

Reflective Essay Response to Shakespeare's Hamlet

Year 12 English

Hamlet is a tragedy published in 1603 by William Shakespeare that accounts the story of young Hamlet in his attempt to take revenge for his father, the previous King of Denmark, by killing the new king, his uncle, Claudius. Due to the ambiguous nature of Shakespeare's plays Hamlet is a polysemic play. However, I will be taking a feminist approach discussing how a women's worth is tied to her sexual reputation. Furthermore, I will examine the relevance of this play with regards to feminism in the 21st century.

Initially, my past experiences of being treated differently to my brother positioned me to pursue a feminist reading of Hamlet in Act 1 Scene 3 when Laertes is dissuading Ophelia, his sister, to continue her relationship with Hamlet. This can be seen when Laertes warns her that, "The charriest maid is prodigal enough..." (I.3.39). The word "charriest" with its connotations of modesty and virtue evokes imagery of an innocent girl and positions the reader to accept this idea of the 'perfect woman'. Furthermore, the use of the word "prodigal" which connotes recklessness suggests to the reader that a women's virtue must be beyond reproach as it is her defining feature. However, this evoked a different reaction in me due to my past experience of my brother being allowed to date at a younger age than me which made me feel anger at the double standards. This allowed me to easily pursue a feminist reading. Therefore, Laertes' belief that Ophelia's worth could be reduced due to her love for Hamlet infuriated me as it signifies that Ophelia has less control of her life because her prosperity is tied to her sexual status unlike her brother Laertes. The connotations of "prodigal" raised my ire as it reminded me that men, like my brother, are allowed to make their own decisions while women are restricted. Overall, this scene successfully uses diction to display an oppressive view of women that did not align with my past experiences. Therefore, I was able to accept a feminist reading.

Similarly to how Ophelia is treated by her brother, Ophelia is viewed as lower than Hamlet which, because of my moral sensibilities as a feminist, motivated me to pursue a feminist reading in Act 3 Scene 1 where Hamlet is speaking to Ophelia while Claudius and Polonius are spying on them. This can be seen when Hamlet states, "If thou dost marry, I'll give this plague for thy dowry; Be thou chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny" (III.1.146-148). The simile "chaste as ice" and positions the reader to view Ophelia as virtuous. This can be seen in the word "chaste" which symbolises Ophelia's virtue and "ice" which represents the reservation women are supposed to show towards intercourse. However, the word "calumny" which connotes slander and defamation position the readers to believe that a woman's reputation is hinged on her sexual status. However, due to my strong beliefs regarding feminism which likely stem from growing up surrounded by strong women, I had a very different response to the scene. My moral sensibilities made it very easy for me to pursue a feminist reading as the message was that a woman's entire life is dependent on her virtue. Consequently, I found the dichotomy that Ophelia is being oppressed for the sake of her purity while men were encouraged to be both ridiculous and galling due to my feminist beliefs. In conclusion, Shakespeare effectively used simile and diction to display women as worthless without their virginity which does not align with my moral beliefs and therefore enabled me to accept a feminist reading.

These double standards can further be seen in Act 3 Scene 2 where Hamlet and Ophelia are conversing while waiting for the play The Mouse Trap to begin which, due to my psychological disposition to fairness, motivated me to pursue a feminist reading. For example, when Hamlet is flirting with Ophelia and says, "Lady shall I lie in your lap" (III.2.111). The word "lie" is a euphemism for intercourse and "lap" for a woman's genitals; both of which were scandalous to discuss at the time. This is emphasised by the alliteration of the 'l' sounds which remind the audience of the exaggerated tongue movements

made when pronouncing the sound and is evocative of intercourse due to the similarity of the actions. Therefore while the audience is positioned to view Hamlet's sexual innuendo as outrageous, concurrently, they are also positioned to believe that Ophelia is no longer a 'good woman' as her reputation has been besmirched. However, Hamlet's reputation remains unchanged. Consequently, this evoked a different reaction in me due to my disposition towards fairness which likely stems from learning to share from an early age as a result of my abundance of siblings. This made it easy for me to pursue a feminist reading of the play and to feel that it contains unfair standards towards women. For example, to me Hamlet's innuendo incensed me as Hamlet will get an extremely light punishment for such scandalous words. However, Ophelia could face complete social ostracism due to contemporary beliefs. This triggered my disposition and therefore I felt that the gender standards were completely prejudiced regarding sexual status. Therefore, this scene was moderately successful at displaying the view that a woman's purity is of utmost importance which did not align with my psychological disposition.

In conclusion, a feminist reading was examined but due to my personal responses it was difficult to align with the reader positioning as gender roles for women have drastically changed since Shakespearian times. This can be seen in the evolution of romantic relationships. For example, today it is common for women to engage in sexual relationships without much reprisal. However, there are still lingering feelings, like those in Hamlet, that believe that women must be more virtuous than men, it has lessened considerably from the 17th century when women would have faced complete social disgrace.