentation, the novel does feature a scene where Rhoda's desire for women becomes explicit. Rhoda is watching Susan and Jinny getting dressed, admiring the confidence with which they go about their normal activities and the ease with which they gather friends. By contrast, according to Rhoda's own analysis, she can only gather "names and faces"; due to her high social anxiety, she can only observe, which explains why she does not develop a romantic obsession in the way Neville does with Percival. But she does look around: "I choose out across the hall some unknown face and can hardly drink my tea when she whose name I do not know sits opposite. I choke. I am rocked side to side by the violence of my emotion" (Woolf 43). Although Rhoda never dwells on one person, this scene is interesting because Rhoda has a visceral reaction to the attraction she feels to the woman she watches from afar. While Rhoda is often stunned by the actions of others, she is usually paralyzed and withdraws; here, Rhoda chokes, as if shocked by the power of her own emotion, rather than shutting down because of the power of her fear. Her functionality is impaired by this woman. Furthermore, Rhoda often experiences paralyzing fear around her friends because she so fears being perceived and then judged as inadequate. Since Rhoda struggles with the concept of her existence, she is put on edge when someone else recognizes her presence, pulling her into the physical world. However, with this woman, Rhoda is watching her, not the other way around. There is no reason for her to be so fearful that she

chokes, because she is not at the moment being perceived. Therefore, I conclude Rhoda is instead struck by how attractive she finds the woman, even from afar.

Cramer comes to the same conclusion and even connects Rhoda's physical reaction to the unnamed woman to an enduring metaphor associated with Rhoda. In childhood, Rhoda is seen rocking a basin with water from side to side as a way to control a small world, since she has no power over the one around her. The action becomes an enduring metaphor for her, and that rocking emotion returns in this tea-drinking scene. Cramer associates the motion with Rhoda's sexuality: "Rhoda's characteristic gesture – "rock[ing] [her] brown basin from side to side" (19) – suggests an auto- and homoeroticism. The sexual meaning of Rhoda's back and forth motion becomes clearer in a later passage when she says that she was rocked from side to side by the violence of [her] emotion when a woman she admired sat opposite drinking tea" (Cramer 450). Cramer later calls the repetitive motion "masturbatory" (Cramer 451), implying that since Rhoda's sexuality is so repressed in the text that this motion is the only safe way she can communicate genuine sexual desire. It should be noted that the text is by no means entirely sexually conservative; Jinny, for example, is aligned with sex often, often expressing a desire to be ravished. Rhoda's need to express her sexuality in such a repressed manner reflects both the perceived deviance of her desire for women and her disconnect from her own body. Cramer argues that Rhoda avoids heterosexual romantic relationships because of her lesbianism rather than a "fear of sexuality or her own body" (Cramer 450) but this scene indicates that Rhoda does in fact fear a healthy expression of her sexuality. This scene combined with Rhoda's overall torturous discomfort with existing in her own body means she is incapable of expressing normal

sexual desires, unlike Jinny. Therefore, this scene can be read as a small outlet for Rhoda, whose desires remain mostly guarded throughout the rest of the text.

Although the text, like with many things, is coy with Rhoda's sexuality, textual evidence does exist to establish Rhoda's queer sexuality. Her alignment with Neville, her lack of alignment with the other female characters and the traditional gender spectrum, and her unconventional expression of sexual desire in the tea scene are all subtle yet highly significant markers of Rhoda's sexuality. Her deviant sexuality, at least according to the expectations of 20th century Great Britain, is what guides her deviant gender expression, which is notably outside of accepted gender practices, contrasted by the stereotypes wholly inhibited by Susan and Jinny. Establishing that Rhoda exhibits both deviant sexuality and a rebellious gender persona frames the need for her to be punished; in stepping outside of her prescribed societal role, Rhoda also defies the synthesis of the group consciousness Bernard strives for in the final chapter, which leads to her complete elimination from the group via suicide.

II. A version of madness: Rhoda's lack of selfhood

Critic Saghar Najafi uses phenomenology, which is the science of phenomena that concentrates on the study of consciousness, to analyze Rhoda's detachment from reality.

According to Najafi, phenomenology captures the essence of selfhood required for proper functioning of consciousness; without the proper consciousness, an individual would have "an impaired sense of selfhood involving temporality, spatiality, absence and presence" (Najafi).

Rhoda is one of the characters named in the article as suffering from this disconnect, a concept I would endorse given her inability to ground herself in reality, especially as it relates to physical space and time. Throughout the novel, Rhoda's thoughts are even more scattered than the other

characters; several of the other main speakers, while still speaking through Woolf's unique stream of consciousness style, are able to move through concrete plot points and explain their emotions surrounding those plots. But Rhoda more often travels through her motifs, rooted only loosely in time and instead presenting a series of concrete images or scenes that make her overall story arc much more difficult to follow than the other characters. Part of the reason Rhoda is less apt to give a play-by-play of her life is because she is often untethered from the present moment, further reinforcing the concept that her consciousness is impaired. Several times throughout the novel, Rhoda's reality disconnect affects her ability to physically exist, and I will analyze the most famous of those scenes later in this chapter.

For example, in one of the childhood scenes, Rhoda struggles to answer a question in school: "I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join—so—and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh, save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!'" (Woolf 21-22). In this scene, as clarified later by Louis, Rhoda is the last one in the classroom, trapped by her inability to answer the question on the board. Rhoda's inability to discern the meaning of the figures before her, which may be a simple problem for the other characters to solve, quickly escalates; she uses the figures as a means to escape the reality of her present situation, seeking a metaphor that transports her away from the present moment, where she finds it suffocating to exist. Rhoda's struggle to solve an equation quickly becomes more about Rhoda's presence outside the group. She is "outside the loop of time," or outside of the social norms represented by the other characters. She feels so separated from them, even at a young age, that she worries she will never be able to reenter their circle. Rhoda is so consumed by the fatalistic nature of this

metaphor that she cannot even describe to the reader the frankly mundane nature of her current problem, which is why it must be clarified by Louis. The frantic, escalating nature of Rhoda's inner consciousness sets her apart from the other characters. Her storylines are constantly clarified by the others because she cannot clearly communicate her desires, motivations, or actions on her own. Rhoda's unconventional consciousness mirrors her unconventional sexuality and gender, conflating her queer sexuality with the queer form of her soliloquies.

Najafi further expands his thesis on phenomenology and the effect of impairments on consciousness through the world-to-mind misfit concept. He describes it in simple terms: "a discrepancy between the intention directed at an object and the object perceived, e.g., directing attention at an apple, perceiving an orange and claiming so, can cause problems in leading a normal life; this nonconformity is also defined as a misfit to world-to-mind or mind-to-world compatibility" (Najafi). In other words, the character can perceive the world differently than it actually exists, which then makes that world difficult to physically and mentally exist within for that character. Najafi puts forward the example of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose world-to-mind misfit presents explicitly in the novel as mental illness. His decision to use Septimus, who suffers from PTSD, as an example in a category Rhoda also fits is interesting, considering Septimus and Rhoda both meet the same end: suicide. In fact, Najafi argues that Septimus's mind-to-world misfit is a significant factor in his eventual mental breakdown and suicide, which is an arc meant to parallel Clarissa Dalloway, the main character in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Septimus's suicide is presented thematically as the end Clarissa could have met, had her life turned out slightly differently. This connection is significant because a chunk of *Mrs. Dalloway* focuses on a female lover Clarissa held in the past, and a sense of regret that she

settled down with her husband rather than following her passion for women. Rhoda stands in as the thematically fleshed out example of who Clarissa could have been had she followed her desire for women: Rhoda, who is attracted to women, suffers the same world-to-mind misfit as Septimus and commits suicide. The connection between these three characters paints a grim picture of the mental punishment that follows an indulgence in queer feelings and sex as a woman, which is the main point of sexual deviance in *The Waves*.

Rhoda, according to Najafi's analysis, suffers from world-to-mind misfit, making her a "delusional" character. He is primarily concerned with Rhoda's obsession with silence and nothingness, which are both concepts Rhoda associates with herself in her monologues. Najafi writes: "Silence is the signified of her thoughts; the signifier, which disturbs her understanding of the world and herself, results in her equalizing her own being as silence and nothingness" (Najafi). Since Rhoda sees herself as "nothingness," she is unable to move physically through the world, resulting in existential crises such as the famous puddle scene, which I will analyze further in this chapter. This analysis fits in with Najafi's second point, in which he recognizes that Rhoda often fails to recognize herself as part of communities, because she has to watch what her friends do in order to react rather than acting organically. Since Rhoda combines the world as nothingness with herself as nothingness, physical presence is at times impossible for her to grasp, which also leads to a great fear of being perceived. She tries to fit the mold of what is presented around her so that when she is perceived, she fits what is expected of her rather than giving into what her perception of the world would lead her to be.

