

Being Ophelia  
(After Elizabeth Siddal)

My face floats  
like a mask.  
A single petal  
on canvas water.  
Wrists limp  
in his garland restraints.  
Hair glides  
through the water  
like scattered ashes.  
There are no ripples.  
He works in her eyes.  
My eyes.  
He paints an echo.  
The water penetrates  
with an aching lick  
that suffocates every pore.  
His whore  
of death.  
I hear their distorted song:  
distant  
drenched voices.

Kimberley Hayes, the author of *Being Ophelia*, writes:

John Everett Millais' Ophelia painting has always captivated me, particularly because of the woman behind the painting.

The story of how Elizabeth Siddal lay fully clothed in a bath full of water while modelling for the painting was extremely profound to me. I imagined so clearly how the water lapped at her dress and hair and surrounded the edges of her face. How the water would have been a weight on her for many hours, her dress heavy and pulling her down. I wanted to express this in the poem, her point of view of the painting. That's when the idea of 'Being Ophelia' came. Elizabeth Siddal was Millais' Ophelia or rather his idea of Ophelia.

I wanted to portray the comparisons between Elizabeth Siddal and Ophelia the character, therefore including the strong symbolism of the flowers and the theme of death/suicide. But, I chose the separate voice of Siddal to drive the poem as she immersed herself into the role of Ophelia for Millais. The poem went through many changes as I created Siddal's voice more strongly – imagining the thoughts and feelings that possibly ran through her mind and body as she lay in the water watching the ceiling or Millais' eyes dart from her to the canvas each day. What type of thoughts or feelings she may have had for him or even the painted Ophelia.

I did not originally intend for the structure of the poem to reflect the content but towards the end I noticed the natural shape the poem had taken and so carried on writing in that style. The final product seemed to show body emerging from the water and consequently the page. Water plays such an important part in this poem as it is the model of the force that consumes Ophelia and Siddal. The water is the repressor.



*Ophelia* (1851-2) by John Everett Millais  
– the model was poet and artist Elizabeth Siddal who lay in this position in a bathtub for hours