Characterization of Women in Shakespeare's Tragedies

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Introduction

William Shakespeare was an English poet, and playwright known as the greatest writer in the English language. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His works include 39 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. His early plays were primarily comedies and histories and are regarded as some of the best work produced in these genres. Until about 1608, he wrote mainly tragedies, among them Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth, all considered to be among the finest works in the English language.

Abstract

The persona of women in the era of renaissance was stereotype as they were viewed weak, fickle, and dependent on the men in the patriarchal society they lived in and were also compelled to accept the decisions made for them.

Shakespeare's presentation of women in his plays demonstrates his feelings about women and their roles in society. Many modern critics claim Shakespeare to be a feminist who departed sharply from flat, stereotyped characterizations of women common to his contemporaries and earlier dramatists.

Women in Shakespearean plays have always played important roles and have been put in challenging situations. Some women are stronger than others, and their effect on the play is different to one another. They often surpass the male heroes and portray very powerful characters who have succeeded in breaking the rigid mold of social norms and expectations.

In this article we will explore mainly Shakespeare's characterization of Ophelia, Desdemona, Cleopatra and Juliet in the tragedies Hamlet, Othello, Antony and Cleopatra and Romeo and Juliet'.

Ophelia in 'Hamlet'

Ophelia is a victim suffering the misfortunes perpetrated upon her by the two main male forces in her life, her father Polonius and her brother Laertes. She is portrayed as beautiful, child like, ingenuous, loyal and an obedient woman unaware of the harsh realities of life. She truly loves Hamlet despite his brutality and devotes her heart and soul to her lover. Her love for Hamlet and her loyalty to her father creates friction and leads to tragedy in Ophelia's life.

Ophelia demonstrates purity, the innocence and virtue of women who believe in doing things expected of them. She is obedient to the commands of the men in her life although she often attempts to do the right thing. As Ophelia is torn between two contradictory poles, she has no strength to overcome difficulties. She is an obedient daughter who abides by the rules of her father to such an extent that she even goes against her inclinations. The shock of her father's death drives her into insanity and Ophelia dies a tragic death.

Desdemona in 'Othello'

Desdemona is the most tragic character who meets undeserved fate and pays the price for falling in love with Othello. She provides a picture of innocence and purity in a play filled with jealousy, anger and cynicism. She is also a victim of the patriarchal attitudes of the people around her and of the state itself. Her innocence is her primary weakness that leads her to death. Her beauty, loyalty, grace and innocence are her most important traits.

The play depicts Desdemona as a self-effacing, faithful wife and as a bold, independent personality. In the beginning of the play she is portrayed as a supremely independent person, but midway through she struggles against all odds to convince Othello that she is not very independent.

Desdemona loves Othello and remains loyal to him till the end. Things go on smoothly for some time between Othello and Desdemona and their relationship continues to bloom for a while. Unfortunately their romance is spoiled when Iago decides to doom their relationship and executes his evil plan by planting suspicion in Othello's mind. However, her fate is the poorest of all the Shakespeare's heroines because when it is time to prove her loyalty she looks at a loss. She does not get love and loyalty in exchange for her love, instead she has to court death at the hands of her lover.

Cleopatra in 'Antony and Cleopatra'

Cleopatra is a powerful character who is portrayed as impetuous and erratic with an alarming range of emotions. She is beautiful, sensuous and represents Egyptian culture. Unlike Ophelia and Desdemona, she refuses to adhere to the stereotypes of patriarchal society. She is aware of her duties as Queen of Egypt, but is deeply infatuated with Antony. She is depicted as an independent character who forces her way into the male arena. She is brave and her heroic courage is revealed when she faces death with strong resolve and chooses to determine her own fate rather than suffering the humiliation of being Octavius' slave.

Juliet in 'Romeo and Juliet'

Juliet is portrayed as a shy, innocent and obedient young girl in the beginning of the play. But as the play progresses , her character displays inner strength, intelligence, bravery and independence . She is the beautiful, thirteen year old daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet who has thought little about love and marriage, but she grows up quickly on falling in love with Romeo, the son of her family's great enemy.

She defies her father and marries Romeo, a Montague. She shows amazing courage in trusting her entire life and future to Romeo. Juliet remains loyal to Romeo till the end and ultimately decides to take her own life so they can be together in heaven. By so doing, she takes control of her own destiny, rather than allow her life to be controlled by others, as so many young women in her circumstances at that time would.

Conclusion: All the characters described in this article are strong, independent, selfless , intelligent , loyal and willing to break the societal norms imposed on them. Shakespeare beautifully created these powerful characters to demonstrate the strengths of women.

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