Bernard, who in some ways is the most omniscient throughout the novel of the six speakers, picks up on this anxiety: "Rhoda loves to be alone. She fears us because we shatter the

sense of being which is so extreme in solitude – see how she grasps her fork – her weapon against us” (Woolf 133). The way Bernard describes Rhoda holding her fork is an excellent example of Rhoda’s world-to-mind misfit. As I mentioned in the above paragraph, Najafi’s analysis of Rhoda reveals that she copies others as a way of coping with her own sense of nothingness. Therefore, I argue that in this dinner scene Rhoda is gripping her fork not as a “weapon,” but the tension instead stems from her intense concentration of mimicking the modeled behavior around her. However, since Rhoda comes off as threatening enough that Bernard interprets the fork as a “weapon,” we can infer that her world is so mismatched from reality that she presents herself as a threat rather than earnest to the people who know her best in the world. I argue this mismatch between the way Rhoda appears in her own head and the way she comes off to others extends to other areas of her life and other major plot points in the novel. For example, returning to Rhoda’s affair with Louis, a reader can infer that Rhoda is more attractive than she considers herself because of her relationship with Louis. Besides Percival, Louis is the most desired member of the presented cohort; Jinny’s first concrete memory is kissing him, and Susan’s first is the pain she felt when she saw that kiss, and it’s a memory she reflects on well into adulthood as formative. However, Rhoda ends up sexually involved with Louis, triumphing over both Jinny and Susan. In Rhoda’s reflection, she often considers herself inferior to both Jinny and Susan in every aspect related to gender, and yet she ends up with Louis, who is not only highly desirable but aligned with traditional gender roles and conventional desire because of his deep metaphorical ties to the British empire.

Further evidence of Rhoda being the one intimidated by the group, rather than the intimidator, comes across in her monologue that shortly precedes Bernard's observation. As she enters the dinner, she says:

The door opens and the tiger leaps. You did not see me come. I circled round the chairs to avoid the horror of the spring. I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do - I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view (Woolf 130).

The anxiety Rhoda feels as she enters the group dinner pours from every word; she sees this meeting, this chance of being perceived, as metaphorically aligned with possible death, which she demonstrates by likening it to a tiger leaping. Clearly, she does not intend to wield anything as a "weapon," even a fork, because her instinct is to flee rather than fight. She demonstrates that in the way she circles the chairs "to avoid the horror of the spring." She keeps her distance from her peers for as long as possible because she knows the inevitable is coming: the tiger. She not only knows it's coming but it becomes all-consuming, swallowing the "end" she can no longer see. The hopelessness that Rhoda feels is completely mismatched from the demeanor perceived by Bernard. While he picks up on her fear, he incorrectly predicts her reaction and attributes it to the wrong sense. It is not that Rhoda prefers solitude – in fact, solitude arguably terrifies Rhoda more, because she is forced to confront her own sense of nothingness. Her sense of being is not stronger when she is alone, she simply has a sense of security in knowing that nobody can perceive her nothingness. The nothingness, however, is ever present, whether Rhoda is alone or

surrounded by her friends. Therefore, even though Bernard can pick up on Rhoda's fear, he cannot correctly place its source, demonstrating how the person Rhoda appears to be is distinct from the person she believes she is exhibiting.

This misalignment is further demonstrated later in this same Rhoda monologue when she describes how she copes: "But since I wish above all things to have lodgment, I pretend, as I go upstairs lagging behind Jinny and Susan, to have an end in view. I pull on my stockings as I see them pull on theirs. I wait for you to speak and then speak like you" (Woolf 131). Rhoda is desperate to correctly mimic the behavior presented by the two "proper" women, Jinny and Susan. She follows behind, but not too closely, so she can see how they act before repeating the behavior to please those who are watching her. It is clear that Rhoda's behavior at the dinner table is not a correct mimicry because she is unable to disguise the fear and anxiety that the dinner causes for her. In Rhoda's head, she is copying every word and action to best fit in with those around her. However, in reality, her facade is poorly maintained and gives her away. This inability to properly fit her behavior with the reality she wants to reflect reveals why Rhoda cannot obtain her most desperate desire: lodging. Rhoda's separation from reality is represented by her removal from concrete time and space, as the phenomenology approach establishes. Rhoda states that all she wants is "lodging": a permanent place to stay. I argue that she just wants something permanent in space, however it presents, because she obtains her sense of grounding from the people and objects around her rather than being capable of tethering to her own sense of self. This sense of lodging is more metaphorical than physical, reflecting Rhoda's desire to simply rejoin reality rather than drifting in her sense of nothingness.

Rhoda's world-to-mind misfits further manifests in the way she talks about her peers, frequently calling them "you" rather than "them" or addressing them by name. Rhoda does fall into some of the regular pronoun usage of the other characters; when she relates specific actions, she uses names and gendered pronouns and in group settings uses "we" as the other characters do to describe group actions. However, Rhoda is distinguished by the use of "you," because she is referring to the other characters even though it appears as if she is addressing the audience. Rhoda uses "you" to create a clear barrier between her and other members of the group; in this particular instance, the "you" refers to Jinny and Susan as she mimics their behavior. Rhoda's use of "you" creates a natural "me versus you" dichotomy, which represents how Rhoda views herself as separate from the group consciousness long before her suicide permanently renders her incapable of joining their chorus. Rhoda is aware of the way her separate reality renders her incapable of synthesis, which is what would have been required of her in the final chapter had she lived to see its closure. Ultimately, Rhoda is distinct from the rest of the group because she cannot make her world match theirs, which is why she is forced to constantly copy behavior in a desperate attempt to appear as if she belongs. Since Rhoda's world-to-mind misfit prevents her from group synthesis, it naturally follows that it would prevent her from surviving the final stage of consciousness represented by Bernard's overtaking of the narrative in the final chapter.

The most potent example of Rhoda's lack of self is the scene in which she comes to a puddle and, unwilling or unable to face her reflection and the consciousness and identity it would suggest, finds herself unable to cross the water. As she stares at the puddle, she says, "I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels" (Woolf 64). Rhoda's lack of identity is not just a mental issue but it affects

her physically as well. Her anxiety over being “nothing” prevents her from crossing the puddle, and as a result, she falls. She has no sense of autonomy without identity; the universe acts upon her, blowing her “like a feather” and wafting her “down tunnels.” Rhoda is merely an object to be acted upon rather than an active participant in her own existence. She directly blames her lack of identity for the outcome, because she says that identity “failed” her before she falls. This complete lack of autonomy mirrors Ophelia’s lack of control over her own life and body in *Hamlet*. While Ophelia never experiences literal paralysis and collapse, as Rhoda does in this passage, the restrictions imposed on her sexuality limits the use and movement of her body, which is just as severe a loss of autonomy as the one Rhoda experiences in the puddle scene. Rhoda literally losing control of her physical faculties because she cannot face her own reflection is an important foreshadowing to the lack of control she feels over life that leads directly to the one thing she can control: suicide. While I will address that scene later in this chapter, it is certainly worth noting that Bernard implies that, like Ophelia, Rhoda commits her suicide in water. Just like with the puddle, Rhoda would have to confront her reflection and lack of identity in order to go through with the act. The implication is that she can only face herself when she knows it’s the last time she will have to do so.

The most peculiar part of Rhoda’s encounter with the puddle is her expression, “We are nothing.” The essential nature of Rhoda’s reflection of the puddle, and a motif that carries throughout many more of her speeches, is that she has no identity and therefore is incapable of seeing her reflection, which would be a face tethered without a consciousness. However, Rhoda does not say *I* am nothing, she uses the plural “we,” as if she simultaneously contains multitudes and nothing at all. I suggest that the use of the word “we” reveals Rhoda’s identity within the

larger group of characters. Since Rhoda's identity "fails" her as an individual, she has to use the entire group as a means of attaching herself to reality. The "we" refers not to multitudes gathered within Rhoda, but the multitudes represented by her circle. Her interactions with them is what allows her to exist within a limited reality; outside of them, she fails to recognize the reality of the universe, leading to situations such as the puddle scene. I further argue that the reason Rhoda can exist within a communal space but not within an individual space is because she defines herself by her differences from the majority. Rhoda is constantly reminded of the ways in which she is different from the rest of the group, and highlighting those differences is what gives Rhoda any sense of identity or meaning. The command with which the other characters hold space allows Rhoda to juxtapose herself against them and therefore share that plane of existence. Outside of that world of constant comparison, Rhoda is unable to survive.

Woolf highlights Rhoda's differences from her peers from the beginning of *The Waves*. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, when the six speaking characters are together, they think in bursts rather than monologues, presenting disjointed thoughts that eventually sync up into central ideas and plot the longer they remain together. This pattern is not limited to childhood scenes, as it repeats itself far later in the novel, at the group dinner scene for Percival's departure to India. From the first burst scene, the characters begin to reveal their personalities and establish central motifs that will follow them throughout the course of both their individual and shared journeys. Rhoda is characterized in this scene primarily by what she lacks, rather than what she provides, within the group dynamic. She often has less to say than her peers and the motifs she forms are less complex than what the other characters present. This is not an absolute rule; at times, Rhoda seems leaps and bounds ahead of the other characters, rather than lagging

behind. However, her inability to tether her personality to language in a consistent manner is in itself a form of lacking.

The other characters all have consistent characterization, language, and motifs; Louis, for example, who I have already suggested is primarily connected to Rhoda from their shared sense of being an outsider, is consistently characterized by empire. His language is commanding, his judgment is sharp, and his major motif is a chained beast stamping. Woolf, a prominent critic of England's role in colonization, fashioned the beast to be England. It is a beast for its actions and chained because of the tumultuous nature of Great Britain in the 20th century, during which the two world wars began to pull at its economic seams. And yet the beast is stamping, demanding to still be heard, which matches the character of Louis at every point of the novel. Rhoda's metaphors and language are far less stable, even if at some points it is just as complex. The rocking of her basin, for example, is associated both with Rhoda attempting to get control over an imagined universe and with her sexuality, which is entirely outside of her control and contributes to her world-to-mind misfit. Another example is when Rhoda goes on a "pilgrimage" and then throws violets into the water as an offering to Percival. While Woolf's personal writings loosely connected flowers to love between women, that metaphor is disjointed here, since Rhoda specifically offers them to Percival (Woolf 164). Furthermore, the need for Rhoda to take a pilgrimage to properly grieve Percival is also confused; Rhoda is never described as particularly close to Percival, and yet she faces her biggest fear, water, in order to toss violets for him into the crashing waves. Rhoda has brief moments of powerful characterization that are quickly crushed by inconsistent symbolism, such as with her basin and her flowers. Rhoda's motifs fail to bring

forward consistent meanings because Rhoda herself completely lacks control over who she is and how she is presented to the world around her.

The tension produced by the dichotomy of Rhoda's language and voice is present even in the first section of the novel, focused on sensory observations through sight and sound. The section is meant to evoke a sense of juvenilia, allowing the characters to introduce their personalities by marking what to them is worth noticing and presenting to the rest of the group. While the language and ideas presented in this section are relatively simple, this scene is essential for establishing the personalities of the six central characters. Additionally, the simplicity of the exchanges juxtaposed against the characters' later linguistic development helps the reader understand the shaky timeline of the novel, which can often get lost in between major transitions. On the first page, Bernard and Susan, who both act throughout the novel as the de-facto leaders of their individual genders, speak first, channeling sight. Bernard identifies a concrete object: a ring, hanging above him. He emerges later in the novel as a primary voice for the group and is at times even thought to embody the rest of the voices as a single character, so his firm grounding in the concrete, matter-of-fact nature of reality fits his character arc well. Susan is slightly more poetic, describing a "slab of pale yellow" that spreads "way until it meets a purple stripe" (Woolf 9). While Susan also presents a visual memory, hers is slightly more abstract and demonstrates her ability to focus on two things at once. She notes both the color of the "slab" and the way it stretches and evolves until meeting its eventual end, the "purple stripe." Susan sees the full picture of this image's evolution, which is fitting for her characterization: from the beginning, Susan is hyper-focused on the qualities she must achieve to be a proper lady. It is a surprise to no one when she emerges in adulthood consumed entirely by her status as a

married mother. When Susan sees an image, she is more concerned with its evolution than its immediate presentation, which matches her focus on long-term goals rather than temporal indulgences.

Both Bernard and Susan choose to emulate sight and then Rhoda breaks the mold. She describes a sound: “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down” (Woolf 9). Rhoda’s first vocalized thought is significant for a variety of reasons. First, as I’ve noted, Rhoda decides to describe something she hears rather than sees. At first, a reader may note that difference as something that will later make Rhoda a breakout character of the novel, one confident in breaking the mold and whose digression is used to examine her power as a character. However, the opposite turns out to be true; Rhoda buries herself in the group dynamic and is incapable of facing her own individuality, as demonstrated in the puddle scene. Additionally, further evidence from this first scene shows that contextually, Rhoda’s observation is further from original than it seems. For one, Rhoda is not the only of the six to choose sound as her first sense, she’s simply the first to do so. Louis’s first interaction with the “beast stomping” is his first sensory description, which also evokes auditory rather than visual senses. Additionally, Louis’s description is arguably a more important digression from the visual mold, because he names his central motif the first time he speaks in the novel. Rhoda’s description of the chirping of birds, however, is not highly significant for her character nor does it take on later meaning through repetition. Rhoda’s observation is concrete rather than abstract, aligning her with Bernard rather than with Susan, but the concrete nature of the observation does not reinforce an aspect of Rhoda’s personality. In fact, it arguably does the opposite, since finding any sense of concrete meaning is Rhoda’s biggest problem. Her inability to grasp the world without being guided by

the other characters is her biggest flaw and insecurity. Rhoda's auditory observation is simple and shallow, unlike the descriptions surrounding hers.

Additionally, Rhoda reinforces the childish nature of her observation through her literal words: her first description, which is the second shortest of the group, rhymes "sound" with "down." Her words have a singsong quality to them when read aloud. It is tempting to attribute that quality to the childlike nature of the opening scene, especially since the opening explores the juvenile attachment to the senses. However, as I analyzed in the descriptions presented by Bernard, Susan, and Louis, the young versions of the novel's characters are still capable of complex language and metaphor. Therefore, Rhoda's reliance on a description that resembles more of a child's nursery rhyme than a complex observation speaks directly to her immaturity as compared to the other characters. This reading is reinforced later in this same section, when Rhoda struggles with classwork the rest of her peers breeze through. We can compare Rhoda's singsong auditory description to the complex construction of Louis's oral observation: "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps" (Woolf 9). In contrast to Rhoda, Louis actually manages to capture both the sound and visual aspect of his observation, by including the detail of the chained nature of the beast in addition to its stomping. The power of this initial description is what enables Woolf to use the metaphor consistently for Louis as a tool for her critique of empire. However, Rhoda's bird appears to be just that: a bird. Even her additional description, "going up and down," tells the reader only the variance of the bird's pitch. Rhoda's childlike nature defines both her inferiority and naiveté in comparison to the rest of the primary characters, a theme that will define Rhoda for the endurance of the novel.

As I've established, Rhoda's inability to identify as an individual and her reliance on the group dynamic speak to both her fragility and lack of autonomy, qualities that both map directly onto Ophelia. Therefore, while what the rest of the characters offer to the group as individuals remain theirs and are often represented as continuous motifs, what Rhoda offers becomes fair game for the rest of the characters to use according to their own wishes. In the same way that Ophelia offers pieces of herself before her suicide to symbolize the ownership of others over her own body, Rhoda's personal and intimate attributes are taken and then used by the other characters, in ways that are not replicated across the rest of the cast. Woolf demonstrates this in the childhood scene, where Rhoda's initial description is the only one that is used by multiple characters; first, by Neville and then by Susan. Both secondary bird descriptions are more complex than Rhoda's. Susan's specifically improves upon Rhoda's initial observation: "Birds are singing up and down and in and out and all round us" (Woolf 10). Rhoda was only able to capture the "up and down" motion of the birds' pitch. Susan, however, expands on the sensory information, stating that the sounds also go "in and out and all round us." Susan has a firmer grasp on the total reach of the sound, which has the sense of being all-consuming because of Susan's decision to describe it as "all round us." Rhoda's view, however, is limited to just one directional pattern. Rhoda's inability to see beyond the limited confines of her own mind, while the other characters enjoy a more expansive view of the world, is a theme that will follow her throughout the novel. Woolf establishes aspects of Rhoda's sexuality and personality that separate her from the rest of the group through these formal devices to demonstrate how the only ending for the character she's designed, especially because she's a woman, is death.

III. When the bloodhounds consume: Rhoda's suicide

As noted several times throughout this chapter, the final section of *The Waves* is taken over entirely by Bernard, who acts as a narrator to synthesize the rest of the group into one central storyline. Bernard's role as the storyteller is certainly not unexpected; in fact, it's foreshadowed by Neville early on in the novel: "We are all pellets. We are all phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B. He tells our story with extraordinary understanding, except of what we most feel. For he does not need us" (Woolf 70). The synthesis Bernard presents in the final chapter is highly questionable because the reader is unaware of what Bernard omits in his attempt to bring the individual consciousness of the other five characters into a centralized group consciousness that he alone characterizes. Long before Bernard takes on this role, Neville questions whether he really understands anyone else's perspective and emotions, or if he is simply invested in presenting what he finds relevant to the group journey. The fact that the concern is brought forward by Neville is significant, as the ultimate feeling Neville is alluding to may refer implicitly to his and Rhoda's sexuality. Since the narrative structure of *The Waves* is so thoroughly inventive, it is hotly debated among scholars whether Bernard narrates the entire novel from the beginning, simply imitating the other voices before it is no longer necessary. Under that analysis, the burying of Rhoda's sexuality in metaphors would reflect Neville's accusation that Bernard doesn't understand what they feel, but simply chooses what best represents the group consciousness and social order he is desperate to create in Percival's absence. Neville says that Bernard doesn't need the rest of the chorus, and for Rhoda, that is certainly true. Not only is her voice discarded in the final chapter, a fate that befalls all of the characters except Bernard's, but her death is referenced with almost as little care

as her affair with Louis was. She is not treated with the same mourning that Neville provides for Percival, the only other death to which Rhoda's can be compared with.

As I argued in the introduction, while authorial intent is not the focus of this thesis, it does at times seem highly improbable that Virginia Woolf, a feminist writer, would go to such lengths to punish Rhoda's deviant sexuality, as contextualized by the era, that in many ways mirrored Woolf's own desires. The group synthesis at the end of the novel provides another possibility: Bernard. When Bernard steps in to channel the six competing voices into one narrative, he literally writes the stories of the other six characters through his own interpretive lens. He takes the reins of the novel and becomes the author for their lives and his own. By installing a literal male author that consciously excludes Rhoda's existence by ridding her via suicide, Woolf may be critiquing the cruelty with which male authors treat their female characters who begin to spin out of control. Rhoda's defining characteristics, her sexuality and world-to-mind misfit, quickly become too much for Bernard to handle. The rest of the characters in the chorus fit neatly into archetypes, ones he understands and can easily control. Rhoda's mind, however, has never been pliable; she does not fit a consistent mold, as demonstrated by her inability to hold onto concrete metaphors that are not muddled between employment for vastly different meanings over the course of the novel. Rhoda refuses to submit to the heterosexual model of patriarchy that Percival represented and Bernard wants to recreate. Therefore, Bernard disposes of her, quickly and without much remorse. Bernard's role as the meta male narrator means Woolf can maintain the suicide of the Ophelia figure while directly critiquing the use of such an archetype by male authors.

Bernard frames Rhoda's death with the emotion he most frequently associated with her – fear: “the figure of Rhoda always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone; she had killed herself” (Woolf 281). He uses over twenty words to characterize her fear, making the announcement of her suicide only a fifth of this bumbling, dismissive sentence. Bernard waits until almost the end of the final chapter to explain Rhoda's death, and when he does, he spares just four words to an act that should be consuming him with grief: “she had killed herself.” The indifference with which Bernard treats the initial announcement of Rhoda's death is further evidence that her death, in his eyes, is necessary for the synthesis of the group consciousness that could not tolerate Rhoda's severe world-to-mind misfit. The indifference also certainly reinforces Neville's earlier statement that Bernard only used the other characters for the story which he drafts; anything that doesn't fit is simply written out, as is the case with Rhoda. Unlike with Ophelia, Rhoda's death is stated explicitly to be a suicide, which removes any narrative ambiguity surrounding the role she took in her own fate. However, Bernard is careful to emphasize the fearful nature of Rhoda's character before revealing her end, almost creating the image of a scared, wounded animal who finally found relief in the end to her suffering. Perhaps Bernard does this to draw up sympathy he does not create by divulging any of his own feelings about her passing, if he has any.

Regardless of Bernard's personal motivations in framing Rhoda's death with fear, his doing so is in line with the way Rhoda feels about death in the aftermath of Percival's passing: “Reckless and random the cars race and roar and hunt us to death like bloodhounds. I am alone in a hostile world” (Woolf 159). While there are scholars like Cramer who argue that Woolf had Rhoda commit suicide to escape a world in which she could never survive happily, I argue that

Rhoda does not associate death with happiness or freedom. Rather, Rhoda associates death not just with fear, but with the feeling of being hunted. She feels chased down by death after Percival dies, which is not the way someone who secretly seeks the relief of such an end would feel. This is highly relevant in making further comparisons between Ophelia and Rhoda in the context of the punishment of suicide for revolutionary female characters. As established in the previous chapter, Ophelia's madness scene is so complicated because she feels equally guilty and angry as she gets closer and closer to her fate. While Ophelia takes blame for her father's death, she also expresses extreme resentment towards her brother and the confines he placed on her sexuality that led her to her end. Ultimately, Ophelia is not fully invested in her suicide, exemplified by the strange way she drowns neither accidentally nor intentionally. Here, Rhoda seems to also feel out of control of her fate. If there was a chance for freedom for Rhoda in death, she would not associate it with the imagery of bloodhounds hunting her down. Death is something that Rhoda feels will happen to her, not something that she makes happen for her own release. Therefore, we can read a similar ambiguity in Rhoda's suicide as we do in Ophelia's: she is said to have committed it, but the hand that forces her feels like it's attached to a different arm than her own. Rhoda is being hunted by the consequences of her perceived deviant nature, and the bloodhounds consume her.

Furthering the connection between Ophelia and Rhoda, Bernard implies that Rhoda dies in water: "I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt" (Woolf 289). Bernard communicates that Rhoda "leapt" and that it must have been a height high enough that her fall could be constituted as a "flight." Rhoda's suicide is often read as a cliff dive into water because earlier in the novel, when Rhoda

is processing Percival's death, she arrives at a cliff overlooking water. The "pillar" from which Rhoda leapt is often read as being that same cliff, although since Bernard's descriptions of Rhoda's suicide are so curt, it is not possible to confirm the site of her death within the text. Death by water connects Rhoda and Ophelia absolutely; interestingly, it also connects to Woolf herself, who ended her life by drowning. The use of water for Rhoda's death could take on many meanings. I argued one earlier in this chapter, concerning Rhoda's decision to end her life once she confronts her reflection in the water a final time, broken by her inability to perceive herself as a physical being, even after all this time. Another suggested symbolism would relate to baptism, suggesting that both Ophelia and Rhoda seek the purifying nature of water in their final moments as a way to cleanse the sin of deviant sexuality. For Ophelia, that may not be possible, considering her suicide itself would constitute an even graver sin than her perceived promiscuity. The healing effects may be more tangible for Rhoda, however, who exists in an era with less stringent religious opinions on suicide.

The water, in its vastness, may also be Rhoda's one way to satisfy her need to be overtaken entirely by something that is at once an individual and a vast entity; if she is incapable of joining the group synthesis in the mortal realm, in death may be her chance. There is evidence for this desire earlier in the text: "There was a star riding through clouds one night, and I said to the star, 'Consume me'" (Woolf 64). The desire that Rhoda expresses in this passage, to be consumed, more appropriately contextualizes what Rhoda believes will bring her freedom which is misread as a yearning for death. As explored at length in this chapter, Rhoda's defining characteristic is her inability to fully exist, either as an individual or within group settings. Despite the differences it exposes, she is arguably more whole within groups, because her

mimicry of others' behavior at least gives the impression that she may be able to assimilate into the group consciousness, despite her inability to do so because of the world-to-mind misfit that prevents the blending of her individual consciousness into a group chorus. If Rhoda is fully consumed, she can finally, truly abandon her attempts to push through her fear and anxiety and imitate the world around her. She can be free of her warped sense of reality and be entirely absorbed by the world around her in a way not usually available to her. While Rhoda expresses this desire for consumption to the star, which would presumably be a reference to the heavens, the baptism represented by water may be just as fitting a symbol. Ultimately, Rhoda is consumed by the water that takes her life, placing her within the chorus of nature that sets the scene for the novel's symbolic interludes.

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the tragic arc of Rhoda in *The Waves* in many ways mirrors the tropes established by *Hamlet's* Ophelia several centuries earlier. Despite Virginia Woolf's status as a prominent feminist writer, her female protagonist falls into the same traps of sexual deviancy and its punishments as Ophelia did within the confines of a far more conservative societal order. Just as with Ophelia, Rhoda's sexual deviancy paves the way for a nontraditional gender expression that is read as a revolt against established social order, characterized by three prominent male characters, just as in *Hamlet*: Percival, Louis, and Bernard. Rhoda suffers from a world-to-mind misfit that tortures her over the course of the novel, a condition which could be read in a similar fashion to Ophelia's madness, especially since another Woolf character that suffers from the misfit is written explicitly as mentally ill. Ultimately, Rhoda ends her life through the use of water, but just as with Ophelia, there are serious questions about autonomy and desire connected to this end. These questions are even

graver for Rhoda's arc because of the explicit male author, Bernard, and his attempt to do what Louis could not: reduce Rhoda to order. In the following chapter, I will briefly trace the evolution of this tragic trope and its modern incarnation through the use of John Green's *Looking for Alaska*. The trope used in that novel is a woman far more dangerous in representation than Ophelia or Rhoda, because she is read as revolutionary despite the reductive stereotypes surrounding her existence.

Chapter Three: The Hopeless Reincarnation

In both *Hamlet* and *The Waves*, the women this analysis has focused on – Ophelia and Rhoda, respectively – did not ground their novels. As mentioned, despite the fame the madness scene has acquired, *Hamlet* can go on nearly unchanged if Ophelia’s character is excluded altogether. While the same cannot be said of Rhoda in *The Waves*, she does have the least concrete plot of the six speaking characters and her death is reduced to just four words buried in the last chapter of the novel. Inversely, the entirety of *Looking for Alaska*, as its name may imply, is about Alaska Young, the character I argue is our modern and misguided incarnation of the Ophelia archetype. While the suicides in *Hamlet* and *The Waves* are valued for their emotional effects on the audience, and in Ophelia’s case on the rest of the characters, neither suicide is a major plot point. In *Looking for Alaska*, Alaska’s suicide defines not just the emotional impact of the novel but it also grounds the story’s structure. Miles Halter, the protagonist, is so deeply affected by the loss of Alaska that he structures his life into the “before” and “after” of her death. Rather than being a tragic oversight, Alaska’s death is the reason for the novel’s existence. While this may appear to be a progressive reincarnation of Ophelia, it is important to note three main facts that demonstrate the actual regressive nature of Green’s reimagination of the tragic Ophelia arc. One, despite Green’s reorienting of the story to center Alaska rather than cast her as a side show, Alaska still demonstrates sexual deviancy that is swiftly punished by suicide. Two, even in a novel titled after the woman, the male narrator takes precedence; Miles’s inability to cope without Alaska takes center stage, out-ranking any consideration of Alaska’s pain before her death. And finally, the manner in which another character, the Colonel, reduces Alaska to her worst moments further reveals her status as a symbol of others’ perceptions rather than a

complex human being in her own right. Even when the Ophelia archetype centers the novel, her complexity falls prey to the male narrator's attempts to reduce her to the symbol that best serves his grief.

Looking for Alaska is a young adult novel by John Green narrated by Miles Halter, a high school junior who leaves a safe if boring existence in Florida to attend a prestigious boarding school, Culver Creek, in Alabama. In his new home, Miles immediately connects with his roommate, affectionately referred to as The Colonel, which is how he meets the soon-to-be center of his universe: Alaska Young. The novel covers Miles's junior year alongside The Colonel and Alaska, as well as two notable secondary characters, Lara and Takumi. Since the first three quarters of the novel are referred to as "before" and each "chapter" is a countdown towards an unknown event, the novel steadily builds towards the revelation of a mystery. Throughout this build-up, the reader watches Miles fall in love with Alaska, who has a boyfriend, from afar, rooted mostly in a fascination with her mystery and sexuality. He swings between his emotions for her; when Miles isn't pining after Alaska, he's dissecting what he hates about her. Eventually, on Alaska's last night alive, she and Miles have a barely sexual but certainly emotionally intimate encounter which is romanticized thoroughly in Miles's head, despite the fact that it is later revealed that Alaska was drunk and likely impaired throughout the event and Miles was completely sober. The novel never addresses whether the encounter would count as sexual assault due to Alaska's drunkenness. Shortly after the aforementioned encounter, Alaska leaves the campus in a panicked hurry, assisted by Miles and The Colonel, and is killed when she drives full-speed into a cop car on the highway, without ever swerving or breaking. The rest of the novel focuses on how Miles and the rest of the friend group process her death, including an

attempt to piece together her mindset that night and whether she was too drunk to stop the car or if she purposefully killed herself. Ultimately, the novel refuses to answer that question, but I will argue Alaska committed suicide.

Alaska is the modern reincarnation of Ophelia, appearing as the infamous “manic pixie dream girl” trope. This trope features a female character, often a teenager, who becomes the center of the protagonist’s world view and yet provides little actual information about who she is. She becomes shrouded in mystery and is often associated with alcohol or drug abuse to further establish her connection to maturity and her distinct separation from traditional conceptions of authority. Her personality is entirely crafted by the protagonist, who often ignores key parts of her character so that she can better fit his personal vision of the ideal woman. Miles certainly does this to Alaska, heightening her good traits to the point of romanticization while making her bad traits, such as moodiness, into far greater obstacles than they are. She is also sexually active, either in theory or in practice, making her sexually available to the often inexperienced male protagonist, who requires some guidance in his sexual exploration. Her existence is entirely made up of bursts of activity, ranging from lewd jokes to explosive stories to impulsive behavior; these activities often reveal less about the manic pixie dream girl as a character as it does about what the male protagonist desires in a woman. Ultimately, this character is not meant to be a fully fleshed out person but rather is a reflection of the male protagonist’s interiority, and her plot is crafted to suit his needs. In Alaska’s case, her suicide is crafted to help Miles come to terms with the fragility of life and help him see that if he wants to experience a life like hers, he has to take it on for himself. The fact that the novel struggles to even declare Alaska’s death a suicide reflects its complete lack of interest in her interiority and projects a dangerous imagination of

suicide as a mystery to be contemplated rather than a tragedy to be mourned. Alaska, as all manic pixie dream girls, is intended to be nothing more than a symbol.

When Alaska kills herself after the self-proclaimed “hooking up” with Miles, she solidifies the novel’s obsession with her sexuality. If both Ophelia and Rhoda are defined by the repression of sexuality, Alaska is defined by an overindulgence. Alaska encapsulates a modern understanding of sexual deviancy, as she is overtly sexual and unfaithful. Additionally, the sexualization and objectification of Alaska begins before she even opens her mouth. Upon meeting her, Miles describes Alaska as “the hottest girl in all of human history” (Green 14). From this line, the reader can infer the upcoming focus on Alaska’s body and sexuality because she is described as “hot” rather than other available adjectives, such as “pretty” or “beautiful,” that do not communicate sexuality as explicitly as “hot.” Miles’s hyperbolic obsession with Alaska that will develop throughout the novel is immediately apparent from this first thought about her. It is doubtful that a 17-year-old girl is truly “the hottest girl in all of human history”; the thought is merely a reflection of Miles’s immediate infatuation with Alaska. This infatuation will render Miles incapable of seeing Alaska as a fully independent person; instead, he will focus on the things he loves and hates about her. Notably, in both cases, the qualities about Alaska that Miles remembers best are those he perceives to directly affect him, such as her moodiness that makes him feel unappreciated or her flirtiness that makes him feel seen. This theme becomes more apparent as the novel progresses and even gets explicitly commented on by the other characters, who grow frustrated with Miles’s limited, rosy view of Alaska’s complexity. However, from the beginning, even in Miles’s appreciation of Alaska’s beauty, he reduces her to what he sees as primarily important: her sexual appeal and the way that makes him feel.

The first time Alaska speaks further establishes the novel's obsession with her overt sexuality. Alaska introduces herself by telling a story from her summer about hanging out with a friend, Justin, who is notably not her boyfriend, Jake:

and Justin puts his arm around me and I think, *Oh that's nice, we've been friends for so long and this is totally comfortable*, and we're just chatting and then I'm in the middle of a sentence about analogies or something and like a hawk he reaches down and he honks my boob. *HONK*. And the first thing I thought was *Okay, how do I extricate this claw from my boob before it leaves permanent marks?* And the second thing I thought was *God, I can't wait to tell Takumi and the Colonel*. (Green 14-15)

Green unveils several important aspects of Alaska's personality in this anecdote. For one, as will be the case for many of Alaska's stories and comments throughout the novel, the story is explicitly sexual in nature, concerning Alaska being groped by a man she is not actively dating. Furthermore, the story objectifies Alaska in the same way Miles does in his previous comment; Alaska's body is literally up for the taking, as Justin feels entitled to simply reach over and grope her, without consent and not even within the context of previously ongoing sexual behavior. That entitlement is made worse by Alaska's apparent endorsement of the behavior. According to the story, she doesn't reprimand Justin or even get angry. Rather, her concern with the inappropriate touching is getting his hand removed from her breast before it leaves "permanent marks." Her comment about such marks suggests that Justin is groping her hard enough to leave marks behind, but Alaska doesn't address the implied pain of the sexual harassment. She tells the entire story as a comedy about something ridiculous that happened to her over the summer rather than angrily recounting to her friends a time she was sexually harassed. Alaska's treatment of the

situation communicates both her own understanding of the overtness of her sexuality and her view of her body as an object to be shared with others; otherwise, she would feel more indignant about Justin's behavior. Alaska's objectification of her own body is framed in the novel as an empowering sense of sexuality, but if that were the case, she wouldn't be punished for it via suicide in keeping with the Ophelia archetype.

Even before Alaska completes her life cycle as Ophelia and commits suicide, however, the novel itself comments on her sexual deviance. Despite the novel being filled with teenagers at the peak of their sexual awakening, Alaska is easily the most sexually active of the characters; she mentions sex often and even demonstrates how to give oral on a toothpaste bottle so that Lara, who serves as Miles's temporary girlfriend, can pleasure Miles. However, Alaska's indulgence in sex cannot be read purely as empowering because the novel itself equates sexual freedom with a lack of control. One of the first things the Colonel tells Miles about Alaska's relationship to her boyfriend makes the connection explicit: "She hasn't cheated on him, which is a first" (Green 21). The Colonel uses Alaska's lack of cheating as evidence that she must really like her boyfriend, which is of course ironically undone towards the end of the novel because Alaska does end up cheating on her boyfriend with Miles. Before she does so, her lack of cheating on her boyfriend is treated as a novelty, a "first." Since the Colonel frames Alaska's faithfulness as something she is trying for the first time, the natural assumption is that Alaska has cheated on the rest of her romantic partners. Apparently, Alaska is incapable of being in touch with her sexuality and expressing that connection freely without also falling into overindulgence and engaging in infidelity. Therefore, Alaska's sexual deviance is two-fold: one, her free-wheeling relationship with her own sexuality is inappropriate, as demonstrated by the fact that

she's the only character in the novel filled with teenagers to feel so comfortable with sex. And two, her sexuality is so explicit that she becomes unable to control it and ends up consistently cheating on her partners, despite her best efforts to remain faithful.

Alaska's inability to control her sexual urges and remain faithful is further evidence of her connection to the Ophelia archetype. Despite the marked differences between their expressions of sexuality, Alaska maintains the established dichotomy by Ophelia and Rhoda that frames her as both sexually mature and still somewhat naive. Beyond the lack of basic impulse control that emphasizes Alaska's youth, the novel reveals a significant emotional trauma Alaska experiences that seems to have stunted her emotional development. When she was eight, Alaska watched her mother die when an aneurysm burst in her mother's head. Alaska didn't call 911 because she thought her mother had fallen asleep. The impact of the emotional trauma fills Alaska with a life-long guilt; it is later revealed that it was the anniversary of Alaska's mother's death that sent Alaska into a spiral the night she died. Alaska's inability to process the trauma forms her mysterious, closed-off persona which only lets its walls down when she drinks. The repressed, childhood version of Alaska does burst forward at times, such as the night she dies. When Alaska descends into the tantrum that leads to her leaving campus drunk and alone in her car, Miles characterizes her crying as "childlike sobs" (Green 132). When Alaska loses control of her carefully crafted facade, what lies directly beneath the surface is the scared child who let her mother die right in front of her because she didn't realize what happened. Alaska performs as the mysterious, experienced teenager to the rest of the world, a character that is marked by sexual maturity and nonchalance concerning such maturity. She uses that character to bury a far more vulnerable person, one that is frightened and naive. Alaska's blunt indulgence in sexuality

appears to be a part of the performance, which means her sexual maturity is directly linked to the innocence she desperately wants to keep hidden, lest it get snatched away from her again.

Now that I've established an understanding of Alaska's sexual deviancy and dichotomy, the archetype has firmly established what comes next: suicide. As I alluded to earlier, the ending of the novel grapples with the question of whether or not Alaska committed suicide or simply lost control of her vehicle because she was severely impaired, and ends up refusing to come to a conclusion. However, multiple pieces of evidence exist that point to the conclusion that Alaska committed suicide, and two are extremely important: Alaska's previous references to suicide and the emotional state she was in when she crashed her car. Despite the fact that they're dismissed by the group as "jokes," Alaska alludes at several points throughout the novel to suicidal ideation. For example, when asked why she smokes cigarettes "so damn fast," Alaska responds this way: "She smiled with all the delight of a kid on Christmas morning and said, 'Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die'" (Green 44). While the smile may be mistakenly read as comical, explaining the joking context Miles and his friends later assign the comment, I argue the smile is more appropriately aligned with a sense of ease. Alaska can talk easily about smoking "to die" because death is truly something she craves, not something she uses as a joke to reel in an excited or sympathetic audience. The fact that Alaska says she smokes "to die" implies a lack of urgency about said suicide; she doesn't feel worthy of living but there's still a fear associated with dying, which explains why she needs to be drunk later in the novel to go through with the act. This comment is especially powerful when put in the context of other John Green novels featuring cigarettes. For example, in his famous love story between two teenagers with cancer, *The Fault in Our Stars* (which, incidentally, is a reference to another Shakespeare play, *Julius*

Caesar), Green crafts a character named Augustus Waters who walks around with a cigarette between his teeth but never smokes, claiming that he's putting the killing thing between his teeth without giving it the power to kill him. The metaphor solidifies Green's association of smoking with some sense of control over life and death, reinforcing the idea that Alaska's attachment to cigarettes stems from a desire to bring about her death in any manner under her control.

Secondly, in their quest to solve the suicide question, Alaska's friends discover that Alaska became emotional and fled the night she died because she realized she'd forgotten to put flowers on her mother's grave for the anniversary of her death. Alaska's alcohol-induced escape from campus results directly from guilt she feels for daring to put the memory of her mother aside long enough to enjoy her life. That guilt, coupled with the guilt she carries for feeling like she killed her mother when she didn't call 911, reveals another connection to Ophelia: suicide spurred by a feeling of responsibility for the fate of a parent. When Alaska returns to her room and asks Miles and the Colonel to distract the school's disciplinarian while she escapes, she says, "I forgot! God, how many times can I fuck up?" (Green 132) and a few moments later says "God oh God, I'm so sorry" (Green 132). Alaska's use of "how many times" indicates that at least one other mistake she's referring to is when, in her eyes, she let her mother die. This piling of guilt onto her conscience spurs the later apology as she grapples with the weight of feeling as if failing to remember her mother's death is just another blow on top of accidentally killing her. Her apologies to nobody in particular border on hysterical, likening this break to a miniature version of the madness scene Ophelia experiences; and just like in that scene, where Ophelia references her father's death, Alaska is referencing her mother's death during her emotional break from reality. The guilt Alaska feels furthers her already established feeling that she deserves to die,

which means her guilt plays a direct role in her suicide. As I've established with Ophelia and Rhoda, part of the power of suicide as a punishment is that it implicates the guilt of the woman in her own death, conflating their deviant sexualities with their personal faults. In this scene, Alaska solidifies her connection to Ophelia and her tragic ending, and Green births the modern, more troubled, and certainly more romanticized archetype.

Furthering the connection, Alaska's suicide occupies the same gray area as Ophelia's and Rhoda's. Ophelia's death is characterized by her neither jumping nor fighting and Rhoda's is even more ambiguous because Bernard declines to describe the manner in which she dies, simply alluding to her jumping from a cliff. Similarly, despite the evidence that Alaska committed suicide, such as the fact that she left marginal notes in a favorite book declaring that the best way out of the "labyrinth" of human suffering is "straight and fast," which seems to reference the head-on car collision that killed her (Green 155), the novel never decides whether Alaska meant to crash and die or not. But the police officer whose car she hits describes her death in a way that mirrors Ophelia's: "I seen plenty, but I ain't never seen that. She didn't tarn. She didn't brake. She jest hit it" (Green 162). The novel is particular about its characterization of Alaska's death – she doesn't accelerate towards the cruiser, but she also doesn't try to swerve or brake. Like with Ophelia, it's as if she doesn't jump to her death, but she doesn't try to fight to live, either. The manner in which Alaska slams into the car, along with her drunkenness, is what muddies her death so thoroughly. The Colonel and Miles establish that even with Alaska's high blood alcohol content, she would have had to been asleep to have not even attempted to swerve out of the way of the obstacle, which is more consistent with a suicide than an accident (Green 182). But the cop who serves as an eye witness to the accident doesn't note that she aimed for the car, or sped

up to meet it faster, matching the “straight and fast” note from her favorite book. Therefore, the reasonable conclusion is that she didn’t aim to die, she just didn’t stop it from happening. Just like Ophelia before her, Alaska is robbed of full autonomy even when ending her own life.

That robbery comes from the positioning of Miles as the narrator. As with Bernard in *The Waves*, *Looking for Alaska* features a distinct male narrator. While Bernard acts more explicitly as an author in his attempt to combine and then contain the five other competing voices into a central storyline, Miles still acts as a male narrator and dictates to the reader what they should know about Alaska through his limited exposure to her. Additionally, one of Miles’s little “quirks,” a staple of John Green’s young adult novels, is that he is obsessed with the concept of last words and has memorized the last words ever spoken of many prominent historical figures. During his journey with the rest of the characters to determine the cause of Alaska’s death, he also searches for any semblance of what her last words might have been. In doing so, he attempts to reduce her short life to a format he is familiar with: a biographical account, written by someone who may have known the focus of the biography but was not actually that person, that claims to know the last words of that person, despite the improbability of determining the truth of such an assertion. By doing so, Miles makes it clear that part of his purpose in telling this story is to attempt to give the reader an account of Alaska Young’s life, up to the point of her death. Unfortunately, Miles romanticizes his short year with Alaska and warps both her personhood and his relationship to her, making him a flawed, if not simply unreliable, narrator. Therefore, I conclude that whether you argue it is John Green as a literal author or Miles as an implied author, the result is the same: Alaska’s deviant sexuality, just like the sexuality of

Ophelia and Rhoda, is punished via suicide by the male author, who also asserts himself as the proper authority in telling Alaska's story.

As established in the previous two chapters, neither Ophelia's nor Rhoda's suicides are appropriately mourned. In *Hamlet*, both Laertes and Hamlet use Ophelia's death to further their own anger and drive them towards the climax of their own plots. And in *The Waves*, Rhoda's suicide is all but glossed over because of the lack of importance Bernard assigns it. *Looking for Alaska* breaks the pattern; the other characters, especially Miles, become consumed by the loss Alaska leaves behind. However, the way those characters process Alaska's death is just as reductive as in *Hamlet* and *The Waves*, despite Alaska's more powerful presence before and after her death. There are two main reactions to analyze: Miles's, which revolves around the betrayal he feels because Alaska left despite promising him shortly before that they could pursue their relationship further, and the Colonel's, who channels all of his energy into dissecting the worst things about Alaska. Both sets of reactions reduce Alaska to what she meant to others, rather than giving any weight to who Alaska was as a stand-alone person and the pain she must have felt to drive her to such a grizzly end. Additionally, the group's desperate search for answers related to her death stems more from a need to set their own consciences at rest – since Miles and the Colonel helped Alaska escape, fully aware of her drunken state – than a desire to understand Alaska's grief.

During the intimate encounter between Miles and Alaska that nearly directly precedes her death by suicide, Alaska pulls away: “‘This is so fun,’ she whispered, ‘but I’m so sleepy. To be continued?’ She kissed me for another moment, my mouth straining to stay near hers” (Green 131). Miles's reaction to Alaska's request displays a type of selfishness that will only grow

greater once Alaska dies. Miles has watched Alaska drink and must be aware that she is at least tipsy if not drunk, and gets confirmation that she isn't in the best place to consent to this encounter when she tells him she's "sleepy." Despite the evidence, Miles says he "strain[s]" his lips to keep kissing Alaska, pushing her to keep going in their last moments together. Despite the fact that they do stop kissing and she does go to sleep shortly after, Miles initially ignores her, pushing for just a few moments more, concerned only with the gratification he feels at finally getting to kiss this girl he's been pining after for months. The selfishness bleeds into other areas; for example, while Miles feels guilty for not talking to his girlfriend, Lara, after Alaska's death, he doesn't feel guilty in the moment or afterward for cheating on Lara with Alaska. He's been waiting for Alaska his entire time at Culver Creek; he's entitled to her, girlfriend or no girlfriend. Although the novel is swift and harsh in its punishment of Alaska for her sexual promiscuity and infidelity, no such punishment falls on Miles's head, mirroring the dichotomy between Rhoda and Neville in *The Waves*. However, perhaps the most selfish aspect of Miles is his later attachment to Alaska's phrase uttered here: "To be continued?" In the wake of Alaska's death, as her friends try to piece together what happened, Miles continuously uses this phrase as a defense for why she couldn't have committed suicide. He claims that Alaska promised to "continue" with him and wouldn't have killed herself and broken that promise. His narcissism captures the manner in which the entire novel, named after Alaska, is far more about Miles. Alaska's personhood is second to Miles's emotional attachment to what she symbolized for his personal journey.

Whenever Miles reflects on Alaska in the "after" section of the novel, he pictures her in the moment most significant to him: on top of him, kissing him, promising there would be more

time. He describes those experiences as paralyzing: “All night, I felt paralyzed into silence, terrorized. What was I so afraid of, anyway? The thing that happened. She was dead. She was warm and soft against my skin, my tongue in her mouth, and she was laughing, trying to teach me, make me better, promising to be continued. And now” (Green 144). Even in death, Miles objectifies Alaska, reducing her to another body that is “warm” and “soft” against his. When comparing her to her current status, “dead,” he doesn’t simply state that she used to be alive, or even conjure up a moment in his mind when he feels she was happiest or the fullest of life. Instead, he juxtaposes dead with sexually engaged with him, creating a dichotomy that’s closer to “serving Miles and not serving Miles” rather than the difference between dead and alive. And he focuses on her “promise” that they would be “continued,” despite the fact Alaska frames the continuation as a question, a sort of proposal, rather than any type of promise. When Alaska dies, Miles is far less concerned about the finality of her death than he is about her inability to fulfill what he views as a promise to pursue things with him, romantically and sexually. The true tragedy of her death is that she will be unable to keep “teaching” him the ways of the world with her sexual prowess. Miles reframes the tragedy of Alaska’s death as a tragedy that particularly affects him and his unfulfilled sex drive, ensuring that the extreme objectification of Alaska continues post-mortem.

Furthermore, a person dying young is often considered a tragedy because said person doesn’t get a chance to live a full life or reach their full potential. For Miles, however, the tragedy of Alaska’s death is that they don’t get to reach their full potential as a couple: “More than anything, I felt the unfairness of it, the inarguable injustice of loving someone who might have loved you back but can’t due to deadness” (Green 151). That thought comes out of Miles

during the car ride to Alaska's funeral, where his emotions surrounding her death would be at their height. At the peak of his emotional processing, where he would be most in touch with the injustice of Alaska's life being ripped away, his focus is still on himself. His utmost concern when it comes to her death is that she could have loved him if they'd just had more time together. He isn't focused on how she would have felt the day they all graduated high school, or where she could have gone to college, or even the fact that she was the only family member her father had left and she could have continued to build her relationship with him. Instead, Miles calls their inability to date now that she was dead an "inarguable injustice." He goes as far as to call his grief over not being able to date Alaska what he feels "more than anything." Yet again, Alaska functions as purely symbolic to what Miles loses in the romantic and sexual realm, rather than symbolizing something greater: the loss of a life not yet lived. At every point in the grieving process, Miles re-centers the importance of Alaska's death, which was obviously motivated by intense pain and suffering, to expand on the way her untimely end affects him and only him.

Miles's unrealistic and selfish attachment to his final moments with Alaska does not go unnoticed by his friends. At several points, they criticize him for thinking he has a monopoly on pain after Alaska's death. The Colonel, in particular, grows frustrated with the selfish way Miles processes pain: "So just stop worrying about your goddamned self for one minute and think about your dead friend. Sorry. Long day" (Green 161). The Colonel seems to address Miles's selfishness, especially as it relates to his obsession with treating Alaska's death as tragic only because it means he can no longer be with her. However, the way the Colonel phrases his critique actually reflects the novel's apparent attitude towards Miles's behavior as a whole. Even though the Colonel does grow frustrated with Miles and shuts him down, he immediately follows it up

with an apology that Miles's behavior doesn't warrant. The apology is framed as one for the Colonel snapping so suddenly, but all of the characters are under intense emotional pressure, which is made worse by Miles's attempts to center himself in the grieving process. The apology makes more sense in the context of the novel's attitude towards its own protagonist. While the novel inserts comments such as the Colonel's to remind Miles of the shared pain after Alaska's death, the latter half of the novel is still entirely focused on the way Miles chooses to process his pain. Rather than having Miles engage in an earnest search for the underlying cause of Alaska's death, Green chooses to have the quest marred by Miles's desperate attempts to assure himself that Alaska did love him, that she was coming back for him. Even with the critiques in place, the novel privileges Miles's perspective over Alaska's by virtue of the fact that he survives while she is punished. That reading is reinforced with Miles's internal response to the Colonel: "It's fine,' I repeated. And, whatever. It *was* fine. It had to be. I couldn't afford to lose the Colonel" (Green 161). Even after being critiqued for his behavior, Miles forgives the explosion not because he thinks the Colonel was justified, but because he doesn't want to start another fight. His response is almost indignant, assured that he was in the right. Despite the way the others talk to Miles, he never truly internalizes how his romanticization of Alaska's life damages and reduces her memory.

The Colonel's response to Alaska's death is equally far from perfect and is just as reductive. Rather than attaching himself to Alaska's best qualities and their relationship, the Colonel lashes out against her worst qualities to ease his own conscience. He even tries to push away blame for letting her drive drunk on the night of her death: "Yeah, I know we should have stopped her, damn it. I am shit sure keenly aware that we should have stopped her. But we

shouldn't have *had* to. You had to watch her like a *three-year-old*. You do one thing wrong, and then she just dies" (Green 145). Despite the fact that the Colonel says that when it comes to Alaska you can't do "one thing wrong," Alaska is probably the most self-sufficient of all of the characters in the ensemble. While Miles and the Colonel are relatively open about their emotions and insecurities, Alaska buries her greatest trauma from the Colonel for years, revealing it only when she's too drunk to stop herself. She is constantly helping others in both academic and romantic realms and appears to genuinely desire happiness for others. Therefore, it seems like more than simple hyperbole to assert that if Alaska isn't watched carefully enough, she dies. Her drunkenness the night she died impaired her ability to reason, and as irresponsible as the Colonel apparently considers that decision, he was just as drunk. The Colonel's need to demonize Alaska's actions, despite the immense troubles that seemed to be lurking just underneath her surface, is just as harmful as Miles's desperate romanticization of her every word and move. Both actions frame Alaska in a way that is far more suitable to those she left behind than it would be to her actual memory.

As I've established in this analysis of *Looking for Alaska*, the reincarnation of Ophelia's story arc has some marked differences from Shakespeare's original, and in some ways, it's more dangerous. Alaska Young is certainly more centered in the novel than Ophelia or Rhoda ever were in their respective stories, but Alaska still isn't in control of what her story is about. Her life is told through the eyes of Miles Halter, who is only able to relay the facts of Alaska's life he feels are relevant to him, which often revolve around their relationship and Alaska's sexuality. Despite the deliberate modification of the Ophelia archetype that allows the reincarnated character to take up more space than Ophelia ever dreamed of occupying, the new manic pixie

dream girl is just as doomed. Alaska's engagement with her own sexuality may be read as empowering because she breaks normal restrictive expectations, but her infidelity and suicide still frames her as a deviant in need of punishment. Furthermore, just as Ophelia's madness scene and death in the water has become overly romanticized in modern art and retellings, Alaska is thoroughly romanticized by Miles. The novel's decision to zero in on Miles and the way he processes Alaska's death exposes the reader to his explicit romanticization and objectification of Alaska in life and death, which reduces her to a shadow of what she could have been had the novel appropriately explored her personhood. The new Ophelia emerges as a mysterious, sexual, interesting woman, and yet her power is futile. She still falls prey to the punishment imposed on her by the male narrator, and is rendered symbolic rather than human through the retelling of her story via a flawed, outside observer. Despite Green's attempts to empower the Ophelia archetype, Alaska is just as tragic, she's just read as beautifully so.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have presented the Ophelia archetype, as established in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which punishes women with perceived deviant sexualities for attempting to use sexual expression to disobey stringent gender expectations that limit their power and mobility. These women are punished by their authors via suicide as a means of implicating the damned female characters in their own deaths by the use of guilt, whether or not the guilt is explicitly connected to their sexual expression. While this trope may seem limiting, it is replicated in the canon with no regard for genre, time period, or even the political leanings of the authors of stories that feature this archetype. Ophelia's story lives on in the most unexpected of places, such as in the experimental masterpiece written by one of history's most famous feminist fiction writers. The widespread nature of Ophelia's arc demonstrates the adaptability of her story across time and space. Each time Ophelia is reborn, so is her sexual deviance, reflecting the changing nature of the world into which Ophelia reincarnates. However, despite the deviant sexuality in question, the Ophelia character is always punished via suicide for the grievous sin of demanding autonomy over her own body via sexual expression deemed inappropriate or even dangerous. Despite the passage of time since Ophelia's first appearance, the world is still obsessed with the confines of female sexuality and how they should be applied, which means literature still necessitates the figure of the tragic, beautiful, and suicidal deviant.

While I have argued throughout this thesis that the damnation of Ophelia due to the perceived deviance of her sexuality is reductive, in many ways, her damnation breathes new life into the perilous and unjust circumstances surrounding her death. The Ophelia archetype, which I have traced from its sixteenth-century origin through the 20th century and into the modern era,

exhibits the very real and very dangerous consequences that stem from the restriction of female sexuality. While the female characters who follow Ophelia's arc are punished by their authors with ambiguous suicides that rob them of their autonomy, that's because their revolutionary actions bring them close to having full autonomy over their bodies, sexualities, and ultimately, their stories. These female characters exhibit revolutionary characteristics by breaking away from their prescribed gender role, often through the exhibition of a sexuality deemed deviant for both their sex – which corresponds with their expected gender expression – and their era. The durability of this phenomenon demonstrates both the continued existence of stringent and often sadistic barriers imposed on female sexuality as well as the increasing progressiveness of women in literature. While the Ophelia archetype still persists, the broadness of accepted sexuality and gender performance continues to expand; if this expansion continues exponentially, we may eventually reach a point in prominent literature where these female characters can exist outside of heteropatriarchy without being punished in the most gruesome way imaginable.

However, as I note in the third chapter, the increasing progressiveness of these female characters should not be mistaken for progressiveness in using the trope. Some authors may employ the Ophelia archetype as an appropriate critique. For example, Virginia Woolf employs the Ophelia archetype in crafting Rhoda, but her use of Bernard as the male author in the last portion of the novel may be a subliminal critique of the tendency of male authors to kill their revolutionary female characters once their traits become too difficult to control within existing social constructs, as was the case for Rhoda. This argument may even apply to *Hamlet*; as established, Laertes and Polonius hold far more power over Ophelia than she does over herself. Therefore, it would not be a stretch to consider that they also have complete control over her

story and the way it unfolds. While the use of the male author would not be as obvious within a play as it is within a novel, Shakespeare may be employing Laertes as the author of Ophelia's story, which culminates in her punishment via suicide.

In our modern example, however, John Green fails to use the Ophelia archetype as a suitable critique of the restrictions placed upon her, if that was even his intention in drafting Alaska Young's story. The liberal expression of Alaska's sexuality as well as her prominence in the novel as compared to the marginalization of Ophelia and Rhoda may at first signal a more empowered Ophelia. However, as I argued in the third chapter, this empowerment is misleading and ultimately insidious. Alaska is defined by sexual promiscuity and mystery, making her highly desirable to the male narrator. However, despite the novel's centering on her life and death, her most intrinsic thoughts are still withheld from the reader, and Alaska's male narrator gets to pen her story rather than her receiving the opportunity to write it herself. The novel's obsession with Alaska's sexuality and death romanticizes the Ophelia trope while doing nothing to undermine the glaring issue with classifying non-normative, in context of differing time periods, female sexualities as deviant and worthy of punishment. Alaska is viewed as just as guilty as her predecessors for her death, but at least she gets a novel's worth of the male narrator, who refused to try to truly understand her, pining after her in both life and death. Furthermore, while *Hamlet* and *Looking for Alaska* have implied instances of the removal of sexual autonomy – the deflowering scene in *Hamlet* and the relationship between Rhoda and Louis in *The Waves* – *Looking for Alaska* is the only piece I examined in which actual sexual assault occurs, since Alaska is drunk and Miles is sober during their late-night encounter. The treatment of Alaska as

the reincarnation of Ophelia is troubling because her life and end is framed as desirable, and likely impacted the young, female audience who read about her and then aspired to be her.

The power of the Ophelia archetype stems from its normalcy. The overt male control over female bodies, the emphasis on proper sexual and gender expression, and the sudden death of women who dare to defy the male supremacy implicit in heteropatriarchy are all aspects that surround the lives of women not just in literature, but in the real world that literature is based on. While Ophelia has grown to be a memorable, sympathetic character, there is still a reluctance to see her in any other way than at her most vulnerable: in her white dress, drowned, and entirely exposed to the male gaze her death was supposed to empower her to escape. The cultural obsession with the vulnerability of female sexuality, especially as it relates to the concept of virginity, continues to bleed into the way female characters are read and written. Furthermore, female characters with villainous traits are still aligned with a perceived sexual deviance, most commonly in the form of either infidelity or some form of queerness. Tracing the Ophelia archetype from her origin to her modern day incarnations demonstrates the durability of this trope which can be employed either as a critique of expectations surrounding female sexuality or as a subliminal endorsement. While the fate of Ophelia is sealed, perhaps establishing why, in her author's eyes, she had to die can help us forge a better path for empowered women on the cusp of revolution, both fictional and realistic alike.

WORKS CITED

- Cramer, Patricia. "Jane Harrison and Lesbian Plots: The Absent Lover in Virginia Woolf's 'The Waves.'" *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2005, pp. 443-463. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/29533720. Accessed 7 Apr. 2020.
- "green, adj. and n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/81167. Accessed 14 May 2020.
- Green, John. *Looking for Alaska*. New York, Penguin Random House, 2005.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1943.
- Kerr, Jessica, and Anne Ophelia Todd Dowden. *Shakespeare's Flowers*. Johnson Books, 1997.
EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=60&site=ehost-live.
- King, Helen. "Green Sickness: Hippocrates, Galen and the Origins of the 'disease of the Virgins'." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 2, no. 3, Winter 1996, pp. 372-387. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1007/BF02678065.
- Małgorzata Myk. "Let Rhoda Speak Again: Identity, Uncertainty, and Authority in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*." *Text Matters*, vol. 1, no. 1, Lodz University Press, Nov. 2011, pp. 106-22, doi:10.2478/v10231-011-0008-5.
- Najafi, Saghar. "A Phenomenological Study of Selfhood in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*." *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, no. 92, Fall2017/Winter2018 2017, pp. 32-24. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hln&AN=128958934&site=ehost-live.

Painter, Robert, and Brian Parker. "Ophelia's flowers again." *Notes and Queries*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1994, p. 42+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.wlu.edu/apps/doc/A15103323/LitRC?u=vic_wlu&sid=LitRC&xid=7e421362. Accessed 14 May 2020.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, edited by Robert Miola. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Shakespeare, William. "Othello." *Open Source Shakespeare*.

https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=othello&Act=3&Scene=3&Scope=scene.

Shakespeare, William. "Titus Andronicus." *Open Source Shakespeare*.

https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=titus&Act=5&Scene=3&Scope=scene

Smith, Barbara. "Neither Accident nor Intent: Contextualizing the Suicide of Ophelia." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2008, pp. 96–112. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27784781. Accessed 14 May 2020.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1931.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unacknowledged aid on this thesis.

Maya Lora